Why is it all right to be influenced by a
dead artist and a scandal if you’re
influenced by a live one?

—Frank O’Hara, “Five Participants in a Hearsay Panel”
Art Chronicles 1954–1966 contains only a selection of Frank O’Hara’s extensive art criticism, but it is a beautiful book, with excellent reproductions as well as delightful photographs of O’Hara on street corners or at black-tie openings or making his way through the revolving doors of the Museum of Modern Art, where he worked from 1952 until his untimely death at 40 in 1966. Read in conjunction with the Collected Poems (1971), this set of essays suggests to me that O’Hara will eventually emerge as the Ezra Pound of the postwar period. His poetry—brilliant, droll, exciting, iconoclastic—may not measure up to the Cantos, but like Pound, O’Hara helped to bring about a revolution in artistic sensibility.

He counted among his friends an astonishing number of the leading poets, painters, composers and dancers of the ’50s and ’60s (for example: John Cage, Merce Cunningham, LeRoi Jones, Kenneth Koch, John Ashbery, Allen Ginsberg, John Wieners, Gregory Corso, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Helen Frankenthaler, Larry Rivers). He collaborated with Jasper Johns on “poems/lithographs,” with Al Leslie on films, with John Ashbery on plays, with Arnold Weinstein on musicals. He contributed poems to exhibition catalogues and literary criticism to little magazines. As curator of the Museum of Modern Art, he was responsible for major exhibitions of Pollock, Kline, Smith, Motherwell and Nakian. At the time of his death he had at last secured de Kooning’s agreement to organize a large retrospective of his paintings. Finally, as art editor and critic, first for Art News and later for Kulchur, he was for over a decade one of the leading champions of abstract expressionism and its offshoots.

Despite—or perhaps because of—this great range of interests, the academic establishment, ready to enshrine an Adrienne Rich in a Norton Critical Edition, still
refuses to take O’Hara seriously. His poems, written at odd monuments of the day or night, are accused of frivolity, formlessness and excessive in-jokes. No doubt, his art criticism will be similarly dismissed by certain academics as being too impressionistic. True, O’Hara is likely to refer to paintings as “tragic,” “demonic,” “sullen,” “somber,” “tender,” “luminous” or “joyful,” without backing up these adjectives with any overt theory of art. Yet his impressionistic criticism takes on a different cast when one notes that, like Pound, he had an unerring eye for genius, an amazing sense of the difference between the first-rate and the second-best.

It is too bad that of the 14 pieces in this collection, four (“Franz Kline,” “David Smith,” “Robert Motherwell” and “Reuben Nakian”) are introductions to catalogues, because the set piece is not O’Hara’s forte. Its form is too confining: something must be said of the artist’s life and background, the work must be treated chronologically, and generalization is the order of the day. But in his omnibus reviews, especially the Art Chronicles for Kulchur, of which only one (Summer 1962) is, regrettably, reprinted here, O’Hara’s critical genius is unmistakable. In 1963, for example, O’Hara said of Mark Tobey: “[He] has done fine things in his own way . . . but they will never be major any more than Redon will ever challenge Renoir . . . . Not while Willem de Kooning and Barnett Newman are about.” This is a judgment that time has certainly borne out. In the same review he distinguishes perceptively between the witty “found art” of Claes Oldenburg and the banal “constructed commonplace” spray-gun paintings of Niki de St. Phalle. “What hath Pollock wrought?” O’Hara asks in mock indignation. “You don’t even have to put the thing on the floor any more and you can get someone else to finish it, as a boyfriend helps his girlfriend win a panda at Palisades Park.”
This may be treating "art" with insufficient respect, but although O'Hara loves to ham it up, he is never merely modish. Today Oldenburg is recognized as a major artist, and who has heard of Niki de St. Phalle? Similarly searching is O'Hara's account of the opening of the Guggenheim in 1962. After praising the wonders of the building—daytime elevators that actually take you somewhere for pleasure rather than business, the ramp that "almost completely eliminates the famous gallery-going fatigue," and the dome that resembles "the home of an urbane and mildly eccentric person," O'Hara comments, very sensibly, on the uneven quality of the show itself. He admits that "Abstract Expressionists and Imagists" is a mixed bag but wonders what the public expected:

. . . what the title implies is a summary of achievement, but what you get is recent works by most of the important members of the movement. This is very interesting, if you want to look at paintings. Unfortunately many people wanted to see a justification, packaged in a new Sherry's container, with a card saying, "Because of this show you are entitled to keep on admiring Abstract Expressionism." Hence the criticism the Guggenheim has gotten about the quality of the show, some of it near hysteria: "A WEAK HOFFMANN! HOW COULD THEY!" None of the reviewers seems to have thought, "How could he!"

Such good-humored—but ultimately quite serious—irreverence is typical of O'Hara. His point is that "the show reflects the living situation" and hence "keeps you fresh for looking. . . . A lot of people," he concludes, "would like to see art dead and sure, but you don't see them up at The Cloisters reading Latin." O'Hara wants
us to look for ourselves; the “masterpieces” need not be prepackaged and labeled. But this is not to say that anything goes. In the same review, O’Hara insists that de Kooning is “the greatest painter after Picasso and Miro,” and singles out from the welter of new shows in town, those of Oldenburg and Jasper Johns. The latter’s “meticulously and sensually painted rituals of imagery express a profound boredom, in the Baudelairian sense, with the symbols of our over-symbolic society.”

This distrust of symbolism lies behind O’Hara’s passionate advocacy of the abstract expressionists, especially his groundbreaking essay on Jackson Pollock, written in 1959 when action painting was still an object of ridicule. Here is the poet’s comment on Number 29 (1950): “A painting-collage of oil, wire-mesh, pebbles and shells composed on glass, it is . . . unique in that it is a masterpiece from opposite sites of viewing.” He marvels at the painting’s “reversible textures . . . the tragedy of a linear violence which, in recognizing itself in its own mirror-self, sees elegance.” And this brings O’Hara to a discussion of scale in Pollock’s abstractions: “The scale of the painting became that of the painter’s body, not the image of a body, and the setting for the scale, which would include all referents, would be the canvas surface itself. Upon this field the physical energies of the artist operate in actual detail . . . with no reference to exterior image or environment . . . no need for the mediation of metaphor or symbol. It is Action Painting.”

Not all the interviews and essays included in this book are as interesting as the monograph on Pollock. O’Hara can be annoyingly flip as in his reference to Nakian’s background as “Armenian-familial and Brave-New-World-Dos Passos-USA social.” But beneath the archness, O’Hara repeatedly demonstrates his profound understanding for non-figurative art. In contrasting the black-and-white paintings
of Pollock and Kline, O’Hara notes that whereas Pollock has “black paint seeping into unsized canvas, at once sensitive in surface and frequently grotesque in form,” Kline’s “forms are stark and simple, the gesture abrupt, rough, passionately unconcerned with finish.” Against the accepted view that Kline was strongly influenced by Japanese calligraphy, O’Hara argues: “The whites and blacks are strokes and masses of entirely relevant intensity to the painting as a whole and to each other . . . . [They] are aimed at an ultimate structure of feeling rather than at ideograph or writing.” If anything, Kline has influenced Japanese painters rather than vice-versa.

O’Hara was, then, always testing critical commonplaces; like Pound’s, his approach to art was insistently individual, independent. By the mid-’60s, when the human figure began to reassert itself, O’Hara was one of the first to discern its new potential. One of the best essays reprinted in Art Chronicles, written shortly before the poet’s death, deals with the “figurative” painting of Alex Katz, whose pictorial world is described as “a ‘void’ of smoothly painted color . . . where the fairly realistic figure existed (but did not rest) in a space which had no floor, no walls, no source of light, no viewpoint. . . . Katz’s people simply existed, somewhere. They stayed in the picture as solutions of a formal problem, neither existential nor lost. . . . They were completely mysterious pictorially, because there seemed to be no apparent intent of effect. They knew they were there.”

Here O’Hara reveals his profound understanding of the new esthetic, whether in painting or poetry. In his own poems there are hundreds of figures, but they too seem to exist in a space with no viewpoint, functioning “as solutions of a formal problem.” They manifest what O’Hara calls (with reference to Katz’s portraits of his
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They Were There

Art Chronicles
by Frank O'Hara

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