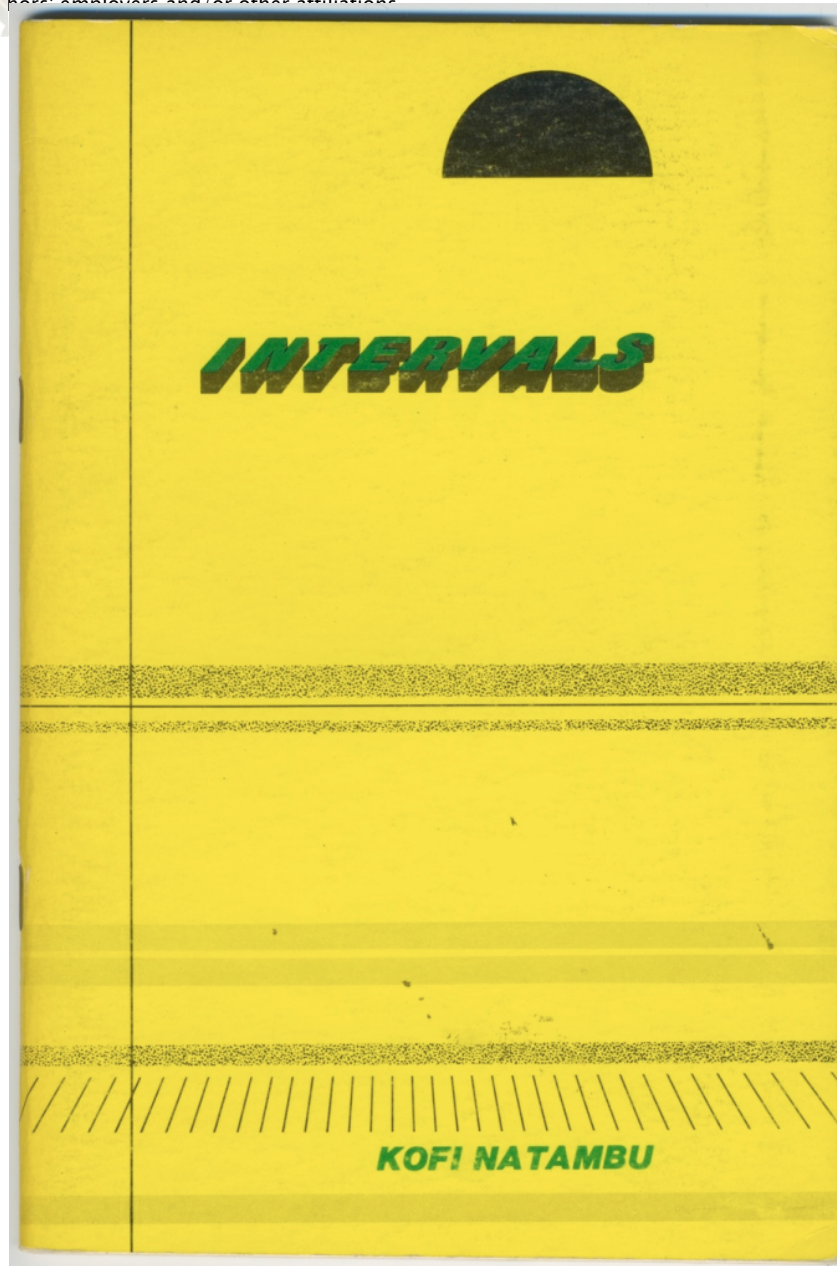


INTERVALS: IN TIME AND SPACE

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POETRY, EMPLOYMENT, AND OTHER SITUATIONS



Kofi Natambu
Intervals, 1983
Post Aesthetic Press
Southwest Detroit

This image (fig. 1) is of the cover of a book of poetry by Kofi Natambu published in 1983. Natambu founded Post Aesthetic Press earlier that year, with an address in Southwest Detroit. This would have been two years after Ronald Reagan came into office, the same year *Return of the Jedi* would be released, and around the time various personal computers would arrive on the consumer market (Commodore 64, the Macintosh, the IBM PC). Coleman Young would be about halfway through his twenty year term as mayor of Detroit.

I figured I would use this post for *Infinite Mile* as an opportunity to research the design of individual publications that were created in Detroit by independent or small presses in the 1960s/70s/80s. Kofi Natambu's *Intervals* stands out, for me, because of the

design of its cover. It is a simple, saddle-stitched, 52-page volume. The cover design is credited to Debra Jeter, of Another Direction in Art (or, alternatively, Directions in Art — the name is listed two different ways, one way on the cover itself, and another way on the copyright page). There is a separate credit for the typesetter (Toni Swanger, of the *Detroit Metro Times*), who laid out the interior pages.

Many of the books of poetry I've come across that were published by small presses from this time include a credit for a cover image, but not a cover design. Often, the relationship between type and image is straightforward — the cover may have been designed following a path of least resistance. Maybe not by someone who identified as a 'graphic designer'. Perhaps the printer made the final decision about where to place image and text. Or the typesetter centered a cover image, with the volume's title and author names above or below the image.

Debra Jeter, the cover designer, is an artist who moved to Detroit in the 1970s, where she attended Cass Tech, then went on to the College for Creative Studies. She graduated in 1979 with a B.A. in graphic design. She moved to California in 1983, the year *Intervals* was published. According to an interview with Jeter published online in 2012, she traveled to Libya in the early 1980s as part of a group of 30 African Americans invited by Muammar Khadafi to "see for ourselves what [Khadafi's] country was all about and not fall victim to press propaganda."¹ She would have been in her early 20s at the time. It's unclear whether the trip took place before or after she designed this book cover, but the experience would influence Jeter's later interest in astrology and metaphysics.²

Using very few marks, Jeter's cover alludes at once to music, time, and physical space. The word INTERVALS falls back, away from us, with a black drop shadow beneath it, as if it is aligned to a plane that tilts away from the reader, at an axis oriented toward the black, sun-like semi-circle at the top right of the cover. The word seems to float on the same plane as the short, angled lines running across the bottom of the cover. These suggest a piano keyboard, for example, or a rhythmic pattern moving through the long, vertical line on the left part of the cover. The word "INTERVALS" is more or less centered horizontally, yet, the drop shadow causes it to shift, to feel as though it is further to the left than it really is. The vertical line running up the left side of the cover creates a kind of a margin, which also gives the sense that the word is more closely aligned to the left and not actually centered on the cover. The semi-circle sun is right-aligned with the S in INTERVALS, and the U in NATAMBU, but nonetheless seems to float, unmoored, near the top of the cover. The thicker speckled black bars running horizontally across the cover suggest horizon lines of some sort — or haze, or roads. The physical relationship between the lines, the title and author name, and the black half-sun is a bit off — it's a bit awkward, a bit illogical. It's asymmetrical. Yet altogether the effect is completely engaging, spacy. It doesn't follow a logical grid, yet it communicates a strong sense of space.

The cover is printed using only two colors — black and green — on a bright yellow cover stock. The colors call to mind Pan-African flag colors (green, yellow, black and red), although there is nothing flag-like about the cover. The cover imagines a yellow universe punctuated with the most minimal collection of black marks. The green is used only for the word INTERVALS and the author's name, Kofi Natambu. The colors could be interpreted as giving a graphic nod to the book's literary forbears in the Black Arts literary movement.

The spare imagery on the cover of *INTERVALS* differs dramatically in style from the colorful, richly textured paintings that Jeter would go on to create as an artist. Yet, it is interesting to see that in 1983 she was attempting to represent space — or, specifically, the "Spaces between the spaces" that Natambu writes about in his introduction to the book — and that later her interests would continue to lead her toward space, as in, outer space.

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Following is Kofi Natambu's poem "Stratified Code Poem #11":

(For Media Junkies)

The rumor is that

we live here and other
times die here. In the T²
society. A transmitter world
ruled by T-dimensions:

Telephone Telegraph Television Teletype Teleprompter

Telescope Telegram Teleran

Yet we are Told (dig it) that
Telepathy means: "COMMUNICATION OF ONE MIND WITH ANOTHER BY MEANS
BEYOND THAT IS NORMAL"

(the same dictionary says *normal* means: regular, usual.)

So my question is: Are these rumors received or transmitted?

projected or directed?
accepted or rejected?

In his poem, Natambu anticipates the 'transmitter world' that, from my vantage point in 2013, was yet to come — e-mail, SMS texts, Twitter, etc.³ I had to look up the meaning of the word *teleran* — it is some kind of air traffic control system that uses radar technology.⁴ I feel a (telepathic?) connection, across time, to Natambu's 1983 self and his evident ambivalence around the hyper-transmitted world he inhabited in Detroit.

Intervals as a book object represents a transmission in and of itself. Natambu imagines it as a "Talking Book", a book whose poems are meant to be read aloud, where meaning "is derived from performance and is *post aesthetic in content*." (Natambu's emphasis.) He writes in his introduction, "I realize the irony of speaking to you thru this typewriter, but there's no need for despair. Soon we won't need this introduction — you'll be able to HEAR what I'm saying to you." This book is meant to be aural, maybe more like a musical score, or, more precisely, a radio transmission. It's meant to exist in that space between written form and that which has just been heard.

The book itself emits a kind of creative intensity. In June of 1983, when Kofi Natambu wrote the introduction to *Intervals*, he was active in a community arts organization called Go-For-What-You-Know that sought to articulate an "independent response to the exclusive and pretentious white avant-garde, which, in our view, failed miserably ... to recognize, acknowledge, support, or include the different critical perspectives and theoretical positions of African Americans."⁵ Through this group, he was editing and publishing *Solid Ground: A New World Journal*, an influential, radical Detroit arts and culture quarterly. He hosted a show on WDET called "Sound Projections." He was organizing performances, workshops, and in the midst of all this he founded Post Aesthetic Press and published *Intervals*.

One imagines this book as the project of an engaged cultural participant — Natambu had connections with a typesetter and printer, he was on the radio, he was in contact with Jeter, a young graduate from CCS, to do the book cover. He was simultaneously involved in other projects which overlapped with, and were in conversation, with this one. Copies of *Intervals* were circulating within Detroit but also making their way out of the city, to a market where they would have been purchased in British pounds (my copy has a price tag stuck to the back cover listing the price as £2.50).

Intervals may be modest in form, but it reads as belonging to something larger — a scene, a network, a conversation.

¹"'Letters to Nasa': An Interview with Artist and Astrologer Debra Renee Jeter"
January 4, 2012. Interview by Yolo Akili.

² I made some failed attempts to reach Debra Jeter over email, though I am still holding out hope that the stars will align for us in the future! I am interested in seeing more of her work from this period in Detroit. Her website can be seen here.

³ Kofi Natambu's blog, The Panopticon Review, is definitely worth a visit! His transmissions continue.

⁴ It's also, interestingly, a company in Fairfield, New Jersey, that describes itself as a "provider of monitoring and control software solutions for analytics, business intelligence, data warehousing and big data."

⁵ Quoted from Kofi Natambu, "Nostalgia for the Present: Cultural Resistance in Detroit 1977-1987", published in Gina Dent, ed. *Black Popular Culture*, 1992.