For Frank O’Hara, the way to a fully contemporary art had to run through Jackson Pollock. But how could writing adapt Pollock’s collapsing of distinctions between foreground and background or his capacity to focus so intensely on the energies embodied in the varied material qualities a line could possess? O’Hara’s solution was to treat Pollock’s later work not as a rejection of his earlier explicit surrealism but rather as a realization of a surrealist spirit that could thrive by rejecting what had become tired surrealist imagery trying to express an ever-receding unconscious:

Cubism was an innovation; Surrealism an evolution. The former dealt with technique, the latter with content. …Surrealism enjoined the duty, along with the liberation, of saying what you mean and meaning what you say beyond any fondness for saying or meaning. ¹

Surrealism becomes a dynamic Modernist demonstration of how art could free itself not just from representational ideals but also from the psychological accoutrements of those ideals—especially the fantasy that to represent the world seems to entitle the artist also to judge it and to parade those judgments as wisdom. Against this fantasy, Pollock managed to achieve a completely literal understanding of the modernist distinction between an art of representation and an art of presentation. The space of painting could become “a field of incident” “exploring possibilities for discovery” by the artist as he or she elaborates an ongoing process of decisions and the adjustments they
necessitate in tracking the self’s energies and the relationships those energies were making possible. This version of surrealism would encompass all of modern art that put the creative act in the service of producing strange conjunctions or sites of being rather than claiming the analytical powers that Cubism and non-iconic painting idealized from Cézanne’s example.

Viewing Pollock this way made a major difference in how writers represented their own modernity, since they could explore their capacities to replace scenic representation by the energies of line that provided an immediacy of saying what one means “beyond any fondness for saying and meaning.” So younger poets could write in the spirit of Pollock without simply copying Pollock’s project. More important, these poets could explore a version of Pollock’s freedom to foreground the self’s energies without binding that self to scenes of confessional sincerity. Instead one could see one’s art participating in what had become the major version of international modernism. Pursuing that freedom in “saying what you mean” then enabled the writers to find allies and guides in a second generation of New York painting that had taken the enormous risk of returning from abstraction to figuration. Both writers and painters could treat the turn to figuration not as a conservative flight from the pressures of innovation but rather as a means to bring freedoms derived from abstract expressionism into conjunction with energies basic to quotidian life.

The filiations between New York School poets and painters were nowhere more evident than in the interests painters took in the poets as portrait subjects—in part because ideas and ideals of portraiture were changing radically under the new dispensation represented by O’Hara’s reading of Pollock. The new art offered various
models for self-portraiture that could refuse the imaginary satisfactions of the finished portrait that tells someone what he or she will have to look like. And the pursuit of this immediacy could recast the entire social role portraits might play. The classical portrait cannot but remind audiences of the patronage system ultimately responsible for what status and freedom artists had achieved in Western society. But now the New York painters were responding to friendship, not to dependency on the whims of their financial masters. Therefore portraits could take on a new intimacy—not by stressing psychological depth but rather as a record of how figuration might provide an expressive register of what the painter feels for and about the subject in the moment of the painting. Tone becomes as central in painting as it had been in literature because an entire tradition must be treated self-consciously and submitted to the interpretive power of a spontaneous and evocative use of color that places abstract expressionist techniques within quotidian life. Conversely that sense of stylizing the quotidian as a means of honoring its centrality for the artist would prove a vital provocation for poets attempting to clarify where their own dispositions were leading them.

Let us take two portraits of O’Hara as typical of how second generation New York school artists bring emphatic painterly presence to figurative tasks. O’Hara’s famous broken nose was one inducement to painterly freedoms; another was the receding hairline that provided lush fields of play for reflected light. But it was his stance that most excited painters to explore imaginative possibilities within the portrait genre. That combination of arrogance and vulnerability, daunting energy and delicate sensibility, enabled artists suspicious of abstract expressionist grandeur to bring the same sense of painterly freedoms over to the pleasures of figuration. The figure in Fairfield Porter’s
Frank O’Hara (1957, figure 1) has the light yet taut body of an athlete. But there is also a rigidity about the body that distances its physicality and makes a spirit of self-protection seem pervasive. Notice that Porter takes significant expressive risks in composing a body that will not quite assume the standard reclining position of salon paintings. Both O’Hara’s thighs seem to refuse the material and psychological support of the couch just as the painting itself seems bound to contextualize its interest in portraiture by citing and disrupting salon tradition. Energy and convention make uneasy adjustments to one another, especially in the strange conjunction of decorative couch and severe, almost minimalist, wall and window. O’Hara sits, or almost sits, at the juncture of multiple visual traditions.

Larry Rivers’ 1954 portrait presents an O’Hara caught up in different kinds of disjunctions that all contribute ultimately to a sense of the power this figure exercised in his friends’ lives. There is still the athletic body. But it is subjected to several other dimensions of cultural force. There are the boots, self-conscious signifiers playing with butch sexuality and promising “real” manliness in the contra-posto pose. Then there is his delicately painted body with its frontal vulnerability—the most important symbol of manliness dangling in a mix of aggression and pathos. (This stance is no ordinary contra-posto: it is exaggerated so that manly assertion is inseparable from acute vulnerability. The hands and arms that could defend against vulnerability here assume a quasi-heroic, quasi distracted and intellectual stance.) This figure has a kind of inner life, but Rivers seems careful to separate that inner life from any standard psychological predicates or even psychological grammar. The complexity of character derives from how what is portrayed negotiates several contrasting and intersecting styles. There is
an abstract painterly harmony in browns that seems to encompass but also to reject the standing figure. And there are free painterly gestures that remind me of strokes by Jasper Johns. Yet the figure is also placed within two competing traditions that promise to secure its realistic impact—one is the tradition of Dutch accurate portraiture and the other is nineteenth-century academic painting as exemplified in, say, Theodore Gericault’s *Thomas Couture*, or .[I am not sure I corrected this properly] Citation and figuration concur to establish a distinctive blend of care and irony that O’Hara would very much appreciate.

John Ashbery also inspired portraits by his friends although he had neither broken nose nor receding hairline. I want to use a photographic portrait of him in his Chelsea apartment to introduce another aspect of New York School painting in the work of Jane Freilicher. Notice how Freilicher’s *A Painting Table* (1954) occupies pride of place over his mantle in the photograph. Ashbery valued this painting for its ability to achieve an anti-photographic realism by means of “the free techniques and feelings of Abstract Expressionism.” That allegiance to painterly traditions is captured nicely by her stressing the presence of her palette. Within the painting itself the brush work incorporating the outside darkness with the gossamer curtain provides a more subtle mark of Freilicher’s fidelity to a kind of abstraction within her realism. More important yet is how she turns realism to the purposes of rendering an event of seeing that Ashbery notes pulls against fidelity to the represented objects. The various cans in the painting give very little information but their color: they exist primarily as part of a seeing, or even of a glance, rather than as something permanent that sustains the artist’s craft. The objects seem noted more than described. For there is a sense of
instant event about the painting, reinforced by the sheer plenitude of the signifiers and the painting’s strangely awkward structuring gestures. The vases containing the brushes almost balance the vertical on the left comprised by the window, but they occupy a different plane, and the busy variety contrasts sharply with the static darkness. There are also many diagonals and loops that organize some of the objects. So there seem too many patterns to organize the painting; it exceeds order—another aspect of its sense of submitting to events of seeing if it is to take on any reality at all.

Ashbery’s comments on this figurative assemblage bring out how the painter’s work becomes the focus for the poet’s thematic probing:

*The Painting Table* is a congeries of conflicting pictorial grammars. The result is a little anthology of ways of seeing, feeling, and painting, with no suggestion that any one way is better than another. … What is better than anything is the renewed realization that all kinds of things can and must exist side by side at any given moment, and that that is what life and creating are all about.6

Now realism itself seems a strange imperative because the painters expand it to deal with the range of feelings elicited by objects. Realism now has to acknowledge and play with the imperative to keep kinds of reality in continuity with one another.

One could approach this fusion of painterly and poetic concerns by tracing the many lyrical appreciations of specific qualities in the first and second generation New York School painting by the poets and by recent critics like Kimberly Lamm writing on James Schuyler.7 But because of my limited space (and limited disposition) I want to dwell on how O’Hara, Ashbery, and Barbara Guest elaborate the desire to recast
surrealism so that it accommodates New York painting and then give their own distinctive twists to how these painters help articulate their own imaginative orientations. This capacity for discursive self-representation was especially important because the invocation of painterly affinities helped enormously in the poets’ developing alternatives to the dominant conservative poetics (which I’ll say more about in a moment) that seemed recipes for success for young writers entering the publishing world during the 1950s.

Let me be more specific. The paintings discussed here and the discourses they generate were part of what it meant to be young and talented in New York City during the early 1950s. The G.I. Bill had opened educational opportunities and transformed schooling—from Kenneth Koch’s and O’Hara’s being able to attend Harvard to the saxophonist Larry Rivers deciding to become a painter and having funds to attend classes given by Hans Hoffman. New York would be the arena where such educations could be tested for their capacity to influence high culture, as Abstract Expressionism was already in the process of doing. But such educations also had to be uneasy with any dominant style, in part because they were so intensely aware that history is the dumping ground of styles. Then there was the emergence of The Museum of Modern Art as an institution eager to replace the Grand Tours of wealthy bourgeois by a series of shows documenting painterly achievements from Pierre Bonnard and Henri Matisse to surrealism and Chaim Soutine. Art was in the air—as possibility more than as authority. In fact New York offered an ideal situation for young artists because many of the European exiles who had been so central to fostering its aura of sophistication were returning home—leaving both a residue of aristocratic ambitions for painting and a
vacuum for how those ambitions were to be satisfied. Perhaps it is not surprising in retrospect (although still shocking) that the CIA would decide to invest in making the city the world center for innovative art.

The situation in poetry was not so promising. While the painter-exiles were leaving, the major modernists remained gray eminences defining what poetry should be. Not surprisingly then, Robert Lowell seemed the most important younger poet in the US. *Life Studies* was published in 1951 and quickly won from both O'Hara and Ashbery an undying enmity for its morbid heterosexual self-absorption and its apparently self-satisfied alienation from the very qualities of community and inventiveness that poets were experiencing in New York. Where else could poetry go to escape the weight of literary tradition and the demands of the New Criticism for complex artefactuality that Lowell honored even as he sought an expressive freedom within it? Perhaps the only release possible was for the poets to mine the opportunities in the intellectual ferment the painters were creating. The poets were already enmeshed in the painterly world. They only had to channel the energies of their intellectual lives into their work as poets. And they needed luck, which arrived in the guise of Frank O'Hara. As Ashbery remembers it, “The one thing lacking in our privileged little world was the arrival of Frank O'Hara to kind of cobble everything together and tell us what we and they were doing.”

Among the poets of the New York School, Barbara Guest was the most explicit on the need to turn to painters in order to create models of space and fluid interconnection that could alter the poets’ sense of their own possibilities: in her view
“modern painters” were “the revolutionaries to whom writers turn in the desire to break from the solemnity of the judicious rules of their craft.” And we will soon see that in many ways she was the most radical in her use “of some of their methods, especially the method that “lends an idea of space to the poem.” But O’Hara and Ashbery wrote more extensively about how the diverse projects of postwar New York painting were all surrealist in spirit and therefore explorations of where modernist art could go if it refused the ascetism of cubism and constructivist abstraction. And they offer brilliant examples of how two very different poetic orientations could anchor themselves in that surrealist spirit. O’Hara’s hallmark “I do this, I do that” formulations are most attentive to the freedom of self-making involved in surrealist critiques of representation, while Ashbery loves the ways surrealism composes “a plane where the subconscious and the concrete mingle on equal terms.” Surrealism offers enigmatic figures marked by an incompleteness of being for which self-expression is an always present and always inadequate metaphor.

Many critics have remarked on O’Hara’s fundamentally painterly style in his commitment to process and in his emphasis on a freedom in structuring details that loosely adapts collage principles. But I am more interested in how by treating Pollock as an exemplary surrealist O’Hara manages to adapt Pollock’s example to developing a free honesty or experimental individualism in poetry. Artefactuality need not be planned but can become inseparable from the intensity of engaging the self in providing names for what one is experiencing. And then one might adapt this mode of being present to an immensely various set of contents, ranging from the playful camp self-consciousness
of Rivers’ intricate levels of significance that cannot quite be fused to Freilicher’s
overripe exploding of realist logic.

Any surrealist art would be attentive to how the unconscious comes into play.
But O’Hara saw that Pollock put aside the ultimately realist dream that one could find an
imagery by which to portray that level of the mind. The unconscious had to be manifest
as a source of energy consistently challenging any version of habit or normativity that
promised variants of conventional representation. If one imagined this expression on
the model of Pollock’s maintaining a dynamic line that refuses subordination to


We can list briefly the three primary ways in which O’Hara might be seen as
continuing Pollock’s spirit of innovation. First O’Hara finds his own ways to develop
what in Pollock is an “amazing ability to quicken a line by thinning it, to slow it by
flooding … to change, to reinvigorate, to extend, to build up an embarrassment of
riches in the mass by drawing alone.”16 And then narrative is possible simply in terms of
how the speaker’s decisions bring a world into the present tense while emptying it of all
external demands that it take particular shapes, as in these lines from “Personal
Poem”:.
we go eat some fish and some ale it’s
cool but crowded we don’t like Lionel Trilling
we decide, we like Don Allen we don’t like
Henry James so much we like Herman Melville

Second, once one has this power over the line, one must put it to work by manifesting the scope of its presence, and so display the difference this play of force can make in our sense of the world. Pollock’s primary instrument for achieving a kind of metaphoric force without metaphor consists in his brilliant use of scale. Scale unites line with a sense of the force of “the painter’s body, not of the image of a body, and the setting for the scale, which would include all the referents,” so that there could be a union of physical and spiritual reality in a “oneness that has no need for the mediation of metaphor and symbol.” In O’Hara scale becomes the constant presence of the variety of New York City and the poet’s capacity to engage an immense range of popular cultural signifiers. Third, what makes this sense of scale believable in O’Hara is his willingness to lay himself on the line so that each line seems to exhaust what is happening in his present and to position himself on the verge of another investment that may go off on a tangent. O’Hara’s is a quotidian expressivism in which there emerges all-encompassing honesty and “spiritual clarity” where there can be “no secrets.” All the negative force of surrealism’s critique of the staging of “art-content” frees in Pollock and O’Hara a “monumental and agonizing”...“eradication of conflicting beliefs toward the total engagement of the spirit in the expression of meaning.” Here the spirit “can act freely and with unpremeditated knowledge ... in a last effort of recognition which is the justification of being.”
Ashbery has a very different focus. He shares O'Hara’s negatives: unfreedom is the force of expectation buttressed by what easily becomes a tyrannical and blind insistence on “truth.” But Ashbery's version of surrealism turned from a focus on the self to how this style established a tradition of active “unknowing” cultivated by constructing planes of experience where “the subconscious and the concrete mingle on equal terms.” The very first essay in Reported Sightings claims “that Surrealism has become a part of our daily lives” because of the diverse and unpredictable crossing of levels of being we need to make sense of quotidian experience. This version of surrealism depends on recognizing how proclaimed surrealists like Dali and Ernst present quite limited versions of this new multiplicity because they root their challenge to reason in the hope that they can somehow provide images that capture or reflect Unconscious activity. The fuller surrealism would eschew the opposition conscious-unconscious for the multiple strangeness within what seems almost pictorially exemplified by de Chirico, whose “manner and substance form an inseparable whole” constituting “an irreducible, magic substance,” “beyond the reach of interesting ideas.” Then one can fully appreciate how “such painters as Pollock, Motherwell, Newman, and Rothko” become “more truly surreal” in their later work than in the work obviously influenced by surrealist artists. For that work provides a richer challenge to the authority or reason and a greater willingness to follow imagination for whatever forces it can muster to express states whose immediacy befuddles our typical expectations of what can make sense. All these artists cultivate the allover picture rather than what it represents so that they produce a “dance of non-discovery” in which every element can
fascinate and none is required to matter “more than another.”²⁶ Where Eliot’s generation “had to bring the whole history of human thought into play,” “today it is possible not to speak in metaphors.”²⁷ When the self in poetry does not have to carry the burden of securing metaphorical interpretation, it becomes free to revel in the many ways objects and situations appear and “accumulate the electrodes of my feelings.”²⁸ And because these feelings seem solicited by what is not self, they are free to agglutinate in the various paths that cross and seem redirected by the neighborhoods objects enter—think again of Freilicher’s *The Painting Table*.

The most important feature for Ashbery’s sense of surrealism was the work’s resistance to any effort to impose a unity that might attribute a distinct purpose to the work. He wanted a sense of pleasure in irreducible difference, like the various ways images make claims on the real in Freilicher or the play of quotation against care in Rivers. That sense of difference can not be subsumed into structural patterns like those proposed by Saussure. Rather the play of levels of sense and allusion become constitutive. Such an art embraces incompleteness and the co-existence of contrary forces on every level of experience. Hence Ashbery stresses how Fairfield Porter’s work shows that there need be “no ideas in art, just objects and materials that combine, like people, in somewhat mysterious ways.”²⁹ Where O’Hara locates freedom in manifesting the energy not to be trapped by memory of his own feelings, Ashbery emphasizes a freedom deriving from how the world’s intricate dissociations give ample occasions for almost surrendering to the luscious incompleteness of dream logic.

De Chirico’s painting is for Ashbery the best articulation of how the spirit of surrealism fully enters quotidian experience. On the concrete level de Chirico
emphasizes the distinctiveness of objects that come from different worlds yet create a sense that they “had always been meant for each other.” But we have to wonder in what world these objects might realize their affinities. The naturalism by which details are rendered is “consistently undermined by devices such as the introduction of multiple vanishing points … and the placing of highlights where shadows logically ought to be.” Then there is the matter of the pervasive mysterious dread that responds to the details but refuses to interpret them as metaphoric or suggest a plausible relation between the general and the particular. It seems as if the painter thinks any feature that promises synthesis into a concrete universal would impose a false intelligibility and threaten the mystery that he protects by allowing differences and incompatibilities to establish what formal unity the painting needs. Rather than pursuing the concrete universal the artist’s ideal becomes prolonging “the dance of non-discovery.” The aim is to unite “the inexhaustibility of poetry with the concreteness of painting.” Poetry and painting in this spirit might even claim ethical significance because they exemplify experiences which suggest that our compulsions to resolve tensions stem less from what the world demands than from how our psyches are trained to displace that very world in pursuit of their own needs. Perhaps it is better simply to accept the tensions differences produce and then imaginatively flesh out the competing options: “It is, fittingly for our late century, a work shot through with oppositions that [R.B.] Kitaj is able to indicate but never quite resolve satisfactorily, which is as it should be.”
Guest matters for my story primarily because she was the writer most focused on the specific issue of how poets might absorb within their own craft the interests and possibilities of this spirit of surrealism in painting. Like Ashbery she wanted to cultivate the force of differences among levels of sense so that the poem would take on a concrete multiplicity of relations making it very much like a canvas. So our task with her is to follow how she uses painting to develop a structuring visuality for the lyric capable of honoring the irreducibly complex and concrete play of these differences without imposing models of understanding typically derived from the intricate linguistic syntax of which she was also very fond.

Ashbery and Schuyler, for example, emphasize figures for visuality quite different from Guest’s emphasis on intricate syntax, ultimately turning against appeals to discursive understanding. So where Schuyler stresses the concreteness of imagistic and tonal details, and Ashbery is fascinated by the instability of cultural codes, Guest seems to emphasize contrasts between writerly and painterly aspects of syntax—the one oriented toward description and argument, the other toward internal balance and subtlety. And in that process she manages verbal echoes of Porter’s deformations, Rivers’ intricacies of allusiveness that trouble the concrete image, and Freilicher’s prolific painterly sense of a real that exceeds the boundaries of conventional empiricism.

This tension between what syntax can enact and what semantics can gather has been central for poets ever since they began emphasizing the non-discursive event qualities of their images. And it is intensified by the fact that logically poetry’s relation to sound patterns seems to echo its commitment to images, since both gain power by resisting the understanding. Witness Pound’s twin obsessions with the concreteness of
the image and the evocativeness of the musical phrase. So it is not surprising that
many poets and critics have formulated accounts of this tension. Rather than bind
myself to any particular poet’s story, I will use the most abstractly formal and synthetic
account I know, namely Nelson Goodman’s *Languages of Art*.

Goodman distinguishes between language as a system depending on discrete
structured differences and painting as operating within a syntactic density where there
are always an infinite possible set of differences that might bring significance to details
and relationships. Language divides the world into differences that make a difference,
as stressed in structural linguistics, and differences that are not registered as significant,
like differences in pronunciation or accompanying gestures. For Goodman language is
syntactically articulate but semantically dense. Pictures, on the other hand, are
syntactically and semantically dense. Every difference is in principle divisible into
significant further differences.

Goodman exemplifies this difference by contrasting an electrocardiogram and a
Hokusai drawing of Mt. Fujiyama that might be indistinguishable taken as visual
material. But when we read the electrocardiogram we treat it as syntactically
articulate: the only differences in the picture that matter are the signs that register
semantically because of contrast with other discrete signifying features. In the Hokusai,
though, every segment of the painting can be significant—the shape of the line of the
mountain, the shading of the figure, the textures that gradually rather than discretely
modulate into one another.

This distinction matters for Guest and the other poets because they were
fascinated by possibilities of pushing the differential logic of words as far as possible
toward incorporating the continuous replete space of painterly composition. One could elaborate that point psychologically in poems like her “Brown Studio” (1962) that play on a speaker’s ability to reconstruct a scene in such a way that the scene ultimately subsumes agency into the physical atmosphere it composes. This sense of engagement in the visual then provides a strange and uncontrollable otherness that at once frightens and exhilarates the intelligence. It comes to seem that the elaborate syntax itself produces a subject matter extending beyond what our vehicles for determining meaning can control.

With “Nebraska” (1973) Guest models an even more ambitious crossing of painterly mark and linguistic sign. Here surrealism departs from any promise of deep psychological truths to stretch the domains of meaning and reference toward something approaching a sheer physiology, but shaped by imagination. The opening sets the affective logic:

Climate succumbing continuously as water gathered
into foam or Nebraska elevated by ships
withholds what is glorious in its climb like
a waiter balancing a waterglass while the tray
slips that was necklace in the arch of bridge

This is not a simple set of images trying to express something ineffable about the psyche. Rather the images are strangely continuous with the intricate flow of syntax, especially since it is the syntactic powers of “as” and “like” that establish the need for the images. It is as if once syntax can sustain a world that resides between reference to an actual Nebraska and Nebraska as itself a figure, language moves toward the replete
space established by conjoined images free to follow their own possibilities of
collection. Can we describe climate without images and metaphors? Perhaps
Nebraska has to float in order to be free of its conventional utterly landlocked condition
(in every register).

Guest’s concluding stanza offers her richest realization of these possible
supplements to discursive meaning:

Hallucinated as Nebraska the swift blue
appears formerly hid when approached now it
chides with a tone the prow striking a grim
atmosphere appealing and intimate as if a verse
were to water somewhere and hues emerge
and distance erased a swan concluding bridge
the sky with her neck possibly brightening
the machinery as a leaf arches through its yellow
syllables so Nebraska’s throat

The force of this final “so” is especially intriguing. Does it suggest that the preceding
figures all express qualities that refer to “Nebraska’s throat,” or does it project
“Nebraska’s throat” as one more metaphor in the effort to characterize what is involved
in hallucinating a site such as Nebraska? The question is unanswerable. But that does
not mean it is not productive. The question allows Nebraska a mode of existence that
can give even that state a complex vitality because it is now in effect adorned by the two
chains that this poem weaves—one of possible reference and one of the undoing of
reference for a continuous set of metaphoric equivalents organized along several axes
like proximity of sound, visual analogy, and emotional association. One can say that along one chain the poet tries to keep in the foreground the capacity of language to afford a coherent structure of signs. But that foreground continually recedes because of a corollary pressure to make the word function as mark in what Goodman calls a “syntactically replete surface” where every kind of difference in gradation and texture is available for reflection.

Guest seems to feel Nebraska needs this supplemental semantics because if this topic is to take on significance, it will have to depend on the poet’s imaginative abilities to reconfigure the contexts within which we imagine it. One might ask, or perhaps must ask, what has the poem to do with the actual Nebraska? And a writer whose adult life was lived in Berkeley and New York City might answer “How could poetry be content with the actual Nebraska?” If Nebraska is to be a candidate for a “fair realism,” the state may have to become something we do not find on any map or government survey. Nebraska has to be a state of mind, an “Oklahoma” brought up to date from its existence in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musical. And Nebraska best becomes a state of mind if it can be located not just as a renewed object of attention but as a force literally establishing paths for the imagination. To refresh Nebraska one has to turn constantly to metaphors and similes that seem to take on their own logic, or to tease us with possible Nebraskas hidden to the practical mind.

Thus Nebraska can flourish only if we are willing to entertain how the imagination can produce strangely plastic continuities that replace traditional description. It is as if Nebraska’s non-descript nature relative to traditional descriptive values heightens the effectiveness of setting two ideals of description against one another. If Nebraska is the
object of description, it here evokes a surreal abandon, as if Nebraska could only come alive by letting it hover as a real stimulus for a series of imaginative equivalents. Yet this may not be enough. The “real” Nebraska of our geography classes may so lack engaging details that it exemplifies the kind of worldly phenomenon especially dependent on what our sentences can invent about it beyond our irritable reaching after fact and reasons. If Nebraska is to live for the mind, the description may have to acknowledge its fictiveness so that Nebraska matters because of how it solicits imagined details.

Now I think we are in a position to appreciate why the syntax here is so elaborate and why that elaborateness in Guest and in Ashbery plays roles quite different from the roles such intricacy plays in traditional lyric poetry. In Yeats or in Stevens, for example, elaborate syntax is a measure of the poet’s ability to bring complex and ambivalent acts of mind into an order that makes rhetoric an effective supplement to argument. Guest, in contrast, seems to develop almost a pure syntax that emphasizes how much apparent discontinuity language can produce within what could be determinate reference. Or, more generously, we can say that in this poem syntax must establish a formal complexity compensating for the semantic simplicity shaping our typical ideas of Nebraska. Syntax calls attention to what can be produced by the experience of sheer language reveling in its capacities for distinction. Here reality for the moment submits to the law of imagination—which is that there are many laws for the imagination all equally capable of generating a sense of our power to find satisfaction in the mind for what is disturbingly difficult to love in the real world. Poetry proves an indispensable and instructive guide to post-representational painting.
5 “Lesser artists correct nature in a misguided attempt at heightened realism, forgetting that the real is not only what one sees but also a result of how one sees it—inattentively, inaccurately perhaps, but nevertheless that is how it is coming through to us, and to deny this is to kill the life of the picture” (Ibid., 242).
6 Ibid., 243-44.
11 Guest, *Forces of Imagination: Writing on Writing* (Berkeley, CA: Kelsey Street Press, 2003), 51
12 Ibid., 107.
16 Ibid., 32. All references to O’Hara’s poetry are to *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995). O’Hara’s specific practices of lineation are worth remarking. His early poetry usually emphasized short, mobile lines, a practice he continued throughout his career. Later these were accompanied by more orchestral compositions adapting Whitman’s line but modifying the bardic into a conversational seriousness, as in “To the Film Industry in Crisis” (232) and “In Memory of My Feelings” (252-256). Both modes stress enjambment, primarily to display a self always trying to catch up with and invest in the syntax-bending energies of his thinking, as in “Poem (When Your Left Arm Twitches) (133)” The pauses also often establish a sense of vulnerability and caution (or the honesty O’Hara finds in Pollock), modified by a flexibility that can shift quickly to other selves as the psyche rushes to fill in the pronounced pauses. “Joe’s Jacket” seems to me O’Hara’s richest lineation because he brings the mobility of the short line to the psychological complexity reveling in the capacities of much longer units of expression. Here the enjambments marvelously manage also to turn on words that offer their own sense of substance, even in transit, so that the motion is insistent but slowed by the hovering that tests what is being expressed. Notice in the poem’s opening how the “I” that gets expressed takes on the combination of substance and transition afforded the nouns that conclude lines:
Entraining to Southampton in the parlor car with Jap and Vincent, I see life as a penetrable landscape lit from above
like it was in my Barbizonian kiddy days when automobiles
were owned by the same people for years and the Alfa Romeo was
only a rumor under the leaves beside the viaduct and I
pretending to be adult felt the blue within me and the light up there
no central figure me, I was some sort of cloud or a gust of wind… (329)

18 O'Hara, Art Chronicle, 34-5.
19 Ibid., 25.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 26.
22 Ashbery, Reported Sightings, 325.
23 Ibid., 4.
24 Ibid., 8.
25 Ibid., 7, also 269.
26 Ibid., 305.
27 Ibid., 82.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 312.
30 Ibid., 404.
31 Ibid., 403.
33 Ashbery, Reported Sightings, 307. This poem, “Clepsydra” goes on to say, “In this way any direction
taken was the right one,/ Leading first to you, and through you to/ Myself that is beyond you and which is
the same thing as space,/ That is the stammering vehicles that remain unknown,/ Eating the sky in all
sincerity because the difference Can never be made up:” (Selected Poems, 68-9).
34 Ibid., 303. Watkins, especially 200-223, is helpful on tensions between what he calls “the grammatical
and the non-rational poetic text” that includes musical densities for the lyric. Robert Kaufman, in his
forthcoming book Negative Romanticism: Adornian Aesthetics in Keats, Shelley, and Modern Poetry, is
very good on how “musical architecture” in Guest pulls against discursive understanding. And I find the
visual artist William Kentridge offering the most powerful contemporary version of this surrealist logic
because the production of meaning is constantly occurring on more levels than the conscious mind can
track. This does not mean we need to hypothesize an unconscious but only a disseminating power in art
that we have to track even though there is no possibility of our formulating its power in discursive terms.
35 Guest, Forces of Imagination, 107.
36 I should note that this material on Guest repeats much of my essay “Barbara Guest and the Boys at
the Cedar Bar: Some Painterly Uses of Language.” Chicago Review 53/4 and 54/1 (2008): 82-87. And it
worth noticing, given my title, that relying on syntax was crucial for Guest in part because it could avoid
any talk of gender, a topic on which she was very sensitive because of her position as both insider and
outsider within the masculine world of the other poets. Making this claim also enables me to avoid
Rachel Blau Duplessis’s brilliant account of Guest’s relying on Surrealist principles to identify with the
subject matter of Picasso’s portraits of Dora Maar in “The Gendered Marvelous: Bababara Guest,
Surrealism, and Feminist Reception” (The Blue Studio, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006).
Duplessis shows superbly how Guest reconstructs “the interior of a painting” by allowing the painting to
“enter my unconscious” so that it can begin “to exist spiritually” (170-71). And she demonstrates how
concerns for space can function beyond syntax: “Rather than seeing the nude only via the painter’s eye,
Guest’s poem makes us see the space and symbiosis between painter and model, body and time, viewer
and situation. She is working with the negative spaces, the push and pull, the in-betweens” (180).
37 As Catherine Elgin, Nelson Goodman’s Philosophy of Art (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997) puts it:
A mosaic pattern or a dot matrix design easily fits into a digital scheme—one whose characters are discrete and determinable. But to construe
them as pictures is to read them differently. When we read a computer printout as a picture, we treat the array of grays that compose it as drawn from the full range of possibilities. ... When we read a mosaic as a nativity scene, we treat its colors, sizes, and shapes as elements of a dense field of alternatives. Even if the artist was in fact limited in the choices available to him, we read the work as part of a scheme that provides unlimited options. (181)

40 Ibid., 102.

Further Reading


**Why is this crossed out?**


