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www.nytimes.com

The New York Times
ON THE WEB

November 9, 2001

Words Into a Deft, Knowing Style

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own, or those of one of his many poet-friends. They also plucked from his surroundings: a silver-foil candy wrapper, a sign, a torn page of notebook paper scrawled with a friend's name.

Similarly, Brainard's images might be of his own devising or lifted from other sources. (His skills with pencil, brush and Xacto knife were about equally exceptional.) De Kooning's slippery women put in appearances, as does Ernie Bushmiller's cartoon character Nancy — and their occasional merger, Nancy as a de Kooning woman. Even when the artworks are devoid of words, the images tend to trigger perfect thought balloons in the viewer's mind: "flowers," "television set," "Madonna and Child," "ashtray," "male torso."

Brainard was a well-known man-about-downtown in New York in the 1960's and 70's. Tall and slim, he nearly always wore freshly laundered jeans and a crisp white shirt — partly unbuttoned but never sleazy — regardless of occasion or season. He had arrived from Tulsa, Okla., in 1960 at 19, with a sense of sophistication that he must have been born with, and a shy innocence that he never seemed to lose.

At the time, art in New York was undergoing a sea change, turning toward reality and popular culture on all fronts. This shift was evident in exhibitions like "In the Art of Assemblage" at the Museum of Modern Art and in the work of artists as diverse as Larry Rivers, Ray Johnson, Jasper Johns, Lucas Samaras, Claes Oldenburg and Andy Warhol.

Brainard felt immediately at home. He designed covers for the books of New York School poets like Ted Berrigan, Kenward Elmslie and Ron Padgett and collaborated on comics with their leading light, Frank O'Hara. Inspired by the poets' emphasis on daily anecdote, he tried his own hand at writing — with wonderful results, most notably a book called "I Remember," which simply listed childhood and adolescent experiences in a compressed style reminiscent of Gertrude Stein, but more accessible.

He was an unbelievably prolific artist, as suggested by a 1970's photograph that shows him at work in a loft carpeted with piles of paper, magazines and projects. He had his first New York show in 1965. In his 11th (and the last during his lifetime), at the Fischbach Gallery in 1975, he achieved his goal of exhibiting 1,500 tiny collages.

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November 9, 2001

ART REVIEW | JOE BRAINARD

Knitting Images and Words Into a Deft, Knowing Style

By ROBERTA SMITH

Joe Brainard (1942-94) was a word-and-image man the way other people are song-and-dance men or women. In his art, language and pictures flowed together effortlessly, almost musically. The retrospective of his short, productive career at P.S. 1 in Long Island City feels a little too precious in spots, but there is not a note off or a step missed.

The words in Brainard's art might be his own, or those of one of his many poet-friends. They also came ready made on scraps of paper plucked from his surroundings: a silver-foil candy wrapper, a tiny cutout of a Holiday Inn sign, a torn page of notebook paper scrawled with a friend's name.

Similarly, Brainard's images might be of his own devising or lifted from other sources. (His skills with pencil, brush and Xacto knife were about equally exceptional.) De Kooning's slippery women put in appearances, as does Ernie Bushmiller's cartoon character Nancy — and their occasional merger, Nancy as a de Kooning woman. Even when the artworks are devoid of words, the images tend to trigger perfect thought balloons in the viewer's mind: "flowers," "television set," "Madonna and Child," "ashtray," "male torso."

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By the time Brainard died of AIDS in 1994 at 52, his work was fading from view. He had made little art — and exhibited even less — since the mid-1980's, devoting most of his last decade to reading Victorian novels. In the mid 90's two shows at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery — a memorial survey of his collages and a small retrospective in 1997 — began to reverse his art's disappearing act.

The P.S. 1 show, which originated at the Berkeley Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, should finish the job. Just in case, de Nagy has mounted its own smaller, also excellent summation of his career.

Like Ray Johnson, another master collagist, Brainard is one of those great nonaligned artists who now seem to fit in everywhere. His love of intimate scale and pop culture ephemera (no one did more with matchbooks); his penchant for captions and punch lines; his forthright joy in being gay; his inability to adhere to a single style or medium (to make "Brainards" as he put it) — these characteristics link him to a host of contemporary artists, among them Jim Hodges, Robert Mele, Raymond Pettibon and Karen Kilimnik. His own influences include Kurt Schwitters, Arthur Dove, Joseph Cornell and Max Ernst, and also Edouard Vuillard.

The P.S. 1 show looks great, especially in the first big gallery. An entire wall is devoted to the garden collages, which transform Pollock's all-overness into fields of bright flowers and fizzily confuse the handmade and the mechanically reproduced, like Warhol crossed with Alex Katz. (All are handmade, except one, which consists entirely of machine-embroidered trim.)

On an adjacent wall hang the densely collaged Madonnas, cosseted in Byzantine fields of sewn and glued patchwork, and in one case accented with Pollockesque drips. On another are the drawings and paintings of his beloved Nancy: as a boy, as a Leonardo drawing, as George Washington on Mount Rushmore. Across the gallery are paintings of a white whippet on a pure green lawn, which reflect Brainard's admiration for the work of Mr. Katz and Fairfield Porter. There are vitrines of his book designs and a room devoted to his assemblage wall pieces, which alone are looking generic and musty.

Despite such diversity, Brainard's art is impressively consistent. He tended to stick to a few favorite subjects, transferring them from medium to medium and often "listing" them in grids: flowers, cigarette stubs, jockey shorts, clean folded shirts, hearts. These motifs, along with an irresistible tenderness and an equally seductive, pitch-perfect sense of craft, gave him all the style he needed.

Much of the pleasure of his art lies in measuring the simplicity of his transformations against the depth of feeling that motivated them. In one of the first works at de Nagy, a postage stamp of the Jefferson Memorial becomes a shimmering nocturne with the addition of some blue gouache and a sliver of moon. In one of the first vitrines at P.S. 1, an open matchbook is collaged with a tiny image of a proscenium stage and the words "Men and Love." Two matches bent upright signify lovers and an audience. In the next, equally small work, the upright matches serve as the stems of blue cut-out flowers.

Brainard is sometimes seen as a miniaturist and a fan. At P.S. 1, for example, there's a cigarette stub, handsomely framed and labeled "Cigarette Smoked by Willem de Kooning, May 15, 1970." But such adulation only thinly disguises a dedicated ambition and an achievement whose pertinence and innovations continue to expand.

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	MoMA PS1	I.A.2879

Knitting Images and Words Into a Deft, Knowing Style

Page 3 of 3

"Joe Brainard: A Retrospective" is at the P. S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, 22-25 Jackson Avenue at 46th Avenue, Long Island City, (718)784-2084, through Nov. 25. "Joe Brainard: Selected Work" is at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, 724 Fifth Avenue, at 57th Street, (212)262-5050, through tomorrow.

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eva

From: conlew [conlew@uclink.berkeley.edu]
 Sent: Monday, October 15, 2001 10:50 PM
 To: eva@ps1.org
 Subject: misc details re brainard

Dear Eva< I left an ridiculously long message on yr phone not knowing if I would get to a computer but as you see I have now.

So to make it easier, I will repeat the things that need to be tidied up.

Labels:

- ✓ 1. Pansey on back wall (gardens wall to right of arch into assemblage room, small grey single flower. It should be Unt 1977 collage and pencil, coll Sarah-Ann and Werner H. Kramarsky (it is misattributed to Kenward Elmslie)
- ✓ 2. large plexi box with 104 small pieces on shelves in collage room. Should be Arthur and Carol Goldberg (look in cat); now says coll John Brainard
- ✓ 3. Need Brad Gooch label

4. Need guards in both rooms with cases. The books are very vulnerable, esp Berrigan, The Sonnets, which is worth nearly 1,000. Now there is a big gap where someone could grab it. Need to put more glass barriers under the glass cover to prevent this

Ditto in other room with tiny collages in case; so easy to grab now; need to be sure there are no gaps and also need a guard

5. Need twice as much light as now on big assemblages

6. Plumes on beige lace - you know

7. Prell: top of assembl is leaning on plexi cover. needs to be straightened.

6. Antler assemblage; beads are stuck behind something. need to be loosened; they should hang down.

- ✓ 7. Room numbers are wrong on handout

That's it. Please see that these things are taken care of; I will probably be out wed or thursday.

Thanks for everything. The opening was a big success and in general the show does look smashing.

Connie

Collection
 Brainard.
 John ~~Plaster~~
 collage miniatures
 misc.
 c. 1975
 mixed media

Collection of Berkeley
 art museum.

Blue

Condition book

Tibor de Nagy - Sun face -
 app. boxes - Peter Skerf
 Should be

meeting - Recker
 Lopez
 front desk - lunch
 announcements
 Jeff? - Brand labels
 in

email Stephen Cannizzo if needed.

- Sign expo. labels on college elements.

* I hate to sound like
some devils in

a Grade B more ...
12.5 x 12.5

Labels:

- ① Pansey on back wall (gardens wall to right of arch into assemblage room, small grey single flower. It should be Unt 1977 collage and pencil coll Sarah-Ann and Werner H Kramarsky (it is misattributed to Kenward Elmslie)
- ② large plexi box with 104 small pieces on shelves in collage room. Should be Arthur and Carol Goldberg (look in cat); now says coll John Brainard *Homocubed*
- ③ Need Brad Gooch label
- ④ Need guards in both rooms with cases. The books are very vulnerable, esp Berrigan, The Sonnets, which is worth nearly 1,000. Now there is a big gap where someone could grab it. Need to put more glass barriers under the glass cover to prevent this

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- ⑥ Antler assemblage; beads are stuck behind something. need to be loosened; they should hang down.
- ⑦ Room numbers are wrong on handout

Connie

mixed.
wed 9.

Collectors

Bred

6000

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Untitled

1977

6 1/2 x 4 1/2"

Collection — ~~6~~

Untitled (Minature)

c. mid-1970s

mixed media

can box 2 1/8 x 2 1/8

Collection —

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• Books to be displayed in all
- nothing w/

• 3 vitrines - walk around

• * glaucine cover of
Train can come off

* w/ slow w/ slowly -

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eva

From: conlew@uclink.berkeley.edu
Sent: Thursday, September 13, 2001 6:09 PM
To: eva@ps1.org
Subject: Re: Joe Brainard wall text

>Dear Eva,

Glad everyone there is ok. We had an opening on tuesday night and it felt extremely strange. We cancelled the dinner post opening but went ahead with the opening itself.

Now to Brainard.

If the walls are grey, you should have no problem with the legibility of the wall text and section texts. The gallery should be painted BEFORE Sept 24 as that it is my understanding that the 25th we will be doing the layout (that is the day I have arranged to be there). If the show is to open on the 30th, it seems as if you would want to have the gallery painted before Bill comes in). I strongly urge you to contact Bill in advance and establish a wall color. You could try his cell, fax or call him in New Mexico where he probably still is: 505 758-7780.

Let me know what is happening.

Thanks, Connie

>Dear Connie,

>

>I hope you are well. We are trying to recover from the shock of recent
>events and get back to work but it is difficult. I have been trying to
>reach you by phone to discuss the wall text for Joe Brainard. I have just
>spoken with Alanna Heiss. I do not believe that the design of the
>exhibition space has been finalized and we have some concern that it will
>not be possible to read the plexi text panels if the walls end up being
>white or gray. This is one of the decisions which Alanna and Bill Katz
>need to make after he arrives on the 24th of September. In the case that
>we do not use the plexi text panels, we will produce our own wall text of
>vinyl lettering. However, we may not be able to produce the entire wall
>text that was used in Berkely and Boulder due to budget issues. Would you
>be able to provide us with an edited version if we need one? I will be
>able to know in more details how long the text can be over the next week.
> This way, we will have a back up in case we are unable to use the plexi
>panels. Also, I would like to reach Bill Katz to discuss this with him. Do
>you have his email address or know where the best place to reach him is?

>

>I look forward to hearing from you soon.

>

>Sincerely,

>

>Eva Levinson

--

Constance M. Lewallen
Senior Curator for Exhibitions
University of California Berkeley Art Museum
2625 Durant Avenue, Berkeley, CA 94720
Berkeley, CA 94720
tel: 510 642 1897
fax: 510 642 4889
email: conlew@uclink4.berkeley.edu

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eva

From: Constance Lewallen [conlew@uclink4.berkeley.edu]
Sent: Friday, September 14, 2001 12:33 PM
To: eva@ps1.org; Mary Kate Murphy
Subject: Re: Joe Brainard wall text

Eva, another idea for wall texts: You can insert a sheet of paper or board of another color behind them so that they can be read!

Connie

--
Constance Lewallen, Senior Curator
UC Berkeley Art Museum
2625 Durant Ave.
tel: 510 642 1897
Fax: 10 642 4889
conlew@uclink4.berkeley.edu

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eva

To: conlew@uclink4.berkeley.edu
Cc: larissa@ps1.org; registrar@ps1.org
Subject: Joe Brainard Wall Text

Dear Connie,

I hope you are well. We are trying to recover from the shock of recent events and get back to work but it is difficult. I have been trying to reach you by phone to discuss the wall text for Joe Brainard. I have just spoken with Alanna Heiss. I do not believe that the design of the exhibition space has been finalized and we have some concern that it will not be possible to read the plexi text panels if the walls end up being white or gray. This is one of the decisions which Alanna and Bill Katz need to make after he arrives on the 24th of September. In the case that we do not use the plexi text panels, we will produce our own wall text of vinyl lettering. However, we may not be able to produce the entire wall text that was used in Berkely and Boulder due to budget issues. Would you be able to provide us with an edited version if we need one? I will be able to know in more details how long the text can be over the next week. This way, we will have a back up in case we are unable to use the plexi panels. Also, I would like to reach Bill Katz to discuss this with him. Do you have his email address or know where the best place to reach him is?

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Eva Levinson

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Museum of Modern Art affiliate
22-25 Jackson Ave at 46th Ave
Long Island City, New York 11101
t: 718.784.2084 f: 718.482.9454
www.ps1.org

PS.1 MoMA

FAXED

FAX

TO: Bill Katz
FAX: 212.431.4926
FROM: Eva Levinson
RE: Joe Brainard exhibition design

September 13, 2001

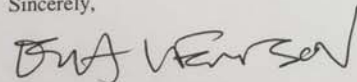
Dear Bill,

I hope this fax finds you well. Jeffrey and I have spoken to Alanna and Tony and would like to finalize plans for the design of the Joe Brainard exhibition:

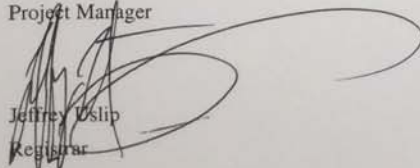
1. The main gallery's walls and ceilings must be white as we will not have the time or the budget to repaint before installing our next exhibition which opens on the third floor December 9th.
2. Please choose a color for the back galleries by no later than Monday if you desire.
3. We will prepare the galleries on Wednesday.
4. Crates will arrive on Monday.

We are aware that the show comes with 12 plexi text panels with white lettering but realize that these will be impossible to read against a white wall. I have emailed Connie about the question of wall text and asked if she could provide an edited version of the original wall text so that we could produce it here. We usually use black vinyl lettering. Please advise.

Sincerely,



Eva Levinson
Project Manager



Jeffrey Osip
Registrar

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kb

To: conlew@uclink.berkeley.edu

Connie,

Sorry to confuse you about when Bill Katz was arriving. That was a misunderstanding between Jeffrey and myself. The meeting with Robert Polito went well. If we go ahead with the marathon reading it will not be on the day of the opening but probably a week or two after. I will give you the details when I have more information.

Best,

Eva

On July 25, 1997, I received a letter from you dated July 23, 1997, asking me to let you know when Bill Katz was arriving. I am sorry I did not get back to you sooner. I will let you know when I have more information.

I am sorry I did not get back to you sooner. I will let you know when I have more information.

I am sorry I did not get back to you sooner. I will let you know when I have more information.

I am sorry I did not get back to you sooner. I will let you know when I have more information.

Connie

Department of Art History
University of California Berkeley Art Museum
2020 Chabot Avenue Berkeley, CA 94720
Tel: 510 841 1937
Fax: 510 841 1938
Email: conlew@uclink.berkeley.edu

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kb

To: conlew@uclink.berkeley.edu
Cc: registrar
Subject: RE: cases for books

Connie,

We don't have a framer on staff. Could we put these covers in the case with books as they are, or in separate cases? We will have to build all cases as the ones we had were damaged. We were thinking a few long cases containing several books each. So we should have list and dimensions first, and then build cases.

Eva

-----Original Message-----

From: conlew@uclink.berkeley.edu [SMTP:conlew@uclink.berkeley.edu]
Sent: Wednesday, July 25, 2001 1:42 PM
To: kb@ps1.org
Subject: RE: cases for books

Does that mean you can't do the installation til Sept 26? Is this a problem.
Will he give you colors in advance so everything can be ready? Is he
still in Santa Fe or how did you reach him, as I would like to.

As for list of books, tell us size and number of cases, and Ron will provide list.

And did you check about possiblity of framing some of the original drawings for book covers?

Connie

--

Constance M. Lewallen
Senior Curator for Exhibitions
University of California Berkeley Art Museum
2625 Durant Avenue, Berkeley, CA 94720
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tel: 510 642 1897
fax: 510 642 4889
email: conlew@uclink4.berkeley.edu

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kb

To: RonPadgettPoet@aol.com
Cc: larissa
Subject: RE: Brainard books for PS1 show

Ron,

I just got you latest message after I wrote to you. No problem. We can arrange for Sunday delivery. Just let me know how many boxes/bags to expect. Were you thinking Sunday August 12th?

Eva

-----Original Message-----

From: larissa
Sent: Wednesday, July 25, 2001 11:38 AM
To: kb
Subject: FW: Brainard books for PS1 show

-----Original Message-----

From: RonPadgettPoet@aol.com [SMTP:RonPadgettPoet@aol.com]
Sent: Tuesday, July 24, 2001 3:03 PM
To: larissa@ps1.org
Subject: Re: Brainard books for PS1 show

<< File: ATT00003.txt; charset = UTF-8 >>

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kb

To: RonPadgettPoet@aol.com

Subject: Brainard Books

Dear Ron,

Do you have a list of titles with descriptions of the books, you will be lending P.S.1? This will be good information for myself and the registrar to have. Are you still planning on August 10th? As I said, anytime is fine to deliver the books. We can meet you in the city or pick them up as well. Approximately how many books are there? Should we bring a car? I am at the museum Tuesday through Saturday, Larissa Monday through Friday.

Best regards,

Eva Levinson

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Att00010

Dear Eva Levinson,

It turns out that I have to be in New York City in August, probably around the 10th, for one day, so I won't be coming in during September. Therefore, not too far down the road, I would like to make an appointment with you to deliver the books to be displayed in the vitrine(s) for the Brainard show.

The thing is that I need to know what vitrine space I should expect to fill.

Choosing the books is not so easy as it might seem. One of Joe's major collaborators (and a lender to the Berkeley show) was quite unhappy

about not being represented in the book display in Boulder, and since the PS1 book display is my responsibility, I want to be very sure that the books

I select do indeed go into the display, with no last-minute cutting or replacements. I realize that coming across as a control freak about what might seem to be a minor part of the show is not very attractive, but since I have promised that certain titles will be includedâ••as they in fact should beâ••I do not want to find myself later having to apologize for surprise omissions.

So please find out in advance the dimensions of the vitrine(s) and let me know so that I can plan the logistics of my NYC visit, which will be very tight on time, especially since I have to retrieve certain titles from

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Att00010

storage.

Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,
Ron Padgett

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t: 718.784.2084 f: 718.482.9454
www.ps1.org

PS.1
MoMA

FAXED

FAX

TO: Bill Katz
FAX: 212.431.4926
FROM: Eva Levinson
RE: Joe Brainard Retrospective

July 19, 2001

Dear Mr. Katz,

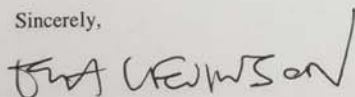
I wanted to introduce myself. I am Project Manager for the Joe Brainard Retrospective at P.S.1, and am working closely with Larissa Harris, Associate Curator, and Jeffrey Uslip, Registrar.

Jeffrey and I would like to get in touch with you to discuss your plans for the installation. Could you fax us a copy of these plans, as well type and color of paints to be used as soon as possible? The Third Floor Main Gallery (now housing *Sooja Kim: Needle Woman*) will be deinstalled beginning September 17th and should take 1 – 2 days. The best time for you to come in person will be Tuesday the 18th. Please let us know if this fits your schedule.

For the next week the best way to reach me is via fax at 718.482.9454. I can also be reached via email at kb@ps1.org, or phone at 718.784.2084 extension *822. These are temporary until I get my own phone installed. I will let you know when this information changes.

I look forward to speaking with you soon

Sincerely,



Eva Levinson
Project Manager

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	MoMA PS1	I.A.2879

kb

To: conlew@uclink4.berkeley.edu

Subject: Joe

Hi Connie,

I got your fax. Thank you for getting back to me so soon. Yes, Carolyn Bane got the labels and will send copies of the press release as well as announcement cards. (Cards announce all exhibitions opening on October 14th.) The press release will be done soon, the cards will be ready around mid-September.

Jeffery and I will continue the search for Bill Katz! I hope we reach him soon as it is important that we schedule his visit.

Larissa and I will keep Ron Padgett informed of what is happening. We just purchased a copy of *Remember*. It is excellent!

I need to ask again if you will be coming to New York yourself, and if so when? Also, could you let me know who to contact to order catalogues?

Best regards,

Eva Levinson

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**Berkeley Art Museum
Pacific Film Archive**
Facsimile Communication

University of California at Berkeley

2625 Durant Avenue

Berkeley, CA 94720-2250

Tel (510) 642-1897

FAX (510) 642-4889

email: conlaw@uclink.berkeley.edu

Date 7/19/01

To: Eva Levinson, PS1

Fax: 718 482 9454

From: Constance Lewallen, Senior Curator

Re: Brainard

Dear Eva,

I am delighted to meet you by fax, and to have someone to communicate with re Brainard details. Would you check with Carolyn Baines (sp?) to see if she received the mailing labels for the Brainard announcement (I imagine this will be an announcement for several shows)? Also will you ask her to send us some copies of the press release and also 20 or so announcements? I also suggested critics she should contact directly who have written on Brainard in the past or whom I know are interested.

Books to be included in the exhibition will be lent by Ron Padgett to you directly. His number in Vermont (where he is this summer) is 802 456 1018. His email address is RonPadgettPoet@aol.com.

The following is a copy of an email I sent Jeffrey yesterday, just so you are up to date.

Jeffrey, I have not been able to reach Bill Katz. Did you mail him a floor plan? My hope was to reach him by phone to call his attention to the new schedule (he still thinks he is installing in October) and then to fax him the plan while I had his attention.

Katz phone: 212 431 4988

cell: 212 783-4251

His fax is 212 431 4926

My advice is, and I will tell Eva Lewallen this as well when I fax her tomorrow, to keep trying Bill Katz's home and cell phone numbers--you will reach him eventually--so at least he will reserve the installation days (what are they, by the way?). My experience is that it doesn't do much good to fax without having spoken to him. He goes back and forth between NY and Santa Fe, and also travels a lot, but he always comes through in the end.

I have some thoughts on how to utilize the smaller rooms, and I want to discuss these with him. Then he can give you paint colors so you can get started. Remember that for the assemblages that are mounted on cloth backs, the cloth needs to be painted to match the wall on which it is hung (there are four or five such pieces). This is easy to do, but just so you know.

Feel free to contact me by email or any way you wish.

Best regards,

Connie Lewallen

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P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center

Museum of Modern Art affiliate
22-25 Jackson Ave at 46th Ave
Long Island City, New York 11101
t: 718.784.2084
www.ps1.org

PS.1 MoMA

FAXED

FAX

TO: Cor
Seni
Univ
FAX: 510.0
FROM: Eva Levinson
RE: Joe Brainard Retrospective

July 18, 2001

Dear Ms. Lewallan,

I wanted to introduce myself. I have been assigned to the position of Project Manager for the Joe Brainard Retrospective at P.S.1. I am very excited to work on this exhibition and have quickly become a Brainard devotee. I have met with Larissa Harris, Associate Curator, and Tom Finkelpearl and these are some preliminary questions I have. Larissa and I will be meeting with Robert Polito of the New School next week to discuss their October 16th Joe Brainard tribute poetry reading as well as a possible marathon reading of *I Remember* at P.S.1.

I understand that we are under obligation to purchase 50 catalogues. Who do I contact to order these catalogues?

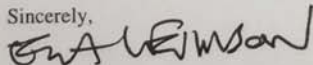
The Third Floor Main Gallery (now housing *Sooja Kim: Needle Woman*) will be deinstalled beginning September 17 and should take 1 - 2 days. When is Bill Katz planning to arrive? What is the best way to reach him?

When are you planning to arrive in New York?

For the next week the best way to reach me is via fax at 718.482.9454. I can also be reached via email at kb@ps1.org, or phone at 718.784.2084 extension *822. These are temporary until I get my own phone installed. I will let you know when this information changes.

I look forward to speaking with you soon

Sincerely,



Eva Levinson

Project Manager

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PS.1 MoMA

FAX

TO: Constance Lewallen
Senior Curator
University of California Berkeley Art Museum
FAX: 510.642.4889
FROM: Eva Levinson
RE: Joe Brainard Retrospective

July 18, 2001

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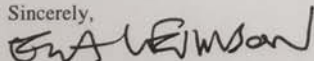
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Sincerely,



Eva Levinson

Project Manager

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Joe Brainard: A Retrospective

The University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAM/PFA) is organizing the first large-scale touring exhibition of the work of artist and writer Joe Brainard, who died in 1994 at the age of 52. This exhibition will open at the BAM/PFA in January 2001 and tour to two or three additional venues. It will feature approximately 150 paintings, drawings, assemblages, book covers, prints and selected writings. In conjunction with the show, the BAM/PFA will produce an illustrated catalogue featuring essays by critic Carter Ratcliff, poet John Ashberry and exhibition curator Constance Lewallen, and present public programs including a poetry reading and roundtable discussion.

Brainard was born in Arkansas in 1942, grew up in Oklahoma, and came to New York, just out of high school, in 1960. From 1965 to 1979 he produced thousands of paintings, assemblages, collages, book covers and illustrations and one-of-a-kind books. He had several one-person exhibitions in galleries in New York (Alan, Fischbach) and elsewhere, and appeared in 45 group shows between 1965 and 1979. By 1980, he more or less ceased making art and spent the rest of his life reading. He died of AIDS-related pneumonia in 1994.

Brainard's closest friend and partner from the 1960s onward was the poet and librettist Kenward Elmslie. He did many book covers for Elmslie and other New York School poets, including John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, Ron Padgett and others. These associations, and his penchant for collage, relate him to Jess.

Brainard's art is difficult to categorize. His subject matter ranges from erotica and camp humor to the more simple pleasures of colorful flowers and a good smoke. The artist he most admired was de Kooning, but the style he was closest to was Pop. He was a miniaturist who also created his share of larger-scale work. Some of his collages and box assemblages are reminiscent of Schwitters and Cornell, respectively, while his Madonna assemblages are as garish as the Puerto Rican and Ukrainian religious stores in which he found his materials, but he was also capable of spare, geometric compositions. His allover flower collages suggest Pollock but also presage Pattern painting. He painted still lifes and landscapes somewhat akin to Fairfield Porter and a whole body of work appropriating Ernie Bushmiller's cartoon character Nancy. For the 1968 cover for *Art News Annual* he collaged Nancy's head on Goya's *Nude Maja*, Manet's *Olympia*, Duchamp's *Nude Descending the Staircase* and de Kooning's *Woman I*.

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His best known writing is I Remember, the varied parts of which were gathered and published in a single volume in the early seventies by Angel Hair Press. Reissued by Penguin in 1995, the book as been described by Paul Auster as a masterpiece: "One by one, the so-called important books of our time will be forgotten, but Joe Brainard's modest little gem will endure."

The Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York has mounted two exhibitions in recent years that have received wide acclaim by Holland Cotter, Carter Ratcliff, Robert Rosenblum, Edmund White and others. Cotter, in a 1997 NY Times reviews, said:

"Like O'Hara's poems, Brainard's collages can be verbose without being fidgety, compact but relaxed...and in some ways Brainard, like O'Hara was ahead of his time. His extravagantly ornamental assemblages and his floral collages resembling fabric or wallpaper design anticipated Pattern and Decoration art of the 1970s, and in turn paved the way for some of the gender bending work of other gay artists. As Robert Rosenblum observed, Brainard gives us 'a preview of the nostalgic regressions of so many recent artists, from Duncan Hannah to Mike Kelley.'"

Brainard enjoyed success but was not a careerist. He was happiest making art, almost continuously, for and with friends. His work crosses boundaries between art and illustration, high and low, personal and public, and between the visual and literary arts.

In the last decade of his life, Brainard stopped producing art and retreated to his Soho loft, where he spent his time reading Victorian novels and smoking cigarettes. He died of AIDS-related pneumonia in 1994. Virtually forgotten by the art world establishment and unheard of by a younger generation, Brainard is beginning to enjoy a tentative revival. He is currently represented in the exhibition **In Memory of My Feelings: Frank O'Hara and American Art** at The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and was the subject of a retrospective at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in 1997. We intend through the exhibition and catalogue for *I Remember Joe Brainard* to provide a fresh perspective on the artist's work and times; by touring the show and creating an online presence, we hope to bring his distinctive style and vision to the attention of a broader public.

The 100-page catalogue will include essays by three writers with unique perspectives on the significance of Brainard's art and the milieu in which he worked; their writings will comprise an important contribution to the dialogue we hope to inspire with this project. Featuring 50 pages of color reproductions, the catalogue will be sold at the BAM/PFA bookstore, as well as at the touring venues. Portions of the catalogue will also be available on the BAM/PFA web site, for which the museum staff will develop an interactive "comments page" to encourage ongoing discussion of the exhibition and related topics. This web site will be available to be linked to web sites of the tour venues.

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	MoMA PS1	I.A.2879

Attending to the Ordinary



For two years, in the mid-1970s, Joe Brainard produced miniatures—bits of paper a few inches square, each bearing a picture of the Mobil Pegasus, a slice of pineapple with a maraschino cherry, or

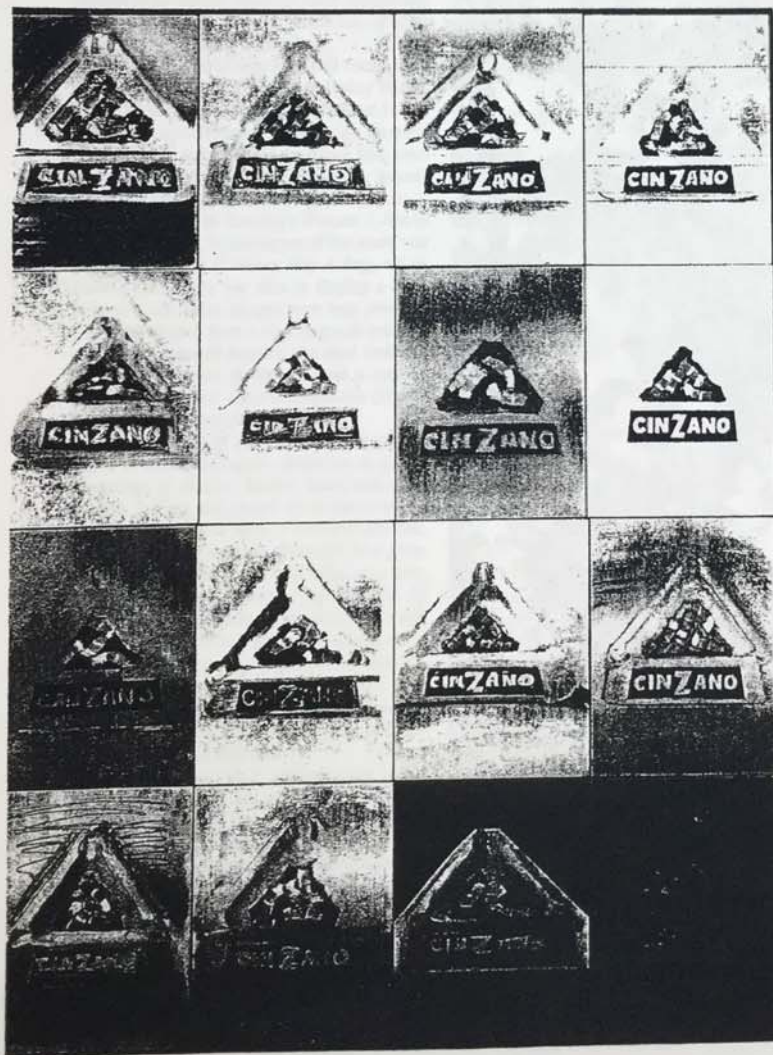
some other motif as recognizable as the nose on one's face, if not more so. There are sunsets, matchboxes, postage stamps. Remember the Zigzag Zouave, that dashing schematized chap who serves as the logo for a brand of cigarette paper? Brainard reproduced him with pen and blue ink. For other Post-it-sized images, he used pencil or paint or both. With a set of buttons or a row of burnt match sticks, he would produce a mini-assemblage.

In their amazing variety, these works number roughly 3,000. About half went on view at Fischbach Gallery in 1975. This was the show that got the artist a write-up in *People* magazine, under the headline "Think Tiny." Brainard—who died of AIDS-related pneumonia in 1994—did think that way, sometimes, and the art world always thought of him as a small artist. This is an error, profound but understandable.

Brainard first came to New York in 1960, at the age of 18, and settled in the city permanently in 1963. Pop art was consolidating its early victories and Minimalism had already charted the paths that would soon lead to its sober triumphs. It was a time for assuming firm stances and making solid stylistic alliances. Brainard couldn't be bothered. On the Lower East Side, he hung around with poets—Ted Berrigan, Ron Padgett and a few others who knew all about the imperatives of style and history, and felt uncoerced by any of them. Still in the first stages of their careers, these writers had already emerged as skeptics with a dazzling knack for converting their doubts into bursts of strange wit and oblique intelligence. And they were willing to acknowledge the relentless force of the most ordinary feelings.

Brainard had met Berrigan and Padgett in Tulsa, Okla., where he grew up. In New York, he devoted much of his energy to collaborating with them and with other poets, including such older figures as James Schuyler, Frank O'Hara and Kenward Elmslie. In 1965 Elmslie and Brainard launched a durable relationship. Every summer, Brainard would join Elmslie at his Vermont house, which appears in several of the paintings shown at Tibor de Nagy Gallery's recent Brainard survey (Mar. 20-Apr. 19). Bright gray, the house sits amid even brighter greenery. Brainard's colors can have the intensity of Christmas tree lights and Valentine's Day cards.

Often, a white hieroglyph appears in the emerald expanse of the Vermont lawn. This sleek and efficient shape signals the presence of Whippoorwill, Elmslie's dog. Brainard was a deft realist, nonchalantly accurate with a brush and blithely obsessive with a pencil. A wall in the gallery was covered with



Joe Brainard: *Cinzano*, 1974, oil on canvas, 48 by 36 1/2 inches. Private collection. All photos this article courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York. Small images at the text breaks of this and the following Brainard article are untitled and undated miniatures by the artist, 4 by 3 inches each.

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	MoMA PS1	I.A.2879

drawings of friends—Pat Padgett, Bill Berkson, Alex Katz and others. Heavily but not laboriously worked, these likenesses are so minutely precise that recognition is delayed, as if one had been dazzled by a burst of light.

With pencil or India ink, Brainard could give a portrait or still life the black-on-white clarity of the well-printed word. With oils he ran the gamut of summer sunlight, from morning sparkle to the luminous overcast of late afternoon. To achieve these effects, Brainard mastered the art of wet-on-wet painting in the manner of Alex Katz and Fairfield Porter. His variant on the technique is stylish, yet he refused to be solemn about oil paint. Sometimes he used it to mimic the thick, dumb line of Ernie Bushmiller, creator of "Nancy."

With her helmet of wiry hair, this comic strip heroine was Brainard's most enduring image-fetish. He pictured her and her chic Aunt Fritzie endlessly, sometimes with enough earnest clunkiness to suggest that his hand had been taken over by Bushmiller's. When his fluency returned, he would produce wild variations—Nancy as Willem de Kooning's *Woman I*, Nancy as the Mona Lisa. In one corner of the show was a picture entitled *If Nancy Was A Boy*, which showed her raising her skirt to display a boy's prim genitals. Other images were less prim—a cock shot clipped from a skin mag and collaged onto paper, a pencil drawing of a stud reclining in well-filled Jockey shorts. Because a dreamy wash of translucent paint obscures the figure's face, he has the anonymity of an ideal.

Toward the end of the '60s, Brainard made a batch of flower collages—gouache-on-paper renderings of pansies, daisies, irises and other species, cut out and pasted up in dense profusion. The results look random until you see that, with unflagging precision, Brainard has given each blossom a placement that defies our compositional expectations. The upshot is alloverness, as in Jackson Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm*. These collages show how affectionately Brainard understood the large-scale, abstract art of Pollock and his generation, and how patiently he devoted himself to the project of transposing that brand of modernism into the style of seed-packet realism.

There is love, as well, in his treatment of the individual blossoms, but where is Brainard's usual exactitude? He has generalized the markings of the flowers quite freely, sometimes to the point of abstraction. Blossoms become blobs, all the better to glow and for another, more subtle reason. Sharply detailed renderings of petal and stamen would have caught and held the eye, distracting it from the allover flow of these collages. To help us focus on pictorial energy, Brainard threw the flowers out of focus, but no more than necessary. All is under precise control. It's as if we were seeing each pansy or daffodil through the

In the 1960s and '70s, Joe Brainard, a friend to many New York School poets, ignored the art world's prevailing insistence on formalism in order to create narratively suggestive, stylistically diverse paintings, drawings, collages and assemblages that embrace everyday experience.

BY CARTER RATCLIFF



Mixed Garden, 1967,
gouache collage, 37 by 27 inches.
Private collection.

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	MoMA PS1	I.A.2879

Brainard's work recommends that we take lively comfort in the sheer profusion of things, not only mass-produced objects like shampoo bottles but also objects produced by unpretentious hands.

blurring induced by a carefully adjusted lens.

Brainard's art shows us the things of the world painted, drawn and rearranged with tireless care. The art world's specialized concerns get short shrift, though Brainard never entirely ignored them. Soon after settling in New York, he attended to the question of style and answered it in the only way compatible with his crush on Nancy and his eye for the sculptural possibilities of a bottle of Prell. He gave Pop art a try.



Among the earliest works in the show was Brainard's crisp rendering of the 7-Up logo. Less a painting than a drawing in oils on canvas, this is an image toughened by the sooty, New Yorkish tone that persisted from de Kooning's '50s to Andy Warhol's '60s. I suppose it counts as a work of Pop art, as do Brainard's early assemblages, with their rows of identical dime-store items—plastic pearls and grapes,



7-Up, 1962, oil on canvas, 24 by 18 inches. Private collection.



Necklace, 1964, assemblage, 40 by 10 by 6 inches. Collection Richard Brown Baker.

junk jewelry, Christmas tree ornaments. Still, Pop art requires a deadpan gaze, and Brainard's was always tender or curious or amused. He ranged too widely, through too many mediums and styles and images, to acquire the Pop label or any other.

Every oeuvre implies a world. With good will, the eye can deduce a climate, a weight of gravity, even from a body of monochrome paintings. Brainard pictured his world in such minute detail that it takes only a little while to realize that its guiding purpose is to celebrate the very idea of detail, of the particular in its inexhaustible particularity. He recommends that we take lively comfort in the sheer profusion of things, not only mass-produced objects like bottles of shampoo but objects produced by unpretentious hands. Brainard occasionally imitated that modesty, embroidering a pattern here, whittling a form there. And his art has ample room for objects produced by accident—pebbles and splinters of wood and the like.

Attracted by an image, Brainard was sometimes content simply to replicate it with fond

precision. Usually, he revamped the images he found in the media and the street, or gave them new settings in his collages. Of course his portraits and still lifes were made from scratch, as one says of a cake intended for a special occasion. Brainard's world has a domestic flavor, a coziness that now and then opens onto boundless vistas. Sometimes his motifs take the night sky for their backdrop. Looking past the charm specific to a leaf or the logo of a Holiday Inn, you sail into the depths of Brainard's midnight. His black and deep blue skies are terrifyingly distant but also near, like pieces of velvet smoothed out for the display and careful inspection of jewelry.

The collages also bring us close, like pages in a picture book, and one wants to hold a Brainard miniature in the hand, as if consulting a pocket watch. The eye is drawn nearer still—right up to the surface and beneath it—by the meadow grass of the early 1970s. First, Brainard would paint leaves and stalks of grass in watercolor on paper. Then, after cutting them out, he'd mount them in layers in Plexiglas boxes. The visual effect is delicate. Yet when you peer into the crowded interiors of the boxes, you're reminded with unexpected force of the summer sun and the hot scent of baked vegetation.

The cutouts also bring to mind a couple of lines from an early poem by John Ashbery—"They dream only of America / To be lost among the thirteen million pillars of grass." Brainard's *Untitled (Abstraction)*, a collage from 1975, sets one dreaming of Europe. Its arrangement of two cardboard rectangles recalls the Euclidian severity demanded by De Stijl, the Bauhaus and other promulgators of utopian modernism.



Bill Berkson, 1971, graphite on paper, 13 1/4 by 10 1/4 inches. Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego.

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Brainard's pieces of cardboard are worn and velvety, and when he made this work, the ideals of that optimistic avant-garde had long been discredited. Nonetheless, his invocation of Old World geometry is amiable, even appreciative, though I suspect that he was taken mostly by the enervated lusciousness of his materials.



Though Brainard never systematized his affections, they sometimes generated repetitions which can be read as "serial"—a concept born of the Minimalist grid. In 1974 he divided a bigish canvas into four rows of four rectangular modules. Within each module floats the triangular form of a Cinzano ashtray. Geometrical and just a touch ungainly, it serves Brainard as a readymade Minimalist object—perfect for "serial" treatment, and perfect for Pop art, too, with its boldly lettered logo. Brainard rescues the ashtray from Pop and Minimalism alike by rendering it in 16 varieties of painterly elegance.

As Brainard's brushwork modulates, there are complementary shifts in the picture's prevailing tones of white. The variations suggest changes in a milky atmosphere, from luminous to slightly glum. In each rendering of the ashtray, a different pattern of cigarette butts appears—and in one instance, the butts are actual, not painted. Are we to imagine fluctuations in mood during a long wait at a café table? Art that raises questions like these has long been tagged



Nancy Diptych, 1974, oil on canvas, each panel 30 1/2 by 24 1/2 inches.
Collection Hornick family.

illustrational. Brainard often seemed to invite the charge. He supplied pictures for dozens of poetry books and some of his works look like illustrations of stories not yet written.

In an untitled collage from 1976, a bright yellow moth hovers over a cluster of faded violets. Above the flowers, the night sky is spangled by a crescent moon and ten stars, each with five points. Elegiac, slightly childish and unashamedly illustrational, this collage can give you the feeling that you already know the sad and exalted story that ought to accompany it. For many in the art world, to let feelings go this far would be to let things get out of hand. What sort of purity, what sort of high modernist or postmodernist seriousness can be achieved if we permit the literary and the visual to have close, emotionally charged contact?

Painters of the 1980s invited narrative into their work, but this was a risk that reassured. For, as it turned out, these artists didn't truly accept the tactic of literary allusion. They only wanted to question it—rather, to subject it to a third-degree so debilitating that a sort of visual purity would emerge. By then, Brainard had almost completely stopped making art, preferring to spend his time smoking cigarettes and reading Victorian novels. The art world's narrowly conceived ideas of purity and seriousness never meant much to Brainard, who lived mostly among poets and others who tend not to object to pictures with poetic overtones. In the art world, he ran up against the argument that art with even a hint of the illustrational is too easy, that it deploys worn-out devices to get superficial responses.

All the old devices must be stripped away, say

the voices of art-world seriousness. Art must be reduced to its latest, most desperate quandary so that the quandary may be faced. From the ensuing struggle will emerge the moment's pertinent art. This is the argument for esthetic difficulty. Formulated by 19th-century avant-gardists, the argument persists in latter-day forms which I am not inclined to dismiss. However, I don't believe that Brainard's art is entirely easy, despite its refusal to be difficult in any manner approved by the art world.

Granted, there are automatic pleasures to be had at a Brainard exhibition. His colors please and his line moves over the surface with entrancing fluidity. As he turns from one realistic style to the next, Brainard reminds us that mimetic precision is, in itself, a delight. More delightful still is his willingness to let images tell stories, and you can lose yourself all the more quickly and happily in his plots because they remain unspun. You're free to take any narrative cue in any direction you like.

The sunniness of Brainard's world is reliable but not absolute. Sometimes melancholy tinges a bunch of flowers or a butterfly or the atmosphere surrounding a really cute guy. A moral hides in these sweetly somber effects: the world's beauty—or our capacity for it—is short-lived. So what else is new? What remains new in Brainard's sensibility is its demonic insistence, which exerts a kindly but unrelenting pressure on the objects and images, colors and textures, of the ordinary world. Brainard wanted to convert everything into an object of hyper-focused, utterly devoted attentiveness. Every last grain of the ordinary had to become extraordinary without losing the ordinariness



If Nancy Was A Boy, 1972,
ink and gouache on paper, 14 by 11 inches.
Private collection.

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Untitled, 1976, collage, 14 by 11 inches. Private collection.

Whippoorwill's World, 1975, oil on canvas, 9 by 12 inches. Private collection.



Untitled (Abstraction), 1975, collage, 10 by 8 inches. Private collection.

that made it real and worthy of attention in the first place.

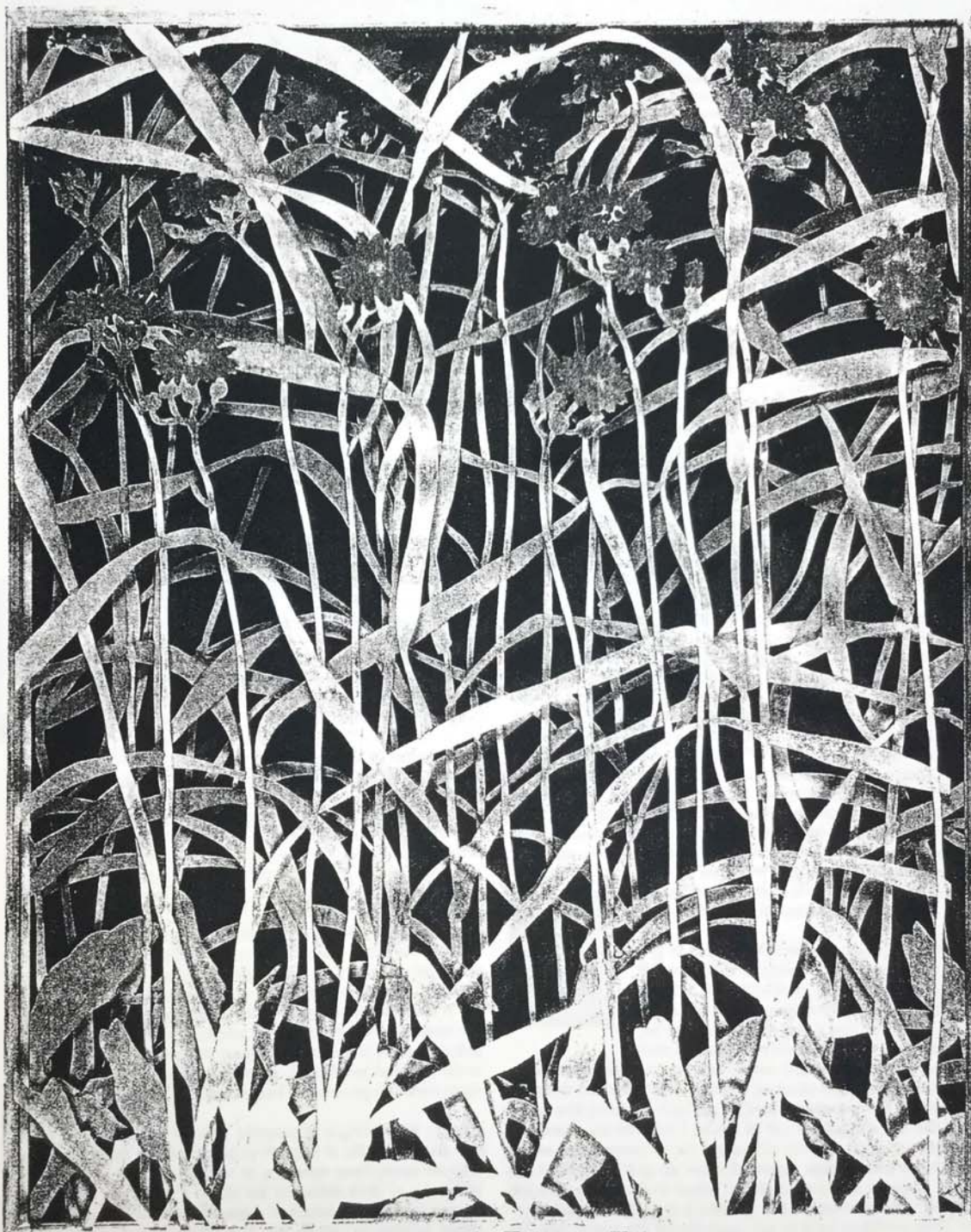
From 1970 to 1975, Brainard worked on his *I Remember* books—lists of memory-fragments that run slant-wise to his more nostalgic visual images. In a letter about the first of these volumes, he said, "I feel that I am not really writing it but that it is because of me that it is being written. I also feel that it is about everybody else as much as it is about me. I feel like I am everybody." Most of us harbor at least a few sappy feelings about the entity known as the self. Brainard played with the rhetoric of sentimentality, but he seems never to have gotten sentimental about the largely accidental fact that one is who one is. He wanted to leave himself behind as he turned outward, toward the clutter of the world.

Wanting his art of familiar things to be understood in a familiar way, Brainard yearned for a generic intelligibility. Yet the self-awareness that made this need so vivid made it impossible to fulfill. His hand has its own, immediately recognizable way of trying to be anonymous. Thus he is always the incorrigibly distinctive Joe Brainard, the one alien presence in the garden of his sensibility. A long-resisted realization that personal identity can be obscured but never escaped may be what persuaded him to stop making art. In the art that he did make, you can find traces of an exceedingly sophisticated assault on the enclosures of the self. But only if you look with care. Brainard was too tactful, too self-effacing, ever to make an eye-catching fuss about his sophistication. □

Author: Carter Ratcliff's book *The Fate of a Gesture: Jackson Pollock and Postwar American Art* was recently published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

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Untitled, 1971, paper cutout, 14 by 11 by 1 inches. Private collection.

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Saint Joe

As well as being a prolific artist, Joe Brainard was the author of the influential I Remember, a book which evokes his early years in Tulsa. Here, a novelist who met Brainard in the mid-'70s recalls the artist's originality and unworldliness.

BY EDMUND WHITE



When Joe Brainard died in New York City on May 25, 1994, he had been nearly forgotten, except by his legion of friends. Tibor de Nagy Gallery [in New York] recently presented his first major one-man show in nearly two decades, a large exhibition containing samples of a huge body of work, including paintings, drawings, collages and assemblages. The show established that, early on, Brainard shared Warhol's love of product labels and that he enjoyed doing parodies of all sorts of artistic styles and movements long before visual appropriation became fashionable. As Robert Rosenblum puts it in the exhibition catalogue, Brainard gives us "a preview of the nostalgic regressions of so many recent artists, from Duncan Hannah to Mike Kelley." Rosenblum also suggests that "on a totally different wave-length, Damien Hirst's artistic recycling of crushed cigarette butts might look déjà vu after we've seen what Joe Brainard quietly did at home with the same theme back in the 1970s."

In his short life (he was just 52 when he died of AIDS), Brainard worked with remarkable intensity and enviable fluency—and then abruptly stopped and devoted the last 20 years of his life to reading. Before the reading set in (it was something like a disease, the equivalent to Marcel Duchamp's chess-playing), Brainard had managed to do thousands of collages, as well as sets and costumes for the Joffrey Ballet Company and art-and-text collaborations with many New York School poets, including Frank O'Hara, Kenward Elmslie, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler, Edwin Denby and John Ashbery. He also designed the covers for numerous magazines and books of poetry.

Most important, he wrote a completely original book called *I Remember*, which was reprinted by Penguin in 1995 but which was first launched 25 years earlier in a shorter small-press version. Brainard had discovered a simple but irresistible form. In a text that eventually ran to more than 130 pages, he started each short paragraph with the words, "I Remember," and then recalled an isolated, highly personal memory or an interlocking set of recollections or just the existence of a product or a fad from his youth.

I remember having a crush on a boy in my Spanish class who had a pair of olive green suede shoes with brass buckles just like a pair I had ("Flagg Brothers"). I never said one word to him the entire year.

I remember sweaters thrown over shoulders and sunglasses propped up on heads.

I remember fishnet.

I remember board and brick book shelves.

I remember driving in cars and doing landscape paintings in my head. (I still do that).

The form of *I Remember* was so delightful and infectious that soon everyone started imitating it. As Brainard's childhood friend, the poet Ron Padgett, writes in his afterword for the 1995 edition: "It is one of the few literary forms that even non-literary people can use." In the early 1970s Kenneth Koch was teaching poetry to children and he found that the "I Remember" format was a natural for kids. Classroom creative-writing textbooks soon took up the idea and by now thousands of teachers have used the device across the country, but few people are even aware of its inventor.

Padgett recalls that Brainard was reading Gertrude Stein in the summer of 1969 when he first started writing *I Remember*, and there is something of her shrewd naïveté in Brainard's wry declarations. Most of the entries he came up with he rejected; the full manuscript runs to over 600 pages. With his usual directness he wrote to a friend at the time he was composing the book that *I Remember* is "very honest. And accurate. Honesty (for me) is very hard because I suppose I don't really believe there is such a thing, but somehow I think I have managed to do it." He went on to say that he had "practically no memory and so remembering is like pulling teeth. Every now and then, though, when I really get into it, floods of stuff just pour out and shock the you-know-what out of me. But it pours out very crystal clear and orderly."

Paul Auster, the author of *The New York Trilogy*, seemed to agree when he blurbed the Penguin edition years later: "One by one, the so-called important books of our time will be forgotten, but Joe Brainard's modest little gem will endure." Harry Mathews, the American novelist and poet who has lived in France since the 1950s, told the Paris-based avant-garde writer Georges Perec (*Life: A User's Manual*) about Joe's book, and soon Perec had produced his own *Je me souviens*. When Perec died, Mathews wrote an obituary for *Le Monde* titled "Je me souviens Georges Perec" and now Mathews's wife, the French novelist Marie Chaix, is translating Joe's *I Remember* into French. The form is so reassuring—with its openness, the mixing of big things with little, the option of linking memories or leaving them discrete—that I found myself turning to it quite naturally when my French lover, the illustrator Hubert Sorin, died of AIDS three years ago.

I was so terrified of forgetting something about him (his quirks, his tastes, his mannerisms, his opinions) that I started an "I Remember" list of my own.



Joe Brainard had been a panhandler for a few years after he arrived in New York in 1960 at the age of 18, fresh from Tulsa, but by the time I met him in the mid-'70s he seemed to be swimming in cash (he was rumored to have a very rich lover from a famous family). This combination of early poverty and more recent wealth meant that he was weirdly naive about money. I remember that he had a big drawer in his nearly empty SoHo loft that was stuffed with thousands of dollars. He loved to invite everyone to dinner in a restaurant, and when he'd set out for the evening he'd fish out of the drawer enough money for ten dinners. "Do you think this is enough?" he'd ask, anxiously. He'd tip the waiter 50 percent, usually, and if one objected that it was too much he'd stutter, "Oh-oh-oh, but he was so nice."

Joe Brainard was both a collector and an antimaterialist. He loved beautiful objects and bought them, but he loved emptiness more and was always giving away his collections and restoring his loft to its primordial sparseness. As one of his closest friends told me, "He was like a

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teenager. It was difficult for him to live in the real world. He'd get rid of everything. His loft was spartan—too much so. I remember at the end, when he was so ill, the nurse would have to kneel next to his mattress on the floor—it broke my heart."

He loved to give away his work; he must have been the despair of his gallery. He gave me a wonderful collage of a young man in sexy white underpants floating against a blue sky. The man's mouth and the tip of his nose are just visible but his eyes are obscured; he is inscribed inside a bold oval. There is something of Saint Sebastian (that classic gay icon) about him, something of a Bellini madonna (the ethereal figure floating against a cerulean blue), and something of a Leonardo da Vinci anatomical study (the geometry imposed on the body). I used the picture as the cover of the English edition of my novel *The Beautiful Room is Empty*.

When I met Joe he had already begun his great reading binge. He had a single bed, that mattress on the floor, and a radio tuned to a country-and-western station 24 hours a day. He'd lie on his bed all night and read; he'd finish *Great Expectations* at 3 A.M. and pick up *Middlemarch*. When he went out he would dress up in his beautiful Armani suits. He'd leave his impeccable, starched white shirts open to his waist and he almost never wore an overcoat, not even in the coldest weather, since someone had once told him he had a great chest. In fact, he was self-conscious about how skinny he was and was always beginning bulking-up schemes that he would quickly abandon.



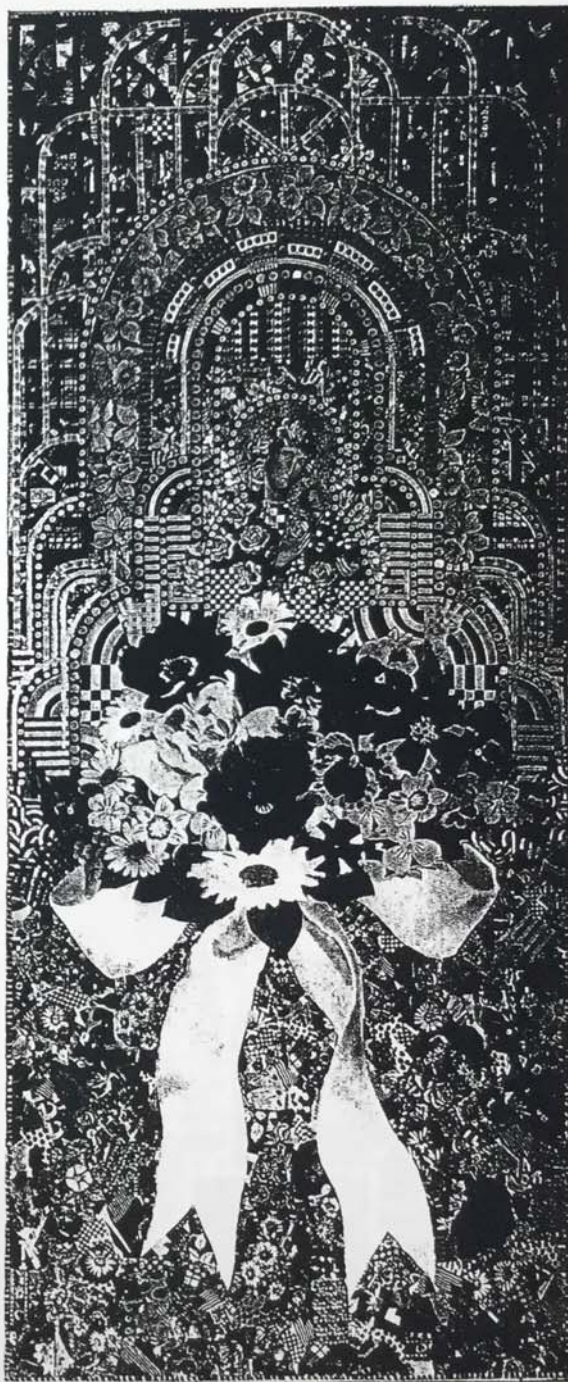
Joe Brainard was born in Arkansas but was brought up in Tulsa. "I remember," he wrote, "that for my fifth birthday all I wanted was an off-one-shoulder black satin evening gown. I got it. And I wore it to my birthday party." "I remember when I got a five-year pin for not missing a single morning of Sunday

School for five years. (Methodist)."

As a teenager in the 1950s he was already friendly with the poets Ron Padgett, Dick Gallup and Ted Berrigan, who were about his age, and with Pat Mitchell, who later became Ron's wife. "I remember giant discussions with Pat and Ron Padgett, and Ted Berrigan, after seeing *La Dolce Vita* about what all the symbolism meant." Even in high school Ron was publishing a little magazine, *The White Dove Review*, for which Joe was the art editor (LeRoi Jones and Allen Ginsberg sent them poems). Joe was considered the best artist in school. "I remember when I worked for a department store doing fashion drawings for newspaper ads." Joe's father, who worked on an oil rig, enjoyed drawing as a hobby, and both of Joe's brothers became artists, and his sister now works in a Denver art gallery.

Pat Padgett recalls that when Joe moved to New York he lived in a storefront on the Lower East Side that he later shared with Ted Berrigan. He had friends and patrons back in Tulsa who occasionally sent him 20 or 30 dollars. He sold blood from time to time and worked in a junk-antique store. One day he received a notice for his army physical. "I remember when I got drafted and had to go way downtown to take my physical," Brainard writes. "It was early in the morning. I had an egg for breakfast and I could feel it sitting there in my stomach. After roll call a man looked at me and ordered me to a different line than most of the boys were lined up at. (I had very long hair which was more unusual then than it is now.) The line I was sent to turned out to be the line to see the head doctor. (I was going to ask to see him anyway.) The doctor asked me if I was queer and I said yes. Then he asked me what homosexual experiences I had had and I said none. (It was the truth.) And he believed me. I didn't even have to take my clothes off."

As Pat Padgett recalls, "In high school he had had crushes on boys and girls. But in his family no one ever spoke about personal things. And I certainly didn't think about things like homosexuality. I guess he told Ron and me as soon as it became apparent to him. After he became close with Joe LeSueur, Frank O'Hara and Kenward Elmslie."



Joe Brainard: *Madonna with Daffodils*, 1966, gouache collage, 5 1/4 by 22 1/4 inches. Private collection. Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.

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Brainard worked with remarkable intensity and enviable fluency, and then abruptly stopped to devote the last 20 years of his life to reading.



Although everyone agrees that Joe felt bad about his scanty education, they all speak of his intelligence and superb instincts. John Ashbery had just come back from years of living in Paris, where he'd been the art critic for the *Herald-Tribune*, and he was very impressed by Joe's artistic judgment, by "an intelligence disguised by a surface naiveté." Kenward Elmslie, who became Joe's best friend and with whom he spent summers in Calais, Vermont, once said that Joe had the finest intuition of anyone he'd ever known. Joe LeSueur agrees that Brainard had a perfect eye and ear. As LeSueur puts it, "I met him when he was nineteen and he already knew everything. He was a true master of collage. He'd do five a day—and he couldn't wait to get on to the next one. He wasn't influenced by anyone. I bought his painting *7-Up* for fourteen dollars—but Joe gave up Pop art of that sort as soon as he saw Warhol's work later."

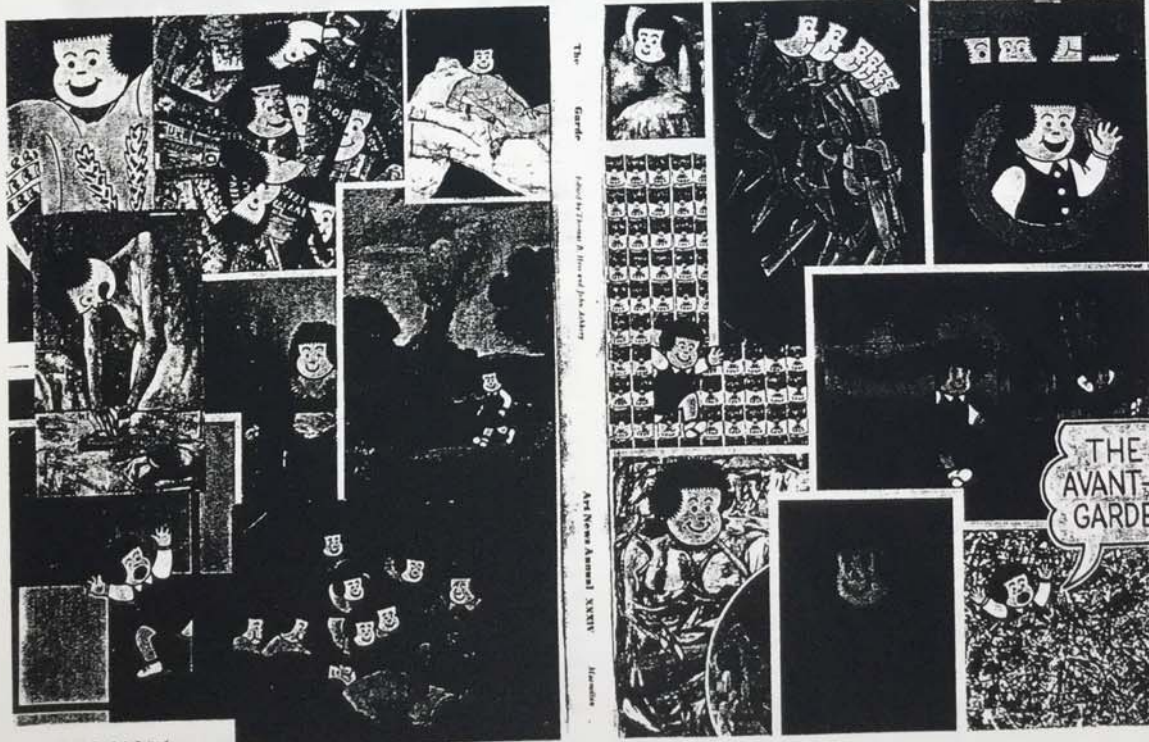
In his first show at the Alan Gallery in 1965 Brainard did big Puerto-Rican-style altarpieces. Soon afterwards he wrote to James Schuyler that he had had no specific religious intention in mind when he constructed his shrines: "On the other hand, a lot of people said I was

making fun of religion which would be even worse. In reviews, I'd almost rather be religious."

Except for the annual summer pilgrimages to Vermont, Joe was faithful to New York, although he once lived briefly in Boston ("I remember when I lived in Boston reading all of Dostoevsky's novels one right after the other") and in Dayton ("I remember when I won a scholarship to the Dayton, Ohio, Art Institute and I didn't like it but I didn't want to hurt their feelings by just quitting so I told them that my father was dying of cancer").

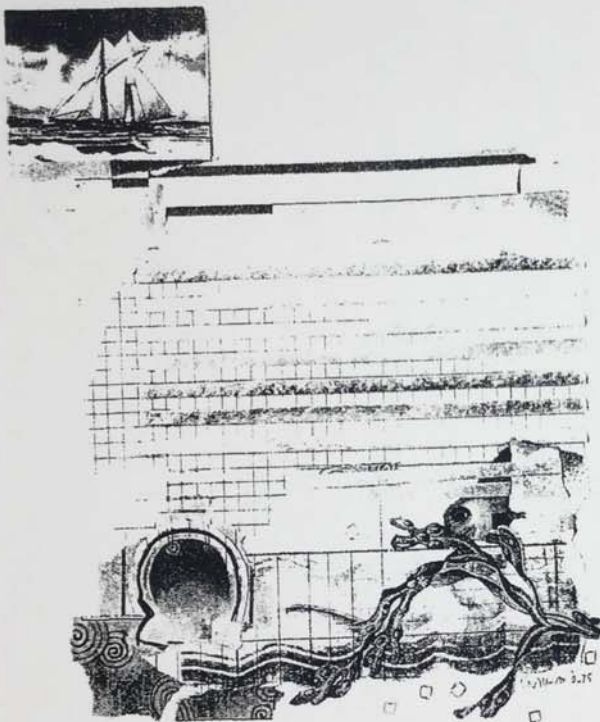
Whereas Pop artists took an adversarial position against everyday images, Joe liked everything, and was himself immensely likeable as a man and as a painter. In a catalogue essay for the recent show, John Ashbery writes: "Joe Brainard was one of the nicest artists I have ever known. Nice as a person, and nice as an artist. This may present a problem. . . . One can sincerely admire the chic and the implicit nastiness of a Warhol soup can without ever wanting to cozy up to it, and perhaps that is as it should be, art being art, a rather distant thing. In the case of Joe one wants to embrace the pansy, so to speak. Make it feel better about being itself, all alone, a silly kind of expression on its face, forced to bear the brunt of its name eternally."

Joe drew a coffee cup with a 1930s illustrator's abstract smartness, or turned out an Ingres-like pencil portrait of Pat as a young woman, or composed a breakfast still life in the comfortable, life-enhancing, pleasurable mode of Fairfield Porter (one of his idols). He did a huge gouache-collage of hundreds of flowers arranged in a "Garden," or he painted a sumptuous, 4-foot-tall gouache of a "Madonna with Daffodils." He crammed cigarette butts into small, intricate patterns.



Collage by the artist for the cover of *The Avant-Garde*, *Art News Annual XXXIV*, 1968.

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Untitled (A Sturdy Craft), 1975, mixed-medium collage, 14 by 11 inches. Private collection. Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery.

(Brainard was as staunch a defender of smoking as Fran Lebowitz.) Sleek athletes in underpants (often with parts of their bodies replaced by bits of blue sky) recall the innocence of physique magazines of the 1950s: "I remember how many other magazines I had to buy in order to buy one physique magazine," he wrote.

One series of small oils was devoted to Kenward Elmslie's dog Whippoorwill. In one canvas, just 9 inches by 12, painted in 1975, the lean white dog is shown crouched on very green grass before a small white clapboard house; it's called *Whippoorwill's World* as a funny allusion to Wyeth's painting, but the humor is gentle, not sarcastic, and it does nothing to detract from the sheer beauty of the image.

Brainard often alluded to other artists (in his 1968 cover for an *ARTnews* annual, the head of the comic-strip character Nancy is shown collaged onto Goya's *Nude Maja*, Manet's *Olympia*, Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* and de Kooning's *Woman*, and she cavorts through a Mondrian abstraction, a Johns Target and a series of Donald Judd boxes). But his own style has no antecedents and only one real parallel—Donald Evans. Like the art of Evans, whose oeuvre consisted of several thousand meticulously painted postage stamps of fictive nations, each of which corresponded, as Bruce Chatwin observed, "to a phase, a friendship, a mood, or a preoccupation," Joe's work was also often miniature, gently parodic and personal. Brainard's brother John told me that Joe and Evans were friends and exchanged letters and that Evans, who died in 1977, signed and gave a stamp to Joe as well as a book about his work.



The one event in Brainard's life that puzzles everyone is why he quit painting. When I mentioned the parallel with Duchamp's virtual "silence" as a painter from the 1920s to his death in the 1960s, Pat Padgett laughed and said, "Yeah, but Duchamp was not a very good painter. He may have been a brilliant thinker but he had little talent. Whereas Joe had a good hand and could do anything. And yet Joe thought he wasn't good

enough to do great easel painting, which for him was the ultimate form. I think Joe felt that no one after the Abstract Expressionists had come up to their level and that disparity tormented him."

Joe LeSueur added, "I think that at first he was excited by fame and was thrilled by all the attention he got. But then he saw that success doesn't bring much happiness. After all, he knew the most famous poets of the day—Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara—and his friendship with them convinced him that success isn't such a big deal. Then he came off speed; he'd been on amphetamines for years and during those years his hands couldn't work fast enough. He must have seen he couldn't go on like that." Another friend told me that Joe had freaked out when he saw little men and after the mid-1970s he'd never done speed again. "Anyway," LeSueur concluded, "he'd already created a huge, totally original body of work. Maybe he felt satisfied with his achievement."

Ron Padgett believes Brainard was too hard on himself. "Towards the end of his painting days he wanted to do lace as well as Velázquez, a gentleman's waistcoat as vividly as Raeburn, a horse as solidly as Stubbs, a cherry as convincingly as Manet. When he couldn't always reach those impossible heights he just stopped." Everyone agrees that the fact he'd had a considerable fortune settled on him permitted him to stop painting; in that sense the money was bad for him. Curiously, he didn't seem to miss the creative act.

The poet Bill Berkson said, "Joe had a difficult time coming off speed. There were times when he seemed nervous, laughing bizarrely at some private joke. Ted Berrigan would tease him and ask, 'Why don't you want to be great like de Kooning?' Joe would demur, but he probably did mean to be great in his own sweet way, like Joseph Cornell. He liked to show people doing dumb, everydayish things—that's why he liked Sluggo and Nancy. And in that way his art was a lot like John Ashbery's poems."



Actor Keith McDermott, whom Brainard fell in love with in 1979 and remained close to, remembers that Joe was surprised by his positive HIV status. "I thought he'd commit suicide, but no, he became very docile and just did whatever the doctors said." John Brainard was with his brother constantly from December 1993 till Joe's death the following May. "He stayed from December to March in the hospital, then he lived in my apartment. He was very accepting of illness and death. Only in September 1993 did he tell me he had AIDS, but at that time he said it was okay with him, he knew much younger people who were dying or who had died. He felt he had had enough time. Though he went through a lot of pain, he suffered it very bravely." At his memorial ceremony several speakers called him "saintly."

I myself always mentally compared him to Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin—he was that unworldly and Christlike. Joe was the only person I've ever known that I'd try to talk and act like when I was with him. My imitations were embarrassing and never successful, but the urge to delete all phoniness and really look at the surrounding world with a fresh eye and to shower everyone with generosity was so compelling that by the end of an evening with Joe I was even unconsciously imitating his stutter. Joe's personal style was certainly hypnotic. □

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