

The Idea of Communication in Frank O'Hara's Poetics of Personism

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Abstract

Frank O'Hara's "Personism: A Manifesto" is central to understand his poetics. This study aims to direct academic attention to the interpretation of this essay, uncovering the idea of communication as the backbone of his poetics and revealing O'Hara's democratic thought behind his seemingly individualistic writing to address his social significance. In the light of relevant notions from open art and intersubjective philosophy, the study makes a detailed analysis of the essay and also draws to his poems and other articulations as further references. It is demonstrated that by sincerely documenting personal "happenings", O'Hara aspires to achieve person-to-person interaction through bilateral communicative rationality and thus his poetry functions as micro-public spheres. His Personism offers not only poetic ethics but also life philosophy, advocating egalitarian dialogues while preserving authenticity of individual experience against the manipulation of systems.

Keywords: Frank O'Hara, Personism, communication, Habermas, social significance

As a central figure of the New York School and an active figure in the art world, Frank O'Hara's poetic practice is renowned for its unique immediacy, intimate colloquial style, and seemingly spontaneous demeanor as an urban wanderer. Many researchers have neglected the significance of social intervention of O'Hara's poems, viewing him in terms of his artistic stance as a vanguard poet, a "poet among painters", defining his "Personism" as stylistic personal expressions (Perloff, 1977; Vendler 1980; Mattix 2011, etc.). However, understanding O'Hara's poetry merely as impromptu, fragmented sketches of his daily life undoubtedly obscures the solid and profound theoretical underpinning of his work. In 1959, urged by Donald Allen, the editor of *The American New Poetry*, O'Hara wrote "Personism: A Manifesto"

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(hereinafter referred to as the Manifesto), serving as a summary and exposition of his poetic theory. In this essay, he articulated the poetic concept of Personism by recollecting his experience of composing a recent poem “Personal Poem”:

It was founded by me after lunch with LeRoi Jones on August 27, 1959, a day in which I was in love with someone (not Roi, by the way, a blond). I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person. While I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born. It’s a very exciting movement which will undoubtedly have lots of adherents. It puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style, and the poem is correspondingly gratified. The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages. (O’Hara, 1995, p. 499)

From the excerpt, we can detect that person-to-person communication is at the center of what O’Hara means by Personism. O’Hara expresses his wish to present what has happened to him to an intimate person, the one he is in love with^①. Driven by the desire to show everything promptly to the person, O’Hara goes back to his place to finish the poem at one stretch. Then he realizes that his process of writing is just like making a telephone call directly to the person in order to tell him something interesting once and for all, which the other side may be impressed by or interested in as well. The function of writing is to realize person-to-person communication between two people in different time and space to merge their experiences into one. Thus “pages” to write down the words are not prerequisite for poetry. The words themselves are the media, a means to connect with another person, whether they are written down or talked through the telephone. In this way, a poem as the space of words links two sides into one—the “Lucky Pierre Style”. The end of such poetics is to realize fictional face-to-face interpersonal communication: “the poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages”.

O’Hara’s comparison of writing poetry to making phone calls to the other side is simply

thought-provoking. While he is writing, he is always having a person in mind, a person to address to as well as to connect with. Thus, in the following space, the “poet—reader” interaction is what we are going to follow in O’Hara’s poetics. The fictional communication between O’Hara and this other “person” is achieved through bilateral communicative rationality, which values common understanding and mutual goodness above all other considerations. His concern for communication is also the point where he differs from his contemporaries, who are on the whole weaker in the sense of equality and openness. The most groundbreaking contribution of O’Hara’s poetics of Personism lies in its unexpected creation of a novel model of interpersonal connection through extreme personalization—a micro-public sphere grounded in the coordination between “you and me.” His poetry is replete with direct appeals to friends, immediate dialogues with readers, and profound attention to serendipitous encounters, and this poetic approach fosters an intimate and egalitarian realm of communication.

1. Writing as Performance

O’Hara’s idea of communication first comes from the perspective of viewing writing as a form of performance, which has its linkage to action painting. Harold Rosenberg has pointed out that when an action painter is painting, he is acting a “role,” which involves his “dramatic interest”:

What gives the canvas its meaning is not psychological data but *role*, the way the artist organizes his emotional and intellectual energy as if he were in a living situation. The interest lies in the kind of act taking place in the four-sided arena, a dramatic interest.
(1970, p. 40)

He calls on critics to pay attention to this played role, since it is key to understand the “message” conveyed in the painting:

Criticism must begin by recognizing in the painting the assumptions inherent in its mode

of creation. Since the painter has become an actor, the spectator has to think in a vocabulary of action: its inception, duration, direction—psychic state, concentration and relaxation of the will, passivity, alert waiting. He must become a connoisseur of the gradations between the automatic, the spontaneous, the evoked. (1970, p. 40)

Spectators have to join the “scene” created by the painter as a coordinator, a “connoisseur”, following sympathetically in imagination every gestural move of the painter. Likewise, when O’Hara reviews the paintings of Mile Forst, he offers a similar idea:

Mile Forst does not believe that there is a “way” of good painting or that there can be a systematized personal projection. His work depends upon power and speed of performance, clarity and instantaneousness of perception.... He is more interested in experience than esthetics, and can use other people’s work with freedom and confidence, since they are what he is experiencing.... (O’Hara, 1999, p. 15)

O’Hara stresses that Mile Forst’s painting is neither abided by a certain rule nor programmed systematically for some larger ambition. It is an offhand show, which depends on how much he can invest in the minutes of self-creation. Thus on-the-spot experience is the most important, since only by indulging oneself in the “role” can one release his innermost energies to “step in” the work.

O’Hara has always been aspiring to create such an effect of improvisation, and as we know, he has the ability to dash off poems at unbelievably high speed and seldom bothers to revise them afterwards. The striving for compositional speed is frequently mentioned by O’Hara in his poems. For instance, in “Memorial Day 1950”, O’Hara said “Picasso made me tough and quick, and the world” (1995, p. 17). In “Poem: to James Schuyler”, he repeats the same idea in different words: “I have mastered the speed and strength which is the armor of the world” (1995, p. 217). Again, in “Sleeping on the Wing”, he says “you are a sculptor dreaming of space / and speed” (1995, p. 235), etc. In this way, O’Hara can merge with his experiences

like an actor performing in a scene. The scene created, in O'Hara's dictionary, is called "happening", which has significant meaning both to the poet himself and to a supposed-to-be viewer: the poet steps into the scene to realize himself through his positive actions, while the viewer steps into it to get to know the poet and experience what the poet is experiencing at the writing moment. Thus, though "happening" is not a live show, it has some resemblances with the latter in its intention to revive a life experience and offer it directly to the reader. In an interview with Lucie Smith (1965), O'Hara openly compares happening to performance:

Happening is just like a little play. There's nothing mysterious about it at all. ... They're improvised plays. ... they just happened because somebody wanted to do them and they wanted to invite a few people who usually came to the gallery, or whom you liked to come and see them. It always was....they were always done in a certain manner of "I'm going to do this delightful thing, I think, and I hope you'll come and think it's delightful." ... It's supposed to remind you that art is fun and that we're all children and that it's marvelous. (O'Hara, 1983, p. 16-17)

There are several implications that can be deduced from the above excerpt. First, like his comment on Mile Forst, happening is not presupposed. It arises in a particular situation when someone is inspired to do so. Second, since happening is "a little play", it is not intended for oneself, but is "inviting". It needs a partner to participate, who can share the artist's views or offer some desired feedbacks. Therefore, happening involves actions, both the two parties of the "play" should take some measures to reach mutual understanding in order to make the play complete. Third, happening is not about the particular things that appear in the "play", it is about ideas behind the lines, the wish to communicate something "delightful", to "have fun" by common appreciation.

O'Hara's idea of "happening" is not only related to action painting, but is in accordance with all forms of open art that began to develop in the earlier half of the twentieth century,

especially with such conceptual artists as Marcel Duchamp and John Cage. In 1910s, Marcel Duchamp demonstrated that such “ready-made” objects as a bottle rack, a shovel, a urinal can be pieces of art because he conceived them so. The assumption that the artist is primarily an inventor of ideas rather than a maker of things is simply groundbreaking. In Duchamp’s eyes, artistic conceptions weigh more than techniques, and the meaning of certain conceptions is completed in the spectators’ participation. In his essay “The Creative Act” (1957), He anchors the position of the artist as some interactive interval which necessarily involves an “other”, be it an artist, a critic, or a spectator. He says that an artist’s “personal ‘art coefficient’ is a personal expression of art à l’état brut, that is, still in a raw state, which must be ‘refined’ as pure sugar from molasses by the spectator” (Lebel, 1959, p. 78). This recognition of creative art as engagement implies the interplay of participators from the two sides of the pole: one side is the artist, and the other is the spectator, who Duchamp calls as “posterity” of art. He further stresses that the spectator joins in the process in the “making” of artwork: “All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act” (Lebel, 1959, p. 78).

Influenced by Duchamp[®], John Cage is another pioneer in open art. Originally a musician, Cage extends his theories of composition to writing, graphic arts, and unclassifiable performance events in ways that break down boundaries between the arts, as between art and life. Due to his non-confinement by any single medium, Cage is recognized as “a quintessential artist” (1993, p. 309) by Anne Waldman, an important member of the second generation of New York School of Poets. Cage actually laid the groundwork of happenings in an event at Black Mountain College in 1952 (Duberman, 1993, p. 370-379). He invited various members of the college community to perform any action they wished within blocks of time arbitrarily assigned by Cage. Participants included the dancer Merce Cunningham, the painter Robert

Rausenberg, and the poet Charles Olson (Diggory, 2009, p. 213). On New Year's Day 1952, O'Hara and Ashbery both attended the show of John Cage's the *Music of Changes* performed by David Tudor. Ashbery has documented the show's impact on them:

We were both tremendously impressed ... a piano work lasting over an hour and consisting, as I recall, entirely of isolated, autonomous tone-clusters struck seemingly at random all over the keyboard. It was aleatory music, written by throwing coins in a method adapted from the *I Ching*. The actual mechanics of the method escaped me then as it does now; what mattered was the chance elements could combine to produce so beautiful and cogent a work. It was a further, perhaps for us ultimate proof not so much of 'Anything goes' but 'Anything can come out.' (O'Hara, 1995, p. ix)

Ashbery felt that he was "profoundly refreshed" after the show, who was freed from a writer's block he had been suffering in two years (Diggory, 2009, p. 87). O'Hara also spoke of Cage's importance to him in a television interview: "everybody went [to John Cage's concerts] because they had to know about it, whether they were bored or they weren't bored, they felt it was important to know what John Cage thought, or did, or sounded like" (Gooch, 1993, p. 209). Clearly, both Ashbery and O'Hara look up to Cage as an enlightener, and their words reflect typically the effects of a happening that the artist wants to achieve in the mind of sympathetic spectators. Just as O'Hara mentioned, whether "you" as a spectator are entertained or not, you have to be present at the show in order to find out what it is about, because you have already acknowledged to yourself there must be something "important." While participating the show, you are struck by ideas conveyed by the artist's manipulation of materials, and your view towards the "materials" is totally "refreshed" after the engaging process: in Forst's case it is the dazzling use of paints, in Duchamp's is artistry of daily objects, and in Cage's is the accidental clustering of sounds.

But there is still another difficulty that O'Hara needs to face in his "performance" of

poetry. Spectators can literally be present in the performance like musical concerts or museum shows. How can readers be attracted to his poems if he is not to perform it out in a live theater? In other words, how to engage readers in his poetry with no virtual visual and auditory aids? O'Hara has to form direct connection with the reader. Referring to Habermas' relevant notions in intersubjective communication, the author intends to further unfold O'Hara's idea of communication in Personism.

2. Intersubjective Communication as achieved by Personism

O'Hara's dialectical reflection on poetry's communicative function aligns with the fundamental philosophical shift from subjectivity to intersubjectivity since the 20th century. Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" stands as a classic expression of subjectivity: humans are cognitive subjects, while others exist as extensions of this central subject and serve as objects of their thought. The dichotomy in Cartesian philosophy stems from the Western philosophical tradition of dualism, tracing back to Plato. However, interpreting subjectivity as private, independent, and isolated experience is problematic, as it represents an introspective approach to acquiring objective knowledge—one that is clearly impossible. By rejecting this self-sufficient and consequently self-restrained metaphysical framework and seeking a more concrete, practical individual, philosophy has undergone an intersubjective turn. Intersubjectivity seeks public, interdependent, and associative experiences—which we can view as a new stage in self-understanding: one characterized by coexistence, mutual exchange, and transcendence of solipsism.

Actually, intersubjective linguistic communication has already been touched upon in Heidegger's discussions of "Being-with", though he is essentially a phenomenologist. For the later Heidegger, the question of Being is inseparable from language. In *Letter on Humanism* (1946), Heidegger states: "Language is the house of Being. In its lodgings dwells man" (1977, p. 239), the idea of which he stresses many times in other places (Frie, 1997, p. 9-10). Besides,

the “I-talk” formula he identifies in his early masterpiece *Being and Time* also foreshadows his coming interest in language. Heidegger treats “talk” or “discourse” as part of his picture of the human search for one’s being, the starting point to step out of oneself to obtain others’ understanding, which is a fundamental way of “being with” each other: “Discoursing or talking is the way in which we articulate ‘significantly’ the intelligibility of being in-the-world” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 204).

Half a century later, Jürgen Habermas resonates with Heidegger in his monumental two-volume *The Theory of Communicative Action (Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, 1981). Though the direct influences on his communication theory are from sociological philosophers, notably, Max Weber and Theodor Adorno, his vision of language giving rise to interpersonal consensus links him to Heidegger. Habermas acknowledges his heritage from Heidegger in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987), in which he presents himself as discovering a lost opportunity which his predecessor had overlooked in his own system (Myerson, 2001, p. 74). Habermas is in favor of a more social and pragmatic accountability of discourse. Drawing on J. L. Austin’s speech act theory,^③ He argues that communicative acts encompass not only informational content but also the relational aspects between speakers, thus embedded within the dual structure of speech: its representational function and intersubjectivity. Within these structures, speakers and listeners establish relationships through illocutionary acts, enabling mutual understanding (Habermas, 1979, p. 41-43). Habermas’s theory addresses both Heidegger’s ontological concerns and highlights language’s social and practical functions—facilitating dialogue and fostering connections. His perspective on intersubjective communication is particularly relevant for interpreting the social function of O’Hara’s seemingly “individualistic” poetics. Below, the author conducts a “contrapuntal reading” of the statements by O’Hara and Habermas, elucidating O’Hara’s poetic reflections on the social function of poetry and its realization through textual interplay.

In *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas elaborates on the mechanisms underlying communicative action. He defines *communicative action* as follows:

...the concept of communicative action refers to the interaction of at least two subjects capable of speech and action who establish interpersonal relation (whether by verbal or by extraverbal means). The actors seek to reach an understanding about the action situation and their plans of action in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement. (1984, p. 86)

It is evident that communicative behavior constitutes a rational form of social coordination, where participants interact through language or actions with the aim of mutual understanding and consensus. In order to achieve communicative rationality, a “performative attitude” is required from “social actors”—Habermas compares social interactions with stage performance to illustrate his points. When actors address one another on the stage, they are engaged in what Habermas calls “communicative action.” An actor is not only to finish his/her own lines, but is supposed to coordinate with his/her partner to bring the situation alive, thus he/she has to cooperate with his/her partner to make the end come true, which means their sharing of mutual understanding is merit-worthy and inherently reasonable. Similarly, for the goals of mutual benefit, social actors should communicate in the same way in the stage of society, or the *lifeworld* as it is called. Communicative action is a consensual form of coordination when social actors use their language to mobilize the potential, the telos of which is to reach rationally motivated agreement.

O’Hara says in an interview with Lucie Smith that he “took part” in the happenings in the sense that he “got that tone of it” (1983, p. 17), which means, he knows it is impossible to communicate with his audience face to face, but it is necessary in his part to pass on the inviting tone to the audience as mentioned: “I’m going to do this delightful thing, I think, and I hope you’ll come and think it’s delightful” (1983, p. 17). There is an important presupposition here:

O'Hara wants his words to do things for him. His language in use is speech acts. O'Hara does not compose in one-sided contemplation but wants to engage the reader in his process of actions. Ferguson gives an apt description of O'Hara's "tone":

O'Hara's poetry begins in the middle of real lives...While the informality of the tone can at first seem baffling, as a reader one is quickly drawn into O'Hara's world, access to which is surprisingly easy to obtain. He simply assumes that people will be interested enough to find their way in, as he himself had quickly found his way into the worlds of avant-garde painting and poetry after he came to New York. The invitation is open for those who care to accept it. O'Hara was confident it will be taken up. (1999, p. 39)

To support the concept of communicative action, Habermas has to specify the mechanism that makes the interpersonal agreement possible. Rooting his view of communication as a rationalized enterprise, he further raises the notion of *validity claims* to expand on communicative rationality. He says: "A validity claim is equivalent to the assertion that the conditions for the validity of an utterance are fulfilled" (1984, p. 38). When a speaker is performing a speech act he is (often only implicitly) raising a number of validity claims. These validity claims can potentially be challenged by the hearer. To accept a speech act the hearer accepts the validity claims raised.

Habermas distinguishes three kinds of validity claims in speech acts in terms of three dimensions of world relations: first, there is the objective world, which is "the totality of all entities" (1984, p. 100). Here the validity claim is truth; second, there is the social world, where interpersonal interactions take place. Here the validity claim is rightfulness: "That the speech act is right with respect to the existing normative context" (ibid., p. 99), that is, whether or not a speech act makes sense is in accordance with present social norms, rules and values; third, there is the subjective world, which is internal "as the totality of subjective experiences to which the actor has privileged access" (ibid., p. 100). In this domain the validity claim is

truthfulness or sincerity, “the manifest intention of the speaker is meant as it is expressed” (ibid., p. 99), which means, subjective experiences, desires and feelings are truthfully presented. This threefold concept of validity claims functions as a reference system for social actors in language communication. It suggests that successful speech acts should fit in these validity claims (truth, rightness and sincerity) in order to be acceptable. On this basis, individuals can discern a certain type of world relation as most appropriate for interpreting a given situation and for understanding one another. They can also apply the reference system positively to coordinate intersubjective communication.

Nevertheless, Habermas also emphasizes that communicative action does not equate with the mere sense of speech: “communicative action designates a type of interaction that is coordinated through speech acts and does not coincide with them” (ibid., p. 101). More importantly, “the orientation to reaching understanding that is predominant in everyday practice,” writes Habermas, “is also preserved for a **communication among strangers** [original emphasis]” (1996, p. 366). Communicative action must involve not only intimacy but also estrangement, not only isolation, but also participation in different social conditions—e.g. private and public spheres, interpersonal lifeworld and impersonal system. In this way, Habermas claims that communicative action is the “original mode” of communication. It is the most comprehensively rational form of communication in which action must be oriented to reaching understanding across all three dimensions: representation of the objective world, expression of subjective meaning, and establishment of legitimate interpersonal relations.

The emphasis on poetry as an act of communication constitutes the defining characteristic of Personism. In the Manifesto, by comparing the writing process to making telephone calls, O’Hara expresses his wish to reach to the other party, a supposed-to-be listener. O’Hara’s poetry starts from one person, that is, nobody but himself, to another, the receiver of his messages. This “listener” or “receiver” is not random either. He depicts “him/her” as a

charming blond, the one he is in love with. Like a lover, he/she must have a sympathetic ear, or rather, is willing to turn a sympathetic ear to the poet, who wants to connect with him through the process of reading. Then the situation is that both the poet and the reader as subjects should open to a certain extent, with each other in the mind and together unified in poetry as one. This scale of “rationality” is necessary to facilitate the communication process, which paves the way to reach consensus later.

In order to initiate a “live performance,” to present the “delightful thing,” his speech acts must be in accordance with the validity claims required for successful interpersonal communication. In other words, the statements in his poetry should be true, rightful or sincere according to what world relations they describe. Coincidentally, O’Hara also confesses in the interview that sincerity and truth are his highest criteria for poetry:

I really dislike dishonesty [more] than bad lines, in a certain way. Because I don’t think there is such a thing as a bad line if it’s true. The metrics make it, you know they get there themselves. If you really are being honest about something, then the metrics just devour them. (1983, p. 14)

O’Hara’s meaning is quite obvious here. If the poet is guided by the rule of being true to himself as well as to the audience, he is passing a real life experience. Under such a circumstance, the poem becomes a spontaneous triggering of words thus it has a life of its own. Though the lines may not look good in conventional sense, they are likely to reach the audience better than polished lines. O’Hara goes on explaining that “truth” lies in “where you don’t find that someone is making themselves more elegant, more stupid, more appealing, more affectionate or more sincere than the words allow them to be” (1983, p. 15). O’Hara takes words as vehicle to present himself, and what he offers are raw materials, without any secondary modifications or personal interventions. It is only in the audience that the words are justified, challenged or even criticized. The poet’s function is to reveal, to connect, and above all, to inform. O’Hara

says: “I don’t believe in reworking—too much. And what really makes me happy is when something just falls into place as if it were a conversation or something” (ibid., p. 21). As we know, a “conversation” is always done between two parties. Thus in O’Hara’s part, his text is always open, which is not something finished, but is something “about to become”, a “guesswork” (ibid., p. 21) resulted from his communicative preoccupations. Hence, making telephone calls is a very vivid metaphor of his writing process since while being on the phone, one is in a conversation but cannot get the other side’s immediate responses, so all is guesswork, full of sweet expectations. It really makes poetry a fun thing to do not only for him, but for the reader simultaneously:

Now what we desire is space

To turn up the thermometer and sigh.

...

Oh space!

You never conquer desire, do you?

You turn us up and we talk to each other
and then we are truly happy as the telephone
rings and rings and buzzes and buzzes,

so is that the abyss? I talk, you talk,
he talks, she talks, it talks.

At last!

You are warm enough, aren’t you? (O’Hara, 1995, p. 192)

This little poem entitled “To Jane, Some Air” is buried among a series of poems dedicated to Abstract Expressionist painter Jane Freilicher. Its significance should be rediscovered in

association with O'Hara's idea of communication. Space is the difficulty that O'Hara wants to conquer in order to "be" in his poetic works, but it also is the desirable guess field between him and his audience. Separated by the talking space of a phone, or a piece of poem, the talking subject is always withheld, suspended, and partially unknown. It initiates a desire in the hearer to know more about the other side of the phone, whether it is the person talking or the things he is talking about. Thus the space really "turn[s] us up" because of the thirst to get closer, to see clearer, and to know better. At last, it is not "I", "you", "he", or "she" talks, but the telephone, the poem, "it talks." The space itself produces meaning in the bilateral communication process, when the speaker is giving away his domination of speech. As the "conversation" goes on and on, it is "the poem whose words become your mouth" (O'Hara, 1995, p. 305).

O'Hara's "I do this, I do that" poems^④ are his documents of happenings that are significant to him. These particular occurrences happen every day and each adds new meaning to his life. O'Hara wants his audience to see life in his eyes and also looks for common understanding towards life experience. Let's take his "Personal Poem" as an example:

Now when I walk around at lunchtime
I have only two charms in my pocket
an old Roman coin Mike Kanemitsu gave me
and a bolt-head that broke off a packing case
when I was in Madrid the others never
brought me too much luck though they did
help keep me in New York against coercion
but now I'm happy for a time and interested (O'Hara, 1995, p. 335)

The beginning section is quite short, however it contains much information: it informs us about the time, his outfit ("two charms in my pocket"), some seemingly casual digressions (his recent trip to Spain, origin of the two charms, coercion in New York), and his mood at the moment.

Like a prologue leading to the coming scenes, it gets us ready for his upcoming performance
in the city space:

I walk through the luminous humidity
passing the House of Seagram with its wet
and its loungers and the construction to
the left that closed the sidewalk if
I ever get to be a construction worker
I'd like to have a silver hat please
and get to Moriarty's where I wait for
LeRoi and hear who wants to be a mover and
shaker the last five years my batting average
is .016 that's that, and LeRoi comes in
and tells me Miles Davis was clubbed 12
times last night outside BIRDLAND by a cop
a lady asks us for a nickel for a terrible
disease but we don't give her one we
don't like terrible diseases, then
we go eat some fish and some ale it's
cool but crowded we don't like Lionel Trilling
we decide, we like Don Allen we don't like
Henry James so much we like Herman Melville
we don't want to be in the poets' walk in
San Francisco even we just want to be rich
and walk on girders in our silver hats
I wonder if one person out of the 8,000,000 is

thinking of me as I shake hands with LeRoi

and buy a strap for my wristwatch and go

back to work happy at the thought possibly so (ibid., p. 335-36)

The displaying of his performance is three-dimensional, covering details on the objective, social and subjective worlds. The objective world are the exact references to people (construction worker, LeRoi Jones, people talking in the restaurant, Mile Davis, a begging lady, et al.), places (Madrid, New York, House of Seagram, sidewalks on the streets, Moriarty the restaurant, BIRDLAND the gay bar, etc.) and things (two charms, a hat, food and drink, wristwatch, etc.) The presentation of the objective world is simply too concrete to be untrue.

On the basis of this true-to-life background, the social world unfolds and actions take place. There are three significant social happenings: (1) African-American singer Mile Davis was caught and beaten by a cop in front of the gay bar; (2) A begging lady asked O'Hara and Jones for a nickel but was refused by the two; (3) O'Hara shook hands with the African-American writer LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka). Except that he gives an explanation for the second event ("we / don't like terrible diseases), the other two goes as easy as the mentioning of weather. O'Hara does not bother to justify his or "their" behavior but gives the right to an engaged reader. In other words, the validity of his speech acts is only to be testified in the other party of the conversation. For instance, the fact that Mile Davis was clubbed is quite astonishing. Why does O'Hara mention it without further commenting? We can link the event with O'Hara's action, his hand-shaking with another African-American artist to understand that O'Hara is against racial discrimination, but he has to hide his view because of the threat of "coercion"; or, we are also free to take it literally as an evidence of O'Hara's aloofness to politics, like what O'Hara has once been criticized for. Also, the act of refusing to give "a nickel" to a dying lady seems rather immoral. Does O'Hara really mean what he says? What is the true reason behind? So we can challenge his words by the validity claim of

rightfulness to uncover some possible implications as well.

Then, among the objective and social surroundings upstages his subjective world, which is comparatively notable in several places: (1) the meaning of his charms is to “keep me[him] in New York against coercion”; (2) He would like a “silver hat” if he were to be a construction worker; (3) They (He and Jones) don’t like terrible diseases. (4) He and Jones agree on several likes and dislikes; (5) O’Hara is thinking of “one of the 8,000,000 [the population of New York at that time] when he shakes hands with Jones. Suppose that his words are all out of sincerity, there are still several question marks behind each statement. How can the charms keep him away from coercion? What kind of coercion is there? Why does O’Hara want to be a construction worker? Why does the “hat” have to be “silver” (since its usual color is yellow or orange)? Why do they make distinctions? What qualities are there in Don Allen and Herman Melville that are more desirable than Lionel Trilling and Henry James? Etc. The questions lead us to dig into O’Hara’s worlds, not subjective, but social and objective instead as a whole.

From the above analysis we can see that the poem become a field of speech acts. While the locutionary acts in O’Hara’s poetic lines are to present everything exactly as it is, their illocutionary acts mean much more to O’Hara as well as to his reader: the words are his actions directing the reader’s attention to the outer world whence he lives. His speech has nothing to do with perlocutionary act which is to “achieve by saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring, and even, say, surprising or misleading” (Austin, 1962, p. 109), the effect of which, as argued above, is deemed by O’Hara as insincere. There is nothing imposing in O’Hara’s part, whose attitude is open, earnest and thus always communicative. Driven by the idea of intersubjective communication, O’Hara’s final aim is to revive his life experience by the participation of the reader. This idea also can be verified by Habermas’ stress on illocutionary acts as the only dimension in speech acts which contains interpersonal interaction:

...I count as communicative action those linguistically mediated interactions in which all participants pursue illocutionary aims, and *only* illocutionary aims, with their mediating acts of communication. On the other hand, I regard as linguistically mediated strategic action those interactions in which at least one of the participants wants with his speech acts to produce perlocutionary effects on his opposite number. ... [Austin] didn't see that acts of communication or speech acts function as a coordinating mechanism for *other* actions. (Habermas, 1984, p. 295)

Habermas is saying that one is performing one-way communication in perlocutionary acts, since one is directing his actions strategically to achieve certain personal ends. While by contrast, illocutionary acts in language is bilateral in that it is directed towards inducing "*other* actions", thus it is not strategic but communicational.

Similarly, O'Hara is quite against the "pretentious" attitude by certain contemporary poets. In the Manifesto, he writes:

But how can you really care if anybody gets it, or gets what it means, or if it improves them. Improve them for what? For death? Why hurry them along? Too many poets act like a middle-aged mother trying to get her kids to eat too much cooked meat, and potatoes with drippings (tears). I don't give a damn whether they eat or not. Forced feeding leads to excessive thinness (effete). Nobody should experience anything they don't need to, if they don't need poetry bully for them. I like the movies too. (1995, p. 498)

O'Hara compares those who want to obtain their subjective ends in poetry as imposing "mothers", whose attitude is unfair to the audience. In his mind, appreciation of poetry should be as willing as it can be, while "forced" ideas is unpleasant and even destructive. Instead, he advocates free participation by the audience—"Nobody should experience anything they don't need to". He playfully says there are other options like watching films for pastime too. He later

rephrases the same meaning in “Statement for the New American Poetry”: “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. What is clear in my work is probably obscure to others, and vice versa” (1995, p. 500). But at the same time, we should also notice that O’Hara’s real attitude is not as easy as he sounds to be. By saying so his intention is to minimize his intervention and also to distance himself from those who he criticizes. Nonetheless, he still aspires to reach his readers, or else he would become an irresponsible poet who cut himself isolated, indulging in his personal business, which, based on O’Hara’s poetic practice, is quite untrue.

In terms of reception, O’Hara also employs another metaphor to indicate his relationship to a potentially engaged reader:

As for the reception, suppose you’re in love and someone’s mistreating (mal aimé) you, you don’t say, “Hey, you can’t hurt me this way, I care!” you just let all the different bodies fall where they may, and they always do may after a few months. (1995, p. 498)

If you are truly in love with someone, you will not blame him/her because he/she may refuse you or misread your message in the conversation. Acknowledging that you and your lover are different persons, you will give him/her time to come to know you and love you back, though the waiting process is painful. By comparing “poet—reader” connection to a love relationship, O’Hara is giving his readers autonomy to respond. He further explains Personism in relation to the love relationship:

It [Personism] does not have anything to do with personality or intimacy, far from it! But to give you a vague idea, one of its 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 feeling towards the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person. That’s part of

Personism. (ibid, p. 499)

Love is the trigger for communication and is also the energy keeping speech acts moving on. In Personism, a poem is a means to get in touch with another person. The poet should build a dialogical tension by addressing the poem to one person, as if driven by the passion of love. However, by the guidance of communicative rationality, love should be directed towards the words themselves rather than towards the person. Otherwise, the poem will be no more than sentimental self-expression, which is not communication but a release of personal feelings. Reciprocal love^⑤ is not about possession or imposition, but is characterized by mutual trust, understanding and also proper sense of space. O'Hara wants his poem to be such an evocative media of interaction. He believes that out of the sincerity of his words, a sympathetic reader will come to understand who he really are or what he means in his words sooner or later. In "A Pleasant Thought from Whitehead", O'Hara imagines a very harmonious picture between his poems and a potential reader:

...Ah!
reader! you open the page
my poems stare at you you
stare back, do you not? (1995, p. 24)

O'Hara's poem thus becomes an invitation: the busy, emotional, and incessantly speaking "I" in his writing is not merely a vivid portrait of an era but also an active social practice. His self-portrayal is not a diary-style monologue but creates an intimate, egalitarian, and immediate space for communication—like turning around at a crowded party and whispering a moment that only "you" can understand into your ear. When readers enter his world filled with concrete details and personal connections, they are not felt excluded; instead, they are inspired to examine and cherish their own daily lives and private emotions. O'Hara shows that sociality exists not only in grand collective movements but also in a casual café encounter, a late-night

phone call, or a shared journey. By writing about individual experiences, he celebrates the fragile, authentic, and fleeting emotional bonds between people. In a modern society where interpersonal relationships grow increasingly distant and instrumentalized, this poetic approach offers a way to restore warmth in human connections, bringing poetry down from its lofty pedestal to the realm of everyday life and transforming it into a daily ritual that sustains communities and affirms existence.

3. From Communication to Democracy: Poetry as Micro-Public Spheres

The social significance of O'Hara's poetry lies not only in fostering interpersonal emotional connections but also in cultural critique and public engagement. Through the interpersonal bonds achieved in his poetry, O'Hara effectively creates micro-public spheres rooted in individual relationships. By employing private perspectives and egalitarian dialogue, his work breaks the discourse monopoly of mainstream society, serving as an effective means of resisting the colonization of the lifeworld.

In his seminal work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit, 1962), Habermas recognized the crucial role of interpersonal verbal communication in bourgeois society. By tracing the historical development of public sphere from middle ages, feudal times to the 19th century, Habermas views the *bourgeois public sphere* as the collective representation of individual sovereignties made through the public invocation of reason—communicative interactions among private bourgeois class. The dialectical demarcation of subjective and objective, private and public is united in intersubjective autonomy: "The spheres of private persons come together as a public" (Habermas, 1989, p. 28). Here, by "spheres of private persons", or *private sphere*, Habermas means an "audience-oriented privateness", "a process of self" which is constructed in dialogical communication (ibid., p. 29). Due to the relevant autonomy of the private sphere, there secures a "social space of communication structure" for private individuals in the public sphere, where

they can “confirm each other’s subjectivity” (ibid., p. 54). Nevertheless, following the invasion of cultural industry, or as Habermas later calls it, *the colonization of lifeworld*, the private sphere is no longer autonomous but subordinate to the manipulation of mass media. Under such circumstances, rationality can only coexist with power systems by not surrendering to them. Therefore, Habermas advocates counterbalancing institutional power by revitalizing an autonomous and freely organized public sphere, considering this the sole path to democracy.

O’Hara’s poetry aims to connect with the public, and through the active engagement of both the poet and the reader, it fosters highly personalized responses to social events—a function akin to a spontaneously formed micro-public sphere. As previously noted, although O’Hara’s poetry incorporates personal elements, its linguistic acts do not focus on his subjective world but rather on the social conditions that gave rise to these verses. By actively engaging with the social phenomena depicted in O’Hara’s works, these life details can awaken collective consciousness among the public. This distinctive form of private rational interaction precisely counters the systemic crises of modern society: his poetry not merely describes daily life but reconstructs it through poetic language, transforming it into a space for intersubjective meaning exchange that reveals the meaning and value of the lifeworld. In “To Poetry”, O’Hara explicitly articulates his creative intent:

Let us do something grand
just this once Something

small and important and
unAmerican Some fine thing

will resemble a human hand
and really be merely a thing

Not needing a military band

Nor an elegant forthcoming

to tease spotlights or a hand

from the public's thinking

But be in a defiant land

Of its own a real right thing (1995, p. 175)

In personification, O'Hara depicts himself incarnated into his poetry as a "human hand", which can "tease spotlights or a hand / from the public's thinking". Habermas' theory of communicative action can once again enlighten us to see the social implications contained in this little poem. Because of the colonization of lifeworld in late capitalist society, the public's views are steered by the media of system represented by money and power, but the problem is that money and power function in their own ways, which are not within individuals' conscience and control. Accordingly, traditional ground for natural opinions coming from communicative rationality is gone. People are guided by instrumental aims and are tempted to lose their sense of reason. Habermas has cautioned for the crisis caused by the colonization:

...Money and power can neither buy nor compel solidarity and meaning. In brief, the result of the process of disillusionment is a new state of consciousness in which the social-welfare project becomes reflexive to a certain extent and aims at taming not just the capitalist economy, but also the state itself. (Habermas, 1987, p. 363)

Thus, Habermas turns to the resurrection of autonomous, self-organized public spheres as counterbalances to the power of system, and believes it is the only way leading to democracy. In this light, O'Hara's poems, then, are to connect with the public to form highly individual

reactions towards social happenings, the function of which is just like a spontaneous “public sphere”. The meaning of these “particulars” in one’s life can stimulate public awareness through their positive engagement into the events presented by O’Hara. In this way, O’Hara and his readers forms a dynamic world of fictional communication and appreciation, which is “a defiant land”, since its aim is to resist the overpowering impacts of “spotlights” (a synecdoche for mass media, which is controlled by system), or “a hand” (again a synecdoche for something powerful). Though the “thing” may be “small”, it is “important” in that it represents something “human” instead of mechanical (as represented by money and power), which can be comprehended through reasoning and be shared between “you and me,” the individual members of society. What’s more, the “thing” is no longer submissive to some collective power, but is “unAmerican”, coming from individually negotiated consensus. Therefore, it is a really “grand” thing to do. That is why in “Personal Poem,” while shaking hands with Leroi Jones, the influential African-American writer, O’Hara is considering whether “one person out of the 8,000,000” in New York will find significance in this small and personal event if it is recorded. While presenting “the thing” that happens to him, O’Hara is forming interface from his private sphere to the public sphere.

“Poem (Khrushchev is coming on the right day!)” is another example. Here O’Hara turns a political event into a personal happening, which can be experienced in one way or another as in separate individuals’ lives. In September 1959, Nikita Khrushchev, the successor to Joseph Stalin, made his first Soviet Premier visit to America, which was of course, the headline of “spotlights”. During his thirteen days of stays, he had high-talks with Eisenhower, got entertained at Camp David and Hollywood, and also went sightseeing in New York. However, O’Hara does not report the actual event, but incorporates it into a specific day when his mood is high:

Khrushchev is coming on the right day!

the cool graced light

is pushed off the enormous glass piers by hard wind

and everything is tossing, hurrying on up

this country

has everything but *politesse*, a Puerto Rican cab driver says (1995, p. 340)

The poet finds it delightful that “Khrushchev is coming”, but why? There is no further message in the poem excerpt the fact that the weather is fine. The bridge phrase “this country” can be linked to the former as well as to the latter line, which together captures the characteristics of America as a new rising country. Seeing the city through a foreign eye, O’Hara for the first time identifies with Khrushchev, who comes from a country which has a much longer history than America, especially quite cultured in “*politesse*”, probably going to find the city tempo here is just “tossing, hurrying on up”. Then O’Hara links the opinion about lack of “*politesse*” to the words of a “Puerto Rican cab driver” to share the feeling with common people. But is it a bad thing or good thing? Again, the answer is awaited in the reader’s reasoning. After an insertion of his personal dialogue with Vincent Warren, O’Hara continues to say “and Khrushchev was probably being carped at / in Washington, no *politesse*.” Khrushchev is an honored guest for Washington, D. C., why is he treated with “no *politesse*”? It directs us again to consider the social meaning of the event. Under the tension of cold war, every move of Khrushchev as the leader of the opposing power is going to be magnified. No wonder in the political center of America, he would be “carped at” —not by official representatives, but by the media, politicians, or the public—as he was placed under the spotlight. O’Hara draws parallels between this situation and the perceived lack of courtesy among taxi drivers, suggesting deeper and more widespread social reactions. There was profound skepticism within the United States regarding Khrushchev’s visit’s motives: many Americans believed the Soviet Union aimed to “take over the world,” with some even comparing the invitation to

“inviting Adolf Hitler.” (Papuc, 2008, p. 70) In this atmosphere, the American criticism and scrutiny of Khrushchev in political settings were entirely consistent with the historical context. Thus, the poem’s opening line, “Khrushchev is coming on the right day!” not only expresses hope for an ice-breaking moment between the United States and the Soviet Union but also carries an ironic undertone. By situating the political event within the backdrop of everyday life, O’Hara reveals a more universal cultural starkness underlying the meticulously orchestrated politeness diplomacy at the national level. Next, O’Hara inserted a series of clips of conversation and names:

Vincent tells me about his mother’s trip to Sweden
Hans tells us
about his father’s life in Sweden, it sounds like Grace Hartigan’s
painting *Sweden*
so I go home to bed and names drift through my head
Purgatorio Merchado, Gerhard Schwartz, and Gaspar Gonzales, all
unknown figures of the early morning as I go to work (ibid., p. 340)

The passage seems like a digression, but it actually arouses our attention that his action in the poem is no more than what “Vincent” and “Hans” does, that is, to “tell”, to transmit information mouth by mouth, from one to another. These seemingly casual conversations reveal the sincere expressions of different individuals grounded in their life worlds. O’Hara does not attempt to unify these voices under a grand theme; instead, he preserves their individual uniqueness and equality. This blending and juxtaposition of languages can itself be seen as a statement—one that respects differences and seeks to establish a provisional, dynamic understanding built upon those differences. In the final stanza of the poem, O’Hara incorporates Khrushchev’s visit to the United States into his personal perspective again:

Where does the evil of the year go

when September takes New York
and turns it into ozone stalagmites
deposits of light
so I get back up
make coffee, and read François Villon, his life, so dark
New York seems blinding and my tie is blowing up the street
I wish it would blow off
though it is cold and somewhat warms my neck
as the train bears Khrushchev on to Pennsylvania Station
and the light seems to be eternal
and joy seems to be inexorable
I am foolish enough always to find it in wind (ibid., p. 340)

O'Hara's trajectory in the poem carries profound meaning: he returns home from the clamor of the external world, lies down, allows various names to float through his mind, then rises again to brew coffee and read Villon. This suggests a strategy of retreating into the lifeworld—under the pressure of systemic forces (political storms)—to seek meaning and strength. While putting us back in the space of the New York City, O'Hara let his "tie" "blowing up the street". Here "tie" is a pun, which also signifies "connection"—in the context, it may refer to relationships between individuals, between individuals and governments, or between different nations. This connection exists in the "streets", the public domain and space, where it flutters with the wind, symbolizing its communal nature and inherent complexity. When O'Hara writes, "I wish it would blow off," is he alluding to the tensions of the Cold War? Khrushchev's visit indeed served as a significant signal. The recurring references to "light" and "wind" in the poem intertwine, creating a luminous, expansive, and hopeful atmosphere that resonates with both this pivotal historical event and O'Hara's personal life, imbuing the poem with tension and

dynamism. Khrushchev's arrival forms the backdrop, while the foreground showcases intimate conversations, memories, and emotions among ordinary people. Through this, O'Hara constructs a vibrant microcosm where sincere individual expression, egalitarian dialogues, and aesthetic engagement with daily life counterbalance pervasive pressures and external disruptions. The poem's social function thus becomes an aesthetic practice, a participatory democratic space. Rather than aiming for specific political consensus, it fosters a poetic model of interaction by celebrating the richness and diversity of the lifeworld itself. Through his poetic wisdom, O'Hara reveals that it may be precisely in those fleeting moments and whispers lies the profound power to withstand individual and collaborative freedom.

From the analysis we can see that O'Hara's poems offer us a vision to see things through his eyes, on condition that we are willing to engage in the world he creates for us. By incorporating public events with personal trifles, linking historical moments to personal agendas, and crossing the private sphere to the urban city space as the common ground, O'Hara revitalizes a life that one is living. To engage the reader in his poetry through communicative interactions, O'Hara demonstrates that poetry can become a coordinating force which parallels to the collective power represented by mass media, money and political system. In terms of a poet's relations to the society, we can quote his lines to summarize: "I am a microcosm in your macrocosm/ and then a macrocosm in your microcosm" (O'Hara, 1995, p. 375-76), which shows O'Hara's ambition to mediate public opinions through personal endeavors. Hence, in O'Hara's mind, the function of a poet is not what famously defended by Sir Philip Sidney as to teach and to delight, nor what Percy Bysshe Shelley claimed as unacknowledged legislator of the world, for these stances are all imposing thus self-important. Instead, O'Hara would rather be called as an "unacknowledged coordinator of the world", whose voice passing through intersubjective communication invites reactions from general readers.

Conclusion

Looking into O'Hara's poetics of Personism, through an exploration of its social function with reference both to relevant artistic and philosophical ideas, his seemingly casual and private individualist poetics has revealed its complex and profound social significance. It is not a narcissistic monologue, but rather a dialectic strategy of retreating to advance under the dual pressure of the Cold War ideology and the dawn of consumer culture. Through his poetic practice, O'Hara demonstrates that the most extreme personalization may precisely be the most effective universalization, for the unwavering defense of the authenticity of individual experience itself constitutes the most gentle yet powerful resistance against all rigid, uniform forces.

In terms of its social function, O'Hara's Personism constructs a poetic ethics. He liberated poetry from its altar of metaphysics, transforming it into a medium for immediate, intimate human communication. The micro-public sphere he envisioned, one centered on "you and me," represents a restorative attempt within an increasingly rationalized society. In his poetics, creation and reading become a collaborative ritual for sharing life experiences. This reminds us that social cohesion relies not only on grand institutions and ideals but also on genuine, fragile yet precious emotional connections between countless social members. In an age where social media reduces interpersonal relationships to superficial labels, O'Hara's emphasis on specificity, immediate presence, and authentic emotions becomes particularly valuable. Thus, His legacy extends far beyond his poetry itself: His poetics offers a life philosophy for maintaining self-integrity while fostering sincere connections with others in modern society. He inspires us to courageously voice our own voices, perhaps not loud but absolutely true, and patiently listen to other's unique articulations, collectively weaving a richer, more diverse, and warmer cultural fabric. His poetry transcends its own era, continually inviting us to passionately engage with life, attentively perceive our surroundings, and through this process, steadfastly and creatively become our true selves. This also represents the

enduring social significance of O'Hara's poetics of Personism.

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Notes

- ① His lover at the time was Ballet dancer Vincent Warren, the one with the "blond" hair. O'Hara dedicated many poems to him when they were together.
- ② Cage met Duchamp in 1942, whose ideas passed through Cage to younger artists later known as "neo-dada" (Diggory, 2009, p. 87).
- ③ In 1955, J. L. Austin delivered a series of lectures, the William James Lectures at Harvard, which were later published posthumously as *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). In the book, Austin presents a new view towards language: when a sentence is spoken, it is a performance that acts upon others. He calls a performative utterance speech act and further divides it into three dimensions: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. A locutionary act is simply to say something, an illocutionary act is to act in saying something and a perlocutionary act is the effects of acting in saying something (Austin, 1962, p. 99-108). For Habermas, only illocutionary acts are oriented towards reaching understanding thus should be pursued in communicative action (1984, p. 295).
- ④ "I do this, I do that" is O'Hara's description of his poetic work, drawn from his poem "A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island." (O'Hara, 1995, p. 306).
- ⑤ Swiss psychiatrist and theorist Ludwig Binswanger (1881-1966) describes dialogical encounter in terms of the "genuine dialogue" in a reciprocal love relation, which is characterized by the mutuality, openness, and directness of the participants in communication (Frie, 1997, p. 96-98, p. 186).

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