

‘too beautiful’: useless art and the queerly optimistic Make Your Own Brainard Project

Rona Cran*

English Literature, University of Birmingham College of Arts and Law, UK

Abstract

This article offers an account of the British Academy-funded Make Your Own Brainard project, which has put the work of New York School artist and poet Joe Brainard into dialogue with digital media and digital media users via an interactive website: www.makeyourownbrainard.com. The project has created a digital corpus of previous un-exhibited paper fragments (hi-res, 2d images) which were intended for use in Brainard’s collages and were discovered among his possessions a number of years after his death. It has enabled users to create their own collages out of the fragments, either digitally or by downloading and printing them for manual assemblage, via a freely accessible bespoke website and app. In doing so the project provides a model for the social and academic significance of user-driven, non-hierarchical, non-monetized artistic activities, and emphasizes the value of enabling and promoting the practical, emotional, and inspirational aspects of making, sharing, and talking about art, rather than inertly observing it. It also argues that the project calls for a reassessment of value judgments regarding ‘fun’ or even ‘useless’ art, and suggests that in its queer optimism it raises important questions about existing hegemonic narratives surrounding academic impact, funding for the arts, and the digital humanities.

Correspondence:

Rona Cran, Department of English Literature, University of Birmingham, UK.

E-mail:

r.cran@bham.ac.uk

1. Joe Brainard: A Fire Marshal’s Nightmare

In the spring of 2017, I travelled to New York to carry out research for my new book, *Everyday Rebellion: Poetry and Resistance in New York, 1960-1995*. My ideas for the book at that point were somewhat scattered, my research processes eclectic and intuitive—but I knew that in writing about the everyday ways in which New York’s poets resisted cultural and political hegemonies I wanted to discuss Joe Brainard, an artist and writer whose work had long arrested me in its

queerness and quiet beauty. Brainard was prolific (he produced thousands of visual works in addition to writing several books), collaborative (often working with poets when making visual work), and devastatingly talented: as he put it in a letter to his friend the poet Ron Padgett, ‘there are really so many different ways that one can go about being an artist’ (Padgett, 2004). His motivation as an artist was his conviction that the best art is playful, experimental, and collaborative in nature. His renowned Madonnas, Nancys, Pansies, Gardens, paper cut-outs, Whippoorwills, collages, assemblages, cartoons, fliers, paintings,

drawings, cover illustrations, postcards, Pop Art-esque pieces, and writings are all suffused with wit, warmth, sensuality, and ‘something lighter than the gritty mechanics of writing can ever convey’ (Sigo, 2019). They are unified by the heightened quality of attention that he pays to his theme, subject, and materials, regardless of what these may be—the same quality of attention that he asks of his viewers and readers. I’d already spent time in the Fales Library at NYU, reading copies of *C* magazine, which Brainard illustrated, and would soon be heading across the country to San Diego, in order to immerse myself in his extensive archive held at UCSD’s Mandeville Special Collections. On my last day in the city, at a small Thai restaurant on East 13th Street, I had lunch with Ron Padgett, fellow poet and one of Brainard’s oldest friends, their association dating back to high school in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Tall, and dressed in corduroys, Padgett was a reserved interlocutor, apparently as uncertain as to my purpose in New York as I was, until the subject of our conversation moved to Joe Brainard. He immediately perked up, his answers to my questions filling with pleasure and growing longer and more animated, his stories about his long-dead friend enacting the feeling shared by people who knew who him or who have come to know his art and writing that, as David Kermani puts it, ‘everything he touched just sparkled’ (Shamma, 2018).

Our talk turned to collage, a form Brainard had ‘developed . . . to dazzling new heights’ (Ford, 2019). I had written a book on the subject, *Collage in Twentieth-Century Art, Literature, and Culture* (2014), and Brainard was famous for his intricate collages in which everything from costume jewelry to his favorite cigarette brand (Tareyton), postage stamps to icons of the Virgin Mary, found themselves playfully appropriated. Brainard was rare in the synergetic closeness he enjoyed with his materials, his use of which was of a piece with the pleasure he took in collaboration throughout his career. A famous photo of him, taken in 1975 for an article in *People* magazine, shows him seated at his worktable in his cavernous Lower East Side loft surrounded by piles of paper fragments which seem as much the denizens of the studio as he is, the only visible space on the floor created by paths forged through what the magazine laughingly called ‘a fire marshal’s nightmare’ (Wohlfert, 1975). Brainard divided his time between

this New York City loft and Calais, Vermont, where he spent extended summers at poet Kenward Elmslie’s house (Elmslie was his partner for over 30 years). Faced with the logistical difficulty of transporting his loftful of collage materials over 300 miles north on the bus, he would group them into manila envelopes and post them to himself in advance, leaving him unencumbered on the long journey to Calais but well-supplied for the summer in paper snippets, postcards, and other ephemera on his arrival.

In 2011, Padgett revealed, 17 years after Brainard had passed away from AIDS-related pneumonia aged just 52, Padgett’s wife Pat (also a dear friend of Brainard’s) discovered a handful of manila envelopes, business envelopes, and plastic sleeves in an outbuilding on Elmslie’s property (which is near the Padgetts’ own). Inside, primarily though not exclusively grouped according to theme or tone (‘Mail’, ‘Blue’, ‘Gay and Gray’, etc.), were a large number of paper fragments, evidently selected by Brainard for use in collages he never completed—and in the majority of cases never even started—as well as, perhaps, for sending to fellow collagists including his brother John Brainard, who is also an artist, and his friend the poet John Ashbery, with whom Brainard and Elmslie used to make drunken after-dinner collages in Vermont in the early 1970s (Cran, 2019). Both Johns were sporadic recipients of treasure troves of paper snippets from Brainard, and both put them to use in their own collages, exhibiting the results at the Nicholas Davies Gallery and the Tibor de Nagy Gallery respectively. When the prospect of an exhibition of Ashbery’s collages first arose, he ‘went through shoeboxes of old postcards and found an envelope filled with materials cut out and collected by Joe’, which he had sent him for one of his birthdays in the early 1990s. Several of the resulting collages are dedicated to or made ‘for’ Joe Brainard, and a 2016–17 Tibor de Nagy exhibition featured a vitrine containing some of the fragments Brainard had sent to him, in addition to a handwritten letter:

Dear John,

Actually, I’m finding it rather hard (a heavy trip) going back through all this stuff again.* Then too, most of what I have seems to have more to do with the color and texture and character of paper, as opposed to imagery, which I

expect you’d be more interested in. Correct me if I’m wrong. At any rate – if this small sampling is of any use to you, let me know, and more will follow.

Love,

Joe

*But anything for you! (Brainard, 1983)

The letter speaks to Brainard’s affective connection with his materials (‘the color and texture and character of paper’), to his inclination to share them with kindred spirits like Ashbery and his brother (‘anything for you!’), and to the increasing distance he put between himself and the American visual art scene, which by the 1980s had exhausted him (‘I’m finding it rather hard (a heavy trip) going back through all this stuff again’). So too did the materials Pat Padgett found in 2011, lovingly squirreled away, but never used and never distributed.

For Ron, as both friend and executor of Brainard’s estate, the snippet collection presented a quandary. While offering fascinating and generative evidence of Brainard’s working creative processes, the snippets are not finished artworks (the majority are not-even-started artworks), and as such (unsigned, undated) hold little appeal for collectors, curators, or even archivists. Furthermore, during his life, Brainard himself was at pains to resist his institutionalization within the art world: as Padgett has written, ‘seeing his work placed in an institutional archive was perhaps too much like having his spirit put in a bottle. Too final’ (Padgett, 2004). But the fragments are not simply art that might have been: they are also, as Padgett and I began to realize, art that might yet be. If similar snippets held creative value for John Brainard and John Ashbery, why not these for other would-be collagists, other dedicatees of ‘the color and texture and character of paper’, other kindred spirits both known to Brainard and more recent comers to his oeuvre? Might there be a way to ‘mail’ these fragments out to others, to share them as Brainard had shared the earlier fragments (in a spirit of collaboration and gift-giving), and thus to set in motion a collage-making enterprise that picked up where Brainard had left off?

Living in an era in which the abundance of technologies and digital platforms has multiplied the ways in which art and scholarship can be made, shared, and archived, it was clear that the way forward lay in

putting Brainard’s tactile, material fragments into dialogue with digital media and digital media users. We would try, we decided over a last iced tea before I caught the subway to JFK, to create a platform that would enable us to digitize the fragments and make them freely and interactively accessible to people all over the world, people who would not only be able to use them to create their own original collages, but to enact a posthumous collaboration with Joe Brainard himself. This would be in keeping with the encouragement Brainard always gave his peers, ‘in practice, presence, and publication to collage with and without him, inventing a new form of collage: collaborative collage’ (Shamma, 2018). Thus the ‘make your own Brainard’ project was born.

At the end of our lunch, Padgett signed my copy of *Bean Spasms*, a collaborative book which he’d written with Ted Berrigan and Joe Brainard in 1967, published by Kulchur Press. In addition to his own signature, he also counterfeited each of Berrigan and Brainard’s signatures (Berrigan died in 1983, Brainard in 1994), and later mailed me a handmade, limited edition ‘Bean Spasms’ button to go with the book, two gestures that affirmed the non-serious, personal, poetic, and processual connections that would underpin our project.

2 Making ‘Make Your Own Brainard’

I returned to New York in August of the following year, having secured a British Academy grant to support the project, and again in April 2019. The primary purpose of these visits was to view and to digitize the Brainard snippets. In addition to those discovered by Pat Padgett in Vermont, I was also invited to make use of the remaining fragments that Brainard had sent to John Ashbery, which Ashbery, in turn, had not gotten around to using in his collages. Ashbery had died aged ninety in September 2017, and, like the Padgetts, his husband David Kermani was keen that Brainard’s legacy, which was now partly also Ashbery’s legacy, be continued in the particularly esoteric manner offered by the Make Your Own Brainard project. After all, this is a project which, like Ashbery’s ‘Brainard collages’, suggests the possibility of the enduring existence of



Fig. 1 The Brainard fragments spread out on Ron Padgett's desk (24 April 2019). © Rona Cran

both artists, less as subjects or dedicatees than as collaborators. I visited Ashbery and Kermani's home in Hudson, in upstate New York, where Kermani and his assistant Timothy O'Connor laid all of the snippets out in the living room for me to view, before photographing each one individually. At Padgett's apartment on the Lower East Side, where he and Pat have lived more or less since they moved to New York with Brainard in the 1960s, we also laid the snippets out on a big wooden dining table and examined and photographed them (Fig. 1).

Many of the snippets are intriguing artifacts on their own terms. They include fragments of stock certificates, scraps of sheet music, arresting little cartoons, meticulously cut-out images of flowers, wings, stars, and dice, bingo cards, images of birds, children, and butterflies, images of characters from children's games, advertising slogans or imagery, postage stamps, historical figures, pretend money, 19th-century cheques, and the odd miscellaneous ticket stub. In among the more thematic selections are occasional hard-to-categorize clippings of things

Brainard appears to simply have appreciated for a variety of reasons (finding them funny, finding them beautiful, etc.), including a pencil print of two Hereford cattle taken from the February 1872 edition of *Hearth and Home*, a panel from a comic strip featuring a speech bubble containing the exclamation 'The British are coming!', repeated twice, the second time in larger, more 'shouty' letters, and the title of the 1936 melodramatic midnight movie *Reefer Madness*, clipped from its 1972 rerelease advertisement (which Ashbery also used in a 2014 collage called *Second State*). The snippets also include fascinating partly-made collages: one in which a black and white nude male torso has been arranged in an embrace with a sepia male torso inside an oval frame, and another which features a black and white kitten and a black heart overlaid on a label from a bottle of Pouilly-Fuissé, recalling a line from Brainard's 1975 poetic masterpiece *I Remember*: 'I remember the several rather unusual ways "Pouilly-Fuissé" has come out of my mouth, trying to order a bottle of wine in restaurants' (Padgett confirmed the recollection,

and that Pouilly-Fuissé was Brainard’s favorite wine; [Brainard, 2001](#)).

Collectively, the snippets and part-collages uncover Brainard’s creative processes as an artist, and particularly as a collagist. They reveal the kinds of images or patterns or colors that caught his attention (blues and greys, flowers, cartoons, material that might be considered detritus), the accuracy with which he excised them from their original contexts using scissors and/or an X-acto knife, the fact that he would sometimes modify them using pencil or paint or by gluing them to another image, and the ways in which he seems to have enabled his collages to develop intuitively or semi-autonomously, almost on their own terms. As he wrote in a letter to Pat Padgett, in which he offered ‘advice to a collage maker’ in his postscript: ‘Do not try to “arrange” your objects; let them help you formulate by building from one object to the next. You’re limiting yourself tremendously. Fantastic things can happen’ ([Brainard, 1963](#)). Or, put another way, as he said to Anne Waldman: ‘The material does it all’ ([Brainard and Waldman, 1979](#)).

Brainard’s advice to a collage maker—in addition to his creative and collaborative ethos and the ways in which his art was disseminated—shaped and informed our next move, which was to build an intuitive web application that would enable the digitized images to be used in the composition of new collages. I contacted Jim Clifford, at Harborne Web Design in Birmingham, with an overview of our requirements. Primarily, we needed the app to freely allow participants to create their own collages online (on desktops/laptops and on tablets/phones), using the digitized snippets. We wanted some flexibility in terms of the extent to which the images could be manipulated (keeping in mind Brainard’s tendency to manipulate the snippets in real life), with participant options including resizing, layering of the same image, layering of other images, and reorientation. In addition to this, we wanted participants to be able to choose the color of their ground and to be able to decide on the aspect (horizontal or vertical). We also wanted participants to be able to download the images of the snippets individually, so that they could make collages either using their own software or by printing them out and assembling them manually, if they preferred to get into ‘the spirit of the pasting’ ([Brainard, 1963](#)) the old fashioned scissors-and-glue way. These

options meant that the collage composer also needed an upload function, so that participants could upload their collages for display in our online gallery, should they choose to do so. Although the idea was that the online collagists would primarily work with the Brainard fragments, allowing them near-endless possibilities for replicating fragments and layering and unlayering between multiple edits, they were also to be able to select material from the world of print media and found objects, integrating their own images into their collages for subsequent upload to the site.

Once collages had been created, we also wanted to offer their makers a number of options regarding what to do with them, once again in keeping with a key aspect of Brainard’s career, namely the multiple destinations of his works: in addition to being included in gallery displays, museum collections, and private collections, Brainard’s art was often given away to friends, lost, kept but not shown, or, as with many artists, destroyed either deliberately or accidentally. The collage composer app, therefore, needed to be able to offer collagists the opportunity to display their work, to ensure that their work was saved but not displayed, to ‘lose’ their work, or to ‘destroy’ their work. For those who wanted to display their collage, we also wanted to offer a chance to title it, and to decide if they wanted it to be attributed to them, to be displayed anonymously, or to be displayed using a pseudonym. Finally, we wanted to include an optional, primarily free-text survey that asked questions about the collage-making process in order to gauge, from a qualitative and personal perspective, what it felt like to make a collage using the project website and to engage with the Brainard fragments.

Throughout the website as a whole, the domain name of which would be [www.makeyourownbrainard.com](#), we would use fonts, colors, and styles that were sympathetic to Brainard’s work. In addition to the collage composer, the website would include material about Brainard’s life and work, about the fragments and their discovery, about the history of collage-making, about the New York School, and about how to use the collage composer. It would also include a selection of ‘Reflections on Joe’, short reflective pieces written by scholars, poets, and artists, including friends of Joe and enthusiasts of his work (or, indeed, both).

In *Approaching Eye Level*, Vivian Gornick muses on the related but different notions of ‘transmission’, which she calls ‘a series of connecting signals sent out across the exploratory surface’, and ‘narration’: ‘a road cut in the wilderness’. ‘Both’, she writes, ‘are wanted in a life’ (Gornick, 1996). Between January and June 2019 Clifford worked on creating the collage composer, readying us to transmit the Brainard fragments across the exploratory surface of the world. As he did so, he eagerly familiarized himself with Brainard’s oeuvre (even, wonderfully, turning his entire family into a group of Brainard aficionados—further testament to Brainard’s enduring ‘sparkle’). Meanwhile, I cut a road in what for many participants in the project may have been a wilderness, writing the website content and soliciting enthusiastic responses from contributors to the ‘Reflections on Joe’ section, including curators Constance Lewallen and Salvatore Schiciano, poets Cedar Sigo, Edmund and Anselm Berrigan, and Ann Lauterbach, and scholars Mark Ford and Daniel Kane, among others, who each wrote moving and insightful pieces to which I refer throughout this essay.

In July 2019, the Make Your Own Brainard website was launched.

3 ‘A Third Sound’: Make Your Own Brainard

Within a week or so, collages began to appear in the gallery, and, slightly more sporadically, survey responses began to appear in my inbox. I was also contacted by scholars, poets, and a filmmaker, primarily from the USA but also from the UK, Canada, Europe, and the Middle East, who were keen to share their enthusiastic responses to the Make Your Own Brainard project website. A handful of anonymized examples from these communications are indicative: the project was referred to as ‘a great model for how digital humanities tools can be used in interesting, fun, and rewarding ways’; ‘a great use of digital humanities’; ‘an excellent idea’; ‘so so so wonderful’; ‘a delightful tool’; ‘a novel and lovely way to honor the legacy of Brainard’, and ‘a wonderful and fun idea and great resource’. Reviewing the website for his

influential New York School-focused website, *Locus Solus*, Andrew Epstein wrote:

This ingenious site embraces the spirit of fun and the DIY ethos of Brainard and his New York School circle and takes it into a new, digital realm. As Cran notes, ‘For Brainard, the chance to be “unprofessional”, and to experiment,’ was of the utmost importance, and this project gives you the opportunity to play along. It’s easy and fun to use, even if the experience does remind you all over again just how wonderful Brainard’s own collages are . . . and how difficult it is to actually make a *good* collage yourself (as can be seen by my own humble attempt). (Epstein, 2019)

I quote this for two reasons: firstly, for its references to fun, unprofessionalism, and experimentation, and second, for its indication of the challenge of producing work of Brainard’s standard, even when using Brainard’s materials. But although the majority of the collages made on the website will never fully encompass Brainard’s eye for combination and his lightness of touch (though some come close, particularly those submitted under the pseudonym ‘Helix’—see Fig. 2), in many ways, this isn’t the point. As noted previously, the project is processual; as indicated by the responses to it, its emphasis is on fun, on ‘playing along’, on delight, on embracing the unprofessional, on experimenting—rather than, necessarily, on the end result (or ‘output’, in common parlance). It embraces a kind of creative practice and engagement which queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick might term ‘reparative’ (Sedgwick, 2003). A reparatively positioned viewer, in Heather Love’s useful take on Sedgwick’s theory, ‘stays local, gives up on hyper-vigilance for attentiveness; instead of powerful reductions . . . prefers acts of noticing, being affected, taking joy and making whole’ (Love, 2010). The reparative impulse, according to Sedgwick, ‘wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an inchoate self’ (2003)—this is the impulse governing the Make Your Own Brainard project. Overwhelmingly, the collagists who engaged with the website and completed the optional surveys used the word ‘fun’ to describe their experiences, along with other descriptors that evoked both the



Fig. 2 *The Spectacular Possibility of Living a Half Life*, by ‘Helix’. © ‘Helix’ and Rona Cran

affective and informally creative nature of their responses to the collage composer and to the fragments themselves. Examples of feedback received from participants include (italics are mine):

- it was *fun* to throw a picture together quickly using little more than free association
- it was *fun* . . . cool website!
- the process was *intuitive*, and *rewarding*
- *joyful, lovely, quiet, absent* . . . love the online platform, *beautiful experience*
- I just wanted to *play* . . . I thought it was *fun, intuitive*, and user-friendly. It’s the kind of ephemera I collect. . .
- *happy fun* time
- lots of beeps and boops . . . it was *fun and easy* to do. It started as a bit of a joke and then I got more serious about it . . . this was *fun*, keep on going!
- *very fun!* Love the way the irregular images could be placed on top of or under other images, and the ability to reuse the same image, and resize is great.
- *so much fun!*
- I’ve collaged with magazines for many years (*unprofessionally*)
- it’s like *having my own Brainard*. . . *lots of fun*
- *really fun* to use, and a novel way to engage with Brainard’s work
- *fun*, nice app
- *delightful*
- it felt *promising*. I want to return
- *relaxing* . . . I feel *soothed* by the process
- I really *love* what you have created. It’s a *spiritual feeling* to work with these pieces which allow *endless play* without loss. I find it a *deep pleasure*. I keep thinking of the pieces in that shed for those summers before discovery. The intense heat and cold. And now ‘they’ are ‘here’.

Brainard explained in his *People* interview: ‘For me, the art is the involvement, the doing . . . Art is a luxury. But the idea of expressing yourself always makes sense. That’s a reason itself, and to learn and discover things’ (Wohlfert, 1975). The Make Your Own Brainard

project embraces this code of creative practice, in the understanding that as luxurious as art may be, its real value lies in ‘the involvement, the doing’—in the joy inherent in creative self-expression and learning. The website’s participants embraced it too, partly because of the Brainard context, whether or not they were already familiar with his work: as one collagist wrote, ‘this is my first exposure to Joe Brainard . . . but I’m gathering there was a spirit of openness in his process and work . . . I really liked the guiding quotes [‘advice to a collage maker’] and tried to incorporate some of those suggestions’. They also embraced it because, as Epstein notes, ‘there’s something about the tactile, playful, anyone-can-do-it premise of collage (unlike, say, oil painting) that invites us to try it ourselves’ (Epstein, 2019).

The collages made on the website bear these ideas out: the gallery is full of lively, humorous variations on Brainard’s themes, in clear evidence of the joy and creative fecundity to be found in the rearrangement of images, shapes, colors, and textures. The juxtapositional logic of the collages is pleasingly ephemeral, bringing us, as Michael Thomas Davis writes about John Ashbery’s collages, ‘to the brink of meaning, of story, only to leave us there, caught in a skein of delightful, unresolved tensions’ (Davis, 2008). Brainard’s fellow New York School poet and collaborator Larry Fagin commented in an interview with Daniel Kane that collaboration is a powerful and subversive (as well as fun) creative act because ‘the result is something that neither person would have (or could have) written on his/her own . . . a third voice. A third sound’ (Kane, 2003). This is what the collage composer, filled with Brainard fragments arranged into new collages by anonymous participants, facilitates and enacts.

As with Brainard’s collages, there are critical judgments and interpretations to be made of all of the works produced on the website should one want to. But the collages are also, in and of themselves, enough. John Ashbery’s appraisal of Brainard’s art is apt: ‘everything will be okay if we just look at it, accept it and let it be itself’ (Ashbery in Lewallen, 2001). The collages share Brainard’s ‘methodology of the no-comment juxtaposing of ordinary things’ (Lewallen, 2001), the egalitarian vision in front of which ‘nothing looks less than splendid’ (Ratcliff in Lewallen, 2001). Like the ‘rose made out of a real rose’, of which James Schuyler writes in his poem ‘Fabergé’ (Schuyler,

1993), the collages (following Brainard’s) provoke a response based not on detached critical objectivity but on propinquity, the possibility of participation in the art-making process, and a kind of universally-accessible intimacy predicated on the linking of the experience of art with the broader experience of life. As Daniel Kane suggests, ‘collage is both the exterior experience one has of the world and an interior choice one makes to determine and shape one’s relationship to that world’ (Kane, 2003). Brainard’s motivations to make collages—both his experiences of the world and his creative mediation of those experiences—were often predicated on a desire to make his friends happy, to provoke and experience their delight, rather than their skills of close analysis. His art is not a distant thing, not something to be over-thought or over-complicated. It does not aspire to a public life; wary of falling into ‘the “elegant” trap or the “arty” trap. (Too beautiful)’ (Brainard, 2012), his works cannot be ossified into commodities.

‘Brainard’s art is profoundly generous’, as Nathan Kernan writes, ‘and his concern is often simply to give the viewer more of whatever would offer the most visual pleasure . . . he seemed to make each work a new beginning, and a visual gift to be enjoyed on its own intrinsic merits’ (Kernan, 2001). The Make Your Own Brainard collages fall squarely into this gift-giving lineage, exemplified by delight taken in reuse and by the sharing of ordinary yet beautiful items, evidence of a process of art-making that resists the expectation that art must aim to be critically as well as financially valuable. As one astute visitor to the site suggested to me, digitization makes Brainard’s fragments inexhaustible—each cutting can be used and reused, set and reset, time and time again. Thus, although users may choose them for themselves, no one fragment is ever ‘theirs’—they are always inherently shared. The website’s collagists also demonstrated a spirit of generosity akin to Brainard’s when it came to committing their work to the gallery or sharing their collages with other people. Typical explanations for sharing work gleaned from the surveys included:

- I decided to add it to the gallery instead to make it more communal and ephemeral. I love making collages and giving art to people . . . I think it’s generous to share materials;

- I think it is important to exhibit all possibilities within a program like this to formulate ideas in other works. A single odd pairing is all it takes to spark an idea and another idea and so on.
- this is my first exposure to Joe Brainard. . .but I’m gathering there was a spirit of openness in his process and work, so yeah, I probably would [share it with someone else];
- I wanted to have it saved because it is art;
- art is sharing.

We can see here that in sharing their work (and appreciating and articulating the significance of doing so—namely, sparking ideas, making art communal) the project’s collagists gesture away from the traditional Maussian model of gift-exchange, predicated on receiving something in return, to reveal a mode of appreciation that suggests instead that the gift is not always vexed. The value of the collages lies in the fact that their existence is part of a generous, collaborative venture that is greater than the sum of its parts.

I was intrigued or moved or amused or delighted by all of the collages that appeared in the gallery: by their color choices, juxtapositions, abundance, thematic interests, titles, and shapes. Viewing the collages, it was clear, as Mark Ford writes in his ‘Reflection on Joe’ (Ford, 2019), that Brainard’s ‘collage off-cuts and remainders exert a peculiar, uncanny fascination’. In Edmund Berrigan’s ‘Reflection’, he writes: ‘I don’t really know him, so we live in an arrangement of glimpses’ (Berrigan, 2019). The collages, at once plausibly and miraculously, seemed to me to be just such an arrangement of glimpses, with Brainard peeking out from behind each of the new creations. A collage called *Drugs-Are-Bad-Mkay*, by ‘Mr Mackey’, offers a witty take on the sorts of narcotics-related moral panics Brainard would have been familiar with (and wryly amused by) coming of age during the late fifties and early sixties: in it, the ‘Reefer Madness’ snippet is juxtaposed with a US postage stamp featuring four young people and the words ‘SUPPORT OUR YOUTH’, alongside a bisected cartoon of what appears to be a hand-wringing seventeenth-century gentleman, his head positioned comically-surreally beneath and between his thigh-high boot-clad legs. Three collages made by *Helix* come closest to the ingenuity, intensity of detail, and

synergetic selection of images that we see in Brainard’s work. In cleverly-titled *The Spectacular Probability of Living a Half Life* (Fig. 2), a fragment featuring the comic book superhero The Atom is placed atop a bank of flowers and beneath a torrent of yet more flowers, the paths of his rotating electrons gratifyingly mirroring the shapes of the petals. Blue dice line the two vertical edges of the collage, which is set against a pale orange ground, and two trees of life occupy the top and bottom right-hand corners. In *Aristocratic Dialogue*, a bewigged John Hancock (on a trade card from the ‘Great Americans’ series issued by W. Duke Sons & Co. brand cigarettes) ‘converses’ diagonally across the collage with a drawing of a young graduate cut from an advertisement, complete with mortarboard and degree certificate, their ‘dialogue’ embodied by another meticulously arranged torrent of flowers. *Cosmic Rain*, meanwhile, is an evocative scattering of blue and blue-ish fragments (hearts, flowers, strings of kisses, fake money, dice, a pair of shaking hands) across a dark blue ground: the effect is that the images appear to be gently in motion, a rain of particles from deep space, familiar objects rendered alien and mysterious in their ‘cosmic’ arrangement. *Encased* (Fig. 3), an anonymous collage, recalls Brainard’s fascination with ‘the color and texture and character of paper, as opposed to imagery’: here, the fragments have been chosen according to their shape (each fragment used is either square or rectangular), their color (mainly blues and greens), and their texture (even though we cannot physically feel them, the images suggest varying degrees of creaminess, flimsiness, durability, fibrousness, and smoothness).

Some of the collages incorporate knowing references to Brainard’s wider oeuvre, and to works by other New York School figures including Ron Padgett and John Ashbery. *Picture of Little Girls in a Prospect of Flowers* echoes Ashbery’s famous early poem ‘The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers’, for instance (‘I cannot escape the picture/Of my small self in that bank of flowers’; Ashbery, 2008). A collage entitled *Bingo* may simply have taken a bingo card fragment as its point of departure, but it also forms part of a ‘bingo lineage’ within the context of the New York School, evoking Ron Padgett’s poem ‘Joe Brainard’s Painting *Bingo*’, Joe Brainard’s actual painting *Bingo*, and John Ashbery’s 2014 collage *Beethoven Bingo*. Other collages make reference to Nancy, Brainard’s

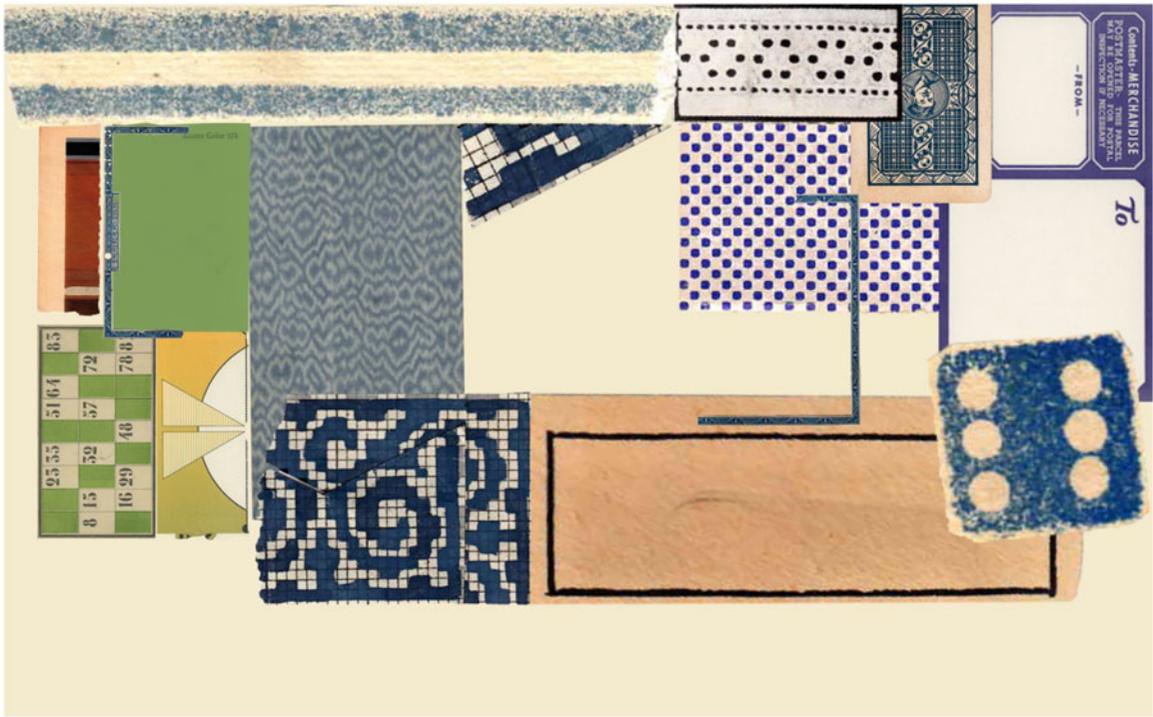


Fig. 3 *Encased*. Anon. © Rona Cran

famous appropriation of Ernie Bushmiller's cartoon heroine, and to *I Remember*, and some derive their titles from Brainard's thematic interests (*Luminous Superheroes*, *Bird Wish*, *Flower Girls*, *Bird's Nest*, *Flutterbies*, *The Boy Who Had Only Birds*). Still others bear visual and literary associations that reach further afield, again in keeping with Brainard's wide-ranging cultural tastes. Eric Fretez's *Four Quartets* invokes Eliot's work of the same name; *Thumbelinus*, by 'Kacper', is inspired by Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *Thumbelina*; the squares and rectangles of *Encased* recall Mondrian's emphasis on color, line, form, and texture; in its swirling, overlaid shapes and abundant textual imagery, *giorgia* by 'carole anne' is an homage to Carlo Carrà's *Interventionist Manifesto*; and the title of Salvatore Schiciano's *The Persistence of Auwls Agreement* has clear visual and linguistic echoes with Geoffrey Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*.

Some collagists displayed their collages using their real names, 'because why not?', as one survey response put it, the smiling tone of the rhetorical question

indirectly evoking the charm of Brainard's signature, always written in cartoonish capital letters. Most collagists chose to use pseudonyms (some of which they had used in other contexts, others of which were particular to the Brainard project) or to remain completely anonymous. Reasons given speak volumes about prevailing aesthetic value judgments, even among collagists of this ilk, as well as calling to mind Brainard's resistance to the artist-as-ego cliché. For example, people who remained anonymous cited concerns that the collage might be the first thing an employer comes upon when carrying out a search for the collagist's name, as if this might reflect negatively on them ('too beautiful?'), or that they made their collage 'quickly, without thinking too much about it', the implication being that it therefore wasn't very 'good' and was best left unattributed. But other responses pushed back against the humble impulse toward self-erasure or artistic anonymity, assuming a variety of stances all of which Brainard would also have appreciated. Choosing the pseudonym 'AF', one respondent explained (echoing Brainard's avoidance of

widespread critical recognition) that it was in order to ensure that ‘people can’t look me up and see other things I’ve done. I’d rather it be a mystery and somebody stumbles upon my work by other means’. Others echoed Brainard’s disarming spirit of not-entirely-performative innocence, or what Cedar Sigo calls his ‘peculiar, dead-on, childlike honesty’ (Sigo, 2019). One collagist wrote: ‘I chose a pseudonym because I think it’s more fun. Maybe I’ll make a whole series of collages under this pseudonym, maybe it will be a one time thing’. Another felt that a pseudonym ‘seemed more artistic’; another chose one because ‘I like to play with words’.

Constance Lewallen, who in 2001 curated a wildly successful and popular retrospective exhibition of works by Brainard for the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum, which travelled to the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, Colorado, the Donna Beam Fine Arts Gallery at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and to PS I in New York, describes Brainard’s method as adding ‘one thing to another until all parts coalesced into something greater’ (Lewallen, 2001). This method shaped and informed our designing and building of the Make Your Own Brainard project website; it also, judging by the collages produced and the survey responses given, appears to have shaped and informed the collage-making processes of those people who visited the website and embraced both its simplicity and its idiosyncrasy, in order to collaborate, indirectly, with Joe.

4 I Like Make Your Own Brainard

The poet Alice Notley, writing about Ron Padgett’s poetry, notes that his poems ‘often seem to be about the journey they take: given where you begin, where will you end up?’ (Notley, 1998). If the same, or similar, is true of the Make Your Own Brainard project, given where we began, where have we ended up? What does the project illuminate? What has it achieved? What creative or intellectual discussions does it contribute to? In many ways it is too early to make any definitive arguments: the website has been live just over a year, just fifty or so collages have been made (and displayed), and fewer than thirty surveys completed. But it clearly speaks to a range of intellectual

sites of enquiry, including most obviously studies of Brainard himself, in addition to New York School studies (and the significance of Brainard’s work to that field), collage, intersections between material, visual, literary, and digital cultures, avant-garde art and literature, museum studies (particularly the move away from a market-driven cultural system of top-down institutional control, as well as issues of communication, cultural legacy, and creativity in a digital age), affect studies (thinking particularly about the practical, emotional, and inspirational aspects of making, sharing, and talking about art within a collaborative virtual community), and queer studies.

It is also, of course, a digital project (albeit a somewhat esoteric one made by a scholar and a poet with hitherto little or no collective experience in the field of Digital Humanities). Its digital form is crucial to facilitating everything discussed above, even given its relative simplicity. Where the project fails (primarily in the absence of physical touch—the inability of anyone other than Ron Padgett to physically handle and rearrange the original material fragments) it also succeeds: hands are put to use in different ways (collagists handle a mouse or trackpad rather than a pair of scissors), and the owners of those hands come together in a non-hierarchical setting, working in the same digital studio where they are given free access to the kind of arcane materials usually reserved for archivists or scholars with institutional financial support. The project, in other words, broadens access to treasures—indeed, it reveals previously unknown treasures *to be treasures*—while simultaneously preserving them, given their inherent material fragility.

In broadening access in this way, the project also encourages acts of creativity, enabling anyone with the inclination to become involved in *making* art rather than passively observing it, while also lessening as far as possible the limitations of economic, geographic, and cultural margins. This kind of interactive art-making vigorously counterbalances perceptions of art and art history as being reserved for creative, educational, or financial elites; as Margot Lovejoy notes, it offers ‘a frame or context which provides an environment for new experiences of exchange and learning’ (Lovejoy, 2005). Visitors to the Make Your Own Brainard website ‘meet’ Joe Brainard, sometimes for the first time, sometimes for the thousandth time, and the immersive, collaborative, participatory experience

they are offered—occupying themselves with a process initiated by Brainard, continued by the curators of the website, and culminating in a new communal, virtual gallery space—changes, enhances, and extends their relationship with him as an artist and with themselves as artists. The website is also a portal to further access and education: in addition to introducing people to Brainard, it also documents the history of collage and the New York School, and leads visitors to new books, new artworks, and new poems.

Whereas discourse around digitization often centers around loss or disappearance (Baudrillard, 1983; Virilio, 1995), what happens with Make Your Own Brainard is the revelation of materials that *weren't* lost (because we didn't know they existed in the first place). The site is therefore about the *appearance* of materials, to the gain of participants all over the world (for whom the materials have never existed materially—for the vast majority, they have *only* existed in their digitized form). Furthermore, if 'digitization allows objects to be simultaneously present and absent' (Stevens, 2016), then the website is even more of a piece with the history and theory of collage than originally planned. As Rosalind Krauss argues, 'as a system, collage inaugurates a play of differences which is both about and sustained by an absent origin' (Krauss, 1981). And in their haptic visuality (the concept of which is predicated on what Laura Marks terms 'a robust flow between sensuous closeness and symbolic distance'; Marks, 2002), both the collages and the Brainard fragments from which they are created affirm Martijn Stevens' notion of affective browsing, or 'touching from a distance': in other words, they hint 'at the experience of proximity in terms of affinity, connectivity, and attraction, which is not necessarily dependent on the material presence of an object' (Stevens, 2016).

Affinity, connectivity, and attraction underpin the Make Your Own Brainard project. But intrinsic to these affects is the straightforward fact that the project is *fun*, and that people *like* it—and these attributes, though not often critically validated (and, indeed, often treated with suspicion), are valuable on their own terms. What the project and its resulting collages offer is of a piece with Brainard's creative ethos, about which Ashbery wrote:

What is a flower, one begins to wonder? A beautiful, living thing that at first seems to promise

meaning . . . but remains meaningless . . . Here they merely continue, each as beautiful as the others, but only beautiful, with nothing behind it, and yet. (Ashbery, 1969)

The project both *is* and *enables* something beautiful, fun, deeply likeable, and essentially unquantifiable, like a flower, or a butterfly landing on your nose. Nonetheless, on its own merits, it is essentially purposeless, at least in terms of prevailing academic and critical value judgments about 'research excellence' and 'impact'. But with its emphasis on 'doing' and making (and the joyful effects of these) rather than on archiving or analyzing, and in its additive, accretive effects, the project is underpinned by a kind of 'queer optimism', to use Michael D. Snediker's term—arguably a contemporary form of aesthetic philosophy with clear echoes of eighteenth-century romantic thought. 'Immanently rather than futurally oriented', queer optimistic art 'finds happiness interesting' and 'concerns persons, rather than subjects' (Snediker, 2009). As Snediker argues, queer optimism attends to 'epistemologies not of pain, but of pleasure' and 'aestheticize[s] not the abdication of personhood, but its sustenance . . . the way one might, more generally, differently, *feel*'. Like Ashbery's flower, or the butterfly on your nose, what the Make Your Own Brainard project makes possible doesn't necessarily *mean* anything; but at the same time, in realizing (and recognizing) happiness, pleasure, and personhood, it is far from being *meaningless*.

Brainard, of course, perfectly understood this. Like many of his fellow New York School painters and poets, his work was predicated on 'the rejection of depth models of meaning' and 'a repudiation of stuffiness, self-importance, and . . . seriousness' (Butt, 2006). The New York School is a very loose grouping, but what its affiliates had in common was a reluctance to seriously theorize their work, in the understanding that theory is too often excessively dependent on abstraction and metaphor, and thus can struggle to find traction in relation to real life or lived experience. Furthermore, as Brainard told *People* magazine in 1975: 'The art scene has gotten too big, too serious, too self-important, and too expensive' (Wohlfert, 1975). In *I Remember* he articulates the arguably unnecessary or obstructive nuances and complexities surrounding the business of modern art, gesturing

And yet the project was awarded the grant, seemingly having found ‘a vocabulary that does not obscure the seriousness of silliness’ (Glavey, 2016). In the process of applying, I was warned that the British Academy looks ‘for pure research and solid academic outputs’ (personal email, 2018), and advised to downplay the ‘activities’ that the project would generate in favor of the resulting journal article and conference paper. It was also deemed necessary in the grant application to frame what is essentially either a kitsch or an avant-garde project, depending on one’s viewpoint, as an ‘output’ freighted with critical and historical significance rather than an activity leavened with joy (of course it could be both—like Sedgwick, I felt reluctant to ‘draw much ontological distinction between academic theory and everyday theory’ (2003)—but the latter risked accusations of insufficient gravitas). But the project’s fundamental premise—that it aimed to enable individuals to gain hands-on experience of the practical, emotional, and inspirational aspects of making, sharing, and talking about art—was always plain.

In this sense the Make Your Own Brainard project represents an opportunity to reassess the criteria by which funded projects are deemed worth funding, as well as to address the inflexibility of the reiterating standards to which ‘outputs’ in the arts and humanities are often held. As the project shows, sometimes, art can ‘just’ bring pleasure, it can ‘just’ be fun (as shown above, one of the most common responses on the project website survey was that it was ‘fun’)—it does not necessarily need to effect *measurable* change to be important. As Sedgwick writes, ‘what makes pleasure and amelioration so “mere”?’ (2003). Pleasure is important; joy is important; if a person has just a little bit more happiness in their day as a result of a butterfly landing on their nose or making their own Brainard collage, then an impact has been felt, even if it cannot be measured or analyzed. John Keeling notes the openness with which John Ashbery attends to ‘the interstices that keep alive the otherness of experience in order to cultivate that which is living, mysterious, and ongoing’, whether or not we can see it (Keeling, 1992). Art (and the making of art) that enables these affects, that asks us to embrace the living, mysterious, ongoing otherness of experience, is important—and deserving of funding—on its own terms.

In 1975, Georges Perec (who championed Brainard’s *I Remember* by penning his own version and who was similarly devoted in his attentions to the mundane or the everyday) mused on the idea that ‘what speaks to us, seemingly, is always the big event’, leaving him wondering: ‘What’s really going on, what we’re experiencing, the rest, all the rest, where is it?’ ‘How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs everyday’, he asks, emphasizing the significance to our lives of ‘the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual’. In his efforts to found an ‘anthropology’ that will account for ‘these “common things”’, he expresses no hesitation at asking questions that seem ‘fragmentary, barely indicative of a method, at most of a project’. Quite the opposite, he writes:

It matters a lot to me that they should seem trivial and futile: that’s exactly what makes them just as essential, if not more so, as all the other questions by which we’ve tried in vain to lay hold on our truth. (Perec, 1975)

Make Your Own Brainard may seem trivial; its method is impressionistic, and it is, of course, inherently fragmentary (‘additive and accretive’); it is a ‘project’ only insofar as circumstances encircled a number of like-minded persons with a shared affinity for a particular artist. Like the reparative impulse, the project’s ‘fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture’ (Sedgwick, 2003). But in its emphasis on fun, on joy, on delight, in its (non-pejorative) devotion to the decorative, and in the opportunities it provides for participants to engage in an ‘unprofessional’, pleasurable, and accessible process of art-making, it offers a queerly optimistic, reparative story that exceeds or contradicts hegemonic narratives around academic impact, funding for the arts, and the digital humanities.

Funding

This work was supported by the British Academy (grant number SRG18R1\181127).

- Performativity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 123–51.
- Sigo, C.** (2019) Free Union. <https://www.makeyourownbrainard.com/reflections-on-joe/#cedarsigo> (accessed 9 March 2021).
- Shamma, Y.** (2018). *Spatial Poetics: Second Generation*. New York School Poetry. Oxford: Oxford University Press. .
- Snediker, M. D.** (2009). *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Stevens, M.** (2016). Touched from a distance: the practice of affective browsing. In van den Akker, C. and Legène, S. (eds.), *Museums in a Digital Culture*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 13–29.
- Trainor, J.** (2002). *Joe Brainard: PSI*. New York. <https://frieze.com/article/joe-brainard> (accessed 21 July 2020).
- Virilio, P.** (1995). Speed and Information: Cyberspace Alarm! *CTHEORY*.
- Waldman, A.** (1979). Interview with Joe Brainard. *Rocky Ledge* 3.
- Wohlert, L.** (1975). Think Tiny, says Joe Brainard – and a show of 1000 miniatures is the result. *People*, 4(25). <https://people.com/archive/think-tiny-says-joe-brainard-and-a-show-of-1500-miniatures-is-the-result-vol-4-no-25/> (accessed 24 July 2020).