

IN CONVERSATION WITH PHILIP TAAFFE AUGUST 17, 1999 WALDOBORO, MAINE



FRANCESCO CLEMENTE

Robert Creeley (2004)

Oil on canvas, 24 x 18 inches (61 x 46 cm)
Collection Raymond Foye, New York

Recorded and edited by Raymond Foye.

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The conversation begins with a discussion of Creeley's friend and mentor, poet Charles Olson (1910-1970). In his magnum opus, The Maximus Poems, Olson created a post-modern epic fashioned from history, geography, literature, dreams, and the natural sciences; it is likewise an investigation into a broad range of cultural patterns, from Sumerian to Greek to Elizabethan to Mayan.

PHILIP TAAFFE: After having revisited the work of Charles Olson recently, it occurred to me that I've never actually heard any recordings of him speaking. All of a sudden I wanted to hear his voice, particularly after reading his lectures from Beliot College, Poetry and Truth.

ROBERT CREELEY: Yes, those I like very much. He's in a funny circumstance in that he's with company that delights in him obviously, but he has also apparently no peers. Not that he's eliminated the competition, but there's no one there other than the young and...

PT: A few hecklers...

RC: Yeah, to keep one awake. So he's in a curious situation—distracted but particular. But there are tapes. Barry Miles came to the States around 1968 and recorded Olson reading the *The Maximus Poems* in Gloucester, Massachusetts, for Apple Records, which they never released. Folkways later

issued it and it's still available from Smithsonian/Folkways. There's also a USA/Poetry Today television program in circulation—part of a series of documentaries that included Allen Ginsberg, Louis Zukofsky, Denise Levertov and others. The one on Olson is really useful in that it gives a very specific sense of where he is physically, where his place is, so to speak; then there are outtakes that add to that interestingly.



PT: I imagine the physicality of the man is reflected in the voice?

RC: Absolutely. It's not so much a booming voice but big— a big diaphragm. He had a beautiful voice. I remember years ago, Cid Corman had this charming radio program, “This Is Poetry,” on an independent station in Boston. Cid happily got a tape of Olson reading, recorded in Washington D.C. by Richard Wirtz Emerson, but neither one of us had the equipment to play it. We brought it to the radio station and they played a little of it for us, and suddenly every announcer in the place was alerted to this incredible voice—not dramatic like a stage voice—but full of energy and particularity.

PT: His delivery was rapid-fire?

RC: Not so much rapid-fire. Continuous. Robert Duncan, who was also an extraordinary talker, said that when he and Olson were first together they realized they had a problem—so they determined to solve it by both talking at the same time. I've been reading this charming biography by Richard Holmes of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's later life, and Coleridge could write a whole journal's worth of text all but overnight—or dictate it, more accurately. He would walk into a lecture room with the intelligentsia of the period all gathered and just let it go—people were dazzled. The range of references and information was staggering and it wasn't at all sham. And that's like Olson. Olson's range of information was extraordinary—the classic autodidact. He invented his own occasion.

PT: I find him to be an ever-expanding source. He makes me want to delve further and further.

RC: Well, he's radical—he may not let you delve. He'll grab you and hold your attention probably for the rest of your life.

PT: I'm sure he has that capacity. He's certainly a good place to start, because *Projective Verse* (1950) is a form of manifesto that recognizes the Abstract Expressionist aesthetic as "ground zero" for our time. His concept of the open field is one of the few critical ideas that makes sense to me in my own working life: the notion of the poem or painting as an energy-construct, capable of containing all the complexities of the phenomenological world. It's one thing to say you want to be all-inclusive, but how does one do that? Olson seems to have created a model capable of embracing all of the cultural patterns that fascinated him, from New England Transcendentalism to Mayan hieroglyphs. And he did this with an extraordinary sense of rhythm, which for me an essential attribute for a poem or painting.

RC: It's post-modern. I think Olson is given credit for the first use of that term, as something that breaks or shifts—not simply nominally but substantively. Something changes the whole human circumstance in the world, and the apprehension thereof; the entire issue of reference and human perception really does change—and has to change. The way of recognizing or codifying or placing humanness in the world had really altered immensely. Olson's argument with "humanism" in its classic disposition was rooted in the fact of his irritation and rejection of any sense that humans were somehow possessed of an authorizing singularity—of a privilege that permitted them to order the world from their particular perspective.

PT: For me Olson represents a whole new form of cultural humanism. In *The Maximus Poems* he was somehow able to shrug off the isolating strictures of Western thought, and in the process helped define a very specific sense of organic form. I've intuitively sought out similar syncretist situations, where incursions from many different geographical sources have a layering effect of cultural or historical density.

RC: Curiously it's against that background that I first began thinking of your work. At times there's a lovely echo or employment, or kinds of scaling or location, that are familiar from the nineteenth century—almost like "God's in his heaven and all's right with the world"—or "God is in the design." I feel all kinds of playful echoes, but these elements are not used ironically. It's as though one were seeing a whole world, not in spite of a design, but in a design. Not a projection, even, but through the design...

PT: Behind the design... "Design" meaning the way things are put together

in order to hold many details in focus at once. It's the specific convergence of all these elements which pulls the viewer inside the work.

RC: Yes, exactly. It's like looking at the sky through a window, but many windows simultaneously, and seeing them in time and space and recognizing all the accumulations and perspectives that have been thus presumed and employed. To see this greater design and then wanting to clear it all away—to allow an image to emerge, yet wanting all that resonance and echo to remain visible...



PT: And to be able to move around inside of it—to revisit these layers of information, both singularly and in relation to other elements of the work. There's another observation that describes this activity, one that Duncan notes: "The work is shaped by its own energies"... Maybe we should set aside this issue of the natural fact as opposed to intentionality. One is acutely aware of what is taking shape, but one is merely guiding things along in a sense. Olson certainly defines a specific sense of organic form in this regard.

RC: Susan Howe has an engaging title for an early book of hers called *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*. I find in your work a parallel enterprise. You are both gaining an "articulation," which is not only aural, not just "hearing" as a nostalgic impulse or preoccupation, but reads the language of a previous time and space as it is, not resuscitated but simply made "speakable" again.

PT: I think the power and the possibilities for painting today has to do with binding it to a cultural legacy, or trying to evolve towards a tribal situation. Painting is where these symbolic languages or forms somehow crystallize and reveal their ancestry—and that in turn shows a certain sense of future possibility. In other words, a continuum. However one thinks about the explicitness or non-explicitness of abstraction, it has certainly moved on to include new themes. I feel an important purpose for art is to demonstrate this range of potential—one that tries to take into consideration archaic realms, but at the same time moves forward to explore unexpected new territory.

RC: Or reaffirms an old territory.

PT: Imaginative territories, yes. I don't feel anymore as though I have a geographical-cultural location—and I'm sure many people today share this feeling. When I travel I'm discovering fragments that I'm bringing back to a certain mode of production. It's just a way of understanding what exists outside of one's own experience. I guess it's a critique of what I feel and see around me in the United States. I'm imagining a place that doesn't exist and so the place is the painting. That is the place I want to inhabit. When I'm working on the pictures I feel very strongly about this as an inhabitable place.

RC: It wasn't that Olson was the great culture hound, but he was absolutely determined to try to get out of the classic European box. He felt the whole humanistic imagination was stuck with a sense of progress anchored in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and he was wanting to get back of that in some fashion. He felt that was a universe of discourse, as he put it, and he thought that there was a time in the oral tradition—not in the primitive tradition but in the sophistication of the oral tradition—where speaking was doing, and not a mere reflection upon what one means. It was a very different employment of language. In that situation language was an act, rather than a report or reflection or reference. In the way that your work is particularly factive—or post-modern. The dilemma is only that those critical or formal terms are so bleak. What Olson is saying is that Modern suddenly declared itself as The End of the Road. Let's define all that's been the past. That's why Eliot is always a bit sad. As Robert Duncan said, Isn't it wonderful that the one term in the qualifications of the nomenclature that defines one enormous period—that the one term that tries to say this is it—Modern—gets instantly qualified by the fact of Post? Now we have something after—which by definition of the first term was supposed to be impossible.

PT: Clearly Modernism was an inevitable and short-sighted concept. But it has been the only ethic available to artists in such a tumultuous and apocalyptic century. I would say Modernity is characterized by a state of continuous rupture—the incredibly accelerated and synchronous overturning of nations—it is only quintessentially about self-consumption and the immediate destruction of precedence. Maybe it's time to make the case for an artistic practice contra speed and aggression.

RC: Modern times. William Burroughs used to say, "I am only a recording



instrument.” I don’t propose, I’m not a moralist, I don’t have attitudes to select here, I’m simply writing. I’m the lone telegraph operator. In other words, my imagination and sense of the job that I’m doing does not involve imposing thoughts or disseminations apart from those the material effectively dictates. It’s interesting when someone as writer becomes a morally imposing person. I was thinking of Wordsworth and Coleridge as a terrific instance of this. Coleridge on the one hand is immensely attractive and one wants to say an extraordinarily moral man despite his addictions and excesses of personality. Wordsworth, whom I equally value, is an absolutely self-determined moralist—he becomes increasingly moral—he’s always moral. Wordsworth finally says Coleridge is a complete loser—he can’t keep his word, he’s awful. But it seems to me in terms of the art it isn’t that one is a better artist than the other. This has nothing to do with whether or not they are interesting as artists—whether they have morally attractive conditions. I’d love it if good people were good artists, but I don’t think they are.

PT: I know what you mean. Conrad Aiken may have been a moral beacon, and Ezra Pound a fascist, but here isn’t much question as to who was the better poet. Although I do admire poets or artists who show a sense of responsibility towards the betterment of society—Allen Ginsberg being an excellent example.

RC: I remember once asking Allen what meditation proved, and he said, “No one can bother me when I’m in that situation.” A place to be in mind and body that would not be the determination of his own intent. He wanted not to be taken over by aliens, but to be free of the onus of self-determination. He wanted to be one with others in some imagined plurality, which is precisely what religion makes possible.

PT: If you think about the idea of the religious icon, and the power certain religious paintings have had in art history, it’s really an impoverished condition. The condition of icon painting in the 20th century—religious iconography— you don’t see any good ones anymore.

RC: I was thinking of particularly of things like Rothko’s chapel—

PT: That’s one of the formidable exceptions.

RC: It is and it isn't. It's an exception because the particular work is interesting. Whether it serves the interests of spiritual bonding, or whether one has necessarily deep religious stirrings in that situation, I don't know. Is it aptly called a chapel? I do know that the paintings per se are attractive in ways that we've been talking attraction. But I don't think they're necessarily religious...

PT: But I feel that with certain paintings—the paintings of Brice Marden for example—sometimes strike me as having a profound religious basis, and I'm interested in that. I am interested in the relationship of art to religion—Matisse and his Vence chapel succeeded on a certain level. I think religious experience can still be one important aspiration for painting. I miss that originating impulse—reflecting upon an image as a way to get closer to—I hate to say God, or prayer, but yes—it brings you into a prayerful condition...

RC: The problem is God has become such a curiously maudlin presumption. You know—God doesn't like you or God thinks you're bad...

PT: And the fundamentalist's God is very far away indeed.

RC: I remember a beautiful moment in a lecture by Cyrus Gordon at Canisius College in Buffalo, a Jesuit college. Cyrus Gordon was the fellow who unlocked Linear A, the classic problem in Sumerian linguistics, and he was talking at some length about the Greeks and the shift to the Christian context or culture. At the end of his talk he invited questions, and a pleasant graduate student asked, What do you think the Greeks meant by their gods? What did they stand for? And Gordon said They didn't stand for anything, they were actual. They weren't metaphors, they were actual presences. For the Greeks these gods were like Harry down the street—they were absolutely real—whether or not they ever showed up in some physical term they were nonetheless evident, manifest and real. I guess God for me was certainly real when I was a kid. Years later I had this shy but determined need to ask Pound the obvious question—Why you were an anti-Semite? He said, Well have you read Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*?—I said yes, but that doesn't really answer my question. And he said, Actually I don't like the Jews for having invented monotheism—and he said both the Christians and the Jews run equally to excess in that regard. He was really asking, What would this world be outside of a monotheistic context?



RC: There's a great museum of Sumerian art in Ankara, Turkey. In this museum there are extraordinary small sculptures, which are so affectionate and whimsical and funny. One recognizes them over thousands of years—just as stable as the eyes in your head—it's immensely reassuring. But it isn't all some hidden cult or lost custom—it's absolutely present and affectionate and particular—and not because it's this way or that and not because it's echoing one's own culture necessarily. It's always in the same place—you'd know it anywhere.

PT: An explicitness that is able to transport you to its own dimension—it shakes you into being contemporaneous with it. Returning to this idea of language from a previous time being made speakable again: do you perceive these articulations to be archaic impulses, or do they at least declare the need to summon the archaic?

RC: Often in your work I feel I'm reading through an accumulated perspective, but a perspective that has no necessary advice to the viewer. At times it evokes curious and engaging emotions, but it doesn't necessarily tell you what those emotions are. I think it's trying to get back to a primary place—but not so simple as a return to the garden of some imagined paradise.

PT: I was thinking recently of what you had to say about Frank Stella—what he was confronted with when he first started to respond to the conditions of the Abstract Expressionist situation. You immediately recognized that the answers or the delineations that he came up with fully took into account the sense and methods of the Abstract Expressionists, yet his answers seemed on the surface antithetical to that context. You observed that the artists who were mimicking the Abstract Expressionists were trying to shape something that was a reality parallel to what had been done; yet the terms of their response were no longer adequate.

RC: There's a work of yours that echoes Clyfford Still in that way—that seeks a response in a similar context.

PT: In that case I was accepting certain iconic factors as a given, and look-

ing at the possibilities of the situation from a somewhat later time frame. I was asking myself a question: in what way is Clyfford Still an Abstract Expressionist? Where was the flow there? What always interested me about Still was his method for achieving a pictorial fact: the direct application of thick oil color by scraping it into the canvas with a knife-like instrument—the raw mineral jaggedness of this. Perhaps the expressionist “flow” of his work is defined as the pain of actually getting the paint on there through this particular means.

RC: I think he goes both ways so to speak, which is fascinating—it’s almost as though he’s not positive/negative in the sense of this way or that, but rather one can read him not so much as determined design but as an intensity of feeling thus manifest or present.

PT: Also the work has an essential grandeur, an American scale. What I find really evident in his work are the reflections upon the geology of the American West.

RC: I certainly do, being an Easterner.

PT: Do you have any particular reading in retrospect of why post-war American painting took on this larger pictorial scale? There are various theories, such as the idea of European easel painting being too confining for these new frontiers. The intellectual and cultural emigration into New York and to the West Coast established the United States as a place where new artistic activity could take shape. Part of what resulted was a larger format to contain this energy—the new American framework had to be on a greater scale. How did you feel about the enormity of some of these canvases when you first saw them?

RC: I guess in one sense I was dismayed. Walter Benjamin has very clear discussions of the shift in the dimensions from classic-monumental to convenient-bourgeois. I think the shift to larger scale was a move back to making painting the point again. It seemed a reaction against the European habit of this activity of objectifying—of always looking at the thing rather than being one with it. The larger scale in the immediate sense argued that one had the authority to claim more space. You had a bigger wall. It also sadly argued that art was moving up toward institutional response and interests again.

PT: For me the paintings often have to be of a certain scale just so I can put a sufficient amount of material in them. They need to be that size because they have to contain “x” amount of things. But I’ve never felt the need to equate scale with a sense of the heroic. In the case of Clyfford Still, I was deeply involved with those paintings for years. I think art always comes out of other art, and that it’s necessary to engage precedent. Artists must invent some things but they don’t invent it all. Artists have a relationship to history and that relationship has to do with identifying who they are—their abilities and concerns—in order to respond to what exists. Finally the only way I could make use of my experience of a Clyfford Still painting was to get inside one of them, to have one of his paintings as a direct subject. It was about engagement.

RC: There’s a particular room at the Albright Knox Gallery in Buffalo where I’ve been many times, and I gather those Clyfford Still paintings are there because the museum agreed to his condition, to keep them permanently on display. Usually, that’s the one downside, so to speak, of the visual arts: I remember talking to an old friend, R. B. Kitaj, about the dilemma of one’s work going to people or situations which are not particularly friendly—like giving over one’s beloved or something thus close to you. With poems it’s so different—they don’t exist in that isolated situation. Ideally everyone gets them when they’re printed. You can’t own them in the same way: they’re public property—or nothing. Even in museums—particularly in museums—one sees materials hung poorly, and one wishes for more care. I remember visiting a local museum a few years ago and being impressed with how everything was so dusty and the lighting was poor, one was struck by how curiously derelict everything was.

PT: Yes, but these are my favorite museums—the derelict kind. That museum at Harvard—the Peabody—they’ve completely destroyed that place. They’ve turned it into an informational circus, with CD-ROMs in every room. The exhibition spaces used to be dusty, the vitrines all had curling yellowed typescript labels, with dead flies lying in the corners. It was wonderful. I suppose curators have to do something about that at some point, but museology has become a rather bizarre science these days.

RC: You have to tidy it up, but not in any hurry. The Peabody Museum used to have these incredible glass cases with recently discovered archaeological wonders and they’d just pop them in there—and they would stay

there for a long, long time. I used to have classes down there. It was very hot, with skulls and Kachina dolls floating about in those cases—as if in a dream.

PT: I was at the Brooklyn Museum recently to see quite a curious and wonderful exhibition, “The Impressionists in Winter.” I went on a Saturday in early summer when you’d expect there to be quite a few people—it was meant to be that blockbuster-type of exhibition—but there weren’t a lot of people there. You could really float from one painting to the next and not be surrounded by people with murmuring audiophones. Then this woman next to me saw me looking at one of the paintings and said, “Don’t you think it’s a shame that there aren’t more people at this exhibition.” And for me there were quite enough people—it was perfectly fine. Audiences seem to have internalized these complaints that used to take place between museum officials, and suddenly the public is now aware that this is really the museum’s job—to pull them in.

RC: Typically in the visual arts, even in the best of circumstances, one’s ability to have comfortable and comforting relations with any particular painting or work of art is fairly meager, so that a museum that is dedicated to changing the building every couple of weeks, or that won’t let things be stable, is going to defeat that possibility. One aspect of the visual arts that seems to me—if not a dilemma at least a very determined factor—is that one can’t hang out, as they say, with particular art in the way one would want to, or in the way one can with poems, or even with music. You either do or do not have access to it. An inevitable distance occurs emotionally and socially if one can’t get to it. I like that fact in old statuary—aspects of Boston for example—the Saint Gaudens sculptures in the Commons. It would be nice for a work of art to be just as familiar as the tree across the street. That would be interesting.

PT: Like old friends.

RC: Exactly. I’ve seen statistics on the amount of time people spend in front of a painting—I think one minute would be considered a very long time—and if it’s a traveling show one may never see that work again. Paradoxically I don’t know if that’s the effect of advertising, but it’s certainly a situation advertising both acknowledges and tries to deal with.

PT: Exploits....

RC: Exploits—yes. It gives you the most hit for the time that you're going to be paying attention.

PT: A major problem as I see it, although I would certainly prefer to be wrong here, is that publicity and technology seem to capture people's imagination much more than the art itself. A worst case scenario is when the art seems to be just a pretext for the publicity and information technology to assert itself over and over again, almost as a kind of cattle call—hitting you over the head constantly—so you can't even see through your own eyes anymore.

RC: Perhaps the challenge lies in the ability of the artist to absorb and find ways of using contemporary technology, the methods of the marketplace, the habits that can make advertising effective. Not to overcome as though it were simply a contest, not simply to know how that content or means is achieved—but to use all the ways of making something accessible.

PT: True, these contemporary means of visual communication are out there and available to artists. I'm personally not so interested in engaging any of it; "communication" in a normative sense is not primarily what I try to do.

RC: Take Bridget Riley, for example. In the appropriation of certain of her paintings in your early work, you're using both intellectually and experientially determined formal agencies. You're using them very comfortably—very unremarkably—no big deal. And that ability to use those formal possibilities so comfortably is informed by a distinctly post-modern sense of replication. I mean, Bridget Riley isn't using them so comfortably in her works. I remember in the first instance there was a great deal of tension.

PT: Well, she has always taken a romantic position vis à vis her own work. Although many of them were actually painted by assistants, she considered herself a romantic in the sense of the paintings being self-willed artistic investigations. But she strongly objected to the misuse of her "visual signs" by department stores and fashion designers. I think she had a very difficult time with that.

RC: Or something parallel, like Agnes Martin, for example—moving from figuration and almost a kind of symbology: lots of inherent relation to the imagined qualities—earth tones as good, morphic forms, natural forms, et cetera, to the reduction of all that. Or not even the reduction because I don't think she set about determining how she could get rid of it all—but I think she began to recognize organizations and order as other than looking at things—in some didactic sense of their value.

PT: It seems many artists today feel that if their work doesn't somehow make reference to or speak within the nexus of new communicative technologies they're somehow not with it—or they're not expressing anything valid about their culture. It gets back to the basic question of whether the artist is meant to reflect how the world operates—by mimicking some part of it—or should the artist attempt to recede, not quite in the romantic sense of disappearing from the culture, but to delve deeper into the sources of its present character. Where does one position oneself in relation to this dilemma?

RC: Allen Ginsberg was a vivid intimation to his friends and neighbors as to how iconized one could be, comfortably living a public persona, not as though it were an attitude, but as an intimate daily friend and neighbor, who could no more transcend this fact than he could change it. Pound put it years ago quoting Remy de Gourmont: “Freely to write what one chooses is the sole pleasure of the writer.” And I think freely to paint or make what one chooses is the sole pleasure of an artist.

PT: That in and of itself is the philosophy—is the whole picture.

RC: And it couldn't get any better or worse, no matter what we did. No one could say, in some didactic frame, “Now, Philip, paint this,” or, “You've painted enough of this, now paint that.” It wouldn't work. I remember a great moment in Provincetown when, briefly there as a kid, I wandered into a gallery as this tender, elder artist brought in some of his work and the guy looked at it and said, “Give us more boats! Can't deal with this abstract stuff—give us more boats!” They needed more boats: the tourists didn't want these sensitive whatever's. There was no condition in our habits that made poetry particular. There was a lot of old-time oral tradition which was wonderful, but if you said in West Acton, Massachusetts, that you were going to be a poet—it's like Allen saying “Few lyres sounded in the

streets of Paterson.” There were even fewer where I came from.

PT: So you have never particularly felt a dilemma with regard to the circumstances of the artist in relation to the broader culture?

RC: No. I was helped by having a charming elder friend, Ira Grant, who lived in Hanover, New Hampshire. He was a house painter but particularly a breeder of poultry, of Barred Plymouth Rocks. I learned more about poetry as an actual activity from raising chickens than I did from any professor at the university. I learned how to pay attention to things, and the necessary patience. So I translated that into my own situation—the concentration of the activity, not in terms of surviving but in terms of the realization that it’s not possible to be responsible for any generalizing situation. The careerism of the present moment is disappointing, I must say.

PT: I think I raise these questions not so much to argue against the status quo, but rather to question the terms of the overall visual culture: the situation that has come to exist as a result of the homogenization or corporatization of our visual environment—what one has to look at walking down the street, and the fact that I don’t want to inhabit a world where everything has been turned into a chain store or multinational franchise. It’s a disheartening trend and at the same time difficult to ignore. Architecture and signage and television are all influential in terms of what human beings feel, and how people end up thinking about various issues—it does influence one’s state in the world. My point is that art does have its own intrinsic authority in this respect and it must demonstrate some primacy within the overall equation.

RC: You couldn’t lose yourself in these things even if you wanted to—not simply your presence but all the factors of your sensibility—your person, your habits, that which is “you” would be manifest as grid or echo or image or information, no matter what you had otherwise. I have verbal habits, and habits of thought, which just won’t go away, no matter what I do. In the finally pathetic attempt to be original, I recognized that I had nothing to worry about nor did anyone else—that there would be an originality in what I did no matter, and there would also be a similarity or congruence.

PT: Yes, I found that to be quite true for myself as well. I guess it’s easier to look to another activity which shares certain goals but takes a very different

route to arrive there.

RC: I think it's important not to get possessed by art with a capital "A." With many painters I knew, I felt that the imagination of heroically great art was, if not the death of a painter, at least made one less playful and less responsive to what one was literally doing.

PT: Do you think that there's a chasm or some aesthetic problem to be dealt with in terms of a work of art that has some literary aspirations—to the point where it seems like an attempt to illustrate a literary idea or a musical idea rather than build upon those sources experientially? Isn't it somehow more satisfying if a work manages to internalize these themes without being beholden to them in any programmatic way? I guess the results are either good, or less convincing, as the case may be.

RC: I would think personally that the attempt to make each of the arts singular—in some respects pure—is a distraction. I think Joe Brainard's work, for example, has a hard time getting a clear response from curators or critics, who wonder if he isn't compromised by his preoccupations with the literary mode and context. And then, in a very different sense, there are artists like Kurt Schwitters, for whom language is very locating and necessary and specific. I don't mean something as curiously inept as the imagination of multimedia, where there's a little bit of song, a little bit of art, a little bit of this...

PT: A hodgepodge.

RC: That to me is very distracting. It reduces the potential of a work.

PT: I've been thinking about these forces of contemporaneity: the temporal boundaries of decision-making. What an artist chooses to do is based upon a personal predilection for certain kinds of investigations; it is also coming out of the art that they have most internalized and responded to. But on a planet that is eroding faster than we can begin to describe—I mean, how does that change the structure and fabric of the art? I'm remembering a discussion you had with Olson on the possibilities of versification after Eliot. You were referring to the moment when it became clear that the world that Eliot's work represented had crumbled. It was a stark recognition of how that type of verse was no longer possible. The reason you gave

was something like, “because the time now is now” — the former rhythmic possibilities had ceased to converge with this newly sensed reality.

RC: Just the fact that we are here, as Denise Levertov used to say. “If we’re going to be here, let’s be here now...” The dismay one felt in Eliot’s circumstance was that the past was peculiarly occupying the present. “Born very young in a world already very old,” is Louis Zukofsky’s phrase. The sense of late arrival—“You should have been here two years ago it was really great”—or, “It’s all over, you might as well go home.”

PT: But how would you begin to characterize some of those forces which enabled you to make such a judgement at that time? To see, quite simply, that those rhythmic structures were just not cutting it.

RC: It had to do with growing up in New England at that moment—having to deal with the literature that was already over by the time we got there, at least in the authority of criticism and imagination. I mean, in the middle fifties critical works were deemed more valuable as literature than the works of Kerouac could ever be. I remember at that time the book that was presumed to do what Kerouac was presumed not to be able to do was *The Adventures of Augie March*, which was dependent upon a kind of objective qualification of the otherwise apparent. For some reason now unknown to me, no one seems to have recognized this. It’s like Brakhage saying how people are taught to see green—if they are not taught within any determined frame, then green has a much wider and more accurate occasion in perception than the statement “This is green” will ever qualify. But somehow there was an imagination to what Kerouac was doing that was previously unthought of, and which for his critics was too “raw.” We were all growing up in the debris of a previous civilization—we all came of age variously in the second world war—we arrived at our various locations whether we went to war or not, to see everything just...blown up.

PT: An apocalyptic reality.

RC: I could not believe as a kid that these guys were serious—the various “leaders” of our race. And how is it today that McDonald’s and Coca-Cola can be so successful and disseminate their dubious or downright false information unfettered, “incorporated” to the ends of the earth?

PT: Rain forests are being cleared so McDonald's can raise their cattle there for a while—before turning it into a complete wasteland. And biogenetic engineers want to patent questionable plants that may end up endangering the world's food supply—it's a distinctly foul use of the imagination. It's cancerous science, a science of industrial misapplication. It can't celebrate the diverse forces of life, so it's receding into the conundrum of mono-culture.

RC: It seems to me so. This present form of biological engineering is rather different because it does not happen in nature, and the natural reproduction system in each case is not the agency that is permitting it. Things have changed as they say. The world today is far more populated, and subsequently our relation to its physical terms has altered both them and ourselves. The same kind of synthesizing or processing of usual habitual human circumstances and contents—what constitutes knowledge and what is information in this present world—is taking place in much the same way. I noticed that most preferred majors in colleges this year are in business. I guess that's all that's left in a weird way—at least in terms of any stable thing one could learn and presume to do when one got out.

PT: I'm very concerned about what the audience for art is going to be like in the very near future, given the fact that art in the public schools—especially in the early grades—seems to be considered an activity that can somehow be dispensed with.

RC: Yet “art education” seems really as though one were trying to extend the territory of demonstrable information rather than have it be anything other than what is expected.

PT: When I was in school at Cooper Union, people generally didn't have much time for painting, especially abstract painting, which was seen as being a frivolous game, or something to that effect. In many cases these people were completely right. I certainly supported many of those positions. But I also had instructors who maintained that no work of art could have meaning without the inclusion of language as part of its presentation and existence in the world. And I found that to be a very disappointing position—narrow in the extreme.

RC: In a poem Robert Duncan has a beautiful phrase—he says:

“...we were looking at the painting
how did he organize those words
leading us away from the painting?”

It's like the tour guide in the museum saying, “This work means so and so.” It's almost as if people need to be reassured that what they're seeing is what they're seeing—and it's okay to see it. I suppose that's fair enough. But it's a more weirdly grotesque instance when the painting is so narrative as to be moving parallel to words. I remember there used to be not so very long ago among painter friends a kind of tacit joking, when one realized that not even the artist addressed could understand the particular critic who was touting one's works with such vigor. I think there was a crescendo that peaked sometime in the nineteen seventies, when the writing had really gone beyond the understanding of any common person. Art criticism had become such a ground for some peculiar form of intellectual questioning it wasn't interesting, it wasn't saying anything, it wasn't locating anything with much clarity—it was simply preening in a funny way.

PT: Well there are critics today who say in effect that the text is the work of art and the work of art merely illustrates the text.

RC: You're working for the man!

* * *

RC: What's the usual length of time it takes you to make a painting?

PT: It varies. Often it might take a couple of months to prepare the actual relief plates or printed elements that are to be utilized in a work. Then the application of them might take a few hours. So after several months of preparation and a few hours of applied activity, the painting may then sit around the studio for another two months while I study it and figure out what direction it needs to take. One stage of operations that might happen over a very short period of time may determine my thinking for the next longer period.

RC: I've seen the wonderful film by Ari Marcopoulos, which shows you at work and emphasizes and clarifies how physical this act of painting is for

you. What is it that you're stamping on—what would you call them?

PT: Those are printing plates, essentially. They're hand-cut from cardboard, and varnished to protect the cardboard from the disintegration that comes with use. The relief surface is coated using lithographic ink, or sometimes oil paint.

RC: How many of those do you have in stock?

PT: Oh, hundreds and hundreds.

RC: How long have you been making those?

PT: It started with linoleum carvings in the early 1980s, but I've just continued producing them in one form or another. They're a lot like drawing for me—in fact they begin as drawings. I'm always working on these things—a never-ending process, it seems.

RC: Where does the attraction to or appetite for stamping occur?

PT: It has less to do with the act of stamping than it has to do with the willing into existence of a certain physical line, or of shaping an image that can be used in a number of ways. I've always taken an indirect approach to the making of my work, even though there's a lot of direct application. I like to invent my material outside the immediate circumstances of the painting, gradually introducing the imagery in phases. I then try to find some means of provoking the situation in progress so that it can be concluded, or else brought to another level of meaning.

RC: I was thinking of some parallels with stenciling, but this is a more flexible and immediate way of working.

PT: I do utilize stencils, but that's a cruder form of what the relief plates accomplish. Very often these printing plates are a way of getting things going. Making a painting for me is not unlike shooting a film, in a schematic sense: one exposes a certain amount of footage and then one goes on to select the parts that belong to the final picture. I make many impressions on paper from these printing plates and then choose the examples that are most stimulating for me. When I'm ready, I can cut them out and

tape them to the canvas to compose with them. I usually mark their exact location with pastel before they get collaged onto the canvas. I want to give myself as much freedom as possible in the formation of the work, and using these methods enables me to generate a lot of imagery outside of the painting before it enters the work. I prefer having imagery that can be built around an improvised idea. It's a constant and ongoing process—some kind of radical empiricism.

RC: I love that—empiricism—the apt and terrific word!

PT: It's intuitive— a leap of faith. But the paintings also have a strong architectural determination. From the outset very careful shapes are drawn and scaled for inclusion and these become important factors in how a painting evolves, because I see the edges of the elements in my paintings as corresponding to our perception of objects in physical reality. For example, how does this chair separate itself from the windowsill behind it? —the physical edges, the atomic definition of the thing.

RC: So it isn't simply that this is a chair—it's the formal chair.

PT: It's the clarity of its edges, how that object is separated from other objects, or from the entire visual environment. Then again, another challenge is to constantly have the possibility of undermining oneself—to be able to subvert that which is taking place. I'm not interested in any formulaic or clear-cut road, so to speak. I'm ultimately interested in discovering how to resolve a story in the most effective manner. Finally one has to make a decision. I work in a highly deliberative way, but the deliberation takes place not by having a brush loaded with color and changing course as the gestures are applied—although sometimes I do that too.

RC: Olson had a great phrase apropos all of this. He said, "Judgement is instant upon recognition." Only if you recognize what it is—then the judgement follows like night the day—absolutely coincident.

PT: Exactly. It's a question of understanding the nature of what one is engaged with, and reading the character of the thing as it moves along. The character of the work gets put there through gestures that are largely unconscious. I may have a general sense of what I want to do to a canvas, and I may have in mind a specific series of operations in order to arrive at

that stage. But it's crucial to follow the clues that become visible along the way; and I study those clues very closely, deciphering them—like breaking a code.

RC: It's an extraordinary field to have manifest or evident: painting. Both the possibility and the dilemma of writing is that it's about the line—it's serial. At times it becomes almost as though one is being driven past something that looks terrific, but unhappily the line will not let you stop—you can't get off there. I've always envied in that way the multiplicity or the plurality of possibilities that visual art invited or permitted.

PT: Yes, but I admire the continuousness of Olson's project—the way *The Maximus Poems* are ever inclusive, ever unfolding. The problem with painting is in framing off the energy: it has to be contained, it must have physical parameters, you have to cut it and frame it. There's a format that exists that has to be filled—or left empty as the case may be. But it's the framing off that is intrinsic to painting, even though it applies to poetry in very discrete ways.

RC: Paintings are objects. That's a condition they don't particularly share with poems. Poetry curiously is displaced by reason of transference, or by its proposal as being a thing—a poem—whatever that made thing is. But I think more and more that poetry is an activity, like music. One can notate it and have a record, but it's the lived activity that constitutes the experience. Seeing you in that film, I realized I wanted to be there too. Because the whole physical act of what you were doing was extraordinarily attractive. I know the point is not simply the lives of the artists as a pitch for the significance of their art, and yet for me, personally, it was very hard not to be moved. Now with reading Richard Holmes' biography of Coleridge, it's very moving to me that that's the person, such as can be recorded. Art to me is always human.

PT: I wonder if we can't apply a term that I've come across in your discussions of poetry, this idea of negative capability—a theory originated by Coleridge and popularized by Keats—as a way of understanding the potential of artistic thought and how it gets transformed into an activity which hasn't yet occurred.

RC: It's his way of recognizing that one can't always have what one wants,

or one can't always intellectually know what's the case in some determining way. What Keats called the "irritable reaching after facts." That doesn't mean all facts, but in some situations facts are not possible—and therefore you tend to resolve what's the case in some didactic manner, which loses whatever signification was present. It doesn't preclude intelligence or response or use of rational thought—but it paradoxically recognizes the limits of rational thought. And it won't answer the question it presumes...

PT: But it does speak to the fact that although there may be an imaginative impulse to move in a certain direction, there are always emotional or cultural factors which will temper the development of what is about to take shape. What's to be done, that sheer sense of possibility, can at times overwhelm our understanding of how to go about doing it.

RC: I love the arts as a real restatement of values—of something proposed in being human. I mean, there's nothing that's more or less anything. Like the human body seen in terms of its intrinsic value: in terms of the actual materials, it may be very little indeed. But it's a manifest or a location or a proposal or recognition of humanness—that's very hard to beat. As I was saying, I was struck in viewing that film about you, by how particular the physical space became, not just in the fact of you standing on the maquette or the print surfaces—but how the place was being so extraordinarily specified by what you were doing. In one way I thought of that phrase of Pollock's, "When I am in my painting..."

PT: He's no longer aware of what he's doing.

RC: He no longer has to know, in some didactic way. As Olson said, "We do what we know before we know what we do." It's one thing to know what you're doing—it's another thing to do what you're doing. I don't think they're necessarily the same thing.

PT: I have a peculiar psychological mechanism or indicator telling me that somehow some good result can come out of the immediacy of that trance-like activity. But I'm also aware of the fact that it's only one stage of the process. I usually cannot bring a work to fruition or completion through that means alone. It can only be an entryway to the next defining shape of that place, to show me how to elaborate it further—so I'm always reaching after something that is... almost an interpretation of what was there.

RC: One thing that's always curiously locating in your paintings is how the elements are literal—but the images aren't—although they're coming from uses in which they're often highly symbolic. Symbols are not deflated in your use of them—you're not displacing that aspect with any intent. I was thinking of your use of the spiral—there's a recognition of the innate authority of the translated images—that can then be used as representative of X, Y or Z. In Olson's *Mayan Letters* he's thinking of the Mayan hieroglyphs and he's charmed by what constitutes an eye for the Mayan—which is simply a spiral. There's a resonance always of "other" but also a particularity. These elements are not random, because you give them such a locating grid.

PT: I suppose I like working towards certain boundaries of abstraction. This has to do with stretching a pictorial idea until it reaches the end of what it can do. Then I'll break this vocabulary wide open, intervening within it somehow. I see this as a way of making the work more abstract, which means that it contains the most of what can be held there. The work must be a highly energized field. The energy field has got to be unified—with every molecule active and contributing towards this. All of it is essential in measuring the impact or success of the thing. For me, when a painting feels complete in this way, it's tantamount to acknowledging a primal condition.

RC: Trying to arrive at a threshold of consciousness where it's apprehending as opposed to saying. My first wife had absolute suspicion of my particular loves as painters. She really grilled Philip Guston one day. She asked him how he knew when a painting was done? "When you can't do any more," he replied.

PT: When anything more would be superfluous and destructive.

RC: When it doesn't need you anymore

PT: Does that also hold true for a poem?

RC: Yes. When I was younger, I realized that oftentimes writing was almost like riding a wave—you want it to go on and on, but suddenly there you were on the beach. You come to the end. And obviously the impulse would be, since it's going so well, can't it go a little bit more? So I responded by taking off the introductory part and then just cutting the work when the

energy was done. Olson again put it very beautifully—he said, “Argument is previous to composition.” It’s not part of the composition. You’re thinking as to how you got to this point, what you’re doing here, why you’re doing this, but that’s not the beginning, that’s the scaffolding. That gets you going.

PT: William Burroughs was particularly aware of this whole issue of retaining energy, keeping the energy on a certain level and knowing when to stop. When we were working on drawings together at his home in Lawrence, Kansas, I wanted to draw all afternoon. Suddenly he wanted to stop, and it had nothing to do with the fact that he was tired. He felt that we had done fifteen of these things, and we were talking into a microphone about what was emerging in front of us on the page. I was just getting into it and he said, “I think that’s enough for one day.” He knew his limits in terms of energy distribution.

RC: The spirit said cool it! William Carlos Williams said something apropos of some of this: “When a man makes a poem, makes it, mind you, he takes words as he finds them interrelated about him and composes them—without distortion which would mar their exact significances—into an intense expression of his perceptions and ardors that they may constitute a revelation in the speech that he uses. It isn’t what he says that counts as a work of art, it’s what he makes, with such intensity of perception that it lives with an intrinsic movement of its own to verify its authenticity.” This seems particularly the case in certain of these larger abstractions—I’m thinking now of *The Red Desert*.

PT: What I was after in that painting was giving each character a certain depth, making every element seem to play a singular role in the drama. It’s a form of theater with a cast of characters interacting in such a way that they have this proximity, this tension to one another, also this depth—you can look inside each one of these figures and discover a distinct world. I’m also aware of how they relate to the gestural vocabulary that’s been impressed upon the area behind them.

RC: That’s what’s interesting too, that sense of the other place, beyond.

PT: The initial marks were applied onto the red ground using liquid latex through stencils. I then painted over this with a darker, brownish red. After

the latex was removed, the theater of operations began. The brightly colored elements are impressions lifted onto the paper from litho ink, which had been rolled over a large pane of glass. Additional sets of stencils were used to mask off the shapes.

RC: And the scale is substantial?

PT: It's a decent scale, not overly huge—but it's a good size for me. It's called *The Red Desert* after the Antonioni movie.

RC: All these forms make very particular impressions. They're not inchoate—they're all very particular. They make one think of symbolic or iconic referential images, but they are not. What's interesting is they don't settle as such. They're evocative fragments. Yet each one is very specific—each one is a line of a poem, so to speak. I don't feel that they're fragments that are unrelated.

PT: They're coexisting.

RC: It's like people waiting for a bus or something. They're not frustrated by the place, they're not trying to get out. I was seeing some images the other morning of a particular breeder of tropical fish, who hopes to stabilize a new species—literally—and this happens maybe twice in several hundred years—and so one's seeing fish swimming, coming up and down as one looks at them, suddenly appearing—they have that kind of parallel specificity—yours is not a pool of fish but they are present in that same curious depth and coming and going from the surface. They're all rare creatures and you've got a lot of them, to give a sense of life to what's there. Trying not to kill it, because in a funny way it's alive. There's a very particular deft manner of handling—here it's bringing these forms to stability in this place and manner that doesn't impose upon them or doesn't determine them, saying, “You must sit here,” like being assigned seats. Keeping things fluid but stable.

PT: Stability is something that is only there for a flash before transmuting itself into something else.

RC: Otherwise it's dead.

PT: For me it has to have stability in the form of some architectonic balance or else it's not a painting. But paradoxically, the architecture that I build into a work is meant to have an activating effect—everything is set in motion on the inside. The structure is there not to lock things into position, but to move them towards one another. The key to thinking about these contrasting principles is to see them as mutually supportive. In mentioning the idea of the proximity of elements in a painting, it calls to mind what I feel is another important prerequisite of a work, which has to do with giving it a certain erotic charge or libidinous direction—so it feels driven by an erotic necessity... What does a painting do? What is the best thing it can do? It can do many things; and it should be able to turn you on...

RC: Yes. Make you interested and very alert.

PT: Alert, alive, regenerated. Confirming that you occupy your own body, and that what you're seeing has a physiological connection to you in a primary sense, a connection that has something to do with Eros. In my work I want to emphasize desire. I want the specialized fragments in a painting to amount to a full and complex world unto itself, almost as an act of nature. I don't want the orchestration or the workings and the labor to be...

RC: Evident?

PT: Just enough evidence is all there needs to be...

RC: The timbers in this room, they're hewn by hand. Somebody went into the woods and cut the trees and then squared them in that fashion, so the labor is very evident in the physical object. But it's done.

PT: There's something of an internal contradiction in that although it's not an act of nature, the painting or poem doesn't want to transgress natural principles or appearances, either. It's deliberately constructed to feel as though everything has fallen into place as it was somehow destined to—translating these observations of nature as the work proceeds. Why do I want the work to be this way? I think it's a matter of saying that there's nothing forced—there's a yielding to a process, a give and take. I'm following a process that for me is similar to moving through a natural cycle.

RC: Olson was fascinated by the autonomous nervous system that permits us to sit down without seeing our backside or how it's lowering into the chair, things of that sort. He was fascinated by a report that Russian scientists had done that seemed to say a cell can qualify information in the same way a whole complex organism can—that each cell contains the potential of the entire organism. That you can read with your hands, for example—not metaphorically but literally—that the condition for the input is present, is there.

PT: There is an early work in this show called *Glyphic Brain*, which was based very much on this notion, this sense of biological necessity about the image-forming activity and the decisions involved—the brain waves that were inducing this space, and how it coalesced. The work is an accumulation of straight lines that are torn away and built up in such a way that the paper became lacerated, and it turns into this enclosed emblem of imaginary space. There's a quote by Robert Duncan that describes this activity: "The work is shaped by its own energies." One is acutely aware of what is taking shape, but one is merely guiding things along in a sense.

RC: He also defined "responsibility" as the ability to respond.

PT: To respond, yes. One is constantly responding to what is taking place in the process of making the work. But the word "respond" also suggests responsibility towards what gets put out there. I was wondering if your sense of the responsibility of the artist has changed, or is it more or less the same—the responsibility of what art should do? Do you have a certain prognosis or feeling about what should happen or can happen?

RC: Oh I never did. I mean, "I only work here." That's why I found Burroughs so attractive, or Allen equally in a funny way. I thought we were workers in the vineyard. We didn't define the vineyard. True, we're responsible in so far as we do have an ability to respond—but we're not of necessity defining the world we're given to live in. I can recall elders in my own life apologizing to me for the state of the world. William Carlos Williams did that, saying "We had such hopes and we're sorry to be handing over to you this extraordinary mess." And I could say the same thing to younger poets also but it's really a useless thing to say, frankly. I loved these people but I didn't think that particular apology was necessary or even useful.

PT: Can you imagine something that you feel in your experience of visual art, something you've thought about that hasn't been done? What you would like to see done...

RC: I feel like this: "Tell them it's been wonderful." I think not just the life I've been given as a person thus employed or thus functioning but I could never have anticipated poetry. I never thought that poetry would be so specific. It's being in the world, being with people. To be a poet was nothing I'd ever thought to be, nor even paradoxically worked that hard to accomplish. I think poetry is unlike painting or the visual arts in so far as the training requisite is not useful in the same way. It's very hard to work at it. Doing push-ups in the context of memorizing umpteen million poems, or practicing the sonnet form until you can do it in your sleep—that's not necessarily going to work at all. I do agree with Wordsworth, that "Many are called but few are chosen." And it's not a sense of privilege. I'm sure there are many people who did not want to be a poet and who chose not to. I wish the world were a happier place in the classic manner, but I have no sense that the arts have failed it. I do feel literally and absolutely and continually that the arts are the most extraordinary information that humanity has—it's the most definitive act a human makes. Art, and all else is love—families—all things that one dearly values, relations with friends—these are so intrinsic—like chickens having feathers. It's the only function that is particularly human that isn't invested with getting more meat for the tribe

PT: You noted that in a conversation with Basil Bunting, he said his own grasp of what poetry might be for him was first recognizing that the sound occurring in a poem could carry the emotional content of the poem as ably as anything said. And when we were talking about the abstract in art, it's really the intonations and the emphases of the forms that to a large extent carries the content. Or as you put it, "the way a thing was said would intimately declare what was being said."

RC: The way a thing is said intimately declares what is being said. For me always one tacit confusion in the implications of the term "abstract" is that something has been taken from its otherwise natural circumstance...

PT: Drawn from...

RC: It's been hauled from, literally—like a tractor—abstracted.

PT: Excavated.

RC: Ab in the Latin, as absent—sent away—he’s not here! So that it’s somehow been displaced or taken from its habits or usual situation of occurrence and put somewhere else... that definition I think is distracting. If someone came and said this is very abstract—But then one would say, But it isn’t abstract—it’s very literal. Nothing’s abstract here. In other words what you see is what you get—it’s here —there’s no confusion.

PT: It’s a term that requires massive doses of qualification. For example, I feel I haven’t painted abstract paintings so much as I’ve painted the abstract tradition into my paintings. I know they qualify as abstract from the standpoint of an audience, but I see them as having a strong personal connection to what I’ve lived through and to what I thought should be manifest in a work. I think of a painting as a physical place. All the paintings that I’ve ever loved in my life I felt as having a very specific geographical/cultural location.

RC: Well, that whole false issue, in the sense of figurative art vs. abstract art—or “representational” art as though one needed for validity a reference. And that’s something again very much in your work. These elements are not references to something else—they are initiating. However it finds company or relation to other possible things seen or known in the world...

PT: The root cause is feeling...

RC: Well, I certainly share that with you, Philip.

END