

TIBOR DE NAGY

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On Joe Brainard: The Art of the Personal by John Yau Tyhe Cooper

[Joe Brainard: The Art of the Personal by John Yau](#)

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A

CLEAR

SKY...

THATS

WHAT IS

IMPORTANT

NOW-A-DAYS

IN BOSTON...

WHERE... ..

“EVERYONE

OWNS A RAIN-

COAT!” BUT ME. (JOE)

This is text taken from a pencil-on-paper self-portrait by Joe Brainard from January of 1963, sized at 4 ¾ by 3 ¼ inches, featured in both John Yau’s *Joe Brainard: The Art of the Personal*, and *Joe Brainard: a box of hearts and other works* at Tibor de Nagy. It’s one of the first works seen upon entering the show.

ME. (JOE).

That parenthetical (*JOE*) is representative of much of Joe Brainard's writing, assemblages, paintings, drawings, and miniatures (etc.). He was earnest about being himself on the page, but never assumed that we must necessarily know that self. He never considered himself to have attained stardom, and thought of others first—something much to be noted when discussing the man who wrote *I Remember*, whose subject was identifiably “himself and everything he touched, saw, or cared about—a world that was simultaneously private and public, personal and anonymous,” in Yau's words.

Joe Brainard: The Art of the Personal, poet and critic John Yau's new monograph of the artist and writer, is a love letter from someone who knew Joe to those of us who wish we did—who feel like we must have. John Yau's 73-page essay is referential, personal, and context-heavy, illustrating and mirroring the nature of Brainard's work and life, providing a framework for the nearly 150 pages of plates that follow. Throughout his essay, Yau focuses on individual works sparingly, extrapolating key points in the pieces to contextualize the trajectory of Brainard's life and practice. The book was released alongside a show of Brainard's works at Tibor de Nagy on the Lower East Side, an early favorite gallery of the Tulsa cohort of the New York School, just eight blocks away from Joe's first apartment in the city (a storefront on 6th Street that now functions as a dry cleaner's). The show, *Joe Brainard: a box of hearts and other works*, was on view from October 22 through December 3, 2022, and included many of the drawings and paintings that are featured in the book, a majority of which have not been exhibited previously.

Joe Brainard worked on the scale of generosity, the scale of his friends' hands—evidenced in both the gallery show and the book, in works belonging to the collections of his friends and fellow poets Ron and Pat Padgett, Ann Lauterbach, Kenward Elmslie, Sandy Berrigan, and others. This community of poets and artists was as active in assembling this book as they were in Joe's life. The book's list of acknowledgements is testament to the strength of the corner of the world that Brainard was embedded in: Yau thanks their mutual friends and collaborators, Constance Lewallen, Anselm Berrigan, Tony Towle, Nathan Kernan, and many more. To borrow a phrase from another of Joe's friends, the poet Anne Waldman, Joe was an “infrastructure poet” in the truest sense—he was deeply embedded in his community, working in and for it—and that infrastructure laid the foundation for this collection.

Joe was supported by the scaffolding of the city's arts and poetry scene of the sixties and seventies and was integral to it. Welcoming the reader into a short history of the New York School, early in his essay, Yau notes that Brainard ought to “be recognized as a primary force in the proliferation of collaborations” in the Downtown scene, something that we know was fundamental to the mission of the New York School—the interconnectedness of that world made it what it was and is—it built the Project, this newsletter, the crowds of people packing the church on New Year's Day for the past forty-nine years. Joe, Ted Berrigan, and Ron and Pat Padgett, the “*soi-disant* Tulsa School” as John Ashbery referred to them, spent their time going around to galleries, seeing films, living, and working together.

Collaborative works abound in the book and show—it would be impossible to collect Brainard's work comprehensively and exclude them. In “Untitled (What!!)”, a 1964 mixed-media collage by Brainard and Berrigan, in classic nudge-wink form, Joe has demarcated a “rectangle for Ted to do something in” below a repeating appropriated comic panel, in his signature all-caps handwriting. Directly above this is another 1964 work, made with Frank O'Hara, and on the facing page we find a neutral-toned collage collaboration with Tony Towle. On page 179, we see an especially debonair teddy bear advertising Anne Waldman and Reed Bye at the Project on December 28, 1977—one of a number of (generally pro-bono) book covers and reading flyers that Joe churned out throughout his life. Get the book, then find as many of the original covers as

you can in your favorite used bookstore (Unnameable Books in Prospect Heights is mine). On the note of Brainard's sheer volume of work, Yau points out key differences and similarities between Joe and Andy Warhol (a common comparison), emphasizing that Brainard's relative lack of stardom was born out of choice and a conscious rejection of the art world, exemplified in his secession from it in 1977, following a solo show of 1500 works in 1975. Yau aligns him more closely with the artists Ray Johnson and Bruce Conner, both of whom circumnavigated the commercial art world in their own ways; Johnson mailing his work to other artists and collaborating via post, Conner repeatedly creating work under various alter egos.

Yau orients much of his essay around Brainard's intentional disregard for the commercial art world, noting that Joe and his friends' "acceptance of one another and the choices they made existed completely outside mainstream American ideals." The very matter of Brainard's work and life—the scale, the generosity, the interest in the beautiful and the real—necessitated a rejection of "western masterpiece tradition" and the desire for hierarchical success that many of his peers were climbing through. "He made art for his friends, created suites of work for his lovers... he did not accommodate his art to capitalism's structure of exchange." Yau points out Brainard's appropriation techniques and his dismissal of the capitalist movements of the art world, but—as he notes in his investigation of "Untitled (Flag)" (1962), a collaged Jasper Johns nod with text by Ted Berrigan—"he was not making fun of the abstract expressionist master or defacing a well-known Pop motif through his references. But he was making their work his own." Because Joe ingested art works and movements irreverently and enthusiastically, and as Ron Padgett noted, saw them as a "way to see the world," he foregrounded beauty, the earnest, and something akin to anti-irony—"there was no message or commentary on consumerism and waste. He was not interested in being ironic." Joe lived a life that purposefully evaded commodification and neglected consumerism in its structure, but he was not interested in declaring anything in his artwork outside of himself, beauty, the real. He cared deeply about his materials. They were his subject, they were himself:

They are present, they are the ways of my country, they are familiar,
they are us, the way we dress and the expression we are forced to
plaster on our faces.

—Joe, age 19, "Self-Portrait on Christmas Night" (1961)

Joe Brainard: The Art of the Personal is personal, artful. The life and work of Joe Brainard is so full and filling as to be difficult to traverse on one's own. John Yau is a stellar guide.