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Poems to the Sea and Painterly Poetics: Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Cole Swensen

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Chapter Two: **ROBERT CREELEY**

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1. Introduction

Robert Creeley considered his contact with Charles Olson as highly influential on the progress and refinement of his poetics, providing him with ‘access at last to a way of thinking of the process of writing that made both the thing said and the way of saying it an integral event’.¹ It is evident from the poetic and painterly ideas as well as the compositional principles Creeley often expressed in his ‘quick graphs’ and ‘notes’ on artists, that in Abstract Expressionism and the new American painting that followed, he clearly recognized and identified with an active, open-ended process of self-realization. The use he made of this influence is most plainly apparent when he says of poetic practice that ‘one proceeds from the immediate and the particular – this is where the universal is to be embodied, if anywhere’.²

Creeley’s collaborations in particular gave him the opportunity to expand his creative energy. His relationship with visual art enabled him to push against the limits of what constitutes ekphrastic writing, moving it beyond the narrowness of pictorial representation or what Creeley called the ‘descriptive act’ in wanting to avoid ‘any act which leaves the attention outside the poem’³ so that each poem functions as a condensed process in itself. For Creeley, collaboration meant truth to the original experience of working with the artist concerned, and to the actual details of perception in relation to their artistic practice. Creeley observes in his essay ‘Introduction to The New Writing in the USA’ (1965) that his poetic language, ‘the sentence itself’, in response to the visual and in accordance with Olson’s reassertion

¹ Robert Creeley, ‘On the Road: Notes on Artists and Poets 1950-1965 [1974], *Claims for Poetry*, ed. Donald Hall (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1982) pp. 62-71 (p. 64).

² Creeley in ‘Robert Creeley in Conversation with Charles Tomlinson [1963]’, Robert Creeley, *Contexts of Poetry: Interviews 1961-1971* (Bolinas: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973) pp. 13-28 (p. 16).

³ Robert Creeley, *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes and Essays*, ed. Donald Allen (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1970) p. 23.

of Fenollosa's proposition, is always "an exchange of force" in no way a "completed thought".⁴

Over his long career he took part in forty-five collaborative projects, thirty of which were featured in a touring exhibition and accompanying catalogue *In Company: Robert Creeley Collaborations* (1999).⁵ Among the painters he worked with were Georg Baselitz, Francesco Clemente, Jim Dine, Robert Indiana, Alex Katz, R.B. Kitaj and Susan Rothenberg. His collaborations varied in approach: with some artists he responded to works already in existence; with some others the aim was to develop new work side-by-side; while further joint projects had Creeley writing the text from the outset, to be then incorporated into the artist's work at a later stage.

As John Yau explains, Creeley avoided writing in the vein of what is generally known as the 'poem-painting', his goal being to produce poetry 'simultaneously integral to the art for which it was written and independent from it'.⁶ These poems and sequences were frequently reprinted and republished in Creeley's own books of poetry outside of the original collaboration and without reproduction of the artwork. Ultimately Creeley was interested only in the inspirational qualities the art or the artist could provide, for as Yau points out, the actual artwork 'becomes a locus for the writer both to inhabit and investigate, a way for him to explore the shifting relationship between 'I' and 'he', the subjective and objective'.⁷

⁴ Robert Creeley, 'Introduction to The New American Writing in the USA [1965]', *The Collected Essays of Robert Creeley* (London: University of California Press, 1989) pp. 89-96 (p. 92).

⁵ Amy Cappellazzo and Elizabeth Licata, *In Company: Robert Creeley's Collaborations* (Greensboro: University of North Carolina Press, 1999)

⁶ John Yau, 'Active Participant: Robert Creeley and the Visual Arts', Cappellazzo and Licata, pp. 45-82 (p. 45).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

After examining the conditions of influence that Abstract Expressionism contributed to the ethos and direction of Creeley's poetry, my discussion focuses on his concern with how the speaker in his early poems is preoccupied with 'seeing': not only with seeing other people and objects or being seen by them, but especially how the self observes itself, both in stasis and in motion. The short, terse, self-reflective lyric poems of Creeley's collection *For Love* (1962)⁸ are concerned with self-contained instinctive gestures that create an exceptional openness to emotional impressions. Creeley imbues his evocative yet oblique language with the painterly aesthetic he identifies in his published art criticism, particularly in his writing on the painter Philip Guston.

Likewise Creeley's insight into Frank Stella's minimalist painting informs the serial poem 'Numbers', in the collection *Pieces* (1968).⁹ This poem was developed in collaboration with the artist Robert Indiana to offer essentially a non-descriptive and non-pictorial response, while at the same time, engaging in a parallel exploration of themes and approaches that are present within both artists' creative processes.

⁸ Robert Creeley, *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley 1945-1975* (Berkeley: University of California, 1982) pp. 103-258.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 377-446.

2. In Company with Abstract Expressionism

In his interviews, essays, reviews and statements of poetics, Creeley frequently referred to painters as models for his own sense of creativity. He explains to Linda Wagner (1965) that the visual art he was initially relating to was Abstract Expressionism, the most promising radical art of his formative time as a poet:

In writing I'm telling something to myself, curiously, that I didn't have the knowing of previously. One time, again some years ago, Franz Kline was being questioned ... and finally said, "Well, look, if I paint what *you* know, then that will simply bore you, the repetition from me to you. If I paint what *I* know, it will be boring to myself. Therefore I paint what I *don't* know". And I write what I don't know in that sense.¹⁰

Creeley felt that visual art provided active stimulus for his writing while his willingness to undertake so many projects with different artists can be traced back to the spirit of collaboration surrounding his connection with Black Mountain College. As editor of *Black Mountain Review* in the early 1950s he worked not only with Franz Kline, but also Rene Laubies, Philip Guston and John Altoon amongst others as contributing artists. All were involved in making gestural paintings that reinforced Creeley's own thinking, while offering key parallels in the ways they explored process, treating the canvas as an open and inclusive field. Interviewed two years later by Lewis MacAdams (1967), Creeley states that by 1953 his relationship with painters 'does become decisive' particularly to Altoon who becomes important 'because his energies were so incredibly – you know, the things he drew, made manifest in his work, were images of my own reality so to speak'.¹¹

In 1953 Creeley also saw Jackson Pollock's work for the first time, experiencing first

¹⁰ Creeley in 'Linda W. Wagner: A Colloquy with Robert Creeley [1965]', *Contexts*, pp. 71-124 (p. 73).

¹¹ Creeley in 'Lewis MacAdams and Robert Creeley [1967]', *Contexts*, pp. 137-170 (p. 153).

hand what Clement Greenberg described as ‘the dissolution of the picture into sheer texture, sheer sensation’.¹² Reflecting on this encounter at the Galerie Facheiti in Paris in his essay ‘On the Road: Notes on Artists and Poets 1950-1965’ (1974), Creeley considers the concerns shared between Pollock’s painting and his own poetry, his realization that:

a number of American painters had made the shift I was myself so anxious to accomplish, that they had, in fact, already begun to move away from the insistent *pictorial*, whether figurative or non-figurative, to a manifest directly of the energy inherent in the materials, literally, and their physical manipulation in the act of painting itself. *Process*, in the sense that Olson had found it in Whitehead, was clearly much on their minds.¹³

Pollock’s approach affirmed Creeley’s sense of the materiality of words he strived for in his early poems. Recognizing this shift towards process that defines Abstract Expressionism, Creeley tells MacAdams of his admiration for this directness, these ‘ways of experiencing activity, energy’.¹⁴ Again he relates how American painters, ‘their way of moving and acting and being in this activity’, connect to Charles Olson, and similarly to Robert Duncan, both strong advocates of ‘open-form’:

this was so much their fact, and Duncan actually in his “Notes on *Maximus*” makes very clear the relation to the painting that he’d felt in San Francisco with the group there – Clyfford Still and Diebenkorn and the whole roster of people he had as friends. That, curiously was far more fresh as imagination of possibility than what was the case in writing where everything was still argued with traditional or inherited attitudes and forms.¹⁵

The reference to Duncan’s ‘Notes on *Maximus*’ (1956) underlines a respect for the ways that painters opened up certain compositional possibilities; how drawing on

¹² Clement Greenberg, ‘The Crisis of the Easel Picture [1948]’, sections reproduced in Norman L. Kleeblatt, *Action / Abstraction: Pollock, De Kooning, and American Art, 1940-1976* (London: Yale University Press, 2008) pp. 191-192.

¹³ Robert Creeley, ‘On the Road: Notes on Artists and Poets 1950-1965’, p. 64.

¹⁴ Creeley, *Contexts*, p. 154.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

their approach gave shape to Black Mountain poetics.¹⁶ Creeley understood that working in their respective mediums, poets and painters shared the same desire to follow a truth to one's materials and preserve only the absolute reality of the moment, to break away from 'traditional or inherited attitudes and forms'.

Both Creeley and Olson sought to create a poetics at the centre of a broader philosophy permeating all of the arts aimed at encouraging spontaneity, hybridity and less prescriptive forms of self-expression. Olson's influential essay 'Projective Verse' (1950)¹⁷ sets out the poem as a field of activity, as fact of a thing's happening, as an event or occurrence in process. Explaining how projective technique brings the poem into being, Olson quotes Creeley's famous statement 'FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT'¹⁸ that had originated in a letter from the first year of their correspondence in 1950. Here Creeley writes of his desire to 'go over into: the possible casts or methods for a way into / a subject: to make clear: that form is never more than an extension of content'.¹⁹ Olson's response to what he calls this 'one sentence to / make me, to, create this cit. for this day plus' was 'beautiful, and most USABLE'.²⁰

Although not striving for an obvious ekphrastic relationship with Abstract Expressionism, both Creeley and Olson wanted to achieve for poetry the same immediacy and impact proclaimed in the work of these painters. Being in close

¹⁶ Robert Duncan, 'Notes on Poetics Regarding Olson's *Maximus*' [*Black Mountain Review*, No. 6, Spring 1956], *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, ed. Donald Allen and Warren Tallman (New York: Grove Press, 1973) pp. 187-195.

¹⁷ Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse [1950]' *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (London: University of California Press, 1997) pp. 239-249.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

¹⁹ Robert Creeley to Charles Olson [June 5th, 1950], *The Complete Correspondence, Volumes 1-10*, ed. George F. Butterick (1-8), Richard Blevins (9-10) (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980-96), Vol.1, p. 79.

²⁰ Olson to Creeley [June 8th, 1950], *The Complete Correspondence, Volume 1*, p. 85.

proximity to such artists was instrumental in giving Creeley and his peers the conviction to explore and experiment. At Black Mountain under Olson's leadership, painters and poets alike discovered the means to engage with open forms and composition by field; to trust in their imaginative leaps of consciousness. Constraints between disciplines were removed, so everyone was potentially in dialogue with everyone else irrespective of medium or subject area. Although the college was geographically remote, Creeley helped foster Black Mountain's interaction with the avant-garde art world of New York City. He admired the integrity and dedication of Pollock, Kline and Guston especially, part of a 'company' of likeminded artists with whom to share mutual concerns and creative ideas. Creeley recalls that 'uncluttered directness of perception and act' he absorbed 'hours on end listening to Franz Kline' and other painters holding court in the Cedar Bar.²¹ As Bill Berkson astutely observes:

what the poets and painters developed together was synergy, the solitary pursuit made sociable by friendship and other allegiances that deepened according to attitude or esthetic stance.²²

This richness of thought and expression, what Creeley calls 'the most articulate sense of human reality in seemingly casual conversation'²³ was a powerful influence on the poet. The same generosity of spirit and opening-up of possibility continued to inform Creeley's lifelong identification and collaboration with visual artists.

²¹ Creeley, 'On the Road: Notes on Artists and Poets 1950-1965', p. 66.

²² Bill Berkson, 'Poet and Painter Coda', *Franz Kline: Art and the Structure of Identity*, ed. Stephen C. Foster (London: Whitechapel/Electa, 1994) pp. 141-153 (p. 142).

²³ Creeley, 'On the Road: Notes on Artists and Poets 1950-1965', p. 66.

3. Sinuous Gestures: Robert Creeley's 'Le Fou'

'At last the picture is the thing, without need to further reference', Creeley remarks in his note 'Rene Laubies: An Introduction' (1954).²⁴ When it came to the artwork featured in most of his books issued in the early 1950s through small publishers, including his own Divers Press based in Majorca, Creeley chose to work with artists such as Laubies whose emphasis on painterly process linked him to the Abstract Expressionist movement.²⁵ Already making a connection between the materiality of words for use in poetry and the stark calligraphic qualities of Laubies's non-descriptive images, Creeley declares 'the application of paint or ink or whatever to a given surface – which act shall effect a thing, in itself significant, an autonomy'.²⁶

These comments on Laubies connect creative expression to experience rather than representation: the practice itself whether painting or writing was now 'an autonomy', vital for its own sake. 'Le Fou' is one of a series of poems that was crucial to Creeley's development in the first half of the 1950s, later included in the collection *For Love* (1962). This was at a time when he was exploring a diversity of line and the idea that in these bare utterances, as they are being formed, different things are coming to be said simultaneously. In this poem dedicated to Olson, thoughts operate as sensations and yet resonate objectively as observational snapshots of the speaker's self-reflexive attempt to construct a poem. In a series of affecting images concerned with moving through a landscape, Creeley captures the urgent sense of the speaker's words and phrases arriving spontaneously onto the page:

²⁴ Robert Creeley, 'Rene Laubies: An Introduction [1954]', *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes and Essays*, pp. 339-340 (p. 339).

²⁵ All of his collaborations with artists are listed in 'Robert Creeley: Biographical Chronology' in Cappellazzo and Licata, pp. 102-104. Creeley's early books of poems include *Le Fou* (1952) with artwork by Ashley Bryan, *The Immoral Principle* (1953) with drawings by Rene Laubies, *All that is Lovely in Men* (1955) with drawings by Dan Rice, and *If You* (1956) with linocuts by Fielding Dawson.

²⁶ Creeley, *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes and Essays*, p. 339.

who plots, then, the lines
talking, taking, always the beat from
the breath
 (moving slowly at first
the breath
 which is slow –

I mean, graces come slowly,
it is that way.

So slowly (they are waving
we are moving
 away from (the trees
 the usual (go by
which is slower than this, is
 (we are moving!
goodbye²⁷

Although the spread of the poem is spacious, the syntax is disrupted through dropped lines, half-statements, parentheses and the emphatically reiterated concern of advancing ‘so slowly’. The chance detail of ‘the trees / the usual’ and the speaker keeping to the present tense to explain ‘they are waving / we are moving’ provide textual analogues to the prioritizing of materiality, immediacy and experience by the Abstract Expressionists that Creeley regarded so highly, whereby ‘Le Fou’ just like a canvas by Pollock or Guston, becomes a field of potential relations to be traversed.

In this call for the particulars of ‘talking’ and ‘moving’ there is a stuttering yet meditative unfolding of time and distance, for although this speaker has an ambulant gaze, he or she remains intensely focused on ‘the breath / (moving slowly at first / the breath / which is slow’. Creeley’s writing is obsessively attentive to form emerging naturally from the actual content and therefore what comes to be said is within the process of writing itself: the dual impulse with equal agility and composure to look at the self attempting to compose the poem while at the same time, trying to consider

²⁷ Creeley, ‘Le Fou’, *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley 1945-1975*, p. 111.

and absorb what is happening in the locality, for ‘I mean, graces come slowly, / it is that way’. Charles Altieri observes that a poem by Creeley ‘does not simply track subjective energies as they engage particular situations. Rather it tracks itself attending to those energies as they work’.²⁸ What connects these energies is a poetic voice that continually moves from one focus to another, shifting between points of vision.

It is as if the speaker ‘who plots, then, the lines / talking’ is receiving glimpses from angles rather than head-on, like faraway signals from the exterior world. These are the thoughts and sensations informing the poet’s mindscape, only part of which is allowed to form into familiar ground, for example, ‘taking, always the beat / from the breath’ and ‘moving / away from (the trees / the usual (go by’). The passing phrases, broken by pausing and dropped lines, become the experience of the speaker who recoils from the imposition of presenting a singular perspective. Instead of a fixed view, the particulars of experience are registered as unstable and in motion where ‘they are waving / we are moving’ and therefore never completely coherent or decipherable.

In this sense, with the speaker’s shifts of consciousness causing momentary insights, ‘Le Fou’ becomes the verbal equivalent of an Abstract Expressionist all-over composition, activating the same kind of energized field while animating a comparable non-pictorial surface. The flux of reality is embodied within each instinctive action: breathing, moving and ‘talking, taking, always the beat from / the

²⁸ Charles Altieri, ‘What Does *Echoes* Echo?’, *Form, Power, and Person in Robert Creeley’s Life and Work*, ed. Stephen Fredman and Steve McCaffery (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010) pp. 36-49 (p. 49).

breath' which are all bodily sensations. In his essay 'Notes Apropos "Free Verse"' (1966), Creeley shows he is fully aware of 'an ordering that is taking place as one writes' which reflects the ongoing relationship of one's body and one's mind, so that every poet will have:

some way, so to speak intimate with his own condition. That is, I feel there will be an inherent condition for an ordering intimate to the fact of himself as literal organism. Again, one of the several virtues of Olson's "Projective Verse" was that of returning to poetry its relation with *physiological* condition.²⁹

According to Creeley, Olson had taught him to try and realize the self, to release the potentiality of poetry as a physical event in the world: 'evident to me was that writing could be an intensely specific revelation of one's own content'³⁰. Like Pollock, Kline or Guston and other abstract painters, Creeley came to believe that one could express without representing. According to Yau, the 'non-mimetic' surfaces articulated by Creeley's early poems emerge from the poet's understated concern with 'the tension between the body's senses and the mind's thinking'³¹ and that his aim was 'to measure the changing contours of the self he inhabits, as well as to discover the nature of the tenuous relation between the self and the self's perceptions'.³²

This interplay of subjective and objective experience was part of the formative influence Olson exercised on Creeley's developing poetics: his focus on the breath in relation to the line and his conception of the projective poem as an open field of energy were decisive factors. This led to Creeley's own particular emphasis on the sound of speech and how the poet finds a voice in the sound of a poem; how his

²⁹ Robert Creeley, 'Notes Apropos "Free Verse" [1966]', *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes and Essays*, pp. 56-60 (p. 58).

³⁰ Robert Creeley, 'I'm given to write poems [1967]' (Berlin Lecture), *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes and Essays*, p. 72.

³¹ Yau, p. 56.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 64.

intonation, rhythm and internal rhyme transmit emotion and attitude; how physiological phrasing imparts a gestural energy to the poetic line, pulling the body's physical existence into play; and how the poem as set out on the page will reveal the intimacies of a poet's particular voice. However, Creeley departs from Olson's expansive rendering of language to create brevity and syntactic compression, achieved through his acute sense of line, his strong enjambment and especially through his sparse but accurate placement of individual words. This concern with spacing and the relation of words as set out on the page emphasize Creeley's oral intention, what he calls 'the rhythmic modality', for he states that 'the typographical context of poetry is still simply the issue of how to score – in the musical sense – to indicate how I want the poem to be read'.³³

His overlapping poetic engagement with music,³⁴ as well as visual art, meant that all three forms of artistic expression could open up sensory pathways where perceptions, sensations and actions might converge and interact within his writing process.

Underlying Creeley's poems are the syncopative and sonorous qualities he gained from his proximity to the practices of both musicians and painters. He was constantly aware of the correlation between projective verse, abstract painting and bebop jazz as in the improvisational phrasing of Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Dizzy Gillespie, John Coltrane and other modern jazz soloists. Blurring the boundaries between the senses, the extension of each art form through spontaneity revealed the cumulative effect of phrase adding upon phrase, gesture building upon gesture, utterance upon utterance belonging to that given moment. Rather than simply hear a 'speaking' art

³³ Creeley, *Contexts*, p. 77.

³⁴ Creeley worked with composers Steve Lacy, Steve Swallow and the group Mercury Rev amongst others, in various music-based collaborations.

object, Creeley's ekphrastic method reflects a freedom that is open enough to encapsulate synaesthetic experience: the mixing of visual and sonic sensation in his distilled poetic language.

4. Cross-Influences: Creeley and Philip Guston

Creeley was fascinated by the unrestricted way painters were able to innovate with the most basic of materials; the way the substance of an emotion could be rendered on canvas in various consistencies of oil colour or in some cases, cheap household paint. What he had to say could lie within the texture of language, in the solidity and cohesion of small groupings or single words. As with the example of the painter, the poet becomes involved in a series of all-decisive moments so that the work in hand is about encountering and extemporizing. Kevin Power describes how Creeley pushed ‘into corners of the self’ to enunciate a very individual content of feeling:

It is a question of moving along, even stumbling painfully, with the writing, with the feelings as felt. There is a direct, unbroken connection between means (content) and end (form) ... What Creeley is doing is to evidence emotion and intelligence, turning language into an active principle.³⁵

Of the painters he was in company with, he looked most favourably towards Guston, who Creeley recalls in an interview with Power, had actually ‘read me long before I’d read him, so to speak, or seen his work. He knew my poems very well, not just as a form of flattery, but really knew them’.³⁶ Creeley related to the emotional intensity that underpinned Guston’s abstract painting, affirming his own need to distil what is most visually compelling as an observer in a more subtle and understated way, for the poet had previously commented how:

Guston was very good to me in the sense that he was very generous with his time ... I became very intrigued by Guston and by the visual, what’s seen in the world and how all that can be complex. Because I’d been so involved with the economy of words as experience of sound and rhythm that suddenly it was like having

³⁵ Kevin Power, ‘In, Around, and About *The Black Mountain Review*: Robert Creeley and Company’, *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art*, ed. Vincent Katz (London: The MIT Press, 2002) pp. 270-295 (p. 291).

³⁶ Creeley in ‘Robert Creeley on Art and Poetry: an interview with Kevin Power [1976]’, *Robert Creeley’s Life and Work*, ed. John Wilson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987) p. 352.

things open again as things seen.³⁷

Even in the most abstract phase of his work, Guston never managed to entirely erase traces of the visible figurative world, as if in each painting, several objects or figures were always on the point of finding a way back in. Composed of shimmering fields of short vertical and horizontal cross-hatched brushstrokes, Guston's gestural abstractions of the mid to late 1950s tremble with uncertainty. Dore Ashton draws attention to the 'winging strokes' in various rhythms that Guston puts into these unsettled atmospheres to set them vibrating:

For they have a beat: they beat like a living organism. They pound away, quickening emotions, and they are as stressed as a pulse, albeit the pulse of a nervous, embattled individual.³⁸

Adjusting each of these quivering brush-marks according to its neighbour, Guston's primary concern during this period was to relate his off-centred forms of strong colour, usually in red, black or blue-green, to the more diffused yet still highly charged surrounding space painted in half-tones of pinkish grey.

Andrew Epstein points out how close alliances in the American avant-garde of the 1950s are frequently celebrated uncritically and that 'a poetics of friendship' can actually activate 'the creation, the meaning, and the form of important poems'.³⁹

When Creeley begins his critical piece 'Philip Guston: A Note' (1956) with 'I tried to be careful, but the form would not have it. My care was the form I had given to it.

³⁷ Creeley, *Contexts*, p. 155.

³⁸ Dore Ashton, *Philip Guston* (New York: Grove Press, 1960) p. 59.

³⁹ Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) p. 4.

How to care, that one does care?',⁴⁰ he is acutely aware as a poet of his relationship to Guston's precarious process of finding and placing the materiality of form against the non-reality of what is unformed around it. In response to the impact of Guston's clusters of twisting colour strokes where the painter seems to be calling indefinite forms back into being, shapes that hover on the brink of legibility, Creeley offers a detailed definition of the word 'care':

Care, it seems, comes from several words, among them the Anglo-Saxon *caru*, *cearu* (anxiety) and the Old Saxon *kara*, (sorrow). Is it moving with care through care, that it comes to? I care, certainly.⁴¹

In Creeley's poems of 1959-60, one can see parallels with Guston's painterly style: their common purpose to move 'with care through care', to move with 'anxiety' and 'sorrow' through the same gestural elements in their respective mediums that would openly express multiplicity of experience. Focusing on the work of an unidentified artist who has 'tried to be careful', Creeley's poem 'The Figures' reads like a statement of their shared artistic aims, to 'care, certainly':

The stillness
of the wood,
the figures formed

by hands so still
they touched it
to be one

hand holding one
hand, faces
without eyes,

bodies of wooden
stone, so still

⁴⁰ Robert Creeley, 'Philip Guston: A Note [1956]', *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes and Essays*, p. 343.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

they will not move

from that quiet
action ever
again. Did the man

who made them find
a like quiet? In
the act of making them

it must have been
so still he heard the wood
and felt it with his hands

moving into
the forms
he has given to them,

one by singular
one, so quiet,
so still.⁴²

These ‘formed / by hand’ figures encapsulate the mindfulness, movement and stasis any artist might seek ‘In / the act of making’ their work. The speaker explores how the poet might adopt the artist’s state of heightened awareness, feeling their way ‘with his hands // moving into / the forms’. Consequently, like the artist ‘who made them’, the poet will surely discover forms ‘one by singular / one’ suitable to his own chosen medium made of words. Almost from the outset of the poem, language that notates the world by describing visual appearance, ‘one // hand holding one / hand, faces / without eyes, // bodies’ slides effortlessly into language that considers itself, for example, drawing attention to the repetition of ‘one’ in ‘one // hand’, ‘one / hand’, ‘one by’ and ‘one, so quiet’.

Altieri persuasively argues that poems such as ‘The Figures’ focus on Creeley’s ‘conative energy’, most evident in the poet’s ‘affective’ states, so that every phrase

⁴² Robert Creeley, ‘The Figures’, *The Collected Poems 1945-75*, p. 245.

employed ‘intensifies and sharpens the dramatic rendering’⁴³ of the poem.

Acknowledging how the poet links his lineation to a sense of the breath, Altieri suggests that Creeley’s ‘self-reflexive capacity’ allows him ‘to make all the turns and twists necessary to stay connected with where thought and speech might lead it’.⁴⁴ In ‘The Figures’ this means showing the speaker’s constant inability to continue easily; how this utterance through such careful attention to the scene, shapes itself into short lines of mainly two, three or four words due to the pauses and stops. As set out on the page, the precision and order of the poem is counteracted by a halting poetic voice that despite being ‘so quiet’ still insists on coming through. Creeley’s ‘conative’ style enables him to manipulate speech whereby, according to Altieri, consciousness might be manifest in a moment of writing that ‘dramatizes the affects involved in finding words that do not falsify the energies making direct description an inadequate rendering of the poet’s world’.⁴⁵

‘The Figures’ is a formidably minimal drama revealing the speaker’s innermost feelings about the intricacies of the creative process. The acts of forming, touching, ‘holding’, ‘making’ and ‘moving’ are small, telling gestures used not only in the realization of these ‘figures’ in wood, but set down as a series of stages to be worked through in the poet’s quest for appropriate language to offer his response. In so doing, Creeley discovers the cadences and lengths of line that can extend content into form, for rather than describe anything, the poetic line should take notice of the emotional pressure of reality:

I want to give witness not to the thought of myself – that specious concept of identity – but, rather, to what I am as simple agency, a thing evidently alive by

⁴³ Charles Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects* (London: Cornell University Press, 2003) p. 134.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁴⁵ Altieri, ‘What Does *Echoes* Echo?’, p. 41.

virtue of such activity. I want, as Charles Olson says, to come into the world. Measure, then, is my testament. What uses me is what I use and in that complex measure is the issue.⁴⁶

The language of 'The Figures' frequently leans towards being less referential, more concerned with patterning, making the reader aware both of the texture of the words and the ideas they uncover. The recurrence of certain motifs such as the hand in 'hands so still', 'hand holding', 'one hand' and 'hands moving' allows the word to gain an objective material presence throughout the poem. Noting how Creeley configures his poetic line to break every three or four words, Charles Bernstein recognizes how the poet registers 'microtonal inflections' in lines that:

can be read as materializing the language (making it linguistically concrete, heard as words as much as for what the words might mean). What from one perspective is an extremely fragmenting prosody is, from another, a highly charged music of felt intensities.⁴⁷

Phrases are measured according to 'that quiet / action' to achieve the poet's inward physical voice mindful of his own outward sense of creation. In the imaginative arc from 'the act of making' to figures 'so still / they will not move', the artist discovers the power of stasis with which 'he heard the wood / and felt with his hands // moving into / the forms'.

It is productive to see this alternation between affective states of movement and stasis as equally compelling for Creeley and Guston, necessary to both their practices.

Despite his concision, Creeley deliberately constructs 'The Figures' to project outwards, to activate meaning through immediacy in the compositional field.

⁴⁶ Robert Creeley, 'A Sense of Measure', p. 488.

⁴⁷ Charles Bernstein, 'Hero of the Local: Robert Creeley and the Persistence of American Poetry [2005]', *Golden Handcuffs Review*, pp. 1-3 from <http://www.goldenhandcuffsreview.com/past/hero-of-the-local.htm>, [accessed 15.07.14].

Guston's painting *Poet* (1958),⁴⁸ completed the year before Creeley's poem, similarly sits on the edge of narrative, a position where, according to Michael Auping, 'the abstract and the world meet, where the purity of the mark and the impure nature of recognition begin'.⁴⁹ Both poem and painting reflect the vulnerability of creative artists within their working processes. Creeley writes in his 'Note' that behind Guston's fields of colour, he sees a 'denseness of anxieties, and sorrows, like a nightmare world'.⁵⁰ His response concurs with Ashton, who reads Guston's *Poet* as:

a sprawling network of very loosely related signs with a single dark crest. The washy strokes around the signs produce a dark windblown atmosphere, melancholy, even exasperate in feeling.⁵¹

Paintings such as this encourage the viewer to gain not simply one single meaning but a series of possible meanings that fluctuate and coalesce with looking, both close in and at a distance, as well as across the surface of the canvas. In Guston's work of this period, the relationship of his painterly forms to each other is tenuous and contingent. The emotions of 'anxiety' and 'sorrow' Creeley sees within the painter's knotted brushstrokes that are simultaneously forwarding from and then disappearing back into accumulations of paint become 'forms which are all exact and there, yet *not* there'.⁵²

Creeley's 'The Figures' and Guston's *Poet* are sites of formation whereby forms of present or immanent meaning move in and out of actualization and effect. Shifting between instances marked either by their definition or their ambiguity, there is a disintegration of certainty at the core of both the poem and the painting. The speaker

⁴⁸ Philip Guston, *Poet*, 1958, Private Collection.

⁴⁹ Michael Auping, 'Impure Thoughts: On Guston's Abstractions', *Philip Guston: Retrospective*, ed. Michael Auping (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003) pp. 37-52 (p. 50).

⁵⁰ Creeley, *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes and Essays*, p. 343.

⁵¹ Ashton, p. 59.

⁵² Creeley, *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes and Essays*, p. 343.

of 'The Figures' retains an uncertain stance towards reality where everything is relative, where both poet and artist are 'moving into / the forms'. A tension is revealed beneath the 'quiet' calm and 'stillness' not just of the sculptures, but also between some of the phrases in the poem. In 'faces / without eyes' there is a painful image of blindness and deception; and 'bodies of wooden / stone' suggests a rigid, clumsy form of expression. These two phrases imply the difficulty of saying what you mean whether in wood, paint or in words.

Such feelings of possible failure embodied within the poem and painting advance each work's emotional effects. The question 'did the man / who made them find / a like quiet?' could well be addressed to Guston who found forms evocative of 'anxiety' and 'sorrow' often hard to escape, for as Creeley knows, 'it is not possible that one should not arrive at them'.⁵³ This congruence in their concerns stands also for their shared belief in the unwilling act only found in the moment of composition.

Regarding his method of writing, Creeley states:

I am more interested, at present, in what is given to me to write apart from what I might attend. I have never explicitly known – before writing – what it was that I would say. For myself, articulation is the intelligent ability to recognize the experience of what is so given, in words.⁵⁴

Guston holds a similar view of the creative self as someone endlessly lost and empty but recreated and replenished through one's work. In his essay 'Faith, Hope, and Impossibility' (1965), Guston elaborates on not knowing what his painting will depict before it is painted:

to will a new form is unacceptable, because will builds distortion. Desire, too, is

⁵³ Creeley, *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes and Essays*, p. 343.

⁵⁴ Creeley, 'A Sense of Measure', p. 487.

incomplete and arbitrary. These strategies, however intimate they might become, must especially be removed to clear the way for something else – a condition somewhat unclear, but which in retrospect becomes a very precise act. The “thing” is recognized only as it comes into existence.⁵⁵

Creeley’s poem ‘The Figures’ and Guston’s painting *Poet* take the unwilled stages of their own construction as their subject. ‘The “thing”’ Guston knows ‘only as it comes into existence’ is an opening up of what is unpredictable despite any restrictive means of composition set by the respective poet or painter. Both poem and painting are part of the play of forces ‘moving into / the forms / he has given to them, // one by singular / one’, while each remains ‘holding’ the uncertainty of their coming dramatically into view, either on the page or on the canvas.

⁵⁵ Philip Guston, ‘Faith, Hope, and Impossibility [1965]’, *Philip Guston: Retrospective*, pp. 93-95 (p. 94).

5. 'Numbers': Creeley and Frank Stella – Formal Issues

The imperative to explore seriality was a strong factor in the working practice of many artists from the mid 1960s onwards. Yau has pointed out how the stark organisation of the serial poem 'Numbers',⁵⁶ included in Creeley's collection *Pieces* (1968), echoes the way certain American painters at this time were applying the grid as a compositional device:

Creeley is careful in his articulation of the independence of each section, even as he is equally attentive to its contribution to the entire poem. Such non-hierarchical writing not only parallels the compositional methods employed by artists as different and distinct as Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, and Agnes Martin, but it is also as rapid and non-explanatory as their work in its juxtapositional concision.⁵⁷

Similar 'non-hierarchical' concerns are also evident in the work of Don Judd, Robert Morris, Robert Smithson, Sol Le Witt and Frank Stella, all of whose content often featured the repeating of discrete units (sometimes interchangeable) or serial objects and images linked to a mathematical pattern.

Although 'Numbers' emerged from a collaborative project with Robert Indiana, Creeley's poem adheres more closely to the formalism of Stella. Presented as a numerical series of inferences, 'Numbers' emulates Stella's minimalist approach to process. Creeley was especially attracted to Stella's paintings, writing in his note (1965)⁵⁸ on the artist that he finds in 'the antithetically disciplined formalism of Frank Stella, and those akin to him' the true gains of Abstract Expressionism: how certain painters had recovered 'the sense of the canvas, or whatever surface is used'.⁵⁹

Describing his use of simple arrangements of monochrome bands and stripes, Stella

⁵⁶ Robert Creeley, 'Numbers', *The Collected Poems 1945-1975*, pp. 395-405.

⁵⁷ Yau, p. 66.

⁵⁸ Robert Creeley, 'Frank Stella: A Way to Go [1965]', *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes and Essays*, pp. 348-355 (p. 349).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 349.

recalls trying ‘for an evenness, a kind of all-overness, where the intensity, saturation and density remained regular over the entire surface’.⁶⁰ Creeley understood how these minimal paintings used ideas of repetition, through rhythm and interval, to stress a sense of flatness and tension across the face of each canvas. Stella’s choice of commercial paint in successive works, moving from enamel to aluminium, to copper, to alkyd, all applied with a house-painter’s brush, suggest the painter as artisan. As fields filled with stripes that are painted freehand, they are based upon the utilitarian facts of their own reality: that Stella’s paint stands for nothing except paint, and yet with their slight irregularities of line and edge, the image still remains subtly personal.

Discussing Stella’s first version of *Luis Miguel Dominguin* (1960), John McLean observes how the aluminium paint ‘although matter-of-fact in its treatment of the surface of the painting, dematerialises it and gives it a painterly, purely visual curiousness’.⁶¹ Creeley claims there are ‘several senses of Frank Stella’s work that seem to me useful’ of which the systematic, non-representational quality has the most relevance and influence, for ‘the painting is not a reference to another reality – not even another painter’s reality – but remains unequivocally its own occasion’.⁶²

Similarly in writing ‘Numbers’, Creeley adopts simple diction as he strives for his words to be always and only words. His non-specialist register allows the poem to stay ‘unequivocally its own occasion’ through expressing some of the ordinariness that forms part of our daily existence.

⁶⁰ Frank Stella in *New York Cool: Painting and Sculpture from the NYU Art Collection*, ed. Pepe Karmel (New York: Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 2008) p. 174.

⁶¹ John McLean, *Frank Stella* (London: Shenval Press, 1970) p. 2. Stella’s *Luis Miguel Dominguin*, 1960, was one of 8 paintings in the Aluminium series made in the same year. He made a 2nd version after the original had been damaged.

⁶² Creeley, *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes and Essays*, p. 349.

In 'Numbers', the actual 'occasion' of making a line in a poem, as in making a painting, becomes crucial. Creeley recognized that through insistent repetition and unity of image, painters such as Stella had found a means of concentrating purely on 'the activity of the line' to such a degree, causing 'that only such surface as is actively engaged by the painting will be admitted as a physical object. It has done this with line'.⁶³ Susan Howe notes Creeley's attention and 'acute sensitivity to the actual event of making (and in poetry making includes breaking) each written line'.⁶⁴ For example, the segment 'Zero' begins:

Where are you – who
by not being here
are here, but here

by not being here?⁶⁵

In this synthesis of speech, the content's presence defines the form. Creeley's precise diction of just a few words is measured into only three phrases where the recurrence of 'by not being here' is further emphasized by the bridge of 'are here, but here'. The uniformity, simplicity and coherence of what is happening within the four lines matches the spacial placement of lines ruled into a minimalist grid painting. Despite the speaker's focus on absence, the image of 'you' is both constantly emerging and disappearing, again creating an interplay of action and understanding where the two are constantly linked.

Segment 'Five' is a set of verbal instructions built up phrase by phrase as 'A way to draw stars':

⁶³ Creeley, *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes and Essays*, p. 354.

⁶⁴ Susan Howe, 'Leaf Flower in the Wind Falling Blue The Dark River', *Jacket, Number 31: October 2006*, pp. 1-3 (p. 3) from <http://www.jacketmagazine.com/31/rc-howe.htm>, [accessed 7.08.14].

⁶⁵ Creeley, 'Numbers', p. 405.

Two by
two with
now another

in the middle
or else at
the side.

.

From each
of the four
corners draw

a line to
the alternate
points. Where

these intersect
will be
five.

.

When younger this was
a number used to
count with, and

to imagine a useful
group. Somehow the extra
one – what is more than four –

reassured me there would be
enough. Twos and threes or
one and four is plenty.

.

A way to draw stars.⁶⁶

Using only a few concise lines distilled to their absolute essence, the first half of the segment moves with ease between action and thought. In this minimalist approach, thoughts operate as sensations and yet resonate objectively, for the speaker approaches the world ‘Two by / two with / now another’. Although by the second half, ‘the extra / one’ is acknowledged as more affirming, for it ‘reassured me there

⁶⁶ Creeley, ‘Numbers’, pp. 399-400.

would be / enough', the adult speaker remains painfully aware of how 'when younger' one emotionally connected with specific numbers that were 'used to count with' to make sense of a chaotic world. Even with the eye as sure as that of an astronomer, the diagrammatic star can only function as a decorative abstraction that 'Somehow ... reassured me'.

Discussing this balance between order and chaos in the poet's work, Charles Alexander observes that:

Creeley appears devoted to a reality, to existence as an emotional state, the emotions disordered in that they do not lend themselves to clear exposition; but the language is highly ordered. In a controlled manner, Creeley's speaker manifests his lack of control.⁶⁷

Above all else, it is the poet's syntactical syncopation coming from writing pauses as actively as words that creates the 'highly ordered' language Alexander refers to. In the face of a 'lack of control', each number for Creeley is a faltering means to secure a stance toward the variable nature of reality. For the final stanza of 'five', the accumulation of perception and experience through action is compressed into a one-line summary of only five words: 'A way to draw stars'.

⁶⁷ Charles Alexander, 'Ordered Fragments of a Disordered Devotion [2008]', *EOAGH: A Journal of the Arts, Issue 4, 2008*, pp. 1-28 (pp. 2-3) from <http://chax.org/eoagh/issuefour/alexandercreeley.htm>, [accessed 14.08.14].

6. 'Numbers': Creeley and Robert Indiana – Collaboration

Of his many collaborations, working on the 'Numbers' project with Robert Indiana was especially decisive in allowing Creeley to concentrate solely on the immanence of his expression, using the process of writing the poem to number different aspects of the present moment. Printed in limited editions of both a bound book and an unbound portfolio, *Numbers* (1968)⁶⁸ consists of ten brightly coloured silkscreen prints of Indiana's poster-like numerals from one through nine to zero and a poetic segment by Creeley as a partner for each, in English, then in German.

While 'Numbers' shows Stella's influence of avoiding any inclination to describe a particular visual object, Creeley's collaboration with Indiana provided the poet with another individual's creative process to respond to. Through his direct contact with Indiana, he was involved in constant revision and adjustment of his approach to writing the poem. Stephen Fredman argues that context created through 'conversation and collaboration' was vital to Creeley's poetic practice 'not only supplying its ground but also forming an integral part of its activity'.⁶⁹ In relation to Indiana's method of configuring a series of painted numerals, Creeley's own corresponding poetic form had to be discovered in the act of writing. It was Creeley's first principle, according to Bernstein, that as a poet:

you find out what you have to say in the process of saying it: poetry becomes a way of making, not representing. This presents a stark challenge to an approach to poems that begin with ideas or sentiments or messages and then represents or approximates them in the poem. Composition (including editing and recomposing) becomes the active agency of the poem.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Robert Creeley and Robert Indiana, *Numbers* (Stuttgart: Edition Domberger; Dusseldorf: Galerie Schmela, 1968), edition of 160. Ten screenprints in colour on white woven paper; ten pages of text printed on heavily textured brown paper. German translation by Klaus Reichert.

⁶⁹ Stephen Fredman, 'Creeley's Contextual Practice: Interviews, Conversations, and Collaborations [2010]' in Fredman and McCaffery, pp. 181-202 (p. 183).

⁷⁰ Bernstein, p. 2.

This ability to capture by ‘making, not representing’ the immediacy of the here and now through one’s experience of counting is the central occupation of ‘Numbers’.

Composed in short stanzas that explore the possibilities and variations each number might afford, the ten segments of ‘Numbers’, with their distilled minimalist lyrics, are concerned with both measurement and the materiality of language.

Aware of the way counting games use repetition to determine form, Creeley writes at the time of working with Indiana that ‘to count, or give account, tell or tally, continually seems to me the occasion’.⁷¹ Reflecting on his writing process, Creeley continues:

I also began to use notebooks, first very small ones indeed, and then larger – and I found many senses of possibility in writing began consequently to open. For one, such notebooks accumulated the writing, and they made no decisions about it – it was all there, in whatever state it occurred.⁷²

Each segment of ‘Numbers’ reflects a moment of writing where the speaker is presently aware of their own body, where experience constitutes both a ‘singular upright flourishing / condition’⁷³ at the start of the poem, and ‘a no / place I know as well as / the last breath’⁷⁴ that is reached by the close. Similarly the speaker’s halting, questioning awareness of ‘Who was I that / thought’⁷⁵ is at once revealed and then restated in various ways throughout the poem, for ‘a mind / makes it, any / mind’.⁷⁶

The opening segment ‘One’ reads:

What
singular upright flourishing

⁷¹ Robert Creeley, ‘Contexts of Poetry: A Postscript [1968]’, *Contexts*, pp. 41-43 (p. 42).

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁷³ Creeley, ‘Numbers’, p. 395.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 405.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 395.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 405.

condition ...
it enters here,
it returns here.

•

Who was I that
thought it was
another one by
itself divided or multiplied
produces one.

•

This time, this
place, this
one.

•

You are not
me, nor I you.

•

All ways.

•

As of a stick,
stone, some-

thing so
fixed it has

a head, walks,
talks, leads

a life.⁷⁷

The segment moves from thought to thought (independence to loneliness, strength to vulnerability, etc) and image to image (self to other, body to head, standing still to walking, etc) without any loss of energy to the line. Taking the number one as a stepping-off point to create a portrait of the individual 'some- // thing so / fixed it has

⁷⁷ Creeley, 'Numbers', pp. 395-396.

// a head', the segment mixes mathematical certainty 'This time, this / place, this / one' with an imagination in pursuit of the flux of reality contained in the habitual 'All ways ... walks, / talks, leads // a life'.

Although the formal lay-out of 'One' is an accumulation of self-sufficient stanzas, ranging from a two word statement to a brief lyric, the reading experience, as Bernstein notes of all Creeley's work from the late 1960s, 'is one of rhythmically charged, exhilarating oscillation, as waves of thought break into particles of sound'.⁷⁸ Through a simultaneous concern for the role of the body where 'a head, walks, / talks' and the role of the mind where 'You are not / me, nor I you', Creeley attempts to track the speaker's consciousness as 'it enters here / it returns here ... this / place, this / one'. It is as if the poet tries initially to hold the speaker's individuality in check, every movement closely monitored before being allowed along various numerical pathways to lead 'All ways ... a life'. Figures of 'this / one' and 'another one' are seen to multiply, divide and reform to create a surface of experience with a core of mathematical logic: 'one by / itself divided or multiplied / produces one'.

How the numbers make themselves known equates with the look of the lines and the placing of the words on the page: Creeley measures every phrase in terms of his multi-various consideration of space. In his interview (1982) with Robert Sheppard, Creeley explains that in the late 1960s he was aware of wanting to find a more open, less claustrophobic poetic condition and response:

So how much space was in any given situation, either emotionally or physically, became peculiarly crucial. Where were we? Constantly checking what you've got with you. Who are you? Where are you? What are you? Who's that person?

⁷⁸ Bernstein, p. 2.

Who's this person? So that, not backing off, but finding a mode that would deal with that but at the same time would admit a far more open condition.⁷⁹

In his questions 'Where are you? What are you? Who's that person? Who's this person?' is a desire to be more inclusive about all the complicated feelings that Creeley wants to articulate about particular relationships. Creeley tells Sheppard that in his book *Pieces*, 'One is self, two is others, and three is the world. Three is a crowd, thankfully. Two's company; three's a crowd. There's the world'.⁸⁰

This transition to a more open stance towards autobiographical composition is articulated in the three stanzas in the middle of the segment 'Two' by the speaker's shift from their isolated oneness toward new possibilities offered by forming a couple; their need to be with another. By gravitating toward this two-ness, the world is let in:

What you wanted
I felt, or felt I felt.
This was more than one.

.

This point of so-called
consciousness is forever
a word making up
this world of more
or less than it is.

.

Don't leave me.
Love me. One by one.⁸¹

Each step in making the relationship is mathematically phrased and concisely uttered, always concerned with balancing 'more' with 'less', yet still revealing that the desire

⁷⁹ Creeley, *Robert Creeley and Robert Sheppard, Stories: Being an Information – an Interview* [1982] (Duplicate Books, 1987) pp. 1-23 (p. 11).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸¹ Creeley, 'Numbers', pp. 396-397.

to be 'more than one' dominates. Although keen to break the isolation, the speaker is aware of being guided by feelings, a susceptibility in all that one says, does and thinks, the 'point of so-called / consciousness'. With minimalist precision, the repeated use of 'felt' in 'What you wanted / I felt, or felt I felt' indicates the limits of language for the poet, where words are 'making up / this world of more / or less than it is'. In these spare, swirling thoughts, 'Two' becomes a portrayal of an individual in flux, beset by a fear of being alone: 'Don't leave me. / Love me. One by one'.

In various interviews Creeley talks insistently about words as 'things', as the materials for writing. He makes clear to Wagner, for example, that:

If I say "I love you" or "I hate you", each one of those words – I-love-you – is a thing. Words are things – word, iron, apples – and therefore they have the possibility of their own existence.⁸²

Focusing on this primary 'existence' of words provides Creeley's 'Numbers' with a presence equal to Indiana's accompanying images: for the poet the impulse is to make the words of each segment have the same physical quality as the vivid colour surface of its silkscreened partner-image. For these numerical 'portraits', Indiana translates both the number and the word into a bold pictorial emblem, treating each print as a concrete text. The project involved the artist in revising his series of ten paintings *The Cardinal Numbers* (1966)⁸³ from which he retained the centrality of the number forms within a standardized circle, and the single words placed below confirming them as visual facts. These Arabic numbers used a roman typeface he had previously adapted from a discarded printer's calendar. Indiana explains that, as found shapes,

⁸² Creeley, *Contexts*, pp. 100-101.

⁸³ Robert Indiana, *The Cardinal Numbers*, 1966, Private Collection, Rome. The work consists of ten painted panels, each 60 x 50 inches.

there was:

a crude vigour to them which I liked. I made certain refinements. It turns out that when you fit a given number in a circle, sometimes you have to tuck in a serif. And you have to squeeze in the bulge of '5'.⁸⁴

Creeley recognized the emotional character of each number he was presented with: how these treatments were meticulously patterned and judged throughout Indiana's sequence of images. Reflecting on their collaboration Creeley remarks, 'it is like someone's particular number and Indiana gives an extraordinarily emotional feel that he can make manifest in, say, "Number Two"'.⁸⁵

Using flat, un-modulated colour, hard-edged forms and a crisp graphic register, Indiana appropriates the methods of advertising and commercial design. Each of the figures in *Numbers* speaks against the white ground of the smooth page which is never inert but a dynamic part of the image. Indiana perfects these techniques, according to Tilman Osterwold, employing:

the sensational energy generated by the colours and letters as signs and forms, thereby creating a balance between artistically unrestrained levels of expression on the one hand, and functionalized representational conformity on the other.⁸⁶

Creeley gets beyond the slick reproducibility of Indiana's work, as well as the flashiness and impersonality more generally associated with Pop Art. Despite being at times coolly minimalist, each of Creeley's segments contain layers of nuance that ruminate on Indiana's fixation with memory: how numbers are recalled or applied to

⁸⁴ Robert Indiana in Susan Elizabeth Ryan, *Robert Indiana: Figures of Speech* (London: Yale University Press, 2000) p. 158.

⁸⁵ Creeley in Ryan [interview 1990], p. 159.

⁸⁶ Tilman Osterwold, *Pop Art* (Cologne: Benedikt Taschen, 1991) p. 13.

reflect aspects of identity and family origin. Most of the artist's iconography is connected with the American Midwest of his childhood, for as Indiana states regarding his repetitive and cyclical use of numbers:

my first real consciousness about them, is simply the fact that I lived in 21 different houses before I was 17 years old and as a child it was a great pastime to tour the countryside and visit all these different houses and to go back to house number 1 and house number 2. That's the first meaningful association. Otherwise numbers are just fascinating because they're numbers, each one loaded with multiple references and significances.⁸⁷

As a means of counting, labelling and calculating, numbers are frequently employed for quantifying social connection and belonging; they tell personal stories. Creeley's poem 'Numbers' operates as a parallel exploration of how numbers serve a practical purpose in one's life, providing shape and order. In both the poem and the screen-prints, the numerical progression is presented simultaneously as in motion and at rest: in motion as a sequence it reveals abstract patterns of images and sounds equal to the shifts of sensation that informs experience; at rest on a separate page, each element stands as an object of contemplation. What is signified throughout is at once universal yet personally specific.

Although the opening stanza of the segment 'Three' evokes the domesticity of a family group, 'They come now with / one in the middle – / either side thus / another', the tension soon becomes aggravated by the difficulties three has a way of turning up:

When either this
or that becomes
choice, this fact

of things enters.

⁸⁷ Indiana, *Robert Indiana: Paintings and Sculpture 1961-2003*, ed. Adrian Dannatt (London: Waddington Galleries, 2004) p. 33.

What had been
agreed now

alters to
two and one,
all ways.⁸⁸

If ‘two and one, / all ways’ creates the odd-one-out, then the unpaired member of the group is forced into the role of the outsider, for as the segment continues:

The first
triangle, of form,
people,

sounded a
lonely occasion I
think ...⁸⁹

The emotion concerning the event of adding a third person, ‘a / lonely occasion I / think’ is embodied in the rhythmic tension of these two line breaks. It is worth noting that at the time of writing this poem, Creeley was dealing with the dissolution of his marriage, which would imply the sequence contains self-reflexive undercurrents of narrative, referring to three adult participants in a triangular relationship. The segment suggests that the emotional permutations of ‘The first / triangle’ are endless and yet resilience has been ‘sounded’ in the face of inevitable hurt and confusion, reiterated in the final lines that read:

... – the
circle begins
here, intangible –
yet a birth.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Creeley, ‘Numbers’, pp. 397-398.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 398.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 398.

Working collaboratively on this project allowed both artist and poet some degree of mutual inspiration and accord: as well as using ‘Numbers’ both as a way of structuring his writing and as an instrument of thought, Creeley also pushes at times towards making a concrete poem. In the second stanza of the segment ‘Seven’, for example, all seven one-word lines are concerned with the speaker’s physical and sensory awareness of duration:

Look
at
the
light
of
this
hour.⁹¹

Connecting seeing and speaking, Creeley also provides a visual score in the final stanza of the segment ‘Eight’:

Oct –
ag –
on –
al.⁹²

By phonetically sounding out the four lines, the reader has arrived at both a sonic and geometric ‘Oct – / ag – / on – / al’ figure from the planetary arrangement of two circles visually constituting a figure ‘8’ that was cited earlier in the segment:

the eight year interval –
for that confluence

makes the full moon shine
on the longest

or shortest
day of the year.⁹³

⁹¹ Creeley, ‘Numbers’, p. 401.

⁹² Ibid., p. 403.

Creeley's suggestion of a celestial cycle 'for that confluence' involves the crucial relationship of the sun to the moon and the earth causing 'the longest / or shortest / day', but is revealed only as a passing observation that 'makes the full moon shine'. In what seems to be the speaker's speculative remarks, one can glimpse, at moments, the mysterious order of the natural world.

Having explored the possibilities available in Abstract Expressionism, Creeley looked towards the potential he found present in minimalism and Pop Art. In 'Numbers' he adapted strategies of poetic composition that were equivalent to Stella's minimalist stripe paintings and Indiana's emblematic images of numbers with letters. In his writing on Stella and his collaboration with Indiana, Creeley responded to the way these artists had reduced their painting practice down to basic questions of order and procedure, and consequently, their formalism became a model for his poetic aspirations.

Creeley's poem 'Numbers' aims to make language equal to an individual's leaps of thought, 'Twisting / as forms of it'.⁹⁴ As distinct facts that the speaker perceives, they articulate how we use numbers to shape our comprehension of the world. Juxtaposing each instantaneous sensation to make sense of the 'flourishing condition' of consciousness – 'it enters here, / it returns here'⁹⁵ – Creeley's poem reaches towards the ambition of Olson's own writing.

⁹³ Creeley, 'Numbers', p. 402.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 400.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 395.

