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Talking about Collaboration:Personal Memories and a Critical Study of Robert Creeley's Collaboration with artist Arthur Okamura[1]

Barbara Montefalcone

I first met Robert Creeley in 2004 on a hot October Indian summer afternoon. Walking through Brown University's elegant campus, heading to Creeley's office, I experienced a bizarre feeling of both fear and excitement. I was about to meet the "subject" of my doctoral dissertation. Someone who, up to that moment, had only been a picture in a book and a voice recorded on a file, downloaded from the Internet.[2]

Once in front of his office door I waited a few minutes before knocking. Robert Creeley was there, waiting for me, listening to my confused steps outside the door and wondering if I would ever have the courage to enter. Finally I did, and all at once everything became so evident. Creeley was sitting in his extremely simple office, a few books, a laptop on his desk. He didn't need anything more–a quiet and luminous place with some important books and the Internet to keep in touch with his Company. On that occasion, he signed and offered me a copy of *Tandoori Satori and Commonplace,* the catalogue of his last collaboration with painter Francesco Clemente: it was a welcome gift he said. I felt that I was the luckiest person in the world.

Only several months later, when Creeley unfortunately was no longer living, did I truly realize the actual meaning of his gift. By offering me the catalogue, he was not, at least not only, welcoming me: he was creating a place for us to be. He was making me part of his company: he was making room for me. He was showing me that a book is not just a book, but that it is, above all, a

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[1] I would like to thank Robert Creeley and Arthur Okamura for their kindness and generosity.

[2] Thanks to an exchange program between Brown University and Université Lumière-Lyon 2, I was able to spend the fall semester of 2004 at Brown working on my research project focused on Robert Creeley's collaborations under the supervision of Creeley himself. My research lead to a doctoral dissertation, defended in December 2006, and whose title is *The "Eye" and the "Company": Robert Creeley's Collaborations, 1953-2004.* It is available online at: <http://demeter.univ-lyon2.fr/sdx/theses/lyon2/2006/montefalcone_b>.

place in common, a place to be. This is what I mainly remember about him: he was always trying to create a place (material or abstract) where a dialogue could be engaged. That is why I think he collaborated so much. That is why he was fond of the Internet. That is why, driving to The Rose Art Museum (Brandeis University) to give a reading of his poems written for Clemente, he insisted that I go with him and his wife Penelope, sharing the back seat (he didn't want to sit in the front!) of the beautiful Cadillac sent by the Museum to pick them up. He was creating the ideal place for conversation, a conversation that always had to be "moving," to cover—if possible—the whole world, and to have rhythm. And what better than a group of people talking inside a car driving quickly down the highway? He could have written a poem about it.[3]

What I also learned about Robert Creeley while working on my research project at Brown, was the importance of rhythm in his life and art. Rhythm was fundamental, of course, to his poetry inspired by the syncopate prosody of jazz. But it seemed to me even more central to his collaborative practice: when looking at a painting/photo/sculpture Creeley was, to me, mainly trying to seize its inner rhythm. He would then try to convert it into something as a poem, or a text, which would, somehow, contribute to the inner harmony of the collaborative book.[4] Thus, when collaborating, Creeley favoured those images capable of challenging his own visual perception. What seemed to count for him once in front of his collaborators' artworks was the shift from indifference to recognition: that moment when the observer recognizes the forms finding a place for them in his own universe. It is the moment when they finally "appear:"

> The clue is not movement, not displacement in time or space (nor its false opposite, tenacious local realism) BUT IS RECOGNITION, the function of you *find* form, have already *found* form, because you are cultural (in Alber's sense of, the capacity to recognize same. (Butterick 88-89)

French philosopher Herny Maldinay, in his book *Regard, parole, espace,* explaining the nature of what he calls "the apparitional moment of forms" suggests an interesting theorization of this phenomenon. According to him

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[3] See also "I Know a Man," one of Robert Creeley's most famous poems, where he constructs a particularly meaningful image of two people intensely talking while driving down the highway. (*The Collected Poems* 132).

[4] See Barbara Montefalcone. "An Active and Defining Presence: Le visible et le lisible dans l'oeuvre collaborative de Robert Creeley" *Reuve Lisa/Lisa e-Journal* 5.2 (2007) <http://www.unicaen.fr/mrsh/lisa>.

visual artworks' specificity is due to the fact that "the essential function of an image is not to imitate but to appear." The "apparitional moment of forms" does not depend on the object but on the gaze. The observer plays a fundamental role since his perception is at the same time personal and affected by the structure of the artwork (Maldinay 155).

Creeley was extremely conscious of his role as an observer when collaborating. He was aware of the combination of a subjective and a guided reading of an artwork. Moreover he was interested in the inner movements and rhythms of a painting. He favoured those images capable of kaleidoscopically proposing themselves to the observer, always appearing new, and thus joining the idea of the so called "opera aperta" theorized by Italian scholar Umberto Eco (Eco 46). He also seemed to be passionate about those forms caught in a moment of passage and transformation as his collaborations with Donald Sultan (*Visual Poetics,* 1999), Susan Rothenberg (*Paintings from the Nineties,* 1999), Francesco Clemente (*It*, 1989; *Life & Death,* 1993; *There*, 1993; *Anamorphosis*, 1997; *Tandoori Satori and Commonplace,* 2004) and Arthur Okamura testify.

Creeley's passion for such dynamic images was a product of his refusal of stasis and contemplation. "An art which attempts to staticize its world, or to bring all to stasis and completion, would terrify me!"[5] he once said. Most of his collaborations testify to this assertion. Among them, *1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0°*, realized in collaboration with artist Arthur Okamura, seems to perfectly embody the "apparitional moment of forms" defined by Maldinay and, at the same time, to clearly attest to Creeley's passion for the inherent movement of images. To me, *1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0°* is one of Creeley's collaborations where his interest for visual rhythm and desire for company are best testified.

1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0°

Completed in 1971, *1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0°* is composed of a sequence of Arthur Okamura's[6] drawings alternating with the stanzas of "People," a long poem written by Creeley. As is the case for most of his collaborative projects, Creeley's text is a response to pre-existing images. Within the book, the poem and the drawings are printed respectively on the front and the back of the same

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[5] See Appendix 1, "Creeley on Okamura."

[6] Arthur Okamura, artist (Long Beach, 1932). He lives in Bolinas. He studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and met Robert Creeley in Mallorca (Spain). His work has been shown at the Museum of Modern Art of San Francisco and at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

sheet. The book cover reproduces one of Okamura's drawings in a coloured version (all the original drawings are black and white).[7]

Using the shape of a miniaturized feminine silhouette as a basis, Okamura builds up a series of complex structures inspired by flora and fauna.[8] By repeating and varying this extremely simple form, the artist constitutes a series of animal and vegetal architectural formations whose simplicity and precision contrast with the fragility of their provisory structure. Okamura stresses his drawings' instability by indicating, through the arrangement of the silhouettes, the direction that the most complex structure is going to take or the place from which it seems to come from. Through this technique, he enhances the instantaneous aspect of the image he is creating.

As a consequence of their complexity and internal movement, Okamura's drawings allude to the tradition of "hidden images," characteristic of Victorian decoration and Art Déco where forms seem to hide some other images that become visible only after sharp observation. As Creeley pointed out during one of our discussions, this technique was also used by celebrated illustrators such as Palmer Cox and Arthur Rackham whose drawings for *The Zankiwank and The Bletherwitch* (1896) evoke Okamura's silhouettes' lightness and quickness.[9]

Okamura insists, however, much more on the hidden aspect of his images as well as on the impression of movement one can suggest by drawing. This interest in the process of appearance and disappearance of forms, corresponds to Okamura's passion for parlour tricks and optical illusions allowing an immediate passage from one image to another. "I often look to illustrate the effects of camouflage, especially those that exist in nature, e.g., when you don't see it, and then, in a moment, you see it, e.g. disruptive patterning, contour elimination, mimicry, illusion, etc,"[10] he explains. The pleasure generated by these phenomena is a consequence of the shift from contradiction to enlightenment: our usual perception of things is put into question by creating doubt and incomprehension in order to subsequently re-establish the previous order and allow us to integrate the contradiction into our common thinking habits. The transition from the invisible to the visible is exactly what interests Creeley and, at the same time, what characterizes the notion of "apparitional

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7 See Fig. 1, Appendix 2.

8 See Plates, Appendix 2.

9 See Appendix 1, "Creeley on Okamura."

10 See Appendix 1, "Okamura on Creeley."

moment of forms" elaborated by Maldinay: forms are caught in the process of their metamorphosis and in between a contractive and expansive movement. Occultation is thus replaced by discovery, contradiction is succeeded by reconciliation (Maldinay 171).

This rhythmical movement characterized by contraction and relaxation is already suggested by the title Okamura chose for this collaboration. On the one hand, the numbered sequence suggests a rhythmical scansion characterized by repetition and variation; on the other hand, by replacing number 10 by a 0, Okamura also insists on the circular movement characterizing the numerical system, so that the enumeration seems to go on endlessly. The artist wants to put forward the internal movement of his drawings and in doing so he inserts them into a temporal structure marked by their sequential disposition. At the same time, every "instant" of this temporal and visual sequence is isolated from the others by the use of a typographical sign (°) indicating a temporary pause of the enumeration. Every numeral (and every drawing) can thus be appreciated for its own qualities besides its relationship to the whole series. Moreover, within the collaborative book, these pauses seem to correspond to the stanzas of Creeley's poem that, by alternating with Okamura's drawings, also separate the one from the other. Thanks to this arrangement, the drawings, even though connected one to the other by continuity, can be still appreciated individually.

The fluidity of the shift from one form to the other is assured by a quick and precise style obtained by a methodical sketching practice focused on the shape of the feminine silhouette used as the structural base of these drawings. As Okamura explains, at the beginning of the collaborative process he chose a masculine silhouette that he subsequently abandoned since its rigidity and consistency turned to be an obstacle to his spontaneous drawing approach:

> At the beginning of these drawings I tried to include both male and female figures but found that the male forms were too boxy and not as fluid as the female forms, which had a fluidity I liked and relating to the spontaneity of fluid drawing. Toward the end I was drawing the female forms as spontaneously as I am now printing.[11]

This spontaneous technique seems to contrast with the drawings' definiteness, but it is exactly this apparent incompatibility that fascinates Creeley, who responds to Okamura's work by filtering the pictorial theme through his

[11] See Appendix 1, "Creeley on Okamura."

own subjectivity. He thus creates a world where childlike curiosity and adult wisdom coexist:

> I knew where they were,
> in the woods. My sister
> made them little houses.
>
> Possibly she was one,
> or had been one
> before. They were there,
>
> very small but quick,
> if they moved.
> I never saw them.

The "people" evoked in the title are imaginary creatures that the poet situates in the woods and who represent an alternative to human society. The mystery and magic suggested by the poem contribute to the construction of an ideal childish world associated with the woods and that seems to be part of Creeley's memories:

> I recall there being endless things to learn and do of that kind, slingshots, huts (as we call them) in the woods, traps, and a great proliferating lore of rituals and locations, paths through the woods, secret signs, provisions for all manner of imagined possibility including at one point the attempt to make a glider out of bed sheets and poles tied together. So it's probable that what I most wanted was a world, if not of that kind, at least of that place. (*Autobiography* 34-35)

The poet, as well as the artist, creates an ideal model of humanness that does not correspond to common hierarchies: man is not at the centre of this world but he is an atom, a microscopic part of a vaster physical universe. Okamura and Creeley conduct a sort of hierarchic reconstruction, as to re-establish man's place in the universe and to criticize his presumption. In doing so they focus on size and relativity. After stressing, in the first three stanzas, the fluidity and quickness of Okamura's silhouettes, the poet underlines how size and dimension relationship vary according to the shift of the point of view from which things are observed:

How big is small. What
are we in. Do
these forms of us take shape, then.

Creeley measures his body's relationship to the world and in doing so he shifts the focus from the interior to the exterior of forms, passing from wide-fields to close-ups. Moving back and forth between occultation and discovery, which characterizes Okamura's drawings, is thus retraced by Creeley in the poem. After presenting man as microcosm, he introduces an aerial shot of a crowd that, perceived from above, seems to draw the outline of a human silhouette:

Stan told us of the shape
a march makes, in
anger, a sort of small

head, the vanguard, then
a thin *neck*, and then,
following out, a kind of billowing,

.

loosely gathered *body*, always
the same. It must be
people seen from above

.

have forms, take place,
make an insistent pattern,
not suburbs, but the way

.

they gather in public places,
or, hidden from others,
look one by one, must be

.

there to see, a record if
nothing more.

The choice of the italic for such words as "head," "neck," and "body" makes the human shape suggested by Creeley even more visible, thus creating a relief-like effect. Just as some of Okamura's silhouettes detach themselves from the

vegetal architectural forms he constructs and become visible as part of a more complex structure, the italicized words acquire additional visibility and allow the image suggested by the poet to emerge from the text.

Compressed or expanded, man's body is always the same according to Creeley who seems to want to abolish the border between the individual and the collective, the "I" and the "others" in order to assert, just as Olson did in his *Maximum Poems*, "that one makes many."[12] Olson and Creeley's common reference to the "e pluribus unum" is however ironic: Creeley is not exalting his nation's value but, just as Olson, he criticizes the concept of hierarchy:

> "In a tree
> one may observe the hierarchies
>
> of monkeys," someone says. "On
> the higher branches, etc." But
> not like that, no, the kids
>
> run, watch the wave of them
> pass. See the form of their
> movement pass, like the wind's.

To the strict and structured form of the genealogical tree, Creeley opposes with a moving form: that of a group of running children whose trajectory seems to imitate that of Okamura's drawings. These drawings thus embody the idea of *Gestaltung* (a "forming form") whose importance is stressed by Henry Maldinay. Aesthetic forms, Maldinay explains, create their referential system during every single moment of their self generation. An artwork functions as a world to him: it is not something existing in space and time, but space and time are existing in it (Maldinay 156).

By the repetition of the feminine forms and by the way they are concentrated or dispersed on the paper, Okamura tries to transpose time compression and expansion. When the silhouettes' density increases, their movement seems to accelerate whereas when the spaces between them are wider they seem to move more slowly. The instantaneous appearance and disappearance of the silhouettes

[12] Olson uses this sentence for the epigraph of the *Maximum Poems* where he transforms the original sentence "out of many, one" (*e pluribus unum*) and writes "one makes many."

seem to be the main principles on which these drawings are founded: Creeley perfectly grasps their structure and tries to transpose it onto the page. He thus mainly focuses on the use of verbs and makes a transition from past to present. When the lyrical voice uses the past tense evoking his childhood and introducing the themes of size and relativity, the verses seem to become more discursive:

> Some stories begin,
> *when I was young-*
> this also. It tells
>
> a truth of things,
> of people. There used
> to be so many, so
> .
> big one's eyes went
> up them, like a ladder,
> crouched in a wall.
>
> Now grown large, I
> sometimes stumble, walk
> with no knowledge of
> what's under foot.

On the other hand, when the tense shifts from past to present, the stanzas seem to reduce their length and to stretch, as if the words were imitating the movement and the shape of Okamura's silhouettes. Every single word, isolated in the verse, looks like a feminine silhouette: we can grasp its meaning but it has much more value as part of a more complex structure, that of the poem, that it contributes to construct. The economy of words, the syntactical reduction and the typographical structure characterizing these stanzas are strategies used by Creeley to mirror the "apparitional" rhythm of Okamura's forms. The pauses stressed by the punctuation as well as by the enjambed syntax seem to follow the forms' progressive deceleration also reflected by the words' isolation:

> Some small
> echo
> at the earth's edge

recalls
these voices,
these small

persistent
movements,
these people,

the circles,
the holes they
made, the

one
multiphasic
direction,

the going,
the coming,
the lives.

The typographic structure of these extremely concise verses confirms the poet's awareness that every perceptive structure is a visual model that concerns the objects as well as the spaces between them. These spatial gaps correspond to temporal pauses whose organization mirrors the rhythm of the visual work. Creeley's writing has to integrate both the rhythm of the visual forms he observes and that of his own breath: in this collaboration these two rhythms seem to run together since the quickness and the slowness of the forms correspond to the contraction or expansion of the text. Thus in this last part of the poem, by playing with blanks and suspensions, Creeley makes the silence as well as the space between the words, more palpable.

By the typographical structure of his poem, Creeley does not want only to create a visual architecture but also to suggest to his reader the way he has to read his poem: "For myself 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" (*Tales Out of School* 29). Silence is fundamental for the organization of aural rhythm just as empty spaces contribute to the whole structure of a painting: "Problem of music (vision) only solved when silence (non-vision)

is taken as the basis," John Cage writes in *Theme and Variation* thus perfectly synthesizing the visual and the aural. By reproducing within his text Okamura's drawings' internal intervals, Creeley allows us to grasp their rhythm by the simple reading of his poem.

"People" ends on a melancholic tone which restates, on a thematic level, the opposition between the ideal condition of humanness described at the beginning of the poem and the actual condition:

I
fails in
the forms

of them, I
want
to go home

Creeley also points to the opposition between the individual and the common (I-them). In the last stanza of his poem, the personal pronoun acts as a third person character detaching himself from the lyric voice. As the poet explains, any form of individuality, represented by the "*I*," seems to fail in front of the community represented by the "others." Creeley's poems can thus be considered as complementary to "The Immoral Proposition," one of Creeley's first collaborative poems, where he asserted: "the unsure egoist is not good for himself." In both poems, the author is criticizing a solipsistic position doomed to isolation and indirectly celebrating a reunion of the "I" and the "others" embodied by the collaborative "us".

Conclusion

My personal memory of Robert Creeley, as well as this study of Creeley/Okamura's collaboration, emphasize two main elements of the poet's collaborative career: the importance of rhythm and that of "others." To me, this is finally what he was looking for by practicing collaboration: he was exploring a way in which he could integrate his personal rhythm with that of his "Company." He wanted the two rhythms to coexist in the same space (the space of the book or that of the Museum) and engage in an active dialogue by constantly stimulating each other, just as a group of jazz musicians do during a jam session. Every single collaborative book can thus be considered as a musical phrase capable of

existing for itself but, at the same time, contributing to the whole harmony of Creeley's "collaborative song."

Rhythm and Company. Here are two words whose importance I learned by reading and meeting Robert Creeley. Looking back at those three months spent at Brown in 2004, I still have this incredibly meaningful image of our drive to the Museum where Creeley's last collaboration was going to be celebrated. If I had to picture him today, I would definitely see him inside a car, intensely talking to his Company while heading somewhere.

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Appendix 1

Robert Creeley and Arthur Okamura: A Double Interview

Barbara Montefalcone

In Autumn 2004, during my doctoral research at Brown University on Robert Creeley's collaborations, I was able to discuss Creeley and Okamura's collaboration *1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0°* with both the writer and artist. This double interview is a product of these discussions. Creeley was so kind to type up his answers to my questions on his laptop (he said he wanted to do a good job!). Arthur Okamura generously mailed me his own thoughts and answered some of my questions. They were both thrilled to be talking about their common experience as collaborators.

Okamura on Creeley

I was not, at first, aware that the book would be collaborative. The drawings for *1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0°* were done during a time when I was having difficulty with finishing my paintings. I decided to work in other media and forms and my first project was drawing the tiny nude forms that became the basis for a book. One of the partners of Shambala publications saw the drawings and offered to publish them, but all along I felt a need for a text. Bob Creeley happened to be in town on a reading tour and I asked him to look at the drawings and perhaps write something in conjunction with them. Shortly thereafter his poem "People" was written and the wonderful long, (for him) poem arrived and perfected my first venture into book publishing and collaboration. I have since done many others.

[. . .]

My work habits have changed through the years. (I'm seventy two years old). I have actively made art in some form since infanthood (a one man show in kindergarten), but professionally (paid) since age fifteen in Chicago in a poster shop (silk screen). I spent long hours doing commercial posters, etc., while also painting oil pictures in a range from magazine illustration realism to abstract expressionism, all as early beginning practice.

My demeanour and nature is basically spontaneous in my life and work. The older I get, the more spontaneous the work becomes. Thus I seem to work in "spurts," usually, on more than one thing at a time . . . perhaps a series or a sequence.

[…]

What attracts you in Creeley's art?

Creeley's unique use of language and space, as in some paintings.

If you had to define the nature of the desire which pushes you to collaborate with another artist (a writer in particular), what would you say?

Sharing a vision and a bridge of sorts, with specific and particular energies becoming one thing.

Robert Creeley, talking about your work, pointed to the factor of "hidden images," i.e., the Victorian and Art Deco habit (for two) of embedding images within images, "hidden" in that sense. Do you agree?

I often look to illustrate the effects of camouflage, especially those that exist in nature, e.g., when you don't see it, and then, in a moment, you see it, e.g. disruptive patterning, contour elimination, mimicry, illusion, etc.

Robert Creeley also told me you have been fascinated by "parlor tricks" for years. Could you tell me something about that?

This relates to the above, when, through natural physics, a contradiction occurs and then an enlightenment.

Which sense of humanness were you trying to present through your drawings? How do you think Creeley's poem responds to it?

At the beginning of these drawings I tried to include both male and female figures but found that the male forms were too boxey and not as fluid as the female forms, which had a fluidity I liked and relating to the spontaneity of fluid drawing. Toward the end I was drawing the female forms as spontaneously as I am now printing.

The bodies, their sequence and various groupings seemed to develop their own kind of gravity and humanness. Bob's poem brings it forth.

What was your first reaction when you read "People" for the first time?

Magical enlightenment of a place, as it is.

Can you tell me something about the title 1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0°?

Sequence, movement, time, circles.

What do you think Creeley's poems add to your images?

An archetype.

Do you know of some other collaborations realized by Creeley? If yes, which ones? What do you think about them?

His book "Numbers" with Robert Indiana. His early note on Franz Kline realized a way of writing about seeing painting. *Black Mountain Review*.

Why do you think so many different artists wanted to collaborate with Robert Creeley?

Collaboration with Creeley creates a very unique and special place and there are not many others like it.

November 2, 2004

Creeley on Okamura

What attracts you in Okamura's art?

I guess it's his deft modesty, the articulateness of his means back of a very quiet presentation—though he's neither conscientiously "tidy" nor contained in his thinking. He's one of the most engaging "Romantics" I've ever known, in fact—a lovely mind and a great, great heart. And he is endlessly curious.

How did you get to know Okamura and why did you decide to collaborate?

As Arthur would tell you, he is my oldest friend on earth—we have known each other since first meeting in Mallorca in the early fifties. He had a fellowship and had just married. His friend and fellow artist (also a friend of mine), John Altoon, thought to spend time in Mallorca and persuaded Arthur to come too. Arthur, for example, did the silkscreen for the Divers Press publication of Paul Blackburn's first book of poems, *The Dissolving Fabric,* and John Altoon does the cover for the *Black Mountain Review's* next to last issue.

How did the collaboration take place? Did he send you the drawings and then you wrote the poem?

I think at that point we were all living in Bolinas, California—at least that's where Arthur and I were most able to hang out together. Shambala, the publisher, may have instituted the project via Arthur (you could ask Arthur for his sense of things). In any case, I wrote the poem from fact of the drawings and ideas for their use Arthur then had.

Who chose the title?

I am pretty sure Arthur chose the book title—my poem, as you know, is called "People."

There seems to be a stronger interaction between the words and the images than in your other collaborations.

I'd question your emphasis, just that there is a very direct relation between words and images in En Famille, for instance—also in the twenty-five entries done for Clemente's Guggenheim show (I call them now "Clemente's Images"). Then *Numbers* with Indiana is certainly a direct response of words to image. In other words, when I am working from the ground and proposal images constitute, the words are pretty directly a consequence of that fact, one way or another.

It's very interesting to see how somewhere in the text the line traced by the painter turns into "letter" and joins your own words in the constitution of significances. What do you think about that?

What might be interesting here is to think about the factor of "hidden images," i.e., the Victorian and Art Deco habit (for two) of embedding images within images, "hidden" in that sense. Lots of illustrators used it, either as suggestion or as fact—like the British illustrator, Rackham. Then there is the tradition represented by Palmer Cox's Brownie books, so that's another line, so to speak. Arthur has been for years fascinated by (and very adept with) "parlor tricks," the classical magic of sleight of hand and illusion. In any case, I am "seeing" the images in reading them the way I do with the poem, and Arthur gives me the lead in his transformation (or use) of one image to become another, the figures into numbers, etc.

Okamura's drawings are simple and, at the same time, mysterious: the more you look at them the more you discover new details so that the viewer's eyes constantly adjust to focus on the multitude of shapes he is confronted with. How did you write your poem? Did you look at the drawings for a long time so to assist their metamorphosis or you wrote down your first reaction to them?

I think I wrote the poem pretty straight-forwardly, i.e., straight off. I knew these images of Arthur's in various guises before this specific sequence and conjunction became a possibility. Your response to the images, incidentally, is the classic one of someone seeing a work with "hidden images" and then recognizing their presence.

It seems that you are fascinated by the work of artists who demand from the viewer an active role during the process of perception. Clemente's images, as well as Okamura's and Sultan's constantly metamorphose so that everyone is free to read them as they wish. Their world is in a perpetual state of flux. What do you like about this process of visual readjustment their images demand and how did you deal with it while writing "People"?

So is mine, I guess, i.e., "in a perpetual state of flux." An art which attempts to staticize its world, or to bring all to stasis and completion, would terrify me! For my part, I take off, so to speak, on whatever aspect of the art provides that possibility. I am not, in that way, providing a judgement or conclusion—I am responding at a particular time, in a particular place, with particular concerns and habits—all variable.

The "risk" is that if you look at one of these images in two different moments of the day it can provoke very different emotions and inspire you different things. Have you ever written some lines and then, coming back to the image some time later, felt that they actually didn't fit anymore?

Why should that be a "risk," one wonders—why can't it be simple "more," as would be the case in real life? Does one have a fixed and unchanging disposition toward anything? Is at an attempt to "end the discussion," so to speak? *Odi et amo*, as Catullus wrote. If there were sufficient impulse provoked in later looking at the image, I'd hope to include it, else write another poem. In *Numbers*, for example, you find multiple senses of the "seed" number or situation so defined: *one by one, one after one, one with one, one for one, one to one, one as one*–etc.

People seem to focus on this process of metamorphosis Okamura's images are subjected to: the content of your statement shifts from the world of plants to the human world just as Okamura's images deal with both, do you agree?

I think we are both involved with presenting a sense of "humanness" which makes it part of a system of physical universe, not an abstract presumption of "control"—again I am following Arthur's lead with my own history, call it—my sister's little houses etc.

Man is not the center of Okamura's universe, he presents human beings as small "atoms" who constitute much more complex structures. Paradoxically, human beings who are deprived of their primary power and are reduced to fragments of reality appear more pure and naïve than they are in everyday life. What do you think about that?

As said, it's my own imagination as well—far from the old concept of "The Great Chain of Being" taught us as children. The experience of WWII, together with that of the atom bomb (and all the parallel "existential" thinking of the time), blew away "humanism" pretty much forever, at least from my own world. I don't know that people now seem either "more pure" or "naïve," thinking of our present political circumstances.

There's also a strong sense of solidarity in these drawings, a feeling of what it means to work together to build up something beautiful, isn't it?

It was a provocative and happy occasion—as working with Arthur always is. We used to do little broadsides for the grammar school commencement there in Bolinas, Arthur's images, my poems—you'll find them in my Collected Poems, p. 651, 'For the Graduation" etc—three in all, I see.

You also stress how everything changes just by shifting the point of view from which we look at the world: small is big if we look at things from inside so that we finally understand "how big is small." How did you deal with your own perception of size in this specific collaboration?

I don't recall any particular sense of doing other than musing on just such questions—and staying with the imagination of "people" Arthur's images made evident.

In the last part of the poem you become quite nostalgic, you talk about how different your perception of things was when you were young and how hard it is now to look at the world in the same way. Could you tell me something about that? Why suddenly the tone is so different? Could you explain your last verse? (I / fails in / the forms / of them, I / want / to go home).

Well, the end of the poem—as with vacation, or life itself – is the end. One reenters the given world as the case—and ours, even then, is bitterly unpleasant in its insistences and distortions of what humans are or might be. The Sixties (into the early Seventies, when this was written) seemed to have real alternatives for a time, sadly, as now, rejected. "I"—as a singular, isolating imagination of "world"—always "fails" formally. It just won't work in the fact of a collective, unless, as Olson writes in the motto he uses for The Maximus Poems, "All my

life I've heard that one makes many…" and that "many" is realized and entered. I am so sick of the American manipulation of "individualism," "independence," all the terms that lend themselves to the simplest use of the device of "divide and conquer . . ." Anyhow I was suddenly sad to be leaving that transforming place the poem had come to, thanks to Arthur's invitation—a home indeed.

October 15, 2004

Appendix 2

Plates

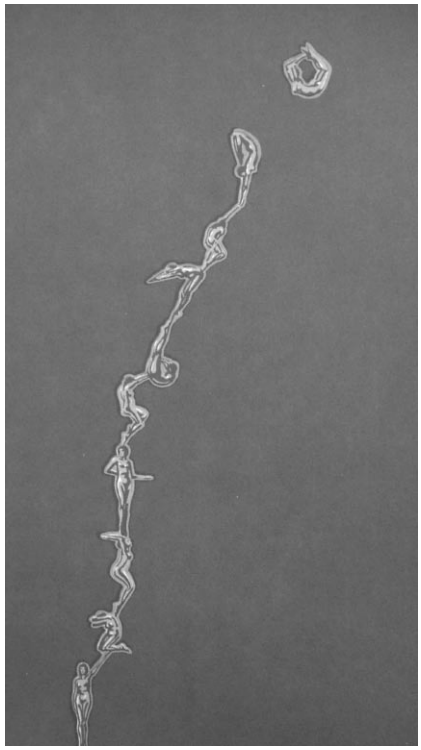

Fig. 1. 1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0°. Bookcover.
John Hay Library, Brown University.

Fig. 2. 1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0. Okamura's drawing.

Fig. 3. 1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0. Okamura's drawing.

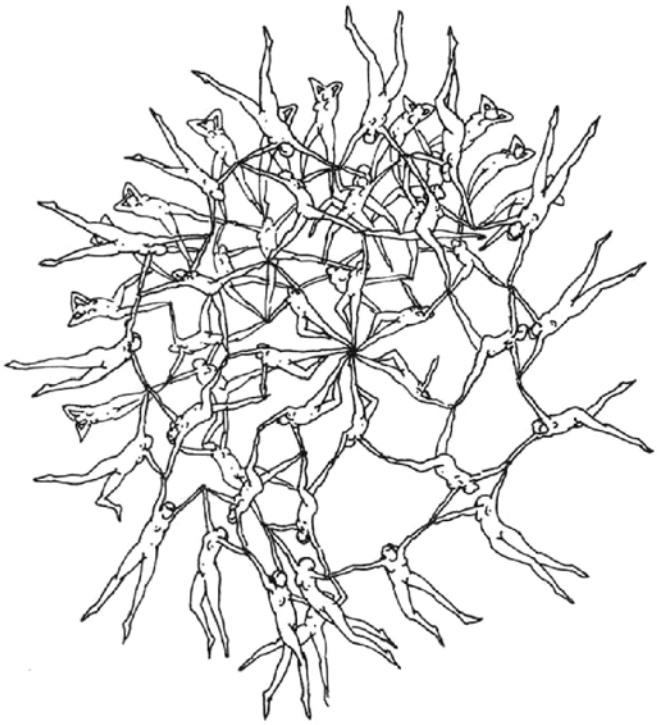

Fig. 4. 1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0. Okamura's drawing.

Fig. 5. 1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0. Okamura's drawing.

Fig. 6. 1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0. Okamura's drawing.