

**Moment and Momentum:**  
The Poetry of Frank O'Hara across Collaborative Contexts  
By Dana Valentina Boutin

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by  
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For my parents who,  
like Frank O'Hara, encourage an intimate relationship with art, a curious mind,  
and a healthy appreciation for life's comedy.

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## Abstract

The thesis examines the poet Frank O'Hara in several collaborative contexts. I examine Frank O'Hara, a social, coterie, colloquial poet, in and out of his time. Focusing specifically on a few of his works, this thesis will attempt to show how the poet's antirational approach enlivens poetry. I conclude that in light of the tension between a historical moment and the momentum, O'Hara's poems sustain their impetus through collaboration.

The first chapter hinges on his poetry as traced through publications, O'Hara's self-representation and mirrored image in his speakers, and his role in the "New York School." The practice of responding to other poets and the space of New York itself affects his work. His "I do this I do that" poems, as he referred to them, record his daily life in New York in detail that transforms the poem itself into a journal of his everyday activities and, when accessed by the reader, into an event. Because O'Hara's "In Memory of My Feelings" captures the complexity of an artistic speaker's identity, the section expounds on three parts of this poem. In light of the multiplicity of the self, I move to a description of O'Hara's artistic group, the New York School of Poetry and why this group is significant enough to be considered avant-garde yet tentative in its accuracy as a summary title. Next, I consider O'Hara's relation to New York School painters, particularly the Abstract Expressionists as an extension of his social sphere. In exploring how social connections manifest in a physical context, I analyze a collaborative piece with Jasper Johns, a second generation New York School painter.

In my second chapter, I focus more specifically on three works by O'Hara: "Poem (The eager note on my door said 'Call me')," "Personism: A Manifesto," and "Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed)." I identify opposing forces of life and death in the content of the poems and conclude that O'Hara's poems emphasize forward movement, largely in relation to what O'Hara saw as the stagnation of academic poets.

In conclusion, in the intersection between O'Hara's poetry in collaborative contexts and what gets lost over time, while readers want to engage in something authentic, the poems are meant to evolve in new collaborative contexts. Readers sustain the original impetus and momentum of the poems most fully when they collaborate with O'Hara's poetry by redefining it.

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Short Titles

- CP; Allen, Donald, ed. Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara. Berkley: University of California Press, 1995.
- E; Elledge, Jim, ed. Frank O'Hara: To Be True to a City. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990.
- PR; Allen, Donald, ed. Frank O'Hara: Poems Retrieved. San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 2001.
- G; Gooch, Brad. City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara. New York, Knopf, 1993.
- L; Lehman, David. The Last of the Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School Poets. New York: Doubleday, 1998.
- P; Perloff, Marjorie. Frank O'Hara: Poet among Painters. New York: George Braziller, 1977.



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## **Introduction**

Despite his specific references to figures of his own times and daily life, Frank O'Hara's popularity has seemingly increased over time and his work still resonates in our communities. Why continue to study Frank O'Hara? By looking at O'Hara and his poetry in different times and contexts, we can see how he and his persona collaborate with their contextual moment.

Different contexts of reception arguably vary in preserving the liveliness of this illusion. Chapter One considers publication, poetic identity, and social identity as collaborative contexts. I focus on the publications of Donald Allen, Marjorie Perloff, Brad Gooch, and Lytle Shaw and conclude that the form of publications shapes the meaning of the content.

Next, because O'Hara's speakers shape the content of his poems, I examine identity as a collaborative context. In tracing the intersection between artist, speaker, and poem, I examine how O'Hara narrates his own identity and how he portrays the self in sections of the poem "In Memory of My Feelings." Because O'Hara is often described as an autobiographical or social poet, I then shift to a consideration of the New York School poets and painters.

O'Hara did not collaborate with an artistic group so much as his personal experience with his friends. Do we have a nostalgia for a "coterie" that is no longer possible? While O'Hara saw other members of the "New York School" as simply his friends, outsiders formalized this group. This combination bolstered individual poet/friends, making their work easier to publish, teach, and make broader critical claims about. In looking at the critic David Lehman's claim that the New York School is an

avant-garde group, I emphasize that groups can only remain avant-garde for a brief moment in time. O'Hara and company thrived on social interactions, but their community was fluid, and the diversity of their work suggests their affiliation was an impetus rather than a subject. I conclude by analyzing a multimedia piece by O'Hara and the painter Jasper Johns.

As seen in Chapter Two, O'Hara's poetry often hinges on momentum. The once popular allusions in O'Hara's poetry, however, are now dated. Chapter Two examines "Poem (The eager note on my door said 'Call me')," "Personism: A Manifesto," and "Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed)" in an effort to assess the extent to which O'Hara's poetry retains its original freshness and immediacy and to what extent this poetry is intrinsic to his work's meaning. Can explanation of references rekindle what is lost?

In conclusion, I argue that O'Hara's work lends itself to working within different collaborative contexts, and that by examining these, we gain a new understanding of how we as readers collaborate with O'Hara's poetry in our own moment. Because art is always collaborating in new ways, the momentum of Frank O'Hara's poetry lies in collaborative contexts that reactivate the poems in our own moment.

## **Chapter One: Moment**

A New York culture hero of the 1950s and 1960s, Frank O'Hara projected the exuberant energy found in his poems into the memory of those who knew him best.<sup>1</sup> Even for those who came after his time, the reception of his poetry collides with the magnetism of his persona. At the tender age of forty, O'Hara was the first New York School poet to die, a fact that shaped a trajectory of his canonization in ways that we cannot now determine.<sup>2</sup> Posthumous collaborations create new artistic contexts that reshape the meaning of his poems. Studying the life and work of Frank O'Hara thus yokes the positioning of the individual artist within a community with the outsider's desire to understand and synthesize the artist in terms of digestible historical, social, and political categories and groupings.<sup>3</sup> Because we can no longer access O'Hara first-hand, we engage in the fantasy that we can understand O'Hara, a suspension of disbelief which art normalizes to the extent that we feel we know his story.

In anthologies today, synopses of biography and style often accompany these "key" works, explaining and contextualizing poetry for readers who do not understand the allusions and who want to know about the artist's socio-historical moment.<sup>4</sup> While

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<sup>1</sup> Marjorie Perloff, Frank O'Hara: Poet among Painters (New York: George Braziller, 1977), xi. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix "P."

<sup>2</sup> Brad Gooch, City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara (New York: Knopf, 1993), 3. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix "G."

<sup>3</sup> While by "categories" I generally refer to stylistic qualifiers such as "surrealist," or "ironic," by "groupings" I refer to extra-textual associations such as "New York School" and "coterie." Typifying an issue of actual connection versus external collapsing of context and work, terms like "social" and "camp" are arguably both "categories" and "groupings."

<sup>4</sup> This thesis will focus on interpretative facets of identity and context, but I pause here to ground the reader in some basic biographical facts. O'Hara was born in Baltimore, Maryland on March 27, 1926 and raised in Grafton Massachusetts (G, 3). His family was Irish-Catholic and as he grew older, he grew farther apart from both his family and his religion (G, 6-7, 36-37). He graduated from high school and enlisted in the Navy in 1944, and was sent to various islands in the Pacific during the Second World War (G, 61, 77-89). He used the G.I. Bill to attend Harvard, graduating with a Degree in English in 1950, and then went to graduate school at the University of Michigan, graduating in 1951 with a Masters of Arts in English Literature (G, 95, 160, 166). He moved to New York where, as a social poet and active instigator

positioning O'Hara in his context and historical moment offers an elucidating reading of his life and work, the impulse to do so raises new questions as to the tension between the artist and external forces that rediscover that individual in new contexts. Inevitably, this information shapes how we read poems and affects the future reception of them. A similar process takes place in academia. Both integral parts of the "literary canon," anthologies and academies have greatly expanded what is published and taught. In literary evolution, we want to "discover" the new and unknown, while preserving our knowledge of the past and looking at it in new ways. We fantasize that through our knowledge of the past we can access poetry in the way it was perceived when it was "new," but inevitably see it through our own lenses and in light of our own concerns.

Initially celebrated for his multifarious life and career, in recent years critics have followed Marjorie Perloff, a prolific critic whose work in the 1970s accounts for much of his recent increase in popularity, in a more concentrated consideration of his poems themselves. O'Hara was in dialogue with readers of his own time and his poems continue to converse with new audiences who access the poems in different historical, physical and critical contexts. Through this contextualization, we learn more about our own academic position and interests. Examining the trajectory of O'Hara's poems in relation to publications, his identity, and his social milieu, elucidates how poems collaborate with context in creating meaning.

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of interactions between artists, he was an integral figure in the emerging "New York School of Poetry." O'Hara's enthusiasm for various art forms, particularly painting, resulted in his becoming a curator at New York's Museum of Modern Art and a critic for *Art News* (G, 20, 263). He was hit by a car and died on July 26, 1966 (G, 3). For a more detailed account, consult Brad Gooch's *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* (1993).

## I. Publications

Both fitness and chance determine the evolution of how we read Frank O'Hara's poems. If being the most widely read is taken as a measure of success, current publications are a measure of success in literary evolution. Books, critical essays, and anthologies shaped and will continue to shape the biographical identity of O'Hara and the accessibility, popularity, and interpretation of his poems. Publications by Donald Allen, Marjorie Perloff, and Brad Gooch significantly contributed to an understanding of O'Hara and his work. The plethora of posthumous publications on O'Hara highlights the chance and lack of agency for poets in affecting how the public receives them. In "The Critic," O'Hara famously describes this figure as "the assassin // of my orchards" and concludes with the commanding plea "Do not // frighten me more than you / have to! I must live forever" (CP, 48).<sup>5</sup> The speaker acknowledges the authority of "The Critic" and the possibility of death. Perloff likens herself to "The Critic" and O'Hara to the speaker "I" (P, xiii-xiv). Critics, however, do not kill poets but rather judge their work and poets are not immortal but rather live through their inorganic work. If the "I" represents a general two-dimensional speaker, the speaker's immortality on the page could be lost if the critic rejects the poem, thus challenging the importance of the work.

While criticism stifles the creativity of this poet-speaker, it promotes poetry by making poetry available in more forms and legitimizing its importance. Even when scholars challenge the status of a work, they bolster it as something worthy of consideration and debate. In prefacing her book with this poem, Perloff acknowledges O'Hara's "strictures on literary criticism" and indicates that she attempts to "respect his

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<sup>5</sup> Donald Allen, ed., The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 48. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix "CP."

wish” (P, xiii-xiv). O’Hara’s attitude toward criticism will be expounded upon in my section on “Personism,” his mock manifesto. O’Hara’s career as an art critic suggests that he feared some but did not reject all criticism. The speaker’s existence in history persists as long as living audiences connect with the speaker by reading the poem. If, as Perloff asserts, O’Hara is the speaker, the “orchards” can be seen as his poetry, which he loses influence over when he dies. By tracing O’Hara’s work and persona in light of publications, we can see how publications collaborate with poetry in nurturing some trees in the orchard while cutting down others.

Orchards take a long time to grow. O’Hara’s work was largely unrecognized beyond publications in small magazines until 1960, when Donald Allen’s The New American Poetry Anthology, 1945-1960 brought attention to the little known New School of Poetry, Black Mountain School, and San Francisco Renaissance (G, 317). Describing these emerging groups, Allen Ginsberg, a poet commonly associated with the Beats and at times with the New York School, emphasizes their rejection of academia and form: “From 1955 on there was somewhat of a breakthrough in American poetry known variously as San Francisco Renaissance or New York School or Beat Generation or Open Form or whatever, but antiacademic, antiformalist style” (G, 318). Donald Allen attributes the unpopularity of these groups to their “one common characteristic: a total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse.”<sup>6</sup> Brad Gooch, O’Hara’s biographer, describes O’Hara and Ginsberg as “serious poets with a shared distaste for the neat academic stanzas being promulgated as poetry by many staid literary magazines” (317). Reporting the difficulty of their resistance, Ginsberg states, “I don’t think people

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<sup>6</sup> David Lehman, The Last of the Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School Poets (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 337. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix “L.”

nowadays realize what a strong hold the notion of stress and accent and stanza had on poetry in what were considered the serious literary magazines” (G, 318). While Allen includes Ginsberg in his anthology (albeit with seven less poems than O’Hara), Ginsberg calls it “a great blow for poetic liberty” (G, 353). As places with a priori value, anthologies legitimate and enshrine artwork. The anthology features those who rejected academic forms within an academic medium, and one that boldly asserts the authority to define “The” important poetry. Yet the anthology offered an alternative for unnoticed poets, and in the case of O’Hara, agency in determining its contents. Gooch reports that “O’Hara had been [Allen’s] primary unofficial consultant, advising on trends as well as lobbying for the inclusion of personal favorites” (339). The anthology became a great success and O’Hara was the “star of the volume,” which included more of his poems than any other poet (G, 354).<sup>7</sup> Marjorie Perloff, a critic who published a book and articles on O’Hara, describes Allen’s anthology as “THE great anthology of avant-garde poetry, the book that determined the direction poetry would take in the second half of the century” (Allen back cover). While publications generally affect the selection and interpretation of poets’ work, through dialogue with Allen, O’Hara influences the early stages of his preservation in a publication. Moreover, by advising Allen on the works of other poets in the anthology, O’Hara helps define the larger scene of poetry and, due to the anthology’s popularity, contributes to the poetic trajectory for the second half of the century.

A half-century later, Allen has now published all of the O’Hara poems available to him.<sup>8</sup> After O’Hara’s death, Allen continued to promote O’Hara by assembling his

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<sup>7</sup> Donald Allen, ed., *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999) xv-xxiii. Hereafter cited in the text.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Allen, ed., *Frank O’Hara: Poems Retrieved* (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 2001), xvi. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix “PR.”



poems in larger publications. Allen's Standing Still and Walking in New York (1975) disseminated interviews and essays by O'Hara. He also promoted O'Hara by publishing several collections of his work: The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara (1971, 1997), The Selected Poems of Frank O'Hara (1974), and Frank O'Hara: Poems Retrieved (1977). These publications made more of O'Hara's poems available to the public and show his breadth and scope.

While Selected Poems and Collected Poems reprinted poems from smaller publications, Frank O'Hara: Poems Retrieved features many poems never before published before which Allen "retrieved" from O'Hara's graduate manuscript, A Byzantine Place, and from his friends (PR, xv). Allen admits that many of these poems he "doubted [O'Hara] would have published without revising, ones that seemed too similar to other poems of the same period or were too fragmentary" (PR, xvi). The availability of these poems after O'Hara's death signals just how little control artists have in how history receives them. Allen claims that in studying them, he "came to realize that O'Hara at one time or another would most likely have published all of his poems, and that the present volume was the logical and necessary completion of their publication" (PR, xvi). Allen's friendship with O'Hara lessens the presumptuousness of the claim. In a recent interview, John Ashbery, O'Hara's friend and fellow New York School poet, provided a poet's perspective on this issue. While positing that "retrieved"

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New poems may surface. In an email, Marvin J. Taylor, Director of the Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University told me, "I believe [O'Hara's] sister still retains his archive in a garage on Long Island, oddly enough. We would love to have his papers here, but don't at this time." In their acknowledgments, critics Marjorie Perloff and Lytle Shaw thank O'Hara's sister, Maureen Granville-Smith, for permitting them to include unpublished material from the Estate of Frank O'Hara. O'Hara suggested that if his letters were ever published, they would embarrass his family members (PR, xv). Perhaps over time and as more critics access it, more of the archival materials from O'Hara's state will become available, possibly shifting our reading of O'Hara.

Marvin J. Taylor, "Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University (21 Dec 2006)," marvin.taylor@nyu.edu.

works will be considered in light of their roughness, he humorously suggests, logically enough, that the dead do not care what is published. When asked what he thought about posthumous publications of his “scribbles,” Ashbery responded, “I won’t mind. I think it will be understood that I didn’t publish them myself if they are published posthumously.”<sup>9</sup> His response underscores artists’ conscious lack of agency in relation to the public, especially posthumously. Separated from the active promotion of O’Hara, the presentation of O’Hara’s “retrieved” work itself bolsters the legitimacy of his poetry separate from his catching persona.

For the decade following his death, O’Hara’s work was largely celebrated in relation to its author, who was seen as too quick in composition and too multifarious in his life to be a serious poet. Published in 1977, Perloff’s Frank O’Hara: Poet among Painters brought critical attention to and argued the importance of O’Hara’s poetry. As Perloff acknowledges in the 1997 revision of her book, the conservatism of the time buried some aspects of O’Hara’s life and work. Commenting on a line in which O’Hara’s speaker likens himself to a “sissy truck-driver,” Perloff states, “Even in the later 1970s, readers didn’t quite know how to respond to such self-exposure. When, in an early draft of Frank O’Hara: Poet among Painters, I referred to Joe LeSueur as Frank’s lover, Donald Allen suggested tactfully that I use the word ‘friend’ instead.”<sup>10</sup> As Perloff’s comment suggests, the sociopolitical moments project their values onto poems.

The conservatism Perloff reports contrasts greatly with Brad Gooch’s biography, City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O’Hara (1993), which returned attention to

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<sup>9</sup> John Ashbery, “Interview with Deborah Solomon,” The New York Times Magazine (14 Jan. 2007): 17. Hereafter cited in the text.

<sup>10</sup> Marjorie Perloff, “Frank O’Hara: Poet among Painters (15 Mar. 2007),” <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/perloff/ohara.html>, 2. Hereafter cited in the text as “PR (1997).”

O'Hara's life while calling attention to previously suppressed sexual and racial aspects of O'Hara's life and work. Perloff says that the biography "is nothing if not candid about the poet's love affairs and one-night stands . . . it becomes an extended (some would say, excessive) portrait of what it was to burn with a hard gem-like flame in the postwar and pre-AIDS decades (PR (1997), 2-3). Suggesting just how much a particular critical moment can shape literary criticism, Perloff says that, "The new respectability of Queer Theory, coupled with the breakdown of the High Culture/Popular Culture divide, and the tolerance, even in the Academy, for open forms and improvisatory discourse—these have given O'Hara a new place in the canon" (PR (1997), 3). Now deemed a worthy topic, O'Hara collaborates with those who, like Gooch, analyze his poetry and persona.

The form of criticism shapes how it collaborates with poetry and determines new meanings. Critics combine fragments of poems to serve specific conclusions. While not an incorrect way to collaborate with a reading, it's useful to remember that it reflects our own interests, as O'Hara's prose "[Statement for The New American Poetry]" suggests when he claims that if his poems provide "clarifying experiences," this is "accidental" (CP, 500). To a large extent, Gooch's biography breaks poems into secluded lines and analyzes a smaller scope of the social: O'Hara's break with his family and religion, his personal relationships, and daily life. In Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie (2006), Lytle Shaw, a professor at New York University, analyzes poems in large sections.<sup>11</sup> Arguing that study of O'Hara's poems on a line-by-line basis renders a reading of his work "fragmentary" and "antitheoretical," Shaw posits, "The result has been to downplay the more social and analytical features of O'Hara's poetry and to construe it instead as a

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<sup>11</sup> Lytle Shaw, Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006). Hereafter cited in the text.

set of fragmentary, casual, speech-based ‘lines’ – only occasionally brought together” (10-11). He rightly points out the implications of *how* we enter into dialogue with art.

Shaw continues to consider social implications of O’Hara’s work, recoding O’Hara as a political poet by suggesting that O’Hara’s poetry dismantles traditional literary and familial lineage (11). According to Shaw, O’Hara’s poetry asserts a new social order. Shaw’s argument is very convincing in terms of the sexual, political, and canonical definition of “social” he addresses. Looking at the social in light of literary tradition, Shaw suggests that O’Hara’s allusions create an alternative kinship structure while his literary influences chart a new “constellation” of tradition (28). Some of the social figures in O’Hara’s constellations will be considered later in this thesis. While Gooch, Perloff, and Shaw consider O’Hara’s poetry in socially consequential terms, O’Hara aggressively asserts that he does not “care about clarifying experiences for anyone or bettering (other than accidentally) anyone’s state or social relation” (CP, 500). In this refusal, O’Hara asserts a particular relationship to his readers. Much more has been and could be said about racial and sexual elements in O’Hara’s poems. Instead, I would like to turn now to the question of how O’Hara’s self-presentation collaborates with history in creating his identity.

## II. Identity: A Narrated Poet and His Autobiographical Speakers

### i. Creating a Poetic Persona

As the outlined publication history suggests, the figure of O'Hara intermingles with ideas about his poems. One reason for this intermingling is that friends and critics identify O'Hara as an "autobiographical" poet, a claim which will be addressed later in this chapter. In the jacket for O'Hara's book Lunch Poems (1964), he collaborates with publications in the forging of his identity in history. He captures in his own words what is so attractive about his poetry and his poetic persona:

Often this poet, strolling through the noisy splintered glare of a Manhattan noon, has paused at a sample Olivetti to type up thirty or forty lines of ruminations, or pondering more deeply has withdrawn to a darkened ware- or fire-house, to limn his computed misunderstandings of the eternal questions of life, co-existence and depth, while never forgetting to eat Lunch his favorite meal. (P, 115)

O'Hara fostered the idea that he is a spontaneous and even non-serious poet. Not one to put poetry on a pedestal, O'Hara narrates a causal observer who happens to stop and write amidst his normal daily routine. As this stylized self-representation suggests, O'Hara was and remains a myth. In his review of Marjorie Perloff's Frank O'Hara: Poet among Painters (1997), Frederick Garber, a professor at the State University of New York at Binghamton, suggests that O'Hara and his work were misunderstood and that O'Hara bolstered some false images of himself (112).<sup>12</sup> Combined with what was seen as the division of his attention between the visual and literary arts, O'Hara's impromptu

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<sup>12</sup> Frederick Garber, "Frank O'Hara, Rev. of Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters," Contemporary Literature 20 (Winter, 1979): 112. Hereafter cited in the text.

style resulted in the myth that he was not a serious poet. Commenting on this myth, Garber describes O'Hara as a "Manhattan-based culture hero" who was thought to live too "harried" a life to write seriously. Garber states, "There grew an image of O'Hara as a frantic party boy, a diligent amateur scattering poems" (112). The quotidian title Lunch Poems and the quotation introducing them present poetry as a daily hobby indulged during a recess from another career. Why would, as Garber suggests, O'Hara "encourage" the image of himself as a "playboy of poetry, pouring out chatty occasional poems" while he eats lunch? (112).

Susan Sontag's description of "Camp" artists enacting "Being-as-Playing-a-Role" elucidates why O'Hara may have wanted to perpetuate this myth.<sup>13</sup> Sontag lists fifty-eight features of "Camp," but in short, "Camp" sensibility undermines the serious, natural, and linear in favor of the artificial, styled, and sensual (1). O'Hara's work is not synonymous with "Camp" but shares several of its features. His interest in the novelists Ronald Firbank and Ivy Compton-Burnett, whom Sontag lists as "Camp," supports this association (Shaw 6; Sontag 2). This is not to say that O'Hara never makes elitist allusions, but rather that by featuring "Camp" figures like movie stars, he contributed to "the breakdown of the High Culture/Popular Culture divide" (Sontag 3-4; P (1997), 3). By adopting the hyperbolized role of casual poet, O'Hara challenged the serious "High culture" that dominated literature (P (1997), 3).

The dual persona of the simultaneously observant and thoughtful yet casual poet mirrors O'Hara's shifts in tone. Simple, direct, yet adorned with descriptive phrases, the quote from the Lunch Poems jacket is both lyrical and colloquial. Like the comic

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<sup>13</sup> Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp' (13 Mar. 2007)," <http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/irvinem/theory/Sontag-NotesOnCamp-1964.html>, 3. Hereafter cited in the text.

oxymoron “computed misunderstandings,” even O’Hara’s edited poetry feels like improvised conversation. The juxtaposition of “eternal questions” and “Lunch” equates the two and even emphasizes the later through its capitalization. John Ashbery summarizes the dichotomy within O’Hara’s poetry and how seemingly incongruous combinations reflect real life when he states, “Half on contemptuously familiar terms with poetry, half embarrassed or withdrawn before its strangeness, the work seems entirely natural and available to the multitude of big and little phenomena which combine to make that almost unknowable substance that is our experience” (CP, xi). The mixture of high and low elements reflects how glib surfaces mask experiential truths in O’Hara’s poems (CP, xi). Darker elements like death underlie O’Hara’s poems, serving as comparisons to bolster his greater emphasis on vitality. The poet claims to ponder “depth,” which sounds like “death.” The adjective “eternal,” which often represents a promise of life after death, bolsters this association. Alluding to, yet leaving “death” unstated, places more emphasis on “life” and “co-existence.” O’Hara’s poems celebrate life while hinting at its impermanence, thus urging readers to embrace life while they can. In public and yet privately ruminating “life” and “co-existence,” the poet narrated above is, like the island of Manhattan, isolated yet enmeshed in the social world.

O’Hara fosters an image of himself as a casual urban observer. Like Charles Baudelaire and William Carlos Williams, poets whom O’Hara admired, O’Hara writes about individual and social experiences and celebrates the city (P, 25, 33). The narrated poet/speaker from O’Hara’s Lunch Poems jacket blurb is an illusion of an autobiographical “I” living in a realistic society, paralleling O’Hara yet artificial. On one hand, O’Hara pushes the boundary between the immortal object and the human by

introducing information parallel to his life and thus legitimizing the speakers' "realness" through their connection to someone off the page. The speakers inhabit social worlds just like the poet they mirror. In many poems, they speak to a general "you" that could be any audience or anyone in general (which will be explored in a few of his poems later in this thesis), positioning the reader in dialogue with the speaker.

On the other, O'Hara's speaker goes beyond observation and challenges his or her two-dimensional status. Contemplating "life, co-existence and depth," the speaker points to an introspective moment during his navigation of his particular world. Because the speaker cannot truly die if he is preserved on the page, he alludes rather to "depth" as the degree of his dimensionality, an abstraction resembling something real. Similar to the speaker in "The Critic," by acknowledging their own preservation on the page, speakers come alive on the page through their consciousness of their artifice. Asking his audience to regard his speakers as real and addressing the topic of life and death, O'Hara creates speakers who are immortal but inorganic.

In his prose essays and biographical blurb, while O'Hara's speakers are first read as O'Hara, they parallel the speakers in his poems, thus inviting readers to see them as another piece of artifice. Commenting on O'Hara's line "It's another case of nature imitating Alfred Leslie," Shaw states, "One can notice that O'Hara's line literalizes Oscar Wilde's dictum that 'life imitates art.' For 'art,' O'Hara has plugged in a proper name" (30). Inserting O'Hara into this dictum reflects the confusion between O'Hara, the role O'Hara took on, and his autobiographical speakers. Examining identity in light of the autobiographical, the medium of art itself, and the social in O'Hara's poems reveals how context molds personal identity, despite nostalgia for a unified self.



ii. The Autobiographical and Social

Poetry is both autobiographical and fictional: drawn from what the poet knows and experiences yet edited or imagined within new contexts and given new significance. Friends and critics often describe O'Hara's poetry as social or autobiographical, labels that suggest his speakers and subjects mirror people off the page. As O'Hara's contemporary poet, Gilbert Sorrentino, describes, O'Hara's poems present a "world made up of a certain kind of strictly New York *joie de vivre*," inhabited by his friends, fellow artists, and cultural allusions congruous to his own life.<sup>14</sup> John Ashbery, O'Hara's friend and fellow New York School poet, claims that in comparison to most New York School poets, O'Hara's poems are "almost exclusively autobiographical" (CP, x). Ashbery lauds O'Hara's work despite his rejection of autobiography in his own work. In an interview this year for The New York Times Magazine, Deborah Solomon asked Ashbery about what she calls his "resistance to personal confession" (Ashbery, 17). When asked if he thinks "Americans are too enamored of their own lives," Ashbery responded, "Yes . . . My own autobiography is so uninteresting to me I have always thought it surely wouldn't interest anyone else. . . . My mother was always telling me not to talk about myself or put myself forward. . . . I always worried about this throughout my life: is my welcome wearing out at this particular moment?" (Ashbery, 17). What does Ashbery find appealing about O'Hara's work if he does not like autobiography? Ashbery stresses that O'Hara's autobiography is not confessional but "Rather he talks about himself because it is he who happens to be writing the poems, and in the end it is the poem that materializes as a sort

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<sup>14</sup> Gilbert Sorrentino, "The New Note," in Frank O'Hara: To Be True to a City, ed. Jim Elledge. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990) 15.

of monumental backdrop against the random ruminations of a poet seemingly caught up in the business of a New York working day or another love affair” (CP, x-xi). Offering a window into a specific time and place, O’Hara’s speaker is a guide who points to various features and events in his day.

In “In Memory of My Feelings,” by contextualizing speakers in relation to society, O’Hara conflates the social with personal identity:

*My quietness has a man in it, he is transparent  
and he carries me quietly, like a gondola, through the streets.  
He has several likenesses, like stars and years, like numerals.  
My quietness has a number of naked selves,  
so many pistols I have borrowed to protect myself  
from creatures who too readily recognize my weapons  
and have murder in their hearts!      (CP, 252)*

Throughout the poem, we get many vignettes identifying this man, the speaker’s selves. As in “The Critic,” someone threatens the life of the speaker, who gets pistols to protect himself or herself from those with “murder in their hearts!” Violence, particularly hunting, and report of dead family members suggest that these selves are under threat. The selves are “naked,” indicating that they are exposed and vulnerable. The speaker’s collaboration with readers reflects the idea that identity relies on a social context.

The beginning portrays multiple selves recollected in “quietness,” or tranquility. O’Hara’s presence in his poems shares with Romanticism the importance placed on the artist’s experience. In his “Statement for The New American Poetry,” O’Hara states, “I am mainly preoccupied with the world as I experience it” (CP, 500). “O’Hara’s cult of

the artist is a Romantic notion taken to the extreme,” David Lehman claims.<sup>15</sup> He describes this extreme notion as “the idea that the most crucial element in a poem is not the isolated text nor its relation to either the world it describes or the reader it addresses but rather the figure of the poet as creator, who has made a ‘monumental and agonizing’ effort to achieve spiritual grace” (306). In O’Hara’s poetry, “spiritual grace” is not divine. In a different section, the poem praises, “Grace / to be born and live as variously as possible” (CP, 256). O’Hara dedicates the poem to the painter Grace Hartigan, thus locating “Grace” in a corporeal, living self. O’Hara’s non-theological conception of “Grace” relocates transcendence on earth, in the human body, in the present.

Marjorie Perloff claims that O’Hara is “essentially romantic,” but that “far from having its origin in emotion recollected in tranquility, [poetry] is the expression of what is happening *now* ... placing the poet’s self squarely at the center of the poem, in the very process of discovering his world.”<sup>16</sup> While the title of O’Hara’s “In Memory of My Feelings” resembles William Wordsworth’s claim that poetry is “emotion recollected in tranquility,” the content reveals not a romantic self but selves in relation to others (E, 61). Like Baudelaire and Williams, O’Hara locates the speaker in the urban setting of “the street.” O’Hara immediately sets his speaker in motion. The speaker’s quietness “carries [him] quietly, like a gondola.” David Shapiro, a second generation New York School poet, describes O’Hara’s poetry as “speed recollected in tranquility.”<sup>17</sup> O’Hara’s speakers take readers with them, quickly shifting through various daily activities.

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<sup>15</sup> David Lehman includes these descriptions in his book The Last of the Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School Poets. As a poet, editor of the annual series The Best American Poetry, literary critic and acquaintance of several of the poets still living, Lehman resembles the individuals he analyzes in his multifarious activities and relationships with his peers.

<sup>16</sup> Jim Elledge, ed., Frank O’Hara: To Be True to a City (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 61. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix “E.”

<sup>17</sup> David Shapiro, “In Conversation with John Tranter (5 March 2007),” <http://jacketmagazine.com/23/shap-iv.html>.

Redefining the romantic poet, he creates speakers who collaborate with their surroundings and he invites his readers to participate in this process. Through “speed,” O’Hara’s speakers manipulate time, forcing readers to collaborate by moving with the speaker. While Shapiro refers to O’Hara’s process, however, here O’Hara creates the illusion of speed in the way that he moves us through the images in the poem.

The image of stars captures the paradox of identity on two levels. In a broader sense, humans are made up of the same essential elements as the stars in the sky. Looking up at the stars, it seems inconceivable that we could be in any way like them. The image of stars captures the complex cycle of destruction and creation, of how a dying star supports life on earth. Within the realm of human society, stars are people society deems worthy of publicity, usually because they entertain. While the fact that O’Hara lists them with the larger measurements “years” and “numerals” suggests he intended the former implication of “stars,” that “stars” refers to the identity of the speaker reflects the author’s role as a poet, a kind of celebrity. O’Hara often includes movie stars and celebrities of the art world in his poems. Reflecting John Ashbery’s description of O’Hara’s poems, the two kinds of stars present in O’Hara’s poems connect “multitude of big and little phenomena” (CP, xi). “Years” and “numerals” suggest that these interior selves are ciphers. From this beginning, O’Hara creates a complex relationship between interior and exterior. The speaker’s “quietness” and the title evoke introspection. The speaker is seemingly outside, observing the body which, “like a gondola,” is a vessel for the “man” inside. The speaker knows of this man despite the fact that he is “transparent,” and thus like “years” and “numerals,” the “several likenesses” of this man are not concrete.

The speaker suggests that art records multiple selves that are mere reflections of an original. The speaker's identity intermingles with preservation through art:

*And the mountainous-minded Greeks could speak  
of time as a river and step across it into Persia, leaving the pain  
at home to be converted into statuary. I adore the Roman copies.*

...

*And yet*

*I have forgotten my loves, and chiefly that one, the cancerous  
statue which my body could no longer contain,*

*against my will*

*against my love*

*become art,*

*I could not change into history  
and so remember it,*

*and I have lost what is always and everywhere  
present, the scene of my selves, the occasion of these ruses,  
which I myself and singly must now kill*

*and save the serpent in their midst. (CP, 252-7)*

The last section speaks of a "cancerous statue" within the body of the speaker that "turns into "art." He says, "I could not change it into history / and so remember it" (CP, 257). As in the quote by Pasternak, the speaker suggests a lack of agency in preserving one's own identity. The speaker cannot put feelings themselves into history but only preserves memory thereof, a memory contingent upon the perception of others. Thus, "emotion recollected in tranquility" is an abstraction and one impinged on by the social. The title of the poem sounds like an elegy. "Memory" is personal history. Art preserves an artificial, inorganic self, immortalized and ever evolving in history. In the end, the speaker "must now kill" his selves and "save the serpent in their midst" (CP, 257). That

the selves are “transparent” likens them to layers of skin that the serpent must shed. But this means that the speaker “I” cannot kill all of them at once and survive.

The speaker often mentions snakes and also refers to the Medusa. The allusion connects to instances where the speaker talks about stone, statues, and Greco-Roman history. In Greek mythology, the Medusa turns those who look upon her into stone, connecting her to Greco-Roman statues, which are silent and preserved in history. Speaking of statues, the speaker states, “I adore the Roman copies.” Like memory, we can only guess at the Greek originals by looking at the many Roman copies which were lost likely altered by the Romans. The Romans reformulated Greek history when they came into power. As with the Roman copies, history is art in that it edits the past in each subsequent generation. We cannot truly know history but can remember a memory of it. History is inherently edited when we choose what facts to emphasize.

As the singular/plural aspect of autobiography and society suggest, O’Hara’s speaker is an “I” with multiple “selves.” Implementing O’Hara’s phrase “the scene of my selves” from his poem “In Memory of My Feelings,” critics Terence Diggory and Stephen Paul Miller argue the instability of identity.<sup>18</sup> The theatrical word “scene” highlights the affected property of the self and its location in a given time and place. In the event that a poet draws from his or her life, three stages necessarily occur: the experience, the poet’s memory of it, and the poet’s re-contextualization of this experience in a work of art. The title, “In Memory of My Feelings,” captures the temporal distancing of the aforementioned stages. The phrase “in memory of” conventionally commemorates something now dead (and indeed, the poem refers to death ten times).

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<sup>18</sup> Terence Diggory and Stephen Paul Miller, ed., The Scene of My Selves: New Work on New York School Poets (Orono, Maine: The National Poetry Foundation, 2001), 9. Hereafter cited in the text.

Because time removes us from direct access to our feelings in a given moment, we merely select, interpret, and attempt to preserve what we remember. O'Hara acknowledges this artifice when he describes the "scene" as "the occasion of these ruses," a description that accentuates the playfulness of his poems. Just as O'Hara remembers the feelings and selves of his past, Diggory and Miller propose that "we share his desire to recover the New York School 'scene,' even as we admit it is 'lost'" (9). Like the poet who tries to rekindle his or her past emotions, readers engage in a fantasy of accessing the poem in the context in which it was written. O'Hara challenges the category of poet-creator, reflecting the instability of the self that Romanticism portrays as unified and expressive. Thus while he was not isolated, O'Hara's poems hinge on his own experiences and relationships, interweaving a Romantic self describing a postmodern world that constructs this multiple self (Diggory 27, P 141).

O'Hara's poetry hinges on the autobiographical and social, which much of his work suggests are intricately linked. As events, his poems involve readers in their unfolding. In narrating events congruous to own life, O'Hara creates speakers who interact with other people and with the character of New York City. The speakers' collaboration with readers reflects the idea that identity relies on a social context. In an essay by O'Hara about a Russian writer whom he greatly admired, O'Hara quotes Boris Pasternak's Dr. Zhivago on personal consciousness:

However far back you go in your memory, it is always in some external, active manifestation of yourself that you come across your identity- in the work of your hands, in your family, in other people. . . . You in others- this is your soul. . . . your soul, your immortality, your life in others. And what now? You have always been in others and will remain in others. And what does it matter to you if later on that is called your memory? This will be you- the you that enters the future and becomes a part of it.

(CP, 503-4)

Pasternak suggests a collective memory here. If identity relies on others, multiple identities must exist. In O'Hara's "In Memory of My Feelings," the speaker portrays a number of selves. Here, the personal is imposed upon the self by the social. The body is a vehicle for retaining an abstract self.

Like Pasternak, O'Hara recognized the collaboration between identity and the social and the retrospect inherent in introspection. Despite its specificity to his own life, the poetry of Frank O'Hara offers a window into a broader time and place by filling his poems with fellow painters and poets. Because of the connection between identity and social context, I will consider O'Hara as a member of the New York School of poetry and then in association with the New York School painters.

### III. The New York School

Frank O'Hara signifies what is now called the "New York School." Although O'Hara is primarily identified as a New York School Poet, his influence extended into the larger sphere of New York at its height as an artistic Mecca. "Grace / to be born and



live as variously as possible,” he writes in “In Memory of My Feelings,” (CP, 256). How does one live “variously”? As a poet, teacher, mentor, friend, curator, critic, and lover, O’Hara took on roles that many people do. He embodies his speakers with many “various” identities. O’Hara’s poetry is in dialogue with contemporary painters, dancers, news reports of popular cultural icons, and fellow poets—figures of his daily life—at a time when painting was hot and an economic boom offered new opportunities for artists living and working side by side.<sup>19</sup> The plethora of collaborations between these artists underscores the communal aspect of their work. While critics such as Perloff undermine O’Hara’s part in the New York School for reasons which will be discussed, the group status of the poets (as well as the New York School painters) are more tied to O’Hara’s work than others because he is a social poet. These group members and visual artists appear in his poems, gave him a coterie audience, and allowed him to create a persona in his poems.

O’Hara is artistically classified as a “New York School” poet, a grouping that necessarily aligns his poems with those of his “group members.” The “New York School of Poetry” includes several generations of poets but hinges on the emergence of its first generation, a group that materialized in the 1950’s. This first generation is largely male, homosexual, Harvard-educated, and linked to New York City and the visual art world, but for each of these classifications, one or more of the poets deviates from the general rule. O’Hara fits all of these descriptions and, as mentioned before, several critics read his poetry in terms of gender, sexual and academic politics, thus mapping social utility onto his art. David Lehman examines the social in terms of artistic group, arguing the New York School of Poetry signifies a pivotal point in reception history. While

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<sup>19</sup> Vernon Shetley, “The New York School,” Raritan. 18 (Spring 1999): 130.

commenting on the tenuous association, both Gooch and Lehman preserve O'Hara's identity as a New York School poet. Summarizing the four main poets in the first generation, David Lehman characterizes Frank O'Hara as a social poet, John Ashbery as radically allegorical, James Schuyler as lonely, wistful, and atmospheric, and Kenneth Koch as comical and narrative (L, 277).

In light of the diversity that these descriptions indicate, why are these poets grouped under the title "New York School"? A large part of what initially connected these poets is in fact nonliterary: a lifestyle, friendships fueled by common interests, schooling, and often location. Much of their literary connection seemingly lies outside the boundary of poems intended for publication.<sup>20</sup> In sharing their poems with one another and in responding to some common aspects of and events in their lives, their poetry is in fact an art of correspondence, the medium Lehman points to as a basis for the group:

The New York School of poets- though it wouldn't be named that until 1961- can be said to have begun on that June day in 1948 that Ashbery, completing his junior year at Harvard, wrote "The Painter" and mailed it to Koch, who had already graduated from Harvard and migrated to New York. "The Painter," a sestina, was the first of many poems in which these poets aligned themselves with modern painters. (L, 7)

In addition to letters to friends, much of their work originally appeared in self-published journals or journals in which they worked on the staff, and readings and performances consumed by other poets and artists. While they published their poems for larger

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<sup>20</sup> To claim that the poets did not write for a public audience (falsely) assumes the intention of the author.

audiences in books and journals, the poems themselves often address an immediate or specific person. These poets reference popular culture of their time, figures within the sphere of the New York art world, and in-group conversations and jokes that not only ground their poems in a specific present but also render their poems more meaningful or “personal” to the intended audience.<sup>21</sup> For example, in Love Poems, O’Hara refers to his lover, Vincent Warren, variously as “V (F) W,” “President Warren G. Harding,” and “Horace S. Warren” (CP, 346, 354). We infer this today through research, but it is second-hand and extremely specific. Beyond these social affiliations, however, these poets often differ significantly in style and content, and their work changes greatly over time. Artificial groupings that aide marketing, teaching, and digesting a moment we cannot access perpetuate their identification with one another. How does the group identification shape our reading of O’Hara?

Two factors challenge the accuracy of calling this group the “New York School of Poetry” and of classifying these poets as a group at all: the diversity of their work as previously discussed, and their questionable identification with New York. Although for the most part they worked in post-World War II New York City, the figures who comprise the first generation of the New York School — Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler and the often disregarded Barbara Guest — did not move

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<sup>21</sup> Whereas other groups, such as the contemporary Black Mountain School, worked in a more narrowly defined environ and advocated particular ideas about art and how to create poetry, the more porous New York School practiced art in their very discussion of it. “Their art and thought was nurtured through constant interchange, so that intellectual exchange and artistic collaboration seemed less like a deliberate program and more like the spontaneous engagement of a game,” says critic Vernon Shetley, summarizing Lehman’s argument. Criticizing Lehman for leaving certain questions about the group unanswered, he asks, “Should we refer to a New York School at all? What principles or common features bind the work of these poets? The New York Schoolers were notably short on manifestos and programs ... they weren’t much interested in having disciples and imitators, or championing an aesthetic” (131). And as John Ashbery’s story reports, when a woman contacts Kenneth Koch about the “New York School,” she is disappointed to discover that she cannot enroll (Shetley 131).

to New York until they were in their twenties, left New York for extended periods of time, and often did not, as a general rule, garner inspiration from this environment.<sup>22</sup>

The poets did not choose the title and it was not original. As the art world shifted in the first half of the twentieth century from Paris to New York, the term “New York School,” reminiscent of the older “École Paris,” was applied generally to artists working in New York but perhaps most significantly to the Abstract Expressionist painters who, like the New York School Poets, flourished in mid- and downtown Manhattan.<sup>23</sup> John Bernard Myers, an enthusiastic curator, endorsed New York School Painters— particularly the Abstract Expressionists and their successors— and distributed the work of those who are now known as “New York School” poets, grouping the poets under this name in an article for *Nomad* magazine (*G*, 200-201). In part for publicity and in part for guilt by coterie association, they published in the same works. Thus associating these individual poets and painters who were contextually but not necessarily stylistically linked, the curator presumed that a group, school, or movement had more potential to spur public interest than would any single artist. In particular, the thought was that newer or little known artists might gain recognition due to their association with more established figures. Less celebrated at the time, poetry could gain from its association with the more fashionable medium of painting (*G*, 200-210). Like many initial christenings, the externally applied title prevailed thereafter. While to a large extent, this curator was correct in anticipating the popularizing possibilities of publicly identifying artists with one another as a group, the categorization thus solidified is somewhat problematic.

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<sup>22</sup> Guest differs from her peers in her identity as a woman and arguably as a Language poet.

<sup>23</sup> Marjorie Perloff, “Watchman, Spy, and Dead Man: Jasper Johns, Frank O’Hara, John Cage and the ‘Aesthetic of Indifference’.” *Modernism/ Modernity*. 8 (2001), 203, 221. Hereafter cited in the text.

Gooch presents O'Hara as a force of unity who is met with resistance: "Back in New York in the golden moment of rapprochement between 'beat' and 'New York School' poetry over which O'Hara had presided began to show signs of coming apart, caused as much by sexual politics as by aesthetic difference" (322). Gooch portrays O'Hara's rejection by some Beat artists, namely Gregory Corso and Jack Kerouac, with the suggestion that this was partially due to artistic competition but also his rejection of O'Hara's sexuality; Ginsberg also receives a derogatory comment from Corso (322-4). In his section on O'Hara's friendship with LeRoi Jones, Gooch represents O'Hara as more interested in maintaining this connection than Jones, who breaks with O'Hara for the strength of his racial political ambitions. While Gooch's biography is rich with details of the times and place, and characters present, the fact that the biography focuses on O'Hara offers the possibility that it slants toward his perspective.

Despite this problem and even while acknowledging it, much commentary on the New York School emphasizes the friendship of the poets and their contact with other artists working in New York. O'Hara's speakers express enthusiasm for art, the city, and figures that inhabit an alternative world, desirable due to its energy, comedy, and community. Uncovering O'Hara is like becoming part of his club; and if you don't want in, "bully for [you]" (CP, 498). From our own context, we collaborate with him through what he shows us. One appeal is that the New York School poets lead exciting lives (relative to more conservative older academics and suburban Americans at the time) in a blooming artistic setting. While partying, engaging in platonic and non-platonic relationships and taking advantage of what New York had to offer by way of artistic entertainment, the poets were also sharing their work with one another (G, 202, 248-9,

206, 218). “We’re very competitive,” Lehman quotes Kenneth Koch as saying about his friendship and artistic relationship with John Ashbery (Shetley 3).<sup>24</sup> While the poets’ disparate styles suggest that this alliance is merely social, David Lehman highlights how mutual artistic interests and engagement in each others’ works prompted and spurred their friendship.

External forces transfigured a colloquial set of poet-friends into a social entity. While these groupings may have made the poems more digestible for the public, such general titles can be misleading and challenge critics to find a common thread among them. Peter Bushyeager, critic and poet in the St. Mark’s Poetry Project, acknowledges this when he refers to the group as the “so-called” New York School (202). Allen Ginsberg is another example of the confusion of categorization. Group categorizations such as Allen’s can associate those who have little in common while severing other connections. Vernon Shetley particularly notes O’Hara as working to maintain artistic relationships across groups. “O’Hara, largely by the force of personal magnetism, managed to maintain friendly relations with some of the Beats, particularly Allen Ginsberg,” Shetley reports (3). Ginsberg claims that the Beats and the New York School constitute “a united front against the academic poets to promote a vernacular revolution in American poetry beginning with spoken idiom against academic official complicated

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<sup>24</sup> As this commentary outside of the poetry evidences, Lehman analyzes the poets with a more personal approach than much literary criticism, an approach that this group seemingly invites. A Professor of English at Wellesley College, Vernon Shetley critiques Lehman in a book review for *Raritan Quarterly Review*, suggesting that his strength lies in capturing the vivid lives of the poets: “Lehman’s background as a journalist contributes to the strengths of *The Last Avant-Garde*; he does an excellent job of rendering the circumstances of the lives and productions of his four central authors. Academic literary criticism is much concerned with placing works within their contexts, but in those acts of contextualization notions like movement and milieu have almost entirely given way to concepts like discourse and ideology; Lehman is refreshingly and usefully old-fashioned in his focus on the web of particular connections among the poets and their friends and supporters, and between the poets and the life made available by their particular times and places” (Shetley 2).

structure derived from the study of Dante” (L, 337). Like Ginsberg, the New York School is often humorous or ironic in their rejection of the academy. James Schuyler attended college, but he dislikes, “the campus dry-heads who wishfully descend tum-ti-tumming from Yeats out of Graves with a big kiss for Mother England” (L, 338). Like Ginsberg and Schuyler, O’Hara entered academia and mocked what he saw as dull.

Even if this and other anthologies seemingly perpetuate authoritarian control of what is read, the present prevalence of these groups stems from the popularity of this work. The group category is marketable for anthologies. While selling an individual poet to an audience stipulates that the publication prove the merit for consuming the poetry of this individual, a title that suggests a broader movement or critical moment sells its own importance as an integral part of literary history. “Schools” are also more teachable. When combined under an umbrella theme, similarities and differences can be traced within a “school” of thought.

Still, not all of the “New York School” poets embraced this title. In his Introduction to The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery criticizes, “The term ‘New York School’ applied to poetry isn’t helpful, in characterizing a number of widely dissimilar poets whose work moreover has little to do with New York, which is, or used to be, merely a convenient place to live and meet people, rather than a specific place whose local color influences the literature produced there” (CP, x). Despite this skepticism as to the title’s accuracy as an umbrella term, he notes Frank O’Hara as an exception when he states, “But O’Hara is certainly a New York poet. The life of the city and of the millions of relationships that go to make it up hum through his poetry” (CP,

x).<sup>25</sup> New York and its characters were important influences for O'Hara specifically.

O'Hara met several of the individuals who would become central figures in his life and poetry as an undergraduate at Harvard and during brief trips to Manhattan, but was not a true New Yorker until he moved there after graduating from the University of Michigan. In "The City Limits: Frank O'Hara's Poetry," Neal Bowers connects, as O'Hara states in his poem "For James Dean," being "true to a city" to his admiration for William Carlos Williams' Paterson.<sup>26</sup> Williams states, "a man in himself is a city, beginning, seeking, achieving and concluding his life in ways which the various aspects of a city may embody—if imaginatively conceived—any city, all the details of which may be made to voice his most intimate convictions" (E, 323-4). But Bowers claims that O'Hara's poetry is a city "not as a microcosm but as that part of a city immediately available through the consciousness of Frank O'Hara" (E, 323). O'Hara's speakers not only comment on but address the city and its inhabitants. O'Hara's poems reveal the tension between speakers preserved on the page and their desire to interact with an urban and social context.

The title of Lehman's book summarizes his major claim: that the New York School of Poetry is the last avant-garde movement, a claim that depends on establishing their group identity. The French term *avant-garde* applies to art that challenges the boundary of what is acceptable. Like soldiers at the perilous position in front of an army, the work of avant-garde artists is so far ahead of their contemporaries that it risks being misunderstood and little appreciated. O'Hara indicates that when the New York School of poetry began writing (and for over a decade thereafter), major publications expressed

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<sup>25</sup> While Gooch suggests O'Hara disliked John Bernard Myers (perhaps due to their rivalry over painter Larry Rivers), there is little to indicate that O'Hara rejected the title "New York School."

<sup>26</sup> In "For James Dean," O'Hara's speaker takes on the identity of the city, stating, "Alone / in the empty streets of New York / I am its dirty feet and head / and he is dead" (CP, 228).



little interest in their work.<sup>27</sup> While, as previously mentioned, their form accounted for some of the initial rejection of their work (which is now in many anthologies), their content also challenged readers and/or the literary canon.

T. S. Eliot, a prominent American poet, expounds on the relationship between new poets and the literary canon in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Eliot claims reciprocity between past and present: “the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” (39). The past shapes new art because artists are influenced by and respond to what they read. Present art should be new and should change the way we look at the past instead of merely imitating it. Readers evaluate art partially by comparison. One way of interpreting Eliot’s essay is that in isolation and without opposition, the values of both new artists and accepted literature are arbitrary.

Despite many artists’ efforts to challenge the existing literary tradition, their defiance paradoxically results in their dialogue with and absorption into this tradition. Eliot writes convincingly on the relationship between the canon and “new” art: “what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them” (38). Works enter the literary canon if they are not already there in some form: “To conform merely would be for the new work not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art” (39). Avant-gardism is revolutionary in going beyond the acceptable but eventually comes full circle and is accepted. The literary canon resists and yet thrives on works that confront our ideas

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<sup>27</sup> As artists mutually interested in experimentation and process, the Abstract Expressionists adopted these poets, inviting them to speak at their club and buying them drinks at the Cedar Tavern (G, 201-204, 216).

about art. The New York School poets challenged the poetic conventions of their time, experimenting with new forms and rejecting the pathos of then pervasive Confessional poetry (which will be discussed in more detail later in this thesis). Their and other groups' subsequent absorption into the literary canon normalized these innovations.

New art is avant-garde if a group of artists confronts convention together. Lehman posits two criteria for the avant-garde: the ability to defy or shock as traditional and an artistic group with a geographic center. Harold Rosenberg, an art critic and advocate for the Abstract Expressionists, stresses that the avant-garde be a group when he states, "An individual can be an innovator, but there is no such thing as an avant-garde individual except as follower or leader" (283). Like the critic who combined the poets under a group name, Lehman's argument assumes the influence of a group is greater than that of individual artists. Thus, these poets are an "avant-garde" group due to their reception history rather than to a *specific* quality generally rejected in all their poems.

While new groups in new cities may form, Lehman suggests that the New York School of Poetry is the last avant-garde group and that it is unlikely that another will be so ahead of their time as to be unaccepted. John Ashbery introduces this idea in his 1968 essay "The Invisible Avant-Garde" when he states, "It is no longer possible, or it seems no longer possible, for an important avant-garde artist to go unrecognized. And, sadly enough, his creative life expectancy has dwindled correspondingly, since artists are no fun once they have been discovered" (L, 283). Here, Ashbery does not say that poets cannot go on to create great work post-discovery but rather that the public will no longer embrace the poetry as something new and edgy. That Ashbery writes for many subsequent years emphasizes the "expectancy" projected onto the artist's life over the

reality of their creative activity. A visible avant-garde is studied, explained, traced within a literary lineage, accepted, anthologized, and absorbed.<sup>28</sup> Like Lehman, Ashbery evokes the public's desire for new discoveries, something that will change the status quo. This desire for the subversive results in all-inclusive embrace and absorption. For example, in one generation, abstraction in painting gradually gains popularity. The return to the figure is then seen as preserve and therefore admirably daring. Because concepts working in specific critical moments are important, even an exact copy, like Larry Rivers' "George Washington Crossing the Delaware," is arguably a "new" piece. Because the context rather than the work itself was new, the painting itself mattered less than its reception and the values and perceptions of its audience. The new is not necessarily something that looks different but rather what challenges accepted conceptions.

According to Lehman, we cannot expect a new avant-garde because the very notion of the avant-garde is an anachronism. "If we are all postmodernists," Lehman posits, "we are none of us avant-garde, for postmodernism is the institutionalization of the avant-garde" (11). Academies, major publications, and anthologies popularize the avant-garde. Notably, Ashbery avoids placing himself within the category of either modern or post-modern. While Lehman seemingly laments the death of the avant-garde, he leaves the possibility that artists are "hidden among us" who constitute an individual avant-garde in the way that groups no longer can (290). According to Ashbery, if this hidden artist is "important," it *seems* they will be recognized. The whole of his argument,

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<sup>28</sup> David Sweet, "And Ut Pictura Poesis is her name": John Ashbery, the Plastic Arts, and the Avant-Garde, (11 Oct. 2006)" [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3612/is\\_199810/ai\\_n8817035/pg\\_13](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3612/is_199810/ai_n8817035/pg_13), 3.

"Putting a new spin on Eliot's theme in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,'" David Sweet reports, "Ashbery identifies 'acceptance' as a primary menace to the 'individual talent,' who risks absorption by one or the other of these 'traditions'" (Sweet 4).

however, evokes a lament for revolutionary communal art that is no longer possible. In addition to the increased acceptance of art, the shift of the art world from New York to regionalism and then globalization signals the dispersal of the artistic city center, another criterion for avant-gardism. In the New York School avant-garde, New York as a central location is more important than its manifestation as a subject in the poems.

#### IV. Skin

As both a participant and promoter of art, O'Hara paradoxically reveals tension between the internal workings of the group and outside authoritative forces that pressure a category or definition onto the group. But as Lytle Shaw states, "O'Hara's writing famously blurs the line between poetry and criticism" (151). Frequently more instances of praise than of criticism, his art reviews shed light on his immersion in the New York art world.

O'Hara's collaborations with other poets and visual artists shed light on the creative possibilities of interactions between artists and reveal the most direct link between the works of artists in New York. Brad Gooch's biography suggests O'Hara's particular interest in relating to artists of other groups. Marjorie Perloff's book Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters and her article "Watchman, Spy, and Dead Man: Jasper Johns, Frank O'Hara, John Cage and the 'Aesthetic of Indifference'" highlight O'Hara's relationships with painters. Portraits by artists such as Larry Rivers, John Button, Fairfield Porter, Alex Katz, Elaine de Kooning, Don Bachardy, and Alfred Leslie visually record O'Hara's presence in the painter's world (G, photo inserts). As previously stated, much of this relation is casual and social rather than just professional. O'Hara's

relationship with the painter Larry Rivers is an apt example of the intersection between personal relationships and the actual artwork. The pair moved in the same social sphere and were friends and lovers at various times, yet also contribute to each others' work: O'Hara poses for several paintings by Rivers, often simultaneously writing poems, and writes a memoir of Rivers.

As reported by Gooch, the painter Alex Katz describes O'Hara as "really an out, aggressive guy" (368). Katz compares O'Hara to Allen Ginsberg, a Beat poet and contemporary of O'Hara: "Allen Ginsberg is a little like Frank. But Allen is in a very small area. He's just in poetry. Frank was in painting, dancing, everything he could get his hands on. He affected artists in other fields" (368). O'Hara captures this versatility in his work. In "Why I am not a Painter," the speaker observes the process of writing his own poetry and of O'Hara's friend, Michael Goldberg, painting and parallels the results, suggesting that what poets do with words painters do with images. Similarly not valuing one medium over another, "Personism" rates "the movies" as equivalent to all but three American poets: Walt Whitman, Hart Crane, and William Carlos Williams. Like most films, collaboration between poetry and visual art marries words and images.

Collaboration with visual artist Jasper Johns, "Skin with Frank O'Hara poem" physically manifests O'Hara's embrace of other artists and art fields. In "Skin with Frank O'Hara Poem," O'Hara and painter Jasper Johns combine visual and textual representation:



*[THE CLOUDS GO SOFT]*

*Jasper Johns, Skin with Frank O'Hara Poem, 1963-5, Lithograph*

*The clouds go soft*

*change color and so many kinds  
puff up, disperse*

*skin into the sea*

*the heavens go out of kilter*

*an insane remark greets*

*the monkey on the moon*

*in a season of wit*

*it is all demolished*

*or made fragrant*

*sputnik is only the word for "traveling companion"*

*here on earth*

*at 16 you weigh 144 pounds and at 36*

*the shirts change, endless procession*

*but they are all neck 14 sleeve 33*

*and holes appear and are filled*

*the same holes*

*anonymous filler*

*no more conversion, no more conversation*

*the sand inevitably seeks the eye*

*and it is the same eye*

*(CP, 474-475)*

The untitled poem, now referred to by its first line, juxtaposes an enigmatic lithograph imprint of Johns' hands and face.<sup>29</sup> "Skin" combines art forms that can create similar meanings yet rely on different means of representing. The connection between painting and poetry can be traced back as far as Horace in his Ars Poetica in which he claims "ut pictura poesis" or, "as is painting so is poetry." Even before Horace, Simonides of Keos (as recorded later by Plutarch) states, "poetry is a speaking picture, painting is a silent [mute] poetry."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Johns made the imprint in 1963 and the poem was added in 1965. Riva Castleman reports that the piece "remains the sole example from what was intended to be a portfolio of prints on unusual papers in a variety of shapes and sizes incorporating new works by the poet" (Perloff, 215).

<sup>30</sup> Alex Preminger ed., "Ut Pictura Poesis, (12 October 2006)," <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/utpict.html>.

What happens when a piece combines “speaking” poetry with “silent” painting? Can a dialogue ensue? In “Radio,” after expressing dissatisfaction with what is on the radio, O’Hara’s speaker describes a “beautiful” painting by de Kooning as “more than the ear can hold” (CP, 234). As in “Poem (The eager note on my door said ‘Call me’),” O’Hara evokes comedy and absurdity through surprising description of the body. By confusing sense perceptions, O’Hara correlates artistic mediums and suggests that you can in fact “‘listen’ to paintings” (PR, 81). The speaker states, “I have my beautiful de Kooning / to aspire to” (CP, 234). Mapping O’Hara’s identity onto the speaker (which a letter from Kenneth Koch and the speaker’s work at a museum support), Perloff infers that if we complete the analogy between artist and medium, the speaker will “aspire” to make his poems beautiful. Perloff explains, “All the arts- visual, aural, verbal- are interdependent. Perfect one, the poem suggests, and you will come closer to the others” (81). While “Skin” is not dialogue in the usual sense, O’Hara’s mixing of medium and respective organs of perception suggests that successful art can transcend its medium’s sensory limitations. By combining visual and verbal arts, “Skin” not only reflects their interdependency but also gives poetry a body and gives visual representation a voice.

In “Skin,” image and text resist the limits of their individual properties. Text relies heavily on order to create meaning. Like notes in a song, words rely largely on conventions of order and direct their reception through their movement in time. Images, conversely, cannot easily control the time their audience takes to experience them but rely rather on the manipulations of space. Artists often try to incorporate properties of different mediums in their work. For example, O’Hara’s concrete “Poem (WHE EWHEE)” creates an image and defies a linear ordering (CP, 25). By emphasizing the



process of painting, Pollock's number series evokes the time inherent in their creation. Pollock even records this process on video. By combining temporal and spatial properties in "Skin," O'Hara and Johns create a two-dimensional physical presence socialized within the system of language.

While the temporal system of language is sustained across generations that socialize subsequent generations, language is temporary for the mortal individual. At the end of the poem, the words "no more conversation" affirm that dialogue occurred but will not continue. Suggesting a similar existence and ending for the visual in the next line, the "sand inevitably seeks the eye." A homophone of "I," this "eye" signifies the mortality of humans. Unlike the previous works discussed, O'Hara does not narrate through a first-person singular speaker. Instead, Johns' imprinted face and hands illustrate the "I" that pushes the boundaries of the page. The ephemeral quality of this being suggests its mortality. The pronoun has both a specific identity and a cipher-like quality. The measurements of the body are exact but the pronoun for the shirt-wearer is a general "you" described as "anonymous filler." Similarly, extra-visual notes tell us that the imprint is specifically of Johns but the blurry, smudged image could be anyone. Like a "cloud," it lacks sharp or distinct detail.

There is a contrast between a concrete earthly identity and, through the metaphor of space travel, an entropic death. O'Hara paradoxically describes things that constantly change and yet remain fundamentally the same. The "clouds" and the face imprinted on the surface only remain constant in the moment the piece captures them. O'Hara contrasts his ephemeral description of clouds and the heavens with a more concrete description of human life on earth. The lines of the poem act much in the same way as

the precise measurements within it in their mutual attempt to capture what is always shifting forms, reflecting a human impulse to analyze and record through such systems as language and mathematics. A quantitative description of humans and the clothes they fill reduces humans to the negative space within a shirt. Similarly, the skin is a step removed from the actual anonymous person in that it is only a copied imprint thereof; real skin, like clothing, is merely an encasement. At the end of the poem, the phrase “no more conversion” suggests that the previous “change” and “dispers[al]” ends. Both the words and the image evoke a sense of emptiness or loss. The change and dispersal, the feeling of loss, and the title “Skin” parallel the shedding serpent at the end of “In Memory of My Feelings.” In order to preserve one part of the self, the person/serpent must constantly shed its exterior. The image preserves one of these lost surfaces.

As a surface and encompassing space, the “skin” in the poem and the title of the collaboration also relate to the canvas or page that contains artistic pieces. Several years before this collaboration, O’Hara applies the metaphor of skin as canvas in an art review of Jackson Pollock (1912-1956):



Jackson Pollock painting, Summer 1950<sup>31</sup>

Where before the canvas was a ground, a field, to be worked and developed, here it is a skin, the skin of an abyss which is contemplating its own nourishment. ... In the traditional sense, there is no surface, as there is no color. There is simply the hand of the artist, in mid-air, awaiting the confirmation of form. And these forms ... manage to refrain from disappearing, even though the complexity of motivation and demand is so extreme, because their own identity is his, and he is there and has the power to hold them. It is drawing ... that holds back the abyss.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Hans Namuth, "Jackson Pollock Painting, Summer 1950 (17 Mar. 2007), <http://www.nga.gov.au/Pollock/action.jpg>.

<sup>32</sup> Bill Berkson, ed. Frank O'Hara: What's with Modern Art: Selected Short Reviews & Other Art Writings. (Austin: Mike & Dale's Press, 1999), 26. Hereafter cited in the text.

Like the black and white Pollock paintings that O'Hara reviews, Johns' lithograph is black and white, and therefore has "no color" in the traditional sense. While the hand of the painter can traditionally be seen as the brushstrokes the painter employs in representing various forms, in Pollock's paintings the brushstrokes compose forms that are themselves the content of the painting. Thus when O'Hara says that "In the traditional sense, there is no surface," he underscores that whereas the canvas was once a backdrop onto which forms were applied, in Pollock's paintings the canvas comes to the forefront and implicitly interacts with and defines forms. Whereas Pollock's form is his own identity evidenced in his hand movements, Johns' lithograph constitutes his identity more literally in the direct application of his face and hands to the surface, in effect applying the artist's organic skin to the skin of the piece. As in O'Hara's poem, the skin and the artist are empty shells that try to capture the intangible in order to "[hold] back the abyss" (Berkson, ed., 26).

The word "soft" generally evokes gentleness or pliability, and indeed the subsequent description in which the clouds "change color," "puff up," and "disperse." In the larger context of the poem, however, "go[ing] soft" acquires a more negative sense of yielding to an entropic process of change. After contextualizing the clouds in the heavens with the moon, O'Hara states, "it is all demolished / or made fragrant." While the adjective "fragrant" denotes a good smell, it nonetheless suggests a breakdown into something less tangible; similarly, the "sand" at the end of the poem emphasizes something that is made up of particles. In "Watchman, Spy, and Dead Man: Jasper Johns, Frank O'Hara, John Cage and the 'Aesthetic of Indifference,'" Perloff analyzes the final lines of the poem by stating, "Here it is not, in the words of the popular song,

smoke that ‘gets in your eye’ but sand that ‘inevitably seeks’ it. Smoke is ephemeral whereas sand can cause permanent damage to the eye” (Perloff, 217). In light of the rest of the poem, the final lines move from the lack of clarity of the smoke-like clouds in the beginning to a harsher, more forceful distortion.

Ideally, painters formulate ideas or images in their minds that they manifest onto a canvas. In a mockery of this process, Johns literally applies his head to the surface of the piece. As in O’Hara’s “I do this I do that” poems, Johns engrafts himself in the two-dimensional surface with relatively little analysis or artistic description, thus creating the illusion of direct contact with the artist. In addition to likening words and images, “Why I am not a Painter” parallels page and canvas. “Colorless” two-dimensional surfaces, printed poetry, Pollock’s painting, and “Skin” all “[hold] back the abyss” through their contact with and preservation of the artist. While not intended for this piece, an idea Johns proposes in his journal supports this conjecture: “take a skull / cover it with paint / rub it against canvas” (Perloff, 209). In her article on Johns, O’Hara, and John Cage, Marjorie Perloff likens the shape of a skull to Johns’ earlier light bulb pieces, images that often represent the birth of a thought or idea (Perloff 214). To reiterate, “Personism” says that the poem should be “between two persons, instead of two pages” (CP, 499). In “Skin,” O’Hara speaks through his poem while the painter replies by applying himself to the same surface, thus creating dialogue between poetry and painting.

## **Chapter Two: Momentum**

### **I. The eager note on my door**

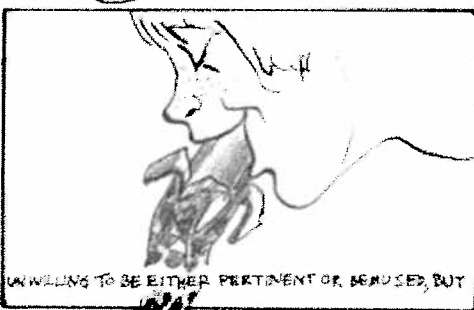
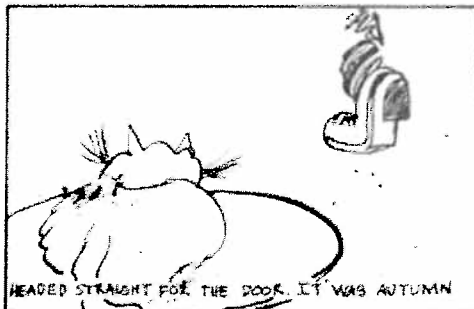
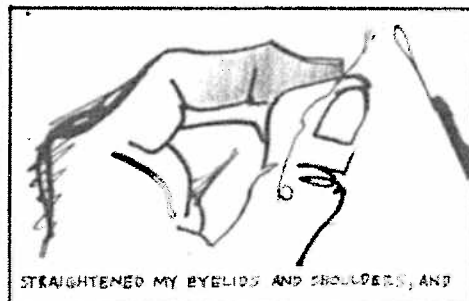
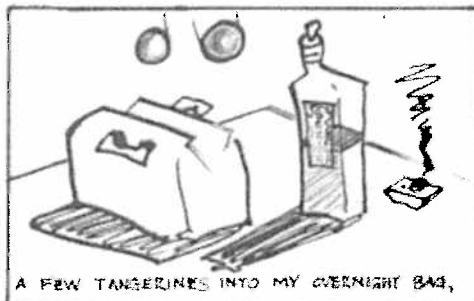
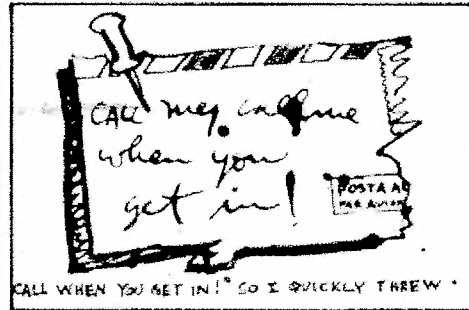
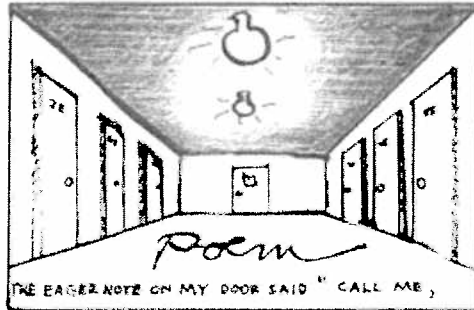
In looking at “Poem (The eager note on my door said ‘Call me,’),” I would like to work backwards in order to continue with visual collaborations. Considering this poem in terms of its appropriation into a visual collaboration and its entrance into the literary canon elucidates how contextualization shapes our reading of poetry. Following O’Hara’s death, a memorial exhibit and book on O’Hara called In Memory of My Feelings (1967) celebrated his life and work. Entering his poems into dialogue with visual arts, In Memory of My Feelings features a selection of poems by O’Hara accompanied by the work of thirty artists (Allen, 518-519). Alfred Leslie makes “Poem (The eager note on my door said ‘Call me,’)” into a comic strip. Because the collaboration is thus tied to his death, thus appropriated, the tragic, unknown death in the poem reflects O’Hara’s recent accidental death:

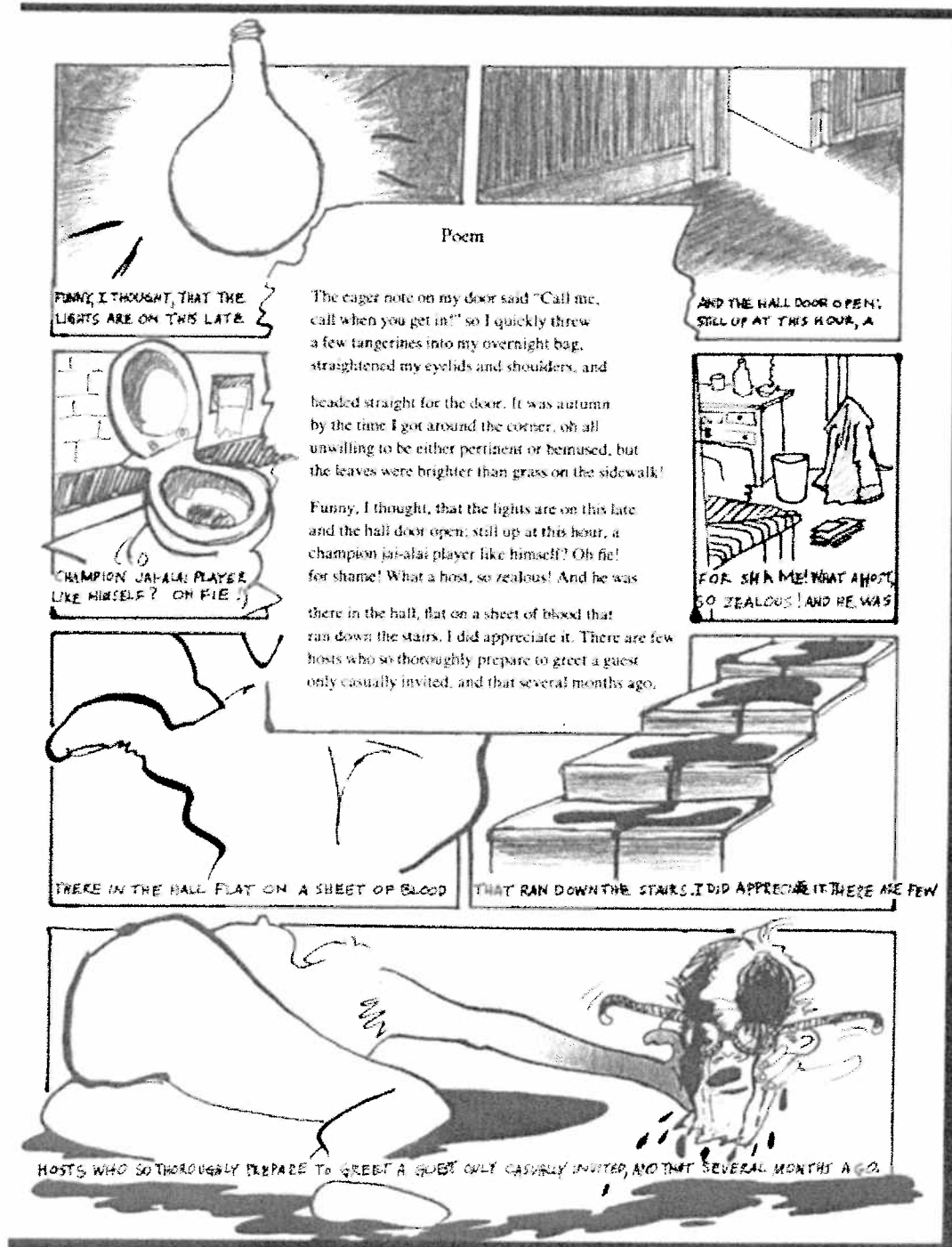
*The eager note on my door said “Call me,  
call when you get in!” so I quickly threw  
a few tangerines into my overnight bag,  
straightened my eyelids and shoulders, and*

*headed straight for the door. It was autumn  
by the time I got around the corner, oh all  
unwilling to be either pertinent or bemused, but  
the leaves were brighter than grass on the sidewalk!*

*Funny, I thought, that the lights are on this late  
and the hall door open; still up at this hour, a  
champion jai-alai player like himself? Oh fie!  
for shame! What a host, so zealous! And he was*

*there in the hall, flat on a sheet of blood that  
ran down the stairs. I did appreciate it. There are few  
hosts who so thoroughly prepare to greet a guest  
only casually invited, and that several months ago. (CP, 14)*





Alfred Leslie's graphic treatment of "Poem (The eager note on my door said, 'Call me')"<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Alfred Leslie, "Al Leslie's Graphic Treatment of One of O'Hara's Breezy, Quotidian Poems (17 Mar. 2007)," <http://library.syr.edu/digital/exhibits/i/imagine/section6/3a.jpg>.



A medium unlike illusionist art, comics do not portray or represent another world but rather tell a story. In addition to the added resonance of O'Hara's death, the illustration projects more specific identities onto the text. Box three comically changes the items the speaker packs from "tangerines" to alcohol and cigarettes, reflecting O'Hara's affinity for drinking (G 67-8). Boxes seven and eight sexualize the poem by portraying two phallic-like objects, the first of which performs a sexual act, and if this speaker is O'Hara or another man, suggests a homosexual moment. The last box continues to render the text more sexual by featuring a nude note writer. Leslie projects gender onto the note writer by giving her breasts. Combined with the previous phallic objects, the note writer projects a heterosexual tone onto the figures in the text which (as aforementioned) Perloff indicates was a requisite of the time. Like O'Hara's descriptions, the cartoon renders a tragic event lighthearted.

Like the comic, the poem itself portrays a dramatic event in a nonchalant way. The unstable relationship between verbs and their objects introduces an illogical world in "Poem (The eager note on my door said 'Call me,')": the speaker packs tangerines instead of clothes or toiletries, as might be expected in an overnight bag; people often straighten their hair or clothing before leaving their house to meet someone, but it is unclear how someone could straighten their "eyelids and shoulders." These unexpected associations render an otherwise ordinary description odd and even humorous. The combination of the lighthearted tone and the speaker's lack of emotion with the tragic event of finding a friend's dead body create tension. The poem challenges trust in the speaker. The reported procedure suggests the speaker is prompt and efficient, or rather

implies that the speaker considers himself so, but disconnect between the speaker's verbs and the objects of these verbs challenge this assumption.

The jarring image of blood running down the stairs and the nonchalant response of the speaker render this world surreal. After describing how one of O'Hara's professors at Harvard favored his "formal rhymed poem in quatrains," Gooch reports, "But most of O'Hara's poems were more surreal, humorous, exotic, and derivatively French than this traditional and more immediately comprehensible play of variations on the simple theme of breathing" (145). Emphasizing the influence of the French, Gooch describes the poem as "richly and purposely dazzling ... a Surrealist black comedy" (145-146). The influence of French and Russian poets such as Apollinaire and Mayakovsky signals an expansion of a literary lineage centered on English and classical sources. Gooch emphasizes the both French and American flavor of O'Hara's early poems when he states, "While the pejorative sense of the term *French* sums up most of these willfully clever poems, even the most precious, such as 'Today,' ... mixes what Ashbery has described as its 'Parisian artiness' with a pragmatic American feeling for the solidity of objects" (146). The importance of "things" is an American idiom that distinguishes some American poetry from its European derivatives. In "Today," another poem included in "A Byzantine Place," O'Hara equates several disparate items in a list: "Oh! kangaroos, sequins, chocolate sodas! / ... / Pearls, / harmonicas, jujubes, aspirins!" ("A Byzantine Place," 9, ln 1-3). He joys in the material, describing these superfluous objects as "beautiful," "with us everyday," "do have meaning," and emphasizing that "all the stuff ... // still makes a poem a surprise!" O'Hara suggests that the concrete objects themselves house an abstract meaning. Like William Carlos Williams, who famously

claims, “No ideas but in things,” O’Hara finds joy in *things*.<sup>34</sup> Perloff suggests that O’Hara links his speakers with his readers through the “process of discovering” this tangible world. She tailors Williams’ claim for O’Hara’s practice: “No things until the poet names them and makes them his own (E, 61).” Just as the objects in “Today,” the “tangerines” the speaker chooses as his necessary object to pack, along with the bright autumn “leaves,” the “grass on the sidewalk,” and perhaps even the “eyelids” and “shoulders,” constitute what is beautiful and surprisingly meaningful in life, thus representing an aesthetic life philosophy in their very simplicity.<sup>35</sup> The meaning and beauty inherent in *things* contrasts the death of the note writer.<sup>36</sup> Presumably inert and lifeless, his blood at least continues the action in that “ran” is an active verb. That the speaker describes the movement of the blood and not the body of the note writer suggests that like the fall leaves, he may appreciate the appearance of this colorful entity.

The speaker’s content and delights in material reality contrast the note writer’s inferred discontent. The note writer urgently needed human contact and socialization which the speaker denies him or her. The note requests, ““Call me, / call when you get in!”” The written repetition of the word “call,” the demand of an immediate response, and the emphatic exclamation point all dramatize the note’s demand. O’Hara yokes these concrete objects to several abstract concepts. While the emphasis on *things* grounds the poem in the material, corporeal present, this surface nonetheless makes claims about human agency, beauty, and death. Describing “A Byzantine Place” in a letter to the

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<sup>34</sup> William Carlos Williams wrote this in his 1944 poem “A Sort of Song.” Richard Ellmann and Robert O’Clair, ed., “William Carlos Williams,” The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), 313.

<sup>35</sup> O’Hara emphasizes that material reality constitutes identity in “Skin,” in which people are simply the space between their clothing.

<sup>36</sup> While it may be a stretch, O’Hara leaves the possibility that the note writer did not appreciate these things as much and thus had less to live for.

painter Jane Freilicher, O'Hara wrote, "The serious poems are all irrelevant to any concern but my own for myself, and the light poems are the more truthful, so there you are" (G, 182). Death is not explained; it seemingly has no meaning. The sequence of events emphasizes time; the poem's juxtaposition of note and death suggests a causal connection, something that the speaker could have prevented. Humans are subject to time, which limits their agency: the events could not have been foreseen, and if the speaker wants to change his actions, he will not be able to. The fragility of human life, evoked through mistake, chance, and unknowing, determine much of human fate and render the loss more tragic.<sup>37</sup>

By tracing the evolution (albeit through our own lenses) of an early poem of O'Hara's, "Poem (the eager note on my door said 'Call me')," we can see how its rejection of death is still in dialogue with readers today. While In Memory of My Feelings reconceived O'Hara's poems within visual mediums, anthologies contextualize poems under umbrellas such as "New," "Modern," and "Postmodern." "Poem (The eager note on my door said 'Call me,),'" one of the more popular poems in "A Byzantine Place," appears in several later publications. It was reprinted in New World Writing (1952) and in Meditations in an Emergency (1957). The poem is not included in Donald Allen's The New American Poetry: 1945-1960 (1960), an anthology that brought new poets to the American public. Evidence suggests that this is not due to its early date: while O'Hara wrote several of the fifteen poems in Allen's anthology as late as 1959 (when Allen was compiling it), a poem written as early as 1952 is also included, very close to when O'Hara submits "A Byzantine Place." Out of the ten O'Hara poems

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<sup>37</sup> The tragedy resulting from inaction reflects later pieces by O'Hara (such as "Personism," "Lana Turner has collapsed," and "Skin") that emphasize immediacy and the need to take action.

featured, Postmodern American Poetry - A Norton Anthology only includes two of the poems that Allen includes.

Later anthologies want to represent a larger scope of the poets' careers. Despite this exclusion, "Poem (The eager note on my door said 'Call me,')," appears in many posthumous collections. More broad publications typically feature no more than ten works by one poet. Out of hundreds of O'Hara poems, anthologies such as The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry (1988) and Postmodern American Poetry - A Norton Anthology (1994) choose "Poem (The eager note on my said 'Call me,') among their selections of several O'Hara poems.

Let's try to recapture some of the socio-historical context of O'Hara in the moment in which he wrote the poem. O'Hara wrote "Poem (The eager note on my door said 'Call me,')" in 1950 as an undergraduate at Harvard, where it was published in the Harvard Advocate. During his graduate studies at the University of Michigan, O'Hara won the school's Avery Hopwood Major Award in Poetry for this manuscript in 1951 (G, 183). Some of the poems O'Hara wrote at Harvard, including "Poem (The eager note on my door said 'Call me')," appear in his manuscript "A Byzantine Place."

When O'Hara studied, the prominence of New Criticism resulted in a "retreat of the literary culture into the university."<sup>38</sup> When he was in school and for the greater part of his career, the generation of "Confessional" poets preceding O'Hara was popular. Shifting dichotomies by elevating the "low," they wrote about the bodily, guttural, sick, and emotionally disturbed. Before O'Hara's time, the university was fairly heterogeneous. In 1944, the G.I. Bill provided new opportunities for O'Hara and others

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<sup>38</sup> Douglas Mao, "The New Critics and the Text-Object (7 Feb. 2007)," <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/elh/v063/63.1mao.html>, 8.

who could not have otherwise afforded to go to elite universities. Due to this infiltration of the academy, new voices challenged the relatively closed literary canon. I shift now to “Personism,” a mock manifesto that responds to the conditions of the moment when O’Hara wrote “Poem (The eager note on my door said, ‘Call me’).”

## II. Personism

O’Hara treats the literary forms of letters, art criticism, and manifestos as pieces of art. By approaching these mediums in terms of his own attitude toward his poems, he evades the categorization that he rejects. His comic prose manifesto “Personism” mocks the seriousness of most manifestos. Written in 1959 after a meeting with LeRoi Jones, “Personism” ironically makes a farce of manifestos yet divulges much of the impetus behind his poems (G, 338-339).<sup>39</sup> While claiming (within the text) that “Personism” is a movement, O’Hara colloquially describes love affairs, poets who try to “force-feed” their readers, and the lacking of most American poets. “Personism” insists upon the necessity of forward propulsion in poetry, a movement that “Personism” can better fulfill than most manifestos, which inherently limit the writer to set principles and objectives.

This is not to say that O’Hara’s work is merely comic or that he is not in earnest. Despite his lighthearted style, an underlying tension arises at times from the real possibility of tragedy. O’Hara reports the images and events, and then leaves the reader to take from the poem what he or she may. In this manifesto, O’Hara emphasizes that poetry should be like a telephone call: shared between and for people rather than written

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<sup>39</sup> LeRoi Jones is an African American poet who changed his name to “Amiri Baraka” in the late sixties, a name that Brad Gooch suggests is “more radical” in his biography on O’Hara. His publication Yugen was one of the first New York journals of contemporary poetry and it featured poems by the Beats, Black Mountain, and New York Schools (G, 337).

merely for publication. When O'Hara refers to real figures such as LeRoi Jones within his manifesto and poems, he implies that real dialogues influence the thoughts produced in his work. Like a conversation, much of his work admittedly responds to his friends and peers.

O'Hara's poems vary greatly throughout his career, particularly in terms of lucidity. The short, direct "Lana Turner Has Collapsed," an example that will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, is relatively accessible because of its narrative sequence and succinct description of a few persons and objects. Poems such as "Second Avenue," on the other hand, feature discursive sequences of images that may be hard for the reader to wrap his or her head around— as soon as one image enters the mind of the reader, another one displaces it. While each form has certain advantages, their difference renders it more difficult to ascertain a synopsis of O'Hara's work.

Faced with the elusive, disparate styles of his poems, a curious reader hopes for O'Hara's prose thoughts on poetics— statements often requested of him by those publishing his poems— to elucidate the reading of his poems. As O'Hara himself admits, however, to a great extent his prose statements apply only to some of his poems, usually the poems contemporary to the statement. A cautious reader will regard most statements made by O'Hara regarding his own work as another piece of fiction.

Yet this caution does not imply that prose statements by artists have no value or that they should be disregarded. Articulating ideas in another form provides the artist a different space and perspective from which to approach representation. Escaping the limitations of one form allows for a dialogue of representations, complicating the artist's conceptions.

Along with the poem “The Day Lady Died,” Frank O’Hara’s prose poetic statement “Personism: A Manifesto” is one of his most widely read pieces. In 1959, O’Hara wrote “Personism” as his poetic statement for Donald Allen’s “The New American Poetry Anthology” (G, 339).<sup>40</sup> The first words of “Personism” state that “Everything is in the poems” (CP, 498). In light of this assertion, why write a manifesto at all? Perloff reports that O’Hara felt Eliot “had had a ‘deadening and obscuring and precious effect’ on his ‘respective followers’” (P, 9). Perloff emphasizes that “the Eliot described by O’Hara is not at all the *real* poet ... Rather, the Eliot venerated by the generation brought up on Brooks and Warren’s Understanding Poetry was the magisterial Elder Statesman, no longer writing lyric poetry ... but making important public pronouncements about its nature and function” (P, 9). By writing a mock manifesto, O’Hara ridicules these public pronouncements. He aligns himself with Williams, who claims that Eliot, “returned us to the classroom just at the moment when ... we were on the point of escape ... to the essence of a new art form” (P, 10). This claim was made twenty-nine years after the publication of Eliot’s The Waste Land. James Breslin suggests that it reflects the situation of 1951, when O’Hara was just finishing graduate school, more than 1922 (P, 10). “Personism” responds to both the current academic situation in poetry and to O’Hara’s fellow free-form poet, Allen Ginsberg.

One response is that poetry needs defense.<sup>41</sup> Poetry, once the most popular artistic medium, was eclipsed by novels and painting during the twentieth century. In

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<sup>40</sup> As O’Hara reports in his later “Statement for Paterson Society,” he wrote a different statement for “The New Poetry Anthology” at the suggestion of Allen, who thought the manifesto only applied to some of O’Hara’s poems. O’Hara published “Personism” in LeRoi Jone’s publication Yugen instead (Allen, 510-511).

<sup>41</sup> And indeed, second generation New York School poets use “Personism” to defend their work. In Anthology of New York Poets, Ron Padgett and David Shapiro “hedged their bets by quoting in full “Personism,” O’Hara’s classic manifesto” (Bushyeager 204).



“US,” a collaboration with painter Larry Rivers, O’Hara writes, “poetry was declining / painting was advancing / we were complaining / it was ’50” (P, 9). Looking back even further, the nature and benefit of poetry has been called into question in texts as early as the ancient Greeks. In The Republic Plato (through Socrates) criticizes poetry and the prevalence of reverence toward Homer’s works, the oldest recorded poetry. Through Socratic dialogue, Plato argues that poetry is inferior to philosophy and its reasoning. He historicizes conflicts with poetry when he states that “there is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry” (Plato 351).

In his own prose essays, O’Hara does not so much make a definite statement about poetry as reveal some of his thoughts on his poems. The beginning of “Personism” describes O’Hara’s supposed provocation for writing this piece:

I will write to you because I just heard that one of my fellow poets thinks  
that a poem of mine that can’t be got at one reading is because I was  
confused too. Now, come on. I don’t believe in god, so I don’t have to  
make elaborately sounded structures. I hate Vachel Lindsay, always have;  
I don’t even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff. You just go on your  
nerve. If someone’s chasing you down the street with a knife you just run,  
you don’t turn around and shout, “Give it up! I was a track star for  
Mineola Prep.” (CP, 498)<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Nerves are not the only thing keeping you alive but they make you *feel* alive (in and of themselves). In a biological sense, nerves are what tell us that we’re alive, life sustaining. So in the grass-covering analogy, prose is dirt, even is it can reproduce something else. The imagery of being covered with earth also evokes burial and death. This recalls the urgency of being chased with a knife. The words of “Personism” are lighthearted on the surface but there is a sense of urgency- that O’Hara is clinging to this glib stance through poetry- the poetry that, keeps him alive.

As in many of O'Hara's poems, he writes in the first person and addresses a nonspecific "you." The colloquial phrase "Now, come on" indicates his lighthearted and colloquial dissension from the claim that his poetry is confusing.

O'Hara shuns larger organizing structures, such as supreme beings, established poets, and traditional literary devices, in favor of sheer momentum and constant movement. In his non-literary, comical analogy of someone chasing someone with a knife, O'Hara is the "track star"—the energetic and gifted poet who does not stop to place his work into "elaborately sounded structures" for confused readers or to assert his own prowess. Two years later, in "Statement for Paterson Society," O'Hara reemphasizes the status of poems over explicatory prose: "I don't want to make up a lot of prose about something that is perfectly clear in the poems. If you cover someone with earth and grass grows, you don't know what they looked like any more. Critical prose makes too much grass grow, and I don't want to help hide my own poems, much less kill them" (CP, 510). As with the track star running from a stabber, O'Hara indicates that if you do not "just go on your nerve," the result can be fatal. Roland Barthes states, "The Text (if only by its frequent 'unreadability') decants the work (if it permits it at all) from its consumption and recuperates it as play, task production, practice. This means the Text requires an attempt to abolish (or at least diminish) the distance between writing and reading, not by intensifying the reader's projection into the work, but by linking the two together into one and the same signifying practice ... In fact, *reading*, in the sense of *consuming*, is not *playing* with the text ... The Text is a little like a score of this new kind: it solicits from the reader a practical collaboration. A great innovation this, for who *executes* the work? ... Today only the critic executes the work (pun intended). The

reduction of reading to consumption is obviously responsible for the ‘boredom’ many feel in the presence of the modern (‘unreadable’) text, the avant-garde film or painting: to be bored means one cannot produce the text, play it, release it, *make it go*” (62-63). As Perloff states, O’Hara places “the poet’s self squarely at the center of the poem, in the very process of discovering his world. Not analysis of feeling but its coming into being is what counts, and the reader’s job is, accordingly, to participate in the poet’s act of discovery” (E, 61).

A “movement” instead of a prose explanation of his work, “Personism” directs the reader back to the poems. Similarly, “Statement for Paterson Society” claims that no prose could better represent the content or message of the poems than the poems themselves, so the text must act differently from critical prose. Just as the track analogy ranks *doing* over stopping and asserting, “Personism” describes an approach to “doing” but also functions as a prose-poem.

While O’Hara reveals in “Statement for Paterson Society” that he wrote “Personism” as his written statement for Donald Allen’s anthology The New American Poetry (but published it in Yūgen instead), he does not indicate a specific audience for the work within the manifesto. In “Statement for Paterson Society,” he describes the manifesto as “a little diary of my thoughts ... a diary of a particular day” (CP, 510-511). That he does not stop to explicate his work or ground it in accessible categories emphasizes that the manifesto is not written for the benefit of the confused poet. His non-literary examples invite readers to interpret his manifesto as a broad statement; his pronoun “you” can be read as “one”— someone or anyone in general. The fact that

“Personism” was first published in artistic journals that were not widely circulated, however, indicates that the immediate readership was indeed that of fellow poets.

The content of “Personism” complicates unearthing its objective. O’Hara does not provide a complete definition for “Personism”:

Abstraction (in poetry, not painting) involves personal removal by the poet  
 ... Personism, a movement which I recently founded and which nobody  
 knows about, interests me a great deal, being so totally opposed to this  
 kind of abstract removal that is verging on a true abstraction for the first  
 time, really, in the history of poetry ... Personism has nothing to do with  
 philosophy, it’s all art. (CP, 499)

“Personism” is about poetry, but beyond an ironic, comical tone, the prose style in “Personism” does not necessarily resemble O’Hara’s verse style. If “Personism” follows its own directive, however, it “addresses itself to one person.” After his somewhat confusing description of love for this person, O’Hara indicates two figures, a friend and a lover, who were important to his life at the time he wrote “Personism”:

It was founded by me after lunch with LeRoi Jones [later known as Amiri Baraka] on August 27, 1959, a day in which I was in love with someone (not Roi, by the way, a blond). I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person. While I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born. (CP, 499)

O’Hara’s report of how “Personism was born” provides an alternate narrative as to his impulse in creating this mock-manifesto: O’Hara’s writing was propelled by a *personal*

set of relationships with other people, not by the initial confused fellow poet.<sup>43</sup> Rejecting the pomp of overly serious declarations of artistic intent in favor of a more personal approach, he asserts that “The Poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages” (CP, 499). Whether O’Hara conjectured that his manifesto would be published and read by his fellow poets or not is less important than his impulse to relate to the individuals—friends and lovers—who stimulate his *nerve*. And indeed, O’Hara’s constant production and negligent care of his poems suggests that he valued creating poetry even when publication was not the final result.<sup>44</sup>

Thus “Personism” is about the author’s communication with an audience, a *personal* audience. While the importance O’Hara places on the artist’s presence is redolent of Romanticism, he negates the godlike position of the sole male artist-creator by placing equal emphasis on a person whom the poem addresses. As O’Hara succinctly declares, “There’s nothing metaphysical about it” (CP, 498). Rather, the emphasis is on relationships with other people and ultimately, through an art of correspondence, the establishment of an interactive creative community.

Do the ideas in “Personism” translate into O’Hara’s poetry? Readings and anthologies often feature “Personism” with O’Hara’s poems. While a memorial reading by O’Hara’s friends and peers integrated the “manifesto” into the list of poems read, texts like “Collected Poems” include it in a separate essay or poetics section. As previously suggested, an objective critic reads an artist’s statement on his or her own work as

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<sup>43</sup> O’Hara was going to name his manifesto “Personalism” before he discovered it was the name of “a dopey philosophy in Southern California” (G, 339).

<sup>44</sup> In her poetic essay on him entitled “What Frank O’Hara Means to Me,” Jennifer Michael Hecht intimates, “You can come away from comments on O’Hara feeling like he shed poetry as a bush sheds leaves in early autumn—every time he leaned against a desk there’d be at least one left behind. He was apparently careless with them. He would often mail to someone his only copy of a poem, and friends said verse fluttered out of drawers in his apartment.”

Jennifer Hecht, “What Frank O’Hara Means to Me,” *Mississippi Review* 31 (Fall 2003): 149.

another creation by the artist. Shaw suggests that reading an author in his or her own terms is limiting and romantic (10-11). O'Hara later admits that, as is fitting to its moment-to-moment propulsion, "Personism" represents his thought at the time he writes them. Donald Allen suggests it reflects only "Personal Poem." And indeed, in light of the impermanence of time, our surroundings, and ourselves, it's natural that our thoughts should change. But what implications does this have for the reading and treatment of "Personism"? Surely we can still read an artist's works in relation to one another. Shaw argues that critics' frequent use of "Personism" normalizes one particular reading of O'Hara (10).

Under the comic surface of O'Hara's work lie jarring reminders of mortality. While tragedy is not the core of his work, the threat of death incites readers to seize the moment in their own lives. O'Hara states,

"It does not have to do with personality or intimacy, far from it! But to give you a vague idea, one of its minimal aspects is to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself), thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love's life-giving vulgarity, and sustaining the poet's feelings towards the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person. That's part of Personism. (CP, 499)

the phrase "life-sustaining vulgarity" captures this dichotomy: the everyday, the guttural and entertaining, resisting death and stagnation. The emphasis is not on content but rather on the potential power of human communication. In looking at O'Hara, we see the content of his poems, his role as a poet and the position of his poetry in a larger history conflating tension between dynamic and deadening forces. Although much of O'Hara's

work foregrounds vulgarity and entertainment, an examination of the way that tragedy undercuts comedy suggests that he is not merely glib but urges us to embrace living while still possible.

O'Hara grounds vulgarity in "love," which is romantic or sexual but also extends to include more general human connections. As a "social" poet, O'Hara taught by example. "Personism" says that poetry should be like a telephone call: a conversation between two people, not necessarily intimate but personal and somewhat improvisational. The idea of conversation forwards this clinging to the concrete and local while expanding it off the page: "the poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages" (CP, 499). By examining dialogue within his work and off the page, we can see how O'Hara stretched the elastic of art into the realm of the living. This contrasts, for example, with Roland Barthes' "From Work to Text," in which he says that "It is not that the Author cannot 'return' in the Text, in his text, but he does so, one might say, as a guest; if he is a novelist, he inscribes himself there as one of his characters ... the *I* that writes the text is never anything but a paper *I*" (61-62). Barthes argues that the artist and speaker are neither one and the same nor totally divorced. A step removed from the artist, the fabricated "autobiographical" speaker *plays* the artist's part while the reader collaborates by staging this character in his or her mind. Examining "Personism" in Barthes' terms, the character O'Hara creates feels inhibited and claustrophobic in this limited space; the "paper I" in "Personism" wants off the page.

O'Hara posits collaboration between poetry and life in his essay on Pasternak, a Russian writer whom O'Hara greatly admired. He quotes Pasternak as saying, "poetry as I understand it flows through history and in collaboration with real life," and reiterates

in his own words that “poetry does not collaborate with society, but with life” (CP, 504). As O’Hara’s work “flows through history,” dialogue occurs between different persons and material contexts.<sup>45</sup> As embodied by the suicide of Boris Pasternak’s main character when he can no longer serve the demands of society, O’Hara’s rejection of societal collaboration signifies that poets should not simply serve a useful function within society (CP, 504). O’Hara says this several times in so many words: he does not “care about ... bettering (other than accidentally) anyone’s state of social relation” (CP, 500). In “Personism,” he mocks the idea that poetry “improves” people: “Improves them for what? For death? Why hurry them along? Too many poets act a like middle-aged mother trying to get their kids to eat too much cooked meat and potatoes with drippings (tears) ... I don’t give a damn whether they eat or not” (CP, 498). As when Oscar Wilde proclaims that “All art is quite useless,” O’Hara locates poetry outside the realm of utility, suggesting that art is entertainment simply for entertainment’s sake. Refusing the role of self-promoter, O’Hara denies the *necessity* of poetry, even pointing towards film (which O’Hara loved) as another source of entertainment. But like children are ought to do, our resistance may be perversity.

By rejecting prose explanations of his work, O’Hara avoids mere societal utility and keeps his work alive. In his prose essays, he does not so much make a definitive statement about poetry as reveal some of his thoughts on his poems. Everywhere he evades the category of poetics by disclaiming that the purpose of his work is to better anyone, by claiming that he is expressing his attitude toward rather than explaining his work, and ultimately by pointing his reader back to the poems. He likens his poetry to a

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<sup>45</sup> These persons include: the speaker, other personal pronouns, and proper names. The artist, audience, and corresponding context complicate these positions. Material contexts include visual and textual mediums, within publications and anthologies.



telephone call or to the dry surface of a painting and his prose to a diary entry or a letter (CP, 495-511). By looking at personal prose statements which O'Hara says reveal merely his attitude at the moment of composition, we can see how O'Hara felt colloquialism and dialogue keeps art alive. By resisting logic and over seriousness, O'Hara sidesteps what he suspects: academia, analysis, criticism, rationalism, and politics. These systems make meaning accessible but make the original emotion or response to art stale: a joke that's explained is no longer funny. "To put it gently," O'Hara says, "I have the feeling that the philosophical reduction of reality to a dealable-with system so distorts life that one's 'reward' for this endeavor ... is illness from inside and out" (CP, 495). Emphasizing the need to experience reality more directly, O'Hara clings to love, vulgarity, the present, human relationships.

### III. Lana Turner Has Collapsed

While Donald Allen and O'Hara agreed that "Personism" most closely aligned with O'Hara's "Personal Poem," several elements in "Personism" are manifest in "Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed)" (CP, 449). Like "Personism," the poem rejects the rational and academic in content, conflating forward movement with living, in this case hurrying to be on time and continuing despite obstacles or step backs. The subjects reproduce a collaborative relationship to the audience and to popular culture. "Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed)" collaborated with a specific event, the first time O'Hara reads it, and reflects O'Hara's relation to literary tradition, particularly Robert Lowell. Removed from the context of this occasion, we reevaluate its success:

*Lana Turner has collapsed!*  
*I was trotting along and suddenly*  
*it started raining and snowing*  
*and you said it was hailing*  
*but hailing hits you on the head*  
*hard so it was really snowing and*  
*raining and I was in such a hurry to meet you but the traffic*  
*was acting exactly like the sky*  
*and suddenly I see a headline*  
**LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!**  
*there is no snow in Hollywood*  
*there is no rain in California*  
*I have been to lots of parties*  
*and acted perfectly disgraceful*  
*but I never actually collapsed*  
*oh Lana Turner we love you get up*

Pronouns position subjects in relation to other social beings, aligning or dividing us from one another. As in “Personism,” the speaker in “Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed)” is in the first person and speaks to a “you.” Biographical information suggests that O’Hara is the speaker. The language of this “I” underscores the colloquial nature of the poem: “I was *trotting along*,” “I was *in such a hurry*,” “I have been to *lots of parties*,” (emphasis added). The other pronouns are more ambiguous: “*you* said it was hailing / but hailing hits *you* on the head,” “I was in such a hurry to meet *you*,” “Lana Turner *we* love *you* get up” (Allen, 449; emphasis added). The “you” used to describe hailing reports a general weather pattern. By using the same pronouns in different ways, O’Hara points to the potential for the same word to be extremely specific and personal or general and impersonal within a couple of lines. This dichotomy reflects the nature of the

star, of whom we know intimate details of their personal life yet do not know at all. The last phrase is also easily deciphered: “we” is used in a general sense for fans of Lana Turner, or perhaps is used for the audience at the reading, and “you” is the actress herself. But who “said it was hailing” and who is O’Hara “in such a hurry to meet”? Certainly “you”, Lana Turner, collapsed in California, could neither give a weather report nor meet the poet in New York.<sup>46</sup>

The speaker collaborates with the audience, taking the audience through the streets with him and including the audience in comic pity and encouragement for Lana Turner. By shifting from the first person singular to plural in the last line, O’Hara insists that the audience be complicit in the speaker’s vitality. Death is the ultimate abstraction from active human life. O’Hara often reminds us of our inevitable conclusion through reference to the dead: his family members in “In Memory of My Feelings,” friends in “A Step Away from Them,” and in elegiac poems for figures of popular culture like James Dean and Billie Holiday. “Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!)” succinctly and colloquially demands that its “collapsed” subject persevere. Turner does not die, but the poem’s insistence that she “get up” signals that she has not recovered from her fall and thus is not actively living. But possible death is not the focus of the poem. Rather, O’Hara reminds us of our imminent end so that we more actively engage in our present moment. The poem tells us nothing about Turner beyond her headlined “collapse.” The speaker insinuates that partying causes her collapse by asserting that his own partying “never actually” results in collapse. As in many of his works, love is the solution to

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<sup>46</sup> I empathize with a claim made by Jennifer Michael Hecht in “What Frank O’Hara Means to Me”: “There are things that are lacking here and surely things that have already been said, but I’ve had a lot of fun and I wish everyone the best of luck not collapsing. What can we expect from not collapsing? Everything. If I’m arguing anything here, it’s that trying to write about Frank O’Hara without sounding like Frank O’Hara is a little beyond me at the moment” (Hecht, *Mississippi Review* 159).

evading death. The poem starts with and headlines collapse, but O'Hara leaves us with "get up." While we lose the exciting newness of the gossip (which occurred the day O'Hara read the poem), we can take away the urgency to sustain life.

O'Hara suggests that Turner's collapse is somewhat pathetic by reporting his own "disgraceful" behavior but emphasizing that nonetheless he "never actually collapsed." O'Hara parallels his own experience in traveling to the poetry reading to the collapse of Turner through the weather, both of which "act."<sup>47</sup> Through a seemingly false causal connection, he indicates that because weather is milder in California, Turner's collapse is even less excusable. To reiterate, "Personism" says that poems should sustain "the poet's feelings towards the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person" (CP, 499). Despite the concern for Turner that the poem suggests, O'Hara follows the claims he makes in "Personism" by not indicating feeling about Turner beyond the reported "love" in the final line. The two exclamation marks and one use of capitalization emphasize Turner's collapse rather than the relatively understated "love." Jennifer Hecht captures one subjective, emotional response to the contrast between the lines "LANA TURNER HAS COLLASPED!" and "oh Lana Turner we love you get up" when she states, "It's got the rhythm of a protest slogan but it's sad and beautiful ... There is no exclamation point at the end and you just fall off the world with pity for yourself without it" (Hecht, Mississippi Review 151-152). This pity stems from the ineffectual, hopeless nature of the command. In light of Hecht's statement, we pity ourselves because we identify with Turner.

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<sup>47</sup> Alan Axelrod, "Frank O'Hara's Work Early and Found," in Frank O'Hara: To Be True to a City, ed. Jim Elledge. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 80.

Turner's collapse works as a metaphor for life, a party that must end. O'Hara's poem "Parties" states, "Kenny you're having / a wonderful party but I am dying // In the middle of a dance oh don't / ask me to clean up the place no / tomorrow no airplanes just flies" (PR, 32). As with the comparison of "airplanes" and relatively mundane "flies," the speaker dreads the low energy and mundane cleanup of the day after the party. An early poem written in Ann Arbor in 1951, "A Party Full of Friends" comprises what the speaker's friends say and do at the party. The last lines resemble a signed letter and align the speaker with O'Hara, stating, "Someone's going / to stay until the cows / come home. Or my name isn't / Frank O'Hara" (PR, 25). The speaker self-consciously suggests that he is writing as the events unfold when he states, "indeed you are, I / added hastily with real ad- / miration before anyone else / could get into the poem" (PR, 25). As the hasty addition and self-reflexive getting "into the poem" indicates, in his own time, O'Hara was revolutionary for his immediacy and directness. Garber describes "immediacy of contact with experience" as "a kind of democracy, a hungry ingestion of all those cluttered minutiae of experience that for Eliot and his successors tended to signal decadence but for O'Hara, Rauschenberg, and others spelled out the very texture of life" (113). While in this early poem, O'Hara uses the past tense until the last stanza, in later poems, present tense verbs and contemporary events make it feel current to the extent that even Ted Berrigan, a second generation New York School Poet, misunderstands that most of O'Hara's "I do this I do that" poems are flashbacks (Shaw, 42-43). Even when we do not know how and when he wrote, O'Hara's poems invite readers to picture him writing while sitting amongst his friends.

Why does O'Hara choose to write about the deaths of popular cultural figures? O'Hara makes use of allusion, but instead of referencing the work of previous poets or classical sources, he alludes to a popular, contemporary, non-literary figure that would be familiar to most audiences in the 1960s. As previously mentioned, O'Hara aligned himself with Williams more than with Eliot and his New Critical successors. By writing about Lana Turner, O'Hara positions poetry outside the classroom. O'Hara's role as a poet ensures that he values poetry; through its non-academic subject matter, however, O'Hara's poem ridicules the aggrandizement of poetry, particularly in its revered pedestal above popular culture, much in the way that his manifesto mocks the serious nature of manifestos. In "Personism," O'Hara states, "Nobody should experience anything they don't need to. And after all, only Whitman and Crane and Williams, of the American poets, are better than the movies" (CP, 498). Through publications like the New York Post, which O'Hara read on the way to the Lana Turner reading, we know about the intimate details of stars' lives and engage in their dramas (Kane, 168). As public figures, stars often make the news more often for their "private" lives than for any aspect of their careers, giving us the illusion that we know them. Just as Lana Turner was, O'Hara is both publicly and seemingly personally available. Garber speaks of the "interplay between O'Hara's public and poetic selves" (113). Stars provide entertainment that has relatively little to do with banal society.

Hailed ever after for the merits of its immediacy and quick composition, O'Hara jotted down "Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed)" on his way to a poetry reading. On the day of the reading, O'Hara told the audience, "On the ferry coming over here, I wrote a poem" (P, 13). The poem was a public riposte of the style of O'Hara's fellow reader,

Robert Lowell. Peter Bushyeager emphasizes the polemic relationship between the New York School of Poetry and the Confessional Poetry of Lowell when he posits that “If you disparaged the New York School, you most likely admired the mainstream confessional poetry of Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell.”<sup>48</sup> O’Hara includes quirky, glib details that Confessional poetry seemingly repels. For example, Sylvia Plath says she cannot put brushing teeth in a poem and Lowell writes seriously about war, but in O’Hara’s “Pearl Harbor,” the speaker brushes his teeth during an attack on Pearl Harbor (CP, 233).<sup>49</sup> O’Hara writes relatively little about politics.<sup>50</sup> Even though he served in the Second World War, his contemporary Robert Lowell writes more about it. While Lowell rejects society’s wars and social stratification, he perpetuates elitism and social politics by giving these subjects importance in his work. A fellow younger “open form” poet, Allen Ginsberg, writes about broader social problems: the starving, homeless, and drug-addicted. O’Hara, on the other hand, is more interested in figures of popular culture collapsing and dying than in the Cuban Missile crisis.

The disparity between O’Hara and Lowell in terms of both style and popularity provoked competition. The difference in their forms was not due to any lack of education but rather to the fact that O’Hara disliked Lowell’s poetry and thought that any college student could recreate his metrics (P, 13). Lowell was influenced by high modernism, a movement made up of poets who were “willing to exploit an idiom that is dry, oblique, learned, and extremely compressed,” particularly the New Criticism taught in many

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<sup>48</sup> Peter Bushyeager, “Staying Up All Night: The New York School of Poetry: 1970-1983,” The World in Time and Space, 201.

<sup>49</sup> Sylvia Plath, “A 1962 Sylvia Plath Interview with Peter Orr (18 Dec. 2006),” [http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m\\_r/plath/orrinterview.htm](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/plath/orrinterview.htm).

<sup>50</sup> Gooch’s biography reports that O’Hara was in fact very politically aware (28-29, 129-130, 425). While he does not focus on war, he addresses racial and sexual politics.

universities, a movement with a penchant for “formal, difficult poems.”<sup>51</sup> Because of his interest in “confessional” poetry, Lowell often wrote about his own experiences but in a carefully crafted and frequently revised manner (Ellmann 958). O’Hara said that Confession allowed Lowell to “get away with things that are just plain bad but you’re supposed to be interested because he’s supposed to be so upset” (P, 13). When O’Hara started writing, his generation struggled for recognition but was repulsed by “staid literary publications” that embraced more formal and academic poetry like Lowell’s (G, 317). Critic Lehman quotes O’Hara as stating, “The literary establishment cared as much for our work as the Frick cared for Pollock and de Kooning,” (G, 202). Lehman says that, “By adopting unconventional methods and models, they were able to reject the academic orthodoxies of the New Criticism, then the dominant mode of literary interpretation, which seemed to have a stranglehold on midcentury verse” (L, 7), suggesting a reason for the group’s early unfavorable reception (L, 332). Like the collapsed Lana Turner, Lowell’s star gradually faded. In Peter Schjeldahl’s poem “To the National Arts Council,” he proclaims, “Robert Lowell is the least distinguished poet alive” (E, 59). O’Hara, on the other hand, was becoming a “Manhattan-based culture hero” who bridged the gap between different artistic realms (Garber, 112). The day of the reading, the audience appreciated the contrast between O’Hara and his Confessional counterpart. Daniel Kane captures the contrast well when he states,

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<sup>51</sup> Richard Ellmann and Robert O’Clair, ed., “Robert Lowell,” The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), 956. Hereafter cited in the text.

David Perkins, A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890’s to the High Modernist Mode (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 11.



This was a potentially refreshing model for any audience member attached to notions of poetic production as tied to stereotypes of the poet as agonized, misunderstood, and solitary muse-inspired genius. Celebrating speed in production made a value out of immediacy, spontaneity, and risk. It made poetry fun.<sup>52</sup>

Even for O'Hara, "Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed)" is relatively lighthearted and campy. By reading this poem at this particular event, O'Hara makes a statement to the poetry community. Reporting the audience's amusement, Perloff states, "When it was Lowell's turn, he said something to the effect: 'Well, I'm sorry *I* didn't write a poem on the way over here,' the implication being that poetry is a *serious* business and that O'Hara was trivializing it" (P,13). Garber suggests that O'Hara encouraged the myth that he is not personally serious. Because the contrast with Lowell augments the force of the poem, it functions as an event in a specific context.

On one level, this poem only works for O'Hara's reading that day. Part news and part gossip, the poem headlines a new, surprising event. The contemporary audience would know who she was. O'Hara's emotional verb "love" and first person plural "we" includes the audience in an ironically intimate address to this absent star. O'Hara's allusions become increasingly remote. Even in the case of properly named figures that are now famous, information about the poems is second-hand. For a poet like O'Hara, who refers to contemporary popular figures, this historical remove greatly changes the reading of his poems. Instead of rendering his poems stale, however, O'Hara increased in popularity. Present tense verbs and reports of his actions give the illusion of

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<sup>52</sup> Daniel Kane, *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 168.

immediacy while publications provide information about his life and explain his poems to a greater audience. To what extent does knowing about O'Hara and Turner affect a reading of the poem? We can infer without research that Turner is famous because she made the headlines. Today, by substituting our own stars and suspending our disbelief, we fantasize that we are engaging in the gossip. To know the particulars of both the reading of and event in the poem, however, requires research. This abstraction would seemingly destroy both the immediacy and familiarity so important to the poem's impetus, the direct and immediate thrust underscored in "Personism."

While the need for research arguably deadens the experience of the poem, the first person speaker sustains a vitality that the distanced allusion cannot. Knowing the particulars of Turner's life does not elucidate the thrust of the poem, and Turner's actions only materialize in comparison to those of the speaker. The generalized speakers, on the other hand, could represent anyone. The poem emphasizes the speaker's actions: walking in precipitous weather, seeing the headline, contemplating his own life relative to the news. The poem is about the speaker's fascination with the star, whom (s)he positions in relation to his or her own life.

The allusion to popular culture and tabloids, the lack of metrics, and quick composition suggest "Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed)" would have felt fresh and revolutionary for O'Hara's audience the day he wrote and read it. Because the possibility of collapse and death, or the fragility of life, are inherent in living, O'Hara self-reflexively seeks to connect to real figures off the page, like Lana Turner and a specific audience, even if some of the impetus dies with them. But inherent in the idea of a revolution is that things return full circle to the beginning: O'Hara has been adopted into

the literary canon and is studied much like the esoteric poets he works against. That it is still read and written about today signals that the poem survives, but largely only in academic circles and the classrooms, from which O'Hara and Williams wanted poetry to escape (P, 10). By reading the poem, however, readers create the event it records, thus making the page immortal.

## **Conclusion**

Chapter One explores the identity of O'Hara in relation to his speakers. While O'Hara claims that "clarifying experiences" in his work are accidental, because readers make sense of poems in relation to what they know and their own associations, we will sympathize with and enter into conversation with speakers. In "Digressions on *Number 1*, 1948," O'Hara's speaker finds the presence of Pollock's "perfect hand" when he looks at Pollock's abstract painting despite the chance in Pollock's flinging of paint onto the canvas (CP, 260). Like this speaker, we seek an organic connection to O'Hara's art, which we fantasize we can find even though, like Pollock's paintings, O'Hara is abstracted from his speakers and his poems are mass-produced in various contexts for our digestion.

While space did not allow for a full investigation of the claim here, another thesis might more fully explore some of O'Hara's speakers as conscious of their two-dimensional status and as wanting to escape this inorganic context. Why is it important that speakers be aware of their artifice? We cling to our romantic, autobiographical selves despite our knowledge of our multiplicity of selves and how contexts construct our identity and how we interpret meaning.

Chapter Two focuses on three works and their collaborative possibilities. Celebrated for the immediacy of his poetry and writing, O'Hara varies in the extent to which he edits his poems. Because many of his poems feature the same figures, an inquiry could be made as to if reformulating similar ideas and images in new poems is a form of editing for O'Hara. As discussed in relation to "Poem (Lana Turner has Collapsed)," O'Hara read his poems creates a different effect than reading his poems in

an anthology today. Because his poems are more palpable for those familiar with O'Hara and his society, publications such as the Norton Anthology of American Literature (1989) offer supplemental knowledge in an attempt to bridge our historical and personal distance from his work. Reflecting the relative liveliness of the context, the poems' content frequently dichotomizes forces of vitality and inertia. By continuing to read his poems in our own moment, we collaborate with O'Hara's poetry and sustain its momentum.

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