The Power of Place:
Frank O’Hara and the New York School of Painters and Poets

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements 3

Introduction 5

Chapter One 13
Locating Frank O’Hara: Childhood, Confessional Poetry, and Social Connections

Chapter Two 42
Back Table at the Five Spot: Frank O’Hara, Grace Hartigan, and Larry Rivers

Chapter Three 73
“One of the most interesting painters in America”: Frank O’Hara and Alex Katz

Works Cited 115
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Introduction

I. Premise

When New York City in the 1950s became the nexus of literary, artistic, and poetic creation, Frank O’Hara was at its center. The social milieu that developed was primarily spurred by several key figures, particularly O’Hara. He bridged gaps between seemingly disparate individuals who seized the burgeoning artistic moment in Abstract Expressionism, while drawing inspiration from Surrealist art and confessional poetry. Frank O’Hara was deeply involved as a poet, art critic, and curator at the Museum of Modern Art. His transformative relationships allow for his work to be improvisational and intimate, but moreover, to express some of the universalities of human existence, fundamental truths that can best be understood through artistic and literary expression. O’Hara’s work centers upon his relationships, which include the artists discussed in this thesis, Alex Katz, Grace Hartigan, and Larry Rivers (Brainard and Bluhm are also considered to be of mutual levels of influence) (Olsen 180), as well as Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Jasper Johns, among others. The immediacy of O’Hara’s voice, combined with his emphasis on the power of place as a means of intermedial connection, of fusing together art and poetry, continues to draw readers to his work decades later.

My first experience with Frank O’Hara’s work came in my first-year introductory English course, in which I was inspired by his ability to reflect upon and encapsulate the quotidian aspects of life, specifically in his 1964 collection Lunch Poems. With poems written during his lunch break at the Museum of Modern Art, his quick and improvisational stylistic technique became increasingly evident to me as a major distinguishing factor from other contemporary poets. As his contemporaries grappled with poetic techniques and structures, there
was a significant push and pull between the Neosymbolists, like T.S. Eliot or Robert Lowell, and the entirely new direction that Frank O’Hara’s poetry took. O’Hara pivoted stylistically, as his philosophy took a painterly approach, first adopting abstraction and later shifting in its discourse and tone, especially as he wrote his own mock manifesto “Personism.” His later intermedial collaborations further cement a divergence from his contemporaries in which he merged painting and poetry as inextricable forms throughout his career. O’Hara’s profound embrace of his surroundings in New York City enabled his work to be influenced by every facet of Modernism and Postmodernism, including the improvisational quality of jazz music, as well as the models of painting which also resisted previous conventions and academic techniques, principally Abstract Expressionism, and regarding some of his predecessors, Cubism and Surrealism.

The innovative nature of Frank O’Hara’s work can be best understood in relation to the divergence his career made. Within confessional poetry, poets like Robert Lowell shifted their focus inwardly, primarily writing from the place of self-loathing and antagonization. In contrast, O’Hara’s poetry was more reflective of his social circle and resulting intellectual experiences. As Hartman suggests, “O’Hara was disparaging of Lowell’s particular brand of confessional poetic, partly because it was not consistent with O’Hara's avant-garde aesthetics” (41). O’Hara saw Lowell’s poetry as such a profound reflection of his internal state that it verged on being narcissistic. The condition of his work can be increasingly read as private, intense, and sometimes tragic; however, O’Hara’s disdain for Lowell’s work is also rooted in their wholly separate identities. O’Hara’s “aversion to Lowell’s poetic was also conditioned by his positioning in American cold war culture as a homosexual man” (Hartman 41). O’Hara lyrically addressed his own internal dimension through works which were addressed to his friends and that were significantly more conversational in tone and improvisational in approach. Moreover,
O’Hara’s poetry encompasses authenticity through its broader depictions of his social circle and separation from the serious and austere approaches to poetry that potentially favored the traditional perspectives of elites like Robert Lowell. Frank O’Hara’s writing chiefly emerged from poetry written from a place of conflict in which some poets embraced tradition, and others, the avant-garde.

The relationship, and established contrast between Frank O’Hara and Robert Lowell, is emblematic of the growing chasm between competing styles of poetics. As David Dick points out, Robert Lowell once noted in his 1960 National Book Award Acceptance Speech that “‘there were two competing poetries in post-war America. The “cooked,” he declared, was “marvelously expert … laboriously concocted to be tasted and digested by a graduate seminar”; the “raw,” on the other hand, was “huge blood-dripping goblets of unseasoned experience … dished up for midnight listeners’” (Dick 4). In essence, the contrast between Frank O’Hara and his contemporaries can be summarized by their different approaches, wherein O’Hara infused his work with humor, observations, and reflections upon his relationships, while poets like Lowell primarily dwell upon their own internal state, containing their work to the confines of their psyche and facets specific to their own relationships. O’Hara’s work is significantly less performative, as it was often written for an improvised context, sometimes even intended for just one recipient.

Perhaps nowhere was this conflict and separation more clear than at a poetry reading the two attended in 1962. The ideological and interpersonal conflicts came to a head when the poets traveled on the Staten Island Ferry en route to a reading in which Frank O’Hara read his “occasional poem ‘Lana Turner has collapsed!’” announcing to the audience that he had written the poem on the way to the reading itself (Hartman 40). This decision essentially mocked poets
like Lowell, who seemingly agonized over their poetic responses to human emotions. Moreover, O’Hara’s improvisational, irreverent, and laissez-faire approach emphasized immediate responses and abstract representations, in which he utilized momentary experiences as a primary source of inspiration. At the reading, Lowell began his reading with his own retort, in which he sardonically apologized for not writing his poem, “Skunk Hour,” on the spot (Hartman 40). While Lowell is typically classified as a confessional poet, perhaps what sets O’Hara apart is his ability to leverage the movement as a means of speaking with greater universality. Furthermore, O’Hara’s work directly addresses a friend and is predominantly conversational, while in contrast, Lowell’s poem features a speaker that “feigns indifference to his audience, and can also be noted in the modernist dramatic and mask lyrics of Lowell’s precursor T. S. Eliot.” The lyrical approach of Lowell differs greatly from O’Hara, who sought to make his first-person narration somewhat inseparable from the perspective of the reader. As Perloff intimates, “In Lunch Poems [“Music”], it is hard to tell where O’Hara’s “I” ends and the external world begins; lavender lips and the leaves of the world blend to create a verbal surface where subject and object are one” (Perloff 785). Though Lowell’s work was notable for its candid discussion of personal and psychological struggles, and thus is confessional in and of itself, his approach was slightly more measured and structured than O’Hara’s. The interplay that exists between O’Hara’s work and his literary and artistic circles is not simply limited to their collaborations on pieces and installations, but rather also extends to his own approach and philosophy. O’Hara ultimately subverted traditional stylistic approaches to poetry through his immersion within different realms of the New York School, particularly his interactions with Abstract Expressionist artists.

O’Hara’s legacy is difficult to trace, largely because of his tremendous involvement with the artistic sphere within Manhattan. Thus, while it is challenging to fully conceptualize Frank
O’Hara’s impact on the New York School and subsequent generations of artists, his untimely death led to poignant memorialization from his contemporaries on the lasting implications of his career. Through various artistic, poetic, and auditory reflections, the social milieu that O’Hara ultimately helped fortify in New York embodies the full extent of his legacy through artistic representations of his physical form, while also speaking to the impact he had on their interpersonal relationships. Because New York had shifted within this generation to become the nexus of artistic creation and social movements, away from Paris in the 1920s, there were key figures, like O’Hara, who facilitated this change through intermedial expression and innovation.

In Peter Schjeldahl’s obituary for O’Hara in The Village Voice, he states, “Collaboration, a direct extension of O’Hara’s mode of living, is a good metaphor for the manner of his relationships—an intimate competition in which each participant goads the other toward being at his best” (Schjeldahl 141). Collaboration between poets and artists is O’Hara’s greatest legacy, and this thesis intends to explore O’Hara’s poetry and the way it is in dialogue with contemporaries Grace Hartigan, Larry Rivers, and Alex Katz.

The New York School of painters was defined by both the ascendancy of Abstract Expressionism, as well as their intellectual divergence, coming together in a shared movement which drew significant inspiration from dialogue with the literary community, as well as the broader energy of the city itself as a cultural and social hub. The diminished distance between society and the reflection of human experiences is evident in the intensely philosophical and deeply abstracted works of the era’s painters, as well as the confessional poetry of Frank O’Hara. In essence, Frank O’Hara’s intermedial relationships afford one the opportunity to chart his influence on his contemporaries, as well as his legacy through the resulting artistic tributes created by artists like Hartigan and Rivers following his untimely death in 1966. Frank O’Hara’s
poetry features an incredible and audacious level of intimacy, wherein he includes autobiographical ruminations upon his life, considers the quotidian and fundamental aspects of the human experience, and is constantly in dialogue with the broader artistic and literary spheres.

II. Methodology

My approach to this thesis was to illustrate the manner in which Frank O’Hara’s status at the social center of the New York School allowed for his work to wholly intersect with both the poetic and artistic realms. In the first chapter, I aim to trace the origins of O’Hara’s confessional poetry, specifically by examining his work in the context of his upbringing, schooling, familial life, and career beginnings. I discuss how his identity as a gay poet manifests in his work, and in terms of his divergence from his contemporaries, with a particular emphasis on the autobiographical nature of his poetry. By locating some of his poems in the context of his childhood and adolescence, I hope to divulge how O’Hara’s early experiences primed his perceptive approach to poetry and the social and communal worlds which ultimately made up his later works and collections. By delving into Lunch Poems (1964), my objective was to portray how O’Hara embraced the New York landscape in the immediacy of his work, and moreover, as a setting which enabled the fusion of art and writing. It is this cross-pollination that facilitated mutually enriching exchanges between O’Hara and artists, as both a critic and as a collaborator.

The second chapter, which focuses primarily on O’Hara’s relationships with Grace Hartigan and Larry Rivers, aims to outline both his impact on their work, as well as their memorialization of O’Hara following his untimely death. Regarding Hartigan, I closely examine their intermedial collaborations, commenting on the social circles and shared artistic impulses that united the pair. Through an intensive discussion of Hartigan’s painting, Frank O’Hara, 1926 – 1966 (1966), I strive to craft a profile of their friendship and its afterlife, highlighting how
the abstract nature of the work perfectly encapsulates and eulogizes the unique qualities of their friendship and working relationship. In my discussion of Larry Rivers, I set out to examine how their close bond, both professionally and romantically, elevated transformative conversations regarding the emerging art and literary scene. By discussing O’Hara’s critical responses to Rivers in addition to Rivers’ views on O’Hara’s poetry, I hope to underscore how both men shared in their desire to subvert traditional expectations surrounding expression while interacting with and commentating on broader societal and social issues. The two similarly engaged in intermedial collaborations, however, perhaps the more intimate nature of their relationship led to a series of portraits, both during and after O’Hara’s lifetime. I analyze these works to consider the fluctuations of their relationship and differing portrayals of O’Hara’s legacy.

In contrast, my third chapter looks toward the future, as I contemplate the relationship between Frank O’Hara and living artist, Alex Katz. O’Hara’s profound admiration of Katz is largely rooted in Katz’s similar divergence from his contemporaries, specifically as he forged his own path amidst the development, and bifurcation of, the art world into the Pop Art and Abstract Expressionist camps. Much of the chapter examines O’Hara’s critical responses to Katz’s work, enabling me to articulate how Katz’s career progressed in relation to O’Hara’s criticism. His recent, large-scale landscapes, for example, align with O’Hara’s belief in the power of his billboard style works in representing intimate and fragmented moments. I comment on Katz’s 2022 retrospective, Gathering, in order to discuss the visceral experience of viewing Frank O’Hara (1959-60), which acts as a permanent, tangible representation of their friendship. In essence, I hope to communicate the poetic quality of Alex Katz’s work in dialogue with the painterly, abstract aesthetic of O’Hara’s poetry. The kinship between Katz and O’Hara further emphasizes the lasting importance of O’Hara’s criticism beyond the confines of the New York
School and well after the members directly interacted. By taking an interdisciplinary approach to framing the life and legacy of Frank O’Hara, I intend to explicate how his work can be located in the contexts of his childhood and early life, career as a poet, curator, and art critic, and as a friend who pushed boundaries and built connections across the New York School, embedding himself at its center.
Chapter One: Locating Frank O’Hara: Childhood, Confessional Poetry, and Social Connections

Frank O’Hara is largely known as a part of the Manhattan literary and art scene, but it is important to understand his background before delving into his mastery of abstraction and prolific leadership of avant-garde art movements. As David Lehman (26) remarks, O’Hara’s poems are so “full of Manhattan, the horns honking, the heels clicking”; his identity is entirely inextricable from his relationship to the New York School and his extraordinary command over the poetic form. By considering the autobiographical nature of O’Hara’s work, one garners a greater appreciation for the overlap between the content of his poems and the pivotal events of his early life. O’Hara’s formative years shaped his relationship to the New York School, where “friendship, artistic collaboration, and the bliss of being alive and young” (Lehman 1) created a moment of significant artistic genesis and social connection. Within the New York School, it was largely understood that “people did not have to come from anywhere special” and that “self-creating” was a quintessential part of the times (Gooch 13). The beginning of O’Hara’s life is as intriguing and nuanced as the stories he often weaved for his own friends, and much of his identity can be derived from his familial and professional relationships.

I. Childhood and Adolescence

Frank O’Hara’s poetry draws on both his own childhood and adolescent experiences, as well as his profound interest in the minute details and momentary experiences in the lives of his family and friends. O’Hara’s birth date was not known for a significant period of his life, which is ironic given that he often referenced his birth in Baltimore and had a profound fixation on, and fascination with, birth dates in his own work (Gooch 14). Frank O’Hara was born to Russell and Katherine O’Hara, and he grew up believing that his birth date was in June of 1926 (Gooch 14).
His parents, who were devout Catholics, felt they had to conceal his true date of birth (Gooch 15), which created a real discrepancy in the life of someone who ironically ruminated on astrology, birthdays, and identity. O’Hara often utilized a more lighthearted tone in his birthday poems, such as “On a Birthday of Kenneth’s” (O’Hara and Allen 396-397). He catalogues a series of fragmented moments, including poetry readings and a trip to Maine, and concludes, “but in a sense these days didn’t add up to a year/and you haven’t had a birthday/you have simply the joyous line of your life like in a Miró/it tangles us in your laughter” (15-18). The objectification of Kenneth Koch’s laughter imbues the memories with a sense of tangibility, each coming together to form a distinctive narrative of their friendship. The invocation of a Miró painting connotes a Surrealist or Fauvist image, therefore implying that Koch’s life has a sense of childlike wonder tied to its “joyous line.” Like with this specific birthday, O’Hara could make anything an event (Lehman 169), and he intensively focused on defining the inconsequential moments in his own life and the lives of his friends, heightening the sense of irony surrounding his feigned birth date.

Frank O’Hara’s literary identity was largely shaped by his upbringing, ultimately facilitating his desire for exploring, and engaging with, literature and the arts. Throughout O’Hara’s childhood, literature was a constant in his life, as his room was filled with classical books gifted from relatives (Gooch 25). O’Hara developed his own idiosyncratic style of poetry, drawing upon a voice that felt entirely his own. His voice perhaps largely came into being with his broader conversations with the literary and artistic world, as he had friendships that spanned artists like Jasper Johns (whom he shared significant correspondence with) (Quilter 133), to fellow New York School poets like John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch (Quilter 126). Perhaps even more important than these relationships, however, was how broad and dynamic O’Hara’s social
circle was. Epstein (87) theorizes that O’Hara’s constant motion in his own career, and his obsession with movement, can perhaps be juxtaposed with “how he conceives of friendship in his own identity,” which is essential to understand given that his work “is driven by a ravenous passion for friendship and intimacy.” The vibrancy and diversity of O’Hara’s cosmopolitan friendships and relationships propelled his poetry forward through eras of experimentation and abstraction.

O’Hara’s innovative, introspective, and incisive voice interestingly came from a man who initially thought there was something “‘sissy’ about poetry (Gooch 26). O’Hara would come to find poetry as an immense source of joy, “an aesthetic form of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” as observed by Koch (Lehman 34). O’Hara’s personal and literary development are often conjoined in his ruminations on his childhood. In “Autobiographia Literaria” (O’Hara and Allen 11), O’Hara reflects, “When I was a child/I played by myself in a/corner of the schoolyard/all alone” (1-4). The retroactive nature of the poem enables O’Hara to reflect upon how poetry transformed his own sense of self and belonging. He crafts a melancholic image of isolation, one which is only exacerbated in a later stanza through his hyperbolic exclamation, “If anyone was looking/for me I hid behind a/tree and cried out ‘I am/an orphan.’” (9-12). The use of “orphan” suggests a dissociation from family, relatives, or structure, a void that poetry can ultimately come to fill, while the image of hiding seemingly represents the covert aspects of his own identity. The use of the past tense enhances the confessional tone, which allows O’Hara to eventually express that he presently is in “…the/center of all beauty!/writing these poems!/Imagine!” (14-16). O’Hara’s reflections essentially suggest a progression from desolation and sequestration to a life enriched by poetry, which acts as “the/center of all beauty,” a grounding force in his life. In essence, O’Hara’s initial hesitancy
with poetry evolved into a lifelong pursuit, one that ultimately intersected a multitude of overlapping literary and artistic interests. O’Hara’s work was multifaceted, as he had a career that spanned from poetry to art criticism, perhaps because of his foundation of intersectional exploration. From working at the front desk of the Museum of Modern Art to contributing to Alfred Barr’s “monumental Matisse” show to eventually serving as a curator of exhibitions (Lehman 46), he engaged in interdisciplinary artistic exploration of the human experience. O’Hara’s work included poetry, art criticism, and even the creation of his own manifesto, and one must consider the inseparable relationship between his multifaceted identity and the autobiographical nature of his work.

Frank O’Hara’s life and childhood were filled with a richness of integrated discourses, from politics to interactions with music. O’Hara’s proclivity toward music is particularly notable given the value that he placed on improvisation and the momentary responses to life’s happenings in his work. His fascination with musicians like John Cage, for example, whose music was inseparably linked to the principles of indeterminacy, underscores how O’Hara forecasted an eventual relationship between his own work and deconstructed musical forms. O’Hara had intensive interests in Schoenberg and Cage and prepared with quite serious intentions for years of becoming a musician, even though his years at Harvard University (Gooch 28). Cage likely influenced O’Hara because his work “demonstrated[d] how a composer might work with sound rather than music” (Quilter 95). In the same way, O’Hara often created works at the intersection of different art forms like music, paintings, and prose. His writing perhaps has a melodic quality to it, in that there is something beautiful about its improvised form, something enchanting and engrossing about its rhythmic lyricism. O’Hara’s childhood is inextricably linked to his passion for the subject, as his father had a great emotional investment in music (Gooch
The familiarity and intimacy of an O’Hara poem is reminiscent of a musical score, and his childhood irrevocably shaped his own understanding of his work and his creative identity.

O’Hara’s New England upbringing in Grafton, Massachusetts exposed him to town politics, largely by way of the local barbershop (Gooch 28). Much of his work is based on speculation, gossip, and overheard conversations and fragmented thoughts, which is fascinating to consider in relation to his exposure to town politics at a young age. Growing up in a time rife with political division and differences of opinion, he was a witness to a period in world history which saw some of the most stark ideological clashes. Furthermore, the work of O’Hara focuses extensively on how his own ideologies have been shaped in response to interactions, events, and movements, and he commentates in a moving way on his own identity. While O’Hara’s work includes details and microcosms of his own childhood, he strips away some of this specificity to comment on broader human experiences.

In his “Ode on Causality” (O’Hara and Allen 302-303), for example, he catalogues universalities, including “the bang of alertness, loneliness, position that prehends experience” (38) as a means of connecting with his readers, later narrowing in on the experience of “standing still and walking in New York” (45). He often contemplates his own identity in relation to place, progressing from his childhood to the city of New York. While O’Hara initially creates an esoteric framework, he speaks to broader ideas of “pompous frivolity” (47) and the universal search for purpose, ideas developed throughout his own reflections on his childhood and identity. He focused on minute interactions and universal experiences, delicately balancing observation with abstraction and direct, autobiographical reporting on his daily life. Within his work, O’Hara notably distanced himself from the war and division that defined the era until his later service in the United States Navy. O’Hara’s interest in art throughout his childhood clearly established his
lifelong passion for abstraction, building toward his time as a curator at the newly formed Museum of Modern Art. His interests in Rouault, Chagall, Matisse, Klee, Calder, Dalí, and Kandinsky (Gooch 47) reflect a particularly sophisticated conception of Modernism and a desire for reimaging the world through philosophical and artistic movements. O’Hara was coming of age in a time of rapid social and societal transformation, and his immersion in arts, music, and politics likely enriched his unique interests, and understanding, of poetic forms.

II. Military Service and Education

O’Hara’s experiences in different settings enabled the poet to bridge the gap between his own identity and the development of his idiosyncratic voice, style, and form. By 1944, when O’Hara left to join the United States Navy, he was an “expert on the latest developments in twentieth century avant-garde music, art, and literature” (Gooch 47). He described his time in the Navy as “‘the most depressing months of [his] life’” (Lehman 40), and his literary pursuits served as a refuge following his time in the military, which left him with a tremendous sense of “disillusionment” (40). His interactions were not just ones of admiration or passive analysis, but rather, filled with contemplation, criticism, and introspection. O’Hara was known to critically engage with the canonical works of Hemingway and Picasso, for example (Gooch 48), underscoring his ability to diverge from widely held or conventional opinions. O’Hara also spent much of his formative years isolating himself in this continued, careful introspection, drawing upon his artistic and literary experiences as a means of psychological and personal reflection.

O’Hara’s time at Harvard began in a rather unconventional way in relation to the rest of his career. Following his time in the United States Navy, O’Hara matriculated to Harvard because of funding from the GI Bill, but also made sure to state his own disapproval of militarism in his application statement (Gooch 95). O’Hara’s rejection of the ideals of the Navy
was perhaps not in alignment with his fellow soldiers. However, his “compulsion to seize the day was shared by most returning veterans” (Gooch 95). O’Hara later reflected upon his experiences through verse, specifically in “Poem” (O’Hara and Allen 43-44): “when I was in/the Philippines/the mud was yellow/as a cocktail” (17-20). His development of sensory imagery transports readers to his experiences in the Navy and highlights his profound capability for introspection. O’Hara’s acquired sense of resolve and purpose drove his pursuit of musical studies at Harvard; however, his scholarly interests were far from contained to this one area. O’Hara had the opportunity to interact with the rich genesis of culture and literary expression emanating from Cambridge, which was enhanced by his relationships with peers who appreciated his own wit and insights (Gooch 100). He was engrossed in both the academic and social realms of Harvard (Lehman 53), finding himself immersed in a social scene that offered opportunities for discourse with like-minded peers. His desire for exploration across the curriculum was also evident, which became clear in his tendency to attend classes he was not enrolled in (Gooch 100). O’Hara’s interdisciplinary and exploratory approach at Harvard is perhaps reflective of his writing style, which draws upon disparate human experiences and an electric set of images in one cohesive work. The unique methods of abstraction that he would come to be known for occurred in tandem with his embracing of new modes of thinking. He challenged his own traditional upbringing and pushed boundaries with “flirtations with Communist thinking” (Gooch 104). While at Harvard, O’Hara honed many of his characteristic talents, but he also held views that would be shaped gradually, even commentating in a junior year journal entry that he was not “‘romantic or sentimental enough to wish to contribute anything to life’s fabric’” (Perloff 31). Over time, the interdisciplinary course of study at Harvard allowed O’Hara to develop his style, and he subsequently emerged as a poet through
works which mark the discovery of his voice. In “How Roses Get Black” (O’Hara and Allen 3), O’Hara seemingly announces these beginnings in poetic form, which is coupled with commentary on the changing nature of his relationship with his father and of his own understanding of art. The image of “burning bushes” (9) can be juxtaposed against the haunting declaration, “You are no myth unless I choose to/speak. I breathed those ashes secretly.” (13-14). O’Hara’s childhood trauma is subtly alluded to in the poem, in which the psychological distance he feels from his father is contrasted against the image of the “burning bushes,” which perhaps also has a biblical connotation. The idea of the burning rose bush underscores the fragility of their bond, but also the underlying beauty and great importance of their relationship. The wilting roses in the poem are perhaps evocative of the disintegration of his connection with his father as new modes of thinking challenged his own upbringing.

III. Death of Russell O’Hara

The death of O’Hara’s father during his time at Harvard was a pivotal part of his development as a poet, particularly in the way that it shaped his emotional tendencies. O’Hara returned home from Harvard for his father’s funeral after he died of a heart attack, and friends recalled the “gargantuan screams and cries” that echoed from his room (Calhoun 82). Though O’Hara had an intricate and complicated relationship with his father, for all intents and purposes, they shared in a close bond (Gooch 104). Though their relationship was tested by his educational path and homosexuality, his personality and demeanor largely came as a result of their interactions over the course of his life (Gooch 104). Perhaps O’Hara was even more troubled by the extent of their conflict, especially as carried out through correspondence, tension mounting between the two men over the course of his adolescence and college years. In all, however, O’Hara developed a great sensibility and insightful means of expression because of his father’s
encouragement of his intellectual pursuits. His complicated devastation can best be understood through his poetry over time, especially through the quatrains he composed in his poem “Solstice”: “The waning star/falls wanly to/the planets are/no vivid hue” (Gooch 105-106). The discussion of the celestial realm implicates a fundamental sense of grounding that O’Hara derived from his relationship with his father. There is a certain planetary, or gravitational pull, a steadying force that Russell provided, and the image of the falling star signals a loss of control or order. The dimming of the star accordingly seems to mirror this loss of life and inspiration, even if his father did occasionally come to serve as a lightning rod in his life. The abstraction and works that O’Hara later become known for primarily reflected momentary or intangible reflections, often on living subjects, making this rumination an intriguing point of contrast. Moreover, O’Hara’s eventual use of free verse is emblematic of a life largely divorced from tradition; he was unconventional and someone who defied rules and expectations until his own accidental death.

In essence, his use of more standardized forms to describe his father is perhaps an homage to Russell. Gooch (106) believes he selected this relatively traditional form to perhaps honor the traditional qualities of his father. O’Hara would ultimately go on to write a poem entitled, “To My Dead Father” (Gooch 106), which was also comprised of quatrains. O’Hara reflects in a poignant rumination on his father’s death, “Don’t call to me father/wherever you are/I’m/still your little son” (O’Hara and Allen 160; lines 1-3). His use of “wherever you are” is intriguing while in dialogue with his father’s staunch beliefs in Catholicism, as the ambiguous nature of his language comes across as relatively agnostic. He then crafts a stark image of a rose, “your roses no longer grow/my heart’s black as their/bed their dainty thorns/have become my face’s/troublesome stubble you” (7-11). The rose connotes images of a flower resting on a grave,
but is also symbolic of love, forcing the reader to consider the undertones of O’Hara’s own, covert romantic life and sexuality. The progression of his life as he has aged, particularly through the image of “troublesome stubble” (11) underscores some of the psychological torment that comes with aging, which is reinforced through the tactile imagery of the duality between thorns and stubble. O’Hara’s focus on perspective and vision is emphasized through his crafting of the image in the “mirror” (16) in relation to the “blue eyes with hazel flecks” (14). The bidirectional quality to vision seems to suggest a continued preponderance on the nature of their relationship, a dialogue that the two continue to share beyond the grave. In his final, ironic, and heartbreaking declaration, “father I am alive! father” (20), O’Hara seems to reassert his own vitality, which draws a fascinating contrast to his presentation of the dying roses’ temporality. He seems to be clinging on to his own life, while grappling with mortality in a raw, poignant reflection.

IV. Sexual Awakening and Sexual Identity

Throughout his coming of age, O’Hara not only engaged with works that inspired him, but also began to contemplate his own sexual awakening (Gooch 50). In the same way that he wrestled with avant-garde works rooted in the subconscious, O’Hara had his own “‘buried life’” (Gooch 50), his own hidden meaning and sense of self. The intimate quality to O’Hara’s work perhaps derives from his own extensive introspection, as well as his profound desire to observe, understand, and connect with others through language. Furthermore, much of O’Hara’s work involves a strong relationship to place, and many of his adolescent reflections mention his attic and field hideaways. His erotic life, and this period of transition, is recalled in poems like his work “Poet in the Attic,” which juxtaposes the attic with the act of masturbation, or in his work “Galata” featuring the same premise but with music echoing throughout the constructed setting (Gooch 50). The interweaving of his sexual experiences and childhood reflections with music
and art reveals the undeniable importance of artistic experiences in his later realization of his sexual identity. O’Hara’s poems featuring reflections upon his childhood often draw upon the barn as a setting, which is an intriguing choice given the seclusion that it provides. O’Hara’s sexual awakening and early homosexual experiences are described in full-scale poems about his childhood, which draw upon setting as a means of imbuing sensuality and introducing innuendos.

O’Hara’s “‘Ode to Michael Greenberg’” (O’Hara and Allen 290-298) oscillates between more concrete descriptions of the farm area interspersed with homoerotic contemplations on his sexual identity, as well as the need to keep his desires deliberately concealed. He juxtaposes the imagery of the barn with explicit discussions of his own sexual experiences: “Yellow morning/silent, wet/blackness under the trees over stone walls/hay, smelling faintly of semen/a few sheltered flowers nodding and smiling” (27-31). The imagery of the darkness contrasted with the sheltered flowers connotes a sense of fragility and danger to the act, while the coming of the morning seemingly represents a new dawn of his conception of self. The libidinous quality to his descriptions throughout the poem can also be contrasted with his own candid admissions and realizations: “It’s odd to have secrets at any early age” (84) in reference to the “what one must do is done in a red twilight/on colossally old and dirty furniture with knobs/and on Sunday afternoons you meet in a high place” (97-98). O’Hara wants to distance himself from the need for suppressing his sexual identity, and he draws his own sexual experiences into parallel with the church, contrasting the height of the hidden location with the holiness, or “high place,” of the church. As a result, he brings his sexuality into dialogue with the church, and he also critiques the moral authority of those who acted with true sexual immorality, namely priests: “a man in a convertible put his hand up a girl’s skirt” (91). O’Hara draws a pointed contrast between the
supposed moral authority and the religious condemnation that likely came with his sexuality. Unlike the isolated barn space or confessional room, O’Hara’s professional career was spent in New York, a city in which a person can easily disappear. One can cloak their identity in the sheer magnitude of the population, and the locale of New York City is reflective of his desire to be unseen. As Gooch comments, O’Hara likely had a compulsive need to be “rootless,” perhaps as a form of escapism from childhood that would have been marked with the “uneasiness of overstepping taboos” (53). O’Hara balances the ways in which his childhood shaped his life, especially through the importance of artistic, musical, and literary expression, with the ways he intentionally deviated from detrimental social and cultural norms.

While family and birthplace are intricately a part of O’Hara’s formative years and self-development, these experiences are reflected upon through prose which reveals a hidden pain. In fact, Gooch (54) articulates the extent of the “furtive danger” that encompassed O’Hara’s personal identity and the negotiation between his understanding of himself and relationship to his family. In “A Modest Proposal” (Gooch 54), O’Hara declares an empty form of gratitude toward a mother who offers her son a quarter to see a film, as the expectation is that he will engage in a sexual experience in the theater. The setting of the poem is representative of the nature of escapism that O’Hara had to engage in, as the dark and secluded location involves immersing one in a produced piece of media with a contrived reality. O’Hara kept his sexual escapades hidden from his family (Gooch 55), which was likely because of the constrictive and conservative nature of his Catholic upbringing. The “suppressed self” (Gooch 54) of O’Hara is evident in his oscillations between a manufactured sense of self and the more exuberant and idiosyncratic facets of his personality. O’Hara was, to put it simply, a complicated figure, and his friends acknowledged the mix of alluring, enigmatic, and even difficult parts of his persona. As
Calhoun reflects (65), “And O'Hara was so remarkable. It seems that to know him was to be both in love and afraid.” The dualities of Frank O’Hara’s existence come both in the aspects of himself that he needed to suppress or grappled with, such as sexuality, with the eventual, more public nature of his published work. There is comfort in numbers, in identification, and in belonging, and O’Hara would go on to become a central figure in the New York School through an embrace of a new aesthetic. Finding community among artists, writers, and poets, his life and acts of expression reflected a public-facing celebration of himself and the intimacies of his life, a stark contrast to the covert elements of his childhood and early understanding of his own sexuality.

O’Hara further reflected upon his sexual orientation in “Homosexuality” (O’Hara and Allen 181-182), in which he discusses his desire in terms of vision and performance. His frank commentary is both radical and impressive, especially considering the homophobic nature of McCarthyism and the greater discomfort that Ashbery and others had with the subject (Epstein 244). In the first two lines of the poem, O’Hara reflects upon the nature of “our masks” (1), alluding to the furtive nature of his sexual orientation and the collective need and desire to conceal one’s own identity. The poem itself is incredibly profound, in that it offers an early expression of unmasking and, in essence, a revolutionary assertion of “gay pride” (Lehman 45). The interrogative “…keeping/our mouths shut?” (1-2) seemingly questions the nature of silence surrounding homosexuality at the time, which O’Hara subsequently contrasts with the attention-grabbing auditory imagery of the “song of an old cow” (3). The contrast between silence and the sound piercing the air seemingly alludes to the dichotomy between suppression of one’s identity and the overt nature of other sexual displays, which can escape like the “vapors” which leave “one’s soul when one is sick” (4). The inescapable nature of heteronormativity, and the judgment
surrounding homosexuality, are poignantly reflected upon in this work. The reader is meant to understand the visceral pain and authenticity of O’Hara’s own experiences with sexual identity. In the following line, “so I pull the shadows around me like a puff” (5), O’Hara leverages a simile to reflect upon the slurs often directed at homosexual men and subsequently returns to the performative nature of sexuality. In his discussion of “a very long opera” (8), O’Hara paints the image of “our delicate feet” (8), furthering the sense of frailty and fragility that comes with condemnation and discrimination. The notion of walking and living through an identity that is masked, or that must be performed, rehearsed, and hidden from plain sight leads into the following implication that they “will touch the earth again” (7), in an almost cry for lucidity and the feelings of being grounded. He states, “It is the law of my own voice I shall investigate” (10), almost communicating a desire to reclaim, while also calibrating, his own voice amidst the constant need for self-suppression. To that end, he states later in the poem, “It’s wonderful to admire oneself/with complete candor” (13-14), underscoring the importance of embracing authenticity and the refuge of his eventual residence in New York City among its art and writing scene.

At the conclusion of the poem, O’Hara presents an atmospheric depiction of a railway station, “and down the lengthening shadow of an Abyssinian head/in the dust, trailing their long elegant heels of hot air/crying to confuse the brave’’It’s a summer day,/and I want to be wanted more than anything else in the world’ (19-22). The confessional tone enhances the reader’s understanding of how desire is indivisibly linked to one’s sense of self, and that even for the “brave” (21), one desires universal love, attention, and belonging. The image of the “lengthening shadow of an Abyssinian head” calls to mind an Abyssinian cat, perhaps symbolic of the rebirth that comes with a public reclamation of one’s sexual identity. The poem in and of itself
represents a confrontation with social norms, standards, and frameworks of comfort. The escape from the physical and metaphoric shadows and into the light of the summer day signifies a transition in which O’Hara gradually comes to terms with his own sexual orientation. The autobiographical quality to Frank O’Hara’s contemplations of sexual identity build intimacy with the reader through poignant, painful reflections on love, heteronormativity, and discrimination.

In essence, there is an intensely autobiographical quality to Frank O’Hara’s poetry. His works reflected upon the sense of direction and purpose his father provided him, while subsequently distancing himself from the constraints of traditional forms, mirroring his break with his father’s guidance. Gooch (106) also believes that O’Hara’s departure from focusing on music, and shift into full devotion to the craft of poetry, was perhaps to divorce himself psychologically from the legacy of his father. Poetry was a coping mechanism, both in terms of the content, but also in how the act of writing poetry allowed O’Hara to escape the grief which acutely and poignantly affected him as a young man. In all, these works present an intriguing contrast to O’Hara’s later poems which encompass quotidian, momentary lapses in time, as opposed to lifelong reflections on formative relationships.

V. “Personism” (1959)

There is a tremendous range to the work of Frank O’Hara, who grappled with different mediums to express his own desires and to describe his own identity, while also responding to the culturally significant ideologies and movements that defined his generation. O’Hara’s presentation of his own personal and sexual identity in “Personism” underscores the relationship between improvisation and art, as well as his responses to trite manifestos written at the time, such as Charles Olson’s “Projective Verse” (Perloff 788). Written during “the middle of O’Hara’s most fertile period,” “Personism” was produced at the request of Donald Allen, and
O’Hara wrote the piece in about one hour (Lehman 185). The movement itself is “opposed to any kind of abstract removal, any grand philosophizing,” which, in theory, mirrors how O’Hara previously wrote a mock manifesto with Larry Rivers in 1953 entitled “‘How to Proceed with Arts: A Detailed Study of the Creative Act’” (Quilter 98). O’Hara takes on the didactic nature of various artistic and literary schools of thought in his own later manifesto, in which he largely seeks to challenge and undermine the Western notion of a manifesto or narrative and its inherent purpose of legitimizing authority on a specific subject. The improvised nature of the movement and piece, as well its rapid formulation, reflected some of the momentary responses O’Hara had to instantaneous artistic and literary movements, as well as discoveries that came from his writing of “Personal Poem” (Lehman 186). In the rapidly changing and escalating era of Postmodernism, movements evolved and progressed swiftly; there were oscillating reactions to revolutionary cultural and social movements, as evidenced by Abstract Expressionism.

In one brief, isolated moment, O’Hara decided that he would essentially create his own movement. Amiri Baraka, who was instrumental in the production of the piece (Epstein 202), reflected, “‘It was his movement. He thought it up. What was good for me was that you could say exactly what was on your mind and you could say it in a conversational tone rather than some haughty tone of public consumption’” (Gooch 338). The responsive nature of O’Hara underscores both his need to confront existing movements, while simultaneously voicing his own beliefs and chiding the hypermasculine nature of academic essays and existing schools of thought. Frank O’Hara’s voice emerges defiantly in his essay, which is fascinating despite its resistance to the constraints and inevitably didactic tones of a manifesto. As Quilter aptly states, “The tone was distinct, intimate,” particularly in the ways that it addressed the “moments of composition” for writers and artists (102). “Personism” acts as an interdisciplinary and
abstracted representation of O’Hara’s broader views of criticism, but also encompasses his characteristic style. The work ultimately illustrates the manner in which O’Hara’s “personal and direct, speech-oriented poetics” (Epstein 246) influenced his philosophical ideologies and public declarations of his ideas. At the time, critics were engaging with new forms of expression by coining their own categories in an attempt to generate and to be a part of their own schools of thought. In “Personism,” O’Hara attempts to do just that, intentionally remaining ambiguous with his own ideology to mock what he perceived to be the contrived nature of the new manifestos.

While O’Hara perhaps considered his contemporaries more than his audience, the publication of “Personism” allowed his piece to contribute to a broader discourse. The manifesto was first published in Donald Allen’s New American Poetry in 1960 but was consequently retracted and appeared in The Aesthetic of Attention (Perloff 16). His work responds to the uptick in new ideas and schools of thought through an intriguing conceit signifying the idea of someone chasing you, “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.’” The somewhat nonsensical quality to his reflections again reinforces the autobiographical quality to his work, wherein he speaks directly to the reader and commentates on what he feels is the directionless nature of the current movements. He later states, “I’m not saying that I don’t have practically the most lofty ideas of anyone writing today, but what difference does that make? They’re just ideas. The only good thing about it is that when I get lofty enough I’ve stopped thinking and that’s when refreshment arrives.” O’Hara is very tongue and cheek about the way he addresses new ideologies, representing a stark contrast to the heightened severity with which his contemporaries addressed their ideas. Perloff largely believes that “Personism” responds to
the emergence of Black Mountain School manifestos, which O’Hara believed were “too theoretical, too self-consciously pragmatic” (16). In contrast, his casual and laissez-faire approach to confronting Postmodernism and abstraction ultimately puts his ideas into conversation with the conception of “the nostalgia for the infinite,” which he states define “an attitude towards degree of abstraction (O’Hara and Allen 498). The nostalgia “of the infinite demonstrates a greater degree of abstraction, removal, and negative capability (as in Keats and Mallarmé)” (O’Hara and Allen 498). O’Hara is perhaps guided by the vision of negative capability that motivated Keats, in which one could pursue artistic visions even without abject clarity. However, his ideology encompasses what he feels to be a more “true abstraction,” possessing a certain level of intimacy to his own identity. He takes ownership over the idea, which he “recently founded and which nobody knows about, interests me a great deal, being so totally opposed to this kind of abstract removal that it is verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry” (O’Hara and Allen 498). In essence, O’Hara is interested in how his philosophy can be distanced from the discipline’s core tenants, and he states an explicit focus on art itself.

The intimacy that O’Hara intends to interject into his work is mirrored in the intimacy he creates in the final image of the telephone which he feels could be substituted for “Personism” itself. O’Hara intends for his movement to have the same closeness and direct communication as the bidirectional quality of a phone call, which is largely reminiscent of the personalized and responsive nature of his poetry. The conclusion of the work asserts that “Personism” signifies a “very exciting movement which will undoubtedly have lots of adherents,” adding to O’Hara’s dialogue with previous movements. He continues to speak directly to the reader with an interrogative, “What can we expect from Personism? (This is getting good, isn’t it?) (O’Hara and
Allen 499). O’Hara recognizes the “propagandists” (499) promoting their own movements will inevitably be intrigued by his feigned and manufactured ideology whose existence is perhaps a direct response to the constantly changing nature of abstraction itself. His movement forces the reader to consider the juxtaposition he presents wherein poetry is “quicker and surer than prose, it is only just that poetry finish literature off” (O’Hara and Allen 499).

Furthermore, O’Hara strongly held the conviction that poetry ought to be the core of his work and that prose, by nature, “makes too much grass grow” (Perloff 17). While the work is, to a certain extent, a parody of manifesto movements and new ideas stemming from the Black Mountains school and other Modernist thinking, the piece is an essential exploration and development of O’Hara’s personal ideology. The universality to Frank O’Hara’s poetry lies in its succinct nature and ability to speak to the human condition in a way that feels inherently personalized but can be widely understood. At the heart of “Personism” is O’Hara’s desire to strip away the self-promotional quality of new schools of thought, all while showcasing his impulsive, spontaneous, and overwhelmingly intimate style of writing in a response to the contrived masculine authority that ruled abstraction. In essence, his work focuses on culmination over examination (Perloff 24), where there is a rejection of forcibly according meaning to an accumulation of images, for example. It is perhaps O’Hara’s understanding of the interdisciplinary relationships between art and poetry, derived from his work in art criticism, that allows his work to simultaneously focus on minute details while spanning broad qualities of the human experience. Moreover, the complex relationship between O’Hara and his understanding of public consumption underscores that, while he took on a reflective and introspective lens with his writing, he was acutely aware of the critical responses to others’ schools of thought. O’Hara
challenges the status quo through a creation of a nonsensical manifesto, one that primarily acts as a portrait of his interactions with the broader world of critics.

VI. *Lunch Poems* (1964) and Beyond

Perhaps his best-known work, *Lunch Poems* (1964) offers a series of beautiful and distinctive reflections on glimpses into seemingly unremarkable aspects of life, but with extraordinary, unmatched brilliance, intimacy, and perceptiveness. The temporal beauty of Frank O’Hara’s work lies in his means of elevating “the prose of everyday life” (Lehman 169), and nowhere is this more evident than in his collection. Written during his lunch breaks at the Museum of Modern Art, he “occasioned by circumstance” (Lehman 169) many of the quotidian instances of ordinary life, while also capturing the urban rhythm of Midtown Manhattan. *Lunch Poems* offer a small glimpse into the fast-paced life of New York City, particularly as one considers that they were often written during fleeting moments and about temporal experiences. In “Music” (O’Hara – *Lunch Poems* 1), O’Hara focuses on a moment prior to his lunch in which he “…rest[s] for a moment near The Equestrian/pausing for a liver sandwich in the Mayflower/Shoppe[,]” (lines 1-3). O’Hara’s use of enjambment establishes the setting of the poem, with a clear emphasis on the sensory experience of consuming the “liver sausage sandwich.” The alliterative effect of “sausage,” “sandwich,” and “shoppe” extends the line in the mind of the reader, who is then aware of how one is meant to linger on this moment. The following line, “that angel seems to be leading the horse into/Bergdorf’s” (4-5) presents an intriguing juxtaposition between the unspecific “angel” and “horse” and the identified luxury department store. The contrast between O’Hara’s likely inexpensive sandwich and the opulence associated with Bergdorf’s alludes to the dynamic nature of city life, which is inevitably affected by inequality and the overlapping experiences of disparate individuals. In the following line,
O’Hara seems preoccupied with the current state of affairs, “Close to the fear of the war and the stars which have/disappeared” (7-8), building tension by alluding to the precipice of global conflict. O’Hara crafts an intriguing comparison between the “war” and the “stars,” in which one can expect the cyclical coming of the stars in the same way that the military industrial complex has made global conflict seem inescapable. The end of the Korean War in 1953, as well as the continuance of the Cold War, rise of McCarthyism, and general rise in geopolitical tensions make the inclusion of “war” to be a tremendously significant choice. The largely concrete nature of O’Hara’s language can be drawn into contrast with the abstract qualities of his work.

O’Hara transitions the poem at this critical juncture, in which he returns to his present reality, a distinction which imbues the poem with a surreal quality. He seemingly concedes to the reader, “I have in my hand only 25¢, it’s so meaningless to eat!” (9). The sense of futility in his admission builds a certain level of intimacy with the reader. O’Hara continues with his use of sensory imagery, “and gusts of water spray over the basins of leaves/like the hammers of a glass pianoforte (10-11). The use of simile draws attention back to the poem’s title, “Music,” and relates the sensory experiences of the reverberations of the piano with the uncontained power of rushing water. O’Hara shifts from a tone of vulnerable admission, “If I seem to you to have lavender lips under the leaves of the world” (12), to a broader discussion of the season “of distress and clarity” (14). From the perspective of the reader, the esoteric discussion of emotions and visceral experiences is put into dialogue with the “locomotive on the march” (13). The range of human emotions cannot be avoided, in the same way that the locomotive approaching the station cannot be deterred or rerouted. This “season” is filled with a conflicting duality “of distress and clarity” (14), wherein the arrival of Christmastime is not solely met with idealized imagery. While O’Hara offers the reader some immersive depictions of New York City winter,
“and my door is open to the evenings of midwinter’s/lightly falling snow over the newspapers[.]” (16-17), one is left to question the speaker’s emotional state before fully investing in his masterful diction. The raw vulnerability of the narrator continues with the subsequent expression of desire: “Clasp me in your handkerchief like a tear, trumpet/of early afternoon! in the foggy autumn.” (18-19). O’Hara creates symmetry through his continued employment of both similes and inclusion of musical instruments, and the reader can follow the various fragments of the poem’s vignette.

The poem pulls together fractured moments in time into a cohesive narrative, largely because of the richness of its figurative language and the authenticity of its voice, boldness of its admissions, and intimacy of its claims. O’Hara shifts from lingering on the intimacy of a close interaction back to the seasonal splendors of New York City: “As they’re putting up the Christmas trees on Park/Avenue” (20-21). The shift in seasons from “autumn” to the coming of Christmas again signals the passage of time an isolated narrative that O’Hara weaves through the poem, but he then acknowledges that he has lapsed describing from his present experiences, “I shall see my daydreams walking by with dogs in/blankets[,]” (22-23). The personification of his “daydreams” is a fascinating choice on the part of O’Hara, as he essentially distances himself from an intangible vision. The final two lines of the poem again return to the setting but take on a more didactic tone about the city’s happenings. O’Hara concludes, “But no more fountains and no more rain,/and the stores stay open terribly late.” (25-26). The conclusion of the poem reads like internal dialogue, again granting the reader access to the narrator’s psychological state and personal beliefs and admissions. The poem’s narration not only encompasses the present sensory experiences and environment of the narrator but delves tangentially into their thoughts, recording the passage of time through their disparate visions. In “Music,” O’Hara overlays a description of
a New York lunch hour with a contemplation of seasonal change, intimacy, dreams, and introspection.

The idiosyncrasies of Frank O’Hara’s poetry lie not only in their temporality, but moreover, the way in which fleeting moments intersect profound, universal truths. O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems* reflect the ephemeral nature of his act of writing, specifically through their titles. In this case, O’Hara’s “Poem” (O’Hara – *Lunch Poems* 19) covers everything, from coffee to core human experiences and emotions, which is emblematic of his ability to address the mundane and meaningful aspects of life in relatively terse poetry. He commences the poem with immersive sensory imagery, “Instant coffee with slightly sour cream/in it, and a phone call to the beyond” (1-2). The identifiable experience of poorly flavored coffee is immediately drawn into dialogue with contemplations of the realm beyond one’s finite lifespan. O’Hara’s use of enjambment allows the reader to transition from a reflection and perception of instant coffee, recalling a mosaic of personal experiences, to ruminations on one’s own otherworldly encounters. In the following line, O’Hara immediately signals a tonal shift, stating: “which doesn’t seem to be coming any nearer” (3). The universal human experiences of death and loss take on an increasingly conversational tone, specifically through O’Hara’s use of “doesn’t” as a conjunction. One can almost imagine a passing interaction with a friend about the daily toll of grief, a passing interaction as one copes with the duality of the linearity of time and finality of death. The desire to alleviate the burdens of grieving is also drawn into its own dialogue with the art of poetry itself: “‘Ah daddy, I wanna stay drunk many days’/on the poetry of a new friend” (4-5). The inclusion of dialogue signifies another shift in the poem but enables the work to remain conversational, increasing one’s intimacy with O’Hara’s seemingly simplistic reflections, which constitute fundamental human truths. Though “drunk” could be viewed in the literal sense,
intoxication comes to represent a form of escapism where one is wholly numb to the outside world.

The immersive quality of poetry allows for an intimacy and understanding with another person, offering a tangible means of connection while simultaneously contemplating who lies in “the beyond” (2). The phrase “a new friend” (5) demonstrates the forward passage of time and formulation of new connections; however, this line is complicated by the paternalistic notion of “daddy” (4). The reader gleans that O’Hara perhaps implies that the relationship he mourns was romantic or sexual in nature, a notion which he revisits at the conclusion of the poem. O’Hara continues with the motif of deriving purpose and direction from friendships in the following lines, where he concedes that his life “…held precariously in the seeing/hands of others, their and my impossibilities.” (6-7). The line break between “seeing” and “hands” cements the relationship between perception, comfort, and intimacy, as O’Hara finds a tenuous sense of stability in his ability to see and physically embrace the mystical quality of love. The “impossibilities” are not solely his; he shifts from “my life” to “their and my,” descending further into a rumination on the loss of love and intimacy. The ordering of “their and my” further underscores the significance of the relationship, which one comes to discover was the speaker’s “first love” (8). O’Hara’s poems oscillate between ruminations on his own personal life, while also considering more broadly how core human experiences can be observed and embodied lyrically.

In “Poem,” O’Hara again offers a shift between the minute, concrete details of his daily existence and a broad address of universalities, conveyed through obscured references and questions to the reader. The conclusion of the poem, in which O’Hara transitions into an interrogative tone, reveals his own personal anguish through the final lines’ verbosity. O’Hara’s
final question to the audience, “Is this love, now that the first love/has finally died, there were no impossibilities?” (8-9), expounds upon his current woes but broadens his own difficulties in a universal address. The use of enjambment emphasizes the death of his first love, implying a sense of liberation with the use of “finally.” The reader garner that the relationship was marked by immense attachment, and ultimately, heartbreak, leading the narrator to question whether their current state is genuine infatuation or affection. The question of “Is this love” (8) is not asked in singularity, but rather is modified with the appositive of “now that the first love/has finally died” (8-9) signaling that there has been no closure from the relationship until this sudden death. The reflective tone of the poem also reveals a newfound understanding wherein one had complete hope, purity, and wholeness with one’s first love, which is fundamentally broken with a first heartbreak.

The speaker contemplates whether their current romantic prospects even express love, illustrating how they have been fundamentally altered by this first and primary romantic experience. The future feels distant and restricted because of the aforementioned emotional brokenness, and the speaker pleads with the reader in an attempt to feel understood and worthy. The elimination of the possibility of returning to this love, however, does underscore feelings of freedom and closure, despite the distressing quality of one’s first heartbreak. In essence, O’Hara concludes with an address of the reader as a means of seeking the human connection he desires, alluding back to the image of “hands” (7), in which his life can only achieve security and comfort when it is in “the hands of others” (7). The universality of Frank O’Hara is enabled by his fluctuation between fleeting moments, as conveyed through sensory experiences, and core human experiences. Frank O’Hara’s “Poem” does not reveal itself in its title, but rather, allows
the reader to derive meaning from its arresting lines, particularly in its arresting conclusion which forces one to consider love, loss, and how to achieve wholeness after heartbreak.

VII. O’Hara’s Death: Aftermath and Legacy

It is difficult to mark the full impact of Frank O’Hara, and his untimely death forces one to reflect upon his indelible legacy and rich body of influential writings. As Lehman (167) comments, there is a haunting commonality in the lives of many prolific and idolized figures essential to the fabric of American culture and society: they die young. In his description of O’Hara, he writes, “Frank O’Hara was a star, the natural center of attention in the room. Because he lived fast, died young, and left a handsome corpse, his life turned to legend” (Lehman 167). In 1966, a newly forty O’Hara was struck by a jeep on the beach in Fire Island, which ultimately led to numerous depictions of the poet wherein he is the “allegorical personification of delicate but defiant artist victimized by the brutal society” (Lehman 167). In Alfred Leslie’s painting, The Killing Cycle: The Accident (The Killing of Frank O’Hara), the image of O’Hara’s death is haunting, both in the tangible nature of his flesh and the fact that the viewer can viscerally come to term with the motion and movement of the car, whose forward motion propelled him toward his death. The established contrast between the darkness of the background and the illumination created by the headlights is a haunting memorialization to the life of O’Hara, particularly in the way that it provides some specificity to the obfuscated events leading up to his death, while also leaving adequate opacity. The death was senseless, and the pair of “naked furies [that] fly over the beach in the foreground” (Lehman 167) underscores the vulnerability and brutality of the death.

The work also can be drawn into intriguing parallels with O’Hara’s poetry, in which he, too, reflected on the untimely deaths of Latouche and Pollock. In “A Step Away from Them”
(O’Hara and Allen 257), he includes the haunting series of lines: “…But is the/earth as full as life was full, of them?/As one 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.” (35-41). The temporality of life is juxtaposed against the premature deaths of artistic geniuses whose work entirely shaped a generation. Perhaps it is notable, too, that he includes temporal expressions of present trends or ideas, like “magazines” (5), underscoring the brief and vivid depictions of their lives. The initial interrogative presented to the reader, in which O’Hara questions the continuation of life without them, is an eerie foreshadowing to the hole that he himself left in the New York Scene following his own death. As Lehman also reflects, the impending tearing down of the Manhattan Storage Warehouse emphasizes the duality of the ever-changing urban landscape while also “subtly reinforce[ing]the sense of impending doom that shadows the poet” (169). In a clairvoyant way, O’Hara perhaps understood that the artistic and literary movements which surrounded his generation were groundbreaking, but tragically, temporary.

However, it is also important to note the excesses that plagued O’Hara’s life, particularly his own struggle with alcoholism. As Quilter asserts, O’Hara was “frenetically busy” in the final years of his life, and his drinking largely kept pace with his prolific production of work, as well as his curatorial duties (203). Though O’Hara was incredibly productive and prolific, he was clearly troubled and descended further into the depths of alcoholism. Perloff even speculates that his death was, in a way, an “instinctive suicide” (5), that there is a lack of plausibility to the manner of death and that O’Hara potentially relented to the fast-paced nature of his own lifestyle and alcoholism. While he was struggling with substance use, especially toward the end of his life, Lehman notes that “the remarkable thing is how well he functioned, and how amazingly
productive he was” as a “poet of great originality, a relentless instigator and inventive collaborator, as well as a champion of the avant-garde in painting and sculpture” (172-173). In essence, even toward the end of his life, O’Hara was engaged with some of the most formative and important expressions crystallizing abstraction and the human experience at the time. He was preparing a Pollock retrospective with Lee Krasner and amid some of the most meaningful years of his life, bound by “limitless obligation” with a pace that was naturally faster than others (Lehman 176). O’Hara’s reach, both artistically and socially, was also perhaps broader than was publicly understood.

Larry Rivers eulogized O’Hara, stating that he “was my best friend. There are at least sixty people in New York who thought Frank O’Hara was their best friend” (Quilter 203). The extent of Frank O’Hara’s personal and professional relationships is perhaps his greatest legacy as a “figure who was so central to a large, diffuse set of overlapping communities” (Epstein 86). Frank O’Hara’s poetry can be understood not only for its Postwar contexts and interdisciplinary underpinnings, but for the meaningful professional and personal relationships he had, bonds which he forged at the intersection of his artistic and literary pursuits. Furthermore, one of O’Hara’s greatest and most intimate relationships and understanding was, in actuality, of himself, therefore facilitating the autobiographical quality to his work. O’Hara was somewhat misunderstood during his lifetime; his legacy was reduced in his New York Times obituary as “EXHIBITIONS AIDE AT MODERN ART DIES–ALSO A POET” (Calhoun 3). The minimization of O’Hara’s accomplishments during, and after his lifetime, underscores that his work transcended boundaries.

O’Hara’s interdisciplinary workings within the art world during the final period of his life cement his legacy, particularly in his conceptualization of how abstracted works converged to
create a generational portrait. In one of his final letters, O’Hara wrote a tribute to Barnett Newman (Lehman 178), whose Abstract Expressionist color field paintings evoke strong emotional responses and psychological experiences for viewers, particularly during an era in which existentialism would have been on the forefront of people’s minds. Differentiating himself from critics like Clement Greenberg, O’Hara wrote criticism “as if it were an extension of poetry by different means” (Lehman 179). His poetic approach to criticism allowed his work to toe the line between actual criticism and flowing praise, as he co-opted Baudelaire’s idea that criticism itself ought to be entertaining. This understanding is critical because Baudelaire is considered to be one of the most formative thinkers in terms of conceptualizing modernity. The legacy of Frank O’Hara lies in how his work acts in response to Abstract Expressionism, as well as other contemporary movements, wherein his work takes on the improvisational qualities of abstracted painting. In essence, O’Hara was wholly capable of “‘defamiliariz[ing]’ the ordinary” (Perloff 19), responding both to earlier movements of Formalism and his own desire to work at the juncture of art and writing. He placed New York at “the center of being” (Perloff 21), finding himself wholly mixed up in the movement and motion that accompanied everything from action painting, to music, to dance, to film. O’Hara’s personal narrative remains a large part of his representation of the Postwar American experience, especially the way his own experiences intersect, complicate, challenge, and ruminate on broader American society and existing movements. Frank O’Hara’s poetry is incredibly intimate for its autobiographical contemplations on his life and quotidian aspects of the human experience, while his broader body of work philosophically encompasses and straddles both the artistic and literary aspects of the New York School.
Chapter Two: Back Table at the Five Spot: Frank O’Hara, Grace Hartigan, and Larry Rivers

I. Grace Hartigan

Frank O’Hara’s relationships across the New York School ultimately propelled his development as a writer, while he also served as a source of inspiration for Abstract Expressionist artists, many of whom were overlooked at the time. The power of place is essential to understanding O’Hara’s story and the impactful relationships he built across the city. The manner in which he decorated his apartments is a microcosm of the undeniable power of his relationships. As LeSueur reminiscences, “By the time I moved in with Frank…he already had a number of things [paintings], by Joan Mitchell, Larry Rivers, Mike Goldberg, Grace Hartigan, Al Leslie, and other friends, as well as a very beautiful de Kooning” (xiv – Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O’Hara). This reflection is emblematic of the way O’Hara was artistically immersed within the scene, even as a poet, and even before he achieved any degree of notoriety. Furthermore, O’Hara’s living space is indicative of the ekphrastic and intermedial quality to his work, which is evident in his poem “Radio” (O’Hara and Allen 234). He concludes the work by stating, “Well, I have my beautiful de Kooning/to aspire to. I think it has an orange/bed in it, more than the ear can hold.” (13-15). By juxtaposing the “dreary music” (1) on the radio with the tangible nature of the coloration in de Kooning’s painting, O’Hara centralizes the role of art in both his physical space, and more broadly, within his own life and work.

Frank O’Hara’s involvement in the art world is reflected in his own criticism, photographic depictions of his interactions, and his working relationships with artists like Larry Rivers and Grace Hartigan. O’Hara was completely engaged in the art sphere, notably through his role at the Museum of Modern Art, which revealed a symbiotic understanding: “The museum
needed Frank. So he entered the establishment art world and brought to it his own non-
establishment style” (Button 42). Button’s statements are intriguing, especially as one considers
the unposed nature of his photographs (Button 44-45), as well as how he portrays a carefree and
sociable Frank interacting with Larry Rivers, Franz Kline, James Schuyler, and others. In
essence, the photographs are emblematic of O’Hara’s intermedial world, in which his
interactions with artists likely influenced his own explicit emphasis on sensation and perception
in his poems. There is a tremendous sense of intimacy captured in these images, which highlight
O’Hara’s sociability, as well as the emphasis he placed on maintaining connections. In another
picture by American photographer Burt Glinn, Back Table at the Five Spot (1957) (Figure One)
(Syracuse University), Frank O’Hara can be seen in conversation with Larry Rivers and Grace
Hartigan gesturing as he is deep in thought. Surrounded by his contemporaries, the image is
broadly indicative of how O’Hara derived inspiration from his social network within the New
York School. O’Hara’s friendship with Grace Hartigan encompassed a shared thematic emphasis
on abstraction and was profoundly influential in spurring the advancement of Postmodern art and
poetry.

Though her start in the art world was somewhat unconventional, Grace Hartigan’s
ultimate impact on the New York School was immense. Born in 1922, Hartigan married and had
a child at a young age, taking art classes while she worked in an airplane factory (The Museum
of Modern Art). A coworker introduced her to Henri Matisse, who was “hooked by her work”; her entry into the broader art scene included her eventual relationships with Jackson Pollock and his wife Lee Krasner, who she met in 1948, as well as the de Koonings (The Museum of Modern Art). Stylistically, Hartigan was influenced by Pollock’s use of scale and the prevalence of abstraction that manifested in different ways across the scene. A few years later, in 1951, Frank
O’Hara met Grace Hartigan when he moved to New York and was performing clerical work at the Museum of Modern Art (Smee). In short, the alliance between the two is emblematic of the richness of the emerging American art work, in which shared ideas and interdisciplinary connections catalyzed innovative art and writing. Frank O’Hara and Grace Hartigan’s relationship was incredibly fruitful, as it included collaborations on exhibits, with a particular reliance on employing abstraction and improvisation as a means of bringing together the written word and visual imagery. As someone who was inextricably linked to the art world, O’Hara believed in the importance of his social milieu to build transformative and intermedial connections, but moreover, perhaps in the importance of physically surrounding himself with art to enact a process of complete immersion in the scene itself. Interestingly, Hartigan had significant working relationships with poets within the New York School, including O’Hara and Ashbery (Perl 244), both of whom commented on Hartigan’s work over the course of their careers. Their critical interest in her work likely resulted from her abstract pieces, which diverged in the same way that New York School poets challenged poetic conventions. The friendship between O’Hara and Hartigan came out of the New York Postwar art scene, a relationship that was likely strengthened by O’Hara’s involvement at the Museum of Modern Art. O’Hara became a “key exponent of, and player in the Museum’s and Alfred Barr’s story about the relationship between Matisse and other, mainly French painters, and the new American painting” (Ward 17). O’Hara was central to the expansion of modern art, not solely because of his curatorial and critical roles, but also for the potential in which he saw in the scene.

The city itself had the existing artistic, literary, and cultural infrastructure which served as a great source of inspiration for the members of the New York School, who were essentially pioneers in creating a center of artistic innovation and proliferation, shifting this away from the
previous site of Paris in the 1920s. Hartigan, Larry Rivers, and O’Hara, for example, all attended theatrical and dance performances (Gooch 246; 252); the city acted as an intellectual playground, as well as a social hub for both emerging and prominent writers and artists. The complexities and inner workings of the city’s social milieu enabled poets and writers like O’Hara and Hartigan to meet, socialize, and find commonalities. The pair was intimately connected both in their social circles, as well as at the root of their own poetic and artistic pursuits, especially regarding the representation of time, memory, and personal experiences viscerally through verse and through art. Furthermore, the pair embraced the opportunities for social fluidity and frequent gatherings among poets and painters that the city facilitated, with O’Hara reflecting in his poetry about the Cedar Street Tavern, in which artists gathered: “to get to the Cedar/to meet Grace” in “L’Amour avait passé pour la” (Gooch 202). The relationship between Frank O’Hara and Grace Hartigan is evidence of both the dynamic power of New York City as a source of inspiration and as a location which promoted impactful conversations between artists and writers that spurred the advancement of Postmodern movements.

The bond between O’Hara and Hartigan was fortified by their shared innate curiosity and responsiveness to the world around them, particularly the urban landscape. Perhaps this desire stemmed from their childhoods. Hartigan’s upbringing mirrored O’Hara’s, as her parents also noted her own creative impulses and desire to immerse herself in a variety of mediums, with her mother remarking on her restlessness (The Museum of Modern Art). In the same way that O’Hara sought to portray quotidian aspects of life through observational and narrative poetry, Hartigan embraced the world around her as a springboard for the basis for her artwork. A parallel can be drawn between “Hartigan’s use of photography in her painting process and O’Hara’s use of paintings (often by Hartigan) in his writing” and that both O’Hara and Hartigan had to
negotiate “social and political tensions...as an interface or mediation between experience and art” (Hampson and Montgomery 8-9). O’Hara and Hartigan share a common pursuit of capturing the essence of everyday life, while also simultaneously considering the groundbreaking artistic, social, and cultural movements that surrounded them. This fluctuation is notably reflected in the work of Hartigan, who oscillated between abstraction and representation, “flouting the art world’s expectations by embracing subjects deemed anathema in the early 1950s: people, clichés, and snippets from modern life” (The Museum of Modern Art). Her work exists at the conjunction of abstraction and realism, as she combined both styles in an entirely idiosyncratic manner. Early in both of their careers, the two collaborated on poem posters, which were exhibited in 1953 (Lehman 22), illustrating how deeply O’Hara was already embedded within the artistic community as a fixture on the scene. The two were critically engaged with each other’s work, as in their correspondence, for example, O’Hara opened up to Hartigan about external critiques that he received, such as in a 1956 letter from John Ashbery (Epstein 325). O’Hara viewed Hartigan’s shift toward “recognizable figures and symbols” as an “act of betrayal in their avant-garde crowd,” ultimately leading to a multi-year estrangement between the two (Smithsonian American Art Museum and Renwick Gallery). Additionally, as Gooch suggests, the two shared in a series of tense interactions in 1964, growing further apart after Hartigan’s marriage (439). However, this increasing separation perhaps mirrored the broader trend of O’Hara’s relationships toward the end of his life, which were tested both by his drinking and inevitable distancing over time. O’Hara and Hartigan had recently reconciled when he was killed in the Fire Island beach accident, forcing Hartigan to reflect upon his role in her life, using painting as a manifestation of her own feelings of grief, mourning, and disbelief.
Hartigan’s painting, *Frank O’Hara, 1926 – 1966* (1966) (Figure Two) (Smee), is a public demonstration of her own desire to mourn O’Hara in spite of the creative differences the pair had toward the end of his life. The painting itself functions as a memorialization of O’Hara, especially for its employment of abstraction, which he endorsed as the superior means of painting and expression. The duality developed between light and dark hues creates a contrast which is evocative of the tensions between the pair and the overwhelming dichotomy between life and death. The canvas itself, however, does feature one more realistic figure “striding through the thicket of strokes on the canvas” (Smithsonian American Art Museum and Renwick Gallery), seemingly in dialogue with O’Hara’s final hours walking on the beach on Fire Island. The desire to capture O’Hara alive and in motion also proves to be a fitting memorial, as though she does not want to wholly accept the finality of his death. The painting employs a fascinating use of linearity, in which dark, linear divisions are utilized in relation to abstracted curvilinear forms. The viewer would likely find it difficult to discern the subject matter, needing to parse through incongruous forms to derive meaning from the work itself. The use of darkened gray forms calls to mind the darkening of the night sky, again reminiscent of the darkness on the beach itself. The way the paint was applied appears like stained glass; the textural effects achieved by Hartigan almost accords the work a certain holiness, which feels fitting given its intended purpose as a memorialization of O’Hara.

Hartigan’s work employs an idiosyncratic use of color contrast and linearity in order to abstractly illustrate her relationship with O’Hara. The lack of specific subject matter creates intriguing optical effects; one cannot wholly discern if the center is intended to portray a face, natural forms, or simply nonsensical, overlapping linear and curvilinear constructions. However, it is conceivably Hartigan’s desire to abstract O’Hara as the subject; the approach which one
must take to understand the work potentially mirrors her own immediate reaction to the tragic circumstances of O’Hara’s death. This work takes on an additional layer of interest when one considers the conversations surrounding mortality that Hartigan and O’Hara shared, as he once told her that he “did not want to live longer than Apollinaire who died when he was thirty-eight during an influenza epidemic” (Gooch 452). O’Hara and Hartigan clearly engaged in formative conversations regarding mortality and existentialism; however, his death was completely shocking to O’Hara’s broader social circle, as well as the New York School at large, as evidenced in Hartigan’s piece. As art critic Peter Schjeldahl declared in his 1966 obituary of O’Hara in The Village Voice, “In 15 years as a poet, playwright, critic, curator, and universal energy source in the lives of the few hundred most creative people in America, Frank O’Hara had rendered that world wholly unprepared to tolerate his passing” (139). Hartigan essentially seeks to optically mimic the effect of the void O’Hara created in their lives, as the painting is essentially devoid of immersion; it visually traps the viewer. Her use of formal qualities supports her subject matter, as the painting’s lack of dimensionality reinforces a subliminal association of the inescapable nature of time and death. In this way, the work resembles her collaboration with O’Hara, Oranges (Figure Three) (Diggory 45), which also shattered “illusion of pictorial depth, exposing the picture for the flat surface that it is” which she accomplishes by highlighting O’Hara’s text (Diggory 43). Additionally, the lack of information surrounding O’Hara’s death is reflected in the limited definition of the piece’s subject matter, which also manifests Hartigan’s own psychological state. Gooch suggests that Hartigan ascribed a “romantic notion of suicide” to O’Hara’s death; Hartigan herself said that “I always felt that Frank’s death was at least part suicide” (467). Hartigan clearly ruminated upon the circumstances of O’Hara’s death, and the painting was an outlet for her to contemplate the entirety of their relationship. In essence, there is
a clear relationship that can be purported between Hartigan’s conceptions of death and the
macabre discussions that she shared with O’Hara about mortality.

The formal qualities of *Frank O’Hara, 1926-1966* encapsulate the finality of the death
itself, especially Hartigan’s stated desire to employ color and linearity as a means of creating a
canvas with essentially no dimensionality. Hartigan expressed that she hoped to create a “surface
that resists, like a wall, not opens, like a gate” (The Museum of Modern Art). While some of her
contemporaries created paintings that acted optically like portals or had the bidirectional quality
of a mirror, Hartigan instead leverages a flattened canvas to memorialize O’Hara. She represents
the profound underlying psychological experiences that are quintessential to Abstract
Expressionism, crafting unsettling dualities through her use of color contrast and unexpected
application of paint. The fragment of yellow, for example, that appears in the upper center region
of the canvas could be read as akin to a rising sun, which is but the lack of defined edges in the
work gives it an overwhelmingly haphazard quality. The inclusion of the resolute blue section in
the corner seemingly calls to a celestial realm, wherein she considers the duality between night
and day, calling to mind the darkness that surrounded O’Hara’s death. The immediate duality
between lines, especially the curvilinear forms, encompasses an intriguing divergence from other
Abstract Expressionist artists who embraced zips and linear separations of blocks of color. The
work seems to be an extension of a vulnerability within Hartigan, in which the lack of precision
reflects the immediacy with which she responded to O’Hara’s sudden death. The curvilinear
forms also demonstrate, to some degree, the platonic sensuality she felt toward O’Hara, as their
friendship was deepened by an intense creative and professional passion that bound the two in
shared artistic and personal kinship.
O’Hara’s poetry offers intimate descriptions of their friendship. O’Hara and Hartigan collaborated on intermedial projects, including “Oranges, a series of twelve paintings based on texts by Frank O’Hara” which marked the “beginning of Hartigan’s work with poets and a decisive moment in determining the identities that both the artist and the writer assumed in their later work” (Diggory 41). The interdisciplinary connection between the pair began with Hartigan weaving his verses into her work, reflecting upon O’Hara’s poetry as a means of inspiration at a time when the two fields remained widely disparate. Through the project, O’Hara bound poems while Hartigan painted original covers, which were shown at the show opening at the Tibor de Nagy Art Gallery, one of the earliest modern art galleries in the city; O’Hara was “quite sentimental about” the show (Gooch 236). The interplay between O’Hara and Hartigan resulted in intermedial collaborations, as well as fruitful, ongoing dialogue about their respective works and emerging commonalities. The exhibit exemplifies their shared desire to critique social structures and constructs, with commentary on representations of gender and sexuality: “In the interplay of word and image in Oranges, we have, then, a defense against sentimentality in at least two forms: a sentimentalized version of woman, in the figure of Ophelia, for instance; and a sentimentalized version of nature, in the mode of pastoral” (Diggory 45). O’Hara and Hartigan both critiqued and contemplated gender constructions, as Hartigan often exhibited her works under the moniker George early in her career, while O’Hara, as a gay man, “faced the imposition by society of the feminine gender role” (Diggory 46). Not only did the two collaborate on intermedial projects, but their friendships extended into the broader New York School given their involvements in productions which involved poets, painters, composers, and actors in theater productions with The Artists’ Theater. O’Hara served as a playwright and poet while Hartigan provided decorations in a multifaceted production which also involved work by Larry Rivers,
Kenneth Koch, and others (Myers 35). The collaboration between Frank O’Hara and Grace Hartigan enriched their dialogues with each other, as well as built their network of relationships across the New York School.

O’Hara and Hartigan had substantial overlaps in terms of the thematic and formal qualities of their work, as there was interplay between the poetic elements of Hartigan’s paintings and the abstracted and improvisational nature of O’Hara’s work. The two engaged in frequent dialogues about their work. Hartigan and O’Hara discussed and ideated around his poem “Second Avenue” (O’Hara and Allen 139-150) in which she recollects that the “chiding from his father…was a direct quotation” (Gooch 53) and believed that it was perhaps “‘Frank’s greatest poem, one of the greatest poems of our time’” (Gooch 234). The poem itself, however, comes more broadly to signify the way the city promoted both relationships and the rise of modernity. As Brady suggests, “‘Second Avenue’ is primarily a portrait of subjectivity within the particular conditions of urban modernity’” because it contends “with specific challenges to modernism in poetry” given its “confrontation between representation and abstraction” (Brady 61). O’Hara’s nonrepresentational “Second Avenue” is potentially why Hartigan took such a significant interest, as she was compelled by his ability to diverge from the previously popularized poetic forms and structures. In essence, the relationship between O’Hara and Hartigan was ultimately fortified by their shared desire to test the boundaries of Abstract Expressionism, while engaging critically with the broader art and literary scene. There is an unmistakable intimacy in the conversations between O’Hara and Hartigan, who were unafraid to share criticisms about each other’s work and shared in a reciprocal admiration and respect. The two shared in correspondence as well, in which Hartigan provided feedback on works like “Meditations in an Emergency” (Gooch 281). During periods of more limited writing, he turned
to Hartigan for inspiration and ideas, drawing upon the inevitable dialogue that could exist between art and writing. Surprisingly, Hartigan even asserted that the two had a quasi-romantic aspect to their relationship, in which she felt a draw toward him that was akin to being in love, despite O’Hara’s homosexuality (Gooch 212). The two shared a mutually beneficial artistic and professional relationship, as the overlap between their work resulted in meaningful intermedial expressions.

O’Hara continued his ekphrastic tendencies, combining his tendency to integrate multiple media with his desire to portray the intimacies of everyday life through verse. In “Portrait of Grace” (O’Hara and Allen 87), O’Hara ostensibly engages with a Larry Rivers illustration of Grace Hartigan, producing a narrative which commentates on multiple levels about his relationship within the New York School, as well as how artistic representations can reveal subtle intimacies about the quotidian aspects of life. Gooch notes that “O’Hara had been writing poems to Hartigan, including “‘Portrait of Grace’” which was based on “‘[Larry] Rivers’ drawing of Grace as a girl monk’” (236). The interplay between O’Hara and Hartigan illustrates the inextricable relationship between poetry and artistic expression at the time, regarding both formal and informal works. O’Hara’s poetry is largely based on his own observation of Hartigan, who admired him both professionally and personally, becoming fixated on his work and persona. In the first stanza of the poem, O’Hara contemplates Hartigan’s femininity: “Her spinning hair webbed lengthening through/amber silk, where the colored plaster and laughter/find division” (1-3). O’Hara’s perspective juxtaposes Hartigan’s hair with gossamer, crafting a vivid image that imbues her with a certain degree of mysticism and sensuality. His use of auditory imagery is captivating, as it harkens back to their conversations and characterizes them with a sense of levity. The use of “plaster” also implies a visit to a studio, in which O’Hara would have been a
witness to her process of creation; the poem does not just act as a portrait of her physical appearance, but rather of her artistic process.

In the following stanza, O’Hara further develops the rapport between the two in artistic terms, comparing the process of painting with the intangible nature of both memory and presence. In this stanza, Hartigan essentially acts as the embodiment of, and as an extension of her own artwork, as “Silently, the presence spills/the inviolable distances in the studio/Blue.” (4-6). O’Hara’s decision to truncate “Blue” onto one singular line emphasizes the importance of coloration in Hartigan’s work while simultaneously underscoring the jarring silence in the studio itself. The idea of the presence “spilling” brings Hartigan’s personhood in dialogue with the act of painting itself, making her identity inseparable from her medium. In the remainder of the stanza, O’Hara takes on a slightly more abstracted and esoteric shift that juxtaposes the beauty of her portrait and image against the natural world itself. The most profound sentiment is perhaps the extent to which he juxtaposes the magnitude and beauty of the natural world with the gravity of his memories of Hartigan. He states, “…And now to ocean,/the roses grow./The plaited ordure that sings/its dust into the feet, it shall be snow; she bears/no memory like a mast, nowhere becalmed/angered,/no spear” (8-11). The tonal fluctuation makes Hartigan’s existence, as well as their friendship, seem increasingly fundamental to O’Hara’s identity, wherein there is an existential and almost life-giving quality to her presence. Interestingly, “After reading one of O’Hara’s poetic tributes, “‘Portrait of Grace,’” Hartigan told him [O’Hara]: “I get so confused about myself, as though only the paintings are real”; she believed that his poem gave her a sense of “existence” (Smee). There is, in essence, a bidirectional quality to O’Hara’s work, which signifies the closeness of their friendship and his admiration for Hartigan, while also illuminating for Hartigan a unique and newfound sense of purpose and identity.
In the following stanzas, O’Hara shifts externally from his portrait of Hartigan to his own personal and critical reflections upon depictions of the female form in art. He considers the fragility of the way in which femininity is illustrated, juxtaposing it with the delicate characteristics of crystal: “If each thing become crystal/‘I’ll not construct that flaw,’ to be beauty itself, /then must she take forests in her arms of water” (12-14). O’Hara is interested in the preoccupation with the female form as an iconographic representation of beauty given that women are held to standards of purity and femininity that are primarily unattainable. The image of “forests in her arms of water” seemingly intimates fertility, while remaining in dialogue with O’Hara’s previous portrayals of the natural world. He then draws into dialogue his naturalistic depictions and the façade of a building with the physical appearance of a woman. Outside of its title, the poem takes on a relatively universal tone, as O’Hara continues, “She will darken, decisive as a light bulb, when/the building crumbles. She had thought herself tough, /but now each day, trembling and cloudy she sighs, /feathered for that virginity which seeks her out.” (18-21). O’Hara creates an intriguing duality between light and day where he contemplates the stifling societal limitations and social constructs of gender, while also considering the sexual implications of the concept of virginity. The inclusion of “virginity” is noteworthy, as it can be juxtaposed directly against the image of “pale fingernails” (22) in the following line, as well as his previous discussion of the “ripe” quality of praise (15).

O’Hara ostensibly seems interested in the way women must persist in the face of societal and social oppression, particularly surrounding the all-encompassing effects of the pressures of maintaining a certain image, as connoted by the façade itself. However, the “crumbling” of the building as an image is conceivably caused by both external and internal pressures, as represented by the leitmotif of the natural world, and in later discussions, in which O’Hara
implicates a sense of self-injury caused by intensive self-criticism. The use of “will,” primarily in relation to “darken” denotes a sense of certainty, whereas O’Hara uses a forceful tone to reinforce the detrimental consequences of faltering under the pressure because of cogitation on one’s flaws. The conclusion to the stanza, in which O’Hara states, “but the sea may flatten into a smile before she’s done/with those bruisings[.]” (23-24) amplifies this action as a repeated act, while continuing to draw it into dialogue with the sea. The natural world offers some sense of healing and escapism amidst the constancy of self-loathing, which can be juxtaposed with the certainty, and cyclical nature, of the ocean’s tides.

O’Hara takes on an increasingly observational tone in the later lines of the poem, which is reinforced by the concrete and authoritative nature of his assertions. The fractured images in the final stanza are intended to mirror the chaos of one’s mental state amid intensive self-criticism, as he isolates the lines, “She has not a natural voice./She’s not a star.” (25-26). The decision to optically have the viewer linger upon these lines only compounds the effects of the previous stanzas, wherein one sees how this portrait is a delicate and intimate one that oscillates between physical descriptors and characterizing Hartigan’s psychological state. The concluding stanza is filled with esoteric qualifiers and descriptions, in which he comments that the subject has “ridden sidesaddle to churches,/is no frequenter of palace or barn” and then subsequently commands us to “…Now/celebrate her for that light which anguish will/again and again illuminate her our shores…” (27-30). O’Hara portrays Hartigan as someone who is unconventional in her approach, defying convention or standards, as conveyed symbolically by the church. The fluctuation in tone is somewhat startling to the reader, as there are not necessarily previous quantifiers of time, space, or direction. The forceful tone of “Now” alludes to a direct line of communication with the reader, who feels obligated to understand the
somewhat intangible relationship between the abstracted “shores” and the light associated with the portrait itself. In essence, O’Hara seems to be calling for admiration of the unconventional and avant-garde, imbuing the central figure with the light that will infiltrate other realms, “our shores.”

The dynamic between the reader and the subject is tenuous as she is later represented as a “downy bird” who “will not forget the eagle” (31). The juxtaposition between the liberated, yet precocious and vulnerable bird with the predatorial eagle suggests the heightened tensions associated with critical views toward Hartigan. The explicit statement expressing that the eagle cannot be disregarded signals the permanence of these beliefs, and yet, also allows O’Hara to build toward the conclusion of the poem which highlights the subject’s resolve. Her lack of fragility is communicated through a series of disparate images: “Her eyes are not glass children. Let not that firebrand/stolen from the summits mark her brow.” (32-33). Interestingly, Hartigan emphasized that her work included a “theme of ‘masks and costumes and hiding’” (Diggory 46), and yet, O’Hara seems focused on her eyes and vision as means of signaling the omnipresent, public, and permanent nature of her work. The image of “brow” is intriguing given its classical and feminine associations, but more broadly harkens back to O’Hara’s desire to create a lyrical portrait in spite of his own poetic resistance to the act of painting. Both Hartigan and O’Hara embraced the ethos of self-creating (Gooch 13), and the poem intimates that Hartigan’s passion enables her to take on radical action and make impactful change as a divergent member of the Abstract Expressionists.

II. Larry Rivers

The writings of Frank O’Hara are inextricable from the overall narrative of the New York School, but it is perhaps his interpersonal relationships with artists that make his lasting
influence felt in the decades beyond his death. As Larry Rivers asserts in his own autobiography, he shared an intimate and romantic relationship with O’Hara, one which commenced at a party in 1950; the mutual respect between the two men emanated from this initial meeting, in which they “talked our heads off for two hours” (Rivers 228). Rivers interestingly recognizes the rich interplay between mediums within the New York School, which encompassed dance, writing, theater, music, and art, and notes that painting was the most conversational and widely appreciated form of expression, believing that it held “an advantage” (Rivers 230). Rivers immediately identified the importance of these conversations, not solely because of his relationship with O’Hara, but moreover, in their respective identities as poets and artists; their interactions proved to be both personally and professionally fruitful. The two were often in conversation about their emerging place in the artistic and literary scene, which is apparent in their dialogue and in their piece “‘How to Proceed in the Arts,’” which was a “hilarious and mordant piece that O’Hara and Larry Rivers wrote in 1952...a mock manifesto that again demonstrates that these figures were a good deal more skeptical about the avant-garde and its communal underpinnings” (Epstein 80). The two were aware of broader elements of the movement wherein the avant-garde became popularized, which manifested in consumerist interpretations of their art forms and ideologies. Essentially, the two were dubious of the “hypocrisy of believing in the importance of communal bonds and the primacy of the self at the same time” with a great disdain for the development and enforcement of schools and artistic approaches as disparate movements and groups (Epstein 80). Their response is understandable, given that O’Hara surrounded himself with members of the artistic community who took increasingly divergent approaches and whose work cannot be easily contained and categorized to one specific area.
These enriching meetings and conversations cemented a deep bond between the two men, and Rivers reflected fondly upon the educational elements of these discussions. He described how his dialogues with Frank “began to resemble a seminar” in which art and discussions of personal matters were intimately linked, indicating that Frank O’Hara wrote poems during lunch time (Rivers 230). The compendium of this work, the aforementioned *Lunch Poems*, encapsulates Rivers’ abstracted and improvisational art, which largely lacked any narrative structure or concrete subject matter. Rivers identified “The Day Lady Died” (231) as one of the more “dramatic” poems in the collection, which is intriguing given some of the most prominent curatorial and critical reflections and interpretations of this poem as emblematic of O’Hara’s ability to address some of the most existential questions and fundamental realities of life’s core questions, as well the eternal duality between life and death. Breslin (25) considers the historical era that the New York School encompassed to be incredibly formative to the work of poets like O’Hara, and “Their work became acts of deliberateness, accountability, and in, the language of our contemporary world, care.” Members of the New York School not only responded to the sociological and psychological ramifications of the Post-War era but were also facing inhospitable realities of American society; Breslin cites antisemitism, the Red Scare, and homophobia, while also noting the “paroxysms of war and mass death” (24-25). The radical nature of their work, however, lies not only in its responses to the tumultuous decade but also in its fervent embrace of happiness despite the omnipresent quality of the unknown.

Convention and tradition were at the essence of American society, as traditional social roles were reaffirmed and reinforced. Regarding the more informal pursuit of leisure and entertainment, film, and the emergence of more widely broadcasted television programming, would have bound people in forms of expression that promoted unity and shared experiences.
The radical acts of writing and creating with abstraction at the core of creation was in direct opposition to the mainstream itself, a repudiation of conformity. In this way, artists and writers like Rivers and O’Hara, from seemingly isolated walks of life, were bound by their shared desire to subvert the traditional while simultaneously celebrating the universal, as well as experiences of everyday joy. During a time rife with political division and geopolitical uncertainty, viewers and readers would be met with work that “coalesces in a feverish devotion to life and living” (25).

Rivers possesses a tremendous desire to memorialize the intensity and the intimacy of their relationship. O’Hara was known as someone who was the “quintessential coterie poet” (Epstein 86), in which collaboration drove his work, and his friendships served as a major source of inspiration. O’Hara’s closeness to Rivers is evident in the latter’s ability to depict the raw emotionality and subtle expressions of his friend. In his "Double Portrait of Frank O’Hara" (1955) (Figure Four) (LeSueur and Rivers 57), Rivers creates a dual image which enables him to highlight O’Hara from two different vantage points and in dichotomy of emotional states. The intensity of O’Hara’s gaze in the right-hand image can be directly compared to his forlorn glance in the other image. Rivers conveyed in an interview with Joe LeSueur that he “began doing portrait of O’Hara in the fall of ‘52” after periods of suicidality which O’Hara ultimately helped him to overcome, later resulting in a relationship with both a professional and a romantic dimension (LeSueur and Rivers 57). The relationship between the two is conveyed through the dueling portraits, which emphasize both his “blazing blue eyes” and widow’s peak, which Rivers believed gave him “a place to anchor the picture, and his broken nose was dramatic and easy to get” (LeSueur and Rivers 57). While the work is more subdued than some of Rivers’ other portraits of O’Hara, which are significantly more overt in their presentation of his sexuality and
persona, this portrait appears largely there is an unnerving quality to the two portraits, which are emblematic of Rivers’ broader fixation with O’Hara.

In their famous lithograph collaboration, Stones (1959) (Figure Five) (Tibor De Nagy Gallery), O’Hara’s prose and Rivers’ illustrations are combined to illustrate the notion that “poetry is a colloquy between people, voices, languages and texts, a dialogic entity issuing forth from, reinforcing, and testing intimate bonds of friendship, and community” (Epstein 91). The intensity of O’Hara’s relationship with Rivers is especially evident in their intermedial collaboration, Stones, which emphasizes universalities including love and human connection. In page 6 of the collaboration, entitled “LOVE,” there are line drawings of interlocking figures accompanied with text which states: “To be lost/the stars go out a broken chair/in red in the dark faint lust/stirs like a plant in the creased/rain/where the gloom/swells into odor/like earth in the moon/lightless the arrow wears its sign of depth and its sorrows/of snow” (1-10). The short poem is intriguing in relation to Rivers’ portraiture of O’Hara, which displays a substantial emotional depth. Perloff notes that “In the spaces between Rivers’ silhouettes of athletic males and phallic shapes” O’Hara included the poem itself (104). The poem, and accompanying artwork, inevitably has some ties to the intimacies of sex and human relationships, facilitating the pair’s reflections on their own bond, as well as their broader social circle.

Both O’Hara and Rivers often use their work not only as a means of commemorating their relationships, but as a means of enriching their artistic community. The pair sought to utilize their work as a broader means of bringing together “small avant-garde collectives” which were “Establishing alternative communities of marginalized individuals in the face of dominant Cold War culture consumed with consensus and homogeneity” (Epstein 91). The development of this environment of a closed space conceivably manifests the feelings of isolation that existed
outside of the social community and bonds that had been built, one that enables the writers and artists to transcend the stifling nature of conformity, and moreover, periods of “sorrows.” Furthermore, the page demonstrates the inherent, universal duality between loss and love, acting as an extension of how O’Hara used writing to articulate his emotions and to manage his own relationships, giving form to the deepest expressions of his psyche. Rivers was riveted by O’Hara’s perceptive approach, taking interest in him as a subject through an extended period of portrayals. He declared that “At the time, I had no idea I was making so many pictures of him; I think I must have made a dozen portraits, and that’s not counting drawings or paintings like ‘The Studio’ and ‘Athlete’s Dream’ he appeared in” (LeSueur and Rivers 57). The interplay of Frank O’Hara and Larry Rivers is palpable not only in their intermedial collaborations, but also through Rivers’ series of portraits which speak to the intimacy of their friendship.

Double Portrait of Frank O’Hara has an arresting quality that is rooted in the soulfulness that Rivers imbues within O’Hara’s eyes, which radiate light, depth, and dimensionality, imbuing the flattened figure with lifelike characteristics. Though the figure itself is relatively flat and semi-abstracted, the increasingly realistic eyes contrast with the ill-defined background on both sides of the canvas, which oscillates between shades of dulled tones of brown, green, and beige. Even O’Hara’s dress is relatively undetailed, framed by limited and haphazard brushstrokes which mirror the blue and green shades of his irises, the focal point of the canvas. The angular jawline can be compared optically with his receding hairline, and the linearity of the portraits extends to the contouring of his cheekbones and idiosyncratic his broken nose. The prominence of his Adam’s apple amplifies the masculine aspects of his portrayal, as he leverages a light and dark contrast to draw particular attention to his neck. The emphasis on the vulnerability of O’Hara in this work, especially the exposure of his neck is illustrative of the intimate nature of
their friendship and alter which relationship, in which Rivers constantly craves proximity and closeness. The detail that is made possible through the presentation of profile and forward-facing views of O’Hara underscores the intensive observation undertaken by Rivers in order to observe O’Hara. Rivers reflected upon his continued approximations by describing his constant quest to capture O’Hara’s essence and appearance simultaneously: “I always felt like I was close to getting him, but I never did, so I kept on trying” (LeSueur and Rivers 57). O’Hara’s emotional state in both portraits is relatively indistinguishable to the viewer, which mirrors the sense of futility Rivers experienced in his pursuit of connection with O’Hara.

O’Hara’s “On Seeing Larry Rivers’ *Washington Crossing the Delaware* at the Museum of Modern Art” (Figure Six) (The Museum of Modern Art) interacts directly with the artwork of Larry Rivers, underscoring the importance of intermedial dialogue that occurred across the New York School, as well as how ekphrasis was an instrumental underlying component of O’Hara’s approach to art. Additionally, as Gooch notes, “O’Hara and Rivers were both obsessed that season with the Russians. O’Hara’s obsession was with Mayakovski, who had so stridently declared that ‘The poet himself is the theme of his poetry’ and ‘The city must take the place of nature’” (238). O’Hara and Schuyler notably engaged in dialogue about the relationship between Russian art and what he deemed “‘the intimate yell’” (Gooch 238). The intermedial interactions between members of the New York School clearly extended to art, literature, and poetry, serving as a source of genesis for Rivers’ painting. As a result, Rivers simultaneously found himself immersed in *War and Peace*, and thus, “decided to make his own attempt at a large-scale epic painting” (Gooch 238). Though Rivers typically worked on a slightly smaller scale, his employment of a larger canvas enables the work to be immersive and to interject more social
commentary. The painting served as a source of inspiration for O’Hara, who comments both on its aesthetic appearance, as well as its external meaning.

The poem’s title “On Seeing Larry Rivers’ Washington Crosses the Delaware at the Museum of Modern Art” (O’Hara and Allen 232-233) is an apt one, given that his act of viewing the painting shifted his expressed beliefs that the work was perhaps anachronistic or clichéd. O’Hara begins the poem by stating “Now that our hero has come back to us/in his white pants and we know his nose/trembling like a flag under fire” (1-3). The portrayal of a generally infallible George Washington in a state of vulnerability is a fascinating point of entry for O’Hara, who is looking to the focal point of Rivers’ work in his abstracted portrait of George Washington. The stark whiteness of his pants, as mentioned in the poem’s second line is striking, especially given that Washington’s countenance is relatively ill-defined, and the contours of his body make his form appear relatively flattened. There is an absence of motion within the work, which is accentuated by the aforementioned lack of dimensionality, so it is interesting to note O’Hara’s perception of the state of trembling. However, his decision to include a mention of the flag inherently calls to mind the canonical 1851 painting by Emanuel Leutze, Washington Crossing the Delaware (Figure Seven) (The Metropolitan Museum of Art). In this way, O’Hara builds upon an artistic lineage of representations of American patriotism, which referencing how Rivers decided to co-opt this image. Gooch (238) notes that the work “was a battle cry, thumbing its nose at Abstract Expressionism an pointing the way toward what would later become Pop Art”; while the work’s source of inspiration was seen as revolutionary, Rivers’ work broke artistic boundaries, specifically for its use of brushwork and its challenge to painting conventions associated with Abstract Expressionism. O’Hara, for his part, allows his work to deal with both the artistic elements of Rivers’ work, but also the lasting implication of Rivers’ work,
particularly the manner in which his artistic approach encapsulates contemporary values. Because the work is in dialogue with Leutze’s classic and iconized painting, O’Hara’s experience with Rivers’ painting is illustrative of his own personal and poignant response to the work but also the generational impacts of this sort of visual messaging.

In the subsequent lines, he moves to a description of the natural surroundings and American attitudes throughout the war: “we see the calm cold river is supporting/our forces, the beautiful history.” (4-5). The river provides metaphoric buoyancy to these ideals, which O’Hara will eventually go on to repudiate and challenge over the course of the poem. Leutze’s painting pictorially emphasizes the inhospitable water, while the lack of naturalism in Rivers’ work visually downplays the significance of the event by decentralizing Washington’s identity in the painting. The following stanza can be externalized to act as social commentary in a more contemporary context: “To be more revolutionary than a nun/is our desire, to be secular and intimate/as, when sighting a redcoat, you smile/and pull the trigger. Anxieties/and animosities, flaming and feeding” (6-10). O’Hara’s use of alliteration draws attention to the generational continuity of violence and war as a part of the American identity, as the image of smile following the visceral description of pulling the trigger underscores an irreverent approach to war. The description of “our desire” and use of the word “revolutionary” play on the context of the painting itself, while also considering how the poem can be later situated in an era which saw a profound push for increased rights, or their “desire[s].” The employment of “nun” is also an interesting choice by O’Hara, as it implicates how the diminished separation between church and state forces certain social norms and attitudes that manifest as religiously based discrimination, particularly toward the gay community. As Perloff suggests, “O’Hara, like Rivers, presumably regards [this] as a nonevent” (Perloff 85). Rivers’ co-opting of Leutze’s patriotic and canonical
painting has the same critical undertones as O’Hara’s poem. The alliterative “flaming and feeding” can be drawn into dialogue with the following stanza, where O’Hara states, “the physical event. They have burned up./See how free we are! as a nation of persons.” (14-15). The irreverent quality to his diction is exposed through his ironic exclamation “‘See how free we are!’”; he intends to emphasize his view of the insignificance of the event, while also representing the lack of unity and great discordance that remains in the country in a contemporary context through the use of “persons.”

The fragility of the nation’s framework is denoted by the image of the flame, which symbolizes a tenuous, young nation embroiled in conflict. O’Hara’s “satiric address” (Perloff 85) comes across in the following stanza, in which he chides Washington: “Dear father of our country, so alive/you must have lied incessantly to be/immediate…” (16-18). O’Hara’s focus on Washington as a figure is intriguing given the discrepancy between Leutze’s hyper realistic work in relation to Rivers’ painting. By employing scale to this degree, Rivers’ painting takes on the opposite effect, as his anonymous presentation of Washington no longer monumentalizes the crossing in the same way, and he diminishes and perhaps even inverts the relationship between the event’s lasting significance and scale of the canvas. O’Hara’s critique of Washington is more forceful, and the reader garners his bitterness with the dichotomy established between the ironic address of “Dear father” and the accusation of “you must have lied incessantly.” The final stanza solidifies O’Hara’s objective for the painting and poem to be collectively “read quite independently as a pastiche on a ‘Major Event in American History’” (Perloff 85). The concluding lines, “Don’t shoot until, the white of freedom glinting/on your gun barrel, you see the general fear[.]” (24-25), leverage a double entendre of “general,” potentially alluding to a general ineptness and continuing a direct address of Washington himself. The lack of detailing in
Rivers’ painting strips Washington of the commanding agency and potent masculinity he is accorded in Leutze’s work, a contrast which is particularly evident given their differences in positionality.

O’Hara’s approach to the poem is fascinating, as it is not only imbued with his social and political commentary, but moreover, his artistic responses. O’Hara critiqued a variety of forms across Abstract Expressionism, but his commentary on paintings perhaps favors those who employ figures. Interestingly, Perloff believes that “O’Hara’s poetic response to the painting of Larry Rivers, like his lyric celebrations of Grace Hartigan, suggests that he was really more at home with painting that retains some figuration than pure abstraction” (85). However, O’Hara’s commentary is theoretically most favorable to specific artists over broader movements and aesthetic choices, insofar as he respects the divergence from what was emerging as more mainstream. The intersection of Postmodern art and poetry allowed O’Hara to find intrinsic value in the work of artists like Rivers and Hartigan, and, as will be discussed in the following chapter, Alex Katz, as he “cared more for individuals than for movements” as the first to recognize the genius of these artists (Perloff 87). O’Hara’s legacy lies equally in both his poetry and relationship to the broader New York School of poets and painters, and thus, his untimely death reverberated artistically across his social circle.

In 1967, Larry Rivers memorialized Frank O’Hara in his piece simply entitled *O’Hara Reading* (Figure Eight), which succinctly memorializes his relationship to the poet through a portrayal of O’Hara pensively engaged in the act of reading. The lithograph features a blue background with gradations made of construction paper, framing an image of O’Hara in which he is posed pensively at a desk, glancing downward and ostensibly reading from a text. This action is visually mirrored through the decision to overlay his figure with text that is woven
around his form from his poem entitled “A Young Poet” (O’Hara and Allen 278-279). As the National Portrait Gallery states, the “curving stream of words” can be visually juxtaposed against the blue background, which appears akin to “blue embankments” (National Portrait Gallery). Interestingly, Rivers decides to incorporate two identifiable figures to O’Hara’s right, not distinguishing them as real persons or merely as components of an artistic rendering. The three remain in dialogue visually because of their depiction in primary colors; O’Hara is most prominent given his unadorned, dimensionless yellow coat in the image. The color contrast that Rivers establishes optically creates an iconographic effect of a halo surrounding O’Hara, memorializing the true essence of his spirit. Rivers intends to convey that O’Hara built and maintained relationships with existing and up and coming members of the scene, promoting their work through his writing and other endeavors.

The incorporation of people is perhaps reminiscent of O’Hara’s previously stated philosophy within “Personism,” in which he intimates that poetry exists between people as opposed to simply between the confines of the pages themselves (O’Hara and Allen 499). Moreover, the work behind O’Hara is also illustrative of his philosophy of community building in relation to his own literary and artistic pursuits, in which the poem “A Young Poet” that is featured was initially written to “praise an emerging writer named John Wieners” (National Portrait Gallery). The inclusion of the poem is notable, as it encompasses a nostalgic tone that simultaneously reads like predestination; O’Hara reflects: “Two years later he has possessed/his beautiful style/the meaning of which draws him further down into passion” (10-13). The lines possibly allude to how O’Hara was slightly all-consumed by his own craft, allowing the pace of his lifestyle and the intensity with which he lived life, including his pursuit of pleasures, to outpace what he could physically withstand. He later reveals “or a poet exhausted by/the insight
which comes as a kiss/and follows as a curse” (28-30); perhaps O’Hara feels an undue burden in his own prolific writing and perceptive and feeling approach to the world around him. He even morbidly mentions the notion that the poet is potentially so attuned with himself that his “elegies are dictated to him” (17). However, the poem’s premise echoes some of the most beautiful aspects of his legacy, in which he takes ownership over a poetic lineage of shorts, encouraging poets to embrace their own style, finding euphoria in the ability to articulate universalities through verse. The bond between Frank O’Hara and Larry Rivers is emblematic of the collaborative dialogue that existed between the pair, in terms of their work and shared projects, but moreover, through the manner in which they sought to fortify the New York School through building transformative personal and professional relationships. Frank O’Hara’s legacy lives on tangibly through Larry Rivers’ painting, as well as in his personal investment in advancing New York broadly as a cultural, artistic, and social hub that irrevocably shaped the trajectory of the canon.
Appendix

Figure One

![Image](image1.png)

Burt Glinn

*Back Table at the Five Spot*

1957

Silver gelatin print

40.6 cm. × 50.8 cm. (16 in. × 20 in.)

Private Collection

Figure Two

![Image](image2.png)

Grace Hartigan

*Frank O'Hara, 1926-1966*

1966

Oil on linen

203.4 cm. × 203.2 cm. (80.13 in. × 80 in.)
Smithsonian American Art Museum and Renwick Gallery

Figure Three

Grace Hartigan

Oranges No. 9

1952

Oil on paper

203.4 cm. × 203.2 cm. (80.13 in. × 80 in.)

Collection of Emily Davis Harvey/Private Collection

Figure Four

Larry Rivers

Double Portrait of Frank O'Hara

1955

Oil on canvas

38.4 cm. × 63.6 cm. (15.25 in. × 25.13 in.)
The Museum of Modern Art

Figure Five

Larry Rivers and Frank O’Hara

Stones, Page Six
1959
Lithograph
60.96 cm. × 76.2 cm. (24 in. × 30 in.)

Figure Six

Larry Rivers

Washington Crossing the Delaware
1954
Oil, graphite, and charcoal on linen
212.4 cm. × 283.5 cm. (83.6 in. × 111.4 in.)
The Museum of Modern Art
Figure Seven

Emanuel Leutze

*Washington Crossing the Delaware*

1851

Oil on canvas

378.5 cm. × 647.7 cm. (149 in. × 255 in.)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Figure Eight

*O’Hara Reading*

Larry Rivers

1967

Lithograph

73.66 cm. × 104.14 cm. (29 in. × 41 in.)

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution
Chapter Three: “One of the most interesting painters in America”: Frank O’Hara and Alex Katz

The friendship between Alex Katz and Frank O’Hara germinated both from their involvement with the New York School, in addition to O’Hara’s broader work as an art critic. The two initially formed a relationship because of mutual friend Edwin Denby, a fellow poet and art critic. Katz stayed within the New York School largely because of his friendship with figures like Denby, even though his work could be more commonly associated with early Popism (Gooch 267). In 1961, Edwin came to see Katz’s exhibition of cutouts at the Tanager Gallery, and was startled to realize that the cutout, Frank O’Hara (1959-60) (Figure One) (The Guggenheim Museum), was not his friend, but rather, a lifelike representation of the poet. The cutout showcases the manner in which O’Hara’s relationships across the New York School fused art and writing within the collective, as Katz created a moving, lifelike representation of his friend, forever monumentalizing their bond.

I. Introduction

Frank O’Hara can perhaps be best understood in relation to the broader New York School, which is inextricably linked to the corresponding artistic movements. While O’Hara’s work can be analyzed through an autobiographical lens, the broader artistic and literary community he was a part of, and the relationships he forged, are fundamental to approaching his life and work. O’Hara found himself at the center of the group through his interactions with various poets and artists, as well as through his role as a curator at the Museum of Modern Art. In essence, the poetry of O’Hara and his peers was “understood and enjoyed by New York School painters and, later, O’Hara became a one of the most acute commentators on their work”; this is direct evidence of a “rapprochement between poets and painters” (Ashton 227). The
symbiosis achieved between poets and artists was not only because of criticism published by poets like O’Hara, but also because of the richness of intermediality and professional relationships that defined the New York School itself.

The connection between Frank O’Hara and Alex Katz is emblematic of the broader commonalities between poets and artists within the New York School. The poetry of O’Hara, and others in the New York School, “has functioned as a creative spur to Katz throughout his life” (Brinson 13). The intersection of prominent or mass-produced images of the American consciousness, with deeply felt and seemingly individual experiences, was conveyed with great intimacy by artists like Alex Katz and poets like O’Hara. As Ashton notes, “There was previously a confounding separation between art forms, wherein one of “the peculiar aspects of traditional American culture had been the total isolation of the different arts” (134). The relationships between artists and critics, for example, in the case of Katz and O’Hara, eventually bridged the gap between disparate modes of creation. The bond between Frank O’Hara and Alex Katz was one defined by great admiration, as Katz recognized O’Hara and his capacity for “emotional extension,” a gift which surpassed other poets (Sperling). The admiration was mutual; O’Hara declared Katz to be one “of the most interesting painters in America” (O’Hara – Art Chronicles 142), citing Katz’s grasp of both European and American influences while forging ahead in the creation of his own idiosyncratic style. O’Hara reflected upon how Katz “freed his own painterly feelings and widened their range of possibility precisely at the moment when he was focusing them on a specific intention” (O’Hara – Art Chronicles 143). He acknowledged that Katz pioneered his own style while in complete awareness of the changing landscape of American painting, while simultaneously embracing a painting style that diverged in unique ways from both Pop Art and Abstract Expressionist tenets. Ultimately, Katz pioneered
his own style and framework and was a leading painter “of a radical counterpoint later called
New Perceptual Realism” (Rooks 16). O’Hara noted this divergence and admired the stylistic
simplicity of Katz and his maintenance of one consistent visual language. Interestingly, he found
parallels between Katz and other artists, believing that Larry Rivers and Katz were “notable
exceptions” (O’Hara – Art Chronicles 143) in terms of their ability to maintain their own
aesthetics, as opposed to giving into other or foreign influences. He wished that “some of the Pop
artists had paid closer attention to what Rivers and Katz, in their different ways, were doing”
(O’Hara – Art Chronicles 143). Perhaps O’Hara saw some of himself in Katz, as the two both
sought to diverge from the traditional schools of painting and poetry and influences that seemed
to consume their time.

Katz and O’Hara saw each other as mutual sources of inspiration, equally benefiting from
the artistically rich environment of the New York School. Katz also felt greatly indebted to Frank
O’Hara, acknowledging that his “business was being an active intellectual. He was out to
improve our world whether we liked it or not…The frightening amount of energy he invested in
our art and our lives made me feel like a miser” (137). Katz captured O’Hara’s tremendous
investment in the advancement of the artistic community, as well as the ideals and concepts that
mutually shaped the development of the poetic and artistic facets of the New York School. Both
rejected tradition and principles in favor of pioneering new styles and distilling their thinking
into authentic ruminations on the world around them. Lajer-Burchart (66-70) invites viewers to
consider the overarching principles of Katz’s work, some of which include “Distillation”;
“Fragmentation”; “Immediacy”; “Non-narrativity”; and “Repetition”, philosophies which
O’Hara also grappled with in his own work and in his responses to the broader artistic
community around him. In short, both Katz and O’Hara benefitted immensely from intermedial
collaboration and from a general awareness of how the intersectional art, literary, musical, film, and dance scenes could come together in powerful ways, both in terms of artistic inspiration and from enriching personal and professional relationships.

O’Hara had a meaningful and fruitful friendship with Alex Katz, and the two shared an idiosyncratic responsiveness to their environment through their art and diction. While Katz graduated from Cooper Union in 1949 (Quilter 98), it was his bonds with members of the New School that ultimately proved to be the most formative part of his education as an artist. Furthermore, his continued experimentation with the contemporary desire for abstraction led to some of his most evocative and recognizable works. Katz’s work existed at the intersection of his own original form and the broader Abstract Expressionist movement; his pieces’ “enormous sizes, evident speed of execution, sheer physicality, and ‘pulsatingly’ clear colors are in some sense as much original extensions of Abstract Expressionism as any of the more strictly abstract artworks by Katz’s contemporaries” (Schwartz 17). Katz’s work experiments with scale, often taking into consideration the design aesthetic of advertising billboards and other public installations in his paintings and other forms. Katz saw the scale and “graphic bluntness” of the billboard as a means of reinvigorating the medium of painting, and even as a way of distancing himself from Abstract Expressionist ideas (Lajer-Burcharth 65). While Katz is known for the scale of his work, and his cropping of images to create close-ups, he is also celebrated for his signature cutouts. He began experimenting with cutouts in the late 1950s, creating figures on a canvas and “placing them in different contexts” to isolate them as “shaped freestanding paintings” (The Guggenheim Museum). Katz was fully integrated into the New York School, through his friendships with Edwin Denby, Rudy Burckhardt, Kenneth Koch, and of course, Frank O’Hara.
II. 2022 *Gathering* Retrospective at The Guggenheim

From October 2022-February 2023, Alex Katz held a retrospective art show at the Guggenheim Museum, which included works spanning the entirety of his impressive career, from his landscape paintings in his home state of Maine to his revealing portraits of his social circle and wife. Not only did the retrospective encompass his diverse artistic methods and styles, but it also offered the opportunity to directly engage with Katz’s art in one of the most architecturally impressive museum or gallery spaces in the world. The scale of Katz’s works cannot be fully appreciated unless they are viewed in person, and moreover, in a space wherein the gallery conditions promote an appreciation of the grandeur of his large-scale works. The long sightlines within the Guggenheim Museum take viewers on an optical journey through Katz’s career progression, which commenced on a smaller scale with his intimate sketches of city life and concluded with his grand, abstracted works and recent landscape paintings. The architecture of the museum itself compliments the way the work is displayed: “the eye does not draw together the dome’s meridians, and the sun’s rays do not cross it” allowing the building to assume the “ephemeral power that languishes on the city’s aerial skyline” (Dal Co 97). The complementary nature of the museum’s setting and Katz’s conception of city life create an immersive experience, one that is only strengthened by the unobscured views made possible by its spherical architectural design. His expansive canvases anchored the exhibit, helping visitors to theorize the influences of the social and working relationships of the New York City School, which promotes a proliferation and free exchange of ideas. In contrast, his landscape paintings fully demonstrated the influence of his time in Skowhegan, in which he moved beyond Cubism and other Modernist systems, painting landscapes as “the final element that enabled Katz to arrive at his mature work” because of the way it inspired his cropped compositions (V. Katz 23). The fluid
connection between the gallery space and Katz’s works promotes a complete understanding of underlying intentions and messaging of each piece.

As one entered and walked up the ramps, one would essentially engage in a confrontation with Katz’s cutouts, including his 1959-60 cutout of Frank O’Hara. My experience in viewing the work was one of initial surprise and wonder, wherein it seems improbable to have a freestanding painting right in front of you. The immersive gallery experience encourages one to view the figure from all sides and directly confront its gaze, while examining its posture and the way O’Hara carefully crafted its detailing. Frank Lloyd Wright’s vision for The Guggenheim, in which he conceived of a “‘new kind of museum’ as one in which populist social interaction and public entertainment have replaced the more elitist types of individuals contemplate and private aesthetic experience” (Levine 88) and the museum “derives its power from its unique and inimitable formal expression of a new way of thinking about how modern art might be exhibited and experienced” (Levine 90). There is an enduring relationship between the gallery experience and the way it promotes direct interaction with Katz’s works, and by extension, O’Hara’s, desires for articulating collective experiences through art and poetry. I found the experience of visiting the installation to be incredibly poignant, as while Katz is still alive, Katz’s work memorializes O’Hara in a tangible way, especially through the naturalistic cutout. Katz’s work, “For all its disarming, hypnotic, suave quality…conveys the peculiar sentience of his figures” (Kuspit 7). The installation honors O’Hara in both his physical appearance, as well as its embodiment of his scholarly thought.

While Katz’s work captures the essence and being of O’Hara, the installation in its completeness also honors the poet on a philosophical level. Katz’s representations and career progression largely align with the way O’Hara charted and projected his eventual progression as
an artist, and moreover, the interactive exhibit honors how both men sought to imbue their work with profound intimacy. The experience of viewing the cutout, as well as Katz’s other pieces, helped me to fully appreciate Katz’s interest in the visual experience and how impactful his network of poets, artists, and writers were in his own ability to innovate a new and distinctive mode and medium of artistic creation.

III. Katz’s Career and Interplay Between Katz and O’Hara

At the time, Katz’s relationships with poets and other members of the New York School greatly impacted his own artistic production. Katz created cutouts for Kenneth Koch’s play, as well as cutouts of his poet friends (Quilter 98). His cutout of O’Hara is one of his most notable works, largely for its arresting realism. As Guggenheim assistant curator David Horowitz notes, the work has an immersive and lifelike quality to it because of the nature of its silhouette, as the outward protrusion of the feet creates a unique representation. O’Hara was “taken” with the exhibit, and he found parallels between Katz’s figures and English Dummy Board Figures of the seventeenth and eighteenth century (Gooch 389). The comparison is intriguing given that these figures would have been created with the intention of providing protection with individuals away from the home; the inanimate sculpture was assigned human qualities. In the same way, Katz’s sculpture of O’Hara retains a certain persona. The act of viewing the work in person promises a captivating visual experience, as one gains insight into the physical presence of O’Hara without physically interacting with him. His process of creating cutouts changed over time, as “He saw that he could salvage a figure he liked and scrap the rest” (Breslin 26), and he captures the essence of O’Hara without additional background. While the cutouts are often situated in front of a solid background or wall, their existence as isolated entities for interaction from multiple viewpoints, as is the case with Katz’s cutout of O’Hara.
When Katz initially conceived of the idea for a cutout, it was because he could not determine a satisfactory way to relate the figure to the environment itself, which also underscores his own notions of space, time, and representation. As art critic Carter Ratcliff describes, Katz eventually decided to mount “them directly on plywood and give them bases” and later painted “directly on metal” and cut “out the image with a power saw,” he was able to immediately create freestanding figures (Quilter 99). The three-dimensional form, which also produces a flattened appearance, allowed for the creation of interactive figures that could be viewed from multiple vantage points. When approaching the work from the side, Katz’s ultimate decision to angle O’Hara toward the viewer fosters this sense of connection, and one can see his expression, hairline, and the protrusion of his jawline, all of which are accentuated by the medium itself. Furthermore, “Katz’s manner of implying movement also enforces distance, a space of absorptive remove – a world to be approached and studied, felt, even, bit not known” (Breslin 26). The creation of negative space lets viewers interact with the cutout more completely. Additionally, Katz’s perspective more broadly encompasses the principles of Modernism itself, wherein it “has been linked to the Baudelairian ideal of… flâneur, who observes the world and is among the world, but retains a coolness and critical distance from it” (Momin 26). This notion can also be understood in relation to Katz’s indifference to time, in which he embraces fleeting moments and divorces context from his cutouts and figures. Katz’s work not only occupies space in a unique way, but also complicates our perception of time, embodying Baudelaire’s principle of rejecting “the academic tradition in favor of depicting the fleeting, mobile, and variable aspects of everyday life” (Lajer-Burcharth 63). Katz invites us to view and interact with the work while potentially lacking awareness of his point of view in its creation.
Alex Katz’s reductive act of creation allowed his figures to uniquely embody the gallery space and form a distinctive reliance on formal qualities as a means of representing his subjects. Katz’s formulation of the figure represented a new Katz pioneered an innovative new technique with this cutout, in which he cut a figure from the canvas and pasted it onto plywood, and his five-foot tall cutout of O’Hara was one of the first manifestations of this idea (Gooch 367). The depiction of O’Hara is grand in scale; the cutout accentuates his figure, from his square shoulders to the elongated forms of his arm, down to his feet, which sit on a wooden pedestal. The feet mark an intriguing and distinctive element, as the cutout appears slightly off kilter in a “bearing that looks initially off balance” in its attempt to mimic O’Hara’s idiosyncratic walk and “effulgence” which is distilled by Katz (Breslin 26). The presence of O’Hara is made possible through both the representation itself, as well as through the removal of space. O’Hara found Katz’s ability to diverge from contemporary representations of the figure to be admirable particularly as he “proceeded to remove even the ‘void’” (O’Hara – Art Chronicles 146). In essence, O’Hara was fascinated by how Katz narrowed in solely on the figure itself, isolating its form entirely from any kind of constructed environment of background. Because of the artistic process he pioneered, he removed “any possibility of a pictorial space or environment” (O’Hara – Art Chronicles 146). It is this combination of medium and formal qualities that infuse these figures with a sense of life, particularly as they occupied various spaces and constructed environments. As Beattie notes, “Alex Katz is painting in a time when we have become used to myopic perceptions…the painter has to respond quickly to the environment” (26). Katz’s works often reposition reality through a reliance on light, color, and texture, often in ways that are ostensibly straightforward.
Katz’s use of coloration, though relatively simple, is highly effective, as he draws an intriguing contrast between the simplistic and somewhat pensive expression of O’Hara with his olive-green jacket. The unadorned, simplistic brushstrokes augment this effect, as Katz effectively draws upon techniques of gradation to create dimensionality to an otherwise flat medium. The dichotomy between flatness and dimensionality is achieved by the manner in which the cutouts occupy space. Because, as art critic Carter Ratcliff describes, “their physicality is compressed into planes” like paintings, but they fill a space like a three-dimensional sculpture (Quilter 99), they defy artistic designation and forge entirely new ground. Katz often incorporates fragmentation in his depictions, relying on reductive processes to produce new optical effects; his pioneering and executions of the cutout conceptually are no exception. As a result, the works can potentially be compared to an effigy (Quilter 99), as is evident in the realism that is inherent in the depiction of O’Hara. The naturalistic quality to the work is wholly complemented by Katz’ choice of medium, as the cutout allows the bodily form of O’Hara to appear increasingly lifelike, particularly because of the precision of the facial features in the side profile, especially his nose and lips.

On the surface, Frank O’Hara and Alex Katz may seem like entirely separate individuals who came together under the pretense of a shared cultural moment. However, it is their common approach which makes their work increasingly poignant when viewed and studied together. As Katz’s career progressed, his work increasingly involved landscapes, a shift away from his characteristic process of creating reductive portraits through his creation of cutouts or his large-scale works depicting the impromptu interactions between friends and acquaintances of the New York School. However, the “landscape [that] has provided a gateway to an emotional aesthetic experience in Katz’s work,” which reflects O’Hara’s belief that Katz was able to connect the
personal and the general through his landscapes (Rooks 14). Katz contemplates formative human experiences, capturing the conditions of the landscape, as well as the human condition. With some of his most recent pieces, for example, Katz produced landscapes during the pandemic rather prolifically, anchoring his eventual 2023 retrospective at The Guggenheim. The pursuit of landscapes is one not solely a byproduct of the desire to retreat into the natural world but is also motivated by an intermedial approach. Katz “often uses the word lyric to define his aspiration for the landscape works to present a poetical image of the world. It is a description not intended to signify an emotive beauty but rather used in reference to a poem’s ability to bypass narrative exposition in favor of an experience distilled to an essence” (Brinson 50). The essence that Katz captures, however, is focused on the sublime, a commonality between the artist and many of his contemporaries and possible sources of inspiration.

Though Alex Katz often leverages coloration as a means of conveying universal human emotions and evoking visceral optical and psychological experiences, he did not take the same approach as Abstract Expressionists like Barnett Newman. His desire to communicate the quotidian through art is certainly shared with O’Hara; both men had a constant drive and desire to capture and isolate specific moments and experiences, allowing their work to achieve a great deal of authenticity and closeness with viewers and readers. Like O’Hara, Katz’s upbringing inevitably shaped his work and approaches to art, particularly his physical environment. In the same way that O’Hara forged his own identity in relation to place, from his childhood to his time at Harvard, to his experiences in New York City, Katz’s observational approach to the natural world ultimately inspired both the initial and current phases of his work. His “unbound late style is seeded in the early landscapes and genres that represent a significant aspect of his production before the breakthrough to his emblematic large-scale portraiture” (Brinson 45). Katz’s career
has traversed landscapes, portraits, as well as commercial imagery, at a scale which seemingly glorifies the commodification of American society. Though he is more commonly associated with his large-scale portraiture, the intimacy of these works is mirrored in his profound constructions of nature, which underscore a desire to represent the visible world. His upbringing in St. Albans, Queens allowed him to cultivate a greater appreciation for the “vivid, mutable beauty” that could be found in relatively bleak surroundings (Brinson 45).

In *Winter Scene* (1951-52) (Figure Two) (The Museum of Modern Art), Katz’s stated desires of looking and perception as an approach to painting are clearly visible, as the clear development of a horizon allows the viewer to be immersed in the scene itself. The work, though lacking in place specificity, is universal because of its emotive qualities; it projects despair, the weight of reflection, and solitude. The concentration of paint at the sight line of the horizon adds to the immersive elements, and the lack of paint in the distance makes the trees and marsh the visual focal point. The scene shares in some of the linguistic commonalities of O’Hara; as later noted in “Meditations in an Emergency,” there is a personification of the trees and the relationship between man and nature. It is this fundamental and innate bond that not only highlights the depicted proximity with the natural world, but moreover, represents a broader ideology of the American consciousness. Katz’s isolation of a singular moment is also aligned with transcendentalist ideas of escaping to nature as a means of personal fulfillment and enlightenment; one is meant to step away from the work with a renewed desire for contemplation. As Brinson states, “the artist’s images of his unpeopled surroundings materialize a volatile exchange between a perceiving gaze and the visual world” (45). There is a transcendental quality to this work, and Katz wholly embraces the sensory experience as a means of creating an emotive landscape.
Alex Katz’s decision to emphasize the linearity of the trees underscores the intentional nature of his brushstrokes and emphasizes his deliberate approach to cultivating an optical experience. *Winter Scene* constitutes this “early, chimeric desire to collapse the distance between sensory experience and its painted record, and in particular, the ‘impossible’ pursuit of harnessing light’s immateriality within matter” (Brinson 46). The way Katz captures light within the work is almost eerie, as there is a dull color palette that is employed without an explicit light source. As a result, one projects light from an entirely undetailed distance, and this lack of surroundings produces an ephemeral effect. Katz was inspired by Pollock and his approach which encompassed “sensation, energy, and light”; these tenets were central to his pursuits and aspirations as a young artist (Brinson 46). Katz’s use of abstract lines and a limited color palette also reveal the influence of Pollock, as the linearity of the branch motif resembles the manner in which the lines on Pollock’s drip paintings occupy the canvas. Katz oscillates between interjecting his own emotionality and broadly portraying universal expressions, as was characteristic of contemporary writers and artists. Both Katz and Pollock employ scale as a means of creating immersion, embracing both the “reflective and dynamic modes” of Abstract Expressionism. Katz’s works capitalize upon a “physically poetic language” in which one can “adapt that structure to our own frame of mind and emotional bearing as a viewer, inflecting the subjects we encounter along the way” (Rooks 18). This phenomenon is particularly apparent in Katz’s landscapes, which rely on the stripped-down quality to their form to enrich the dialogue with the viewer. The relationship between barren landscapes and unadorned scenes and the capacity for ascribing emotional attributes to works strengthened by their overall concision and simplicity.
O’Hara greatly admired Katz’s approach to painting, particularly for their shared approach driven explicitly by intimacy. He once observed how Katz began with his “‘all-over tree paintings’” and progressed toward his depictions of “summers in Maine” and “increasingly abstract landscapes and increasingly accurate coloration” (Brinson 47). O’Hara was clearly interested in the “all-over” effect of paintings like Winter Scene, which reflect both an intensity, as well as a desire to capture the essence of a singular moment. As Beattie suggests, “There is a stillness about Katz’s work that is difficult to articulate” (31). There is an almost otherworldly essence to the work, wherein there is a lack of place specificity, and yet, Katz draws upon memory and one’s perceptions of reality to evoke a sense of familiarity, comfort, and even nostalgia. The painting itself captures one moment in time with a rare clarity, and the stillness of the landscape can be contrasted with the assumed atmospheric quality of the work; one could assume the conditions of the environment. In all, there exists some “productive tension between the articulation of the surface,” which allows the work to straddle modernist constructs of surface and “representational illusion” (Brinson 47). Katz’s explorations of the natural world are integral to his development as painter, as his desire to create large, expansive horizons led to his comfort with a deliberate employment of grandiose scale in his later works. In effect, Katz’s landscapes cemented his personal inclinations and interests, wherein he focused on “‘the present tense, in jazz and dancing’” (Brinson 46) in relation to his personal and artistic growth in Manhattan. Frank O’Hara also embraced the present moment, improvised poetic forms, and the joie de vivre that came with life amidst creative minds and precipitated artistic and literary pursuits. O’Hara’s momentary responses to his environment and quick, abstract, and improvisational approaches to his work mirror the energy of the city. O’Hara diverged from his contemporaries in his conversational approach to confessional poetry, while Katz similarly drew upon intimate
experiences and the isolation and framing of specific moments as key constructs within his body of work. The two were notably responsive to their own environments and experiences, constructing visual and written representations that shaped viewers and readers’ conceptions of both temporality and intimacy.

Frank O’Hara had an extraordinary grasp of the way in which the art world intersected prose and language, drawing upon his own capacities for introspection and expression through his criticism. While art editor for Kulchur in 1962 and 1963, O’Hara authored three “Art Chronicles,” in which he reviewed Mark Tobey’s art retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, while also commentating on Pop artists (Perloff 87). While he considered abstract painters in these works, O’Hara differentiated specific artists and their contributions which he viewed as divergent from the traditional scene. Perloff (87) asserts that O’Hara was among the first to discover the “genius of Alex Katz, whose realistic ‘‘flat sculptures’ were painted, so to speak, against the grain.” Katz also clearly evaluated the gallery experience while creating Frank O’Hara and his other cutouts, as one can move around the piece and interact with the form from different vantage points. O’Hara distinguished the works as “modern in ethos, emphasizing almost inadvertently the spatial absence which surrounds them…They have an air of watchfulness, without ever being silhouettes” (Perloff 87). The immersive experience created by Katz is immediately identified by O’Hara, who believes that he creates an entirely new dimension through works that interact directly with both the viewer and the gallery space, an effect which is amplified through the painting techniques and medium. Katz essentially works at the intersection of painting and sculpture, wherein he accords a portrait of O’Hara with the lifelike and dynamic qualities of a sculptural installation. Katz’s “outsized portraiture” brings together the eye and the mind, as he scales up “painterly transformations of light and color”
The physical act of reduction necessary to create the cutout itself allows O’Hara’s form to interact with the gallery space and the viewer, and Katz unknowingly created an homage to the poet, who looks forward here with a haunting sense of clarity and direction, a sense which is heightened by his erect posture and the tentative balance achieved by the form resting on the wooden block.

O’Hara’s writings on Katz’s work reveal a sense of awe and a deep fixation on the lifelike presence and psychological dimension to the works themselves, a sense of being that goes beyond the visual experience. He states that Katz’s figures were “‘completely mysterious pictorially, because there seemed to be no apparent intent of effect’” (Perloff 88). Unsurprisingly, the cutout of O’Hara is indicative of the manner in which the figures commanded the gallery space in spite of their relatively limited detailing. The “‘flat sculptural portrait of O’Hara testifies to the sense of presence’” that O’Hara believes exists (Perloff 87), capturing the essence of the poet himself. The completeness of the representation seemingly underscores Katz’s understanding of the human form and his preoccupation with the “commingling of time and representation” (Breslin 27). His fascination with nineteenth century photographers like Mathew Brady, most famous for his long exposure images documenting the Civil War, ultimately inspired his own painting techniques through his desire to carry out multiple sessions” (Breslin 26). Katz often had close working or romantic relationships with his subjects, but within his portraiture still forced the viewer to engage in introspection and uncover the underlying meaning of his work, in both cutouts and paintings. The influence of photography on Katz’s work is evident, as “Katz’s portraits may be seen as analogous to the way certain photographers take a picture, when Katz comes in close it is not to reveal detail…[he] forces us to back off, to stare, to try to figure something out that has not been interpreted for us” (Beattie
27). Katz imbues his figures and portraits with a sense of personhood that is infused with a great level of intimacy, and his building of images on top of each other signaled dynamic representations that wholly captured the presence of the cutouts he created. Not only does this work make evident Katz’s close friendship with, and observation of, O’Hara but is illustrative of his broader desire to depict the closeness of human relationships through his art.

The bond between the two men resulted in a fruitful collaboration and the two men acting as mutual sources of inspiration. O’Hara was gifted pieces by Katz, including Ada on the Beach, and encouraged Katz to depict more “extroverted figures” (Gooch 367). The two had some provocative conversations, largely because O’Hara was so deeply involved with art and poetry, invested in the ways that he could influence the fields and creators to produce works that transcended boundaries. As Katz wrote, “‘Frank was in painting, dancing, everything he could get his hands on. He affected artists in other fields’” (Gooch 368). While other poets confined themselves to the more widely accepted limitations of their medium, O’Hara was evidently invested in shaping the artistic community around him, which was made possible through his close relationships with artists like Katz. The sense of trust the two developed led to recommendations made by O’Hara, who, for example, pushed Katz to scale up works like The Red Smile (1963) (Gooch 368) (Figure Three) (Whitney Museum of American Art). And in doing so, Katz “had ascended to another realm of virtuosic painting where the artificiality of commercial art forms was conjoined with his own vision” (Weinberg 13), one in which Katz leverages scale to toe the line between the public and private realms. Katz’s employment of scale as a means of isolating and framing moments of personal intimacy can be drawn into parallel with the familiarity and specificity O’Hara capitalized on in his own poetry. He emphasizes “the
themes of immediacy, intimacy, directness and acquittance” as a means of fostering “clear, deliberate, and beautiful expression” (Herd 138).

In the same way that Katz was responsive to contemporary iconography and isolated experiences, O’Hara’s observational poetry leverages colloquial language and momentary responses to quotidian life. There are significant parallels that can be drawn between the abstract nature of Katz’s paintings, as well as the improvisational quality to O’Hara’s work, which is seemingly as abstracted as the contemporary Postmodern works. Katz is “a painter of instants, ephemeral and unencumbered” in which he refines his perceptions of reality to express and convey facets of his daily life (Graham 27). Both men could find the consummate combination between the everyday, recognizable facets of life and powerfully leveraging abstraction as a form of experimentation and artistic challenge. Katz “wanted the existential weight of the abstraction he loved without the representation that gave weight to the everyday” (Breslin 22). The two men were deliberate in their approaches to evoking emotionality on the part of their readers and viewers. The imagery of Katz is “recognizable,” and thus, “we feel instantly comfortable or uncomfortable—convinced or skeptical” (Beattie 13). The poetic quality of Katz’s work lies in his marriage of the quotidian, the universal, and the profoundly personal. Breslin (22) further articulates how Katz exemplifies the qualities O’Hara observed in his “conjoining of the personal and the general, as well as formalism and expressionism.” In essence, O’Hara believed that the power of Katz’s portraiture lay in his ability to master scale as a means of developing additional intimacy with the viewer, wherein there is an immediate familiarity with the face based upon one’s understanding of advertising and commercial iconography.

O’Hara was also fascinated by the manner in which Katz oscillated between traditional depictions, styles, and mediums while simultaneously innovating his own idiosyncratic style. To
this end, O’Hara cited Katz’s landscapes, which he found significant “because through them
Katz has found a liaison between the personal and the general, the intriguing dialogue without
which one is left with either formalism or expressionism” (O’Hara – *Art Chronicles* 144). While
his predecessors and contemporaries may have been mostly formalists, focusing on the formal
elements of line, color, or contrast over explicit subject matter, Katz created abstracted
landscapes that bridged the gap between the two schools. And as O’Hara noted, Katz was
heavily invested in abstracting the defining qualities of his subjects, which he “‘released,’”
wherein “his subjects became the foundation for his paintings’ personal effects” (Prombaum 31).
The way Katz engaged with expressionism is evident in his naturalistic depictions, especially his
tree paintings, which O’Hara found to be evidence of his discovery of “the force of schema”
(O’Hara – *Art Chronicles* 145). O’Hara maintained that Katz was able to communicate his own
internal dialogue while simultaneously creating works with enduring external meaning. O’Hara’s
identification of Katz’s employment of schema is “still evoking a fugitive flicker of awareness”
(Brinson 49), wherein the trajectory of Katz’s career has continued to encompass abstraction and
a mastery of individual brushstrokes and linearity as a means of conceiving a broader
representation of temporality. While Katz was incredibly prolific and productive in the time
following Frank O’Hara’s death, the poet’s observations about his work still encompass his
ability to ascribe human emotion to mostly abstracted forms, eliciting visceral responses on the
part of the viewer.

In *Blue Night* (2018) (Figure Four) (Gavin Brown’s enterprise), Katz again leverages
scale as a means of creating an immersive experience, wherein an uncontained black mass
seemingly emanates from the lower right-hand corner of the canvas. As the *Gathering* catalogue
asserts (107), the only source of clarity in the context of the work is the “reference to the visible
world in the title”; in every other sense, Katz creates a spellbinding experience for the viewer, who is transported to a realm without concrete definition. O’Hara believed that Katz’s work had the “some of the effects of the Intimists to reinforce an abstract schema” (O’Hara – Art Chronicles 148), wherein he likely believed that Katz leveraged abstracted forms as a means of depicting highly conceptual and intimate psychological experiences. In this way, O’Hara believed that he diverged from traditional and contemporary schools of painting. He was “‘post painterly’” (O’Hara – Art Chronicles 148), a divergence which is still evident in the abstracted and idiosyncratic of Katz’s more recent works like Blue Night. Within the context of this work, the canvas itself is disquieting, potentially because one cannot contextualize the content of the image. Like many of Katz’s landscapes, this work is perhaps “much more devoted to formal painting rhythms of color and line than to any authentic representation of figure or field” (Schama 194). Furthermore, the closeness to work, which represents an isolated frame, creates some feelings of discomfort for the viewer, who cannot escape its intensity. There is a subliminal nature of the contrast between blue and black, which can initially be only faintly registered. The frayed quality of black mass’ edges makes the shape increasingly amorphous, as one tries to place its texture and shape to other more comfortable representations, in this canvas, conceptually, a night sky. O’Hara was acutely aware of how Katz intended to challenge the psychological schema, which provides a sense of comfort and stability, through his unique co-opting of formalism and expressionism.

Alex Katz deliberately created a new style of painting wherein he deliberately challenged contemporary conventions to create a new visual language. In 1961, Katz wrote about his intention to create a “‘brand new and terrific’ style for painting” that would combine the tradition associated with the art form with a “‘magical state’ of newness” (Gathering Catalogue 42). Katz
was wholly aware of the perspective of his audience and the inundation of visual imagery they were accustomed to. He believed that paintings “reflected the time of their making”; in this instance, his works were in direct dialogue with the still frames of film and magazines that dominated the public consciousness (The Guggenheim Museum Wall Chat/Press Release).

O’Hara encouraged Katz to push boundaries related to scale and form and create his characteristically expansive canvases because of the pervasiveness of this visual convention. While Katz may have employed identifiable imagery, he wanted his works to act as a starting point for introspection, particularly as one considered the broader significance of the subject.

O’Hara believed that Katz progressed as an artist through “enlargement of image, a move away from personal characteristics in the handling of paint, in order to emphasize the abstractness of the subject and the inherent values it possessed” (O’Hara – Art Chronicles 143). In this case, Katz developed a truncated personal narrative of his relationship with his wife, isolating one frame as a large-scale rumination on their relationship. Katz painted this work at the intersection of iconography and personal intimacy, as the seven by ten-foot portrait is of his wife’s Ada’s face (Whitney Museum of American Art), but more closely resembles the scale and flattened iconography of a billboard. The subject could be judged to be Ada; however, the limited detailing and lack of dimensionality make the subject of the painting appear relatively anonymous. O’Hara found Katz’s representations of Ada to be particularly tantalizing, as in “each painting he finds new features of her iconography and implications in those features” (O’Hara – Art Chronicles 147). Katz’s work can be simultaneously personalized and decoupled from its original context, as the iconography of this work registers as akin to commercial works leveraged sensuality to sell. The implication of the features is largely of intrigue and sexual appeal, which is made possible through the employment of formal qualities.
Within the context of this work, Katz’s mastery of the face as the focal point of the canvas is accentuated by his use of scale and background. The optically alarming red background draws a dramatic parallel with Ada’s lips, which are a noticeably lighter shade, while one strand of her hair is isolated in upward momentum, connoting a sense of motion at the side of the image. The blue headband also draws an intriguing contrast with Ada’s hair, which can be wholly isolated from her countenance or the background of the painting. O’Hara believed that for “Katz the image, and his TV, billboard, or movie close-up discovery, provided a way of both isolating and abstracting each separate feature” (O’Hara – *Art Chronicles* 144). While Katz does develop color contrast, the paintings lack some dimensionality. The painting registers as barely two-dimensional, and its Minimalist approach does produced Katz’s desired “‘immediate sensation you [one] see[s] before you focus’” (Whitney Museum of American Art), which is essentially the automatic or impulsive responses and associations that come from advertising or large-scale iconography. The lack of contouring to the face produces a completely even texture, and there is very limited differentiation between the brushstrokes of the work. The decision to show his wife’s face in profile, as well as in a contemplative state, also increasingly places the viewer in dialogue with Ada herself. There is an inevitable sense of wondering what is on her mind, and moreover, where or to whom she is directing her attention outside of the frame and confines of the work.

Katz’s depictions of Ada toe the line between the private and public spheres, in which he capitalizes upon intimacy as a means of connection with the viewer in the same way that O’Hara ruminated upon universal human experiences. Katz allows the viewer to enter a dimension in which he and Ada engage in private experiences and his “compact with his subject is different from…ours…involving as it does an exchange of glances that subtly ignores the public while
seeming to let the public in...artist and model—are the magnetic poles” (Storr 1). The aforementioned polarity between Ada and Katz is explored through his works which narrow in on one precise moment of interaction, seemingly fighting against the universal limitations of temporality. The image, like many of Katz’s larger works, is “abruptly cropped” (The Guggenheim Museum Wall Chat/Press Release), capturing a specific juncture in time and escalating and amplifying the significance of an isolated instance. Because the painting resembles a photograph, there is a sense of temporality; this is only strengthened by the visual similarities to temporary, fleeting advertisement-based iconography. The subject’s glance is aspirational, especially the way in which her head is elevated, as accentuated by the motion of her hair. Combined with her white dress, the prominence of the red and blue colors in the work infuses it with a sense of optimistic near patriotism; it resembles an advertisement that is as seductive as it is reflective of intentionally cultivated values. This deliberate approach is made possible by “Katz’s composition and painterly technique” which is “predicated on careful premeditation and deft execution, on slow observation followed by meticulous design and refinement of shape and outline, as well as ruthless editing of pictorial information” (Storr 8). The “icon construction” (Storr 8) that Katz engages promotes the full optical effects that underlie his outlining and definition of the human form. Katz truly leverages the form and stylistic choices of Pop Art in a way that deconstructs and challenges their conventions, especially as he integrates the intricacies of interpersonal encounters, with his wife as well as others in the New York School like Frank O’Hara.

O’Hara lauded Katz for his mastery of the figure and portrayal of the human form, finding that this ability was particularly evident in his depictions of his wife’s Ada. O’Hara draws a significant parallel between the “heads and figures of his wife, Ada” and the “role as
abstract as the Helen of Troy,” citing that “She is a presence and at the same time a pictorial conceit of style” (O’Hara – *Art Chronicles* 147). O’Hara is perhaps referencing the way Katz leverages his wife as a visual device, particularly as she is repeated in varying positions across the canvas. Her presence is accorded power in this way, as she takes on a variety of stances and seated positions, with four of the six figures staring directly at the viewer. Lajer-Burcharth (65) suggests that the image is reminiscent of a “private modeling session,” amplifying the idealization of her form, and elevating her status, through this act of replication. The juxtaposition O’Hara makes between Ada and Helen of Troy not only accords her with unadulterated beauty but also elevates her status to that of a literary figure or fixture, or in this case, an iconographic representation. O’Hara states that Katz “finds new features of her iconography and new implications in those features” (O’Hara – *Art Chronicles* 147).

The implications of Ada’s countenance extend beyond her beauty and the historical and mythical invocations one could ascribe to her; the intimism of her portrayal more broadly encompasses how Katz’s work diverges from his contemporaries. More globally, Ada comes to represent a counterpoint to the historical era in which he painted, as she is emblematic of a reality of “cultivated taste, aesthetic accomplishment, social ease, and marital contentment suspended above a world of clashing ideas, high-cost failures, general unrest, and sexual strife” (Storr 19). Ada’s sensuality is an inevitable focus of Katz’s depictions of her, and his works undoubtedly emphasize her form through contrast and framing. As the title of *The Black Dress* (1960) (Figure Five) (The Guggenheim Museum) would suggest, there is ostensibly a great focus on the garment itself, but largely because of the way it frames the curvature of Ada’s body, infusing her with a degree of subtle sensuality. Additionally, the color contrast established between the pale hues of her skin and the jet-black dress creates an intriguing, repeated duality
across the surface of the canvas, which one can take in through a circulating viewpoint. Katz develops a sense of motion and movement as the viewer takes in the image, as the reproduced images of Ada in different positions underscores the dynamic optical experience. Edwin Denby coined the portrait “‘reduplicative,’” which although it typically refers to the doubling of a figure, potentially reflects the “pattern formed by recognition and memory as we keep meeting people under the conditions of modern life” given the “sense of multiple entrances” (Alloway 98).

At the left side of the canvas, the first two depictions of Ada do not directly address the viewer; however, are notable given the second figure interacts with the constructed background of the painting. O’Hara noted how “she appears in several attitudes simultaneously” (O’Hara – Art Chronicles 148), which draws the attention of the viewer in combination with her own interactions with the background. She looks toward a painting of an anonymous man who dons a suit, whose solemnity is striking, along with the truncation of his form. The viewer can only see part of his figure, and yet, this representation of Ada seems entirely fixated on him. The Gathering exhibition catalogue (65) notes that the figure is poet James Schuyler, a central member of the New York School who worked closely with O’Hara. It is this surrealist depiction that keeps the viewer engaged and invested in the continued developments of Ada’s form across the canvas itself. There is potentially some clever commentary underlying the inclusion of Schuyler, who also wrote about quotidian facets of life, and the inclusion of his portrait signals to future viewers the significance of the New York School and their challenging of both literary and artistic conventions. Similarly, the multiplication of Ada across the canvas seemingly inverts principles of Cubism, as Ada “is represented through multiple viewpoints…as if different moments are being captured simultaneously” (Gathering Catalogue 65). The tactile relationship
between the subsequent illustrations of Ada seemingly isolates different facets of her identity into spheres. Because she is presented in several positions, Katz can emphasize her posture and subtle changes to her expression, an element which clearly interested O’Hara. There is a dramatic quality to the oscillations of her appearance, from her stoic position to her confrontational gaze, to her droll smile. The employment of the chair accentuates how the variation of poses across the reproductions accentuates the understated differences in how Ada emotes, while maintaining the commonality of the refined and sophisticated black dress. Katz stated that Ada had “performative agency,” which was reinforced by her interest in cinematic gestures, performance, and depictions (Gathering Catalogue 65). Ada’s repeated forms are also complicated by Katz’s construction of the foreground, wherein there is clear differentiation between isolated areas of the floor, as well as the irregularities present on the wall behind her.

In another depiction of Ada, *Upside Down Ada* (1965) (Figure Six) (The Museum of Modern Art), Katz furthers his quasi-voyeuristic depiction of his wife, leveraging scale as a means of isolating an intimate moment. His decision to invert her form, and place her figure upside down, gives the viewer a direct gaze into her eyes, heightening the perceived sense of human connection and closeness. As Beattie assesses, “Time and time again Katz has painted public performances of a private reality” (32). Katz offers us a glimpse into this private realm, and his use of scale draws substantial attention to both her visage and bare body, with an almost emboldened representation of femininity through her enlarged lips, emotionless eyes, and bare shoulders. The limited amount of specificity in the background forces the viewer to believe the image is a bed or similar location, and the lack of detailing on the remainder of her form leaves her dress, or lack thereof, entirely up to the viewer’s imagination. O’Hara believed that this depiction gave Ada “curious sense of calm abandon” (O’Hara – Art Chronicles 147). Katz
achieves serenity through the painting through the work’s overall sense of stillness, which is furthered by the vulnerable positioning of Ada. Ada appears near-prelapsarian; her skin is entirely unblemished, she seemingly lacks inhibition, and her eyes radiate youthful innocence in their upward glance. As Beattie notes, her face “is so subtly shaded that it lacks the expected planes and takes on a symbolic, mask-like quality” and she is “refined into untouchability” (39). Katz’s accentuation of her femininity is largely made possible through his employment of coloration with her skin and hair, visual markers of her own vitality.

Katz develops alluring dichotomies in this image, as there is a color contrast established between her skin and the intensity of the rich darkness of her hair, an effect which is only compounded by Katz’s mastery of light in this work. Inevitably, there is interplay established between the viewer and her gaze, as she is isolated in the frame in a position of frozen vulnerability, while the viewer can observe her at any vantage point. Overall, however, there is an unassuming quality to her representation, which is conceivably furthered by the fluid nature of her physiognomy, as the viewer can endeavor to dissociate themselves from her gaze. O’Hara responds to this sense of calm, commentating on how Katz’s depiction of Ada is not only intimate and personal, but reflects a broader expansion of scaled up iconography in print media and art, as well as cinema. Because Katz approximated the billboard scale and mimicked the Hollywood close-up, he also “confirms this cinematic paradigm as the artist’s vantage point rotates around and invests his model’s head like a cameraman” (Storr 12). Katz places Ada at the center of his work, often framing her with the same sense of awe and mysticism that surrounds actors. Alex Katz forged “a modernist style that cultivated captivating perceptual energies, openings and instabilities” in which he distilled the “social character” of individuals (Prombaum 31); he created through close artistic encounters. O’Hara’s interdisciplinary interests led him to
develop relationships with artists like Katz, expertly commenting on their work while establishing its contribution to Modernism and Abstract Expressionism, as well as its more contemporary responses to iconography and cultural trends.

O’Hara and Katz’s relationship underscores both the diversification of O’Hara’s pursuits and their mutual admiration and respect the two men had for each other. O’Hara reviewed Katz’s work in ARTnews and other publications and even purchased several of his paintings in 1960. The friendship represents how the New York School’s legacy can be cemented by these intermedial interactions, in which poets and painters inspired each other with a true sense of reciprocity. The dialogue between O’Hara and Katz was clearly meaningful, with O’Hara forcing the artist to consider how his works related to the broader canon, visual tropes, and artistic conventions. In his series of paintings, which Katz continues to dub the “Coca-Cola Girls,” he examines and deconstructs the iconography associated with the long-running advertisements for Coca-Cola. The campaign itself drew upon female sensuality as a means of selling product, and while this is in no way a proprietary strategy, the iconography itself is deeply ingrained in the American cultural consciousness. O’Hara recognized the powerful impact of this kind of art, especially within American society, as there was an “imperative need in American painting for the radical treatment of the figure in a manner which was personal to the painting impulse of the artist” (O’Hara – Art Chronicles 143). Katz taps into the sexually charged imagery through his series, relying on the color contrast between the figures themselves and the intensity of the red background. The duality essentially taps into primal desires, both in terms of the inherent associations with passion, activity, and sexuality, and moreover, for the focus that it draws to the women’s bodies. In some paintings in the series, Katz chooses solely to depict the midsections of the women, stripping them of their identity entirely. The linearity of the forms accords attention
to curvature of their forms, accentuating their hips, breasts, and waist. In the first painting in the series, *Coca-Cola Girl 1* (2019) (Figure Seven) (Haw Contemporary), for example, Katz solely depicts a woman walking forward, her hair extended behind her as evidence of forward motion. The contrast between her white bathing suit and the intensity of the red background imbues the image with an underlying sensuality, as the viewer draws a visual link between her plump red lips and the all-encompassing red canvas.

In other works from the series, like *Coca-Cola Girl 45* (2018) (Figure Eight) (Timothy Taylor), Katz creates a lineup of three consecutive frames, in which he continues to truncate the image of the anonymous woman. The viewer becomes a voyeur, as we observe the figure engaged in what appears to be a form of dance, arms outstretched as she follows a prescribed choreography. In both paintings, and the series at-large, Katz’s work has “all but the most essential details pared away” (Tomkins), which forces the viewer to consider the latent cultural messaging over the visual content of the series’ imagery. Katz established a direct link between the carefree depiction of the Coca-Cola girl and the Americanized depiction “‘unlimited happiness.’” The work perhaps serves as a social commentary on capitalism, as well as portrayals of female sexuality. Katz’s contemplation extends further, as Frank O’Hara, as well as his mother, had an intense fascination with Rembrandt’s *The Polish Rider*. Katz believed that the original iconography of the Coca-Cola advertisements, which featured young women in convertibles, was reminiscent of the Dutch Medieval figure in the 1655 work. In both works, the use of coloration lets the figure emerge as the focal point; however, both works, and the series, have anonymous subjects meant to deliver a certain message. Katz described the advertising iconography as a “romance image” (Tomkins), which underscores his belief in the power of immersive art and advertising. In the same way that Rembrandt’s hazy brushstrokes leave the
context and central figure in *The Polish Rider* ambiguous, Katz does not directly identify the Coca-Cola girl, in facial features nor in the signature branding itself.

The intensity with which Katz uses color causes the face to emerge as memorable and central to the viewer’s optical experience. O’Hara cited that Katz had a “realization of the head or figure in a plane of color or pattern” that is “as strict in its sense of pictorial decorum as Barnett Newman’s or Kenneth Noland’s” (O’Hara – *Art Chronicles* 144). The juxtaposition is intriguing, as O’Hara accords a psychological dimension to Katz’s works, as the use of coloration is the core focus, leading the viewer to make subconscious associations. Critics like Jack Kroll found that O’Hara “psychologizes by palpitating the known surface” (Prombaum 31), particularly given his utilization of color and detailing to create psychologically moving optical experiences. However, these optical experiences, which may initially seem jarring or less legible to viewers perhaps become more recognizable to the masses. Notably, “Katz says that he is not interested in the psychology of his subjects when he paints them, or interested in what they think after the fact” (Beattie 10). In essence, Katz is focused on capturing and embodying the being of his central figure without the potentially overstimulating techniques of abstraction; he also distances himself, to a certain extent, from the psyches of his subjects. He created “sociable ways” (Prombaum 32) that let his portraits develop an identifiable style, one that could not only be situated with Abstract Expressionism, but also that was consistent in its representation of intimate physiognomies of tremendous scale. The common reliance between the work of Katz and Abstract Expressionists, as well as the aforementioned Rembrandt, is perhaps on the viewer, who must imbue the central figure with power. In the case of Katz, sexuality and sexual appeal, and in the case of Rembrandt, military or political control. The invocation of Newman also builds upon O’Hara’s observation that both Newman and Katz rely on “color, dimensions, and
texture” to transcend beyond the physical confines of the image and produce a “hieratic” effect (O’Hara – Art Chronicles 144); Newman accomplishes this through the psychological dimensions of these formal qualities, while Katz arguably escalates these effects through the character he crafts. Additionally, the use of contrast through Newman’s zips and Katz sharp divisions and truncations in his work force contemplation on the part of the viewer. Newman was “wielding abstract shapes because he was directed by a ‘will toward metaphysical understanding’” (Ashton 133). Furthermore, the common surrealist impulses in both art and writing essentially led to the formulation of Postmodernism, especially the divergent techniques he employed. In the same way, Katz captures the essence of humanity through basic, carnal inclinations, cultural messages that extend beyond the confines of the canvas, and moreover, universal desires.

Throughout his career, Alex Katz’s work represents a great level of responsiveness to artistic, social, and political conventions. Katz’s paintings are “distinguished instead by a commitment to the irreconcilable, unrepeatable possibilities that come from an earnest and sustained engagement” with contemporary discourses (Prombaum 40). The iconography Katz creates leverages formal qualities not only as a means of social commentary, but rather, as a form of direct engagement with the viewer, who is visually engaged with the microcosm or minute details of the scene, interaction, or figure depicted. Perhaps, too, Katz intends more broadly to separate himself from the dark realities in the decades that preceded these works, in his “apolitical adherence to aestheticism, a turning away from the big issues of the world (war, peace, more war more peace) to the personal, the colloquial, the everyday epiphanies outside a window or in a bottle of Coke” (Breslin 24). The desire for preservation of moments of fleeting happiness, particularly in human interactions and relationships, unites O’Hara and Katz in their
respective forms of expression. O’Hara believed in the power of the visages created by Katz, and the two ultimately share in an uncanny ability to capture a portrait of someone with a delicate combination of intimacy and widespread appeal, tapping into shared elements of the human condition. While the images or verses may seem anonymous, their elements capture the essence of specific instances, individuals, or locations. The continued dialogue between Katz and O’Hara reveals the tremendous sense of mutual respect, wherein O’Hara believed that Katz’s pursuit of the “‘great American tradition’” afforded his work a place in the canon with artists like Matisse (Tomkins). Katz’s deep understanding of the evocative nature of iconography can be drawn in parallel with the core human emotions and experiences O’Hara commentates on in his own verses.

The commonalities between the work of O’Hara and Katz are also rooted in their shared emphasis on specificity, in terms of depicting concrete visuals, as well as isolating specific moments through employing colloquialism. As stated by Butterick and Bertholf (Poetry Foundation), “O’Hara's most persistent interest, however, was the image, in all its suddenness, juxtaposed with an equally unlikely image, following techniques not of Imagism but those perfected by the French Surrealists.” In effect, O’Hara favored the specificity of language of Imagism, while simultaneously encouraging Katz to scale up detailed depictions, as well as to imbue his figures with a sense of personhood. He remarks specifically on how Katz’s works emphasize the “isolation of the visage” (O’Hara – Art Chronicles 144), which mirrors the implicit focus on the development of concrete imagery. Ultimately, the stylistic choices of O’Hara, who had “been steeped in the traditions of Lafforgue, Apollinaire, and Jacob” and “picked up the irony and burlesque inherent…and added a rich farrago of American vernacular” can be juxtaposed against Katz’s co-opting of previous Abstract Expressionists and oscillations
between American and European painting conventions. In short, it is the improvisational and impulsive nature of Katz’s and O’Hara’s work that highlights the commonalities between the men who both worked quickly to capture responses to finite moments and experiences.

The bond between Frank O’Hara and Alex Katz was cut short by the former’s untimely death in 1966; however, O’Hara’s legacy undoubtedly inspired the work of Katz in both its formal qualities and its content. One such case is a direct tribute, *Homage to Frank O’Hara: William Dunas* (1972) (Figure Nine) (The Museum of Modern Art), a lithograph created by Katz featuring William Dunas, a dancer and choreographer in the New York School. Katz was drawn to printmaking around 1965, potentially inspired by his contemporaries, like Andy Warhol and Jasper Johns, who were already engaging with the artistic process. The painting is a fitting tribute to O’Hara because of its use of scale and formal qualities. The flattened form of Dunas’ depiction only showcases his head and collar, with extensive focus placed on his eyes and shirt because of the color saturation. A duality can be drawn between these two locations on the canvas, as both employ green as a means of drawing the gaze of the viewer, who can inevitably take notice of Dunas’ forlorn glance.

The stylization of his appearance demonstrates the clear influences of Pop Art, particularly for its enlarged and flattened forms, employment of color, and limited detailing and dimensionality on Dunas’ face and disheveled hair. As Styron notes, artists like Katz who were influenced by the Pop genre produced works “with buttery slick surfaces, larger-than-life comic images, and insipid pictorial flattery” (35), which is clear with the scale of his depiction of Dunas. Though not in direct confrontation with the viewer, Dunas’ perspective and gaze seems distant and forward-facing, perhaps a metaphor for the avant-garde movements he was a part of in the dance world. Dunas had relationships with both Katz and his son and was a member of
Katz’ broader social circle, especially within the dance community; at his time of death, he was working on a biography of Edwin Denby (Dance Magazine). The work itself serves as an illuminating tribute to O’Hara for its portrayal of Dunas, as it illustrates the kind of intermedial artistic community that O’Hara fortified through his multiplicity of connections across the New York School. Though Katz did create a cutout of O’Hara, and initially intended for this work to be a mockup for a cutout as well, this tribute is perhaps more effective, particularly in combination with the epigraph that reads “I am the least difficult of men. All I want is boundless love.” The line is from O’Hara’s poem “Meditations in an Emergency” (O’Hara and Allen 197-198) which also served as the name of O’Hara’s 1957 collection.

“Meditations in an Emergency” is proper epigraph of O’Hara because it is demonstrative of his constant introspection into his own internal state, as well as the world around him. He begins the poem with hypothetical questions, offering readers a glimpse into his own internal dialogue: “Am I to become profligate as if I were a blonde? Or religious as I were French?” (1). Though the notions expressed are seemingly nonsensical, O’Hara forges ahead with his characteristic sense of profound intimacy, as he reveals his own state of devastation, “Each time my heart is broken it makes me feel more adventurous (and how/the same names keep recurring on that interminable list!), but one of/these days there’ll be nothing left with which/to venture forth” (2-4). His decision to utilize parentheses to make a point of clarification ultimately amplifies his conversational and contemplative tone. His admission of a desire for adventure can be later juxtaposed against his own contemplations into purpose, and more broadly, his interactions with the natural world, “Even trees understand me! Good heavens, I lie under them, too, don’t I?/I’m just like a pile of leaves.” (7-8). O’Hara’s existential contemplations indicate his own sense of stagnation, in which he is searching for life’s meaning through his series of
disjointed ruminations. In the following stanza, O’Hara affirms his internal sense of
connectedness to New York City itself, “…One need/never leave the confines of New York to
get all the greenery one wishes—I/can’t even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there’s a
subway handy, or a/record store or some other sign that people do not totally regret life…” (10-
12). It is the aspects of familiarity and convenience that provide a sense of grounding; his life in
the city is simultaneously a source of identity and invigoration. He continues to draw parallels
throughout the poem, in which continued mentions of the natural world suggest that there is a
sense of life and vitality that he derives from the energy and inhabitants of the city itself. Katz
likely admired this poem both for its candor, but moreover, because O’Hara weaves his own
identity through disparate sequences, emotions, and experiences, all while returning to the city as
a place of belonging and centrality. Katz’s work similarly encompasses this level of “detachment
that characterizes both this gathering and distanced mode of depiction” (Lajer-Burchar Barth 69).
Fragmentation and non-narrativity can be understood in conjunction in the works of both O’Hara
and Katz.

O’Hara lyrically conveyed the roles of perspective, sexuality, and religion in
“Meditations in an Emergency.” He literally considers his own vision through a double entendre
evoked by his description of his own eyes: “My eyes are vague blue, like the sky, and change all
the time; they are indiscriminate/ but fleeting, entirely specific and disloyal, so that no one trusts
me.” (15-16). The sense of soulfulness that is ascribed to the eye reveals some of O’Hara’s
underlying insecurities and furthers the vulnerability communicated throughout the poem. While
the poem has continued allusions to, and direct mentions of religion, O’Hara is clearly grappling
with his own sense of purpose and personhood, particularly in relation to his sexuality. In
subsequent reflections on his own homosexuality, O’Hara personifies this facet of his own life,
“Heterosexuality!/you are inexorably approaching. (How discourage her?)” (22-23). O’Hara’s own contemplations with sexuality are followed by invocations of both St. Serapion, a martyr, and Dostoevsky, illustrative of the ill-fated nature of many of his own pursuits and love affairs. However, the religiosity of much of O’Hara’s language creates a sense of hope and redemption, wherein self-acceptance and human connection calm his oscillating states of internal peace and turmoil.

The poem, though wide-ranging in its state of intensive psychological contemplation and presentation of disparate images, presents some of O’Hara’s purest and most unadulterated desires, as well as shrouded wisdom. He muses, “It is easy to be beautiful; it is difficult to appear so. I admire you, beloved, for the trap you’ve set. It’s like a final chapter no one reads because the plot is over” Though the lines follow a discussion of martyrdom, O’Hara’s consideration of his own mortality reflects a man who intensively grappled with his own sense of self and sexuality, as well as the unpredictable nature of love. At the core of O’Hara’s desires is an underlying need for love and a sense of meaning, a sentiment which is clearly expressed in the epigraph Katz ultimately selected, “I am the least difficult of men. All I want is boundless love” (6). The use of “boundless” emphasizes the reliance on religious language throughout the text, but also illustrates O’Hara’s desire for unending acceptance and fulfillment. The series of allusions and contemplations throughout the poem present an intense internal dialogue, but one that reveals a universal desire for contentment and belonging. The disjointed form of the poem is demonstrative of the role of abstraction in O’Hara’s work, as well as the intermedial relationships between his writing and the proliferation of Abstract Expressionism across different mediums and forms of expression in the New York School. O’Hara’s identity is inextricable from the New York School, because of the sense of security and joy he derived from the location.
and for the sense of kinship he developed across the overlapping artistic communities. Katz’s depiction of William Dunas, in combination with the words of Frank O’Hara is emblematic of the intersectional social, ideological, and artistic qualities of the New York School.
Appendix

Figure One

Alex Katz

*Frank O’Hara*

1959-1960

Oil on wood cutout

152.4 cm. × 38.1 cm. (60 in. × 15 in.)

The Guggenheim Museum

Figure Two

Alex Katz

*Winter Scene*

1951-52
Oil on board

61.1 cm. × 60.7 cm. (24 in. × 23.88 in.)

The Museum of Modern Art

Figure Three

Alex Katz

*The Red Smile*

1963

Oil on linen

200.3 cm. × 292.1 cm. (78.88 in. × 115 in.)

Whitney Museum of American Art

Figure Four

Alex Katz

*Blue Night*

2018

Oil on linen

182.9 cm. × 243.8 cm. (72.0 in. × 96.0 in.)
Gavin Brown’s enterprise (Gallery)

Figure Five

![Image of Alex Katz's The Black Dress]

Alex Katz

*The Black Dress*

1960

182.88 cm. × 213.36 cm. (72 in. × 84 in.)

Oil on canvas

The Guggenheim Museum

Figure Six

![Image of Alex Katz's Upside Down Ada]

Alex Katz

*Upside Down Ada*

1965

Oil on linen

130.6 cm. × 162.6 cm. (51.36 in. × 64 in.)

The Museum of Modern Art
Figure Seven

Alex Katz

*Coca-Cola Girl 1*

2019

20-color silkscreen

101.6 cm. × 127 cm. (40 in. × 50 in.)

Haw Contemporary/Private Collection

Figure Eight

Alex Katz

*Coca-Cola Girl 45*

2018

Oil on linen

121.9 cm. × 243.8 cm. (48 in. × 96 in.)

Timothy Taylor/Private Collection
Alex Katz

*Homage To Frank O’Hara: William Dunas (With Words)*

1972

Lithograph

91.76 cm. × 64.45 cm. (36.13 in. × 25.38 in.)

Colby College Museum of Art
Works Cited


