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噪音與法蘭克·奧哈拉的《午餐詩集》

Noise and Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*

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摘要

法蘭克·奧哈拉的作品因為以鮮豔的視覺影像呈現城市生活而著名，然而本論文要聚焦在作品中的聽覺呈現。詩人與聲音親近的程度顯而易見：第一，奧哈拉曾學習鋼琴多年並期許自己成為演奏家；第二，詩人時常在充滿噪音的環境下創作，這些聲音包含收音機音樂、旁人說話的聲音以及街上的汽車聲。雖然在一般情況下，噪音被視為影響創作的混亂因素，但奧哈拉卻格外地接納聲音，似乎將聲音當成創作的靈感。我好奇這些噪音如何影響詩人的創作過程。我將分析這些噪音，在轉化成詩中的形式與內容後，對詩人有何意義，以及這些噪音是否對當時奧哈拉身處的社會，也就是五零、六零年代的紐約，抱持不同於主流社會價值的看法。

第一章探討約翰·凱吉的實驗性音樂如何影響奧哈拉將噪音視為寫作時的重要元素，嵌入詩的形式與內容。凱吉認為音樂應該要包含日常生活的聲音，也就是允許隨機、不可預測的聲音出現在表演當中，同時也在作曲上脫離傳統記譜的束縛。我將比較凱吉的《威廉混音》與奧哈拉的〈離他們一步〉，試著呈現凱吉對於奧哈拉的影響。我也會分析奧哈拉對於音樂的觀點。我認為從他寫給作曲家拉赫曼尼諾夫的生日詩文中想表達在日常生活中聆聽音樂即刻的感受。對他而言，音樂不只是譜上創作的呈現，還包括聆聽環境的噪音。第二章聚焦在詩人充滿噪音的創作環境。我將檢視環境裡的噪音，像是談話聲跟科技媒介(打字機、電話和收音機)讓奧哈拉創作時以非人類中心的思考方式創作，並從詩中的形式與內容看到科技媒介的影響。第三章表明噪音在奧哈拉的詩中無所不在，而這些噪音呈現有別於大眾認知的都市空間。這些都市噪音包含街上的噪音、詩中語音的噪音、八卦及談話的噪音、都市身體的噪音、媒介發出的噪音以及思考上的噪音。

關鍵字：法蘭克·奧哈拉、噪音、科技媒介、約翰·凱吉、能動性、都市空間、原真性

Abstract

Frank O'Hara's works are known for presenting a vibrant visual image of urban life, but in this thesis I intend to focus on the audio aspect of his works. The poet's attachment to sound is apparent: firstly, O'Hara had once wished to become a concert pianist before becoming a poet; secondly, the poet often writes in an environment surrounded by noises such as radio music, people talking, and street traffic. While noises are normally regarded as intervening during one's writing process, O'Hara's high acceptance of them suggests that he sees noises as inspirational. I am curious how these noises influence the poet's creating process. In addition, I will analyze what these noises, by becoming the form and content of poetry, mean to the poet, and whether they suggest anything against the social values of 50s and 60s of New York.

Chapter One discusses how John Cage's experimental music inspires O'Hara to embrace noise as an essential element in the form and content of writing. Cage believes that music should be about everyday life, which means allowing unpredictable sounds to appear while breaking away from traditional notations. I illustrate Cage's influence on O'Hara with a comparison between the former's *Williams Mix* and the latter's "A Step Away From Them." In addition, I will analyze O'Hara's attitude toward music in his poems dedicated to Rachmaninoff, arguing that the poet emphasizes the instant feeling he gets from listening to music in his daily environment. Chapter Two focuses on the poet's writing sites, which interestingly, are often full of noises. I will investigate how noises from these sites, namely, noises of talk and technological mediums (the typewriter, the telephone, and the radio) allows O'Hara to write with a non-human-centered mindset, influencing the form and content of his poetry. Chapter Three will demonstrate that urban noises populate O'Hara's works, presenting an alternative urban space that is different from the norm. These noises are noises of the street, noises of

speech-sounds, talk and gossip, noises of the urban body, noises from technological media and finally noises of the thought.



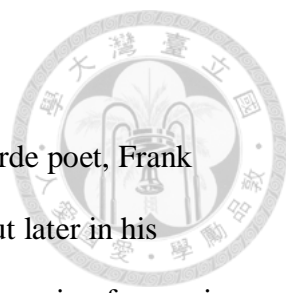
Keywords: Frank O'Hara, noise, media technologies, John Cage, agency, urban space, authenticity

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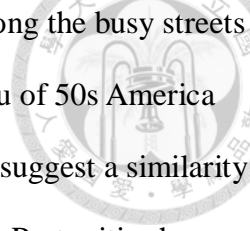
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Introduction



Noises and music are of great interest to the New York avant-garde poet, Frank O'Hara. The poet had initially wished to become a concert pianist, but later in his university years found art and poetry more appealing. Yet, the poet's passion for music and noises persisted: several of his poems are dedicated to composers such as Sergei Rachmaninoff, different kinds of urban noises become primary content in his poems, and a highly tolerant and inviting attitude is shown toward surrounding noises during the process of composing. Writing in an urban environment with loud noises such as cars honking and radios blaring is very challenging, but acquaintances of O'Hara never mentioned that the poet resisted them; instead, to their surprise, the poet embraced sounds that was commonly thought of as disturbing for those who needed to concentrate during work, allowing them to make an impact on the outcome of his poetry. Thus, I would like to find out how noises influence O'Hara's poems, hoping to achieve a better understanding of the poet's intentions through an investigation of the characteristics and effects of O'Hara's urban noises. By focusing on noises, I do not mean replacing the visual with the audio; instead, I propose turning our attention to the audio, and the network it forms with poetry composition. The main question that I will ask is: how does noise propel O'Hara's poetry? To put it more precisely, how is noise, in terms of its acoustics and impact on writing, integrated into the poetry's literary aspect? Such a broad question cannot be answered easily, so I will separate it into three interrelated questions, concerning the content and form of *Lunch Poems*, and the relationship between experimental music and poetry, specifically Rachmaninoff's Birthday Poems.

Firstly, I will explore the general content of a few selected poems and how it is related to presenting something authentic, different from the social atmosphere promoted by the 50s Cold War era. Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* are generally viewed

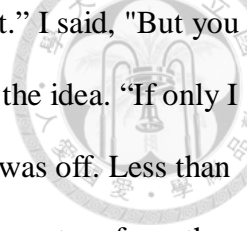


as composed of the daily events of a white-collar worker hurrying along the busy streets of Manhattan. The countless referents to the social and cultural milieu of 50s America seem overwhelming even to contemporary readers, leading critics to suggest a similarity of his poetry with social media posts that report the trivialities of life. Past critics have dismissed O'Hara's randomness, such as bringing together unrelated objects and names with each other, deeming it insignificant, incongruous, and esoteric. However, the reasons behind his randomness in the poetry are not sufficiently addressed; moreover, it is contestable whether the unconventional content of O'Hara's poetry should be interpreted solely as inconsequential. O'Hara's randomness can be found in the visual, but in my thesis, I intend to focus on the acoustics, specifically noises of the urban space: noises on the streets, speech-sounds, noises from media technology, noises of the body, and finally noises of the thought. These urban noises make up O'Hara's environment and at first glance, they seem like trivial background noises, scattered across the pages and interfering with the coherence of the poem's message. However, their ubiquitous presence is transformed by the poet's fantastical imagination into an insight that refreshes one's perception of reality. Several "I do this, I do that" poems such as "A Step Away from Them," "Personal Poem," and "The Day Lady Died" strike a chord with the currently trending "A Day In the Life" YouTube videos as the poet reports his daily actions in Manhattan, allowing readers to have a peek of "a day in the life of" a MOMA curator and avant-garde poet. Although the poet has an institutional job in which his working hours and lunch hours are regulated, his "I do this, I do that" poems are far from orderly and dull. Instead, his lunch break is an urban fantasy in which animated noises and sights spill over the pages despite their somewhat surreal correlations to each other. In light of this noisy structural presence, can we argue that the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated, illogical events bid us to reconsider what

might be a more authentic representation of the real? If the answer is affirmative, how does the noisy content, whether acting as a platform for interaction or as an agent in connecting affects, contribute to achieving authenticity in narrating? As a possible further expansion of my discussion, how does this authenticity modify our understanding of 50s America urban life, particularly the relation between the individual and the society?

Second, I will explore the ubiquitous influence of technological mediums on O'Hara's poetic form. In this section, I will focus on the interrelation between noise, mediated by urban surroundings of the poet, and the rhythm, punctuation, and language of selected poems. O'Hara poems are thought to be experimental and avant-garde, and several scholars have linked his techniques with that of action-painting. However, many friends of the poet have mentioned his tendency to immerse his compositional process in various urban soundscapes: street traffic, radio music, and telephone conversation. With this in mind, I propose investigating how medium-generated noise influences the poet's compositional process. Texts that are parasited by noise from media technology become challenging to understand because these noises come from the real, which means that they are excluded from the symbolic and so to make sense of the message is hardly possible. Do the unwanted signals of the radio, the crackling sounds of a telephone line, and the clattering of typewriter keys bring out a modified message from the poet's works? How do these soundscapes influence the poetic form, and what might be the incentive behind the poet's embrace of this disorder? Upon asking O'Hara whether he would be distracted with music and his presence while writing his famous mock manifesto "Personism," Joe LeSueur, a long-time flat mate of the poet, recalls:

He poured himself a bourbon and water, thought for a moment, then went quickly to the typewriter. I asked him if he wanted me to turn off the radio. "No,



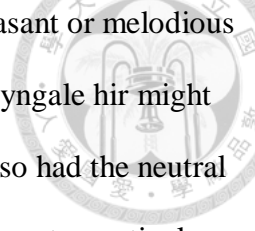
turn it up,” he said. “They’re playing Rachmaninoff’s Third next.” I said, “But you might end up writing another poem to Rachmaninoff.” He liked the idea. “If only I could be so lucky,” he said. Then the concerto began and Frank was off. Less than an hour later—in fact, about the time it took for the concerto—he got up from the typewriter and let me see what he’d written (xxiv).

Though “Personism” mentions nothing about music, the presence of the radio, particularly from O’Hara’s favorite composer, suggests that the poet allows his physical surroundings to immerse in the writing process.

The third section of my study concerns an interdisciplinary examination of O’Hara’s poetry and music. I have already discussed noise from the environment, appearing in O’Hara’s poetry as a cacophonous subject matter and also noise specifically from the poet’s working site, influencing the working process of the poet. For the last part, I will shed light on how experimental music in the first half of the 20th century, with its dissonant pitch language and alternative musical notation, considered “noise” to audience of the time, influenced the poet’s approach to writing. O’Hara’s fondness for music is stated in biographies and memoirs, such as Brad Gooch’s *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O’Hara*, yet there is still not much research on the relationship between his works and contemporary music. I argue that his cacophonous content and form resemble the attempts to break away from conventions that contemporary music also strive to achieve. I seek to compare the poet’s language and contemporary music, as a kind of noisy medium, reach out to refresh the suffocated social atmosphere of 50s America.

Definition of Noise

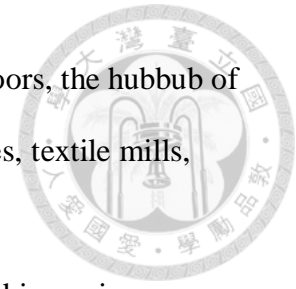
The term noise in Modern English generally means sounds that are undesired, interfering, meaningless, and confused; namely, noise is a negative term. However, in



the Oxford English Dictionary, noise once had the meaning of “a pleasant or melodious sound” as in Chaucer’s *Romaunt Rose* in 1425: “Than doth the nyghtyngale hir might To make noyse and syngen blythe” (“noise, n.”). In addition, noise also had the neutral definition of “the aggregate of sounds occurring in a particular place or at a particular time” (“noise, n.”). Indeed, in the Middle Ages, noise and music were not separated yet because music was rooted in daily life, such as street cries and chanting (Van Leeuwen 1). After the arbitrary separation of noise from music, music is defined as periodic, regular and “beautiful” while noises are non-periodic, irregular and “ugly” sounds (Van Leeuwen 2). Yet this binary division fails to account for many exceptions, such as the charming sounds of human voices and nature; in addition, not all classical music or instruments produce strictly regular sounds (Van Leeuwen 2). Van Leeuwen argues that with the advent of recording technology, the boundaries between speech, music, and other sounds are weakened (3). O’Hara’s poetry also breaks the division between speech, music, and noises, incorporating all sounds into a less strictly regulated context, which is poetry. Van Leeuwen and Futurist builder of experimental instruments, Luigi Russolo both believes that the sounds of the city and speech should be listened to as if they were music (4). Russolo, in his manifesto “The Art of Noise,” states that musical noise is attuned to modern life as it also has its own dominant pitch and rhythm (10). He writes:

Let’s walk together through a great modern capital, with the ear more attentive than the eye, and we will vary the pleasures of our sensibilities by distinguishing among the gurglings of water, air and gas inside metallic pipes, the rumblings and rattlings of engines breathing with obvious animal spirits, the rising and falling of pistons, the stridency of mechanical saws, the loud jumping of trolleys on their rails, the snapping of whips, the whipping of flags. We will have

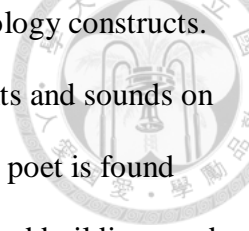
fun imagining our orchestration of department stores' sliding doors, the hubbub of the crowds, the different roars of railroad stations, iron foundries, textile mills, printing houses, power plants and subways. (7)



Russolo believes that the art of noise is not just imitation, but to combine noises according to one's "artistic fantasy" (12). Russolo's view about the aesthetic of noise is similar to how O'Hara processes stimulus and orchestrates them into a fantastical image of his life and the city. In addition, both Russolo and O'Hara believe that by embracing noises and redefining it as pleasant like music, one is able to expand his sensibility (Russolo 12). Besides from discussing noise in terms of acoustic traits, noise can also play a critical role in communication. Michel Serres, in his book *Parasite*, states that noise serves as the third person that intercepts in the relation of two other people (51). Parasitic noise stops the relation, forcing the communication system to adapt to the invader and create a new system (Serres 52). Serres argues that although the noise seems like an unwelcome guest, it was actually there in the beginning of the system, intervening and then sometime later letting others intervene in its own relation: "the parasite parasites the parasites" (55). Understanding Serres perspective on noise and communication, I sense that O'Hara's reception of noises in his writing allows the language of his poetry to become open to change and reformation, presenting a real that language (the symbolic) cannot block out. Lastly, Jacques Attali's renders noise from a political perspective, for in *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, noise is defined in relation to music. The former is disorder and differences, disrupting the existing order created by music and causing new orders (Attali 19). Music, as a political means, silences the other and excludes noise (Attali 60). It maintains order in the society by sometimes disguising itself to represent nature and by making sense of sounds through rhythm, harmony, and melody (Attali 61). Similar to Serres view, Attali also believes

that noise can be a violent force in overturning the existing system. The noises in O'Hara's poems are not eminently political or violent like the Beat poets, but the poet's campy tone can be considered a kind of noise-speech that runs against the dominating heterosexual presence in the society of 50s America.

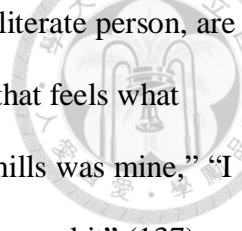
My use of the term noise differs slightly from the above mentioned scholars and thinkers in that I believe there is an agency in these sounds so that their effects can reveal the real that is submerged under the symbolic, or established orders of the society. In the following chapters, I will touch upon noises of speech-sounds and talk, noises of the body, noises from media technology, noises of the urban streets and finally noises of thought. In analyzing the noise poetics of O'Hara's works, I see noise as sounds that are less regulated by man-made rules (for example, the symbolic) as to how sound should be presented, such as in classical music. With this in mind, noise is a spontaneous, organic, and mobile form that gives breathing space for those who live under the rigid structures set up by America's 50s mainstream values, such as capitalism and heterosexual hegemony. These noises are ubiquitous but often go unnoticed, for they can be the sounds of the human body as in breathing, kissing, and walking. In addition, they sometimes come as an interference to human thought, causing the train of thought to stop abruptly or to take an alternate direction as in the sounds made by media technology: the static of the radio and the clattering of the typewriter. Moreover, I view the acoustics of speech as a kind of noise to those that attempt to eradicate musicality of written text. Onomatopoeia may seem nonsensical who do not see the acoustic meaning in words. Apart from the sounds of words, I also focus my attention on the abundant orality in O'Hara's poetry such as gossip and self-talk, which actually compose the main part of human speech in everyday life. I consider these fragmented pieces of speech to create a noisy ambience that supplements the psychological state of mind of



the main discourse and to also subvert the order that mainstream ideology constructs. Moreover, since O'Hara is a city poet that often writes about the sights and sounds on urban streets, I agree with Russolo's view that the art of noise for the poet is found mainly on the streets of New York. The sounds of traffic, the crowd and buildings under construction may be irritating, but the poet is able to acknowledge the presence of these noises, and to transform them into his own urban fantasy. Lastly, an urban dweller like O'Hara, influenced by all of the afore-mentioned noises, is prone to have noises that interfere with his writing and thinking process. The poet's embrace of noises during writing indicate that he allows these external noises to influence his concentration and train of thought. The noises of thought emerge when the poems show the poet's anxious effort to grasp hold of fragmented experience in life and the poet's distracted mindset such as self-correcting himself in a "talkative" poem and a display of non-linear thinking where unrelated objects are creatively put together. Having delineated every nuance of noise's catalytic existence, I will trace noise in the literary aspects of O'Hara's poems, discussing what noise brings to the poetry's content, poetic form, and theme. I believe that noise cannot be overlooked in our understanding of O'Hara's poetry and 1950s New York, particularly when the presence of noise is so immediate and significant to the poems and the era.

Developing the Agential Nature of Noise From Whitmanesque Writing Style

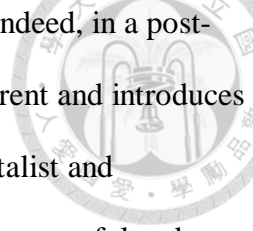
O'Hara's noisy poetic content finds its influence from his American predecessor Walt Whitman, who also wrote catalogues of seemingly random things. O'Hara hails to the *Leaves of Grass* poet, writing that only Whitman, Crane and Williams are better than the movies (*Collected* 498). Both poets make lists of catalogues, acknowledging the multitudes in life. Whitman's non-judgmental embrace of all the people and objects shows his democratic spirit: "Here the profound lesson of reception, nor preference, nor



denial, / The black with his wooly head, the felon, the diseas'd, the illiterate person, are not denied..." (127) Speaking in a self-aggrandizing tone like a god that feels what mankind feels, Whitman writes that "I too lived, Brooklyn of ample hills was mine," "I too walk'd the streets of Manhattan island, and bathed in the waters around it" (137).

The poet's progressive attitude corresponds with the time he lives in as he witnesses the transformations in an early modern city in the 19th century. The positivity and energy that emanates from his all-embracing catalogues originates from his sense of temporality. Whitman represents the spirit of the new era (the new Adam) and what was to happen after the traditions are denied (Lewis 42). Time is progressive and the only direction for the new Adam is to move forward since Whitman does not acknowledge the existence of the past (Lewis 44). The poet shows doubt of the past and teachings from institutions: "Old institutions, these arts, libraries, legends, collections, and the practice handed along in manufactures, will we rate them so high?" (180). His *Leaves of Grass* show the poet's ambition to go back to the primitive Adamic state, a time before the traditions. In this state, the man is in a new society, creating everything as he asserts the things (Lewis 43).

Both Whitman and O'Hara write catalogues, but the latter does not hold an attitude as progressive as his predecessor. Instead, O'Hara's noisy catalogues do not suggest a definite value, but interfere with meaning-making, which is in fact what reality is like before rules (oftentimes beneficial to the privileged) are given to set order and make sense of chaos in society. The relationship between O'Hara and his catalogues are not as inseparable and full of affection as Whitman's. Whitman's non-judgmental listing and seeing value in all kinds of things is different from O'Hara's random choices. Olivier Brossard, in his article on Whitman and O'Hara, suggests that O'Hara's speaker "does not contain multitudes as the lyrical self merely goes from one avatar to the other



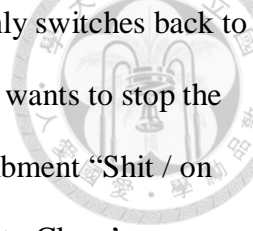
without the hope of reaching any kind of all-embracing unity” (66). Indeed, in a post-WWII era, O’Hara’s sense of time, modernity, and the crowd is different and introduces much more complexity. The 1950s in America was a time when capitalist and patriarchal values dominated the nation, yet underneath the seemingly peaceful and harmonious society of sexual innocence, moral stability and cultural accord lay problems that the mainstream overlooks (Gair 20). Christopher Gair, in *The American Counterculture*, argues that the Eisenhower administration created a “false” happiness with the promotion from mass culture that had no way of telling whether it provided true satisfaction for the mental needs of all (Gair 20). A countercultural representative of the time were the Beat poets who criticized the society by employing non-conventional forms of writing such as black vernacular and a jazzy rhythm (Gair 26). Though O’Hara is regarded as apolitical, his writing casually reflects his attitude toward the “choices” that are determined by values of the society. Michael Clune argues that O’Hara’s random selections of items, people and places in his poetry suggest that they are “determined neither by the stable preferences of the subject nor by the intrinsic value or interest of the chosen object” (Clune 184). Clune states that the random and willful choices is a way for the poet to resist a society that is “repressed by the hegemonic liberal model of a nation ordered by the rational choices of sovereign individuals” (Clune 186). The two charms in O’Hara’s pocket: “an old Roman coin Mike Kanemitsu” gave him and “a bolt-head that broke off a packing case” are not picked because the poet bears a personal liking for them or by their extrinsic values (Clune 184). They are randomly selected as charms because they derive its worth “not from a definite relation to a personal past but from an open relation to a personal future” (Clune 184-85). In “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday (Quick! a last poem before I go),” O’Hara makes a list of his childhood belongings after recreating a dreamlike surrealist

representation of Rachmaninoff's music:

Quick! a last poem before I go
off my rocker. Oh Rachmaninoff!
Onset, Massachusetts. Is it the fig-newton
playing the horn? Thundering windows
of hell, will your tubes ever break
into powder? Oh my palace of oranges,
junk shop, staples, umber, basalt;
I'm a child again when I was really
miserable, a grope pizzicato. My pocket
of rhinestone, yoyo, carpenter's pencil,
amethyst, hypo, campaign button,
is the room full of smoke? Shit
on the soup, let it burn. So it's back
You'll never be mentally sober. (*Lunch* 11)



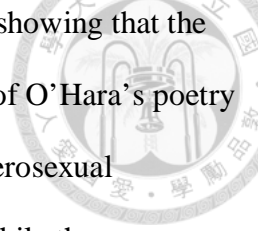
There are no personal stories behind each random object in the childhood speaker's pocket. Since the objects do not possess any metaphorical meaning, readers might be guilty of skipping them. Yet, why are these random objects aligned with the poet's "miserable" childhood and a "grope" plucking sound of a string instrument? The motivation and effect of randomness here cannot be explained easily but it seems that these different items add more to the confusion of the speaker's childhood. Rather than rationally sidestepping childhood problems and his present drinking problems, the poet "let's go of his desire to control experience, resigning himself to the entropic irrational that seemed in the opening lines to drive him mad" (Sadoff 161). Sadoff argues that the poet blurs the boundaries between "madness and imagination, anxiety and play" (161).



In the midst of reminiscing about childhood miseries, O’Hara suddenly switches back to time present when he smells smoke in the room. In the beginning, he wants to stop the burning as he curses “shit,” but the word is actually part of the enjambment “Shit / on the soup, let it burn” (*Lunch* 11). Randomness in this poem responds to Clune’s argument that O’Hara tries to resist rationalization and self-control. This seems to be in line with John Cage’s notion that randomness should come from life and nature through the cancelling of the self and being unaffected by the society’s criteria. I believe O’Hara’s randomness manifests his agential nature of noise, for although this noise seems apolitical, its meaninglessness resists any meaning-making from the orders of society.

Literature Review

Past studies on Frank O’Hara generally adopt approaches that deal with interdisciplinary, queer, and consumer culture topics. In the first category, O’Hara has received quite a lot of attention from interdisciplinary critics, with particular emphasis on the intermediality in his poetry. Marjorie Perloff points out that as O’Hara’s objective in poetry is to defamiliarize one’s automatic perception of objects, the poet adapts the techniques of various mediums, such as film and action painting, to his verse. Furthermore, Perloff argues that the seemingly random naming and illogical parallels in O’Hara’s poetry are designed to defamiliarize common perceptions and to create a sense of presence of the world’s chaotic splendor. In “‘In Fatal Winds’: Frank O’Hara and Morton Feldman,” Will Montgomery explores the relationship between O’Hara’s writing and Feldman’s music, finding that both aspired for freedom but denied an endlessness to it by acknowledging containment. Montgomery states that while O’Hara dedicated “Winds” to the composer, Feldman twice set music to the poem as well. He compares Feldman’s emphasis of allowing sounds to exist themselves to O’Hara’s

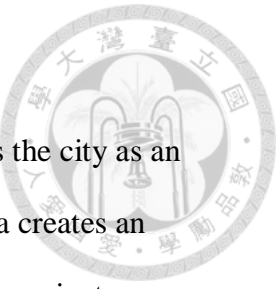


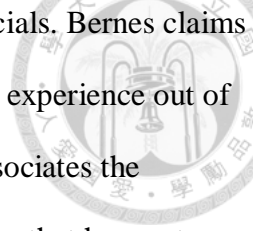
rejection of a poetic form and the uncontainable passion of the poet, showing that the poet is committed to language itself. Dwelling on the intermediality of O'Hara's poetry and film, Mark Goble states that poet is capable of appropriating heterosexual Hollywood films for his homoerotic imagination. Goble states that while those Hollywood films may be saturated with mainstream ideologies of the 50s America, O'Hara does not easily concede but actually provides dissent through a particular use of sonic assonance and semantic dissonance. Sarah Riggs proposes that for the poet, cinema brings a radically transformed idea of reality. She views O'Hara's poetry as a critique of the new medium of cinema as he positions his readers in the place of cinema spectators. With numerous references to film and movie stars such as James Dean and Lana Turner, there is no doubt that O'Hara's poetry is often compared to film techniques and content in scholarly works. However, other technological mediums such as online social media have been linked with O'Hara in recent years as Benjamin Lee states that O'Hara's resurging popularity makes particular sense in "an era of text messages and social networking" (244). Todd Tietchen proposes that O'Hara's poetry circle anticipates the online networks in the digital age of computation. Tietchen notes that the poet circulates his works amongst his group of artistic friends while at the same time finds inspiration from connecting with them. In addition, he considers the poet's self-reporting in "I do this, I do that" poems and his reflections on celebrity news resemble Tweets and user-generated commentary, suggesting an intermedia convergence that foresees the democratizing of the Internet and digital media. From the aforementioned scholarly work, we can observe that O'Hara interweaves his work, whether technique or content, with that of various technological mediums. However, investigation on how the radio, the telephone, and the typewriter in O'Hara's poetry generates "noise" has yet to be done so as to unveil how the poet constructs an

alternative with these technological mediums.

Another group belongs to queer studies, in which O'Hara renders the city as an attempt to construct a queer counterpublic. Herring argues that O'Hara creates an alternative public space for sexual minorities to encounter each other as private individuals. Herring asserts that O'Hara uses the language of everyday life (like that of telephone conversation) and queer desires so as to project actual gay presence, yet dissolves the self by situating himself in the public sphere of the poetic medium. In this way, O'Hara allows readers to enjoy the pleasure of mass subjectivity while escaping being under gender surveillance, resulting in a "closeted openness" that creates a community of impersonal individuals. Comparing O'Hara with the confessionals in "Confessional Counterpublics in Frank O'Hara and Allen Ginsberg," Hartman claims that O'Hara's poetry problematizes Lowell's universal sincerity because it excludes a homosexual public. Hartman points out that O'Hara adopts a camp tone of writing so as to address a particular community and protest against impersonal poetry tradition, suggesting that O'Hara's counter-public mediates sexuality that transforms private lives. Lastly, Hazel Smith deems O'Hara as a non-essentialist gay poet who emphasizes more on sexual fluidity than the politically outspoken sexual transparency. Smith claims that O'Hara's poetry explores alternative masculinities in a way to deconstruct a hegemonic masculinity.

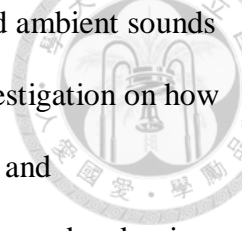
In addition to the two kinds above, consumer culture is another main thread of O'Hara's criticism as many scholars investigate the vast amount of commodities that are depicted in O'Hara's poetry. Jasper Bernes argues that O'Hara's love poem "Having a Coke with You" may sound like an advertisement for Coca Cola, but the poet's objective is to transform the commodity into a placeholder for the affects of human interconnection. Bernes points out that as "experience" is a focal point in postmodern





advertisements, O'Hara's style of writing prophesizes these commercials. Bernes claims that the poet ultimately creates a queer counterpublic and presents its experience out of a space of consumption. Susan B. Rosenbaum argues that O'Hara associates the language of a capitalist consuming society with homosexual desires so that he create an alternative sphere against Cold War ideologies. Rosenbaum likens O'Hara to the flaneur, who constantly makes his own choices in a time and space constrained by workplaces, markets, and streets. Rosenbaum points out that by presenting his acts of consumption in the city, O'Hara displays an openness and spontaneity to join the flows of capital but also connects his choices with identities and desires. In "Frank O'Hara and the Aesthetics of Free Choice," Michael Clune argues that the random free choices in O'Hara's poetry suggest a resistance against individual rationality manipulated by institutions of 50s America. Clune observes that O'Hara's preferences are not based on personal affiliations with the object or its intrinsic value, but inspired by the given environment that the individual is situated. In this way, O'Hara's personal desires become the ones of the social collective as a whole. Finally, Mutlu Konuk Blasing observes that though O'Hara works in an experimental mode, he does not oppose but shares the cultural force while acknowledging the social strains of 50s and 60s America. Blasing indicates that the poet is convinced his free forms does not "free" him from the traps of discourse, but his focus on the bodily origins of language engage with the social context.

Although there is substantial research on intermediality in Frank O'Hara's poetry, most studies are centered on the interplay between film and poetry, or painting and poetry, mainly expounding the visual appropriation of mediums. However, as a poet who once aspired to become a concert pianist, who dedicated several poems to Rachmaninoff, and who embraced noises, such as street sounds and party talking whilst



composing, one cannot help but ask whether environmental noise and ambient sounds greatly shape Frank O'Hara's poems, and whether an intermedia investigation on how sound mediums impact the poet's work can result in new discoveries and understandings. Some might argue that O'Hara's poetry is not about sound and noises which serve merely as stimulants for the poet's writing process, so all of audio technologies to the inconsequential background. However, this argument weakens considerably when we take into account how present and influential audio technologies are, not only in the world of O'Hara's poems but also that of the poetry's readers. Thus I propose orienting my reading of O'Hara's poems around the network formed by human beings and media technologies, and explore how this network can facilitate new understandings of the poetry's noisy narrative.

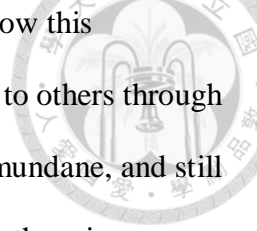
Methodology

Past studies on Frank O'Hara generally explore aspects such as the influence of visual media on poetry, traces of social-media-like writing style and its imaginary audience, the alternative space that the poet sets up for queer interaction, and how consumer culture is utilized to represent queer desire. Though there are quite a few studies that incorporate media into their analysis, these studies generally focus on the visual aspect of media, dwelling on painting and film. I will first elaborate on the developments of audio technologies in the poems' historical background, so as to establish how intertwined audio technologies is with human history and justify my focus on the radio and the telephone in O'Hara's poetry. Next, I will use existing media studies to illustrate the call for recognizing the actual audio technologies in literary studies and responding methodologies. Lastly, I will make use of Edouard Glissant's notion of "the right to opacity" as a framework to realize how O'Hara's noisy poetics facilitate an equal and mutual understanding in the relation of the poet and the reader,

the poet and the city, and the reader and the city, and how noise helps discard original binary oppositions that often result in an imbalance of understanding.

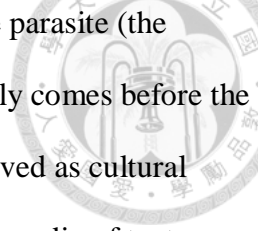
In the latter half of the nineteenth century, storing sound in a machine was made possible through the invention of the phonograph. The effect of the sound storage medium coincided with the evolution of music in which Arnold Schoenberg, in the early 1900s, sought to turn chords into pure acoustics, entering the new world of overtone series (Kittler 24). “Overtones are frequencies, that is vibrations per second. And the grooves of Edison’s phonograph recorded nothing but vibrations” (Kittler 24). For the first time, media was able to dissolve feedback loops; before that, man consciously reflected on his thoughts through writing (Kittler 22). In addition, the phonograph, as a mechanical sound recording, does not filter voices, sounds, and words out of noise; thus, the phonograph registers the real rather than the symbolic (Kittler 24). Regarding the invention of the phonograph, Sigmund Freud applauds the storage medium for recording unfiltered speech of the patient, such as nonsense words and slip of the tongue (Kittler 86). Freud argues that the psychoanalyst should be like a telephone receiver without censoring what the patient has said, transmitting the unconscious of the patient (Kittler 88).

The phonograph and the subsequent radio made a huge social impact on people’s lives, especially during the 1930s of America, when the radio became so popular to an extent that every household radio that emitted blaring noises nonstop throughout the day became a noise pollution issue. David Goodman asserts that besides from several attentive listeners that tuned in to only the programs they were interested in, the majority of people, such as housewives and young people, turned on the radio for hours throughout the day, treating it as background noise while they multitasked (housewives tend to household chores and many youngsters like to study with music playing from



the radio). There were many reasons that these distracted listeners allow this cacophonous sound environment to thrive: some people felt attached to others through the broadcast, others wanted the radio to help them live through the mundane, and still others relaxed and socialized more easily with people at a party when there is some background radio music (Goodman 22). Goodman believes that distracted listening is a part of “the modern condition,” which is made possible by “the revolutionary technology of recorded and broadcast sound that allowed ordinary people to choose to accompany their lives with talk and music from elsewhere” (45). From Goodman’s illustration of the radio hearing habits of people, one can infer that the practice of distracted listening means the welcoming of noise. This noise makes some people find it hard to concentrate on other things even though they still enjoy listening to the radio at the same time. Other times, the radio noise of neighbors are blasting so loudly and constantly that it harms the living quality of the neighborhood.

Aware of the evident developments of technological mediums, several scholars call for investigating the real uses of these mediums in literature since interference and noise from these media technologies existed before they were excluded or put into order by the symbolic. For German media thinkers like Friedrich Kittler, media technology determines the human condition and produces new modes of thinking. Speaking about German media theory, Bernhard Siegert argues that “the conditions of representation” and “the exterior and material conditions of what constitutes semantics” are put under the spotlight (2). Regarding how media serves as an interface between the real and the symbolic, Siegert proposes that media not only generates but also destroys codes, decolonizing “bodies, images, text, and music” (15). In “Cacography or Communion,” he presents that Michel Serres’ concept of the parasite contributes to a better understanding of the processing of communication. Replacing the bivalent subject-



object model with a trivalent one that includes a channel, namely, the parasite (the third), Serres suggests that disturbance and noise from the real actually comes before the symbolic. The symbolic order, or successful communication, is achieved as cultural techniques, such as typographic, telephonic, and computer-generated media of text production, filter and turn the real into a sign that is comprehensible for humans. Thus, Serres argues that what may be a hindrance to all messages is “reversed and added to the information” (32). Concerning “noise” in his theory of communication, Michel Serres argues that no matter how committed media attempts to minimize noise, it always generates its own, new kind of noise. For Serres, noise was there in the beginning, and order was established as a way of countering noise; thus, noise always adds something new to the message that the sender did not intend on conveying to the receiver.

Taking into account the historical background of 1950s America, and advantages of a medium-oriented approach proposed by Friedrich Kittler and Bernhard Siegert, I will analyze O’Hara’s poetry with a medium-centric approach that places more emphasis on audio technologies’ contribution to the characteristics of the poetry. By medium-centric, I do not propose replacing human beings with the media; instead I will analyze the network formed by human and media as agents. The idea of self-referentiality come from New Media theorists, particularly Friedrich Kittler and Bernhard Siegert. Different from media theory cornerstone Marshall McLuhan, who thinks of the medium as an extension of the human body and who proposes that the medium is the message, new media theorist Friedrich Kittler believes the opposite, arguing that man is the extension of the medium and that “medium determines our situation” (xxxix). Kittler’s non-human-centered aspect does not reject the subjectivity of man, but asks one to rethink what it is like when technology influences the thought and actions of man (Lin 35).

How is technology's self-referentiality seen through its influence on man in literature?

In order not to confine my discussion on noise to only information theory, I will also refer to John Durham Peters definition of medium in *The Marvelous Clouds*. Peters argues that instead of only viewing media as devices of information, they are also “vessels and environments” that make sense of human beings' existence (2). Peters believes that nature such as water and fire should be seen as media as well since they sustain human's lives; thus, they are agencies of order because everything in the world from nature to the Internet is manipulated by humans.

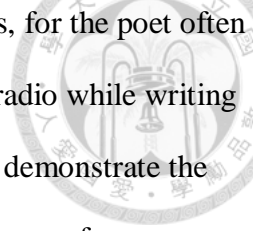
In order to better understand the reason why O'Hara embraces all kinds of noisy distractions, I will draw upon Edouard Glissant's call for “the right to opacity” (94). Opacity is not confusion or fuzziness of the language, but creating an “ethical mode of being between self and other” through accommodating paradoxes in writing (Wiedorn184). Glissant discards the binary of self and other, dictating that “in the other an unknowable remainder persists” (Wiedorn 184). I believe that O'Hara's creolized language is more than a mixture of cultures, but through his poetics there is an “interaction between agents, human or nonhuman” (Li 6), creating “a new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and in errantry” (Glissant 34). By embracing distractions, O'Hara is more likely to achieve an opaque rendering of things, allowing media, music, noise to become agents and interact in his poems. Bermann, on discussing how translation is perceived according to Glissant's opacity, proposes that translation is “never scientifically equivalent” to the original text, but it forges “a new language (*langage*) based on a respect for Otherness” (7). Likewise, I believe that O'Hara's poetry, in representing another object, does not just seek for a precise depiction but, more importantly, emphasizes the unpredictable and the accidental that

results from a respect for the opacity of the object that is being described.

Incorporating these theoretical discourses into my methodology, I view noise both as surface and agent, with particular emphasis on its ubiquity, disruptiveness, and representation of the real. Regarding noise as surface, I want to highlight that noise is an essential platform which makes it possible for the real to resurface in a world of order. Moreover, it is not a passive, inanimate stage, but one that shapes the writing process with its noisy properties. Noise is an agent; in simpler terms, an intervener that interacts with the message from the sender to the receiver in a powerful, tangible manner. I propose the idea of noise as agent when its presence becomes so pronounced that it is no longer sufficient to term it as a surface. In the following section, I will trace noise's definition throughout history and come to define it in my own terms that facilitate a better understanding of O'Hara.

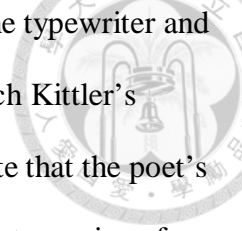
Chapter Description

Chapter One will focus on the relationship between Frank O'Hara and noises and music. The poet is drawn to contemporary music and musicians of the New York School, such as John Cage and Morton Feldman, but at the same time, he enjoys listening to Rachmaninoff, a Russian composer of the late romantic period. Firstly, I will examine how John Cage's redefinition of music and his inclusion of noise in experimental music influences the poet's approach to writing and noise. I would like to explore how the poet's writing style, particularly his pursuit for freedom in form and content, is influenced by these music that also seeks to break away from conventional notation. By comparing Cage's tape-edited *Williams Mix* with O'Hara's "A Step Away From Them," I find both works present an intricate collage of noises, redefining one's traditional way of perceiving urban time and space in a linear fashion. Next, I believe that O'Hara's appreciation of Rachmaninoff's classical music does not go against his



beliefs that sounds should be liberated through the inclusion of noises, for the poet often enjoys the music in distracted contexts, such as listening to it on the radio while writing a poem. I will analyze several of “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday” and demonstrate the poet’s belief that noises are pervasive in the process of artistic creation, performance, and in the relationship between artist and audience. By investigating these poems, I hope to understand how experimental music, which was regarded as noisy for its dissonant pitch and a completely different musical notation, could influence the writing of O’Hara and refresh those who felt nauseated by the social and political climate of 50s America.

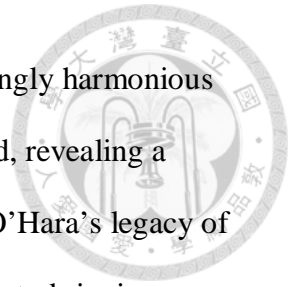
Chapter Two will focus on writing sites of O’Hara, full of noises, and present the poet’s inclusiveness of the noises, deeming the noises as a vital source of inspiration on his writing process. I will illustrate O’Hara’s embrace of a noisy writing site through several of his poems, such as “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday #158” where the poet manifests his dependence on the radio music of Rachmaninoff as his muse for writing: “I better hurry up and finish this / before your 3rd goes off the radio” (418). Speaking of the radio, Joe LeSueur, the poet’s long-time flat mate, mentions how O’Hara insists on having the radio turned on when writing his mock manifesto “Personism” (xxiv). I will also explicate a scene where O’Hara collects ideas from a telephone conversation through a documentary by U.S.A: Poetry. Lastly, the blurb on the back cover of *Lunch Poems* shows the daily lunch routine of the poet pausing “at a sample Olivetti to type up thirty or forty lines of ruminations, or pondering more deeply,” withdraws into “a darkened ware- or firehouse to limn his computed misunderstandings of the eternal questions of life, co-existence and depth” (O’Hara). The typewriter is the main writing material for the poet, and traces of the medium’s technological influence on the writing style can be seen in “Biotherm.” In the above-mentioned writing scenarios, I explore



how noises from certain technological mediums, namely the radio, the typewriter and the telephone, influence the writing of the poet. I will rely on Friedrich Kittler's elucidation on how mediums determine our situation, and demonstrate that the poet's embrace of noise from mediums attest to Kittler's argument that "what remains of people is what media can store and communicate" (xl). I would like to find out how the real, coming from mediums such as the crackling sounds of a telephone line, the clattering of typewriter keys, and the unwanted signals of the radio, bring out a modified message that the symbolic writing system cannot convey.


Chapter Three will focus on urban noise as a subject matter in O'Hara's poetics and its contribution to presenting a more authentic picture of the poet's surroundings. I will draw on several "I do this, I do that" poems to illustrate O'Hara's interaction with the environment and how he puts the moment of interacting with his surroundings into words. O'Hara's "I do this, I do that" poems are named as such because they suggest the poet's free-associating voice as he roams down the streets of Manhattan during his lunch time break. In "Steps," the walking noises of the poet stand out from the crowd because his body reacts to a melody in the film *Swing Time*, and thus his "steps" become a personalized gait with its individual noise as opposed to the fast steady rhythm of New Yorkers heading to work. Apart from noises of the body, the poet also demonstrates noises of the urban street in the same poem, where he is able to share a communal experience with the masses because the omnipresent noise influences everyone. I also include noises of talk as an urban sound because they help the poet affirm his sense of being in a modern city filled with fragmented experience. I argue that O'Hara, unlike those who develop a detached attitude to protect oneself from the excitements of metropolitan life, responds directly to the noisy shocks of urban life and absorbs them, and in this way, achieves a more authentic representation of the real. I

perceive that the poet's unveiling of the real problematizes the seemingly harmonious and prosperous picture that the mainstream of 50s America advocated, revealing a profit-driven and authoritative society. In addition, in order to trace O'Hara's legacy of technical audio, I will compare how the noisy environment contribute to bringing a more authentic picture in the 21st century through Paul Legault's *Lunch Poems 2*, a book of poetry dedicated to O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* fifty years later. I will trace the urban noises of media in this final part, comparing the noises of gossip that surround the newspaper and Internet news in O'Hara's "Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!)" with Legault's "Poem (J-Law has collapsed!)."



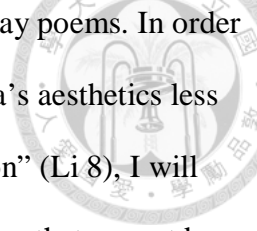
Chapter One

Experimental Music and Rachmaninoff's Birthday Poems



Music played an immense role throughout O'Hara's life as the poet initially aspired to become a concert pianist in his early years, studying piano at the New England Conservatory in Boston from 1941 to 1944. During the war, O'Hara served as a sonar man, but in his free time, he attended numerous classical music concerts (Gooch 91). Although O'Hara graduated from Harvard in 1950 with a degree in English, he had first majored in music, working on composing and being deeply influenced by contemporary music. O'Hara was impressed with composers of a wide diversity ranging from Sergei Rachmaninoff and Arnold Schoenberg to avant-gardes such as John Cage and Morton Feldman. John Ashbery, in his introduction to O'Hara's *Collected Poems*, recalls that he and the poet were refreshed after attending a David Tudor concert, in which John Cage's "Music of Changes" was performed (ix). Ashbery claims that composers ranging from Rachmaninoff, Schubert, Sibelius, Krenek to Cage and Feldman inspired O'Hara to create by borrowing words and colors from everywhere, and that the poet's production bore no likeness to his antecedents in American poetry, but "more like the inspired ramblings of a mind open to the point of distraction" (ix). Though O'Hara did not pursue a career in music, his works were certainly influenced by many composers and their music.

In this chapter, I would like to explore how the poet's writing style, particularly his pursuit for freedom in form and content, is influenced by John Cage's experimental music, which also seeks to break away from conventional notations. Next, I will focus on how sounds from everyday life (O'Hara's distracted listening to classical music on the radio), regarded as noises by traditional Western music, is incorporated into O'Hara's perception and appreciation of listening to classical music by Rachmaninoff,

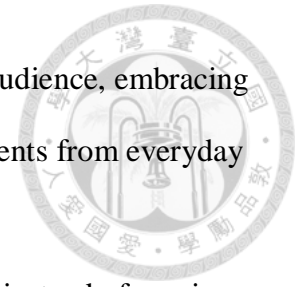


investigating the poet's noise poetics through Rachmaninoff's Birthday poems. In order to analyze how the intervention of experimental music makes O'Hara's aesthetics less transparent, namely escaping from "the controlling authority of reason" (Li 8), I will investigate how it creates and realizes the ontological status of an other that cannot be reduced. I will divide my chapter into two sections: first, I will examine how experimental music exerts its strong influence on the form and content of O'Hara's poetry through the comparison between John Cage's *Williams Mix* and O'Hara's "A Step Away From Them." In the second section, I will present the poet's reflection on the relationship between his poetry and Rachmaninoff's music through a few eulogy poems, namely four of his "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday."

Frank O'Hara and John Cage's Experimental Music

As the center of the New York School, O'Hara inspired and found inspiration from this group of avant-garde poets, painters and musicians. Members of the music of the New York School include composers Earle Brown, John Cage, Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff, and the pianist / composer David Tudor (Nicholls 335). Out of these musicians, O'Hara has collaborated with Feldman, dedicating poem "Wind" to Feldman while the composer later set the poem to music two times, first in his *O'Hara Songs* (1962) and second in his *Three Voices* (1982) (Montgomery 198). Will Montgomery, in "In Fatal Winds': Frank O'Hara and Morton Feldman," has devoted much to examining how the poet engages with Feldman's experimental music. However, as my thesis focuses on the agency of noise in O'Hara's poetry, I find that the poems' openness to sound and noise is influenced mainly by John Cage's innovative insight on how sounds should be liberated from the traditional compositional and performance framework. In the following pages, I will briefly illustrate how O'Hara's writing style resembles Cage's view in freeing sounds by breaking away from traditional musical

notation, allowing active participation from the performers and the audience, embracing unpredictable presentations of music, and redefining sounds as elements from everyday life.

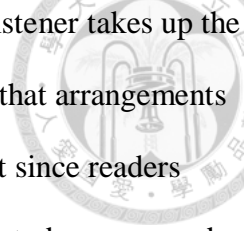


Cage's receptive view that sounds should be about everyday life instead of coming from regulated musical notations has influenced O'Hara to achieve spontaneity with the direct usage of words. Cage's concept of art is that it should be instinctive and "imitate nature in its manner of operation" (Nyman 26). Unlike classical music, where the whole piece of music is calculated and logical so that "moments are heard as-they-are-structured," experimental music aims to represent moments that "are heard-as-they-happen" (Nyman 28). Cage shows a willingness to reach the real of life, an external and impersonal reality of sound, and to discard the ordered relationships and priorities constructed by musical notation and the mind. He believes that sounds should be heard through the ear instead of the trained mind, and that even if there are no notes on the score, as in *4'33"*, the sounds from the environment, like the audience coughing, still exist. Similarly, O'Hara shows his desire for spontaneity through a playful metaphor on abandoning rigid poetic forms to express his immediate impressions: "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" (*Collected* 498). The poet's sensuous, bodily description of the objective and effect of the poetic form relates to Cage's belief that sounds should be about life and the process of nature. O'Hara's free verse breaks away from the traditions of classical poetry, where structure, rhythm, rhyme, and meter are strictly organized. However, that is not to say that the poet discards all musicality of poetry; instead, like experimental music, O'Hara strives for the most direct and straightforward way of setting words in motion. Different from classical music, where everything is guided from the mind, experimental music

seeks to produce and experience sounds physiologically, that is, with the hands (Nyman 14).

Cage did not approve how under the system of traditional notation, the only sounds that are recognized are those that have become a musical form: rhythm, pitch, dynamics. Cage's objective was to abandon the divisions that musical symbols construct, such as tempo signs "allegro" and "adagio," and to allow sounds to be as they are instead of being arbitrarily put into distinct categories. This outreach, similarly, is also reflected in O'Hara's approach to writing. O'Hara breaks down the hierarchical structure of syntax, where subjects, verbs, and objects are not always corresponding and in the expected grammatical order. In addition, conjunctions such as "and" are supposed to link two clauses with similar importance or to express continuity such as giving supplementary information, but in many cases of O'Hara's, two unrelated events are often put together, causing the reader's grasp of the poem to come to an abrupt stop. The fluidity of O'Hara's sentence structure echoes experimental music's attempt to erase priorities and dualism, bringing readers to an understanding that everything is equal and that each object, phrase or sentence can often easily blend with each other. Both Cage and O'Hara sought to let sounds be sounds, and words be words. O'Hara expresses a similar view in "Personism: A Manifesto" by rejecting rhythm, assonance and "elaborately sounded structures," preferring to follow inspiration from words themselves and "go on your nerve" (*Collected* 498).

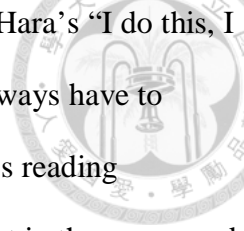
Cage believes that experimental music opens up more participation from the performer and the audience, discarding the one-way channel where the listener is passively taking in the information. The roles of composer / performer / listener become fluid, breaking away from "the standard sender / carrier / receiver information structure of other forms of Western Music" (Nyman 22-23). The performer is given options from



the score when playing, resulting in different outputs of music. The listener takes up the responsibility of imagining and perceiving the music individually so that arrangements will be done to the piece (Nyman 25). Similarly, O’Hara believes that since readers actively interpret the poem from their side, it is unnecessary for poets to be concerned about the reception of his work. The poet compares the experience of reading poetry to that of consumption, insisting that poets should not overfeed their readers like a “middle-aged mother trying to get her kids to eat too much cooked meat, and potatoes with drippings (tears)” (*Collected* 498). In addition, O’Hara states that the poem is between “two persons” instead of “two pages” (*Collected* 499), comparing his readers to lovers. He understands that the poem is only complete with the participation of both the poet and the reader, and that the poet should not force the reader to realize his message. O’Hara playfully writes:

As for their reception, suppose you’re in love and someone’s mistreating (mal aime) you, you don’t say, “Hey, you can’t hurt me this way, I care!” you just let the different bodies fall where they may, and they always do may after a few months. But that’s not why you fell in love in the first place, just to hang onto life, so you have to take your chances and try to avoid being logical. Pain always produces logic, which is very bad for you. (*Collected* 498)

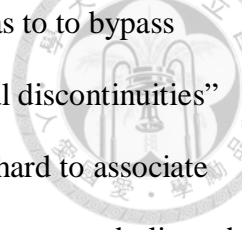
O’Hara stresses that poetry is about life and that life’s spontaneity cannot foresee a determinate reaction from the readers, which strikes a chord with how experimental music no longer presents a “prearranged time-object structure” but becomes “a process of generating action” (Nyman 4). Thus, readers do not merely witness, but become “actors” that need to experience the life in the poetry, assembling “synecdochal sequences as symbolism, and then allow[ing] them to fall apart again into surrealism” (Smith 91). That the poem is between two persons for O’Hara suggests that each reader



will come out with different interpretations of the poem. Many of O'Hara's "I do this, I do that" poems bring readers across Manhattan, but readers do not always have to experience the walk with a start point and a destination. Instead, one's reading experience of the poet's walk through town might start from any point in the poem, and readers might take a different route from the poet according to each individual interpretation.

Unpredictability is also a key feature of Cage's composing and performing aspirations, emphasizing the actual listening experience instead of what is prewritten on the score. Sounds are no longer represented by specialized symbols found in traditional notation, but are generated by chance and options, which is more improvised and close to the workings of nature (Nyman 3). Regarding the unpredictability of performance, the composer believes that experimental music is "an act the outcome of which is unknown" as his composition creates a situation and gives directives for the performer to freely interpret the piece (Silence 13). With the prepared piano, the composer places nails on the strings of a piano, producing unpredictable noises that interfere with mind and ear and rendering "obsolete all possible score analysis" (Sinker). As for chance operations in composing, Cage relied on *I-Ching* to randomly select some element of the composition as it could free the composer from making music with biased preferences, achieving an ultimate meaning in appearing meaningless.

John Cage's music of unpredictability is similar to O'Hara's random cataloguing in terms of the effect it causes and the approaches taken. I observe that the composing approach, which allows some parts of a piece of music open to chance or to the performer's free choice, seems to strike a chord with the poet's embrace of outside influences during the writing process, randomly cataloguing people, places, and objects. Hazel Smith argues that O'Hara's random cataloguing is based on associative



improvising, which means that improvisers work metonymically so as to to bypass rationalizing procedures, producing “unconscious patterns and logical discontinuities” (152). The reading experience of associative improvising is that it is hard to associate subjects in the poet’s writing with determinate meanings because the non-symbolic and the surreal also pervade through the lines. O’Hara’s use of more than one “synecdochal chain” in a poem constantly merges with other chains, making associations mobile and expanding and preventing any subject from becoming a static symbol (Smith 93).

Montgomery explains what the unpredictable implies in O’Hara’s poetry:

This is not the liberty of the realized autonomy of the self nor of the somehow unfettered energies of the unconscious. It is a liberty that realizes the limits of the self in directing language but does not relinquish the commitment to the lightly ordering touch of ‘design’ in the poem’s composition. (202)

Montgomery notes that O’Hara urges for a commitment and openness to language that might produce something unpredictable (201-202). O’Hara’s understands that there are limitations as to writing from a human-centric starting point, and that only by accepting the unpredictable outward influences can he produce a work that is closer to the real.

In short, Frank O’Hara and John Cage are both avant-gardes that brought a new perspective to their specific fields of art, whether it was the approach to creating art, the meaning of art, or the creation itself.

***Williams Mix* and “A Step Away From Them”**

Cage’s concept of experimenting with sounds is developed further with the use of electroacoustic media devices, such as the phonograph and the tape recorder. These devices register all acoustic events, and so it “does not hear as do ears that have been trained immediately to filter voices, words, and sounds out of noise” (Kittler 23).

Aeberhard proposes that man’s trained ears, namely the mind, proves to be “corrupted

by intellection when it comes to sonic perception” whereas the ear is capable of taking up “acoustic reality unspoiled by musical formalization and cultural signification” (5). With the cutting and splicing of tape recordings, Cage’s electroacoustic music shows indifference toward “musical forms, musical semantics and musical meaning” since there is “no space available for semantic rests,” suggesting that all blanks will not “remain silent” but be filled with white noise by the apparatus (Aeberhard 5).

In 1953 Cage wrote *Williams Mix*, an electronic composition for eight tracks of quarter-inch magnetic tapes played simultaneously. The material for the music are divided into six categories: A (city sounds), B (country sounds), C (electronic sounds), D (manually produced sounds), E (wind produced sounds) and F (“small” sounds, which need to be amplified). Cage explains that the score consists of 192 pages (Figure 1.1):

Each page has two systems comprising eight lines each. These eight lines are eight tracks of tape and they are pictured full-size so that the score constitutes a pattern for the cutting of tape and its slicing. All recorded sounds are placed in six categories ... Approximately 600 recordings are necessary to make a version of this piece. The composing means were chance operations derived from the I-Ching. (*Werkverzeichnis* 41)

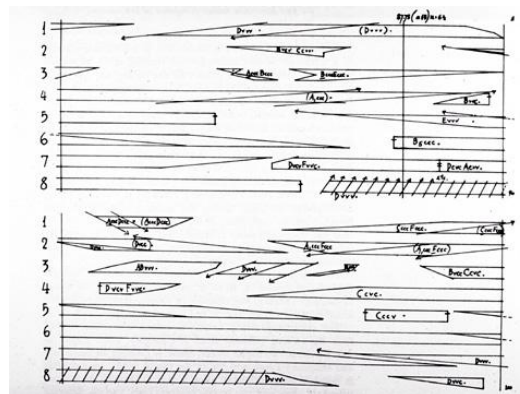
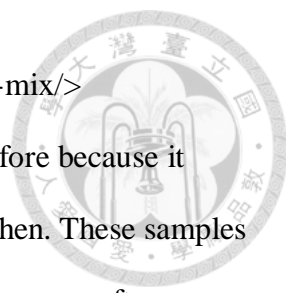


Figure 1.1 Cage, John. Music score of “Williams Mix.” *Werkverzeichnis*. Web. 28 June.

2020. <<http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/williams-mix/>>



When *Williams Mix* came out, no one had heard anything like this before because it synthesized raw material samples, which was a new technique back then. These samples are actually ordinary noises that people are so familiar with that their senses often become numb toward these stimuli. The noises could come from anywhere in one's life: a choir in church, clapping from the audience, or the hustle and bustle of city life. These noises no longer inspire people anymore due to a blasé attitude that they have developed to protect from shocks in a modern cosmopolitan society. Yet *Williams Mix* is refreshing and situate new perceptions because for the first time, music becomes editable with the suspension of the linearity of time and selective manipulations. Chanan observes that by “cutting, copying and crossfading, isolating, reversing and superimposing these fragments,” noise will become “acoustically multidimensional” (130). While noises from the mundane are arranged by Cage into a “dressmaker's pattern” as seen from the score, O'Hara also displays a similar writing technique, juxtaposing various irrelevant events and creating a multidimensional soundscape.

While most critics have focused on the visual aspects of O'Hara's poetry, I propose that O'Hara's works display a similar acoustic effect to the sound collages of Cage's *Williams Mix*. O'Hara's “A Step Away From Them” is one of his “I do this, I do that” poems that depicts what occurs during an ordinary lunch time in Manhattan. Yet more than a Facebook post that updates one's whereabouts, O'Hara's self-reporting lunch poems claim personal authority over the phantasmagoria of the city, seeing what he wants to see and hearing what he wants to hear in the streets of New York. Upon first glance, one senses a vibrant vitality coming from the bustling and populous street scenes:

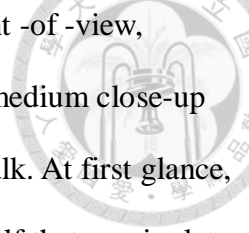
It's my lunch hour, so I go



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. Then onto the
avenue where skirts are flipping
above heels and blow up over
grates. The sun is hot, but the
cabs stir up in the air. I look
at bargains in wristwatches. There
are cats playing in sawdust. (*Collected* 257)

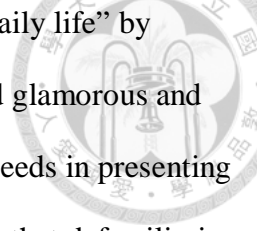
Noise collage come in the form of cab engines humming, electric drilling noises, falling brick sounds, laborers chatting, cats meowing and then there is the reference to the 1954 film *The Seven Year Itch* where Marilyn Monroe's white skirt blow up over the subway grates. In the iconic and sexual scene, Monroe and Ewell are conversing, while suddenly there is a loud, urgent sound of a subway train approaching, sending gusts of wind through the grates. While these bits of modern life might seem fragmented and trivial to most, the poet grasps hold of these pieces, affirming his place in a teeming city world. To put this piece of poem to music with *Williams Mix* would seem perfectly compatible.

Although O'Hara takes more control in visual and acoustic arrangements in this particular poem, his objective is similar to Cage's *Williams Mix*, and that is to overturn reader's assumption of city life and defamiliarize normal perceptions. The lunch walk



through the streets are narrated through a cinematic first- person point -of -view, offering readers a full shot of the street scene, and then focusing on medium close-up shots of the people and things that O’Hara encounters through his walk. At first glance, it seems that O’Hara’s first-person point-of-view suggests a heroic self that manipulates what he sees and hears, opposite to Cage’s notion of decentering the self from the creating process. The poet embraces the chaos of street noises but at the same time tries to make sense of them. On the other hand, Cage’s composition is not based on personal choices but is produced by an external system as in chance methods. More space is left for the audience and the performer to interpret and experience the noise. While “A Step Away From Them” does not necessarily show the influence of Cage’s chance methods, O’Hara’s typewriter-influenced poems (which I will elaborate on in Chapter Three) display unpredictable outcomes brought by a medium-centric writing approach.

The poet’s close-up description of each encounter focuses on not just mundane sounds but reorienting them in a position that would not normally be associated with. In fact, the background story to the Puerto Ricans that are mentioned in “A Step Away From Them” contrasts much with the cheerful tone of the poem. O’Hara and Kenneth Koch were heckled by the immigrants on the streets while they were walking up Sixth Avenue to lunch (Gooch 289). Koch was angered by the remarks but O’Hara replied, “Listen. It means they think we’re attractive” (Gooch 289). From the above anecdote, the Puerto Ricans in “A Step Away From Them” originally produced ear-piercing heckling noises, but they were not “heard” in the poem; instead, O’Hara write that they are “beautiful and warm” (*Collected* 257). O’Hara’s response to national and sexual tensions is relaxed and almost humorously dismissive. The poet is able to resolve ear-piercing homophobic slurs by sexualizing the Puerto Ricans and thus undermining their heterosexual-centered ideology, resisting assaults on his sexuality with a flexible



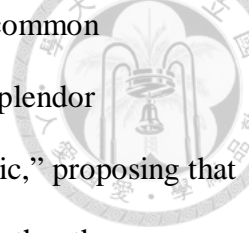
manner. Gooch argues that O'Hara has a tendency to "mythologize daily life" by depicting construction workers and Puerto Ricans as "mysterious and glamorous and tropically sexual" (289). In "A Step Away From Them," O'Hara succeeds in presenting an immediacy of street sounds but also resituating them in a situation that defamiliarize one's perceptions, breaking down the gender binary. It is with this authority and a vision for the opaque, that the poet, like an ambitious "world-city impresario racing against time" could "orchestrate components of a cultural crescendo" while strolling in Manhattan (Gray 21). Allen Ginsberg, reacting to this poem, states:

He [O'Hara] integrated purely personal life into the high art of composition, marking the return of all authority back to the person. His style is actually in line with the tradition that begins with Independence and runs through Thoreau and Whitman, here composed in a metropolitan spaceage architecture environment. He [O'Hara] taught me to really see New York for the first time, by making of the giant style of Midtown his intimate cocktail environment.

It's like having Catallus change your view of the Forum in Rome.

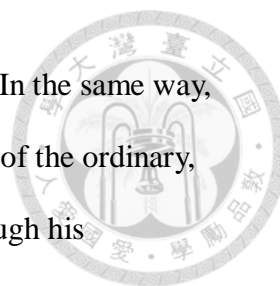
While O'Hara is similar to Whitman for his random cataloguing, he does not want to be read as an all-embracing, non-judgmental persona that contains multitudes. Instead, though everything in "A Step Away From Them" sends a liberal, pluralistic message, the poet wants to emphasize the "return of all authority back to the person," signifying that the all the random juxtapositions are designed to present an opaque rendering and a resituating of one's perceptions of New York.

Critics have explained how O'Hara's random cataloguing operates according to his aesthetics. In "A Step Away From Them," O'Hara authoritative role makes the random referents seem more deliberately designed than his other poems, such as "The Day Lady Died," where he assumes the role of a spectator. Perloff argues that the seemingly



random naming and illogical parallels are designed to defamiliarize common perceptions and to create a sense of presence of the world's chaotic splendor ("Aesthetics" 784). She illustrates her argument with O'Hara's "Music," proposing that all the displaced referents in the poem "Music" are actually devised rather than catalogued randomly ("Aesthetics" 782). Like the same effect that *Williams Mix* creates among listeners, Perloff argues that the aim of "Music" is quite simply to "defamiliarize a scene all too familiar to any New Yorker, indeed to any city dweller" ("Aesthetics" 784). Just as Cage aims to awaken new perceptions among listeners, Perloff claims that O'Hara adapts the techniques of various mediums, such as film and action painting, to create an ever-shifting poetic structure and to defamiliarize general perceptions ("Aesthetics" 783). She states that several lines reflect movie-like techniques such as cuts and dissolves, and that, like action painting, the poem captures the present moment and the on-going process of the world ("Aesthetics" 783). Perloff refutes how former critics understand O'Hara's poetry as petty catalogues of names and objects ("Aesthetics" 781).

While many past critics have compared O'Hara to his coterie of artist friends such as abstract expressionist painters and their action paintings, Marjorie Perloff states that "O'Hara's aesthetic is closer to the conceptualism of the John Cage-Merce Cunningham-Jasper Johns-Robert Rauschenberg circle of the fifties and sixties" than to the "openly emotive and expressive gestures of Action Painting or Black Mountain or Beat aesthetic" (*Poet* xxiii). Indeed, both the artist and the composer discarded the traditional necessity to stick sounds with sounds and words with words to make a continuity, but feeling the opposite, got "rid of the glue" so that sounds and words would be themselves (Cage, *Silence* 71). Through the orchestration of different urban noises and an indifference to stereotypical perceptions, O'Hara creates an opaque world



where binaries are taken down and each entity has space for growth. In the same way, Cage's collages of noises and sounds highlights his respect for those of the ordinary, and that they would no longer be erased by traditional notations through his innovations.

Gossips and Rachmaninoff's Birthday Poems

O'Hara's obsession with the Russian composer Rachmaninoff is shown through his seven elegy birthday poems. What is interesting is that as an avant-garde poet influenced by contemporary music such as John Cage's chance elements, O'Hara's passion for the late Romantic Rachmaninoff baffles readers and critics. Brad Gooch, biographer of O'Hara, wrote that the poet's father's favorite composer was Rachmaninoff, and that he played music at home, eventually influencing his son to pursue a career in music (37).

Gooch states that in O'Hara's Harvard years, there had been rumors that the poet once played for Rachmaninoff in the New England Conservatory and that the composer had pointed out that his hands were too small to make ultimate success (130). The poet made use of this story in one of his Rachmaninoff's birthday poems:

Good
fortune, you would have been
my teacher and I your only pupil
.....
Only my eyes would be blue as I played
and you rapped my knuckles,
dearest father of all the Russias,
placing my fingers
tenderly upon your cold, tired eyes (*Collected* 189)

O'Hara's affection for the composer is seen in the same poem:

Blue windows, blue rooftops
and the blue light of the rain,
these contiguous phrases of Rachmaninoff
pouring into my enormous ears
and the tears falling into my blindness

for without him I do not play,
especially in the afternoon
on the day of his birthday. (*Collected* 189)

The poet's extreme love for Rachmaninoff's music can be seen in his tolerance of listening to the music on the radio, a mediated audio channel. Scholars such as Adorno despises those who listen distractedly to classical music on the radio because he believes that the authenticity of the music can only be heard in the concert hall (Goodman 42). Goodman notes that for Adorno, the "distracted listener of radio music was condemned to hear only fragments and to appreciate only 'isolated charms' rather than the whole structure of a piece" (43). Adorno is right in the sense that for many people, radio music is listened to while they are doing something else, resulting in an inattentive participation. In addition, the sound quality of classical music heard in the concert hall is in much higher quality than the radio. However, O'Hara's embrace of music in a distracted venue shows that he acknowledges noise is ubiquitous and more real, and even in a concert hall there are sounds, as heard in Cage's *3'11"*. Even though O'Hara might be labeled by Adorno as an artist that lacks seriousness and responsibility, the poet's distracted writing manners allows him to reflect reality, where experience in the modern world is deconcentrated. O'Hara's poems may seem hard to grasp because

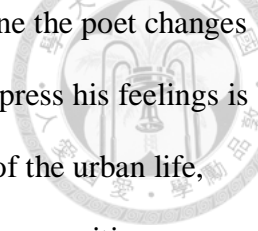


so many events, talking, and reflections are scattered all over the page, but the poet makes an effort to transform these unrelated parts into an aesthetic presentation.

In "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday #158," O'Hara insists on listening to Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3 on the radio while writing the poem or otherwise he won't know what he is feeling (*Collected* 418). Yet apart from seeking inspiration from the music itself, O'Hara describes the listener's experience of listening to music accompanied by radio noise, "transforming real life into text life" (Smith 163). The poet is lost at words even though he might have listened to the music countless times on the radio before writing down the experience, and presumably he may have heard it at a concert and even attempted to play parts of the piece. Thus, the poet's hurry to finish his poem is not just to take down the beauty and magnificence of the piano concerto melody but more to capture and reflect on the brief moment of having an ephemeral mediated encounter with the piece of music that is being played on the radio:

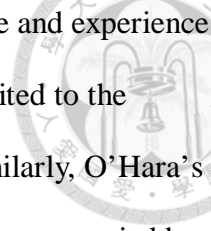
I better hurry up and finish this
before your 3rd goes off the radio
or I won't know what I'm feeling
tonight
tonight
anytime (O'Hara, *Collected* 418)

O'Hara recreates the momentary fascination that he feels from listening to the piece of music by slowing down the rhythm of the poem to a sudden halt of "tonight / tonight / anytime," inducing readers to hold their breath just as the poet "stopped breathing" when he heard Billie Holiday whisper "a song along the keyboard" in "The Day Lady Died" (*Lunch* 21). The poet initially expresses his desire to grasp hold of the momentary experience for just "tonight," emphasizing his urgent need to know what he is feeling as



he repeats “tonight” again in the second line. However, in the third line the poet changes his idea and decides that not just for “tonight,” but his ambition to express his feelings is through capturing the fleeting moments of “anytime” in life. Noises of the urban life, and in this case, radio noises that distract the poet when concentrating on writing, become inspiration and the subject matter of the poem. In addition, the poet’s change of mind from tonight to anytime also signifies that his thought is filled with noises. The three line breaks for “tonight / tonight / anytime” show that the poet is at first certain but then pauses shortly after the second “tonight”, where his thought is intervened and drawn to the power of noises from the radio music (*Collected* 418). Subsequently, noisy thoughts of a greater need for immediate description of every chance meeting appears, resulting in the final “anytime”. O’Hara’s noise of thought is caused by noises from his surroundings, but at the same time, this noise of thought is there in the beginning to usher in the external noises.

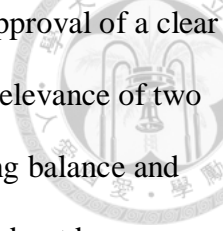
Josh Robinson observes that the poet's particular sensation is "best conveyed by an analogy to the desire to be kissed" (155) as the poet implores "you" to "kiss me again / I'm still breathing" (O'Hara, *Collected* 418). Though the experience of hearing is compared to a want for physical contact, the poet’s feelings are not muted. Instead, the sounds of kissing and breathing, both emanating from the body, Rachmaninoff’s music, and the poet’s confiding voice, are all synchronized into one. In addition, through comparing his sensation to sounds from the body, the poet reminds us that no matter how abstract music is presented, everything underneath it reveals a living being organically connected to the world. This may be why Robinson argues that the experience of artwork is “necessary” for the poet to respond to “a burning imperative felt in the body” (156). The bodily noises are related to Cage’s view that the spontaneity of physiological actions from the performer is more important than the mechanical



accuracy proposed by traditional Western music ideology. To produce and experience sounds physiologically is closer to the real, where sounds are not limited to the symbolic musical notations, but to life and the process of nature. Similarly, O'Hara's sensual reaction is not by chance, but demonstrates that all music is accompanied by noises of the body; namely, the sounds of everyday life.

In addition, O'Hara's play on words "I think / that / the Tratar (no, that would be too funny) / the Tartar hordes" suggest that however skilled the pianist may be, playing a few wrong notes is unavoidable and should not be criticized too much (*Collected* 418). Mistakes made by writers and pianists also imply that they are human beings instead of machines, and this is more related to Cage and O'Hara's aim for spontaneous presentation. What's more, O'Hara seems to ridicule the idea of writing poetry which conforms to a strict form to produce "elaborately sounded structures" (*Collected* 498) by still spelling "Tatar" hordes incorrectly. O'Hara's deliberate misspelling creates the same effects as Glissant's creolized language, toning down the logic that dominates over the discourse of self and other. In many aspects, the poetic word is "a creolized word" because it is "a complex juncture of oral and written language" (Bermann 5). O'Hara's conversational tongue twister display the oral aspect of language, "attuning the written to the oral and the oral to the written" (Glissant, *Poetics of the Diverse* 119). The avant-garde style of O'Hara's poetry resists the standardized and traditional, but explores unforeseen borders and attempts to create a "diverse totality" (*Poetics of the Diverse* Glissant 120).

Apart from deliberate misspelling, deranged syntax, O'Hara often randomly juxtaposes disparate objects that seem to lack connection with one another. Sometimes readers of O'Hara may be befuddled by the irrelevant catalogues, but I believe it is not the poet's intention to have his readers scrutinize for any hidden logic that explains the

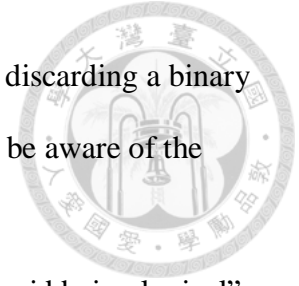


randomness. Instead, I argue that O'Hara's catalogues suggest a disapproval of a clear distinction between self and other, and of being so certain about the relevance of two categories. The respect for each entity's opacity is more likely to bring balance and reconciliation into a diverse world, avoiding the destruction brought about by a transparent, rational discourse. In "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday (Quick! a last poem before I go)," O'Hara presents a surrealist image of things transforming into other things:

Onset, Massachusetts. Is it the fig-newton
playing the horn? Thundering windows
of hell, will your tubes ever break
into powder? Oh my palace of oranges,
junk shop, staples, umber, basalt; (*Collected* 159)

The fig-newton, a pastry filled with fig paste, is becoming a musician playing the horn. The sounds that come from the tube are so thunderous that the tubes become windows that might break into powder. Sardoff notes that every object here "transmutes" and that nothing can be "held on to or stabilized," including the speaker himself (160). What is interesting is that the poet's descriptions of his encounter with Rachmaninoff's music focus not on the mundane but reorienting them in an irregular position. Marjorie Perloff believes that the referents mentioned are actually designed instead of randomly cataloguing, and that the poet's objective in poetry is "to defamiliarize one's automatic perception of objects" ("Aesthetics" 784). In *Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute*, Anna Balakian states that surrealist artists achieved "intensified life experience" through rendering matter dynamic and thereby reaching the absolute through matter, implying that the absolute does not present itself by the orderly normalcy of viewing objects, but through disassociating the object and finding new relationships and new functions

(174). O'Hara's object-oriented technique echoes Glissant's view of discarding a binary distinction between self and other, and by doing so allows readers to be aware of the world's chaotic splendor.



In his mock manifesto "Personism," O'Hara argues it is best to "avoid being logical" when receiving criticism from readers, reminding himself that writing is like falling in love and "evoking overtones of love without destroying love's life-giving vulgarity" (498-99). In representing Rachmaninoff's self-criticism over the success and failure of his works and his bout of depression after the poorly received *Symphony No. 1 in D Minor*, the poet makes a list of words related to Rachmaninoff's feelings:

how do you like hatred
cruelty
sadism
self-interest
selfishness
self-pollution
self (*Collected* 418)

It is interesting to note that the poet uses alliteration with the repetition of the letter S throughout the sequence of words, and that each word starts with a stressed syllable, creating a menacing hissing sound. These sounds not only portray the stress that are imposed on the composer from critics and audience but also suggest noises of the self that disturb the composer. In this sense, the noises from poetry embody the conundrum that perplex an artist's mind. Yet in the following lines, it is also through sounds in poetry that O'Hara encourages the composer to make peace with himself:

perhaps you
mistake it for health



as I once did
but you get stuck in a habit
of thinking about things
and realize they are all you
that's amusing, hein?
so think (*Collected* 419)

In contrast to the previous lecturing towards Rachmaninoff's bitter mindset, the tone of the last part of the poem becomes more casual and conversational. With the French filler word "hein," meaning "right" or "isn't it," O'Hara counterbalances the aforementioned weighty alliterations with a rising intonation from the nasal sound that "hein" produces. The love / hate relationship between the composer and his music is dissolved as O'Hara accommodates a space of opacity for both self and other to live in harmony.

In "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday (I am so glad that Larry Rivers made a)," O'Hara again seems to be directing his attention towards the distressed Russian composer, discussing the purpose and process of artistic creation. In a light-hearted and chatty tone, O'Hara starts by noisily gossiping about himself:

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 shep-
herd and its influence—for presence is

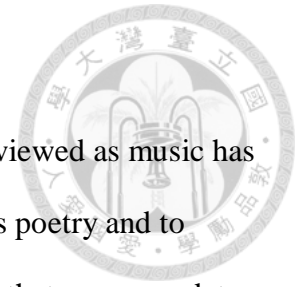
better than absence, if you love excess (*Collected* 190)

While gossiping is usually talking about other people behind their backs, the poet becomes both subject and object of gossip, which is also a way of self-fashioning. In addition, the “eroticized mode” of glorifying himself reveals a queer camp taste (Bennett 156). It seems that apart from conversing with Rachmaninoff, the poet makes his readers “insiders” of his secret by confiding in them. Even though there is no evident sound, the poet uses “hears” instead of “learns” to inform that his sexual organ is seen by young sculptors, emphasizing the excited, buzzing noises that come from gossip between the young artists. Moreover, the s-sounds that words “Picasso,” “penis,” “influence,” “presence,” “absence” and “excess” materialize these whispering noises of sculptors and visitors to the art gallery. The gossipy noises of others make up O’Hara’s “aesthetic self making” (Bennett 156), corresponding to the last part of the poem where the poet claims that “I am what people make of me—if they / can and when they will. My difficulty is / readily played—like a rhapsody, or a fresh / house” (*Collected* 190). The poet gives agency for others to make him into a musical store and a new house. Again, the poet’s perspective on what comes into his creating process is opaque and has no definite boundary as to what is excluded or included. Rosenbaum argues that the poet works toward “a collaboration that ideally includes the readers” (72), but at the same time, the poet often takes up the initiative of gossiping about himself. This may be the reason that the “music” that surrounds his typewriter paper is described as muddy, ambiguous, and like a disease; yet, the music is also “soft as one’s character,” “melancholy as one’s attractiveness” (O’Hara *Collected* 190). With these opaque characteristics, the poet is trying to make the composer understand that the creation and the creating process is a “relation” between both artist and readers/listeners, accommodating paradoxes that might seem chaotic but also attractive, but doing so



leads to “free dialogue and exchange” (Bermann 6).

In short, John Cage’s new understanding that noises should be viewed as music has encouraged O’Hara to also see urban noises as a subject matter in his poetry and to regard the pervasive noise as a revelation of the real. With a mindset that accommodates all sounds in life, O’Hara’s writing about hearing Rachmaninoff’s music on the radio is not merely to be inspired by classical music, but to grasp the immediate feeling of hearing music on a noisy medium. O’Hara also engages with the noises of speech-sounds and gossip in his other Rachmaninoff Birthday poems to show that the process of composition is built on the basis of a noise of thought that is distracted by and attracted to noise. O’Hara’s noise of thought means that he strives for an opaque rendering of what he sees and hears, keeping the object and subject matter in equal status by acknowledging noise’s presence at both ends.





Chapter Two

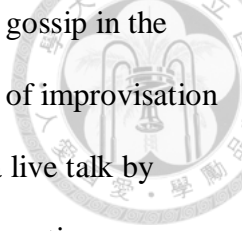
Noise at the Writing Site

To many, noise is unwanted because it is disturbing and meaningless: the honking of cars and the annoying electric drills that worsen the living quality of city dwellers, the uncontrollable signals that interrupt information from reaching its destination, the harmful and physiologically arousing sounds that interfere a performance, the sounds that are unable to become codes in music, and also the movements that disrupt the status quo. In contrast to music, noise is uncontrolled, unpitched, and indeterminate; it is repressed and excluded from the symbolic order (music notation). Yet, humans do not seem to realize that noise is everywhere, as most of the time, their minds filter out distractions so as to focus on the sounds they want to hear. Thus, noise may seem trivial, but its omnipresence actually influence people's lives immensely. Some people find a sense of security in an environment by hearing human activity, showing panic when they are suddenly to put up with the silence in a rural area. In addition, noise is not altogether meaningless: the crying of a newborn baby may seem bothersome, but it is actually calling for attention, for mutual recognition (Keizer 49) and the noises from machinery might suggest that it is in need of repair and is working inefficiently. If noise is perceived in a political sense, it is a subversive power that poses a threat to the established order set up by music. In other words, noises are "*prophetic* because they create new orders, unstable and changing" (Attali 19). For artists ranging from the Baudelairean flaneur to Whitman and to O'Hara, being sensitive to everything around them, from something heard on the telephone to the color of a construction worker's helmet, is often their main concern, including the minutest and noisiest details. O'Hara states that "the slightest loss of attention leads to death," implying that it is the poet's

duty to embrace the overabundance of sounds and make sense out of them through his writing.

Noises inspire Frank O'Hara during his writing process. Though they may come in the most trivial and mundane form, such as the chattering at a party, classical music from a radio, and the sudden interruption of a telephone call, the poet is highly receptive of them in his creative writing. While some writers and poets seek for creativity in quiet surroundings, living alone and apart from the crowd like a hermit, others like O'Hara lived as a poet in the heart of noise. The poet's long-time flatmate, Joe LeSueur, recalls that the poet often spent his nights going to parties, movies, the New York City Ballet, drinking at the San Remo and the Cedar Street Tavern, sitting around with friends at home, or simply chatting on the phone (xv). The noises from the city, at first glance a mere fragmented experience, are transformed into spontaneous and vibrant presentations as seen in *Lunch Poems*. In "Meditations in an Emergency," the poet declares that he "can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally *regret* life," suggesting that his meditations on poetry actually arise from the immediate experiences of city life (*Collected* 197). I would like to separate this chapter into two parts: the first talks about how noises from the environment, such as fragmented phrases of talk from other people, become an agent, and that these "vessels and environments" can make sense of human beings' existence and sustain human's lives (Peters 2); the second part is focused on how noises from technological media such as the radio, the telephone, and the typewriter become a disruptive force that allow the real to resurface, shaping the writing process with its interference.

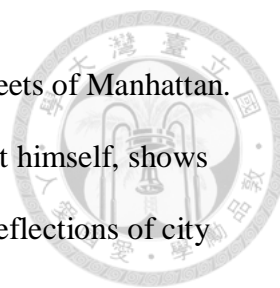
Regarding noises of talk, Hazel Smith provides a comprehensive discussion of oral speech's functions and display in O'Hara's poetry. She argues that O'Hara's poems



create unique “talkscapes,” and that performativity, conversation and gossip in the poetry are linked with the poet’s writing process through the concept of improvisation (5). Smith observes that O’Hara’s poems emanates the ambience of a live talk by mimicking the mannerisms of speech: colloquialisms, interjections, questions, exclamations and redundancies (143). According to Smith, the poet sometimes engages in self-talk, which is a combination of talking and thinking, revealing the poet’s psychological processes and internal functioning (144). In addition, gossip may seem inconsequential, but it can become a “subversive strategy for challenging the binary of trivial and serious” (Smith 150). I would like to further Smith’s argument by asking why the poet adopts this informal and conversational writing mode instead of the traditional formal writing mode. A probable answer is that oral speech, as a kind of sound, will disappear with the passing of time; its irreversibility and transience is what the city poet is keen on capturing. To keep up with the evanescence of sound, the poet forces himself to be attentive, stating that his eyes are like the sky that changes “all the time; they are indiscriminate but fleeting, entirely specific and disloyal, so that no one trusts me. I am always looking away.” (*Collected* 197). O’Hara goes on to add that his attention is not on pastoral life such as the clouds, but it is more important for him to “affirm the least sincere,” suggesting something like sounds that often seem trivial and that quickly dissolves in time. It is with the duty to capture the transitory of sounds that O’Hara’s poems could “transmit an embodied presence in language” (Smith 136).

Writing as a Medium and Noise

O’Hara often writes poetry in the midst of chaos, of being distracted by noises. For instance, *Lunch Poems* is a book of poetry in which the poet composed some poems during his lunch break, while working at the Museum of Modern Art. Many of the “I do this, I do that” poems in *Lunch Poems* show a self-reporting, chatty persona disclosing

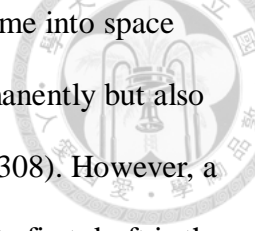


his lunch routine: what he sees and hears when walking down the streets of Manhattan. The blurb on the back cover of the book of poetry, written by the poet himself, shows the urgency of the poet to jot down his immediate observations and reflections of city life:

Often this poet, strolling through the noisy splintered glare of a Manhattan noon, has paused at a sample Olivetti to type up thirty or forty lines of ruminations, or pondering more deeply has withdrawn to a darkened ware- or firehouse to limn his computed misunderstandings of the eternal questions of life, coexistence, and depth, while never forgetting to eat lunch, his favorite meal. (*Lunch* O’Hara)

Generally, visual representation on written text is easier to trace than the audio because people don’t instinctively think what an object sounds like; at the same time, what one hears is often accompanied by its visual stimulus (Peters 302). However, as the poet tries to capture the immediacy of urban experience, he not only draws inspiration from the visual but also the audio. It is untrue to say that the poet’s writing process is not affected by the noises and sounds around him.

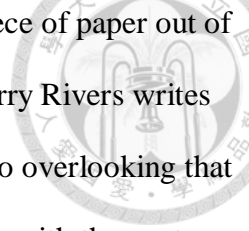
Knowing that the poet’s ambition is to present a spontaneous flow of life and to capture noise, one might wonder: why does O’Hara still write poetry when a telephone might even be more convenient for his purpose of direct communication? To examine this matter, we should first think about how writing as a medium, compared to the telephone, deals with noises and time. In *The Marvelous Clouds*, John Durham Peters presents writing as a medium that “united visual, auditory, and linguistic processing” (303), explaining that it is a primary inscription medium to the nineteenth century innovations of *telegraphy* (writing at a distance), *photography* (light writing), *phonography* (sound writing), *cinematography* (movement writing) (Peters 286). Before time axis manipulation was achieved through the phonograph, writing could already



manipulate time by spatializing its data; in other words, converting time into space (Peters 306). With writing, oral speech could not only be stored permanently but also rearranged and edited, “thus breaking the linear flow of time (Peters 308). However, a telephone conversation cannot be reversed, played slow or sped up; its first draft is the final draft. For O’Hara, although he hastens to record immediate experiences, urging himself to “just go on your nerve” instead of being stuck to the traditional poetic form, his ultimate objective is to manipulate time and its properties: noises and sounds. With the craftsmanship of an artist, O’Hara’s disclosure of his daily events are not reduced to a newspaper report or a Facebook update, but are carefully arranged to make sense of the chaos of the world. The phantasmagoria of the modern world and its colossal amount of shock experience would either overwhelm or make a person numb. The noises of the world may seem an inspiration for the poet, but he needs poetry to transform these experiences into some meaning: “It may be that poetry makes life’s nebulous events tangible to me and restores their detail; or conversely, that poetry brings forth the intangible quality of incidents which are all too concrete and circumstantial.” (500).

Noises of Talk at the Writing Site

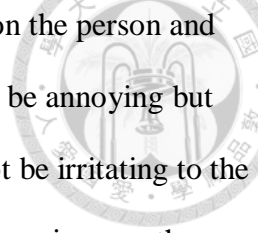
O’Hara’s urgency to record noises from the environment, such as friends talking and street sounds, while he is writing corresponds to his improvisatory writing style. According to Smith, improvisatory processes consist of three groups: referent, sensory and associative improvising (152). Sensory improvisation uses input from the environment and so is “the most context driven” but very difficult to detect (Smith 152). From the information given by O’Hara’s friends, it is clear that he is engaged in sensory improvisation as he often incorporates phrases and words from a talk with a friend. For the poem “Ducal Days,” Jane Freilicher recalls saying “the day was ducal” when she



joined Frank O’Hara in the Cedar Tavern, and that the poet took a piece of paper out of his pocket and started to write the poem (*Collected O’Hara* 526). Larry Rivers writes that the poet had written “Second Avenue” in his plaster garden studio overlooking that avenue (*Collected O’Hara* 527). James Schuler said that when he was with the poet sitting under a paulownia, he described leaves falling like pie-plates, and these words later appeared in the poem “The Hunter” (*Collected O’Hara* 530). As for the poem “Sleeping on the wing,” Schuler writes that one day while he was having breakfast with the poet and Joe LeSueur, their conversation suddenly became an inspiration for the poet, and he dashed off into the next room to finish the poem (*Collected O’Hara* 536). Joe LeSueur, O’Hara’s flatmate for many years and sometime lover, describes that everything that happened around the poet became a part of the creative act in progress:

The radio could be blaring, the phone could be jangling, people could be dropping by, someone could be in the same room with him (*talking to him*); and when we lived on East Ninth Street, in a second-floor apartment so close to the street that it seemed an extension of it, a cacophonous symphony of ugly urban sounds played fortissimo outside our window, punctuated regularly by the sound of the Ninth Street crosstown bus making its stop next to the downstairs doorway—incredibly, these distractions not only failed to impede but seemed to spur the steady stream of words rushing from his teeming brain to his two nimble index fingers that decisively, at full tilt, struck the keys of his trusty, overburdened Royal portable, of which he ran through three over fifteen years I knew him. (82)

From his casual conversational tone, it is evident that O’Hara’s poems embrace the impact of the many conversations that he has in daily life: at parties, pubs and work, on the streets, and through the telephone. The poet even realizes that he “could use the telephone instead of writing the poem,” suggesting that writing actually finds its source



from oral speech (*Collected* 499). Whether talking is noisy depends on the person and the environment: chatting in a library or during a performance would be annoying but casual chitchatting in the pub or with a friend on the streets would not be irritating to the ear. However, compared with the authority of written text and speeches given on the podium, O'Hara's small talks are fleeting and minor, mixed with redundant filler phrases. Yet, these trivial chitchats that fill up one's daily life could reveal a counterculture, especially emphasis on sexual fluidity, that is often overlooked by authorities. I will explain in the following poem how the poet's self-talk, seemingly trivial and noisy, become a disruptive force in challenging mainstream heterosexual values.

In "Poem (Dee Dum, dee dum, dum dum, dee da)," O'Hara shows how the immediate noisy context (JJ is dashing off to work and probably causing chaotic noises before leaving; the radio is turned to full volume because it is playing O'Hara's favorite song) provides a starting point for the purpose of writing the poem:

Dee Dum, dee dum, dum dum, dee da

here it is March 9th 1962

and JJ is shooting off to work

I loll in bed reading *Poets of Russia*

feeling perfectly awful and smoking

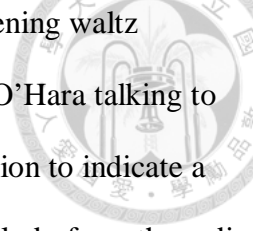
hey wait a minute! I leap out of bed

it's Sam's Barber's birthday and they

are going to play *Souvenirs!* turn it up!

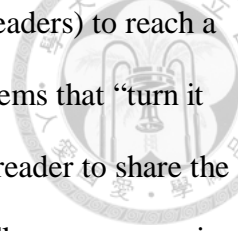
how glad I am I'm going to be late that's

starting the day with rose-colored binoculars! (*Collected* 449)



Joe LeSueur explains that the first line imitates the melody of the opening waltz movement of Samuel Barber's *Souvenirs*, and that "turn it up!" was O'Hara talking to him (267-68). O'Hara's use of onomatopoeia and the use of punctuation to indicate a rhythmic pause explains his urgent desire to write down the exact melody from the radio that made him instantly sentimental. The noisy speech-sounds "dee" and "dum" do not convey any comprehensible meaning, but their direct and natural presentation of the melody allow readers to have a communal experience with the poet and his noisy environment. O'Hara does not just relate what happens chronologically, but rearranges these segments of experience by "humming" before thinking of and hearing the piece of music. Through spatializing time and sound, writing and reading becomes non-linear as one can "move backwards, delete, skim, and reread" (Peters 305). In addition, the poet creates a noisy talk space with self-talk, revealing his changes of mood and thoughts. From misrecognition ("feeling perfectly awful") to self-recognition ("how glad I am"), one sees that the poet's train of thought is noisy itself, and that his moods are prone to the influence of external noises: JJ's frantic chaotic noises make the poet discouraged about work but after hearing *Souvenirs* played on the radio, the poet becomes happy.

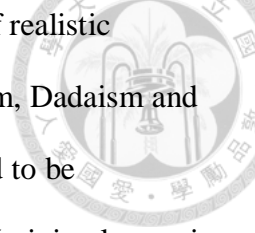
The poet's self-correcting in many of his poems reveals that there is no coherence in the self, as if his condition is determined by noises outside of him. Yet this incoherent self implies that the poet is a mobile agent instead of a static one, and that he is always "becoming" into something else and coping with the uncertainties that reside in him. In addition, the poet invites the reader into his gossip: by revealing personal knowledge of himself (according to LeSueur, JJ was the poet's lover at that time), the reader is transformed into a voyeur. Yet by transforming the reader into a new role as an intimate insider, the poet cunningly places the reader in a "ideological common ground" that expresses solidarity with him; namely, a recognition of same-sex relationships. In this



way, the poet has access to summon the strength of the masses (the readers) to reach a consensus in an unaggressive yet influential way. Upon reading, it seems that “turn it up!” is both an imperative and an invitation to the reader, urging the reader to share the same passion for the cacophonous radio. O’Hara’s gossip and self-talk may seem noisy and trivial, but it can be a “vehicle for social comment, regulation” and a “subversive strategy for challenging the binary of trivial and serious” (Smith 150-51). As O’Hara unabashedly displays his private life through noisy self-talk, he is challenging the strict surveillance imposed by the government, which opposed gay culture, in the 50s Cold War era. Todd Tietchen argues that in the aftermath of the two Wars, some prominent figures of New American Poetry expressed anxiety upon the tightening of information control by the government as technological media progressed (6). However, it seems that O’Hara intends to reverse the anxious situation by boldly revealing details of his life. The poet perceives surveillance as pleasure, viewing it as an “informatics of liberation” that allows him to express freely and disclose himself (Tietchen 6): though the information in his poetry are so trivial, gossipy and boisterous that they may be easily dismissed, the poet still successfully expresses his homosexual identity. As informatics of control, “the technology of listening in on, ordering, transmitting, and recording noise” are weapons of power (Attali 7). O’Hara transforms the disadvantage of being subjected to surveillance and seizes back his autonomy, “smuggling” ideas of minor groups in a rowdy yet imperceptible manner.

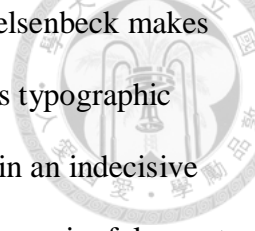
Noise, Technological Media, and Poetry

O’Hara willingly embraces the influences from technological media during his writing process, allowing his structures of thinking to break away from the human mind. By drawing inspiration from technological media, such as the telephone and the radio, O’Hara is suggesting that poetry should not be human-centered, but should find



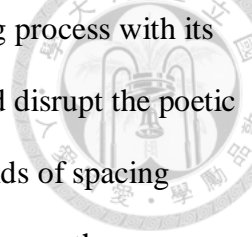
intuition from the non-human. O'Hara's reimagining and rejection of realistic representation of the world finds his predecessor in French Surrealism, Dadaism and Futurism. The Futurists and Dadaists both believed that language had to be reconstructed according to media, seeking to process language with "minimal conscious intervention" (Niebisch 53) so that there could be "communicative interaction on a physiological level" (Niebisch 46). In *Media Parasites in the Early Avant-Garde*, Arndt Niebisch compares the Dada and Futurism to parasites, and that as agents, they constantly irritated and influenced the hegemonic discourse through the use of media technologies (175). Marinetti, founder of the Futurist movement, believed that for poetry to record the real, it should strive for an "intuition into the nonhuman material and technological structures of the world" (Niebisch 49). The Dada were also inspired by the noises produced by media technologies; however, unlike the Futurists who sought to create a language that conveyed information efficiently and that resisted noise, the Dada wanted to reproduce noise through poetry, disturbing the audience's reading or listening process (Niebisch 46).

An ardent lover of motion pictures, which combines the audio with the visual, O'Hara presents sounds of the environment through noisy speech-sounds such as onomatopoeia, which finds its origins in Marinetti. In order to mimic the minimalist and efficient mode of telegraphic and cinematic communication, Marinetti calls for a complete destruction of syntax and elimination of the adjective and adverb (Niebisch 52). Marinetti's use of onomatopoeia is modeled after telegraph messages, intending to compress as much information as possible and to frustrate all social interaction, deeming the human being as the parasite (Niebisch 53). Though O'Hara is definitely not as extreme as Marinetti, his way of onomatopoeia also enables "the reproduction of noncoded phenomena such as noise" and "condenses a multitude of sensory effects in

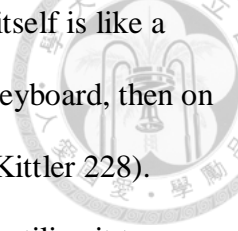


out the real by paralyzing the symbolic with parasites. Dada poet Huelsenbeck makes the reading experience difficult by implementing disturbances such as typographic errors and nonsense words. The confusion of the text puts the reader in an indecisive situation because he or she cannot distinguish whether an element is meaningful or not. Niebisch argues that as the parasite enters into Dada poetry, “noise and message can no longer be differentiated from one another” (70). When it comes to discussing noise from the approach of (new) media theory, noise is considered to be an interruption to the message between the sender and the receiver. When listening to the radio, unwanted random electrical signals sometimes drown out the desired radio signal. With the invention of the phonograph and the radio, people realize that other than hearing the desired music, they also hear noises. Thus, for the human mind to concentrate on the intended music, they filter out the noises during listening. In “Ode to Michael Goldberg (’s Birth and Other Births),” the poet intentionally leaves out his typing error “a certain kneeness” when it was supposed to be “keenness” (Allen), suggesting that he improvises in a typewriter-influenced environment. The typing error also indicates that the parasite is ubiquitous, and that with its intervention, readers’ understanding of the work needs to readjust to the annoyance of the real. “A third exists before the second. A third exists before the other.... There is always a mediate, a middle, an intermediary” (Serres 63). It is interesting to note that writing is a cultural technique that filters out signals from noises (Siegert 30), but O’Hara makes communication futile by intentionally leaving the third in his poetry.

Also influenced by the exclusive typesetting and writing style of the typewriter (as opposed to the pen), O’Hara makes the reading process challenging by filling it with typewriter-induced noises in “Biotherm (For Bill Berkson).” These noises are similar to Cage’s invitation of unpredictable outcomes from chance methods. In O’Hara’s case,



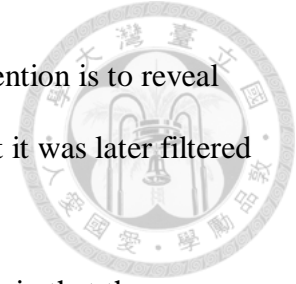
the typewriter replaces Cage's *I-Ching*, influencing the poet's writing process with its self-referential materiality and allowing random noises to surface and disrupt the poetic message. With the typewriter, the poet experiments with different kinds of spacing (different from writing on a piece of blank paper with a pen, the spaces on the typewriter become "grids" that are measurable and countable) and has the leisure to type an excessive amount of repeated words with ease. The poet juxtaposes interjections: "oops! and no nail polish, yah / yak, yak, Lieut" (*Collected* 438), colloquial and even childish talk: "I'm so so so so so so so so so so happy / so happy I make you happy / like in the s- s- s- s- soap opera wow" (*Collected* 439), different textual genres such as a menu in French, capitalized words: "NEVERTHELESS (thank you, Aristotle)," "ziggurats ZIG I to IV" (*Collected* 437), "a child means BONG" (*Collected* 439), and scatters punctuation marks all over the page: "perhaps at the end of a very stange game / you won (?)(?) / and that is important (yeah) to win (yeah)" (*Collected* 437). These diverse "writings" are produced being influenced by the medium of the typewriter, and so become "solely the materiality of its medium" (Kittler 208). The self-referentiality of the poet's language signify that humans have turned from "the agency of writing to become an inscription surface" (Kittler 210), and that the typewriter is "a precondition of production that contribute to our thinking prior to any conscious reaction" (Kittler 214). "The excessive media link of optics and acoustics, spellings and acronyms, between the letters, numbers, and symbols of a standardized keyboard makes humans (and women) as equal as equal signs" (Kittler 231). Indeed, O'Hara's hand that clatters on the typewriter is nothing like the "phallogentrism of classical pens" but more like playing the piano, producing mechanized and automatic writing (Kittler 206). Though the font size of every word is the same and there are no pictures, some parts of the poem are indented while others are not, and blank spaces are



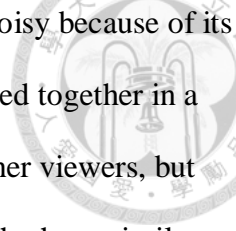
scattered unevenly through the pages, suggesting that the typewriter itself is like a printing press: “As a doubled spatialization of writing—first on the keyboard, then on the white paper—it imparts to texts an optimal optical appearance” (Kittler 228). Onomatopoeia also appears in this poem, but unlike the Futurist who utilize it to communicate in a minimalist manner that filters out noises, O’Hara allows the typewriter to take control of his creative process, creating a language that no longer processed meaning: “no flesh to taste no flash to tusk / no flood to flee no fled to ddown flom the iceth loot,” “sen sen bene bene bullshit” (*Collected* 438). Similar to the Dadaists, the “distortion, interruption, and randomization of communicative patterns foreground the materiality of communication” (Niebisch 36), and that the parasite (noises) found in the poem are a result of the media effect.

Akin to the influence of the typewriter, O’Hara allows noisy feedback from telephone calls to interrupt and provide inspiration in the midst of the creating process. In the documentary *U.S.A. Poetry: Frank O’Hara and Ed Sanders*, O’Hara is seen typing and talking with filmmaker Alfred Leslie when the telephone rings. He talks for a while and all of a sudden types down what the other person said in the conversation, “A flashing bolt. Is that art? Or, what is it? I just laid it onto the paper!” (O’Hara *U.S.A.*). Next, the poet reflects on this peculiar situation of simultaneously talking on the phone, typing, and being filmed for education TV, and calls it a “performance” (O’Hara *U.S.A.*). The telephone call in the middle of O’Hara’s creative process seems like an interruption, but the poet embraces this parasitic noise, initially understanding that disturbance can never be avoided. With the inclusion of noise, the ultimate message becomes meaningless and undecipherable. Yet O’Hara considered it a “performance” instead of some serious metaphysical thinking, demonstrating that noise is ubiquitous and comes before the symbolic (Siegert 21). What may be a hindrance to all messages is

“reversed and added to the information” (Siegert 32). The poet’s intention is to reveal that chaos and meaninglessness were there in the beginning, and that it was later filtered out and made sense by cultural techniques such as writing.



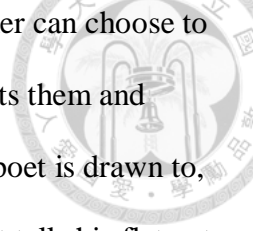
O’Hara’s telephone discussion on poems with friends are noises in that they, as feedback, try to interrupt and express ways to alter the poem. However, O’Hara’s embrace of these feedback as inspiration suggests the poet’s democratic attitude in allowing the environment to influence his decision-making, which foresees the democratizing of the Internet and digital media (Tietchen 108). In “Personism: A Manifesto,” the poet claims that he could use the telephone instead of writing the poem (499), implying that his message is open to the influence of the immediate feedback coming from the other person and that as long as the other person has his phone number, he will have easy access to speak to the poet. I would like to emphasize that O’Hara’s high acceptance of telephone conversations that talk about his poetry are similar with how present day YouTube creators or live streamers gain new ideas. For each Facebook post, each YouTube vlog, and each live streaming video, there is always a comment section for fans and followers to respond to the content. Though trivial, the content of these media messages are not to be kept secret like a diary, but the creators anticipate feedback or likes from the audience. The comment section shows all kinds of feedback: viewers respond with supportive or disapproving opinions, or they might pose a question or a request. Though there might be Internet trolls that behave unreasonably, the comment section provides a democratic platform that receives feedback from all kinds of people. Similarly, O’Hara receives feedback from his coterie of associated avant-garde poets, circulating his works amongst them while at the same time finding inspiration from connecting with them on the phone or in person. Tietchen proposes that O’Hara’s poetry circle anticipates the online networks in the digital age of computation



(109). The comment section on the Internet is generally considered noisy because of its unpredictability: cacophonous criticism and die-hard support are mixed together in a whirl. The comments are sometimes agonizing for the creator and other viewers, but many times people find a sense of belonging when there are others who have similar opinions or when the live-streamers and vloggers address and interact with them. The democratic nature of these Internet platforms is manifested through its accommodation of all kinds of noises, becoming a socially inclusive environment that demonstrates diversity.

When the poet listens to radio music while writing at the same time, he is situated in a cacophonous environment filled with noises because his work is influenced by distractions. However, the poet does not see the noise as background sounds, but often in his poems make them the main topic for discussion. The poet's mood in the present moment is often influenced by what piece of music the radio selects. In "Radio," the poet complains that the radio plays "dreary music / on Saturday afternoon, when tired / mortally tired I long for a little / reminder of immortal energy" (*Collected* 234).

O'Hara's relationship with the radio demonstrates how the media, though having a "permanent, omnipresent contact with the audience," does not wait for or accept any feedback from its listeners (Niebisch 143). LeSueur comments that O'Hara was weary of classical music stations constantly playing overly familiar works of Brahms, Schumann, Mozart, and Beethoven (81). After O'Hara's death and with the advent of CDs and music players, LeSueur believes that the poet would have enjoyed listening to music of his own choice and also exploring music that he has not heard of before (263). It is interesting to note that although O'Hara, as a listener, is not able to interfere in the feedback loop of the radio because he is stuck in "a world of unspoken communication between writer-speaker and the listener" (McLuhan 299), the poet "talks back" by



addressing the radio in many of his poems. Though O'Hara the listener can choose to turn off the radio and shut off the noises that distract him, he confronts them and absorbs them into writing material. Yet there are moments when the poet is drawn to, even relying on the radio: during the writing of "Personism," the poet tells his flatmate not to turn off the radio because it is going to play Rachmaninoff's Third next (LeSueur xxiv), suggesting that the poet has been expecting the piece of music to come up and that he intends write along with his favorite music. In "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday #158," the amount of time that the poet has to write a poem hinges on the length of the radio music: "I better hurry up and finish this / before your 3rd goes off the radio / or I won't know what I'm feeling" (*Collected* 418). From the poet's paradoxical feelings toward the radio (he looks forward to the upcoming music but is also afraid that it might be dreary), it seems that the radio has the capability of forcing the listener to wait actively in a "standby mode" (Niebisch 14). The radio, as a hot media, "affects most people intimately, person-to-person," and that it has the "power to turn the psyche and society into a single echo chamber" (McLuhan 229). The radio public is thus formed, and O'Hara is one of the millions of people too. Thus, when the poet attempts to compose with the radio on, it might not just be the music of Rachmaninoff that is inspiring him; on the other hand, knowing that countless anonymous others are having a private experience with the radio at the same time allows the poet to stay connected with the public through this medium. The radio has become an addictive entertainment that has altered people's way of receiving information. For most people who need distractions to fill up their time when alone or to kill time, they are reliant on these background noises yet do not pay much attention to them. However, these noises do not distract O'Hara but are conscientiously dealt with and appreciated if the noises suit his taste.

In conclusion, it is necessary that when discussing technology's impact on literature, one shouldn't just focus on the metaphorical meaning of a technological medium since it would always be displaced by the item that it is compared with. The self-referential aspect that the radio, the telephone, and the typewriter reveal is what I think significant because in the past, approaches to technology have been human-centered, but it's high time to view technological medium as a subjectivity itself. Noise is often repressed and excluded from man-invented language (the symbolic); however, O'Hara has made significant progress in demonstrating the materiality of language, reflecting noises through writing.





Chapter Three

Urban Noises of *Lunch Poems*

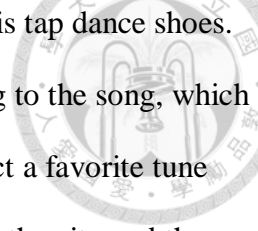
Noises are prevalent in the urban space just as they are in O'Hara's poetry. O'Hara has been described as "a poet in the heart of noise" because he constantly wrote poems in the midst of interacting with the city, such as dashing off numerous poems during his lunch break. The poet could be seen strolling along the pavement with cars whizzing by, sometimes exchanging a few words with cab drivers (*Lunch 31*), getting asked for a nickel by a lady (*Lunch 27*), and even hearing the ringing of telephone bells (*Lunch 36*). Like the all-embracing Whitman, O'Hara catalogues street scenes and experience as trivial as going to the bank, and also as memorable as hearing Billie Holiday singing in the last few years of her life. While there has been much examination of the visual aspect in his poetry, not much has been done on O'Hara's noise poetics. The 50s and 60s of New York City, a modernized and cultural center of the world, was no stranger to a robust lifestyle that seemed to be constantly innovating, adopting, and shifting. O'Hara, an attentive observer, wrote down many of his observations and reflections of the city life in *Lunch Poems*. The immediacy, spontaneity and unconventional poetic form imply that he is in a hurry to keep up with the richness of the spatiality and temporality of New York is especially presented in his "I do this, I do that" poems from *Lunch Poems*. In discussing the noises of urban space, it might be better if noise is defined as a sound that is irregular, complex and improvised instead of the subjective notion of an unwanted sound (Kreutzfeldt 16). Thus, if carefully investigated, the everyday life in O'Hara's urban representation of New York should demonstrate a vibrant noise culture. In this chapter, I would like to explore how urban noises of the body, of talk, and of the streets are transformed into an aesthetic experience in O'Hara's

poems. I am also interested in the effect that O'Hara's noises have on one's perception of the city. Lastly, I will trace the influence of O'Hara's noise in *Lunch Poems 2*, a book of poetry written by Paul Legault dedicated to the deceased poet fifty years later.

Noises of Urban Walking and "Steps"

Noise is inseparable from space: the cries of a shoe shiner, the singing of a street performer, the flapping of pigeons at a city square, the mechanic sounds of rushing cars all exert its range of influence in a certain zone. Noises mark their territories, influencing the movements and moods of human beings who are in the zone. With an overabundant whirl of noises popping up here and now as one walks through the city, it is challenging to orchestrate these acoustic inputs into an aesthetic experience.

However, the spontaneous noises of walking can be heard through O'Hara's creative rendering of his walk. In "Steps," O'Hara manages to set the tone of his walk in New York City as he thinks of the cheerful melody that Ginger Rogers is dancing to in *Swingtime*: "How funny you are today New York / like Ginger Rogers in *Swingtime*" (*Lunch* 46). When the poet comes outside of his house and walks along the pavement, he does not conform to the mechanized and uniform rhythm of the steps of the urban crowd that hurry quickly to work. On the contrary, the poet's walk has been described by many acquaintances as "confident," "beautiful," "light and sassy" and "with a slight bounce and a slight twist," knowing in mind that others are looking at him and that he does not care (Brainard 20). Thus, O'Hara's walk stands out from the crowd, adding character to the gait of his steps and creating a noise that stands out among the disciplined steps in the crowd. His walk gains its individuality by walking in time to the tempo of the songs in *Swingtime*, representing the noises from a tap dancer's shoes. From the elated tone and the celebration of life in the poem, one can assume that O'Hara is referring to the joyous song "Pick Yourself Up," in which Ginger Rogers and



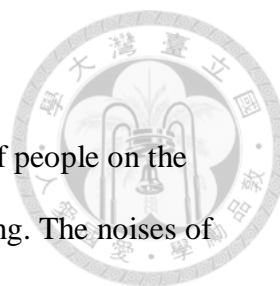
Fred Astaire tap to the rhythm of the polka with her high-heels and his tap dance shoes. In his stroll along the streets of the city, O'Hara is probably humming to the song, which is quite similar to people nowadays who put on headphones and select a favorite tune when going out. The mood of the song affects how O'Hara perceives the city and the rhythm of the song evokes certain physical reactions, such as skipping, dancing and prancing: "here I have just jumped out of a bed full of V-days" (*Lunch* 46).

The melody from *Swingtime* is like a track that O'Hara might have selected on his iPod if he were in the 21st century. By humming to a song in his mind, O'Hara transforms city noises by adding an artistic filter to it and thus creating his personal soundscape. In *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life*, Brandon LaBelle argues that when a pedestrian uses auditory technologies such as the iPod, the movements of the body on the street becomes personalized compared to the regulatory monotony of the street (97). In addition, since urban experience is fragmented and overwhelming for the modern individual, one's choice of music becomes a guide for perceiving and absorbing noises on the streets:

The urban if anything is that condition of excess on so many levels. Personal audio technologies provide a performative shelter for the senses by both filtering out the undifferentiating flood of sound as well as empowering individual agency in controlling what comes in. (LaBelle 97)

Noises in the urban world is transformed into an aesthetic experience that involves amusing surrealist associations:

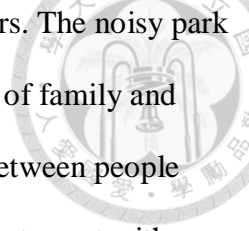
and even the traffic halt so thick is a way
for people to rub up against each other
and when their surgical appliances lock
they stay together



for the rest of the day (what a day) (*Lunch* 46)

The experience of being stuck in a traffic congestion or in a swarm of people on the streets moving in the same pace is sometimes suffocating and irritating. The noises of cars honking and office worker's quick feet clicking on the ground are mundane and depressing. Yet, with the customized touch of a cheerful melody, these noises become united in creating a public community that drags each individual out of their annoyed private thoughts on the way to work. The poet combats the fragmented experience of sudden bursts of industrial noises, in which the crowd has become blasé to, perceiving the jammed cars and people who are locked together as a playful communal event. The "surgical appliances" suggest that the people on the streets have not been "walking" in the right way, and that with a new mode of walking people, such as experimenting with the noises that one makes when one walks like the poet, enjoy the freedom of personalized motions instead of being hollow bodies conditioned by the industrial pace of the city. In O'Hara's perspective, pedestrians should be able to display their creativities publicly, coming out of their hidden private thoughts. For O'Hara, different noises can be made with a slight variation to the walking style: a casual stroll, a brisk walk, an amble, or a limping walk. Despite the uniform walking style of the crowd, the uncanny feeling that people experience when they are in close proximity to a stranger but has no communication disappears even though the pedestrians are locked together by their surgical appliances. O'Hara's embrace of this communal experience corresponds to the two lines that precede it: "all I want is a room up there / and you in it" (*Lunch* 46). The poet's all-encompassing attitude is extended from lover to the masses, sharing an intimate connection with each other but also preserving a touch of personalized body movement.

The third stanza illustrates how urban noise, such as passers-by talking, that



permeate in public spaces provide a shelter for homosexual encounters. The noisy park becomes a place that allows gay men to escape from the surveillance of family and neighbors, for in the crowd, with all sorts of conversation going on between people from different walks of life, gay men are more likely to find their counterpart with backward glances (Chauncey 188). Through asking exclusive yet seemingly ordinary questions such as asking for a match or for the time of the day (Chauncey 188), these often overlooked “noises” of conversation hides the gay identity but also help them find the right person. O’Hara’s depiction of the streets and parks indicate a gay map of New York:

where’s Lana Turner
she’s out eating
and Garbo’s backstage at the Met
everyone’s taking their coat off
so they can show a rib-cage to the rib-watchers
and the park’s full of dancers with their tights and shoes
in little bags
who are often mistaken for worker-outers at the West Side Y
why not
the Pittsburgh Pirates shout because they won
and in a sense we’re all winning
we’re alive (*Lunch* 46)

O’Hara finds delight in visual surfaces, “in the reading and misreading of bodies and types, because of their erotic energy” (Rosenbaum 79). The park becomes a practice space of romantic and sexual intimacies for gay men, transgressing the boundary of the urban site’s functionality. Certain public places in New York thus became the only

privacy for gay men. Noises in the urban area, though sometimes from violent police raids and harassment from gangs of youth, provides anonymity and security for gay men.



Unfriendly noises (such as cat-calling) from passers-by that discriminate against the poet's gay identity are transformed into admiration and attention in the poem. It is interesting to note that O'Hara compares his identity to the likes of Hollywood celebrities like Lana Turner and Greta Garbo. Garbo has refrained from the public eye ever since her retirement to an extent that "Garbo-watching" became an activity for photographers, the media, admirers and curious New Yorkers. Similarly, O'Hara hides his homosexual identity from the police who patrol the streets, finding strategies to negotiate his way around streets. However, instead of feeling threatened by the newspaper reports and frustrated by catcalls coming from the streets, he enjoys being the center of attention and that he would rather "be wanted more than anything else in the world," as he admits in "Homosexuality" (*Collected* 182). For O'Hara, the way he gossips about celebrities is similar to the hostile noises of people whispering and heckling on the streets. Though the tone is different, these noises are all transformed by the poet into proofs that show he is as attractive as the celebrities. With the uplifting melody of the songs from *Swingtime*, O'Hara is able to consume the noises of the city, whether they are benevolent or malevolent, and celebrate his being "alive" and "winning" (*Lunch* 46).

Not limited to his say or personal identity, the poet also wishes have a communal experience with noises of the masses. This is expressed in feeling the same vitality as Pittsburgh Pirates fans and players who "shout because they won" (*Lunch* 46). The cheering noises coming from these winning folks on the streets explain that regardless of identity, the poet yearns to be a part of the crowd. O'Hara ends the poem with a revel



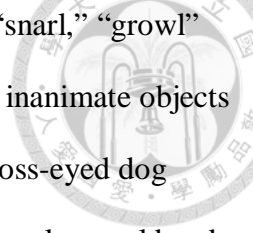
in “the excesses of consumption” (Rosenbaum 79):

oh god it’s wonderful
to get out of bed
and drink too much coffee
and smoke too much cigarettes
and love you so much (*Lunch* 46)

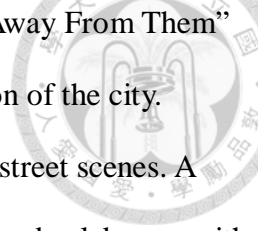
The words “and” and “too much” are repeated three times, and they leave a sonic impression on the readers as if they just heard this from an ardent speaker on the stage chanting about the love for life. The speech sounds of the last stanza also signify the poet’s excessive love for the urban experience, of people shouting, traffic buzzing, strangers asking questions, and listening to too much music. Like the name of his book *Standing Still and Walking in New York*, the poet manages to settle down in the big city, accommodating himself to the rhythms of other pedestrians, yet also finds freedom to create his own “steps,” like the dancing Ginger Rogers in *Swingtime*. LaBelle believes that the sonic body (the rhythms that walking produces) can be thought of as a dancer. O’Hara’s gait exemplifies a sonic body that is “driven by the beat” yet finds its own “particular expressive shape” (125). To dance dynamically expresses how “rhythm is a timed order containing the promise of its own rupture— to dance is to follow the beat while fraying its edges; to cut into the beat with feverish steps” (LaBelle 125).

Street Noises

Most noises from the urban street in *Lunch Poems* reveal a buoyant atmosphere of New York, but occasionally O’Hara writes about the unpleasant and neglected parts of the city. In “On the Way to the San Remo,” O’Hara depicts the darker side of the city in a metaphoric writing style, which is quite different from his “I do this, I do that” city poems that are full of referents to create an authentic and realistic feeling. The black



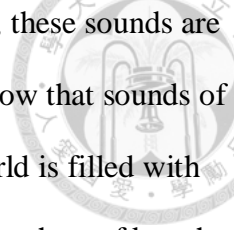
ghinkos, the moon and the apartment houses are personified as they “snarl,” “growl” and “climb defeaningly,” creating a lot of noise even though they are inanimate objects (*Lunch* 8). Next, the poet meets real animals: a bat “hisses” and “a cross-eyed dog scratches a worn patch of pavement” (*Lunch* 8). The poet then sees people: an old and dirty woman on the street “cajoles” and “whistles her filthy hope” and then there is a bus packed with “fat people who cough as at a movie / they eat each other’s dandruff in the flickering glare” (*Lunch* 8). Finally, the poet talks about sound instruments: “High fidelity reposed in a box a hand on the windowpane / the sweet calm the violin strings tie a young man’s hair” (*Lunch* 8). These noises of the city suggest that the street scenes appear hostile, grotesque, and miserable to the poet. Different from other poems that depict the street scene in the daytime (lunch time), this poem describes the night time soundscape of the city. The poet’s negative connotation of the way to the San Remo bar probably is connected with some unpleasant experience he had there. The San Remo does not refer to the luxury apartment building but to a bar that the poet frequents, meeting other bohemians, poets, writers, and intellectuals to discuss literature (Gooch 201). However, compared to the San Remo, O’Hara favored the Cedar more, an artists’ tavern, and found more inspiration there with the painters (Gooch 202). Gooch explains that the irreverent poet disliked the writer Paul Goodman, who enjoyed being surrounded by disciples and being the center of attention (201). The last stanza of the poem is presumably referring to Goodman: “Yes you are foolish smoking / the bars are for rabbits / who wish to outlive the men” (*Lunch* 8). The speaker in “On the Way to the San Remo” is much more detached and passive than the ones in “I do this, I to that” poems where the subject “I” actively arranges what he sees, does and hears according to his unique perception, and that there is often an addressee “you” for the speaker to chat to.



In contrast, urban noises in “I do this, I do that” poem “A Step Away From Them” is taken control of and transformed into a more fantastical imagination of the city. O’Hara is not just a spectator but takes authority in orchestrating the street scenes. A typical lunch hour walk in O’Hara’s New York include: hum-colored cabs, laborers with glistening torsos, Coca-Cola, yellow helmets, skirts flipping, bargains in wristwatches, cats playing in sawdust, Times Square, a Negro languorously agitating, and a blonde chorus girl (*Lunch* 12). The diversity and vitality of this visual image all of a sudden “honks,” and the poet is reminded of the time: “it is 12:40 of a Thursday” (*Lunch* 12). “Everything suddenly honks” becomes a middle that connects the first half with the second half of the poem. Though the noise of honking seems to come from the aforementioned street scenes, it acts as a caesura that abruptly halts and changes the fast-paced flow of flooding images in the first half of the poem. The visual scenes in the first half of the poem looks like a silent film until the addition of the honking noise. This particular noise has more of a significant meaning than any random noises in other poems because it seems like O’Hara deliberately puts a pause to separate the bustling, fragmented and buoyant atmosphere with his reflections on the death of artist friends and the affirmation of his place in a teeming city world: “First / Bunny died, then John Latouche, then Jackson Pollock. But is the / earth as full as life was full, of them?” (*Lunch* 12). Though the honking noise is an agglomeration of “everything” that was mentioned before on the streets, indicating the mundane, its impression draws momentary attention from the readers and the speaker, differentiating itself from the blasé attitude that most modern noises have on people.

Urban Noises of the Body

Urban noises of the body are also essential to O’Hara’s depiction of the city because they act as an organic force that resists the mechanized movements of



modernity. These noises are about life, death, and sex, and in a sense, these sounds are the most natural and connected with each individual. These noises show that sounds of the symbolic (music) cannot wholly represent reality because the world is filled with intervening sounds from physical reactions, such as a cough or sudden short of breath. Noises from the body offer an aesthetic that is more immediately sensuous and which supplements mere abstract experience. In the last stanza of “The Day Lady Died,” the poet reflects on the time that he heard Billie Holiday sing in Five Spot bar:

and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
while she whispered a song along the keyboard
to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing (*Lunch 27*)

The impression of Holiday’s voice is not presented by how the song is beautifully and emotionally sang, but shown through noises of the body that indicate illness. Holiday was suffering from liver disease at that time and LeSueur recalls that her “whiny little voice could scarcely be hard” (193). The aesthetic experience is not about skill and precision, but about leaving an eternal moment in the minds of the listeners, and that, interestingly, is through organic noises that disappear with the passing of time. Holiday was singing with the last breath, and so presumably her whispering voice sounds more like noise than music. Yet the sensual replaces abstract metaphysical understanding of music, making everyone stop making breathing noises. In addition, the poet vividly depicts Holiday’s whispering voice like the fingers of a jazz musician sliding along the keyboard, and the effect of this synesthesia shows the fluidity and transcendence of the noises of the body, and its impression that outlives the aforementioned list of trivial events in the first four stanzas. Noises of the body are sometimes depicted in a burlesque and playful manner through onomatopoeia:



Wouldn't it be funny
if The Finger had designed us
to shit just once a week?
 all week long we'd get fatter
 and fatter and then on Sunday morning
 while everyone's in church

ploop! (*Lunch 22*)

The poet contrasts the solemn image of church service and its sacred music with the noise of defecating. The poet also puts an effort into describing the noise of sexual activities as in “hard and moist and moaning,” emphasizing the sensual pleasure of the prolonged sound from the syllable “mo” in “moist” and “moaning” (*Lunch 34*). In “Mary Desti’s Ass,” intimate interaction is described with body noises: “the postcards and the smiles and kisses and the grunts” (*Lunch 48*). Interestingly, the poet likes to pile different noises of the body with the conjunction “and” to convey his sensual pleasure, as if in a hurry to capture the transient feeling with the most straightforward ways of expression.

Urban Noises of Talk

Urban noises of talk affirm one’s existence through meditating and voicing out words, emphasizing aspects of oral language. They are why O’Hara’s poetry possess a chatty tone, and they make the poetic structure cacophonous because the poet’s talk is seldom consistent in its logic, and thus to understand the message of the poem becomes even more challenging for the reader. However, I believe these noises of talk exist for the poet as a way of resisting fragmented urban experience that might make him lose direction and have existential crisis. Whether it is talk with other people or self-talk, either way of talking involves the poet meditating and asserting his existence. Readers’

sense a voice ringing in the heads when they read these lines of talk because the poet is speaking to them, and so these noises of talk appear materially in the minds of readers.

In “Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul,” O’Hara engages in assured and positive self-talk through affirming that everything (from museums to a person’s identity) “continues”:

the only thing to do is simply continue
is that simple
yes, it is simple because it is the only thing to do
can you do it
yes, you can because it is the only thing to do (*Lunch 29*)

The poet supports his confidence in “continuing” by illustrating to readers that:

the Seine continues
the Louvre stays open it continues it hardly closes at all
the Bar Americain continues to be French
de Gaulle continues to be Algerian as does Camus
Shirley Goldfarb continues to be Shirley Goldfarb
and Jane Hazan continues to be Jane Freilicher (I think!)
and Irving Sandler continues to be the balayeur des artistes
and so do I (*Lunch 29*)

However, the list of name referents and place referents do not make it more concrete for understanding; on the other hand, the poem becomes more demanding because readers will have to do research to understand. Perloff argues that these referents are only particular to the poet, and that they lose significance and have no inner reality to the readers (*Poet 131*). I believe the purpose of these referents in his “talk” is thus to show the personal and trivial experience of everyone’s life, and that by “telling” them to

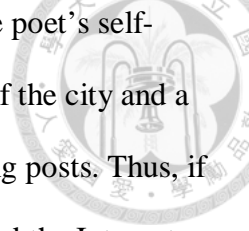
readers, the poet constructs his sense of self with his relationships to these referents instead of getting lost in the whirl of fragmentation. In “Personal Poem,” O’Hara’s talkative nature appears again as he, with LeRoi Jones, discusses and judges which writers they like:

... 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 (*Lunch 27*)

The repetition of a similar sentence pattern (“we like,” “we don’t like”) causes irritation to one’s ears because there is no elaboration on the reason of choice and that the obstinate tone of the lines sounds like a relentless and monotone noise that would not stop, noisily forcing its way reader’s minds willfully. From the stubborn noises he makes, the poet wants readers to understand that these choices are not influenced by extrinsic factors and so through this the poet is able to preserve his individuality.

Paul Legault’s *Lunch Poems 2*

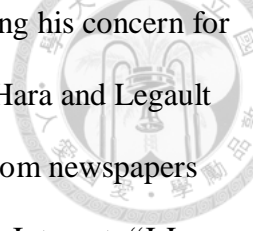
Fifty years after the publication of *Lunch Poems*, Paul Legault offers a refreshed version of what strolling the streets in Manhattan at lunch time in the twenty-first century would look like and sound like in his *Lunch Poems 2*. Legault is greatly influenced by O’Hara’s “I do this, I do that” writing style and also the poet’s embracing attitude of urban noise. The *Lunch Poems 2* poet imitates his predecessor by writing about city life and his interaction with mass communication media such as the Internet. Legault demonstrates that if O’Hara were to live in the 21st-century, the *Lunch Poems* poet would also be highly receptive of noises in the Internet. In previous chapters I have mentioned O’Hara’s embrace of feedback noises from the telephone foretells the same



kind of noises from the Internet, such as on YouTube. In addition, the poet's self-disclosing "I do this, I do that" writing style, which contains noises of the city and a casual way of walk, comes as a precursor of Facebook's self-reporting posts. Thus, if O'Hara were to live to the digital age, he probably would have utilized the Internet as source for writing materials, embracing the noises that come from this gigantic network of information.

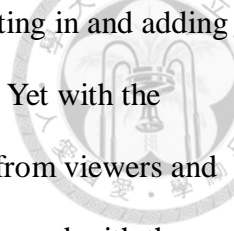
Urban noises in Legault's world is composed of less mechanic sounds from cars and talking on the streets, but more noises coming from personal electronic gadgets such as the phone and Internet YouTube videos. A quick glance at the content shows that the means of receiving information have been "updated": the collapse of Lana Turner was reported in the newspaper, but in *Lunch Poems 2*, Legault gains news from websites such as YouTube and Facebook; the gossipy nature of people never resides, but the place where these noises of talk are heard has changed. In short, the Internet has taken over as one of the main platforms for human interaction in Legault's 21st century reproduction. Though there might be slight modifications and personal improvisation in *Lunch Poems 2*, one can still see that O'Hara's works foresee a social network in the digital age, welcoming in the noises of talk from user-generated commentary on the Internet. In the following pages, I proceed to analyze noises from the Internet, and to demonstrate the technological legacy that O'Hara leaves on the future generation.

The gossipy tone and noise reappears in Legault's rendering of O'Hara's "Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed)," but in the digital age, this noise spreads much faster and grows huger than the traditional press makes it because of the Internet: footage are shared and watched millions of times and some YouTube creators make parodies or "reaction" videos on the news. In "Poem (J-Law has collapsed!)," Legault comments on the incident of Jennifer Lawrence falling on the stairs during the 2013 Oscar Ceremony,



parodying the media for creating a commotion about it by exaggerating his concern for her. Just like O'Hara's "Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!)", both O'Hara and Legault gossip about tabloid news except that the former saw the headlines from newspapers being sold on the street while the latter was probably informed by the Internet: "J-Law has collapsed! / I wasn't even watching the Oscars" (Legault 72). Amidst O'Hara and Legault's comments are millions of others talking about the same matter. For O'Hara, he might have heard strangers on the streets discussing; his friends might have joked about it with him at a bar; the radio in his house, on the streets, and at a restaurant might have blasted the news countless times. For Legault, he must have seen hundreds of anonymous replies on YouTube as the video clip of Lawrence falling is replayed over and over again; his friends might also have made fun about it as their pastime.

Lunch Poems confirms O'Hara's insight that it might be creative to transform the short-lived babbling noises of tabloid news and daily conversation into a writing that is preserved longer. Though written in the poetic form, both poets do not make serious metaphysical remarks but playfully ridicule the celebrities. O'Hara writes: "I have been to lots of parties / and acted perfectly disgraceful / but I never actually collapsed / oh Lana Turner we love you get up" (*Collected* 449). Legault, reflecting on the Dior dress Lawrence wore at the Oscars, writes: "I have been to many themed parties / and gotten both tarred and feathered, / but I never looked very swan-like. / Oh, Jen, nothing's funny. Never die" (72). That the movie stars collapsed at a party and fell at a ceremony are neutral events. Yet these neutral events are resituated in different contexts as the press, the Internet, and finally the poets report them, resulting in more noises and confusion. The Internet as a digital media becomes a "self-archiving phenomenon" (Garde-Hansen 72) as users create new noises out of the news through commenting, reposting, and even making reaction videos. O'Hara and Legault's thus act like a

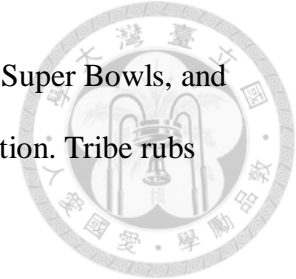


“curator in a process of social tagging” (Garde-Hansen 82), participating in and adding noise to the communal collaboration of remembering a certain event. Yet with the convenience of the Internet and its endless intense feedback coming from viewers and viewed objects, the obsessed individual is eventually trapped and obsessed with the noises of the Internet. In the following, I will explain how Legault’s Internet noises divert him away from reality.

Legault’s poems are full of McLuhan’s hot media, which means that there is need for only slight participation from the viewer to understand the information that is provided (Hildebrand and Vacker). Hot media come in high definition and so “viewing subjects and viewed objects” are in “close proximity” with each other, causing “acceleration, quick reactions, short attention spans, instant feedback loops” (Hildebrand and Vacker). Both O’Hara’s radio and Legault’s Internet are hot media, and both poets have expressed an intimacy but also irritation with the high-densities of the media. Hildebrand and Vacker write:

Hence, heat and friction also lie in our global layers of ego-media, giant clusters of networks and webs, all jammed with ever more contents and contexts. Platforms, websites, services, affordances. Google, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, Netflix. Social media sharing, caring, shaming, connecting. Hashtags and emojis, clickbait and catfishers. Hot takes, hive-minds, eHarmony. YOLO. Tinder love, tribal chieftains, Internet trolls, TV realities, Twitter gods. Fake news, false flags, and filter bubbles. FOMO. Cute cat videos and candy crushes. LOL. Meming and mining. Copies of copies of copies. Reduce, remix, redact. Colliding echo chambers. Siri and Alexa. Firewalls and border walls. Breaking news, Streetviews, Times Square. Screens and screening. TSA, NSA, MI6, MSS. Governments, corporations, and capitalism. Democracy, socialism, and fascism.

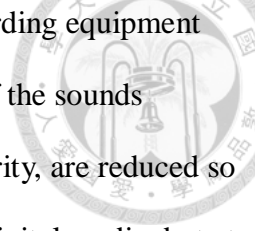
Arab Spring. Occupy. Women's March. #MeToo. Superheroes, Super Bowls, and World Cups. Empowerment, domination, entertainment, distraction. Tribe rubs against tribe. Proximity, friction, and heat in hot ego-media.



In "Poem En Forme De Pomme," meaning poem in the form of apple in French, Legault shows aspects of hot media in the Apple product, Siri, the Internet, and artificial intelligence. The poet attempts to force mutual interaction with these hot media, but ends in vain because the sensory data from these media are so rich that the individual cannot participate much in meaning-making. Legault cries out to Siri as if it were a real person: "I order you to be alive, Siri. / Nobody listens when they're an inanimate object" (63). Though Siri simulates the presence of a human being, providing so much sensory stimulus, people become detached from it after a few tries because the media is so hot that it does not allow much feedback or real interaction between the user and the artificial intelligence. Legault continues by saying:

I know when the internet is out I should think on my own,
but that's just like being me but stupider
I say to myself on the phone to myself,
and Narcissus would be internet-famous
if he could've just taken selfies instead of drowning,
like internationally maybe on Instagram. (63)

The poet wants to take control of his own thoughts but admits that he is defeated by the vast amount of knowledge that the Internet provides. In addition, hot media like Instagram appeal to viewers with its high-definition photographs, expressing meaning through its apparent content and context. The Internet, with both its hot media and digital acoustics, presents sounds with a higher clarity and less individual participation to understand the message. This is in contrast to cool media with analog acoustics such



as the phonograph, where noises are also recorded. With digital recording equipment such as the MP3, humans rely less on their thinking to make sense of the sounds because there is enough information. Thus noises, in the sense of clarity, are reduced so as to facilitate more efficient communication due to the advance of digital media, but at the same time, authenticity is lost because noises are filtered out. Siri speaks in such a clear way to an extent that it somehow becomes unreal, failing to genuinely present itself. Sounds from artificial intelligence and digital recordings on YouTube thus allow less participation and less space for interpretation from the audience. The object becomes overly real that understanding becomes too straightforward and transparent, losing the opacity that balances the relation between the subject and object. On the other hand, McLuhan argues that a telephone is a cool medium that involves two people to make meaning happen, and thus it is more democratizing because both sides have to participate and express their opinion (23).

Despite the fact that digital media and artificial intelligence omit noises from the real and reduce participation from the audience, the Internet should not be generalized as merely a tool for control and order because it often acts the opposite in congregating different opinions and leaking secrets that might overturn a corrupted institution.

Legault is glad that he can easily have access to other artists' works through watching YouTube, a video platform for creators to show their works on unlimited free space:

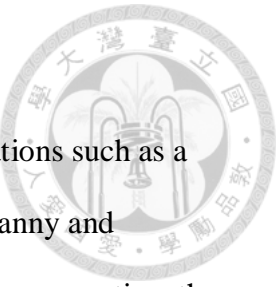
Ah Wendy Vainity –
when you think about her
doing her thing on iClone from Reallusion on YouTube
as an Australian
in 2009
you know how wonderful 21st century

can be. (29)

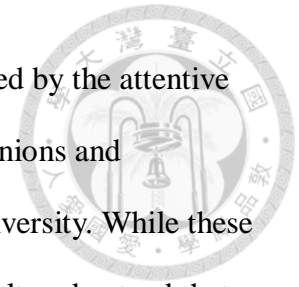
Wendy Vainity is known for her eccentric collection of 3D animations such as a gothic dancing skeleton with eerie background music, creating an uncanny and disturbing presence by juxtaposing unrelated elements together. In this perspective, the Internet is an all-embracing network that contains diverse archives that might have been excluded by print texts and traditional media. YouTube can become a source for grassroots revolution as anyone can upload videos that reveal the truth about certain political events that traditional media does not broadcast. Noises are once again a major presence in the Internet world, demonstrating that the relation between subject and object is not easily rationalized and represented, and that an incomprehensibility has always existed and should be respected. In addition, people find personal stories and similar experience of others on the Internet, and by doing so they are able to acquire a sense of belonging in the virtual world even when they are oppressed in reality:

“Another reason you should google / how to turn your family queer / when I send you – what are now your – / packages of rainbows is / there’s a style drought / like in the middle country. Do not / hold onto your white horses — the / last thing we need’s to die” (Legault 45). Noises appear as varied on the Internet, for they could be countless personal experience videos, shocking footages and different interpretations of a historical event.

In conclusion, noises in both O’Hara and Legault’s “I do this, I do that” poems, whether they come in the form of gossip in traditional mass communication or the Internet, are agencies that facilitate the poets to have a better understanding of the real. Noises from the urban space can come in different modes: noises of self-talk affirm existence in a modern world of fragmented experience; noises of the body are more akin to nature than man-made notations that make up music; noises of the city streets are



often overlooked by the modern blasé crowd, but they are transformed by the attentive poet into an urban fantasy; noises of the Internet provide various opinions and individual works are shared, subverting hegemonic power with its diversity. While these noise may be excluded by those who desire order, O'Hara and Legault understand that they are there before order, and thus, with an embracing noise of thought, utilize them as a muse for writing.



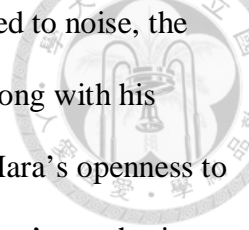


Conclusion

This thesis has sought to answer why urban noise is such an attraction to O'Hara, and has explained the influence of Cage on O'Hara's openness to noise. O'Hara's noise has an agential quality that unveils the real that resides underneath social values and orders. Since the real cannot be comprehended with language, it looks and sounds chaotic, and that is why some of O'Hara's poems cannot be easily deciphered. With this in mind, I aim to provide an interpretation of the different urban noises found in O'Hara's poetry.

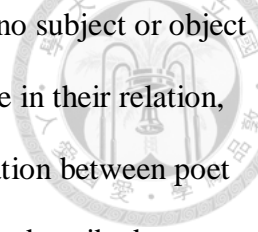
Firstly, since noises, as acoustic entities, are often discussed with music, I have examined John Cage's view that noises should be brought back into music composition because they are real sounds that are heard every day in life. Cage believes that the ubiquity of these noises have been overlooked by traditional Western music, and claims that with attention to these sounds and allowing them to develop by chance methods, one will perceive the more natural side of music. Cage's open mindset toward noise strikes a chord with O'Hara, for the poet also believes that by welcoming the randomness of noise and allowing subsequent unpredictable outcomes, he could offer a refreshing and authentic perspective of the city life with an avant-garde poetic presentation that breaks away from traditional poetics.

Secondly, I notice the poet's high reception of noises during the process of writing a poem. These noises could come from a conversation with a friend or a radio that is blasting off while the poet writes. These urban noises either become a subject matter in O'Hara's poems or they influence the writing form with their noisy technological characteristics. O'Hara understands that noises are integral to one's sense of the real and that they have existed before the symbolic order attempted to suppress and exclude



them. Thus, with a mindset that is willing to be distracted and attracted to noise, the poet sees these noises as transient and that need to be transformed, along with his feelings, into his aesthetic presentation immediately. In addition, O'Hara's openness to the noises of technological mediums manifests the influence from Cage's emphasis on the randomness of sounds. O'Hara allows noises from technology to exert its agency on his poetic writing, resulting in unexpected creations that seem baffling to traditional understanding, similar to Cage's experimental music.

Finally, I present the ubiquity of noise in O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*, and they are categorized into five kinds: noises of the street, noises of speech-sounds, talk and gossip, noises of the urban body, noises from technological media and finally noise of the thought, which acts as the underlying agent in ushering in external noises. These urban noises all have their separate effects on the poem, but if seen from a broader perspective, they all give mobility to the poet and reader's initially fixed perception of urban life. Noises of talk, with its campy tone, sexualize a hostile heterosexual-centered other. Noises of media technology influence a human-centered way of describing things, showing a non-human-centered approaching to understanding the other. Noises of the self are often affirming and denying, suggesting that O'Hara accommodates paradoxes. Noises of the streets are heard as the poet wants them to be heard, refreshioning one's fixed perception of how the city should sound like. Noises of the body allows appreciating music to be more about nature and not limited to a rationalized and intangible comprehension. These noises show that there is an unknowable remainder that persists in every relation, and that by embracing the noises can there be a better understanding of reality. O'Hara's noises may seem difficult to understand because the reader cannot fully grasp the poet's intentions if he or she stuck to analyzing the referents and to finding logic between the lines. On the other hand, these noises, with

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their confusion, should be seen from a wider perspective, and that is no subject or object can be easily defined in a binary comparison because noises intervene in their relation, making them equal but never totally understandable entities. The relation between poet and reader, poet and the city, and reader and the city cannot be plainly described, or otherwise, there will be an imbalance in the relation. The urban noises that reside in every relation show that the self and the other should be equal, and that one can never totally describe the other.

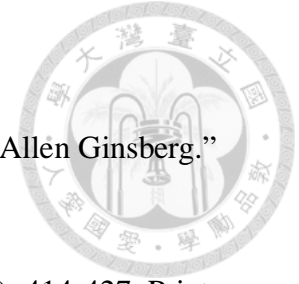
Noise is the essential manifestation of O'Hara's attitude to aesthetics, to society, and to life. Knowing that life in a post-WWII modern New York City is bombarded by stimulus of all kinds yet constrained by a dominant social value, the poet knows that meaning-making would be futile. O'Hara allows readers to see that noise is indeed ubiquitous in life, and that they are always seeping into the symbolic, challenging already established orders and asserting their presence.



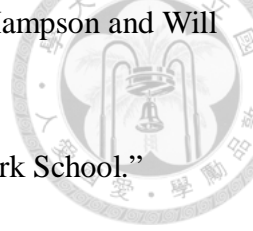
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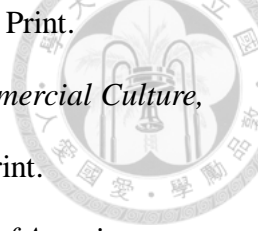
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