

filthy dreams

Everyone Will Be Famous for Fifteen Cookies: 15 Things I Would
Steal from *Brigid Berlin: The Heaviest*

by Emily Colucci
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Brigid Berlin, *Untitled (Self Portrait as a Nun)*, c. 1970 Polaroid, 3 3/8 x 4 1/4 inches (8.6 x 10.8 cm) (© Vincent Fremont/Vincent Fremont Enterprises, Inc. All rights reserved)

The muddled, muffled sounds of an indiscernible song fuzzily blasted through a pair of wireless headphones at Vito Schnabel Gallery. Even though the listening experience was akin to holding a tin can full of static to my ear, I got a little choked up, straining to hear a then-new Velvet Underground demo played over the telephone by Lou Reed to Brigid Berlin in June 1971. Not only was I overcome due to my outsized love of Reed, but I got trapped in feelings of unexpected nostalgia for those days of extended, exhaustive phone calls with friends and family members, which inevitably led to loudly blaring some freshly discovered music back and forth across the wires. Sure, I never could hear what the fuck was being played but that didn't matter. What mattered was the connection.

It's no surprise, then, that my yearning for the bygone days of meandering phone conversations came courtesy of an audio recording of a call by the Phone Queen herself, Brigid Berlin. The B to Warhol's A, Brigid Berlin exists in my conception permanently entangled in a phone cord as seen in a photograph from the *Factory* by Billy Name. She's chatting for hours and hours at a time—sometimes to the dismay of those so unfortunate as to get caught paying her long-distance bills. Of course, Brigid, who died in 2020, was much more than a voice on the other end of the line: an artist, Hearst Media empire heiress, socialite rebel, pie binge-eater, pug enthusiast, tit printer, Chelsea Girl, amphetamine queen, Warhol superstar, *Interview Magazine* employee, and, as Reed lovingly says in his call, record producer, after capturing *The Velvet Underground* live at the storied Max's Kansas City.

Vito Schnabel Gallery's *Brigid Berlin: The Heaviest*, curated by Alison M. Gingeras, weaves together all of these different aspects of Berlin's life and career. And does so near flawlessly within a one-room gallery, relatively small for the enormity

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of both the task and the sheer amount of artwork and other materials. In case you hadn't noticed, summer 2023 is the season of overstuffed museum-worthy archival exhibitions, some better than others. For instance, *Luxe, Calme, Volupté* curated by Antonio Sergio Bessa and Allen Frame at Candice Madey, attempts to contextualize artist Darrel Ellis (and the Bronx Museum's current show *Darrel Ellis: Regeneration*) within a notably dynamic, largely queer NYC art scene of the 1980s. Only the curators forgot the context part of this contextualizing. Without wall labels or object descriptions, this salon-style hang only speaks to those who were a part of this community itself (an insular misstep I find happens A LOT with this particular artistic circle). Even I—someone who is singularly obsessed with this period—had no idea who some of these artists were and left the gallery knowing just as little as I did when I entered.

The Heaviest does not have this problem. Organized in collaboration with the co-executors of Brigid Berlin's estate—co-founder of The Warhol Foundation, Vincent Fremont, and Brigid's companion, Rob Vaczy, the show perfectly balances the artistic and the historical with extended descriptions for those who aren't already experts. Not only does the show introduce Brigid to newbies, but it also widens the understanding of the already indoctrinated Brigid fanatics like me. Even I left learning more about Berlin, including how close she was to the high art "heavies" like Willem de Kooning, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Larry Rivers, some of whom, like Rivers, she collaborated with.

With reproductions of Berlin's garishly busy home wallpaper, the show brings viewers into Berlin's obsessive, provocative, and seemingly fearless world, revealing an artist as fixated on repetition and artistic rebellion as Warhol himself rather than simply a muse or the strikingly butch figure appearing nearly always nude (or partially nude) in group shots of Factory folk. Yet, the show doesn't do so at the expense of dispelling all of the mystery surrounding the woman. I still find it challenging to fully get a handle on Brigid, a bundle of contradictions, not the least of which is rectifying her lifelong motivation to abandon the prim and proper privilege of her patrician family with her similarly strongly held strident conservatism. Someday there will be a full biography of Brigid so I can understand exactly what the hell she was up to. I hope so, at least.

Until then, what else can I do but indulge in some klepto fantasies and dream about stealing these fifteen items from the show?! For research purposes, of course!



Installation view of *Brigid Berlin: The Heaviest*, curated by Alison M. Gingeras; Photo by Argenis Apolinario; Courtesy Vito Schnabel Gallery Inc. All rights reserved)

1. Alexander Sharpe Ross, *Portrait of Brigid and her sister Richie from "Pie in the Sky"*, c. 1944

I'll be honest, the main reason why I trekked over to that strange Holland Tunnel no man's land of Clarkson Street for *The Heaviest* was the presence of one painting and one painting alone: Alexander Sharpe Ross's eerie blue-blood childhood portrait of Brigid and her sister, Richie. It's not that I wasn't enticed by the prospect of a Berlin-a-palooza, but my interest in Brigid was overpowered by the opportunity to both case the joint and figure out exactly WHO outbid me for this piece of heiress history in Brigid's estate sale at Doyle last year. Many of you, faithful readers, will know I have been mourning that loss ever since. Well, this was my chance to finally discover whose apartment window I need to crack open and creepy-crawl into! To see whose living room I must tip-toe through until I can get what is rightfully (or, okay, not rightfully per se) mine! I NEED THIS PAINTING! Plus, I had to confirm: yes, Richie and Brigid's youthful eyes do follow you around the room. While I was ready to pluck these disconcertingly alive-looking children right off the wall, one detail stopped me. On the exhibition's checklist, I noted the painting is owned by Roger Padilha and Mauricio Padilha, the brains behind MAO public relations, which has released books on luminaries like Stephen Sprouse and Antonio Lopez, to name a few. Fine...I'm happy that it's in a worthy home. I GUESS. Can I at least get a post-exhibition cocktail invite so I can come and gaze upon its majesty?



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2. Berlin Family Christmas Card

Though I am way too lazy and cheap (stamps are expensive!) to send them myself, I have a thing for Christmas cards. Blame it on John Waters who has yet to send me one of his famed Xmas missives. One day! Even more than John's, I might prefer receiving one of the Berlin dynasty's kitsch creations. Between the Ross portrait and these fussy little printed cards, the Berlin family's conservative media mogul aesthetics run a bit tackier than I'd imagine. Granted, I'm basing all my knowledge of media mogul families on *Succession* alone. The issue with snatching myself one of these good-cheer holiday greetings is that there are just so damn many to choose from! Do I grab the baby photo of Brigid looking distinctly disgruntled? (And who wouldn't be with that lamb looming ominously over her!) What about the card featuring the Berlin children peering around a corner to gaze at a dollar store plastic Santa? Or do I pocket the picture of Brigid and Richie trapped under a spotlight as if they're being interrogated to see if they were really good girls this year?! Don't make Santa get out the lie detector test! But if I had to pick just one, I'd probably have to settle on the image of Brigid and Richie kneeling and standing, respectively, beside a bed with their hands clasped in pious prayer. What little angels!

3. Letter from the Director of La Chatelainie School, Switzerland, 1958

As anyone who has read my previous shopping lists of stolen goods knows, I covet furious letters feverishly sent from disappointed teachers, concerned principals, dismayed headmasters, or any other upset authority figures. I find other people recoiling in horror at the naughty antics of my favorite juvenile delinquents inspiring. Of course, Brigid is no exception. In fact, this letter from the Director of the La Chatelainie School in Switzerland, one of a few finishing schools where Brigid was sent to lose weight and gain manners, may be one of the filthiest. "My mother wanted me to be a slim respectable socialite," Brigid once said. "Instead, I became an overweight troublemaker." And she did so early according to this terse letter, which opens with the anticipation-building preface: "...I wish very much that I did not have to write this letter." What did our bad seed do? Well, she swindled some beers and got hammered along with a few other girls. Pretty conventional stuff for a growing deviant, but Brigid, ever exceptional, managed to make a lasting impression. On the carpet! "On Wednesday morning last, the servant came to ask the Matron to go up to Brigid's room to see what had happened. I could not believe it when I was told, but unfortunately, it was true that Brigid had not been able to reach the lavatory in time and there was a mess on the carpet beside the bed," writes the Director. Whoopsie! Bad Brigid! Bad! But at least, as the letter cheerfully concludes, Brigid lost weight!



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4. Brigid Berlin, *Untitled (Lou Reed, My Room, Late After Max's)*, 1969

Though Brigid's own art practice inevitably gets overshadowed by Warhol, there are several significant crossovers from A to B and Back Again. While Brigid's perpetual monomaniacal tape recording may be the most influential, Polaroids are a close second. I associate Warhol's stunning, ghostly, sometimes kabuki-esque Polaroids of celebrities, artists, and his other wealthy sitters much more (but not exclusively) with preparatory work for his society portraits. Previously the commercialist bane of Warhol art historians' existence, these portraits are just now starting to be appreciated in their own right rather than shoved aside as blatant money grabs off of the rich and famous. Brigid's Polaroids, however, don't have that problem. The rich, famous, and talented are caught in such candid, cheery, and unexpected moments by the snap of her Polaroid camera that they cannot feel like a pose. Brigid's Polaroids humanize highfalutin luminaries who, beyond the art historical textbook, appear to be a blast at a night out at Max's Kansas City. Though Nico's vacant and haunted stare into the abyss always drags me into a photograph (or performance as I recently saw Tammy Faye Starlite channel Nico in her tour de force of fanaticism, Nico: Underground, at Joe's Pub), my take of the bunch is *Untitled (Lou Reed, My Room, Late After Max's)*. True to its description, the photo captures a completely plastered Lou, standing in front of Warhol's

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Flowers. Have you ever seen the notoriously prickly Lou Reed smile so big? Or smile at all? Anything beyond a slightly amused grin/grimace? I know I haven't and I already pilfered my way through his archives last year at *Lou Reed: Caught Between the Twisted Stars* at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Ok, I'll take the Nico pic too.

5. Brigid Berlin, *Untitled (Self-portrait as a Nun)*, c. 1970

What would an ill-gotten collection of Brigid Berlin Polaroids be without a photo of the woman by the woman herself? While her iconic double exposures may be more essential formal experiments, I dream of owning Brigid in nun drag. Hallelujah! Not only would it go perfectly side by side with my previously nabbed Berlin Christmas card, but it would be ideal for genuflecting. O Brigid, our lady of the tits, pies, and thighs! A renowned amphetamine poke(hence the nickname Brigid Polk)-giver and general rabble-rouser, Brigid, at least in 1970, may not seem like the most virtuous of figures. But, *The Heaviest* also includes Berlin's own rosary, which she kept close, along with Warhol's woo-woo crystals, until she died. And take a close look: there's a scratch on her hand. She has the stigmata! She has risen! Amen!



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6. Brigid Berlin, *Mr. and Mrs. Brigid Pork* photobook, 1970

Along with the framed Polaroids, the exhibition also displays a range of mysterious photobooks—albums of Polaroids—each one enticingly and peculiarly titled such as *Sunday Lunch*, *Roast Beef and Brussel Sprout*, and *Drella*, named after Warhol's not-quite-so-flattering nickname, a combination of Dracula and Cinderella. Of all the archival works trapped in vitrines throughout the show, these are the ones that I desperately want to grubbily paw through. Because only one of these photobooks lies open, looks like I'm going to have to saw my way through the Plexiglas vitrine in order to flip through them myself. My first impulse grab? *Mr. and Mrs. Brigid Pork*, a collection of, I hope, domestic visions of Brigid and Andy's close and sometimes acrimonious friendship. (See the scene in Interview visionary Bob Colacello's *Holy Terror: Andy Warhol Close Up*, in which Brigid storms into the Factory, dropping f-bombs in her wake, after she discovers that Warhol used her tapes of Mama Honey Berlin for his production of Andy Warhol's *Pork at La Mama*). Is that, in fact, what's in *Mr. and Mrs. Brigid Pork*? Who knows! But there's only one way to find out!

7. Brigid Berlin, *Untitled*, 1969

Ok, ok, ok. Just ONE more Polaroid. This one is found in a section on Brigid's frequent correspondence with mail art icon Ray Johnson. While Johnson's Xeroxed Pepperidge Farm ad sent to Brigid with an inscription, "Everyone will be famous for fifteen cookies," tickles me because I want cookies much more than fame, I'm even more amused by Brigid's Polaroid to Johnson. This snap features Brigid lying, butt-naked and prone, on a kitchen table next to a plate of two pieces of sliced bread. "Dear Ray-Don't tell, David, Jill, Gregory, Anne, or John Quinn or Polly you had me for dinner..." she wrote on the back. There's no deeper analysis as to why I want this photograph. It's just pure silly fun about cannibalism! Who is hungry?!

8. Brigid Berlin, *Untitled (Tit Print)*, 1995

What would a Brigid Berlin booty hoard be without at least one preserved painted smush of Brigid's proudly displayed beaver tail tiddies?! Nothing! While the rainbow oranges are enticing, my choice out of the four on view in *The Heaviest* would be the punky pink and purple zebra-striped tatas. Funky!

9. *Factory Dust*, n.d.

I'm delinquent about regularly dusting my apartment and in an Alphabet City five-story walk-up, that spells disaster. All of my books and various tchotchkes are coated with a thin layer of a century-plus of tenement film, ConEd smog, and FDR exhaust. All of which is to say I don't need MORE dust lying around. And yet, I still want just a little filth from the final Factory at 22 East 33rd Street. According to the explanatory label in *The Heaviest*, Brigid and Rob Vaczy snuck into the building's demolition site in 2009 to nab a few remaining bricks. They were planning to sprinkle this Factory fairy dust into various engraved metal plates but, as seen in the exhibition, didn't seem to get that far. No matter! Just give me the dust! Maybe I'll even take inspiration from Keith Richards and snort it!



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10. Brigid Berlin, *Untitled (I did not kill my daughter, JonBenet, We loved JonBenet)*, c. 2008

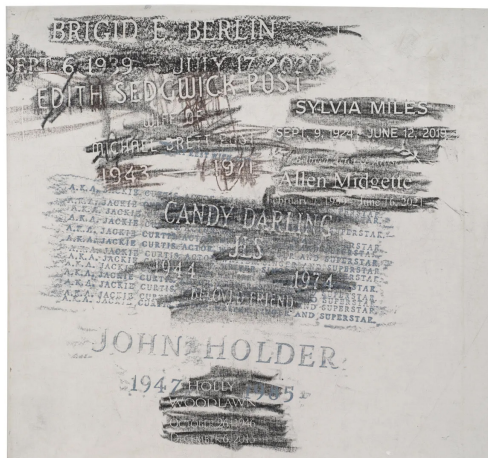
Again, what would a Brigid Berlin-inspired thievery frenzy be without one of her needlepoint pillows, my all-time preferred Berlin artistic medium?! A hysterical juxtaposition of stereotypically feminine craftwork and yellow journalism sleaze, a series of these needlepoint pillows recreate the hilariously trashy front pages of New York City tabloids like *The Daily News* and my own chosen regular rag, *The New York Post* (yes, I read *The Post* and not *The Times*). "I Snorted My Dad," reads a headline with an appropriately haggard image of Keith Richards. "Well Hung," blares another alongside a proudly beaming pic of President Bill Clinton. Rather than selecting these headlines at random, Brigid seems to be making sly connections to her own life. Drug use. Disaster heirs. And perhaps most relevant, an infamously doomed child beauty queen who certainly could relate to the pressure Berlin faced to act as the ideal child socialite. Here, of course, I'm talking about JonBenét Ramsey who tapdances across the pillow in her iconic wide-brimmed black-and-white hat. Below Ramsey's pageant performance, Berlin renders a quote in yarn from Patsy Ramsey: "I did not kill my daughter, JonBenét. We loved JonBenét." Sure, it's more than a bit ghoulish, but this pillow would fit right in with my collection of various other artistic tributes to famous murder cases and crimes. I'm sure my perpetually perceptibly terror-stricken monthly exterminator would appreciate this fresh addition to my collection!

11. Brigid Berlin, *Untitled (Jasper Johns Flag)*, c. 2002

If I could be so bold, I'm going to swipe a second needlepoint work: a take on Jasper Johns's American flag fixation, paired with a maniacally war-mongering quote from former cowboy-in-chief, George W. Bush, on the war in Afghanistan. Given Berlin's conservatism, the purpose of this "We're gonna smoke 'em out of their holes" needlepoint is quite ambiguous. Is Brigid cheering on the post-9/11 patriotic psychosis that would propel the country forward into two decades-long forever wars? As this work was made in 2002, I suspect she is. Strangely, though, the work could be equally effective as a wry take on the inextricable binds between our country's flag-waving self-mythology and violence on the international stage (see Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer*). No matter Brigid's intent, this moral dubiousness transfixes me and I'd like to ponder Brigid's American carnage over and over again while reading the near-weekly news of Biden sending more weapons to Ukraine. USA USA USA!!!

12. Pug Dog Collars Shadow Box

Queen Elizabeth had her corgis; Queen Brigid had her pugs. "I consider myself the queen of pugs of New York City," she said. And boy, she was. Brigid's estate sale featured a cavalcade of precious pug gewgaws: needlepoint pug slippers, pug pillows, pug statuettes, pug this, pug that. While the pug frieze in *The Heaviest* is certainly a prime example of high canine camp, I am partial to the half-sweet, half-morbid framed collection of dog collars from puppies past with their names and Brigid's phone number etched onto the heart-shaped pendant. What were some of her doggies' names? I spotted Whoopi and the even more appropriate, Fame. A Factory member through and through. It's worth noting that these are no average collars with their red leather and ornate golden bells. These pups were surely pug royalty!



Scott Covert, *Warhol Superstars*, 2012-2023, Wax, oil and acrylic on muslin, 28 x 30 inches (71.1 x 76.2 cm) © Scott Covert; Courtesy the artist

13. Scott Covert, *Warhol Superstars*, 2012-2023

The one curatorial misstep in the show—or at least the part I feel less than breathlessly enthused by—is the choice to include some newer work by contemporary artists responding to Berlin's legacy. From Jane Kaplowitz's Brigid drag to Jenna Gribbon's itty-titty prints, these works just don't compare to the inventiveness, originality, and humor in Berlin's own artistic output. The singular exception, however, is Scott Covert's delightfully morose gravestone rubbings, which I also recently fawned over in Company Gallery's group exhibition, *Dream Journal* (I could have run off with ALL of Covert's works in the basement gallery of Company. A Jack Kevorkian art piece at home?! Yes please!). Covert's Warholian repetitions of Berlin's headstone, entitled *Brigid Berlin 1-10*, are the perfect send-off and frankly, could have held the show alone as the one contemporary posthumous nod to the ultimate superstar. Though *Brigid Berlin 1-10* may be thematically appropriate, I'm planning on pinching Covert's *Warhol Superstars*, which not only preserves Berlin's gravestone but those of Edie Sedgwick, Jackie Curtis, Sylvia Miles, Holly Woodlawn, and Candy Darling. Since I'll likely never make it to all of their respective resting places myself, I'll use Covert as my guide and pay solemn respect to these enduring filth elders from the comfort of my own apartment.



L: Kate Simon, *Brigid Berlin, at home, NYC*, 2008, Cibachrome print, 24 x 20 inches (61 x 50.8 cm) (© Kate Simon; Courtesy the artist)

R: Installation views of *Brigid Berlin: The Heaviest*, curated by Alison M. Gingeras; Photo by Argenis Apolinario; Courtesy Vito Schnabel Gallery Inc. All rights reserved)

14. Kate Simon, *Brigid Berlin, at home, NYC*, 2008

Speaking of role models and apartments, why are there so many photographs of filthy elders in their lusciously ruby red interiors that perfectly tread the line between stylishly gaudy and downright tasteless? I can think of two right off the bat: Horst P. Horst's depiction of fashion matriarch Diana Vreeland and Slim Aarons's overwhelmingly pretty pic of young Truman Capote in Brooklyn Heights. These two photographs are visions of the aspirational NYC decadence that I hope to one day attain. Add to that Kate Simon's *Brigid Berlin, at home, NYC*, which portrays Brigid sitting at a dining room table, flanked by two tall cabbage (?) candles, in front of her wonderfully loud wallpaper. An obsessive eye will notice that behind her is even more pug art!

15. Brigid Berlin's tape on the phone with Truman Capote, January 9, 1980

The listening station featuring a selection from Brigid's over a thousand hours of audio tape recordings of phone calls, nights out, answering machine messages, and more is, without a doubt, the crowning glory of *The Heaviest*. I could have lingered there for the rest of the day listening to Nixon sending a congratulatory greeting to Big Daddy Berlin, Honey Berlin recoiling in horror at the filth of Brigid and the other Factory denizens, and Candy Darling doing her best Kim Novak impression. Yet, none of the selected audio from Brigid's tapes made me burst out laughing like her 1980 conversation with Truman Capote. "I'm going to finish *Answered Prayers*," Truman insists in his quintessentially squeaky high-pitched lisping Louisiana drawl about his often-discussed but never-finished magnum opus of grievance. Oh, Jesus Christ, here we go again! Brigid clearly has heard this same tale before though she does supportively urge him on that he has to finish the book. Like Warhol, Truman adored Brigid (she would help him with his Interview essays and interview transcripts, often as they were both struggling with sobriety) and I would love to listen to more of their conversation, from that phone call or others like it. And I assume there are others like it. Many, many others like it. This cannot be the first or the last time Capote started in on his same old *Answered Prayers* schtick even though just one published chapter got him booted right out of high society. Oh, Mary! Just finish the book or give it up already!