"Grace to be Born and to Live as Variously as Possible": Tracing the Influence of the Visual and Performing Arts on the Poetry of Frank O'Hara

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“Grace to be Born, and to Live as Various as Possible”:
Tracing the Influence of the Visual and Performing Arts on the Poetry of Frank O’Hara

Elizabeth Wingate Grice

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of the Prerequisite for Honors
in English

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Preface

I first discovered Frank O’Hara’s poetry in the early days of September 2013. He appeared following a week-long meditation on Robert Lowell in Contemporary American Poetry, and perhaps for this reason, I disregarded O’Hara’s flippant, quickly-crafted poems as those of secondary importance. It was a transitional period in my life, and I was more attracted to the comparatively formal works of Robert Lowell and John Ashbery.

I was persuaded to reconsider O’Hara as more than a peripheral focus of my thesis by a good friend in June 2014. She argued not to discount his sarcasm, and as the two of us were situated in downtown New York in the building next to O’Hara’s last apartment, I decided to humor her by purchasing his Selected Poems at the Strand Bookstore on E 13th and Broadway. The rest, as they say, was history.

My rediscovery of O’Hara exemplifies what makes his poems wonderful; each time you visit them, you are struck by a different line, metaphor, or image that transforms with each reading. O’Hara’s work is full of language that haunts; even in their more tangential, fantastical moments, his poems fixate on the simultaneous insecurities and joys of a life in flux. The ability to be spontaneously inspired amidst impending anxieties, opportunities, tragedies—“everything,” as he notes in his poem, “Avenue A,” is “too comprehensible” and on the page. As such, O’Hara’s poems are consistently applicable and constantly evolving in their relationship to his audience. They are, by association, some of the most profound poems that I have ever encountered.

This project has allowed me to explore my interdisciplinary interests in an uncensored capacity similar to the way that O’Hara explores New York City in his poems. I have lost myself in research, pouring over pages and pages of manuscripts at The Museum of Modern Art,
Harvard University, The New York Public Library, and The University of Connecticut. I have read his entire collected works, have visited each one of his former apartments in New York City, and have talked with his childhood friends about their perception of him during his upbringing in Grafton, Massachusetts. I have been there as well. Despite having dedicated much of my year to this project, I have only developed a heightened passion for Frank O’Hara’s poetry, biography, and lifestyle. As I prepare to leave Wellesley, I will be forever grateful for the experience to pursue such a unique and transformative subject.
"The main thing is to tell a story," the mid-twentieth century poet, Frank O'Hara, promises in "Fantasy." The last poem of his most famous volume, *Lunch Poems* (1965), "Fantasy" juxtaposes a fictional ski expedition with an evening spent with Allen Ginsberg, bumping up against celebrated composers and actors along the way.

*How do you like the music of Adolph Deutsch? I like it, I like it better than Max Steiner's. Take his score for Northern Pursuit, the Helmut Dantyne theme was... and then the window fell on my hand. Errol Flynn was skiing by. Down down down went the grim grey submarine under the "cold" ice.*

*SP, 243*

Storytelling is in an active part of O'Hara's aesthetic, supplementing a narrative of artistic influence and performance. Reading O'Hara, who died in the summer of 1966, reality quickly takes a backseat to plausible hyperbole as the poet's world—one of Lana Turner, "the Paradise bar on / St. Mark’s place,"¹ and "luminous humidity"²—is exhaustively itemized for his audience. Although O'Hara alerts his readers as early as the title of the poem, "Fantasy," of its fictional contents, they find themselves along for the ride, however odd or endearing.

Stock-full of humor, irony, and map-like precision, "Fantasy" possesses the whimsical tone that pervades many of O'Hara’s poems, and as such, reflects his signature poetic style. As much as O'Hara’s poetics are narrative, they are also often illogical—if not paradoxical—and align the poet with artistic masters and celebrities beyond his grasp like Picasso, James Dean, and Sergei Rachmaninoff. Alongside his constant need to locate the narrator at various stops in

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² Frank O’Hara, “Personal Poem, Line 9, Selected Poems, 168.
New York City, O’Hara transforms self-proclaimed fantasies into semi-plausible plotlines in the life of a young artist. As a result, O’Hara’s poetics live somewhere between abstract and figurative, confessional and removed, tangible and intangible.

An investigation of O’Hara’s poetics first begins with an examination of his literary influences. Unsatisfied with the fixed canon of writers taught at Harvard and at The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor in the late ‘forties and early ‘fifties, O’Hara adopted an alternative canon of avant-garde, often international literary figures like Vladimir Mayakovsky and Pierre Reverdy into his studies, though independently. As Brad Gooch notes in his biography of O’Hara, the young poet possessed a voracious appetite for learning, often auditing courses in which he never enrolled. In spite of O’Hara’s shift away from canonical poets by embracing a more informal poetic voice in his poetry, however, it is important to note that he received a formal literary education as well. In a letter to Lawrence Osgood on September 27, 1950, he wrote of his graduate work at Ann Arbor, “I am taking Shakespeare and Plato, isn’t that the most chi-chi thing you ever heard? I’m sure it will discourage all the nonsense, charm, and talent right out of me, to everyone’s great advantage.” Gooch similarly asserts the elementary influence of the great masters on O’Hara’s poetry, if only as structural guides. O’Hara’s “freshman poems,” Gooch notes, “tended to be games, tests, exercises, or parodies. Learning about the history and techniques of poetry as he went along, he challenged himself by imitating the styles of Wyatt, Coleridge, or Stein.” O’Hara’s first publication, Oranges, reflects this formal training; not only was the volume a response to Grace Hartigan’s series of paintings with the same name, but it was

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also an attempt to emulate the structure of Arthur Rimbaud’s *Illuminations.* However, O’Hara’s early poems, collected posthumously in *Early Writings* and *Poems Retrieved,* reflect a desire to practice his craft, rather than to align his poetic voice alongside the work of the great masters.

In fact, what critics perceive as O’Hara’s characteristic style—frenetic, colloquial, and at times, ambiguous—did not fully emerge until the poet’s third installation of poems, *Meditations in an Emergency,* in 1957. In contrast to O’Hara’s earlier works, the volume displays a mastery of language in a clear diversion from traditional poetics; humor and timing, rather than line structure and rhyming control his poems. This transformation appeared in part from the poet’s move to Greenwich Village in the early part of the 1950s. Unlike the poet’s upbringing in Grafton, Massachusetts, his experience in New York City was one of immense artistic collaboration, particularly as artists from all walks of life flocked to the city alongside government-sponsored programs like the Works Progress Administration (WPA). As was the case for many, the move to New York was additionally linked to a desire to escape political tensions in Europe in the years surrounding World War II. By association, O’Hara found himself presented with endless opportunities for artistic overlap amidst “a busy grid of coldwater lofts, storefront galleries, and artists’ clubs and cafeterias along an axis of Second Avenue and Tenth Street.” As O’Hara’s engagement with other art forms like art, movies, and music expanded exponentially during his time in the city—as an employee of The Museum of Modern Art and as a regular at artistic hubs like The San Remo, The Cedar Tavern, The Artist’s Club, and The Five Spot—he began to incorporate stylistic elements from peripheral art forms into his poetry. As a result, O’Hara’s poems, particularly those that compose his most famous volume, *Lunch Poems*

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6 Gooch, 141.
incorporate many stylistic elements of the mediums that were relevant to the poet’s experience in New York City.

The following three chapters present an in-depth look at the development of O’Hara’s unique poetic voice and its association to ideas of improvisation and performance present within alternative art forms like music, cinema, and painting. While Chapter One tracks the influence of musical structural techniques such as polyphonic improvisation and blue notes on O’Hara’s poems, Chapter Two looks at cinematic techniques such as establishing shots and jump cuts as a way in which to understand their jumbled nature. Finally, Chapter Three outlines O’Hara’s involvement in the Abstract Expressionist movement in the art world in order to explore the automatic, paradoxical, and visceral language in his poetry. My analysis of O’Hara’s poetic style through three separate, but overlapping mediums outside of poetry—music, cinema, and painting, respectively—will seek to explain O’Hara’s artistic decisions as they relate to his poems’ unique tone of voice, line structure, and imagery. In contrast to other art forms that circulated the downtown art scene in New York during O’Hara’s time there, music, cinema, and the visual arts played a significant role in O’Hara’s biography as well as in his career as a poet; in his short life, O’Hara trained as a professional concert pianist, viewed movies as a way to return to his childhood in Grafton, Massachusetts and as a space in which to safely confront his homosexuality, and became one of The Museum of Modern Art’s most influential curators in the International Painting and Sculpture Department. He additionally played an integral role in the careers of Robert Motherwell, Larry Rivers, Jane Freilicher, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, as well as in the Abstract Expressionist movement as a whole. As a result, the three chapters of my investigation of O’Hara’s poetic influences often consult snapshots of the poet’s biography as a way in which to cement the importance of each medium on the poet, both personally and
professionally. Additionally, I will explore each art form relevant to the development of O’Hara’s poetic style in the order that the poet experienced them during his lifetime.

As O’Hara incorporates musical, cinematic, and aesthetic techniques like polyphonic improvisation, establishing shots, and *écriture automatique* into his poems, he creates an innovative poetic form rooted in performance. The junction additionally gives O’Hara the leeway to adapt elements of peripheral art forms to the poetic genre. What I came to discover in reading O’Hara was his ability to seamlessly integrate a portrait of city life alongside his autobiography. By including elements from other art forms into his work, O’Hara’s poems capture the narrator’s surroundings similar to the way that he perceived painting, cinema, and music; his life becomes equally captivating, unpredictable, and fantastical.
Chapter One:
RHAPSODY

“...no words are needed for me to tell what his voice is saying. It twangs jauntily along, then bubbles into a laugh, suddenly jumps forward like a motorcycle revving up a hill, and finally swoops down like a Rachmaninoff glissando in a delighted pounce of a final, unintelligible word. The sound says that life is exciting, that honesty is joyous and pretension silly, that all discoveries are good, and that energy is all.”

-Lawrence Osgood, Homage to Frank O’Hara

In the months leading up to his graduate work in English Literature at The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Frank O’Hara sent a series of letters to Lawrence Osgood. “This finality is actually better than when I left the Navy,” he told Osgood, “I [have]...managed to establish my identity with real people and situations, rather than depend on the context of a piano or a vide papier to enable me to manage it.” Although O’Hara asserts the importance of his surroundings in this statement, he additionally outlines music and writing as integral components of his identity. Sorting through Frank O’Hara’s letters in the archives, one becomes vastly aware of the immense role that music played in his life; alongside correspondence with the composers, Morton Feldman, Ned Rorem, and Ben Weber, appear reference after reference to concerts, sonatas, and odes to “Bach, Mozart…Poulenc…Rieti…Rachmaninoff and Milhaud.” In contrast to his love of the visual arts and the film industry, however, O’Hara’s passion for music makes a minimal appearance in his poems. Rather, O’Hara’s mastery of music appears in the transformative quality of his poems’ narrative voice as its quick transitions mirror many stylistic elements of jazz such as polyphonic improvisation, blue notes, and swing rhythms.

While jazz was most closely associated with the Beats in the 1950s, it permeated the

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8 Lawrence Osgood from Bill Berkson and Joe LeSueur, Homage to Frank O’Hara, (Berkeley: Creative Arts Book Co., Revised Version, 1980), 25.
downtown art scene in New York, colliding with Frank O’Hara along the way. Local hangouts like The Five Spot, a downtown jazz club on Third Avenue between Fifth and Sixth Streets,\(^ {11}\) began to organize events that encouraged the overlap between poetry and music—often in the style of a performance. While O’Hara vehemently objected to the spectacle, even supporting a parody of the phenomenon where Larry Rivers and Kenneth Koch read the phone book,\(^ {12}\) he and The New York School found themselves at The Five Spot for the music. Ornette Coleman and his band—Don Cherry on cornet, Charlie Haden on bass, and Billy Higgins on drums—performed regularly until 1960, exposing the young poet to the jazz avant-garde. A departure from the musicians in O’Hara’s classical canon like Sergei Rachmaninoff, Claude Debussy, and Sergei Prokofiev, those of the jazz avant-garde like Thelonious Monk, Morton Feldman, and Ornette Coleman rooted their compositions in improvisation, even leaving portions of their musical scores empty to do so.\(^ {13}\) In spite of O’Hara’s objectively classical taste, he accepted jazz over time. By the end of his life, Michael Magee notes, O’Hara would go so far as to call Billie Holiday “\textit{better} than Picasso.”\(^ {14}\)

O’Hara’s adoption of jazz resulted in part from his professional training as a musician. In contrast to his other artistic passions like the visual arts and the movies, O’Hara actively pursued career as a musician in his youth, even taking time off from high school in Worcester, Massachusetts to attend the New England Conservatory for piano. As Brad Gooch highlights in his biography of O’Hara, the poet’s father contributed to his fascination with the medium. He notes, “With Francis perched on a chair nearby, [Russell O’Hara] played every night before


\(^ {14}\) Frank O’Hara quoted by Michael Magee, 710.
dinner for fifteen or twenty minutes—compositions by Gershwin, Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, and Rachmaninoff.”

Although O’Hara abruptly changed his concentration from Music to English in his freshman year at Harvard, he continued his study of music, though in a different context. Beyond O’Hara’s spontaneous writing methods—“dashing…poems off at odd moments—in his office at The Museum of Modern Art, in the street at lunchtime or even in a room full of people”—his narration mimics many aspects of a free jazz performance, particularly in its tendency to quickly shift between a variety of different tempos and tones of voice.

Although Frank O’Hara’s fascination with classical composers like Sergei Rachmaninoff, Claude Debussy, and Sergei Prokofiev appears to conflict with his interest in musicians of the mid-twentieth century avant-garde, his classical and contemporary preferences retain many stylistic similarities. The “curiously passive romantic flavor; the spontaneous, almost improvisatory melos; the predilection for harmonic sequence” in the work of nineteenth-century composer, Sergei Rachmaninoff, resembles the unconstrained style of the ‘fifties experimental jazz musician, Morton Feldman, for example. The difference between classical masters and their modern counterparts lay in the style of their performance; while Rachmaninoff’s compositions remain fixed performance after performance, those of jazz musicians like Morton Feldman transform with each performance due to gaps intentionally left in the score; by association, musicians like Feldman encouraged musicians to adlib melodies, guaranteeing that no two performances would sound the same. Hazel Smith comments on this

phenomenon in her book, *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara: Difference, Homosexuality, Topography*. She notes:

…composers such as Cage, Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff and Earle Brown, left some of the composing of the music up to the performers…For example, in Cage’s ‘Concert’ for Piano and Orchestra…the player has a largely notated part, but any part of it can be played and at any speed. On the other hand, in Earle Brown’s ‘Four Systems’ for piano(s) and/or other instruments or sound-producing media, the graphic score consists of horizontal lines of varying length and thickness and the instructions on the score say it ‘may be played at any sequence, either side up, at any tempo.’

As a result, a musician’s tendency to deviate from traditional musical structures often gauged O’Hara’s interest in their compositions; improvisation remained a key element in determining the poet’s musical preferences.

Beyond O’Hara’s personal taste, his interest in improvisation played a vital role in developing his unique poetic style, particularly in terms of his narrative voice. His tendency to alternate between different tones of voice within “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday #158,” for example, adds a conversational quality to the poem similar to the way that instruments engage with one another in a musical composition. Perhaps the most intimate of O’Hara’s “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday” series, “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday #158” expresses the narrator’s desire to communicate with the late composer.

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I am sad
I better hurry up and finish this
before your 3rd goes off the radio
or I won’t know what I’m feeling
tonight
tonight
anytime
or
ever
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*CP, 418*

Although the poem begins in a rush, its short, staccato lines and vulnerable tone of voice mark a

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stylistic departure for the poet. By acknowledging a set time in which to communicate his feelings to the late composer, “before [his] 3rd goes off the radio,” the narrator adds a tone of desperation to the poem, though dramatized. This notion of ephemerality continues throughout the piece as the narrator makes repeated attempts to connect with the composer that convey his interest in the musician as both an artistic guide and mentor; “What do you think,” he asks in line 12. Alongside the fast-paced structure of the poem, however, the narrator has no choice but to respond for—or in the place of—Rachmaninoff in the following line. “I think / that / the Tratar (no, that would be too funny) / the Tratar hordes / are still advancing,” he notes. In tandem with the questions in lines 21-27, “how do you like hatred / cruelty / sadism / self-interest / selfishness / self-pollution / self,” the narrator draws a parallel between himself and the composer. In doing so, he displays the narrator’s dependence on Rachmaninoff as an essential part of his creative identity.

The atypically exposed tone of voice in “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday #158” extends beyond the poet’s fascination with the musician into a commentary on the influence of performance in O’Hara’s poetry. Whereas fantasy appears in the form of fictionalized language in the James Dean series, it appears as early as the piece’s title in “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday #158.” Although the title of the poem suggests it is the 158th poem in a series to the composer, “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday #158” is in reality one of seven poems of the same name that O’Hara composed during his lifetime to the musician. Additionally, O’Hara wrote each poem in the “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday” series on a different date, not all of which surrounded the musician’s actual birthday on April 1, 1873. In fact, only three poems in the group fall in line with the composer’s birthday—“On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday (Blue windows, blue rooftops),”

dated roughly April 1954, “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday (I am so glad that Larry Rivers made a),” dated April 10, 1954, and “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday (It is your 86th Birthday),” dated April 2, 1959. In contrast, “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday #158” was written on July 6, 1961. Although the series does not capture a realistic or illuminating portrait of the late composer in terms of its date or its content, the series’ duration from July 1953 to 1961 reflects the lasting effect of Rachmaninoff’s work on Frank O’Hara.

In tandem with the narrator’s urgent tone of voice and attempt to feign connection to the late composer, the title of “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday #158” additionally establishes the poem as a performance, not an example of historical accuracy.

O’Hara also turns to language of performance in primary source materials that reference music. Similar to the relationship between the narrator and the composer in “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday #158,” O’Hara cannot seem to mediate performance with reality in his discussion of music. This phenomenon begins as early as the poet’s senior year at Harvard. In a letter to Lawrence Osgood on October 19, 1950, O’Hara recounts his experience with Brahms, Mozart, and Schoenberg through hyperbolic language. He notes:

Listen have you yet experienced (that looks so pretty I can’t bear to change it) the Brahms Serenade no. 2 in A Major, opus 16 (I have it here before me, you observe) which is backed by Mozart’s Serenade for winds K 288? Both are conscripts of heaven, especially the Brahms. These things somehow I suppose because they are smaller public forms, avoid both the grandeur of symphonic stuff and the subtlety of chamber stuff, and to great advantage. I also love the Schoenberg Serenade opus 24.

Beyond O’Hara’s explicit interest in Brahms and Mozart, the passage displays his early

22 Allen, 532.
23 Allen, 543.
24 Allen, 552.
25 Allen, 519-558.
experiments with alternative linguistic forms. His refusal to correct his misspelling of experienced, “exl/2erienced,” additionally evokes the idea of improvisation through the voice of an uncensored narrator. A similar principle appears in a letter he wrote to Jane Freilicher about Dvorak one year later. O’Hara dissects the structure of the words in order to playfully depict his excitement toward a piece of music. He notes, “The other night I heard the divine Dvorak’s First Symph—what with the superb time I had listening to his Fourth in Boston he is my THING this year, and also Hindemith’s 4 Temperaments, which seemed terribly n obel and, really! I mean: noble and beautiful.”27 It is not until later that O’Hara began to associate the unfinished quality of his discussions of music with fantastical imagery. In a letter to Larry Rivers in 1953, he notes:

I was listening to a Chopin Nocturne when I woke up and suddenly I felt so unalterably great just by contact with it that I swear I must have thought I was Homer at the edge of the sea and I suddenly thought of how words in one’s head boom and crash like the sea and do, corny as it sounds, keep ebbing before one ‘gets’ them. 28

The enthusiastic language that O’Hara uses in this instance appears in many of his letters, particularly in those that allude to music. Although he does not directly cite music as much as he does the visual arts or the movies in his poems, O’Hara incorporates the notion of performance in his poetry as a whole; as a result, music acts as a creative catalyst that helps determine the rhythm of O’Hara’s narrative voice, rather than the content of his poems.

As O’Hara’s first critically acclaimed book of poetry did not appear until the release of *Meditations in an Emergency* in 1957, the poet’s mastery of performance pervades the breadth of his celebrated works. The hyper-specific references to time and place in his elegy to Billie Holiday, “The Day Lady Died” (1959) reflect his flair for drama, in particular.

27 Frank O’Hara to Jane Freilicher, March 8, 1951, Houghton Special Collections Library, Harvard University, The Jane Freilicher Papers.
It is 12:20 in New York a Friday
three days after Bastille day, yes
it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine
because I will get off the 4:19 in Easthampton
at 7:15 and then go straight to dinner
and I don’t know the people who will feed me

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

Much of the tension in the poem emerges as allusions specific to the world of the narrator and those that belong to the public sphere overlap. The names in the poem—“Miss Stillwagon,” “Verlaine,” “Patsy,” “Bonnard,” “Hesoid,” “Richard Lattimore,” “Brendan Behan,” “Mike,” and “Mal Waldron”—for example, are either members of O’Hara’s friend group or those of the greater artistic canon. O’Hara’s casual integration of the two adds a coded quality to the poem; although larger names like “Verlaine” are easily recognizable, those like “Patsy,” in reference to O’Hara’s good friend, Patsy Southgate, are uniquely valuable to the poet. As O’Hara directs the poem toward those close to him, he adds an impersonal component to the piece as it transitions to the public sphere. The poem’s simultaneous intimacy and anonymity perhaps also mimics O’Hara’s own relationship to Billie Holiday. Although he saw her perform at “Loews Sheridan on Seventh Avenue and Twelfth Street in the summer of 1957,”29 O’Hara contextualizes his interaction with Holiday in “The Day Lady Died” within a greater narrative of loss.

The overall structure of “The Day Lady Died” additionally reflects the influence of performance on O’Hara’s work. Composed entirely in the present tense, it appears to have been written alongside the poet as he wanders through the streets of New York and completes seemingly mundane tasks.

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

CP, 325

O’Hara’s lackadaisical description of errands such as those in lines 7-10 directly contrasts with the overarching theme of the poem, the narrator’s grief over the death of Billie Holiday. A level of deception additionally lies in the poem’s title the way it does in “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday #158.” Although O’Hara sets “The Day Lady Died” in present tense, he has composed the poem after learning of Holiday’s death, though on the same day. As Michael Magee notes, “...the whole passage is a model of what James called ‘reactive spontaneity.’” By association, the narrator’s inclusion of monotonous tasks throughout the poem like going to the bank and the liquor store are put in place afterwards as a way to build to the emotional climax of the poem. Although the poem does not explicitly reference the narrator’s hysteria until line 25, its nineteen uses of the word “and”—even starting lines 6, 8, 12, 14, 20, 23, and 26 with the word—give the poem a breathless, anxious tone before the narrator’s realization of Holiday’s death in lines 22-25.

then I go back where I came from to 6th Avenue
and the tobacconist in the Ziegfield Theatre and
casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton
of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with her face on it.

SP, 155

Alongside the poem’s lack of punctuation, the narrator’s repetition of “and” inflicts a physical reaction on anyone who reads the piece aloud. Such feelings of breathlessness additionally echo the final thought of the poem in line 29, “everyone and I stopped breathing.” As a result, the series of monotonous tasks expressed at the beginning of the piece contributes to its climax. By

association, the notion of performance guides the poem as a whole.

Similar to “The Day Lady Died,” O’Hara’s epic poem to Bill Berkson, “Biotherm,” contains many quick changes in tone of voice and imagery. As O’Hara pairs opposing narrative voices against one another at line breaks, he produces an effect similar to a blue note in a jazz performance. A note that falls a whole or half-step flat or sharp of the expected tone in music, a blue note can be used as a framework with which to describe the mismatched pairings in O’Hara’s poems, particularly in terms of the conflicting tones of voice that often bump up against each another as a poem progresses. Perhaps the clearest example of blue notes in O’Hara’s poetry emerges in “Biotherm” as polar images and tones of voice appear alongside one another in rapid succession.

\begin{verbatim}
The best thing in the world but I better be quick about it
better be gone tomorrow
better be gone last night and
next Thursday better be gone
better be
always or what’s the use the sky
the endless clouds trailing we leading them by the bandana, red
you meet the Ambassador “a year and a half of trying to make him”
he is dressed in red, he has a red ribbon down his chest he
has 7 gold decorations pinned to his gash
he sleeps a lot, thinks a lot, fucks a lot, impenetrable and Jude-ish
I love him, you would love him too if you could see outside

whoops-musicale (sei tu m’ami) ahhahahahaah
SP, 218
\end{verbatim}

The shift in the narrator’s tone of voice in lines 12-14 from “I love him, you would love him too if you could see outside” to “whoops-musicale (sei tu m’ami) ahhahahahaah / loppy di looploop which is why I suppose” is incredibly abrupt. As the poem deviates from its

original rhythm and narrative voice in line 13, it mimics the nature of a blue note. Not only are the lines before and after lines 13-14 perfectly elocuted, but they also fulfill logical thought progressions until they unexpectedly bump into a shift in tone of voice in line 13. The curtness of the transitions between narrative voices in “Biotherm” is both surprising and disorienting for O’Hara’s audience. Following the structure of blue notes, however, O’Hara’s brief changes in tone of voice from declarative to nonsensical disappear as quickly as they emerge. Following the narrator’s musical exploration in lines 13-14, for example, he switches his tone of voice once more in the following lines: “…I suppose / Leontyne Price asked Secretary Goldberg to intervene with Metropera.” Although the introduction of Leontyne Price appears unexpectedly, O’Hara’s reference to the singer emerges in response to line 13; “whoops-musical (sei tu m’ami) ahhahahahaah / loppy di looploop” acts as a slight variation in tone that, retrospectively, does not entirely detract from the overall narrative in the poem, although it is a marked deviation from the poem’s content and rhythm.

As “Biotherm” progresses, tangential information and unexpected shifts in tones of voice contribute to a fragmented overall composition. However, the narrator appears continually unsatisfied with the voice he chooses, and as such, repeatedly adds and alternates between drastically different narrative voices. This phenomenon overwhelms the poem as the narrator begins to blend voices in the same line as he does around line 41.

perhaps at the end of a very strange game
you won   (?!)(!?)
and that is important (yeah) to win (yeah)

bent on his knees the Old Mariner said where the fuck
is that motel you told me about mister I aint come here for no clams
I want swimmingpool mudpacks the works carbonateddrugstorewater hiccups
fun a nice sissy under me clean and whistling a donkey to ride rocks

Although the transient narrative voice in “Biotherm” creates a conversation-like structure within
the poem, it appears immensely jarring to O’Hara’s audience. In contrast to the work of
O’Hara’s contemporaries, “Biotherm” embodies an uncensored narrative structure. In tandem
with the jazz performances that pervaded downtown clubs where Frank O’Hara was a regular
patron such as The Five Spot, the improvised quality of his poem evokes many musical
techniques of the time period such as the blue note.

O’Hara’s uncensored narrative voice additionally emerges in one of O’Hara’s more
famous pieces, “Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!),” as the narrator argues with an absent third
party about the nature of the weather outside.

\[
\begin{align*}
Lana Turner has collapsed! \\
I was trotting along and suddenly \\
it started raining and snowing \\
and you said it was hailing \\
but hailing hits you on the head \\
hard so it was really snowing and \\
raining and I was in such a hurry \\
to meet you but the traffic \\
was acting exactly like the sky
\end{align*}
\]

Characteristic of O’Hara, the tone of the poem is decidedly frazzled at first glance. Alongside the
narrator’s inability to identify a phenomenon as easily recognizable as the weather outside,
O’Hara transforms the otherwise mundane act of sitting in traffic and watching the weather
outside into an event of extreme hysteria. As the imagery in the piece evolves throughout the
poem, the narrator inserts images that seem to emerge by way of word association—“raining”
transitions to “snowing” to “hailing.” Indications of immediacy such as “suddenly” in line 2 and
the “headline / LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!” in line 11 solidify a feeling of urgency as
the narrator takes in his environment as the piece progresses, similar to the way that he does in
“The Day Lady Died.” In contrast, the narrator of “Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!)” retracts
many of the assertions that he puts forth within the poem. This phenomenon appears in lines 2-6.
I was trotting along and suddenly
it started raining and snowing
and you said it was hailing
but hailing hits you on the head
hard so it was really snowing and
raining.

SP, 234

The narrator’s tendency to visibly edit himself throughout the poem, rather than to eliminate unnecessary components, reflects a piece composed without time to iron out the narrator’s thought process through editing. In his feigned ability to determine his surroundings and his messy transitions, he adds an intimate component to his poems, as if directly recounting his thoughts—however scattered—to his audience.

Interestingly, O’Hara’s incorporation of musical techniques often appears in poems where O’Hara does not overtly reference music; instead, the rhythmic pulse of the poem suggests a musical influence. The energetic transitions in O’Hara’s poetry, in the form of “ing” verbs and enjambments, add a cadence to his poems that mirrors the nature of swing rhythms, a principle in jazz directly tied to performance and improvisation. Anders Friberg and Andreas Sundström suggest that, “another important issue for the swing feel is the temporal relations between the different instruments in an ensemble…[this often means] playing ‘before the beat,’ ‘after the beat,’ or ‘on the beat.’” As a result, a poem that incorporates swing rhythms is one that is directly linked to the components that determine the composition’s overall timing. Within O’Hara’s “Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!),” for example, the repetition of “ing” verbs propels the poem forward.

LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!
there is no snow in Hollywood
there is no rain in California
I have been to lots of parties

and acted perfectly disgraceful
but I have never actually collapsed
oh Lana Turner we love you get up

SP, 234

Alongside transition words like “suddenly,” the influx of verbs like “raining,” “snowing,” and “hailing” in the first half of the poem gives the piece a feeling of perpetual movement heightened by O’Hara’s use of enjambments; not only do they force quick transitions between lines, but in doing so, they also set the pace of the piece. As elongated allusions like “I have been to lots of parties / and acted perfectly disgraceful” collide with the repetition of “ing” verbs in lines 2-7—“trotting,” “raining,” “snowing,” “hailing,” “acting”—the poem develops an internal rhythm. As swing rhythms are often associated with “consecutive long-short patterns,” the juxtaposition of successive, staccato “ing” verbs and concrete imagery in “Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!)” reflects many structural similarities to jazz compositions rooted in swing.

In longer poems, O’Hara’s tendency to self-edit adds a complexity to his work characteristic of polyphonic improvisation, a musical technique in free jazz characteristic of two or more individual lines of melody. Multiple interwoven tangents track the narrator’s emotional state in “Meditations in an Emergency,” for example.

Am I to become profligate if I were a blonde? Or religious if I were French?
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.
Why should I share you? Why don’t you get rid of someone else for a change?
I am the least difficult of men. All I want is boundless love.
Even trees understand me! Good heavens, I lie under them, too, don’t I? I’m just like a pile of leaves.

SP, 66

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34 Friberg and Sundström, 334.
In contrast to “Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!),” “Meditations in an Emergency” possesses a conversation-like structure as the narrator bounces back and forth between six distinct tones of voice. As Edward Mendleson notes in *The New York Review of Books*, “The longer poems tend to be performance pieces, in which O’Hara writes as a poetic one-man band, shifting rapidly among his roles as a party-goer, art critic, movie fan, amateur chef, balletomane, raconteur, sexual adventurer, European traveler, always rushing someplace else, quick to shed his past.”

The poem begins introspectively as the narrator acknowledges his grief in the wake of a breakup in a series of questions: “Am I to become profligate if I were a blonde? Or religious if I were French?” However, the tone of voice becomes increasingly antagonistic in line 5 as the narrator inflicts blame on his former lover. “Why should I share you? Why don’t you get rid of someone else for a change?” he notes. Almost immediately afterwards, the narrator transforms the overall mood of the piece once more—this time, into his environment. By ranting about the pastoral way of life in statements such as, “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” in lines 11-13, the narrator detracts from the vulnerability expressed in the opening of the poem.

Scott Richardson asserts the importance of this difference, drawing a link between the variations of a musical performance and O’Hara’s tendency to “self-edit” within his poems. He notes, “In the hands of the poet, the variation set becomes a series of revisions—in the fullest possible sense—a repeated going back to a single moment of time and a single place to obsessively review and remake that reality.” In tandem with Richardson’s ideology, O’Hara’s poem,

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“Meditations in an Emergency,” exists in cyclical movements where the narrator repeatedly distances himself from—and then embraces—his emotional state throughout the poem.

Perhaps more interestingly, the simultaneous plot lines in Meditations in an Emergency make it hard to distinguish the central focus of the poem itself. The piece’s reference to separate, overlapping emotional states compounds this idea as each image appears to emerge from within another image. The fourth section of the piece in lines 16-23, for example, combines the tone of the poem’s opening and that of the previous six lines.

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. I am always looking away. Or again at something after it has given me up. It makes me restless and that makes me unhappy, but I cannot keep them still. If only I had grey, green, black, brown, yellow eyes; I would stay at home and do something. It’s not that I am curious. On the contrary, I am bored but it’s my duty to be attentive, I am needed by things as the sky must be above the earth. And lately, so great has their anxiety become, I can spare myself little sleep.

SP, 66

Touching upon feelings of doubt and vulnerability in the poem’s opening and the celebration of city life in its third section, the narrator provides a new, hybrid tone of voice in the fourth section. In many ways, this overlapping sensation is evocative of the frenetic compositions of free jazz. Trumpet, bass, and drum compete with one another in separate, but simultaneously occurring melodies to create a feverish excitement in Ornette Coleman’s composition, “Eventually,” for example. Hazel Smith expands on this idea noting, “In O’Hara’s poetry…everything differs from itself and this is always an ongoing process. Ways of being and modes of writing are constantly deconstructing themselves and sliding into their opposites, as they swing athletically between the poles of difference and identity.”38 As storylines in “Meditations in an Emergency” compete for the focus of the poem, they reflect the narrator’s

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emotional fragmentation as well as the influence of musical structural techniques like polyphonic improvisation on the structure of O’Hara’s poetry.

Overall, O’Hara’s poems reflect multiple variations of an original idea that evolves as the poem progresses. As a result, many of his poems mirror a standard bebop format: “an introduction, followed by the head, a series of solos and finally a closing recapitulation of the head.”39 The process appears on an abbreviated scale in O’Hara’s shorter poems such as “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday (Quick! a last poem before I go).”

Quick! a last poem before I go
off my rocker. Oh Rachmaninoff
Onset, Massachusetts. Is it the fig-newton
playing the horn? Thundering windows
of hell, will your tubes ever break
into powder? Oh my palace of oranges,
junk shop, staples, umber, basalt;
I’m a child again when I was really
miserable, a grope pizzicato.
SP, 55

After establishing the initial view of the poet “[going] / off [his] rocker” in the first line, O’Hara weaves in a series of variations through the poem in the form of seemingly unrelated catalogues. Frenzied lists like those that begin in line 9, “My pocket / of rhinestone, yoyo, carpenter’s pencil,
/ amethyst, hypo, campaign button” speak to O’Hara’s mastery of improvisation and tonal fluctuation. Additionally, they further complicate the initial image put forth of the narrator losing his mind. The poem builds in a crescendo along these lines until the final line of the piece, “You’ll never be mentally sober.”40 While the tone of the last line directly contrasts with that in lines 3-13 of the poem, it directly mirrors the opening theme of the poem; as a result, the influx of agitated allusions adapts the initial image, “Quick! a last poem before I go / off my rocker,” to

40 O’Hara, 159.
the similar, but refined final line of the piece, “You’ll never be mentally sober.” As departures from the poem’s opening, the fast-paced imagery that occurs in lines 3-13 of “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday” mirrors separate solos performed throughout the poem.

Beyond Frank O’Hara’s personal fascination with classical composers like Sergei Rachmaninoff and Claude Debussy, his exposure to different forms of musical expression in New York City—particularly those sweeping the downtown art scene in the 1950s and 1960s like that of jazz avant-garde musicians like Ornette Coleman, Thelonious Monk, and Cecil Taylor—served as an impetus for musical principles to appear within his poems. Although the poet directly alludes to music in poems like “Rhapsody,” “Radio,” and his “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday” series, he channels many structural techniques that he would have recognized in the music at The Five Spot such as polyphonic improvisation, blue notes, and swing rhythms, particularly in his tendency to quickly alternate between different tones of voice and imagery. Although O’Hara’s mastery of hyperbole reflects his love of performance, it additionally illuminates the influence of musical structural techniques in his poetry. Within the poet’s longer works such as “Meditations in an Emergency,” for example, conflicting tones of voice interact in a similar way to the way that multiple instruments converge with one another in polyphonic improvisation. As vastly different narrative voices collide unexpectedly, O’Hara not only presents an incredibly diverse portrait of the narrator’s surroundings, but he also adds a rhythmic pulse to his work. As a result, O’Hara’s inclusion of musical structural techniques like blue notes, swing rhythms, and polyphonic improvisation allows him to retain immense control over the content and the timing of his compositions. By association, O’Hara is able to manipulate the attention and emotional state of his audience as they read his poems, producing a poem as equally entertaining and offbeat as a jazz composition.
**Chapter Two:**
**NEVER ARGUE WITH THE MOVIES**

“The true field of the movies is not art but myth...a fiction, a basic, prototypic pattern capable of many variations and distortions, many betrayals and disguises, even though it remains imaginative truth.”

-Parker Tyler, *Magic and Myth of the Movies*

One evening in the fall of 1950, Frank O’Hara came home to find the “floor, walls, bed, desk, shelves, chair, even the closet” of his room plastered with posters for John Cocteau’s film, *Orpheus*. After listening to the twenty-four year old poet incessantly “rave” about the film for weeks, his friends decided to give him a taste of his own medicine. Frank O’Hara’s fascination with *Orpheus* enters into a long-standing narrative of the poet’s love of cinema, building on childhood adventures spent at the Loews and Warner Theaters in Worcester, Massachusetts with his Great Aunt Elizabeth. As in the case of O’Hara’s room, the poet’s fixation with film is visibly present in his poetry; movies, in the form of storylines, actors, and production companies, appear fifty-four times in the 515-page volume, *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, “slightly more than one out of every ten poems.” By evaluating O’Hara’s poems alongside cinematic techniques like establishing shots and jump cuts, the evolving, and often contradictory, elements in his poems’ imagery and tone of voice become stylistic misdirects that the poet uses to distance himself from his autobiography. Alongside film’s ability to both physically and emotionally detach the moviegoer from the world around them, O’Hara’s revolutionary poetic voice, rooted in cinematic principles, allows him to play out alternate realities.

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42 Frank O’Hara to Hal Fondren, 1951, Houghton Special Collections Library, Harvard University, The Jane Freilicher Papers, Series 1, Folder 10.
realities in his poems and to objectively comment on the increasingly vulnerable periods in his life, such as the death of a friend or of a relationship.

O’Hara’s initial explorations of cinema are often tied to a loss of innocence, particularly as he begins to associate components of his biography with fictional portrayals of reality that unfold on-screen. This phenomenon appears in the poet’s primary documents as well as in his poetry, most notably in a letter written to Fairfield Porter in 1955 where O’Hara gushes about Elia Kazan’s cinematic interpretation of John Steinbeck’s novel, *East of Eden*. After seeing the film, “the La Strada of our set,” for the fourth time alongside John Ashbery, the twenty-nine year old methodically recounted the similarities he felt between James Dean’s character, Cal, and his own experience as a child growing in Grafton, Massachusetts. He notes:

Did you see *East of Eden* before you left? It’s a marvelous movie…it made me remember more things about my childhood and my family than I have in years. John didn’t like it and in telling me about it, it was so strange, because the main character, a sort of naughty boy wondering why he’s different, I felt very illuminating and even that eerie feeling that I was being exposed to an intimate, scarcely-remembered level, whereas John identified with his brother…The movie takes place in California 1917 but the diction I remember in Massachusetts in 1938 was amazingly similar.47

O’Hara’s decision to align himself with Dean’s fictional character emerges alongside the poet’s long-standing fixation with film’s ability to draw from and fictionalize reality. Not only do many of O’Hara’s works dedicated to cinema illuminate the intricacies of the viewing experience, but they also reflect the medium’s propensity for contradiction in their construction.

In his mock manifesto, “Personism,” O’Hara presents a defense of his poetic style as one rooted in authenticity, rather than in fiction. Published in *Yugen* in 1959, “Personism” touches on many of O’Hara’s stylistic idiosyncrasies such as his reliance on hyperbole and his tendency to

locate himself within a greater narrative. As he champions the work of “Whitman and Crane and Williams,” as the only literary figures who are “better than the movies,” O’Hara exemplifies many of his own paradoxical writing techniques. By illuminating his preferences in the literary world alongside his fixation with cinema, O’Hara references poets whose very work is stylistically linked with fantasy, rather than the direct, realistic language that he argues for throughout “Personism;” just as filmmakers present plausible, albeit imagined, plotlines in their projects on-screen, O’Hara’s depicts a world of fiction in his poems, as carefully calculated images give the appearance of a haphazard compositional process and a world of fantasy, masquerading as reality. Furthermore, in O’Hara’s attempt to justify the direct and seemingly unpolished quality of his poems, he argues for an alternative poetic structure beyond the early abstractions put in place by figures of the literary elite like Whitman, Crane, and Williams. Three-fourths of the way through the essay, he notes, “Personism, a movement which I recently founded and which nobody knows about, interests me a great deal, being so totally opposed to this kind of abstract removal that it is verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry.” By distinguishing his poetic voice from those that pervade the work of other literary figures around him and by drawing from cinematic techniques such as establishing shots and jump cuts used to supplement a character’s identity, O’Hara diverts attention away from the image of the narrator.

Frank O’Hara presents movie-going as a simultaneously freeing and crippling interaction in “An Image of Leda” as the narrator’s personal attachment to on-screen fictions is suppressed in favor of the polarizing effects of cinema. Paradoxical language dominates the poem’s opening

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49 O’Hara, 247.
50 O’Hara, 248.
lines as a way to connote the simultaneous intrigue and ignorance that audience members feel in their relationship the blank screen.

*The cinema is cruel like a miracle. We sit in the darkened room asking nothing of the empty white space but that it remain pure. And suddenly despite us it blackens.*

*SP, 15*

In doing so, O’Hara adds an ominous quality to the viewing experience by highlighting the narrator’s lack of control in the theater as he has no way of predicting the film’s plot in its entirety without having seen it beforehand. By asserting the audience’s physical and emotional distance from the screen, O’Hara transforms the act of movie watching from an everyday occurrence to a power struggle. Rather than sitting in silence and waiting for the film to begin, O’Hara presents a world where moviegoers must bargain with the screen by “asking nothing / of the empty white / space but that it / remain pure.” In spite of their request, it “blackens” in line 9. As a result, O’Hara dramatizes the viewing experience as audience members must succumb to the authority of the screen and the storyline that it presents. By emphasizing the dissection between the world on-screen and that which exists beyond the bounds of the theater, O’Hara displays the power of cinema as an artistic medium where alternate, often fantastical versions of reality appear not only preferable to reality, but also tangible to audience members.

Although aware of its fictional associations, moviegoers succumb to the world of the hypothetical during a film’s runtime. Alongside references to “disguise” such as those in line 31, O’Hara aligns moviegoers’ pursuit of imagined realities with allusions to exposure in order

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52 O’Hara, Line 31, 15.
to convey their vulnerability in the midst of fictional plotlines. In the face of scripted fantasies, the narrator becomes immensely aware of the world apart from screen, as if “naked / on the river bank / spread-eagled while / the machine wings / nearer.” Faced with seemingly plausible storylines before him, he develops a desire for on-screen fantasies in lines 24-31:

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Our
limbs quicken even
to disgrace under
this white eye as
if there were real
pleasure in loving
a shadow and caress-
ing a disguise.
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SP, 15

Although the narrator acknowledges the fictional elements of the movie’s storyline, he remains steadfastly interested in the film; as such, ephemerality and desire become interchangeable in the presence of the screen. His references to “shadow” and “disguise” add a level of distrust to the viewing experience that extends beyond the film’s fleeting runtime. More overt indications of fiction such as the film’s costumes additionally connote a clear physical separation between on-screen fantasies and the world of the narrator. Despite visual cues that remind the audience of film’s manipulation of reality like setting and costume, the narrator’s interest in the medium persists. “Oh what is / this light that / holds us fast?” he asks in lines 22-24. Within this context, the narrator’s vulnerability at the beginning the poem emerges more along the lines of a jealous fixation, rather than out of a fear of the film’s evolving plotline. O’Hara’s personification of the screen as a watchful “white eye” in line 27 further illuminates cinema’s deceptive qualities as it directly and ominously presents audience members with the fantasies that they desire most.

Another one of O’Hara’s characteristic “movie poems,” “Ave Maria,” expands on the notion of a changing identity in the theater illustrated in “An Image of Leda” by presenting

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movies as a place of temporary inclusivity to those who are persecuted as outsiders in their environment as a result of their age, sexuality, or ethnicity. Addressed to “Mothers of America,” the poem compares the conflicting sensation of intimacy and anonymity that occurs while watching a film to fooling around with a stranger in the theater during a film’s runtime.

_Mothers of America_
_let your kids go to the movies!
get them out of the house so they won’t know what you’re up to
it’s true that fresh air is good for the body
but what about the soul
that grows in darkness, embossed by silvery images
and when you grow old as grow old you must
ey don’t hate you._

SP, 197

In contrast to “An Image of Leda,” the narrator of “Ave Maria” perceives the emotional detachment that occurs within the theater as a way to gain autonomy in the duration of the film. Rather than settle into his role as another anonymous figure in the theater, the narrator channels the independence of the fictional characters before him; in doing so, he transforms his perception of the empty screen before him from an invasive eye to an opportunity to take on an alternate reality, such as the one presented on-screen before him. “Embossed by silvery images,”54 the narrator of “Ave Maria” engages in trangressive desires such as leaving the theater with “a pleasant stranger whose apartment is in the Heaven on Earth Bldg / near the Williamsburg Bridge.”55 The narrator’s decision to act on his desires during a film’s runtime supplements the movie-going experience as one of simultaneous freedom and ephemerality.

The narrator’s ability to blur fantasy and reality within the confines of the movie theater presents a narrative that questions the restrictiveness of external pressures in one’s environment. As the darkness of the theater eliminates the ability to persecute others based on physical

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appearance, it acts as a way to simultaneously unify and shroud the members in the theater. However, what the narrator of “An Image of Leda” perceives as vaporizing, the narrator of “Ave Maria” regards as empowering. This phenomenon drives the narrator’s adamant campaign to “Mothers of America” to allow their children to experience the same emotional freedom that he feels within the theater in “Ave Maria”; fantastical on-screen locations such as “some glamorous country / they first saw on a Saturday afternoon” become separate realities where audience members can escape reality in favor of the lives of fictional characters. When such freedom is threatened, the tone of “Ave Maria” shifts from conversational to critical as the narrator outlines the repercussions, although hyperbolic, that may upset the family structure as a result of restricting one’s access to imagined freedoms.

you won’t have done anything horribly mean yet
except keeping them from the darker joys
it’s unforgivable the latter
so don’t blame me if you won’t take this advice
and the family breaks up
and your children grow old and blind in front of a TV set
seeing
movies that you wouldn’t let them see when they were young

The exaggerations of this section reveal the narrator’s blatant frustration with external permissions. His cause-and-effect paradigm between a child’s inability to see a movie and “the family [breaking] up” in line 16 portrays cinema as a simultaneously inclusive and impersonal medium. The narrator’s desire in this instance is not to encourage one’s loss of innocence but rather to provide spaces where audience members, particularly those who feel restricted by the environment around them can escape their treacherous realities.

O’Hara plays on this idea in his ode to cinema, “To The Film Industry in Crisis,” by itemizing—and in some ways, teasing—the major players of the industry “at a time of crisis for

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the major studios (due to the rise of television and financial mismanagement).”

Although O’Hara’s poem lauds the film industry in many ways, it additionally juxtaposes the successes and setbacks of cinema as a medium; through his exploration of cinema, O’Hara presents his ability as a poet to encompass the entire industry in forty-five tight lines. O’Hara possesses the medium by consulting language of exclusivity in the poem.

Not you, lean quarterlies and swarthy periodicals
With your studious incursions toward the pomposity of ants,
Nor you, experimental theatre in which Emotive Fruition
Is wedding Poetic Insight perpetually, nor you,
Promenading Grand Opera, obvious as an ear (though you are close to my heart), but you, Motion Picture Industry,
it’s you I love!

SP, 92

In doing so, O’Hara presents a highlight reel of mid-twentieth century cinema in two neatly packed pages of text. Unlike a filmmaker who must consult a variety of different resources in the production of a film—from actors, to screenwriters, to costume designers, and so on—the poet retains immense control over the content of his medium. In order to properly convey the film industry’s feeling of being overwhelmed, for example, O’Hara explicitly outlined the visual aspect of the poem to the founder of Grove Press and his publisher, Barney Rosset, on September 19, 1956. O’Hara notes, “The lines should be as long across the page as possible and then dropped to the next line if they won’t all fit…It’s all right if the last words of some lines have to be on the following, but that should only happen when necessary and not to be made to seem other than an exigency of the printing.”

By meticulously organizing the structure and tone of “To the Film Industry in Crisis” prior to its publication, O’Hara ensures that the piece properly evokes the narrator’s fervor for film, as well as his own.

O’Hara’s assertion of the poem’s appearance additionally transforms the way in which “To the Film Industry in Crisis” is read; as such, all successive interpretations of the text reflect the intentionality of the poet. As the poem goes on to lionize thirty of the time period’s finest actors and directors, it becomes a kind of manifesto that dictates the importance of film.

...To
Richard Barthelmess as the “tol’able” boy barefoot and in pants,
Jeanette MacDonald of the flaming hair and lips and long, long neck,
Sue Carroll as she sits for eternity on the damaged fender of a car
and smiles, Ginger Rogers with her pageboy bob like a sausage
on her shuffling shoulders, peach-melba-voiced Fred Astaire of the feet,
Eric von Stroheim, the seducer of mountain-climbers’ gasping spouses,
the Tarzans, each and every one of you (I cannot bring myself to prefer
Johnny Weissmuller to Lex Barker, I cannot!, Mae West in a furry sled

By outlining the poem in this manner, O’Hara not only embodies many behaviors of the cinematic figures that he mentions, but he also presents the text in a way that articulates his voracious appetite for cinema. As Mark Goble suggests in his article, “Our Country’s Black and White Past: Film and the Figures of History in Frank O’Hara,” “Frank O’Hara probably saw more movies in his brief lifetime than any other American poet ever has or ever will.”59 As a result, O’Hara’s ability to attach, if not integrate himself, into the film industry alongside the actors and directors he idolized displays his fascination with the medium. The poet’s assertion of cinema as, “more wholesomely pagan in spirit than it is antichristian,”"60 additionally aligns the medium along the lines of a religious creed or a blessing in O’Hara’s devotion to the industry, particularly following the narrator’s dismissal of the “Catholic Church / which is at best an oversolemn introduction to cosmic entertainment”61 in lines 11-12. By discounting what he does

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60 Alan Feldman, Frank O’Hara, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), 150.
not believe in, such as the literary world’s failure to master “real abstraction” and the restrictive qualities of the movie-going experience, O’Hara creates a new poetic language that incorporates the components of poetry and cinema that he finds intriguing.

In their quick transition from image to image, the catalogues in O’Hara’s poems parallel cinematic techniques that ground the characters in their environment; his ability to capture an all-encompassing view of New York City in the opening lines in many of his poems mirrors the nature of an establishing shot, “a long shot introduced at the beginning of a scene to establish [an] interrelationship of details,” for example. Whereas an establishing shot, such as the image of the New York City skyline, emerges in a film’s opening to establish setting and to supplement further character development, it appears in the form of spontaneously organized catalogues in O’Hara’s poetry. As a result, O’Hara’s poems similarly begin in a series of images. Take his poem, “Present,” for example:

_The stranded gulch_
_below Grand Central_
_the gentle purr of cab tires in snow_
_and hidden stars_
_tears on the windshield_
_torn inexorably away in whining motion_
_and the dark thoughts which surround neon_

_in Union Square, I see you for a moment_
_red greed yellow search lights cutting through_
_falling flakes, head bent to the wind_

SP, 186

Introductory allusions to public transportation and the weather direct the poem to the external world, describing the narrator of the poem in a removed, almost objective manner. As O’Hara bounces between separate scenes such as “the gentle purr of cab tires…Union Square…muddy

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footprints…[and] the quarrels and vices of / estranged companions;”⁶⁴ he meditates on the narrator’s environment as a way to detach the narrator from the complexities of his surroundings. Allusions to impermanence—“tears on the windshield,” “red green yellow searchlights”—heighten this sensation as well as speak to the transient nature of the narrator’s relationship with his former partner. Placed alongside references to submersion—“below Grand Central” and his comment in line 13, “we’ll meet again in even greater darkness”—O’Hara indirectly displays the lingering impact of the narrator’s previous relationship by projecting his emotion onto an external phenomenon, much like the sentiment of watching a film unfold on-screen; in the midst of concrete assertions like “I see you,” “I know perfectly well,” and “I can lean,” allusions to ephemerality evoke a conflicting sense of confidence and insecurity in the poem. In a similar style to the opening of a film, the establishing images in O’Hara’s poems externalize the narrator’s interactions in order to link him to a larger narrative, rather than to illuminate the personal, and at times immensely dark, components of his biography; the structure of cinema and O’Hara’s poems are both rooted in a physical and an emotional detachment between reality and fiction.

Although the catalogues in O’Hara’s poems situate the narrator’s actions and emotions within New York City, they make it difficult, and at times impossible, to determine the sentiment behind O’Hara’s poems. The introductory imagery that appears in the first three lines of “Present,” for example, “The stranded gulch / below Grand Central / the gentle purr of cab tires in snow,” bumps up against the narrator’s wistful and voyeuristic encounter with his former partner “across the square” in line 22. In doing so, the transient nature of the imagery in O’Hara’s poetry conjures an immediate, rather than a sustained, emotional response in O’Hara’s

audience that emerges alongside the narrator’s spontaneous movements around the city.

\[
\text{even now I can lean} \\
\text{forward across the square and see} \\
\text{your surprised grey look become greener} \\
\text{as I wipe the city’s moisture from} \\
\text{your face}
\]

\[SP, 186\]

In contrast to the imagery at the beginning of the poem, the narrator’s imagined interaction with his former partner “across the square” is described in allusions that establish location; physical distance becomes a way to articulate emotional distance. As such, the establishing images in “Present,” as well as in many of O’Hara’s other poems, ground the narrator in his environment as a way to camouflage his and the poem’s emotional state. Within this structure, O’Hara mimics the nature of introductory images that appear in a traditional cinematic framework as a way to illuminate the thought process of the narrator, without conforming to the structure of the confessional poems that he despised.\(^{65}\)

As it abruptly shifts from one image to another, the narrator’s unpredictable, external gaze additionally mirrors the nature of jump cuts as images appear to emerge from within each other. A cinematic technique created in the editing process, a jump cut pairs together two separate scenes in rapid succession, the effect of which is both disorienting and, at times, confusing.\(^{66}\) Within the structure of O’Hara’s poems, jump cups emerge at shifts between line breaks. Furthermore, alongside the structure of jump cuts, the images that appear within O’Hara’s poems may or may not be thematically related; the desired effect is rather the rapid transition and juxtaposition of two or more separate images or tones of voice. In “Present,” for example, images transform at enjambments—“snow” in line 3 becomes “hidden stars” in line 4.


which becomes “tears on the windshield” in line 5—and so on. O’Hara’s syncopated snapshots add a level of spontaneity to the poem as well as capture the complexities of the narrator’s environment in a seemingly fragmented composition. By association, the narrator of the poem becomes omnipresent, or as Mark Goble notes, “a speaking ‘eye’…self-consciously filmic moments of montage assembled from scenes with little intrinsic relationship.”67 Although Goble’s reference to “montage” acknowledges the evolution of images in O’Hara’s poetry, it ignores the intentionality of their transitions. Much like the effect of a jump cut on-screen, the structural shifts in O’Hara’s poems—as images and polar tones of voice transform at line breaks—detach the narrator from his environment, and by association, O’Hara’s audience from his autobiography. As a result, O’Hara’s poetic interpretation of jump cuts emerges as a stylistic misdirect implemented to obstruct the poet’s personal narrative in the poem.

The jarring nature of jump cuts in O’Hara’s poems, as contradictory images and tones of voice bump up against one another within catalogues and at line breaks, allows him to meditate on darker elements of his autobiography in a flippant tone that negates the emotional implications of doing so. As images of suicide emerge amidst references to a leisurely evening spent with a friend in “Poem (The eager note on my door said ‘Call me),” for example, the paradoxical tones within O’Hara’s poems complicate the overarching mood of the piece.

The eager note on my door said “Call me, call when you get in!” so I quickly threw a few tangerines into my overnight bag, straightened my eyelids and shoulders, and headed straight from the door. It was autumn by the time I got around the corner, oh all unwilling to be either pertinent or bemused, but the leaves were brighter than grass on the sidewalk.

67 Goble, 63.
The poem begins in a burst of energy, consulting whimsical imagery such as an “eager note,” “tangerines,” and “the leaves...brighter than grass on the sidewalk.” However, the subject matter of the piece darkens almost immediately afterwards. In spite of this, O’Hara sustains the upbeat tone introduced at the beginning of the poem. The tension between these two paradoxical messages becomes particularly problematic in the presence of the narrator finding his friend after his suicide, “in the hall, flat on a sheet of blood that / ran down the stairs.”68 The narrator’s blithe dismissal of the encounter in the following lines, “I did appreciate it. There are so few / hosts who so thoroughly prepare to greet a guest / only casually invited, and that several months ago,”69 speaks to his emotional detachment from the situation itself. As the narrator flippantly pairs the realization of his friend’s death in “Poem (The eager note on my door said “Call me,)” alongside images of spritely behavior, he represses the consequences of the tragedy by fixating on the opposite, albeit inappropriate, response in lines 11-16.

O’Hara often turns to fantastical imagery and cinematic-like plotlines in his poems as a way to draw attention away from the narrator’s vulnerable emotional state. His poem, “To An Actor Who Died,” captures O’Hara in a uniquely confessional state of mind following the actor’s death in 1955. A part of a larger series of elegies dedicated to Dean, “To An Actor Who Died” is set away from the city in a bucolic atmosphere. Although the poem captures the narrator’s environment through a number of descriptive images, they are too Surreal to be plausible. Faced with perpetual reminders of death like a carnivorous bird devouring a deceased sea urchin

“dropped and cracked / on the rocks” while mourning the loss of a loved one, the narrator’s description of his environment becomes a projection of his fragmented emotional state.

As the days go, and they go fast on this island
where the firs grow blue and the golden seaweed
clammers up the rocks, I think of you, and death
comes not, except a sea urchin’s dropped and cracked

on the rocks and falling bird eats him to rise
more strongly into fog or luminous purple wind. So
to be used and rest, the spiny thing is empty, still
increasing decoration on the craggy slopes above.  

SP, 88

Overwhelmed and isolated, the narrator improperly assigns colors to his surroundings, sculpting a fictional, and almost fantastical, backdrop for the poem. The narrator’s description of color, for example, transforms from an exaggeration to an implausible reality—“the firs grow blue and the golden seaweed / clambers up the rocks” in lines 2-3 becomes “luminous purple wind” and “Clover lies, / in its mauve decline” as the poem progresses; in order to comprehend his emotional state following Dean’s death, O’Hara plays upon the relationship between the moviegoer and on-screen fantasy by contextualizing his reality within a Surreal backdrop, as if to enter into a fictional world himself.

The tension between the narrator’s reality and his attempt to externalize his emotions is heightened as the narrator of “To An Actor Who Died” describes the rest of the island in the poem in simplistic, often redundant language in spite of the setting’s fantastical elements. The third stanza of the poem, in particular, displays the narrator’s inability to conjure original language to eloquently describe his surroundings:

...Lightly falls the grieving light
over the heel of Great Spruce Head Island, like cool
words turning their backs on the bayness of the bay

His constant repetition of related words in this section—“lightly” and “light”, “bayness” and “bay”—adds a layer of monotony to the space while conveying his shock and disbelief following the death of a loved one. While the narrator’s rejection of James Dean’s death is believable from an emotional standpoint, the hyperbolic way in which he describes the environment around him is both improbable and melodramatic; through the use of selective exaggeration, O’Hara fantasizes his emotional response to Dean’s death in a setting only plausible in the context of a dream or a movie. By setting the aftermath of Dean’s death in a sphere away from New York City, O’Hara detaches himself physically and emotionally from the implications of realistically grieving the actor’s loss in a similar framework to the interaction between the moviegoer and the screen during a film’s run time.

Beyond O’Hara’s personal fascination with James Dean, his elegies to the actor reflect the “movie-like” quality of his poetry. Although more emotionally charged than O’Hara’s other works, O’Hara’s elegies to Dean exist in a hyperbolic structure that mirrors that of a movie plotline. An emphasis on plausible fiction pervades O’Hara’s work as he incorporates everyday interactions alongside those rooted in exaggeration. Within “To An Actor Who Died,” for example, he pairs the image of a “sea urchin’s dropped and cracked / on the rocks” in lines 4-5 next to Surreal elements that break the boundaries of normalcy such as “luminous purple wind” in line 6. In the preface to his book, *Magic and Myth in the Movies*, Parker Tyler outlines the importance of myth to create convincing plotlines in film. He notes:

> The true field of the movies is not *art* but *myth*, between which—in the sense ‘myth’ is invariably used here—there is a perhaps unsuspectedly wide difference. Assuredly a myth is a fiction, a basic, prototypic pattern capable of many variations and distortions, many betrayals and disguises, even though it
It is perhaps this unique combination of probable and improbable that makes O’Hara’s poems believable and relatable in spite of their flirtation with the Surreal. O’Hara embraces Tyler’s assertion of myth in his other works as he transforms everyday images such as eating breakfast and reading *The New York Times* into those rooted in hyperbole such as, “eating St. Bridget’s benediction / washing the world down with rye and Coca-Cola.” In O’Hara’s poems, menial tasks are transformed into performed realities. Within the context of “To An Actor Who Died,” for example, O’Hara not only gives the impression that he is mourning Dean’s death from a remote island, but also that he and Dean were personally close in the first place. When taken at face value, the poem becomes a kind of façade similar to that of a movie as O’Hara obscures reality for the sake of revealing a larger plotline—the association of Dean’s death with an overwhelming sensation of personal and artistic loss. As O’Hara recounts the myth of James Dean in his series of elegies, he solidifies the actor’s image in the world following his death; myth, in this regard, becomes a way to preserve identity.

O’Hara’s attempts to preserve the image of James Dean reflect a desire to protect the actor’s emblematic identity in the context of the movie theater. Dean’s association to the role of the outsider plays an important role in O’Hara’s perception of the actor. Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times* described the plot of *Rebel Without a Cause* (1965) as, “Young people neglected by their parents or given no understanding and moral support by fathers and mothers who are themselves unable to achieve balance and security in their homes are the bristling heroes

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and heroines of this excessively graphic exercise.” Given James Dean’s modern identification as both a gay icon and a stereotype of American masculinity, his on-screen role as an outsider complicates his persona; his identity becomes both tangible and intangible to his audience. Alongside O’Hara’s repeated will to contain his own sexual identity in the theater, James Dean’s death in 1955 not only reflected the death of masculine promise, but also that of palpable homosexual desire. Frank O’Hara touched upon this idea in a letter to Howard Griffin on October 14, 1955. “I have been very depressed lately about the demise of James Dean and [have] written several dreary whining poems about him,” he wrote. In the years after Dean’s death, O’Hara continued to collect news of Dean’s relevance throughout his lifetime, perhaps as a way of cementing his presence in media following his death. In fact, posthumous newspaper clippings of Dean, “Feu James Dean” by François Truffat (September 26, 1956) and “The New Lost Generation” by Sam Astrachan were even found among O’Hara’s belongings at The Museum of Modern Art following his own early death in 1966. As a result, O’Hara’s elegies to Dean not only extend the actor’s relevance after his death, but also link the two men artistically in an alternative medium; in this regard, O’Hara acts as a kind of heir to Dean’s legacy.

O’Hara’s many odes to cinema such as “To the Film Industry in Crisis,” “Ave Maria,” and “An Image of Leda,” align the medium with images of inclusivity, autonomy, and identity, particularly in the audience’s simultaneous engagement and detachment with the images unfolding on-screen. Through quickly rotating images that establish setting—alongside members of the film industry such as James Dean, Greta Garbo, and Lana Turner— O’Hara sculpts a

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fictional environment where he can objectively describe the darker moments in his biography, particularly those that surround loss. In his adaptation of cinematic techniques like establishing shots and jump cuts, O’Hara presents his audience with truncated plotlines equally rooted in fantasy and reality. As O’Hara draws influence from film, desire and ephemerality come to define his poetics, as if the fantastical scenes in his poems are not only possible, but also accessible.
Chapter Three:
THE URBAN PASTORAL

"Underlying, and indeed burgeoning within, every great work of the Abstract Expressionists, whether subjectively lyrical as in Gorky, publicly explosive as in de Kooning, or hieratical as in Newman, exists...the artist assuming responsibility for being, however accidentally, alive here and now"
-Frank O’Hara, Art Chronicles 1954-1966

In 1951, Frank O’Hara boarded a train from Ann Arbor to New York City after receiving the prestigious Avery Hopwood Award for Poetry. Little did he know that by the time of his death just fifteen years later that his relationship to the visual arts would rival his legacy as a poet. In his decade and a half in New York City, Frank O’Hara directed nineteen exhibitions at The Museum of Modern Art, including three major retrospectives, New Spanish Painting and Sculpture (1960), Robert Motherwell (1965), and Reuben Nakian (1966); served as an editorial assistant at ARTnews (1964); published a book on Jackson Pollock (1959); and nestled up to the exclusive group of painters that included Elaine and Willem de Kooning, Larry Rivers, Jane Freilicher, and Fairfield Porter known by critics as “The New York School”—all while simultaneously churning out enough material for seven books of poetry. O’Hara’s voracious appetite for the visual arts raises several questions, including his lack of formal training and his role in the development of Abstract Expressionism in New York. Perhaps more interesting, however, is the influence of Abstract Expressionism on Frank O’Hara’s poetry—both share similar compositional approaches, a knack for distortion and deconstruction, and a distaste for classical renderings of depth and space.

While O’Hara publically collaborated with visual artists during his time in New York in the late ‘fifties and ‘sixties, he experimented with painting on his own as early as 1949. Unlike the abstract paintings that he lauded in his career as a curator, however, the watercolor

illustrations that appear within the pages of a birthday gift to Hal Fondren entitled, *A Christmas Story*, are figurative, minimalistic, and devoid of shading or perspective. Images appear as appendices to the text, and as such, they assume a secondary importance to the storyline. The poet’s fascination with abstract, non-illustrative art only emerged a few years later. In a letter to Jane Freilicher in 1952, O’Hara describes two independent projects in progress—“one is a collage featuring the dripping face of Greta Keller about the size of a postage stamp…The other is a man who had a beautiful button of light cadmium yelling surrounded by a medium cadmium yellow.” Although O’Hara toyed with the boundaries between painter and poet early in his career, he cites the theory in Thomas Hess’ *Abstract Painting* as the source of his inspiration. “I find mighty diverting what all the lovely things he says,” he tells Freilicher. O’Hara’s use of the word “diverting” in this instance frames the poet’s creative process as one rooted in the overlap of different artistic mediums. Although his self-deprecating comment later on in the letter that the second painting had to be “smudged up to Save The Picture” leads one to believe in O’Hara’s lack of technical skill as a painter, his use of the word “smudged” reveals just the opposite. Alongside the poet’s description of the different hues of yellow in specific—albeit exaggerated—language, “cadmium yelling surrounded by a medium cadmium yellow,” O’Hara reflects his knowledge of artistic creation—whether physically, in the paintings he describes to Freilicher or theoretically, as outlined by Thomas Hess in *Abstract Painting*. Alongside his admission in “Memorial Day 1950,” “we never / smeared anything except to find

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79 Frank O’Hara to Jane Freilicher, August 8, 1952, 326 East 49th Street, Houghton Special Collections Library, Harvard University, The Jane Freilicher Papers.
80 O’Hara to Freilicher, August 8, 1952.
81 O’Hara.
82 O’Hara.
out how it lived,” O’Hara’s description of his paintings asserts the importance of the creative act alongside the appearance of the actual artwork itself.

O’Hara’s ubiquitous presence in the art world, as a regular contributor and as a model for his friends’ artworks, complicates his relationship to the visual arts further. His project with Norman Bluhm, *Poem-Paintings*, for example, cements his role as a participant in the Abstract Expressionist movement as an artist, rather than as a mere proponent. A series of 27 watercolor and gouache paintings on paper, the project reflects a spontaneous construction process; Bluhm’s quickly cast markings are “imageless…antiformal, improvisatory, energetic and free in its brushwork,” while O’Hara’s accompanying words, “noël”, “apples”, and “light,” fill the blanks in the image’s composition. The two men’s unstructured collaboration encourages an automatic relationship between thought and canvas under the “assumption is that the Unconscious will take over and produce a work of art.” Furthermore, along these lines, O’Hara’s creative decisions equaled those of Bluhm in *Poem-Paintings* in spite of the poet’s lack of formal training as a visual artist. This is particularly significant in the life of Frank O’Hara as he once referred to Norman Bluhm as, “the only artist working in the idiom of Abstract Expressionism who has a spirit similar to that of Pollock…beyond beauty, beyond composition, beyond the old-fashioned kind of pictorial ambition.” Given O’Hara’s rare insight into Abstract Expressionists’ compositional style and his reverence for visual artists in general, the question still lingers: Why did O’Hara discount his participation in the movement as a painter himself?

*I am not a painter; I am a poet.*

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84 See Figure 1 for an illustration of Frank O’Hara and Norman Bluhm’s, *Poem Painting*.
86 Parker, 25.
Why? I think I would rather be a painter, but I am not. Well,

For instance, Mike Goldberg is starting a painting. I drop in. “Sit down and have a drink” he says. I drink; we drink. I look up. “You have SARDINES in it.” “Yes, it needed something there.” “Oh.” I go and the days go by and I drop in again. The painting is going on, and I go, and the days go by. I drop in.

SP, 113

The answer emerged four years later in the poem, “Why I Am Not a Painter.” A stylistic manifesto of sorts, the poem distinguishes the compositional timeline of the visual artist, Michael Goldberg, from that of Frank O’Hara. In contrast to Goldberg’s techniques, O’Hara argues that his process revolves around quick inspiration and subsequent obsession; however, in tandem with the overlapping nature of different art forms at this time period in New York, O’Hara’s critiques against Goldberg come down to a matter of the speed in which a poem and a painting can be produced instead of a narrative surrounding which art form is superior. As such, phrases that describe Michael Goldberg’s compositional process do so as indications of passing time—“Mike Goldberg / is starting a painting,” “the days go by,” “The painting / is going on”—while those that describe the narrator’s movements are quick and definitive—“I drink,” “I look,” “I go,” and “I drop in.” By portraying the poet as active and curious, O’Hara encourages an immediate approach to the composition process, regardless of the medium. Furthermore, the repetition of “I go” alongside the passive “the days go by” in lines 10-13 emphasizes the passage of time that occurs between the poet’s initial visit and all subsequent visits thereafter; as a result, time mediates inspiration.88 In contrast to the painstaking amount of time that visual artists set

88 See Figure 2 for an illustration of Michael Goldberg’s painting, Sardines (1955).
aside in order to achieve a particular image, the poet can concretely display the product of his inspiration in a considerably condensed amount of time. This idea emerges full-force in the second stanza of the poem as Mike Goldberg tells the narrator that he has taken out many of the painting’s original details. “It was too much,” Goldberg notes in line 16.

But me? One day I am thinking of
a color: orange. I write a line
about orange. Pretty soon it is a
whole page of words, not lines.
Then another page. There should be
so much more, not of orange, of
words, of how terrible orange is

While time controls the painter’s actions in the second stanza, inspiration and impulse sculpt the poet’s behavior in the final stanza. Phrases that imply growth such as “another page” and “there should be / so much more” directly contrast the relatively static passage of time that captures Goldberg’s process. As O’Hara tracks the growth of the artistic concept from “a line” to “a / whole page of words” to “another page,” he emphasizes an uncensored creative process. Furthermore, he highlights a major advantage in a poet’s compositional process—time. In many ways, O’Hara repurposes Harold Rosenberg’s argument of the painting, or in this case, the poem, as an "arena in which to act." The poem’s strategic juxtaposition of active and passive verbs acts as a way to distinguish the two men’s compositional style in the context of the poem as well as a way to solidify O’Hara’s reinterpretation of Rosenberg’s theory of art as action.

The narrator’s exponential energy in “Why I Am Not a Painter” additionally reflects the influence of écriture automatique on Frank O’Hara’s poetry. A Surrealist principle “developed at the end of the nineteenth century by French psychiatrist Pierre Janet as a therapeutic means to

elicit the spontaneous images of the subconscious” and then embraced by the more avant-garde painters of The New York School, écriture automatique—or automatism—encourages an uncensored compositional process. Rather than consulting a preconceived structural plan for the painting, for example, the artist looks to the Unconscious as the catalyst for creativity; by association, an artwork becomes not so much about the mastery of technique, but rather about the outpouring of artistic inspiration and emotion that goes into the work at every stage of its creation. Only in doing so can the artist capture artistic thought in its most authentic, uncorrupted form in the eyes of Surrealist thinkers. The narrator’s exhaustive exploration of “orange” in “Why I Am Not a Painter” from “a line about orange” to “a / whole page of words” to “another page” to the final product, “twelve poems [called] / ORANGES,” mirrors this process, as the narrator of the piece—a poet—fulfills and records his creative impulses as soon as they appear.

The poem’s description of the narrator’s automatic composition process is visually recognizable in the work of O’Hara’s painterly contemporaries like Jackson Pollock. In O’Hara’s eyes, Pollock’s gestural drip method—additionally referred to as “action painting”—warranted praise, rather than criticism. In an essay on Pollock published in Art Chronicles 1955-1965, O’Hara booms, “each change of interest, each search…is not automatism or self-expression, but insight.” He continues to laud the visual artist among his personal correspondences. In a letter to Kenneth Koch in 1957, he exclaimed, “The Pollock show dazzlingly beautiful: what generosity! passion! strength! and delicacy!” Given O’Hara’s affinity for artworks that appear to have been created as the result of a burst of inspiration, it is no coincidence that the spontaneous elements that he lauded in the work of Pollock began to appear in his own work, in

terms of both the poet’s compositional process and the quickly rotating images within his poems. “Poetry flowed out of him as easily as breath,”\(^{94}\) remembers John Bernard Meyers in *Homage to Frank O’Hara*. While the language in O’Hara’s poems appears fragmented at first glance, in actuality, its haphazard, almost whimsical composition reflects the uncensored creativity prevalent in *écriture automatique*. Linking automatism to Surrealism, the genre’s chief proponents, Philippe Soupault and André Breton, describe the phenomenon in its oral history as a series of illogically conjured, unconscious images regurgitated by a patient in psychoanalysis. They note in the introduction of *Magnetic Fields* (1920) that, “the mind once freed from all critical pressures and school-bound habits, offered images and not logical propositions.”\(^{95}\) As such, compositions created through techniques like free association became not so much about the rendering of the figures, but rather about the action behind the artwork itself.\(^{96}\)

Beyond the composition process, *écriture automatique* additionally appears in the physical nature of Frank O’Hara’s poems. The long lines, scarce punctuation, and arbitrarily drawn line breaks in “You Are Gorgeous and I’m Coming,” for example, evoke a feeling of perpetual movement that mirrors the narrator’s journey from point A to point B.

Vaguely I hear the purple roar of the torn-down Third Avenue El it sways slightly but firmly like a hand or a golden-downed thigh normally I don’t think of sounds as colored unless I’m feeling corrupt concrete Rimbaud obscurity of emotion which is simple and very definite even lasting, yes it may be that dark and purifying wave, the death of boredom nearing the heights themselves may destroy you in the pure air to be further complicated, confused, empty but refilling, exposed to light

absence of punctuation, images converge in the style of stream of consciousness or as appendices to one another—the “purple roar of the torn-down Third Avenue El” in the first line becomes a description of the sound “[swaying] slightly but firmly like a hand or a golden-downed thigh,” then a symbol of “obscurity of emotion,” and so on, thus complicating each image’s relationship to one another in the duration of the poem. By association, the structure of “You Are Gorgeous and I’m Coming” captures a series of mental associations that appear in the narrator’s head as they would in accordance with psychoanalysis as he continues his journey to see his beloved. Whereas the natural pauses in the poem appear at the end of each line in the first stanza, those in the second stanza emerge more sporadically. By limiting the poem’s punctuation, O’Hara eliminates the need to pause when reading the piece aloud. In doing so, he adds a component of excitement, or perhaps hysteria, to the poem. O’Hara’s use of “ing” verbs such as “thundering,” “shaking,” “encircling,” and “repeating” additionally incorporates a sense of progression in the piece as each line builds upon the actions of the previous line. This phenomenon speaks to O’Hara’s often spontaneous compositional process. Rudy Kikel notes, “In the nine years that they lived together, Joe LeSueur knew of only two poems that O’Hara composed without a typewriter, banging the rest of them out rapidly, usually satisfied with one draft.” As a result, the overflowing lines and successive clauses in “You Are Gorgeous and I’m Coming” reflect a breathless quality that suggests an automatic composition process.

Écriture automatique appears perhaps the most obviously in Frank O’Hara’s poetry in the form of catalogues. Seemingly thrown together in the order that the narrator may have encountered them during his day, each image culminates to create an overwhelming portrait of city life. The rapid succession of catalogues in “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday (Quick! a last

poem before I go),” for example, not only conveys the energy of the narrator’s surroundings, but also gives the illusion of a piece written spontaneously—by word association or by stream of consciousness.

*Quick! a last poem before I go*
*off my rocker. Oh Rachmaninoff!*
*Onset, Massachusetts. Is that the fig-newton*
*playing the horn? Thundering windows*
*of hell, will your tubes ever break*
*into powder? Oh my palace of oranges,*
*junk shop, staples, umber, basalt;*
*SP, 55*

The images in “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday (Quick! a last poem before I go)” reveal feelings of anxiety, ecstasy, and hyperactivity in rapid succession. As the poem bounces from “Rachmaninoff” to “Massachusetts” to “basalt,” energy rather than continuity becomes the piece’s central focus. Additionally, contradictions occur between allusions as “palace” bumps up against “oranges” and “junk shop” against “basalt.” As the catalogues in the poem progress at an almost machine-like pace, they highlight a tension between reality and abstraction in O’Hara’s works. Although the poet’s use of assonance from line to line incorporates a level of fluidity in an otherwise fragmented poetic structure—“poem” becomes “go,” “rocker” becomes “Rachmaninoff”—his refusal to elaborate on each image causes a jarring effect when read aloud. As the narrator itemizes his surroundings, he tracks his own emotional progression through the poem from haste, to curiosity, to euphoria. Within this jumbled form, man becomes a series of objects and emotions that one might encounter during a stroll in New York City.

Although the catalogues in “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday (Quick! a last poem before I go)” quantify the narrator’s surroundings ad nauseam, they transform the poem from a personal reflection to a snapshot of the narrator’s environment. As quickly rotating catalogues physically deconstruct the content in Frank O’Hara’s poems, they additionally divert attention away from
the actions and emotions of the narrator. As a result, the narrator’s self-portrait becomes distorted or lost as autobiography takes a back seat to the chaos of city life. O’Hara justifies his absence from his poems in his mock manifesto entitled, “Personism,” noting:

Abstraction (in poetry, not painting) involves personal removal by the poet…It does not have to do with personality or intimacy, far from it! But to give you a vague idea, one of its minimal aspects is to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself), thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love’s life-giving vulgarity, and sustaining the poet’s feelings towards the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person.\[98\]

In spite of the efforts of this passage, O’Hara’s argument for a simultaneously public and private poem poses many paradoxes. Most blatantly, the statement disregards the reality of the poem’s release into the narrator’s surroundings in its transformation from meditation to publication. Perhaps the more sound argument behind O’Hara’s “Personism” is, then, one that centers around the emotion behind the text, rather than on the structure of the text itself. Whereas O’Hara describes poetry as a code “addressed” to and only understood by the piece’s intended recipient in the essay, he fails to acknowledge the overall effect of the poem on the public. Within this context, reading O’Hara becomes just as much about the poem’s emotional undertones as it does its representational meanings.

O’Hara’s incorporation of écriture automatique additionally falls in line with a major trend in the visual arts in the 1940s and 1950s, the deconstruction of the figure. Building upon abstract principles of Cubism, Surrealism, and Fauvism, Abstract Expressionist painters like Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock, and Willem de Kooning began to dissect and reorganize traditional renderings of the figure in non-representational paintings. At first glance, Willem de Kooning’s Excavation (1950)\[99\] resembles a collage of neutral shapes held together by jagged

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\[99\] See Figure 3 for an illustration of Willem de Kooning’s Excavation (1950).
black outlines. Looking further, however, contorted legs, noses, arms, and eyes jump into the foreground—twisting furiously among each other within the confines of the canvas. In contrast to Realist painters who emphasized classical representations of objects, Abstract Expressionist painters like Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline celebrated the process behind their projects as much as they did the works themselves. Devoid of the perspective and shading commonly associated with traditional three-dimensional compositions, de Kooning’s *Excavation* freely reinterprets the anatomic boundaries of the human form. In doing so, the figures in the painting become indistinguishable from each another. By reinterpreting traditional representations of space and the human physique, de Kooning achieves what Hans Hofmann referred to as “plasticity” in the composition. “Depth, in a pictorial, plastic sense,” Hofmann notes in *Search for the Real*, “is not created by the arrangement of objects one after another toward a vanishing point, in the sense of the Renaissance perspective, but on the contrary (and in absolute denial of this doctrine).”\(^\text{100}\) Following this ideology, the seemingly disconnected catalogues in O’Hara’s poems like “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday (Quick! a last poem before I go)” —“My pocket / of rhinestone, yoyo, carpenter’s pencil, / amethyst, hypo, campaign button”—reflect the many moving parts in the narrator’s environment; what appears to deconstruct the narrator into a series of tasks that one completes during the day, in fact, sculpts a complex portrait of his identity.

The tension in O’Hara’s work between reality and abstraction additionally reflects Hans Hofmann’s concept of *push and pull*, “an idea about the creation of space on a two-dimensional surface though the manipulation of tensions between form and form or color and color.”\(^\text{101}\) One of the most notable artistic methods of the ‘forties and ‘fifties, the theory, incorporated in Hofmann’s classes as a teacher at the Arts Students League of New York from the early 1930s

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onward, emphasizes the idea of equilibrium in a work of art achieved through the interaction of opposites. “By pressing one side of the balloon, you will disturb the [balance of the balloon at rest], and, as a consequence, the other end will swallow up the amount of pressure applied,” he outlines in his book, *Search for the Real*. The balance that occurs in Frank O’Hara’s poetry emerges in the matter of tone—between the immensely hyperbolic catalogues and the darker, emotional undertones that surround them. In addition, Hofmann’s method encouraged artists to distort and deconstruct traditional representations of depth and space in order to create more complex and visually interesting two-dimensional compositions as opposed to those that capture a subject as closely to the way that it appears in the flesh. Hofmann’s geometric painting, *The Gate* (1959-60), for example, displays a tension created between color and form; whereas fluidly painted rectangles in cool hues like green and blue compose the backdrop, precisely outlined red and yellow rectangles jump into the foreground. The interaction of the two opposite sides of the color spectrum creates movement in the composition as each layer of the piece takes turns bouncing in and out of the foreground. As Jed Perl notes in his biography of the mid-twentieth-century art scene in New York, *New Art City*, “…these formal operations could become a way of grappling with man’s energizing, unquenchable desires…push-and-pull was a dream of what life could be, a dream simultaneously rooted in the dynamic relationship between one form and another, and in the dynamic relationship between a person and an environment.”

Alongside Abstract Expressionists’ reinterpretation of *écriture automatique*, *push and pull* becomes a way to mediate an artist’s reality with their unconscious desires.

Frank O’Hara’s poem, “A Step Away From Them,” similarly balances many different, but simultaneously occurring planes in the poet’s life, creating a highly emotional poem with

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102 Hofmann, *Search for the Real*, 44.
103 See Figure 4 for an illustration of Hans Hofmann’s *The Gate* (1959-1960).
confrontational elements; the monotony of the poet’s lunch hour bumps up against overwhelming feelings of grief as well as the continuing friendships in O’Hara’s life—despite their physical absence in the poem itself. The interaction of these planes, captured in O’Hara’s tangential compositional style, creates a tension that builds to the piece’s eventual climax near the end of the poem.

It’s my lunch hour, so I go
for a walk among the hum-colored
cabs. First, down the sidewalk
where laborers feed their dirty
glistening torsos sandwiches
and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets
on. They protect themselves from falling
bricks, I guess.

SP, 109

Within the first seven lines of the poem, O’Hara touches upon a variety of simultaneously occurring phenomena—his walk to lunch from The Museum of Modern Art, his parallel relationship to construction workers eating “sandwiches / And Coca-Cola,” and his shared vulnerability with the laborers—whether emotionally, as in the life of the poet, or physically, as expressed by the presence of “yellow helmets” on laborers’ heads. To mediate the simultaneously occurring phenomena in his life and to perhaps combat the abrupt shift from the hyper-aestheticized curatorial environment at MoMA to the streets of New York City, O’Hara looks to systematic language to create order in the remainder of the poem. The concreteness of language—“First, down the sidewalk,” “Then onto the / avenue,” “On to Times Square”—that O’Hara uses to outline his successive journey from The Museum of Modern Art to lunch add the presence of routine to his works; as such, the poet’s actions reflect the existence of habit, rather than of spontaneity. When used to describe the darker moments in the narrator’s life, such as the remembrance of his friends’ deaths in line 36, the routine-based language in the poem cements the reality behind the narrator’s grieving state.
First
Bunny died, then John Latouche,
then Jackson Pollock. But is the
earth as full of life as life was full, of them?

SP 109

By framing the realization of his friends’ deaths in a similar structure to that pervades the remainder of the poem, O’Hara transforms the narrator’s seemingly mundane tasks, “a walk along the hum-colored cabs” and a “stop for a cheeseburger at JULIET’S CORNER,” into perpetual reminders of loss; they, too, have become part of the poet’s routine.

Beyond the poem’s structure, the tone of “A Step Away From Them” embodies Hofmann’s theory of push and pull as O’Hara simultaneously balances feelings of grief and wonderment through the piece. O’Hara’s seemingly random, and almost romanticized, image of laborers “glistening” from the heat emerges in opposition to his grief over the passing of his friends. To balance one with the other, O’Hara must juxtapose laborers working, the epitome of life and physicality, with the acknowledgement of his friends’ deaths. His decision to synchronize the structure of the poem as a series of successive steps—“First, down the sidewalk / where laborers feed their dirty / glistening torsos,” 105 “Then onto the avenue where skirts are flipping / above heels,” 106 and “On / to Times Square, where the sign / blows smoke over my head” 107—not only mirrors the narrator’s own footsteps, but also, as the title of the piece suggests, the exponentially increasing amount of time spent away from those who have already passed. By using concrete language in the climax of the poem, O’Hara cements the permanence of the events that occur in the poem itself, although the syncopated language used to reveal the narrator’s grief adds a coldness to the poem. The poem’s dually euphoric and tragic tone emerges

106 O’Hara, Lines 8-10, 109.
the most clearly in the last five lines of the piece. Immediately following the wistful statement, “I / used to think they had the Armory / Show there,” in lines 44-46, the narrator abruptly shifts back into work mode—“A glass of papaya juice / and back to work. My heart is in my / pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy,” for example. O’Hara’s decision to hide his emotions, rather than to display them outright, gives “A Step Away From Them” a simultaneously lighthearted and crushing emotional composition. The poet’s ability to balance grief alongside the spontaneous components of the metropolis simulates the paradoxical and unpredictable reality of coping with loss in the context of one’s routine in the city. As a result, the tension that results from the interaction of the narrator’s schedule and his realization of his friends’ passing directly embodies Hofmann’s *push and pull* as it depicts the difficulty of masking one’s immense vulnerability in an atmosphere that prides itself on unparalleled energy.

Perhaps the largest tension that occurs in O’Hara’s poetry, however, is the interaction between the individual and his environment. While frenetic anecdotes pull the narrator’s attention in a million different directions at once—“a liver sausage sandwich in the Mayflower Shoppe,”108 “Pearls, / harmonicas, jujubes, aspirins!”109—his emotions, at times fraught with grief or infatuation, appear quietly in the background of the poem. Recall the opening to “Steps”:

    *How funny you are today New York  
    like Ginger Rogers in Swingtime  
    and St. Bridget’s steeple leaning a little to the left*

    *Here I have just jumped out of a bed full of V-days  
    (I got tired of D-days) and blue you there still  
    accepts me foolish and free  
    all I want is a room up there  
    and you in it  
    and even the traffic halt so thick is a way  
    for people to rub up against each other*

    *SP, 195*

Although the poem ends with the narrator’s acknowledgement of the love that he feels for the city and his partner, its allusions to popular culture and life in the metropolis such as “a traffic halt,” “the apartment,” and “the little box…out on the sidewalk” interrupt the narrator’s candid feelings of infatuation. As a result, O’Hara’s constant inclusion of city life forces the perspective of “A Step Away From Them” into the narrator’s surroundings, drawing attention away from the narrator. Terrell Harding describes the paradox, noting, “The poem is, in effect, a social fantasy that enables O’Hara to connect with individuals who may be thousands of miles away…because this imagined communication occurs through the public discourse of the poetic medium, the poet is simultaneously intimate and depersonalized.” \(^{110}\) As a result, O’Hara’s unique tone of voice establishes his poems as externally, rather than internally focused artworks. By association, the fragmented components of Frank O’Hara’s poetry allow him to paint a picture of the city as a place of optimism, even in the midst of its darker elements such as “the stabbings…helping the population explosion / though in the wrong country.” Despite the gruesome quality of the allusion, when read in conjunction with the poet’s humor and his fascination with the city, it adds a light and sarcastic tone to the poem.

In O’Hara’s constant desire to quantify his life in New York, stopping to reflect on his evening at the ballet or to drink “some tea and cognac,”\(^{111}\) he often describes the metropolis through the eyes of an omnipotent narrator. As he hops from image to image, O’Hara touches on minute details in an external perspective similar to that of a landscape painter; in doing so, O’Hara synthesizes the emotions and actions of his environment into quickly rotating images that become representative of a larger, metropolitan narrative. Although O’Hara’s overall...

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flirtation with abstraction aligns his work with that of the more avant-garde painters of Abstract Expressionism like Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and Franz Kline, his tendency to locate the narrator in his surroundings is similar to the work of the movement’s figurative painters like Jane Freilicher. Her painting, *Early New York Evening* (1954), in particular, captures New York City in a simultaneously personal and impersonal tone. Captured from an upper-level apartment window at sunset, *Early New York Evening* highlights the sea of starkly geometric buildings that compose the city’s skyline in rust, indigo, and orange. From Freilicher’s perspective in the painting, buildings bleed into the purpling sky. The painting additionally incorporates reminders of Freilicher’s presence in the painting—sconces, picture frames, and flowers—and, in doing so, comments on the interaction between man and machine. By implementing hints of human life, Freilicher produces compositions that transcend the genre of the pastoral; as they simultaneously mediate and romanticize the city’s man-made and its natural components, her paintings become urban pastorals as they balance the city’s spontaneity with its necessity for routine.

O’Hara’s poems, too, embrace an external perspective similar to that present in Freilicher’s *Early New York Evening*. One of O’Hara’s more romantic poems, “Avenue A,” for example, projects a couple’s private interaction onto their surroundings.

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\begin{align*}
    \text{We hardly ever see the moon any more} \\
    \text{so no wonder} \\
    \text{it’s so beautiful when we look up suddenly} \\
    \text{and there it is gliding broken-faced over the bridges} \\
    \text{brilliantly coursing, soft, and a cool wind fans} \\
    \text{your hair over your forehead and your memories} \\
    \text{of Red Grooms’ locomotive landscape} \\
    \text{I want some bourbon / you want some oranges / I love the leather} \\
    \text{jacket Norman gave me.}
\end{align*}
\]

*SP, 189*

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112 See Figure 5 for an illustration of Jane Freilicher’s *Early New York Evening* (1954).
Although the poem recounts an evening spent with a loved one, descriptions of the couple are few and far between. With the exception of the “cool wind fans / your hair over your forehead” and “you want some oranges” in line 8, no description of the narrator’s beloved appears within the poem. Rather, in typical O’Hara fashion, the narrator utilizes his relationship to his surroundings and references to cultural figures to convey a particular emotion that runs throughout the entire poem. In this case, O’Hara captures the romantic feelings that the narrator feels at his partner’s side through references to phenomena that belong to the public sphere such as everyday items and artists like Red Grooms and El Greco. Although the allusions in lines 8-9—“bourbon,” “oranges,” “the leather / jacket Norman gave me”—are put in place to contextualize the narrator’s relationship to his partner, they are as arbitrary and impersonal as the tone that the narrator uses to describe them with. Furthermore, they direct O’Hara’s audience beyond the world of the narrator and his beloved—into their environment. In doing so, O’Hara distracts from the intimacy exchanged between the two characters as he places them into their surroundings.

Alongside the narrator’s external, and almost impersonal, tone of voice, O’Hara captures the characters’ surroundings instead of ironing out the details of the narrator’s relationship with his partner in “Avenue A.” By association, the couple’s environment—the moon, “gliding broken-faced over the bridges / brilliantly coursing, soft,”113—becomes a metaphor for their romantic affair, even as the piece draws attention away from the implications of displaying the narrator’s emotions. Alongside the narrator’s detached tone of voice, allusions to ephemerality and the supernatural pervade the piece.

…it is more mysterious than spring, the El Greco heavens breaking open and then reassembling like lions in a vast tragic veldt

O’Hara’s meditation on his environment in lines 11-15 of the poem, in particular, depicts the sky as a reflection of the transient nature of romantic relationships. Almost immediately after embracing a uniquely confessional tone in “Avenue A,” however, the narrator contradicts his statement. “Everything is too comprehensible,” he notes in the following line. In doing so, he once again directs the poem externally, calling into question the authenticity of the narrator’s voice throughout the poem as it flip-flops between candid and vulnerable.

O’Hara’s tendency to integrate personal anecdotes with snapshots of his environment fosters a unique poetic style that mirrors many compositional techniques of the visual artist, Robert Rauschenberg. An equal master of abstraction and figuration like Frank O’Hara, Rauschenberg expanded on the external perspective embraced by figurative, landscape painters like Jane Freilicher by physically incorporating elements of his environment—cigarette packs, crumpled pieces of trash along the street—into artworks known as combines. Existing somewhere between a painting and a sculpture, Rauschenberg’s combines “[juxtapose] the urban detritus with his own expressive gestural paintings” alongside immensely personal, primary-source materials like the artist’s personal childhood photographs. As opposing elements bump up against each other, Rauschenberg produces works of art that are simultaneously alienating and inviting; the polarity in his works reacts in a similar way that it does in the work of Hans Hofmann—in order to create an aesthetically balanced and immensely complex composition.

In one of Rauschenberg’s more famous *combines* entitled, *Odalisk* (1955-1958),\(^{115}\) the visual artist plays upon word association much like the way that O’Hara does in his “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday” series; the title conjures mental, rather than visual, associations to other works of art and artists. The work, an 83 x 25 ¼ x 26 inch structure, combines “oil paint, watercolor, crayon, pastel, paper, fabric, photographs, printed reproductions, miniature blueprint, newspaper, metal, glass, dried grass, steel wool, a pillow, a wooden post and lamps on a wooden structure mounted on four casters and topped by a stuffed rooster,”\(^{116}\) and at first glance, is as odd as it is intriguing. *Odalisk* not only draws an immediate association to nineteenth-century French painting traditions, but it also aligns itself with the commemorative form of an obelisk.\(^{117}\)

Alongside cut up photographs from the artist’s childhood in Port Arthur, Texas, *Odalisk* suggests a conflicting portrait of the artist—one that is both coded and expository. In their eccentric, and often contradictory, depictions of a person’s relationship to their environment, both Frank O’Hara and Robert Rauschenberg invite and obstruct their audience from the more personal elements in their works. As Jonathan Fineberg notes, “Rauschenberg redirected the viewer’s attention from the psyche of the painter onto the outside world…He attempted to push the artistic persona into continue flux, perpetually reinventing himself through an acutely sensitive response to the prevailing context.”\(^{118}\) Although both men encoding their works with personal information, they simultaneously make a conscious effort to draw attention away from the implications of doing so; whereas Rauschenberg turns to word play and physical means of abstraction like collage, O’Hara alters his tone of voice and juxtaposes contradictory allusions in order to draw attention away from the personal, and therefore vulnerable, moments in his poetry.

\(^{115}\) See Figure 6 for an illustration of Robert Rauschenberg’s *Odalisk* (1955-1958).


\(^{117}\) Patricia Berman, Lecture: Modern Art, Wellesley College, Spring 2015.

Elaine de Kooning plays on this concept in her 1962 portrait of Frank O’Hara as her elongated and jagged brush strokes simultaneously frame and detach the poet from his environment. Caught somewhere between the style of abstraction and figuration in diaphanous pastels of light green, yellow, and blue, Elaine de Kooning’s portrait of O’Hara depicts the poet as an anonymous figure, yet one whose presence is defined by his energy and ephemerality; while those familiar with the poet’s typical dress—a navy blue work shirt and a pair of slim fit pants—would perhaps recognize the poet’s silhouette in the doorframe of de Kooning’s painting, her last minute decision to wipe away the poet’s face adds a coded quality to her artwork. Although de Kooning’s portrait may imply a vaporization of O’Hara, her decision to erase O’Hara’s face emphasizes the poet’s physical presence in the art world—his tall, gangly silhouette and long heart-shaped face would have been instantly recognizable to those active during O’Hara’s tenure at The Museum of Modern Art and in downtown New York. De Kooning’s statement, “It was more Frank than when the face wasn’t there,” depicts the poet as a figure captured on the go between two locations. As such, de Kooning’s painting solidifies, in many ways, the poet’s role in the artistic canon in the visual art sphere as well as the literary sphere.

Elaine de Kooning’s painting of O’Hara accompanies a host of works that supplement the poet’s legacy. As paintings of O’Hara hung in the major galleries around New York during his lifetime, they cemented the poet’s immense role in the art world as a proponent of Abstract Expressionist techniques and artists since the movement’s infancy. David Carrier itemizes the poet’s appearances in contemporary artworks in his article, “Frank O’Hara and American Art in

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119 See Figure 7 for an illustration of Elaine de Kooning’s portrait of Frank O’Hara.
121 Elaine de Kooning from Russell Ferguson’s In Memory of my Feelings: Frank O’Hara and American Art, (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999), 89.
Los Angeles” in a review of the posthumous exhibition in the late 1990s at The Museum of Contemporary Art: Los Angeles:

[O’Hara] was painted by Alice Neel and Grace Hartigan and photographed by Fred W. McDarrah and Hans Namuth. Philip Guston’s extraordinary drawing *Frank* turns the critic into a figure who might come form a Piero della Francesca fresco redrawn by Balthus…His poetry was illustrated by Franz Kline, Joan Mitchell, and [Larry] Ribers; he made amusing collages with Joe Brainard…and he contributed to Alfred Leslie’s film *The Last Clean Shirt* (1964).122

Carrier’s passage provides two important points about Frank O’Hara’s relationship to the visual arts. First, his review highlights the sheer quantity of works of art that depicted the painter, and, second, it notes the poet’s personal connection to a vast number of artists in his lifetime, therefore reiterating his permanence in the artistic canon in the years after his death. As a result, paintings that captured O’Hara in his lifetime are representative of O’Hara’s legacy in the art world, sixty years after his tragic death on Fire Island in 1966.

Frank O’Hara’s relationship to the visual arts both illuminates and enhances the poet’s unique poetic style. Similar to the structure of the visual arts in the ‘fifties and ‘sixties, O’Hara’s poems—in the narrator’s tendency to locate the narrator in a plethora of tangible, and often contradictory, New York City landmarks—reflect a similar grey area between self-portraiture and representation. While O’Hara’s fifteen-year stint at The Museum of Modern Art and immense participation in the creation and implementation of Abstract Expressionism in New York City defined his career in the art world, it additionally allowed the poet unique access into the compositional process of visual artists like Willem de Kooning and Robert Motherwell. Although O’Hara’s poems often appear haphazardly composed, during his lunch break or a train ride, they reflect the poet’s mastery of the Surrealist principle of *écriture automatique*; he gives the illusion of a quickly-written poem through erratic images and tones of voice that rotate as

quickly as they appear. As O’Hara’s poems weave in and out of different tones of voice and reality and abstraction, they embody a tension that mirrors Hofmann’s assertion of *push and pull*. As a result, the compositional techniques and theories that O’Hara drew from his involvement in the visual arts allowed him to create a new poetic voice that prefigured the style of many abstract poets in the generations to come.
Conclusion

In the last sixty years, Frank O’Hara has gone from an outsider, known well by his contemporaries and collaborators, to an artist unequivocally associated with the poetic canon. In many ways, he has become a cult figure in the art world through a series of posthumous exhibitions and publications in his honor such as a three-part symposium at The Museum of Modern Art, a retrospective of his influence in American art at The Museum of Contemporary Art: Los Angeles in the late 1990s, and Marjorie Perloff’s biography of the artist, Poet Among Painters, among others.

Interestingly O’Hara is not only by claimed the literary world, but also by the peripheral art forms that he lauded during his lifetime. Beyond his appearance in paintings by Larry Rivers and Elaine de Kooning, the poet appears in the memoir of the composer, Ned Rorem, entitled Settling the Score: Essays on Music, as well as on-screen; Donald Draper is famously featured reading the poet’s Meditations in an Emergency in the first episode of the second season of Mad Men, for example. Although O’Hara’s cult-hood began with the publication of The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara in 1995, it has expanded exponentially a result of the steady stream of publications and programming; since the poet’s death in July of 1966, eleven posthumous publications such as Early Writing (1977) and Poems Retrieved (2013) have been released.

O’Hara’s incorporation of peripheral art forms not only supplements his desire to implement, as he asserts in “Personism,” a “real abstraction”\(^\text{123}\) in his poetry, but it also creates a wedge between the poet and his audience. His poetics are, by association, equally inclusive and exclusive; O’Hara’s audience must fight past layers of allusions, often organized in a way that shrouds the emotional state of the narrator in order to get to the crux of the poem. Alongside his

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ability to simultaneously invite and misdirect his audience, O’Hara captures elements that defined the mid-twentieth-century art scene in his work. Drawing upon principles of polyphonic improvisation, establishing shots, and *push and pull* from music, cinema, and painting, respectively, O’Hara developed a unique poetic style that captured his generation’s affinity for artistic collaboration and opportunity. In O’Hara’s eyes—and in his poetry—art is active, metamorphic, and collaborative. As such, his continued prevalence in the art community, some sixty years after his death, is far from an anomaly. Rather, O’Hara’s multifaceted, unwavering legacy speaks volumes of his importance and influence in the world of poetry and beyond.
Appendix

Figure 1.
Norman Bluhm and Frank O’Hara, *Noel*, 1960
Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University

Figure 2.
Michael Goldberg, *Sardines*, 1955
The Smithsonian American Art Museum
Figure 3.
Willem de Kooning, *Excavation*, 1950
The Art Institute of Chicago

Figure 4.
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
Figure 5.
The Tibor de Nagy Gallery

Figure 6.
Museum Ludwig
Figure 7.
Elaine de Kooning, *Frank O’Hara*, 1962
The National Portrait Gallery
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