

# the exchange of ideas among the living

## laura owens finds a new curative practice

"In Memory of my Feelings: Frank O'Hara and American Art" is an exhibition curated by Russell Ferguson at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. I was immediately drawn to the exhibition because it seemed to propose a new way of looking at older art. The show juxtaposes the super famous with lesser known artists of the era. Abstraction, portraiture, text and film all sit comfortably next to one another. I liked looking at a group historical show through the lens of one person—albeit a person who played many roles: poet, curator, critic and artist. The collaboration between Frank O'Hara and Norman Bluhm blew me away. More than that, the works by over 25 artists in the show didn't compete with one another. They existed independently and I was interested in thinking about all of them in this new context.

**laura:** How did you start thinking about the idea for this show?

**russell:** It started for me in thinking about much

more recent art. I was frustrated with the kind of writing about contemporary art that seems to pigeonhole artists much too quickly and easily into categories. I knew from my own experiences talking to or hanging out with artists that that wasn't at all how they organized their lives. Most artists have very diverse circles of friends whose work is often rather different than their own. In spite of this they may have a lot in common in terms of ideas and enjoy bouncing ideas off one another.

**laura:** How did you first hear about Frank O'Hara's poetry?

**russell:** I have been asked that question

repeatedly and unfortunately, I don't have a good answer. I just don't remember. I studied primarily American literature when I was an undergraduate in Scotland, and I did a junior year abroad at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, which was great. At some point in college I read Frank O'Hara's poems, and I've always liked them. He lent himself to this project in a number of ways. One, he was extremely eclectic, he didn't align himself exclusively with one particular group. Two, there are a lot of great portraits of O'Hara by different artists. Three, he

mentions artists and works of art constantly in his poetry. Four, there are a number of important works of art that were inspired by his poetry. And five, he collaborated directly with artists on a number of occasions.

**laura:** There is a quote by Richard Howard in the catalogue that proposes that O'Hara's poetry works only in a metonymical, side by side way, instead of a metaphorical or symbolic way. This reminded me of looking at the exhibition where I found a distinct lack of metaphor. This seems like one of the hardest things to do in a group historical exhibition because the current curatorial practices assume that the curator must use

the artwork as symbols or metaphors for a larger idea.

**russell:** I think that really gets at the heart of what I was trying to do in the exhibition. O'Hara's style of writing is to move quickly and fairly lightly, laying things end to end, one thing after the other. O'Hara was impatient with these grand overarching or mythological archetypes that were very common [to] poetry at that time. He preferred to build up his own effects out of the details of life as it passed before him. That would include what he was thinking, what he was reading, what he was seeing as well as his emotions. As a viewer, I want to get more out of

seeing an artwork within a group exhibition than I would get if I saw it in a room by itself. I wanted people, if possible, to come away with more depth in a work rather than less. A lot of thematic group exhibitions in a way reduce the individual works of art. There is always a danger of subordinating them to a theme. In the worst case scenario the works of art are reduced to illustrations.



ALEX KATZ  
*Frank O'Hara, 1959-60,*  
oil on wood.

**laura:** Yeah, that's what I was going to say that I meant by metaphor.

**russell:** More specifically, in the structure of the show there is no path through it from beginning to end. It doesn't follow any chronological sequence. Some artists have works together then in other places it's broken up. So even in the physical structure I was really trying to avoid imposing too much of my own narrative. With the

juxtapositions that I made I was trying to find, at least for myself, ways in which the works could have a conversation with each other. That was my goal, anyway. It is related to the overall idea for the show, that these artists were engaged in a kind of ongoing conversation with each other in a literal way, and their ideas and works could inform each other's ideas and works.

**laura:** In the catalogue there is a juxtaposition between a unified self as represented by Jackson Pollock and the figure of O'Hara who writes "My quietness has a number of naked selves" and who you also describe as "No ideas but in people." Do you think the exhibition

functions on one level as presenting this idea of O'Hara?

**russell:** Yeah, I do. There is a kind of broadly Jungian rhetoric associated with the first generation of abstract expressionist painters, of whom O'Hara was actually a great champion. It would involve a kind of digging deep into your own subconscious and when you got there, letting that then flow out in a more or less unmediated way onto the canvas. But O'Hara's whole approach was quite different from that. He was profoundly

uninterested in deep archetypes. He was not interested in the dream-world. He didn't even like to sleep. He liked to be awake and having conversations with people. Grace Hartigan painted him as *The Masker*. When Elaine de Kooning painted his portrait she finally painted out the face and said it was more Frank without the face than with it. And that testifies to what a lot of his friends felt about O'Hara, that he was someone who could take on and put off his masks. He could fit in a number of different





milieus. It might be downtown in the macho environment of the Cedar Bar, or uptown at the Museum of Modern Art in a tuxedo talking to the trustees, or he could be in the gay underworld of cruising that was completely hidden from straight society at that time.

But that ability to wear different masks does not imply insincerity. Many people said that when he was talking to them, they felt that there was no one else in the world. He managed to focus his attention entirely on the person he was talking to and subordinate his own sense of self in order to deeply engage in their interests and passions. I think it is reflected in the exhibition not just in the portraits, but in the other works. You can see that O'Hara was just as at home offering a poem to Franz Kline for a very serious etching collaboration or with giving advice to Jasper Johns on which poets to read. He could be giving his poems to Grace Hartigan for a very emotional group of artworks and just a few years later be collaborating with Joe Brainard in a very campy, jokey way. And be equally successful.

**laura:** I think subtly, slyly, this is a show about curatorial practices and that it's making a proposal for O'Hara's values—his idea of Personism, that you described as "Committed to a shifting aesthetic constantly changing through passionate human relationships" or as "evoking overtones of love without destroying love's life giving vulgarity."

**russell:** Um, it's not wrong. But it would be incredibly presumptuous of me to—and I never would—compare myself directly with Frank O'Hara, who is one of the great poets of the century, as far as I'm concerned.

**laura:** No, but, I guess I just meant... is his manifesto sort of implicit within the exhibition? It's not just a show about art from the fifties and sixties. Instead you do a show about Frank O'Hara. Doesn't it sort of...

**russell:** I think the element of O'Hara's values that is most directly related to what I was trying to do is his openness. He was very open in a period where criticism in general was increasingly directed at establishing the single correct path. This is the era of the increasing influence of Clement Greenberg, whose entire critical practice was devoted to establishing the inevitable way forward for art and at the same time kind of dismissing the activity of other artists that were not on that path as in some way minor or irrelevant. One of the great things that was lost, I think, with O'Hara's early death, was his alternative way of dealing with artists' production. It is more difficult than it sounds to suspend all of your preconceived baggage when you see something new coming out of an artist's studio. O'Hara was able to approach new work through the eyes of the artist. Even though he worked on a very early monograph of Jackson Pollock and was a great champion of Abstract Expressionism, as soon as he saw Claus Oldenberg's *The Store* he was completely rapturous about it. It sounds like it should be a basic thing, but we know from experience that in fact it's very hard to remain that open to what artists are actually doing over any extended period of time. O'Hara's attitude was, "Well, bring it on, what can you show me? Show me something new, show me what you're passionate about, it doesn't have to be something I am already comfortable with." I find that a very refreshing attitude. I don't want to be able to look at something right away and know all I need to know about it. One of the things that I get out of art in general is a sort of recalibration of my visual frame of reference. For me, the most exciting art I see I may not even like the first couple of times I see it. That is the work that gets under my skin, makes me think, and draws me back to it almost against my will.

**laura:** There are two sets of opposing ideas I want to compare. One is when you write "Committed to a shifting aesthetic that's constantly changing through passionate human experience." The opposites would be "committed" and "shifting." And the second being "Museum of Contemporary Art." The word museum means stability that is bound to a sort of



**ALICE NEEL**  
*Frank O'Hara No. 2,*  
1960, oil on canvas.



**NORMAN BLUM AND FRANK O'HARA**  
*Meet Me In The Park, 1960, gouache and ink on paper.*

academic rigor in order to validate ideas. The opposite of that being contemporary art, which is always questioning or shifting. Things like nonsense, humor, or play can be shown for example, in a John Cage exhibition but not expressed by the curator in his or her practice. I was just thinking this exhibition, for me, puts a tiny crack in the wall that divides "the rational curator—with the crazy artist." You are not directly expressing it as a curator, but you are showing another curator.

**russell:** Yeah, the Museum of Contemporary Art, like most museums, is a relatively large institution, so there is always this sense that in any institution of that size one of

the things that is hard to present is a sense of lightness, of the playful. For many people the whole idea of the Museum is associated with the idea of the temple. I think that in O'Hara's case, he was committed to the sense of play. He thoroughly enjoyed himself when he was involved in the give and take of ideas, conversations, exchanges, sparking ideas and coming back with one-liners or putdowns. All of which were very much a part of the witty cocktail party atmosphere that O'Hara felt very at home in. O'Hara was well known for completely changing his position during the course of an evening. If other people agreed with him too easily, he would shift his position just to make it more interesting for himself. Like any great spontaneously witty person, it's hard to get that down later for posterity. It's like Oscar Wilde, who is a great writer, but from all the testimony of his contemporaries, his conversation was three times funnier than anything he ever wrote.

**laura:** I noticed you were credited for a photo of O'Hara's grave, what was that experience like?

**russell:** Oh, I went out there with Joe LeSueur, who was a very close friend and roommate of Frank O'Hara's. He lives out in Springs which is where the cemetery is. It's the famous cemetery where Pollock is buried. The head stone is very simple. It's laid flat into the ground and it has a quotation from one of his poems—"Grace to be born and live as variously as possible"—which is directly related to a lot of the things we have been talking about. Someone had put a shell on the grave and we picked it up and there was a little amateur poem tribute to O'Hara inside the shell. Joe said that people leave things like that all the time. It was very moving for me, but I try not to be too sentimental about that kind of thing. I don't believe there's anything of O'Hara there other than the memories the people bring to the cemetery. It did feel a little like a pilgrimage but really I felt I was closer to O'Hara through talking to Joe LeSueur than through looking at his grave marker. O'Hara was about the exchange of ideas among the living.

*Laura Owens is a Commodore 64 we found at a garage sale in Ohio.*