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Introduction by Lisa Rovner
Painting by Sophie von Hellermann

IN 1964 FRANK O'HARA'S seminal book of poetry, *Lunch Poems*, was published by City Lights. As Brad Gooch notes in his biography of O'Hara, 'America in 1964 was straining to break out of black and white and into colour and *Lunch Poems* was part of the brewing social drama. The directness of O'Hara's voice was a tonic.'

City Lights, the now iconic San Francisco bookshop and press, was run by fellow poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti. He recalls meeting O'Hara with Allen Ginsberg one night in New York in 1959, at the studio of painter Larry Rivers: 'He was writing poems on his lunch hour and I was interested in that, so I said, "Why don't you do a book of lunch poems?"' In response to his invitation, O'Hara sent Ferlinghetti a postcard that read:

'Yes sub, lunch is on the stove and lordy, I surely hope you don't think I forgot to put the fire under the greens, I am even flavoring same with cholesterol and hormones so we will all live for ever (in health's despite, as John Wieners said).'

It would take another five years for the book of 37 poems to come together. 'How about lunch? I'm hungry,' Ferlinghetti would write. 'Cooking,' O'Hara would reply.

O'Hara worked as a curator at New York's Museum of Modern Art and watched while lunch was being prepared. As the blurb on the back of *Lunch Poems*, penned by O'Hara himself, reveals:

'Often, this poet, strolling through the noisy splintered glare of a Manhattan noontide, has paused at a sample Olivetti to type up thirty or forty lines of ruminations, or pondering more deeply has withdrawn to a darkened ware- or firehouse to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, co-existence and depth, while never forgetting to eat Lunch his favorite meal....'

In *Lunch Poems* all the traditional distinctions between major and minor events, life and art, collapse. This is poetry inspired by *avant-garde* jazz; poetry informed by the surrealist traditions of collage, juxtaposition, surprise and reuse. O'Hara's poems are, as one critic put it, 'articulations of drift.' He positions his readers right there beside him, on street level, and so as he sublimates Times Square, its chorus girls and neon lights, his friend Edwin Denby's words, cheeseburgers, actress Giulietta Masina (Fellini's wife), French poet Pierre Reverdy's poems, painter Jackson Pollock, and Manhattan Storage Warehouse, all in the same poem, so do we. For O'Hara, poetry mirrored life and life mirrored poetry.

The 'I do this, I do that' poems (as he called them) still feel so modern they have been compared to Facebook posts or tweets. As poet Adam Fitzgerald suggests, 'Many of his poems have the immediacy of a consciousness formed by the internet; fragmentation, collage, name-dropping, checking in, quotations, gossip, scandal, click bait and trends, laconic witticisms and gushy, full-breasted rants. Call him a prophet of the internet.'

Lunch Poems is bite-sized and easily devoured in one sitting but perhaps what makes this collection of O'Hara's poems so appetizing is what Margaret Perloff – who wrote the first comprehensive study of his work – has to say: 'Here was a writer who made poetry look like a delightful game.'

