



Granary Books, Inc.
168 Mercer Street, Ste 2

TELEPHONE: 212.337.9979
FACSIMILE: 212.337.9774
New York, NY 10012

sclay@granarybooks.com
www.granarybooks.com

REVIEWS & PRESS

Joe Brainard. *I Remember*. Granary Books, 2001.



Mlinko, Ange. "Review of Joe Brainard: A Retrospective." *Shark 4* (Summer 2002).

"There is an artistic theory of knowledge different from a scientific or philosophical one." -
Fairfield Porter

When James Schuyler, a great aficionado of flowers, wrote about them in "Salute," he thought of them species by species, "Like that gathering of one of each I planned, to gather one of each kind of clover, daisy, paintbrush that grew in that field the cabin stood in and study them one afternoon before they wilted. Past is past. I salute that various field." One might say that Joe Brainard takes the study even further in his *Garden* series, seeking the differentio specifica beyond even species. In these collage works, he individually painted and cut each blossom, pasting them on medium-sized rectangular canvases in a dense "seed-packet look" as John Ashbery notes in the catalog. Schuyler, writing in *Art News* in 1967, remarked: "the scale is the size of a petal, or its color... Nor is scale realistic. A white Oriental poppy is smaller than a morning glory. Johnny-jump-ups are huge because life-size. Parts of this fiction are nearer than others, although distance has been suppressed, or rather, not called into being." These nonhierarchical flowers—always individual even when identical with their species, each species scaled to its neighbor—are not Linnaean flowers, organized within the usual taxonomy or nomenclature. They are, however, a figure for Brainard's creativity both in its fecundity and in its resistance to categorization.

In the catalog accompanying Brainard's first full retrospective, much is made of his preternatural output in the sixties and seventies. The word "proliferation" pops up throughout Carter Ratcliff's essay, Joe Brainard's "Quiet Dazzle": "Their larger subject is imagery itself, its tireless proliferation over the centuries, its manic proliferation now, and its vulnerability to style... For nothing in their proliferation establishes a principle of containment." Brainard's last solo show, at Fischbach in 1975, contained 1500 small mixed media collages; his mini-assemblages number about 3,000. And there's more: book and magazine covers, comics, flyers, altarpieces, and of course drawings and paintings. Schuyler called Brainard a "painting ecologist"; Ratcliff sees "a kind of charting of evolution of society through its throwaway

materials." He might also have invoked the word "hybridization" in addition to "proliferation": the collagist as part naturalist, part demiurge. Some of my favorite works are his paper-cutouts-and-Plexiglas, wherein he painstakingly painted and cut out tracteries of grass, layering them between clear plexiglass, creating a simultaneous mouse—and god's-eye view of a summer meadow.

Brainard was a New York artist. The city's impact on his work was as clear as on Frank O'Hara's (with whom he collaborated): the quickness and crowdedness, the variety of materials and styles, the fecund vulgarity. His radical particularity problematizes attempts to categorize him art-historically. "Stylistic diversity did not serve his career," Lewallen observes. He was "anti-theoretical and neo-Hedonistic," as John Perreault put it. Brainard worked for pleasure (and some say he stopped working, in the last decade of his life, when it stopped feeling pleasurable). "People of the World, Relax," his comics recommended. A series of magazine cutouts, each with a surprise substitution of blue sky and fluffy clouds somewhere in the image, becomes an emblem of the optimism, the Oklahoman sky in Brainard's soul, that is also somewhat insouciant. That his painted pansies are truly pensive, or that his altarpieces are truly devotional, rather than balancing this insouciance, reinforces his naïf persona. "I'm not really flying I'm thinking," wrote O'Hara in the thought-bubble of a Brainard butterfly. Yeah, right, goes our thought-bubble. In our more anxious era, Joe Brainard seems not prolific but prolix and profligate—in its dual meanings of licentious and extravagant. Hence also frivolous.

Unlike butterflies and flowers, however, the organ of Brainard's prolificity is the mind, and if there really is a "drive" to create, it doesn't come free of the assumptions and knowledges that comprise a mind. So then one may ask what it is that the artist knows, and since this is art and not something else, how does the artist know what he knows such that he ends up an artist and not a scientist or philosopher?

One answer is that the artist knows his materials, and everything he knows he learned from physical processes pertaining to those materials. Brainard doesn't rely solely on the eye, the measuring, distancing organ; he relies too on haptic knowledge. For Aristotle, touch is the lowest of the senses but also the most exact; in *De Anima*, seeing is classified as a kind of touch. Brainard wrote, "I remember one of the very few times I ever got in trouble at school. I got caught doing drawings all over my hand with a ball point pen in music class" (*I Remember*). This image, of one hand drawing on the other, stands in for the reciprocity of form and material, lines and nerves. The artist's eye and hand typically work in tandem, but how much more so for a collagist and assemblagist, whose fingers handle the work of cutting, gluing, arranging. Eye and hand become synaesthetic.

Touch is never more than an extension of sentience; sentience is the most basic property of life; therefore Life itself becomes the *raison d'être* of art: Life over death, Life over abstract categories. Brainard's hedonism, insouciance, and proliferation/profligacy beam a vitalistic force at odds with a systematizer's *reductio*. Brainard the collagist and assemblagist is grounded in the belief that he can touch it. Brainard the ecologist, his collages accreting on the floor of his apartment like cultures, affirms the basic truth of the (inter)relational. And Brainard

the maker of flowers without "principle of containment" is no more clothed in anxiety than the Biblical lilies of the field: he proposes natural abundance as a metaphysical comfort. The basic Eleusinian and Orphic mystery of flowers and their cyclical resurrection—a very old knowledge specific to the poetic tradition—is exactly the knowledge he reproduces.

Black, Noel. "The Art of Memory." *San Francisco Bay Guardian Literary Supplement* (February 2001).

There's something pornographic about a list—about a naked catalog of facts, details, or observations. *The Guinness Book of World Records*, *Harper's Index*, Letterman's Top 10, Billboard charts, Top 40 radio, MTV's "Top 100 Pop Songs," etc. Whether hierarchical or arbitrary, the list as literary form has been particularly suited to the particularly American mixture of ideological materialism and egalitarianism ("democracy" being the practical reality). For Walt Whitman the list was both neobiblical and Democratic. "Leaves of Grass," his lyrical catalog of the people, places, ideas, and textures of American life, was meant to set all things down as equal parts of an idealized poetic nation. For Gertrude Stein the list served as a playground for words and sentences and parts of sentences and their rearrangements: the listing of language's possibilities. For Diane di Prima, Amiri Baraka, Allen Ginsberg, Bob Kaufman, Anne Waldman, and other writers and poets of the postatomic age, the list became a form of indictment and a prophetic dirge meant to bring about consciousness and change. For the poet Ted Berrigan, famous for his "Things to Do" poems, the list became a location, a place to put words and experience in the same way one makes a shopping list—to organize and order the act of living. And for Joe Brainard, the artist and author of the recently republished cult favorite *I Remember*, the list became a vehicle for pure memory, a document of generalized American and American queer culture. As a list, *I Remember* brings the form to its apex as it finds its home in the ultimate pop aesthetic of absolute surface while somehow managing to consistently reveal and expose a personal honesty that makes artifice irrelevant. And, like porn, Brainard's writing is irresistible to the eye—the memory's eye.

You can't rightly call *I Remember* a book of poetry, though it does have some of those qualities. The fact that every entry begins with "I remember" might make it a memoir, except that it isn't. So it's just a list—a list that manages to mimic memory in the way that one actually remembers: by a strange chain of association that is the simultaneity of the past. Anything one might say about this book overcomplicates the beauty of its inherent simplicity. For example (at random):

I remember my father scratched his balls a lot.

I remember cheating at Solitaire.

I remember early fragments of daydreams of being a girl. Mostly I remember fabric. Satins and taffetas against flesh...

I remember "Double Bubble" gum comics, and licking off the sweet "powder."

I remember wondering about the shit (?) (ugh) in fucking up the butt.

What still amazes me about this 167-page book, republished by Granary Books after many small-press publications and one major run by Penguin in 1995, is that it doesn't bore. Even

when I find my attention fading from the particulars, I'm still captivated by the repetitive incantation of the list in the same way that I'm charmed by the rapid-fire orations of the auctioneers in Werner Herzog's documentary *How Much Wood Would a Woodchuck Chuck*. Brainard's speech, like the pure capitalism in the auctioneer's, is practical, grotesque, and dazzling. Each detail seduces and reveals while remaining entirely true to the unsentimental demands of the form itself. That rare ability to evoke feeling without choking the reader becomes one of the book's greatest virtues, as it allows the leader to free up his or her own "I remembers."

The republication of *I Remember* coincides with the opening of the first major retrospective of Joe Brainard's artwork, at the Berkeley Art Museum from February 7 to May 27. (Brainard died in 1993 of AIDS-related causes.) The catalogue to the exhibition, "Joe Brainard: A Retrospective", curated by Constance M. Lewallen, has also been issued by Granary Books. Like *I Remember*, Brainard's drawings, paintings, and collages turn the surfaces of American pop and queer culture into fetish objects. Unlike so many other pop artists who used surface only to create implied ironies, Brainard revered and embraced the iconography of pop, and used it to almost religious ends. "Good 'n Fruity Madonna," for example, a 1968 collage that assigns equal surface value to repeated images of a high Catholic Madonna and Child and a torn package of Good 'n Fruity Candy, employs Kurt Schwitter's garbage pastiche aesthetic, Warhol's repetition, and Brainard's own kitsch sensibility to create a bright and campy nod to the mama's boy. Aside from the obvious critique, the Good 'n Fruity package provides the exclamation point to what is a deceptively simple pun. Irony, for Brainard, was both a means to amusement and a form of social discourse.

Similarly, in his "Nancy" paintings, Brainard uses Ernie Bushmiller's cartoon character Nancy as a persona—what Constance Lewallen calls his "mischievous alter ego"—to reevaluate assumed perceptions. In "If Nancy Was a Boy," Nancy holds up her skirt to show her penis. The familiarity of Nancy's image, the pun inherent in her name, and the jokey gender-fuck leave the viewer to think about what lies beneath the skirts of American appearances. While he is patently revealing himself as well, Brainard refrains from making an issue of his homosexuality, preferring instead to elaborate on his own symbols and make them, as his many paintings of pansies also show, as approachable as possible.

Also included in the second half of the catalog are selections of Brainard's writings about art, culled from his journals and prose; an interview with him by his friends poet Ron Padgett and Pat Padgett, and another by Anne Waldman; and a selection of letters to his poet and painter friends. All of these documents flesh out the life of an artist who was incapable of murk, being always too clear to get caught in the trappings of theory. His works aren't naïve, and they aren't simple; they're direct.

Both the catalog and the new edition of *I Remember* bring light to the career of an artist and writer who has been overlooked by the larger art and literary establishment. Brainard was, as John Ashbery says in his brief introduction to the catalog, "nice as a person and nice as an artist." This quality seldom does anything for one's career in a sensationalist culture, but time

has proved his worth. And in the waning days of the urban gender wars, Brainard's matter-of-fact, noncontentious honesty about himself and the way he saw the world are more relevant than ever.

Noel Black is a San Francisco writer.

Martin, Christopher. "Review of Joe Brainard: A Retrospective." *Rain Taxi* 6.2 (Summer 2001): 12.

Joe Brainard writes that art is "a way of pleasing other people." With the opening of a retrospective exhibit of his work, and the release of its accompanying catalog, the occasions for pleasure have improved enormously. In the catalog, essays by John Ashbery, Carter Ratcliff, and Constance Lewallen, the exhibit's curator, are bolstered by select interviews, published and unpublished writing, and a series of letters, all of which seldom fail to simultaneously enlighten and delight. For what could be more pleasing than to revisit an artist and writer of such irreplaceable talent, humor, and humility.

Brainard, who died in 1993 of AIDS-related causes, was a champion of generosity. To view his work is tantamount to receiving a gift. It is, in his own words, "a present of which I need very much to give." This seems to leave both friends and fans unable to separate the art from the artist. Nowhere is this more evident than in Ashbery's elegiac essay, which begins: "Joe Brainard was one of the nicest artists I have ever known. Nice as a person and nice as an artist." Not a very sound critical approach, but that, perhaps, is the point; Brainard eluded the kind of hard-edged Greenbergian theory so prevalent around the time he began work in New York in 1962, and his style was—like many of the poets (including Ashbery) who were his friends—anti-serious, non-hierarchical, and deliciously ironic. His technique was mainly self-taught. His real schooling began and ended with an appreciation for, and a fraternity with, other artists and writers, starting in Tulsa in 1958 when he became art editor for the *White Dove Review* conceived and edited by then fledgling poets Ron Padgett and Dick Gallup. Through *White Dove*, Brainard came to know the work and person of poet Ted Berrigan. In an interview with Ron and Pat Padgett found in the catalog, Brainard cites Berrigan as "the single biggest influence" during his first years of creative effort. In other interviews, writing and letters collected here, the influence of various additional figures—Fairfield Porter, de Kooning, Warhol, Hans Hoffman, Goya, Alex Katz, etc.—announces itself through his very personal consideration of their work.

Constance Lewallen at once seems to understand this relationship and to confuse it with a more sinister, Bloomian idea of influence, going to some critical length to decode the many art historical references to be found in Brainard's work. In "Acts of Generosity," Lewallen thus misses some of the more delicate aspects of Brainard's association with and appreciation for other artists, though readers may glean this subtlety for themselves through the later, more direct material. The essay, in full, is nonetheless concise and articulate, providing a well-wrought frame through which to view Brainard's total output. Its clear and comprehensive nature allows the reader to approach the remainder of the catalog with no small degree of

excitement and understanding; also serving as apt preparation for Ratcliff's more pointed and lyrical investigation of what he terms "Joe Brainard's Quiet Dazzle."

Speaking with especial verve on Brainard's collages and assemblages, Ratcliff notes: "To his eye, nothing looks less than splendid." This attention to visual prospect, which Ratcliff terms "egalitarian," is another way to understand Brainard's sense of appreciation: his generosity was not limited to acts of friendship, but extended itself just as brilliantly to junk store Madonnas, wayward postcards, pansies, Prell, and anything else that happened to catch his inclusive yet distinguishing eye. It is Brainard's way to celebrate, congratulate, and integrate. The luscious density of his work, most pointedly his assemblages and gardens, always invites the viewer, as if somehow he has turned the sparkle of his material inward and created a vacuum of color that sucks one in. In fact, when asked whether the homosexual "sensibility" played a role in Brainard's art, he answered: "Most artists are very straight, I mean straight in their seriousness and in what they're trying to do. I think I'm a lot more sensual." It is this sensual quality that proliferates in his best work.

My only complaint is that of the many spectacular reproductions included here, only a few highlight Brainard's substantial collaboration with some of the best poets of the latter half of last century. Even Lewallen seems to admit, though it smacks more of concession than commemoration, that "as accomplished as Brainard became as a realist painter, his real genius and originality lay in illustration and collage." I could not agree more. Brainard's singular ability to create illustrations that consistently astound with their inventive juxtaposition has rarely, if ever, been mastered so thoroughly. The most disappointing absences are *Life with Chris* with Ted Berrigan and *Sufferin' Succotash* with Ron Padgett. And I'd be remiss if I failed to observe that, after seeing any of Brainard's matchless "Nancy" pieces, one is immediately overcome with a compulsion to see them all. Nevertheless, if you cannot see the actual exhibition, this uniquely enjoyable catalog is an excellent stand-in. Joe Brainard has a gift for you; please take this opportunity to receive it.

Cory, Jim. "Remembering Joe Brainard." *Oyster Boy Review* 17 (Fall 2003).

I Remember—the meticulous record of Joe Brainard's memory—may be the longest catalog poem in the language. Composed and published in stages, the work in its final incarnation by Granary Books lists 1,000+ images at lengths ranging from a single sentence to a paragraph.

The great charm of Brainard's writing—he wrote much more than *I Remember*—lies in its unswerving honesty and unselfconscious directness. ("I remember closely examining the opening in the head of my cock once, and how it reminded me of a goldfish's mouth.") His list includes green grass knee stains, Davy Crocket hats, pink lemonade, "parking," "petting," attempting to dribble a basketball and failing, etc. etc. etc. Many originate in the humiliation, confusion, and joys of childhood and adolescence—being hit on the head by bird shit, for instance (twice!)—and it was Brainard's simple stroke of genius to group them. The tone of the writing and the collective form of the list gives this book its considerable power as a literary experience. Seductive for being so personal—"I remember sneezing into one's hand and then

the problem of what to 'do' with it"—the poem achieves its pathos and humor by a simple rearrangement of context, i.e., by placing the naive in service to the urbane. It's the literary equivalent of Brainard the graphic artist's funny, wise collages and oil paintings. My personal favorite: "I remember a boy I once made love with and after it was all over he asked me if I believed in God."

Original URL: <http://www.oysterboyreview.com/issue/17/CoryJ-Brainard.html>

Stampanado, Jonathan. "Four Poetry Books & a Masterpiece (Review)." *Chicago Review* 47.2 (Summer 2001): 97.

Peering onto the racks of the poetry section at your local megastore emporium is an increasingly depressing affair. Who are all these people? How is it a poet I've never heard of can have a retrospective brick just out on Norton? *The Collected Limericks of Angus MacKilt*, with Notes & Commentary by Glyn Maxwell: I think I'll pass. And then the endless stream of matte-finish volumes of verse: this one's won a prize (the Olga Klumpff First Book Over 60 Pages Prize); this one's gotten a wink from Marjorie Perloff (the poet cites Cage, Benjamin, and Baudrillard in the title suite). Where's a young boy or girl to turn for the News That Stays News?

Turn first to Mark Nowak's first book, *Revenants*, finely produced by Coffee House Press (2000). The pages are big, the typesetting is handsome, and, most importantly, the poetry is dynamite. Nowak, who edits Xcp: Cross-Cultural Poetics, and can be spotted around Minneapolis impersonating a dragon, has written one of the most engaging books of poetry, let alone a first book, I've read in a few years. *Revenants* is comprised of three poem suites, two of which I'd seen before: "Zwyczaj," which was a Backwoods Broadside's Chaplet, and "Back Me Up," which appeared in Xcp. But I had never seen the major sequence of the book, *The Pain-Dance Begins*, which is a sixty-page Polish-American cosmogony, replete with myth, city grit, cultural skepticism, and that crucial ingredient frequently missing nowadays, greasy mythopoeisis. Excerpts of the poem won't do it justice. Reading it, I found myself asking the question: When did young poets stop reading Olson in favor of Theory? Nowak's book shows irrefutably why this has been a mistake. Not quite Maximus, these are the Zwiastowanie Poems, and St. Casimir is glad for them.

Next, track down any copies of Ibis Edition books you can find. Ibis is a collectively run outfit, relatively new, located in Jerusalem, dedicated to producing books of writing from the Levant. So far, titles have included two books of Harold Schimmel's poetry (Schimmel is from Jerusalem), admirably translated by Peter Cole; Ahmed Razim's *The Little Bookseller Oustaz Ali*, translated by Gabriel Levin (Rassim was an Alexandrian who wrote primarily in French); and most recently Taha Muhammed Ali's *Never Mind*, translated by Cole, Levin, and Yahya Hijazi (Ali is a Palestinian poet presently living in Nazareth), a book that captures some of the sense and senselessness of living in a land of frequent political and religious chaos, as in these lines:

I do not consider myself a pessimist,
and I certainly don't

suffer from the shock
of ancient, gypsy nightmares,
and yet, in the middle of the day,
whenever I turn on the radio,
or turn it off,
I breathe in a kind of historical,
theological leprosy (41-42).

Another recent Ibis Edition is Michael A. Sells's *Stations of Desire*, which translates some love elegies of Ibn Arabi, the medieval Sufi, to which some of Sells's own poems are added. What's interesting (to me) about this book is that Sells is a scholar of religion, with a specialty in Islamic mysticism. His book *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago, 1995) is a seminal treatment of the importance of apophasis—a negative impression or even a negation of God—to mystical speech. Scholars don't often make good poets; Sells in this book is a welcome exception. Besides bringing new and interesting translations into the light of day, Ibis Editions are really handsome little books with uniform covers on a thick cardstock, folded to create the effect of a jacket. Ibis has a website and its books can be ordered through Small Press Distributors.

Now, find a copy of *Word of Mouth: An Anthology of Gay American Poetry*, edited by Timothy Liu (Talisman House, 2000). As tedious as this collection might sound (why do we need another anthology? and why a gay one?), it's full of delights and treasures. There are no real surprises in terms of the inclusions (though I only learned that Bronk was gay last year and find it surprising to think of him in this context even still); the real surprises are in terms of the exclusions, which are not many. Most notably Merrill is missing, presumably because of prohibitive costs in reproducing his work (Liu goes into some detail about this in his thoughtful preface). Organized chronologically, the anthology has a couple of very tasty juxtapositions: Bronk followed by Duncan (represented by his late suite: "Circulations of the Song" about Rumi, a very good choice); and Frank Bidart followed by a selection from Joe Brainard's very funny *I Remember*. Perhaps the greatest strength of *Word of Mouth* is that it fearlessly includes works by established, mainstream poets (Auden, Ashbery, Mark Doty, Carl Phillips) with that of experimentalists (Robin Blaser, Stephen Jonas, Kevin Killian, Jonathan Williams), making for an interesting conversation. The Experimental v. Mainstream Smackdown is pretty sensational these days. It's refreshing to find a book that constructively ignores these foes.

Speaking of Joe Brainard, *I Remember* has just been reissued by Granary Books in a delightful pocket-sized paperback, featuring a Joe Brainard painting on the cover. This new edition collects all three editions of this book that Brainard himself issued, making for maybe the best book for summer reading ever published. Two strophes, picked at random:

I remember, when you've done a real stinker, hoping there won't be someone waiting to rush in right after you.

I remember a spooky job I had once cleaning up a dentist's office after everyone had gone home. I had my own key. The only part I liked was straightening up the magazines in the waiting

room. I saved it as the last thing to do. You wouldn't think a repetitive device so trite would make for a great poem but it does, over and over. I read my copy only in the morning, only after finishing breakfast, and only for ten minutes, so I could stretch reading it out as long as possible.

White, Edmund. "Saint Joe (Artist Joe Brainard)." *Art in America* 85.7 (July 1997): 78-81.

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 *deja 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 spareness. As one of his closest friends told me, "He was like a 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 be 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."

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 naïveté." 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. (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 Velazquez, 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 took 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.