Wojciech Drąg
Institute of English Studies
University of Wrocław
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9089-2465

Er(r)go. Teoria–Literatura–Kultura
Er(r)go. Theory–Literature–Culture
Nr / No. 49 (2/2024)
queerowa ruralność
queer rurality
ISSN 2544-3186
https://doi.org/10.31261/errgo.16301

"Hurry-hurry to Vermont!": Joe Brainard's Rural Refuge

Abstract: This article considers the many important functions of Joe Brainard's summer retreat in rural Vermont: as a haven from city life, as an opportunity to spend time with his long-term partner Kenward Elmslie and their mutual artist friends and as a space to fully devote himself to work. Brainard's representation of his summers in Calais, Vermont, is examined in the context of Scott Herring's postulate of queer anti-urbanism and of the concepts of the gay pastoral, the gay Arcadia and the rural idyll. The article argues that Brainard ultimately embraced both the urban and the rural instead of privileging either of them. The analysis draws mainly on Brainard's autobiographical writings and on Ron Padgett's *Joe: A Memoir of Joe Brainard*.

Keywords: queer rurality, anti-urbanism, pastoralism, rural idyll

In the late 1960s and 1970s, happiness could be attained by American gay men also away from the metropolis. Although, in line with the so-called metronormative narrative, the countryside was the point of departure rather than the destination for gay people seeking personal fulfilment, this article will argue that – for the American visual artist and writer Joe Brainard and his close circle of artist-friends – rural Vermont served as a lasting refuge from the dizzying pace and relentless competitiveness of New York City, on the one hand, and from the fraught sociopolitical climate of the aftermath of Martin Luther King's assassination and the Stonewall Inn riots, on the other. The author of *I Remember* (1975), who left Tulsa, Oklahoma, at the age of 19 and made New York his adopted home, spent his summers for almost three decades in a house belonging to his partner and fellow writer Kenward Elmslie. The initially modest abode in Calais, Vermont, soon became a summer meeting place for such poets as Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Ted Berrigan, James Schuyler and Ron Padgett. Despite Brainard's strong artistic association with New York and the New York School, this article will argue that rural Vermont was of no less significance to his life and work than the metropolis where he lived for the most part of the year. It will proceed by considering the myriad functions of the Calais retreat: as a haven from city life, as an opportunity to spend time with Elmslie and their mutual friends and as a space to fully devote himself to work.

The analysis will draw mainly on Brainard's autobiographical writings (including his unpublished letters to Ron and Pat Padgett) and on Ron Padgett's *Joe: A Memoir of Joe Brainard*.[1] Brainard's representation of his summers in Calais, Vermont, will be examined in the context of Scott Herring's postulate of "queer anti-urbanism"– a critical call to put an end to the stereotypical association of queer life only with the metropolis. Among the other critical concepts employed in the ensuing discussion are David Shuttleton's gay pastoral, Byrne R. S. Fone's gay Arcadia and G. E. Mingay's rural idyll. The article seeks to demonstrate that Brainard ultimately embraced both the urban and the rural instead of privileging either of them. His freedom to straddle the two realms is attributed to the financial independence that Brainard enjoyed thanks to Elmslie's continued material support.

Calais (pronounced like the word "callous," unlike the city in the north of France) is a town in central Vermont with a population of 1,661, according to the 2020 census.[2] The house in which Brainard spent almost every summer – from the beginning of June to the end of September (and, occasionally, the Christmas holidays) – between 1965 and 1993 (he died of AIDS in 1994) was built in the mid-19th century.[3] In the 1950s, it was bought as a country house by the famous Broadway lyricist John Latouche, the author of several popular musicals (such as *Cabin in the Sky* and *The Golden Apple*) and the song "Taking a Chance on Love" (performed by Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald). At the time, Latouche and Kenward Elmslie (15 years his junior) were a couple. When Latouche died of a heart attack in 1956, Elmslie inherited half of the house and then bought the other half from Latouche's mother.[4]

Brainard made his first visit to Calais in August 1965, after an eleven-hour car journey from New York City, in the company of Elmslie and the Padgetts.[5] Initially, the two-story farmhouse boasted few amenities, but over time it became fully functional.[6] The greatest asset of the place was (and still is)[7] its natural beauty and serenity. The house is situated next to a scenic pond surrounded by pine trees

1. Ron Padgett, *Joe: A Memoir of Joe Brainard* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2004).
2. "Calais, Vermont," Wikipedia, accessed November 6, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calais,_Vermont.
3. Padgett, *Joe*, 190.
4. Padgett, *Joe*, 93.
5. Padgett, *Joe*, 92.
6. Padgett, *Joe*, 99.
7. During my fellowship at Dartmouth College financed by the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA) in the summer of 2021, I was able to visit Elmslie's property thanks to the kindness of Ron and Pat Padgett, to whom I remain profoundly indebted. That experience was the main impulse for writing this article. Ron Padgett has also fact-checked this article and made several valuable suggestions, for which I am immensely grateful.

and several hillocks. It was also perfectly isolated from the rest of the township's residents – the sole house in Emslie [sic] Road (it would take years for the typo to be officially amended). The idyllic atmosphere of the place has been captured in one of Brainard's best-known oil paintings, *Whippoorwill's World* (1973), the title being a "send-up" of Andrew Wyeth's canonical *Christina's World*.[8] In it, Elmslie's white whippet is sprawled in the sun against the backdrop of a lush green lawn and a freshly painted house on the horizon.

Fig. 1. Joe Brainard, *Whippoorwill's World*, 1973, oil on canvas.
Collection of Kenward Elmslie. Used by permission of the Estate of Joe Brainard

It is on that lawn (while sunbathing) that Brainard began working on his magnum opus *I Remember* in the early summer of 1969. The first reader and champion of that work-in-progress was James Schuyler – one of the most famous poets associated with the New York School and a later Pulitzer Prize winner, who also spent that summer in Calais.[9] Calais was also where Brainard created most of his still lifes and landscape paintings, as well as his numerous portraits of

8. Constance M. Lewallen, *Joe Brainard: A Retrospective* (New York: Granary Books, 2001), 31.
9. Padgett, *Joe*, 144–146.

Whippoorwill, of which the most famous – showing the whippet asleep on a green sofa, from 1974 – is in the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and is featured on the cover of John Yau's *Joe Brainard: The Art of the Personal*.[10] Without the summers spent together in Calais, Brainard and John Ashbery would not have conceived and executed their collaborative volume, *The Vermont Notebook*,[11] which comprises fifty ink drawings by Brainard. According to Yau, the time between 1965 and 1975, which overlaps perfectly with the first decade of his regular trips to Calais, "marked one of the most sustained, extensive, and creatively productive periods" not only for Brainard but for any artist.[12] There is a critical consensus that that decade constituted the most productive and successful period in Brainard's career, culminating in his acclaimed exhibition at New York's Fischbach Gallery in 1975, during which Brainard presented 1,500 collages (out of the approximately 3,000 that he had created for the occasion).[13] The full artistic significance of the retreat in Calais would have to encompass all the works produced there not only by Brainard but also by Elmslie, Padgett, Ashbery, Schuyler and Anne Waldman, all of whom paid extended visits over the years. It may seem ironic that a significant proportion of works by artists associated with the New York School were inspired by their sojourns in rural Vermont.

Vermont vs New York

I shall now turn to examine how Brainard thought and felt about Calais both when he was there and when he was away, which, for the most part, would have been in New York City's SoHo, where he rented a loft for many years. Among Brainard's most successful autobiographical pieces are two introspective travelogues written during the very long bus ride from the Port Authority Bus Terminal to Montpelier, the capital of Vermont, from which he was routinely picked up by Elmslie and driven to Calais. In "Wednesday, July 7th, 1971 (A Greyhound Bus Trip)," he writes, "I'm on my way to Montpelier, Vermont. Then to Calais. To Kenward Elmslie. To beautiful country. To work."[14] Several hours later, upon seeing the familiar landscape, he notes, "It really is beautiful, Vermont. Makes so much sense to live here."[15] The bus journey and the travelogue conclude with

10. John Yau, *Joe Brainard: The Art of the Personal* (New York: Rizzoli Electa, 2022).
11. John Ashbery and Joe Brainard, *The Vermont Notebook* (Calais: Z Press, 1975).
12. Yau, *Joe Brainard*, 58.
13. Padgett, *Joe*, 222.
14. Joe Brainard, *The Collected Writings of Joe Brainard*, ed. Ron Padgett (New York: The Library of America, 2012), 334.
15. Brainard, *Collected Writings*, 346.

the excited exclamation, "*I guess this is it!*".[16] Brainard's account of the analogous journey the following year in "Friday, June 16th, 1972" conveys his excitement about reaching the destination through italicized exclamations such as "*Vermont!*" and "*Summer!*"[17] His enumeration of the artistic projects he planned to complete in Calais is followed by the line, "*And then nothing!*"[18] Expressions of anticipation about spending the summer in Calais can also be found in Brainard's journals. In "N.Y.C. Journals: 1971–1972," he writes, "Boy do I look forward to Vermont. This head needs a rest."[19] In an entry from April 9, 1973, the sense of anticipation is expressed by the confession: "*Everything* … is going to be very much 'etc.' until Vermont,"[20] suggesting a qualitative difference between his city life and his time in Calais. A note of impatience about spending the summer in the company of his close friends is evident in Brainard's letter to the Padgetts from July 1966, which he ends with the call: "Hurry-hurry to Vermont!"[21]

The primary role of Calais to emerge from Brainard's autobiographical writings is that of a haven from New York City. It served him as a refuge from the staggering pace of the city's art scene and the usual frustrations and distractions of a metropolis. According to Padgett, "[f]or Joe, rural Vermont was perfect for recuperation, whether from illness or the stress of big-city life."[22] When, in 1971, Schuyler was convalescing after a mental breakdown, Brainard wanted him to come to Vermont to recover; "I can't think of a better place," he wrote to the Padgetts.[23] In an earlier letter, he encouraged them to come to Vermont, calling Calais a "retreat."[24] During an interview by Anne Waldman, another frequent guest in Calais, Brainard said that what he appreciated about Vermont was that there were "fewer possibilities" than in New York.[25] Fewer opportunities meant fewer dilemmas and less anxiety that one is missing out, a feeling that often afflicted Brainard while in New York.

A retreat or a haven is most effective when it is used in small doses. By strictly following the annual regimen, which allowed up to four successive months in Calais, Brainard seemed careful not to let Vermont become his primary habitation.

---

16. Brainard, *Collected Writings*, 352 (original italics).
17. Brainard, *Collected Writings*, 377, 378 (original italics).
18. Brainard, *Collected Writings*, 379 (original italics).
19. Brainard, *Collected Writings*, 374.
20. Brainard, *Collected Writings*, 445 (original italics).
21. Joe Brainard, Unpublished letter to Ron and Pat Padgett, 1967. Courtesy of Ron and Pat Padgett.
22. Padgett, *Joe*, 180.
23. Padgett, *Joe*, 180.
24. Joe Brainard, Unpublished letter to Ron and Pat Padgett, 1966. Courtesy of Ron and Pat Padgett.
25. Brainard, *Collected Writings*, 514.

Although he occasionally missed Vermont while being in New York, he did not contemplate abandoning the metropolis, which he loved and, for the most part, very much enjoyed. In Matt Wolf's documentary *I Remember: A Film About Joe Brainard*, Padgett recalls that Brainard was "wowed" by the city when they first arrived there from Tulsa in 1960.[26] Brainard knew right away that "what [he] wanted was in New York."[27] In line with the metronormative narrative – the received idea that a gay person must move to a city in order to flourish – he left provincial Oklahoma for a metropolis, where he met other gay people, came out and found himself accepted by the artists who constituted his circle of friends. In New York, he could be sexually adventurous; besides the long-term but open relationship with Elmslie, he dated many men from the New York art scene, including writer Joe LeSueur, actor Keith McDermott and, briefly, the novelist Edmund White. When he did not see anyone, he relished his solitary routines; in 1966, he wrote to the Padgetts: "I am the loner again and am rather enjoying it. Tonight it will be Times Square, Toffenetti's [restaurant] & a movie."[28] New York was also, of course, where he flourished as an artist and had his most successful exhibitions and readings.

Brainard's love for the metropolis makes him appear an unlikely representative of what Scott Herring has called queer anti-urbanism.[29] Whereas Herring's project of asserting the overlooked potential for queer existence in rural America springs from a personal disenchantment with the city as the promised land for gay men (the opening chapter of *Another Country* is titled "I Hate New York"), Brainard's celebration of rural Vermont is not a way of tacitly denouncing any aspects of city life. Rather, it appears to be a recognition that happiness (for a gay man) is attainable outside of the metropolis. In that respect, Brainard also shows the limitations of metronormative doxa, which relies on "a travel narrative that demands a predetermined flight to the city; a mythological plot that imagines urbanized queer identity as a one-way trip to sexual freedom, to communal visibility, and to a gay village […] whose streets are paved with rainbow pride."[30] Although his impulse to leave Oklahoma at the age of 18 and head straight to New York, followed by his decision to give up his scholarship in Dayton, Ohio, in order to settle in New York, represents a textbook example of a gay man's inevitable "flight to the city," Brainard's later choices show that his move from province to a metropolis was not "a one-way trip."

---

26. Matt Wolf, *I Remember: A Film About Joe Brainard* (Polari Pictures, 2012).
27. Brainard, *Collected Writings*, 491.
28. Brainard, Unpublished letter to Ron and Pat Padgett, 1967. Courtesy of Ron and Pat Padgett.
29. Scott Herring, *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).
30. Herring, *Another Country*, 33.

One of those choices was the decision to make rural Vermont his second home for the last three decades of his life; another – to defy what Herring calls cosmo-urbanism: "a psychic, material, and affective mesh of stylistics" prevalent among urban homosexuals and characterized by "knowingness," "sophistication," "worldliness," "refinement" and "fashionability."[31] As a person and artist, Brainard represented the opposite of urbane pretension and superiority; his defining qualities were humility, simplicity and straightforwardness. In a diary entry about a July day in Vermont, he wrote, "What I really hope for, I guess, is that, by just painting things the way they look, something will 'happen.'" Likewise, in the entry at hand, "I have nothing that I know of in particular to say, but I hope that, through trying to be honest and open, I will 'find' something to say."[32] Brainard's honesty, openness and generosity have been emphasized by virtually everyone who knew him: Edmund White called him "Saint Joe" and likened him to Prince Myshkin,[33] whereas Ashbery famously referred to him as "one of the nicest artists [he has] ever known. Nice as a person and nice as an artist."[34] Ultimately, perhaps, it was his "niceness" and his insufficient tenacity to compete for attention in the increasingly commodified New York art world that led him to quit that scene in the late 1970s,[35] which can be interpreted as yet another proof of his resistance to perceiving the metropolis as the only destination for any (gay) artist of his time.

A Rural Idyll

Rather than the preferred alternative to New York, Calais was, as noted before, more of an antidote to the inevitable temporary exhaustion from the pace and opportunities offered by the city – a place to retreat to in order to unwind, recover and return, reinvigorated, to the imperfect but alluring city life. Also a respite from the fraught sociopolitical atmosphere of the late 1960s and early

31. Herring, *Another Country*, 15.

32. Brainard, *Collected Writings*, 243. In a letter to Schuyler, when reflecting on one of his assemblages, Brainard writes, "Sometimes what I do is to purify objects" (Padgett, *Joe*, 312).

33. Edmund White, "Saint Joe," *Art in America* 85 (July 1997), 81.

34. John Ashbery, "Joe Brainard," in *Joe Brainard: A Retrospective*, ed. Constance M. Lewallen (New York: Granary Books, 2001), 1.

35. Unlike his friend Andy Warhol and Roy Liechtenstein, Brainard did not want to emulate his signature style, which would increase his chance of being widely recognized. According to Constance M. Lewallen, he was "too protean to be stuck with Pop or any other label" (Lewallen, *Joe Brainard*, 10). Padgett attributes it to his "lack of patience" (Padgett, *Joe*, 256). As a result, as Brainard admitted in an interview, one would not think of any of his works as "a Brainard" in the same way that one might call Warhol's painting "a Warhol" (Brainard, *Collected Writings*, 498).

1970s. On his way there to Calais in 1972, Brainard wrote in his diary, "I need a total rest for a while. To get into good shape physically. And to clean out my head a bit."[36] His summer routine in Vermont included sunbathing, swimming and floating in the adjacent pond, which Waldman facetiously named "Veronica Lake," and reading 19th-century English novels (mostly Dickens and Trollope).[37] In numerous diary entries, Brainard returns to images of Vermont that sound like encapsulations of happiness:

> I'm outside sunbathing in Calais, Vermont. I am lying on my stomach on a big white towel and all I can see is grass. Let me tell you now (and I'll try not to tell you again) that Vermont is beautiful. I'm so glad to be here…[38]

> This morning is a beautiful morning. A clear sky. Blue and hot. It is about 10:30. I am sunbathing. Drinking a Pepsi. Smoking a cigarette. And writing this.[39]

The second entry, in a manner reminiscent of Frank O'Hara's poetry, attempts to capture the beauty in the mundane and locate happiness in a leisurely routine. In a letter to Bill Berkson from 1990, Brainard describes himself as "blissed out of [his] mind" while floating on his air mattress in the pond.[40] In accounts of his city life, Brainard never evokes comparable images of sheer happiness.

In Brainard's diaries, as well as in his drawings and paintings, Vermont is represented in a way that is compatible with G. E. Mingay's notion of the rural idyll. This capacious concept relies on the countryside's "exclusiveness" and accommodates what any generation "wants to see in the land: romantic beauty, nostalgic traces of the rustic past, peace, tranquillity…"[41] For Brainard, the last two qualities are essential: it is peace and tranquillity – the absence of all the jazz of city life, its noise, pace and temptations – that captures the image of Vermont that he consistently conjures up. The most immediately apparent feature of the great majority of his visual representations of Vermont is the absence of people. Such is the case with all the rural landscapes drawn by Brainard in *The Vermont Notebook*, where village houses are often present but without any trace of their

36. Padgett, *Joe*, 190.

37. Besides the canon, Brainard would also reread every summer all of Barbara Pym's novels (Padgett, *Joe*, 260). In 1981, Padgett wrote to a friend, "[Joe] continues to read *all* day, novels, and he can't remember *anything* about the books except whether or not he 'liked' them!" (Padgett, *Joe*, 264).

38. Brainard, *Collected Writings*, 241.

39. Brainard, *Collected Writings*, 243.

40. Padgett, *Joe*, 286.

41. G. E. Mingay, Introduction, in *The Rural Idyll*, ed. G. E. Mingay (London: Routledge, 1989), 6, 10.

residents.[42] The only creatures populating Brainard's countryscapes are animals, such as horses or the earlier mentioned Whippoorwill.

Fig. 2. Joe Brainard in Calais, Vermont, 1967 or 1968. Photograph by Ron Padgett. Courtesy of the Author

The many references in Brainard's diaries to sunbathing and swimming could be related to Byrne R. S. Fone's concept of the gay Arcadia – a "myth that speaks directly to [the] minds and hearts" of homosexual men and dates back to Virgil's *Second Eclogue*.[43] Pointing to examples such as Henry Scott Tuke's painting *August Blue* (1894), E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908)[44] and

42. Ashbery and Brainard, *Vermont Notebook*, 10, 18, 70, 92.

43. Byrne R. S. Fone, "This Other Eden: Arcadia and the Homosexual Imagination," *Journal of Homosexuality* 8, no. 3–4 (1983), 32. In "The Queer Politics of Gay Pastoral," David Shuttleton traces the lineage of "a 'gay' pastoral canon" to Theocritus's *Idylls*. He includes in it such works as Walt Whitman's "Calamus" poems in *Leaves of Grass* (1855–1889), A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* (1896) and Marcel Proust's *Sodom and Gomorrah* (1922).

44. Robert Kusek has called Forster "one of the spiritual forefathers of queer rurality," emphasizing the significance of the "greenwood" in his posthumously published novel *Maurice*

Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912), Fone argues that scenes of boys and young men bathing have been "a genre of homosexual art and literature."[45] It has to be conceded, however, that Brainard's plentiful mentions of sunbathing and swimming in Veronica Lake are deprived of any discernible homoerotic charge. Although Brainard was not reticent about his gayness in his literary works (most notably in *I Remember* and *Bolinas Journal* [1971]), and he created a lot of overtly homoerotic collages (often including cut-outs from pornographic magazines), he was not drawn to – in David Bell's phrasing – "eroticizing the rural."[46] In all of the published accounts of his summers in Vermont, it is difficult to find any erotic comments. The most overtly sexual reference, though not necessarily erotic, is a memory of a "hard-on" that "wouldn't […] go away" during a "stoned" night with Elmslie in 1971.[47]

Solitary Work and Collective Play

Whereas post-1975 Calais became increasingly a place of rest and relaxation, in the first decade of his summer visits to Vermont, Brainard treated it also as an opportunity to commit himself to very intense artistic work during the day and to enjoy the company of Elmslie and their friends in the evening (about which more will be said later). In the summer of 1967, Brainard set himself the goal of mastering oil painting, which, according to Schuyler, he quickly did.[48] Six years later, in a letter to Padgett, Brainard proudly reported having just had "*seven* hours of solid painting" on a rural landscape.[49] To his painter friend Fairfield Porter, he wrote that summer about having created three small paintings in a single day, one of which was his frequently reproduced (also on the cover of *Joe Brainard: Paintings* from the American Art Catalogues series) representation of a toothbrush rack (*Untitled*, 1973).[50] The following summer, Brainard wrote to Padgett from Vermont: "Boy have I been working hard! […] Yesterday [I] was painting a lobster for eleven hours solid."[51] In 1985, about a decade after taking "a step back from

(1971). Robert Kusek, "'Go West!' In Search of the 'Greenwood' in Mike Parker's *On the Red Hill*," *Language and Literary Studies of Warsaw* 10 (2020), 308.

45. Fone, "This Other Eden," 26.

46. David Bell, "Eroticizing the Rural," in *De-Centering Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis*, ed. Richard Phillips, Diane Watt, and David Shuttleton (London–New York: Routledge, 2000).

47. Brainard, *Collected Writings*, 355.

48. Padgett, *Joe*, 126.

49. Lewallen, *Joe Brainard*, 111.

50. Lewallen, *Joe Brainard*, 115.

51. Lewallen, *Joe Brainard*, 112.

the labor-heavy competitiveness of the New York art world,"[52] Brainard reported to Keith McDermott that that summer in Calais he "made [him]self […] work three hours every morning […] [a]nd usually some in the afternoon too."[53] Away from the "possibilities" of New York, Vermont offered Brainard both picturesque views of the countryside and a space to devote himself to artistic projects that, in the city, he might not have had the time or patience to pursue.

A discussion of the importance of Vermont in Brainard's personal life and artistic career could not be complete without examining the social and economic aspects of the summer holidays in Calais. The one person who was always there with Brainard was Elmslie – his romantic partner for many years, a devoted friend, patron and frequent artistic collaborator. Although they regularly saw each other in New York City, they lived in different apartments and led different lives, Elmslie being primarily a poet, a librettist and a performer, as well as one of the heirs to Joseph Pulitzer's fortune. Calais was the place where their lives cyclically coalesced.

Fig. 3. Kenward Elmslie, Bill Berkson and Joe Brainard in Calais, Vermont, 1969. Photograph by Ron Padgett. Courtesy of the Author

52. Nick Sturm, "'Fuck Work': The Reciprocity of Labor and Pleasure in Joe Brainard's Writing," in *Joe Brainard's Art*, ed. Yasmine Shamma (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 189.

53. Padgett, *Joe*, 273.

The rural idyll of their joint summers in Vermont was certainly made possible by Elmslie's inherited wealth, which enabled him to become the sole proprietor of the house and land in Calais, to live a comfortable life unfettered by material concerns, and to provide Brainard with sustained financial support. Brainard's reliance on Elmslie's assets is one of the key themes of his earlier cited travelogue "Wednesday, July 7th, 1971." The author admits that he is "a *very* lucky person" and expresses the hope that "life isn't proportionately tougher for those not so lucky."[54] This is followed by his candid enumeration of the three aspects of his life that he does not like to discuss, the first being "Kenward's money." "I like it too much," he confesses. "And have gotten to need it too much. And am still embarrassed to admit to taking it."[55] Despite the financial inequality in their relationship, Brainard never suggests that Elmslie used that advantage to exert control over him or curb his freedom. On the contrary, theirs was a companionship based on egalitarian principles and the recognition of individual autonomy.

While committed, for the most part, to their separate projects during the day, Elmslie and Brainard spent their evenings enjoying each other's company and, often, the company of their guests. Over the years, Calais hosted such writers as John Ashbery, Bill Berkson, Ted Berrigan, Michael Brownstein, Kenneth Koch, Ann Lauterbach, Harry Mathews, James Schuyler and Anne Waldman.[56] While many of them came frequently and stayed for a long time, Ron and Pat Padgett visited there practically every summer.[57] Brainard's diaries contain numerous descriptions of their leisurely routines, such as the following account of an August morning in 1967:

> I'm outside sunbathing on Kenward Elmslie's lawn in Calais, Vermont. I would say that it's about 10 o'clock. I'm all covered with suntan lotion. The sun is not shining. The sky is total gray clouds. You never can tell about Vermont, tho. It might clear up at any moment. Wayne is crying. Now he's laughing. Wayne is Pat and Ron Padgett's new baby boy. They're up here too. And so is Jimmy Schuyler. He's still asleep in the front bedroom. Kenward is down at his work cabin working (I think) on collaging a table with magazine ads from the '20s and '30s. Ron (in white gym shorts) just stood up and said, "Well." He smiles

54. Brainard, *Collected Writings*, 338 (original italics).

55. Brainard, *Collected Writings*, 339.

56. The list of notable guests is much longer and includes artists Alex Katz and Donna Dennis; composers Claibe Richardson, Steven Taylor and William Elliott; actors Ruth Ford (the star of several Tennessee Williams's plays) and Richard Thomas (best known for *The Waltons* TV series). Ron Padgett, E-mail to author, November 6, 2023.

57. In the late 1970s, Elmslie sold them a plot of his land so that they could build their own summer house several hundred yards away from his house.

at me, meaning "No sun" and goes inside. I bet, for a Pepsi. – I was right. He is coming back out now with a Pepsi.[58]

Such descriptions tend to be infused with a sense of rural idyll – a quiet refuge for highly ambitious and competitive individuals from the exigencies of the New York art world. They also exude a sense of well-deserved rest, of a time when the most pressing decisions to be made are whether to have a Pepsi or a Coke and where to place one's deckchair.

While some friends mostly rested and read, others – as the reference to Elmslie indicates – were free to work on their current projects; there was enough space for no one to be in each other's way. Whatever one's daytime routine involved, it was implicit that evenings (well into the night) were reserved for fun and shared activities, which often involved playing charades, card games, chess, backgammon, roulette and mah-jongg.[59] Padgett remembers "wonderful dinners, burnished with wine and marijuana."[60] In *Vermont Notebook: 1971*, Brainard recollects being "stoned out of [his] mind on three John Ashbery brownies" the previous night.[61] Some of the communal pastimes led to the creation of tongue-in-cheek artworks. In the early 1970s, Brainard, Ashbery, Elmslie, Schuyler and Padgett would often amuse each other with reciting letters by the rural readers of magazines such as *Women's Household* and *Women's Circle*. Their clumsy and inadvertently funny sentences (such as "I put sequins on everything imaginable" or "I think I will break camp and go like the beaver") became the building blocks of collectively composed found poems.[62]

In the same company, they would also produce visual collages. This is how Ashbery remembered their routine: "after dinner and a certain amount of wine, we would sit around the table, cutting up old magazines and splicing them back together for our amusement."[63] Some of the collages Ashbery created this way were displayed during a 2008 exhibition at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York City (and during other subsequent events). The small show also featured the poet's later amateur visual collages, which Brainard encouraged him to make over the years and even supplied him with materials. In a study of their mutual reliance on collage, Rona Cran notes that Ashbery's collages assembled out of Brainard's cut-outs "seem to enable us to hear the conversations that took place

58. Brainard, *Collected Writings*, 218.
59. Padgett, *Joe*, 183.
60. Padgett, *Joe*, 126.
61. Brainard, *Collected Writings*, 355.
62. Padgett, *Joe*, 183.
63. Rona Cran, "'Men with a Pair of Scissors': Joe Brainard and John Ashbery's Eclecticism," in *Joe Brainard's Art*, ed. Yasmine Shamma (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 112.

between Brainard and Ashbery back in Vermont, after dinner, in the summers of the 1970s – goofy chatter that calls to mind Frank O'Hara's idea of poetry being created between two people rather than two pages."[64]

According to Andrew Epstein and Andy Fitch, the apparently carefree atmosphere of those collage-making sessions should be viewed in a more serious, and sinister, context – as a "small-scale utopian (so more internally fraught than it appears) negotiation of violence still not long after Stonewall."[65] Their comment introduces an important sociopolitical aspect of the rural retreat for Brainard, Elmslie, Ashbery and Schuyler, all of whom were homosexual and lived in New York throughout the 1960s, when the police regularly raided gay bars, and who then witnessed the rise of the gay liberation movement. The question arises to what extent Calais functioned as a refuge not just from the haste and noise of New York but also from the city's sometimes menacing aura and, more broadly, from the homophobia of the time. The answer is not to be found in any of Brainard's published writings, which do not contain any reference either to the Stonewall Inn riots of 1969 or to any events connected with gay persecution or activism. Brainard was not at all political, and the fact that homosexuality was accepted in the narrow circles of the New York City art world, which coincided with the circle of his closest friends, was sufficient for him to feel comfortable with his sexual identity.

Epstein and Fitch's remark suggests an element of escapism in the carefree aura of gay men holidaying in Vermont, a state known for its progressive politics and the general affluence (and racial homogeneity) of its residents. David Shuttleton sees escapism as a basis for the link between gayness and rurality, which he discusses under the rubric of "gay pastoral." He emphasizes "the escapist pull of pastoral's own dominant rhetoric, which seeks to evade time, history and material political realities through a retreat into a phantasmic ideal space."[66] Shuttleton points to the metaphor of "self-imposed exile" as a reminder of "the sometimes

64. Cran, "'Men with a Pair of Scissors,'" 122. The collective, amical spirit of the reunions in Vermont and their male-dominated aura bring to mind "Friendship as a Way of Life," where Michel Foucault asks, "how is it possible for men to be together? To live together, to share their time, their meals, their room, their leisure, their grief, their knowledge, their confidences." Foucault stresses that he does not mean the question in the context of "a couple but as a matter of existence" (136). Given their extended length, the sojourns in Calais offered a taste of the semi-utopian idea of friends living together under one roof, dividing their time between individual pursuits and shared activities.

65. Andrew Epstein and Andy Fitch, "I Wonder: In Dialogue, on Dialogue," in *Joe Brainard's Art*, ed. Yasmine Shamma (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 164.

66. David Shuttleton, "The Queer Politics of Gay Pastoral," in *De-Centering Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis*, ed. Richard Phillips, Diane Watt, and David Shuttleton (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 126.

regressive meanings of queer pastoral."[67] Fone takes a more benevolent view of queer rurality, arguing that Arcadia is first and foremost "a place where it is safe to be gay," where one is "free from the outlaw status," and where homosexuality "can be revealed and spoken of without reprisal."[68] Calais certainly met all of Fone's criteria for an Arcadian space. Because it served Brainard and his friends as merely a temporary refuge (from which they would inevitably return to the "real" world), the charges of escapism or myopia seem of limited applicability to their summer holidays in Vermont.

Beyond the Binary

Jack Halberstam's seminal *In a Queer Time and Place* is a spirited critique against seeing the city as the default destination of any gay man and the country as an oppressive and dangerous space for non-heteronormative desire.[69] The metropolitan and the rural used to be, in Brainard's day, conceived as sets of binary oppositions, with the privileged, desirable element invariably associated with the city. Being "easily identified and punished" in the country was contrasted with metropolitan anonymity. "Rural repression" was pitted against "urban indulgence"[70]; "speaking out," "fulfilment" and "being" against "silence," "repression" and "nonbeing."[71] Failing to move to New York, Chicago or San Francisco, which all offered opportunities to come out and flourish, was viewed as being "'stuck' in a place that [one] would leave if [one] only could."[72] The metronormative narrative involved a journey from "a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy" and "a closet for urban sexualities" to "a place of tolerance."[73] Brainard's earlier noted decision to move from Oklahoma to New York City was consistent with that hegemonic narrative of liberation. What is more, he would most likely have agreed that the city embodied most of the positive qualities in the above-listed dichotomies, especially at the beginning of the three-and-a-half decades of his residency in the metropolis.

At the same time, Brainard certainly would have objected to the grim view of the country. His insistence on spending several months each year in Vermont can be interpreted as a refusal to accept the view of rural life as a form of nonbeing and

67. Shuttleton, "Queer Politics," 140.

68. Fone, "This Other Eden," 13.

69. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Transcultural Lives* (New York–London: New York University Press, 2005).

70. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time*, 35.

71. Kusek, "'Go West!,'" 307.

72. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time*, 36.

73. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time*, 36–37.

silence. If anything, much of the time, he seems to have been at his most alive and creative while in Calais. Also, paradoxically, around the time of the Stonewall crisis, it may have been so that some rural spaces, rather than being a "perpetual site of isolation and exclusion," showed their potential to serve as a "locus for queer community, refuge, and security" (a notion conventionally associated with urbanity).[74] However, Brainard's representation of Calais neither upholds nor reverses the urban–rural hierarchy constructed by Halberstam and Herring. Instead, it questions the need for a gay man at the time to build his identity upon a celebration of the city and a repudiation of the country, or vice versa. By embracing both poles, Brainard implies that for "Joe and his kind" – to echo the title of Christopher Isherwood's famous memoir – fulfilment was attainable in the city and the country alike, in New York as well as in Vermont. As this article has signalled, the rural refuge may have been an option restricted to those who were comfortably off, surrounded by a community of friends and possessed of a capacity to turn a blind eye to the violence and mounting sociopolitical tensions of the day.

Bibliography

Ashbery, John. "Joe Brainard." In *Joe Brainard: A Retrospective*, edited by Constance M. Lewallen, 1–2. New York: Granary Books, 2001.

Ashbery, John, and Joe Brainard. *The Vermont Notebook*. Calais: Z Press, 1975.

Bell, David. "Eroticizing the Rural." In *De-Centering Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis*, edited by Richard Phillips, Diane Watt, and David Shuttleton, 123–142. London–New York: Routledge, 2000.

Brainard, Joe. *The Collected Writings of Joe Brainard*, edited by Ron Padgett. New York: The Library of America, 2012.

Brainard, Joe. Unpublished letters to Ron and Pat Padgett, 1966–1967.

Cran, Rona. "'Men with a Pair of Scissors': Joe Brainard and John Ashbery's Eclecticism." In *Joe Brainard's Art*, edited by Yasmine Shamma, 103–126. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019.

Epstein, Andrew, and Andy Fitch. "I Wonder: In Dialogue, on Dialogue." In *Joe Brainard's Art*, edited by Yasmine Shamma, 165–180. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019.

Fone, Byrne R. S. "This Other Eden: Arcadia and the Homosexual Imagination." *Journal of Homosexuality* 8, no. 3–4 (1983), 13–34.

Foucault, Michel. "Friendship as a Way of Life." In *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, edited by Paul Rabinow, translated by Robert Hurley, 135–140. New York: New Press, 1994.

Herring, Scott. *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*. New York: New York University Press, 2010.

74. Herring, *Another Country*, 10.

Kusek, Robert. "'Go West!' In Search of the 'Greenwood' in Mike Parker's *On the Red Hill*." *Language and Literary Studies of Warsaw* 10 (2020), 305–319.

Lewallen, Constance M. *Joe Brainard: A Retrospective*. New York: Granary Books, 2001.

Mingay, G. E. Introduction. In *The Rural Idyll*, edited by G. E. Mingay, 1–6. London: Routledge, 1989.

Padgett, Ron. *Joe: A Memoir of Joe Brainard*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2004.

Shuttleton, David. "The Queer Politics of Gay Pastoral." In *De-Centering Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis*, edited by Richard Phillips, Diane Watt, and David Shuttleton, 123–142. London–New York: Routledge, 2000.

Sturm, Nick. "'Fuck Work': The Reciprocity of Labor and Pleasure in Joe Brainard's Writing." In *Joe Brainard's Art*, edited by Yasmine Shamma, 183–199. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019.

Wikipedia. "Calais, Vermont." Accessed November 6, 2023. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calais,_Vermont.

White, Edmund. "Saint Joe." *Art in America* 85 (July 1997), 78–81.

Wolf, Matt. *I Remember: A Film About Joe Brainard*. Polari Pictures, 2012.

Yau, John. *Joe Brainard: The Art of the Personal*. New York: Rizzoli Electa, 2022.