

Having a Coke with You Is Even More Fun Than Ideology Critique

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IN THE SPRING OF 2014, I TAUGHT A COURSE ON THE POETICS OF OVER-sharing, a course that considered a range of queer poets writing in the 1960s and 1970s and their relation to shifting conceptions of sexuality and privacy in more recent decades. After spending a few weeks discussing confessional poetry and the Beats, I was hoping to lay the groundwork for an overarching argument about these shifts in a series of classes devoted to Frank O'Hara that centered on a reading of a challenging cruising poem entitled "Homosexuality." Students were expected to post a response to the reading before each class session, and, before the class on "Homosexuality," I was expecting them to post their thoughts about this particularly difficult poem. The first student to post, however, had a different agenda. After chancing upon a poem that I had not assigned in the edition of O'Hara we were using, she insisted, "I know that Professor Glavey did not assign this poem for us to read, but I am going to talk about it anyway because I have been talking about it incessantly to anyone who will listen since I read it for the first time this afternoon" (Norton). The poem in question, "Having a Coke with You," was not on the syllabus, but that absence was no match for my student's enthusiasm: "This poem is SO DAMN GREAT," she proclaimed, a conclusion subsequently taken up and amplified by the other students in the class, nearly all of whom decided to write about this extracurricular text. The consensus of their posts was resounding: after weeks of confessional soul-bearing and Beat exultation—and even after a handful of O'Hara poems filled with references to friends and cultural touchstones that the students did not share—the Coke poem's celebration of infatuation and fun was irrepressibly *relatable*.

One of a series of striking lyric poems that O'Hara wrote for the dancer Vincent Warren, the great romance of his life between 1959 and 1961, "Having a Coke with You" is one of the most significant

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love poems of the twentieth century and arguably the quintessential date poem. O'Hara's poem breathlessly announces that sharing a drink with his lover "is even more fun than going to San Sebastian, Irún, Hendaye, Biarritz, Bayonne / or being sick to my stomach on the Trevers de Gracia in Barcelona," before undertaking a deprecatory museum tour, playfully declaring all, or nearly all, of Western art since the Renaissance inferior to his companion:

I look
at you and I would rather look at you than all
the portraits in the world
except possibly for the *Polish Rider*
occasionally and anyway it's in the Frick
which thank heavens you haven't gone to yet
so we can go together the first time
and the fact that you move so beautifully
more or less takes care of Futurism
just as at home I never think of the *Nude*
Descending a Staircase or
at a rehearsal a single drawing of Leonardo or
Michelangelo that used to wow me
and what good does all the research of the
Impressionists do them
when they never got the right person to stand
near the tree when the sun sank
or for that matter Marino Marini when he
didn't pick the rider as carefully
as the horse
it seems they were all cheated of
some marvelous experience
which is not going to go wasted on me which
is why I'm telling you about it

In elevating the simple joys of spending time with someone you love over purportedly more-refined experiences, O'Hara's poem thematizes erotic relationships not in terms of age-old solemnities but in terms of the exhilarating but low-key affective vocabulary of fun. It is easy to see why this gesture might appeal to a roomful of undergraduates. The invocation of relatability as the basis of their affection, however, threatened to dissolve critical inquiry into haze and generalities. Despite the

unanimity of the responses, there was at first glance little in my students' posts about what in particular they found relatable: not the itineraries the poem traces through Europe or its assessments of specific artists, say, nor the phenomenology of the closet the poem performs. As it often does, saying that a text is relatable seemed to be a way of not relating to it.

Over the past decade, numerous commentators have noted the ubiquitous invocation of relatability inside and outside the classroom. Its recent omnipresence suggests that relatable might be a worthy addition to Sianne Ngai's catalog of the aesthetic categories most relevant to our contemporary moment, except that it is not self-evident that it is an aesthetic category at all, at least to the extent that it often appears not as a description of an object but merely as a reflection of a subject. Rebecca Mead summarizes the objections of many when she labels it a "scourge," noting that "the notion of relatability implies that the work in question serves like a selfie: a flattering confirmation of an individual's solipsism."¹ Labeling a work relatable can indeed feel like a refusal of critical thinking or a resistance to experiences different from one's own. As Laura Salisbury explains, it seems to short-circuit the "reflective, temporally extended close work that criticism understands texts to be inviting and yielding," shutting down patient attention and the willingness to spend time with ideas that we might not initially relate to (1156). On the one hand *relatable* highlights the relational character of art, yet on the other it appears to confirm a lack of relationality. These theoretical objections mirror the grammatical discomfort surrounding the term. Like most adjectives that end in *able*, *relatable* in its older sense clearly derives from a transitive verb: something is relatable when it can be related, can be told. Because the newest iteration deviates from this typical pattern and derives instead from an intransitive use of *relate*, the term, especially to many of us past a certain age, hardly seems like a

word at all—though it is worth noting that *reliable* and *laughable* once elicited the same objections.² This grammatical unease is interesting beyond the typical vagaries of usage because it highlights an important conceptual problem. The ambiguity surrounding whether *relatable* attaches to an object or only to the subject could be said to be a central problem for aesthetic categories in general, one arguably just as relevant for the beautiful or the sublime. The paradox of relatability makes us ask whether an aesthetic experience is transitive or intransitive, whether an encounter with a work of art is a relation primarily with otherness or with the self.

Addressing this paradox, however fascinating, was not part of my initial lesson plan, but my carefully wrought critique of “Homosexuality” nonetheless gave way to my students’ desire to talk about love and Coca-Cola. It is not that “Having a Coke with You” resists being read in terms of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s epistemology of the closet. Indeed, Alice C. Parker’s *The Exploration of the Secret Smile* (1989), an early study of the role of sexuality in O’Hara’s work, draws its title from “the secrecy [O’Hara’s and Warren’s] smiles take on” in the Coke poem.³ But a contemplation of O’Hara’s relatability engages a different set of scholarly tasks—reparative rather than paranoid reading, say, or the kind of tracing of readerly attachments to aesthetic objects that Rita Felski suggests might exist beyond the demystifying intellectual project of critique. And yet at the same time “Having a Coke with You” insists that these different critical protocols are not incompatible, and it can guide our approach to enthusiastic attachments in other modes of reading, of contextualization, of historicizing, and so on. The poem is itself a work of criticism that models a way of valuing art that relates it to people and to other things, making room for various forms of engagement, including critique.

My students, in other words, were on to something when they championed the relat-

ability of O’Hara’s poem. O’Hara’s poetry and criticism are centrally concerned with the relationality and sociability of art. On the one hand, “Having a Coke with You” is obviously committed to *relatable* in one of its older senses, insisting that art and experience must be communicated so as not to be lost. Marvelous experiences are thus, by O’Hara’s definition, *relatable* ones. But, on the other hand, his treatment of poetry, art, and love resonates with the newer sense of *relatable* as well. Michael Clune and Oren Izenberg have both illustrated how aesthetic judgments become important for O’Hara not in relation to any particular criteria but rather as ways of making contact with or even constituting a distinct public. In “Personal Poem,” for instance, when O’Hara and LeRoi Jones decide over lunch that “we don’t like / Henry James so much we like Herman Melville” (336), the poem is not asking us to reconstruct the motivations behind these choices, but is instead encouraging us to see them as enacting a form of relatability: relating to certain authors and not to others becomes a way of relating to your friends. Such judgments create a social world and put art in contact with it.

This sort of relationality is in part a matter of taste and classification, marking positions in the literary field.⁴ But this version of relationality has a queer, affective dimension that cannot be completely reduced to a model of cultural capital. Although *relatable* often functions as an alibi for the normative, it sometimes resonates on queerer registers as well. One might find oneself relating to the Coke poem’s portrait of infatuation in a general way. But one might also relate to the more specific depiction of an infatuation experienced by two gay men carving out a space for their own happiness in the sunlit publicness of a sculpture garden. *Relatable*, in other words, applies to queer relationships just as plausibly as it does to heteronormative ones, and the term’s aura of self-evidence can easily allow it to align with the open-secret logic

of the closet. Indeed, confessions of a certain kind of overidentification with cultural objects are central to reparative reading, which often involves the experience of finding oneself reflected in texts that may or may not have been intended for such purposes. Consider Sedgwick's account of her own reading practice: "a visceral near-identification with the writing I cared for, at the level of sentence structure, metrical pattern, rhyme, was one way of trying to appropriate what seemed the numinous and resistant power of the chosen objects" (*Tendencies* 3). One of the most moving aspects of queer theory might be the irrepressible resources of relatability it mobilizes, the resilient creativity with which queer readers find ways of relating to the objects of a culture that has often shown little interest in their survival.

This reparative sociability explains why "Having a Coke with You" stands as a primary example of queer utopianism in José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*. "This poem tells us of a quotidian act," Muñoz argues in the opening of his book, "that signifies a vast lifeworld of queer relationality, an encrypted sociality, and a utopian potentiality" (6). His invocation of O'Hara's poem has been highly effective across a broad range of queer writing, its influence visible everywhere from anarchist journals to the elegies mourning Muñoz's untimely death in 2013.⁵ As successful as Muñoz's reading has been in consolidating its own utopian communities, it nonetheless might be said to replicate the self-reflective, nonrelational logic of relatability. Muñoz's discussion of O'Hara is not directed toward a reading of the details of the Coke poem, mobilizing instead a generalizable mood that the poem makes available. Such an approach almost by necessity remains gestural. This is arguably a feature rather than a bug, but Muñoz's emphasis on potentiality threatens to deprecate the poem's actuality, just as viewing the poem through the lens of queer time travel tends to blur its place in queer history.

It is worth noting that O'Hara's poem locates its queerness not on an anticipatory horizon but in a particular and immediately felt present: four o'clock on a Friday in the sculpture garden of the Museum of Modern Art.

There is much about the poem and its context that has to be ignored, in other words, in order to identify it as queerly utopian. It would be easy to imagine, for instance, an interpretation of the poem that takes it to be an emblem of precisely the sort of pragmatist homonormativity that Muñoz resists, proffering a commodified vision of queerness organized around the privilege of middle-class white men at ease in elite institutions.⁶ Perhaps more than any of his other works, "Having a Coke with You" bears the mark of the propagandistic cultural work undertaken by O'Hara for MoMA's International Program. The junket from San Sebastian to Bayonne outlined in the poem's opening lines retraces a trip devoted to research for a show, *New Spanish Painting and Sculpture*, celebrating the international success of abstract expressionism, while many of the artists invoked in the second half of the poem, from Marinetti to Marino Marini, were on his mind in relation to another show, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art in American Collections*. Both shows testify to the imperialism described in Serge Guilbaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*. The poem's collusion with Cold War propaganda is endorsed by no less an authority than the Coca-Cola Company itself. Jac Kuntz explains in an essay on the Coca-Cola Web site: "'Having a Coke with You' almost begs an interpretation that asserts the glory of the inherently American 'every day' over Europe's crown jewels of high culture." One man's queer utopianism is another's product placement.

These normative contexts do not obviate queer readings of the poem, but they do suggest that the logic of relatability can be a way of having your Coke and drinking it too, creating a space where it is not always easy to distinguish the normative from the queer.

That “Having a Coke with You” has recently appeared as a touchstone for pragmatists and anarchists, for queer utopians and multinational corporations alike speaks to the fact that O’Hara recognized the creative potential in various modes of relationality. Indeed, the Coke poem is a manifesto for a kind of queer relatability. We have only recently caught up to this aspect of his work: in recent years O’Hara’s reception has shifted as his work has been presented—by queer theorists and cultural critics as well as lay readers—in terms of contemporary readers’ ability to see themselves in his poems. Over the past decade, O’Hara has repeatedly been lionized as a poet of our time rather than his own. While the varieties of relatability that O’Hara promotes in his work are firmly rooted in his late modernist moment, having at least as much in common with his understanding of abstract expressionism as with our understanding of *Snapchat*, even the poet’s most sophisticated critics respond less to the poem’s specifics than to its general mood, its ability to anticipate our twenty-first-century existence, and their readings possibly have more to do with their friends and lovers than with the words on the page.

When did O’Hara become so relatable? The poet’s work has achieved forms of influence and accessibility in the early twenty-first century that might have surprised many of his contemporaries. In the introduction to the 1998 edition of *Frank O’Hara: Poet among Painters*, Marjorie Perloff notes the striking turnaround of O’Hara’s reputation since her book about a seemingly minor poet was first published in 1977. “Thirty years after his death,” she notes, “O’Hara’s poetic has thus come of age” (xiv). In the twenty-odd years since 1997, O’Hara has become only more modern. This ascendance is partly a matter of shifting literary tastes, as the high seriousness of the seemingly more ambitious figures of mid-century poetry has lost out to the play-

ful insouciance and experimentation of figures like O’Hara. But this transformation has broader cultural implications as well. During his lifetime and in the decades immediately following his death, O’Hara’s aesthetic was associated with a sensibility tied to a distinct gay male subculture, a sensibility signaled in the terms invoked in his early reception: *gossipy*, *charming*, *campy*, and so on.⁷ Today, a version of this aesthetic sensibility has become a broadly recognizable feature of the age, which is arguably one of the interesting developments in the aesthetic history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. O’Hara’s poetics have apparently come of age not only among poets but in the wider world as well, an evolution that Felix Bernstein has called “social media’s Frank O’Hara-ization of us all.” Something like the queer cosmopolitan style of the New York School poet has become nearly ubiquitous. Mixing chatty observations about culture high and low with gossip about one’s friends, documenting the minutiae of one’s day-to-day life, and joyously dissolving the boundaries between the public and the private: people increasingly appear to be living in a smartphone-mediated version of *Lunch Poems*. In the months in 2014 running up to and following the fiftieth anniversary of that famous volume’s publication, many scholars and critics championed O’Hara as an anachronistic poet of the *Twitter* age. “Call him a prophet of the internet,” urges Adam Fitzgerald. “Many of his poems have the immediacy of a consciousness formed by the internet: fragmentation, collage, name-dropping, checking in, quotations, gossip, scandal, click bait and trends, laconic witticisms and gushy, full-breasted rants” (qtd. in Ciabattari).⁸

O’Hara’s contemporary prominence is clearly due in part to its relation to social media. But commentators already immersed in O’Hara’s book-bound poetics have possibly overemphasized the extent to which this prominence is the result of the poet’s analog

anticipation of *Twitter*. The version of O'Hara that has become iconic online has more in common with the *Instagram* poetry of figures such as Rupi Kaur than it does with the poetry of fragmentation, name dropping, and checking in that critics have lauded as ahead of its time. Witness how the Coke poem in particular has gone viral, becoming in recent years O'Hara's most famous, and certainly his most retweeted, poem. A decade ago, such a distinction would likely have gone to one of his "I do this I do that" poems. The current fame of the Coke poem would have surprised O'Hara. The Coke poem first appeared, along with other Warren poems selected and arranged by John Bernard Myers, in the 1965 collection *Love Poems (Tentative Title)*, and we might imagine that the collection's titular hesitation suggests that O'Hara was more tentative about the poem than my students were.⁹ That O'Hara has become famous as a love poet is evident in his online iconography: *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Tumblr*, and *Twitter* are populated by thousands of O'Hara references, quotations from his poems accompanied by

paintings, drawings, stock photos of coffee cups, sodas, and sunsets ("Frank O'Hara—'Having a Coke with You'"; fig. 1).¹⁰ Although his poems have been circulated in these forums, the O'Hara that has gone viral is in fact not the author that microblogs and timestamps the daily meanderings of his lunch hour or the poet that fills his works with in-jokes and the names of his personal friends but rather the author of an appealing form of romanticism, the author who effuses movingly about Warren:

oh god it's wonderful
to get out of bed
and drink too much coffee
and smoke too many cigarettes
and love you so much ("Steps" 371)

The O'Hara of the *Twitter* age, in other words, is the author of *Love Poems* rather than *Lunch Poems*.

O'Hara's work became even more visible when lines from his 1957 collection *Meditations in an Emergency* were recited in the

FIG. 1

Image from the YouTube video "Frank O'Hara—'Having a Coke with You.'"



second season of Matthew Weiner's television series *Mad Men* ("For Those Who Think Young" 00:47:00–00:47:55). The lines, declaimed in voice-over by the protagonist, Don Draper, gave O'Hara's sales a boost after the episode aired in 2008, propelling the popularity of the poem "Mayakovsky":

Now I am quietly waiting for
the catastrophe of my personality
to seem beautiful again,
and interesting, and modern. (202)

For many readers, O'Hara had never ceased being interesting and beautiful. But there is no denying that the appearance of his work in this and other venues of popular culture helped his poetry find new audiences in the early twenty-first century.¹¹ The Coke poem's visibility, for instance, seems to have been augmented by two videos circulating online: a brief clip of O'Hara reading the poem just a few weeks before his death in 1966, taken from Richard Moore's documentary series *USA: Poetry* and posted on *YouTube* in 2008 ("Frank O'Hara Reads 'Having a Coke with You'"), and a scene from Daniel Barnz's heterosexual teen romance *Beastly* (2011), a variation on *Beauty and the Beast* that culminates in a heartfelt reading of "Having a Coke with You" ("Beastly—Having a Coke with You"). It would seem that a major testament to O'Hara's popularity is the usefulness of his poems as a means of narrating various crises of heterosexual masculinity, helping beasts become princes and advertising executives.

In this regard, it is worth noting that the love poet conjured in the Coke poem is not self-evidently—or rather, not exclusively—queer. O'Hara's unabashed celebration of his love for Warren is brave and moving, but its language remains nonspecific enough to allow multiple forms of identification. There are of course indications in "Having a Coke with You" that O'Hara's lover is a man (the iconic Saint Sebastian, the secret smiles, Ma-

rino Marini's phallic rider, and so on), but the poem is also easily detachable from its context, the secret yet public intimacy shared by two men in love in late afternoon in the middle of the twentieth century. Such portability is not a common feature in O'Hara's work. As Susan B. Rosenbaum explains, "it is a rare O'Hara poem that does not name friends, lovers, or particular social events in which he will be or has been involved," the significance of his poetry usually embedded in the hyperparticular scene of its composition and circulation among initiates (84). Given the preponderance of personal names in so many O'Hara poems, it is all the more significant that, with the exception of an acrostic, Warren's name is notably absent from *Love Poems (Tentative Title)*. As Brad Gooch notes, O'Hara was reluctant to name his lover because Warren feared that his mother would discover the truth about his sexuality (335–36).¹² Reticence might partially explain this lacuna, but it would be a mistake to consider the omission a symptom of homophobia. Instead, it is central to the poem's dialectic of openness and closure. "Having a Coke with You" shares with many love poems the core paradox of relatability, the way that its second-person address conjures the luminous particularity of an individual lover and yet also seems to liquidate that particularity when it gives way to the identifications of its readers. The capaciousness of the poem's address, the way its lyric abstraction mediates between the particular and the universal, is arguably a sign of its identity-blurring queer-ness. But it also threatens to render queer-ness so diffuse that it loses all meaning. Or, to quote another line from *Meditations in an Emergency*: "Heterosexuality! you are inexorably approaching" ("Meditations" 197).

This is not to say that O'Hara's popularity diminishes the power of his candor about his sexuality, but merely to suggest that this status potentially obscures the radical, disruptive elements of his poetics in favor of a

universalizing vision of love that is more easily appropriated for use in normative and even heterosexual contexts. The openness of “Having a Coke with You” to appropriation reveals a pressing dilemma at the heart of contemporary queer politics. The surprising success in the United States of the gay-marriage campaign, for instance, might be attributed in part to a strategic decision to focus on arguments about the universality of love rather than on critiques that insist on the differences between the experience of those with normative and those with nonnormative genders or sexualities. The trouble with normal might be that love turns out to be more relatable than radical challenges to the status quo. This logic, as it has shaped O’Hara’s reception, is evident in the publicity poster for *Beastly*, which summarizes the movie’s narrative with the proclamation “Love Is Never Ugly.” The seemingly undeniable rhetorical force of *love*, which threatens to elicit, in Izenberg’s words, “a solemn hush of assent” whenever it is uttered, has of course been an effective counter to homophobia and ignorance (130). But, as critics of homonormativity explain, such arguments perpetuate an assimilationist ethos that sells out the potentially transformative effects of queerness. In practice the love doing this rhetorical work appears to be a generic one, intent on turning the radically different into the blandly conventional. Again, the paradox of such universalizing gestures is the way that the lover’s devotion to the radical particularity of the beloved is rendered so abstract that it becomes a cipher.¹³

It is tempting to read the empty universality of the poem’s relatability as an effect of the iconic commodity in its title. Jasper Bernes offers a brilliant reading of “Having a Coke with You” that explains this paradox as the result of the poem’s adaptation of a certain way of conceptualizing commodities, a logic arguably still incipient in 1960 but one that would become central to advertising in sub-

sequent decades. “The jargon of experience,” Bernes explains, “allows the same commodity to be addressed to each person uniquely” (44). The interpellating address of the commodity is thus not so different from the abstraction offered by the lyric. According to Bernes, O’Hara is interested in exploring the way that a commodity—Coke, in this instance—“could be emptied of its content and made into a vessel for human interconnection, erotic or otherwise” (43). One does not have to conclude that O’Hara himself intends the poem as an advertisement to see that this dematerializing strategy helps explain why the poem has been taken up by the likes of *Mad Men*. It is hard, for instance, not to think that marketing executives were taking a page from O’Hara in 2011 when they launched their celebrated “Share a Coke” campaign, in which Coca-Cola was debranded in order to make room for consumers’ names on bottles and cans.

Reading the poem retrospectively as an anticipation of the strategies adopted by the new spirit of capitalism later in the twentieth century amplifies an important dynamic in O’Hara’s poetry, but it does not adequately account for the way that the poetry explores the relation between the aesthetic and the political in its own moment. It downplays, for instance, the extent to which O’Hara’s treatment of art as a vessel for interconnection runs throughout his body of work and exists in a complicated relation to questions of commodification. O’Hara is not Andy Warhol. Despite the latter’s famous insistence that “[a]ll the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good,” the beverage functions differently in the two artists’ works (101).¹⁴ Warhol extrapolates a democratic similitude from the banality of the commodity; O’Hara remains invested in a modernist logic of the exceptional, in the unique voice of the poem, and in the possibility that art might put us in contact with “some marvelous experience.” Whereas Warhol’s project is devoted to remaking the work of art in the image of the mass-produced

bottle of pop, O'Hara's strategy invokes the transformational power of art to give a new glaze to an ordinary object. The poem implies that the lover's extraordinariness transfigures the ordinariness of everyday life, aspects of which appear almost interchangeable. Critics have nonetheless tended to overemphasize the importance of the Coke to the poem's overall argument and effects. David J. Alworth offers a corrective when he points out that "the poem becomes less about the objects, despite the litany of them, than about relations." For O'Hara, the engine of this amorous transformation is a mode of relationality that is the more significant feature of the poem's title: it is the idea of having something "with you" that animates the work's queer utopianism. That the item being shared is a soft drink is not particularly important in the framework of the poem—or, rather, it is only as important as getting sick to your stomach in Barcelona. The value of any of these experiences, O'Hara insists, derives from the poet's ability to talk about them with his lover. Throughout his poems, O'Hara locates a queer sociability in the network of a particular way of imagining the social function of art.¹⁵

Throughout both his poetry and his critical writing, O'Hara repeatedly poses significant questions about the sociability of art: about the ways that viewers relate to works of art, the ways works of art relate to each other, and so on. That O'Hara's critics often compare his own aesthetics with movements just slightly after his time results from the way that these questions became sites of experimentation in the decade after O'Hara wrote "Having a Coke with You" in 1960. In those mid-century years before the widespread success of pop art, minimalism, and conceptualism, such questions were more strictly delineated. The most influential critical paradigms for understanding abstract expressionism during O'Hara's career made it clear what sorts of relations were appropriate. The formalisms of Clement Greenberg and

Michael Fried, for instance, are predicated on an austere separation between the art object and the everyday life of the spectator. The significance of a work of art in their account is a matter of medium specificity, an autonomy that achieves its hard-fought value by turning its back on everything that is not itself. How one might relate to such a work of art is irrelevant. Indeed, according to Fried's influential 1967 account, modernist painting might be understood as a battle waged against the unfortunate truth that paintings have spectators in the first place. Genuine art, according to this paradigm, exists in a realm free of relationality; or, rather, the only relations that matter for art are the formal relations between colors and shapes that exist within the boundaries of the frame.¹⁶

O'Hara's reading of abstract expressionism is not wholly divorced from these models. A quintessentially transitional example of the aesthetic ideology of late modernism, O'Hara's writing sometimes treats abstraction as a form of art making that does achieve a version of autonomy: such art is relational in a very special way. "Abstract Expressionism is the work of serious men," he explains in 1961 in the first of the journalistic pieces called "Art Chronicles," which he wrote for *Kulchur*: "They are serious because they are *not* isolated. So out of this populated cavern of self come brilliant, uncomfortable works, works that don't reflect you or your life, though you can know them. Art is not *your* life, it is someone else's" ("Art Chronicle" 6). In many regards, O'Hara's assertions closely track more-canonical accounts, which cast "serious" artists as brave individuals excavating genuine aesthetic value from cavernous depths, in a heroic struggle that promises to resist the capitalist temptations of crass materialism and the conformism of communism. But O'Hara is careful to insist that the seriousness of these serious men is born not from rugged individualism so much as from an irreducible intersubjectivity. As Andrew Epstein

explains, O'Hara's conception of selfhood sees experimental individualism as opposed to the boundary-dissolving power of intersubjectivity (*Beautiful Enemies* 86–126). The self, for O'Hara, may be deep and dark but it is nonetheless always populous, social through and through. As he writes elsewhere, approvingly quoting Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, "You in others—this is your soul. This is what you are" ("About Zhivago" 504). Whether abstract or figurative, art is important because it offers a relational space for intersubjectivity—what O'Hara's "In Memory of My Feelings" calls "the scene of my selves" (257)—in which one might come into contact with an alterity that paradoxically installs a kind of nonidentity at the heart of individual subjectivity.

According to this account, art is valuable because it reflects life and because that life belongs to someone else. As Lytle Shaw demonstrates, O'Hara's abstraction multiplies rather than reduces the modes of relationality with which art is created, circulated, and understood. In his poetic and critical work, abstraction produces an orgy of relationality that, in its boundary-defying abandon, disrupts the forms of professionalism and disciplinaryity that were being consolidated at the time by the dominant aesthetic ideologies of late modernism. For Shaw, O'Hara's relational understanding of abstract expressionism contextualizes individual works of art in multiple interpretive frameworks, which allows O'Hara to construct a more flexible and compelling account of the movement's relation to history. "O'Hara ultimately imagines a form of viewing," Shaw argues, that "links abstract expressionism not merely to the forms of existentialism that had gripped so many imaginations but to the popular culture of Buicks and Gladstones, Hollywood subjectivity, and daily life in post-WWII urban centers" (188). In this conception, one might relate to abstraction in any number of ways, blurring the line between abstraction and figuration itself. Thus, in the Coke poem, the presence of

the speaker's lover transforms portraits into splotches of color: "the portrait show seems to have no faces in it at all, just paint / you suddenly wonder why in the world anyone ever did them." Whereas in certain situations the paintedness of the pictures might be a sign of their aesthetic sophistication, in others it cannot help eliciting disappointment.

Even abstraction, then, is a matter of relationality for O'Hara: the aesthetics of a particular image do not foreclose the stances we might adopt before it, and acknowledging the seriousness of a work of art does not prevent us from having fun with it. The queerness of the Coke poem has much to do with the way it establishes fun as an aesthetic criterion, a gesture that levels the meaning and value of art, suggesting that our responses might be understood in reference to a list of partial explanations: "partly because of my love for you, partly because of your love for yoghurt / partly because of the fluorescent orange tulips around the birches." An experience, according to this schema, is accretive, made up of multiple (and multiplying) factors that, as the propulsive rhetoric of the poem implies, extend indefinitely. Values in the poem are inherently relative: sharing a Coke is not just fun, it is even more fun. This framework makes it possible to imagine a "better happier" homoerotic martyr. For Izenberg, the invocation of fun as a criterion for judgment enables a profound capaciousness in O'Hara's sensibility: "resemblance to religious icons, gustatory pleasures, natural beauties, and even personal affections can all be valued in the same way at the same time—though not necessarily to the same degree" (130). The idiosyncratic hierarchy of values that O'Hara establishes is queer in the sense that it flouts normative classifications. Its rejection of totalizing conceptions like the beautiful or the sublime in favor of campy flirtation revises heteronormative assumptions about what is and is not valuable. As Mark Silverberg argues, this sort of fun aims to topple "distinctions and preconceptions

which restrict readers from enjoying work they've been conditioned to believe they should only 'take seriously'" (151).¹⁷

But fun is not all fun and games for O'Hara. Its push and pull with seriousness is one of the most productive tensions in his work. His discussion of intersubjectivity, for instance, contrasts the gravity of abstract expressionism with the "fun" of the newly opened Guggenheim Museum, where he had seen a 1961 show entitled *Abstract Expressionists and Imagists*: "In a capitalist country fun is everything. Fun is the only justification for the acquisitive impulse, if one is to be honest," he explains. "The Guggenheim is fun, and as such it justifies itself. Abstract Expression is not, and its justifications must be found elsewhere" ("Art Chronicle" 5, 6). O'Hara's discussion of this show does two things: On the one hand, it distinguishes between fun and the aesthetic of intersubjectivity exhibited by abstract expressionism, an aesthetic that, true to the hegemonic aesthetic ideology of late modernism, purports to resist both capitalism and communism, being something "very difficult for the acquisitive spirit to understand, and for that matter the spirit of joinership that animates communism" (6). On the other hand, his observations do not add up to an unqualified critique of this "acquisitive spirit." O'Hara devotes much of his essay to emphasizing in rather convincing detail just how fun the Guggenheim really is, defending the institution and its controversial new building against the many contemporary critics who saw the venue as less than ideal for the presentation of serious art. Fun in fact takes on the mantle of autonomy associated by others with abstract expressionism itself: fun becomes autotelic, requiring no justification, whereas paintings derive their value from an ongoing adjudication, their justifications to be found elsewhere.

Even abstract expressionism is more fun at the Guggenheim, and O'Hara describes the museum's sense of fun as distinctively queer:

"It's wonderful looking from the outside, and when you enter the flat exhibition space on the ground floor the effect . . . is urbane and charming, like the home of a cultivated and mildly eccentric person" ("Art Chronicle" 1–2). Its organization transforms experiences typically figured as disagreeable—like taking an elevator, which, he claims, one associates with "going to some unpleasant experience like work or a job interview"—into a source of "pleasure" (2). O'Hara characterizes the Guggenheim as an institution keen to acknowledge the fact that, as Jennifer Tyburzcy contends, "all museums are sex museums," "theatrical spaces of everyday drama, veritable contact zones between bodies and objects" (1). At its heart, the fun O'Hara identifies in the museum is linked to the queer sociability that its architecture authorizes, according to which one interacts with works of art as if they were attractive strangers. "The downward stroll, then, is enhanced by the glimpses you've been sneaking . . . at the pictures on the lower ramps, and you get lots of surprises: things that looked especially inviting or dramatic from a partial look turn out to be totally uninteresting and others you hadn't bothered to anticipate are terrific" ("Art Chronicle" 2). One's encounters with the paintings are almost a form of cruising, an experience shaped by partial glances and surprising connections, such that one might "come around a semi-wall and find a masterpiece has had its back to you," or experience "the relation between seeing a painting or a sequence of them from across the ramp and then having a decent interval of time and distraction intervene before the close scrutiny" (2). Moving through space in ways that are explicitly theatrical and relational, visitors to the Guggenheim enter a field for encounter and surprise.¹⁸

The relational logic of fun as it intersects with art is most thoroughly elaborated in the Coke poem, but other works similarly establish the gallery or museum as a fun, relational

arena. An illuminating companion to “Having a Coke with You” is “Favorite Painting in the Metropolitan,” a poem written in the summer of 1961 and influenced by the poet Bill Berkson.¹⁹ Between 1960 and O’Hara’s death, in 1966, the two muses most visible in his poetry were Warren and Berkson. These two figures inspired two distinct kinds of poems during the final years of O’Hara’s life. Whereas the Warren poems tend to be open and accessible—relatable—the Berkson poems are experimental, disjunctive, and collaborative. The two men also inspired two distinct varieties of love poetry. Although marked by an emotional intensity that was obvious to all their peers, O’Hara’s relationship with Berkson was nominally nonsexual: the Berkson poems are animated by the complexity and frustration of a friendship structured in part around unrequited desire (Gooch 329–438; LeSueur 219–39). “Favorite Painting in the Metropolitan” is in many ways typical of the Berkson poems. But, as a poem documenting a visit to a museum with a beloved friend, it can also be read as a fascinating counterpart to Warren’s Coke poem, one that helps bring into focus the relationality that O’Hara’s poetry explores. Like the earlier work, “Favorite Painting” casts the museum as a backdrop for multiple encounters, weaving works of art into social and amorous experience. The poem intersperses lyric stanzas with quotations overheard in the gallery. The poem opens with an observation not about the painting promised by the title but about the museum as the setting for a bit of movie romance between Audrey Hepburn and Fred Astaire: “these are the stairs / from *Funny Face*,” it announces, before continuing:

But I would like to see
the three Zenobius bits
before I die of the heat
or you die of the denim
or we fight it out without
lances in the obscure public

Echoing the anaphoric opening lines of “Having a Coke with You,” the sequence “before . . . or . . . or” demonstrates that there are multiple ways to navigate the museum, in a sense putting Hepburn into friendly competition with Botticelli. As they do in the Coke poem, both popular and unpopular culture pale in comparison to a beloved friend. At one point the poet or his interlocutor interjects, “[W]hen I saw you coming / I forgot all about Breughel.” This apparent demotion, which demonstrates that attention points in many directions and not always at works of art, resonates with the other poem’s interest in a mode of valuing art that counters high modernist conviction with low-key affective attachments. The poem’s title, “Favorite Painting in the Metropolitan,” signals that O’Hara is concerned with personal preference, not an ostensibly objective standard of importance or beauty. The poem also explicitly conjures an atmosphere defined by interest and fun, in which nothing is as stable or staid (or, as the earlier poem suggests, as “unpleasantly definitive”) as the masterpieces on the wall might suggest:

and I could walk through ex-
changing with you through the
exchanging universe tears
of regretless interest tears of
fun and everything being temporary
right where it seems so permanent

Embodying the universe of constant exchange it describes, the poem breaks down the seemingly permanent boundaries around the works in the museum. It is the spectators, not the pictures, that are “hanging / around,” and various extra-aesthetic figures are seen to emerge: the actor Richard Burton “waves through de Kooning,” cowboys emerge from a Pollock, and a Fragonard is compared to Berkson’s ear (423).

The back-and-forth between aesthetic experience and extra-aesthetic commentary, the good-natured bickering over what to look at

first, is even more evident in the manuscript version of the poem, which juxtaposes its lyric stanzas and supplemental quotations in two separate columns. In a 1962 letter to John Ashbery, O'Hara complained that the "simultaneous arrangement of stanzas and quotes" that he had intended was ignored when the poem was typeset for publication in *Locus Solus*, an editorial choice replicated when the piece was reprinted in *Collected Poems* after his death (Letter 127). The single-column version, he explained with frustration, upset not only the look of the poem but the order of the stanzas: "accidentally the last stanza is still the last stanza but it is now connected with 'oh shit! a run!' which is hardly the same thing as having the poem end that we are going back to his place before the movies and/or/because we both feel so enthusiastic about his always having imagined my childhood as being like the infant in that Bellini" (127–29).²⁰ Both versions conclude with a stanza narrating an appreciation of a painting by Giovanni Bellini, ostensibly a depiction of the Madonna and child from the late 1480s:

I see the Bellini mirror and this
time you follow me seeing me in it
first, the perfect image of my
existence with the sky above
me which has never frowned on me
in any dream of your knowledge

The misordering of the stanzas, however, scrambles O'Hara's initial intent, obscuring the extent to which this aesthetic encounter was supposed to emphasize the sociable and eroticized mode of queer relationality he describes in his essay on the Guggenheim, setting up a nonhierarchical connection between admiring the beauty of a work of art and the sense of sexual possibility promised by "going back to his place." The dialogic structure of the piece attempts to suggest such possibilities without constraining them: Is the pair's shared experience of the Bellini painting the motivation for their abscond-

ing to the apartment? Would the trip back to his place mark a culmination of their shared insight in front of the canvas, or are the two unrelated? The answer, O'Hara writes to Ashbery, is "and/or/because."

This ambiguity, amplified in particular by the inclusion of unidentified and fragmentary voices, arguably makes "Favorite Painting in the Metropolitan" a more relational if less relatable work than "Having a Coke with You." Whereas the latter is apparently unilateral in its address of Warren—with perhaps the possible exception of the observation that "you suddenly wonder why in the world anyone ever did them" (emphasis added)—the Berkson poem is interrupted throughout by dialogic interjections, a multiplicity written into the form of the poem itself as O'Hara intended it to be read. Though it does not evoke the Whitmanesque openness of the Coke poem, "Favorite Painting" still summons at its core an aesthetic experience of relatability: the painting of the Madonna and child is presented as a mirror reflecting the "perfect image of my / existence" (424). Art may be someone else's life, as O'Hara argues, but there is nonetheless some fun to be had in seeing oneself reflected there. This image of reflection is an avowedly narcissistic form of relatability: finding one's image in a painting of an infant Jesus is a parodically extreme example of the subjectivist response to art at which many of O'Hara's contemporaries balked. And yet, although the final stanza is crowded with first-person terms, the poem leaves it impossible to say whose favorite this painting might be. The act of seeing is itself presented as a form of sociability, fusing the poet and his interlocutor into an intersubjective, pronominal blur: "you follow me seeing me in it / first." This construction makes it difficult to tell who sees first. In such an encounter, art enables the communion of more than one imagination, allowing one person's existence to be colored by the dream of someone else's knowledge.

Such intersubjectivity is an example of the serious form of queer relatability that reverberates throughout O'Hara's poetry and criticism: the soul is yourself in others. It shares this quality with the striking image at the heart of the Coke poem: the ecstasy of two lovers cross-pollinating "like a tree breathing through its spectacles." Moments like these demonstrate one way that art, for O'Hara, is always relational. But these moments occur against the backdrop of other, less transcendent forms of sociability as well, forms that uncover a queerly utopian promise in merely finding oneself interested in or surprised by something. These different forms of relatability all reflect a belief that we deepen our aesthetic experience when we talk about it. The key to not wasting a marvelous experience is to tell someone about it. The beautiful thing about paintings and statues, in other words, is the way they can be woven into social relationships. By declaring his preference for love over works of art in "Having a Coke with You," O'Hara recalibrates art's relation to everyday life, suggesting that we might value it in the same way that we value our other attachments, presenting it as a means of relating to the world in complicated and unpredictable ways. Moving back and forth between aesthetic and nonaesthetic criteria, between art and romance, between being in love with a dancer and being in love with yogurt, the poem suggests that art and poetry are valuable because they create spaces of relationality that allow for the peaceful and productive coexistence of futurism and Coca-Cola. In this regard, my student, who found herself "incessantly" talking about the poem all afternoon, was on the right track, amplifying the poem's own voluble enthusiasm, the way its title runs on breathlessly into the body of the text, its accretive logic suggesting that it might go on forever. For O'Hara, the value of the art object is constituted by the social relationships that go into its creation and sustain its reception, and the best way to attest

to that value is to talk, to write, to compose a poem or post a video, which is, after all, why I am telling you about it.

NOTES

1. For more critiques of relatability in the public sphere, see North; Orange.
2. See Zimmer for more on the history of the term *relatable*.
3. Herring offers a particularly helpful account of O'Hara's relation to the epistemology of the closet.
4. O'Hara's relatability, in other words, can in part be understood according to a sociological account of the aesthetic such as the one offered by Pierre Bourdieu. For a discussion of O'Hara and Bourdieu, see Izenberg 124–30.
5. See Gilson for a particularly moving elegy. The Coke poem appears as the final text in the "queer time travel" issue of the anarchist journal *Bædan*.
6. Kane discusses a fascinating 1978 critique of O'Hara involving a parody of the poem published in the punk feminist magazine *Koff* that compares sharing a Coke to "getting beaten on the ground and tossed into [a] filthy Turkish prison cell" (182).
7. For accounts of O'Hara's queer talk, see Bennett; Boone; and Smith.
8. For examples of this argument from mainstream publications, see Ciabattari; Mattix. For more-academic accounts, see Tietchen; Lee.
9. See Gooch 441. There is of course a compelling case for reading the Warren poems as the culmination of O'Hara's poetics, even if O'Hara himself did not see them that way (Herd 163–66).
10. See Charman on the phenomenon she describes as the "Frank O'Hara-ization of social media."
11. On O'Hara and *Mad Men*, see Epstein, "No"; Lilley.
12. See LeSueur 225.
13. Zapruder enacts such paradoxes in a Valentine's Day meditation on the poem: "O'Hara's 'Having a Coke with You' always seems to me like a good poem to read at a wedding," he suggests, before thinking better of it: "until I read it again."
14. For a thorough account of the implications of Warhol's comments, see Flatley 14–17.
15. O'Hara's vision of art looks forward to pop art and minimalism but also to the more recent rubric of "relational aesthetics," a term coined by Bourriaud to describe a variety of late-twentieth-century art that emphasizes social relations and conversations. But this relational vision of abstraction does not simply anticipate postmodernism. Heffernan describes how, even in the early twentieth century, abstract art was seen by some as "the starting point

of a chain that connected disparate people and things in a newly collective way of knowing the world" (886).

16. It is true that O'Hara's thinking about abstract expressionism has more in common with the spontaneity of the action painting model of Harold Rosenberg. But Rosenberg's model, too, understands abstraction according to a limited repertoire of relations. The relation that matters is the artist's relation to the void; the meaning of abstract gestures is born within the artist's heroic confrontation with the existential freedom of the blank canvas.

17. Butt also analyzes O'Hara's refusal to treat the serious and the trivial as opposites.

18. For an O'Hara-inspired meditation on the queer-ness of the Guggenheim, see Crimp 18–46.

19. Curtis speculates that this poem is about Grace Hartigan (203), but given the moment of its composition and the use of the male pronoun in O'Hara's letter to John Ashbery, this connection seems unlikely.

20. See Latta for more on O'Hara's letter and the typography of the poem.

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