

# Traces: *whatdoyoumeanandhowdoyoumeanit*

FRANK O'HARA. The «New York School» between Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art

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*Rising,  
he wraps himself in the burnoose of memories against the heat of life...  
and I have lost what is always and everywhere  
present, the scene of my selves, the occasion of these ruses,  
which I myself and singly must now kill  
and save the serpent in their midst*<sup>2</sup>.

## THE NEW YORK SCHOOL

In the nineteen-fifties, the poet Frank O'Hara and the musician John Cage were important stimulators for New York artists searching for alternative paths to Abstract Expressionism. O'Hara and Cage presented their aesthetic views as early as 1952 in panel discussions and lectures at *The Artists Club*, an association of Abstract Expressionist artists.

A panel discussion on 7 March 1951, with O'Hara and the artists Jane Freilicher, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, Alfred Leslie, and Larry Rivers was led by John Bernard Myers, partner of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery<sup>3</sup>. With the exception of Mitchell, each of the artists participating in this discussion exhibited in this gallery, which also published volumes of poems by O'Hara (*A City Winter*, 1952; *Oranges*, 1953; *Love Poems*, 1965). In O'Hara's poems, the first names of Freilicher, Hartigan, and Rivers were frequently mentioned. Furthermore, the de Nagy Gallery also published the four-page literary journal *Semicolon* on an irregular basis, which included poems by O'Hara, John Ashbery, Edwin Denby, and Kenneth Koch.

The poets O'Hara, Ashbery, Denby, and Koch, along with Barbara Guest and James Schuyler, are united by literary criticism under the epithet *New York School of Poets*. On 14 March 1952, Larry Rivers moderated a panel discussion in *The Club*, on which each of the aforementioned poets — with the exception of Koch — participated.

## O'HARA'S POETIC FORM

In 1951/52, O'Hara developed his own literary style. Without consideration of meter, he quickly wrote down allied impressions. Memories, fictions, and impressions from the immediate environment — O'Hara frequently wrote at his work place, the bookstore of the Museum of Modern Art (1951-55) — blend together. Following reports of imagined or actual occurrences — this cannot be differentiated by the reader — in the imperfect or perfect tense, are descriptions in the present tense, and vice versa.

Names and expressions from the various fields of art and from public life receive the same relative importance in the poetic process of association as the first names of friends. The significance of names is not explained within the work itself. Even with foreknowledge, the reader can recognize the difference between art-internal, public, and private only with difficulty.

The artistic ego is not clearly recognizable as an individual disassociated from the outer world, following principles independent of situation. The border between the freely associated and the disintegrating subject — between the constitution and dissociation of the ego — becomes fluid<sup>4</sup>. Experiences and conceptions receive their own relative importance in the stream of association of the act of writing, which is related to 'Action Painting': *In verse*, the poet is like Jackson Pollock, who *literally (works)... in the painting*<sup>5</sup>. As a result of their *cubist syntax* (Perloff) with temporal and spatial *displacements*<sup>6</sup>, the reader can no longer reconstruct the author's stream of thoughts in O'Hara's poems. The reader can use the poem only as a multiply-refracted framework for his or her own associations. By means of the multiplicity and intricacy of the references which make the poem possible and leave it open at the same time, the impressions which arise during its reading become at least as significant as that which is read.

## WASHINGTON CROSSING THE DELAWARE

In 1952, Hartigan, Rivers, and the gallerist Myers regularly visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art<sup>7</sup>. Hartigan, who had even closer contact with O'Hara than Rivers, was inspired to paint expressive adaptations of Dürer, Rubens, and others by these museum visits. Hartigan had reworked the adapted figures only in a painterly manner, not compositionally. Rivers, who in his early figurative work was influenced by Pierre Bonnard and Henri Matisse, was inspired by Gustave Courbet's *Un Enterrement à Ornans* (1849/50) as early as 1951. In contrast to Hartigan's *Old Master Paintings*, Rivers reworked the original



autonomously — in the representation of the Jewish burial of his grandmother.

Unlike Hartigan who completely adapted a painting's composition, in *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1953) Rivers reworked the composition with the help of other sources. He represented Washington's crossing of the river in a new manner which contrasts with the well-known painting of the same motif by Emanuel Leutze from 1851 in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Rivers translated O'Hara's *cubist syntax*, into a multi-perspective composition. In various places, soldiers, cavalrymen, and civilians are more drawn than painted on — and at the same time in — a landscape which is only loosely suggested by strokes of color.

As a model for Washington's portrait, Rivers stated: .../ took the face from a Da Vinci demon, a man screaming<sup>8</sup>. The position of the front hooves of the white horse, especially that of its inclined standing leg, as well as the posture of its head are related to that of the horse in Peter Paul Rubens' oil sketch of St. Martin cutting his cloak in half (c. 1609-13). No other figure is painted so precisely as the white horse and Washington. The posture of the head, as well as of the standing and trailing legs of the white horse's front hooves correspond — although laterally inverted — with the contrapposto of Washington. Leutze's real-idealistic Washington is based upon Rivers' revision of his classicist prototypes<sup>9</sup> and satirized in the posture of the horse. Such analogies in opposition, whereby pathos is treated with irony, is also found in O'Hara's poems<sup>10</sup>. Rivers satirizes a well-known history painting by fragmenting it into many scenes and adapting figures from other narrative contexts. Through satire, he upsets the Cold War nationalism of the McCarthy Era. Rivers transfers O'Hara's 'displacement' of names and places into the visual field via adaptation in *Washington Crossing the Delaware* and via set pieces borrowed from the everyday and private spheres in the compositions which followed in the course of the fifties. Paintings from 1955 to 1958 are no longer constructed with multiple-perspective in terms of composition only — as in, for example, the 'Washington' painting — but also in terms of the individual figures: see *Frank O'Hara, One in Three* (1957). For O'Hara, Rivers' quality lies in the *fluctuation between figurative absence and abstract presence*<sup>11</sup>.

## POEM-PAINTINGS

In 1952-53, Grace Hartigan translated into oil paintings 12 of the 19 (anti-)pastorals from O'Hara's series of poems *Oranges*<sup>12</sup>. Hartigan united lines of verse into blocks in these 12 paintings by varying the color base and handwriting. Hartigan substituted O'Hara's long lines of verse with new line arrangements. The artist wrote the first lines of verse larger than those which follow: they thus become headings. Hartigan employed text as image, whereas Rivers and O'Hara crossed image and text while working together on *Stones*<sup>13</sup>, a series of twelve lithographs, between 1957 and 1960. O'Hara: *Sometimes we would discuss the placement of an image, which would leave me enough room to write the text, or I would say where I wanted the text and then he would decorate the rest of the stone*<sup>14</sup>.



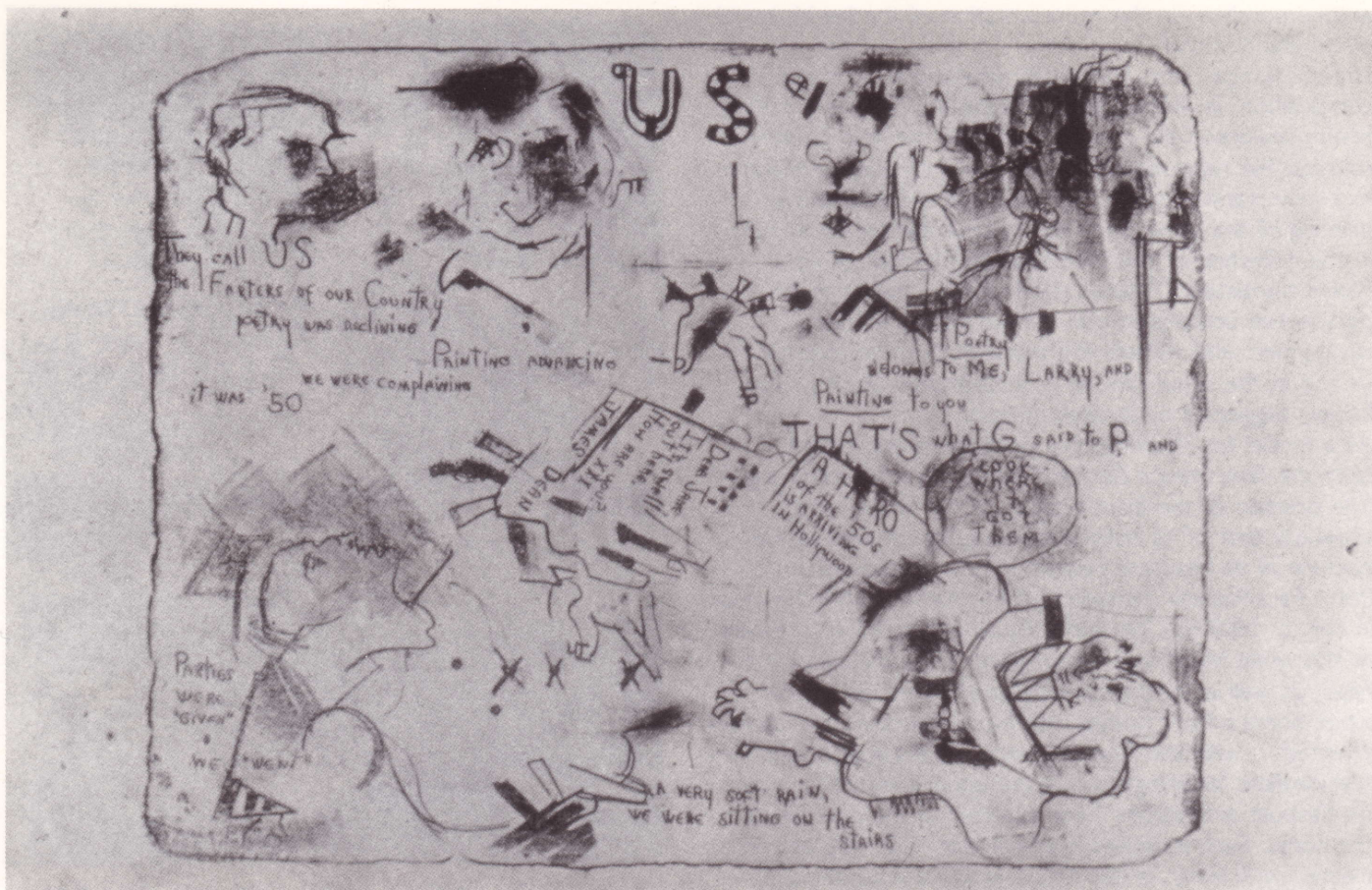
Grace HARTIGAN *Organges I*, 1952-53 Oil on paper 112 x 85 cm

Rivers' images are placed either as illustrations next to, above or below parts of poems, or as words in lines of verse. Segments of text also become image forms by means of special script forms, or they are integrated with image forms as letters, signs, and comic-strip balloons. Illustrative as well as signal-like non-illustrative symbols are employed as prominent signs of the text. Iconical and indexical sign functions change. The exchange between processes of seeing and processes of reading provokes a reception which fluctuates between de- and re-semanticization.

## PERSONISM

Kenneth Koch, with the painting *New York 1950-60*, completed in 1961 in collaboration with Rivers, was obviously influenced by the graffiti of the period - scrawlings on walls and toilettes. The title refers to a retrospective attitude: O'Hara's *Personism*, which Koch and Rivers followed in the fifties, was superseded in the sixties by Andy Warhol's and Roy Lichtenstein's impersonal adoption of models and subjects. Hartigan's and Rivers' adaptations were followed by a process of quotation, with which the artist not only adapted himself to the anonymous means of production of graphic design, but also denied the creativity which was demanded there as productive force. The points of reference in the external urban world which, for O'Hara and Rivers referred back to the personal, were replaced by mechanical reproductions of reproductions. For Warhol and Lichtenstein, the public replaced the private, whereas, in the sixties, Rivers was creating a personal cosmos, an





Larry RIVERS and Frank O'HARA *Stones: US*, 1957 Lithograph from one stone

individual iconography. References to the external world can be deciphered as quotations of the self, since a limited amount of reference points returns in many works, and sometimes even within the individual works themselves.

The non-individual from the external world is re-individualized in a painterly revision stressing fields of color. Rivers' quotation of himself transforms former external points of reference into internal ones and demonstrate that his former proximity to O'Hara's hyper-sensitive alertness to external influences is superseded by a withdrawal from the external world.

This withdrawal from the external world is also apparent in terms of O'Hara by as early as the end of the fifties, as his lines of verse about *Berdie* (1959; Mrs. Bertha Burger, who died in 1957, was Rivers' mother-in-law and model) in a lithograph from the *Stones* series demonstrates: museums are depicted as possibilities for withdrawal. Images in which the deceased is depicted become memorials: *How lucky we are that you're in so many museums*. It is not a matter of expressive revitalization, but rather of the mourning over the loss of life outside the museum.

O'Hara's programmatic statement, *You just go on your nerve*, also implies the opposite: the insurmountable stagnation, the mourning over the loss which forces one to a closing off of oneself from external stimuli. Openness for new acquaintances in public appears as an antipole to love and mourning in private. In a *Statement* from 1959, O'Hara reflects upon the contrast between death and hyper-sensitive openness for the present:

*I am mainly preoccupied with the world as I experience it,*

*and at times when I would rather be dead the thought that I could never write another poem has so far stopped me. I think this is an ignoble attitude. I would rather die for love, but I haven't.*

## IN MEMORY OF MY FEELINGS

In 1961, Jasper Johns integrated in stencil script the title of a longer poem, *In Memory of My Feelings*, written by O'Hara in 1956<sup>17</sup>, into a painting of the same name. It is one of the first paintings in a development of Johns' away from the appropriation of impersonal, generally known signs towards the complex, barely decipherable image compositions with autobiographical references. Johns placed the title above the lower edge of the left side of the painting. On the lower right side of the painting are the name *Frank O'Hara* and the signature *Johns 61* in the same stencil script. Above the names, the pentiment of the words *Dead Man* are still legible under layers of paint. We are not concerned here with an epigraph, but rather with the trace of an epigraph in the form of residues of past phases of work. The meaning of the script and the possibilities of interpreting the form of presentation correspond with one another.

The title of O'Hara's verse refers to past emotions which only live in memory, analogous to painting, which can only present traces of past actions, and to the old fork and knife which — their everyday function discharged by the function of the image — can only be 'drawn' from the traces of past use. Johns represents not a 'past present'<sup>18</sup>,





Jasper JOHNS *In Memory of My Feelings* — Frank O'Hara, 1961 Oil on canvas and objects 102 x 152 cm Private Collection

but rather signs of the absent, that is to say traces. Johns attains a new presence of the flat surface of the painting as a result of the way in which he engages traces of painting, usage, and script with one another to become signs which then refer to each another.

## MEMENTO MORI

In 1969/70, after O'Hara's accidental death in 1966, Johns had *Memory Piece* (Frank O'Hara) constructed according to a model from 1961. In the realization of the piece, a rubber cast of O'Hara's left foot was used. One relief on a flap is printable in each of the three interchangeable, sand-filled, uppermost drawers. The mould of the deceased, a trace of an eternally absent referent, can be reproduced any amount of times as traces in the sand. The reference *foot - imprint of production* is transformed into a reference between imprints in the work. With *In Memory of the Dead* (1967), Rivers thematized the relationship between death and life in a manner different than and yet similar to Johns: in the vertical axis, he presents Berdie above and, under this, O'Hara. The dead are depicted in collaged drawings, as further quotations of the self next to studies for already completed pictures of animals and animal-logos. The individual parts of the work consist of works which can be related to other works in Rivers' oeuvre — the represented disappears in a network of representations that refer to representations. In the sixties, Rivers and Johns began to repeatedly

entwine and unravel signs of a vocabulary which recurs again and again in their oeuvres. The irretrievable absence of the represented — of the referent — as a result of death is employed to transform communicating sign functions: the reference of signs to reality becomes the reference of signs to signs — as in a dictionary, in which every word is explainable only by means of new words, or, as John Ashbery states:

*All things seem mention of themselves*

*And the names which stem from them branch out to other referents...*

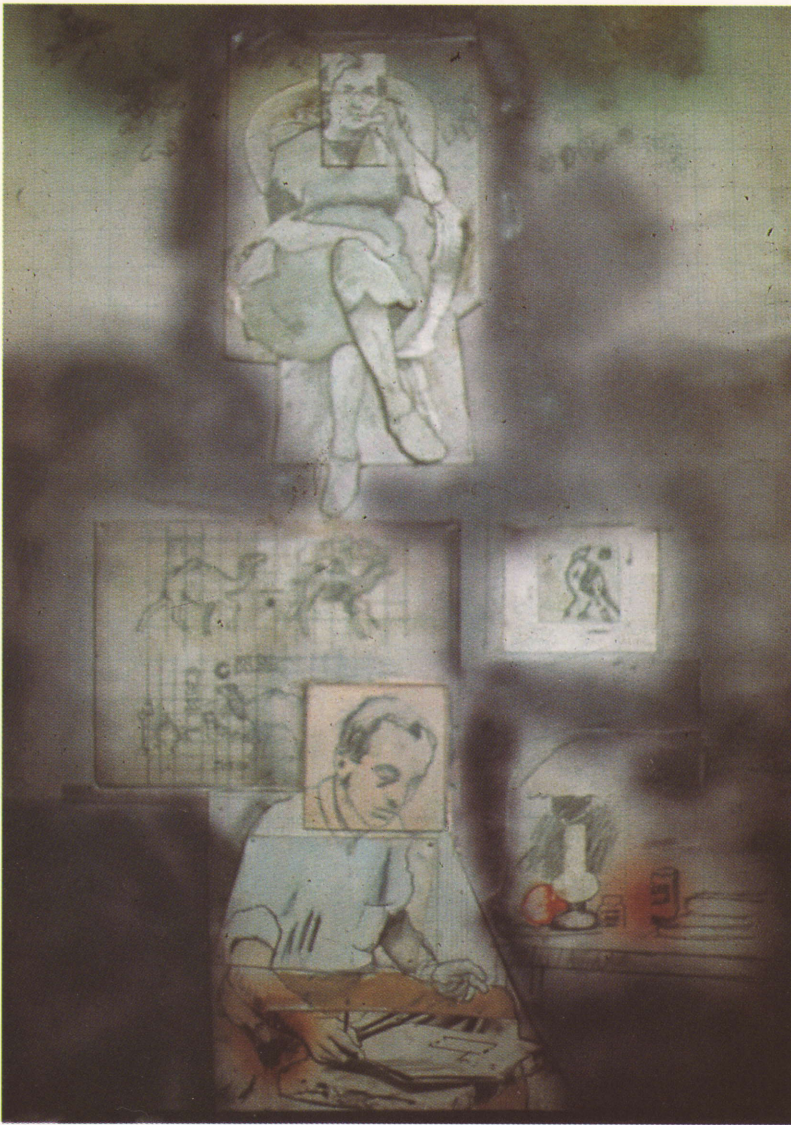
*Unfinished concepts that can never bring themselves to the point* <sup>19</sup>.

For the recipients — as for the readers of O'Hara's poems — possibilities of associations of presented signs with one's own life experiences and possibilities of the emotive filling of the processes of seeing and reading triggered by the network of signs condense as intensity. The relationship between recipient and author can be explained in two ways:

A. The work reflects itself as 'dead', or rather as 'mute', since it makes no statement about the relationships between referents external to the sign, the cause for the use of the presented signs and the combination of signs internal to the work. Merely the result of a transformation of signs becomes relevant, but not the process of transformation itself.

B. The 'dead' work is regarded as the medium of a 'secret exchange' between author and recipient. The relationship between the occasion of the projection and the projection itself, between the production of signs and





the reception of signs, remains open, without being arbitrary. The 'communicating tubes' between absent author and recipient projections do not allow themselves to be deciphered, nor do they reveal themselves. Intellectual examination of the sign process restricted to the work itself (A.) and emotive openness for the potential of meaning referring to past sign processes (B.) are not simultaneously, but successively pregnable attitudes of reception. ■

1. F. O'HARA, *Biotherm* (1961/62), in: *The Collected Poems*, New York, 1972, p. 445.
2. F. O'HARA, *In Memory of My Feelings* (1956), in: *The Collected Poems*, pp. 252-256.
3. I. SANDLER, *The Club*, in: *Artforum* (September 1965); reprinted in: C. and D. SHAPIRO, *Abstract Expressionism. A Critical Record*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 53.
4. See: A. FELDMAN, *Frank O'Hara. Criticism and Interpretation*, New York, 1979, pp. 90-112.
5. J. POLLOCK, *My Painting*, in: *Possibilities I* (Winter 1947-48); reprinted in: SHAPIRO, *Abstract Expressionism*, p. 356.
6. Grace HARTIGAN, 25 November 1975. Quoted in: M. PERLOFF, *Frank O'Hara. Poet Among Painters*, Austin/London, 1979, p. 70.
7. J.B. MYERS, *Tracking the Marvelous. A Life in the New York Art World*, London, 1984, p. 126; R.S. MATTISON, *Grace Hartigan. A Painter's World*, New York, 1990, p. 20.
8. J.H. LORIA, *Golden Oldies: An Interview with Larry Rivers*, in: *Arts Magazine* (Nov. 1978), p. 104; H. KORIATH, *Larry Rivers...*, Frankfurt/Main, 1990, p. 102.
9. See, for example, the posture and clothing in Ingres' portrait of de Nogent (1815) in the Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge.
10. M. PERLOFF, pp. 40, 63, 68.
11. F. O'HARA, *Larry Rivers: The Next to Last Confederate Soldier* (1959); reprinted in: F. O'HARA, *Standing Still and walking in New York*, Bolinas, California, 1975, p. 43.

12. F. O'HARA, *Oranges: 12 Pastorals* (1949), in: *The Collected Poems*, pp. 5-9; PERLOFF, pp. 39-41; MATTISON, p. 28.
13. Illustrated in: E. SPARKS, *Universal Limited Art Editions...*, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1989, pp. 471-475.
14. E. LUCIE-SMITH, *Frank O'Hara...*, in: *Studio International* (Sept. 1966), p. 112.
15. F. O'HARA, *Personism: A Manifesto*, in: *Yugen* 6/1960; reprinted in: O'HARA, *The Collected Poems*, p. 498.
16. F. O'HARA, *Statement* (1959), in: D. ALLEN (ed.), *The New American Poetry*, New York, 1960; reprinted in: O'HARA, *The Collected Poems*, p. 500.
17. See note 2.
18. J. DERRIDA, *Ellipse*, in: *Die Schrift und die Differenz*, Frankfurt/Main, 1976, p. 450.
19. J. ASHBERRY, *Grand Galop*, in: J. ASHBERRY, *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, New York, 1975; reprinted in: J. ASHBERRY, *Selected Poems*, New York, 1986, pp. 172, 174.

Translated from the German by Gérard A. Goodrow

Frank O'HARA (1926, Baltimore/Maryland) was a poet, art critic and organiser of exhibitions. He lived since 1951 in New York. In 1955 he became 'special assistant' of the international exhibition programme at the MOMA, New York, in 1960 'assistant curator of painting and sculpture exhibitions'; in 1965 associate curator and in 1966 curator. He died on 25.7.1966 runned over by a buggy on the beach of Fire Island/New York.

Grace HARTIGAN (1922, Newark/New Jersey), lives and works in Baltimore/Maryland.

Jasper JOHNS (1930, Augusta/Georgia) lives and works in New York and in Saint Martin, French West Indies.

Larry RIVERS (1923, Bronx/New York) lives and works in Southampton.

Thomas DREHER (1957) is an art historian. He works as an art critic in München.