

## Parodic Nostalgia for Aesthetic Machismo: Frank O'Hara and Jackson Pollock

[David L. Sweet](#)

*Columbia University*

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In his apologetic letter of rejection to Frank O'Hara for the 1955 Yale Younger Poets prize (awarded to John Ashbery), W. H. Auden wrote: "I think you (and John, too, for that matter) must watch what is always the great danger with any 'surrealistic' style, namely of confusing authentic non-logical relations which arouse wonder with accidental ones which arouse mere surprise and in the end fatigue."<sup>1</sup> In a letter to Kenneth Koch, O'Hara responded to Auden's comment, saying: "I don't care what Wystan says, I'd rather be dead than not have France around me like a rhinestone dog-collar."<sup>2</sup> In this way he confirms Auden's characterization, but only after broadening the definition of "surrealistic style" to encompass modern French poetry as a whole, thus betraying the ambivalence which the New York poets felt about bearing such a label.

Koch makes this attitude clear in an interview with Richard Kostelanetz in 1991:

No, it was not founded on surrealism or Dada. Frank read the French poets and knew them, but his poetry was not surrealistic. It seems to me the surrealist attitude--trusting the unconscious more than the conscious, doing automatic writing, saying whatever comes into your head, using accident in your poems, bringing in material from dreams--all those things that were programmatic for the surrealists . . . these characteristics have by now become a natural and almost instinctive part of the work of many poets writing in English. You can find them in poets who are not of the "New York School." But whereas a good deal of surrealist poetry tends to stay in this world of dreams and the unconscious and magic, Frank's poetry very **[End Page 375]** clearly comes back to what would be considered ordinary reality. It always ends up back on the streets, back with the taxicabs, and most of all back with the emotional attachments in this life.<sup>3</sup>

Ashbery is more affirmative, explicitly enumerating these French avant-garde influences that he sees as framing and modulating O'Hara's work: "It is part of a modern tradition which is anti-literary and anti-artistic, and which goes back to

Apollinaire and the Dadaists, to the collages of Picasso and Braque with their perishable newspaper clippings, to Satie's *musique d'ameublement* which was not meant to be listened to."<sup>4</sup> Other, more academic writers have situated O'Hara's work not so much in a marginalized "other tradition" (as Ashbery calls it),<sup>5</sup> as in an American offshoot of a Symbolist tradition subtly inscribed at the core of twentieth-century avant-garde experiments, especially those of the so-called Cubist poets. Thomas Meyer summarizes this tendency, discovering in O'Hara's poems a "notion of surface ... inherited from Mallarmé via Apollinaire, coming as it did through Dada and Surrealism on the way."<sup>6</sup>

The contrasts and confluences of these assessments arise from Surrealism's being the principal repository of poetic experiments since the Symbolists, yet a distinct entity within the Modernist Avant-Garde with its own agenda and methodology. A general principle, however, separates the Dada/Surrealist attitude from the Symbolist/Cubist one and pertains to the relative importance of the creative process for the first group as opposed to that of the finished work for the latter. Consequently, two modes of avant-garde discourse emerge that are closely connected yet vibrantly antagonistic. But O'Hara's generation felt little obligation to maintain them in any doctrinaire way in the postwar American context. Thus, the Americans enjoyed a strategic flexibility that masked an underlying ambiguity about their role as the cultural heirs of the European Avant-Garde.

But O'Hara had another reason to avoid taking sides: his interest in the Avant-Garde paralleled that of the Abstract Expressionists, who were combining aestheticist and anti-aestheticist concerns in a new way. At the time, Abstract Expressionism was popularly viewed as an acculturative outgrowth of Surrealist aspirations as they were adapted to American conditions after World War II.<sup>7</sup> The linchpin of this association was psychic automatism boldly transferred to the medium of paint.<sup>8</sup> Yet as "Action Painting,"<sup>9</sup> psychic automatism acquired a new, aesthetic viability in shedding the Surrealist orthodoxies that had constrained it. In works by Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and others, the painted [End Page 376] canvas became the plastic correlative of unconscious processes, the spontaneous, non-verbal expression of raw, psychic energy. Its status as art, however, was unabashedly proclaimed (not denied as the Surrealists tended to do), thereby fusing Cubist attitudes à propos of the finished work with Surrealist ones regarding *action, process, immediacy*. In this way, the new American painters re-enacted and resolved the drama of those earlier aesthetico-ideological divisions among Symbolists, Cubists, and Dada-Surrealists. Their action seemed exemplary, even heroic, for O'Hara, in whose work the same divisions overlap and transpose themselves in forms so ideologically attenuated as to yield an eclectic outlook--both mannered and arbitrary--that one might retrospectively term Postmodern.<sup>10</sup>

But O'Hara also found important precursors in poets as diverse as Pierre Reverdy (*Standing Still*, p. 12) and William Carlos Williams (*Collected Poems*, p. 498), both of whom theorized extensively about the formal integrity of their poetry. Williams, for

example, wrote that poems were "machine[s] made of words"<sup>11</sup>:

When a man makes a poem [...] he takes words as he finds them [...] and composes them--without distortion which would mar their exact significances--[...] that they may constitute a revelation in the speech that he uses. It isn't what he *says* that counts as a work of art, it's what he makes, with such intensity of perception that it lives with an intrinsic movement of its own to verify its authenticity. Your attention is called now and then to some beautiful line or sonnet-sequence because of what is said there. So be it. To me all sonnets say the same thing of no importance. What does it matter what the line "says"? [...] There is no poetry of distinction without formal invention. . . .<sup>12</sup>

O'Hara differs from both poets, however, in suggesting a mysterious basis for form (*Standing Still*, p. 33), which develops as if by accident as the writing poet interacts with the world. But the products of this interaction still require a certain formal strategy--albeit of cultivated carelessness, sophisticated sincerity, rigorous haphazardness. O'Hara stakes his poetic on the invisibility of such strategies, paradoxically utilized in an anti-formalist milieu. His position mirrors that of the Abstract Expressionists vis-à-vis the Cubists: in the spirit of surrealist anti-formalism, the Abstract Expressionists emphasize the dynamic aspect of their work, its violent, instinctual performance, rhetorically eschewing any hint of the deliberate construction [End Page 377] so dear to the Cubists. Yet Art remains sacred to them, hence form now resides mysteriously in the process, and in the work only as the evidence of that process. Like the Abstract Expressionists, O'Hara retains an idea of form even though he intends to make full use of chance, speed, and the kind of innate creative energy which the Surrealists believed exceeded the bounds of controlled expression.

The irony was nothing new, considering the often destructive, anti-illusionist impulse of the Cubists themselves in their analytic mode--which, just as paradoxically, contributed to their reputation as the most subtle of formalists in their synthetic mode. In a remarkable early poem, *Memorial Day 1950*, O'Hara pays tribute to the French Avant-Garde of the 1910s and 1920s. It also addresses the Williamsian conception of poems as made things or machines. Art, as the poem says, "is no dictionary," (*Collected Poems*, p. 17-18), is not about meaning--yet meaning issues from the joints of this verbal construction like blood from a shrouded body in the presence of its undiscovered assassin. Thus, the expressionist, anti-formalist accent that O'Hara gives both Williams' and the French's achievement is unmistakable:

Picasso made me tough and quick, and the world;  
just as in a minute plane trees are knocked down  
outside my window by a crew of creators.  
Once he got his axe going everyone was upset  
enough to fight for the last ditch and heap  
of rubbish.

Through all that surgery I thought  
I had a lot to say, and named several last things  
Gertrude Stein hadn't had time for; but then

the war was over, those things had survived  
and even when you're scared art is no dictionary.  
Max Ernst told us that.

How many trees and frying pans  
I loved and lost! Guernica hollered look out!  
but we were all busy hoping our eyes were talking  
to Paul Klee. My mother and father asked me and  
I told him from my tight blue pants we should  
love only the stones, the sea, and heroic figures.  
Wasted child! I'll club you in the shins! I  
wasn't surprised when the older people entered  
my cheap hotel room and broke my guitar and my can  
of blue paint.

At that time all of us began to think  
with our bare hands and even with blood all over  
them, we knew vertical from horizontal, we never  
smeared anything except to find out how it lived.  
Fathers of Dada! You carried shining erector sets **[End Page 378]**  
in your rough bony pockets, you were generous  
and they were lovely as chewing gum or flowers!  
Thank you!

And those of us who thought poetry  
was crap were throttled by Auden or Rimbaud  
when, sent by some compulsive Juno, we tried  
to play with collages or sprechstimme in their bed.  
Poetry didn't tell me not to play with toys  
but alone I could never have figured out that dolls meant death.

Our responsibilities did not begin  
in dreams, though they began in bed. Love is first of all  
a lesson in utility. I hear the sewage singing  
underneath my bright white toilet seat and know  
that somewhere sometime it will reach the sea:  
gulls and swordfishes will find it richer than a river.  
And airplanes are perfect mobiles, independent  
of the breeze; crashing in flames they show us how  
to be prodigal. O Boris Pasternak, it may be silly  
to call to you, so tall in the Urals, but your voice  
cleans our world, clearer to us than the hospital:  
you sound above the factory's ambitious gargle.  
Poetry is as useful as a machine!

Look at my room.  
Guitar strings hold up pictures. I don't need  
a piano to sing, and naming things is only the intention  
to make things. A locomotive is more melodious  
than a cello. I dress in oil cloth and read music

by Guillaume Apollinaire's clay candelabra. Now  
my father is dead and has found out you must look things  
in the belly, not in the eye. If only he had listened  
to the men who made us, hollering like stuck pigs! (*Collected Poems*, p. 17)

Not just a machine made of words, but a whole sewage treatment plant of history. Given O'Hara's admiration for Reverdy and Williams, it is surprising to see him upending their poetics in a parodic elegy--written in part to them. Similarly, the eulogizing of Picasso is significant because his work is invoked primarily for its analytic, as opposed to synthetic, qualities: that is, as a form of invasive surgery or land-clearing, rather than as benign construction. Thus, O'Hara wants to get at the heart, root, or foundation of aesthetic syntheses. Indeed, the social and political analogues which he links with Picasso's toughness reveal the painter's genius in an almost menacing, futuristic light, a revelation that seems fitting in an occasional poem intended, *prima facie*, to commemorate the war dead, but which is really **[End Page 379]** about what America can learn from the European Avant-Garde considered as a cultural war machine. As elegy, it foretells a miraculous politics of utility and excess, responsibility and indulgence, through the agency of a new poetic candor.

Though focusing on literary and art movements, the poem demonstrates that creation and destruction are interdependent and endemic to modern developments as a whole. As armies slaughter each other for country and honor (the retrospective rubbish of World War I), avant-gardists scramble to place selected detrita on the endangered fossils list of the collective imagination. With feigned ingenuousness, O'Hara characterizes such recuperative efforts as *naming* things: re-defining them in a sort of Modernist Eden or Book of Life (*qua* dictionary). But just as such artists miraculously affirm or *give meaning to* the autonomy and dignity of objects, so they reveal the hegemonic potential of such acts when salvation metamorphoses into dominion, and creation slouches toward eschatology. Picasso, again, is the agent of this discovery: "Guernica hollered look out!" (p. 17) Like the balloon-headed figure billowing out of *Guernica's* window, the painting is a reminder about looking out, about opening art onto realities thought to have been unmasked by the Avant-Garde as mere illusion or convention, but now re-surgng as political realities that threaten all life on the margins. But it is also about looking out for what is sinister in one's own creative impulse--especially as a late modernist enthralled by the achievements of early Modernist mentors. This caveat is suggested by the ironic position of O'Hara's persona in the poem. Mesmerized by art and "busy hoping our eyes were talking/ to Paul Klee," his ephobic persona defiantly proclaims--like an unwitting Hitler youth--that "we should/ love only the stones, the sea, and heroic figures." (p. 17) But he is speaking in the context of America where such cultural, European sentiments seem misplaced. The enmity of the world swoops in on him in the form of caricaturally disciplining American parents, who break his guitar and can of blue paint (another Picassoid topos now sonorously reminiscent of Wallace Stevens' own use of it). World War II and its aftermath seem to break out in the poem when "all of us began to think/ with our bare hands." (p. 17) Thinking is a form of fighting and thus a new, more passionate process

of analysis begins closer to home.

Yet even with its mayhem, the war proves intellectually fun: a certain pragmatism or technical facility (that is, knowing "vertical from horizontal" [p. 17]) keeps the horror within the political and imaginative category of a constructive undertaking. Under the mantle of American power, art retains its intellectual aloofness, its character of megalomaniacal play or masturbation; but it is also now a gift, one of modern Europe's many legacies to America, proffered through the subtle agencies of Surrealism, and thus metamorphosing itself in American hands: "Fathers of Dada! You carried shining erector sets/ in your rough and bony pockets, you were generous/ and they were lovely as chewing gum or flowers!/ Thank you!" (p. 17) Thus, even while acquiring the campiness of holiday greeting cards, avant-garde influences retain a certain elegance of construction, a certain deceptive quality of play that is habit-forming and deadly. The fathers of Dada, then, are like all fathers: their generosity is both beautiful and dangerous. A further corrective is required ("alone I could never have figured out that dolls/ meant death" [p. 17]), and this corrective is love.

Love, then, is O'Hara's idea, the nervous, attentive, slightly sentimental gauge of poetic value by which he distinguishes himself from Williams, who, having "no ideas but in things," treats poetry as a form of Cubo-Dadaist construction with the building blocks of language. **[End Page 380]** In Surrealist fashion--but without the demands of Surrealist theory--O'Hara insists on the responsibility of the artist or poet in making his work an act of love: "Our responsibilities did not/ begin in dreams, though they began in bed." (p. 17) He dispenses with the Freudian obsessions and ideological watchwords that burden adult heterosexuals such as André Breton and Delmore Schwartz, but gratefully accepts a lesson in love from the adolescent homosexual Arthur Rimbaud. Love teaches that poetry is not "crap" (p. 17)--the symbolic currency of childhood empires; poetry is serious, worldly, personal, didactic. But, in Rimbaldian fashion, it also teaches that crap is also not crap: with pantheistic ardor, responsible love covertly assimilates to poetry the very elements that it officially banishes--elements of infantile, fecal play. A new, more global, more *ecological* mode of play is set in motion in keeping with a new sexual freedom, with post-war abundance, and with America's popular self-conception as a power that "exists purely to inspire love."<sup>13</sup> In what has become a post-scarcity society, sewage is shown to be "richer than a river" (*Collected Poems*, p. 17); airplanes become toys, and death, a new lease on life. Where something can always be made, apparently, from nothing, waste disposal and laying waste become productive functions; aesthetic excess and technological progress overlap as post-war wars (more icing on the cake) offer lessons in both American prodigality and utility--or obversely, Soviet utility and prodigality. Yet the poet, idealistically youthful still, somehow imagines that his appreciation of Pasternak will keep his poetry "above the factory's ambitious gargle" (p. 17) in either instance. Such is the magic of symbolic hegemony in 1950. In a world in which the concept of responsibility is already obsolete, the empty word is triumphantly touted by the powers and poets that be, each using it to attack the other with the best of intentions. O'Hara's persona falls into the same rhetorical trap by presuming once again to teach the world a lesson, especially to the fathers: in America the self-styled adult-child becomes father to the man, and so

this neo-Worsworthian concludes with some thoughts on his own biological father, a victim of the ever self-renewing new realism: "Now/ my father is dead and has found out you must look things/ in the belly, not in the eye. If only he had listened/ to the men who made us, hollering like stuck pigs!" (p. 17) Inasmuch as the final clause dangles, both the creators and the created alternately have a share as victims and victimizers in a process of revitalization. The poem is a kind of proto-manifesto against the Postmodern empty sign, even as it actively empties its own signs in the process. And yet there remains a persistent faith in an idea of responsibility, or in the view that the poet's integrity somehow pertains to poetry's relation to the world.

In this way, O'Hara tries to assimilate formalist and expressionist strains of the Avant-Garde into a more encompassing worldview in which all oppositions of form and content, aesthetics and politics, are synthesized with a kind of useless American pragmatism. Such pragmatism, however, depends on the creators assuming a modern, internationalist outlook without subjecting that outlook to any rigorous dialectical hashing. According to O'Hara, the Americans now had to act out the fantasy of being extreme (*Art Chronicles*, pp. 69-70), had to determine what their emotional stake was in the globalizing thrust of late Modernism itself. Along with this paradoxically *responsible* self-absorption came the injunction to remake the world in a new and original act of creativity. It was not enough to imitate the Europeans; they **[End Page 381]** had to venture out on their own. Although both literary and artistic precedents had been set (Surrealism, Social Realism, the Mexican School), the work of the Abstract Expressionists best fulfilled this cultural necessity in O'Hara's view. In a late description of their achievement (1962), he describes the existential conditions that make their works possible:

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 traumatic consciousness of emergency and crisis experienced as personal event, the artist assuming responsibility for being, however accidentally, alive here and now. Their gift was for a somber and joyful art: somber because it does not merely reflect but sees what is about it, and joyful because it is able to exist. It is just as possible for art to look out at the world as it is for the world to look at art. But the Abstract Expressionists were frequently the first violators of their own gifts; to this we often owe the marvelously demonic, sullen, or mysterious quality of their work, as they moved from the pictorial image to the hidden subject. (*Art Chronicles*, p. 67)

The responsibility which O'Hara describes had little to do with earnestly assuming the kind of moral and political positions advocated by someone like André Breton or Diego Rivera. It had more to do with the glamorous responsibility of taking the creative initiative at the moment when an *historic* opportunity presented itself. With the nation's new sense of pre-eminence and infallibility in the post-war world, certain American-based artists quickly accustomed themselves to the mantle of avant-garde extremism. Consequently, creative spontaneity became something of an accomplished style: what for the Surrealists was an arduous struggle to discover what pure

spontaneity might be, was cultivated with an acquired self-assurance (if little fervor in the area of oppositional politics) by the New York painters. Unlike the Surrealists, the Abstract Expressionists were not ideologically opposed to their personal emotions or cultural ambitions. The American artists were intent on being, not merely revolutionary or liberating, but *great*: if the new painting seemed to come naturally, seemed invested with personal sincerity, the painter's natural inclinations were nevertheless gilded with a sense of aesthetic accomplishment.

Symptomatic of this belief in a natural virtuosity was an insistence on the importance of content in works too often accused of having none (of being "decorative" in the case of the Abstract Expressionists,<sup>14</sup> trivial in the case of O'Hara). This insecurity about content seems to have motivated O'Hara's 1954 essay "Nature and New Painting," in which he writes that "great art . . . is seldom about art, though frequently its insights are so compelling and so pervasive they can be applied to art as well as to their subject. . . ." (*Standing Still*, p. 41) Although careful not to dismiss what is self-reflexive and self-defining in great art, O'Hara realigns such formalist concerns in order to support the expressionist thrust of his own argument: "From the impressionists through the cubists to the present, art has been involved [End Page 382] with nature" (*Standing Still*, p. 41). Hence, the subject of the new painting is not art itself, but the immediate experience of the artist in response to the present and to the world--an experience that is inherently expressive, naturally artistic. Nor is art about the representation of nature; its concern, rather, is with the perception of nature as a creative impulse in humanity: "In past times there was nature and there was human nature; because of the ferocity of modern life, man and nature have become one." (*Standing Still*, p. 42) To the extent that natural human expression is calculated, the calculation involved is appropriated to the cause of nature, to the "innermost will of the artist" (*Standing Still*, p. 43), a will that verges on instinct.

In his monograph *Jackson Pollock* (1959), O'Hara writes that his subject was one of the few who entirely "gave himself over to cultural necessities which, in turn, freed him from the external encumbrances which surround art as an occasion of extreme cultural concern . . ." (*Art Chronicles*, p. 13). Thus, culture itself is paradoxically liberating and cumbersome, and it is only the genius, only the one whose action spontaneously conforms to cultural necessity, who can overcome the external encumbrances that otherwise mediate his or her relation to culture. These burdens are primarily those of academic tradition, which sinisterly assimilate the artistic will, a will that can only be redeemed at the right historical moment through "drastic self-knowledge" (*Art Chronicles*, p. 13) of the kind O'Hara attributes to Pollock: "This is not automatism or self-expression, but insight." (*Art Chronicles*, p.13) Thus, even though O'Hara emphasizes the mythological themes of Pollock's work in his study, he is not simply stressing contents over style, but offering a concrete analogy for the ways in which tradition must be assimilated to the new artistic will: the mythological contents of Pollock's earlier works are not erased, but sedimented and transfigured in his later non-objective works, in which he achieves a state of what O'Hara calls "spiritual clarity" (*Art Chronicles*, p. 25), the state of knowing how to discriminate between cultural necessities and their external encumbrances (incidental, academic precedents). Thus, it



is a state of mind in which "the spirit can act freely and with unpremeditated knowledge. . . . Only the artist who has reached this state should be indicated by Harold Rosenberg's well-known designation Action Painter, for only when he is in this state is the artist's 'action' significant purely and simply of itself." (*Art Chronicles*, p. 26)

In this way, pure spontaneity or *action* moves beyond the technical facility of appropriated styles or procedures; but it also achieves a kind of poise or calm usually associated with formal virtuosity. O'Hara dissociates action from its Surrealist precedents of automatism, emotion, and accident (*Art Chronicles*, pp. 13, 30, 39). Instead, the intensity of Pollock's action involves, "in its complete identification of the artist with his work, a denial of the accident" (*Art Chronicles*, p. 39), hence, at least a partial denial of Surrealism's influence on the Americans. In this way, creative spontaneity, formerly associated with chance, now mysteriously enters the realm of cultural necessity despite the instinctual, chancy nature of its physical performance. O'Hara exempts Pollock from the vagaries of fortune and chance and places him astride the juggernaut of historical forces as an unimpeachable cultural icon whom he can admire, if not exactly accompany.

Naturally, O'Hara draws important lessons from Pollock's method, particularly his use of line and a certain shift in painterly scale. In each case he discovers and celebrates a sense of free bodily movement, exhilaration, even violence. And although this movement implies a kind of macho vigor apropos of Pollock's work, O'Hara's prose captures the more nervous, **[End Page 383]** sprightly energy of his own verbal restlessness, as in his description of the artist's draftsmanship: "that amazing ability to quicken a line by thinning it, to slow it by flooding, to elaborate that simplest of elements, the line--to change, to reinvigorate, to extend, to build up an embarrassment of riches in the mass by drawing alone." (*Art Chronicles*, p. 32) Here the draftsman's line takes on all the metamorphic vitality of poetic lines, even straying into what may be a direct description of O'Hara's poetry. On the other hand, where Pollock's line betrays an "open nostalgia for brutality" (*Art Chronicles*, p. 33) the description seems apt in both contexts (if for opposing reasons).

As for scale, it has less to do with the large size of many of the works than with their emotional impact, and thus it bears implications, once again, for O'Hara's own poetic procedures, which involve a similar sense of scale:

The scale of the painting became that of the painter's body, not the image of a body, and the setting for the scale, which would include all referents, would be the canvas surface itself. Upon this field the physical energies of the artist operate in actual detail, in full scale; the action of inspiration traces its marks of Apelles with no reference to exterior image or environment. It is scale, and no-scale. It is the physical reality of the artist and his activity of expressing it, united to the spiritual reality of the artist in a oneness which has no need for the mediation of metaphor or symbol. It is Action Painting. (*Art Chronicles*, pp. 34-35)

O'Hara's poetry also assumes the scale of the poet's body in ways that both duplicate and parody those above. The difference is that O'Hara's poetry, in assuming the scale of the body, requires a whole scene of writing as its canvas, a whole semantic arsenal as its ink. Yet, like the action painter, the poet's exertions are often temporally circumscribed by the immediate situation of the writing with as little premeditation or correction as possible. It is telling, then, that so much of O'Hara's poetry was concretely occasional, written spontaneously--at lunch, at parties, in the office--where the referents of his physical situation were directly available, perceivable, and usable depending on the exact vectors of the poem's dynamic.

But when O'Hara writes of Pollock's inspiration tracing "its marks of Apelles with no reference to exterior image or environment" (*AC*, pp. 34-35), clarification is needed. In O'Hara's poetry, objects at hand are not specifically employed as a way of imaging the writing body or of establishing the scene of writing as a narrative setting. Yet insofar as language (unlike graphic marks) is inherently referential, exterior objects and events do indeed enter the poetic canvas as a kind of "smorgasbord of the recognizable" (as the painter Larry Rivers once called it). (*Art Chronicles*, p. 118) To this extent, the poetry can be said to fail to achieve the non-referentiality of Pollock's marks. Nevertheless, O'Hara's language often acquires a degree of semantic opacity that makes it strangely comparable to non-representational marks and so verges on non-objectivity. What finally links the two procedures, however, is the stress that each places on the artist's or poet's bodily presence within the work (Pollock once described himself as being literally *in* his painting [*Art Chronicles*, p. 39]), the belief that the creator and the work are physically and temporally co-extensive during the act of creation and that every stage of this activity, every surge of energy, is fully evident in the final product. **[End Page 384]**

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In view of these procedural similarities, consider, for example, the short poem "Digression on *Number 1, 1948*," which O'Hara audaciously incorporated into his Pollock monograph. The poem describes an almost random catalogue of paintings on exhibition culminating in Pollock's monumental *No. 1*. Its movement suggests a restless looping, figure-eight around a magnetic center (*No. 1* itself) and an increasing concentration in the moment that is Pollockian. O'Hara also allows for a certain randomness, incorporating whatever physically comes along (such as the European paintings in the first half), yet with a kind of instinctual control in finding just the right quotient of immediacy to avoid both sloppiness and over-conscientiousness. This does not make it an abstract-expressionist poem, however. Despite O'Hara's casualness, the poem still has a structure that seems premeditated. Despite his refusal to be merely descriptive or symbolic, a residue of such elements divorces his work, finally, from the abstract quality of Pollock's automatism. Furthermore, while the poem seems comparable to Pollock's *No. 1* in O'Hara's terms of scale (that is, emotional impact), one cannot dismiss the more basic difference in terms of size. Indeed by including in his monograph a short poem about a big painting and calling it a digression, O'Hara seems to be making fun of his own aspiration to be compared with Pollock. He even

hints that the "sense of genius" (*Collected Poems*, p. 512) that he obviously feels in Pollock is a kind of infatuation verging on desire (as in the overly-sensuous phrase "his perfect hand" [AC, p. 30]). Such sentiments reveal both the poet's attraction to and alienation from what is supposed to be his creative ideal. In the end, O'Hara's attitude is one of difference yet a certain covetousness apropos of Pollock's virile heterosexual image, an image that the poet can himself assume only with ludic irony in the McCarthyite, homophobic 1950s.<sup>15</sup>

The artistic influence, I think, that best explains this divergence of sensibility between O'Hara and his artistic idol is Larry Rivers. In contrast to the high seriousness of Action Painting, Rivers expresses a more lighthearted, Dadaistic iconoclasm: "I didn't give a crap about what was going on at the time in New York painting, which was obviously interested in chopping down other forests. In fact, I was energetic and egomaniacal and what is even more: important, cocky, and angry enough to do something no one in the New York art world could doubt was *disgusting, dead, and absurd.*" (*Art Chronicles*, pp. 111-112) Although Rivers is specifically discussing his painting *George Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1953), his remark can be applied to his entire oeuvre and to his stubborn adherence to representing the human figure and ordinary objects in his work, or what can be termed content: just what the Action Painters were accused of lacking.<sup>16</sup> Rivers' art proceeds from an appreciation of *recognizability* as the starting point for a free association that takes place. His "smorgasbord of the recognizable" (*Art Chronicles*, p. 118), then, results from the freedom that he feels in making personal, diaristic associations in his paintings. But he also associates objects on a more formal basis at times, effecting a kind of lateral slide into unrecognizability [End Page 385] or abstraction, much as Pollock's earlier mythological themes disappeared in a web of fluid reverberations. Thus, O'Hara could say of his friend (and, for a time, lover<sup>17</sup>) that he was "engaged in an esthetic [*sic*] athleticism which sharpens the eye, hand, and arm in order to beat the bugaboos of banality and boredom, deliberately invited into the painting and then triumphed over." (*Collected Poems*, p. 515) O'Hara even allows for an element of the accidental in Rivers' paintings that he cannot in Pollock's because he saw the accidental as unheroic--a quality not without virtues in the context of his own or his friends' work, but subtly inappropriate for that of his heterosexual idols. Chance and accident occurred at the margins where O'Hara seems to have relegated himself both out of modesty and existential protest.

In Donald Allen's anthology *The New American Poetry* (1959), O'Hara made one of his most explicit statements about his poetic:

What is happening to me, allowing for lies and exaggerations which I try to avoid, goes into my poems. I don't think my experiences are clarified or made beautiful for myself or anyone else, they are just there in whatever form I can find them. [...] It may be that poetry makes life's nebulous events tangible to me and restores their detail; or conversely, that poetry brings forth the intangible quality of incidents which are all too concrete and circumstantial.<sup>18</sup>

O'Hara's oscillation between the concrete and the intangible, the circumstantial and the constant, seems to take place within the same parameters of Rivers' oscillations between the recognizable and the unrecognizable and the different formal categories in between. In both cases, it is a question of forms that are fully compatible with a new commitment to content--the concrete, the circumstantial, the recognizable. Such provisionality allows the poet or painter to exploit formal options while flouting formal régimes: "As for measure and other technical apparatus, that's just common sense: if you're going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you." (*Collected Poems*, p. 498) Personal desire and the sense of immediate circumstances thus provide their own more discreet modes of seduction that constitute technique in O'Hara's action poems. For O'Hara, formal techniques arise as a kind of accidental consequence of his total commitment to the immediacy of personal experience and the desiring body of the moment, as presented in his pseudo manifesto, "Personism." This commitment nevertheless preserves his poetry from the insincerities of the personal pose or reflective attitude in literature. O'Hara uses his immediate situation to shatter the edifice of the self-portrait. In this way he avoids the trap of confessional poetry--even in conditions of total self-indulgence. The personal achieves a kind of de-familiarization, even abstraction, through over-familiarity:

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 [**End Page 386**] that it is verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry. Personism is to Wallace Stevens what *la poésie pure* was to Béranger. Personism has nothing to do with philosophy, it's all art. 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. (*Collected Poems*, pp. 498-499)

Thus, O'Hara asserts a capacity for abstraction, even formality, through a complete adherence to the personal. If this assertion sounds ironic, it is because O'Hara's criteria for abstraction is founded on his idea of painting, criteria having nothing to do with the abstraction of certain literary movements, according to O'Hara: "Abstraction (in poetry, not in painting) involves personal removal by the poet." (*Collected Poems*, p. 498) Thus, even in the "Personism" manifesto, he indirectly links his poetic with the most advanced movements in painting.

This linkage, with its abstracting effects on poetry, is achieved through attention to immediate personal space, thoughts, and affects, an attention sharpened by an emphasis on compositional speed. Speed is the calculus of O'Hara's poetry, yet its parallels with Pollock's method reconfirm its primary filiations with Surrealist automatism--particularly in O'Hara's early poems "Easter" and "Second Avenue." The Surrealism of these two long poems is quite programmatic, conveyed through the clash of mythology and modernity in a swell of creativity that also characterizes Pollock's early art.<sup>19</sup> But the poems in which O'Hara attends to immediate experience most thoroughly are his

famous I-do-this-I-do-that poems, which combine Pollockian dynamism and Riversian intimacy. They are, in a sense, Action Poems; yet they are completely personal and new--a leap into the unknown, not an imitation.

One cannot doubt that "A Step Away From Them," "Lana Turner Has Collapsed," "The Day Lady Died," "Rhapsody," "Personal Poem," or "Music" were all written on-the-go, as it were, in transit or at lunch. The ephemera of the moment is all too rapidly taken in and shot back like a series of quick glances, without being over-burdened by a sense of discrimination, of having to make anything but the most tenuous connections. Yet, as if acutely aware of the strict working limits of re-creative time (the lunch hour), the writing itself seems ironically regulated by reflexes--of the body, mind, and articulate tongue--as they occur, with an air of total candor, in a public space. O'Hara abandons classic, hermetic automatism (against its historical backdrop of sexual repression) for a kind of unembarrassed, workaday automatism--to be more in the work for its allotted duration. In writing this way, he could well say along with Pollock: "... the [work] has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the [work] that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the [work] comes out well." (*Art Chronicles*, p. 39) Knowing that the end of his lunch hour, commute, or walk is always only minutes away, O'Hara must work quickly to avoid losing contact with the poem which seems to grow out of both personal and cultural necessity. But because of the requirement of speed, a certain **[End Page 387]** efficient sincerity is assured--along with a regular exit strategy: the idea of a stop-time. It is always present in the short poems, ready to put an end to all that racing ephemera (whether sought or chanced upon), yet ensuring a kind of tonal consistency across juxtapositional clashes. It is a game that works well for O'Hara, who plays by the rules that he has set. As he told Edward Lucie-Smith: "I don't believe in reworking too much. And what really makes me happy is when something just falls into place as if it were a conversation or something. . . . [M]arvelous painting [is like that.] It looks like it took about three seconds." (*Standing Still*, pp. 21-22)

But, as Andrew Ross has written, there is an ambiguous relation to the circumstantial in these poems that recalls the Action Painter's obsession with surface: "this technical obsession [with surface] was underpinned by a whole ideology of depth--angst, alienation and autonomy--which marked the tradition of moral seriousness that was their heritage as artist-intellectuals."<sup>20</sup> It is perhaps easiest to recognize this depth in "A Step Away From Them" or "The Day Lady Died," in which the technical stop-time of the writing is complemented by the theme of personal death (whether of Pollock, Bunny Lang, or "Lady Day" [Billie Holiday]). O'Hara's attitude toward death becomes harder to decipher, however, when it is removed from the sphere of the personal to become "the enormous bliss of American death" in the poem "Rhapsody" (*Collected Poems*, p. 326), named after the 1954 film starring Elizabeth Taylor. There is no way to determine whether this death is a big or a little one, let alone whether the poet belongs to it any more than "Tibet [is] historically a part of China" (p. 325). In the poem, O'Hara seems afflicted with a desire to have it both ways: to join a "myth of ascending" (suggested by a Madison Avenue address described as a portal to heaven) with that of descending (the urban jungle of eight million, whose "Negroes" seem conspicuously

representative); to reach a "summit where all aims are clear," and yet to move in a "smog of desire" through tunnels, in taxicabs, or "lying in a hammock on St. Mark's Place" (all, p. 325); to be another proponent of dominant history, or to slip away into the relative immediacy of personal desire. Death and bliss, and by extension moral seriousness and verbal play, become reversible categories as the poem slides across images that refuse to take a stand concerning what may or may not constitute the *soul* of America: the alienating glamor of skyscrapers or the "challenge of racial attractions"(p. 325).

The poetics of speed in these poems is fraught, then, with a poetics of dead stopping or mortality. It is the techniques of the former that necessitates those of the latter. But O'Hara's techniques are not limited to those of speed and surprise, and in certain longer, commemorative works this poetics of mortality is made into a specific theme with respect to the great painters whom O'Hara admired. If the relationship between O'Hara and Pollock in any way reflects the strategic dichotomy of desire and death in the I-do-this-I-do-that poems, then the "Ode at the Grave of Jackson Pollock" (or "Ode on Causality" [*Collected Poems*, note, p. 542) develops the subtle linkage of death and monumentality found in "Rhapsody."

There is the sense of neurotic coherence **[End Page 388]**

you think maybe poetry is too important and you like that  
suddenly everyone's supposed to be veined, like marble  
it isn't that simple but it's simple enough  
the rock is least living of the forms man has fucked  
and it isn't pathetic and it's lasting, one towering tree  
in the vast smile of bronze and vertiginous grasses (*Collected Poems*, p. 302)

Although the *you* in this poem often refers directly to Pollock himself, it is not clear in these opening lines. Here, the lines probe the issue of commemoration itself and of what forms are valid. In some ways, the poet seems to address Pollock about the appropriateness of using a boulder to mark his grave, but he also seems to be asking himself about the requirements of his own elegiacal stance. In both cases a "neurotic coherence" (p. 302) validates the choices made for being simple, lasting, and not "pathetic" (p. 302), that is, not "wet, reflective, and self-conscious" (*Collected Poems*, p. 497). Yet both choices are historically resonant, even if they flout certain aspects of traditional commemoration, the sculpted marble or the strophic ode.

In the second "stanza" a visit to Pollock's grave with the child of a neighbor is described. The child Maude, who says, "he isn't under there, he's out in the woods' beyond" (p. 302), is also, anomalously, identified with the rock. The comparison is both clarified and complicated later in the poem when, addressing Pollock as a sort of muse, O'Hara intones:

and like that child at your grave make me be distant and imaginative  
make my lines thin as ice, then swell like pythons  
the color of Aurora when she first brought fire to the Arctic in a sled

a sexual bliss inscribe upon the page of whatever energy I burn for art  
and do not watch over my life, but read and read through copper earth (p. 302)

The child and the rock are both distant and imaginative. Given what one knows already of O'Hara's attitude toward poetic distance or "abstract removal" (*Collected Poems*, pp. 498-499), the relation between distance and imagination, like that between boulder and child, would seem to be more contradictory than metonymic. As such, the poem itself is conflicted--both distant, elegiac and imaginative, experimental. O'Hara implies that the elegiac ode is in transition, ready to assume new, anomalous forms. The matter of commemorative standards seems to disappear, like Pollock's ghost, in the woods of O'Hara's analogizing. He asks not for moral guidance but for creative energy and imaginative innocence--to write, in short, as Pollock painted, as if through a process of intellectual ebullience, ecstasy, ejaculation. Through this process apparently anything--all genres, all forms--can provide fuel for the living crematorium of art. And yet this crematorium preserves and immortalizes even the least admired of elements:

and there's the ugliness we seek in vain  
through life and long for like a mortuarian Baudelaire working for Skouras  
inhabiting neighborhoods of Lear! Lear! Lear! [End Page 389]

O'Hara then offers the reader some gently parodic accounts of the ways in which great men were sung in times past, whether by French medieval *romanzers* or the shrewdly occasional Andrew Marvell, who celebrated Cromwell with cautious irony. Yet mention of the latter brings to mind other odes written in "sweet scripts to obfuscate the tender subjects of their future lays" (p. 302). With this insinuating allusion to little T.C. and the pun on *lay* ("to be layed at all! romanticized, elaborated, fucked, sung, put to 'rest'" [p. 303]) the connections between death and bliss are reinforced. There is the sense of exploitation in writing such odes, a kind of criminal, sodomite ecstasy at another's expense that can either be merely embarrassing: "worse than the mild apprehension of a Buddhist type caught halfway up/ the tea-rose trellis with his sickle banging on the Monk's lead window" (p. 303); or more embittering: "unless the tea exude a little gas and poisonous fact/ to reach the spleen and give it a dreamless twinge that love's love's near/ the bang of alertness, loneliness, position that prehends experience" (p. 303). More than an opportunity for seductive verbal play on some important occasion or theme (such as causality), O'Hara's ode, in attempting not to apprehend, but to *prehend* experience in its language (as if to become experience instead of illustrate it), tempers its own verbal pleasures with the physical pain of frustrated apprehension, a sense of the permanent divide between experience and text, life and death. An avant-garde scandal of the historical elegy, O'Hara's ode imposes a state of loss upon the reader, or, what Roland Barthes calls "bliss": a crisis in the reader's relation to language.<sup>21</sup>

With the line about prehending experience, the remaining lines of the poem, formerly swollen like tumescent pythons, freeze again into shards of ice--quick, pert propositions. O'Hara subliminally communicates the principle of his poem: to turn the long, self-reflective tones of commemoration into the sharp staccato of blissful self-

abandonment. In the process, multiple dialectical relations seem to achieve synthesis for O'Hara with "each in asserting beginning to be more of the opposite" (*Collected Poems*, p. 302). Marvelously, this condensation of the elegiac ode into an almost ecstatic experience of self-loss, their blissful synthesis, is construed as causality--the movement from personal death to public commemoration, experience to art, and back again: "what goes up/ must come down, what dooms must do, standing still and walking in New York" (p. 302). Pollock's death, then, becomes a link in that dialectico-causal chain that will burn more energy for art. Hence, Pollock lives, is *re-incarnated*:

let us walk in that nearby forest, staring into the growling trees  
in which an era of pompous frivolity or two is dangling its knobby knees  
and reaching for an audience  
    over the pillar of our deaths a cloud

heaves  
pushed, steaming and blasted [End Page 390]

    love-propelled and tangled glitteringly

has earned himself the title *Bird in Flight* (p. 302)

A more synthetic attitude from that of Barthesian bliss finds hortatory expression in these lines which swing the pendulum of O'Hara's concerns in the poem back to that of the ode proper (albeit in new verse form), a hymn of praise expressing the hope of finding eternal celebrity in some sort of heaven. Yet the only celebrity available is that created by the living, by those like O'Hara who will see *Bird in Flight* as a title that Pollock has earned. In this way the poem fluctuates between the commemorative demands of the conventional ode (by which Pollock is imaged among the heroes of traditional histories, the upholders of causality as it were) and the experimental needs of the personal ode (the poet responding to immediate circumstances in all their simultaneity). Thus "Ode on Causality" assumes a technique similar to that of Rivers' *George Washington Crossing the Delaware* as a parodic adaptation of a traditional genre, the recognizable elements of which both appear and disappear (as the outlines of a narrative structure) in the courses of creative play. Pollock the man provides the subject matter which becomes the starting point for a "Riversian" strategy of transformation--a movement toward verbal abstraction that leaves the reader breathless but still able to catch the reassuring glimpses of recognizable situations and forms.

This movement toward the abstract becomes even more pronounced in the monumentalizing poem "Biotherm" (*Collected Poems*, p. 436), which perhaps comes closest to Pollockian non-objectivism, or what Mutlu Konuk Blasing calls "immanence" in his study of the poem.<sup>22</sup> Yet minimal vestiges of the recognizable persist in a poem that obliquely commemorates a personal relationship between O'Hara and the poet Bill Berkson that was in the *un-making*--a process that also seems to be going on between language and denotation in the poem. It is as if O'Hara wanted to erase definitely, the burden of semantic correspondences but could not avoid leaving



some trace, some imprint of the merely personal or conventional in the sticky stuff of language (as in verbal *biotherm*, a French skin cream). Thus, even in his most conspicuously experimental works, the poet surreptitiously re-enacts what is still a theme in "Ode on Causality": the commemorative impulse "to obfuscate the tender subjects of . . . future lays" (*Collected Poems*, p. 302).

[David L. Sweet](#) received his doctorate in comparative literature from Columbia University. He has taught literature at Columbia, the City University of New York, the New School, the American University of Paris, and Princeton University, where he is a part-time lecturer. He has written on the American and French Avant-Gardes, including the text for a book of photographs on Jean Cocteau's film *The Testament of Orpheus*, to be published by Viking.

## Notes

[1](#) W. H. Auden quoted by Brad Gooch, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), p. 261.

[2](#) Gooch, p. 261.

[3](#) Richard Kostelanetz, "Frank O'Hara and His Poetry" in *American Writing Today* (Whitston Publishing, 1991), pp. 205-06.

[4](#) John Ashbery, introduction to *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (University of California Press, 1995), p. vii. Subsequent references to this edition are cited parenthetically in the text as *Collected Poems*.

[5](#) John Ashbery, "The Other Tradition" in *Selected Poems* (Penguin, 1986), p. 208.

[6](#) Thomas Meyer, "Glistening Torsos, Sandwiches, and Coca-Cola" in *Frank O'Hara: To Be True to a City*, ed. Jim Elledge (University of Michigan Press, 1990), p. 94.

[7](#) John Ashbery, "Yves Tanguy" in *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles 1957-1987* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), p. 26, and John Bernard Myers, *The Poets of the New York School* (University of Pennsylvania, 1969), p. 9.

[8](#) Although there were distinct Surrealist prototypes by Max Ernst and André Masson, they remained experiments, never sufficiently sustained to engender a complete new style.

[9](#) Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters" in *The Tradition of the New* (Horizon Press, 1959), p. 23.

[10](#) O'Hara understood the connection between the French Avant-Garde and the

Abstract-Expressionists; but more importantly, he saw his own association with the New York painters as a continuation of an avant-garde tradition inherited from the French poets. In an interview with O'Hara in 1965, art historian and critic Edward Lucie-Smith asked him about "this link between poetry and painting": "Well, it's partly, I suppose, because of the French influence, in a way, on American painting. You know [. . .] Apollinaire, Cubism, and all that sort of thing. [. . .] When we all arrived in New York or emerged as poets in the mid 50s or late 50s, painters were the only ones who were interested in any kind of experimental poetry, and the general literary scene was not. Oh, we were published in certain magazines and so on, but nobody was really very enthusiastic except the painters." See Frank O'Hara, "Edward Lucie-Smith: An Interview with Frank O'Hara" in *Standing Still and Walking in New York*, ed. Donald Allen (Grey Fox Press, 1983), p. 3. Subsequent citations from this edition will appear in the text as *Standing Still*.

[11](#) William Carlos Williams, "Introduction to *The Wedge*" in *Poetics of the New American Poetry*, eds. Donald Allen and Warren Tallman (Grove Press, 1973), p. 138.

[12](#) Williams, "Introduction to *The Wedge*," p. 139.

[13](#) O'Hara, *Art Chronicles: 1954-1966* (George Braziller, 1975), p. 41. Subsequent references to this edition are cited parenthetically in the text as *Art Chronicles*.

[14](#) Rosalind Krauss, "Reading Jackson Pollock, Abstractly" in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (MIT Press, 1989), p. 226.

[15](#) At least once Pollock called O'Hara a "fag" to his face and "was enough of a menace that O'Hara fled the Cedar [Bar] one night when he heard that Pollock was on a drunken rampage." (Gooch, p. 204) One might also compare O'Hara's attitude toward Pollock with that toward a more archetypal American hero in his poem "On Seeing Larry Rivers' *Washington Crossing the Delaware* at the Museum of Modern Art." (*Collected Poems*, p. 233)

[16](#) Krauss, p. 221.

[17](#) Gooch, pp. 227-240.

[18](#) *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*, ed. Donald M. Allen (Grove Press, 1960), p. 419.

[19](#) Anthony Libby, "O'Hara on the Silver Range" in *Contemporary Literature* XVII (1976), pp. 240-62.

[20](#) Andrew Ross, "The Death of Lady Day" in *Frank O'Hara: to Be True to a City*, ed. Jim Elledge (University of Michigan Press, 1990), p. 381.

[21](#) Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (Farrar, Straus &

Giroux, 1975), p. 14.

[22](#) Mutlu Konuk Blasing, "Frank O'Hara: The Speech of Poetry" in *Frank O'Hara: To Be True to a City*, ed. Jim Elledge (University of Michigan Press, 1990), pp. 307-308.

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