

FACT

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Animating Poetry

Research-led Creation

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Chair of Animation Education NUA

My current research and practice includes the interdisciplinary area of poetry and animation. Recently my focus has been on American poets. I regularly collaborate with sound designer Tom Simmons (RCA), as well as a literary academic from Oxford University, Rothermere American Institute Research Fellow, Dr Sally Bayley. Her expertise in American poetry and her knowledge of relevant critical literature has fed in to the process through her constant critique of a film's development. We make animations about poets and poetry through our collaborative interdisciplinary practice. One of these films 'Letter to the World' was commissioned by the Emily Dickinson International Society and another 'The Girl Who would be God' was commissioned by organisers of two Transatlantic conferences on Sylvia Plath. We wish to represent the poet as well as their work through serious study of their lives as well as their published writing. I have called this talk *Research-led Creation*, but it is also about Practice as Research.



Harold Hart Crane in Brooklyn 1928

In December 2013 we completed a new animation based on a poem by Harold Hart Crane 'Proem -To Brooklyn Bridge' the first poem in Crane's epic work 'The Bridge'. Crane was born in Ohio 1899, and he died in 1932, plunging to his death from a steamship in the Bay of Mexico. He was already a famous New York Poet, a Modernist Romantic. He spent ten years of his short life writing 'The Bridge', an esteemed iconic work, written in the vein of T S Eliot's Wasteland, but countering Eliot's pessimistic view of urbanity. It is a portrait of America framed through the device of the Brooklyn Bridge, Hart Crane's favourite piece of architecture about which he writes ecstatically in diverse contexts.



Brooklyn Bridge 1925

In a letter to Waldo Frank, he writes about it in relation to his gay relationship with Emil Opffer ; "And I have been able to give freedom and life which was acknowledged in the ecstasy of walking hand in hand across the most beautiful bridge of the world, the cables enclosing us and pulling us upward in such a dance as I have never walked and never can walk with another. " ¹ Although it was tempting to include this wonderful image of dancing lovers on the bridge, we felt that this was not an experience included in the poetic text we were 'transcribing' to animation.

¹ Letter to Waldo Frank from Hart Crane April 21st 1924

Hart Crane, as a poet and also as an unwilling advertising copywriter, was a master of extremely condensed phrasing. Close reading of the poem reveals consistent use of oxymorons which create dynamic tension, the reader is given a vertiginous ride in an “inviolate curve” from the very first line of the poem. Examples include the seagull’s “rippling rest”, “shedding /building”, “elevators drop”. He sets the dawning scene, a seagull lifts us up to a bird’s eye view of the bay and of the statue of Liberty. The poem moves from dawn to night but not in a temporally linear narrative style. Much of the visual reference is monochromatic, white is the only colour referred to by name in the whole poem.

To Brooklyn Bridge

How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest
The seagull's wings shall dip and pivot him,
Shedding white rings of tumult, building high
Over the chained bay waters Liberty—

Then, with inviolate curve, forsake our eyes
As apparitional as sails that cross
Some page of figures to be filed away;
--Till elevators drop us from our day . . .

I think of cinemas, panoramic sleights
With multitudes bent toward some flashing scene
Never disclosed, but hastened to again,
Foretold to other eyes on the same screen;

(verse 1 of 11)

To Brooklyn Bridge

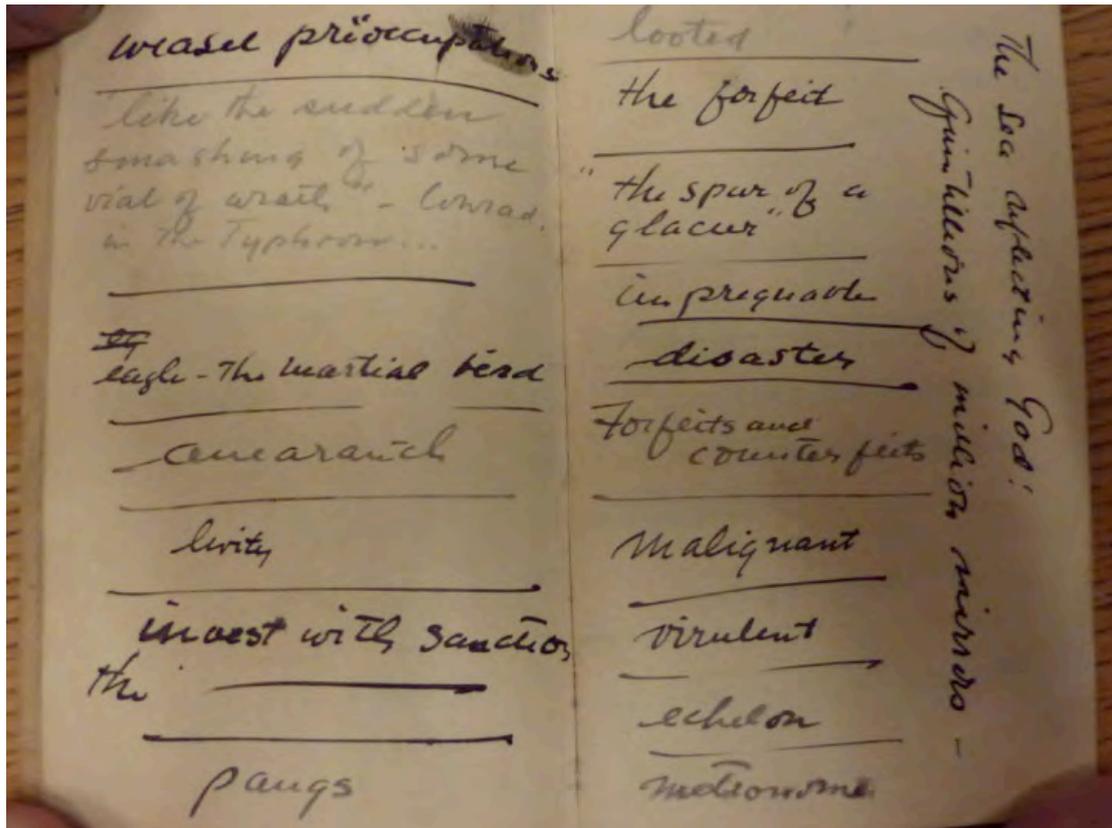
How many dawns, chill from his **rippling rest**
The seagull's wings shall dip and pivot him,
Shedding white rings of tumult, **building** high
Over the **chained** bay waters **Liberty-**

Then, with **inviolable curve**, forsake our eyes
As apparitional as sails that cross
Some page of figures to be filed away;
--Till **elevators drop** us from our day . . .

I think of cinemas, **panoramic sleights**
With multitudes bent toward some flashing scene
Never disclosed, but hastened to again,
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(verse 1 of 11)

In order to understand the poet's creative process we visited Columbia University Rare Manuscripts library in NY, and were given access to copious letters and drafts of poems. Pocket notebooks evidence Crane's obsession with collecting words and phrases, these are noted from conversations, music lyrics, news items and private thoughts, and he plays with textual juxtapositions. These pages are equivalent to a visual artist's sketchbook.



Double page spread of one of Hart Crane's notebooks

Hart Crane sent and received letters nearly every day of his adult life so there is a mass of evidence concerning his ideas and struggles. In a letter to poet and literary critic Yvor Winters he shows his desire to follow in Walt Whitman's steps, representing America through great poetry. "The New Metaphysics that Whitman proclaimed in "Democratic Vistas" is evident here and there in America today. I feel it in your work and I think I can sense it in some of my own work."²

² Letter to Yvor Winters 1926

thing in print I almost wept.

The "new Metaphysics" that Whitman proclaimed in "Democratic Vistas" is evident here and there in America today. I feel it in your work, and I think I can sense it in some of my own work. (Probably Whitman wouldn't recognize it in either of us, but no matter). That sine qua non evidently has to be fought for and defended. I'm doing my best about it here and now, fighting off miasmas, bugs, hay fever, bats and tropical squeaks and birds—toward "The Bridge" a very long poem for these days, extending from Columbus to Brooklyn Bridge and Atlantis. It is three-fourths done, and I may have to flee the torments (now settled in my nerves) to New Orleans soon to finish it. It will be a book by itself. And in it I shall incidentally try to answer all my friends who have for three years, now, sat down and complacently joined the monotonous choruses of "The Waste Land." (The Dedication to it you may soon see in The Dial).

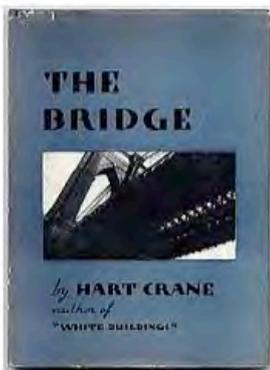
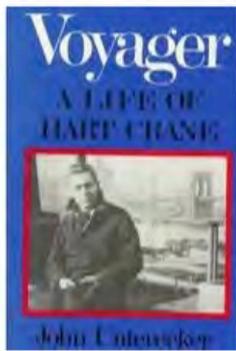
These preoccupations make me an inactive enthusiast toward the sensible proposals you make in your letter to me. I simply haven't time to copy out anything, nor extra energy. But I have ^(THAN) more time and energy to read anything of yours that you'll be kind and patient enough to send me. Won't you do so, saving such things as translations until later? Another

Section of Letter to Yvor Winters 1926

I read numerous books and texts in my attempt to understand Hart Crane's poetry, including his poetry, detailed biographies and academic critiques. John Unterecker's 'Voyager -A Life of Hart Crane' and Brian M Reed's 'Hart Crane -After his Lights' were two invaluable sources of information. Hart Crane is much studied as a poet who developed his own language critique. The lines and curves of architectural design in Joseph Stella's contemporaneous paintings of Brooklyn Bridge, simulate what Crane described, in a now well-known letter to Harriet Monroe, editor of the Modernist journal, *Poetry* (October 1926) as the 'logic' or 'illogic' of metaphor. "Metaphorical language, Crane argues, follows its twist and turns, pursues its own bent; it is a bent that reflects the inflections of every individual reader's experience."³ Unterecker writes that "the total poem describes a feeling in exactly the way a word defines a concept."⁴

³ Bayley S Hanna S Simmons T, Thinking Narratively, Metaphorically and Allegorically through Poetry, Animation and Sound' Journal of American Studies/ Volume 47 / Special Issue 04 / November 2013, pp 1231 - 1256

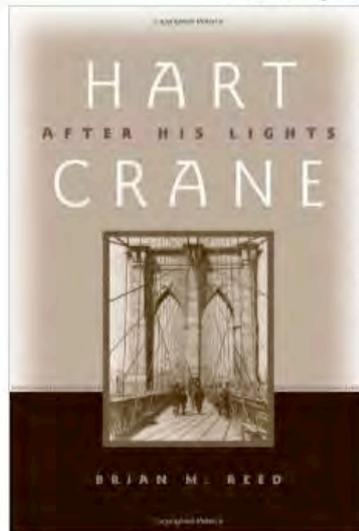
⁴ Unterecker J (1987) Voyager A Life of Hart Crane, New York, Liveright p377



THE LANGUAGE OF HART CRANE

By BARBARA HERMAN

*What words
Can strangle this deaf moonlight?*

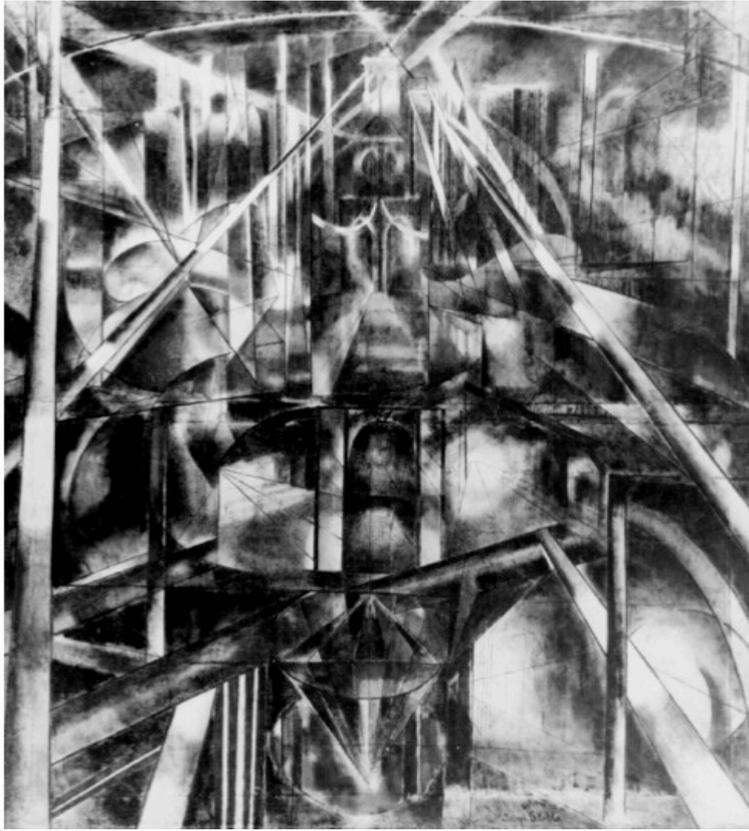


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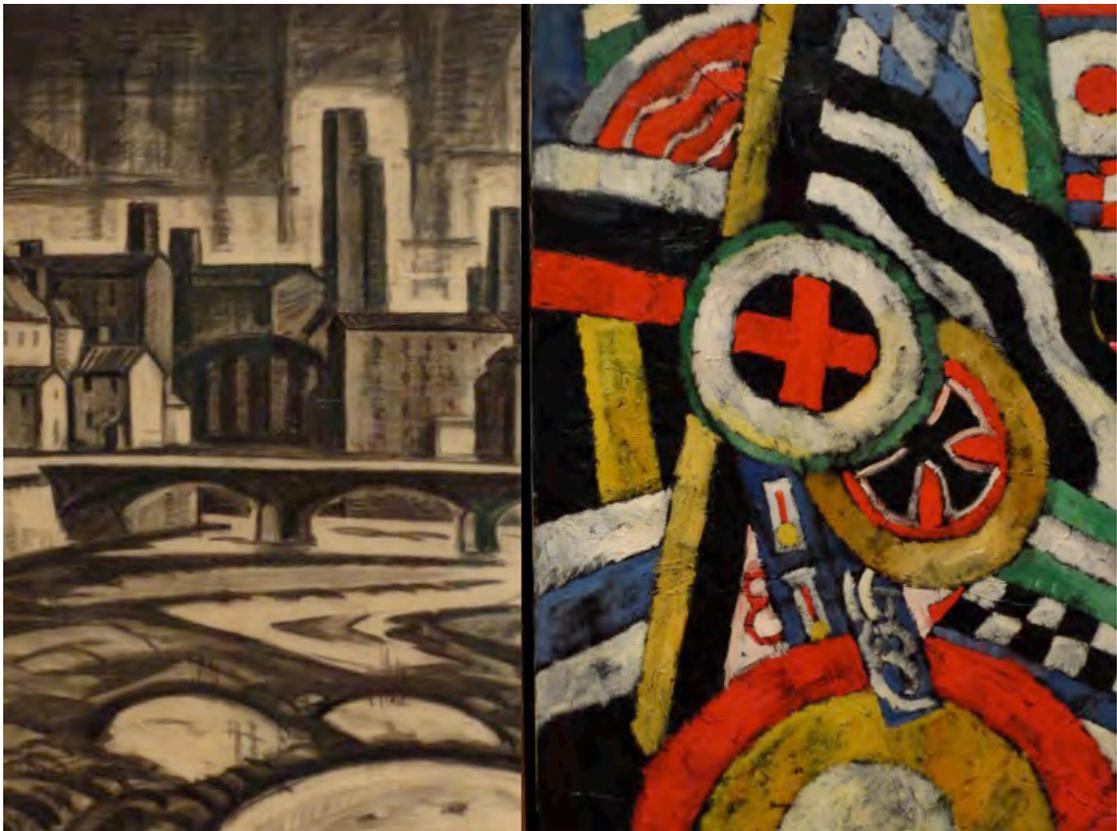


Crane 's acquaintances in New York and Paris included Walker Evans, Gertrude Stein, Marsden Hartley, Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O'Keeffe. He corresponded with Allen Tate, Harriet Monroe, Waldo Frank, Gorham Munson, Kenneth Burke, William Carlos Williams, e e cummings, Yvor Winters, Marianne Moore and Eugene O'Neill. He was constantly engaged in cross-disciplinary conversations, developing and sharing his creative critique.

As a visual artist I studied New York painters' work from the period including that of Oscar Bluemner, Marsden Hartley and Joseph Stella, and referencing Adolphe Cassandre's poster styles and typefaces. His depiction of urban and engineered objects, boats, bridges, and trains, resonates with Hart Crane's subject matter. Hart Crane admired the writings of Wyndham Lewis, and I felt that some Vorticist imagery, although not entirely contemporaneous, resonated with his 'Proem' their pared down shapes promoting an intrinsic unsettling vertigo. These all influenced my chosen graphic style.



Brooklyn Bridge by Joseph Stella



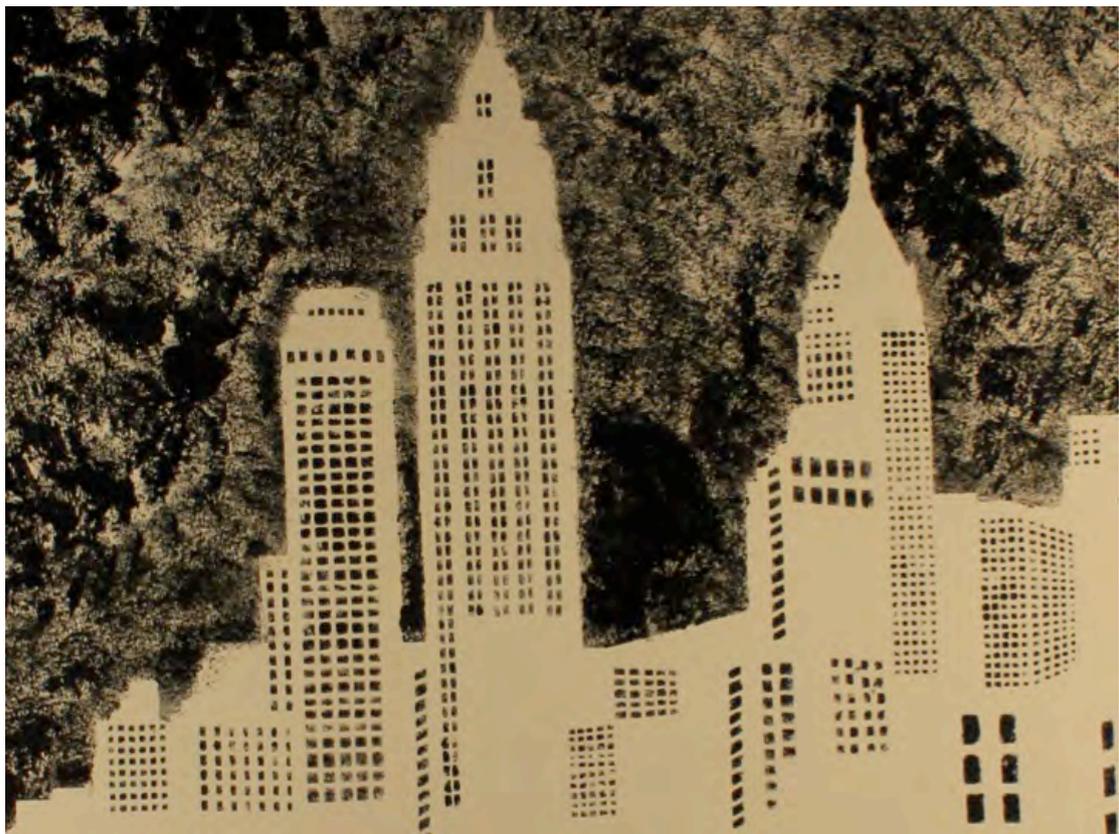
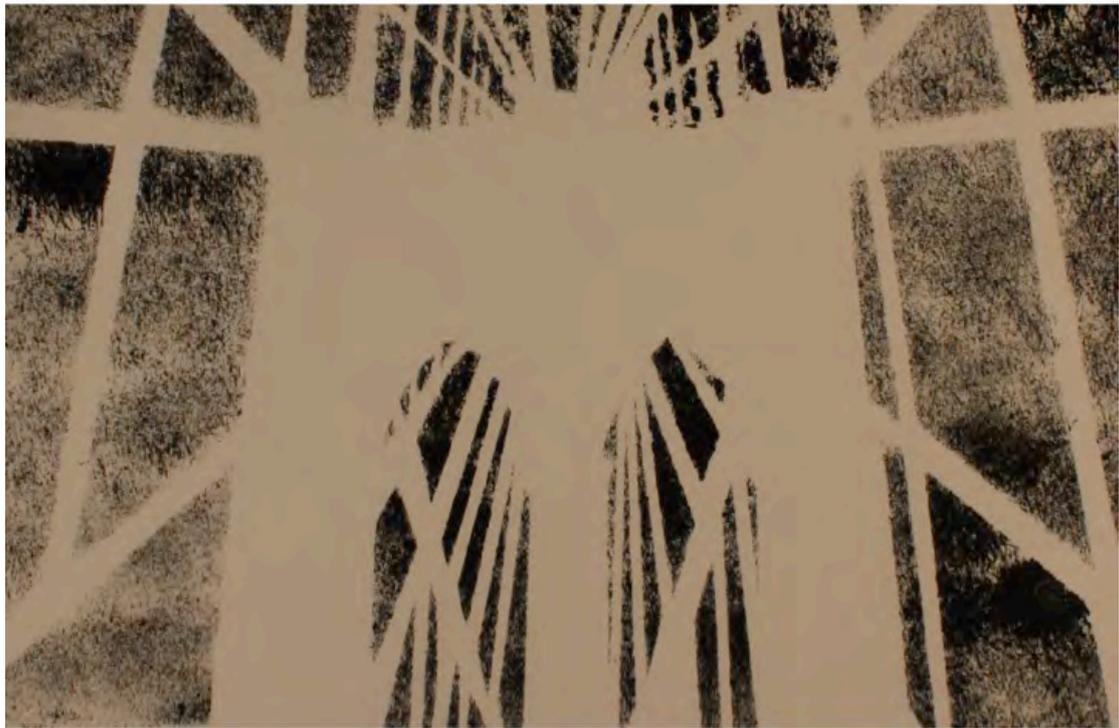
Oscar Bluemner's New York Silk Street and Marsden Hartley's abstract portrait of Karl Von Freyburg

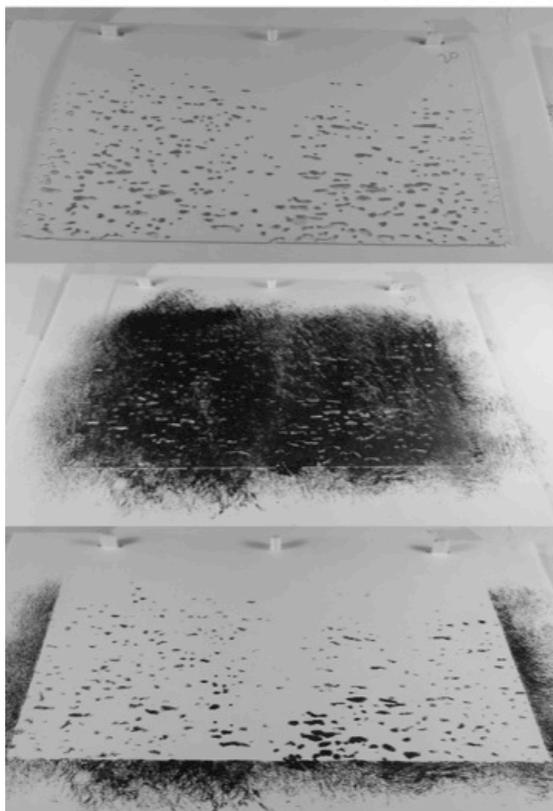


Vorticism by Edward Wadsworth and Poster advertisement by Adolphe Cassandre

I started to experiment with stencils, using the Brooklyn Bridge itself as a starting point, referencing photographs of Manhattan and Brooklyn from the period in which Hart Crane was writing, I had to simplify the imagery in order to animate it. I started overlaying stencils to create visual 'oxymorons' where space and form, positive and negative, start to work together in what may be regarded as a poetic image. The texture afforded by this technique was redolent of the materiality of the bridge. "The animation of the architectural materials of the bridge is....dependent upon the linguistic materials of the poem."⁵

⁵ Hammer L, (1993) Hart Crane and Allen Tate Janus-faced Modernism, Chichester, Princeton University Press p181





Images from the development process

Whilst I was developing visual ideas, Tom Simmons was working on the sound track, including recording sounds on location in New York. But we also

recorded a lot of metallic and musical sounds in the studio, such as bowing gongs. Crane's own shamanic creative process is described in Unterecker's biography. "(Gorham) Munson was driven, he said, nearly wild by Crane's hammering typewriter alternating with his loud trial reading of the lines and their variants, all the time in the background the same record grinding over and over through its five minute cycles. Crane racing to wind up the machine or, if the writing were going well, letting it nightmarishly wind down in its hissing, clicking final grooves." ⁶

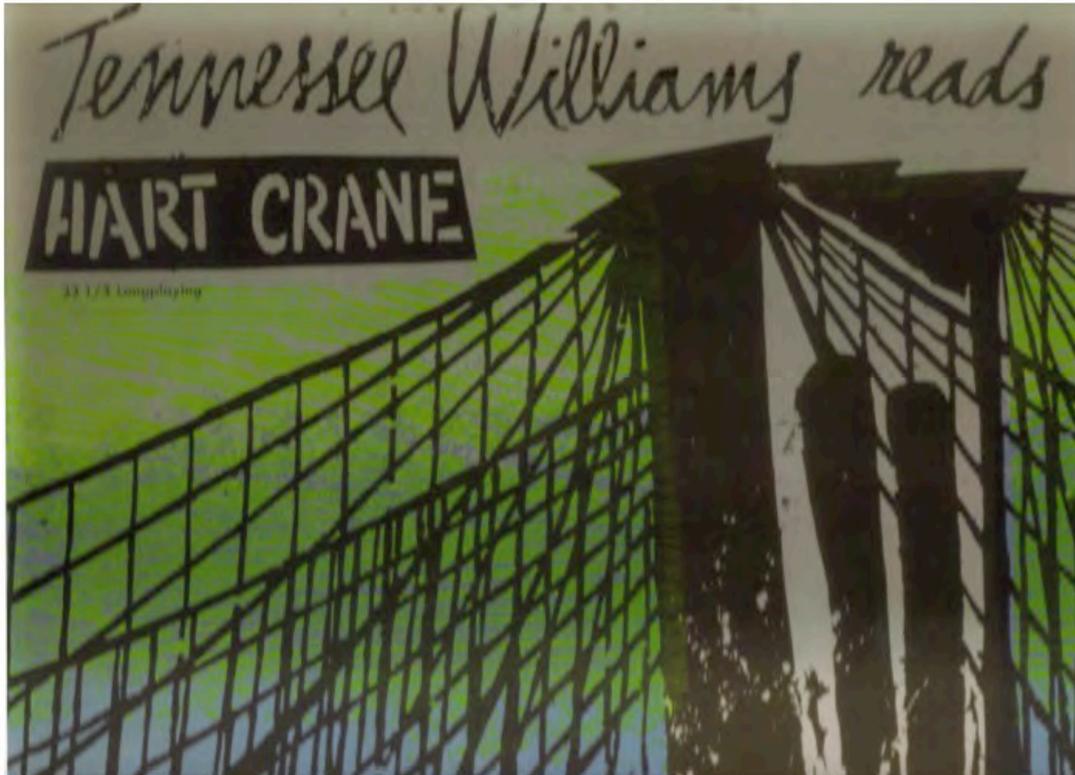


Tom Simmons records the Brooklyn Bridge

⁶ Unterecker J (1987) *Voyager A Life of Hart Crane*, New York, Liveright p 253



Amongst Crane's favoured records for this drunken activity was Ravel's 'Bolero', absolutely brand new 'mechanical' music of the time. We played a contemporary recording of this on a 1920s gramophone, and used this recording in some parts of the film as a window into the making of the poem as well as of the film. We found a 1960s Caedman recording of Tennessee Williams reading 'The Bridge', and after several months we managed to obtain permission to use this as part of the soundtrack from Harper Collins, the current copyright owners. Tennessee Williams admired Hart Crane to the extent he expressed a wish to be buried at sea where the poet had drowned.



But Dr Peter Riley, Lecturer in American Studies at the University of Exeter, gave this view of the inclusion of TW's voice in our film: "Hart Crane comes from Cleveland, Ohio; Tennessee Williams from Columbus Mississippi. So, for me at least, the playwright's Southern drawl – though easy on the ear, and eminently suited to the poem's five beat lines – rather cedes to a lyricism that Crane's own particular Ohioese would, I suspect, have quietly worked to distort: "I am no vocalist" he told his mother in November 1924, just before a poetry reading in front of an intimidating gathering of New York Literati including Marianne Moore, Georgia O'Keeffe, Alfred Stieglitz, and Jean Toomer. "Pray with me that the tongue be less stubborn than usual in conveying my intentions from the written page."⁷ Crane apparently rose to the occasion that night, reading 'more deliberately and distinctly' than he ever thought he should be able to – but an enchanting Tennessee Williams he definitely wasn't. "

⁷ Letter to Grace Hart Crane 30th November 1924



Since we completed the film at the end of December 2013 it has been selected in competition for screening at twelve international film festivals and has won two prizes, one for editing and one for sound design. The audience is broad, including those interested in film, animation and poetry. We have also written an academic article about our research and process that has been published in the *Journal of American Studies: Thinking Narratively, Metaphorically and Allegorically through Poetry, Animation and Sound*, *Journal of American Studies*.⁸ Sally's words and my images are also published in *The English Review* volume 25, 2015. (*Hodder Education*).

Proem has also been exhibited at The Gallery NUA as part of the 215 show *Hidden in Plain Sight* selected by Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery Curator of Modern Art, Hannah Higham and Professor Nichola Johnson, former Director of the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts.

⁸ Bayley S Hanna S Simmons T, Thinking Narratively, Metaphorically and Allegorically through Poetry, Animation and Sound' *Journal of American Studies*/ Volume 47 / Special Issue 04 / November 2013, pp 1231 - 1256

