New York School Collaborations

Joe Brainard and Ron Padgett, *Bill Bill*, 1963; Mixed media, 6" x 4 1/2"

Joe Brainard and Ron Padgett, *Upside Down Nancy*, 1963; Mixed media, 6" x 4 1/2"
What follows is a gallery of collaborations between poets and visual artists from the New York School, first and second generations. Visual artists include Joe Brainard and George Schneeman. Poets include Bill Berkson, Ted Berrigan, Alice Notley, Ron Padgett, and Anne Waldman. Collaborations among these poets and artists covered the gamut from extremely informal to formal, including visual art, spontaneous poems, numerous handmade books (or “bokes”), illustrated poems and books, poetry book covers, and classic volumes of co-authored poetry like Ron Padgett and Ted Berrigan’s *Bean Spasms* and Berrigan and Waldman’s 1970 book, *Memorial Day*. We also include a poetic tribute to New York School poets Kenneth Koch (“The Transcontinental Poetry Reading”) and work that references the work by Frank O’Hara and John Ashbery. The section ends with a tribute to the late Barbara Guest.
I wonder what Willem de Kooning
thinks when it rains. However,
I am sure there is no answer
to that question. Is there
Bill?

"You bet!"
While working on his open-ended prose masterpiece *I Remember*, Joe Brainard commented: “I feel that I am not really writing it but that it is because of me that it is being written. I also feel that it is about everybody else as much as it is about me. I feel like I am everybody.” One great truth about style or character in art is that it is not so much to be pursued or cultivated so much as to be allowed or tolerated as that aspect of the work that can’t be avoided. Thus viewed, personal-ity, style, even so-called “meaning” register as inexorable elements, not necessarily the main order of business at all. A certain hankering after anonymity—or generality anyway—rules the greatest art. As Carter Ratcliff once wrote of Brainard, “His hand has its own, immediately recognizable way of trying to be anonymous.”

All art is collaboration. You collaborate with your culture, your language, your reading. Kenneth Koch called Frank O’Hara’s poem “Choses Passagères,” written in O’Hara’s limited French but inspired by a French dictionary, O’Hara’s “collaboration with the French language.” When Bernadette Mayer says of her writing “It’s as if the language wants to say this,” she acknowledges the proper relation of matter to genius. Or, as Brainard again put it, giving “advice to a collage maker: ‘Do not try to “arrange” your objects; let them help you formulate.’” As an artist, you collaborate with history, the past, the art—poetry, paintings, dance, whatever—that you admire. You don’t so much control as work with your materials, which inevitably include yourself, whatever may be your most intimate facts. You collaborate with your peers, either directly (that is, you write works together) or not (that is, by parallel creations you form the work that comes to be recognized as that of a period style, the art of your time). Competitive-ness is a form of collaboration. Addressing an audience—conceiving an addressee, a reader or viewer, for the work—you collaborate with that shifting phantasmagoria. Such sociability is what puts the work in the world.

Artistic collaboration between one or more poets, or between poets and other artists (be they dancers, painters, musicians or theatre folk), is often a spontaneous extension of social life. If your friends are other artists, the inclination to make something is likely to become salient in the midst of the most casual occasion. The writing pad gets passed across the room. Some nights in the late 1960s the drop-in work force in George Schnemann’s studio was George plus four to six poets deep. There are, of course, more formal, institutionalized projects—but those are usually livres d’artiste, where the text is the starting point for, and eventually incidental to, the creation of a beautiful luxury item, a book of illustrated verse. Artists have illustrated poetry perhaps since poetry was first written down. Image-and-text work certainly goes back at least as far as the Mayans. Botticelli’s drawings for a folio edition of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Manet’s responses to Poe and Mallarmé, Picasso’s drawings on poets as various as Ovid and Pierre Reverdy—the tradition stretches to the present with Joe Brainard’s settings of images to John Ashbery’s *Vermont Journal* and to Kenward Elmslie’s *Album* and *The Champ*, and more. But the more hands-on variety of such works, by now so familiar, has a much shorter history. “Poem-paintings” and “poem-pictures” or just “collaborations” are some of the terms for the kinds of image-and-text combinations painters and poets together and separately have invented in this century. Foreshadowings of these modes may be found among the group inventions of the Surrealists—Exquisite Corpses made in the 1920s by poets, painters and others, where revelation rather than virtuoso handicraft was the charge. Collage and ready-mades in a sense had already insinuated a kind of a collaborative spirit into modern art. (Ernst’s collage novels such as Semaine de Bonté enlisted the tacit collaboration of nineteenth-century dime-novel illustrators.)

In 1957 Larry Rivers and Frank O’Hara were invited to produce a portfolio of lithographs in collaboration for Tanya Grossman of Universal Limited Art Editions. Working together over the next two years in Rivers’s Second Avenue studio, they made a set of twelve prints called *Stones*. Rivers recalled the process a few years later in these terms:

I did something, whatever I could, related in some way to the title of the stone and [Frank] either commented on what I had done or took it somewhere else in any way he felt like. If something in the drawing embarrassed him he could alter the quality by the quality of his words or vice versa... With these images, and his words we were at once remarking about some subject and decorating the stone.

We were fully aware... That Frank with his limited means was almost as important as myself in the overall visual force of the print... Frank without realizing it was being called upon to think about things outside of poetry. Besides what they seemed to mean he was using his words as a visual element. The size of his letters, the density of the color brought on by how hard or soft he pressed on the crayon, where it went on the stone (which many times was left up to him) were not things that remained separated from my scratches and smudges.

O’Hara went on to do other, less formally proposed, collaborations with Norman Bluhm, Michael Goldberg, Jasper Johns and, eventually, Joe Brainard. With Rivers, Kenneth Koch soon followed suit. The ’50s and ’60s were the prime decades of such wildcat improvisation, the working principles of which, in retrospect, could be set down as three:

- Two or more people working on one or more surface at a time in the same room.
- Given a degree of impersonal “otherness” (or what William Burroughs more arcaneously called “The Third Mind”)—simply put, more, and more varied, information goes into the mix.
- Participants have no expectations—there’s a tacit agreement that the result may be a desultory mess—but there is a strong sense of obligation, again sociable, to keep one’s end up. (Brutal undercutting, rash obliteration and every other form of one-upmanship—each has its place.)

Commenting on the 1950s poetry-and-jazz collaborations, Frank O’Hara wrote to Gregory Corso (March 20, 1958): “I don’t really get their jazz stimulus but it is probably what I get from painting... that is, one can’t be inside all the time, it gets too boring and you can’t afford to be bored with poetry so you take a secondary enthusiasm as the symbol of the first...” O’Hara collaborated with other poets, with painters, composers, theatre producers and directors and actors; the results were poem-paintings, collage comics, lithographs, songs, a musical comedy, numerous plays, and two films with Alfred Leslie. In 1960–1, O’Hara and I wrote a series of poems together that Larry Fagin later published as the *Hymns of St. Bridget* in a small edition with a cover by Larry Rivers. Some of the poems read to me today like instances of a very young poet (me) tagging along after an older poet in full possession of his genius. Yes, but what “Third Mind” was responsible for this choice item?
Song Heard Around St. Bridget's

When you’re in love the whole world’s Polish
and your heart’s in a gold-striped frame
you only eat cabbage and yogurt
and when you sign you don’t sign your own name

If it’s above you want and you know it
and the parting you want in your hair
the yogurt gets creamy and seamy
and the poles that you climb aren’t there

To think, poor St. Bridget, that you never got
to see an Ingmar Bergman movie
because you were forbidden our modern times
but you’re not as old as all that, you’re not a mummy
you saw the Armory Show and Louis Jouvet
and Mary of Scotland and ANCHORS AWEIGH
and we’re sure
that you’ve caught up with La Vie et Esprit poetically pure
and indeed quite contemporary and just as extraordinary
as ice cubes and STONES and dinosaur bones and manure

When you’re in love the whole world’s a steeple
and the moss is peculiarly green
you may not be liked or like people
but you know your love’s on your team

When you’re shaving your face is a snow bank
and your eyes are particularly blue
and your feelings may be fading and grow blank
but the soap is happy it’s you!

Joe Brainard’s collage-comic collaborations with O’Hara occurred in much the same way, except that Joe apparently had the courage to suggest collaborating, and the terms of doing it, himself. Like myself, Joe was a twenty-something interloper emboldened by O’Hara’s keen eye for talent at the get-go stage of its development. (Actually, by the mid ’60s when these collage comics were done, Joe had already refined his talent more than had any poet his own age.) Writing on O’Hara, Joe defines the in-tandem, hand-over-hand improvisational method in comparison with another, intermediate, call-and-response kind:

Actually, in the strict sense of the word, Frank and I never collaborated. (Alas) never on the spot, starting together from scratch. Giving and taking. And bouncing off each other. What we did do was that I’d do something (a collage or cartoon) incorporating spaces for words, which I’d then give to Frank to “fill in.” Usually he would do so right away, with seemingly little effort...

What Joe does in that little paragraph is detail his two basic ways of collaborating, except that the comics more often than not were delivered to poets for text-production through the mail, and filled in with considerably less spontaneity than was normal for O’Hara. Comics were very natural. We had a feeling for how they worked. They were our first art and, in many respects, our first literature.

Intrinsically, criticism is a form of collaboration, another form of call-and-response. It can, as Saint-Beuve observed, transform “half-poets who become and appear whole poets in criticism: all they need is an external fulcrum and a stimulus.” Think of the great critics and reporters who are neither artists nor poets—Whitney Balliett on music, Herbert Muschamp on architecture—and you see that Saint-Beuve was right. But then again occasionally a poet who is “whole” to begin with maintains that same wholeness across the board. In poetry and prose, James Schuyler wrote about what was really there, and loved to trace out the details that appealed to him. (Schuyler said that he even used to write his art reviews out in verse lines first and then ‘turn’ them into prose.) In 1967 Schuyler wrote on Brainard for an issue of Artnews that feature a picture of Joe’s on the cover. Schuyler’s text reads in part:

Also a painting of a ribbon tied in a bow: “I don’t know what I’m going to do with it.” He is a painting ecologist whose work draws the things it needs to it, in the interest of completeness and balance, of evident but usually imperceived truths. He is like Darwin deducing why there is more red clover where old maids live: they keep cats that catch the field mice that eat the clover.

Also a Prell “shrine.” A dozen bottles of Prell—that insidious green—terrible green roses and grapes, glass dangles like emeralds, long strings of green glass beads, a couple of strands looped up. Under glass, in the center, a blue-green pieta, sweating an acid yellow. The whole thing cascades from an upraised hand at top: drops and stops like an express elevator. It is a cultivated essence of shop-window shrines and Pentecostal Chapels (John Wesley with Tambourines, lugubrious and off-pitch). Its own particular harsh pure green is raised and re-inforced until it becomes an architecture. It is to green what a snowball is to white, an impactment. A violet-blue, the border of the glass over the pieta, emerges as an echo, as though if you squeezed a leaf hard enough a little sky blue would ooze out. The whole thing has the musical look of a clock.

Criticism made by artists, which is sometimes formal, in the art magazines, but mostly spoken or otherwise off-the-cuff, is valuable mainly for its forthrightness. Brainard wrote to Schuyler: “One thing I like about Hans Hofmann is that he is hard to like.” Then again, Schuyler quoting another painter on Brainard’s acumen as a colorist: “He just puts down a color, and it’s right.” (Most professional art critics would spend 20 pages getting around to such a conclusion.)

Then, too, there is self-criticism, the unacknowledged type of criticism that makes good art good in the best way—it is good on purpose. Joe meant his work to be good. He wrote (this again appears in Schuyler’s endlessly informative text) in July, 1965:

Working on a new construction that I am a bit suspicious of; it is practically floating together. (As though I am not really needed.) I do love it though: each object is crystal clear, but equally so, they all seem to belong together very much. It is constructed in the simplest possible way: one thing on top of another. It has no theme except color: emerald green, royal blue, cherry red and black. It is not all gooky, which I am glad of. Also there is purple, and stripes of clear rhinestones. It is very geometrical. And of course very dramatic. Sometimes what I do is to purify objects. That is what I have done in this construction.

The fullness of Joe’s art is augmented by the fact that he was a wonderful writer—so philosophically adroit, and as good as any artist you can name (and that includes some very big names—Leonardo, Delacroix, van Gogh, Picasso, de Chirico and de Kooning, among others). For a while, it seemed that his literary masterwork I Remember would oustrip his assemblages and collages in the immortality sweepstakes. Historically, it’s important to realize that Joe began writing I Remember in 1969 at what may have been the exact mid-point in his artistic career. (Ron Padgett says that he had been reading Gertrude Stein at the time.) All of the major assemblages and a good many of the great collages, including the “gardens” series, were already behind him, and at least ten more years of marvellous invention lay ahead.

Joe was a such a brilliant writer that he could even write his “visual” works in prose, viz, the series of piquant Imaginary Still Lifes, written in the 1970s, one of which reads:

I close my eyes. I see a white statue (say 10” high) of David, Alabama. And pink rose petals sprinkled upon a black velvet drape.

This is a sissy still life. Silly, but pretty. And in a certain way almost religious. “Eastern” religious. This still life is secretly smiling.
Another example: Joe the expert portraitist manifested his acuity in both words and pictures. Here is his word portrait of James Schuyler:

**James Schuyler: A Portrait**

Let me be a painter, and close my eyes. I see brown. (Tweed.) And blue. (Shirt.) And—surprise—yellow socks. The body sits in a chair, a king on a throne, feet glued to floor. The face is hard to picture, until—(click!)—I hear a chuckle. And the voice of distant thunder.

Poets and painters collaborate partly for the same reasons that painters make portraits of people they know—it’s another way of spending time with that person, and the artistic aspect lends an extra, more surreptitious, intensity to the get-together. Usually, my collaborations with Joe were done at Joe’s invitation—either he sent a comic in the mail for me to fill in the text, or, as we sat around in his studio or in Kenward’s house in Vermont, he would quietly ask if I felt like doing “some works.” Collaborating in person with Joe was a gas. He was usually quiet, purposeful, always encouraging, quietly amused. My favorite instance with him was an afternoon in his Sixth Avenue loft in 1973—Joe was in his “blue” period, and we did I forget how many collages all in blue with blue lettering, the title for which was a line I contributed from the Humphrey Bogart /Lizbeth Scott movie *Dead Reckoning*: “It’s a Blue World.”

Alex Katz’s recent statement about collaborating with Robert Creeley reads in its entirety: “Working with Bob makes me feel bright.” Working with Joe was bright, sweet, demanding, mysterious (how to pleaseJoe in this process was both mysterious and demanding, as well) and silly. Somewhere beneath the scornful shrug of “silly” sits the etymological mother lode of “soulful.” Avoidance of pretense is a prime stratagem of the pursuit of beauty and truth; hence Joe’s love of the dime store frames and slightly more expensive but just plain Kitlicke plastic passe-partouts he somewhat casually slid his drawings and collages into. Kenneth Koch has remarked on O’Hara’s “feeling that the silliest idea actually in his head was better than the most profound idea actually in someone’s else’s head.” Smart or idiotic but never dull. (Ron Padgett recalls poems we wrote in groups of anywhere from two to ten in the late ’60s as making him laugh so hard his stomach hurt.) Collaboration thrives on the nerve of putting shamelessness at the service of mutual respect and the will to be interesting no matter what. In 1978—in an interview reprinted in the present exhibition catalogue—Anne Waldman asked Joe “What about collaborations?” and Joe summed it up for her (and for us today) like so:

It’s fun. It’s very arduous. You have to compromise a lot. You have to be willing to totally fail and not be embarrassed by it. That’s the main thing, which is very good for you.

To the memory of Joe LeSueur.

2001

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A poem by Bill Berkson, written for Joe LeSueur:

*Like angels I can only arrive*

*On the point of your admiration,*

*And what kind of thing is that*

*For a grown man?*

*But what I really want*

*Is to do what I can*

*For nothing in particular*

*Letting the black holes rip,*

*As they may, through your lives,*

*And golden light on the stones*

*Just before sundown, anywhere.*

—Bill Berkson

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An ink drawing Joe left behind when he returned to New York from Bolinas. Eventually I had the nerve to mess up the space of the bottom half with my blotchy handwriting. The poem was separate—not a response to Joe’s landscape—but it fits. Interestingly the same poem occurs in *Enigma Variations* facing Guston’s “Beast Hand” drawing, which was Guston’s way of providing a corrective to “Like Angels...”’s apologetic tone.

—Bill Berkson