

Frank O'Hara and Friends: The Day Before O'Hara Died

One-day public Symposium at the ICA, London – 24 July 2016

ABSTRACTS AND NOTES ON PRESENTERS:

Keynotes:

Professor Geoff Ward (Cambridge University):

“you will not die not knowing this is true this year”: Frank O'Hara's timing'

At the time of his death and even twenty years later, Frank O'Hara was a poet's poet and consigned to the sidelines of New York cultural studies as an art-world gadfly. His ascent into both the critical canon and a popular readership over the last twenty five years would secure him some unlikely admirers (not least, the late Geoffrey Hill) but now seems wonderfully irreversible. My helicopter view of O'Hara looks at various aspects of his times and timing - his conversion of Carlos Williams' snapshots into an aesthetic of personism, the importance of comic timing to his work, the equal importance of a darker dialectic to the aims of that comedy, and the trajectory of his hyper-professional yet riskily personalised and precarious career in the Museum of Modern Art.

Geoff Ward is the author of *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets* (1993/2000), the first study linking the core coterie of Ashbery, O'Hara and Schuyler. Currently Principal of Homerton College, University of Cambridge, he is also Chairman of the Fitzwilliam Museum there. Life Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, and Honorary Fellow of Harris Manchester College, Oxford, he is an editor of *The Cambridge Quarterly*, a poet, and occasional broadcaster on American Literature for BBC Radio. His first novel *You're Not Dead* (Garn Press) was published in 2015.

Dr Daniel Kane (University of Sussex):

'Frank O'Hara in radical contemporary British poetry'

'Frank O'Hara's poetry has no program and therefore cannot be joined,' wrote John Ashbery soon after Frank O'Hara's death in 1966. '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 Vietnam or in favor of civil rights; it does not paint gothic vignettes of the post-Atomic age.' This paper will explore Frank O'Hara's legacy in the UK, paying special attention to his influence on the work of contemporary British poets including Sophie Robinson and Keston Sutherland. Along the way, we'll question whether Ashbery was erasing O'Hara's politics, or whether Ashbery was right. Was O'Hara a disengaged aesthete, one whose main contribution was, as Ashbery put it, to propose 'This is me and I'm poetry—baby'? What 'program' might Ashbery have

missed in O'Hara's work that would motivate a contemporary radical UK politics / poetics? Is it queer sex? Speed and spontaneity? The 'foundness' of objects as they are imbricated in systems of global capital? These and related questions will be bandied about with the hope of encouraging a larger discussion about poetry's place in social and political praxis.

Daniel Kane is Reader in English and American Literature at the University of Sussex. His books include *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s* and *We Saw the Light: Conversations between the New American Poetry and Cinema*. His book *Kill Those Bastards the New York School: Poetry and Punk Rock in New York City* is forthcoming in Spring 2017.

Professor Redell Olsen (Royal Holloway, University of London):

'Frank O'Hara's Poetics of Art Writing: "On Looking" to the "Crowning of the Poet"'

Frank O'Hara's writing on art is diverse and crosses multiple genres from criticism, poetry to collaborative and visual works. In addition to critical writings on artists he often wrote poems on paintings, dedicated his poems to painters and made reference in his own poems to particular paintings from a range of art historical periods that included his own. In its diversity O'Hara's art writing contributed to the conditions of mutual influence that emerged between the poets and writers who were his contemporaries. Grace Hartigan's painting the 'Crowning of the Poet' (1985) demonstrates the ongoing effect of the poet on the artist nearly twenty years after O'Hara's death. This talk will examine a number of paintings and works of art that relate in very different ways to O'Hara's poems and explore the ways in which these paintings, when read in conjunction with O'Hara's writings, might help us to re-imagine and to rethink the traditional modes used to describe the constellated and inter-related practices of poetry and painting.

Redell Olsen is a poet who also makes film and performance works. Her recent books include: *Film Poems* (Les Fives, 2014) and *Punk Faun: a bar rock pastel* (Subpress, 2012) and *Secure Portable Space* (Reality Street, 2004). In 2013-14 she was the Judith E. Wilson visiting fellow in poetry at the University of Cambridge. She is currently Professor of Poetry and Poetics at Royal Holloway, University of London. www.redellolsen.co.uk

Panels:

PANEL 1: Friends

Nikolai Duffy, 'Poetry before Instagram or, I want you to know I was thinking of you today: Some thoughts on Frank O'Hara and personal poetry'

In an age before the conference call, talking on the telephone was a personal thing, an act as intimate as asking someone about their day and getting a response that knew friendship was in the detail. Not many people in the 1950s, outside of security agencies, wrote these conversations down; fewer still made poetry out of them, and even fewer recognised that poems were what you wrote simply because the other person was out or on another call or just plain unavailable. For O'Hara, poems are conversations; as he put it in his 1959 manifesto, 'Personism', 'I realized that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem.' In opposition to the self-aggrandizing world of academic poetry and corporate publishing, this paper discusses O'Hara's sense of poetry as conversation and correspondence, and argues that O'Hara, despite his death almost 50 years ago, is one of our most contemporary poets.

Nikolai Duffy is a poet and Senior Lecturer in American Literature at Manchester Metropolitan University. He has published various essays and reviews on contemporary poetics, experimental writing, and small press publishing. He is the author of the cross-genre work, *The Little Shed of Various Lamps* (Very Small Kitchen, 2013) and *Relative Strangeness: Reading Rosmarie Waldrop* (Shearsman, 2013). He is the editor of *The Selected Poems of Rosmarie Waldrop* (New Directions, 2016). His collection of prose poems, *Up the Creek*, about what happens when all the paddles have been sold to offshore investment funds, is forthcoming from Knives Forks and Spoons Press.

Jack Parlett, 'Solitude and all that'

Frank O'Hara had lots of friends. But what of the company he kept through poems? This paper will attend to a selection of O'Hara's poems with the subject of loneliness in mind, as a site of melancholy and desire negotiable also as a celebration of the lyric I's capacity to realise other voices and imagined companions. O'Hara's numerous solitary tableaux – of being 'lonely for myself' with a late-night cognac in 'At Joan's', or wondering if one of the nameless 8,000,000 is thinking of him in 'Personal Poem' – can offer nuance to our understanding of his work's inter-personality (its 'Personism', no less), in so far as they are animated by considerations of dedication, pronominal address and form (bringing together lone or fragmented syntactical units, as in 'St. Paul and All That'.) Under this aspect composition constitutes a form of company, the writing of the self always referential to another, and a way of recuperating the alone togetherness of urban modernity such that, as O'Hara writes in 'Morning', 'it/is difficult to think/of you without me in/the sentence.'

Jack Parlett is a first-year PhD candidate in English at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. His doctoral research is concerned primarily with the place of walking in Frank O'Hara's work, conceived of variously as an act of the flâneur, a mode of queer performance, and an analogue for poetic writing.

Jess Cotton, ““Even your lines have / a broken nose:” James Schuyler, Frank O'Hara and the poetics of friendship’

Jess Cotton, ““Even your lines have / a broken nose:” James Schuyler, Frank O'Hara and the poetics of friendship’

Frank O'Hara had a catalytic effect on James Schuyler: he introduced him to the New York art world, he shared his apartment, and provided him with a model for a new kind of poetics, one that makes, as O'Hara writes, the poem an encounter 'between two persons instead of two pages.' But O'Hara was also a figure that Schuyler felt most consistently overshadowed by and the object of his frustration about his own lack of productivity in the mid-1950s. O'Hara's death has often been read accordingly as providing Schuyler with the necessary creative space to establish his poetics on his own terms. This reading, for all its potential neatness, does however simplify the nature of O'Hara's and Schuyler's creative bond, subsuming it under an anxiety of influence model. O'Hara's influence on Schuyler was far more fluid and complex than this model allows for. Concentrating on Schuyler's early work, influenced by O'Hara's 'I do this, I do that' poetics, and the two elegies he wrote for O'Hara, I argue that their friendship was at once integral and amorphous, a continually shifting context against which Schuyler's own work takes root, rather than an anxiety to be worked through. I argue that Schuyler's poetry works through the fictions that O'Hara's off-the-cuff writing process sets up between life and art, creating against this model of speedy city composition his own slow-time poetics which allows for the process of living to be situated not in the moment of composition but in its continual revisitation.

Jess Cotton is a LAHP-funded PhD student in the English department at UCL. Her thesis looks at the intersection between childhood and queer identities in the work of John Ashbery, Elizabeth Bishop, James Schuyler and Joe Brainard. Her writing on poetry has been published or is forthcoming in *Harper's*, *Modernist Cultures*, *Oxford Poetry* and *The White Review*.

PANEL 2: Artforms

Sam Ladkin, ‘Paragone of the New York School’

When considering the life and legacy of the poet Frank O'Hara, it might be illuminating to think of the New York School as a renaissance by comparing it to one of the contests of the Renaissance, that of the paragone. The debate of the paragone, of the hierarchy of arts, is hardly deserving of polite conversation when discussing O'Hara, the poet and art curator, pianist and balletomane. The question of paragone is not tactful since, as O'Hara writes of his great friend, the poet and dance critic Edwin Denby: 'The ballet, the theatre, painting and poetry, our life accidentally in co-existence, is a rather large provenance which he [Denby] tactfully

negotiates and notates'. Decorum aside, we might propose painting was first among equals as the New York School artform, but it was ballet O'Hara referred to as 'the most modern of the arts'.

I propose to bring together the social ties between Burckhardt and Denby (lovers), de Kooning (their neighbour) and O'Hara (their friend) in a particular way, which is by drawing on the mutual support each borrows from the next, both personally and in print, and by extending such affiliations through their respective artforms: photography, dance, art, poetry. Reflecting on the paragone will allow me to offer a brief thought on the periodisation of the New York School, and will encourage speculation on New York School qualities, amongst them attentiveness and risk.

Sam Ladkin is senior lecturer in the School of English, University of Sheffield. His work tends to focus on the relationships between poetry and the arts. With Robin Purves he has edited three collections, *Complicities: British Poetry, 1945–2007* (2007), the 'British Poetry Issue' of *Chicago Review* (2007), and "'The Darkness Surrounds Us": American Poetry,' special issue of *Edinburgh Review* (2004). He is at work on a monograph titled *Frank O'Hara and the Language of Art*. With Emile Bojesen and Robert McKay he co-edited *Against Value in the Arts and Education* (Rowman & Littlefield). His articles have appeared in *Textual Practice*, *Glossator*, *Blackbox Manifold*, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, *World Picture*, *Chicago Review*, *Edinburgh Review*, *Word & Image*, and *Angelaki*.

Matthew Holman, 'Frank O'Hara and Jan Cremer'

This paper will consider The New York - Amsterdam Set (completed 1978, otherwise titled The End of the Far West), a collaboration between American poet Frank O'Hara and Dutch artist Jan Cremer, in relation to questions of Cold War Americanisation and how practitioners 'from' both sides of the Atlantic creatively responded to this issue. Political subjects of the work, comprised of 10 poems and 10 paintings, include the assassination of President Kennedy, the 1964 New York World's Fair, and the Profumo Affair in which O'Hara's assumed apoliticism is questioned and anxieties around American cultural homogenisation are played out. O'Hara's poetry in this collection probes the 'alienation of distance', thinking through the sexual subversion of queer 'passing' as well as the risk associated with nuclear contamination and urban complicity during the Cold War. Cremer's work, depicting as it does clouds of dust, the crossing of political-sexual boundaries, and sexual innuendo, demonstrates a shared interest in how personal proximity can be understood politically. It will interrogate the definition of 'collaboration' itself, and situate the much-discussed subject of New York School collaborative projects in the under-explored context of associated poets' direct engagement with the European avant-garde.

Matthew Holman is an AHRC-funded PhD candidate at University College London, where his thesis examines Frank O'Hara's relationship to the global, transnational, and cosmopolitan - with a particular focus on his curatorial work in Europe for the Museum of Modern Art. He is currently a co-organiser on the Terra/Tate 'Refiguring American Art 1945-80' research strand, and before UCL he was an F. R. Leavis Scholar at The University of York.

Eleanor Careless, “‘risk the big gesture’’: Frank O’Hara on Helen Frankenthaler’

In a 1960 exhibition catalogue, O’Hara wrote of pioneering colour-field painter Helen Frankenthaler that she was ‘a daring painter, willing to risk the big gesture’. Frankenthaler is known for her huge, abstract canvases, created using her stain-soak technique, a variation on Jackson Pollock’s paint-pouring. As one of very few female painters in the New York art world, Frankenthaler’s risk-taking was not only aesthetic, but gendered. As Frankenthaler herself said, ‘it’s all about risk, deliberate risk’. O’Hara’s catalogue recognises the aesthetic risk and bigness of her work but it is only in his poem ‘Blue Territory’, dedicated to Frankenthaler, that O’Hara acknowledges an element of concurrent gendered risk. Through O’Hara’s poetry and Frankenthaler’s painting, this paper will approach questions of risk, gender and representation.

Eleanor Careless is a CHASE funded PhD candidate at the University of Sussex, working on gender, critical theory and modernist poetry. Her current research also investigates feminist responses to terrorist violence. She is based in London and co-edits *The Literateur*, an online literary magazine.

PANEL 3: Styles

Peter Middleton, ‘Dances and jackets: how O’Hara’s poems picture readership’

O’Hara’s poem ‘At the Old Place’ depicts the poet and a group of friends going to a gay dance bar in a seedy basement where they waltz and do the lindy hop watched by acquaintances from the West Coast, including Jack Spicer. My talk contrasts the San Francisco Renaissance interest in finding mythic images of queer poetic community with the quite different strategy of picturing poetic readership developed by the New York School. Close reading of the poem ‘Joe’s Jacket’ leads to the conclusion that O’Hara and his circle are able to picture poetic vocation and the reading of their poems by selecting ever-changing images of the values, affects and ideas from the everyday life they share, images such as dancing, borrowed jackets, and paintings. One of O’Hara’s great achievements is to show a non-normative structure of feeling in action, and thereby show later poets and readers how lyric can adjust to differences of identity and culture.

Peter Middleton is the author of *Physics Envy: American Poetry and Science in the Cold War* (Chicago, 2015), and other books and essays on modern and contemporary poetry. He is currently working on a book of essays for University of New Mexico Press on O’Hara and other poets who have reconfigured authorship. He teaches at the University of Southampton, and will be a visiting professor at New York University this coming fall.

Gareth Farmer, 'Master of the poly-tonic cool'

Frank O'Hara's poetry is often praised for its engagingly casual tone. We admire the apparent ease with which he breezes through the city, describing its locale, finding mini-moments of epiphany and delight in the urban sprawl. O'Hara's poetry has also been read as giving voice to the quintessential post-modern self, exploring the various versions of the 'I' as it tries on the multiple poses enabled by the fast-paced and changeable city. The casualness of the poetry and the presence of the multiple 'I's are related insofar as they create both internal-facing as well as externally directed dialogues: O'Hara addresses his multiple, and multiply performing selves, as well as his friends and his projected readers. These dialogues create a poetry of multiple address, producing what might be called its 'poly-tonic' style – poly-tonic, rather than phonic, as each shift of address creates its own poetic tone. Multiple address, intertextuality and dialogism all comprise O'Hara's poetics of the poly-tonic which we experience, overall, as the casually cool. O'Hara was a master of such a complex tonality, but it was one laboured at and produced in necessary dialogue with the world. In other words, his poly-tone is a creation of dialogic and dialectic tensions, all tentatively held in place by the appearance of the casual and the 'cool'. In dialogue with himself and with the world, he creates a style which is camp (Sontag), painterly (Perloff), deceptively and artificially easy (Milne), as well as flirtatious. O'Hara's restless dialogue with himself in the world created a poetry of the poly-tonic cool.

Gareth Farmer is a literary scholar and lecturer in English Literature. He writes on poetry, poetics, literary experimentation and theory. He has a new collection of poems, *Diurnal Sweigh*, due out in 2016.

Ed Luker, 'Uneasy reading: O'Hara and modernist masculinity'

Frank O'Hara is famed for his *jouissance* and flippancy. They are the driving force of the sociality of his poetry, how it extends beyond the personal into a relation with its reader. This presentation historically contextualizes these aspects of O'Hara's work, by arguing that they are a response to the masculine 'seriousness' underlying the poetry of Charles Olson and Ezra Pound. I will examine how their ideas are taken up in O'Hara's work and how his work distinguishes itself from their own.

The graveness of Pound's lament for modernity ('Nor is it equipped with a frigidaire patent') is undermined in 'St Paul an All That' where, 'I walk in / sit down and / face the frigidaire'. If O'Hara quips 'You just go on your nerve', could this be seen as an insouciant reconfiguring of breath in Olson's theory of projective verse? What I will argue is that not only is O'Hara's flippancy and *jouissance* a way of responding to the masculine seriousness of Pound and Olson, but that what many contemporary readers of O'Hara have missed is that it is counterweighted by the sudden appearance of death. *Jouissance* and flippancy must be read alongside O'Hara's moments of unease: 'the enormous bliss of American death'.

Ed Luker is a poet and a writer. He is the author of *Peak Return* (Shit Valley Press, 2014), *Headlost* (RIVET. Press, 2014) and *The Sea Together* (Materials Press, 2016). He is currently working on a long prose-poem on the non-citizen, indefinite

detainment, attainment and the British state called *Universal Attainment Centre*. He is studying for a PhD on the politics of attention Ezra Pound, Charles Olson and J. H. Prynne at Northumbria University.

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