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Brigid Berlin

INVISIBLE-EXPORTS



Brigid Berlin, *Untitled (Self-Portrait with Wig II)*, ca. 1971–73, Polaroid, 3 3/8 × 4 1/4".

"Everyone, absolutely everyone, was tape-recording everyone else," Andy Warhol noted about the Factory days. Everyone, perhaps, but no one as avidly as Brigid Berlin. From the 1960s through the '70s, Berlin made thousands of tapes, recording everything from her morning calls with Warhol to the late-night local news. The droning audio of these tapes formed the backdrop to Berlin's remarkable exhibition "It's All About Me," a collection of twenty-three Polaroids, more than forty "Tit Prints," 1966–96, and a selection of journals and albums. The barely audible snippets of banal conversation seemed to extend the images well beyond the single room they occupied, insinuating that there were just as many photographs of herself and of Andy as hours of tape.

Seen together, the Polaroids are distinctive in a way the tapes are not. These images, all dated ca. 1971–73, are marked by an internal doubling that obscures the face in the center of the frame, either as a reflection (in a TV screen, a mirror) or a double exposure (via the superimposition of the disarrayed jars of an open refrigerator, a bookshelf, a stately building, or clouds). Another kind of doubling happened here via the selection of images; often the pictures appeared in pairs, such as the two in which Berlin wears a platinum wig. In one, Berlin dashes into the frame, her mouth almost upturned into a rare smile. The cool lighting, the bare breast peeking out from an open vest, and the slightly skewed doorframe in the background give the shot a spontaneous feel. But in a second shot, everything but the wig has changed: The harsh lighting washes out her face, and her double chin and glassy eyes register as pathetic rather than lighthearted.

Throughout, we see a self in the making, coming into view, rather than presented for consumption. Sometimes this happens via a trope of femininity—the foil wraps of hair dye, for example, or tanning-bed goggles—but other times it occurs through objects. In *Untitled (Self-Portrait Double Exposure with Candy)*, the most constructivist of the images in the show, Berlin's face is obscured by radiating sticks of gum, including, appropriately enough, Doublemint. The double exposures were a way of exceeding the limits of the Polaroid format, of forcing more into its frame than it was perhaps intended to have.

In two photographs, Berlin poses against a backdrop of a "Tit Print," which she made by painting her breast and pressing it to paper; a group of similar such works from 1995 and 1996 occupied the exhibition's fourth wall. The appearance of the print in the photos draws these newer paintings into the orbit of her Factory work, a critical connection that prevents them from being read as distinct bodies of work separated by decades. The print visible in the two photos is much more densely covered with the shapes than those in the show, many of which have just two circular forms. But the statement is wittier with just two per page, for it keeps it resolutely at the level of the body rather than multiplying it. The shapes become a pair of eyes or striped beach balls or mottled oranges. Berlin does not use the breast as a brush, but as a stamp, with all its mechanical implications; it is not meant to be evocative or emotive, merely pressed into service.

Both the Polaroids and the body prints were a function of Berlin's manic impulse to document more and more. As an archival system, recording everything quickly becomes unwieldy. But Berlin wasn't recording for posterity; she was recording for the present. Capturing it all was a means of validating her presence, which is why her Polaroid 360 was the perfect vehicle; there was no delay between taking the shot and

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holding the print in her hands. Gratification was immediate, not in terms of "this is me," but "I am here."

—*Rachel Churner*

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