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REVIEWS & PRESS

John Ashbery & Joe Brainard. *The Vermont Notebook*. Granary Books, 2001.



Black, Noel. "Toeing the Lines." *Fine Print* (Jan. 31–Feb. 6, 2002).

This is John Ashbery (of a generation before) at his most accessible smugness, which isn't saying much. His "entries," which range from a laundry list of names and oil companies to faux diary moments, is made bearable by Joe Brainard's always gorgeous black-and-white pop doodles of cartoon rain, the toilet, bacon and eggs, and other illuminated mundanities.

The Angel Hair Anthology, edited by Anne Waldman and Lewis Warsh, Granary Books, 2001.

Like Donald Allen's seminal 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry*, this collection of avant-irreverence reads like notes from a collective of disillusioned scientists furtively searching for a new feeling. Gathered from the archives of poets Waldman and Warsh's underground magazine and press of the same name, *The Angel Hair Anthology* rounds up works of brilliant then-young poets the likes of Bernadette Mayer, Ted Berrigan, John Wieners, Rene Ricard, Dick Gallup, and Joanne Kyger. Like all anthologies, the poems are hit-and-miss, but it's great to see works by many lesser-known and less-published authors like Mary Ferrari and Charles Stein. A great look into Angel Hair's sphere of influences and progressions.

Original URL:

<http://www.csindy.com/csindy/2002-01-31/fineprint.html>

Dillon, Cy. "Some of these tunes hold up remarkably well." *Oyster Boy Review* 17 (Fall 2003).

It goes without saying that any book of poetry and graphic art worth reprinting, as this one certainly is, must have certain qualities that transcend the time in which it was written. On the other hand, any really important book also embodies its own age to a degree that realizing its underlying values and assumptions and participating in its revelation is a far better way of understanding that age than reading a whole library of political history. *The Vermont Notebook*, naive as it seems in some aspects, tells readers as much about the 1970s in America as the best works by the mature writers of the same period. Of course, by 1975, John Ashbery had already developed the ability to confound, amuse, and fascinate readers that still confronts us regularly, and Joe Brainard was known as one of the best and most driven of the young New York artists. But their combined view is fresh and light without avoiding the darker elements of American life. Ashbery's lists, made-up letter and journal entries, and complex ramblings address subjects like corporate greed, the

environment, gay eroticism, and fast food. Brainard's illustrations, at once the best of Pop Art and Minimalism, go with the text the way Paul Desmond's graceful saxophone solos complemented the struggle of Brubeck's piano. This is a reprint well worth putting in any collection of 20th century American poetry. It opens lost doors to the complexity and richness of an era that is just far enough in the past to suffer from the categorizing, simplifying tendency of human memory.

<http://www.oysterboyreview.com/archived/17/reviews/DillonC-AshberyBrainard.html>

Scharf, Michael. *Publishers Weekly* (Oct. 22, 2001).

"Did I know you, split-levels? What it's like to inhabit your dangerous divided spaces with views of celery plantations?" Long listed on the pages dedicated to "other books by John Ashbery" but largely unobtainable, *The Vermont Notebook*, the poet's wonderful 1975 collaboration with artist Joe Brainard (1942- 1994), is finally seeing accessible print. Nearly 50 page-sized pen-and-ink drawings are matched with diary-like prose pieces, pairings that remain offhandedly perfect.

Boening, John. "Review of *The Vermont Notebook*." *World Literature Today* 77.1, (April- June, 2003): 111.

Originally published by Black Sparrow Press in 1975, *The Vermont Notebook* is a whimsical collaboration between Ashbery and the artist Joe Brainard. It consists of forty-seven pages with text (though some with only a line or two) and the same number of black-and-white drawings en face. The texts are fictional (are they all?) "journal entries," including essays on diverse subjects, disconnected ramblings, and numerous pages of lists (lists of Ashbery's friends and acquaintances, lists of kinds of cloth and items of clothing, lists of architectural features and main-street shop names, lists of cities, lists of newspapers, brand names, lists of free-associated words, some having in common their connection to small-town life), and notes of things to do: "Suede, tweed, cotton, silk jersey, whipcord, cavalry twill, melton, moire, nylon, net, chamois, challis, cordovan, maxi, midi, scarf, shoes, zipper, cuff, button." Some of the entries make little sense at all. There are also six straightforward-looking pages devoted to a visit with a marine biologist and to his plans to develop a marine ecology research station on the Gulf coast of Florida, pages that sound as if they had been lifted from a brochure extolling the virtues of a planned community at Marco Island (but having who knows what to do with Vermont).

Some of the "entries" are maddeningly banal, some obviously parodic: "This is where we are spending our vacation. A nice restful spot. Real camp life. Hope you are feeling fine." Some are even made to rise toward a kind of innocent grace, as if among discarded vacation journals one might discover a new genre of folk art, like the raunchy postcards from working-class seaside resorts now treasured by collectors of things British: "Some of these tunes hold up remarkably well. So, in the words of the song, I shall "stay on the bus, forget about us, and put the blame on me." Unless you decide to "tie a yellow ribbon round the old oak tree.' (Corky sees me at the landfill and starts complaining.)" It is the kind of thing lots of people were doing in the 1920s and 30s in Berlin and Paris once the ground had been broken, a kind of domesticated surrealism.

Instead of laminating newspapers and theater tickets (or simulacra thereof), Ashbery and Brainard seem to have dreamt up and assembled pages from who-knows-whose journals. Brainard's "illustrations" sometimes play off the texts and sometimes do not, or do not seem to. They include sketches (or drawings wanting to pass as sketches), pen-and-ink line work (sometimes cartoonish), and a few pictures that look to be woodcuts (or some other kind of presswork). They are every bit as various as Ashbery's texts. With or without the facing texts, they have a Rorschach quality about them, or that of a party game. One gets the feeling that there are likely a number of inside jokes here for the cognoscenti who used to gather in the Village or the Hamptons, but one can grow daffy trying to tease them out. To be fair, there are even a few spots of poetry, but most of

the *Notebook* consists of entries like "What lovely antiques... (fap, grunt). Isn't it funny the way something can get crowded clean out of your memory, it seems new when you see it again, although some part of your mind does remember, though not in any clear-cut way?" What this wacky (a term used in one of the cover blurbs) experiment adds to Ashbery's reputation is anyone's to guess.