

From the early '70s to the late '80s Armin Hagen Baron Freiherr von Hoyningen-Huene pursued a lifestyle that very few had attempted before or have attempted since. Armin dedicated all his time exclusively to the pursuit of sexual satisfaction and streamlined every action, decision, and all creative output to be in the service of that mission. This unique endeavour was armed with a handsome face, a blonde, pageboy haircut, a slender, muscled physique, and a wild intellect. Upon moving to San Francisco in his early 30s, his super-powered libido, spectacular narcissism, and a lust for exhibitionism came together in a perfect storm to create Peter Berlin. From then on, he lived his life as his sexual alter-ego, and he took on his new identity with militant dedication. Normal clothes were not sheer enough nor tight enough for his needs. He started designing himself looks that simultaneously concealed and revealed everything. He felt so incredible in these outfits that he needed to document them, producing a

PETER BERLIN

INTERVIEW BY MICHAEL BULLOCK
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANIEL TRESE

collection of thousands of photographs that caught the attention of all the major artists of the day: Andy Warhol (who silkscreened him), Robert Mapplethorpe (who photographed him), and Tom of Finland (who uncharacteristically accepted a commission by Peter to create a now famous collection of drawings that feature him). His activities culminated in two landmark erotic films: *Nights in Black Leather* (1973) and *That Boy* (1974). The success of these films burned his identity into the psyche of gay men all over the world and empowered them to embrace their own sexuality.

On this rare occasion the now camera-shy 75 year old invited *Apartamento* into his home to reflect on his outlandish life. I'm delighted to learn he's every bit as radical as he was in the '70s. His values are unchanged: anti-capitalist, anti-work, pro-drugs, pro-sexual satisfaction. He's eager to share his many philosophies on style, attraction, and desire, and our one-hour session accidentally becomes five without either of us noticing.

apartamento - San Francisco





Is Peter Berlin done for you?

He was done already more than 30 years ago.

So what should I call you, Peter or Armin?

I don't care if you call me this way or that way.

Do you still take pictures?

Very rarely. Look at the view.

Beautiful. When did you move in here?

I've lived in San Francisco since 1970. I've had five apartments. I'm here since 1989.

If I had this view, I would never leave either.

What are these framed geometric patterns?

They're from my friend, Bryce. He was in jail and he asked me to buy him colouring books. He coloured those. When he died in 2005, I cut them out and framed them. I'm very sentimental. This is Bryce here in this photo. A great guy. He was living with me for a while. He appreciated me; the current one doesn't. Reggie is drug addicted. Still, I take good care of him. I wash his clothes and cook for us. I have a mother instinct.

I can't imagine Peter Berlin cooking.

I cook quite well, as much as I do everything quite well. My cooking is done in 30 minutes. I bake potatoes and then I do my piece of fish, usually red snapper or whatever's on sale. It doesn't have to be perfect. That's my whole life idea. I describe my approach as that of a dilettante; I do things well enough.

If I compare my photographs with Mapplethorpe's, with his big studio and all the lights, the perfect image was so important for him, but for me it was never perfect, and that's fine. But with Reggie, it's such a drama.

Addiction makes people extremely ungrateful. Sorry to hear that.

How about this painting of you reclining in a leather biker outfit?

I painted that in the '80s. See those black marks? When Bryce was angry he took black paint and completely covered the entire painting. I scraped it off the figure and left those abstract marks. I don't know why he got angry. He painted the television black, too. He lost his mind.

I didn't realise you also painted.

Jochen Labriola taught me to paint. He was the man that took me out of Germany before I became Peter Berlin. We lived all around the world: Rome, Paris, New York. He got sick in 1988. When he died my life went from colour to black and white because he was the greatest.

He was the love of your life?

There's a German word for 'comrade'. It covers every different gradation. It can mean acquaintance, friend, or lover. Comrade is kinship. It doesn't really have to do with sex, just great fun, great humour, great understanding. He was always smiling and laughing.

Is that a Mapplethorpe?

Yes, the only one that survived. I'm on the boardwalk on Fire Island. I could have shot it myself, but it's a Mapplethorpe. Actually, these square frames are from an exhibition that Mapplethorpe curated in New York. He asked me to participate, and he bought one behind my back. Meaning, he just paid the full price and never said a word to me. I always found that very telling about him.

Was it unusual for you to exhibit your work?

I hardly ever showed it in galleries. My stuff falls through the cracks; it's not seen as art. I don't even use the word. I never saw myself as a photographer; I saw myself as just chronicling the moments in my life when I felt the best. I said, 'You know what? I had a good night',

and I'd be looking good still in the morning. I'd say, 'Let's freeze it'. That's all. It's not a picture where I could make an appointment with a photographer: 'OK, get hard now'. No, I just made a record, a very honest, real picture. It was not a fake. Whenever I took my picture, I felt great. Peter Berlin is the epitome of, 'I looked in the mirror, I love myself'. I say, 'OK, let's have a good time', but I think what is more intense with me is not the so-called narcissism, it's the exhibitionism.

So you never considered yourself an artist?

One day someone gave me a name tag for some event, and it said, 'Peter Berlin: artist'. I asked,

Peter Berlin,
Self-portrait, circa 1974.



'What makes one an artist?' Especially when you're not connected to the art world and the business side of it. Now rich people see artwork as something to invest their money in. In my case, unfortunately, nobody sees the potential.

Do you think it's because in that time period it was tricky to define what you created? Because even though it was all in the service of creating your self-image, you were engaged in too many activities: photography, painting, acting, designing clothes, and modelling. Or was it that it was too associated with por-

nography for the art world to take seriously? Both, you hit it right on the head.



But if you started your project today instead of in the '70s, everyone would say, 'He's an artist, of course'.

You know how many years ahead of my time I am? I figured it out. In 50 years my stuff will be expensive, but usually one has to die first. I entertain myself by thinking about this stuff. I'm very bored by people. I'd rather be here with my cat.

That's always been the case. In your first erotic film, *That Boy*, in your monologue you complain how boring it is when people approach

you by telling you that you're good looking. How do you remember that?

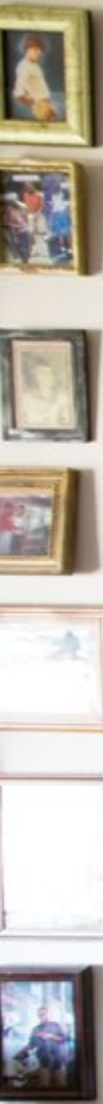
I recently rewatched the 2005 documentary about you, *That Man*.

I only saw *That Boy* once, when I finished it. I'm not interested in it. I was never happy with any of my films. We made them just to get it off my chest. I don't look at pornography, it's too boring for me. The exciting part about erotic feeling and sensation is in one's head. It's not that you have some physical contact; it is all about the mental context that surrounds the physical contact. I found this impossible to capture on film.

How do you feel dating apps have changed sexuality?

They've diminished sex to a transaction, like going to a bank. Do you want to have a loan of \$1,000 or \$2,000? The question these days is always, 'What are you into?' Top? Bottom? Whenever I get that question it's already over for me. That beautiful, colourful array of possibility is gone. I realised early on that for many people sex was not as important as it was for me. They do it between 5.30pm and 6.00pm, get it out of the way: 'OK, now we can go out for dinner'. For me, it was my whole life: my photographs, the films, the daily cruising. At the time it never felt abnormal. I was exactly like all my friends. We all went out looking, night after





night. I've had so much time in my life to think about these things; most people can't, because they are too busy with work and family.

What have you learned?

I've asked thousands of men, 'What's your dream? What's your fantasy?' You know what I immediately realised? People don't have any. I say, 'What do you want in life?' They don't know. We don't live in a world where your parents tell you, 'Whatever you do in life, just have a great time'. No. You have to go to school and then do well at university. You have to earn a degree and then you have to

What's the biggest misconception about Peter Berlin?

That I'm stupid. Our culture looks at young, pretty, blonde girls. 'Look at her, she must be stupid'. Same with me: 'He looks good, he does pornography, he is stupid'. Have you heard the expression, 'Dumb fucks good'?

Yes! The judgement is that if you've made your life's work the pursuit of perfecting your own pleasure then you must be stupid, because pleasure is supposedly meaningless?

There you are. I have enjoyed my life. So, really, who is the stupid one?



get a good—I said, 'Oh, fuck'. This is when people waste their most precious time: their youth. Now I'm old. I agree with Katharine Hepburn: there's nothing good about old age.

What about wisdom, self-knowledge, or a refined philosophy?

Wisdom is something that is also embedded in young people. Old age doesn't mean that you get wise. Am I wiser now than when I was Peter Berlin? No. Maybe I have a more definite impression about certain things. You can be stupid as a young person and you can die stupid. Already you see it in nations. After the Second World War in Europe, I said, 'OK, it's over. This will be the last war'. Boy, was I mistaken.

When you're as famous for your looks as you were, you must have had to turn down thousands of suitors.

If they want something from me and I don't give it to them, people change how they feel about me in a split second.

Well, if their fantasy is rejecting them, that could be traumatic.

It's not traumatic. Trauma is great; it's heavy, it's important.

But sexual rejection is a significant attack on the ego.

If you're sexually rejected, I would ask you why you put yourself in a position to get rejected.



I was never rejected in my life. Why? Not because I'm so cute, but because I never in my life went up to anybody and said, 'I want you'. Now, I had a lot of people that I ended up having a good time with. At some point I've asked myself, 'Why did I choose that person? They're not really that attractive, not really this, not really that'. The first thing that comes to mind is respect. They never put me in the position to reject them. I don't want to reject anything. But when you push me, I can do it in a split second.

That is the art of cruising: to communicate your attraction without words.

But you were also never afraid to show off your enormous cock.

No! Oh my god. Go to the internet and look at some other guys. My dick is just proportional. If someone approached me in a bar because they wanted a huge dick, that would be the end for me and that person. A big dick, for me, is no different than if you have a big ear or if you have a big thumb. It doesn't matter to me. There is something else to that: Peter Berlin is from head to toe. When you think about my image, you visualise the whole picture. It always has to be harmonious, top to bottom. You mention Prince and Bowie; the



The art of living in a community where you don't create something like rejection. There are hundreds of guys over the years who have seen me and said, 'You're not my type'. Not everybody wanted me. That's fine. Although in my case there was a very broad variety that were attracted. It's something interesting about Peter Berlin; I had a universal look. Not too big, not too small, not too butch, not too femme, just right.

Your style was well balanced between masculine and feminine energy. Like David Bowie or Prince, they were fluid between genders and pulled style ideas from men and women. I think the word 'androgynous' fits me.

main thing with those people was that they were authentic.

How do you define authenticity?

When you stand on this planet and you're not insecure. Insecurity is very unsexy. Authenticity means you're saying, 'This is me, take me or leave me'. I used my body as best as I could. Even at my height, my body was never perfect, my face was not photogenic. Maybe that's where the art came in. I made myself look good. The dick was a part of it: 'By the way, I have a dick'. I didn't hide it. It was part of the legs, the face, the head, and the boots. That made me stand out more than many other people. When

I was Peter Berlin I never thought I was so special. I now look back and say, 'Oh my god, it was special'.

Do you still dress up?

Not really. I used to dress Reggie when we first met. I think that's why we remain together. I was like a little girl playing with a doll. I have hundreds of pictures of him. I'm like a child; I'd take you and say, 'Let's stop you from dressing so boring'.

You think my outfit is boring?

Yes, of course! Ordinary. You're running

'There is no one but me as the male version'. I said, 'My god, she created herself, and I created myself'. Nobody told me, 'Wear this, wear that'. I knew exactly what I wanted to project. So, yes, I'm the male Marilyn Monroe. I wish I could have talked to her, because she would have understood what I was talking about. She couldn't bear it though. She died that fragile Norma Jean, because she couldn't separate: they wanted Marilyn, they didn't want Norma, and she broke. Now, in my case, because it is not that man-woman thing, it's a man-man thing, I realised quickly I had to separate Armin Baron Hagen Freiherr von



around blending into that vast picture of boredom and nothingness.

Ouch! Well, would you help me? Would you dress me up tonight?

Then I would say I want to get high with you. That's how I did it with Reggie. For me, the dressing-up thing needs a certain level of intimacy.

Who inspired your looks? You didn't really have men to look up to because you were breaking new ground. Was Peter Berlin referencing Marilyn Monroe as a sexual-icon prototype? She didn't come into my thought process until 30 years later, when I realised there was this very iconic thing with Marilyn. Then I thought,

Hoyningen-Huene from Peter Berlin. I haven't met one person who's said, 'Yes, you are exactly how I thought you'd be'. They've always said, 'You're so different to what I thought'. What that tells me: you're stupid.

But how could anyone imagine Peter Berlin's real personality when your image is a synthesis of a collective fantasy?

I made it easy for you to feel sexual, especially gay men. That's fine. That's beautiful. I did a great job. I have a lot of letters telling me how great I was. Boys, when they were 14 years old, have seen my picture and got off to it. They write to me, saying, 'Peter, thank you so much. It helped me to feel good about





my own sexuality'. I never felt shame about my homosexuality. I loved it from day one. I've never had that feeling, 'Poor me, I'm gay and I'm so discriminated against'.

Your parents accepted your sexuality?

No. My mother was traumatised. How do I feel about that? I was sorry that I hurt her, but I moved out of the house. Today, I have a good relationship with my mother, with my sister, with all three of my nephews who are grown men, all straight as hell with families, babies. They all love me, 'There's Armin. Yes, he was Peter Berlin'. They're intrigued because I'm the only one in the family who did something outside of the norm. When I look back, my intent wasn't to be some iconic symbol; the only thing I wanted was to get laid. That was my whole intent.

It wasn't to make art, it wasn't to change politics or liberate gay men. If your lifestyle had no other intention, why did you feel the need to document yourself?

It created a great feeling in me. It couldn't be topped by a visit to the museum or a trip to Italy, by swimming in the ocean or jumping from an airplane. I said, 'I know this can't be topped'. Maintaining that feeling of sexual arousal, staying in that place where you're just about to cum but don't. When you cum, it's over. After you cum, you say, 'Leave me alone. I want to go to sleep'. The climax is like dying. So what did I do? I maintained it.

Is that why you famously were never into fucking, because it ends the sensation?

I love the state when the mind and body are in such great harmony. Some people go to the movies; I was out in the morning at the beach, and at the bars in the evening, sexually vibrating. For me, the art of cruising is about maintaining the good times for as long as possible.



Peter Berlin as drawn by Finnish artist Touko Valio Laaksonen, aka Tom of Finland, 1978.

You say you were ahead of your time by 50 years. Now there are millions of people trying to achieve icon status through their style and body on social media. You did it analogue. Your pursuit has been made simultaneously much easier, because you can reach an audience directly with little effort, and much harder, because the market is flooded with competition. Perhaps only a few have been as original or as dedicated as you were, but the quest is now on a mass scale via Instagram.

This whole thing with Facebook and Instagram, people show pictures and receive comments: 'Awesome, great'. Something incredible has happened in my lifetime. Time-wise, I was very well born. After the war in Berlin, gay life was incredible and it was all underground. Nobody talked about it. It took place in speakeasies. You'd knock on the door, and if you belonged you'd be invited into this fabulous shared reality. But now with the computerisation of social life, with Instagram and Facebook, the young

generation say, 'Look, I have 5,000 friends'. Everyone thinks they're Michael Jackson, that millions of people love them. Guess what? Nobody loves you. They live in this illusion of life. There will be something awful coming when these young people grow up. When they are a little bit sensitive they'll break. They'll say, 'My god, where are all those friends?' The friends I had in my life, I met the old-fashioned way. The people who wrote Peter Berlin fan mail, I had a very good sense of what was real and what was not. Real for me is when I walk the streets and you pass me, I look at you, you look at me, we pass each other, and then I look back, and you look back, and then you stop. That's real! That will never happen inside a computer.