REVISITING JOE BRAINARD'S *I REMEMBER*

Ron Padgett on Joe Brainard

A Conversation

SUSAN KARWOSKA

Ron Padgett grew up with Joe Brainard in Tulsa, Oklahoma in the 40s and 50s, where they became close friends in high school. They soon left Tulsa for New York City and joined the thriving literary and artistic community there. Both Padgett's poetry and Brainard's writing and art are widely admired, and the two were abiding supporters of each other's work. Brainard died in 1994 of AIDS-induced pneumonia. This conversation with Padgett was conducted by email in October 2012.

Susan Karwoska: The Collected Writings of Joe Brainard, *which you edited, was published this past spring by the Library of America. What was the genesis of this project?*

Ron Padgett: Over the years Joe's *I Remember* had become an underground classic, going through edition after edition, but his other writing was to be found only in fugitive little magazines or was unpublished, to the dismay of his many fans. So I assembled the whole lot and then was lucky to have found a fabulous publisher for it.

Ron Padgett *is the author of many books of poetry, including* How to Be Perfect, You Never Know, The Big Something, How Long, *and* Great Balls of Fire, *as well as* Joe: A Memoir of Joe Brainard. *He edited* The Collected Writings of Joe Brainard *(Library of America., 2012).*

Susan Karwoska *is the editor of* Teachers & Writers Magazine. *She was recently awarded a New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA) fellowship for her novel-in-progress.*

SK: *In your afterword to the Granary Books edition of* I Remember, *you begin by saying:*

> I don't remember the genesis of *I Remember*, but as soon as Joe Brainard showed the initial version of it to friends and read it in public, everyone saw that he had made a marvelous discovery, and many of us wondered why we hadn't thought of such an obvious idea ourselves.

Along with the sly humor in starting with "I don't remember," you also capture here what has made I Remember *so compelling to so many people: the sense that Brainard discovered what was right in front of us all along. Paul Auster, in his introduction to the* Collected Writings *(which starts off with "I can't remember …"), puts it this way:*

> I remember ... It seems so obvious now, so self-evident, so fundamental and even ancient—as if the magic formula had been known ever since the invention of written language. Write the words "I remember," pause for a moment or two to give your mind a chance to open up, and inevitably you will remember, and remember with a clarity and a specificity that will astonish you.

What was it about Brainard's approach to art that allowed him to make this discovery, to tap into this vein that others had overlooked?

RP: Joe never cared for over-complication in anything. Instead he favored clarity and freshness, and to achieve them in his art and writing he periodically tried to "clear out his head," as he put it, and to get back to basics. So instead of trying to write an autobiography, which he wasn't interested in doing, he took a simple approach, which of course yielded all sorts of nuances and subtleties.

SK: *In Matt Wolf's short film on Brainard, titled* I Remember*, you say of living in New York City in the 1960s:*

> There was all this energy and this sense of possibility here. And I think it gave Joe the feeling that he, too, could be a writer. Why not? Why not?

One of the reasons Brainard's work is so beloved by teaching artists is that they see it as instilling this same sense of possibility in their students: Reading I Remember*, they think "I, too, could be a writer. Why not?" Did Brainard get to see the extent of* I Remember*'s popularity with writers in the classroom? What would he make of this use of his work?*

RP: Joe was aware that Kenneth Koch, who was a friend of Joe's, had his elementary school students use the *I Remember* format, but he didn't live to see how very popular and useful the work has become. I'm sure he'd be glad that others were using "his" device. He liked to give things away.

SK: *The accessibility of the writing in I Remember is one reason teaching artists love to bring Brainard's work to their classrooms, but I think they are also drawn to Brainard's approach to art and the model it offers for their students. In Matt Wolf's film you describe this approach: "Joe wasn't willing to get good at something and then just keep doing it, and I liked his courage in that, very, very much." How much did this attitude contribute to the success of his work?*

RP: I think it contributed a great deal. For one thing, it helped him avoid the staleness that comes with repeating one's success, and on the positive side his artistic bravery led him to do risky work that surprised even him with its beauty and energy.

SK: *Brainard's references in* I Remember *are incredibly specific and intensely personal, and are set in a time and place that is now quite distant, and yet the magic of the work as a whole is that it achieves a universal appeal. How do you account for this?*

RP: I can't, really. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that readers are drawn to real people, places, and things, as well as feelings, when those subjects are presented with candor, charm, and openness. It's like the pleasure and reassurance of being around nice people, and in reading *I Remember* one senses how genuinely nice Joe was.

SK: *You knew Brainard since you were in a first grade class together in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and the two of you were in high school together. I can't imagine that Tulsa at that time would have offered much support to either of you as artists or to Brainard as a young gay man. How important was the friendship you shared in your development as artists?*

RP: Very. We were part of a very small band of artists and poets in Tulsa back then in the late 1950s, four of whom—the poets Ted Berrigan and Dick Gallup, along with Joe and me—migrated to New York about the same time. Of course it's possible that we all would have become poets and artists on our own, but the friendship and camaraderie made us bolder and more cheerful, and our friendly competition made us try even harder to make good art.