

Frank O'Hara Plaque Ceremonies at 441 East 9th Street, June 10, 2014

Tony Towle

As you all know, Frank O'Hara lived here from 1959 to 1963 with Joe LeSueur, until early June, this very time of year. And it was while he lived here that he wrote much of the work that made up *Lunch Poems*, almost all of the contents of *Love Poems (Tentative Title)*, many of which he wrote for Vincent Warren, and also the unique "Biotherm," for Bill Berkson. This was clearly an extremely productive period for Frank, so it is appropriate that a plaque commemorate his presence here. He typed his poems on the kitchen table, up there on the second floor between the first and second window, accompanied periodically by the din and exhaust fumes of the 9th Street Crosstown bus.

I know when he and Joe moved out and went to their new loft on Broadway, because Frank Lima and I were moving in (and it's where I lived for the next two years). Frank had "passed the apartment on" to us by talking to the landlord. The rent went up from 53 and change to 56 and change. Yes, you heard those numbers right. The increase wasn't exactly an outright hardship, but it was an annoyance. To put things in perspective, a short beer at the Cedar was fifteen cents and a pack of cigarettes was thirty (an exorbitant thirty-five from a vending machine).

The layout of the apartment included the large kitchen, which had a very small sink, a reasonable stove, an oversized refrigerator, the customary bath tub that had a removable plywood cover, and an ancient, uncleanable linoleum floor. There was a minuscule bedroom — maybe six by eight feet — to the rear of the kitchen, which was windowless to the outside, but had a large cutout opening onto the kitchen over the tub (and it had no door). This bedroom was Frank's. The other two windows facing the street belonged to the living room, and there was a six-by-eight bedroom off the back of that — Joe's — which had a small window that opened onto an air shaft, and did have a door. The toilet was in a tiny alcove between the kitchen and living room. As down-at-the-heels as all this sounds — and I could go on — when Frank was here the place had charm: a Motherwell and a de Kooning and other artwork on the walls, the interesting books on the

shelves, the bourbon in the glass, the Prokofiev on the record player, and above all the engaging conversation; they all misdirected the attention from the deficiencies of normal housekeeping and lack of ordinary amenities that would be expected in a mid-twentieth-century apartment.

Frank took the conversational mystique with him, of course, as well as the books and paintings and record player. The dirt and grime were now unavoidably present. Every few weeks the refrigerator's freezer needed an hour-long, Antarctic-exploration-type "defrosting" with a hammer, after the encroaching ice had reduced the available space to where you couldn't even get your hand in, let alone store a pork chop. And there was an endless parade of cockroaches that behaved as if the apartment had been passed on to *them*.

It took me a year to convince them otherwise, thanks to a poisonous blue powder I bought from the drug store that used to be there on the corner. Almost directly across the street there was a miniature deli run by two Polish ladies, where, as Frank and Joe did, I could buy kielbasa, bread, milk, and eggs on credit. But when the figure began to approach the five-dollar mark, they would get visibly nervous and you knew it was time to reduce the balance significantly. They kept an open pack of Marlboros behind the counter, out of which you could buy single cigarettes for two cents apiece, a convenience I sometimes had to make use of.

Eddie's father, Ted [Berrigan], lived a few doors down on 9th Street on the other side of Tomkins Square, where he pretty much kept open house. If I were coming back here from there after dusk, I walked as fast as I could along the rather dimly lighted path through the park. There was complete darkness and a menacing silence on either side. The park was rumored to be quite dangerous at that time, and I believed the rumors.

Eddie read a poem that was geographically appropriate ["Avenue A"]. I'm going to read a famous poem Frank wrote either in his office at the Museum of Modern Art after lunch, or perhaps composed during the three-hour train ride to East Hampton, where he was

going to spend the weekend with his close friends Mike and Patsy Goldberg, who lived near there, in Springs. [Reads "The Day Lady Died"]