

THE TIMES

Brigid Berlin: artist, socialite and pioneer of the selfie

by Dr. Louisa McKenzie
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Brigid Berlin's *Self Portrait with Willem de Kooning*, 1971 – one of her many experiments using double exposure
Brigid Berlin, *Untitled (Self Portrait with Willem de Kooning, Double Exposure)*, 1971, Polaroid, 3 3/8 x 4 1/4 inches
(8.6 x 10.8 cm) © Vincent Fremont/Vincent Fremont Enterprises, Inc. All rights reserved;
Courtesy Vito Schnabel Gallery

Andy Warhol's best friend is finally having her five minutes of fame

With short, dirty blonde hair teased into a bouffant, a silk scarf knotted around her neck and jaunty gold accessories, Brigid Berlin steals the show in *Chelsea Girls*, Andy Warhol's cult 1966 split-screen film. Her character, the Duchess, was a louche amphetamine dealer holed up in a room at the eponymous residential hotel. The character's nickname was fitting for Berlin. The daughter of the president then of the Hearst Corporation, the influential publishing company, and his socialite wife, Honey, Berlin had rebelled against her Upper East Side upbringing and gravitated towards the downtown scene. Also fitting was the character itself. Berlin had been a prodigious user of amphetamines since childhood, when her mother had encouraged their use so that Berlin would lose weight.

Berlin had joined Warhol's Silver Factory (his first) in 1964 and remained, in one role or another, associated with the artist until his death in 1987. The pair were close – often described as best friends – and alike in many ways. Theirs was a symbiotic relationship, feeding off the other's personality and creativity. Both Berlin and Warhol worried about their weight – their own and that of the other. "Brigid called and said she's down to 197. Ever since she saw herself in *Bad* [a film, produced by Warhol released in 1977] weighing 300 pounds and went on a diet, she's so boring to talk to," Warhol recorded in his daily audio diary on November 28, 1976. Each had issues with addiction – to drugs, to drink and to different kinds of foods. They even both suffered from gallbladder disease, with Berlin having hers successfully removed some months before Warhol's own operation, which would indirectly result in his death.

But more than just a Warhol acolyte, Berlin was an artist in her own right – and a true original. *Brigid Berlin: The Heaviest*, a new exhibition at the Vito Schnabel Gallery in New York (until August 18), is the first to explore all aspects of her life and art. Curated by Alison M Gingeras, the exhibition's setting is inspired by the interior of her final apartment. Some of

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the gallery's walls are covered in the same bespoke floral wallpaper from the US manufacturer Twigs that featured in Berlin's home, and the exhibition includes never before seen family photographs, letters and memorabilia. Another of the exhibition's wall coverings turns attention to Berlin's creative output, in the form of a newly commissioned wallpaper featuring J-cards from her extensive audio archive. Both Warhol and Berlin were obsessed with documenting every aspect of their daily lives and, importantly, the people they met, using Polaroids and cassette recordings. While Warhol would become well known for this practice, it was Berlin's use of both media that prompted him to take them up. This was not uncharacteristic of Warhol. He took constant creative inspiration from others, both in his own circle and further afield, channelling his borrowings and making them icons of his own practice.



Brigid Berlin was an artist in her own right
Billy Farrell/Patrick McMullan via Getty Images

In 1970, Polaroids and audio cassettes featured in Berlin's first solo show, at the Heiner Friedrich Gallery in Cologne, Germany. *Brigid Berlin: The Heaviest* presents the first opportunity in 50 years to experience her audio recordings. Amounting to almost a thousand hours, these date principally from 1969-74 and feature monologues, fights with her parents, daily calls with Andy Warhol and conversations with artists, who were Berlin's bread and butter. "Artists excite me. Every time I meet a new one, I'm thrilled that I know one more!" she once explained. Much of the exhibition underscores her interactions with a veritable who's who of the biggest names in the art world of the 1960s and early 1970s, including Richard Serra, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. Aside from immortalising these artists' thoughts on tape, Berlin captured them, as well as people she met in Warhol's orbit (such as the *Vogue* editor Diana Vreeland), with her Polaroid camera. She neatly organised the resulting images in leather-bound books, each with a different theme. Berlin also used the Polaroid camera in much the same way most of us use our phone cameras today. She was a pioneer of the selfie, except Berlin's selfies experimented with double exposure to superimpose her image on to a snapshot of another person. In one, Willem de Kooning, the abstract expressionist, jauntily sticks out his tongue for Berlin's camera while a ghostly imprint of Berlin's face hovers in front of him.

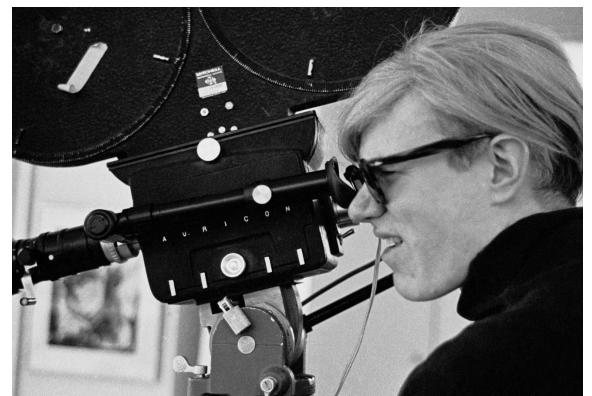
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Aside from her encounters with legends of the art world, the exhibition spotlights Berlin's other creative outputs. She was an artist who worked across media, not just photography. Perhaps symptomatic of her lifelong battle with her weight, Berlin also used her body to make art, including paintings dubbed *Tit Prints*. In later life she produced a series of tongue-in-cheek needlepoint creations, including some based on covers of the *New York Post*, as well as performance art.

Although Berlin was in some ways an artistic pioneer, wider recognition of that status by the art market is some way off. From time to time Berlin's artworks come up for sale from private collections, although the 2022 auction of her estate provided the last big opportunity to acquire them. The prices they fetch (less than \$10,000) are a fraction of those for works by her more famous best friend, Andy Warhol, whose status as an artistic icon looms large in the public imagination. Warhol remains the patron saint of pop art, despite a recent setback over copyright in the Supreme Court. Befitting this sanctity, anything and anyone he touched – directly or tangentially – becomes a kind of Warholian contact relic and, therefore, big business. A black-and-white photo of Warhol walking two pugs taken by his studio assistant sold for 14 times the estimate at the sale of Berlin's estate, reaching \$4,410, while a brick from Warhol's final Factory fetched 10 times the estimate at \$3,150 at the same sale. Warhol's own work is perennially popular at auction. In 2022 his *Shot Sage Blue Marilyn* broke auction records for a 20th-century artwork at \$195 million. With his prolific output that spanned media and formats, prices range accordingly and are based on rarity and authentication. Some photos and prints may fetch in the low thousands, while paintings usually run between five and seven figures. Meanwhile, earlier this year, the Andy Warhol Foundation partnered with eBay to sell 50 photos, print and posters at more affordable prices (\$128-\$24,000), with the funds raised channelled back into artistic philanthropy.



The exhibition *Brigid Berlin: The Heaviest* features bespoke floral wallpaper from the US manufacturer Twigs that featured in Berlin's home
Installation view of *Brigid Berlin: The Heaviest*, curated by Alison M. Gingeras; Photo by Argenis Apolinario; Courtesy Vito Schnabel Gallery. Needlepoint pillows by Brigid Berlin; © Vincent Fremont/Vincent Fremont Enterprises, Inc. All rights reserved



Andy Warhol in 1968
Santi Visalli/Getty Images

As the market clamours for more and more Warhol, interest is naturally shifting to members of his wider circle. The Gagosian Shop in the Burlington Arcade, central London, was recently the site of *Andy Warhol's Insiders*, featuring works by Warhol himself alongside a range of photographic portraits taken by many of his inner circle. One of that circle was Christopher Makos, whose photographs documented his time with Warhol in the late 1970s and 1980s, and which can now fetch five figures. Paige Powell started working for Warhol's *Interview* magazine in the 1980s, and through this met Jean-Michel Basquiat, with whom she would become romantically involved. Some of her photographs from the period are featured in the current *Basquiat x Warhol: Painting Four Hands* exhibition at the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris.

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Brigid Berlin, *The Artists*, 1969 - 1971, Photo album with 65 polaroids, list of artists included, 4 7/8 x 4 1/4 x 1 1/8 inches (12.4 x 10.8 x 2.9 cm) © Vincent Fremont/Vincent Fremont Enterprises, Inc. All rights reserved. Photos by Argenis Apolinario; Courtesy Vito Schnabel Gallery



Warhol, circa 1985
Jill Kennington/Getty Images

A happy side effect of this is that some of these individuals, artists in their own right like Brigid Berlin, are undergoing long-overdue critical evaluation as they emerge from Warhol's shadow.

Five members of Warhol's circle whose names you should know

Billy Name

Born William Linich, the man responsible for turning Warhol's first Factory silver, was also a film-maker and photographer known for atmospheric black-and-white shots of his Warhol days.

Gerard Malanga

Poet, film-maker and one-time Warhol right-hand man, Malanga also took photographic portraits, often of writers and musicians, both during his time at the Factory and subsequently.

Robert Mapplethorpe

Now well known for his erotic black-and-white images, Mapplethorpe did some photographic work for Warhol's *Interview* magazine in the mid-1970s before his career started to take off.

Kenny Scharf

Scharf was a painter and sculptor specialising in psychedelic, cartoon and sci-fi-infused artworks who counted Warhol as a mentor in the early 1980s.

Marta Minujín

A conceptual, mixed-media and performance artist from Argentina, Minujín knew Warhol, who featured alongside her in her 1985 photographic series *The Debt*.