

THE ART WORLD
ARTISTS AND WRITERS

New York mashups.

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“Certainly whatever funny happens to you/Is OK. To demand more than this would be strange/Of you,” John Ashbery wrote. He addressed a wispy personage who, as is often the case in his work, could be himself or anyone: “you who have so many lovers,/People who look up to you and are willing/To do things for you, but you think/It’s not right, that if they really knew you . . ./So much for self-analysis.” The poem is “And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name.” (The Latin phrase, from Horace, means “as is painting, so is poetry.”) It appears in the catalogue of “Painters & Poets,” a show at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery that revisits the years, beginning in 1950, when the gallery amounted to a salon for what John Bernard Myers—its co-founder, with de Nagy, a Hungarian émigré banker—dubbed the New York School of poets. (The catalogue, which is gorgeously designed, features a fine and gossipy essay by the poet and critic Douglas Crase.) The de Nagy published

the first or second books of Ashbery, Frank O’Hara, James Schuyler, and Barbara Guest, among others, and showed artists with literary sympathies, including Fairfield Porter, Larry Rivers, Jane Freilicher, Grace Hartigan, and Red Grooms. A deceptively easy-seeming urbanity marked the group, which projected New York as a new Paris of sociable aesthetic zeal, and which did indeed shrug off analysis—of everything. The coterie was doomed to specialness in the coarsely triumphant art world of the sixties—never mind the harum-scarum culture at large—even as it expanded to embrace young poets, such as Ron Padgett and Ted Berrigan, who regularly collaborated with the artists Joe Brainard, George Schneeman, and, later, Trevor Winkfield. I was among those poets, for a few years, on a scene that lost force with the death of its galvanizing central figure, O’Hara—hit by a jeep on Fire Island—at the age of forty, in 1966.

The de Nagy Gallery had roots in the circles of refugee artists and writers who fled Europe for New York during the Second World War. Myers was the managing editor of *View*, a lavish avant-garde magazine that celebrated Surrealism. The New York School poet Kenneth Koch—who, like Ashbery and O’Hara, graduated from Harvard after the war—plausibly bragged of having been the only soldier in the Philippines with a subscription. De Nagy arrived in 1947 with the air, but no longer the means, of a courtly patrician. He had been imprisoned by both the Germans and the Russians, and had lost his villa in Budapest, and, with it, his extensive art collection. In 1949, he and Myers launched a high-toned marionette theatre, which went bust when a polio epidemic scared away its juvenile audience. They then formed the gallery, with the backing of a wealthy dilettante, Dwight Ripley, and modelled it on *Art of This Century*, the artistic and

social hub started by the black-sheep heiress Peggy Guggenheim. (That gallery, like *View*, had expired in 1947.) Oddly, given that so many of the artists, with the exception of Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell, and Alfred Leslie, were figurative painters, the de Nagy’s initial stable was assembled on the advice of that apostle of abstraction Clement Greenberg. The warmly refractory painter and critic Fairfield Porter, who was robust in spirit while conservative in style, became a leader. He continually hosted poets at his capacious family home in Southampton—notably Schuyler, who dropped by one day in 1961 and stayed for twelve years.

The show is dominated by literary material—collaborative graphics and collages, books, and ephemera, as well as whimsical dramatic films, made by the photographer Rudy Burckhardt and starring his friends—and the best paintings are Porter’s portraits of poets,