

# VOU

VISUAL POETRY, TOKIO, 1958–1978

## BOOKS BY TAYLOR MIGNON

### POETRY

*Japlish Whiplash* (Printed Matter Press, 2010)

*The Thomas Kilbilmer Conflict Model Motel* (Printed Matter Press, 2010)

### TRANSLATION

*Bearded Cones & Pleasure Blades: The Collected Poems of Torii Shōzō*, (highmoonoon, 2013)

### COEDITOR

*Poesie Yáponesia: A Bilingual Anthology* (Printed Matter Press, 2000)

*Distant Frogs: Selected Senryu by Gengorō* (The Hokuseido Press, 2007)

*Shakin' It Back: An Anthology of Lyrics, Fiction, Non-Fiction, Poetry, Photography and Art for Tohoku*  
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**you**

**VISUAL POETRY, TOKIO, 1958–1987**

edited by Taylor Mignon

introduction by Eric Selland

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With grateful thanks to Hashimoto Sumiko for permission to reproduce the photographs of VOU Club members on the back cover and on pages 15 and 112, as well as material from the covers designed by Kitasono Katue for the following issues of *VOU* magazine: 61, 77, 97, 100, 110, 112, 118, 122, 130, 132, 152, 153, and 154. Many thanks also to all the poets for permission to reproduce their work; in two cases, in spite of every effort having been made, we were unable to contact the poet or find a copyright holder.

In this book Japanese names appear in the Japanese order, with the family name first.



This publication is dedicated to the memory of


Karl Young (1947–2017)

Coeditor



# VOU

REVUE  
DE  
LA POESIE ACTUELLE



numero 61

VOU CLUB

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REVUE  
DE  
LA POESIE ACTUELLE

VOU

## INTRODUCTION

This long-overdue publication fills a gap in the understanding of postwar Japanese poetry and the role of visual poetry in the avant-garde of Japan's postwar period. It is a highly welcome book. The VOU Club was a group of outsider poet-artists with their roots in Japan's Modernist avant-garde of the 1930s who were an active part of Japan's tumultuous 1960s and 1970s. This was a time of political unrest due to the populist reaction against the security pact between the U.S. and Japan, as well as antiwar sentiments held by students and leftist thinkers and artists. It was also a very active time for underground theater by the likes of Terayama Shuji, who encouraged young people to drop out of mainstream society and live an alternative lifestyle rather than work for Japan's conservative corporations. However, as time went on, the activities of the group faded into the past. VOU poets failed to gain the official recognition of Japan's conservative poetry community. The work has been kept alive and documented by a small group of poets and scholars, themselves 'outsiders' of a sort. Here, for the first time, a selection of VOU visual poetry is made available in print.

VOU visual poetry has its roots in the work of poet Kitasono Katue.<sup>1</sup> Kitasono was originally an artist and designer who became involved in Modernist and avant-garde poetry magazines in Tokyo in the 1920s, when new experimental poetry and arts blossomed after the great earthquake of 1923. The city itself was newly rebuilt and this was a factor in the excitement of the new and the modern. Kitasono was involved in Surrealism and Dadaism and established the VOU Club in 1935 in order to bring artists and poets interested in these movements together. Around that same time, he began an intensive correspondence with Ezra Pound. Throughout his career Kitasono had many international contacts, such as Haroldo de Campos of the concrete poetry movement in the 1950s. James Laughlin of New Directions and poet Kenneth Rexroth were also in contact with Kitasono and were aware of VOU's avant-garde activities, including some of the VOU poets in their international annual a number of times during the 1970s, but this seems not to have stuck in the American consciousness during a period in which American poets were more interested in Zen and haiku.

The Modernist period was one in which the materiality of language became an element of growing interest, with poets making use of that awareness and the openness to new forms in a wide variety of ways, but most never wandering too far from language's semantic foundations. But some poets did venture into visual poetry following

<sup>1</sup> The spelling of Kitasono's name uses non-standard romanization, which was Kitasono's own preference. John Solt, *Shredding the Tapestry of Meaning: The Poetry and Poetics of Kitasono Katue (1902-1978)*, Harvard University Asia Center, 1999.



Apollinaire who was one of the earliest poets to focus on the visual elements of poetry. Though Japanese Dadaist poet, Hagiwara Kyōjirō, experimented with such visual elements, Kitasono was the first to venture further in the direction of total abstraction, eventually cutting ties completely with the semantic foundations of language. His roots as a visual artist may have been one of the factors making this possible, but Karl Young,<sup>2</sup> who curated a major selection of Japanese visual poetry on the internet, stated in his lengthy introduction that he felt strongly that there is something in Japanese culture and history providing Japanese poets with a sensibility that leans more naturally toward visual poetry than does the Western concept of language. Young did not pursue this question further, so we are left somewhat up in the air. However, he may have been onto something, and it is not the usual mistaken assumption about the pictorial quality of Chinese characters.<sup>3</sup> (In fact, according to John Solt, Kitasono's biographer, the avoidance of Japanese written characters in his works as he began to distance himself from the concrete poetry movement was because of the Western tendency to exoticize Chinese characters.)

Writing has long appeared in painting in the Japanese tradition, such that it is a part of the painting rather than outside commentary. The written symbol can also be used to decorate objects of daily use such as tea cups and so on. In the art of calligraphy, words and phrases are written in a highly stylized manner such that meaning is often not immediately discernable. The characters can at the same time be appreciated as abstract images. The viewer knows that they have meaning, but that meaning may merely be hinted at. This ability to appreciate writing as art without demanding a meaning or logic, in other words without a utilitarian function, may be something that naturally lends itself to the production of visual poetry. But this doesn't explain VOU's venture into completely non-semantic terrain, or Japanese mainstream poetry's tendency to ignore their importance.

The significance of postwar VOU visual poetry is that dependence on semantic relationships (or ideogrammatic relationships) has been broken, moving the art more into the area of total abstraction. To place the artists included in this collection into the context of their own times we have to look at events following WWII. The

<sup>2</sup> Karl Young, to whose memory this anthology is dedicated, was an important progenitor of the American avant-garde during the 1960s and 70s and one of the first to introduce computer-based poetry. He also gave encouragement and support to the Language poets when they were getting started. Unfortunately, his contributions have been all but forgotten due to his own modesty and the tragic loss of his personal archive not long before his death.

<sup>3</sup> Current scholarship classifies Chinese characters as being a logographic writing system, a complex system using both sound and meaning. Many characters are compounds made up of parts of other characters based on their meanings. There are of course a small number of characters with pictographic or ideographic origins, but that is not how the system works.

complete destruction of not only Japan's cities and industry, but the total collapse of a particular world-view and identity, had wiped the slate clean, and writers and artists felt that they could start over like new. Many reveled in their new-found freedom, but there were intellectual and philosophical gaps that needed to be filled, such as the problem of identity. What did it mean to be Japanese after the collapse of the Japanese empire? These issues were taken up by a new group of writers producing what became known as *Nikutai Bungaku*,<sup>4</sup> which expressed the sense that the only identity possible for a person to adopt after the total destruction of Japan was the body and sexuality. This plays out in various ways in literature, film, and performance (Butoh for instance). One major interest was eroticism in art and writing. It was both an expression of freedom and a search for identity. In the 1960s this interest in eroticism continues, but in the Vietnam war and anti-ANPO protest era, it takes an especially violent aspect.<sup>5</sup> This can be seen in some of the more controversial VOU works and also in the major photographers of the time, as well as in the experimental theater of Terayama Shuji. In the introduction to his study of Terayama, Steven C. Ridgely writes that 'a broad trend of eroticized violation narratives emerges in Vietnam-era Japan.'<sup>6</sup> This is seen in the work of Mishima, Oe, and the critic Shibusawa who translated the works of Sade. We can also see this tendency in some of the work included in this selection, especially that of Okazaki.

Perhaps one of the fascinating things about the work of the VOU group overall is that the pieces range from the highly physicalized and eroticized to work that reflects a kind of absolute abstraction. One wonders how something like this could fall so easily by the wayside. For one thing, VOU's founder, Kitasono Katue, had become *persona non grata* in mainstream poetry circles due to his failure to publicly show repentance for what leftist critic, Yoshimoto Takaaki, saw as collaboration with the militarist authorities during the war.<sup>7</sup> Kitasono felt that he had nothing to apologize for, and continued his avant-garde activities as before, but this had to be done completely outside any of the mainstream poetry circles. VOU's place in the Japanese arts of the 1960s was as a kind of *angura* (a term usually referring to the underground theater<sup>8</sup> of the time,

<sup>4</sup> See *The Body in Postwar Japanese Fiction*, by Douglas N. Slaymaker, Routledge (2004), as well as other books covering this subject in the bibliography.

<sup>5</sup> ANPO is the Japanese term for the US-Japan Security Treaty, originally signed in 1952. The revision of the treaty in 1960 triggered massive protests, often turning violent. There was a repeat of this situation in 1970.

<sup>6</sup> Steven C. Ridgely, *Japanese Counterculture: The Antiestablishment Art of Terayama Shuji*. University of Minnesota Press (2011), p. xxv.

<sup>7</sup> John Solt covers this part of Kitasono's past in great detail in *Shredding the Tapestry of Meaning*.

<sup>8</sup> See Ridgely, *Japanese Counterculture: The Antiestablishment Art of Terayama Shuji*.

but it can also be used for non-mainstream activities in general). As time went on and other issues were uppermost in the minds of poets, VOU still had difficulty getting the attention of the mainstream poetry community due to a problem shared by visual poetry everywhere.<sup>9</sup> This is the difficulty of reconciling the differing interpretations of visual poetry: is it poetry materializing itself as object or non-linguistic image, or is it simply visual art since, after all, it no longer makes use of language as its main means of expression?

There is one more possible reason for this falling by the wayside of the VOU Club's work, but this is only an educated guess based on my own involvements with Japanese poetry during the 1980s: it is that perhaps Kitasono and his group were simply too international, going over the heads of the local poetry community and directly to European groups. This would have made them somehow inauthentic as Japanese poets. During the early, chaotic years of postwar Japanese poetry, questions of identity remained fairly open, but gradually, as the new postwar canon began to form, concerns began to gather around the forming of a uniquely Japanese identity – one that of course rejected the extremes of the war period, but which tended to canonize poets in whom some kind of unique or authentic Japaneseness could be seen. The icons of modern Japanese poetry during the postwar period were Hagiwara Sakutarō and Nakahara Chūya, poets who were part of the avant-garde in their own, prewar time; but now the interpretation of their work began to gather around the lyric beauty of their poetry and other elements of their lives and work deemed uniquely Japanese. The more difficult and experimental aspects of their activities were brushed to the side. A certain range of experimentation was tolerated by the postwar canon as long as it did not go beyond certain limits, but even the linguistic-based poems of Kitasono and his group tended to go beyond those limits. Moreover, Kitasono's use of humor was thought to be a sign of a lack of the seriousness felt to be appropriate for an authentically Japanese lyric self.

The work included in this selection has been cared for and preserved by Taylor Mignon and a handful of other people without whose efforts it would have fallen into oblivion. It is hoped that this publication will bring about more awareness of Japan's dynamic experimental tradition in poetry during the twentieth century and encourage further study and research.

Eric Selland  
Tokyo, November 7, 2021

<sup>9</sup> Willard Bohn discusses the various arguments surrounding visual poetry in his publication, *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry: 1914-1928*, The University of Chicago Press (1986).



# vous

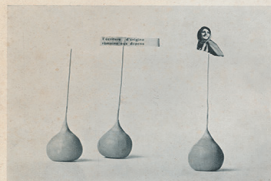
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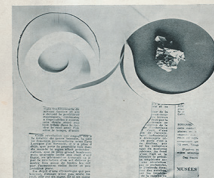
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REVUE DE LA POESIE EXPERIMENTALE



NUMERO 112

# vous

NUMERO 113

NUMERO 113

1976

1976

# vous

SHIMIZU Toshihiko, SHIMAMURA Ryo  
SAWADA Shinichi, MARI Nabuo  
INOUE Mitsuko, HANO Yoshiro, KI  
DA Tatsuya, UNO Kei, TORII Shozo  
TSUJI Setuko, JULIEN BLAINE, KITO  
HARA Atsushi, TAKAHASHI Akihiko  
Hiro, FUKUDA Kazuhiko, OKAZAKI  
Kazuhiko, BAN Naoko, JINBO Kei  
tsuke, TERAYAMA Chiyoko, SUZUKI  
Takashi, ITO Isao

# vous

NUMERO 114

1976

1976

TAKAHASHI Shohachiro, UNO Takashi, TORII Shozo, BAN Naoko, M  
ARI Nabuo, HANO Yoshiro, SHIMIZU Toshihiko, TSUKATANI Akihiko,  
ISHII Motoshi, ITO Motoyuki, SAWADA Shinichi, OKAZAKI Kazuhiko,  
Julien BLAINE, SARENCO, KIYOHARA Etsushi, FUKUDA Kazuhiko, TSUJI  
Setuko, JINBO Keiuke, ITO Isao, KITASONO Katsumi

# vous

NUMERO 152  
SEPTEMBRE  
1976

REVUE DE LA POESIE EXPERIMENTALE

ITO Isao • TSUJI Setuko • FUKUDA Kazuhiko • SHIMIZU Toshihiko • MORIMOTO Hidekazu •  
Tabei Takashi • WAKABAYASHI Mitsuo • OKAZAKI Kazuhiko • SAWADA Shinichi •  
KITOHARA Etsushi • SEKI Shiro • HISINO Yumiko • TORII Ryosuke • KIDA Tatsuya • TAMU  
RA Koh • YODA Yoshiharu • KITASONO Katsumi • SHIMIZU Masato • SUZUKI Takashi •  
HANO Yoshiro

# vous

NUMERO 153  
NOVEMBRE  
1976

REVUE DE LA POESIE EXPERIMENTALE

TSUJI Setuko • FUKUDA Kazuhiko • JINBO Keiuke • TAMURA Koh • YODA Yoshiharu •  
TORII Shozo • KITASONO Katsumi • SHIMIZU Toshihiko • MORIMOTO Hidekazu • HISINO  
Yumiko • KITOHARA Etsushi • SEKI Shiro • OKAZAKI Kazuhiko • TORII Ryosuke • Julien  
BLAINE • ITO Isao • Tabei Takashi • FUNAKI Hiroshi • WAKABAYASHI Mitsuo • HANO  
Yoshiro

# vous

NUMERO 159  
FEBVRIER  
1978

REVUE DE LA POESIE EXPERIMENTALE

ITO Isao • TSUJI Setuko • FUKUDA Kazuhiko • SHIMIZU Toshihiko • FUNAKI Hiroshi • KIDA  
Tatsuya • MORIMOTO Hidekazu • SEKI Shiro • KUSAKI Toshiro • YODA Yoshiharu • Pierre  
GARNIER • SAWADA Shinichi • TORII Ryosuke • OKAZAKI Kazuhiko • Etsushi KUCHIKAWA  
ER • KITOHARA Etsushi • HISINO Yumiko • JINBO Keiuke • TAMURA Koh • TORII Shozo  
• Tabei Takashi • SHIMAMURA Ryo • HANO Yoshiro • OKUNARI Tetsuo • WAKABAYASHI  
Mitsuo • TERAYAMA Chiyoko • SUZUKI Takashi

**30th EXHIBITION VISUAL ACTIVITIES • VOU GROUP**  
**KINOKUNIYA GALLERY • AUGUST 22-27 • TOKIO**

*from left to right:*

*(Names of members featured in this anthology are printed in blue.)*

TSUKUTANI Akihiro  
NARAYAMA Fujio  
**SEKI Shiro (TANABE Shin)**  
**TSUJI Setsuko**  
FUKUDA Kazuhiko  
**SHIMIZU Toshihiko**  
KITASONO Katue  
Mrs OKAZAKI  
YODA Yoshiharu  
SHIMIZU Masato  
FUJITA Kohei  
**KIYOHARA Etsushi**  
**HIBINO Fumiko**  
**OKAZAKI Katsuhiko**

*Not pictured:*

ITŌ Motoyuki, SAWADA Shin'ichi, TAKAHASHI Shōhachirō





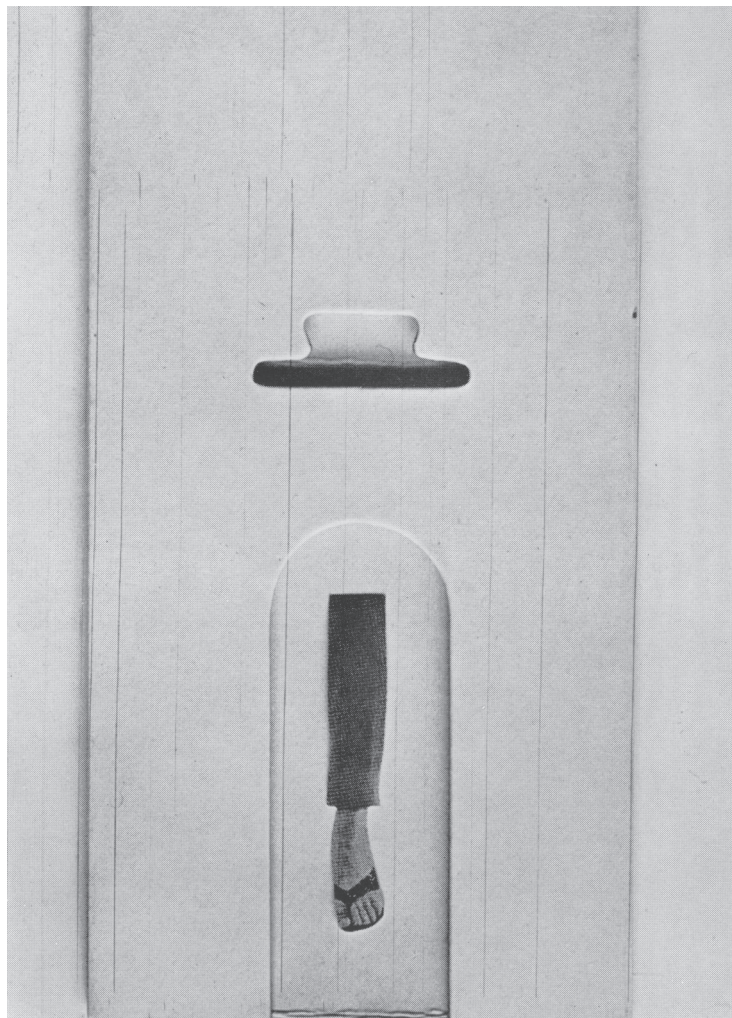
## TSUJI Setsuko

Tsuji Setsuko (Sugiyama Hisako, 1927–1993) was, according to John Solt, one of the most 'uncompromising and dedicated contemporary avant-garde photographers in Japan.' Her lexical and visual poetry, composed in a strongly surrealist style, show the influence of her mentor Kitasono Katue, yet express distinctive viewpoints. Before joining the VOU Club, she was a member of the coterie associated with the magazine *Pan Poesie*, and after VOU, published her own journal *O*, some images from which are included here. Her visual poetry, created with a camera, was published in the U.S. in *New Directions in Poetry and Prose* 34 in 1977 and her poem 'Sand's Design / Poem,' translated by John Solt, was published in 1988 in a special section on VOU poets in the magazine *Third Rail*. Her work also appeared in *Cold Drill* in 1991. She published twelve volumes of poetry, a poetry chapbook, a collection of short stories and a collection of visual poetry.

If the catchphrase of surrealism is 'as beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table,' Tsuji's might be 'as elegant as a sandal-legged keyhole below a Panama hat.' Traditionally, the combination of such concrete particulars was utilized in the practice of haiku composition. Poet and critic Nishiwaki Junzaburo (1894–1982) argued that lines written by Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694) were precursors to European surrealism in their joining of contrasting elements – although that contention does not seem to be widely acknowledged by critics of literary modernism. A perhaps more fitting analogy for Tsuji's work (albeit in a different genre) would be that of experimental poet Yamamura Bochō (1884–1924), who wrote the poem 'Geigo' (literally, delirious speech) in 1913. This poem contains crime-related nouns on one side of the page with nouns from random categories on the other side – *abduction sponge-cake, robbery trumpet, blackmail sitar, gambling cat*, for example (translation by Miryam Sas). Thus, before the founding of Europe-based surrealism, there was already pioneering work of a highly surrealist nature in Japan. Tsuji's 'plastic poems' here show the carrying-over of juxtaposition from the haiku tradition into a purely visual presentation, away from its lexical foundation.

Tsuji often portrayed the human form, using a variety of everyday media, and placing her figures in unexpected contexts. In *op. 016*, between two rectangular sections of corrugated cardboard, a cowboy looks away from the viewer. Above the cowboy, the head of a philosopher-like personage peeks from the top of the cardboard, to ponderous, poetic and humorous effect. In haiku, or more precisely, in the *senryu* form (where the human rather than the natural is central), I suggest it could be interpreted as 'a philosopher peeks from above corrugated cardboard at a cowboy contemplating the void.' Tsuji's works combine the profundity of haiku with the surreal randomness of Yamamura's 'Geigo' to create her own elegant and nuanced visual idiom.





high summer

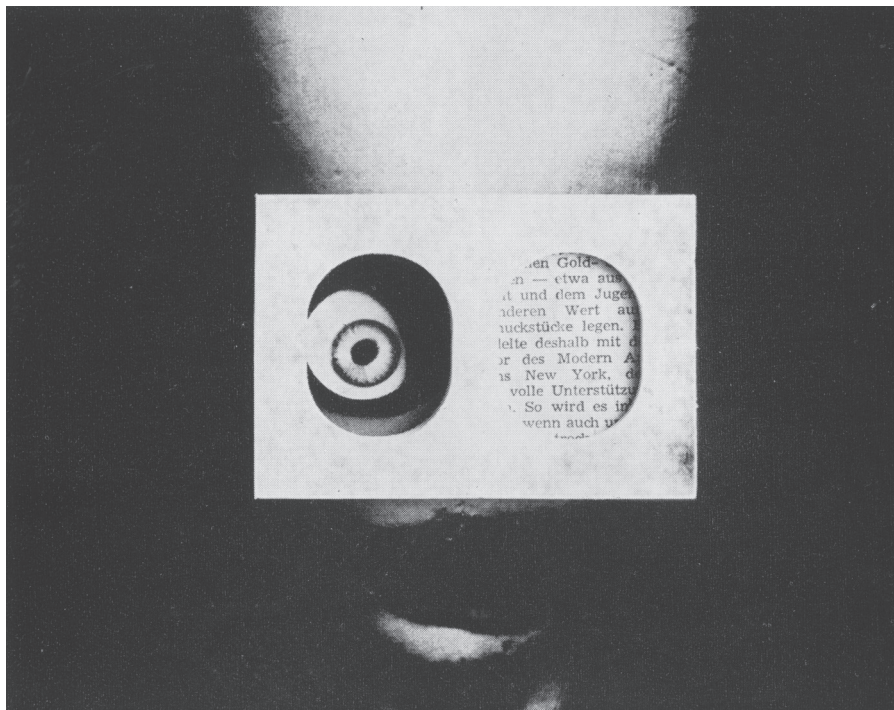
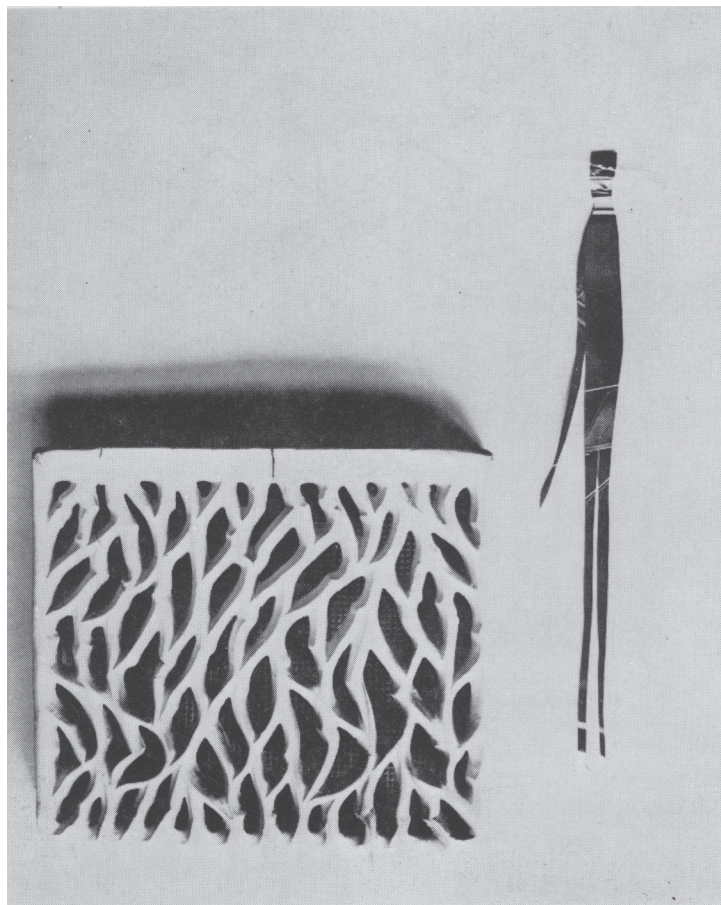
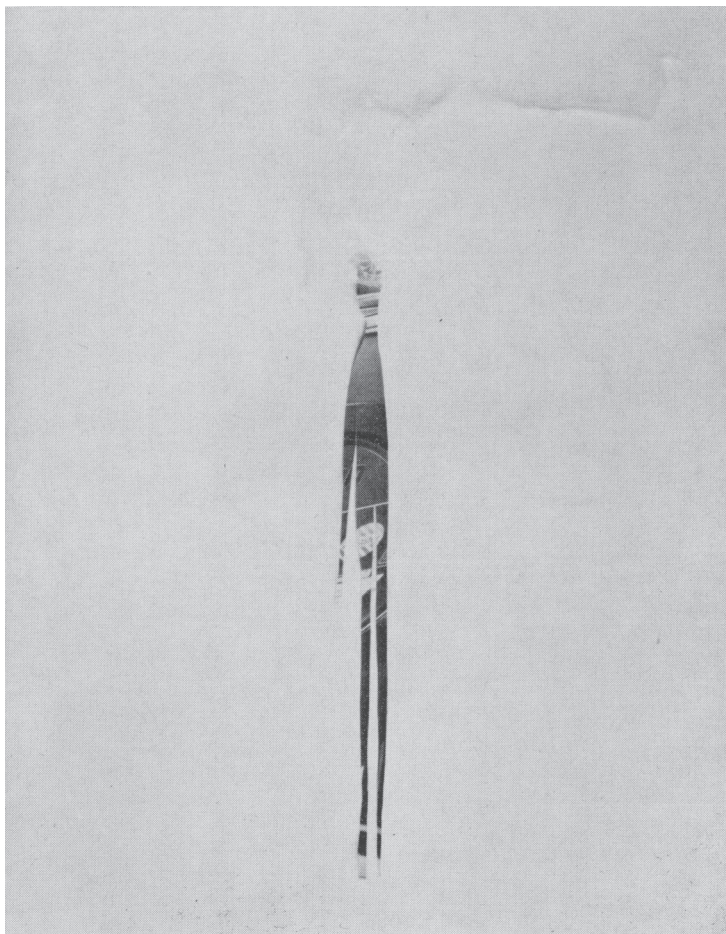


Photo poem



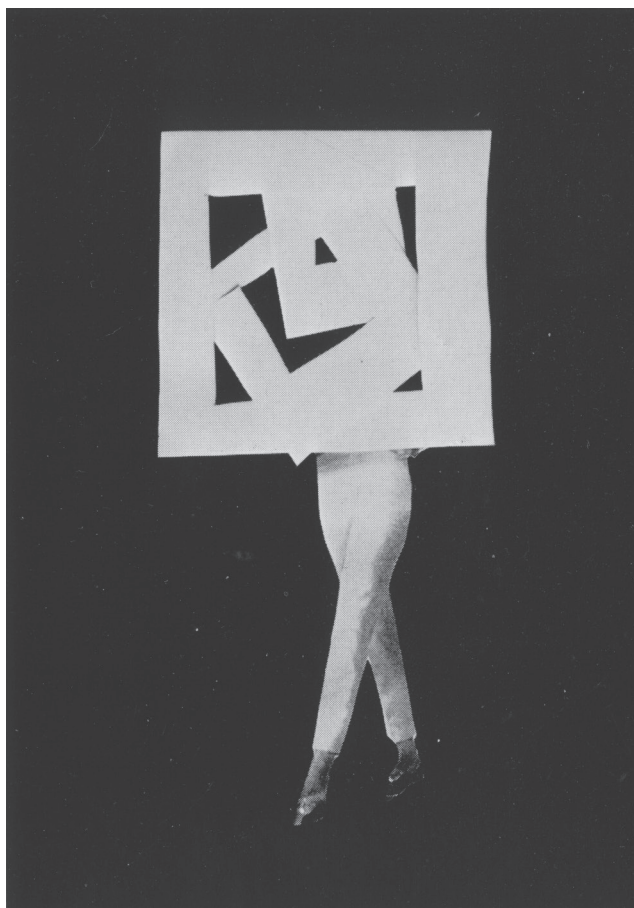
op. 4



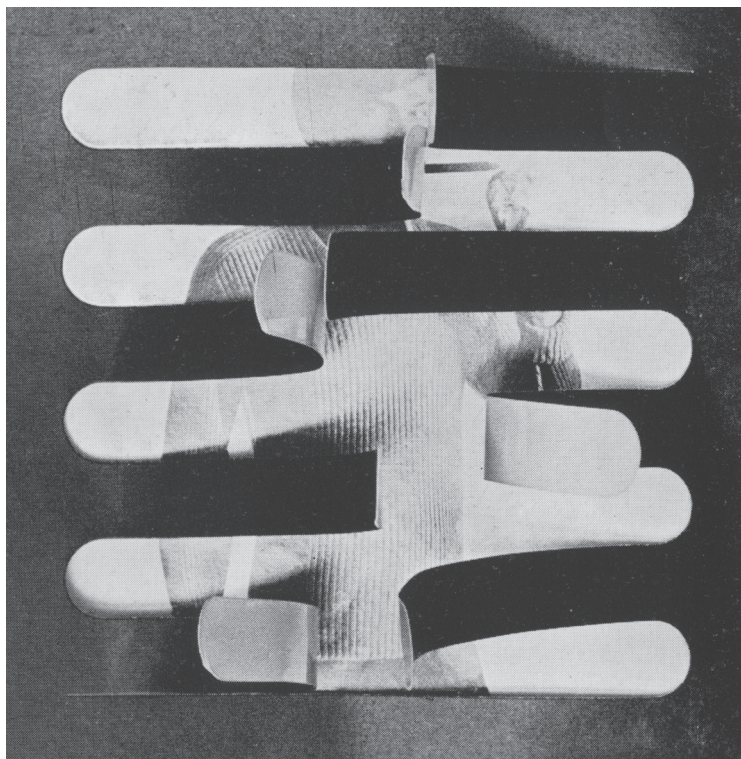


op. 5

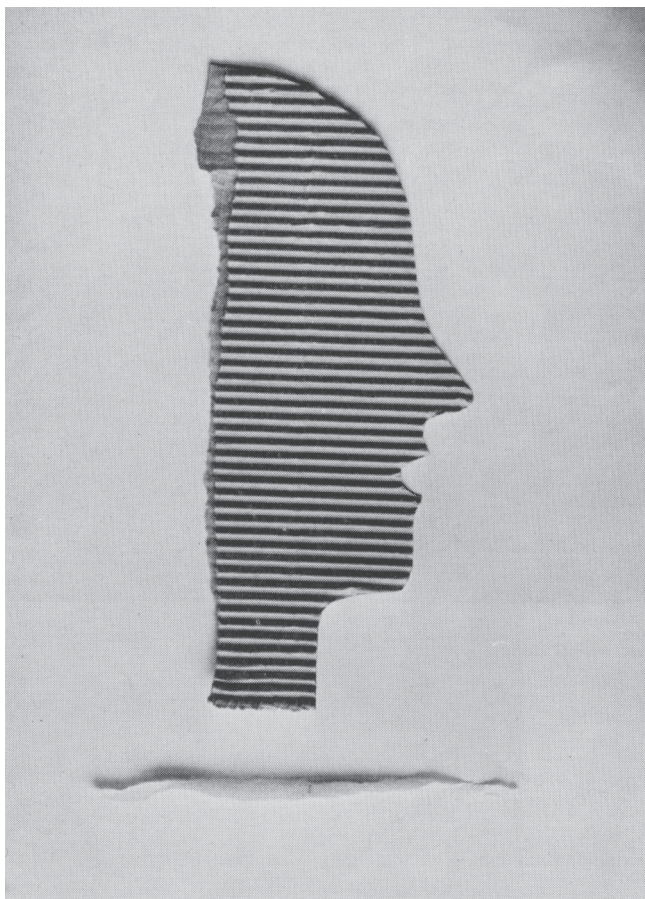




op. 5



op 77-I

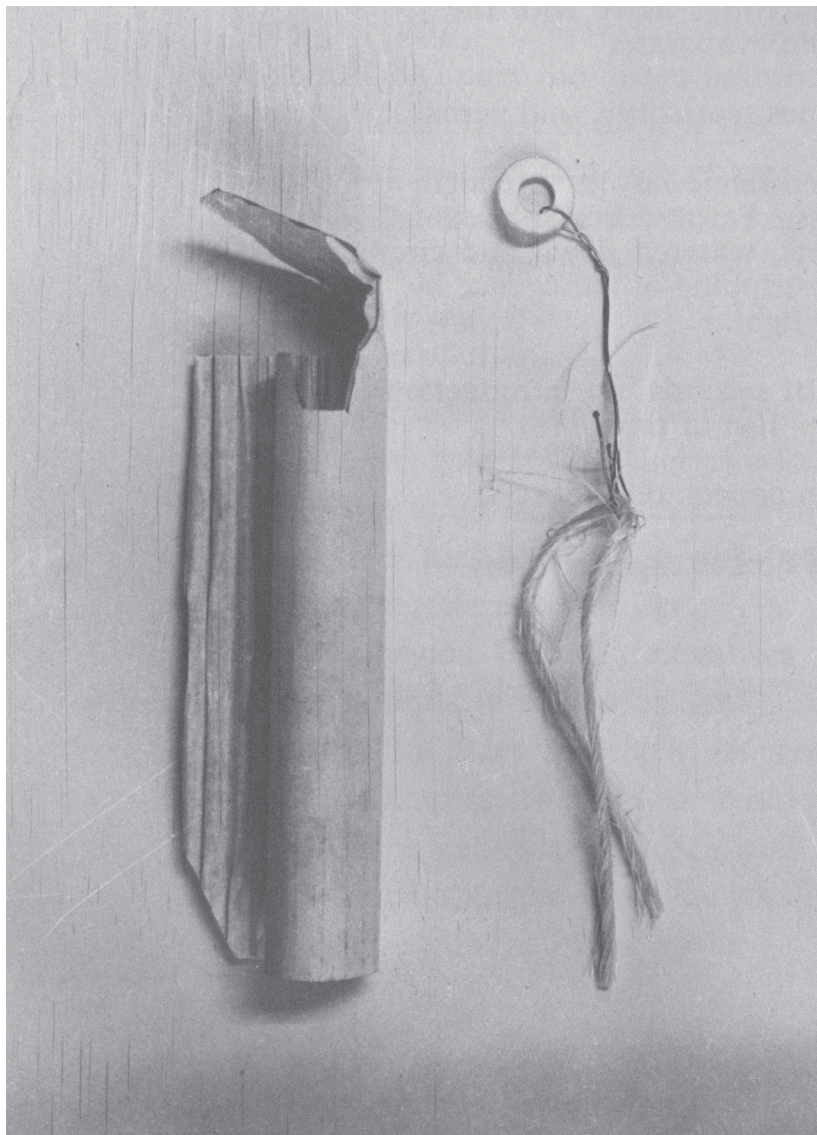


opus I

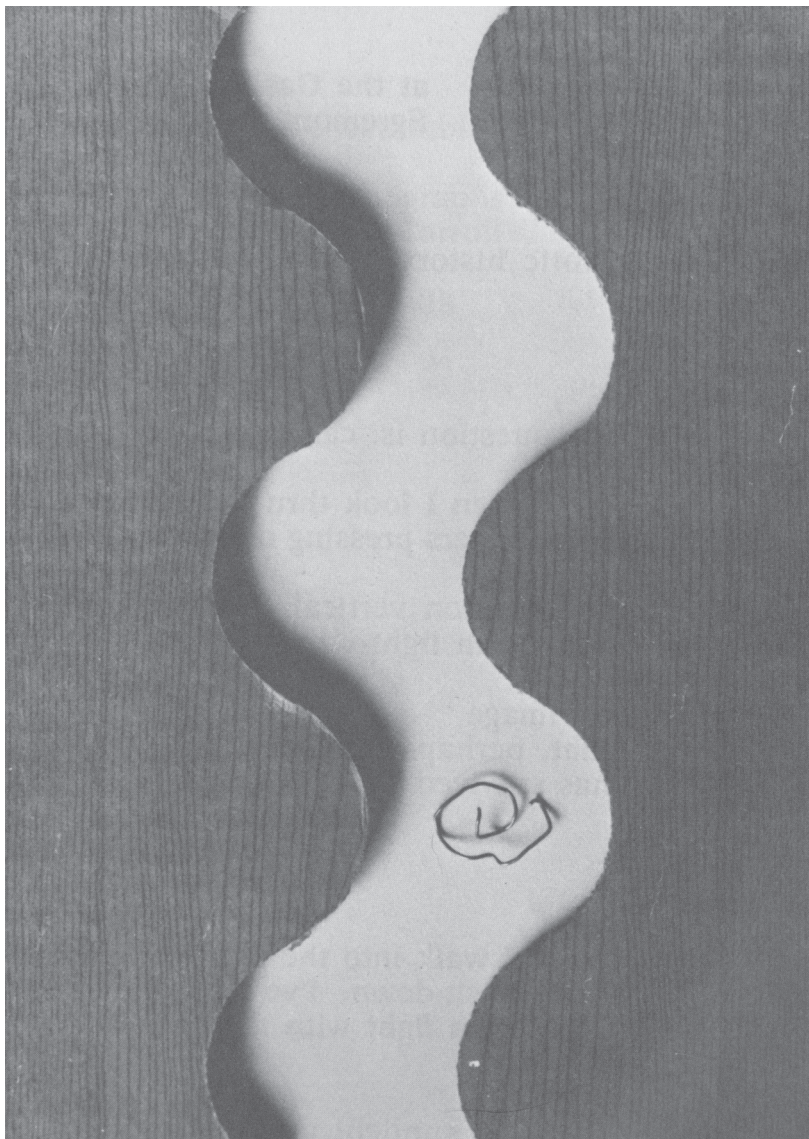
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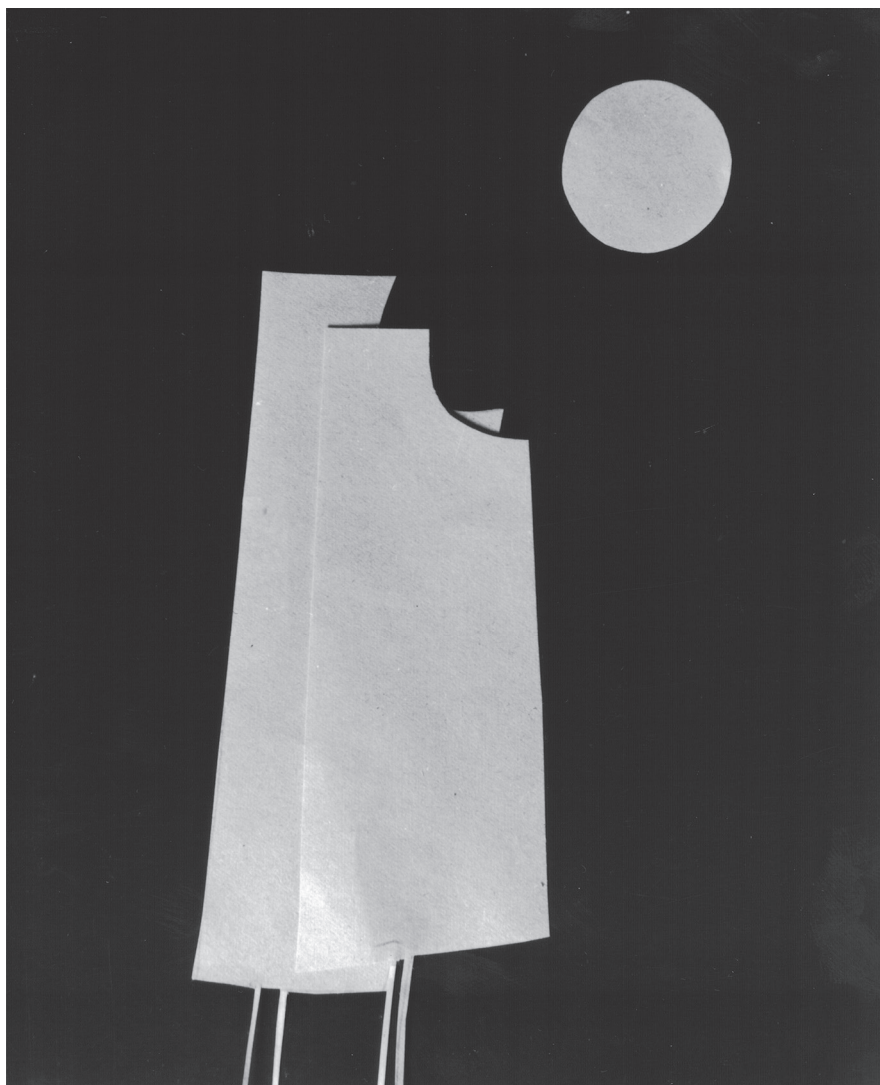




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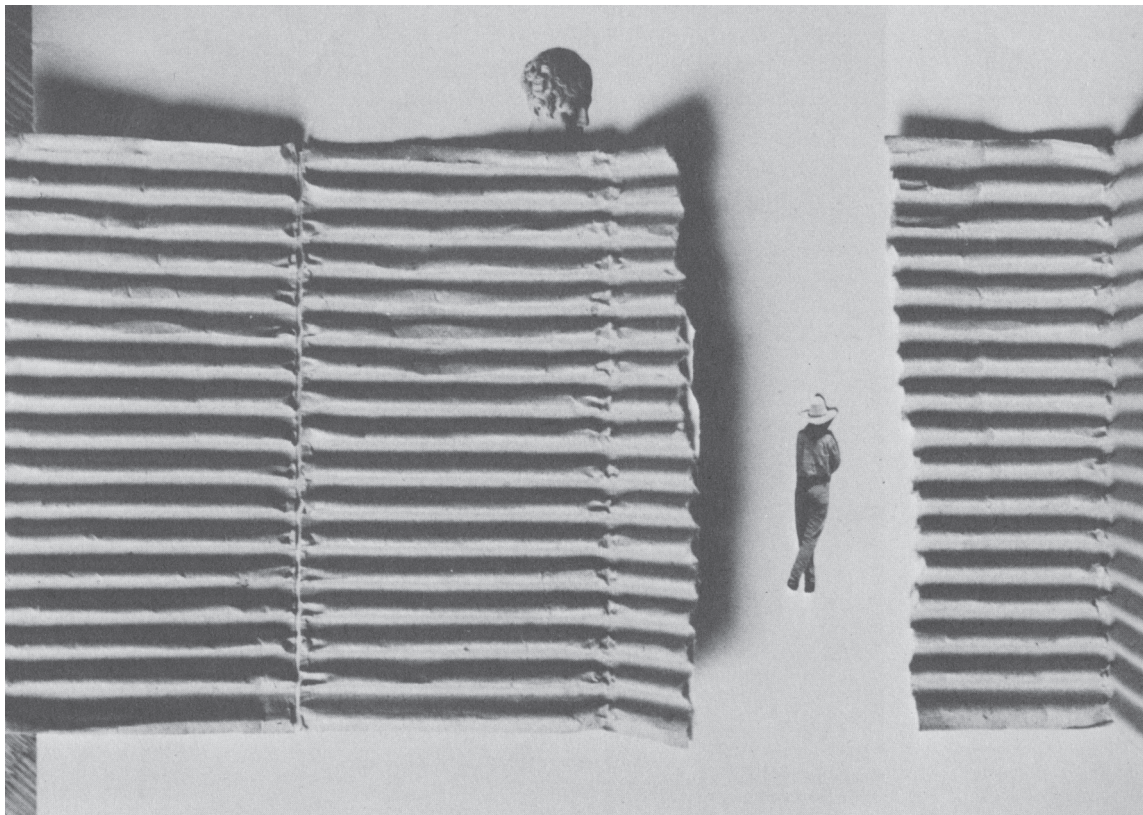


op.001 or 川のある記憶 (memory with river)



two people eating the moon





op.016





op.017