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FRANK O'HARA'S ORANGES:
Poetry, Painters and Painting

By
Karen Ware
B.A., Spalding University, 1994

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
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For the Degree of

Master of Arts

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University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

August 2001

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A Thesis Approved on

8/6/01

by the following Reading Committee:

Thesis Director

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Clare Pearce,
because I promised,
and to Kyle,
through all things.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many amazing individuals have taken a seat in the roller coaster construction of this long-awaited project. Many thanks to Dr. Golding for not running away when I cornered him in Brian's kitchen two years ago and asked him to direct me. Thank you to Dr. Tom Byers and Dr. Jay Kloner who so graciously agreed to be my readers. I also happily mention Dr. David Garrison, whose 1992 poetry seminar introduced me to O'Hara and set the wheels in motion. I wish a special note for Linda Baldwin, without whom I would never have had a single piece of paper in the right spot.

My pursuit of the study of literature is strongly influenced by my family, especially my parents. As a child I was always granted a new book or a trip to the library whenever I wanted, no matter how often I asked, or how inconvenient the timing. Mom, Dad, thank you.

I am grateful to Brian Huot, Kim Burton and David Overbey: my teaching mentors and companions. They have each been encouraging, inspiring, and blessedly distracting.

Thank you to my friends and co-workers at Governor's Scholars. I greatly appreciate the respect given to my work. Thanks, as well, to everyone at Peter Pan Cleaners who endured my academic chatter and chided, "when will you be finished?" just enough.

I owe more praise than I can express to my husband Kyle, who buckled into the seat beside me and held my hand through every climb and descent.

ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on twentieth-century poet Frank O'Hara and his relationship to painting and painters in New York in the 1950s. An examination of the concept of ekphrasis functions as a theoretical frame and substantiation for the discussion of O'Hara's life and poems. Painters Larry Rivers, Jane Freilicher, and Grace Hartigan had significant relationships with O'Hara, both personally and artistically. Michael Goldberg, Norman Bluhm, and Joe Brainard collaborated with him on several projects, each of which are discussed in terms of their combination of verbal and visual elements, of poet and painter working together or in tandem. Another example included in the exploration of O'Hara's connection to visual expression is a series of Apollinaire-inspired calligrams. Each element of the discussion helps define the specific context in which O'Hara worked, functioning as an example himself of the significant link painting and poetry have historically shared.

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INTRODUCTION

There should be
so much more, not of orange, of
words, of how terrible orange is
and life. Days go by. It is even in
prose, I am a real poet. My poem
is finished and I haven't mentioned
orange yet. It's twelve poems, I call
it ORANGES.

O'Hara "Why I Am Not A Painter" CP 262

In the mid-twentieth century, one New York art circle developed their work in the context of a multifaceted network of poets and painters of around the same age, all connected by varying degrees of friendship. The poets included Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler and Bill Berkson. The painters included Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Larry Rivers, Grace Hartigan, Jane Freilicher and Michael Goldberg, to name a few. O'Hara's body of work in particular achieves cohesiveness through this interrelation of artists and writers, and their styles. O'Hara related passages in his poems to portions of his own previous poems, the poems of

others, or the visual art of others. New York was his studio and the napkins he scribbled across at lunch were his canvases. This thesis looks at O'Hara as a poet in terms of his specific relationships to painters and painting, in order to explore how understanding the intricacies of O'Hara's relationships with visual artists leads to a more complex reading of his work.

Much current scholarship on O'Hara emphasizes the social context of New York or is preoccupied with his sexuality. Many critics engage in close readings that focus on the meaning the poems might hold for the gay community; Jim Elledge's "Lack of Gender in Frank O'Hara's Love Poems to Vincent Warren" is a well-executed example of such an examination. Caleb Crain's "Frank O'Hara's 'Fired' Self" discusses "Personism: A Manifesto" and several poems in light of the psychological and philosophical search for a gay sense of self, showing how "O'Hara's gay persona--expressing anger and desire, insisting on a full emotional presence--deserves the attention of gay studies" (287). Other criticism is more concerned with O'Hara's poems themselves, intent on the implications of the body of work of the New York poets in general. Geoff Ward's *Statutes of Liberty* defines and explores the New York School, rather than examining O'Hara alone. David Lehman's *The Last Avant-Garde*, while full of wonderful details and anecdotes, is confined in its self-serving definition of "avant-garde," a definition that views the poetry of the New York School as leading up to Lehman's own. Marjorie Perloff's

Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters is the best example of a more holistic approach to O'Hara's poetry, focusing primarily on critical interpretation of his poems, with personal and social information included only when she sees it as integral to her interpretation.

My project continues the exploration of the large portion of O'Hara's life and work that deals with visual art. The recent exhibition *In Memory of My Feelings: Frank O'Hara and American Art*, which debuted at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles in July 1999, helps contextualize and validate these concerns. In the catalogue to accompany the exhibition, Russell Ferguson explains the purpose of the project: "to use the charismatic figure of O'Hara as a lens through which to take another look at the most mythologized period in American art" (15). Ferguson also attempts to answer the question "why O'Hara, why now?": "the milieu that is visible in O'Hara's writing and in the work gathered for this exhibition will, I hope, be compelling enough to communicate with those who look back at it today from a distance of almost forty years" (16). Ferguson concludes his description of O'Hara's influence with the pronouncement that "his poetry, of course, has lasted, and is more widely read today than ever before. He remains an inspiring figure to young poets, and to artists" (56). A further testament to the timeliness of continued work on O'Hara is the publication of a new collection,

Terence Diggory and Stephen Paul Miller's *The Scene of My Selves: New Work on the New York School Poets*.

I have found a helpful theoretical frame for approaching O'Hara in the current discussion of the time-honored concept of ekphrasis.¹ The *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines the term narrowly in a section on visual arts and poetry, remarking that "poems or parts of poems that describe specific paintings are traditionally said to partake of *ekphrasis*. Ekphrastic poems (literally) [sic] speak to, for, or about a work of art; they are verbal representations of visual representations" (1361). Most texts dealing with ekphrastic theory cite two important works, the second a direct response to the first. They are G. E. Lessing's "Laokoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry" (1776) and Murray Krieger's "Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry, or Laokoon Revisited" (1967). Each source deals with the classical idea of ekphrasis as the representation of visual art, including painting, in poetry.

Some more contemporary writers have wrestled with this narrow classical definition in an attempt to broaden the applicability of the term, while others maintain the critical tradition. In Chapter I, "Ekphrasis: A Fresh Look at an Old Theoretical Approach," I discuss both Lessing and Krieger as well as more recent work by James Heffernan and Valerie Robillard. I

find Robillard's parameters for ekphrasis the most useful in my examination of O'Hara's work, although concepts from the other theorists also enter the discussion.

Robillard frames ekphrasis in terms of what she sees as an often intricate intertextuality between the verbal and the visual. This idea of ekphrasis as a sort of intertextual relationship applies easily to O'Hara's poetry. This concern with intertextuality, like most discussion of O'Hara and his associates, tends to begin with an attempt to define "New York School." Dore Ashton describes it as a movement similar to the European concept of a school of painting, with the style of Abstract Expressionism as the dominating force (2). Artists living and working in New York in the 1950s and early 60s are grouped together due to similarities in their aesthetic ideas and their place in the same social milieu. David Perkins explains that the same applies to the poets of the time: "These poets were friends, referred to one another in their poems, lived in New York City, and described or alluded in their verses to its sophisticated pleasures" (529). (More skeptically, Geoff Ward describes the labeling of the New York poets as a school a "half-joke" that stuck [277].) Even though the genesis of the New York School lies in painting, the poets grow to occupy an integral position in a system of mutual influence. The painters, in fact, were acutely aware of the traditional segregation of the arts in

¹ "Composed from the Greek words ek (out) and phrazein (tell, declare,

America and looked for voices in poetry to serve as inspiration in a way similar to the schools of European (especially Parisian) tradition. Ashton states that "the lack of poetic voices that did so much to stimulate and advertise the School of Paris was keenly felt in New York" and artists at the time seemed responsive to, if not respectful or even envious of, "French traditions that made the poet the natural ally of the painter" (134). As a result, such writers as Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, James Schuyler and Kenneth Koch were quickly accepted and added to the culture of New York.

Once interrelations between the two worlds of art have a chance to germinate, an intricate intertextuality is formed. Perkins writes that "much in the styles [of the New York School Poets] might be explained by reference to Abstract Expressionism and collage" (529). O'Hara gleans from the painters the idea of art as a process that is not only changing, but evolutionary:

the abstract expressionists in particular and
then later other artists...gave me the
feeling that one should work harder and
should really try to do something other than
just polish whatever talent one had been
recognized for, that one should go
further. (*Standing Still* 3)

Geoff Ward describes the relationship between the painters and poets of this time and their respective ideologies as a combination of synchronicity and difference:

insofar as the poets named here [including O'Hara] may be read as a group, that group did emerge in a historical relationship to the painters of the Abstract Expressionist movement. That relationship was defined by antithesis as much as continuation. Where Abstract Expressionism denotes an art often of monumental severity, the poets are witty, sociable, and bored with alienation and too-heavy symbols (*Statutes* 7).

O'Hara entered into a New York where the Abstract Expressionists were thriving. But his writing more closely relates to the painters referred to as the "2nd Generation": Rivers, Johns, Rauschenberg, Hartigan, Freilicher, Goldberg. O'Hara pushes the form of the poem in several directions, often within the same poem. Perkins explicates part of "Second Avenue" as Surrealist, while a few lines later it becomes a presentation of wit (532). Perhaps due to these elements, perhaps due to the way in which O'Hara wrote (at lunches on napkins, on scraps of paper at any moment), his poems evoke a sense of spontaneity and urgency, similar to the work of these painters.

The playfulness of the images and language of "Today" serves as almost an anthem for this poetic approach:

Oh! kangaroos, sequins, chocolate sodas!
You really are beautiful! Pearls,
harmonicas, jujubes, aspirins! all
the stuff they've always talked about

still makes a poem a surprise! (CP 15).

This wonder and fascination at the ordinary and the everyday is present in O'Hara's "I do this I do that" poems (CP 341), narrated in a "flatly factual voice telling of his literal, small doings on an ordinary day" (Perkins 534). These poems recount the buying of alcohol, walks down the street, lunches and conversations with friends. The friends are named, but left unexplained. A researched explication of one of the "I do this I do that" poems would most likely identify the persons mentioned as members of the New York School. In "A Step Away From Them," a poem written in 1956, O'Hara laments "First/ Bunny died, then John Latouche, / then Jackson Pollock. But is the/ earth as full as life was full, of them?" (CP 258). Pollock, of course, refers to the artist; Latouche was a musician and writer, and "Bunny" is O'Hara's friend and fellow poet Violet Lang. "Portrait of Grace" refers to a work by Larry Rivers of fellow artist Grace Hartigan. "[DEAR JAP,]" is a poem-letter for artist Jasper Johns.

These "named names" hold a level of significance on their own, as representatives of O'Hara's life and, by extension, the New York art milieu, and it is easy to see through signals such as this sort of name-dropping how much of O'Hara's work either responds to or stems from the work of other artists. A healthy chunk of the *Collected Poems* was originally sent in letters to these poets and painters and never published, but kept as a part of his private manuscripts. In a 1965 interview with Edward Lucie-Smith, O'Hara himself states that he does not feel as if he ever really "collaborated" with a painter. O'Hara did, however, construct texts of visual and verbal elements in conjunction with particular artists. To name a few: "Stones," lithographs with Larry Rivers (1958); a series on paper with Norman Bluhm (1960); and collages with Joe Brainard (1964). What, then, is O'Hara's definition of collaboration? In Ch. 4 "Collaborations," I will approach this issue, using some of Lessing's original ideas on the limits of each genre, and thus the limits of connections between them. Wallace Stevens' "The Relations between Poetry and Painting," presented at the Museum of Modern Art in New York on January 15, 1951 and published later that year by the Museum as a pamphlet, was surely known by this group, including O'Hara, and is helpful in its discussion of the similarities in the modern arts, places where painting and poetry easily intersect in dialogue. (Alan Feldman utilizes Stevens as a means of introduction to his critical text on O'Hara.)

O'Hara's personal and professional life includes too many connections to artists and their work for the thesis to be inclusive. I focus on figures whose ties with O'Hara are well enough documented to suggest general applicability to the poet's artistic framework. Larry Rivers, Jane Freilicher, Grace Hartigan and Willem and Elaine de Kooning had significant relationships with O'Hara, both personally and artistically. Michael Goldberg, Norman Bluhm, and Joe Brainard collaborated with him on several projects. My chapter arrangement will move from my theoretical framework down to a closer look at particular poems and painters: 1. Ekphrasis: A Fresh Look at an Old Theoretical Frame, 2. Painting Poems: O'Hara's Relationship with Visual Art, 3. Painter Poems: Inspiration from Personal Relationships and 4. Collaborations: Friendship and Work Manifested in Ekphrasis. The section on collaborations, as previously mentioned, will be concerned with defining collaboration in order to discuss work O'Hara actually constructed together with an artist. The discussion will include the oft anthologized "Why I Am Not A Painter" as well as "In Memory of My Feelings" and "Second Avenue." I will also mention several of the less often discussed poems of the "I do this I do that" type, exemplified by "Poem (Now it is the 27th)." These will help illustrate both representations of painting in general in O'Hara's poems (Chapter 2), as well as his relationship to specific painters and their styles (Chapter 3). The aim is not

to closely explicate individual poems, but to use a few in order to address the larger issue of contextualizing O'Hara in reference to painters and painting.

Chapter I

EKPHRASIS: A Fresh Look at an Old Theoretical Frame

From Horace's *ut pictura poesis* to Aristotle's proposal of composition for the imitative arts in the *Poetics*, poetry and painting have enjoyed attention in tandem. Wallace Stevens concludes that such study not only is useful to each of the particular art forms, but also is reflective of art's current climate and universal in its application:

It is enough to have brought poetry and painting into relation as sources of our present conception of reality, without asserting that they are the sole sources, and as supports a kind of life, which it seems to be worth living, with their support, even if doing so is only a stage in the endless study of an existence, which is the heroic subject of all study. (175-76)

However overly rhetorical Stevens' statement may seem, it is effective in conveying the magnitude many attribute to these explorations. Such discussion also serves to substantiate further applications and arguments, including my current exploration of O'Hara and painting.

O'Hara's fellow poet Ashbery wryly expresses his own perspective in "And *Ut Pictura Poesis* is Her Name":

About what to put in your poem-painting:

Flowers are always nice, particularly delphinium,
Names of boys you once knew and their sleds,
Skyrockets are good—do they still exist?
There are a lot of other things of the same quality
As those I've mentioned. Now one must
Find a few important words, and a lot of low-keyed,
Dull sounding ones (*Selected Poems* 235).

Whether the discussion is pedantic or ironic, the written and plastic arts have historically been linked, particularly in the arenas of criticism and theory.

Ekphrasis has emerged to narrow the examination of how a poem describes, uses, or refers to a particular work of art. G.E. Lessing's late eighteenth-century work on ekphrasis is cited by nearly every writer dealing with ekphrasis since, from definitive resources like *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* to recent essays that examine specific works. It is important, then, for my use of the idea of ekphrasis to begin with Lessing as well.

Lessing sees visual representations (painting, sculpture) as limited due to a concern for the concept of beauty. He speaks of classical considerations, established by "the Ancients," as indicating particular stylistic demands, according to which "screams must be reduced to sighs, not because screams would betray weakness, but because they would deform the countenance to a repulsive degree" (13). Lessing is referring to the central

figure of the first-century Hellenistic sculpture of the Laokoon group.² In Virgil's *Aeneid*, the father screams horribly as the serpents attack, while the sculpture shows lips parted in silent pain, far from the shrieks the poet describes.

Lessing stresses, almost exclusively, such differences between poetry and painting, rather than delineating similarities or opportunities for close connection. The two arts, visual and poetical, are described by Lessing as having markedly different rules and capabilities. He sees poetry, in the hands of a master, as surpassing painting in its ability to provide truly vivid depiction. Though most of his text looks at Virgil's Laokoon, it is in Lessing's discussion of Homer that this polarity is clearest:

The poet here is as far beyond the painter,
as life is better than a picture...It is
impossible to translate into any other
language the musical painting heard in the
poet's words. Equally impossible would it be
to infer it from the canvas. Yet this is the
least of the advantages possessed by the
poetical picture. Its chief superiority is
that it leads us through a whole gallery of
pictures up to the point depicted by the
artist. (84-5)

² See Appendix A.

Lessing further discusses Homer's poetry in terms of how artists have tried to represent the stories of the Iliad and the Odyssey through their own visual means. Lessing gives a certain amount of credit to the artist, but reserves his highest praise for the poet: "Painted pictures drawn from the poems of Homer, however numerous and however admirable they may be, can give us no idea of the descriptive talent of the poet" (86).

Lessing significantly limits the range of relation possible between poets and painters, indicating only a system of object and response, rather than the many possibilities that exist for influence, commentary, appreciation and dialogue. Lessing assumes his audience will agree, stating that "when we speak of an artist as imitating a poet or a poet an artist we may mean one of two things,-- either that one makes the work of the other his actual model, or that the same original is before them both, and one borrows from the other the manner of copying it" (49). By thus distilling the ways in which poetry and art may be connected, Lessing truncates the realm of ekphrasis. Part of this limitation is due to the boundaries of his own culture, of working in a time and space unable to anticipate the growing complexity of art and writing relations that would characterize later modern and contemporary eras. Lessing's understanding of painting is one of a single time and place, similar to what he sees as the means available to the visual artists he critiques:

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Since the artist can use but a single moment of ever-changing nature, and the painter must further confine his study of this one moment to a single point of view, while their works are made not simply to be looked at, but to be contemplated long and often, evidently the most fruitful moment and the most fruitful aspect of that moment must be chosen. (16)

Lessing's discourse reflects the canon of art and literature as available to him in his own time. Were he able to see the Cubists of the early twentieth century, he would be confronted with paintings whose compositions rely on multiple perspectives and the fusion of separate moments in time. Lessing's delineation of what art can and cannot do would certainly be altered by the energy and emotion of the Abstract Expressionist and Action Painters who so influenced O'Hara and his work. Artistic evolution of the last two centuries antiquates some of Lessing's argument, rendering it inadequate as a solitary means of interpretation. I turn, therefore, to subsequent discussions of ekphrasis in order to develop my understanding of the concept as it might apply to O'Hara.

Murray Krieger's 1967 response, "Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry; or, Laokoon Revisited," addresses his departure from Lessing's "insistence on keeping distinct among the arts what belonged to Peter and what to Paul, what to space

and what to time" (4). He defines ekphrasis as "the imitation in literature of a work of plastic art" (5). Unlike Lessing, Krieger stresses the similarities between poetry and painting, rather than the distinctions. The "still movement" to which he refers in his title is meant to be inclusive: "I have freely used it as adjective, adverb, and verb; as still movement, still moving and more forcefully, the stilling of movement" (7). Defined in this manner, Krieger sees still movement as an integral part of the relationship between literature and art.

Where Lessing describes art only in terms of a carefully selected frozen moment in time, Krieger proposes poetry can be described in much the same way, as this "still movement." Krieger's counterpoint to Lessing lies in the expansion of the possibilities of ekphrasis as a useful critical term: "ekphrasis, no longer a narrow kind of poem defined by its object of imitation, broadens to become a general principle of poetics, asserted by every poem in the assertion of its integrity" (22). The reconsideration of Lessing's confining separation of poetry and painting is welcome, but to call every poem of formal "integrity" ekphrastic would be inaccurate. The genesis of the term "ekphrasis," however debated its definition and parameters, lies in the struggle of literary critics to describe those poems whose form or subject delves into the realm of visual arts.

Krieger visits the subject again in 1992 in *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*, this time expanding his original

ideas on ekphrasis and speaking in terms of an "ekphrastic principle" that no longer limits the poetic representation to visual art or painting, but expands the possibilities to "the visual" in general. Two decades after the publication of his first article, Krieger still finds the subject of ekphrasis to be "maddeningly elusive" and fraught with "theoretical evasiveness" (1). He subsequently delivers a rather lengthy list of what his theory of ekphrasis seems to include. His claim that "a study that parades under the name ekphrasis can be many things" is obviously qualitative, nudging the reader to accept his current mode as most genuine (3). He does, however, choose to situate his discussion within the context of a larger measure of possibilities the term ekphrasis may cover. Krieger's list suggests one might examine the poetry and painting of a particular period of time to look for connections between the two, or "as a slight variation of such a study, we could look at the attitudes of individual poets or schools of poets toward painting or contemporary painters, or the reverse, the attitudes of painters toward poems or contemporary poets, tracing friendships and enmities, influences and aversions" (3). Here I see the beginning of how ekphrasis might be useful in reading O'Hara. Of all the writers living and working in New York at his time, he is acknowledged as the most closely connected to the pulse of the art world. Anyone who seeks to "trace friendships

and enmities, influence and aversions" in the New York School will find O'Hara at every turn.

In 1993, James Heffernan redefines ekphrasis again, calling for movement away from Krieger's ekphrastic principle, back to a less generalized conception. Heffernan looks to the roots of the term: "composed from the Greek words eke (out) and phrazein (tell, declare, pronounce), ekphrasis originally meant 'telling in full'" (191). His working definition is "simple in form but complex in its implications: ekphrasis is the verbal representation of visual representation" (3). The novelty to Heffernan's approach lies in the texts he chooses, moving from classical to contemporary. John Ashbery's "Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror" is given particular attention as "probably the most resoundingly ekphrastic poem ever written" (170). Heffernan calls Ashbery "the premier combination of art critic and poet in our time" with one qualification: "the exception of Frank O'Hara" (169). He justifies his pursuit of Ashbery partially through a chronology of Ashbery's critical work on art and artists, explaining that "the full story of what Ashbery's poetry owes to his experience of visual art would probably require careful scrutiny of all these items-- however ephemeral some of them may be-- as well as the volumes of poetry he has published under titles drawn from paintings...and all of the other allusions to painters and painting that ripple through Ashbery's poems" (170). Such an allowance seems at odds with Heffernan's self-imposed

narrow definition of ekphrasis and more in line with Krieger's 1992 work. This discrepancy and unwitting agreement with Krieger lead towards more of a consensus on how to talk about ekphrasis than Heffernan's text would first suggest. Heffernan draws his title *Museum of Words* from part of his definition of ekphrasis, saying that "in a sense, the whole collection of ekphrastic poetry treated in this book can be seen as a museum of words-- a gallery of art constructed by language alone" (8).

In each of these discussions of the concept of ekphrasis , I find useful vocabulary with which to examine O'Hara, his work, and his relationships with painters and painting. Lessing's preference for poetry over painting is inversely related to some of O'Hara's thoughts on how painters are capable of modes of expression that he, as a poet, is not. Krieger's broadening of the concept of ekphrasis sets a precedent for further discussion. Heffernan's vision of a "museum of words" could be seen in several of O'Hara's descriptive painting poems. This is in line with ekphrasis as "verbal representation of visual representation." I contend, however, that a work does not have to be strictly descriptive in order to fall into the realm of ekphrasis. O'Hara's writing is so often referential that Heffernan would not explicitly term the poems ekphrastic, even though his discussion of Ashbery gives an implicit nod to O'Hara's work.

Lessing's preference for poetry over painting, for instance, is inversely related to some of O'Hara's thoughts on how painters are capable of modes of expression that he, as a poet, is not. Where Lessing values poetry over the visual arts, O'Hara sees painting as capable of "immediacy": "He accepted that his poetry-- any poetry-- could never achieve the direct immediacy in itself of a brushstroke across a piece of canvas" (Ferguson 25). Krieger's broadening of the concept of ekphrasis, as Heffernan says, "gives this moribund term a new lease on life" and sets a precedent for further discussion (2). Heffernan's vision of a "museum of words" can be seen in several of O'Hara's descriptive painting poems.

Meanwhile, a 1998 collection, Valerie Robillard and Els Jongeneel's *Pictures into Words: Theoretical and Descriptive Approaches to Ekphrasis*, provides the broadest and most applicable variation on the traditional definition of ekphrasis. Robillard both includes and questions previous definitions:

if we continue to base our understanding of ekphrasis primarily on the attempt of the verbal to represent or describe a visual work of art, or even its ability to do this at all, then how do we account for the myriad of alternative ways in which contemporary literary works touch on the visual arts, some

of which are themselves non-representational?

(53-54)

Robillard's solution is to look at ekphrastic work in terms of its intertextuality. Her terms allow significant freedom in the definition of a text's range of references. A written text may refer to a visual text (i.e. painting), the ideology from which a visual text stems or the artists who create the visual text. This version of ekphrasis as intertextuality is integral to approaching O'Hara's writing.

Robillard proceeds to apply Manfred Pfister's 1985 model of intertextuality to ekphrasis. She presents Pfister's model and her adaptation of it in great detail:

Pfister proposes an intertextual framework consisting of six points which measure the manner and degree to which an intertext is present within a new text. He visualizes his model as a system of concentric circles, where the highest possible intertextual intensity is located at the center; the further from this center, the weaker the intertextual relationship. (57)

Robillard's subsequent model for ekphrasis based on intertextuality between verbal and visual texts allows, then, for one work to be "more" ekphrastic, another "less." She uses the

same six labels as Pfister for her scalar model, modifying each category as necessary:

1. **Communicativity**
2. **Referentiality**
3. **Structurality**
4. **Selectivity**
5. **Dialogicity and**
6. **Autoreflexivity.**

Communicativity is the basic use of allusion to a pretext in an intertext. Robillard clarifies that "this ranges from vague allusions to a direct reference in a title, to explicit marking in the body of the text" (57). O'Hara's "Study for Women on a Beach," for instance, obviously refers to a pictorial work, but does not explicitly name the artist nor can we trust O'Hara's imagery of "flaming parachutes/ of praise, and walruses wear[ing] sables" as literal (128).

Referentiality, as used by Robillard, is "quantitative" measuring "the extent to which a poet actually uses an artwork in the text" (58). **Structurality** applies to poems of ekphrasis in which the writer actively appropriates the form of the pretext art through imitation of structure. The category of **selectivity** looks at what specific elements of the pretext are chosen and emphasized. Robillard explains that "this category also refers to the transposition of certain topics, myths, or norms and conventions of particular periods or styles of pictorial

representation" (59). Many of O'Hara's poems are products of his immediate culture, the artistic climate of New York at the time of his writing. His *selectivity* is often expressed in loosely mentioned names of artists and galleries, emphasizing not always a particular artist or work, but the general milieu with whom O'Hara associated and their "particular period." In "Lines for the Fortune Cookies" O'Hara asks "Have you been to Mike Goldberg's show? Al Leslie's?" (CP 466). "Bill's School of New York" not only includes a highly referential title, but the line "He is most at home at the Sidney Janis Gallery," a common showcase for the work of O'Hara's friends (CP 415).

In Robillard's model, **dialogicity** addresses the tension created between two texts that may handle their subject matter in the frame of very different ideologies. An intertext that intentionally criticizes or evaluates its pretext in some way is of a higher degree of intertextual intensity, or dialogicity (59). O'Hara's "Digression on *Number 1*, 1948" is a lovingly rendered exploration of Jackson Pollock's 68" x 104" drip painting:

There is the Pollock, white, harm
will not fall, his perfect hand

and the many short voyages. They'll
never fence the silver range.

Stars are out and there is sea

enough beneath the glistening earth

To bear me toward the future

which is not so dark. I see (CP 260).

Here the ekphrasis of the poem can be explored in terms of its *dialogicity* of admiration and appreciation of the pretext of Pollock's painting, as well as being high in *communicativity* (the title of the painting and artist's name are clear) and *referentiality* (the bulk of the poem itself appears to describe both the visual appearance of the painting and the poet's response).

Autoreflexivity, according to Robillard, is found when "the poet specifically reflects on and problematizes the connection between his poem and its pictorial source(s), or, for example, between his own medium and that of the plastic arts" (59). "To Larry Rivers" expresses a criticism of poetry that O'Hara often brings forth, as writing is only able to *name* that which the painter *does* (CP 128).

Within Robillard's parameters, the personal relationship between an artist and a writer might be read as a text that may enter into the text of their visual or verbal work, thus creating the sort of intertextual connection she deems as part of ekphrasis. I do not use Robillard's amalgam of the Pfister model in direct application to O'Hara's poetry, but as a more general justification for my interest in the intricate web formed by the subject and forms he chose and the artists he knew. This is not

the place for determining if a particular poem fits into level 3 or 3a of the Robillard/Pfister scales; but it is through the suggestion of the importance of intertextuality that my understanding of the applicability of ekphrasis is complete. The term seems an excellent, if not obvious, one to connect to the work of O'Hara.

Chapter II

PAINTING POEMS: O'Hara's Relationship with Visual Art

Frank O'Hara moved to New York in August of 1951 after finishing his BA at Harvard and MA at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. In the 1993 biography *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara*, Brad Gooch describes O'Hara's immersion in the artistic culture of New York as immediate: "Within three months of his arrival, O'Hara figured out a clever way to combine his need for art, money, friendship, and poetry. He needed a job, and he found one that exposed him to painting and painters while still allowing him time to write poems" (208). A retrospective show of Matisse opened at the Museum of Modern Art in November of 1951. O'Hara took a job at the front desk "selling postcards, publications and tickets" in early December so he could see the show repeatedly (207). He would return to the Museum of Modern Art in 1955, this time as a special assistant to the International Program. His tenure at the museum culminated in his appointment as Associate Curator of Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions in 1965. O'Hara was not a poet who merely liked art or was fascinated with painting; his daily working life was consumed with visual art. In "A False Account of Talking with Frank O'Hara and Roland Barthes in Philadelphia" Bob Perelman wittily remarks on the poet/curator combination by having Barthes question O'Hara about the tone of his poem "A Step Away From Them":

"Were you writing there as curator or poet?"

"Neither" [O'Hara answers].

"You really can't say that." (62)

I contend that in saying "neither" O'Hara (or one of his critics, Perelman, myself) could just as easily say "both," for that is ultimately and inescapably how he wrote: as both curator *and* poet.

Stevens' "The Relations Between Poetry and Painting," presented at the Museum of Modern Art the same year O'Hara moved to the city, is a good barometer of the connectivity of the arts at the time. Stevens justifies the importance of the study of these relationships (and, according to the definitions we have discussed, ekphrasis) through the apparent importance each artisan places on his counterpart:

The truth is that there seems to exist a corpus of remarks in respect to painting, most often the remarks of painters themselves, which are as significant to poets as to painters. All of the details, to the extent that they have meaning for poets as well as painters, are specific instances of relations between poetry and painting. I suppose, therefore, that it would be possible to study poetry by studying painting. (160)

More specifically, it is effective to study O'Hara through studying the painting he knew and with which he worked. This echoes one form of ekphrastic theory put forth by Krieger in *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*: "we could relate the actual painting being produced in a give period with the poetry being written and trace the relationships, if any, between these products" (3). Thus, we look towards the efforts of painters in New York in the early 1950s to see with what attitudes O'Hara was confronted, to grasp what Stevens terms "the coercing influences of time and space" (172).

Abstract Expressionism emerged in American art in the 1940s as many painters began to strive for spontaneity and energy as the driving forces for their work. Also known as the Action Painters, members of what would come to be called The New York School are well known: Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, Franz Kline, among others. These artists were enormously successful, enjoying increasingly public attention. By 1949 Pollock paintings, for instance, were in five museums across the states and in forty private collections, a testament to the movement as well as his own popularity (Ashton 154). Their success affected not only other painters, but all manner of artists, including writers. Von Hallberg indicates a level of intimidation involved in the measure of their success; for some that circle seemed unattainable, yet attractive, and artists and writers responded accordingly:

The enthusiasm of the New York poets in the 1950s was mostly for the so-called second generation-- Larry Rivers, Helen Frankenthaler, Grace Hartigan, Robert Rauschenberg and others-- who were not making a radical break with the art institutions of their time, but rather were trying to clear professional space for their own careers in the shadow of the immediately preceding generation. (104)

In *Statutes of Liberty* Geoff Ward agrees that "the poets had before them the conspicuously successful example of the New York painters, whose encouragement and interests may have been a stimulus, but whose success cast a shadow over the writers' efforts to 'de-provincialize' poetry and reach a wider public than their own coterie" (7). At the center of the twentieth century Frank O'Hara entered into what seemed to be the center of artistic creativity. Both first and second generation Abstract Expressionists sought to build not just individual pieces of art, but whole new methods of construction. In her discussion of the year 1950 as a "turning point" in American art, April Kingsley suggests the label of "Action Painting" for the Abstract Expressionist movement "speaks of its physicality, its base in the process of making, rather than in an intellectual esthetic position" (11). These painters were interested not only in the

final product, but the methods, materials and movements necessary to create the end result as well. The definition of materials for painting was changing. In this area, too, the emphasis was on openness, newness and experimentation. Kingsley mentions the innovative methods utilized by the painters: "dripping, throwing, squirting, squeegeeing, and spattering-- using crude, untraditional tools like unwieldy house-painters' brushes, sticks, basting syringes and trowels" (12).

The painting of the time reflects images of a particular time and space and these materials helped reinforce the transient nature of the work; it could not be repeated in exactly the same way. O'Hara was attracted to the time-bound and process-centered nature of the work, to the expression of a single instant. Many of the poems contain exact references to places or time of the day. "A Step Away From Them" recounts what he sees and buys during the hour he has taken for lunch: "Everything/ suddenly honks: it is 12:40 of a Thursday" (*Collected* 257). The poem titled "October 26 1952 10:30 O'Clock" is a beautiful lament on waiting for a friend; it ends "Where are you? where are you? where are you?" (*Collected* 105-6). We can only guess the friend (unnamed, but obviously Jane Freilicher) eventually arrives and the two roar off into the night, the pain of the poem a product of simply that moment. O'Hara was also often meticulous in dating his drafts, including his location at the time of writing.

Other effects of contemporary philosophies of painting are found elsewhere in the poems. James Breslin tells us the work of the Abstract Expressionists "sometimes inspired particular O'Hara poems, and their inventions and theories, particularly those of the 'action painters,' stimulated O'Hara to push his own medium in new and adventuresome directions" (212). "Adventuresome" is an excellent term for O'Hara's playful use of language in his writing. No word is too unpoetic for an O'Hara poem. The very first line of "Oranges," for instance, reads "Black crows in the burnt mauve grass, as intimate as rotting rice, snot on a white linen field" (CP 5). "Biotherm" mentions both 'horseshit' and 'bullshit' (CP 439) and admonishes "better a faggot than a farthead" (CP 441). O'Hara even has a penchant for rendering any manner of sound or utterance in the text. An early poem from his days as a student at Harvard entitled "God!" ends not with some religious or spiritual commentary, as the title might imply, but with a sneeze: "Pfui!" (*Early Writing* 62).

O'Hara's facility with language was not limited to novelty, however, anymore than the Expressionists were incapable of realism. He could just as easily manipulate difficult textual phrasings, often peppering the lines with bits of German or French. "Choses Passageres," for instance, is entirely in French. O'Hara's occasional use of sound words and conversational speech is a choice of experimental material, just

as the painters were using fantastically large canvases and cheap paints.

In his insightful article, "O'Hara on the Silver Range," Anthony Libby provides a metaphor that aptly connects the awareness of moments of time, places and people in the poetry to the concepts of painting. Libby suggests that "visualizing O'Hara as an Action Painter operating in essentially abstract realms leads not only to a sense of the richness of his trivia but to the depths in his deliberately flat surfaces" (241). This helps support my argument that much of O'Hara's work is ekphrastic. In what better way can poetry reflect art than for the poet to express artistic sensibilities similar to a painter's? O'Hara recognizes the tension in himself as a poet so surrounded and immersed in the ideas of painting in "Why I Am Not A Painter":

I am not a painter, I am a poet.

Why? I think I would rather be

a painter, but I am not. (*Collected* 261-2)

The poem proceeds to discuss his writing in tandem with a painting project of Michael Goldberg.³ The simultaneous discussion leads the reader to look for comparisons as well as contrasts between the acts of writing and painting. O'Hara signals just how connected are the two seemingly separate acts of creation by indicating that the painter (Goldberg) has begun with

³ See Appendix E1.

a word (sardines), while he, the poet, began his writing "thinking of/ a color: orange." O'Hara may not be a painter, but his poem so resoundingly echoes the awareness of a painter, it is best described through the recent definitions of ekphrasis.

O'Hara rather passionately describes the emotion of the post-World War II art movement in his 1959 volume *Jackson Pollock*:

This new painting does have qualities of passion and lyrical desperation, unmasked and uninhibited, not found in other recorded eras; it is not surprising that faced with universal destruction, as we are told, art should at last speak with unimpeded force and unveiled honesty to a future which well may be non-existent, in a last effort of recognition which is the justification of being. (22)

It is as apparent to O'Hara as to the other art critics that the frenzy, the emotion, the emphasis on the moment of the Action Painters was a natural, necessary response to the seriousness of world war and the inherent threat of the atomic bomb. These artists lived and played with as much vigor as their work expressed: they felt, in some ways, that they had to do so.

An aspect that is most clear in O'Hara's writing on Pollock is that he absolutely adores the Action Painters and their work.

He calls Pollock's *Blue Poles* "one of the great masterpieces of Western Art" and "the drama of an American conscience, lavish bountiful and rigid" (30-31). *The Deep* is "a work which contemporary esthetic conjecture had cried out for" (30). *Number 1, 1948* is "one of the most perfect works of his life [Pollock's] or anyone else's, viewer or artist" (25).⁴ O'Hara's poem "Digression on *Number 1, 1948*" expresses his admiration for Pollock, for this particular painting, and for art and artists in general. The second stanza chronicles "A fine day for seeing" in which he observes and mentions several works by artists, including Miro and Picasso (*Collected* 260). *Number 1, 1948* elevates his mood:

I am tired today but I am not
too tired. I am not tired at all.
There is the Pollock, white, harm
will not fall, his perfect hand

and the many short voyages.

The poem closes lyrically, simply: "I see."

O'Hara's interest in the dialogue between the verbal and the visual is emphasized by his experiments with imitations of the calligram form. The calligram is a visual poem in which the composition of the verse forms the shape of its subject. Guillaume Apollinaire's 1918 collection *Calligrammes* is the

⁴ See Appendix D.

benchmark for the form (Preminger and Brogan 160). The four lines of "It's Raining," for example, snake their way down the page vertically in waves to simulate the fall of drops of water.⁵ "The Bleeding-Heart Dove and the Fountain" is as mournful visually as it is in tone, the shaking symmetrical arcs of the fountain filled with words for "THOSE WHO LEFT FOR THE WAR IN THE NORTH [who] ARE FIGHTING NOW" (*Calligrammes* 123).⁶ Other images formed by the *Calligrammes* include rifles, hearts, stars, a necktie and watch, and the Eiffel Tower. Apollinaire was also a figure in his own art culture, as famous for posing for numerous portraits as for his poetry. The *Calligrammes* reflect the influence of the Cubists, who had incorporated the written word into some of their paintings. O'Hara cites Apollinaire's relationship with cubism as one of the French influences on American painting and one of the reasons poetry and painting found themselves linked in New York (*Standing Still* 3).

O'Hara's dalliance with the form lies in a handful of poems dated November 1950. At this time he was finishing graduate study in Ann Arbor and making regular trips to New York. His burgeoning interest in visual expression is exhibited by these imitations of Apollinaire. "A Small Bouquet" begins with "we do not know what violet calls to us in the wet woods" (*Retrieved* 8).⁷ "We do not know what violet" forms the closed blossom of a

⁵ See Appendix B1.

⁶ See Appendix B2.

⁷ See Appendix C1.

flower while "calls to us in the" serves for the stem, and "wet" and "woods" are each a leaf. A final lines of simple sentiment complete the classically sentimental image as the container for the flowers: "Believe me that all is not easy/ and I surely adore you/ winter and daytime, too." Not only does O'Hara use "violet" and "rose" in the blossom shapes in fulfillment of the calligram form, his presiding tone matches the Victorian poesy echo of the image of a small bouquet of flowers. Another calligram in a different vein, but within the bounds of the visual themes found in Apollinaire's work, is "Automobiles."⁸ Apollinaire's calligrams included mechanical forms as well. O'Hara does depart from the style, or rather creates an addition to the form by linking words together in crossword-puzzle fashion. In order to form the door of the car, the vertical word "paradise" shares the letter "p" with the hiss of "psst!" and the "e" in "we" of "are we not happy riding?" (Retrieved 10).

Two works remain, but share the closest connection in image to each other and to Apollinaire's "Fan of Flavors": one entitled "A Calligram," the other "Poem (WHE EWHEE)". All three poems form the features of a face. The eyebrow of "Fan of Flavors" also resembles a handgun, situating the piece within Apollinaire's series of war poems.⁹ The subject of O'Hara's "A Calligram" not only fits the calligram form, but exhibits his playfulness with words. The hat is formed by the lines "Under this hat I say/

⁸ See Appendix C2.

this dry yellow straw piece" (*Retrieved* 8).¹⁰ Here also is the crossword puzzle intersection of words: "say" and "yellow" share the "y." The tie under the chin holds the line "the tie makes the man yeah!", an exclamation whose urgency seems very much of the moment. "Poem (WHE EWHEE)" forms the shape of a woman's face, the outline of the lips its most prominent suggestion¹¹. In terms of Robillard's hierarchy of forms of ekphrasis, this calligram would be the most ekphrastic. The visual nature of the calligram form itself instantly invokes the sort of relationship between the verbal and the visual that the broader definition of ekphrasis is meant to envelop. The woman represented in the poem's words and shape is Jane Freilicher, a painter friend of O'Hara's. Her full name on the page makes the shape of her nose. A third item to elevate the level of ekphrasis in this particular calligram is the poem's request of a portrait in the line "You are the genre your sweet self, don't forget to paint my trait" (*Collected* 25). O'Hara is calling for an exchange of portraits. He submits his verbal-visual portrait of Jane through this rather exuberant and affectionate calligram, while her portrait of O'Hara would be, we assume, a painting. Such an exchange links verbal and visual, painting and poetry, painter and poet through the act of portraiture. Freilicher did, indeed, paint several images of O'Hara, as he wrote many poems about, or dedicated to,

⁹ See Appendix B3.

¹⁰ See Appendix C3.

¹¹ See Appendix C4.

Jane.¹² The calligrams, this one especially, exhibit the working concepts of ekphrasis in O'Hara's writing due to the close knowledge of painting, its theories and its forms not only through his time at the Museum of Modern Art, but as a personal fan of the visual and those who create it.

¹² Significant Freilicher-inspired poems include: "Poem (WHE EWHEE)," "A Party Full of Friends," Interior (With Jane)," "Jane Awake," "Jane Bathing," "Poem (The distinguished)" (sent to Freilicher in an August 8, 1952 letter), "Chez Jane," "To Jane, An in Imitation of Coleridge," and "To Jane, Some Air." The latter, dated April 1954, is commonly referred to as the last of the Jane poems. It begins "Now what we desire is space" (CP192).

Chapter III

PAINTER POEMS: Inspiration from Personal Relationships

Frank O'Hara's reputation as a representative of the creative energy and spirit of New York City is well established in the body of criticism on his life and work. He adored life in the city--his poems are a clear catalogue of that love affair. But that particular relationship, while of the utmost importance, is only the beginning. O'Hara had many affairs of the heart: some emotional, some physical, some intellectual, some artistic. His most passionate ones, which are evident in his writing and directly influenced it, included several if not all of these aspects. The poems that include the details of his motion-filled daily existence are amazingly approachable despite the many in-jokes and personal references. His life itself was sufficiently open and recorded by friends and family that most, if not all, of these personal references can be uncovered for the original source: a conversation at the Cedar Tavern, an exhibit at MOMA, a weekend getaway at Sneden's landing.

More often than not, each drop of a name in O'Hara's work reveals a poet, painter or other integral figure in New York artistic culture of the 1950s and early 60s. Russell Ferguson's catalogue to the *In Memory of My Feelings* exhibit addresses this aspect of the poems:

O'Hara's poetry begins in the middle of real lives, casually dropping names as if they were as familiar to the reader as to the poet. While the informality of the tone can at first seem baffling, as a reader one is quickly drawn into O'Hara's world, access to which is surprisingly easy to obtain. He simply *assumes* that people will be interested enough to find their way in, as he himself had quickly found his way into the worlds of avant-garde painting and poetry after he came to New York. (39)

When O'Hara mentions "Bill" he either means Bill Berkson, a young poet, or painter Willem de Kooning. "Larry" refers to artist Larry Rivers. Many of New York's artists shared their interests in such ways, despite the differences in the nature of their disciplines. In his essay, "Larry Rivers: A Memoir," O'Hara states they "divided time between the literary bar, the San Remo, and the artist's bar, the Cedar Tavern. In the San Remo, we argued and gossiped; in the Cedar we often wrote poems while listening to the painters argue and gossip" (*Standing Still* 169). The "we" in question are one poet circle of New York, all within the same age range, and all friends: O'Hara, V.R. Lang, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and others. The poets are friends as well with New York's abstract expressionist painting circle: Larry

Rivers, Jackson Pollock, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, and Robert Motherwell, to name a few.

Quite often, the artists would utilize the resource of their friends and peers. After they worked together on a play, Frank O'Hara was "amused" enough to pose for an eight-foot-tall nude portrait by Larry Rivers. A guide book to one of Larry Rivers' shows describes his tendency to become involved in "collaborations with his poet-friends, as in Pyrography: Poem and Portrait of John Ashbery, 1977-82. Throughout his career, words have been an integral part of Rivers' art" (Remer 23). The portrait of Ashbery shows the poet sitting at a typewriter with an enlarged, typed text of a poem for the background. Similarly, Franz Kline incorporates a handwritten version of Frank O'Hara's work "Poem (I will always love you)" into an etching he made for the portfolio *21 Etchings and Poems*, published by the Morris Gallery in 1960. O'Hara originally dedicated the poem to Kline.

Painters, sculptors, writers, and poets interchanged philosophies, ideas, and styles. They constructed projects for one another, and used each other's work as a source of inspiration. O'Hara's manuscript of the poem "Portrait of Grace" has a side note that reads "Rivers' drawing of Grace as a girl monk." O'Hara is referring to Grace Hartigan and Larry Rivers. The poem "Berdie" is about Rivers' mother-in-law from his first marriage. Berdie serves as the model for many of Rivers' paintings. She was also familiar with O'Hara and her former son-

in-law's other artistic friends. The street name in line two of "Berdie" is one of the locations frequented by Rivers and O'Hara. O'Hara's poem "Second Avenue" describes the views of the street. Larry Rivers comments: "His long marvelous poem 'Second Avenue', 1953, was written in my plaster garden studio overlooking that avenue. One night I was working on a piece of sculpture of him. Between poses he was finishing his long poem" (CP 529). O'Hara's "Notes on 'Second Avenue' " are a clear indication of the interrelation of the writers and artists. O'Hara describes the sources on the poem as

a newspaper clipping report of [poet] Bunny
Lang's trip to the Caribbean...a talk with a
sculptor (Larry Rivers, who also sculpts)
about a piece in progress...a description of
Grace Hartigan painting...a little
description of a de Kooning WOMAN which I'd
seen recently at his studio...You see how it
makes it seem very jumbled, while actually
everything in it either happened to me or I
felt happening...(*Standing Still* 39).

The complexities of the relationships and the subsequent descriptive poem have the same feel as paint that has been layered to achieve depth: many colors show through, but it is the whole that forms the image.

"Second Avenue" is one of many O'Hara poems written in connection to Larry Rivers. His relationship with Rivers is an excellent example of how O'Hara's personal and professional lives often collided within his relations to artistic companions. Rivers was a friend, a lover, a collaborator, inspiration and a distraction. Rivers produced several portraits of O'Hara, including a rather infamous full size nude in which the poet is depicted wearing only a pair of leather boots. The two worked together on a series of prints called "Stones," which paired visual and text elements into one work. The finished effect is one that is visual art and poetry, one, the other and simultaneously. In his autobiography Rivers writes about their relationship in terms of reciprocity: "Frank O'Hara was a big influence on me, but I think I influenced him too; I was already a working artist in New York [when we met]" (230).

One of the modes of mutual inspiration shared by O'Hara and Rivers is the tendency for the immediacy of the moment and its environment to overtake other factors in their work. Just as lunch with a friend might send O'Hara scrambling for a writing utensil, so Rivers would find inspiration for his paintings and constructions in the times and places of his daily life. Abby Remer describes such an incident in the catalogue to Rivers' 1991 exhibition *Public and Private*: "In 1959 Rivers walked out of the Cedar Bar, the popular downtown New York City haunt of the Abstract Expressionists, with a poem wrapped in a menu. His

initial intention was to illustrate the poem, but this painting [Cedar Bar Menu I] resulted instead" (20).¹³ On a white ground with swatches of bright green, red, and blue in stylized, stabbing letters *Cedar Bar Menu I* renders the list of food choices and their prices: Beef Goulash 1.25 Hawaiian Ham Steak 1.35. O'Hara does much the same thing in his 1965 poem "Spring's First Day". In a white space between stanzas, it reads "BEANS/ regularly 2 cans 35cents" and TUNAFISH/ regularly 2 cans 35cents" (CP 245).

Rivers and O'Hara also debated the competing merits of expression through painting and writing. In what feels like an immediate verbal response, one half of a dialogue, O'Hara praises painting in "To Larry Rivers":

You are worried that you don't write?
Don't be. It's the tribute of the air that
your paintings don't just let go
of you. And what poet ever sat down
in front of a Titian, pulled out
his versifying tablet and began
to drone? Don't complain, my dear,
You do what I can only name. (Collected 128)

O'Hara speaks here not only as a somewhat self-effacing art museum employee, but as a devoted aficionado and still more devoted friend of a painter.

¹³ See Appendix F1.

Their relationship, of course, was not one of constant seriousness and work. Both men were extremely social creatures, carousing as if mixing business with pleasure was not just preferable, but vital. Rivers comments on typical banter with O'Hara, saying "So how long can you discuss any subject, especially behind three martinis? If any moment of our getting together began to resemble a seminar, we'd switch to social gossip, art gossip" (230). In a recent article for *Modern Painters* Bill Berkson, a younger poet-friend of O'Hara's, recounts an anecdote that helps indicate the playful regard O'Hara had for Rivers. Berkson says "I thought from seeing his paintings that Larry Rivers must be the sharpest person alive, but when I got to know him he seemed as confused as anyone else, not sophisticated at all. How could that be? Frank O'Hara said: 'Maybe he's just come out the other side'" (51). O'Hara's affection for Rivers extended to his mother-in-law and often model, Berdie. She enters as the subject of several poems, including "Song of Ending," dated October 29, 1957 in which O'Hara laments:

Berdie, Berdie

where are you, and why?

sometimes I see you in the earth

sometimes in the sky (*Collected* 279)

Berdie had died in August of 1957. Rivers said that O'Hara's eulogy made the entire attendance of the funeral cry (331). Later, Rivers' *In Memory of the Dead*, 1966 would serve as a visual eulogy in remembrance of both Berdie and O'Hara.¹⁴ The collage shows Berdie seated in a large chair, a familiar pose used in other paintings. Below her are tacked up sketch studies for other paintings including repetitions of the Camel cigarette camel and one of Rivers' birds. O'Hara sits at the low center of the collage, this image taken from a photograph of him while he was working on the *Stones* lithographs.

Such intense intermingling of friendship, passion, work and craft was not unusual in O'Hara's life. O'Hara moved from muse to muse, lending insight and inspiration of his own as much as he took such energy from others. Through a poem like "Why I Am Not A Painter," it is possible to understand further some of the ways in which the painters and poets related. The lines "It's twelve poems, I call/ it ORANGES" refer to one of O'Hara's earlier works. "Oranges: 12 Pastorals" is, as described in "Why I Am Not A Painter," divided into twelve sections, none of which embraces orange as a concept, color, or fruit. O'Hara links the two poems, yet does not cause them to depend on one another for meaning. O'Hara has no intention of creating dependency between any of his texts. In response to a request from an editor of a literary magazine for an explanation of meaning and subject for a

¹⁴ See Appendix F2.

particular poem, O'Hara expresses a desire for "the poem to be the subject, not just about it" ("Notes on *Second Avenue*," 495-97). Here again O'Hara shares philosophies with painters. Wallace Stevens says that modern art "has a reason for everything. Even the lack of reason becomes a reason. Picasso expresses surprise that people should ask what a picture means and says that pictures are not intended to have meanings. This explains everything" (167). While it is overstatement to say Picasso's position "explains everything," it does lend insight into how O'Hara worked. When reading "Why I Am Not A Painter" it is not necessary to know there actually is a set of twelve poems called "Oranges". The detail is not required for clarification. The connection does, however, lend the two poems a certain sense of fluid evolution. The poems prove strong enough individually to serve as catalysts and descriptors of other works of art.

This particular poem is exemplary of the depth of intertextuality in O'Hara's work. The initial manuscript draft of "Oranges: 12 Pastorals" is dated June-August 1949, during O'Hara's years at Harvard. The first publication occurs in 1953 by the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in a pamphlet for Grace Hartigan's twelve-painting exhibition aptly titled "Oranges." In his volume on the artist, Robert Mattison confirms O'Hara is the impetus for Hartigan's *Oranges* series: "Hartigan remembers telling him in one of their many conversation over drinks that she would like to do 'a lot of something.' O'Hara whimsically replied 'How about

oranges? I have a dozen'" (28). What we do not know is if O'Hara had his poems in mind from the beginning or was being literal about fruit in his kitchen, or both. The resulting paintings certainly have as little to do with fruit as the poems. Each painting has one of O'Hara's pastoral poems rendered in part or whole in paint, letters and words of varying size, line of the letters in varying thicknesses. Some hint at the shape of a figure or other recognizable form, others are completely abstract; many contain bright swatches of blue. Mattison admires the series for the intensity of the connections between O'Hara's verbal and Hartigan's visual productions, saying that "her mood parallels his; sensuous and ironic passages alternate with each other in the paintings" (28). *Oranges No. 7* shows a nude male in flesh tone and white, a large yellow-orange sun encircling his head like a halo.¹⁵ Large deep blue letters spell out the first half of the first line of the poem: "As I waded through inky alfalfa the sun seemed empty" (Ferguson 45). The paintings and poems combine to form a complete presentation not achieved separately.

The painter teams with the poet again in 1957 for the publication of O'Hara's *Meditations In An Emergency*. A special edition of fifteen copies includes original drawings by Grace Hartigan as frontispieces. Mattison deems the pair a good match because "O'Hara's ideas paralleled and informed the modernity and

¹⁵ See Appendix G.

ardor of Hartigan's contemporary paintings" (35). O'Hara dedicates "In Memory of My Feelings" to Hartigan, a poem in which "the energy is distributed in a pattern of looping enunciations, without linear impulse or accumulated tension, but rather with the obsessive ubiquity of a Pollock drip-painting" (Howard 472).

A similar situation is found in the case of "Why I Am Not A Painter," which is included in the catalog for Michael Goldberg's show at the Martha Jackson Gallery in March and April of 1966. The *In Memory of My Feelings* exhibit features Goldberg's *Sardines* displayed with O'Hara's poem. Goldberg executes the cover and title page of O'Hara's 1960 *Odes* in ink.¹⁶ The pages mix brightly splashed colors of grass green and ultra pink with contrasting solid black.

The few stabs O'Hara took at painting himself exhibit both his fascination with the color that many of the Abstract Expressionists around him used so vividly and an inability to produce the kind of layered effects with the paint that he desired. O'Hara recognized this inadequacy, but found himself so often in the studios of his friends, surrounded by painting materials, picking up a brush every so often was inevitable. Equally inevitable, it would seem, is the influence of O'Hara's writing on the work of his painter friends.

¹⁶ See Appendix E2.

Chapter IV

COLLABORATIONS: Friendship and Work Manifested in Ekphrasis

Here the discussion leads us to an important aspect of O'Hara's connection with painters and painting and, I propose, an issue central to shaping the contemporary definition of ekphrasis. I am referring to the act of collaboration between artists and writers, which I have mentioned as part of O'Hara's working life. Thus far I have looked at the tacit ways in which particular works of art, the style of the Abstract Expressionist movement, and personal references to particular Action Painters enter O'Hara's poems. But what happens when O'Hara turns his writing efforts specifically in the same direction as the creative energy of an artist, so that the two are together on the same project? In his *Art in America* review of the "In Memory of My Feelings" exhibit, David Lehman answers that such work reflects exactly the energy of both the artist and the poet, as well as, more expansively, the movement:

Two great and related themes emerge in the O'Hara show. One has to do with the true nature of improvisation, the other with collaboration as the tribute art pays to friendship. Many of O'Hara's collaborations with visual artists are odes to spontaneity, recklessness, accident and chance. (121)

This "spontaneity, recklessness, accident and chance" are typical of Abstract Expressionist style, where gravity may, just as easily as the artist, choose where paint would fall. The Action Painters' penchant for experiment supported those planned accidents. But Lehman's concept of collaboration as "tribute" to friendship in art does not entirely cover the sort of collaboration in which O'Hara participated as a poet. Two visual artists working together produce a tribute to their friendship or, at the least, to their complicity with one another, in art. An artist and poet working together produce a work of ekphrasis: a visual and verbal combination representing the intersection not just of their poetry and painting, but all poetry and painting. If ekphrasis can include intertextuality in which both the visual and verbal exist as potential texts, then painters and poets creating texts together for simultaneous combination is the ultimate act of ekphrasis.

It is important to consult here what O'Hara himself says about collaboration in the Lucie-Smith interview:

Larry Rivers and I actually did physically collaborate on some lithographs called *Stones*. Which were called *Stones* because we both did work on them. I learned how to write backwards, for instance. We did not use any transfers. We worked on the stones together. He did not work on the stone if I

wasn't there and I didn't work on the stone if he wasn't there to see what I was doing. Sometimes we would discuss the placement of an image which would leave me enough room to write a text, or I would say where I wanted the text and then he would decorate the rest of the stone. But that's the only time I think that I've really collaborated. I've done other things there some-- well Grace Hartigan has used some of my poems in painting. Or I have made pages of words for Michael Goldberg which he then completed, but I delivered them in those cases, and then they went on and did what they wanted. I didn't have any say about what they would do with them. I was very pleased with the results. I think the Rivers thing is the only thing I really did collaborate on, that I consider to be a collaboration (4).

Many would say that the intertextual work that O'Hara downplays in this talk as not "really" collaboration falls well within conventional definitions. To say that he has no "say" in what the artists use in conjunction with his writing is erroneous, not taking into account the intense visuals signaled by his poetry. Hartigan's work in the *Oranges* series, for instance, is certainly

not independent of the text. The work of the two is inextricably combined into one product.

O'Hara's privileging of the collaboration with Rivers is a product of the preference for immediacy, of working together in the moment. The genesis of the collaboration reflects the sort of creative spontaneity possible when friends both play and work together. Gooch's *City Poet* chronicles the impetus for *Stones* in a rather humorous anecdote:

The project came about one day that summer [1957] when Tatanya Grossman, whose Universal Art Editions printmaking workshop was located in West Islip, Long Island visited Rivers in Southampton to ask him to work on a series of lithographs in collaboration with a poet.

O'Hara had been suggested to her as the best poet to work with Rivers by Barney Rossett, who was busily preparing *Meditations in an Emergency* for Fall publication. Not knowing that O'Hara was Rivers' houseguest, Grossman made her request to Rivers, who responded by calling out 'Hey Frank!' whereupon O'Hara appeared in blue jeans. (297-8).

Gooch indicates the decision to embark on the collaborative adventure was quick and purposeful: "Always sizing themselves up against the poets and painters of Paris in the earlier part of

the century, when Apollinaire had pasted his poem 'Les Fenetres' on the back of Delaunay's painting of the same title to establish an equivalence, they [O'Hara and Rivers] immediately agreed to Grossman's request (298).

It is interesting to note the dates of the *Stones* range from 1957 to 1960, indicating that O'Hara and Rivers' promise to each other to truly work together necessitated coming together in intervals separated by other concerns. The nature of the construction, as well, influenced its timing. The words could not immediately spring from pen to page, as was O'Hara's usual inclination. Rivers also had to plan adeptly the execution of the images. The resulting pages are purposeful in composition, often playful in tone, and wonderfully wild and scattered visually, an effect that belies the time, attention, and form O'Hara and Rivers gave to the project.

Stones: Berdie from 1959 visits again the familiar muse of Rivers' mother-in-law.¹⁷ Her nude figure is suggested in waving black streaks that outline just the round of her breast and thighs; the nipples are two dots, the nose and lips of the face are brief marks. Another from the same year, *Stones: Energy*, looks and reads like an anthem for the artist, the poet, and the climate of New York.¹⁸ A large hand-drawn graph of squares is peppered with colors: yellows, reds, and blues. A starburst or

¹⁷ See Appendix F3.

¹⁸ See Appendix F4.

firework or flower blooms in black and greys. Energy is found in O'Hara's words, as well:

we are neither up nor down
red! you are nothing but red
and just as red at midnight as at noon, at dusk maybe
(Ferguson 57)

The final line expresses an attribute of the artists and their creations, that they have "the ability to absorb attention when no one is there." The *Stones* are works of art, poems of ekphrasis, equally at home on the wall of a gallery and printed in a collection of poems¹⁹.

Having spent some time with the work that O'Hara himself called collaboration, I would like to turn attention to two projects O'Hara did not (or would not) mention. The first is with artist Joe Brainard, who also wonders what collaboration between artists really means in his reminiscence in *Homage to Frank O'Hara*:

Actually, in the strict sense of the word,
Frank and I never really collaborated.
(Alas) never on the spot, starting together
from scratch. Giving and taking. And
bouncing off each other. What we *did* do was

¹⁹ The lithographs were printed in a series of portfolios published by Grossman in 1960, but titled "Tabloscripts." The complete *Stones* series toured with the *In Memory of My Feelings: Frank O'Hara and American Art* exhibit in 1999 and selections are presented in Ferguson's text of the same name as full-color plates.

that I'd do something (a collage or cartoon) incorporating spaces for words, which I'd give to Frank to 'fill in.' Usually he would do so right away, with seemingly little effort. (108)

Here Brainard buys into the same definition as O'Hara, one that locates the two persons in the same physical time and space in order for the work to be a "true" collaboration. The collages constructed can certainly be viewed, however, as both collaborative and ekphrastic in nature: O'Hara's captions are witty responses to the visuals put forth by Brainard. A work from 1964 uses 1953 Easter Seals to frame a Victorian cutout of flowers and a butterfly that Brainard has shaded in ink.²⁰ O'Hara's word balloon reads "I'm not flying I'm thinking." The collage is incomplete without the words, the line less interesting outside of the visual of the butterfly and the blue Easter Seals. This mutual dependence is inherent in collaboration. The work requires the creativity of each participant; otherwise the individual could continue with solo work of image or poem alone. The end result is something more, a commentary on words and pictures through the act of their use together: contemporary ekphrasis.

The second collaboration that O'Hara does not mention in the interview is a series of black and whites on paper with Norman

²⁰ See Appendix H.

Bluhm. Russell Ferguson recounts that the spontaneous construction occurred on "one rainy Sunday in October of 1960, [when] O'Hara visited Bluhm in his studio on Park Avenue South, as he often did" (60). The two were talking and listening to music. At one point in the conversation, Bluhm used a paintbrush to "illustrate a point he was making about the music" on a large sheet of paper tacked to the studio wall. O'Hara joined him, writing a few words on the same sheet. The two proceeded with other sheets of paper, alternately splashing the surface with paint and words. *Meet Me in the Park* has an emphatic radiating black swatch of paint with the words "meet me in the park/ if you love me" (Ferguson 64).²¹ In *There I Was* a wriggle of white paint serves as a visual stanza between the black looping letters of "there I was minding my own business when--" and "buses always do that to me."²² Bluhm and O'Hara crisscrossed the studio from paper to paper, responding and initiating at the same time. This collaboration thoroughly expresses the urgency of the work, and the sort of close connection with both the painter and his form that is so integral to O'Hara poems.

Stevens calls this sort of connection a "relation." I propose that in contexts where it seems appropriate to use Stevens' phrase "the relations between poetry and painting," we might substitute the term "ekphrasis" instead. My understanding of O'Hara's work, his responses to and the representation of the

²¹ See Appendix I1.

minutiae of his life in New York in his poems, is richer for this attempt to understand what ekphrasis means and how it might apply to O'Hara. Arming oneself with biographical and contextual information is obviously often useful when approaching any written work-- in the case of O'Hara's poetry it is necessary. Since O'Hara biography yields a vast image of poetry in conjunction with painting, it has been vital to the reading of O'Hara to discover the philosophy of his painter friends in addition to uncovering specific painter names. He was not influenced solely by a specific movement, such as the first Abstract Expressionists or the 2nd Generation that followed; O'Hara's body of work reflects an over-arching concern for the visual, with a special emphasis on painting. His work as a poet is an act of ekphrasis, delivering his personal experiences as an inside member of the New York art scene in sometimes carefully structured, but more often spontaneous verbal terms. As an active participant in both verbal and visual arenas, O'Hara perpetuates the relation between poetry and painting.

²² See Appendix I2.

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Appendix A

"Laokoon" (De La Croix 176)

Appendix B1

It's Raining

It's raining, it's raining,
The weather is so fine,
The sun is shining, the birds are singing,
The flowers are all in bloom,
The children are playing,
The old folks are all at home,
The world is full of joy and cheer,
The rain is falling like a tear,
The clouds are all so white,
The sky is blue and bright,
The earth is green and fresh,
The air is cool and sweet,
The water is so clear and deep,
The mountains are all so high,
The valleys are all so deep,
The rivers are all so wide,
The oceans are all so deep,
The world is full of life and love,
The rain is falling like a dove,
The clouds are all so soft,
The sky is blue and bright,
The earth is green and fresh,
The air is cool and sweet,
The water is so clear and deep,
The mountains are all so high,
The valleys are all so deep,
The rivers are all so wide,
The oceans are all so deep,
The world is full of life and love,
The rain is falling like a dove,

Il Pleut

Il pleut, il pleut,
Le temps est si fin,
Le soleil est si brillant,
Les fleurs sont toutes en fleurs,
Les enfants jouent,
Les vieux sont tous chez eux,
Le monde est plein de joie et d'espoir,
La pluie tombe comme une larme,
Les nuages sont si blancs,
Le ciel est bleu et clair,
La terre est verte et fraîche,
L'air est frais et doux,
L'eau est si claire et profonde,
Les montagnes sont si hautes,
Les vallées sont si profondes,
Les rivières sont si larges,
Les océans sont si profonds,
Le monde est plein de vie et d'amour,
La pluie tombe comme un oiseau,
Les nuages sont si doux,
Le ciel est bleu et clair,
La terre est verte et fraîche,
L'air est frais et doux,
L'eau est si claire et profonde,
Les montagnes sont si hautes,
Les vallées sont si profondes,
Les rivières sont si larges,
Les océans sont si profonds,
Le monde est plein de vie et d'amour,
La pluie tombe comme un oiseau,

"The Bleeding-Heart Dove and the Fountain" (Apollinaire 122-123)

Tous les souvenirs d'un jour
O mes amis partis en l'air
J'allais vers le firmament
Et me regarde en l'air d'un air
Moi, mélancolique et triste
Où sont-ils, la France et Max Jacob
Derain aux yeux gris comme le ciel
Où sont Raynal Billy Dalize
Dont le cœur est si mélancolique
Où est Gretna qui s'engorge
Où sont les souvenirs mon amour
Deux pleurs sur ma poitrine

O

Appendix B2

this dove is enraptured
 All memories of long ago are Billy Raynal Daise
 Oh my friends who have gone a g... whose names melancholic
 Spring upward toward the war whose footsteps in a cathedral
 And in stagnant pools your gaze like a Cremona who enlisted
 With melancholy die where perhaps already dead
 Whose have Brague and Max Jacob gone
 Drown with eyes gray as the dawn
 A monument in weep for my sorrow

THOSE WHO LEFT FOR THE WAR IN THE NORTH ARE FIGHTING NOW
Evening falls **O** bloody sea
Gardens where rose-laurel warlike flower bleeds in abundance

Éventail des Saveurs

Attols singuliers .
de brownings quel
goût
de vie
re Ah!

Des lacs versicolores
dans les glaciers solaires

1 tout
petit
oiseau
qui n'a pas
de queue et
qui s'envole
quand on
lui en met
un au

Mes tapis de la saveur moussons des sons obscurs
et ta bouche au souffle
azur

ouïs ouïs le cri les pas le pho
NOGRAPH ouïs ouïs L'ALOÏS
sclater et le petit mirliton

Fan of Flavors

Fantastic attols
of brownings what
a taste
for liv
ing Ah!

Multicolored lakes
in solar glaciers

1 very
small
bird
that hasn't any
tail and
that flies off
when you
give him
a one

My carpets of taste let's foam obscure sounds
and your mouth with its breath
of azure

hark hark the cry footsteps pho
NOGRAPH hark hark THE ALOÏS
bursts open and the tiny flute

Appendix C1

A SMALL BOUQUET

be
 must trusted
 hearts the rose's whole
 e soft our
 not do know what
 we violet
 fful to love
 gence
 r ea lly
 a l l y t
 s t o o d e w
 u s w o r e
 e h t h n
 t i n h w
 h e r o
 o
 my whole
 but if life's
 love meaning!
 you,
 er—
 low
 f
 t h a s n
 n
 easy
 not
 d
 w s
 i y
 n t
 t i
 e m
 r a e
 n d
 t o
 o
 Se lieve that all is
 me
 a n d I
 s u r e
 ly adore
 y o o

Appendix C2

AUTOMOBILES

This machine of my adolescence,
is such a fright to old maids as

ob-serve
the sea
at our
rear is oh
bitter, dear

do not lean out of my
door my darling house

peet!

are we not happy riding?

glorious so
macadam?

Appendix C3

A CALLIGRAM

Under this hat I
 (nuts! a
 oh a
 try this dry yellow
 if straw
 consternation piece
 ease you)
 resides the conscience of my friend, like
 a tortoise in the hot sun

 or
 Ge ge b grapher
 Montgomery- e a photo- whose
 zino,- eyes not meddle with,
 Bron- meet s I should
 i
 l
 e
 n
 t

 b
 e
 f
 o this
 re more

 cause is haugh- w
 be- it ty,- k
 and sometimes 't
 de- ing n
 limit- d
 a i
 s d
 if we

 the m
 they a the
 tie k yeah!
 s e man
 s

Appendix C4

POEM

WHE
 EWHEE
 ry never
 d g always perhaps
 c n never always
 a -ed J a like
 r, wick as a are blue velvet
 wicked- gold, w n fl- in one wind
 y o c uttering
 o u k n
 F
 r
 e
 i
 l
 i
 c
 h u
 er yo
 t
 c
 g
 r
 o
 f
 t
 not i e w
 h be k v o
 e oh e man,-
 y S r my pretty,
 o c r n
 o g hehle azade
 hoo e n f d
 a n r paint l o
 g e pots ts
 n y e p
 t o u r swe a
 o p i
 e s n really
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"Poem (WHE EWHEE)" (O'Hara CP 25)

Appendix D

Jackson Pollock "Number 1, 1949" (Varnedoe 259)

Appendix E1

Michael Goldberg "Sardines" (Ferguson 23)

Appendix E2

Michael Goldberg "Odes"
(Ferguson 69)

Appendix F1

Larry Rivers "Cedar Bar Menu I" (Hunter 73)

Appendix F2

Larry Rivers "In Memory of the Dead, 1966" (Hunter 240)

Appendix F3 and F4

Larry Rivers "Stones: Berdie"
(Ferguson 55)

Larry Rivers "Stones: Energy" (Ferguson 57)

Appendix G

Grace Hartigan "Oranges No. 7" (Ferguson 45)

Appendix H

Joe Brainard and Frank O'Hara "I'm Not Really Flying I'm Thinking" (Ferguson 111)

Appendix I1 and I2

Norman Bluhm and Frank O'Hara
"Meet Me In The Park"
(Ferguson 64)

Norman Bluhm and Frank O'Hara
"There I Was" (Ferguson 66)

VITA

Karen Ware was born to Diane and Greg O'Connell in Lexington, Kentucky on November 19, 1973; fourth of five children, second of two daughters. After graduating from Presentation Academy in 1991, she received a B.A. in English and Psychology with a minor in Art History from Spalding University in Louisville in 1994. In December of 1994 she married Kyle Ware.

Karen began graduate work at the University of Louisville as a Graduate Assistant to the Office of the President in 1996. In the Fall of 1997, she was granted a Teaching Assistantship and began work as an instructor of Composition. She joined the staff of UofL's Effective Learning Program and the Kentucky Governor's Scholars Program in 1999.

Karen will begin coursework at UofL in the Ph.D. program in Rhetoric and Composition in the fall of 2001. She currently resides in Old Louisville with Kyle, Sasha and Kitty.