“Personism” and Consumerism:
Reading in O’Hara’s Love and Lunch Poems

by

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To my parents.
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Abstract

Frank O’Hara’s 1959 essay “Personism: A Manifesto” figures a poem as the middle participant in a sexual threesome. Positioning a poem directly between the poet and reader, “Personism” suggests that meaning is made through collaboration. Through proposing this collaboration, O’Hara offers his poetry as a lived experience rather than as a commodity. Using both poetic theory, as well as scholarship on postwar consumerism and advertising, this thesis aims to determine how “Personism” can be seen as a reaction to the commodification of things, people, and poetry.

Much of the study acts as an extension of Caroline Miller and Susan Rosenbaum’s writings on how the poet navigates a consumerist society. Similar to the work of Miller, this thesis stems for an understanding of the roles of reader and poet as emphasized in “Personism.” This thesis explores what “Personism” and O’Hara’s poetry can illuminate about the role of readers in a consumerist society. In this study, the term “reader” does not necessarily refer to the reader of poetry, but also to those who interpret landscapes, things, and people.

The first chapter deals specifically with the poet’s collection Lunch Poems and the poet as a reader of the urban landscape. Media consumption, as well as advertising, greatly affects the speaker’s interpretation or “reading” of his environment. This altering of interpretation also affects the speaker’s ability to create and translate sincere identity. The chapter reveals these consequences of consumption in close readings of “A Step Away From Them,” “Poem (Lana Turner Has Collapsed!),” and “The Day Lady Died.” The following chapter looks at how an outside reader helps protect the affection described in intimate love poems from commodification. This chapter builds off Caroline Miller’s work, which argues that the poet saves brand name objects from commercial abstraction by positioning them between the speaker and lover in these poems. It also challenges this argument by suggesting that the affection between speaker and lover may not be totally distinct from the commercial sphere. The final chapter thinks about O’Hara himself as a text and how the myth, celebrity, and nostalgia surrounding his figure complicate his Personist poetic intentions. The chapter also asks whether or not O’Hara as a figure remains as vibrant as his poetry. In conclusion, this study begins to tease out the ways in which O’Hara might advise maintaining a sense of reality in an increasingly abstract and commercial world.

Keywords: Consumption, reading, mass media, advertisements, commodification, texts
# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Short Titles</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figures</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One: Reading Urban Spaces</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A Step Away From Them”</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!)”</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Day Lady Died”</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: Reading Love</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of the Lover</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love and Consumption</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of the Reader</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three: Reading Frank</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Mobile to Fixed</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank O’Hara and Don Draper</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Status of the Personist Poem</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Consulted</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Figures

i. Marilyn Monroe on the set of *Seven Year Itch*, 11
ii. Camel Cigarette Advertisement at Times Square, 12
iii. Alex Katz, *Frank O’Hara*, 45
iv. Elaine de Kooning, *Frank O’Hara*, 46
Introduction

“At last the poem is between two people rather than two pages.”

— Frank O’Hara, “Personism”

For his 1957 anthology *The New American Poetry*, editor Donald Allen requested that each contributor write a statement on poetics. New York School poet Frank O’Hara sent Allen a witty essay entitled “Personism: A Manifesto.” Although Allen ultimately rejected the essay for failing to reflect the poet’s “Odes,” “Personism” remains a touchstone bit of writing for American poetics (Diggory). The essay asserts a “new movement” created by O’Hara, one that will move the poem “between two people rather than two pages” (*CP* 499).

Although remarkably tongue-in-cheek, the essay enlightens many aspects of O’Hara’s poetic, particularly his eschewal of self-reflection and moral. He writes, “Too many poets try to act like a middle-aged mother trying to get her kids to eat too much cooked meat, and potatoes with drippings (tears). I don’t give a damn whether they eat or not” (*CP* 498). Unlike more didactic poets, O’Hara was averse to forcing meaning at his readers. Moreover, he didn’t want to forcefully evoke the sentimental where it need not be evoked. This is not to say that O’Hara thought all poetry should be light, but rather, that he did not particularly favor poetry that was “dripping” with overt meaning and determined sentiment.

The essay also helps to explain the seemingly spontaneous, off-the-cuff quality of the poet’s lines: “You just go on your nerve. If someone’s chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don’t turn around and shout, ‘Give it up! I was a track star for Mineola Prep’” (*CP* 498). Movement, as pointed out by both Susan Rosenbaum and Roger Gilbert, plays an
important role in O’Hara’s poetry, and relates very much to his distaste for self-reflection. Poetry, in his opinion, should be more instinctual than thought-out. In a way, the writing of poetry should be a reaction, just as running would be your immediate reaction to a knife-wielding stranger.

“Personism” testifies to a unique and tense moment in the politics of American poetry. Poets have been concerned about the commodification of their work since the invention of the printing press; however, with the rise of postwar consumerism, these anxieties only increased. Disparaging both self-reflection and self-removal, “Personism” challenges the values of the postwar marketplace and insists that both the poet and the reader determine the meaning of a poem. This sort of collaboration offers poetry as a process, a lived experience rather than a commodity.

This thesis explores what “Personism” and O’Hara’s poetry can illuminate about the role of readers in a consumerist society. In this study, the term “reader” will not necessarily refer to the reader of poetry, but also to those who interpret landscapes, things, and people. Postwar marketing and consumer culture greatly affected the way people read not only texts, but also their own environments. Advertisers emphasized images rather than production or quality, thus distorting the reality of and behind physical objects. As scholar Martin Halliwell puts it in American Culture in the 1950s, “Advertising culture and bright surfaces of 1950s commodities were, for most, more attractive than thoughtful discussion about labour value, overproduction and regulating markets” (Halliwell 21). Halliwell argues that the rise of mass media in conjunction with the rise of consumerism challenged the possibility for a “raw” or “unmediated” experience of one’s environment (11). Essentially, advertising and consumption altered the way
people understood things in their own environment.¹ This thesis is interested in how O’Hara’s poetry, which details much of the New York cityscape, reacts to this distortion.

This is certainly not the first study to consider the poet in relation to postwar consumerism.² Susan B. Rosenbaum’s book *Professing Sincerity* (2007), which she developed from the dissertation *Confessional Commerce* (1997), argues that as O’Hara moves through the city, he charts new pathways of desire, resisting the commodification of both his poetry and himself. Caroline Miller reads O’Hara’s nostalgia for concrete objects in her dissertation *Abstract, Concrete* (2011) and finds that O’Hara valued objects personalized in their being interposed between two people, much like a poem in “Personism.”

O’Hara’s collection *Lunch Poems*, which the poet published in 1964 with Lawrence Ferlinghetti at City Light Books, documents the poet’s reaction to and reading of the urban landscape. It is largely held that O’Hara wrote most of the poems while on lunch break from his job at the Museum of Modern Art. The poet describes the process of his writing on the back jacket:

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

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¹ Halliwell also suggests that during the mid twentieth century, “‘consumption had replaced ‘activity’ as the dominant mode of cultural behaviour” (Halliwell 13). This thesis will also examine how O’Hara’s poetry reacts to this shift.

² In addition to the two critics that I am about to cite, both Hazel Smith and Multu Brasling, among others, have discussed O’Hara's poetry in relation to its capitalist context.
The reader travels with the speaker as he moves through the streets and occasionally stops to eat or to buy a pack of cigarettes. He consumes not only goods, but media as well, reacting to headlines and advertisements in his midst. The collection fluctuates between the speaker’s insistent self-narration, a study of the “real” cityscape, and a very evident absorption in a capitalist, consumerist culture.

The first chapter, entitled “Reading Urban Spaces,” looks exclusively at *Lunch Poems* and the ways in which the poems in the collection demonstrate an anxiety about how consumption, be it of media or products, affects one’s reading of his material environment. Starting with “A Step Away From Them,” I think about how mass consumption and advertising reduce physical bodies to flat surfaces and images in the eyes of the consumer. I then use “Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!)” to examine O’Hara’s exploration of how the consumption of media alters one’s independent voice and unique interpretation of his environment. In a close reading of “The Day Lady Died,” I look at how the speaker attempts to read and create subjectivity through consumption patterns and yet discovers emptiness when faced with human loss. *Lunch Poems* allows us to consider O’Hara as not only an authoritative poetic figure, but also as a reader of his own culture. Overall, I find that the poems perform how consumerist culture not only challenges the reading of the urban environment, but also the construction and translation of authentic identity.

In Chapter Two, “Reading Love,” I look at our role as readers, particularly of O’Hara’s love poems. By first examining how the direct address of the love poems complicates the Personist relationship between reader and poet, I use “Personism” to look at two levels of a love poem: the dialogue between speaker and lover, and the poem between poet and reader. I use Caroline Miller’s thinking to examine the first level of the poem and its work. Miller uses the
outline of “Personism” to explain how O’Hara imbues abstracted, commodified objects with life by placing them between the speaker and lover in his poems to Vincent Warren. I analyze the complex presentation of love in O’Hara’s poetry, noting that the poems often portray love as consumption. Expanding Miller’s thinking, I draw back to consider the poem in the context of a read object. Through this consideration, the chapter concludes that the reader of the poem helps in keeping the expressed love from being commodified.

After examining both our role as readers of O’Hara’s love poems and the consumer’s role as a reader and narrator of his own environment, I briefly consider how O’Hara has been read as a figure not only in his own moment, but posthumously as well. My analysis ranges from a study on the way he has been portrayed in works of art to the way he is written about to his more recent appearance on AMC’s television show *Mad Men*. This chapter, “Reading Frank,” will consider how the celebrity, nostalgia, and myth that surround O’Hara as a figure—even as an image—challenge his poetic aims presented in “Personism.” Ultimately, the chapter will consider whether or not O’Hara’s cultural identity remains as vibrant as his poetry.

The aim of this thesis is to determine how “Personism” acts as a reaction to the commodification of things, people, and poetry. Moreover, it thinks about the possibility of the existence of a truly “Personist” poem, a work that exists squarely between the poet and the reader. Finally, this study begins to tease out the ways O’Hara might advise maintaining a sense of reality in an increasingly abstract world.
Chapter One: Reading Urban Spaces

Even today, “Personism” remains one of the O’Hara’s most discussed writings. In the essay, O’Hara condemns the forcing of meaning or feeling onto the reader by overt symbolism and moral. A truly “Personist” poem would exist as a collaboration between poet and reader—“Lucky Pierre style” (CP 499). This analogy places the poem between two lovers, as the middle participant in a threesome. As the poet and reader both interact with the text, the poem is “correspondingly gratified” (499).

This emphasis on collaboration indicates a desire for a sort of communication not mediated through in-depth psychoanalysis or self-reflection on the part of the poet. O’Hara says he created “Personism” when he realized that instead of writing a poem, he “could have used the telephone” to communicate (CP 499). The telephone acts as both an instrument of intimacy and a mode of mediation. While the telephone allows for a personal interaction, in that the two callers hear the tone and the inflection of the other’s speech, it also mediates the callers’ dialogue through physical separation. Likely, O’Hara valued the candidness and immediacy of the phone call. A telephone conversation achieves the frankness of a personal conversation, while still maintaining a degree of separation inherent between poet and reader.3

Concerns about poetic mediation influenced much of the discourse dominating postwar American poetry. Poets were interested and anxious about the ways in which their own active participation in a consumerist society affected their ability to produce sincere poetry that existed

3 In his monograph of the poet, Alan Feldman suggests that “Personism” was less of a movement and more of “an attitude that suited [O’Hara] in the writing of certain poems.” Feldman adds, “He wants the informal diction of the telephone rather than the verbal structure usually associated with the printed page. This desire reflects his interest in interpersonal truth and his rejection of the black and white truth of moral stricture” (Feldman 46).
as more than a commodity. While simultaneously trying to sustain sincerity and negotiate the literary marketplace, poetic sincerity, which ideally is distanced from capitalism, becomes a commodity. This commodification draws suspicion from critics—has the poet or author reimagined his person to be more attractive to the consumer, or has he reproduced capitalist language or ideas? In her study of sincerity in British Romantic and Postwar American poetry, Susan Rosenbaum writes that both the British romantic and post-1945 American moments in poetic history “reveal the contours of a long-standing culture sensibility . . . in which the practice of writing for a literary marketplace generates a recurrent anxiety about whether authors can be trusted, resulting in a paradoxical desire for and deep skepticism of sincerity’s rhetorical forms” (Rosenbaum 5). Rosenbaum’s study reveals how the marketplace both demanded and challenged poetic sincerity, as well as how that paradox influenced many poets of these two moments.

Although O’Hara writes in “Meditations in an Emergency” that it is important to “affirm the least sincere,” his eschewal of dramatic self-reflection and implied meaning suggest that he was somewhat interested in maintaining poetic sincerity by not stretching the poem to force meaning (CP 197). Unlike confessionals such as Robert Lowell, whose poetry suggests a self-analysis and corresponding morals, O’Hara’s poetry often appears light in tone. But even if O’Hara’s speakers appear to be casual and even sometimes flippant about their situations, many of the poems reveal an anxiety, or at least a consideration, of how

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4 According to Rosenbaum, a claim to sincerity in an autobiographical texts implies “that the author is who she says she is and means what she says: in short, that she speaks openly and honestly” (Rosenbaum 2).

5 O’Hara would often write poems quickly with little revision. At a reading with Lowell, O’Hara shocked the confessional poet when he announced that he had written “Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!)” on his way over (LeSueur 279).
someone’s role in a consumerist society can shape his thinking. O’Hara has a complicated and often muddled relationship with postwar consumerism and media. At times he does appear to be, as Miller notes, “nostalgic” for real things that seem to have been replaced by images and ideals pulled from advertisements. On the other hand, the speakers in his poems consume profusely. And while the speakers often revel in the material reality of an object, they are also fascinated by the advertisements that cover the urban landscape. The poems do not tend to resolve questions of identity or sincerity, but rather, they perform the then-contemporary confusions surrounding these questions, often seeming to propose multiple readings of the same poem. Three famous lunch poems, “A Step Away From Them,” “Poem (Lana Turner Has Collapsed!),” and “The Day Lady Died” exhibit these concerns in distinct and rich ways.

“A Step Away From Them” (1956)

Perhaps the most notable “lunch” poem is “A Step Away From Them,” which Roger Gilbert calls “O’Hara’s purest walk poem” (Gilbert 185). As the speaker observes the chaotic city streets, his role as a consumer of both goods and media greatly shades his interpretation of the urban environment. By noting how the speaker interprets or “reads” people, places, and

6 In my close readings of O'Hara's poetry, I choose to refer to the poetic persona as the "speaker" rather than as the poet, although this is quite uncommon in the scholarly discourse surrounding O’Hara’s work. I do this because I find that his poems "perform" sincerity without necessarily reflecting O’Hara’s true self. Hazel Smith discusses the difficulty in naming the persona in O'Hara's poetry in *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara* in the first chapter, under the section “Real Text, Real Life.”

7 Gilbert qualifies the poem as the "purest" one of its kind on account of its lacking a hierarchy of meaning and importance between the different parts. He argues that other lunch poems such as "The Day Lady Died" have an evident climax and trajectory, thus spoil the aim of a "walk poem" (Gilbert 185-190). I would, however, assert that both "The Day Lady Died" and "A Step Away From Them" appear to emphasize the fullness of human life in contrast to the inevitable feeling of emptiness that comes with commercial consumption.
things, one can see how a culture of mass consumption tends to transform real landscapes into flat surfaces.  

It’s my lunch hour, so I go for a walk among the hum-colored cabs. First, down the sidewalk where laborers feed their dirty glistening torsos sandwiches and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets on. They protect them from falling bricks, I guess. Then onto the avenue where skirts are flipping above heels and blow up over grates. The sun is hot, but the cabs stir up the air. I look at bargains in wristwatches. There are cats playing in sawdust. (CP 257)

The speaker characterizes his environment by its surface. He describes the construction workers as erotic visuals rather than as people, using synecdoche to objectify them as “glistening torsos.” The workers’ “yellow hats” appear somehow aesthetically tied to the “hum-colored cabs.”

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8 I use the term “reader” to refer to someone who “interprets” the landscape. I also like Hazel Smith’s phrasing of this reading as “filtering.” She writes, “The roads, landmarks and routines of New York become a poem-as-map filtered through the consciousness of the poet” (Smith 54).

9 There does, however, appear to be some depth here, as the speaker consumes these men as visual pleasures, while they simultaneously consume “sandwiches/and Coca-Cola.” Although it
cabs” on the street. Again, these hats become surfaces rather than utilitarian objects, much like the men who wear them. The speaker acknowledges the hats’ intended use, but does so almost flippantly—“They protect them from falling/bricks I guess.” The color and aesthetic qualities of the hats take precedence over their use value. Here, the speaker demonstrates a surface level consumerist reading of the urban landscape in which “glistening bodies blur into glistening commodities” (Rosenbaum 68).  

In the following lines, the speaker’s consumption of media affects his interpretation of the urban landscape. When he notes that “skirts are flipping/above heels and blow up over/grates,” he evidently alludes to the famous film still of Marilyn Monroe from *The Seven Year Itch* (1954) in which her dress is flying up as she stands over a street grate. The media consumer’s mind has been infiltrated by these prevalent images, and through association, these images impose on the speaker’s reading of the landscape. One also wonders how much Marilyn’s picture has caused the speaker to visually misread his surroundings. How many times does he actually see a woman’s skirt fly up over the course of one lunch hour?

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10 Likely, the speaker's exposure to a plethora of advertisements trained his eye to see surface rather than depth. In the postwar years, production greatly increased, so in turn, so did advertising. In *Waste Makers* (1962), Vance Packard writes that for postwar industries the “challenge was to develop a public that would always have an appetite as voracious as its machines” (Packard 37).
As the speaker walks on, the poem further demonstrates a unique reading of the visual landscape.

On
to Times Square, where the sign
blows smoke over my head, and higher
the waterfall pours lightly. A
Negro stands in a doorway with a
toothpick, languorously agitating.
A blonde chorus girl clicks: he
smiles and rubs his chin. Everything
suddenly honks: it is 12:40 of
The first two images in this stanza, the sign blowing smoke and the waterfall, bring to life artificial surfaces. The sign blowing smoke is a Camel Cigarette advertisement contemporary to O’Hara’s New York. The waterfall describes the waterfall on the Bond building facade, already remodeled into a Pepsi advertisement when O’Hara wrote the poem (C. Gray). The speaker’s animation of these surfaces suggests a recreation of the environment where actual surfaces become active participants, and actual living things become surfaces.

Interestingly, the speaker also erases the consumerist meanings of the ads. He sees them as a natural part of his environment rather than as advertisements. However, he seems to commodify the people in this poem, using capitalist, surface-level descriptions to characterize
them. Using visual typing, the poem flattens actual people. Rosenbaum writes, “O’Hara singles out individuals in the crowd based on race, nationality, or profession, as well as the status of power accorded them in the economy” (Rosenbaum 68). The speaker identifies people by their race or appearance, marking the man in this stanza as a “Negro” and the chorus girl as “blonde.” The one sentiment noted is “languorously agitating” and it does not even have a clear owner. Is the man agitating the girl? The girl agitating him? And how can one be both languorous and agitating all at once?11 The sentiment becomes separated from its source and shades the surface of the scene.

Rosenbaum suggests that the emphasis on visualization and aesthetics is purely for pleasure, that “the parade of difference before his eyes constitutes an enjoyable spectacle in which O’Hara seems to un-self-reflexively participate as he eats lunch” (Rosenbaum 68). Indeed the speaker does seem to achieve some satisfaction from playing with the visual cues.

Neon in daylight is a
great pleasure, as Edwin Denby would
write, as are light bulbs in daylight.
I stop for a cheeseburger at JULIET’S CORNER. Giulietta Masina, wife of
Federico Fellini, è bell’attrice.
And chocolate malted. A lady in
foxes on such a day puts her poodle
in a cab. (CP 258)

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11 Rosenbaum offers one solution to this ambiguity: the man is agitated because the economy imposes his leisure, leaving him little agency (Rosenbaum 68).
This reveling in aesthetic satisfaction is coupled by a performance of a media consumer’s associational consciousness. Upon reflecting on his own love for “Neon in daylight,” he is drawn to the poetry of his New York School contemporary Edwin Denby. And when he sees “Juliet’s Corner,” he thinks of the wife of Italian director Federico Fellini, whose name happens to sound similar to Juliet. As the speaker observes his environment, he recalls outside texts and imposes them on the present moment, densely complicating the significance of his own environment.

After pondering over Denby’s poetry and Italian actresses, the speaker at last appears to return to the moment and to his lunch. We might assume the “chocolate-malted” goes with the cheeseburger (as part of the speaker’s lunch) and that the speaker simply put the meal off during the tangent on Fellini’s wife. But although this move back towards the food appears to be a move back to the present, the poem has already shifted to a more ambiguous moment. The speaker types the woman getting in the cab by her clothes—but this is different from the typing in the second stanza: whereas we would assume the “Negro” and the “chorus girl” are actually present at the moment of the speaker’s lunch hour, the woman here appears to have been or to be imagined, described as being present on “such a day,” rather than being present “today.” The woman appears, as do the skirts over grates, as influenced by outside texts and images. In fact, it seems as though the speaker advertises an idealized New York afternoon rather than narrating a real one.¹²

He begins to doubt the advertisement when he remembers the deaths of his friends:

¹² Interestingly, Roger Gilbert seems to suggest the opposite. He proposes that by introducing ordinary aspects of the city in a slightly different manner (i.e. "hum-colored" instead of "yellow" taxis), the poem refreshes the readers’ experience of reality by defamiliarizing the familiar (Gilbert 180). One could say that the speaker in this poem performs a contradictory relationship with capitalism. In some ways, the speaker allows advertisements and consumerist groupthink to guide his interpretation of his surroundings, and in other ways, he pushes back against these institutions, enlivening the environment.
There are several Puerto Ricans on the avenue today, which makes it beautiful and warm. First Bunny died, then John Latouche, then Jackson Pollock. But is the earth as full as life was full, of them? And one has eaten and one walks, past the magazines with nudes and the posters for BULLFIGHT and the Manhattan Storage Warehouse, which they’ll soon tear down. I used to think they had the Armory Show there. (CP 258)

Although the speaker finds pleasure in the typified aesthetic of the Puerto Ricans, he can’t help but grieve the inevitable loss of human life. He wonders about the difference between the visual surface of the urban landscape and the vibrant lives of Bunny, Latouche, and Pollack. During his lunch hour, the speaker consumes things, food, media, and sights. But even all of that consumption cannot seem to measure up to the fulfillment of true human relationships. As Rosenbaum puts it, the moment “juxtaposes a material and spiritual fullness, suggesting the emptiness he feels in a landscape that restricts the language of desire to ‘fulfilling’ material appetites through a purchase” (Rosenbaum 68). Indeed, after this pondering, the speaker’s tone becomes distinctively less celebratory and more mundane.
In the final stanza, the speaker consumes once more, this time a glass of papaya juice:

A glass of papaya juice

and back to work. My heart is in my

pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy. (CP 258)

Despite the speaker’s focus on his external surroundings for most of the poem, he now shifts to something more enclosed: his heart, which he figures as a collection by Pierre Reverdy tucked in his pocket. Rosenbaum suggests that by placing the poems in his pocket, the poet both encloses them and allows the to move through the city. She insists that this reflects the poet’s own movement, as he remains open yet closed to the commercial bustle of the city. She compares the positioning of the poems to be like the poem in “Personism,” Reverdy’s collection now directly between O’Hara’s body and the city. Rosenbaum writes,

O’Hara’s poetry demands an active negotiation of the city in all its flux, noise, traffic, and complexity. It is in this sense that O’Hara’s poems ‘walk’: received, they elicit efforts to consider the forces that shape everyday life in the postwar city as one ‘walks through’ and reads it oneself. The spontaneity and modernity of O’Hara’s poetry resides in this intimate collaboration with the future reader-consumer. (Rosenbaum 85-86)

The “active negotiation of the city” performed by the speaker is his interpretation or “reading” of the urban landscape. When considered in light of “Personism,” the city or, as Rosenbaum puts it, “the visual landscape of advertisements,” acts as the poem or text (67). The speaker actively interprets the text, as a reader would a poem in “Personism.” At the other end of the text or

13 Marjorie Perloff also considers this visual landscape as a surface rather than a threedimensional environment; she writes that O'Hara's poems during this period embraced a “flat literalism” (Perloff 125).
landscape are the institutions that produce such advertisements and the economy of type: capitalism, culture, and urbanity.

In Poet Among Painters Marjorie Perloff suggests that throughout the speaker’s active negotiation of the city, the poem’s horizons broaden, so as to expand from the poet’s consciousness to a more public one: “O’Hara switches from ‘I’ to ‘one’ . . . making the poem’s seemingly personal situation (going for a walk during lunch hour) fictive, theatrical” (Perloff 136). In the following poem the speaker’s voice performs, on account of his participation in consumerism, a confusion with a broader, public consciousness.

“Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!)” (1962)

O’Hara’s poems demonstrate mass media often altering the subject’s perception of his own life and environment. Newspaper headlines and celebrity culture cause the speaker to contextualize his own life and environment at a scale that exceeds his immediate, material environment. In this way, O’Hara shows us that a newspaper headline affects not only the speaker’s reading of himself, but the way he presents himself and his environment to the reader. “Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!)” explores how cultural media, such as a newspaper, alters the way one interprets and narrates his own environment.

Despite what Roger Gilbert calls Lunch Poems’ “habitual use of present tense,” which he claims, “seems to cancel out all distance between represented experience and representational text,” “Poem (Lana Turner Has Collapsed)” is largely written in the past tense (Gilbert 176). Because of this retrospective narration, the poem doesn’t lend itself to a clear, single reading. On one hand, the speaker plays the role of the herald, delivering the news that movie star Lana Turner has collapsed. On the other hand, the poem is organized as a story about how the speaker came to be the reader of the headline and how it causes him to reflect on his own life in relation
to Lana’s. And at times, it seems the poem might simply be an excuse for the speaker to talk about himself.

Lana Turner has collapsed!
I was trotting along and suddenly
it started raining and snowing
and you said it was hailing
but hailing hits you on the head
hard so it was really snowing and
raining and I was in such a hurry
to meet you but the traffic
was acting exactly like the sky
and suddenly I see a headline

LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!
there is no snow in Hollywood
there is no rain in California
I have been to lots of parties
and acted perfectly disgraceful
but I never actually collapsed

oh Lana Turner we love you get up (CP 449)

The speaker begins the poem with an exclamation—“Lana Turner has collapsed!” At this point, the reader does not realize that the exclamation has been pulled from a headline. For all he knows, the words are the speaker’s own. The speaker plays two roles in the poem: that of the reader and that of the writer. He plays the role of the writer in that he relays to us his encounter
with the news, and he acts as a reader in that he also must interpret the news of Lana’s collapse. In these roles, the imposition of the news on the speaker's consciousness limits his agency. It is difficult to discern whether the speaker relays the headline because he thinks it is important or because he has been made to think whatever is on the front page of the newspaper must be important.

At first, it seems the speaker writes the poem as a means to relay the news to a friend or to the reader that “Lana Turner has collapsed!” But he does not initially cite the headline, and so it is unclear as to how he heard the news; maybe another friend told him, maybe he heard it on the radio. But it is important to realize that ultimately he did not see Lana collapse. Reading the headline caused the speaker to begin contemplating Lana and Hollywood. Because we do not know the speaker’s motives, it is difficult to determine how we should treat the shift between the exclamation “Lana Turner has collapsed!” to the narration “I was trotting along . . .” Although the backstory as to how the speaker encountered the headline, which includes a discussion on perhaps the most mundane of topics—the weather—seems irrelevant, the speaker seems to find its inclusion necessary.

It could be that the speaker’s narration of his walk is an effort to demonstrate a difference between his thinking before and after he reads the headline. When he begins the narration nothing, even the weather, seems of any consequence greater than making the speaker late. It is not until after the speaker says he saw the headline that the weather becomes so important, as it marks the distance between his own world and Lana’s—“there is no snow in Hollywood/there is no rain in California.” Through the narration, the poem performs the way in which the headline causes the speaker to reevaluate the importance of certain aspects of his environment.
That shift from the news of Lana’s collapse to the speaker’s self-reflection makes the poem oddly comical and perhaps not even about Lana at all. It seems that the speaker uses the news of Lana’s collapse to talk about himself, to make it clear that although his own drinking might be excessive, he has “never actually collapsed.” Maybe this self-interest actually demonstrates the extreme measure to which the speaker identifies with the movie star, but more likely, it demonstrates how the speaker mediates his own life and self-reflection through texts like the headline, and also how these texts cause him to perceive intimacy with people like Lana. That is to say, the poem performs how the media greatly affects the speaker’s “active negotiation” of his life and environment.

More than the poem acts as a demonstration, it appears like a performance. The speech is sometimes over-the-top (“oh Lana we love you get up”).14 What’s more, because the reader learns midway through that the opening exclamation simply repeats the headline, he begins to understand that in some regard, the speaker has appropriated the voice of the newspaper. So it becomes entirely unclear which lines can be attributed to the speaker’s voice and which lines might be attributed to his performing the rhetoric of pop media.

This confusion raises the question: does the speaker care about Lana at all? Admittedly, this question is never resolved. It’s actually unclear who, if anyone, in this poem loves or cares about the ailing starlet. The “we” that begs the movie star to get up might be a general “we,” the public in which the speaker includes himself, or the “we” might not even include the speaker. Because the speaker has in some ways taken up the voice of the newspaper, it’s impossible to tell

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14 Miller argues that this call for Lana to "get up" also functions as a plea for Lana to get up off the paper. In this interpretation, Lana exists very much like the "flat" or "surface-like" construction workers in "A Step Away From Them" (Miller 83).
whether or not the lines reflect some degree of his own thinking and feeling or whether they reflect a humorous ventriloquism in which he assumes the voice of the newspaper.

**“The Day Lady Died” (1959)**

“The Day Lady Died” further explores the question of complex identity. In this poem, the reading of material reality, along with the reading of advertisements, is central to how the speaker understands both his identity and the identity of others. Here, there is a focus on the reality of material objects and physical beings in light of a consumerist society. The poem is an elegy to Billie Holiday, but for the first several stanzas, it seems to be much more about consumption that it does about the singer.

In his memoir *Digressions on Some Poems*, O’Hara’s longtime roommate Joe LeSueur recounts the history of “The Day Lady Died.” LeSueur remembers listening to O’Hara talk about seeing Holiday perform at the 5 Spot towards the end of her life, after the ailing singer was barred from performing at typical venues on account of drug charges: “... it became something I wanted to have experienced, a memory I coveted, and for a while I was so hung up on it that I went as far as to lie to someone about having heard Billie Holiday that night” (LeSueur 206-207). At the end of O’Hara’s poem, the speaker recalls his own memory of the night and how Holiday “whispered a song along the keyboard.” Although O’Hara, unlike LeSueur, actually saw Holiday perform that night, “The Day Lady Died” suggests that the memory his roommate “coveted” is not something even O’Hara can tangibly and indisputably “have.” In discussing the performance, LeSueur admits that although he remembers the beginning of the night at the 5 Spot, his own memory seems quite different from those of friends like Kenneth Koch. Many of the roommates’ friends have been asked to recall the night during discussions of O’Hara’s poem.
Interestingly, the memories of O'Hara’s friends are brought to new importance with the success of the poem. Although different, everyone’s memory of Holiday’s performance is linked and influenced by a poem published years after the gig. LeSueur asks, “What in heaven’s name…will [Koch] have remembered by the time of the next O’Hara panel!” (LeSueur 209). Lived experience, as evidenced by the imperfect recollections of the night, cannot be immortalized or kept pure by memory.15

These recollections and the poem itself attempt to immortalize something quite fleeting: the talent of a disturbed and magnificent artist. It’s no wonder that O’Hara’s friends, all artists and writers, desired to hold on to Holiday for so long; she was an inspiring, talented musician. But as is obvious from the discrepancies in their memories, it's impossible to immortalize the reality of a moment or person. O’Hara’s elegy considers this desire to hold onto and own a contingent reality, and the disheartening inability to realize it.

Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of this elegy is the fact that the all stanzas except for the last appear to have nothing to do with Holiday. Instead, they describe acts of consumption, in which the speaker buys gifts for friends, eats lunch, and buy cigarettes, before finally seeing the news of “her” death (interestingly, he never actually names Holiday in the poem) on the front-page of the New York Post. The poem begins in a manner quite far from the sentimental:

It is 12:20 in New York on a Friday

three days after Bastille day, yes

15 This of course also suggests something about the possibility of Personist poetry, as a poem between two people should offer itself as “lived experience” rather than as an unwavering narrative. However, experience in a Personist poem is meant to constantly change with each new reader, so it is unlike the very specific memory of Holiday at the 5 Spot that no one can seem to get quite right.
it is 1959 and I go get a shoe shine
because I will get off the 4:19 in East Hampton
at 7:15 and then go straight to dinner
and I don't know the people who will feed me (CP 325)

The speaker grounds himself in the present by offering the exact date and time. He also specifies his location, setting a rigid tone for the following stanzas. The actions that follow appear to be fixed moments. They do not appear to be contemplative, as the speaker moves in a straight temporal line from one errand to the next. This forward motion echoes “Personism”: “If someone's chasing you with a knife you don't turn around and yell “‘Give it up already! I was a track star for Mineola Prep!’” (CP 498). The speaker keeps his narration moving. The poem negates “to know,” which is the only verb in this stanza that does not suggest some sort of physical movement. For the entirety of the first stanza, the speaker demonstrates a fixation on the reality of the current moment, as well as a desire to consume bits of this present.

But nearly all of the speaker’s actions follow consumerist desires rather than an independent and uninfluenced understanding of reality.

I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun
and have a hamburger and a malted and buy
an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets
in Ghana are doing these days (CP 325)

Here, the speaker enjoys the accessibility of the lunch counter and international texts. But what does he hope to gain through this consumption? He seems to be forming identity through his purchases, as they are, when combined, quite interesting. He establishes himself both as someone
who can enjoy a hamburger on a hot summer day, and also as an intellectual concerned with
global culture.\textsuperscript{16}

As he moves on to choose gifts for his friends Mike and Patsy Southgate, he chooses
unique, international goods, only, of course, after stopping at the bank to insure his ability to
purchase.

\begin{quote}
I go to the bank
and Miss Stillwagon (first name Linda I once heard)
doesn't even look up my balance for once in her life
and in the GOLDEN GRIFFIN I get a little Verlaine
for Patsy with drawings by Bonnard although I do
think of Hesiod, trans. Richmond Lattimore or
Brendan Behan's new play or \textit{Le Balcon} or \textit{Les Negres}
of Genet, but I don't, I stick with Verlaine
after practically going to sleep with quandariness \textit{(CP} 325)\end{quote}

The speaker, a seemingly cultured individual, must enjoy having the ability to buy and own art
all for himself. But are there consequences or implications in purchasing art? Just as a poet may
be concerned about the status of his own sincerity in the marketplace, an artist may feel similar
anxieties. Does art lose something once it is purchased or does it gain something? The extreme
accessibility demonstrated in this stanza appears to rattle the speaker. He is overcome with
possibility and “quandariness.” For the first time in the poem, the speaker’s ability to consume

\textsuperscript{16} In \textit{Hidden Persuaders} Vance Packard discusses how mid twentieth century ad men helped
build brand loyalty by encouraging consumers to relate products to their own identity. He writes,
"While a competitor can often successfully imitate your product as to ingredients and claims of
quality, a vivid personality image is much more difficult to imitate and so can be a more
trustworthy sales factor" \textit{(Packard} 47).\textsuperscript{16}
seems more traumatizing than enticing. The availability of Heisod distracts from the appeal of Verlaine and Behan from Heisod, and so on. When everything is for sale, some things become interchangeable and historical difference becomes irrelevant.\textsuperscript{17}

The speaker uses the penultimate stanza to return to the casual colloquialism with which he narrated his consumption in the second stanza:

and for Mike I just stroll into the PARK LANE Liquor Store and ask for a bottle of Strega and then I go back where I came from to 6th Avenue and the tobacconist in Ziegfeld Theatre and casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with her name on it (\textit{CP} 325)

Again, the items that he purchases (here Strega, Gauloises, and Picayunes) indicate a certain taste made possible by the beginnings of a global economy; he does not simply pick up a pint of Seagram’s and two cartons of Camel Cigarettes. In buying his cigarettes—his particular preference of cigarettes—the speaker seems to resettle himself (“then I go back to where I came from”) in a complex economy and society.\textsuperscript{18} The speaker creates an identity through his own commercial preferences. Something about his selection seems to hinge on the internationality of the brand, as though by possessing something rare he might achieve a rare happiness or completeness.

\textsuperscript{17} By purchasing art, the speaker also uses consumption to increase his cultural capital and construct his social identity.

\textsuperscript{18} On the topic of brand preference, Packard quotes the research director at a New York advertising agency: “People have a terrific loyalty to their brand of cigarette and yet in tests cannot tell it from other brands. They are smoking an image completely” (qtd. by Packard 46).
Interestingly, the speaker does not present Holiday as one of these brand items. Whereas nearly many proper nouns in the poems are written in all caps, it is important to note that Holiday is never directly named, as though the speakers intends not to brand the singer as an object of consumption. Perloff remarks that “touchstones” such as people, places, and allusions don’t carry much firm significance in O’Hara’s poetry. She writes, “His poetic world is thus one of immanence rather than transcendence; persons and places, books and films are named because they are central to O’Hara’s particular consciousness, but they have no ‘inner reality’” (Perloff 130-131). When O’Hara names places and people like THE GOLDEN GRIFFIN and Miss Stillwagon, they don’t have particular symbolic meaning, at least in the context of the poem; they are flat surfaces. Holiday, however, is not named, and thus retains her “inner reality.”

and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
while she whispered a song along the keyboard
to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing (CP 325)

The verb “thinking” returns again, signaling a shift back into the trauma of consumption. You buy something so you don't have to think—advertisements and consumer culture suggest that buying a product leads to simple end: buy a Coke and fall in love, wear a dress and become a movie star. But as we saw with the speaker’s state of quandariness before, the act of purchasing is not always so simple. And one would think that you buy a copy of the New York Post in order to be part of a larger community that shares the same news, to feel included in a common set of

19 In Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry Mutlu Brasling offers another possible reading: “Since O'Hara emphasizes his complicity with the consumer economy in the first four stanzas, we could argue that he consciously exploits Billie Holiday to elevate his poem” (Brasling 50). But I think his use of Holiday’s memory is more complex than “exploitation,” as he treats her figure far more carefully than the products he consumes.
concerns. But in seeing Holiday’s face, the speaker doesn’t appear to know what to think at all. In fact, he is drawn not into public concern, but into a very personal memory of Holiday performing at the 5 Spot.

This personal memory seems to trump the proceeding acts of consumption. Whereas the previous moments seem almost interchangeable, Holiday’s face on the paper seems to stop time, as well as the speaker’s breath. “The pace slows down until finally the sequence of meaningless moments is replaced by the one moment of memory when Lady Day enchanted her audience by the power of art. Time suddenly stops,” writes Perloff. Indeed, the moment of memory is incredibly affecting, but not because we as readers have the same access to Holiday as O’Hara did, rather because the consumption in the previous stanzas suddenly becomes dishearteningly irrelevant. In his reading of the poem, Andrew Ross puts it, “The last stanza... suggests that there are some cultural experiences that are literally priceless and that therefore lie beyond the realm of paperback discount shopping” (Ross). The experience of seeing Holiday perform, like the lives of Bunny, Latouche, and Pollack, cannot be bought and remains far more valuable than any tangible commodity.

At the moment of remembering, the speaker is sweating and it is hard to tell whether he is sweating in the memory or in the present. Indeed, the two seem to fuse together in a new moment that is present, although arguably imagined. The speaker remembers a moment where he witnessed true artistry and the physical person of Holiday, and although he may try, he cannot recreate a perfect image of that moment. All the paper can do is recall a faint image or "whisper" of Holiday from the speaker's memory. Indeed, it seems that LeSueur perhaps covets something that no one can own.
Chapter 2: Reading Love

The previous chapter demonstrated how *Lunch Poems* reveals an anxiety about how consumerism distorts one’s reading of his own environment. Throughout the collection, the speaker inhabits a dual role as both a reader and a narrator: he reads media, objects, and people, and then narrates these readings in the poem. These roles—the reader and narrator—are often complicated by the abstracting nature of postwar consumerism. Objects become abstracted by advertisements and the voice of the speaker seems tied to his consumption of media.

This chapter focuses not on the speaker’s role as a reader of the urban environment, but on our role as readers of the poems. Much like O’Hara interacts with his complex environment, we interact with his complex work. The poet interprets signs, people, and objects in his world, and we attempt to interpret the words and images of his poetry. In “Personism” the poet writes that a poem should exist between the poet and the reader “Lucky Pierre style.” By indicating that the poem should be the middle participant in a sexual threesome, O’Hara argues that the poem, affected by both the poet and the reader, is “correspondingly gratified.” Being so “gratified,” the experiences documented in the poems remain vibrant, as with every reader they alter and change. The “Lucky Pierre” metaphor alludes to how meaning is made—meaning, in a Personist poem, is a product not only of the poem’s creation, but of its interpretation as well.

“Personism” is unique in the way it defines the roles of the reader and poet. The central New Critical ideal was that the poem should exist completely independent of the poet, that it should be the property of the public. As William Wimsatt declared in “The Intentional Fallacy,” the poem “is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it” (Wimsatt 5). Contrastingly, confessional poets opposed this “detachment,” and held quite firmly to the idea that the poem should and could be tied to a
single, historical figure.\textsuperscript{20} Although he was extremely distanced from the New Critical tradition, O’Hara took issue with the “baring of the recesses of the soul” found in confessional poems (Perloff 13). On Lowell’s “Skunk Hour,” O’Hara commented that the tone of the poem allowed Lowell “to get away with things that are just plain bad” (O’Hara qtd. by Perloff 13). O’Hara didn’t oppose or support the New Critical tradition, instead arguing that a poem acts in multiplicity, as a potential thousand moments of intersectionality, where the making of meaning is a collaboration between the poet and the reader.\textsuperscript{21} O’Hara writes, “The poem is at last between two people rather than two pages” (CP 499).

One difficulty with “Personism” (aside from its thick irony) is that the essay never clarifies who fills the role of the reader in the threesome. Is it anyone that happens to pick up the poem, maybe an addressee? O’Hara’s story of the movement’s inception does little to clarify:

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

But use the telephone to call who? The blond? O’Hara adds that one of the “minimal aspects” of Personism is “to address itself to one person, other than the poet himself, thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love’s life-giving vulgarity” (499). By having a singular direction, Personist poems upset the New Critical determination that a poem should be free from situation or context and be met equally by any learned reader. Moreover, the idea of directly addressing a

\textsuperscript{20} In 1959 M.L. Rosenthal coined the term “confessional” in his essay “Poetry as Confession,” which is about Robert Lowell’s \textit{Life Studies}.

\textsuperscript{21} On O’Hara’s relation to poetic tradition, friend and poet John Ashberry writes, . . . O’Hara’s [poetry] does not attack the establishment. It merely ignores its right to exist, and is thus an annoyance for partisans of every stripe” (Ashberry qtd. by Perloff 12).
poem to another person disrupts a tradition influenced by John Stuart Mill’s 1833 essay “Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties,” which Gillian White discusses in Lyric Shame (White 13-14). Mill asserts that poetry should have the quality of being “overheard.” This poetic concept, according to White, “attempts to figure poetry’s ideal existence as necessarily outside of the economies of ‘eloquence’ and commerce (implied by the figure of the audience ideally ignored and ineffectual)” (14). Indeed, O’Hara’s poetry seems to present itself as a mode of communication rather than a pure work of art.

Although O’Hara does upset these traditions by acknowledging his poetry as read by unique individuals, it is unlikely that the O’Hara directs his poems to his reader. Writing a poem, for him, was probably much more like calling friend on the phone than imagining a phone call with readers of future decades. In fact, many of O’Hara’s poems have a direct address, namely some of his love poems. These addresses complicate the role of someone who reads the poem and has no relation to Frank or his lover. If the Personist poem exists directly between the reader and the poet, there still is no way of knowing whether this meaning-making model refers to just O’Hara, the poem, and whoever he felt like calling on the phone, or O’Hara, the poem, and whoever decided to read the poem. How does the intimacy of a love poem or really any poem with a direct address affect the idea that when we read an O’Hara poem it should exist between us and O’Hara, “Lucky Pierre style?”

One year after the publication of Lunch Poems, O’Hara published Love Poems (Tentative Title) with Tibor de Nagy Gallery. Most of these poems were written for his young lover Vincent Warren (the blond to whom he refers in “Personism”). A distinguishing aspect of this collection is the intimacy of address. Whereas it is easy to image O’Hara narrating Lunch Poems to anyone who might listen, the poet clearly wrote much of Love Poems for Warren.
The poet also wrote one of his most widely read love poems, “Having a Coke With You” for a very specific person (again, Warren). I first encountered the poem when I was fifteen, when I saw it read by two characters in a teen remake of Beauty and the Beast. I remember it seemed odd in that context, as though the characters were trying to pass off someone else’s very distinctive love for their own (they weren’t even drinking Coke!). Here are the first few lines:

is even more fun than going to San Sebastian, Irún, Hendaye, Biarritz, Bayonne or being sick to my stomach on the Travesera de Gracia in Barcelona partly because in your orange shirt you look like a better happier St. Sebastian partly because of my love for you, partly because of your love for yoghurt (CP 360)

Whereas the title “Having a Coke With You” seems to suggest that the poem could fit many relationships, the actual content just doesn’t create a “one-size-fits-all” love poem. Not only is it specific as to the identity and experiences of the speaker (his travels, his stomachache), it is also very specific as to the identity of the “you” (his love of yoghurt, his orange shirt). And though this poem undoubtedly was read by Warren at some point, it was and is still being read by the general public, through teen movies, poetry courses, even an illustrated version of the poem by Nathan Gelgud. But it’s not O’Hara’s love poem to us; it’s his love poem to Warren.

It’s unlikely the poet intended the poem to be read by so many people, given its publishing history. Tibor de Nagy Gallery only published 500 copies of Love Poems. The poet’s negative relationship to mass publication indicates his reluctance to market his poetry. Despite being prolific (evidenced by the sheer volume of his posthumous collected works), the poet only published six slim volumes in his lifetime and almost always with small, avant-garde presses, such as Tibor de Nagy (Love Poems) and City Lights (Lunch Poems). Friends remember finding
his poems everywhere: discarded in his sock drawer, left on tables, written into letters, and sometimes lost altogether. His actions suggest that publication was not his immediate thought when composing a poem and often in his love poems, it seems that his immediate concern was Warren (Rosenbaum 72). And if the poem does really exist “Lucky Pierre style,” then it seems that we, as general readers, may have been kicked out of bed.

This chapter argues, however, that we haven’t been kicked out at all, and that the role of the reader in O’Hara’s love poems is to help protect the pure love from commodification. As Rosenbaum argues, O’Hara saves his poems from becoming goods and himself from becoming a brand, to which I would add that the poet resists the commodification of love through "Personism." I will demonstrate this claim first by reading Miller’s argument that objects exchanged between lovers in O’Hara’s poetry are saved from commercial abstraction, then by looking at the ways in which O’Hara suggests love is often an act of consumption rather than affection, and finally by using the meaning-making model proposed in "Personism" to understand our role as interpreters of this claimed intimacy.

The Role of the Lover

Although this study looks primarily at the role of the love poem’s reader, in Abstract, Concrete, Miller analyzes the role of the lover in O’Hara’s poetry, mapping her understanding of the role onto the basic elements "Personism." Her argument is important to this study as it brings the metaphor of the threesome to the level of the poem, reading a Personist relationship between the lover, the speaker, and the physical objects within the poem itself.

Miller argues that O’Hara reverses the commercial abstraction of objects by placing them between the speaker and his lover, personalizing them. She reads O’Hara’s love poems as efforts
to rescue brand name objects from abstraction, prompted by the poet’s nostalgia for simple things with grounded significations. She identifies this nostalgia in “To the Poem,” “some fine thing will resemble a human hand/and really just be a thing” (qtd. by Miller 63). According to Miller, O’Hara promoted consumption so long as the objects in question were personalized in this way (Miller 14). He personalizes objects by placing them in between two lovers, taking “mass produced goods” and making them “objects of affection,” so that the objects are positioned “‘Lucky Pierre style’” (65). For instance in “Having a Coke With You,” O’Hara makes the Coke personal by placing it as an object mediating his and Warren’s love.

He does this, writes Miller, by “co-opting the vacuousness” of soft-sell advertising. This type of advertising, still fairly new in the postwar moment, proposed a product as an ideal rather than a physical thing (66). Often these ads created a generic canvas onto which the consumer might project his own life and desires. Miller notes that many Coke ads from that moment advertised Coke as a drink for couples, and so the title “Having a Coke With You” could almost be mistaken for a real tagline (66).

The title does appear to mimic these advertisements, but as discussed earlier, the opening lines are strikingly specific:

is even more fun than going to San Sebastian, Irún, Hendaye, Biarritz, Bayonne
or being sick to my stomach on the Travesera de Gracia in Barcelona
partly because in your orange shirt you look like a better happier St. Sebastian
partly because of my love for you, partly because of your love for yoghurt (CP 360)

The frankness and specificity of the comparisons alter the conventionally broad address of the advertisement, insisting on the uniqueness of having this particular Coke with this particular
lover. Indeed, “O’Hara uses the marketing scheme against itself” (Miller 67). Moreover, the “marketing scheme” is further turned upside down by the ambiguity of the poems’ grammar. The phrase following “partly because of” likely refers to why having a Coke with Warren is so fun, but can also refer to why the speaker is sick to his stomach. The bottle of Coke becomes a marker for a unique love unfamiliar to an outside party.

Miller also draws attention to the fact that these physical objects become “dark, negative presences” when removed from this space between two lovers (70). She uses the poem “Cheyenne,” written after O’Hara’s split with Warren, as an example of the difference:

We're looking at the most advanced apparatus ever recalled.

It's called a Dixie Cup. I love you. The Tootsie-Roll wrapper drifts up onto the window ledge

ready to jump, inflamed

by all the banalities of positive experientialism (qtd. By Miller 77)

In this poem, the objects give way to abstraction, as the speaker gives way to heartbreak with the quick utterance of “I love you.”

While I do agree with Miller’s claim that the poet saves things from commercial abstraction within his poems by putting them between two people, so that they might be “real, right,” I think this space that she proposes, what one might call the “affectionate sphere,” is a bit more problematic than her analysis lets on, as this “affectionate sphere” may indeed be infiltrated by consumerist habits (68). I might argue that it is not just these physical objects that need saving from a capitalist conscious, but also love itself. This opening of Miller’s arguments would suggest that more than just being nostalgic for concrete objects, the poet was interested in and concerned about the future of human sentiment in a capitalist society.
Love and Consumption

Despite suggesting that love, especially love shared with Vincent Warren, remains distinct from a commercial culture, some of O’Hara’s poetry complicates the purity of love, suggesting that love, much like consumer goods, can become dispensable. When the speaker in “The Day Lady Died” purchases objects, we note that the extreme accessibility of the objects he purchases make some products dispensable. Although he purchases items in some way to define himself as what Andrew Ross calls “a man of taste,” the speaker realizes that even with all of these culturally significant items, he still feels empty in the wake of real, human loss.

Oddly, the verb “love” in O’Hara’s poetry often seems to translate to “consume.” And sometimes, the consumption of love fails to fulfill the speaker, as the consumption of Strega, Verlaine, and a malted does in Lunch Poems. Love fails to live up to expectations in “Poem (Light clarity avocado salad).”

Light clarity avocado salad in the morning
after all the terrible things I do how amazing it is
to find forgiveness and love, not even forgiveness
since what is done is done and forgiveness isn’t love
and love is love nothing can ever go wrong
though things can get irritating boring and dispensable
(in the imagination) but not really for love
though a block away you feel distant the mere presence
changes everything like a chemical dropped on a paper
and all thoughts disappear in a strange quiet excitement
I am sure of nothing but this, intensified by breathing. (CP 350)
One might assume that the speaker narrates this moment after a night of lovemaking, his lover having already left the apartment, now “a block away.” The “light clarity” in the first line appears to indicate a rejuvenated sense of the speaker’s environment—a personalization of it. However, “light” can also indicate a low measure of clarity. Already the poem appears to both insist on love’s power to bring life to the speaker’s world and also to simultaneously doubt this power.

The privacy of eating the avocado alone in one’s kitchen while ardently thinking about one’s lover portrays a romance felt by the speaker as distanced and other to the noise of commercial city life. The avocado becomes what Miller calls “the stuff of love poems,” an object that belongs to the unique relationship between the speaker and his lover. But the romance already breaks in the following line, “after all of the terrible things I do,” only to be quickly regained by “how amazing it is/to find forgiveness and love.” The sudden shift from love to regrets to love reflects the speaker’s uncertainty towards the actual power and purity of the love in question.

He gets carried away in the convincing in the following, rapid lines: “since what’s done is done and forgiveness isn’t love/love is love nothing can ever go wrong.” But again, the skepticism returns with “though things can get irritating boring dispensable.” When placed as a love object between two people, things, like the avocado, should be imbued with continual and particular presence and certainly never become “boring” or “dispensable.” Here the poem rejects the idea that things might be reclaimed by love, as love itself seems fleeting. He tries to rewind the moment with the addition of “(in the imagination),” but the parenthetical insert doesn't seem quite right: do things become dispensable only in the speaker’s imagination or is the idea that
they become so not really true at all and a mere figment of the speaker’s imagination? Again, the poem seems to falter between a performance of wonder and a very real skepticism.

Just as in “Having a Coke With You,” the lack of punctuation in this poem greatly complicates our view of the relationship being described. If we are to read “but not really for love/though a block away you feel distant” to be one thought and “the mere presence/changes everything” to be another thought, the lover fails in convincing himself of love’s fulfillment. However, if we read “though a block away you feel distant the mere presence/changes everything” as a coherent thought, then the speaker seems more convinced, and the love seems more pure.

Miller’s argument that the poet personalizes things by making them objects of affection hinges on the idea that this affection retains a sense of purity distinct from commercial consumerism. But as we see in “Poem (Light Clarity avocado salad)” love does not always seem so pure, so lasting. The experience of affection in the love poems often resembles the experience of a consumer rather than the experience of a lover.

In the poem “Saint,” for instance, the speaker’s desire for Warren is likened to a consumer projecting his desires onto an ad copy.

Like a pile of gold that his breath

is forming into slender columns

of various sizes, Vincent lies all

in a heap as even the sun must rest (CP 332)

The poem first sounds like ad copy in that the title implies that it identifies Warren as “Saint Vincent,” thus imposing a celebrity surface over the real, physical body of Warren. In “The Day Lady Died” the speaker seems to protect Holiday, never naming her in the poem. In omitting the
artist’s name, he rejects the possibility of her commodification. In this poem, however, the speaker does no such favors for Warren.

Moreover, the speaker aestheticizes and qualifies the sleeping lover like one might a luxury good. To the speaker, Warren is a “pile” or “heap” of gold. This stanza, the first of the poem, brings the lover to the status of an advertised good rather than the person. The following stanzas eerily project thoughts onto the sleeping body:

so night comes down upon
the familial anxieties of Vincent
he sleeps like a temple to no god (CP 332)

Here Warren’s sleeping body stands as an object onto which an advertiser might project abstract desires. The speaker appears to inventory Warren’s body, like an advertisement might inventory the parts of a product. But it’s worth considering whether our own thinking about mid-century consumer culture brings this out when as we interpret the poem. Feldman reads the surveying of Vincent’s body to be more reflective of “the way a painter studies a subject, not by trying to define what is but by observing how the light transforms it.” Feldman suggests that this sort of “studying” allows the poet to “sustain the exhilaration” of love, which the critic admits is tinged with “an awareness on O’Hara’s part of the temporary, fragile nature of happiness” (Feldman 127). However I would disagree, as the memorializing of Warren like the subject of a painting does little to engage love as a lived experience. Perhaps this sort of observation instead works to sustain Warren’s beauty against the passage of time.

In other poems, O’Hara consumes love in excess, much like he does other products.

Oh God it’s so wonderful
to get out of bed
and drink too much coffee

and smoke too many cigarettes

and love you so much (CP 371)

This quote, largely found on contemporary Internet settings like Tumblr and Pinterest, strikes many as wildly romantic, but it actually makes love seem as accessible and consumable as a cigarettes and coffee. And as we saw in “The Day Lady Died,” value generally decreases with accessibility.

What these readings reveal is that although the poet puts love in high esteem, love does not remain distinct from the commercial sphere. As a historical figure, O’Hara did not even seem to instinctively follow the idea of love as pure and unrelated to a market of some kind. O’Hara’s sometimes lover Larry Rivers gave the eulogy at O’Hara’s funeral, one that very much echoed the overall sentiment of the pair’s relationship: “He was a professional hand holder. His fee was love” (Speech at Springs 138). Love with O’Hara was almost always a sort of exchange and not often an even one.

Love is problematic in its often-fleeting nature. Pure love, like the artistry of Holiday, cannot be owned. Therefore, the idea of love can be abstracted and reworked to appear like a commodity. Take for instance how Lana Turner the person becomes a flat, sellable surface of a newspaper in “Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!).” Love can very much work in the same way.

The Role of the Reader

Miller uses “Personism” to explain the relationship between the lovers and the material objects that stand between them. Her argument tends to stay on the level of the poem. My interest is rather at the level of the relationship between the poet, poem, and reader.
An important aspect of “Personism” is the offering of poetry as lived experience. In *Lunch Poems*, the poet moves through the city with an eye for potential, what Rosenbaum calls his “habit of movement and vision” (Rosenbaum 74). By looking towards the future, O’Hara offers his poems as “an active negotiation of the urban landscape, one that ideally includes his reader” (71-72). Experienced by both the poet and the reader the poem is “gratified” and the urban landscape personalized. In his statement for Donald Allen’s *New American Poetry* (written after Allen rejected Personism), O’Hara writes,

> It may be that poetry makes life’s nebulous events tangible to me and restores their detail; or conversely, that poetry brings forth the intangible quality of incidents which are all too concrete and circumstantial. Or each on specific occasions, or both at the same time. (*CP* 500)

Through poetry, the flat surface of the city comes alive, but only when the poem is “between two people rather than two pages” (*CP* 499).

When O’Hara navigates the city in his love poems, his singular desire for Warren colors the city.

> Did you see me walking by the Buick Repairs?
> I was thinking of you
> Having a Coke in the heat it was your face
> I saw on the movie magazine, no it was Fabian's
> I was thinking of you
> and down at the railroad tracks where the station has mysteriously disappeared
> I was thinking of you
as the bus pulled away in the twilight
I was thinking of you
and right now (CP 367)

Miller uses this poem, “Song,” to support her assertion that the love poems give personal weight to abstract commodities (Miller 65). Not only does the poem personalize another bottle of Coke, but also the poet uses the romantic relationship to mark the potential in “the movie magazine” and the “Buick Repairs.” In Lunch Poems the speaker navigates a commercial city, but in love poems the speaker navigates a landscape of love.

Although the love poems often appear to treat love as consumption, the poet in part veils or protects the intimacies of his own personal relationships from commodification. In “Having a Coke With You” and “Poem (Light clarity avocado salad),” the lack of punctuation creates ambiguity, thus restricting the sentiments from being reified into something of a Hallmark card. In a way, it is like what the poet does with Billie Holiday in “The Day Lady Died.” Despite the poem being obviously about the artist’s death, the speaker never names her, thus protecting her memory and figure from commodification.

The poet further protects the sentiment of his love poems from commodification by positioning the poems themselves—expressions and performances of these sentiments—between himself and his reader, “Lucky Pierre style.” As Miller argues, he personalizes brand name objects by bringing them between the speaker and his lover, as part of an extremely individual relationship. Because his love poems remain ambiguous, for various reasons including the lack of punctuation, each person that approaches the poem may interpret it differently. Thus, the poem becomes an object unique to the relationship between O’Hara and his reader. The
sentiment can never be reduced to flatness of a Hallmark card because it remains an active text, one that shifts meaning when brought between O’Hara and each new reader.
Chapter Three: Reading Frank

So far this thesis has explored the relationship between reader and poet in O’Hara’s love poems, as well as the relationship between consumer and the urban landscape in *Lunch Poems*. Primarily, it has studied what we might consider to be interactions with texts: our interaction with love poems and O’Hara’s interactions with the surface of the urban landscape. This chapter will analyze how we read and interpret O’Hara as a figure. It will also explore how this reading complicates the idea of a Personist relationship creating lived experience.

Personism, as we have so far discovered, demands the individuality of a unique relationship, by which I mean, when placed between the poet and reader, a poem becomes lived experience rather than a static text. It has the immediacy of a phone call and acts like a shared object between two people. This creates what critic Robert Polito calls an “endless present” (qtd. by Ciabattari). The poem always appears in the moment and surprising, because its meaning is being constantly reconstructed between O’Hara and a new reader. Indeed, something about the collaboration between poet and reader dictated by "Personism" adds to the appearance that O’Hara’s poetry does not fix itself in a concrete moment, but rather moves with both parties with which the poems interact.

The poet likened this continual reconstruction and vibrancy with the tenets of action painting. He thought that the surface of his poems shouldn’t sink into conventional meanings, much like action paintings don’t sink into formal figures. In a letter to Larry Rivers that included several poems, O’Hara writes:

> 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 “push”
and “pull,” and I’ll keep working on them until each foot is high. (qtd. by Perloff 22)

In Poet Among Painters Marjorie Perloff describes the relationship between an action painting and a poem’s surface as follows, “The surface of the painting, and by analogy the surface of the poem must, then, be regarded as a field upon which the physical energies of the artist can operate, without the mediation of color or symbol” (Perloff 23). Her term “mediation” rings back to the previous discussion of “Personism” and about how the poet wished to avoid deep mediation through apparent immediacy.

Critic Timothy Gray insists that this constant movement and immediacy is a characteristic not just of the poems, but also of the poet himself.

If a symbol is a central, fixed, and overcoded object, O’Hara was a decentralized and excessively mobile (albeit still overcoded) sign. He was crucial to New York because he refused to remain fixed and it was not long before he became catechized as a site of pure movement (Gray 546).

Gray considers O’Hara to be a “semiotic shepherd” of the New York counterculture. The constantly moving figure (both intellectually and physically), according to Gray, became attached to an interpretation of the city that worked to define emerging cultural sectors. Gray calls to memory a portrait of the poet done by Alex Katz in which the poet’s body actually extends forward, cut out of the plywood background, signaling the poet’s mobile yet unified nature. He argues that Katz’s cut-out portraits, such as the one of O’Hara, “truly did not rest, because they removed the problematic of an environment or background” (Gray 548). By not fixing O’Hara’s body to any single context, Katz demonstrates how the body could come to take on many different meanings to many different people.
Whereas Katz captures the mobility and shifting nature of O’Hara as a signifier by removing the poet’s background environment, Elaine de Kooning captures this unfixed nature in a different way. In her portrait of the poet she removes the face noting that, “Frank was standing there. First I painted the whole structure of his face; then I wiped out the face, and when the face was gone, it was more Frank than when the face was there” (qtd. In Lehman 166). De Kooning’s portrait indicates an openness of sorts in O’Hara’s figure. By not having determined features, the poet could take on several interpretations at once and become, as Gray argued, a “decentralized and excessively mobile (albeit still overcoded) sign” (Gray 546).
Gray’s insights, as well as those of Katz and de Kooning, bring to light two things about O’Hara as a figure: one, that his own intellectual, artistic, and physical movement was particularly important to the “endless present” of his poetry, and two, that O’Hara himself was and is a text on which to project interpretation. It seems worthwhile to explore how we read his figure, to see whether or not or not he remains as “high and dry”—open to multiple interpretations—as his poems.

**From Mobile to Fixed**

What’s difficult about this analysis is that so far this thesis has been looking at texts as objects between two distinct parties: the object between the speaker and lover and the poem between the reader and poet. But now O’Hara himself is the text, and if we are the reader, who is the poet? This role shifts. Due to his influential role in the New York art scene, artists often fill the role of the poet. De Kooning and Katz’s portraits highlight O’Hara’s existence as a shifting
text, but other artists impose metaphor onto the body. Take, for instance, Alfred Leslie’s “The Killing of Frank O’Hara” (1966), which Perloff describes in the opening of Poet Among Painters. O’Hara died in a freak accident involving a beach buggy on Fire Island nine years before Leslie’s painting. The poet was forty years old. Leslie’s painting shows the poet lying serenely on a plank being lowered by several bikini-clad young women (Perloff 1). Perloff argues that the poet’s tragic death led to these dramatic sorts of representations: “The artist, in short become a work of art attention was deflected from O’Hara real achievement, which was his poetry” (Perloff 3).

Indeed, O’Hara has become, as Perloff argues, “mythologized.” She asks that we look to the poems and not to the life and figure. But this is also difficult, as his poetry is so often considered indicative of that life. Kenneth Koch remarks on reading the massive collected works:

All those “moments,” all the momentary enthusiasms and despairs which I had been moved by when I first read them when they were here altogether made something I had never imagined. It was not all one great poem, but something in some way better: a collection of created moments that illuminated a whole life.

(qtd. in Perloff 7)

This “illumination” is, of course, a complex notion. Koch says that the moments described in the poems are “created” and thus artificial and yet they illuminate a real “life.” It is as though the poems give way to an artificial, trace O’Hara.

The poet is also remembered in numerous iconic photographs, namely one on the cover of LeSueur's ’s *Digressions on Some Poems* that shows him leaning against the wall and talking on the telephone. By remembering him in images, do we readers make O’Hara immobile and less open? Imagine walking down the street and seeing his photo…does it render him a celebrity
like Lana Turner’s? When O’Hara permanently collapsed in 1966, Larry Rivers’ eulogy described the injured poet’s body in great detail. The funeral-goers also experienced the life being drawn out of the poet, watching him fall from a mobile life to the subject of retro photographs (“Speech at Springs”). Do we beg O’Hara to “get up” like we do Lana? In “Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!)” the speaker reads Lana's body as a metonymy for Hollywood, immediately contemplating California when he sees her image (“there is no snow in Hollywood/there is no rain in California”). Similarly, we often associate O’Hara with New York, such when Brad Gooch deems him the “City Poet.”

Gray argues that when alive, O’Hara acted as a meeting place for different types of people. He joined uptown and downtown, museum and bohemian, and artists and poets. In this way, he acted like a Personist poem, bringing together two distinct parties and reflecting a collaboration of their contexts and efforts. But that was when he was alive and moving. Now we fix him in images and myths, forms that allow for less collaborative interpretation, not only of his person but of his poems, as well. By permanently stabilizing one side of a Personist reading, we reduce interpretive possibilities.

**Frank O’Hara and Don Draper**

In season two of Matthew Weiner’s hit television show Mad Men, Frank O’Hara makes a surprise appearance. Sitting alone with a glass of bourbon, marketing genius and antihero Don Draper reads the first edition copy of Meditations in an Emergency (in true form, Don hears about the collection while at the bar). The solitary shot soon changes to a suburban winter night, with Don reciting the final section of “Mayakovsky” in a voiceover.
Something about the words and the scene struck viewers and poetry critics alike. Sales for the 1957 book increased so much that the *New York Times* suggested that it saved the poet from “relative obscurity” (Manly). Andrew Epstein, whose *Locus Solus* blog is dedicated to the New York School of Poets, tags nine of his posts “Mad Men,” although he retorts the *Times*’ claim about the show rescuing O’Hara. I would argue that the poem’s placement seems odd. Perhaps it is hearing Jon Hamm’s trained and deep voice reading instead of Frank’s sharp and nasal inflections. It seems as though, in this setting, a representation of the past that reduces the 1950s to Lucky Strike and the over consumption of gimlets mediates the reading of “Mayakovsky.”

It would be, however, too far to accuse the show of shoving O’Hara into a vintage store, as the program itself has an extremely complex, and sometimes problematic, relationship with the nostalgic world that it presents. Objects in the show, all fastidiously selected and placed, are mediated not only by the fictive world they inhabit, but also by the nostalgia of the show's makers and viewers. In lieu of a synopsis, it's important to recount that *Mad Men* follows the lives of several advertising executives on Madison Avenue, namely Don Draper. At the height of postwar advertising, these men, and a few women, create the ad campaigns that we see O’Hara interact with in his work. And so the artificiality of commercialism isn't ignored, but rather examined by the show's designers and writers.22

While the show explores the complications of materiality and capitalism in its fictive moment, it simultaneously markets itself as a “vintage” or “retrospective” product that can be identified by a surface made up of Coca-Cola bottles, Lucky Strike cartons, and Frank O’Hara

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22 In “Selling Nostalgia: Mad Men, Postmodernism, and Neoliberalism,” Deborah Tudor argues that within the world of the show, Don Draper (whose real name is Dick Whitman) seems related to the “commodification of the individual,” a “convincing surface persona” (335, 336).
poems. In fact, the show seemed to reanimate a trend in late 50s and 60s vintage fashions—in particular, the J Crew Group created an entire clothing line advertised by the show’s name and based on the costumes. The increase in the sales for O’Hara’s collection likely stemmed from a similar consumer attitude—the desire to identify with the attractive, fictive world of the television program. But whereas mid-length dresses in modern clothing franchises indicate a revival of historical aesthetics, it's hard to think about the increase in the sales of *Meditations in an Emergency* in the same way. In a rather passionate post about the claim that *Mad Men* “rescued” O’Hara, Epstein writes,

> O’Hara was hardly a fringe figure, forgotten by cultural history, before 2008. For the past several decades, everyone (at least everyone with an interest in poetry) has agreed that O’Hara is one of the most important, influential, and best-loved poets to have emerged since World War II. (“No, Mad Men Didn't Rescue Frank O’Hara From Obscurity”)

Part of what is so interesting about the way *Mad Men* markets both itself and the retro products it inspires is that it does so not just on the longing of contemporary consumers, but on the reconfiguration of the past in the present. In “Nostalgia and Style in Retro America” Paul Griange asserts that nostalgia programming involves the recontextualization of past media and artifacts into facets of the present. On what terms does the show bring O’Hara to the twenty-first century?  

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23 Interestingly, Tudor also argues that by removing most of the historical tensions surrounding race and gender, the fashion and images in show can be enjoyed by contemporary audiences without burden (Tudor 334-335). Something about this argument seems related to Katz’s portrait of O’Hara that removed the complexities of a background from his figure.

24 In "Seeing the World Second Hand: Mad Men and the Vintage Consumer," Caroline Hamilton talks about vintage consumption with the help of scholar Kaja Silverman, who claims “by
stanza makes him more human and anxious. Matthew Weiner says the lines “related exactly to what Don felt in the first episode” (Weiner qtd. by Epstein).

As a reader of O’Hara, hearing Don read “Mayakovsky” allows one to think about the ways in which O’Hara’s poetry comments on and interacts with the complex world of Madison Avenue. If the speakers in Lunch Poems read advertisements as texts, then the ad men are the poets. Thus, in a way, the show helps to make sense of the other side of the Personist meaning-making model. It also brings out different readings of the poem and cautions against hearing it only in Frank’s voice, an association between O’Hara’s text and person that had previously limited my reading of “Mayakovsky.” However, for new readers to encounter O’Hara for the first time in this sort of venue, the consequences could be reductive.

**The Status of the Personist Poem**

Although Polito suggests that O’Hara’s poetry remains in the “endless present,” there seems to be a tendency for both literary and pop culture to aestheticize the poet (and his work) and read him as an accessory of 1950s New York City. In fact there seems to be a contradiction (even a paradox) in critics who value O’Hara as notably vintage and as continually relevant. The *New York Times*’ review of the 50th Anniversary Edition of *Lunch Poems* captures this paradox in its opening lines: “Frank O’Hara’s ‘Lunch Poems,’ the little black dress of American poetry books, redolent of cocktails and cigarettes and theater tickets and phonograph records, turns 50...
this year. It seems barely to have aged” (Garner). The review continues in similar fashion, alternating between the literary past and present to describe the included poems.

Perhaps American literary culture is in a bit of a bind when it comes to how it talks about and interacts with O’Hara as a figure and poet. Even Epstein, who clearly believes that O’Hara remains relevant to contemporary poetics, indisputably treats O’Hara, as well as other members of The New York School, in a nostalgic manner. That is not say the content of his blog is not scholarly or well-articulated, but that the concept of a niche blog about a select group of historic individuals, with a Joan Mitchell painting as the background image, demonstrates a degree of longing for a certain, somewhat idealized, past.²⁵

Unfortunately, the contemporary attraction to O’Hara as both an aesthetic and nostalgic figure tends to flatten the poet, reducing him to a glistening surface like the construction workers in Lunch Poems. In allowing his figure to be reductively reified in photographs and recreated versions of the past, contemporary readers fail to enliven this surface as the poem enlivens between two people. The strength of the three-way relationship between reader, poet, and poem and the vitality of the poems themselves depends greatly on our ability to allow O’Hara to be a figure not fixed in the Cedar Tavern, to allow him to move with us into the 21st century rather than to the walls of a museum.

²⁵ Another interesting contemporary example New York School nostalgia is Jenni Quilter’s New York School Painters & Poets: Neon in Daylight (2014). The title draws, of course, from the lines of "A Step Away From Them." The book contains a wide array of New York School painting and poetry. It also contains memorabilia, such as photographs.
Conclusion

Even now, O’Hara’s attitude towards consumerism has yet to be fully fleshed out. Although Miller suggests that the poet longs for “real, right things” untouched by consumerist abstraction, O’Hara also evidently embraces the pleasures and accessibilities capitalism affords. Additionally, Rosenbaum suggests that the poet navigates the “visual landscape of advertisements” to mark new pathways of desire within a capitalist city. Much like our relationship to his celebrity figure, the poet’s relationship to consumerism seems quite contradictory.

In her examination of how media studies has transformed as a discipline since the mid-twentieth century, Susan Douglas cites Stuart Hall’s “Encoding and Decoding” (1980), in which Hall argues that consumers had a more complex relationship with media than simply subverting or conforming to its capitalist messages. Douglas praises:

> It was the elegance with which Hall continued to lay out the push and pull between media power and viewer resistance to that power that served as a model to so many of us struggling, still, to understand how different historical eras shaped the balance of power between these forces. (Douglas 89)

Douglas describes this complex relationship presented by Hall as one that “pushes” and “pulls,” much like surface of an action painting or poem.

In O’Hara’s letter to Larry Rivers (cited in “Reading Frank”), the poet asks the painter if his poems have enough “push” and “pull” and if they are “high and dry.” The push and pull constitute the surface of the poems, what Perloff argues is a “field upon which the physical energies of the artist can operate, without mediation of metaphor or symbol” (Perloff 23). Indeed, the poet favored tension over mediation and “push” and “pull” over solid images.
I believe, and I think Perloff would agree, that the terms “push” and “pull,” reflect not only the aesthetic surface of an action painting or poem, but one nuance of the Personist relationship between poet and reader, as well. The poem (or the canvas) exists as a “field upon which the physical energies of the artist”—and the reader—“can operate.” The tension between the poet and reader creates unique and vibrant meanings for the text in question.

Douglas’ paraphrasing of Hall’s proposed relationship between the media consumer and media evokes the idea of “Personism” in real life. Indeed, O’Hara would likely advise contemporary readers to maintain this tense, yet open, relationship to the media around them. When they see an advertisement on the street, he would allow them to take pleasure in its aesthetics, yet urge them to question how it affects their interpretations of the environment. When reading the romantic relationships of others, he would encourage them to find their own interpretations of the scene, rather than reify it to the idealistic love of the movies. And finally, I do not think he would be of the opinion that people of any moment should move beyond past icons, beyond Lucky Strike advertisements and film stills of Marilyn Monroe, but that their should reevaluate their presence in each new contexts. O’Hara reinvents, rather than rejects, capitalist icons.
Works Consulted


