

An article by:

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Visual Poetry from the United States

For reasons having to do with the size, historical relations to Europe, the native flowering of commodity capitalism and the ethnic/social mixtures of which the nation is composed, the United States has had a peculiar relation to culture in general and to poetry and visual poetry in particular. It is commonly accepted that in the case of literature, the European line culminated only in the middle of the nineteenth century in our first specifically *American* literature in the works of Poe, Melville, Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, Dickinson and Hawthorne. The visual arts remained hopelessly in the thrall of European influences at least until the massive blow inflicted by the Armory Show (1913), if not as late as the early 1950s when abstract expressionism began to have an influence abroad.

Poetry in which the visual aspects of language play a significant role has always been regarded as a freakish aberration, mildly fascinating, but not worthy of being included in serious treatments of American culture except as a sidelight. However, as Geoffrey Cook put it, "Visual poetry is a cry by the poet that the content of the past is

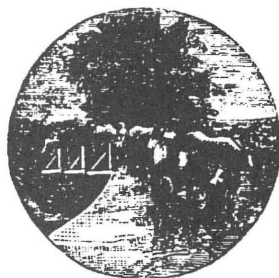
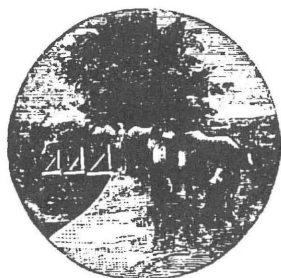


Paul Zelevansky

from *Case for the Burial of Ancestors, Book 3*

A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS:

My job is done. It is time to settle accounts. In the end, of what use was this history to me? The Hegemonians had their pictures, and we have to construct our own. Yet, it's important to understand that when you're lying down at the close of a long day, *hope* and *imagination* are the operative words. Hope will give you a reason to continue. Imagination will put you in the right place at the right time. But *memory* is the only proof you have that anything has happened at all. So take notes, gather your artifacts, and keep good records in preparation, because old age turns the memory to soup and other forms of proof may be required by everyone else.



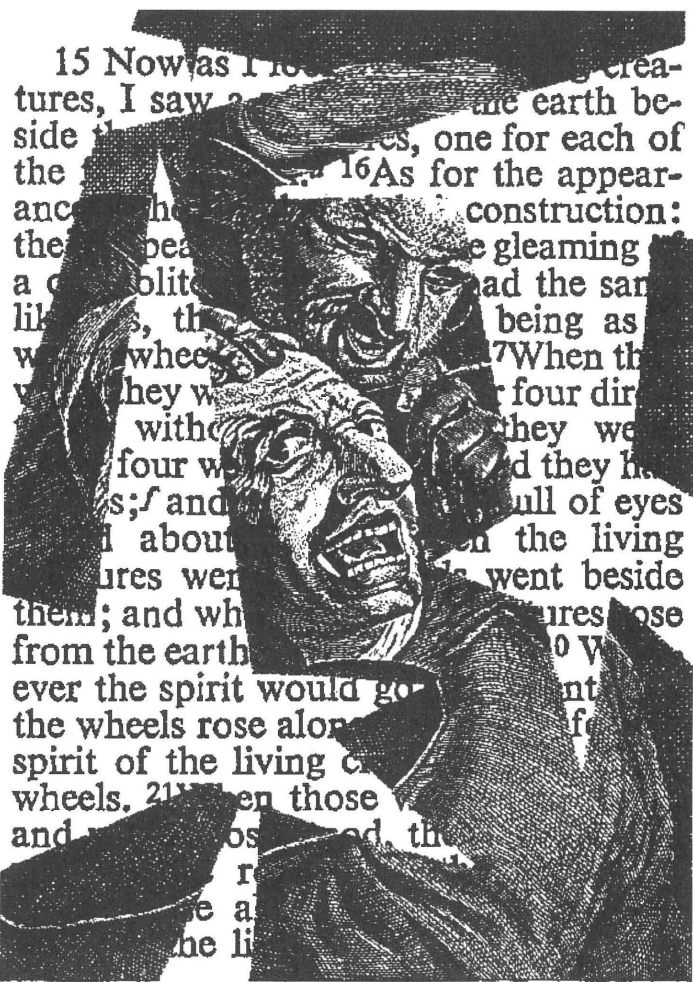
Paul Zelevansky

from *Case for the Burial of Ancestors, Book 3*

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FISH & LEAVES FREEZE IN THE LAKE
 V []
] []
 N []
 C []
 S H E W A L L S
 E V
 I V
 A V
] V
 F V
 C V
 L V
 I G V
 C V
 RATTLE AT NIGHT V
] V
 C V
 N V
 E V
 S V
 L I E S I N T H E W A L L N E A R I T
 F I S H & L E A V E S P I P E S
 T H I C K W A L L N A R R O W
 H

Karl Young
Untitled



15 Now as I looked at the creatures, I saw a... the earth be-
 side the... one for each of
 the... 16 As for the appear-
 ance... construction:
 they... gleaming
 a... had the same
 like... being as
 wheels... 17 When the
 they... four dir-
 with... they we
 four... and they ha
 s; and... full of eyes
 about... on the living
 ures we... went beside
 them; and wh... ures rose
 from the earth... 20 W
 ever the spirit would go...
 the wheels rose along...
 spirit of the living...
 wheels. 21 When those...
 and... ad, the
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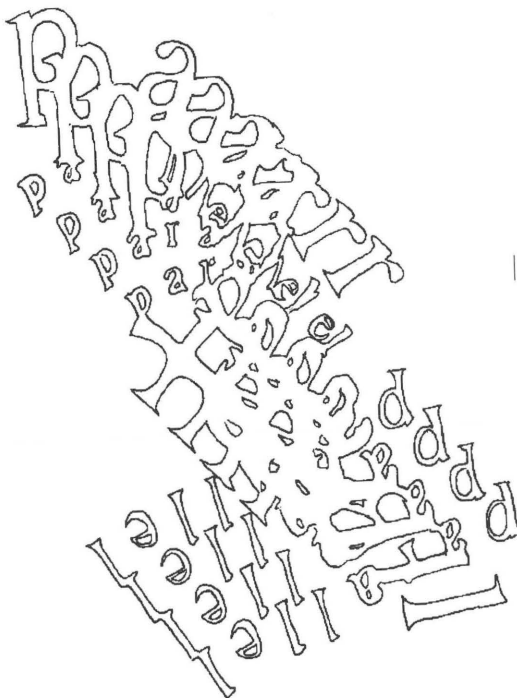
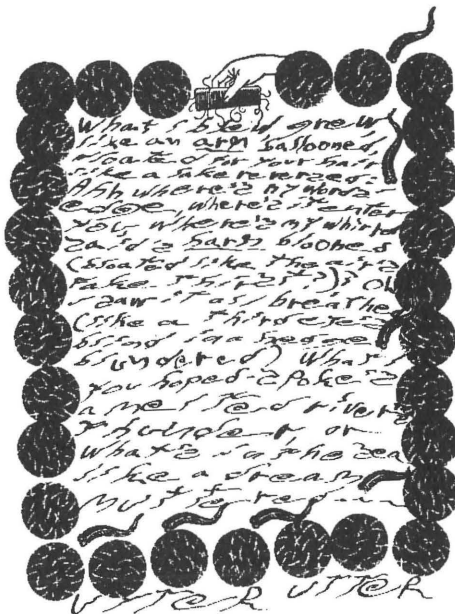
FEELING

Stephen-Paul Martin
Feeling

cancerous & a new skin must be sewn to contain the dreams of the future.”¹ Visual or non-linear poetry is “the inter-medium between literary and visual art.”² In spite of critical misunderstanding, according to Higgins “there are a surprising number of pattern poems and near-pattern poems in American literature.”³ The first known visual poem in the United States dates from 1674, by Edward Taylor.⁴ Still, until recently there has been little evidence of a strong native tradition of visual poetry. Even as late as the 1950s, very few Americans participated in concretism. Then in the 1960s Fluxus artists worked consciously with the visual properties of language and visual poetry’s closely allied form, the “artist’s book,” underwent a revival among those conceptual artists whose work featured language (for example, Sol LeWitt, Lawrence Weiner, John Baldessari). Then in the post-concrete period, we must extend “visual poetry” to include hypermedia and video art which take written or printed language as their base. Although linear poetry of course continues to be practiced, we are fortunate to have increasing poetic activity in those areas mediated by technology, especially the computer, which is making possible the cross-fertilization of previously separate art practices.

Today several journals regularly publish and review visual poetry. Among these are *Central Park*, *PhotoStatic*, *Score*, *Inkblot*, *Generator*, *Kaldron*, *American Book Review*, *Lost & Found Times* and *Afterimage*. The most important collection of visual poetry in the country is the Ruth and Marvin Sackner Archive, Miami Beach, Florida, which is international in scope. Among those artist-writers known as experimental poets, the following have been selected for their current presence in North American visual poetry as defined above: Mielke And, Guy Beining, John Bennett, Jake Berry, Dick Higgins, Crag Hill, Karl Kempton, Richard Kostelanetz, Stephen-Paul Martin, Mike Miskowski, Liz Was, Chris Winkler, Karl Young and Paul Zelevansky.

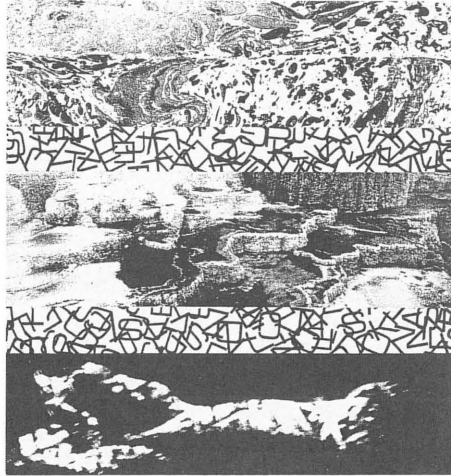
John M. Bennett
Utter Utter



Crag Hill
Parallel

Mieka And

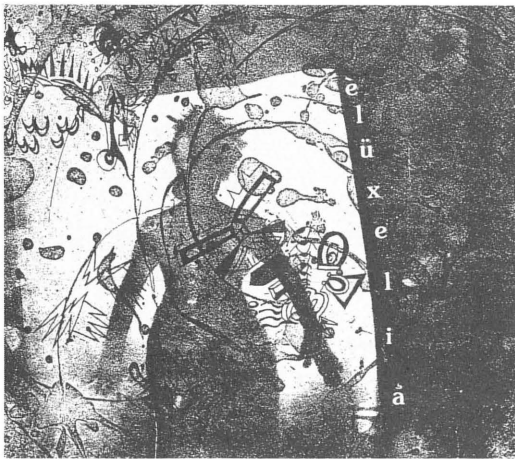
The Electric Samara Lightbook

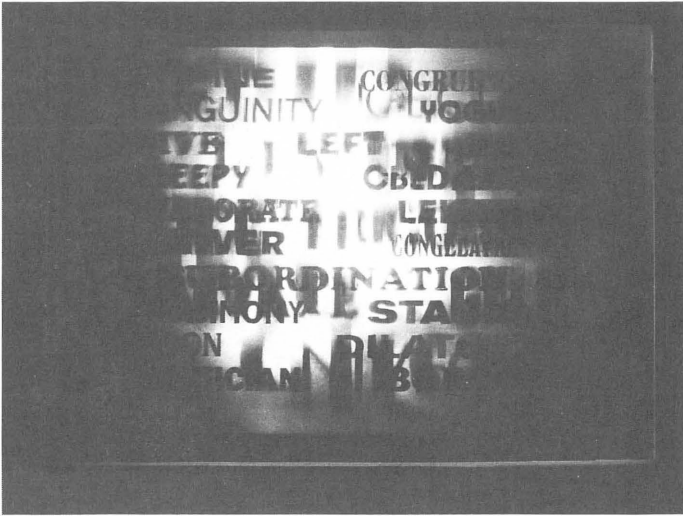


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Liz Was

from Onion Leaves, Her Map Untended





Richard Kostelantez
One Side of Antitheses

Notes

- ¹ Geoffrey Cook. 1979. Visual Poetry As a Molting. *Precisely*, 3/4. 141.
- ² Dick Higgins. 1987. *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 233.
- ³ Dick Higgins, *Pattern Poetry*, 109.
- ⁴ Dick Higgins, *Pattern Poetry*, 110.

Selected Resources

(organized by date)

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Crane, Michael, and Mary Stofflet, eds. 1984. *Correspondence Art: Source Book for the Network of International Postal Art Activity*.
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