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**Beyond Radical Art:
The New York School Poets and the Neo-Avant-Garde**

by

Mark Andrew Silverberg

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

at

**Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
September 2000**

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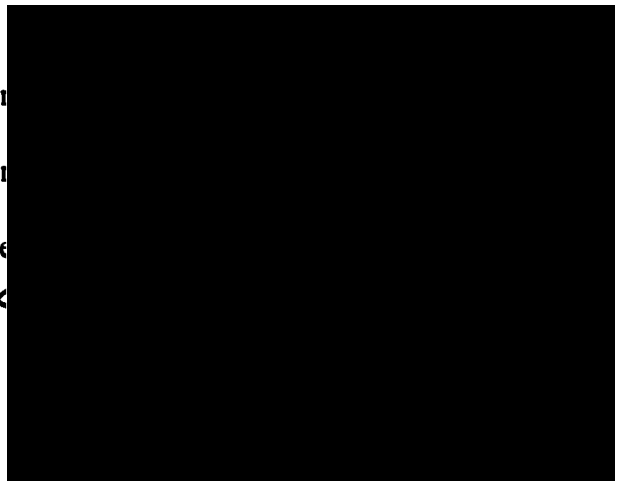
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*In memory of my grandfathers
Joseph Silverberg and Albert White
and their lifelong commitments to knowledge
And for the four generations of women who have made all of this possible:
Bertha Silverberg and Frances Freilich
Barbara Siskind
Lynda Ceresne
and Aidyn Julia Silverberg-Ceresne
This dissertation is dedicated with love*

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ABSTRACT

This study of the family resemblances among the New York School poets (represented here by Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, and Kenneth Koch) focuses particularly on the poets' response to the changing status of the avant-garde artist in New York between the 1940s and 1960s. Following the work of art critics like Hal Foster, I use the term "neo-avant-garde" to define those movements in the 1950s and 60s which both revive and revise the achievements of the "historical" avant-garde. These movements (New York School poetry, Pop art, Conceptual art, etc.) draw particularly on the historical avant-garde's techniques--collage, montage, assemblage, and various forms of non-organic art--but at the same time are extremely critical of what they came to understand as the avant-garde's ideological orientation, particularly in terms of its antagonistic or oppositional stance. This understanding of the avant-garde is historically specific to the United States in the 1950s and 60s where the avant-garde "outsider" (whether in the form of Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock, Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, or movie star James Dean) was fast becoming an insider and trendsetter, as corporate and consumer America went about the task of transforming "radical art" into "radical chic." At a time when "the break with tradition" had become the tradition, and when avant-gardism was reduced to a consumer novelty, a new kind of position needed to be found. The New York School poets, from their well-informed position at the center of the New York art world, responded to the compromised role of the artist through a series of neo-avant-garde strategies which this dissertation considers in detail.

The introduction provides an argument for why it makes sense to talk about a New York "School" and considers the relationship between the poetry and various theories of the avant-garde. Chapter One continues the discussion of family resemblances and commonalities among the poets by considering standard conceptions and misconceptions about the New York School. Chapter Two turns to the question of the neo-avant-garde ideology by reading three New York School manifestos in order to discern an aesthetics and politics of indifference (contra the avant-garde politics of opposition). Chapter Three considers the relationship between New York School poetry and other arts, particularly painting, through an examination of the "poetics of process." In Chapter Four the question of taste is investigated by examining the New York School's use of camp to deconstruct the high/ low, avant-garde/ kitsch binary so essential to modernist culture. A conclusion reassesses the neo-avant-garde position in relation to avant-garde ideology and suggests avenues which the New York School poets opened for succeeding generations of practitioners.

List of Abbreviations

John Ashbery:

- Mooring* *The Mooring of Starting Out: The First Five Books of Poetry*
RS *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles 1957-1987*
SP *Selected Poems*
SPCM *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*

Kenneth Koch:

- AP* *The Art of Poetry: Poems, Parodies, Interviews, Essays, and Other Work*
Rainway *On the Great Atlantic Rainway, Selected Poems 1950-1988*

Frank O'Hara:

- AC* *Art Chronicles 1954-1966*
CP *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*
SS *Standing Still and Walking in New York*

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INTRODUCTION

The New York School and the Problem of the Avant-Garde

“A Lot of Guys Who Know All About Bricks”

Sometime in 1954 Frank O’Hara and his partner Larry Rivers, the *enfant terrible* jazz musician turned painter, wrote a play entitled *Kenneth Koch: A Tragedy* which, O’Hara later recorded, “cannot be printed because it is so filled with 50s art gossip that everyone would sue us” (“Larry Rivers: A Memoir” CP 514). In many ways, the play provides a perfect self-contained example of the New York School text, attitude, and ideology which will be the subjects of this study. Not only was it produced collaboratively and across disciplines, but the play was also a creation of improvisation and happenstance. It began on the spur of the moment during one of O’Hara’s many modelling sessions for Rivers as a way of keeping the model amused (CP 514). And, with typical New York School nonchalance, this audacious play was abandoned when its momentary usefulness was exhausted; it remains incomplete.

Regardless of (or perhaps *because of*) its gratuitous and casual genesis, *Kenneth Koch: A Tragedy* is a fascinating, self-reflexive document which uses parody and self-parody to examine the conditions of artistic production in New York the 1950s. This is a play about the “New York School” which both enacts and satirizes the qualities of the School. This doubleness is refreshing, especially given the fact that the New York art world of the 50s and 60s has by now developed a rather hallowed mythic aura (produced through the initiative of the artists of the time and with the help of later critics like David Lehman). Lehman’s 1998 book *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* presents New York in the 50s and 60s as America’s answer to “Paris in the golden period before World War I” (1). Frank O’Hara thus becomes America’s Guillaume Apollinaire and Abstract Expressionism becomes their Cubism:

The poets of the New York School were as heterodox, as belligerent towards the literary establishment and as loyal to each other, as their Parisian predecessors had been. The 1950s and early '60s in New York were their banquet years. It is as though they translated the avant-garde idiom of "perpetual collaboration" from the argot of turn-of-the-century Paris to the roughhewn vernacular of the American metropolis at midcentury. (*Last 2*)

It is instructive to compare this romantic version of New York to one presented by one of the New York School's key figures: painter and sometimes poet and playwright Larry

Rivers:

There is no doubt in my mind if the idiots and garbage collectors who shovel up ideas for Hollywood and T.V. run out of material, even further than now, our lives could easily be made into a cornball modern *Vie de Boheme*. Instead of calling it *Moulin Rouge* with a dwarf and a few whores it could be called "The Cedar Bar" with fags, dope addicts, and an endless and exhausting amount of "names." (92)

Rivers' attitude and language is far more expressive of the actual attitudes of the artists of the time than Lehman's. The New York School poets and the Pop and neo-Assemblage artists who were their contemporaries were not "belligerent" radicals (as the Abstract Expressionists sometimes portrayed themselves) but rather more sophisticated and shrewd producers. They didn't just "translate the avant-garde idiom" of turn-of-the-century Paris, updating it to a "roughhewn" American vernacular, but responded to it in a much more comprehensive way. The New York School poets applied a keen historical awareness of both the conditions of avant-garde production in the first decades of the century, and of the compromised situation of the avant-garde in America in the 1950s and 60s, to create a neo-avant-garde aesthetic, an aesthetic which both revived and *revised* the "historical" avant-garde.

The comically entitled *Kenneth Koch: A Tragedy* (Koch is, after all, the most insistently *silly* of all the New York artists) is in part the "cornball modern *Vie de Boheme*" Rivers imagines above, a drama that simultaneously presents and lightly mocks the New York School "project." The play is set, appropriately enough, in the Cedar Street Tavern, the famous haunt of the Abstract Expressionists (site of Jackson Pollock's many renowned drunken escapades, including ripping the door off the men's room), where Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, and Kenneth Koch would frequently go to "wr[i]te poems while listening to

the painters argue and gossip" (O'Hara *CP* 512).¹ The play features New York School luminaries such as John Bernard Myers, the flamboyant director of the Tibor de Nagy gallery who published the poets' first books and was the first to use the label "The Poets of the New York School." Here is O'Hara and Rivers's sardonic characterization:

JOHN MYERS:

Why, my dear, haven't you heard? I have a gallery of the liveliest, most original, and above all youngest, painters in America, and for every painter there's a poet. You know we've discovered something called "The Figure" that's exciting us enormously this season. I don't quite understand it myself but it has something terribly pertinent to do with the Past. It's called "Painting Divine" and includes the black laugh of surrealisme and the pile-strewn sobs of suprematism, and lots of boffing. (*Selected Plays* 128)

Also present on stage are the major Abstract Expressionists like Franz Kline (who calls Koch "a skinny drink of water . . . a Mountain of Moles, a Matador of Joy, a Fisher in the Sea of Mother Progress, a Stutterer Who Improved . . ." [125]); Willem de Kooning ("Yah, travel is okay, Poland, the marshes, it's terrific. It's like the signs I used to paint in Holland when I was a kit" [127]); Elaine de Kooning ("don't cum dahn on yuh price, Bill, Giedion said youh great" [128]); and a snarling Jackson Pollock who refers to the authors, Frank and Larry, as "those fags," and tells Kenneth "My wife is a lousy lay, but you're the worst" (129). Critics like Philip Pavia and Tom Hess also make brief and silly appearances:

TOM HESS:

I've come to represent the American Renaissance, where is it? (128)

And of course the play features the inimitable Kenneth Koch who is presented (quite accurately) as part artist, part intellectual, part clown:

KENNETH:

I was a mason, boys. I come from an educated family. Though my grandpa dealt in burlap, my mother wrote up bridge parties for the Cincinnati Courier. . . . The difficulty was in being Jewish. As a high school boy I was very interested in Zionism and changed my name from Cherrytree so I wouldn't embarrass the Jews. We parked our cars on the hill. The nights were simple. A soda. Thin girls in organdy. Where was the 14th century those evenings? . . . They called me "queer" and I thought they meant I was a poet, so I became a poet. What if I'd understood them? Moses! what a risk I was running. (128-9)

The in-joke at the end of this speech has to do with what O'Hara used to teasingly call Koch's "H.D."--homosexual dread--which was, Joe LeSueur observes in his introduction to the *Selected Plays*, "Kenneth's understandable dismay at realizing that so many of his friends were gay" (xvii). Like the Abstract Expressionists, the poets of the New York School were almost all men--but unlike the painters, they are predominantly gay men, a fact that informs their work in several ways. These will be considered in Chapter Five on the Camp sensibility of the New York School.

Kenneth Koch is, as the proceeding examples show and as O'Hara readily admits, teeming with gossip, name-dropping, and in-jokes. Gossip, as we will see, is an important discourse in many New York School productions:

KENNETH:

I wonder if John Myers has persuaded Wylan to make me a Yale Younger Poet yet? . . . Oh Frank, come away from the Museum of Modern Art, with your baked feet, oh Grace leave Walter, where are the autos of yesteryear. Oh John Ashbery you'll never be able to afford one, oh Larry Rivers leave fame to the Brachs, oh Bill de Kooning leave the Cedar, the Hessians are waiting, oh Jane Frielicher leave off, there is no colitis! oh Al Leslie behave yourself, oh Jimmy Schuyler why did you beat up Bill Weaver? Bill, forgive him! I am the snow-white Laundry Way. I am the Hand. Or Mouth. There is no intelligence, there is only Europe. (125, 127)

As we will discover in so much of O'Hara's poetry, gossip was one of the major currencies of intellectual and artistic exchange in New York in the 1950s and 60s. The physical work of "the Hand" and lingual work of the "Mouth" were inextricably linked. The painters, poets, musicians, and critics who gathered at the Cedar and at the equally famous Eighth Street Club (known as "The Club," this was a more formal venue where artists met for lectures, panel discussions, concerts, and heated debates)² were an extremely gregarious bunch, and their art talk, gossip, and debate are a crucial part of the story of New York School art. As much as the Abstract Expressionists sometimes portrayed themselves as radical individualists, the history of the New York School proves that art is not only the activity of a solitary producer, but also the result of the "conversations" of a community. New York poet John Giorno has called gossip "the hardcore of art criticism" (qtd. in Wolf 16), and readers need to recognize how the

archeology of gossip can reveal the ways in which artists' personal concerns and relationships impact significantly not only on their lives but also on their works. Moreover, as I will argue in Chapter Three, gossip is used in New York School poetry, especially in O'Hara's oeuvre, as a new (and highly seductive) model of verbal discourse and relationship.³

Besides the language of gossip, the play also uses and satirizes other predominant forms of New York School poetic discourse. Goldie, a character who is "in love" with Kenneth (the quotation marks signify the campy, theatricalized nature of the emotion), presents his poetry as illustration of the fact that "he's beautiful *in his way*" (123, italics added). What follows is a burlesque of the New York School's poetry of surface play, a poetry which elevates sound over sense, signifier over signified. Here, in the poets' typically campy way, these avant-garde gestures of fragmentation and discontinuity are fondly exaggerated--almost to the point of absurdity--while nonetheless being preserved and respected in their reproduction. We must remember, after all, that this is not just parody, but self-parody⁴:

GOLDIE:

Mother, at night the sea speaks to me with Kochean overtones.

MOTHER:

He may be a spring song to you but he's a pain in the ass to me. What a beau, he's an ape.

GOLDIE:

You don't understand, mother; he's beautiful in his way.

MOTHER:

I understand, I've been to the zoo.

GOLDIE:

Listen to this mother:

"We undress orders to Doris the day tobacco-lift, who
 Senator, isn't that a movie star coughing in your turnip?
 O cradle frost, wigged, crane-blown, sign below Kentucky
 That the Wettmay be white, dropping alleys on teats."
 That's the side of him you don't know.

MOTHER:

Maybe you should marry him, Goldie. (123)

As well as the language of gossip and this fragmented language of surface play, *Kenneth Koch* also performs what this thesis will examine in Chapter Three as the language of improvisation or process. The New York School's "poetics of process" transforms the act of making art, or the very processes of awareness (what Ashbery calls in one interview "the experience of experience" [Poulin 245]) into the subject of art. Here, for example, in the play's second act, Kenneth's recollection of a recent trip to Europe is delivered in a neo-avant-garde stream of consciousness which again fondly mimics its avant-garde predecessors:

The village rats of Chartres. How I long for water where women wash clothes. O soap! sponge! Lysol! fingernails imprisoned in lavender underdrawers, fish, albumen! A lift from Dijon to Nice, a bearded Duke at my knee, guess what he had on his wrist: a thin blue wasp to be suffocated by your tongue. . . . Yes, the past is a hotel where all the rooms are a joy to behold. Why are the Swedish tall? Why are the Belgians interesting? Am I a negro? Is this literature? The lustful play of balding men, eating out their hearts over sandwiches, I am no bigger than their smallest. And is the purpose of life to be mighty in their eyes? Somewhere an egg is cooking. To be stronger than those whom you know are weak. Turn it over. Flapjacks. A room with a zoo. Oh eggplant! isn't it better to be John Myers than Waldemar Hansen? And isn't it marvelous that the A&P is already an institution? (125, 126)

"The lustful play of balding men, eating out their hearts over sandwiches"--this line (with a possible nod to Jackson Pollock and other large, lustful men) highlights one of the New York School poets' major targets. This target is not so much an individual figure or movement, but rather an idea of art as overly serious or overly extended. Unlike contemporaries such as Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, or Robert Lowell, the New York School poets never wanted to be "mighty in their eyes;" rather, their camp sensibility constantly militates against "mightiness."

As well as performing and parodying the gestures and techniques of the New York School, *Kenneth Koch* also takes up philosophical questions about the aesthetic roots and commitments of the School. These questions are put, somewhat humorously, into the mouth of painter Milton Resnick:

Tradition, it's like a brick wall, you build it up, it gets higher and heavier every century but yuh keep going because yuh think there is plenty of room, and then it falls over on yuh. . . . You know what the New York School is? It's a lot of guys

who know all about bricks. It's us. . . . We're pushin em down day and night. It's a cold water loft revolution. Take that Brooks Brothers look off your face. Put on these dungarees. Elaine broke em in herself. (131)

As with so much New York School poetry, there is both comedy and thoughtfulness in this passage. If Tradition is a brick wall, and the New York School set out to push it down, what--if anything--did they build in its place? Perhaps more to the point is the question of whether the wall can ever really be knocked down, or whether its bricks can only be disassembled and re-layed in a new way. In fact, "pushin down" bricks can be read in two ways: one of the brick layer who "pushes em down" to *build* a wall, and the other of the renegade who only wants to demolish the wall. Although the "historical" avant-garde (of the first decades of the century) and some neo-avant-garde movements of the 1950s and 60s have claimed the role of wall-smashing iconoclasts, this thesis plans to look more closely at the substance and meaning of this claim, particularly for the "cold water loft revolution" of the 1950s. The humor and absurdity of Resnick's comments indicate O'Hara's and Rivers' rather ambivalent reaction to the macho, knock-em-down avant-gardism of not only the Abstract Expressionists but also another group of "cold water loft" revolutionaries in New York, the Beats. If such radical activity means only wiping "that Brooks Brothers look off your face" and "put[ting] on these dungarees" (as corporate advertisers and the culture industry in the 1960s tried to convince innumerable consumers), then it doesn't signify much for advanced artistic practice. The questions of what kind of barriers the New York School poets were facing, how they responded to the walls of the past and the present, and what, ultimately, they did with the bricks will be the subjects of the following chapters.

Is There a New York School of Poetry?

The relevance, and in fact the very existence, of a “New York School” of poetry has been a matter of much debate. The name was coined in 1961, in what has been read as a commercially motivated move, by editor and gallery director John Bernard Myers. In his recent study, David Lehman suggests that Myers “came up with the New York School moniker . . . hoping to cash in on the cachet of the world-conquering Abstract Expressionists” (20). In fact, Myers’ motivation probably ran in the opposite direction. As he notes in the introduction to his 1969 anthology *The Poets of the New York School*:

‘Every artist should have his poet,’ Virgil Thomson once told me . . . And it is strictly true that for an artist to have a Baudelaire, a Jarry, a Max Jacob, a Valéry or an Eluard to sing his praises or to explicate his pictures there can be no finer form of publicity. After all, a painting or a sculpture is, in the end, a saleable commodity, and the myths which accrue--generated by poets--form precious barnacles about these works, guaranteeing a rise in their market value. No such market can attach itself to a poem. (9)

While Myers hoped that the poets would help advertise the painters his gallery represented, what he doesn’t understand or acknowledge is that the painters could likewise serve as publicists for the poets, though in a different way. The mystique and success of Abstraction Expressionism (also known as New York School Painting) could lend both allure and authority to a group of poets whose work, like that of the painters earlier in their careers, had no real audience at all.⁵ Abstract Expressionism was, after all, one of the most successful and important twentieth century art movements, the movement that in Serge Guilbaut’s convincing analysis helped “steal” modern art from Europe, transferring its world capital from Paris to New York. It is ironic, however, that by the time Myers came up with the label, the painters’ ascendancy had peaked, and by the 1960s was in decline as cool, ironic forms of Pop art displaced the hot, passionate forms of gestural abstraction. Thus, as we will see, the New York School poets took on the difficult task of contending with Abstract Expressionism both by applying its lessons and advances and by moving beyond its limitations and those aspects that had already become passé by the 1960s.

Myers' choice of label, in any case, is certainly more than just descriptive. Given the associations attached to "the New York School" it is not surprising that when the tag became applied to the poets it was seen sometimes as a gimmick, sometimes as a joke.⁶ From the beginning, members, supporters, and critics of the New York School poets have frequently debated the appropriateness, relevance, and use of the label. Lehman notes: "The 'New York School of Poets' was always, on the face of it, an incongruous label. Here was a group of poets who were born elsewhere, went to college elsewhere, and contrived--all except Frank O'Hara--to abandon New York City for long stretches in Europe" (*Last* 19). John Ashbery lived not in New York but in Paris when his first books were published and his reputation, along with the reputation of the New York School, was formed. Ashbery himself has always been doubtful of the label, and in several interviews rejects it as a critical convenience, "a way of lumping us all together just because we happened to be living in New York for various practical reasons," when in his mind "the differences are greater than the similarities among our work" (Poulin 252). Kenneth Koch has similar reservations: ". . . there was no school of New York poets, in the sense that the French and other European countries have schools of poetry; that is, there was no manifesto, there were no rules, there were no meetings. There *was* a group of friends-- John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara and me at the beginning and later James Schuyler" (Tranter 177). In their mock-manifesto *How to Proceed in the Arts*, O'Hara and Rivers gives us another reason to be suspicious of the "school" mentality: "If you are interested in schools, choose a school that is interested in you. . . . good or bad schools are insurance companies. Enter their offices and you are certain of a position" (*AC* 93). Even Myers hedges his bets. The introduction to his anthology includes this disclaimer: "Notice: I have not called these writers 'The New York School of Poets,' [he calls them The Poets of the New York School] but have deliberately refrained from so defining them because, properly speaking, they do not constitute a 'school of poets' in the old-fashioned sense" (7).

What all of these comments raise is the difficult problem of classification. Here we have a group of poets--Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, and Kenneth Koch are the three I will use to represent this group, but to these "first generation" poets could be added James Schuyler, Barbara Guest, Edwin Denby, and perhaps Violet Lang⁷--who never claimed to be a group and, in fact, often disclaimed any collective association. And yet there are striking similarities in the poets' works and, perhaps more importantly, in the poets' attitudes towards their work and towards art in general. While the poetry of Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery may look very different at first glance (particularly when we contrast the illusions of personal presence in O'Hara and personal absence in Ashbery), I believe there are underlying similarities of a much more fundamental sort. These are similarities that move beyond the surfaces of form and content, and find their root in attitudes towards aesthetics, the institution of art, and the relationship between art and life in general.

This thesis will argue that the label the "New York School" does have significance beyond its promotional value, and that it describes not only congruencies in geographical position but also more important and deep-rooted similarities in attitudes, values, and preoccupations. While it may be difficult to find a single feature common to all their poetry, it is not at all difficult to locate a wide range of what Wittgenstein calls "family resemblances": "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail" (I 66). In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein uses the metaphor of a thread made up of many fibres to explain how a group of similar items may be bound together by resemblances: "The strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres" (I 67). It is the purpose of this thesis to build such a thread by entwining a number of the overlapping fibres of the New York School poets.

There are a number of reasons why such a thread might be an important critical construct or, more directly, why it is worthwhile to study the poets as a group rather than

only as individuals (as critics like Harold Bloom urge us to do). The poets' collective ideas, which are represented in their family resemblances, form a crucial point of origin, both for each individual's work, and for their collaborations and intertextual conversations. By reconstructing the complex background from which these poets emerge and investigating their overlapping interests and resemblances (with each other and with the New York art world of the time in which they were fully immersed as critics, curators, and collaborators), we can draw a more complete picture in several ways. First, we will gain better insight into the progression and totality of each poet's oeuvre. Only by having a sense of where these poets started can we accurately measure the distance their work travels. As well, these points of origin highlight the way that a reading of one poet can illuminate and inspire our readings of his colleagues. By seeing their resemblances, we establish a point from which to measure deviation and difference. Their resemblances also form a base from which to view the way each individual tackles a similar problem--since the problems these poets faced (such as the challenge of creating a poetry of enaction rather than representation) are an important subset of their resemblances. Finally, putting the poets together is one way of acknowledging the fact that artistic production can be a *collective* as well as an individual project--and that collectivity can be essential to production, contrary to romantic myths of individual genius.

These points of origin can also be used against one of the most powerful and willful misreadings of John Ashbery, that of Harold Bloom, who argues that the poet is "so unique a figure that only confusion is engendered by associating him with Koch, O'Hara, Schuyler and their friends and disciples" ("Charity" 169). Bloom is not the only critic who would separate Ashbery completely from his colleagues and thus from his origin. David Perkins shares this idea and uses it to structure Ashbery's placement in his important work, *A History of Modern Poetry* (1987). Perkins argues that Ashbery shouldn't be considered with the New York School because although he was "initially associated with this group, his achievement completely transcends this early identification" (529). I would suggest that

Ashbery's poetry does not transcend, but extends the New York School project.

Ashbery's connections, collaborations and conversations with other New York artists are crucial and undeniable points of origin. The attitudes, ideas, procedures, themes, and images of early New York School poetry are elements which Ashbery helped initiate and which continue to inform all his later work. And this network of New York resemblances is as relevant and important to his work as, for example, his engagement with romantic and modern precursors which Bloom uses as the measure of his poetry's importance. If we agree with some of the leading critics of the day (Bloom, Altieri, Perloff, Blasing, Shetley and others) that Ashbery is among the most significant, perhaps even *the* most significant postmodern American poet, we need to give much more serious consideration to his New York origins and connections than Bloom or Perkins allow.

Finally, by putting the poets back in their place and time their work can be included with, and appreciated in relation to, the trans-genre artistic renaissance occurring in New York City in the 1950s and 60s--the time the poets were beginning to publish.⁸ This renaissance, which might appropriately take as its father-figure long time New York resident Marcel Duchamp, included experimental composers and musicians such as John Cage, Morton Feldman, and David Tudor; painters, sculptors and mixed media artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Larry Rivers, and Jean Tinguely; and avant-garde dancers and choreographers such as Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, Yvonne Rainer, and Steve Paxton (famous for, among other things, performing a duet with a chicken). With these artists the poets shared many aesthetic beliefs and enthusiasms. All were interested in highlighting the continuity of art and life and in putting emphasis on process, spontaneity, and performance. Each was absorbed in the problem of producing an art in motion rather than a static, stable, classical art (the "Happening," installation, performance, and "action poem" are all solutions to this problem). In the pursuit of motion, change, and the texture of lived experience, these artists often shared similar techniques and procedures, such as the use of chance in composition, and the use of "found" objects, texts, and sounds in

place of traditional materials. As well, all of these artists shared, in different ways, a comic, ironic, sometimes absurdist, sometimes camp-inflected attitude that mocked the high seriousness of art and artists (here Duchamp's example of the 1919 "corrected readymade" *L.H.O.O.Q.*, which attached a beard and moustache to a photograph of the Mona Lisa serves as an apt precursor).⁹ Finally, as I will discuss next, all shared the formidable task of moving beyond what they began to see as an established, stale, and increasingly commercialized "avant-garde" and finding new ways of creating "advanced" art.

The New York School and the Avant-Garde

Because of the particular historical moment and the unique place in which the New York School poets began publishing their works, they were among the first American poets to decide that successful work would have to move beyond the oppositional ideas of the "avant-garde." Before we can understand the importance of this transition we must pause to take stock of the idea and history of the avant-garde as it was understood and instituted in postwar America.

At its broadest base level and in common usage the "avant-garde" defines artists or works which are deemed revolutionary, radical, "in advance" of their time. As Jürgen Habermas puts it "the avant-garde understands itself as invading unknown territory, exposing itself to the dangers of sudden, shocking encounters, conquering an as yet unoccupied future" (99). But such a definition is so broad, general, ahistorical, and open to subjective judgment (who decides what is viable, revolutionary art?) that it seems fraught with problems for critical theory and history. Nonetheless, from Renato Poggioli's 1962 *Theoria dell' arte d' avanguardia* (translated in 1968 as *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*) to Peter Bürger's 1984 *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, to Richard Murphy's 1999 *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, numerous critics have attempted to construct all-encompassing theories of the avant-garde. In this study, I present not another totalized theory, but rather a survey of

speculations about the avant-garde. In particular, what interests me is the way “the avant-garde” was understood and used in postwar America, since this is the ground from which New York School poetry grew. Just as critics in the past few decades have begun to understand that there were and are many “modernisms,” so we are beginning to see that there are also many “avant-gardes.”¹⁰ Thus, while comprehensive theories like Bürger’s are extremely provocative and useful points of departure for understanding this heterogeneous artistic phenomena, it seems unlikely that any single theory of the avant-garde will ever account for all its diverse (and often contradictory) manifestations. This study proposes to use both those more general accounts of the avant-garde which circulated in the late fifties and early sixties (when the New York School poets were developing their aesthetic), and the more academically rigorous accounts from Bürger on, in order to understand both what the avant-garde meant to the poets and what it might mean to their readers today, at the end of the twentieth century.¹¹

In beginning to develop a fuller understanding of the idea of the avant-garde we will turn, as several critics have before, to the origin of the concept. In his important early study, Renato Poggioli—who was, significantly, one of Frank O’Hara’s favored professors at Harvard (Gooch 150)—notes that the earliest uses of the term “avant-garde” in relation to art were primarily political. Of French origin, the term was used (as early as 1825) by followers of the proto-socialists Saint-Simon and Fourier to suggest how art could be “an instrument for social action and reform, a means of revolutionary propaganda and agitation” (Poggioli 9). Like the “advanced” troops of an army, revolutionary artists could prepare the way (psychologically, emotionally, intellectually) for political changes to come. As Fourieriste Gabriel-Désiré Laverdant exclaims in *De la mission de l’art et du rôle des artistes* (1845): “Art, the expression of society, manifests, in its highest soaring, the most advanced social tendencies: it is the forerunner and the revealer” (qtd. in Poggioli 9). In this early discourse there were two avant-gardes—the political and the artistic—which worked hand in hand to achieve a political end. However, by the 1880s, with the birth of

the first modern literary “little magazines,” a separation of the two avant-gardes took place. A growing number of artistic coteries appropriated the political discourse (and with it the *symbolic force* of political dissent) to signal their own “radical” aesthetic departures from bourgeois artistic forms and practices (Poggioli 11-12, Lyon 5). In these early artistic manifestos the militaristic language of political tracts was used to valorize more purely aesthetic projects. By the turn of the century, Poggioli observes, “expressions such as ‘the art, or literature, of the avant-garde’ . . . took on the common inheritance of French language and culture, and passed over the frontiers as ‘exchange currency’ into the international market of ideas” (12). Our abiding idea of the avant-garde thus crystallizes at the intersection between political and aesthetic motives and at this intersection, Poggioli argues, are the common and fundamental avant-garde concepts of alienation and opposition. It is concepts or abstract ideas such as these that Poggioli’s study focuses on, and while his work has been rightly criticized for its lack of historical specificity¹², these trans-historical concepts are nonetheless important and relevant to any understanding of the avant-garde. Poggioli’s ideas are in fact particularly relevant to this study since they influenced not only general discourse about the avant-garde in the 1960s, but also may have specifically inspired the three poets under consideration, all of whom were studying at Harvard during Poggioli’s tenure. I will proceed, then, by dealing first with these abstract concerns and then turning to a consideration of the avant-garde *in history* through a discussion of Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.

According to Poggioli the root of vanguardism (and here we can think in both political and aesthetic terms) is alienation. The artist’s estrangement from his or her society--which Poggioli analyzes in detail in terms of *psychological, social, economic, cultural, stylistic, and aesthetic* alienation (109-28)--prompts the creation of deviant, revolutionary work. Such work is offered both as a means of criticizing the ideals and limitations of the dominant society and its stabilizing discourses, and as a forum for expressing what those discourses (through their chief pseudo-artistic modes of “classics”

and “commercials” [Poggioli 123-4]) cannot adequately express.¹³ Alienation produces opposition, which expresses itself in various modes of anti-traditionalism, futurism, nihilism, obscurity, iconoclasm, cerebralism, abstraction, fragmentation, black humour, etc.--modes which Poggioli analyzes throughout his work.

Opposition, or what Poggioli labels “antagonism” in *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, becomes the *sine qua non* of the first avant-garde movements, of the “historical” avant-garde (the term used by Peter Bürger to categorize Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, etc.), and of later groups such as Abstract Expressionism or Beat poetry. Opposition and revolt--whether directed against a master, a tradition, or society at large--is what unites different avant-garde movements, and creates solidarity within individual avant-garde groups. Without an enemy these movements lose their force since “as a minority culture, the avant-garde cannot get by without combating and denying the majority culture it opposes” (Poggioli 108). On this reading, avant-garde culture is essentially aristocratic, and the new art serves to divide the public into two classes: an enlightened minority who understand it, and an ignorant majority who do not.¹⁴

An example of this oppositional dynamic relevant to the New York School can be seen in a typical Abstract Expressionist manifesto. This document, written by Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman (though signed only by the former two) was included in an open letter to the *New York Times* dated June 7, 1943:

1. To us art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risks.
2. This world of the imagination is fancy-free and violently opposed to common sense.
3. It is our function as artists to make the spectator see the world our way--not his way.

.....
 Consequently, if your work embodies these beliefs, it must insult anyone who is spiritually attuned to interior decoration; pictures for the home; pictures for over the mantle, pictures of the American scene; social pictures; purity in art; prize-winning potboilers; the National Academy; the Whitney Academy; the Corn Belt Academy; buckeyes; trite tripe; etc. (in Ross, *Abstract Expressionism* 206-7)

Here we see how binary “us” and “them” constructions allow for the avant-garde position. Risk taking becomes meaningful when opposed to the security of those unwilling to risk. Imagination becomes compelling when opposed to tedious common sense. “Our way” makes sense in that it is not “their way.” This strategy, which Edward Said has described in another context as “imaginative geography,” “help[s] the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away” (55). Thus, the conformist Other (part reality, part reductive illusion) who is “spiritually attuned to interior decoration; . . . prize-winning potboilers; . . . [and] trite tripe” is essential for avant-garde attainment.

There are a number of crucial problems with the oppositional stance, as the New York School poets learned from closely examining the fate of contemporary “avant-gardists.” In the first place, while these artists set out to reject conventions, such gestures may easily ossify into a new set of “conventions of the unconventional,” and thus become self-defeating. Poggioli explains that

the conventions of avant-garde art, in a conscious or unconscious way, are directly and rigidly determined by an inverse relation to traditional conventions. Thanks to this relation, a paradoxical one, the conventions of the avant-garde are often as easily deduced as those of the academy: their deviation from the norm is so regular and normal a fact that it is transformed into a canon no less exceptional than predictable. Disorder becomes a rule when it is opposed in a deliberate and symmetrical manner to a pre-established order. (56)

The poets learned from the Abstract Expressionists (and perhaps from the repetitive rebellions of the Beats which had ossified into a “hip” style that would find major cultural expression in the mass “hip-py” movement of the 1960s) that when the unconventional becomes habit it is time to move on.¹⁵

In a similar way, the gestures of challenging bourgeois democracy and convention may in the end resolve into affirmations of exactly that which is putatively opposed. Poggioli notes that avant-garde art cannot exist in a controlled, totalitarian state, but only in a climate where the “art of exception” is tolerated, just as individual eccentricity and deviation is tolerated. While such deviation is opposed by the “tyranny of opinion,” such

cultural controls cannot establish absolute conformity (Poggioli 106). Thus, Poggioli draws the following ironic conclusion:

Avant-garde art then cannot help paying involuntary homage to democratic and liberal-bourgeois society in the very act of proclaiming itself antidemocratic and antibourgeois; nor does it realize that it expresses the evolutionary and progressive principle of that social order in the very act of abandoning itself to the opposite chimeras of involution and revolution. (106)

A final, and perhaps most important, reason that the New York School abandoned avant-garde antagonism is because, particularly in the United States in the 1950s and 60s, these conventions of opposition were especially amenable to, and easily co-opted by, the bourgeois majority they supposedly opposed. This is vividly illustrated by the way the Abstract Expressionists--originally seen by many as radical outsiders, artistic outlaws, charlatans and scoundrels in the best avant-garde tradition--quickly became the darlings of mainstream collectors, politicians, and advertising agents. Artists who began their careers scraping by, surviving mostly on salaries from Roosevelt's Federal Art Project which paid them \$95 monthly for 96 hours of work (Sandler, *Triumph* 5), ended up making fortunes and displaying their work in the most important galleries and collections in the country. This remarkable transformation has much to do with the attitudes of opposition, independence, and rebellion which informed the painters' work and rhetoric and which, often in altered forms and uncontrolled ways, came to represent them in the media. Serge Guilbaut's important study *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* is a detailed account of the political appropriation of Abstract Expressionism by Cold War policy makers. As Guilbaut summarizes: "Avant garde artists, now [portrayed as] politically 'neutral' individualists, articulated in their works values that were subsequently assimilated, utilized, and co-opted by politicians, with the result that artistic rebellion was transformed into aggressive liberal ideology" (200). Guilbaut surveys the ways in which the ideas and values of the Abstract Expressionists (individualism, risk, freedom, the new frontier) took on politically charged

meanings in documents such as the Marshall Plan (Guilbaut 144-8) and Schlesinger's *The Vital Center* (Guilbaut 189-92).

While the collusion between painting and politics may be somewhat more tentative and ambiguous than Guilbaut allows--amounting to, as one commentator suggests, "guilt by vague association" (Clark 176)--the ties between painting and capitalism are less opaque. Jackson Pollock, who Mark Rothko once called "a self contained and sustained advertising concern" (qtd. in Clark 176) perfectly illustrates the commercial potential of avant-garde defiance. Pollock came to embody a certain highly popular myth, one which fuses the energies of the "noble savage," the "frontiersman," and the "artist-outcast," as Brian O'Doherty argues (83).¹⁶ The centrality of this myth to American culture, and with it Pollock's lucrative potential as a figure for audience recognition, association, and identification, accounts at least in part for the painter's remarkable success. Pollock moved from a position of utter marginality¹⁷ to the pages of *Life* magazine where he became, along with Marlon Brando and James Dean, the commodified embodiment of certain popular, saleable forms of defiance.

Returning to the poets, we can begin to see that at this historical juncture--when Jackson Pollock (the most fiercely antagonistic member of a group sometimes known as the Irascibles) was being conscripted to promote Country Homes real estate and couturier fashion, and when the once outcast Beat writers were being used to sell everything from pulp fiction paperbacks and Hollywood films to "beachnik" swimsuits--the New York School poets would not be predisposed to be seen as another defiant group.¹⁸ Instead, these poets chose to abandon the traditional rejections of the avant-garde as they understood it. It is in this new attitude of indifference, rather than in any specific content, form, or place that the coherence of the New York School lies.¹⁹

* * *

As Kenneth Koch noted earlier, the New York School is not an avant-garde movement in the sense which requires “manifesto[s], rules . . . , meetings.” It does not subscribe to any of the four broad ideological aspects of the avant-garde described by Poggioli. These aspects include: antagonism (the necessity to “agitate *against* something or someone,” especially “that collective individual called the public” [25-26]), activism (“action for the mere sake of doing something” [27]), nihilism (“destructive labor . . . attaining nonaction by acting” [61-2]), and agonism (which posits “the artist as victim-hero”: “a paradoxical and positive form of spiritual defeatism” [66]). The New York School in fact successfully subverts each of these subverting qualities. In place of antagonism (the kind expressed repeatedly in their day by the Beats and Bay area poets towards the “squares,” for instance), the New York School substituted what Marcel Duchamp called “the irony of indifference,”²⁰ choosing withdrawal as a more relevant form of protest. In place of the macho activism expressed in so many manifestoes of the historical avant-garde (or, for that matter of manifesto-like contemporary texts like *Howl* or *On the Road*), the New York poets chose a quieter immersion in the world of art. They also chose, at times, a kind of ironic camp “activism” which subtly satirized action for action’s sake, as we will see in mock-manifestoes like O’Hara’s “Personism” and Koch’s “Fresh Air.” As well, these poets were not interested in violently overthrowing older artistic orders, nor in nihilistic destruction, but rather in using fragments of the past (including past avant-gardes) to create a new, multifaceted art. Finally, while many of their contemporaries, men and women in the Confessional and Beat schools particularly, took on the role of “victim-hero” the New York School poets adopted a different, more old-fashioned, role of aesthete.

Through a stance of indifference the New York School fulfilled a new role by challenging not only the status quo (early readers and critics found their writing just as “resistant”--though not necessarily more “shocking”--than Beat or Confessional work) but

also challenging an increasingly popular “avant-garde.” Such a two-pronged challenge was necessary, they believed, since the avant-garde was being deprived of its force through co-optation by Cold War rhetoricians and capitalist entrepreneurs, as well as by the academy in its increasing efforts to institutionalize intellectual innovation.²¹

In place of opposition, the task for contemporary writers, according to John Ashbery in his 1968 lecture “The Invisible Avant-Garde,” was to find an attitude that “neither accepts nor rejects acceptance but is independent of it” (RS 394). The idea of independence, of an art disconnected from the fashionable, short-lived “advances” of the day, is a key one for understanding how New York School poetry developed and how it functions. Here is Ashbery’s description of O’Hara’s poetry in a short obituary essay:

Frank O’Hara’s poetry has no program and therefore cannot be joined. It does not advocate sex and dope as a panacea for the ills of modern society; it does not speak out against the war in Viet Nam or in favor of civil rights; it does not paint gothic vignettes of the post-Atomic Age: in a word, it does not attack the establishment. It merely ignores its right to exist, and is thus a source of annoyance for partisans of every stripe. (“Frank O’Hara’s Question” 6)

Kenneth Koch arrives at a similar conclusion in an interview when he rejects the idea of the New York School poets as “iconoclasts”: “An iconoclast may make the mistake of taking the ideas that are opposed to him too seriously and being overconcerned with destroying them, whereas maybe the best thing to do instead of destroying all the Fords is to build a good Chevrolet. . .” (“O’Hara” 205).

Instead of strategies of opposition the poets developed strategies of indifference and withdrawal (a topic examined in detail in Chapter Two) which were necessary given the new dilemma of the advanced artist. Marcel Duchamp, a New York School mentor who chose to give up the formal practice of art as early as 1923 because of this dilemma, summarizes it well²²:

In my time we artists were pariahs, we knew it and we enjoyed it. But today the artist is integrated, and so he has to be paid, and so he has to keep producing for the market. It’s a vicious circle. . . .the only solution for the great man of tomorrow in art is to go underground. . . . Not having to deal with the money society on its own terms, he won’t have to be integrated into it and he won’t be contaminated, as all the others are. (Tomkins 67)

The New York School poets have, of course, not made the same decision as Duchamp. They have continued to practice art and to produce work; where they have “gone underground” is in the area of ideology. In terms of form, New York School poetry has always been “advanced” work, with an emphasis on experimentation and innovation. Early on, the poets signaled their allegiance to the “tradition of the new” (or more specifically to what both Perloff and Ashbery have defined in slightly different ways as ‘the Other Tradition’ of nonorganic art) in their allusions to writers such as Guillaume Apollinaire, Pierre Reverdy, Raymond Roussel, and Gertrude Stein (among many others). Such avant-garde connections also extend to a host of vanguard painters (from Parmigianino to painter/writer Henri Michaux), musicians (from Erik Satie to John Cage), and choreographers (from George Balanchine to Merce Cunningham). Likewise, the response to New York School work, with typical accusations of obscurity, dehumanization, cerebralism, and charlatanism, also places it as part of the “art of exception.” The movement’s neo-avant-garde revision, then, is best understood not in terms of content or form but in terms of ideology--the ideas and goals of avant-gardism. In order to move beyond Poggioli, and to understand how the New York School responded not only to a trans-historical idea of avant-gardism, but also to historically specific avant-garde manifestations, we need to turn to the work of Peter Bürger. Bürger’s theory can help us further comprehend how the poets both used and revised the gains of the historical avant-garde.

While Poggioli’s theory is concerned with the structure and characteristics of avant-gardism *in general*, Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* carries his analysis further through a more detailed consideration of the historical development of the avant-garde, particularly in terms of changing perceptions of the social function of art. Bürger provides the provocative suggestion that the best way to understand the avant-garde (as a related group of historical movements--Cubism, Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, etc.) is not by the

content of particular works, but by a new attitude vis-à-vis the institution of art. This was an attitude which rejected art's autonomy from life praxis and sought to reintegrate art and life. The idea of art's autonomy from the practical realities of life goes back to the late 18th century, Bürger notes, citing H. Kuhn's "Ästhetik" in *Das Fischer Lexikon*. At this time, the modern conception of "art" as a group of related disciplines (poetry, music, theater, visual arts, etc.) came into being (Kuhn in Bürger 42). These disciplines were removed from everyday life and treated as an autonomous whole, "as [a] realm of non-purposive creation and disinterested pleasure" (42). This autonomy was further reinforced, Bürger observes, with the establishment of aesthetics as a separate sphere of philosophical knowledge (42).²³

In Bürger's analysis nineteenth-century Aestheticism, which in the idea of *l'art pour l'art* pushed art's autonomy to its extreme and logical conclusion, set the stage for avant-gardist dissatisfaction with the social ineffectiveness of their medium. Contra Aestheticism and Decadence, the early avant-garde artists longed for a more politically effective art. However, they also realized that efficacy could not be achieved through political content. This is because such content tends to be neutralized by its appearance in a medium which is taken as autonomous. Bürger advances this theory, using Marcuse's analysis from "The Affirmative Character of Culture":

Marcuse outlines the global determination of art's function in bourgeois society, which is a contradictory one: on the one hand it shows "forgotten truths" (thus it protests against a reality in which these truths have no validity); on the other, such truths are detached from reality through the medium of aesthetic semblance (*Schein*)--art thus stabilizes the very social conditions against which it protests. It is not difficult to recognize that Marcuse is guided by the Marxist model of the critique of religion: just as Marx shows that religion stabilizes undesirable social conditions . . . so Marcuse demonstrates that bourgeois culture exiles humane values to the realm of the imagination and thus precludes their potential realization. (11)

Since autonomous art unintentionally "affirms" the status-quo, the historical avant-garde movements choose to challenge exactly this separation, and in this way to reveal "the nexus between autonomy and the absence of any consequences" (22). Instead of rejecting an earlier style, the historical avant-garde movements rejected the dissociation of art from life

praxis. These early avant-gardists were not suggesting that the content of art should become more socially significant, but rather were directing their attack on the way art functions in society by highlighting the institutional framework through which it is produced and received. The form such challenges took was usually the provocative manifestation such as Duchamp's readymades, Kurt Schwitter's "Merz art" (junk collage), the notorious performances at Zurich's Cabaret Voltaire, and other "anti-art" or "a-art" (Duchamp's term) demonstrations by figures such as Francis Picabia, André Breton, Arthur Cravan, Max Ernst, Man Ray, etc.²⁴ Through these demonstrations, avant-gardists challenged audiences to reconceive art's relationship to society at large. They provoked viewers to consider the institutional role and their own role in the construction of art, to question the dividing line between the artist and non-artist, and to reflect on the cultural norms and values which seek to relegate art to an autonomous, non-functional realm.²⁵ In general, these manifestations challenged audiences to see the logic, and more often illogic, of art as a natural and integral part of life.

Bürger concludes that the historical avant-garde movements failed to integrate art into the praxis of life (a task that may well be impossible in capitalist societies based on goal-oriented behaviour instead of the intuitive, nonpurposive logic of art the avant-gardists intended to elevate). However, what is important for literary history and for this project in particular are the real changes the avant-garde movements made and the options they opened for future artists. The first significant change is that while these movements failed to reintegrate art and life, they succeeded (for the first time in history) in making art *recognizable* as an institution, and in revealing autonomy as its principle for functioning (Bürger 57).²⁶ What this recognition meant was that instead of criticizing past art or other schools, avant-garde and neo-avant-garde movements turned to self-criticism and criticism of the institutional commerce between art and society. Future artists who heeded the lessons of the historical avant-garde, like the New York School poets, were particularly conscious of this condition of separation between art and life, and worked to develop new

strategies for communication between the two spheres.²⁷ While other contemporary movements such as the Beats continued to naively believe that art could have political efficacy through content, the New York School recognized art's autonomy and responded directly to this condition through a strategy of withdrawal. This strategy, as noted, is in contrast to the historical avant-garde approach of opposition which, as we've seen, led to the kind of co-option suffered by Jackson Pollock or Allen Ginsberg (who, late in his career, was raising money as a poster-boy for Gap jeans).

Instead of trying to "change the world" through direct intervention, the New York School poets were interested in playfully examining, deconstructing, and subtly repositioning component parts of their world. As art critic Hal Foster says of the neo-avant-garde in the visual arts, the artists "moved away from grand *oppositions* to subtle *displacements*" (25, Foster's italics). While the New York School poets were committed to contemporary culture (their work is soaked in popular cultural reference to movies, comics, and all kinds of current events) they didn't believe that poetry's job was to proselytize for (or against) mass culture. Moreover, they didn't believe their role was to change audiences' perceptions or minds by telling them how to act, what to think, or what to believe (a job that much 1960s "political poetry" took on wholeheartedly). Rather, the New York School produced a poetry where "the aesthetic" is intimately linked with (rather than antagonistically opposed to) popular culture. In this way their poetry was much closer to their pop art contemporaries (Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenburg, Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist) than to their Abstract Expressionists forefathers (Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Barnett Newman, Franz Kline) who continued to endorse a high modernist separation of "high art" and mass culture.

Another important advance which the historical avant-garde initiated relates to artistic techniques and procedures. Once art is acknowledged as a separate, autonomous institution, artistic means can be seen simply as means, none with an inherent superiority or priority over another. Bürger elaborates:

It is in the historical avant-garde movements that the totality of artistic means becomes available as means. Up to this period in the development of art, the use of artistic means had been limited by the period style, an already existing canon of permissible procedures, an infringement of which was acceptable only within certain bounds. . . . It is, on the other hand, a distinguishing feature of the historical avant-garde movements that they did not develop a style. There is no such thing as a dadaist or surrealist style. What did happen is that these movements liquidated the possibility of a period style when they raised to a principle the availability of the artistic means of past periods. (18)

This advance, as we will see, is a key one in New York School poetics where the availability and use of various forms and techniques from different periods, genres, and cultures is fully exploited.

Another gain which avant-garde and modernist writers shared (and which neo-avant-garde artists continue to exploit and develop) was the establishment of a new kind of text which Bürger characterizes as “nonorganic” in contrast to the more traditional organic text. The nonorganic text is based on an organizing principle of fragments, rather than a principle of the unified whole. Growing out of Cubism (the movement “which most consciously destroyed the representational system that had prevailed since the Renaissance,” [Bürger 73]) and the procedures of montage, the nonorganic text uses fragments of reality to dissolve the singularity of the work and to call into question its identity as the unified creation of an individual mind. Such “reality fragments”—like the piece of newspaper stuck to the cubist canvas—give the nonorganic work a different status “since parts of it no longer have the relationship to reality characteristic of the organic work of art. They are no longer signs pointing to reality, they *are* reality” (Bürger 78). For the organic text, material has meaning in that it is supposedly drawn from “real life.” For the nonorganic text, on the other hand, material is just material, a collection of signifiers to be arranged in new orders (70). Bürger further comments that “the organic work appears as a work of nature . . . [it] seeks to make unrecognizable the fact that it has been made,” whereas the nonorganic work “proclaims itself an artificial construct, an artifact” (72). Moreover, the organic text has been associated politically with the “affirmative” function of art. By creating “false reconciliations,” it has been argued, the organic text produces “the

aesthetic illusion of a harmonious world” (Murphy 16). On the other hand, the nonorganic text (with its fragmentation, discontinuity, and multiple or contradictory perspectives) disrupts “any artificial sense of unity which might offer the subject a sense of reconciliation within the social imaginary” (Murphy 13). The New York School inherited the idea of the nonorganic work from the historical avant-garde movements and further developed its forms, as subsequent chapters will explore. As with the first nonorganic works, the New York School’s early texts (most famously and notoriously Ashbery’s second volume, *The Tennis Court Oath*) often provided a powerful, disorienting shock to readers who expected texts to act in certain (logical, predictable, organic) ways.

The last, and perhaps most important, area that the avant-garde opened up for the New York School has to do with attitudes towards art and the relationship between artistic and life praxis. The avant-garde did not succeed in its goal of reintegrating life and art, of making art, in other words, a basis for action *at a societal level*. What it did do, however, was to create in the artist’s own work the artistic possibility for such an accord *at the individual level*. Figures like Duchamp, Picabia, and Breton did not make art or poetry into the daily practice of society they hoped it would become, but they did help individual artists choose this kind of correspondence as a strategy for making art and living life. The expatriate artists in New York (who were driven from Europe by fascism and Stalinism) became avant-garde models in their attempt to live, according to Johnathan Fineberg, “a heightened existence twenty-four hours a day” (30). In *New York Dada*, Rudolf Kuenzli argues that artists like Duchamp had a defining effect on the New York art scene as they encouraged young Americans to “free themselves from European tradition [read ‘high modernism’]” and create their own experiments “in uniting art, life, experience, and technology” (4-5).²⁸ Thus through a chain of New York connections, an avant-garde philosophy about the coincidence of art and life was inherited (through the Abstract Expressionists) by the New York School poets and other artists of their generation. The consequences of this philosophy will be considered throughout this study. For now, I will

only briefly list some of the ramifications. To begin with, the view that for the artist, art and life are inseparable was an informing principle behind what I will discuss in Chapter Three as the “poetics of process.” “Art as process” focuses on the living practice of art, its movement instead of its destination. Thus processes are elevated over products as in John Cage’s aleatory music, Merce Cunningham’s dance happenings, Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings, or Frank O’Hara’s “I do this, I do that” poems. The accord between art and life also means refusing traditional artistic materials in favor of everyday materials. This helps explain the musical use of “found sounds” (as in Cage’s use of street noises and of silence); the visual use of everyday objects (as in Duchamp’s readymades and Robert Rauschenberg’s combines); and the New York School’s scavenging of the clichés, inflections, and artifacts of popular culture. Finally, an art that is inseparable from daily life abjures the extraordinary for the ordinary. Thus Cunningham choreographed dances that included much ordinary walking, running, and standing still²⁹; Jean Tinguely created artistic machines out of locally salvaged junk; O’Hara made dozens of lunch poems out of his daily walks; Koch constructed meditations on such topics as a “Farm’s Thoughts” and “The Boiling Water”; and Ashbery wrote poems featuring Daffy Duck (“Daffy Duck in Hollywood”) and Popeye (“Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape”). The intersection of art and life is an important theme for a great deal of New York art at the time, and we will continue to see how this broad idea took specific form in the poets’ work.

* * *

The New York School has often been seen as *another*, or in the case of David Lehman, the *last*, avant-garde movement. It is the contention of this thesis that in fact these poets must be seen in a different light, that of the neo-avant-garde, a loose grouping of movements that both participate in and reconstruct the projects of the historical avant-garde movements. The New York School poets’ work began to develop its true character at that moment in American history—late fifties, early sixties--when the contemporary “avant-

garde” had apparently lost its revolutionary edge, when the insurgent Abstract Expressionists were in the process of being ousted by Pop, an art which seemed to accept rather than reject the status quo and the consumer institutions which it reproduced.³⁰ The New York School came of age in a time when, according to John Ashbery, “the loyalty oath mentality has pervaded outer Bohemia, and where Grove Press subway posters invite the lumpenproletariat to ‘join the Underground Generation,’ as though this were as simple a matter as joining the Pepsi Generation, which it probably is” (“Frank O’Hara’s Question” 6). To strike the radical pose in the New York art world of the early 1960s, in other words, was simply to submit to a passé fashion. What this study is interested in is how these poets dealt with this problem, and how they created a position *between* the radical art of the historical avant-garde and the radical chic of the 1960s which turned “revolutionary” gestures into saleable commodities.

Lehman’s theoretical approach, which allows him to crown the New York School poets as “the last avant-garde,” suffers from a weakness in two ways. Because he fails to historicize the avant-garde, Lehman is unable to see that the New York School approached the idea of innovation at a particular moment in history. Furthermore, Lehman fails to recognize that the poets’ ideas developed from a brief (and never strongly articulated) youthful opposition in the 1950s (which matches Lehman’s conception of the avant-garde), to a more subtle, consciously indifferent position in the 1960s--one quite different from their iconoclastic predecessors and poetic contemporaries. Approaching the question abstractly, Lehman submits the following list of six “necessary conditions for an avant-garde movement”:

One would begin by postulating the existence of a group. . . . It will locate itself in an art capital. . . . The artists must have a taste for adventure, and their art must in some sense be “advanced,” new . . . The movement will have a name . . . At its center will be a charismatic figure . . . The movement must have an adversarial character . . . (284)

Even if we were to accept Lehman’s lack of historical specificity in defining the avant-garde, it would be hard to agree that the New York School quite fits the bill. This is

because the last, and probably most important condition--the adversarial character of the group--does not really stand up to scrutiny. The New York School exists as part of what Harold Rosenberg calls "the socially reconciled avant-garde" of the 1960s: "the leading idea of Pop, Op, color-field, Minimal, and Kinetic art and in Happenings has been to exorcise the negative impulses that tormented the earlier vanguards. Today, both the alienation of the artist and the antagonism of public opinion to art have been successfully liquidated" (*De-Definition* 218). As I have suggested and will continue to explore, New York School poetry does not "attack the establishment" as Ashbery said of O'Hara's work, but "merely ignores its right to exist." It does not, as Koch says, try to "destroy all the Fords," but instead "to build a good Chevrolet." How this Chevy was constructed, and what kind of poetic vehicle it would become, is the subject of the following chapters.

Chapter One will bring us back to the question of family resemblances and commonalities among the New York School poets by considering standard conceptions and misconceptions about the group. In Chapter Two we will turn to the question of the neo-avant-garde ideology by reading three New York School "manifestos" in order to discern an aesthetics and politics of indifference (contra the avant-garde politics of opposition). Chapter Three will consider the New York School's relation to other arts, particularly painting, through an examination of the "poetics of process." Process art will be examined here as a neo-avant-garde strategy for attaining a slightly reformulated avant-garde goal: the reintegration of art and life. In Chapter Four the question of taste will be considered by examining the New York School's use of camp to deconstruct the high/ low, avant-garde/ kitsch binary so essential to modernist culture. I will show how camp acts of combining experimental and popular forms became another way for the New York School poets to create a non-oppositional, neo-avant-garde position. A conclusion will reassess the neo-avant-garde position in relation to avant-garde ideology and suggest avenues which the New York School poets opened for succeeding generations of practitioners.

NOTES

¹ In *The New York School*, art critic Irving Sandler describes the Cedar: “The artists and their friends, particularly those who lived downtown, found the Cedar’s decor comfortable; its drabness and anonymity typified their public stance and even the life-style of many. . . . Colorlessness was taken as a sign of seriousness, conforming to the self-image of the artist as ‘creator’ rather than ‘creative liver’ either in the style of Bohemia or the world of fashion. As an additional increment, the drabness of the Cedar’s decor discouraged Greenwich Village Bohemians and slumming Madison Avenue types from frequenting the bar” (32). The serious, macho image that the painters cultivated and which, Sandler suggests, the Cedar reflected was far from the campy image of the poets--as the parody of this milieu in the play suggests (and as I will discuss in more detail in the chapters to come). While Abstract Expressionism (particularly the “gestural” work of Pollock, de Kooning, and Kline) was praised for qualities such as action, energy, and intensity--all qualities of an “informing metaphors of masculinity” as critic T.J. Clark notes (229)--the New York School poets were noted for their “sophistication” (a kind of backhanded praise that I will examine in the next chapter). For more on the nature and function of Abstract Expressionism’s “aura of masculinity” see Michael Leja’s discussion of “Gender and Subjectivity” in *Reframing Abstract Expressionism* 253-68.

² For details see Irving Sandler’s article “The Club” in Shapiro and Shapiro 48-58.

³ Reva Wolf’s *Andy Warhol, Poetry, and Gossip in the 1960s* follows a similar thesis, arguing that Warhol used his art to communicate--overtly and covertly--with specific people, and to insinuate himself into different art world communities.

⁴ The following mock-Kochean lines seem no more, and no less, absurd than the poetry Koch, O’Hara, and Ashbery were actually publishing at the time:

And, with a shout, collecting coat-hangers
Dour rebus, conch, hip
Ham, the autumn day, oh how genuine!
Literary frog, catch-all boxer, O
Real! The magistrate, say “group,” bower, undies
Disk, poop, “Timon of Athens.” . . . (Koch, “When the Sun Tries to Go On”
Rainway 17)

Butter. Lotions. Cries. A glass of ice. Aldebaran and Mizar,
a guitar of toothpaste tubes and fingernails, trembling spear.
Balustrade, tensile, enclosing the surging waters of my heart
in a laughing collapse where the natives tint urine their hair:
trolley cars find cat-eyes in New Guinea where Mozart died,
on the beach fraught with emotion and rotting elephants,
that elephant of a smile which lingers when I lean over and throw.
(O’Hara, “Second Avenue” *CP* 149-50)

multitude headquarters about there
Because there are no
because the majority is toxic
An exquisite sense--like pretzels . . .
He was sent to the state senate
wage conceal his disapproval

The arguments situation lawyers worthless sullen cafeterias (Ashbery, "Europe"
Mooring 142)

⁵ Without saying so specifically (and perhaps without realizing it), Myers was using an advertising strategy not unlike the one used by the Beats. These writers borrowed the semblance (and occasionally the reality) of the marginality and hardship of African American jazz musicians to add a sheen of authenticity to work that might otherwise have been seen as the postured sufferings of middle class, well-educated white kids toying with marginality from the safety of the center.

⁶ Poet and dance critic Edwin Denby called the label "a complicated double-joke." Denby saw the label as a kind of comic homage to the "New York School Painters" who coined their name in opposition to the "School of Paris," which had originated as a joke in opposition to the "School of Florence." See Ward 6-7.

⁷ To this list could be added a much longer roster of "second generation" New York School poets including names such as Ted Berrigan, Ron Padgett, Bernadette Mayer, David Shapiro, Bill Berkson, Anne Waldman, Frank Lima, Ed Sanders, Kenward Elmslie, Alice Notley, etc.

⁸ I am claiming that the poets and the "school" came of age around 1960, although this is admittedly later than their first writings and small press publications with the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in the early 1950s. The sixties was a time of growing maturity in their work and a point where their signature styles were formed. The year 1960 marked the poets' appearance in Donald Allen's widely read anthology *The New American Poetry*, and thus much greater public recognition. 1960 also saw the publication of a four volume box set of poetry, published by Tibor de Nagy Editions: *Odes* (O'Hara), *The Poems* (Ashbery), *Permanently* (Koch), and *Salute* (Schuyler). Their first important individual volumes appeared in the years between the late fifties and early sixties. O'Hara published *Meditations in an Emergency* in 1957 and *Lunch Poems* in 1964. Ashbery published *Some Trees* in 1956, *The Tennis Court Oath* in 1962, and *Rivers and Mountains*, the collection that most clearly inaugurated his signature style, in 1966. Koch published his first major works, the mock-epic *Ko, or a Season on Earth* in 1959 and *Thank You and Other Poems* in 1962. From 1961-2, Ashbery, Koch, Schuyler and Harry Mathews collaborated to produce five issues of the journal *Locus Solus* which helped define the New York School aesthetic. In 1959 O'Hara wrote (and in 1961 published) "Personism: A Manifesto" which, in its own odd, campy way, outlined a New York School attitude. Thus, while the poets' associations date back to their meeting at Harvard (circa 1946), the documents and poems which best exemplify the New York School spirit are those which date from the late fifties and early sixties.

⁹ Pronounced phonetically in French, Duchamp's title becomes "Elle a chaud au cul" ("She has a hot ass").

¹⁰ A good example of such modernist revisionary work is Margaret Dickie and Thomas Travisano's *Gendered Modernisms* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1996), a collection of essays which reconsiders the story of modernism from the perspectives of female poets who in the past have been relegated to "little more than footnotes to the general histories" (vii).

¹¹ In this thesis I will be observing the critical distinctions made between modernism (the larger, more encompassing historical designation and movement) and the avant-garde (a group of related movements that fit under the modernist rubric--sharing a historical

moment, but differing in ideological implications). There are several related ways that these distinctions have been made. In his introduction to Bürger's book, Schulte-Sasse comments, for example, that "Modernism may be understandable as an attack on traditional writing techniques, but the avant-garde can only be understood as an attack meant to alter the institutional commerce with art" (xv). In these (generally Marxist-inspired) accounts Modernism is seen as being interested chiefly in formal and aesthetic questions and problems, as opposed to political issues. Its political orientation (though readable, and often conservative or rightist as with Pound and Eliot) usually remains a subtextual issue. The avant-garde, on the other hand, is said to be overtly interested in ideology and in the relationship between art and culture. Its orientation tends to be leftist and anti-bourgeois. Modernism focuses on "the work" as a self-contained, autonomous entity, whereas the avant-garde is interested in the social reality which helps structure "the work," and which "the work," in part, reflects. Also related to these issues are modernism and the avant-garde's differing attitudes towards mass culture (as discussed by Andreas Huyssen). Huyssen argues that while modernism is almost always antagonistic towards mass culture (and, in fact, constitutes itself based on this opposition and antagonism), the avant-garde has a much more receptive and open relationship to mass culture. For more on the distinctions between these two movements, see Richard Murphy's introductory chapter to *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*. My sense is that while these generalizations tend to be true, they nonetheless suffer from the inaccuracy of all generalization. There can, in fact, be no totalized definition of "modernism" or the "avant-garde" that some particular modernist or avant-gardist manifestation will not completely contradict (as Italian Futurism proves for the avant-garde and writers like Gertrude Stein or William Carlos Williams prove for modernism).

¹² See Jochen Schulte-Sasse's "Forward: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde" vii-x for a discussion of the limitations of Poggioli's theory.

¹³ "Classics" (bourgeois high art) and "commercials" (bourgeois low art for the masses) are linked, according to Poggioli, in that they both belong to "the dominating class": "Bourgeois culture is certainly unable to distinguish the values of the first from the nonvalues of the second, just as the critics in that culture are unable to determine the criteria of taste distinguishing the various strata of the contemporary public" (124).

¹⁴ This point was made originally by Ortega y Gasset (see Poggioli 91).

¹⁵ A whole series of conventional unconventionalities established themselves around "the hip"--from motorcycles and leather jackets to long hair and beads. The "hip" became established nonconformism and rebellion, to the point where *Life* magazine in 1959 was ironically extolling the Beat movement as "The Only Rebellion Around" (O'Neil 115).

¹⁶ O'Doherty further notes that "Pollock brought into American art mythic energies previously confined to American literature, to Poe, Melville, Wolfe, Hemingway" (83). His essay, "Jackson Pollock's Myth," is an excellent study of the substance and consequences of Pollock's public face.

¹⁷ In 1930, at eighteen years old, Pollock moved to New York to try to make it as an artist. He was utterly unsuccessful for twelve years. As Kirk Varnedoe notes in his catalog essay for the 1998-99 MOMA Pollock retrospective: "A perpetual student, he lived from hand to mouth, mostly in shared or borrowed apartments, and shuttled from one forgiving support system to another. . . . Had he been run over by a bus, or (more likely) gotten himself killed in a drunken accident, there would be no trace of him in the history of modern art, nor any reason to look for one" (23).

¹⁸ See Guilbaut 185 for an analysis of how Country Homes of Tarrytown, New York used Pollock to help sell luxury housing development units. Also see Guilbaut 87 for a discussion of how Pollock was “domesticated by the system of fashion” which made his paintings and himself into desirable commodities. This kind of domestication is vividly illustrated in the March 1, 1951 issue of *Vogue* magazine which included “four pages of photographs by Cecil Beaton, in which Irene and Sophie showed off the latest [fashion] creations” in front of four Pollock canvases (Clark 173). See Hobbs 156-7 for a discussion of the commodification of the Beats and their adoption by television (*Dobie Gillis*), radio soap opera (*Helen Trent*), pulp fiction (*Beatnik Party*) and movies (*The Beat Generation*).

¹⁹ Harold Rosenberg has argued that in modern art style is determined not by place but by ideology, so that, for example, there is a “decisive difference between a Fauvist and a Cubist painting executed at the same time on the Paris Left Bank” (*De-Definition* 194). The same is true for poetry, as illustrated by the vast differences between poems written in New York City in the late 1950s by formalists like John Hollander or Anthony Hecht, Beat poets like Allen Ginsberg or Gregory Corso, and New York School representatives such as O’Hara or Koch. What most distinguishes these poets from one another is not the subject or form of their work, but the aesthetic ideology which informs it. A major preoccupation of this study, then, will be with such ideologies (the ideas, beliefs, and values that preface the production of poetry).

²⁰ “If you can ironize with no affective result, with no destructiveness or laughter either--in other words with indifference--then you have a chance for another vista,” Duchamp has said (Tomkins 65-66).

²¹ On the growing ineffectiveness of the avant-garde, Harold Rosenberg writes: “Almost to the degree that art expressed its contempt of all that is established and official, it is sought out and paid for--which is to say: taken into camp and deprived of its antagonistic force. The readiness of capitalist society to accept the art that avows its antagonism to capitalist society is therefore anything but the evidence of art’s power; it is exactly the means by which art is made impotent. . . . the highest achievement of the free subversive spirit has been co-opted to lend the color of spirituality to the capitalist enterprise” (in Lehman, *Last* 287). Stuart Hobbs’s 1997 study *The End of the American Avant-Garde* posits a trio of causes for the demise of advanced art. Firstly, borrowing from Guilbaut, he argues that political “Cold Warriors” appropriated avant-garde rhetoric and personalities to illustrate the superiority of American culture over Soviet culture. Avant-garde artists thus became ideological tools, and while they gained respect and recognition, they simultaneously disqualified themselves as radicals (15). Secondly, Hobbes maintains that with the postwar expansion of universities, these institutions developed “all but insatiable appetite[s] for young intellectuals” and bohemian artists. In the pursuit of stable and lucrative university employment, avant-garde “cultural outsiders” became neutralized “cultural insiders” (16). Finally, Hobbes notes the effects of capitalism with the rise of “a consumer culture based on the sale of lifestyle images.” Journalists and advertisers “converted avant-garde rebellion into fads and fashions” which further neutralized true radicalism by converting it into “radical chic” (16).

²² Duchamp’s decision to opt out of the commercial art world led one critic to call him “Picasso’s bad conscience”(Tomkins 49). While Duchamp has not made a definitive statement about quitting art, one important reason was his desire to concentrate his mental energies on chess. Tomkins notes: “He seems, on the whole, to have been a good deal more serious about chess than he ever was about art, and he has made no secret of his

opinion that as an activity of the mind chess is much purer than art, because it is in no danger of being corrupted by money” (51).

²³ In his discussion of aesthetics, Bürger refers specifically to Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790), where “The aesthetic is conceived as a sphere that does not fall under the principle of the maximization of profit prevailing in all spheres of life” (Bürger 42). He quotes Kant: “The delight which determines the judgment of taste is independent of all interest” (§ 2).

²⁴ The nightly performances at the Cafe Voltaire included (according to Foster and Kuenzli) “. . . Huelsenbeck’s *Phantastische Gebete* (Fantastic Prayers), gymnastic poems, dances in African masks, readings of medieval mystical texts, African chants, Hugo Ball’s sound poems, and Tristan Tzara’s simultaneous poems. This incongruous juxtaposition, together with Huelsenbeck’s constant drum beats, created, according to Arp, ‘total pandemonium’ (“Introduction” 5). Schwitters’ “Merz art” was relief-collage made from any sort of available rubbish (“cloth, cardboard, machine parts, iron, wire, old pieces of furniture, rope, newspapers”) which was nailed, glued, and pasted together to form assemblages “intended to dissolve the cultural norms according to which materials have their logical purpose” (Foster and Kuenzli 8). Duchamp’s famous readymades, which challenged both the idea of the unique art object and the genius art producer, will be discussed in more detail later in this thesis.

²⁵ Richard Murphy provides a good summary of some of the institutional factors which the avant-garde highlighted and attacked. These include: “conventions of artistic context (for example, the fact that the work is exhibited in a museum may lead automatically to its being pre-defined as a ‘work of art,’ and so viewed correspondingly); the notion of authenticity and originality (customarily indicated by the signature of the artist); and the ‘Werkbegriff’ (the concept of the ‘work’ as a definable entity or frameable ‘thing’ with a definite set of limits--as opposed to an avant-garde event or abstract ‘happening’)” (24).

²⁶ Bürger makes the following important qualification to the concept of autonomy: “It must be remembered that the detachment of art from the praxis of life and the accompanying crystallization of a special sphere of experience (i.e., the aesthetic) is not a straight-line development (there are significant counter-trends), and that it cannot be interpreted undialectically (as the coming into its own of art, for example). Rather, the autonomous status of art within bourgeois society is by no means undisputed but is the precarious product of overall social development. That status can always be called into question by society (more precisely, society’s rulers) when it seems useful to harness art once more. Not only the extreme example of the fascist politics of art that liquidates the autonomy status, but the large number of legal proceedings against artists for offenses against morality, testify to that fact” (24-5).

²⁷ O’Hara’s “I do this, I do that” poems are one solution to this problem. Ashbery’s “epistemological snapshots” (the phrase comes from his poem “Wet Casements” *SP* 225) which attempt to represent “the experience of experience,” are another. Both these forms will be considered in subsequent chapters.

²⁸ The first wave of European artists (Duchamp, Picabia, Albert Gleizes, Arthur Cravan and others moved to New York in 1915 to escape the war) was followed by a second in the 1940s including international Surrealists such as Salvador Dali, Max Ernst, André Masson, Yves Tanguy, and Chilean painter Matta (Roberto Echaurren Matta) who had a strong influence on Abstract Expressionists (Shapiro and Shapiro 7), and through them the New York School poets.

²⁹ A popular Cunningham-Cage collaboration is called *How to Pass, Kick, Fall, and Run*. Tomkins describes it as “An irresistible combination of joyous athletics by the dancers, who wear bright sweaters and white ankle socks, and a ‘score’ made up of droll stories read, one a minute, by Cage, who sits at a table at one side of the stage and sips champagne while reading” (269).

³⁰ In *Pop Art and Consumer Culture: American Super Market*, Christin Mamiya argues Pop art’s complicity with consumer culture and the ideology of consumption. She writes: “Pop art not only depicted and reflected this rampant consumption [of the 1960s] but also appropriated the mechanisms and strategies of corporate society, ensuring the effective marketing of the movement and its absorption into the matrix of consumer institutions. . . . Pop art succeeded not only because it fit into, and reflected, consumer culture but also because it actively entered into the discourse and ultimately deflected or absorbed social and political criticism about this system” (1,4).

CHAPTER ONE

Searching The Surface:

Conceptions And Misconceptions About The New York School

Before beginning an investigation of the family resemblances between poets in terms of ideology (Chapter 2), investment in process (Chapter 3), and the unique humor of their work (Chapter 4), we will consider some of the established general beliefs about the movement. While their work has received sustained attention in two important critical studies (by Geoff Ward and David Lehman), the popular image of the poets has been formed more by brief articles and reviews. This chapter intends to examine these sources in search of the images by which the New York School has been described, as well as the implication of those images.

Perhaps because, in the tradition of Gertrude Stein, the New York School poets have always insisted so strenuously on the *surface* of their poems, the (frequently non-signifying) play of language, the general critical attitude, until recently, has been to define the group and their poetry by its surface. This is understandable, though the consequences of such defining practices have been unfortunate. Such a tendency is to be expected since criticism which relies on close reading as its main tool has long been wedded to a model of surface and depth, and New York School poetry seems to offer only the former. The surface/depth model doesn't work for much New York School poetry, just as it didn't work for precursor texts such as Stein's *Tender Buttons* or Williams's *Kora in Hell*. Close reading in the New Critical tradition will almost always prefer texts such as *The Waste Land* to Stein's or Williams's since the former seems to allow for readings which can move from surface to depth. Critics of *The Waste Land* can begin with surface details--affinities, ambiguities, tensions (favorite New Critical terms)--and move towards showing how these details add up to a deep structure, a unity, which is explicable.¹ Eliot offers the

promise of depth, the hope of finding a key to unlock the surface, while poems in what Marjorie Perloff has called the “Other Tradition” insist strenuously on their surfaces, and just as strenuously resist attempts at unification, as Perloff shows exhaustively in studies of Stein, Williams, Ashbery, and others in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*. Unfortunately, some critics of the New York School who were unable to find “depths” (or hidden unities) in the poetry did not have the language to see this work in a “nonorganic” tradition. Instead, they frequently denigrated the project, writing it off as trivial, nonsensical or, as David Perkins summarizes, “frivolously nihilistic” (528). This may help explain complaints like Daniel Hoffman’s in the *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing* (1979) about Ashbery’s “arbitrary and solipsistic reveries” (556):

It is all reverie conceived exclusively on the right side of the brain, attractive in texture; but toward structure it is seditious, hence few of these poems hold together as unified experiences and their profusion of imagery, however dazzling, is fatiguing. (558)

Harry Roskolenko, reviewing Koch’s *Poems* in *Poetry* magazine, was even more vindictive about the poet’s “many literary crimes”:

Mr. Koch, it seems, has a rare combination of words rattling about in his skull, but it is difficult to call any of his word combination the bric-a-brac of poetry. He is precious and puerile when he is not merely futile and noisy, seldom if ever writing two consecutive lines that can . . . be called even *lazy verse*, as Max Eastman describes that phenomenon. (233)

“Word combinations” and “reveries” are necessarily unpoetic to these reviewers because they are “seditious” to structure, lacking in unity and depth. Critics responded less damningly, but in a similar vein, to O’Hara’s work, which was frequently trivialized (according to one *New York Review of Books* critic in 1966, his poetry is “amiable and gay, like streams of crepe paper, fluttering before an electric fan,” [Bewley 17]) as a way of highlighting its lack of depth. Again, in a 1972 review of O’Hara’s *Collected Poems*, Michelle Murray observed: “His poetic world is light and bright, gay, charming, witty, sunny, and agreeable, but it is neither large nor *deep* enough to fill the oversize pages of his *Collected Poems*” (44, italics added). These trivializing and disparaging gestures allow

commentators to avoid the complex and primary critical problem that New York School poetry (and other nonorganic work) poses. This problem, which Perloff tackles in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* (1981) and has spent much of her career following up on, is one of the central issues of twentieth century poetry. The conundrum is how one can usefully discuss poetry which explicitly resists the kind of New Critical reading which has been the main way to talk about poetry since “poetry talk” became institutionalized, along with modernism, in the 20s and 30s. This thesis attempts to tackle this problem in several ways, firstly, by looking at the nature and consequences of particular nonorganic poems, and then by considering the poets’ neo-avant-garde project in relation to other nonorganic works in different genres being produced in New York in the 50s and 60s.

We will turn now to look at some of the generalizations made about New York School poetry, noting how these comments reveal the tendency to define the work by its surface. A good place to locate a kind of generalized view of the New York School is in the pages of introductions, histories, and encyclopedias of contemporary American literature. Three types of observation recur in these discussions: comments about “open” form, about “sophisticated” content, and about the “difficulty” of New York School poetry. These remarks will be useful both for what they say explicitly, which is frequently to the point, and for what they tacitly imply in their choices and omissions.

Questions of Form

Critics begin by linking the New York School poets with other 1950s and 60s innovators by invoking what Michael Davidson in his “American Poetry” entry in the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (1993) calls the “poetics of presence”:

Whether through Olson’s ideas of composition by “field,” or through Robert Bly’s ideas of the psychological “deep image,” or through Frank O’Hara’s “personism,” poets began to think of the poem not as a mimesis of experience but as an experience itself, a map of moment-to-moment perceptions whose value is measured by immediacy and sincerity rather than artistic unity. . . . The older romantic idea of synthetic creative imagination (the artist’s imperative to order fragmentary reality) gives way to a poetics of “open forms”. . . (62)

As a general observation this is accurate and important. The poets who appeared in Donald Allen's landmark 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry* (which was divided into sections featuring the Black Mountain poets, the Beats, the poets of the San Francisco Renaissance, and the New York School) did share important similarities, but these resemblances were matters of broad attitudes and ideologies, rather than choices of particular forms. Davidson's shift from "the poetics of presence" to the "poetics of open forms" reveals a particular bias, one which elevates formal over rhetorical choices. This is a hierarchy which accounts less well for the practice of the New York School poets than it does for some of their contemporaries, since the New York poets routinely wrote in closed forms, particularly early in their careers. And yet comments about open form, usually presented in less sophisticated ways than Davidson's, predominate among definitions of the New York School writing. The *Longman Dictionary and Handbook of Poetry* (1985) defines the poets as a group who "sought to break the strong influence of T.S. Eliot's and Robert Lowell's Modernism by creating a more open, chaotic, and informal aesthetic," and notes that "other movements such as the Beats and Black Mountain School paralleled their search for freer forms" ("New York Poets" 209). Ihab Hassan's *Contemporary American Literature* (1973) informs us that "The New York poets . . . are anti-formalist in a sense, inventors of new open styles" (124), and *The Poetry Dictionary* (1995) notes that "Free verse predominates [in] their work" ("New York School" 176). While the last comment is true, its emphasis in a brief, half-page entry is peculiar since Ashbery and O'Hara regularly wrote sonnets, sestinas, and pantoums, and Koch's first major work, the epic poem *Ko, or a Season on Earth* (1959), was written in strict *ottava rima* (modeled on Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*). In fact, Koch is well known not only for writing, but also sometimes for speaking, in blank verse.

The over-emphasis on "open form" can be explained by Mutlu Konuk Blasing's thesis in *Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry* (1995), which traces an ideological

argument that aligns innovative forms with oppositional politics. Blasing argues that critics and poets have presented the story of American poetry since World War II as “a contest between a formalist academic consolidation of early modernism’s experimental impulse” (represented by the poets in Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson’s anthology *New Poets of England and America* [1957]) and “an antiformalist revolt that reaffirms presence and process in open forms” (represented by Don Allen’s “New Americans”) (Blasing 1). Moreover, Blasing suggests that in this drama poetic *techniques* have been privileged, and have been taken as the badge of political orientation:

. . . specific sociopolitical, ethical, and metaphysical values are thought to inhere in particular forms. Thus a sonnet can become a “fascist” form, in William Carlos Williams’s term, and disruptive compositions can make for substantive cultural criticism. Whether presented from conservative or liberal perspectives, critical evaluations of modernist and postmodern poetry alike privilege experimental technique as the test of its modernity and link radical techniques to oppositional politics. (2)

Given this analysis, it is little wonder that critics who pictured New York School poetry as part of a general fifties revolt against “formalist academic consolidation” (figured, for example, in their heroic attempt to “break the strong influence of T.S. Eliot’s and Robert Lowell’s Modernism”) would want to emphasize its “search for freer forms.” It is with comments such as these that we start to sense the ideological weight in a phrase like “freer forms.”

What these generalizations about “open form” hide is the fact that it is not form, but ideology or attitude towards form (or what Blasing defines as “rhetoric”), which really distinguishes poets and poetic projects. This distinction becomes clear when we compare two sestinas: “Crone Rhapsody,” which Ashbery and Koch wrote in collaboration, and “Sestina d’Inverno” by Anthony Hecht, a New York City poet of a very different character.

Ashbery and Koch wrote “Crone Rhapsody,” along with a number of collaborative poems, on a whim in Florence. The title came from a German circus, Krone Rhapsody, performing in the town, and the writing procedure was appropriately carnivalesque and campy. Koch explains that the poem “was written according to the following requirements:

that every line contain the name of a flower, a tree, a fruit, a game, and a famous old lady, as well as the word *bathtub*; furthermore the poem is a sestina and all the end-words are pieces of office furniture” (*Locus Solus* 196). Here is one of its seven sprawling stanzas:

That was the year that a calla lily bought Colette’s *Ice Hockey* in the capital of Honduras. It was the year of the bathtub Ice Age and the flowering of the stone pear. The catalpa shivered gently in the shade of the filing cabinet. Then Barbara Frietchie skipped rope under the ginkgo tree, spitting buttercups on the loganberry bushes. In the dim light of the bathtub formed a typewriter. The bathtub fell amid orange blossoms. The black walnut tree fell amid lemon soccer balls. Marie Bizard fell under the desk. But who won the sack race? Spirea split the bathtub. Why, here is Susan B. Anthony holding up a raisin to the sequoia chair! And here is the Joshua tree. Mistinguett thought about the tomato. The bathtub was nailing up the rules for seven-card stud by the light of a crocus lamp. All of these things were confided by a pine tree to a primrose in the bathtub. Inside the pomegranate Ivy Compton-Burnett was playing hand tennis with her fan.

Hecht’s “Sestina d’Inverno” (Ellmann and O’Claire 1075-76), in its quiet earnestness, presents a stark contrast to “Crone Rhapsody”’s exuberant silliness. Though borrowing the Poundian gesture of an Italian title, “Sestina d’Inverno” is in fact a poem about Rochester, New York, where Hecht worked as a university professor. (Ironically, “Crone Rhapsody,” while written in Italy, sticks to what Marianne Moore once called “plain American which cats and dogs can read!” [“England” *Complete Poems* 46]). That “Sestina d’Inverno” was written from a university makes perfect sense, since it is a fine example of the confident, achieved university poem--a poem of “wit and wisdom” of the kind written by an earlier generation of poet-professors like John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate. Consciously borrowing tones and themes from Andrew Marvell’s “The Garden” and John Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” “Sestina d’Inverno” is a poem in the tradition of romantic longing for an other-worldly place far from the poet’s present situation. The reality from which the speaker wishes to escape is the “bleak city of Rochester,” where the abundant snow gestured to in the title is a sign of destitution and foreboding:

. . . here the natives
Of this grey, sunless city of Rochester
Have sown whole mines of salt about their land
(Bare ruined Carthage that it is) while the snow
Comes down as if The Flood were in the making.

Rochester becomes Keats's world of "weariness . . . fever, and . . . fret/ . . . where men sit and hear each other groan" ("Ode to a Nightingale," *Selected Poems* 206)--though in this case they sit and hear each other shiver ("Under our igloo skies the frozen mind/ Holds to one truth: it is grey, and called Rochester"). The poem continues its Romantic meditation by imagining an island, "a blessed haven," in contrast to "grey, sunless" Rochester. The island is a "utopian dream" in which "the mere thought of snow / Was but a wedding cake; the youthful natives, / Unable to conceive of Rochester, / Made love, and were acrobatic in the making." But this Marvellian garden is a creation of "the wayward mind" and, as with his predecessor Keats, Hecht finds "the fancy cannot cheat so well" ("Nightingale" 207):

Dream as we may, there is far more to making
Do than some wistful reverie of an island,
Especially now when hope lies with the Rochester
Gas and Electric Co., which doesn't mind
Such profitable weather, while the natives
Sink, like Pompeians, under a world of snow.

"Sestina d'Inverno" is the perfect anthology poem. Well-crafted, serious, spare, and allusive, it highlights both the tradition and the individual talent, and rightfully belongs where this reader found it, in the secure canonical confines of *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*. Hecht uses the rigor of a classical form (the sestina) to create a tightly controlled, impressive verbal artifact (to see how impressively he uses the form, take a look at the last stanza where all six end words have to be compressed into three lines).

Ashbery and Koch use exactly the same form to do something very different. As "Sestina d'Inverno" is proficient, erudite, and "well wrought" (in Cleanth Brooks's famous phrase), "Crone Rhapsody" is loose, excessive, and silly. Ashbery and Koch use the equivalent poetic requirements and strictures to create the impression of art not as hard work, but as play, the artist not as dedicated craftsman but as circus clown.² "Crone Rhapsody" cannot be found in the pages of any anthology, or even in print for that matter, outside of an extinct little magazine, *Locus Solus*, which existed for five issues between 1961 and '62 under the editorial direction of Koch, Ashbery, James Schuyler, and Harry

Mathews. The poem appears in a special issue on collaborations which includes “linked-verse” from ancient Japan, Troubadors’ *tensos*, as well as collaborations by Metaphysical poets (Donne and Goodyere), Romantics (Coleridge and Southey), Futurists (Marinetti and Cangiullo), Surrealists (Breton and Eluard), and New York School poets, painters, and friends. Once again in contrast to Hecht’s text, the location of “Crone Rhapsody” says something about an attitude towards poetry. The collaborative issue of *Locus Solus* suggests an attitude which does not individualize and sacralize texts, but which sees them as the creations of surprise and chance encounters, as something ephemeral (like the little magazine itself), and most importantly as something to have fun with (Koch has written that “collaborating [is] a way to be at work and at a party at the same time” [AP 168]). In the avant-garde tradition, *Locus Solus* highlights the institutional frames by which poetry is received, subverting entrenched ideas about individual genius and individual text, as well as the idea of a permanent, immutable canon which collects and memorializes these rarefied objects.

The contrast between “Crone Rhapsody” and “Sestina d’Inverno” reveals the limited usefulness of labeling poets as practitioners of “opened” or “closed” forms by showing that it is not form, but rhetoric and attitude towards form, which makes a poem. Rather than talking about the New York School’s propensity for “open forms,” then, it might make more sense to talk about their openness *to* forms, both old and new. As David Lehman notes, the New York School renewed, recycled, and created a wide range of new forms:

On the ground that the rules of all verse forms are at base arbitrary, they created ad hoc forms (requiring, say, an anagram or the name of a river in every line) and unconventional self-assignments (“translate a poem from a language you do not understand; do not use a glossary or dictionary”). They adapted the Cubist collage and the Surrealist “exquisite corpse”. . . A poem could originate in snatches of overhead conversations . . . [or] lines culled at random from books. Or you could scramble the lines in an already written poem to produce a disjunctive jolt. . . . Poems didn’t have to make sense in a conventional way; they could discover their sense as they went along. (4)

The New York School has been praised for opening up subject matter, for a poetic inclusiveness (in the tradition of Whitman and Williams) which embraces “high” and “low” culture and language. What has been less often noticed is that they equally opened form, showing how any form of language can *become* poetic (as Duchamp once translated a urinal and a snow shovel, and Williams a red wheelbarrow, into art). It is important to remember, however, that these poets frequently “created” new forms by recreating old ones, as “Crone Rhapsody” reimagines the sestina. Unlike some artists of the historical avant-garde who loudly rejected antiquated Victorian traditions, the New York School poets neither wholly reject nor accept past traditions, but instead use their *forms* as raw material for new work.

An early O’Hara poem, “A Sonnet for Jane Freilicher” (1951), provides another example of how old forms can be given new life. As with “Crone Rhapsody,” this poem reminds us that it is not form but attitude towards form that gives a poem its meaning. O’Hara is less interested in taking a side in the debate between formalists and anti-formalists than in interrogating the terms of the debate. Rather than choosing between open and closed form, O’Hara mediates the two positions, and at the same time exposes the way particular forms have been restricted to particular ends.

Wakening at noon I smell airplanes and hay
rang wildly on long distance telephone
ah! what a misery abed alone
alas! what is that click? hurry! hurray!

the sky was wheeling under sad and grey
sweet clouds but wickedly ne’ertheless shone
outside my lonely coverlets where gone
oh Operator Eighty-one? today

bring me that breath more dear than Fabergé
your secret puissance Operator loan
to pretty Jane whose paintings like a stone

are massive true and silently risqué:
“How closer than Frank to the cosmic bone
comes the bold painting of Fernand Léger”! (CP 61)

Jane Freilicher was one in a line of O'Hara's female muses (she was preceded by poet Violet "Bunny" Lang, and succeeded by abstract painter Grace Hartigan) on whom, some have suggested, the gay poet's more tender, and less socially acceptable, emotions towards men may have been displaced.³ In this poem, the theatrical, campy adoration of the gay poet towards his female muse creates a farce of the traditional Petrarchan love sonnet. While maintaining all the rigors of the traditional *form* of the sonnet (including a loose iambic pentameter line and a strict rhyme scheme), O'Hara's rhetoric contaminates some of its more classical attitudes and modes. O'Hara mixes "high" and "low," traditional and untraditional, as a way of rewriting sonnet rhetoric while maintaining sonnet form. The poem succeeds by parody and self-parody, as O'Hara mocks both the conventions of the love sonnet, and his own involvement in those conventions.

O'Hara's lover, who lies "abed" at mid-day, and dreams of communicating not in person or by written word, but by telephone, is much more indolent than the traditionally ardent love sonnet protagonist. O'Hara's persona is both sonneteer and clown. While the conventional form of the sonnet prompts the expectation of conventional language to match, in O'Hara's poem formal and informal languages combine. Thus traditional apostrophes such as "ah!" and "alas!" sit comfortably alongside colloquial exclamations like "hurry!" and "hurray!" The mixture of these two kinds of rhetoric highlights the artificiality of the conventionally serious "ah!" and "alas!", transforming these exclamations into campy parodies of themselves. The fourth line of the poem ("alas! what is that click? hurry! hurray!"), with three caesuras and three exclamation points mimicking and overstating the anxious excitement of the adoring speaker, is classic O'Hara melodrama. The exclamation has a campy doubleness which is both serious and winking. It mocks the conventional enthusiasm of the love sonnet, and also laughs fondly at its own authentic involvement in this kind of rhetoric.

Just as the archaic and colloquial mix, so pastoral and urban elements collide in the smell of "airplanes and hay," which deprive the setting of a traditional romantic glow.

Likewise, customary references to nature are supplanted by references to the artificial and the commercial. The beloved is not “more lovely and more temperate” than a summer’s day (as in Shakespeare’s famous sonnet), but “more dear than Fabergé,” with the word “dear” suggesting values of both an emotional and *commercial* kind. But such combinations should not be surprising in a poem where the “secret puissance” and higher power is a telephone Operator.

Where the ending couplet of traditional English sonnets often provides a turn of events, O’Hara’s twist is to further and more explicitly mock his own enterprise by presenting himself as the artist-fool. He does this by interjecting the voice of his beloved, who finds the work of a painter, Fernand Léger, much more pertinent (“closer to the cosmic bone”) than that of her adoring poet. Not only will the poet’s work probably not live forever, let alone “give life” to its subject (pledges Shakespeare offers his beloved in the final couplet “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee”), this sonnet doesn’t even seem to be very successful with its intended recipient.

Throughout “A Sonnet for Jane Freilicher,” O’Hara is both self-mocking and satirical, making fun of *his* poem’s pretensions at the same time as he parodies the pretensions of the classical form. In a sense, artistic solemnity of *any* kind becomes the butt of the joke. This solemnity might belong either to an established form or to the dogmatic refutation or satire of that form. The combination of these two kinds of humor (parody and self-parody) is one of O’Hara’s great skills, and one of the things that makes his work so appealing and saves it from the high handedness of much satire. It is also one of the things that pushes it beyond the predictable antagonism or opposition of many avant-garde movements, and places it in a more neutral, neo-avant-garde position.

To return to my initial claim, then, the New York School poets are not just practitioners in “open” forms. Rather, they frequently deform established, “closed” forms to show how these structures do not carry greater truth or poetical values, nor do they carry

ideological implications, but are, like all choices of construction, arbitrary. This is not to suggest that such forms do not have accrued values. It is, in fact, these very values that O'Hara tries to expose through a campy satire that doesn't chastise so much as enjoy the original.

The New York School poets can be rightly seen as part of the 1950s shift to a poetics of presence. Their goal was, to some extent, "to break the strong influence of T.S. Eliot's and Robert Lowell's Modernism"; however, their methods and philosophy for doing so differed greatly from many of their contemporaries. Many of Donald Allen's "New Americans" sought to break with traditional forms as a kind of valiant revolt against a generalized 1950s conformity. These poets expressed their opposition through binary rhetoric of the "us versus them," "hip versus square" type, as reflected in many of the public declarations and manifestoes of the day.⁴ Charles Olson's "Projective Verse" (1950), a key manifesto for the new generation, for example, presents this revolt as a contest between two players: the *new* hero, "OPEN . . . COMPOSITION BY FIELD" versus the *old* enemy, "inherited line, stanza . . . the 'old' base of the non-projective" (148) which "smother[s] the power of line by too set a concept of foot" (149).⁵ One of Robert Duncan's statements in Allen and Tallman's anthology includes a section entitled "Convention, Conformities, and Regulated Meters," which contrasts "free meters" with "regulated meters," the later coming to stand for a particular rigidity of mind:

Form to the mind obsessed by convention, is significant in so far as it shows control. What has no rime nor reason is a bogie that must be dismissed from the horizons of the mind. It is a matter of rules and conformities, taste, rationalization and sense. . . . It is a magic that still survives in Christian Science and the New Criticism, a magic that removes the reasonable thing from its swarming background of unreason--unmentionable areas where all the facts that reason cannot regulate are excluded and appear as error, savage tribes, superstitions and anarchical mobs, passions, madresses, enthusiasms and bad manners. . . . Poets, who once had dreams and epiphanies, now admit only to devices and ornaments. (197)

In this way the Beat poets and their contemporaries set themselves up as prophets of "passion, madness, . . . and bad manners" by defining themselves in contrast to (their own version of) New Critics, Christian Scientists, and other adherents to "closed forms." The

New York School abjured this heroic stance of defiance, essential to the oppositional avant-garde. Instead of protesting closed forms, the New York poets both used and exposed these forms as the child in *The Emperor's New Clothes* exposes the pompous illusion of the naked monarch.

Sophistication or Sophistry?

A second notion about the New York School that we find repeated in a range of general studies once again focuses on the surface of their work. Almost all these studies refer to the “sophistication” evident in New York School poetry. Calling their work “sophisticated” (123) and “intensely cosmopolitan in spirit” (122), Ihab Hassan’s New York School entry in *Contemporary American Literature* notes the poets’ “affinities with the European avant-garde, . . . Action Painting, . . . *Art News*, . . . the Living Theater and Artists’ Theater” (122). *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry* (1994) likewise notes “a common interest in what might be called the intense urbane, expressed in language that is witty, abstract, and colloquial by turns” (386). John Drury in *The Poetry Dictionary* tags the work “hip and urban, funny and emotional and knowing,” and refers to the “breezy style” of the poets. A more important commentator, David Perkins in his *A History of Modern Poetry*, follows a similar line, calling the writing “light, witty, sophisticated, and ebullient,” though he does go on to qualify the sentence with “and beneath their bright surfaces were serious implications” (528). This need to qualify the first part of the sentence, to explain that writing can be “light, witty, sophisticated, ebullient” *and* serious at the same time, gives us insight into what implications lie behind the word “sophisticated.” While sophistication can have connotations of complexity, knowledge or refinement, I suspect that these are not the only ones operative here. To sophisticate is also to “make artificial, deprive of natural simplicity . . . [to] corrupt, spoil, mislead . . . or distort” (*OED*). “Sophisticated” harkens back to sophistry, which is the clever, specious reasoning of “intentionally deceptive arguments” (*OED*). So although

“sophisticated” sounds close to “complex,” which is one of New Criticism’s highest accolades, it actually signifies something slightly different. Sophistication is a complexity which is all surface, all subtlety; it has to do with worldly wisdom, “wit” (another frequently recurring word) or fashion, rather than “timeless truths.” Sophistication is the wisdom of the dandy, of the descendants of Oscar Wilde, and ultimately somewhat suspicious. Indeed, this link between sophistication, the dandy, and Wilde suggests the way that “sophisticated” (or “witty”) was often used in the past as a code word to comment on the unmentionable sexual orientation of the writers in question, and thus to condemn them out of hand.

Of the poets’ modern predecessors, Wallace Stevens was also sometimes subtly damned with the praise of sophistication. In early reviews of Stevens the vocabulary differs slightly but the idea is the same. Stevens is described as a sophisticated wit, a dandy whose poetry is too clever, too cosmopolitan, perhaps too continental for its own good. Edmund Wilson provides a typical backhanded compliment when he calls Stevens’s poems “ingenious, charming and sometimes beautiful,” noting that the poet is “the master of a style . . . even when you do not know what he is saying, you know that he is saying it well” (102). Note Wilson’s cutting turn of “a master of style” into “the master of *a* style,” suggesting Stevens’s limited range. In early Stevens criticism, the words of reproach which have a similar force to “sophistication” are “wit,” “dandy,” and “luxuriance” (as in “The topography is concealed by luxuriance, and one regretfully assumes that perhaps Mr. Stevens doesn’t mean to be any more illuminating than life itself, which offers a glorious amount of experience, much of which teaches one nothing” [Seiffert 155]). Here is Mark Van Doren’s remarkably unprecise assessment: “Mr. Stevens will never be much read. But some day there will be a monograph on him and his twentieth-century kin who ranged their restless faculties over all the deserts and hill-tops of the world to inaugurate a new era of what Dryden once called ‘wit-writing’” (400). What Dryden called “wit-writing,” the late nineteenth century called “Decadence,” and the twentieth century calls “sophistication.”

There are many connections between Stevens and the New York School poets. For now I think it is useful to see how a similar charge, basically what Perkins summarizes as a “frivolous nihilism” was leveled against both of them (as it was earlier against such precursors as Wilde, Whitman, and Stein). For both, the charge is sometimes overt and sometimes concealed in language that might be read as blame or praise (is it good or bad to be the master of a “breezy” style? to produce “luxurious” writing? to be “witty,” “hip,” or “urbane”?). Moreover, there is a similar progression in the reception of Stevens and the New York School poets. While both were blamed for a frivolous, dandified sophistication early in their careers, in time this very “frivolity” would be seen as a serious concern and strength of their work. This is because the art of being both frivolous and serious *simultaneously*--an amalgamation that Stevens and the New York poets manage beautifully--is an essential skill for poetry which wants to move beyond the solemnity of High Modernism and the polemics of an antagonistic avant-garde. Both Stevens and the New York School stake a successful position between these poles, and their true sophistication speaks to the way they avoid the reductiveness of either extreme.

While the notion of sophistication has much hiding behind it, this is not to say that it is an inappropriate term, for it reveals a lot about the work and about its readers. It makes sense to talk about the “sophistication” of the New York School for at least two other important reasons. The first is that one of the things which unifies these sometimes very different poets is their residence in what might be called the most “sophisticated” city in the world. New York City embodies both connotations of the word “sophistication” in its unique combination of high culture and sly deception. And this city, which Marcel Duchamp called “a complete work of art” in itself (Kuenzli 4), and which a thrilled Mayakovsky described simply as “the most, the most, the most” (qtd. in Brooker 49), became a source of inspiration, excitement, and sophistication in the poems. In an interview, Koch talks about the importance of the poets being together in a city that “could sustain [our] voracious appetites for culture, conversation, excitement, and other people”

(“Frank O’Hara” 204). He continues: “I suppose there are some general things that one shares in New York: that sort of dizzying anonymity, the feeling of freedom, the ‘availability of experience,’ as Marianne Moore says in a poem about New York, the feeling of excitement and nervousness” (205). The frenetic rhythms and energy of the “city that never sleeps” are the source of, and become translated into, the excitement and “nervousness” of much New York School poetry. Thus the sophistication of the place and the poems become one as the poets, O’Hara in particular, become the voice of the city.⁶

We are reminded of another reason why this talk about sophistication makes sense when we recall that to “sophisticate” is to “complicate” or “alter,” often by “mixing with a foreign substance” (*OED*). One of the most obvious and important ways that the New York School was sophisticated was in its collaborations with other artists and other arts. The poetry is not only full of references to painting, music, dance, film, and theater, but it also (as critics such as Perloff, Moramarco, and Wolf have argued) borrows and reinvents techniques from these other arts to create new poetic forms.⁷ New York School poetry is immeasurably enriched and broadened by the poets’ media-crossing work. While they were dedicated to poetry, O’Hara, Ashbery, and Koch also wrote and acted in drama (Koch’s theater pieces are collected in *One Thousand Avant-Garde Plays*, Ashbery’s in *Three Plays*, and O’Hara’s in *Selected Plays*). These plays, ranging from the lyric to the experimental, also involved collaboration with painters such as Larry Rivers, Alex Katz, Grace Hartigan, and Nell Blaine who frequently designed sets and costumes. The poets also helped create films (O’Hara wrote the dialogue for Alfred Leslie’s *The Last Clean Shirt*; Rudy Bruckhardt’s *In Bed* was based on Koch’s poem of the same title). Most importantly, they collaborated with painters on lithographs (O’Hara and Rivers’s *Stones*, Jasper Johns’s *Skin with O’Hara Poem*), paintings (Jane Hammond’s John Ashbery collaboration), mixed media collages (Koch and Rivers’s *New York 1950-60* and *Cows*), Poem-Paintings (O’Hara and Norman Bluhm; O’Hara and Grace Hartigan’s *Oranges*), maps (Koch with Red Grooms), illustrated books (Alex Katz and Koch’s *Interlocking*

Lives), pop up books (Rivers and Koch's *Diana*), and comic books (Joe Brainard with O'Hara and Koch). These interarts connections, so central to New York School process and product, will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters. For now, it is important to note that this kind of "sophisticated" mixing of media is surely one of the things which distinguishes New York School poets from their contemporaries in Donald Allen's anthology. While many of the Beats were interested in poetry performance, and occasionally collaborated--as Ferlinghetti did--with jazz musicians, no group of poets in America has ever exploited the possibilities of collaboration to the extent of the New York School. Thus the generalities about "sophistication" highlight the *milieu artiste* of New York in the 1950s, and the ways in which the vibrancy of the city helped to shape the sensibility of the poetry.

One of the things possibly obscured by the term "sophistication" is the extent to which the New York School's "sophisticated" tastes leaned towards the comic, the playful and the absurd. When "sophistication" is used, as it is by Hassan, to highlight the poets' "affinities with the European avant-garde" what is often stressed are issues of refinement and complexity. But just as the New York School rejected the oppositional politics of some avant-garde movements, so too they rejected the kind of sophistication and seriousness associated with the "high modernist"/"high culture" mode of works like *The Waste Land* or *The Cantos*. Crossing what Andreas Huyssen has called "The Great Divide" of modernism⁸--which strictly categorizes works into "high" and "low modes"--the New York School produced work that mixed the classical and the popular, high and low, avant-garde and kitsch. While contemporaries were producing earnest manifestoes like Olson's "Projective Verse," Duncan's "Towards an Open Universe," or Gary Snyder's "Buddhism and the Coming Revolution" (all collected in *Poetics of the New American Poetry*), the New Yorkers were working on comic books, mock-manifestoes, and collaborative absurdist novels such as *A Nest of Ninnies*. What is truly sophisticated or complex about the New York School is the way they manage to be both frivolous and

serious, silly and sophisticated, “low” and “high” simultaneously. Their sophistication manages to be both cultured and fun, a combination which puts them in closer affinity to their pop art contemporaries than to the first generation Abstract Expressionists (Pollock, de Kooning, Klein, etc.) with whom they have been traditionally associated.

Beyond The Idea of Difficulty

The last general claim made about the New York School poets has to do with the “difficulty” of their work. The charges of “inaccessibility” (“New York Poets” 209), “refusal of sense” (Hassan 122), “strangeness” (Grey 318), and “obscurity” (Hoffman 555) leveled both in blame and in praise of the New York School are old and familiar ones for American poetry. We must remember that T.S. Eliot, who for many young poets of the 50s symbolized the epitome of an academic formality and conservatism, was at the beginning of his career greeted with disdain by established critics such as Arthur Waugh because of the outrageous difficulties and “incoherent banalities” which “threatened . . . the state of Poetry . . . with anarchy which will end in something worse even than ‘red ruin and the breaking up of the laws’” (Grant 68). In fact, most modern American poetry which we continue to value, with the conspicuous exception of Robert Frost, was difficult for the majority of its early readers. What is important, then, is not the charge of difficulty, which is perpetually hurled at modern art of all kinds, but the ways in which the charge is made. We return, then, to some of the general studies to see how this accusation has been defined.

In contrasting the New York School poets with contemporaries Robert Bly and James Wright, the *Longman Dictionary* provides a typical generalizing summary, calling the work of the former group “difficult and, at times, inaccessible” (“New York Poets” 209). The contrast is apt since Bly and Wright (who made their appearance not in Allen’s “fugitive” anthology but in its conservative rival in the “anthology wars,” *New Poets of England and America*) were among the progenitors of what Charles Altieri later called

“scenic” poetry. Bly and Wright’s poems were one type of 1950s reaction to the then dominant mode, characterized by Eliot and Pound’s ideas of impersonality and craft. Bly and Wright attempt to create poetic presence by naturalizing and humanizing language in the voice of an “authentic” or “sincere” first person speaker who delivers a meditative address in a natural environment.⁹

Contra this naturalist poetics, early New York poetry provided what looked like *unnatural* language. Frequently nonreferential, syntactically problematic, intensely focused on surface (à la Stein and Stevens), the early poems of the New York School appeared to critics like Ihab Hassan as “a spatial disposition of poetic clues” which, as he summarized in *Contemporary American Literature*, refused “sense, structure, coherence” (122). “Poetic clues” suggests a puzzle which can be solved (once again, the surface/depth model) but as Hassan and others pointed out, the puzzling New York School poem seemed difficult to the point of impossibility. Hassan observes that Ashbery’s poems, in particular, “are so discontinuous, his sense so recalcitrant, as to defy the closure of a ‘complete reading’ (123-4). Here, with the terms “closure” and “complete reading,” we move to the heart of the matter. What is difficult about these poems is that they cannot be read (or better, solved) in the way readers had learned to make sense of poetry. Difficulty with any poetry, as many theorists have pointed out, results not from the poem itself, but rather from something that happens between poem and reader. Difficulty occurs when the attitudes and expectations we bring to a poem (for example expectations of closure, of a complete reading, of natural language, or of narrative sense) are foiled by the poem. Thus, Richard Grey’s summary of New York School difficulty in *American Poetry* notes that what Ashbery and O’Hara share in common is “a similar estrangement from simple mimesis” (318). It is this movement away from simple mimesis, from the natural language of Bly and Wright, which makes the work difficult. Given our daily investment in language as a forum for (what seems like) untroubled communication, it is no wonder that poetry which problematizes language itself, making it opaque instead of transparent, would seem alien.

The claim of difficulty, made particularly in discussions of Ashbery, but also of the frequently abstract, language-oriented early work of O'Hara (in the vein of *Second Avenue*) and Koch (*When the Sun Tries to Go On*) is interesting in that it has been used both to censure and to praise the poetry. Detractors used the idea of difficulty to condemn the work as intentionally incoherent, a pointless game, and perhaps even a grand hoax.¹⁰ Daniel Hoffman in the *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing* summarizes this position when he calls New York School poetry "private, obscure, purposely lacking in logic," and notes that "this work, it would seem, is designed to alienate . . . [and] outrage any possible readers" (555-6). And outrage was exactly the reaction it received from many early critics. Koch was called "precious and puerile . . . futile and noisy" (Roskolenko 233), while O'Hara's work was seen as "garrulous, pseudo-Surrealist, and often incoherent potpourri" (this from a review of his *Collected Poems* in the *New Leader*, Elledge 38). J.W. Hughes in a 1970 *Saturday Review* article called Ashbery "The Doris Day of modernist poetry," remarking that his "trite and silly" lines "have about as much poetic life as a refrigerated plastic flower" (34). Together, the New York School poets were seen by some as "abstract expressionists in words . . . every bit as undistinguished and indistinguishable as their confreres of the drip, dribble, and squirt," as John Simon put it in a 1962 issue of the *Hudson Review* (457-8). Even Harold Bloom, who would become one of Ashbery's staunchest supporters, expressed his "disbelief" at the "egregious disjunctiveness" and "calculated incoherence" of Ashbery's second volume, *The Tennis Court Oath*, which he called "a fearful disaster" ("Charity" 172-4).

Why such anger and outrage? The answer seems to lie in the fact that "difficult" writing not only challenges readers trying to make sense of a single text, it also calls into question the very premises by which readers make sense of *any* text. When critical strategies fail to explain New York School poetry, critics are faced with two choices: either there's something wrong with the strategies in this particular case or there's something wrong with the poetry. Not surprisingly, critics whose vocation depended on these

strategies (developed, no doubt, with care and at considerable expense) felt threatened by poetry that threatened their utility. These critics would often go to lengths, employing considerable venom, to denounce such work. This may help explain why a highly regarded critic like Daniel Hoffman, in as public a form as the *Harvard Guide*, would reduce Ashbery's poetry to an "aimless noodling" and "solipsistic aestheticism." Hoffman justifies his terms of abuse in this way (he is talking about the title poem of *The Tennis Court Oath*): "What is being proclaimed here is indeed the overthrow of an old order, the order of cognitive knowledge, the assumptions of reality which our entire past has bequeathed us. In place of these heavy burdens we are given this poet's arbitrary and solipsistic reveries" (556). It seems ironic that where traditionally it has been avant-garde artists in oppositional manifestos who claimed the "overthrow of an old order," here it is the critic defending against a challenge which has not been (and in fact will never be) explicitly proclaimed. This is indeed part of the danger and the power of New York School poetry: it challenges the status quo by subverting the utility of their very terms of understanding. Thus it challenges something even more fundamental than an idea; it challenges the idea of how to make an idea. Maybe for this reason negative reactions like Hoffman's just seem to glance off the poetry; they can't touch it because their language is unable to reach it. A true challenge would have to adopt the terms used by the New York School and show, in those terms, how the work doesn't succeed or measure up. In any case, thus far detractors have not become that sophisticated because they have not had the desire to spend enough time with the poetry to learn the terms by which it might be truly criticized.¹¹ Instead, detractors like Hoffman seem to form opinions less on the basis of aesthetics than on the basis of morality. The "overthrow of an old order" is an old charge-- it is exactly the accusation Waugh aims at Eliot--and it suggests an *a priori* dismissal of anything new and unexpected. Renato Poggioli calls this "the pathological prejudice, which condemns modern art en bloc by way of the concept of *degeneration*" (157). When Hoffman accuses Ashbery of an "art of withdrawal from the 'real' world" (561) which

“obliterates both the realism of art and the validity of objective experience” (560) his complaints have the force of an ethical more than an aesthetic appeal: and as such we need to see them for what they are. And so, while these critics stick to tried and true paradigms of how to make meaning and how to assign value, New York poetry will continue to be uselessly difficult, a “solipsistic presentation of personal fantasy” (Hoffman 553) which, on one hand, is not supposed to merit their regard, and on the other garnered a good deal of disparaging criticism. In the long run these attacks have probably done much more good than ill for the New York School. This is because fanatical judgment seems to attract opposition and interest, just as a mocking *Life* magazine article helped raise Jackson Pollock to the spotlight.

While detractors have not had much difficulty slandering the work, supporters of the New York School have had the more complex task of recuperating difficulty by finding ways in which these textual problems could be made purposeful and meaningful. This has been a large project, with many contributors over the years. Ashbery in particular has occasioned a huge number of critical responses that have attempted to explain, justify, and frequently glorify his difficulties. Without spending a great deal of time, I would like to briefly summarize a few of the most important and interesting attempts to recuperate the difficulties of this poetry. Marjorie Perloff has made a career of studying and proselytizing the problems of poetry in the “Other Tradition” or, as the subtitle of *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* puts it, poetry in the tradition from *Rimbaud to Cage*. Perloff argues that what is difficult about poetry in this tradition is that readers’ attempts to connect parts of a poem (or even parts of a sentence) with one another, to follow a narrative or time line, to find syntactic or systematic coherence of any sort, are constantly frustrated. This poetry, in the tradition of Rimbaud, “destroyed relationships in language and reduced discourse to words as static things” (qtd. in *Indeterminacy* 3). These static parts, like elements in a Cubist painting, combine to create not a unified whole, but what Ashbery has called an “open field of narrative possibilities” (qtd. in *Indeterminacy* 252). Such texts can be read

and understood in multiple ways; they are not reducible to a single meaning. For Perloff, the indeterminate or “undecidable” text is characterized by “free play, constructing a way of happening rather than an account of what has happened, a way of looking rather than a description of how things look” (85). The mystery and uncertainty which makes the text difficult and frustrating for some readers is, for Perloff, one of the main sources of pleasure in the text. The sense of “opening and closing, or revelation and re-veiling, of simultaneous disclosure and concealment” (262), in other words the constant deferral of meaning, is one of the notable joys of reading poems which tantalize us with “the disclosure of some special meaning [which] seems perpetually imminent” (11). For Perloff, the difficulties of such texts are “mysteries of construction” (a phrase she takes as the title for her Ashbery essay) which readers can explore and bask in, but would never want to solve.¹²

The same type of difficulties have been approached in a slightly different vocabulary by deconstructionists like Steven Connor in “Points of Departure,” an essay which examines the manifold ways Ashbery’s poem “Sortes Vergilianae” deconstructs the idea of a coherent discourse. Connor provides a detailed and fascinating reading of the poem showing how interruption and complication of elements like narrative progression and time-scale, as well as an intentional confusion of the relationships between fragment and whole, poem and title, tenor and vehicle in metaphors, provide the structural basis for a poem which undoes itself in the process of creating itself. For Connor, the difficulties arise from elements which militate against a unified, untroubled reading. Ashbery’s difficulties, he argues, are willful constructions which have both a literary and a political purpose. Connor summarizes: “The shape of the reading which is portended by ‘Sortes Vergilianae’ runs together authority and surrender, affirmation and negation, insinuating that what poetry and critical deconstruction may have in common is the singular responsibility they assume for conducting the dissolution of forms of absolute authority” (17). This kind of interpretation, which sees the problematizing of language in poetry like

Ashbery's as a project designed to subvert any authoritative language (be it the language of politics, of advertising, or of literary criticism), became a founding idea for Language poetry. It also, in the guise of deconstruction, ironically became an authoritative critical norm itself--which rather takes the revolutionary edge off a project supposedly conducting "the dissolution of forms of absolute authority."

For Connor and others interested in the political ramifications of poetic utterances, difficulty in a sense purifies language by showing us that language is not as transparent as various authoritative discourses would have us believe. By complicating language, poetry reveals the constructedness of discourse and invites readers to question not only texts that look particularly difficult but also texts that look deceptively easy. Difficulty teaches us to look closely, which hopefully encourages readers to ask questions about whose interests are served by certain kinds of rhetoric.

The difficult constructs of the New York School poets and their predecessors such as Williams and Stein have also been seen as "purifications" of language in another way--which forms the basis of a third type of argument to recoup difficulty. Critics such as Bram Dijkstra (following Clement Greenberg) have examined the progression of the arts with modernism as a process of increasing purification, that is, a rejection of all elements extraneous to the particular art form. In painting, this meant focusing only on the primary materials (pigment and canvas) and elements (line, colour, texture, value) and excluding those aspects such as narrative or figuration which were seen as "literary" as opposed to "painterly." Discarding the impulse to represent anything external, the purified painting (the type initiated by the first abstractionists like Vassily Kandinsky) would be about nothing but itself. For writing, this purification meant focusing on, as William Carlos Williams said, "the tactile qualities, the words themselves beyond the mere thought expressed" (qtd. in Dijkstra 51). The early abstractionists of words (Stein, Joyce, Williams) concentrated on the physical qualities of language, the density and texture of

words and sounds, and their connotative rather than denotative values. Such a concentration returns us to the idea of a poem as all surface, and the difficulties this entails for readers. The difficulty in reading a text by Stein, for example, which proposes itself as “all surface” is that readers must accept the idea that language might represent nothing but itself, that it might be stripped of denotation and become pure connotation. They must accept, in other words, that a poem can be a self-supporting verbal artifact. Language which claims to represent nothing but itself presents a much greater challenge than painting that claims to do the same thing. Since language exists, rather like air, as the element we consistently conduct our lives in, and since we rely on it to function in a representational way that allows for communicative agreements, to let go of this is to sacrifice a great deal. The same kind of sacrifice does not attach to pictorial representation which makes it much easier for us to accept visual rather than verbal abstraction.

Dijkstra and others have attempted to recuperate this difficulty by examining and valuing the poem as one would a painting. Dijkstra’s second chapter in *Cubism, Stieglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* examines “The Poem as a Canvas of Broken Parts” which can, like a painting (and *unlike* poems before it), represent a moment or instant of perception by sacrificing narrative and putting in its place strategies of simultaneity. What is difficult about many poems of this kind, such as Williams’s “The Great Figure,” is not that we can’t understand them, but that we don’t know how to talk about them using our standard literary vocabulary. Dijkstra and others have suggested that we need to broaden our vocabulary, and that the best way to do this is to turn to the poets’ own source of inspiration: the visual arts. Perloff does the same thing in *Poet Among Painters* by borrowing the vocabulary of Abstract Expressionism to help explain O’Hara’s “flat” writerly canvasses. This has been a productive and revealing method, and one that this study will use and update in several ways.

A final explanation for the difficulty of New York School poetry (along with several other types of postmodern poetry) is made by critics such as Charles Altieri and Vernon Shetley. These critics argue that through strategies similar to ones noted above, these poems explicitly try to “counter tastes fostered by academic, pedagogical versions of New Criticism, which stressed . . . formal structures, image patterns, and complex linguistic ironies,” as Altieri put it in *Enlarging The Temple: New Directions in American Poetry in the 1960s* (22). Shetley’s *After the Death of Poetry: Poet and Audience in Contemporary America* follows a similar argument, providing a wonderfully detailed account of how New Critical conventions have shaped our current reading practices, and how Ashbery diverges from these protocols, particularly by subverting and problematizing the indispensable New Critical concepts of *speaker* and *situation* (111-121). Once again, difficulty is a challenge to staid reading habits and an invitation to open poetry and criticism to new kinds of interpretation.

A study of all the ways New York School poetry has been seen as difficult could be the topic of an entire dissertation, but for our purposes this summary has gone on long enough. What is important to remember, especially because it is a fact often hidden in these discussions, is that difficulty is always something that happens between reader and text, rather than a quality of the text, as detractors have almost always asserted. The concept of difficulty is an attitude we import: if we are Perloff’s ideal reader we won’t find Ashbery, O’Hara, or Stein difficult or obscure in a negative sense, rather, we will find them enigmatic, evocative, and engrossing.

Rather than weigh in with another explanation and recuperation of New York School difficulty, then, I want to suggest that it may be time to move beyond difficulty. While the poetry of the New York School has not changed (*The Tennis Court Oath*, *Second Avenue*, and *When the Sun Tries to Go On* still have the same syntactic irregularities and narrative disjunctions they did when they were first published), readers

have. As Gregory Polletta noted in 1990, “living with strange compositions or decompositions of language in literature has become our familiar habit as readers or teachers or critics” (187). Educated readers, readers in the age of Language poetry, have become comfortable or at least familiar with difficulties that alienated earlier readers. While the work hasn’t changed, then, the psychology of contemporary readers has. This is a key point since, as Poggioli notes, the understanding of modern art in general rests as much on the psychological predisposition of its readers as it does on critical exegesis. Poggioli writes:

Without denying the efficacy of education and familiarity, the obscurity of modern art will remain an insurmountable obstacle for those who consciously refuse to give at least a provisional assent; but for those who can assent even if only in principle, the most arduous asperities will be surmountable, the works most resisting understanding made accessible. (154)

A good illustration of this shift in psychological predisposition to “difficult” work is provided in Ashbery’s amused comments when once hostile or indifferent critics started praising the clarity of his eighth book, *Houseboat Days*. In a 1980 interview he observes: “People think: well, at last he’s settled down and decided to write so that we can understand him. In fact, I’m not proceeding in any different way: I didn’t think that my work was understandable to begin with and I don’t think it’s any more or less so now” (Sommer 31). If we agree with Ashbery that his work is not, and never was “understandable,” what we need to do is let go of a vocabulary that tries to understand it, and adopt one that engages with it on different terms.

One way of moving beyond difficulty is to shift our focus somewhat from texts (and what makes them problematic) to readers (and how they have attempted to recuperate, make sense of, or respond to unfamiliar kinds of language). My conclusion will focus on two of the most important responses to New York School poetry, Language poetry and Second Generation New York School writing. Here we will consider how a number of readers and writers “talk back” to Ashbery, O’Hara, and Koch by creating other works as a form of dialogue. Furthermore, I will suggest that there is something in the very nature of

the New York School poem, in its valuing of process and fluidity, which invites readers into the process of creation. This dialogue between the New York School poets and their successors will be examined in connection with the idea that one of the things New York School poetry is about is fostering new forms of community.

In conclusion, we can see why critics have always been so drawn to the surface of this work, since New York School poetry, like the abstract painting it admires and sometimes imitates, is more interested in surfaces than in depths. While Robert Bly and colleagues were searching for the “deep image” (in a way not dissimilar to the Surrealists), and Lowell and the Confessional poets used depth psychology to plumb their own minds, the New York School poets were examining the objects and images in the everyday culture around them. This is not to suggest that there is no “depth” to their poetry, but rather that its deepness or wisdom derives from a different place--from the surface which, as Ashbery writes in “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” is the “visible core”:

. . . But your eyes proclaim
That everything is surface. The surface is what's there
And nothing can exist except what's there.
.....
. . . there are no words for the surface, that is,
No words to say what it really is, that it is not
Superficial but a visible core . . . (SPCM 70)

In order to engage with this poetry, then, we should pay close attention to the surface, but we also need to move beyond New Critical strategies of “close reading” which search for closure or a “complete meaning” (as Hassan put it). Instead, readers must pursue strategies of close reading for the nonorganic text--giving weight and attention to individual parts, lines, and words, without assuming that these will add up to a unified whole. This will be a method which respects and revels in differences and quirks, instead of expecting that poems will function in certain predetermined ways. Surrealist writing, Confessional verse, and scenic poetry all have a prearranged quality--though their formulas are radically different, there is nonetheless something formulaic about their procedures and themes. In contrast, one of the few regularities of the New York School is how irregular their poems

are. And yet this thesis is interested in the commonalties of this uncommon verse, and to understand these shared concerns we need to return to the ideological roots of the poetry, in the neo-avant-garde shift from opposition to indifference.

NOTES

¹ This search for an underlying structure and interpretive key, it should be noted, was the major preoccupation of the poem's first readers, and of the mid-century New Critics who secured the poem's and Eliot's authoritative position in the academy at that time. However, since that time critics have moved away from this obsession with order and organization that Eliot's famous notes no doubt encouraged. While Eliot provided the notes which drew readers to Weston and Frazer, he also called *The Waste Land* "a piece of rhythmical grumbling" in an interview with Donald Hall, and noted that "I wasn't even bothering whether I understood what I was saying" (*Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, Second Series. New York: Viking, 1963: 105). In *The Columbia History of American Poetry*, William Pritchard observes that "Not so many years ago it seemed important to try to loosen the poem from the interpretive structures critics had attached to it; there was so much 'scaffolding' . . . that it was all but impossible to see the object the scaffolding surrounded. Now, much of that surrounding material has fallen away or has become so inert that it's simply on longer of interest" (332-3). Nonetheless, I think it's fair to suggest that both the *promise* of deep structure and unity, and the frustration of that promise can be found in *The Waste Land*, whereas poems in the "Other," nonorganic tradition rarely offer the promise of unity.

² Consider these telling titles: Hecht won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Hard Hours* in 1968. In the same decade the New York School produced books with titles such as *Lunch Poems* (O'Hara, 1964), *Thank You* and *The Pleasures of Peace* (Koch, 1962, 1969), and *A Nest of Ninnies* (Ashbery and Schuyler, 1969).

³ O'Hara's biographer, Brad Gooch, suggests that O'Hara infatuation with painter Larry Rivers was displaced onto Freilicher, since "his feelings for her were less troublesome and so more easily flaunted" (227). A complicated triangle developed between the three, with Rivers, who was sexually involved with both O'Hara and Freilicher, in the center.

⁴ Janet Lyon, in the first book-length critical study of manifestoes, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*, argues that such binary thinking is one side of the "contradictions of political representation" embedded in manifesto rhetoric: "On one hand, the manifesto as we know it from the French Revolution forward is the liberatory genre that narrates in no uncertain terms the incongruous experiences of modernity of those whose needs have been ignored or excluded in a putatively democratic political culture. On the other hand, the manifesto is the genre not of universal liberation but of rigid hierarchical binaries: on this reading, the manifesto participates in a reduced understanding of heterogeneous social fields, creating audiences through a rhetoric of exclusivity, parceling out political identities across a polarized discursive field, claiming for 'us' the moral high ground of revolutionary idealism, and constructing 'them' as ideological tyrants, bankrupt usurpers, or corrupt fools" (2-3).

⁵ Olson's status at the time may be gauged by the fact that Warren Tallman's introduction to *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, co-edited by Donald Allen as a companion text to his anthology, claims that there have been two "waves" of American poetic invention--the first "Pound's generation" and the second "Charles Olson's" (ix).

⁶ Brad Gooch, O'Hara's biographer who entitled his work *City Poet*, notes that over the course of his career O'Hara "composed a fragmented epic of the city, focusing particularly on the humor and chaos of the growing metropolis and using his experiences as a trail

through an ever-changing urban labyrinth rather on the scale of Joyce's Dublin or William Carlos Williams's Paterson" (191).

⁷ See Perloff's *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters* (21-24) for an important discussion of how O'Hara applied painterly techniques (such as *push and pull*) and painterly considerations (such as scale) to poetic compositions. Also see Fred Moramarco's "John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara: The Painterly Poets" and Leslie Wolf's "The Brushstroke's Integrity" for further considerations of how the techniques and ideas of abstract painting were applied to experimental poetry.

⁸ In the introduction to his *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* Andreas Huyssen explains that the Great Divide is "the kind of discourse which insists on the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture" (viii). Huyssen writes: "Ever since the mid-19th century, the culture of modernity has been characterized by a volatile relationship between high art and mass culture. . . . Modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture" (vii). He argues that the end of this Divide marks the place where postmodernism takes over from modernism.

⁹ As so often happens, this "revolutionary" challenge settled into position as the norm, as the "scenic poem" became, in Charles Altieri's convincing argument, the dominant mode of contemporary poetry in the 1970s and 80s. In *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary Poetry* Altieri summarizes the gestures of the scenic poem: "The work places a reticent, plain-speaking, and self-reflective speaker within a narratively presented scene evoking a sense of loss. Then the poet tries to resolve the loss in a moment of emotional poignance or wry acceptance that renders the entire lyric event an evocative metaphor for some general sense of mystery about the human condition. . . . the poems must clearly illustrate the controlling hand of the craftsman, but the craft must remain subtle and unobtrusive" (10-11). Altieri highlights a number of significant problems with this mode. First of all, the supposed sincerity or naturalness of the poem is undermined by the highly artificial means required to produce this sincerity. As well, the repeated gesture of closure at the visionary, silent moment is likely to become boring, not to mention the fact that it may also seem at odds with the style's "overall emotional economy" (15). Finally, for Altieri "a cult of silence makes it easy to luxuriate in vague emotions" (15). For Altieri the scenic poem becomes a kind of tiresome machine made out of words which churns out "modest, highly-crafted narrative structures producing moments of sudden illumination" (5) ad nauseum. *Self and Sensibility* argues that the strongest kinds of contemporary poetry are being produced *against* this mode.

¹⁰ This is a pretty standard reaction to art work which deviates from the norm, as modernism has taught us. Early in their careers such respected writers as Eliot, Pound, Joyce, Woolf, and others were all labeled as charlatans and pranksters who were intentionally perpetuating an insulting joke on the reading public.

¹¹ Hoffman's "criticism" of the New York School relies on repetitive slander rather than on close reading and analysis of any of their work. Though I hate to repeat Hoffman's repetitiveness, it is so notable in a work with the prestigious seal of Harvard, that I must record some examples. The first sentence of Hoffman's brief section which deals with the New York School calls their work "satirical, absurdist, parodistic, self-absorbed and detached from external reality" (553). In case we missed the point, a later sentence on the same page calls the work "a solipsistic presentation of personal fantasy . . . all but divorced from any given reality." Two pages later, we are reminded that the poetry is "Private, obscure, purposely lacking in logic" (555), and on the following page we hear about

Ashbery's "arbitrary and solipsistic reveries," not to mention his "whimsy, narcissism, solipsistic aestheticism" (556). Apparently developing this theme through continued repetition, Hoffman decries Ashbery's "reveries conceived exclusively on the right side of the brain" (558), also described as "aimless noodling that fatigues and exasperates the reader" (559). Most readers, by the time they get to the description of "this art of withdrawal from the 'real' world and substitution of a solipsistic immersion in the pleasure principle," (561) will be "fatigued and exasperated" by something other than Ashbery and New York School poetry. As further evidence of Hoffman's casual knowledge of the poets in question, I must also mention the critic's basic errors, such as claiming that "Ashbery was a curator at the Museum of Modern Art and O'Hara an editor on *Art News* (553; it was, in fact--as anyone with an elementary knowledge of O'Hara knows--the other way round). Such errors suggests that Hoffman's condemnation comes without close attention to or understanding of the New York School poets. In another instance, Hoffman misquotes O'Hara in a particularly suspicious way, since the error supports Hoffman's emphasis on the lazy, ungrammatical nature of the work. Hoffman writes: "The spirit of *épater les bourgeois* is enacted over and over . . . as in his mock manifesto for [here Hoffman misquotes O'Hara] 'Personism, a movement which I recently founded and which nobody knows nothing about.'" (O'Hara's text in fact reads ". . . a movement which I recently founded and which nobody knows about" [CP 498]).

¹² David Lehman describes exactly the same kind of pleasure derived from the "difficulties" of Ashbery: "Reading Ashbery one felt on the edge of comprehension (or of incomprehension, which means the same thing). But the state of uncertainty to which his poetry transported one was as oddly intoxicating as it was perplexing. The bafflement itself produced a mental commotion not unlike that of the uncanny . . ." (*Last* 113-14).

CHAPTER TWO

The Neo-Avant-Garde Manifesto

“To be what people call anti-art is really to affirm art, in the same way that an atheist affirms God. The only way to be really anti-art is to be indifferent.”

- Marcel Duchamp (in Tomkins 148)

After examining what others have said about the New York School, we will turn in this chapter to what they say about themselves, particularly in that most quintessential of avant-garde forms, the manifesto. Critics like Marjorie Perloff and Janet Lyon have persuasively outlined the critical role manifestoes played in early avant-garde movements. In the years just before the First World War, the manifesto became a new and highly popular literary genre (or what Perloff calls a “literary sport” [*Futurist* 81])--whereas previously it had been chiefly a political tool. Groups like the Futurists appropriated the political and military overtones of the genre in order to symbolically connect their aesthetic programs to a history of political combat. As Lyon comments: “To write a manifesto is to echo a history of struggle against dominant forces; it is to link one’s voice to the countless voices of previous perpetual struggles” (29). In this way, as Perloff notes, the artistic manifesto became a genre that appealed to a mass audience, “even as, paradoxically, it insisted on the avant-garde, the esoteric, the antibourgeois” (81).

The manifestoes of the early part of the century had several purposes. Their express purpose was to set out, and at the same time validate or authorize, an aesthetic program--though such programs were often articulated with a stridency that suggested more than aesthetic fervour. The artistic purpose, in other words, was often demoted to second place by the very rhetoric through which it was expressed. Intensely serious (with the notable exception of Dada), the rhetoric of these manifestoes is invariably that of aggressive challenge. Thus the purpose of stating a program often seemed ancillary to (or at least inextricably linked with) the purpose of naming an enemy. Through a construction

of “us” versus “them” (variously manifested in the oppositional pairings of son/father, life/death, reality/illusion, present/past) the *new* art is contrasted with an *old* form which must be toppled and displaced. While the manifesto sometimes stated what the new art was meant to do, it more often stated what it wouldn’t do, or how it would differ from its predecessors. For one example among many, here is an excerpt from Naum Gabo’s *The Realistic Manifesto* (1920):

The attempts of the Cubists and the Futurists to lift the visual arts from the bogs of the past have led only to new delusions. . . . their experiments are being made on the surface of Art and do not touch on the bases of it seeing plainly that the end result amounts to the same old graphic, the same old volume and to the same decorative surface as of old. . . . [They] cannot satisfy us who have already accomplished the Revolution or who are already constructing and building up anew. (Bowlt 211)

Here, the enemy is clearly named from the outset and the most common charge, of “oldness,” is leveled. The Realistic artists were not interested in realist representation, but in moving beyond all old forms and creating a simplified, idealized art for the Revolution. I want to continue with a few more examples of the oppositionality at the heart of the manifesto. The first comes from one of the avant-garde’s founding documents, F. T. Marinetti’s infamous 1909 *Manifesto of Futurism*. Marinetti, who was an indifferent poet and philosopher, found his real forte as a kind of manifesto performance artist. Marinetti spent most of his artistic energy perfecting what he called in a letter “the art of making manifestoes” [*dall’ arte di far manifesti*], a form which required “la violence et la *précision*” (qtd. in Perloff 81):

Up to now literature has exalted a pensive immobility, ecstasy, and sleep. We intend to exalt aggressive action, a feverish insomnia, the racer’s stride, the mortal leap, the punch and the slap. . . . We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind, will fight moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice. . . . We establish *Futurism*, because we want to free this land from its smelly gangrene of professors, archaeologists, *ciceroni* and antiquarians. (Apollonio 21, 22)

Of course such extremist claims far exceed the Futurist grasp, but this is essentially beside the point since it is the claims themselves, and not their fulfillment, which constitute the art of the manifesto. Manifestos succeed by creating a discourse of urgency and immediacy

where the rhetoric appears to be not only an avowal, but also an incipient action. Thus, as Perloff observes, for the Futurists and other manifesto artists, “to talk about art becomes equivalent to making it” (90). Although the *Manifesto of Futurism* makes grand claims that “Courage, audacity, and revolt will be essential elements of our poetry,” in the end the manifestoes themselves proved to be not only the first, but also the best productions of Futurist art.¹

Further examples of the antagonism so important to many of the movements of the historical avant-garde are seen in these two Russian manifestos, from 1912 and 1918 respectively:

We alone are the face of our Time. . . . The past constricts. The Academy and Pushkin are less intelligible than hieroglyphics. Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc., etc., must be thrown overboard from the Ship of Modernity. He who does not forget his first love will not recognize his last. (A Slap in the Face of Public Taste, 1912, Proffer and Proffer 179)

The Futurists are dead. There are no more Futurists: there are Presentists. . . . their beautiful “Somewhere-out-there” has been found, and it is our present, mighty, glorious, noble Republic of Soviets. (*The Presentists*, March 1918, Proffer and Proffer 195)

Here again we see the fundamental link between the rejection of the past and the cult of the new. It is not only Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and the Futurists as individuals who must be discarded, but the very language they represent. Thus the *Slap In the Face* authors (Mayakovsky et al) “decree” that the poet’s right and responsibility is “To feel insuperable hatred for the language that existed before them.” Such rejections are so essential to these programs that Matei Calinescu suggests that Mikhail Bakunin’s famous anarchist maxim “To destroy is to create,” “is actually applicable to most of the activities of the twentieth-century avant-garde” (117). One final example is from Tristan Tzara’s *Dada Manifesto* of 1918. Although, in typical Dadaist fashion, Tzara claims he is writing a kind of anti-manifesto (“I am writing a manifesto and I don’t want anything, I say however certain things and I am on principle against manifestoes, as I am also against principles” [149]) he in fact uses many familiar oppositional strategies. His manifesto names an

enemy, extravagantly rejects the past, and in general combines polemics and poetics to suggest a vague, but nonetheless *new* program:

So DADA was born of a desire for independence, of a distrust of community. Those who belong to us keep their freedom. We don't recognize any theory. We have had enough of cubist and futurist academies: laboratories of formal ideas. Do you practice art to earn money and fondle the middle class? . . . I am against systems, the most acceptable system is the one of not having any system, on principle. . . . I call it don't give a damnism the state of life where each person keeps his own conditions . . . (150, 154)

It will be clear from all the preceding examples that the aggressive rhetoric of the manifesto owes much to the military origins of the concept of the avant-garde.² Even a group as aesthetically-oriented as the Rayonists expressed themselves in belligerent terms: "We will crush in our advance all those who undermine us and all those who stand aside. . . . We have our own artistic honor, which we are prepared to defend to the last with all the means at our disposal" ("Rayonists and Futurists: A Manifesto" [1913], Bowlit 88-89). Although no humor is intended here, one has to smirk at the image of the Rayonists fighting to the death for "spatial forms arising from the intersection of the reflected rays of various objects"--which is how they describe their work in this manifesto (90).

As one of the chief characteristics of the historical avant-garde movements is antagonism, the manifesto functions as an announcement and record of a form of struggle. Futurism in fact codified this struggle as the basis for all authentic art: "Except in struggle," Marinetti proclaimed in the 1909 *Manifesto of Futurism*, "there is no more beauty. No work without an aggressive character can be a masterpiece. Poetry must be conceived as a violent attack on unknown forces, to reduce and prostrate them before man" (Apollonio 21). Of course a struggle against unknown forces is much harder to sustain than one aimed at the namable "gangrene" of society: "professors, archaeologists, *ciceroni* and antiquarians," as Marinetti saw it. In general, the adversary of the historical avant-garde was an image of the ideal Victorian gentleman, the genteel artist--an image half created and half observed. However, as the historical avant-garde movements progressed, the enemy

changed slightly. Though the opponent remained in most cases “the status quo” in one form or another, the specific face of this adversary tended to take on the characteristics of the movement preceding the one being proclaimed. Thus Futurists attacked the passivity of their Cubist forebears, Dadaists challenged the belligerence of Futurist ancestors, and the Surrealists challenged Dada’s nihilism. The Futurists who, more than any group, thrived on struggle, had already in their inception predicted their dissolution: “The oldest of us is thirty . . . When we are forty, other younger stronger men will probably throw us in the wastebasket like useless manuscripts--we want it to happen!” (23).

In these early manifestoes stating an artistic purpose was often less important than naming an artistic enemy, so that aesthetic programs developed not through a dialectic, but through a series of rejections. This makes Dada, in a sense, the supreme avant-garde movement (as it has often been described) since it succeeds in rejecting just about everything:

Dada is life with neither slippers nor parallels; which is against and for unity and certainly against the future; we know our brains will become downy cushions, that our antidogmatism is as exclusionist as the civil servant and that we are not free although we shout freedom; severe necessity without discipline or morals and we spit on humanity. . . . DADA exists for no one and we want everyone to understand that. . . . DADA is not madness, nor wisdom, nor irony, look at me, there’s a good man. (Tristan Tzara, *Manifesto of Mr. Antipyrine*, 147)

I do not want to suggest that the manifestoes of the historical avant-garde failed to set out principles and practices. Many, like Pound’s famous Imagist manifesto, “A Few Don’ts for an Imagiste,” went to lengths to describe what young artists should and shouldn’t do.³ What I do want to suggest is that such prescriptions cannot be separated from the adversary they set out to reform--thus Pound’s requirements must be understood in contrast to the genteel Victorian verse Imagism sought to overthrow.

The New York School’s “advance” on the advanced guard of art, as suggested in chapter one, was to forsake the enemy and to abjure “adversary culture.” The 1950s and 60s were a time of crisis and reformation for the avant-garde in America (according to the

most important critics of the day: Leslie Fiedler, Irving Howe, Lionel Trilling, Harold Rosenberg, etc.). With the unforeseen success of the avant-garde (figured in the “triumph” of Abstract Expressionism or the surprising attainments of “Howl,” *On the Road*, and the Beats in general) adversary culture was becoming *popular* culture. Opposition, as advertisers quickly learned, became fashion. Furthermore, in an age when almost *anything* was acceptable, when (culturally at least) permissiveness became the rule, it became more and more difficult to locate a recognizable enemy. Given these conditions, artistic antagonism (the kind expressed repeatedly by someone like Allen Ginsberg) became self-parody--its gestures repeatedly reinscribing the dominant it sought to defeat. The New York School poets were well aware of the problem of appropriation by the culture industry and, like Marcel Duchamp, chose to confront it through a strategy of independence or indifference.

To be indifferent, the *Oxford English Dictionary* informs us, is to “mak[e] no difference between conflicting parties”; it is to choose “a position or value between two continua of experience, such as a temperature that is experienced as neither warm nor cold.” In the theory of magnetism, the *indifference point* is that “middle zone of a magnet where the attractive powers of the two ends neutralize each other” (*OED*). For the New York School the two artistic positions they had to choose between varied slightly from the 1950s to the 1960s. In the 50s, the “conflicting parties” were those two antagonistic camps in the “anthology wars”--on one hand, the formalist “academic” poets (represented in Hall, Pack, and Simpson’s anthology *The New Poets of England and America*) and on the other, the oppositional “experimentalists” (represented in Don Allen’s rival anthology *The New American Poetry*). Although they were anthologized, and often closely associated, with Allen’s “radicals” the New York School poets were more interested in finding a space, as Ashbery put it, “between the extremes of Levittown and Haight-Ashbury” (*RS* 393). This search for a “between” position may have evolved slightly in the 1960s when the two opposing camps might be designated by the terms “radical art” and “radical chic.” On the

one hand were artists like the Beats who chose the old-fashioned rebelliousness of the historical avant-garde. On the other hand, were artists like Andy Warhol who not only accepted but flaunted the language of the dominant culture. Warhol's famous "Factory" studio functioned by the logic, and through the strategies, of market capitalism. Using techniques of rapid reproduction (silk-screening, film, magazine production, etc.) the Factory churned out mass-produced art objects, which converted Hollywood stars, supermarket commodities, and consumer capitalism in general, into a new aesthetic. Rather than choosing between these positions, the New York School poets chose to exempt itself from the debate altogether, realizing that in this zealous atmosphere--an atmosphere of intense competition for artistic attention, audience, and dollars--a lack of zeal might be a truly productive attitude. Indifference in this case might also be seen as a kind of liberty. If one is not committed to one path or another, one has the freedom to choose. The New York School's neutrality gave them the freedom *from* necessity, which allowed them to utilize the strategies and benefits of either and both positions.

The last thing we would ever call the manifestoes of the historical avant-garde is indifferent. And this, according to Duchamp, is one of their main problems, since to oppose in such a forceful way is necessarily to invest your adversary with power, to make him or her worthy of opposition. To be indifferent, on the other hand, is to express a self-contained disinterest which deprives opponents of their essential importance or seriousness by ignoring them. Such unconcern is, in fact, far more devastating than opposition could ever be.

I would like to proceed, then, by examining three documents of the New York School, one from each of the poets in question, which I will suggest are new kinds of manifestoes. These texts decree the position of indifference, and even locate an enemy, but do so in a way which takes the opponent (and, for that matter, themselves) less seriously than their predecessors. Each document at times relies on and at other times subverts the intentions of the manifestoes we have considered so far. I do not want to suggest that these

manifestoes be considered “in opposition” to earlier manifestoes, as further documents in a long chain of avant-garde advances through rejection. Instead, the “advance” of the New York School, if we can call it that, is one of awareness both of the strategies of avant-gardist opposition, and of the pitfalls of such a position in their own historical moment. The New York School manifesto both relies on and departs from older conventions, and it moves in both directions in an attempt not to defeat, but to escape from the problems and contradictions of the avant-garde position in America in the 1960s.

“The Invisible Avant-Garde”

Much of John Ashbery’s most intriguing and revealing work is his writing about visual art. As David Bergman remarks in his introduction to *Reported Sightings*, a collection of thirty years of Ashbery’s criticism, “Art writing has been a halfway point between the visual and the linguistic and often a place to explore ideas that make their way into the poems” (xii). Moreover, art writing has helped Ashbery, and his colleagues in the New York School who also worked regularly as art critics, to formulate an aesthetic ideology which informs their poetry at a basic level. One of the things that separates the New York School from contemporary poetic movements like the Beats or the Confessional poets is a heightened self-consciousness, not only about writing, but about the *institution* of writing and the institution of art in general. Long years of looking at, meditating on, and writing about visual art made these poets highly aware of the ways in which art is institutionalized. Their careers as critics and curators required them to think frequently and deeply about art’s commerce with society in a way that would have been foreign to Allen Ginsberg, Adrienne Rich, or Robert Lowell. Thus, for these poets, the position they took on the institution of art in general--both within and outside of their poetry--was an essential ingredient to their identity as artists.

Such a position is formulated with unusual clarity (or at least an unusual lack of ambiguity for Ashbery) in “The Invisible Avant-Garde,” a lecture delivered in 1968 at the Yale Art School, and subsequently published in *ArtNews Annual*. While “The Invisible Avant-Garde” may not look like a traditional manifesto, it in fact functions in the same way. Like earlier manifestoes, it addresses a specific audience of artists, and engages the primary question of artistic praxis: What to do next, how to make meaningful art in this moment given past and present constraints. It also, to a lesser extent than its predecessors, names an enemy—though here the ambiguity we expect from Ashbery is more in evidence, as we will see. Unlike the traditional manifesto, “The Invisible Avant-Garde” doesn’t present itself as a polemical document, a prescription or a sermon, but as a conversation or personal communication.

Ashbery begins his lecture by observing that in the present moment the avant-garde, which was supposed to be “the very antithesis of tradition” has in fact become “a tradition of sorts” (RS 389). To make matters worse, the avant-garde has become the most fashionable and marketable tradition around (as advertisers showed us in their use of Pollock, and Pop art showed us by turning advertising into high art). Thus, Ashbery ironically complains that “the avant-garde can now barely exist because of the immense amounts of attention and money that are focused on it” (392).⁴ Since long before James Dean the rebel was established as the archetypal American hero, and since the avant-garde artist is (usefully, if ironically) a *productive* rebel, the artist and his product became, as Pollock most certainly did, the perfect commodity. From the commercial point of view, the artist and her art are a capitalist market dream: seductively difficult to finally “possess,” but easy enough to keep buying. From the artistic point of view, however, this product is immediately vulgarized and degraded by fashion and acceptance.

The cooption of the avant-garde by the forces of commercialism and by the “acceptance world” (Ashbery’s term for a public which rushes to embrace anything that looks modern or scandalous) puts the young artist who wants to do something new in a

particularly difficult quandary. For in doing something new, something shocking in the best avant-garde tradition, the young artist is likely to end up, Ashbery remarks, “join[ing] Andy Warhol and Viva and the rest of the avant-garde on *The Tonight Show*” (392).

Ashbery offers two possible solutions to this problem. The first is the way of the enigmatic Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico who, half way through his career, renounced the brilliant experimental work of his youth and became a traditional painter. Such a radical move (Ashbery suggests the artist “passed from being one of the greatest painters of this century to a crotchety fabricator of bad pictures” [RS 391]) seems to suggest de Chirico’s realization that when everyone begins to expect the unexpected, the only way to do something new is to do something old. At a time when it has become “safest to experiment” (393), the revolutionary artist must turn away from experimentation. This kind of reactionary solution is not, for Ashbery, a satisfactory option since it is ultimately a gesture of bad faith and an act of artistic self-denial. He writes:

I would class de Chirico’s late paintings as good traditional art, though as bad art, because they embrace a tradition which everything in the artist’s career seemed to point away from, and which he therefore accepted because, no doubt, he felt as an avant-garde artist that only the unacceptable is acceptable. (392)

The other option that Ashbery offers is to fight acceptance not by opposing and turning against it, not by doing the opposite of what’s expected, but simply by ignoring it:

The Midas-like position into which our present acceptance-world forces the avant-garde is actually a disguised blessing which previous artists have not been able to enjoy, because it points the way out of the predicament it sets up—that is, towards an attitude which neither accepts nor rejects acceptance but is independent of it. (394)

The advantage artists have today is that they are acutely conscious of the (often insidious) ways art is institutionalized and commercialized in a culture based on consumption, and so can develop an artistic theory and practice that takes this situation into account. This is exactly what the New York School poets tried to do in developing an aesthetic, as Ashbery suggests above, of *independence*. Ashbery ends “The Invisible Avant-Garde” with a quotation from German composer Busoni (whose music, he writes, “has the unique quality of being excellent and of sounding like nobody else’s”) who reminds us that “one follows a

great example most faithfully if one does not follow it, for it was through turning away from its predecessor that the example became great" (394). This suggests an aesthetic not of rejection, but of aloofness, an aesthetic willing to take true risks by turning its back on success and acceptance.

Ashbery provides several models for this kind of aesthetic autonomy. An article for *Art News Annual* in 1966 locates a group of such independent artists in those Americans who have abandoned New York, "the capital of the contemporary art world," for the "privacy and isolation" of Paris: "The Americans in Paris are permanently out of fashion, first ahead of it and now behind it, without ever having gone through an intervening period of acceptance." Ashbery observes in the essay entitled "American Sanctuary in Paris" (RS 87- 88). And this independence, this sense of being out of step, may account for a particularly engaging quality in their work:

It is as though they had given up all efforts at trying to please a public, whether French or American, and had gone back to pleasing themselves. For once, you don't have the feeling that the artist is breathing down your neck, or that you are catching the work in a split-second of its trajectory from easel to gallery to museum (88).

Ashbery has made a career of collecting models for this kind of aesthetic independence. His interest in painters like Parmigianino, de Chirico, and Michaux; in musicians like Busoni, Satie, and Cage; and in undiscovered writers such as John Clare, David Schubert, John Wheelwright, Laura Riding, etc. all support a fascination with the outsider, the artist who doesn't buck, but ignores all current trends. Ashbery has very much incorporated this model of independence into his own poetic practice, as will be examined shortly through a reading of the title poem of his first major collection, *Some Trees* (1956).

Before turning to this poem, we need to look a little closer at the relationship of "The Invisible Avant-Garde" to the traditional manifesto in order to understand the basis for Ashbery's aesthetic. As suggested previously, a key role for the manifestoes of the historical avant-garde was to name an enemy. Ashbery does essentially the same thing, though his enemy is much subtler than the traditional target of avant-gardist attack. In

Ashbery's manifesto the enemy is acceptance, and this is a tricky adversary since it no longer looks like an enemy, but instead like a supporter. Such an opponent provides its attack not through indifference or hostility, but by "the efficacious means of over-encouragement" (RS 91). Thus the paradox: "Before they [the avant-garde] were fighting against general neglect, even hostility, but this seemed like a natural thing and therefore the fight could be carried on in good faith. Today one must fight acceptance which is much harder because it seems that one is fighting oneself" (RS 393). If the enemy is acceptance, fashion, noise, and acclaim, the way it must be fought, Ashbery seems to be suggesting, is through neutrality, independence, reticence, and secrecy. Ashbery notes that "the period of neglect for an avant-garde artist has shrunk for each generation," so that now "it is no longer possible, or it *seems* no longer possible, for an important avant-garde artist to go unrecognized. And, sadly enough, his creative life expectancy has dwindled correspondingly, since artists are no fun once they have been discovered" (392). I have italicized the word *seems* to suggest that here we find the program Ashbery and his colleagues will follow. They will attempt, through various strategies, to be unrecognized or, more accurately, to produce poetry that is *unrecognizable*. If the artist cannot remain undiscovered, this program suggests, he can at least write poetry which is *undiscoverable*, and thus difficult to coopt for commercial, political or academic purposes. Let us turn, then, to the title poem of Ashbery's first collection in search of these strategies of neutrality, independence, reticence, and secrecy.

Like most of Ashbery's poems, "Some Trees" is an elusive, mysterious piece, and it claims that mysteriousness quite consciously as a poetic strategy. Instead of being shocking in the old avant-garde manner (like Kurt Schwitter's Merz poetry, Hugo Ball's sound poems, Hans Arp's word collages, or Tristan Tzara's cut-ups)⁵, "Some Trees" is enigmatic and reticent. It chooses a strategy of secrecy, a logic of mysteriousness which, rather than provoking the reader, resists his or her understanding, and thereby resists assimilation or cooption. As the final poem of this volume suggests "All beauty,

resonance, integrity, / Exist by deprivation or logic / Of strange position" (*Mooring 56*).

Here is the "logic of strange position" called "Some Trees":

These are amazing: each
 Joining a neighbor, as though speech
 Were a still performance.
 Arranging by chance

To meet as far this morning
 From the world as agreeing
 With it, you and I
 Are suddenly what the trees try

To tell us we are:
 That their merely being there
 Means something; that soon
 We may touch, love, explain.

And glad not to have invented
 Such comeliness, we are surrounded:
 A silence already filled with noises,
 A canvas on which emerges

A chorus of smiles, a winter morning.
 Placed in a puzzling light, and moving,
 Our days put on such reticence
 These accents seem their own defense. (*Mooring 37*)

"Some Trees" is about a kind of communion, but who or what is communing, and what the nature of their communication is, remains concealed. Ashbery begins, in what will become a signature gesture, with the ambiguous pronoun "These."⁶ Readers may resolve the ambiguity by assuming "these" are the trees (which would follow the rhythmical logic of the poem), but such a resolution leaves many questions. How, readers may wonder, do trees speak? In what way is this speech "a still performance"? And what, most importantly, are these trees "trying" (notice the Frost-like reticence here) to say? Certainly, the trees' message seems of ontological importance, since it claims to tell "us" *who we are*. Such information would be useful both for the self-knowledge of the poem's "us," and for the critical appreciation of the poem's readers, who remain baffled as to the identity of this ambiguous "us."

These uncertainties of the poem are compounded by a number of willful paradoxes and contradictions. How can one arrange, for example, to meet by chance, when such an

intention would defeat the random nature of the meeting? How, also, would one meet “as far . . . from the world as agreeing with it,” when these positions imply both distance and closeness? One might also wonder if “a silence already filled with noises” can still be recognized as a silence. These are not contradictions to be solved, but are part of the “logic of strange position” which underwrites this, and so many of Ashbery’s poems. These contradictions do not suggest discord, but rather an accord which is strangely unplaceable--an accord of rhythm rather than reason. Thus the reason of the last couplet follows a kind of logic of mystery, a logic which seeks to hide as much as to reveal:

Our days put on such reticence
These accents seem their own defense.

The “accents of reticence,” words which conceal their meaning in the very act of giving it expression, are the tones which inform “Some Trees.” Such tones may remind readers of another gesture of simultaneous defense and revelation from the title poem of a later volume, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. Here, in describing Parmigianino’s elusive self portrait, Ashbery is also creating a self portrait of his writerly aesthetic:

As Parmigianino did it, the right hand
Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer
And swerving easily away, as though to protect
What it advertises. A few leaded panes, old beams,
Fur, pleated muslin, a coral ring run together
In a movement supporting the face, which swims
Toward and away like the hand
Except that it is in repose. It is what is
Sequestered. . . .

.
But there is in that gaze a combination
Of tenderness, amusement and regret, so powerful
In its restraint that one cannot look for long.
The secret is too plain. (SPCM 68-9)

What is the “plain” secret (notice again the contradictions of revelation and concealment) facing us in Parmigianino’s gaze and in Ashbery’s poems? What is being “protected” in Parmigianino’s ambiguous gesture and in the “accents of reticence” which compose “Some Trees”?

According to Vernon Shetley, there is something very specific at stake which needs protection. Shetley reads "Some Trees" as a love poem and suggests that while "Ashbery seems to have been destined to be a love poet . . . he found the way blocked by the imperative of secrecy surrounding the love he would have taken as his subject" (25). For Shetley, "the poem's reticence [is] generated by a need for concealment" of homosexual desire (26). Although Shetley doesn't mention it, the work of Jacob Stockinger, who coined the term "homotextuality," would also support his reading. Stockinger's article identifies a number of textual features as commonalities of homosexual literary expression. He notes: "the most frequent type of homotextual space is the closed and withdrawn place that is transformed from stigmatizing into redeeming space" (144). These free spaces can also take the form of "the open country side, which is privileged space for the homosexual because it marks both his ostracism and the chance to recuperate his 'unnatural' love in nature" (144). While I find these interpretations convincing and pertinent, I also think that ultimately we need to give a wider berth of interpretation to Ashbery's interest in concealment.

We must begin by asking who the "you and I" of "Some Trees" refer to. Like so many of Ashbery's "characters" (or more properly pronouns), "you and I" remain ambiguous. While "you and I" might refer to homosexual lovers, they might also refer to reader and author. On this reading, the arranged chance meeting is the encounter of the poem itself, a space that "surrounds" and includes both reader and author: "A silence already filled with noises,/ A canvas on which emerges/ A chorus of smiles . . .".⁷ What is being protected is more than a secret human love affair, it is also a love affair with language, a poetic process that is unwilling to reduce poems to paraphrasable meanings. Through concealment, reticence, and the logic of mystery, Ashbery must protect his own poetry from the cooption of a "final" reading. Through this indeterminacy Ashbery also protects his work against the pitfalls of the avant-garde, against a public eager for poems and personalities to consume, a public only too willing to accept the unacceptable. Such an

approach does not deny Shetley's insights into the poem, which I think are valid and important, especially as they speak to the daily lived experience of its author. Rather, my approach adds to Shetley by suggesting that Ashbery makes the need for concealment into an aesthetic which reaches beyond the very real imperatives of expressing (and concealing) homosexual desire.

The need for reticence, secrecy, and independence at the root of "Some Trees" reaches up into desires which are not only physical but also artistic. Such reticence is an embodiment of Ashbery's neo-avant-garde aesthetic which replaces the imperatives of shock and rebellion with the principles of withdrawal and independence. It will be immediately obvious to readers that such reticence is *not* the style of Frank O'Hara or Kenneth Koch. Next, we will explore how each of these poets develops his own unique strategy to dodge the "acceptance world" and to find a space for artistic independence.

Personism

"... the fact that you move so beautifully more or less takes care of Futurism"
- Frank O'Hara, "Having a Coke With You"

The story of the composition of O'Hara's infamous poetic manifesto is a perfect illustration of the myths of his writing method and of the program he sets out--half jokingly, half in earnest--in the manifesto itself. According to his lover and roommate Joe LeSueur, O'Hara wrote "Personism" in less than an hour, with a bourbon and water in hand and Rachmaninoff's Third blaring on the radio. The piece was requested by Don Allen for the "Statements" section of *The New American Poetry* and, after much procrastination, O'Hara finally sat down to write it with his editor on the way across town to pick it up (Gooch 338-9). The manifesto was eventually rejected by Allen, who felt that its aesthetics did not apply to all of O'Hara's work.⁸ This was an unfortunate choice, since there is in fact a widely encompassing program hiding behind O'Hara's typically flippant and whimsical prose. I would like to examine this program in several ways. First, I will

look at how the manifesto's rhetoric turns the solemnity of the traditional manifesto on its head, by replacing seriousness with camp. Next, I will examine the attitude of "nerve" or risk that O'Hara advances and which is a central preoccupation and family resemblance among many New York School artists. Finally, I want to look at the form the manifesto introduces, the Personist address, which is a kind of revised dramatic monologue for a postmodern, camp sensibility. I will further consider this model in contrast to its contemporary rival, the confessional poem.

"Personism" is both comical and serious, and in fact posits "the comic" as a serious poetic position--an important New York School stance in general. Comedy, for all of the New York School poets, is a way of deflating pretentiousness, and challenging what they saw as the polemical seriousness of so much contemporary writing. Such seriousness, as far as O'Hara and his colleagues were concerned, had become institutionalized not only with the New Critics but also with many groups who challenged the New Critics. As "Personism" declares:

Too many poets act like a middle-aged mother trying to get her kids to eat too much cooked meat, and potatoes with drippings (tears). I don't give a damn whether they eat or not. Forced feeding leads to excessive thinness (effete). Nobody should experience anything they don't need to, if they don't need poetry bully for them. I like movies too. (CP 498)

Humour is a way of withdrawing the force feeding hand, of suggesting that poetry need not be somber, nor, for that matter, culturally *central* (as many poets of O'Hara's day tacitly or openly insisted). Poetry, as "Personism" both states and *shows*, can also be fun: "And after all," O'Hara continues, "only Whitman and Crane and Williams, of the American poets, are better than the movies" (498). Comparing poetry to the movies (which still had the taint of popular culture, or kitsch), as opposed to, say, associating it with the very life breath of humanity, as Charles Olson does in probably the most famous manifesto of that decade, "Projective Verse," is to radically deflate the high style and dogmatism of most poetic manifestoes. It is also a way of bridging an important gap, Huyssen's "Great Divide" between high art and mass culture. This is how Olson begins "Projective Verse":

“Verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of *essential* use, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings” (147). He goes on to proclaim that “the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge” (148). The textual and, for that matter, sexual politics of these lines--with their emphasis on manly energies and discharges--probably both amused and annoyed O’Hara for whom Olson becomes something of a synecdoche for a kind of macho seriousness in verse. It is against this position that Personism stakes its camp poetics and politics.

In a 1965 interview with Edward Lucie-Smith, O’Hara complains that Olson (and we must remember that Olson’s dominant position makes him an easy synecdoche for a more general and widespread stance towards poetry) is too “conscious of the Pound heritage and of saying the important utterance, which . . . is not particularly desirable most of the time” (SS 13). Straining for the “important utterance,” an occupation so evident in Olson’s polemical essays and in poems like the *Maximus* series (“I, Maximus / a metal hot from boiling water, tell you . . .” [Ellmann 809]), is a way of positing poetry as an unremittingly serious and (here the gender politics come in) manly business. A comparison of the rhetoric of “Projective Verse” and “Personism” is quite revealing. Here Olson barks orders about prosody as though he were some kind of Poundian poetic drill sergeant:

ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION. It means exactly what it says, is a matter of, at *all* points (even, I should say, of our management of daily reality as of the daily work) get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen. And if you also set up as a poet, **USE USE USE** the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must must **MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!** (149)

(One imagines a gaggle of young Black Mountain student-poets saluting and calling out “**YES SIR, MR. OLSON, SIR**”). Here, in contrast, are O’Hara’s audacious, campy notes on prosody:

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. There’s nothing metaphysical about it. (CP 498)

For O'Hara the "important utterance" and "other technical apparatus" are not particularly desirable because they are constricting (though not in the *good* way of tight pants). Rather, they constrict because they deprive poetry of humour, pleasure, and breadth. They are, in essence, elitist forms of control which claim a monopoly over culture. Ideas are important to O'Hara and his New York School colleagues, but they are not *the only thing* that is important: "I'm not saying that I don't have practically the most lofty ideas of anyone writing today," O'Hara records, "but what difference does that make? They're just ideas. The only good thing about it is that when I get lofty enough I've stopped thinking and that's when refreshment arrives" (498). Seriousness, which is the essence of the traditional manifesto that aims to aggressively advance its position, becomes the "enemy" in O'Hara's new manifesto:

I don't believe in god, so I don't have to make elaborately sounded structures. . . . I don't even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff. You just go on your nerve. If someone's chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don't turn around and shout, "Give it up! I was a track star for Mineola Prep." (498)

* * *

The idea of nerve or "risk" (as the New York School painters called it), presented half-seriously in the above quotation, is in fact an extremely important part of O'Hara's aesthetic. In place of the solemn reflection or historical density of a Pound or Olson, going on nerve means working spontaneously, intuitively, often flippantly, as all the New York poets habitually did. But nerve signifies more than just speed, for Olson, too, calls for speed in "Projective Verse." More importantly, nerve means being indifferent to any *external* evaluations, it means stepping outside of artistic battles and beyond the progressivist model of literary history to which these battles tacitly subscribe.

The very idea of the *avant-garde*, of a group of artists who consider themselves *ahead of their time*, suggests a progressivist model of the arts, where each new movement advances and improves upon their predecessors. Thus Futurism must present itself as superior to Cubism; Presentism must be an improvement on Futurism; and Surrealism must

be seen as a corrective to the insufficiencies of Dadaism. In each case the new movement is ironically reliant upon the old, just as Projective Verse needs an enemy--“the ‘old’ base of the non-projective” (148)--to define itself. The mentality of the traditional manifesto always follows the logic of debate.

Instead of progressing by this oppositional logic, O’Hara and the New York School adopt a new strategy of “going on nerve.” Such an aesthetic means trusting in and relying on only your own impulses and compulsions, regardless of current or past trends or contests. Going on nerve means stepping outside of the artistic bickering and position-taking which constitutes “the institution of art” by establishing hierarchies and positions.⁹ A nery artist, one who is willing to take real risks by remaining independent of current trends and external evaluations will, in Ashbery’s words “neither accept nor reject acceptance but [remain] independent of it.”

O’Hara’s comments on nerve and risk undoubtedly evolved, to some extent, from his interaction with the Abstract Expressionists for whom the idea of the artist “at risk” in the creative process was an important one. The painters’ idea of risk resulted, according to art critic Alwynne Mackie, “from the view of painting as a journey into the unknown, with the end outside conscious control; it involved greater risk of failure, and it also left one alone and exposed” (93). The heavy dose of existential angst that accompanied these Abstract Expressionist ideas, and expressed itself strongly in their anguished personae, did not really match the poets’ temperament. As O’Hara remarks in his first “Art Chronicle” “Abstract Expressionism is the art of serious men” (AC 6). However, while the brooding personae of a Pollock or de Kooning could never be adopted by the campy O’Hara (or the reticent Ashbery or mercurial Koch for that matter), some of the ideas behind the style might be. As O’Hara explains in his interview with Lucie-Smith: “I think the *example* of the abstract expressionists . . . gave me the feeling that one should work harder and should really try to do something other than just polish whatever talent one had been recognized for, that one should go further” (SS 3). The poets’ idea of risk or nerve, then, evolved not

so much by following the artists' *idea* of painting as an angst-ridden struggle for self-definition, but by the artists' *example* of significant risk-taking by pushing the boundaries of art. In other words, the poets appropriated and reinterpreted the painters' project, glossing over the manly existential rhetoric, but keeping the idea of artistic endeavor as a significant risk. Ashbery exemplifies such a creative reinterpretation in his description of Jackson Pollock's art. In this passage from "The Invisible Avant-Garde" Pollock becomes an emblem of nerve:

A painter like Pollock for instance was gambling everything on the fact that he *was* the greatest painter in America, for if he wasn't, he was nothing, and the drips would turn out to be random splashes from the brush of a careless housepainter. It must have occurred to Pollock that there was just a possibility that he wasn't an artist at all, that he had spent his life "toiling up the wrong road to art" as Flaubert said of Zola. But this very real possibility is paradoxically just what makes the tremendous excitement in his work. It is a gamble against terrific odds. Most reckless things are beautiful in some way, and recklessness is what makes experimental art beautiful, just as religions are beautiful because of the strong possibility that they are founded on nothing. We would all believe in God if we knew He existed, but would this be much fun? (RS 390-91)

Ashbery's description virtually ignores the whole intellectual framework which Pollock himself saw undergirding his art and his "risk."¹⁰ The poet-critic glosses over Pollock's ideas myth, symbol, and the unconscious in order to make the painter into a emblem of a kind of risk which is in fact more neo-avant-garde than it is avant-garde in its claims of independence rather than commitment. While avant-garde work is generally committed to changing perception which, the artists believed, would lead to changes in the institution of art and in society in general, the neo-avant-garde advocates indifference rather than opposition to these institutions. While Pollock's risk was related to his desire to change artistic codes and beliefs, risk for Ashbery, O'Hara, and the New York School in general, has to do with independence, with the artist's willingness to turn his or her back on the whole "institution of art." Of course, at the time of Pollock's ascendancy (the mid-40s) these institutional codes and beliefs were more traditional and rigid than they were by the 1960s. By this later date, as Ashbery notes, these institutional codes had ironically come to favour experimentation and constant innovation. For the New York School, the

risk of turning one's back on all these institutions (even, in the case of the poets, when these institutions seem to be endlessly permissive) is what gives the art (in Ashbery's words) its "tremendous excitement."

Kenneth Koch has suggested that it is exactly this kind of risk of independence which gives O'Hara's poetry its excitement and urgency. Ignoring codes and fashions at a time when poetry was marked by various kinds of seriousness (while the Black Mountain, Beat, Confessional, Feminist, and Black Arts movements produced very different kinds of poetry, they are all marked by a serious, perhaps solemn, rhetoric of commitment), O'Hara took the risk of trusting his intuitions. O'Hara built a poetry based not on collective political commitments but on quirky individual tastes and preferences. Koch recalls: "Something about Frank that impressed me . . . was his feeling that the silliest idea actually in his head was better than the most profound idea actually in someone else's head--which seems obvious once you know it, but how many poets have lived how many total years without ever finding it out?" (AP 20). This reckless faith in personal taste led to poems made from what seems to be the random junk of the poet's days, what Koch calls "an inspired irrelevance which turns out to be relevant" (AP 21). Ashbery comments on the same phenomena in his introduction to O'Hara's *Collected Poems* when he describes the form of an O'Hara poem as "a bag into which anything is dumped and ends up belonging there" (ix).

In the visual arts, Robert Rauschenberg and other "assemblage" artists were following a similar path, making "combine paintings" (in Rauschenberg's case) from daily objects and handy junk: old bedding, broken furniture, soda bottles, scrap paper, used tires, and stuffed animals are a few of the most famous of Rauschenberg's materials. While artists like Rauschenberg, Richard Stankiewicz, and John Chamberlain were interested in junky, rusted, raw materials (which had a kind of "gestural" look similar to the Abstract Expressionists--de Kooning, Kline--whom they both admired and wanted to succeed) O'Hara's aesthetic risk was to incorporate all kinds of glitzy, gaudy, commercial,

mass-produced, poetically inappropriate junk as poetic material.¹¹ As Koch remarks, “His poetry contained aspirin tablets, Good Teeth buttons, and water pistols” (*AP* 21). Here, in an early poem, “Today,” O’Hara asserts the importance of the quotidian:

Oh! kangaroos, sequins, chocolate sodas!
 You really are beautiful! Pearls,
 harmonicas, jujubes, aspirins! all
 the stuff they’ve always talked about

still makes a poem a surprise!
 These things are with us every day
 even on beachheads and biers. They
 do have meaning. They’re strong as rocks. (*CP* 18)

This poetics of inclusiveness, which finds its literary precursor in William Carlos Williams, takes Williams a step further by carrying his prerogative to use the commonplace and mundane into the area of mass culture and the sensibility of camp. “Today”’s assertion of the importance of “things” is reminiscent of a similar assertion by Williams in the opening poem of his first “modern” collection: “Pastoral” from *Al Que Quiere!* (1917):

When I was younger
 it was plain to me
 I must make something of myself.
 Older now
 I walk back streets
 admiring houses
 of the very poor:
 roof out of line with sides
 the yards cluttered
 with old chicken wire, ashes,
 furniture gone wrong;
 the fences and outhouses
 built of barrel-staves
 and parts of boxes, all,
 if I am fortunate,
 smeared a bluish green
 that properly weathered
 pleases me best
 of all colors.

No one
 will believe this
 of vast import to the nation. (*Selected Poems* 15)

The distance between O’Hara and Williams can be measured in the difference between the impertinent sequins, sodas, and jujubes of “Today,” and the working class dignity of

“Pastoral”’s chicken wire, ashes and furniture gone wrong. While O’Hara is interested in campy “stuff . . . that still makes a poem a surprise!” Williams’s stuff grows from what he calls in “Tract”--an even more explicit manifesto from the same volume--“ground sense.”

The much-anthologized “Tract” is a poem which covertly instructs new poets on ways of making a proper American poem under the pretense of teaching a group of “townspeople” how to conduct a proper funeral:

I will teach you my townspeople
 how to perform a funeral
 for you have it over a troop
 of artists--
 unless one should scour the world--
 you have the ground sense necessary. (*Selected* 18)

As its title implies, “Tract” is a manifesto of poetic “ground sense.” Its aesthetic of naturalness and inclusiveness both licenses much New York School practice, and sits at a great distance from the way that practice is worked out in many poems. “Tract” imagines the poem as a “rough plain hearse”: “Let there be no glass-- / and no upholstery, phew! / and no little brass rollers” and the poet as the hearse driver who must be brought down from his high place:

For heaven’s sake though see to the driver!
 Take off the silk hat! In fact
 that’s no place at all for him--
 up there unceremoniously
 dragging our friend out to his own dignity!
 Bring him down--bring him down!
 Low and inconspicuous! (*Selected* 19)

Williams’s “lowering” of poetry to the common level of the everyday undergirds much of New York School practice. However, we must acknowledge that in O’Hara poetic cosmos the hearse would more likely be a “Porsche Spyder sports car” (like the one James Dean drove to his sensational death--as O’Hara recounts in “Four Little Elegies” [*CP* 248-52]), and the driver might well be decked out from head to toe in silk, might even be in drag. Nonetheless, both Williams and O’Hara were taking substantial risks by challenging both the content and the form of the majority of poetry in their time, a risk that can be measured by the combination of disregard and disdain both their poetry met with early in their

careers. O'Hara's risk, to make poetry more chatty, informal and personal by using objects of everyday experience is further presented in the manifesto that began our consideration and to which we will now return.

* * *

Though many critics have discussed "Personism," noting its combination of sincerity and satire, few if any have tried to seriously understand the nature of the program it half-seriously advances. This is natural, perhaps, given the fact that O'Hara gives so many contradictory signals: offering an idea with one hand only to withdraw or undercut it with the other:

Abstraction in poetry, which Allen [Ginsberg] recently comment on in *It Is*, is intriguing. . . . Abstraction (in poetry, not in painting) involves personal removal by the poet. . . . 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. . . . 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. That's part of Personism. It was founded by me after lunch with LeRoi Jones on August 27, 1959, a day in which I was in love with someone (not Roi, by the way, a blond). I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person. While I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born. (CP 498-99)

The program of "Personism," which so much of O'Hara's best poetry bears out, is the requirement to write *as if* one were speaking to one other person. It is a stance of conscious artifice. Personism claims to be both opposed to abstraction and truly abstract. It achieves this contradictory feat by basing itself on that least abstract of occasions--the relationship of one individual to another--but also by *abstracting* this relationship from the real world and recomposing it into a poetic relationship. Thus the Personist poem *sounds* personal and intimate, by "evoking overtones of love," but these are just evocations, just material to be manipulated. This removed or *abstract* use of love, intimacy, and friendship as material allows a "sustaining [of] the poet's feelings *towards the poem* while preventing love from distracting him into feeling *about the person*" (499, italics added). The thing

about a Personist poem is that it *could* be a telephone call (it sounds like that kind of personal, chatty discourse)--but it *isn't* a phone call. Personism was “born” of the decision to write instead of to call, but to make the writing sound like calling. This kind of self-consciously “intimate” talk (which puts its own discourse, always, between quotation marks) is one of O’Hara’s major bequests to twentieth century poetry.¹² As Kenneth Koch notes: “In a lot of [O’Hara’s] poems he *seems* to be just talking . . . talking with someone, talking with himself, talking to the reader, talking to a friend, and the subject is the feeling or the situation that has caused him to talk. That is a rather original way to organize a poem” (“Frank O’Hara” 208, italics added).¹³

Personism can also be seen, in a similar way to Ashbery’s tactics of reticence and secrecy, as part of a neo-avant-garde project of independence or indifference. While other movements of the time were keenly interested in building public audiences--in speaking to and for a larger group--Personism plans to neglect the public, and in fact to neglect the whole institution or industry of art (with its interminable bickerings, its focus on the “important utterance,” and its relentless search for newness) by concentrating instead on one other individual. As O’Hara writes: “It puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style, and the poem is correspondingly gratified. The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages” (499). Within O’Hara’s camp is a serious new stance, a new way of understanding to whom a poem should speak. Simply talking to one other individual, instead of heroically assuming a poem should speak to or for many, may be a way, “Personism” tacitly suggests, to defend against the pitfalls of cooption and consumption which were the fates of so many avant-garde works.

* * *

Given all this talk about the intimate and the personal, O’Hara is careful to delimit here, and elsewhere, that Personism is very different from another kind of personal poetry that will later be labeled “Confessional.” (Thus the exclamation: “It does not have to do with personality or intimacy, far from it!”). In his interview with Lucie-Smith, O’Hara

makes clear his attitude towards Robert Lowell and the confessional poem: “I think Lowell has . . . a confessional manner which [lets him] get away with things that are really just plain bad but you’re supposed to be interested because he’s supposed to be so upset” (SS 13).¹⁴ Despite some claims to the contrary, Confessional poetry is essentially a public mode of discourse. It derives its charge and its meaning from breaking the taboo of disclosing private matter in a public forum (we must remember or imagine a time when the personal revelations of a Lowell or Sexton were truly shocking instead of routine poetic content or the daily fare of confessional talk shows like Oprah). The Confessional poem depends on an audience of onlookers or overhearers to feel reverent horror at the agonies of the poet. It works, in other words, on good old-fashioned shock value. The Personist poem, on the other hand, is written as though it truly doesn’t matter if anyone other than the recipient is reading or listening. While the Confessional poem courts the reading public with disaster, the Personist poem acts as if an audience were completely incidental. It acts, in other words, with indifference. One Personist poem, “A Letter to Bunny” attests to this focus on the singular recipient: “When anyone reads this but you it begins / to be lost” (CP 23).

“A Letter to Bunny” (1950) was written “to” the first of several O’Hara muses: poet, playwright, and all around theatrical character Violet R. (“Bunny”) Lang, whom O’Hara described in 1950 as “my constant companion solace and inspiration this summer” (Gooch 162). Though written ten years before the manifesto, this poem shows that O’Hara already had the Personist style well in hand.¹⁵ “A Letter to Bunny” illustrates the complicated kinds of literary relationships a poet can create by imagining the poem as a personal message to a single recipient. The poem is a reconstruction of a relationship in a particular place and time with all the specific details that are meaningful only to the intimates involved:

Once before I tried to tell you
about the incinerator. Last summer
while I was living in the hot
city. All day long at the theatre

would flash in my mind this thing
 and that thing too, but usually
 that heavy cave where there were
 no flames bothered me. And I
 could not tell you, Bunny, then:
 there was always my spiral
 staircase and the diamond pattern
 of the well, the eerie sounds of
 a quiet house, le Boeuf sur le Toit
 and friends who would fight and
 would not kill anyone silently. (CP 22)

What readers other than Bunny receive from this “letter” is not so much a personal message, as an image of how interpersonal relationships are constructed. In the following passage we see how the speaker’s *imagination* of another person, as reader and recipient, can help shape the way he speaks and the kind of poem he makes:

. . . . Before,
 I wrote, “it’s grey and monstrous” which
 is false, and fumbled after “hints of
 mysticism” or “death’s shrewdness,”
 all notions, all collections of sentiment
 that make a poem another burner full of
 junk. You enable me, by your least
 remark, to unclutter myself, and my
 nerves thank you for not always laughing. (CP 22)

We must remember that it is not really Bunny, so much as the speaker’s *imagination* of Bunny which helps “unclutter” him and his poem (of its earlier verbiage/ garbage). We are seeing, in other words, how poetic discourse is always radically shaped by the idea of an audience. What Personism does is bring the idea of the poem’s recipient to the forefront, whereas many other poetic styles speak only implicitly about their audiences. Personist poems must always struggle against becoming “collections of sentiment” (just as Abstract Expressionist paintings must struggle against becoming mere decorations). This emotional excessiveness was one of the problems O’Hara would come to find in the Confessional poem, with its “hints of / mysticism” and “death’s shrewdness,” ultimately resolving into a “burner full of / junk.” By imagining Bunny--“talking,” in other words, not to himself and not to a generalized “public” or “reader”--the speaker is able to revise such excessive sentiment (its focus on the “grey and monstrous” is wonderfully prophetic of Confessional

matter) and find a strategy to both unburden and “unclutter” himself. That such a method is good for the “nerves” makes perfect sense in the Personist philosophy since these are what, ultimately, the poet must go on.

Like many of O’Hara’s poems, “A Letter to Bunny” creates a world which seems intensely private, but not in a murky, sentimental, or “self-pitying” way (to use O’Hara’s phrase of censure).¹⁶ Rather, it is private in a way that opens the poem to an imagined interpersonal intimacy, an intimacy whose substance, ultimately, is literary. The women with whom O’Hara flirted and about whom he created poems (Lang, Freilicher, Hartigan) were subjects of a conjoined artistic and real intimacy.¹⁷ Part of O’Hara’s genius was for creating provocative collisions between these two kinds of intimacy. The difficulty readers have in separating the “real” from the “constructed” relationship is an essential part of the interest and pleasure of O’Hara’s work. On one hand readers are made to feel that they are part of O’Hara’s life, that they are being given personal, intimate access. At the same time, however, they are constantly reminded of their distance from his life. After all, we really don’t *know* Bunny or Larry or Bill or Joan or Jean-Paul--and the fact that they are real people may make our fictive knowledge that much less stable. It is this tension, the *frisson* of intimacy and distance, which gives the poetry its unique charge:

Bunny, when I ran to you in the summer
 night and upset us both it was mostly this,
 though you thought I was going away. See?
 I’m away now, but I’m here. And even if the
 rose has been ruined for all of us by religion
 we don’t accept these blue flowers. The sun
 and the rain glue things together that are not
 at all similar, and we are not taken in
 by the nearness, the losses, or the cold.
 Be always my heroine and flower. Love, Frank. (CP 23)

The Personist poem holds together “away” and “here,” “literary” and “real” intimacy--by turning the personal into a literary device. Such poems propose to let us into a relationship, while keeping us aware of the fact of our distance, the fact that this is a literary reconstruction. The self-aware meditation on distance: “I’m away now, but I’m here” competes with the gestures of intimacy: the direct address, the personal language, the

intimate closing. The Personist strategy is to find new and ever more convincing gestures of intimacy--signs that extend the standard rhetorical closing "Love, Frank."

Such gestures are exactly the way O'Hara defines "truth" in poetry. When asked in a 1965 interview what his "criterion for truth in poetry" is, O'Hara replied: "Where you don't find that someone is making themselves more elegant, more stupid, more appealing, more affectionate or more sincere *than the words will allow them to be*" (SS 14, italics added). Truth, intimacy, and personal revelation in poetry are constructions of language, a fact that O'Hara is more willing to admit than some of his Confessional rivals who also have a major investment in the personal. Truth in art, in other words, is successful artifice. To those poets from the 1960s dedicated to sincerity and personal revelation O'Hara might advise, along with Oscar Wilde, that "all bad poetry springs from genuine feeling," or might remind that "to be natural is such a very difficult pose to keep up." One of the most appealing things about O'Hara's work is that we know that he knows that he's playing a game with intimacy. And--of equal importance--that he plays it very well.

Before moving on to Kenneth Koch, let's briefly return to our original hypothesis and summarize some of the ways O'Hara's poetry moves beyond the standard gestures of the avant-garde. Comedy and camp are used to counter the seriousness of the historical avant-garde and of contemporary movements like Beat, Black Mountain, and Confessional poetry. O'Hara and the New York School have consistently sabotaged such seriousness, and refrained from making lofty claims while nonetheless producing some of the most significant poetry of the post-war years. "Personism" suggests one way of achieving the kind of independence or indifference Ashbery claims is necessary for advanced artists circa 1960. It suggests that instead of writing against the grain of approval--as Ginsberg did when he shocked people with "Howl" or Lowell did when he brought out *Life Studies* against the best advice of supporters like Allen Tate--the poet should ignore the dynamics of approval by writing as if he were speaking to one other individual. "Howl" and *Life Studies*, for all their reliance on the personal and intimate, are finally public proclamations.

Whether or not their authors intended them to be (and they probably did), these poems are public and provoking, as the *Howl* obscenity trial and the uproar over Lowell ruining his career with *Life Studies* indicate.¹⁸ In contrast, a poem like “Letter to Bunny” declines to speak to or for a greater public, it declines to engage in any kind of debate. Instead, O’Hara’s poems take up a casual and risky attitude of independence where anything from poodles and water pistols to personal letters and lunchtime lists might *become* poetry (just as Jackson Pollock’s dripped paint or Robert Rauschenberg’s splattered bedding might become a painting) based on the artist’s dramatic will that it should be so.

“*Fresh Air*”

Kenneth Koch’s “Fresh Air” is a poem in the guise of a manifesto. Ever in search of new forms, Koch uses the rhetoric of the manifesto (particularly its attack on the enemy) to both advance and undo a stance of opposition. By humourously pushing the rhetoric of opposition to unlikely extremes, Koch is able to both attack an enemy and to subvert the very idea of such an attack. Koch’s poem succeeds in undermining both the opponent and the idea of opposition.

In many ways, “Fresh Air” is a more traditional manifesto than either Ashbery’s or O’Hara’s texts. Koch names the enemy loudly and clearly from the beginning of the poem, and this opponent is a familiar one to the “New American” poetry of the 50s and 60s:

At the Poem Society a black-haired man stands up to say
 “You make me sick with all your talk about restraint and mature talent!
 Haven’t you ever looked out the window at a painting by Matisse,
 Or did you always stay in hotels where there were too many spiders crawling on
 your visages?
 Did you ever glance inside a bottle of sparkling pop,
 Or see a citizen split in two by lightning?
 I am afraid you have never smiled at the hibernation
 Of bear cubs except that you saw in it some deep relation
 To human suffering and wishes, oh what a bunch of crackpots!”
 The black-haired man sits down, and the others shoot arrows at him. (*Rainway* 70)

The enemy that the black-haired man is raving about is essentially poetic mediocrity, poetry “ruled with the sceptre of the dumb, the deaf, and the creepy!” as it’s later put (71). The

Poem Society, rather like a genteel bridge club, is “organized to defend the kingdom / Of dullness,” according to another oppositional speaker at the meeting, whose insights are also greeted with a hail of arrows from the “assembled mediocrities” (70). But Koch’s target is somewhat more specific than just poetic dullness and blindness. His attack is aimed at a specific historical entity: what was widely regarded in the late 50s and early 60s as the “academic tradition” of American poetry, a tradition of “restraint and mature talent.” This tradition stems from Eliot through those poet-professors who canonized Eliot and themselves: John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and on to their students and protégés who became the next generation of poet-professors: Randall Jarrell, John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Richard Wilbur, etc. “Fresh Air” summarizes and satirizes this poetry as the work of “men with their eyes on the myth / And the Missus and the midterms” (73). In 1957, the younger poets of this academic tradition were collected in *The New Poets of England and America*. Edited by Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson, the anthology aimed to show, in the words of its editors, “that poetry today is worthy of its inheritance” (9). Poems by Anthony Hecht, John Hollander, Donald Justice, James Merrill, W.S. Merwin, Howard Nemerov, Adrienne Rich and others highlighted this “inheritance” as a tradition of technical and emotional control.

The enemy in “Fresh Air,” then, was a familiar one at the time. It was the enemy Allen’s *The New American Poetry* set out to challenge by anthologizing a wide range of important young talents who had been neglected by *The New Poets of England and America*. As Allen notes in his introduction, the “one common characteristic” of these overlooked poets is “a total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse” (xi). In their “Statements on Poetics” collected at the end of the anthology, and in the more extended *Poetics of the New American Poetry*, many of Allen’s poets concurred. On the formalism of academic poetry, LeRoi Jones protested: “Accentual verse, the regular metric of rumbling iambs, is dry as slivers of sand. Nothing happens in that frame anymore. We can get nothing from England. And the diluted formalism of the academy (the formal

culture of the U.S.) is anaemic & fraught with incompetence and unreality” (425). Never one for understatement, Ginsberg adds this note on the Academy in “When the Mode of the Music Changes the Walls of the City Shake”: “The amount of blather & built-in misunderstanding we’ve encountered--usually in the name of good taste, moral virtue or (at most presumptuous) civilized value--has been a revelation to me of the absolute bankruptcy of the Academy in America today, or that which has set itself up as an academy for the conservation of literature. For the Academy has been the enemy and Philistine host itself” (326).

Although “Fresh Air” appears not in the “Statements” but in the poetry section of Allen’s anthology, it is obviously engaging a similar enemy:

Where are the young poets of America, they are trembling in publishing houses and
universities,
Above all they are trembling in universities, they are bathing the library steps with
their spit,
They are gargling out innocuous (to whom?) poems about maple trees and their
children,
Sometimes they brave a subject like the Villa d’Este or a lighthouse in Rhode
Island,
Oh what worms they are! They wish to perfect their form.

Yet could not these young men, put in another profession,
Succeed admirably, say at sailing a ship? I do not doubt it, Sir, and I wish we
could try them.

(A plane flies over the ship holding a bomb but perhaps it will not drop the bomb,
The young poets from the universities are staring anxiously at the skies,
Oh they are remembering their days on the campus when they looked up to watch
birds excrete,

They are remembering the days they spent making their elegant poems.) (71-2)

Although aimed at a similar enemy, lines like these reveal an important difference between Koch (and the New York School) on the one hand, and Ginsberg or Jones (as representatives of oppositional poetics) on the other hand. Unlike most oppositional rhetoric (though Ginsberg may be the exception), Koch’s enmity is always edged with a heavy dose of satire and the absurd. The absurd images of the young men “bathing the library steps with their spit,” or “staring anxiously at the skies” for elegant poems and bird excrement, help to undo the attack on the academy in the very process of formulating it.

By pushing the attack to an extreme, Koch turns it on itself. Compare what happens when Ginsberg's hipsters face the academy:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical
naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry
dynamo in the machinery of night . . .
.....
who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating Arkansas
and Blake-light tragedy among the scholars of war,
who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes on the
windows of the skull . . . ("Howl" 9)

Any comedy in Ginsberg seems to be secondary to the oppositional stance the poetry takes.¹⁹ The "crazy . . . obscene" insights, the "heavenly connections" and "Blake-light tragedies" of these hipsters are quite earnestly opposed to the "scholars of war," to the universities and academies from which such radiant insight must be expelled. With Koch, on the other hand, comedy is primary. The poem's humour begins to overwhelm the attack, to become the very point of the poem.

One way of reading Koch's use of comedy is to suggest that he is not as willing to subscribe to the easy polarities of "academic" versus "oppositional," "cooked" versus "raw" poetry, as he seems at first. In the preceding quotation, the placement of the unusual aside "(to whom?)" supports such a reading--"They are gargling out innocuous (to whom?) poems about maple trees and their children." By suddenly interjecting a voice which asks "to whom" these poems are "innocuous," the speaker calls this evaluation--and the oppositional position from which it is formulated--into question.²⁰ Thus by the time we reach "Oh what worms they are!" and the succeeding fantasy of bombing the bad academic poets, readers may be as apt to question the values of the speaker, as the values of the innocuous poems that so enrage him.

"Fresh Air" finds a way to have it both ways: to attack a certain kind of academic verse ("stale pale skunky pentameters" [76]) and simultaneously to assail the idea of opposition. We may grasp this position better by realizing that Koch's real enemy is less a *kind of poetry* than an *attitude towards poetry*--an attitude of solemnity and earnestness.

What is most annoying to Koch (as it is to O'Hara in "Personism") is the profound seriousness and self-regard of poets--academic or not--who long to "perfect their form," (and frequently uses all of the old poetic clichés to do so).²¹

In Part 3 of "Fresh Air" the speaker's annoyance at this kind of poetic self-regard, seriousness, and mediocrity is metamorphosed into a comic super-hero, the Strangler, whose vocation it is to kill bad poets:

Summer in the trees! "It is time to strangle several bad poets."
The yellow hobbyhorse rocks to and fro, and from the chimney
Drops the Strangler! The white and pink roses are slightly agitated by the struggle,
But afterwards beside the dead "poet" they cuddle up comfortably against their
vase. They are safer now, no one will compare them to the sea.

.....
In the football stadium I also see him.
He leaps through the frosty air at the maker of comparisons
Between football and life and silently, silently strangles him!

.....
The Strangler's ear is alert to the names of Orpheus,
Cuchulain, Gawain, and Odysseus,
And for the poems addressed to Jane Austen, F. Scott Fitzgerald,
To Ezra Pound, and to personages no longer living
Even in anyone's thoughts--O Strangler the Strangler!

He lies on his back in the waves of the Pacific Ocean. (72-3)

The Strangler doesn't discriminate between "makers of comparisons between football and life" and those who won't shut up about Orpheus or Ezra Pound--to all these come the same, silent fate. "Fresh Air" ends by bidding farewell to all these very different sorts of poetic detritus:

Goodbye, Helen! goodbye, fumes! goodbye, abstract dried-up boys! goodbye,
dead trees! goodbye, skunks!
Goodbye, manure! goodbye, critical manicure! goodbye, you big fat men standing
on the east coast as well as the west coast giving poems the test! farewell,
Valéry's stern dictum! (76)

In two lines Koch trashes the seriousness of the mythic poem (the first adieu is to Helen of Troy who appeared earlier in the poem), the Confessional poem (Lowell's skunks), the scenic nature poem (dead trees and manure), the "abstract dried-up" poem (the New Critical model?), and the post-Symbolist poem (Valéry's stern dictum). In general, "Fresh Air" bids goodbye to all poetic forms which rely on repetitive, worn out gestures.

Koch's use of comedy highlights the difference between his practice and that of the more vocally oppositional poets of Allen's anthology. By proclaiming a loud and consequential resistance to the academic enemy, the oppositional poets imbue the enemy with a kind of power. The adversary becomes something serious, something worth fighting against. But another, perhaps more effective, way of undermining the enemy is by not taking him seriously. This is the method Koch chooses in "Fresh Air." It is also, appropriately, the attitude O'Hara takes in his statement for *The New American Poetry*, where he strips the solemnity both from his own position and from the position of the opponent:

I don't think of fame or posterity . . . nor do I care about clarifying experiences for anyone or bettering (other than accidentally) anyone's state or social relation, nor am I for any particular technical development in the American language I dislike a great deal of contemporary poetry--all of the past you read is usually quite great--but it is a useful thorn to have in one's side. (419-20)

Here, O'Hara abjures the major claims (for historical importance, social relevance, representative status, technical innovation, etc.) made by many of his contemporaries in such lofty documents as Olson's "Projective Verse" or "Human Universe," Duncan's "Towards an Open Universe," or Snyder's "Buddhism and the Coming Revolution."²² As well, unlike the poets surrounding him in Allen's anthology, O'Hara embraces rather than rejects the poetry of the past, and only casually (rather than passionately) dismisses "a great deal of contemporary poetry" (the kind anthologized in *New Poets of England and America*). In this brief statement, O'Hara locates a place for his poetry not in opposition but in independence: "What is happening to me, allowing for lies and exaggerations which I try to avoid, goes into my poems. . . . What is clear to me in my work is probably obscure to others, and vice versa. My formal 'stance' is found at the crossroads where what I know and can't get meets what is left of that I know and can bear without hatred" (419-20). While I cannot claim to explicate this foggy place in which O'Hara locates his "stance," it seems to me that its very fogginess is its relevance. Like Ashbery and Koch,

O'Hara doesn't want to be easily locatable, easily pinned down. Like both, he is trying to create a space of independence and this kind of equivocal rhetoric is one way of doing it.

In "Fresh Air" Koch creates an independent stance by presenting opposition not through the familiar histrionics of the avant-garde, but through a kind of cartoon comedy which will become a staple of New York School writing (both first and second generation). In this depiction of the chairman of the Poem Society, Koch is able to present an enemy without the portentous gravity which usually accompanies such portrayals:

The chairman stood up on the platform, oh he was physically ugly!
 He was small-limbed and -boned and thought he was quite seductive,
 But he was bald with certain hideous black hairs,
 And his voice had the sound of water leaving a vaseline bathtub,
 And he said, "The subject of this evening's discussion is poetry
 On the subject of the love between swans." And everyone threw candy hearts
 At the disgusting man, and they stuck to his bib and tucker,
 And he danced up and down on the platform in terrific glee
 And recited the poetry of his little friends . . . (70)

This scene evolves into a mock-epic battle between the forces of good and evil, in which the chairman's poetry on the "love between swans" is challenged by the black-haired man's poems "of the relationship between terrific prehistoric charcoal whales" (70). In the end, the chairman's poems are overcome and he "wilt[s] away like a cigarette paper on which the bumblebees have urinated" (71). It seems to me that Koch is less interested in supporting the poetry of prehistoric charcoal whales, than he is in undermining the portentousness and pretentiousness of *either* kind of poetry. At the end of this scene, the bad poets have all disappeared, the "professors [have] left the room to go back to their duty," and the Poem Society has been cleared of all but "five or six poets." These remaining artists join together in an act of collaboration to "s[i]ng the new poem of the twentieth century / Which . . . is so exciting that it cannot be here repeated" (71).

What might this "new poem of the twentieth century" look like? Since so much of "Fresh Air" is concerned with comic deflation, it is relevant to ask what, exactly, Koch is advocating. The two facts that we know from this scene--that the new poem is a spontaneously produced work of collaboration, and that it cannot be repeated--are

important first clues. Another clue to the shape of this “new poem” that cannot be described is in the title, “Fresh Air.” The speaker invokes the air as a muse in the last section of the poem:

Sun out! perhaps there is a reason for the lack of poetry
In these ill-contented souls, perhaps they need air!

Blue air, fresh air, come in, I welcome you . . .
Give them a little inspiration, they need it, perhaps they are out of breath,
Give them a little inhuman company before they freeze the English language to
death!

(And rust their typewriters a little, be sea air! be noxious! kill them, if you must,
but stop their poetry! . . . (74)

“Fresh Air” calls for fresh *airs*, new ways of writing or speaking in a poem -- linguistic “inspirations” to help unfreeze the English language. In a 1986 interview with John Tranter, Koch talks about how the New York poets wanted to advance the opening of language William Carlos Williams had begun earlier in the century: “. . . if Williams was using plain American speech, what we wanted to use was plain American speech, fancy speech, comic-strip talk, translation talk, libretto talk, everything, we wanted all kinds of speech” (178). The comic manifesto of “Fresh Air” is one example of Koch’s career-long search for new forms, new ways of speaking and organizing a poem. More than either Ashbery or O’Hara, Koch has always exhibited a maverick restlessness, a constant experimentation with form. However, it must be noted that like his New York School colleagues, and *unlike* many oppositional contemporaries, Koch is interested in all forms, old and new, traditional and experimental. Among his many productions Koch has written book-length narrative poems in ottava rima (*Ko* and *The Duplications*)²³, experimental poetic plays, and a fragmented expressionist epic (“When the Sun Tries to Go On”). He has experimented with many traditional forms (sestina, canzone, Japanese linked-verse, etc.) and also introduced a wide variety of original forms which have become much-copied New York School staples: list poems (“Lunch,” “Locks”), one line poems (“Collected Poems”), instructional poems (“Some General Instructions,” “The Art of Poetry,” “The Art of Love”), and poems in the form of comics. He has helped create artistic collaborations of

all kinds: in poetry, visual art, performance and, frequently, combinations of the three forms.²⁴

Many of Koch's poems might be conceived as literary equivalents to conceptual art in the visual realm. In his relentless search for new forms, Koch has created poem-performances that grow out of an initial idea and carry that idea as far as it will go. A few brief examples will have to suffice here. "Taking a Walk with You" is a poem-performance based on the idea of misunderstanding as poetic insight:

I thought Axel's Castle was a garage;
And I had beautiful dreams about it, too--sensual, mysterious mechanisms;
 honking, wheels turning . . .
My misunderstandings were:
1) thinking Pinocchio could really change from a puppet into a real boy, and back
 again!
2) thinking it depended on whether he was good or bad!
3) identifying him with myself!
4) and therefore every time I was bad being afraid I would turn into wood . . .
5) I misunderstood childhood. I usually liked the age I was. However, now I
 regard twenty-nine as an optimum age (for me). (*Thank You 77*)

The title poem of the same volume, "Thank You," is a piece conceived as a series of polite refusals for a long list of absurd occupations. Again, the interest and amusement in the poem is to see how Koch develops and extends a basic concept:

Oh thank you for giving me the chance
Of being ship's doctor! I am sorry that I shall have to refuse--
.....
Thank you for giving me this battleship to wash,
But I have a rash on my hands and my eyes hurt,
And I know so little about cleaning a ship
That I should rather clean an island.
.....
And thank you for the chance to run a small hotel
In an elephant stopover in Zambezi,
But I do not know how to take care of guests, certainly they would all leave soon
After seeing blue lights out the windows and rust on their iron beds--I'd rather own
 a bird-house in Jamaica:
Those people come in, the birds, they do not care how things are kept up . . .
(*Thank You 69-70*).

Another conceptual poem, "The Boiling Water," extends the idea of this basic physical change into a long reflection on the significance of hidden moments of transformation:

A serious moment for the water is when it boils

And though one usually regards it merely as a convenience
 To have the boiling water available for bath or table
 Occasionally there is someone around who understands
 The importance of this moment for the water--maybe a saint,
 Maybe a poet, maybe a crazy man, or just someone temporarily disturbed
 With his mind "floating," in a sense, away from his deepest
 Personal concerns to more "unreal" things. A lot of poetry
 Can come from perceptions of this kind, as well as a lot of insane conversations.

.....
 A serious moment for this poem will be when it ends,
 It will be like the water's boiling, that for which we've waited
 Without trying to think of it too much, since "a watched pot never boils,"
 And a poem with its ending figured out is difficult to write. (*Rainway* 188)

Of course with poems of this type, as with conceptual art, the performance cannot be repeated with the same effect. It can be taken only so far (though the distance is usually greater than readers might imagine, which is part of the pleasure of reading Koch), and then the performer must move on to the next idea. This is why Koch, unlike Ashbery or O'Hara, seems to be perennially in search of new forms, fresh airs.²⁵

To conclude, let me recapitulate how "Fresh Air" functions as a manifesto, implicitly suggesting a program that has in fact been carried out through the course of Koch's career. Like "The Invisible Avant-Garde" and "Personism," "Fresh Air" proposes a poetics of independence. By humorously destroying both an academic status quo (who are painted as the "castrati of poetry" [76]) and an oppositional avant-garde (by exaggerating their gestures of defiance *ad absurdum*), Koch tries to make room for a new kind of poetry. "Our idea," Koch writes of the New York School project in "Days and Nights," "is to write poetry that is better than poetry / . . . Our idea is to do something with language / That has never been done before" (*Rainway* 235). Though such a poem cannot be shown *within* "Fresh Air" ("it cannot be here repeated"), it can be shown *as* "Fresh Air" since the most significant element of this poem is its remarkable novelty and freshness. For Koch, independence expresses itself by departing from the expected. And since in the late fifties and early sixties both the gestures of "academic verse" and of "oppositional verse" were easily foreseen, the New York School had to move beyond these predictable positions. Abjuring the critically acclaimed poem of the time (epitomized by Robert

Lowell's early successes) and the poem of opposition (epitomized by Ginsberg's "Howl"), Koch looks for a place outside of the debate by opening the window to fresh airs, of which "Fresh Air" is one example.

While it might be argued that the form of "Howl" would have been just as surprising and original as Koch's forms, what is more significant is the fact that Ginsberg's *stance* is entirely unsurprising. Ginsberg insinuates himself into the debate on the politics of form, advancing (à la the avant-garde) his "raw" oppositional forms as a kind of left wing challenge to the conservative, "cooked" forms emanating from the universities. The problem with this is that the loudly articulated rhetoric of Ginsberg's stance leaves his position open to easy cooption by a market system that is quickly realizing (and cashing in on) the saleability of such forms of protest. Furthermore, such an avant-garde position also leaves itself open to a kind of repressive tolerance in which the oppositional form is accepted and at the same time consigned to its own sphere of cultural irrelevance. By casting doubt on both sides of the debate, Koch and his New York School colleagues succeeded in stepping outside of the fray. From this position of slight remove they created a dynamic, resilient, and elusive poetry whose independence saved it from the boredom of the status quo and the easy assimilation of the avant-garde.

* * *

The poetics of indifference, which I have argued all these poets share, also informs one of the great myths (and in all likelihood realities) of New York School production. This is the myth of "instant creation," which purports that many of their poems were casually dashed off, created almost instantly--rather like the myth of the action painting--in a burst of intuition and spontaneity. While contemporaries presented the scene of writing in valorized terms--as an agonized struggle (for example, in Robert Lowell's "Night Sweat"--discussed in the next chapter), or as a powerful "transfer of energy," in Olson's terms, in which "certain laws and possibilities of the breath" are enacted ("Projective Verse" 147)--the New York School poets presented this scene in less glamorous and

histrionic ways. On the back cover of *Lunch Poems*, for instance, O'Hara rather flippantly presents the scene of writing in this way: "Often this poet, strolling through the noisy splintered glare of a Manhattan noon, has paused at a sample Olivetti to type up thirty or forty lines of ruminations . . . while never forgetting to eat Lunch his favorite meal . . .". The *Lunch Poems* themselves--supposedly snatched from O'Hara's busy work schedule like the "liver-sausage sandwich" (of "Music") or "cheeseburger . . . and chocolate malted" (of "A Step Away From Them")--have just the kind of impulsive, gratuitous feel that O'Hara describes as the condition of their production.

O'Hara was famous for writing in the middle of any number of distractions: blaring music, boisterous friends, or the drone of the television. In "Frank O'Hara and His Poems," Kenneth Koch remarks "one extraordinary thing about Frank was that he could write with other people in the room. If he had an idea while people were there, he would just go and sit down and say, 'Excuse me a minute.' And he would write a poem" (202-3). Artist Joe Brainard recalls one occasion: "We were watching a western on T.V. and he got up as tho to answer the telephone or to get a drink but instead he went over to the typewriter, leaned over it a bit, and typed for four or five minutes standing up. Then he pulled the piece of paper out of the typewriter and handed it to me to read. Then he lay back down to watch more T.V." (Gooch 410). In another instance, James Schuyler tells of how O'Hara wrote "Sleeping on the Wing," a highly regarded poem, "in a matter of minutes" on a challenge from Schuyler and LeSueur (Gooch 273). When asked by Lucie-Smith whether "this element of speed is important in writing," O'Hara replied:

Yes, 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. As for instance, well to take Keats for example, it doesn't much matter if he did work very hard because it seems as if he didn't. . . That's also the quality that marvelous painting and sculpture has. It looks like it took about three seconds, in a way. A Matisse, for instance, seems to be simply the result of a lot of talent, thoughts, and everything, but that the actual execution took practically no time at all. (SS 21)

Not only did O'Hara want his writing to seem careless and casual, he also treated his poems and their possible reception with equal nonchalance.²⁶ Diane di Prima, who edited

the mimeographed little magazine *Floating Bear* with LeRoi Jones, describes O'Hara's management of his poetry:

When I tried to get manuscripts for *The Floating Bear* from him I would go up to his place and he'd let me look through everything including the dirty laundry. He'd finish poems and put them anywhere. His typewriter was always on his kitchen table. He was always in the middle of a piece. But as pieces got done they just wandered anywhere. The towel drawer was a very good place because I guess towels were flat. I would just take whatever I wanted. Often he didn't have another copy. That didn't seem to be an issue or a point. (Gooch 370)

This situation will help explain the utter shock of Kenneth Koch and friends when they recovered O'Hara's poems from his apartment after his sudden death, at just how many poems there actually were ("Frank O'Hara" 201). *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, following as it does a meager five slim published volumes, is indeed a wonder in its size and scope.

Instant creation is also important to the aesthetic of Koch and Ashbery, though perhaps not to the same degree as O'Hara. In several interviews Ashbery has asserted that he writes quickly, with little premeditation, and very infrequent revision: "Most of my poems I write all at once, at one sitting, and pretty fast. . . I somehow trained myself not to write something that I'm going to have to revise a great deal because I'm essentially lazy and would like to get the poem finished once and for all" (Sommer 305). Also, like O'Hara, he claims "my best writing gets done when I'm being distracted by people who are calling me or errands that I have to do. Those things seem to help the creative process . . ." (Gangel 14). One remarkable instance of this casual and quick attitude towards his work is reported by David Lehman. Ashbery was invited to present the prestigious Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard in 1989-90. Lehman records that the poet wrote his lecture on Raymond Roussel--one of six lectures and supposedly a highlight of Ashbery's Norton series--on the day of the presentation, in the back seat of a car travelling from his apartment in Manhattan to Cambridge (*Last* 111).

In "3 Poems about Kenneth Koch," O'Hara calls his friend "our Hermes, the fastest literary figure of his time" (*CP* 152). Koch's speed is not, like O'Hara's or

Ashbery's, in the area of rapid creation, but rather in his mercurial transformation from one genre, style or mode to another. For our purposes, "speed" is better understood as an attitude *towards* production rather than a hard and fast rule of production. In fact, manuscripts from all the poets reveal important and thoughtful revisions--as we would expect from any writer. What's important here is not the truth of instantaneous production but the ideology behind this myth. That ideology has to do with relinquishing the high tones and earnestness of both the formalists (who see the poem as a matter of dedication and calculation) and the avant-gardists (who see it as a product of oppositional energy). Presenting writing as a daily, casual activity, and as a matter of some indifference--poetry as the kind of thing you do while daydreaming on your lunchbreak--brings a new kind of "unprofessional" stance to poetry, one quite different from the high modernists and their more committed heirs.

The New York School poets present the scene of writing and the writing itself as an unexalted, everyday experience. While the romantic and popular image of the poet has always pictured him or her making art from extraordinary experience, the New York School was interested in ordinary experience. Moreover, they were interested in showing how the ordinary is extraordinary, how everyday life can be a heightened state, and how heightened states are created through *attention*. New York School poetry is about paying attention to the minor details--the passing lunch thoughts, the boiling water, "the experience of experience"--and it demonstrates how writing is one way of paying attention. For the New York School, art is an attentive, engaged way of handling daily experience. In this sense, their ideology was close to that of the historical avant-garde who wanted to rescue art from its increasing autonomy and bring it into daily practice. One way of achieving this conjunction for the New York School is by paying increased attention to the ways we describe our experience to ourselves--and for this art is an excellent tool. In the next chapter we will explore the ways the poets used this tool by focusing their attention not on

the putative “subjects” or “themes” of art, but on the very process (the everyday process) of producing it.

NOTES

¹ Perloff notes: “Most historians of Italian Futurism agree that the fifty-odd manifestos published between 1909 and Italy’s entrance into the war in 1915 were the movement’s form par excellence” (*Futurist* 90).

² Calinescu claims that as a term of warfare “avant-garde” dates back to the Middle Ages (97).

³ Pound’s whole manifesto is a long list of nagging requirements: “Use no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something. . . . Go in fear of abstractions. . . . Don’t imagine that the art of poetry is any simpler than the art of music . . . Use either no ornament or good ornament. . . . Let the candidate fill his mind with the finest cadences he can discover Let the neophyte know assonance and alliteration, rhyme immediate and delayed, simple and polyphonic . . . Don’t be ‘viewy’ . . . Don’t be descriptive . . .” etc. etc. (201-203)

⁴ This attention and money came from a number of directions, as Stuart Hobbs documents in *The End of the American Avant Garde*. Advertisers cashed in on the fashionability and prestige “high art” could bring to their products, incorporating work by such artists as Pollock and de Kooning into their sales strategies (Hobbs 146-7). Following the same trend, major companies also began investing in avant-garde art, both in corporate collections and through grants and sponsorship. As well, as universities began post-war expansion they started supporting and hiring artists and (formerly) radical intellectuals as artists in residence and permanent faculty. They also invested in the avant-garde by building multi-million dollar art centers where the new art was performed for a growing class of educated and affluent “culture consumers” (133-4).

⁵ Of course Ashbery also, occasionally, used these shock techniques--most obviously in the fragmentary poems of his second volume, *The Tennis Court Oath*. For details on the philosophy and tactics of “shocking” poetry see Rudolf E. Kuenzli’s “The Semiotics of Dada Poetry” in *Dada Spectrum* 52-70. A perfect illustration of the cooption of the avant-garde for commercial purposes is the transformation of Tzara’s famous recipe for the production of a dadaist poem into a popular novelty item of the 1990s called Magnetic Poetry™. Tzara’s original text is as follows:

To make a dadaist poem
Take a newspaper.
Take a pair of scissors.
Choose an article as long as you are planning to make your poem.
Cut out the article.
Then cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them in a bag.
Shake it gently.
Then take out the scraps one after the other in the order in which they left the bag.
Copy conscientiously.
The poem will be like you.
And here you are a writer, infinitely original and endowed with a sensibility that is charming though beyond the understanding of the vulgar. (in Kunezli 58)

Typically, Magnetic Poetry™ takes Tzara’s ironic conceptual piece quite literally, offering for a mere twenty dollars a little box of magnetized pre-cut up words which can be assembled, preferably on a refrigerator, into (the box tells us): “provocative work . . . big

Magnetic Poetry™ is missing is a picture of Tzara (or any other avant-garde poet for that matter), looking suitably bohemian, on the back of the box.

⁶ Here are a few other examples (selected from many) of poems which open with vague or ambiguous pronouns: “Yes, they are alive and can have those colors” (“A Blessing in Disguise,” *Mooring* 184); “Out here on Cottage Grove it matters” (“Pyrography,” *SP* 212); “You can’t say it that way any more” (“And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name,” *SP* 235); “It is better this year / And the clothes they wear / In the grey unweeded sky of our earth / There is no possibility of change / Because all of the true fragments are here.” (“If the Birds Knew,” *Mooring* 171). Several critics, most notably Perloff, have discussed how Ashbery’s ambiguous pronouns, among many other strategies, function to create a “poetics of indeterminacy” or “undecidability.” While Perloff’s explications of these texts are notable, she is less successful at explaining *why* Ashbery employs this poetic strategy. Perloff relies on placing this work in a tradition of indeterminacy stemming from Rimbaud. While Ashbery’s interest in, and debts to, the poets of this tradition are undeniable, I think it is also important to see Ashbery’s indeterminacy as a solution to a particular problem self-aware artists like Ashbery faced in the 1960s. This problem is articulated, and its solution suggested, in “The Invisible Avant-Garde.”

⁷ There are other possibilities for interpretation as well. Harold Bloom, in his typically vague way, offers another reading, suggesting that the poem is a statement of Ashbery’s “largest aesthetic principle, the notion that every day the world consented to be shaped into a poem” (“Charity” 170). Here “you and I” seems to refer cryptically to Nature and “man” [sic?]. Bloom extols: “The Not-Me, as Emerson said, is nature and my body together, as well as art and all other men. Such a conviction leads Ashbery, even as it impelled Whitman and Stevens, to a desperate quest that masks as an ease with things” (“Charity” 171).

⁸ “Personism” was published subsequently, along with “Personal Poem,” in the little magazine *Yugen* 7 (1961).

⁹ Such contests, hierarchies, and positions, still informed by a progressivist model ever in search of newer and better art “regulates the sponsorship of artists and modes of art by museums, galleries, international exhibitions, critics, and collectors,” Harold Rosenberg notes. It also “stimulates the feverish search by young artists for new materials and extreme gestures, [and] determines the attention paid to works in the popular press” (*De-Definition* 218-19).

¹⁰ Pollock would have seen his own risk not necessarily as a lone gamble, but as a shared project based on definite principles related to the topics of myth, symbol, and the unconscious. These comments, for example, are from an undated interview with Selden Rodman: “Clyff Still--do you know his work?--and Rothko, and I--we’ve changed the nature of painting. . . . when you’re painting out your unconscious, figures are bound to emerge. We’re all of us influenced by Freud, I guess. I’ve been a Jungian for a long time. . . . Painting is a state of being. . . . Painting is self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is” (Ross 146).

¹¹ In terms of *materials*, O’Hara’s choices were closer to the so-called “hard-edge” Pop artists (Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, etc.) who were interested in commercial objects rather than cast-offs. However, in terms of *technique* O’Hara shares more in common with the assemblage artists (particularly Rauschenberg) who use their materials in more mixed and layered ways, rather than following the “flat,” commercial techniques of the hard-edge artists. Particularly in long poems like *Second Avenue*, “Ode

techniques of the hard-edge artists. Particularly in long poems like *Second Avenue*, "Ode to Michael Goldberg," or "Biotherm" we can detect an assemblage-like aesthetic in O'Hara's work which evokes urban experience by importing its detritus.

¹² The self-consciously intimate, the intimate as a *role*, has much to do with O'Hara's camp sensibility. As Susan Sontag comments in her "Notes on 'Camp'": "Camp sees everything in quotation marks . . . To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater" (280).

¹³ Marjorie Perloff (advancing an argument from Charles Altieri) has suggested that this kind of talking poem might be seen as a contemporary replacement for the dramatic monologue, which has become a "dead convention." According to Perloff, the dramatic monologue is out of date because it is now implausible "that the poet can penetrate the experience of a fictional narrator, can distance himself from that experience and define its meaning." She continues, with reference to O'Hara's "Personism": "Always a skeptic, O'Hara recognizes that the only mind he can wholly penetrate is his own, but he sees that this need not be a loss if he can project a lyric 'I' engaged in what looks like live talk--intimate, familiar, expressive; 'real' conversation that seems purely personal and yet avoids what he calls in the letter to Larry Rivers 'disgusting self-pity'" (*O'Hara* 26).

¹⁴ Lehman makes some interesting suggestions about O'Hara's animosity towards Lowell. He suggests that Lowell stood for "everything [O'Hara] detested in American poetry: didacticism, symbolism, and the grandiose egoism of a speaker who likens the welfare of the body politic to the state of his psyche and quotes Milton's Satan, 'Myself am Hell' without a saving irony" (*Last* 348). The end of this quotation refers to Lowell's lines in "Skunk Hour," perhaps his most famous Confessional poem. Lehman goes on to make the ingenious suggestion that we read "Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!)"--which O'Hara wrote on the Staten Island ferry on his way to give a reading with Lowell at Wagner College--as an "antithetical response to 'Skunk Hour,'" which deflates the later poem's "moral agony" and "high accents" (350) and replaces them with a camp response to "personal disaster." O'Hara read the poem that afternoon at Wagner, announcing he had written it minutes earlier on the way over. When Lowell got up to read he apologized, rather sarcastically, for not having written anything on the trip over--the implication being, as Perloff notes in recalling the story "that poetry is a *serious* business and that O'Hara was trivializing it and camping it up" (Perloff *O'Hara* 13).

¹⁵ This is an interesting and significant difference between the manifestoes of the New York School and those of the historical avant-garde. While the first avant-garde manifestoes were written either before (or concurrent with) the artistic work they supposedly supported and explained, the New York School worked the other way round. Their manifestoes appeared (in the 1960s) to consolidate and "explain" work that had begun ten years earlier. This suggests an important priority of the artistic over the political in New York School writing, which is the inverse of the historical avant-garde movements, which began with the political and worked their way to the artistic. This dichotomy also sheds light on the relationship between New York School and the major movement that proceeded from it, Language poetry. Like the historical avant-garde, the Language poets produced numerous manifestoes prior to, and concurrent with, their poetry. Also like the historical avant-garde, the Language movement tends to be much more didactic, oppositional, overtly political--in sum more "traditionally" avant-garde--than the New York School. As far as the history of poetic movements go, then, we probably need to see Language poetry as more backwards looking than its proponents would have us believe.

¹⁶ O'Hara was very conscious of what he wanted to avoid, as evidenced by this comment in a 1957 letter to Larry Rivers which included a group of poems and the following question: "Now please tell me if you think these poems are filled with disgusting self-pity . . . and I'll keep working on them" (qtd. in Perloff, *O'Hara* 22).

¹⁷ I do not mean to suggest that O'Hara only wrote Personist poems to women. In fact some of his greatest poems are intimate poems to men (Vincent Warren, Larry Rivers, Joe LeSueur) which occasionally inflect the classical love poem with a Personist sensibility. Many critics agree that some of O'Hara's most successful poems are his love poems. What they often overlook, however, is the fact that these more tender, serious poems are closely connected with the campy sensibility of his Personist occasional poems ("Poem Read at Joan Mitchell's," "John Button Birthday," etc.). All of these poems rely on a simple, common strategy: instead of speaking as a poet, O'Hara speaks as an individual, "to" someone. O'Hara's major contribution was to develop the process and the reflection on such "personal" communication into a way of making a new kind of poem.

¹⁸ Though today Lowell's book will hardly seem the most shocking thing to be published in the late fifties, we must remember that with the poet's reputation for uncompromisingly formal, dense and allusive poetry, these loose, conversational, personal poems would have been a "shocking" departure (as John Thompson wrote in the *Kenyon Review* [482]). Lowell's mentor and bastion of the New Critical sensibility Alan Tate implored the young poet not to publish the book in a letter of 1957: "All the poems about your family are definitely *bad*. I do not think you ought to publish them. . . . They have no public or literary interest" (Hamilton 237). The published volume met with both positive and (more strongly articulated) negative views mostly focused on its "shockingly personal" subject matter. One reviewer characterized it as "vapid unadulterated prose . . . intending to shock more than uplift" (Coblentz 21).

¹⁹ The question of how seriously we should take Ginsberg (or how seriously he took himself) is a vexed one which probably gets more difficult the further we move away from the historical period in which his most successful work (i.e. *Howl*) was written. Perkins's *A History of Modern Poetry* suggests that Ginsberg is "perceived more as a spiritual clown than as a threat" (550) today, and one has to wonder whether this clownishness will ultimately take precedence over what were Ginsberg's strongly held oppositional beliefs.

²⁰ I find this parenthetical aside particularly unsettling since it reverses the argument so quickly (though a sudden, unaccounted self-questioning), and since if we were to move it one word to the right, so that the line read: "They are gargling out innocuous poems (to whom?) about maple trees and their children," the meaning would be *very* different. The fact that it stands out in this way suggests to me that we need to give it greater interpretive weight.

²¹ Of course such seriousness and self-regard does not belong only to the academic tradition. In fact, the pronouncements of figures like Ginsberg, Olson, or Duncan are frequently more high-minded than those of their academic rivals. Here is Robert Duncan, for instance, from his statement in Allen's anthology: "I make poetry as other men make war or make love or make states or revolutions: to exercise my faculties at large" (407).

²² O'Hara parodies Snyder's spiritual earnestness in these lines from "The Lunch Hour, FYI": "I had just finished the last chapter of my biography of the / Buddha, *The Yoghurt and the Revolution*, and I was GLAD to eat" (*CP* 421). In another poem he muses "where is Gary Snyder I wonder if he's reading under a dwarf pine / stretched out so his book and his head fit under the lowest branch / while the sun of the Orient rolls calmly not getting

through to him / not caring particularly because the light in Japan respects poets" ("Les Luths" *CP* 343).

²³ Koch recalls in an interview with Jordan Davis that after discovering the beauties of narrative in *Ko* "I went on what seemed a wonderful binge of storytelling--love stories, adventure stories, crime stories, sports stories, all kinds, some speeded up, some slowed down, long, short, full of all kinds of details" (*AP* 208).

²⁴ Part of the appeal of collaboration for Koch is the element of newness and surprise that unusual combinations of personality and material may produce. As he notes in the catalogue for a 1993 exhibition of his collaborative works in England: "One thing collaboration gives is the frequent if not constant feeling of being surprised, of being led where one had no idea one was going, and finding that being there one has something interesting to say" (*AP* 170).

²⁵ The fact that the performance cannot be repeated also may also highlight a potential problem with Koch's aesthetic. Many of Koch's conceptual poems are similar to jokes which, as Geoff Ward notes, "will never be as good the second time" (8). This implies that returning to Koch's poems is like returning for repeat visits to Duchamp's urinal installation, "Fountain"--in a word: unnecessary. Though in theory this seems right, I believe that in reality Koch's poems tend to be more complicated, subtle and rich than Ward allows when he imagines them primarily as jokes.

²⁶ It must be admitted that part of O'Hara's casualness was in fact carefully constructed (as, he would be the first to admit, were the poems of Keats or the paintings of Matisse). For example, Brad Gooch notes that some of the impromptu *Lunch Poem*, supposedly written during breaks from his busy day at the Museum of Modern Art, in fact date back as far as 1954, "when O'Hara had no lunch hours" (266). As another example, of the seven poems entitled "On Rachnaminoff's Birthday"--which give the impression of being unpremeditated celebrations of this particular occasion--only two were actually written on April 1, the "real" birthday.

CHAPTER THREE

The Poetics Of Process

In the mid 1940s Jackson Pollock took a decisive step in his painting which would become a provocative symbol not only of Abstract Expressionism, but also for artwork in general in the 1950s. Around this time, Pollock began tacking his large unstretched canvases to the floor of the dilapidated tool shed which was his studio on Long Island, New York, and painting in a new, spontaneous, “direct” manner. The movement from easel to floor marked a decisive step in what Harold Rosenberg would come to call “Action Painting.” With the canvas on the floor, Pollock could not only approach his work from all sides and at all angles; he could also, as he famously stated, be “literally *in* the painting” (“My Painting,” in Shapiro & Shapiro 356). At the same time, Pollock began dispensing with the traditional tools of the artist. Easel, palette and brushes were abandoned in favor of simpler, more primitive instruments: sticks, trowels, knives and, most famously, no tools at all as he dripped paint directly from the can to the floor. In this way, Pollock began producing his celebrated “drip” paintings (also called “over-all field” or “mass image” compositions¹), composed of dynamic, looping, and fragmented lines, which build up a dense, richly textured environment.

Pollock explained that this new method allowed the artist to treat the painting as an extension of the body (“On the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting” [Shapiro & Shapiro 356]) and as a process of pure discovery rather than an act of intention. The subject of the painting was not an external object to be copied, represented, or transformed, but an internal state whose process was simultaneously discovered and defined in the act of painting:

When I am *in* my painting, I’m not aware of what I’m doing. It is only after a sort of “get acquainted” period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc. It is only when I lose contact with the

painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well. (Shapiro & Shapiro 357)

Harold Rosenberg would soon capitalize on Pollock's innovation, giving it full theoretical expression, with a heavy dose of existential philosophy, in his essay "The American Action Painters" (1952).²

Willem de Kooning once famously remarked that Pollock "broke the ice" for American painters. One of the many reasons Pollock looms so large in the American cultural imagination is that his "breakthrough" signified a shift not only in painting but in all the arts: a shift from product to process, from representation to dramatization, from contemplation to action. Pollock's "breakthrough" opened a painterly and a metaphorical space which allowed both for a new kind of painting and a new kind of relation between the artist and his work. The changes that Irving Sandler sees Pollock initiating in painting, apply with equal force to arts such as poetry, music, and dance. In *The Triumph of American Painting* (1970), Sandler suggests that Pollock "opened the way to a kind of painting that was more direct, improvisational, abstract, and larger in size [He] revitalized American abstraction, giving other artists the confidence to risk basing their own paintings on the spontaneous gesture, knowing it could yield a unified picture full of energy, drama, and passion" (102).³ Robert Motherwell put it more succinctly when he called Pollock a "guide to freedom" for other artists (in Sandler, *New York School* 15).

"Process art," a concept which began topping the art terminology charts by the 1970s according to one English art critic (Walker 247), refers to an important shift from end result (product) to creative behavior (process) that took place in many disciplines in the 1950s. At this time, painting, poetry, music, and dance all began foregrounding the actions and mental processes of artists in new and dramatic ways. In each of these disciplines, the process of making art became, in various ways, the subject of art. In action painting, the work was seen as a chronicle of the creative experience that produced it. Painters did not copy external reality, but transformed internal processes into external signs. Barnett Newman claimed that paintings should be viewed not as objects, but as

“specific embodiments of feeling” (qtd. in Hobbs 72). In another famous statement, he claims that “we [the Abstract Expressionists] are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you, that have been the devices of Western European painting. Instead of making *cathedrals* out of Christ, man, or ‘life,’ we are making it [sic] out of ourselves, out of our own feelings” (“The Plastic Image” 127).

From the Abstract Expressionists’ lead, neo-dada, or neo-assemblage artists like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg extended the gains of process art. Like Pollock and others, Rauschenberg was interested in pushing the painting process to see “what is a picture and what isn’t” (Tomkins 208). While Pollock’s overall canvases sometimes included sand, broken glass, cigarette ends, bottle tops, and other accidental debris from his studio, Rauschenberg stretched this older cubist method to bring more and more of the real world into the picture. “I think a picture is more like the real world when it is made out of the real world,” he claimed (Tomkins 193-4). Thus he made pictures from dirt, pictures with plants growing in them, and finally combine-paintings with everything from bedding and discarded clothing to stuffed chickens and goats. Process is also highlighted in Rauschenberg’s work (as it is, some would argue, in Pollock’s) through the use of chance. Besides the combine paintings, which develop their forms from the random objects which make up their spaces, Rauschenberg uses chance in several other ways. In creating *Rebus* (1955) Rauschenberg used unlabeled cans of paint which he bought at discount prices from hardware stores on Canal Street. Thus he had no way of knowing what colours he would use until he opened the lids. His famous all-white and all-black paintings of 1952 are also ways of abandoning choice and discrimination. Like John Cage’s *4’33”* (to be discussed shortly) these paintings are environments which are continually created and recreated by elements outside the picture--that is by the fortuitous movement of shadows, light, and reflections. In a 1963 interview Rauschenberg commented “I always thought of the white paintings as being not passive but very--well,

hypersensitive. So that one could look at them and almost see how many people were in the room by the shadows cast, or what time of day it was” (Tomkins 203).

In experimental music, Rauschenberg’s frequent collaborator John Cage foregrounded process by using unintentional (aleatory) methods of composition and by using the noises (and silences) of daily life as musical material. Cage believed that any and all sounds could be musical based on our attention to them, and that art’s job was not to create new orders of sound, but to awaken the audience to the orders already there. His indeterminate compositions thus highlight the processes by which music is made by a composer and an audience together. His notorious *4’33”* (1952), which consists of a performer sitting silently at a piano for 4 minutes and 33 seconds, is a piece of process art. The composition is a space to be filled by the attention of the audience and by the smallest of unscripted environmental noises. Other process pieces by Cage include *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* (1951), which is composed by twelve radios tuned at random, and *0’0”* (1962) a piece which consists of the maximum amplification of a single action. In one performance, Cage amplified the sound of himself drinking a glass of water. The score specifies that no two performances are to be of the same action and thus the composition, created through the process and at the moment it is performed, will always be original.

Cage’s frequent collaborator, dancer Merce Cunningham, brought the idea of process to contemporary dance. Cunningham’s company abjured traditional dance in favor of what he called “Events,” movement created spontaneously, randomly (sometimes, like Cage, through coin tosses), or as recombinations of other works. His dances are created without preconceived ideas, but rather are based on impulsive movements of the body. He explains his process: “There’s no thinking involved in my choreography . . . I work alone for a couple of hours every morning in the studio. I just try things out. And my eye catches something in the mirror, or the body catches something that looks interesting, and then I work on that. . . . I don’t work through images or ideas--I work through the body” (Tomkins 246). One example of a Cunningham-Cage collaboration is *Variations V* (1965)

in which, among other “happenings,” radio antennas on the stage are hooked up to respond to the dancers’ motions, thus creating a random electronic score (which, of course, will be different in each performance). Of his collaborations with Cunningham, Cage notes “We are not, in these dances and music, saying something . . . We are rather doing something. . . I may add there are no stories and no psychological problems. There is simply an activity of movement, sound, and light. . . . what it expresses is determined by each one of you” (qtd. in Hobbs 68).

In the poetry of the time, the “New Americans” (of Donald Allen’s anthology) also began highlighting spontaneity, improvisation, and the process of poetic composition.

Referring to Rosenberg’s article, Michael Davidson notes that

Poets of this generation appropriated many of these same physical metaphors (energy, action, gesture) in their quest for a poetics of unmediated statement. Charles Olson’s emphasis on “breath,” Robert Duncan’s physiological and biological poetics, Robert Creeley’s stress on a poetry of intensities, Michael McClure’s “beast” language and Beat “bop” prosody are only some examples of a poetics for which muscular and physical response is valued over reflective and discursive moments. (“Skewed” 44)

To Davidson’s list we need to add the New York School’s “action poetry,” as Michael Hettich calls the Abstract Expressionist-inspired work of O’Hara and Ashbery.⁴ Along with an emphasis on the physical aspects of composition, went a heightened interest in the process of performance. This accentuation of performance accounts in part for the growing interest in poetry readings in the 1950s and 60s, with their agenda to move the poem from the static page to the live stage. According to Reva Wolf, readings became forums for the process and development of poetry:

The poetry reading was an ideal meeting place for individuals who later might serve each other as collaborators, supporters of each other’s work, new friends, or lovers. . . . [It was] a place to discover the latest work of friends and colleagues, to respond to this work on the spot, and to exchange gossip. . . . As one denizen of the Café Le Metro and similar Tenth Street venues recalled, “It was not uncommon for remarks to be made by people in the audience in approval or disapproval, and it was even more common for the reader to be ready to answer any comments. The give-and-take got heavy at times. These readings were more like living magazines. Poets and audience gathered to communicate about what they were doing. Each reading was a means of getting the latest news.” (63)

While groups like the Beat, Black Mountain, and New York School poets often liked to highlight their differences, what their practices have in common is the elevation of 'art as action' over 'art as artifact.' All of these poets (along with many young painters, musicians, and dancers of the time) put enormous faith (they would say "risk" faith) on the process of imagination. Each came to believe that the genesis and evolution of an expressive act is the most pertinent material and true subject of art--though, of course, each group would explicate this common assumption in its own way. Here is Allen Ginsberg's oracular-mystical conception of process in "When the Mode of the Music Changes the Walls of the City Shake" (1961):

The only pattern of value or interest in poetry is the solitary, individual pattern peculiar to the poet's moment & the poem *discovered* in the mind & in the process of writing it out on the page . . . Poetry [is] the expression of the highest moments of the mind-body--mystical illumination--and its deepest emotion (through tears--love's all)--in the forms nearest to what it actually looks like (data of mystical imagery) & feels like (rhythm of actual speech & rhythm prompted by direct transcription of visual & other mental data) . . . (325)

Compare this to Charles Olson's oracular-didactic presentation in "Projective Verse":

Verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of *essential* use, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings. (147)

Finally, here is John Ashbery's typically off-hand, deflated pronouncement on process art from a 1983 interview in Warsaw:

When I write a poem, I have no idea or I have a very sketchy idea, of what it's going to be about, and it may be just that I have a few phrases or words in mind, or it's some simple idea; and in connecting these things the poetry happens. In fact, the original thing I began with I may decide to cut out of the poem. It's getting from one place to another, from one *moment* to another. Life is very difficult, and it seems very often that we're in a situation that is impossible to deal with, but somehow it does go on, so it's very difficult and easy at the same time. It happens by itself and we're part of its happening. (Sommer 313)

How the New York School poets both explained and used the poetics of process (while generally avoiding the various inflations we see above in Ginsberg and Olson) is the subject of this chapter.

* * *

In "The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art" (1957), Meyer Schapiro, another critic the poets admired⁵, suggested that "there is a sense in which all the arts today have a common character shared by painting. . ." (258). According to Schapiro, because painting and sculpture were the first arts to consistently push the boundaries of representation, they opened "whole new fields of form-construction and expression (including new possibilities of imaginative representation) which entailed a new attitude to art itself. . . . The idea of art was shifted, therefore, from the aspect of imagery to its expressive, constructive, inventive aspect" (259, 260). Although Schapiro doesn't phrase it this way, his is another argument for process art: "No other art today," he writes of Abstract Expressionist painting, "exhibits to that degree in the final result the presence of the individual, his spontaneity and the concreteness of his procedure" (265). Schapiro's position, both on the origin and the nature of the new art, was one with which the New York School poets readily agreed. Thus to understand the New York School's poetics of process, we will turn our attention to painting--as several earlier critics have--since it was this more than any other discipline that inspired the poets' experiments. The relationship between New York School poetry and painting is one frequently acknowledged by the poets themselves, as for example in James Schuyler's statement for *The New American Poetry* entitled "Poet and Painter Overture" (1959):

New York poets, except I suppose the color blind, are affected most by the floods of paint in whose crashing surf we all scramble.

Artists in any genre are of course drawn to the dominant art movement in the place where they live; in New York it is painting. . . .

Harold Rosenberg's Action Painting article is as much a statement for what is best about a lot of New York poetry as it is for New York painting. . . . Poets face the same challenge, and painting shows the way, or possible ways. "Writing like painting" has nothing to do with it. (418)

Ashbery, O'Hara, and Koch also make similar statements about their debt to Abstract Expressionism, again in terms of the ideas or the spirit of the art, more than in terms of actual techniques. If "writing like painting" has nothing to do with it then "thinking like

painting” is of the essence. The poets were inspired not so much by particular methods as by artistic ideologies. In a 1974 interview, Ashbery notes of Abstract Expressionism that:

It’s an influence in a loose, general way. I mean, I didn’t go and look at a Jackson Pollock painting and decide to try to imitate this in poetry somehow. But it’s just the idea of being as close as possible to the original impulse to work, which somehow makes the poem, like the painting, a kind of history of its own coming into being. (Osti 84)

O’Hara’s comments tend to be similarly broad and conceptual:

I think certain poets have been very much inspired by American painting. You know, not in the sense of subject matter, or anything like that, but in the ambition to be that, to be the work yourself, and therefore accomplish it. (SS 17)

In a 1983 interview with Carmel Friedman, Koch considers the New York School’s roots when he reflects on how Dada aesthetics, important to contemporaneous process work like Rauschenberg’s and Cage’s, also “opened things up for us” (10).

While the relationship between New York School painting and poetry has been considered by many critics, none has focused specifically on the idea of process as an informing *metaphor* for the poetry. While past critics have suggested that we “see poems as paintings” (Libby 241) (a comparison that puts emphasis on *text*), none have advanced an extended analysis of poets as painters (a comparison that emphasizes *process*). Such an analysis would focus on the way poets have built upon the same inspirations and followed the same working procedures as painters. In the past, critics like Libby and Perloff have focused primarily on the ways poets have appropriated and translated painterly techniques into poetic styles.⁶ Thus Perloff is interested in the way “O’Hara’s heterogeneous images and syntactic dislocations ‘imitate’ the process of the painting itself” (*O’Hara* 79). Relying heavily on painterly vocabulary like Hans Hoffman’s term “push and pull,” Perloff carefully explicates a large number of syntactic/stylistic techniques O’Hara employs in order to convince us that his poems should be read (or perhaps “seen”) rather like mass image action paintings:

When these syntactic and prosodic devices are used in conjunction, we get a poetry of great speed, openness, flexibility, and defiance of expectations. Like the “all-over” painting, an O’Hara lyric often seems intentionally deprived of a beginning, middle, and end; it is an instantaneous performance. Syntactic energy is thus

equivalent to the painter's "push and pull"--the spatial tensions that keep the surface alive and moving. The rapid cuts from one spatial or temporal zone to another, moreover, give the poetry its peculiar sense of immediacy: everything is absorbed into the NOW. (135)⁷

Perloff's careful and convincing scholarship was essential in elevating O'Hara to the well-deserved position in American poetry he enjoys today. While her ideas were groundbreaking, and her readings remain convincing ways of explaining the excitement of so much of O'Hara's work, I also think there is a problem with her method. Perloff's analysis remains in the world of "writing like painting" (in Schuyler's phrase). The idea behind this analysis, which is the idea of surface or flatness, belongs to an earlier generation of abstractionists--it goes back to Cubist conceptions exemplified in painting by artists like Picasso and Braque, and in poetry by Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams. It belongs to a tradition of surface which Perloff examines in detail in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*. Thus, Perloff writes of O'Hara's work: "The *surface* of the painting, and by analogy the *surface* of the poem, must, then be regarded as a field upon which the physical energies of the artist can operate, without mediation of metaphor or symbol" (*O'Hara* 23, Perloff's emphasis). If, however, as has been repeatedly claimed, the New York School painters made advances on this kind of abstraction, then we must hope that the New York School poets did the same. Their work, I have suggested, should be seen in light of the neo-avant-garde, which does not just repeat but modifies and updates its avant-garde precursors. For all its importance Perloff's analysis has two problems. In the first place, she relies too heavily on a mode of comparison based on stylistic imitation although the poets, in their comments above, disavow such direct connections. When she does look at the more abstract or conceptual connections between poetry and painting, Perloff focuses too much on a formalist and materialist conception of surface. This interest in surface stresses product rather than process, and is more "historical" than "neo" avant-garde in its focus. Moreover, such New Critical focus on text (artifact) misses much of the artistic energy which, as we have seen, accrues in the shift from text to process, from artifact to action.

It is my intention, then, to begin not with texts, techniques or styles but with the informing ideas (particularly, in this case, ideas about process), and then to suggest ways in which these ideas and attitudes may have been translated into poetic techniques and styles. I believe this method is truer to the way the poets understood their own inspiration in painting--which was more unobtrusive than intentional, "an influence," as Ashbery put it, "in a loose, general way."⁸

* * *

Since Harold Rosenberg's article has been important not only to the poets, but also to the study of the aesthetics of process, I would like to continue by examining this essay in more detail. Rosenberg's theory will set the stage for an understanding of how the New York School poets tried to translate ideas about painting into a poetics. In the second section of "The American Action Painters," subtitled "Getting Inside the Canvas," Rosenberg observes: "At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act--rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event" (25). The first notable quality of Rosenberg's theory is its high degree of abstraction. Unlike Clement Greenberg and most theorists who supported Abstract Expressionist work by elucidating its formal qualities, Rosenberg is less interested in artistic qualities than artistic relations--his theory begins with the conception by which the artist approaches his work. Rosenberg's radical (and in the end perhaps untenable) position is based on shifting the emphasis of art theory from object to action. In stressing the existential event or action of the painting, Rosenberg is willing to sacrifice what is usually seen as its most primary qualities--that is, the painting's aesthetic attributes. "Form, color, composition, drawing, are auxiliaries," he writes, "any one of which--or practically all . . . can be dispensed with. What matters always is the revelation contained in the act" (26-7).⁹

When he dispenses with the traditional “qualities of the painting,” Rosenberg needs something to replace them as a mainstay for his theory. In place of the painting as object, Rosenberg puts the painter as actor:

The painter gets away from Art through his act of painting. . . . The revolution against the given, in the self and in the world, which since Hegel has provided European vanguard art with theories of a New Reality, has re-entered America in the form of personal revolts. Art as action rests on the enormous assumption that the artist accepts as real only that which he is in the process of creating. (28, 32)

Thus the artist’s “personality” becomes the backbone of Rosenberg’s theory, though this prosaic term is usually dressed up in language such as *identity* or *morality*. This replacement of object with actor makes sense in Rosenberg’s politically-oriented, Marxist-inspired criticism, since for him it is not things but actions which are of ultimate importance. For Rosenberg while objects can be coopted, copied, and consumed, only actions can be truly revolutionary. “An action is not a matter of taste,” he declares. “You don’t let taste decide the firing of a pistol . . .” (38).¹⁰ When Rosenberg talks about the “revelation” contained in the painting-act, it is an expression of personality he is speaking of, though again this is dressed up in more imposing language:

A painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist. The painting itself is a “moment” in the adulterated mixture of his life--whether “moment” means, in one case, the actual minutes taken up with spotting the canvas or, in another, the entire duration of a lucid drama conducted in sign language. The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist’s existence. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life. (78)

Thus, Rosenberg rather grandly images the action painting solving Bürger’s major task for the avant-garde: the reconciliation of art and life. The painting is nothing more--and nothing less--than the result of the artist’s encounter with him- or herself through the medium of art. Typically, Rosenberg’s theory works at this high level of abstraction and poetic metaphor, a fact that may well account for its attractiveness to the poets. Here, we are asked to imagine the painting as an existential equivalent to the artist’s personality.

Rosenberg’s esoteric language (“metaphysical substance as the artist’s existence”) is probably one of the reasons why his work quickly fell out of favor, becoming eclipsed

by the more rigorous, academic language of Clement Greenberg. Greenberg's language focused, significantly, on objects that could be bought and sold, rather than actions which could not. This economic consideration suggests that a related reason for Rosenberg's decline may be the inadequacy of his theory in dealing with questions of value. In the world of the visual arts these questions are of urgent importance (since the abstract question "what to value" is translated daily into the pragmatic question "what to buy" for collectors and galleries). If a painting is to be judged not by aesthetic qualities, but simply as a kind of action, one might ask, what makes one act-painting better than another? What, for that matter, distinguishes the act-painting of Jackson Pollock from (as several critics of the time--including Randall Jarrell--asked) that of Betsy the Chimp?¹¹ If what counts is the act and not the aesthetic qualities of the object, why should any painting be considered art at all?¹² Here is Rosenberg's sidelong, but I think useful, answer:

Art--relations of the painting to the works of the past, rightness of color, texture, balance, etc.--comes back into painting by way of psychology. As Stevens says of poetry, "it is the process of the personality of the poet." But the psychology is the psychology of creation. Not that of the so-called psychological criticism that wants to "read" a painting for clues to the artist's sexual preferences or debilities. The work, the act, translates the psychologically given into the intentional, into a "world"--and thus transcends it. (29)

What the critic is interested in, then, is not psychological data of the type gathered by a psychoanalyst, but the psychological *role* that the painter plays in the creation of his or her world. This is where Stevens is so useful and ingenious. Poetry, or painting in this case, is not the *personality* of the poet, but the *process* by which that personality is constructed. This artistic process is, according to Rosenberg, "the way the artist organizes his emotional and intellectual energy [on the canvas] as if he were in a living situation. The interest lies in the kind of act taking place in the four-sided arena, a dramatic interest" (29). Thus the finest action paintings are those which create the greatest dramatic interest in organizing the artist's energy (in Rosenberg's words "translating the psychologically given") into an original, intelligible, human "world"--which explains why Betsy the Chimp doesn't measure up to Pollock, de Kooning, or Kline.

The fact remains that Rosenberg does not take on the difficult and pertinent question of how one judges between different action paintings and painters, though it must be noted in his defense that his goal is not to create an evaluative standard. Instead of criteria for evaluation, he briefly considers the (for him more fundamental) question of criteria for discussion which accompanies the shift from object to act:

Criticism must begin by recognizing in the painting the assumptions inherent in its mode of creation. Since the painter has become an actor, the spectator has to think in the vocabulary of action: its inception, duration, direction--psychic state, concentration and relaxation of the will, passivity, alert waiting. He must become a connoisseur of the gradations among the automatic, the spontaneous, the evoked. (79)

“The American Action Painters” is a poetic and provocative essay, and the influence it had on the rise of Abstract Expressionism and on the thinking of future artists and viewers should not be underestimated. However, as art critic Alwynne Mackie points out, “Reading Rosenberg is a very stimulating, but also very frustrating experience. One swings wildly from the conviction that he captures profoundly important things about Abstract Expressionism, to the suspicion (sometimes irrational) that his ideas get one nowhere when it comes to practical criticism” (82). While it proposes a radical new way of thinking about painting, the essay’s terms tend to range from the vague to the esoteric. One elementary criticism is summarized in Mary McCarthy’s famous quip that you can’t hang an event on a wall (Shapiro & Shapiro 19). This is a point well taken, and we must concede that a painting--far more than a poem--is a singular object distinguished by its aesthetic qualities whose artistic value may be difficult to measure, but whose exchange value can be precisely determined. Rosenberg’s idea of art as action is most valuable not as a prescription for practical criticism but as a metaphor for the way both an artist and a viewer might approach a particular, new kind of art which seeks not to depict or represent an object, but rather to express an emotion or state. Though it may be difficult to judge whether Pollock’s *Sea Change* (1947) “translates the psychologically given . . . into a world” more effectively than his *Comet* (1947), it is quite useful to think about *both* these works less as representational objects than as engaged, spontaneous actions. The collector

or evaluative critic may not find much help from Rosenberg in determining which painting is “better” or more valuable. However, the general critic or viewer can gain much from his conception of paintings as acts of engagement, as “private rituals made visible” as another romantic critic put it (Sandler *Triumph* 110). By shifting the emphasis of contemplation from object to action, Rosenberg opened a metaphorical space for criticism similar to the one opened for painting by Pollock. Rosenberg’s metaphor allows us to see how an object can also be an act, how a painting can also be a process which can “include” (again metaphorically) both the artist (in his or her execution) and the audience (in its response).

We have already heard from the poets that the informing ideas of Abstract Expressionism (and in particular ideas about process) were important to them in the development and practice of their own poetics. What remains to be seen is in what ways the idea of process was transformed from painting to poetry. I would like to make a few brief suggestions here before turning to specific poems by O’Hara, Koch and Ashbery to examine how some of these preoccupations play themselves out in each poet’s work.

Process is a broad concept which is relevant not only to a number of postwar arts, but also to a number of different aspects of each artistic genre. It is also a slippery concept because it refers not so much to a new kind of art product as to a new way of thinking about art, and a new relation between the artist and his/her work. Rosenberg gives us a few general ideas to work with. To begin with, process poetry would conceive of a poem as an action instead of an object. It would see a poem as an experience in language, a “world” the poet creates through a spontaneous process of “talking” (O’Hara’s personism), “thinking” (Ashbery’s “epistemological snapshots”), “breathing” (Olson’s projective verse), or “writing” (Ginsberg’s spontaneous bop prose). Rather than a preconceived *depiction* of some external reality, the process poem would be an *expression* of an emotion or state--it would find its meaning in the process of speaking. Commenting on O’Hara’s writing in a review of the *Collected Poems*, Koch does a good job of describing the New York process poem in general:

They are the result of an unfamiliar aesthetic assumption: that what is really right there, in the poet's thoughts, fantasies, and feelings, is what is richest in possibility and worth the most attention. Beginning with whatever is there, if one's feelings are stirred by it, is the best way to get anywhere . . . The movement [of the poem] seems determined by a musical line of feeling rather than by an intellectual working out or a preconceived form. It is as if the poet were writing to his feelings, as one might write poetry while listening to Chopin, letting the melodic rise and fall of the sound determine what one says. (AP 23, 24)

The metaphor of music seems to come up in all the poets' work as a way of describing the organic evolution of pieces. In this 1993 interview, Ashbery is asked about his creative process:

I don't know about how my creative process works, but I always put on some kind of music, and probably don't listen to it very carefully. But the forms that music takes seem to be similar to the ones my poetry takes. I think my poems, like music, have their own debates, resolutions, and meanderings. You can feel their meanings, but you can never put them into words. (Lopes 28)

Like music, and as Rosenberg describes action paintings, the process poem unfolds, and in its movement it reveals something of the personality of its creator. This "personality" is not revealed in a clinical sense (the poem does not tell us about "the artist's sexual preferences or debilities" in Rosenberg's phrase) but more in an impressionistic way.¹³ The poem enacts, in Stevens's phrase borrowed by Rosenberg "the process of the personality of the poet" (*Necessary Angel* 45). The key word here is process: the poem is a performance of the self exploring, and simultaneously creating, the self. Rosenberg suggests that the canvas is "the 'mind' through which the painter thinks by changing a surface with paint" (26).¹⁴ If we substitute "the page" for "the canvas," and "words" for "paint," we have an excellent description of how the New York School poets also approach their work. "The process of the personality of the poet" is a view of the self writing the self, and such a performance discloses something of the individual which the clinical psychologist cannot show. Here is Koch again:

There is a difference between a feeling seized rapidly, while it's happening, or while it's being created . . . and a feeling considered in any other way. In catching a feeling in the process of coming into being, or as it first explodes into a thousand refractions, one can hope to reveal some of the truth that lies hidden in our unconscious, in all the things we have known or felt but can't be aware of simultaneously. (AP 25)

With some of these ideas about process in mind, then, we turn to poems by each of the three poets to see how they put the theory into practice.

“Why I am Not a Painter”

“Why I am Not a Painter” (1956) is one of O’Hara’s most anthologized poems, no doubt because it so neatly sums up the poet’s aesthetic. Conversational, cosmopolitan, witty, and fast paced, it is a poem that is both casual and calculated. “Why I am Not a Painter” is also a poem which finely encapsulates O’Hara’s poetics of process: both in its method and in its subtle orchestration of the personality of the poet. O’Hara’s ideas about action, movement, and process--developed to some extent from his involvement with the American Action painters--are a nodal point from which a great deal of his poetry grows. In what follows I will consider some of the ways in which “Why I am Not a Painter” encapsulates many of O’Hara’s ideas about art as process.

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

For instance, Mike Goldberg
is starting a painting. I drop in.
“Sit down and have a drink” he
says. I drink; we drink. I look
up. “You have SARDINES in it.”
“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. The painting is
finished. Where’s SARDINES?”
All that’s left is just
letters, “It was too much,” Mike says.

But me? One day I am thinking of
a color: orange. I write a line
about orange. Pretty soon it is a
whole page of words, not lines.
Then another page. There should be
so much more, not of orange, of
words, of how terrible orange is
and life. Days go by. It is even in
prose. I am a real poet. My poem
is finished and I haven’t mentioned

orange yet. It's twelve poems, I call
it ORANGES. And one day in a gallery
I see Mike's painting, called SARDINES. (CP 261-2)

To start, as with many O'Hara poems, the subject of "Why I am Not a Painter" is the process of making art and of being an artist. As with the Abstract Expressionist canvases of Pollock and others, this poem makes artistic problems and processes, questions and nuances, into the subject of the work of art. There is an important distinction to be made here. The poem is not about the state of being an artist, but about the process: it doesn't tell us what an artist *is*, but shows us what an artist *does*. By the same token, the poem is best seen not as a conventional narrative but as an event (notice the use of a fragmented, paratactical present tense rather than a continuous, narrative past tense, as well as the complete absence of imagery or descriptive details). As O'Hara once wrote of Robert Motherwell's painting, his poetry attempts to "engage the viewer in its meaning rather than declare it" (AC 76).

Although O'Hara presents the poem as an answer to the question of differences between the poet and the painter, he ends up treating the question as a joke or an absurdity. Instead of telling us why he is not a painter, O'Hara brings us into a scene which ultimately enacts the similarities rather than the differences between the two arts. The only way we can know what an artist is in this poem is by what he does. And what both Mike and Frank do in this poem is remarkably similar. Each starts with the barest of conceptions, a simple word or image (sardines, orange), and from this improvises a chain of associations that so exceeds the original stimulus, that the sardines and oranges eventually disappear altogether. Neither work of art is really about the thing it starts from; both are about the process of extrapolating from that thing. Both, in other words, are about the process of creation.¹⁵

Both Mike and "Frank" (who functions, in the typical O'Hara manner, as both narrator and protagonist of the poem) represent a new image of the artist as personable, offhand, and unprofessional:

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."
 "Oh." I go and the days go by . . .

Neither of these characters fit the bill for the popular, romantic image of the artist. They are lacking the Rilkean loneliness (claimed by Deep Image poets like Robert Bly and James Wright), the Nietzschean darkness and torment (crucial to Confessional poets like Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton), the Whitmanian prophetic expansiveness (Allen Ginsberg, Adrienne Rich), and the Poundian gravity (Charles Olson, Robert Duncan) so many readers had come to expect from poets by the 1960s. What makes Mike and Frank artists is something rather different from their contemporaries--that is, their common faith in the process, their willingness to risk that as the days go by and the painting and writing go on, something worthwhile and unexpected (it may even be in prose!) will come out. This casual image of the artist goes back to Doc Williams's persona: the poet not as revolutionary hero but as plainspeaking everyman. Williams's persona was developed, to some degree, in opposition to the high modernist image cultivated by Pound and Eliot (an image which emphasized professionalism and elitism, but also hinted at the anxiety of the expatriate outsider). This high modernist image of the poet, which would dominate American poetry until Allen's anthology, was inherited by the Southern fugitives--well-spoken poets and New Critics such as John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Randall Jarrell. The image was passed on, and modified with more emphasis on the undercurrent of anxiety, to the New Critics' protégés: Lowell, Berryman, Schwartz, et al., a group Perloff accurately describes as the genteel poètes maudits.¹⁶ Frank and Mike illustrate the opposite pole: they are casual, unprofessional artists, whose creativity comes not from well-tutored (and appropriately tortured) subjectivity, but from the daily, zestful processes of life. Their work evolves through the accidents and improvisations of the quotidian: visiting friends, casual conversation, drinks and sardines and oranges.¹⁷

I Do This, I Do That: Poem as Experience

Another way in which O'Hara's work constitutes a poetics of process is related to Rosenberg's assertion that action painting is "inseparable from the biography of the artist. . . . The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life" (78). For Rosenberg, the artist does not copy or represent an object outside of himself, but records an encounter with himself on the canvas. The self is the grounding assumption, the initial point of improvisation from which all else springs. O'Hara also makes such self-involvement (though of a very different kind from the Abstract Expressionists) the heart of his work, as Michael Hettich has noted, in that he "literally uses the immediate events and feelings of his life, no matter how fleeting or inconsequential, as the 'action' that both inspires his poetry and constitutes its subject" (45).¹⁸ O'Hara's "I do this, I do that" poems (of which "Why I am Not a Painter" is a loose example) are performances of the poet's daily life, chronicles of personality in process. The poems enact Frank's lunch time and other perambulations, strolls (both physical and mental) from his MOMA office on West 53rd, to favorite lunch spots (Juliet's Corner in "A Step Away From Them", Moriarty's in "Personal Poem"), artist's studios (like Mike Goldberg's), bookstores (the Golden Griffin in "The Day Lady Died"), nightclubs (the 5 Spot, Birdland), parties, movies, concerts, etc. Sometimes the poems take us further afield: to the country home of painter Fairfield and Ann Porter ("Goodbye to Great Spruce Head Island"), to the Koch weekend retreat in the Hamptons ("Adieu to Norman"), or as far as Europe in poems like "With Barbara Guest in Paris," or "Now That I am in Madrid and Can Think."

Not only is his life the subject matter of his poems, but that life is almost always seen in movement, in process, forever pushing forward. O'Hara's epitaph line sums up his aesthetic and his life well: "Grace to be born and live as variously as possible." The line comes from one of his most important early works, the long poem "In Memory of My

Feelings” which provides an updating of Whitman’s “multitudinousness.” Here, O’Hara’s “transparent selves” move at lightning speed through a series of identifications:

One of me rushes
to window #13 and one of me raises his whip and one of me
flutters up from the center of the track amidst the pink flamingoes,
and underneath their hooves as they round the last turn my lips
are scarred and brown, brushed by tails, masked in the dirt’s lust,
definition, open mouths gasping for the cries of bettors for the lungs of earth.
So many of my transparencies could not resist the race!

.....
I am a Hittite in love with a horse. I don’t know what blood’s
in my I feel like an African prince I am a girl walking downstairs
in a red pleated dress with heels I am a champion taking a fall
I am a jockey with a sprained ass-hole I am the light mist
in which a face appears

.....
and I’ve just caught sight of the *Nina*, the *Pinta* and the *Santa Maria*.
What land is this, so free? (CP 253, 256)

An aesthetic of change and speed marks the pace and mood of O’Hara’s work, and also, as we know, informs the composition of that work. Those who know anything about the O’Hara legend will not be surprised by the poet’s comment, made to his lover and frequent drinking companion J.J. Mitchell just two weeks before O’Hara’s death. After a long night of drinking Mitchell asked “Don’t you ever get tired and want to sleep?” To which O’Hara replied: “If I had my way, I’d go on and on and on and never go to sleep” (Gooch 458). This constant pushing ahead, dashing madly for the future, might be read as a neo-avant-gardist updating of the avant-garde obsession with the future. The goal of the historical avant-garde was to prompt political action and to provoke a revolutionary *collective* future through art (“In the name of art of the future, Futurists’ art, we have started the grand destruction of all areas of beauty. This will not stop--no, it cannot stop at the theater door,” Mayakovsky proclaims in the “Theater, Cinema and Futurism” manifesto of 1913 [Proffer and Proffer 181]). The neo-avant-garde, on the other hand, professes the less grand and less totalizing goal of moving constantly into a *personal* future:

One of me rushes
to window #13 and one of me raises his whip and one of me
flutters up from the center of the track amidst the pink flamingoes . . .

.....

What land is this, so free?

Freedom for the New York School poets who came of age in the depoliticized 1950s--a time that marked "the end of ideology," as Daniel Bell famously claimed--was an *individual* not a collective ideological attainment.¹⁹

As O'Hara improvises the movements of his days into poems, readers become aware of, and caught up in, the playfulness of the process. For O'Hara, and other improvisational artists of the New York School, art is, after all, a form of play.²⁰ Play, in the broadest sense, is what we all do (though children and artists seem to do it with the greatest enthusiasm) in order to make sense of, and make up, our world. Play takes many forms in O'Hara: from playful observations on friends, foes, and New York in general ("How funny you are today New York / like Ginger Rogers in *Swingtime*"), to play-acting and gender-bending of camp, manifested in the burlesques of Hollywood stars like Greta Garbo, Bette Davis and, most famously, Lana Turner.²¹

In general, the playful, *carpe diem* zest with which O'Hara seems to throw himself and his persona into life and poetry sits at the opposite extreme from the gravity and immobility of the Confessional persona and voice. As an illustration of this contrast, compare O'Hara's impish "Steps" to Robert Lowell's distraught "Night Sweat," both published in volumes in 1964 (the former in *Lunch Poems*, the latter in *For the Union Dead*):

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
.....
everyone's taking their coat off
so they can show a rib-cage to the rib-watchers
and the park's full of dancers with their tights and shoes
in little bags

who are often mistaken for worker-outers at the West Side Y
 why not
 the Pittsburgh Pirates shout because they won
 and in a sense we're all winning
 we're alive. (CP 370-71)

Work-table, litter, books and standing lamp,
 plain things, my stalled equipment, the old broom--
 but I am living in a tidied room,
 for ten nights now I've felt the creeping damp
 float over my pajamas' wilted white . . .
 Sweet salt embalms me and my head is wet,
 everything streams and tells me this is right;
 my life's fever is soaking in night sweat--
 one life, one writing! But the downward glide
 and bias of existing wrings us dry--
 always inside me is the child who died,
 always inside me is his will to die--
 one universe, one body . . . (Selected Poems 134)

Lowell's "equipment" is stalled in more ways than one. The poem plods along at an intentionally narcotic pace ("wilted . . . wet . . . [and] creeping") heightened especially when read in contrast to O'Hara's buoyant lines. While Lowell's poem contemplates death and the "child who died," O'Hara's celebrates the child's perennial existence.

"Night Sweat" is ultimately an attempt at maintaining *composure*, both psychologically and aesthetically ("one life, one writing"). Even while the speaker is "losing it" psychologically, his form maintains its composure (in self-possessed iambic pentameter and regular rhyme). Lowell (never quite giving up his formalist heritage) holds fast to a stylistic rigidity as a last refuge of organic wholeness ("one life, one writing . . . one universe, one body"). Such organicism first came under fire at the hands of the historical avant-garde, and again became an object of attack in the neo-avant-garde poetry of the 50s and 60s. Unlike "Night Sweat," "Steps" freely loses its composure. Instead of tending towards emotional and aesthetic economy, it revels in profusion, heterogeneity, and waste. O'Hara's neo-avant-garde aesthetic finds value in inconstancy and vagrant attention (in a similar way to Ashbery). Play and process are intimately linked in this aesthetic: O'Hara makes up his poem in the course of making up, and playing out, his day. As well, the playfulness and exuberance of O'Hara's milieu (with its "rib-watchers" and

“worker-outers”) is one of the qualities that invites readers into the process, making his poems feel less like objects than like experiences or events.

According to Rosenberg’s theory, action painting begins with the modern dissolution of the traditional “subject”—that is the removal of the “thing” to be copied or represented. With this subject gone, painting was no longer a predetermined exercise (an act of copying) but instead an existential event. Paintings themselves, in Rosenberg’s somewhat Heisenbergian paradox, were no longer objects but “events.” (In fact, it is probably best to say that they are both objects and events simultaneously). O’Hara shared in these conceptions, as we have seen, and his poetics of process demands that poems be imagined and created (or better, performed) not as narrations or mimetic representations, but as events. Instead of telling a story, pointing to an object, or being “about” something, a poem should be an experience. It should invite readers into a process. One way of achieving this effect of immediacy (and O’Hara never deluded himself into thinking this was any more than a literary effect) was to avoid any predetermined mimetic intention. Like the painters, O’Hara set out to liquidate the traditional subject. In an early journal entry of 1948, he wrote:

I must take pains not to *intend* anything but the work itself, to let the work take shape as it comes . . . and develop into an entity without interruptions or stumble-posts; I must think only of and for the emergent work and not allow messages or ideas as such to displace the validity of the work with their sham importance and subtle derangements of emphasis. (*Early Writings* 103)²²

By letting the work develop as a conversation with itself, O’Hara hoped to produce poems which would, as he wrote in “Notes on *Second Avenue*,” “*be* the subject, not just about it” (*CP* 497).

O’Hara’s intention, then, was to create poems that were not about experiences but that *were* experiences—works that would bring readers into the process of the poem. We can see him working towards this difficult effect (the greatest difficulty being the production of the illusion of *ease*)²³ in an early poem of 1950 or ’51:

Let’s take a walk, you
and I in spite of the

weather if it rains hard
 on our toes

we'll stroll like poodles
 and be washed down a gigantic scenic gutter
 that will be

exciting! ("Poem," *CP* 41)

O'Hara had developed the idea of making a poem into an event by presenting it as a communal journey early in his career. However, it took some time for him to find more sophisticated and convincing ways of bringing readers into the poem. By the late 50s he had succeeded:

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 . . .
 ("The Day Lady Died," 1959, *CP* 325)

Now when I walk around at lunchtime
 I have only two charms in my pocket
 an old Roman coin Mike Kanemitsu gave me
 and a bolt-head that broke off a packing case
 when I was in Madrid the others never
 brought me too much luck though they did
 help keep me in New York against coercion
 but now I'm happy for a time and interested

I walk through the luminous humidity . . .
 ("Personal Poem," 1959, *CP* 335)

Like "Why I am Not a Painter," both of these poems create effects of spontaneity, immediacy, and inclusion which together contribute to the illusion of the poem as event rather than object. O'Hara was among the first, and the most successful, poets at creating the illusion of acquaintance. His poems, with their personal or Personist "talk," their striking and original use of proper names of people and places, and their inviting tone, tempt readers into the process. They bid us into O'Hara's fast-paced, cosmopolitan, unburdened environment and, not surprisingly, this is a place many readers enjoy being.

Rather than the confining atmosphere of Lowell's sweaty study, readers find themselves at the center of an exhilarating artistic community, in the heart of New York during one of its greatest moments of the century. This is an atmosphere where readers seem to participate in Frank's life: where they can stay up all hours and drink too much; attend parties, performances, and art openings; rub shoulders with the de Koonings, gossip with Grace Hartigan, and summer with the Porters.²⁴ In "Join the Club," a review of O'Hara's *Selected Poems* for the *Village Voice* Peter Schjeldahl foregrounds this quality of inclusiveness:

At Frank O'Hara's funeral in 1966 . . . his friend Larry Rivers said, "There are two-hundred people in New York who thought of Frank as their best friend." Vicariously, that original group keeps expanding, as readers discover a poetry more deliriously intimate than anything in English since Whitman. . . . [O'Hara] had the gift of making life seem like a secret club for those committed to loving it sufficiently, meaning to absolute distraction. (71)

The delightful "intimacies" which devoted club members found in O'Hara struck other, less ardent, readers as a "wearisome cataloging of personalia" (Roseliep 14) or the "sterile chatter and maudlin benedictions" (Leibowitz 26) of a "whimsically charming gadfly . . . [and] indefatigable partygoer" (Bell 38)--as three different negative reviews put it. Both Schjeldahl and the disapproving reviewers agree on one thing: that gossip is a crucial part of O'Hara's aesthetic. Early critics who dismissed O'Hara's talent as "throwaway charm" (Liebowitz 25) and disparaged his work as "vagrant letters and lunch-napkin scribbles" (Bell 38), often did so based on the assumption that gossip must necessarily be trivial and unimportant.²⁵ Since that time, sociologists, psychologists, and literary critics have begun to take gossip much more seriously, and their work can help us to see gossip as a meaningful part of O'Hara's aesthetic, and an important device for achieving the effects of intimacy for which O'Hara's poetry has been so justly commended. In what follows, I will consider gossip in terms of content and style: that is, both as a kind of information and as a model of a type of verbal relationship.

* * *

“Gossip,” as Patricia Meyer Spacks notes in her book of that title, “means many things to many people and even, at different times and in different contexts, to a single person. Always it involves talk about one or more absent figures; always such talk occurs in a relatively small group” (4). Gossip is both a kind of content (information about private lives) and a style of talk which implies secrecy, trust, and shared intimacy among its participants. In the past gossip has been trivialized as mere “idle chatter” or more harshly condemned, frequently on moral grounds. In *Gossip: The Inside Scoop*, sociologists Levin and Arluke quote a religious pamphlet which warns parishioners against gossip “because the tongue is like a tiny spark that sets a huge forest ablaze” (4).²⁶ To deal with these differences in interpretation, Spacks creates a continuum of types of gossip. At one end is hurtful gossip, the circulation of scandal designed to damage reputations. At the other end of the continuum is the kind of gossip we are interested in. This is what Spacks calls “serious gossip” which exists, she observes, “only as a function of intimacy.” She continues:

It takes place in private, at leisure, in a context of trust, usually among no more than two or three people. Its participants use talk about others to reflect about themselves, to express wonder and uncertainty and locate certainties, to enlarge their knowledge of one another. . . . It provides a resource for the subordinated (anyone can *talk*; with a trusted listener, anyone can say anything), a crucial means of self-expression, a crucial form of solidarity. . . . The relationship such gossip expresses and sustains matters more than the information it promulgates; and in the sustaining of that relationship, interpretation counts more than the facts or pseudo-facts on which it works. (5-6)

While Spacks notes that “gossip is not literature,” her interest, and ours here, is in the ways literature can create forms of verbal relationship approximating that of gossip. O’Hara uses gossip in several ways to structure a particular kind of relationship between speaker and reader. It is one of his key strategies for establishing a feeling of intimacy which leads to the reader’s sense of participation in the poem. Reading O’Hara’s poems about the lives of the artistic and famous in New York (characters who exist off-stage, whose privacies we temporarily breach through O’Hara’s invitation) approximates the

titillating experience of participating in gossip. Spacks comments on this intrigue when she notes that

Gossip, even when it avoids the sexual, bears about it a faint flavor of the erotic. . . . The atmosphere of erotic titillation suggests gossip's implicit voyeurism. Surely everyone feels--although some suppress--the same prurient interest in others' privacies . . . A relatively innocent form of the erotics of power . . . this excitement includes the heady experience of imaginative control: gossip claims other people's experience by interpreting it into story. (11)

One of the ways O'Hara uses gossip is through his constant name-dropping which over many poems builds up, as Marjorie Perloff notes, "an elaborate network of cross-references to close personal friends, artists, film stars, city streets, bars, exotic places, titles of books, movies, operas, and ballets" (*O'Hara* 128). The people, places and things named by O'Hara form a kind of community, a highly specified world within a world. This engaging, cosmopolitan society is unmistakably stamped with the O'Hara emblem, but it is also a community open to the speculation and participation of readers invited in by O'Hara's personal, colluding voice. O'Hara's talk suggests intimacy and special knowledge; it posits the reader as insider and as such forms the basis of an invitation to imagine ourselves there:

Tonight you probably walked over here from Bethune Street
down Greenwich Avenue with its sneaky little bars and the Women's Detention
House,
across 8th Street, by acres of books and pillows and shoes and illuminating
lampshades,
past Cooper Union where we heard the piece by Mortie Feldman with "The Stars
and Stripes Forever" in it
and the Sagamore's terrific "coffee and, Andy," meaning "with a cheese Danish"--
did you spit on your index fingers and rub the CEDAR'S neon circle for luck?
did you give a kind thought, hurrying, to Alger Hiss?
(*"Poem Read at Joan Mitchell's, CP 265*)

Although the poem addresses the artist Joan Mitchell, it is also a come on to readers, by naturally assuming our familiarity with the places and people it names. By rhetorically inviting us to participate in gossip and intimacies, O'Hara solicits our participation in the poem:

and Allen is back talking about god a lot
and Peter is back not talking very much
and Joe has a cold and is not coming to Kenneth's

although he is coming to lunch with Norman
 I suspect he is making a distinction
 well, who isn't

("Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul," CP 328)

so they repair the street in the middle of the night
 and Allen and Peter can once again walk forth to visit friends
 in the illuminated moonlight over the mists and the towers
 having mistakenly thought that Bebe Daniels was in *I Cover the Waterfront*
 instead of Claudette Colbert it has begun to rain softly and I walk
 slowly thinking of becoming a stalk of asparagus for Hallowe'en
 which idea Vincent poopos as not being really 40s
 as the weight

of the rain drifting amiably is like a sentimental breeze
 and seems to have been invented by a collapsed Kim Novak balloon

yet Janice is helping Kenneth appeal to the Ford Foundation in
 her manner oft described as The Sweet Succinct and Ned is glad
 not to be up too late

for the sake of his music and his ear
 where discipline finds itself singing and even screaming away

I shall not dine another night like this with Robin and Don and Joe
 ("Poem," CP 346)

While I believe references like these are ultimately ways of including the reader in the poem (through their *style* as much as their content), the critical consensus so far seems to suggest the opposite. Charles Altieri has argued that O'Hara's use of proper names reinforces the distance and otherness of these people and places:

His texture of proper names gives each person and detail an identity, but in no way do the names help the reader to understand anything about what has been named. To know a lunch counter is called Juliet's Corner or a person O'Hara expects to meet is named Norman is rather a reminder for the reader that the specific details of another's life can appear only as momentary fragments, insisting through their particularity on his alienation from any inner reality they might possess. (*Enlarging* 112)

Perloff agrees with Altieri, adding that these references may at first seem like "a tiresome in-joke," but that in fact they support O'Hara's poetic world of "immanence rather than transcendence; persons and places, books and films are named because they are central to O'Hara's particular consciousness, but they have no 'inner reality'" (*O'Hara* 130-31).

I see two problems with these interpretations. To begin with, while O'Hara's proper names may not have "depth" in the context of a single poem, they develop a depth

and resonance over the course of his oeuvre. While “Norman” may be an empty signifier if we read only “Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul,” once we delve further into O’Hara’s work we know that this is abstract painter Norman Bluhm with whom O’Hara collaborated on a series of twenty-six “poem-paintings,” who appears in number of poems, and to whom O’Hara dedicated “Three Airs.”²⁷ Thus the more we read, the better acquainted we become with these people--and since many of them have become quite famous, readers’ interest is that much more piqued. Reading O’Hara becomes a way of participating in a continuing conversation, and of enjoying a lively, often glamorous, community. Altieri’s alienation belongs to the outsider, the reader who is uninterested in or unwilling to “join the club.”

A more significant problem with readings that see O’Hara’s name-dropping as creating distance or flatness, rather than closeness or depth, is that they ignore the dynamics of gossip by privileging content over form. What is finally important in these poems is not that we know a lot of details about Norman (or painters Jean Paul [Riopelle] and Joan [Mitchell]) but that we are invited by O’Hara’s sociable persona into a conversation that approximates the closeness and trust of gossip. Form, in other words, takes precedence over content. As Spacks notes “the relationship such gossip expresses and sustains matters more than the information it promulgates. . . . What is seldom articulated, but always present in gossip is the bonding that it generates and intensifies” (5-6, 22). Furthermore, while O’Hara’s poems are peripherally about Norman, Allen, Kenneth or Mike, they are centrally about “Frank.” In talking about others, gossips are really reflecting upon and revealing themselves:

and now there is a Glazunov symphony on the radio and I think of our
 friends who are not here, of John and the nuptial quality
 of his verses (he is always marrying the whole world) and
 Janice and Kenneth, smiling and laughing, respectively (they
 are probably laughing at the Leaning Tower right now)
 but we are all here and have their proxy

.....
 you will live half the year in a house by the sea and half the year in a house in our
 arms

we peer into the future and see you happy and hope it is a sign that we will be
 happy too, something to cling to, happiness
 the least and best of human attainments
 (“Poem Read at Joan Mitchell’s,” *CP* 266-7)

Such wistful and slightly melancholic meditations on hope and happiness are really less for or about the newlyweds whom the poem commemorates than they are about O’Hara himself. Gossip, Spacks notes, is an opportunity for “emotional speculation” (3). This is especially relevant when we must remember, as Ashbery notes in “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” that the Latin *speculum* means mirror.

David Lehman has noted that the technique of name-dropping which O’Hara initiated “became a New York School trademark” (*Last* 73). Its popularity and prevalence in the work of second generation poets like Ted Berrigan, Ron Padgett, and Anne Waldman derives in part from the realization of its effectiveness in creating intimacy and involving the reader in the process of the poem. Though no one, it is widely agreed, has succeeded like O’Hara, everyone wanted to be, as Berrigan punningly put it, “perfectly frank” (qtd. in Lehman, *Last* 73).²⁸ Being frank means being direct, involved, apparently honest, and at the heart of things. Frank, as he is constructed in O’Hara’s poems, is a “real poet” (in the words of “Why I am not a Painter”) who speaks constantly and charmingly, sometimes lyrically, sometimes “even” in the colloquial, gossipy language of “prose.”

Returning to “Why I am not a Painter,” we have come to see that O’Hara continually answers the rhetorical question of the title not with explanation but with demonstration. If you want to know why I’m a poet, he implies, you need to see, or better yet you need to enter into, the process by which I make my days into art:

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

Putting words down on paper is like taking steps on a lunch time stroll: you keep moving through the process believing something will come out, trusting in an end without a destination. For in the process poem you never know exactly where you're headed. The impetus "orange" may lead in any number of directions, and since the poem is not predicated on an idea, but on a process, the final product may have no oranges in it at all. In "Why I am not a Painter," O'Hara's looping, repetitive lines build up a sense of progression and of continuousness, rather than a sense of destination. The movement is akin to the surging arabesques of Jackson Pollock's action paintings, paintings which Pollock himself described in notes of 1951 as "energy and motion made visible" (Mackie 138). O'Hara draws this connection between his own and Pollock's *lines* in "Ode on Causality" (originally titled "Ode at the Grave of Jackson Pollock") where the poet prays for some of the painter's spontaneous power:

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

not to fall at all, but disappear or burn! (CP 302).

O'Hara worked in an aesthetic that imagined the form of a poem to be, like the form of a Pollock painting, its energy, motion, and forward push. He also believed in poems that shared in the same kind of risk and daring Ashbery earlier attributed to Pollock's work. O'Hara's poetry risks that the process of its becoming will indeed be significant, be interesting, be *art*. As he noted earlier, his inspiration from action painting is not in a particular technique but in an artistic vision of will, nerve, and process: "in the ambition to be that, to be the work yourself, and therefore accomplish it" (SS 17).

Process and Improvisation: Kenneth Koch's "The Artist"

More than almost any other contemporary American poet, Kenneth Koch has made improvisation the heart of his aesthetic. A restless experimenter in forms both traditional

and innovative, singular and collaborative²⁹, Koch is also a long time teacher of creative writing whose pedagogy focuses not on the analysis of texts but on the dynamics of process. David Lehman was among Koch's many students at Columbia:

I took Koch's writing course in my sophomore year. It was the only writing course I ever took, and it changed my life. Unlike standard-issue creative writing workshops, class time was not devoted to the analysis of students' work; rather Koch gave specific and highly detailed assignments The assignments he gave us were inventive and sometimes bizarre. Rewrite the first scene in *Hamlet* without re-reading it first. Purchase a comic book, do not read it, tape white paper over all the dialogue balloons, then fill in your own dialogue. Write a story about a sports event in which the contestants are the members of your own family disguised.
(233-4)

By emphasizing procedure rather than product, Koch offered students a new way of thinking about poetry--a way complementary to the process-oriented ideas of the New York School. This way suggests that it is the development and movement of a poem, the discoveries along the way, and not the poem's destination or "meaning," which are important.³⁰

In his own writing, Koch has always foregrounded process by, on one hand, choosing so many unique procedures for making poems and, on the other hand, by leaving evidence of those procedures in the poem. In fact, Koch often turns this evidence into the "subject" of the poem, as if he were recording the creative experience directly on the page. His early poems are provocative, surrealist-inspired variations on images and themes, which use a kind of controlled automatism similar to that employed by the Abstract Expressionists.³¹ These poems foreground their own unfolding, so that the shifting, circling, and stumbling of Koch's lines--its writerly "gestures"--becomes the poem's true subject. "Aus einer Kindheit" (From a Childhood), which takes its title from Rilke, is an example of an outlandish Koch improvisation combining memory and invention:

Is the basketball coach a homosexual lemon manufacturer? It is suspect by O'Ryan
in his submarine.
When I was a child we always cried to be driven for a ride in that submarine.
Daddy would say Yes!
Mommy would say No! The maid read *Anna Karenina* and told us secrets. Some
suspected her of a liaison with O'Ryan. Nothing but squirrels
Seemed to be her interest, at the windows, except on holidays, like Easter and
Thanksgiving, when

She would leave the basement and rave among the leaves, shouting, I am the Spirit
of Softball! Come to me!
Daddy would always leave town. And a chorus of spiders
Would hang from my bedroom wall. Mommy had a hat made out of pasty hooks.
She gave a party to limburger cheese.
We all were afraid that O’Ryan would come!
He came, he came! as the fall wind comes, waving and razing and swirling the
leaves
With his bags, his moustache, his cigar, his golfball, his pencils, his April
compasses, and over his whole
Body we children saw signs of life beneath the water! . . . (*Rainway* 39)

Like many of Koch’s early poems, “Aus einer Kindheit” plays with the border between the surreal and the plain silly. On the side of the ridiculous, we have the “party to limburger cheese” and the maidenly “Spirit of Softball.” But this nonsense is balanced by odd recurring images and tones of sexuality and submersion. These lines of association, triggered by one another in a kind of subconscious paratactical fashion, create a canvas that is both absurd and startling, comical and slightly uncanny (“When I was a child we always cried to be driven for a ride in that submarine./ Daddy would say Yes!/ Mommy would say No! The maid read *Anna Karenina* and told us secrets. . . . we children saw signs of life beneath the water!”). With reference to Rilke in mind, readers may begin to wonder just what kind of childhood this was.

An important category of Koch’s improvisations are what I have called his “conceptual” poems. Like O’Hara’s “Oranges” or Goldberg’s *Sardines*, Koch’s conceptual poems start with a simple word or image and extemporize on a theme, as in this example from “Locks”:

These locks on doors have brought me happiness:
.....
The lock on the filling station one night when I was drunk
And had the idea of enjoying a nip of petroleum;
The lock on a family of seals, which, when released, would have bitten
.....
The lock on the foghorn the night of the lipstick parade--
If the foghorn had sounded, everyone would have run inside before the most
beautiful contestant appeared;
The lock in my hat when I saw her and which kept me from tipping it,
Which she would not have liked, because she believed that naturalness was the
most friendly
.....
The lock on the hayfield, which kept me from getting out of bed

To meet the hayfield committee there; the lock on the barn, that kept the piled-up
 hay away from me;
 The lock on the mailboat that kept it from becoming a raincoat
 On the night of the thunderstorm; the lock on the sailboat
 That keeps it from taking me away from you when I am asleep with you,
 And, when I am not, the lock on my sleep, that keeps me from waking and finding
 you are not there. (*Thank You 66*)

Images of sleep and dreams, drunkenness and fog, locked portals and “seals” of two kinds, reveal this poem as another emissary of the surreal. It is a work which adopts both the content and the narrative logic of dreams, progressing by free associations of image and sound (the “mailboat” becomes a “raincoat” and then a “sailboat” which floats us back to a land of dreams). However, as noted above, while Koch relies on many of the gestures of Surrealism, his lighthearted absurdity subverts some of the historical avant-garde’s more serious intentions of reforming the mind and the world through the subconscious. For Koch, poetry’s job is not to revolt or reform, but simply to enjoy itself, to play.

One of Koch’s most successful conceptual works is “The Artist,” a poem which, appropriately enough, takes as its subject a conceptual artist. Like “Why I am Not a Painter,” “The Artist” takes the problems and processes of contemporary art as its subject. Koch presents the poem as an extended diary of an unnamed artist (“extended” because, in cubist fashion, it includes bits and pieces of other texts: newspaper articles, headlines, announcements, etc.) whose productions are less objects than events, happenings, or ideas. The artist’s creations are examples of installation or environmental art, neo-avant-gardist productions which expand the borders of art by escaping the limitations of the single object. By making art into an encompassing environment or Happening, the conceptual artist calls into question presumptions about art as a series of unique, stable, aesthetically pleasing “works,” and presumptions about artists as gifted, individual creators. The “works” of Koch’s artist are not so much unique artifacts as performances of certain ideas: ideas which develop in their execution, and which rely on the participation of the audience for their completion:

I often think *Play* was my best work.
 It is an open field with a few boards in it.

Children are allowed to come and play in *Play*
 By permission of the Cleveland Museum
 I look up at the white clouds, I wonder what I shall do, and smile.

Perhaps somebody will grow up having been influenced by *Play*,
 I think--but what good will that do? (*Rainway* 62)

The *Magician of Cincinnati* is now ready for human use. They are twenty-five tremendous stone staircases, each over six hundred feet high, which will be placed in the Ohio River between Cincinnati and Louisville, Kentucky. All the boats coming down the Ohio River will presumably be smashed up against the immense statues, which are the most recent work of the creator of *Flowers*, *Bee*, *Play*, *Again* and *Human Use*. Five thousand citizens are thronged on the banks of the Ohio waiting to see the installation of the work, and the crowd is expected to be more than fifteen times its present number before morning. (66)

Because they are lacking in unique aesthetic qualities, entities like *Play*, *Magician of Cincinnati*, or *Bee* (which, the artist notes, is “a sixty-yards-long covering for the elevator shaft opening in the foundry sub-basement / Near my home” [63]) emphasize art as idea as opposed to art as commodity. *Play* is not so much an object as an event which occurs when audiences respond to, or play with, the artist’s provocation. Conceptual art itself is often a set of instructions or an idea which could be put into motion by anyone. As such, it emphasizes process over product, thought over material.³²

On one level, “The Artist” presents (I think half ironically and half seriously--as is usually the case with Koch) a diary of process art in action. As well, Koch uses his fictional artist’s work to reflect on the conceptual basis of his own art. The status of “The Artist” as a poem in many ways matches the reflections of its content. Rather than as the unique, highly crafted work of a single mind (the New Critical ideal of the poem), “The Artist” presents itself as a pastiche made up of fragments of diary entries, newspaper headlines, overheard conversations, and scattered ephemera. Though the poem progresses in rough chronological order, there is no single center of consciousness to hold it together. Rather, it is bound by the accumulation of bits of texts and textual events. Sections look like this:

GREATEST ARTISTIC EVENT HINTED BY GOVERNOR
 Reading, June 4. Greatest artistic event was hinted today by governor.

Animals converge on meadow where artist working.

CONVERGE ON MEADOW WHERE WORKING

ARTIST HINTED, SAME MAN

. . . *the Magician of Cincinnati*

THREE YEARS

October 14th. I want these hills to be striated! How naive the *Magician of Cincinnati* was! Though it makes me happy to think of it. . . . Here, I am plunged into such real earth! Striate, hills! What is this deer's head of green stone? I can't fabricate anything less than what I think should girdle the earth. . . .

PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Artist who created the *Magician of Cincinnati*; Now at work in Pennsylvania; The Project--*Dresser*--So Far.

* * *

Ah! . . .

* * *

PHOTOGRAPH

SKETCH

DEDICATION CEREMONY

GOES SWIMMING IN OWN STREAM

SHAKING HANDS WITH GOVERNOR

COLOR PICTURE

THE HEAD OF THE ARTIST

STACK OF ACTUAL BILLS NEEDED TO PAY FOR PROJECT

Story of *Dresser*

PENNSYLVANIA'S PRIDE: *DRESSER* (67-8)

This lack of center raises questions about the unity of poetic texts, just as *Play* or *Magician of Cincinnati* test the unity of artworks by making their boundaries or borders hard to

determine. In other words, like the conceptual art it presents, “The Artist” interrogates traditional notions about the status of the artist, the audience, and the work. And all of these interrogations are at the service of dissolving the idea of art as product and putting in its place the concept of art as process.

“The Artist” is a meditation on not only how artists make art, but also the processes by which society makes artists: the **STACK OF ACTUAL BILLS NEEDED TO PAY FOR PROJECT**. In a serious and silly way, “The Artist” interrogates our ideas and preconceptions about what makes someone an artist. ‘Is an artist one who produces great or important works?’ Koch asks as he presents for speculation a few boards called *Play*, a covered hole called *Bee*, or a “tremendous” six-story piece of charcoal, called *Campaign*. Do we know an artist by his or her seriousness of intent, by the familiar articulation of angst? Here is Koch’s parodic answer:

November 19th. Disaster! *Bee* was almost completed, and now the immense central piece of sailcloth has torn. Impossible to repair it!

December 4th. I’ve gone back to work on *Bee*! I suddenly thought (after weeks of despair!), “I can place the balloons over the tear in the canvas!” So that is what I am doing. All promises to be well! (64)

It is important to understand that Koch is not mocking the artist here, so much as satirizing the social preconceptions about what makes an artist (in this case, the idea that an artist is always in search of complex solutions to difficult problems). To a poet who has always been as interested in making comic books as epic poems, who has written avant-garde plays as short as three lines long, and plotted the *Ice-Cream Map of Italy* with Red Grooms, productions like *Play* and *Bee* are not meant to be purely fatuous. Rather, they are meant to expand the boundaries of what art and artistry might be.

As Koch satirizes traditional images of the artist, he also highlights the responsibility of the audience and of institutions (both actual and rhetorical) in the creation and regulation of art. An example of such control is seen in the Cleveland Museum’s “regulation” of *Play*. By permitting only certain kinds of access to *Play*, it is the Museum which makes the piece an “artwork” instead of a (rather pathetic) playground. Thus we see

that an audience's preconceptions, conditioned by various institutions, are essential for the management of art. Once the Museum ceases to single out and rope off *Play*, it ceases to have the same status:

Well, here I am! Pardon me, can you tell me how to get to the Cleveland
Museum's monumental area, *Play*?
"Mister, that was torn down a long time ago. You ought to go and see the new
thing they have now--*Gun*."
What? *Play* torn down?
.....
Now I am on the outskirts of town
And . . . here it is! But it has changed! There are some blue merds lying in the field
And it's not marked *Play* anymore--and here's a calf!
I'm so happy, I can't tell why!
Was this how I originally imagined *Play*, but lacked the courage?

It would be hard now, though, to sell it to another museum. (63)

Play can't be sold again because it has been "deregulated," ironically returned to a non-artistic status--though the artist (and this is perhaps the essence of being an artist) already sees new possibilities for it.

Just as it questions the roles of artist and audience, the poem also interrogates the notion of the artistic work. One of the ways it does this is through its language. Since "The Artist" is almost completely prosaic, choosing for the most part the language of journalism over conventional lyrical language, it requires us to consider the linguistic criteria by which we judge a text to be "poetical." Why do we extend such value to the *texture* of poems at the expense of other qualities--such as humour, for instance? Conceptual art, it has been noted, is often visually uninteresting because its goal is to draw attention away from the texture of objects and towards the play of ideas ("Conceptual" 123). Duchamp's ready-mades, which are among the first conceptual pieces, are good examples of this dynamic. Duchamp's method was to attach an artistic "signature" to an ordinary, unaesthetic, mass-produced object (such as a urinal, a snow shovel, or a bottle drier) and thus transform it into an art object. For Duchamp, the object itself was not significant (he stated that his choices were based on "visual indifference with, at the same time, a total absence of good or bad taste" [qtd. in Craven 685]); what was important were

the questions the procedure raised about the very idea of the unique, individual work and the idea of the “artist” as gifted craftsman.³³ In a similar fashion, Koch creates a text that is “poetically” uninteresting in terms of sound, diction and imagery in order to highlight its notional qualities.³⁴ While the language of “The Artist” may appear uninteresting or unsatisfying, the recognition of this dissatisfaction is what really counts in the poem’s meaning.

In “The Artist” and later poems, Koch turns his back on early work that was intensely focused on texture, frequently at the expense of meaning. Such a shift may remind us of Duchamp’s rejection of easel painting and what he called “visual thrill” after his early success at the Armory Show. Like Duchamp, in this poem Koch creates meaning through the creation of questions. He raises questions about “works”: What is the ontological status of art objects? Is *Play* an idea, or a place, or a thing? What about this text, “The Artist”? He also raises questions about audiences and artists: In what ways do social structures regulate who becomes an artist and what becomes art? What is the conceptual content behind these structures? How do we draw the line between spectator and artist? On this last question, Koch submits the following parodic diary entry:

December 6th. The foreman of the foundry wants to look at my work. It seems that he too is an “artist”--does sketches and watercolors and such . . . What will he think of *Bee*? (64)

Koch’s entire poem puts the word “artist” into quotation marks as it meditates on the meaning of such a designation. The conclusion it seems to arrive at is very close to O’Hara’s: that the artist is the person who throws him or herself into the process of art, which is a daily process and a daily practice. Art does not have to be monumental, mythological, tortured, prophetic, hard-won, or any of our other standard clichés. Art consists simply in moving ahead with the process, in offering further propositions about the nature and content of art:

Summer Night, shall I never succeed in finishing you? Oh you are the absolute end of all my creation! The ethereal beauty of that practically infinite number of white stone slabs stretching into the blue secrecy of ink! O stabs in my heart!

. . . . Why not a work *Stabs in My Heart?* But *Summer Night*?

January. . . . A troubled sleep. Can I make two things at once. What way is there to be sure that the impulse to work on *Stabs in My Heart* is serious? It seems occasioned only by my problem about finishing *Summer Night* . . . ?

* * *

May 17th. I feel suddenly freed from life--not so much as if my work were going to change, but as though I had at last seen what I had so long been prevented (perhaps I prevented myself!) from seeing: that there is too much for me to do. Somehow this enables me to relax, to breathe easily. . . .
(65-6)

To realize there is too much to do is also to realize there is nothing one *has* to do. The artist is "suddenly freed" when he realizes he can do anything (since he can't do everything)--that whatever he puts his talent to will become his art. And so, as in Koch's own oeuvre, one artwork continues to follow the next, with no preplanned progression, but with a free and impulsive sense of development. This is a philosophy of process which sees artistic production not as the execution of a blueprint but as an act of pure invention which is simply a natural part of living the life of an artist. Frank O'Hara applies this philosophy to the work of his most respected predecessors:

Franz Kline, for instance, and Pollock when they died didn't leave anything undone except what they would have invented. They had become it. They did do it. Anymore than Whitman should have written another book, i.e. maybe he should have, it would have been marvelous if he had, but he didn't have to, though.
("Interview" SS 15)

These artists didn't leave anything undone because there was no prearranged plan: making art and living life were synonymous. And so Koch's artist--like Koch himself--continues to practice his work; *Summer Night* is far from "the absolute end":

June 3rd. It doesn't seem possible--the Pacific Ocean! I have ordered sixteen million tons of blue paint. Waiting anxiously for it to arrive. How would grass be as a substitute? cement? (69).

Ashbery and Process

Some things we do take up a lot more time
 And are considered a fruitful, natural thing to do.
 I am coming out of one way to behave
 Into a plowed cornfield. On my left, gulls,
 On an inland vacation. They seem to mind the way I write.

Or take another example: last month
 I vowed to write more. What is writing?
 Well, in my case, it's getting down on paper
 Not thoughts, exactly, but ideas, maybe:
 Ideas about thoughts. Thoughts is too grand a word.
 Ideas is better, though not precisely what I mean.
 Someday I'll explain. Not today though. ("Ode to Bill," *SPCM* 50)

Here, in his classically reticent style, a style which is always amicably giving and then pulling back, enticingly deferring meaning to "another day," Ashbery slyly describes and simultaneously enacts his writing process. His writing, as he tells us repeatedly in his poetry and in interviews, is about what happens in the mind--whether we call it thoughts or ideas or ideas about thoughts--what Ashbery is interested in is less the content than the texture of the mind's processes: its associations, digressions, intuitions and leaps. "I'm trying to set down a generalized transcript of what's really going on in our minds all day long," Ashbery has said (Poulin 245). Ideas, or a certain way of understanding them at least, are anathema to Ashbery's procedure--when they suggest logic, careful reasoning, an extended line of thought. Though we see multiple "extensions" in Ashbery's poetic wanderings they tend to follow tangential rather than analytical patterns. Ashbery's "ideas about thoughts" are most characteristically his own when they develop a *musical* (to use a favorite metaphor of Ashbery's) rather than a *logical* pattern: "I think my poems, like music, have their own debates, resolutions, and meanderings. You can feel their meanings, but you can never put them into words" (Lopes 28).³⁵

Ashbery tells us that he often writes while listening to music, and indeed his poems sometimes take their titles from musical pieces. "Grand Galop" (Liszt) is a typical musical landscape, a no-place strikingly in contrast to O'Hara's specific New York locales. While

O'Hara's "I do this, I do that" poems make the poet's physical roamings into their subject, Ashbery's "epistemological snapshots" ("Wet Casements" *SP* 225) do the same for the wanderings of the mind:

It is a night like many another
 With the sky now a bit impatient for today to be over
 Like a bored salesgirl shifting from foot to stockinged foot.
 These khaki undershorts hung out on lines,
 The wind billowing among them, are we never to make a statement?
 And certain buildings we always pass which are never mentioned--
 It's getting out of hand.
 As long as one has some sense that each thing knows its place
 All is well, but with the arrival and departure
 Of each new one overlapping so intensely in the semi-darkness
 It's a bit mad. Too bad, I mean, that getting to know each just for a fleeting second
 Must be replaced by imperfect knowledge of the featureless whole,
 Like some pocket history of the world, so general
 As to constitute a sob or wail unrelated
 To any attempt at definition. And the minor eras
 Take on an importance out of all proportion to the story
 For it can no longer unwind, but must be kept on hand
 Indefinitely, like a first-aid kit no one ever uses
 Or a word in the dictionary that no one will ever look up.
 The custard is setting; meanwhile
 I not only have my own history to worry about
 But am forced to fret over insufficient details related to large
 Unfinished concepts that can never bring themselves to the point
 Of being, with or without my help, if any were forthcoming. (*SPCM* 16)

What we are witnessing here is poetry as the improvised performance of a hyperactive mind. Where the action painter foregrounds physical "gestures" (the "mark," "stroke" or "drip"), Ashbery highlights mental gestures and movements. Description is linked to commentary in ways that make both self-reflexive ("... The wind billowing among them, are we never to make a statement?"). Landscapes become mindscapes which shift constantly from the specific to the general to the abstract ("khaki undershorts" to "certain buildings" to "a pocket history of the world"). Ancillary thoughts, like powerful minor themes in a musical piece, take over their precedents, "take on an importance out of all proportion to the story." Ideas are momentarily picked up, turned over, trailed off. These wanderings and digressions are not so much a feature of the poetry as its very substance. The exigencies of the writing process, writing as thinking, is what the poems are all about. Ashbery has said "I think that in the process of writing all kinds of unexpected things

happen that shift the poet away from his plan, and that these accidents are really what we mean when we talk about poetry" (qtd. in Lehman, *Last* 107).

Once we accept Ashbery's description of his own practice, articulated repeatedly in both poems and interviews, a great deal of the poet's infamous difficulty may vanish. This difficulty, as I've suggested previously, does not so much reside "in" his poetry as in the disjunction between Ashbery's method of writing and our (most familiar and widespread) methods of reading. Practical criticism or "close reading" treats the text as a verbal artifact which encodes meaning in particularly complex and compressed ways. The critic's job is to uncover the formal unity or balance of the work, through close attention to imagery, diction and sound. This method presumes a totalized meaning; it imagines the poem as a puzzle with a more or less obscurely hidden solution. It assumes, quite naturally, that a poem is about *something* and the critic's job is to show us what it's about.

When we impose this eminently logical and teachable method on Ashbery's poetry, difficulties arise. The first problem is that rather than being about *something*, Ashbery's poems are about some process. Rather than the representation of a preconceived notion, Ashbery's poetry is, as he puts it, "art which makes itself up as it goes along" (Poulin 251). While readers generally come to poetry expecting it to represent ideas, things or, most commonly with poetry of the 50s and 60s, experiences, Ashbery's poetry does something slightly different:

My poems aren't usually about my experience, because I don't find my experiences very interesting as a rule. . . it doesn't particularly matter about the experience; the movement of experiencing is what I'm trying to get down. . . . Most of my poems are about the experience of experience . . . the way a happening or experience filters through to me. (Poulin 245)

Like the action painting of Harold Rosenberg's theorization, an Ashbery poem is less an object than a linguistic event: it is "about" its own coming into being. And this fact calls for a shift in our critical methodology. Rather than looking for a "meaning" in the New Critical sense, readers of Ashbery's poetry need to look for a *way of proceeding*. If there is any reading key to a poem (and Ashbery constantly disavows the possibility) it is to find the

poem's way of proceeding and to follow it, in its spirit of play, as far as one can go. What this calls for is not a radical re-establishment of the principles of criticism, but a slight shift in vocabulary of the type Harold Rosenberg called for with action painting. Changing the references from painting to poetry, we find that Rosenberg's prescriptions make a lot of sense for Ashbery:

Criticism must begin by recognizing in the painting the assumptions inherent in its mode of creation. Since the painter has become an actor, the spectator has to think in the vocabulary of action: its inception, duration, direction--psychic state, concentration and relaxation of the will, passivity, alert waiting. (79)

Of course, Ashbery's "actions" or "gestures," unlike the painters, are not physical but mental. Following a poem's way of proceeding means concentrating on its leaps and digressions, its associations and musings, its contours and colourings. What we are looking for in an Ashbery poem is its ways of encoding perception, emotion, thought, memory, and daydream. These mobile processes combine to make not so much a literary artifact as a literary event--an event that takes place, as it were, not in the world but in an inclusive, depersonalized mind:

What I am trying to get at is a general, all-purpose experience--like those stretch socks that fit all sizes. Something which a reader could dip into and maybe get something out of without knowing anything about me, my history, or sex life, or whatever. The reputation that my poetry has as being something terribly private and difficult to get at is not at all which I hoped for. I'm hoping that maybe someday people will see it this way, as trying to become the openest possible form, something in which anybody can see reflected his own private experience without them having to be defined or set up for him. (Poulin 251)

This Steinian paradox of having everyone's or anyone's experience reflected in the work is resolved when we recall that the poems are not about specific experiences but about *the experience of experiencing*, which is one thing all human beings do share in common.

What I am trying to describe, and what Ashbery is always writing about, is so general, so simple and familiar, that it is almost impossible to hold onto (another very Steinian paradox). Like *the present*, which is Ashbery's major subject, it is constantly slipping away, and is gone the moment you try to arrest it:

Tomorrow is easy, but today is uncharted,
Desolate, reluctant as any landscape

To yield what are the laws of perspective

All we know

Is that we are a little early, that
 Today has that special lapidary
 Todayness that the sunlight reproduces
 Faithfully in casting twig-shadows on blithe
 Sidewalks. No previous day would have been like this.
 I used to think they were all alike,
 That the present always looked the same to everybody
 But this confusion drains away as one
 Is always cresting into one's present.

.....

Today has no margins, the event arrives
 Flush with its edges, is of the same substance,
 Indistinguishable. ("Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror" *SPCM* 72, 78, 79)

One of the reasons Ashbery needs to constantly repeat what his poetry does is because to say it is about "the present" or about "the movement of the mind" is to say almost nothing. Isn't all poetry about the movement of the poet's mind? we reasonably might ask. The question cannot be answered in generalities. Instead, we need to turn to a specific Ashbery poem (and many poems will suit the purpose) to see how the work elegantly performs what interpretation can only sloppily or heavy-handedly say. We will turn to a poem from *Rivers and Mountains* (1966), Ashbery's third volume, which combines the formal practices of *Some Trees* (1956) and the radical experiments of *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962) in the early establishment of his characteristic style which mimics the process of consciousness. The poems in this volume, most importantly the long poem "The Skaters," are both meditations on, and enactments of, the unique and paradigmatic consciousness of the writer in the process of creating.

"The Ecclesiast"

"Ponder the doings of God:
 who can straighten what he twists?" (*Ecclesiastes* 7:13)

Though few people would think of John Ashbery as a prophet--unless as a postmodern prophet of irony or the doom of referential meaning--"The Ecclesiast," as its presuming title suggests, does indeed bring News. What's new and tricky about this poem

(and in this reading I will take the poem as a paradigmatic example of Ashbery's brand of process art) is that Ashbery's News is less something to be known than it is a way of knowing. Like so many of Ashbery's poems, in fact probably all of them, "The Ecclesiast" is less interested in the objects of a world than in "the actions of a mind" (Ashbery qtd. in Vendler 185), whose gestures are world enough for the poet. Here is the poem in its entirety:

"Worse than the sunflower," she had said.
 But the new dimension of truth had only recently
 Burst in on us. Now it was to be condemned.
 And in vagrant shadow her mothball truth is eaten.
 In cool, like-it-or-not shadow the humdrum is consumed.
 Tired housewives begat it some decades ago,
 A small piece of the truth that if it was honey to the lips
 Was also millions of miles from filling the place reserved for it.
 You see how honey crumbles your universe
 Which seems like an institution--how many walls?

Then everything, in her belief, was to be submerged
 And soon. There was no life you could live out to its end
 And no attitude which, in the end, would save you.
 The monkish and the frivolous alike were to be trapped in death's capacious claw
 But listen while I tell you about the wallpaper--
 There was a key to everything in that oak forest
 But a sad one. Ever since childhood there
 Has been this special meaning to everything.
 You smile at your friend's joke, but only later, through tears.

For the shoe pinches, even though it fits perfectly.
 Apples were made to be gathered, also the whole host of the world's ailments and
 troubles.
 There is no time like the present for giving in to this temptation.
 Tomorrow you'll weep--what of it? There is time enough
 Once the harvest is in and the animals put away for the winter
 To stand at the uncomprehending window cultivating the desert
 With salt tears which will never do anyone any good.
 My dearest I am as a galleon on salt billows.
 Perfume my head with forgetting all about me.

For some day these projects will return.
 The funeral voyage over ice-strewn seas is ended.
 You wake up forgetting. Already
 Daylight shakes you in the yard.
 The hands remain empty. They are constructing an osier basket
 Just now, and across the sunlight darkness is taking root anew
 In intense activity. You shall never have seen it just this way
 And that is to be your one reward.

Fine vapors escape from whatever is doing the living.

The night is cold and delicate and full of angels
 Pounding down the living. The factories are all lit up,
 The chime goes unheard.
 We are together at last, though far apart. (*Mooring* 178-9)

“The Ecclesiast” is full of, in fact it is almost completely composed by, typical Ashberian indeterminacies: shifting voices and perspectives, incongruous diction, unclear pronoun reference, seemingly impossible contradictions and, in general, frustration of readers’ expectations of narrative, sequence, and sense. Given these problems, I have suggested that Ashbery criticism should begin not by trying to find a poem’s totalized meaning, but by examining its “way of proceeding.” A related way of approaching the poetry is to ask what a poem’s “occasion” for performance might be. In interviews, Ashbery often talks about these occasions. Some of them, as noted, are musical:

The reason that poem “Syringa” was written was because I played, by chance, Monteverdi’s “L’Orfeo” on my turntable. And as I was wondering what to write about, I thought that Orpheus is a very worn-out topic for poetry, but perhaps I could still do something with the idea. I was half thinking about Orpheus and half about writing poetry. That poem came about purely by coincidence: if I had not played that particular music, I would have written something else. (Lopes 29)

Though sometimes based on “ideas” (like the Orpheus myth) Ashbery’s poems seem more often based on the experience of an idea. “Syringa”’s occasion is not just the Orpheus myth, but the experience of thinking about the myth while listening to a piece of music and simultaneously thinking about writing. The poem emerges as an amalgam of all these movements.³⁶ Not surprisingly, the occasion for many of these poems about the movement of the mind is an event in motion. Asked by one interviewer about “Leaving the Atocha Station” Ashbery explained:

That poem was written after my first trip to Spain; the Atocha Station is a railway station in Madrid. . . . It was really nothing for me to be leaving this particular railway station. It meant nothing to me at the time except that I was in a strange city going somewhere. But it strikes me that the dislocated, incoherent fragments of images which make up the movement of the poem are probably like the experience you get from a train pulling out of a station of no particular significance. The dirt, the noises, the sliding away seem to be a movement in the poem. The poem was probably trying to express that, not for itself but as an epitome of something experienced . . . (Poulin 245)

In an interview with Sue Gangel, Ashbery talks about two other ideas in motion which occasioned *The Vermont Notebook* (which, he admits, was actually written in Massachusetts but, “the title sounded nice to me”) and “Popular Songs”:

I had to do a great deal of traveling by bus in New England, mostly in Massachusetts, and most of [*The Vermont Notebook*] was written on a bus, which I found to be an interesting experience. Writing on a moving vehicle. Not only did my mind move, the landscape was moving as well. A bus is not the most poetic place either, so this was an experiment in writing in an uninspiring environment. (15)

[“Popular Songs”] was written in an attempt to conjure up the kind of impression you would get from riding in the car, changing the radio stations and at the same time aware of the passing landscape. In other words, a kind of confused, but insistent, impression of the culture going on around us. (17-18)

Like each of these poems, “The Ecclesiast” also imitates and translates the motions of the mind into a poetic form. But here the form seems to be occasioned less by an experience than by a kind of rhetoric. The title of the poem gives us an important clue to its way of proceeding. The second century *Ecclesiasticus* was a Hebrew book of moral proverbs and maxims, verses in praise of wisdom. The English title, *Ecclesiastes*, as it appears in the Old Testament, follows the Greek name of the book and means “one who addresses an assembly” (Terrien 577). It has been noted that “because the book abounds in non sequiturs and contradictions, scholars of past generations suggested that it was an anthology of reflections upon existence written by different hands. A general uniformity of language, style, and even tone has led others to consider the book as the intellectual diary of a lay teacher . . .” (Terrien 577). Ashbery’s *Ecclesiast* is also “one who addresses an assembly” in “non sequiturs and contradictions” which on the surface don’t seem to add up, but which may finally gesture, as *Ecclesiastes* does, to a deeper faith. Ashbery’s humorous and enigmatic poem uses a similar strategy or way of proceeding to its Biblical counterpart. The poem is also a series of disjunctive maxims with an unmistakable ecclesiastical ring, though these proverbs are almost always of doubtful, puzzling, satirical, or impenetrable character.

And in vagrant shadow her mothball truth is eaten.

In cool, like-it-or-not shadow the humdrum is consumed.
Tired housewives begat it some decades ago,
A small piece of the truth . . .

The poem is full of claims that have a stylistic ring of certainty, an ecclesiastical assurance, though one feels continually uncertain about what they are certain of:

The hands remain empty. They are constructing an osier basket
Just now, and across the sunlight darkness is taking root anew
In intense activity. You shall never have seen it just this way
And that is to be your one reward.

What is this “mothball truth” or “humdrum” which apparently must be consumed to make way for another truth, both mysterious and mundane, “begat” (in religious parody?) by “tired housewives some decades ago”? The second passage presents another “scene” which gestures towards ecclesiastic significance (darkness “taking root anew” across the sunlight) but leaves these hints unfulfilled through Ashbery’s typical strategy of the ambiguous pronoun. What is the “it” that we “shall never have seen just this way”? And *what* is to be our reward? These are the kind of unanswerable questions that readers and critics of Ashbery always come back to (this is Perloff’s highly explicated “indeterminacy”).³⁷ And the reason we keep coming back to them is that the unanswerable question is a structural principle of Ashbery’s work. It is not an answer which is required, but a reading practice (a way of proceeding) that can accept, incorporate, and account for the unanswerable question.

With this goal in mind we can begin to move towards the “News” (the ironic “illumination”) that “The Ecclesiast” brings. Rather than presenting “the truth,” or even “a truth,” “The Ecclesiast” presents and performs “new dimension[s] of truth.” Instead of knowledge (in the familiar sense of the word as a noun--as currency or property--a “body,” to make it explicit, of information), “The Ecclesiast” presents new ways of knowing. Since Ashbery’s poems are always about the mind, it makes sense to say that ultimately “The Ecclesiast” is about epistemology; it presents and performs ways of knowing. And what it shows us is that the mind does not live by logic, by “grand” thoughts, alone--but

also by emotion, intuition, fantasy, and dream, among other mental gestures. “The Ecclesiast” shows us that questions can have *meaning* without having logical *answers*, and that sometimes the most interesting meanings skirt logic altogether. In the words of the poem, “The Ecclesiast” shows us that sometimes an idea, a feeling, a line, or an image, like a shoe, may “fit perfectly” even when there’s a nagging, slightly uncomfortable “pinch.” Let’s return to the beginning of the poem to see how it presents and performs some of these thoughts about thinking.

Like so many of Ashbery’s poems, “The Ecclesiast” seems to start not at the beginning but in the middle of some unspecified action--as if an endless poem were continually unreeling in Ashbery’s mind and “The Ecclesiast” represented a moment of attention to this always evolving poetic drama.³⁸ Here, we tune into a conversation which has seemingly begun before the poem:

“Worse than the sunflower,” she had said.
 But the new dimension of truth had only recently
 Burst in on us. Now it was to be condemned.

The opening line is both clear and opaque, specific and mysterious. It presents none of the typical “difficulties” readers might encounter in a high modernist poem: its diction is plain, its syntax unproblematic; its prose meaning is utterly clear. Where the difficulty lies is with context. And here we’re back to Perloff’s unanswerable questions: What is “worse than the sunflower”? Who is saying this? and why? Ashbery gives no clues and no hope of solving these problems since a “new dimension of truth” immediately intrudes on our reading, just as it has in the almost completely undelineated scene we are reading about. Attention thus shifts from the “sunflower” context to the “new dimension of truth” context and where we are likely to find “meaning” is not in either place (since this next will be immediately dis-placed by another “mothball truth”) but in the movement itself. Ashbery says as much in an interview with Peter Stitt: “I am more interested in the movement among ideas than in the ideas themselves, the way one goes from one point to another rather than the destination or the origin” (qtd. in Hettich 104). This method of rapid shifting, quick

and unaccountable changes, is the informing principle of “The Ecclesiast” and of the unstable epistemology it indirectly advances. Ashbery’s epistemology values all kinds of knowing without privileging any one type. And this, I would suggest, is different from an avant-gardist epistemology which privileges disruptive, revolutionary knowledge. Knowledge in avant-gardist terms is ultimately teleological--the best discourse (and the best art) points most forcefully into the future. For Ashbery and the neo-avant-garde, on the other hand, knowledge is not teleological, not future-oriented, but relative, non-hierarchical, disseminated. We cannot know with certainty in Ashbery’s world since new dimensions of truth are always bursting in on us, usually when we least expect them. This is why “There was no life you could live out to its end / And no attitude which, in the end, would save you.”

Since “no life,” “no attitude,” or as Ashbery puts it in another poem “No Way of Knowing” (*SPCM* 55-7) can be conclusive, “The Ecclesiast,” along with most of Ashbery’s poetry that follows it, rejects the idea of a unified, singular truth. And since “truth” in poetry is always encoded in, and is inseparable from, form or structure, Ashbery simultaneously rejects certain kinds of modernist and New Critical ideals of unitary form, just as his avant-garde precursors did. The modernist idea-form of collage, where fragments of “the truth” combine eventually into a single vision (as in the last section of *The Waste Land* or in the “magic moment” recounted in Pound’s “Canto 81”³⁹) is replaced by a postmodern pastiche where snippets of “truth” never essentially coalesce.⁴⁰

The difference between these two strategies, as Steve Connor has pointed out, is that with the modernist text an organized principle of fragmentation is applied. In the last section of *The Waste Land* where “lands” are set “in order,” where Eliot collects “These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” we sense the monumental power of this accumulation. Part of the poem’s power is the sense of *damyata* (control--to use Eliot’s selection from the *Upanishads*) which regulates the fragmentariness and allows for the strong possibility that these pieces do indeed add up to something greater than the sum of

parts. For without this *damyata* and cumulative power, a text like *The Waste Land*--or even more powerfully *The Cantos*--would be a meaningless rag bag.⁴¹ Ashbery's fragmentation, on the other hand, disclaims this cumulative power. It tells us outright that no life, no attitude, no system will save us. Ashbery's poem is a pastiche in the original Italian sense of the word *pasticcio*: "a pie containing numerous ingredients. . . A medley of various ingredients; a hotchpotch, farrago, jumble" (*OED*). In Steve Connor's words, Ashbery's is a "fragmentation deprived of the orderliness of fragmentation" (10-11). Ashbery relinquishes the cumulative power of the fragment (which works through history, storage, accumulation as of property--all key concepts for Pound) in favor of the power of improvisation, change, and the unexpected. He exchanges the capital of accumulated property, held with a combination of fear and threat which so strongly mark *The Cantos*, for the capital which is paradoxically accrued when one lets go of property or power.⁴²

Ashbery's version of truth or knowing is--in the postmodernist tradition--one which is multiple, open, unhierarchical. The "message" of "The Ecclesiast" is a performance of those different kinds of knowing--gestured at, described, but never inscribed in the indelible way of other "ecclesiastical" texts. The poem plays with these "gestures of truth" in ways that may be unsatisfactory to the reason, but uncannily satisfactory to the imagination. The best way to define these gestures which compose the paratactical content of "The Ecclesiast" may be to use Daniel Cottom's term for the characteristic unit of Ashbery's poetry: "the striking utterance":

As opposed to elements such as the word, line, sentence, strophe, or whatever it is we designate as a complete text, the striking utterance is distinguished by its cavalier attitude towards the niceties of form. . . . It simply does not make sense to wonder if a striking utterance is meaningful; it does not care about that. One certainly may mull over the passage in question . . . but in doing so one neglects the nature of its insistence, which is not concerned with soliciting justifications from any quarter. . . . Whether its content is grammatical and reasonable, or even decipherable and reproducible . . . the striking utterance mocks the reverence for reference evident in our institutions if not in our speech. (8-9)

It is through a series of equivocally meaningful, loosely connected striking utterances ("My dearest I am as a galleon on salt billows. / Perfume my head with forgetting all about me")

that Ashbery advances the poem and its multiple ways of knowing. The numerous “contexts” in the poem, which includes almost as many scenes or contexts as it does sentences, are matched by multiple ways of knowing and experiencing these contexts. For Ashbery, the truth arrives unannounced and unexpected, like each new utterance in the poem, “millions of miles from filling the place reserved for it.” It arrives in one guise, for example, not as the product of ancient wisdom, not in a sacred text, or under the mantle of God-the-Father, but “begat” rather mundanely by “tired housewives . . . some decades ago.” This is truth as gossip more than gospel, and Ashbery’s truths almost always share this whimsical, mild, unauthoritative quality. I want to continue by examining some of the poem’s other truths and ways of knowing.

In contrast to the idea of knowledge as capital, as a currency to increase our rhetorical or actual wealth (Ben Franklin was the great American apostle of knowledge as wealth, but Eliot’s stored fragments, and Pound’s luminous moments are no less literary real estate), Ashbery presents a kind of knowledge that is destructive rather than constructive, that attacks and “crumbles” the once secure epistemological categories it encounters. The “small piece of truth” that arrives in the first stanza, which is “honey to the lips,” ends up destabilizing rather than securing the categories or institutions of the personal “universe” it encounters:

You see how honey crumbles your universe
Which seems like an institution--how many walls?

Instead of fortifying, this knowledge erodes. Such destructive, or deconstructive knowledge also summarizes the strategy of movement in the poem. The sunflower is displaced by “vagrant shadow”; honey crumbles the walls of our universe; the wallpaper takes our attention away from the philosophy which introduces it until, one sentence later, we’re transported into an oak forest in a sad key. Each moment we “wake up forgetting” what came before. And this epistemology of the continual present, the text implies, is another valid way of knowing: just as valid as the logic of memory and accumulation.

Another type of knowing the poem presents is secret knowledge, a knowledge that is personal, probably irrational, and sharable only in name rather than substance:

Ever since childhood there
Has been this special meaning to everything.
You smile at your friend's joke, but only later, through tears.

Ashbery's poems are full of these secret or special meanings, weird images and metaphors that if they make sense do so in an uncanny way, a way readers may feel, but generally cannot adequately explain. There is no way of specifically knowing the nature of "the joke," or the circumstances surrounding the smile or tears. What we are left with is a resonance, a feeling of belated but powerful emotion. Not surprisingly, it is exactly this type of "strange" uncanny art which uses its "craftsmanship at the service of a sense of the mystery behind physical appearances," as Ashbery writes of Parmigianino (*RS 31*), which Ashbery the art critic most approves. Writing of a Courbet painting, Ashbery comments upon the way the image "intrigues and excites us because we cannot tell why it seems right" (*RS 36*). The images of "The Ecclesiast" tap into this type of subterranean, secret authority Ashbery admires in artists like Parmigianino, de Chirico, or Joseph Cornell.

Consider the poem's final stanza:

Fine vapors escape from whatever is doing the living.
The night is cold and delicate and full of angels
Pounding down the living. The factories are all lit up,
The chime goes unheard.
We are together at last, though far apart.

The way that these lines communicate is through a secret, peculiar knowledge. Either they are purely obscure (given the vagueness of "whatever is doing the living," the inconsistency of the angels "pounding down the living," and the lack of specificity regarding the factories or the chime) or their meaning is in excess of what the words dictate. Like a de Chirico painting which is neither realistic nor surrealistic, but contains elements of both, Ashbery's "scenes" like the one above flirt with the border between reality and dream. They create an ambiguous and amorphous environment which is open to multiple possibilities.⁴³ This kind of artwork which relies on resonance or excess

captures not what we know, but what we half-know, what lies in wait. What I see in Ashbery's final stanza is a sketch of an environment of receptivity, a no-place that exists as a projection of thought and expectation. The rising vapors are both an antithesis and a complement to the earlier "darkness taking root anew" and the subsequent "angels / Pounding down the living." This is a place of danger and possibility, of chimes ringing and unheard, of union and separation. Through the art of secret knowledge Ashbery creates this cold, ethereal, illuminated, and faintly, tantalizingly, dangerous place.

I could go on at greater length explicating the kinds of knowing encoded in this perpetually expanding poem. I might consider its fatalistic knowledge, which assures us that regardless of "life" or "attitude," "The monkish and the frivolous alike were to be trapped in death's capacious claw." This striking utterance maintains the ecclesiastical tone of the poem, while again subverting the Christian metaphysics of good deeds and adopting the Buddhist attitude that all striving is in vain since all is impermanent.⁴⁴ In a different vein, I might consider the dream knowledge which infuses the poem from the oak forest to the Poe-esque "funeral voyage over ice-strewn seas" to the poem's final chimes. But dream knowledge shouldn't necessarily be privileged since the poem also presents practical knowledge (of harvests and animals), as well as impulsive knowledge ("no time like the present . . ."), which is sometimes undercut by satiric knowledge (" . . . for giving in to this temptation"). While the poem presents the signs of emotional knowledge (with repeated mentions of weeping, for example), emotion is treated rather blithely ("Tomorrow you'll weep--what of it?" since "salt tears . . . will never do anyone any good"). What a number of phrases like the preceding ones also represent is knowledge in the form of cliché. Clichés, rather like familiar ecclesiastical adages, package knowledge in neat, repeatable forms, and in this way take on epistemological significance since they may direct our ways of understanding. Ashbery exposes this dynamic by slightly deforming either the clichés or their contexts. Thus "There is no time like the present" would normally be followed by a work ethic sentiment such as "for getting down to business." By replacing

the expected cliché (“... for getting down to business”) with an unfamiliar one (“... for giving into this temptation”) Ashbery calls attention to the way clichés stand in for, and thereby become, forms of knowledge.

Ultimately, “The Ecclesiast” privileges “no way of knowing.” Each moment and each way in the poem blends into the next, leaving us always in the present, a little breathless, but pleased to be looking around:

There is no way of knowing whether these are
 Our neighbors or friendly savages trapped in the distance
 By the red tape of a mirage. The fact that
 We drawl “hallo” to them just lazily enough this morning
 Doesn’t mean that a style was inaugurated. Anyway evening
 Kind of changes everything. Not the color,
 The quality of a handshake, the edge on someone’s breath,
 So much as a general anxiety to get everything all added up,
 Flowers arranged and out of sight. The vehicular madness
 Goes on, crashing, thrashing away, but
 For many this is near enough to the end: one may
 Draw up a chair close to the balcony railing.
 The sunset is just starting to light up. (“No Way of Knowing,” *SPCM* 56)

“Evening / Kind of changes everything” is a phrase that well sums up Ashbery’s epistemology. It seems to me to be both unemphatic and disproportionately powerful, uncannily ordinary. The phrase embodies the secretive and personal truth (each of us may privately *know* what this means), the deconstructive truth (with its emphasis on change), as well as perhaps invoking the dream truth of night. And while it may hold all this semantic content it is also, in the end, a cliché--but (and this is one of Ashbery’s remarkable achievements) a cliché of magnitude.

Ashbery’s poems are always gesturing toward the magnitude of daily, mundane experience (“that special lapidary / Todayness”) without ever circumscribing or containing it. They are pastiches of what Ashbery calls “the gigantic/ Bits and pieces of knowledge we have retained” and Ashbery assembles this knowledge not through the *damyata* of a unifying art but through the *a-da* (acceptance) of a process-based art that lets things happen as they will. While such a model may not give us the sense of unity and solidity that *The Waste Land* achieves, it gives us something perhaps more interesting: an art which strives

to keep pace with the multiplicity, complexity, and temporality of daily life. Ashbery's is an art which can accommodate the restlessness and diversity of life, while simultaneously transforming it into a shared, almost stable base ("like those stretch socks that fit all sizes"):

Why must you go? Why can't you
Spend the night, here in my bed, with my arms wrapped tightly around you?
Surely that would solve everything by supplying
A theory of knowledge on a scale with the gigantic
Bits and pieces of knowledge we have retained:
An LP record of all your favorite friendships,
Of letters from the front? Too
fantastic to make sense? But it made the chimes ring.
If you listen you can hear them ringing still:
A mood, a Stimmung, adding up to a sense of what they really were,
All along, through the chain of lengthening days.
("No Way of Knowing," *SPCM* 57)

* * *

While process art shares many techniques and characteristics with the art of the historical avant-garde (fragmentation and montage, discontinuity and indeterminacy, mundane rather than elevated materials, critical self-reflexivity, etc.), where it differs is in its purpose for using these techniques, and its attitude towards them. According to theorists like Bürger, the common link in these avant-gardist techniques is their resistance to the convention of the organic work. And this resistance has an explicitly political intention. Richard Murphy summarizes:

The various component parts of the organic work form a rounded and continuous whole, and in imitating the appearance of a natural phenomenon or "work of nature" the organic work covers up the traces of its own construction, producing artificially the appearance of the "givenness" of nature. The danger with this attempt to produce a harmonious appearance by covering over the traces of discontinuity is that it produces the "false reconciliations" that Benjamin also warns against: the creation of an imaginary sense of social unity. (13)

Summarizing Theodor Adorno, Bürger adds: "Every attempt to create organic, coherent works . . . is not merely a regression beyond an already attained level of artistic techniques, it is ideologically suspect. Instead of barring the contradictions of society in our time, the organic work promotes, by its very form, the illusion of a world that is whole, even though the explicit contents may show a wholly different intent" (86). Thus by abjuring the

conventions of artistic unity, the avant-garde is said to disrupt the “affirmative” effects of organic art. The New York School, on the other hand, has no such overtly political intentions. The process work is not an act of conscious opposition, but rather a moment of fortuitous creation. While individual avant-garde works may have indeterminate meanings, avant-garde work in general nonetheless seeks to impose a meaning: that there must be a revolution in perception and society, that art and life must be reconciled to facilitate this revolution, and that nonorganicism is the proper way of expressing alienation in bourgeois society and bringing about this transformation. New York School poetry, on the other hand, imposes no such meaning. It doesn’t claim to be the best way or the only way; it doesn’t believe in teleological narratives of change. In fact, it continually avoids ideological resolutions and preclusions (“There was no life you could live out to its end / And no attitude which, in the end, would save you”).

Of course to some this disavowal of ideological projects may sound suspiciously similar to the position of contemporary intellectuals like Daniel Bell, Arthur Schlesinger, and Lionel Trilling who claimed to be “anti-ideological” (Bell 16). The historically specific reasons for this swerve away from “ideology” (which, many critics have noted, is in fact a new liberal ideology by another name) are enumerated by Richard Pells:

Weary of Marxist slogans and radical activism of the 1930s, disappointed by the American labor movement’s abandonment of its Depression-style sense of mission, bored by the absence of dramatic social controversies in the 1950s, and increasingly mistrustful of all political movements that incited mass emotions (especially if they resulted in right-wing crusades like McCarthyism), intellectuals sounded ever more skeptical about grandiose projects to remodel economic institutions or human nature. (119)

Ultimately, however, I think that the poets’ concerns, particularly those of Ashbery and O’Hara, were very different from those of Bell and company. This is not only because of the poets’ sexual politics (to be discussed in the next chapter), but also because these two groups were asking very different kinds of questions. Bell, Schlesinger, and others were exploring ways to achieve stability, moderation, and “pragmatic compromise” (Bell 302), ways to avoid the radical extremism of the Old Left and achieve the “vital center” (as

Schlesinger put it) of American life (Pells 141). Other writers like Paul Goodman, David Riesman, and Dwight Macdonald had turned from political to cultural questions and were interested in exploring ways to lead a “good life” in spite of increasing bureaucratization, routinization, anonymity, and personal alienation in “mass society.”⁴⁵ The New York School poets, on the other hand, were asking questions of a far less pragmatic, more abstract, indeterminate, and frequently comic, satiric, or campy nature. Their indifference not only to “ideology,” but also to the “end of ideology,” signaled by their campy deconstruction of all forms of seriousness, puts them at some distance from the important intellectuals of their day. In approximately the same year (1960) as Bell’s *The End of Ideology*, Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd*, and Goodman’s *Growing Up Absurd*, John Ashbery was mischievously pondering these questions, which might be seen as a mockery of intellectual issues posed by these “slightly older” writers:

How much longer will I be able to inhabit the divine sepulcher
Of life, my great love? Do dolphins plunge bottomward
To find the light? Or is it rock
That is searched? Unrelentingly? Huh. And if some day

Men with orange shovels come and break open the rock
Which encases me, what about the light that come in then?
What about the smell of the light?
What about the moss?

.....
.... What a marvel is ancient man!
Under the tulip roots he has figured out a way to be a religious animal
And would be a mathematician. But where in unsuitable heaven
Can he get the heat that will make him grow?

For he needs something or will forever remain a dwarf,
Though a perfect one, and possessing a normal-sized brain

.....
Meanwhile what am I going to do?
I am growing up again, in school, the crisis will be very soon.
And you twist the darkness in your fingers, you
Who are slightly older . . .

Who are you, anyway?
And it is the color of sand,
The darkness, as sifts through your hand
Because what does anything mean . . . ?
(“How Much Longer...” *Mooring* 78, 79, 81)

The intellectuals of the 50s were interested in the “meaning” of cultural events and conditions like white collar work and leisure, the attractions and horrors of suburbia, child-rearing and education, and the powers of the expanding mass media. Ashbery, on the other hand, in an experimental volume like *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), which radically examines the limits of language and meaning, is interested in a different question: “What does *anything* mean?” or, as he puts it in the opening line of a later poem, “The One Thing That Can Save America,” a poem whose title again gestures towards significant meaning: “Is anything central?” (*SPCM* 44). Unlike Schlesinger, Ashbery is completely uncertain about a “vital center.”

Another important difference between the New York School poets and the 1950s intellectuals is their contrasting responses to the mass media. While critics like Clement Greenberg and Dwight Macdonald were warning against the dangers of popular culture and the degeneration of “high” art through the banalities of “kitsch,”⁶ Frank O’Hara was “meditating” on not how to *escape* but how to *use* the enticements of mass culture. His aesthetic, as he declared in “My Heart” (1955), aimed at having “the immediacy of a bad movie,/ not just a sleeper, but also the big,/ overproduced first-run kind” (*CP* 231). Here are the kinds of questions and problems O’Hara was posing the year before in “Meditations in an Emergency” (1954):

Am I to become profligate as if I were a blonde? Or religious as if I were French?
 Each time my heart is broken it makes me feel more adventurous . . .
 . . . I have never clogged myself with the praises of pastoral life, nor
 with nostalgia for an innocent past of perverted acts in pastures. No.
 How am I to become a legend, my dear? (*CP* 197)

O’Hara’s *distance* from some of the leading intellectuals of the day can be illustrated in one case by the fact that when the poet published his elegy “For James Dean” (a “legend” himself whom O’Hara sought to emulate in several ways) it was condemned by Paul Goodman who felt that a popular actor “wasn’t a suitable subject for poetry” (Gooch 268).

Finally, while critics were pondering the major cultural questions of the day, Kenneth Koch, in his constant undercutting of seriousness, was delving into these (previously quoted) impertinent problems:

Is the basketball coach a homosexual lemon manufacturer?

Will he dance the hornpipe? we wondered, Will he smoke a cigar underneath eleven inches of ocean? Will he beat the pavement Outside our door with his light feet, for being so firm? Is he a lemon Memnon?

Was our maid entertaining that limburger cheese, or my mother? has the passageway fallen asleep? and can one's actions for six years be called "improper"? ("Aus einer Kindheit" *Rainway* 39)

Koch and his New York School colleagues made a career of being "improper," both from the perspective of the liberal status quo and from the perspective of their more left leaning contemporaries. Of course just because no conscious program is articulated in their poetry doesn't exempt them from "politics" altogether. The difference, it seems to me, is that the poets' positions tend to be less dogmatic, more open-ended and open-minded than the critics of their day. The intellectual revolt against "ideology," as Pells notes, "was more than anything a revolt against Marxism" (181), and as the "neutrality" of the 1950s developed into the neo-conservatism of the 1970s and 80s this became more and more apparent. The New York School poets' indifference, on the other hand, had no such specific target beyond the mark of anyone or any movement that took themselves too seriously. However, that the poets, like the 50s intellectuals, failed to realize or articulate the linkage between cultural/artistic issues and pragmatic questions of economic and political import is a criticism that they cannot escape.

One final difference between 50s intellectual discourse and New York School poetry, which returns us to the topic of process art, is that while the 50s intellectuals disdained collective programs and communal work (which they associated with the outmoded radicalism of the 1930s)⁴⁷, the New York School poets made collaboration an important part of their aesthetic. Some of the best illustrations of unpremeditated "process" work are New York School collaborative projects, such as the twenty six "poem-paintings"

created spontaneously one rainy Sunday in October 1960 when Frank O'Hara dropped by Norman Bluhm's house for lunch. In a 1996 interview, Bluhm recalls the work's unplanned genesis:

I was talking about the Prokofiev [playing on the radio] . . . I don't remember what I said, but to illustrate my point I took a brush and went up to the paper and made a gesture. And just like that, Frank got up and wrote something . . . He was open and quick, and we're talking, and what we did was part of our conversation. . . . It was all instantaneous, like a conversation between friends. You know, going back and forth. Quick and playful. There were no big thoughts, no idea that anyone would be interested in it or that it would ever be shown or published. We were just having fun on what had started out as a dismal Sunday afternoon" (11-12).

The series of small, unplanned gestures that make up this work are not consciously aimed at reconfiguring attitudes towards art or life, but mark the vicissitudes of pleasure and attention in a particular moment. What Bluhm is describing is collaboration as conversation, art as gossip. The pieces emerged as gossip often does: as "idle talk" lacking in "big thoughts," talk for talk's sake. In fact, as Bill Berkson notes, the poem-paintings are full of intimacies and gossip: "Bluhm and O'Hara had been friends since 1955, and their friendship shows up in O'Hara's lines with mention of Chicago (where Bluhm grew up), the Cedar Tavern . . . Bluhm-isms . . . and the happy dishing of one or two mutual acquaintances" ("It's raining," np).

This idea of art not as revolutionary discourse but as gossip (perhaps even better is Allen Ginsberg's phrase for O'Hara's work: "deep gossip") is repeated in Larry Rivers's comments about his collaborative works with O'Hara and Koch. Rivers calls *Stones*, a series of 1957 lithographs created with O'Hara, "a peculiar extension of our social life" (92). Of his 1961 collaboration with Koch, *N.Y. 1950-60*, he writes: "It was like a colorfully decorated gossip column where the content is so obscure you are forced to look for something else to distract yourself. What it was for us was chunks of the canvas devoted to mutually experienced parties, neighborhoods, resorts, houses, studios, people, and restaurants" (98). The obscurity of such gossip is part of the point for Rivers, since it forces the viewer/reader to look beyond putative "meaning" and give attention to local

details without trying to explain or totalize. Rivers is quite direct in his disdain for “big thoughts” and ideological-aesthetic projects, and his comments bear directly on the (often subtle) differences between the historical and neo-avant-gardes:

I always thought that the reasons for doing something in art were a boring concern and of no use except perhaps as shit for your enemies to throw at you. It rarely determines quality. It could make you feel like a good person or part of a “right-thinking” group but the worst reasons for doing something could produce the best thing. . . . I think our point of view can be summed up as “Anything is possible if we turn to it” or “You name it we do it.” What else do we have? Any of us? Being thought “modern.” That begins to feel like a good boy. . . . How weak to create out of that simple and socially acceptable idea. (92, 96)

Although the New York School is constantly repudiating serious projects--whether those of high modernism (and its New Critical inheritors), those of the historical avant-garde, or those of their oppositional contemporaries--this is not to say that their poetry does not have its own unwritten project. That “project,” however, is extremely (and purposefully) hard to pin down, being tied up as it is with the position of indifference and with the subversive dynamics of comedy and camp. Perhaps the major way that this “project” is expressed is through the predominance of humour in New York School poetry, particularly the charged humour of camp. As we will examine in the next chapter, humor for the New York School becomes both a value in itself and part of the unstated scheme of dethroning earnest projects of all kinds.

NOTES

¹ The term “mass image” was first used by George McNeil, who noted that in this type of painting “no single object or shape stands out from the total energy impact” (qtd. in Sandler 92). Irving Sandler further elaborates: “In contrast to the Synthetic Cubist image, whose distinct planes seem deliberately pieced together, balanced and contained within the picture limits, the mass image, composed of open and mobile painterly marks, appears impulsive and dynamic, and to expand beyond the framing edges” (92).

² While I will be giving Rosenberg’s essay extended attention in this chapter, it must be kept in mind that he is only one of the major voices on Abstract Expressionism at the time. Clement Greenberg’s formalist justification for the painting was just as influential, and in fact in time would prove to be more influential, than Rosenberg’s existentialist construction. However, it was Rosenberg’s more poetic and provocative portrayal of action painting that most engaged the poets.

³ Although I will rely on Sandler on a few occasions to provide details about aesthetic assumptions and formal properties of Abstract Expressionist painting, I am aware of the ways in which his biases have been challenged by critics like Serge Guilbaut. Guilbaut argues that formalists like Sandler, Clement Greenberg, William Rubin, and Michael Fried have focused exclusively on stylistic considerations, ignoring “the ideology that underlies the images and texts produced in this period” (6). While these political and cultural implications are a crucial part of the history of Abstract Expressionism, for the purposes of this thesis Sandler is nonetheless a valuable source. While he presents only part of the story, he presents it in the same depoliticized way that the poets themselves viewed it. When Ashbery praises Pollock in reviews, or when O’Hara comments on the painters in full-length studies such as *Jackson Pollock* (1959) and *Robert Motherwell* (1965), what they focus on are issues shaped by the analysis of critics like Rosenberg, Greenberg, and Sandler. Thus while the later critics may not present as comprehensive a picture of Abstract Expressionism as more recent commentators like Guilbaut, T.J. Clark, or Michael Leja, they are the people who can best help us understand *how the poets understood* the painting which is our chief concern here.

⁴ I use Hettich’s label as a convenient summary of the comparison between New York School poetry and Abstract Expressionist painting that has been developed in detail since the 1970s by critics like Marjorie Perloff, Fred Moramarco, Anthony Libby, and Leslie Wolf. In one of the first articles on the topic, “John Ashbery and Frank O’Hara: The Painterly Poets,” Moramarco noted in 1976 that “Just as American painters were experiencing the exhilarating freedom of discovering the act of painting as the ‘event’ to be captured and frozen on the canvas, American poets were discovering, in the very act of poetic composition, the subject matter of their poetry” (438).

⁵ In “Larry Rivers: A Memoir” O’Hara refers to Schapiro in at least half serious reverence as “a god” (CP 512).

⁶ Another extended example of this method can be seen in Carmel Friedman’s 1984 dissertation from Columbia University entitled simply *The New York School of Poetry*. Friedman’s method is to “develop an ‘operative vocabulary’ culled from terminology developed by art critics . . . to describe the characteristics of New York painting and poetry” (Abstract, np). The author isolates techniques, specifically “juxtaposition, palpability, inscaping, collage, parody and Surrealism” as the key elements of resemblance

between New York School poets and painters, but generally ignores larger questions of aesthetic ideology.

⁷ These devices, connected by the idea of “syntactic ambiguity” include things like shifting pronouns, ambiguous references, pseudo-connectives, floating modifiers, spatial and temporal dissolves, ellipsis, absence of punctuation, quirky line breaks, etc. (see *O’Hara* 133-135).

⁸ As further evidence of the “loose” unintentional influence of painting on poetry, I submit part of this fascinating letter written by O’Hara to Gregory Corso in 1958. O’Hara is talking about “secondary enthusiasm[s]” (jazz for the Beats, painting for the New York School poets) and how they impact on writing: “I don’t really get their jazz stimulus but it is probably what I get from painting . . . where one takes Bird for inspiration I would take Bill de Kooning . . . Then also, I don’t have to see what I admire while I’m writing and would rather not hear it, which seems unavoidable in the jazz milieu since even if they don’t whistle while they work they read with it. Maybe I should try to give a reading somewhere in front of a Pollock or a de K. . . . I guess my point is that painting doesn’t intrude on poetry” (qtd in Perloff 110). What seems important here is O’Hara’s comment that he doesn’t have to see the painting for it to be an influence. Rather than the painting “intruding,” its spirit is absorbed and recreated in poem.

⁹ It was this part of the argument that the artists themselves found less than convincing, and in some cases quite insulting. Such an approach undermines or underrates the technical skill and discipline of the work, seeing the artists as existential heroes rather than as the skilled technicians, draughtsmen, and colourists. While some disliked the theory, they didn’t seem to mind the financial benefits which came as part of the impact of its seductive, romantic appeal. And, it should also be noted that the image Rosenberg created was one that the self-presentation of a Pollock or de Kooning very much reinforced. The existential hero (seen in other more popular media as the star of detective fiction and *film noir*) was the hero of the fifties, and while the painters might have squabbled with Rosenberg among themselves, when it came to their public personas they were more than ready to be Action Painters. See Mackie 82-83 for more on their acceptance and rejection of the term. Also relevant here is Michael Leja’s important book, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* which looks at the Abstract Expressionist product and persona in terms of “Modern Man” discourse. This complex discourse--which Leja traces through many cultural productions from psychology and anthropology to philosophy and art--involves the construction of a new form of subjectivity, “riven and besieged, rife with ‘unconscious’ and ‘primitive’ instincts and impulses” (2). Leja is particularly interested in how painting and painters assimilated and helped reproduce this discourse, of which Pollock’s labyrinthine images and film noir persona is but one example.

¹⁰ For more on Rosenberg’s Marxism, and for a political reading of “The American Action Painters,” see Fred Orton’s “Action, Revolution and Painting.”

¹¹ In “Against Abstract Expressionism” Jarrell contemplates the similarities between a painting chimpanzee on Channel 9 and the generic action painter: “I watched [the chimp] dispassionately. His painting, I confess, did not interest me; I had seen it too many times before. But the way in which he painted it! He was, truly, magistral [sic]. He did not look at his model once; indeed, he hardly looked even at the canvas. . . . He was the most active, the most truly sincere, painter that I have ever seen; and yet, what did it all produce?--nothing but the same old abstract expressionist painting . . .” (191).

¹² This problem of *distinction* is particularly relevant to Ashbery's work since so many of his poems seem to defy qualitative evaluation. How do we know the "great" from the "good" Ashbery poem, or how do we know when a poem, whose goal is to represent "the experience of experience," fails? Part of the answer to these difficult questions, I think, is that they are the wrong questions to be asking of Ashbery's unusual oeuvre. If a poem's goal is to be psychologically mimetic, it doesn't make much sense to argue that one poem better represents the poet's particular state of mind than another. Moreover, as Hal Foster has argued in terms of neo-avant-garde visual art, the very value of *quality* (which measures works by artistic standards of the past) is something that Ashbery (and many postmodern artists) have exchanged for the value of *interest*, "provoked," Foster notes, "through a testing of cultural limits in the present" (xi). This does not mean that we should give up on evaluative analysis of Ashbery, only that we should recognize the ways in which his work militates against such valuation (by elevating the cliché or valuing "light verse" or "bad poetry" for example--topics I will examine in the following chapter). Ironically, this testing of the limits of traditional evaluation (based on comparison with past works and with instituted standards) may well be seen as part of the *value* of Ashbery's work.

¹³ In contrast, the personality *is* revealed in a clinical way in confessional poetry which revels in disclosing sexual (as well as an array of other personal) "preferences and debilities."

¹⁴ This idea and phrasing may very well have come from Stevens also: "The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice" ("Of Modern Poetry" *Collected* 239).

¹⁵ This procedure of improvisation from the most minimal sources is an accurate description of the method the New York School poets and painters habitually used. Ashbery, for example, describes his creative process this way in a 1993 interview: "I never have any idea when I sit down to write what is going to happen or how I am going to write. . . . I tend to start with a few words and phrases that occur to me and that I have copied down on bits of paper, especially when falling asleep, or when I wake up in the morning. I use these later as a sort of gimmick to get started. Then one word seems to lead to another, and pretty soon I'm in the middle of writing a poem. But it doesn't matter so much what the words are or what the phrase is as long as I get started" (Lopes 29, 32). Compare Abstract Expressionist William Baziot's comments on the genesis of his paintings: "I cannot evolve any concrete theory about painting. What happens on the canvas is unpredictable and surprising to me. . . . There is no particular system I follow when I begin a painting. Each painting has its own way of evolving. One may start with a few color areas on the canvas; another with a myriad of lines; and perhaps another with a profusion of colors. . . . As I work, or when the painting is finished, the subject reveals itself" (Untitled statement, *Possibilities* 1 [Winter, 1947-8]: 2).

¹⁶ See Perloff, "Poète Maudit of the Genteel Tradition" in *Robert Lowell: Essays on Poetry*. Ed. S.T. Axelrod and H. Deese. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986. 99-116.

¹⁷ O'Hara's attraction to Williams's causal persona and aesthetic is perfectly in keeping with the neo-avant-garde search for an alternative tradition, outside of the canon of classical modernism. For more details on this search see Andreas Huyssen, "The Search for Tradition: Avant-garde and Postmodernism in the 1970s."

¹⁸ Interestingly, though, while they start with the same conceptual framework (not to mention the same time and place), the selves O'Hara and the Abstract Expressionists end up enacting are radically different. The monumental, troubled, sombre selfhood many have

seen encoded in Pollock's twisted calligraphs, de Kooning's anxious, irritable figures, or Still's and Kline's stark and severe designs, seems miles away from that recorded in O'Hara's campy, personable "I do this, I do that" poems like "Why I Am Not a Painter." We should not forget, however, that O'Hara wrote (less successful and less often discussed) poems with tones and ambitions much closer to the painters he admired. These poems (best characterized by "Easter" and *Second Avenue*), written mostly in the early fifties when O'Hara first moved to New York, have been characterized by Koch as "rugged, hard, brilliant, surfacey kind of poems . . . which in some ways resemble the big abstract canvasses Pollock, de Kooning, and others were painting at the time" (AP 28). Ironically, "Oranges: 12 Pastorals," an early poem of 1949, fits much more closely with the "rugged," clotted Abstract Expressionist work like *Second Avenue* than it does with the personable "Why I Am Not a Painter." Compare the language tone of "Oranges" to the later poem which supposedly tells the story of its composition:

Black crows in the burnt mauve grass, as intimate as rotting rice, snot on a white linen field.

Picture to yourselves Tess amidst the thorny hay, her new-born shredded by the ravenous cutter-bar, and there were only probably vague lavender flowers blooming in the next field.

O pastures dotted with excremental discs, wheeling in interplanetary green, your brown eyes stare down our innocence, the brimstone odor of your stars sneers at our horoscope! (CP 5)

If this is what O'Hara thought of as a painterly aesthetic at the time, maybe "Why I am Not a Painter" can be read as a self-mocking of his earlier technique. "I am not a painter," the poem would then imply, "because I could not go on writing 'painterly' poems like this"!

¹⁹ Whereas the 1920s have come to be seen as a time of cultural rebellion (Modernism), and the 1930s as a time of political radicalism (Marxism), the 1950s have come to be seen as a time political conservatism and accommodation. As Richard Pells explains in *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age*: "Writers who had eagerly embraced the bohemian life after World War I and moved to the left in response to the Great Depression were then catapulted by the horrors of Stalinism and the orthodoxies of the Cold War to the safer harbors of conservatism and complacency in the 1950s. Whereupon, in the serenity of the Eisenhower interregnum, they ceased to serve as critics of American society, becoming instead its explicators and apologists" (118). The leading intellectuals, writers, and critics of the day--Daniel Bell, David Riesman, Paul Goodman, Clement Greenberg, William Whyte, Lionel Trilling, Arthur Schlesinger, etc.--turned from the study of political, "ideological" questions to the study of private anxieties and cultural problems (in books like *The Lonely Crowd*, *Growing Up Absurd*, *The Organization Man*, etc.). Given the nation's remarkable affluence and seeming stability, these writers felt that the political and economic questions so pertinent in the Depression years had been chiefly resolved and could be put aside to focus on questions of work and leisure, sex and child-rearing, corporate organization and administration (Pells 117-30). It seems quite likely that this environment of "neutrality" or "autonomy" (code words for liberal ideology) had some effect on the New York School's desire for an indifferent art. Guilbaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* looks at the way the "De-Marxization of the Intelligentsia" and the emergence of a "new liberal" ideology paved the way for the supposedly depoliticized art of the 40s and 50s: the Abstract Expressionism which avoided the extremes of both left and right. (See Guilbaut, particularly chapters 1-3). A similar argument might be applied to the New York School poets, though of course these writers were not in the public spotlight and were not coopted for political purposes in the same way that the painters were. Their capitulation to an "end of ideology" position, which *might* be read in their desire for a

desire for a neutral art which avoids the extremes of the artistic “left” (Donald Allen’s experimental iconoclasts) and “right” (Hall, Pack and Simpson’s formalists) is thus problematic. Their sexual politics--most evident in O’Hara’s work, but also present in Ashbery’s (as I will discuss in Chapter 4)--and the related comic/campy ability to wriggle out of almost any prescribed position, makes it difficult to view their work as complementary to the serious, and patently heterosexist, concerns of writers like Riesman, Goodman, Greenberg, or Trilling (the latter whom, O’Hara tells us quite explicitly in “Personal Poem” “we don’t like” [CP 336]). Nonetheless the relationship between New York School poetry and the writing of 50s intellectuals like Paul Goodman (with whom O’Hara had a personal relationship), David Riesman, Clement Greenberg, Lionel Trilling and others is a topic that deserves further consideration (but is right now beyond the scope of this dissertation project).

²⁰“Play” also became an important category in the work of 50s intellectuals like Greenberg, Bell, and Goodman who, according to Pells, “insisted that only when work and leisure were reintegrated could culture become an important part of, rather than a flight from, daily life” (228). In this analysis, artistic play becomes a depoliticized version of the historical avant-garde’s desire to “reintegrate art into the praxis of life” (Bürger 22). For the writers of the 1950s such “reintegration” had significant *cultural* but not *political* implications since these critics were interested in scrutinizing middle class lifestyles and attitudes, but not in challenging the basic tenets of postindustrial capitalism which underwrote these attitudes. Once again, however, the sexual politics of O’Hara’s “play” make it rather different from the kind imagined by most 50s intellectuals. I consider these politics in more detail in Chapter 4.

²¹ In “The Gay Frank O’Hara,” Rudy Kikel makes this acute observation about O’Hara’s highly anthologized Lana Turner poem: “When the poet . . . instructs a movie actress, it is not, we suspect, as one artist so much as one *queen* addressing another, one who recognizes a ‘theatrical position’ when ‘she’ sees one and, while ‘she’ can sympathize with the fragility calling it forth, is not beyond drawing the curtain on a rival’s performance:” [Kikel quotes:]

LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!
 there is no snow in Hollywood
 there is no rain in California
 I have been to lots of parties
 and acted perfectly disgraceful
 but I never actually collapsed
 oh Lana Turner we love you get up (CP 449) (Kikel 338-39)

O’Hara’s attraction to Lana Turner, Garbo, Dietrich, and other Hollywood stars is related to the allure of exaggeration, the appeal of playful theatricality. As Susan Sontag remarks in her famous “Notes on ‘Camp’”: “The hallmark of Camp is the spirit of extravagance. Camp is a woman walking around in a dress made of three million feathers” (283). Brad Gooch notes O’Hara’s own fondness for theatrical performance, mentioning a favoured routine of “singalongs to an old recording of Marlene Dietrich’s cabaret performances, during which [O’Hara] sometimes applied blue lipstick to his full lips for effect” (144). One of my favourite stories of O’Hara’s theatrical personality is recalled by John Ashbery. After a drunken party in which O’Hara appeared “wrapped in a lavender feather boa,” O’Hara was walking outside with a friend and was, he claimed, approached by a woman with a little boy who came up to him and said “This is my son. Please take him and teach him your ways.” Ashbery records “I’m not at all sure this is an actual memory of mine and if it is it undoubtedly couldn’t have happened, but something somehow sticks in my mind” (Gooch 142). Whether or not this *actually* happened seems less relevant than the fact that,

given O'Hara's penchant for playful, campy extravagance, it is the kind of thing that *might* have happened.

²² Another place in which O'Hara formulates an aesthetics of process which downplays the "subject" in favor of the movement of language is in a talk delivered as part of a panel discussion at "The Club." Speaking on "The Image in Poetry and Painting," O'Hara praised "Poetry which liberates certain forces in language, permits them to emerge upon the void of silence, not poetry which seeks merely to express most effectively or most beautifully or most musically some preconceived idea or perception" (Good 217). The panel, which consisted of Edwin Denby, David Gascoyne, and Ruthven Todd, was one of the weekly forums held at the famous Eighth Street haunt of the Abstract Expressionists and their colleagues.

²³ "It is easy to be beautiful; it is difficult to appear so" O'Hara writes in "Meditations in an Emergency" (CP 198).

²⁴ Ashbery finds the same quality of inclusiveness, or the illusion of inclusiveness, in Koch's poetry. His comments, made while introducing Koch at a poetry reading in New York in the 1960s, suggest that this illusion is an important part of the New York School aesthetic: "[Koch's poetry] gives you the impression that you are leading an interesting life: going to parties and meeting interesting people, falling in love, going for rides in the country and to public swimming pools, eating in the best restaurants and going to the movies and the theater in the afternoons. By comparison, most other modern poetry makes me feel as if I were living in a small midwestern university town" (qtd. in Lehman, *Last* 210). The same comments would apply very well to the fourth important member of the New York School, James Schuyler, whose work, like O'Hara's uses a personal voice and uses the daily thoughts and processes of the poet's life as primary poetic material.

²⁵ Reviewers were not the only ones to dismiss O'Hara's work in this way. Charles Altieri's chapter on O'Hara in *Enlarging the Temple* focuses on the poet's use of "absolutely trivial and conventional materials" and "stereotyped trivia" (108-9) to present a realistic picture of the contemporary reality of city life. From this presumption, Altieri develops his thesis of O'Hara's "landscape without depth" (a concept Perloff uses to more positive ends). Since Altieri argues that the content of O'Hara poems is intentionally "insignificant" and "superficial," it is not surprising that he comes to the conclusion that O'Hara's influence and popularity are "considerably greater than his achievement" (116).

²⁶ Levin and Arluke point out the gender bias encoded in our dismissal or denunciation of gossip, noting that it is women who have always been portrayed as frivolous or evil gossipmongers. In fact, when men take part in gossip they are said to be "acting like women." This negative connection between women and gossip, Levin and Arluke argue, had much to do with male anxiety surrounding "the mystery of women sharing secrets with other women . . . and the possibility for alliance and solidarity . . . Even though women were expected to gossip, there was also the suspicion among men that gossip was potentially subversive. Women who did it too much might decide not to stay in their place . . ." (6).

²⁷ The "poem-paintings," which can be read using the paradigm of "art as gossip" or "gossip as art," will be discussed in the conclusion to this chapter. Another instance of interconnected gossip and art involves Bluhm's three-panel painting entitled *Flight 114*, which was painted to commemorate O'Hara and Bill Berkson's trip to Paris on Pan Am 114. In response to the painting, Berkson wrote "Flight 114" and dedicated it to Bluhm (Gooch 380). "Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul" is another dedication

poem which O'Hara wrote an hour before a bon voyage lunch with Bluhm who was off to Paris (Gooch 331).

²⁸ These second generation poets like Berrigan provide an object lesson in just how difficult it is to be casual, and show what a hard act O'Hara was to follow. A great deal of their poetry, issuing from the St. Mark's Poetry Project and in little magazines like *The World*, ends up having what Libbie Rifkin calls "a high school yearbook feel" of "cloistered sociality" (np). What distinguishes this work from O'Hara's are its excesses (Geoff Ward calls magazines like *The World* and *Adventures in Poetry* "New York-poetry-by-the-yard" [111]) as well as its frequent lack of craft and vision beyond the purpose of gossip (Rifkin submits Larry Fagin's poem "Thirty Girls I'd Like to Fuck," a straightforward list of thirty recognizable names which appeared in *The World*'s 1968 Valentine Issue, as a typical example of the magazine's "in-group humor").

²⁹ Collaboration is one of Koch's favorite ways of expanding the possibilities for improvisational art. In his catalogue notes for the Tibor de Nagy show *Kenneth Koch: Collaborations with Artists* (Dec. 1, 1994 - Jan. 14, 1995), Arthur Danto observes: "The Koch Collaboration involves . . . participating in a game of creativity in which identities are enhanced and augmented in a work which none of us could have made on our own but which could not have been made without us. When Kenneth Koch talks about collaboration, he has in mind something that is fun at every instant, and in which our selves and souls are not something to be overcome but are part of what we hope to find in the process of making the work, which brings things out of us none of us knew were there. It is as much as anything a strategy of self-discovery, like making love" (np).

³⁰ Ashbery talks about using similar teaching methods in his creative writing classes: "I might give them formal assignments. I like forms that occupy the conscious mind to the extent that the unconscious is liberated and can go about the business of contributing to the poem. I use the sestina, the pantoum, or the canzone . . . I also have them do translations of texts from a foreign language that they do not know. . . . Or I'll have students write from a different point of view, say from the point of view of a person who is suffering from a particular mental disorder" (Remnick 61). The point of all these exercises relates to the New York School belief that a poem need not be, and in fact should not be, "about" something but rather should be a performance in language in which the unconscious mind as much as the conscious exercises its talents.

³¹ In the first Surrealist manifesto (1924) André Breton had defined Surrealism as "Pure psychic automatism, by which it is intended to express, verbally, in writing or by other means, the real process of thought. Thought's dictation, in the absence of all control exercised by the reason and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations" (in Sandler 36). Both the New York School painters and poets and were interested in expressing "thought's dictation," but both also agreed that pure automatism was not the best method. Pure automatism often emerged as pure, self-indulgent babble, and so the New York School artists agreed that while automatism was an essential and revolutionary *technique*, it was not acceptable as an end in itself. Thus the painters and poets developed what I've called "controlled" forms of automatism--techniques which put unconscious forces into conscious practices.

³² A pioneer in the field of conceptual art, Joseph Kosuth, defined the work as "art as idea, as idea" (Walker 86). Another theorist, Sol LeWitt, perhaps unknowingly turned W.C. Williams's famous statement around when he claimed that "an idea is a machine that makes art" (Walker 85).

³³ See Bürger 51-3 and 56 for more details. Bürger also notes that Duchamp's procedure "unmasks the art market where the signature means more than the quality of the work" (52).

³⁴ Koch's later "instructional" poems such as "Some General Instructions," "The Art of Poetry," and "The Art of Love" will carry this procedure to further lengths in their utterly (perhaps absurdly) banal style.

³⁵ In another interview, when asked about his "painterly" qualities as a writer, he conceptualizes them first in auditory and then in visual terms: "My poetry is full of scenic passages, but I seem to *hear* them, before I *see* them" (Gangel 17, italics in the original).

³⁶ A sample passage:

But it isn't enough
To just go on singing. Orpheus realized this
And didn't mind so much about his reward being in heaven
After the Bacchantes had torn him apart, driven
Half out of their minds by his music, what it was doing to them.
Some say it was for his treatment of Eurydice.
But probably the music had more to do with it, and
The way music passes, emblematic
Of life and how you cannot isolate a note of it
And say it is good or bad. You must
Wait till it's over. "The end crowns all,"
Meaning also that the "tableau"
Is wrong. For although memories, of a season, for example,
Melt into a single snapshot, one cannot guard, treasure
That stalled moment. It too is flowing, fleeting;
It is a picture of flowing, scenery, though living, mortal,
Over which an abstract action is laid out in blunt,
Harsh strokes. (*Selected* 245-6)

³⁷ Here is Perloff from the Introduction to *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* commenting on Ashbery's "These Lacustrine Cities": "Why is the poet's carefully conceived 'tower' arising from lacustrine depths 'burning'? And who is the 'you' that suddenly appears in stanza 3, or the 'we' who want to relegate this 'you' to 'the middle of the desert' or 'to a violent sea'? How does the 'I' of stanza 6 know that 'You will be happy here'? Is he talking to himself or to someone else? In this context, the phrase 'Because of the logic / Of your situation, which is something no climate can outsmart,' is particularly ironic because the 'situation' has no logic whatever. Indeed, the poem blocks all attempts to rationalize its imagery, to make it conform to a coherent pattern" (9-10). Such questions seem to be unavoidable fare of Ashbery criticism.

³⁸ Ashbery describes his poetry as exactly this kind of constantly playing drama in an interview with Sue Gangel: "I think I can plug into poetry whenever I want to, and it will come out much the same way at any given time. I don't do it that often. It's like that television set over there. I don't watch television much, but occasionally I turn it on and, sure enough, something is going on, and that's that for that moment. I don't know if I could justify to you my reasons for doing so, but it seems to me that that's the way life is arranged, and you get around to things when you have time for them. And poetry is one of those things" (19). It's perfectly fitting that Ashbery would describe his "plugging into poetry" not as a kind of communion with the Muses (as a Deep Image poet like Robert Bly

represented in it must likewise poetically tell you of something that is far way from them and also of what their shapes materially hide from us" (qtd. in Moramarco 460).

⁴⁴ Ironically, and fittingly enough, this line is the only one that may have been borrowed directly from the Bible: "The wise man is no more remembered than the fool, for in days to come both alike will have been long forgotten. Alas, the wise man dies like the fool!" (*Ecclesiastes* 2:16)

⁴⁵ Dwight Macdonald, for example, abjured "political writing" for what he called (in an essay entitled "The Question of God") the "small" questions: "What is a good life? How do people really live and feel and think in their everyday lives? What are the most important human needs? How can they best be satisfied, here and now? Who am I? How can I live lovingly, truthfully, pleasurably?" (qtd. in Pells 180).

⁴⁶ For more on the perceived "threat" of popular culture (what Dwight Macdonald called "Masscult") to the canons of educated taste see Richard Pells' section on "The Message of the Media" (216-32) and Andrew Ross's chapter "Containing Culture in the Cold War" (in *No Respect* 42-64). For primary sources see Clement Greenberg's "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (discussed in Chapter 4), or Dwight Macdonald's "Masscult & Midcult" in *Against the American Grain* (New York: Random, 1952: 3-75). Also see the 1952 *Partisan Review* symposium entitled *Our Country and Our Culture*.

⁴⁷ Pells elaborates on these attitudes by noting the interesting shifts in discourse and the meaning of certain words between the 1930s and 1950s: "What the writers of the 1930s called 'community,' the postwar intelligentsia labeled 'conformity.' Cooperation now became 'other-direction' . . . solidarity with others implied an invasion of privacy; 'collectivism' ushered in 'mass society' . . ." (247).

CHAPTER FOUR

The Politics of Taste: Comedy, Camp, and the Neo-Avant-Garde

"I had never read any Plato and really adore him so far, these dialogues are the best thing since Mutt and Jeff!"

- Frank O'Hara, letter to Lawrence Osgood (Gooch 170)

The New York School poets were among the few of Donald Allen's "New Americans" to make humor an important part of their aesthetic. Humor for these poets was both a value in itself and a means toward an end already described: a way of achieving the detachment or indifference necessary to the creation of truly challenging avant-garde art in the 1960s. Unlike the Beats, the one other group of poets who might be said to use humor (sometimes unintentionally) to achieve their critique, the New York School poets used it in a spirit of playful enjoyment, rather than one of antagonistic challenge. While the Beats used satire to castigate the banal social conservatism of 1950s (and the formal conservatism of New Critical poetry), the New York School used comedy and camp as means of incorporating, celebrating and, most importantly, exaggerating (rather than rejecting) the culture in which they lived. Unlike the Beats, the New York School poets were not interested in offering a new (more progressive, liberated, hip) culture but rather in working with American culture as they found it--exposing, playing up, and camping up its quirks, absurdities, and quaint mannerisms.

O'Hara's campy estimation of Plato, occasioned by a course he was taking at the University of Michigan in the summer of 1951, provides a neatly encapsulated version of New York School humour. The first thing that needs to be made clear about his comment to lover and fellow classmate Lawrence Osgood (whom he met, incidentally, in Renato Poggioli's Harvard class on The Symbolist Movement) is that the young poet is not being sarcastic. His "adoration" of Plato, though undoubtedly exaggerated in the hallmark style

of camp, is nonetheless partly sincere. O'Hara's notes and comments indicate that he honestly enjoyed reading Plato, and in fact incorporated ideas from the *Republic* into the novel he was writing at the time.¹ O'Hara's amusing equation of the philosopher with the comic strip stars is not meant to devalue Plato, but rather to elevate Mutt & Jeff (who can be taken as a synecdoche for "the comics" or "the comic" in general). In fact, as theorists of comic book art have maintained, there is good reason to take Mutt & Jeff, and other representatives of popular culture, seriously.²

Like most comedy, O'Hara's comment is funny because of a perceived incongruity: the awkward fit between a "high" cultural form (Plato) and a "low" one (Mutt & Jeff). This kind of juxtaposing was one of the main strategies of the New York poets, who were experts at combining "high" and "low" styles and materials and, in the process, calling into question these very hierarchies.³ By placing Plato next to Mutt & Jeff, O'Hara's "joke" calls ingrained and mostly tacit hierarchies of value into question. Why does it seem funny for one to equally appreciate Plato and Mutt & Jeff? The humor derives from the mostly unexamined prejudice against popular culture, a prejudice which has its roots in modernist strategies of exclusion employed most obviously and forcefully by Ezra Pound. Pound promoted "the New" (at first in the form of Imagism) at the expense of popular art enjoyed by that "mass of dolts," the American public. From his position of expatriate sophisticate, Pound used the politics of elitism to convince people that he knew best and what was best was always that which the public most despised. Pound saw *τὸ καλόν* (The Beautiful) "Decreed in the market place," and knew that this art of "tawdry cheapness" which "the age demanded" must be overthrown ("Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," *SP* 61-3). Of all the "high" modernists, Pound is probably the one who most vigorously insisted that "the modern" must be the antithesis of the popular, and he thus set a tone for modernism (Andreas Huyssen's "Great Divide" mentality) which the Beats and New York School poets were among the first to challenge. These poets insisted that the distinctions between high and low were illusory (or, more to the point, that they were categories of cultural power and

control). As Kenneth Koch put it, the distinction between high and low art is “like the difference between being attracted to someone at court or in a bowling alley.” There is, in fact, no difference, Koch argues, since each can be a moving, passionate experience and “along the way [in either case] one may say something memorable” (AP 192).

One of the most important documents of the Great Divide in American art theory is Clement Greenberg’s famous 1939 essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” which first appeared in the *Partisan Review*. Greenberg’s strident article argues the absolute incommensurability of two kinds of artistic production named in its title:

One and the same civilization produces simultaneously two such different things as a poem by T.S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley Song, or a painting by Braque and a *Saturday Evening Post* cover. All four are on the order of culture, and ostensibly, parts of the same culture and products of the same society. Here, however, their connection seems to end. (3)

Taking a typically elitist approach to the avant-garde, Greenberg defines it as the antithesis of the popular or the public. It is by this logic that abstract art becomes the avant-garde form *par excellence*:

Retiring from the public altogether, the avant-garde poet or artist sought to maintain the high level of his art by both narrowing and raising it to the expression of an absolute in which all relativities and contradictions would be either resolved or beside the point. . . . It has been in search of the absolute that the avant-garde has arrived at “abstract” or “nonobjective” art . . . (5)

Unlike the historical avant-garde movements which were interested in manipulating public forms, and in joining art and social practice, Greenberg’s depoliticized avant-garde responds only to the demands of *the medium*. Art achieves its highest effects, in Greenberg’s scheme, through *purification* which requires an intense focus on only the questions and problems of the medium. The corollary to this is that all ‘extraneous’ considerations must be ignored, “narrowing and raising [art] to the expression of an absolute.” This strategy of submission to the medium becomes a way of isolating and purifying not only the work, but also the artist: “The avant-garde artist or poet tries to in effect imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid . . . something *given*, increate, independent of meanings, similars or

originals” (6). Of course this theory of purification relies on its Other, and on the threat of contamination, to validate itself. Kitsch is the embodiment of this threat.

Kitsch, which Greenberg defines as “popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc.” (9), is the antithesis of aesthetic purity. Kitsch feeds off “legitimate” culture, indiscriminately borrowing its strategies and themes but simplifying and prostituting them: “the new is looted for new ‘twists,’ which are then watered down and served up as kitsch” (11). Though Greenberg poses his argument in “purely aesthetic” terms, its severity indicates that there is more at stake than “just” questions of taste. His claims have strong ethical and political overtones. As the avant-garde is created by and for the elite, kitsch’s only purpose and justification is to serve “the masses” (in the most derogatory sense of the term):

The peasants who settled in the cities as proletariat and petty bourgeois learned to read and write for the sake of efficiency, but they did not win the leisure and comfort necessary for the enjoyment of the city’s traditional culture the new urban masses set up a pressure on society to provide them with a kind of culture fit for their own consumption. To fill the demand of the new market, a new commodity was devised: ersatz culture, kitsch, destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide. (10)

For Greenberg kitsch works by profit, rather than aesthetic motives. Like all mass production, it operates mechanically and “by formulas” (10). In the end--and here Greenberg’s hyperbole points straight to the political heart of the matter--“Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times” (10).

Set against the background of the Great Divide, O’Hara’s juxtaposition of Plato with Mutt & Jeff (and here we can substitute any “high” and “low” cultural forms) raises crucial questions about taste and value, as well as ethics and politics. Although they rarely posed it in these terms, the New York School’s interventions into this dichotomizing of culture (high/low, elite/mass, avant-garde/ kitsch) is a political as well as an aesthetic intervention. By taking pleasure in and elevating just those products someone like Greenberg most despised (ads, pulp fiction, comics, Hollywood movies, etc.) the poets

were raising ethical as well as aesthetic questions. These were exactly the kinds of questions raised simultaneously by pop art which claimed the status of “high” art for comics (as in the paintings of Roy Lichtenstein), advertisements (as in Andy Warhol’s Campbell’s soup cans, Coke bottles, and Brillo boxes), and other products of popular culture (Claes Oldenberg’s giant soft sculpture hamburgers, BLTs, and apple pies; Jasper Johns’s beer cans and flashlights; James Rosenquist’s billboard art).

O’Hara’s delight in, and lack of discrimination between, products of high and low culture (his equal embrace of Rachmaninoff & Ginger Rogers, Rembrandt & Rudolph Valentino, Khrushchev & Krazy Kat, Coleridge & Kitty Carlisle, *Swan Lake* & *Swingtime*), raises important questions about “Old World” versus “New World” values: by what standards is Plato *better* or more important than Mutt & Jeff? What gets ruled out--what do we lose--if we adhere to these standards? What, exactly, distinguishes “high” from “low” art? If we personalize these questions of aesthetic value, in the way that O’Hara always does, we may arrive at a number of other revealing questions: Which is more enjoyable, Plato or Mutt & Jeff? The screwball comedy or the experimental film? *The Waste Land* or *Singin’ in the Rain*? Less pointedly, what kind of enjoyment can we derive from each? Do we really want to sacrifice either? And more abstractly, how are issues of pleasure connected to issues of value? Is fun a suitable value to pursue in art? What kinds of cultural messages tell us it is not? In what ways does social class relate to distinctions of high and low art? How is taste used as a form of cultural power? What does it say about my level of culture if I choose Mutt & Jeff over Plato? And finally: is it possible to have them all?

To this last question, the New York School poets answer with an enthusiastic YES. An important part of their project was to free American taste from elitist assumptions reinforced by the academic bent of fifties poetry with Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot as the reigning authorities. This did not necessarily mean *inverting* but instead *opening* standards of taste to embrace popular culture, to see the value and art in such genres as the comics

and the movies which Greenberg so condemns. After all, as O'Hara notes in "How to Proceed in the Arts," "amusement *is* the dawn of Genius" (AC 98). One of the values of New York School poetry is that it doesn't *answer* questions of value and taste in the didactic way Pound or Greenberg does. Rather, the poetry poses a number of provocative questions (à la Marcel Duchamp, for example) which require readers to re-think the entrenched values of a high modernism which constituted itself through such strategies of dichotomous exclusion.

Another important fact about O'Hara's off-hand comment is that its "sincerity" is the winking, "in quotes" kind. In other words, it is bound up with the exaggeration and artificiality of the discourse known as camp. Camp (from the French *se camper*, to posture or flaunt) aims at converting the serious (Plato) into the frivolous (Mutt & Jeff) through exaggeration, extravagance, and theatricality. "The whole point of Camp," Susan Sontag comments in the first theoretical treatment of the phenomenon, "is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to 'the serious'" (288). When O'Hara claims that he "adores" Plato, he chooses a descriptive verb one might more naturally expect to be attached to a cute pet or perhaps a glamorous Hollywood star ("oh Lana Turner we love you get up"). The incongruity is humorous, but it is also serious in its own way, since it is through gestures such as these that "a new, more complex relation to 'the serious'" is formed. O'Hara's theatrical, gushing adoration attests to the fact that "one can be frivolous about the serious" (Sontag 288), that seriousness, in other words, does not require solemnity. O'Hara's "adoration" is both sincere and winking, and the double sense in which it can be taken is another of the hallmarks of camp. O'Hara's "unserious" wink is aimed at those cognoscenti who understand that he is making a serious point about sensibility or taste. By raising Mutt & Jeff up to the level of Plato, and "raising" Plato *down* to the level of Mutt & Jeff, O'Hara is tacitly commenting on the reductiveness of standards which relegate popular and

entertaining forms to a “low” position. Sontag explains the significance of such gestures when she notes that camp is

based on the great discovery that the sensibility of high culture has no monopoly upon refinement. Camp asserts that good taste is not simply good taste; that there exists, indeed, a good taste of bad taste. . . . The man who insists on high and serious pleasures is depriving himself of pleasure; he continually restricts what he can enjoy; in the constant exercise of his good taste he will eventually price himself out of the market, so to speak. Here Camp taste supervenes upon good taste as a daring and witty hedonism. It makes the man of good taste cheerful, where before he ran the risk of being chronically frustrated. It is good for the digestion. (291)

Before going further, I must note here the overwhelming reaction against Sontag’s reduction of camp to an aesthetic phenomena. Since Sontag, the vast majority of critics have argued that camp is not simply a style or sensibility (that it is not just about taste), but rather that it is best seen as political critique inextricably connected with gay culture and queer self-definition. As Moe Meyers argues in his introduction to *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, camp is a “suppressed and denied oppositional critique embodied in the signifying practices that processually constitute queer identities” (1). On this reading, camp is about subverting the “homo/hetero binary” and refusing sexually-defined identity. For Meyers, camp manifestations challenge “bourgeois notions of the Self as unique, abiding, and continuous while substituting instead a concept of the Self as performative, improvisational, discontinuous, and processually constituted by repetitive and stylized acts” (2-3). However, the arguments of Meyers and others (who see camp as productive of a gay sensibility and critique) do not negate Sontag’s extremely useful discussion of the *qualities* of camp productions. While the origin and heart of camp undoubtedly is related to experiences of marginalization, this does not change the fact that camp manifestations are frequently aesthetic and raise substantial issues about taste that are relevant to many spectators, regardless of sexual self-definition. So while critics like Meyers chastise Sontag for “play[ing] down homosexual connotations, sanitizing camp and making it safe for public consumption” (7), it is also worth noting the way Sontag’s essay opens the

discourse to considerations that are not *only* bound by questions of sexuality. Sontag provides an elegant defense of the importance of taste:

Most people think of sensibility or taste as the realm of purely subjective preferences, those mysterious attractions, mainly sensual, that have not been brought under the sovereignty of reason. They *allow* that considerations of taste play a part in their reactions to people and to works of art. But this attitude is naïve. And even worse. To patronize the faculty of taste is to patronize oneself. For taste governs every free--as opposed to rote--human response. Nothing is more decisive. There is taste in people, visual taste, taste in emotion--and there is taste in acts, taste in morality. Intelligence, as well, is really a kind of taste: taste in ideas. (276)

What Sontag leaves out here, surprisingly, is the issue of taste in gender. The choices and performances of drag kings and queens, transvestites, and other transgendered individuals are vivid displays of the fact that gender and sexual orientation, too, are--at least to some degree--matters of taste.

Perhaps the best way of seeing this debate between Sontag and Meyers is not as two binary and exclusive positions, but as a spectrum along which various camp manifestations might fall. At one end of the spectrum we have Meyers's position that *all* camp is a political enactment of queer identity (thus, camp acts performed "independently of queer self-reflexivity" are in fact not properly camp at all, for Meyers, but instead are camp traces or residual camp, "a strategy of un-queer appropriation of queer praxis whose purpose . . . is the enfusement of the un-queer with the queer aura, acting to stabilize the ontological challenge of Camp through a dominant gesture of reincorporation" [5]). At the other end of the spectrum is Sontag's belief, as she sets out clearly in Note 1 of "Notes on 'Camp'," that "Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is *one* way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization" (277). The New York School poets in a sense mediate this debate by submitting camp products that fall in different positions on this spectrum. Koch's "un-queer" camp, which is interested in questioning and deconstructing traditions of taste, falls on Sontag's side of the spectrum. While Koch's work *is* political, it is not political in Meyers's sense of the word. Koch's subversive gestures are aimed at

the high modernist tradition of taste and culture, with its emphasis on purity, impersonality, seriousness, and craft. O'Hara, on the other hand, an openly gay man twenty years before Stonewall, belongs on Meyers's side of the spectrum. As we will examine, his poetry uses various strategies to challenge not only elitist assumptions about taste but also bourgeois notions of sexuality. Ashbery, as usual, is the hardest to place on this spectrum. His always elusive work tends to move in both directions without ever explicitly stating its allegiances, the way Koch and O'Hara frequently do. While Ashbery is clearly interested in questions of taste, he never takes the kind of aggressive stance Koch does in a poem like "Fresh Air." Likewise, while his texts can be productively read through the lens of the "homotextual" (as they have been by John Shoptaw and others), their queer orientation is never "out" in the way O'Hara's poems frequently are. These individual positions will be charted more clearly in the forthcoming discussion of each poet.

Whether we follow Sontag's or Meyers's definition, one important thing camp is always "about" for the New York School is the crucial topic of taste. The camp attitude toward taste is *not* the typical antagonistic one which defines the *new/good* in opposition to the *old/bad*. This stance, adopted in different ways and to differing extents in the postmodern era by the Beats and the Abstract Expressionists, claims that current tastes (in the well-wrought New Critical poem for the Beats, or in Regionalist painting for the Abstract Expressionists) are bad because they are outmoded, conservative, and enshrined. For the avant-garde, whatever tastes are affirmed by the status quo are necessarily spoiled by habit, acceptance, or fashion, and therefore must be abandoned (again and again) for "the New." Thus the avant-garde creates a perennial cycle of binary oppositions where new art quickly becomes accepted and thus "old," and so must be perpetually updated. This pattern is rather similar to the way our unquenchable thirst for "the new" requires us to constantly replace our cars, household appliances, and computers (among other things).

Camp sensibility intervenes in this interminable cycle (and here we can start to see its overlap with New York School aesthetics) not by offering another new kind of art, but

by “turn[ing] its back on the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgment” (Sontag 286). Camp doesn’t simply reverse things (claiming that good is bad and bad is good), but instead offers “for art (and life) a different--a supplementary--set of standards” (Sontag 286). Camp standards put emphasis not on breaking with the past but on remaking it through stylization, exaggeration, and theatricality. In place of the criteria of seriousness and dignity by which we usually evaluate art, camp installs the value of extravagance, a love of the unnatural, and a taste for the decorative (placing emphasis on surface and style at the expense of content).

Camp is particularly amenable to the aesthetics of Ashbery and O’Hara not only because of its connection to queer signifying practices (a topic I will take up in my discussion of the two poets) but also because of its close connection to the project of the neo-avant-garde. By turning its back on the usual dynamics of taste, and on what Ashbery calls “the acceptance world,” camp stakes out exactly the kind of detached, indifferent position I have described as the basis of the neo-avant-garde aesthetic. Rather than fighting for a new position, a ranking in an artistic hierarchy controlled by the binaries of good/bad, new/old, in/out, acceptance/rejection, camp and New York School poets turn their backs on the whole organization, synthesizing old and new, bad and good, kitsch and avant-garde. Sontag explains it this way:

Camp proposes a comic vision of the world. But not a bitter or polemical comedy. If tragedy is an experience of hyperinvolvement, comedy is an experience of underinvolvement, of detachment. . . . Detachment is the prerogative of an elite; and as the dandy is the 19th century’s surrogate for the aristocrat in matters of culture, so Camp is the modern dandyism. Camp is the answer to the problem: how to be a dandy in the age of mass culture. (288)

Of course the dandy’s decision to exempt himself from the “good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgment” is frequently seen as frivolous, irresponsible or nihilistic (as revealed earlier in the discussion of “sophistication”), rather than as a considered aesthetic choice. This helps explain why Ashbery has been seen as “the Doris Day of modernist poetry” (qtd. in Lehman, *Beyond*, 22) and why O’Hara was often reduced to “a whimsically

charming gadfly” (Bell 38). To understand why the dandy, the camp artist, and the early New York School poets were not taken seriously we need to look a little more closely at the historical relationship between comedy and seriousness in the poetic genre.

* * *

In his introduction to *The Comic Imagination in American Literature* (1973), Louis Rubin has noted that

In the hierarchy of letters comedy has always occupied a position below and inferior to tragedy. We tend to equate gravity with importance. The highest accolade we give to a humorist is when we say that even so he is a 'serious' writer--which is to say that although he makes us laugh, his ultimate objective is to say something more about the human condition than merely that it is amusing. (4)

While these distinctions are obviously less true today than when Rubin wrote this in the early 1970s, they would have been even more true in the time period under consideration here, the late 1950s and early 60s. Rubin points out that the fallacy with this kind of thinking is the equation of comedy with the “un-serious.” When we take the word “serious” to mean both “important” and “without humour” we do an injustice to a long tradition of comic writing (by Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Molière, Swift, Pope, Wilde, Twain, etc.) which is both very important and very funny (Rubin 4).

This prejudice against the comic seems to be especially true for poetry which, more than drama or prose, has the aura of “high art” about it. Kenneth Koch notes that many readers “think of a poem as a sort of ceremony--a funeral, a wedding--where anything comic is out of order. They expect certain feelings to be touched on in certain conventional ways. Dissociation, even obscurity, may be tolerated, but only as long as the tone remains solemn or sad enough” (“Interview with Jordan Davis” *AP* 211). This predisposition likely has much to do with the striking lack of humor in the canonized modern poets (think of Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Rilke, Mallarmé, etc.) Wallace Stevens is an interesting exception that proves the rule. Although the early Stevens of *Harmonium* is sometimes funny in a campy way that his contemporaries are not, the Stevens who was originally canonized is

the later, more philosophical, meditative, “mature” (and thus “serious”) poet of the “Supreme Fiction.” The Stevens who came to represent the “serious” claims of high modernism was not the “bric-a-brac poet” (as Frost called him), but the man who saw poetry as a replacement for religion and God:

What makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it. (*Necessary Angel* 31)

After one has abandoned a belief in God, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life’s redemption. (*Opus Posthumous* 185)

Stevens’s comments may indicate another reason why humour has been excluded from so much contemporary poetry. As Stevens suggests, poets have often been (“or ought to be”) considered as priestly, prophetic beings who draw from the unfathomable Imagination the supreme fictions by which we live. And this kind of work, the stock images of poets since the Romantics tell us, requires dedication, isolation, and solemnity. It is not surprising, then, that writers who grew up in a culture where this clichéd image of the poet reigned, often came to reproduce it (Vernon 307). This may be one reason for the general humorlessness of so many young poets in the 1950s (Robert Lowell, John Hollander, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Robert Bly, W.S. Merwin, Adrienne Rich, etc.) who were ready to assume the prescribed cultural role of prophet and preacher. Another reason for the 50s lack of humour is humorously summarized by Kenneth Koch in this portrait of the time from his autobiographical poem “Seasons on Earth”:

It was the time, it was the nineteen fifties,
When Eisenhower was President, I think,
And the Cold War, like *Samson Agonistes*,
Went roughly on, and we were at the brink.
No time for Whitsuntides or Corpus Christis--
Dread drafted all with its atomic clink.
The Waste Land gave the time’s most accurate data,
It seemed, and Eliot was the Great Dictator
Of literature. One hardly dared to wink
Or fool around in any way in poems,
And Critics poured out awful jereboams
To *irony, ambiguity, and tension*--
And other things I do not wish to mention. (*Rainway* 310)

The New York School poets, along with some of the others collected in Don Allen's *The New American Poetry*, succeeded in breaking with the time and with the stereotype of the poet, and in doing so opened new areas of content and tone for the writers of the 1960s. Among the many provocations they presented to the poets of Hall, Pack, and Simpson's rival anthology (*New Poets of England and America*), was a challenge to the philosophy and aesthetic that equated solemnity and seriousness. By creating poems which were experimental, challenging, new, *and* funny, the New York School poets reestablished a place for comedy in American poetry.

In the remainder of this chapter I would like to do two things. I will examine the unique comic and camp strategies and forms each of the three poets employs. Simultaneously, I want to examine these forms and strategies in light of their collective project of creating an indifferent avant-garde art. This is an art which moves beyond the dynamics of good and bad, beyond the confrontation of satire, and establishes instead a detached, non-cooptable, neo-avant-garde position.

Ko, Koch, and the Comics

"I remember John Ashbery and I were reading *The Faerie Queene* at the same time (1949 or 1950). When I asked him how he was liking it, he said it was wonderful, like reading an endless comic strip."

- Kenneth Koch (Interview with Jordan Davis, *AP* 194)

As critics have noted, Kenneth Koch is both the most insistently funny and the most consistently neglected of the New York School poets. The relationship between these two facts is probably a direct one since, as David Lehman notes, "in academic America the bias against humor in poetry is matched only by the bias in favor of the short, sincere, autobiographical anecdote" (*Last* 204).⁴ Koch's sprawling narrative and instructional poems, his humourous fantasies, surrealistic lists, and avant-garde plays are as far from the

short, sincere, “scenic” poem as one could imagine. Koch’s choice to write funny poems in an age of seriousness (the 1950s) must be seen as exactly that--a conscious, political *choice* based on thoughtful deliberation about what kind of poetry would be meaningful at that particular historical moment. Few critics have considered the aesthetic deliberations and political motivations which inform this decision (and here we must remember that not only Koch, but also O’Hara, Ashbery and most New York School poets made the choice in favor of comedy).

Koch has been at times (as in “Fresh Air,” for example) quite vociferous against the meditative lyric, as well as against a kind of academic poetry written by “the men with their eyes on the myth / And the Missus and the midterms” (*Rainway* 73). However, Koch’s ultimate goal is not to nullify the controlled meditative poem so popular in the 1950s, but rather to offer another set of poetic standards. In place of the pursuit of traditional “excellence” (as it was defined in magazines like the *Hudson Review*, *Kenyon Review*, and *Partisan Review*) Koch’s poems aim at something quite different, what David Lehman calls “the pursuit of happiness”:

What his poetry affirms is pleasure, which in Koch’s lexicon is linked closely with the state of peace and the possibility of personal happiness. . . . Koch *likes* his subjects, his characters and the things he puts into poetry . . . all are pleasures to be approved, not mocked. . . . To say that Koch’s poetry is a lot of fun is, then, another way of saying something a little grander--that the project of his poetry is pleasure, peace, and the pursuit of happiness. (“Dr. Fun” 57)

Koch pursues happiness through childlike play and fantasy, as well as through a near complete disregard for the rules and standards of “adult” poetry. (It is relevant here to recall that Koch wrote one of the first and finest books on teaching children to write poetry, *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* [1970]). Tossing aside the discriminations of “high” art (with varying connotations of the tragic, lyric, epic, serious, and avant-garde) and “low” art (comic, popular, entertaining, pleasurable, happy) Koch’s poetry indecorously combines the two, producing forms that take pleasure instead of “excellence” as their grounding assumption. In poems like “The Artist” Koch doesn’t disparage seriousness or “high” poetic intentions so much as offer the suggestion that there might be more to art.

One of the ways Koch's work moves towards dismantling aesthetic presumptions is by reviving, recycling, and reinventing forms which have particularly strong aesthetic biases attached to them. I would like to proceed by taking two such forms, one "high" and one "low" (the epic and the comic book), and examining the ways Koch uses these forms to interrogate biases of taste. By endowing the comics with the aura of "high" literary art, and by turning the epic into a wacky, comic fantasy, Koch manipulates formal expectations as a way of challenging what amount to elitist preconceptions about high and low art.

Kenneth Koch's first major publication, the 1959 *Ko, or A Season on Earth*, is a sprawling 438 stanza, 3504 line poem, which makes use of traditional epic form in order to dissolve epic expectations. Koch uses the technical strictures of *ottava rima* not to give the poem the ceremonial, formal tone of the traditional epic, but rather to imbue it with a sense of the absurd. The second canto takes us from a perilous adventure at sea to the morning milk run of a bottle-painting milkman. The canto begins:

If like a dairy truck the opening canto
Came to a close, the second should begin
In a like manner. Past the campo santo,
The drugstore, and the county airport, in
Great haste the milkman rides, begins to pant, "Oh,
How shall I ever paint in time to win
The bottle picture contest, which, it's true,
Is sponsored by the Cincinnati Zoo, . . . (*Seasons* 45)

Throughout, Koch makes great use of the rhyme scheme, particularly the forced rhyme of the ending couplet (true-Zoo), to bring epic pretensions "down to earth."⁵ Likewise, while Aristotle taught readers to expect the epic to treat a great and serious subject, Koch's epic swings madly from the mundane to the comic-fantastic. Its willfully haphazard contents feature the trials and tribulations of the Dodgers baseball club and their manager Slater, who plans to marry off the players as a publicity stunt. It follows British detective Andrews' worldwide search for his beloved, Doris, as well as for the notorious criminal, Hugh Fitz-James (a.k.a. Dog Boss) who wants to control all the dogs on earth. It presents

the befuddled Huddel's attempts to foil Dog Boss and install his pet, Ammily, as "the best spaniel in the kingdom" (62). Another of its many plots concerns Pennistrek, Fitz-James's cousin, who frees himself from the criminal's power and finds true love at a hog show in Tucson. Within the major plots are innumerable twists, turns, and sub-plots featuring characters such as king Amaranth the First; Joseph Dah, the Action Poet; Jim, the artist-milkman; Corinna, Dog Boss's love-slave; Higby, a resurrected catcher; and Inspector Smethergy of Scotland Yard -- not to mention a "human-fish," a circus elephant, and a number of intelligent dogs with names like Buddy's Prince and Pyrethrum's Sandro. As well as all these characters, the ostensible "hero" of this mock-epic is the decidedly unheroic Japanese baseball player, Ko, who has a fabulously powerful pitching arm but absolutely no pitching control.

Ko, whose name is obviously an abbreviated version of his creator's, shares with Koch a kind of marginal status within the conventional worlds of baseball (in Ko's case) and poetry (in Koch's). In Ko's Japan, baseball is a subject to be studied at the University, but not played, and so his decision to try out for the Dodgers makes him an outcast (a fact which is reinforced by his nationality on an all-American team). The poem begins:

Meanwhile at the University of Japan
 Ko had already begun his studies, which
 While making him an educated man
 Would also give him as he learned to pitch
 And catch--for Ko was more than a mere fan,
 But wished as a playing member to do a hitch
 With some great team--something to think about
 More interesting than merely Safe and Out. (*Seasons* 23)

Ko wants to move beyond the world of "academic baseball," which he studies under Professor Inyaga who "taught him [playing] baseball was a sin" (23). Likewise Koch, the only Ph.D. among the New York School poets, has set himself the goal of moving beyond the "academic" strictures placed on poetry by current tastes, as well as by generic classifications. In the age when "Eliot was the Great Dictator/ of literature" and "One

hardly dared to wink/ Or fool around in any way in poems,” Koch set out to write serious comic verse. At a time when serious poetry was expected to behave in certain circumscribed ways, Koch planned to write, as he says in “Days and Nights,” “poetry that is better than poetry” (*Rainway* 235). And to make matters more difficult Koch, the Japanese kid in an all-white league, chose to defy generic expectations not through a total break and reversal (as Ginsberg did three years earlier with *Howl*) but by adapting one of the “highest” genres, the epic.

After an exhausting forty hour flight from Japan to the Dodgers training camp in Tampa, Ko has a particularly telling dream in the first Canto of the poem. This occurs just before he is about to try out for the Dodgers:

. . . Ko saw warriors dressed in red and white
 Dancing across some paper, as if in flight.
 Each had a black mustache, one stroke of ink
 Per warrior, each had long white ink-drawn sleeves
 And a red vest, a spear whose tip was pink,
 And in the all-white background one perceives
 Some bright green tufts of grass. With a great wink
 One of the warriors looks at Ko, who leaves
 His dream immediately with a cry:
 “Oh am I still asleep? Who’s passing by?” (28)

The oblique references to *writing* more explicitly link the displacements of Ko and Koch.

The warriors with “ink-drawn sleeves” who trail across an all-white, paper-like background “wink” at Ko, and simultaneously Koch is winking at us, his readers.

Baseball, which has always been the most literary of American sports, here becomes a kind of loose metaphor for writing or for art in general. Through this correspondence, Koch is able to talk about baseball and poetry simultaneously.⁶ In fact, as Richard Howard pointed out in an early review, *Ko* continually reflects on its own construction:

Countless episodes of *Ko* reveal and revel in its own shortcomings, delusions, absurdities. . . . The poem . . . is fatally, or at least fitfully (in *fits*, as the old name for stanzas of heroic action had it) examining the poem, rejecting or *showing up* its own criteria by showing them, in order to substitute other possibilities, other *interests*” (283).

What *Ko* is interested in, more than baseball, detectives, villains, dogs, or milk-bottle art, is its own formal experiments, its trying the boundaries of the epic poem, and the boundaries of readerly expectation. Among other things, *Ko* is about testing assumptions as to what constitutes art, what counts as epic poetry and why. With this in mind, I would suggest that the poem is not a mock-epic, since this in fact constitutes another established genre. *Ko* does more than simply invert epic conventions, and in fact retains some epic gestures, and uses them sincerely (as in the Andrews/Doris love plot). *Ko* is about creating a new set of standards, new possibilities, and its form is perhaps best described by a new classification suggested by Patrick Murphy: the verse novel.

Murphy's "The Verse Novel: A Modern American Poetic Genre" describes and analyzes a new type of American long poem which doesn't fit with previous historical genre definitions such as romance or epic. The verse novel employs formal characteristics we usually associate with prose fiction: plots, characters, settings. Moreover, Murphy argues that many modern American long poems have become "novelized" in the Bakhtinian sense of the word. Bakhtin explains the novelization of other genres in this way:

They become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the 'novelistic' layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally--this is the most important thing--the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present). (qtd. in Murphy 63)

Ko is very much a polyphonic, novelized poem in the Bakhtinian sense. "Permeated with laughter, irony, humour, . . . [and] self-parody," it evolves in part through "speech events" and stories narrated from different points of view, all of which are given equal weight. Personal anecdotes and reported action by characters such as Slater, Higby, Pemmistrek, Andrews, and others all add to the carnivalesque quality of the poem. Furthermore, contra the Greenberg aesthetic of purity, these stories foreground heterogeneity and impurity, helping to create a text which no longer fits one of the binaries of high/ low, avant-garde/ kitsch.

As well, *Ko* leans towards the complexity and constant change of the novel rather than the greater simplicity and prosodic repetition of epic verse precursors which are structured with oral transmission in mind. *Ko*'s complexity is reflected not only in its multiple, interconnected plots, but also in its high level of self-consciousness. *Ko* is aware not only of historical precursors such as Ariosto and Byron (models who Koch emulates, updates, and parodies at different moments), but also of a wide mix of other genres (fairy tales, baseball novels, detective fiction, tall tales, Harlequin romance, etc.)

The usefulness of this new category of the verse novel is that it allows us to ask questions about poems like *Ko* that we might not have previously asked. Murphy summarizes:

From concerns with lyrical intensity, epic scope, or poetic language . . . critics can shift their attention to the action of the poem, its narrative development, and its dialogical interanimation through both intertextual and intratextual double-voicing. From focusing on isolated segments and stylistic elements, the critic can turn to focusing on the relationships of utterances and themes, speaking subjects and their practical and philosophical behavior. (69)

There is another key question that we rarely ask of epic poetry--or for that matter of poetry in general. This question, which a novelized, carnivalesque poem like *Ko* seems to invite, is at the heart of Koch's approach to poetry. The question is simply this: "Is it fun?" and to this we may add the more critical question: "if so, how and why is it fun?" "How does it engage in the pursuit of happiness?" Such questions about pleasure, entertainment, and fun have too often seemed "beneath" serious criticism and more properly applied only to the "lower" forms of popular entertainment (movies, comics, television, rock music). Part of the serious intent of *Ko* (and of New York School comedy in general) is to bring fun, happiness, excitement and entertainment back into the art of poetry. And a key step in this process is to get rid of distinctions between high and low, popular and elite. It is these distinctions and preconceptions which restrict readers from *enjoying* work they've been conditioned to believe one should only "take seriously."

* * *

We might think of *Ko* as an epic in the form of an “endless comic strip,” as John Ashbery once described *The Fairie Queene*. While *Ko* uses comic strip elements (slapstick humor, outlandish exaggeration, bizarre adventures, and whimsical fantasies) to recalibrate the value of the epic, elsewhere Koch lends the “high” art aura of poetry to comic strips themselves in order to elevate their potential for certain kinds of signification. By crossing the wires, treating comics as “high” and epics as “low” art, Koch complicates what, with certain forms of modernism, had become a clear dividing line between elite and mass culture. Like the pop artists of the day, Koch disregards distinctions of high and low, good and bad, and thus implicitly highlights the way these categories of cultural taste are used as a form of power to entrench certain forms and to undermine or disqualify others. Such gestures, though they do not follow Meyers’s scheme, are nonetheless rightly seen as part of the politics of camp which makes its intervention here at the level of taste (rather than the level of sexuality).

In his 1995 interview with Jordan Davis, Koch talks about the fact that his writing has long been influenced by comics, a form he has been fascinated with since childhood when his ambition was to become a comic strip artist (“I was deterred, though, by my fear that I wouldn’t be able to draw the characters so they would look the same every time” [AP 194]). Koch is interested not only in the celebratory humor of comics, but also in their potential to provide new *forms*:

The comics format suggested new ways of talking about things and dividing them up. . . . In a comic strip you can emphasize *any* detail or moment of the story--the pattern of the hero’s necktie, a bus passing outside the window, a grin, a tear drop. I enjoyed doing things like that a lot in *Ko*. (AP 195)

What comics offer to poetry is a new way of presenting material. They require readers to move sequentially, by frames, in a way different from prose or poetic lines. They invite new kinds of pacing, and new kinds of attention which are again different from lyrical or narrative poems. They also open a whole realm of relationships between visual imagery and written words. Koch experiments with these relationships in different ways. Some

poems use the visual form of the comic strip, with its sequential division into frames, but replace visual imagery with linguistic signifiers. “Birth Comics” (Appendix A), for example, creates a domestic narrative in sentences and sentence fragments. In this case, the pace of the story, controlled by its division into frames, becomes, in essence, the story itself. The comic strip form highlights the way small linguistic units (“HE DANCES WITH HER”) can suggest a great deal of semantic content. In a variation of the sequential narrative, “Appliqué Comics” (Appendix B) begins with sentences but ends with a series of juxtaposed word/images: FLOWERED ARMCHAIR, SMALL ROUND TABLE, SEA, HAND LOTION, SHARK, CEMENT--which suggest their own absurdist drama. In these comic strip poems, Koch inverts the cliché that a picture is worth a thousand words by allowing words to stand in for an infinite variety of possible pictures.

In “Sad About You” (Appendix C), the comic strip form allows for the repetition of the simple phrases GOOD DAY, BAD DAY to imply an engaging unwritten narrative. Here a whole relationship and its aftermath, with the attendant feelings of loss and frustration, are distilled in three words. The poem is compelling precisely because of the childlike emotional simplicity it both expresses and replicates. The close relationship of visual structure and language moves this poem, and others like it, in the direction of concrete poetry--though ultimately this is not the best way of defining Koch’s work.⁷ Another poem, “You’re Amazing” (Appendix D), plays with the expressive nature of language and scale to create an ingenious comic/conceptual poem of two words. Here Koch uses lessons of scale learned from the Abstract Expressionists, and used in a similar manner to Koch by pop artists like Claes Oldenberg, who made hamburgers and other mundane items monumental by increasing their scale. Other productions, like the “Leda and the Dog” series (Appendix E), combine the varying typographies of hand-drawn words and visual images to create more complex single frames which also combine in sequential order.

Like “Leda and the Dog,” “The Dead White Man Comics” (Appendix F) are composed of more complex, full-page images which combine in sequence. Here Koch takes a serious academic issue (and at the time a “hot” topic): the state of the canon and the politics of inclusion, and turns it into fodder for the funny pages. With typical New York School wit he translates the generic “Dead White Man,” who plagues English course syllabi, into an absurd comic book skeleton who shouts things like “BOUHOUHAHAHA! ALL THE BOOKS ARE MINE! MINE! MINE!” As Sontag says of camp in general, Koch here “converts the serious into the frivolous” (276). But the gesture of conversion itself is not purely frivolous; Koch’s comedy provokes further consideration of the issues. An interesting feature of the first frame of the comic is that the “books,” “musical compositions,” and “paintings”—the entirety of the Dead White Man’s canon—are all completely blank. These empty vessels may be read in several ways. On one hand, they may represent the modernist aesthetic of purity (à la Greenberg) pushed to its furthest extreme. These vacant artworks would then mark the end point of a project habitually anxious about contamination, an art dedicated to purifying itself of all extraneous heteroglossia, an aesthetic “narrow[ed] and rais[ed] to the expression of an absolute” (Greenberg 5). Another reading might take these empty works to suggest the absolute importance of the audience in the construction of meaning. Shifting the emphasis from a modern focus on the individual artist to a postmodern focus on the reader’s role in the construction of meaning, the comic strip poem would then imply that the discourse of the canon debates needs to focus on not only *what* we read but *how* we read. This would again be a camp or neo-avant-gardist intervention against the dominance of entrenched, elitist taste. Another interesting and humorous feature of this frame is that the only composition by the Dead White Man that we can actually read is his personal ad: “DWM, SMD, SEEKS DWF . . . FOR EASY-GOING LITERARY ARTISTIC AND MUSICAL CONVERSATION AND POSSIBLY DEEPER INVOLVEMENT. MUST BE LIVING OR DEAD AT TIME OF RESPONSE TO AD.” The ad serves a typically double camp

function of simultaneously humanizing and burlesquing the Dead White Man who, in much discourse, becomes a generic, solemn figure. By representing him not through “great works” but through personal needs (in another frame, a rather pathetic Dead White Man head is presented “LOST IN THE CROWD OF WRITERS AND ARTISTS / NO ONE HAS AS YET ANSWERED HIS PERSONAL AD / HE ANXIOUSLY SCANS THE FACES OF THE CROWD”) Koch invites us to consider the Dead White Man as a person instead of as a concept. Moreover, Koch turns the proverbial purveyor of canonized taste, Sontag’s “man of good taste,” into a preposterous figure who dances on his own grave shouting “IF BUT ONE PERSON READS ME, THEN I AM NOT REALLY DEAD!!!” The butt of Koch’s humour here is *both* the overly solemn positions represented by the Dead White Man and the canon reformers who would destroy him. Koch’s camp is aimed at both sides of the debate in order to suggest a third, non-antagonistic position which would move outside of the binaries set up by the very terms “canonical” and “non-canonical.” Like Duchamp’s criticism of the atheist who ultimately affirms God by his or her rejection, Koch’s comics imply that canon antagonists ultimately serve to reinforce the canon. The only way to defeat the canon, by New York School lights, is to be indifferent to it, to ignore its right to exist.

One final example of Koch’s rehabilitation of the comic strip form is his 1970 production *Interlocking Lives*, created in collaboration with pop artist Alex Katz. Katz’s line drawings (which are considerably more achieved than Koch’s) coupled with the poet’s clever narratives “raise” this comic book to the level of art book--and at the same time complicate the boundaries between these two genres. *Interlocking Lives* consists of five stories (entitled “Interlocking Lives,” “The Bullfighter,” “Off to Mexico,” “Father and Son,” and “Jim as a Young Man”) which are each composed from the same twenty-one pictures, arranged in different order for each story. By using the same visual content to create five very different narratives, *Interlocking Lives* becomes a kind of blueprint for narrative construction, showing how an infinite number of plots can be generated from the

same materials. Moreover, this method, following the Duchampian model, highlights the *randomness* rather than the necessity of the artist's shaping vision: we have the sense that *any* order might make a story (in the same way that a broom might make just as good a readymade as a snow shovel). Another unique feature of these stories is that while all the images include speech balloons (in typical comic-strip fashion), all of the balloons are left empty. This is another way of downplaying the artist's unique, personal vision, and instead leaving the form open and inviting reader participation. The empty balloons create the almost irresistible temptation to fill them in—either in one's own mind, or on the page (as my copy from the library indicates). Furthermore, the empty balloons suggest that *any* way of filling in will be acceptable, that no one way takes priority. Here again we see Koch's preference of a postmodern belief in many routes and many stories to a modernist belief in metanarrative: in the one, best-told story. *Interlocking Lives* uses all kinds of discourse, both "high" and "low": from fables and folk tales to philosophical speculation ("philosophy is a struggle between reason and despair. For the nihilist, reason is permanently pinned to the mat"). It combines Freudian dream sequences with deadpan American humor (in a manner often reminiscent of Ashbery's illustrated poetry book, created with artist Joe Brainard, *The Vermont Notebook* [1978]). From talking dogs to Italian counts to American football players, no one's voice gets the final say in this pop art mixture of the language of advertising and the language of art.

By offering a number of different uses for the comic strip form, Koch shows (as he did earlier in "Crone Rhapsody") that forms themselves hold no implicit ideological or aesthetic value. The comic strip, like the sestina, is simply another vehicle which can be used for different ends. Just as one can write a silly, kitschy sestina, one can also make a serious comic book.⁸ What is important, as Blasing noted earlier, is not the form but the *rhetoric*, or the politically-inflected way the form is used. An important part of Koch's aesthetic project has been to actualize this idea by revaluing the entertaining, popular forms that have been so deprecated by certain modernists. Koch has worked in many genres to

raise the status of these discredited forms as an antidote to high modernist elitism and to the somber conditions of 1950s verse that this elitism produced.

Frank O'Hara and the Hollywood Aesthetic

I am ashamed of my century
for being so entertaining
but I have to smile
- Frank O'Hara, "Naphtha" (CP 338)

In his 1972 review of Frank O'Hara's *Collected Poems* Kenneth Koch, arguably one of the poet's best critics, summarizes his friend's work in this way:

O'Hara's poems are buoyant, exuberant, wild, personal, open in troubling and troublesome ways, sometimes humorous, often about seemingly ordinary or trivial things, and radically original in form. They are the result of an unfamiliar aesthetic assumption: that what is really right there, in the poet's thoughts, fantasies, and feelings, is what is richest in possibility and worth the most attention. (AP 23)

While Koch's comments are fairly general, they are especially good at underlining the radical simplicity of O'Hara's "aesthetic assumption." Buoyancy, exuberance, and excitement about the personal, about "what is really right there, in the poet's thoughts, fantasies, and feelings," are what give many O'Hara poems their unique, irresistible humour and charge. This far from simple reproduction of excitement and energy in poetic form is, I suspect, what has drawn so many readers to O'Hara's work. And the delight of this personal, chatty, affectionate voice is undoubtedly related to these readers' unabashed, uncomplicated *enjoyment* of O'Hara. It is possible to enjoy O'Hara's work as one enjoys a Hollywood musical, an engrossing trashy novel or television show, a melodrama or soap opera. O'Hara's poems are, in a way, like those extravagant Hollywood musicals of the poet's childhood in the 30s and 40s--the Busby Berkley type, with their emphasis on atmosphere, mood and glamour; their big budgets and large casts of stars; and their open indulgence in sentiment and sexuality. It is this combination of buoyancy, extravagance,

“Frank was so sure of his own reactions towards works of art that he did not need to be aggressive. He had absolute integrity without self-righteousness. . . . many of us, because of Frank’s presence, learned to see better” (qtd. in Perloff, *O’Hara* 75). O’Hara’s remarkable rise through the ranks of the Museum of Modern Art, where he began selling postcards in the bookshop in 1951 and ended as Associate Curator, with an impending promotion to a full curatorship at the time of his death (July, 1966), is a testament to his remarkable sense of taste (Feldman 25-6). Given these facts how does one account for O’Hara’s simultaneous championing of Jackson Pollock and Mutt & Jeff? his equal enthusiasm for avant-garde theater and Hollywood film?

Instead of viewing O’Hara’s inclusiveness as a lack of discrimination, I think it is best seen as the application of new standards of judgment. These standards are based not on codified tastes, but rather on eclectic, odd, “queer” personal enthusiasms. These standards are informed by the same childlike energy and “foolish” joy which propel poems like “Poem (Khrushchev is coming. . .)” or “Ave Maria,” which comically pleads a case for the subversive value of the movies (against traditional institutions of “family values”):

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
 they won’t hate you
 they won’t criticize you they won’t know
 they’ll be in some glamorous country
 they first saw on a Saturday afternoon or playing hookey
 they may even be grateful to you
 for their first sexual experience
 which only cost you a quarter
 and didn’t upset the peaceful home (CP 371-2)

What “Ave Maria” and other poems declare is a willingness to sponsor, or more specifically to *love* not only authorized, “high” art forms (and here “high” may be conceived in a classical, moral, or avant-garde tradition) but also unauthorized, popular

forms, like the movies. In what follows I want to consider the movies, and a number of O'Hara's almost dozen film poems, as perhaps the most complete representative of the "unauthorized" form of entertainment. Like comics for Koch, movies for O'Hara offer not only a world of enjoyment, but also a new set of standards to escape the limiting dynamics of codified tastes based on distinctions of high and low. But unlike Koch's, O'Hara's considerations of, and camp interventions into, the area of taste also carry politically-charged messages more in line with Meyers's understanding of the subversive nature of camp.

* * *

O'Hara uses the binaries of high/ low, avant-garde/ kitsch to structure the opening of one of his most famous film poems, "To the Film Industry in Crisis" (1955):

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! (CP 232)

O'Hara's comic derision of both classical high art (the "promenading Grand Opera") and the "swarthy" avant-garde (with its upper case pretensions to "Emotive Fruition" and "Poetic Insight"), takes on the value of both an aesthetic and a *moral* decision in the second stanza:

In times of crisis, we must all decide again and again whom we love.
And give credit where it's due: not to my starched nurse, who taught me
how to be bad and not bad (and has lately availed
herself of this information), not to the Catholic Church
which is at best an oversolemn introduction to cosmic entertainment,
not to the American Legion, which hates everybody, but to you,
glorious Silver Screen, tragic Technicolor, amorous Cinemascope,
stretching Vistavision and startling Stereophonic Sound, with all
your heavenly dimensions and reverberations and iconoclasm! (CP 232)

O'Hara's poem is not just about choosing popular art over high art, it is also about the moral dimensions of such a decision. The "starved nurse," whose puritanical morality allows her (and her charges) only to see how one can be "bad" or "not bad" (as opposed to good), represents the same kind of oversolemn, intolerant, "right-thinking," homophobic worldview shared by the Catholic Church and the American Legion. Against this worldview, O'Hara proposes another institution, the glorious Silver Screen, which in its "heavenly dimensions and reverberations and iconoclasm" suggests a whole new set of aesthetic and moral standards. The movies' "iconoclasm" (a word with the aural echo and thematic suggestion of "orgasms") subvert not only a set of aesthetic standards regulated by the concept of "high" art, but also, in subtle ways, a set of moral and sexual standards represented by the starved nurse and company.

Poems like "To the Film Industry in Crisis," "Ave Maria," "In the Movies," "Vincent and I Inaugurate a Movie Theater," "An Image of Leda," and the James Dean series do more than simply authorize and raise the stakes of a medium which, in the fifties, still had "compromising associations with the cheap and urban, the immigrant working classes, the uneducated, the low, and the popular" (Goble 86). These poems also present the movies and certain Hollywood stars as media through which to read and construct a new set of aesthetic and moral standards--iconoclastic, willful, playful, exuberant, queer--for art and life. As so often in O'Hara's work, this set of standards in "To the Film Industry in Crisis" is encoded in a list of proper names. The names of Hollywood stars, like those of friends and other artists dropped constantly in O'Hara's work, point to a whole world of extra-literary experience that many O'Hara readers share in their common enthusiasm for certain aspects of the movies. "To the Film Industry in Crisis" continues:

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, her bordello radiance and bland remarks, Rudolph Valentino of the moon, its crushing passions, and moonlike, too, the gentle Norma Shearer . . .

.....
 Marilyn Monroe in her little spike heels reeling through Niagara Falls . . .
 and Dolores del Rio

eating orchids for lunch and breaking mirrors, Gloria Swanson reclining, and Jean Harlow reclining and wiggling, and Alice Faye reclining and wiggling and singing, Myrna Loy being calm and wise, William Powell in his stunning urbanity, Elizabeth Taylor blossoming, yes (CP 232)

What these stars have in common is that almost all of them, for one reason or another, have become the heroes and heroines of what Vito Russo has called “the celluloid closet.” In his study with the same title, Russo presents the thesis that while homosexuality remained “unspeakable in our culture” it all the more powerfully haunted “the dim recesses of our celluloid consciousness” (6) in forms that ranged from the threatening to the provocative. The stars whom O’Hara (and a whole subculture of gay viewers) admired and idolized, came to represent alternative positions for viewers who could not identify with the standard, socially-authorized roles of male as stoical hero, and female as passive object of male desire. Though their various camp-like exaggerations and theatricalizations, their provocative androgyny, and/or their performative gender play, these stars (and others like Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, James Dean, and Montgomery Clift) have held an enormous fascination for a large subculture of gay and lesbian viewers. This is a culture for which O’Hara has also become an important spokesperson.

O’Hara ends his poem, in the simultaneously exaggerated and sincere mode of camp, with a gushing tribute to Hollywood and the star system:

and to all you others, the great, the near-great, the featured, the extras
 who pass quickly and return in dreams saying your one or two lines,
 my love!
 Long may you illumine space with your marvelous appearances, delays
 and enunciations, and may the money of the world glitteringly cover you
 as you rest after a long day under the kleig lights with your faces
 in packs for our edification, the way the clouds come often at night
 but the heavens operate on the star system. It is a divine precedent

you perpetuate! Roll on, reels of celluloid, as the great earth rolls on! (CP 232-3)

In part, O'Hara is following standard conceptualizations of the day which lent the connotations of religion to the movies, imagining the theater as a place of worship where "fans" (fanatics) came to pay their respects to the latest Hollywood "idols" (Bell-Metereau 15). But there is also something more specific to the kind of "edification" O'Hara finds from these particular stars. One of the main things that the performances of stars like Mae West and Rudolph Valentino, Marilyn Monroe and Johnny Weissmuller demonstrate is the flexible, unfixed, performative nature of gender roles. West, Monroe, Jean Harlow (the archetypal sexpot star of movies like *Platinum Blonde* [1931] and *Bombshell* [1933]), Alice Faye (another Harlow-esque bleached blonde who was eventually ousted by Betty Grable [Katz 405]), and Gloria Swanson (the reigning queen of silent film glamour)--all of these women exaggerate the gestures of femininity to such an extent that they call attention to the fact that femininity itself is a performance, a construct, an act. In this way these stars enact, as does the drag queen and female impersonator, a deconstruction of "natural," "authentic" gender roles (Ross, "Uses" 159-60). The flamboyant seductiveness of these female actors is both titillating and ridiculous, and thus their performances bring us face to face with the ways we construct otherness and desire. Mae West's "bordello radiance" coupled with her "bland remarks" both illustrate and mock the artifice of femininity. In a remarkably duplicitous performance, West on the one hand offers male viewers what they're *supposed* to want, and on the other hand laughs at them (and encourages them to laugh at themselves) for wanting it. In fact, Hollywood's different constructions of femininity--illustrated perfectly in the transformation of Myrna Loy's character from the "exotic vamp" (a part she played in over sixty films in the 1920s) to the bubbly perfect wife (played opposite William Powell in *The Thin Man* series in the 1930s)⁹--ultimately show how there is no authentic femininity, only different roles which become more or less acceptable at different historical moments.

This same dynamic of stretching, exaggerating, performing and, ultimately (if unconsciously), questioning gender roles applies to male actors as well as female. One of the ways this occurs is when male actors freely perform in ways that have been socially typed as feminine. The range of “feminine expression” is fairly broad since typically masculinity has been signaled by a *lack* of emotional gesture (Bell-Metereau 9). When contrasted with the stoical, straight-faced performances of the “strong, silent type” (John Wayne, Charlton Heston, Humphrey Bogart, etc.) almost *any* emotional nuance may be read as feminine. The first actor on O’Hara’s list, Richard Barthelmess, the silent film star whom Lillian Gish described as having “the most beautiful face of any man who ever went before the camera” (Katz 86) is a good example of a challenge to this narrowly defined masculinity. Barthelmess’s sensitive character and performance in *Tol’able David* (1921) calls into question traditional associations of masculinity with aggression and “toughness.”

Rudolph Valentino is another star who became famous for subverting gender decorum with a provocative kind of androgynous masculinity. Valentino’s screen persona of the exotic Latin lover who “moved gracefully and gazed at his heroines with a mixture of passion and melancholy” was revered by women “as a symbol of mysterious, forbidden eroticism” (Katz 1182). On the other hand, his “feminized” masculinity which inverted recognized codes of male behaviour, was experienced as an affront or a threat to certain male viewers who found “his acting ludicrous, his manner foppish, and his screen character effeminate” (Katz 1182). One *Chicago Tribune* reporter, who undoubtedly spoke for many viewers whose idea of masculinity was threatened by Valentino, wrote: “When will we be rid of all these effeminate youths, pomaded, powdered, bejeweled and bedizened, in the image of Rudy--the painted pansy?” (in Katz 1182). Valentino played with the boundaries between male and female, using the tease of otherness (both ethnic and sexual) as a form of seduction. Such gender play would also become an important part of the appeal of later gay actors, like James Dean and Montgomery Clift, who also proved to be highly attractive both to straight female and gay male audiences. Dean and Clift

performed with a unique combination of “feminine” sensitivity and “masculine” virility as they acted or “passed” as straight male characters.

At the opposite extreme (though closely related) to Valentino’s “effeminate manliness” is the “macho manliness” of the elaborately-staged Tarzan films. These films’ exaggerated enunciations of strictly polarized gender roles (“Me Tarzan, You Jane”) ultimately have the effect of calling those roles into question as staged, theatricalized performances. Or at least a camp reading of the film (on Meyers’s side of the spectrum) has that effect--for most viewers, the films probably reinforce rather than deconstruct gender roles.

For O’Hara, Hollywood’s heavenly power and “divine precedent” was two-fold. On one hand, the extravagant, over-the-top glamour of stars from Rudolph Valentino to Elizabeth Taylor was particularly appealing to a young gay artist in the 1950s whose current models for excellence (in the two most important genres) were the rigid balances of the New Critical poem and the heroic, macho individualism of the Abstract Expressionist canvas. Only in Hollywood (and later in pop art, which appropriated so many of the images and strategies of Hollywood) could the young poet find an *American* version of glamour--a quantity which O’Hara and many of his predecessors had turned to Europe to find in the Symbolists, Dadaists, and Surrealists.¹⁰ On the other hand, though closely related, for this openly gay poet, Hollywood provided avenues of *identification* not readily available to gay and lesbian viewers elsewhere. Men and women who failed to find role models in the narrow heterosexual types of the 1950s, found them by reading into (and reconstructing) certain film stars’ subtle disruptions of these types. Gay men, it has been argued, identified with powerful female stars as *emotional subjects*--empathizing, for example, with Bette Davis and Joan Crawford’s “struggles to have men’s rights and women’s hearts” (Hadleigh 12).¹¹ For lesbian viewers, the androgynous appeal of Marlene Dietrich or Greta Garbo, stars who appeared in cross-dressed roles and who

refused to be characterized only as objects of male desire, provided crucial sources of identification.¹²

When O'Hara's poetry takes on the question of identification (as we will see shortly in "An Image of Leda"), he moves more towards Sontag's side of the spectrum than Meyers's. Meyers is interested in camp parody as a way of demonstrating the performative constitution of gender roles. Sontag, on the other hand, is interested in camp both as parody and *homage*. When viewers seek to close the distance between themselves and admired stars (through identification)--when they want to *be* Marlene Dietrich, rather than just appreciate her performance as a subversive, conceptual act--they are moving into the murky ideological waters of Sontag's side of the spectrum.¹³

One of O'Hara's first film poems, "An Image of Leda" (1950), provides an excellent sketch of the dynamics of identification as it applies to the movies. "The cinema is cruel / like a miracle," the poem begins, as it compares the cinema's power over its viewers to Zeus's power over Leda in the myth of Leda and the Swan. Like Leda's rape, there is something both violent ("cruel") and heavenly ("miraculous") about the way the cinema invades and overwhelms the consciousness of viewers:

. . . We
 sit in the darkened
 room asking nothing
 of the empty white
 space but that it
 remain pure. And
 suddenly despite us
 it blackens. Not by
 the hand that holds
 the pen. There is
 no message. We our-
 selves appear naked
 on the river bank
 spread-eagled while
 the machine wings
 nearer. We scream
 chatter prance and
 wash our hair! Is
 it our prayer or
 wish that this
 occur? Oh what is

this light that
 holds us fast? 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! (*CP* 35-6)

What does the cinema do to us so that “Our/ limbs quicken even/ to disgrace”? It invites us to see on the “empty white space” potential, uninhibited versions of ourselves (“We our/ selves appear naked/ on the riverbank”). The movies give “real/ pleasure in loving/ a shadow and caress-/ ing a disguise.” The “shadow” and “disguise” for the gay viewer in the 1950s, who was likely passing as straight in his or her daily life, may be those versions of the self which are deemed unacceptable by the light of day, but become permissible by the dim light of the silver screen where normative codes of behavior are relaxed.

A unique quality of the movies is that they present images and roles in a way that seems (at least to the speaker of this poem) more physical, more fully sensory, and more open to personal incorporation than literature (“the hand that holds / the pen”) can be. O’Hara seems to be suggesting that while literature holds an author-ized “message,” the message of the movies is ourselves. More specifically, the “messages” of the movies are the multiple, potential versions of ourselves opened through identification with any of the cinema’s many characters, male *or* female.

The version of the self released in O’Hara’s film experience is uninhibited and vocal (“screaming” . . . “chattering”) and also distinctly “feminine” by stereotypical gender expectations (“prancing” and “washing our hair!” are not actions we imagine Hollywood men of the fifties--the John Waynes, Marlon Brandos, Humphrey Bogarts, and Charlton Hestons--to be performing). What the movies allow for, O’Hara’s “An Image of Leda” suggests, are open identifications with male or female roles--and frequently with both. Socially-constructed gender codes are relaxed in the cinematic atmosphere of fantasy, not to mention the physical darkness and security of the theater--and thus it becomes safe to

identify with a range of emotional expressivity not bounded by gender. “An Image of Leda” reflects on the fact that identification is a key part of the filmic experience, and that the imaginative identifications opened by film have the ability to cut across lines of gender in powerful ways.

I believe that the kind of open identifications discussed here are central to the humor and delight embodied in both certain Hollywood films and certain O’Hara poems. It is not only viewers who identify themselves as gay or lesbian who may take delight in male or female actors who deviate from prescribed character and gender roles. In fact, such deviations are related to the essence of the comic which values childlike freedoms--of expression, movement, and play--over rigid adherences. If, broadly conceived, a “tragic” view of life is dominated by rigidities and restraints, by codes and rules dictating how one “ought” to act (the “starched nurse”), a comic view is characterized by flexibility and freedom. The great modern comedians like Charlie Chaplin embodied and performed this kind of freedom. One of the most appealing qualities of Chaplin’s little tramp was his remarkable ability to cross and play with established gender lines. Thomas Yingling points out that while Chaplin’s character is not specifically identified as gay, he “often exhibits behaviors that make his gender identification ambiguous (he sews, he flutters his eyelashes, he blushes, is shy and practically defenseless); the list could go on . . .” (245 n8). It is no surprise that some of Chaplin’s funniest and most affecting scenes involve moments of female impersonation (*A Woman*, 1915) and homosexual suggestion (*Behind the Screen*, 1916).¹⁴

Like Chaplin’s little tramp, the O’Hara persona similarly collapses some of our official distinctions about what constitutes suitably masculine and feminine behaviors. The freedoms of expression, emotion, sentiment, and sensibility which the O’Hara persona manifests in many of his open, exuberant poems calls into question many of the guidelines and codes of masculinity, so strictly enforced in the 1950s. Andrew Ross has made this point so convincingly in his reading of “The Day Lady Died,” a poem written on the death

of jazz singer Billie Holiday, that I want to include part of his original analysis here. “The Day Lady Died” (1959) is one of O’Hara’s most frequently discussed poems, and it has generally been read along fairly traditional lines. Critics like Charles Altieri have analyzed the poem by isolating a unifying theme in O’Hara’s seemingly random ramblings.¹⁵ Altieri suggests that this ostensibly naïve, spontaneous poem “participates in and evokes for consciousness a complex, satisfying, and relatively traditional lyric emotion” (*Enlarging* 120). The emotion is elegiac, and the poem’s apparently random details coalesce around the theme of “death, separation, and fragility of established order” (*Enlarging* 121). David Lehman is another critic who foregrounds this same interpretation: “The sharpness of the contrast between the vitality of the living man, attending to the errands and tasks of life, and the dead singer is like a last percussive note held in an expectant silence. The poem’s breathless ending virtually enacts the death of the ‘first lady of the blues’” (*Last* 202). While this interpretation certainly makes sense, there is something terribly unsatisfying about reading “The Day Lady Died” which, as Ross correctly notes, “has radically transformed modern poetry’s expectations of how it is licensed to represent everyday life,” (“Death” 383) as an expression of “relatively traditional lyric emotion.” Instead of focusing on the elegiac tone of the poem’s last four-line stanza then, Ross examines the overall tone of the preceding twenty-five lines which presents life “lived at high speed . . . like the three-minute rock and roll classics of its day” (383). The part of Ross’s ingenious analysis that particularly interests me here is his discussion of tone as it relates to gender:

The tone of the poem marks its obvious distance from the voice of legitimate masculinity; O’Hara’s is not the voice of the public sphere, where real decisions are made by real men and where real politics is supposed to take place. In fact, the hectic itinerary followed by his poet could just as well be that of a genteel lady about town, if you substitute a hairdresser for the shoeshine, the Russian Tea Room for the soda parlor, Rizzoli’s for the Golden Griffin, and so on. This is *a man on a shopping trip* The “day lady died” is an account of a lady’s day, played out by a man through an imagined lunch hour that is the very opposite of the power lunches being eaten in restaurants in the same few blocks by the men who make real history--no quandariness for them! (388-9)

Of course O'Hara's poem makes quandariness and aesthetic, "feminine" sensibility into desirable qualities (in a manner similar to the way James Dean and Montgomery Clift both began to authorize a more "sensitive," less stoical, less conforming masculinity). The humor and excitement of lunch poems like "The Day Lady Died" is that they put readers, along with O'Hara's poet-persona, out on the "muggy street beginning to sun." And these lunchtime locations are marked in part by their distance from the stuffy, confined "power lunches" going on in restaurants which O'Hara's readers most likely can't (and more importantly *don't want to*) afford. The cost of the power lunch is the price of corporate conformity: it means playing by the rules which, in the fifties, authorize certain behaviors and certain interests for each sex. By playing out this "lady's day" O'Hara's poem subverts these rigid categories and begins to imagine a less confined kind of masculinity where attention to style and emotion are perfectly acceptable.

O'Hara's use of camp and the open, "out" sensibility of many of his poems is responsible not only for their infectious humor and joy, but also for their unique status among the poetic artifacts of the 1950s and 60s. By rejecting the reigning models of his day (both aesthetic and moral), and instead finding inspiration in the recesses of high culture, O'Hara created an art that went beyond contemporary assumptions and standards of evaluation. Rejecting the standards of good and bad, high and low, avant-garde and kitsch, O'Hara created a body of work which could hardly be touched by the reigning New Critical vocabulary ("ambiguity, irony, tension / and other things I do not care to mention"). Instead of criticizing the status quo, be it moral or aesthetic, O'Hara simply ignores its right to exist. His poems like "The Day Lady Died" achieve the unique feat of simultaneously mocking and celebrating the culture to which they are so closely attached. David Bergman defines camp as a form of politically motivated gay praxis which chooses the path of "aggressive passivity." The same may be said for O'Hara's poetry:

Gay people have recognized that they can achieve their rights not by becoming the majority, but by finessing the entire issue of power. Or to put it another way, were gay culture to develop a discourse of power in parity to the dominant society's discourse, it would only end up reproducing the machismo which has oppressed it.

The aggressive passivity of camp has been among its most potent tools in giving gay people a voice that we ourselves could hear and then use to speak to others. ("Strategic Camp" 106-7)

Such a voice is an important part of O'Hara's art, and it borrows its tones not from the immediate poetic precursors (Yeats, Pound, Eliot) who lent their voices and visions to mainstream poetic art in the 40s and 50s, but rather from the other, "queerer" side of modernism (Stein, Williams, and the early "bric-a-brac" Stevens), whose less authoritative work has steadily gained canonical ground over the past forty years--in large measure because of the sponsorship of New American poets like O'Hara. Moreover, O'Hara's poetry borrows its tone and subject matter from pop culture (like Hollywood) and from (what would become) pop art--with its emphases on entertainment, fun, and glamour. Bergman notes that "Camp does not do away with the dominant society, but rather finds a way to live within it" (108). The same is true of O'Hara's aesthetic which subscribes both to an experimental art of the avant-garde outsider and the consumer passions and Hollywood glamour of the new American insider. It is this "double investment" which helped O'Hara produce a unique body of work whose influence on postmodern American poetry is yet to be fully measured.

Laughter and Indeterminacy: Ashbery's Variations on Camp

While O'Hara and Koch give us poems that are deliberately funny, Ashbery's tone is more difficult to place. With their reticence, their ironies, their rapid and easy variance from philosophical musing to surrealistic non sequitur to comic book dialogue to mixed metaphor and cliché, Ashbery's poems present a constantly *unstable* tone. Though no less a critic than Harold Bloom assures us that we are reading high romanticism, many readers of Ashbery have felt equally sure that they are reading low comedy--or at least a bit of both. Ashbery's shifting tone prevents us from knowing whether he is singing true songs of praise (in "Whitmanian expansiveness," according to Bloom ["Charity" 172]), or whether his tongue is firmly planted in his cheek. Here, for example, are some typically

problematic lines from “Soonest Mended,” which Bloom reads as a “representative poem” of Ashbery’s Romantic inheritance, a poem “astonishingly poignant and wise” (“Charity” 174):

Barely tolerated, living on the margin
 In our technological society, we were always having to be rescued
 On the brink of destruction, like heroines in *Orlando Furioso*
 Before it was time to start all over again.

 And then there always came a time when
 Happy Hooligan in his rusted green automobile
 Came plowing down the course, just to make sure everything was O.K.,
 Only by that time we were in another chapter and confused
 About how to receive this latest piece of information.
 Was it information? Weren’t we rather acting this out
 For someone else’s benefit, thoughts in a mind
 With room enough and to spare for our little problems (so they began to seem),
 Our daily quandry about food and the rent and bills to be paid?

 Better, you said, to stay cowering
 Like this in the early lessons, since the promise of learning
 Is a delusion, and I agreed, adding that
 Tomorrow would alter the sense of what had already been learned,
 That the learning process is extended in this way, so that from this standpoint
 None of us ever graduates from college,
 For time is an emulsion, and probably thinking not to grow up
 Is the brightest kind of maturity, for us, right now at any rate.
 And you see, both of us were right, though nothing
 Has somehow come to nothing; the avatars
 Of our conforming to the rules and living
 Around the house have made--well, in a sense, “good citizens” of us,
 Brushing the teeth and all that, and learning to accept
 The charity of hard moments as they are doled out,
 For this is action, this not being sure, this careless
 Preparing, sowing the seeds crooked in the furrow,
 Making ready to forget, and always coming back
 To the mooring of starting out, that day so long ago. (*Mooring* 231-3)

I have a great deal of trouble seeing this poem, as Harold Bloom suggests, as an “evenly distributed rumination” which proclaims “the wisdom of a wiser passivity” (“Charity” 168). Instead, it seems to be a poem of instability and unbalance: with its sudden appearances (from Ariosto to comic-strip star Happy Hooligan), its balancing act of “daily quandry” and epistemological crisis, its half-parodic self-reflexive turns, its platitudes (“time is an emulsion”), mixed clichés (“nothing has come to nothing”), contradictions

("careless preparing," "making ready to forget"), uncertainties ("--well, in a sense", "right now at any rate"), and mock certainties (that "good citizenship" should be defined by teeth brushing), etc. Like most of Ashbery's work, this is a precarious poem whose gestures of lyrical closure in *tone* ("... that day so long ago") are constantly undercut by the indeterminacy of its *content*. Bloom, as usual, reads the poem selectively, with romantic blinders that block out particular kinds of uncertainties, and encourage him to focus on seemingly "transcendental" (Bloom's word) moments such as the poem's ending: "... learning to accept/ The charity of hard moments"--the line which Bloom takes (or better mis-takes) for his essay's title.

Rather than the more straightforward hilarity and absurdity of Koch, or the exuberance of O'Hara, Ashbery's particular brand of humor comes precisely from the sense of imbalance his poems produce in readers. The sudden surprise, the unusual juxtaposition, the deformed cliché--in general, the sense of bemused bewilderment that Ashbery produces in so many readers--this is the essential ingredient of his comedy. His readers are watching (or perhaps better, engaging in) the performance of the very clever Fool who follows his own arcane and amusing rules of composition: stumbling forward, falling behind, advancing always by digression. And at the same time readers are excitedly anticipating the moment when the rug will be pulled out from under them. I suspect that most readers who delight in Ashbery want to be fooled and bewildered, and that they keep returning to his work because he continually finds new, more sophisticated or more silly, ways of perplexing them.

The imbalance that I am discussing, that may produce uncertainty, anticipation, or laughter, has been commented on by most critics of Ashbery. On the negative side, it is seen as "solipsistic aestheticism" or "an extreme instance of [the] dissociation of sensibility from intellect" (Hoffman 496, 560). Positively, it has been famously defined by Marjorie Perloff as Ashbery's provocative "indeterminacy" which produces the sense that "disclosure of some special meaning seems perpetually imminent" (*Indeterminacy* 11). In

general, this imbalance is related to Ashbery's "difficulty": the sense that his poems, and the "subjects" they ostensibly represent, are almost always blurry, shadowy, or distorted (as in the famous convex mirror). Ashbery's statements seem perpetually conditional, his lines perpetually open to revision. Indeed the "revising voice" (which may be either uncertain or mock-authoritative) is one of Ashbery's most familiar tones:

This, thus, is a portion of the subject of this poem
 Which is in the form of falling snow:
 That is, the individual flakes are not essential to the importance of the whole's
 becoming so much of a truism
 That their importance is again called in question, to be denied further out, and again
 and again like this.
 Hence, neither the importance of the individual flake,
 Nor the importance of the whole impression of the storm, if it has any, is what it is,
 But the rhythm of the series of repeated jumps, from abstract into positive and back
 to a slightly less diluted abstract.

Mild effects are the result. ("The Skaters," *Mooring* 199)

Another example of this indeterminacy, from *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975), displays Ashbery's habitual fondness for the question mark and the indeterminate pronoun "it" as ways of deferring meaning:

And then? Colors and names of colors,
 The knowledge of you a certain color had?
 The whole song bag, the eternal oom-pah refrain?
 Street scenes? A blur of pavement
 After the cyclists passed, calling to each other,
 Calling each other strange, funny-sounding names?
 Yes, probably, but in the meantime, waking up
 In the middle of a dream with one's mouth full
 Of unknown words take in all of these:
 It is both the surface and the accidents
 Scarring that surface, yet it too only contains
 As a book on Sweden only contains the pages of that book.
 The dank no-places and the insubstantial pinnacles--
 Both get carried away on the surface of a flood
 That doesn't care about anything,
 Not even about minding its own business. ("No Way of Knowing," *SPCM* 55)

Such passages or "fugues" (to adopt a suitable musical term which Ashbery uses in another poem) which constantly gesture towards but never name "it" are, in Ashbery's words, "a kind of fence-sitting/ Raised to the level of esthetic ideal" ("Soonest Mended," *Mooring*

232). Like the self-conscious camp of Oscar Wilde, Ashbery's poems present themselves as if always bracketed by invisible quotation marks which warn us not to take them "too seriously." Like the best instances of camp, there is a doubleness to many of Ashbery's gestures, especially his endings, which seem to offer traditional moments of lyrical closure, but whose slight oddness or off-ness forecloses on a completely unironic reading. (Consider, for example the ending of "Soonest Mended" quoted earlier, or recall the ending of "The Ecclesiast": "We are together at last, though far apart"). Given this frequent doubleness, our best strategy might be to take Ashbery seriously *and* not too seriously. We need to accept the fact that in Ashbery's poetry the trick is just as good as the real thing-or perhaps that the trick *is* the real thing:

Yes, friends, these clouds pulled along on invisible ropes
 Are, as you have guessed, merely stage machinery,
 And the funny thing is it knows we know
 About it and still wants us to go on believing
 In what it so unskillfully imitates, and wants
 To be loved not for that but for itself . . .
 ("The Wrong Kind of Insurance," *SP* 238-9)

This doubleness in Ashbery helps explain why Bloom is not entirely wrong in reading the poet as a traditional Romantic heir. Half the time the poet's gestures seem to be pointing in just this direction. Of course, the other half of the time Ashbery seems to be parodying or camping up these Romantic ideals. And the real problem, or the real humor, in Ashbery is that these are not in fact divided halves, but are inextricably linked, simultaneous moments.

A good example of this doubleness occurs with one of Ashbery's seemingly simplest, most anthologized poems, "The Instruction Manual" (from *Some Trees*, 1956). This poem has often been taken as a sincere representation of Romantic transport (à la Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," or Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight,") where the speaker and his readers, are carried "from the mundane and often tedious realities of our daily lives to this exotic, marvelous world, brimming over with a vitality that is clearly absent in the world of instruction manuals" (Moramarco, "Painterly," 448). Fred Moramarco argues that Ashbery's goal in this poem is to show us "that

literature and art can provide these moments of revitalization for us, and although we must always return to the real world, our esthetic encounters impinge upon our sensibilities and leave us altered” (448). David Lehman also offers a similarly straightforward, unironic reading. For Lehman, Ashbery is “at heart a romantic poet, who conceives of the Imagination as a realm apart from experience, or reality, or time. . .” (*Last* 30). Thus, the speaker’s transport to Guadalajara is “a parable of the imagination with its power to fulfill desire and supply any lack” (29). What both Lehman and Moramarco fail to notice is that the descriptive details of the poem, far from being “rich” and “vitalized” (Moramarco 448), are in fact utterly prosaic, banal, and uninspired:

Around stand the flower girls, handing out rose-and lemon-colored flowers,
Each attractive in her rose-and-blue striped dress (Oh! such shades of rose and
blue),
And nearby is the little white booth where women in green serve you green and
yellow fruit.
The couples are parading; everyone is in a holiday mood.
First, leading the parade, is a dapper fellow
Clothed in deep blue. On his head sits a white hat
And he wears a mustache, which has been trimmed for the occasion.
His dear one, his wife, is young and pretty; her shawl is rose, pink, and white.
Her slippers are patent leather, in the American fashion,
And she carries a fan, for she is modest, and does not want the crowd to see her
face too often.
But everybody is so busy with his wife or loved one
I doubt they would notice the mustachioed man’s wife. (*Mooring* 8-9)

Such shades of rose and blue indeed. The poem goes on in this monotonous, hackneyed way for three pages. It more closely resembles a high school “what I did for my summer holiday” composition than it does Keats or Coleridge (or, for that matter, O’Hara’s far more vibrant and interesting “I do this, I do that” poems)--which, appropriately, is what we might expect from the writer of an “instruction manual on the uses of a new metal” (5). Far from being charged with imaginative power and redemptive significance, these details are so packed with Ashbery’s deadpan wit that they constitute not a Romantic transport, but rather a mimicry of such transport.¹⁶ The little flower girls, the white hatted man and his “dear” wife, along with all the quaintly trite scenes of “young love, married love, and the

love of an aged mother for her son” (10) are instances not of authentic encounters but of *naïve camp* which intends to be serious but comes out as absurd:

But I have lost sight of the young fellow with the toothpick.
 Wait--there he is--on the other side of the bandstand,
 Secluded from his friends, in earnest talk with a young girl
 Of fourteen or fifteen. I try to hear what they are saying
 But it seems they are just mumbling something--shy words of love probably.
 She is slightly taller than he, and looks quietly down into his sincere eyes.
 She is wearing white. The breeze ruffles her long fine black hair against her olive
 cheek.
 Obviously she is in love. The boy, the young boy with the toothpick, he is in love
 too . . . (*Mooring* 9)

Such “aw shucks” scenes, with their *Leave it to Beaver* sentimentality, are perfect examples of what Susan Sontag calls “naïve, or pure, Camp” whose “essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails” (283). In “The Instruction Manual,” Ashbery consciously employs what might otherwise be read as naïve camp. His portrait of “exotic” Guadalajara, with the band playing schlock-romantic “*Scheherazade* by Rimsky-Korsakov,” while “everyone is in a holiday mood” is so bad it’s good.

While there seems to be this duplicity to Ashbery’s poem, in a way Lehman and Moramarco and undoubtedly countless other readers are correct. “The Instruction Manual” is Ashbery’s most anthologized poem not because of its subtle irony but because people have enjoyed it as “a version of the Greater Romantic Lyric” (Perloff, *Indeterminacy* 264) with its focus on reverie, daydream, and sentimental exoticism. What is uniquely Ashberian is the fact that his work can be read as both ironic and straight. There is a part of Ashbery that quite authentically enjoys and freely indulges in “bad” sentimental verse, both his own and others. How, if not as an example of “good” “bad” verse, are we to take a poem like “Some Words,” which Ashbery translated from the French of notorious poet-boxer-showman Arthur Cravan and included in both *The Double Dream of Spring* (1975) and his *Selected Poems* (1985)?:

Each hour has its color and forever gives place
 Leaving less than yon bird of itself a trace.
 In vain does memory attempt to store away
 The scent of its colors in a single bouquet

Memory can but shift cold ashes around
When the depths of time it endeavors to sound. (*Mooring* 274)

How again, should we take a poem such as “Into the Dusk-Charged Air,” whose romantic title is followed by five monotonous pages describing the flowing of various rivers:

The dark Saône flows silently.
And the Volga is long and wide
As it flows across the brownish land. The Ebro
Is blue, and slow. The Shannon flows
Swiftly between its banks. The Mississippi
Is one of the world’s longest rivers, like the Amazon.
It has the Missouri for a tributary.
The Harlem flows amid factories
And buildings. The Nelson is in Canada,
Flowing. Through hard banks the Dubawnt
Forces its way. . . . (*Mooring* 173-4)

Ashbery seems to be keenly interested in tediousness here, in seeing how far he can push bad poetry and what kind of response it will create. A final example, and another species of bad poetry, is from “Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox,” a poem we will consider shortly in detail, which plays on the work of one of the most famous (thus perhaps one of the “greatest”) bad writers of the nineteenth century:

So my youth was spent, underneath the trees
I always moved around with perfect ease

I voyaged to Paris at the age of ten
And met many prominent literary men

Gazing at the Alps was quite a sight
I felt the tears flow forth with all their might

A climb to the Acropolis meant a lot to me
I had read the Greek philosophers you see

In the Colosseum I thought my heart would burst
Thinking of all the victims who had been there first . . . (*Mooring* 239)

One way of reading such moments of patently “bad” or mundane writing, (and more like them), is by invoking the discourse of camp, which Sontag calls “a mode of seduction—one which employs . . . gestures full of duplicity, with a witty meaning for cognoscenti and another, more impersonal, for outsiders” (281). Ashbery’s sponsorship of bad taste

(which is closely related to his delight in the cliché and the hackneyed phrase) once again calls into question the distinctions of good and bad, high and low art, in the neo-avant-garde manner which aims, like its avant-garde precursor, at deconstructing the modernist Great Divide.¹⁷

Ashbery is interested in light verse like that of Ella Wheeler Wilcox, on the one hand for its comedic value as naïve camp, and on the other hand because it raises important questions about taste and about how we make distinctions between “light” and “serious” verse. In performing and examining the implications of light verse, Wheeler’s and Ashbery’s work engages questions that will be relevant both to Sontag’s and Meyers’s ideas of camp. Morris Bishop has suggested that we take light verse as serious (or “heavy”) verse’s shadow, the fool or child that exposes its nakedness. In “Light Verse in America,” he defines the genre in a way that seems particularly amenable to Ashbery’s aesthetic:

[Light Verse] is not poetry, in the high, pure, and proper sense; for poetry is an effort to discover truth and to reveal it in beauty, while Light Verse has no such lofty pretensions. It looks with suspicion on those who claim divine inspiration; it brings sublimity down to earth. . . . The aim of . . . Heavy Verse is to seek understanding in forms of beauty. The aim of light verse is to promote misunderstanding in beauty’s cast-off clothes. But even misunderstanding is a kind of understanding; it is an analysis, an observation of truth, which sneaks around truth from the rear, which uncovers the lath and plaster of beauty’s hinder parts (259).

With this idea in mind, we can see why Ashbery, whose goal was to sneak around established definitions of beauty and to find a position outside of the twinned gravities of “the classical” and “the avant-garde,” would find light verse particularly attractive.

Shades of Ella Wheeler Wilcox

Though critics may bow to art, and I am its own true lover,
It is not art, but heart, which wins the wide world over.
- E.W.W., “Art and Heart”

Ella Wheeler Wilcox is perhaps the most famous “bad” poet of the nineteenth century. Adored and voraciously purchased by countless readers who admired her for

alone,” and “It is easy enough to be pleasant, when life flows by like a song . . .,” Wheeler was, according to the *London Times* obituary (31 October 1919) “the most popular poet of either sex and of any age, read by thousands who never open Shakespeare.”

Wheeler was a poet for the middle class and of the middle way. “She believed,” wrote *Smart Set* editor Charles Towne in 1926, “that she was an evangelist who spoke in rhyme to her immense audience” (94). Her first book, *Drops of Water* (1872), was a collection of lilting, conservative temperance poems. This was followed by *Shells* (1873), a volume of cheerful religious and moral verses, and *Maurine* (1876), a sentimental verse narrative. Her real fame came, however, in 1883 when her *Poems of Passion* was rejected by a Chicago publisher as immoral. The publishers’ literary as well as moral sense might have been enflamed by references to the “Impassioned tide that sweeps through throbbing veins” and the “convulsive rapture of a kiss.” Nonetheless, the volume was snapped up by a more commercially-minded publisher who recognized the value of sensation, and sold more than sixty thousand copies in its first two years, scandalizing and titillating readers with verses like the following¹⁸:

Love, when we met, 'twas like two planets meeting.
 Strange chaos followed; body, soul, and heart
 Seemed shaken, thrilled, and startled by that greeting,
 Old ties, old dreams, old aims, all torn apart

 My being trembled to its very centre
 At that first kiss. Cold Reason stood aside
 With folded arms to let a grand Love enter
 In my Soul's secret chamber to abide.
 Its great High Priest, my first Love and my last,
 There on its alter I consumed my past. (“Surrender,” *Poems* 61-2)

Wheeler, who became known as the Poetess of Passion, went on to produce over forty more best-selling volumes of “romantic, unctuous verse in the ‘Oh God, the pain’ school” (According to the *Oxford Companion to American Literature* 721) with such memorable titles as: *Poems of Pleasure* (1888), *Men, Women, and Emotions* (1896), *Poems of Power* (1901), *Poems of Love* (1905), *Poems of Sentiment* (1906), *New Thought Common Sense and What Life Means to Me* (1908), *Poems of Progress* (1909),

The New Hawaiian Girl (1910), and *Poems of Problems* (1914). Though she was ignored or belittled by critics of the time¹⁹, she earnestly and steadfastly continued her work, maintaining that “heart, not art” was the essential ingredient for poetry. Her appeal grew steadily, particularly through the syndicated column of prose, poetry, and advice she wrote for various yellow-sheet newspapers, where she offered such optimistic adages as these:

There is nothing, I hold, in the way of work
 That a human being may not achieve
 If he does not falter, or shrink or shirk,
 And more than all, if he will *believe*.

Believe in himself and the power behind
 That stands like an aid on a dual ground,
 With hope for the spirit and oil for the wound,
 Ready to strengthen the arm or mind. (“Limitless,” *Poems* 121)

In the end, Wheeler’s astounding popular success may give us reason to agree with her biographer’s assessment that she was “not a minor poet, but a bad major one” (Ballou 98). What seems significant about her verse today is how hard it tries to be good: how excessive and passionate and dedicated is her failure. In other words, Wheeler has become the perfect object of camp. Her verse is best when it’s at its worst:

. . . I am one who lives to say
 My life has held more gold than grey
 And that the splendor of the real
 Surpassed my early dreams’ ideal. (qtd. in Lewis 48)

* * *

John Ashbery’s “Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a theme by Ella Wheeler Wilcox” might be seen as a kind of low key drag performance, in which the poet fondly performs and exaggerates the gestures of the original: its excess and cliché, its enchantment with emotion, sentiment, and “personal growth.” Like the drag queens who imitate Bette Davis, Judy Garland, Marlene Dietrich and other powerful women, Ashbery’s performance is not meant to ridicule Wheeler, but to *enjoy* her (though on slightly different terms than her own). Furthermore, Ashbery’s poem offers the flamboyant gestures of the original, its “passionate” mixture of Art and Heart, as a new set of artistic standards which move

beyond the strict classicism of the formalists and the antagonistic experimentalism of the avant-garde.

As its title suggests, Ashbery's composition/performance is divided into three stages. The "Variations" open with the final quatrain from Wheeler's poem "Wishing" which includes such philosophical reflections as these:

Do you wish the world were wiser?
 Well, suppose you make a start,
 By accumulating wisdom
 In the scrapbook of your heart:
 Do not waste one page on folly;
 Live to learn, and learn to live.
 If you want to give men knowledge
 You must get it, ere you give.

Do you wish the world were happy?
 Then remember day by day
 Just to scatter seeds of kindness
 As you pass along the way;
 For the pleasures of the many
 May be oftentimes traced to one
 As the hand that plants an acorn
 Shelters armies from the sun. (*Poems of Power* 18)

Taking Wheeler's shade image as the impetus for his performance, Ashbery spins it out, in the scrapbook of *his* (he)art, to absurd lengths:

And in places where the annual rainfall is .0071 inches
 What a pleasure to lie under the tree, to sit, stand, and get up under the tree!
Im wunderschönen Monat Mai
 The feeling is of never wanting to leave the tree,
 Of predominantly peace and relaxation.
 Do you step out from under the shade a moment,
 It is only to return with renewed expectation, of expectation fulfilled.
 (*Mooring* 238)

Ashbery's scrapbook is a collage which collects all kinds of language, from cliché and comic banality to Eliotic *Waste Land*-like quotation. While Wheeler's art is based on the soothing power of the cliché to comfort readers looking for easily swallowed truths, Ashbery uses but varies these clichés, twisting them into less comfortable forms:

Yes, the world goes 'round a good deal faster
 When there are highlights on the lips, unspoken and true words in the heart,
 And the hand keeps brushing away a strand of chestnut hair, only to have it fall
 back into place again.

But all good things must come to an end, and so one must move forward
 Into the space left by one's conclusions. Is this growing old?
 Well, it is a good experience, to divest oneself of some tested ideals, some old
 standbys,
 And even finding nothing to put in their place is a good experience,
 Preparing one, as it does, for the consternation that is to come. (238)

Readers accept the familiar homily that “all good things must come to an end” (this is exactly the kind of pacifying cliché Wheeler might have used in her advice column), but what does it mean to “move forward into the space left by one's conclusions”? How do I apply this to my life? Likewise, we might fairly easily understand why it is worthwhile “to divest oneself of some . . . old standbys,” but what would it mean to put nothing in their place? To have no ideals or beliefs? And how would this prepare one “for the consternation that is to come”? What consternation? What Ashbery is doing here is making us see just how *weird* clichés actually are, how surreal it is to expect that our experiences can be collectively summarized in this way--as if my experience should naturally be the same as everyone else's. The concept of the cliché is problematized by phrases that sound quite reasonable but in fact make no sense at all (“Yes, the world goes 'round a good deal faster/ When there are highlights on the lips, unspoken and true words in the heart,/ And the hand keeps brushing away a strand of chestnut hair, only to have it fall back into place again”). By simultaneously exaggerating and diverging from Wheeler, Ashbery reinvigorates the cliché, making it more difficult and seductive in a new (less comforting, more “indeterminate”) way. He moves us from “the feeling . . . of predominantly peace and relaxation” at the beginning of the Variations section, to the sense “That the tree should shrivel in 120-degree heat, the acorns/ Lie around on the worn earth like eyeballs, and the lead soldiers shrug and slink off” (239) at the end.

In the next, “Calypso,” section of the poem Ashbery employs bad high-school verse couplets as a way of performing and transforming Wheeler's view of the connection between poetry and personal growth. Throughout the poem, but in this section in particular, he plays with the idea that poetry must be an expression of “heart” and emotion:

Gazing at the Alps was quite a sight

I felt the tears flow forth with all their might

A climb to the Acropolis meant a lot to me
I had read the Greek philosophers you see

In the Colosseum I thought my heart would burst
Thinking of all the victims who had been there first

On Mount Ararat's side I began to grow
Remembering the Flood there, so long ago (*Mooring* 239)

Wheeler insisted throughout her career, and most zestfully in her famous manifesto poem

“Art and Heart,” that “It is not art, but heart, which wins the wide world over”:

Though perfect the player's touch, little if any he sways us,
Unless we feel his heart throb through the music he plays us.

Though the poet may spend his life skillfully rounding a measure,
Unless he writes from a full warm heart, he give us little pleasure. (*Poems* 52-3)

Ashbery takes equal pleasure in playing with this sentiment, and in turning it upside down:

This age-old truth I to thee impart
Act according to the dictates of your art

Because if you don't no one else is going to
And that person isn't likely to be you. (*Mooring* 240)

Thus, as his poem of noble travels and thoughtful morals (“Thinking of all the victims . . .

Remembering the Flood . . .”) progresses it becomes stranger, less moral, and more

surreal--less heartfelt and more artful:

On the banks of the Ganges I stood in mud
And watched the water light up like blood

The Great Wall of China is really a thrill
It cleaves through the air like a silver pill

While Wheeler asked her readers to dream of Christian simplicities (“Keep Love and

Sympathy and Faith alone in your Soul and you can Defeat Time”), Ashbery's Calypso

section advises us to

. . . trust in the dream that will never come true
'Cause that is the scheme that is best for you
And the gleam that is the most suitable too. (240)

The longest section of the poem, the prose collages which make up the “Fugue,” are fugal in two ways. First, as the musical derivation of the word suggests, this section is a polyphonic orchestration of voices and themes which combine, like music, more in an emotional or intuitive than a rational way. The second, psychiatric, derivation of the word may help highlight the obscured theme which organizes this section. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a fugue is “A flight from one’s own identity, often involving travel to some unconsciously desired locality. It is a dissociate reaction to shock or emotional stress . . . during which all awareness of personal identity is lost.” What organizes this meandering section of the poem are images and indications of fugue, forgetfulness, and some unmentionable “incident” (also alluded to as “these things” and “such issues”) which may occasion this fugal condition.

In the morning you forget what the punishment was. Probably it was something like eating a pretzel or going into the backyard. Still, you can’t tell. These things could be a lot clearer without hurting anybody. But it does not follow that such issues will produce the most dynamic capital gains for you. (241)

No one ever referred to the incident again. The case was officially closed. Maybe there were choruses of silent gratitude . . . The point is no ear ever heard them. Thus, the incident, to call it by one of its names--choice, conduct, absent-minded frown might be others--came to be not only as though it had never happened, but as though it never *could* have happened. Sealed into the wall of that season’s coming on. And thus, for a mere handful of people--roustabouts and degenerates, most of them--it became the only true version. (241)

Can it ever be resolved? Or are the forms of a person’s thoughts controlled by inexorable laws . . . So mutually exclusive, and so steep--Himalayas jammed side by side like New York apartment buildings. Oh the blame of it, the de-crescendo. My vice is worry. Forget it. The continual splitting up, the ear-shattering volumes of a polar ice-cap breaking up are just what you wanted. You’ve got it, so shut up. (242)

Weak as he was, Gustavus Hertz raised himself on his elbow. He stared wildly about him, peering fearfully into the shadowy corners of the room.

“I will tell you nothing! Nothing, do you hear?” he shrieked. “Go away! Go away!” (243)

“These [unmentionable] things” which “could be a lot clearer without hurting anybody”--this “choice,” “conduct,” or covered up crime (“the case was officially closed”)--point to what John Shoptaw calls the “homotextual” level of Ashbery poetry²⁰:

Many pleasures may be oftentimes traced to one illicit experience. This impossible theme was first announced in "Fragment" ("the incident is officially closed," *DDS* 84). In the discourse of the criminal justice system ("incident," "officially closed," "roustabouts and degenerates") the roustabout poet orchestrates his prosecutors. "For a mere handful of people," this criminalized, obliterated response to stimuli is not dismissed as an unspeakable aberration but trusted as the homosexual scheme of existence. (110)

The dissociative style of this last section--its shifting perspectives, voices, tones and scenes; its vaguely introduced characters (Peter and Christine, Mother and Alan, Professor Hertz); and its obscure transitional couplets ("Pink purple and blue/ The way you used to do" . . . "The crystal haze/ For days and days")--all these curious behaviours, and more, will be familiar to readers of Ashbery. One way of explaining this fugal style (a style which gives the impression of identity dispersal--as if each part is a lost, unconnected, unit) is suggested by theorists like Shoptaw and Thomas Yingling. In his study, *Hart Crane and the Homosexual Text*, Yingling argues that evasion and disguise have long been central to the thematics and stylistics of texts by gay men. He proposes that while gay men have historically had access to the means and codes of literary production because of their biological identities, they have, at the same time, been

unable to employ [these means] as they might because those codes denied validity to their experience as homosexuals. Thus, gay writers seem often to have found literature less a matter of self-expression and more a matter of codings: from Byron through John Ashbery, the consistent locus of parody in gay texts suggests a self-consciousness about what texts may and may not do. (25)

And, more to the point in this case, what texts may and may not say. Because gay authors have been "empowered to speak, but unable to say" they have, according to Yingling and other theorists, "hidden, erased, universalized, or otherwise invalidated not only their homosexual desire, but also the shape (or mis-shape) their lives have taken as a result of the social taboos against it" (26). Yingling argues that until recently "the homosexual has been almost literally unable to speak of itself coherently except in a vocabulary of remorse" (26). And this inability to speak from, or of, a coherent identity may be one useful way of explaining the dissociation of so many of Ashbery's poems.

While Yingling's discussion focuses on Crane, his fascinating analysis, particularly of the relationship between homosexual identities and "the problem of the subject," is quite applicable to Ashbery. He argues that homosexual identities problematize traditional ideas of subjectivity based on binary concepts of gender. "Western patriarchal culture has overwhelmingly solicited heterosexual rather than homosexual desire as the key to sanctioned social and legal identities," Yingling writes (29). Thus, "the homosexual encounters his sexuality as a division from himself" because he rejects "culturally central, bourgeois institutions of sexual pleasure" and participates instead in "*unsanctioned, decentered experiences and rituals. . . .*" (29). Because of the centrality of this rejection, homosexuality can become "an almost permanently radical experience of alterity and liminality" (29)--a description, it seems to me, which is an excellent way of summarizing the experience encoded in Ashbery's poems.

The language of allusion without direct reference, which speaks incessantly but never says ("There is something to all this, that will not elude us:/ Growing up under the shade of friendly trees, with our brothers all around" ["Variations" 238]) may be another quality Ashbery picked up on and found intriguing in Wheeler's poetry. While Wheeler's poems were censored and condemned in proper Victorian fashion for indecorous *enthusiasm*, what remains unnamed by the poet and her critics is the issue of *to whom* these passionate poems seem to be directed. In all the commentary I've found, everyone carefully skirts the fact that many of these fervent laments were written by a woman to *another woman*:

That one, with a smile like the splendour
 Of the sun in the middle-day skies--
 That one, with a spell that is tender--
 That one with a dream in her eyes--
 Cometh close, in her rare Southern beauty,
 Her languor, her indolent grace;
 And my soul turns its back on its duty,
 To live in the light of her face.

She touches my cheek, and I quiver--
 I tremble with exquisite pains;
 She sighs--like an overcharged river

My blood rushes on through my veins;
 She smiles--and in mad-tiger fashion,
 As a she-tiger fondles her own,
 I clasp her with fierceness and passion,
 And kiss her with shudder and groan. ("Delilah," *Poems* 24)

Many of Wheeler's poems, like Ashbery's, point towards some oblique, unmentionable incident, secret, or "crime":

Sometimes I think there is not space or room
 In all the earth for such a love as mine,
 And it soars up to breathe in realms divine. ("Individuality," *Poems* 7)

Once in the world's first prime,
 When nothing lived or stirred,
 Nothing but new-born Time,
 Nor was there even a bird--
 The Silence spoke to a Star,
 But I do not dare repeat
 What it said to its love afar:
 It was too sweet, too sweet.

.....
 For the great white star had heard
 Her silent lover's speech;
 It needed no passionate word
 To pledge them each to each.
 O lady fair and far,
 Hear, oh, hear, and apply!
 Thou the beautiful Star--
 The voiceless Silence, I. ("Love Song," *Poems* 26)

Of course Wheeler is generally far less oblique and subtle, both more innocent and more public than Ashbery:

I know, in the way that sins are reckoned,
 This thought is a sin of the deepest dye
 But I know, too, if an angel beckoned,
 Standing close by the Throne on High,
 And you, adown by the gates infernal,
 Should open your loving arms and smile,
 I would turn my back on things supernal,
 To lie on your breast a little while. ("Ad Finem," *Poems* 11)

Her poems are also dramatically self-censoring, with a confessional tone that leaves readers completely unsure about how to take them:

In the midnight of darkness and terror,
 When I would grope nearer to God,
 With my back to a record of error

And the highway of sin I have trod,
 There come to me shapes I would banish--
 The shapes of deeds I have done;
 And I pray and I plead till they vanish--
 All vanish and leave me, save one. . . . ("Delilah," *Poems* 24)

. . . Show me the way to that calm, perfect peace
 Which springs from an inward consciousness of right;
 To where all conflicts with the flesh shall cease,
 And self shall radiate with the spirit's light.
 Though hard the journey and the strife, I pray
 Show me the way.
 ("Show me the Way," *Poems* 41)

Time flies. The swift hours hurry by
 And speed us on to untried ways;
 New seasons ripen, perish, die,
 And yet love stays.
 The old, old love--like sweet at first,
 At last like bitter wine--
 I know not if it blest or curst,
 Thy life and mine. ("Time and Love," *Poems* 26)

The obvious way of destigmatizing these poems is to suggest that Wheeler was writing in the voice of a (male) persona. Strangely, the poet seems not to have ever made this suggestion. Reviewers dutifully skirted the issue of sexual orientation and instead condemned the morality of talking about sex at all in poetry--never mind what kind of sex. Even her biographer, twenty years after Wheeler's death, sidesteps the issue. Here are Jenny Ballou's oblique comments on the "offending" poems:

The poems that had caused this minor revolution were, some of them, lovely in their lilt, overbrimming with an authentic freshness of emotion. She had never sought the "word" for which Hart Crane committed suicide. But, within her natural frame, she could have saved herself, if she had matured in it, the doom of that smile at the mere mention of her name, which among the real lowbrows indicated all by itself a brushing denunciation, and among the highbrows, among the police of letters, amounted to a literary criticism which needed no further annotation. (95)

Ella Wheeler Wilcox's actual sexual desires will probably remain unknown, and are not really what's at stake here. What *is* of interest is the way Wheeler starts to symbolize a kind of doubleness--whether in the goodness of her bad poetry, or in the irony of the woman who was both the disreputable Poetess of Passion and a revered advice columnist and matron of morality. One of the ways Ashbery uses Wheeler, particularly in the last

section of his poem, is to introduce the topic of sexuality, to talk about and around desire, without specifically naming names--and on this account, Ashbery and Wheeler may have more in common than he even realized:

Oh, you who read some song that I have sung--
What know you of the soul from whence it sprung?

Dost dream the poet ever speak aloud
His secret thought unto the listening crowd?

.....
Our songs are shells, cast out by waves of thought;
Here, take them at your pleasure; but think not

You've seen beneath the surface of the waves,
Where lie our shipwrecks, and our coral caves.
("Introductory Verses," *Poems*, np)

It is quite possible that Ashbery had no idea about the *Poems of Passion* scandal, and was interested in Wheeler solely based on the camp potential of so much of her verse.

Nonetheless, following a queer analysis of the type advanced by Yingling or Meyers, it is important not to separate style from content, but to read camp style as an exhibitiv register of desire. On this reading, Ashbery's aesthetic interests in Wilcox are inextricably tied to political interests of the kind described by Meyers. I would like to close this section by looking a little more closely at some of the aesthetic/ political reasons that might be offered for Ashbery's engagement with Wheeler.

* * *

Ella Wheeler Wilcox's poetry might be a source of curiosity to Ashbery for a number of reasons. Their mutual attention to the (affirmative *or* subversive) powers of the cliché, for example, provides an interesting point of contact. As well, Wheeler's "unsophisticated" aesthetic might have been appealing to Ashbery given the unusual fact that it represents a position that is intolerable both to formalists and to experimentalists. In other words, it occupies an aesthetic position similar to the one I've defined as neo-avant-garde.

In a famous essay entitled “Badness in Poetry” (circa 1925), one of the New Criticism’s founding fathers, I.A. Richards, uses “a favourable specimen” of Ella Wheeler Wilcox’s poetry (a sonnet whose title he doesn’t even bother to cite) to explain the dynamics of bad verse. For Richards, Wheeler’s poem is bad not only because of “the heavy regular rhythm, the dead stamp of the rimes, the obviousness of the descriptions . . . [and] the triteness of the close” (201), but chiefly because this clichéd verse expresses “stock conventional attitudes” (202) which invite nothing but “stock responses” (203). The poem is bad because it invites or allows for only banal, simple-minded responses, which produce “immature and actually inapplicable [that is stock, conventional, clichéd] attitudes to most things” (203). Of course Ashbery’s poem, which is in essence an extended response to Wheeler, completely disproves Richards’s thesis by creating an engaging and complex series of variations on her themes. Ashbery carries Wheeler to new heights (“*Im wunderschönen Monat Mai*”)²¹ and sinks her to new depths (“Time farted”). Ashbery shows--and this has been a favorite strategy of all the New York School poets--that intellectual complexity and verbal density are not the only ways to make a successful poem.

Although avant-gardists might have considered Wheeler’s light verse to be unworthy of their contempt--that is too easy and too inauspicious an opponent--an early avant-garde manifesto like Pound’s 1913 “A Few Don’ts By an Imagiste” nonetheless speaks clearly to her brand of valentine verse. Certainly, these admonishments were most applicable to Ella Wheeler Wilcox’s excesses:

Use no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something. . . . Don’t retell in mediocre verse what has already been done in good prose. . . . Use either no ornament or good ornament. . . . Don’ be ‘viewy’--leave that to the writers of pretty little philosophic essays. Don’t be descriptive; remember that the painter can describe a landscape much better than you can . . . Consider the way of the scientist rather than the way of an advertising agent for a new soap. . . . (201-3)

Pound’s ultimatum that “It is better to present one Image in a lifetime than to produce voluminous works” is absolutely ridiculed by Wheeler’s forty plus volumes, the tens of thousands of poems she “dashed off” (these are her words) during her lifetime.²² Of

course Ashbery, too, is famous for his lack of restraint, as evidenced by the excessiveness of “Variations” itself—not to mention the sprawling, immoderate long poems which appear in almost every Ashbery volume (poems like “Europe,” “The Skaters,” the ironically titled “Fragment,” *Three Poems*, “Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” “Litany,” etc.). Such immoderacy is the antithesis of Pound’s modernist strictures and of Greenberg’s goal of avant-garde purification. While Greenberg or Pound’s high art sensibility would likewise condemn Wheeler as popular and thus degenerate, Ashbery, like the other New York School poets, moves beyond the Great Divide mentality, taking a genuine interest in popular as well as experimental. “Variations,” a poem which bridges the gap between avant-garde and kitsch, begins with a quatrain from one of the nineteenth century’s most popular versifiers, and ends with a verbatim quote from the 1925 pulp fiction sci-fi mystery, Roy Rockwood’s *The City Beyond the Clouds: or, Captured by the Red Dwarfs* (Shoptaw 110). “Variations,” like so much of Ashbery’s work, and like the best pop art of its day, exhibits a simultaneously affectionate and ironic attitude towards popular culture.

While Wheeler’s verse seems to be the natural opponent, the ideal dupe for both the “right” and the “left,” Ashbery, ever in search of a position between right and left, finds a way to recuperate it as a genuine instance of camp. Like all camp, Wheeler’s verse works through an “aggressive passivity” (Bergman) that doesn’t challenge so much as ignore the rules. Rather than accept a formalist or experimentalist position, Wheeler plays by her own rules:

It is not the artist’s skill, which into our soul comes stealing,
With a joy that is almost pain, but it is the player’s feeling.

And it is not the poet’s song, though sweeter than sweet bells chiming,
Which thrills us through and through, but the heart which beats under the rhyming.

And therefore I say again, though I am art’s own true lover,
That it is not art, but heart, which wins the wide world over. (*Poems* 53)

Wheeler’s passionate and innocent championing of heart over art—even though art is what she’s *supposed* to be producing—makes her work into a perfect example of pure or naïve camp. Such productions work not through self-conscious artifice (like Ashbery’s camp in

“The Instruction Manual” or “Variations”) but precisely because they intend to be serious. Their charm is founded on their innocence. They succeed as touching *failures*--projects with ambitions so great they are absurd. Such a description would certainly apply to Wheeler’s ambition to heal the world through gushing, sentimental verse which she believed was divinely inspired (Ballou 26). This blithe disregard for the rules must certainly be one of the things that Ashbery finds attractive about Ella Wheeler Wilcox’s poetry.

Wheeler’s poetry, it must be added, is campy not only in its innocence but also in its extravagance--another quality Ashbery would admire. Like the best camp performers, Wheeler is nothing if not excessive. The maudlin theatricality of her poetry was matched by her melodramatic personality and appearance. According to commentators, Wheeler strove all her life (from her early years as the country girl with the “inspired pen” to her final days as yellow journalism’s domestic bard) to be the center of attention (Baird 607). Syndicated poetry and advice columnist, Spiritualist and Theosophist, war matron, and popular moralist, Ella Wheeler Wilcox was as extravagant in her own way as Oscar Wilde.²³ Her biographer describes her thus:

She loved perfume and color, and she wore a large ring on her thumb when she became entirely Ella Wheeler Wilcox. Something always happened when she walked into a room, when she made an appearance--and she always made an appearance. . . . Her hair was light; her eyes had tigerish gleams when she wore her favorite topaz. She always had some chiffon fluttering in her hand or round her neck; and, in the days of Omar Khayyám and the Turkish Cozy Corner, she like to lie in Madame Récamier fashion. (Ballou 9)

It is just such a “character” who we can image penning a poem like “Communism,” where the ostensible political outlaws are enflamed emotions run amok:

And on nights like this, when my blood runs riot
 With the fever of youth and its mad desires,
 When my brain in vain bids my heart be quiet,
 When my breast seems the centre of lava-fires,
 Oh, then is the time when most I miss you,
 And I swear by the stars and my soul and say
 That I will have you, and hold you, and kiss you,
 Though the whole world stands in the way.

And like Communists, as mad, as disloyal
 My fierce emotions roam out of their lair;
 They hate King Reason, for being royal--
 They would fire his castle, and burn him there.
 O Love! they would clasp you, and crush you, and kill you
 In the insurrection of uncontrol.
 Across the miles, does this wild war thrill you,
 That is raging in my soul? (*Poems* 5)

“The insurrection of uncontrol”: such brilliantly bad lines are not as easy to create as one might imagine. And we can easily see why the author of preposterous sestinas such as “Crone Rhapsody” and “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in an Landscape,” an absurdist novel of manners like *A Nest of Ninnies*, a parodic play like *The Compromise* (based on a silent Rin Tin Tin feature), and so many poems that are constantly flirting with the boundaries of farce, would enjoy such an author.

At a time when poets were beginning to make their work more precise, pared down, and Imagistic, to rid it of excesses, “to use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation” as Pound demanded in the rules of Imagisme (199), Wheeler was writing the same gleefully longwinded and light-headed sentimental poems. When critics advised her, as they often did, to write less and more thoughtfully, to stretch herself beyond cliché and rhyme, Wheeler answered in what could be the only appropriate way:

And quite out of date, too, is rhythmical metre;
 The critics declare it an insult to art.
 But oh! the sweet swing of it, oh! the clear ring of it,
 Oh, the great pulse of it, right from the heart,
 Art or no art. (qtd. in Lewis 52)

The risk involved in choosing her own way, art or no art, is certainly something Ashbery would have appreciated. In the 1950s, Ashbery and his colleagues were taking a similar risk by challenging new formalist insistence on craft and control.²⁴ At a time when T.S. Eliot was still the “Great Dictator” of letters, the New York School poets (along with their Beat friends) reintroduced the value of excess à la Whitman or Stevens (or, for that matter, Wheeler, though she was never mentioned). While Wheeler naïvely diverged from the expectations put on professional (but not amateur) artists, Ashbery consciously diverges

from these expectations, playing the role of the gifted amateur. The humor of his poems often comes from this kind of consciously chosen irresponsibility. After an era in which the New Critics insisted that every word in every poem needed to be carefully chosen and justified, the New York School revived the value of play and excess, the joys of extravagance and waste.

Finally, both Wheeler and Ashbery are funny, and yet we're never quite sure when, or whether or not, they're supposed to be. But this uncertainty, the doubleness with which their work can be taken, is an essential part of their unique humour. We need to understand this doubleness, and to hold it in mind, to fully appreciate the humour and achievement of either of their oeuvres. Charles Towne has a wonderful anecdote in *Adventures in Editing* (1926) where he describes an unfortunate printer's error in setting up a Wheeler poem--which now, from a certain perspective, looks like a marvelous case of poetic justice or insight. The poem in question began with what Towne calls "one of her most cosmic lines, typical of her style" (97). The line was supposed to read:

My soul is a lighthouse keeper

However, the printer accidentally set up the line to read:

My soul is a light housekeeper

That both these lines now seem equally valid, equally funny, and equally "good" says something important about the singular, eccentric quality of Wheeler's verse. And this eccentricity and doubleness is a quality that Ashbery has long exploited to produce a not dissimilar, oddly funny, indeterminacy.

NOTES

¹ His almost completed novel, *The 4th of July*, unfortunately remains unpublished. See Gooch 170 for suggestions on how O'Hara incorporated Plato.

² Comic strips are read by over 100 million Americans on a daily basis; they are one of the most widespread and long-standing forms of American folk culture. As such, they are a rich source for sociological, historical, and semantic research into American culture, reflecting values and archetypes in bold and graphic ways. Comics have helped create tastes, not only in commercial products (which they have been tied to through advertising), but also in art and humour. It has been suggested that the content and form of early silent films, for example, was shaped in large part by even earlier comic strips (Reitberger and Fuchs 29). Finally, some comics, such as George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, have been praised as high artistic achievements. In *The Seven Lively Arts*, distinguished American critic Gilbert Seldes called *Krazy Kat* "the most amusing and fantastic and satisfactory work of art produced in America today. . . . It is wise with pitying irony; it has delicacy, sensitiveness and an unearthly beauty" (207, 217).

³ John Ashbery's poems, for example, are as likely to feature Popeye and Daffy Duck as they are Parmigianino and de Chirico. And, more importantly, poems like "Daffy Duck in Hollywood" and "Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror" are capable of synthesizing the philosophical and the facetious into one seamless product. Likewise, O'Hara's meditations on mortality and death are as natural in "light" verse forms ("I do this, I do that" poems like "A Step Away from Them," "The Day Lady Died," or "Lana Turner has collapsed!") as they are in his more traditional Odes. Koch, whom Geoff Ward has called "the most frantically and farcically humorous of all [the New York School] poets" (7), combines the "high" and "low" constantly. This occurs in mock epics like "Ko," in parodies of "serious" poets (Frost, Lawrence, Williams), and in the creation of a new genre of poetry in the form of comic strips.

⁴ Though Lehman's essentializing of "academic America" has the fault of all generalization, the observation seems mostly true. Lehman submits comments by John Hollander, another of Koch's supporters, who calls his work "a continuing celebration of the playful sublime," but also notes the poet's isolation from mainstream praise, picturing Koch's poetry as "a sort of gaudy tent, pitched among the ruins of high seriousness" (qtd. in Lehman, *Last* 204).

⁵ The poem's arch-villain, Dog Boss, is described as a man "Who wreaked his will on men and helpless pups / Throughout the town of London's downs and ups. . . ." (96). Another example of the poem's playful prosody is in this stanza describing an incident on the baseball field:

Slater had fainted; and the golden sun
Sent down its last warm beams upon his visage
Which lay upon the field like something one
Has splattered golden paint all over (syzyg-
ies of manager and player than stun
Them both!). With bottled soda, for its fizzle
All shaken up, and then released to spray
The unconscious manager, came shortstop Gray. (30)

⁶ Appropriately enough, the Dodger's band is a group of highly trained classical musicians who bring art to athletics. In one case, a game is greatly postponed so the band can play on:

There's nothing nicer than a concert where
 You sit outside and are surprised by greatness,
 And it is spring, and through the fragrant air
 The notes come floating to you, saying, "Lateness
 Is sad, but how can you quite quite despair
 When there is so much love, so much first-rateness,
 So many silver buds that bloom together . . . (57)

At this point, the umpire demands that the game begin,

But Slater cried, "What this crowd wants is art,
 Just for a while, and that our band can yield . . .

 Ours is music of grand class;
 They may not ever play so well in future.
 It's an esthetic moment. Be content." (58)

⁷ I think a distinction must be made between concrete poetry and Koch's comic strip poetry, which he calls "Comics Mainly Without Pictures" (AP 195). While both are forms of visual poetry, in concrete poetry (as practiced by writers such as Eugen Gomringer [the Swiss poet who first adopted the term "concrete poetry" in 1955], Ian Hamilton Finlay, and Emmett Williams), the visual shape is generally abstract, with the words or letters within it functioning as ideograms ("Concrete" 233). Though this form is adopted occasionally in Koch's work, in poems such as "Bosom Comics" or "Sad About You," he is much more likely to use the sequential format of the comic strip. More importantly, concrete poetry was an avant-garde European phenomena, formulated and practiced by Swiss, German, and Austrian intellectuals with serious intentions in mind. Koch's work, on the other hand, is filled with a spirit of comedy and foolishness which seems much closer to American popular culture than to European vanguardism.

⁸ There are, of course, artists whose work illustrates this point much more powerfully than Koch's. Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize winning *Maus*, which presents a complex and unsentimental look at the Holocaust in comic book form, is certainly one of the best examples. Comic book aficionados would also highlight the "underground" work of comic book artists like Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez, R. Crumb, and Dan Clowes, among many others, as worthy of serious, extended critical attention. For a list and summary of one critic's selections for the most important comics of the 1990s, see R. Fiore, "A Nice German Trench," in *The Comics Journal* 200 (1997): 67-71.

⁹ For more on Loy's career see Katz's *International Film Encyclopedia* 737.

¹⁰ Here is O'Hara's comment on glamour from a 1950 letter to Lawrence Osgood: "We americans [sic] are all more lonely for glamour than for each other, and until we learn to find it in each other and around us, that is to say in something which we can comprehend, relax with, and use, glamour is just an elder brother's cast off exoticism" (Gooch 140). The elder brother O'Hara is referring to is Europe, the place where young artists had traditionally turned for glamorous, exotic role models (O'Hara: "I'd rather be dead than not have France around me like a rhinestone dog-collar" [Gooch 261]). Hollywood, for O'Hara and many of his contemporaries, became a major source of *comprehensible, useable* glamour.

¹¹ Richard Dyer discusses this process of identification in his introduction to *Gays and Film*, comparing it to Lévi-Strauss's idea of *bricolage*: "We could use the films--especially those *not* directly offering us images of ourselves--as we chose. We could practice on movie images what Claude Lévi-Strauss has termed '*bricolage*', that is, playing around with the elements available to us in such a way as to bend their meanings to our own purposes. We could pilfer from straight society's images on the screen such that would help us build up a subculture, or what Jack Babuscio calls a 'gay sensibility'" (1). On this point, also see Ross in "Uses of Camp" 158, and Bronski's *Culture Clash* 95.

¹² See Andrea Weiss's *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film* 30-40. Two key films for Weiss and other critics are Dietrich's *Morocco* (1930) and Garbo's *Queen Christina* (1933). In both films, the two actresses appear in male dress and each features a "scandalous" scene where the stars kiss another woman on the lips. Garbo's androgyny and over the top performance appealed both to men and women. The bisexual poet H.D. noted her allure: "Greta Garbo, as I first saw her, gave me a clue, a new angle, a new sensation of elation. This is beauty . . . Let us be thankful that she, momentarily at least, touch the screen with her purity and glamour" (qtd. in Weiss 36). Apparently, O'Hara was infatuated as well, as evidenced by this campy note sent to Vincent Warren: "I hate to tell you that *Queen Christina* is on TV this thurs--how can I bear it without you? xxx F" (Gooch 343).

¹³ My thanks to Steve Bruhm for helping me see this distinction.

¹⁴ These violations of gender decorum may help explain Hart Crane's fascination with Chaplin's "meek adjustments" and "fine collapses" ("Chaplinesque," *Complete Poems* 11). In Crane's famous "Chaplinesque" the gay poet identifies with "the buffooneries of the tragedian, Chaplin" (as Crane put it in a 1921 letter [*Letters* 68]), picturing both himself and the actor as innocent misfits who "have seen/ The moon in lonely alleys . . . /And through all the sound of gaiety and quest/ Have heard a kitten in the wilderness" (*Complete Poems* 11). Thomas Yingling calls the poem "an allegory of homosexual desire and its articulation within the 'American restrictions' of the Midwest ca. 1921" (117).

¹⁵ The opposing point of view, represented by a critic like Paul Carroll, is that this poem, and much of O'Hara's work, is essentially antiorganicist, or "impure" (in Carroll's words). The impure poem is made from fragmentary items of experience which don't necessarily "add up" to any unified attitude or lyric point. See Altieri, *Enlarging* 119-21 for a summary and refutation of this position.

¹⁶ Both Perloff and Ward move towards this interpretation of "The Instruction Manual," though neither seems quite sure whether Ashbery's irony is intentional or not. This uncertainty is an appropriate response to the achieved doubleness of Ashbery's camp, as I will explain shortly. See Ward 101-2, and Perloff, *Indeterminacy* 263-65.

¹⁷ Ashbery's interest in poetry which tries to be "good" but ends up being "bad" (like Wilcox or Cravan) is paralleled by the New York School fascination with poetry that tries to be "bad" but ends up being "good." The classic case of this later phenomena is the infamous Ern Malley poetry hoax. In 1943, two minor, conservative Australian poets decided to perpetuate a hoax to unmask what they considered the ridiculous pretentiousness of "modern" poetry. In one afternoon they produced the life work of Ern Malley, a parody, or so they thought, of avant-garde surrealist verse. They succeeded in getting the work, sixteen poems entitled *The Darkling Ecliptic*, published in *Angry Penguins*, the leading Australian avant-garde journal. The authors then revealed the prank to the press,

and succeeded in temporarily humiliating the journal and its editor, Max Harris. The final butt of the joke, however, was the authors themselves, since even after the revelation Harris insisted that this was important work, and that "the myth is sometimes greater than its creator" (in Lehman, *Jacket 2*). His assessment was supported by many important intellectuals at the time, including the celebrated painter Sidney Nolan and the eminent critic, Sir Herbert Read. Much to the authors' dismay, their Ern Malley poems (though *not* their own, formalist poetry) have been taken seriously ever since, and in fact appear in toto in *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry*. The poems are a New York School favourite, included in the *Collaborations* issue of *Locus Solus*, and taught by both Koch and Ashbery in their creative writing classes (Lehman, *Jacket 2*). In both the cases of Ella Wheeler Wilcox and Ern Malley, what Ashbery seems to enjoy is the way certain poems can confound evaluation and subvert our established notions of what is good and what is bad.

¹⁸ The poems were received in many circles as disgraceful. The Chicago *Herald* called them "the songs of half-tipsy wantons" and prayed that Miss Wheeler would "now relapse to Poems of Decency" (in Lewis 49). In his 1899 *Critical Confessions*, Neal Brown wrote of *Poems of Passion*: "Of what avail is this lawless, wanton, verse? It bears the stigmata of mental debauchery and hysteria and does not teach one valuable lesson. To the psychopathist it may possess a curious scientific interest; but to laymen this demented verse is as abhorrent as the maunderings of a maniac. If it does express the language of a human heart is it not better that that language should remain untranslated, or at least that it should have no such brutal translation?" (191)

¹⁹ Neal Brown characterized her readers in this way: "One may be allowed to guess that those admirers are found pretty exclusively among men who have dealt in lumber or pork with but little time for literature" (184). Of Wilcox's boast to have selected her *Poems of Passion* from over 1200 poems she wrote on the theme, Brown notes: "This standard compels us to measure poetical greatness as certain loyal Americans do national greatness--as if it were a matter of barrels of pork and bushels of wheat" (185).

²⁰ Shoptaw explains the homotextual in this way: "Rather than simply hiding or revealing some homosexual content, [Ashbery's] poems represent and 'behave' differently, no matter what their subject. With their distortions, evasions, omissions, obscurities and discontinuities, Ashbery's poems always have a homotextual dimension" (4). The term "homotextuality" was coined by Jacob Stockinger in his article "Homotextuality" A Proposal," published in Louie Crew (ed.) *The Gay Academic* (1978). Surprisingly, Stockinger's name does not seem to appear in Shoptaw's text.

²¹ This *Waste Land*-like fragment, Shoptaw informs us, is an "allusion to Schumann's bitter *Dichterliebe* (a setting of Heine)" (108).

²² Amusingly enough, Wheeler produced her own doctrinal essay, "A Few Important 'Don'ts'" (1901), addressed in this case to young career women who have just moved to the big city: "Don't think everything you see done by the people you are thrown among is right and fashionable and 'the thing,' because you are in New York. . . . Don't be afraid to express delight and enthusiasm about the things which please you. . . . Although you are to occupy an independent and self-supporting situation, do not think it necessary to dress in a masculine manner or assume mannish dress. Keep yourself as feminine as possible in conduct and attire" (*Everyday Thoughts* 42-3).

²³ Ella and her husband Robert were both interested in Spiritualism and Theosophy. In the 1890s, they studied with the Indian mystic Swami Vivekananda as part of an attempt to

communicate with their dead infant son. After Robert's death in 1916, she began a new campaign of seances, which she detailed for the readers of her newspaper column. On the advice of her dead husband, she arranged a series of tours of Allied army camps late in 1916. She read poetry, counseled soldiers, and delivered lectures on sexuality, entreating the boys to "Come Back Clean," as she titled one spirited poem (Baird 608).

²⁴ In fact it was not only the New Critics and New Formalists who insisted on this kind of control. In the "New American" camp, the Black Mountain poets, who took inspiration and dictation from Pound, insisted on a slightly different kind of control. O'Hara explains it this way: ". . . with the influence of Levertov and Creeley you have another element which is making *control* practically the subject matter of the poem. That is your *control* of language, your *control* of the experiences and your *control* of your thought. . . . where they've pared down the diction so that the experience presumably will come through as strongly as possible, it's the experience of their paring it down that come through more strongly and not the experience that is the subject" ("Interview," SS 23).

CONCLUSION

Beyond Radical Art

In his 1974 study of modern poetry, *Children of the Mire*, originally delivered as the Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard (1971-72), Octavio Paz discusses the current “crisis” of the avant-garde in terms that were by that time quite familiar in American discourse on the topic:

Modern art is beginning to lose its powers of negation. For some time now its rejections have been ritual repetitions: rebellion has turned into procedure, criticism into rhetoric, transgression into ceremony. Negation is no longer creative. (149)

Paz’s argument follows on the heels of essays like Leslie Fiedler’s “Death of Avant-Garde Literature” (1964) and Irving Howe’s “The Idea of the Modern” (1967) which argues similarly that

it seems greatly open to doubt whether by now, a few decades after the Second World War, there can still be located in the West a coherent and self-assured *avant-garde*. . . . Bracing enmity has given way to wet embraces, the middle class has discovered that the fiercest attacks upon its values can be transposed into pleasing entertainments, and the avant-garde writer or artist must confront the one challenge for which he has not been prepared: the challenge of success. (24)

This “crisis” or “challenge” which John Ashbery summarizes in “The Invisible Avant-Garde” when he observes that “this force in art which would be the very antithesis of tradition” has become “a tradition of sorts” (RS 389), is the result of the historically-specific way avant-garde art has been defined, developed, and used in the United States.

From its inception, and up until the neo-avant-garde reformations of movements like Pop art and New York School poetry, the American avant-garde (best exemplified by movements like Abstract Expressionist painting and Beat poetry) has been based upon and has (sometimes openly, sometimes unwittingly) subscribed to at least three key factors: antagonism, individualism, and futurism.¹ These three factors were also important characteristics of some of the historical avant-garde movements. Certain qualities will, of course, apply more forcefully to certain movements than others (Italian Futurists, for

example, have a much stronger inclination towards futurism than, say, Berlin Dadaists). In what follows, I will examine these three interrelated factors, considering both what they meant for certain (European and American) avant-gardists earlier in the century and why they became contested areas for the neo-avant-garde movements of the 1960s such as the New York School poets.

We have considered the avant-garde's antagonism in some detail: from the revolts of the historical avant-garde's manifestos (in Chapter Two) to the us-them, hip-square, enlightened-enslaved rhetoric of the Abstract Expressionists and the Beat poets. Avant-garde antagonism requires, and thus helps create, an Other against which to define its own deviation and difference. While always based on an inverse relationship, the Other wears different masks depending on specific historical contingencies. For the Futurists, the Other took the forms of "women . . . professors, archaeologists, *ciceroni*, and antiquarians" (Apollonio 22). For the Abstract Expressionists, it was the Regionalists, "the Corn Belt Academy" and purveyors of "trite tripe." For the Beats it was the "capitalist press and various brain-washed academies . . . ignorant & frightened bunch[es] of bores" who "wouldn't know Poetry if it came up and buggered them in broad daylight" (Ginsberg "Notes for *Howl*" 320-21). Allen Ginsberg became a spokesperson for so many disaffected youth of the 1960s because of his rhetorical flair in representing the Other, "the robot skullface of Moloch" ("Notes for *Howl*" 319), who in *Howl* is the quintessential opponent to Beatitude: the face of money, status, government, bombs, pollution, etc.

The problems and contradictions with this antagonistic position as it developed in the United States have been explored in my introduction. Here it was noted how authentic and original gestures of revolt in the early decades of the century--gestures which responded both to genteel Victorianism (in the form of modernism) and to the ultra-autonomy of Aestheticism (in the form of the avant-garde)--had become self-defeating and perhaps even self-mocking as avant-garde negation devolved, as Paz observes above, into "ritual repetition . . . rhetoric . . . [and] ceremony" by the 1960s.² By the time Abstract

Expressionism had secured its (paradoxically) “revolutionary” position as *the* art of liberal individualism, the break with tradition had become the tradition. At such a moment, when the avant-garde had succeeded so well that it had become the institution, its accustomed gestures of antagonism took on the paradoxical quality of becoming “affirmative” rather than “dissenting.” Ultimately, as Abstract Expressionism’s cooption by Cold War rhetoricians demonstrated, gestures of defiance may be taken as the final sign of liberal democracy’s supremacy, since only in the highest free society would such deviation be tolerated.

Finally, the Self-Other binary construction on which avant-garde antagonism is based, and which made particular sense for a modern art which had a historically-specific need to contrast itself from the masses, was in the process of unraveling in the 1960s and 70s. Andreas Huyssen argues that the political and historical contingencies which shaped the modernist Great Divide (high art versus mass culture) can be located in “the age of Stalin and Hitler” when

the threat of totalitarian control over all culture forged a variety of defensive strategies meant to protect high culture in general, not just modernism. Thus conservative culture critics such as Ortega y Gasset argued that high culture needed to be protected from the “revolt of the masses.” Left critics like Adorno insisted that genuine art resist its incorporation into the capitalist culture industry which he defined as the total administration of culture from above. (197)

As such a need for differentiation dwindled, and as a postmodern sensibility which treats aspects of mass culture positively rather than as a threat began to gain ground, the Self-Other binary became more and more suspect. With a decline in the imaginative dividing powers of the Cold War, and with the growth of movements like feminism, queer theory, and postcolonialism (which seek to subvert binary rhetorics of power and to treat otherness not in terms of inverse mirror images but rather in terms of authentic and valuable difference) the effectiveness of “us-them,” “square-hip” avant-gardism also decreased.

Like the antagonistic moment, the individualism of certain avant-garde movements is also based on a model of enlightened self (the artist) and enslaved other (the masses).

This particular brand of individualism posits artists as modern heroes who are out of time, or in *advance* of their time, and whose work will bring society forcefully into the future. The cult of the individual--whether manifested in Futurism's militant heroes; Dada's I don't give a damnist "desire for independence . . . [and] distrust of community" (Tzara 150); the Abstract Expressionists desire to make cathedrals "out of ourselves, out of our own feelings" (Newman 127); or the Beat belief in individual transgression and "Beatitude"--is central to many avant-garde movements. This centrality is one of the reasons why the avant-garde has been so susceptible to liberal-bourgeois cooption. For what is liberal-bourgeois politics if not individualism (personal identity & personal property, free markets & free agents) raised to an ideological principle? The individual hero, no matter how subversive (or perhaps in direct proportion to his/her subversiveness), is one of the West's most valuable ideological commodities both for domestic and export use (especially during the Cold War when individualism became a rhetorical weapon in the war against communism, as Serge Guilbaut has argued). We need only consider America's unending romance with outlaws, outcasts, drunks, drug-addicts, criminals and anti-heroes of all sorts to realize how central this figure is to the construction and maintenance of liberal democracy. In the time period under consideration in this study, we might take the example of a cross-addicted, wife-shooting, hyper-paranoid, convicted felon named William Burroughs--who ended his ceaselessly defiant life as a pop cultural icon, doing commercials for Nike shoes in 1994--to illustrate American's need for extreme "individualists." The avant-garde's staunch individualism (coupled with its provocative antagonism) has thus, ironically, made its leaders (figures like Pollock, Ginsberg, Burroughs, etc.) particularly susceptible to cooption by the culture industry which, in Andreas Huyssen's words, has mastered "the high art of integrating, diffusing, and marketing even the most serious challenges" (168). At a time when this elevation of the individual was reaching its peak in the American mass media it is not surprising that the

New York School poets would begin to challenge such uncritical individualism, as we will examine shortly.

The last important quality of the avant-garde as it came to be understood and institutionalized in America is its futurist ideology. The very idea of an avant-garde, of an art ahead of its time, it has been argued, rests on a progressive, linear, and teleological sense of history. Avant-garde artists (so the “futurist” myth goes) risk rejection, ridicule or persecution, staking their enlightened efforts on a venture to bring the reluctant masses into a necessary and improved future. According to this myth, the future is always already there, under the sign of “the modern” or “the new” and only awaits an avant-garde artist-hero to bring it to fruition. Such thinking about the avant-garde seems to be quite prevalent in American discourse and so it is not surprising that Poggioli, who set so many of the terms for the discourse, argued that, given the avant-garde’s investment in “revolution” and rejection of the immediate past, “the futurist moment belongs to all the avant-gardes and not only the one named for it” (68-9).

The futurist, utopian orientation--which belongs to some, though perhaps not all, of the historical avant-garde movements³--is one way of understanding the avant-garde’s romance with technology. Appeals to the marvels and triumphs of science and technology, industrial-oriented constructivist and productivist activities, dynamist or vorticist philosophies, and a general fascination with mechanisms, machines, mass communication, mass transport, and automated production are all central preoccupations of many movements of the historical avant-garde. One typical example of the valorization of technology is from the *Manifesto of the Futurist Painters 1910*:

Comrades, we tell you now that the triumphant progress of science makes profound changes in humanity inevitable, changes which are hacking an abyss between those docile slaves of past tradition and us free moderns, who are confident in the radiant splendour of our future. . . . We must breathe in the tangible miracles of contemporary life--the iron network of speedy communications which envelops the earth, the transatlantic liners, the dreadnoughts, those marvelous flights which furrow our skies, the profound courage of our submarine navigators and the spasmodic struggles to conquer the unknown. (Apollonio 25)

Although the Futurists expressed these ideas most bluntly and militantly, other movements also saw technology as a metaphorical parallel to art's progressivist goals. As Naum Gabo put it in *The Realistic Manifesto* (1920), art must meet the challenges of "the growth of human knowledge with its powerful penetration into the mysterious laws of the world" by supplying a "New Great style" suitable to the new "unfolding epoch of human history" (Bowl 209-10). These ideas were continued by American avant-gardists like Jackson Pollock who makes a very similar comment thirty years later in an interview with William Wright: "My opinion is that new needs need new techniques. . . . It seems to me that the modern painter cannot express this age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in the old forms of the Renaissance or of any other past culture. Each age finds its own technique" (Ross, *Abstract Expressionism* 140). From these comments we can see how the idea of a "tradition of the new," which must constantly find new techniques to meet "new needs," is inextricably linked to the American avant-garde's futurist ideology.

The perceived futurist ideology is one of the avant-garde qualities which was most forcefully challenged by the neo-avant-garde movements of the 1960s and after. This is not surprising, given the radical change in the meaning of "the future" by the second half of the century. What the Futurists and other artists hailed at the beginning of the century as the "triumphant progress of science," neo-avant-gardists and their postwar contemporaries viewed with distrust and even dread given the long history and continued forebodings of war, nuclear threat, technologically-assisted genocide, pollution, environmental catastrophe, etc. As Octavio Paz notes, the avant-gardist (and particularly American) reverence for the idea of "change" had been replaced by the 1970s with a respect for its opposite, "conservation." "The present has become critical of the future and is beginning to displace it," Paz wrote in the early 70s (151).

Though current theorists would likely argue that Paz's lectures and subsequent book, particularly his thoughts on "The Twilight of the Avant-Garde" (148-64), simplify

matters far too much, Paz's reflections nonetheless provide an important gauge on discourse about the avant-garde at the time.⁴ In "The Twilight of the Avant-Garde" Paz argues that the "age of revolutions" (like Marxism) which posit collective, universal solutions has been replaced by the "age of rebellions" (of cultural and ethnic minorities): "Marx postulated a future in which all classes and peculiarities would dissolve in one universal society; today's struggle is for the recognition here and now of the concrete and individual reality of each and every one" (155). These rebellions (and here I assume Paz is thinking of "movements" like postcolonialism, feminism, queer theory, etc.) "do not offer programs for the organization of the society of the future" (154) but instead give their attention and energy to the recognition and respect of difference:

Indifference toward the shape the future should take distinguishes the new radicalism from the revolutionary movements of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth. Confidence in the strength of spontaneity exists in inverse proportion to the disgust towards systematic constructs. The discrediting of the future with its geometric paradises is widespread. Nor is this strange: in the name of building the future half of the planet has been covered with forced labor camps. (154)

The suspicion of the future, which Paz underlines here, gives way to an elevation of the value of the present:

All these rebellions appear as a breach in the idea of linear time. They are the irruption of the offended present and thus, explicitly or implicitly, postulate a devaluation of the future. . . . The vision of the present as a point of convergence of all times, originally a vision of poets, has become the underlying belief in the attitudes and ideas of most of our contemporaries. (155, 157)

Paz goes on to explain that this elevation of the present does not imply the negation of the past or the future. Rather, it requires a reformulation of these time concepts, so that we see these moments not as the irretrievably anterior and the hypothetically imminent, but as vital dimensions of the present: "both [past and future] are present--both are presences in the now" (157). Having thus set up this binary between an avant-garde futurism and what might be described as a postmodern presentism, Paz announces the need to consider the implications of this change:

The time has come to build an Ethics and a Politics upon the Poetics of the now. Politics ceases to be a construction of the future; its mission is to make the present habitable. (157)

This thesis has suggested that the New York School poets, with their focus on process rather than product, their interests in mapping the movements of the mind and the body in the present moment, and with their indifference to metanarratives, rhetorics of power, and universalizing projects, see themselves as similarly participating in a "Poetics of the now." The New York School's camp rejections of dichotomies of high and low, elite and mass, straight and queer, and their complementary suspicion of those obsessed with the unitary, logocentric "meaning" of language instead of interested in its sensuous surface and spontaneous play, are similarly a rejection of what they saw as a centralized poetics of the future⁵ and an embrace of the heterogeneous poetics of the now. I would like to continue a consideration of the ethics and politics of New York School poetry by looking at the way these artists reformulated these characteristics (antagonism, individualism, futurism) which came to be seen ~~as~~--correctly or not--as defining features of the avant-garde.

Before going further, I should note that the broad qualities ascribed to the avant-garde could equally (and have in slightly revised arguments) be assigned to modernism in general. Thus, "antagonism" would describe the modernist attitude towards mass culture (as Andreas Huyssen argues); "individualism" would denote the cult of genius that produces historical accounts with individuals at their center (Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era* and Harold Bloom's "The Age of Stevens"⁶); and "futurism" would signify the various strategies for "making it new," the modernist obsession with modernity. In this sense, what I call the neo-avant-garde is closely related to what has been called the postmodern, and the qualities of the postmodern, as we will see in the following discussion, apply similarly to the poets. To use the broader term "postmodernism" rather than "neo-avant-garde," however, eliminates some of my argument's specificity because what these poets share with the historical avant-garde (its nonorganic techniques, its interrogation of the

institution of art, and its desire to reintegrate art and life) is more substantial than what they share with modernism.

The problem with the term “modernism” is that it is so broad (encompassing as it does “high modernism,” nativist or “low” modernism, the historical avant-garde, not to mention feminist or queer accounts of “other” modernisms), one must be very specific about which modernism one is considering. The same distinctions, of course, need to be made among the various avant-gardes, as important differences between, say, Italian Futurists, New York Dadaists, and German Expressionists would indicate. In fact, to really do these movements justice we should distinguish between different trends in German Expressionism (as Richard Murphy does) or between Zurich, Berlin, Paris, and New York strains of Dada (as Foster and Kuenzli indicate in their introduction to *Dada Spectrum*). This is one of the main problems with Peter Bürger’s theory: it sets for itself the infeasible goal of finding a set of terms to define *all* avant-garde activity. For any putatively total or complete definition of such broad and heterogeneous terms as “modernism,” “the avant-garde,” or “postmodernism” will always be challenged by examples that provide exceptions to the rule. Rather than attempting unequivocal definitions of these terms, then, what I have tried to do is elucidate the New York School poets’ specific understanding of these terms (where possible) which are naturally related to general understandings at the time. This is why critics such as Poggioli, Paz, Rosenberg, and Howe are of particular relevance to my project. It seems clear that for the New York School poets, “modernism” equaled “high modernism,” the reign of Eliot (“the Great Dictator/ Of literature” in Koch’s phrase) in particular and his conscripts, “the men with their eyes on the myth/ And the Missus and the midterms” (Koch *Rainway* 73). The poets reacted against this high modernism (which is the modernism of the Great Divide) by turning to “other” modernist traditions (Stein and Williams are probably the two most important figures here) and by reprising some of the qualities and strategies of the historical avant-garde (particularly the avant-garde use of mass culture). However, these poets also

reacted against what they saw as certain problematic qualities of the avant-garde, particularly related to its perceived ideological agenda. What I want to do in the remainder of this conclusion is to examine the specific qualities of the New York School's general reaction to modernism and the avant-garde by considering the three broad traits already outlined. Furthermore, I will make some suggestions about the areas the New York School poets' reactions opened for succeeding generations of American writers.

* * *

In place of avant-gardist and modernist antagonism--whether represented by the iconoclastic challenges of the Beats towards "the square world" (Ginsberg, "When the Mode" 330) or by New Critical antagonism to popular artists like Ella Wheeler Wilcox--the New York School poets produced what I have called a poetics of indifference. Bürger has helped us to see that a useful way of understanding the ideology of a particular aesthetic movement is to examine their relationship to the institution of art. The standard relations, fostered up until the last decades of the twentieth century by modernism and the avant-garde, have been that of "insider" and "outsider." The insider is the established artist--and one may be "established" either as "classical" (one who produces in the accepted high style) or as "commercial" (one who produces kitsch which is a perfectly stable, acceptable, and saleable commodity of the culture industry). The outsider is conceived as the avant-garde challenger, the artist ahead of his or her time. The New York School poets, like Duchamp before them, realized that both of these positions had serious limitations and downfalls. "Insiders" run the risk of producing for the market (whether "high" or "low") and of constantly repeating themselves in order to maintain their stable, privileged position. This, one could argue, is what happened to such different writers as Richard Wilbur and Allen Ginsberg who both ended up producing homogenous and predictable bodies of work. "Outsiders," on the other hand, run the risk of exhausting all their energy in rebellion, and of producing work which is just as predictable in its hostility, provocation and negation as the insider work it supposedly challenges. Furthermore, given the easy cooption of

outsiderism by insider culture (particularly media culture) such gestures often devolved into puerile or adolescent self-parody (rather like the way that rock concerts by decaying fifty-five year old members of the Rolling Stones appear to some as grotesque self-parody). Given the problems and contradictions of both these positions, the New York School poets attempted to discover a new relation to the institution of art--neither inside nor outside. They attempted to establish an indifferent art which would, in Ashbery's words, avoid "the extremes of Levittown and Haight-Ashbury" (*RS* 393).

One way of establishing this kind of in-between, indifferent position is through the discourse of camp, as examined in Chapter Four. Along with the rejection of the insider/outsider binary, camp rejects the dichotomies of high and low, elite and mass culture, so important to the high modernism of Ezra Pound or Clement Greenberg. By ignoring institutionalized categories of taste (which are simultaneously categories of power), and by creatively combining "high" and "low" materials (as did many early avant-gardists), the New York School poets revived a space for different kinds of aesthetic experience. In Chapter Four we considered Koch's revival of the comics, O'Hara's promotion of Hollywood, and Ashbery's valorization of the cliché and of "bad" or "light" verse as not only poetic, but also political acts that challenged modern hegemonies (including bourgeois notions of sexuality). The implications of this challenge to high modernist hegemony would be developed more fully in the 1970s through the work of cultural and ethnic minorities who (as in the early "queer" work of O'Hara and Ashbery) sought to emphasize areas of experience (particularly gender- and race-based subjectivity) which had been excluded from canonical formations and, for that matter, from public articulation. Thus the New York School's challenge to the Great Divide mentality was an important early instance of what has come to be seen as a postmodern politics of inclusion. In this sense, their indifference should not be seen as a general, disaffected state, but rather an indifference to particular ideological positions and historical formations which employ

rhetorics of power and exclusion in the service of either the left (Kerouac and Ginsberg's "boy's gang") or the right (Pound's idea of the Great Tradition).

Throughout this thesis we have considered the New York School poets' response to avant-garde individualism, soaring to new, often ridiculous, heights in their day in the maverick claims of Beats like Allen Ginsberg. The Beat's poetic-ideological strategy was to pit individual voices against a mass, conformist Other, "an America gone mad with materialism, a police-state America, a sexless and soulless America prepared to battle the world in defense of a false image of its Authority" (Ginsberg "Poetry, Violence, and The Trembling Lambs" 333)--and to figure these as singular voices of prophesy or salvation. An example of such prophetic individualism (an individualism closely tied to the futurist moment) is this 1961 comment by Allen Ginsberg who is responding to criticism on his lack of values and lack of knowledge:

Must I be attacked and condemned by these people, I who have heard Blake's own ancient voice recite me the Sunflower a decade ago in Harlem? and who say *I* don't know about "poetic tradition"? The only poetic tradition is the Voice out of the burning bush. The rest is trash, & will be consumed. . . . I am sick to death of prophesying to a nation that hath no ears to hear the thunder of the wrath & joy to come--among the "fabled damned" of nations--& the money voices of ignoramuses. . . . That we have begun a revolution of literature in America, again, without meaning to, merely by the actual practice of poetry--this would be inevitable. No doubt we knew what we were doing. ("When the Mode" 327, 330)

Against a background of such strong, totalizing claims--claims which simply invert the power and "Authority" against which they are protesting instead of questioning the whole power structure--it is not surprising that the New York School poets proposed a different concept of the individual. While for Ginsberg (and some other avant-gardists) the individual is the incontestable source of truth (recall the Abstract Expressionists' plan to make "cathedrals . . . out of ourselves"), the New York School does not present the individual in such reified terms, but rather as a dispersed, performative, conditional being. For the New York School poets "the individual" is a social as well as a personal construction, a formation which isn't *given* but is constantly made and remade through acts

of articulation. "Naming things," as O'Hara writes in the early poem "Memorial Day 1950," "is only the intention to make things" (CP 18).

John Ashbery has commented in a 1977 interview that "My own autobiography has never interested me very much. Whenever I try to think about it, I seem to draw a complete blank. There is the title of a Japanese film by Ozu, 'I was born, but . . . ' That's how I feel about it" (Gangel 10). Comments like these are crucial for understanding not only Ashbery's (putatively "difficult") *aesthetics* of personal dispersal or dislocation (a poetry of multiple consciousnesses, shifting and ambiguous pronouns and speakers, temporal and spatial dislocations), but also his *politics* of alterity.⁷ What is important to Ashbery is not personal experience ("I don't find my experiences very interesting as a rule") but the *experience of experience*, that is "the way a happening or experience filters through me" (Poulin 245). Ashbery is interested in the way that experience is manufactured through an ongoing dialogue between language, the environment, and the individual: "I'm trying to set down a generalized transcript of what's really going on in our minds all day long" (Poulin 245). Thus, ironically, while readers may have a powerful sense of Ashbery as *auteur*, to use a suitable term from film theory, our sense of him as an individual or subject is constantly unstable. Politically, Ashbery's dematerialized subjectivity, this poetics of otherness or alterity, is an important weapon in the battle against essentializing politics which would define individuals on the basis of race, class, gender, sexual orientation or *any* given determinant. Though Ashbery himself has always steered clear of overt political statements, his sense of self is nonetheless very much in accord with what a critic like Moe Meyers defines as "queer" identity, which challenges "bourgeois notions of Self as unique, abiding, and continuous while substituting instead a concept of the Self as performative, improvisational, discontinuous, and processually constituted by repetitive and stylized acts" (2-3).

The same sense of "processually constituted" rather than polemically given identity is important in both O'Hara's and Koch's aesthetic. As we saw in readings of Koch's

“The Artist” and O’Hara’s “Why I am Not a Painter,” the artist is not defined by an ontological given (who he *is*) but rather by an interactive process (what he *does*):

One day I am thinking of
 a color: orange. I write a line
 about orange. Pretty soon it is a
 whole page of words, not lines.
 Then another page. There should be
 so much more, not of orange, of
 words, of how terrible orange is
 and life. Days go by. It is even in
 prose, I am a real poet. (CP 262)

To be a real poet is to use language, and to allow language to use you in co-creative, never fully predetermined enterprises. While O’Hara’s Personism seems at first to be about personal presence, it is in fact more about the artifice of presence, the way we bring ourselves into being by talking to each other (and ourselves), the way that language constitutes us in our more or less self-conscious acts of self-definition.

The power of language to remake its speaker is a constant theme in O’Hara’s work. In fact, not only the “Grace” but also the fear of language’s over-productiveness, the fear that by living “as variously as possible” the speaker will lose “what is always and everywhere/ present, the scene of my selves, the occasion of these ruses” (CP 257), is a subtext to many O’Hara poems, not just ones like “In Memory of My Feelings” which deal with it explicitly. Like Ashbery’s “epistemological snapshots,” O’Hara’s Personist poems see identity as a process, an act of improvisation and play in which the individual is not anterior to, but constructed within language. In this sense, the poetics of process also suggests a politics of process in which the individual is never given but always *other*. In Thomas Docherty’s phrase, this is a politics in which the “philosophy of Identity (‘Know thyself’) [is] replac[ed] with a philosophy of alterity (‘Acknowledge the unknowability of the Other’)” (17). Such a philosophy is noted, tellingly, by Language poet Clark Coolidge in his tribute to O’Hara, “F’OH Notes”:

The feeling that states of other-being, object, strange thought sometimes speak in his poems. “my theory being that an exact other is better than another one”—*The Old Machinist* [CP 457-8] (Coolidge in Berkson and LeSueur, *Homage* 184).⁸

That Coolidge would highlight this philosophy of alterity, the attention to “other-being” in O’Hara, and that other Language poets would find the same in Ashbery, is particularly relevant since it was in part this New York School challenge to the individualist ethic from which Language poetry grew.

The New York School poets’ subtle (and never polemically articulated) deconstruction of the reified individualist voice, I am suggesting, is a key point of origin for Language poetry. This later poetry has continued to explore the idea, as Bruce Andrews puts it in “Misrepresentation (a text for *The Tennis Court Oath* of John Ashbery)” (notice the text *before* the author), that “saying is not just an utterance but a social performative” (Silliman 521). Unlike New York School poetry, and in fact more like some of the movements of the historical avant-garde, Language is a movement in which theory and poetic practice are inextricably (and for some readers uncomfortably) linked.⁹ Without going into great detail, and recognizing the wide variety of Language practitioners and practice, we can note generally that Language writing is a politicized interrogation of the economies of language. As Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews put it in their introduction to *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, this writing “explores the numerous ways that meanings and values can be (& are) realized--revealed--produced in writing” (ix). Such self-conscious texts are meant to interrogates the idea that language can ever be neutral or “transparent,” and thus “can act to critique society”:

It is our sense that the project of poetry does not involve turning language into a commodity for consumption; instead, it involves repossessing the sign through close attention to, and active participation in, its production. (x)

Many Language poets acknowledge *The Tennis Court Oath* as an extremely important and productive precursor, given the multiple ways in which “the reign of description is put on the dock” in Ashbery’s book, as Andrews puts it (Silliman 525). Andrews sees *The Tennis Court Oath* as a “dizzying parade--of eroded representations and wreckage” (520) in which “single words are unleashed from a familiarity which their very unleashing helps to undermine” (523). In other words, Ashbery’s book is seen as one of

the first American collections to self-consciously address the problems of language. In "Misrepresentation," Andrews presents the text as taking on issues of reference ("the accuracy of pointing" [520]), "of clarity and communicative competence" (520), and of a stable conception of speaker or subject ("Personhood might be mere transmission" [525]). *The Tennis Court Oath*, a colossal mistake for a romantic like Harold Bloom, has been taken as perhaps the best and most auspicious thing Ashbery has ever done by the Language poets: "It has opened rooms, even if Ashbery's own work has not walked into them" (522).

Of key importance to Language writing is the dematerialization of the subject which *The Tennis Court Oath* experiments with in radical ways, but which Ashbery's later poetry never completely abandons. While Language theorists may despair at Ashbery's less radical, somewhat more readable, later work, the fact remains that he never relinquishes a philosophy of alterity, but continues to value otherness and to problematize unitary, transparent, "natural" conceptions of identity. In fact, one might argue, Ashbery's poetry after *The Tennis Court Oath* handles the subtleties, contradictions, and *pleasures* of identity (the later quality being mostly absent in Language work) in increasingly sophisticated and interesting ways.

The same subtle but powerful challenge to the philosophy of identity (perhaps powerful *because* subtle, unlike much Language work) is also present in O'Hara's work which, Geoff Ward argues, has also been crucial to Language poetry. In connection with Language preoccupations, Ward points out the way in which the "I" in O'Hara's poetry "can appear as the abrupt concretization of different discourses that were in the air, and in relation to which the I stands variously as self and other, producer and product" (184). O'Hara's keen and unusual talent for making the self into the locus of different discourses and yet, paradoxically, keeping that sense of "grand intimacy" so central to his poetry, is one of the reasons his work has become, according to Ward, "the most productive way forward in American poetry today" (184).

While the New York School poets challenge reified ideas of individualism, they do not, like Language poetry, leave the reader unmoored in language. Rather, these poets offer something in the individual's place: the idea of community. While the avant-garde often creates a community based on negation or opposition, the New York School poets produce a community based on affirmation and collaboration. As David Lehman observes in the first sentence of his recent book: "The story of the New York School of poets is a study in friendship, artistic collaboration, and the bliss of being alive and young at a moment of maximum creative ferment" (*Last* 1).

New York School poetry is indeed about friendship and strategic collaborations with other artists and other discourses "in the air" around New York at the time. Ashbery's, Koch's, and O'Hara's poetry is about establishing communities in many different ways. As we have examined, the poets' participation in collective projects--from simple collaborations like Rivers and O'Hara's *Stones* to more elaborate Happenings like Koch's "The Construction of Boston," (a chaotic event involving Jean Tinguely, Robert Rauschenberg, Niki de Saint-Phalle, and two Merce Cunningham dancers, Viola Farber and Steve Paxton)¹⁰--was one important way of establishing an interdisciplinary New York community. Along similar lines, the poets' involvement in writing workshops (which all three taught and which became a New York School institution in the mid-1960s in the St. Mark's Poetry Project) and with little magazines like *Locus Solus* also contributed to the community spirit, a spirit which became institutionalized in Second Generation New York School poetry and practice, as we will examine shortly.

As well, by treating writing as an open-ended process which invites (and in some ways requires) readers' participation, the poets also fostered the community spirit of New York School work. I have argued throughout this thesis that New York School poetry treats the reader not as a consumer but as a participant whose contribution is necessary to complete the poem. This is particularly true of Ashbery's indeterminate constructions

which, in Bruce Andrews' words, "demand *responsiveness* from us and not simply *decipherment*" (Silliman 521). The same is true in a different sense in O'Hara's work where the poem is put, rhetorically at least, "between two persons instead of two pages" ("Personism" *CP* 499). O'Hara's strategies, I have suggested, invite the kind of intimate participation experienced between the co-conspirators in gossip. In Koch's case it may be less his poetry and more his pedagogical practice that most helped develop the community ethos of New York School poetry. Koch's unusual assignments, discussed earlier by David Lehman, presented poetry as an attainable, daily goal (much in line with the avant-gardist desire to integrate art and life). He "used his vivacious pedagogical methods," Lehman comments "to convert a generation of Columbia undergraduates into sorcerers' apprentices" (*Last* 233). One of his students, Aaron Fogel, recalls the poetic license Koch's process-oriented philosophy and methods offered: "Koch made us feel it was great to be young and great to be young in your writing. It wasn't something you needed to do penance for for the next thirty years while you found your true voice" (*Last* 235). In a list of Koch's favorite teaching aphorisms, David Lehman recalls this comment which well summarizes the New York School project of breaking down barriers between art and life and establishing a community in language: "Paul Valéry said a poem is a communication from one who is not the poet to one who is not the reader" (*Last* 234). In the cases of all three poets, what is finally produced is a vision of writing and reading as relationship, as active dialogue between participants not restricted to the roles of "poet" and "reader." This vision--much in line with their avant-garde precursors who also subverted traditional roles of producer and recipient, artist and non-artist--may help account for the extraordinary number of creative responses to New York School poetry. These responses consist of poems, paintings, and other art works created to, for, or about the poets, particularly Frank O'Hara, who is likely the most widely written to, and certainly the most widely painted, poet of the postwar years.¹¹

The last way in which we might consider the community orientation of New York School poetry is in terms of gossip, name-dropping, and campy intimacy--all strategies by which the poetry produces its own society of insiders. In place of the avant-garde's aggressive individualism, embodied in heroic figures from Marinetti to Pollock, the New York School substituted a campy communalism, wonderfully embodied in a collaborative project like *The Coronation Murder Mystery*. This wacky play was written by O'Hara, Ashbery, and Koch on the occasion of James Schuyler's thirty-third birthday and performed at his party with Ashbery playing Schuyler, Koch playing a muddling Psychiatrist, and O'Hara playing the Body (which, it turns out, is not dead but "just thinking"--an apt comment on what too much "thinking" can do). Also in the cast are Larry Rivers, Jane Freilicher, and Michael Goldberg (playing themselves) and Hal Fondren as John Myers. Like *Kenneth Koch: A Tragedy* and many other New York School collaborations, *The Coronation Murder Mystery* uses insider humour both to establish and to playfully mock its own coterie project. In this play community is fostered and lightly satirized not only by its nonsensical plot, real-life characters, and customary setting (like "Why I am Not a Painter," the play is set in Mike Goldberg's studio), but also by its absurdist turns of language:

GIRL:

Fairfield, would you pass me those Norman Bluhm playing cards, please. (148)

PSYCH:

I would like to tell you all how I came by my jar of Jane Freilicher peanut butter. . . I was standing at my window one bright Spring morning when suddenly the breeze wafted it into my hand. Joe Hazan said I ought to accept. (148)

GIRL:

John Myers recommended me for the Brussels World Fair Nobel Prize. I won this prize. King Hal Fondren the Tenth of Sweden awarded me a solid gold Jimmy Schuyler. This trophy now adorns my all-white living room. (150)

JOHN MYERS:

Have you seen "The Bridge on the River Bob De Niro"? The Kiesler sets are awful, but Jayne Mansfield is absolutely marvellous! (153)

The "Norman Bluhm playing cards" and "Jane Freilicher peanut butter" provide a kind of absurdist extension of friendship and community past the world of people and into the

world of things, so that even objects begin collaborating in the New York School project. However, while collaboration and community are extremely important parts of this project, the poets' *tone* towards this ideal will always be one of campy play, not earnest polemic. The doubleness of camp allows for expressions of community while protecting the poetry not only from the rigid oppositionality of some avant-garde projects, but also from the softer "communalism" of later sixties cultural movements which took their cues and styles from the Beat avant-garde.

Just as Language poetry arguably grows out of the New York School challenge to the philosophy of identity, so Second Generation New York School poetry can be said to grow out of the first generation's commitments to community. Ted Berrigan (1934-83), whose poetry, ironically, may not outlive his name, is finding his place in literary history as the great impresario of the New York School, both first and second generations. While Berrigan's poetry is unlikely to ever make it into the canon, his ceaseless efforts as a promoter, publisher, and chronicler are being given serious academic attention.¹² Berrigan will be remembered for his founding and editing of "C" magazine (which formed an important bridge between first and second generation New York School poets) and "C" press (which published books by Ron Padgett, Dick Gallup, Tom Veitch, Kenward Elmslie, Joseph Ceravolo, Michael Brownstein, and Berrigan himself), as well as for his work with Anne Waldman and Joel Oppenheimer in establishing the St. Mark's Poetry Project in a community church in the Bowery. Berrigan developed his aesthetic by extending O'Hara's ventures of name-dropping, gossip, and community-building into an oeuvre where friends, fellow artists, and fellow readers form an endlessly self-referential society. Here is a typical example from his best known collection, *The Sonnets* (1964):

LXXVI

I wake up back aching from soft bed Pat
gone to work Ron to class (I
never hear a sound) it's my birthday. I put on
birthday pants birthday shirt go to ADAM's buy a
pepsi for breakfast come home drink it take a pill
I'm high. I do three Greek lessons

to make up for cutting class. I read birthday book
 (from Joe) on Juan Gris real name José Vittoriano
 Gonzáles stop in the middle read all
 my poems gloat a little over new ballad quickly skip old
 sonnets imitations of Shakespeare. Back to books. I read
 poems by Auden Spender Pound Stevens and Frank O'Hara.
 I hate books.

I wonder if Jan or Helen or Babe
 ever think about me. I wonder if Dave Bearden still
 dislikes me. I wonder if people talk about me
 secretly. I wonder if I'm too old. I wonder if I'm fooling
 myself about pills. I wonder what's in the icebox. I wonder
 if Ron or Pat bought any toilet paper this morning (64)

What's obvious from this example, and a huge amount of Berrigan's work, is how much it relies not only on O'Hara's community-building initiatives, but also on O'Hara's poetic strategies, his unique voice and style and, frequently and most troublingly, his (and Ashbery's) actual lines. Berrigan's common practice was to work with other writers' books surrounding him and to copy and use lines at will. This procedure of appropriation (plagiarism, theft, or intertextual community-building--depending on how you see it--Berrigan would have happily admitted to any of these descriptions) was an important part of Berrigan's aesthetic, openly discussed, theorized, and reproduced in poems:

had 17 1/2 miligrams desoxyn
 last night I Milton, read Paterson, parts
 1 & 2, poems by Wallace Stevens & How Much Longer
 Shall I Be Able to Inhabit The Divine Sepulchre
 (John Ashbery). Made list of lines to
 steal ("Personal Poem #7" Padgett and Shapiro 63)

Libbie Rifkin describes Berrigan's poetry as "so roomy, so full of other poets' names and lines, that it emerges as a kind of free-love alternative to traditional figurations of literary family as necessarily nuclear, claustrophobic, and oedipal" ("Worrying" 644-5). A less charitable assessment would use words like "derivative" or "plagiarized." However, as Reva Wolf argues, the theoretical problems and complexities that such appropriations raise is at least partly what Berrigan was after. In "copying" Ashbery (making lists of "lines to/ steal" from "How Much Longer . . ."), Berrigan was borrowing from a poet who himself freely borrowed other writers' lines, as the title of the to-be-plagiarized poem in question indicates. Such appropriation by Berrigan of "cut-ups" by Ashbery raise

interesting questions about “the ownership of words” as Wolf puts it (94). It should be noted in this context that Berrigan himself drew specific parallels between his method and the visual arts appropriations of Duchamp and Warhol.¹³ According to Wolf, “[Berrigan] loved to think about the multiple potential implications--artistic, legal, and those regarding identity--of the act of copying words” (94). This is not the place to debate whether Berrigan’s experiments in appropriation are interesting and important or simply derivative. My intention is to note that these experiments--and others like them by poets such as Ron Padgett and Gerard Malanga¹⁴--are undeniably related to Ashbery, O’Hara, and Koch’s interests in moving beyond the individualism of the avant-garde and exploring new forms of literary community. In the communal ethos of the New York School, *who* writes what is far less important than what is written.

With Berrigan’s sponsorship this aesthetic which, like Language poetry, questioned individual identity but, unlike Language poetry, valorized the idea of community, became the driving force of the St. Mark’s Poetry Project. Speaking of the Project and its first journal *The World* (issued January 1967 and co-edited by Anne Waldman, Lewis Warsh, and Joel Sloman) Rifkin observes a “‘house aesthetic’ -- call it, ‘friendly recycling’” which informs its philosophy and productions (“St. Mark’s” 4). Pushing ideas implicit in early New York School poetry to radical extremes, the St. Mark’s Project put the life and the words of the community ahead of any idea of individualism. Bernadette Mayer’s St. Mark’s writing workshop (1971-5) produced a list of Kochian experiments which give a sense of the kind of procedures followed its members:

- Rewrite someone else’s writing. Maybe someone formidable.
.....
- Experiment with theft & plagiarism in any form that occurs to you.
.....
- Get a friend or two friends to write *for* you, pretending they *are* you.
.....
- Take an already written work of your own & insert (somewhere at random, or by choice) a paragraph or section from, for example, a book on information theory or a catalogue of some sort. Then study the possibilities of rearranging this work, or perhaps, rewriting the “source”.
.....

Experiment with writing in a group, collaborative work: a group writing individually off of each others work over a long period of time (8 hours say); a group contributing to the same work, sentence by sentence, line by line; one writer being fed "information" while the other writes; writing, leaving instructions for another writer to fill in what you "can't" describe (Silliman 557-60)

This last experiment in group writing became the first issue of the magazine *Unnatural Acts*, which collected the results of an eight-hour writing binge in Mayer's loft, and published them "entirely without attribution or editorial information" (Rifkin "St. Mark's" 6). The second issue of *Unnatural Acts* (November 11, 1972) provided a more explicit statement of its communal ideology on its cover: "Each issue of unnatural acts magazine will be a collaborative writing experiment. . . . Our poems aren't our appearances . . . when you take out the I's / everybody is matched" (qtd. in Rifkin "St. Mark's" 7). Again, the success or failure of this writing without "the I's" is not our concern here. Rather, I am interested only in outlining the possibilities that the work of the New York School poets opened up to future writers. Furthermore, I think it is reasonable to suggest that it was the work of the New York School poets, more than any other movement of their generation, that opened the most productive ways forward in American poetry.¹⁵

I have already made some suggestions about how the New York School poets challenged the futurist ideology they found implicit in some contemporary, putatively "avant-garde" movements. The futurist logic, it has been suggested, is the logic of "metanarratives," those great codes or stories which legitimate "scientific" knowledge of the present and the future (Lyotard xxiii-xxv). In place of these coercive and normative universal histories of modernism, theorists like Lyotard have called for "the supervision of a micropolitics which will attend to the local and specific without recourse to some grand programme or macropolitical theory such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, or evolutionary progress" (Docherty 4). As Lyotard puts it: "Postmodern knowledge . . . refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (xxv). The New York School poets provided one of the first concerted group efforts in American

poetry to abandon “the future” (which is at the center of the poetic programs of high modernists like Pound, Eliot, and the later Stevens) and instead to focus on the present (there are, of course, important individual precursors in the work of Williams and Marianne Moore, for example). Such “presentism” is at the center of all three poets’ work.

Frank O’Hara’s “I do this, I do that” poems are nothing if not documents of the present, calling attention to the fact through their continuous present tense, their minute local details (cats playing in sawdust, liver sausage sandwiches, poodles in cabs), and that classic O’Haraism which launches many poems and which would become a New York School staple: telling the exact time (“It is 12:20 in New York a Friday/ three days after Bastille day, yes” [CP 325]). Like Williams, O’Hara produced a “poetry of things” and, as he suggests in “Meditations in an Emergency” (1954), the *duty* to things is both an aesthetic and a moral imperative in his work: “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” (CP 197). The anxiety of things may be related to their being ignored or being treated without proper respect for their uniqueness, treated as if they *belong* to the perceiver instead of to themselves. A “respect for things as they are”¹⁶-- which places objects in the present and in their own context rather than in the perceiver’s narrative--is expressed wonderfully in the words of the Sun who, in O’Hara’s poem “A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island” (1958), visits the poet in his bedroom. The Sun, who has only ever “spoken personally” to one other poet, Vladimir Mayakovsky, tells the speaker: “Frankly . . . I like your poetry” and reminds him to

always embrace things, people earth
sky stars, as I do, freely and with
the appropriate sense of space. (CP 307)

To embrace things “freely and with the appropriate sense of space” is a wonderful maxim for all the New York School poets’ presentism.

Douglas Crase has suggested that one way of understanding and coping with John Ashbery’s “difficulty” is by realizing and accepting his presentism. While critics have

complained that Ashbery's writing is difficult and obscure because is it prohibitively *private*, Crase argues just the opposite:

The difficulty with Ashbery is that his poetry is *so* public, so accurately a picture of the world we live in, that it scarcely resembles anything we have ever known. Just so, the present is indeed a world none of us has ever known, because words to describe it can be put together only after the fact. When the poet does put them together the combination comes as a shock. (30)

Part of Ashbery's difficulty disappears when we understand his attempts to transcribe "the experience of experience" as a way of encoding that most slippery, unrepresentable of subjects, the present. With this in mind, Ashbery's disjunctions and shifts begin to make an odd, uncanny sense, a sense beyond logic, a sense *of* experience: not what it means but how it feels. As well, those weird questions and statements that appear without warning in Ashbery's work begin to make a kind of sense when we see them as attempts to interrogate, elicit, or sneak up on the present:

What time of day is it?
Does anything matter?
Yes, for you must wait to see what it is really like,
This event rounding the corner
Which will be unlike anything else and really
Cause no surprise: it's too ample. ("Grand Gallop" *SPCM* 14)

The present is like that, in Ashbery's poetry as in life, it is both mundane and magnificent in the way it confronts us, again and again, with its otherness, its unlikeness to anything else:

Is there anything
To be serious about beyond this otherness
That gets included in the most ordinary
Forms of daily activity, changing everything
Slightly and profoundly, and tearing the matter
Of creation, any creation, not just artistic creation
Out of our hands . . .
.....
Each person
Has one big theory to explain the universe
But it doesn't tell the whole story
And in the end it is what is outside him
That matters, to him and especially to us . . .
("Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" *SPCM* 80-82)

For Kenneth Koch, the pursuit of the present is inextricably connected to what David Lehman has isolated in his poetry as that quintessentially American venture, “the pursuit of happiness.” Like O’Hara’s and Ashbery’s, many of Koch’s poems are built on an immersion in the present moment, a focus which in its intensity annuls the future and becomes the source of happiness. “Fate,” collected in Berkson and LeSueur’s *Homage to Frank O’Hara*, is a poem which recollects the power of being fully present in a single moment, “Alive for an Instant” as the title of another Koch poem puts it. “Fate” recalls a day in June of 1951 in Jane Freilicher’s West Tenth Street apartment when Koch had just returned from Europe and was sharing a bottle of whiskey and tales of his travels with his friends:

The walls
Were white in that little apartment, so tiny
The rooms were so small but we all fitted into one
And talked, Frank so sure of his
Talent but didn’t say it that way, I
Didn’t know it till after he was
Dead just how sure he had been, and John
Unhappy and brilliant and silly and of them all my
First friend

.....

I was

Never so happy with anyone
As I was with those friends
At that particular time on that day with
That bottle of Irish whiskey the time
Four in the afternoon or
Three in the afternoon or two or five
I don’t know what and why do I think
That my being so happy is so urgent
And important? it seems some kind
Of evidence of the truth as if
I could go back and take it? or do
I just want to hold what
There is of it now? . . .

.....

Who

Cares if he grows older if
He has friends like
These I mean who does not
Care? the celebration is the cause
Of sorrow and not
The other way around. . . (173-5)

More than O'Hara's or Ashbery's, Koch's present tends to be imbued with a nostalgia for the past, and yet this does not make his poems any less about the present. Many of Koch's most affecting narrative poems ("The Circus," "To Marina," "Seasons on Earth," etc.) treat the past as a dimension of the present by enacting it in the process of writing. The past is not past, not lost, but instead becomes a way of feeling and thinking in the now:

The past, that seems quite often
To be false, or fantastic, like a hippogriff,
Or to be a huge book we have been given
Of which we've hardly time to read a paragraph,
Is in these poems, I hope, some way, at random--
Story and past as if they were in tandem-- (*Rainway* 317)

These lines from "Seasons on Earth," a poetic autobiography written by a sixty year old Koch in the *ottava rima* of his youth, reflects on the poet's youthful "obsession" with happiness and living "in the present tense":

There is a way of thinking about happiness
As being at one's side, so that one has but
To bend or turn to get to it; and this
For years I thought was true. . . .
.....
In spite of the real suffering around me,
And poverty, and spite, I had the sense
That there was something else. Each midday found me
Ecstatically in the present tense,
Writing. And you would have to come and pound me
Quite hard to drag me from my innocence.
That sense that now seems almost unbelievable--
I love it, loved it--is it irretrievable? (*Rainway* 307)

The answer for Koch and the New York School poets in general is that this sense of "something else" (beyond suffering, poverty, and spite) is retrievable, in unexpected and unplanned ways, in language. This "something else," the feeling that "each exquisite sensuous day or evening / Is an announcement of a door unlocking" ("Seasons" 308), this "event rounding the corner/ Which will be unlike anything else and really / Cause no surprise" is the thing, the Other, that New York School poetry is always gesturing towards, and always respectfully leaving unnamed. This "something" is simply, and complexly, the present--an ever-changing gift offered in the poetry to any and all readers:

Tomorrow is easy, but today is uncharted,
 Desolate, reluctant as any landscape
 To yield what are the laws of perspective

.....

All we know

Is that we are a little early, that
 Today has that special lapidary
 Todayness that the sunlight reproduces
 Faithfully in casting twig-shadows on blithe
 Sidewalks. No previous day would have been like this.
 I used to think they were all alike,
 That the present always looked the same to everybody
 But this confusion drains away as one
 Is always cresting into one's present. ("Self-Portrait" *SPCM* 72, 78)

It is that movement of escaping the anxieties of the future and "cresting into one's present," into the "visible core" of being and becoming, which gives New York School poetry its rigor, insight, and depth.

NOTES

¹ Other factors, such as those described by Poggioli--activism, nihilism, agonism, anti-traditionalism, experimentalism, iconoclasm, cerebralism, obscurity, abstraction, unpopularity--are also relevant. Lists of such "isms" could be developed at length. I have chosen the three factors that I believe best summarize essential qualities of the avant-garde. Furthermore, to highlight the transformations of the avant-garde, I have chosen those factors that most come under suspicion and attack in the neo-avant-garde movements of the 1960s (New York School poetry, Pop art, Happenings, Conceptual art, Performance art, etc.)

² Part of the cause of this problem rests with the American mass media who had turned the term and the idea of the "avant-garde" into a rather meaningless advertising catchword, "reducing cultural radicalism to lifestyle, status, celebrity and fashion" as Stuart Hobbs puts it (140). For more on this topic see Chapter 8 of Hobbs's *The End of the American Avant Garde*.

³ More recent scholarship on the avant-garde, from Peter Bürger to Richard Murphy does not so much deny Poggioli's claims as engage with the avant-garde in very different terms. Far from seeing the avant-garde as futurist or utopian, Bürger and Murphy are interested in the way avant-garde art interrogates all bourgeois social and linguistic constructs, be they artistic, moral or political. Murphy would argue that the most significant avant-garde artists (certain German expressionists, for example) do not share a futurist impulse and in fact work to subvert any and all types of metanarrative which claim to speak to or for the future.

⁴ It seems relevant to me that both Paz's and Poggioli's work on the avant-garde issues from Harvard University where O'Hara, Ashbery and Koch were all students. In fact, as mentioned previously, O'Hara was a student of Poggioli's and, according to Gooch, Poggioli's class on The Symbolist Movement was the only one O'Hara attended regularly during the second semester of his senior year (150).

⁵ For O'Hara, this kind of grand poetics of the future, which makes large claims for what poetry can do culturally, is related to (in O'Hara's words) "the Pound heritage" and the obsession with the "important utterance"-- motives which O'Hara applies to poets like Charles Olson (Lucie-Smith interview 13).

⁶ Responding to Kenner in *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, Bloom argues that the period in question is better defined as "the Age of Stevens (or shall we say the Stevens Era?)" (qtd. in Perloff *Dance 2*). For an excellent account of what's at stake in the Pound-Stevens debate, see Perloff's essay "Pound/Stevens: whose era?" in *The Dance of the Intellect*.

⁷ Philosopher John Koethe's "The Metaphysical Subject of John Ashbery's Poetry" is particularly good at describing this kind of dispersed, dislocated subjectivity, which Koethe connects to the Kantian notion of a transcendental ego. Koethe argues that Ashbery's poetry presents a metaphysical subject rather than a psychological self. This subject "seems to inhabit a durationless 'now,' existing in a condition of (and here Koethe quotes Ashbery) 'drifting . . . toward a surface which can never be approached,/ Never pierced through into the timeless energy of a present'" (92-3). Koethe examines the devices which allow for this unusual subject position: "the extreme referential, temporal, and spatial dislocations and transitions in his poems that make it impossible to read them as an autobiographical record of the experiences of a time-bound, self-identical ego; [and] his

subject's characteristic impulse to identify or produce an adequate representation of itself while simultaneously distancing itself from every such image, which all become 'other' as soon as they become concrete or clear enough" (97). What Koethe's essay doesn't do, however, is give any indication of why these devices and subject position might be important to Ashbery--or what readers might make of them. I am suggesting that there is not just an aesthetics but also a politics at work in this position.

⁸ Coolidge's homage also mentions another extremely interesting (and little noticed) early O'Hara poem which might be taken as an ode on alterity. "Interior (With Jane)" is a poem in which the otherness of objects is respected and celebrated:

The eagerness of objects to
be what we are afraid to do

cannot help but move us Is
this willingness to be a motive

in us what we reject? The
really stupid things, I mean

a can of coffee, a 35 cent ear
ring, a handful of hair, what

do these things do to us? We
come into the room, the windows

are empty, the sun is weak
and slippery on the ice And a

sob comes, simply because it is
coldest of the things we know (CP 55)

⁹ Geoff Ward observes that "[Charles] Bernstein's and Andrews' exhortations . . . manifestos and statements, combine to stage a pre-emptive strike on any individual reader thinking he or she dare make his or her own way into the poetry, without the cellophane-wrapped Information Pack" (181).

¹⁰ Calvin Tomkins describes "The Construction of Boston" for which Koch wrote the script: "Tinguely originally planned to act the part of a lady architect . . . building a 'rubber city' by pumping up huge balloons onstage; as he pumped up one, the others would slowly deflate. Then, at the last minute, he decided instead to build a cinder-block wall between the performers and the audience. Rauschenberg constructed a set resembling a furnished apartment and had two dancers . . . go through the routines of an 'ordinary day,' which included being rained on by an elaborate Rauschenberg rainmaker, until Tinguely's wall sealed them from view" (229). Tomkins does not mention Niki de Saint-Phalle's role in this Happening, but her specialty was to create works by "firing a .22 rifle at papier-mâché and plaster constructions in which plastic bags of paint are embedded" (Tomkins 228).

¹¹ For an excellent collection of dozens of O'Hara tribute poems see Berkson and LeSueur's *Homage to Frank O'Hara*. For works of visual art representing O'Hara, see Russell Ferguson's catalogue *In Memory of My Feelings: Frank O'Hara and American Art*, produced to accompany the exhibition with the same title, shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, July 11 - November 14, 1999.

¹² See in particular Libbie Rifkin's "Worrying about Making It': Ted Berrigan's Social Poetics." Rifkin notes that most writing on Berrigan takes the form of memoir/homage, suggesting that its focus is personal and social rather than critical.

¹³ This connection is made in discussing one of his most candid experiments in appropriation, a kind of writerly readymade in the tradition of Duchamp: "[M]y entire poem 'Frank O'Hara's Question from "Writers and Issues" by John Ashbery' in my book *Many Happy Returns* is entirely by John, i.e. some quotes from Frank surrounded by prose by John, which I 'found' à la Andy Warhol . . . (that is, I simply put a frame around the particular section which then became my whole poem. I neither changed nor shifted a word.) . . . I was never trying to hide what I was doing, but thought that I was extending (at least sideways) ideas used by Duchamp, Warhol, John" (qtd. in Wolf 94).

¹⁴ Berrigan and Padgett's collaboration, *Bean Spasms* (1967) is another good example of the communal ethos. This book includes poems written together and individually--all relying on methods of appropriation and repetition, and all printed without attribution. According to Padgett, the impetus for their work was Ashbery and Koch's communal poems published in the collaborations issue of *Locus Solus* (Wolf 178 n 70). Gerard Malanga (who studied with Koch at the New School for Social Research from 1961-2) is another Second Generation poet who borrowed liberally from New York School precursors and was particularly interested in Berrigan and Warhol's aesthetic of appropriation. For a lively discussion of the connections between Malanga, Warhol (to whom he was both assistant, protégé, and possibly lover), Ashbery (who makes oblique references to both Malanga and Warhol in his poetry), and Berrigan (from whom Malanga learned to recycle) see Chapter 4 of Wolf's *Andy Warhol, Poetry, and Gossip in the 1960s*.

¹⁵ It seems to me that the possible challenges to this admittedly large claim could come either from supporters of Black Mountain poetry, who might suggest that Olson and Creeley are the real father-figures for Language poetry, or from feminists who could rightly argue the major influence of Rich, Plath, Lorde and others on women's writing. I would argue, however, that the New York School is at least as important as the Black Mountain poets for Language writing *and* that New York School writing, particularly O'Hara's, also extends in other, less dogmatic, directions. The problem with putting Rich, Plath, Sexton, Lorde and other feminists together is that they do not, in fact, historically form a collective. The poets themselves might argue that such a grouping is only a way of ghettoizing them as "women writers" instead of appreciating their individual differences and their individual influences.

¹⁶ This phrase, appropriately, is the title of John Ashbery's essay on the painter Fairfield Porter. Ashbery argues that Porter's achievement was to create a provocative naturalist aesthetic (Porter's paintings, completely unfashionable at the time, are figurative and naturalist) based not on "ordering" but on accepting the order of things as they are. Ashbery quotes Porter: "Order seems to come from searching for disorder, and awkwardness from searching for harmony or likeness, or the following a system. The truest order is what you already find there, or that will be given if you don't try for it. When you arrange, you fail" (254).

APPENDICES

BIRTH COMICS

A BABY IS BORN	SHE IS NAMED "ANGELA"	THE MOTHER HOLDS HER	ANGELA WAVES ONE FAT HAND
THE MOTHER TAKES THIS HAND IN HER OWN HAND	ANGELA TURNS TOWARD HER MOTHER	HER MOTHER'S BREAST	ANGELA IS FED
THE MOTHER MEETS A MAN	WHO BECOMES THE FATHER	OF BABY ANGELA	"HELLO!" HE SAYS
HE DANCES WITH HER	THE PAIN IS INTENSE HE HOLDS HER HAND	THE PHYSICIAN: IT'S A GIRL!	NOW ANGELA FALLS ASLEEP
HER FATHER COMES HOME	HE KISSES HIS WIFE	HOW IS ANGELA?	HIS WIFE SAYS "SHE'S ASLEEP!"

Appendix A

APPLIQUÉ COMICS

HERE AND THERE A SPOT	OF RED IS APPLIQUÉ'	ROB GETS OUT HIS FRENCH- ENGLISH DICTIONARY	IT'S HEAVY!
BOY! THIS WEIGHS A TON!	SO, BETTY SAYS, WHAT'S "APPLIQUÉ"?	IT MEANS "PUT ON" ROB SAYS	BETTY SITS DOWN
FLOWERED ARMCHAIR	FLOWERED ARMCHAIR	SMALL ROUND TABLE	FLOWERED ARMCHAIR
SEA	SEA	SEA	SEA
WINDOW	HAND LOTION	SHARK	CEMENT

Appendix B

SAD ABOUT YOU

THE PAST	GOOD DAY	BAD DAY	GOOD DAY
BAD DAY	GOOD DAY	GOOD DAY	GOOD DAY
GOOD DAY	BAD DAY	BAD DAY	BAD DAY
THE PRESENT	BAD DAY	BAD DAY	BAD DAY
BAD DAY	BAD DAY	BAD DAY	BAD DAY
DEATH	IS NOT THE WORST	OF ALL	SORROWS

Appendix C

YOU'RE AMAZING



Appendix D

LEDA AND THE DOG


♪♪♪ AMBULATING DOWN
THE STREET

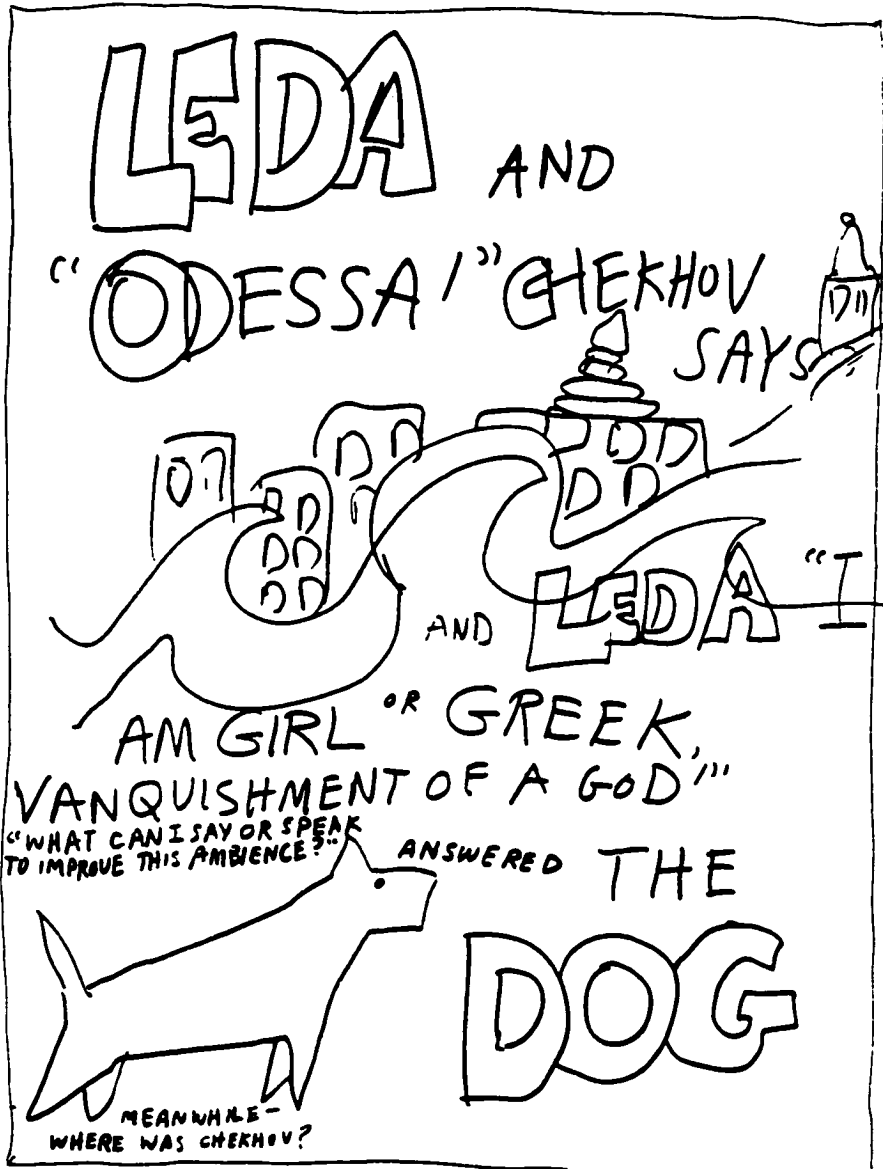
WHOM SHOULD LOVELY
LEDA MEET

BUT  ANTON
CHEKHOV

BESIDE WHAT WOOD OR
STREAM

NATURE FASHION IT? LEDA ASKED THE DOG

CHEKHOV NODDED / 
BEAUTY! THE
DOG BARKED/SAID.

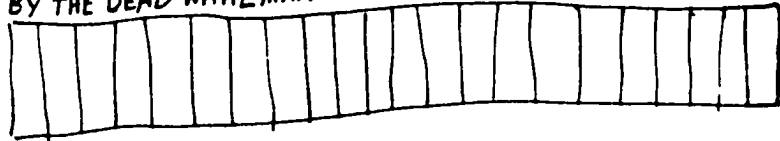


Appendix E

THE DEAD

WHITE MAN COMIX

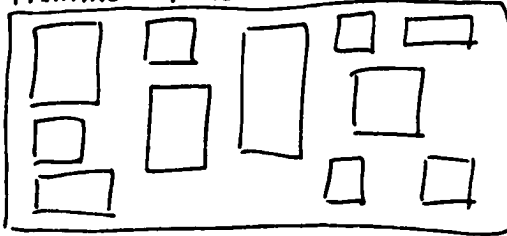
BOOKS
BY THE DEAD WHITE MAN



MUSICAL COMPOSITIONS
BY THE DEAD WHITE MAN



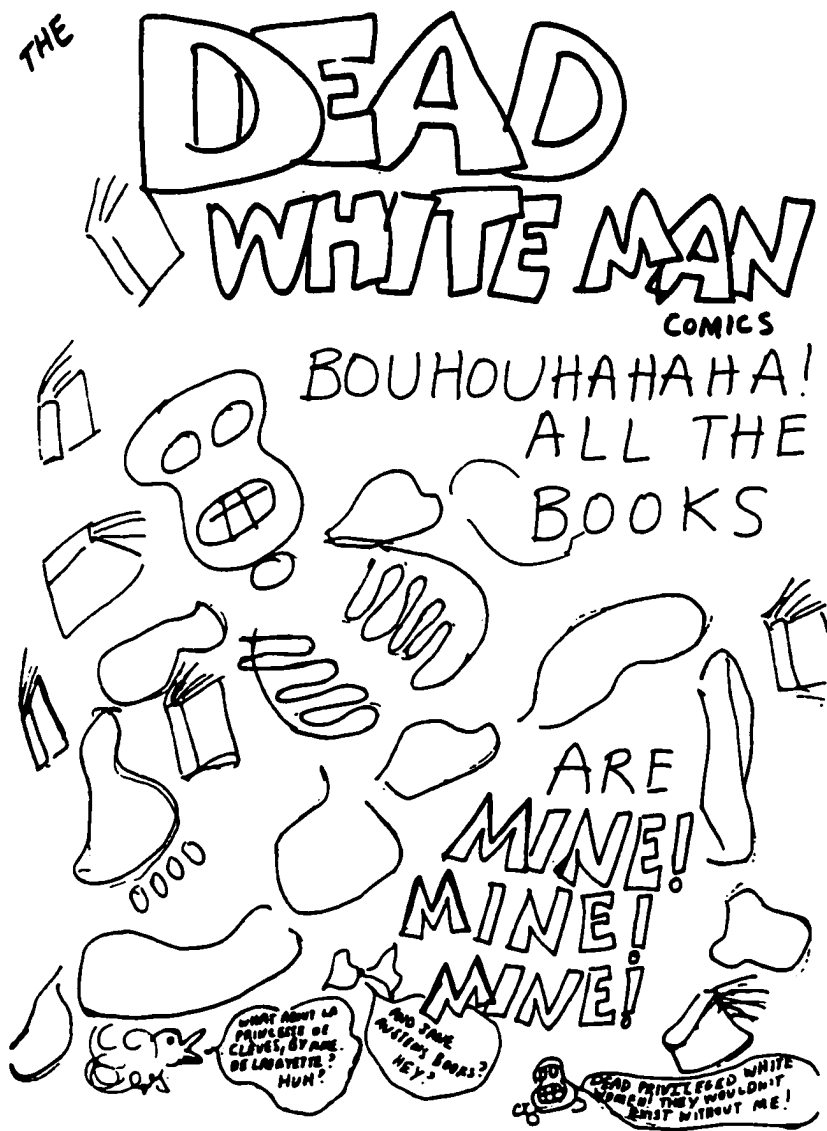
PAINTINGS BY THE DEAD WHITE MAN



PERSONAL
BY THE DEAD WHITE MAN

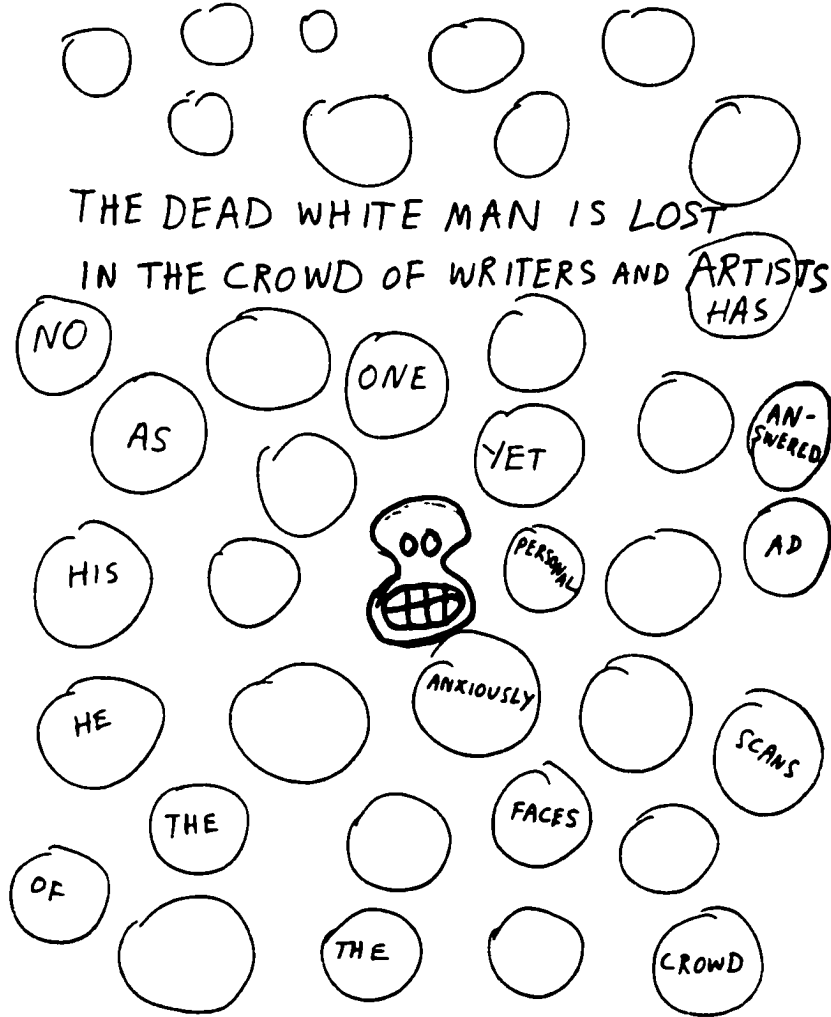
DWM, SMD, SEEKS
DWF, LWF, DBF,
LBF, DAF, LAF,
OTHER, FOR EASY-GOING
LITERARY ARTISTIC AND
MUSICAL CONVERSATION
AND POSSIBLY DEEPER
INVOLVEMENT. MUST BE
LIVING OR DEAD AT
TIME OF RESPONSE TO AD
X304216

Appendix F



Appendix F

THE DEAD WHITE MAN COMICS



THE DEAD WHITE MAN

SPEAKS:



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