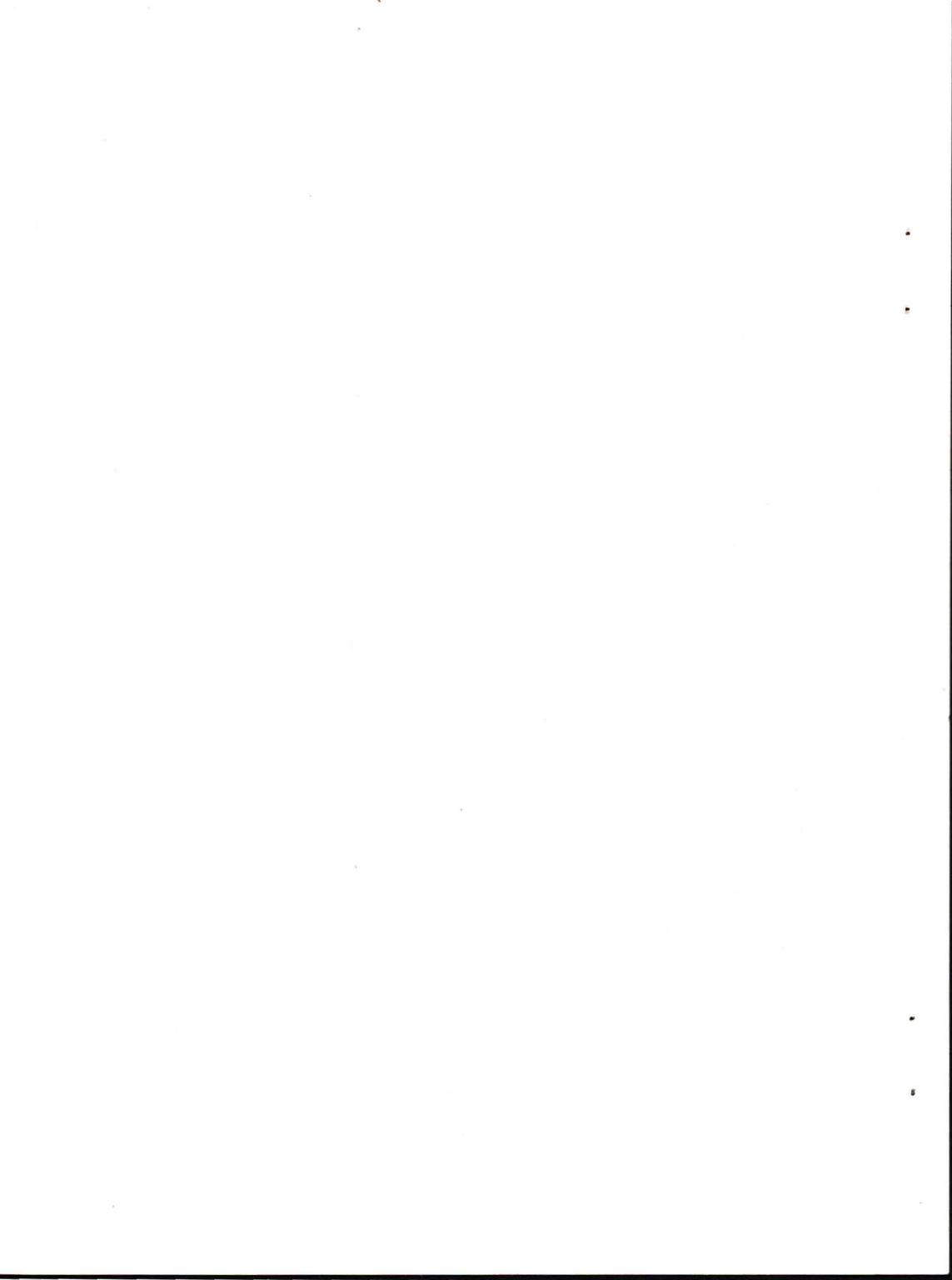
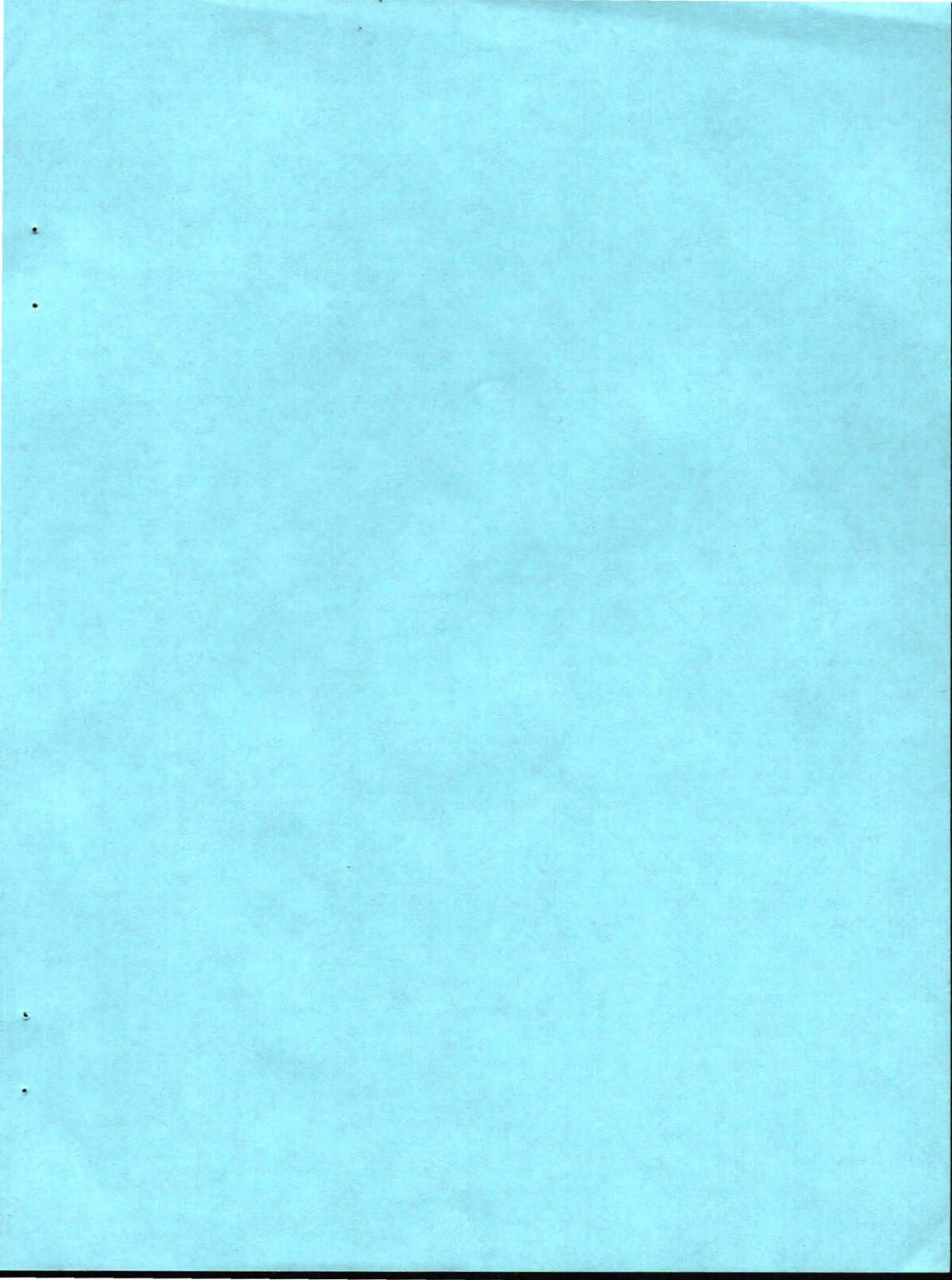


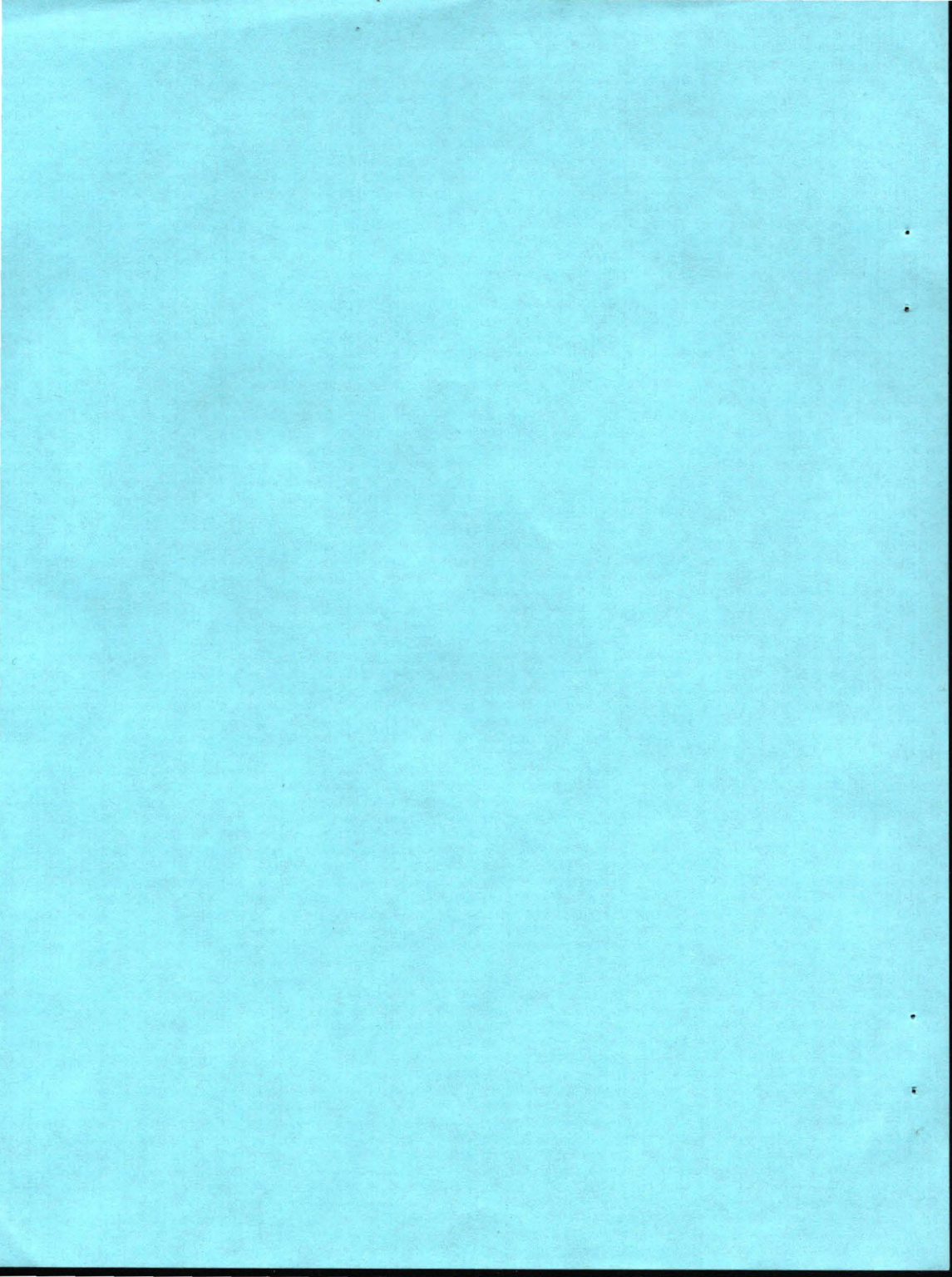
MATERIAL THINKING

clark coolidge









ART IS MATERIAL THINKING

A thought: art is material thinking. It's always seemed to me that the verb 'to be' is a strangely forceless verb, although it's the central verb form, the most important one. And the word 'as,' instead of having the usual kind of prepositional force, seems more like an equal sign in an equation. This as that. To do this as one does that. Maybe it's more adverbial.

The plurality of any ongoing activity, as shown by present singular verb forms' likeness to plural nouns—words like walks, works, et cetera,—in multiples is the feel of movement. Plural nouns as verbs, and stasis: the repeated *one*. In other words, 'names' could be a verb or a plural noun, could be a repetition of a single thing, or it could be an action: names, works . . . so on.

Critics—yeah, sometimes I write about them, to myself—here's a bit of spleen for you. Critics freeze artworks into descriptions, explanations, explications, orders of terms—they don't want to swim but to come up with something. What goes into a work of art is a constellated matter composed of present impulses, recent pasts, and an array of points from distant times which don't necessarily cohere into any other "system" than that proposed by the work itself. That's been said other ways by many artists.

Here's something I got from Larry Fagin, in conversation years ago: "There are, at best, only one or two or three things to be said

about a work of art. To speak further of a work is to merely fill out a form, essay, or whatever, with distancing verbiage."

A quote from George Kubler, who wrote a fascinating book called *The Shape of Time*: "Actuality is the inter-chronic pause when nothing is happening. It is the void between events."

And this is one of my favorite quotes—Cecil Taylor: "And yet, like the separateness that brought hearing." It seems to me that when you listen, there must be space around the things you're hearing, otherwise you're listening to a wall. There's nothing.

Here's a piece from a description of the Johnstown Flood, from 1889. A beautiful book by David McCullough, called *The Johnstown Flood*: "And just above the hideous pile up at the stone bridge"—the waters broke a dam and raced miles down a valley and finally caught everything up in it and jammed it all up against this bridge—" And just above the hideous pile up at the stone bridge, on a billboard at the depot, there was a large poster, undamaged by the flood, which several reporters made a point of mentioning, put there a few days before the flood, to announce the arrival of Augustin Daly's play "A Night Off." Its very large headline read, 'INTENSELY FUNNY.'" You understand there were burning bodies of humans underneath the sign, as well as animals, pieces of houses, pianos, whatever. The whole mass caught on fire. And there were dead bodies that had been washed down. All this was burning, charnel mess.

Paul Valéry: "The meaning of objects dispels their form." This is the reason the most common objects are the most enigmatic. Their meaning is so large that their form is reduced to almost

nothing. We understand but do not know them, and now we understand that we do not know them. A can is a word, etc. Perhaps the great mystery of words is that they hide the world, and we use them as if there were something else, something more solid, that holds the system together. Are words a variously translucent film in suspension between thought and objects? Is language, at its most solid, a double-faced mirror that returns each to itself? There seems a desire to view the mask as more solid than the face, than the view. Increasing focus on language puts everything else at a greater remove, returns the universe untouched.

This is a speculation. Williams, from the *Embodiment of Knowledge*: "Lest we mistake our signs for the reality, let them be ever new—forever new—for only by forever changing the sign, can we learn to separate from it its meaning, the expression from the term, and so cease to be idolaters."

Here's a quote I like, when I've occasionally seen people imitating my work, style, whatever, from Paul Valery, he said, "Our successors have not envied us our torments, they have not adopted our scruples, they have sometimes mistaken for liberties what we had taken on as new problems. And sometimes they have torn to pieces what we had meant only to dissect."

Another line of mine from a notebook: "dreaming of vast caves, and of language that you don't know what it comes to when it comes out." Juxtaposed with a quote from Zukofsky, A 22: "At the most, truths dig caverns."

Thornton Wilder, on Gertrude Stein—he was a friend of hers, and wrote about her: “Neither her company, nor her books, were for those who have grown tired of listening. It was an irony that she did her work in a world in which for many reasons, and for many appalling reasons, people have so tired.” And Stein herself: “With using with abusing, with losing with wanting, with denying with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun.”

Picasso: “Painting isn’t a question of sensibility. It’s a matter of seizing the power. Taking over from nature. Not expecting her to supply you with information and good advice.”

George Oppen, a poem called “The Song:”

When the words *would with not but*
Take on substantial Meaning

It is a poem

The hand holds
The foot holds
To dig in one’s heels

Which may be sung
May well be sung

Ernest Fenellosa: “But the great thing to remember is that all poetry was once in the language itself, and still underlies the dry bones of even our dictionaries. Every word, a metaphor, perhaps several degrees deep, still has the power to flash meaning back

and forth between apparently divergent and intractable planes of being. The prehistoric peoples who created language were necessarily poets, since they discovered the whole harmonious framework of the universe and the essential interplay of its living processes."

And also from Fenellosa: "The development of the normal transitive sentence rests upon the fact that one action in nature promotes another. Thus the agent *and* the object are secretly verbs." And here are two statements put together, one by Olson, one by Pound: Olson—"One perception must lead directly to the next perception." Ezra Pound—"Where one thought cuts through another with clean edge."

Wittgenstein: "What is mirrored in language, I cannot use language to express." And I went on with that, and said: the suspicion is that nothing corresponds. The analogies are too infinite. Nothing corresponds with everything; it mixes. Take any point, draw a line to another point. The constellations are correct.

Guy Davenport: "An abstract art in which the world does not disappear in abstraction." Given enough information, it pictures.

Melville, from a letter to Hawthorne, in 1851: "But what plays the mischief with the truth is that men will insist on the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion."

Zukofsky, from his poem "4 Other Countries:"

Nothing is
even,
so
touches.

I wrote this down one day: creation has no expression, because it has no face. That's largely a reaction against art being simply an expression of one's feelings. Olson, from an unpublished *Maximus* poem: "Anacoluthic"—yeah, 'anacoluthic' means you start a sentence with a certain structure and change to another one in the middle of the sentence. "Anacoluthic and drag / is the nature of a poem when / it satisfies the problem of movement."

Look at the score of Ives' *Concord Sonata*—it's all phrasing, and phrasing is how something goes, not where it is. If your hands could go in those ways, you wouldn't be reading and you wouldn't care where anything was. I'd like to be playing this, making my mistakes by the way, since Charles Ives isn't here anymore to change things. My father gave me a copy of the piano score to the *Concord Sonata* for Christmas last year. And I haven't really played the piano in a long time; I wish I could play this, it's a very very difficult piece, technically. Ives himself, they say, never played his own written music the same way twice. He was always improvising.

We are material, and we react to material. Language is the thinnest material known. Larry Eigner has a line: "The writing is thinner than the panes."

Guy Davenport, about Thoreau: "It is not, even now, known, who Thoreau was. What science, purposely unseparated from

meditation, lies in the notebooks and journals." And Thoreau, from the *Journals*: "Some names are to be retained, not because they are descriptive, but because they strike the fancy and suggest ideas in harmony with the flower. A writer, a man writing, is the scribe of all nature. He is the corn, and the grass, and the atmosphere, writing."

And here's a typo, from the South Bend Indiana *Tribune*, that I love: "The affidavit said she was in a fog, unable to confuse actuality from reality." That's right! Nothing wrong with that.

Bernadette Mayer, from *Memory*: "And as I write all this stuff down, I know it comes out of nowhere, goes nowhere, and remains. Nothing leaves."

Cecil Taylor: "You are the recipient of all the things around you that you wish to be. Things like dance, theater, literature, the people you see. So, you are a departure."

Perhaps art is merely the translation of the external into an obduration of mind. That's a—I think I invented that word. Putting obdurate—hard, irreducible—together with duration—time. Hard time, having a hard time. Perhaps art is merely the translation of the external into an obduration of mind that erodes neither to the side of memory nor conception. Whew, that's quite a pronouncement.

The history of twentieth century art is so much one of assimilation that art itself is finally becoming inseparable from the main mechanisms of society—business, education, government, the church. Therefore the artist must reject art to keep clear.

That comes from late night talks with Guston, who is always talking about rejecting art. That's what sense I made of it by now. At the same time there is the plethora, proliferation in instant transmission of all forms making a mark unforeseen previously. Beckett's statement, 1961: "to find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now." That quote seems pointed exactly at our condition.

WORDS

Words, what to say about these things. Not things exactly, but what. As a subject? But am I not the subject of all things. You start with a tangle, put any head on it at all, it runs. About, in words. What to say. They obsess me? That they want out? They light and sculpt their own particular spaces. Such spaces that, Gogol can have a man lose his nose and the nose walks about in the streets without feet of description (explanation); Beckett can watch himself giving himself the words, a special anxiety and delight inherited from our age of thought. Whole edifices of philosophy rising and falling on the momentary basis of what one has said. Word space, a marvelous and terrible and most friable condition. What I mean to say, pointed indications of an unconscious. Which, as Duncan says, we can never contact, whatever in mind already conscious. Transformation. How it all changes from what you thought to anymore think. *Moby Dick*, a distressing mess—the essentials of madness in a structure of whales?! Months of tracking the Pacific scratching on paper in a northlit room of Berkshire hills. Who is in there now. Lies, how. A space in which Guy Davenport can dispense with the painter Van Gogh, point for point an invention of Lautrec, Gauguin and brother Theo. Beckett begins *Molloy's* second section: "It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows." and ends it "Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining." Alright, obvious gaps, and naturally finally of time also. Otherwise how go any words. Sometimes it feels like Wittgenstein has written

the armature of this century in his quicksand notebooks. Melville having already given us too much size. His pyramid of a whale still the vastest-scale thing in any book. & Beckett pulled back to so few things that there is no end to the words arriving. The mind seizing on whatever, the motor then seized. Writing as a process of the freeze and thaw. Rules? There are none. But forms, movements, flashes and residua.

What is a cat. Say, what? And having said that, how do you like your cat now? Cat placed in such a situation is no longer a question. A cat what is. What cat is a. The word is always initial. Zukofsky inhabiting the first position for a lifetime, finds he must add all the other letters quickly at the other end, to make an end. "For it is the end gives the meaning to words" (Beckett). But my work will never be completed. And habitually thinking of the title after the work, I realize too late there will never be a title to this one, this lifetime. "Frequently there must be a beverage"—Woody Allen. Rule, from the Latin: "model" and "to direct." To direct a model? Sounds like photography. Plenty of instruction, turn your head, again, just a little that way, but no certainty. Muybridge's stop-frames of a naked man on the run (1880's). Then how could anyone have mistaken *Breathless* (1959). It seems Relativity means it. Melville on himself writing *Moby Dick*, "He has assassinated the natural day." Nothing if not the slamming together of times and their spaces. Condensations & deformations of the book "like a vast lumbering planet, revolves in his aching head. And all the outside coming upon that becomes in it squeezed & transformed into the final irreducible unrecognizability" (*Pierre*, p. 423).

Or is it all but that rock on the window ledge, glowing in the grey light of this particular spot of day? The words don't say. Though at least they move on. Move on what. What I in the midst of this am trying to say. Yes, the midst, that of this am trying. Then what I in this midst? The I picks up again, I was waiting for it?, at this am that's trying to say. To say back again to the initial What. The What not circular, but demanding yet another completion. In what I am trying to say of this midst. For "everything comes to him from the middle of his field" (Wallace Stevens). In New Haven where all evenings are ordinary (they move in succession): "the eye's plain version is a thing apart . . . of this, a few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet—as part of the never-ending meditation . . . these houses, these difficult objects, dilapidate appearances of what appearances, words, lines, not meanings, not communications, dark things without a double, after all . . ." & on & on for thirty pages. Thus, the commonplace. (Trivial: trivium (L.) crossing-point of three roads—their "place in common"—common-place).

A mountain covered with cats. "The catalogue is too commodious." So much for Whitman, Williams so much wanted to take the measure of. And now the wellknown plethora, our land with its car stops. The "mess" (Beckett). & the accompanying desire to have it all, but particularly (Uccello's battles). Can it be the language now contains more words than there are things. Thus precipitates additional this out of (the) solution back into the universe (Ballard). What a revolting development that is. Human mind on the move (running scared?) "There seemed to be an endless stream of things" (Dashiell Hammett, *The Tenth Claw*). "So full of a number of things" (Jack Collom, *Exchanges of Earth & Sky*, p. 81).

Surrounded and breathing. In my own words, what do they want out of me. And I only own them in the very act of releasing them. More than I know. And "more than I could" (Beckett). And there's another one—a little known form of peanut? But, looking closer, it's an agate. "Indeed the whole visible world is perhaps nothing other than a motivation of man's wish to rest for a moment"—Franz Kafka, a writer of few satisfactions. But perhaps the reason one can never do what one feels oneself able to do is that one's ability is actually limitless?

Bring it all back down and in to the singular. the specific, the one. The unique, as one feels oneself to be in any strong act of focus. From the many the one. And then the next one. Not quite still, but as if just moved or about to move. And the absolutely still? Too impossibly mysterious, as every thing seems in motion, if only at the edge. Stillness of that order, perhaps a node particular to mind alone. "To restore stillness is the role of objects"—Beckett.* His desire? But for any radiance there must be motion. The pyramids in a noon sun. As Pound mis-had it from Confucius (& later Zukofsky in the annals of the Objective), the precise definition of the word sincerity: "pictorially the sun's lance coming to rest on the precise spot verbally." Some conundrum. To Zukofsky there is the notion of incompleteness in this sincerity ("which does not attain rested totality"). Next to this he places "Objectification" (rested totality): "distinct from print which records action and existence and incites the mind to further suggestion, there exists, though it may not be harbored as

* This is me misremembering and going on with that, so I'll let it stand. But the real quotation is: "to restore silence is the role of objects"

solidity in the crook of an elbow, writing (audibility in two-dimensional print) which is an object or affects the mind as such." This conglomerate stillness, the highest order to a man who lived his life in a house of music. Who later kept a regular count of the words in his lines, the barest possible ground for his variables? We merely count.

It is a field now. And the figures (of one possible figure) are oppositely Olson & Cage. Follow your nose, and follow your no's. Olson wants to possess it all, to will it all into definition ("I compel Gloucester / to yield, to / change"—Letter #27), Cage to get out of its way. What they leave us with is the Field. And pictures of possible activity. To Go, or To Let Go. All, or Nothing At All. One wants to Have, the other to Receive (Leave). Olson loved Melville because he was full, took on the largest things, and quantity became the prime term; Cage Zen because it holds everything as empty, no weight & no waiting. Both men of large ego, different techniques to divert or still them. Olson to heap up his will on things to make form, Cage to counter his will to allow forms he would otherwise have missed. They make a curious figure for art in our time. They seem mirrored opposites, but can be seen also to mix. Olson often to hazard a guess. Cage to will his indeterminacies into workable existence. Both inclined toward the pedagogic & the quest for social solutions. They only seem to have come together once, at Black Mountain, Olson reading from a stepladder, Cage arranging all other matters so that he could not be heard. They do seem to present an interference figure, but only if one follows them as their dogma(s). Instead, see the matter they are pointing out: The Field, of things & forces & absences. And the uses that can be made (transformations / syntheses) of their separate

stands. As, one example, Godard's "The immediate is chance. At the same time it is definitive. What I want is the definitive by chance."

Olson's much-quoted statement—via Creeley (Form is never more than an extension of content) still reposes the old scholastic separation, though seeking to close the gap by a more active mechanism. But there is no separation. Things are. No avoidance. & no scholarly equational rhymes (To be content with form, one must form the content, etc.). To the working artist there is no such state as Form or content. Only forms. (Guston). (Zukofsky's "we are words, horses, manes, words"—end of A - 7). Olson knows this in his quoting of Melville: "By visible truth we mean the apprehension of the absolute condition of present things." But rather than accenting the necessary plural, he seems to come down harder on the absolute there (an unpublished Maximus, the single word: "Absoluteness"). One might say, we live intruded by a world of absolute plurals. The plethoran mode. Varying like- and dis- like nesses.

The heavy every, the noted nothing. Olson, Cage.

Put it all together, it spells "other"—the "M" having been lost in the fray. I find myself very close, in spirit & work, to the "Yes, But" dialectics of the painter Philip Guston. You never have one thing but you have another, and they are never alike. They push, and recede, and blend, and advance, and refuse. But never stand long, except in the flash of a pause, having just moved, and / or being about to move once again. This seems the kinetics of thought / action: growth, destruction, transformation. An endless working of matters and forms. And it reveals doubt as active,

if it forces one to move. As the scientists say, a negative result is, after all, also a result. What is it? Where is it? And what's next?

I have the sensation that the most honest man in the world is the artist when he is saying I don't know. At such moments he knows that to the questions that truly interest him, only the work will give answers (which usually turn out further questions). This should be an instruction to any possible audience. I am reminded by this memory picture: a guy in my highschool class of such quick imaginative wit he could transform any happening into what it had not been a second before. (This) thus making us all laugh, one day called on in physics class to answer a question stood up and gazing fiercely into space yelled "I DONT KNOW!!!" Amazing. Obdurate as hell and sometime a most apt correction of all his surroundings.

Cage: "We're going to go on playing games,
even if the rules are downright fascinating.
We require a situation more like it really is—
no rules at all. Only when we make them do it
in our labs do crystals win our games. Do they
then? I wonder."

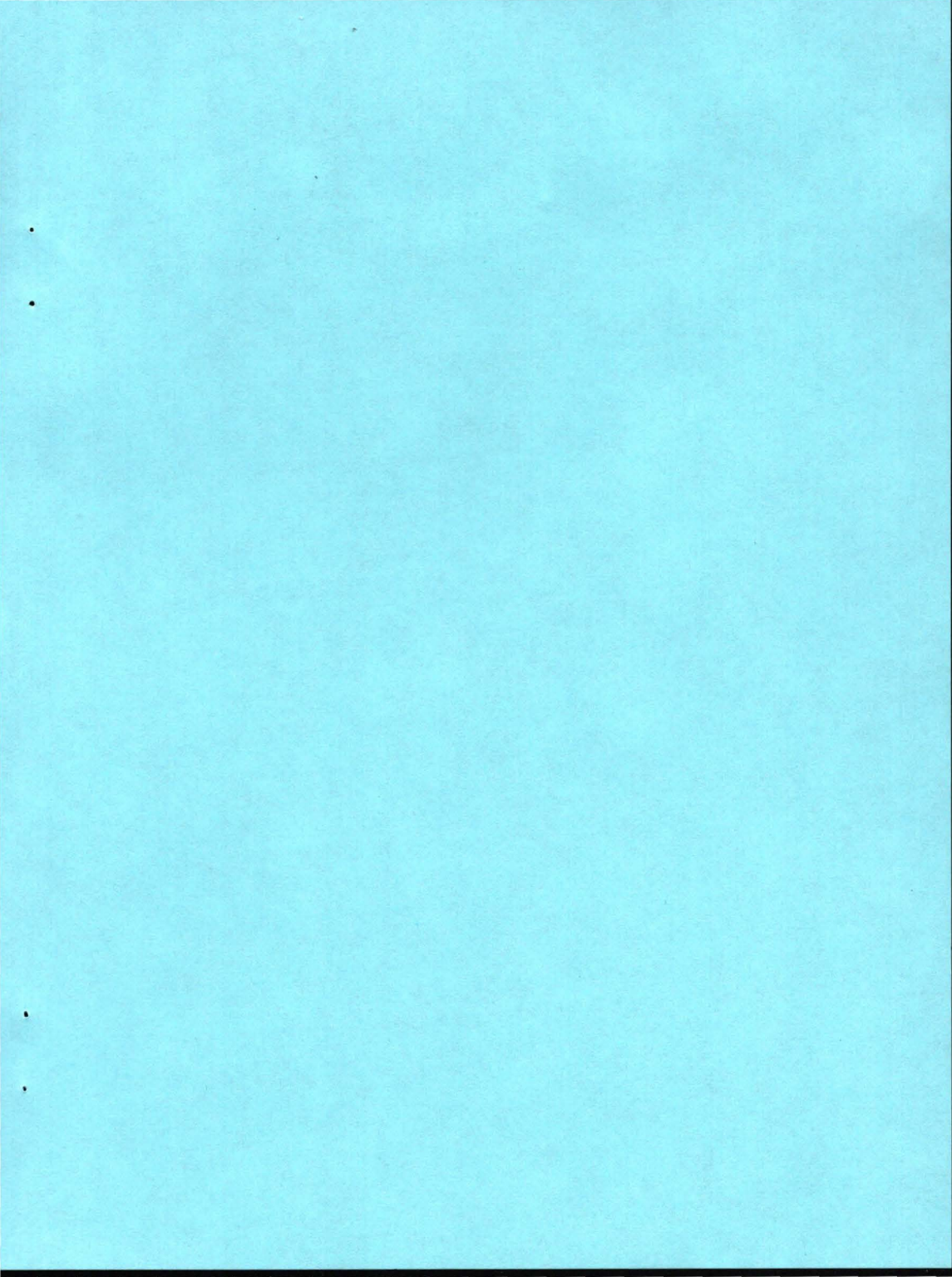
These two talks were originally given at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, in July of 1977. They expand upon and advance the ideas in a third talk given earlier the same summer, entitled "Arrangement." A transcript of that lecture is included in the anthology *Talking Poetics from Naropa Institute* (Shambhala, 1978, ed. Waldman).

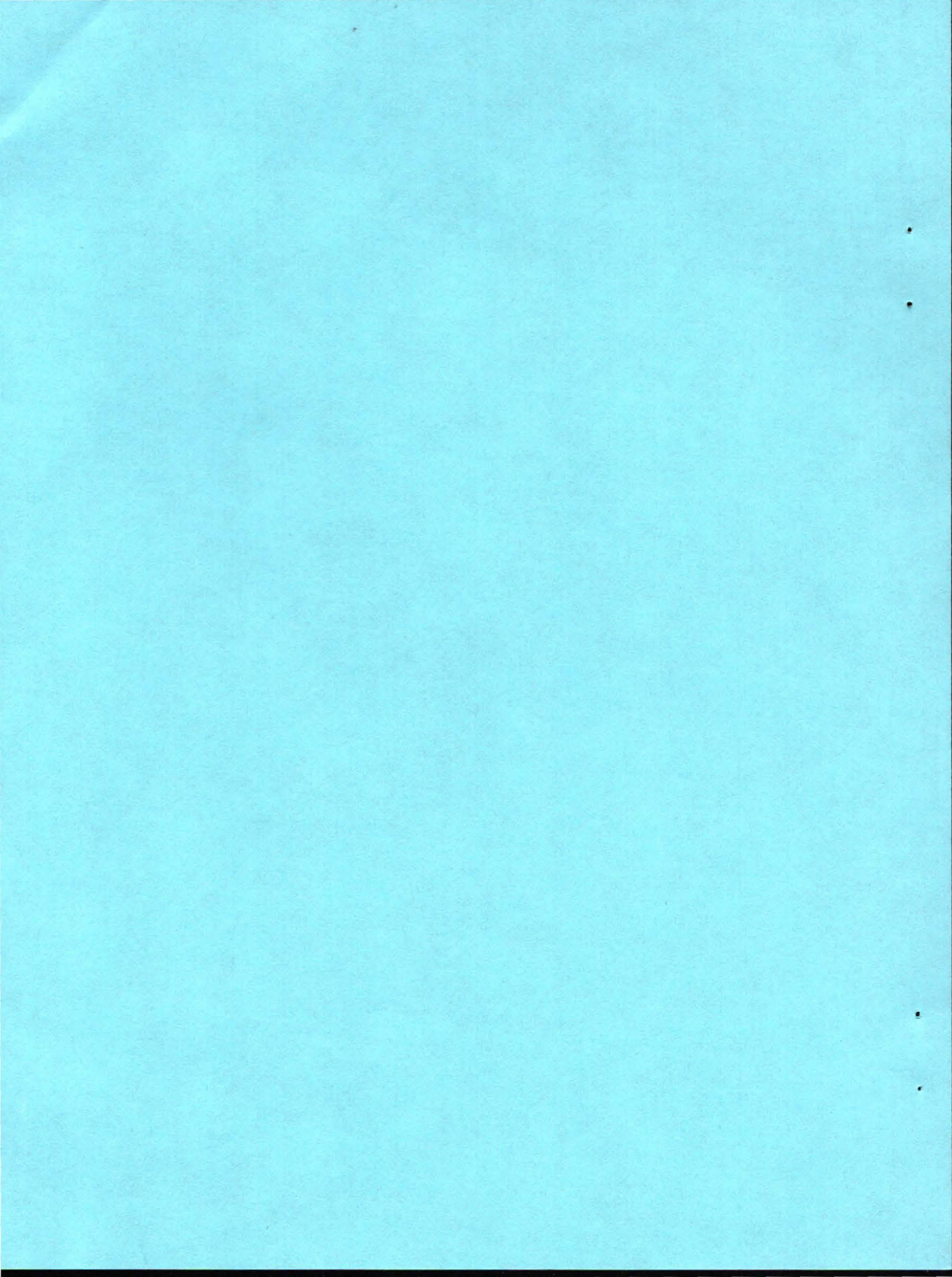
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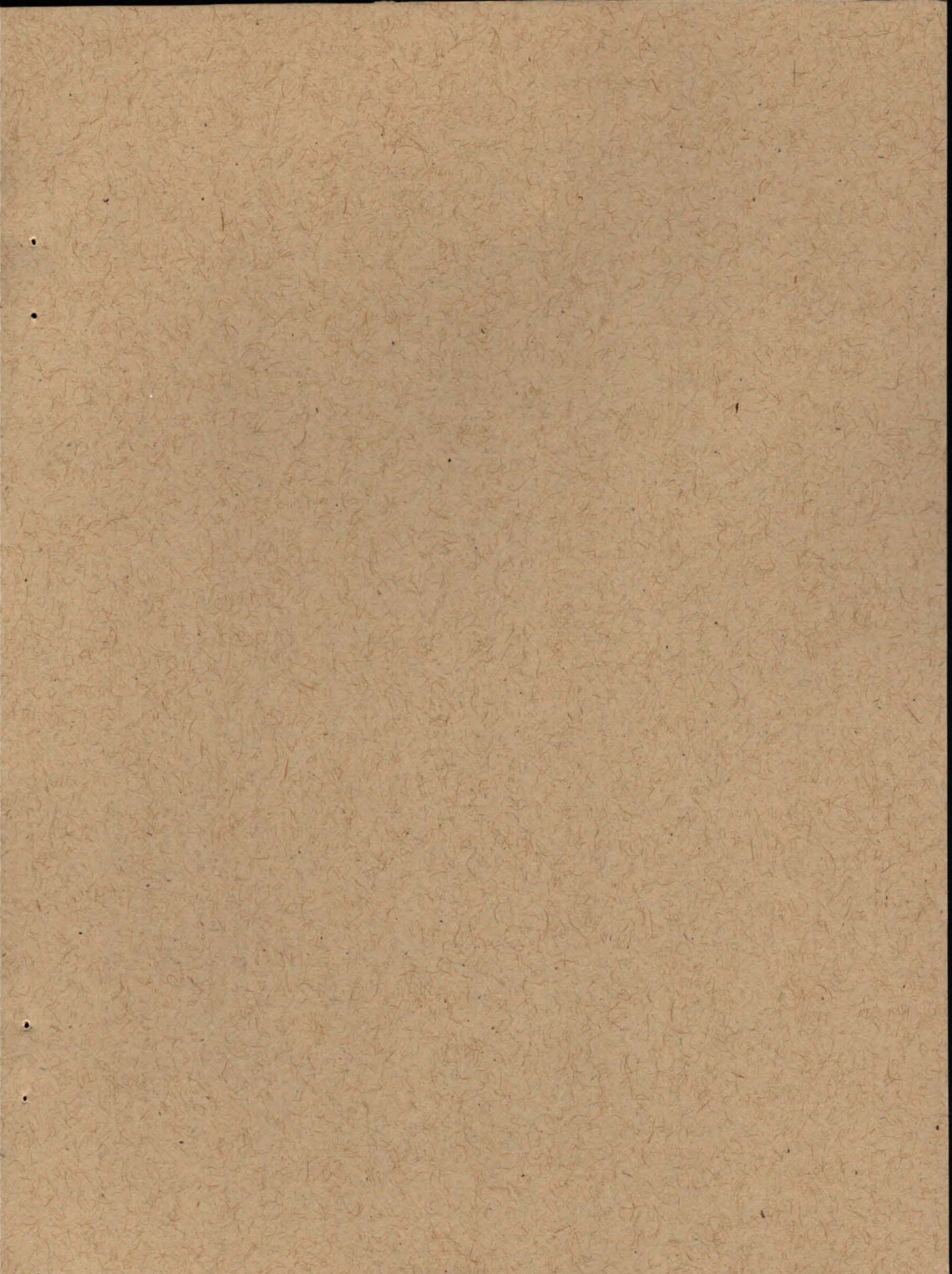
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