

**Université de Montréal**

**“I Do This, You Do That:” Mass Consumption and Subversive Protopolitics in Frank  
O’Hara’s Poetry**

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## Résumé

Mon mémoire propose d'analyser la poésie de Frank O'Hara comme étant une réponse subversive, quoi que « protopolitique, » à la montée de la surconsommation aux États-Unis, plus précisément à New York, dans les années cinquante et le début des années soixante. C'est en passant par la philosophie et la sociologie du quotidien d'Henri Lefebvre et l'art de la flânerie exemplifié par Charles Baudelaire et Walter Benjamin que je développerai une compréhension de la poésie du quotidien de l'auteur et des effets de l'inclusion d'objets anodins dans ses poèmes. Dans un deuxième temps, j'utiliserai des peintres de l'expressionnisme abstrait et du mouvement « pop art » pour tisser un lien entre leur désir mutuel d'empêcher la surconsommation de s'établir comme stratégie économique de base. En dernier lieu, la poésie et les essais littéraires de plusieurs auteurs modernes américains tels Charles Olson et William Carlos Williams et des Futuriste et Formaliste Russes Vladimir Mayakovsky et Viktor Shklovsky m'aideront à approfondir la poétique subversive d'O'Hara et son effet sur la surconsommation et le sentiment d'éloignement qu'il en ressent. Pour conclure, j'élargirai le spectre de ma recherche pour montrer que mon analyse de l'œuvre d'O'Hara me servira d'assise pour un projet futur qui tentera de comprendre l'effet de la poésie d'autres auteur(e)s américain(e)s reconnu(e)s et de leur propre œuvre beaucoup plus engagée politiquement que celle du New Yorkais.

**Mots-Clés:** Frank O'Hara, surconsommation, quotidienneté, protopolitique, banal, expressionnisme abstrait, pop art, Futurisme Russe, Formalisme Russe, poésie.

## **Summary**

In my thesis, I analyze Frank O'Hara's poetry as a subversive, albeit protopolitical, response to the rise of mass consumption in the United States, more specifically in New York City, from the 1950s until his premature death in 1966. Through Henri Lefebvre's sociologic and philosophic theories on the everyday and Charles Baudelaire's and Walter Benjamin's representations of the flâneur, I develop an understanding of O'Hara's mundane poetics and of the numerous echoes of banal objects in his oeuvre. Secondly, I contend that pop artists Claes Oldenburg and Andy Warhol and the abstract expressionist movement share a mutual desire to critique mass consumption as the main economic doctrine of the epoch. Furthermore, O'Hara's passion for the essays and poetics of American modernists such as Charles Olson and William Carlos Williams and Russian Futurist and Formalist Vladimir Mayakovsky and Viktor Shklovsky proves an essential component of O'Hara's subversive poetics and in the "enstranging" effects it exemplifies with regard to mass consumption. To conclude, I argue that O'Hara's work is but the foundation of my argument and points to a larger discussion on mass consumption and the post-war poetic response to it.

**Keywords:** Frank O'Hara, mass consumption, everyday, protopolitics, mundane, abstract expressionism, pop art, Russian Futurism, Russian Formalism, poetics.

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## Abbreviations

- AP* Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1999.
- CP* *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* Rev. ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- C I* Lefebvre, Henri. *A Critique of Everyday Life, Volume I*. London: Verso, 1991.
- C II* Lefebvre, Henri. *Critique of Everyday Life*. Trans. John Moore. "Vol. II: Foundation for a Sociology of the Everyday." London: Verso, 2014. 273-652.
- C III* Lefebvre, Henri. *Critique of Everyday Life*. Trans. John Moore. "Vol. III: From Modernity to Modernism' (Towards a Metaphilosophy of Daily Life). London: Verso, 2014. 653-842.
- R* Lefebvre, Henri. *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life*. London: Continuum, 2004.

*To my cat ねこ、  
who kept my feet warm for  
the whole process of this thesis.*

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## 1. Introduction

“First you took Arthur’s porcelain / pony from the mantel and! dashed / it against the radiator!” These are the first three lines from Frank O’Hara’s poem “How Roses Get Black” and the very first lines from the diverse body of work tentatively put together in his *Collected Poems* (3). O’Hara’s well documented tendency to write poems on the go certainly led to a few lines scattered in the wind or whole poems thrown in bins having been mistaken for a banal, used napkin. These initial lines highlight effectively what have been deemed O’Hara’s main attributes. For example, they show immediacy by starting with “first” throwing the reader into the poem from the onset. Then, they depict a mundane scene from the poet’s life without any desire to retouch the setting or the action. Also, they invariably transcend a certain sense of melodrama both attached to the radio soap operas that he listened to religiously and to a certain camp aesthetic. Nevertheless, I will argue here that there is more to these lines, that they can be interpreted in a new way. This rethinking does not shun these readings, but, instead, builds on them and pushes them further.

In this thesis, I aim to present O’Hara’s poetry as inherently protopolitical, as a carrier of a generation’s struggle with new economic and social trends. Hazel Smith uses “protopolitical” in her work on O’Hara, *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O’Hara: Difference, Homosexuality, Topography*. Smith quotes Andrew Ross on that matter when he mentions that “Texts, in other words, speak more than they say, even where they seem to be about ‘surface things’” (qtd. in Smith 23). She uses this term because she concurs that “texts can be positively influential and generative” (23). I would like to reclaim Ross’s term as well, because I believe that there are many interpretations that are hidden in O’Hara’s poetry, interpretations that are of rich political and subversive value. I would also like to expand on this term and use it as a marker of



ambiguity. In effect, this sense of ambiguity reflects the ethos of what Dan Wakefield named the “Silent Generation” (2). He adds: “like many people in the fifties, I felt sort of politically schizophrenic” (258). In that sense, this thesis will analyze both O’Hara’s flagrant anti-consumerist poems and those whose subversive messages are subtler, if not nearly contradictory to the others. For these reasons, his poetry would certainly not be linked to mass consumption and especially not as a major critique of its rise in the 1950s and 1960s. It is also fair to say that O’Hara was no Ginsberg; he was not going after governmental forces directly. But O’Hara’s oeuvre evokes the consumerist ethos of his epoch, challenging, through his poetics, the tendencies of planned obsolescence and of an ever-growing desire to consume. In this thesis, I challenge the conception that mass consumption can be more than peripheral to post-World War II poetics, and assert instead that it can be central to it. While one would look at O’Hara’s “I Do This, I Do That” poems for their unique rhythm and overflow of spontaneous thoughts, I would prefer to see striving political possibilities in them as they go against the grain of excessive consumption from the post-war era.

My ultimate goal is to present a different component of O’Hara’s poetry; to show that the man behind the spontaneous poems was more than just relating day-to-day activities in the metropolis. He was also deploring those of an ever accelerating everyday life and those of an economy relying on people spending beyond their means. It is my contention that O’Hara’s poetry is more than just surface, it is a prime example of how the late 1950s and 1960s were years of major transformations in the United States. In other words, O’Hara’s *Collected Poems* demonstrates how everyday American life in these two decades was rife with change, widespread confusion and alienation. While O’Hara may not have intended everything that I will mention in this study, it is an ideology that is steeped in his poetry that I want to tackle. He

embodies an epoch, a rising movement that would not slow down for another decade after his death.

While his general readership has been mainly acquainted with poems from either *Lunch Poems* or *Meditations in an Emergency*, I want to examine O'Hara's poetry in a different way. In effect, by choosing any given poem, one can fully grasp the range in themes the author has written and build a better understanding of how they somehow all fit together. This is what ultimately led me to choose my title, "I Do This, You Do That." Indeed, as much as the various movements and other artists influenced O'Hara and how much he has been linked to mass consumption, I would argue that O'Hara is a unique figure in the American canon because he would always do what he wanted to do, he wanted to go "on [his] nerve" (CP 498). This desire to go beyond the anthologized poems is, I believe, essential to a better understanding of not only O'Hara's most ordinary characteristics, but also as the most efficient way to recreate an unfiltered societal portrait of the era.

In the same vein, this thesis will argue that any form of art is always consumed. One consumes a painting by looking at it, one consumes a book when reading it, be it once or twice or even more than that, and the same goes for movies, opera, or any type of performance. Martyn J. Lee's explains this concept very well. His argument in his fascinating *Consumer Culture Reborn* thoroughly unearths the meanings attached to the commodity and successfully manages to translate its effects on the modern consumer society. One of the many interesting passages I have found in this study is worth citing at length:

What we consume, therefore, is not the object of consumption itself, but its meaning and its sign-value. ... This forces us to address more precisely some of the ways in which commodities function symbolically at the moment they have

passed through the market and have entered into the realm of everyday life; that is, at the moment they are transformed from *commodities for consumption* to *objects of consumption*. (36)

This is exactly what I aim to describe through O'Hara's poetry. O'Hara renders a certain tangibility to the banal objects in his poetry. In other words, I contend that he brings back the notion of object before that of commodity, as they are consumed over and over again, for an extended period of time. It outlives the notion of commodity that had been attached to the particular object in the moment of purchase. The "symbols" attached to it are that of rebellion, and a subversive desire to make them last and defy the general laws of planned obsolescence.<sup>1</sup>

Art's intense commodification reached its peak in the years recently targeted by George Cotkin in *Feast of Excess*, that is, from 1950 to 1975.<sup>2</sup> This phenomenon worried many writers, including Herbert Marcuse who, in his groundbreaking *One-Dimensional Man*, wrote that: "the extent to which this civilization transforms the object world into an extension of man's mind and body makes the very notion of alienation questionable. The people recognize themselves in their commodities" (11). In that sense, I would argue that it is nearly impossible to dissociate an idea of excess without discussing mass consumption. In regards to O'Hara's work, excess takes many forms, be it through endless enumerations of ordinary objects, hyperbolic statements, or even in the frenetic rhythm of his poems. These various examples all correlate in their representation of

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<sup>1</sup> Lee later adds, "goods are simultaneously material and symbolic objects, useful not only for their functional and physical properties, but also as important instruments of cultural taxonomy and classification" (40). O'Hara tackles this as well in his poetry especially in their role in the general "cultural taxonomy" of the New York market. On occasions, O'Hara will come to describe friends or acquaintances through their objects or what they like as in the gifts he plans to buy in "The Day Lady Died" or in "Having a Coke with You."

<sup>2</sup> I would like to develop other aspects of these commodifications in my PhD dissertation. One of the main aspects that interest me the most is the important relationship between the jazz industry in this period and the Black Arts movement. I intend to argue that the pivotal role of jazz in the poetry of the 1950s and 1960s—building from Charles Mingus's rhetoric and legible in Langston Hughes's *Ask Your Mama* and Amiri Baraka's revolutionary "poems that kill"—served both as a gateway to solidifying jazz's role in black cultural nationalism and as a rejection of commodification, in response to pressure from the recording industry to make radical music accessible to the mainstream. This cultural reappropriation redefines musical consumption as an historical and nationalistic tool to counter the music industry's desire for it to serve the white market.

the new consumerist society of the 1950s and early 1960s. It is these commentaries that I will address in this thesis.

I would like to begin with the everyday as a concept through which the most mundane of our actions occur and interact with mass consumption and its multiple facets. In the first chapter, I theorize the everyday, especially in the Lefebvrian sense of the word. Nevertheless, I would like to address how it is essential to a better understanding of O'Hara's poetry. One of the main works focusing on the everyday that I have looked at, outside of Lefebvre, is John Roberts' *Philosophizing the Everyday*. Like his predecessor, Roberts focuses on the links between the ordinary and the commodity form. This idea is especially vital to my work. When he writes that "the most undistinguished, unprepossessing and conformist of intellectual and material objects hide various kinds of disaffirmative and dissident and utopian content" or that "the everyday represents those daily forms of resistance and common culture which consciously and unconsciously generate the wider horizons of class consciousness" Roberts provides a strong case for analyzing the mundane objects in O'Hara's poetry as loci of political messages (39, 67).

Though I will touch upon O'Hara's most famous poems such as "Meditations in an Emergency" or "The Day Lady Died," my textual analysis will mainly focus on lesser known poems like "Katy," "Lines for Fortune Cookies," or "Les Étiquettes Jaunes." It is this preference for a wider range of poems that will lead me not to only perceive the everyday in its philosophical and theoretical sense, but also to delve into the everyday itself; to look at a common day-to-day poem that might not have attracted as much attention from critics in the past. After all, as Donald Allen points out in his note at the beginning of O'Hara's *Collected Poems*, "he [O'Hara] apparently did think of his work as a whole," which is well reflected by the general shape of the collection, as it does not clearly refer to O'Hara's various, individual

published works. Instead, it is presented in an homogeneous, unaltered succession over five hundred pages (vi). By dissecting O’Hara’s oeuvre and looking at its different subject matters—walking in the city, contemplating life from his kitchen table, etc.—I will be able to form a clearer understanding of O’Hara’s protopolitical message and desire to tackle the rise of mass consumption.

O’Hara has been greatly influenced by other artistic media and that is why I will be reading his work alongside abstract expressionism and pop art in part three, and American Modernist, and Russian Futurism and Formalism in the fourth part. As a curator at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and as a friend of many poets and artists, O’Hara’s poetics have been greatly inspired by these various figures, going as far as collaborating with them on different pieces—as he did with Mike Goldberg or Larry Rivers—or merely by having long discussions with them at his favourite bar, the Cedar Tavern. Through the works of Claes Oldenburg or Andy Warhol, O’Hara was exposed to another side of art, that of happenings, “a nonrepeatable ecstasy of spontaneous expression, refused to be divorced from ‘daily life’” (Cotkin 4). Oldenburg’s work, as it will later be explained, plays an important role, albeit much more politically engaged, in the rise of everyday art attacking the dogmas of mass consumption. No critical work has linked Oldenburg to O’Hara. As for Warhol, his sheer influence on the epoch itself suffices to include him in this study, thus his work will appear in a much more referential manner, rather than as a correlating tool.

In addition, I will compare O’Hara’s work to the poetry of William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson and Wallace Stevens on the American scene, and the theoretical work of Russia’s Viktor Shklovsky and Vladimir Mayakovsky. Most of these artists were either dead or in the later days of their career when O’Hara reached his peak. They will enable me to show all of

O'Hara's artistic facets and unearth their affiliations to his protopolitical message. It is mainly through their theoretical essays—an aspect that is lacking from O'Hara's own curriculum except for his mock-manifesto or his multiple essays on the medium of painting—that I will forge an understanding of O'Hara's poetry and how it came to be. It is by first looking at this influential collage and then by taking it apart, piece by piece, that one can understand how O'Hara's protopolitical message is hidden behind a strongly built wall of theoretical and poetical influences.

Through this thesis, I hope to demonstrate that the foundation of O'Hara's poetics does not lie in its surface—the everyday, the spontaneity and the anecdotal tone—but instead in the mostly ignored material on which the poem is built—the seemingly random objects included in the poems. For instance, in “Why I'm not a Painter,” the reader is tempted to look only at the discussion O'Hara had with Mike Goldberg and the painter's progress in the completion of his next piece, “SARDINES” (*CP* 261). While the surface of the poem presents the spontaneity of O'Hara's coterie, it leaves in the background what Barbara Guest described as “an exact statement of an Abstract Expressionist principle” (qtd. in Lehman 1998:344). What is more of interest, as Perloff points out, is the relationship between the titles, sardines and oranges, that “triggers a chain of associations that ultimately leads straight to its demise” (112). It is this eventual erasure of sardines from the painting that leaves O'Hara incapable of being a painter: he cannot leave objects aside and hide them; they need to be essential to the building of his poetry.

These objects mirror the actual implications of O'Hara's everyday life and his desire to “enstrange” the reader.<sup>3</sup> After all, O'Hara's peak occurred conjointly with the inception of socio-political and racial revolutions, and despite his apparent restraint, I will unearth many subversive

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<sup>3</sup> I am referring to Benjamin Sher's translation of Shklovsky's work. By enstrangement, he means to confuse the English reader in the same way that Shklovsky's use of *otstranit* confused his Russian readership (1990:xix). I concur with Sher's argument and use his translation.

elements that can be extrapolated from his poetry to illustrate his social and political rhetoric. Through one of the New York School's epitomes, I hope to demonstrate that it was impossible not to carry a sense of rebellion or political opinion in such a turbulent decade.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> By the New York School, I imply that of poetry. This name was also attributed to painters of the post-war era and, in their case, that rebellious aspect was not unanimous. As Serge Guilbaut writes in *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*: "from compromise to compromise, refusal to refusal, adjustment to adjustment, the rebellion of the artists, born of frustrations within the left, gradually changed its significance until ultimately it came to represent the values of the majority, but in a way (continuing the modernist tradition) that only a minority was capable of understanding." (3).

## 2. The Everyday

The late 1950s and 1960s in the United States were decades of major changes starting from the return of Republicans to the White House after nearly twenty years, to the Vietnam War protests epitomized by songs such as “Hey, Hey, LBJ” or Dylan’s “Times they are a-changin’.” These changes are intricately linked to the rise of mass consumption in economic institutions, which was highly rejected by countercultural movements. One might think of Mario Savio’s comments during his address at the sit-in in Berkeley or in his “An End to History,” in which he compares students to “products needed by industry or government” (91). In Henri Lefebvre’s words, these socio-economic changes brought new rhythms<sup>5</sup> to Western society. While charismatic figures such as Dylan and Savio have been cited for their undeniable role in the changes the American population effected from Eisenhower to Kennedy’s presidencies, more subtle traces of these new rhythms can be found in the works of certain poets of the era. This chapter aims to clarify Frank O’Hara’s poetics of *flânerie* as a critique of mass consumption and as a showcase for his rhythm analyst attributes. It is by comparing O’Hara’s work to that of two *flâneurs* epitomizing this style, Walter Benjamin and Charles Baudelaire, that I construct the American poet’s (post)modern network of *flânerie*. It is from Lefebvre’s point of view that I will be looking at the respective contexts in which these two famous figures operated. I will contend that O’Hara’s poetry serves as a cultural barometer that mirrors the ebb and flow characteristic of the rise of mass consumption in New York City (and elsewhere).

### 2.1 Henri Lefebvre: Framing the Rhythms of Everyday Life

French philosopher Henri Lefebvre has been constantly upstaged in the past decades by his

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<sup>5</sup> Lefebvre sees rhythm as a more, all-encompassing, term than how it is usually used in everyday discourse. As he acknowledges, “the meanings of the term remain obscure. We easily confuse *rhythm* with *movement*, speed ... [F]ollowing this, we tend to attribute to rhythms a **mechanical** overtone, brushing aside the **organic** aspects of rhythmized movements” (R 5-6).



compatriots; the likes of Althusser, Baudrillard, de Certeau and even his good friend Guy Debord are recurring names found in the literature on consumption and everyday life. Nevertheless, I would argue that Lefebvre's body of work is more complete and connects these two aspects in a more efficient manner, that is, through rhythmanalysis.<sup>6</sup> Lefebvre writes: "The commodity prevails over everything. (Social) space and (social) time, dominated by exchanges, become the time and space of markets; although not being *things* but including **rhythms**, they enter into **products**" (R 6). Therefore, embracing the everyday entails that "[t]he most extraordinary things are also the most everyday; the strangest things are often the most trivial, and the current notion of the 'mythical' is an illusory reflection of this fact" (C I 13).

In that sense, I contend that by looking at trivial objects, by analyzing them, and writing about them, O'Hara is breaking away from surrounding social rhythms and would exemplify Lefebvre's claim that "*the critique of everyday life involves a critique of political life*" (92). For instance, O'Hara has written about how much one can gain from discussing with a clerk in "Mrs Bertha Burger," from going further than the "social time" attributed to such commercial exchange (CP 181). In this poem, the rhythms of everyday life defy socio-economic logic. Through this simple poem about a woman living next to his apartment, O'Hara criticizes the lack of human contact between seller and buyer preferring discussions (human exchanges) over consumption (monetary exchanges).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This particular field of study is one of the last on which Lefebvre worked, hence most of his arguments evoke past research. This makes *Rhythmanalysis* an all-encompassing term for Lefebvre's oeuvre. Through this brief work, one can perceive shades of commentaries on everyday life, consumption and, most evidently, on neo-Hegelian Marxism.

<sup>7</sup> To further develop this point, one could turn to Graeme Gilloch's excellent work on Benjamin, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City*. In the penultimate chapter, I believe that Gilloch echoes O'Hara's argument and exemplifies it in the industrial system. As he puts it, "The suffering of the worker is rooted in the dehumanizing tendencies and repetitious character of commodity production" (161). Despite the lack of direct human relations in the everyday of the chain worker, there is a similar dehumanizing effect in the silent, repeated gestures. While one, pieces the same part of an automobile every day without a word, the other mechanically tells the price and gives back the change. O'Hara's image is more striking because of the actual one on one human contact, but Gilloch's example is as important to develop, though peripheral to my research.

Similarly, Lefebvre criticizes what he deemed the main sign of a developed country's healthy economic system: the act of throwing things away in larger quantities and at a faster pace. He even attacks O'Hara's hometown directly by stating, "In New York, in the promised land of free enterprise, the dustbins are enormous, and the more visible they are the more inefficiently public service operate" (*C II* 337-8). Though Lefebvre ironically comments on the ecological inefficiency encouraged by a striving economy, it nevertheless correlates with O'Hara's statement on human relations. Indeed, they both contend that a well-oiled capitalist system achieves such a status to the detriment of human relations and a clean environment. If something does not bring money in, but requires only laying money out, then it is not worth investing in or dwelling upon.

Rhythms play a major role in differentiating one argument from the other, especially to compare the work of a philosopher with that of a poet. Indeed, while Lefebvre develops a critical approach to everyday life and mass consumption, O'Hara looks at these aspects from a poetic point of view. In other words, Lefebvre epitomizes what a critical rhythm analyst should be—he delves into the origins of everyday life, striving to understand its urban mechanics, as he chronicles its different eras. When writing "[e]very object is determined by its function and is reduced to being a signal; it orders one thing and forbids another; ... it conditions," Lefebvre delineates the frames of rhythms and how they are created and operate.

When authors like Frank O'Hara or Viktor Shklovsky give new meanings to words, they break from convention, thus setting new rhythms and providing alternative ways of interpreting everyday life. For example, O'Hara derives a narrative from a seemingly ordinary piece of clothing in "A Raspberry Sweater" (*CP* 259). On his part, Shklovsky defies the logic of words by writing, in his novel *Zoo: Or Letters Not About Love*, "You gave me two assignments. 1) Not to

call you. 2) Not to see you. So now I'm a busy man" (32). These two examples reinvent the borders of time by extending the importance of a sweater from a cozy and warm piece of clothing to a memory protector whereas Shklovsky challenges non-action as being the most demanding act despite its call for inactivity.<sup>8</sup>

Though Lefebvre does not clearly establish a connection between rhythmanalyst and flâneur, I would argue that Baudelaire and Benjamin are not only flâneurs, but also the former, clearly defined rhythmanalysts. As Benjamin observes in *The Arcades Project*, "The flâneur is the observer of the marketplace. His knowledge is akin to the occult science of industrial fluctuations. He is a spy for capitalists, on assignment in the realm of consumers" (427). What Benjamin is describing here matches Lefebvre's concept of rhythmanalysis. In fact, Lefebvre defines the rhythmanalyst accordingly:

He is always "listening out," but he does not only hear words, discourses, noises and sounds; he is capable of listening to a house, a street, a town as one listens to a symphony, an opera. ... Attentive to time (to tempo) and consequently to repetitions and likewise to differences in time, he separates out through a mental act that which gives itself as linked to a whole: namely rhythms and their associations. He does not only observe human activities, he also hears [*entend*] (in the double sense of the word: noticing and understanding) the temporalities in which these activities unfold. (87-88)

Despite the major differences in the phrasing of these definitions, they both describe a person listening to his/her senses, be it hearing, seeing or both. While the contexts in which these texts

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<sup>8</sup> I have chosen these two examples for their specific effect of enlarging the spectrum of time and of social conventions. Undeniably, poets and writers often expand the meaning of words, but they do not always stretch the boundaries like O'Hara and Shklovsky do in their respective work and in their respective time period.

were written affect greatly their content—one written in war-torn Europe<sup>9</sup> and the other in the boom of postmodernism and intellectual emancipations—they sketch a similar portrait of their distinctive terms. Ileana Apostol, in *The Production of Public Spaces: Design Dialectics and Pedagogy*, tries to synthesize them “in presenting the flâneur as a rhythm analyst, I argue that his involvement in social interaction is more important than the gaze and interpretation of the window display” (203-4). Likewise, I want to present these terms as complementing each other, especially to give more credit to the work of the flâneur from Baudelaire to now.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, I believe O’Hara was more of a rhythm analyst especially concerned with notions of “noticing and understanding” human activities. Obviously, he was greatly influenced by mass consumption as it can be seen infiltrating his frank and lively poetry. As Apostol points out, Lefebvre perceived that the rhythm analyst needed “externality and inward abandonment,” a notion intrinsic to O’Hara’s body of work (219).

Lefebvre believed that when “everyday life” was used as terminology in contemporary times, it was to be shunned or given another meaning instead of being embraced for what it was. The French Marxist was hoping for someone “to see them [human facts] where they are, namely in humble, familiar, everyday objects: the shape of fields, of ploughs” (*CI* 132). Here, one could think instantly of Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow” instead of O’Hara’s poetry for its use of

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<sup>9</sup> It is also important to consider that the term commodity was not yet fully fledged out. As Gardiner puts it: “Daily life in the 19th-century had not yet become ‘colonized’ by the commodity form and instrumental rationality. That is everyday life in Marx’s day had not yet become problematic, and was therefore not a sphere that attracted theoretical interest in the early socialist movement” (98). Though this aims more towards Marx and Baudelaire’s works, they both have greatly influenced Benjamin’s writing. Despite writing in the twentieth century, Benjamin’s topics are deeply ingrained in the past, especially in the epoch described by Gardiner. Also, it is not negligible to consider that there is a large gap between the commodification of everyday life in the first and second part of the twentieth century that affects greatly the argument of both theorists here discussed.

<sup>10</sup> Apostol puts great emphasis to show the role of the postmodern flâneur going as far as coining the term ‘e-flâneur’ by which she means “the contemporary surfer and browser of the on-line space” (216). Apostol studies space and the way we, as users of that space, affect it. In this chapter, my aim is to do the opposite and emphasize the effects of these mediated public and private spaces and how the flâneur analyzes and treats them. Furthermore, I want to shed light on the role of the flâneur during the middle of the twentieth century, a period left out from her research.

ordinary pastoral objects similar to Lefebvre's plough example, but being a fervent reader of William Carlos Williams's work, he was also doing the same in his poetry. Though Lefebvre's critique here is right, it does not apply to O'Hara, who, in fact, embraced the everyday without trying to change it through his poetry: instead like the rhythm analyst, he observes. For example, Lehman describes O'Hara as "elevat[ing] the prose of everyday life-the diary entries, bread-and-butter letters, memos, and obituaries-into the stuff of lyric poetry" (1998:169). It is in this desire to recreate the everyday in its social sense that O'Hara replicates Lefebvre's intent. He is not trying to criticize modern society through political statement, à la Ginsberg. O'Hara preferred to write poems as snapshots of his time, just as "The Day Lady Died" could be seen as a vignette of New York City at the time of Billie Holiday's death. O'Hara adds meaning subtly through the objects he buys and he mirrors Lefebvre's desire through those. It is instead through his capitalist actions that the political message is given, to which I will come back in a later chapter when I discuss the more politically charged poetry of Russian writers.

Lefebvre's work also brings forth an understanding of the role and the effect of media on rhythms and of their repercussions on everyday life. In the chapter "The Media Day," he contends that: "Producers of the commodity *information* know empirically how to utilise rhythms. They have cut up time; they have broken it up into *hourly* slices" and that "the everyday is **simultaneously** the prey of the media, used, misunderstood, simultaneously fashioned and ignored by these *means* that make the *apparatuses*" (R 48, 50). With the rise of mass consumption came the first television, radically changing the everyday patterns of the nuclear family. Here, Lefebvre argues that the everyday becomes commodified, even fetishized through this new medium of information. Media control the news, choose what is essential and what can be forgotten thus "shap[ing] taste and cloud[ing] judgement" (C II 518). While

newspapers are to be read and therefore give some sort of control to the reader who decides what he wants or does not want to read, televised news cannot be interrupted, they are to be consumed in their entirety without room for a break or an opinion; one must simply watch and listen. The role of the anchor(wo)man is also primordial, as they deliver the news, giving, for many, much needed liveliness to the boring black and white pages of its paper equivalent. What Lefebvre wants to hint at is that these non-stop news programs do not leave room for thought processes and therefore force the viewer to accept everything they see as truth-value. Therefore, Lefebvre is afraid of a certain uniformity in the everyday life as if news would bring everyone to think in the same way and eventually *be* the same by watching sitcoms like “The Brady Bunch.”<sup>11</sup>

## **2.2 Walter Benjamin: Understanding Baudelaire and the Rise of the Consumerist Flâneur**

Contrary to Henri Lefebvre, Walter Benjamin’s oeuvre has been widely read and used in diverse spheres of literary criticism. It is difficult to approach Benjamin’s work without discussing more than a single text or topic because they are so interlinked and compliment each other. For the purpose of this thesis, I focus on the unfinished *The Arcades Project*, but I nevertheless refer to other important works such as his essays on Baudelaire and “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”<sup>12</sup> Benjamin’s in-depth analysis of the flâneur in the

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<sup>11</sup> Michel de Certeau would later push these ideas and actualize them to fit the reality of the 1980s in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In it, he contends “The media transform the great silence of things into its opposite. Formerly constituting a secret, the real now talks constantly. News report, information, statistics, and surveys are everywhere. No story has ever spoken so much” (185). De Certeau efficiently vulgarized the role of the state in the control of everyday life, especially through the media setting up the rules or the “tactics” of consumption (Gardiner 112). In sum, he confirms Lefebvre’s fear that the everyday is more and more controlled and that, in many ways, the urban citizen became a commodity. This rings true in the contemporary world as well, in fact, more than ever. From the advent of the Internet to unlimited data on smartphones, we share more and more information everyday without even knowing much about it. This has led to the creation of multiple databases that store all that information from which governmental agencies can adjust their strategies to “supposedly” better serve society. The example of such databases enhances the citizen’s status as a commodity. Indeed, in these files names are replaced by numbers and binaries, thus effacing all traces of our daily existence.

<sup>12</sup> It would be interesting to pursue a more thorough comparison between the works of Walter Benjamin and Frank O’Hara. In this project, I especially wanted to highlight the links between the two flâneurs, but they also look at the past with the same approach and it would certainly be worth investing in. For example, in “A Berlin Chronicle,”—later published as the heavily edited *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*—the descriptions all tend toward the same

nineteenth century, and in his own time, still echoed in the 1950s and 1960s.

To grasp Benjamin's work, one has to understand what the Arcades meant to the author and what they stood for. Solibakke describes the Arcades as a site where "textile stores and elegant shops ... tantalized the eye, whetted consumer appetite, and aroused the yearning to acquire" (159). This new construction rapidly became the locus of modern consumption where "commodities form the substance of collective dreams" (162). To become someone worthy of mention, you needed to make your way through the different stands of the Arcades and go daily to make sure that you were not missing out on anything new. One could argue that the Parisian Arcades are the bedrock of our contemporary consumerist societies.<sup>13</sup>

By naming his work after this famous site, Benjamin not only recreates a site of consumption of his own, but he also transforms his various subject matters into different, immortal commodities.<sup>14</sup> I want to emphasize the impact such a theory would have on the convolute named "Baudelaire." Though Benjamin delves into the concept of *flânerie* in convolute "M," "J"—or "Baudelaire"—explores it as well through the life of its epitome. Benjamin's definition of the *flâneur* hints at the reason why he might have decided to commodify him through the titles of two of his most famous convolutes. Gilloch phrases this well when stating:

[F]or Benjamin, the *flâneur* becomes the strolling embodiment of the commodity.

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thing. In other words, "Benjamin's childhood memories are less of people than of those urban spaces in Imperial Berlin which formed the settings for his experiences" (Buck-Morss 219). O'Hara's poems correlate on certain instances with this, as in "The Spoils of Grafton," in which the poet's tale of childhood revolves around objects such as a toy Ferris-Wheel or his "moving piano" (CP 26). This comparison is not an isolated case and demonstrates that the two authors' respective work relate to one another in multiple ways.

<sup>13</sup> In the same vein, Solibakke contends that they "stimulated a new dogma of aggressive merchandising and the first intimations of the voracious appetite for consumer goods that characterizes today's affluent societies" (158).

<sup>14</sup> I am referring once again to Solibakke here, but I want to push his argument. Solibakke wrote "The scope of the dialectical image can best be admired within the panoptic of Benjamin's convolutes arcades within the *Arcades*, which weave the phantasmagorias of commodities and spatiotemporal scenery into the complex texture of early modern urbanity. (175) Here, Solibakke does not investigate further the correlations between the two arcades. If the convolutes are arcades of sorts, does that mean that Benjamin is commodifying Baudelaire, the *flâneur*, the collector and other subjects or people that were attributed a convolute of their own?

... the *flâneur* ‘took the concept of consumption itself for a walk’ ... The degenerate and thus quintessential *flâneur*, the afterlife of the dandy, is a walking commodity who attracts the gaze and attention of passers-by, only now as pauper not peacock. (156)

In that sense, Benjamin perceived the *flâneur* as a living commodity who needed to go to the Arcades to feel at home within the centre of capitalism.

By embodying this new concept, the *flâneur* foreshadows the limits of the commodity. Indeed, s/he enlivens the commodity, as long as s/he exists, it will be consumable unlike all the objects on sale in the Arcades. Also, Benjamin remarks: “his *flânerie* reflects the fluctuations of commodities” (*AP* 367), which presents the *flâneur* as a sort of barometer of the French economy. If all is well, he will be dressed in lavish clothes and stroll in all the exuberance he can muster—for example, Gérard de Nerval and his pet lobsters—but, on the contrary, if one strives for more than objects and material meaning, one will be sad like Baudelaire, the “seeker of modernity” (336).<sup>15</sup> In contradiction with the contemporary *flâneur*, the original one appreciated the act of buying and displaying his purchases; he embraced consumerism.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* historicizes the journey of the commodity through the Arcades and its major contributors. Nearly a century after Baudelaire, the Arcades were not what they used to be, but, when Benjamin walked through them, he consumed their historical importance vicariously through the lives of Baudelaire and his fellow *flâneurs*. Through this reflection, Benjamin “investigate[s] the nature of shock experience: the

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<sup>15</sup> There is an important distinction to make. While Nerval seemed to enjoy everyday life and to make the most of it in buoyant fashion, Baudelaire lived the everyday morosely. They were not approaching the commodity in the same way. Baudelaire, as Benjamin observes, “idealizes the experience of the commodity, in that he ascribes to it, as canon, the experience of allegory” (*AP* 346). Therefore, Baudelaire approached this new modern set-up with an artistic and philosophical lens. The commodities became a set of experiences that would shape one’s life, especially through their different prices (386).

<sup>16</sup> This even led Baudelaire to bankruptcy. As Benjamin explains, his love for antiquities led him to buy excessively, but he chose to do business with a crook that not only took all his money, he gave him ersatz furniture (*AP* 366).



points of rupture in the everyday, its cracks and fissures” (McCracken 151).<sup>17</sup> In other words, by looking at Baudelaire’s life and his general ethos, Benjamin tries to understand why the flâneur was so different and why he had such a great impact on Parisians’ lives and the notion of modernity.

By commodifying Baudelaire through this seminal text, Benjamin is displaying the malaise that surrounded the rise of economic consumption. To quote McCracken again, “The most difficult theoretical problem of Benjamin’s late work is how we might rescue history’s forgotten and discarded objects—the material world of the everyday—because, he argues, it is through those objects that we might write a history from the point of view of its victims” (155).<sup>18</sup> Baudelaire, through his financial mishaps, falls in the category of these victims. By walking in the French poet’s footsteps, Benjamin recuperates his narrative and makes it viable and important. His unfinished project is, after all, mainly quotes from other authors; he is merely weaving them into a story. This palimpsest of sorts recaptures an important moment in French economic history and, by describing it through the likes of Baudelaire, enables a reemphasis of the importance of the flâneur in history.

By reclaiming the important role of the flâneur, Benjamin intersects with Lefebvre’s own desire to bring the everyday and its components to the forefront of intellectual discourse. Michael Gardiner offers a response to McCracken’s argument asserting that his fellow critic “argues that Benjamin cleaves to the possibility of a dialectic between routine and innovation—as does Lefebvre, ... one that does not seek to neutralize or supersede the everyday, but to

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<sup>17</sup> McCracken refers to “the critic of the ordinary modern” here, but it can easily be seen as correlating as the flâneur’s main task as well, especially Benjamin. Benjamin, like O’Hara can be perceived as being both the flâneur and the rhythm analyst, the same is less evident for Baudelaire.

<sup>18</sup> McCracken is mainly referring to the “Theses of Philosophy of History” in which Benjamin discusses the link between past and present and how history is written by the victors (*Illuminations* 256). By unpacking the nature of the everyday, Benjamin hopes to rewrite history and add the victims’ voice to it, especially Baudelaire’s.

nourish and enrich it” (246). By bringing to the forefront the likes of Baudelaire and the Arcades, Benjamin is recuperating the nineteenth century everyday and adds it to his own mundane walks around the French capital. In a sense, by rewriting history from the “victims” perspective, Benjamin is adding a textual layer to the meaning of the everyday in order to keep the old routine and not to innovate on the everyday. By maintaining the banal routine of his French predecessor, he hopes to reach a deeper understanding of the everyday. In a similar pattern, Lefebvre adds to the definition of the everyday by unpacking its meaning, rendering to it the important tone that, he believes, it truly deserves. In that way, both writers keep the general definition of everydayness despite adding their personal experiences to it. Though he is not referring as abundantly to past sources per se, Lefebvre is still instilling much vigour in a discipline in need of it. In sum, in Benjamin’s opinion, the flâneur, through his every footstep in the city, transcends both the historical baggage of the profession and the economic and consumerist ethos *à la mode*.

Like Benjamin was to Baudelaire, O’Hara can be described as Benjamin’s contemporary flâneur. In the words of Monika Gehlawat, O’Hara is “as a receptive host and producer who converts what he sees in architecture, commercial art, movies and paintings into the material that gives flesh to his poetic ruminations” (41). Like Benjamin, O’Hara absorbs what composes his surroundings and incorporates them in most of his poems; he makes the everyday the backbone of his poetics. By depicting these events as they happened, O’Hara is helping his readership to understand the world he lived in and to possibly utilize this knowledge for its own purposes, in a similar way that Benjamin did with Baudelaire’s work. While O’Hara does not always focus his poetry on the mundane, there are always important instances of ordinariness glued to every poem.

Furthermore, the contemporary flâneur adapts to the new rhythm of society, something a rhythm analyst would also do. His predecessor, especially Baudelaire, embraced consumerism by wholeheartedly buying products and shamelessly showing them off. However, the contemporary flâneur consumes less in order to reflect society's ever accelerating pace as genuinely as possible. In that sense, the contemporary flâneur, like O'Hara, describes everything he sees at a frenetic pace, stringing together a list of things or events without taking a break to properly breathe or calm down whereas the former master of flânerie would linger around the Arcades as the commercial epitome of bohemian fashion (Gehlawat 102). While the change in style may seem drastic on paper, it is certainly essential to properly depict the variations of everyday life. It might sound contradictory with mentioning that the everyday in Benjamin was nourished and not superseded, but it is obviously needed and it represents a drastic change in the customs of the ordinary that Benjamin could not have predicted or at least he did not theorize. I would contend that what happened between the work of Baudelaire, Benjamin and O'Hara is greater than what can be controlled by the flâneur. In other words, there is an important gap between Benjamin's and Baudelaire's everyday and that of O'Hara's and it would seem a daunting task to seal it, in the same way that it is impossible to follow Benjamin's desire to nourish the everyday without seeing it utterly transformed. In the end, it is the treatment of the commodity and the flâneur's relationship with it that enables the unbreakable connection between the three artists. They are the "observer[s] of the marketplace" following the flows of the economy and of the city just trying to fit in and understand this "realm of consumers" (*AP* 427).

### **2.3 Textual Analysis**

O'Hara's "A Scene" respects the criteria established for a rhythm analyst or for a contemporary flâneur (*CP* 19). In this poem, O'Hara mirrors Lefebvre's notion of the

rhythmanalyst to perfection, blending real life situations with that of a typical scene from one of the early sitcoms created or more relevantly here, from a radio soap opera.<sup>19</sup> The first instance linking the works of both writers is in the choice of preposition in the title. By opting for “a” instead of “the,” O’Hara is relativizing the importance of the scene, giving the readership a sense that what will follow is not unique, but trivial, just another scene like many others. This non-specificity emphasizes the mundane attributes of the scene in question. What is described is a commonality; it does not break away from the ordinary American life.

This commonality though, is one that can only be found in real life and not on the small screen. If viewers had seen a wife rebel against her husband like this, throwing food and dishes on the floor in anger, they would have most certainly complained to the broadcaster. That was not what they wanted to see. The effect of the television shows that started with the television’s inception have stayed with its (now) older viewers. As Halberstam puts it, “One reason that Americans as a people became nostalgic about the fifties more than twenty-five years later was not so much that life was better in the fifties, (though in some ways it was), but because at the time it had been portrayed so idyllically on television” (514). What this quote points out, is that O’Hara already puts the finger on the problem in this poem, proving the unrealistic features of these sitcoms. Therefore, the title reflects on both a particular event in real life and “a single piece of action that happens in one place in a movie, book etc.”<sup>20</sup> In that sense, O’Hara plays with the etymology and creates a poetic environment of his own where the scene on the television set actually emulates that of most nuclear families.

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<sup>19</sup> Though I have not found a specific equivalent to the Smiths in the sitcoms nor in radio shows of the late 1950s or early 1960s, it could have been easily influenced by the likes of *Father Knows Best* or *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*. There is a particularly vivid example from a 1952 episode, “The Rivals.” This episode is preceded by a Hotpoint Appliances advertisement in which the actress breaks plates on the floor in response to the ludicrous amount of dishes to do. The solution given here is to buy the new Hotpoint dishwasher, the best available on the market instead of buying a television set in O’Hara’s poem.

<sup>20</sup> This definition is taken from the *Longman Advanced American Dictionary*.

O'Hara's comment, then, anticipates Lefebvre's theory on the rhythms of the "mediatised everyday" (R 50). While Lefebvre described the everyday as being "the prey of the media, used, misunderstood, simultaneously fashioned and ignored by these *means* that make the *apparatuses*," O'Hara subtly touches upon the role of the media in sitcoms in the poem through two references to "Gods" (50).<sup>21</sup> Interestingly enough, O'Hara's use of the term is first capitalized and then utilized with a lower-case /g/. In the first stanza, O'Hara writes "Your damnable ennui's aroused the Gods!" as an answer to Mrs. Smith's enraged tossing of "[p]ie, tomatoes, eggs, coffee, [and] spaghetti" (CP 19). As the poem is written in response to this rebellious act, the "Gods" here stands for O'Hara who was intrigued by the rise of the female role model. In that sense, the husband is scared of what a writer would be able to make of this. He goes on pleading his case stating how she does not have "a thousand demon consciences, all arguing!," but it seems all in vain. The real impact in this stanza is made by the wasting of more than a meal's worth of food; the use of exclamation points to highlight the male protagonist's ire pales in comparison to this act of domestic defiance.<sup>22</sup>

The second stanza presents the oral equivalent of the food throwing when Mrs. Smith explains the sources of her unhappiness. There is no physical action in this stanza; it is a monologue that does not leave any place for a response from the man. It is also for this reason that this middle stanza stands out from the rest of the poem. It is the part that is less likely to be found in a sitcom or a radio show. The two other stanzas start with the same enumeration of

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<sup>21</sup> It is interesting here to note as well that it is the artist that is attacking the content of the creative components found through this new medium whereas the sociologist focuses on the object per se and on the "real" news.

<sup>22</sup> An alternative analysis here would be to compare Mrs. Smith's actions with Guy Debord's comment on goods. Debord proposes that "all the *goods selected* by the spectacular system are also its weapons for a constant reinforcement of the conditions of isolation of 'lonely crowds'" (28). Debord's argument can be turned upon itself by using the goods as weapons against the spectacular system embodied by her husband. By doing so, she is hoping to get out of her lonely housewife life. Obviously, it is important to keep in mind that what is described by O'Hara comes straight from his imagination and not from an event that he actually watched unfold on his television set, though it would certainly be enriching to speculate on the possible effects it would have had at the time.

products, thus emphasizing even more the oddity of the middle one. It is trapped in between the two, more typical, scenarios. By that I am implying that the breaking of plates as a result of anger was seen as a stereotypical response from a woman, as portrayed in a Hotpoint commercial. The shouting and demonstration of voiced anger, on the other hand, was certainly impossible to fathom, especially in a nationwide broadcast. This time around, the exclamation points are felt, they do not abound simply to add to the theatricality of the remarks like in the first stanza—they feel genuine. In other words, the female protagonist's actions reflect a real life scene that could occur only in the household of some families, but could never be emulated in a sitcom, whereas the male's replies are more staged, fitting the exaggeration and the demands of the typical family show.

In the last stanza, O'Hara does not only include the husband's response, he also adds a statement on the influence of the media on the content of the sitcoms. It is through the inclusion of the lower case "gods" that O'Hara explains how the actors, let alone the scriptwriters, are not coming up with the text, but that it is the media leaders themselves. In fact, the poet ends "A Scene" with the following sentences: "Right now the gods are telling me / I love you. I'll buy you, dear, a television set" (19). This closing statement entails a lack of control on the husband's part. Instead, he has to follow the orders of "the gods." I would assert that, this time around, the deities stand for the media. In this case, they want to avoid further imbroglio by buying the wife's sympathy through a new television set. By doing so, they are ensuring that order in the marital status quo is preserved. While the first use of "Gods" can be read as a catalyst to the man's initial reaction and to the wife's response, the second's homeostatic statement enables the poem to end on an ironic, but nevertheless dubious note.

Moreover, the purchase of the television set has a dual meaning. First, it represents an

important commodity, one that, back then, was a must in every American household. Thus Mrs. Smith's household would resemble even more that of other families and this, in her husband's opinion, should invigorate her temperament. Through the purchase, Mr. Smith forces his wife to expropriate her body,<sup>23</sup> losing her "inadequate" temper through this act and replacing it by a desire to acquire more.<sup>24</sup> She would then be conforming more willingly to the mass, to the typical nuclear family.<sup>25</sup> She would become like her husband whose body is already expropriated. This can be seen through the matter-of-fact tone in the last two sentences: "I love you therefore I will buy you a television set." In other words, to please your loved ones, you must buy them the latest trends. By expropriating her body, the wife would want to buy other appliances, like the Hotpoint dishwasher for example, instead of feeling a need to break and throw things away.<sup>26</sup> Such was the ethos of the time and the one O'Hara attacks and ridicules in this poem.

In Mr. Smith's mind, the television set would improve his wife's behaviour as she

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<sup>23</sup> This phrase comes from Lefebvre who wrote it in a different context. Indeed, in France commodities such as the television were not as widespread as they were in the United States. For the French Marxist, it was part of the "privileged products" (*C III* 703). Nevertheless, I believe that the product's mission is still the same and can be applied to the scene described by O'Hara. As Lefebvre writes, these objects were "allocated the following mission: expropriating the body and compensating for this expropriation; replacing desire by fixed needs; replacing delight by programmed satisfaction" (703). In that sense, despite the American family's ability to purchase these commodities far more easily than in Europe, they were tied to these objects in the same way.

<sup>24</sup> A similar poem would be "A Rant" in which the narrator—quite possibly O'Hara himself—mourns the departure of a lover and connects with every object in the room, "my bedroom making things cry" and leaving him with "most oppressive" silence (*CP* 54). Though the general ambiance is different—the narrator refuses to "thrash the floor or throw any / apples!"—there is still an important sense of expropriation through objects as if their personification was more than just that, it goes as far as saying that they are containing pieces of his soul. "Interior (With Jane)" presents a homologous argument and can be read as a rewriting of "A Rant."

<sup>25</sup> This topic would also be rose a decade later by Betty Friedan who greatly influenced the life of the American housewife through *The Feminine Mystique*. For example, she asserts that "The buying of things drains away those needs which cannot really be satisfied by home and family—the housewives' need for 'something beyond themselves with which to identify,' 'a sense of movement without with others toward aims that give meaning and purpose to life'" (266). This passage correlates well with what I have been arguing here. There is a sense in Friedan's work that these objects are only repressing even more the American wife. Friedan phrases this well later in the book by stating that the need for self-realization was ultimately, and unfortunately, "very easily translated into a search for status through the possession of objects" (322).

<sup>26</sup> This echoes in many ways Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, especially relating to his concept of the *one-dimensional thought* "in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe" (14). Though Marcuse's analysis is deeply pessimistic, it does nevertheless correlates relevantly with Lefebvre's argument.

watches model housewives completing their duties and serving their husband fresh, warm dinners without complaining too much. Therefore, watching sitcoms on television acts upon the body in the same way than the object itself according to Lefebvre.<sup>27</sup> In other words, watching *Father Knows Best* regulates the body and gives Mrs. Smith a model to strive for, to imitate and even to outshine. These ideas do not match contemporary ethos, but it did not fit O'Hara's either. Joe LeSueur relates that O'Hara "angrily lamented one night, 'Jane cares more about her new refrigerator than she does about her painting'" (128). It is important to take into consideration that O'Hara was jealous of Jane's new status as Joe Hazan's wife and it led him to make this comment. Through this, it can be seen that O'Hara despised the status of housewives who only cared for their new appliances and that he did not want Jane to experience a similar lobotomy. This poem, then, provides a statement against the status of the housewife and deplores the sexist aims of this particular form of everyday life. In the same vein, the poem tries to establish a counter narrative for sitcoms in order for them to paint the true rhythms of the everyday. As a rhythm analyst, O'Hara converges two different rhythms and tries to make them work together, shedding light at the same time on the problems of the housewife and her intricate relationship with the world of commodities.

Further developing O'Hara's qualities as a rhythm analyst is "To the Film Industry in Crisis" in which he praises the movie industry, especially its superiority to the more "immobile" entertainment media. He begins the poem with a near declaration of love to Hollywood:

Not you lean quarterlies and swarthy periodicals  
with your studious incursions toward the pomposity of ants,

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<sup>27</sup> This extrapolation can be reinforced by another poem of O'Hara's, "Commercial Variations" (CP 85-6). Originally entitled "Variations on a Radio Commercial", the poem expands on the simple storyline of the advertisement and pushes it through a witty narrative that can hardly hide O'Hara's apparent rejection of its purchasing demands. By doing so, he, again, brings the real life to the alternative storyline of the commercial hence making it more realistic and, through this, less attractive to its audience.



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)

This exuberant declaration not only demonstrates O'Hara's preference, it also shows that the quicker the medium, the better. First, there are the quarterlies and the periodicals, which are magazines with fixed images. Their rhythms are non-existent and require the imagination of the reader to be animated. Second, the experimental theatre's emotions go against O'Hara's idea of fun and remind him too much of his Harvard days.<sup>28</sup> As for the Opera, it does not bring anything new anymore. It is too "obvious" and lacks character.

The motion pictures, on the other hand, bring exactly what it is named after: motion. This rhythm exactly reflects society in O'Hara's opinion, it brings everyday life to the screen and what the audience wants: exuberance, excessive action and jokes, greatly underlined in the following stanza through a quick succession of many different events found in the movies.<sup>29</sup> He goes even further by mentioning those working in the background—the extras and the features—to show that they all share the same dream for money, the same desires to strive under the Hollywood spotlights. By writing this piece in reaction to the "industry in crisis," the poet hopes to prove its value as a barometer of cultural values and how it reflects commodity capitalism. An example of this is the last sentence of the poem when, with ironic optimism, O'Hara proclaims "Roll on, reels of celluloid, as the great earth rolls on!." This positive emphasis on the necessity of movies indicates how it encapsulates well our world and that its rhythms are the same that

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<sup>28</sup> See Gooch pp.125-6.

<sup>29</sup> It is emphasized even more through a later poem, "Vincent and I Inaugurate a Movie Theatre" (*CP* 399-400).

regulate our daily lives. Without movies, O'Hara contends, there would not be an adequate medium to mirror the ebb and flow of human activities and especially to see the everyday in all its glory.<sup>30</sup>

O'Hara's well-known "I Do This, I Do That" poems embody perfectly the constantly fluctuating rhythms of one's everyday life. It is in "Getting Up Ahead of Someone (Sun)" that he coins his famous, and unique term, for this particular genre (*CP* 341). In this poem, time is easily bent and the reader is rapidly bombarded with seemingly incoherent time references. At first, the narrator wakes up with tea and cognac at dawn, then "hours and hours go by" while he smokes and reads, but then it is the house that "wakes up and goes / to get the dog" and the poem ends with "it is tomorrow / though only six hours have gone by." There is a sense that reading as an activity of leisure takes time and that, unlike at work, you do not see it go past you. Despite drinking alcohol to slow this process down, he cannot do it and it leads him to reflect on how "each day's light has more significance these days."

O'Hara also uses "it" quite elusively as a marker for his craft and how, when he is unable to write, time flies by and leaves him anxious. Nevertheless, this miserable mood helps him to write this poem as a way of countering his quotidian depression. In 1959, when he wrote this poem, having a morose mindset fuelled O'Hara as he pointed out two years later in his statement for the Paterson society (*CP* 511). In that sense, the rhythms that O'Hara puts on the forefront in this poem are those of the inspired poet. This portrays a realistic aspect of an artist's quotidian life. While the poem is slow and goes from one element to the other without losing the reader, hours pass by. This demonstrates that if the writer's mind does not work at full-throttle, then time will invariably do so. When O'Hara is inspired, the descriptions will unceremoniously go one

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<sup>30</sup> The irony in this particular example also depicts how the audience wants everyday life to be presented as grandiose or simply as less boring than their own. O'Hara's exuberance reflects this through "great earth rolls on!" that seems to embrace an epic model of everyday life that would be truly universal.

over the other and at such a fast pace that it is impossible to track time, but the reader rapidly understands that it is usually just a few minutes, or at least he understands that the chaos is part of the daily life of the author. Here, we find another aspect, that of the bohemian artist who stays at home and reads without participating in the rapid rhythms of daily life of the working class. Nevertheless, O'Hara understands how this time is precious and is left frustrated at not being able to really work on a poem. By the time he is able to write one of his "I Do This, I Do That" poems it is already too late and he is left frustrated that a whole day has gone by.

As discussed in the section on Henri Lefebvre, O'Hara's characteristics as a flâneur are much more elusive than those as a rhythm analyst, and it is particularly evident in a popular poem like "Meditations in an Emergency." The poem mainly revolves around the heartaches caused by unfaithful lovers and how to live without them, but flânerie is offered as a solution to fight against these ills. Another way of looking at this is through Gehlawat's lens when she states, "His meditations occur 'in an emergency' so that the poetry is always already proof that his immediate experiences do matter" (112). These experiences are mixed. Obviously, there is the lover who takes a good part of the narrative to describe his immediate feelings without filtering them. Though the poem seems to be focusing on the future of this misunderstood lover, it is in fact his "meditations" that are put to the forefront in the title. Though the emergency stands for the emotional crisis the lover finds himself in, the emphasis is put on the meditations. In other words, the poem serves as an explanation for the fabric of these meditations and how they help the narrator to get rid of his emotional problems.

The main meditation pointed to in the poem is the duality found in the urban world between the natural and the man-made. For example, O'Hara writes: "I / can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that

people do not totally *regret* life” (*CP* 197). This comparison accompanied by the observation that he does not understand pastoral life or “nostalgia for an innocent past of perverted acts in pastures” are the narrator’s way of understanding who he is through his metropolitan surroundings. Here, O’Hara plays with past and present, the rural and the urban, to explain the vast changes that occurred in the last decades in American mores. By walking around the city and observing New Yorkers in their daily lives, O’Hara redeems his faith in his own ordinary life despite the emotional toll it takes on him. These observations are noted in thick blocks of text reinforcing the importance of the city’s sidewalks and their own blocks of concrete on which O’Hara was wandering pensively. These interrogations end positively when O’Hara ask the clouds if “they know what they’re missing?” demonstrating in his mind the superiority of the city over the countryside.<sup>31</sup>

Objects are also presented as redeemers keeping the narrator busy enough to forget about his other problems. In the second block of text, the narrator mentions that he is “needed by things” and that “*their* anxiety” became greater in the last few weeks to the point of leaving him with “little sleep.” Mattix gives a sound explanation for this when arguing that “In naming things, O’Hara prevents the poem from becoming too ‘reflective’ or dense with what he calls ‘emotional spilling over’” and that he “shows us that the pleasure we obtain from the experiences of things—both the everyday and the extraordinary—affirm our sense of being” (86-7). These

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<sup>31</sup> O’Hara plays on the same relationship in “Rhapsody” where his trip around the city keeps revolving around “515 Madison Avenue” which he describes as “a sight of Manahatta” (*CP* 325-6). Manahatta, usually written with two ns, refers to the Lenni Lenape tribe’s term for Manhattan translating to “land of many hills”. The aptly named DuMont Building then becomes more than the home of a radio station, but also one of the many hills, a skyscraper standing out from the rest like the Empire State Building. Thus, imposing skyscrapers are the new natural references, but O’Hara does not convince me as being all in favour of such constructions. Indeed, the poem ends on “I historically / belong to the enormous bliss of American death.” This statement rings with irony; the sarcastic tone leads me to believe that the giant buildings replacing the grassy hills of old are not necessarily pleasing the usually self-acknowledged urban poet. Still, he is attracted to it when claiming that he “always wanted to be near it,” but there is a fluctuating attraction/repulsion operation going on around this building, as if, despite its apparent beauty and what it brings to the city, it does not feel completely right. By ultimately ending the poem on an opened “death” note, O’Hara acknowledges the destruction of the landscape brought on by gentrification, but he remains troubled and unsure of his emotions vis-à-vis the grand scheme of things.

two quotations set up “Meditations in an Emergency” as a sort of manifesto for O’Hara’s other poems where he names successively a flurry of objects without pausing.<sup>32</sup> This close relation with the unidentified objects serves as an elusive, all-encompassing definition for his journey as flâneur. Their anxieties are his, he is connected to the objects like Benjamin is connected to the Arcades and to their past. Unlike in “A Scene,” O’Hara does not abide by the general rule that he would be expropriated from his body; instead, he looks at the objects from a distance. As observer, he can consume these objects through his writing, even if he does not actually own them. This “visual consumption,” as Rosenbaum observes, acts as “a refusal to discipline one’s body to cultural norms” (164).<sup>33</sup> Thus, the contemporary flâneur is not, like Baudelaire, an epitome of consumerism, but, instead, the most active visual consumer. He sees as much and consumes as much as he can without actually proceeding to an economic transaction; he consumes through sight only.

O’Hara’s personal style of flânerie, though closer to Benjamin’s own here, is largely based on his observations while on a walk in the city. For instance, despite the early commentaries on a defective relationship, “Nocturne” quickly veers in a whole different direction in which the narrator compares himself to a decaying, out-of-place building (*CP* 225). Hence, the flâneur goes further than just observing the fluctuations of the metropolis, he actually merges with it. In the middle of the poem, he writes “I’m / built the wrong way for the / river and a mild gale would / break every fiber in me. ... It’s the architect’s fault” (225). By going further than merely personifying the building, O’Hara fuses the narrator’s body with that of the structure

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<sup>32</sup> Famous poems such as “The Day Lady Died” or “Personal Poems” can serve as prime example of this. Most of O’Hara’s work deals with various objects either directly or in surrealist fashion. They nevertheless fit with Mattix’s argument.

<sup>33</sup> Interestingly enough, LeSueur notes “Frank was the least acquisitive person I’d ever known” (86).

of the obsolescent construction.<sup>34</sup> This sense of possible disappearance echoes that of losing the lover mentioned at the beginning of the poem. Furthermore, the proximity to the river and other natural elements such as the “mild gale” correlates with O’Hara’s argument in “Meditations in an Emergency” in which the elements of the natural world refer to a past, pastoral romance. It is these expectations being crushed by the ex-lover’s departure that render his structures inadequate. The ending of “Nocturne” further transcends the idea of underperformance and upcoming disappearance. The last lines, “Because you have / no telephone, and live so / far away; the Pepsi-Cola sign, / the seagulls and the noise,” are incongruous. Who is “you?” Is it the lover or is it another character related to the narrator whose anonymity is kept? This “you” is clearly distinguished from the “I” of the crumbling office building. “You” is on the seaside, unreachable and is ridiculed by a connection with a “Pepsi-Cola sign.”<sup>35</sup>

The other commodity included here, or actually its lack-there-of, is the telephone, a quintessential feature of O’Hara’s mock manifesto. In “Personism: A Manifesto,” the poet points out that he “could use the telephone instead of writing the poem” (*CP* 499). Following that statement, it is only logical that the absence of a telephone implies forced poetry. It is this possibility of picking up the phone that usually enables O’Hara to write his poetry, but here he finds himself without any option, he must write poetry even if he does not want to. For an urban flâneur, it is a desolate space without anything worth describing at length. O’Hara proves this by only linking fragments together in the last sentence. It is grammatically incorrect, and he opts instead for quick snapshots, giving the reader the gist of this unfit habitat.

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<sup>34</sup> Nealon pointed out this obsolescent characteristic, though in another context, and in another poem, “Having a Coke with You”. He notes that “New York school poets made friends with popular and mass culture, deliberately braving the possibility of obsolescence or eventual inscrutability” (584). This approach, though different, certainly could be perceived as having an impact on O’Hara’s work and use the example of the decaying building as another instance of this fear of being deemed useless.

<sup>35</sup> Though Pepsi’s popularity drastically increased in the 1960s and led to, in the words of Thomas Frank, “the arrival of the segmented market,” it was still an underwhelming brand at the time O’Hara wrote “Nocturne” in 1955 (Frank 24).

This sense of inhospitality is also reflected in the poem's lyricism. By looking at "Nocturne" from the word's musical definition, one can see that it holds subtler connections with the flâneur. O'Hara was an accomplished pianist having studied at the New England Conservatory and constantly playing records on his turntable, from Rachmaninoff to Poulenc (Gooch 55-58). The nocturne's slow pace defies the contemporary flâneur's fast pace. By adding this to the already ill-fitted environment that the narrator finds himself in, I believe that it supplements O'Hara's own status as both flâneur and rhythm analyst with a subtler musical aspect. There is also the "noise" on which the poem ends that breaks from the dreamy characteristic of the nocturne. Indeed, there is a sense in the poem that the narrator is much more into a reverie of flânerie than actually going through his ex-boyfriend's neighbourhood. By ending the poem on that "noisy" note, there is a sense of breaking from the poem and from the nocturne in and of itself. Also, by snapping out of it, the narrator leaves aside the romantic quality of the musical style. In that sense, while he breaks from the urban setting, he also breaks from the sexual and emotional link with the lover's body.<sup>36</sup>

While the ebb and flow in "Nocturne" mirrors that of nocturnal, "Spring's First Day" epitomizes diurnal rhythms (*CP* 245). In it, the hustle and bustle of the American Metropolis is arguably more on display than in most of his other poems. There are so many things being discussed in this poem that it is difficult to keep up with the aim of the poet. He goes from describing couches to bean and tuna fish sales, missiles to soap operas and apartments to cars. Consequently, it is the commodities themselves that are put at the forefront leaving the narrator's journey barely traceable. This is accentuated by the title in which spring is used in its traditional

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<sup>36</sup> Other poems, such as the pseudo-eulogy "For James Dean," reflect on the city's dirty side and its inadequacies that force stars like the young actor to live life at an efferent rhythm. Though O'Hara mentions a narrator finding himself "Alone / in the empty streets of New York" the poem does not follow a traditional pattern of flânerie (*CP* 228-30). Therefore, it once again mixes rhythms and in debt analysis of the city landscape without affirming clearly an attachment to one or the other.

archetypal form to convey a feeling of renewal and the beginning of something flowering. Here, though, it is used sarcastically to criticize consumerism, and the American economy in general, as the main thing in need of blooming at the beginning of the new spring season. For example, the deals on beans and tuna fish are compared to “another windfall,” which hyperbolize the situation.

Despite the sales and the availabilities of so many commodities, O’Hara expresses through them how shallow they are and that they do not bring any sense of warmth or life unless they are willingly bought. There are two main examples of this: the soap operas and the two cottages. The soap operas are the quintessential examples of cheap thrills exemplified by O’Hara through “He doesn’t know I’m alive—but I’m going to help him” which not only evokes heroism, but also an unrealistic reaction that does not echo everyday life. The two cottages on the other hand present a desert apartment, lacking familial or friendly warmth especially next to other advertisements for jobs and used cars. Through these examples, the narrator can be defined as a flâneur who disappears from the poem and prefers to describe what surrounds him, but comes to the conclusion that these commodities are basically transparent, inexistent just like him. In other words, I am implying that the lack of “I” or any other form of narrative appropriation leaves the poem to the discretion of the objects, but that they do not take up the space they are awarded. Instead, they are all over the place, without order, amorphous and show that, without any human interaction, they are nothing, that they need to be loved or at the very least, feel wanted.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> This could be compared to Woolf’s chapter “Time Passes” in *To The Lighthouse*. This famous chapter stands out from the novel, as it does not include any of its main characters. Instead, it focuses on the empty house and the objects therein. Mirroring the many soldiers killed in World War I, the objects are isolated, nameless and purposeless. Like in O’Hara’s poem, the objects do not take advantage of the empty space. As Woolf writes, “Nothing stirred in the drawing-room or in the dining-room or on the staircase” (126). The lack of punctuation in this sentence reflects the immensity and unity in the lack of movement: there is simply nothing happening in the house despite being filled with objects. In fact, it is this sense of nothingness that becomes the subject, the main



These descriptions fit well with George Perec's later work, which operates in a similar way to O'Hara's. Despite the fact that most of his novels are mainly concerned with consumerism and the state of urban settings in the French capital, and that they were written around ten years after O'Hara's death,—*An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (1975), *Life a User's Manual* (1978)—they still are quite revealing, complementing especially this poem. An example of this can be found in Michael Gardiner's article "Everyday Utopianism." Indeed, he notes that "Daily newspapers, Perec observes humorously, are misnamed because they are concerned with virtually everything except what actually occurs in daily life in the ebb and flow of our quotidian, mundane existence" (229). In the same way, the many advertisements present in the poem do not mirror the truth of daily life. In fact, it only presents the consumer's part of the quotidian and not the human being per se. O'Hara's poem adds another dimension to Perec's statement by including bits and pieces from radio shows and multiple job offers. By centering life on working and consuming O'Hara is pointing to a problem close to the counterculture that had been blooming from the late 1950s onward. Though O'Hara does not fully share the same beliefs, his observations in this poem actually drive to that point and show the negative aspects of a growing consumerist culture. In some ways, O'Hara is putting as many examples of consumerism as possible in a single poem without losing meaning and without oversaturating it.<sup>38</sup> The flâneur, again, fits with the rhythm analyst through the staccato rhythms of the poem. In other words, through an analysis of the succession of all these objects and radio shows, one can perceive an inadequacy, an impossibility to achieve and look at everything found there without

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protagonist of this short chapter. The objects become the subjects, but they struggle to establish themselves as rulers of their environment, facing the same struggle than those in O'Hara's poetry.

<sup>38</sup> Perec pushed this experiment to the next level in his *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, which is essentially consisting of Perec's observations from various cafés and restaurants in downtown Paris. The use in the title of the word "exhausting" obviously reflects well the French writer's objective of finding the limits of commodities and of daily life in general. Such observations rapidly become tedious and redundant, but it nevertheless represents one of the most interesting works from an Oulipo member in my opinion.

taking a moment to think.

As a flâneur O'Hara relies heavily on the city and on specific streets; it is particularly evident in "A Warm Day for December," which encapsulates the poet's relationship with the Big Apple to perfection (*CP* 375-6). He finds himself on "57<sup>th</sup> Street / Street of Joy" where he is "a microcosm in your macrocosm / and then a macrocosm in your microcosm [sic]." Through a single street of the American metropolis, the narrator lives a fascinating role reversal. He is both playing a small part in the 57<sup>th</sup> street lively mosaic, but he also takes on a major role on the smaller scale of the city through his poetry. In other words, as the flâneur, O'Hara is small, he is just another man in the vast crowd of the always busy cosmopolitan artery probably slowing the rhythm of the masses by observing everything around him, but when he is putting this to paper, he is the one making the street look small and only one possibility out of so many. The poet demonstrates this efficiently by starting the poem with "57<sup>th</sup> street" and ending with it as well, giving an effect of closure. This effect transforms the poem into a unique vignette about the lively life in New York City, especially around Christmas time. O'Hara has clearly switched from being inspired while sad to happy at that point using people's declarations of love as an inspiration and one of the reasons why that December day was particularly "warm."<sup>39</sup>

By comparing the phone booth to a "space ship," O'Hara is also signifying his fear of boredom. Consequently, the poet's flânerie sessions are presented as being in good part to appease this distress. The simile evoked here is to help him to get away from the street, hoping to find someone with whom to talk and get away from the fear of being alone and bored. Instead, it is the "I love you" that gets him out of his torpor. In a sense, it is the city itself, the beauty of its streets and the people living in it, which helps him to get out of this phase. While going out alone

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<sup>39</sup> It makes a stark contrast from the January 1960 poem "Present" in which he personifies rain as "tears in windshields" of cars and perceives "dark thoughts" around neon lights (*CP* 352-3). O'Hara's change in his writing style affected greatly his flânerie and directly impacted the poems that are attached to this activity.

in the city might be frightening for fear of ennui, the urban rhythms ultimately help O'Hara to find his own and go to a bar to meet friends, Leroi Jones and Bill Berkson. The flâneur, then, finds himself more isolated than ever in the postmodern world and quickly realizes that without a human touch, days can get quite cold and that objects alone cannot save him from such insecurity.

After considering these poems, I would claim that O'Hara's statuses as rhythm analyst and flâneur can hardly be distinguished from one another. Through the rise of mass consumption, objects carry their own rhythms, hence leaving the flâneur with no other possibility than to accelerate his lifestyle to match them. It is by looking and analyzing these various objects that O'Hara seems to have come to the conclusion that they are not following human rhythms. The poet finds it difficult to deal with their faster pace. This form of insecurity is cured through drinking, socializing and especially through writing. O'Hara's taste for cinema serves as a great example of this philosophy. When he consumes, he only consumes through his eyes and ears, either through poetry, movies or by analyzing specific locations in the city. In a sense, it relates to Clune's argument when he writes: "the author selects what to put in the poem and what to leave out. But O'Hara's work is characterized by its insistent and explicit thematizing of the process of choosing" (182). In other words, the objects found in his poetry are chosen wisely as a way of reflecting the rhythms of everyday life. Furthermore, this capacity to choose enables him to control his body unlike Mrs. Smith in "A Scene," allowing him to stay true to himself and consume at the same time.

### 3. The New York Art Scene

The transition from the 1950s to the 1960s brought a change of guard in the American artistic world, especially in New York City. In his famous essay “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock,” Allan Kaprow writes, “Young artists of today need no longer say, ‘I am a painter’ or ‘a poet’ or ‘a dancer.’ They are simply artists. ... They will discover out of ordinary things the meaning of ordinariness. They will not try to make them extraordinary but will only state their real meaning” (9). This declaration was applied to perfection in the work of Claes Oldenburg, who presents, as Hochdörfer points out, “pieces ... ambiguous as to their status as painting, sculpture, or the intermediate form of relief. Rather, they constitute a hybrid: they describe different aggregate states of a *movement*” (44). In the work of a poet, this mixing of genres may be more difficult. Nevertheless, Frank O’Hara managed to blend them in his poetry, especially by recuperating techniques such as the abstract expressionists’ “push” and “pull” under different forms, through what Perloff refers to as “floating modifiers” (Perloff 56). Obviously, this approach is subtler, but still relates to Kaprow’s prediction. In this chapter, I contend that, through their unique techniques, both O’Hara and Oldenburg critique the growth of consumerism in America and hope for an economic state that does not encourage irrational consumption. Also, I will suggest that nostalgia is a recurring theme in both of their works hinting at a return to the past when planned obsolescence did not affect most purchases. Furthermore, it is by connecting notions of fame and camp aesthetics with the most popular pop artist, Andy Warhol, that I will demonstrate that Oldenburg and O’Hara’s work are technically very similar. After all, the two artists were friends in real life unlike O’Hara and Warhol (Gooch 397). In effect, Warhol will be seen as facilitating the establishment of correlations between these artists.

The instabilities in the late 1950s and 1960s were not only a result of the many social

revolutions, but a direct result of the economic shift of the period and the resulting injustices. “[P]ost-war Keynesian economic policy sought to achieve ... the manipulation of the sum total of national consumer demand as a means of counteracting the fluctuating and destabilising tendencies of markets when left to their own devices” writes Lee giving an indicative of why the class divide started augmenting in this particular period (85). Similarly, Hazel Smith believed that it had a great influence on O’Hara. She contends:

O’Hara’s poems were written during the Fordist post-war era which was strongly influenced by Keynesian economics based on consumption rather than production. Keynesian economics work from the assumption that the gross national product and employment are determined by spending, so consumption has to be stimulated. ... During the 1950s consumerism soared, along with the mass consumption of services and goods and the growth of recreational activities. The government disseminated the idea that consumption was patriotic and, fuelling a national obsession with material wealth, ideologically pitted American affluence against communism. (Smith 30)

This growth in consumerist practices only expanded in the 1960s and it had multiple consequences for notions of space and time. In *Conditions of Postmodernity*, David Harvey argues that the rise in consumption’s “primary effect has been to emphasize the values and virtues of instantaneity ... but also [to be] able to throw away values, life-styles, stable relationships, and attachments to things, buildings, places” (286). These economical changes entail a modification in everyday life, which has to adapt to these new, rapid conditions.

O’Hara and Oldenburg tackle these changes in society quite drastically, but they both respond to Harvey in their own subversive way. While O’Hara’s work reflects the “virtues of

instantaneity” through its fast-paced poetry, which constantly goes one way and then another, he still pays attention to ordinary objects that are rendered obsolete by the constantly evolving world of commodities. Poetry as a genre enables O’Hara to write snapshots of his surroundings. At a certain moment, O’Hara will be discussing a scene from his breakfast and in another poem he will do the same for an evening out at the Cedar Tavern. The single event that each poem depicts strengthens the importance of poetry as O’Hara’s literary genre especially in his critique of consumerism. While in a novel or in drama various events occur at the same time, O’Hara’s poetry can be analyzed as embracing the spontaneity that the poetic genre gives him. He can focus on a specific event or object and then move on, leaving behind his thoughts and moving to another specific one. Instead of doing this to reflect the consumerist *modus operandi*, he hopes to create a tableau of different objects or events all crucial to this particular moment and to reflect the madness enforced by these new daily rhythms. O’Hara’s poems are rarely longer than a page because they generally are straight to the point without overwhelming the reader with metaphors and other figures of speech. Some poems do not necessarily attract his readership because of their limited context, but they do show the extent to which O’Hara’s poetry genuinely reflects his everyday life. It is by getting involved into this unique world that one can trace a link between the various comments on consumerism that O’Hara scatters around his body of work.

Similarly, Oldenburg rethinks the idea of attachment, especially in *The Store* and in *The Street*, in which he recreates banal commodities such as hamburgers or popsicles in oversized, inflated versions that he sells for more than ten times their “normal” worth. By doing so, Oldenburg suggests to his viewers that they can immortalize objects like hamburgers by buying his art. Instead of consuming the objects through various quickly forgotten actions, they can now consume them for as long as they want. In the case of Oldenburg, his unique medium of

expression, which blends object-making and painting, provides him with a unique perspective on consumerism. It is his over-blown simulacrum that protests against the rise of mass consumption and artistic elitism.<sup>40</sup> In that sense, Oldenburg's exaggerated objects clearly depict his views on consumerism. In comparison with O'Hara, the viewer at an Oldenburg show is immediately confronted with the artist's stance on mass consumption, whereas to understand O'Hara's political position, the reader needs more than a few hours of close reading and analysis in order to formulate an understanding of it.

In this way, both artists reflect more closely Peter Jackson's definition of consumption than Harvey's. Jackson "propose[s] to treat consumption as a process by which artefacts are not simply bought and 'consumed', but given meaning through their active incorporation in people's lives" (209). This definition ties in well with Oldenburg's work where commodities are given a new signification and, more importantly, timelessness. It is this sense of immortality that makes them more than a consumable commodity in the general sense, but now an art piece that can be consumed by the eye for as long as one wants. As Stemmrich observes, "By stripping everyday objects of their function, replicating them as art and radically undermining their design, he [Oldenburg] suspends the ability of rationality and functionality to guide us" (168). Stemmrich's comment adds to the argument of timelessness attached to Oldenburg's art. In other words, it is this necessary pause forced upon the viewer every time he looks at one of Oldenburg's uncanny objects that produces their immortality.

If they would not be consumed without forcing a quizzical look from the audience, the objects would become examples of commodities that can be appreciated in a single moment and

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<sup>40</sup> In his notes, Oldenburg writes "The bourgeois artist goes to the Museum. Instead of going to the Museum, I go to the Store" (160). He rejects artists wishing to have a one-man-show at prestigious venues like the MoMA or the Guggenheim. Instead, Oldenburg wants to blend in, creating his one-man-show within the realm of the city without attracting journalists or mere publicity. He prefers people to get in his shows without too much anticipation, following instead their curiosity more than a newspaper's article.

then left behind without another thought about it. Instead, Oldenburg surprises his audience by transforming the ordinary, making most glances uncomfortable. He forces the viewer to question reality, to question what really forms his/her everyday. Oldenburg wrote about this idea as well in his notes. For example, he argued “This is a time, I think, for big and absolute acts, acts that affect people, and I have the feeling that is very central to my thinking; I think art should be literally made of the ordinary world; the space should be our space, its time our time, its objects our ordinary objects; the reality of art will replace reality” (152). In a sense, Oldenburg creates an alternate reality.<sup>41</sup> After all, his one-man-show *The Store* was set in a store like any other, on a common passing street, where the ordinary is given centre stage. In this context, everyday art objects need not be consumed rapidly, but appreciated for what they are and could be.

Peter Jackson also connects with both artists when he draws on Paul Willis’s *Common Culture* in which everyday life and its essential correlations with consumption are given new meanings in contemporary America (214). He writes “His [Willis’s] project amounts to an attempt to rehabilitate the concept of consumption, emphasizing its creative potential, ‘to explore how far ‘meanings’ and ‘effects’ can change quite decisively according to the social contexts of ‘consumption’” (214). This particular argument relates to O’Hara’s poetry. In his “I Do This, I Do That” poems, O’Hara refers to many ordinary objects such as a worker’s hardhat or a frying pan that, despite their apparent banality, reinforce the importance of these respective poems. Mattix’s reasoning concurs with this idea when he writes, “O’Hara shows us that the pleasure we obtain from the experience of things—both the everyday and the extraordinary—affirm our sense

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<sup>41</sup> This alternate reality is, in fact, mainly the work of the passer-by. It is he/she who becomes the spectator. In her book, *Carried Away: The Invention of Modern Shopping*, Rachel Bowlby deconstructs the passer-by’s nature and his/her relation to the shop’s window. She describes the window display as either “stylish modern art” or as showing the object for what it is (61). It is by looking at the various windows that the passer-by gets either interested or not by the shop bringing attention to the tensions between outside and inside (63). When the shop intrigues them, they are “*out of themselves*”(64). It is with this in mind that I believe Oldenburg creates a form of alternate reality that surpasses the mere simulacrum. Instead, Oldenburg defied Morand’s idea that, in New York City, “all shops and all streets are identical” (75).



of being” (87). Similarly, Cappucci believes that such instances evoke an “ability to unfold even the most common and base materials into art” (78).

In this regard, through his poetry, O’Hara portrays banal objects that are not merely consumed, but that also help to create something bigger than them. In this case, they represent the base of his poetry. Without hardhats, books or even hot tea, O’Hara’s inspiration is altered and does not produce a poem that is equally effective. In that sense, the poet puts to the forefront of his poetry ordinary objects so that they can be consumed beyond their economic purposes. For example, in “Les Étiquettes Jaunes,” O’Hara writes about a single yellow leaf that he picks up, building the fifteen-line poem around the narrator’s harsh criticism of it. Though the tone is willingly satirical, there is a critique of consumption hidden behind the words. Indeed, when the narrator bemoans the fact that “you change your / color then just fall!,” I would argue that O’Hara is criticizing the short span of consumable objects—extending it to natural sights—by attacking a single, fallen leaf (*CP* 21). The leaf itself is described as “big” which entails it should be able to face new economic trends. Instead, it falls and will rapidly lose all its beauty.

The poem’s title also hints at this criticism of consumption by using the French word “étiquettes” which can be translated in various ways, one of them being “price tag.” How can the leaf be interpreted as a price tag? How is the price tag’s “death” reflecting consumption? Its fall thus indicates an immediate loss of value from the moment the product is bought and is deemed to be forgotten rapidly in the same way that a leaf has less impact on the ground, on its own, than in the tree. Furthermore, the tree would represent a shelf where many goods are stacked, as if individual trees were becoming synonyms of shelves in a supermarket. This analogy is not entirely mine, it is also O’Hara’s, in a sense, who was never able to appreciate nature without shades of urbanism in it. After all, it is in “Meditations in an Emergency” that he writes “I / can’t

even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or a / record store" which can explain why he would be inclined to perceive leaves as price tags (*CP* 197). Therefore, when he is observing beautiful, natural sights, the narrator cannot get away from notions of consumption such that even nature becomes commodified. Though the tone is satirical, O'Hara raises an important point regarding the rise in consumption during this epoch of change when even the pretty, quotidian sights of fall become signs to be consumed and then left aside for another season cycle.

When the consumption is not satisfying, when it does not elevate to the expectation caused by advertising or by the simple idea of its consumption, it generates nostalgia, a sense of sadness. This idea has been picked up by Smith when she argues that: "The celebratory allusions to shopping, fast food and mass media are often accompanied by an undertow of sadness which suggests that material goods do not ultimately satisfy, or allay, loneliness" (31). She identifies those instances with cases of solitude and that they are an extent of O'Hara's intricate relationship with materiality. Those cases represent the negative side of consumption, namely, when it becomes overconsumption. For example, in "The Day Lady Died," as Smith rightly points out, O'Hara's multiple purchases lead him to a state of "quandariness" (Smith 31). It is as if the process of buying gifts to his friends becomes exhaustive; the simple act of purchasing unnecessary gifts becomes tiresome even if the gifts in themselves are valuable. In a sense, for O'Hara, finding valuable products requires more work because they are not represented by mass commodities, they are rare, but nevertheless quotidian. It is this sense of transforming the ordinary by buying more products that affects O'Hara. The poem's spontaneity mirrors the frenetic rhythm of a New Yorker's quotidian, in which even the possibility of meeting friends becomes complicated because of the ever-present desire to please them. This desire is directly

linked to a need for consumption. In other words, buying gifts to his friends, and possibly to the strangers “who will feed him,” is done out of politesse. Even if O’Hara does not mind obeying this courtesy, it still makes him feel anxious. Therefore, O’Hara’s ambiguous relationship with consumption is mainly reflected in the way he reacts to the more rare commodities included in his poetry.

It is his liminal state between subversive artist and normal consumer that makes these objects so vital. First, he buys “a little Verlaine” in a bookstore, “GOLDEN GRIFFIN,” specialized in European arts. Though Paul Verlaine is one of the epitomes of the Symbolist movement, he was certainly not a bestseller. In that sense, O’Hara does not buy the first book he sees, he goes for a specific author adding meaning and depth to the purchase. O’Hara chose Verlaine over other choices such as Genet. I would argue that his decision is important and carries more critical meaning than the other options. By choosing a symbolist poet out of all different movements is meaningful here because, in the words of another famous symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé, symbolism can be seen “as the art of evoking an object ... and extracting from it an *état d’âme*” (qtd. in “symbol and symbolism,” 886). The poetry therefore is not only consumed, but it also enables the reader to consume the objects within it in quite a different manner.

For Mike Goldberg, he opts for a “bottle of Strega,” an Italian Liqueur, a nice touch that is still not as valuable and valued by O’Hara as the Verlaine collection. The alcohol bottle is indeed a European product just like the poetry, but it is more common than the latter. It is consumed much more rapidly and does not carry a second layer of consumption like the symbolic objects in the French poet’s work. The poet himself acknowledges the inferiority of the second gift by introducing the action thus “and for Mike *I just stroll* into the PARK LANE”

(CP 325, emphasis mine). The straightforward act of buying the bottle compared with the endless cogitation over which French book to buy shows the difference between mass consumption and artistic qua subversive consumption. The poem, albeit focusing on a much more serious matter, entails through purchases the status of his friendships with Patsy Southgate and Mike Goldberg. For one of his closest friends, an ever-consumable symbolist poetry collection that does not reflect the poetic ethos of the moment, and for the other, a mere bottle of exotic alcohol that is only meaningful until the last drop.

Oldenburg correlates with O'Hara's ideas through his commentaries on consumerism. He was a poet as well, though on the side, relating to O'Hara in terms of their blending of artistic genres. Oldenburg is arguably O'Hara's foil through the exuberance he transcends in his one-man-shows and especially because of the frankness of his writing that does not conceal his views on the economic shift of his time. In this sense, while O'Hara could be seen as being protopolitical<sup>42</sup> in his poetry, Oldenburg does not mind stating bluntly his opinion. In Oldenburg's notes, one can read "anything can be used" or that "Art without political orientation is dead, somehow unplugged in" (154). It is Oldenburg's desire to be political that distinguishes him from O'Hara. In regards to his show *The Street*, Oldenburg believes that it is "a proletarian declaration or a declaration for the people. An art for people and about people is a strong concern of mine, even if I don't think so sometimes. This is not to say I do not freely use the space above and behind or even within the spectators" (154). Oldenburg was politically engaged while O'Hara merely depicted what was happening around him. Nevertheless, the poet portrayed

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<sup>42</sup> Smith mainly uses the term to describe the works of Warhol and pop art in general. She argues that: "Pop Art abides within the protopolitical through its undecidable surfaces which make it ambiguous whether it is celebratory or critiquing consumer society" (176). This statement sheds light on Oldenburg's own uncertain state as a pop artist. His political drive gives a sense of ambiguity about his affiliation. I would contend that, while he is seen as part of the pop movement, he is much more of a freelance artist or in a liminal state between abstract expressionism and pop art.

surroundings that were troubling at times.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, Oldenburg was fully aware of the ridiculous impression that some of his blown-up objects might leave with the viewer. It is thus not surprising to find in his notes that he believed that his art was “[e]ssentially ... comic—a serious, absurd comedy. Comic, irreverent, and erotical... moralistic. Having to do with values. Universal comedy or deep comedy” (158).

This aspect of Oldenburg’s work can be linked to O’Hara, whose style was quite ironic as, for example, in the poem “Lines for the Fortune Cookies” in which he wittily mimics lines from Chinese cuisine’s iconic menu. Through O’Hara’s poem, the cookies’ status as stereotype reinforces its value as a common food and therefore emphasizes the dichotomization of its consumption. It is by giving the reader more than a few lines from cookies that O’Hara manages to express mass consumption. In other words, one would not eat more than two or three cookies at a time, but O’Hara gives examples for more than ten or twelve cookies clearly expanding the usual number. Moreover, O’Hara exaggerates the already ridiculousness of these messages through lines such as “You will take a long trip and you will be very happy, though alone” or “You will eat cake” (*CP* 464-465). Therefore, the lines do not only give examples of how to consume them, but they also give the reader a new way of using them and making them funnier and, to a certain extent, worthwhile. Thus, O’Hara reinvents in positive fashion the way to eat banal food like fortune cookies. He makes the reader think about the limits of their silliness, hence making the consumption not only physical, but also psychological.

Irony can also be transformed into absurdity, while recuperating the meaning of ordinary objects and elevating them. O’Hara describes consumption in his “Memorial Day 1950” through lines such as “How many trees and frying pans / I loved and lost!” (*CP* 17). They bring into question the poem’s seriousness and O’Hara’s critique of the ever changing models of pans and

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<sup>43</sup> See “My Heart” (*CP* 231), “Sleeping on the Wing” (235), or “Ave Maria” (371-372).

other kitchen accessories (17). This poem also includes words such as “rubbish,” “guitar strings” and his quintessential “tight blue jeans” that refer to objects observing a certain life cycle—the pants will wear down and the guitar strings will break to then be replaced by other ones. The broken copies will be dropped into what he foreshadows as a “heap of rubbish.” This blend of humour, through the pans, and of more serious concerns, through the accumulation of rubbish, makes O’Hara’s poetry subtler than Oldenburg’s provocative visuals.

It is interesting to note that this poem was written for his parents in a mocking way. As Gooch notes “O’Hara challenges authority figures from his past, especially mother and father, with these new, thoroughly avant-garde poems” (152-153). In this sense, the poet’s wit is mainly in response to his parents whom he did not have the best relationship with and the commentaries on consumerism thus become a second thought. Consequently, O’Hara’s poetry is protopolitical because, in order to find the political messages, the reader needs the poem to be contextualized, he needs to go beyond what he finds on paper. Whereas poems like “The Day Lady Died” or “Lines for the Fortune Cookies” clearly include a subversive economic message, others like “Memorial Day 1950” are too fragmented to be analyzed in such a way, as the ordinary objects have more than one clear meaning.

O’Hara and Oldenburg do correlate in their views on consumption, but to better understand the links that tie their work together it is imperative to look at the work and opinions of Andy Warhol. Warhol is by far the most famous of all pop artists because of the worldwide attention he gained from his iconic Campbell’s Soup cans and portraits of famous stars such as Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley. Another important fact to consider is that he enjoyed his fame. Thierry de Duve in his essay “Andy Warhol, or The Machine Perfected” argues that there is much more to this than just a desire to be famous. Indeed, he contends that:

To desire fame—not the glory of the hero but the glamour of the star—with the intensity and awareness Warhol did, is to desire to be nothing, nothing of the human, the interior, the profound. It is to want to be nothing but image, surface, a bit of light on a screen, a mirror for the fantasies and a magnet for the desires of others — a thing of absolute narcissism. (4)

This passage demonstrates that Warhol does not only respect the usual notions attached to stardom, he pushes them to their limits; he wants to be commodified, to become inhuman like a machine. Warhol's every move becomes an act, a part of his art. His clothing, hairstyle and his every word become consumable, similar to his art pieces. The man becomes an extension of the art piece. Like O'Hara and Oldenburg, he seeks to extend the relationship between the viewer and the artist. In Warhol's case, it is his fame and everyday bravado that extends the viewer's experience.

O'Hara does not mirror this approach, but it can be seen as correlating with Oldenburg's technique. It took O'Hara a long time to appreciate Warhol's work (and the pop art movement, for that matter). Gooch gives an extended description of the early relationship between the two artists:

O'Hara was vexed by Warhol's rise. They had both arrived in New York at about the same time. But Warhol's acceptance by the artworld in which O'Hara was so celebrated was peripheral at best. ... As a curator, O'Hara had visited Warhol's studio in 1959. "He was very unkind to Andy," says the poet John Giorno. ... "Frank was so meeean" ... But then at some point Frank made a change and thought that what Andy was doing was valid. (395)

What prompted this change in O'Hara's opinion? Is it simply because of the growing popularity

of the movement, or because his jealousy finally subsided?<sup>44</sup> I would argue that O'Hara's unpretentious approach to his art is another reason why his relationship with Warhol never lifted off. In poems such as "Autobiographia Literaria" or "Why I'm not a Painter," O'Hara laughs earnestly at his status as a poet with lines like "And here I am / the center of all beauty / writing these poems! / Imagine!" or "It is even in prose, I am a real poet" (CP 11, 261). It was normal for O'Hara to write poems and then forget about them and the act of putting together collections of poems was a real burden for him. Some might argue that his relationships with the likes of the De Koonings or Mike Goldberg made him a famous artist, but O'Hara never bragged about it. In a sense, they were like any other friends for him; this was not anything special to talk about even if he relished the opportunity of meeting well known painters. In other words, O'Hara always felt that painters were always superior to writers and that feeling never left him.<sup>45</sup> Thus O'Hara diverges from Warhol in his opinions regarding fame. While one strived for it and wanted to be consumed like his art, the other wanted to be a poet and a curator at the MoMA without completely making his poetry autobiographical.

Claes Oldenburg connects with Warhol through his desire to commodify his artistic self in his own art. While Warhol achieves it through fame, interview and worldwide one-man-shows, Oldenburg participates actively as another piece of art in Happenings and as a member of the Fluxus network of artists. I will mainly focus on two of his one-man-shows: *The Store* and *The Street*. In other words, Oldenburg may not care about fame, but he cares about his art and pushes it to the point where his own body becomes part of the performance, an idea that Warhol also exemplifies, but through his public visibility. It is a quality that is essential to pop artists, as Perl

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<sup>44</sup> Gooch proposes that O'Hara was instead preoccupied by the decline pop art imposed on abstract expressionism. This change affected indirectly O'Hara's poetry, which Gooch perceived as greatly influenced by the abstract expressionists' work (396).

<sup>45</sup> As Lehman points out, "O'Hara felt that the painters were the heroes of a modern artistic revolution. 'You do what I can only name,' he wrote in a poem to Larry Rivers" (1998:178).



notes: “The difference, and it made all the difference, was that Warhol or Lichtenstein or Johns vanished not into tradition but into commercial culture” (435). Oldenburg could easily be added to this list, which entails that the artists of the pop art movement were always fully invested into their art to the point that they became a commodity. In fact, Oldenburg only wants his art to be part of the New York everyday scene without having the pretension of being in a museum. The audience itself “become[s] integral components of the installation” in a show like *The Store*, which makes Oldenburg just another member of the audience (Hochdörder 34). In other words, Oldenburg mimics consumption through his one-man-shows; he shapes a new society that is much more interactive and not as ephemeral as the real one of the 1960s. As Stemmrich argues “Oldenburg had already encapsulated, in *The Street*, his experience of the cityscape, and just as the cityscape transformed his studio could transform the cityscape” (182). In sum, Oldenburg commodifies his body to make the experience of his one-man-shows livelier to the detriment of his fame, which greatly diverges from Warhol’s approach that strives for attention as a means of commodifying his body.

Warhol’s attitude towards fame, then, helps us to clarify one of the differences between O’Hara and Oldenburg concerning consumption: one wants to depict it in its everyday surrounding without getting personally involved into it, whereas the other recreates a microcosm in which the idea of consumption can be shaped differently. In this sense, O’Hara prefers to act as a flâneur depicting New York City in the most genuine way possible. Featherstone notices the importance of flânerie in the postmodern world and it leads him to state that “Berman, following Baudelaire, sees the flâneur, the stroller, in the anonymous urban spaces of the modern city, as experiencing the shocks, jolts of the impersonal stimuli of the impressions gained in the crowd” (85). This passage is important to explain O’Hara’s complicated relationship with fame. In a

sense, when he is writing, he transforms himself into the flâneur, the individual, he becomes just another subject in his poetry. In other words, the narrator is as valuable as any other of the friends and acquaintances mentioned in the text. When not writing, O'Hara is a curator at the MoMA, a well-known man loved by many and mostly respected. In his poetry, he thus becomes another self, his flâneur identity where he becomes just another face in the crowd.<sup>46</sup>

On the other hand, Oldenburg is dissatisfied with the way the city is transforming under the pressure of Keynesian economics, hence he wants to reshape it in order for his audience to notice the gloominess of the urban future. Compared to O'Hara, Oldenburg becomes, not a flâneur, but a voyeur,<sup>47</sup> relishing the participation of his audience in his one-man-shows and always wanting to know more about their habits and views. It is by becoming a commodity like any other object in his collection that Oldenburg is able to both display his opinion and simultaneously understand how the crowd receives it. The commodity, in this regard, becomes alive. Those like Oldenburg who are intricate participants in the show are mirroring the objects, they are on even ground with the objects and, like them, "they are sleeping and are simply waiting to be awoken to fulfill the normal functions of an everyday object" (Joseph 105, Stemrich 168). Thus, Oldenburg does not care about fame in the same way Warhol does, but he recuperates his desire to be commodified to ensure that he gets feedback directly from the audience. For both Oldenburg and O'Hara, fame is not important, but they diverge in the role of the artist: O'Hara prefers to be removed and to observe without having any form of control over

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<sup>46</sup> Baudelaire linked the flâneur to the crowd stating: "it is an immense ecstasy to dwell in numbers" (60, translation from French mine).

<sup>47</sup> Here, I am using to a certain extent de Certeau's definition of voyeur. While Oldenburg is not standing at the highest point of the Big Apple, he still shares the voyeur's God-like look (92). He is able to analyze the crowd's movement around his one-man-show while playing an anonymous role in it. Oldenburg has a better understanding of the citizens and how they perceive consumable objects and consumption in general through their whereabouts. The artist also shares the French sociologist's idea of simulacrum. After all, Oldenburg's two shows are simulacra of everyday activities be it in the streets or in shops. What provides him with the status of superiority is obviously his status as leader of the simulacrum, its creation and its every action. That is why, despite the lack of a bird's eye view, Oldenburg nevertheless shares similarities with de Certeau's voyeur theory.

the crowd, while Oldenburg prefers to be physically involved to influence the viewer's whereabouts as much as he can.<sup>48</sup> This reemphasizes the difference between O'Hara's protopolitical approach to his work and Oldenburg's engagé style.

Another aspect coming from Warhol that can establish a better connection between O'Hara and Oldenburg is the transcending nostalgia emanating from his work. To fully understand what is meant by nostalgia in pop art, one needs to take into consideration Jennifer Dyer's theory on the use of the mundane. In her essay "The Metaphysics of the Mundane," she terms mundane as that "which includes not just ordinary everyday life but also features of the familiar world, such as previous cultural and aesthetic icons and practices" (35). In her opinion, it is by constantly repeating the patterns of the Campbell's Soup cans or of Marilyn Monroe that these similarities become different (35). In this sense, Warhol invokes that something has changed since Monroe's prime and since soup cans are not seen as an important component of one's dinner. In other words, by presenting these two elements in various shades of colours he leads the viewer to reconsider his/her status. Why Monroe? Why a mere soup can? It is by stopping to think about them that Warhol calms the frenetic rhythm of consumption. The soup can be stared at for an hour without needing to open it and dump it in a saucepan. The same can be applied to Monroe who does not need to move to exude grace and sensuality, she can be appreciated for the same reasons in shades of green, red or blue.

Dyer's definition can be tied in with Jane Doris's use of "obsolescence" to emphasize this desire to show the difference between what is hip and what is passé. Doris's main focus is on Warhol's *Marilyns*. In her opinion, he deliberately chose an earlier image of the artist at a moment when she was not considered a star yet, in fact, not even an actress. In this context,

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<sup>48</sup> This is specific to *The Store* and *The Street*. Oldenburg worked on many monumental projects that render this sort of control impossible. While the bigger projects expanded his ethos, it did so to the detriment of his contact with his audience.

Doris observes, “Warhol’s *Marilyns* were thus first produced and received in a context where the star was portrayed as a tragic figure, a martyr to fame and its fickleness” (187). She also disputes that pathos emanates from the images as a result of Monroe’s mythical status hyped by the media (198). Furthermore Lucy Lippard adds, “Warhol’s use of dated image of Marilyn serves to make all that artifice insistently visible to the spectator, and so to call attention to the way in which the sexuality of a feminine archetype like Monroe could be read as mere face veneer” (204). For that reason, Warhol can be perceived as willingly applying a nostalgic gloss to his work. In that sense, despite Monroe’s unquestionable beauty in those various colourful pictures, the viewer does not find as much of the actress’ sensuality as in other photos taken years later. Though Monroe’s face is much more natural on Warhol’s paintings than in the staged photo shoots she would later take part in, there is still a sense of detachment between the two that the viewer is not necessarily at ease with. S/He will undoubtedly feel closer to that portrait, on par with the actress, than s/he would look at a more iconic picture. While the soup can does not create this issue, they both hint at simpler things, at the idea that human beings are to a certain extent, all the same, famous or not.

“Camp” is a term that regroups these notions of nostalgia and obsolescence together in a more efficient way and that also clarifies how they are portrayed in O’Hara and Oldenburg’s respective work. In 1964, Susan Sontag popularized the camp movement through the publication of her now famous “Notes on ‘Camp.’” Sontag suggested that high and low, or mass and popular, arts should not be divided anymore, that art was but an object, an object that could be “manufactured or mass-produced” and not necessarily created by an individual (287). This object was also better when it was not part of the zeitgeist because “[w]e are better able to enjoy a fantasy as fantasy when it is not our own” (285). Such a way of thinking was drastically opposed

to Keynesian economics that encouraged the rapid obsolescence of goods to be replaced by more efficient products that fulfill needs in a better way.<sup>49</sup> What Sontag proposed was to enjoy whatever one wanted to enjoy regardless of its value in society. Cleto rephrases Sontag's argument well and links it with nostalgia. Indeed, he acknowledges the idea that camp and pop do much more than just invoke nostalgia; they create what he calls "surplus counter-value" (304). Camp and pop get their subversive political message from examples such as this one. In this sense, both movements act against the economic ethos of the time, they prefer to concentrate on the past to question contemporary methods. Ross adds: "Pop's commitment to the new and everyday, to quantity and to the throw-away was a direct affront to those who governed the boundaries of official taste" (319).

For Sontag, this desire to emphasize the ordinary and the banal comes to the detriment of rhythm, substance and even to its general appreciation. "For Camp art is often decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of music," described the artist in an interview to *Time* magazine (qtd. in Cotkin 192). In response to this passage, Cotkin adds, "She craved a more immediate and pleasurable relationship with text, painting, film, or stage production" (193). This is reflected in O'Hara's art, as banal objects render the poem more convivial; it makes it more accessible on the surface despite not directly affecting the reader's understanding of the poem in itself. In that sense, I would argue that this technique elevates the everyday object and leaves behind any sense of modernist rhetoric to his poetics. Thus camp aesthetics plays a major role in O'Hara's choices of objects and of general descriptions of everydayness.

It is this desire to bring back obsolete objects and past cultural movements to the

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<sup>49</sup> This reflects pop art as well. Critics like Lippard argue that it is the movement's purposeful use of obsolescent objects that foregrounds its "preoccupation with the accelerated cycle of innovation and obsolescence in popular culture" (225).

forefront of the artistic world that links camp to pop art and that makes it possible to see them as interrelated. By this I mean that camp and pop art influence each other and I would add that they influenced O'Hara's work in the same way. Doris believes that it is the pop art movement's desire to discover nostalgia in new creations that links it to camp (185).<sup>50</sup> She adds, "Camp thus exploits the semantically devalued status of obsolescent culture in order to reconstitute its meanings in ways which subvert those originally present" (187). In this sense, camp thrives on past movements, aesthetics or trends and it makes them relevant again in the same way that Warhol and Oldenburg recuperate commodities like soup cans or hamburgers and reinvent them to give them cultural relevance.

Camp is easier to attribute to Warhol's work because it is orbiting around popular culture and pop icons, whereas Oldenburg's oeuvre revolved around banal objects that did not have the same appeal as a soup can or especially, of a pop star like Elvis or Monroe. Instead, Oldenburg's campiness lies in his desire to recreate the economics of the past in one-man-shows like *The Store*. It is by recreating a shop's front window with derelict objects that Oldenburg emulates not a contemporary shop, but one that could have been found on the main street of a smaller city.<sup>51</sup> Joseph points out, "it was precisely by forcing art into the temporality of planned obsolescence and fashion dictated by consumer society ... that Pop could reveal the consumer product in its essence ... or expose the object's social function with a system of indifferent commodity exchange" (81). It is through this desire to demonstrate the meaninglessness of commodities in the 1960s that Oldenburg recuperates camp ideologies, but, by recreating blown-up simulacra, he embraces the "over the top" characteristics that both attracted and revolted crowds (Cotkin 192).

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<sup>50</sup> Cleto saw the link between pop art and camp as well. Indeed, he notes, "The camp mania of the mid-1960s, in fact, mirrors the craze for the pop scene and icons it referred to" (303).

<sup>51</sup> For a better understanding of the role of the shop window, see "The Passer-by and the Shop Window" in Rachel Bowlby's *Carried Away: The Invention of Modern Shopping*.

Nevertheless, when Oldenburg plays with the objects, he transforms them; he paints them to make them even less realistic. While they are consumed in a different way, they get away from a campy definition. A good explanation for this is given in Hochdörfer's essay. He justifies this approach by writing "conceptually, his work is already 'true' Pop art *avant la lettre*; aesthetically, however, he remains indebted to Abstract Expressionism" (50). I would contend that it is this incorporation of abstract expressionist concepts in his art that makes his approach so different from that of Warhol's. Abstract expressionism was far from following the camp aesthetics, which led Oldenburg towards the pop movement. As a consequence, his work is stuck in a liminal state between the two movements.

O'Hara's relation to camp aesthetics is much more grounded and it influenced his work, but there is still a sense of nostalgia in certain poems that does not correlate with this countercultural movement, but feels closer to Sontag's "New Sensibility." In her words, "The new sensibility is definitely pluralistic; it is dedicated both to an excruciating seriousness and to fun and wit and nostalgia" (qtd. in Cotkin 185). In that sense, O'Hara blends both of Sontag's essays in his work, going as far as to have them greatly influence his poetics. Both concepts led to changing the artistic scene by going against the grain of capitalism and by enjoying a work of art without feeling a necessity to analyze it in depth. Critics such as Hazel Smith have argued that O'Hara criticism has mainly linked the poet to a campy style because of his homosexuality, but she argues that there is much more to it (107). Though camp was not, as Ross argued, strictly meant as a political act, it is now, more than ever, seen as one.<sup>52</sup> As Smith mentions, "camp works to destabilise sexual roles, and norms of gender identity," which informs O'Hara's open style in a time when the gay community was, as a majority, closeted (107). Smith adds,

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<sup>52</sup> Cotkin argues in the same vein noticing that Sontag's "tone harshened" towards the middle of the 1960s (196). While she presented Camp and the idea of a "New Sensibility" outside of the political realm, she invariably ended up talking about the governmental oppression and the constantly growing social inequalities.

“O’Hara’s gay sexuality overlaps, then, with the carnivalesque, the campy, the humorous, the linguistically inventive, the deconstructive, and the ethically subversive in his work” (126). Then, the new sensibility brings a sort of stability to O’Hara’s body of work, adding an important nostalgic and anti-materialistic gloss to it.

In a sense, O’Hara was much more political regarding his sexuality than he was about consumerism, but he was doing this unwillingly. What I mean by this is that O’Hara was simply writing spontaneously, ensuring that his poetry would reflect his life and his sexuality, hence echoing openly his gay identity and less evidently his mixed opinion regarding the rise of mass consumption. For example, in “Vincent and I Inaugurate a Movie Theatre,” (1961) “Poem (Although I’m a half hour)” (1950-1) or “Poem (I live above a dyke bar and I’m happy),” (1957) O’Hara does not directly attack the foundations of a conservative society. Instead, he writes about his life, about events that constitute its mundane parts. It is by treating his homosexuality with the same triviality than a heterosexual would that O’Hara could be deemed political, especially as two of these poems were written in years of intense homophobia brought by McCarthyist practices. In that sense, spontaneity affects more directly the political content of the poems regarding homosexuality than it does for mass consumption because the lack of editing provokes the readers who were genuine conservatives.

Despite the importance of his gay sexuality attached by critics to camp and its effects on O’Hara’s poetry, his “I Do This, I Do That” poems can be analyzed as illuminating the importance of mundane objects in one’s life. Therefore, I would argue that instances of camp aesthetics in the New Yorker’s poems are much more than just concerned with his sexuality, but also in the objects and events that he describes. Smith supports this idea when she states, “The camp tendency to trivialise the serious, but at the same time to assume the significance of the



trivial, is central to O'Hara's poetry" (131). In this sense, O'Hara's desire to emphasize the importance of "pans" and of warm tea in the morning cannot only be perceived as a result of dissatisfaction with advertising and American economics in general, but also as a recuperation of camp ideologies. A relevant example of this is the desire to "buy a strap for my wristwatch" in "Personal Poem" (*CP* 335). What is the importance behind the inclusion of such a trivial passage? The answer is found in the lines immediately before and after it. Indeed, it is the fact that the hope of having "one person out of the 8,000,000 is / thinking of [him]" is left aside while he "shake[s] hands with LeRoi" and buy the strap to finally come back to "the thought possibly so." The act of buying the strap obliges O'Hara to stop thinking freely, it forces him into actions that he would not have normally have needed to perform if it was not for the unreliability of the watch. In other words, the simple task of buying a strap for a watch is usually forgotten because it is just another banal task added to one's routine. In fact, it hinders one to think and to move freely; one is instead forced into the realm of consumption. What seems to be a choice is not one, it is enforced upon someone and here, as a consequence, it breaks O'Hara's wish to know if someone is thinking about him. For a short period of time, he disappears in the world of consumerism to come back to his thought later on, nevertheless, in a happy mood. Therefore, camp here plays the role of demonstrating what is wrong with leaving aside one's trivial actions: it displays how these little acts of consumption are, in effect, those that make our lives not totally our own.

O'Hara's work is deeply inspired by his friendship with abstract expressionist painters, which impacts the effect of camp on his work as well due to the former's close relationship with content. Lehman is one critic who was deeply impressed by O'Hara's use of surface in his poetry. Indeed, he states that it "is so dazzling, with taste so fine and sensibility so rare and

appealing, that it comes a surprise to investigate and realize that there are depths of meaning in his offhanded poems that seem as disarmingly immediate and perishable as telephone calls” (1998:184). Blasing concurs when she adds: “The distinction between the surface and what hides behind it becomes untenable, for the surface is now a depth” (55). Perloff makes concrete link between poetry and painting through a reference to the abstract expressionist terms “push” and “pull.”<sup>53</sup> It is through the use of these terms that she believes that “[t]he *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 metaphors and symbols” (23). It is these surfaces that, through the “push” and “pull,” help create a certain depth that expresses the painter’s or the poet’s own environment (23). Also, Perloff quotes Hoffman’s essay to situate the role of objects and how the “push” and “pull” on these objects create the depth of the art piece or the poem (22).

The best example of “push” and “pull” in O’Hara can be found in his characteristic “floating modifiers” (56). These modifiers are ambiguous because they create “word groups that point two ways” (57). For example, Perloff gives a passage from “Morning:” “I think of it on grey / mornings with death / / in my mouth the tea / is never hot enough” (CP 30). This technique is characteristic to O’Hara’s poetry and a good example of how the poem leads the reader from one interpretation, death in the mouth, to another, tea in the mouth, and finally to wonder if, in fact, it is just the disappointing tea that renders the grey mornings even more unbearably morose. By using techniques that were meant for the medium of painting, O’Hara

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<sup>53</sup> Push and pull is accredited to Hans Hofmann. Perl defines it as “an idea about the creation of space on a two-dimensional surface through the manipulation of tensions between form and form or color and color” (24). He adds that “For Hofmann, push-and-pull was a dream of what a life could be, a dream simultaneously rooted in the dynamic relationship between one form and another, and in the dynamic relationship between a person and an environment” (24). This particular definition ties in with O’Hara who tries to make sense of the commodities that constitute his material everyday.

pushes the boundaries of artistic experiences. In that sense, when Perloff mentions Hartigan's theory that "painter and poet would often use the same image as a starting point," I think that it is incomplete and that, in O'Hara's case, the painter and poet come to have the same aesthetics (Perloff 77). It is by using these techniques that O'Hara renders a more realistic surface to his poetry and that he creates new ways of making the everyday noticeable. Furthermore, by looking at the poems from different perspectives, they affect the reader like an art piece would on its viewers. This aspect makes O'Hara's poetry more than mere words, it becomes an amalgam of phrases that are slightly abstract from one another and that needs to be contextualized in different ways to be fully understood.

It is through his metaphors, often created by the "floating modifiers," that O'Hara reflects, at times, nostalgia that abides to camp aesthetic and that raises political issues. In "Morning," when O'Hara links death to the disappointment brought by the cold tea, it can both reflect the ludicrousness of the situation and also entail a message against advertising. On the one hand, the hyperbolic idea of death created by a disappointing beverage creates an amusing comparison that the reader might perceive as an exaggeration that could easily be compared to the size of Oldenburg's objects. On the other hand, the distress engendered by the tea can be linked to the expectations created by an advertising campaign that could have led O'Hara to buy the tea and to expect that its consumption would lead him to be happier.<sup>54</sup> The tea then breaks from the everyday, it breaks the quotidian happiness of having tea with a cigarette and, in this case, with writing poetry. The tea's inability to be "hot enough" breaks the possibility of a

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<sup>54</sup> Lefebvre considers the effects of advertisement on consumption in *Volume II*. The French philosopher writes: "Let us note that the apparently clear concept of satisfaction and of the fulfilment of a need — the need for *this* or for *that* — is in reality very obscure. Being in its entirety feels the pressures of need, whether it be satisfied or not" (300). Lefebvre here can be used to clarify O'Hara's distress. It is this "obscurity" in which O'Hara finds himself vis-à-vis his tea. Why did it not fulfill his need? Did he really need it to make his quotidian perfect? This feeling of death correlates with Lefebvre's theory of "pressures of need." By that I mean that a warm, satisfying tea is required for a perfect morning, that the narrator feels a certain pressure to find the perfect infusion for his daily writing activity. Failing to do so would result in cases like the one described in "Morning."

perfect morning and demonstrate that one cannot afford to be naïve when confronted with advertising. In a sense, it defies the validity of advertising because it does not mirror the truth-value that it is selling. The poem's dramatization of the situation recalls, in a way, a parody of an advert, where the disappointment is reflected in the actor's surroundings—the weather outside, his face, the cleanliness of the kitchen, etc.—hence only inspiring O'Hara with hyperbolically negative imagery.

Both Oldenburg and O'Hara play on the expectations anchored in advertising and Keynesian economics. They point them out in ways that seem mildly humorous while, in fact, they reflect a profound dissatisfaction with the economic system. The best explanation for this comes from Shannon when he writes on Oldenburg's *The Street*, "The work responded to the growth of an ordered, negotiable, and legible system of exchange, which seemed more and more to be trumping the world of material particularities" (27). This passage entails Oldenburg's desire to show, through unrealistic blown-up objects, the falsity of the economic system. In other words, by creating a fake shop with modified commodities, Oldenburg is challenging the economic portrayal of these objects; he is pushing the limits of materiality in the city (24). Oldenburg's inflated hamburgers and popsicles illuminate O'Hara's dramatization of the disappointment prompted by the lukewarm tea. Indeed, these objects are clearly perceived ludicrously by the crowd when they look at them for the first time, but upon further looking around, the omnipresence of these objects can be overwhelming. This leads them to question their presence and their meaning. The viewers come to the understanding that for them to appreciate fully such seemingly banal commodities, they have to be blown-up and torn from the mould of their respective simulacra. Likewise, O'Hara links the banal act of drinking cold tea with death, which at first strikes the reader as being merely humorous, but can, after further

consideration, be seen as a critique of the expectations encouraged by equally dramatized advertising media. Through their different techniques, it is the use of hyperbolic qua campy imagery that links both artists in their discontent over the rise of consumerism in the United States.

Ultimately, O'Hara and Oldenburg's works are linked through their desire to depict the commodification of everyday life. Despite practicing drastically different artistic genres, they share a similar objective, that of rendering to the banal extraordinary qualities. It is these metaphorical capacities that make frying pans and bathtubs carriers of important political messages. Nevertheless, these objects do not play the same role in each artist's work. While in Oldenburg's one-man-shows the swollen objects play a central role, objects are scattered all over O'Hara's poetry and seem only peripheral to its meaning. In other words, O'Hara's readers must look at the objects not as connected, but as separate entities, and this marks the poem quite differently from the amalgamating objects in Oldenburg's *The Street*. These different techniques can be another example of why O'Hara's work is deemed protopolitical while Oldenburg is clearly politically engaged; he wants to shock. O'Hara observes and lets the audience do the rest; he lets them decide if the objects and the various quotidian actions are what they want a society to be or if they are instead breaking away from traditions. Oldenburg imposes his point of view on his audience to ensure that they have a full understanding of what he is trying to do. He includes them in his performances; they become a part of the alternative consumerist society he creates through shows like *The Street* or *The Store*.

There are no doubts that O'Hara and Oldenburg's aesthetics greatly diverge, but, through their desire to portray what society is and is becoming, they correlate relevantly. Commodities are both central to their styles and it is through their multifaceted qualities that both artists can

send their respective message efficiently. These various objects are characterized by their ordinariness, their campiness and their disinterest for fame. In that sense, Andy Warhol's commodification of famous objects and pop stars, like Campbell's Soup cans or Marilyn Monroe, are intriguing his audience because of their popularity and this notion reflects Warhol's fame. On the other hand, O'Hara and Oldenburg prefer to depict toilets, popsicles or watchstraps to keep their status as artists as "low key" as possible, concentrating their effort on constantly transforming their work instead of their public figure.

O'Hara's popularity cannot be denied and Oldenburg's either, but it is their desire to be just the observer, in Oldenburg's case, or, in O'Hara's case, the flâneur that kept them grounded. Both were, in a sense, removing the artist's name from the work by being so deep in it to the point of disappearing. In other words, their involvement is so essential that the reader or the viewer does not recognize the artist, he sees him as another character or performer. In O'Hara's case, he was able to be "in" [his] poems without overwhelming them and rendering them 'confessional'" (79). In this regard, he was able to be an essential part of the poetry without making it all about him and his specific actions; he was just another part of the work. It is this desire to become an object like any other found in their work that make both artists so invested in their desire to tackle consumerism and the state of society.

While Warhol wanted to become a machine,<sup>55</sup> O'Hara and Oldenburg preferred to become commodities to be consumed by their readership or viewership. By doing so, both artists turned consumerism into a positive occupation. Oldenburg created an atmosphere where

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<sup>55</sup> De Duve believes that "What Warhol fulfilled is the historical necessity for the painter to want to be a machine" (12). It was his way of becoming a commodity like any other, to be a part of the proletariat, being created by it. Warhol is criticizing the economic and socio-political state of the United States in the 1960s, but he is doing it through his own body, outside of his work. This technique diverges greatly from either O'Hara's or Oldenburg's and that is why I have preferred to use Warhol's ideologies only in certain cases where his ideas correlated with both artists.

everyone is equal, where they can enjoy commodities in the same way without economic discrimination. Commodities were consumable on the spot, with one's eyes instead of one's money. For his part, O'Hara rendered homosexuality and quotidian life accessible, giving them the attention that they rightfully deserved. He did not necessarily commodify himself, but more what he stood for, what he cherished and what he believed deserved more attention. The three artists were looking at the past and everyday life not as trivial elements that needed to be replaced, but, instead, prized and lived them for as long as possible.

#### **4. American and Russian Poetics**

I have thus far argued that O'Hara's poetics are greatly, and evidently, influenced by various painting movements of the post-war era—especially in both the content and structure of his ekphrastic poems—and, more subtly, by the rhetoric of philosophers and sociologists like Lefebvre. But it is essential to look at the works of other poets of the twentieth century from both pre and post World War II and how they have influenced him individually, and collectively, to fully fledge the New Yorker's best poems. While O'Hara was well-read, in part due to his years at Harvard, and liked to discuss various movements with friends and colleagues, I will focus on three specific models that both influenced and changed O'Hara's view on poetry: the American Modernists, the Russian Futurists, and Russian Formalists. Indeed, it is their distinct perspectives on banal objects that will be analyzed as the meeting ground of these movements. While they all perceive it in a different, albeit connected, way, O'Hara is the unifying force that binds them into a new poetics.

It is through the inspiration triggered by reading these poets that O'Hara creates his own style by not only blending theirs, but also their common rejection of material obsolescence and the recuperation of commonalities. I will argue that the works of Charles Olson, William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens have greatly influenced O'Hara's style, especially through their respective formulations of their (post)modernist aesthetics. In the same vein, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Viktor Shklovsky's work as Russian Futurist and Formalist, respectively, was a constant source of inspiration for O'Hara, who even introduced the former's poetry to friends such as Allen Ginsberg (Gooch 318). Despite the fact that these artists did not write during the same period, they all correlate to O'Hara through the close attention they paid to objects and their indispensable role in written art, especially in poetry, and, it could be said, prose poetry. I



will first look at the three different poetic inspirations and then present examples of how they can be seen as coming together in a single poem. It is by combining these various ethos that one can come to an understanding of O'Hara's poetic roots and how they influenced his intricate relationship with everyday life and the mundane objects attached to it.<sup>56</sup>

#### **4.1 American Poetry**

Despite the thirty-year gap between Olson and Williams's writing of "Projective Verse" and *Spring and All*, their status as modernists enabled their ideas to connect, especially in their cultural and political anxieties. In Belgrad's words, "Williams and Olson sought to develop an oppositional voice in a cultural climate defined by the academicism of Eliot on the one hand by the profusion of advertising and mass culture on the other" (31). While Olson believed that the artist had to work with the plasticity of society (121) and that to see people as objects was positive for art (127), Williams sought a readership that would enjoy breaking the "banal surfaces" to gain a favourable experience from his work (Cappucci 28). In that sense, both poets were writing in a homogeneous, accessible way that demanded their audience to do most of the work without giving them clear guidelines on how to do it. While Eliot wrote dense, measured and structurally sound poetry that left indications and references for the highly educated reader, Olson and Williams preferred "The work [to be] in the realm of imagination," "the search of the poet for his language, his own language" or even "poetry as the means by which to construct what Whitehead would call 'a common world' in which particular differences *among* objects are sustained *by* the relationality of their being in common" (Williams 2011:22, 1995:xiv & Brown).

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<sup>56</sup> Another movement that may appear to be missing from my research would undoubtedly be French Symbolism. It is true that the likes of Rimbaud, Mallarmé and Verlaine do play a major role in O'Hara's poetry and have greatly influenced his style, but they do so in a less materialistic way than the American Modernists and the Russian Futurists and Formalists. Their influence is particularly present in poems such as "12 Pastorals" or in "Blocks," but it is either more concerned with his ambiguous relationship with the natural world or with a funnier playfulness of language (*CP* 5, 108). Though they are intrinsic to O'Hara's poetry, they do not correlate as much with the protopolitical message that I am striving to fledge here.

They detached themselves from Eliot's "tradition" to orbit around a poetic closer to Pound's "make it new."<sup>57</sup> For example, Williams's famous short poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" is as banal as Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," but they are both indubitable masterpieces because they transcend their meaning through simplicity; they leave lengthy descriptions aside to let a multiplicity of interpretations control meaning. Similarly, Olson's belief that "A PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION" does not leave space for wordiness (Olson 240). Consequently, both artists' poetry is seemingly raw and direct on the page, but in fact is immensely developed in its psychological analysis.

In a poem like "A Letter to Bunny," Williams's influence transpires through the poets shared descriptions of imitated objects and the absence of meaning that can be attached to them. The main equivalent to this poem in Williams's arguably most influential collection, *Spring and All* is "XII." In it, Williams discusses "imitation leather" and stars made out of cardboard "with a tin edge" (2011:54-55). These ersatz products are matched by the fields of blue flowers that O'Hara encountered in Cambridge while on vacation with V.R. Lang (Gooch 162). These fields were "all blue, all / innocent. The artificial is always innocent / They looked hand-made, fast-dyed, paper" (CP 23). Reinforcing the abnormal natural settings are the many enjambments found in both poems. These create a sense of dislocation. While O'Hara's stanzas feature lines of seven or more syllables, Williams goes for four or five syllables, usually including only a phrase or a clause per each line. For instance, O'Hara breaks a line on "tiny mirrors where / the object is lost" optimizing the effect of the line-break by separating the location, "where," from the sought

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<sup>57</sup> While they were at Black Mountain College, Olson and fellow teacher Robert Creeley, arguably detached from the generally conservative pedagogical approaches found in other American institutions to focus instead on fostering individual talents in a new, non-Eliotian way, by creating an importantly heterogeneous community. By reshuffling the academic cards, Olson and his colleagues have revolutionized ways of approaching art and doing so in a more collaborative, unlimited fashion, paving the way for artistic and socially active figures such as Allen Ginsberg and John Cage.

for object. Williams's staccato rhythm is more crucial than O'Hara's as it puts greater emphasis on the phoniness of these objects.

Ultimately, what separates the two modernists is their perspective on how to "make it new," especially in terms of how they want to phrase sentences and in their playfulness with language. This is well explained by Stephen Paul Miller when he posits, "O'Hara works in the tradition of Williams, but goes further in that he resists measuring language as a substance detachable from communication" (177). In other words, whereas Williams's *Spring and All* can hardly be described as a collection of poems, but more as a lengthy mélange of prosaic and poetic manifesto, O'Hara's "A Letter to Bunny," written in an epistolary form, bemoans the lack of tangibility of certain events, especially the unreality of the blue fields. Epstein argues that "O'Hara is taking up the vernacular idiom of one of his chief models, William Carlos Williams, he intentionally revises or tropes Williams's famous dictum. 'When the doctor comes to / me he says 'No things but in ideas,' O'Hara writes, rather than 'no ideas but in things'" (105). Here lies the crucial difference between the poetics of the two poets: one strives to establish a better poetic world through the objects that he sees around him, while the other creates from the sheer power of mental spontaneity regardless of where it might lead him.

In a sense, this difference reinforces the resemblance between the two by giving a wider range of subjectification to ordinary objects. The difference here resides, again, in the way the writers are personally active in the forcefulness of their message. Williams's message is aimed at a larger audience here,

Things with which he [the writer] is familiar, simple things-at the same time to detach them from ordinary experience to the imagination. Thus they are still "real" they are the same things they would be if photographed or painted by

Monet, they are recognizable as the things touched by the hands during the day, but in this painting they are seen to be in some peculiar way-detached. (2011:34)

The reader senses Williams's desire to render poetry as tangible as a painting and to give objects another realm in which they can be consumed and be rediscovered. The writer's imagination thus can refresh one's perspective on banalities, he can "make them new again." He is fighting against the obsolescence that he could have encountered otherwise with the fast rise of mass consumption that was already brewing in Williams's best years. His intent is certainly to revive a purposeful poetic movement and enhance the role it could play in the future on the American artistic scene. In this particular instance, fake clothing material is as damaging as the sky's astral components. The poet's comments are forceful, hyperbolic and leave the audience slightly confused, but nevertheless force them to rethink their perspective on their surroundings, be it in their wardrobe or in mysterious spatial satellites.

O'Hara, though, through the epistolary format of his poem, shares his similarly groundbreaking ideas primarily with a friend and, then, reluctantly, with his audience. This sentiment is well represented by his fear that "when anyone reads this but you it begins / to be lost. My voice is sucked into a thousand / ears and I don't know whether I'm weakened" (23). This anxiety demonstrates O'Hara's desire to share tangible ideas with his audience, hoping they would be able to grasp them despite the lack of context or without ever having been in Cambridge on a summer day. Through this poem, O'Hara is asking how much of an influence memories can have on other people and how a personal idea can influence another's perspective on banal objects. His constant search for meaning and how the flowers' blue tint can influence their connotations reinvigorate his angst. It is also important to consider that "A Letter to Bunny" is one of O'Hara's earliest poems, written in 1950. Despite the strong influence of poets like

Williams, he was still looking for his own poetics and such a personal, yet theoretical, poem serves as a great debut to identify the influence of American Modernism on the constitution of his poetics.

His poetics rapidly become more concrete, developing spontaneous aspects, especially in poems like “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday,” which start with “Quick!.” In this poem, Olson’s influence on the New York School poet is showcased, especially in the relationship they entertain with the role of the past on their poetics. In fact, “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday” relates to one of Olson’s most famous statements, that of the need for perceptions to follow one another in the quickest succession possible (240). Olson explains that it even contains “our management of daily reality as of the daily work,” which relates relevantly to O’Hara’s style on many occasions, especially in this particular poem, emphasized by the imperative “Quick!” as the very first utterance of the poem (240, *CP* 159).<sup>58</sup> In O’Hara’s case, though, the spontaneous chain of thoughts is there to evade one of his most feared enemies: boredom.<sup>59</sup>

Here, it is by using Rachmaninoff’s music as an artistic inspiration that O’Hara can escape going “off [his] rocker.” As Perloff puts it, “To be ‘influenced’ by another artist, then, is to find new means to evading monotony, boredom, sameness-to force oneself to ‘see’ in new ways, to *defamiliarize* the object” (22). In that sense, the musical perception leads to its poetic equivalent. The defamiliarized object here is not restricted to the poem, but also includes a

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<sup>58</sup> Another poem worth a look at would be “Mozart Chemisier” (*CP* 428). Just like in “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday” where O’Hara begins with “Quick!,” he leads his audience straight into the thick of things by beginning with “For instance.” The poems are fairly similar content-wise, as they both present a confusing succession of narrative that does not lead to a definitive conclusion. The shift in perceptions would also be interesting to develop further.

<sup>59</sup> When Belgrad defines the specific type of spontaneous activity found in the 1940s and 1950s, he argues that it adds to its, until then, narrow definition. While the dictionary presents it as an “impulsive, unconstrained and unpremeditated behavior,” he prefers to see the artistic movement of this epoch as practicing “spontaneity with a purpose” (222). Olson’s purpose is entirely theoretical, he hopes to use this energetic field to a greater poetic purpose whereas O’Hara recuperates the anxieties of a boring ordinary morning in artistic form to evade the boredom attached to it. In other words, he personifies boredom to make it useful instead of frightening.

cornucopia from O'Hara's youth. In fact, there are two trains of thought in this poem that are constantly overlapping: the musical and the unrestrained nostalgic thoughts. Though they may seem to be on entirely different tracks, they both refer to O'Hara's past, one that he still cherishes through the music of those he admires, and the other from youthful events that he would most probably prefer to forget. Having studied music at the New England Conservatory, O'Hara is more than able to blend poetry and music in his poem.<sup>60</sup> For example, he uses technical terms such as "pizzicato" or more common instruments like the horn and he links them with what seems to be food from his kitchen like "fig-newton" or "palace of oranges." The poem dances between a cacophony of brass instruments and material flashes from his youth. The "rhinestone, yoyo, carpenter's pencil / amethyst, hypo, campaign button" obstruct his musical thoughts leading to a frenetic, nonsensical rhythm ultimately resulting in the burning of soup. The mixture of shiny gems, toys and ordinary work objects corresponds to the ebb and flow of a traumatic childhood without any particular salient event worth remembering. These objects, which O'Hara would prefer to forget, lead to the soup's inedible state, making the past and the present correlate in their uselessness. This plays on the role O'Hara assigns to objects and how they can stay effective despite their apparent obsolescence.

The relationship between music and past commodities can also be correlated to Williams's own assertions in *Spring and All*. Though Williams may not have shared O'Hara's expertise, he still theorizes an important point quite relevant to the present poem:

According to my present theme the writer of imagination would attain closest to the conditions of music not when his words are disassociated from natural objects and specified meanings but when they are liberated from the usual quality of that

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<sup>60</sup> For a thorough look at O'Hara's complete musical background, refer to Gooch from page 55 to 58. Interestingly enough for this particular poem, Gooch mentions a passage from O'Hara's "Autobiographical Fragments" in which he notes that he hopes to be as great a pianist as Rachmaninoff (56).

meaning by transposition into another medium, the imagination. (2011:92)

While Williams is referring to poetry's lyricism much more than to music per se, the idea is still pertinent in this context. The American Modernist is refuting Russian Futurists' desire to break from ordinary language and strive to "enlarge the *scope* of the poet's vocabulary with arbitrary and derivative words" ("A Slap in the Face of Public Taste" 179). Instead, Williams proposes that to obtain a certain musicality, the objects need to become tangible in the realm of imagination. A perfect example of this would certainly be his "The Red Wheelbarrow" in which the audience rapidly comes to feel the importance of the three elements contained in the poem—the chicken the wheelbarrow and the rain—and to understand through them the simplest of American pastorals.<sup>61</sup>

In "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday," O'Hara cannot access this lyricism through relics from his own pastoral background; it only leads into a cacophony of sounds and a heteroclitite assemblage of words.<sup>62</sup> The limitations engendered on O'Hara's imaginary capacities by these memories have repercussions both in the past and in the present, ultimately leading him to conclude: "You'll never be mentally sober." Rachmaninoff's concerto is thus ruined by the memories instead of leading O'Hara to new poetic inspiration. Commodities from his past are thus perceived as still tangible, proving that O'Hara not only advocates for banal commodities' longer lives, but also repudiates the negative effects they may have on his artistic capacities. While he would like to honour the great pianist's birthday, he is instead forced into

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<sup>61</sup> Another poem that relates, though in a different way, to this passage from *Spring and All* is "As Planned" (CP 382). In this particular poem, O'Hara tries to understand the possible meaning hidden behind words trying to go further than the mere signifier. There is some sort of commodity fetishism at work here hoping to unearth the reason why "a box / of matches is purple and brown and is called / La Petite and comes from Sweden." By doing so, O'Hara seeks to understand in a more tangible way the processes leading to this single matchbox. For once, instead of playing with the words, the poet tries to understand how the words are played with.

<sup>62</sup> Though my argument does not go in that direction, it would be interesting to analyze how Rachmaninoff's unique style correlates with the particular pace and changes in this poem. The Russian musician was renowned for his large hands and his ability to reach more than one octave at a time leading to sounds that may not be played by pianists with smaller hands.

reminiscences that he would prefer to leave behind to fully concentrate on newer objects, like the fig-newton, on which he can build a stronger and more positive future.

Wallace Stevens's influence on O'Hara's oeuvre is undeniable despite the ambiguous role it may appear to play in the poems themselves in comparison with the previous two poets. The most evident link between the two American poets can be found in their ekphrastic works. I would like to focus mainly on Stevens's essay "The Relations between Poetry and Painting" and O'Hara's poem "Early Mondrian."<sup>63</sup> In his essay, Stevens ties the two artistic media together stating that:

The paramount relation between poetry and painting today, between modern man and modern art is simply this: that in an age in which disbelief is so profoundly prevalent or, if not disbelief, indifference to question of belief, poetry and painting, and the arts in general, are, in their measure, a compensation for what has been lost. (170-1)

This postmodernist argument *avant la lettre* is well represented in both poets' work, but in quite distinguishable ways. For Stevens, this argument is well embodied in poems such as "Study of Two Pears" and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," which both exhaust the meaning of their subject by writing extensively about their ordinariness and by looking at them from every possible angle, even those that do not bring anything meaningful to it. These nearly three-dimensional looks at either an ordinary animal or a common British fruit help to recreate a full

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<sup>63</sup> It is still unclear whether O'Hara or Stevens published their respective work first. Donald Allen estimates that it was written in 1950 or 1951, and later published in 1952 in *A City Winter, and Other Poems*. As for Stevens's essay, it seems certain that the essay was written by the end of 1951 as he presented it that year at the Metropolitan Museum.



portrait that could only be optimized by a painting. When found in a poetic form, they are brimming over with information that, at first glance, is not needed by the audience.<sup>64</sup>

In O'Hara's corresponding poem, "Early Mondrian," the visual aspects of the poem play a large part in creating a connection with the other artistic medium that he admired so much. The two gaps separating the stanzas also form enjambments, first between "the black draped sea / of the Lowlands" and "becoming / spindrift and ambergris, / the sea is beautiful" (CP 37-8). In both cases, the sea is separated from its adjective creating a gap reminiscent of the sea itself.<sup>65</sup> The poem recreates the painting on the page, blending both media together and reconstructing a sense of truth à la Stevens. O'Hara is much more verbose about it though, taking the time to narrate the story behind the painting, looking at every brush stroke as a sentence that deserves to be as pretty as the colour itself. This creates a sort of second life for the painting, making it livelier and, to a certain extent, more accessible to people who do not necessarily understand art as much as O'Hara does. His relation to truth in the connection between poetry and painting is much more complicated than Stevens's descriptions of pears and birds.<sup>66</sup> Instead of painting through the words like his elder, O'Hara prefers to deconstruct the painting and then replace the strokes one

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<sup>64</sup> To a certain extent, this can be linked to Baudrillard's hyperreality. When the French post-structuralist theorized this now acknowledged term in his magnum opus *Simulacra and Simulation*, Stevens had already come up with his own poetic equivalent thirty years earlier. There are shades of Stevens's claim in Baudrillard's words when, for example, he claims that "every society looks for in continuing to produce, and to over-produce, is to restore the real that escapes it. That is why *today this 'material' production is that of the hyperreal itself*" (23). In both poems mentioned above, Stevens does exactly in a poetic form what the industrial enterprises were chasing, the truth, but for quite nobler reasons. Indeed, Stevens strived to re-establish meaning in the natural world and in that of the everyday whereas the enterprises sought to recuperate the consumers' trust in their products despite their ever growing rapid obsolescence.

<sup>65</sup> A similar instances occurs in "Sudden Snow" (CP 354) where the "sea" space in between stanza is here replaced by "snow / avenue," but with a similar effect. In fact, O'Hara is much more playful with the structure of this particular poem with stanzas of different shapes amplifying the general playfulness of the poem.

<sup>66</sup> Phillips proposes another possible explanation in the difference in approaches here when she asserts that "O'Hara's attention to Stevens at Harvard relished the aestheticism of Stevens' wordplay, in particular, rather than the older poet's treatment of quotidian life" (95). I believe that this rejection argues for a difference approach to ekphrastic poetics and aims at pushing its boundaries further than what Stevens experienced before 1940.

by one by means of visual additions of his own to emphasize the importance of the sea in the painting.<sup>67</sup>

O'Hara's position would be closer to Stevens's earlier in the essay when he asserts that "the power of poetry, leaves its mark on whatever it touches. The mark of poetry creates the resemblance of poetry as between the most disparate things and unites them all in its recognizable virtue" (170). This correlates well with O'Hara's claim in his "Statement for *The New American Poetry*" that "poetry brings forth the intangible quality of incidents which are all too concrete and circumstantial. Or each on specific occasions, or both all the time" (CP 500). In "Early Mondrian," these two statements are interlinked. In other words, it is by rendering the painting more tangible and by making it truer that poetry has a unique perspective on retelling the creation of a painting. This aspect is much stronger in O'Hara's poetry than in Stevens who merely relates and does not depict what he sees.<sup>68</sup> While in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" Stevens relates metaphorically the different actions of blackbirds, in "Early Mondrian" O'Hara reinvents the painting giving it another, fresher meaning by only describing what he is looking at.

In that way, the visual consumption of the painting triggers a written response thus resulting in a truer reproduction of the product instead of simply consuming it. This, I contend, mirrors another of Stevens's arguments in "The Relations between Poetry and Painting," leading to the idea of artistic consumption not as a monetary transaction, but instead as a literary one.

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<sup>67</sup> Shaw goes in a different direction when he writes that O'Hara's ekphrastic poems are in fact "experimental modes of *criticism* in which proliferating discursive registers operate as possible locations for imagining the effects and implications of painterly gesture" (2001:145). Though I cannot vouch for Shaw's inclusion of "Early Mondrian" in this category, I would argue that this achieves more than just a new form of artistic criticism, but that it instead reinforces the power of the painting and brings it another life form that would not be achieved simply through a critical prose piece or as a more subtly critical poetic piece like "At Joan's" (CP 327).

<sup>68</sup> O'Hara is far from being the first poet that practice an ekphrastic style, though I would contend that his practice may differ from previous poets and that his desires to write about paintings are quite different from others'. The close relationship with consumption is invariably at stake here and it is probably an idea that starts in Stevens's time and that caught up with O'Hara.

Indeed, when Stevens suggests that poetry and painting “have in common a laborious element, which, when it is exercised is not only a labor but a consummation as well,” it implies that when these two art forms interact, they do not end up in a single product, but instead result into two pieces, similar in content, albeit different in medium (165). They express the infinite possibilities of art that go further than mere monetary or visual appreciation. By this I want to express the idea that Mondrian’s painting, which must have been accessible to the viewer at the museum, can be appreciated much more than through the amount of money—an entrance fee—that has been spent in exchange for a quick glance at it or for a longer analysis of the piece. It is by reinventing it through a poem, by writing the visual, that O’Hara recuperates the art piece and recreates its colours in adjectives and its strokes through verbs hoping to do it justice. By then publishing this piece, O’Hara is reinvesting his consumption with the readers who have now access to the painting by reading this poem.<sup>69</sup> This, in my opinion, is what Baudrillard deplors through the hyperreal and that Stevens hopes to regain through this artistic intermingling.

Despite the protopolitical aspects of O’Hara’s poetry, certain poems do attack the conventions more strongly and blatantly than others. For example, in “October,” O’Hara hints at both Williams’s *Spring and All* and at Stevens’s “The Plain Sense of Things” to stress the lack of unity that can be attached to the new, growing, consumerist American society. This poem presents O’Hara at his most serious after being beaten up during a party at his and Joe LeSueur’s apartment (Gooch 196). He is clearly shaken up by the physical and mental scars left by his

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<sup>69</sup> One could argue, and would not be in the wrong, that the audience needs to pay to read O’Hara’s poem. This is, of course, true, though does not express O’Hara’s main desire. In fact, many poems written by O’Hara were found after his death lying under his bed, in various drawers and sometimes only in letters sent to friends (*CP* vii). The poet would also need to be forced to publish the poems, as he was never looking forward to putting them together, he wrote them for their own sake and showed them to friends. Personally, I see O’Hara as a poet who wrote for the sake of writing for his own pleasure, and the money won from publishing his poetry was the last thing on his mind. My argument here simply aims at showing the road taken by the commodity from the painting to the poem itself; to bring a relatively exclusive commodity to the masses. This could even be linked to Hardt and Negri’s argument “that the relation between capital and consumers is no longer mediated by things but by information, images, messaging and the proliferation and marketing of symbolic forms ...” (Harvey 2014:237).

assailant. From the onset, O'Hara refers to Williams's most anthologized poem, "The Red Wheelbarrow:" "Summer is over, / that moment of blindness / in a sunny wheelbarrow / aching on sand dunes" (CP 109). These are the first four lines of the poem and they disregard immediately the role of the wheelbarrow as a quintessential cultural icon of modern America. The clearly defined colours of the American flag—the white chicken, the red wheelbarrow and the blue tinted rain—are replaced by blindness and brown sand dunes. This rebuttal foreshadows the ending of the poem where O'Hara critiques the political priorities of the country preferring to deal with international economic wars instead of settling domestic problems. The sand dunes are also an obvious reminder of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Hence O'Hara portrays the two main schools of modernist American poetics as clashing.

This strong political message schools is strengthened in the second stanza, by the wintry imagery that can be likened to Stevens's own frugal description of the coldest season of the year.<sup>70</sup> In "The Plain Sense of Things," Stevens rues the end of autumn as the upcoming freeze leads to "an end of the imagination" (Lehman 2006:269). As the cold weather settles in, the adjectives are frozen and cannot be developed as freely as in the fast-flowing summer or in burgeoning spring. Similarly, O'Hara is trapped in "[r]estful boredom," "winter's cold" and in "time's rough passage." Here, for once, the tables are turned, as it is O'Hara who is engagé, seeking changes to the homophobic ethos surrounding him, except maybe in the more liberal Greenwich Village.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> O'Hara's poem is slightly contradictory. While it is named after the tenth month of the year, the thematic of the poem would fit better with colder months. This leads me to believe that while O'Hara is physically stuck in October, his mind has already accelerated into the upcoming winter.

<sup>71</sup> For a more detailed perspective of the gay artistic scene, see "Prelude to the Stonewall Uprising" in John Strausbaugh's excellent *The Village* and for earlier historical context see George Chauncey's *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* and Jonathan Katz's *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.: A Documentary*.

Through one of his most important commodities, his glasses, O'Hara personifies the broken state of New York City, not to mention the United States. In the concluding stanza, the poet, in one of his most violent instances, relates:

... My glasses  
are broken on the coffee table.  
  
And at night a truce  
with Iran or Korea seem certain  
while I am beaten to death  
by a thug in a back bedroom. (110)

While the very ending of the poem is highly troubling and depicts the strong homophobia in the 1950s resulting from Joseph McCarthy's politics of fear, I want to focus on the role of the glasses in this particular stanza and the effect it has on the whole poem. The brokenness of the glasses leaves O'Hara short sighted thus explaining or punning on the reference to the "moment of blindness" earlier in the poem. Without his sight, O'Hara must trust his other senses to understand his surroundings and what is happening, hence focusing on things that he would not normally. In other words, most of his "I Do This, I Do That" poems rely on his great observational skills, but now that they have been hindered, he must focus on hearing and feeling, thus explaining the emphasis on the drastically cold month of October in the second stanza. In effect, as much as the beating represents a direct attack on gay rights, it also hurts another of his most important characteristics: his sight. While the violent scene occupies much of the stanza, he only needs one, fairly short, sentence to describe the broken glasses, nevertheless putting it to great purpose. Like in so many other poems he has written, the commodity only occupies a

minor space, but it carries as much meaning as the rest of the poem and defies the general rules of how much attention should be attributed to it.

#### **4.2 Russian Futurism and Formalism**

Russian Futurist Vladimir Mayakovsky greatly influenced O'Hara's work, leading him to dedicate poems to his name and even to write a poem entitled "Mayakovsky." But I will argue that his contemporary, the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky's theories can be perceived as equally relevant to his work, despite his prose-oriented arguments. Shklovsky's critical writings do not only reflect the Formalists' rhetoric, they also recuperate ideas from the Futurists, thus providing me with a more complete theoretical account to correlate with O'Hara's own prose poetry. For Russian Formalists, art must be differentiated from everyday life or what they refer to as 'Byt' (Steiner 48). Everyday life, in their opinion, "automatizes" life, making every single event unnoticeable and rendering ordinary objects invisible. In that sense, 'byt' prefers story—linear series of events that reflects reality—over plot—liberation of event from temporal contiguity (51). In other words, writing about the 'byt' is, in their opinion, "the law of the least effort," whereas real art reflected "the law of maximal effect" (50).

For Shklovsky, devices are essential as they make objects more than just material. It is this rhetoric that leads him to say "in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art" (1990:6). It is this desire to change art and to want it to write more meaningful words by attacking "the automatized forms of life" in the hope of making everyday life respectable again (Steiner 55). For the Russian writer, it is by understanding the disharmony of life that someone can recognize how it works on a daily basis (94). In his novel *Zoo, or Letters Not About Love*, Shklovsky tackles the exiles' problems of quotidian life and it is through its non-linearity, its incongruous metaphors, and its similes that

the author makes his audience aware of the problems and sadness attached to this particular lifestyle. If I were to put together the novel's synopsis, it would be fairly banal, even uninteresting, but through the attention that he gives to these mundane moments, Shklovsky makes it new, in a way that any form of a summary would not convincingly reflect his work. In his words, "A work has to be composed so that it turns into something unexpected and innovative" (2007:101).

It is this desire to challenge the perceptions of the reader that binds O'Hara and Shklovsky together. While Perloff sees the link mainly "by adapting the technique of film and action painting to a verbal medium," I also think that, by including multiple banal objects, O'Hara creates a tableau that challenges the reader's mind (121). One of the most relevant instances that correlates with Shklovsky can be found in "A Step Away From Them." Indeed, the poem closes with "My heart is in my / pocket. It is poems by Pierre Reverdy" (*CP* 257) which duplicates the meaning of Reverdy's poetry. In this instance, these two matter-of-fact sentences add to the effect; they give the impression that O'Hara's heart changes weekly, depending on what he is reading, and leaving in his breast pocket a constant connection between his heart and poetry. It is through short sentences and creating metaphors in unusual ways that O'Hara recuperates Shklovsky's style. Moreover, in a poem like "The Day Lady Died," it is the amalgamation of cigarettes and books that creates a critique of the way in which Billie Holiday had been treated by the public and that led to her eventual death. O'Hara's style is much more spontaneous and less patiently designed than Shklovsky here, as he crafts a collage of perceptions instead of a single one (Cappucci 79). While the Russian Formalists' theory is much more focused on defining the various bearings of art, Shklovsky goes deeper into the question of

devices and objects making him a more relatable figure to O'Hara's poetry than the other members of the movement.

The earliest poem that transcends ideologies from both Mayakovsky and Shklovsky is "Sneden's Landing Variations" written in 1953, right when O'Hara was obsessed with Mayakovsky's work (Gooch 238).<sup>72</sup> In the poem, references to the two Russian artists are clearly defined, but they are also different from one another. I will first look at Mayakovsky's more apparent influences. Gooch mentions an important statement from Mayakovsky's theoretical work in his rich biography of O'Hara's life: "The city must take the place of nature" (238). This is directly echoed in O'Hara's famous "Meditations in an Emergency," as was mentioned earlier for other, albeit similar, purposes, when stating "I / can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy" (CP 197). This declaration is greatly tested in "Sneden's Landing Variations" as the poet finds himself far from his beloved metropolis. For example, O'Hara adds the urban to the rural through descriptions such as "whitewashed air" or "trees like electricity." These instances serve as a sort of "anti-enstrangement" for O'Hara, opposing to Sher's translation of Shklovsky's *ostranit* a coined term to "'remov[e]' it from the network of conventional," but it still does result in confusion for his audience (Shklovsky xix). The poet's nostalgia for the urban settings reinvents the purpose of the natural world painting it in new, unorthodox ways. This is expressed earlier in the poem when he asks "All things are something else, aren't they?," an assertion that will also be essential to a better understanding of Shklovsky's possible influence.

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<sup>72</sup> One could argue that "Poem (If I knew exactly why the chestnut tree)" counts many instances of Shklovskian "enstrangement," but as the poem was written in 1951, it would be bold on my part to assume that O'Hara was already influenced by both Russian artistic rhetoric. The reference to a chestnut tree's "pyramids" or unusual comparisons to "a picnicker who has forgotten his lunch" do with the Russian Formalist's ethos, but these instances are far more scarce than what can be found in poems such as "Sneden's Landing Variations" or other poems published, let alone written, after the poet's obsession with the Russian Futurist in 1953.



By industrializing the smell of the air he breathes and by presenting trees not as filters of that air but as an essential urban resource, O'Hara creates an urban pastoral to evade nostalgia. As O'Hara does not have access to a similar cornucopia of everyday objects, he is now forced into transforming the natural landscape itself, transforming its purity into man-made utilities in the process. This uneasiness presents O'Hara as dependant on those relatively mundane and common urban odours and resources, but it demonstrates the lifestyle he is now used to and depends upon. While he advocates for the longer lifespan of everyday objects, O'Hara appears to contradict himself here by altering the natural settings as a result of the anxiety set by the more rudimentary vistas of the rural world. This explains in part why O'Hara remains a "protopolitical" figure: he cannot deny the importance of these urban settings and how they control and play a significant role in his day-to-day life to the detriment of natural, unaffected rural landscapes.<sup>73</sup>

Though Shklovsky does not appear to have influenced O'Hara directly—a good example of this would be his absence from Gooch's biography—the New Yorker's piqued interest for the Russian Futurists and desire to reassert the importance of common objects makes the Russians' work of great importance to a better understanding of O'Hara's own. As mentioned earlier, "All things are something else aren't they?" mirrors Shklovsky's general ethos even more than Mayakovsky's. In his arguably most important work, *Theory of Prose*, he asserts:

An artist always incites insurrections among things. Things are always in a state of revolt with poets, casting off their old names and adopting new names and new

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<sup>73</sup> Mayakovsky's relationship with the natural world was much more drastic in terms of its capacity in giving raw material to the industry. In other words, the natural world in "The Flying Proletarian," especially in the "Labour" section, advances that the industrial enterprises "make ... compressed / air" or "manufacture / from clouds / artificial sour cream / and milk" (2013:298). Mayakovsky's writing is always steeped into political propaganda and he did not shy away from it. While O'Hara merely compares, Mayakovsky transforms. Through this idea, it becomes easier to understand the gap found between a protopolitical poem and a political one.

faces. A poet employs images as figures of speech by comparing them with each other. For instance, he may call fire a red flower or he may attach a new epithet to an old word, ... [I]n this way he brings about a semantic shift. He wrests the concept from the semantic cluster in which it is embedded and reassigns it with the help of the word (figure of speech) to another semantic cluster. We, the readers, sense the presence of something new, the presence of an object in a new cluster. The new word envelops the object, as new clothes envelop a man. The sign has been taken down. This is one of the ways in which an object can be transformed into something sensuous, into something capable of becoming an artifact. (62)

Shklovsky's lengthy explication is balanced by O'Hara's single sentence. It also serves as an answer to why O'Hara tries to reinvent the feeling of air and the purposes of trees: he wants them to fit the urban "semantic cluster" even in rural spaces. Then, these comparisons do envelop him like clothes; they make him feel more at home.

O'Hara's poem also mirrors Shklovsky's most famous rhetoric, "to make the stone feel stony" (6).<sup>74</sup> "The air is calm as a pencil" is certainly the best example that can be found in the poem immediately "'enstranging' objects ... mak[ing] perception long and 'laborious'" (6). I would like to analyze this particular simile as a way of proving how the settings of Sneden's Landing render the poet's artistic inspiration impotent. O'Hara thrives on the cacophony of the American metropolis always seeking to make his audience understand that this cacophony is much of a symphony of heterogeneous sounds that construct the real identity of the Big Apple.

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<sup>74</sup> Marjorie Perloff came to the same conclusion, but she establishes the correlation with a statement made by the poet in "Statement for *The New American Poetry*." She also perceives that, like Shklovsky, O'Hara "defamiliarizes" objects by presenting them as if seen for the first time or by distorting their form" (19). Likewise, I will look at the effects of Shklovsky's theoretical framework on O'Hara's poetry in lesser-known poems to see how it also applies to O'Hara's day-to-day poems.

Now though, O'Hara is faced by the characteristic silence of the rural world with only the sound of wind, waves and the occasional car to inspire him. This silence is transferred to the pencil, O'Hara's main work tool, which is now busy scribbling word after word on a sheet leading to the characteristic, dim, but still audible sound of graphite on paper.<sup>75</sup>

Through this action, the pencil is elevated to a far higher level than a simple writing tool; it now gives a voice to its owner, a lyricism that one may not possess or transcend through the mouth.<sup>76</sup> This lyrical attribute is enhanced by the "poetic versions of musical forms" that O'Hara liked to play with and this particular poem fits the mould as it "uses five different kinds of rhymed stanzas" (Gooch 244). It is thus through estrangement that O'Hara can get rid of his rural anxieties. By realizing the quietness of the pencil and how it partly results in his boredom, it is by letting his poetic speech speak and manipulating it at the same time as a conductor's baton, that O'Hara can create a piece resembling himself despite the alienating effect engendered by the setting.<sup>77</sup> O'Hara's commodification of the natural world is much cleaner than industry's; he only does it in the written form, hence in an imaginary realm. Despite comparing trees to telegraph posts or to machines generating electricity, he only does so in his mind, not thinking seriously about changing the rural landscape for a more urban one or criticizing the industry at

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<sup>75</sup> The choice of the pencil over the typewriter is of interest as well. The more traditional pencil is much quieter than the constant clinging sound of every single letter typed in and the occasional pushing of the roll from right to left. Though O'Hara did write many of his poems on the go, at the restaurant, as in his famous *Lunch Poems*, or on the train, as in "Poem (Lana Turned has collapsed!," he still needed the typewriter for poems he would write at home either in the morning or during loud parties. Both of these tools were essential to the success of the spontaneous poet.

<sup>76</sup> O'Hara's free verse and prosaic style breaks from Shklovsky's theory presenting prose and poetry as dichotomies. Indeed, in his "Art as Device" chapter he presents "poetic speech [a]s *structured* speech" and "prose ... [a]s ordinary speech" (13). Here, O'Hara certainly sides with the Russian's definition of prose, but barely with his version of poetry; it is only through the stanzas that he is quite similar in this particular poem, though the line is even blurrier on other occasions where it is only Shklovsky's prose definition that fits. This raises the point that O'Hara's poetry can sometime go outside of the realm of the Russian poet, reaching a new poetics that he had not seen in his many years in Germany and in the Soviet Union.

<sup>77</sup> This partly concurs with Mayakovsky's theory that "the poet himself is the theme of his poetry" (qtd. in Gooch 238). Though O'Hara is "often 'in' [his] poems without overwhelming them and rendering them 'confessional,'" it is true that he sets his own style and preferences in this poem, making the natural landscape much more soothing to his taste, but it still fits, once again, with the Russian Futurist (Cappucci 79).

the same time à la Mayakovsky. In sum, O'Hara transforms the natural settings surrounding him in this particular poem to feel at home, to the detriment of enstranging his readership, but still leaving them with new metaphors and much to ponder over.<sup>78</sup>

Another poem that blends equally the impact of Mayakovsky and Shklovsky is "Katy" (*CP* 242). This lesser known poem is short, seven lines grouped into a single stanza, but makes the most of every single line rendering it one of O'Hara's denser poems. The first two lines "They say I mope too much / but really I'm loudly dancing" correlate well with the sense of enstrangement created by the pencil in "Snedden's Landing Variations" especially between the orally spoken and poetic speech. In this particular instance, the moping is, I would argue, in the poems themselves and not spoken out in his daily actions. O'Hara explains to his detractors that he uses sadness in his poetry to make it "loudly danc[e]" hence without this sadness the poems would not be as interesting either in terms of content or in terms of lyricism. The use of "loudly" here emphasizes the power of words and poetry itself and how it can be superior to spoken language. As he concludes half way through the poem, "I dance, / I am never quiet, I mean silent." This slightly provocative statement confirms O'Hara's desire to continue to write sad poems, be it through loud or soft words, as it helps him waltz through his daily life and makes his poems as great as they can be.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> In "Embarrassing Bill," enstrangement is also highly relevant. It is through similes such as "smelling like a new rug in a store window" or "he is just like a pane of glass in a modernistic church" that the poet's audience is challenged to push the boundaries of his poetic understanding. This poem exposes the reader to a gay relationship and, in the context of the late 1950s was still taboo, if not illegal. This frank openness about his sexual orientation coupled with the multiple enstranging comparisons enhance the experience of "unaccustomed" readers. Though the effect is quite different from a poem like "Snedden's Landing Variations," it instead focuses on domesticity and how their lives are far from simple. The religious simile even amplifies the feeling of alienation for the gay couple and it is by recuperating it here that O'Hara makes the most of the effect of "enstrangement" recreating the stained-glass windows into a more, all-encompassing, religious figure that includes a stronger sense of tolerance towards the gay community.

<sup>79</sup> This would later change as he writes in his "Statement for Paterson Society:" "it used to be that I could only write when I was miserable; now I can only write when I'm happy" (*CP* 511). This was written in 1961 so O'Hara still had a few years writing in his "miserable" mood.

This is also found in Mayakovsky's work, as in his "To his Beloved Self the Author Dedicates these Lines" in which he uses contradictory similes such as "If only I were / small / like the Pacific Ocean" or "If only I were poor! / Like a billionaire!" (2013:63). The first of these two examples is of importance here as it makes the most of free verse and the flexibility attached to its stanzas. By isolating "small" on its own line, the Russian poet reflects on the look of immensity a word can have despite being so insignificant. In that case, small looks, in fact, as big as any other line, just like the Pacific Ocean that Mayakovsky aims at emulating. Just as O'Hara uses moping in a favourable way, the Futurist transforms a seemingly pejorative adjective into a positive one. The second example is much more ironic, playing on the use of an exclamation point to enhance the ludicrousness attached to the life of a billionaire so often idolized. The two punctuation markers play here as ornaments to show that the lives of the richest men and women in Russia are nothing but artifice and counterfeit. This is reinforced by the straightforwardness of the two lines that do not contain any wealth-related adjective—or any, except poor—that could add to the meaning. Instead, the exclamation points attract the eye and are placed there to compensate for the lack of intellectual richness.

The third line reflects another of Mayakovsky's claim in his essay "We Also Want Meat!" as both authors hint at the effect of words and poetry on the poet's body. While O'Hara writes "I eat paper. It's good for my bones," the Russian Futurist posits in all seriousness that "Each word must, like a soldier in the army, be made of meat that is healthy, of meat that is red!" (1980:188). Both citations refer to poetry and its individual components as inestimable food to keep the poet healthy. The interpretations though, I contend, are quite different. One could perceive Mayakovsky's statement much more in terms of poetry and his writing in general as a source of income that will keep him alive and well fed. This was a difficult feat to accomplish

because Russia—then the U.S.S.R.—suffered from multiple famines occasioned by the Great War and the Russian Revolution. O’Hara though, with his work at the MoMA and occasional writing clinics, perceives paper as the essential commodity on which to write poetry and as an integral part of who he is. The two comments actually seem to complement one another. In other words, if the paper is the bone, the words are the meat around it. The more the meat, and the redder it is, the healthier the poem on the piece of paper will be worth sharing. In that sense, O’Hara’s metaphor can be seen as complementing his mentor’s statement.

This powerful statement is in a sense a general comment on the commodity industry. While the product itself is essential for the creation of the poem, it is always the human touch that makes it what it is, that gives it its identity. To let the object accomplish its planned obsolescence, is, in a sense, to let go of a part of one’s self. That explains why he writes in the penultimate line “Some day I’ll love Frank O’Hara.” There is a sense here that he is implying that one day his poetry will be more cheerful, as it will be towards the beginning of the 1960s. He identifies himself as one with the piece of paper, which has not yet become “Frank O’Hara.” This is something that Rosenbaum touches upon in her essay, “Frank O’Hara, *Flâneur* of New York,” when she writes that: “While he incorporates the stuff of consumption—brand names, particular stores and commodities, advertisements and news headlines—into his poetry, he resists rendering the poems simply another commodity and ‘Frank O’Hara’ simply another brand name” (154). It appears that Rosenbaum is hinting at something different here, but I would argue that when the poem is written on paper, when the meat joins the bone, the piece of paper becomes much more than just a commodity, it becomes an integral part of its owner, it is elevated to something superior. By uplifting the commodities and giving them more time of consumption than one would expect in an ever-accelerating society, O’Hara evades the trap of

commercialization. The protopolitics at stake here are subtler than Mayakovsky's desire to live through his art in the harsh Soviet Union, but they are nevertheless everywhere in his poetry, enhancing the power of various objects despite the desires of the industry to sell more and more of them and not to build an "intimate" relationship with them. In Mayakovsky's case, it eventually cost him his life. Since he could not write as freely as he wanted to, he preferred to shoot a bullet through his art leaving unfinished poems behind him.

### **4.3 Connecting the Movements**

While Shklovsky and Russian Futurists and Formalists dissect the practices of prose and the best ways to transcend the everyday, they can be linked to Olson and Williams in their shared desire to change the techniques of objectification in the world of art of their epoch. But how is this reflected in O'Hara's poetry? How does he manage to blend these seemingly heterogeneous styles into a single poem? First, Williams and Shklovsky connect in their desire to enhance the way objects are portrayed, especially ordinary ones in Williams's case. It is through O'Hara's depictions of such objects that their respective techniques intertwine. Williams referred to the distinction between objects in real life and in a painting, or in his case in his desire to create the detachment in poetry as well, while Shklovsky wanted to create "enstrangement" in his audience's reading experience so that they could not simply read a figure of speech without pausing to analyze it. In O'Hara's poetry, the objects are essentially banal and it is mainly the accumulation of their presence that creates a certain questioning and to wonder if they are ordinary or if they mean more than what societal values attribute to them. It is the simplicity of his spontaneity that creates the discomfort. Do the objects have a connotative meaning or are they mere observations? In fact, most of the time, it is because they are observations that they have a connotative value; they connote the everyday. While it may seem an obvious statement to

make, the reader must take the time to analyze those objects and try to understand why they are in the poem and what purpose they serve. Is it mere luck or did O'Hara add them? What is the norm and what is not? It thus becomes much more difficult to understand hidden meanings and forces the reader into a more thorough reading of the poetry. Through this closer look, he is forced to stare at these objects and think about them for a longer span than he would occasionally do. He elevates them to a higher status than that of a commodity.

It is the idea of spontaneity in O'Hara's poetry that ties in with Olson's manifesto. Belgrad thinks that "Spontaneous composition was for Olson the key to poetry's social relevance. It had potential for authentic communication exploring new forms of human relatedness" (29). Spontaneity emphasizes honesty in style and subject instead of metre and knowledge of tradition and this is well reflected in O'Hara's poetry (16). The genuine portrayal of everyday life is in fact much more drastically replicated in his poetry than in Olson's or Williams's. A good example would be the way O'Hara does not make a distinction between title and body, opting alternatively for a continuation of theme by leaving aside the traditional title/body distance, with the title being an embodiment of the poem itself. Instead, it is now a title for the sake of having one to merely introduce the poem, instead of summarizing it. The title thus becomes even more honest; the poem develops into a retelling of the poet's life or of a specific moment in it without the need to pause between title and body. It also reclaims Olson's idea of flowing perspectives. This is something that O'Hara must have seen first in Mayakovsky's poetry, especially in his "I Myself" in which the section "And So Every Day" does not present a clear, distinct, difference between title and content. Olson and Mayakovsky thus connect here through their mutual desire to establish a fluid contact between perceptions leaving out useless words and transitions, or as Shklovsky would later put it: "In art, material



must be alive and precious” (1973:42-3). Thus O’Hara blends Olson’s spontaneous fluidity, William’s “realistic objects” and Shklovsky’s “stone more stony” through the amalgamation of mundane objects and his recreations of ordinary scenes composing his quotidian life.

Williams, Stevens, Shklovsky, and Mayakovsky inspired O’Hara to make the intangible, tangible. Also, they influenced him deeply in the way he writes the everyday commodity not as a product bound to disappear, but as central to a poem, if not its subject. Philosophers and sociologists have a direct influence on how O’Hara perceives and interacts with the city, and abstract expressionists and pop artists have helped him to consider every object as a possible topic worth discussing. As for American Modernists and Russian Futurists and Formalists, they helped him to synthesize his writing and politics. Together, I believe they contributed immensely to his desire to follow the seemingly impossible quest of living the most mundane moments of his life as the most precious and valuable.

## 5. Conclusion

“Language is in fact a special kind of material practice: that of human sociality,” writes Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature*, a citation that sums up very well the experience that each reader lives when reading Frank O’Hara’s *Collected Poems* in its entirety (165). It is through the written word and the linguistic journey on which the reader embarks that one clearly establishes the importance of O’Hara’s body of work and how it affects one’s perspective on human relations and their intricate relationship with consumerism. Not only does the poet make his audience comfortable with his poem despite the apparent coterie it so often depicts,<sup>80</sup> he also makes readers privy to the incessant relationship between consumers and the fluctuating market.

In this thesis I have argued that notions of everyday life and the influence of multiple media and movements greatly affected the formation of O’Hara’s protopolitical poetics, but I would add, to conclude, that it is ultimately the constant friendly tone of the poet’s oeuvre that glues all of these aspects together. This open and friendly tone mediates the effects of his subversive comments, arguably making them less impactful on paper. Yet as I have contended here, they are still as important to consider as those of a Ginsberg or a Baraka. I chose to write about O’Hara because I knew that it would be more difficult, but more rewarding to unearth the political side of his writing and to explain how crucial his writing and his subversive persona are to a better understanding of mass consumption in post-war America. I have shown here that

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<sup>80</sup> Even Lytle Shaw in his book devoted to the question cannot totally agree with O’Hara being labeled as a coterie poet. In reaction to Shaw’s work, I believe that O’Hara’s poetry can be understood as being an example of how artists of his time were interacting and how it can be reflecting the rest of society or as Shaw puts it, “his work might be understood to examine social and literary linkages — the bonds that both enforce and seem to explain relationships in terms of similarity and difference” (2006:6). By becoming this social presence, O’Hara’s narrative technique refutes the need for a clearly established “I,” by instead becoming a multiplicity of subjects. It is by making his life such an integral part of his art that it makes it challenging to distinguish between O’Hara simply stating facts and O’Hara being emotional, an idea that appears in Andy Warhol’s work as well (7).

O'Hara, just like his contemporaries, had strong opinions and engagements with the many changes in the American quotidian.

This thesis is but the groundwork for a bigger project that aims to clarify the political stances of other poetic movements. O'Hara's subtle, but effective poetry enables me to create a blueprint of this epoch, both in terms of its artistic and economic scene. If his oeuvre is protopolitical despite carrying an important subversive message, what does this entail for the message of those who were deliberately political in their poetry? The work of poets from the postwar era—especially from 1950 to 1975—like Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka and Audre Lorde are overtly political, but O'Hara still share an essential, subversive characteristic with their poetry. While I have deemed O'Hara's work protopolitical, it still holds an important message in opposition to the rise of mass consumption, a message that echoes in the poetry of these three poets, undeniably in different ways. While the first two dealt forcefully with issues of race and cultural independence, the latter fought restlessly for both a feminist and anti-racist cause. They nevertheless, in their own way, attacked concepts of mass consumption and its undeniable effects on the matters that they had so close at heart.

Despite being drastically more open about these topics, their relation to mass consumption is in line with O'Hara. I believe that they capture other issues primarily and leave notions of consumption in the background, as a subtext sometimes as subtle as that of O'Hara's poetry. For instance, in "Rhythm & Blues (1," Baraka attacks:

Empty white fingers  
against the keys (a drunken foolish stupor  
to kill these men  
and scream "Economics," my God, "Economics" (81)

This attack is not singularly pointed at the White Jazz scene of the early 1960s and the deadly impact of this cultural appropriation; it invokes a desire to shut down major labels and their desire to commodify this growing musical genre. Baraka subtly plays on the notion of catharsis brought by the music in a subversive way. In other words, while the catharsis should act as a mechanism to cope with the injustices brought by segregation as in Hughes's "The Weary Blues," it is here replaced by economic greed. The seemingly orgasmic shouts of "Economics" deplore the capitalist system and its lack of cultural sensibility. This senselessness is reflected through the emptiness of the fingers, they do not carry any emotion when playing harmonies or single notes; they simply replay over and over again the same simulacrum to ensure a maximum of profit.

Through the works of Lefebvre, Oldenburg, and Shklovsky, I have been able to understand the foundations on which O'Hara's poetry was based and demonstrate how it presented much more than just anecdotes and snapshots of Greenwich Village in its Golden Age. O'Hara was certainly an important figure, both socially and artistically, at this time and was one of the most intelligent poets around. His impressive list of friends from various artistic media significantly influenced his writing style and his political opinions. He enjoyed long conversations on these topics without ever being the centre of attention in a heated political debate—while other friends like Ginsberg or Rivers would be leading the charge and offering their two cents on the matter at hand. Instead, O'Hara soaked up all the information and transcribed it on paper, either right on the spot or the next morning with coffee and a Gauloises. This spontaneous flow of information would then lead to another "I Do This, I Do That" poem, mixing emotions, anecdotes and, invariably, a few scattered objects so intricate to the ever-changing tableau of his restless life.

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