

# ARTFORUM

## Review: Brigid Berlin at Vito Schnabel Gallery

by Alex Jovanovich  
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that a human could be seamlessly slotted into the gap. This new framing momentarily made the viewer the subject, the star—but also a digression, an afterthought.

—Cassie Packard

### Brigid Berlin

VITO SCHNABEL GALLERY

The torpid affect and exasperating glibness; the terminal tongue in cheek; the ruthless detachment, mind games, and cruelty: I can understand why someone would want to put a bullet into Andy Warhol. In 1964, East Village reprobate Dorothy Podber sent one through his silk-screened paintings of Marilyn Monroe. Later, Valerie Solanis planted a few in the artist's own flesh, piercing his lungs, liver, esophagus, stomach, and spleen. Brigid Berlin—compulsive documentarian, Factory superstar and stalwart, amphetamine freak, and all-around shitkicker—never Popped the master, but she mortally wounded his ego: Whenever he asked her what she wanted for Christmas, she'd say "Andy, anything, but not a painting."

Crazies and climbers suffused Warhol's universe. Yet Berlin (1939–2020) could more than hold her own among the best (and worst) of them, likely owing to her gilded but perilous upbringing on Manhattan's Upper East Side. She was the daughter of staunch right-winger and Nixon confidant Richard E. Berlin, the onetime president and chief executive officer of Hearst Corporation, and Muriel "Honey" Berlin, a socialite who spent all her waking hours trying to change her overweight and obstreperous child into a reed-thin, high-society good girl by putting her on strict diets and shipping her off to fat camps. And although Brigid was a doyenne of downtown, she never quite shed her politically conservative roots: She was a lifelong Republican and a diehard Fox News watcher who, according to her obituary in the *New York Times*, was "heartened" by Donald Trump's ascension to the White House.

"Brigid Berlin: The Heaviest," organized by Alison M. Gingeras, was a modestly scaled yet comprehensive survey of the artist's work (including tape recordings, Polaroids, needlepoint pillows, and Berlin's famous "tit prints"—monotypes she made with her breasts), bolstered by a wide range of ephemera (family photos, assorted tchotchkes, letters, news clippings, and a framed menagerie of dog collars for her beloved pugs Afrika, Fame, Fortune, India, and Whoopi). The exhibition also featured tributes to Berlin from other artists, such as Francesco

Clemente, Scott Covert, and Jane Kaplowitz, lending the show a uniquely affectionate dimension.

Some of the more *recherché* offerings on view included a healing crystal that Warhol carried around during the 1980s in a shoe-polish bag from the Watergate Hotel in Washington, DC; a reliquary containing "Factory dust" taken from the studio's final location at 22 East Thirty-Third Street, before the building was torn down in 2009; a beautifully illustrated correspondence from Ray Johnson; and a May 19, 1958, letter to Berlin's mother and father from one A. Jobin, the director of a Swiss boarding school, describing an incident in which their daughter got a little drunk, couldn't get to the bathroom in time, and made a "mess on the carpet beside [her] bed." (Jobin concludes this embarrassing missive on an even more humiliating note, mentioning that, despite everything, Brigid still managed to "[lose] weight during the past week and now weighs 94 kilos.")

While the artist cultivated an antagonistic persona (she often played an unrepentant bitch in Warhol's movies, and John Waters once characterized her as being "ornery as hell"), there is an undeniable vulnerability to a lot of Berlin's art. It's easy to get caught up in the more starry, sensationalistic aspects of her oeuvre: Take the *Topical Bible (Cock Book)*, ca. 1960s–70s, an exhaustive compendium of dick pictures, among them those executed by Cecil Beaton, Jane Fonda, and Donald Judd; or the untitled album of Polaroids in which the artist documents herself having sex with an unidentified man. Considering the chilly, restrictive atmosphere of her youth, a need for self-exposure and intimacy seems palpable in all her work.

After Warhol was shot, he had to wear medical corsets for the rest of his life to keep his body properly aligned. Berlin dyed them in a range of sprightly hues—perhaps it was her way of trying to "touch" a man who seemed to dislike human contact and, like her mother, was often disparaging of her. In one of the show's vitrines was an assortment of men's briefs, colored in a similar palette by the artist—a gift to her friend and former lover Rob Vaczy. Next to the underwear was a handwritten note from Berlin, which begins *I DYED FOR ANDY / I DYE FOR YOU*—an unequivocally doting gesture from Her Satanic Majesty.

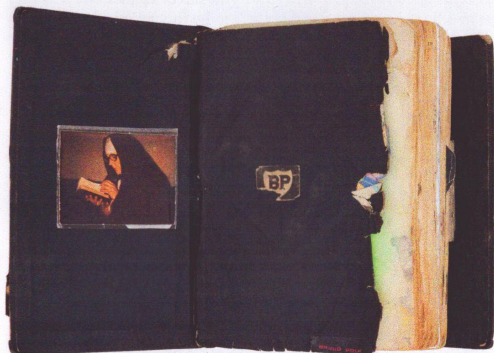
—Alex Jovanovich

### Jane Dickson

KARMA

In New York's Times Square, value can be measured in watts and lumens. At night, the streets and the people on them are irradiated by colossal video screens, electric signs, and spotlit billboards—desperate pleas for our attention . . . and money. Even during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, when the sidewalks were mostly empty, the lights remained on, flooding the desolate terrain with advertising. In the late 1970s and early 1980s—when the area was crudely lit by the neon signs and fluorescent marquees of bars, pornographic theaters, and sex shops—Jane Dickson made this nightscape her primary subject. From her perch in the office behind the massive Spectacolor light board at One Times Square, where she worked the graveyard shift, or her loft window around the corner on West Forty-Third Street, Dickson observed the activity below, taking photographs and making sketches that formed the basis of her earliest canvases.

For the recent paintings exhibited across two of Karma's three East Village galleries, Dickson has been revisiting her decades-old photographs, producing a new body of work that homes in on the inadvertent poetry of commercial signage. A trio of tall, slim paintings of the Empire Theater's marquee—*Kung Fu Hits Horse Cops 2*, *Empire Always Great*, and *Rage* (all works 2023)—bridge her early and recent



Brigid Berlin,  
*The Topical Bible*  
(*Cock Book*),  
ca. 1960s–70s,  
closed: 10 ¼ ×  
6 ½ × 6".



Brigid Berlin, *The Topical Bible*, 1960s-'70s, 6 1/2 x 10 1/4 x 6 inches (16.5 x 26 x 15.2 cm)  
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Ryder Road Foundation.

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BRIGID BERLIN

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