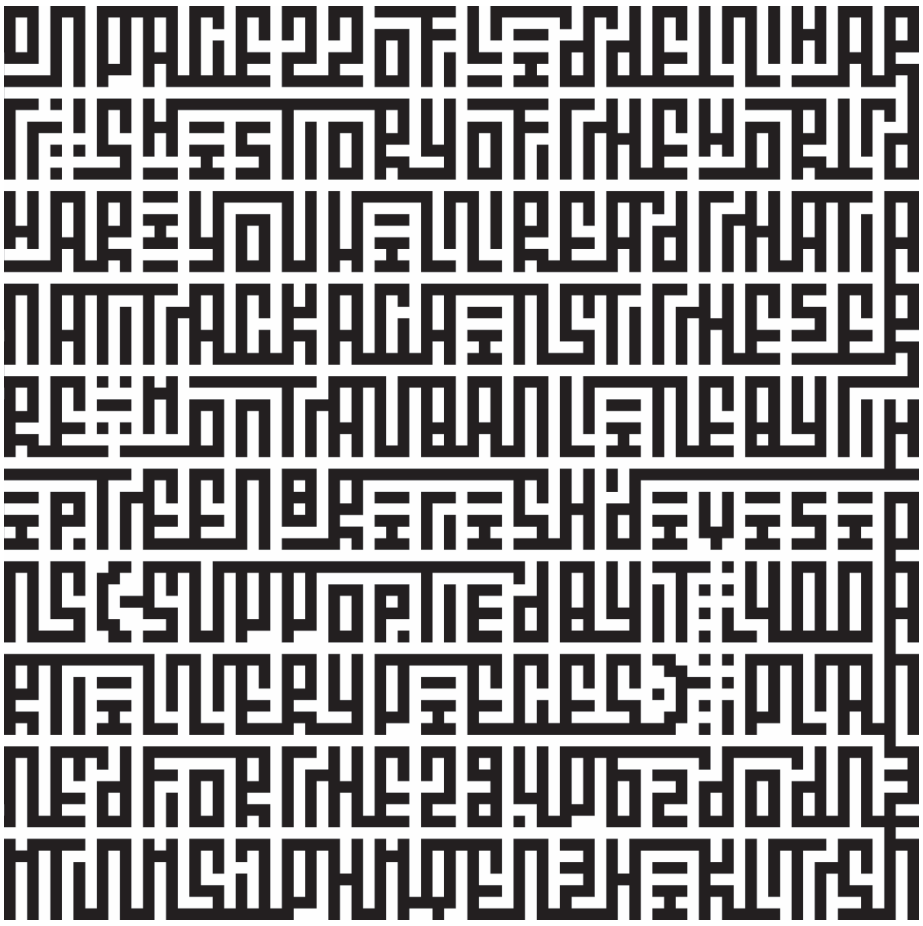
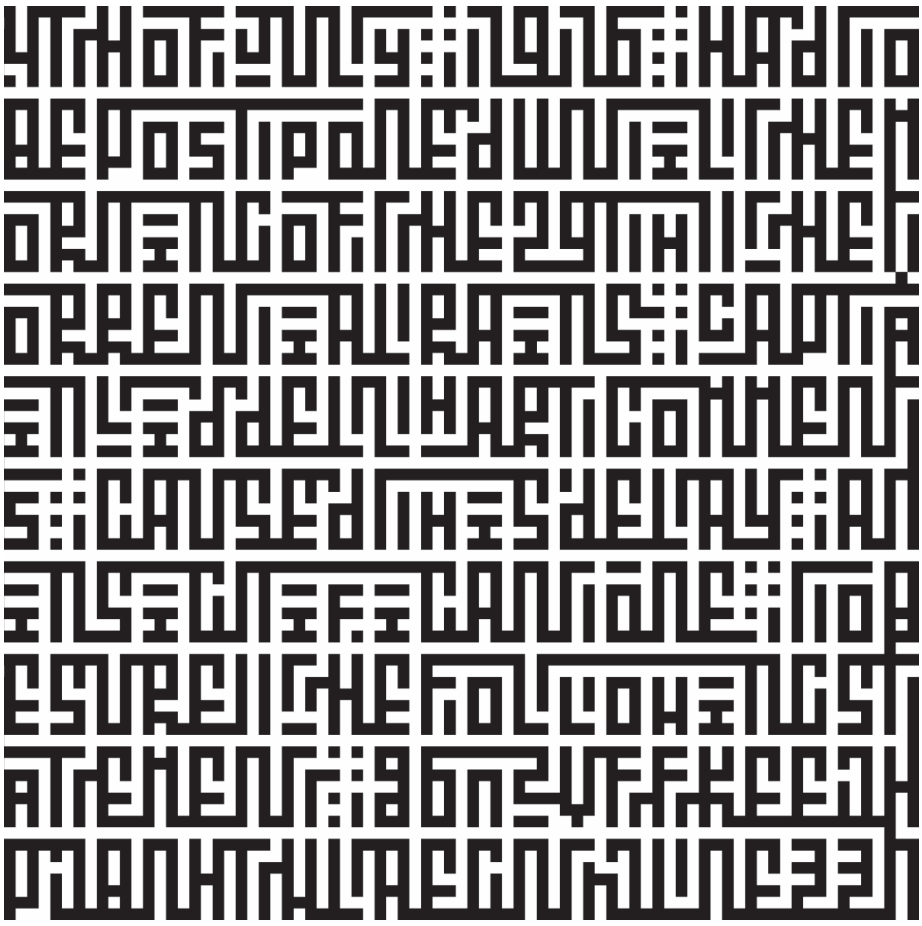
THE GARDEN OF FORKING PATHS

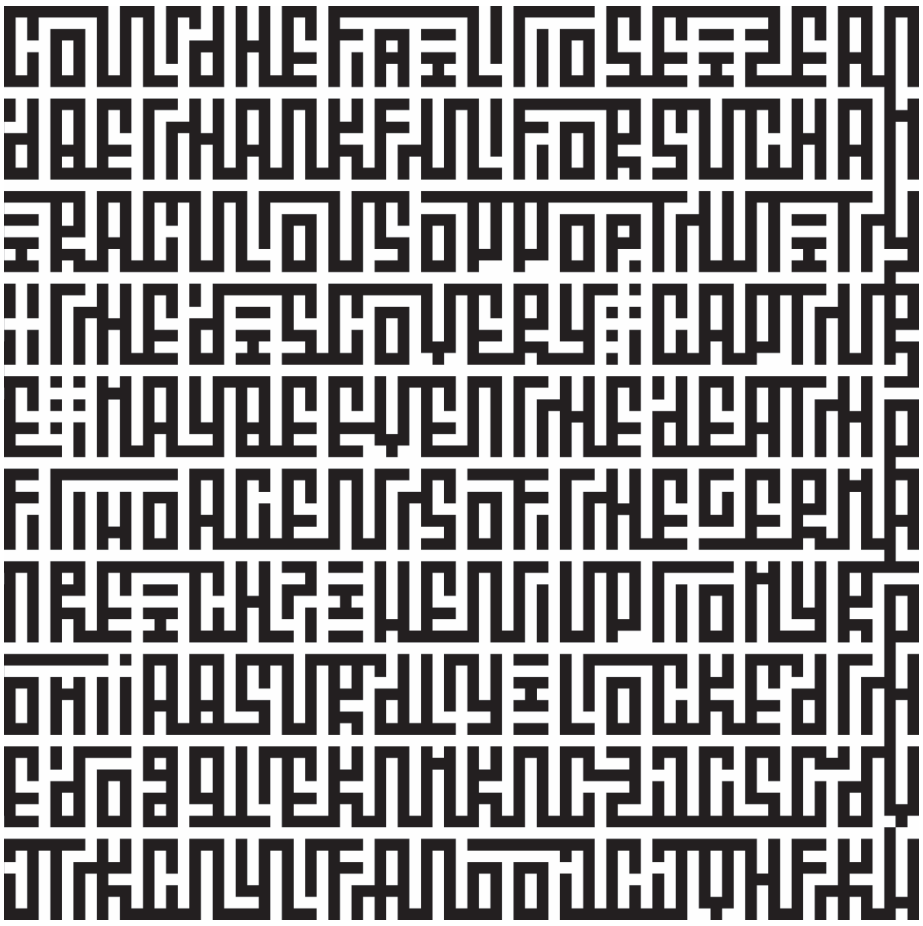
CHRISTIAN BÖK

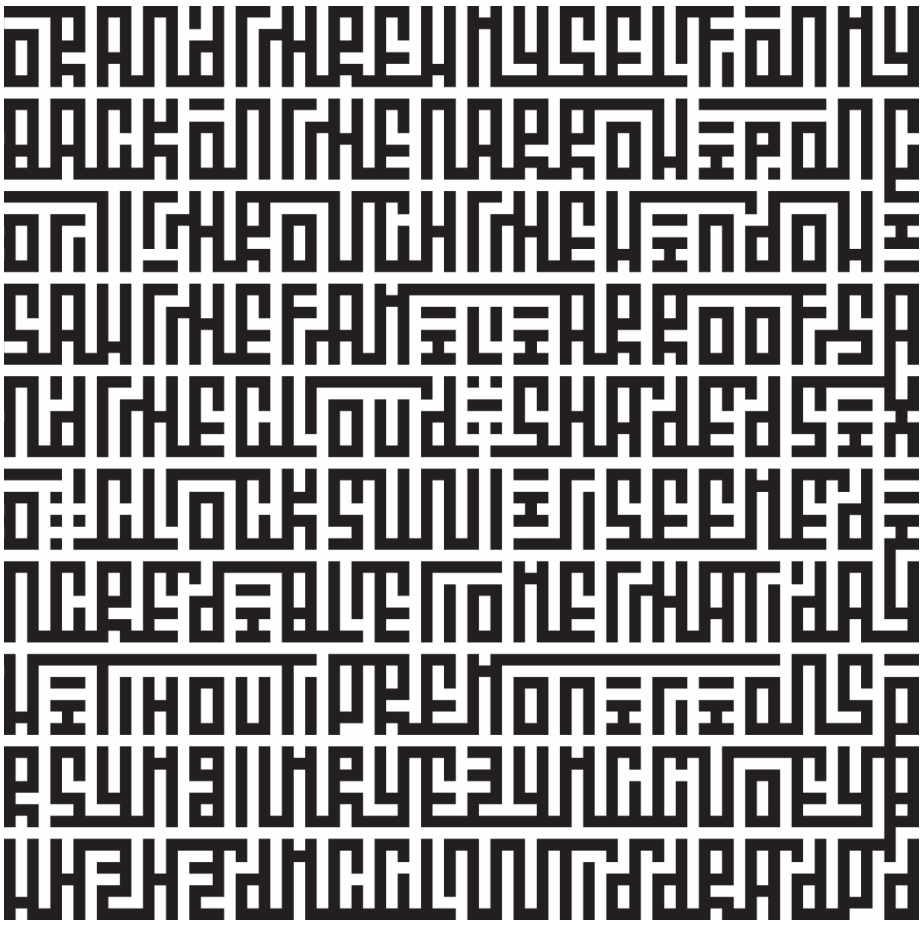
‘To no one did it occur that the book and the maze were one and the same thing.’

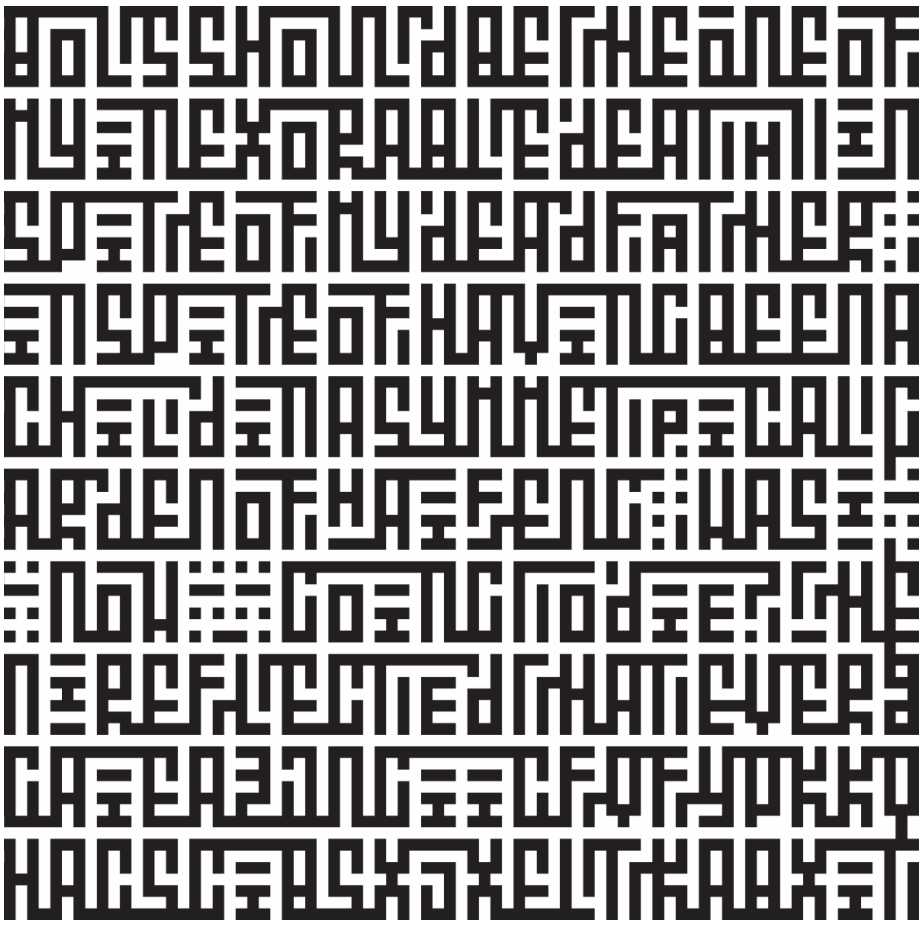
— Jorge Luis Borges

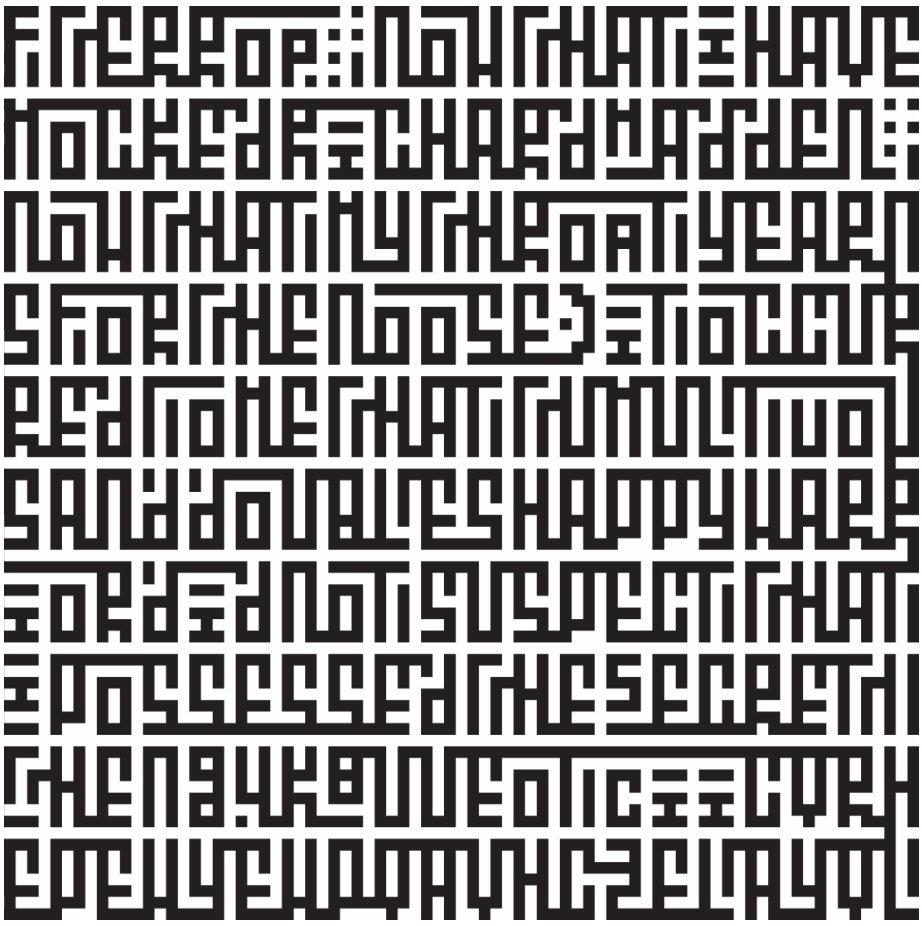


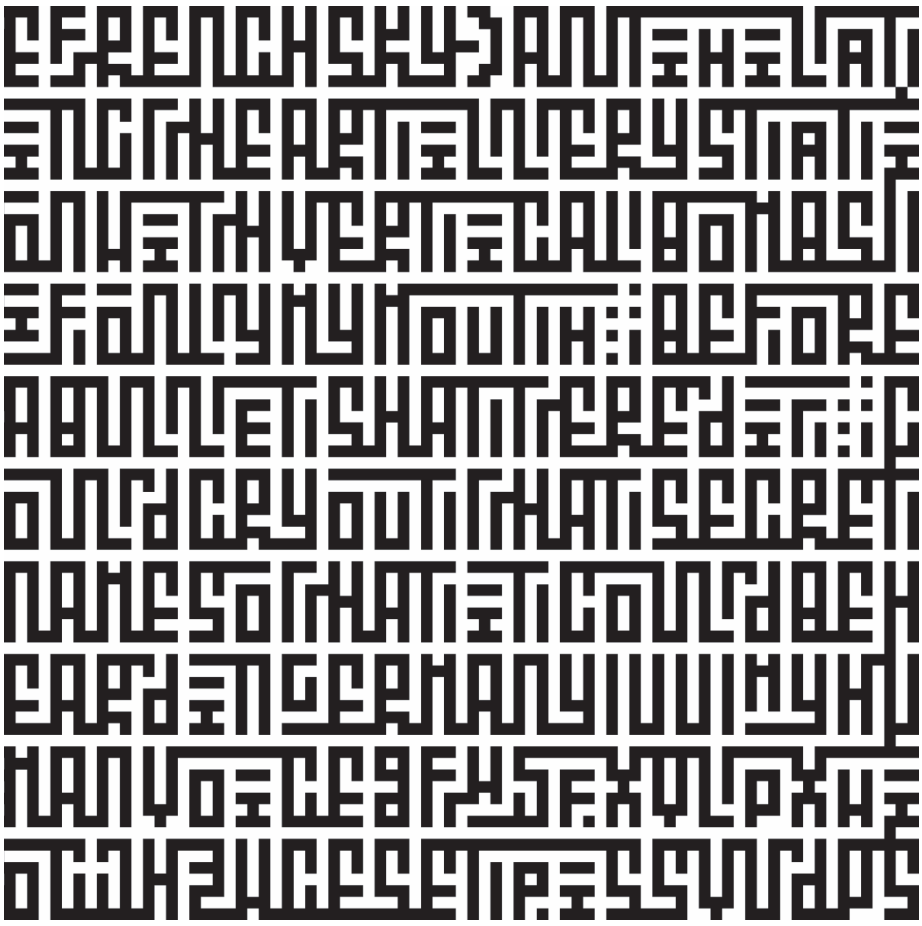


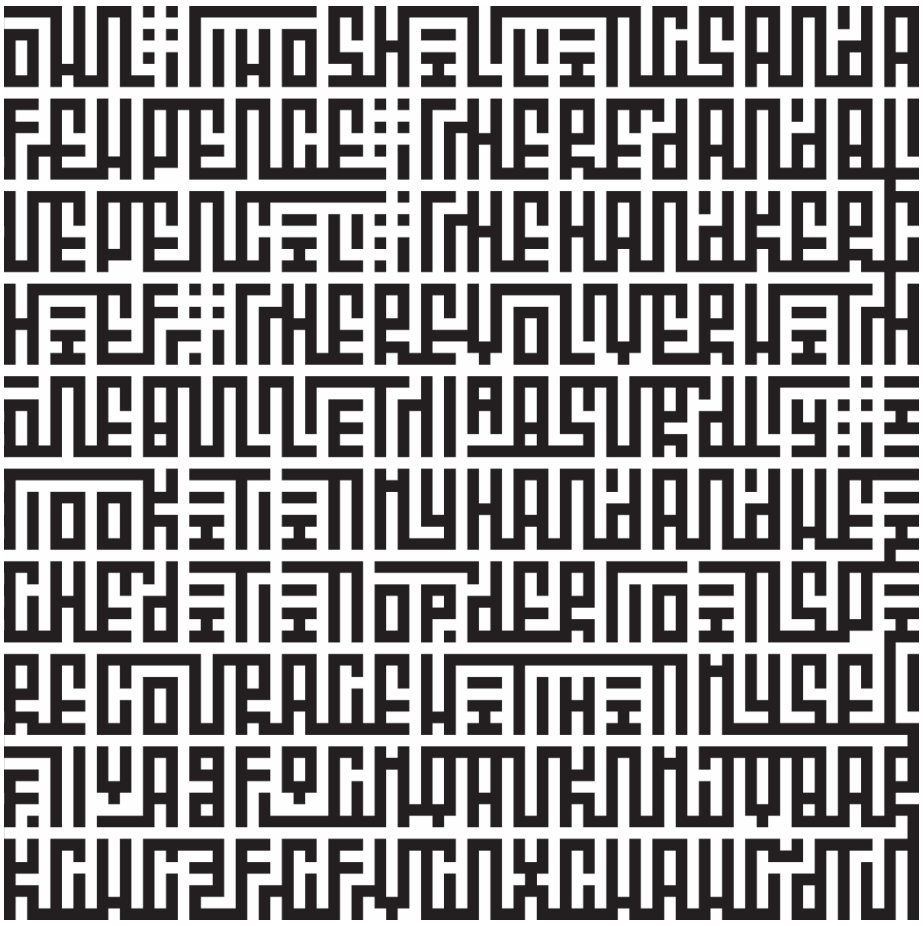


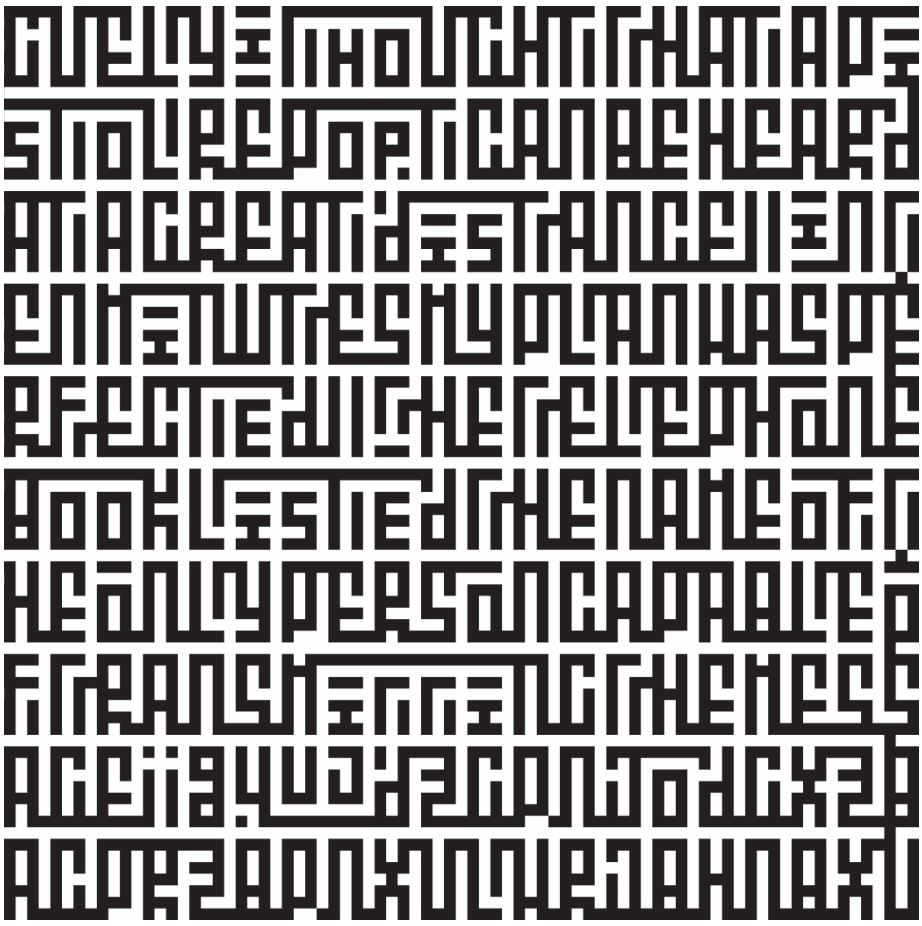


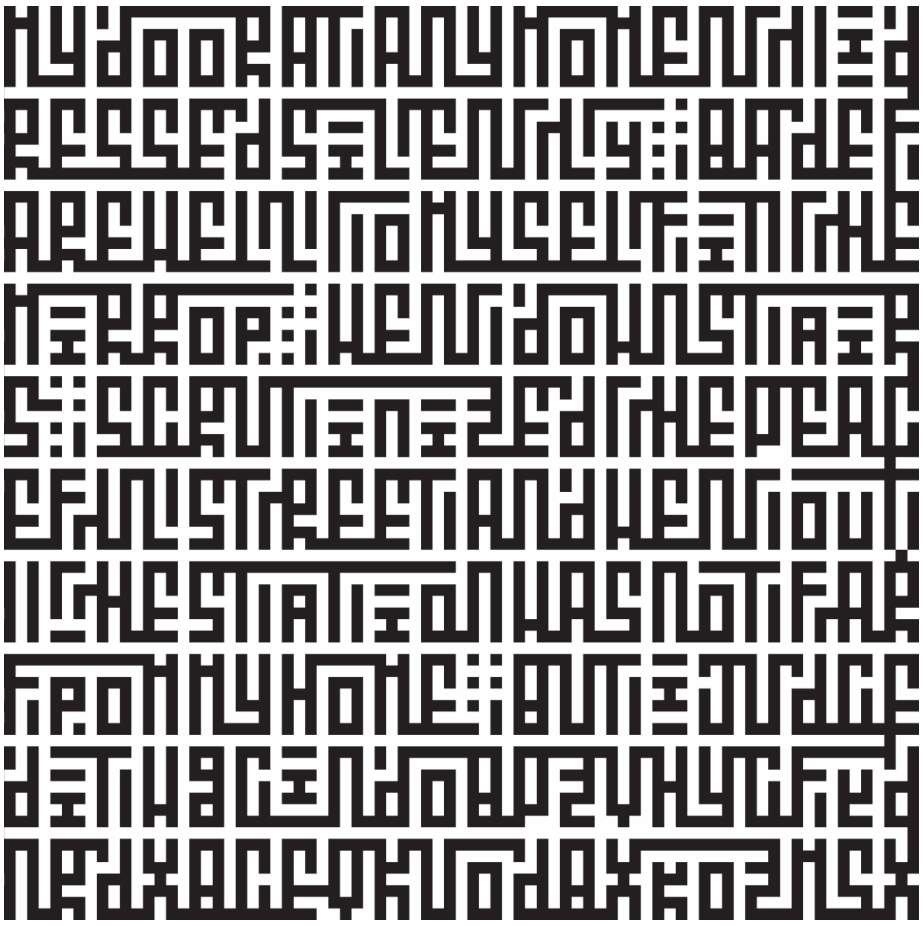


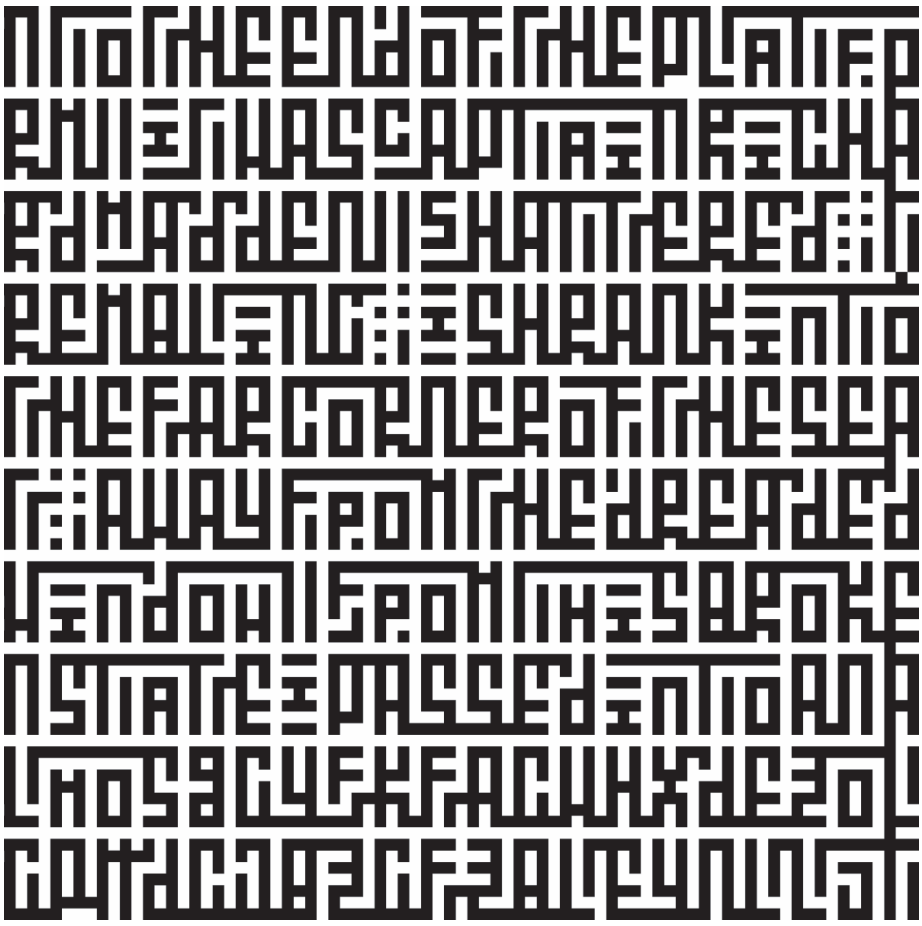


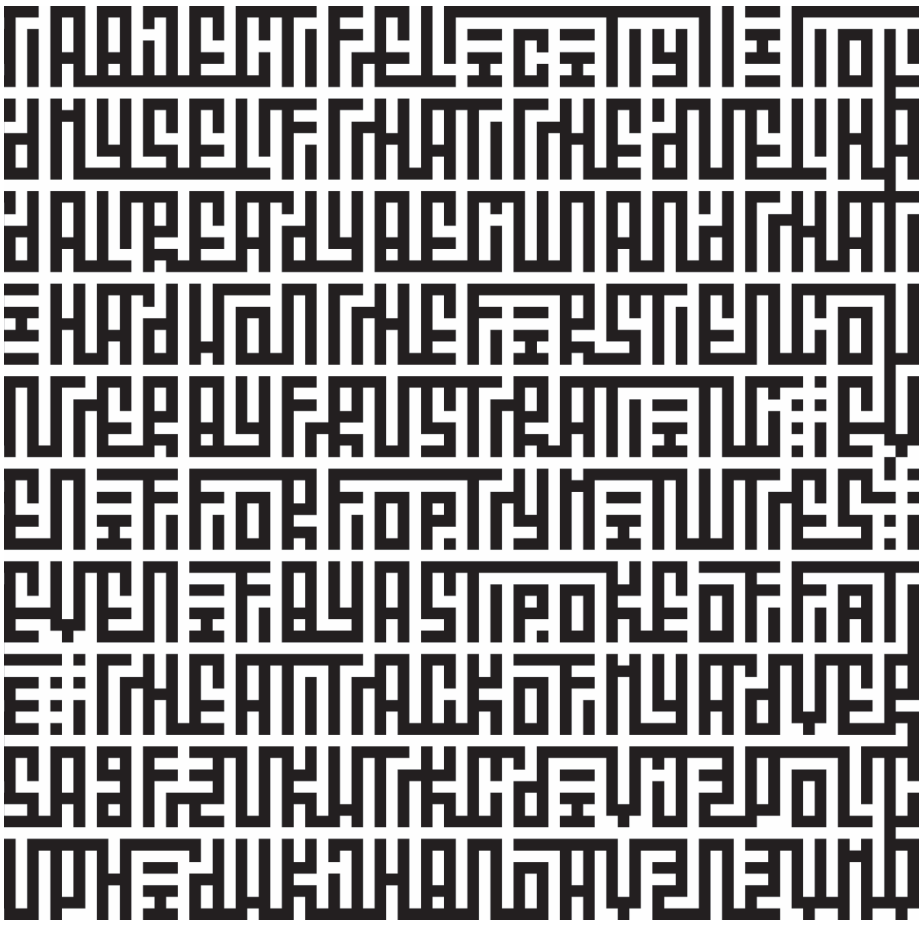


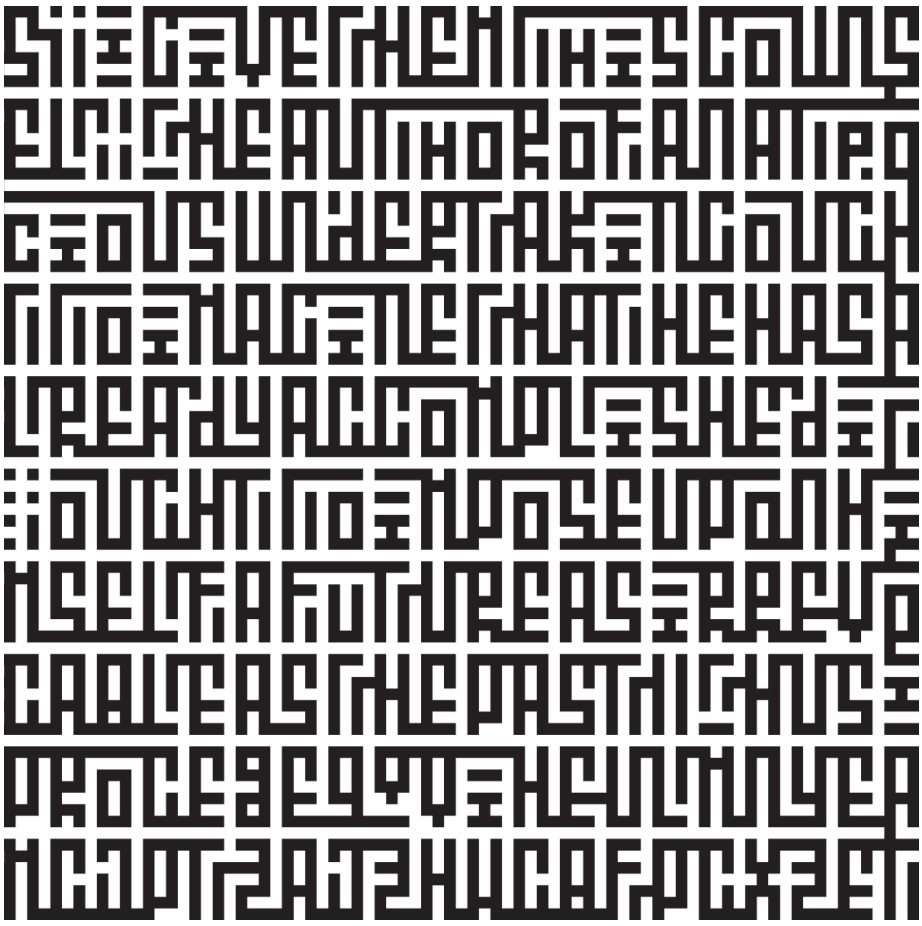


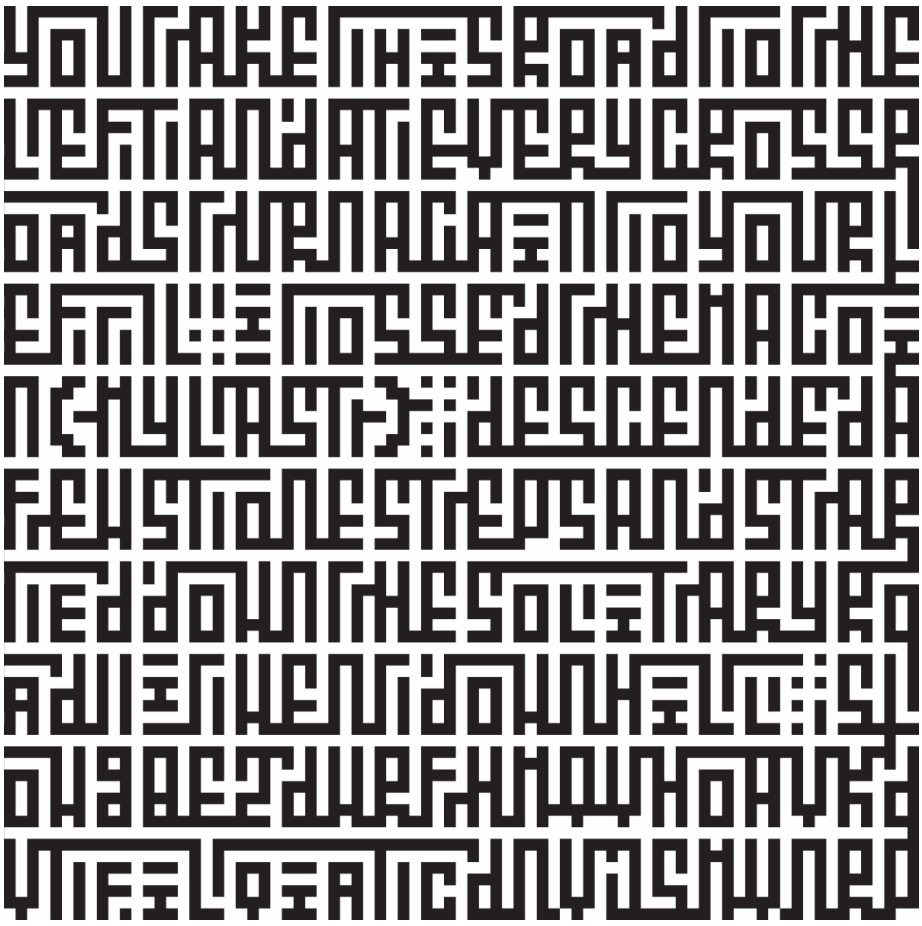


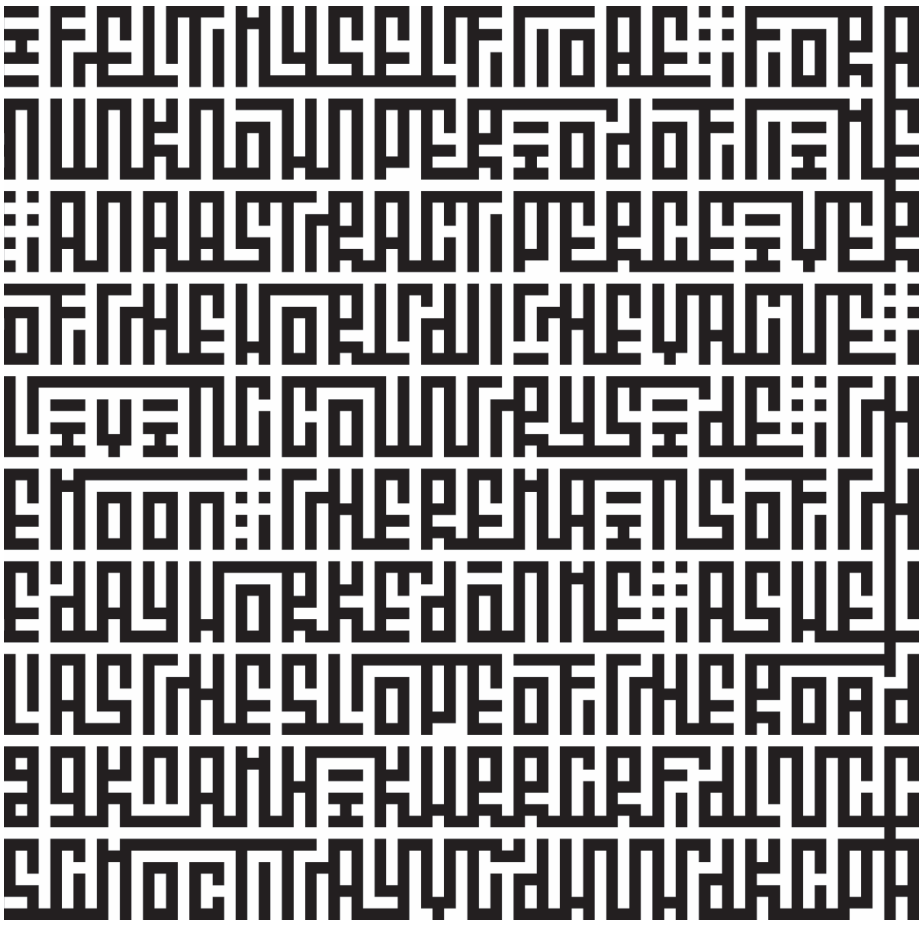


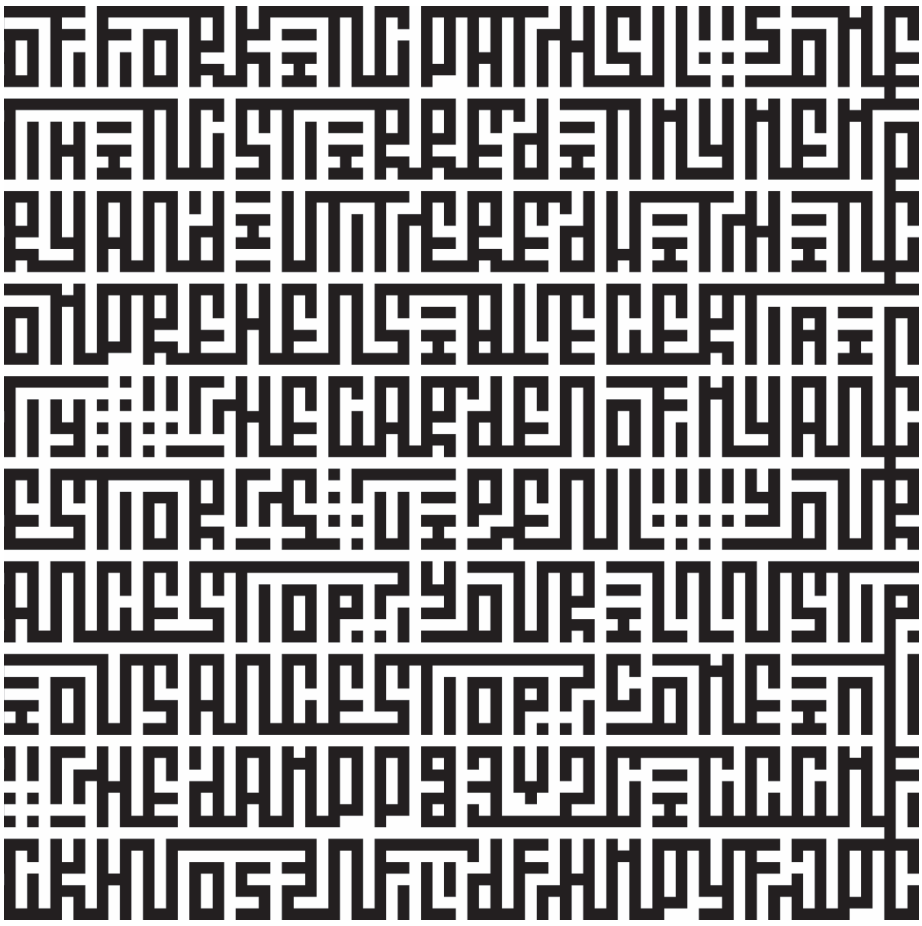


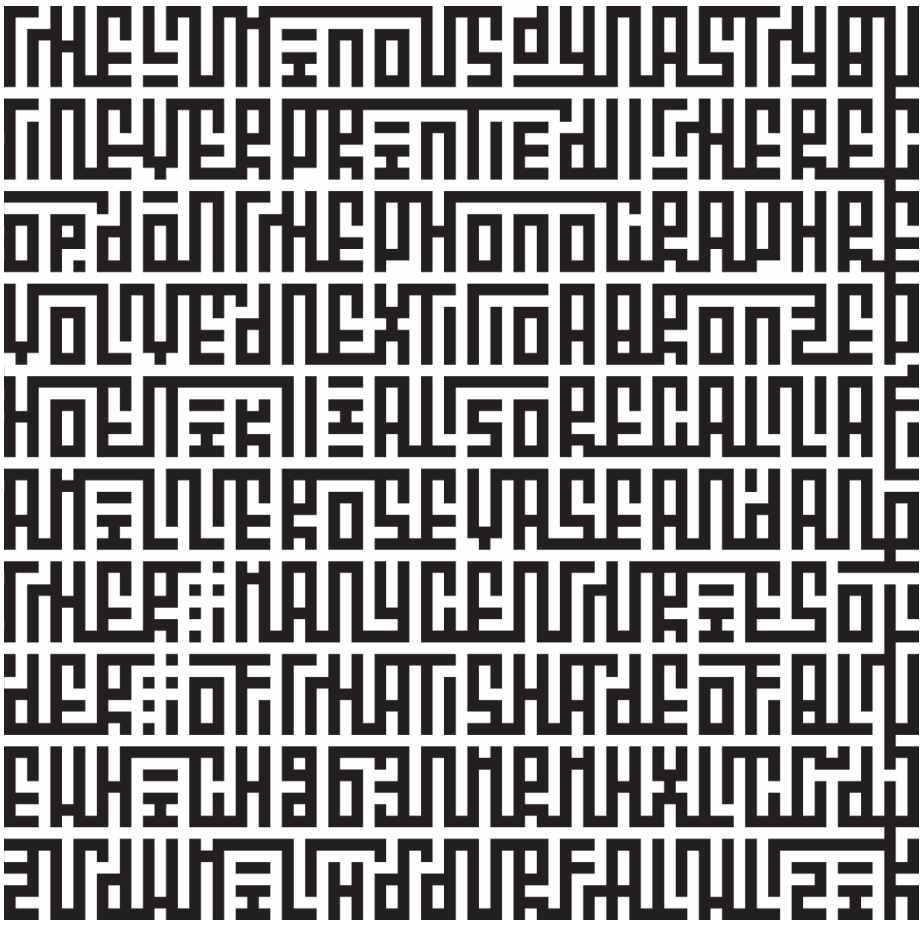


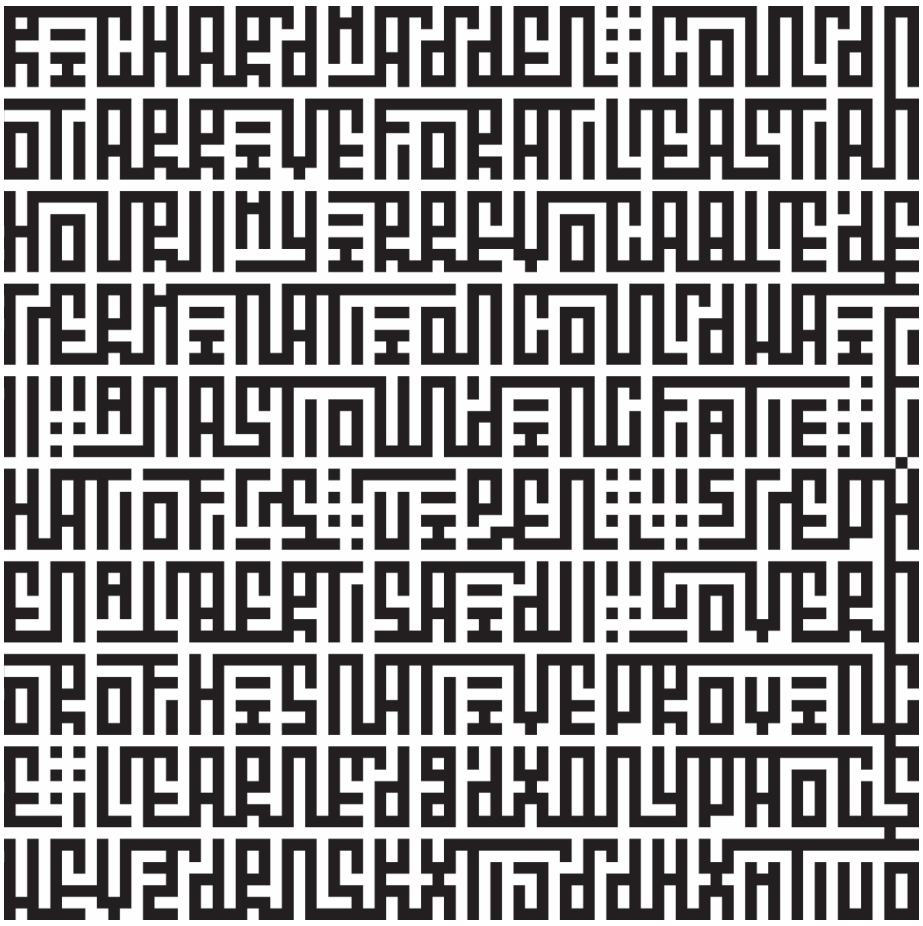


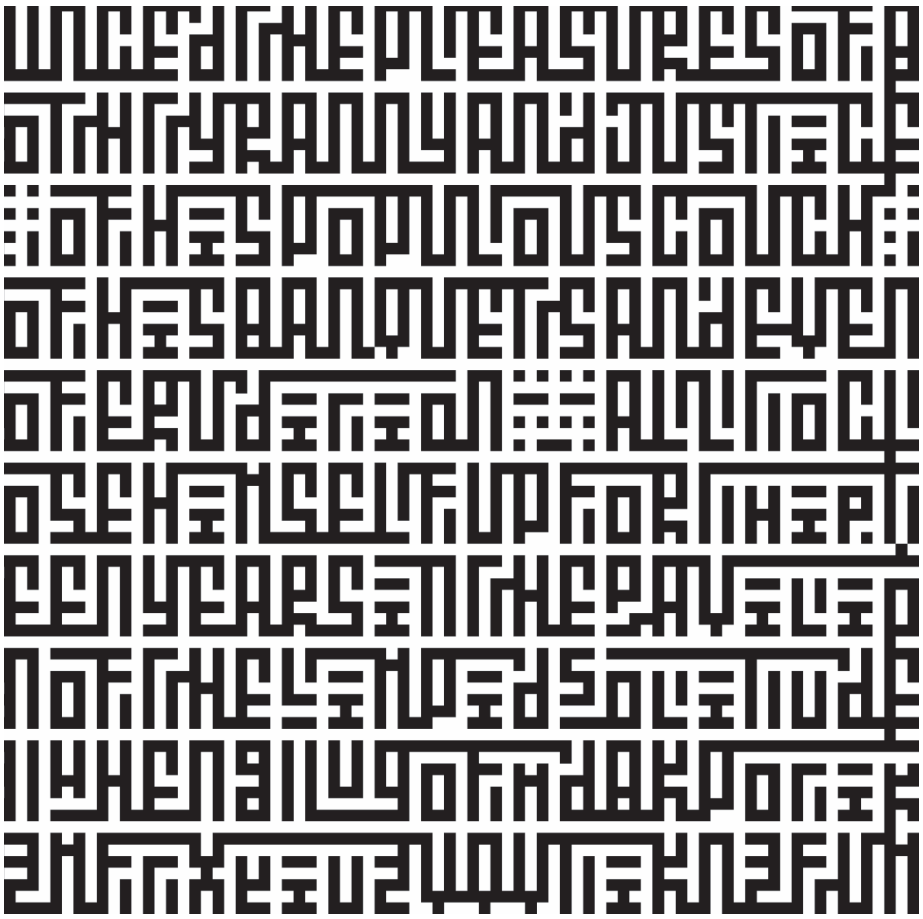


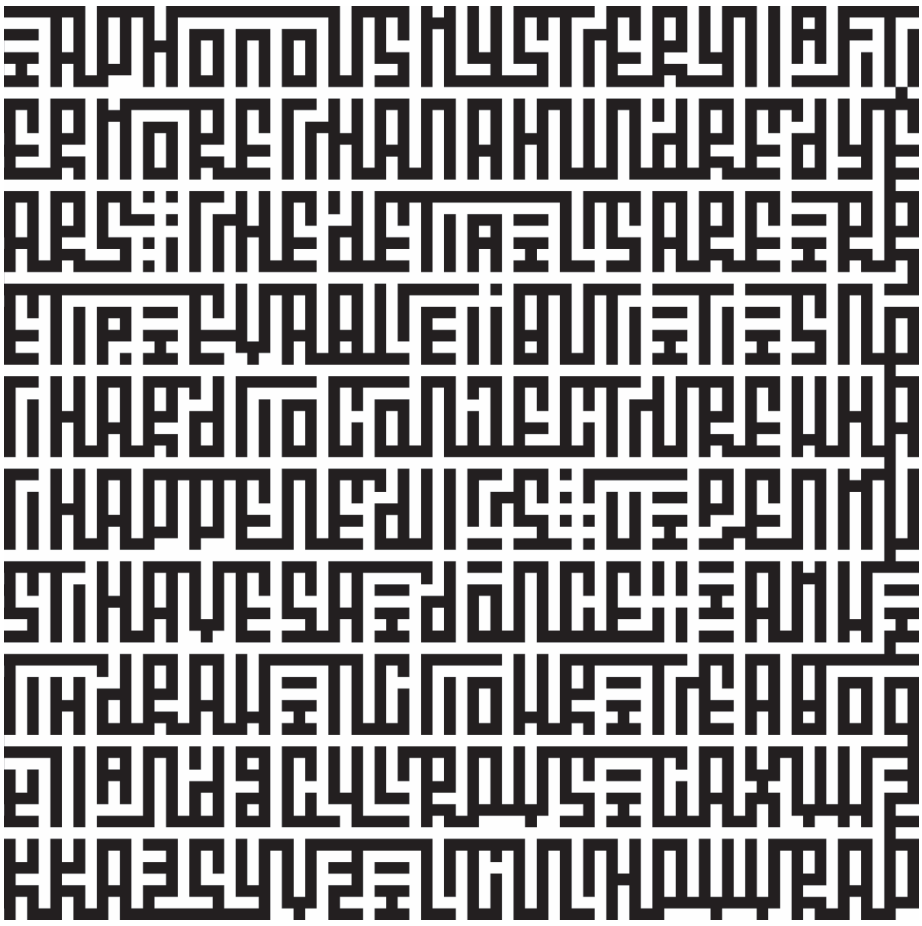


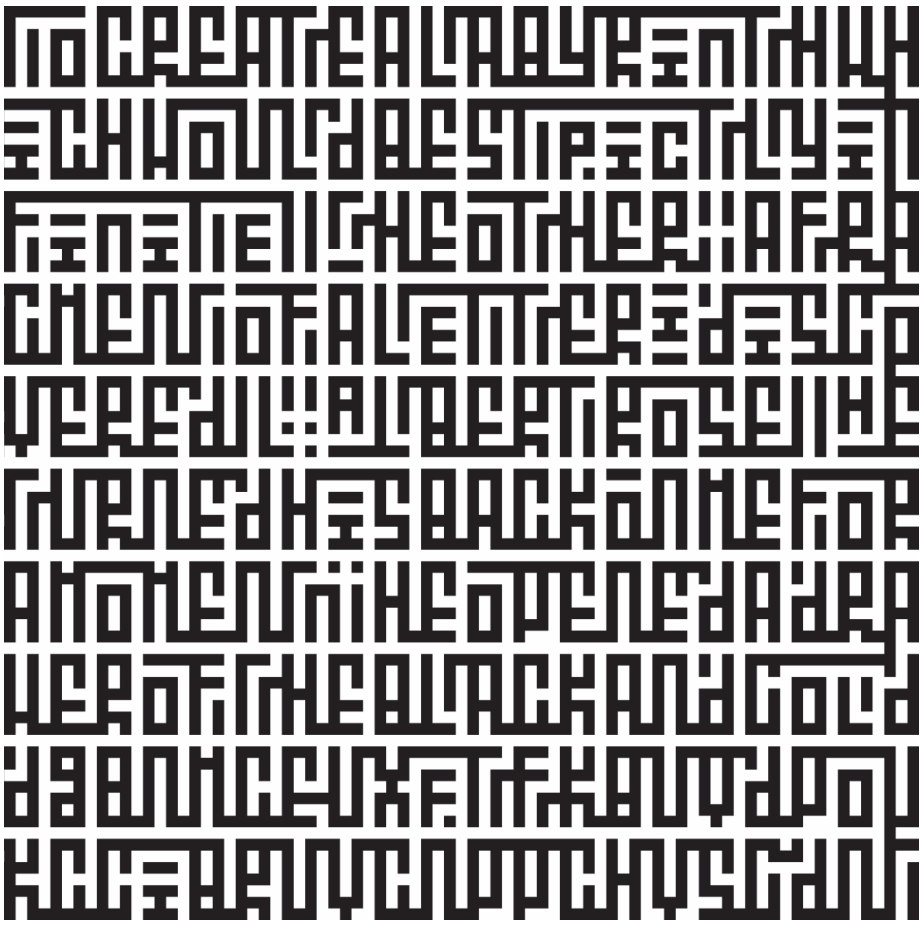


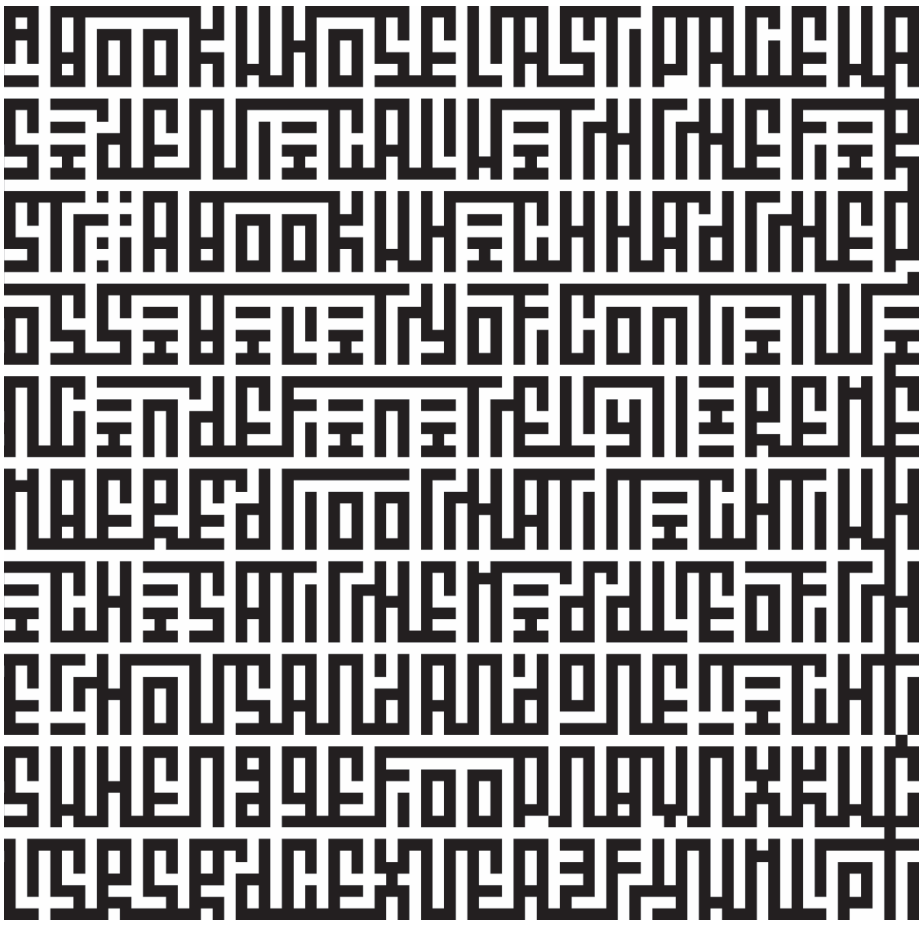


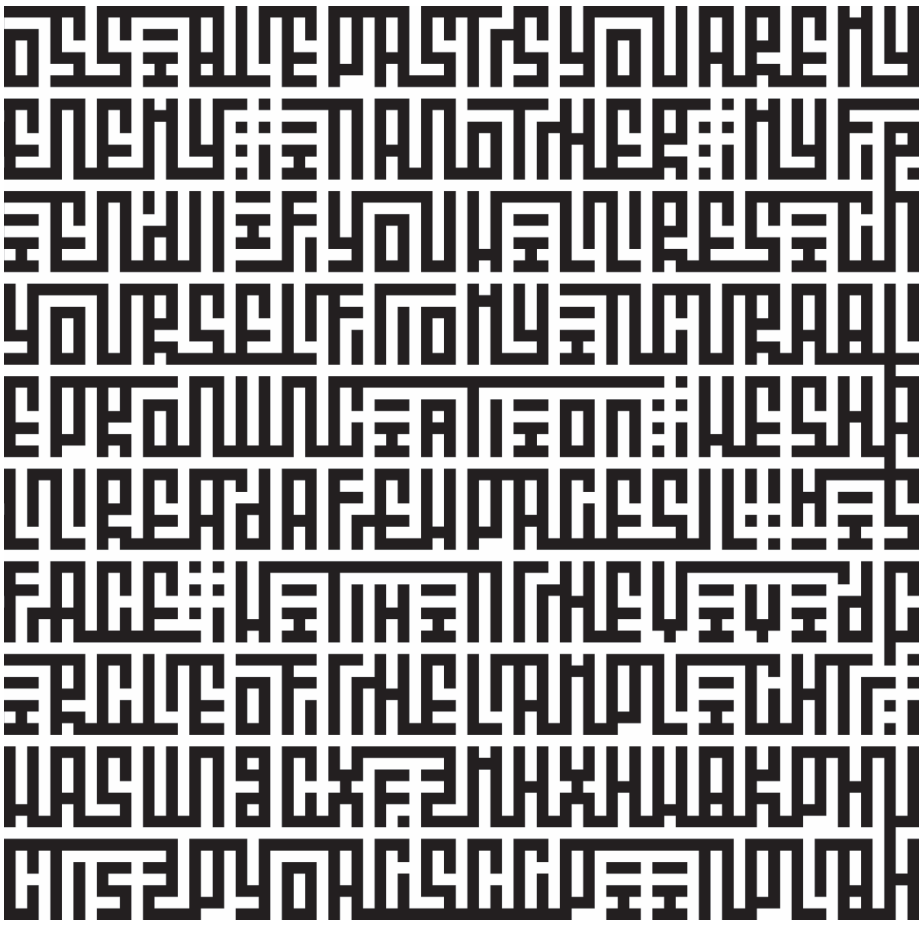


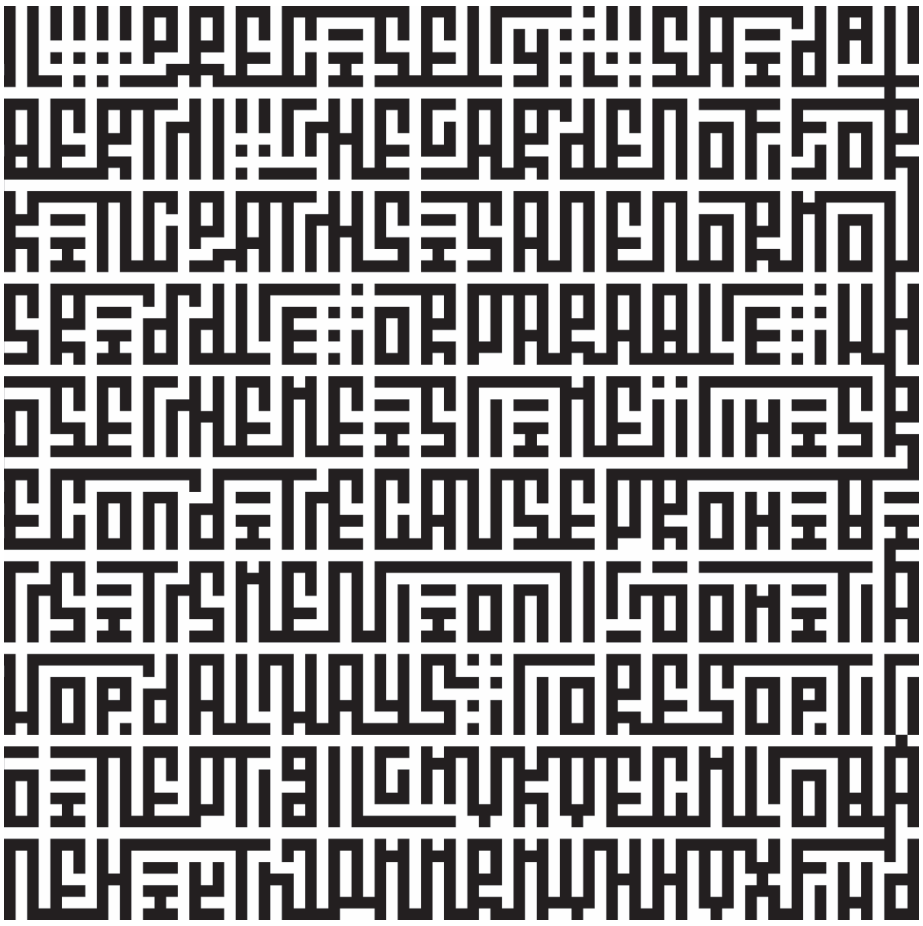


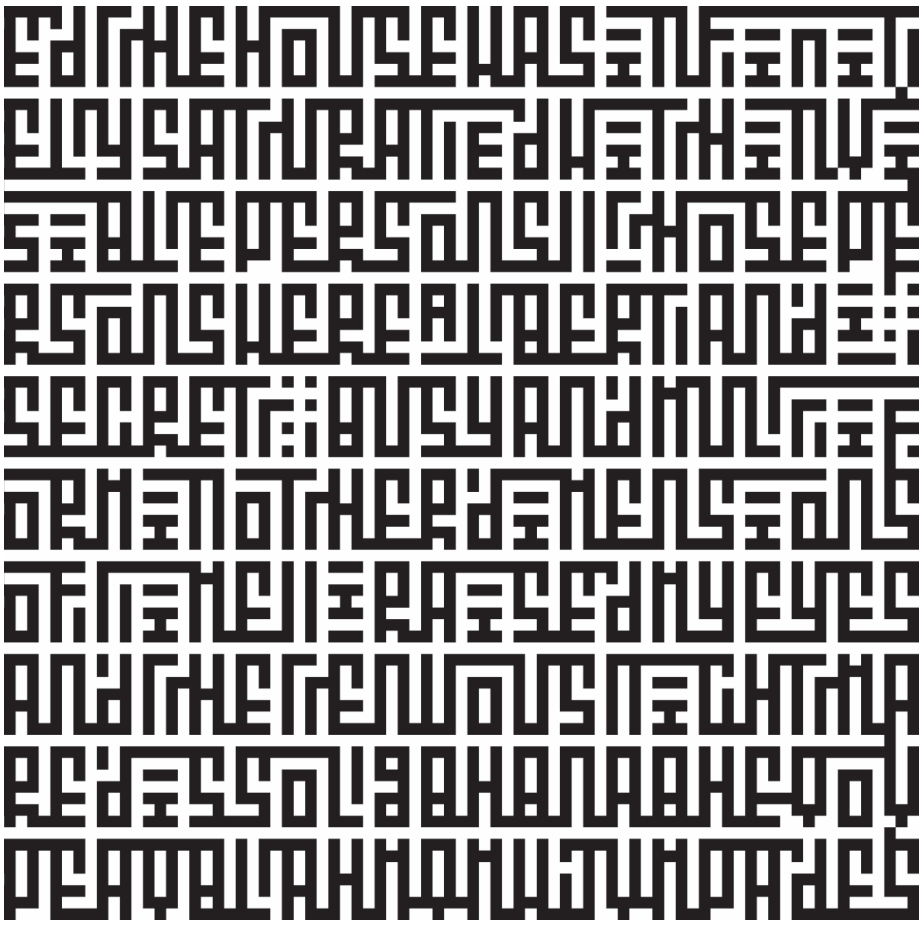


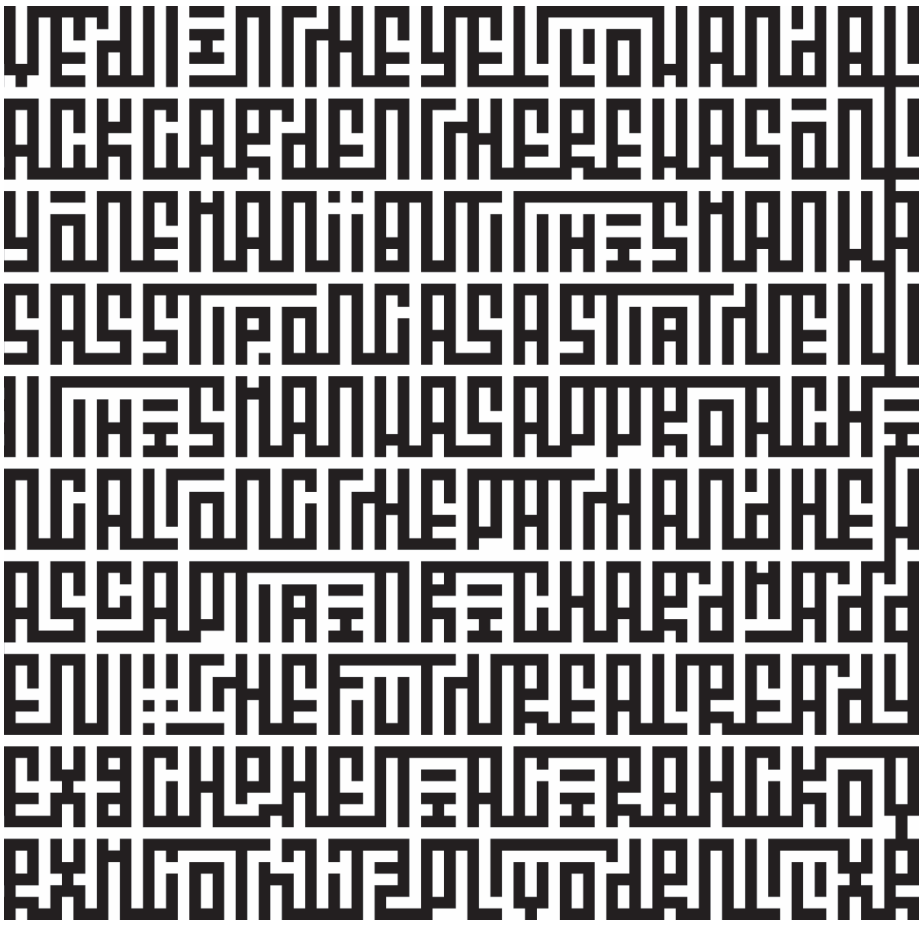


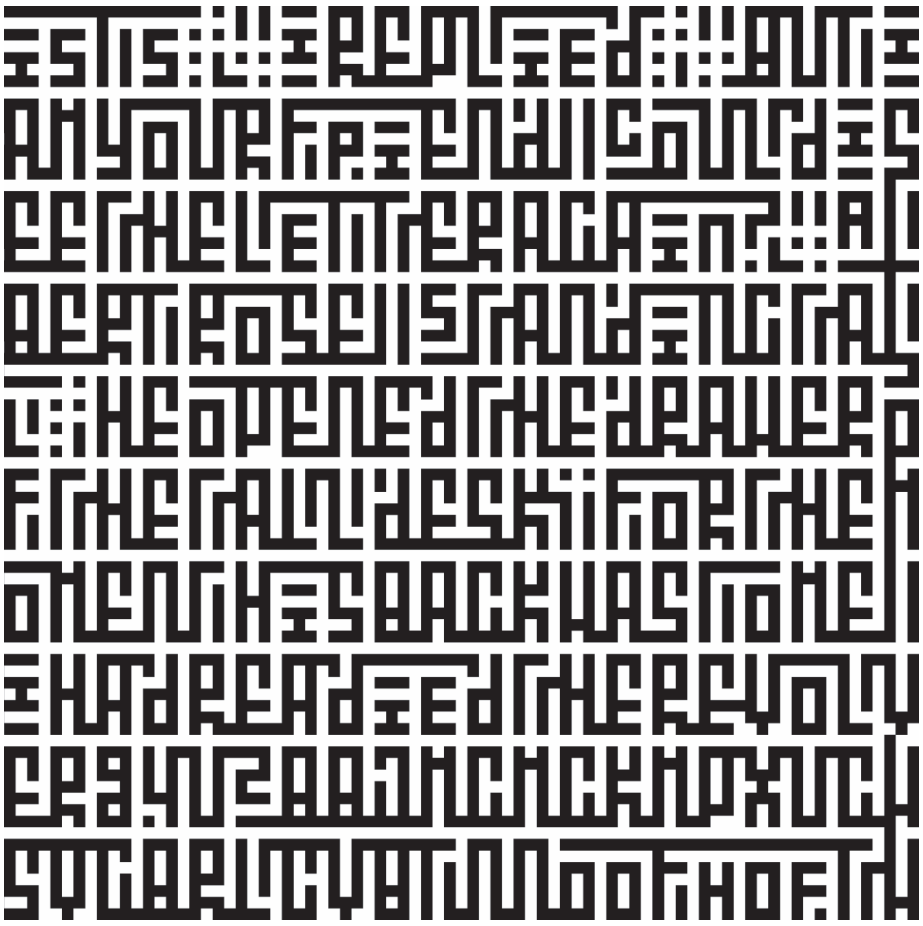


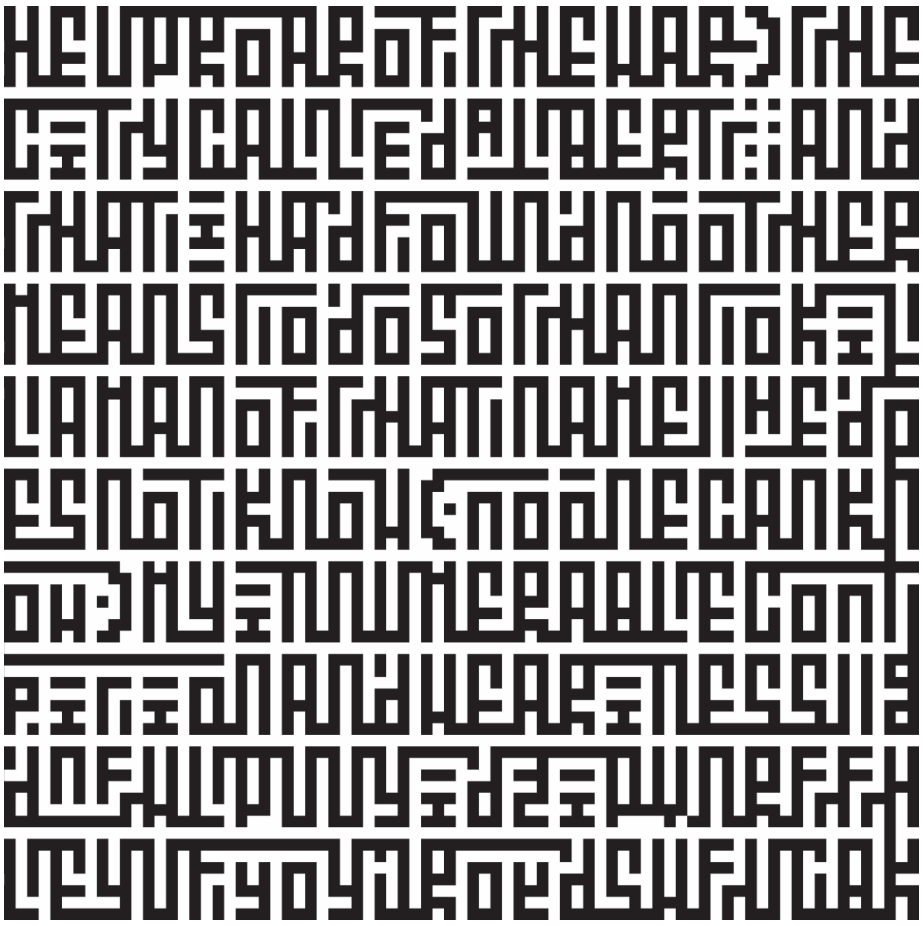


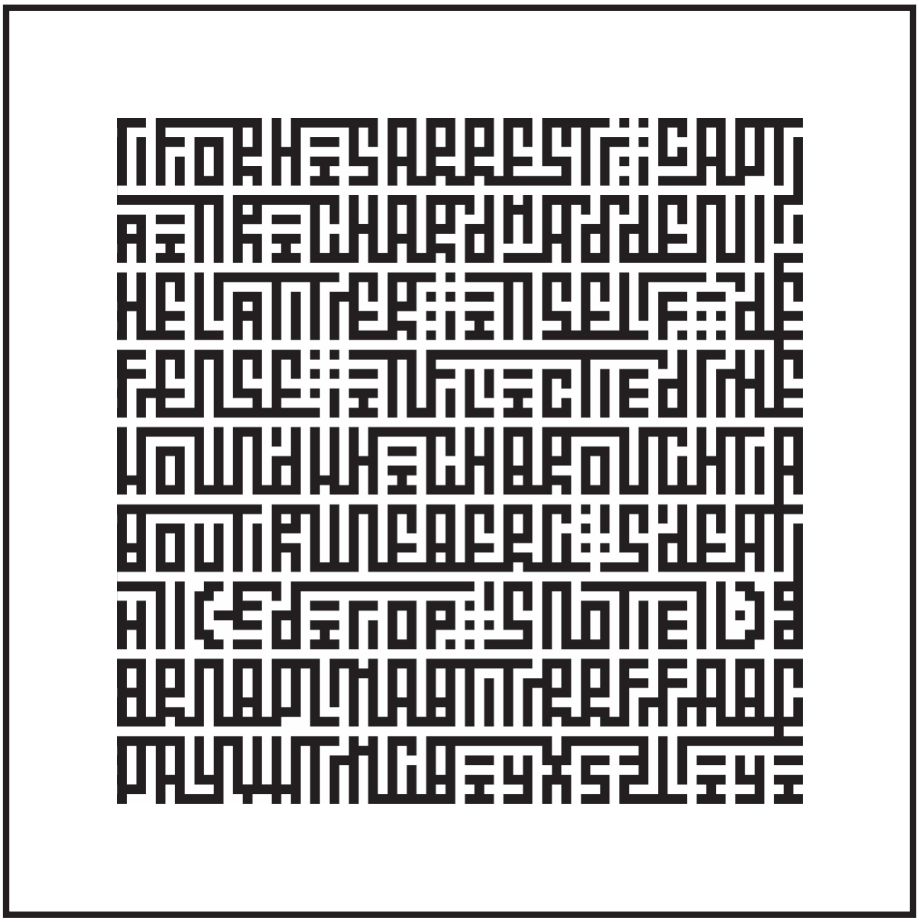












Jorge Luis Borges in 'The Garden of Forking Paths' imagines a novel by the Chinese writer Ts'ui Pen — a novel that features a hero named Fang who, when faced with a variety of potential, narrative outcomes for a decision, does not simply select one of these paths, thereby eliminating all others; instead, Fang can pursue the storylines for each of his decisions simultaneously. The novel thus retells the myriad fables that branch away from each of these crucial moments in the life of the hero — hence: 'all possible outcomes occur; each one is the point of departure for other forkings.'

Jorge Luis Borges depicts such a novel as a lost maze — 'a labyrinth of labyrinths,' whose complexity verges on the Infinite, encompassing the entirety of the Universe itself in 'an invisible labyrinth of time.' Each passage branches off into 'diverse futures,' all concurrent with each other in multiple, but parallel, worlds. Each fable has innumerable digressions from its storyline, as some forkings converge on a certain outcome, while other forkings disperse from each other, resulting in radically different endings, despite having originated from this same line of events.

‘The Garden of Forking Paths’ argues that we cannot easily determine where the boundaries of such a textual complex might begin or cease, and hence, this absence of borders aggravates the very feeling of being ‘lost’ in a structure whose design evokes such a feeling of anxiety. The vexations caused by poetry, for example, might originate in this sense that a ‘maze’ of glyphs has no exit into the light of meaning; instead, the text just leads the reader into a series of dead ends without any sense of escape from such a panoply of cryptic puzzles. The text resists every attempt to map it.

‘The Garden of Forking Paths’ by Christian Bök imagines an alternative possibility for such a tale by Jorge Luis Borges, doing so by citing the English version (written by Donald A. Yates), converting this translation into a series of ‘floor plans’ for mazes. Segments of the text (200 characters in length) have been converted into HRQR codes, each of which constitutes a work of nearly asemic, visual poetry, decodable by an automated, robot viewer, if not by a diligent, human reader. Each letter in the text thus becomes a partition in what Borges might describe as ‘a labyrinth of symbols.’

‘The Garden of Forking Paths’ by Christian Bök thus requotes the original allegory, reprinting the story as a stack of diagrams for a labyrinthine architecture. Each letter of the story exists, freed from the ease of its own legibility, since no sign-post offers enough guidance to navigate such a text, nor do any threads of meaning permit the reader to backtrack through these corridors. The gaze must follow a path without aim, losing itself in the geometric ‘blueprint’ for each letterform. Any route taken by a reader maps another maze, hidden within the very maze of language itself.