For Ann Arbor, “the only place in the western hemisphere where cafeterias frankly put out a neon sign saying simply and clearly FOOD.”

- Frank O’Hara
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Abstract

Countless critics have contemplated Frank O’Hara’s numerous and diverse connections with the New York art world. This thesis concerns itself with how such associations influenced his poetry. Indeed, the thesis argues that Frank O’Hara seized upon the example of Abstract Expressionism and other New York School style painting methods in order to write poetry as free as possible of the influence of New Criticism and its devotion to the tradition of symbolic poetry.

The first chapter of the thesis analyzes O’Hara’s experimental poem “Second Avenue” as a means of identifying the painterly techniques O’Hara employs and exploring the effect of channeling those techniques into written form. I link formal characteristics of the poem such as unexpected juxtapositions, incompatible word combinations, nonsensical pronouns, et cetera with prominent painterly techniques like all-over painting and push-pull. I expand upon these terms as I perform a close reading of the poem in an attempt to prove that O’Hara’s experimentation with these techniques successfully undermines the tendency for symbolic interpretation. Admittedly, “Second Avenue” sacrifices coherence for the sake of fully rejecting symbolism, a shortcoming O’Hara himself recognized. As a result of this problem, O’Hara develops his later poetry in a way that preserves the useful painterly techniques while discarding the experimental techniques that faltered in “Second Avenue.”

The second chapter expands upon the weaknesses of O’Hara’s initial attempts to channel painterly technique as a means of avoiding symbolism, depth, and ontological transcendence. In short, these methods fail to free his work from the inherent meaning of language and its attendant symbolic implications. I examine two of O’Hara’s poems — “In Memory of My Feelings” and “Music” — as a means of charting the ways in which O’Hara addresses this problem. The chapter elucidates the ways in which O’Hara embraces poetry’s tacit dependence on symbolic devices while still utilizing painterly techniques to weaken that dependence. It also alludes to O’Hara’s experimentation with William Carlos Williams’s colloquial style as a way to supplement his efforts to break with the symbolist tradition.

The last chapter provides a close reading of an interartistic text that parallels “Second Avenue” as an experiment in the avant-garde mode. The collaboration between Larry Rivers and Frank O’Hara on the lithograph Stones expands upon the methods O’Hara developed in his earlier work to combine visual and verbal techniques. It emphasizes the ways in which the fusion of visual art and poetry can facilitate the deconstruction of conventional interpretations of images and symbols.

Structurally, the battle between the symbolic meaning inherent in words and the struggle to subvert that meaning via painterly technique provides a point of reference in each chapter of the thesis. O’Hara arrived in New York ready to chart a new direction in poetry. Eager to eschew T.S. Eliot and the neo-Symbolists, he initially embraced painterly technique wholeheartedly. After he realized his poems could never achieve the same abstraction or lack of referentiality as Jackson Pollock’s paintings, he shifted his poetic to align with a more metaphorical discourse, while still clinging to some of the painterly stylistics in order to stay true to his rejection of symbolism. His collaboration with Rivers marks his ultimate discovery of the limitations and possibilities of fusing painting and poetry.
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Introduction

On December 3, 1951, Frank O’Hara accepted a job selling postcards, publications and tickets at the front desk of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Though he would go on to immerse himself more professionally in the Museum’s Byzantine office politics, this entry job marked his formal introduction to the art world and all the friendships, collaborations, and poetry that came with it. Painting held a special place in O’Hara’s poetic universe. My thesis will examine its role in O’Hara’s artistic development. Specifically, I will explore the way in which O’Hara channeled painterly techniques — especially the New York School painting methods of Abstract Expressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism — to work against the symbolic properties of words.

The poet himself explained his affinity with painting in a letter he wrote to Gregory Corso in 1958:

I don’t really get their [Kerouac et. al’s] jazz stimulus but it is probably what I get from painting...that is, you can’t be inside all the time it gets too boring and you can’t afford to be bored with poetry so you take a secondary enthusiasm as a symbol of the first — for instance, I’ve noticed that what Kerouac and “they” feel as the content of jazz in relation to their own work (aspirations), I feel about painting with the corresponding difference in aspiration, that is where one takes Bird for inspiration, I would take Bill de Kooning; partly because I feel that jazz is beautiful enough or too, but not fierce enough, and when jazz is fleeting (in

1 In 1955, he became special assistant in the International Program at MoMA, in 1960 Assistant Curator of Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions for the Museum, and in 1965 Associate Curator. Exhibitions into which he had major input include: New Spanish Painting and Sculptures; Robert Motherwell; Reuben Nakian; Magritte Tanguy; Abstract Watercolors by 14 Americans; and Franz Klein.
time) and therefore poignant, de K is final and therefore tragic….Then also, I don’t have to see what I admire while I’m writing and would rather not hear it, which seems unavoidable in the jazz milieu since even if they don’t whistle while they work they read with it. Maybe I should try to give a reading somewhere in front of a Pollock or a de K….I guess my point is that painting doesn’t intrude on poetry.  

This excerpt clarifies O’Hara’s relationship to painting in several ways. He emphasizes that he does not want painting to “intrude on poetry,” that it remains his “secondary enthusiasm.” Nevertheless, he stresses its function in order to avoid getting “bored with poetry.” As such, this passage implicitly illustrates O’Hara’s resistance to following in the footsteps of his poetic predecessors. Rather than fall in line with his contemporaries, O’Hara chose to explore the more challenging artistic model of painting (specifically Abstract Expressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism), where a more profound sort of experimentation was taking place. He also toyed with ideas from jazz music and motion pictures, but O’Hara’s adaptation of painterly technique will be the primary focus of this thesis.

O’Hara’s poetic exploration of painting, along with his involvement at the Museum and his extensive art criticism, prompted Edward Lucie-Smith to ask him whether he had ever wanted to be a painter. O’Hara assured him that he had not, though he admitted to “fooling around” with painting whenever he was waiting in a studio for someone: “I might do some little thing, you know. But I never really did it seriously

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because…it seems like painting and sculpture take so much concentration over such a period of time that I’m not sure I can do it. Whereas one *can* write relatively fast.⁴ This answer suggests nothing other than the fact that his particular genius was not for painting, for many abstractionists and pop artists did not exhibit the extended “concentration” O’Hara cites. In any case, the question “Why are you not a painter?” must have struck O’Hara as wonderfully absurd, for his pseudo-answer subsequently became the subject of one of his most well-known poems:

**WHY I AM NOT A PAINTER**

I am not a painter, I am a poet.

Why? I think I would rather be a painter, but I am not. Well,

for instance, Mike Goldberg is starting a painting. I drop in

“Sit down and have a drink” he says. I drink; we drink. I look

up. “You have SARDINES in it.”

“Yes, it needed something there.”

“Oh.” I go and the days go by and I drop in again. The painting is going on, and I go, and the days

⁴ SS, 21
go by. I drop in. The painting is finished. “Where’s SARDINES?” All that’s left is just Letters, “It was too much,” Mike says.

But me? One day I am thinking of a color: orange. I write a line about orange. Pretty soon it is a whole page of words, not lines. Then another page. There should be so much more, not of orange, of words, of how terrible orange is and life. Days go by. It is even in prose, I am a real poet. My poem is finished and I haven’t mentioned orange yet. It’s twelve poems, I call it ORANGES. And one day in a gallery I see Mike’s painting called SARDINES.5

Initially, it seems as if O’Hara is stressing the differences between poet and painter in the poem. The painter Mike Goldberg constantly takes things out until nothing remains of SARDINES but the letters, whereas the poet keeps “putting in” and “putting in.” As the poem progresses, however, it becomes clear that O’Hara’s art is just like Goldberg’s. If

Goldberg’s painting finally contains no sardines, O’Hara’s “Oranges” never mentions the word “orange.” In both works, the initial word or image merely triggers a series of associations that ultimately eclipse the starting point. In other words, O’Hara is a poet not a painter for no other reason than that is what he is.

Of course, the poem also suggests that poetry and painting are part of the same spectrum, that ultimately, SARDINES and “Oranges” are congruent examples. This is why the rhetorical device governing the poem is repetition (“I drink; we drink”; “I go and the days go by” “I drop in; I drop in again”). By prioritizing this device, O’Hara emphasizes that art does not lend itself to divisions; all art, be it painting or writing or even other forms, should be about the process rather than the product. Furthermore, the poem mirrors the painting in its subversion of conventional interpretation. It fails to close off its meaning, which is constantly deferred. For example, the initial statement, “I am not a painter, I am a poet,” seems quite definite until it is immediately modified by a statement which neither quite follows on from the first, nor completely negates it. The whole poem hinges on a not-quit parallelism, which infuses it with an abstract quality. At the same time, it retains representational elements. Indeed, Mike Goldberg was a painter and a friend of O’Hara’s. He really painted a picture called SARDINES, which is reproduced below. The poem, then, explains the connections O’Hara saw between poetry and painting and serves as a starting point from which to examine his other work.
While the poem “Why I Am Not a Painter” and the letter to Gregory Corso clarify O’Hara’s view on the connection between poetry and painting, the question still remains as to why O’Hara thought the 1950s and 60s New York art world could challenge and mold his poetry more than the literary community at the time. Part of the reason may simply be the historical era in which O’Hara wrote. Indeed, as nearly every literary historian has noted, the immediate postwar years were lean ones for American poetry. O’Hara comments on this reality himself in US, the first of twelve lithograph stones he made with the artist Larry Rivers: “poetry was declining/ Painting advancing/ we were complaining/ it was ’50.”
On a related note, O’Hara voiced specific criticism of the poems written by his contemporaries in the 1950s. According to Paul Carroll, the poems admired as models of the poetic tradition at the time include the following: the Eliot of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Poems 1920, and “The Waste Land;” the Ransom of “The Equilibrists” and “Bells for John Whiteside’s Daughter;” the Tate of “Sonnets at Christmas,” the Warren of “Bearded Oaks;” and the Auden of “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” “September 1, 1939,” and “Musée des Beaux Arts.”

While the extent to which O’Hara takes issue with these poets varies widely (O’Hara admired Auden, but reviled Eliot), he objected most to the stale manner in which the following generation incorporated these traditions into their own poetry (i.e., the Lowell of Lord Weary’s Castle, the Delmore Schwartz of “For Rhoda” and “In the Naked Bed, in Plato’s Cave,” the Shapiro of Person, Place and Thing and V-Letter, and the Wilbur of “A Black November Turkey” and “Love Calls us to the Things of This World”). Indeed, a talk O’Hara gave in 1952 entitled “The Image in Poetry and Painting” reveals the poet’s attitude toward the reception of T. S. Eliot in the 1950s. He notes that Eliot had a “deadening and obscuring precious effect” on his “respective followers” in an attack that recalls William Carlos Williams’s criticism of Eliot in his autobiography (a book O’Hara knew well). Robert Lowell’s book Lord Weary’s Castle, for example, was still squarely in the Eliot tradition that Lowell had absorbed from Tate, Ransom, and Jarrell at Kenyon College. The book was an instant success, to the point that Eliot himself, who rarely commended younger poets, even sang its praises. To

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6 Paul Carroll, The Poem in its Skin (Chicago: Big Table, 1968), 204
7 Again, Carroll’s list
O’Hara’s chagrin, the ubiquity of works like Lowell’s meant that Eliot reigned supreme, and the prevailing mode was that of neo-Symbolism, a poetry Carroll described as “civilized, verbally excellent, ironic, cerebral” — and traditional in its use of metrics, rhyme, metaphor and other technical features.

Yet at the same time, as Carroll puts it, “the barbarians were already at the gates of the city.” More specifically, the “barbarians” were those who “shared a concern with trying to write types of poems either alien or hostile to the poem as defined and explored by Eliot and his heirs.”9 One might mark the height of this invasion as the publication of Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* in 1956.

Despite the possibility of a counter-tradition that the Beat writers provided, O’Hara insisted on charting a different path. As John Ashbery remarks in an obituary essay, O’Hara was, “too hip for the squares and too square for the hips.” In other words, his emphasis on the immediacy of the everyday experience and distaste for analogic, or “poetic,” devices adhered to neither tradition:

O’Hara’s poetry has no program and therefore cannot be joined. It does not advocate sex and dope as a panacea for the ills of modern society; it does not speak out against the war in Viet Nam or in favor of civil rights; it does not paint gothic vignettes of the post-Atomic age: in a word, it does not attack the establishment. It merely ignores its right to exist, and is thus a source of annoyance for partisans of every stripe.10

Here, Ashbery seems to be speaking just as much of his own poetry as of O’Hara’s. In a sense, the description applies to all the poets of the New York School, which is the

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9 Carroll pp. 206-207.
designation ultimately attributed to O’Hara. As Marjorie Perloff points out, however, the differences between the poets in the New York School make the group label largely irrelevant. Nevertheless, Ashbery’s remark that O’Hara is caught between the “opposing power blocks” of “hip” and “square” is useful to keep in mind.

It is in this absence of a suitable poetic tradition that O’Hara turns to painting for artistic inspiration. Since this choice represented largely uncharted territory, O’Hara’s New York-era poetry moves from relatively inconsequential experiments to a developed conception of a painterly poetic. This thesis charts that development. It examines how O’Hara makes use of techniques like Jackson Pollock’s “push-pull,” Larry Rivers’s “smorgasbord of the recognizable,” and the proto-Cubists “syntactic ambiguity” to overcome the symbolic import of words and images. It treats O’Hara’s poetry more or less chronologically, tracking changes in O’Hara’s utilization of painterly techniques as he diversifies the manner in which he resists the influence of the reigning neo-symbolists.

The first chapter of the thesis explores the various artistic techniques O’Hara incorporated into his poetry. Primarily, it examines O’Hara’s experimental poem “Second Avenue,” a work that rejects symbolism and poetic influence in favor of painterly technique so completely that it reaches the point of incomprehensibility. The second chapter studies two of O’Hara’s later poems — “In Memory of My Feelings” and “Music.” These poems combine the colloquialism of Williams with painterly technique in order to increase their accessibility while still working to avoid transcendental, symbolic meaning. The final chapter discusses the lithograph *Stones*, a collaboration

11 Although O’Hara preferred painterly technique to the methods of the Neo-Symbolist poets, he does find inspiration in the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Boris Pasternak, and Pablo Neruda.
between O’Hara and Rivers. It tracks how the fusion between visual art and poetry can facilitate the deconstruction of conventional interpretation of images and symbols.

Structurally, the battle between the symbolic meaning inherent in words and the struggle to subvert that meaning via painterly technique provides a point of reference in each chapter of the thesis. O’Hara arrived in New York ready to chart a new direction in poetry. Eager to eschew T.S. Eliot and the neo-Symbolists, he initially embraced painterly technique wholeheartedly. After he realized his poems could never achieve the same abstraction as Jackson Pollock’s paintings, he shifted his poetic to align with a more metaphorical discourse, clinging to some painterly stylistics in order to stay true to his rejection of symbolism. His collaboration with Rivers marks his ultimate discovery of the limitations and possibilities of fusing painting and poetry.
Chapter I:
Parallel Experimentation: Abstract Expressionism and O’Hara’s Painterly Poetic in “Second Avenue”

As I stated in the introduction, Frank O’Hara craved distinctive modes of artistic inspiration as a reaction against, in his estimation, the stale postwar poetic climate in America. This hunger, in conjunction with the endless artistic outlets available in Manhattan, prompted him to write some of his most experimental poems when he first arrived in the city in the early 1950s. At that same moment, American painting was also evolving in dramatic ways. Indeed, after World War II, the Abstract Expressionists began charting a way to adapt surrealist aspirations to American conditions. In this chapter, therefore, I will read O’Hara’s poem “Second Avenue” (1952) as a literary product of this parallel era of experimentation. This reading should elucidate the ways in which Abstract Expressionism, Surrealism, and Cubism initially influenced O’Hara’s poetry and helped him rebel against the New Critics and the symbolist poetry of predecessors such as Lowell.

Before beginning my discussion of “Second Avenue,” I will examine the influence of Surrealism on Abstract Expressionism as a way of clarifying the driving force behind the development of the latter movement. While early Abstract Expressionists had already acknowledged their debt to the French avant-garde, the impact of Surrealism on American painting increased exponentially with the arrival of several leading contemporary artists from abroad — André Breton and Max Ernst, particularly

12 O’Hara took issue both with the lack of attention New Critics paid to the socio-political role of the text and with their emphasis on close reading as the best way to derive meaning from a poem.

13 Always keeping in mind that this label is shorthand for a long tradition of writing with much variation. Indeed, perhaps William Butler Yeats is the poet most identified with the term.
after the outbreak of the war in Europe. Usually as a result of direct contact with the Surrealists, the Abstract Expressionists turned to visual forms reflecting their own psychological depths as a way of avoiding the misled attempts of earlier generations of artists to capture the enormity of political catastrophe in representational form.

Ultimately, the war generated the perception that if vanguard culture was to survive at all it would be on American soil, a notion that infused Abstract Expressionism with a sense of immediate self-importance.

The linchpin of the association between the two movements was psychic automatism. Where Surrealists primarily limited the technique to the verbal milieu, Abstract Expressionists boldly applied the method to painting. In works by Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and others, the painted canvas reflected the surrealist belief in spontaneous, non-verbal expression of raw, unconscious energy. In its ultimate manifestation, however, the psychic automatism of “Action Painting” acquired new aesthetic possibilities by shedding the surrealist orthodoxies that had constrained it.

For the Abstract Expressionists unabashedly proclaimed (not denied as Surrealists and Dada tended to do) the status of their work as art, thereby fusing cubist attitudes

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14 In his First Manifesto, Breton provides this definition: “SURREALISM, noun. Pure psychic automatism by means of which we propose to express either verbally, in writing, or in some other fashion what really goes on in the mind. Dictation by the mind, unhampered by conscious control and having no aesthetic or moral goals.” Translation by Herbert S. Gershman, *The Surrealist Revolution in France* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974), 35.

15 There have been several studies of Surrealist paintings in the 1930s. Max Ernst and André Masson both created distinct Surrealist prototypes, but they remained experiments, never sustained enough to engender a new style.

regarding the finished work with surrealist veneration of action, process, and immediacy.\textsuperscript{17}

Although the surrealist adaptations of Abstract Expressionists did influence O’Hara’s poetry, it is important to note that O’Hara read and drew from French Surrealist poetry in its own right as well. Indeed, in his memoir of the writer Bunny Lang, one of his closest friends in Cambridge who died tragically of cancer at the age of thirty-two, O’Hara recalls: “We both loved Rimbaud and Auden: she thought I loved Rimbaud too much and I thought the same about Auden and her.”\textsuperscript{18} O’Hara also cites translations of Pierre Corneille and Jean Racine, Voltaire and Laclos, Charles Baudelaire and Gérard de Nerval, and Arthur Rimbaud and Comte de Lautréamont in the Commonplace Book that he kept during his Harvard years. And in a reading list he compiled toward the end of his undergraduate career, he adds the names of a plethora of Dada and Surrealist texts: the list contains ten poems by Guillaume Appollinaire, Pierre Reverdy’s \textit{Les Epaves du ciel}, Alfred Jarry’s \textit{Les Minutes de sable memorial}, Louis Aragon’s \textit{Le Paysan de Paris}, Robert Desnos’s \textit{Deuil pour deuil}, Max Ernst’s \textit{La Femme 100 tetes}, and Benjamin Peret’s \textit{Le Grand jeu}. Given the numerous references to surrealist poetry in O’Hara’s early journals, it seems clear that his interest in Surrealism supplemented and magnified his interest in Abstract Expressionism.

O’Hara wrote his most pure surrealist poetry before his direct (and frequent) association with the Abstract Expressionists in New York altered his style. A telling example of the kind of long surrealist poetry he initially wrote is “Meditations on Max Ernst’s \textit{Historie Naturelle},” a set of seven prose poems written at Harvard in 1949. The

\textsuperscript{17} Unlike the surrealists, the cubists placed a high value on deliberate construction.
series of collages to which the poem refers utilizes the techniques *frottage* and *decalcomania*. The art critic Kenneth Coutts-Smith identifies an important connection between these formal qualities and the tenets of Surrealism more generally: “From the random forms Ernst produced, he read and isolated images that his conscious mind was too inhibited or preconditioned to discover; he tried to create an irrational, or unconditional landscape of images.” This irrationality helps subvert the traditional meanings associated with those images, ultimately questioning the relationship between symbols and what they represent.

*Les pampas* (from the *Histoire Naturelle* series)
Max Ernst
1926

O’Hara’s poem attempts to channel the psychic automatism of Ernst’s “frottage” landscapes. In the opening paragraph of “Meditations,” the reader encounters “ferocious

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19 Frottage entails the production of images in the first case by rubbing chalk or some other medium across a rough or textured surface, and in the second by blotting images onto paper from wet paint.
lions” who “scent succulence lasciviously,” while “lime trees grow tractably, especially on boarded plains.” O’Hara undercuts this fantastical landscape in the second paragraph:

Washing-machines (those mirrors of apple blossoms) and looms (the progenitors of nudes) and airplanes (memorials to our fathers). In the same way the films have taught us how beautiful we really are from the anguish of our shadows and the accuracy of objects (the heart of Charlie Chaplin). All machines, similarly, enliven us.

The juxtaposition of these opposites, of nature versus machine, is typically Surrealist. But the six poems that follow come dangerously close to incomprehensibility. One can surmise that they are love poems of some sort; there are references to a father who “warned of the consequences / how passion wells up like a tornado of spiraling blood so that the tongue barely can move its thickness into the mouth of another.” But the references are intensely private to the point of inaccessibility on the part of the reader. Perhaps O’Hara believed this was the best way to channel Ernst’s notion of “frottage,” but since words have meaning, the poem doesn’t quite mark the verbal equivalent of Ernst’s visual effects. Symbolic implications creep into the poem whether O’Hara wants them to or not. Already, then, O’Hara encounters the same problem he would face in translating Pollock’s “all-over” quality, Hoffman’s concept of “push and pull,” and Abstract Expressionism more generally in his next major painterly experiment, “Second Avenue.”

Poems Retrieved (Bolinas, California: Grey Fox Press, 1977), 15-24, hereafter referred to as PR.
Thus far, I have explored O’Hara’s attempt to incorporate the techniques of the surrealist artists into his poetry. A letter and series of poems O’Hara wrote to Rivers in 1957, which Rivers later incorporated into a collage, links his ideas about abstract expressionist painting to his personal poetic as well:

Now please tell me if you think these poems are filled with disgusting self-pity, if there are “holes” in them, if the surface isn’t kept “up,” if there are recognizable images, if they show nostalgia for the avant-garde, or if they don’t have enough “push” and “pull,” and I’ll keep working on them until each is a foot high.

Yours in action art,

Frank

This excerpt verifies O’Hara’s desire to keep “up” the “surface” of his poems just as the abstract painters do. The terms “push” and “pull” derive from theoretical discussions on Abstract Expressionism, specifically Hans Hoffmann’s discussion of the relationship of planes in Cubist and abstract art: “Pictorial space,” wrote Hoffmann, “exists two-dimensionally…Depth is not created by arrangement of objects, one after the other, toward a vanishing point, in the sense of Renaissance perspective, but on the contrary, by

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it’s so hot out
and I read the letter which says
in your poems your gorgeous self-pity
how do you like that

that is odd I think of myself
as a cheerful type who pretends to
be hurt to get a little depth into
things that interest me…
the creation of forces in the sense of push and pull.\textsuperscript{23} Indeed, O’Hara’s poetry attempts to “keep up the surface” by exploiting the opportunity for simultaneous movement in every direction in a push-pull movement that drives the poem all over that surface. For example, just as he introduces a conditional clause from which the reader anticipates a seemingly predictable “then” follow-up, O’Hara subverts expectations and pulls the poem in an entirely unexpected direction. The shifts undermine clues associated with specific words, thus making the possibility of interpreting a deeper meaning below the surface of the word itself nearly impossible.

O’Hara’s commentary on Jackson Pollock’s sense of scale also sheds light on the terminology used in his letter to Rivers:

Pollock, choosing to use no images with real visual equivalents…struck upon a use of scale which was to have a revolutionary effect on contemporary painting and sculpture. The scale of the painting became that of the painter’s body, not the image of a body, and the setting for the scale, which would include all referents, would be the canvas surface itself. Upon this field the physical energies of the artist operate in actual detail, in full scale…. It is the physical reality of the artist and his activity of expressing it, united with the spiritual reality of the artist in a oneness which has no need for the mediation of metaphor or symbol. It is Action Painting.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{24} Jackson Pollock (New York: Braziller, 1959); rpt. Frank O’Hara, Art Chronicles, New York: Braziller, 1975, hereafter referred to as AC, 34-35.
The surface of the painting, and by extension the surface of the poem, then, serves as the field upon which the physical energies of the artist operate, without “mediation of metaphor or symbol.” The poem’s images — for example, the “PARK LANE liquor store,” “tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre,” and “the john door in the 5 SPOT” in “The Day Lady Died” (CP 325) — are not symbolic properties; there is nothing beneath these surfaces. Rather, the poet’s chance interaction with these images as he walks down the street or into stores or night clubs result in their inclusion in his poem. They function metonymically to create a microcosm of O’Hara’s New York world — a world verifiable by any city map, but also fictive in its fantastical configuration in the poems. This notion of eschewing symbolism in favor of exploiting the poem’s surface, therefore, stems directly from O’Hara’s emulation of Abstract Expressionists like Pollock.

The features of Abstract Expressionism I have just outlined figure prominently in this chapter’s central object of analysis, O’Hara’s poem “Second Avenue.” Although John Ashbery calls the work a “difficult pleasure” that “eventually turned out to be
unsatisfactory,” it is worth taking a closer look at the poem as a way of understanding O’Hara’s initial ideas about how to achieve a painterly style of writing.\textsuperscript{25}

O’Hara wrote most of the eleven-part, 478-line poem in Larry Rivers’s plaster garden studio overlooking Second Avenue between 7\textsuperscript{th} and 8\textsuperscript{th} streets. At the time, Rivers was making a plaster sculpture of O’Hara who, between poses, would sit down and add more lines.\textsuperscript{26} True to his desire to fuse art with life, O’Hara’s interaction with Rivers during the writing process surfaces in the poem on several occasions. O’Hara wrote the following passage, for instance, based on a conversation he had with Rivers about a sculpture in progress:

\begin{quote}
Your feet are more beautiful than your father’s, I think,

Does that upset you? admire, I admire youth above age, yes,

in the infancy of the race when we were very upset we wrote,

‘O toe!’ and it took months to ‘get’ those feet. Render. Rent.

Now more features of our days have become popular, the nose broken, the head bald, the body beautiful. Marilyn Monroe.

Can one’s lips be ‘more’ or ‘less’ sensual?

(CP 147)
\end{quote}

This passage recounts their conversation with documentary-like realism (or so they claim), even if the lack of context makes it hard to detect.

In addition to Rivers, O’Hara also interacted with the poet Kenneth Koch during the poem’s production. Koch was in the process of writing his long poem “When the Sun

\textsuperscript{25} CP, iiv
Tries to Go On,” and the two would call each other every day to recount their progress. Sometimes they would even meet for lunch to discuss their respective poems, an experience so central to the writing process that O’Hara included one such meeting in the finished poem. In an essay that appeared in the *Partisan Review*, Koch recalls how the partnership came about: “I had no clear intention of writing a 2400-line poem (which it turned out to be) before Frank said to me, on seeing the first 72 lines — ‘why don’t you go on with it as long as you can?’ — I can’t remember how much his decision to write such a poem had to do with his suggestion to me to write mine.” There was a sense of “racing to the finish line,” Koch thought, adding that O’Hara “was very polite and also very competitive.”

Aside from these two artists, O’Hara points out, “there are several scenes in the poem with characters.” For instance, a flier in his plane over the ocean, (CP 143), a newspaper clipping report of Bunny Lang’s trip to the Caribbean (CP 144), a description of a poetry critic and teacher (CP 148), a description of de Kooning’s *WOMAN* (CP 147), and a description of a Grace Hartigan painting (CP 149). Snapshots of other memories also make their way into the poem:

As I walked into the Dairy B & H Lunch, I couldn’t remember your other eye, I puked.

(CP 147)

Or this memory of his father’s admonition:

My father said, “Do what you want but don’t get hurt,

I’m warning you. Leave the men alone, they’ll only tease you.

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27 Gooch, 234.
When your aunt comes I want you to get down off that horse
And speak like a gentleman, or I’ll take it away from you.
Don’t grit your teeth at me.”

(CP 148)

These examples hint toward O’Hara’s eventual interest in capturing his immediate experiences in his poetry. The fact that a newspaper clipping O’Hara happened to receive in the mail made it into his poem proves that he did not include the clipping because of its underlying significance. Rather, he incorporated the clipping into his poem because of mere accident, to provide a surface detail and nothing more. Even these comprehensible snippets do not encourage symbolic interpretation, therefore. And other than these few instances of discernible reality, surreal descriptions and stylistic devices dominate the poem.

In “Notes on ‘Second Avenue,’” a collection of stray observations written by O’Hara at the request of Time/Life cultural editor Rosalind Constable for her in-house memorandum on the arts, O’Hara admits that he had not yet discovered how to balance his experimental, surrealist style with his burgeoning desire to catalogue actual experiences in his poetry: “You see how [the style] makes everything seem very jumbled, while actually everything in it either happened to me or I felt happening (saw, imagined) on Second Avenue” (CP 497). He goes on to justify why he wrote in the style he did later in the “Notes:” “The verbal elements are not too interesting to discuss although they are intended to consciously keep the surface of the poem high and dry, not wet, reflective and self-conscious. Perhaps the obscurity comes in here, in the relation between surface and meaning, but I like it that way since the one is the other (you have to use words) and
I hope the poem to be the subject, not just about it.” This statement highlights O’Hara’s desire to maintain the surface of a poem in the same way that painters like Larry Rivers maintain the surface of their painting. Indeed, O’Hara wants the “poem to be the subject, not just about it,” meaning he does not want the reader to have to dig beneath the surface or interpret any analogical devices to unearth the subject, or meaning, of the poem. The passage also alludes, however, to the limitations O’Hara faced (“you have to use words”) in achieving this goal. Abstract painters have the luxury of eliminating images entirely from their work. Pollock’s drip paintings, for instance, include no discernible images open to unwanted interpretation. Words, however, always have meaning. They function to signal something else and thus always call to mind the images they are intended to represent. O’Hara’s musings in “Notes,” therefore, signal his recognition of the obstacles he must overcome for his poems to mimic abstract painting.

O’Hara changed the dedication of “Second Avenue” three times, evidence of how carefully he thought about what message he wanted this poem to send. He first dedicated the poem “To Willem de Kooning,” the main figure of the Abstract Expressionism movement along with Jackson Pollock. He then replaced the original dedication with an epigraph from the Russian Revolutionary poet Mayakovsky’s “The Cloud in Trousers” — “In the church of my heart the choir is on fire.” Finally, O’Hara settled on “To Vladimir Mayakovsky.” The choice of a revolutionary artist seems appropriate given the groundbreaking nature of the poem, one that defines a new poetic direction wherein poetry eschews its era’s dominant literary movement in favor of the

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29 Gooch, 233
experimental one. Nevertheless, it is notable that O’Hara changed his dedication from an artist to a poet, a decision that acknowledges the undesirability of O’Hara’s painterly influences entirely overshadowing his role as a poet. O’Hara also admired Mayakovsky’s conflation of art and life (which abounds in similarities to the work of action painters). Indeed, O’Hara once remarked, “The poet himself is the theme of his poetry.” Lastly, the choice comments on the voice and scale of the poem. In “Notes,” O’Hara explains, “Mayakovsky and de Kooning have both done works as big as cities where the life in the work is autonomous (not about actual city life) and yet similar: Mayakovsky: ‘Lenin,’ ‘150,000,000,’ ‘Eiffel Tower,’ etc.; de Kooning: ‘Asheville,’ ‘Excavation,’ ‘Gansevoort Street,’ etc.” (CP 497). O’Hara experiments with the stylistic tendencies of both artists throughout the poem.

Overall, the mode of “Second Avenue” seems to be one of constant disorientation and displacement. For instance, O’Hara writes the first three lines of the poem in a beautifully lyrical mode:

Quips and players, seeming to vend astringency off-hours,
celebrate diced excesses and sardonics, mixing pleasures,
as if proximity were staring at the margin of a plea…

(CP 139)

The stanza makes grammatical sense: no ambiguous references, no shifting pronouns, no pseudo-connectives, and no floating modifiers. The lines even embrace a metaphorical mode, as if O’Hara is welcoming the influence of poets like Eliot and Lowell. No sooner does O’Hara lull the reader into a false sense of linguistic normalcy, however, than he undercuts his lyric model:
This thoroughness whose traditions have become so reflexive,
your distinction is merely a quill at the bottom of the sea
tracing forever the fabulous alarms of the mute
so that in the limpid tosses of your violent dinginess
a pus appears and lingers like a groan from the collar
of a reproachful tree whose needles are tired of howling.

( CP 139)

O’Hara dives into the confusion in the first two lines of the second stanza by shifting
pronouns from “this” to “your.” He criticizes the poetic tradition (it has “become so
reflexive”) and devalues the poet, making clear that what follows will bear no
resemblance to the type of poetry that precedes it. As Grace Hartigan points out, the use
of pronouns in these opening stanzas is especially artful. Indeed, “This thoroughness”
shifts to “your violent dinginess” shifts to “One distinguishes,” and finally, shifts to “I
must bitterly…” (CP 139 – 140). These constant shifts set up a surreal scene, wherein the
reader cannot distinguish subject from object, or even past from present. Ultimately, this
technique helps to rid the poem of the very subjectivity that dominates mainstream
postwar poetry.

Beyond the nonsensical use of pronouns in the opening stanzas, unexpected
juxtapositions, incompatible word combinations, and arbitrary relationships between
signifiers and signifieds abound. “Alarms of the mute,” for example, is a contradictory
expression that makes the noun phrase absurd and illogical. O’Hara also makes surreal
juxtapositions such as placing “going underground” next to “something in your navel.”
Furthermore, each line makes a few new connections, but there is minimal attempt to pull
it back into metaphorical unity. The reader follows O’Hara’s comparison of an ineffective poet with his “quill at the bottom of the sea,” but the following lines (“tracing forever the fabulous alarms of the mute so that in the limpid tosses of your violent dinginess”) attenuate the initial metaphor in an abundance of unrelated comparisons. This technique achieves the “push-pull” effect of Pollock, Rivers, and other Abstract Expressionists; the poem does not revolve around a central object to which it always returns, but rather, explodes outward in every direction. And since metaphorical construction confuses rather than clarifies, the constant changes in direction in the poem undermine the tendency for symbolic interpretation based on a coherent design.

O’Hara supplements his mirroring of painterly techniques by describing several works of art in the poem (and emulating that particular artist’s style in the process). As Marjorie Perloff remarks, “what O’Hara calls Hartigan’s ‘process of inclusion’ is beautifully conveyed in a passage from ‘Second Avenue’ wherein O’Hara describes a Grace Hartigan painting:”

Grace destroys
the whirling faces in their dissonant gaiety where it’s anxious,
lifted nasally to the heavens which is a carrousel grinning
and spasmodically obliterated with loaves of greasy white paint
and this becomes like love to her, is what I desire
and what you, to be able to throw something away without yawning
“Oh Leaves of Grass! o Sylvette! oh Basket Weavers’ Conference!”

and thus make good our promise to destroy something but not us.

(CP 149)

This passage parallels an assessment O’Hara made of Hartigan’s style in his essay “Nature and New Painting.” In this essay, O’Hara likewise notes Hartigan’s “new canvases erupting with images and influences hitherto repressed…a continual effort to put more into the picture without sacrificing the clarity she loves in Matisse nor subduing the noise of the desperate changes she perceives in the world around her…[retaining] the chaotic brushwork and whirling impasto of expressionism.”

In light of his analysis of Hartigan’s technique, O’Hara’s heterogeneous images and syntactic dislocations imitate the process of painting itself. The pronoun “it” (“It’s anxious”) has no antecedent, the relative clause “which is…” no specific referent, yet the narrator declares that “this” (the “dissonant gaiety”? the “heavens”? the “loaves of greasy white paint”? or everything combined?) is “like love to her” and “what I [the poet] desire.” Subsequently, the phrase “and what you” in line 6 of the poem transfers the perspective from the poet to Grace herself; her painting is what she imagined it to be — a work of “wildly discordant images” that opts for heterogeneity rather than pure abstraction. This search for a balance between abstraction and inclusion of actual events recalls O’Hara’s admission of his similar exploration in “Notes” and foreshadows the next stage of his painter-poet experimentation. Neither mode, however, succumbs to the pressure to include analogical devices that require plunging beneath the surface of the poem.

31 SS, 45.
O’Hara also describes a controversial de Kooning portrait of a woman in the poem:

You remained for me a green Buick of sighs, o Gladstone!
and your wife Trina, how like a yellow pillow on a sill
in the many-windowed dusk where the air is compartmented!
her red lips of Hollywood, soft as a Titian and as tender,
her grey face which refrains from thrusting aside the mane
of your languorous black smells, the hand crushed by her chin,
and that slumberland of dark cutaneous lines which reels
under the burden of her many-darkly-hued corpulence of linen
and satin bushes, is like a lone rose with the sky behind it.

(CP 147)

This description refers to de Kooning’s WOMAN, which O’Hara had seen the summer before in the Hamptons. The painting, pictured on the next page, conjures a demonic Mona Lisa female landscape, built up by sharp contrasts and erasures executed violently around the focal point of a pasted-on ruby smile of a Lucky Strike lady from an ad. O’Hara claimed that the woman in “Second Avenue” began as a description of a woman he saw leaning out of a window on Second Avenue with her arms on a pillow, but soon fused with de Kooning’s icon. The initial inspiration for including the woman supports O’Hara’s commitment to accident, to injecting his poetry with whatever images or ideas come to mind during the process of writing. Koch remarks on the ideal subject of this painting in terms of poetic material, which might explain why O’Hara fused the painting with his initial inspiration: “the Women were obviously wonderful. They had that double
vision of things, which we were so interested in in poetry. Those sorts of double-exposure effects, you’d see a woman and her lips would also look like a seascape.”

In light of the poem’s intimate connections with paintings, it is no coincidence that Hartigan considers “Second Avenue” “Franks greatest poem, one of the great epic poems of our time….It has everything art should have. It has imagery, emotional content, leaps of imagination, displacements of time and place going back and forth, flashings of modern life and inner feelings. Name it, name anything, and it’s got it.”

O’Hara does indeed include everything, but the question still remains as to whether or not

O’Hara succeeds in making his longest poem “be the subject, not just about it,” in achieving a completely nonmimetic verbal structure. Critics are not convinced that it can. Indeed, Perloff contends, “such vertige ultimately can’t sustain the poem.” Helen Vendler’s review in the 1972 issue of *Parnassus* reaches a similar conclusion: “The longest poems end up simply messy, endless secretions, with a nugget of poetry here and there, slices of life arbitrarily beginning and ending for no particular reason. ‘Dear Diary,’ says O’Hara, and after that anything goes.” Richard Howard echoes these remarks when he writes, “Each time I read ‘Second Avenue’ I bear off a handful of glittering lines…but they are never the same lines, and never suggest anything converging, opposing, or even subordinating in the kind of tension that makes for unity.” He goes on to call the work “a poem…of promiscuous agglomerations, a virtuoso performance in discourse without composition.” Perhaps O’Hara succeeded in obscuring the meaning of words in “Second Avenue,” for most critics cannot interpret the poem, but does utter confusion really translate into successfully eschewing symbolism?

Despite these negative reviews, the poem does represent a stylistic advance on O’Hara’s part. It is one of the first poems to invoke O’Hara’s friends by name. Many lines have immediacy, excitement, and a sense of presence that parallels the process of action painting that endures in O’Hara’s later poetry. As Perloff remarks, after “Second Avenue,” “O’Hara learns to relate individual elements more intricately, to forge them into a coherent whole. He begins to put what we call ‘straight Surrealism’ behind him. In the poems of 1954-61, we can no longer identify the echoes of Peret or Tzara or

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33 Perloff, 72.
34 Helen Vendler, *Parnassus* (Fall/Winter 1972), 403.
Desnos as readily; Surrealism has now been assimilated into an American idiom."36 This assessment is not to say that O’Hara abandons his earlier affinity with painting. Indeed, painterly technique remains one of the sole devices by which O’Hara can combat symbolic interpretation. Rather, he develops his poetry in a way that preserves the painterly influences that make his poems stronger and discards the experimental techniques that faltered in “Second Avenue” and his earlier surrealist poems.

36 Perloff, 73.
Chapter II: Referentiality and the Limitations of the Painterly Word

As O’Hara admits in “Notes on ‘Second Avenue’” his initial attempts to channel painterly techniques as a means of avoiding symbolism, depth, and ontological transcendence fail to free his work from the inherent meaning of language and its attendant symbolic implications. Indeed, words always function to signal something else and, in this sense, language is innately metaphorical. Whereas Pollock’s all-over drip paintings can draw the eye everywhere at once, and call to mind nothing in particular, O’Hara must order his words on the page, thus inviting unintended connections between words as well as associations between words and the images they cannot help but represent.

In O’Hara’s “Digression on Number 1, 1948,” the poet pokes fun at his own aspiration to write as Pollock paints, simultaneously weaving painterly techniques into his writing and exposing the limitations of doing so. The poem describes a sequence of paintings the narrator views during his lunch hour, culminating in his reaction to Pollock’s monumental No. 1. The poem’s order mirrors the accidental sequence in which the narrator views the works and ultimately climaxes when he experiences the “aha moment” associated with viewing Pollock’s masterpiece. The randomness of incorporating whatever comes along into the poem mimics the reliance of Pollock’s paintings on the accidental conditions in which Pollock paints. Similarly, the lines of the poem thicken and thin just like the drips in Pollock’s painting: the relatively short line “I am not tired at all” precedes the much longer line “there is the Pollock, white, harm will not fall, his perfect hand and the many short voyages.” Despite these similarities, O’Hara makes clear that his poem bears little resemblance to the painting to which it responds.
The poem’s stanzas fluctuate between four and six lines in an arrangement that seems much more premeditated than the automatism that spurred Pollock’s creations. Also, while O’Hara remarks that the day is “a fine day for seeing,” he does not try to describe the visual qualities of the painting at all. Instead, he digresses into lyrical, symbolic descriptions of a silver range, stars, and the sea. At the very moment when the painting and the poem come closest together, that is, O’Hara abandons painterly technique in favor of the poetic. Even though it is “a fine day for seeing,” therefore, O’Hara can only reify the sense of awe at viewing a Pollock painting via the written word. His words will never allow for the same sort of visual reaction that an abstract painting elicits and he must resort to words that symbolize/signify the experience instead.

As “Digression on No. 1, 1948” suggests, O’Hara recognizes that his reliance on words elicits unwelcome symbolic interpretation by the reader. Even if he avoids all overt analogical devices, words in and of themselves are symbols. Despite this restriction, however, O’Hara still finds ways to undermine traditional meaning and subvert symbolic expectations in the poems he wrote after “Second Avenue.” Even though his later poems take on a more metaphor-based discourse, he still utilizes surrealist and abstract expressionist techniques to avoid the neo-Symbolism favored by Lowell and the New Critics.

It is important to note that O’Hara is not the first poet to eschew symbolism, even if he did so in a unique way. William Carlos Williams wrote countless anti-symbolic poems that sought to suppress the symbolic overtones of words. Take, for instance, Williams’s “Poem:”

As the cat
climbed over
the top of
the jamcloset
first the right
forefoot
carefully
then the hind
stepped down
into the pit of
the empty
flowerpot

This poem resists symbolism by emphasizing the mundane behavior of a cat above any
transcendental, metaphorical search for meaning. It includes no similes, no metaphors,
no devices that call analogies to mind. In spite of this, it is still possible to read the poem
metaphorically. The manner in which Williams describes the cat personifies the animal
and portrays its actions as displaying human characteristics like control and care. Even if
Williams intended control and care to apply solely to the animal in question, he cannot
control the connotations readers associate with the words. Deeper meaning creeps into
other anti-symbolist poems by Williams as well. “The Red Wheelbarrow,” for example,
a classic anti-symbolist poem that focuses solely on the image of the wheelbarrow, begins
with the words “so much depends,” suggesting that the wheelbarrow implies more than just itself. Indeed, the phrase inevitably makes the wheelbarrow into a carrier of value.

According to Marjorie Perloff, O’Hara “accepted Williams as a master, no doubt because he identified with Williams’s struggle against convention, pretentiousness"—“the going thing.” Thus, in a short poem written in 1952 called “WHAT SLEDGEHAMMER? Or W.C. WILLIAMS’S BEEN ATTACKED!” O’Hara writes:

Yester the heat I walked my tiglon “Charles F”
around the Park, as three nuns in a stationwagon
(au Zoo) robbed the Elizabeth Arden Building.
In the University pistols were not shot off
because they aren’t “clean precise expression.” Ho
ho ho, kra, chuh chuh, tssk tssk tssk, tereu….

And there’s going to be a wedding! There’s going to be a
We-Know-What-To-Do-In-The-Fall (a Ball!) between
The Metatheosophists with Italian bedbugs
Swinging from their wooly nipples and The Hudson Review

(that Organ)….

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37 Perloff, 44
38 PR, 111
This poem is clearly an attack on Eliot and the New Criticism school that made “The Wasteland” its sacred text. The title indicates that O’Hara much preferred Williams’s straightforward colloquial style to Eliot’s matrix of symbols and allusions.

O’Hara admires Williams’s “liberation of language,” his “attempt to find an honest, tough, hard, beautiful thing.” As such, he incorporates these concepts into his later poems. For a good example of his Williams mode, consider O’Hara’s poem, “Les Etiquettes Jaunes”:

I picked up a leaf

today from the sidewalk

This seems childish.

Leaf! you are so big!

How can you change your

color, then just fall!

As if there was no

such thing as integrity!

You are too relaxed

to answer me. I am too

frightened to insist.

Leaf! don’t be neurotic

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39 Quoted in Perloff, 45
like the small chameleon. (CP, 21)

This poem bears resemblance to a poem Williams wrote entitled Trees [1917]:

Crooked, black tree

On your little grey-black hillock,

ridiculously raised one step toward

the infinite summits of the night….

you alone

warp yourself passionately to one side

in your eagerness. 40

Unlike O’Hara’s early surrealist poems, every word in his poem can be readily understood. In both poems, the diction is colloquial, the sentences short and exclamatory, the line breaks quirky. O’Hara’s poem accepts a tacit reliance on metaphor (“don’t be neurotic like the small chameleon”), but only on a superficial level. That is, the comparison between a leaf changing colors and a chameleon changing colors does not signal any underlying significance other than the changing of colors. The comparison between these two poems, therefore, signals O’Hara’s willingness to incorporate poetic influence on his poetry so long as it stopped short of the techniques of Lowell and the New Critics.

Despite his appreciation for Williams, O’Hara recognized that he had an unfortunate influence on lesser poets. In his lecture on “The New Poets” on May 14, 1952, O’Hara refers judgmentally to the “WC Williams-ites” with their “I am the man

40 Collected Earlier Poems, 142
your father was Americanism” and their “Cleanliness thinned down to jingoism.” This
ambivalent attitude prompted O’Hara to merely incorporate influences from Williams
into his complex poetic rather than adhere to the model of his predecessor
wholeheartedly. In the poems O’Hara writes between 1954 and 1961, therefore, he
begins to combine Williams’s influence with the painterly techniques he cultivated earlier
in his career. He begins writing in the more personal, direct style of Williams. In sum,
he implements Williams’s method of celebrating ordinary experiences as a way of
resisting the search for transcendental meaning. Even as O’Hara begins to scale back his
painterly experimentation in favor of a more colloquial, Williams-esque idiom, however,
he still relies on painterly techniques as one of the supporting methods through which to
counteract the symbolic property of words.

“In Memory of My Feelings,” for example, moves away from the attempted non-
thematic meaninglessness of “Second Avenue” even as it counters pressure to succumb to
symbolic devices. Symbolism does crop up throughout the poem, particularly in the form
of the serpent. This symbolism likely speaks to the poem’s play on Romanticism and
grounding in a more American poetic idiom. The central theme — the fragmentation and
disintegration of the inner self — is certainly familiar Romantic territory.

O’Hara turns the autobiographical convention inside out, however, fusing fantasy
with realism in a painterly poem that unites form with content. Like action painting, the
way the poem reads emphasizes the process O’Hara underwent when writing it rather
than the conclusion he ultimately reached in the final product. To that end, the non-
symbolic and the surreal make a straightforward interpretation of the poem’s symbols
impossible and ultimately call into question the notion of what figurative language is and
how it functions. Ultimately, this treatment of language and symbols both succumbs to the necessity of language and subverts traditional linguistic devices in order to preserve painterly influence on the poem.

O’Hara both utilizes symbolism and undermines the traditional function of the symbol in the first stanza of the poem. Consider, for example, the first three lines:

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. (CP, 252)

Already, O’Hara subverts the traditional function of metaphor and simile. Rather than the man symbolizing quietness, the noun “quietness” contains the man. And in the run of similes that follows, “he has several likenesses, like stars and years, like numerals,” the grammatical structure interferes with the standard relationship between the signifier and the signified and the sharpness of one-to-one comparison gets lost.

Similarly, the other figures in the poem do not function as traditional symbols in the sense that they signify almost anything. Even if they seem like symbols, that is, they quickly lose this status through their non-specificity. For example, the characterization of the serpent constantly changes, removing the possibility of it signifying something consistent. Every comparison made between the creature and something else is imprecise and inexplicit:

And now it is the serpent’s turn.

I am not quite you, but almost, the opposite of visionary.

(CP, 256)

or
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, 257)

Marjorie Perloff suggests that the serpent could symbolize the poet’s true self throughout
the poem. The absence of detail and concrete metaphor, however, makes this
interpretation precarious. Furthermore, even if one concludes that the serpent does
symbolize the poet, it certainly does not conjure a consistent depiction or
characterization. Indeed, the poet’s reactions to the serpent frequently contradict each
other. In section one, the poet loves the serpent and at the end of the poem, the poet
yearns to kill everything else in order to “save the serpent.” At another point in the
poem, however, the serpent resembles the Medusa, turning those who look at him into
stone. These multiple portrayals suggest that the serpent represents multiple things at
once; it is good and evil, God or the devil, all at the same time. The poet’s feeling about
the serpent constantly changes; he cannot tell whether it is a positive or negative force in
his life.

Just as the serpent conveys multiple meanings, the selves depicted in the poem
prove inconsistent as well. In part 3, the poet plays the role of the hero: he begins as a
noble savage in the Arabian desert (“The most arid stretch is often the richest”), then
shifts into several other forms: French Revolutionary, Napoleonic platoon leader,
anything to escape his empirical self (“Beneath these lives / the ardent lover of history

41 Perhaps each appearance of the serpent in the poem represents one part of the self, a
Picasso-like figure.
hides”). Additionally, the poet moves between the voice of a single self, the “I” in the poem, to the image of multiple selves. Indeed, in a merging of singleness and multiplicity, the narrator refers to himself as “himselves” in part 3.

Although the symbols in the poem are for the most part unconnected, fragments of each symbol merge, intersect and transform with other fragments. Rather than producing chaos, however, these fragments achieve the sense that everything in the poem is related to everything else. As Hazel Smith points out, the poem is constructed around a number of synechdochal lines or chains. She identifies the serpent chain, the selves chain, a hunt chain (“the hunter crackles and pants,” “animal death whips out its flashlight,” “the dead hunting / and the alive, ahunted,” “fleeing a hunter”); a war chain (“the barrage balloon,” “My / grand-aunt dying for me, like a talisman, in the war,” “war-hero,” “the German prisoners,” “the bush full of white flags,” “a guerilla warrior”); a race chain (“the center of the track,” “my transparencies could not resist the race!” “racing into sands,” “as runners arrive from the mountains”); and the desert chain (“in the desert / taste of chilled anisette,” “the most arid stretch is often the richest,” “his mistress will follow him across the desert”). In a sense, then, these chains seem to form symbolic categories that impose logic’s order onto the poem.42 This interpretation is misleading, however, because it implies a sense of overall organization and unity among the different chains. Although the repetition of symbols does introduce some logic to the poem, this seeming organization easily breaks down when elements of each chain intersect with then diverges from elements of other chains.

The vast network of intersections and associations in the poem keeps it fluid, mobile and resistant to symbolic interpretation. These networks and intersections function in several ways. To begin with, O’Hara arranges several image chains one after the other so that one chain easily melts into the next:

I am underneath its leaves as the hunter crackles and pants
and bursts, as the barrage balloon drifts behind a cloud
and animal death whips out its flashlight,
whistling
and slipping the glove of the trigger hand. The serpent’s eyes
redden at sight of those thorny fingernails, he is so smooth! (CP, 253)

In the passage above, the hunt chain changes to the war chain, transitions back to the hunt chain, and finally, ends with a transition to the serpent chain. The plethora of quick transitions has the effect of all three chains joining together as one, eluding a reductive interpretation of any one chain. Other times, the chains are linked in comparison: “my transparent selves / flail about like vipers in a pail,” but these comparisons obscure more than they elucidate.

Although the poem’s inclusion of these chains of symbols acknowledges that poetry cannot avoid symbolism in the same way that abstract or cubist painting can, the structural devices described above enact O’Hara’s earlier experimentation with painterly technique. Perloff notes that O’Hara lets one image bleed into another just as Grace Hartigan (to whom the poem is dedicated) does in her paintings. In fact, Hartigan herself calls the poem “a painterly collage-poem whose form is at one with its meaning,” whose aim is to define “inner containment, or how to be open but not violated, how not to
panic.” To that end, the constantly shifting sequence of chains is open to change and adaptation, but it does not obscure the essence of each memory or detail included in the poem. The poem has a far more definite direction than “Second Avenue.” It has a larger, more thematic purpose than attention to structure and painterly technique alone. Essentially, it is open, but it does not panic. The free-floating manner in which the poem is written simply forces the reader to concentrate on the process of the meaning being created, rather than the static, neatly packaged thematic conclusion of a traditional autobiographical poem. Just as Pollock insisted his drip paintings were more about the process of their creation than the end result, so too is O’Hara’s poem and sense of self more reliant on the process of creating than the final creation. As Hartigan noted, the structure does indeed signal the meaning of the poem, for memory is not a unified whole, but rather, a process to which we are continually adding or subtracting. Memory is the avenue through which the past interacts with and changes the present. The poem ultimately suggests that no one event brings together or makes sense of everything that has happened in our lives. Memories and events constantly change and re-form us, just as the words in the poem constantly shift and give rise to different interpretations.

Perhaps even more than “In Memory of My Feelings,” the poem “Music” embraces the style of Williams by capturing and celebrating the ordinary experience of walking down a New York street. And despite its related subject matter, it certainly has more ontological resonance than “Second Avenue.” Like “Second Avenue” and “In Memory of My Feelings,” however, “Music” relies heavily on painterly technique (in this

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43 CP, 210
case, Cubist contradiction and Abstract Expressionist “all-erness”) to subvert a straightforward interpretation of the words, or the signifiers, on the page.

As we have seen in “Second Avenue,” O’Hara’s poetic structure makes use of false connectives and demonstratives, pronouns with shifting referents, dangling conditional clauses, incomplete declarative sentences, confusing temporal and spatial relationships, and so on. As these examples demonstrate, one of the central tenets of O’Hara’s poetry is what Eric Sellin has called, with reference to Reverdy’s poetry, “syntactic ambiguity.”

Sellin reasons that grammatical ambiguities such as those in “Music” are “irreducible because its effect is to render two or several contextual meanings simultaneously possible for a given passage.” Or, as Ernst Gombrich describes it in his remarks on Cubism, “If illusion is due to the interaction of clues and the absence of contradictory evidence, the only way to fight its transforming influence is to make the clues contradict each other and to prevent a coherent image of reality from destroying the pattern in the plane.”

A Cubist painting resists all our attempts to apply “the test of consistency. Try as we may to see the guitar or the hug suggested to us as a three-dimensional object and thereby transform it, we will always come across a contradiction somewhere which compels us to start afresh.” By intentionally scrambling his representational clues, the Cubist painter thus forces us “to accept the flat surface with all its tensions.” The ambiguity cannot, in other words, be resolved.

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Despite the inherent symbolic resonance of words, therefore, O’Hara utilizes Cubist syntax to render those resonances unintelligible, or at least contradictory. If, in a Derridian sense, words cannot fully summon forth what they mean without clarification through more words, juxtaposing two unrelated images brings poetry as close as possible to a Cubist painting’s rejection of meaning and ultimately, to the rejection of the innate symbolic implications of specific words.

To return to “Music,” let us examine instances of “syntactic [or Cubist] ambiguity”: To begin with, no “then” clause follows the statement “If I rest for a moment…” at the start of the poem. Rather, the conditional clause dissolves into the parenthesis of line 3. The words “I must tighten my belt” follows the next “If I seem to you” clause in line 8, a phrase that follows grammatically but makes no sense. Similarly, phrases set in apposition are not actually related and parallel nouns are only pseudo-parallel: “It’s like a locomotive on the march, the season/ of distress and clarity”; or “the fear of war and the stars which have disappeared.” In what sense is “season” a “locomotive on the march”? And why “distress and clarity” or “the fear of war and the stars”?

Practically all of O’Hara’s poems utilize Cubist syntax in some way. Before returning to the discussion of “Music,” consider the following examples:

AMBIGUOUS REFERENCE

*There* I could never be a boy,

though I rode like a god when the horse reared

At a cry from the mother I fell to my knees!

*there* I fell, clumsy and sick and good…  

(CP, 216)
JUXTAPOSITIONS WITHOUT PUNCTUATION

   The fluorescent tubing burns like a bobby-soxer’s ankles
   the white paint the green leaves in an old champagne bottle… (CP, 331)

FLOATING MODIFIERS

   the warm walking night

   *wandering*

   amusement of darkness… (CP, 269)

ARBITRARY RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SIGNIFIERS AND SIGNIFIEDS

   *Like* a nickelodeon soaring over the island from sea to bay,
   two pots of gold, and the flushed effulgence of a sky Tiepolo
   and Turner had compiled in vistavision. (CP, 230)

SHIFTING FORMS OF PRONOUNS: From First to Second Person

   yet I always loved Baltimore
   the porches which hurt *your* ass
   no, they were the steps
   well, *you* have a wet ass anyway
   if they’d only stop scrubbing (CP, 402)
When O’Hara combines several of these syntactic devices in the same poem, we get a poem of great speed, flexibility, and defiance of expectations. Like the “all-over” painting, O’Hara’s poetry often lacks a beginning, middle, and end; it is an instantaneous performance. What’s more, these syntactic devices are the vehicles through which O’Hara achieves a “push-pull,” a concept I will elaborate upon during what remains of my analysis of “Music.”

In terms of “Music,” specifically, the poem’s constant juxtaposition of unrelated images succeeds in “keeping up the surface,” something O’Hara established as important when he wrote “Second Avenue.” As I discussed in the first chapter, O’Hara exploits the potential for simultaneous movement in every direction with a push-pull technique that drives the life of the poem all over that surface. Just as he introduces a conditional clause from which the reader anticipates a seemingly predictable “then” follow-up, O’Hara subverts expectations and pulls the poem in an entirely unexpected direction. These sudden shifts certainly work to undermine clues associated with specific words. Once again, therefore, painterly technique helps to dim the likelihood of symbolic interpretation.

Time shifts in the poem help maintain this sense of surface, as if everything in the poem happens at once despite the ordering of events on the page. While these shifts are not new in poetry, O’Hara established a reputation of maintaining the present tense (or conditional tense as in “If I rest…”) regardless, and to supply no adverbial pointers (i.e., “when,” “after,” “before,” “during”) that signal a shift. This technique, too, allows the reader to experience an effect similar to viewing a painting all at once when he reads O’Hara’s poetry. “Music,” specifically, begins on a note of suspended animation: the
poet rests “for a moment near the Equestrian / pausing” for his sandwich. A sense of excitement pervades the poem: nerves hum, the speaker proclaims it “so meaningless to eat!” The initial “pause” gives way to the urgency of the “locomotive on the march.” And at last, the mood of yearning suddenly culminates with the imperative “Clasp me!”

These devices all merge together to infuse “Music” with a sense of magic, urgency, and confusion so present in New York during its “season of distress and clarity.” It maintains an air of total fluidity, due to its constant use of participles “pausing,” “leading,” “humming,” “talking,” “putting,” “walking.” Furthermore, repetitive internal sound patterning offsets the ever-shifting meanings and direction of the actual words in each verse: “rest,” “Equestrian”; “pausing,” “Sausage”; “seems to be leading”; “lavender lips under the leaves of the world,” and so on. The effect of all these devices is to create an aura of intense animation. Like action painting, therefore, “Music” presents the poet’s act of coming to awareness rather than the results of that act. It traces the shift from calm to an ever-building sense of excitement associated with the “gusts of water” spraying over the leaves and the rapturous imperative “Clasp me!”

Although “Music” embraces many elements of O’Hara’s painterly technique, there are also several other forces at work in the poem. In this sense, “Music” is much more involved and complex than “Second Avenue.” For example, “Music” draws upon the colloquial influence of poets like Williams and describes a walk down an ordinary city block. In this sense, it employs not only painterly technique, but also poetic devices to work against the symbolist mode that had dominated American poetry during the first half of the twentieth century. Unlike Prufrock’s “sawdust restaurants with oyster shells” and their accompanying symbolic connotations of sterility, aridity and decay, O’Hara’s
“Mayflower Shop” has no deeper significance; it represents nothing other than an authentic presence any New Yorker could locate and recognize. Or again, whereas Prufrock’s fear of eating a peach encapsulates his fear of ripeness or fertility, O’Hara’s “liver sausage sandwich” has no particular symbolic properties. The type of sandwich is simply a matter of chance.

The inclusion of ordinary New York locales draws upon, not only Williams’s influence, but painterly influence as well. Indeed, the aesthetic of “Music” and many of O’Hara’s other poems turns out to be remarkably close to that of the painter Larry Rivers. Rivers rejects the primacy of the subject matter in painting, insisting that the how supersedes the what. Like O’Hara, he stresses the importance of “the immediate situation,” the role of “accident” in art, and the need to “evoke the discomforts of boredom.” “One of my theories,” Rivers says, sounding just like O’Hara in his rejection of stale literary styles, “about the art of the last hundred years is that more alterations to the image of painting have been brought about by boredom and dissatisfaction of the artist and his perversity than anything else.” A painting, Rivers says, is best described as a “smorgasbord of the recognizable:”

I may see something — a ribbon, say, and I’ll use it to enliven a three-inch area of the canvas. Eventually it may turn into a milk container, a snake, or a rectangle…. I may even have private associations with that piece of ribbon, but I don’t want to interpret that association…. I feel free to use the appearance of a thing — that piece of ribbon — without assigning any specific meaning to the object.46

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46 AC, 118.
This statement reveals the intense similarity between O’Hara’s resistance to the standard interpretation of words and Rivers’s refusal to allow an object to serve as an interpretive device. The next chapter will examine the connections between O’Hara and Rivers in more depth in order to discuss the tenuous boundary between poetry and painting.

Like the landscapes of Williams, of Rivers, of Reverdy, or of Apollinaire, O’Hara’s is thus what Charles Altieri has called a “landscape without depth,” a presence stripped of its “ontological vestments.” Aerial perspective and three-dimensionality give way to a world of surfaces. The majority of these types of poems paint a picture, if you will, of the speaker’s walk down a city block. Poems like “In Memory of My Feelings” and “Music” fuse multiple influences (Williams, action painting, smorgasbord of the recognizable, cubist syntax) in order to produce an understandable poem that nonetheless means nothing beyond the surface of its words. Although these poems cannot avoid their dependence on words, they combine a commitment to mundane, non-transcendental experiences with painterly technique to ultimately avoid referential range.

Chapter III: The Ultimate Fusion of Poetry and Painting — O’Hara, Rivers, and the Lithograph Stones

A poem painting, whether done by a single artist or via collaboration, tends to be either a painting with a few words of text used as part of the visual scheme, or, conversely, an illustrated poem in which verbal meaning dictates the choice of visual image. O’Hara and Rivers, however, opted for neither of these conventions during their collaboration on a series of lithographs entitled Stones. Rather, this collaboration signifies a true melding of painting and poetry, so much so that often one medium is nearly indistinguishable from the other.

Although the simultaneous collaboration between painter and poet was virtually unprecedented, many poets and visual artists had experimented with combining art forms before. William Blake is perhaps the most influential example. In 1788, Blake published All Religions are One and There Is No Natural Religion, wherein he introduced his technique of “illuminated printing.”48 The following year he created his masterpiece of literature and art, Songs of Innocence, a collection of nineteen illustrated poems. He soon added onto this work in order to publish Songs of Innocence and Experience, his most famous work. Blake’s creations amount to the juxtaposition of image and written word, which ultimately lacks the integration that O’Hara and Rivers sought. Nevertheless, his work marks an important precedent to artists who would build on his ideas about combining the visual and the verbal.

Perhaps more directly related, O’Hara’s concept of the poem-painting bears striking similarities to those of Max Ernst. In Ernst’s work, word and image are not

48 A process that involves writing the text of the poems on copper plates with pens and brushes, using an acid-resistant medium, before etching the plates in acid in order to dissolve away the untreated copper and leave the design standing in relief.
merely juxtaposed, but fused so as to form what Lucy Lippard has called “a genuinely ‘intermediary’ statement.” In an essay called “Beyond Painting,” written in the mid-1930s, Ernst defines his technique of collage as an “alchemical composition of two or more heterogeneous elements resulting from their unexpected reconciliation….toward systematic confusion and ‘disorder of the senses’ (Rimbaud), or to chance, or to a will of chance.”

His ideas about collage manifest themselves in his “collage novel” La Femme 100 têtes, wherein the artist takes a series of ordinary nineteenth-century wood engravings and rearranges them in order to discover a new figurative reality brought about by the chance encounter of previously related images. Each resulting picture is given a poetic caption. Neither the picture nor the caption carries the “plot” alone; rather, in Lippard’s words, they offer “a double viewpoint that forms a stereophonic unity. The reader must literally read between the lines provided by the verbal-visual interaction and project himself onto that intermediary space.” The collage novel, moreover, has important analogues to film: “The pictorial dislocation of action and sequence juxtaposed against the ambiguous captions, apparently out of sync, suggest a silent movie with subtitles in a foreign language. The mixing is done, impressionistically, in the mind” (Lippard, p. 13). Like O’Hara’s juxtaposition of seemingly disparate signifiers and signifieds, Ernst deconstructs the inherent meaning associated with words and images by placing contradictory messages side by side. Although he leaves interpretation up to the reader, he prevents standard interpretations from occurring by undermining conventional symbolic readings.


50 Quoted by Lippard, “Max Ernst,” 12
Although Ernst’s technique looks ahead to the collaborations between O’Hara and visual artists, he never worked simultaneously with a poet to create the final project. Rather, Ernst illustrated previously written poems (for example, Paul Eluard’s Repetitions and Les Malheurs des Immortels), thus infusing existing work with his artistic vision. O’Hara took Ernst’s projects to a new level in his work with Rivers, therefore, working simultaneously with a visual artist in the same spatial area, fusing words with images to create new forms.

Rivers and O’Hara made the ideal collaborative couple because Rivers shared O’Hara’s general disdain for stale artistic tradition. He, too, wanted to subvert and deconstruct conventional interpretation of images and symbols. Indeed, in an essay entitled “Life Among the Stones,” Rivers explains that embarking on the collaboration satisfied his desire to be cruel. He remarks, “My cruelty consists of destroying the ease I see in the presence of cliché and vogue.” This remark suggests that Stones presented the perfect opportunity for two artists who already pushed the limits within their own medium to blow the lid off convention and produce something that had never been produced in the history of painterly or poetic tradition. Stones would be the ultimate fusing of the two art forms. It would achieve something neither artist could achieve without the other. It would come closer to accomplishing O’Hara’s goal of writing the ultimate painterly poem than ever before, closer than his most painterly poem “Second Avenue” had come.

In “Life Among the Stones,” Rivers reveals the origin of the project. “It started,” he recalls, “with this Siberian lady Tanya who came to my house in the summer of 1957.

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51 Larry Rivers, “Life Among the Stones,” Location (Spring 1963), 90-98. Succeeding quotes from Rivers are from the same source.
Her life at the time called for an activity. She found it and dedicated herself with gentle fury to the production of lithographs.... She wanted me to work on lithograph stones with a poet. She had the devotion, the press, and she would print.”

The “Siberian lady named Tanya” was Tatyana Grossman, whose print shop in Long Island is now world famous. In his study of contemporary printmaking, Calvin Tompkins writes, “both technically and aesthetically the prints published by Tatyana Grossman’s Universal Limited Art Editions are generally acknowledged to be equal or superior to anything being done in Europe or anywhere else.” Grossman’s skill meant that the artistic merit of the collaboration could be limitless. Now it was up to O’Hara and Rivers to devise an idea that matched the medium in its ability to build upon and ultimately outshine similar projects that had come before.

Fitting with O’Hara’s penchant for the accidental creation of art, Grossman’s choice of Frank O’Hara as Rivers’s collaborator was the result of a series of coincidences. She recalls:

I went to see...Barney Rosset of the Grove Press to ask if he could perhaps suggest a poet for such a book [i.e., of lithograph stones], and he suggested Frank O’Hara. Well, I read some of O’Hara’s poems, but I didn’t really understand them very well, they were so abstract. But then a few days later...I drove out to Larry Rivers’s studio in Southampton.... I talked to Larry about this idea of a book that would be a real fusion of poetry and art, a real collaboration, not just drawings to illustrate poems, and Larry listened, and then he called out, “Hey,

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Frank!” And down the stairs came a young man in blue jeans. It was Frank O’Hara.⁵³

Despite its happenstance genesis, Rivers insisted that O’Hara was the perfect choice:

“This Siberian lady didn’t just find some painter and some poet who would work together. She asked two men who really knew each other’s work and life backwards.” She asked two men who would not interfere with each other’s artistic ethos. They would not discuss their plans in advance. They would intertwine features of painting and poetry so closely that the distinction between the two virtually disappeared.

According to Rivers, the process of engraving the lithograph proved challenging to both artists. He describes the difficulties posed by the medium as follows:

The lithograph stone is very smooth. The marks going on it can be made with a rather difficult to handle almost rubbery crayon or with a dark liquid called Touche…. Whatever you do comes out the opposite way you put it down. In order for the writing to be read it must be done backwards. It is almost impossible to erase, one of my more important crutches. Technically it was really a cumbersome task. One needed the patience of another age, but our ignorance and enthusiasm allowed us to jump into it without thinking about details and difficulties.

Since the surface on which the two artists worked — lithograph — is a type of stone, the fact that Rivers and O’Hara entitled their collaboration Stones is telling. The title does not symbolize anything beyond the bare visual reality of the project, thereby emphasizing the centrality of surface to the work. The fact that the medium makes marks “impossible

⁵³ Quoted by Tompkins, The Scene, pp. 61-62
to erase” supports the importance of surface as well; the surface dictates the possibilities and limitations of the project and forces the artists to stay committed to the initial choices they make.

Rivers’s account of the first of the twelve Stones — entitled US — sheds further light on the process of collaboration:

Each time we got together we decided to choose some very definite subject and since there was nothing we had more access to than ourselves the first stone was to be called “us.” Oh yes, the title always came first. It was the only way we could get started. U and S were written on the top center of the stone backwards. I don’t know if he wrote it. I remember decorating the letters to resemble some kind of flag and made it seem like the letters for our country. Then I put something down to do with his broken nose and bumpy forehead and stopped.

From a round hand mirror I eked out a few scratches to represent my face. The combination of the decorated U and S, his face and mine [see top left], made Frank write “…they call us the farters of our country….” I did something, whatever I could, which related in some way to the title of the stone and he either commented on what I had done or took it somewhere else…. Sometimes I would designate an area that I was sure I was going to leave empty. He might write there or if I did put something down I would direct him to write whatever he wished but ask that it start at a specific place and end up a square or rectangular thin or fat shape of words over or around my images.

In this excerpt, Rivers stresses the improvisational character of the work, its status as an event happening rather than a preplanned work of art. Rivers also makes clear that
neither he nor O’Hara directed the other artist during the creation of the lithographs. It was an equal exchange wherein painter and poet explored their ideas together, constantly readjusting their plan as the other artist added new components to the work.

The importance of improvisation and constant adjustment to the work does not mean that it lacks a message. The fact that words and images come onto the surface in a non-hierarchical manner causes each medium to merge with the other in a process that promotes semiotic exchange. Indeed, in *US*, particularly, the text becomes part of the image and the image becomes part of the text.

*US*
Larry Rivers and Frank O’Hara
1957
Perhaps because it was the first of the series, *US* deals with the breakdown between painter and poet, between painting and poetry, the most overtly. While each of the twelve lithographs all explore this idea technically, that is, *US* addresses the dissolution of the barrier between visual and verbal thematically as well. Indeed, the semiotic exchange between visual and verbal signs is the central subject of *US*, which parodies the concept of artist separation and division. The line ‘Poetry belongs to me, Larry and Painting to you’ seems out of place in a work that escapes classification as either visual art or poetry alone. In such a work created by both a painter and a poet, Rivers and O’Hara mock the outdated notion that the artist must stick to his own sphere of creativity.

As Hazel Smith points out, the collaboration might also refer to the verbal and visual spheres in terms of the art milieu in the 1950s when painting was achieving more commercial recognition: ‘poetry was declining/ painting advancing.’ Indeed, Smith notes, “The lithograph itself invokes both pop camp and Abstract Expressionism. Its visual structure mimics comic strips and advertisements, is full of pop iconography, is ironic and camp, but uses abstraction as a technical tool.” Ultimately, the lithograph is highly satirical about the entire art scene. O’Hara places a letter from James Dean at the center of the lithograph that almost bumps into the sign “A HERO of the ‘50’s is arriving in Hollywood.” In the cacophony of poetry fading away and painting advancing, therefore, maybe James Dean is the real hero.

Despite the ironic attempt of the line about poetry and painting to relegate O’Hara and Rivers to their respective craft, the rest of the piece splinters both men so the viewer

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54 Smith, 191.
ultimately cannot distinguish between the artists. The two collaborators appear as themselves in the lithograph but in a way that involves segmentation and dispersal of body parts throughout the piece. The faces of the two men in the upper right-hand corner look remarkably alike. In the upper left-hand corner, their two faces overlap and converge with other images. And in the lower right-hand corner, the two men appear cheek to cheek in a sensual union. In this case, sensuality serves as a metaphor for collaboration and for the two types of sign systems, verbal and visual. Ultimately, the visual images of the artists’ faces contradict the verbal characterization of the two in order to prevent the viewer from interpreting O’Hara’s words in a preordained way.

Furthermore, the lithograph resists hierarchical and fixed relationships between text and image in which image illustrates text or text explains image. The visual images and verbal messages interpenetrate, and in the case of the smudged words “look where it got them,” obscure and transform the lettering itself. Other times, the visual and the verbal make the same statement. For example, the image of O’Hara in heroic pose rests next to the word ‘hero’ and the icon of O’Hara drinking appears to the left (and underneath as well) of the words ‘Parties were “given” we “went.”’ These links likely appear to the observer at different moments and upon different viewings, however, because they are merely implicit. There might be connections or there might not; the images and words sometimes support a certain interpretation of the symbols, sometimes subvert it, and, more often, leave it entirely open.

Significantly, images and words are attributed variable importance throughout the piece, which supports their equal status in the work as a whole. For example, sometimes words are underlined (Painting, Poetry) to emphasize their importance; sometimes they
are smudged and hard to read (“look where it got them”) to undermine their significance. Not only does this technique call into question the importance of the phrase, it adds a visual dimension (underlining, smudging, blackened emphasis, faint lettering) to the words. Rivers remarks on the visual nature of O’Hara’s words in his essay:

“We were fully aware by now that Frank with his limited means was almost as important as myself in the overall visual force of the print…. Frank without realizing it was being called upon to think of things outside of poetry. Besides what they seemed to mean he was using his words as a visual element.

Conversely, sometimes images are clear and bold (the two faces in the upper left-hand corner); sometimes they are smeared and unclear (the faces in the upper right-hand corner). And in the case of the doodles in the “U” and the “S” of the title, the images are confined to the space within the letters, giving the visual a verbal dimension. The merging of the visual and verbal elements of the piece brings the supposedly different subjectivities of painter and poet into a shared subjectivity.

Lastly, there is really no focal point in the piece. The images do not overwhelm the words, the words do not overwhelm the images, and the eye is not drawn into the entire work at any specific point. The arrangement of the words and the images disrupts any spatial connections and allows the eye to travel in a multidirectional way. This arrangement allows the viewer to absorb the material in a way that is unfixed, to travel across the surface via a different route each time. Ultimately, therefore, this lithograph allows O’Hara to avoid the necessity to order his words in a specific way (as he had to

55 Similar, but more successful, to the movement I noted in “Second Avenue.”
with his other attempts at painterly poems). It allowed him to break down the limits of words as well as lineation more than ever before.

Several of the other lithographs in the series accentuate the commonalities between the two art forms as well. *Melancholy Breakfast*, for example, contains semiabstract images of breakfast items, distorted so as to give the impression that one is viewing the scene through the blur of half-sleep or a hangover. O’Hara’s words emphasize the disconnectedness of the images: “the silent egg thinks / and the toaster’s electrical ear waits.” Ultimately, the line at the bottom of the page puts forth the thematic message of the piece: “The elements of disbelief are very strong in the morning.” The words, therefore, make the same statement as the images and achieve a union between the two mediums that reinforces and advances the intention of both artists.

A few of the lithographs in the series fall short of true collaboration. *Springtemps*, for example, consists of a self-contained O’Hara poem on the left and blurred images of butterflies, flowers, and human bodies on the right. Neither the picture nor the poem gains much from this juxtaposition. And the lithograph *Music* is more of an illustrated poem than a poem painting. The bottom of the lithograph reproduces a poem O’Hara had already written entitled “Students.” Rivers himself remarks on the failure of this lithograph to achieve their collaborative goal. He admits that the *Stone* “is a little more old-fashioned: our unintegrated style.” Despite the few lithographs that faltered, however, the overall project marked true collaboration like none before.

It’s funny that, of the two collaborators, the visual artist is the one that chose to write an essay on the project. An excerpt from that essay sums up Rivers’s view on the collaboration and suggests the underlying reason for taking it on:
The hope beneath this venture of tough togetherness seems to be the same as in opera or ballet. That is, the assault on the senses, in this case, coming from two directions, pictorial and poetic, will be twice as strong and moving…. It took two years to make twelve of these stones. There were changes in our work outside of this, in our lives (whew), in our faces (Oy) and these changes are reflected in the differences between the first and last stones. It wasn’t a struggle. That crap has come to an end. If there was difficulty it was finding a way to think about it…..I spoke here a lot about Frank’s response to the physical necessity of arranging his words in relation to my image. How did I respond to the meaning of his words? I think the charged breath of making something on my neck kept me from reacting other than “What can I use in his words to begin.”

This passage conveys Rivers’s intense hope that combining painting and poetry will make his and O’Hara’s art stronger, more moving. He rejoices, “it wasn’t a struggle,” it was an equal exchange between two types of art that only made the other stronger. Rivers admits that O’Hara’s words still had “meaning.” Just as O’Hara cannot eliminate the symbolic import of words in his poems “Second Avenue” and “In Memory of My Feelings,” he cannot entirely eradicate the symbolic level of his words in Stones. But Rivers explains that he only thought about that meaning in one way: what visual possibilities do the inherent meaning of words open up? And how can the collaboration between a painter and a poet subvert, extend, challenge, encourage those possibilities all at the same time?
Conclusion

Frank O’Hara was not a painter. As I discussed in my introduction, poetry remained his primary passion despite his intimate connection with the New York art world. Even though he was not a painter, however, O’Hara’s poetry would have been entirely different had his world not intersected with artists such as Jackson Pollock and Larry Rivers. It would have been entirely different had he not admired the tenets of action painting and all-over art and pushed himself to incorporate those techniques into his poetic style.

My thesis has sought to prove that O’Hara seized upon the example of the Abstract Expressionist and other New York School style painting methods in order to write poetry as free as possible of the influence of New Criticism and its devotion to the tradition of symbolic poetry. As a result, O’Hara’s early poems sacrificed meaning for the sake of perfecting painterly technique. As he discovered after he wrote “Second Avenue,” however, the inherent meaning of words made creating a surface poem devoid of metaphorical meaning undesirable. Frank O’Hara was not a painter, after all, and avoiding all allegiance to past poetic traditions proved impractical.

After the experimental moment of “Second Avenue,” therefore, O’Hara explored ways to acknowledge poetry’s tacit dependence on symbolic devices while still utilizing painterly techniques to weaken that dependence. Indeed, he pulled poems in unexpected directions and subverted the conventional interpretation of symbols by channeling painterly techniques, especially the Abstract Expressionist notion of “all-over” painting.

Despite O’Hara’s attempts to stop readers from digging beneath the surface, critics like Ian Davidson mistakenly assign metaphorical meaning to the symbols O’Hara
employs in his poetry. In his discussion of O’Hara’s early poems, for example, Davidson contends that the poet employs words like “blue” to transcend the surface meaning of the poem and to create a coded message recognizable only to his inner circle. Davidson goes so far as to claim that such words mean the same thing in every poem O’Hara writes. Blue, for example, always denotes male homosexuality in Davidson’s estimation.56

A look at Davidson’s close reading of O’Hara’s 1950 poem “Today” sheds further light on his misguided effort to assign symbolic meaning to the images in O’Hara’s poetry. Below, the poem in full:

Oh! kangaroos, sequins, chocolate sodas!
You really are beautiful! Pearls
Harmonicas, jujubes, aspirins! All
The stuff they’ve always talked about

Still makes a poem a surprise!
These things are with us every day
even on beachheads and biers. They
do have meaning. They’re strong as rocks. (CP, 15)

In order to correctly interpret this poem, Davidson insists, one must “examine the individual words themselves.” He goes on to assign a network of associated meanings to the words in the poem, explaining, “jungaroos and aspirin are either Word War II or 1950s slang which refer to prostitution, sequins reinforce the notion of the poem as a

56 Ian Davidson, “Symbolism and Code in Frank O’Hara’s Early Poems,” Textual Practice, 790 (October 2009), pp. 787-802. All subsequent references to Davidson derive from this article.
theatrical camp performance, and pearls, jujubes, rocks, beachhead, and harmonicas are all slang references to semen, genetalia, or oral sex.”

Although critics have a wide array of views on the poem, none assign as an overt or unified meaning to “Today” as Davidson does. John Ashbery, in his introduction to The Collected Poems, dismisses the poem as “Parisian artiness” and the “conversational tone…a borrowed one” (p. x). Gregory Bredbeck in his 1993 essay “Barthes Text/O’Hara’s Trick,” similarly bypasses the individual words and their meaning and says that the “content is mostly in terms of tone, an imitation of the breathy exclamatory conversations associated not with poetry but with gay bars.” And Marjorie Perloff calls the poem “merely clever,” a piling up of “bizarre disjunctive images in exclamatory line units.” This thesis lends itself primarily to Perloff’s reading of the poem. The poem combines O’Hara’s college dalliances in surrealism with his experimentation in the colloquial, everyday style of Williams. The disjunctive nature of the images O’Hara chooses resists a singular message, even if they “do have meaning,” in the unavoidable sense of the inherent meaning associated with certain words. Overall, the poem represents a pre-“Second Avenue” experiment in ways to employ surrealist technique as a way of resisting ontological depth. It asserts the necessity of poetry remaining “a surprise” and shifts pronouns and referents in much the same way as O’Hara’s later painterly poems.

Despite my objections to Davidson’s reading of the poem, I would like to acknowledge here that his assertions do nod toward a line of reasoning that is beyond the

58 Perloff, 43.
scope of this thesis; namely, the homosexual undertones and motivation for much of O’Hara’s poetry. Perloff touches on this facet of his work, suggesting a link between O’Hara’s sexuality and the painterly influences he pursues. Indeed, she notes that O’Hara’s aesthetic moves from an early association with macho painters like Pollock and de Kooning to the adoption of the conceptualism of John Cage-Merce Cunningham-Jasper Johns-Robert Rauschenberg circle of the fifties and sixties, “a circle of gay, if notably closeted and discreet artists.”

Perhaps this suggestion explains why O’Hara chose to explore love and relationships in the collaboration with Rivers that chapter three of this thesis explores. Indeed, Hazel Smith suggests that the mixture of Pop Camp and Abstract Expressionism surfaces in both O’Hara’s poetry and Rivers’s painting. Perhaps O’Hara’s proclivity for fusing these painterly styles in the same way as Rivers contributed to his desire to work so closely with the artist.

Whatever his justification for collaborating with Rivers, their joint project *Stones* provided a platform to fuse the visual and verbal and ultimately employ visual art as a means to subvert the symbolic property of words. Not only did the collaboration provide compelling commentary on the power of combining art forms, it solidified O’Hara’s insistence that poetry could benefit from maintaining the surface of a work in nearly the same way as painting could. Despite this intense integration, however, O’Hara did not draw images on the stones and Rivers did not write words. The visual and verbal can complement each other, they can adopt the techniques of the other medium, but they can never be the same. Frank O’Hara could channel painting to write innovative, unprecedented poetry, but he could never be a painter.

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59 Perloff, 11
Works Consulted


Ware, Karen. “Frank O’Hara’s Oranges: The Relations Between Poetry, Painting, and
