Larry Rivers and Frank O'Hara: Reframing Male Sexualities

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LARRY RIVERS AND FRANK O’HARA: REFRAMING MALE SEXUALITIES

by

DONG-YEON KOH

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

Larry Rivers and Frank O’Hara: Reframing Male Sexualities

by

Dong-Yeon Koh

Adviser: Professor Anna Chave

In 1970, Sam Hunter complained that the distinctive persona of proto-Pop artist Larry Rivers had overshadowed his artistic achievement. “Too often he has been taken as an engaging public performer,” wrote Hunter, claiming that some critics “make the mistake of confusing his irrepressible exhibitionism with an imagined artistic flaw of fitful or unsteady inspiration.”¹ This dissertation presents an alternative proposition regarding the relationship between Rivers’ artistic persona and art: that an examination of Rivers’ numerous activities inside and outside the artistic arena, such as poetry, jazz, and media, is indeed useful for understanding his work. Particularly, Rivers’ involvement with young homosexual poets in the New York School, including Frank O’Hara, proves crucial to Rivers’ artistic production during the 1950s and early 1960s. Rivers’ intimate and artistic partnership with O’Hara set him in close contact with camp, the gay subculture, and historical references to homoeroticism in art and literature.

Concentrating on Rivers’ and O’Hara’s collaborative years, this dissertation explores selected individual and collaborative works by Rivers and O’Hara from the 1950s and early 1960s. These include Rivers’ early drawings from the late 1940s and his Washington Crossing the Delaware in 1954, which are discussed in conjunction with


The purpose of this examination is to locate parallels, influences, and interactions between Rivers’ and O’Hara’s works and then to consider their treatment of the self and male sexuality from various angles—theories of camp, theoretical discussions in gay/lesbian studies or queer theory, and the historical context of the 1950s. The particular emphasis is placed upon how Rivers’ and O’Hara’s depictions of the male nude and the image of male intimacy were forged against the distinction between high art/literature and the gay subculture or between “normality” and “abnormality” in male sexualities.
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Writing a dissertation has been an exceptional journey—one that I never anticipated. My idea for a dissertation topic developed in the fall of 2001 through my independent research under the guidance of Prof. Anna Chave. I am deeply indebted to Prof. Chave for her advice, mentoring, and support throughout the research and writing processes. I have truly appreciated her patience and tolerance during my numerous mishaps. This dissertation is the result of her careful, detailed, and consistent revisions, suggestions, and criticisms.

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My hands-on experience at Rivers’ archive was also crucial to my knowledge of Rivers’ art. David Joel, Chief Archivist, was kind enough to allow me to access all of Rivers’ materials, including the artist’s collections of books and magazines and his
correspondence with O’Hara. David Joel, who worked as an assistant to Rivers for almost twenty years, shared much of his firsthand knowledge of Rivers’ creative process with me. I was also fortunate to have an opportunity to conduct interviews with Rivers’ two sons. Joseph Rivers, the older son, kindly responded to all of my questions, offering descriptions of Larry Rivers’ personal lives that would otherwise have been hard to obtain. Steven Rivers, the younger son, also offered detailed information on Rivers’ involvement with poets, especially his memories of Frank O’Hara. During a difficult time, Steven Rivers invited me to his house and showed some of Rivers’ paintings in his collection.

This dissertation has also benefited from Addie, Constanza, Heather, Mary-Ellen, Paul, Pam, and Tina, the members of my peer group. I would not have been able to complete my dissertation without their consistent emotional support and insightful suggestions at every turn. We had a weekly Friday meeting to share our concerns, from administrative tasks to writer’s block. They helped me to maintain my self-confidence and my passion toward the dissertation throughout its different stages.

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT........................................................................................................................................ iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.................................................................................................................. vi
THE LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .................................................................................................... xi

INTRODUCTION

Larry Rivers and Frank O’Hara: Toward the Fluidity in Male Sexualities--------1
Rivers, Art Critics, and Camp: Literature Review on Rivers------------------------
A Poet among Painters: Literature Review on O’Hara---------------------------
Writing on Rivers and O’Hara: Methodology and Structure------------------------

CHAPTER 1. MAKING A QUEER CIRCLE OF ARTISTS AND POETS IN THE NEW YORK SCHOOL

The Formation of Nell’s Gathering and “Avant-Garde Sex”------------------------ 24
Rivers and O’Hara: Standing Still and Walking in New York “Together”--------

CHAPTER 2. MALE SEXUALITIES IN AN AGE OF ANXIETY: 1950S

DISCOURSES ON MALE HOMOSEXUALITY IN SEXOLOGY, LITERATURE, AND ART

Re/defining Homosexuality in the 1950s: the Kinsey Report and Its Reception- 60
Beyond the Sexual Binary of Homosexuality and Heterosexuality--------------
The “Homophile” Movement and Homosexual Poets in the 1950s------------------
Issues of Gender and Sexuality in the New York School------------------------
CHAPTER 3. RIVERS’ FORMATIVE YEARS AND *WASHINGTON CROSSING THE DELAWARE* (1953)

The Beginning: Tradition, Figuration, and the New York School------------------- 126

Rivers’ Early Nude Drawings and Hans Hofmann-------------------------------

Rivers’ *Two Women* Series and Willem de Kooning’s *Woman* Paintings-------

Rivers’ *Washington Crossing the Delaware* and the New York School of Poets

Rivers and O’Hara: Reframing the Sexualities of Male Heroes-------------------


Rivers’ Portraits of the Mid 1950s: Painting the Family and Friend and

Competing with the Old Masters---------------------------------------------190

Rivers’ *O’Hara*: Reframing the Male Nude----------------------------------

O’Hara’s “Homosexuality”: Revisiting Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself”-------

Walt Whitman and Homosexual Poets in the 1950s-------------------------------

Rivers’ Family Portraits and O’Hara’s “In Memory of My Feelings”: Revising the

Ideals of the American Family and the Masculine Self-----------------------
The List of Illustrations


5. Walter Silver, “Posing for Grace Hartigan’s *The Masker*” in 1954 (with Ashbery and Schuyler, seated center; and Jane Freilicher and O’Hara standing, right), Photograph.

6. Grace Hartigan, *Oranges No. 1*, 1952, Oil on paper, 44 1/4 x 33 1/2 in, Poetry and Rare Books Collection/State University of New York, Buffalo, NY.


11. Fairfield Porter, *Portrait of Larry Rivers*, 1952, Oil on canvas, 50 x 30 in, Colby College Museum of Art, ME.


14. Jasper Johns, *Target with Plaster Casts*, 1955, Encaustic and collage on canvas with objects, 51 x 44 in, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Leo Castelli, NY.

15. Larry Rivers, *The Burial*, 1951, Oil on canvas, 69 1/2 x 104 in, Fort Wayne Museum of Art, IN.
16. -----, *Bathers after Cezanne*, 1952, Oil on board, 26 1/2 x 38 1/2 in, Collection of the artist, Bridgehampton, NY.

17. -----, *Bathers*, 1952, Pencil and pastel on paper, 13 1/2 x 16 1/4 in, Collection of Edwin Denby, NY.

18. -----, *Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus After Rubens*, c. 1950, Pencil on paper, 14 x 17 in, Collection of the artist, Bridgehampton, NY.

19. -----, *After Rembrandt*, 1950, Pencil on paper, 13 7/8 x 16 1/2 in, Collection of the artist, Bridgehampton, NY.


22. Larry Rivers, *Head of Woman with Blue Eyes*, 1952, Pencil and pastel on paper, 13 3/4 x 16 1/2 in, Collection of the artist, Bridgehampton, NY.

23. -----, *Two Women*, 1952, Pencil and pastel on paper, 13 3/4 x 16 1/2 in, Collection of the artist, Bridgehampton, NY.

24. -----, *Two Women Posing*, 1952, Oil on canvas, 32 1/2 x 53 1/2 in, Collection of the artist, Bridgehampton, NY.


30. -----, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, 1954, Oil on canvas, 7 x 9 ft, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. (Partially destroyed due to the fire.)


32. Leonardo Da Vinci, *Study of Five Grotesque Heads*, 1494, Pen and ink on paper, 10.28 x 8.11 in, Royal Library, Windsor Castle, Berkshire.
33. -----, Studies for the Heads of Two Soldiers in the “Battle of Anghiari” (detail), 1504-05, Metalpoint, black and red chalk on paper, 7 9/16 x 7 7/16 in, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.


35. Unknown artist before 1550 and Peter Paul Rubens c. 1603. Copy of the Battle of Anghiari by Leonardo, 1550-1603, Black chalk and ink heightened with lead white, over-painted with watercolor, 17 7/10 x 25 1/10 in, Musée du Louvre, Paris.


38. Jacques-Louis David, Napoleon in His Study, 1812, Oil on canvas, 89 1/4 x 49 1/4 in, The National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

39. Larry Rivers, The Greatest Homosexual, 1964, Oil, collage, and pencil on canvas, 80 x 61 in, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.


41. -----, Frank O’Hara in Profile, 1955, Pencil on paper, 21 x 14 in, Collection of the artist, Bridgehampton, NY.

42. Larry Rivers, Study of Frank O’Hara for sculpture The Swimmer, c. 1955, Pencil on paper, 21 x 18 in, Collection of the artist, Bridgehampton, NY.


44. Fairfield Porter, Portrait of O’Hara, 1957, Oil on canvas, 63 7/8 x 45 7/8 in, The Toledo Museum of Art, OH.

45. Physique Image from Physique Pictorial, Fall 1954.

46. Elaine de Kooning, Frank O’Hara, 1962, Oil on canvas, 93 x 42 in, Private Collection, RI.

47. Antonio Canova, Theseus and the Centaur, 1804-19, Marble, 133 3/5 in (Height), Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.


51. ------, *Eakins’s Students at “The Swimming Hole,”* c. 1883, Photograph, 3 21/32 x 4 25/32 in.


53. ------, “There’s Something Very Funny About Us…” from *Strips*, 1964, Ink on Paper, 10 x 8 in, Collection of Joe LeSueur, East Hampton, NY.


55. Paul Cadmus, *The Fleet’s In!,* 1934, Oil on canvas, 30 x 60 in, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC.

56. Tom Finland, *Test Your Strength*, April 1961, Pencil on paper, cover of *Physique Pictorial*.


59. ------, *Augusta*, 1954, Oil on canvas, 83 x 54 in, Collection of the artist, Bridgehampton, NY.


61. Eugène Durieu, Two photographs of male nude from Delacroix’ album, c. 1854, Photograph, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

62. Eugene Delacroix, Sketches of the male body, c. 1854, Musée Bonnet, Bayone.

63. Wilhelm von Gloeden, undated, Photograph.

64. Larry Rivers, *Joseph*, 1954, Oil and charcoal on canvas, 53 1/4 x 46 1/4 in, Private collection, NY.
65. -----, *The Family*, 1954-55, Oil on canvas, 81 x 71 in, Private collection, NY.

66. -----, *Joseph Seated*, 1954, Pencil on paper, 11 x, 14 in, Private collection, NY.


68. Joshua Reynolds, *Age of Innocence*, 1788, Oil on canvas, 30 1/16 x 25 1/10 in, Tate Gallery, London.


70. Larry Rivers, *The Studio*, 1956, Oil on canvas, 82 1/2 x 193 1/2 in, The Minneapolis Institute of Art, MN.


73. Hans Namuth, *Frank O’Hara and Larry Rivers at Work on Stones*, 1958, Black-white photograph, 16 x 20 in.

74. Larry Rivers, Stage design for *Try! Try!* , 1953, photograph published in *Frank O’Hara: Selected Plays*.

75. Larry Rivers, A Drawing for *Try! Try!* , 1953, drawing published in *Frank O’Hara: Selected Plays*.

76. Larry Rivers and Frank O’Hara, Inner folder from *Stones*, 1957, Linen cutting and blue denim, 19 x 23 1/2 in, Marlborough Gallery, New York.

77. -----, “Us” from *Stones*, 1957.

78. -----, “The End of All Existence” from *Stones*, 1957.


82. -----, *The Accident*, 1957, Oil on canvas, 84 x 90 in, Collection of J. Seagram and Sons, Inc., NY.
83. ------, *Me II*, 1958, Oil on canvas, 105 x 120 in, Collection of Joseph E. Seagram and Sons, Inc., NY.


Introduction

Larry Rivers and Frank O’Hara: Toward the Fluidity in Male Sexualities

Larry Rivers (1923-2002)—whose best-known painting, *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1953), made him one of the precursors to the Pop artists of the 1960s—published an autobiography in 1992 entitled *What Did I Do?: The Unauthorized Autobiography*. In the book, Rivers offered vivid descriptions of the twists and turns of his marital life, his years with a jazz band, and his subsequent involvement with bohemian writers and artists in New York in the late 1940s and the 1950s. The most scandalous elements of his autobiography were his bold and lengthy accounts of sexual encounters with both men and women. He reflected, “[…] was I gay or not? Or queer? Or whatever it was called that week. The English use the expression ‘bent’ (as in the play of the same name about homosexuals sent to concentration camp). There’s also ‘light on his feet.’ Was I bent in one ball and straight in the other? Light on one foot, heavy on the other?”

Rivers’ comments on sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular hardly provide a clear entry point into his own definition of homosexuality, let alone what he called his particular sexual “bent.” In his autobiography, Rivers quoted a friend who

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expressed skepticism about his sexual relationships with other men. Ann Tabachnick, who attended Hans Hofmann’s School with Rivers in New York between 1946 and 1947, declared that Rivers’ affiliation with homosexual poets in the 1950s was an expression of his social and artistic ambition, suggesting that he saw same-sex relationships as a way of educating himself among what he perceived as sophisticated and culturally savvy homosexual men. “Larry didn’t have gay episodes to have sex but to improve himself! He thought by hanging out in gay company he would learn to be classier,” she wrote, “He was insecure about his manners, he confided to me. He really wanted to learn how to dress and talk!… No, it wasn’t the homosexuality, it was the upward mobility.”

Curiously enough, Rivers cited Tabachnick’s remarks without strongly objecting to or agreeing with them. Rather, he replied to her analysis of his personal life with a typically oblique comment: “I put on what I thought was a queer act—how much of an act could it be?” Rivers’ seemingly detached, mystifying attitude sheds light on his basic position toward rumors about his sexuality. Though Tabachnick asserted that Rivers’ “homosexuality” was an affectation, her comments ultimately lead the reader to question whether an individual’s homosexuality can be easily knowable and recognizable. Indeed, how can others really know if someone is having same-sex relationships or not? More importantly, is homosexuality a kind of act that a person can easily put on if he or she has no natural inclination toward same-sex desire? What about the relationship between

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3 Excerpt quoted in Rivers and Weinstein, What Did I Do?, 133. Tabachnick’s original manuscript is in Rivers’ archive. Ann Tabachnick, Manuscript (no date), Bridgehampton, NY: Rivers Archive, Rivers literature box #15-IA 34, 5-6.

4 Ibid.
individual sexual acts or desires and homosexuality—or, for that matter, heterosexuality—as a relatively permanent and stable part of a person’s identity?

Rivers’ autobiography is replete with puzzling remarks upon and quotations about homosexuality, apparently to convey his reservations about the notion that homosexuality is definable or fixed. Rivers listed definitions of homosexuality provided by gay men ranging from street hustlers to Gore Vidal (1925- ), social and cultural critic and author of The City and the Pillar (1948), a novel that contains explicitly homoerotic relationships. While street hustlers claimed that taking a passive (feminine) position by allowing penetration positively identified a man as homosexual, Vidal famously declared, “There are only homosexual acts, not homosexuals.”

Rivers’ efforts to confuse and problematize monolithic definitions of homosexuality were far from unusual among the poets whom he befriended. Frank O’Hara (1926-66), a poet and curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, who also established a close personal and artistic alliance with Rivers from the 1950s until his death in 1966, was, for instance, notorious for openly talking about same-sex relationships in front of artists and writers both gay and straight. In a conversation with writer Terry Southern, a mutual friend of Rivers and O’Hara, O’Hara humorously addressed the process of distinguishing homosexual men from heterosexual men. When Southern asked him whether he could instantly recognize homosexuals based on external indications such as attire and gestures, he first said “no.” Five minutes later, after leafing through various magazines, he told Southern, “Now, this one is completely gay, you can tell by his stance,” and “Here is one who is partially gay now, but will probably be

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5 Ibid., 235.
completely gay within 6 or 7 months.” He then pointed to another man in the magazine, opining, “Now, here’s someone who is completely gay, but doesn’t know he’s a gay at all.”

Southern quoted O’Hara’s playful responses in order to illustrate his keen sense of “humor” and ability to “see the other side of things.” In so doing, he failed to point out O’Hara’s underlying criticism regarding the limitations of definitions of “homosexuality” in describing an array of sexual behaviors and tendencies. Certainly, defining homosexuality from various social, psychological, and cultural perspectives has been a serious concern within homosexual communities.

Today, the coined term “gay-dar,” a blend of “gay” and “radar,” captures this concern by referring to the ability of a homosexual person to distinguish other homosexuals or bisexuals from heterosexuals. The ingenuity of O’Hara’s answer lies in its comic reenactment of the identifying process itself, which neither emphasizes nor de-emphasizes stereotypical images of homosexuals. In assuming that the term “homosexual” has gradations such as “completely” and “partially,” and that sexuality can be fluid or even unconscious, O’Hara challenged the rigidity of the homosexual-heterosexual binary.

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7 Ibid.

8 The question of whether there are behavioral similarities among homosexuals was frequently discussed among gays and lesbians during the 1950s. Donald Webster Cory, author of the 1952 book *The Homosexual in America: A Subjective Approach*, wrote an article addressing this concern in “Can Homosexuals Be Recognized?” (1953), published in *One* magazine. *One* magazine was a monthly periodical by the Mattachine Society, founded in 1953 in California as the first public gay forum and gay organization. In his article, Cory argued, “No insult is quite as great as to tell the homosexual, ‘You can be spotted in a minute,’” but granted that at the same time, “there is a strong need to recognize others in the group and to be recognized, in order to find companionship, friendship, affection, understanding” within the community of homosexuals. Donald Webster Cory, “Can Homosexuals Be Recognized?,” *One* 1, no. 9 (1953): 10.
Rivers’ and O’Hara’s playful, disrespectful attitudes toward 1950s definitions of homosexuality are perhaps most relevant and understandable from a contemporary perspective, as their critical boldness prefigures major inquiries by queer theorists from the 1990s onward. In her highly influential *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Eve Sedgwick, for instance, posed questions such as the following: “In whose lives is homo/heterosexual definition an issue of continuing centrality and difficulty?” and “how fully are the meaning and experience of sexual activity and identity contingent on their mutual structuring with other, historically and culturally variable aspects of a given society”? Diana Fuss similarly cast serious doubt upon epistemological certainty as to the sexual orientations of persons under scrutiny: “How can we tell the difference [between homosexuals and heterosexuals]—if we hold to the by no means certain assumption that there is a difference? Questions of epistemology (‘how do we know’) enjoy a privileged status in theorization of gay and lesbian identity,” she stated, yet “the very insistence of the epistemological frame of reference in theories of homosexuality may suggest that we cannot know—surely or definitely.”

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine Rivers’ and O’Hara’s critical responses to discourses on homosexuality—more specifically, their reactions against very limited ways of distinguishing homosexuality from heterosexuality and of describing male intimacy. For this, the present dissertation concentrates on their treatment of male sexualities, self-images, and homoerotic themes in their paintings and writings. The

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period covered by the dissertation is from the early 1950s until the early 1960s, a time
during which Rivers explored and developed his view of homosexuality and male
sexuality while interacting closely with O’Hara. The 1950s are notorious, in the United
States, as a decade of obsessive insistence on the boundary between abnormality and
normality in the areas of politics and sexuality. The “macho” image that was presented of
several major New York School artists in the 1950s is another crucial element of the
historical backdrop against which Rivers’ and O’Hara’s sexual politics arose.

**Rivers, Art Critics, and Camp: Literature Review on Rivers**

Most of the extant discussions of Rivers’ art locate the painter in a transitional art-
historical position between Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art. For instance, in *Larry
Rivers* (1965), Sam Hunter argued that Rivers’ style bridges “two distinct periods in
American art, the subjective idealism of action painting and the new cult of literal
experience.”11 Although developments in gay/lesbian and queer studies have offered
alternative avenues to interpreting the work of the New York School artists from the
perspective of the artists’ gender and sexuality, such scholarship has concentrated largely
on the canonical figures of Abstract Expressionism or on the Neo-Dada artists Robert
Rauschenberg (1925-) and Jasper Johns (1930-). While there is a vast general literature
on Rauschenberg and Johns, Rivers has been the subject of only two monographs—Sam
Hunter’s in 1970 (expanded and reprinted in 1989) and Helen Harrison’s in 1984—and

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one retrospective in the United States, to date, at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, in 2002.

A case that illustrates the critical neglect of Rivers is the 1993 exhibition *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955-62*, curated by Paul Schimmel and Donna De Salvo, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, which offered one of the most valuable opportunities to date to view works by known homosexual and bisexual artists of the 1950s and early 1960s. The exhibition catalogue focused on artists established within the pre-existing discourse on 1950s art instead of expanding or reconsidering the artistic canon. In the catalogue, Kenneth Silver’s “Modes of Disclosure: The Construction of Gay Identity and Rise of Pop Art” described an extensive effort to decipher hidden homoerotic meanings in pieces by Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Andy Warhol (1928-87). Although Silver explored the correlative relationship between Frank O’Hara’s 1956 poem “In Memory of My Feelings” and Johns’ 1961 *In Memory of My Feelings—Frank O’Hara*, he failed to mention Rivers’ intimate relationship with O’Hara in the 1950s. Rivers and several of his well-known paintings, including *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1953), are mentioned in Paul Schimmel’s

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12 Prior to this, there was one retrospective on Rivers in 1980 at Hannover, Germany. Carl Haenlein, *Larry Rivers Retrospektive* (Hannover, Germany: Kestner-Gesellschaft, 1980).

13 Rivers’ 2002 retrospective, *Larry Rivers: Art and the Artist* at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC, offered viewers a rare opportunity to look at his paintings of the 1950s as a group; however, the exhibition and catalogue carefully undercut and even ignored the more controversial aspects of Rivers’ personal life. The catalogue focused on his distinctive “campy” persona without providing a detailed account of the artist and his work. The exhibition also omitted “Us” from *Stones*, Rivers and O’Hara’s collaborative poem-painting series. “Us,” Rivers’ most explicitly homoerotic work, contains an image of Rivers and O’Hara embracing each other and appearing as an intimate couple.

“The Faked Gesture: Pop Art and the New York School.” However, Schimmel’s introductory essay is principally concerned with setting the historical groundwork for a transitional period between Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art rather than with offering close analyses of individual artists and works, let alone discussing the queer perspective in Rivers’ art.

While the early 1990s were extremely fertile years for queer art criticism and art history, Rivers received little attention from major art critics in this area of research during this period. Art historian Jonathan Katz pioneered and expanded gay and lesbian studies of 1950s art in the United States, beginning with his provocative 1992 essay “Art of Code: Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg” and continuing with his 1998 writing “Dismembership: Jasper Johns and the Body Politic.”15 As the 1990s progressed, Katz’s approach incorporated elements of artists’ biographies, cultural history, and queer theory, yet his primary interest remained in Rauschenberg, Johns, Warhol, and the circle surrounding John Cage (1912-92).16 The same artists and their circle were the focus of critical attention in Caroline Jones’ 1993 essay “Finishing School: John Cage and the

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16 Rivers’ purportedly marginal position within scholarship on homosexual or bisexual artists in the 1950s may be partly attributable to the fact that the dominant approach in pioneering studies such as those of Katz and Silver has been to decipher hidden and obtuse iconographical meanings or formal characteristics associated with the gay subculture and artists’ biographies. Relatively explicit references to sexuality and to the artist’s personal life in Rivers’ nude portrait O’Hara (1954) and The Greatest Homosexual (1964) may have made Rivers a less suitable candidate for studies on bisexual artists of the pre-Stonewall era.
Abstract Expressionist Ego,” as well as in her 1996 wring “Andy Warhol’s Factory, Commonism, and the Business Art Business.” 17

From the late 1990s onward, as the influence of queer studies within art history increased, critics began to pose serious epistemological, psychological, and philosophical challenges to conventional approaches to artists’ identity and sexuality. During this time, Rivers appeared in a few art historical writings, such as Gavin Butt’s 1999 article “The Greatest Homosexual?” and 2005 essay “The Gift of the Gab: Camp Talk and the Art of Larry Rivers.” 18 In “The Greatest Homosexual?,” Butt dealt with Rivers’ work in light of the theory of camp. He addressed Rivers’ self-presentation in Life magazine and in his autobiography as embodying a subjectivity that was distinctive in the 1950s New York art world. “His [Rivers’] refusal to abide by the dominant image of the male artists in the 1950s, his tendency for self-aggrandizing and self-mythologizing statements—made him a problematic candidate for the artist subject position as constituted within Abstract Expressionist circles,” wrote Butt. 19 In 2005 essay, Butt extended his previous analyses of Rivers, whose discussions of homosexuality he saw as important—less in light of his actual relationship with another man than as evidence of his inclination to gossip about artists’ personal lives, including his own. Butt claimed, “Unlike what happened to most subjects of gossip … it wasn’t friends and colleagues who were doing most of the


gossiping but Rivers himself, working in his self-publicizing mode.” Indeed, the subtitle of Rivers’ 1992 autobiography—*The Unauthorized Autobiography*—may reflect his ironic attempt to undermine the reliability of the “gossipy” information in his own book.

Butt’s article and study informed this dissertation. His basic theoretical framework is that of “performative” theory in gender and sexuality, through which he probed Rivers’ unstable and distinctive subject position—a position neither gay nor straight—to undermine traditional categories of self and identity. In his work, Butt purposely avoided discussing Rivers’ actual sexual relationship with O’Hara as the basic historical subtext for his involvement with gay writers. More importantly, his analysis often bypassed or undermined Rivers’ rather “serious” and committed ways of dealing with the issues of male sexuality and homosexuality in his art. In reviewing Rivers’ *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, Butt contended: “Rivers’ attitude toward his subject was, I would venture, neither serious (‘I never took them seriously’), nor was it as a joke or ironic comment.” In his view, Rivers’ attitude “allowed him to endorse his

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20 Butt, *Between You and Me*, 76.

21 “Performative theory” of gender and sexuality is derived from Judith Butler’s criticism of traditional concept of fixed and permanent identity that can be attributable to the naturally gendered body. Inspired by John L. Austin’s theory of the “performative statement,” Butler has argued that “gender effects” is rather the result of “forced” enactment or “performance” in that the very repetitive performance of socially proscribed gender roles paradoxically produces the imaginary fiction of a “core gender.” Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990, 2nd ed., 1999), 171-80.

22 Butt’s comparison of the “gossipy” nature of O’Hara’s lines with Rivers’ painting (he quoted the artist saying that his painting was like a huge “visual gossip column”) does not extend into an iconographic reading and thematic analysis of Rivers’ and O’Hara’s works. Such an analysis would enable the reader to access Rivers and O’Hara’s shared critical stance against gender and sexual norms and definitions—a stance that transcended the “superficial [camp] pleasures” of gossip that are the focus of Butt’s work.
‘pleasurable feeling’ for a discredited subject and outmoded genre of painting while at
the same recognizing and reinscribing its outmodedness and illegitimacy.”23 What Butt
emphasized as pleasure was, in fact, at the heart of Susan Sontag’s famous 1964
definition of camp as basically “apolitical.” “Homosexuals have pinned their integration
into society on promoting the aesthetic sense,” Sontag wrote. “Camp is the solvent of
morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness.”24 She later argued,
“People who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label as ‘a camp,’
they’re enjoying it.”25

Regarding Rivers’ apparent lack of seriousness as an expression of his camp
sensibility, Butt did not fully appreciate the potentially rebellious nature of his work in
relation to the sexual politics of the 1950s New York art world. According to Sontag,
camp involves a new, more complex relation to the serious: “One can be serious about
the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.”26 Contrary to Butt’s suggestion that Rivers
gossiped about his alleged homosexuality primarily in the service of “self-publicizing,”
Rivers appears to have been “concerned” about sexual norms and the condition of gay
people. Rivers’ collection of personal videos and films made throughout his life shows

23 Butt, Between You and Me, 90-91.

24 Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in Against Interpretation, and Other Essays (New
York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 290. Sontag’s 1964 article—which was published in
Partisan Review when John Ashbery, a close friend of Rivers and O’Hara’s, was working there as
an editor—is one of the most relevant contemporaneous essays for a discussion about camp’s
influence on Rivers and O’Hara.

25 Ibid., 292.

26 Ibid., 288.
that he was, in fact, an attendee at numerous parades and meetings for gays and lesbians until his death in 2003.\footnote{Rivers published a still from one of his films of a gay parade in his autobiography, where he noted a wide range of attitudes toward homosexuality within so-called mainstream society. Rivers and Weinstein, \textit{What Did I Do?}, 224.}

Camp remains a crucial theoretical framework for understanding Rivers’ humor and choice of subject matter, and, for that matter, O’Hara’s. What is more, this dissertation highlights camp’s political implications. Drawing upon her study of drag queens, Esther Newton, an anthropologist, interpreted camp theatricality as part of a potentially feasible political strategy. Newton’s insight into gender reenactment of drag queens, in particular, is helpful in understanding Rivers’ and O’Hara’s similarly critical responses to how normative masculinities are created and distinguished from their supposedly abnormal homosexual counterparts. In her study “Role Model” (1993), Newton summarized three core traits of camp—“incongruity, theatricality, and humor”—that she perceived as intimately related to the homosexual situation and strategy.\footnote{Esther Newton, “Role Models,” in \textit{Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality}, ed. David Bergman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 45.} The drag queen, as opposed to the female impersonator, rarely intends to be taken seriously as a woman; from the outset, the drag artist intends others to see the self-conscious artificiality of the performance.\footnote{Ibid., 44.} In that respect, she argued, camp sensibility is found not in an object or person, but in a dialectical process of interaction between the viewer and the camp performance, or, more specifically, between the viewer’s awareness of artificiality and the stylization of the camp performance.\footnote{Ibid., 47.}
A Poet among Painters: Literature Review on O’Hara

In addition to gay/lesbian or queer studies, the close affinity between art and poetry is a theoretical axis of this dissertation. As scholars have documented, interaction among artists and writers was quite common in the bohemian circles of the 1950s and 1960s in the United States. In “Modes of Disclosure,” for instance, Kenneth Silver concentrated on Jasper Johns’ literary interest in Frank O’Hara and Hart Crane (1899-1932). Silver argued that Johns’ allusion to O’Hara’s poem “In Memory of My Feelings” (1956) in his work *In Memory of My Feelings—Frank O’Hara* (1961) bears “an unfortunate but necessary relationship to ‘outing.’ ”

Reva Wolf’s 1997 study *Andy Warhol, Poetry, and Gossip in the 1960s* also dealt with Warhol’s association with writers. In 1952, Warhol completed a series of drawings after his reading of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) by Truman Capote (1924-84), a novel that depicts a boy who falls into a relationship with a decadent transvestite. Warhol, along with Joe Brainard and other artists, contributed to the cover of a 1965 issue of Ted Berrigan’s *C magazine* (*C* represents “Censored”). This issue featured poets and writers such as Edwin Denby, Frank O’Hara, John Wieners, and Berrigan, all of whom were known to be gay. Robert Duncan (1919-88), a poet who was associated with the Black Mountain Poets during the 1950s and became the center of the San Francisco Renaissance in the late 1950s and


32 This series was first exhibited as *Fifteen Drawings Based on the Writings of Truman Capote* at the Hugo Gallery in New York in 1952. For an extensive list and discussion of Warhol’s early drawings, see Mark Francis and Dieter Koepplin, *Andy Warhol: Drawings, 1942-1987* (Pittsburgh: The Andy Warhol Museum, 1999) and Neil Printz, “Other Voices and Other Rooms: Between Andy Warhol and Truman Capote, 1948-1961.” (Ph.D. Diss., The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 2002).
1960s, lived with Jess Burgess Collins (1923-2004, more frequently called “Jess”), a
collagist and painter. During their relationship, which lasted from 1951 until Duncan’s
death in 1985, Jess constructed collages that he called “paste-ups” from old book
illustrations and photographs. These images reflected the lifelong interests he shared with
Duncan: chemistry, alchemy, surrealist art and literature, and the beauty of the male body.
Duncan, in turn, wrote a poem entitled “These Past Years: Passages 10” from *Bending
the Bow* (1968) to celebrate his companionship with Jess.

The frequent collaborations among non-straight artists, poets, and critics may
have been partly attributable to the fact that the arena of literature is rich in gay
iconography. One finds gay themes, for instance, in classical Greek literature and
nineteenth century Romantic poetry. Same-sex relationships are directly treated in
twentieth century novels and poems such as *The City and the Pillar* (1948) by Vidal,
(1926-97), and *Naked Lunch* (1959) by William S. Burroughs (1914-97). Artists
frequently formed networks with writers, through which they sought a social space that
provided relative freedom of expression and protection from society. In 1993, Silver
argued that the interpretation of Johns’ works requires hermeneutical investigation, as
Johns performs a kind of “ventriloquism” by primarily using the voices of “three gay
American poets: Frank O’Hara, Hart Crane, and Walt Whitman.”33 As will be discussed
in chapter five, Rivers’ 1957 collaboration with O’Hara, “The End of All Existence,” also
centers on two poets, French Romantics Paul Verlaine (1844-1896) and Arthur Rimbaud
(1854-1891), who were known as lovers.

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33 Silver, “Modes of Disclosure,” 183.
Several writings document the evolution of a small coterie of artists and poets within the New York School during the 1950s. John Bernard Myers, director of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery and Rivers’ dealer, wrote of this social group in *Tracking the Marvelous: A Life in the New York Art World* in 1983. John Gruen, a musician who was married to painter Jane Wilson, described the informal atmosphere in Rivers’ and O’Hara’s circle in *The Party’s Over Now: Reminiscences of the Fifties—New York’s Artists, Writers, Musicians, and Their Friends* in 1972. Although both books stand as early, rare documents of the world of this coterie of artists and poets, the primary focus in Myers’ book is the professional affiliation between artists and poets in collaborative projects, while the information in Gruen’s book is partial and unfocused, especially compared to two important recent publications: Rivers’ 1992 autobiography and Brad Gooch’s 1994 *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O’Hara*.

Prior to the exhibition *In Memory of My Feelings: Frank O'Hara and American Art* at the Los Angeles Museum of Art in 1999, scholarship on O’Hara’s association with the art world was primarily limited to works of literary criticism such as Marjorie Perloff’s monograph *Frank O’Hara: Poet among Painters* (1977, with a new introduction in 1998). Despite various publications—*In Memory of My Feelings: A Selection of Poems* (1967), a compilation of artists’ tributary prints to O’Hara and his poetry, *Art Chronicle 1954-1966* (1975), and *Standing Still and Walking in New York*,

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34 For an additional recent memoir by a close friend of O’Hara’s, see Joe LeSueur, *Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O’Hara: An Intimate Memoir* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003).

35 *Art with the Touch of a Poet: Frank O'Hara* at the William Benton Museum of Art, University of Connecticut in 1983, was a smaller yet significant exhibition that preceded the 1999 exhibition on O’Hara.
and *Homage to Frank O’Hara* (1983), collections of his essays in art and culture—art history scholars have been slow in recognizing the significance of O’Hara’s collaborative relationships with painters and his standing in the art criticism of the 1950s. More importantly, most writings on O’Hara’s connection to the art world have tended to confine their focus to his curatorial activities and his art criticism related to Abstract Expressionism and the older generation New York School artists. In contrast, Russell Ferguson, in *In Memory of My Feelings*, treated O’Hara’s distinctive personality and sex life as relatively significant to his writing; he discussed Rivers’ 1954 portrait *O’Hara* quite extensively, mentioning O’Hara’s intimate relationship with Rivers.

A final area for discussion is O’Hara’s place in literary criticism. There have been several significant monographs on O’Hara, including Perloff’s *Frank O’Hara: Poet among Painters* and Alan Feldman’s *Frank O’Hara* (1979). In the 1990s, O’Hara received a considerable amount of attention from literary critics, partly prompted by the advent of gay/lesbian and queer studies in cultural and literary history and criticism. This attention was also driven by the publication of foundational books on O’Hara such as Gooch’s O’Hara biography (1994) and *Frank O’Hara: To Be True to a City*, a 1990 anthology of writings on O’Hara edited by Jim Elledge. The 1990s saw a number of serious studies on O’Hara that contained open and lengthy discussions of the poet’s sexual life and orientation, including Alice Parker’s *The Exploration of the Secret Smile: The Language of Art and of Homosexuality in Frank O’Hara’s Poetry* (1989), Geoff Ward’s *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets* (1993), David Lehman’s *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (1998), and Hazel

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36 Donald Allen’s *Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara* was first published in 1971 (later reprinted by University of California Press in 1999).
Smith’s *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O’Hara: Difference, Homosexuality, Topography* (2000). Among these references, Smith’s *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O’Hara* has been the most helpful for this dissertation, not only in its focus on queer studies, but also in its emphasis on O’Hara’s critical view of the self, identity, and male sexuality. The present dissertation, situated in art history, has benefited from all of these useful recent studies, most of which are in literary criticism.

Though it does not directly address the artists within Rivers’ and O’Hara’s circle, Ann Gibson’s 1997 *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* is an invaluable study on artists in the orbit of the New York School whose gender, sexual, and racial orientations or identities did not conform to the seemingly dominant image of the white heterosexual male. In this book, Gibson dealt with Theodoros Stamos (1922-97), Alfonso Ossorio (1916-90), and Fritz Bulman (1919-85), artists who were close to major Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock (1912-56) and Willem de Kooning (1904-97) yet were noted for their eccentric artistic styles and, more suggestively, their homosexual orientations. In particular, Gibson’s extensive documentation of the derisive and coded language used in critical literature on Stamos’ and Ossorio’s art during the 1950s sheds light upon the alienation and hostile social conditions that most non-heterosexual artists and poets within the New York art world, including Rivers and O’Hara, endured.

**Writing on Rivers and O’Hara: Methodology and Structure**

In proceeding with the interpretation of Rivers’ and O’Hara’s works from the perspective of gender and sexuality, I am aware of some of the important conflicts between essentialist and anti-essentialist approaches or correspondingly between gay/lesbian studies and queer studies. The primary theoretical concern among certain
scholars in gay and lesbian studies who are dubbed essentialist is to delineate the historical and psychological experiences of gays and lesbians in society. In so doing, certain scholars, such as Jonathan Katz in his 1975 *Gay American History* and Eric Marcus in his 1992 *Making History*, tend to treat gay and lesbian experiences in collective and relatively homogeneous terms. In contrast, scholars adopting an anti-essentialist approach, under the influence of “queer theory” which gained currency from the late 1980s and 1990s, concentrate on the problematic aspects of the very categories “gay” and “lesbian,” questioning monolithic definitions of gay identity and challenging the conventional binary of normative versus deviant sexual behaviors.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), an influential anti-essentialist work, Judith Butler argued that studies on “sex, gender, and desire” had to investigate “the political stakes in

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38 The word “queer” has a primary meaning of “odd” and “out of the ordinary.” According to Annamarie Jagose, “queer” is relatively unaligned with specific identity categories: “Unlike those identity categories labeled lesbian or gay, queer has developed out of the theorizing of often unexamined constraints in traditional identity politics.” Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford, UK and New York: New York University Press, 1996), 3.

designating as an origin and cause those identity categories that are in fact the effects of institutions, practices, discourses,” rather than searching for “the origins of gender, the inner truth of female desire, a genuine or authentic sexual identity.”⁴⁰ Such discrepant views of “gay identity” resulted in distinctive theoretical emphases among scholars examining the history and culture of non-heterosexual people.

Some art historians who prefer gay and lesbian studies to queer studies have criticized the queer approach to art history for its lack of interest in the histories of individual gay and lesbian artists and the development of gay politics. In “Goodbye Lesbian/Gay History, Hello Queer Sensibility: Mediating on Curatorial Practice,” published in Art Journal in 1996, Robert Atkins argued that an exhibition In a Different Light, curated by Nayland Blake and Lawrence Rinder at the University Art Museum in Berkeley, in 1994, exemplified the state of curatorial practice under the influence of queer studies. The exhibition not only passed up the opportunity to compile “a much-needed historical record of lesbian and gay artists,” but also “consciously rejected the notion of identity politics in favor of an amorphous notion of queer sensibility.”⁴¹

As Jonathan Weinberg noted in “Things Are Queer” in 1996, art-critical and art-historical studies influenced by queer theory, by contrast, emphasized artists’ critical attitudes toward common binaries between “normal and abnormal,” “decent and

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⁴⁰ Butler, Gender Trouble, xxix.

⁴¹ Robert Atkins, “Goodbye Lesbian/Gay History, Hello Queer Sensibility: Meditating on Curatorial Practice,” Art Journal 55, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 80. According to Atkins, more than half of the essays in the exhibition catalogue constitute a “primer” of contemporary theory. None of these essays, he argued, contains detailed historical information about lesbian and gay artists or serious debate about identity politics. Ibid., 82-83.
obscene,” and “gay and straight.”

Although Weinberg acknowledged the danger that queer theory posed to the politics and history of gay and lesbian communities, he also argued with those in gay/lesbian studies in art history for “gain[ing] not a little satisfaction in believing in the conservatism of art history and the scandal of speaking of sex and deviancy.” He continued, “Foucault is correct to suggest that merely speaking of sex is not the same as transgression—often such speech may be the means to traditional academic success.”

Weinberg’s contention was that art historians “should be free to move between them [queer studies and lesbian gay studies] and even confuse them,” rather than taking one theoretical stance exclusively.

I share Weinberg’s endorsement of a more comprehensive methodology that encompasses the approaches of both gay/lesbian studies and queer studies. The structure of this dissertation reflects changes that occurred within the personal and artistic aspects of Rivers’ and O’Hara’s relationship, which it follows from inception through fruition to maturity. A partial collection of personal correspondence between Rivers and O’Hara reserved in Rivers’ archive in Bridgehampton, New York, and a relatively comprehensive collection of O’Hara’s letters to his friends (including Rivers and members of the New York School of Poets) archived in the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center at the library of the University of Connecticut are cited throughout the dissertation.

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43 “However, there is a danger in this shift,” Weinberg wrote, for “if homophobia is everywhere, and everything and everybody is potentially queer, then the specific stories of how gay and lesbian people have lived and represented their lives, as well as the record of their persecution and struggle for civil rights, may be passed over.” Ibid., 12.

44 Ibid., 13.

I also undertake close iconographic readings of subject matter and motifs in Rivers’ and O’Hara’s work in light of visual and literary resources circulated among male homosexuals both before and during the 1950s. In addition to John D’Emilio’s *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* (1983) and *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (1997), I examine magazines related to homosexuality in the 1950s, such as *One* (published between 1953 and 1968), the most influential and widely circulating gay periodical in the postwar United States, as well as relevant articles in popular publications such as *Life* and *Time*. These magazines and articles are valuable historical documents that can help readers understand the homophobic conditions of the 1950s in general and the beginning of the gay liberation movement in the United States during that period.

At the same time, I treat Rivers’ paintings and O’Hara’s poetry as indicators of their potentially subversive and critical attitudes toward gender and sexuality rather than merely as documents of their sexual lives and “deviancies.” For this purpose, the dissertation also takes its basic theoretical framework from several pivotal and renowned works in queer and performative studies, such as Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990, with a new introduction in 1999) and “Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” (1997); Sedgwick’s *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) and *Epistemology of the Closet* (1991); and *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (1991), edited by Diana Fuss.

not only in their personal relationship, but also in their professional lives, as will be discussed in detail in chapter five. In addition to Rivers’ and O’Hara’s individual paintings and writings (including a poem by Rivers), I treat their collaborative projects in theater, art criticism, and print.

Chapter one, “Making a Queer Circle of Artists and Poets in the New York School,” discusses the formation of artists’ and poets’ gatherings within the New York School of the 1950s, from which Rivers and O’Hara emerged as the most productive artistic and personal partners.

Chapter two, “Male Sexualities in an Age of Anxiety: 1950s Discourses on Male Homosexuality in Sexology, Literature, and Art,” offers a historical and theoretical overview of Rivers’ and O’Hara’s collaborative period. Emphasis is placed upon how the concept of homosexuality became contingent upon the binary of homosexuality and heterosexuality, as well as upon how this binary originated in the ideological and cultural contexts of the postwar United States. It is argued that, in the 1950s, incessant attempts to draw strict divisions between categories of gender and sexuality within the larger society and the art world are crucial for understanding Rivers’ and O’Hara’s critical treatment of homosexuality and male sexualities in their art and poetry.

Chapter three, “Rivers’ Formative Years and Washington Crossing the Delaware (1953),” charts a period during which Rivers assumed a marginal position in the New York art world, formed ambivalent relationships with the major New York School artists, and established personal and creative proximity to the New York School poets, particularly O’Hara. In the last two sections of this chapter, I further analyze the connection between Rivers’ Washington Crossing the Delaware (1953) and O’Hara’s
early writings and poem “On Seeing Larry Rivers’ *Washington Crossing the Delaware* at
the Museum of Modern Art” (1955) in light of the historical context of the early 1950s, a
decade marked by intense efforts to separate the normal from the abnormal in ideology
and sexuality.

Chapter four, “Rivers’ Family Portraits in the Mid 1950s and O’Hara’s
‘Homosexuality’ (1954) and ‘In Memory of My Feelings’ (1956),” addresses the most
intimate period of Rivers and O’Hara’s relationship in 1954 and 1955, examining Rivers’
portrait *O’Hara*, his other family portraits, and O’Hara’s “Homosexuality” and “In
Memory of My Feelings.” In exploring Rivers’ and O’Hara’s ostensibly autobiographical
paintings and poems, this chapter ultimately uncovers the ambiguous nature of biography
in their works—in other words, how they utilized images and experiences drawn from
their personal lives to criticize a number of binaries, such as self/other, effeminate versus
macho stereotypes, and masculinity/femininity.

Chapter five, “Rivers’ and O’Hara’s Collaboration (1953-1960),” deals with their
collaborations throughout the 1950s in theater, art criticism, and print. Unlike their
individual pieces, their collaborative projects integrated their immediate interactions and
informal talk. Especially noteworthy is *Stones*, a ten-part lithograph series completed
between 1957 and 1960 that is considered their most extensive collaborative work. *Stones*
centers on the ambiguous status of their relationship, which was situated between
friendship and love or homosociality and homosexuality. Using the example of *Stones*,
this chapter aims at investigating their radical treatment of male intimacy in art and
literature.
Ch. 1. Making a Queer Circle of Artists and Poets in the New York School

The Formation of Nell’s Gathering and “Avant-Garde Sex”

As critic Hilton Kramer noted, “The New York art world in the 1950s was a much smaller place than it is today, and Greenwich Village was then its downtown boundary.”

In 1986, Rivers nostalgically spoke of the intimate milieu he enjoyed within the circle of artists working in New York during the 1950s and early 1960s:

Elaine de Kooning said to me, about twenty-five years ago, that if anybody was doing anything—meaning anything important in art—we, our group, would know it. Today you couldn’t possibly talk that way—unless you were an art sociologist. It’s all gotten so much bigger. It’s just mushroomed.

Within this friendly atmosphere of the New York avant-garde, painters and poets frequently mixed with one another at several famous downtown bars, such as the Cedar Tavern and San Remo Café. “You had painters coming in there and poets—all my friends went there—Kenneth Koch, Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, Arnold Weinstein, all writers,” recalled Rivers. In his 1965 “A Memoir,” O’Hara also stated that poets often divided their time between the San Remo Café (at 189 Bleecker Street), a literary bar, and the Cedar Tavern (24 University Place), an artists’ bar, both located in the neighborhood of Washington Square. As O’Hara wrote, “An interesting sidelight to these social activities

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3 Larry Rivers and Carol Brightman, Drawings and Digressions (New York: Clark N. Potter, Inc., 1979), 71.

4 The San Remo Café (today, Carpo’s Café), located at the corner of Bleecker and MacDougal Streets, was a writer's hangout from the late 1920s to the 1950s; it was also frequented by James Baldwin, William Styron, Jack Kerouac, James Agee, Gregory Corso, Dylan Thomas, William Burroughs, and Allen Ginsberg. John Clellon Holmes wrote of the San Remo in his 1952 novel Go, one of the first works published by a member of the Beat generation. Brad Gooch, City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O’Hara (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 201.
was that for most of us non-Academic, and indeed non-literary poets in the sense of the American scene at the time, the painters were the only generous audience for our poetry, and most of us read first publicly in art galleries or at The Club.”

The core members of the New York School of Poets were Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery (1927- ), James Schuyler (1923-91), and Kenneth Koch (1925-2002); the younger generation New York School artists associated with this group included Larry Rivers, Jane Freilicher (1924- ), Grace Hartigan (1922- ), Nell Blaine (1922-96), Michael Goldberg (1924- ), and Alfred Leslie (1927- ). The poets in O’Hara’s circle—who socialized with and posed for the painters—came to be known as the “New York School of Poets.” This label gained wide circulation with the publication of the first anthology of their writing, *The Poets of the New York School*, in 1969, but like other attempts to categorize artistic and literary movements, the rubric of the “New York School” proved problematic and limiting. John Bernard Myers, editor of the anthology, *The Poets of the New York School*, maintained that what these poets formed was a kind of a “coterie” rather than “a school of poets in the old fashioned sense.”

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6 In an interview in 1979, Grace Hartigan maintained that although there was no self-conscious effort to create a break between the older and younger generation New York School artists, most of the older generation artists had participated in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and in socialist realism in the late 1930s and the 1940s. Many of the older generation artists were also personally acquainted with the Surrealists, who were expatriates in New York during the 1940s and 1950s whereas most younger generation artists lacked these experiences. Grace Hartigan, Interview with Julie Haifley (Oral History Program), May 10, 1979, Washington, DC: Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, transcript, http://artarchives.si.edu/oralhist/hartig79.htm, 11.

‘mutual aid,’” rather than by the congenial and unified artistic direction that is required for the establishment of any school in a traditional sense.8

For Anne Waldman, a poet and friend of these writers, the term “New York School of Poets” was “a complicated double joke.”9 To her knowledge, the poets originally adopted the name as a kind of an homage to the New York School of painters, “who de-provincialized American painting” during the 1940s and 1950s. The term “New York School” was also intended to obliquely refer to the School of Paris, a group of artists active in Montparnasse before 1930 who were known for their eclectic style, which ranged from Post-Impressionism to Fauvism. Whatever its origin, the term “New York School of Poets” was meant to underscore the close personal and artistic partnerships developed among artists and poets in the 1950s New York avant-garde.

Throughout the history of modern art in both Europe and the United States, there have been numerous efforts to create communities of artists and poets; most of the major avant-garde artistic movements that evolved in Europe during the prewar years (e.g., Cubism, Dadaism, and Surrealism) were interdisciplinary, featuring artistic experimentation that transcended the confines of fine art and entered the areas of literature, theater, and music. Marjorie Perloff borrowed a nickname that originally referred to French poet and art critic Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) for the subtitle of her study of O’Hara, Frank O’Hara: Poet among Painters (1977), in order to underscore the similarity between O’Hara’s role in the 1950s New York School and that

8 Ibid., 8.

of Apollinaire in the Parisian avant-garde during the 1910s and 1920s.\textsuperscript{10} Apollinaire’s *The Cubist Painters (Les Peintures Cubistes)*, a collection of critical essays written between 1905 and 1912, was considered a pioneering attempt to articulate the basic aesthetics of Cubism to the public.\textsuperscript{11} Apollinaire wrote poems after or inspired by paintings such as *The Three Windows, The Tower and The Wheel* (1912) by Robert Delaunay (1885-1941). In his poem “It Rains (Il Plût),” the words float down the pages from left to right like drippings of pigment on a canvas. In *Calligrammes* (1918), a book of poems based on the poet’s experiences in the First World War, Apollinaire incorporated words, letters and phrases into complex visual collages, such that a simple reading along the familiar linear axes (left to right, top to bottom) was no longer possible. The page became a sort of canvas for experimentation with different spatial relationships of words arranged on a blank paper.

In the postwar United States, there were various collaborative projects or interactions among artists from different arenas, notably at Black Mountain College. John Price opened Black Mountain College in 1933 with the hope of reviving the


multidisciplinary curriculum and pedagogical approach that thrived at the Bauhaus during the prewar years in Germany. Under his guidance, the college soon became a hotbed of interdisciplinary art education and avant-garde experimentation, attracting a number of renowned and influential figures in the fields of visual art, design, architecture, and literature. Major Abstract Expressionists came to Asheville, North Carolina, to teach at the college’s special summer program. Robert Motherwell (1915-91), for instance, served as an instructor at the summer program from 1945 until it ended in 1953, joined by Willem de Kooning in 1948 and Franz Kline (1910-62) in 1952. The summer program gave birth to several notable interdisciplinary avant-garde performances, including the multimedia “happening” organized by John Cage in 1952, in which Robert Rauschenberg’s *White Painting* (1951), made of seven panels all painted white, served as a backdrop for Merce Cunningham (1919- ) dancing, Charles Olson (1910-70) reciting verse from a ladder, and David Tudor (1926-96) playing an experimental piece on the piano.¹²

Charles Olson, who taught at Black Mountain College between 1951 and 1956—the period that saw the most frequent and active collaborations among artists in visual art, literature, dance, and music in the history of the college—also developed his literary theories under the direct and indirect influence of Abstract Expressionism. In a series of writings including “Projective Verse” (1950), Olson proposed that “a poem should have

the writer’s breath in it,” just as a painting has the “artists’ idiosyncratic gestures in it.”

He conceived of a poem as an “open field of energy which at all points discharged,” an idea that shows strong affinities with de Kooning’s wild brushstrokes and Jackson Pollock’s unconventional method of moving around a canvas spread on the floor like an “open field.”

Notwithstanding important historical precedents, the relationships between younger generation painters and poets within the New York School were quite different from previous relationships between artists and writers, particularly those nurtured among the older generation New York School artists and poets at Black Mountain College. First, the community of younger generation painters and poets in the New York School was built upon personal friendships, which were primarily generated by the geographic proximity of the painters’ and poets’ studios, homes, cafés, and bars, rather than built upon temporary encounters in summer programs. Beginning in the late 1940s, Freilicher and Koch lived in the same building; Ashbery joined Koch after their graduation from Harvard in 1949 and enrolled at the Graduate School of Columbia University in the same year. Rivers’ apartment was located on Twenty-First Street just across from Blaine’s studio, which became an important, informal gathering place for artists and poets.

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14 Ibid., 148-49.

15 For more detailed information about artists’ neighborhoods in the Lower East Side during the late 1940s and the 1950s, see Jane Freilicher, Interview with Barbara Sikler, August 4, 1987, transcript, Washington, DC: Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, 16-18.
Second, the younger poets and painters tended to collaborate on projects in a range of genres, media, and arenas, such as poem-painting, book printing, and theater. Unlike the relationships developed between Olson and artists such as de Kooning and Motherwell, those between poets and artists in the New York avant-garde of the 1950s were bolstered by institutional support that made ongoing creative cooperation between artists and poets possible. Although in his 1969 description of the New York School of poets, as stated earlier, Myers tried to undermine the existence of a social structure within the New York School of poets as part of his efforts to stress and even mythologize the informal atmosphere of the group, he himself, as director of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, offered institutional and financial support for most of the collaborative efforts of artists and poets in the New York School throughout the 1950s.

Third, O’Hara, Ashbery, and Schuyler, major members of the New York School of poets, frequently contributed their writings to *Art News*. O’Hara began his professional career in the New York art scene as an editorial associate at *Art News* in 1953 and continued to write short reviews of the younger generation New York School artists during the 1950s and 1960s. Ashbery was also a professional art critic and served as a correspondent for the *International Herald Tribune* and *Newsweek*, among other

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16 Thomas Hess, editor of *Art News*, actively sought the presence of these young poets in his magazine, presumably in the hope of bringing their fresh visions of art, which they developed largely through their close friendships with younger generation artists, to his publication. Irving Sandler, *The New York School: The Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 263.

17 O’Hara also had a long career at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, first as an assistant to the Director of the International Program in 1955 and later as an Assistant and Associate Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture. He held the latter post until his death in 1966. Schuyler was also an associate editor and critic at *Art News* from 1955 to 1962 and worked at the Circulation Department for traveling exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art from 1955 to 1961.
publications. Bernard H. Friedman’s *School of New York: Some Younger Artists* (1959), the first comprehensive exhibition catalogue devoted to the younger generation of the New York School, contained an essay on Rivers by O’Hara and on Leslie by Schuyler. The New York School of poets followed the precedent of French avant-garde poets, particularly Apollinaire, who served as an important advocate and critic of Cubist painters.

Fourth, and most importantly as regards the discussion of male sexualities in the New York School, homosexual poets, painters, and dealers played indispensable roles within Rivers and O’Hara’s coterie. Among the poets, O’Hara, Ashbery, and Schuyler were homosexual, and they gained substantial visibility within New York artists’ circles either by appearing at informal gathering places such as the Cedar Tavern and Nell Blaine’s studio or by writing for *Art News*. In addition to gay poets O’Hara, Ashbery, and Schuyler, the circle included Blaine, a lesbian painter, and Myers, a gay dealer. Rivers’ and O’Hara’s circle can be described as one of several homosexual or bisexual enclaves that existed in New York and, later, San Francisco during the 1950s. One notable enclave was formed around beat poets Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs; another was populated by avant-garde musicians, artists, and dancers such as John Cage, Morton Feldman (1926-87), Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Merce Cunningham.

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18 Half of the authors in Friedman’s catalogue *School of New York School of New York: Some Younger Artists* were poets, including O’Hara, Koch, Schuyler, and Barbara Guest. The publisher was Grove Press, which published books of poetry by O’Hara and Koch from the late 1950s.
Blaine’s studio, as stated previously, was one of the most popular gathering places for these artists and poets. During the late 1940s and the 1950s, Blaine became a mentor to the younger generation artists. She moved from Virginia to New York in 1942 to study at Hans Hofmann’s school and by the late 1940s had already built a reputation as one of the most promising abstract artists of her generation in the United States. In addition, Blaine was knowledgeable in art history, especially in theories of European modernism. According to Al Kresch, who served with Blaine as one of three directors of the Jane Street Gallery, she generously shared her art historical knowledge with younger artists, whom she taught “how to see, to see what we were doing by showing what her masters did, Arp, Léger, H[é]lion.”

Blaine and her studio proved especially attractive to homosexual writers, partly due to her lifestyle and sexuality. According to Rivers, Blaine had been married to Bill Bass (a jazz musician and photographer) for six years beginning in 1942, but she had become romantically involved with a woman, Gene Smithberg, at the end of the 1940s.

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19 Koch recalled, “I would stand on Twenty-first Street and I’d look up at Nell’s loft and in the big window of her studio I’d see Nell, Jane, or Larry waiting for us…. I guess they shared the same feeling.” Kenneth Koch, manuscript for “Tribe (unpublished Rivers autobiography),” undated, Bridgehampton, NY: Rivers archive, # 15-IA26 (Rivers literature box).

20 Blaine became a member of the American Abstract Artists (AAA) when she was just twenty-two years old. In 1946, her work was shown in the 10th annual exhibition of the American Abstract Artists in New York, which also included the work of renowned European abstract artists, such as Josef Albers, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, and Ben Nicholson. She also served as secretary/coordinator of the Jane Street Gallery, the first artist’s co-op gallery in the United States (established in 1945), along with two other painters, Al Kresch and Hyde Solomon, between 1948 and 1949.

21 Al Kresch, Interview with an unknown person, undated, transcript, Bridgehampton, NY: Rivers archive, # 15 (Rivers literature box).

Rivers, who came from a working-class Jewish family and was the father of Joseph\textsuperscript{23} (a son of Rivers’ first wife Augusta out of wedlock with other man before her marriage to Rivers), and Steven (Augusta’s and Rivers’ son), was deeply impressed by the liberated attitudes toward sexuality within the bohemian circle of artists and poets at Blaine’s gatherings. Rivers perceived Blaine’s sexuality as a sign of her nonconformist social stance, a stance only allowable within certain restricted arenas of art and literature. Rivers wrote in his autobiography,

Nell, who made no effort to closet her lesbian feeling, was married to Bob Bass. I never heard anyone refer to her as Mrs. Bass. I thought being a lesbian and married was so fantastic it became a lighted gateway into art, the jazz, the parties, the banter that went on in her studio. If anything could be the relieving opposite of “square,” Nell’s life of avant-garde sex, abstract art, and a loft was it!\textsuperscript{24}

In addition, Rivers was impressed by the male homosexuals—especially by their extensive knowledge of art and literature. “At Nell’s gatherings there was a brimming presence of male homosexuals. The few ideas I had about homosexuality were quickly adjusted to my new experiences. I began spinning in an ever expanding reality,” Rivers wrote, and “most of the gay guests, if not as well read as they tried to sound, showed a great interest in literature. Literary heroes’ names were dropped constantly.”\textsuperscript{25}

These poets also demonstrated a certain conversational style and humor only available within the literary world and the gay subculture. Homosexual men frequenting Blaine’s gatherings often referred to one another with women’s names or the names of

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{23}] Rivers took care of Joseph after his separation from Augusta; in the late 1950s, he adopted him.
\item[\textsuperscript{25}] Ibid., 109.
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female characters in classical literature. Rivers once overheard O’Hara and Schuyler refer
to their friend Waldemer as “Wilma”: “Oh, look! There goes Wilma, off to Ophelia
Ocean for her afternoon dip.”26 Among the poets in O’Hara’s circle, it was common to
compare ordinary persons, things, and places to those that appear in literary works such
as Greek myths. Rivers recalled that there was also a suffix—“-ola”—that became so
popular that everyone in their coterie, either gay or straight, picked up the habit.27 In
1972, John Gruen also recalled that gender switching and performance were widespread
among the poets and artists; the female artists in O’Hara’s coterie, including Hartigan and
Freilicher, often wore masculine attire.28

The distinctive conversational style in Rivers’ and O’Hara’s circle befits the
category of “camp talk.” According to Michael Bronski, the practice of camp talk,
especially that of changing the gender of names and pronouns, initially evolved as a
coded, protected way of speaking about one’s personal or sexual life: “If one man were to
be overheard at a public dinner table saying to another, ‘You’ll never guess what Mary
said on our date last night,’’ nothing would be thought of it.”29

26 Ibid., 109-110.

27 The suffix was “used to an excess that didn’t necessarily lead to the palace of wisdom,”
Rivers claimed, “but I picked up on it like everyone else I knew, gay and straight.” Ibid., 110.

28 For an overview of the influence of “camp” culture on gender transgression, see John
Gruen, The Party’s Over Now: Reminiscences of the Fifties—New York’s Artists, Writers,
Musicians, and Their Friends (New York: Viking, 1972), 133. In her letter to Terrence Diggory,
a literary critic, Hartigan also said that she wore masculine attire such as army pants during the
early 1950s. Grace Hartigan, Letter to Terrence Diggory, April 30, 1992, quoted in Terrence
Diggory, “Questions of Identity in Oranges by Frank O’Hara and Grace Hartigan,” Art Journal
52, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 50.

29 Michael Bronski, Cultural Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility (Boston: South End
Press, 1984), 43.
In his 1993 study about the development of the gay subculture during the pre-Second World War era, historian George Chauncey argued that the term, “camp” had already circulated among homosexual men to refer to “a style of interaction and display that use[s] irony, incongruity, theatricality, and humor to highlight the artifice of social convention.”30 According to Allan Bérubé, a historian, camp served an especially important function within the community of male homosexuals. In his 1990 book on homosexuals in the military during the Second World War, Bérubé argued that camp “could simultaneously distance [gay men] from humiliation they endured as social outcasts while creating an alternative moral order and culture in which gay men were in control,” as camp’s humor “reflected the self-consciousness of some gay men as sexual or gender outsiders,” but “helped them define themselves as ‘insiders’ of their own secret world.”31

In her 1964 “Notes on Camp,” Susan Sontag defined camp as characterized by duplicity of meaning: “to camp is a mode of seduction—one which employs flamboyant gestures full of duplicity, with a witty meaning for cognoscenti and another, more impersonal, for outsiders.” When a person or thing is camp, Sontag argues, duplicity is involved, and one could find “a private zany experience of the thing” behind the

30 George Chauncey, Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940 (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 290. In the introduction of Camp Ground, David Bergman also summed up various interpretations of camp as follows: First is that camp is a style, which favors exaggeration and artifice; second is that camp exists in tension with popular and commercial culture; third is that someone who recognized camp is a person outside of the cultural mainstream; fourth is that camp is deeply affiliated with homosexual culture. Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality, ed. David Bergman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 4-5.

“‘straight’ public sense.” While Blaine’s informal gathering place offered certain artists and poets chances to evolve a small coterie in which they could maintain a liberal lifestyle and rebellious views of gender and sexuality, John Bernard Myers, working as a director of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, provided some institutional bases for diverse collaborative endeavors between poets and painters. Myers, a homosexual himself, began his career in the art world as managing editor of View magazine (a famous Surrealist publication produced by European expatriates) between 1942 and 1947. When most of the Surrealists returned to Europe, the magazine lost its momentum in the United States, and Myers started his own puppet theater with his business partner Tibor de Nagy, who had been a manager at the National Bank of Hungary before fleeing the Communist regime in 1947. Using the art-world connections he had previously established as an editor for View and as a puppet theater entrepreneur, Myers opened his own gallery in 1950, which he named after his partner.

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33 According to Rivers, “John Myers was homosexual as James Baldwin was black. It was instant, almost unconscious recognition.” Rivers and Weinstein, What Did I Do?, 202. Myers was older and more knowledgeable about art and literature than were the rest of the artists and poets in O’Hara’s coterie. John Gruen, The Party’s Over Now: Reminiscences of the Fifties—New York’s Artists, Writers, Musicians, and Their Friends (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 134-35. Jane Wilson surmised that Myers’ entertaining, witty, and intelligent manner might have been modeled after Oscar Wilde. For more artists’ comments on Myers’ personality, see Karen Wilkin, “The First Fifty Years,” 25.

34 According to Roland Pease, Myers’ puppet company performed at The Club. The list of artists and intellectuals who attended Myers’ performances and became his fans included Franz
The idea of opening a gallery devoted to contemporary art was originally suggested by critic Clement Greenberg, who encouraged Myers to open a space for “the new, up-and-coming talents.” Myers hoped to distinguish his gallery from established commercial galleries in New York, which primarily concentrated on European artists and demonstrated no interest in the development of contemporary artists in the United States. Most of the younger generation artists—including abstract painters such as Helen Frankenthaler (1928- ), Joan Mitchell (1926-92), and Mike Goldberg, as well as figurative painters such as Jane Wilson (1924- ), Freilicher, and Rivers—became members of Myers’ gallery.

The marriage of art and literature was one of the primary objectives of Myers’ gallery because he was especially thrilled by the interdisciplinary ambiance within the New York avant-garde, an ambiance not significantly different from that of Surrealism, a movement that he sought to be identified with throughout his career. The Tibor de Nagy


Karen Wilkin claimed that Dwight Ripley, a wealthy British expatriate in Peggy Guggenheim’s entourage, had already planned a new, non-commercial art gallery and had arranged a meeting between Greenberg and Myers in January 1950, contrary to Myers’ explanation. Dwight Ripley’s diary, quoted in ibid., 22.

There had also been a growing demand to fill the void created by the 1947 closing of Peggy Guggenheim’s famous gallery “Art of this Century.” For a more detailed history of the New York art world in the late 1940s when Myers opened his gallery, see John B. Myers, Interview with Barbara Rose, 1969, transcript, Washington, DC: Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, 8-9.

As portrayed by Rivers and O’Hara in “Kenneth Koch: A Tragedy” (1953), a co-written play that satirized the New York art world, Myers was seriously devoted to nurturing, promoting, and sometimes protecting the artists and poets who became closely involved with his gallery. In the transcript, Myers character says, in his typically exaggerated and dramatic manner, “Why, my dear, haven’t you heard? I have a gallery of the liveliest, more original [sic], and above all youngest, painters in America, and for every painter there’s a poet.” Larry Rivers and Frank O’Hara, “Kenneth Koch: A Tragedy” (1953), published in Frank O’Hara, Selected Plays (New York: Full Court Press, 1978), 55 (Hereafter abbreviated SP).
Gallery, thus, emerged as “a place to be, to show (if you painted), to have a book (if you were a poet)” during the 1950s, as Koch recalled.\(^{38}\)

In 1954, Myers began publishing a little magazine called *Semi Colon*, in which poems by O’Hara, Ashbery, Koch, and Schuyler were accompanied by illustrations of work by the younger generation New York School artists.\(^{39}\) Myers selected and arranged the painters and poets whose works might be congenial to one another for a number of slender poetry volumes published by his gallery. Some of the poem-paintings that previously appeared in *Semi Colon* later evolved into books. The poetry books that Myers published during the 1950s were O’Hara’s 1952 *A City Winter and Other Poems* (with Rivers’ pen drawings) and Ashbery’s 1953 *Turandot and Other Poems* (with Freilicher’s illustrations). The gallery remained one of the major publishers of the New York School poets until they began publishing with commercial presses such as Grove from the late 1950s onward.

Myers’ plan to create a dynamic setting for collaboration between artists and poets in the New York avant-garde was eventually extended to the arena of theater. In 1953, he established the Artists’ Theater at an old Greenwich Village movie house—formerly the Theater De Lys, site of the U.S. premiere of Bertolt Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* and purportedly one of the landmarks on the gay strip of Christopher Street. The Artists’ Theater, which lasted only three years, was directed by Herbert Machiz, who had recently returned from France and was romantically involved with Myers for a brief

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\(^{38}\) Quoted in Wilkin, “The First Fifty Years,” 30.

\(^{39}\) *Semi Colon* was sold at the gallery, the Cedar Tavern, and the Club. For a list of the poets and artists who contributed to this small brochure, see John Bernard Myers, *Tracking the Marvelous: A Life in the New York Art World* (New York: Random House, 1983), 147-48.
period. The Artists’ Theater had strong ties with the Poets’ Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The latter was founded in 1951 by a group of Harvard graduate poets, including O’Hara and Bunny Lang, O’Hara’s close friend during his Harvard days. The first play mounted at the Artists’ Theater in 1953 was O’Hara’s *Try! Try!*, which had premiered at the Poets’ Theater in 1951.

The playwrights who presented at the Artists’ Theater included the core members of the New York School of poets—O’Hara, Ashbery, Schuyler, Koch, James Merrill, and Barbara Guest—as well as other poets closely affiliated with them. Meanwhile, the younger generation New York School painters who remained close to Rivers and O’Hara throughout the 1950s and 1960s, such as Hartigan, Freilicher, Leslie, and Robert Goodnough (1917- ), participated as stage designers. According to the first program note of the Artists’ Theater, it was organized to “fill a need for that unorganized and inarticulate audience which loves both painting and poetry and wishes to see these arts reintegrated into living performances on a stage.”

In a 1979 interview, Hartigan vividly described the dynamic ambiance of the Artists’ Theater:

There were a series of plays by the poet Jimmy Merrill. I did a set for Kenneth Koch, Larry did the set for Frank O’Hara, I think Jane did the one for Jimmy Merrill, Elaine de Kooning did one for Jimmy Schuyler, all the poets did plays. It was fun, it was insane. I had a budget of $25 to do the set with …. And then I emptied my studio of all my furniture, easel, stools, drafting table… just spent the $25 on the backdrop material. Larry spent all his money on pipe and did a gigantic pipe sculpture in the middle of the stage and that was all there was in the set. Quite effective [….] So then we just got involved with it.

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41 Hartigan, Interview with Julie Haifley, 13.
Hartigan’s description of the chaotic, experimental milieu of the Artists’ Theater effectively captures the exciting and productive collaborative spirit that pervaded the circle of artists and poets in the New York School during the 1950s.

**Rivers and O’Hara: Standing Still and Walking in New York “Together”**

Of the poets and artists in the New York School, Rivers and O’Hara developed the most productive and the closest relationship. From 1950 until O’Hara’s death in 1966, Rivers and O’Hara were not only occasional romantic partners, but also one another’s advisors and artistic collaborators. Rivers and O’Hara first met at Ashbery’s Christmas party in 1950. Rivers had recently returned from Europe after a six-month sojourn in Paris with Nell Blaine, and O’Hara was frequently visiting Ashbery and Koch, his friends from his Harvard days, in New York. O’Hara wrote of this first meeting in a memoir published in Rivers’ 1965 exhibition catalogue:

I first met Larry Rivers in 1950 when I started coming down to New York from Harvard, Larry was in Europe, and friends had said we would like each other. Finally, at for me a very literary cocktail party at John Ashbery’s we did meet, and we did like each other …: certain of my literary “heroes” of the *Partisan Review* variety present at that party paled in significance when I met Larry, and through these years have remained pale while Rivers has been something of a hero to me, which would seem to make me intelligent and Larry brilliant. Who knows?[^42]

This meeting with O’Hara was also a significant event for Rivers, who had begun developing a serious interest in literature through his contact with Koch and Ashbery.

“To know modern poets and poetry was number one on my list,” said Rivers, and

“Kenneth Koch, John Ashbery, and Jimmy Schuyler were the poets I admired most. And Frank was their favorite! And they said Frank and I would hit it off!” As their friends expected, Rivers and O’Hara instantly admired each other’s talent, humor, and

personality: “I liked his Ivy League dirty white sneakers, he liked my hands full of paint,” wrote Rivers.  

The personal attraction between Rivers and O’Hara derived, in large part, from the fact that they both had a strong propensity to chat and gossip, as some of their closest friends liked to point out. Jane Wilson, a friend and painter, thought that they resembled each other primarily because they were both loquacious: “They were connected to some kind of energy…. As they were both talkers, the threat of silence when they were around was impossible.” Michael Goldberg compared their conversations to a kind of “minuet” in dance. “Larry alone always got to be a pain in the ass because he was always involved with the dance he was doing. I think with Frank it became a minuet. He was a partner.”

Rivers and O’Hara also shared a common background in music. O’Hara attended Harvard as music major before he switched his major to literature. He trained as a concert pianist throughout his formative years. Rivers, by contrast, began his musical career as a jazz saxophonist in 1940. He briefly enrolled in Julliard on the G.I. Bill with the pension that he received from the military service in order to study music composition in 1944. Rivers, however, soon left the school after less than a year when he was offered a stable


45 Michael Goldberg, Interview with Brad Gooch, September 14, 1988, quoted in Ibid., 231.

46 William Vacchiano, then the principal trumpet of the New York Philharmonic and renowned music teacher, taught at Julliard from 1935. He is considered to be one of the first players to use different trumpets in order to create a variety of pitches in keys and music. Another notable student at Julliard in 1944 was Miles Davis, who spent most of his time following Charlie Parker’s quintet in clubs on 52nd Street and Harlem rather than attending classes. Davis also did not complete his studies. For a description of the atmosphere of Julliard in the 1940s, see John Szwed, *So What: The Life of Miles Davis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 32-33.
job playing alto saxophone in a professional jazz band: “So I thought that was really what I wanted to do. So I went on the road with bands.”

He later arrived at the decision to become a visual artist when he met Jane Freilicher through her husband, Jack Freilicher, a musician in a band in which he played.

Gooch used musical instruments—a jazz saxophone for Rivers and a piano for O’Hara—as metaphorical means of understanding their different personalities as well as their contrasting social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. O’Hara came from a relatively stable, middle-class family of Irish descent, attended Catholic schools, and graduated from Harvard University. Rivers, on the other hand, came from a working-class family from the Bronx. Rivers’ parents are Polish and Russian Jewish immigrants, and his original name was Irving Grossberg. His father, a plumber, would later run a

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48 In 1945, while the rest of the band members played card games, Jane and Jack Freilicher and Rivers occupied themselves with painting and art discussion. Rivers and Weinstein, What Did I Do?, 32-34.

49 There are several conflicting stories of the source of the name “Larry Rivers.” In his autobiography, Rivers insists that the name was given by a nightclub emcee who introduced his band as “Larry Rivers and His Mudeats”; however, his mother and sister, as quoted by Rivers, claim that the artist named himself after Francis Rivers, an African American judge, in order to give himself “black airs” that would boost his standing in jazz circles. Rivers and Weinstein, What Did I Do?, 45. In private conversation, art critic Clement Greenberg attacked Rivers for changing his original name: “Sounds like you’re ashamed of being Jewish.” Ibid., 182. Contrary to Greenberg’s rather rude suggestion, Rivers’ act of naming himself after an African American judge would have had broader cultural implications among artists and writers in the 1950s. While the adopted name might have erased or masked his ethnic background, it also reinforced his “black airs.” Indeed, Rivers, being a jazz musician who was closely affiliated with poets of both the New York School and the Beat movement, had been fascinated by the influence of African American culture and promoted a sense of “otherness”—a tendency best captured in Norman Mailer’s 1957 essay “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster.” Therefore, the name he chose can be read as presenting a form of masculinity that was an alternative to white and heterosexual masculinity, rather than as merely revealing his fear of being identified as a Jew. For a discussion of the complicated relationships among white, black, and Jewish masculinities in the 1950s, see Andrea Levine, “The (Jewish) White Negro: Norman Mailer’s Racial Bodies,”
small trucking company in the Bronx. As Rivers told O’Hara in an interview in 1959, his early cultural education and exposure to fine art were seriously restricted:

The only things in our house resembling art were cheap tapestry, a cross between a Fragonard and a Minsky popular in many dining rooms in the twenties, and a five-and-ten-cent store 8 by 10 reproduction of a Spanish señorita holding a flower just above an exposed breast, a painting which, to make matters worse, followed us from one apartment to another …. But if I’ve inherited natural bad taste I’d praise my parents for passing on to me their strength, their natural physical endurance and animal concentration.50

David Davidson Reiff’s photograph of Rivers and O’Hara, which appears on the cover of *Standing Still and Walking in New York* (Undated, Fig. 1), can be read as visual confirmation of the difference in their personalities and cultural backgrounds. Donald Allen, editor of *Standing Still and Walking in New York* (1983), must have chosen this photograph in order to highlight two important inspirations for O’Hara’s writing: the City of New York and visual art. The latter is, in a sense, personified as Rivers, who is standing beside O’Hara in the photograph. As the title “Standing Still and Walking in New York”—a line from O’Hara’s poem “Ode on Causality” (1958)—suggests, the photograph expresses Rivers and O’Hara’s shared enthusiasm for metropolitan life. In it, Rivers and O’Hara look in the same direction, presumably observing and enjoying the dynamic energy of the city while their outfits were meant to reflect quite opposite personalities. O’Hara wears an immaculate seersucker jacket with a tie—the perfect outfit

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for an Ivy League graduates—and assumes a gracious posture, holding his arms together, whereas Rivers wears a crumpled work shirt and blue jeans.

The differences of their personality suggested by Reiff’s photograph offered a foundation for their productive artistic partnership. O’Hara’s suggestions and encouragement became indispensable for Rivers as he developed self-confidence as an artist. In his early twenties, Rivers spent most of his time traveling with jazz bands. The only serious artwork that he remembered encountering during his early formative years was a mural by James Michael Newell in his high school library in the Bronx. O’Hara, in contrast, took several art history courses at Harvard during his senior year in 1949 with his friend and roommate, Edward Gorey, who later became the director of the Poindexter Gallery in New York.

Hartigan, a mutual friend of Rivers’ and O’Hara’s, maintained that it was O’Hara who continued to motivate and direct Rivers: “Larry would have never been as good a person, or an artist or a mind as he was,” except that Frank was consistently “running herd on him, keeping him in order, checking him, and making sure he did the best.” O’Hara, who had greater knowledge of art and literature and was more verbally articulate than Rivers, was perfectly suited to his role as Rivers’ artistic advisor.

In turn, Rivers’ quick observations and intuitions offered O’Hara fresh visions and interpretations of art and literature that he might not have achieved independently.

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51 In his writings and interviews, Rivers stressed his lack of cultural education and exposure to high art. “Given my background and where I came from in the place of art,” said Rivers, “I’ve just looked upon art as a fantastic thing for me to be doing [....] I had very little confidence in myself I suppose.” Larry Rivers, Interview with Jeff Loria, 1978, transcript, Bridgehampton, NY: Rivers archive, # 18-lA13 (Rivers literature box).

52 Grace Hartigan, Interview with Brad Gooch, February 14, 1988, quoted in Gooch, City Poet, 231.
According to Koch, “Frank’s conversation was more sophisticated in the ordinary sense of the word than Larry’s was. But Frank admired Larry’s intelligence enormously. He thought Larry was really brilliant, with which I agree.”\(^{53}\) In Howard Kanovitz’s *The New Yorkers* (1967, Fig. 2), a series of photo collages placed on a light box, O’Hara is situated at the center, surrounded by renowned art critics and other important figures from the 1950s New York art world.\(^{54}\) The collage underscores O’Hara’s prominent place in this world, as well as his distance from other ostensibly influential art critics. The fact that Rivers, who sits immediately to O’Hara’s right, is the sole painter in the collage suggests the significant place that Rivers occupied in O’Hara’s life as an art critic and writer during the 1950s and 1960s.

As Rivers described it in his 1992 autobiography, their relationship did not “exclude all sorts of sexual undercurrents.”\(^{55}\) Indeed, their friendship reached a new level between 1952 and 1953, especially after the summer of 1953, when O’Hara quit his job as a receptionist at the Museum of Modern Art and began spending more time with his friends in the New York art world, including Rivers. Some of O’Hara’s poems inspired by Rivers or directly referring to him do not conceal the poet’s feeling toward the artist. “To the Harbormaster,” written in the end of 1954 when their intimate relationship grew rocky and unstable, contains relatively explicit references to O’Hara’s feelings toward Rivers. O’Hara calls Rivers “my Polish rubber,” alluding to Rivers’ identity as a second-

\(^{53}\) Kenneth Koch, Interview with Brad Gooch, November 39, 1988, quoted in ibid., 230.

\(^{54}\) From left to right, those depicted are Morton Feldman, composer, Larry Rivers, painter, Sam Hunter, art critic (below), Frank O’Hara, poet, Howard Kanovitz, painter, B.H. Friedman, writer, and Alex Katz, painter. Howard Kanovitz, An e-mail to the author, March 16, 2006.

generation Jewish immigrant from Poland, while portraying himself as a ship headed to shore that consistently fails to reach its destination.\(^{56}\) “I wanted to be sure to reach you:/ though my ship was on the way it got caught,” O’Hara wrote, and “The ship cannot turn itself to the shore because of the waves “which have kept me from reaching you.” (\textit{CP} 217)

In a letter to O’Hara in July 1953, Rivers, however, emphasized that their friendship should prevail over their romantic relationship: “‘Can two people who have prides as high as the Chinese Wall who have dirtied the same sheets know happiness as friends?’ It is rare. But we ’neath the philosopher’s trees are always open for surprises and always full of hope.”\(^{57}\) O’Hara agreed with Rivers that they should not allow their feelings to stop them from continuously supporting each other’s artistic and literary endeavors. In a letter sent to Rivers in August 1953, he claimed, “My devotion to you and your work will always be strong and important to me no matter how what happens or has happened affects your friendship for me.”\(^{58}\)

A series of early contacts in 1953 indicate that from the beginning of their serious relationship, Rivers and O’Hara were very cautious about maintaining a balance between romantic involvement and artistic endeavors.


\(^{58}\) Frank O’Hara, Letter to Larry Rivers (copy), August 10, 1953, Bridgehampton, NY: Rivers archive, # 2 (Rivers literature box).
partnership; both men stressed that they valued the artistic support and friendship they gained from their association more than they did their love affair and emotional attachment to one another. Despite the sporadic nature of their sexual encounters and their occasional breakups during the mid 1950s, they maintained an artistic partnership that culminated in *Stones* (1957-60), a ten-part lithograph series in which Rivers’ drawings and O’Hara’s writings were directly inscribed in the stones referenced in the title.

Rivers’ and O’Hara’s enduring collaboration provides a valuable comparison to the relationship between Rauschenberg and Johns, the two Neo-Dada artists who were also acquainted with the artists and poets in Rivers and O’Hara’s circle during the 1950s and 1960s. They were among the artists, musicians, and dancers in Cage’s circle, which included homosexual or bisexual artists, dancers, and musicians, as documented by Calvin Tomkins. In 1993, Jonathan Katz examined Johns and Rauschenberg’s intense

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59 Gooch surmised that the intimate relationship between Rivers and O’Hara lasted from early 1953 until the summer of 1954, based upon O’Hara’s letters to Rivers and his other friends. However, during this time, O’Hara also dated Robert Fizdale, a musician whose boyfriend, Arthur Gold, became involved with James Schuyler during the summer of 1953. Their relationship, though short-lived, attests to the complicated network of relationships within Rivers’ and O’Hara’s circle. For a detailed account of Rivers and O’Hara’s breakups and reunions during this tumultuous period, see Gooch, *City Poet*, 236-55.

60 In his interview with Calvin Tomkins, Johns characterized his years with Rauschenberg as “a two-way operation.” “Our world was very limited,” he recalled. “I think we were very dependent on one another. There was that business triggering energies. Other people fed into that but it was basically a two-way operation.” Calvin Tomkins, unpublished notes, quoted in Jonathan Katz, “The Art of Code: Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg,” in *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*, ed. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 200.

emotional involvement between 1954 and 1961 in an effort to ascertain the impact of their “male/male relationship” on the development of their work. “Rauschenberg’s and Johns’ careers are … linked from the beginning,” Katz asserted, “and right from the start a dynamic is set up in their relationship, one in which Rauschenberg, the senior and more experienced figure, acts as agent and enabler of his younger lover’s more dynamic career.” The collaged images and objects from everyday life that one finds in Rauschenberg’s “combine” paintings and in Johns’ Flag series that began between 1954 and 1955, or in Target with Plaster Casts (1955), reveal an important stylistic parallel between their works. According to Katz, in one of his early freestanding combines called Untitled (Man with the White Shoes) (1955, Fig. 3), Rauschenberg pasted a drawing of an American flag reminiscent of Johns’ Flag series (begun in 1954), situated next to “judiciously torn up” letters from Johns. This piece also includes personal mementos such as newspaper clippings about the artist’s family, the family photographs, and a pair of white shoes. An image of a young man in a white suit is reflected in a mirror, recalling Narcissus, a Greek mythological figure who falls in love with his own male beauty. The man in a white suit in the photograph also resembles Rauschenberg in

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62 Ibid., 191.

63 Tomkins argued that before 1954, most of Rauschenberg’s works had been untitled. The increasingly linguistic flair, such as Charlene (1953), Rebus, Monogram (1955-59), and Canyon (1959) in the mid and late 1950s might be attributable to Jasper John’s influence on Rauschenberg. Johns was known for his interest in literature and was well-read, especially compared to Rauschenberg. Tomkins, Off the Wall, 116.

64 In Freud’s theory, the term narcissism was to describe a person who treated one’s own body as if it is a sexual object. That attitude was frequently seen in homosexuals—although Freud also considered it as part of normal human development. Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism,” in Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. 14, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), 73-107. In art and literature, the image of Narcissus or narcissism (self-love) has represented or implied same-sex passion; ranging from Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890), F. Holland Day’s homoerotic photographs to movies such as
a photograph taken at his wedding to Susan Weil in June 1950. Mary Lynn Kotz claimed that the white shoes and socks displayed inside the box must have been the actual shoes and socks that he wore at his wedding.\(^6^5\) The work, seen from this perspective, conveys meanings related to Rauschenberg’s family, early marriage, and fatherhood, as well as homoeroticism. Moreover, Katz interpreted the juxtaposition of photos of Rauschenberg’s son and family with photos and letters from Johns as representing the division of Rauschenberg’s loyalty between love and family—or as signifying the torment of living between two incompatible realms.\(^6^6\)

In Katz’s view, after Rauschenberg’s final breakup with Johns in mid 1961, Rauschenberg ceased to introduce references to gay imagery. Rauschenberg, Katz suggested, may have lost the “ability to represent themselves [he and Johns].” In reviewing Rauschenberg’s 1997 and 1998 retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum, Roni Feinstein also observed that noticeable changes had occurred in Rauschenberg’s artistic direction and his choice of subject matter during the early 1960s.\(^6^7\) According to Feinstein, Rauschenberg’s works in the 1950s were frequently derived from personal artifacts—family photographs, remnants of Johns’ letters, and drawings of Cy Twombly,

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\(^6^6\) Ibid., 200.

\(^6^7\) According to Roni Feinstein, during the course of the 1960s, Rauschenberg redefined his artistic direction: “He shifted his focus from local concerns (autobiography, the self, and his immediate urban environment) to a broader involvement with American Politics and society…..” Roni Feinstein, “Rauschenberg: Solutions for a Small Planet - Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York,” *Art in America* (February 1998): 68.
a fellow painter. His art in the 1960s, in contrast, became more actively involved with technology-based art and performance works that he collaborated with Cage and Cunningham, or with political and social issues of American governmental policy, as in the *Retroactive* series of 1964.

This does not suggest that there was a sharp break in Rauschenberg’s art, as Katz maintained—nor can those changes be considered the direct consequence of his personal separation from Johns. Nonetheless, Rauschenberg’s growing distance from subject matter related to the self, autobiography, and homosexuality constitutes an interesting contrast to the case of Rivers and O’Hara, who continued to maintain their friendship and treat homoerotic messages and themes throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, irrespective of the end of their romantic affiliation, as will be more discussed in chapter five.

The artistic partnership of Rivers and O’Hara also appeared distinct from O’Hara’s intimate relationships with other men. O’Hara’s poems inspired by men such as Vincent Warren, a dancer to whom O’Hara was emotionally attached during the late 1950s and early 1960s, serve as valuable cases for comparison. The poem “Avenue A” (1960) exemplifies the style and tone of the verse O’Hara wrote to Warren during this period: “everything is too comprehensible/ these are my delicate and caressing poems/ I suppose there will be more of those others to come, as in the past/ so many!/ but for now the moon is revealing itself like a pearl/ to my equally naked heart.” (*CP* 356) Citing this poem’s explicit reference to a male lover, its candid portrayal of the poet’s feelings, and

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68 Feinstein claimed that in a series of works from 1959, including *Canyon*, *Summerstorm*, *Wager*, *Photograph*, *Dam*, and *Allegory*, Rauschenberg developed “a personal iconography of signs and symbols” related to homosexual love. Ibid., 71. For a detailed analysis of the homoerotic themes represented in *Canyon*, see Kenneth Bendiner, “Robert Rauschenberg’s *Canyon*,” *Arts Magazine* (June 1982): 57-59.
overt sentimentalism, Gooch argued that Warren can be regarded as the first serious muse for O’Hara’s openly gay love poems. According to Gooch, O’Hara wrote a cycle of about fifty poems to Warren, most of which were “often surprising even to him in their openness and clarity.”

Contrary to Gooch’s claim, however, Warren was not the first individual to inspire O’Hara to write of his feelings toward another man. O’Hara made direct references to his friendship and emotional involvement with Rivers in the following poems, besides “To the Harbormaster”: “Walking with Larry Rivers” (1952), “Sonnet for Larry Rivers and His Sister” (1953), “Larry” (1953), “River” (1953), and “Round Robin” (1953). Nonetheless, the poems that O’Hara wrote on the topic of same-sex relationship were not predominated by or limited to descriptions of the poet’s emotional state. For instance, in “Homosexuality,” written in 1954 when O’Hara was still romantically involved with Rivers, O’Hara addressed the social pressure and alienation that male homosexuals had to endure in the 1950s from a broader perspective, rather than strictly from personal experience. He dealt with the closeted homosexual life as one of the central concerns of homosexuals by citing two contradictory solutions—taking off the mask and becoming the object of public curiosity and remaining silenced: “So we are


70 Gooch, City Poet, 330.
taking off our masks, are we, and keeping/our mouths shut?” (CP 181) O’Hara here used the pronoun “we,” emphasizing the importance of the question at the collective level. In other words, O’Hara did not restrict the content of his poems to his romance with Rivers, as he explored broadly the politically poignant concerns of homophobia and the homosexual closet.

O’Hara’s “Two Dreams of Waking” (1957), a poem consisting of a conversation between Rivers and O’Hara, effectively demonstrated their overall collaborative connection. O’Hara wrote “Two Dreams of Waking” while he was posing for Rivers, who, in turn, offered comments on O’Hara’s naked body. Rivers first declares that O’Hara’s body evokes gender ambiguity. “It is Larry welding a/figure and he says, ‘I’m/glad you’re developing breasts.’” O’Hara strongly objects to Rivers’ observation, arguing, “‘I’m not/ menstruating. I’m peeing.’/ I am.” (CP 278) Despite O’Hara’s repudiation, Rivers insists that O’Hara’s masculinity—along with his own—is “wrong.” “‘You think,’/ Larry says, ‘that you’re safe/because you have a penis. So/ do I, but we’re both wrong.’” (CP 278)

In the poem, Rivers pays attention to O’Hara’s body—especially his genital area—and teases him about his “wrong” manliness, which does not conform to the common definition of normal, heterosexual masculinity. While the poem draws upon O’Hara’s naked body and his informal conversation with Rivers, it ultimately touches upon broader issues of “right” and “wrong” masculinity and the role of the male body in such categorizations. O’Hara’s intention in this work seems less to depict the internal pain or social alienation that homosexual men experience within highly repressive and homophobic social conditions than to muse the definition of “natural” male sexuality.
The ending of the poem undercuts the seriousness of having the “wrong penis”: “He [Rivers] starts banging on the steel/ again and the sound puts me/ to sleep standing up.” (CP 278)

Rivers’ and O’Hara’s unequivocal manner of addressing issues surrounding male sexuality in their works was unique, even among their fellow poets and artists. Rivers continued to paint male nudes, a genre that attracted the viewer’s attention to the gender attributes and sexuality of the male sitter. Rivers’ O’Hara, for example, was a life-sized portrait that exposed O’Hara’s genital area to the viewer; he painted his two sons, Joseph and Steven in the nude in a number of portraits, such as Joseph (1954) and The Family (1954-55). Similarly, O’Hara dealt with subject matter related to male sexualities, homosexuality, and his relationships with other men in a relatively straightforward way. In “Homosexuality,” he made it clear that he was part of the homosexual “we” that the poem articulated, and he developed relatively candid portrayals of various types of homosexuals.

Most of the other artists and poets, such as Hartigan, Blaine, Ashbery and Schuyler, who remained close to Rivers and O’Hara, in contrast, preferred to obscure and evade issues of gender and sexuality in their works—let alone being playful. In Hartigan’s portrait of O’Hara The Masker (1954, Fig. 4), the sitter wears a clownish costume—tight pants and a ruffled blouse. Hartigan described O’Hara’s outfit to Julie Haifley in 1979: “The time I did ‘The Grand Street Brides,’ I had some costumes around, like I put him in a jacket and did a painting called ‘Mas[k]er.’ ”

71 In Walter Silver’s photograph (1954, Fig. 5) taken while the poets were posing for The Masker, O’Hara

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71 Hartigan, Interview with Julie Haifley, 13.
wears the same tight pants. The image of O’Hara as a masker in Hartigan’s painting must have been inspired by O’Hara’s poem “Homosexuality,” written the same year. The poem, as discussed earlier, begins with an image of a mask, which represents the homosexual closet. In keeping with the main theme of “Homosexuality,” O’Hara appears as a man who disguises himself as a clown and is obliged to act out someone else’s identity. The lines over O’Hara’s face and around his neck area reinforce a sense of entrapment. Part of his eyes is painted in white without an iris or a focal point; his upright posture also appears to be stiff and restrained. Overall, the portrait seems to be aimed at creating an image of O’Hara, who is confined, arguably inside the homosexual closet—although, in life, he was occasionally outspoken about his sexual life.

While Hartigan may primarily get her inspiration from O’Hara’s poem “Homosexuality,” the theme of masquerade also reflects her ambivalent relationship with her own femininity. During the early phase of her career, until 1954, Hartigan signed her canvases with the pseudonym “George.” According to Hartigan, she identified with two renowned female writers of the nineteenth century, namely “George Eliot” and George Sand.” In addition to using a pseudonym, which certainly served to obscure her status as a woman artist, Hartigan wished to avoid her paintings being described in terms of “natural,” “pastoral” concepts strongly imbued with notions of “femininity.” In an interview with Barbara Flanagan in 1963, Hartigan stated that during the 1950s she reacted strongly against critics who tried to find “lyrical” and presumably “feminine” qualities in her work: “I always am afraid I’ll fall into a lyricism by being in nature,” she

said, “so, like witchcraft, I find something I can’t bear and then exorcize in the art of painting.”

Hartigan’s *Oranges* (1952), a series of twelve paintings based on O’Hara’s 1949 poem of the same title (discussed in chapter four), illustrates her approach to pastoral subject matter that might be associated with femininity. She chose lines from O’Hara’s poem “Oranges” and juxtaposed them with her painting. In the first of the series, *Oranges No. 1* (1952, Fig. 6), Hartigan picked out the words “sneers” from O’Hara’s poem and wrote with thick, dark colors that ominously filled the canvas. According to Terrence Diggory, author of “Questions of Identity in *Oranges* by Frank O’Hara and Grace Hartigan” (1993), the word “sneers” stood out from the background by the size of the lettering and the placement at the center of the composition right up against the image of Ophelia. “This is a highly charged juxtaposition because Ophelia, a favorite figure in late nineteenth century painting, carries heavily sentimental associations,” writes Diggory; Hartigan’s emphatic deployment of the word “sneers” immediately next to the figure of Ophelia becomes a kind of her “defense against sentimentality” or a concept of nature which is strongly imbued with feminine connotation. Hartigan frequently employed dark, striking colors such as black and navy with whites and oranges, rather than soothing

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73 Barbara Flanagan, “Lively Artist Rebels at Labeling and Doesn’t Like to Be Lionized,” *Minneapolis Tribune* (September 24, 1963), clipping, Grace Hartigan Papers, Syracuse, NY: George Arents Research Library/Syracuse University.

74 Diggory, “Questions of Identity in *Oranges* by Frank O’Hara and Grace Hartigan,” 43. Perloff argued that “Oranges” are “essentially antipastorals in which the usual conventions are slyly inverted, but which, nevertheless, celebrate erotic love in a ‘pastoral’ setting.” O’Hara consistently juxtaposed the ugly with the beautiful or the low or obscene with the elegant. Perloff, *Frank O’Hara*, 40. For instance, O’Hara ended the poem as follows: “O my posterity! This it the miracle: that our elegant invention the natural/ world redeems by filth.” (*CP 9*)
pastel tones that might have been more suitable for evoking a sense of calm and suggesting a peaceful pastoral landscape.

While Hartigan attested an ambivalent attitude toward her femininity by signing as “George” during the early 1950s, as well as in her choice of artistic themes related to masquerade, Blaine hardly dealt with issues of gender and sexuality in her works. Although she was close to Rivers during the late 1940s and early 1950s (partly due to their shared interest in jazz), traveling to Europe with him for eight months and sharing the same studio in Paris, Blaine devoted herself to purely formal experimentation. Blaine’s Abstraction (1948, Fig. 7), for example, a painting that shows her signature artistic style from the late 1940s and 1950s, does not contain thematic elements evidently related to her experience as a lesbian.\(^{75}\) Major influences on her work included European modernists with whom she had become friendly through her connection with the organization “American Abstract Artists” (AAA) beginning in 1944. She was later influenced by Fernand Léger (1881-1955) and Jean Hélion (1904-87), whose studio she visited during her sojourns in Paris in 1950. “I was already quite influenced by Léger. I think Léger was the biggest influence in making the transition, Léger and Hélion,” said Blaine, adding that she was especially intrigued by the “organization and rhythm that he

\(^{75}\) Griselda Pollock maintained in “Killing Men and Dying Women: Women’s Touch in the Cold Zone of American Painting in the 1950s,” Women artists appropriated gender-neutral subject matter or subject matter that avoided specific associations with femininity in order to ensure that their work would be judged solely on the basis of its artistic value rather than on the basis of the gender or sexual identity of the painter. Griselda Pollock, “Killing Men and Dying Women: Women’s Touch in the Cold Zone of American Painting in the 1950s,” in Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Garde and Parisian Reviewed* (Manchester, UK and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 224. According to Ann Gibson, like women artists, African American artists found the mode of abstraction to be a means of diffusing “the burden of difference” that white culture imposed on them. See the chapter “The Anonymity of Abstraction,” in Ann Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 68-86.
[Léger] would get with a cascade of form on into the other.” Blaine’s biomorphic form in *Abstraction*, for instance, bespoke the influence of Léger and other European modernists. Her fascination with the formal organization of colors and shapes designed to evoke a sense of movement and rhythm, either during her most abstract period in the 1940s or her later semi-abstract period in the early 1950s, proves that her personal circumstances and experience of being a lesbian were not among her major artistic concerns.

In Ashbery’s and Schuyler’s poems from the 1950s, personal experiences with homosexuality, let alone with their lovers, did not constitute primary concerns; whenever these poets treated sexuality, the tone and nature of their comments remained generally evasive. In 1995, John Shoptaw noted that Ashbery’s 1957 poem “They Dream Only of America” included an unusual mention of another man. “He held a key in his right hand./ ‘Please,’ he asked willingly/…. He went slowly into the bedroom/…. Against the living room table. What is it to be back/ Beside the bed? There is nothing to do/ For our liberation, except wait in the horror of it.” This image of a man entering the bedroom with the poet seems to imply a homosexual encounter. The language used in the poem, however, is elusive, particularly in comparison to O’Hara’s depictions of the gay man in “Homosexuality” (1954) and descriptions of his feelings toward his lovers, including

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77 Blaine’s approach to issues of sexuality in her art might have been attributable to her particular view of being a lesbian. Al Kresch, a friend and member of the Jane Street Gallery, recalled, “She [Blaine] was a lesbian, and she never proselytized. She admitted she was gay and had her gay affairs…. She did not think the gay life was so terribly happy. It simply was not for everyone.” Kresch, Interview with an unknown person.

Rivers and Warren, during the 1950s. The core characteristic of Ashbery’s treatment of subject matter related to homosexuality lies in the very cryptic nature of his poetic language. And his evasiveness remains typical of writings by homosexuals, Shoptaw argues, in which concealment and disguise play vital roles.⁷⁹ Moreover, Ashbery portrayed his same-sex relationship as sad and even pathological, implying that he should accept his own vulnerability to wait and live “in the horror of it.” A feeling of horror and futility, indeed, characterizes the overall tone of the poem, which may indicate the poet’s uneasiness in dealing with such issues at all.

David Lehman argued in 1998 that in Schuyler’s poetry subject matter or phrases related to homosexuality surfaced only during the post-Stonewall era of the 1970s. Schuyler’s “Saturday Night” from Hymn to Life (1974) takes the form of a love poem whose object is “he.” “You’re physical/ and need that/ breeze. Breeze,/ blow for one I love, stretch/ his muscles as/he needs and wants.”⁸⁰ In this poem, Schuyler referred to the object of the poet’s desire and love with the pronoun “he,” becoming relatively explicit about his homoerotic desire and homosexuality. Schuyler’s love poem, however, appeared during the post-Stonewall era and long after O’Hara’s poems about homosexuality and male sexualities written during the 1950s and 1960s.

Therefore, Rivers’ and O’Hara’s relatively bold and candid ways of dealing with subject matter involved with male sexuality, gender distinctions, and the definition of

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⁷⁹ Ibid., 66. According to Michel Foucault, there is no binary distinction to be made “between what one says and what one does not say: we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things.” Furthermore, he argued, there are many different forms of silence, which often become “an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourse.” Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 27.

homosexuality in the 1950s were quite radical, even within their coterie of poets and artists. Instead of the neutrality, sadness, and futility that prevail in some of the sexuality-themed paintings and poems by other second generation New York School artists and poets, casual and humorous attitudes were consistent attributes of O’Hara’s poems. The distinctive nature of the relationship between Rivers and O’Hara also led them to treat homosexuals and male bodies within the context of a discussion of various types of male sexuality, rather than being restricted to describing specific personal relationships and experiences.
Ch. 2. Male Sexualities in an Age of Anxiety:

1950s Discourses on Male Homosexuality in Sexology, Literature, and Art

In both the art world and the society in the United States during the 1950s and early 1960s, there were diverse and serious efforts to distinguish and keep separate opposing categories such as abnormality/normality, patriotism/anti-patriotism, and unmanly/manly. In this chapter, I examine various historical contexts, including the discourses on homosexuality in the study of sexuality in the 1950s, fear of communism and homosexuality in politics, and the construction of the bohemian male self among the major New York School artists. These historical contexts serve as important backdrops for understanding Rivers’ and O’Hara’s approaches to gender categories and sexual binaries in art and literature.

Re/defining Homosexuality in the 1950s: the Kinsey Report and its Reception

O’Hara’s poems on homosexuality that refer to Rivers are often characterized by a duality between autobiographical elements and more conceptual matters, such as the definition of male homosexuality. “Two Dreams of Waking” (1957), for instance, revolves around the relationship between O’Hara’s and Rivers’ individual bodies and the biological and social norms for distinguishing the “normal” masculine body from its “abnormal” counterpart. O’Hara’s poems that engage with the inquiry as regards “normal” and “abnormal” masculinities or male sexualities, based upon the notable biological and physiognomic traits, should be examined in light of discourses on homosexuality, especially those circulated during the 1950s and early 1960s. As Richard Meyer argued in 2002, “to utilize the negative terms of homosexuality is not necessarily to endorse or accept those terms.” According to Meyer, certain gay men stage their
gender-inverted traits and openly acknowledge their sexual lives as a means of posing “the question of homosexuality for further inquiry.” ¹ Meyer’s claims evince the influence of Michel Foucault, who pioneered to bring critical perspectives on the dynamic and often interdependent relationships between discourses on homosexuality, homosexual identity, and consciousness and the rise of a resistant gay subculture. In 1978, Foucault claimed that the emergence of “homosexuality” as a separate category of identity ironically propelled artists to develop “reverse discourse.” While the appearance of nineteenth century psychiatry and jurisprudence, for instance, made possible a whole series of discourses on homosexuality, Foucault contended, “it also made possible the formation of a ‘reverse’ discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturality’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary.” ²

Indeed, inquiries as regards the cultural, historical, and biological origins of homosexuality and the proper definition of homosexuality are far from resolved. Homosexual desire and behavior have been known and have been the targets of criminal interrogation and religious condemnation throughout history, but some theorists, philosophers, and historians who take a so-called historical approach argue that the concept of homosexuality is a relatively modern invention that is attributable to the advent of modern medical science and psychiatry during the nineteenth century. As Foucault argued, the rise of homosexuality as a separate category for identity marked a


new recognition that identity could be classified in accordance with an individual’s choice of sexual object and sexual behaviors. Foucault famously—and controversially—dated the birth of the modern concept of homosexuality to the late nineteenth century. According to Foucault, by around 1870, one could say that the “Sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.”

Of course, this shift in understanding of homosexuality—from an individual act to a marker of permanent identity—was not a simple historical progression; opposing views of homosexuality as act and identity continued to co-exist, intensifying confusion about the definition of homosexuality. The decades of the 1940s and 1950s can be considered among the most significant and volatile periods for discourse on human sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. Several factors contributed to the increasing attention accorded to homosexuality as a distinct and separate category of identity during and after the Second World War. In 1941, the military in the United States embarked upon its first extensive process to screen for the sexual orientation of all men applying for military service. The influx of psychoanalysts and the assimilation and popularization of

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5 In May 1941, the Army Surgeon General’s Office issued a report entitled “Selective Service Circular No. 1,” a document that provided the army with the foundation for the mandatory screening of homosexuals in the process of enlistment in all divisions of the military
European theories of human sexuality induced government officials and administrators to adopt the opinions of so-called experts such as psychoanalysts and psychiatrists in their policy toward homosexuals. Finally, the intolerance of social nonconformists during the Cold War years, which came to a climax in the hearings on the “Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perversts in the U.S. Government” between 1950 and 1953, was another major social and ideological factor that generated extreme anxiety about homosexuals throughout the 1950s.


D’Emilio maintained that although Freudian psychoanalysis had already been popularized during the 1920s in the United States, the initial reception of Freud’s theory was meant to revolutionize manners and morals in heterosexual marital relationships, rather than to redefine homosexuality or homosexual behavior. Ibid., 19.

In “Araxes” in 1870 and “Critical Arrow” in 1876, German lawyer Karl Heinrich Ulrichs developed the idea of a third sex and coined the term “Urnings” as the opposite of “Dionings”—a kind of predecessor to homosexuality in English derived from Plato’s *Symposium*. Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, “Critical Arrow,” in *Ulrichs: The Life and Work of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs* trans. Hubert Kennedy (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1988), 196-98.
Inversion: Studies in the Psychology of Sex (1915, expanded into four volumes in 1936) and Sigmund Freud in Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, in 1905. Ellis propounded that homosexuality derived from the innate, congenital gender inversion of the individual who demonstrated such traits in his sexual life and personality, whereas Freud emphasized social conditions such as the “Oedipus complex” that might be more germane to the nurturing of gender-inverted types.

Notwithstanding a continued presence of European pre-war theories in American psychology and sexology, the most widely read and controversial studies on human sexology in the postwar United States were the Kinsey reports, which were published as two separate volumes on the human male (1948) and the human female (1953). At the time of its publication, the Kinsey report on the human male was the most extensive and comprehensive compilation of sexual behaviors among the male population in the postwar United States. The research and statistics relied on data gathered in interviews conducted from 1938 onward by Kinsey, then a professor of biology at Indiana

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8 In his 1915 book Sexual Inversion, Ellis, a British psychoanalyst, described homosexuality as “congenital sexual inversion” in which the “sexual instinct turned by inborn constitutional abnormality towards persons of the same sex.” This inversion, Ellis contended, was largely predetermined by biological or genetic factors. Havelock Ellis, Sexual Inversion, vol. 1, quoted in Paul Robinson, The Modernization of Sex (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 4-5.

9 In Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, Freud described sexual inversion as caused by particular environmental factors, such as “a phase of very intense but short-lived fixation to a woman (usually their mother),” through which homosexuals begin identifying themselves “with a woman and take themselves as their sexual object.” Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. 2, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), 145.

10 The number of participants in Ellis’ Sexual Inversion was just seventy-five, and Ellis’ sample was restricted to prison inmates, unlike Kinsey’s relatively broad range of interviewees which included college students, inmates, and other voluntary participants. In his report on the human male, Kinsey criticized Ellis for failing to make serious attempts to test the representativeness of his sample. Alfred C Kinsey et al. Sexual Behavior in the Human Male (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders, 1953, 2nd ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 619.
University, and his team at the Institute for Sexual Research at Indiana University. Kinsey’s team used face-to-face interviews of more than five thousand white men; for each subject, depending on the interviewee’s personal experiences and circumstances, up to five hundred and twenty-one questions were asked.

The Kinsey report on the human male consisted of eight hundred four pages filled with graphs, charts, and metrics borrowed from medical science and biology. Although the format of the Kinsey report as a specialized medical text made it an improbable candidate for the bestseller list (the price of the book was six dollars and fifty cents per copy, which was expensive for a bestseller), the first printing of twenty thousand copies of his book on the human male quickly sold out. In 1948, the Kinsey report on the human male remained in second place in the non-fiction category of the New York Times’ bestseller list. According to a Gallup survey, one out of five Americans had either read or heard about the book.

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12 Kinsey, who was originally trained as a zoologist, used the taxonomical approach to break down various sexual behaviors in accordance with the participant’s social, educational, and economic levels. Howard Rusk, a physician and reviewer of the Kinsey report on the human male in the New York Times (January 4, 1948), described the taxonomical approach as being involved with the “measurement of the variation in a series of individuals that represent the species.” Howard A. Rusk, “Concerning Man’s Basic Drive” [review of Sexual Behaviors in the Human Male], The New York Times (January 4, 1948): sec. 3, 1, quoted in James H. Jones, Alfred C. Kinsey: A Public/Private Life (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1997), 565.

13 The Kinsey report on the human male prompted an outpouring of letters, articles, and books, including some extremely hostile reactions. Henry P. Van Dusen, the head of Union Theological Seminary in New York, lamented that the Kinsey report was strongly indicative of a “degradation in American morality approximating the worst decadence of the Roman era.” Henry P. Van Dusen, “The Moratorium on Moral Revulsion,” Christianity and Crisis (June 21, 1948): 81. For a more detailed explanation of the reception of the Kinsey report, see Regina M. Morantz, “The Scientist as Sex Crusader: Alfred C. Kinsey and American Culture,” American Quarterly 29
As Kinsey put it in his introduction, his report was aimed at approaching the topic of human sexuality from purely empirical and biological bases, guarding against applying pre-existing standards of sexual propriety or making moral and ethical value judgments. “This [Sexual Behavior in the Human Male] is first of all a report on what people do,” he wrote, and it “raises no question of what people should do.” Kinsey believed that preconceptions of normality and abnormality regarding sexual behavior would interfere with the determination of facts about of “all types of sexual activity, as found among all kinds of males.”

Kinsey’s preoccupation with individual variation in his report led to many shocking revelations, such as statements regarding the prevalence of orgasms aroused by the same-sex encounters among the male population in the United States. In addition to indicating a huge bisexual population, Kinsey’s statistics on the human male showed that more than one third (thirty-seven percent) of American males who were sexually active from adolescence engaged in homosexual behaviors or experienced orgasm aroused by homosexual desire at some point in their adult lives. Kinsey, by relaying the statistics culled from his data, criticized as outdated and inadequate the definition of homosexuality that had been commonly accepted. Under this definition, a homosexual was a person who had consistently homosexual relationships. Instead of using such terms as “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” to “stand for persons, or even as adjectives to describe persons,” said Kinsey, “they [homosexuality and heterosexuality] may better be

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14 Kinsey et al. Sexual Behavior in the Human Male, 7

15 Ibid.
used to describe the nature of the overt sexual relations, or the stimuli to which an
individual erotically responds.” Kinsey thus categorized individual sexual behavioral
patterns and desires along a newly devised six-point scale—on which 0 denoted
exclusively heterosexual, having no homosexual activity, and 6 signified exclusively
homosexual—as part of an effort to complicate or even dismantle the pre-existing sexual
binary.

Researchers in the fields of psychoanalysis and social science soon challenged the
reliability of Kinsey’s sample group and the basic premise of his research method,
especially with regard to the unexpectedly high percentage of homosexuals or bisexuals
he reported in the population. Psychologist Edmund Bergler, for instance, cast serious
doubt on the adequacy of Kinsey’s sample group. Bergler speculated that some of
Kinsey’s interviewees must be “homosexuals who gladly use[d] the opportunity of
providing, by volunteering, that ‘everybody’ has homosexual tendencies—thus seeking to
diminish their own inner gulf.”

Another vein of criticism targeted Kinsey’s limited definition of sexual behaviors
and orgasms. According to Lionel Trilling, the Kinsey report showcased serious
problems among researchers on human sexual behaviors: it bore “an extravagant fear of

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16 Ibid., 617.
17 Ibid., 639.
Krich, Homosexuality: A Subjective and Objective Investigation (New York: George Allen and
Unwin, 1958), 282-83. During the 1990s, Judith Reisman argued that Kinsey’s research on child
orgasm was a blatant case of child abuse committed in the name of the scientific study of
sexuality. According to Reisman, Kinsey’s former colleagues admitted that actual pedophiles
were involved in Kinsey’s research on child sexuality. See “The Unethical Research Mind” in
Judith Reisman et al. Kinsey, Sex and Fraud (Lafayette, LA: Lochinvar-Huntington House, 1990),
52-55.
all ideas that do not seem to it to be, as it were, immediately dictated by simple physical
fact.”

Although Trilling acknowledged the potentially positive impact that the book
might have by habituating “its readers to the idea of sexuality in all its manifestations, to
establish, as it were, a democratic pluralism,” he saw that a fundamental problem with the
Kinsey report rested upon Kinsey’s basic idea of the composition of human sexuality,
which was more or less limited to the physical aspects of sexual orgasm and behavioral
patterns.

Despite some of the objections raised against Kinsey’s basic method and premise,
immediately after the report’s publication, his radical idea about male sexual categories
based on his statistical data seriously challenged the traditional view of the male sexual
binary. Although Kinsey did not entirely discard the categories of homosexuality and
heterosexuality as the two most significant ways of understanding human sexual behavior,
he came to conclude that homosexual and heterosexual desires and orgasms could coexist
within one individual; he observed the discontinuity of sexual object choices in a
considerable portion of the nominally heterosexual population. In an extreme sense, for
Kinsey, same-sex relationships were not aberrant behaviors limited to a homosexual

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20 One of the most extreme examples illustrating Kinsey’s lack of interest in the
emotional and psychological aspects of human sexuality was his rating scale, through which he
attempted to translate the orgasms of his interviewees into numbers. He later argued in his female
volume in 1953 that there was “a reality involved in any summation of orgasms,” and that all
orgasms appear to be “physiologically similar quantities whether they derived from masturbatory,
heterosexual, homosexual, or other sorts of activity.” This notion of the orgasm or outlet,
independent of the individual’s emotional and psychological circumstances and interpersonal
relationships, helped Kinsey to separate “momentary” sexual acts from sexual identities such
homosexuality and heterosexuality—while its basic premise, heavily drawing upon the
animalistic notion of human behaviorism, troubled many of his detractors during the late 1940s
minority, but were common sexual behaviors among seemingly normal, heterosexual men.

The Kinsey report brought ambivalent consequences to homosexuals during the 1950s. As John D’Emilio, author of *Sexual Politics and Sexual Communities* (1983), argued, the statistical evidence of widespread homosexual behaviors cited in the Kinsey report served to confirm “what many gay people in the 1940s were experiencing—the sense of belonging to a group.” By revealing that millions of Americans exhibited a strong erotic interest in their own sex, the report “implicitly encouraged those still struggling in isolation against their sexual preference to accept their homosexual inclinations and search for sexual comrades.” 21 At the same time, however, the information about homosexuals gathered in Kinsey’s study did not “ameliorate hostility toward gay men and women.” Instead, the Kinsey report ultimately magnified “the proportions of the danger they [homosexuals] allegedly posed.” 22

The most notorious and publicized homophobic event of the 1950s was a series of Senate hearings that lasted for three years (1950-53), also known as the hearing of “Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in the U.S. Government”; and the Senate Committee used the Kinsey report as concrete statistical evidence for the ubiquity of the homosexual “problem” in the postwar United States. In May 1950, Republican Senator Kenneth Wherry of Nebraska quoted police sources stating that three thousand seven hundred fifty homosexuals held federal jobs; within a month, Wherry’s remark led the Senate to authorize an official investigation of “sex perverts,” namely individuals

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21 Ibid., 37.

22 Ibid.
“who engage in unnatural sexual acts” or so-called “homosexuals…who may be broadly defined as ‘persons of either sex who as adults engage in sexual activities with persons of the same sex.’”

As a result of the committee’s hearings, two hundred seven workers in total were laid off from government jobs based on their so-called sexual perversion.

This number was larger than the number of workers laid off solely for security reasons.

The public justification for this major dismissal of homosexuals from government offices was related to national security against communist infiltration and foreign espionage. The homosexual personality type had been generally described as emotionally unstable, inconsistent, and often disloyal to the dominant ideology of democracy. Under the heading “Sexual Perverts as Security Risks,” the committee’s report reads, “The lack of emotional stability is found in most perverts and the weakness of their moral fiber, which makes them susceptible to the blandishments of the foreign espionage agent.”

In a way, this notorious Cold War initiative turned the tacitly acknowledged existence of homosexuals in government—a more or less open secret of the prewar and war years—

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23 The Committee excluded so-called “latent sex perverts”—those persons who knowingly or unknowingly have tendencies or inclinations toward homosexuality or other types of sex perversion—from their list of “sexual perverts.” U.S. Senate, “Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in the U.S. Government,” printed in We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics, ed. Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 244 (page citation refers to his book).

24 David Johnson, author of The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government (2004), claimed that the actual number of allegedly homosexual workers who were purged throughout the process might have been higher than the statistics reported by government document suggest, since some government workers might have chosen to resign voluntarily rather than face further publicity. “An Interview with David Johnson, Author of The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government,” 2004, on-line transcript, http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/404811in.html.

into a subject of public curiosity, a social consequence that the Senate committee had
previously sought to avoid.\textsuperscript{26}

The Senate hearings on homosexuals in government reflected the highly
politicized atmosphere of a period when private and intimate matters, such as those of
sexual identity and personal lifestyle, could not be separated from broader social and
ideological issues. Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin—who
promulgated “McCarthyism,” an extremely distorted and polarized view of ideology and
sexuality during the late 1940s and early 1950s—equated homosexuals with Communists.
In a 1950 speech to the Ohio Country Republican Women’s Club in Wheeling, West
Virginia, McCarthy publicly denounced homosexuals and Communists as two major
subversive groups in the postwar United States: “If you do want to be against McCarthy,
boys, you’ve got to be either a Communist or a cock sucker,” he declared.\textsuperscript{27}

In addition to a view that homosexuals and communists shared a rebellion against
the ideological and sexual norms of postwar society, both were considered to be secretive
and deceptive.\textsuperscript{28} Unlike certain ethnic groups, however, they did not share distinct and
noticeable physiognomic or physical characteristics that could serve as convenient and
reliable indicators of ideological and sexual difference. In the Senate report, the

\textsuperscript{26} The Senate Committee maintained that it would make every effort to protect
individuals from unnecessary public ridicule and to prevent the hearing from becoming “a public
spectacle.” However, the hearings, as an unprecedented public event, incited enormous public
curiosity about as well as fear of so-called sexual perverts and homosexuals in the postwar United
States. Ibid.

\textsuperscript{27} Eric F. Goldman, The Crucial Decade—and After America, 1945-1960 (New York:

\textsuperscript{28} Johnson, a historian, noted, “In popular discourse, communists and homosexuals were
often conflated.” The public usually believed that both groups had “hidden subcultures with their
own meeting places, literature, cultural codes, and bonds of loyalty.” “An Interview with David
committee underscored that it had found no consensus among authoritative theoreticians and scholars as to the particular physical traits of homosexuals. “Most authorities believed that sex deviation results from psychological rather than physical causes,” the report read, claiming that in many cases there are “no outward characteristics or physical traits that are positive as identifying marks of sex perversion.”

For instance, the seemingly macho appearance and attitude of the masculine type within the homosexual community did not conform to what had been commonly accepted as the stereotypical image of the male homosexual. The committee added the category of the bisexual, a type of man who “engages in normal heterosexual relationships as well as homosexual activities.” “It is also a known fact that some perverts are bisexual,” the report reads. “These bisexual individuals are often married and have children, and except for their perverted activities they appear to lead normal lives.”

The report confirmed the existence of an increasingly complicated view of homosexuality even among the most conservative committee members; it acknowledged the diversity within the community of homosexual men by rejecting a stereotypical image of homosexual men as exclusively effeminate. In an undated journal entry in 1959, John Cheever (1912-82), a short fiction writer who focused on the spiritual and emotional emptiness of middle-class suburban American life, comically illustrated the anxiety about

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29 “The fact is that many homosexuals are very masculine in their physical appearance and general demeanor,” the report read. U.S. Senate, “Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in the U.S. Government,” 242.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid., 243.
allegedly common homosexual desires and behaviors that prevailed even among ordinary
married couples. Is he? Was he? Did they? Am I? seemed to be at the back of everyone’s mind. A
great emphasis, by way of defense was put upon manliness, athletics, hunting, fishing, and conservative clothing, but the lonely wife wondered, glancingly, about her husband at his hunting camp and husband himself wondered with whom he shared a rude bed of pines. Was he? Did he? Had he? Did he want to?

The threatening instability of homosexuality would seem to oppose to the legitimacy of
heterosexuality and traditional forms of heterosexual unions, such as marriage.

Nonetheless, Kinsey’s shocking statistical evidence of varied sexual behavior
among the male population of the United States—including evidence of extensive
homosexual behavior and orgasms—did not lead to a flexible approach to the binary
between heterosexuality and homosexuality among the conservative broader public in the
1950s. Instead, the report for the Senate Committee suggests that the paranoid reaction
toward homosexuality of that time was prompted by the alleged similarity between
homosexuals and heterosexuals in their outlooks—and, in some cases, in their actual
sexual behaviors.

32 In a way, as literary critic and cultural historian Jonathan Dollimore argued, the more
homosexuality emerges as culturally central, “the less sure become the majority as to what,
exactly it [homosexuality] is,” whether it is “a sensibility, an abnormality, a sexual act, a
clandestine subculture, an overt subculture, the enemy within, the enemy without?” Jonathan
Dollimore, Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault (Oxford, UK and New

Cheever’s posthumously published letters and journals also reveal that he was bisexual during his
marriage to Mary Winternitz, which lasted over four decades.

34 Arthur Schlesinger Jr., historian and author of The Vital Center (1949), a book
encapsulating a view of American liberalism in the 1950s, associated some changes occurring
with masculinity in general with what he called the problem with “sexual ambiguity.” In his
1958 article “The Crisis of American Masculinity,” he declared, “It appears no accident, for
example, that the changing of sex—the Christine Jorgensen phenomenon…[or] that
homosexuality, that incarnation of sexual ambiguity should be enjoying a cultural boom in our
The context surrounding the definition of homosexuality in the 1950s is best explained by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). The definition of homosexuality “holds the minoritizing view that there is a distinct population of persons who ‘really are’ gay,” Sedgwick wrote, while, at the same time, it “holds the universalizing view that sexual desire is an unpredictably powerful solvent of stable identities: that apparently heterosexual persons and object choices are strongly marked by same-sex influence and desires, and vice versa for apparently homosexual ones.”35 Such contradiction became more poignant in the particular historical context of the 1950s, in which conservative politicians used Kinsey’s statistics to generate fear about the ubiquitous problem of homosexual behavior while simultaneously trying to define male and female homosexuals as discrete groups and socially and ideologically dangerous minorities. Subsequently, the nominative category of homosexuals has, as Sedgwick argued, “failed to disintegrate” not in the first place because of “its meaningfulness” to those whom it defines but because of “its indispensableness to those who define themselves as against it.”36

**Beyond the Sexual Binary of Homosexuality and Heterosexuality**

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36 Ibid., 83.
Some of O’Hara’s poems and Rivers’ paintings during the 1950s indeed illustrates their radical attempt to promote the instability of male sexualities that do not follow the common homosexual-heterosexual binary when that binary became one of the major sources of anxiety regarding male homosexuality in that decade. In addition to “Two Dreams of Waking,” “In Memory of My Feelings” (1955), one of O’Hara’s longest and most mature autobiographical poems of the 1950s, for instance, presents the poet as a man whose gender and sexual identities are constantly shifting: “and I have lost what is always and everywhere/ present, the scene of my selves, the occasion of these ruses/ which I myself and singly must now kill/…I don’t know what blood’s/ in me I feel like an African prince I am a girl walking downstairs/ in a red pleated dress with heels I am championing taking a fall.” (CP 256) These lines offer an image of O’Hara transgressing the gender line between men and women; he likens himself to “an African prince” as well as “a girl” wearing heels. In the same breath, O’Hara depicts himself as both an ordinary husband and a boy with a perverse tendency. The phrase “sordid identifications” and the concept of masquerade, a leitmotif of “Homosexuality,” reappear in this poem: “The conception/ of the masque barely suggests the sordid identifications …. I am a dictator looking at his wife… I am a child smelling his father’s underwear.” (CP 256)

Hazel Smith, literary critic, posited that “In Memory of My Feelings” celebrates “the shifting, performative nature of gender identity” as an ideal state of existence. According to Smith, O’Hara employed the image of his body in order to unfold his vision of multifarious forms of gender and sexual categories, such as femininity and masculinity or straight and non-straight. And this reconfiguration of masculinities, Smith contended,
should “only be experienced through the body.”

She interpreted O’Hara’s body as “liberating because it is pre-discursive,” yet she also saw it as “constraining, because it has certain apparent sexual characteristics which mean it is inevitably caught in a particular position in discourse.”

O’Hara should retain his corporeality if only to transcend it, rather than asserting a fixed non-heterosexual identity onto his body.

Likewise, Rivers’ *O’Hara Nude with Boots* (1954, Fig. 8), a portrait painted while Rivers and O’Hara were still on-again, off-again lovers, has a profusion of ambivalent meanings. This portrait will be discussed in detail in chapter four. For the present, it will suffice to illustrate some of the important characteristics of O’Hara’s image that consistently upset conventional distinctions between femininity and masculinity or the images of virile men and of ostensibly gender inverted homosexual men. In the portrait, O’Hara holds his hands together at the back of his head while naked; this posture, which exposes his entire body to the viewer, is more common in female nudes than in male nudes. A similar “raised-arms” pose is taken by female nudes in nineteenth century French paintings such as *The Toilet of Ester* (1841, Fig. 9) by Théodore Chassériau (1819-56) and *The Source* (1856) by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780-1867). In a 1939 photograph of the studio of Henri Matisse (1869-1954), a female model takes the same posture as the artist works on a sculpture. This posture, in a way, enabled O’Hara to

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38 Ibid.
turn himself into an erotic object of the gaze and thus to assume a position and role that
the female body usually takes in paintings of the nude in the modern era.\textsuperscript{39}

In O’Hara’s nude, Rivers emphasized the textural effects on the surface of
O’Hara’s body and its musculature. O’Hara’s slightly erect penis and black leather boots
further suggest hyper-masculinity and even aggression—characteristics that belie his
apparent passivity. The boots and the theatrical posture of putting one leg on the cement
block were popular tropes of the male nude in physique magazines during the 1950s, as
will be discussed in chapter four. The leather boots, in particular, represented the
fascination with military culture within the community of male homosexuals during the
postwar years of the 1950s and 1960s. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, bikers’ leather
gear and Nazi uniforms were considered attractive within a segment of the gay subculture.
According to the maverick journalist, Hunter S. Thompson, the aura of danger and
aggressiveness that surrounded bikers made them popular icons in the sadomasochistic
circuit and among certain circles of gay men.\textsuperscript{40} This incorporation of attire from military
culture within gay subcultures during the immediate postwar years manifested the
complicated relationship between homosexual stereotypes and heterosexuality; namely

\textsuperscript{39} The theorization of “the male gaze” seems to have been pioneered by Laura Mulvey in
her 1975 article “Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema.” According to Mulvey, in the
classical structure of cinema, the male gaze constructs the woman as textual object and prevents
her from being herself, from having a self separate from or prior to the socio-visual construct
imposed by the male gaze upon her body. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and the Narrative
Cinema,” \textit{Screen} 16, no. 3 (1975): 6-18. According to Abigail Solomon-Godeau, in European art,
the female nude occupied an unstable position until its final hegemony in the nineteenth century
French visual culture. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, \textit{Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation}
(London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 30.

\textsuperscript{40} Hunter S. Thompson, \textit{Hell’s Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga} (New York:
how the gay man’s self-presentation had been considerably shaped by the influence of rough and otherwise macho types of manhood in mainstream society.

In the field of queer studies, Judith Butler and Eve Kofosky Sedgwick have been attacking the fundamental incoherence, contradiction, and false assumptions underlying the idea of a permanent and perceivable self in accordance with existing gender and sexual categories. In 1990, Butler claimed, “If one thinks that one sees a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man, then one takes the first term of each of those perceptions as the ‘reality’ of gender.” She maintained that therefore “the gender that is introduced through the simile lacks reality… we think we know what the reality is, and take the secondary appearance of gender to be mere artifice, play, falsehood, and illusion.”

In Butler’s theory, it is largely a “forced” and repeated enactment or “performance” that produces the fiction of a “core gender.” The effect of gender is, for instance, produced through “the stylization of the body” or “the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gender self,” and this entails the conception of gender “off the ground of a substantial model of identity.”

Butler’s insights into the elusive and incoherent nature of the categories of woman and man can also be applied to the categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality. Sedgwick argued that the coming-out experience of gay men in the twentieth century ironically led to uncertainty rather than to affirmation and assurance on the part of the individual who avowed her or his “homosexual” orientation. “In the process of gay self-

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42 Ibid., 141.
disclosure…in a twentieth century context, questions of authority and evidence can first arise,” Sedgwick maintained. “‘How do you know you’re really gay? … After all, what you’re saying is only based on a few feelings, not real actions.’”43 Such responses at the occasion of a homosexual’s coming out, in Sedgwick’s view, reveal “how problematic is the very concept of gay identity, as well as how intensely it is resisted and how far authority over its definition has been distanced from the gay subject her or himself.”44

While Butler’s and Sedgwick’s critical re-readings of Eurocentric notions of the self took place in philosophy, literary theory, and psychoanalysis, in literature, Jonathan Dollimore has noted that homosexual and allegedly non-straight writers have had a tradition of undermining unified and idealized notions of the self and identity. Dollimore contended that, beginning with Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), many homosexual writers have employed what he called “perverse dynamics,” which produce not “an identity, a logic, economy, so much as an anti-teleological dialectic producing knowledge in opposition to destiny.” This dialectic “transvalues sameness” and discloses “not an underlying unity” in the name of which social division can be transcended, but “a radical interconnectedness which has been and remains the unstable ground of both repression and liberation.”45 The cases of O’Hara’s “In Memory of My Feelings” and Rivers’ O’Hara may also seem to target contradictions and incongruous elements within the categories of gay and straight as they existed during the 1950s, a decade that evinced an obsession with defining a

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44 Ibid.

monolithic homosexual personality type that was distinct from its normative heterosexual counterpart.

**The “Homophile” Movement and Homosexual Poets in the 1950s**

Rivers’ and O’Hara’s critical and intellectual approaches to the definition of the homosexual self also differed from the position that prevailed among early gay activists. The decade of the 1950s was notorious for homophobic social conditions, but it also saw the beginning of a relatively organized gay rights movement in the United States, also known as the “homophile” movement. The “Statement of Missions and Purpose” (1951) adopted by the Mattachine Society (The Society of Fools)—considered the first gay rights organization—effectively captured the primary focus of the gay rights movement during its early and nascent phase. In its mission statement, the organization first called for a grassroots movement of gay people to challenge anti-gay discrimination. Second, the organization recognized the importance of building a gay community. The result of such activism, as the statement put it, would be to gain “new pride—a pride in belonging, a pride in participating in the cultural growth and social achievements of…the homosexual minority.” In an effort to achieve this end, the Mattachine Society sponsored small discussion groups beginning in 1951 and published *One Magazine* from 1953 until 1968. The organization provided forums in which socially alienated and self-

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**46** The term, “Homophilia” and “homophile,” which referred to “love of the same,” were developed to de-emphasize the sexual overtones of the word “homosexuality.” These terms were adopted by gay activists, primarily before the Stonewall era. One of the most significant nationwide gay rights organizations to exist before the Stonewall riot was the North American Conference of Homophile Organizations (NACHO), established in 1966. For the origins of the word “homophile” and a history of gay activism during the 1950s and 1960s, see D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 197-99, 227-29.

conscious homosexuals could gather to debate a range of topics, such as the origins and curability of homosexuality.\textsuperscript{48}

In the arena of literature, well-known and promising poets and writers also began dealing with issues of homosexuality in a relatively open and critical manner.\textsuperscript{49} Defining the stances taken by diverse homosexual writers in that decade is far from an easy task. However, one can state that the primary concern of these poets was, as with grassroots gay activists, to reconfigure the social status of male homosexuals within or against mainstream society, rather than challenging the idea of fixed sexual identities such as homosexuality and heterosexuality, as O’Hara and Rivers did in their works.

In 1944, Robert Duncan, for instance, wrote an article entitled “The Homosexual in Society” in \textit{Politics}, a magazine established by Dwight MacDonald in the same year and known for its radical leftism. The immediate consequence of this valiant essay was that John Crowe Ransom, who was then the editor of \textit{Kenyon Review}, refused to publish Duncan’s previously accepted poem in his magazine.\textsuperscript{50} Duncan was, to reiterate,

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{48} For an overview of the beginning of the Mattachine Society and major members who also formulated most of the opinions of \textit{One} Magazine, see ibid., 63-66, 80-89 and Hay, \textit{Radically Gay}, especially chapter one and two.

\textsuperscript{49} James Baldwin, for instance, wrote “Preservation of Innocence,” which was published in \textit{Zero}, a now-defunct Moroccan journal, during the summer of 1949. “Preservation of Innocence” was not published in the United States during the 1950s, but it represents one of the earliest intellectual discussions of modern medical science’s and mainstream society’s unfair and contradictory treatment of same-sex relationships. James Baldwin, “Preservation of Innocence,” 1949, \textit{Zero}, reprinted in \textit{We Are Everywhere}, eds. Blausius and Phelan, 234-35. His novel \textit{Giovanni’s Room}, in which he candidly portrayed the inner struggle of a young man deciding whether to live as a homosexual, was published in 1956 by Dial Press, one of the major publishers during the 1950s.

\textsuperscript{50} In a rejection letter sent to Duncan in 1944, John Crowe Ransom claimed that his magazine could not publish Duncan’s poem because “we are not in the market for literature of this type,” and by literature of this type, Ransom meant poetry that was an “obvious homosexual advertisement.” John Crowe Ransom, Letter to Robert Duncan, December 6, 1944, quoted in
affiliated with the Black Mountain College poets and known for his life-long companionship with a painter, Jess Burgess Collins.\textsuperscript{51} Although he was married to a woman during the 1930s, an hermetic philosophy and his almost fetishistic vision of male sexuality became primary poetic forces of his work. In his 1944 essay, Duncan denounced literary critics for treating male homosexual culture and homosexual relationships in literature as perverse, unique, and separate from mainstream culture. He also criticized the development of camp culture within the community of male homosexuals. In Duncan’s view, camp culture served as the major source of the degraded and dehumanized male homosexual stereotype. He believed that camp, as a “secret language” within the community of male homosexuals, would exacerbate gay men’s ghettoization within mainstream culture because the tone and vocabulary of “the camp” were “loaded with contempt for the human.”\textsuperscript{52}

According to Duncan, most established literary critics also misunderstood “homosexual” content in poems written by allegedly non-straight poets; they often failed to look at homosexual experience as part of the overall human condition. The critical reception of prewar poet Hart Crane, for instance, exemplified the dominant approach toward “homosexual” content in literary criticism. Critics of Crane were usually puzzled by what they called a little “perversion” in his texts, although they claimed “that they are


\textsuperscript{52} Robert Duncan, “Homosexual in Society,” Politics 1 (August 1944), reprinted in We Are Everywhere, ed. Blasius and Phelan, 231.
great despite their ‘perversion.’ ”53 For Duncan, Crane’s experience as a homosexual poet should, however, be regarded as part of the spectrum of human suffering that is common to homosexuals and heterosexuals: “Crane’s suffering, his rebellion, and his love are sources of poetry for him not because they are what make him different from, superior to, mankind,” but because “he saw in them his link with mankind.”54

In his poems of the 1950s and 1960s, Duncan hoped to offer morally uplifting, idealized images of male homosexuals and homosexual companionship, as opposed to the degraded, sarcastic, and perverse images of male homosexuals that he believed camp culture and literary critics often endorsed. One of his major themes after 1951—the year he began his relationship with Jess Collins—was the “household,” which referred to an idealized and intimate space for love between men. In his poem “This Place Rumored to Have Been Sodom” in 1960, he wrote, “This was once/ a city among men, a gathering together of spirit./ It was measured by the Lord and Found Wanting.”55 Duncan fictionalized a more positive image of Sodom and the development of a communal space for male homosexuals in the final stanza: “In the Lord Whom the friend has named at last love/ the image and loves of the friends never die./ This place rumored to have been Sodom is blessed/ in the Lord’s eyes.”56

Allen Ginsberg, a contemporary of O’Hara’s, was another influential poet who openly dealt with the experiences of male homosexuals and with same-sex relationships

53 Ibid., 230.
54 Ibid., 232.
56 Ibid., 59.
in his writing during the 1950s. Unlike Duncan, who ultimately hoped to provide a more positive and inclusive vision of homosexuality within mainstream culture under the broader rubric of humanism, Ginsberg associated same-sex relationships and homosexuality with social rebellion. In one of his earliest and most widely known poems, “Howl” (first read at the Six Gallery poetry reading in October 1955 in San Francisco; published in 1956), he presented men having same-sex relationships as primary subject matter. According to Robert Martin, during the postwar years Ginsberg may have been the first American poet to use his sexual profile as an integral component of his public image. For Martin, Ginsberg’s avowal of homosexuality was “part of his larger attempt to undermine American society and its pretensions to respectability.”

“Howl” has been described by many critics as a manifesto for the Beat poets that effectively captured Ginsberg’s rebellious literary, cultural, social, and sexual stances. The poem begins, “I saw the best minds of my generation, destroyed by madness, starving/ hysterical naked,/ dragging themselves through the negro street at dawn looking for an/ angry fix, angel headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the/ starry dynamo in the machinery of night….” Homosexuals and individuals exploring sexual freedom—along with members of other categories of the young and rebellious—occupy central places in “Howl.” “Who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and/ screamed with joy,/ who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of/ Atlantic and Caribbean Love,/ who balled in


the morning in the evenings in rosegardens and the grass of/ public parks and cemeteries scattering their semen freely to/ whomever come who may…."

Ginsberg here candidly cited several stereotypical images of male homosexuals, such as sailors and motorcyclists, whose macho images constitute a drastic contrast to the image of sad, melancholic, and isolated (usually effeminate) male homosexuals that still dominated the perception of male homosexuals in popular imagination. The most common prototype of the gay man, published as a cover image of One Magazine, was a lonesome homosexual man, often located in darkness and isolation, who stared in a given direction as if he were looking for help. Despite One Magazine’s supporters’ collaborative efforts to expand a sense of the community among homosexuals and to improve gay self-consciousness, a sense of vulnerability prevailed in the images that circulated among them. “Howl,” by contrast, depicted not only motorcyclists and sailors, but also their sexual relationships in a bold, even celebratory manner. Words such as “fucked,” “blew,” and “blown” reinforced powerful and even violent images of the gay man, whose strong, tough masculinity defied the social alienation and pain that Duncan noted in the case of Crane’s writing.

John D’Emillio argued that Ginsberg’s “Howl” presents an image of “gay male sexuality as joyous, delightful, and even holy.” Male homosexuals in “Howl” emerge as non-conformists who rebel against norms, rather than as psychologically immature, troubled persons. In that sense, “Ginsberg served as a bridge between a literary avant-

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59 Ibid., 51.
garde tolerant of homosexuality and an emerging form of social protest indelibly stamped by the media as sexually deviant.”

O’Hara’s stature as a self-consciously political gay poet during the pre-Stonewall era could be seriously questioned, especially when his approach is compared to the more aggressive and explicit sexual politics of major homosexual poets of the 1950s such as Duncan and Ginsberg. O’Hara’s efforts to promote an ambiguous understanding of male sexuality could be viewed as obscure and not confrontational enough. It is worth noting that O’Hara’s poem “Homosexuality” was only published posthumously, in 1970 in *Poetry* magazine, whereas Duncan published his controversial essay in 1944, acknowledged his homosexual inclination publicly, and consequently endured a period in which the literary establishment discriminated against him. Ginsberg read “Howl” at the Six Gallery in 1956. Copies of his *Howl and Other Poems* were confiscated in 1957—an act that would ironically serve to make the book a bestseller and secure its place as the quintessential text of the gay liberation movement during the pre-Stonewall era. O’Hara sometimes used personal symbolism—such as a Polish rubber and the seashore for Rivers and a ship for himself—to describe the emotional tensions in their romantic relationship in “To the Harbormaster.” Unlike Ginsberg, who preferred to use extremely graphic language—phrases such as “who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors”—to portray same-sex relationships, O’Hara often deployed inorganic objects to

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depict sexual encounters presumably between men. The humorous tone of O'Hara’s poems also prompted literary critics to question the presumably serious political intent of his poem. For instance, “Two Dreams of Waking” typifies the poet’s gossipy and casual voice; it hardly conjures a painful, self-torturing image of two men.

The critical reception of O'Hara’s poems during the early 1970s illustrates some of the difficulty in understanding O'Hara’s poetry in the context of the gay liberation movement. Literary critics began paying close attention to O'Hara’s poems and other writings during the early 1970s with the publication of his *Collected Poems* in 1971 and Marjorie Perloff’s *Frank O’Hara: Poet among Painters*, of 1977, which was the first comprehensive study of O’Hara’s oeuvre. Upon reviewing Perloff’s *Frank O’Hara*, Thomas Byrom stated that O’Hara’s aesthetics were like “a catalogue of late Victorian camp, a matter of excellent personal taste,” calling his work “Paterian pop” and characterizing his style as “mental chatter and drift.”61 Reviewing O’Hara’s critical literature in her new 1997 introduction to *Frank O’Hara*, Perloff argued that Byrom’s comments on O’Hara’s unique writing style were, in fact, “coded terms for ‘queer’” during the early 1970s although these critics did not mention O’Hara’s same-sex relationships and involvement with other homosexual writers. 62

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62 Perloff confessed that she herself interpreted Byrom’s response as his critic on her part “to take this playful poet seriously!” rather than recognizing the underlying insinuation of O’Hara’s association with the gay subculture. Ibid.
Helen Vendler, who first observed the underlying sexual politics in O’Hara’s poems, was no exception. In 1971, Vendler argued that the absence of grammatically correct syntax in O’Hara’s poetry is a strong indicator of his refusal to participate in maleness and to adopt the dominant ideological position of the literary world: “Such a radical and dismissive logic flouts the whole male world and its relentless demand for ideologies, causes, and systems of significance.” Simultaneously, however, she noted that “the sex poems [by O'Hara] aren’t very good, though they try too hard and are brave in their homosexual details.” She considered the “sex” itself in O’Hara’s poems to be a matter of “details.”

In the 1990s, after the explosive growth of gay and lesbian studies, some literary critics remained reluctant to see radical sexual politics underlying O’Hara’s treatment of “homosexuality” and “homosexual consciousness.” In Martin’s The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry (1979), a comprehensive study of homosexual poets in the United States, O’Hara occupies a marginal position. In a new introduction to the book in 1998, Martin stated that despite the fact that O’Hara made references to homosexuality in his poetry, he would not treat O’Hara as a quintessentially “gay” poet in the homosexual tradition generally represented by Walt Whitman (1819-92). He explained, “I have not taken up the challenge posed by many readers to explain why Frank O’Hara (or W. H.  

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64 Ibid., 20.
Auden) is not present. To this I can only reply that *The Homosexual Tradition* is in fact the study of a Whitman tradition or, if one prefers, a gay liberation tradition.”

What Martin tried to define as a homosexual poet, in the tradition of the gay rights movement was a poet who boldly and explicitly eulogized “manly” love in his poems, as Whitman did in “Song of Myself” (1855), which will be discussed in relation to O’Hara’s “Homosexuality” in chapter four. According to Martin, Whitman was “fully aware of the possibilities of sexual expression between men,” and “he celebrated them not only as an end in themselves but also as a means to a mystic penetration of the universe and a more democratic vision of the American future.” The question of how much Whitman’s poetic depictions of tender moments shared among men should be interpreted as a faithful record of the poet’s homosexuality or as part of a self-conscious effort to promote a homosexual lifestyle remains vexing. This unresolved question notwithstanding, Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* is a rare and pioneering work of high literature, in that it invokes explicitly eroticized images of the naked male body and of intensive friendship among men.

As Hazel Smith pointed out, O’Hara’s “Homosexuality” might have been at odds with the political aims of the gay rights movement, particularly at its beginning stage in the immediate postwar years. She mused, “So, in one sense, I suggest that sexual identity in O’Hara’s poetry was too radical for its time, since what was required politically was


66 Ibid., xvi-xvii (1979 Introduction).
the overt and unambiguous assertion of gay identity and gay power.”\textsuperscript{67} However, she also emphasized that politics in poetry, in any era, has “a distinct role and does not necessarily have to be unequivocal to be effective.” O’Hara’s poetry, which espouses “sexual fluidity rather than sexual transparency,” can speak to us “more now about gay identity than it could when it was written.”\textsuperscript{68} O’Hara’s non-essentialist approach to homosexuality and efforts to promote understanding of the ambiguity of male sexualities would have been better appreciated within present scholarship, as gay and lesbian studies now offer more encompassing and inclusive frameworks for articulating sexual politics.

**Issues of Gender and Sexuality in the New York School**

Rivers’ and O’Hara’s literary and artistic treatments of gender and sexualities were also forged against the situation of the New York School, in which the supposedly dominant artist’s type was the heterosexual man. In 1953, Rivers and O’Hara co-wrote an incomplete play entitled “Kenneth Koch: A Tragedy” (hereafter abbreviated as “A Tragedy”), a rare and valuable document that shows the importance of the image of the macho artist within the rhetoric of the major Abstract Expressionists. The setting of the play is the Cedar Tavern, a legendary gathering place of the New York School artists, and its major characters are the canonical first generation figures of the New York School, also known as the Abstract Expressionists, such as Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and Willem de Kooning, along with Koch, Rivers, and O’Hara. As the title suggests, the play is written in the style of Koch, who was known for his comic sensibility and humor. The

\textsuperscript{67} Smith, *Hyperspaces in the Poetry of Frank O’Hara*, 112.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.
play, as O’Hara pointed out, could not be published during the 1950s because it was so replete with “50’s art gossip that everyone would sue us.”

In “A Tragedy,” Pollock and Kline call Rivers and O’Hara “fags” and “dope addicts.” Pollock’s terse conversational style in the play is meant to depict the rude, macho attitude that he was famous for in the 1950s New York art world. Using the character of Milton Resnick (1917-2004), Rivers and O’Hara satirized the extreme seriousness and hyperbolic language prevalent among the major New York School artists. In the play, Resnick, a lesser-known artist, delivers a sermon on the idea of the bohemian self, a crucial concept of Abstract Expressionism:

> You know what the New York School is? It’s a lot of guys who know all about the bricks. It’s us. And listen to me. It may be a plain point of view but it’s better than any I’ve heard in a long time. It’s got vitality. We’re pushin em down day and night. It’s a cold water loft revolution. Take that Brooks Brothers look off your face. (SP 131)

Rivers and O’Hara here candidly addressed the Abstract Expressionists’ discomfort with well-educated, sophisticated, effeminate homosexual writers and their artist friends within the New York School. What Resnick called the “Brooks Brothers” types were members of a group of New York School poets—notably O’Hara, Ashbery, and Schuyler—most of whom began socializing at the Cedar Tavern during the 1950s. Brooks Brothers, a clothing company established in 1818, became famous for its button-down shirts and seersucker suits, which many see as representing the classic American style of men’s fashions. Joe LeSueur, a close friend and roommate of O’Hara’s between 1955 and 1964, recalled that a “Brooks Brothers seersucker jacket” became O’Hara’s

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trademark 70; he wore this jacket in David Davidson Reiff’s photograph on the cover of *Standing Still and Walking in New York*, mentioned in chapter one. LeSueur credited an “Ivy League outfit with Brooks Brothers jacket” with helping him to find a way into the Oak Room of the Plaza, which represented a kind of high society among male homosexuals in New York:

[I]t might be wondered how I, an upstart from trashy Los Angeles, found my way inside its [the gay enclave’s] covert perimeters. Well, it was by chance, through no effort on my part, unless one counted my sporting a specious Ivy League outfit (Brooks Brothers jacket, regimental striped tie, scuffed white bucks), venturing alone into the Oak Room of the Plaza, and then, after taking a stool at the bar, not disallowing a glib conversation with an elegant stranger of fairly advanced years.71

O’Hara’s adoption of “Ivy League” attire does not necessarily imply that the poet was a regular patron of bars for upscale male homosexuals in midtown New York. As a curator at the Museum of Modern Art and a close friend to bohemian artists and writers in Greenwich Village, he maintained an ambivalent position toward the Oak Room of the Plaza Hotel as well as toward the Cedar Tavern. At the latter, the major New York School artists tended to wear “a combo of corduroy and army-navy store rejects used for working-class association,” wrote Rivers.72 Rather, O’Hara might have crafted an image...


71 Ibid., 41.

of himself as a young poet in a Brooks Brothers jacket with the purpose of self-parody and to indicate his difference from the “dominant” types of patrons at the Cedar Tavern.

Rivers and O’Hara paid special attention to the role of the macho artist in the rhetoric of the major older generation New York School artists. With phrases such as “vitality” and “guys who know all about the bricks,” they ingeniously satirized the Abstract Expressionists’ obsession with their public personae as tough, masculine, heterosexual, bohemian artists. The association implied by Rivers and O’Hara—of bohemian artists with working-class men “who know all about the bricks”—had a long tradition in the history of modern art. According to Raymond Williams, a British sociologist, the identity that artists voluntarily adopted was invariably masculine. In constructing images of themselves as bohemians, artists frequently associated themselves with tough, working-class manhood as opposed to bourgeois domesticity and comfort, which were predominantly linked with womanhood and femininity.73

Rivers and O’Hara were familiar with the Abstract Expressionists’ obsession with tough, masculine tropes. During the 1950s, Rivers and O’Hara gained membership within the circle of the New York School, a group that usually met at the Cedar Tavern or at the “Club” (also known as the Eighth Street Club or the Artists’ Club), which emerged as an artists’ discussion society.74 Initially, Rivers—and by extension, the younger generation


artists and poets of the New York School—might have been deeply impressed by the
Abstract Expressionists’ commitment to their aesthetic direction and subliminal language.

As Rivers wrote in his 1992 autobiography,

The Club was created in the 1950s as a forum for discussions about modern art.
When I first went there, I was an upstart—a young painter. The artists all seemed serious. That impressed me more than anything. They were very, very serious—in their rhetoric (aesthetic and political). …

Rivers, however, soon became disillusioned with Abstract Expressionism in
general and Pollock in particular. A visit to Pollock’s studio in 1951 left an indelible
mark on him: “About an hour after the visit Helen [Frankenthaler] and I were standing on
a deserted beach with drawn faces looking into the ocean…, promising to devote
ourselves even more determinedly and forever to art,” he recalled. However, as the
decade progressed, he wrote, “this had all changed considerably.” Pollock’s art “seemed
narrowed to his point of view,” and subsequently, his “devotion to art and life had taken
on a distinctive anti-Pollockian tone.” Rivers also recorded in his 1979 memoir “The
Cedar Bar” that “Pollock was like the all-American rough-and-tumble-drunk type of guy;
he was a big cornball—the kind of person that I’m not used to.”

Certainly Rivers’ and O’Hara’s satire in “A Tragedy” deflates the complicated
nature of the issues surrounding homophobia and sexism by obscuring the individual
differences among the major New York School of artists. For instance, Pollock’s

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75 Rivers and Weinstein, What Did I Do?, 280.


77 Rivers and Brightman, “The Cedar Bar,” 40. Jane Freilicher also found that the New
York art world of the late 1940s and the 1950s was dominated by “a lot of macho” men who took
“Ernest Hemingway poses,” creating an atmosphere that she “didn’t find too appealing,” in which
she had difficulty fitting in. Jane Freilicher, Interview with Barbara Sikler, August 4, 1987,
homophobia was notorious among the artists who hung out at the Cedar Bar, while de Kooning maintained a relatively agreeable personal relationship with O’Hara. For these reasons, any attempts to form generalized perceptions of sexual attitudes and conflicts within the New York School based on “A Tragedy” should be approached with great caution. As David Craven noted in 1999, the actual gender and sexual politics inside the New York School are not easy to summarize: “We need instead to analyze with much greater sophistication and far more stringency just how enmeshed, yet not incapacitated, all the members of the New York School were in this dense, but not totally disempowering, web of hierarchical relationships and discriminatory discourse.”

Under the modernist framework of the late 1940s and early 1950s, subject matter and themes that went beyond purely formal qualities such as line and color were regarded as unworthy of full attention in serious scholarly discussion; however, the overriding reticence on topics of gender and sexuality that one finds in the art criticism of the 1940s and 1950s does not necessarily suggest that the art criticism of that decade was free of misogyny and homophobia. Clement Greenberg, one of the most influential formalist critics of postwar American art, could not hide his underlying gender bias against what he perceived as improper—presumably non-masculine—style in his review of Altar by Theodoros Stamos, a work submitted to the Whitney Annual in 1948. He lamented that Whitney’s Annual, on the whole, revealed a trend toward “neutralized, easy-to-accept abstract art, an ingratiating, pseudo-advance kind of painting” that served to “attract and charm people who do not otherwise take to non-representational art” and cited Stamos as the most notable practitioner of this trend. Greenberg described Stamos’ work as

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78 David Craven, Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 123.
“sickeningly sweet” and “utterly empty” and summarized it as a weaker version of the biomorphic forms and artistic style of William Baziotes (1912-63).  

In his review, Greenberg never mentioned Stamos’ sexual identity, yet his criticism of what he perceived as Stamos’ excessively “sweet” visual effects and lack of originality reflected the critic’s deep-seated bias against feminine taste. Moreover, Greenberg contrasted Stamos with Baziotes, whom he regarded as a “serious” and vastly “superior artist.” Greenberg, here, alluded to a structural division that may parallel an opposition between the womanly characteristic of “sweetness” on one hand and “manly” seriousness and artistic superiority on the other. He once called a work by Hedda Stern (1915-), a female Abstract Expressionist, “a piece of femininity” that expressed “nothing more than a delicate sensibility.” Such comments attest that gender bias suffused his

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79 Clement Greenberg, “Review of the Whitney Annual,” Nation (1948), reprinted in The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 2, ed. John O’Brien (Chicago and London: University of Chicago), 266. The words employed by critics of Stamos’ paintings in the 1940s and 1950s reflect the misogyny and homophobia that prevailed in art criticism at the time. Stuart Preston observed “rainbow-hued waves and blots of soft color” in Stamos’ work, the general effect of which he characterized as “a certain spinelessness.” According to Gibson, the word “spinelessness” is coded language denouncing homosexuality for its perceived fluidity in terms of gender boundaries—or, as the word literally indicates, for the alleged weakness and unmanliness of the gay man. Ann Gibson, Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 11.

80 Greenberg, “Review of the Whitney Annual,” 226. Unlike Greenberg, Gibson perceived the feminine element in Baziotes’ painting. She argued that while female artists like Lee Krasner consciously evaded the connotations of the primitive and feminine, Baziotes “in his softer contours and subtly muted colors courted the feminine qualities” that he might have seen as primordial. Gibson, Abstract Expressionism, xxxiii.

criticism, belying his professed disinterest in issues of gender and sexuality with respect to specific works and artists. As T. J. Clark argued, the terms most frequently used in art critical discourse in the 1940s and 1950s, such as scale, action, and energy served as tacit “operators of sexual difference” that were part of an “informing metaphoric of masculinity.”

One of the most valuable documents that effectively captures the binary of femininity and masculinity and the gender hierarchy within the New York School is Nina Leen’s famous 1951 group portrait of the major New York School artists, which was published in *Life* under the title “Irascible Group of Advanced Artists Led Fight against Show” (January 15, 1951, Fig. 10). Leen’s group portrait—which includes Baziotes, Willem de Kooning, Newman, Pollock, Clyfford Still, and Mark Rothko—depicts virtually the entire generation of painters who would be identified as the Abstract Expressionists.

In the portrait, Hedda Stern, the sole female painter, literally protrudes from a group of male artists who either sit quietly or stand up to form an enclave. She distinguishes herself from her male colleagues by standing on higher ground. Michael Leja observed in 1993 that Stern “bepedestaled” herself as though she were the muse of the male artists, rather than a painter who had equal standing with her colleagues. Her

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long black coat, with its relatively plain design may have represented a deliberate effort
to be identified with the rest of the vanguard male artists rather than with ordinary
women—or, worse yet, with bourgeois housewives. Nevertheless, her slim figure and
handbag prevent her from entirely blending into the group. Stern’s tangential presence in
the photograph can be perceived as useful historical evidence of the marginal presence
accorded to the women artists who aligned themselves with Abstract Expressionism, a
movement that has been generally regarded as a male domain.

A comparison of the *Life* group portrait with Walter Silver’s 1954 photograph of
New York School poets and artists (Fig. 5) might help us further apprehend the relatively
strict gender division that prevailed among the older generation New York School artists.
Silver’s photograph was taken while artists and poets were posing for Grace Hartigan’s
*Masquerade* (1954). In Silver’s photograph, Ashbery and Schuyler occupy the middle of
the frame, but the most lively and visually conspicuous figures are O’Hara and Freilicher.
Whereas Freilicher’s wedding gown is presumably intended to underscore her femininity,
her posture and physical size ensure that her image, in relation to O’Hara’s, is neither
marginal nor passive. She is as tall as O’Hara, and her wedding gown enhances her
physical presence. Next to her, O’Hara appears disproportionately slim, even effeminate.
Ashbery and Schuyler, who are half-clothed, and O’Hara, in his tights, expose the
contours of their bodies to the viewer in a relatively candid manner. Freilicher occupies a
space that suggests the relative gender equity between her and the male homosexual poets,
while Stern in the *Life* portrait is visually estranged from her group, underscoring the
structural division between the “normative” masculinity of the male artists and her
femininity.
In the *Life* group portrait, gender difference—highlighted by Stern’s visual singularity, her physical protrusion, and her outfit—receives more emphasis than sexual difference does. Although Stamos, seated in the first row on the left, was known to be a homosexual, his outfit, gesture, and sitting position are not significantly different from those of the other, heterosexual male artists. In the photograph, at least, the difference in his sexual profile or orientation is nullified and unrecognizable. Silver’s photograph, in which Ashbery and Schuyler sit half-naked on a bench and wear tights, offers an interesting contrast to the *Life* image of manly, serious Abstract Expressionists in dark suits.

Suggestively, O’Hara and Freilicher as bride and groom appear to parody the concepts of marriage and heterosexual union, especially when one considers the fact that this “groom” and his friends are openly homosexual. To reiterate, female artists within O’Hara’s coterie adopted masculine attire. Considering the attitudes prevailing at Nell Blaine’s gathering, Freilicher’s wedding dress seems to represent a playful comment on traditional gender roles, rather than underscoring the traditional gender division that is much more evident in the Abstract Expressionists’ group portrait.

**The Emergence of “Masculine” Aesthetics and Macho Images in the New York School**

The rigid gender division and the closeted image of Stamos in Leen’s group portrait may not necessarily indicate that there was no gender reversal or confusion within the 1950s New York art world. To the contrary, as I will argue, the emergence of macho images of the major Abstract Expressionists and the supposedly heroic and masculine characteristics of their artworks, as endorsed by 1950s art critics...
such as Thomas Hess, Rudi Blesh, and, subliminally, Clement Greenberg, bore various contradictory underpinnings in relation to gender ambiguity.

In criticism of the New York School artists, the allegedly free and expressionistic brushstrokes of the Abstract Expressionists are often described in gender-coded terms, such as “vitality” and “force,” which serve as substitutes for masculine modifiers. Upon reviewing Pollock’s drip painting in 1956, for instance, Thomas Hess lauded its physical vitality and dynamism, which were either observable in the process of creation or in the tangled web of pigments. “Finally everything was in risk; the artist could analyze the creative act within himself, define his feelings about it,” Hess wrote. “Pollock’s pictures were the first public and dramatic evidence of the New York School. The vitality and force of his example continue to affect artists, in Europe as well as in America.”

Pollock’s process of pouring and dripping pigment on canvas could, however, as easily be associated with irrationality, unconsciousness, and femininity. In 1993, Anna Chave observed elements of gender reversal in Pollock’s technique, noting the fact that Pollock dared to refuse to control his work or to exercise authority and mastery over his craft. To support this argument, she cited Klaus Theweleit’s observation that flows are associated primarily with the female body; although the male body can also generate

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85 Thomas Hess, “U.S. Painting: Some Recent Directions,” *Art News Annual* (1956): 92. In the article “Reframing an Appearance: On the Surface of Abstract Expressionism,” Richard Shiff, in contrast, argued that Pollock’s gesture remained performative and had less to do with Pollock’s intrinsic being, as Hess had observed: “This is not to say that a painting by Pollock would be valued only for its effect as an event, that it would be a free happening and not an organized picture. Rather it is to indicate that performance itself would be picture…. On a certain level, such art thus remains a matter of appearance, of mere representation, of one thing indicating something it cannot be.” Richard Shiff, “Reframing an Appearance: On the Surface of Abstract Expressionism,” in *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments* (New York: Abrams and Buffalo, NY: Albright Knox Gallery, 1987), 97-98.

flows, in fantasies of the specific population, studied by Theweleit, flows remain deeply associated with the fearsome floods of the female: “Fluid fell under the heading of dirt...[and] unmanliness,” wrote Theweleit. Along with his pouring technique, Pollock’s de-centered and de-hierarchical pictorial organization—also known as his all-over painting—evinced his process of relinquishing his privileged status as wholly in control of his work. Chave argued, “One might see how, in his [Pollock’s] tacit assumption of the position of the woman—the decentered and the voiceless, the one who flows uncontrollably, the one who figures the void and the unconscious—he remained,” on some level, “a man using his masculine authority to appropriate a feminine space.”

If the Abstract Expressionists’ artistic techniques and influences fundamentally reveal the complicated nature of gender construction, the emergence of the macho bohemian self that prevailed in the 1950s New York art world had equally ironic implications. The wide circulation of a macho image of the Abstract Expressionists was attributable in part to the overriding discourse on masculinity during the 1950s—especially the notion that the traditional type of masculinity was in decline. Underscoring a masculine sensibility and masculine taste was not a novel phenomenon in art history,

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87 Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, Volume One: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, trans. Stephen Conway (1987), quoted in Chave, “Pollock and Krasner,” 105-06. The population treated in Theweleit’s book was Freikorps members (or “soldier males,” as he called them). They were paramilitary groups of World War I veterans, who were addicted to the militaristic and combative lifestyle.

88 Ibid., 108. Fluid, as a distinctive artistic material and motif, has been used by contemporary artists. In her performance *Vagina Painting* in 1965, Shigeko Kubota painted on a flat canvas using a brush attached to her crotch as a female rejoinder to Pollock’s drip painting. In Andy Warhol’s 1977 *Oxidation Paintings*, canvases primed with copper-based paint were oxidized by uric acid. These paintings can be considered parodies of Pollock’s technique, as they link the act of urinating—a rather homoerotic gesture from the perspective of homosexuals—with artistic potency. Water and urine also appeared in Fluxus performances and concerts such as George Brecht’s *Drip Music* (1959) and *Water Yam* (1963) and Nam-Jun Paik’s *Physical Music* (1962), which challenge the orderliness of the Western musical and artistic tradition.
but the macho image of the Abstract Expressionists that appeared in popular magazines and in photographic portraits of artists in the late 1950s was unique for its wide circulation. The dominant image of the Abstract Expressionists was bohemian, rebellious, and macho, and the most well-known example of this image appeared in Life magazine’s article on Pollock in 1949. The article, entitled “Is He America’s Greatest Living Painter?,” was illustrated with a photograph of Pollock leaning on a wall in front of one of his drip paintings. George Segal (1924-), a younger generation sculptor, compared Pollock’s tight t-shirt and oblique glance to Marlon Brando’s in the movie Wild Things (1953). Both men represented the tormented, aggressive, uncontrollable male rebel in the postwar United States. Marlon Brando’s filmic image in A Streetcar Named Desire (1951) and James Dean’s in Rebel without a Cause (1955) provided, as art historian Ellen Landau claimed, “ready-made opportunities for analogy with Pollock.”

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90 Barbara Rose, “Namuth’s Photographs and the Pollock Myth,” in Hans Namuth and Barbara Rose, Pollock Painting (New York: Agrinde, 1980), unpaginated. However, as Amelia Jones argued, Brando and Pollock’s animal-like, intuitive type of masculinity is ultimately ambivalent in its gender attributes, especially when one considers the common association of the primitive with femininity. Amelia Jones, Body Art: Performing the Subject (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 275.

91 More suggestively, Tennessee Williams (1911-83) spent a summer with Lee Krasner (1908-84) and Jackson Pollock in 1944. In his 1975 memoir, Williams wrote of Pollock’s boisterous drunken behaviors. For a possible connection between Pollock and the character of
As the 1950s progressed, male subjectivity emerged as a frequently debated topic in serious studies and books such as David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), C. Wright Mills’ *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (1951), and William H. Whyte, Jr.’s *The Organization Man* (1956). Sociologists observed that so-called masculine rationality would eventually have a detrimental effect on men’s aspirations to achieve autonomous identities and selves. Riesman explained that modern society had passed through three stages, each of which had given rise to a distinct character type. The first type was the tradition-directed man; the second type was the inner-directed man, and the final type was the other-directed man. Riesman claimed that the inner-directed man was typically “driven by his inner ideals and values,” whereas the other-directed man—whom he saw as the more or less predominant type among office workers in the postwar United States—was usually driven by the hope of attaining “economic abundance,” meeting social standards, and achieving external recognition.92

Barbara Ehrenreich, author of *The Hearts of Men* (1984), maintained that although Riesman did not use any explicitly sexual metaphors in his analysis of conformist culture, his definition of the “other-directed” man mirrored many attributes of the feminine, in accordance with Talcott Parsons’ definition of the masculine and feminine.93 One of the core traits of the other-directed man, as described by Riesman,

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93 Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men* (New York: Anchor, 1984), 34. Through numerous articles, such as “The Social Structure of the Family” (1949) and “The American Family: Its Relation to Personality and to Social Structure” (1955), Parsons set up a rigid system of classification of masculine and feminine characteristics.
was the tendency to adjust himself to others’ feelings and needs rather than to his own. In this way, he shared a core characteristic with the feminine, passive subject. According to Parson, one of the most influential sociologists in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s, men, who were the traditional breadwinners, were “instrumental” and rationally oriented, while women were more “expressive and more emotionally attuned to the feelings of others.”

These sociologists concentrated primarily on addressing the shifting sense of self among office workers. Their studies on the changes occurring in men’s subject position and sense of self were also responsible for a surge in popular literature concentrating on problems of masculinity and gender roles in the 1950s. Within this historical context, articles on Pollock, highlighted his unique and eccentric personality and his artistic style, which did not conform to pre-existing ideas about art. For instance, Life articles such as “Is He America’s Greatest Living Painter?” (1949) and “Baffling U.S. Art” (1959, posthumously published after Pollock’s death in 1956) emphasized his unconventional


95 According to Robert Corber, these sociologists primarily concentrated on how the social structures of corporations and factories influenced workers’ subject positions in the postwar United States. This transformation of subject position must have been considered less dramatic for female workers than for male workers, given women’s traditionally passive positions in the home and workplace. This circumstance might have led sociologists to focus on the case of male workers rather than that of female workers. Robert Corber, Homosexuality in Cold War America (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 33-34.

96 Drawing largely upon extreme cases, articles in popular magazines such as “The Danger of Being Too Well Adjusted” (1956) in Reader’s Digest and “The American Male: Why Is He Afraid to Be Different?” (1958) in Look expressed alarm regarding alleged shifts in masculinity and gender roles in the ordinary American family during the postwar years. Ehrenreich, The Hearts of Men, 30.
artistic technique, which had often been misunderstood not only by the general public, but also within the community of artists. Pollock’s difficult art sometimes provoked vehement attacks from critics. In 1958, Robert Bustein, critic for *Horizon*, harshly attacked Pollock’s art for being “a pictorial parallel to the murmuring method performance and the stemming San Francisco novel—an exercise in non-communication.”

The male Abstract Expressionists’ strong sense of self paralleled their firm sense of male sexuality. Pollock’s avant-garde art, derived from his inner self, was frequently touted as the embodiment of his tough-minded, genuine masculinity. The media’s fascination with Pollock was based not only upon his bohemian status, but also upon his masculine appeal. Rudi Blesh referred to Pollock and de Kooning as “athletes.” In 1956, Blesh wrote,

They will be long remembered as a remarkably rugged lot, with minds as well muscled as their bodies (*Time* calls Pollock “The Champ”). They are built like athletes, and some of them, like Pollock and De Kooning, paint like athletes…. They are a strange breed of esthetes completely unlike the old notion of painters as a wan fraternity of daydreamers.  

In his description of the macho image of the New York School artists, Blesh indicated that Pollock and de Kooning deviated fundamentally from the stereotypical notion of the artist as an unreliable, emotionally unstable, and “wan” (read: inadequately masculine)

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“daydreamer.” Blesh, here, underscored not only the concept of the artist as bohemian, but also the masculine aspects of the artist, especially as viewed in terms of an “athletic” creative process.

To be sure, art critics and writers ignored and distorted certain elements of the Abstract Expressionists’ personalities and work with the objective of dramatizing a macho image.\(^9\) However, photographs of the Abstract Expressionists, in general, confirm that the artists themselves shared mainstream society’s nostalgia for the traditional masculine type, as well as its anxiety about gender ambiguity.\(^1\) In 1996, Caroline Jones carefully traced the origin and evolution of artist portraiture in postwar American photography. Due to an increasing emphasis on the artist’s subjectivity on one hand, and the influx of European expatriate photographers on the other, the American art world in the 1940s and 1950s experienced a surge of exhibitions and art books devoted to artist-photographs as an independent genre. Photographers, along with participating New


\(^1\) Michael Leja also drew a significant connection between the prevailing image of the macho Abstract Expressionists and the historical construction of masculinity and male subjectivity in the late 1940s, citing film noir as effective visual evidence for this link. Film noir is a term that describes a genre of detective movies developed throughout the late 1930s and 1940s, almost contemporaneously with Abstract Expressionism. According to Leja, the basic narrative trope of film noir is the struggle of the male protagonist torn between two worlds: good and evil, present and past, consciousness and unconsciousness. Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 194. According to Leja, the female muse in Willem de Kooning’s *Woman* painting became the “symbol that enables the staging of his subjectivity as a combat between opposing drives of conscious control and unconscious impulse.” Ibid., 268. Leja’s analysis of the type of the modern man and of the film noir genre also enable us to perceive the major Abstract Expressionists’ ambiguous relationship with strict gender divisions. The central themes of the New York School of painting and film noir, according to Leja’s interpretation, rest upon conflict and tension between opposing realms (e.g., active/passive, consciousness/unconsciousness) that are strongly suggestive of the gender division of masculinity and femininity.
York School artists, established a consistent style of lighting and poses that served to promote and popularize the image of the bohemian macho artist in the 1950s and 1960s.\textsuperscript{101}

The dynamic and sometimes interdependent relationship between artists’ self-presentations in the media and a certain discourse on masculinity during the late 1940s calls for a revised understanding of macho imagery among the first generation New York School artists; their normative masculinity was far from natural, secure, and evident. Instead, these artists’ photographs in general, and Pollock’s emblematic image in particular—especially in relation to Riesman’s “other-directed man” in the 1950s, indicate the paradoxical circumstances underlying the strict gender division in the New York School from which Rivers’ and O’Hara’s distinctive sexual politics arose.

\textbf{Rivers and O’Hara in Art History: Between Abstract Expressionism and the Rise of Pop Art}

While Rivers’ and O’Hara’s non-straight sexual identities and same-sex relationships distinguished them from the most prominent—and macho—New York School artists, their relationship with popular imagery and the way they dealt with homosexual themes also distinguished them from the Neo-Dada and Pop artists, namely Rauschenberg, Johns, and Warhol. In this section, I further highlight how Rivers and O’Hara differed from both the macho Abstract Expressionists and the queer Neo-Dada

\begin{footnote}{\textsuperscript{101}Caroline Jones noted the ambivalent nature of the Abstract Expressionists’ “private self” that became popularized and circulated in the media and photographs. For the Abstract Expressionist, Jones claimed, the artist’s studio served as a “solitary retreat from the demands of society, sanctuary for private creation, metaphor for the individual artist.” Yet photographs of the artists in their studios also became public statements of their quintessentially “private acts.” Caroline Jones, \textit{Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artists} (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1996), 20.}\end{footnote}
and Pop artists to understand their unsettling art historical position from the varying perspectives of camp, popular culture, and male sexualities.

Fairfield Porter, an artist and critic who was close to Rivers and O’Hara, painted *Portrait of Larry Rivers* (1952, Fig. 11), in which Rivers hardly appears to be a profoundly tortured or socially alienated bohemian. Porter, almost twenty years older than the artists and poets in Rivers’ circle, exerted a great influence on the younger generation New York School artists who pursued the figurative mode of painting such as Rivers, Hartigan, and Freilicher. Rivers recalled the time when he and his colleagues began considering Porter’s painting seriously: “Like every other painter’s work, including our own, it[Porter’s painting] had something wrong with it. All this attention lit a spark under Fairfield.”

In the painting, Rivers is lean and slim, and the interior scene is warmly lit. At the time, Rivers was wearing bandages on both wrists to cover wounds allegedly inflicted during suicide attempts. In 1952, Rivers experienced an emotional breakdown after the end of a short affair with Freilicher. This incident is significant in consideration of his relationship with O’Hara. Gooch claimed that during Rivers’ recovery, he and O’Hara began establishing the first phase of their intensive friendship. Porter’s portrait does not convey Rivers’ personal struggle and pain. Nonetheless, his boyish appearance and

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casual manner of sitting make him a less-than-perfect representative of the ordinarily serious-looking, confrontational New York School artists.

In his 1954 review of Rivers’ work, Porter emphasized Rivers’ talents in a range of genres and media. Rivers, he noted, was a saxophone player, a jazz musician, a poet, a sculptor, and a painter. “If it is like an actor not to know who he is, then, like an actor, and because he likes to experiment, Rivers acts out his life in search for a sound basis,” Porter wrote, “It is as if all events in which he participates were crucial moments in his autobiography.” Likewise, a *Life* magazine article on Rivers (1958, Fig. 12) emphasized that the painter had not settled on a definite artistic style, genre, or medium. The *Life* article was published in 1958, on the occasion of Rivers winning the TV quiz show *$64,000 Challenge*, on which he appeared as an art expert. The artist had won twice: he was awarded the show’s top prize in 1957 before winning $32,000 in the 1958 appearance. The *Life* article devoted attention to Rivers’ unique artistic persona and his varied roles as a member of a jazz quartet, painter, sculptor, and nightclub emcee. Four images of Rivers, presumably performing these different roles, were published on the first two pages of the article and were captioned, “Wonder Boy and His Many Sides.”

The image of Rivers as a man of disparate disciplines and talents, as evoked by both the content of the *Life* article and the layout of the accompanying photographs, was in stark opposition to the image of Pollock that appeared in the famous 1949 article “Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?” in the same magazine. In the photograph illustrating the latter article, Pollock presented himself as an

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extremely serious, and somewhat bitter man, challenging the viewer with his characteristically valiant posture. Pollock appeared as a lone individual in the middle of the frame, assuming the guise of the alienated bohemian self that he often emblematized in the 1950s New York art world. The resulting image—of what the article called a “brooding and puzzled-looking man”—is in marked contrast to Rivers, with his theatrical, agreeable, and inviting look and gestures. According to Gavin Butt, the 1958 Life article juxtaposed Rivers’ painting The Athlete’s Dream (1956) with four images of the artist spread over two pages. “In this way both the photograph and the painting within the photograph, foreground the multiplicity of ‘Rivers’ in life and art (or indeed as they co-mingle in Life.),” Butt remarked.106 Rivers’ distinctive artistic persona, as Life magazine purported, has serious consequences for his canonical position within 1950s art history. Rivers’ appearance on a television quiz show and his involvement in jazz music rather “anticipated Warhol in the formulation of the artist as a kind of celebrity personality” rather than “appearing surly, anguished and inward-looking in the manner of Jackson Pollock.”107

Also the words “wonder boy” in the title of the article on Rivers insinuate something about the artist’s personality, and specifically his masculinity. Vito Russo explained that the word “boy,” when used to refer to a man in popular movies and media, was often a shortened form of ‘sissy-boy’ or ‘nancy-boy,’ and served to refer elliptically

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107 Ibid., 109.
to “homosexuality.”

Although the author of the *Life* article did not make any comments on Rivers’ masculinity in the text, the reference to Rivers’ “boyhood” clearly suggests that he did not fit into the tough, macho paradigm that dominated the New York art world.

While the critical reception of Rivers during the 1950s concentrated on the fact that his artistic personality differed from the prevailing macho type, with the advent of Pop Art during the early 1960s, art critics, indeed, began treating Rivers’ multiple talents and theatricality more or less in relation to popular culture—and subsequently in relation to Pop Art. In her 1965 *New York Times Magazine* article, for example, Grace Glueck cited Rivers’ exploits in arenas other than visual art, such as music and literature. She claimed that Rivers’ colorful life and personality could be the subject of enormous curiosity and attention in show business. “If Larry Rivers—painter, sculptor, poet, jazz musician and hard-core picaresque—didn’t exist, the movies (both Hollywood and underground) would have to invent him.”

Some of the critics of the Abstract Expressionists, such as Harold Rosenberg, associated Rivers with popular culture in order to question his artistic values and achievement. In his 1965 review in *Art News*, Rosenberg derided Rivers’ talent by indicating that it was more suitable to low or popular culture than to high art: “In contrast to the intellectualism and austerity of the reigning

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vanguard, Rivers was ‘talent’ in the Broadway or Hollywood sense of skill practiced to
arouse an assortment of feelings.”

Art critics’ efforts to forge connections between Rivers and Pop Art—and, for
that matter, Neo-Dada—are valid inasmuch as Rivers, the Pop artists, and the Neo-Dada
artists were all reacting against Abstract Expressionism. Although the Neo-Dada artists
differed from Warhol in their subject matter as well as in their gestural brushwork—in
which they were more similar to Rivers than to Warhol—they can still be linked to the
Pop artist by some of the core traits of camp that they shared. To reiterate, Sontag’s 1964
“Notes on Camp” was largely responsible for introducing the notion of camp in
“mainstream” magazines of art and culture--beyond the confines of gay enclaves or
subculture. According to Sontag, camp was indeed amorphous concept and listed its fifty-
eight attributes. Among these different attributes, the most frequently cited is that the
whole point of camp is “to dethrone the ‘inversion of the serious and frivolous and vice
versa.’ ” The exemplars of camp style that Sontag mentioned, which ranged from
Tiffany Lamps to feather boas, are distinguished by their exaggerated nature and extreme
artificiality. According to Sontag, camp is a “perverse” mode of aestheticism. It is “art
that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is ‘too
much.’”

Sontag’s did not equate camp with recent developments in visual art; however, art
critics soon began employing the term ‘camp’ interchangeably with Pop Art. Just as the


111 Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” reprinted in Against Interpretation (New York:

112 Ibid., 277.
Pop artists drew heavily upon subject matter from popular culture, thus challenging the common dichotomy between high and low art, Sontag’s writing subverted conventional lines separating canonical from marginal texts by valorizing artworks that were “serious about the frivolous” and vice versa, exploring the fusion of elite art and popular culture. In 1965, Thomas Meehan, art critic for The New York Times, borrowed Sontag’s basic definition of camp as the love of artifice for his self-coined term “third stream of taste.” The third stream of taste, according to Meehan, is distinct from good taste or bad taste and “encompasses the curious attraction that everyone—to some degree, at least—has for the bizarre, the unnatural, the artificial and the blatantly outrageous.” Meehan cited Warhol’s eight-hour film Sleep (1963) and Heinz Ketchup Box (1964) as the most suitable examples of the particular taste that Warhol advocated. In Heinz Ketchup Box, Warhol silk-screened a product logo with synthetic polymer paint on a wooden replica of a Heinz box, and the strong red color of the logo heightened the sense of artificiality.

Critics such as John Adkins Richardson noted the influence of the camp sensibility among artists either directly or indirectly affiliated with Pop Art. In 1966, Richardson, a critic and philosopher, declared that Rivers and Johns “anticipated Pop’s emergence in this country” and that Rivers was “a precursor of the Camp sensibilities associated with it.” According to Richardson, Rivers’ Dutch Masters and Cigars II

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113 Thomas Meehan, “Not Good Taste, Not Bad Taste—It’s ‘Camp,’ ” New York Times Magazine (March 21, 1965): 30. Meehan’s “third stream of taste” echoes Sontag’s definition of three different sensibilities. According to Sontag, first sensibility, that of high culture, is “basically moralistic,” the second sensibility, which is represented in much contemporary “avant-garde” art, gains power by “a tension between moral and aesthetic passion”; finally, the third is Camp, which is “wholly aesthetic.” Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 287.

(1963, Fig. 13) amounts to a philosophical work expressing “a Camp ideality.” Rivers’ selection of Dutch Masters as a theme was significant, as this brand of cigar had a certain prestige among intellectuals and celebrities such as TV comedian Ernie Kovaks, who was known for his theatricality and absurd humor. The Dutch Masters cigar commercial featured an animation of the 1662 painting *The Syndics of the Clohtmaker's Guild (The Staalmeesters)* by Rembrandt Van Rijn (1606-1669). This advertisement, in Richardson’s view, exemplified the camp sensibility by revisiting a masterpiece in a lighthearted manner. In his *Dutch Masters and Cigars II*, Rivers copied after Rembrandt’s work that appears on the Dutch cigar box twice—once on the upper part of the piece and again on the bottom, on a smaller scale. Richardson claimed that Rivers hereby upset the distinction between high art and consumer products “by memorizing the trivial and making the cigar box into a cultural monument that synthesizes past and present.”

Richardson’s interpretation of Rivers’ reference to Dutch Masters cigars seems compatible with Sontag’s definition of camp, which alludes to a certain preference for and connection to an old and nostalgic style and sensibility. According to Sontag, camp is, in brief, “Dandyism in the age of mass culture.” She cited Oscar Wilde who personified camp connections to both the old and new. Sontag saw that Wilde “could never depart too far in his life from the pleasures of the old-style dandy” as he sported a velvet beret, lace shirts, velveteen knee-breeches and black silk stockings. At the same time, Wilde’s attitudes suggest something more modern as he declared that a doorknob could be as admirable as a painting and anticipated “the democratic esprit of Camp.”

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115 Ibid.

made a distinction between the old and new style of dandy: “The old-style dandy hated vulgarity. The new-style dandy, the lover of Camp, appreciates vulgarity. Where the dandy would be continually offended or bored, the connoisseur of Camp is continually amused, delighted.”

Andrew Ross, a literary critic and cultural historian, further distinguished “Pop camp” from “Pop art” based upon Sontag’s definition of camp, which grounded its origins in dandyism. In 1989, Ross claimed that Pop was, in principle, “cool,” neither complicit nor dissenting; it was based on “an outright refusal of the act of judgment.” Camp was, he suggested, involved with forms of attachment or nostalgia. He quoted Sontag’s famous definition of camp as “tender,” “passionate,” and nurtured “on the love that has gone into certain objects and personal styles.” In his revised essay of the same title, he added that while Pop tried to disavow the traces of production behind its objects of attention and concentrates on surface immediacy, camp cultivated an attitude toward the participation of producers, past and present. Camp, he maintained, retrieved not only materials that had been excluded from the serous high-cultural tradition, but also “the more unsalvageable material that has been picked over and found wanting by purveyors of the ‘antique.’”

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117 Ibid.


119 The above quote was included in Ross’ revised article under the same title. Andrew Ross, “Uses of Camp,” in Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality, ed. David Bergman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 68.

120 Ibid., 66.
Ross’ idea of Pop camp appears to be useful in understanding how Rivers’ choice of subject matter differed from that of the Pop movement. Unlike Pop Art that embraced the vulgarity of popular culture, high camp consistently looked toward elements of the past, such as art history and aristocratic taste. As will be discussed in chapter three, the most important artistic and cultural sources for Rivers included not only popular imagery, but also works from traditional art history, such as the seventeenth century Baroque paintings of Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) and Rembrandt Van Rijn and nineteenth century French academic paintings by Théodore Géricault (1791-1824), Gustave Courbet (1819-77), and Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863).

The relationship between Rivers and the camp of Neo-Dada and Pop Art is, therefore, complicated and ambiguous, despite their shared sensibility and interest in popular culture and everyday imageries. Stylistically, Rivers never entirely escaped the influence of the major New York School artists. He combined his preoccupation with human figures and recognizable subject matter with artistic techniques pioneered by Willem de Kooning, who emerged as one of the most influential figures of his formative years, as will be discussed in chapter three. In addition, unlike the work of the Pop artists, Rivers’ paintings of the 1950s were less inspired by consumerism and popular culture than by his immediate and personal surroundings. For instance, a group of his portraits that will be treated in chapter three, including Joseph (1954), The Family (1954-55), Boy in Blue Denim (Portrait of Steven) (1955), Double Portrait of Berdie (1955), Toylsome Lane (1955), and Studio (1956) presented images of his friends and family or scenes from his studio, gardens, and his house at Southampton, New York.
O’Hara’s relationship with Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art was as unsettled and ambivalent as Rivers. O’Hara’s primary artistic resource was of course words, but his literary endeavors were shaped by his serious artistic and personal relationships with first and second generation New York School artists. In 1959, O’Hara wrote the first monograph on Jackson Pollock (published by the Museum of Modern Art, New York), and a number of literary critics, such as Charles Molesworth and Fred Moramarco, noted that O’Hara’s poems were related to Abstract Expressionism in their deployment of a quick, casual, and breathless voice, comparable to a kind of quick gesture or action in Pollock’s and Willem de Kooning’s paintings. O’Hara’s “Second Avenue,” one of the longest and most mature poems in his early oeuvre, was, for instance, inspired by de Kooning’s Woman series. In a 1957 letter to Rosalind Constable, editor at the New York Times, O’Hara explained that his portrayal in “Notes on ‘Second Avenue’ ” of a woman leaning out of a window with her arms on a pillow, as seen from Rivers’ studio on Second Avenue, was “influenced by de K’s [sic] woman (whom he [de Kooning] thinks of, he once said, as ‘living’ on 14th St).” O’Hara was especially impressed by how de Kooning compartmentalized the female muse in his painting. De Kooning’s Woman was “very jumbled while actually everything in it either happened to me or I felt happening (saw, imagined) on Second Avenue,” wrote O’Hara. O’Hara tried to compose a poem based on his immediate reactions to the scene outside the window, much as an action

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painter would attempt to work on a canvas without preconceived ideas or a rational planning process.123

Literary critic Geoff Ward maintained that although the Abstract Expressionists’ emphasis on spontaneous creative processes paralleled similar traits in the writing of the New York School of poets, the relationship that developed between these painters and poets was primarily prompted by the poets’ sheer, unmediated enthusiasm for the dynamism of the 1950s New York art world. According to Ward, “the important factor is surely that the poets had before them the conspicuously successful example of the New York painters,” and the relationship between the poets and painters in the New York School can be “defined by antithesis as much as continuation.”124 While Abstract Expressionism “denotes an art often of monumental severity, such as the dark and portentous canvasses painted by Mark Rothko,” the poets were, as Ward put it, “witty, sociable, and bored with alienation and top-heavy symbols.”125

O’Hara’s references to everyday images have led some critics, such as Hazel Smith, to connect the poet with the Pop Art of the early 1960s as well as with the camp sensibility. Smith contended that O’Hara’s “Why I Am Not a Painter” (1955), a poem inspired by Michael Goldberg’s Abstract Expressionist work Sardines (1955), not only

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123 As Grace Hartigan noted, O’Hara’s poetic images consistently transform themselves and generate disorienting effects: “It [“Second Avenue’”] has everything art should have. It has imagery, emotional content, leaps of imagination, displacements of time and place going back and forth.” Grace Hartigan, Interview with Marjorie Perloff, November 25, 1975, quoted in Perloff, Frank O’Hara, 70. Perloff, a literary critic, was cautious about connecting O’Hara’s poem with the development of visual art. She claimed, “the question remains whether a poem, especially such a long poem, can ‘be [emphasis on original] the subject not just about it,’ whether verbal structure can be so insistently nonmimetic.” Ibid.


125 Ibid., 3.
raises issues about the alliance between poetry and painting, but also “probes the relationship between Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art,” artistic movements that have usually been regarded as two highly polarized camps. “The methods which both poet and painter use are those of action painting (O’Hara creates an action poem),” Smith wrote, “but the subject matter is that of commodities, sardines and oranges.”

O’Hara, along with other poets in the New York School, is known for his preference for subject matter and language culled from everyday life and popular culture, O’Hara frequently wrote about movies and celebrities such as James Dean and Billie Holiday. According to Gooch, a number of O’Hara’s poems, including “For James Dean,” “Obit Dean, September 30, 1955” and “Thinking of James Dean,” were written as tributes to Dean after his death in a car crash on September 30, 1955. When O’Hara’s “For James Dean” was published in Poetry in March 1956 with its title advertised on the front cover, a small controversy ensued among poets in New York. Paul Goodman, an influential bisexual poet and writer, complained that James Dean wasn’t a suitable subject for poetry. Bunny Lang agreed, calling the poem “too out” for publication.

As was the case with Rivers, O’Hara’s appropriation of popular imagery was distinct from Warhol’s arguably detached and indifferent approach to the images of movie stars and celebrities that he was appropriating. The subjects Warhol chose for his first set of silk screen paintings in 1962, such as Troy Donahue and Elvis Presley, may attest to his fascination with highly sexualized images of young male celebrities as well.

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126 Smith, Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara, 174.

as the influence of the gay subculture. Notwithstanding, the industrial and relatively impersonal creative process of enlarging a photograph of a celebrity and silk screening it repetitively with minimal artistic intervention discourages viewers from drawing conclusions regarding the artist’s personal and political sentiments based on the subject matter.

O’Hara’s poems on James Dean, by contrast, express the poet’s attachment and sentimentalism regarding the tragic death of a young movie star. In “Four Little Elegies” (1955), O’Hara wrote, “Your name is fading from all but a few marquees, the big red/ calling-card of your own death. And there’s a rumor that you live/ hideously maimed and hidden by a conscientious studio.” (CP 250) According to Gooch, O’Hara’s poem on Dean reflected his twin themes of “love and death with a sentimental directness,” and for O’Hara, Dean became a screen-actor version of the tragic lyric hero. In “Thinking of James Dean” (1955), O’Hara portrayed himself lying down on

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129 During the 1950s, James Dean, along with Montgomery Clift, emerged as a popular icon for a segment of the gay subculture, partly due to his deeply psychological and sometimes overly emotional and tender screen images, which challenged the rigid gender-role expectations of 1950s America. Some gay men identified with the emotionally vulnerable personalities and alienated social circumstances of Dean’s movie characters. For a discussion of the cultural influence of Dean and rumors of Dean’s bisexuality, see Val Holley, James Dean: The Biography (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1995). In 1985, Warhol created Ads: Rebel Without a Cause (James Dean), a silkscreen of the Japanese poster of Rebel Without a Cause (1955).

130 Gooch, City Poet, 269.
the beach imitating Dean’s tragic ending: “And after hours of lying in nature, to nature,/ and simulated death in the crushing waves, their shells and heart/…had I died at twenty-four as he, but/ in Boston, robbed of these suns and knowledges, a corpse more whole.” (CP 230-31)

Some art critics, like Thomas Crow, have found hidden meanings of love and death in Warhol’s choice of subject matter, concentrating on how Warhol depicted the image of Marilyn Monroe. Crow posited that in Marilyn Diptych (1962), Warhol, in his unique way, laid out “a stark and unresolved dialectic between absence and presence, and life and death,” mediating the conflict between Marilyn’s immortality as a movie star whose image is captured forever on rolls of film and the real-life death of Norma Jean. For this, Crow paid special attention to the varying and faded tones of Marilyn’s image that resulted from the screen-printing mechanism and the juxtaposition between a group of colorful images of Marilyn on one side and a group of black-and-white, faded images of her on the other. While Crow’s interpretation of Warhol’s Marilyn Monroe images may expand our understanding of the artistic intent underlying Warhol’s supposed indifference toward his subject matter, O’Hara’s sentimental poems, written on the occasion of James Dean’s death, spell out more clearly and straightforwardly the poet’s preoccupation with the ironic fate of a tragic young movie star than Warhol’s obscure work, which has continually confused and perplexed critics and writers. Thus,

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132 Hal Foster divided Warhol critics into two groups based on their approach toward “meaning” in Warhol’s art. Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard are representative of the first group. In Foster’s words, these writers tried to “release the image from deep meaning (metaphoric association or metonymic connection) into simulacral surface.” Foster’s second group of critics
O’Hara’s supposedly more personal and less detached attitude toward his subject matter—namely, immortality and celebrity—had more similarity with Ross’ definition of Pop camp than with Pop art.

Rivers’ male nudes, including O’Hara, and O’Hara’s treatment of James Dean also attest to the distinctiveness of their approaches to homosexual themes in the New York art world, especially compared to the tactful reticence and obscurity that prevailed in the artistic production of Neo-Dada artists. Rauschenberg and Johns, like Rivers, occupied an ambivalent position between Abstract Expressionism and Pop art, as they combined found objects with Abstract Expressionist-influenced brushwork. In Johns’ Target with Plaster Casts (1955, Fig. 14), casts of various body parts, including the male and female sexual organs, are set inside small boxes attached to the upper part of the canvas. Fred Orton claimed in 1994 that Johns might have taken his casts from several men and women. According to Orton, the co-existence of the shape of the internal female genitalia on the far right, and penis in Johns’ work complicates the conventional erotic appeal of the female form in modern art. Johns’ plaster casts effect “resistance to interpellation by making that sign [the image of a penis] disrupt [this] convention,” wrote Orton. 133

The strategy of mixing the sexual organs of the male and female in order to confuse the viewer’s desire and blur the distinction between conventional heterosexuality

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and unconventional homosexuality is not uncommon in Rivers’ paintings and O’Hara’s poems. In Target with Plaster Casts, Johns placed several body parts—for example, a green penis, an orange ear, a red hand, and a foot—in separate boxes as though they were specimens. In 1999, Jonathan Katz argued that in Johns’ work, the “human body is fully domesticated to the pictorial surface” as its relationship to living flesh becomes “attenuated—literally bound within the painting and circumscribed by a frame.” In Katz’s view, Johns’ plaster casts are stripped of their ‘inherent’ corporeality; they become “defleshed” and “decontextualized” and serve as ironic reminders of the absent (whole) body. In a way, Johns fragmented the human body and presented anonymous sexual organs to a greater extent than did Rivers and O’Hara.

However, a distinctive feature of Target with Plaster Casts is the door attached to each box that can be opened and closed. The penis cast is visible only when the door on its box is fully open. According to Kenneth Silver, Johns’ Target with Plaster Casts is “first a portrait of the homosexual man of the postwar period, an era of extreme sexual repression; the besieged gay body—and gay psyche—is fragmented and sorted into compartments, each one capable of being alternately closeted or exposed.” The lidded boxes suggest the self-censoring of an artist who remained discreet and extremely cautious about discussing autobiographical elements in his work—let alone his homosexuality—throughout his career. Jonathan Weinberg noted that when Johns posed

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135 Ibid.

with *Target with Plaster Casts* in Dan Budnick’s 1964 photograph, the penis cast was hidden.\(^{137}\) Indeed, it bears mentioning that Johns did not insist that the lid should be seen at all times in his conversation with Alfred Barr, who was deeply impressed by the work but eventually did not purchase it for his Museum due to “certain graphic details.”\(^{138}\)

This does not suggest that the personal references, especially to same-sex relationships, in Rivers’ and O’Hara’s work are transparent to the viewer; rather, Rivers’ and O’Hara’s efforts to question the definitions of masculinity, femininity, homosexuality, and heterosexuality by using their own experiences and images are more straightforward and less obscured than those of the Neo-Dada artists. In this respect, Jonathan Katz maintained that it was the “primarily literary world” that actively and openly engaged with homosexual rights and gender or sexual politics during the 1950s. “The figures like Frank O’Hara and Allen Ginsberg were writing about their gayness in explicit terms,” Katz declared, and “Johns and Rauschenberg knew and were friendly with some figures in this gay avant-garde, but it was primarily a literary world and never their main social focus.”\(^{139}\)

Therefore, Rivers and O’Hara occupied an ambivalent position among significant artistic movements during the late 1950s and the early 1960s—Abstract Expressionism

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and Pop Art or Neo-Dada—stylistically, thematically, and in their treatments of homosexual themes. These different artistic tendencies are also considered as having represented different artists’ milieus—namely the macho atmosphere of the Cedar Tavern and the gay subculture under the influence of Pop Art. Rivers’ multiple images in his Life magazine article reflected a persona that defied the Abstract Expressionists’ traditional concept of the monolithic and consistent self; his self-presentation, in a way, corresponded to his refusal to align himself with a particular artistic movement or trajectory. Accounts of Rivers’ flexible artistic personality are echoed in Ashbery’s overview of O’Hara’s equally unsettled poetic self. According to Ashbery, O’Hara had always been caught between “opposing power blocs.” As he famously put it, “Too hip for the squares and too square for the hips is a category of oblivion which increasingly threatens any artist who dares to take his own, regardless of mass public and journalistic approval.”

Rivers’ and O’Hara’s unique art historical positions in the 1950s and 1960s New York art world reflected the fact that their poems and paintings defied simple categorization, both in terms of conventional art historical movements and in terms of the homosexual-heterosexual binary.

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Ch. 3. Rivers’ Formative Years and *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1953)

The Beginning: Tradition, Figuration, and the New York School

Elaine de Kooning, reviewing Rivers’ first one-person show at the Jane Street Gallery in 1949, claimed that he had reversed the “accepted procedure.” He began his career as an abstract artist, studying with Hans Hofmann for two years. Afterward, he adopted “the time-tested method of copying the masters—old and modern.”¹ Rivers’ oeuvre in his formative years followed a kind of pattern: a fixation on a particular artist or style that would eventually give way to another fixation, with each infatuation lasting two or three years at most. The range of artistic periods and styles that Rivers copied between 1947 and 1952 was extensive, from French Impressionists or Post-Impressionists, such as Auguste Renoir (1841-1919), Édouard Manet (1832-83), Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), and Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947) to Fauvists and Expressionists, especially Chaim Soutine (1894-1943).²

In *The Burial* (1951, Fig. 15), a work exhibited at his first one-person show at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, in 1951, for instance, he realized subject matter and a basic composition that he borrowed from Gustave Courbet’s *A Burial at Ornans* (1850) in an expressionist style loosely derived from Soutine.³ The basic horizontal layout of his


3 In *Burial* Rivers may have been musing on the loss of the Eastern European Jewry, relying for his painting both on Courbet’s work and on a family photograph taken at the time of the funeral of his grandmother Miriam. During the 1950s and 1960, Rivers continued to revisit
Burial, in which the people at a funeral line up in the foreground, was clearly reminiscent of the Courbet painting that he saw during his sojourn in Paris; however, he rendered the scene with relatively vibrant colors and a tangled web of expressionist brushstrokes. In his 1951 review, art critic Manny Farber of the Nation, who criticized Rivers’ effort to recycle such a well-known work as Courbet’s Burial, nonetheless, found that the color in Rivers’ painting was “visceral, acid, rich, and so contemptuously and angrily applied as to be visually exciting.” A subsequent painting and drawing, Bathers after Cézanne (1952, Fig. 16) and Bathers (1952, Fig. 17), are studies after Cézanne’s Large Bathers, completed in 1906. In Bathers after Cézanne, the naked female figures in the foreground under the arc of trees and the pyramidal structure of the composition refer to Cézanne’s famous Large Bathers. Rivers’ brushstrokes became less gestural compared to his Soutine-inspired Burial, and he adopted a variation on Cézanne’s subtle palette while translating its brownish tones into a mix of bluish and greenish tones in his work.

A number of pre-twentieth century European painters, such as Rubens, Nicholas Poussin (1594-1665), Rembrandt, and, later, Delacroix and Courbet, also joined the list of Rivers’ favorite artists. Notable examples of his early drawings after old masters include Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus After Rubens (1950, Fig. 18), Two Nudes: “Le Sommeil De Venus” after Poussin (1950), and After Rembrandt (1951, Fig. 19).

family photographs as reminders of his ethnic background, usually in an ambivalent manner. His 1956 series Europe is also based on a photograph of his father taken before the family’s immigration to the United States. In 1960 Marriage Photograph (Rejected Copy—Social Patterns), Rivers wrote letters of “rejected” on the top of his painting of a family wedding photograph.

4 According to Blaine, Rivers painted Burial at the time of the funeral of his uncle. The basic format of the painting was inspired by Courbet’s A Burial at Ornans, a painting that she and Rivers saw together in Paris. Blaine, Interview with Dorothy Sekler, June 15, 1967, transcript, Washington, DC: Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, 17.

Although his early drawings of the late 1940s and early 1950s remained unsophisticated, these works from his formative years were instrumental as they expanded his understanding, especially of strategies for representing human bodies. Talking to one interviewer in 1960, Rivers maintained that from the beginning of his career, “Not only did I want to be a great painter in modern terms, I really felt as if I had to… make a figure, you know, just as great as anybody in the past.” The medium of drawing, in particular, allowed Rivers to master the meticulous, sometimes tedious preparatory process of traditional painting practice.

In these drawings, Rivers used pencil or charcoal, unlike other major New York School artists, who preferred to explore the more spontaneous and flowing effects of pen and watercolor. Influenced by the Surrealist concept of automatic drawing, many New York School artists used drawing chiefly as a means of accessing and pursuing the realm of the artist’s subconsciousness. Baziotes’ Untitled (1939), in which the artist developed a biomorphic form out of some initial markings of watercolor on paper, and Pollock’s Composition with Pouring II (1943), which is comprised of splashes of pigment, both represent active applications of a form of the automatic drawing concept. In these works, the artists strived to eliminate conscious planning from their creative processes. Rivers, by contrast, used his lines to delineate and render human figures and other recognizable

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6 Larry Rivers, Interviews by unknown authors in conjunction with the Gres Gallery in Washington, DC, March 5 and April 16, 1960, transcript, Washington, DC: The Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, unpaginated. Rivers’ aspiration to be a great painter of nudes is comparable to Edouard Manet’s. In his 1865 Olympia, Manet updated Titian’s Venus of Urbino (1538) by presenting a courtesan in place of Titian’s nude and by setting the image in a contemporary Paris brothel. Manet took his figures from the Renaissance master, but rather than idealizing his female muse, he painted the contemporary people and environment, in keeping with Charles Baudelaire’s famous statement in his 1863 work The Painter of Modern Life that the true painter “will show us how great and poetic we are, in our cravats and shiny boots.” Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” (1863), reprinted in Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Literature trans. P.E. Charvet (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 395-422.
images, continuing a tendency that he developed during his formative years. (Rivers consistently appropriated certain hallmarks of the New York School style in his work—such as expressionistic and seemingly randomly drawn lines—and superimposed charcoal drawings over a layer of oil paint, but his drawings never achieved the relatively accidental, fluidly expressive style of the major Abstract Expressionists.)

Rivers’ ambition to become a “great” painter—not only by the standards of modern art, but also by traditional standards—was at odds with the overriding artistic tendencies in the New York School during the late 1940s and early 1950s. In his diary in 1952, Rivers wrote: “History doesn’t disgust me…. Old masters are my favorite painters. I have no illusions as to their influence on my work.”  

Art historian Sam Hunter maintained that Rivers wrote this entry shortly after other artists had criticized his “conservatism” at the Club, which he attended regularly during the early 1950s. Hunter did not mention the particular meeting at which Rivers’ art underwent criticism, but in March of 1952, Rivers and O’Hara, along with Nell Blaine and Grace Hartigan, were panelists in a Club session called “A Group of Younger Artists.” Rivers also expressed his desire to “be able to make a nude as powerful as any in history. My contemporaries feel little concerned with such problems.” In reference to the major New York School

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7 Sam Hunter, *Larry Rivers* (Waltham, MA: Rose Art Museum/Brandeis University, 1965), 24. Fairfield Porter, a strong advocate of realism and a close friend to Rivers and O’Hara, also rejected a strict distinction between conservatism and the avant-garde. He argued: “I want to do everything that avant-garde theoretician say you can’t do. When someone [e.g., Reinhardt] says you can’t disregard the past fifty years of art history, it makes me want to prove you can—the avant-garde implies a protocol which is more a challenge than a guide.” Quoted in Frank O’Hara, “Porter Paints a Picture,” *Art News* (January 1955): 39.


artists and the abstract art that dominated the scene during the early 1950s, he wrote, “Every time I become interested in my own contemporaries, I feel that I am becoming unsure of my own direction.”¹⁰ These comments evince that, in 1952, before his *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, Rivers had already developed his aspiration for an independent artistic direction and stance within the New York Art world.

The rigid boundary that is supposed to distinguish the avant-garde from conservative, primarily traditional figurative painting, was a polemical issue within the New York School. Of course, some artists were more concerned with drawing a sharp boundary between these camps or tendencies than others were. In his 1957 *Art News* article “Twelve Rules for a New Academy,” Ad Reinhardt (1913-67) delineated some of the widely assumed artistic stances within the New York School. Reinhardt stridently advocated for art that was anti-figurative, anti-traditional, and anti-European. To underline his critical point, he provided an illustration of the nineteenth century aquatint, *Drawing from Life at the Royal Academy* (1808) by Thomas Rowlandson and Augusta Barry Pugin, which was captioned “Practicing rules in the old academy.”¹¹ In that aquatint, students observed and rendered a naked female model, located at the center, as realistically as possible. Reinhardt cited the print as representative of the traditional paradigm of art education through which most art students of the nineteenth century learned three dimensional modeling.

Reinhardt was an extreme case in his vehement attack on figurative painting and European-derived artistic practice. One famous counterexample to the anti-figurative and

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¹⁰ Ibid.

anti-European sentiment within the 1950s New York art world was the Willem de Kooning of the *Woman* series. In an *Art News* article published in 1958, “Is Today’s Artist with or against the Past?,” de Kooning, who had received a traditional art education at the Rotterdam Academy of Arts in his native Netherlands before immigrating to the United States in 1927, rejected the idea that contemporary artists generally disowned the history of art. “Old and new are just one thing,” he maintained. Between 1937 and 1939, Pollock also created drawings after the Baroque painter El Greco (1541-1614). One of Pollock’s sketchbook contained drawings with swirling lines and rhythmic counterpoints that echo prominent visual characteristics of El Greco’s art.

However, most major New York School artists remained very selective and cautious in drawing connections between their art and that of the past. Dore Ashton wrote in 1972, during the late 1940s, the New York School artists often underwent a serious conflict between the influence of European artistic tradition and ideas and “the need to reject tradition and other intellectual assumptions” to find a new artistic idiom. When they expressed a desire to reconnect with the past, many Abstract Expressionists often tended to make an effort to draw principally from “primitive” cultures, that is, from non-

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12 “Is Today’s Artist with or against the Past?” Part I, *Art News* (Summer 1958): 27. In his interview with Katherine Kuh, Franz Kline also contested the idea that contemporary artists were innovators whose artistic inspiration came from scratch. Kline argued: “As for me, I’ve always liked Tintoretto, Goya, Velásquez and Rembrandt.” Franz Kline, Interview with Katherine Kuh, 1962, published in Katherine Kuh, *The Artist’s Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 143. The influences of the Western artistic tradition on the major New York School artists were less explicit and straightforward than those on Rivers, especially in his quoted and pastiched works, however.

13 An exhibition *Pollock Draws El Greco*, held at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2004, displayed six drawings drawn under the influence of El Greco from Pollock’s sketchbook.

Western or ancient art. Barnett Newman’s noted essay, “The First Man Was an Artist” (1947), for instance, postulated an aesthetics that emerged at the dawn of humanity, carefully telescoping any intermediate steps between ancient and contemporary art.15 “In our inability to live the life of a creator can be found the meaning of the fall of man,” Newman argued, and “it is precisely here that the artist today is striving for a closer approach to the truth concerning original man.”16

More importantly, the Abstract Expressionists did not engage with direct dialogues with the old masters’ works. In other words, they did not copy famous paintings and drawings from Western art history in a way that some younger generation artists did.17 Hartigan, for instance, painted her Knight, Death, and the Devil (1952, Fig. 20) after an early sixteenth century engraving (1513, Fig. 21) by Albert Dürer (1471-

15 Newman’s advocating for art outside of the Western tradition evinced the continuing efforts to limit and reject the influence of European art among certain American artists during the 1930s and 1940s, decades coinciding with the formative years of most New York School artists. During this time, art critic Thomas Craven lauded what he considered to be the courageousness of the American Regionalists, such as Thomas Benton (Pollock’s teacher), Grant Wood, and John Stewart Curry, who had broken ties with France and discarded the influences that were so inimical “to the development of an indigenous art culture.” Thomas Craven, Modern Art: The Men, the Movements, the Meaning (1934, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940), 318. Although the major New York School artists tried to escape the narrow definition of American subject matter and the provincialism popularized by their predecessors, they inherited from them the notion that European artistic idioms alone were not a sufficient means for rendering the distinctive social and cultural condition of the postwar United States.


17 According to Hartigan, Helen Frankenthaler and Joan Mitchell, who adhered to the modality of abstraction, found that Hartigan’s return to a figurative mode and to art history from 1952 onward betrayed the dominant artistic trend, as they perceived it: “I think Helen wasn’t very nice about it, neither was Joan. In fact, I can’t remember anybody [among the Abstract Expressionists] that was nice. I had a lot of fights.” Grace Hartigan, Interview with Julie Haifley (Oral History Program), May 10, 1979, transcript, Washington, DC: Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, http://artarchives.si.edu/oralhist/hartig79.html,10.
In her Dürer-inspired painting, she employed relatively wild, strong brushstrokes, verifying the influence of Abstract Expressionism, yet she chose the image of a knight wandering the forest at night, a theme that allegorized the conflict between good and evil in Dürer’s engraving.

Barbara Rose attributed the younger generation artists’ general openness toward European artistic tradition to the distinct historical moment at which they entered the New York art world.

The self-conscious chauvinism of which the New York School had been accused was largely a matter of breaking with Europe. But once its independence had been established, Europe was scarcely a threat any longer. Not surprisingly, the attitude toward Europe of the second generation was quite different from that of the older generation…. Many of them, in fact, settled in Europe after the War, studying at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, or at the Grande Chaumière on the G.I. Bill.

Some of the younger generation artists sojourned in Paris, where they gained firsthand experience with traditional art and the ambience of the European avant-garde. Rivers, along with Blaine, stayed in Paris for nine months in 1950, visiting art museums and the studios of Léger and Héliion.

Hartigan, unsure of her new direction toward figuration, did not exhibit her figurative works inspired by the old masters during the early 1950s. “I like Knight, Death, and the Devil, but fear I couldn’t exhibit it,” she wrote. Quoted in Robert Mattison, Grace Hartigan: A Painter’s World (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1990), 22.


For more information about the younger generation artists’ direct and indirect contacts with the European artistic tradition, see Sandler, The New York School, 103-21. In addition, during the late 1940s and early 1950s, major art museums in New York featured a growing number of one-person shows and retrospectives of European Modernists. In 1948 and 1951, the Museum of Modern Art mounted exhibitions of Bonnard and Matisse, respectively. The Metropolitan Museum of Art also offered exhibitions of Soutine, in 1951, and of Cézanne, in 1952, exhibitions that had direct influences on Rivers’ art. During the early 1950s, Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly (1928- ) also made a trip to Europe, staying in Rome between 1952 and 1953, that allowed them to become familiar with both traditional and contemporary
European art, either traditional or modern, served to inspire some of the younger generation artists, including Rivers and Hartigan, to defy the dominant influence of the older generation New York School artists and to invent their own styles and directions. As O’Hara succinctly put it, it might have been inevitable that the younger generation artists would move away from the dominant influence of the Abstract Expressionists. “The impact of THE NEW AMERICAN PAINTING on this group was being avoided rather self-consciously,” O’Hara wrote, because “if you live in the studio next to Brancusi, you try to think about Poussin.”

Hartigan, for instance, began copying themes from Dürer and Rubens after showing her work at The Ninth Street Show in 1951. Most of the paintings presented at this exhibition were by members of the Club, namely older- and younger generation New York School artists. Upon observing the extensive and widespread influence of Abstract Expressionism on artists of her generation who participated in the show, Hartigan gradually estranged herself from the dominant influence of Abstract Expressionism. In her journal of the early 1950s, as quoted in Robert Mattison’s *Grace Hartigan* in 1990, Hartigan wrote: “What have I learned from the show? I have learned a lot about content. I am less and less interested in ‘pure painting’,” namely painting devoid of readily recognizable images.

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22 The show began as an opportunity to present the development of contemporary and avant-garde art to the public. The first show was held in 1951, when a member of the Club invited sixty one artists to submit one piece each and displayed them in an empty store on East Ninth Street. There was a sequel to this exhibition at the Stable Gallery in 1953. The show then turned into an annual event, also known as the Stable Annuals. Sandler, *The New York School*, 32.

23 Quoted in Mattison, *Grace Hartigan*, 20. In the 1950s, in addition to Rivers and Hartigan, a group of young artists including Lois Dodd (1927-), Alex Katz (1927-), and later...
Rivers also voiced his discomfort with Abstract Expressionism and the idea of “pure painting.” In his 1959 interview with O’Hara, Rivers recalled that although his decision to pursue figuration was problematic during the early 1950s, it was imperative that he retrieve images and narrative elements inherited from traditional painting as he did not want to become “bored” by the pervasive trend toward abstraction. “If it [the figure] doesn’t turn into some sort of cornball realism, it becomes anecdotal, it seems,” Rivers wrote, but “if the problem is one of choosing between being bored and being challenged, having to do the difficult, I’ll take the latter.”

Therefore, already at the beginning of his career, Rivers maintained a serious artistic distance from some of the major New York artists due to his attitude toward art history, especially toward the traditional genre of the nude. His knowledge of traditional painting and drawing of human figures would also offer him a valuable window to his artistic direction during the late 1940s and early 1950s, a direction, which would be effectively exemplified in his Washington Crossing the Delaware.

**Rivers’ Early Nude Drawings and Hans Hofmann**

Rivers’ early passion for the history of art and the traditional genre of the nude, was, to a great extent, indebted to Hans Hofmann (1880-1966), his first official art teacher. Rivers went to Hofmann’s school in Greenwich Village and in Provincetown,

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Philip Pearlstein (1924-+) pursued the mode of figuration. These painters were the founders or major members of the Tanager Gallery, a co-op located on Tenth Street. There was a confluence between the Tanager members and Rivers’ and O’Hara’s circle. Katz did a cut-out portrait of O’Hara between 1959 and 1960; Porter included Dodd in an exhibition of realist painters that he curated in 1965. For a personal account of Tenth Street, the Tanager Gallery, and some of the conflicts between abstraction and figuration in the 1950s, see Alex Katz, “Starting Out,” *The New Criterion* 21, no. 4 (December 2002): 4-8.

Massachusetts, between 1947 and 1948. At Hofmann’s school, Rivers was exposed to traditional art history and art pedagogy, consisting of drawing classes with live models.

During the postwar years, Hofmann’s school was a place where young American artists went in order to master the basic vocabulary of European modernism. Almost all of Rivers’ close friends, including Blaine, Freilicher, and Hartigan, attended. Hofmann, a German artist who immigrated to the United States in 1931, settled in New York two years later. Hofmann’s school, established in 1933, rapidly built a reputation within the New York art world for its systematic approach to abstraction, an approach that Hofmann had learned from major European modernist painters at the turn of the century. During his sojourn in Paris between 1904 and 1914, Hofmann befriended many artists and writers in the Parisian avant-garde, including Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Robert Delanunay.

Hofmann’s training in Europe largely underpinned his pedagogy, which he derived from traditional models of art education. According to Rivers’ colleague Wolf Kahn, who often translated Hofmann’s non-native English to students, the day-to-day activity at the school centered on drawing classes with live models—the principal method in the European art pedagogy that Reinhardt had dismissed as “Old Academy.” Hofmann adopted this old-fashioned approach to help his students better understand the relationship between a model and the surrounding space. “Simple drawing [of the figure] became an analysis of not elbows or kneecaps,” Kahn recalls, but “of the space in front of

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the model, at the sides, and behind—even finally, the space occupied by the figure. A term still widely used—‘negative space.’”

Hofmann also urged his students to visit local art museums to examine old masters’ works and to analyze them using a purely formalist method also known as the “push and pull principle.” For Hofmann, Rivers recalled, all artists—whether traditional or contemporary, fully blown or nascent—should deal with the same aesthetic problems. Hofmann employed this principle in his own painting aiming to generate illusive depth by arranging various formal elements of color, form, and shape to reflect the opposition between expansion and contraction (i.e., push and pull) and, in his words, to answer “force with counterforce.”

Hofmann’s highly analytical and formalistic approach to the figure, however, prompted Rivers to pursue alternative ways of treating human bodies. Presumably, for Rivers, who had relatively little exposure to high art and culture, as he emphasized in his interview and autobiography, Hofmann’s formalist, intellectual approach was somewhat difficult to follow. According to Freilicher, in drawing classes, Rivers consistently breached their teacher’s instructions by creating composite human figures out of objects, e.g., an upright lamp or a potted palm tree, anticipating his propensity for working with ordinary objects found in everyday lives.

29 Jane Freilicher, Interview by unknown, undated, transcript, Bridgehampton, NY: Rivers archive, # 15-IA 16 (Rivers literature box), 2.
In his 1977 interviews with Barbara Dimonstein, Rivers expressed his discomfort with Hofmann’s purely analytical and mechanical treatment of subject matter. In Hofmann’s drawing classes, the “subject matter” was typically a live model, “a very beautiful model, a twenty two-year-old,” as Rivers recalled. “To the average person, the ordinary person, she was some girl with a certain kind of figure, and you had a certain physical response, but at school, you dropped all that. It was like a monastery of some sort.”

As Rivers put it in “A Discussion of the Work of Larry Rivers in 1961,” his drawings of human figures in Hofmann’s classes often ended up depicting “three peculiar rectangles.”

Discontented with Hofmann’s teaching, Rivers sought to depart from a strictly formalist approach to subject matter. And he would ultimately reject Hofmann’s pure formalism by injecting sexual themes into his figurative work. For instance, in his 1950 drawing, *Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus after Rubens*, Rivers depicted the highly-charged sexual imagery of a nude woman being grasped by a man from the back. Although Rivers’ drawing was a mere sketch of Ruben’s famous painting of the same title, his choice of subject matter certainly indicated that he committed himself to pursuing a theme related to sexual tension and violence in 1950.

Personally, Rivers was also experiencing an escalating fascination with sexually-charged themes and imagery from the late 1940s:

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30 Larry Rivers, Interview by Barbara Dimonstein, March 1977, transcript, Bridgehampton, NY: Rivers archive, # 18 (Rivers literature box), unpaginated.


32 Beginning in the late 1940s, Rivers’ approach to issues of sexuality might have been largely influenced by his contact with the circle of bohemian artists and poets. As he later recalled, “No one we knew was seriously married. At these shindigs you felt part of a happily
I was very interested in nudes—it was the awakening of sex in myself. I had done a paradise painting in 1948, all nudes, Bonnard nudes, about ten! These women were draped in casement windows—I was so far out of this world, I was dreaming up castles. Ingres’s *Women in Turkish Bath* may have had some influence on me, but I did it in a Bonnard style. Then I covered that painting with a painting of Christ kneeling in the garden, the moment before he was crucified. It was insane.\(^{33}\)

The series of Rivers’ drawings in Bonnard’s style, as he describes it, is not extant; however, his heated description of the process of creating it demonstrates Rivers’ fascination with explicit, sometimes “perverse” eroticism—a fascination that remained central to his artistic concerns from the late 1940s onwards. In *The Nude in American Painting 1950-1980* (1998), David McCarthy argues that the revival of the traditional genre of nude painting by Rivers, Pearlstein, and Tom Wesselmann (1931-2004) during the 1950s and 1960s was part of a revolt among artists “who could take for granted the legacy of abstract painting and instead search for their own artistic voices.” In doing so, McCarthy maintains, these artists sought for “an erotic and embodied alternative to the increasingly puritanical and disembodied look of late modernist abstraction.”\(^{34}\) Rivers’ early female nudes were, as McCarthy noted, driven by his desire to distinguish his art not only from the prevailing mode of abstraction, but also from a narrow formalist beleaguered community. In ’48 art was still looked upon by mother and father, aunt and uncles, the grocer—the Common Man—as a way of escaping the reasonableness of working for a living.” The only professional area, he explained, “where it was not social or economic suicide to be shameless about being homosexual, or fond of drugs, was in the arts.” Larry Rivers and Arnold Weinstein, *What Did I Do?: The Unauthorized Autobiography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 133.

\(^{33}\) Larry Rivers and Carol Brightman, *Drawings and Digressions* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1979), 22.

perspective that evinced a “sexually repressive” attitude toward subject matter—an attitude epitomized by Hofmann.

**Rivers’ Two Women Series and Willem de Kooning’s Woman Paintings**

Along with Hofmann, Willem de Kooning was another significant artistic figure who exerted a crucial influence on Rivers’ early development as a painter and draftsman of human figures. De Kooning’s famed *Woman* series, undertaken between 1950 and 1955, might have infused Rivers with courage to pursue his interest in traditional painting, especially in the genres of female portrait and nude. During the early 1950s, Rivers continued to copy works by old and modern masters, but in his *Two Women* series of drawings and paintings, he singled out a contemporary painter to emulate. “This is my de Kooning period. 1952…. the large eyes from those women-things of his.”

So, Rivers wrote in 1979, referring to the *Two Women* series, including drawings such as *Head of Woman with Blue Eyes* (1952, Fig. 22) and *Two Women* (1952, Fig. 23) and a painting titled *Two Women Posing* (1952, Fig. 24), that he modeled after Willem de Kooning’s *Woman* series, such as his notorious *Woman I* (1950-52, Fig. 25).

According to Helen Harrison, Rivers first became acquainted with de Kooning in 1948. Rivers and O’Hara regularly participated at the Club from the early 1950s, where most major New York School artists, including de Kooning, also attended. De Kooning’s familiarity with the history of art and his preoccupation with human figures and drawing must have attracted Rivers’ attention. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, de Kooning

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35 Rivers and Brightman, *Drawings and Digressions*, 43.


37 Like Rivers, de Kooning may also have experienced some alienation from his colleague artists in the New York School. Referring to his fellow Abstract Expressionists, de
made a series of drawings and paintings after old masters. His 1940 painting *Seated Figure*, subtitled “Classic Male,” for instance, showed that he had adopted classical musculature for his male figures, whose rounded and accentuated volumes were reminiscent of the heroic male bodies depicted by Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo, one of de Kooning’s favorite painters.\(^{38}\) (De Kooning then fragmented and recomposed various body parts, following the Cubist painters’ approach of integrating the central image into its surrounding space.)\(^{39}\) In addition, de Kooning was, along with Hofmann, one of a few members of the older generation of New York School artists who adhered to the traditional practice of creating numerous preparatory drawings for his paintings.\(^{40}\)

When a series of de Kooning’s *Woman* paintings was displayed in his first one-person show at the Sidney Janis Gallery in 1953, some art critics registered rather

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Kooning said “They stand all alone in the wilderness…. This is an American idea. I am a foreigner, after all. I am different from them because… I feel myself more in tradition.” Willem de Kooning, Interview with Irving Sandler, June 16 1959, quoted in Sandler, *The New York School*, 9.


39 Rivers also explained that he had a particular fondness for de Kooning’s dark figures from the late 1930s and 1940s. Rivers, “Why I Paint as I Do,” 114. Most of de Kooning’s figures from his 1930s oeuvre are men. They are ghostly, poignant figures rendered in his favorite colors of the period—pink and gray—and they emerge from their backgrounds.

hyperbolic reactions to his shift toward figuration, suggesting that his *Woman* paintings belied the revolutionary direction that the Abstract Expressionists had ventured towards a few years earlier.\(^{41}\) In 1953, Hubert Crehan, a critic for *Art Digest*, expressed concern that de Kooning’s new paintings showed a “reactionary” tendency, as they marked a move away from abstraction and, more seriously, toward banal subject matter.

Does De Kooning, or any painter, today, especially an artist who has previously jettisoned so many of the banalities and the associative encumbrances of the subject, does such an artist need an image to express an emotion in his work, even an emotion about woman? Are we on the scene of a reaction? Is our revolution in painting imperiled so soon?\(^{42}\)

De Kooning also suffered the disdain of fellow artists. Pollock, de Kooning’s colleague and competitor in the early 1950s New York scene, privately accused him of betraying abstraction by pursuing figurative work.\(^{43}\) (Ironically, Pollock himself began employing recognizable human figures in his drawings in 1953.\(^{44}\))

Rivers did not make any critical comments on de Kooning’s *Woman* series in words. However, for Rivers, who aspired to be a great portrait and nude painter in a relatively traditional sense, de Kooning’s works, which suddenly reopened the terrain of

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\(^{41}\) For a systematic and scholarly examination of the critical reception to de Kooning’s *Woman* series from the fifties, see David Cateforis, “Willem de Kooning’s ‘Women’ of the 1950s: A Critical History of Their Reception and Interpretation.” (Ph. D. Diss., Stanford University, 1992). For the most recent reference concentrating on issues of gender and sexuality in some of the critical receptions of de Kooning’s *Woman* series, see the chapter “Fragmented Bodies and Canonical Nudes: Painting and Reading de Kooning’s *Woman* Series,” in Marcia Brennan, *Modernism’s Masculine Subjects: Matisse, the New York School, and Post-Painterly Abstraction* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2004), 46-75.


figurative painting, must have been a powerful example.\textsuperscript{45} Moreover, de Kooning often socialized with artists and poets in Rivers and O’Hara’s circle during his visits to gallery owner Leo Castelli, as documented in Rivers’ autobiography.\textsuperscript{46} Starting in 1951, Rivers made regular summer visits to the Hamptons, an area that had begun establishing itself as an artists’ colony in the early part of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{47} In 1951, Rivers began staying at Fairfield Porter’s house and using Porter’s barn as his studio.

According to Thomas Hess, de Kooning executed drawings, studies, small oils, and dozens of pastel drawings on the “woman” theme while he was a guest at the house of Castelli in East Hampton during the summer of 1952.\textsuperscript{48} In 1988 interview with Brad Gooch, an O’Hara’s biographer, Kenneth Koch reported that a circle of his close friends, which included Rivers, Hartigan, Freilicher and four New York School poets, saw a pile of slashed and discarded \textit{Woman} paintings by de Kooning during their visit to Castelli’s house in the summer of 1952.\textsuperscript{49} Koch recalled that O’Hara’s 1952 poem “Second Avenue,” inspired by de Kooning’s painting, was written after this visit. Given this circumstantial evidence, Rivers must have been seen or heard of de Kooning’s \textit{Woman} series in 1952 before its formal debut at the Sidney Janis Gallery in March 1953.

\textsuperscript{45} Hess observed in 1955 that de Kooning’s \textit{Woman} paintings provoked an “urge to remake figure-painting into a new grand style” in general among artists in the New York School. Thomas B. Hess, “Trying Abstraction on Pittsburgh,” \textit{Art News} (November 1955): 42.

\textsuperscript{46} For Rivers’ account of artists’ social gatherings at Southampton during the early 1950s, see Rivers and Weinstein, \textit{What Did I Do?}, 267-70.

\textsuperscript{47} For the history of the artists’ and writers’ bohemian circles at the Hamptons, see Helen Harrison and Constance Ayers, \textit{Hamptons Bohemia: Two Centuries of Artists and Writers on the Beach} (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002).


\textsuperscript{49} Kenneth Koch, Interview with Gooch, November 30, 1988, quoted in Gooch, \textit{City Poet}, 236.
The basic format of Rivers’ *Two Women* series was clearly reminiscent of de Kooning’s 1952 drawings of double female figures. During the summer of 1952, de Kooning concentrated on working with double female figures instead of a single figure, the format that had been more dominant in a series of his pastel drawings from 1952, such as *Two Women with Still Life* (1952, Fig. 26). In his *Two Women* series Rivers also imitated the huge, bulging eyes, enlarged lips, and exaggerated breasts that are prominent features in de Kooning’s *Woman* paintings and drawings. Rivers’ female images have facial expressions similar to those rendered in de Kooning’s *Woman* series; specifically, they have open mouths and exposed teeth (as in the drawing *Two Women* and the painting *Two Women Posing*), which appear to be simultaneously smiling and grimacing.

In addition to these physiognomic similarities, the relatively expressive and flowing pencil lines in Rivers’ drawing *Two Women* are modeled after de Kooning’s lush and expressive crayon, charcoal, pastel drawing lines—although Rivers’ brushwork occasionally appears shorter, thinner, and thus less pronounced than de Kooning’s. In his 1952 drawing series, de Kooning experimented with the interpenetration of double female figures and the space surrounding them, and the media of charcoal and pastel might have helped de Kooning control variables of pressure and the fluidity of his lines with relatively little difficulty, thus enabling him to experiment with the techniques of smudging and erasing human figures more freely than he could in oil paint.

Despite some similarities in their works, Rivers had a conflicted relationship with de Kooning, especially regarding the dominant, macho image and aesthetic practices of

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the first generation artists. An episode surrounding the original title of Rivers’ oil *Two Women* sheds light on his ambivalence. The first title of his oil painting *Two Women Posing* was “Lesbians at Fire Island,” which was inspired by O’Hara, who initially suggested the less controversial and explicit title “Les Amies” to Rivers. According to Rivers, “Les Amies” was a reference to a Courbet painting, possibly *The Sleepers* (1866, Fig. 27), which depicts two naked women asleep in a bed.\(^{51}\)

Courbet painted *The Sleepers* in 1866, the same year that he completed another controversial painting, *The Origin of the World*.\(^{52}\) In these pieces, the nineteenth century Realist painter—who had concentrated on the everyday lives of ordinary people in earlier works such as *The Burial at Ornans* (1849-50) and *The Stone Breakers* (1850)—became interested in highly eroticized images of women. *The Sleepers* depicts two naked women locked in an embrace, one woman putting her leg over the other, while the other woman places her face close to her partner’s breast. With its creamy, rich flesh tones and suggestive details, the painting is a testament to Courbet’s skillful naturalism. Simultaneously, the painting represents a taboo scene with two naked women involved in an erotic exchange that is inescapably homoerotic. As for Rivers’ painting, the fact that Fire Island was a well-known gay and lesbian hangout, even during the 1950s, reinforces Rivers’ reference to “Lesbians” in his original title.\(^{53}\)

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\(^{52}\) When *The Origin of the World* was first shown in a dealer’s window in 1872—after bankruptcy forced its original commissioner Khalil Bey to sell all of his prized collection—it immediately caught the public’s attention for violating public decency and soon sold to an unknown collector. Cited in Georges Boudeaille, *Gustave Courbet: Painter in Protest*, trans. Michael Bullock (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1969), 132.

\(^{53}\) Andy Warhol’s movie, *My Hustler* (1965), also took place in one of the beach houses at Fire Island, a well known gay and lesbian vacation spot before the Stonewall era.
Apparently, the connection O’Hara implied between Rivers’ work and Courbet’s painting was superficial, relying upon a mere similarity in subject matter—two women. There is also nothing explicitly homosexual about Rivers’ figures. Rivers did not provide additional information about his intent or the choice of, and change of the title. Nonetheless, some personal and art historical circumstances might suggest implied messages related to male intimacy or female sexuality in Rivers’ paintings after de Kooning’s Woman series. First, the year of 1952 marked the beginning of a growing proximity between Rivers and O’Hara as artistic partners although they first met each other at the end of 1950. In the same year, O’Hara and Rivers appeared together on two panels at the Club: “A Group of Younger Artists” in March and “New Poets” in May. They also embarked on their first collaborative project, A City Winter and Other Poems, a book that included thirteen of O’Hara’s poems and two of Rivers’ drawings; a year later, Rivers designed a set for O’Hara’s play Try! Try! at the newly established Artists’ Theater.

Second, and more importantly, from a historical perspective of the 1950s art, when de Kooning’s Woman series was first exhibited in 1953, contemporary art critics noted his complex treatment of female figures, observing that it was at once destructive and eroticized. Sidney Geist, in 1953, for instance, proposed that de Kooning’s Woman figures, which could be read either as commercial sex symbols or as ancient goddesses: “I cut out a lot of mouths…Maybe it was like a pun, maybe it’s even sexual, or whatever it is… It always turned out to be very beautiful and it helped me immensely to have this real thing….  

54 The fact that Rivers’ Two Women Posing, which is currently in Rivers’ archive, was originally owned by O’Hara may suggest that the title carried autobiographical significance. Frank O’Hara, Letter to Rivers (copy), April 18, 1964, Bridgehampton, NY: Rivers archive, #2 (Rivers’ literature box).

55 In describing his collage of women’s mouths taken from Camel cigarette advertisements, de Kooning alluded to the ambivalent feeling that he wanted to project onto his Woman figures, which could be read either as commercial sex symbols or as ancient goddesses: “I cut out a lot of mouths…Maybe it was like a pun, maybe it’s even sexual, or whatever it is… It always turned out to be very beautiful and it helped me immensely to have this real thing….
might appear both sexually engaging and threatening to the viewer. “In a gesture that parallels a sexual act,” Geist argued, “he [de Kooning] had vented himself with violence on the canvas… in what is a desperate effort to find an image” that is between “Miss America, vulgar, blowsy, 20 years after Atlantic City,” on the one hand, and “the muse of painting [on] whom De Kooning is wreaking a vengeance,” on the other.  

Hubert Crehan, who remained skeptical about de Kooning’s return to a figurative mode, also argued that de Kooning’s working process in Woman attested to the painter’s mixed feelings toward the female figure. In a 1954 review, Crehan described the Woman series as a “shamelessly self-expressive” example of the painter’s “great energy and abandon,” revealing that de Kooning might have been “traumatized by the subject” of woman. Crehan noted that the painter consistently shifted the outlines of his female figures and mingled various body parts, creating visual effects that indicate his complicated feelings toward his female muse. De Kooning, Crehan wrote, “responds to Woman ambivalently: with an emotion of desire—fear—it’s written all over the canvases.”

De Kooning’s remark on his Woman series further attest to the painters’ rather traditional view of the gender hierarchy in art and life. In a 1957 interview with Selden

Maybe the grin—it’s like the Mesopotamian idols.” De Kooning’s remarks about cut-out lips in his interview with David Sylvester are reproduced in Hess, Willem de Kooning (1968), 79.


58 Feminist art historians saw de Kooning’s Woman series as exemplifying the male painter’s relationship with women and femininity in general. In her article “The MoMA’s Hot Mama,” Carol Duncan cited two apparently opposing sources for de Kooning’s Woman, which she extracted from de Kooning’s own remarks. According to de Kooning, his Woman I was inspired by the idol goddess found in all cultures—Western and Eastern, primitive and contemporary—as well as by the pin-up girls of popular culture. It is precisely this dual inspiration that makes each woman in these paintings look like “an awesome mother goddess as well as a modern burlesque queen” and that allowed the male artist to enact the modern myth of
Rodman, de Kooning tentatively suggested that his female figure might be a projection of his own femininity: “Maybe…I was painting the woman in me. Art isn’t a wholly masculine occupation, you know. I’m aware that some critics would take this to be an admission of latent homosexuality.” In these remarks, de Kooning might seem to postulate an unstable boundary between the masculine self and the feminine other. (In a way, de Kooning’s statement about his feminine aspect reflected a complicated and ironic process of gender reversal and of reconfirmation of masculinity among the major New York School artists as discussed in chapter one.) De Kooning, however, immediately corrected his view of masculinity, noting that his ultimate intent in painting the Woman series was to transpose his heterosexual desire toward the female muse onto his canvas. “If I painted beautiful women, would that make me a nonhomosexual? I like beautiful women. In the flesh; even the models in magazines. Women irritate me sometimes. I painted that irritation in the ‘Woman’ series. That’s all.” By thus explicating his intent in painting the Woman series, de Kooning not only asserted his rather conservative desire to reinscribe conservative gender norms, but also reasserted his heterosexuality—in other words, his liking of “beautiful women.”

the “artist-hero.” In Duncan’s view, de Kooning fantasizes about the magical potency of the ancient goddess yet also seeks to tame and nullify her supernatural power by transforming her into a pin-up girl—an ordinary object of men’s sexual desire. Carol Duncan, “The MoMA’s Hot Mama,” Art Journal 43, no. 2 (June 1989), reprinted in Carol Duncan, The Aesthetics of Power (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 199.

60 The emphasis in the original. Ibid.
61 In a 1994 catalogue to an exhibition of de Kooning’s work, art historian Richard Schiff also interpreted the Woman series within a theoretical framework of “eroticism,” contending that its sexual allure rests not as much in the illustrative quality of the subject matter as in the tactile effects of the art. He described de Kooning’s technique of creating a wet surface as reminiscent of the human flesh and cut-out lips pasted on his canvas; “Water and Lipstick: De Kooning in
Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Rivers must have been familiar with de Kooning’s vaunted masculine persona and the attitudes toward actual women. Although it is Pollock who explicitly expresses contempt for homosexuals and women in “Kenneth Koch: A Tragedy,” Rivers’ and O’Hara’s co-authored transcript of the play in 1953, de Kooning was also one of the major characters. In his 1979 Drawings and Digressions, Rivers reproduced four of the drawings he made of de Kooning between 1961 and 1963. In one of the drawings, De Kooning with My Texas Hat (1963, Fig. 28), de Kooning is wearing a cowboy hat and looking straight ahead. Although the drawing is a fairly realistic rendition of de Kooning’s face, similar to Rivers’ numerous sketches of his fellow artists and family members, Rivers reinforced a sense of de Kooning’s tough manhood by adding a cowboy hat and depicting an uncleanly shaved beard on his chin. Situated below the drawing is Rivers’ written description of his personal experience with de Kooning during the 1950s. “Bill came over to my house drunk one afternoon, trying to make out with Ellen Oppenheim,” wrote Rivers, continuing, “as I look back at it now, he would show up drunk over the years, and usually with a woman and usually in a fight—and he was a very aggressive and boring drunk, really quite intolerable.”

Rivers’ critique of de Kooning’s persona in both public and private became explicit in the early 1960s as did his procedure of reworking with de Kooning’s artistic method and legacy. Rivers’ drawing, Wipe Out, Portrait of Willem de Kooning (1961, Fig. 29) was another relatively realistic rendition of de Kooning’s face, partially erased.

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62 Rivers and Brightman, Drawings and Digressions, 106-07.
Rivers described how he chose the medium of drawing and the method of erasure for his depiction of de Kooning because this medium and method were frequently used by de Kooning himself. Rivers derided de Kooning’s exaggerated search for artistic excellence that reinforced de Kooning’s public image.

This drawing is in the tradition of those kinds of work in which the history of the work became part of the quality of the work. De Kooning’s work is full of that. His whole genre is that. His work is all about sweeping away, putting in… struggle, struggle, struggle, and poof—masterpiece!!!\(^63\)

Certainly, Rivers’ idea of working with the legacy of de Kooning and with the method of erasure was not unique; Rauschenberg’s famous *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) had entailed erasing an original drawing by de Kooning. Rivers’ partial erasure of de Kooning’s face lacked the dramatic impact of Rauschenberg’s bolder gesture, yet his description of his de Kooning-like drawings of 1961 offered an important clue to his method of working with as well as reacting against de Kooning, including de Kooning’s macho persona and sexism.

Therefore, Rivers’ *Two Women* series and the episode surrounding the naming of the oil painting *Two Women* in 1952—however minor and obscure this episode might seem—appear to provide early indications of Rivers’ and O’Hara’s preoccupation with sexual politics within the New York School. The episode surrounding the original title of *Two Women* reveals two important aspects of Rivers’ position in the 1950s New York art world: his ambiguous relationship with de Kooning and his increasing proximity to the New York School poets, especially O’Hara, during the early 1950s.

**Rivers’ Washington Crossing the Delaware and the New York School of Poets**

\(^63\) Ibid., 109.
In 1953, one year after *Two Women Posing*, Rivers completed *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (Fig. 30)—the work that, among the paintings in his oeuvre, has received the most attention from art critics and art historians. Rivers described that his “adult artist identity began with” this painting: “That is the point at which I began to think myself seriously.” 64 The painting contains the image of General Washington leading American Revolutionary troops across the Delaware River the day after Christmas in 1776. This incident considerably altered the course of the war and led to the victory of the Revolutionary Army.

When *Washington Crossing the Delaware* was first exhibited in Rivers’ one-person show at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in December of 1953, it immediately became an object of controversy within the New York art world. 65 Rivers explained in a 1959 interview with O’Hara that artists often reacted vehemently against *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. The painting, he said, elicited “about the same reaction as when the Dadaists introduced a toilet seat as a piece of sculpture in a Dada show in Zurich. Except that the public wasn’t upset—the painters were.” 66 Many artists who viewed this painting during its initial exhibition sneered at Rivers not only for his use of figuration, but also

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64 Quoted in Larry Rivers, Interview with Jeffrey Loria, 1978, transcript, Bridgehampton, NY: Rivers Archive, # 18 (Rivers literature box), unpaginated.

65 During the late 1950s and early 1960s, a number of artists worked on images of American presidents. Notable examples of works created after Rivers’ *Washington Crossing the Delaware* that explore similar themes include Robert Rauschenberg’s *Lincoln* (1958), Alex Katz’s *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1961), and Tom Wesselmann’s *Still Life* (1963). The most notable example is Roy Lichtenstein’s depiction of Washington’s crossing in the style of naïve folk art. Lichtenstein’s *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1951) did not get as much attention as Rivers’ version, however. For a comprehensive list of works dealing with similar historical subject matter from the 1950s and 1960s, see Sidra Stich, “American Icon,” in *Made in USA*, ed. Sidra Stich (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987).

for his appropriation of well-known and banal images commonly found in history books. The genre of history painting was generally regarded as outmoded by most artists in the 1950s New York art world. One painter, Gandy Brodie, who frequented the Club, responded to *Washington Crossing* by asking Rivers whether corn was his favorite food. For some of Rivers’ artist colleagues in the early 1950s New York School, the painting’s subject matter simply appeared to be “corny.”

(Even O’Hara found Rivers’ artistic choice “hopelessly corny until I saw the painting finished.”)

In his 1959 interview with O’Hara, Rivers insinuated not only the controversy surrounding his painting, but also his absent-minded and careless attitude toward his subject matter by comparing his *Washington Crossing* to Marcel Duchamp’s (1887-1968) notorious ready-made, *Fountain* (1917). With this piece—an industrially produced porcelain urinal dislocated from its original setting and placed in a gallery—Duchamp introduced a detached, relatively uncommitted way of presenting a work of art. In the same interview, Rivers maintained that he decided to paint Washington and his crossing primarily to bewilder painters and critics in the New York art world: “I was energetic and egomaniacal and what is even more: important, cocky, and angry enough to want to do something no one in the New York art world could doubt was disgusting, dead and absurd.”

Rivers seems to brag about bringing “disgusting, dead and absurd” subject matter into the 1950s New York art world. However, the significance of *Washington Crossing*

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67 Quoted in Rivers and Weinstein, *What Did I Do?*, 313.


goes beyond Rivers’ “egomaniacal” gesture of presuming to revive the genre of history painting for a resistant art community. A close examination of his *Washington Crossing* shows how he carefully underwent serious stages of planning and re-planning the images of the soldiers and of Washington. The painting exemplifies his distinctive process of appropriating and blending various art historical, cultural, and literary references to achieve specific artistic effects. He derived his Washington figure, for instance, from Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze’s 1851 painting of the same title (Fig. 31), as well as the other numerous portraits of Washington, and children’s book illustrations that he found at the local library in Southampton. In his interview with Barbara Stein, Rivers also claimed that his attitude toward history, war, and war heroes followed from his reading of Leo Tolstoy’s epic novel *War and Peace* (1865-69) that summer, primarily promoted by his close poet friends.

Rivers’ efforts to utilize various artistic, historical, and literary sources for *Washington Crossing* should be understood in light of his artistic partnerships and

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70. Leutze was a German-born historical painter who settled in America. He was educated in Germany during the height of German Romanticism in the early nineteenth century. In *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, the dramatic placement of General Washington and the contrast between light and dark reflected Leutze’s Romanticist-influenced approach. Created in 1851, three years after the failure of the German Revolution in 1848, the painting also suggested the artist’s sympathy for German Revolutionists. For the most recent and comprehensive account of Leutze’s painting and the history of the crossing, see David Hackett Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing* (Oxford, UK and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3-4.

71. Larry Rivers, Interview with Barbara Stein, undated, transcript, Bridgehampton, NY: Rivers Archive, # 18 (Rivers literature box), 17. Rivers’ reading of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* must have neen ignited by O’Hara’s interest in Russian literature. O’Hara was fascinated by Boris Pasternak (1890-1960) and Vladmir Mayakovski (1893-1930). For both biographical and poetic sources that inform O’Hara’s fascination with Mayakovsky’s poem from his Harvard days, see Gooch, *City Poet*, 238. Russian history also attracted Rivers for many years, partly due to his background as a second generation Jewish immigrant from Eastern Europe. In his 1965 mixed-media construction *The History of the Russian Revolution: From Marx to Mayakovsky*, he successfully combined images of ordinary Russian people of the period with those of historically eminent figures.
mutually influential relationships with the members of the New York School of Poets from the early 1950s. Rivers had been visiting Southampton since 1950, but during the summer of 1953, he relocated his studio to Fairfield Porter’s barn in Southampton. His close friends, including core members of the New York School such as Ashbery, Koch, and O’Hara, were frequently dropping by Porter’s house and came to have a pronounced influence on Rivers’ work. Indeed, the theme of history, war, and patriotism emerged as one of the common subject matter in writings of the New York School throughout the 1950s.

In 1953, the year Rivers completed *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, O’Hara wrote a poem on Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790). His 1953 poem “Manifesto,” which has the subtitle “Announcing the publication of a new journal: THE BENJAMIN FRANKLIN REVIEW” must have been written almost contemporaneously with the creation of Rivers’ *Washington Crossing the Delaware* during the summer of 1953. Rivers, in turn, wrote a poem entitled “Benjamin F.” in the same year. In his “Manifesto,” O’Hara mocked the legacy of Franklin as one of the founding fathers of the United States. In his diplomatic role during the Revolutionary War, Franklin secured French aid for Washington’s army—aid that would play a crucial role in supporting the ultimate victory of the Revolutionary forces. However, O’Hara’s poem undermines Benjamin Franklin’s mythologized legacy and historical stature. In his typically absurd and comical tone, O’Hara wrote, “With the amusement of his policy which/ is foreign, sit on it. The word ‘savior’ will now/ be translated as ‘to die.’ ” (*CP* 132)

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72 The emphasis in the original.
Some of the poems by the New York School of poets were directly inspired by Rivers’ *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. In 1955, the year that Rivers’ *Washington Crossing* was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, O’Hara wrote a poem “On Seeing Larry Rivers’ *Washington Crossing the Delaware* at the Museum of Modern Art.” In addition, Koch wrote a play called “Washington Crossing the Delaware” in 1955. The original 1955 manuscript of this work no longer exists; Koch later rewrote the play and mounted a production in 1962. In his 1956 poem “You Were Wearing,” Koch also featured a wide range of subject matter drawn from daily life and popular culture, including the image of Dick Tracy and Abraham Lincoln. “Father came in wearing his Dick Tracy necktie: ‘How about/ a drink, everyone?’/ I said, ‘Let’s go outside a while.’ We went onto the/ porch and sat on the Abraham Lincoln Swing.” These lines mention the names of two quintessential America heroes. One is Dick Tracy, a 1930s comic-book character who is a plain-clothes detective and seemingly “ordinary” guy with the ability to transform himself into a defender of American justice and morality. The other is Abraham Lincoln, who is among the most revered of American presidents.

The New York School of poets’ preoccupation with subject matter related to patriotism, American militarism, and heroism reflected their experiences during the

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73 Koch planned to stage a play called *Washington Crossing the Delaware* at the elementary school of Rivers’ son, perhaps also in commemoration of the recent acquisition of Rivers’ painting by the Museum of Modern Art. According to Rivers, the principal of the school eventually decided to cancel the performance of Koch’s play. “I offered my home to the students for rehearsals, but the principal, beginning to fear the impact *Washington Crossing the Delaware* might have on the student body, concluded…that they might as well just call the whole goddamn thing off.” Although in his autobiography Rivers did not quote or publish any portion of Koch’s 1955 draft of the play (he simply noted that the play was written in the absurdist style of Alfred Jarry), the principal’s reaction implies that it was an unconventional work whose content was probably controversial enough to prompt its cancellation. Rivers and Weinstein, *What Did I Do?*, 313.

Second World War and the immediate postwar years. Three of the four core members of the New York School of poets—O’Hara, Koch, and Schuyler—as well as Rivers fought during the Second World War. O’Hara and Schuyler served in the Navy, while Koch engaged in combat in the Philippines and Japan. In his application to Harvard in 1946, O’Hara described his time at boot camp as being to that point, “the most depressing months of my life.” Later in his service, when he was charged with transporting the signers of the peace treaty, he became attentive to—and largely critical of—the foreign and military policy of the United States. “Watching the botching of military governments, the crippling of the U.N., the ineffectual expediency of our national policies, and the mishandling of the atomic bomb, has been a bitter experience,” he wrote. “Memorial Day 1950,” one of the longest poems among O’Hara’s early works, opens with lines that allude to the war and to the persistent militarism of American life during the postwar years: “The war was over, those things had survived/ and even when you’re scared art is no dictionary.” (CP 17) The poem is also full of images of destruction: “And airplanes

75 Another core member of the New York School of Poets, namely Ashbery, received an exemption from service due to the revelation of his homosexual orientation.


77 Ibid. Historian Wini Breines observed that during the 1950s, the “bomb haunted young people’s imaginations.... Like polio, the bomb flourished as an apprehension.” Wini Breines, Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 7. Rauschenberg’s 1950 Mother of God, composed of a white orb superimposed over collaged roadmaps of American cities, can be viewed as representing the atomic bomb spreading over the urban landscape. Allen Ginsberg also referred to the atomic bomb in his famous image of a “hydrogen jukebox” in “Howl” (1956). In this phrase, he juxtaposed the menacing image of the atomic bomb, signaled by the word “hydrogen,” with the seemingly benign image of the “jukebox,” an item that sat in the bars he frequented with his friends. Allen Ginsberg, Selected Poems 1947-1995 (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 50.
are perfect mobiles, independent/ of the breeze; crashing in flames they show us how/ to be prodigal.”(CP 18)

In the eyes of the New York School of Poets, postwar American society made little progress relative to the prewar years in terms of violence and militarism, which remained rampant inside and outside the United States. Although the postwar period brought Americans unprecedented wealth and opportunity, it was also marked by intense fears about national security, which culminated in the Korean War and the anti-Communist campaign. John Ashbery wrote of the escalating tension and fear that he experienced in this environment—feelings that he undoubtedly shared with many of his peers in the New York School. “In the early ’50s, I went through a period of intense depression and doubt. I couldn’t write for a couple of years,” he recalled. This period featured “the beginnings of the Korean War, the Rosenberg case and McCarthyism.” Although Ashbery tried to distance himself from the political scene, “it was impossible to be happy in that kind of climate. It was a nadir.”

The year 1953, in particular, saw the revival of mass patriotism with the celebration of the one hundred seventy-fifth anniversary of Washington’s crossing. For this occasion, Leutze’s famous 1851 painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware* gained wide public exposure. As historian David Hackett Fisher observed, the image of Washington’s crossing in Leutze’s painting became so familiar to the American public that twentieth century cartoonists often refer to the work without explanation in captions,

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79 The year of 1953 was also significant for the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in June, an incident that epitomized anti-communist sentiment during the Cold War.
such as “Nixon Crossing the Delaware” and “Feminists Crossing the Rubicon.”

But during 1953, Leutze’s original was relocated to a site where the actual crossing may have taken place (Washington Crossing Park, Pennsylvania). Major popular magazines, such as *Time* and *National Geographic*, ran special stories on the event along with large photographs of Leutze’s painting, sparking a new wave of patriotism.

This publicity may have caught the attention of Rivers, who had developed a deep preoccupation with issues of history and politics through his friendships with the New York School of Poets. The basic elements of the boat, the image of Washington standing in the front, his Revolutionary army, and the sun just arising over the horizon in Leutze’s 1851 painting are all included in Rivers’ more abstracted version. However, in his work, Rivers re-interpreted Leutze’s idealized imagery; he did not attempt to constitute visual connections among the images of Washington, his soldiers, the horses, and the boat such as would express a clear, easily accessible narrative. Instead, the images—for instance, the soldier riding on a horse in the upper left, the two soldiers holding guns at the bottom left, and the figure of Washington—are scattered around the canvas. They are simply juxtaposed with one another, failing to provide a sense of unitary pictorial formation that might be required to convey the central narrative and underlying patriotic message.

Leutze’s well-known nineteenth century depiction of the same historical event, by

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81 For a description of the surge of patriotism surrounding the 1953 exhibition of Leutze’s *Washington Crossing the Delaware* and its coverage in popular magazines of the period, see Stich, “American Icon,” 16.

82 The lack of a visually coherent composition corresponded to what Rivers imagined the actual crossing to have been like. He envisioned Washington’s army in a state of confusion and chaos, rather than an army with clear direction and plan. In his 1992 autobiography, he described this: “I saw large rowboats shoved here and there, men misinterpreting orders, horses slipping, sliding, and rearing.” Rivers and Weinstein, *What Did I Do?*, 310-11.
contrast, has all of the soldiers rowing together, urging their boat toward the other side of the river. Even though the soldiers demonstrate a variety of postures and facial expressions, it is the unity among them—as they head in the same direction with the ultimate goal of winning the war and achieving independence—that is especially prominent element in Leutze’s painting. Washington stands at the front of the boat, looking toward the other side of the river; the placement of his body is precisely matched with the direction in which his boat is moving. This correspondence between Washington, his boat, and his army serves to reinforce the painting’s allegorical meaning of spiritual unity and patriotic zeal. As Fischer argues, “The artist invites us to see each of these soldiers as an individual, but he also reminds us that they are all in the same boat, working desperately together against the wind and current. He has given them a common sense of mission.”

Instead, Rivers, throughout the extensive processes of revising the image of Washington, his armies, and the lay-out of Leutze’s original painting, tried to underscore the more realistically human and even anti-heroic aspects of Washington—rather than copying what he called the “hand-on-chest heroics” in Leutze’s work. In 1992, Rivers recounted his painstakingly slow process of constructing details of the images of Washington and his army, utilizing numerous history paintings, portraits, and other visual resources. He even speculated that his audience would be surprised if they learned of the disparate original sources that had been employed for “General Washington”:

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84 Rivers, “Why I Paint as I Do,” 112.

85 Rivers claimed that his method of combining body parts from a mixture of sources—ranging from Leonardo’s drawing of a screaming man to David’s portrait of Napoleon—was
I can draw from imagination, but I prefer to look at visual information based on someone else’s effort, like reproductions and photos. From those I can pick and choose and feel more confident. For the head of George I found a reproduction of a Leonardo da Vinci drawing, *An Old Man in Hell*. He was screaming. Great. Just what I wanted.\(^{86}\)

There are several drawings by Leonardo that show the image of a man making a similar facial expression or grimace, such as *Study of Five Grotesque Heads* (ca. 1494, Fig. 32) and *Studies for the Heads of Two Soldiers in the “Battle of Anghiari”* (1504-05, Fig. 33).\(^{87}\) A comparison of the man at the left of Leonardo’s *Studies for the Heads of Two Soldiers in the “Battle of Anghiari”* and Rivers’ *Studies for Washington Crossing the Delaware, Two Heads and a Horse* (1953, Fig. 34) reveals a striking resemblance, particularly in a protruding chin and exaggerated facial expressions at a moment of high tension.

Leonardo was especially interested in an array of muscle movements performed by the human face. In *libro di pittura* (Codex, Urbinas Latinus, 1270), which was posthumously compiled by Francesco Melzi, Leonardo articulated the intended effect of his small drawings of distorted human faces: “It is true that the signs of faces display in

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\(^86\) Rivers and Weinstein, *What Did I Do?*, 311.

part the nature of men, their vices and temperaments.” Among a range of facial expressions studied by Leonardo, Rivers chose the image of a man opening his mouth and possibly screaming out of anxiety or tension as in Studies for the Heads of Two Soldiers in the “Battle of Anghiari,” rather than a facial expression that displayed inner grace and courage. A seventeenth century copy of Leonardo’s Battle of Anghiari by an unknown artist, later over-painted in watercolor by Peter Paul Rubens, (c. 1603, Fig. 35) also shows the man Rivers borrowed from Leonardo’s study depicted at the height of battle. The man occupying the center of the canvas is part of a whirlpool of horses and enemy fighters, his face distorted in this moment of intense combat.

In the final oil, Rivers added charcoal lines to articulate the grimace on Washington’s face. In a way, Rivers hoped to underscore the agony and internal struggle that Washington might have experienced at the moment of the crossing. In his 1959 interview with O’Hara, he claimed that he had been struggling to imagine “anyone getting into a chilly river around Christmas time with anything resembling hand-on-chest heroics.” He speculated that the moment of the actual crossing in 1776 was “nerve-racking” and “uncomfortable.” Rivers’ drawings include his study of Washington’s

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88 In his manuscript the libro di pittura (1470), Leonardo offered detailed and lengthy descriptions of various muscle movements in the human face in order to read human temperament according to a classification of facial features. Carmen C. Bambach, “Entries,” in Leonard da Vinci, ed. Bambach, 451-52.

89 Rivers, “Why I Paint as I Do,” 112. Rivers’ desire to demystify the image of General Washington might have been also inspired by his reading of War and Peace. Rivers was impressed by the fact that Tolstoy placed greater emphasis on the lives of ordinary people than on historically significant and memorable events and epic heroes. Rivers wrote in his autobiography that Tolstoy successfully “meshed Napoleon’s invasion of Russia with contemporary life.” Rivers and Weinstein, What Did I Do?, 310. The narrative of War and Peace follows the members of four aristocratic families as their personal lives become caught up in tumultuous Russian society during Napoleon’s invasion of Russia in 1812. As literary critic Ernest Simmons wrote, “the so-called great men” of War and Peace “are merely labels, giving names to events, and like labels, they have only the smallest connection with the events themselves.” Ernest Simmons, “War and
face after Gilbert Stuart’s famous portrait. His drawing Close-up of G.W. (1953, Fig. 36), in which Washington appears stiff, inert, and aloof, offers an image of the president with which most Americans are familiar. In contrast, Rivers’ painting, rather than referencing a typical image of Washington, presents him with a grimace on his partially smudged face.

Rivers’ treatment of Washington evinces his unconventional and even irreverent attitude toward the mythical and epic portrayal of Washington and his historic crossing that was circulated in history books and paintings. “When I began thinking about the subject [Washington Crossing the Delaware], I thought mainly about the patriotic grade school plays I sat through or participated in,” Rivers wrote in 1992, “I never took them seriously, even at seven or eight years old….“90 This attitude could be seen as running parallel to O’Hara’s approach to Benjamin Franklin in “Manifesto,” written the same year. Thus, by drawing connections between Rivers’ Washington Crossing the Delaware and the New York School of poets’ works on the themes of patriotism, heroism, and American history, one can gain a perspective on Rivers’ painting that is outside standard art-historical accounts. The predominant interpretation of Rivers’ Washington Crossing the Delaware has been geared toward its ambiguous art historical position between Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art: Sam Hunter declared in 1965 that Washington Crossing the Delaware was “the first explicit effort” by an American artist to assimilate “popular folklore to the high style of advanced art.”91 Despite the critical importance that

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90 Rivers and Weinstein, What Did I Do?, 312.

91 Hunter, Larry Rivers, 20.
Hunter accorded to Rivers’ painting, treating the subject matter of Washington’s Crossing in Rivers’ painting within the received art historical framework of movements is, without a doubt, too reductive. The situation has been relatively unchanging. Three decades later in 1990s, Paul Schimmel still adopted the same view: “Rivers’s defiant nature and his fascination with ‘unsuitable’ subjects connects him with the anti-art spirit which was of significance to Johns, Rauschenberg, and subsequently to Pop art in general.”

Contrary to Schimmel’s assertion, Rivers’ approach to his subject matter—and, for that matter, O’Hara’s approach also—was arguably more committed than that of the Pop artists. Hazel Smith contended that Rivers’ artistic approach to well-known figures, such as Washington, did not fit precisely into the category of Pop art given his lack of interest in media culture, and, most importantly, his relatively engaged stance toward the subject matter that he was appropriating. Rivers’ appropriation of Washington’s image, in her view, was reflected “not only in [Rivers’] inclusion of consumer goods but also in his parodic revisions of historical representations which are deeply ingrained in American popular culture.”

Certainly how much Rivers committed to his subject matter, either

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from a critical perspective or out of campy personal mannerism, remained a vexing question, yet Rivers researched historical, literary, and art historical references related to Washington’s Crossing to deliberately transform his original source, methods that might more befit Andrew Ross’ definition of “Pop Camp.” For instance, Rivers’ fascination with Leutze’s work, the outmoded genre of history painting, and illustrations from children’s books points to one of the aesthetic traits of Pop Camp—recycling or salvaging historical material “that has been excluded from the serious high-cultural ‘tradition’, ” which Ross called “history’s waste matter.”  

Rivers’ relative ignorance of the distinction between high and low or popular culture during the early 1950s can be best explained in connection with his association with the New York School poets, rather than in terms of his pioneering position relative to Pop art or Johns’ and Rauschenberg’s works. For the New York School of poets, disrespectful treatments of the heroes of American history constituted part of their rebellion against the postwar canon and postwar literary criticism. After the Second World War, the dominant trend in American literary scholarship was “New Criticism.” New Critical essays were generally characterized by close attention to the language of a

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95 According to Steven Watson, during the 1950s younger generation poets in the United States shared the same purpose of the imperative to reinvigorate literary culture dominated by New Criticism and Modernist poetry. These groups included the Beat Generation, the San Francisco Renaissance, the Black Mountain poets, and the New York School poets. In an attempt to widen the range of modern poetry, these young poets emphasized many elements that were new or disparaged by modernist critics in literature, such as links to jazz, spontaneous composition, open verse forms and rhythms, derangement of the senses as a stimulus to creativity, confessional candor, and content that embraced political issues, Buddhism, and the natural environment. Steven Watson, “Rebel Poets of the 1950s” in Carolyn Kinder Carr and Steven Watson, Rebels: Painters and Poets of the 1950s [exhibition catalogue] (Washington, DC: National Museum of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, 1996), 4.
text with the relatively pure and restrictive purpose of deciphering its pattern and formal structure. New Critics saw the literary text as representing a distinctive and privileged source of meaning and value, sharply distinguished from other texts and uses of language. The New York School of Poets, members of a postwar generation of writers who were educated in universities and were knowledgeable about the history of literature, presumably sought to avoid the prevailing influence of 1940s and 1950s New Criticism. Poets such as Koch were forthright in their hostility toward some of the luminaries of this movement. Within the dominant literary milieu, Koch said, “not only were you supposed to be serious, you were supposed to be a little depressed.” In contrast, he argued, “in O’Hara’s poems”—or, for that matter, in the work of all of the New York School poets—the “comic” was “part of what is the most serious for art to get to—ecstasy, unity, freedom, completeness, Dionysian things.”

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96 Arguably, the foundations of New Criticism were first laid out in books and essays written during the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s, especially in writings of T.S. Eliot. In an essay titled “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1917), Eliot argued that the “literature of Europe from Homer” could be viewed as a “simultaneous order” of works, in which the value of any new work depends on its relation to the order of tradition. From this perspective, the work of the “individual talent” does not so much express a personality as it affects—and is affected by—the literature of the past. In suggesting that literature could be treated as a kind of system, Eliot paved the way for more explicitly speculative and theoretical studies that focused attention solely on the fundamental operations by which literary works created intelligible structure. T.S. Eliot, Selected Essays 1917-1932 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1932, 3rd ed., 1950), 4.

97 The popularity of New Criticism in the United States during the late 1940s and the 1950s—the decades when the New York School poets were at Harvard—coincided with the institutional rise of English departments and with the development of academic literary criticism in the United States. New Criticism also became one of the prevailing critical approaches in influential literary journals, such as Southern Review, Sewanee Review, and Kenyon Review. Kermit Vanderbilt, American Literature and the Academy (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 513-31.

O’Hara’s “Manifesto,” for instance, has the dual purpose of demystifying the seriousness of high literature and of interrogating the heroic male figure. The subtitle “Benjamin Franklin Review” suggests that O’Hara composed the poem for a journal of the same name. However, after investigating this possibility, Jeff Encke, author of the article “Why I Am Not a Manifestor” (2003), claimed that he could not find any records of a literary magazine entitled *Benjamin Franklin Review* or dedicated to Benjamin Franklin printed from the 1940s to the 1960s.  

Bill Berkson, a friend of O’Hara’s in the late 1950s and the subject of several of his poems, speculated that the journal may have been the product of the poet’s imagination. Given the dubious existence of the “Benjamin Franklin Review,” Encke asserted that O’Hara might have written “Manifesto” not as an actual promotional piece for an existing literary journal, but as “a commentary on writing such commemorations,” especially “on the act of writing manifestos.”

O’Hara’s “Manifesto” lacks seriousness, which is a core trait of most formal manifestoes. “Throw away/ your galoshes and subscribe (contribute!) to/ Franklin, the review that’s dedicated.” (*CP* 132) O’Hara’s strong recommendation that the reader should subscribe and contribute to this publication is misleading, considering his lack of

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100 Berkson cited the fact that O’Hara changed the name of the magazine in the original subtitle of the poem from “Franklin, a journal of the arts” to “Benjamin Franklin Review” (included in Donald Allen’s *The Collected Poems*) as an indicator of the journal’s fictional status. Bill Berkson, Interview with Jeff Encke, February 25, 1999, quoted in Ibid, footnote 6.

101 Ibid.
commitment to the particular literary stance of the magazine. He did not put any efforts to clarify its basic aesthetic stance, except by expressing an anti-high literature stance. O’Hara undermined the received idea of literature as a fine and beautiful object distinct from ordinary uses of language: “Literature will now open its big face/ in the pages of this publication/ and slyly, in the spirit of FRANKLIN…. No longer will things/ be said to be ‘beautiful,’ ‘amusing,’ ‘passionate,’ ‘moving.’” (CP 132)

Koch also introduced images from popular cartoons and comics in his poems, such as “You Were Wearing” and “A Postcard to Popeye,” both in 1956, to challenge the New Critics’ approach to literary works as sources of privileged meaning and value that were distinct from those found in other uses of language. In his co-written poem with Ashbery, “A Postcard to Popeye” in 1956, Koch featured Popeye, the popular comic character, which also first appeared on consumer products such as toys, vegetables, Pepsi, and popcorn—not to mention millions of t-shirts, caps, jackets, and collectors’ watches. Koch’s line including an image of Popeye reads: “Popeye has many records. Among his favorites is that of T.S. Eliot singing to Bernard Berenson.”

If T.S. Eliot (1888–1965) was one of the most vigorous advocates of high modernism in literature, Bernard Berenson (1865-1959), an art critic and connoisseur, was his counterpart in visual art. By

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102 In his 1991 interview with Richard Kostelanetz, Kenneth Koch argued, “Frank’s poetry very clearly comes back to what would be considered ordinary reality. It always ends up back on the streets, back with the taxicabs.” Koch’s remarks about O’Hara’s poetry also applied to his own poems, which were full of images drawn from popular culture and banal images. Quoted in Richard Kostelanetz, “Frank O’Hara and His Poetry,” in American Writing Today, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Whitston, 1991), 205-06.

103 The line contributed by Koch—what Ashbery called the “high point in that poem”—was accidentally omitted from the publication of the piece in the magazine Chelsea in 1994. John Ashbery, Telephone Interview with David Lehman, February 29, 1994, quoted in Lehman, The Last Avant-Garde, 111.
irreverently placing these two figures with the comic character Popeye in one line, Koch and Ashbery challenged age-old notions of proper subject matter for literature.

The New York School poets’ relationship to the literary establishment paralleled Rivers’ similarly reactive and anti-high art position within the New York art world in the 1950s. In his 1959 interview with O’Hara, Rivers called the image of Washington crossing as “national cliché,” and the wide circulation of Washington’s image made Rivers’ painting an efficient vehicle by which to reconfigure notions of the proper subject matter for high art, just as the New York School poets pushed the boundaries of appropriate content for literature. For the historical accuracy of the actual uniforms and weapons worn and used by the Revolutionary army, Rivers also referred to illustrations from children’s books, which were less likely to be deemed proper sources for high art.

The distinctive features of Rivers’ painting that reveal the influence of camp appropriation and his reactive position against the norms of the art world are not limited to his choice of subject matter. The campiest aspect of Rivers’ work—his tendency to recycle extant images, artistic styles, and themes—rested upon his Abstract Expressionist-influenced gestures. In Washington Crossing the Delaware, Rivers employed gestural brushstrokes and color fields. As pointed out by Hunter, Washington Crossing contains many techniques and pictorial devices originating in Abstract Expressionism. In its background, for instance, Rivers generously employed gestural brushstrokes around the figure of a soldier in the left corner. On the top layers of the oil paint are scribbles and charcoal drawing lines that are loosely imitative of de Kooning’s techniques.
However, as Hunter maintained, Rivers’ brushstrokes in *Washington Crossing the Delaware* seem to be “getting thinner.” His gestural works are also not as expressive and pronounced as, say, de Kooning’s. Helen Harrison concurred that Rivers’ brushstrokes might have arisen from the impulse to illustrate a “carefully planned and credible narrative” rather than to imitate Abstract Expressionist gestures. In this respect, she argued that Rivers’ *Washington Crossing* stylistically signaled his transition from the Soutine- and de Kooning-inspired Expressionist stage to a new style resembling “translucent stains.” Both Hunter and Harrison, two major critics of Rivers, found that his artistic style, especially his expressionistic gestures, became less intense and pronounced in *Washington Crossing*. Rivers’ surface, with thinner layers of pigment, lighter touches, and playful scribbles delineating the details of the Washington figure, struck Hunter as the “surface charm” that would constitute an important characteristic of Rivers’ future oeuvre.

Some art critics described Rivers’ brushwork in *Washington Crossing* in gender-coded terms. In 1960, Betty Kaufmann wrote that Rivers’ “footwork is dazzling, but he has no knockout punch.” She argued that Rivers’ works often had the quality of “the banal, the superficial and the show-off.” Kaufmann titled her article “Rivers: Boy Painter,” presumably comparing Rivers to the dominant male artists of the 1950s, namely the macho Abstract Expressionists. Kaufmann, noting Rivers’ “dazzling” footwork,

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104 Ibid.


106 Ibid., 36.

107 Hunter, *Larry Rivers*, 26

agreed with Hunter and Harrison that he was a capable draughtsman who could create sophisticated surface effects. At the same time, she pointed out the “boyishness” of Rivers’ work, especially of his Abstract Expressionist-driven gestures that lacked a “knockout punch” or virility.

Kaufmann’s criticism reflected gender biases that prevailed in the art world, especially during the 1950s and early 1960s. To reiterate, during these decades, masculine characteristics in art were equated with the gender and sexual identities of male painters. Artists and artworks that could not be associated with a masculine, heterosexual prerogative tended to occupy marginal positions in the art world. Kaufmann’s description of Rivers as a “boy painter” reflected the gender and sexual biases that dominated art criticism and gave marginal status to Rivers’ art.

Simultaneously, Kaufmann’s identification of a “superficial,” “show-off” quality in Rivers’ painting may allude to Rivers’ strategy of “camping out” the artistic techniques and devices of the major New York School artists. Rivers’ charcoal drawing lines, inspired by de Kooning, often belied their original purpose of exploring artistic effects outside the control of the artist’s consciousness. Rivers used his charcoal drawing lines on the top layer of paint to insinuate the details of Washington’s face rather than pursuing free handwork—as a kind of continuation of his previous studies and drawings from the late 1940s.

Rivers’ Abstract Expressionist-influenced artistic techniques should be considered in light of his search for an independent artistic voice in the New York art world of the early 1950s, rather than as a failure to execute gesture with the same vigor and intensity as the major New York School artists, or as the mere reflection of Rivers’ nonconforming
status in terms of his sexual profile. Rivers declared his determination to explore the subject matter of the genre of traditional nude and figurative painting in a diary entry in 1950, and he demonstrated a propensity to work with traditional art history that took him beyond the influence of Abstract Expressionism. Considering his search for artistic autonomy within the New York art world, one can argue that in *Washington Crossing*, Rivers rather self-consciously imitated elements of Abstract Expressionist painterly style while consistently trying to undermine its basic aesthetic intent and heroic meanings.

**Rivers and O’Hara: Reframing the Sexualities of Male Heroes**

In 1953, the year he painted *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, Rivers also wrote a poem entitled “Benjamin F,” which can be regarded as companion piece to O’Hara’s “Manifesto.” Like O’Hara, Rivers challenged various types of myths related to Franklin; he first delved into Franklin’s legacy as the Renaissance man who excelled in both science and politics. The poem reads: “Did he marry or invent heavy garden tools?” or “Was he the stooge of honest George?” 109 Among different categories, Rivers remarked upon the intimate lives of Franklin: “His name is like a stone./ He was a homosexual and a thief./ His mother died smiling./ O bring him moons and joke books,” the poem reads. Rivers here presented Franklin not only as a dishonest man (“Deceit is the known quantity”), but also as a man who concealed his own “sexual perversity.”

In a 1999 interview with Jeff Encke, Rivers stated that during the 1950s he and O’Hara often humorously talked about what they perceived as the disproportionately enormous size of Franklin’s face in his portraits. They also used to “fancy the thought of

Franklin being a homosexual.” This does not seem to suggest that they had a serious interest in Franklin’s actual sexual profile. Instead, Rivers and O’Hara might have derived pleasure from transforming a sacred political symbol into a sexually “perverse” figure in their private conversation.

Their casual and seemingly random gossip about Benjamin Franklin as a “non-straight” man points at the historical and ideological context of the Cold War era with its revival of patriotic fervor and its paranoia about communists and other types of nonconformists, including homosexuals. In the midst of this sexually intolerant context,
Rivers’ poem “Benjamin F.” deflated idealized images of Franklin by slyly placing his presumed heterosexuality into question, thus, disrupting his status as morally superior and patriotic national father figure. To explore “queering” strategies in Rivers’ and O’Hara’s works is then to examine how they render the ostensibly “normative” heterosexuality of male heroes as strange and unsettled and how they promoted the notion of “non-straightness.”

In Rivers’ *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, the image of Washington is the most visually prominent element, relative to the other images of soldiers and horses, many of which merge with the background. The General is also larger than the other soldiers and objects. Washington emerges from a fairly abstract background and stands alone, distanced from his army; he turns his body and face toward the audience, self-consciously presenting himself—his posture and uniform—to the viewer’s gaze. The overblown scale of Washington’s image and the bright white color of his pants underscore his stylized and exaggerated pose. Parts of Washington’s arms and legs are smudged, but the costumed and carefully posed torso of his body remains intact.

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113 In my analysis, I will occasionally use the word “queer” less as an idiomatic adjective related to the sexual identity of gays and lesbians than as a verb related to the action of questioning the idea of fixed gender and sexual categories. The term “queer” is relatively unaligned with specific identity categories, although in recent years it has occasionally been used as an umbrella term for culturally marginal sexual self-identifications in place of “homosexuality.” According to Annamarie Jagose, in academic contexts, “queer” has been associated most prominently with lesbian and gay subjects, but its analytic framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity, and gender-corrective surgery: “Whether as transvestite performance or academic deconstruction, queer locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms [sex, gender, and sexual desire] which stabilize heterosexuality.” Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford, UK and New York: New York University Press, 1996), 3.
In his 1992 autobiography, Rivers described how he “placed the Leonardo Head on a half-invented, half-Jacques-Louis David Body” in *Napoleon in his Studies* by Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825) for his Washington figure. The contrapposto pose that Rivers selected for Washington originated in late Antiquity and was revived during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for propagandistic representations of idealized and heroic men. In her 1998 study “Ideal Masculinities,” Anthea Callen argued that by assuming the contrapposto posture, eighteenth and nineteenth century aristocrats, professionals, politicians, and bourgeois patriarchs strove to emulate classical nobility. These figures were usually portrayed in a manner that suggested “the noble and elevated power and civic gravitas by association with classical authority.” The contrapposto pose is found in Leutze’s *Washington Crossing the Delaware* and Jean-Antoine Houdon’s *Statue of George Washington* (1788-89, Fig. 37), which is located in the Rotunda of the Virginia State Capitol. Washington’s pose with his arms at his sides in Rivers’ painting, copied after David’s *Napoleon in His Study* (1812, Fig. 38), as Rivers claimed, was also known as a “hand-held-in” posture, which had existed from the seventeenth century, though during the Neoclassical period it became standard for portraits of heroic figures and orators.

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116 Although the “hand-in” gesture had already been established as part of an English portrait convention during the seventeenth century, it became best known from its revival in France during the nineteenth century, notably in David’s *Napoleon in his Study* in 1812. See Arline Myer, “Re-Dressing Classical Statuary: The Eighteenth-Century ‘Hand-in-Waistcoat’ Portrait,” *Art Bulletin* 77, no. 1 (March 1995): 61.
A decade later in 1964, in his *The Greatest Homosexual* (Fig. 39), Rivers revisited the same painting by David that he copied for Washington. In it, Rivers repeated Napoleon’s image three times on the canvas; he first painted Napoleon as a whole figure in a relatively realistic style on the far left and then repeated the same image twice with certain body parts of Napoleon dissected and re-pasted on the canvas. Napoleon appears on a white and somewhat vacant canvas; a few pencil lines make his features stand out against the background. Rivers stenciled the name David, the painter whose portrait of Napoleon he copied, in the left corner. David Lehman, literary critic, notes that *The Greatest Homosexual* is “full of smudges and erasures” and “manages to be iconoclastic and idolatrous at once.” The painting appears to be “idolatrous” of David’s portrait of Napoleon as Rivers underscored the uniforms and particular posture of Napoleon. At the same time, his depiction of Napoleon is “iconoclastic” because the painter dissected and defaced the Napoleon figure and repeated the same image three times, undermining its powerful and authentic presence.

The most controversial aspect of the painting is, of course, the title, which ascribes homosexuality to Napoleon. In 1965, John Adkin Richardson wrote, “In his recent *The Second Greatest Homosexual*, a construction based on Jacques Louis David’s Napoleon (the famous pose of which stuck him as unnatural and effete), Rivers would seem to be working very obviously within the mental set of Camp.” Theatricality constitutes a notable trait of Napoleon’s image, as Richardson observed; however, it remains unclear whether the image itself positively manifests certain gender inverted

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traits. Instead, Rivers’ comments hint at an alternative way of looking at the image of Napoleon that is less associated with the stereotypical image of the gay man as effeminate. When Lehman asked him why he had given *The Greatest Homosexual* such an unusual title, Rivers responded, “In those days I was carrying on with people in the gay bathhouse world…. And I had just read that Napoleon was a little peculiar. In St. Helena he used to be surrounded by an entourage of officers and he would take a bath in front of them, nude.” Rivers’ comments are baffling and incomprehensible; the parallel that he drew between the gay bathhouses of New York City and Napoleon’s obliging entourage might have been a kind of a joke. His comments are also inconsistent with the description of his painting. The image of Napoleon fully clothed in authentic nineteenth century uniform does not show the slightest resemblance to that of the naked, effete youth that served as a more common and familiar homoerotic trope in art.

Nonetheless, Rivers’ controversial gesture of associating Napoleon with homosexuality may not have been a mere trifle. First, it bears noting that there is a persistent myth among modern male homosexuals that the Napoleonic Code (*Code Napoléon*), in 1804, drafted and passed by Napoleon, and later renamed after his name in 1810, decriminalized homosexuality in France. Contrary to this belief, the French Revolution (1789-1799) already decriminalized homosexuality in 1791 in the newly drafted criminal code submitted to the National Constituent Assembly. But within a

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certain section of the gay subculture, Napoleon is still considered to be one of the liberators for male homosexuals in modern days.\textsuperscript{120}

Second, the image of Napoleon in this painting indicates that Rivers was familiar with gay men’s fascination with military men and military culture. According to Jason Goldman, several works of contemporary gay male pornography are set in army barracks, close quarters, and shore-leaves.\textsuperscript{121} Images of soldiers and their uniforms have also become fetishistic items among certain painters known as gay. \textit{Portrait of a German Officer} (1914) by Marsden Hartley (1877-1943), for instance, included abstracted versions of the initials of German Officer Karl von Freyburg with whom he was romantically involved, and who perished on the front at the young age of twenty-four. In the painting, military regalia is arranged to suggest a body, probably von Freyburg’s corpse.\textsuperscript{122} The painting was part of Hartley’s series of works devoted to military themes between 1914 and 1919 and reflects his fascination with a German officer and with military culture. Its quasi-anthropomorphic images composed of abstract forms recall the flat patterns of Cubism, while its striking colors are aligned with the German Expressionist or Fauvist palette. Amidst the stacked abstract forms, the most recognizable images are flags and medals from the German military. Goldman described how the


images of military men had multilayered meanings in works by gay artists; they were often “idolized, undermined, and reinterpreted for their perceived rugged masculinity, virile physicality, and forthright patriotism.”¹²³ (The relationship between outright virility and homosexuality will be further discussed in chapter four.)

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the particular white and tight pants worn by Napoleon in The Greatest Homosexual bore significant historical, cultural, and personal meanings related to Rivers’ strategy of “queering” Washington and Napoleon. In his 1992 autobiography, Rivers emphasized the “Napoleonic pants, handsome matching vest, and tall dark boots—the same outfit as in Jacques-Louis David’s Napoleon in His Study,” which he again introduced in The Greatest Homosexual.¹²⁴ In Washington Crossing the Delaware, Washington’s smudged face and upper body merge with the background, whereas his white jodhpurs are clearly visible, accentuated by their color. During the 1950s and 1960s, the attire of tight pants was considered one of the identifying marks of a male homosexual. Tight pants could draw attention to the contours of the male form, especially to the genital area, transforming an “ordinary” male body into the body that has become “problematic” and even “socially unacceptable,” presumably due to its overt sexuality. In a fourteen-page, 1964 Life magazine article entitled “Homosexuality in America,” tight pants were also considered as part of the standard uniform of many gay


¹²⁴ Rivers and Weinstein, What Did I Do?, 310-11. In drawing readers’ attention to graphic details of Benjamin Franklin’s image, Rivers underscored Franklin’s clothing throughout his poem. In “Benjamin F,” he wrote: “he turned down card was like his tight socks/…/In the forests men unbuttoned their vests.” Rivers’ early poem (copy), undated.
men. At the beginning of the article, Paul Welch described the “scene” of male and female homosexuals in New York City as follows:

[…] swarms of young, college-age homosexuals wearing tight pants, baggy sweaters and sneakers cluster in a ragged phalanx along Greenwich Avenue in the Village. By their numbers and by their casual attitude they are saying that the street—and the hour—is theirs.  

Images of white and tight pants also appear in many of O’Hara’s works, from “Memorial Day in 1950” (1950) to “Personism” (1959). According to Brad Gooch, O’Hara’s biographer, patrons at the Silver Dollar, a gay bar in Boston, that O’Hara frequented, used to ask him how he managed to get into such tight pants. O’Hara soon incorporated the patrons’ comment into his poetic vocabulary, partly in self-mockery, and partly for the rebellious purpose of questioning the stereotypical attire of gay men in the 1950s and 1960s.

“Personism,” which is written in a lighthearted manner as a kind of manifesto of his poetic ideas and direction, also included his comments on numerous non-literary subjects, including his humorous remarks on male sexuality and a relatively suggestive phrase concerning the homoerotic message of tight pants: “As for measure and other technical apparatus, that’s just common sense: if you’re going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you.” (CP 498)

With his provocative and absurd tone, O’Hara equated a poet’s creativity and his or her sexual attractiveness (although he did not specify the gender or sexuality of the partner in the poem). In “On Seeing Larry Rivers’ Washington Crossing the Delaware at the Museum of Modern Art” O’Hara also stressed the image of Washington in white pants as

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its central motif: “Now that our hero has come back to us/ In his white pants and we
know his nose.” (CP 233)

By highlighting white and tight pants in the images of Washington and Napoleon,
Rivers may have been trying to associate white/tight pants, part of the regular military
uniform for generals in the eighteenth century, with the attire of the 1950s male
homosexual; in other words, Napoleon’s white pants, as an element of the classic
“dandy” look, converged with the street fashions of the contemporary gay man. His
depiction of Washington and Napoleon, thus, pursued an unlikely marriage between
homosexuality and the icon of idealized manhood, and such an approach also showcases
core strategies of Camp sensibility in Rivers’ art—the recycling of well-known images
from the past, and the merging of the historical and contemporary.

Rivers’ efforts to “queer” heroic male figures from history in his early poem
“Benjamin F.” and his paintings Washington Crossing the Delaware (1953) and The
Greatest Homosexual (1964) have precedents in O’Hara’s writing. To explore the dual
concerns of ideology and sexuality is common in O’Hara’s The 4th of July, his incomplete
novel, written in 1950, as soon as he graduated from Harvard.126 Although the novel
deals with an ordinary American family rather than historical figures or epic events, it
evinces O’Hara’s critical views of American politics and patriotism, as well as his
oppositional stance toward the rigid sexual norms, especially regarding “sexual perverts,”
that prevailed at the beginning of the Cold War. The main characters of the novel,

126 Its manuscript is kept in O’Hara’s archive, and the overall content is summarized and
briefly introduced in Gooch’s biography. O’Hara dealt with his critique of American patriotism
and militarism within the context of domesticity in Try! Try! in 1953, which was also his first
serious collaborative work with Rivers. The contents and aesthetic traits of Try! Try! will be
discussed in detail in chapter five.
members of the Amanti families, appear to represent the paradigmatic postwar American family. As the novel unfolds, however, O’Hara reveals that this apparently ordinary American family does not conform to the popular ideal. Billy, the twelve-year-old son, consistently tries to escape his family to hang out with Bud, the son of his piano teacher. Meanwhile, his father, Lewis, begins playing with beach boys, including Bud and Bud’s lover, Mike. Ethel, Billy’s mother, struggles with alcoholism and ends up sleeping with men she meets in a local bar. 127

From the perspective of the 1950s ideology of the family, the most troubling character is Lewis, a father whose friendships with young homosexual boys cast doubt on his ostensibly heterosexual identity. O’Hara paid special attention to Lewis’ physical appearance, transforming him from an ordinary working-class father into a hyper masculine and overly sexualized man. Lewis’ physical attributes, such as his robust muscles and his genitals are graphically portrayed: “His flesh smelled, stank, and the hair on his body was flattened in little rivulets against his skin; his genitals were cool and wet with sweat.” Gooch, reviewing O’Hara’s depiction of Lewis, dubbed Lewis an exemplar of O’Hara’s “fantasy of ‘masculine sexuality.’” 128

O’Hara’s renditions of homoeroticism and homosexual relationships in the novel are often unequivocal and straightforward. 129 According to Gooch, the “happiest relations

127 Ethel, the alcoholic mother in the novel, may have been based on O’Hara’s mother Francis, about whom O’Hara’s sister Maureen said, “She was someone who I’m sure he loved very much. But she became a monstrous person” after she began struggling with alcoholism. Quoted in Gooch, City Poet, 164.

128 Ibid., 165.

129 Gooch’s descriptions of the unpublished novel’s storyline and characters as the only accessible source for my analysis do not offer a full sense of the text and the author’s intentions; however, the information Gooch provides in O’Hara’s biography implies that the novel is
in the novel are homosexual, especially that of Bud and Mike.” Mike is a sailor temporarily stationed at Boston’s Charleston Navy Yard. O’Hara’s description of Mike in his white Navy uniform is especially vivid. Mike looks “fresh and odd in the light of the streets, the heavy bells slapping against his ankles as he walked.” Bud, Mike’s partner, brags about his relationship with Mike to his sister, Sarah. He exclaims, “Poor dear, you haven’t the faintest concept of the intensity of homosexual love, how it fosters itself amidst the alien corn, triumphant in its own found identity, this magnificent façade thrust in the face of hostile society.”

As its title suggests, O’Hara’s novel is set on the Fourth of July, a holiday celebrating American independence and freedom. Nonetheless through his portrayal of the Amanti family, O’Hara deflated American myth; he suggested that homosexuality, alcoholism, and bisexuality were more common than many in mainstream American society wished to believe. The Amanti families certainly deviated from what historian Elaine Tyler May has called the culture of “domestic containment,” namely the idealized perception of the American family and domesticity in the 1950s. According to May, “domestic containment” was an outgrowth of the fears and aspirations unleashed after the Second World War. For the prevailing idea was that the home was the place where

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provocative enough to startle present-day readers. O’Hara’s decision not to finish the novel or publish any parts of it may indicate his caution. Its candid and bold rendition of the problematic aspects of the propagandistic, fictional image of the 1950s American family might have seemed dangerous even to O’Hara, who was known for his fearless.

\(^{130}\) Ibid.
“potentially dangerous social forces of the new age might be tamed, where they could contribute to the secure and fulfilling life to which postwar women and men aspired.”

In May’s view, the ideology of the home and Cold War militancy were interdependent; “stable family life seemed necessary for national security, civil defense, and the struggle for supremacy over the Soviet Union.” Undoubtedly, in popular imagination, homosexuality constituted an enormous threat to the ideal of “domestic containment” and family. O’Hara’s portrayal of Lewis, in particular, may point to some of the shocking findings about pervasive homosexual desires and behaviors within the ordinary family. Kinsey’s statistic that a large percentage of American men could be considered bisexual cast serious doubt in many Americans’ minds about the integrity of the “domestic containment” culture and made some feel an urgent need to protect this culture from further instability.

Among O’Hara’s poems, “On Seeing Larry Rivers’ *Washington Crossing the Delaware* at the Museum of Modern Art” (1955) contains the most explicit references to the combined themes of sexuality and politics. In this work, O’Hara addressed the anti-communist paranoia of the early 1950s. Although the poem was written two years after Rivers’ painting was executed, it served as the perfect verbal counterpart to the painting, mirroring Rivers’ irreverent approach to Washington. O’Hara, like Rivers, debunked the highly mythologized image of Washington as the emblem of patriotism:

Now that our hero has come back to us  
In his white pants and we know his nose

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May, *Homeward Bound*, 207.
Trembling like a flag under fire,
We see the calm cold river is supporting
our forces, the beautiful history. (CP 233)

The opening stanza, with the phrases “Now that our hero has come back to us” and “beautiful history,” establishes the overall anti-heroic and campy tone of the poem. O’Hara’s references to Washington’s “trembling” features and the chilly winter weather precisely echo Rivers’ description of the “nerve-racking” moment of Washington’s crossing of the “very chilly river around Christmastime with thoughts on death and discomfort.” The final stanza implies that when Washington decided to cross the river, he chose this risky, dangerous military action simply because it was the only option that he had at the time: “[A]nd ever so light in the misty glare/ of a crossing by water in winter to a shore/ other than that the bridge reaches for.” (CP 234) The poem hereby demystifies Washington’s courage and valor in this historic moment by portraying him as an ordinary human being who is anxious about a military operation.

In the fourth stanza, O’Hara treated Washington’s legacy as a thing of the past. “Dear father of our country, so alive/ you must have lied incessantly to be/ immediate, here are your bones crossed/ on my breast like a rusty flintlock.” (CP 234) He made fun of the continued legacy of Washington as manifested in the patriotic fervor surrounding the anniversary of the river crossing. He seemed to suggest that the American people admired an invented Washington, while the real Washington’s flesh had disappeared, leaving his bones like “a rusty flintlock.”

The second stanza further implies a scene in which Washington spots a homosexual and engages in suspicious sexual behavior although O’Hara’s poetic language is coded and sometimes has double meanings. “To be more revolutionary than a
nun/ is our desire, to be secular and intimate/ as, when sighting a redcoat, you smile/ and pull the trigger. Anxieties/ and animosities, flaming and feeding.” (CP 234)

Here, the use of the word “nun” may hint at the poem’s implications relative to male sexualities. In his 1953 poem “Round Robin,” Koch claimed that O’Hara called Rivers a “nun” because the painter had occasional homosexual relationships but refused to commit himself fully to a romantic relationship with a man. The line “To be more revolutionary than a nun/ is our desire” thus suggests a circumstance in which a group of people can boldly accept their homosexual desire, rather than suppressing or undermining it as a nun would.

Therefore, the word “revolutionary” contains contradictory meanings. On one hand, the word refers to Washington’s revolutionary army, which fought for the independence of the United States and is thus emblematic of American patriotism. On the other hand, in O’Hara’s poem, “revolutionary” desire is meant to imply “homoerotic” sexual desire, and during the 1950s homosexuals who did not have inhibitions related to this “revolutionary” desire were regarded as inimical to American moral values and patriotism.

The underlying sexual innuendo of the poem is further supported by the fact that the image of Washington holding his gun, ready to pull the trigger, has certain erotic connotations. In the line “as, when sighting a redcoat, you smile/ and pull the trigger. Anxieties/ and animosities, flaming and feeding,” O’Hara may have intended to draw an analogy between a gun and male genitals, both of which have the function of discharging

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133 Koch told Gooch that O’Hara’s poems between 1952 and 1953, including “Round Robin,” derived from O’Hara’s frustration over his love affair with Rivers. Kenneth Koch, Interview with Brad Gooch, July 7, 1988, quoted in Gooch, City Poet, 231. The image of a nun might also reflect O’Hara’s upbringing as an Irish Catholic.
an object or substance that penetrates the human body. O’Hara often compared human sexual relationships with the movement and operation of machines. In the 1953 poem “Grand Central” (posthumously published in 1970), O’Hara composed a relatively explicit account of same-sex relationships at Grand Central Station, a place notorious for gay cruising, by substituting homosexual men for the trains. “He unzipped the messenger’s trousers/ and relieved him of his missile, hands/ on the messenger’s dirty buttocks,/ the smoking muzzle in his soft blue mouth,” the poem reads. (CP 169) As will be discussed in chapter four, in Stones, their collaborative prints, Rivers also used the image of a bullet that turned into the shape of the male sexual organ.

The phrase “a redcoat” also carries homosexual connotations. In various works, O’Hara used color contrasts to allude to the ideologically divided political milieu of the Cold War years. In “Manifesto,” for instance, he used the words “the Red World and the White World” (CP 132) to refer to the strict ideological division of the globe into “Red” Communist countries and “White” Western democratic nations.134 Furthermore, during the 1950s, homosexuals were frequently equated with Communists, as explained previously; thus, a person in a red coat in O’Hara’s poem may represent not only his or her connection to Communism, but also to homosexuality.

The image of Washington pulling his trigger, in that respect, bears dual meaning; one can interpret this image as suggesting that Washington simply persecuted a

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134 The phrase “White World” can be interpreted in a number of ways. It can refer to the Western world of democracy as opposed to the Eastern world of communism during the Cold War years. The particular wording of “white” could additionally indicate O’Hara’s critical view of the racial divide between the “black” and “white” worlds. According to poet David Shapiro, Koch once told him that the issue of racism had been particularly important to O’Hara since his days in the Navy during the Second World War. David Shapiro, Interview with Brad Gooch, November 4, 1987, quoted in Gooch, City Poet, 426.
communist and homosexual, two major groups of ideological and sexual non-conformists; simultaneously, the line has a subtle insinuation that Washington might have been engaged in forbidden sexual acts or interactions with a redcoat-wearing homosexual. The viability of the second reading is strengthened when one considers O’Hara’s tendency to associate aggression with sexual encounters, particularly via the symbol of the machine. O’Hara’s poem, thus, suggests an alternative way of looking at the image of the male hero presented in public. Like Rivers, O’Hara queered and estranged what had been firmly defined as the “straight” and “patriotic” masculinity of Washington and turned his image into something odd and unsettling. The images of patriotic figures served as useful icons or myths through which Rivers and O’Hara were able to question the larger political, cultural, and sexual context of the 1950s, a period in which patriotism, serious ideological divisions, and homophobia coincided.

Rivers’ and O’Hara’s preoccupation with “queering” male heroes proved to be also significant within the recent formation of queer theory—beyond the particular historical context. “Queerness,” according to Eve Sedgwick, promotes homosexual definition as “an unpredictable solvent of stable identity,” to explore the continuity between the boundary of homosexuality and heterosexuality that persists. Diana Fuss has also argued that the heterosexual majority tries to understand homosexuals only by projecting onto them a negative image—an image that is made up of the “contaminated and expurgated insides of the heterosexual subject,” rather than anything inherent in

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homosexuals themselves. Yet, this homosexual and heterosexual binary in homophobic discourse created by the heterosexual majority could never be complete. “But borders are notoriously unstable, and sexual identities rarely secure,” wrote Fuss; “Heterosexuality can never fully ignore the close psychical proximity of its terrifying (homo) sexual other, any more than homosexuality can entirely escape the equally insistent social pressure of (hetero) sexual conformity…”

Similarly, in Rivers’ and O’Hara’s works dealing with Washington’s image—as well as in their pieces depicting figures such as Napoleon and Benjamin Franklin—the key question is not whether their treatment of heroic male bodies represents proper or improper manliness. Rather, the question is how these images manifest the unstable boundary between two types of male sexualities and, more suggestively, how our perceptions can be re-channeled by appreciating their paintings and poems.

Rivers’ art during his formative years, before Washington Crossing the Delaware, evince his path toward an artistic style and subject matter through which he could explore his critical views of the formalism and heterosexism that dominated the 1950s New York art world. The subject matter and Abstract Expressionist-driven style of Washington Crossing the Delaware were the natural outgrowths of his continued search for an independent artistic direction and preoccupation with eroticism in art. More importantly, along with, or influenced by, O’Hara’s writing, Rivers’ depiction of the patriotic and heroic man reflects his combined interest in male sexuality and politics, an interest that evolved around the social paranoia regarding the binaries of

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137 Ibid.
heterosexuality/homosexuality, patriots/communists at the height of cold war anxiety of the early 1950s. Therefore, contrary to Gavin Butt’s view of *Washington Crossing the Delaware* as exemplifying “camp pleasure,” Rivers’ queering of the Washington figure reveals elements pertinent to a serious discussion of gender and sexual politics.
Ch. 4. Rivers’ Family Portraits in the Mid 1950s and O’Hara’s “Homosexuality” (1954) and “In Memory of My Feelings” (1956)

Rivers’ Portraits of the Mid 1950s: Painting Families and Friends and Competing with the Old Masters

What roles do Rivers’ and O’Hara’s personal lives play in their portraits and poems? A close reading of Rivers’ portraits of his family members and close friends, such as O’Hara (1954), and O’Hara’s poems of the mid-1950s, including “In Memory of My Feelings,” one of his most-cited autobiographical works provide a partial response to this question.

During the mid-1950s, the primary subject matter of Rivers’ paintings became his family and friends. Notable portraits in oil that Rivers produced between 1954 and 1955 include O’Hara, Augusta, Joseph, Steven, Family, Double Portrait of Berdie, and Studio. The sitters in these portraits are O’Hara; Augusta, who married Rivers in 1945 and divorced him a year later; Steven (b. 1945), Rivers’ son with Augusta; Joseph (b. 1940), Augusta’s son before her marriage to Rivers, whom Rivers adopted as his own son in 1956; and Mrs. Berdie Burger, Augusta’s mother.

Rivers wrote in his 1992 autobiography that Augusta’s unstable mental state, combined with his desire to become a serious artist, led him to divorce. “I wanted to be an artist, and I have to do it alone. This was a trip that did not include a partner, a lover, a woman, and her sainted mother and children.”¹ After their divorce in 1946, Rivers soon moved to Twenty-First Street on the East Side, with help from Jack Freilicher, a fellow member of Rivers’ jazz band and Jane Freilicher’s husband. He first shared a room with

Eddie Aster, a musician, across the street from Nell Blaine’s studio as he attended Hofmann’s art school beginning in 1947 while Joseph, Steven, and Mrs. Burger stayed with Augusta in the Bronx.

During the early 1950s, Augusta’s phobic reactions to germs and other eccentric behaviors worsened: “She[Augusta] is better now, but she used to sit in a chair and stare and I just thought that it would be throwing the children to the wolves to leave them with her. So her mother [Mrs. Burger] came to live with me and we raised the boys together.”\(^2\)

In 1952, Augusta agreed that her sons and mother could join Rivers at St. Marks’s Place, and at the end of 1953, Rivers’ new family moved to 111 Toylsome Lane in Southampton. Of course, for Rivers, taking over the care of the two boys was not an easy task, and his friends often volunteered to help. In 1953, he sent Joseph to Fairfield Porter’s house in Southampton at Mrs. Porter’s suggestion before Rivers’ household finally moved to Southampton at the end of that year. Mrs. Porter continued to guide Rivers in parenting. O’Hara also played an important role, sometimes functioning as a maternal figure for Steven, the younger sibling; he taught Steven to play the piano, and the two wrote poetry together.\(^3\)

Rivers’ decision to move from lower Manhattan to Southampton was also prompted by the end of his brief yet tumultuous affair with Jane Freilicher in 1953. His

\(^{2}\) Larry Rivers and Carol Brightman, *Drawings and Digressions* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1979), 47.

\(^{3}\) Steven Rivers, interview with author, May 23, 2004, Nyack, New York. As the 1950s progressed, Rivers’ children were integrated into the bohemian circle. Joseph and Steven got permission to go to the gallery together and often stayed up late to listen to conversations among the artists, curators, writers, and musicians in their father’s circle. Joseph soon decided to become a painter. In 1961, he helped Rivers to paint the billboard for the First New York Film Festival, held at Lincoln Center in 1963.
new house in Southampton, he hoped, would help him concentrate on his social and physical surroundings—in other words, his family, his close friends, and the natural environment of Southampton: “Moving could be a geographical solution to the Jane problem…. I didn’t think the birds and the trees and the lawns alone would snuff out the blazing torch I was carrying,” he wrote, but he expected “more time spent with the kids would hold my attention.”

Rivers had been drawing family members and friends since the beginning of his career, but with these portraits, he began approaching the people closest to him as serious subject matter worthy of treatment on a large scale in oil. O’Hara, for instance, is ninety-seven by fifty-three inches. The size of his family portraits are usually between seventy and eighty inches in height and width, certainly bigger in scale than most of his previous oil painting, such as Bathers after Cezanne of 1952, and twice the size of his paintings of the early 1960s loosely affiliated with Pop Art.

These portraits appear to represent a distinct stage of Rivers’ oeuvre. Unlike his Washington Crossing the Delaware, they showcase the sitters through an enhanced naturalism. Double Portrait of Berdie (1955, Fig. 40), a painting comprised of the double image of Mrs. Burger both sitting and standing around her bed in an interior, for instance, contains relatively feasible illusionistic space, fully modeled masses, and realistic details. When Double Portrait of Berdie was first shown at the Stable Gallery in 1955, art historian and critic Leo Steinberg criticized Rivers’ obsession with “obnoxious detail.” In his review, Steinberg reprimanded Rivers for his lack of effort to create pictorial unity between the rather cursorily treated interior, on one hand, and Berdie’s flesh and the

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4 Rivers and Weinstein, What Did I Do?, 286.
flower patterns in the bedding (which Steinberg saw as excessively detailed), on the other.

“This brings me to what I thing is the crux of the Rivers problem. His talent seems to me that of a mild-mannered decorative painter,” wrote Steinberg. Hilton Kramer also found Rivers’ turn to the genre of academic nude painting and to naturalism during the mid-1950s to be unsatisfactory. In a 1954 review, Kramer complained that the figures in Rivers’ conservative portraits and nudes, such as O’Hara, “remain, for the most part, unassimilated with the paintings as unique whole.” Helen Harrison, a critic who was sympathetic to Rivers, agreed with the dominant reception of Rivers’ portraits. Although she acknowledged that “the portraits netted Rivers valuable experience in dealing with physical structure,” she characterized a group of Rivers’ portraits between 1953 and 1955 as “academic digressions” that represented a temporary, transitional phase of Rivers’ career and had little autonomous artistic significance.

As a result of such assessments, art writing on Rivers veered away from his mid-1950s portraits. Unlike Washington Crossing the Delaware, a painting that more clearly illustrates Rivers’ controversial position in the 1950s New York art world, his family portraits failed to capture art critics’ serious attention. Apparently, the subject matter of these works was regarded as too banal, with no apparent connection to social and political concerns. Stylistically, these portraits also revived a form of naturalism, an

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5 Steinberg also criticized the anatomical inaccuracy of Rivers’ figure, which “accord[ed] neither with the ways of nature, nor with the needs of symbol, but solely with the vagaries of art.” Leo Steinberg, “Month in Review,” Arts Magazine (January 1956): 48.


artistic modality that could be considered extremely conservative from the standpoint of the 1950s New York art world.

Despite the overriding critical reception of Rivers’ family portraits, his turn to the male and female nude in the relatively conservative mode of naturalism is of particular importance for understanding his preoccupation with traditional ways of representing male and female figures in high art as it evolved from his formative years of the late 1940s. *Double Portrait of Berdie*, for instance, questions the ideal of the female nude in traditional Western painting.\(^8\) From smooth and immaculate skin tones to sexually inviting postures, the features of female bodies in art have been shaped by “male fantasy,” as Margaret Walters argued in 1978.\(^9\) Given the attention devoted to the sitter’s distorted body shape and uneven skin tone, the images of Mrs. Burger certainly deviate from the tradition of the beautiful female muse soliciting the (male) viewer’s gaze.

These unflattering portrayals of Mrs. Burger beg a comparison with other unconventional female forms in modern and contemporary art. In her portraits *The Blue Room* (1923) and *Reclining Nude* (1928), Suzanne Valadon (1865-1938), a female painter affiliated with the French Impressionists, depicted exceptionally sturdy female painters.

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\(^8\) Rivers’ harsh realism in depicting the naked body of an old woman also recalls Lucian Freud (1922-), a leading British figurative painter, whose portraits from the 1950s are known for their eerie qualities. Like Rivers, Freud depicted people from his life such as friends, family members, fellow painters, lovers, and children, usually in domestic settings—for instance, naked on the floor or on a bed, sometimes juxtaposed with a dog or cat. The sitter of his most well-known painting, *Girl with a White Dog* (1951-52), was his first wife, Kathleen Epstein. Freud was also notorious for his unflattering depictions of his sitters, especially his starkly literal treatment of their skin and the overall impression of anxiety and alienation these images convey—qualities that led art critic Robert Hughes described Freud’s portraits as reaching far beyond their apparent naturalism in 1987. He especially noted Freud’s distinctive ability to paint the texture and thinness of skin over flesh, which reinforced the haunting and unsettling nature of his portraits. Robert Hughes, *Lucien Freud* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 17.

figures, almost butch types. In *The Blue Room*, the woman appears to relax herself while holding a cigarette in her mouth. Her stripped blue pajamas and short hair reinforces a sense of her gender ambiguity. She is no longer a muse who surrenders herself to male painters’ desire, but an independent being who presents herself “matter-of-factly.” Valadon’s female figure can find her counterpart in *Self-Portrait* (1980) by Alice Neel (1900-84). Her self-portrait was painted in her eighties. The caricature style serves to emphasize physical imperfections such as the wrinkles on her forehead, her double chin, and her big ears. Mary Winkler wrote of Neel’s painting, “Traditional assumptions about female agency and female beauty seem shoddy under the honest, sardonic gaze of an old woman who wills herself to know herself—naked.”

In addition to the controversial nature of the deidealized image of an old naked woman, *Double Portrait of Berdie* also demonstrates Rivers’ distinctive approach of repeating the sitter’s images twice or three times in one portrait. He developed the multiple-figure method as he experimented with different views of the same figure in drawings such as *Face and Profile of Artist’s Mother* (1953), *Double Portrait of Myself* (1954), and *Two Views of Augusta* (1955). Rivers did not explain the specific purpose of this method, but in addressing his drawing *Double Portrait of Myself*, he stated a tension he felt when rendering his own face as following: “I felt that I would be too prone to want to alter the reality, and so I decided that not only did I not want to face what I looked like, but I didn’t want that quality of character which might lie and draw other kinds of features.” This remark hints that the double or triple figures in his portraits are not

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11 Rivers and Brightman, *Drawings and Digressions*, 25.
products of formal invention alone; rather, this method evinces a core idea of Rivers’
painting practice regarding his perception of the sitter and the self. Rivers remained
uncomfortable with a monolithic perception of sitter’s personality; additional images of
the sitter might have helped him to transfer his sense of the indeterminate and multiple
quality of the sitter into his portraits.

Rivers’ double and triple figures will be discussed later in this chapter in parallel
with O’Hara’s poetry. Here, it is sufficient to say that Rivers’ portraits of family members
and friends became a genre through which the painter could pursue his critical views of
gender, sexuality, and self in art. These portraits were neither definitive documents of the
sitters’ personalities nor records of the painter’s relationships with the sitters. Jacquelyn
Days Serwer, a curator of Rivers’ 2003 retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery in
Washington, DC, claimed that the subject matter of the “personal” in Rivers’ oeuvre
always remains ambiguous, having originated from the painter’s personal life as well as
having been borrowed from art history and popular culture. “When we interpret Rivers’
work this way, as a continuum of the private and the public,” Serwer remarked, subject
matters in Rivers’ paintings “seem to fall largely into several rich categories: personal
history, history and politics, the French connection, art and artists, and show business.”
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In *Burial* (1950), for instance, Rivers utilized a photograph of a recent family funeral
while following the basic format and layout of Courbet’s *Burial at Ornans*, a painting
that he had seen during his sojourn to Paris in 1950.

Among Rivers’ portraits of the mid-1950s, the most notable and controversial
work for a discussion of the relationships among autobiography, sexuality, and art is

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O’Hara, which he painted during January 1954 as he re-entered an emotional relationship with the sitter. According to O’Hara’s biographer, Brad Gooch, Rivers and O’Hara had a relatively short, turbulent romance that began in 1952, but during 1953 the two men became involved in other romantic relationships: Rivers with Jane Freilicher, a fellow artist, to reiterate, and O’Hara with Robert Fizdale, an interior decorator. Beginning in 1954, however, Rivers and O’Hara resumed their intimate relationship, which then lasted less than a year.\(^\text{13}\)

Joe LeSueur, O’Hara’s roommate during the early 1950s, wrote a letter to O’Hara on January 21, 1954, in which he confirmed the “unexpected” reconciliation between Rivers and O’Hara: “My God, I was very surprised to learn of the turn of events—you’re going back to Larry I mean.”\(^\text{14}\) O’Hara himself sent a letter to Freilicher on January 19, 1954, in which he stated that he and Larry were “getting along so well […..] My heart couldn’t be more of one piece! Sometimes I think I’m so equilibrious as to be shallow! But perhaps this is just a temporary fever phase.”\(^\text{15}\)

A nude of a contemporary figure on such a huge scale as O’Hara appeared unusual and even controversial in the 1950s New York art world. Rivers recalled that when the painting was first shown at the Whitney Annual in 1955, a guard often stood in front of it to ensure that the painting would not be defaced or damaged: “There was something about the male nude that seemed to be more of a problem than the female


nude.” Some contemporary viewers were shocked by *O'Hara*, given its depiction of a naked male body with meticulous attention to the genitals. According to an anonymous staff member at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, where *O'Hara* was originally displayed, one female collector visiting the gallery turned “absolutely purple” upon realizing that O’Hara, the man who was installing the painting, was the same man exposing himself in the portrait. In 1961, Rivers recalled that Elaine de Kooning had derided him for having painted *O'Hara* in the style of what she called “Pubism.”

*O'Hara* is also different from Rivers’ other drawings and works that feature the poet. O’Hara posed for Rivers in a series of drawings and sculptures entitled *The Swimmer* and, subsequently, in *Frank O’Hara with Hammer* (1955) and *Frank O’Hara in Profile* (1955, Fig. 41). In most of these works, Rivers used O’Hara as a model for preparatory drawings and sculptures, rather than as autonomous subject matter. In one of the drawings for *Swimmer* (c. 1955, Fig. 42), Rivers cursorily treated O’Hara’s body, paying little attention to his identity and physiognomic characteristics. In *O'Hara*, by contrast, he rendered various body parts, especially the genitals, with a heightened

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16 Rivers and Brightman, *Drawings and Digressions*, 85. During the 1950s, several artists drew the male nude, but mostly in the arena of drawing: for example, Fairfield Porter drew O’Hara’s nude *Untitled Male Nude (in boots)* in 1954, presumably after Rivers’ *O’Hara*; Paul Cadmus also created a series of male nude drawings, which was relatively unknown until the 1990s. Justin Spring, *Paul Cadmus: The Male Nude* (New York: Universe, 2002).


19 Rivers wrote, “At that time, I had no idea I was making so many pictures of him; I think I must have made a dozen portraits, and that’s not counting drawings or paintings like ‘The Studio,’ and ‘Athlete’s Dream,’ he appeared in. I always felt I was close to getting him but I never did, so I kept on trying.” “Larry Rivers in Conversation,” paraphrased by Joe LeSueur in *Homage to Frank O’Hara*, ed. Bill Berkson and Joe LeSueur (Berkeley: Creative Arts Book, 1980), 57.
naturalism. He also put O’Hara’s name in the lower left corner of the canvas, so that the viewer could easily identify the sitter, whose homosexuality was relatively well known within the 1950s New York art world.

When one considers the close relationship between the painter and sitter as well as Rivers’ bold approach toward his subject matter, O’Hara invites a biographical reading. To what extent is the portrait a faithful document of Rivers and O’Hara’s intimacy? In other words, does this work serve to “out” Rivers and O’Hara? Russell Ferguson, author of In Memory of My Feelings: Frank O’Hara and American Art (1993), insisted that the explicit sexual content of the painting emerged from the painter’s intense emotional interactions with the sitter. In Ferguson’s view, O’Hara is an “unmistakably homoerotic work” created at a height of the romantic relationship between painter and sitter. “The predominance of the penis and the rough trade suggestion of the boots” leave no doubt about the underlying homoerotic implications of the painting. According to Ferguson, O’Hara’s posture—his arms are behind his head—underscores “his act of self-revelation” before the viewer’s gaze, and the painter’s “lavish and loving brush work is evidence of the obsessive looking at O’Hara’s naked body over the months of sittings that the work took to realize.” For Ferguson, O’Hara depicts Rivers’ fascination with O’Hara’s naked body, not only as an onlooker, but also as a lover. The painter may have

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20 According to Joanna Woodall, author of Portraiture: Facing the Subject (1997), avant-garde artists at the turn of the twentieth century in Europe began working almost exclusively with noncommissioned portraits of friends and families. Throughout modern and contemporary art, this important shift in the nature of the sitter not only “enhanced the authority of the artist by making worthiness to be portrayed dependent upon one’s relationship to him or her,” but also implied enhanced and “lived intimacy between painter and sitter.” Joanna Woodall, “Introduction: Facing the Subject,” in Portraiture: Facing the Subject, ed. Joanna Woodall (Manchester, UK and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 7.

expressed his desire in his laborious pink brushstrokes, as though he equated the surface of the canvas with O’Hara’s flesh.

Although there is ample support for a biographical reading of O’Hara, interpreting this portrait primarily on the basis of the artist’s private life could lead one to miss a chance to examine the portrait in the context of Rivers’ overall artistic practice. According to O’Hara, Rivers worked with well-known images from artistic and literary history in various portraits, including O’Hara. O’Hara maintained that his portrait had been inspired by A Nude Study (1816, Fig. 43), a nineteenth century male nude at the Metropolitan Museum of Art that was originally attributed to Théodore Géricault (1791-1824).²² As O’Hara wrote in a 1965 memoir, all of Rivers’ major portraits, including O’Hara, were more or less influenced by the history of art:

> There is a little bit of Hemingway in his attitude toward ability, toward what you do to a canvas or an armature. His early painting, The Burial, is really, in a less arrogant manner than Hemingway’s, “getting into the ring” with Courbet (A Burial at Ornans), just as his nude portrait of me started in his mind from envy of the then newly acquired Géricault slave with the rope at the Metropolitan Museum, the portrait of Augusta from a Delacroix; and even this year he is still fighting it out, this time with David’s Napoleon.²³

Rivers also acknowledged that O’Hara had been largely motivated by his ambition to paint something that was “absolutely conditioned by another time,” such as the nineteenth century male nude. “Géricault painted a male nude perhaps two feet tall. I

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²³ Sam Hunter, Larry Rivers (Waltham, MA: The Rose Art Museum/Brandeis University, 1965), 17.
painted one eight feet high. I felt competitive and wanted to prove myself as good, if not better, on their own terms,” explained Rivers.24

The artificial quality of O’Hara’s posture in Rivers’ painting also defies the notion that the portrait is a straightforward rendition of the physical likeness and personality of the sitter. The image of O’Hara appears highly studied and constructed compared to Porter’s Portrait of O’Hara (1957, Fig. 44). Sitting on a couch, glancing at the viewer casually, and wearing comfortable shorts and a t-shirt, O’Hara, in Porter’s portrait, looks much more relaxed and natural. The backdrop of flowered upholstery adds a sense of comfort and informality. In O’Hara, by contrast, one of O’Hara’s legs rests on a prop—a cement block. The use of props was common practice in male nude photography for physique magazines. For instance, photographs published in Physique Pictorial (1954, Fig. 45) show a small pedestal covered in fabric, on which two male models sit or stand to pose. As will be discussed in the next section, physique magazines served as major sources for male nude photographs.

This image of O’Hara in black leather boots deviates from the image of the poet typically presented by his friends. Most of his friends remember him as an effeminate male with a slim figure and fair skin—in the words of John Bernard Myers, he was “a guy who walks with toes effortlessly.”25 In their Abstract Expressionist-inspired portraits of O’Hara in the 1950s and 1960s, Jane Freilicher and Elaine de Kooning underscored his slender, relatively non-muscular form. Elaine de Kooning’s Frank O’Hara (1962, Fig. 46)

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pictures O’Hara in his typical “Brother Brothers look,” a blue button-down shirt in classic pants; he is also standing counterpoised. Throughout the 1950s, de Kooning painted artists, critics, and patrons in the New York art world as faceless figures….”  

Most of the male figures in her portraits remain still as expressionistic brushstrokes swirl around their bodies. In these portraits, de Kooning hoped to capture the personal mannerisms, postures, and body language of her sitters. “Some men sit all closed-up—legs crossed, arms folded across the chest. Others are wide open. I was interested in the gesture of the body,” said de Kooning.  

In her portrait of O’Hara, too, de Kooning accentuated O’Hara’s posture, body language, and appearance while rendering O’Hara’s face blank and obscuring most details in his face with a few sweeping brushstrokes. De Kooning first included the entire structure of his face, and then wiped it out. “When the face was gone,” she recalled, “it was more Frank than when the face was there.” As a result, the most visually prominent element of the image is O’Hara’s body in the Brooks Brothers outfit and an elegant contraposition position, through which O’Hara’s distinctive personality is supposed to be revealed or communicable to the painting’s audience.

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28 Quoted in In Homage to Frank O’Hara, ed. Berkson and LeSueur, 97.
Rivers’ *O’Hara* appears quite distinct from the image of a sophisticated urban gay man that most of O’Hara’s friends remember and that de Kooning may have tried to render in her portrait. This discrepancy between the common perception of O’Hara among his friends and the image of O’Hara in Rivers’ portrait calls for an alternative approach that considers the portrait as more than a likeness of the sitter or a mere reflection of poet’s personal life.

**Rivers’ *O’Hara*: Reframing the Male Nude**

The major artistic inspiration for *O’Hara* was, to reiterate, a nineteenth century male nude study at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the image of which is published in O’Hara’s 1965 memoir in *Larry Rivers*. O’Hara referred to this work as the direct precedent to the portrait. At first glance, *A Nude Study* (1861) does not seem to offer clear indications that it exerted a direct influence on *O’Hara*. The apparent lack of close similarity between the works might be partially attributed to the fact that Rivers, following Hofmann’s teaching, frequently reconfigured and combined his source materials.

The primary artistic emphasis of *A Nude Study* is a well-developed muscular form. The nude’s downcast eyes naturally direct the viewer’s attention to his body—particularly to the musculature of his arms and legs. His twisted pose and well-developed muscles are accentuated by the way his body is situated and silhouetted against a dark background.

*A Nude Study*’s dramatic lighting effects and attention to a healthy, strong, masculine body reflect the overall milieu of early and mid nineteenth century in France. The historical moment when *A Nude Study* was produced was during a period when male
figures became highly visible and popularized for ideological purposes. In *Oath of the Horatii* (1784), David painted stoic warriors with slim but well-muscled torsos, creating elegant symmetry of form through gestures such as a balanced turn of a head or a twist of an athlete’s body. Antonio Canova (1757-1822), a renowned Neoclassical sculptor, also portrayed the male body in the mode of Greek gods and heroes. In *Theseus and the Centaur* (1804-1819, Fig. 47), Canova underscored the suspension of heroic action and the frozen contemplation of male physical beauty; his renderings of smooth, polished marble surfaces heighten the sensual quality of his figures. In Canova’s sculpture, the figure of Theseus emblematizes the ideal beauty of Neoclassical sculpture, as it combines the “perfect” proportions of antique statuary, as prescribed by conventional rules of mathematical proportion, with the most beautiful aspects of live models, based upon observation of the actual human body.

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29 In her account of French Neoclassicism, Abigail Solomon-Godeau argued that masculinity prevailed in the school’s representation of the human body; ironically, however, just as women were banished from public life and their revolutionary gains were rescinded in an antifeminist backlash under the Jacobin Republic (1792-94), effete male nudes proliferated in painting and sculpture. Within this historical context, two varieties of male image emerged. While virile pugilists like the Horatii swear their oaths in David’s work, effeminate lovely males such as Ganymede, Eros, and Narcissus lie sleeping, dying, and in otherwise passive attitudes in the work of other artists. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997).

The emphasis on the figure’s muscular development in *A Nude Study* may also anticipate the increasing preoccupation with the human anatomy during the mid-nineteenth century. Although *A Nude Study* was completed during the early nineteenth century, it still predicts early male nude studies in photography such as *Study of the Male Nude* (Fig. 48, 1855), in which the model holds a similar staff and twists his body. Photographic techniques developed from the late 1830s through the 1850s also made portraits relatively less expensive, allowing more people access to visual representations of their own bodies. While the motif of the staff and loincloth might suggest the remnant influence of Neoclassicism, the photographer seems to have taken a clinical approach.\(^{31}\) The various muscular changes on the surface of the naked male body in *A Nude Study* attest to the prevailing view of the healthy male body as a source of artistic and natural beauty.

Compared to *A Nude Study*, O’Hara’s portrait does not feature such emphatic presentation of the muscles, but Rivers did use broken, repetitive brushstrokes to create irregular surface effects on O’Hara’s flesh. The light yellowish tones around his arms and legs constitute a notable contrast to the darker brown colors of the hair on his chest and genital area. The painting’s irregular tones also serve to heighten the corporeality and physicality of O’Hara’s body. The contrast between the areas of darkness and light makes O’Hara’s flesh stand out from the background, though somewhat less sharply than in *A Nude Study*.

\(^{31}\) According to Tamar Garb, the healthy masculine body was celebrated and eulogized as an ideological and national icon, especially after France’s disastrous defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71). Garb’s study offers valuable insights into the ideological construction of manhood and the emergence of the male nude as a popular artistic genre in France during the nineteenth century. Tamar Garb, *Bodies of Modernity: Fiction and Flesh in Fin-de-Siecle France* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 61.
Apart from the way the naked male body, especially the masculine musculature, had been emphasized in *A Nude Study*, the nineteenth century male nude may have also inspired Rivers in terms of its ambiguous treatment of male sexuality and the potentially homoerotic meanings attached to the naked male body. There has long been a tension between artists’ efforts to underscore masculine aggression and the beauty of the male body on the one hand and their rather timid approach to the male penis on the other. In *A Nude Study*, the hyper-realistic rendition of muscles emphasizes the physical strength of the male body; the lighting reflected on the surface of the naked male body is meant to underscore the smooth and attractive nature of the flesh. One can also see the sword as a symbol of the phallus. At the same time, the posture of his body pushes the figure’s penis into darkness; as a result, the male organ appears to be smaller and less important compared to the rest of his body parts; his posture guides the viewer’s attention to the anatomical characteristics of the male body. The model avoids direct eye contact with the viewer.

O’Hara in Rivers’ portrait, by contrast, bends his arms behind his head, actively inviting the viewer’s gaze toward his naked body. O’Hara in the painting confronts the viewer with a gesture of engagement, rather than avoiding the viewer’s scrutiny of his nakedness. The preparatory drawing *Frank O’Hara with Boots On, Study for Painting* (1954, Fig. 49) shows that Rivers changed O’Hara’s arm position from being folded over the chest—a more typically manly pose—to the back of the head. O’Hara’s penis is also slightly erect; his pubic hair is insinuated by the darker colors and textural changes of the pubic area. In *A Nude Study*, the penis is clearly visible and somewhat erected, yet his pubic hair is almost obscured by the dark shadow.
Throughout much of Western art history, when the penis has been depicted, it has been treated cursorily and minimized in size. For instance, the genitals in the paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel are all disproportionately small, and this artistic practice was directed at making the male nude seem safer and purely aesthetic. In 1978, Kenneth J. Dover pointed out that the typical penis depicted on Greek vases was small, with no pubic hair. “This small penis,” he noted, “is combined as a rule with a scrotum of normal size, and the contrast is something striking.”32 In 1997, Lawrence Schehr contended, “the penis has been the most hidden of male body parts because of the ideological as well as the psychoanalytical temptation to turn the penis into its evil twin brother, the phallus.”33

Another common method of obscuring the presence of the male sexual organ involved the use of special postures and angles. As in *A Nude Study*, a particular posture and composition were often employed to downplay the penis. In a series of male nudes by Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) that includes *The Swimming Hole* (1883), all of the naked men conceal their penises from the viewer, either by turning their bodies away or by hiding their genitals in shadow. Eakins was known for his passions for human anatomy and for photography. He devoted his artistic energy to the subject of the male body; especially notable were his photographic nude studies, which he employed as drawing


33 Lawrence Schehr, *Parts of an Andrology: On Representations of Men’s Bodies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 16. The classical dichotomy between the penis and phallus was provided by a fourth century philosopher St. Augustine. The penis, St. Augustine claimed, is the “logical extension” of all rational men, created in the image of the divine logos, while the phallus, which is rationally uncontrollable, must simply be “the handiwork of the Not-God, Satan” and is the constant reminder of the fall of man. Quoted in Ilona Rashkow, “Daughters and Fathers in Genesis…Or, What is Wrong with this Picture,” in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 32.
aids in his classroom at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. In *The Swimming Hole* (ca 1883, Fig. 50), he relied upon numerous photographic studies that he and his students had taken of one another during an outdoor excursion to Mill Creek, Pennsylvania, such as *Eakins’s Students at “The Swimming Hole”* (c. 1883, Fig. 51) and *Thomas Eakins and J. Laurie Wallace at the Shore* (c. 1883).³⁴ Despite his uncompromising interest in the naked male body, not one figure among his crowd reveals so much as a flash of genitals. According to Henry Adams, author of *Eakins Revealed* (2005), in the final painting, Eakins also altered the figuration arrangement of his students in the photograph in order to conform to a triangular shape, reminiscent of the pediment of a Greek temple. Eakins, in Henry Adams’ words, “toned down the erotic implications of the final painting, whether because of his own inhibition or because of his knowledge of how his audience would react.”³⁵ (In fact, three years after painting *The Swimming Hole*, Eakins was dismissed from his post at the Academy; allegedly, one of the official reasons was that he had removed a loincloth from a model in order to demonstrate musculature and bone structure for the members of his life class.)

O’Hara’s 1954 letter confirmed that he was well aware that Rivers had taken an unconventional approach toward his naked body in *O’Hara* by including the explicit and detailed visual depiction of his penis and pubic hair. In a letter to Jane Freilicher, he wrote that he was posing for Rivers completely nude: “I am posing for Larry avec La

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nudité in great big boots for a canvas to be called ‘The Truth about Christine,’ ” O’Hara wrote, adding that the painting was filled with “wonderful candor and verve.” In “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday” (1954), O’Hara declared that Rivers’ portrait of him had finally recovered what had been missing from Picasso’s male nudes—the penis. “I am so glad that Larry Rivers made a/ statue of me/ and now I hear that my penis is on all/ the statues of all the young sculptors who’ve/ seen it…./ instead of the Picasso no-penis shepherd and its influence—for presence is/ better than absence, if you love excess.” (CP 190)

This poem thus confirms Rivers’ and O’Hara’s self-conscious efforts to retrieve and uncover the “excessive” element of the male anatomy (the penis), presumably in reaction against traditional ways of representing the naked male body in high art. In his collaboration with Joe Brainard entitled C Comics No. 2 (1966), O’Hara wrote lines under the balloon signs and Brainard drew cartoons; he made an interesting comment on the prohibition on the openly naked male body in fine art. In “Hard Times (after Dickens),” a man whose face is wiped out and genitals are hidden said that “Sometimes I wonder just why I am a Fine Arts Major—I guess it must be because I’m so beautiful. I seem to find something of myself in every great work of art.” The other comic from the same series (1966, Fig. 52) literally contains an image of the male nude hiding his penis by raising his leg, and other genital areas covered by a black bar, methods that had been widely used in physique magazines. If the genital is exposed, the face was covered with a black blurb. In another collaborative work with Brainard (1964, Fig. 53), a group of

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naked female models mock their male counterparts who hide their sexual organs:

“There’s something very funny about us being nude and them hiding their dickies.”

According to Kenneth Clark’s 1956 study *The Nude*, “the nude,” a word carrying in educated usage “no uncomfortable overtone,” is usually expressed in the form “of a balanced, prosperous, and confident body: the body re-formed.”; in contrast, “the naked” evokes the state of being “deprived of one’s clothes” and “some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition.”\(^{37}\) In a 1972 lecture, “Definition of Pornography,” Clark further elaborated the fundamental problem of the naked human body in relation to the viewer’s reaction. For him, pornography crossed the line between the private realm of sexual pleasure and the public realm of aesthetic contemplation because it was aimed to invoke “voyeuristic interest” and turned viewers into “active participants” in private “sexual activity.” The viewer’s voyeuristic interest is inimical to aesthetic contemplation, he claimed, because the moment that art taps into sexual instincts and the viewer’s voyeuristic interest, art “loses its true character.”\(^{38}\)

Lynda Nead, a feminist scholar, on the contrary, maintained that Clark’s nude/naked dichotomy failed to explain the incomplete and porous distinctions between the nude as a pure object of aesthetic consumption and the naked as engaging with an illegitimate interest in human sexuality. According to Nead, Clark’s theory of nudity and pornography rather reminds the viewer that “erotica” is “bubbling away but in constant


danger of boiling over.” Even the most veiled work can easily be subjected to its association with excessive eroticism in art due to the problematics of the naked body. Therefore efforts to establish the difference between the naked and the nude, the sensual and the pornographic, the cerebral and the corporeal appear to be illusory.

More importantly, fear of pornographic content overlapped with fear of homoeroticism, for the nakedness of the male nude could easily be subjected to the suspicion of homoeroticism. As one New York Times critic expressed, “There is something disconcerting about the sight of a man’s naked body being presented as a sexual object.” The critic continued, “whereas the Greeks, the Romans, and Michelangelo had produced male nudes that symbolized some ideal of strength and skill,” contemporary male nudes failed to show an idealized and distanced image of the male nude, presenting “a world in which men expose their bodies to strangers in a confused invitation to sex.”

Avoiding the charge of homoeroticism was also a crucial concern of the male photographers and artists who worked for physique magazines, which served as major venues for the creation and consumption of explicitly and implicitly homoerotic images during the postwar years. The histories of the physique magazine and the gay subculture overlap, and a handful of influential photographers and illustrators for these magazines were gay. The physique magazine also shared with the gay culture the goal of turning the...
almost-naked male body into an object of aesthetic pleasure. In *Little Big Men: Bodybuilding Subculture and Gender Construction* (1993), Alan Klein claimed that gay men constituted the major part of the audience for bodybuilders, to whom they offered validation and support that mainstream society often failed to provide. Klein argued that a considerable segment of the gay population “unquestionably appreciates the physique that young bodybuilders struggle to fashion.”

During the 1950s, male nude photographs in physique magazines were subject to the serious interrogations of postal inspectors and FBI agents, who were attentive to allegedly pornographic content such as “excessive genital delineation.” In the highly repressive social atmosphere of the period, a stylized male posture that followed the precedents of classical statues proved an effective justification for the male nude. The most common images were well-developed male bodies, generally placed in remote, idyllic settings. Typical poses in *Physique Pictorial* were those of the discus thrower, wrestler, Mercury, Hermes, and Michelangelo’s David. The cover of a 1956 issue of *

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42 In 1948, the Postmaster General established strict measures to control the number of physique ads in men’s magazines. Also magazines that contained content deemed obscene would be forbidden to use the mail. According to Hooven, none of the physique magazines of the 1950s were actually prosecuted, although there were frequent investigations and occasional confiscations. Valentine Hooven, *Beefcake: The Muscle Magazines of America 1950-1970* (Köln: Taschen, 2002), 30, 60.

Grecian Guild Pictorial also featured the image of a man wearing a Greek-style helmet (Fig. 54). The magazine set out its objective as follows: “It [The Grecian Guild] is pledged to the perfection of the body as the divinely created temple of the mind and spirit; to the appreciation of all beauty and worthy art; to the accomplishment of the best of which each man is capable; to the love of God, truth, honor, purity, friendship, and native land.”

Therefore, O’Hara did not conform to the notions of decorum held within the high-art community or the gay subculture; this non-conformity enabled Rivers to question the validity of the boundary between the idealized male nude and illicit homoerotic imagery. Rivers problematized the masculine ideal in high art from various angles; the posture of exposing one’s body to the viewer’s gaze in O’Hara reminds the viewer of the female nude, whereas O’Hara’s erect penis, his black leather combat boots, and the rough brushstrokes evoke a sense of masculine aggression. Harrison also noted the absurd and ambiguous gender undertones of O’Hara’s posture. “The O’Hara canvas, its pretensions to old-master grandeur notwithstanding,” she argued, “had a deeply affecting presence caused in part by the sexual vulnerability that permeates the figure’s macho, half-burlesque pose.”

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45 Susan Bordo noted an important paradox inheriting the naked male body displayed in public, relative to gaze in general. According to Bordo, the male body, which became a passive receptacle of other man’s gaze, occupied a feminine position in visual dynamic. At the same time, it is, however, the naked male bodies’ imagined masculinity (that is, the consciousness of them as active, evaluating sexual subjects, with a defining and ‘penetrating’ sexual gaze) that made them the objects of heterosexual fear.” Susan Bordo, “Reading the Male Body,” in The Male Body: Features, Destinies, Exposures, ed. Laurence Goldstein (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1997), 287.

46 Harrison, Larry Rivers, 40.
O’Hara’s body, accorded with hyper-masculine traits, complicates not only the
gender divisions, but also the relationship between the homoerotic body and various
forms of masculinity. In the portrait, the leather boots—the only thing O’Hara wears—
contrast with O’Hara’s nakedness. The image of the leather boots has been associated
with multiple meanings in the gay subculture. First, it connotes “rough trade,” the
primary meaning of which is violent, often brutal sex acts. Within the gay subculture,
“rough trade” was also a slang term that alluded to gay men’s fascination with working-
class men, especially with male prostitutes, who were usually not self-avowedly male
homosexuals but were involved in “abnormal” same-sex relationships. In the most typical
case of rough trade, an upper- or middle-class gay man hired a macho, allegedly
heterosexual or bisexual man from the lower or working class to satisfy a fantasy of
“tough” male sexuality.47

The actual relationship between Rivers and O’Hara, in a sense, fell into the
category of rough trade.48 According to Gooch and Rivers, O’Hara had been known for
his tendency to become attracted to a “straight man,” rather than a man who had been
oriented exclusively to the same-sex relationships. In an interview with Gooch, Rivers
reflected, “I was in a rather conventional tradition of men who are mainly heterosexual or
have had mostly heterosexual experience…. One night I’d be with him and the next night

47 The term rough trade did not enter the lexicon until the 1930s, but the practice of male
prostitution had been historically well recorded. In Sexual Inversion (1902), Havelock Ellis
(1898-1905), for instance, reported that “trade” prostitution by military men and working-class or
lower-class men who were not exclusively homosexual themselves was relatively common in
London at the turn of the twentieth century. Havelock Ellis, Studies in the Psychology of Sex:

48 Ferguson, In Memory of My Feelings, 80.
I’d be with a woman. It got to be funny.” In Drawings and Digressions, Rivers also noted that it was relatively common for O’Hara to favor heterosexual men: “He [O’Hara] usually picks on guys who also like women—the classic case of the homosexual who likes ‘men’: by definition a ‘man’ is someone who likes women.”

Apart from such biographical references, the general implication of rough trade also had rich historical and cultural precedents. For example, in novel In Search of Lost Time by Marcel Proust (1871-1922)—particularly in volume five, entitled Sodom and Gomorrah (1922)—one of the main characters, Baron de Charlus, has relationships with men from a range of classes; he is especially fascinated by young criminals and street toughs. During the 1920s and 1930s, Paul Cadmus created a series of paintings of sailors, in which he juxtaposed seemingly macho sailors with effeminate “fairy” types. In his controversial painting The Fleet’s In! (1934, Fig. 55), Cadmus portrayed a man in a white sailor uniform making eye contact with an effeminate man—a “pansy” type—while handing him a cigarette.

Although gay men’s fascination with sexual encounters with male heterosexuals and tough, macho types has a long history in art and literature, rough trade in relation to

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49 Larry Rivers, Interview with Brad Gooch, March 2, 1989, quoted in Gooch, City Poet, 229.

50 Rivers and Brightman, Drawings and Digressions, 79.

leather culture—as implied by the leather boots in the painting—was a relatively new phenomenon during the postwar years. “Leather” is a blanket term for an array of sexual preferences, identities, and social organizations, loosely tied together by a common trait—what is conventionally defined as sadomasochistic sex. During the 1950s and 1960s, homosexual men who preferred leather pants, boots, and metal chains formed distinct social groups within the community of male homosexuals. They shared a fascination with military culture—especially its social hierarchy, honor code, uniforms, closely cropped hair, and leather jackets. Donald Cory and John LeRoy have vividly described the scene in a typical American “leather bar” during the 1950s and 1960s.

Here, sturdy swaggering males dressed in tight dungarees, leather jackets or heavy shoes, dark hued woolen shirts, and sometimes motorcycle helmets, aspire toward a super-masculine ideal. Behind the façade of robust exploits, the uniform of pretentious male prowess, the mask of toughness, there sometimes lies a dangerous personality that can express itself physically by substituting violence for erotic pleasure: capable of receiving sexual pleasure only by inflicting pain (or receiving it).


Motorcycle clubs had been formed by the early 1950s, primarily on the West Coast. These clubs staged runs—public events where members could meet members of other clubs—and patronized certain bars, typically hanging a banner that bore their club emblem to mark these bars as informal meeting places. Mark Thompson, “Introduction,” in Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice, ed. Mark Thompson (Boston: Alyson Pub., 1991), xv-xvi. Kenneth Anger’s 1963 Scorpio Rising has best captured the life of motorcycle gang and leather culture from the perspective of a queer director. The movie chronicles a group of young bikers’ activities, focusing in particular on a biker named Scorpio. For an excellent discussion of the influence of bikers and leather culture in Scorpio Rising, see Juan A. Suarez, Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 141-180.

Donald Webster Cory and John LeRoy, The Homosexual and His Society: A View from Within (New York: Citadel Press, 1963), 109. Leather-bar imagery also constitutes a popular trope in German New Cinema director Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s postwar films. Fassbinder’s
Gay men’s attraction to aspects of military culture—particularly leather attire—may have been largely attributable to their experiences during the Second World War. Nazi military culture, in particular, emerged as one of the most powerful sources for the leather culture that developed within the male homosexual community in the 1950s. Rivers himself mentioned Nazism in passing in reference to the leather boots in O’Hara: “Frank had done one little afternoon of posing naked with very heavy leather boots on and the Nazis knew nothing like it.” O’Hara’s leather boots and Rivers’ comments may support the assertion that the painter was familiar with the significance that the leather boots and homosocial culture of Nazi Germany had among male homosexuals during the postwar years.

Most National Socialist organizations in Nazi Germany were all-male societies. According to the anti-fascist journal Het Fundament, published in Holland during the 1930s, “the great danger of male bonding, especially in the military, was indeed

1982 Querelle, a filmic adaptation of Jean Genet’s 1947 novel Querelle de Brest, is replete with fetishized images of homosexual romance, including gay archetypes ranging from leather men to sailors. It has been theorized that the Second World War and the emerging motorcycle outlaw are the two major historical factors that contributed to the development of S/M culture during the 1950s and 1960s. See “Introduction,” in Different Loving: A Complete Exploration of the World of Sexual Dominance and Submission, ed. Gloria Brame, Jon Jacobs, and William Brame (New York: Villard Books, 1996), 30.


57 Larry Rivers, Letter to Grace Hartigan, January 17, 1954, Grace Hartigan Papers, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Library/Department of Special Collections.
homosexuality.” Historian Parker Rossman noted that there were consistent efforts “to revive the Greek ideal of pedagogic pederasty in the movement of ‘Wandering Youth’... Ultimately, Hitler used and transformed the movement...expanding and building upon its romanticism as a basis for the Nazi Party.” In her 1974 article “Fascinating Fascism,” Susan Sontag observed that “much of the imagery of far-out sex has been placed under the sign of Nazism. Boots, leather, chains, Iron Crosses on gleaming torsos... had become the secret and most lucrative paraphernalia of eroticism.” The tendency to eroticize Nazism, she observed, was especially pronounced among male homosexuals.

The connection between postwar leather culture and Nazism points to principal changes as regards stereotypical images of male homosexuals. In short, the leather culture played a significant role in integrating gay men’s attraction to hyper-masculine types into the gay subculture during the 1950s and 1960s. Images of bikers in leather pants and jackets began cropping up in physique magazines during the 1950s. According to historian Thomas Waugh, Mizer’s photographs from the 1950s marked a transitional period for gay erotica. Although a majority of Mizer’s male nudes in Physique Pictorial

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59 Parker Rossman, Sexual Experience between Men and Boys (New York: Association Press, 1976), 103. Ironically, during the twelve years of the Nazi regime, nearly 50,000 men were convicted of the crime of homosexuality, and the majority ended up in concentration camps.


61 Sontag listed several films and art works by homosexuals in which the influence of fascism was evident, such as Kenneth Anger’s Scorpio Rising (1964) and Luchino Visconti’s The Damned (1969). She also claimed that Nazi material had entered the repertory of popular iconography in Pop art, as exemplified by Andy Warhol’s silk screen of Mao Tse-Tung in 1972. Ibid., 100-101, 103.
in the 1950s depicted classical male bodies set in exotic and mythical contexts, Mizer also favored rough-looking, muscular models, many of whom—according to British painter David Hockney—had criminal records and earned their living modeling, sitting for artists, and hustling.62 Sailors, bikers, policemen, and prison guards were also popular visual tropes or motifs in the drawings of Tom of Finland (the pseudonym of Touko Laaksonen, 1920-91), an influential illustrator who worked for Physique Pictorial in from the mid 1950s.63 His drawing entitled “Test Your Strength” (1961, Fig. 56), published on the cover of the April 1961 issue of Physique Pictorial, for instance, shows virile men dressed in military caps and tight leather jackets casually socializing with one another. The illustration presents Finland’s prototypes, whose bulging and exaggerated shoulders contrast with their narrow hips and thin legs. The words “test your strength” inscribed next to the figures reinforce the image of homosexual men bragging about their physical power—an image that obviously departs from the stereotypical image of effeminate male homosexuals.

The growing masculinization of the gay stereotype during the 1950s and 1960s attested to the ambiguous relationship between homosexuality and apparently normative (heterosexual) masculinity. On one hand, gay men’s fascination with tough, macho men


63 Touko Laaksonen, a Finland-born illustrator, chose to publish his drawings under a pseudonym, “Tom of Finland,” in magazines for gay readership, including Physique Pictorial, in the United States from the 1950s onward. According to Valentine Hooven, Finland’s drawings differed from other depictions of the gay man during the 1950s in three respects. First, the content was identifiably homosexual, as he depicted men rather explicitly flirting or engaging in physical contact; second, his drawings were set in contemporary society; third, his drawings portrayed a novel type of the gay man who was unmistakably happy. Valentine Hooven, Tom of Finland: His Life and Times (London: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 89-94. For the critical reception of Finland’s drawings within gay and lesbian studies, see also Micha Ramakers, Dirty Pictures: Tom of Finland, Masculinity, and Homosexuality (London: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 18-23.
reflected a failure to question traditional gender types—not to mention the momentary and illusive pleasure of empowerment. The prevalence of a macho style may indicate an erotic investment in masculinity and an uncritical identification with it. On the other hand, the macho style in the gay community may have also served the political purpose of challenging signifiers of male heterosexuality. In 1999, Susan Bordo argued that in Tom of Finland’s drawings the visual indication of ostensibly aggressive masculinity—biker tattoos, police cuffs, frontal bulges—“are so abundant that they simply cannot be taken seriously.” His drawing, then, might be erotic in intent, but “with an ironic wink.”

According to film critic and gay theoretician Richard Dyer, a gay macho style should be seen as “a form of semiotic guerilla warfare” through which gay men self-consciously seek to undermine the signifying practices that naturalize the social production of masculinity. The existence of this style raises a troubling question: “If that bearded, muscular beer drinker turns out to be a pansy, how ever are they going to know the ‘real’ men any more?” This question seems especially pertinent in the context of the 1950s, a time of intense paranoia regarding the boundary between homosexuals and heterosexuals.

From this perspective, the layered references to the artist’s biography, art history, and sexual politics embedded in O’Hara suggest that the painting is not a mere portrait meant simply to reflect O’Hara’s personality, nor a faithful record of the intimate feelings shared between sitter and painter, as Ferguson postulated; instead, O’Hara’s image serves

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as a vehicle through which various boundaries and categories are questioned, challenged, and reconfigured, such as self and other, private and public, naked and nude, femininity and masculinity, effeminacy and virility, and high art and gay subculture.

**O’Hara’s “Homosexuality”: Revisiting Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself”**

O’Hara wrote “Homosexuality” (1954) two months after posing for Rivers’ *O’Hara*, a poem that centered on an inquiry related to representations of male sexuality and of homoeroticism in the history of literature, like Rivers’ *O’Hara*. The title “Homosexuality” puts the poem’s major theme up front. The work opens with the poet’s inquiry as to the problem of the “homosexual closet”: “So we are taking off our masks, are we, and keeping/ our mouths shut?” (*CP* 181) The question that O’Hara raises at the beginning of the poem is so forthright that it is almost impossible for the reader to miss the controversial nature of the poem. Alice Parker claimed in 1989 that the pronoun “we” in O’Hara’s “Homosexuality” was a rare occasion in which the poem directly referred to the homosexual community in general, of which the poet was supposedly a member.66

O’Hara’s forthright manner has attracted divergent interpretations as to the role that the poet’s personal life plays in the poem. Joe LeSueur maintained that “Homosexuality” was not necessarily confessional in nature:

> These trenchant, wittily observed lines that touch upon an unsavory aspect of Manhattan gay life in the 1950s have led to a misunderstanding about the way Frank conducted his sex life, which is to say, the poem is not as confessional or as autobiographical as some of his readers might assume.67

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Kenward Elmslie, another friend of O’Hara’s, recalled that it was quite common for O’Hara to read “Homosexuality” to a mixed crowd of friends and family members. O’Hara casually spoke of his sexual adventures “in front of Janice, Kenneth Koch’s wife, and other women and straights, spelling out everything so it wasn’t just shocking, it was hilarious.” Elmslie regarded O’Hara’s “outing” of himself as more or less an extension of his eccentric personality.

Koch, on the contrary, maintained that O’Hara’s entire Collected Poems could be seen as “a collection of created moments that illuminated a whole life.” Koch cited O’Hara’s poems on Larry Rivers between 1952 and 1954, “Homosexuality,” and poems to Vincent Warren between 1959 and 1961 as supporting evidence of this claim. Bruce Boone, a literary critic, proceeded to interpret what he called O’Hara’s “gay language” practice. In 1979, Boone maintained that O’Hara’s self-deprecating humor, including his candid portrayal of gay night life in “Homosexuality,” can be understood as a kind of a defense mechanism against harsh social reality and alienation. According to Boone, O’Hara’s treatment of homosexuality in some of his poems may reflect his strategy of “minimizing sensations of great pains and suffering with humor that neutralizes the seriousness of the harm done.”

Such variability in the reception of O’Hara’s “Homosexuality” reflects the difficulty critics have faced in understanding the ambivalent nature of self-exposure in his

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68 Gooch, City Poet, 196.


writing. One group of critics has ignored the aspects of his writing that might contain personal revelations; another group has fully embraced an interpretation of O’Hara’s poems as primarily reflective of his sexual identity and the distinctive social conditions of homosexuals. However, neither approach seems effective in fully excavating the historical and cultural implications of O’Hara’s explicit treatment of homosexuality in his poem. The image of the gay man at the beginning of “Homosexuality” (“So we are taking off our masks, are we, and keeping/ our mouths shut?”) rather reminds the reader of the ambivalent positioning of the homosexual between concealment and exposure. O’Hara hereby alluded to the questionable visibility of the homosexual who pulled out his mask, yet remained unsure whether he should speak loudly or remain silent.

Instead, I will suggest that the ambiguous self-positioning of male homosexuals on the threshold of the closet, in general, and the core images of masks and veils in “Homosexuality,” in particular, should be looked upon in relation to Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” first published in 1855.\(^\text{71}\) Whitman’s “Song of Myself” was, as Robert Martin has stated, one of the prototypical literary texts in the United States, especially in relation to gay liberation. Whitman’s work exerted considerable influence on the development of postwar poetry in the United States.\(^\text{72}\) Whitman strongly recommended

\(^\text{71}\) Whitman seemed to become bolder in addressing his celebration of male comradeship in his second publication of the “Calamus” poems in 1860. In the beginning of this volume, he announced that his new literary mission was “To tell the secret of my nights and days,/ To celebrate the need of comrades.” From 1855 to 1881, Whitman published seven revisions of “Song of Myself” while maintaining the core message of the poem. For a general introduction to the history of “Song of Myself,” see Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself”: A Mosaic of Interpretations, ed. Edwin Haviland (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), xviii-xxviii.

\(^\text{72}\) For a discussion of Whitman’s influence on twentieth century American poets (especially on Hart Crane, Langston Hughes, and Allen Ginsberg) in relation to these poets’ sexual orientations and their attitudes toward the dominant forms of masculinity, see Robert Martin, “Introduction,” in The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman, ed. Robert Martin (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), xi-xxiii.
that young poets write in their own vernacular. In the postwar period, the young poets of O’Hara’s generation, including Allen Ginsberg, sought to question the formulaic methods of planning and composing poetry advocated by New Critics, who conceived the literary text as a unique and privileged source of meaning and value, sharply distinguished from other texts and uses of language. Whitman’s incorporation of oral traditions, celebration of bodily pleasure, and inclusion of strongly personal voices in his poetry gave him the status of a near-prophet for many in the postwar literary scene. In “Personism” (1959), O’Hara wrote that “after all, only Whitman and Crane and Williams, of the American poets, are better than the movies. As for measure and other technical apparatus, that’s just common sense....” (CP 498)

In his 1972 interview with Allen Young, Ginsberg cited Whitman’s “Song of Myself” in summoning the distinctive poetic language that had greatly influenced his poetry and the writing of his generation. He paraphrased a passage that he perceived as the nineteenth century precedent to his own “Howl.” In the poem “We Two Boys Together Clinging,” included in Calamus (1860), Whitman wrote, “We two boys together clinging,/ One the other never leaving/ Up and Down the road going, North and South excursions/ making,/ Power enjoying, elbows stretching, fingers clutching,/ Arm’d and fearless, eating, drinking, sleeping, loving,/…fulfilling our foray.” (LG 111) Stylistically, this passage reflects Whitman’s imitation of chanting. According to Ginsberg, Whitman read psalms in the Bible in order to prepare to write poems informed by the oral tradition, and Whitman’s poems were meant to be recited rather than read silently. In the first words of Whitman’s “Song of Myself”—“I celebrate myself, and sing myself, and what I
shall assume you shall assume”—“a syntactical balance is used to give a measure to the line rather than an academic accent count,” wrote Ginsberg.73

Whitman’s “Song of Myself” is also a pioneering work for its articulation of the poet’s utopian vision of a community of men.74 Within this imaginary community, all men experience social equity and enjoy harmonious relationships. In his 1871 writing “Democratic Vistas,” Whitman hailed male romantic friendship as the basis of American democracy. In a footnote to “Democratic Vistas,” he elaborated on this notion:

It is to the development, identification, and general prevalence of that fervid comradeship (the adhesive love, at least rivaling the amative love hitherto possessing imaginative literature, if not going beyond it) that I look for the counterbalance and offset of our materialistic and vulgar American democracy, and for the spiritualization thereof. Many will say it is a dream, and will not follow my inference: but I confidently expect a time when there will be seen…threads of manly friendship, fond and loving…not only giving tone to individual character, and making it unprecedently emotional, muscular, heroic, and refined, but having the deepest relations to general politics. (LG 770-71)

Whitman here distinguished “adhesiveness,” the spiritualized bonding between men, from “amativeness,” the more crudely physical attraction between men and women. According to Michael Lynch, classical phrenologists, who originally coined these terms in the nineteenth century, did not present these two categories as antithetical or specifically gendered; for them, “amativeness” referred to sexual attraction and “adhesiveness” to intense, yet not essentially erotic, friendship. Lynch claimed that it was

73 Allen Ginsberg, Interview with Fernanda Pivano, November 1968, first published in Italian as the preface to Allen Ginsberg, 

74 Whitman’s influence on postwar poets—especially those with non-straight identities—was not limited to the United States. Federico Garcia Lorca wrote a poem entitled “Ode to Walt Whitman” (1934), in which he spoke of “the sun singing on the navels of boys playing baseball under the bridges,” which, according to Ginsberg, alludes to Whitman’s community of young men in “Song of Myself.” Allen Ginsberg, Interview with Allen Young, September 1972, first published in Allen Ginsberg: Gay Sunshine Interview (1974), reprinted in ibid., 319.
Whitman who described “adhesiveness” in specifically gendered terms as a spiritual union between men, in contrast to lower forms of “amativeness” between men and women.  

In *The Homosexual Tradition*, Robert Martin contended that although Whitman’s poetic language contains layered implications and metaphors, the core concept of “adhesiveness” is crucial to an understanding of “spiritual as well as physical unions between males in his poetry.” This theme, Martin professed, was “already on the surface from his early major works such as ‘Song of Myself.’” Martin cited the following passage from the twenty-fourth section, which can be interpreted as the climactic moment of “Song of Myself”: “You sweaty brooks and dews it shall be you!/ Winds whose soft-tickling genitals rub against me it shall be you,/ Broad muscular fields,/ branches of liveoak, loving loungers in my winding paths, it shall be you,/ Hands I have touched, face I have kissed, mortal I have ever touched, it shall be you.” *(LG 47)*

The image of male genitals rubbing and touching the poet’s body suggests male homosexual friendship. Noting this central image in “Song of Myself,” Martin concluded that “it is impossible to believe that Whitman, at the time he conceived this as a major symbol for his poems, wished to imply a love” that was merely “fraternal” and “not

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76 Martin argued that although Whitman did not use “adhesiveness” in print until 1856, at the end of “Song of Myself, he implied this concept, which he had not yet named: “There is that in me…I do not know what it is…. But I know it is in me/ …it is without name…it is a word unsaid/ it is not in any dictionary…” Robert Martin, *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 31.
“Song of Myself” is, indeed, profuse with celebrations of brotherhood and idealized poetic depictions of male bodies. In the eleventh sonnet, Whitman wrote, “Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore,/ Twenty-eight young men and all so friendly;/ Twenty-eight years of womanly life and all so lonesome…./ The beards of the young men glisten’d with wet, it ran from their long hair,/ Little streams pass’d all over their bodies.” (LG 34)

In “Homosexuality,” O’Hara also included both direct and indirect allusions to the central theme of Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” For instance, Whitman strongly urged the male self (a category that presumably includes the homosexual self) to break the social mold by removing disguises and veils: “Through me forbidden voices,/ voices of sexes and lusts, voices veiled and I remove the/ veil,/ voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur’d.” (LG 46) He demanded openness and self-revelation: “Unscrew the locks from the doors! Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!” (LG 46) The beginning of O’Hara’s “Homosexuality” bears similarity to Whitman’s poem; the first notable image in O’Hara’s poem is a mask, and the tenth line, which indicates that the poet will examine his own voice: “It is the law of my own voice I shall investigate.” (CP 182)—a line that may also make reference to Whitman’s “forbidden voices” and “voices veiled.”

As its title suggests, “Song of Myself” is the song of an independent being who could courageously confront his bare, unique, and individual self, even at the risk of breaking social taboos and restrictions. At the beginning of “Song of Myself,” Whitman wrote: “I celebrate myself, and sing myself,/ And what I assume you shall assume,/ For

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77 Ibid., 25.
every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.”\textsuperscript{78} In the second couplet of “Homosexuality,” O’Hara wrote: “The song of an old cow is not more full of judgment/ than the vapors which escape one’s soul when one is sick” (\textit{CP} 182). Referring to this phrase in “Homosexuality,” Robert Martin has argued that “‘Homosexuality’ imitates Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’ in an amusing way,”\textsuperscript{79} as it contains numerous—both obvious and loose—“ironic and satiric” allusions to Whitman’s poem.\textsuperscript{80}

O’Hara’s investigation of his hidden voice or inner self, which might be inspired by “Song of Myself,” led him to a different place than Whitman’s utopian community of men and the search for the bare self. In the third and fourth couplets, O’Hara gave a detailed description of his removing of the veil or the shadow that covered the bare face underneath: “So I pull the shadows around me like a puff/ and crinkle my eyes as if at the most exquisite moment/ of a very long opera, and then we are off!/ Without reproach and without hope that our delicate feet” (\textit{CP} 182). Unlike Whitman’s rather determined way of investigating his hidden voices and forming a community of men (“Twenty-eight young men and all so friendly;/ Twenty-eight years of womanly life and all so lonesome go”), O’Hara’s gesture of “outing,” as described in his poem may leave the reader confused since the poet’s delivery is profuse in campiness and theatricality. It hardly evokes the sense of gravity and seriousness that the process of self-disclosure typically entails.


\textsuperscript{79} Martin, \textit{The Homosexual Tradition}, 165.

\textsuperscript{80} Parker, \textit{The Exploration of the Secret Smile}, 93.
Especially, the phrase “without reproach and without hope” implies that O’Hara took a neutral and even skeptical position toward political and idealistic readings of the “brave” act of “coming out” and forming brotherly bonds, which Whitman’s poem consistently celebrated. O’Hara did not seem to remain aloof from both the moral standards of “mainstream” society and the effort to promote the alternative and independent standard for the gay people. In a way, “Homosexuality” illustrates the poet’s journey from confrontation to self-criticism and skepticism; O’Hara put forth a question, but quickly refused to endorse the further positive, political impact that coming out of the closet might have on the social circumstance of the gay man.

In tone, O’Hara’s poem departs from Whitman’s presentation of an idealized poetic self who is ready to celebrate and sing with courage and determination. O’Hara wrote,

in the rain. It’s wonderful to admire oneself
with complete candor, tallying up the merits of each
of the latrines. 14th Street is drunken and credulous,
53rd tries to tremble but is too at rest. The good
love a park and the inept a railway station,
and there are the divine ones who drag themselves up (CP 182)

The streets mentioned in the poem represent the two major gay neighborhoods of postwar New York. During this era, most of New York’s gay bars were located either in Greenwich Village or along Third Avenue. On Third Avenue between Forty-fifth and Fifty-third streets—a slightly run-down stretch overshadowed by the tracks of an elevated train—was a string of gay bars, such as the Golden Cockerel, the Yellow Cockatoo, the Swan, the Golden Pheasant, and the Blue Parrot, which became known as the “Bird
Circuit.” According to Gooch, cruising gay bars was “a big part” of the experience of most gays in the 1950s. O’Hara, who happened to live on East Fifty-First Street during the early 1950s, was no exception. In a 1951 letter to O’Hara, Rivers warned him that “the cops are making arrests at the Blue P [Parrot] every night these days.”

Yet in suggesting meeting places for male homosexuals, O’Hara used the word “latrines,” which denotes simple toilet holes used in military settings or outdoor campsites. Among gay people, “latrine” usually signified a kind of “tearoom” for the gay man. The phrase tearoom is a slang within homosexual subculture referring to a venue where public sex occurs, generally in a public toilet. O’Hara’s mention of various homosexual gathering places in downtown, midtown, and uptown New York gives the reader a sense of the drifting and promiscuous urban male homosexual, of a world in which a man rarely settled down with a stable partner or lover. The gay man in “Homosexuality” appears “drunken and credulous” in the midtown bars and has an instant relationship at a secret area in the park. The clause “It’s wonderful to admire oneself with complete candor,” in a way, refers to the Whitmanesque depiction of the gay man relatively free of social pressure and eager to confront his hidden identities. Also, O’Hara’s portrayal of the openly gay man in “Homosexuality” clearly departs from the picture of twenty-eight men openly bathing together and forming a peaceful, harmonious,

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82 Gooch, City Poet, 194. According to Gooch, customers in the East Side bars tended to be conservatively dressed in bow ties and blazers.

83 Larry Rivers, Letter to O’Hara, August 14, 1951, quoted in ibid.

84 Parker, The Exploration of the Secret Smile, 100.
and ideal brotherhood in Whitman’s poem. Parker claimed that the primary purpose of O’Hara’s “Homosexuality” was to reverse Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” “O’Hara is not intent upon being amusing here,” wrote Parker; rather, O’Hara “uses Whitman’s inclusiveness,” and turns it upside down in a satirical and cynical commentary on the limitations of choice that the ‘exclusive’ attitude of the straight world forces upon the homosexual living in that world.”

The image of a drag queen at the end of the poem effectively sums up the absurdity, humor, and pessimism that pervade O’Hara’s “Homosexuality.” Drag queens could be perceived as the bravest members of the gay community, as their unmistakable gender ambiguity alerts mainstream society to their outward “difference”: “and there are the divine ones, who drag themselves up/...in the dust, trailing their long elegant heels of hot air/ crying to confuse the brave ‘it’s a summer day,/ and I want to be wanted more than anything else in the world.’ ” (CP 182) Despite their candor, the drag queens, in their image and “cry,” hardly evoke liberation and self-esteem; instead, their words remind the reader of the pathological condition of some homosexuals—yearning for permanent loving relationships and for social acceptance.

To O’Hara, Whitman’s “Song of Myself” might have exemplified not only the idealistic vision of brotherly love, but also the limitations of representing male intimacy in high literature. In nineteenth century literature, one common way of describing male union was to equate sexual desire with poetic inspiration; from that perspective, the homosocial gatherings and comradeship in Whitman’s poem may not be explicitly sexual. Mark Maslan posits that an analogy between “sexual and poetical rapture” was at

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85 Ibid., 93.
the “heart of the Romantic transformation” of poetry in England and United States.\(^\text{86}\)

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82), whose idea of “mystical unity with nature” hugely influenced Whitman, said: “The poet speaks adequately…only when he speaks somewhat wildly not with the intellect, used as an organ, but with the intellect released from all service.”\(^\text{87}\) In “Song of Myself,” Whitman described his own soul entering his body: “You settled your head thwart my hips and gently turn’d over upon me, And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue on our Bare-strip heart, And reach’d till you felt my beard, and reach’d till you held my feet.” \(\text{(LG 29)}\) Maslan interpreted these lines as representing the union between poet and penetrating soul. Here, the word “tongue” can be also interpreted as the metonym for the poet’s voice; by plunging a tongue into Whitman’s chest, the soul “ravishes” and “inspires” him.\(^\text{88}\) In this poem, Whitman himself declared that he was a poet for corporeality as well as spirituality: “I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,/ The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are/ with me, The first, I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I/ translate into a new tongue.” \(\text{(LG 43)}\)

Therefore, on the one hand, Whitman’s seemingly overt expression of manly love should be understood within the context of the Romantic tradition of poetry. On the other

\(^{86}\) Quoted in Mark Maslan, \textit{Whitman Possessed} (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University, 2001), 75.


\(^{88}\) Maslan maintained that interpreting Whitman’s sexual metaphors in a less graphic way does not entail “domesticating Whitman’s dramatically new poetic approach to sexuality.” Instead, Maslan argued, this new approach has “helped us recognize the precise nature of his audacity—as well as its literary-historical implication.” Eroticism or homosexual desire in Whitman’s poetry was by no means a sublimation of homosexual desire, but the rendition of his vision that male poetic agency is intrinsically “homoerotic.” Maslan, \textit{Whitman Possessed}, 77.
hand, the ambiguous nature of male friendship in “Song of Myself” may point to a
contradictory circumstance related to Whitman’s allegedly open attitude toward
homosexual content. Whitman, in fact, deliberately undermined the homosexual or
homoerotic implications of his “Song of Myself.”89 In a response letter to John
Addington Symonds,90 who had highly praised “Song of Myself,” Whitman wrote: “Such
a construction as mentioned is terrible. I am fain to hope the pages themselves are not to
be even mentioned for such gratuitous and quite at the time entirely undreamed and
unwished possibility of morbid inferences—which are disavowed by me and seem
damnable.”91 Symonds quoted Whitman’s remarks in his essay A Problem in Modern
Ethics (1891), in which he claimed, “there are inevitable points of contact between sexual
inversion and [Whitman’s] doctrine of comradeship.” In Symonds’ view, Whitman’s
“treatment of comradeship, or the impassioned love of man for man” is something to
which “the modern world is unaccustomed.”92 Throughout his notebook, Whitman erased
the name of Peter Doyle, who was believed to be his lover.

89 Martin acknowledged that the obscurity of Whitman’s “universal vision” of
brotherhood consistently made literary critics neglect, undermine, or trivialize the importance of
homoerotic messages in Whitman’s vision of comradeship. According to Martin, this process of
revision, which “has worked to make Whitman ‘safe’... began with Whitman himself,” who was
always “crafty, playing with the limits of the sayable, retreating when he was found out...and he
worked hard to construct a public image for himself as that was based on both his role as the
American national poet and his role as the ‘secret’ gay poet.” Martin, “Introduction,” in
Continuing Presence, xxi.

90 Symonds’ A Problem in Modern Ethics included a homoerotic interpretation of
Whitman’s poem. John Addington Symonds, A Problem in Modern Ethics (1861), reprinted in
We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics, ed. Mark Blasius and

91 Ibid., 104.

92 Ibid., 103-4.
During the 1940s and 1950s, a number of works on Whitman—such as G. W. Allen’s *Walt Whitman Handbook* (1946) and biography of Whitman, *The Solitary Singer* (1955), as well as Fredson Bower’s *Whitman’s Manuscripts* (1955)—were published, stirring controversy over Whitman’s sexual life. These books included his diaries and letters to Peter Doyle. The cover title of the July 1954 issue of *One* magazine was also “The Mystery of Walt Whitman,” in which David Russell and Dalvan McIntire introduced the various critical receptions of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, especially those concentrating on its homoerotic content. The authors concluded: “Whitman’s reaction to his urge for comradely love is full of contradictions—on the one hand, he openly affirms, proclaims his nature as a new gospel; on the other, he resorts to the mask, the innuendo and even forthright denial.” Russell and Dalvan did not further investigate Whitman’s alleged relationship with Doyle and other men, but their conclusion might reflect the prevailing view of Whitman’s “suspicious” sexual lives among homosexuals during the 1950s.

Whatever Whitman’s physical relationships with other men, O’Hara’s image in “Homosexuality” of a gay man as a “hungry cur” wandering around secret gathering places to gratify his physical needs confronts Whitman’s ambiguous and obscured images of romantic friendship between men. O’Hara’s reference to Whitman’s “Song of Myself” in “Homosexuality” suggests several parallels with Rivers’ *O’Hara*. O’Hara revisited Whitman’s poem, a widely known and influential source of idealized notions of manhood.

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in nineteenth century American literature, just as Rivers “got into the ring” with the old masters, especially nineteenth century painters of the male nude. Such efforts to revisit the history of art and literature indicate O’Hara and Rivers’ shared tendency to work within the framework of history and to break down the boundary between high literature and contemporary life. One of the important aspects of camp or pop camp was its ambiguous attachment to cultural heritage and its nostalgia for the past. Camp relied upon methods of “salvaging” materials from the past and of bringing novel and sometimes critical perspectives to them.

Moreover, Rivers’ portrait and O’Hara’s poem both reveal their critical views of an idealized or desexualized masculine image. In both art and literature, the increasing preoccupation with antiquity during the nineteenth century helped the theme of male friendship or comradeship, as exemplified in Whitman’s poetry and in Eakins’ renditions of young men in nature. Rivers’ O’Hara responded to the way the male body had been depicted in nineteenth century male nude studies while reconfiguring the image of the nineteenth century male nude in light of 1950s gay erotica, O’Hara approached the nineteenth century theme of manly companionship within the context of a gay man roaming the metropolis in the 1950s. As Parker noted, O’Hara transferred Whitman’s vision of adhesiveness into the streets of New York, exploring the city’s subterranean side in search of the “reality of homosexual life in the contemporary urban milieu.”

By doing this, O’Hara, like Rivers, may have intended to reveal contradictions and limitations underlying the obscured and idealized representation of male sexuality and homosexuality in literature.

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95 Parker, The Exploration of the Secret Smile, 103.
Walt Whitman and Homosexual Poets in the 1950s

During the 1950s and 1960s, Whitman’s vision of brotherly love was influential among homosexual poets, especially Duncan and Ginsberg. Therefore, comparison of O’Hara’s “Homosexuality” with Duncan’s and Ginsberg’s poems that have been inspired by Whitman’s idealized depictions of brotherhood and the male body offers insights into O’Hara’s distinctive attitude toward the homosexual closet and intimacy among men in pre-Stonewall gay literature.

In his essay “The Advent of Whitman’s Line” (1970), Duncan eulogized the unceasingly changing vision expressed in Whitman’s poetry: “Whitman was the poet of primary intuitions, ancestor of Whitehead’s Process and Reality and of our own vision of creation, where we now see all life as unfoldings, the revelations of a field of potentialities and latencies….”

Duncan also connected Whitman’s formal innovation of free verse to the “arousal of a strength in man’s sexual love that is to be throughout ‘tender’ and boundless.”

Although Duncan did not directly cite Whitman in his poems, Whitman’s vision remained a guiding force for his writing. In the poem “Torso,” included in his Bending the Bow (1968), Duncan placed various parts of the naked male body in emphatic italics in a sort of tribute to Whitman, who also extensively dealt with and idealized the body of the young man. Duncan’s disposition toward the naked male body in “Torso,” is one of distanced, aestheticized voyeurism. The third stanza reads, “At the rise of the pectoral muscles/ the nipples, for the breasts are sleeping fountains/ of feeling in man, waiting

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above the beat of his heart, shielding the rise and fall of his breath, to be awakened…. At the root of the groin/ the pubic hair, for the torso is the stem in which the man/ flowers forth and leads to the stamen of flesh in which/ his seed rises.” According to Cary Nelson, a literary critic, this eroticized image of the naked male body could be read as the physical and spiritual union between two men, rather than as an actual physical act: “Commingling souls also suggest both breath and a spiritual communion.” Duncan’s view of the spiritual and “tender” unions among various men can also be traced back to Whitman.

While Duncan may have inherited from Whitman an idea of sexual liberation within the tradition of Romantic poetry, Ginsberg promulgated sexual politics as part of a larger program of ideological and political protest. Whitman’s ambitious project of eulogizing manly love was, indeed, complicated, combining the poet’s spiritual, political, social, and cultural visions of American society. In “Howl,” Ginsberg rendered numerous

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100 Whitman’s influence on Ginsberg is relatively well-established. Ginsberg recalled that his most memorable school day was the afternoon that his English teacher, Frances Durbin of Newark’s East Side High School, read aloud from Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” to the class. In his long and mature poem “A Supermaket in California” (1956), Ginsberg cited Whitman as both an invisible mentor and the main progenitor of the poem. “What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman, for/ I walked down the sidestreets under the trees with a headache/ self-conscious looking at the full moon/ …/ in my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!… I saw you, Walt Whitman/…/ Where are we going, Walt Whitman?” Allen Ginsberg, Selected Poems 1947-1995 (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 59-60 (hereafter abbreviated AG).
images of manly companionship. Although Ginsberg’s portrayals are not exactly “tender,” his lines are breathless stylistic imitations of Whitman, replete with images of men locked in an endless cycle of bodily contact, pleasure, and ecstasy. Ginsberg famously began all of his lines in “Howl” with “who”: “who ate fire in paint hotels or drank turpentine in Paradise Alley, death, or purgatoried their torsos night after night/ with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and cock and endless balls,/ who talked continuously seventy hours from park to pad to bar to Bellevue to museum to the Brooklyn Bridge/…./ who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love.” (AG 50-51)

More importantly, Ginsberg’s fascination with male writers of the “Beat Generation” such as Jack Kerouac (1922-69), Neal Cassady (1926-68), and William Burroughs may be viewed in relation to his Whitmanesque vision of intensive brotherhood. He claimed that Neal Cassady, known for his uninhibited exploration of sexuality with both men and women, as well as for his friendships with the Beat poets, was “recovering a tradition of generosity of emotion and magnanimity of body and soul that were praised by Whitman, Sherwood Anderson and Hart Crane.” According to Ginsberg, Cassady was “a very early exhibition of that sexual democracy that’s spread now and accepted by the entire psychedelic unisex generation.”

101 The Beat poets’ formation of intensive friendships as the basis of their creative output and collective counter-cultural rebellion, in Ginsberg’s view, largely grew out their generational response to Whitman’s “Adamic” tradition.

But the point is that in our private relationship we found the whole spectrum of love if not convenient at least tolerable and charming. And that was a world of private sociability and discourse which was the inverse of the lack of adhesiveness and the lack of recognition of Person, the objectification, reification, depersonalization, mechanization of Person…. So I think *On the Road* and *Visions of Cody* and all the other books have a basic political prophetic value, not merely in discovering the body of land…but as the presentation for the first time in a long time of unabashed emotion between fellow citizens.¹⁰²

Ginsberg, in a way, expanded Whitman’s “democratic/Adamic vision”; he used his poems as tools of social protest in order to attract readers and other revolutionaries to his cause(s), thus establishing a community of compassion, concern, and action based upon intense friendship among major Beat poets.

Ginsberg could be characterized as the closest poet among beat and contemporary poets to O’Hara in writing style, subject matter, and thematic sources. “Howl” was written between 1955 and 1956, a year after O’Hara’s “Homosexuality,” as Ginsberg moved from New York City to San Francisco. Ginsberg and O’Hara belonged to the generation of homosexual poets who hung around the San Remo Café and other renowned gay meeting places in New York City. The stylistic similarity between O’Hara’s “Homosexuality” and Ginsberg’s “Howl” is also hard to miss; O’Hara’s poem, with its breathless, immediate, and open form, adopts aspects of the oral tradition in Whitman’s poems. The settings of O’Hara’s and Ginsberg’s poems are also quite similar; both works follow gay men through the city at night as they yell, cry, and explore forbidden love and ecstasy.

Notwithstanding, there are notable differences between Ginsberg’s and O’Hara’s works, especially regarding their implied political positions and attitudes toward gay men’s self-disclosure and gay liberation. O’Hara never explicitly avowed a political

¹⁰² Ibid., 294-95.
stance in “Homosexuality.” In this poem, the speaker appears to be a single individual, evidently with a camp sensibility, who casts himself as a distant observer. The speaker is performing rather than doing; he is observing, narrating, and reporting about various gathering places for male homosexuals in the city, occasionally injecting notes of sarcasm and humor. Ginsberg’s poem is, by contrast, full of immediate, visceral, and graphic scenes of sexual intercourse and experimentation, such as the image of sailors involved in “perverse” acts.

The endings of “Homosexuality” and “Howl” also point to a significant discrepancy between O’Hara and Ginsberg. Ginsberg expressed a somewhat hopeful vision of the future at the end of part one, titled “For Carl Solomon.”: “and rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in the goldhorn shadow of the band and blew the suffering of America’s naked mind for love into an eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani saxophone cry that shivered the cities down to the last radio.” (AG 54) Ginsberg’s poem is at once a work of critique of the modern capitalist society that suppresses the liberated, creative spirit of young men. Unlike Ginsberg, who never gave up a hope of “reincarnation” of such struggling young minds and spirits (“America’s naked mind for love”), O’Hara concluded his poem with a drag queen’s pathetic outcry of “I want to be wanted more than anything else in the world.”

O’Hara’s reference to Whitman’s “Song of Myself” offers a useful window through which to perceive O’Hara’s similarities with and differences from contemporaneous homosexual poets. While Whitman was one of the most inspirational poets for O’Hara and his generation, O’Hara, unlike Duncan and Ginsberg, remained relatively aloof from Whitman’s “adhesiveness.” In “Homosexuality,” he expressed an
oblique view of Whitman’s idealistic and utopian depiction of homosexual “outing” and ideal friendship.

**Rivers’ Family Portraits and O’Hara’s “In Memory of My Feelings”:**

**Revising the Ideals of the American Family and the Masculine Self**

Thus far, Rivers’ *O’Hara* and O’Hara’s “Homosexuality” have been treated in relation to the history of art and literature, the gay subculture, and writings by other homosexual poets. In order to understand the gender and sexual politics implied in his treatment of the bodies of women and of a young boy, I will consider Rivers’ family portraits from 1954 through 1956. O’Hara’s “In Memory of My Feelings” in 1956 will also be treated in conjunction with Rivers’ *Studio* of the same year, so as to examine parallels in their approaches to images of self and of male sexualities.

Rivers’ families, including Augusta, his first wife, were frequent sitters for his portraits during the mid-1950s. Although Rivers divorced in 1946, Augusta continued to appear in his drawings almost a decade after their separation; Rivers drew her whenever she visited his studio. 103 *Reclining Nude (Augusta Burger)* (1953, Fig. 57), *Augusta in a Rubens World* (1954, Fig. 58), and *Two Views of Augusta* (1955) are several surviving drawings of Augusta that Rivers completed during the mid-1950s.

_Augusta* (Fig. 59), an oil portrait, was finished early in 1954, when the sitter dropped by Rivers’ Southampton house to meet her children and mother, Mrs. Burger. _Augusta_ differs from most of Rivers’ previous depictions of his ex-wife. In previous

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103 Apart from Augusta’s visits to Rivers’ house to see Joseph and Steven, and Mrs. Burger (“Berdie”), her mother, who lived with Rivers throughout the 1950s, Augusta consistently sought Rivers’ help whenever she suffered emotional breakdowns and economic hardship. Rivers and Brightman, *Drawings and Digressions*, 47.
drawings, Rivers portrayed Augusta as either a coquette or an estranged, ordinary housewife. In *Reclining Nude*, for instance, he presented Augusta leaning back and gazing at the viewer or the painter. In another drawing, *Augusta in a Rubens World*, he depicted only Augusta’s face, probably with an aim of portraying her emotional and psychological state.\(^{104}\) When Rivers became friendly with downtown poets and artists during the late 1940s and early 1950s, Augusta became anxious, not only because of Rivers’ “sexual diversions” and heroin problem, but also because of her alienation from the culturally savvy world of downtown New York.\(^{105}\) Rivers’ autobiography also includes Augusta’s writing, in which she introduced her perception of Rivers, her relationship with Rivers, and finally her emotional struggles after the divorce in 1946. From her perspective, Rivers had “taste for everything wild and different,” and his strong desire for art, freedom, music, and sexual lives for both men and women made her feel as less important to him.\(^ {106}\) Rivers’ and Augusta’s descriptions contradict the image of Augusta that he created in the 1954 portrait, which has no resemblance to an emotionally troubling and jealous ex-wife. In *Augusta*, she is transformed into a rather imposing and authoritative figure.

O’Hara claimed in 1965 that Rivers’ *Augusta* was, like his own portrait by Rivers, derived from Delacroix’s female nudes. He did not specify the title of the Delacroix works Rivers had studied in preparation for *Augusta*, but Delacroix’s *Seated Model*...
(Mademoiselle Rose) (1817-1820, Fig. 60) depicts a woman taking a similar pose. Delacroix realized a number of famous female nude paintings, but Seated Model is the closest to Rivers’ Augusta in composition, the sitter’s posture, overall deep tonality, and the contrast between darker and lighter areas.¹⁰⁷

But compared to Delacroix’s nude—a woman who slumps slightly looking passive, humble, and modest—Rivers’ Augusta is upright and fearless. Augusta’s skin is not as smooth as that of Delacroix’s female nude, and the modeling of her body does not seem to follow the typical image of a voluminous, curvaceous female form, common among the female nude of the nineteenth century. To late nineteenth century French writer and art critic Marie-Amélie Chartroule de Montifaud (1849-1912), the beauty of the ideal female body resided in its “roundedness”: “Every part of her body was round, from her wrist to her tiny ankles. The smooth roundness and majestic angles of the lines which seemed to slowly surround the contours of her figure, enclosed it.”¹⁰⁸ Though Rivers’ portrait presents Augusta with large breasts, her legs appear lean and long, in contrast to the nineteenth century ideal. Also, her posture of stretching her arms to hold a staff reinforces the sense that her body is rather elongated.

David McCarthy associated the staff with nineteenth century nude photographs, especially those of Eugène Durieu (1800-74).¹⁰⁹ The staff, as a symbol of male athletic


¹⁰⁹ McCarthy, The Nude in American Painting 1950-1980, 36. In mid to late nineteenth century France, Durieu emerged as one of the most influential photographers and writers on
skill and physical strength, was a common motif in male nude studies during the mid to late nineteenth century.  

Durieu’s photographs of naked men (ca. 1854, Fig. 61) include images of nude models holding staffs. In addition, Delacroix’s female and male nudes from the nineteenth century, including his sketches of three male figures (ca. 1854), were at times based on Durieu’s photographs. According to Aaron Scharf, Delacroix’s sketches (ca. 1854, Fig. 62) must have relied on Durieu’s photographs of men, which similarly show three male figures taken from different perspectives. These photographs were, in fact, found in Delacroix’s personal collection.

Male nude photographs by Wilhelm von Gloeden (1856-1931) at the turn of the twentieth century also include an image of a youth holding a staff, which was clearly based upon Greek art. Von Gloeden was known for his thinly veiled homoerotic imagery, frequently depicted his models as mythical gods or ephebes and employed motifs from photography. As a member of the Société Héliographique, Durieu actively sought public recognition of the artistic quality and creative possibility of photography, devising his own term, “artistic photographic print (épreuves artistiques).” “The camera is not a simple optical contraption which responds mechanically to the first comer who cares to try it out,” Durieu wrote to the Salon, “but an instrument that the photographer can direct and control according to his personal feelings.” Quoted in Aaron Scharf, Art and Photography (London: Penguin, 1968, 4th ed. 1986), 142.

110 The image of a male nude holding a staff can also be found in a number of representations of Greek gods throughout the history of art. Apollo holds a staff or wand in Pietro Perugino’s 1495 Apollo and Marsyas and Albert Dürer’s 1501 drawing of Apollo and Diana. The image of Oedipus has also been associated with a staff, as in Gustave Moreau’s Oedipus and the Sphinx in 1864. A few female figures, such as William Adolphe Bouguereau’s Shepheardess and Thomas Eakins’ sculpture of a shepardess in the nineteenth century, also hold a staff. It had been used as a device to study the arm of a model, either male or female, posing with outreached arm though it is mostly male nudes or semi-nudes that have been associated with a staff.

111 Delacroix preserved Durieu’s male nude photographs in his album, and he wrote a letter to Durieu in which he specifically mentioned the three photographs of male nudes with staffs. Quoted in Scharf, Art and Photography, 120-21.
antiquity. According to Thomas Waugh, von Gloeden juxtaposed a man standing and holding a staff with another man who was sitting down, holding a teacup (undated, Fig. 63). In this image, the staff serves as a visible attribute that sets the traditionally masculine “he-man” apart from the homosexual, effeminate type.

Certainly, the connection between the staff in Rivers’ *Augusta* and the staffs used in male nude photographs from the nineteenth to twentieth century remains speculative. Neither Rivers nor his critics have identified a Delacroix painting upon which *Augusta* was based. Nonetheless, Rivers has been known for his voracious interest in art history and his tendency to mix and combine apparently unrelated images and iconography, especially images from high art with those circulated within the community of gays and lesbians. The ambiguously gendered staff in Rivers’ *Augusta* can also be examined in light of the camp play with gender inversion in O’Hara and Rivers’ circle. At “Nell’s gathering,” it was common for male poets to address each other with female names and feminine pronouns. In the subtitle to his early poem “Locarno” (1952), O’Hara alluded to

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112 Equally suggestive is how von Gloeden’s photographs contribute to the longstanding tradition of docile, brown-skinned young boys in European art. During his twenties, von Gloeden took photographs of young boys in the remote Sicilian village of Taormina. As his work was contemporaneous with a rise of modern tourism among the wealthy, and as his images were celebrated mainly among affluent socialites, the erotic nature of these images is largely informed by racial, cultural, and class differences. For a discussion of von Gloeden’s aesthetics and images, see Patricia Berman, “F. Holland Day and His ‘Classical’ Models: Summer Camp,” *History of Photography* 18, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 348-367 and Charles Leslie, *Wilhelm von Gloeden, Photographer* (New York: SoHo Photographic Publishers, 1977).

113 A majority of von Gloeden’s male nude photographs are images of the effeminate youth type rather than a masculine type. However, Waugh argued that this photograph juxtaposing two types of men offers rare yet very valuable evidence of the association of gender attributes with the staff in male nude photographs. Thomas Waugh, “The Third Body: Patterns in the Construction of the Subject in Gay Male Narrative Film,” in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 432.
this practice by calling Schuyler “Miss”: “I ever feel the traitor, Jesus, my old
copperhead:/ you know, Miss, I never done delivered no baby before.” (CP 90)\textsuperscript{114}

In general, Rivers’ female figures are less conventionally attractive and sexually
charged than his male figures are. While his female figures, such as Augusta and Mrs.
Burger (“Berdie”), have heavy, even bulky bodies, his two boys, Joseph and Steven, in
Joseph (1954, Fig. 64) and The Family (1954-55, Fig. 65) had slimmer contours. In
Family, their lean, naked bodies stand on each side of Mrs. Burger, who is a totally
clothed and solemn figure. Rivers depicted the aging and flagging skin of Mrs. Burger in
Double Portrait of Berdie (1955) with extra care. His delicate brushwork portrayed the
wrinkled and flaccid surface of her skin.\textsuperscript{115}

Rivers’ sons repeatedly appeared in his drawings and paintings, from Joseph
Seated (1954, Fig. 66) and Joseph Standing (1954, Fig. 67) to Boy in Blue Denim
(Portrait of Steven, 1954), Family, and The Studio (1956). In 1954, Rivers painted a nude
depiction of Joseph. According to Rivers, Joseph had happened to rush down to the living
room, completely naked, holding up all of his clothes; this incident inspired Rivers to
paint his son in the nude. “He was tall and had a slim, beautiful figure and a synchronized
lope that was pretty sexual,” he explained. “Painting and drawing him nude, I couldn’t

\textsuperscript{114} Rivers’ depiction of Augusta in the early 1950s can be also looked upon in terms of
Rivers’ relationship with Augusta. According to Rivers, during the late 1940s and the early 1950s
Augusta often became sensitive about Rivers’ intimate relationships with other men. Augusta was
a “pouting, unhappy, haranguing [ex-]wife,” who accused him “every day of infidelity, neglect,
and homosexuality.” Rivers and Weinstein, What Did I Do?, 46-47.

\textsuperscript{115} Leo Steinberg attacked Rivers’ awkward drawing and lack of interest in pictorial
composition. He also criticized Rivers’ preoccupation with “obnoxious details”—specifically, the
rough surface of the old woman’s skin and her unbalanced body shape. “This evidence of
contrivance,” Steinberg observed, “makes the total absence of compassion in the rendering of
help observe the size of his cock and the sparse growth of his pubic hairs.”

Joseph had mixed feelings about his own body. Initially, he procrastinated about posing; like a typical fourteen-year-old boy, he was embarrassed by nudity. At the same time, he was curious. He recalled his ambivalence toward his body and sexuality in a piece of writing included in Rivers’ autobiography:

I was fourteen and my pubic hair had just come in, very fast, but not fast enough. Here I’m standing in a cold room next to a book case, facing the viewer, wearing nothing but socks at that time when a fourteen-year-old is becoming aware of his body and sexuality…. My thinness accentuated the size of my penis, which may appear semi erect but was really frozen.

When Joseph was first displayed in a bookstore window on Southampton’s main street in 1955, it became the object of censorship. According to Joseph, the Southampton community immediately took action against the work by forming a committee led by the editor of the local newspaper, The Southampton Press, and the parents’ association. The committee issued a statement expressing their demand to “have this disgraceful image removed from the fair township of Southampton” and wrote a letter to the local police asking them to take the picture out of the bookstore window. The police, “the ready guard against any infraction of the moral code,” immediately came in force one evening and removed the painting before “a cheering parade of upstanding Hamptonians,” Joseph recalled. The bookshop’s owner, Rivers’ friend Bob Keene, kept the section of the

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117 Ibid., 300.

118 Ibid., 301.
wall where *Joseph* had hung vacant, with “a four-foot black censored X that marked the
spot,” according to Joseph.\(^{119}\)

Although the censorship of *Joseph* by the community of Southampton was a relatively minor, little-publicized event, this incident revealed Rivers’ conflict with what can be considered public standards of decency. It also highlighted the fact that dealing with the sexuality of young adolescents, especially the nudity of a young boy, could be a serious breach of social taboo. Anne Higonnet’s powerful study, *Pictures of Innocence* (1998), documents the ways in which the modern concept of childhood is centered on the notion of innocence. Higonnet cited *Age of Innocence* (1788, Fig. 68) by Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-92), a portrait of a young girl, as a pivotal work for the idealized Romantic image of childhood. This portrait, she argued, shows how the social and sexual status of children was completely omitted from representation,\(^{120}\) as well as the efforts that were made to separate the world of children from that of adults. “The Romantic child makes a good show of having no class, no gender, and no thoughts—of being socially, sexually, and physically innocent,” and the child’s body is defined by “its difference from the adult body,” Higonnet wrote.\(^{121}\)

Higonnet cited Sally Mann’s photographs of her children in explaining the controversy raised by images that defy or challenge the idealized, Romantic notion of innocence.

\(^{119}\) Ibid.

\(^{120}\) An episode surrounding Reynolds’ painting *The Children in the Wood* aptly illustrates the painter’s ignorance of the socio-economic identities of the children he portrayed. According to a detailed description quoted in Richard Wendorf’s study, Reynolds modeled the angelic figure of the child in this work on his close observations of a young beggar sleeping in the street. Richard Wendorf, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: The Painter in Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 127.

children’s innocence. Mann’s photograph *Jesse at Five* (1987), for instance, depicts a young, naked girl aspiring to resemble a grown up fashion model with heavy makeup. The figure of Jesse contrasts with the two girls in traditional dresses who stand on either side of her. While the children in traditional dress do not convey sexuality, Jesse’s coquettish, adult-like pose seems to suggest her precocious awareness of her own allure. Mann’s work, in this way, flouts the “sexual innocence that was at the core of the Romantic child ideal.”

Mann’s photograph made her the subject of accusations that she had exploited her children’s sexuality or made child pornography. Rivers’ *Joseph*, completed decades before Mann’s photograph, might have been involved in a similar controversy. The overly anxious reaction to *Joseph* during the 1950s seems all the more significant because the putatively perverse nature of the work was not limited to its bold treatment of childhood sexuality. The naked bodies of young boys have long been an important element of homosexual iconography. The “ephebe,” one of the most popular images in gay iconography, is a late nineteenth century invention derived from the ancient Greek word meaning “puberty” and classifying the adolescent training phase of Athenian citizenship. In the late Victorian period, the term was used as a generic descriptor of an adolescent male; within the context of male friendship, the word also referred to the young, beautiful man in ancient myths who entered intellectual and spiritual communion with an older, wiser man. Historian Thomas Waugh claimed that throughout the history of male nude and homoerotic imagery, the homosexual couple was consistently described in terms of heterosexual distinctions such as masculine aggression versus feminine

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122 Ibid., 206.
passivity, or active agent of desire versus passive object of the gaze. In this common binary, the image of a young boy occupied the passive position. The two types of men who appear in von Gloeden’s photographs—one is older and has a darker complexion than the other—well exemplify this binary structure.123

In their collaborative lithographic series, *Stones* (1957-60), Rivers and O’Hara dealt with Joseph’s image in a work titled “Springtemps” (1958, Fig. 69). In this piece, Rivers used an image of a naked young boy (whose name is written on the bottom of the picture) diving with a spring flower that is about to blossom. The accompanying poem reads, “when it gets into that area/ it’s like opening a door for/ someone...up bee-keeper presents/ not/ that anything’s/ been born yet/ it’s only the first day, Joe/ what did you expect?” O’Hara’s lines describe a young man touching a beehive and tasting honey. These phrases seem to connote initial sexual pleasures and experiences. The overall setting is spring, a season when nature begins blooming, analogous to the beginning of Joseph’s sexual maturity.

In *The Studio* (1956, Fig. 70), a work that contains the images of Steven, Joseph, Frank, and Mrs. Burger (“Berdie”), Rivers continued to underscore the sexuality of the naked boy. The painting was inspired by Courbet’s *The Painter’s Studio: A Real Allegory* (1855). Rivers’ *Studio*, similar to Courbet’s painting, was meant to sum up the painter’s

123 Thomas Waugh, *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 45-46. Sedgwick also claimed that the turn of the century saw a shift in homoerotic sensibilities from the classicizing, pederastic tradition of emphasizing heterosexual difference between two men—as epitomized by the image of ephebe—to “a conception of male-male desire based on sameness.” Eve Kofosky Sedgwick, “Nationalisms and Sexualities in the Age of Wilde,” in *Nationalism and Sexualities*, ed. Andrew Parker (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 242. Waugh, however, argued that this evolutionary thrust required a more moderate and cautionary approach; indeed, the image of the ephebe continued to be an important aspect of gay iconography in the physique magazines of the 1950s. Waugh, *Hard to Imagine*, 46.
career and to depict the people most important to his personal and artistic life. The images of Mrs. Burger, Steven, Joseph, and O’Hara, are spread across the horizontal picture plane. (Whereas Courbet painted an image of himself in the central area of *The Painters’ Studio*, Rivers inserted his face in the upper right corner.)

Stylistically, *The Studio* is an interesting amalgam of his efforts to treat figures in a relatively naturalistic and realistic mode and to merge them into a flat pictorial plane. The figures themselves are easily recognizable—although some remain sketchy—but they are all placed in front of a flat, abstract background. Elements of these figures, such as the yellow-and-black square pattern of Mrs. Burger’ dress, are repeated in the background. The figures are also drawn twice or three times, a technique that became common in his portraits in the mid 1950s, including *Double Portrait of Berdie* during the mid 1950s, and to reiterate, the multiple figures in his portrait might have been the outcome of his difficulty with settling on a single figure or his preference for indeterminacy. This technique might have helped Rivers approach his sitters from various perspectives, figuratively as well as psychologically.

Irving Sandler, a critic who offered one of the most detailed analyses of *The Studio*, however, restricted his interpretation of the double figures from the formalist perspective; he stated that the emphasis of the painting seemed to be “not so much on the subject matter as on the various manners of approaching the subject.”\(^{124}\) The doubled or tripled features of each sitter and the images of small objects and abstract shapes flowing across the canvas add a considerable degree of dynamism to the painting. As a result, the painting looked like a huge “diaristic billboard,” in which sketches and multiplied figures.

“overlapped and interpenetrated in a kind of gestural, stroboscopic, and double exposure,” and the overall impression of the work was, he wrote, “roving, multiple, and episodic.”

Although *Studio* signaled an important shift in artistic modality from the relatively conservative realistic and naturalistic portraits of the mid 1950s, the subject matter of the painting is of particular importance. Contrary to Sandler’s observation, the manner in which Rivers treated his male and female nudes sheds light upon not only his aesthetic stance, but also his views of female and male sexualities. One of the most notable elements of this work in terms of male sexuality is the image of Steven in an awkward position, stretching his legs over what seems to be a sofa while staring at the viewer. Steven’s body catches the viewer’s eye, not only due to its uncomfortable posture, but also due to its full exposure of his penis. In fact, his rather unself-conscious and even playful gesture reminds the viewer of the typical image of angel (putti), the naked boy babies who decorated tombstones and fountains. Margaret Walters claimed in 1978 that “putti” exceeded adult nudes in their pure physical joy and untrammeled freedom; oftentimes seemingly casual, yet bold reference to sexuality may appear to be “wild, impertinent, and [even] amoral.” According to Walters, Some of Donatello’s dancing angels can be disturbing from a certain perspective for their too explicit sexuality: “They have the rounded chubbiness of small children, but their size, their proportions, their knowing faces and exhibitionist poses suggest a much older and consciously provocative sexuality.”

The image of Steven in *Studio*, like those of certain young angels in

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125 Ibid.

traditional art—and, for that matter, Joseph—is meant to suggest the pure yet controversial nature of child sexuality. Additionally, the body of a young boy is on the verge of suggesting homoeroticism. As Walters argues, the word “putti,” which comes from the Latin meaning ‘boy,’ refers to figures that are almost always male and that embody the uninhibited, playful energy that we lose when we become more sexually conscious and subject to embarrassment and guilt related to our diverse sexual desires.¹²⁷

Another prominent figure of Studio is the figure standing in the middle of the painting. According to Joseph, Rivers’ elder son, she was a local African American jazz musician with whom his father might incidentally have a sexual encounter.¹²⁸ Russell Ferguson compared the figure in the center of Studio with the self image in O’Hara’s “In Memory of My Feelings,” which was also completed in 1956.¹²⁹ Whatever the actual identity of the central figure, her enormous scale, comparatively dark complexion, and posture of raising her huge arms make her stand out. She is certainly not easily integrated with the rest of the images in the picture.

O’Hara wrote “In Memory of My Feelings” almost simultaneously with Rivers’ Studio in 1956. Although there is no document to verify that Rivers’ figures were inspired by O’Hara’s poem, as Ferguson has maintained, a comparison of these works

¹²⁷ Walter added that pretty sentiment prevailing in the representation of putti often disguised its underlying homoeroticism. Ibid., 116

¹²⁸ Joseph Rivers, Interview with Author, June 17, 2004, Poughkeepsie, New York. The image of an African American occupying the center of the picture evinced not only his personal contact with other jazz musicians, but also his continued interest in African American culture in general and jazz in particular. In his autobiography, Rivers wrote: “I was influenced by the best of the bebop musicians. I talked like them, drank what they drank, smoked what they smoked, and occasionally injected into my veins the dope they took… The only thing I complained about was that I wasn’t born a Negro.” Rivers and Weinstein, What Did I Do?, 4-5.

¹²⁹ Ferguson, In Memory of My Feelings, 91.
may offer an important clue regarding the connection between Rivers’ family portraits and O’Hara’s poems in the mid-1950s. One of the impressive figures in “In Memory of My Feelings” is again an “African prince,” O’Hara’s alter ego (“I don’t know what blood’s/ in me I feel like an African prince.” [CP 256]). “In Memory of My Feelings” is a pivotal work in O’Hara’s oeuvre; it introduces many of the core concepts of his work during the 1950s, such as the dispersed self and the ambiguous nature of the poetic voice. It offers an array of worlds and perspectives that continually slide and collapse into one another. The poem begins with O’Hara’s image of himself: “My quietness has a man in it, he is transparent/ and he carries me quietly, like a gondola, through the streets.” (CP 252)

There have been several useful and elaborate studies on the nature of the self in O’Hara’s poetry. Charles Altieri, a literary critic, argued that the poets of the 1950s and 1960s turned to English Romanticism while rejecting the academic and rigidly formal style and lack of personal voice in George Eliot’s poetry. For Altieri, O’Hara’s ceaselessly transforming self-image was the outcome of his effort to introduce open form poetry. In the English Romanticist model, most notably propounded by William Wordsworth, the poet has to emphasize the moment of writing and intensive, immediate, firsthand experience; only through this procedure can the poet arrive at harmony with the world and achieve “ethical and psychological renewal.”130 The transforming image of the poet’s self in “In Memory of My Feelings,” Altieri reminded us, may correspond to the Romantic emphasis on temporality and immediacy in poetry.

However, unlike the poet who has attained Romantic “renewal,” O’Hara wrote about death and loss of the self; in his work, various selves exist momentarily before

disappearing. His most famous line, “the grace to be born and live as variously as possible,” is immediately followed by his lament of “trying desperately to count them as they die.” Mutlu Konuk Blasing, a literary critic, argued in 1977 that the poet seeking to capture his present selves faces an important dilemma: Once a self, which is limited to a certain framework of time and space, is captured in poetry, it is no longer “alive”; it is part of history and memory. When one considers this analysis, it is interesting that O’Hara titled his poem “In Memory of My Feelings.”

In “In Memory of My Feelings,” O’Hara’s goal does not appear to have been “to salvage a continuous and coherent self”; instead, he followed his particular, various selves as they appeared and disappeared in their temporal and spatial contingency. In the climactic moments of the poem, O’Hara acknowledged,

and I have lost what is always and everywhere present, the scene of my selves, the occasion of these ruses, which I myself and singly must now kill and save the serpent in their midst. (CP 256)

As Blasing pointed out, O’Hara juxtaposed his own image with that of a serpent in this climactic passage. The serpent is related to Medusa, the mother of Pegasus, the traditional symbol of poetry. However, any literary effort to save the poet’s self leads to “self-destruction,” Blasing claimed, and O’Hara presented the process of writing poetry, especially poetry about himself and his personal experiences, “as [an] inner drama of

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131 “The poet’s dilemma is clear. On the one hand, he must transform his past into art,” wrote Blasing, continuing, “on the other hand, he must try, as a person, to preserve his past as history in order to salvage a continuous and coherent self out of the flow of isolated moments of consciousness—transparent selves.” Mutlu Konuk Blasing, “Two Poets, Paterson: Notes toward an American Revolution, Frank O’Hara and Poets of Love,” in The Art of Life: Studies in American Autobiographical Literature (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), 150.

132 Ibid., 148.
violence.” The following line effectively captures his view of the loss of the self:

“memory is a soundless ruin.” (CP 258)

The image of self in “In Memory of My Feelings” evinces not just O’Hara’s critical view of the traditional notion of the monolithic, unitary self or the dilemma that the poet usually encounters when writing a poem about himself; it also evinces his critical view of traditional categories of gender and sexuality. The poet wished to break free from various labels others used to define and classify him:

Grace
to be born and live as variously as possible. The conception of the masque barely suggests the sordid identifications.
I am a Hittite in love with a horse. I don’t know what blood’s in me I feel like an African prince I am a girl walking downstairs in a red pleated dress with heels I am a champion taking a fall I am a jockey with a sprained ass-hole I am the light mist in which a face appears and it is another face of blonde I am a baboon eating a banana I am a dictator looking at his wife I am a doctor eating a child and the child’s mother smiling I am a Chinaman climbing a mountain I am a child smelling his father’s underwear I am an Indian sleeping on a scalp (CP 256)

O’Hara, here, cited various selves or scenes of selves without commas or periods, as though his selves were continuously emerging and disappearing.

These different images of the self illustrate more than O’Hara’s process of undermining the traditional definition of the self; O’Hara actively expressed his critical approach to normative categories of gender and sexuality: “so many pistols I have borrowed to protect ourselves/ from creatures who too readily recognize my weapons/ and have murder in their heart!/… so many of my transparencies could not resist the race!” (CP 252) In these lines, O’Hara may seem to have intended to depict his

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133 Ibid., 150.
vulnerable situation. What O'Hara described as “creatures” might be mainstream society or the people who perpetuated the belief in the “naturalness” of categories such as masculinity and femininity or homosexuality and heterosexuality. He stated that he “singly must now kill” himself, not only to acknowledge the impossible task of capturing the ever-changing self, but also to protect him from such categorizations.

According to Ferguson, Rivers’ portrayal of O’Hara in *The Studio*, to a considerable extent, reflects O’Hara’s self-image in “In Memory of My Feelings.” “Larry Rivers … painted a number of portraits of O’Hara that suggest this sense of masking and doubling of identity, most notably his version of Courbet’s *The Painter’s Studio*, in which O’Hara hovers to the side in a double incarnation,” said Ferguson. The figure as a double image became a common feature of Rivers’ portraits; the rest of the figures in *The Studio*, except the central African American figure, are depicted in this way. Therefore, the image of O’Hara as a double does not have the special significance that Ferguson suggested. However, the hovering image of O’Hara in *Studio* can still serve as an effective visual counterpart to O’Hara’s self-image, which is fleeting, temporary, and contingent. As discussed in relation to *Double Portrait of Berdie*, Rivers showed a propensity to bring alternative or multiple perspectives of the self and of his sitters into his portraits. O’Hara’s poetic vision of the self and Rivers’ artistic mode of double portraiture thus offer valuable points of comparison regarding their shared discomfort with ideas of the fixed self and identity in poetry and art.

Despite their obvious debt to the artist’s and poet’s biographies, Rivers’ *O’Hara* and O’Hara’s “Homosexuality” address the larger concern of how the naked male body

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134 Ferguson, *In Memory of My Feelings*, 90.
and homoerotic relationship between men have been represented in high art and literature. Similarly, Rivers’ family portraits and O’Hara’s “In Memory of My Feelings” demonstrate ingenious ways of combining personal references, and unconventional attitudes toward self/other, masculinity/femininity, straight/queer, and proper/improper in art and literature. Therefore, as Jacquelyn Days Serwer, a curator of Rivers’ 2003 retrospective, has implied, a genre of Rivers’ portraits of families and friends of the mid 1950s is a good arena to move away from simple biographical readings and to further investigate Rivers’ criticism against traditional definitions of the self, identity, gender, and sexuality that has been shared by O’Hara.
Ch. 5. Rivers’ and O’Hara’s Collaboration (1953-60)

O’Hara and Collaboration: Chatting with and about Friends

Rivers’ and O’Hara’s works from the mid-1950s deal primarily with their personal lives and self-images, but which of their works represents their collaborative relationship in art and poetry? More specifically, which of their works reflects the dual aspect of a relationship that was at once artistic and romantic, professional and emotional, public and private? An examination of Rivers and O’Hara’s collaborative projects in theater, art criticism, and poem-painting between 1953 and 1960 will offer further insights into their particular strategies and purposes of underscoring the complicated and sometimes indefinable nature of the intimacy between men.

Peter Schjeldahl declared that “collaboration is a direct extension of O’Hara’s mode of living” and “a good metaphor for the manner of his relationships,” as it reflects his intimacy—and competition—with fellow writers and artists.¹ Indeed, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, O’Hara participated in a number of collaborative projects with artists and writers, including Rivers.² O’Hara’s first poetry book, *A City Winter and Other Poems* (1951), contained two of Rivers’ pen drawings in the style of surrealism. Rivers


2 In addition to collaborating with Rivers, O’Hara worked with Norman Bluhm on *Poem-Painting* (1960), with Michael Goldberg on *Ode* (1960), and with Joe Brainard on a series of comics and cartoonish poem-paintings between 1963 and 1966. His poems also inspired Hartigan’s series of paintings *Oranges* (1952) and Franz Kline’s 21 Etchings and Poems (1960). In addition, he wrote the subtitles for Alfred Leslie’s 1964 experimental film *The Last Clean Shirt*. Rivers, meanwhile, contributed layout and illustrations to a number of books by members of the New York School of poets from the 1950s onward. In 1961, he completed a collaborative project with Koch entitled *New York 1950-60* (1961), in which Rivers’ drawings and Koch’s writing have the appearance of graffiti. This poem-painting was meant to convey the vibrant atmosphere of the New York art world in the 1950s.
designed the set for O’Hara’s play *Try! Try* (1953). In addition, they co-wrote a script called “Kenneth Koch: A Tragedy” (1953) and “How to Proceed in the Arts” (1954-55), the latter of which is an interesting text containing Rivers’ and O’Hara’s sarcastic comments on the state of art and art criticism. For *Stones* (1957-60), a ten-part lithographic series whose title refers to the original stone used in the printing process, Rivers and O’Hara drew and wrote images and lines simultaneously.

The New York art world of the 1950s and early 1960s was conducive to active collaboration between poets and artists. Through Myers’ Tibor de Nagy Gallery, a number of poets and painters published illustrated books such as *City Winter and Other Poems* by Rivers and O’Hara and *Turandot and Other Poems* by Ashbery and Freilicher. According to Rivers, within his circle, there was an overall feeling of admiration and optimism toward artists’ and poets’ collaborations. “As a student or a young painter, I had the notion that there was an intrinsic good in painters and poets working together,” he explained.³ At the Club, the relationship between art and literature was also one of the most popular topics. In 1952 alone, there were three Club meetings—“The Image in Poetry and Painting,” “New Poets,” and “When the Arts Meet”—in which major New York School poets served as panel members. In 1955, three panels were devoted to the implications and critical significance of O’Hara’s 1954 article “Nature and New Painting,” which was published in the literary magazine *Folder*.⁴

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The New York School poets were especially eager to apply to their poems what they believed were the crucial aesthetic achievements of Abstract Expressionism. At a panel titled “The Image in Poetry and Painting” in April 1952, O’Hara expressed deep concern with the state of poetry and literature in the United States. According to his argument, Eliotic Modernism, which still served as the dominant literary tendency in the postwar United States, had become excessively obsessed with expressing “most effectively, most beautifully, and most musically some preconceived idea or perception.” At another panel entitled “New Poets” held a month later, O’Hara recommended that the new generation of poets should look to visual art as an alternative source for their writing. In order to move away from old, arcane, and pretentious literary metaphors and preoccupation with the formal structure of language, he said, poets had to write like contemporary gestural painters, whose works he saw as exemplifying the aesthetic of the “honest, tough, hard, and beautiful.” Despite important gaps and differences between O’Hara and the older generation New York School artists, O’Hara was fascinated by the immediate, accidental, and improvisational creative process of the Abstract Expressionists. In 1959, O’Hara wrote of Pollock: “His action is immediately
art, not through will, not through esthetic posture, but through a singleness of purpose which is the result of all the rejected qualifications and found convictions....”7

O’Hara transformed his collaborations into temporary events akin to Pollock’s action paintings. Norman Bluhm, his collaborator in Poem-Painting (1960, Fig. 71), recalled that O’Hara “thought of our collaboration as a theatrical event, an amusement.” The collaboration was, for the poet, “a Happening—a way of amusing ourselves….an event by two people who had this special feeling for each other.”8 In Poem-Painting, Bluhm strived to capture the dynamic interaction between painter and writer, instead of merely illustrating O’Hara’s lines:

Basically, we tried to keep the art as just a gesture [hence the decision to use only black and white paint], not an illustration of the poem. The idea was to make the gesture relate, in an abstract way, to the idea of the poem. Only rarely did we do a thing a la Dali where you pick up the drip and throw into the word.9

Bluhm explained that none of the elements of the poem-paintings he completed with O’Hara were pre-planned; they reacted to each other’s lines and images on the spot. “Frank would write something on a sheet of paper while I was in another part of the studio, making a gesture on the paper,” he reflected. “It was all instantaneous, like a conversation between friends. Quick and playful.”10 Although Marjorie Perloff objected to the view that the lines O’Hara incorporated in his collaborative works were born of

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9 Quoted in ibid., 106-7.

total improvisation, she admitted, “true artistic collaboration must have involved simultaneity.”

Moreover, each work in *Poem-Painting* more or less “grew out of some hilarious relationship with people we know, out of particular situations,” wrote Bluhm. For instance, “Homage to Kenneth Koch” was based upon Bluhm’s descriptions of a double date he had shared with Koch a few years earlier. According to Bluhm, O’Hara instantly made up lines in reference to that evening: “picked up two girls at a cocktail party, and Koch ended up with the better-looking girl with big feet…. I was staring/ outside your window/ how lucky I was…. “

One of O’Hara’s primary literary objectives was to write poems based upon immediate interactions with his collaborators, or, better yet, upon chats he had with his friends. In his 1959 literary manifesto “Personism,” he claimed, “while I was writing it [a poem] I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born.” (*CP* 498) He hoped to replace the serious and highly studied poetic language of the New Critics with quick, relatively accessible, everyday language. O’Hara hereby also rejected the conventional definition of the author as sole controller and creator of his literary works. O’Hara wrote in “Personism” that the “poem is a lot about two persons, instead of two pages. In all modesty, I confess that it may be the death of literature as we know it.” (*CP* 499)

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11 Citing *Stones*, a twelve-piece series of lithographs by Rivers and O’Hara, Perloff argued that O’Hara’s collaborations were not a case of “anything goes.” In her view, “Us,” the first work in the *Stones* series, has a definite structure and theme that connects the images and words. Perloff, *Frank O’Hara*, 101-2.

12 Quoted in ibid., 107.

13 Ibid.
Paul Goodman’s definition of the “occasional poetry” of the late 1940s and early 1950s sheds light on O’Hara’s use of informal conversations and experiences in his poems and collaborative works. In 1947, Goodman, a writer, literary critic, and historian of American society and culture, declared that the sort of poetry that celebrates weddings, commencements, and local heroes is the “highest kind” of poetic art; this genre of poetry, he insisted, “not only decorates these events but heightens them.” And the precondition for this kind of poetry is “a community of sentiment deep enough for creativity…to the ordinary mores to sing on a public occasion.” In 1951, Goodman further maintained that occasional poetry had to draw upon genuine personal feelings and experiences that had been understood and shared by the members of a relatively small, tight community of artists and poets:

[S]uch personal writing can occur only in a small community of acquaintances, where everybody knows everybody and understands what is at stake…. As soon as the intimate community does exist—whether geographically or not is relevant but not essential—and the artist writes for it about it, the advance-guard at once becomes a genre of the highest integrated art.

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14 Goodman is best known for his Growing Up Absurd (1960). During the early 1950s, he emerged as one of the most influential figures in New York intellectual circles, especially among gay writers. According to Gooch, during the 1950s, O’Hara bought Goodman’s poetry books, including Stop Light (1941), The Facts of Life (1945), and The Dead Spring (1950). Goodman frequented the San Remo Café in Greenwich Village, where he was usually surrounded by young (gay) poets. Gooch, City Poet, 186, 201.


One of O’Hara’s letters confirms the significance that Goodman’s theory had for him from the early phase of his career. In August 1951, he wrote to Freilicher that an unspecified Goodman article was “the only pleasant thing that has happened to me since you left gal,” urging his friend, “if you haven’t devoured its delicious message, rush to your nearest newsstand! It is really lucid about what is bothering us both besides sex, and it is so heartening to know that someone understands these things…. Just knowing that he is in the same city may give me the power to hurt myself into poetry.”

O’Hara not only addressed poems to close friends such as Hartigan, Rivers, Freilicher, and fellow members of the New York School of poets, but also wrote in response to various social events—which is also compatible with Goodman’s notion of “occasional poetry.” In one of the lithographs of the Stones series, “To the Entertainment of Patsy and Mike Goldberg” (1958, Fig. 72), O’Hara wrote and Rivers drew to commemorate the occasion of their friends’ wedding. The bride, poet Patsy Southgate, and the groom, painter Michael Goldberg, were close friends of Rivers and O’Hara. To enliven the casual and informal quality of the work, O’Hara added funny lines such as “and so they were happily married and it was raining bourbon and (hic) champagne and bop (sic).” This humorous and playful way of depicting the couple and their marriage may reveal O’Hara’s mixed feelings toward the wedding—his simultaneous desire to celebrate his friends’ union and to convey a sense of loss. By the late 1950s, O’Hara’s closest female friends, such as Grace Hartigan, Patsy Southgate, and Bunny Lang, began disappearing from his tight coterie, partly due to marriage and early death. His friends’

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weddings might also have reminded O’Hara of his alienation from heterosexual unions in general.

O’Hara’s collaborations with other writers and painters, including Rivers, represented a crucial part of his literary endeavor; they enabled him to explore the idea that poetry had to prioritize friendship, informal language, and everyday experience over the metaphoric, symbolic expressions that prevailed in high literature.

*Try! Try!: Working Together in Theater*

Among O’Hara’s collaborations with painters, his work with Rivers was the most consistent with his basic stance toward poetry and collaboration. In their joint efforts, O’Hara and Rivers worked simultaneously, capturing their improvisational, immediate reactions to each other’s lines and images. In a 1965 interview, O’Hara stated that his collaboration with Rivers on *Stones* should be regarded as the products of a genuine partnership between a painter and a poet. “We worked together on the stones. He [Rivers] 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,” wrote O’Hara, adding, “Rivers’ thing is the only thing I really did collaborate on, that I consider to be a collaboration.”

In Hans Namuth’s photograph in 1958 (Fig. 73), Rivers was carefully looking at O’Hara’s lines, presumably preparing his own drawings. The photograph well captures the closeness of the working relationship as the two responded to each other’s contribution. When working with Rivers on source material he had previously written—as was the case when Rivers

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designed a set for *Try! Try!* in 1953—O’Hara seriously considered revising his own work to meet the needs of the joint project.

In contrast, most of O’Hara’s collaborative projects with other artists during the 1950s centered on his already-completed poems. Hartigan’s twelve-painting series *Oranges* (1952), for instance, originated from O’Hara’s poem of the same title written two years previously during his Harvard days. Hartigan juxtaposed her images with the lines from O’Hara’s poem that had inspired them. Although O’Hara initially suggested the poem “Oranges” to the painter, it was Hartigan who determined which lines would be included in her completed series. Similarly, O’Hara’s collaboration with Michael Goldberg on *Dear Diary* was derived from O’Hara’s diary, which he had given to Goldberg after returning from a curatorial trip to Europe in 1960. In a 1965 interview with art critic Edward Lucie-Smith, O’Hara said, “I’ve done other things where some—well Grace Hartigan 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.” Although O’Hara gave his poems to these artists, he “didn’t have any suggestion about what they would do with them.”

The first serious collaboration between O’Hara and Rivers was the play *Try! Try!* in 1952. Although two of Rivers’ pen drawings had been included in O’Hara’s *City Winter and Other Poems* in 1952, *Try! Try!* was the first collaborative work in which Rivers’ and O’Hara’s contributions—in this case, sets and dialogue—corresponded to each other thematically and stylistically. The play was mounted in February 1953 at the

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19 The exception is *Poem-Painting*, in which O’Hara wrote lines while Bluhm worked on images.

opening of the Artists’ Theater, newly established by Myers in Greenwich Village. During its three years of existence between 1953 and 1956, the Artists’ Theater was a vital site for experimental performance; many of the New York School poets premiered their theater pieces there, with second generation artists participating as set designers.\textsuperscript{21}

*Try! Try!* had premiered at the Poets’ Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1951. The Poets’ Theater was founded by a number of Harvard literature students, including O’Hara and Violet Lang, and can be considered an important precedent to the Artists’ Theater in New York. O’Hara revised the entire script for the rerun of the play at the Artists’ Theater in 1953, although the basic storyline and theme remained fairly unchanged.\textsuperscript{22}

The play revolves around three major characters: Jack, a returning soldier; Violet, his wife; and John, with whom Violet became intimately involved during her husband’s absence.\textsuperscript{23} The basic situation of these three characters is meant to suggest the condition of most men and women during the immediate postwar years in the United States. (SP 32) According to Philip Auslander, the romantic problems of returning veterans were “acutely familiar to most Americans” and were the subject of countless movies, novels,

\textsuperscript{21} According to Auslander, the years immediately following the Second World War marked the beginning of alternative theater in the United States. In New York, for instance, the Living Theater (founded in 1951) and the Artists’ Theater (founded in 1953) began to introduce an off-Broadway experimental repertoire mostly written by young and less established writers such as the New York School poets. For a brief survey of the history of off-Broadway theater during the 1950s, see Philip Auslander, *The New York School Poets as Playwrights: O’Hara, Ashbery, Koch, Schuyler, and the Visual Arts* (New York: P. Lang, 1989), 39-40.

\textsuperscript{22} *Frank O’Hara: Selected Plays* (1978) includes both versions.

\textsuperscript{23} The names of the major characters must have been drawn from the names of the actors who performed the roles: John Ashbery and Violet Lang.
and radio soap operas during the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the basic storyline and
characters in *Try! Try!* resemble those of the melodrama and love-triangle narrative.  

In the play, Jack, a returning veteran, has lost his sense of manly courage and
patriotic zeal, and Violet has begun questioning her life as a housewife captive in the
home. As soon as Jack returns from the war, he says to Violet, “Something went wrong.
One minute I was lord of all I surveyed, and the next I knew that I’d be beaten—that I’d
better go back to my easy throne, and leave this virgin land I’d first laid heavy hands
upon. That was a retreat!” *(SP 24)* Jack also boldly expresses anti-war sentiment: “Had
the war started for me to kill or to be killed? I don’t know.” *(SP 25)* He consistently
reminds himself of his nightmarish experiences on the battlefield, through which he
becomes increasingly skeptical of his image of himself as an aggressive and courageous
man. In a 1953 revised and undated script, Jack confesses to Violet: “So I spent most of
my time wondering when bullets, mortars, and bombs were going to find out where my
courage ended and this cowardice—oh intuition, I’m not on trial am I?—began.” *(SP 43)*

Jack’s lines communicate O’Hara’s critical stance toward war, American
militarism, and patriotic fervor during the 1940s and 1950s. These topics are explored in
many of O’Hara’s early writings, such as “Memorial Day 1950” and “On Seeing Rivers’
*Washington Crossing the Delaware* at the Museum of Modern Art.” Staged in 1953 at the
Artists’ Theater, *Try! Try!* must also have a direct influence on Rivers’ *Washington
Crossing the Delaware*, a painting done a few months later.

Some of Jack’s and Violet’s lines seem to imitate the conversational clichés and
exaggerated emotionalism of soap operas. Violet says to John, “I know you love me.

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(They Kiss.) I didn’t know you loved me so much. What a magnificent gesture.” (SP 33)

Sometimes, O’Hara simply employed lines or images from popular culture. “You haven’t talked this way since that afternoon in Arlington Cemetery when the football game was being broadcast over the car radio.” (SP 34) The juxtaposition of the heroic, patriotic site of Arlington Cemetery with a football game reflects O’Hara’s typical irreverence toward the “serious” dialogue of traditional plays.

In 1965, O’Hara claimed that he originally insisted that he would rewrite his play if Rivers did the set.25 The photograph of Rivers’ set design (1953, Fig. 74) that is published in Frank O’Hara: Selected Plays (1978) does not depict the full stage; therefore, it is difficult to compare the first and second stage sets for the play.26 But according to Rivers’ description in his autobiography, the main theatrical props of his set design were an old wicker chair and a gramophone:

My set was an empty stage except for a dilapidated wicker couch I found in a secondhand furniture shop, some floor pillows, and the six-foot-high former armature on which characters improvisationally hung coats, hats, socks, shirts, and pants. A giant pencil drawing of some clumsy reclining nudes formed a wall behind the couch.27

While the characters moved around or sat on the wicker chair, which serves as the central theatrical prop, the dissonant sounds coming from the gramophone convey Jack’s tragic memories of the war. The notable element in Rivers’ stage design that corresponds to O’Hara’s script is the presentation of disparate elements—especially “junk”


26 Both Edward Gorey’s design for O’Hara’s Try! Try! and the production photograph of Rivers’ set was published in Frank O’Hara: Selected Plays. Gorey’s pen drawing of the set features relatively expressive lines.

materials—in front of his huge drawing of human figures as the backdrop (Fig. 75).
Rivers brings these materials and furniture, as they are, like found objects, rather than
adding his creative touch or attempting to integrate them into the overall theatrical
design.

Auslander maintained that the disparate visual components Rivers selected
functioned as important reminders of the parallel characteristics of Rivers’ set design and
O’Hara’s script. O’Hara’s play borrowed its conversation and acting style from various
sources, including soap operas and Japanese Noh Theater. Auslander compared Try! Try!
to Rauschenberg’s combine paintings, which were also comprised of various objects and
junk materials. “O’Hara’s plays are panoplies of heterodox elements,” wrote Auslander,
“some recognizable, some invented, some purely abstract, reminiscent of Rauschenberg’s
combine paintings.”²⁸ Contrary to Auslander’s suggestion, Rauschenberg’s combines,
such as Monogram (1955-59) and Bed (1955), date after the version of Try! Try! that
featured Rivers’ set design, which premiered in 1953.²⁹ Instead, as Jane Freilicher noted,
Rivers (along with O’Hara) might have already developed his personal tendency toward
working with everyday objects, such as lamps and coat hangers, during his drawing
classes at Hofmann’s School in the late 1940s.

Despite the existence of parallel thematic and aesthetic traits in Rivers’ stage
design and O’Hara’s script for Try! Try!, Rivers and O’Hara’s first serious collaboration

²⁸ Auslander, The New York School Poets as Playwrights, 61.
²⁹ Rivers claimed that he had been deeply impressed by Rauschenberg’s work featuring a
“goat with a rubber tire around its middle” at the annual group show held at the Stable Gallery in
1955. These remarks presumably refer to Rauschenberg’s famous Monogram, one of his earliest
combine paintings, which consisted of junk materials affixed to a flat canvas. Rivers submitted
his sculptural work to the same group show. Rivers and Weinstein, What Did I Do?, 240-41.
can be characterized as a mere extension of their individual painting and writing efforts from the early 1950s. This earliest collaborative work did not feature the reliance upon immediate, improvisational interaction that typified their subsequent joint works, the co-written texts “Kenneth Koch: A Tragedy” in 1953 and “How to Proceed in the Arts” between 1954 and 1955.

“Kenneth Koch: A Tragedy” and “How to Proceed in the Arts”: Gossip about the New York Art World

“Kenneth Koch: A Tragedy” is a script for a play of the same title. The play was never finished and mounted on the stage, but the script offers a rare insider’s view of the atmosphere of the Cedar Bar, an informal gathering of the New York School artists. LeSueur maintained that the play would give the audience a clear sense of “what they … missed out” on in the dynamic New York art scene of the 1950s. (SP xvii) This is the earliest co-written text by Rivers and O’Hara, and one that showcases distinctive traits of their joint endeavors; that is, the text contains signature elements of their informal conversational style, such as name-dropping and gossip about the personal lives of artists and writers.

Rivers and O’Hara chose Koch as one of their major characters as well as their primary figure of inspiration. Koch, a mutual friend, was known for his humor and absurd conversational style.³⁰ His nickname within the New York School of poets and

³⁰ Another aspect of Koch’s personal character was his relatively “normal,” apparently conventional heterosexual lifestyle. Koch remained married to wife Janice Koch for over three decades; they had a daughter in 1956. Joe LeSueur recalled that O’Hara teased Koch with the letters “H.D.,” meaning “homosexual dread,” partly in his campy “including-him-in way” and partly in order to do “some reverse kidding.” Joe LeSueur, Interview with Brad Gooch, May 9/10, 1988, quoted in Gooch, City Poet, 224-25. In “A Tragedy,” O’Hara portrayed Koch as rebuking such labels: “They called me ‘queer’ and I thought they meant I was a poet, so I became a poet. What if I’d understood them? Moses! What a risk I was running.” (SP 129)
artists was “Dr. Fun,” and, according to Gooch, he lived up to this moniker with his “hillbilly accent or speaking in flawless” yet “uninterruptible blank verse.”  

The subtitle “A Tragedy” is derived from one of Koch’s lines. Upon observing Pollock’s ever bad-tempered and surly attitude, Koch responds, “it is tragedy that he was such a baldy.” (SP 129) O’Hara and Rivers thus contrasted Koch’s lighthearted conversational style with the overly serious attitudes and rhetoric of the first generation New York School painters.

“A Tragedy” presents bold, hilarious caricatures of the artists, dealers, and writers of the 1950s New York art world. It was first published in O’Hara’s Selected Plays in 1978. O’Hara claimed in 1965 that he and Rivers had not published this text during the 1950s because “it is filled with [so much] 50s art gossip that everyone would sue us.”

In the play, Pollock, the most drunken, abusive, and homophobic figure, enters the Cedar Tavern and abruptly calls Rivers and O’Hara “those fags.” (SP 130) In imitation of Pollock’s terse, bragging rhetorical style, most of Pollock’s lines are abrupt and short. His anti-type is Myers, the flamboyant, loquacious director of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery whom Rivers considered “unmistakably gay.” In the play, Myers boasts, “Why, my dear, haven’t you heard? I have a gallery of the liveliest, more original, and above all youngest, painters in America, and for every painter there’s a poet.” (SP 128) In lines such as these, Rivers and O’Hara parodied Myers’ obsession with his own role as the self-appointed champion of the poets and second generation artists of the New York School—as well as the campy phrases and exaggerations that marked his conversational style: “You know we’ve discovered something called ‘the Figure’ that’s exciting us enormously this

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31 Gooch, *City Poet*, 224.

season…. It’s called ‘Painting Divine’ and includes the black laugh of surrealism and the pile-strewn sobs of Suprematism, and lots of buffing.” (SP 128)

Rivers and O’Hara portrayed Willem and Elaine de Kooning as greedy artists who were eager to achieve material gains. Elaine urges her husband not to “come down on the price of his work”: “Bill, I just wahked bah youh stuido un there wuz a kew of aht critics from Hoboken waiting to see youh wuhk. Whah duntcha go bahk un give em a peep, Bill. Bill. Bill, whah duntcha jump inta the Jaguah, it’s outsahde, really it is. Nah don’t cum dahn on yuh price, Bill, Giedion said youh great.” Willem agrees with his wife: “But there’s something about America that’s further away… Elaine was telling me there’s this guy in New Jersey that made a lot of money, that’s America for you….” (SP 127) Rivers and O’Hara used the de Kooning couple to satirize the contradiction between the increasing publicity and economic success of the Abstract Expressionists in the early 1950s and their original stance of non-commercialism and bohemianism.

Meanwhile, the Resnick character explains that Abstract Expressionism is “marvelous and yuh feel like a grandson, you’re a hero because yuh continue the battle….” Presumably, Resnick’s crude personality, although exaggerated, was meant to emblematize the stereotype of the major New York School artists. Resnick’s character also expresses his contempt toward “Brooks Brothers” types—a term that describes the poets and writers within the New York School, as stated previously. Earlier in the play, the pervasive sexism and homophobia of the New York School are noted when Pollock calls “Frank” and “Rivers” “those fags” and exclaims, “My wife is a lousy lay!” (SP 130). 33

33 The distinctive personalities of the major Abstract Expressionists, especially Pollock, became the subject of caricature in Tennessee Williams’ 1969 play In the Bar of Tokyo Hotel. As
Certainly, Rivers and O’Hara’s portrayal of the Cedar Bar’s atmosphere in “Tragedy” is exaggerated and sometimes misleading; the characters in the play are often overly simplified and reductive, and their lines are frequently incomprehensible and inconsistent. Notwithstanding, Rivers’ and O’Hara’s use of gossip about artists’ sexuality and homophobia may provide important insight into how their informal talk influenced their collaborative writing. The name dropping and gossip about the intimate lives of other artists and writers in “A Tragedy” reflect the conversational style within Rivers and O’Hara’s coterie. As documented by Rivers in his autobiography, the artists and writers in O’Hara’s circle had developed a distinctive mode of conversing that could be likened to “camp talk.” The following passage, quoted from Rivers’ autobiography, effectively attests to this linguistic pattern:

“My dear, I’ve been reading Dostoyevsky’s Raw Youth. It’s marvelous,” and other friends respond, “[H]e filched it all from Dickens, who has everything Dostoyevsky has, plus being—,” then the next person also retorts, “How about the honorable Honoré? You’re not telling me that Dickens had more balls than Balzac.  

According to Rivers, there was consistent competitive pressure to invent what he called “well-turned phrases.” Poets in Rivers’ and O’Hara’s coterie often used “silly bits

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Ellen Landau observed, the main characters—Miriam and Mark Conley, a domineering wife and her drunken painter husband—are reminiscent of Pollock and Krasner. One of Williams’ characters directly alludes to Pollock by saying, “Mark is mad… a man raging in the dark…. He’s gone through drip, fight, sopped, saturated, scraped, ripped, cut, skeins of, mounds of heroically enduring color.” Quoted in Ellen Landau, Jackson Pollock (New York: Abrams, 1989), 16-17.

Rivers and Weinstein, What Did I Do?, 109. In “The Sorrows of the Youngman” in 1963, O’Hara wrote that John Rechy’s writing style in City of Night (1963) imitated the “Exact tone of homosexual bar-talk” while his own writing style resembled Rechy’s. The prose of “homosexual bar-talk,” as defined by O’Hara, is “full of dots and dashes and elisions” that frequently “work well to create a run-on casual, or hysterical, faggoty diction” “along with the use of capitals for Emphasis of the important feeling word.” Frank O’Hara, “The Sorrows of the Youngman,” in Kulchur (Winter 1963), reprinted in O’Hara, Standing Still and Walking in New York, 160. The dialogues in “A Tragedy” are also full of breathy pauses and exclamation marks, along with gossip on the sex lives of artists and writers.
of information,” recycling them as variously as possible, rather than trying to prove claims or express serious opinions. Rivers offered the following example: “Did you know there was a case in Michigan where a mother ran off with two objects? The Renoir hanging over her fireplace and her equally well-hung nineteen-year-old son…. That’s adding incest to injury, Mary.”35 The poets who chatted in this manner randomly mixed the day’s news with comments on art and artists.

Paul Goodman’s study of the particular linguistic patterns that evolve within the confines of formal and informal social groups might shed light on the type of dialogue used in “A Tragedy,” and, for that matter, within Rivers’ and O’Hara’s circle. In 1971, Goodman postulated diverse functions of sub-language, which could “glue together not people in general, but a specific group, clique, adolescent gang, or thieves’ gang.”36 While sub-language may or may not communicate ideas more accurately or relevantly than other types of language do, it affirms a “group’s identity and commits the members to it.” Although Goodman did not deal with the example of gay language, he addressed various origins of sub-language, particularly those developed within groups regarded as minorities; he cited “Yiddish” and “African American slang” as notable examples of sub-language and claimed that minorities and alienated groups appropriated language for self-defensive and self-affirming purposes.

Of course, defining fixed intrinsic or universal linguistic patterns shared by gay people is not a feasible task. As Michael Warner has argued, a distinctive feature of lesbian and gay history has been the concept of “non-community” or “dispersal rather


than localization,” which continues to be definitive of queer self-understanding. Nonetheless, Goodman’s idea of a “shell-shocked society,” drawn from communal sub-language, might well be applicable to the case of Rivers’ and O’Hara’s coterie, as their chatty and absurd style of conversation—“camp talk”—was instrumental in their art and life. In “A Tragedy,” Rivers and O’Hara drew an imaginary boundary between “us” and “them”—between the “Brooks Brothers types” and the “macho bohemian artists.” This boundary permitted them to express their marginality or difference from the older generation New York School artists.

The random nature of the topics discussed and the relative incoherence of the statements in Rivers’ and O’Hara’s co-written text also follow the definition of gossip. Gossip generally refers to a kind of idle, chatty talk among friends or companions—typically female—about the personal matters and relationships of themselves and others; it is conceived of as a relaxing activity whose value lies in the activity itself rather than in the achievement of external ends. This “does not imply that gossip has no consequence, but those are mostly by products, not ends,” Aaron Ben-Ze’ev argued. In Ben-Ze’ev’s view, the typical gossip is easygoing, “with no significant intended practical results.” In general, gossip seems to be talk for the sake of talking; therefore, when people are “involved in serious, practical, and purposive talk, they are not gossiping.”

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1992 autobiography exemplifies the gossipy conversational style in his circle is. The book’s title—“Unauthorized Autobiography”—self-mockingly highlights the “dubious” status of the art-world gossip upon which a considerable portion of the book is based.)

Despite its lack of coherence and clear purpose, gossip can give one a sense of what has been excluded from the existing official discourse on artists and artworks within the New York School. Henry Abelove, a gay and lesbian studies scholar, contends that gossip is “illicit speculation, information, knowledge” of private and personal information about individuals’ sexual orientations and lives, yet at the same time is “an indispensable resource for those who are in any sense or measure disempowered, as those who experience funny emotions may be, and it is deep whenever it circulates in subterranean ways and touches on matters hard to grasp and of crucial concern.”39 In 2003, Gavin Butt concurs that gossip offers “an invaluable resource for discovering sexual meanings which might otherwise be passed over in silence by the discursive proprieties of art history.”40 He quoted an interesting remark by John Giorno suggesting that art world gossip could serve as a useful alternative source of “hard core art history.” Giorno was a homosexual poet and one of the key members of Warhol’s coterie during the early 1960s. In 1974, Giorno explained the importance of gossip about artists’ sex lives in understanding the 1960s New York art world:

39 Henry Abelove, *Deep Gossip* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), introduction, xii. According to Abelove, the title of this book came from Ginsberg’s poem “City Midnight Junk Strains,” written in commemoration of O’Hara after his death in 1966. Ginsberg wrote, “I see New York thru your eyes/ and hear of one funeral a year nowadays—/ From Billie Holiday’s time/ appreciated more and more/ a common ear/ for our deep gossip.”

Everyone is always gossiping about what everyone else is doing, like who’s making it with whom, who has done what to whom, and all the weirdness…. Ordinarily it just seems like boring gossip, but it actually is the dynamic relationships between artists, between artists and poets.\footnote{John Giorno, “Winston Leyland Interviews John Giorno,” in \textit{Gay Sunshine Interviews} 1 (1974): 159.}

In 1996, Irit Rogoff, a feminist art historian, argued that the point of theoretical activity is “to locate that which is outside of the theoretical framework,” and gossip can bring novel perspectives to an art historical canon grounded upon gendered, racialized, and sexualized exclusions:

\begin{quote}
We have to ask ourselves, what does it mean to have evidence of someone’s sexuality, of their intimate lives? Does it shift the field from historical subjects to contemporary desiring subjects who, by constructing new oral artifacts and projecting their own desires onto the historical field, are in fact devising reading strategies [...]?\footnote{Irit Rogoff, “Gossip as Testimony: A Postmodern Signature” in \textit{Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings}, ed. Griselda Pollock (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 61.}
\end{quote}

Indeed, “A Tragedy,” heavily based upon art-world gossip, can expand our limited perspective on the distinction between proper and improper—and essential and tangential—information on art and artists in official art history.

In 1954, Rivers and O’Hara brought off-the-record gossip into the arena of art criticism in “How to Proceed in the Arts.” This text is a unique piece of writing that is part art criticism and part manifesto. Comprised of alternating lines by Rivers and O’Hara, it uses a format that foregrounds the interaction between two writers, which is the central trait of the piece. Rivers and O’Hara initially planned to write several “how-
to” texts in the fields of art, literature, and theater; “How to Proceed in the Arts” is the only completed, extant writing in this intended series.43

The idea of writing a list of recommendations or suggestions for artists grew out of Rivers’ and O’Hara’s readings of contemporary art reviews. Each line in “How to Proceed in the Arts” represents a response to the art reviews and art criticism that they came across at the time of their collaboration. As Rivers recalled,

About a year later we collaborated on a piece of writing, ‘How to Proceed in the Arts’ driven to it by articles on art, half of them incomprehensible, by name-dropping exhibitions, and of course by other artists and their statements about art receiving more attention than we could bear.44

The Abstract Expressionists were championed in critical discourse, especially that of Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg. In a series of influential essays including “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939), “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” (1940), and “American Type Painting” (1955), Greenberg theorized and refined his formalist art criticism. Greenberg sought to canonize certain painters whom he believed emblematized the most desirable direction in contemporary art, notably Pollock, Still, Newman, and Rothko. Meanwhile, in a 1952 article entitled “The American Action Painters,” in which he introduced the term “action painting,” Rosenberg claimed that Abstract Expressionism was “the most vigorous and original movement in art in the history of this nation.”45 These critics’ single-minded devotion to the first generation Abstract Expressionists


44 Rivers and Weinstein, What Did I Do?, 241-42.

alienated some other art critics and artists, however. As Rivers recalled, Greenberg
frequently put down artists (presumably including Rivers himself) who did not conform
to his dogmatic view that modern and contemporary art had evolved in the direction of
articulating the material conditions of painting—colors, forms, and the flat canvas—and
abstraction. ⁴⁶

O’Hara was known for his independent position as an art critic of the 1950s. His
influential 1954 essay “Nature of Painting,” for instance, reflects neither the preference of
conservative art critics for traditional figuration nor that of formalist art critics, such as
Clement Greenberg, for Abstract Expressionism. In his “Nature and New Painting”
(1954), O’Hara targeted art criticism that was derived from a given set of rigidly
formalist theories. He insisted, “Had it not been for the adventurous spirit of American
abstract expressionism we should have been given over to a cult of mechanics, of know-
how, of push-and-pull spatial organization which, as a means of formal
knowledge…cannot be confused with creation.” ⁴⁷ In addition to resisting common
binaries such as representational versus abstract art, O’Hara did not believe in definite,
fixed critical stances. Waldo Rasmussen, who worked with O’Hara at the International
Program of the Museum of Modern Art in the 1950s and became the director of the
program in 1961, effectively summarized O’Hara’s approach in the 1950s:

He [O’Hara] wrote eloquently about the artist he admired, but not with the
analytical distance of the scholar or the broader theoretical base of the critic.

⁴⁶ Greenberg favorably reviewed Rivers’ first show at the Jane Street Gallery in 1949 but
radically changed his position on the painter after viewing Washington Crossing the Delaware.
For detailed documents on Greenberg’s reactions to Rivers’ work in writing and in person, see

in New York, 43.
Essentially he was the artist’s spokesman, and that was considered in some quarters a questionable role for museum professionals and compromising to institutions.\textsuperscript{48}

Like O’Hara, Rivers resisted a dogmatic and formalist approach to modern art.

“Monet: The Eye is Magic,” an article he wrote for \textit{Art News} in 1960, is a historically significant document that reveals his critical position toward formalist-influenced curating and art criticism.\textsuperscript{49} This article was written on the occasion of the French impressionist Claude Monet’s exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1960. Rivers described the exhibit as follows: “This selection reduces Monet by its emphasis and its ideology…what we were given is a controlled and severe arrangement by subject and place that makes Monet very modern and very weather-bent.”\textsuperscript{50} Rivers also attacked the curator’s effort to present Monet solely in light of the development of contemporary abstract art and of the narrow interpretive framework of formalism. In the


\textsuperscript{49} In his 1992 autobiography, Rivers maintained that his 1960 article on Monet was intended to challenge Greenberg’s inaccurate and narrow view of art and art history. Rivers and Weinstein, \textit{What Did I Do?}, 184-85. Rivers’ reference to a 1960 Monet exhibition may specifically aim at Greenberg’s famous 1957 essay, “The Later Monet,” in which he maintained, “those close-ups which are the last \textit{Water Lilies} say—to and with the radical Abstract Expressionists—that a lot of physical space is needed to develop adequately a strong pictorial idea that does not involve an illusion of deep space.” Clement Greenberg, “The Later Monet,” \textit{Art News Annual} 26 (1957), reprinted in \textit{Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism}, vol. 4. ed. John O’Brien (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993), 11. Greenberg’s remarks on Monet, especially on the shimmering effects of his colors, came at a moment when Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, and Mark Rothko were gradually discarding expressive brushwork in order to focus on the effects of color in broader fields. Thus, Monet’s late paintings served for Greenberg to create a historical progression from French modernism to a certain trend within the New York School of art.

exhibition, Monet appeared to be “a painter with no prior idea of the outcome, only sure he wants to paint something—all very ‘New York School’,” wrote Rivers.  

“How to Proceed in the Arts” represented Rivers’ and O’Hara’s discomfort with critics and curators who vigorously defended a certain artistic lineage within the New York School. The principal idea of the text is that good art has nothing to do with finding visual equivalents to personal and inner struggles or with serious formalist rhetoric. The most useful and practical advice for young artists, Rivers and O’Hara contended, was to adopt any artistic strategy and style that would guarantee success and fame in the art world. “We are too embarrassed to decide on the proper approach. However, this much we have observed,” Rivers and O’Hara wrote, “good or bad schools are insurance companies. Enter their offices and you are certain of a position.” The most important goal for any young artist, they declared, was to become “a successful all around man like Baudelaire.”

Rivers and O’Hara found various ways of challenging and even mocking mythologized ideas of the creative process, such as the concept of “action,” as upheld by Rosenberg: “They say painting is action. We say, remember your enemies and nurse the smallest insult. Introduce yourself as Delacroix. When you leave, give them your wet crayons. Be ready to admit that jealousy moves you more than art.” They redefined the idea of a huge canvas, perceiving it not as a door to a mysterious world or as a conduit for the artist’s unbounded power, but as a carrier of the artist’s exaggerated, showy ego:

51 Ibid., 28.


53 Ibid.
“Even if it is a small work. Say 6 feet by 9 feet, it is a start. If it is only as big as a postage
stamp, call it a collage—but begin.”\textsuperscript{54}

In the second section entitled “Working on the Picture,” Rivers and O’Hara
explored sexual desire, including homosexual desire, as part of the creative process:

But Michelangelo has just turned over in his grave. His head is furrowed and you,
like those dopey Florentines, accuse him of being homosexual. He began to turn
back, but not before you find yourself at his toes, begging for the cheese in
between.\textsuperscript{55}

This reference to Michelangelo might suggest Rivers’ and O’Hara’s familiarity with the
effort to discover a gay current in traditional art and literature. \textit{One}, the first widely
circulated gay magazine in the postwar United States, presented articles, historical
studies, and biographies on well-known artistic and literary figures such as Michelangelo,
Whitman, Tchaikovsky, and Beethoven. The magazine also explored the question of
whether there was an intrinsic relationship between homosexuality and artistic talent.\textsuperscript{56}

As George Chauncey wrote in 1979, certain historical figures were important to gay men
“not only because [they] validated their own homosexuality, but because [they] linked
them to others” through the construction of “a history that provides its members with a
shared tradition and collective ancestors […]”\textsuperscript{57} Contrary to the purpose of recovering
the hidden sexual orientations of old masters and reclaiming a cultural heritage and

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 96.

\textsuperscript{56} Examples of these articles are Mario Palmieri’s “Leonardo the Forerunner,” \textit{One} (Fall 1958): 76-83, “Immortal Beethoven,” \textit{One} (June 1958): 6-8, and R. H. Crowther’s “Homosexual Culture,” \textit{One} (Spring 1960): 176-82. On the cover of the April 1960 issue of \textit{One}, an image of
Michelangelo’s David was presented as a powerful icon for the gay man.

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past}, ed. Martin Duberman,
tradition for the gay man, Rivers and O’Hara took a comical twist in describing the
Michelangelo figure. They rather lightheartedly associated Michelangelo’s artistic
achievements with homosexuality.

Rivers’ and O’Hara’s comment on Michelangelo was followed by the more
provocative and obscene recommendations. “It is 12:00. Pick up the adult and throw it
out of bed. Work should be done at your leisure, you know, only when there is nothing
else to do.” Rivers and O’Hara here not only treated the “serious” creative process as
part of a trivial, leisure-time activity (“at your leisure”), but also described it as an
occasion of unleashing the physical and sexual desires of the painter. They advised
young artists to seek sexual adventures, including same-sex experiences, whenever they
felt that they had to be recharged with “better” and “fresher” artistic inspiration: “At this
point go out and have a hot pastrami sandwich with a side order of beans and a bottle of
beer. Grope the waitress, or, if you are so inclined, the waiter. Now return to your
canvas—refreshed and invigorated.”

In the case of “How to Proceed in the Arts,” Rivers and O’Hara brought
presumably unessential information about sexuality into the realm of art criticism; they
ingeniously mixed informed discussions about various topics related to art, art making,
and authorship with obscene jokes about artists’ sexual encounters and same-sex
relationships. This brash, controversial manifesto confronted the supposed lack of interest


59 In modern and contemporary art, there have been numerous efforts to associate male
ejaculation or masturbation with artistic creation. Marcel Duchamp’s Large Glass (1915-23) and
Vito Acconci’s performance Seedbed (1971) explore male masturbation, for example.

in gender and sexuality within the framework of formalist art criticism during the 1940s and 1950s. “How to Proceed in the Arts” challenged the boundary between serious art criticism and art-world gossip; it also recovered a gendered and sexualized subject position—such as those of Rivers’ and O’Hara’s—in the vicinity of the first generation New York School artists.

**Stones: Writing and Drawing Male Intimacy**

*Stones* is the most significant and comprehensive collaborative project that Rivers and O’Hara completed. Since Rivers and O’Hara worked on the original stone printing plates together, they became very careful about arranging each other’s images and words. O’Hara explained, “sometimes we would discuss the placement of an image which would leave me enough room to write the text, or I would say where I wanted the text and then he would decorate the rest of the stone.”\(^{61}\) Moreover, unlike their co-written texts, *Stones* evolved around their self-images, addressing the nature of their intimacy and its role in their collaboration.

The *Stones* series was initiated at Tatyana Grossman’s suggestion. In 1957, Grossman, who had recently opened her print workshop, Universal Arts Edition, in the Hamptons, was looking for poets and artists who would collaborate for her first print project. Barney Rosset, an editor at Grove Press, recommended O’Hara to Grossman. Rosset had been working with O’Hara on *The Meditation on the Emergency* (1957), O’Hara’s first poetry book for Grove. Grossman accidentally met O’Hara at Rivers’ house in Southampton in the summer of that year. After speaking to her, both Rivers and

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O’Hara were enthusiastic about the project. Rivers recalled that the circumstances appeared to be ideal, since they had known about each other’s work for so long:

The Siberian lady didn’t just find some painters and some poets who would work together. She asked two men who really know each other’s work and life backwards which means to include all the absurdity and civilization a lively mind sees in friendship and art.  

*Stones*, indeed, as Rivers insisted, revolves around the themes of collaboration, friendship, and love. On the inner folder cover of *Stones* (1957, Fig. 76), Rivers’ and O’Hara’s profiles overlap. The first lithograph, “Us” (1957), the third, “The End of All Existence” (1957), and the fifth, “Love” (1958), concentrate on the personal and artistic relationship between Rivers and O’Hara. A second group in the series deals with the romantic feelings between them. These lithographs include “Melancholy Breakfast” (1958), “Energy” (1959), and “Five O’ Clock” (1958). A final group of prints touches upon elements of their personal surroundings, such as Rivers’ family members and close friends: “Berdie” (1959) treats Rivers’ mother-in-law, “Springtemps” (1958) addresses Rivers’ first son, and “To the Entertainment of Patsy and Mike Goldberg” (1958) was composed for newlyweds who were their mutual friends.

The first lithograph in the series is titled “Us” (1957, Fig. 77). According to Rivers, each time he got together with O’Hara, they chose a very definite subject, and “the first stone was going to be called ‘us.’ ” The predominant visual images in “Us” are the faces of O’Hara and Rivers, separate and together. O’Hara’s face in profile, with his unmistakable broken nose, appears in the upper left corner next to Rivers’ face, which

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63 Ibid., 93.
is rendered from the front. The juxtaposition of Rivers’ frontal face with O’Hara’s profile is repeated on the upper right and upper bottom corners as well.

The title “Us” was supposed to carry double meanings, suggesting both the second person plural pronoun and the initials of the United States. O’Hara wrote, “They call US the Farters of our Country/ poetry was declining, painting advancing/ we were complaining./ it was ‘50s…” Perloff explained that the pun on the word “us” is “not just [a] local joke,” but the theme of the whole poem-painting, “which portrays heroism and anti-heroism in various guises.” 64 O’Hara made random references to the historical context of the 1950s in the United States where, in his view, the development of literature could not compete with the active and experimental scene of the New York art world. The reference to James Dean may also attest Rivers’ and O’Hara’s distinctive views of a new type of the male hero in 1950s Hollywood movies—more or less as the victim, Perloff argues. O’Hara’s line “It’s swell out here. How are you?,,” which bumps into the other sign: “A HERO of the 50’s is arriving in Hollywood.” While “U.S.” presents historical contexts of their collaboration in the 1950s, “us,” designating Rivers and O’Hara as partners, involves the more intimate, personal aspect of their relationship as friends and occasional lovers. 65

The overall pictorial composition of “Us” also reflects these dual aspects. In addition to the images of Rivers and O’Hara situated at the left side of “U.S.” with the red and blue patterns of the American flag, the upper part of the picture contains the

64 Perloff, Frank O’Hara, 102.

65 Rivers also described how “Us” there was a tension between their self images and the references to renowned figures in the history of art and literature: “Our self image, mind you, was no less grandiose than those old Parisians but it was another time and we had our own balls to take care of.” Larry Rivers, “Note,” undated, Bridgehampton, NY: Rivers Archive, unpaginated.
image of Rivers and O’Hara as a serious artist-poet couple; they present themselves as an American counterpart to Pablo Picasso and Gertrude Stein, whose artistic and literary experiments must be said for a time to have run parallel. (Picasso famously painted *Gertrude Stein* in 1906.) On the upper right corner of “Us,” O’Hara wrote, “Poetry belongs to me,/ Larry, AND PAINTING to you,” adding, “That’s what G said to P,” and “Look where they got them.” The “G” and “P” here represent Gertrude and Pablo, indicating that O’Hara borrowed his line from Stein. 66 Therefore, Rivers’ and O’Hara’s images in the upper parts may manifest their ambition to be identified with the legendary modernist artist and poet in the 1950s art and literature of the United States.

Rivers’ images and O’Hara’s words in the lower part, by contrast, represent the personal and private aspects of Rivers and O’Hara’s relationship. For instance, the image of Rivers and O’Hara embracing each other in the bottom right corner rather straightforwardly represents them as a gay couple. In this drawing, O’Hara’s profile and Rivers’ face are almost superimposed, and their lower body parts merge into each other and become indistinguishable. O’Hara’s accompanying lines on the lower part of the picture also reflect a sense of intimacy, identifying the couple as ‘we.’ O’Hara wrote “Parties were ‘given,’ we ‘went’ ” on the left corner of the picture right below his own profile drawn by Rivers. On the left side of Rivers’ drawings of Rivers and O’Hara, O’Hara also inserted a line whose intimate tone was meant to evoke the romantic and tender feelings between them: “A very soft rain/ we were sitting on the stairs.”

In his 1961 article “Life Among the Stones,” Rivers mentioned the ambivalent nature of his relationship with O’Hara, as represented in “Us”: “The height of Romance?

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Sorry Identification with historical figures? So what?" As Rivers put it, Stones might deal with their romantic relationship and intimacy, might express their personal ambitions, or might represent the campy gesture of dropping famous names from the history of art and literature. Whatever the case, I will argue that it was the dual aspects of their images, and the nature of their relationship—which was situated between friendship and love—that became the consistent and notable theme in “Us.”

The ambiguous nature of friendship between men, especially that developed between literary collaborators, has been a subject of scholarly interest. In 1989, literary critic Wayne Koestenbaum claimed that much of the intensive collaboration that occurs between men bears some degree of erotic allusions. To illustrate this point, he chose a number of texts from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that were co-authored by male intellectuals, researchers, and writers, such as Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer, William Wordsworth and Samuel T. Coleridge, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, and Ford Maddox Ford and Joseph Conrad. Each of these collaborative texts or studies, in one way or another, evinces the contradictory attempts of the collaborators to “express” as well as to “strive to conceal” the erotic undercurrent between them.  

Freud and Breuer’s joint authorship of Studies in Hysteria (1893), for instance, began with the exchange of a woman when the older doctor abandoned his treatment of Bertha Pappenheim (Anna O.), turning her over to Freud. Koestenbaum speculated that Freudian psychoanalysis and its methods were created at a moment long before Freud had begun to understand his own homoerotic longings. Like so many male collaborators before and after them, Freud and

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Breuer “collaborated in order to separate homoeroticism from the sanctioned male bonding that upholds patriarchy,” wrote Koestenbaum.  

Koestenbaum’s study of male bonding as a means of maintaining patriarchy was predicated on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s influential formulation of what she called “homosociality” and “homosexuality.” Sedgwick’s theory, derived from a feminist stance, recognized the dual nature of male friendship and the problematic boundary between homosexuality and homosociality. According to Sedgwick, the word “homosociality” has been used in history and the social sciences, where it has described social bonds between persons of the same sex, but more importantly, it is a neologism formed by analogical relationship with “homosexual” and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from “homosexual.”

Within Sedgwick’s theoretical framework of “homosociality,” the only way to eliminate the homosexual threat is to include a woman in the relationship, forming a (safe) “triangular configuration” rather than a (threatening) “linear, male-to-male union.” Women function in this system as signs and tools to ensure the survival of male relationships and to deflect the threat of homosexuality by serving as a link between men. If we accept Sedgwick’s formulation, the seemingly opposing homosocial and

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69 Ibid.


homosexual aspects of male friendship do not necessarily occupy discrete spheres. On the contrary, Sedgwick maintained, homosociality and homosexuality exist on a continuum and are not distinct categories, as homophobia is intertwined with patriarchy. “Much of the most useful recent writing about patriarchal structures [suggests] that ‘obligatory heterosexuality’ is built into male-dominated kinship systems, [and] that homophobia is a necessary consequence of such patriarchal institutions as heterosexual marriage.”

Sedgwick’s definition of nineteenth century homosociality may correspond to the confusing term “friend,” which is widely used in literary works of the past. According to Alan Bray, in sixteenth century Elizabethan England, the word “friend” in poetry and drama generally signified the bonds among influential patrons and their clients, suitors, and friends at court, yet the same word could also signify a lover—what Bray called “someone’s bedfellow” in different contexts. Bray maintained that such tension between ordinary male bonding and an “immoral emotional or physical liaison” between men—if not explicit homoeroticism—was central to Christopher Marlowe’s Edward II (1590). This play depicts Edward’s unusual affection toward Gaveston, which prompted the rebellion of Edward’s resentful nobles and subsequently precipitated Edward’s death. The apparently “homosexual” aspects of the play, such as the passionate language and the embraces that the two men share, have “ready parallels in Elizabethan

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72 Sedgwick, Between Men, 3.


74 In the opening scene of the play, a naked boy in Gaveston’s entertainment for Edward holds a bush “to hide those parts which men delight to see.” The hidden body of the boy in this explicit sexual scene at the beginning of the play, along with Edward’s passion for Gaveston, might imply forbidden erotic desire between two men. Ibid., 346.
England in the daily conventions of Friendship,” which did not elicit accusations of sodomitical behavior.  

Rivers and O’Hara’s depiction of themselves as both friends and lovers is consistent with confusing definitions of male friendship that have surfaced in the history of Western literature, especially during the nineteenth century, the period from which Sedgwick and Koestenbaum drew most of their examples. The arrangement of several, often contradictory images of Rivers and O’Hara reflects the multiple aspects of friendship, which can engender confusion and controversy. Hazel Smith, author of Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O’Hara, observed that in “Us,” it is hard to locate an “absolute line” between “friendship and sex.” Sometimes, the theme of friendship is “inscribed within an erotic or romantic discourse,” but “friendship can morph into sexual relationship and back again.”

In a print entitled “The End of All Existence” (1957, Fig. 78), Rivers and O’Hara disguised themselves as a well-known gay couple from nineteenth century French literary history: Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud. When Verlaine met Rimbaud in 1871, he was a married man, and Rimbaud was a boy from Charleville, a small province in Northern France, who had just turned seventeen. Verlaine eventually left his pregnant wife to live and travel with Rimbaud in London and Belgium. In 1873, Verlaine

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75 Bray maintained that Marlowe’s play effectively captures the confusing, intense emotions between two male friends of the sixteenth century Renaissance, rather than readily delivering the theme of homosexuality, as some modern literary critics have maintained. Ibid., 346.

Rimbaud at the Brussels train station and was jailed for eighteen months—an event that stirred enormous publicity and scandal.

Rivers explained that he drew an image featuring Verlaine with a big mustache and Rimbaud as an attractive young man based on a photograph that he had put up in his studio. As Rivers recalled in his autobiography, John Myers once compared him and O’Hara to Verlaine and Rimbaud:

We [Rivers and O’Hara] then remembered a ballet night at the City Center. During an intermission we were making our way down the wide staircase from the cheap seats to the mezzanine where our mutual friend and my dealer John Myers thinking he was being funny screamed out for general use “there they are all covered with blood and semen.” This is a reference to something said about Rimbaud and Verlaine that Verlaine’s wife hounded him with for his whole life.  

Rivers looked for visual equivalents to O’Hara’s citing of Mathilde Verlaine’s lines that would suggest the story of the famous nineteenth century gay couple in French literature: “Finally I began making bullets that were also penises with legs. Simple Simon’s response to what Frank had written about the corpse de ballet.” In the center and right-hand corner of the lower area of the picture plane, Rivers repeated the bullet forms three times, one of which became part of the human body and appeared to be a penis. Just as O’Hara employed an erotically charged image of a gun in “On Seeing Larry Rivers’ Washington Crossing the Delaware at the Museum of Modern Art,” Rivers explored the erotic implications of bullets in this work, suggesting a physical and functional parallel between ammunition and the male genitalia. He also colored the face of Rimbaud in red and drew dots spread out around Rimbaud’s face to suggest blood erupting and splattering from Rimbaud’s wound.

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78 Ibid.
The story of Verlaine and Rimbaud was likely cited to invoke common perceptions of the homosexual couple or homoerotic relationship, rather than merely to respond to Myers’ comments. Paul Schmidt, a literary critic, claimed that Verlaine and Rimbaud’s sometimes sadomasochistic relationship was a laboratory for their love and poetry. According to Schmidt, blood and wounds are constant motifs in both poets’ writings, where cruelty and torment are also presented as means of reaching a different stage of love and life. In “Deliria” from *Une Saison en Enfer (A Season in Hell)* (1873), Rimbaud presented two characters: Verlaine as a foolish virgin and himself as a deluded poet. Verlaine’s character cries out, “I am the slave of a hellish Husband, to him who undid foolish virgins. There’s no doubt he’s the same demon…. We aren’t of this earth. I go where he goes, how can’t I?” Schmidt interpreted the image of Verlaine completely submitting himself to another as implying a state of masochism that is between “tears and blood” and “cruelty and submission.” Rimbaud’s character, in turn, responds, “I don’t like women. Love has to be reinvented, that much is clear…. No man before him had wished for such a thing. I was aware—without being afraid of him—that he could be a menace to society. Maybe he had found a way *to change life as we know it?*”

Themes of violence and self-destruction related to passionate love, of course, occur in homosexual and heterosexual love stories alike, but due to the forbidden nature

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of gay love, violence and the tragic ending have been common elements of literary
depictions of the homosexual couple. Most of the notable gay novels of the 1950s, such
as Gore Vidal’s *The City and the Pillar* in 1948 (published in 1954) and James Baldwin’s
*Giovanni’s Room* (1956), revolve around a doomed gay couple. In the original version of
*The City and the Pillar*, Jim Willard kills Bob Ford, his best friend as well as his boyhood
crush. In *Giovanni’s Room*, heartbroken Giovanni, after his separation from the main
character, David, murders Guillaume, the owner of a gay bar. At the end of the novel,
Giovanni is sentenced to death. Thus, the image of Verlaine and Rimbaud serves as an
important reminder of the flip side of passionate love between men, as portrayed in
literature.

The piece entitled “Love” (1959, Fig. 79) further demonstrates Rivers and
O’Hara’s exploration of the dual aspects of homoeroticism—love/hate, passion/violence,
happiness/tragedy. Rivers drew several phallic shapes, either attached or detached from
the main bodies. The one on the left, separated from the body, is depicted in a relatively
realistic mode; the big thumb situated slightly in the middle resembles a penis in shape.
Next to it is a circular form with an appendage, which can be viewed as a part of either a
penis or a female breast. Finally on the far right, the penis is attached to the man with the
overblown shoulders. Rivers explained that he had scattered the images of a number of
sexual organs throughout the lithograph, sometimes without articulating their gender

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83 For a comprehensive analysis of the origin and popularity of the “fatal” gay love story
during the nineteenth century, see Kevin Kopelson, “Wilde’s Love-Deaths,” in *Love’s Litany:

84 In 1968, Vidal published *The City and the Pillar Revised*, a substantially altered
version of the book with a different ending. In his revision, Jim rapes Bob instead of killing him.
attributes or distinguishing them from one another. Overall, Rivers’ drawing conveys a mix of absurdity and dejection. The female and male organs appear fragmentary, suggesting vulnerability whereas the images of two bodybuilder-type men with exaggerated shoulders are not in harmony with the rest of the imagery.

To accompany Rivers’ drawings, O’Hara contributed a poem whose tone “wholly undercuts the visual impression,” wrote Perloff. O’Hara’s lines are sad, resigned, and even melancholic, employing what Perloff perceived as the “parodic diction of romantic poems”: “To be lost/ the stars go out a broken chair/ is red in the dark a faint lust/ stirs like a plant in the creased rain/ where the gloom/ swells into odor/ like earth in the moon.” O’Hara’s verbal descriptions of love, which are dominated by pretty images, rhymes, and sonorous vowel sounds, hardly mirror Rivers’ drawings of broad-shouldered supermen, giant genitalia, and a top hat. This incongruence between the verbal and visual elements of the work, Perloff contended, “creates a delicately ambiguous vision of Love,” ensuring that the viewer is “confronted by contradictory signals that arrest the attention.”

In the lower area of “Love,” O’Hara wrote, “Lightness of the arrow wears its sign of depth and its sorrows of snow.” In gay iconography, the motif of the arrow is usually connected with the murdered and tortured male body through association with famous images of Saint Sebastian. In St. Sebastian (ca. 1630), Guido Reni (1575-1642) depicted

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85 “I distributed male and female over the surface with a few genitalia for the sex of it,” Rivers wrote, and “never even mentioned man or woman or bodies or sex.” Rivers, “Life Among the Stones,” 97.

86 Perloff, Frank O’Hara, 105.

87 The emphasis in the original. Ibid.
the saint as a youth with an immaculate body pierced by arrows. During the nineteenth century, a number of writers, including Oscar Wilde, conceived Saint Sebastian as an iconic image of homosexual martyrdom, largely prompted by the common portrayal of him in art as a young and virtually naked man. In Marsden Hartley’s *Sustained Comedy* (1939, Fig. 80), which depicts a young blonde man with earrings, butterfly tattoos, and a pumped-up torso in a tank top, the most visually captivating elements are two white arrows piercing the figure’s eyes. In addition, Hartley painted an image of a crucified semi-naked man on the chest of his sitter, further suggesting the theme of gay martyrdom. The arrow motif also appears in “The Dance” from the “Powhatan's Daughter” section of *The Bridge* (1930) by homosexual poet Hart Crane, who became the subject of Hartley’s 1933 painting *Eight Bells Folly Memorial for Hart Crane*: “Mythical brows we saw retiring—loth./ Disturbed, and destined, into denser green./ Greeting they sped us, on the arrow’s oath: Now lie incorrigibly what years between…."

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88 Saint Sebastian was a Roman commander of archers in the third century who was condemned to death by Emperor Diocletian for aiding the Christians. The emperor insisted that Sebastian be shot to death by his fellow archers.


90 In *Eight Bells Folly, Memorial for Hart Crane*, a tiny ship, surrounded by a dark navy sky with triangular clouds, is driven by a powerful wave. This scene clearly refers to homosexual poet Crane’s jump off a ship after a visit with Hartley the same year.

O’Hara opened the first stanza of “Homosexuality” with an arrow like image (“as if we’d been pierced by a glance!”) that recalls Hartley’s portrait. However, in “Love,” phrases such as “Lightness of the arrow” that wears off its “sorrow” prohibit the reader from interpreting O’Hara’s lines in terms of the standard gay iconography described above. Additionally, Rivers’ drawings of two super-macho men with big shoulders do not evoke vulnerability and pain that gays and lesbians should endure.

This lack of congruence between Rivers’ drawing and O’Hara’s poem in “Love” could afford crucial insight into important features of Stones and into the implied relationship between Rivers and O’Hara. Most of the works in the Stones series center on the relationship between Rivers’ images and O’Hara’s words, which could be described as non-hierarchical. O’Hara wrote in “Personism” (1959), he wanted his poetry to consist of the ideas and thoughts shared by “two persons.” However, O’Hara also added, “In all modesty, I confess that it may be the death of literature as we know it.” O’Hara thereby may have suggested his rebellion against not only a common definition of authorship, but also conventional literary endeavors to extract coherent meaning out of poetic languages. Indeed, the juxtaposition of Rivers’ images with O’Hara’s words in Stones consistently fails to deliver a monolithic message.

Close examinations of “Us,” “The End of All Existence,” and “Love” reveal that Rivers and O’Hara foregrounded the indeterminacy between opposing sensibilities and messages, such as seriousness and humor, love and death, private and public. Similarly, in “The End of All Existence” and “Love,” the intimacy between Rivers and O’Hara could be described as neither romantic nor destructive, neither positive nor pathological. O’Hara’s comment on love in “Personism” further illustrates his intention to deal with
various aspects of love without articulating a definite view of it, or of the nature of his relationship with Rivers. O’Hara maintained that he did not want to limit himself to expressing his specific feelings toward the person about whom he was writing:

But to give you a vague idea, one of its [Personism’s] minimal aspects is to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself), thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love’s life-giving vulgarity, and sustaining the poet’s feelings towards the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person. (CP 498-99)

Intimacy and love emerge as prominent concerns of O’Hara’s writings, including his poems in Stones. However, the lines in “Love,” which are partially humorous and partially sentimental, are not especially coherent; they cannot be read as the record of a consistent love for or feeling toward Rivers. In a way, his contributions to “Love” are similar to his poem “In Memory of My Feelings,” in which he refused to provide a clear sense of his identity to the reader. Similarly, in Stones O’Hara seems to urge the reader to understand his relationship with Rivers as an indefinable state, thus preserving what O’Hara called its “life-giving vulgarity,” immediacy, and temporality.

In his analysis of O’Hara’s poetry, Gregory W. Bredbeck argued that launching an assault on the conventional (phallocentric) symbolic system is “not a process easily formulated in coherent terms, nor is it a process to be programmatically mapped.”

Bredbeck criticized Roland Barthes’ notion of jouissance (bliss) as a valid strategy for intervening in literature dominated by normative heterosexual perspectives. In his 1975 The Pleasure of the Text, Barthes argued that “there are those who want a text…a text

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without fecundity, without productivity, a sterile text.”

Barthes further compared a conventional “procreative” text with an unconventional “sterile” text, alluding to the sexual binary of normal versus abnormal or heterosexuality versus homosexuality. According to Bredbeck, for Barthes, “the text’s ‘identity’ is established through difference:…the procreative text as different from the sterile one,” and as a result, difference turned into “stable sites,” and “these sites become ‘totalized and essentialized by the myths of heterosexuality.’”

Bredbeck further quoted O’Hara’s words to prove that O’Hara’s purpose had less to do with imagining a literature of homosexuality that opposed conventional approaches in writing than with expressing the impossibility of placing personal experience into fixed categories—namely, homosexuality/heterosexuality. In his 1953 essay “Notes on Second Avenue,” O’Hara claimed, “I have a feeling that the philosophical reduction of reality to a dealable-with system so distorts life that one’s ‘reward’ for this endeavor […] is illness both from inside and outside.” (CP 495) In this respect, Bredbeck wrote, “what must be imagined, rather, is a process undertaken ‘hit and myth’ that asserts the discrepancy between, on the one hand, individuals’ material experiences of their sexualities and, on

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94 Ibid., 278. Robert Martin argued that Barthes’ writing envisaged “the creation of an écriture gaie, parallel to the écriture féminine that his theoretical writing also helped define.” Like feminist writers such as Luce Irigaray, Marguerite Duras, Claudia Hermann, and, especially, Hélène Cixous, who tried to challenge the unity of language structured and dominated by the phallus, Barthes, in his “radical critique of textuality,” defied monolithic and meaningful linguistic structure. The signifier is, in Barthes’ text, “enjoyed in its own right,” similar to the “phallus released from aggression and production, treasured as a source of pleasure (jouissance) rather than as means to control, linguistic or social,” wrote Martin. Robert Martin, “Roland Barthes: Toward an ‘Écriture Gaie,’” in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, ed. David Bergman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 286.
the other, the webs, tissues, and symbolizations deployed by the phallus to efface those experiences.”

In responding to questions regarding the nature of their relationship as represented in *Stones*, Rivers again undermined the common distinction between romance and friendship that could been seen as paralleling the homosexual/homosocial dichotomy ("The height of Romance? Sorry Identification with historical figures? So what?"). Rivers’ radical gesture of undercutting this distinction seems to correspond to O’Hara’s sometimes contradictory feelings toward those close to him, as observed by one of his friends. John Button, a mutual friend of Rivers and O’Hara’s, declared that O’Hara rejected the distinction between personal and public and between intimate feelings and professional affiliations. According to Button, O’Hara did not “compartmentalize his feelings in the way ordinary mortals do,” and “his respect, his admiration, his judgment, and his love” seemed “inseparable.”

**A Different Ending: Beyond the Distinction between Love and Friendship**

Rivers’ and O’Hara’s radical openness toward the love/friendship division must have been responsible for their lengthy and fruitful collaborative relationship throughout the 1950s and 1960s. During the late 1950s, O’Hara, according to Gooch, decided to acknowledge the immeasurable difficulty of relying on Rivers’ faithfulness. Gooch claimed that after around 1955, they were officially no longer lovers although they may have romanced one another occasionally afterwards.

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Between 1959 and 1961, an intense and intimate phase of their relationship finally came to an end with a series of events that included the beginning of O’Hara’s romance with Vincent Warren at the end of 1959 and Rivers’ 1961 marriage to Clarice Price, a Welsh-born art and music teacher. After Mrs. Burger’s death in 1957, Rivers moved back to New York City, where he found himself in desperate need of someone to take care of various household chores as well as his children. Miss Price first came to Rivers’ household as a maid and babysitter for Steven, Rivers’ younger child, in 1960, but soon became an indispensable part of Rivers’ family. In 1961, Rivers and Price married in England, with Price’s parents attending the wedding.

O’Hara, in turn, embarked on a serious career as a curator at the Museum of Modern Art. He had been working at the Museum since 1955 as an assistant in the International Program, but it was during the late 1950s that he became increasingly preoccupied with curatorial tasks and related duties such as writing a monograph on Pollock in 1959, preparing an article for Franz Kline’s 1960 retrospective at the Museum, and composing an article for a 1960 Helen Frankenthaler exhibit at the Jewish Museum.

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97 For a description of the beginning of O’Hara’s relationship with Warren, see Gooch, *City Poet*, 331-37. According to Gooch, Warren was not exactly O’Hara’s type, having “not fitted within the genre of straight male painters to whom O’Hara had been addicted.” Rivers characterized Warren as one of those beautiful-looking men “who look like women.” Quoted in ibid., 331.

98 Ann Schwartly, Frank Kline’s girlfriend, introduced Price to Rivers in 1960. Price also worked as an artists’ model. During the late 1950s, Rivers dated Helene Grass, a writer and intellectual working at a publishing company, but as he wrote in his autobiography, he gradually became attracted to Price, a woman of warm and lively character. Rivers and Weinstein, *What Did I Do?*, 336-347, 368-375.

99 Gooch explained that “the O’Hara of the sixties could also be found more often uptown.” The parties that O’Hara began to attend through his curatorial work drew characters who were “more elegant, less bohemian, more obviously intellectual” than were the members of
Sculpture. Given all of the time he spent administrating exhibitions in this role, he had fewer opportunities to write poetry and could no longer consistently hang out with his bohemian friends. Meanwhile, Rivers traveled to Europe and sojourned in Paris for eight months between 1961 and 1962, holding a one-person show at Gimpel Fils Gallery in 1962.

Despite this shift in their personal relationship during the late 1950s and early 1960s, Rivers and O’Hara continued to write to each other. In addition, between 1957 and 1960, they sporadically worked on Stones. O’Hara appeared in Rivers’ The Athlete’s Dream (1956), It’s Raining Anita Huffington (1957), and Frank O’Hara: One in Three (1957, Fig. 81). O’Hara’s poems also remained inspirational to Rivers. In The Accident (1957, Fig. 82) and Second Avenue with “The” (1958), Rivers explored dynamic urban scenes that were influenced by O’Hara’s “lunch poems.” One of these poems, “A Step Away from Them” (1956), was written during lunch hour as the poet walked the
pavement of New York City: “it’s my lunch hour, so I go for a walk among the hum-colored cabs. First, down the sidewalk where laborers feed their dirty glistening torsos sandwiches and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets on. They protect them from falling bricks, I guess.” (CP 257) As Perloff noted, O’Hara compared New York’s yellow cabs to bees (“hum-colored”) while also using the color of yellow to relate them to laborers’ “yellow helmets.” “The poem’s brilliance,” Perloff maintained, rests in its ability “to connect these disparate items” as the poet quickly moves along while leaving “the import of the connection hanging….”

Neal Bowers, a literary critic, further associated the effect of various images and experiences appearing and passing away in O’Hara’s poem with a cinematic vision. The fleeting images in O’Hara’s poem “is something like a motion picture, with O’Hara in each frame. Saying what all the details mean is easy—they mean whatever they are, and their importance lies in their randomness and transience….”

In The Accident, Rivers’ rendition of disparate images, successively linked in cinematic progression, may remind the viewer of O’Hara’s writing. In this painting,

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103 As Gooch explained, the poem follows O’Hara’s usual route during his lunch hour; he heads “west and then downtown from the Museum, past construction sites on Sixth Avenue, through Times Square where he stops for a cheeseburger and a glass of papaya juice beneath the Chesterfield billboard with blowing smoke, and then back uptown to work.” Gooch, City Poet, 288.


106 In Accident, the multifaceted pictorial composition, in which diverse accidents are happening in various parts of the picture plane, is reminiscent of what Brian O’Doherty called the “vernacular glance” in Robert Rauschenberg’s painting. Brian O’Doherty, “Rauschenberg and the
Rivers repeated yellow and red dots signifying the flicking lights of cars, and these elements create a visual continuity among different scenes of a yellow cab, an ambulance, and car crash. The fragmentary images of cars, various random objects, flowing in the picture plane underscore the tentative and transient nature of the urban landscape in a powerful visual counterpart to O’Hara’s poetry.

Rivers took a journalistic approach to art by documenting random and accidental happenings without constructing hierarchical emphases among different visual elements, similar to O’Hara, who observed and recorded the busy streets during his lunch hour as he moves along. The wounded woman and man carried by the emergency crew, broken cars, probably the remnants of auto body parts, are depicted whatever they are; they become part of a whirlpool of a dynamic urban landscape. According to Sam Hunter, among Rivers’ works during the 1950s and 1960s The Accident of 1957 looks more contemporary even today; it presents “a fresh vision of agitated mosaic of urban life. The action revolves around successive scenes of an auto accident on the New York Street; an injured victim is helped onto a stretcher and placed in an ambulance, detectives take notes,” Hunter observed, but “the life of the city goes on.”

Rivers also painted a series of self-portraits—Me I, Me II, and Me in a Rectangle—between 1958 and 1959. These works may be regarded in conjunction with O’Hara’s poems dealing with the self and personal experience, such as “Personal Poem,”

Vernacular Glance,” Art in America (September/October 1973): 82-87. However, unlike Rauschenberg’s works such as Small Rebus (1956), in which more or less urban debris, washed-out photographs, and postcards are arranged in a random manner, Rivers’ painting consists of relatively realistic and easily recognizable depictions of events happening on the streets of New York City.

107 Sam Hunter, Larry Rivers (Barcelona, Spain: Ediciones Poligrafa, 1990), 46.
“Personism,” and “Statement for the New American Poetry,” in 1959. Rivers’ *Me II* (1958, Fig. 83) consists of disparate photographic images that depict Rivers’ life from birth onward. In the 1965 book *Larry Rivers*, Hunter included a photograph titled “Autobiographical Photographs Related to Me II” (1959, Fig. 84), which shows the exactly identical arrangement of photographs on the wall of Rivers’ studio. Helen Harrison claimed that Rivers’ use of photographs from throughout his past as the basic reference for his self-representation was symbolic, as the photograph “offered a means of further distancing the artist from his subject by its one-step removal from experience.” She also argued that the “abstract pictorial rhythm” of the painting “relegated [the] narrative content and detail[s]” of photographs containing the image of the painter “to the status [of] trivia.” Indeed, Rivers deliberately obscured the details of photographs. Rivers explained this process to O’Hara in a 1959 interview: “[W]ell the fact is I am taking up the challenge. I have in mind before everything disappears from my painting, a picture to me called Me.” In Rivers’ self-portrait, the only way of accessing the painter’s self is to look at the accumulation of photographs taken throughout his life, at bits and pieces of self-representation in different temporal and spatial circumstances.

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108 “It will be an extra-extra-large canvas, with glimpses of everything that’s happened to me from birth to the present. I expect it to go down in history as the most egomaniacal painting ever,” said Rivers. Rivers, “Why I Paint as I Do,” 120.


110 Rivers, “Why I Paint as I Do,” 120.

111 In his autobiography, Rivers later wrote of his dissatisfaction with the mythical status of the artist’s ego in the 1950s New York art world. In a conversation with a critic, Rivers said, “I don’t have the faith in self that abstract painters need. And I didn’t think then, and don’t now, that ‘self-expression’ is much of a reason to paint, which self? Whose self?” Rivers and Weinstein, *What Did I Do?*, 312-13.
Likewise, in 1959, O’Hara rejected the ideas of a coherent self and self-expression: “What is happening to me goes into my poems. [Yet] I don’t think my experiences are clarified or made beautiful for myself or anyone else; they are just there in whatever form I can find them.” (CP 500) In “Personism,” he further contended, “Personism has nothing to do with philosophy, it’s all art. It does not have to do with personality or intimacy.” (CP 499) O’Hara’s poems and essays on the role of the poet’s self, voice, and personal experience in 1959 came at a time when confessional poetry had become influential.\footnote{112 M.L. Rosenthal, a leading critic of the day, in his 1959 Nation article “Poetry as Confession,” situated Robert Lowell’s poetry in the tradition of nineteenth century Romanticism: “Lowell removes the mask. His speaker is unequivocally himself, and it is hard not to think of Life Studies as a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal.” M.L. Rosenthal, “Poetry as Confession,” Nation (September 19, 1959), reprinted in The Critical Response to Robert Lowell, ed. Steven G. Axelrod (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 64.}

Allen Ginsberg’s Howl (1956) and Robert Lowell’s Life Studies (1959) radically rejected the idea that the poet should speak in a neutral, distanced voice. These poets dealt with elements of their personal lives—sexuality, the loss of a father, and unhappy married life—with unprecedented honesty and candor.\footnote{113 In an interview, O’Hara offered criticisms of some of the major literary movements and ideas of the late 1950s, notably confessional poetry: “And I think Lowell had, on the other hand, a confessional manner which [lets him] get away with things that are really just plain bad but you’re supposed to be interested because he’s supposed to be so upset.” O’Hara, “Edward Lucie-Smith: An Interview with Frank O’Hara,” 13.} Within this context, O’Hara might also have addressed the Beat poets, whose writings, such as Howl and Jack Kerouac’s On the Road (1957), are filled with personal and sometimes “perverse” sexual anecdotes and fantasies: “so everyone will want to go to bed with you. There’s nothing metaphysical about it. Unless, of course, you flatter yourself into thinking that that what you’re experiencing is ‘yearning.’ ” (CP 498)
Rivers’ and O’Hara’s irreverent approaches to the self are suggestive of their reactions against the heroic and mythical images of the first generation New York School artists and the emergence of confessional and Beat poetry in the late 1950s, respectively. But more importantly, Rivers’ absurd self-portraits and O’Hara’s “Personism” indicate their parallel treatments of the self in art and poetry; they both did seem not to believe in a permanent self that was waiting to be mythologized or celebrated. In that respect, one can compare O’Hara’s idea of the self in “Personism” to Rivers’ 1957 portrait *Frank O’Hara: One in Three* (Fig. 81). This is a unique painting consisting of three different images of O’Hara, which the title foregrounds as the primary subject matter. In terms of artistic mode, Rivers continued to dismantle his figures, mixing them into the background with abstract patterns and grids. O’Hara’s images are primarily depicted in black, white, and shades of gray whereas abstract patterns, lines, and blocks have hues of red, blue, and yellow. There is an interesting emphasis on O’Hara’s face, painted from the front and side, in contrast to his body, which is mostly absent—except for a hand painted on the lower part of the canvas. However, the faces do not seem to be depicted with careful attention and appear to be different from one another. The overall impression of the painting is random and incoherent; there is no sequential progression in terms of the layout of the faces or in terms of the implied symbolic or narrative meaning. O’Hara’s disparate images were put together “in whatever form” Rivers found suitable at the moment of painting, and the different faces of O’Hara come to mirror the poet’s effort to promote the unsettled and multiple self in literature.

Therefore, the alleged lack of an emotional tie between Rivers and O’Hara during the late 1950s thus did not discourage them from maintaining a productive professional
relationship. They remained the most important artistic and literary influences on each other during the late 1950s and the 1960s, when they were not “officially” lovers. As Joseph LeSueur recalled, O’Hara had a unique ability to shift into different roles in his close relationships:

> And there were times when I thought he was in love with at least half of his friends, for it was possible for him to get so emotionally involved that it wasn’t unusual for him to end up in bed with one of them and then, with no apparent difficulty, to go right back to being friends again afterward…. He didn’t make distinctions, he mixed everything up: life and art, friends and lovers—what was the difference between them?  

O’Hara and Rivers’ apparent ability to achieve such an easy transition in roles—from lovers/sexual partners to friends—may beg a question regarding the common pattern of romantic relationships between men within the 1950s community of gays and lesbians.  

There were a few personal accounts, interviews, and oral histories of gay men in the 1950s. But, as John D’Emilio wrote, it became much harder “to reconstruct the emotions and experiences of lesbians and homosexuals” than “to chart the attitudes of

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115 Rivers’ and O’Hara’s continued friendship also constituted an interesting contrast to a famous gay and bisexual couple in the 1950s New York art world, namely Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. According to Calvin Tomkins, by the end of the summer of 1962, they were decidedly no longer lovers, Rauschenberg and Johns: “The break was bitter and excruciatingly painful, not only for them but for their closest associates—Cage and Cunningham and a few others—who felt that they, too, had lost something of great value.” Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 198.

society and compile the catalogue of penalties facing gay men and women.” The lack of substantial evidence for an overview of patterns of male intimacy makes it difficult to locate Rivers’ and O’Hara’s distinctive love/friendship relative to other non-heterosexual relationships during the pre-Stonewall era.

Nonetheless, Rivers’ and O’Hara’s shared interest in various arenas and topics—art, music, literature, gossip, and the urban landscape—might offer answers to the ties that survived the end of their sexual liaison. As discussed in chapter one, from the beginning of their relationship, they clarified their goal of maintaining their intimacy beyond the sexual, emotional, and personal aspects of their relationships. Their membership within a tight network of artists and poets in the New York School might have also played a critical role in their sustained friendship and artistic partnership. In her 1991 study of Bay Area gays and lesbians, Kath Weston, a sociologist, pursued the importance of social networks for relatively durable intimate and close relationships between men. According to Weston, a group of informal and formal networks and social organizations of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals served as alternative and extended families. Such closely knit circles and groups became the consistent and durable source for emotional support and understanding that some gay men could often not find from their families and neighborhood. According to Weston, within alternative forms of kinship and “a family

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of choice,” the emphasis has often been placed upon the non-erotic ties. She added, “This emphasis on making a transition from lover to friend while remaining within the bounds of gay families” contrasted with most heterosexual couples in the Bay area, “for whom separation or divorce often meant permanent rupture of a kinship tie.”

Rivers’ and O’Hara’s most important collaborative project, *Stones*, can be seen as offering significant insight into their efforts to embrace different aspects of their relationship—love and friendship or erotic or non-erotic ties between men. Rivers and O’Hara seem, ultimately, to suggest that the intimacy between men cannot be defined in terms of dichotomies such as heterosexual love/homosexual love and happy ending/unhappy ending. In so doing, their intention was not to expose anything true or stable, but to re-invent ways of thinking about collaboration and companionship between men in art and life.

119 Ibid., 111.
**Conclusion**

This dissertation, inspired by queer theory, has concentrated on boundaries related to discussions of homosexuality and male intimacy in art and literature. Following Rivers and O’Hara through the intimate years of their relationship from the 1950s until the early 1960s, I have emphasized their critical approaches toward distinctions between the normal and the abnormal and legitimate and illegitimate depictions of male sexuality and male intimacy in art and literature.

My examinations of Rivers’ works, including not only his individual paintings, but also his writing and his collaborations with O’Hara have exposed the rather “serious” sexual politics underlying his oeuvre. Art critics and historians have tended to undermine the central role of sexual politics in Rivers’ works. In reviewing Rivers’ *The Greatest Homosexual* (1964), John Richardson remained ambiguous about its deeper connection with the gay subculture and the historical context of the 1950s and early 1960s. Similarly, in his examination of Rivers’ *Washington Crossing the Delaware* and *The Greatest Homosexual*, Butt undermined Rivers’ critical reactions to how male intimacy was framed in the 1950s and 1960s. Contrary to Richardson’s and Butt’s assertions, Rivers’ association with camp demonstrated a more serious engagement with discourses on homosexuality during the Cold War years, the gay subculture, the history of art and literature, and O’Hara’s writings.

The correspondence between Rivers and O’Hara in 1963 and 1964 further support the contention that Rivers’ 1964 *The Greatest Homosexual* was, indeed, reflective of his

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1 Richardson paraphrased Susan Sontag: “This is not to say that all campy people are homosexual any more than that every Jew is a liberal; it accounts only for a ‘peculiar affinity and overlap.’” John Adkins Richardson, “Dada, Camp, and the Mode Called Pop,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 24 (Summer 1966): 552.
awareness of notorious cases of censorship against books and films related to homosexuality in the early 1960s. O’Hara wrote to Rivers, who was staying in London as an informal artist-in-residence at the Slade School of Fine Arts:

In preparation for the World Fair New York has been undergoing a horrible cleanup…. All the queer bars except one are already closed, four movie theaters have been closed (small ones) for showing unlicensed films like Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* and Genet’s *Chant d’amour* (Jonas Mekas has been arrested twice, once for each)…. Lots of committees are springing up to protest all this….2

Popular magazines and newspapers such as *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Life* and *The New York Times* carried lengthy, in depth articles on the development of the gay subculture in major cities in the United States. In one such piece, a fourteen-page article entitled “Homosexuality in America,” published in *Life* (1964), the author argued that the secret world of gay people was becoming more “open and bolder.”3 The article also included an image of a group of homosexual men at night with the following caption: “A policeman in tight-pants disguise waits on a Hollywood street to be solicited by homosexuals cruising by in cars.” Within this homophobic social milieu, Rivers revisited the image of Napoleon in white/tight pants under the provocative title “The Greatest Homosexual.”

This dissertation has also centered on interactions, influences, and parallels between Rivers’ art and O’Hara’s writings. It has followed their intimate relationship and artistic partnership through the 1950s until the early 1960s. However, to reiterate, its

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2 Frank O’Hara, Letter to Larry Rivers (Copy), April 18, 1964. O’Hara already mentioned similar circumstances in a letter to Ashbery three months earlier: “You may be interested in knowing that the *New York Times* had a front page (and a full page contribution inside) story on how New York is the world center of homosexuality, with somewhere between 100,000 and 600,000 of THEM prowling the area ways of fair Gotham…. I think it was all triggered by the closing of the Fawn, a charming little dancing boite on Christopher Street near the Hudson Rivers…. ” Frank O’Hara, Letter to John Ashbery (Copy), January 21, 1964. Both letters is in Collection of Frank O’Hara Letters, Storrs, CT: Thomas J. Dodd Research Center/University of Connecticut.

purpose has been not to delimit the discussion as to how their intimacy is reflected in their works; instead, its purpose has been to investigate both their personal relationship and their shared references and concerns in regard to camp, male sexuality, and the self in the history of art and literature.

In his 1996 article, Jonathan Weinberg included a series of 1973 photographic works by Duane Michals (1932- ) titled *Things Are Queer* (Fig. 85-93). The series begins with a simple, stark photograph of an ordinary household bathroom, followed by an image of a man standing in a small bathroom. The next photograph depicts an enormous thumb on a page. It turns out that what we have really been seeing is a man looking at a picture in a book. Apparently, Michals’ photograph and his subject matter bear no relationship to homosexuality, except for—as Weinberg pointed out—the dim suggestion of bathrooms, darkness, corridors, and voyeurism. Weinberg suggested that the queerness in Michals’ photographs is “not a matter of specific sexual identities, but of the world itself,” as meanings “are always relative, a matter of relationships and constructions.”

The complicated progression of a photographic narrative in Michals’ work is based upon the consistent revelation of unexpected circumstances, fragmentary information, and uncertainty regarding the real. Weinberg thus argues that Michals’ title is contradictory, as “the series seems to say that things themselves are not queer, rather what is queer is the certainty by which we label things normal and abnormal.” In that respect, Michal’s photograph could stand for Weinberg as “an allegory for the current ambitions of lesbian

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and gay studies to go beyond documenting specific homosexual identities and cultural practices.”

To question “normality,” as did Rivers and O’Hara, has constituted the main theoretical objective of this dissertation. I have attempted to take a balanced stance between history and critical theory—that is, to recover the history of the gay subculture and artists’ personal and sexual lives while bringing a queer perspective to art history.

The dissertation has thus far concentrated on investigating the similarities between Rivers and O’Hara, but Rivers’ collaboration with the Beat poets alludes to possible differences between them. Rivers starred in *Pull My Daisy* (1958), a sixteen-minute experimental film written and narrated by Jack Kerouac and directed by photographer Robert Frank and painter Alfred Leslie. Although very loosely structured, the movie tells the story of a railway brakeman whose painter wife invites a respectable bishop over for dinner. Rivers, as the railway brakeman/absent husband, appears near the

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5 Ibid. This shifting emphasis from gay or lesbian studies to queer studies endorsed by Weinberg can also be understood as part of the broader changes occurring within the community of queer historians and critics. One good example is Jonathan Ned Katz, a historian and author of *Gay American History* (1975), who changes his primary research focus from documenting the hidden history of gays and lesbians to charting the origin and beginning of the sexual binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality in twentieth century psychoanalysis and sexology in his book *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (1995).

end of the film, when his character suddenly hits his wife. This brutal and misogynistic gesture is supposed to remind the viewer of Neal Cassady, whose masculine, reckless personality inspired Kerouac’s *On the Road.* Rivers might have been chosen to portray Cassady because Rivers, like Cassady, was purportedly a bisexual who had married and become a father. Rivers contributed to *Pull My Daisy* only as an actor, but his appearance in the Beat film has significance in terms of his distinctive relationship with the Beat poets. In the late 1950s, O’Hara maintained a critical detachment from the Beat movement. According to Gooch, Kerouac often bullied O’Hara in public, and O’Hara was relatively intolerant of Kerouac’s boisterous personality. Although Rivers may not necessarily have shared the Beats’ attitudes toward woman, his loose liaison with this group may reveal areas of differences between Rivers and O’Hara in terms of their different sexual lives and their distinctive relationship with the beat writers and poets in the late 1950s.

By underscoring interactions among non-straight poets and younger-generation artists in the New York School, this dissertation has also proposed an alternative emphasis for studies of gay and lesbian artists of the 1950s and 1960s. Scholarship and art criticism on the social networks of non-straight and interdisciplinary artists--such as

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7 Neal Cassady, once a minor con man, was an important inspiration to the Beat writers. His masculine, sensual, and energetic disposition is captured in the figure of Dean Moriarty in Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1951), loosely based on the author’s road trips across the United States and Mexico with Cassady. Cassady was, among the Beats, known for his allegedly enormous sexual appetite and his involvement with both female and male partners, including Allen Ginsberg. For an influential and excellent discussion of the Beat poets’ attitudes toward woman and Cassady’s role in inspiring these attitudes, see Catherine R. Stimpson, “The Beat Generation and the Trials of Homosexual Liberation,” *Salmagundi* 58-59 (Fall 1982/Winter 1983): 373-91.

8 Compared to Rivers, O’Hara was relatively consistent in his choice of male partners.

Jonathan Katz’s study of Rauschenberg and Johns and Kenneth Silver’s study of Johns and Warhol--has often focused on delineating individual artists’ personal and sexual lives rather than exploring social dynamics inside their circles. The diverse sexual orientations of members of Rivers’ and O’Hara’s coterie--such as Rivers’ alleged bisexuality, Koch’s straight sexuality, and Blaine’s lesbian relationship--afford an understanding of the mixed nature of the gay enclave that existed in the orbit of the New York School. This diversity enables us to rethink our approach to gay enclaves, suggesting that our focus needs not be strictly limited to the sexual lives of individual artists and poets. Rivers’ critical insights and Koch’s campy humor, in particular, complicate the image of an isolated, secretive gay enclave that would not include bisexual or ostensibly heterosexual men.

Further exploration of the complicated relationships among the members of avant-garde groups during the late 1950s and the early 1960s—the Neo-Dada artists in John Cage’s circle, Rivers’ and O’Hara’s circle, the Beat Poets and younger-generation artists including Rivers, and Warhol and writers associated with his Factories—offers a promising direction for future scholarship.
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