

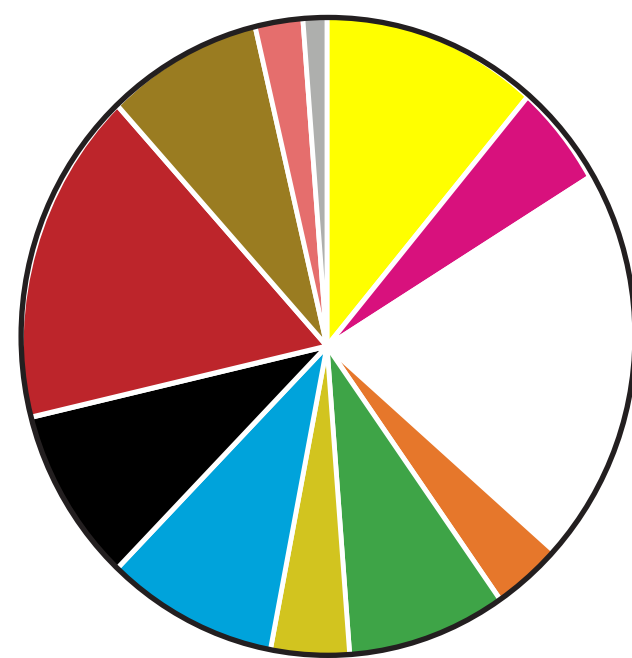
The Intersection of Visual and Verbal Mediums in Joe Brainard's *I Remember* and Ted Berrigan's *The Sonnets*

By Avni Shridhar and
Connor Koelsch



Brainard

Even after grouping his more eclectic shades of color into color families, Figure 1 shows Joe Brainard's affinity for a variety of tones. His use of color is often bright, saturated, and joyful. Brainard also has a tendency for light and happy colors like white, yellow, and orange, as well as warmer colors like pink and red.



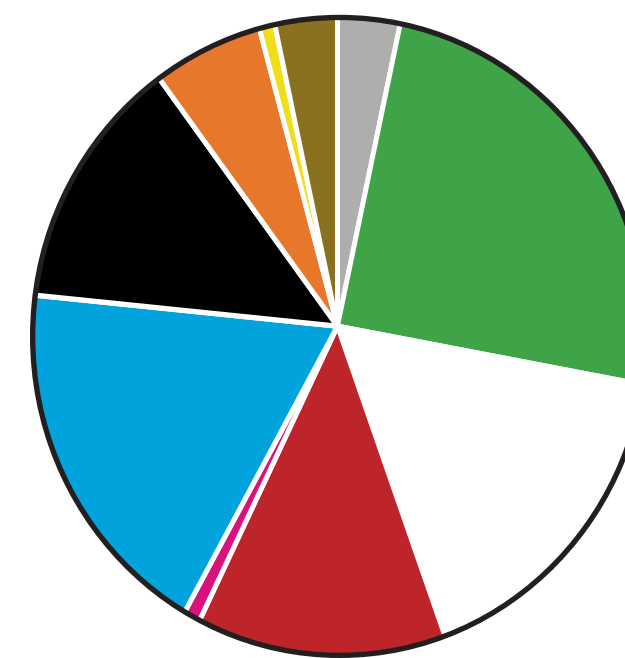
Frequency of color usage
(Figure 1)

Introduction

When describing the work of The New York School, Carter Ratcliff states, "For decades, art and poetry have inhabited separate planets. But there was a time, beginning in the early 1950s and lasting into the '70s, when poets and painters lived in the same world." Their comfort with different mediums is clear through the writing interspersed within their visual work, but it is less clear if there is a similar intersection in their written pieces. As artifacts of the New York School, Ted Berrigan's *The Sonnets* and Joe Brainard's *I Remember* are marked by the intersection of visual and verbal mediums despite being constructed entirely out of words. This can be seen through their use of color and color-related language, which serve to enhance the narratives of each work and show a clear connection between the authors' writing styles and their visual preferences.

Berrigan

Berrigan uses a far less varying set of colors. Almost 50 percent of the time, he uses green or blue; another 40 percent is red, black, or white. His palette, while smaller, ranges the color spectrum. This allows Berrigan to make intellectual choices when including a color in a sonnet. Further, it allows for less frequent colors like orange to have far greater an impact when they are encountered.



Frequency of color usage
(Figure 2)

I Remember

The Sonnets



Figure 5

A main feature in much of Brainard's visual work is a comic strip character named Nancy. She is often collaged or illustrated into a bigger piece of art, creating an aesthetically intriguing and often humorous piece. In one 1974 piece entitled "Nancy Diptych" (Figure 5), Brainard shows two Nancys, looking at each other from across a table. The painting, however, is split down the middle. The right side shows Nancy as expected, with normal colors (red, black, white and tan). On the other side, Nancy has been washed in pinks and yellows, decorated with playful and rhythmic doodles, and topped with a fried egg. This image displays Brainard's preference for the artificial, bright, and playful colors that were just becoming popular with the pop-art movement. This same attention to Americana and consumerism is present in *I Remember*, where he provides images of "heavy blue eye shadow" (16), "black velvet winged suit" (139), and "red sat-in hat with red poppies." Brainard is heavily concerned with the way colors are tied to objects and how the colors are what remain present in one's memory.

When Brainard talks about color, he does it in a very specific way, allowing you to recall similar moments. Many of his most poignant uses of color are images from his childhood, which makes sense because as children, we see everything through the lens of bright colors. Brainard recalls that "finger painting creates a purple brown mess" (94), and we recall that same memory in our childhood with him. Through these shared memories of colors, he can quickly make connections with his audience.

Brainard is adept at crafting images through his use of color. In one line of *I Remember*, he describes a "tall girl with blonde hair who every year got a really dark tan. She wore white a lot (to set it off) and light pink 'wet' lipstick" (145). His use of the colors blonde, tan, white, and light pink immediately bring to mind a Barbie-esque like girl, and suddenly the reader remembers a person in their life like that as well. Brainard can also be distinguished by his preference for pop-y colors that jump right off the page and create a distinct image.



Figure 3



Figure 4

Each sliver represents each time a color is used chronologically

Berrigan uses green frequently through *The Sonnets*. A quarter of his color words fall in to the green family. Interestingly, the images produced are not green themselves, but somehow awash in a green light. For this reason, the colors Berrigan uses would provide the same effect if they were severed from the object they are modifying and placed elsewhere in the poem. For example, in "Penn Station," the sonnet would be unchanged if the mention of green remained as is with "green boy," "green jungle," and "green nosegays" or if the green was elsewhere in the poem (11). What really matters is how the mention of green makes you feel.

Berrigan's usage of color tends to set lighting on the poems rather than conjure up literal imagery. This is seen clearly in Sonnet XXXVII, where Berrigan refers to "orange libraries" and "orange dreams" (34). It is irrelevant that the libraries and dreams are orange, but the repetition of this color word throughout the poem evokes a specific state of mind. Sonically and visually, the color orange tends to be artificial or overwhelming, and this orange haze also brings about feelings of delirium.



Figure 6

In a 1966 article reviewing a painting by Red Grooms entitled "The Levinson Family" (Figure 6), Berrigan seems enthralled by the "haunting" aspects of the piece. Berrigan's own work strikes the reader in a similar way, by placing familiar words and imagery ("Ginger Ale," "Webster Unabridged Dictionary," "Christmas") in a familiar format (the sonnet) and creating a sometimes upsetting and often confusing disorientation within that familiarity. He describes the feeling of "The Levinson Family," saying it is "as if someone or everything could very well go totally berserk at any instant and it would be just as logical as not" (Sturm). Berrigan's visual preferences clearly bleed over into his writing preferences. He enjoys looking at the overall tonality of a piece of art, and he creates this same sort of effect by making his poems awash in certain colors like blue, green, or orange.

Conclusion

Brainard's and Berrigan's employment of colors in their writing differs in its intended effect. Brainard is interested in using color to conjure specific and nostalgic imagery, while Berrigan's usage tends to be more abstract. With Brainard's writing, the color and the object it is modifying are heavily tied to each other. Through Berrigan's writing on the other hand, colors can become independent of the objects they modify, and they become important in their own right. Brainard's colors are very concrete and present, and Berrigan's are more nebulous and painterly. Brainard and Berrigan can be differentiated as writers through their relationship with visual art: one is an artist, and the other is an art critic and viewer. To both, writing is a visual mode, but Brainard is much more concerned with the mechanism of producing an image, while Berrigan prefers to use color to draw out an effect on the reader. Ultimately, examining the colors presented in *I Remember* and *The Sonnets* allows one to notice the way Brainard uses colors to create intense and specific memories and the way Berrigan uses colors to paint his poems a certain hue.