

# PETER BERLIN

## AFTERNOON TEA WITH “THE LION IN WINTER”

**Celebrating the 80th Birthday  
of Artist and Icon Peter Berlin, the Avatar of  
Armin Hagen Freiherr von Hoyningen-Huene  
in Conversation with Jack Fritscher  
San Francisco  
November 11, 2022**

### **A Treatment for a Screenplay *The Peter Berlin Story***

**Jack Fritscher:** Hello, Armin Hagen Freiherr von Hoyningen-Huene. Is Peter Berlin available?

**Peter Berlin:** Peter Berlin is not.

**Jack Fritscher:** Mr. Berlin has left the country?

**Peter Berlin:** [Laughs] Yes. He left about twenty years ago.

**Jack Fritscher:** He left twenty years ago? Your avatar left?

**Peter Berlin:** What is left of my dream lover is me, Armin.

**Jack Fritscher:** Sorry. Could you please speak a little louder?

**Peter Berlin:** Oh. Oh. Now, yeah, you see I'm frail and old. Right?

**Jack Fritscher:** That makes a pair of us. You're three years younger. That's why I'm calling because your seniority perhaps frees you to

say new things you've never said before. I wish we could meet in person as we have so often, but I'm now entering my fourth year of strict Covid quarantine. You're probably reclined on that lovely bed in your apartment you've photographed so perfectly. There are many interviews of Peter Berlin. I would like to interview Armin Heune.

**Peter Berlin:** Yes. I'm only doing this interview because I realize you are such a good writer. I'm not saying it to flatter you, but I guess you would give your work high grades. Right?

**Jack Fritscher:** [Laughs] Well, in the way you appreciate your work, I understand mine.

**Peter Berlin:** Of course, of course. What I feel about my own work, which I don't even call work, I was just shooting pictures of myself.

Shooting on location in the 1970s, Peter lensed his modernist "Self-Portrait in Painter's Cover-Alls" and his nude "Self-Portrait on the Roof of the Ansonia Hotel" while the Ansonia housed the orgiastic Continental Baths in its basement where Bette Midler sang with Barry Manilow on piano to gay audiences in white towels.

**Peter Berlin:** It was for no other reason than just, you know, capturing my daily sort of life. I must confess that I never owned a motorcycle. You know Buena Vista Park the way it was when cars could drive to the top and there was motorcycle parking? Well, I just climbed on one of the parked bikes and took my picture and left.

**Jack Fritscher:** To thine own selfie be true. Your transition into Peter Berlin created a foundational gay character that captured the gay imagination just after Stonewall. In fact, you arrived in America in 1969. In the 1960s when you were creating "Peter Berlin" on your body, John Waters was creating "Divine" on the body of Glenn Milstead, and Andy Warhol was creating "Little Joe" on the body of Joe Dallesandro.

**Peter Berlin:** The Swinging Sixties. "Divine" had Waters. "Peter" had me. Everything is timing, yes? I wish I had the time and talent

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**HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK**

to write, to sing, to make music. I haven't done any work for years. I'm not proud of it. The direction of the human race distresses me. Who cares about Peter Berlin? The planet is sending messages that something bad is happening, and no one cares about it. That's on my mind. Why should Peter make another photograph?

**Jack Fritscher:** In a toxic world.

**Peter Berlin:** I nearly called you to cancel because sometimes I have these episodes of really feeling not good.

**Jack Fritscher:** I'm sorry to hear that and happy you didn't cancel. You're a trooper.

**Peter Berlin:** For years, doctors have looked at my heart and poked this and tested that, and other things, and never could really diagnose anything. Then it sort of subsided. So now, once in a while, I have these odd feelings of lightheadedness and nausea.

**Jack Fritscher:** We've lived through AIDS and Covid and the collapse of San Francisco and shades of Sondheim's ladies who lunch: "We're still here." Even though neither of us has AIDS or coronavirus, we're still "Black Leather Swans" with mileage from the last mid-century. And we're moulting.

**Peter Berlin:** [Laughs] Now I'm feeling fine.

**Jack Fritscher:** You're celebrating your 80th birthday coming up on December 28th, aren't you?

**Peter Berlin:** Did you look it up? There's a lot online with the many interviews I've given over the years for magazines.

**Jack Fritscher:** I did look up your date of birth. Actually, I first wrote about you forty-two years ago in *Skin* magazine.

**Jack Fritscher:** If you recall, we've been acquainted since the early 1970s on Polk Street, plus while I was editor of *Drummer* and Robert Mapplethorpe shot you on Fire Island [1977] and me in New York [1978].

**Peter Berlin:** That's right.

*Drummer* 123, September 1988: With AIDS deaths raging, I wrote the "Solo Sex" feature to introduce readers to the safe sex of masturbation while watching actors perform solo on screen. "In the 1970s, I met Peter Berlin... a perfect Narcissus of Solo Sex practice. For years, the reclusive, blond, sylphlike Berlin has sold Solo Sex movies and videos of himself, shot by himself, featuring himself jerking off with/against himself on screen. Berlin has rarely shot another model, and has turned his own image, with his own camera, into an esthetically, and one hopes, financially successful cottage industry of mail-order Solo Sex. Peter Berlin, in...his tour-de-force films, *Nights in Black Leather* (1973) and *That Boy* (1974), is the perfect symbol of the high-flying Solo Sex Act of Man Alone, of Man as Island, of Man Sexually Self-Satisfied."

**Jack Fritscher:** Last night I re-watched all of *Nights in Black Leather* and *That Boy*.

**Peter Berlin:** You did? You did your homework.

**Jack Fritscher:** To be prepared to chat with you. In my archives, there is my Peter Berlin folder. I must tell you how much I like Jim Tushinski's documentary [*That Man: Peter Berlin*, 2005]. Perhaps this afternoon we can go beyond all those interviews and films to dig into something fresh about you—Armin—the artist at eighty who at twenty created his avatar Peter Berlin.

**Peter Berlin:** Right, right. People think they know Peter, but what they know is rarely about me, the person behind Peter. Peter Berlin is my stage name. [Armin Huene lives his life as an artist in pursuit of his muse who was Peter Berlin.] I'm a photographer, but I am not known like Robert Mapplethorpe or Marcus Leatherdale.

**Jack Fritscher:** May I say that just as there are now feature films about Mapplethorpe and Tom of Finland and Basquiat, there should be a Peter Berlin biopic.

**Peter Berlin:** There would have to be three actors playing me as a boy, as Peter Berlin, and then as the old man I am now.

**Jack Fritscher:** Have you seen Harry Styles in *My Policeman*? That movie has two actors playing the same character, one as young, one as old. And there's Timothée Chalamet. He's androgynous, award-winning, and a fashion icon who could channel the Peter Berlin Look.

**Peter Berlin:** I like Harry Styles. I think he could play Peter Berlin. While we talk, are you taking notes?

**Jack Fritscher:** Here at the beginning is where I ask your permission to record this.

**Peter Berlin:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I think this is a good thing. I wish I would be able to record it too. I wish I could have saved all my recorded phone messages I got over the years. I would love to have all the messages Mapplethorpe left in the 70s and 80s.

**Jack Fritscher:** Me too.

**Peter Berlin:** Did you make a lot of notes?

**Jack Fritscher:** I started keeping a journal when I was fourteen. From my journal notes in the 1970s, I wrote my novel *Some Dance to Remember* which is about the 1970s on Castro Street and Folsom.

**Peter Berlin:** I would encourage everybody to keep notes.

**Jack Fritscher:** I would too. Sam Steward kept his *Stud File* on every trick he ever had. Each on an index card.

**Peter Berlin:** I know about Sam. There's a book, right?

**Jack Fritscher:** Justin Spring's bio. It's called *Secret Historian*. It too should be a feature film.

**Peter Berlin:** My friend Eric Smith gave me the book, but I don't read much and I just sort of paged through it. But what I would give

to have a Polaroid picture of all my tricks, thousands and thousands of tricks I had over the years.

**Jack Fritscher:** How many?

**Peter Berlin:** Thousands. Because I was—not to brag—collecting tricks. Sex was my thing. My photography was a sideshow.

**Jack Fritscher:** That's the way we were. We were all like John Rechy collecting tricks aka “numbers” in his [1967] novel *Numbers*. Would you say 10,000?

**Peter Berlin:** I have to think about that. But at least 10,000. When I came out in the 60s, I had been living in Berlin for ten years, and going out every night. I was never looking for a relationship. I got off on getting people off. Sometimes without even touching. Just the idea of seeing a man standing opposite to me, existing in ecstasy. I could have maybe two, three, four men a night. I did that for ten years, twenty years, thirty years. I wish I would have a journal and could give you the number of 20,000.

**Jack Fritscher:** We're all Rita Hayworth in *Fire Down Below* when she said, “Armies have marched over me.” I think our sex lives like our daily lives are essential, especially for those of us who rode the merry-go-round of that first decade after Stonewall.

**Peter Berlin:** That's what I mean. Armies. I'm so glad that your timing and my timing of being born was brilliant. I was born in 1942.

**Jack Fritscher:** I agree. I was born in 1939. People today who didn't live through the war and its aftermath, and the 60s and 70s may not understand that we were lucky to have met so many men so intimately.

**Peter Berlin:** The war in Germany.

**Jack Fritscher:** Right. My first memories are of that war. I was in grade school when it ended, and we all went downtown to celebrate in the streets. You and I are the unique generation of gay war babies.

**Peter Berlin:** I was too young to remember the war itself, but I think the 1920s and 30s must have been great in Berlin.

**Jack Fritscher:** Think of how much the wild Weimar Republic in the 1930s was like the 1970s.

**Peter Berlin:** Great in Hollywood too, right?

**Jack Fritscher:** *Cabaret* made the connection and with all its Academy Awards taught us something in the 1970s about Weimar bisexuality popular at places like Studio 54.

**Peter Berlin:** There was so much sexual freedom. Our time was really very special. Didn't you think in those days after Stonewall that life would get better? Back then, I said, "Oh, this is really nice." In my mind, in my fantasy, I always felt it could get even better. I thought the World War would be the last war ever. I was sure, first of all, that the Church would die out, all that nonsense about God and Jesus. Well! I was wrong in that—and I was wrong about things getting, [chuckles] you know, getting better. With AIDS and all. My grandmother was a Catholic, but my mother left the Church. When she was twelve, she asked a priest to explain the Immaculate Conception, and he said, "Marion, there are things we can't explain," and she said, "Okay, enough."

**Jack Fritscher:** We were born lucky. We were very lucky to have been young and active in the window between the invention of penicillin and the arrival of HIV. We had great sex in a wonderful time. I also thought things were getting better during that time until Anita Bryant and AIDS and the politically correct raised their ugly heads.

**Peter Berlin:** I must explain I was never politically interested or active. When I came to America, I knew there was a war going on in, you know, the war...

**Jack Fritscher:** Vietnam.

**Peter Berlin:** Vietnam.

**Jack Fritscher:** Right. People forget that Vietnam dominated the 1970s. Men, including gay men, were still being drafted, some right off the streets of the Castro. Vietnam didn't end till 1975 the year *Drummer* was founded.

**Peter Berlin:** I didn't read the papers. I was always going out to have a good time. Anita Bryant, I read about her, but nothing of that affected me. See, when I came here I talked to younger guys, and heard the horror stories of being born in Texas, or being born into Catholic guilt. They had to get out because of gay bashing and religion. That never happened to me.

**Jack Fritscher:** So that American bigotry seemed like American fascism even to you who were born in Nazi-occupied Poland?

**Peter Berlin:** Yeah. Horrible. I was impressionable, but I was too young a boy to experience the Nazi occupation, but I remember the American occupation of Berlin.

**Jack Fritscher:** You were lucky. Tom of Finland was nineteen when the Nazis bombed Finland in 1939. He was born twenty years before us. He told me one night at supper, without flinching, that as a young man he was turned on by the uniforms of the Nazis who were occupying Finland. Look at his drawings. The fetish influence is there.

**Peter Berlin:** You see, I was protected. My poor mother, my poor dear mother, had three children. She had to flee from the Baltics to Berlin. Her husband, my father [1915-1945] died, was shot dead in the last days of the war [when Armin was three]. But me as a child? I was out playing in the sand in one of the big holes of a bomb, uh, you know, when a bomb goes off, what is it?

**Jack Fritscher:** A crater?

**Peter Berlin:** Crater of a bomb. That's where we were playing in Berlin. So, I just had a ball.

To experience the context of the wrecked world of children playing in the rubble of postwar Berlin, see director Fred Zinnemann's film, *The Search* (1948) shot on location in the city ruins, starring the beautiful gay Montgomery Clift and the marvelous Czechoslovakian child star Ivan Jandl who won a special Academy Award. Some of the film's official screenings were hosted by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

**Peter Berlin:** When I arrived in America, I was very surprised at how much drama people here in this country went through during the war.

**Jack Fritscher:** My first memories are of food and gas rationing. Nightly blackouts. Air raid wardens. Men leaving for the war. Women building tanks and bombs. Nothing compared to you, but until the war ended, I feared the Nazis and Tojo were going to kill me. My parents helped me a lot when we gathered up good pieces of our clothing, like my mother's fur coat, and sent them off to displaced persons in "DP" camps, as we called them, in Germany.

**Peter Berlin:** I grew up okay about cops in Berlin. It was only when I arrived here and started cruising that I first had to run away from the police in the park.

**Jack Fritscher:** Right. In 1978, the San Francisco police raided my office at *Drummer* and tossed all our drawers and filing cabinets. Just like the Gestapo. Maybe you remember the night of the White Night Riot [May 21, 1979], the cops stormed the crowds on Castro Street and drove us down the street beating people with batons.

**Peter Berlin:** I knew about White Night. But Peter Berlin stayed outside of politics. I would only have read about it, right? It didn't affect me, right? What's the word in English? I sort of was unaware and not interested.

**Jack Fritscher:** Aloof, aloof.

In the opening monologue of *That Boy*, the voice-over exposition is a thumbnail of what it was like to see Peter walking down the street. The narrator says about Peter: “I used to watch him on Polk Street everyday and wonder what he was looking at as he’d walk by a window, stare into it like mirror, and leave. Parading down the street in his tight white pants showing off his huge organ of pleasure. Everyone would stare at him. Weird people. Boys. Girls. Young men. Freaks. Everyone staring at his cock. Doing anything to get attention. Still he ignored everyone....I suppose he knew they would follow him. Anywhere. Everywhere. Just to get one more look at his cock.”

**Jack Fritscher:** In an age of San Francisco hippies, you were kind of like that other German, the Pied Piper of Hamelin, walking down Polk Street gathering up the Flower Children, but the pipe you played, displayed, was the most famous uncut cock of the 1970s.

**Peter Berlin:** [Laughs] Now I think I was then sort of a stupid person, just not aware of his surroundings.

**Jack Fritscher:** Armin! You were never a dizzy blond.

**Peter Berlin:** No, no. But I was sort of out of it. My father died because of politics. Lies and fake news. People would ask: “Do you know about this book or that film?” There was a person once at a party talking to me and he asked me, “Do you read?” And, I said, “No, I don’t read.” He looked at me and said he felt sorry for me. He said, “In school in Germany you had to read, right?” Reading was part of my education, but I didn’t read. I was so, so *visual*. That was a big negative for that person.

**Jack Fritscher:** John Waters says if you go home with a guy and he has no books, don’t fuck him.

**Peter Berlin:** Let me tell you. As an artist from postwar Germany, I was tired of politics that ruined everything.

**Jack Fritscher:** Politics can cause PTSD.

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**HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK**

**Peter Berlin:** I wasn't politically active. I knew there was a Harvey Milk—and could have cared less. I didn't vote for him or anyone else. I wasn't trying to change things in San Francisco. I was changing myself in America.

**Jack Fritscher:** Inventing your self?

**Peter Berlin:** Inventing Peter Berlin.

**Jack Fritscher:** Your performance art. Your street theater. You were a rebel whose cause was knowing your self.

**Peter Berlin:** My days were spent at the beach, at Land's End [at the west end of Golden Gate Park], oiled up, and looking good, and high. Okay? I saw I could create attention. So when I went home, I said, "Okay, take a camera and make a picture."

I tried to capture the image I was creating. That was my life. That's so completely different from Mapplethorpe and Leatherdale who were trying to achieve their own certain vision, especially Robert, and all the other photographers who saw their photography as a career to be successful and make money. I never had money in my mind. That's why I'm poor.

**Jack Fritscher:** It's hard to make money from art.

**Peter Berlin:** With all the books you've written, you couldn't live on those?

**Jack Fritscher:** Oh, no, no, no. My God, no. As a gay writer for sixty years, I've earned about a penny a day. If that. Some books take ten years. Plus since the internet started [early 1990s], I've posted my books free to all online. Like you, I don't create for money. I write to document gay experiences. Even while I edited *Drummer* on the side for three years, I've always had a straight job. So on weekend afternoons I'd see you cruising Polk Street, and as a writer, I'd observe you from afar because your act was too fascinating to interrupt.

When Peter strolled down Polkstrasse in 1972, even before releasing his first film which would have made a great music

video, I could hear Lou Reed singing his new song, “Walk on the Wild Side.” When people mention a sighting of Peter Berlin, they always remember where and when they first saw him on the street—and what they thought. Like a Hollywood star, Peter’s hand, foot, and dick prints should be cast in the cement in front of what’s left of the Alhambra Theater on Polk Street.

**Jack Fritscher:** I liked watching you—just like the guy you cast as a character, the voyeur, watching you, the exhibitionist, from across that Polk Street intersection in *That Boy*. I studied you because I was taking mental notes of the rise of Polk Street and Castro Street and Folsom Street.

**Peter Berlin:** In my documentary [*That Man*], Armistead [Maupin, author of *Tales of the City*] said he saw me at the beach and he came up to me and said that he figured that, like him, I didn’t want to be approached and have to talk to so many people and hear them saying things repeated over the years. “I saw you on Polk Street,” or “I saw you in Provincetown,” or “I saw you in New York,” you know, always from afar, because that was my thing. [Four minutes into *Nights in Black Leather*, Peter talks on screen about these kinds of fan questions.] To save my privacy in public which was Peter Berlin’s stage, I gave the impression: “Please don’t come up and try to talk to me.”

**Jack Fritscher:** You are Armin. They wanted to talk to Peter. I never approached you then because I dug your vibe. I thought of you as the Gay Garbo. I would no more have talked to you while you were performing “Peter” than I would’ve talked to an actor on a Broadway stage.

**Peter Berlin:** Now, looking back, I like saying, “I played the role of Peter Berlin.”

**Jack Fritscher:** Yes.

**Peter Berlin:** And I played it very well. Right? It *was* like I was on stage. And the people who realize that, like you, said, “Okay, that’s what he’s doing. So I’ll just watch him.”

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**HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK**

**Jack Fritscher:** I saw what you had to offer in your tight clothes and your Saran Wrap white tights [which, according to the *New York Times*, inspired Freddie Mercury to “shrink-wrap his junk.”] I appreciated your exhibitionism. Your show on the road. I went on my way thinking how well you captured your street image and distilled it into all the pictures and ads you ran in papers and magazines to sell your movies.

**Peter Berlin:** There was not one political thing in my films.

**Jack Fritscher:** That’s radical. Has any gay filmmaker ever said that? Your movies, like Leni Riefenstahl’s, were about beauty which transcends politics.

**Peter Berlin:** Whenever people talk to me about my films, I always say they’re nothing to write home about. Now, years later, I’d love to re-edit the films to make them better.

**Jack Fritscher:** As I told you, last night for the second time in fifty years, I watched both of your movies, *Black Leather* and *That Boy*, and really enjoyed them both.

**Peter Berlin:** So you prepared yourself.

**Jack Fritscher:** Of course. Out of respect. I’ve been preparing for you for three days. I’ve got five pages of notes to ask you.

**Peter Berlin:** I’m so flattered because, you know, back when you published that *Drummer* article on Tom of Finland, I always felt that I was not included as part of that *Drummer* leather art scene.

**Jack Fritscher:** No, you weren’t. You were thought of, and then purposely excluded. At first, homomascuine leathermen did not know what to make of your leatherish androgyny. When I interviewed the director Roger Earl [in 1997], he told me on the record that when he was casting *Born to Raise Hell* in 1975, he thought “Peter Berlin would be perfect as the lead.” But the producer [Terry LeGrand] wanted a more standard-looking leatherman like Ledermeister, the brawny hairy Colt model who was the lifelong erotic avatar of

San Francisco actor Paul Garrior. Paul looked the part, but he was not really a leather player. So they cast Val Martin, our first “Mr. Drummer,” a leatherman immigrant from Argentina, in the role you would have played. Like us, Ledermeister, who just died, lived into his eighties, but Val died young of AIDS.

The Peter Berlin character is a vivid example that gender is construction and performance. In *Drummer* 66, July 1983, when Peter got his only mention on the contents page, the shameless publisher John Embry reductively compared Peter to the campy Chippendale dancers.

**Peter Berlin:** I did not know all those details, but being directed by someone else? Ugh. So difficult in my first film. I always felt I was not into that “Leather Thing” even though I wore some of it. I was not part of the so-called fetish scene because I was shy, and I didn’t want all that “leather fraternity” stuff of parties and dinners and orgies. I only wanted to get laid.

**Jack Fritscher:** Like Erica Jong, you were in search of a zipless fuck.

**Peter Berlin:** What’s that?

**Jack Fritscher:** Casual, spontaneous, anonymous sex with strangers.

**Peter Berlin:** Exactly.

**Jack Fritscher:** So, instead, you played at the baths, like the Barracks on Folsom, to get your kink on?

**Peter Berlin:** The Barracks? I loved it. There was the [Red Star Saloon] bar downstairs, and then behind it and upstairs the Barracks bathhouse. It was the best.

**Jack Fritscher:** I agree. [Leather poet] Thom Gunn wrote lyrics about it. I spent hundreds of nights and weekends there. Room 326. First door left top of stairs.

**Peter Berlin:** I liked to go to the Barracks after cruising the streets after the bars closed.

**Jack Fritscher:** The Barracks had a lot of rough and creative S&M action, hundreds of men orgying in pig piles, but it wasn't solely leather because the Barracks was a kind of three-story theater with lots of exhibitionists and lots of voyeurs. It was a three-ring circus. You didn't have to play S&M games or even touch anyone to have a good time.

**Peter Berlin:** You're right. I liked walking up and down the hallways and posing under one of the spotlights at ends of the halls. Men who like looking liked my exhibitionism.

**Jack Fritscher:** Peter Berlin was obvious, obscene, and hot. You were your own art exhibit, a voyeur's dream.

**Peter Berlin:** I didn't get involved like Mapplethorpe did.

**Jack Fritscher:** Peter Berlin never shoved a whip up his ass.

**Peter Berlin:** I heard about the games Robert played from my friend, Jochen Labriola [1942-1988, German-American painter]. Jochen was an artist and my best friend and my patron in those days. I never had to work again. Thanks to him. He taught me how to paint. He was the one who actually got me out of Germany—and that's why I ended up in America. Jochen had a fling with Robert, and told me, uh, how you sometimes sit and say, "Oh, you know, uh, the games Robert was playing." His trips were never, never my thing. You see, I met Robert when he approached me because I was Peter Berlin. He liked my fame.

**Jack Fritscher:** He introduced himself to me because I was the editor-in-chief of *Drummer* and he needed publicity.

**Peter Berlin:** He was always very impressed that people recognized me, and he liked that. So I only know Robert from talking and hanging out with him, but I never had sex with him. It never occurred to me that I even wanted it. Right? The same with Marcus Leatherdale. You know, one thing that really surprised me in the *Mapplethorpe* [HBO] documentary was when you read into the camera the letter

Robert wrote to you about Leatherdale—that he found Marcus basically naïve. That surprised me.

On September 12, 1978, Robert wrote me a letter complaining about some wannabe who was bugging him. “The ‘punk’ leather boy from San Francisco is getting more and more on my nerves. I hate naïve people. He just left wearing his motorcycle jacket. I feel as though he shouldn’t be allowed to wear it as he just doesn’t have a sophisticated sense of sex. I hate happy, naïve people.” I never asked Robert the guy’s name. I didn’t pry. I never knew who he was. However, in 2015 when Randy Barbato and Fenton Bailey came to my home to interview me for *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures*, I read into their camera several letters Robert had written to me, including the one about the troublesome punk leather guy.

Creating a perfect made-for-TV moment, the genius directors, the producers of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, who know their business shot a close-up of Marcus Leatherdale while they played for him the recording of me reading Robert’s letter. It hit him like a punch in the face. I felt sorry for him caught on camera. Had I known the unnamed guy was identifiable and alive, I would never have read the letter out loud. I debated over and over about contacting him and apologizing for the weird concurrence, but I didn’t want to make matters worse because he may not have known that it was my voice reading the letter. And why bring up a sore subject with someone I never met? After having a stroke in 2021, he committed suicide in 2022.

**Jack Fritscher:** Well, they kissed and made up after he wrote that letter to me.

**Peter Berlin:** Then they hung out for quite a while, huh?

**Jack Fritscher:** They did. They ran around Manhattan like twin boyfriends. Robert hired Marcus to work as an office manager in his studio. And then competition reared its head.

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**HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK**

**Peter Berlin:** Because they both were photographers.

**Jack Fritscher:** Some say they were fighting over models. Marcus beat Robert to Madonna. And Leatherdale's photographs often looked too much like Mapplethorpe pictures, plus Robert, you know, in the early 80s was moving away from white guys to black guys.

**Peter Berlin:** I remember Robert telling me he only had sex with black guys.

**Jack Fritscher:** Robert had an interracial eye even as a student at Pratt that evolved while he and I were romantically involved in the late 1970s. In the 1980s, he turned from white guys to black men on and off camera.

**Peter Berlin:** When I was in his loft [24 Bond Street], he showed me some of his pictures. The Warhol portrait of him was hanging on the wall, right? And the cocaine was always there. So I asked, "Robert, no more nice white guys?" He said, "No, only black guys." It sort of surprised me. "Over the years," he said, "I realized I basically was attracted to black guys." I also realized there's something about black men or the black soul, not only beautiful, but there's something so, so, authentic. I've had two black roommates, one several years ago, Bryce White, who had been in jail, and one now, Reggie. I think of the bodies of those guys. White guys can go to the gym for twenty years and will never will look like this black perfection.

**Jack Fritscher:** Race, sex, gender. Welcome to America. Can you tell me about your father? I know you were only three, but can you describe the postwar Berlin scene growing up fatherless, what you and your mother felt, what your mother later told you about the last days of the war when he was shot dead?

**Peter Berlin:** One of his comrades who was with him when he died told us that at that time the *Wehrmacht* was rationing guns and ammunition, and sending unarmed soldiers who had no protection to the Eastern Front.

**Jack Fritscher:** Like Putin in Ukraine.

**Peter Berlin:** Yes. Like Putin. So my father was in the situation where the Russians were close, but he was unarmed. He was a sitting duck and he was shot dead. My mother only knew it because, at some point, she got a postcard from Dr. Weiss, a soldier who was a doctor, but she never got any sort of confirmation from the German government. My father was about thirty years old when he died.

**Jack Fritscher:** Was he drafted into the German army?

A number of gay men in the U.S. in the 1970s had escaped Nazi Germany after being forcibly ordered as Hitler Youth to the Eastern Front in the last days of the war. As fourteen and fifteen year-old boys, like Hank Diethelm, the jolly immigrant owner of the Brig leather bar on Folsom Street in San Francisco, they disobeyed the order, ditched their uniforms, and fled West into the arms of Allied troops who rescued the teen boys, and brought them to the U.S. In a tragic irony of murder on April 10, 1983, Hank who—to deal with his postwar PTSD had made a counterphobic sex fetish of Nazi S&M—was tied up, tortured, and strangled in a dentist's chair in the basement playroom of his home where his body was set on fire destroying his house.

**Peter Berlin:** Yes. He had to go to war. I was a baby. Because I have no memory of that time, just before my mother died two years ago, I asked her to write what happened in his last days. You remember that they tried to kill Hitler with a suitcase bomb under his desk, but he survived. When my father heard that, he got so upset. “How could you,” you know, “kill the *Führer*?” He believed the propaganda they were fighting for the fatherland. And then in the last letters my mother got from him, he started to suddenly realize what was happening. You see this idea when the Germans say they didn’t understand what was happening. There was truth to it. I was born in Litzmannstadt, Poland, while it was occupied by Hitler, and what I even didn’t know, there was a concentration camp. Right? In Litzmannstadt. Right? I had no idea. I only know my mother told me one day years later, “Do you know that one of the inmates escaped from the concentration camp and knocked on our door and

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asked for help?” And my father gave him a horse to get away and he said, “I can’t do more because it’s too dangerous for my family. I could get killed.” I mean, all these stories, what my mother told me, so awful. Maybe that’s why I’m not so much interested in my own history.

**Jack Fritscher:** So your father as a young man was swept up into the politics of the times and believed the fake news until he realized what he believed was not happening.

**Peter Berlin:** Like me, he was not very much following the nitty-gritty of politics. So I’d like to think he knew nothing about the killing of the Jews. I know that my Hoyningen-Huene family is a big tribe. Still is. I had one cousin who was a very big Nazi. My mother said when he was at our dinner table that he spent time criticizing her for being too, um, yeah, too beautiful and too sexy, you know? And she told him, “Shut the fuck up. I know who you are.”

**Jack Fritscher:** A Nazi relative at a dinner table? Worse than a crazy MAGA uncle at Thanksgiving. Your mother was not a Nazi.

**Peter Berlin:** No. In the circle of my parents’ and grandparents’ friends, there were so many Jewish people. I only knew their names. I had no idea who was a Jew or not a Jew. Later on, I was thankful that my family had no feelings of antisemitism, just like I’m color blind about race.

**Jack Fritscher:** Yeah. One might think your father didn’t read and the consequences of that killed him.

**Peter Berlin:** I know. My father was a *Landwirt*, a farmer. We had land. I have pictures. We raised horses and pigs. He was just a country boy when he came from the farm and met my mother in Berlin. I remember her telling me the first thing she thought was, “Oh, he’s so arrogant.” But he had that Hoyningen-Huene name and there was a title and this and that, you know. So they married and she was widowed, and she and I and my brother and sister fled to Berlin where I grew up and came out while the East Germans [under Soviet Russia] were building the Berlin Wall.

**Jack Fritscher:** You were outed the day they started building the Berlin Wall? Yes? [Sunday, 13 August 1961]

**Peter Berlin:** No, I was out already. I had just come out. I was nineteen. But my mother didn't get it. It was a weekend, just another gay weekend, with all the East German boys coming over to West Berlin because that's where the fun was, and the clubs. I was picked up on a Saturday night by an East German guy and he took me home to East Germany. To East Berlin. Right? And the next day when I wanted to go back, the S-Bahn train we'd crossed over on was not running. I realized the trains were not going. I said, "What's happening? What's happening?" So I remember I had to walk back home passing through the Brandenburg Gate where I saw what were now East German soldiers rolling out this wire fencing thing, and I just stepped over it from East Berlin to West Berlin. And then I realized what was happening.

The reason I was outed that weekend when this all happened was because it was in the television news. Everybody understood the danger of what was happening. My mother realized: "Oh, Armin is not here. Where's Armin?" Right? And then I, yeah, was, yeah, outed. To her.

**Jack Fritscher:** Like your father, you were swept up into history. How were you outed?

**Peter Berlin:** Like I said, I was out before, but I always was very private. I never said anything. I seemed only a little bit out of the norm because of the way I dressed in tight pants I ran up on a sewing machine. Because I was gone all night in East Berlin, and because the news of the Wall was so frightening, my mother worried herself into a state. She asked me where I was, what I was doing. I was never into lying or anything, you know. And I never felt, "Oh, my God, I do something wrong." So right then I came right out with it. I came out to her because of the television news. I said to her "This is what I do." She was horrified because homosexuality was something basically sick. My dear mother didn't understand. My whole family didn't understand. Then I found out my mother had found a letter I'd written about sex. All that happened on one day. I had to move

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out of my home and I was happy to move out to a rooming house. I finally felt very free, right? But then afterwards, my mother and my family adjusted. My sister had a lot of gay friends. My nephews, I have three of them, are now grown men who are completely good with it, right? But they are all straight. My nephew Martin always said he was very proud of me because every family needs a black sheep.

**Jack Fritscher:** Was your trick in East Berlin young or older?

**Peter Berlin:** No, no, no, no. I went with German boys. Young. I never went with older men. I never looked for older men. I never looked for my daddy. I've always looked for my age and younger.

In scenes in *That Man*, Peter has sex with the types of young black and blond ephebes he prefers. His contemporary Fred Halsted also romanced chicken born yesterday in his lover Joey Yale, his blond co-star in *LA Plays Itself* and *Sextool*, for whom writer-director Halsted said he coined the term *twink*.

**Peter Berlin:** I remember everybody seemed over twenty when I was seventeen—already too old for me, right? So that trick from East Berlin was my age. A teenager. He was nineteen. I remember he wore a suit which was never my cup of tea. But somehow we hooked up and we went to his place in East Berlin.

**Jack Fritscher:** Now I understand how it happened when your mother asked, “Where’s Armin?”

**Peter Berlin:** Unfortunately, my exact memory fails me. I only remember my mother looking at me with disgust, you know? Because she looked at my tight pants and she was horrified. I completely understood that. I never, never, never had one negative thought about my mother, or my misguided stepfather. I realized at that moment that some people don’t understand things. And one can’t blame them for that. And I never blamed my mother. I never blamed my stepfather. She was a very traditional woman in those days. Now she’s dead I can say this. She only had three men—compared to you and me. My father was her first. Years later, she admitted, “Oh, once

at a party there was this beautiful man.” Later she said, “Oh, my god, I should have.”

Not long after my father died, she met Herr Kittel, my stepfather, a sort of a typical German. But nice, you know. I always had a good time with him. After the war, he moved in and was trying to make a living for us. He started to work for Daimler Benz, the Mercedes Benz company. And he worked himself up to a very good position and was a bit bourgeois which embarrassed my mother a little bit because he was always kind of showing off. My family is from a very aristocratic background. We never talked about money. That was something one just doesn’t discuss.

**Jack Fritscher:** So he was your mother’s live-in lover.

**Peter Berlin:** He thought that the man was the boss and the woman was in the kitchen. But my mother considered us lucky. She said, “My God, he stood by me and took on three little children.” My mother always felt grateful because survival was very hard at that time. We had lost everything.

**Jack Fritscher:** So, Herr Kittel lived with your mother and you and your two siblings?

**Peter Berlin:** Yeah. At some point, he moved in with us when we lived with my grandmother who never accepted Herr Kittel. My grandmother was this woman who behaved like a queen. She wasn’t bad, but she believed the servants were downstairs and we Hoyningen-Huene were upstairs. Is upstairs right? There was that feeling Herr Kittel is not one of us. There was always that thing about class. Now, you see, now I can talk about it openly. My mother is dead. Herr Kittel is dead. I always saw him from the outside, but I always felt good with Herr Kittel. When we were children, he helped us build little toys, like a little sailing boat. He took time for us and I always felt good. My sister’s completely different because she felt completely negative about him, and that made life very difficult for my poor mother. My mother was always caught in between the two. She had to appease my sister and she had to appease him. I always

felt sorry for my poor mother who worked so hard to feed us and keep us together.

**Jack Fritscher:** The grandmother you lived with. Was she born in Russia?

**Peter Berlin:** In Saint Petersburg. On the Baltic Sea. She spoke fluent Russian and she loved the Russians. See, this is the trouble. We think of Russia today as the enemy because that idiot Putin has made it so terrible now with his invasion of Ukraine. The Russian people are good, the way the people of any nation are good, until politics ruins them. Are American people bad because of what's now happening here in America with the percentage of right-wing nuts who are running the show?

**Jack Fritscher:** Right.

**Peter Berlin:** Americans mostly are good to Germans. German people are nice people, but back then there were some before the war who said, "Okay, let's find some scapegoat for our troubles. Let's find a scapegoat for the economy. Somebody has to pay." The Jews had to pay. I remember when my mother was hiding a Jewish man and woman who were our friends. I know about this from my mother's stories. She wrote so much beautiful stuff. All in German.

**Jack Fritscher:** She kept notes.

**Peter Berlin:** Yes. I've always had the idea of writing my autobiography. I have her writings. My family story is actually a very, very good story about my upbringing and my family. What I was like during the first part of my life before the second part of my life: the Peter Berlin thing. And the third part, me as Armin who is an old man, right? The old man telling the story.

**Jack Fritscher:** The Lion in Winter.

**Peter Berlin:** I always said, "Oh, my God, I wish I had money." I could make a film with the best talent of Hollywood. There's a German guy, a musician who writes film music. Hans Zimmer. I

would hire people like him. Academy Award winners. I'd put out a casting call for some actor to play Peter Berlin. I can't think of one famous young person who could play me. I think it would be an unknown.

**Jack Fritscher:** We've mentioned Harry Styles who is famous, talented, and still young.

**Peter Berlin:** Yes. If a film were made, the actor playing Peter Berlin in the 1970s would become a star, or an even bigger star. He'd be one of three actors playing Armin as a boy, Peter Berlin as a young man, and then me as the old storyteller. Only I can tell you movie scenes that are real like one time in Paris I saw a beautiful man in a shop window and thought "Look at that guy!" Then realized it was me. It was like a shot of me on screen. I had found one of my dream lovers. Me. I wish it had been someone else. I would have liked to have met him. My other dream lover is a robot. My camera.

In the first two minutes of Peter's first movie, *That Boy*, Peter's star face debuted on screen in a mirror like the introduction of Barbra Streisand's star face in a mirror at the beginning of *Funny Girl*. It's not narcissism. It a human moment of spring awakening when a young man first truly sees himself. With Pachelbel's *Canon in D* playing on the soundtrack, Peter identifies himself as a satyr among the wood nymphs. The opening edenic garden-park scene is his "Afternoon of a Faun" sequence.

**Peter Berlin:** A Hollywood movie of me is a dream that will never be realized. It would be the crowning glory of my life. I'm losing my memory. I'm ready to go. I had my life and I'd just like to go to sleep and not wake up. But I think that my double life as a person and as the persona of Peter Berlin would make an interesting movie digging into the essence of Peter Berlin who is a very in-your-face erotic character, like the Tom of Finland characters.

**Jack Fritscher:** What did you think of the *Tom of Finland* movie?

**Peter Berlin:** I loved it. I was impressed by its production values. I would have to watch it again. It seemed authentic. I wish there was less emphasis on the war scenes and killing than there was on scenes revealing the soul of what I felt Tom the person was. I really must watch it again. I liked the production, but I would have done it a little different. I always look at any film now as a filmmaker, as an editor. When I was a child, I watched movies for the story. As a filmmaker, I look at movies from a different perspective. Is the *Tom* movie still playing?

**Jack Fritscher:** It's streaming online.

All comparisons are odious especially when it comes to *Origin Stories*, but I think the lavender roots of a common gay history call for some comparison, contrast, and consideration of the interlocutory DNA of the generational and geographical male gaze. Tom of Finland (born 1920) and Peter Berlin (born 1942) were European artists working at the same time in the 1960s and 1970s. With a head start in the 1920s, Tom in Finland was in his forties and in print when Armin in his twenties in Germany in the 1960s began creating Peter Berlin. It's as if both visionary artists were coincidentally drinking from the same homomasculine well. So many of Tom's drawings of men in tight pants, cocks rampant, legs spread, torsos angled, resemble Peter's poses in his photos.

Both artists may object, but it's as if two men—like two generations of older and younger leather brothers—dialed into the same European homomasculine archetype and each made that platonic ideal of gay masculinity uniquely his own. Tom drew men like Peter posed, and Peter posed like men Tom drew. You say *Tomato*. I say *Toronto*. One's critical thinking must not make the logical fallacy, "Post hoc, ergo propter hoc," that because B follows A, B must have been caused by A. Armin said his life and work are simply "coincidental" with Tom's.

Queer scholarship has yet to notice that the artist whose 1970s drawings also resembled Peter Berlin and his look

was Frederick L. “Toby” Bluth (July 11, 1940–October 31, 2013). He whose porn signature was “Toby” was a longtime and very important Walt Disney artist and stage producer who also had a gay underground career creating in 1970 his sexy-go-lucky cartoon drawings of his young blond avatar, “Toby,” his own platonic ideal of a juicy teen piece of veal, not yet beef, with Dutch Boy blond hair, a button nose, a bubble butt, and a big cock.

Even though gay scholars have yet to notice the *zeitgeist* connection between Berlin and Bluth, the “Toby” drawings were everywhere in the gay press from *The Advocate* to *After Dark* because “Toby,” whose succulent flesh looked pumped with sperm was the dripping epitome of the “young, dumb, and full of cum” blond look that dominated gay vanilla culture before grown men yanked the gay gaze from ephebes toward adult men in leather like Peter Berlin. Just so, those two magazines that liked “Toby” were the first publications to pay important media attention to Peter Berlin.

If ever any artist might have created a series of animation cells to present the *Cartoon Adventures of Peter Berlin*, it would have been Bluth who knew a thing or two at Disney about creating animated characters. While not cartoons, Tom of Finland’s selected storyboard drawings also seem ready-made to be rounded up, maybe by artificial intelligence, to illustrate a curated graphic novel about Peter Berlin and his leather pals the way Tom created his *Kake* series of comic books.

For one of its ads appealing for subscriptions, *The Advocate*, skimming close to the popular Peter Berlin look, used a drawing of “Toby” reclined like a satyr in a field of flowers and butterflies (like Peter in the opening of *Nights in Black Leather*), stripped to the waist, pecs ahoy, wearing fringed bellbottoms, a cocked knee hiding a promised hardon. In the way that Peter Berlin of San Francisco advertised himself and his films insistently in the gay press, Toby of Los Angeles was also the come-and-get-it advertising image for

businesses like the Key Club baths, the Fallen Angel bar, the Closet bar, the Coronet Theater, the Metropolitan Community Church, and the musical, “*Love: As You Like It*, A Male Musical. Shakespeare Transmogrified by TOBY. Previews start April 12, 1972 [when Peter was shooting *Nights in Black Leather*]. Tiffany Theater, 8534 Sunset Strip. All Male Cast of 25. Limited to L.A. run prior to S. F. and N. Y.”

One can only wonder what kind of erotic convergence might have exploded on stage if Peter Berlin had auditioned for director Toby/Bluth to be cast in the role of Jaques for whom “All the world’s a stage.” Just like Polk Street.

“I never wanted to be on stage,” Peter told me, “even if I could sing and dance. I wouldn’t want to be that kind of product in front of a crowd. Peter Berlin only had one admirer at a time. Even two people would be too much.”

**Peter Berlin:** In the late 1970s [1978], I approached Tom who was signing books in a San Francisco store. Tom said, “Hello,” but he was distracted, like, he didn’t say, “Oh, my God, Peter Berlin,” or anything like that. He was kind of cold. I wasn’t a collector of his work, but I liked the idea of having a Tom of Finland original. The meeting was not an earthshaking encounter. He said yes, he’d draw me. So I sent him photos and he made four drawings of me at \$300 a piece.

Ultimately, Tom of Finland drew Peter six times. After the first commercial meeting in 1978, Tom on his own dime went on to draw Peter Berlin and Jochen Labriola as two cruising studs walking together down the street. The MOMA exhibited the drawing. About Jochen, Peter said: “There’s a German word: *comrade*; it can mean friend or lover. It doesn’t necessarily have to do with sex, just great fun, great humor, great understanding. When Jochen died, my life went from color to black and white.”

**Jack Fritscher:** I have a clipping here I’d like to share with you. John Waters, who often works the same pop-culture beat as I, wrote in *The New York Times Style Magazine* that “Peter Berlin, Kenneth

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Anger, Joe Dallesandro, Jeff Stryker, Jim Morrison, James Bidgood, John Rechy, even Elvis and James Dean. None of them could have existed without Tom of Finland's art coming first."

**Peter Berlin:** John Waters is an interesting man, but this comment is stupid and inaccurate. If I had never seen a drawing by Tom of Finland, I'd still have become Peter Berlin. I see myself as the living expression of Tom's fantasy, but he did not create me. Tom created drawings. I created a live person. We were sort of coincidental. Tom is a good artist. Don't get me wrong. I like his work, and I like the Tom of Finland Foundation and Durk Dehner, but if Durk with his business head had not decided to become Tom's champion and turn him into a Foundation [in 1984], his drawings would never have moved from the small sex magazines to galleries and museums. Durk broke the porn ceiling and got him in museums.

Tom of Finland and Peter Berlin, each in his own way, like the iconic fashion designer Rob of Amsterdam, were, alongside the power of *Drummer* magazine, the first "influencers" who helped create international leather culture.

**Jack Fritscher:** Does resembling Tom's men mean cause and effect or common sources? From before Tom and you hit it big in pop culture, gay leathermen cloning their image in the first leather bars in the 50s stood, posed, and dressed like straight 1940s bike gangs [Hollister] and 1960s biker movies after Brando and James Dean defined leather posturing in *The Wild One* [1953] and *Rebel without a Cause* [1955].

**Peter Berlin:** That all took awhile.

**Jack Fritscher:** Actually, when I was editor and at odds with the publisher, I managed to publish Tom's work as a *Drummer* first for Tom in my special arts issue called *Son of Drummer* [September 1978 featuring Tom and Mapplethorpe and the leather artist Rex].

Because publisher John Embry had a black list that included Tom for demanding payment for his work, Tom wasn't even mentioned again after my 1978 notice until four years later

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in *Drummer* 61, February 1982. After Embry sold *Drummer* to Anthony DeBlase in 1986, it took six years from that 1982 mention—and four years after Durk started the Foundation—for Tom to be published in *Drummer* on the cover of issue 113, February 1988.

**Jack Fritscher:** I watched your two films online. Your long and short films are very popular with lots of late-night hits on pornsites. Thousands of viewers watching for free just like I watched *Nights in Black Leather*.

**Peter Berlin:** Then I will watch it again. This is the problem with me. My memory was always bad. It's not the recreational drugs we all took. I remember in school for English lessons, the teacher was reading a story and writing new vocabulary words on the blackboard so we could all repeat them over and over. I had to make little notes to keep up. The same with mathematics. In English and mathematics, you have to remember the rules. Reading and writing were always so hard for me. That's why I asked you, "Did you make any notes?" I wish I would have written a diary or shot little Polaroids of all their faces.

**Jack Fritscher:** Like Mapplethorpe shot Polaroids of you.

**Peter Berlin:** Yes, because I have very few clear images in my mind of the thousands of boys I had. I do have lot of notes I wrote when I was stoned at the beach, oiled up, early in the morning when it was quiet. I was usually the first one there. And then I had my little "garage marijuana" to smoke and that always helped me focus my mind. Grass is fantastic, right? I don't do grass anymore.

**Jack Fritscher:** In pursuit of the origin of Peter Berlin, may we return to your family DNA in Saint Petersburg out of whose "Peter" maybe subliminally came your "Peter" Berlin—the way your famous relative, George Hoyningen-Huene [1900-1968] came out of the Russian Revolution and became Chief of Photography of French *Vogue* [in the 1920s before meeting, in 1930, fashion photographer Horst P. Horst who was both his lover and model].

**Peter Berlin:** Many of the Germans living in Russia, like my grandfather, were working for the Tsar who hired German aristocrats to teach upper-class manners to Russian aristocrats.

The Tsarina Alexandra was a German princess who married Tsar Nicholas in 1894 and ran a German-inflected Imperial Court until they were murdered during the Russian Revolution in 1918.

**Jack Fritscher:** How did your family become aristocratic? How did you get the baron title?

**Peter Berlin:** My family tree goes back to 1500 or so. It's a German title given by the *König* [king], and then passed to each generation. You inherit it. That all stopped in 1918 [with the fall of the German Empire at the end for the First World War].

**Jack Fritscher:** Was your father a baron?

**Peter Berlin:** Yes.

**Jack Fritscher:** Are you a baron?

**Peter Berlin:** Yeah. But it's no longer a title. Barons no longer exist, but the title became part of the name. My cousin in Berlin, who is old and sick, said she always felt like, "Yes! I'm a Baronin, a baroness." She married a scientist who was an earthquake expert, but she didn't take his name. She was always the Baroness von Hoyningen-Huene. I deleted myself from all that. I like that Touko [Laaksonen] called himself "Tom of Finland," but I purposely called myself "Peter Berlin," not "Peter of Berlin."

**Jack Fritscher:** Good branding.

**Peter Berlin:** So, the *von* and the *baron*, I never used because I never think in those royal terms, although I do, as myself Armin, appreciate certain behavior towards me, where I feel that somebody should give me respect. Maybe that's because when I was Peter Berlin, I was treated like a dumb blond. "Oh, he must be stupid!" So I'd

immediately put the brakes on, and sometimes offended people who thought Peter Berlin was an arrogant asshole.

**Jack Fritscher:** Do you think that Peter Berlin is an extension of the baron? Is Peter Berlin more aristocratic than Armin?

**Peter Berlin:** Yes. Unlike little me, Peter Berlin has a commanding presence. The image I created is a very stylized expression of male masculinity without being overly butch. I'm not really a hardcore leather guy, right? Peter Berlin has always straddled a certain androgynous quality. He has gay and straight appeal. I have now a woman in my life. She's from Canada. She wrote to me after she saw my documentary. What was surprising, she thought, looking at my picture, that I was straight. Okay. On one hand, I look gay. On the other, straight. Art is in the eye of the beholder. I'm not any of those labels, those boxes, gay, straight, up and down, black and white. I don't go there because labels are just a made-up thing to put people in their place. I like the idea of straight appearance, you know? I just do. About homosexuality, I had so much to think about because homosexuality is so completely misunderstood in our stupid society. I think there is, I don't know, was it Mr. Jung said about some kind of scale, you know, really gay or really straight?

**Jack Fritscher:** The Kinsey Scale?

**Peter Berlin:** Yeah, Kinsey. Not Jung. You see my memory? Thank God, you know, I am definitely, definitely, definitely gay. I've never had an experience with a woman. It wouldn't even occur to me.

**Jack Fritscher:** We're Gold Star Gays.

**Peter Berlin:** Many of my friends have had experiences with a woman, and I say, "Rah! Rah! Rah!" because they all stayed gay. I did consider women. Why in the world do I eliminate half of the population? Wouldn't it be more intelligent to have sex with boys and girls? But I made my decision. It's not gender so much as beauty. I'm such a great admirer of male beauty and beautiful men. That word *beauty* is very important to me because it's a free word. Like *art*. You don't find it in the American Constitution, in no law book. It's

really only in poetry. I always felt that beautiful people have different laws. Think about that.

**Jack Fritscher:** I have. I've lived it. I wrote a novel about the privilege of the bad and the beautiful in San Francisco. Beautiful men think they can get away with murder and your checkbook and your heart.

**Peter Berlin:** Romeo and Juliet never interested me because of Juliet. Love between a man and woman was not interesting to me as a boy. Nowadays homosexuality is really a mainstream thing on screen. Still there is no Hollywood movie of Peter Berlin who, it makes perfect sense, is still mysteriously taboo, like when my mother looked at me with genuine disgust. Magazines still censor my frontal nude shots.

**Jack Fritscher:** The most frightening thing in the world is a photo of a penis. Ask Mapplethorpe.

**Peter Berlin:** I'm constantly shocked when I see nasty news about gays in the political arena. I'm shocked. I'm shocked. A shock should only last split seconds, but when I'm shocked for three days, I say, "Oh, fuck you." Peter Berlin not fitting into that world makes perfect sense. So I don't go out. I live very much private. Like you, right?

**Jack Fritscher:** San Francisco is for the young. I retired to the woods north of the Golden Gate.

**Peter Berlin:** When I read your book on Mapplethorpe [1994] describing the whole scene of New York and Studio 54 and the Mineshaft in the 1970s, it seems now just like a dream, no?

I think it's almost impossible for anyone who did not experience the 1970s to understand how wild was that first decade after Stonewall. In 1975, the year *Drummer* began publication to report on the rising new gay leather culture, New York City was a 24/7 sex party celebrating the "divine decadence" of *Cabaret* (1972) with thousands of newly liberated men coming from around the world to cruise streets, bars, baths, piers, parks, and clubs like Studio 54 and the

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Mineshaft. As we rose to heights of gay sex not seen since orgies in ancient Rome, we creatures of the night—unlike politically correct gay puritan censors, like Richard Goldstein condemning leather culture as akin to Nazism in the *Village Voice* in 1975—did not care that Manhattan was a dangerous bankrupt garbage dump where we felt safe and encouraged because the city was as lawless as the wild west and every cowboy knew the lyrics to “Anything Goes.” The blighted urban context we had to walk through to get to our pleasure domes shows up in its full glory in Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* and William Friedkin’s *Cruising*.

**Jack Fritscher:** Oh, yes. In fact, I even call it “The Dream Time.” It’s all gone with the wind.

**Peter Berlin:** It was bliss. Back then, I liked live sex more than I liked porn. When I was in the bathhouses that showed porn in their lounge, it took me always two or three seconds to be immediately bored because what I saw is not what I wanted to see. I have a very limited erotic window. I’m not at all versatile. I could be the worst lay if I wasn’t careful. So I had to reject people who didn’t want what I want. When I was cruising the piers in New York, a guy followed me and started making small talk and ruined his chances. I said, “Talking is not the way it works for me. I have to start the minute we lay eyes on each other.” He said, “What do you mean?” He said, “Can we redo it?” I said, “Okay, I’ll stay here and you go to the other side of the street and start watching me.”

**Jack Fritscher:** *The Peter Berlin Story*: Scene 1. Take 2. You directed the scene and acted it out.

**Peter Berlin:** Then it worked for me. And he liked it. That’s what I would like a Peter Berlin movie to show. That kind of excitement without being X-rated. Especially now because of politics and censorship. There’s five million hot scenarios possible that aren’t X-rated. *Brokeback Mountain* was good, but not good enough.

**Jack Fritscher:** To timeline a film about you, when was Peter Berlin born?

**Peter Berlin:** The Peter Berlin character?

**Jack Fritscher:** Yes. [Laughs]

**Peter Berlin:** Peter Berlin was born in 1972 when I made my film *Nights in Black Leather* [released 1973]. I had to title it and put my name on it. I first put “Peter Burian” on it because there was a gay guy I thought beautiful who was named that in Berlin. Then suddenly this big envelope arrived from a lawyer in New York who accused me of stealing the name of Peter Burian who was a legitimate New York model. I was summoned to the office of that lawyer, and I said, “I’m sorry. I will change my name.” And then I thought of Berlin, and chose Peter Berlin.

**Jack Fritscher:** Warhol couldn’t have given you a better superstar name. It matches his superstar Brigid Berlin. You said Peter Berlin left the building about twenty years ago. So around the year 2000?

**Peter Berlin:** Yeah, it was a slow-motion exit, a shutting of a door. One night, I was cruising in Central Park. I was high and horny and feeling great. I looked up at the skyline, the buildings, Manhattan, and I said, “My God, I’m well over fifty. How long can this go on?” Peter Berlin was thirty when he was born. He was never young. He was never old. Peter Berlin is always thirty.

**Jack Fritscher:** You, Oscar Wilde, and Dorian Gray. The average age of a leading man in Hollywood has always been thirty-five.

**Peter Berlin:** People have always asked, “You do porno. What will you do when you are old?” I tell them I started when I was old, when I was thirty. Then I started just getting off by myself. I have a lot of unpublished videos of me getting off by myself. Do you get off by yourself?

**Jack Fritscher:** What? Quit the self-care act of gay magical thinking?

**Peter Berlin:** So then around 2000, I wasn't going to the bars anymore. I was cruising Folsom Street and Ringold Alley for hours, and I'd be the last one on the street. I found myself rather alone. Standing in the dark under a streetlight. I thought "What is this?" Having sex was my career. One night, around three or four in the morning, I met Reggie who I've had sex with for twenty years. In my iPhone, I have lots of pictures of him and the dates we had sex.

**Jack Fritscher:** Finally, you're taking notes.

**Peter Berlin:** The night we met, I looked at Reggie and thought, "Okay, Peter Berlin will meet Peter Berlin." I was still sort of Peter Berlin, aging out of young Peter, and I thought maybe Reggie could also be Peter Berlin. He had a body like mine that I could dress up in Peter Berlin clothes. So I started dressing him as Peter Berlin and shooting pictures.

**Jack Fritscher:** You were already casting an actor in a Peter Berlin movie.

**Peter Berlin:** With a black man. When I met Reggie, I still had Bryce, this guy who was living with me. My lovers were Jochen [Labriola] until he died, then James [Stagner who was white] for twenty years until he died, and then Bryce [White who was black] until he died in 2005. Then Reggie moved in and I stopped going out. I only have sex with Reggie. I wash his clothes, shop for our groceries, and cook for him. I told Eric I live like an old housewife in bed with my cat drinking tea.

When James was extremely ill for a long time and I was caring for him in my apartment, it was a very touching scene. One day, he was so weak, he said, "Can you make the pudding?" I knew what he meant. So I said, "Vanilla or chocolate?" So I made the pudding and gave it to him, and he poured his whole bottle of morphine into the pudding and ate it. I told him to lie down. He said, "You're always telling me what to do." He fell asleep, slept for hours, and then he was gone. And then Bryce who was so sick died during heart surgery. When Reggie moved in, he said, "You're not going to try to kill me too, are you?"

**Jack Fritscher:** Thank you for sharing that intimacy. What human scenes for your movie. But may I re-wind a bit? As a boy in Berlin, when did you first start dressing up?

**Peter Berlin:** I was in school where we all played sports. My grandmother had a sewing machine and I was tightening my shorts. I made them so tight that my sister said that people were talking behind my back. I did this very early on as a teenager. I found excitement in the sensation of tight clothing. Not only the look of it but the fit like a second skin. The feel of it. The constant vibration between skin and shorts.

**Jack Fritscher:** Peter Berlin wins the Battle of the Bulge. What a great mirror-fucking scene for your movie. A montage of how you evolved your look.

**Peter Berlin:** I always related to Marlene Dietrich and Marilyn Monroe. Miss Dietrich, you know, had this very tight see-through thing, and she wanted to have it sort of sparkling like it was electric. And Marilyn Monroe, when you think of her, you think not only of the blond hair and the face, but you think of her body that is so intriguing.

In any feature film about Peter, this character-defining scene is an early necessity. In 1962, when Peter was twenty, he watched Marilyn Monroe on television singing “Happy Birthday, Mr. President” to Jack Kennedy. The moment is both scandalous and iconic. The world gasped and gaped. Her famous blond figure had been sewn into a skintight shimmering see-through gown designed by Bob Mackie who was famous for dressing Carol Burnett, Judy Garland, Liza Minnelli, Cher, and Bette Midler.

**Peter Berlin:** When you think about Peter Berlin, the character, you think about him done up from head to toe.

**Jack Fritscher:** Yes, the whole body. Were you about ten years old when you started this?

**Peter Berlin:** Maybe not ten, because it happened around puberty. So maybe twelve or thirteen. A fetish even though I was not aware of fetish. I knew tight pants were a must for me to get out of the house as Peter Berlin. Right? I mean, when I was Peter Berlin, everything had to really be pulled together. So I leave the house and I become that character. Whenever I left the house, I was “Peter Berlin.” I played that character and I played him very well. I realized very quickly that I had to separate Armin from “Peter” because all that caused two kinds of reactions. I got a lot of negative reactions. I was aware that I was being looked at, but I didn’t want to be looked at by a family with children, right? I didn’t do my thing to be admired by the so-called public. That was not my thing.

I wasn’t, you know, courageous. I just was never in the closet. I wanted to get laid. I wanted to have someone who saw me start to follow me down the street which was the positive reaction that happened many times. In San Francisco, I usually wouldn’t go downtown to Union Square full of straight tourists. No. When you saw me on Polk, it was a gay street. At that time, I was living on Filbert Street and Polk Street. I would walk down to the Golden Gate YMCA past people who saw me every day. But I wouldn’t walk like that in some straight area. I always played on the gay field. At that time, I remember always seeing the hustlers standing on corners on Polk Street. I always was intrigued by hustlers. I always liked that scene. And, of course, I was basically seen as a hustler.

**Jack Fritscher:** Did you ever hustle? Mapplethorpe hustled a sandwich or two when he was a teen in Times Square in the 1960s.

**Peter Berlin:** No, I never, never hustled because I knew I didn’t have the credentials of a hustler. A hustler is selling his body and is doing what a client is telling him—and I don’t want anybody telling me what to do. So, I wouldn’t oblige, okay? People asked me, and I liked being mistaken for a hustler because that’s what I looked like.

**Jack Fritscher:** Perhaps you were like Coco Chanel who was so modern, someone said, that even though she wasn’t an out-and-out hooker or hustler, she’d settle for something in between being admired and being given gifts. Like you, she had two identities.

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**HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK**

One as a fashion designer. One as a singer in a cabaret popular with cavalry officers.

**Peter Berlin:** Oh! I don't know her story. That is interesting.

**Jack Fritscher:** Two designers. She had her little black dress. You had your Saran Wrap jeans. I think of you like her as a unique fashion designer who fit the times. Your movies came out [1973 and 1974] just after the movie *Cabaret* [1972]. As if Peter Berlin stepped out of a Weimar cabaret. Berlin. Nazis. And all that jazz.

By now there are so many gender-variant live stage versions of *Cabaret*, I can see the role of the Emcee played by Joel Grey being played in a homosurrealist fashion by an actor playing Peter Berlin wearing Peter Berlin drag. I'd pay to see "Peter Berlin" coming on stage shouting over the opening song's powerful Kander vamp: "Meine Damen und Herren!" In truth, culturally and politically, creative director Armin's Peter Berlin is at least subtextually a triumphant anti-fascist creation and divinely decadent symbol because he emerged from the war as an avant-garde next-gen incarnation of the degenerate gay art the Nazis tried to destroy. He was his own art object.

Standing in the shadow of his father killed by Nazi ideology, he grew up as part of his generation's postwar reaction to Nazis. His proud DNA is in his thin silhouette. His fashion runway was the yellow-brick road that ran from Berlin to Paris to Rome to New York to San Francisco where he put down roots on Polk Street, still often called today by its original name, Polkstrasse, because of the German immigrants who settled there in the nineteenth century.

When Armin created Peter, he began performing beyond the narrow prescriptions of gender stereotypes. In the contours of global masculinity, Armin was all-male in body, spirit, and personality, and yet, he was perfectly androgynous. In the form and fashion of homomascularity, Peter was both metaphor and contradiction. On the Rainbow Spectrum, he wasn't hyper-masculine; he was homomascularity. He was

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perfect adjunct for the Cockettes crowd with whom he collaborated. He was too soft for the leather crowd which was why Peter was never featured in *Drummer* magazine—and why he had at first to pay Tom of Finland to draw his portraits which are now classic “Tom.”

His independence in identity and style was his homo-surreal erotic power. His trans-Atlantic presentation of the platonic ideal of a sensuous European masculinity reads like “androgyny” which some queer progressives like as gender fluidity and some gay male conservatives hate as effeminate and decadent.

Everyone from fans to haters had an opinion about Peter Berlin. No one ever forgot their first sighting of him. When the immigrant Peter walked American streets during the Vietnam War doing his own thing, he upended conventions. He pushed boundaries. He was a challenge to the sliding order of gay masculinity on the Kinsey Scale. His aloof attitude and his *outré* clothing—a hybrid original of leather stylings for men not to be confused with drag for queens—were punk years before punk rock. Mapplethorpe, attuned to the early 70s rise of punk through Patti Smith, first shot the punkness of Peter on Polaroid in 1974.

When Vivienne Westwood began designing punk fashions in the early 1970s, she who dressed the Sex Pistols in 1975 was influenced by gay leather and bondage culture and by Peter’s disobedient style in his new films that thrust him into the international spotlight. Think of Peter’s Technicolor designer selfie standing like a ballet dancer on a garbage can, *punk*, while wearing see-through gray tights from calves to tits, *punker*, and a stylishly reconfigured set of red suspenders holding up the tights and harnessing his chest, shoulders, and biceps in hints of bondage while wearing a red pillbox hat over a blond wig, *punkest*.

In March 2015, Lauren Murrow in *San Francisco Magazine* included Peter as the lead image in her photo-feature article “San Francisco: The Pioneers (The Pin-Ups, Porn

Stars, and Provocateurs of San Francisco's Sexual Heyday)." The mature Peter in a photo by Cody Pickens appeared alongside Cockettes Fayette Hauser, Scrumbly Koldewyn, Sweet Pam, and Rumi Missabu, as well as beside Linda Martinez, David Steinberg, Joani Blank, Annie Sprinkle, and myself. It was the first time Peter and I were linked in the straight press after exhibiting our photos together for the SF Camerawork Exhibit: *An Autobiography of the San Francisco Bay Area, Part 2: The Future Lasts Forever*, 2010.

**Peter Berlin:** You have a good sort of overall view I don't have because I'm too close to myself. I became known as a person you might run into in the middle of the night in a bar or the street or a train station. Sometimes I meet people who remember me from that time, and they say, "Oh my God, you were a vision!" It was a thrill to have that effect on people. I always intended to be obvious because I tried to be an example, a role model, a blueprint, a template for guys to imitate. I always thought, my God, the best thing that could happen is that somebody looks at me and tries to imitate me. I encountered two or three who tried, but the imitations were always not as good as I did it.

**Jack Fritscher:** Right.

**Peter Berlin:** Now, you know.

Regarding "Peter Berlin impersonators," Dom Johnson reported on Vaginal Davis's blog: "November 27, 2009: I also met...writer Bruce Benderson [a marvelous friend, insightful scholar, and longtime champion of Peter Berlin]... What a riot he is! It was the most peculiar night, as he had a British Peter Berlin lookalike staying with him, who is living as 'Berlin circa 1975,' and doing a project where he gets photographed in Berlinish poses by superstar photographers. He even got the aging original Peter Berlin to photograph him as his youthful self, which is pretty perverse.... Slava [Mogutin] was photographing the new [not the original] PB

(with a Dutch bowl haircut, in slutty white string pantyhose, cowboy boots, and a little silk neckerchief)."

**Jack Fritscher:** I know you're authentic.

**Peter Berlin:** I did the best with the body I was born with because my frame when I look at my body compared to a black guy—when I go to the internet, I say, "Oh my God, if I could have looked like that, sure and confident." I never was sure of myself even as I gave an impression of sureness and confidence. I was actually much more frail and insecure.

**Jack Fritscher:** How tall is Peter Berlin, and how much did he weigh?

**Peter Berlin:** Peter is five-foot-ten. I'm sort of five-ten, right? I was always on the thin side, 150 pounds. So I went to the YMCA to work out. My workout ran twenty minutes, lifting weights, but I never took it serious. I never liked the idea of a workout. I never liked the word *work*. I went to the gym because I could cruise and have sex there. I went there for the experience.

**Jack Fritscher:** As we all did at YMCAs everywhere.

**Peter Berlin:** I never got into the pleasure of lifting weights and feeling good the way runners get a runner high. Did you ever have a runner's high?

**Jack Fritscher:** Oh, yeah. I spent years on treadmills and working out at the Y and Gold's and the Pump Room.

**Peter Berlin:** If I run, I get a pain in my left or right side. So, I never had that runner's pleasure. I worked out not to get big but to get a little definition.

**Jack Fritscher:** But you did develop killer abs.

**Peter Berlin:** I never had killer abs. [Laughs] I never had killer anything.

**Jack Fritscher:** You have killer abs in *Nights in Black Leather*. Nobody slouches and presents his washboard torso for worship like Peter Berlin.

**Peter Berlin:** But when I compare myself with the best, with what I see in the black guys! My God, I never was really happy with myself. But I said, “Okay, it’s not good enough” because for all the work I put in, I didn’t have enough drive to put real work into anything. Not like Mapplethorpe. He had drive. He did a lot of real work. Besides his sexual life, he was a worker.

**Jack Fritscher:** You certainly are in shape in your films. In what I think of as your signature move on screen, you thrust out your pelvis and your very tight torso, and you twist it from the waist, and pivot your shoulders thirty to forty degrees away from the plane of your waist. It accents your sixpack abs. I’ve watched your films in theaters full of men. And that makes audiences swoon.

**Peter Berlin:** When I picked up my camera, I always had a plan. In every photo I took, I first watched myself move in a mirror. I had a big mirror, and I put in front of the mirror a camera looking back at me. So I could stand there and choose my poses exactly. I could maybe move a little bit my face and it would look awful. People think, “Oh, he’s so photogenic.” No. I’m everything else but photogenic.

**Jack Fritscher:** Sondheim wrote “My body’s all right, but not in perspective and not in the light.”

**Peter Berlin:** Yes. Yes. So it’s tricky to be able to make a photograph.

**Jack Fritscher:** Each one a separate art object.

**Peter Berlin:** I have to look a very definite way to become Peter. I look and stare and study the image in the mirror, and the instant I see Peter Berlin in the mirror, I clicked and made it work.

**Jack Fritscher:** So you would direct yourself in the mirror. You'd shoot what the mirror was seeing. You did not shoot into the mirror. You shot yourself from the point of view of the mirror.

**Peter Berlin:** I shot at myself.

**Jack Fritscher:** The mirror gave you the "proof" of what you were doing?

**Peter Berlin:** The mirror made me see how I looked. I directed the shoot. When you hire a photographer to shoot you, he tells you, "Okay, move here, move there, do this, and do that." Right? If I had to rely on another photographer, I never would have been Peter Berlin.

**Jack Fritscher:** How did you feel when Robert Mapplethorpe shot you in 1977? How did you two handle that. Two stars with one camera?

**Peter Berlin:** That portrait he shot on the boardwalk? On Fire Island? That I could have done myself with a tripod.

**Jack Fritscher:** Snap.

**Peter Berlin:** Robert was after me so he could shoot a picture. He was after me, my look, my pants, right? He shot several more photos of me [in 1976]. In one, I was sitting in the same spot he'd shot Patti Smith, where I was sitting in his studio against a white wall, and I look terrible. You can tell it's me, but I don't look like Peter Berlin at all. I never liked to be photographed by other people. I only did it because Robert asked me, and I said okay. I was stupid in a way, you know. I should have exploited my connection with Robert. He sent me that picture of me sitting in his studio and I hung it in my first apartment on Broadway, and somehow a fight broke out with some guy and the picture fell down, and was all messed up, right? And I didn't think twice about it. Yeah. I was stupid, right?

"Robert Mapplethorpe. 'Peter Berlin, N.Y.C.,' 1976. Gelatin silver print, Image: 13.9 x 13.94 in. (35.3 x 35.4 cm.). Signed,

dated, numbered on recto in ink; Signed, titled, dated, numbered on verso with artist's [Mapplethorpe's] copyright credit stamp. Edition 3/10. Estimate: \$6,000 to \$8,000. Artnet Auctions. April 25, 2023."

In a perfect match on both sides of the camera, the thirty-year-old Mapplethorpe's exquisite technique embraces the energy emanating from thirty-three-year-old Armin's exquisite beauty. This quintessential image is important to both Robert's and Peter's work because Robert shot a portrait of Armin, not of Peter Berlin. Armin told me: "I don't look like Peter Berlin at all." This unmasked posture portrait of Armin sitting nude on the floor of Robert's studio matches Robert's series of unmasked posture portraits of Patti Smith crouched nude almost in the same spot, also in 1976, hugging the radiators below the windows of the Bond Street room.

**Jack Fritscher:** Did you ever meet Patti Smith?

**Peter Berlin:** I met her once, but I wasn't interested in her and she wasn't interested in me. So I never saw her perform. In fact, I never go to see anyone perform. I don't want to meet them that way. I want to meet the person they are.

**Jack Fritscher:** Robert really admired you and the art of your self-portraits because he shot so many self-portraits in leather and drag, and with that whip coming out of his butt.

**Peter Berlin:** I know. I must tell you because like you I knew Robert before he was famous. I was very surprised to see how he developed. I always said, "Oh, you know, Robert, yeah, he's a very nice, sweet, pleasant guy." He approached me the way many people approached me. He was impressed by the whole Peter Berlin thing.

**Jack Fritscher:** He liked you because you were a celebrity and he collected celebrities.

**Peter Berlin:** Robert was a starfucker. May I tell you, Robert clicked on me. He was so impressed when I'd be out walking with him

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wherever, you know, Provincetown, New York, Polk Street, and people would recognize me because my films were playing in theaters. And he'd say, "My God, I'd like that." So, I told him, "Robert, put your fucking face on a book so people can recognize you. That's all what you have to do to be recognized. You have to be seen on TV or on film or in a magazine."

**Jack Fritscher:** Perhaps you emboldened Robert to continue doing his own self-portraits. He also studied himself in the mirror.

**Peter Berlin:** Yeah. The influence I probably had on him. The other influence on him was my friend, Jochen, who Robert had a fling with. Jochen was painting flowers—many, many calla lilies, calla lilies, calla lilies. Robert saw those. I have hundreds of plants in my apartment. I've shot hundreds of pictures of flowers, enough to make a good book. You know that one flag picture Robert shot?

**Jack Fritscher:** Yes, the tattered flag with the sun behind it.

**Peter Berlin:** We were living on Fire Island, and I looked up at that flagpole, and I said, "Robert, look, that looks nice, right?" And he said, "Oh, yes." So I know exactly the moment when he took the camera and made that picture.

**Jack Fritscher:** A moment in time.

**Peter Berlin:** I got a good, good feeling from that. Soon after, here in San Francisco, I met Marcus Leatherdale who met me as Peter Berlin. I hung out with him. He knew I knew Robert and he asked me, "Can you introduce me to Robert?" And they became good friends.

**Jack Fritscher:** Until they didn't. So, you had influence on Robert?

**Peter Berlin:** Yeah.

**Jack Fritscher:** You and Jochen.

**Peter Berlin:** Yes. My God! What a good time we had mixing it up back then. I remember the first time I went to Studio 54 and stood

in line. The doorman came up to me and said, “Peter Berlin doesn’t have to stand in line.” I felt terrible because I was ushered in past all the people hoping to get in. One night when Andy Warhol came into 54 with his entourage, he saw me. I was shy. We greeted each other sort of with a nod, you know, that kind of thing. I never approached Warhol because I never approach people in my life. I’m not proud of that. [Later, Peter had supper with Warhol whom he permitted to shoot him.] I probably could have made a lot of nice friendships. But I was never interested in that.

I only got into Andy’s Factory with my Dutch friend Koos Van Den Akker, the New York fashion designer. He’s dead now. Everybody’s dead. He had a string of stores in Manhattan and sold to Bloomingdale’s and Saks Fifth Avenue. He was known for his collage dresses. A very funny guy. He had a house on Fire Island. That’s why I spent so much time on the island. So I was living there when Robert and Sam Wagstaff rented Koos’ house. So I always was with them on their weekends. They would all leave on Monday because they had to go to work. I stayed alone all week. Because of Jochen, I didn’t have to work.

**Jack Fritscher:** So you and Koos and Robert and Sam were staying in the same house?

**Peter Berlin:** Yeah, yeah. That beautiful house. It had big windows. I was there living like a millionaire with no money in the pocket.

**Jack Fritscher:** Were you there when Wakefield Poole shot *Boys in the Sand*?

**Peter Berlin:** No. These things, I avoided. Porno didn’t interest me. I was always an outsider. All that big porno stuff with groups of guys was not my cup of tea. I only did my little film because I wanted to be in a porno. I wish I would have been more honest in my film-making. That’s why years later I don’t like my films, you know. It’s sort of all fake and stupid.

**Jack Fritscher:** I don't think they're fake and stupid at all. I think they're statements, documents of a time gone with the wind, about people who love to have sex.

**Peter Berlin:** There's a lot of stuff in them I feel okay about. I've always wanted to make another feature film, but, um, you see, this is what, what I was not given in my life. I have no partner. You have a partner who helps you.

**Jack Fritscher:** Right.

**Peter Berlin:** Robert had a partner.

**Jack Fritscher:** Sam Wagstaff.

**Peter Berlin:** All the big stars they had partners.

**Jack Fritscher:** Marlene Dietrich had Josef von Sternberg.

**Peter Berlin:** You see, I have a lot of talent, but there are certain things that I just can't do and won't do. Right?

**Jack Fritscher:** That separation of tasks was one of the amazing things I felt about your films. I thought, Peter always shoots himself in stills, but he doesn't shoot himself in movies.

**Peter Berlin:** So true. The first film I tried was *Nights in Black Leather* [a spin on the Moody Blues' 1967 "Nights in White Satin"] with a very interesting friend [Richard Abel] who spoke better German than me. He was American and had a big beautiful reflex camera. He went to film school to make his master's in filmmaking. He showed me a ten-minute black-and-white student film that was nicely done. I told him, "You can show that film to your mother and to your sister, but let's do something more. Let's make a porno." He liked the idea. So, there I was in front of the camera and I told him, "Here, now, do this and do that." And when I saw the footage, I realized, no, he didn't do what I told him, right? So, I was directing and starring. The only thing he did without me was the editing which was all his doing. And the sound.

For that reason, I decided to make another film, *That Boy*, with another friend [Ignatio Rutkowski—with second camera by Phillip Martin] who had a Bolex H16 reflex camera. It was the same situation where I was telling him, oh, you know, motivating him, saying, “The weather is nice today. Let’s go shoot something.” I was spontaneous. Not one word was written down. We made it up on the spot.

**Jack Fritscher:** So, no shooting script. Did you write down the voice-over you added later?

**Peter Berlin:** It was all made up. Spontaneous. Like the idea with the blind guy in *That Boy*. That came about when I told that guy, “Now walk from there to here towards the camera.” And he walked. I said, “Oh, my God, look at the way he walks across the street.” I suddenly thought I should make him blind. It came to me as we shot. I made the best of what I had with the friends I asked to be in it [like Cockette Pristine Condition aka Keith Blanton].

**Jack Fritscher:** Actually, the blindness of a voyeur attracted to the vision of Peter Berlin is a perfectly homosurreal contradiction. A great provocative idea.

**Peter Berlin:** I just asked friends, “Oh, you want to be, uh, a star?” And they obliged.

**Jack Fritscher:** In *Nights in Black Leather*, the voice-over is you speaking. And in *That Boy*, the voice-over is the photographer.

**Peter Berlin:** Right.

**Jack Fritscher:** So no one “wrote” those scripts?

**Peter Berlin:** As I say about *That Boy*, it was spontaneous, just spur of the moment. Just like I sewed my clothes without a pattern. I certainly didn’t write anything down. I was supposedly reading from my journal which I was holding on screen.

**Jack Fritscher:** You are a performance artist. You were doing improv theater. For my erotic films, I’m a writer dictating a story to get an actor to improvise while I run a camera.

**Peter Berlin:** I had tons of other things to do with the film. I was editing hours of film and asked myself what do I do with all that footage? What do I do with all this crap? I had all the various pieces of the film clipped up hanging on my wall. Not even the editing was premeditated. So I did the best I could splicing things together to tell a story. I worked hard, yeah? That was the only time in my life where I actually worked very hard because I'd look at all the cuts and splices I'd made that I hung side-by-side on the wall to sort out.

**Jack Fritscher:** You didn't use a storyboard.

**Peter Berlin:** I had to study the frames. Where was this? Where does this go? I tell you, I was sweating and, and I said, "Oh, God!"

In Berlin in the 1960s, Armin trained as a photo technician to learn the basic tricks of the trade and started working as a photographer for German television shooting stars like Alfred Hitchcock, Catherine Deneuve, and Klaus Kinski.

**Jack Fritscher:** So you didn't edit both your films?

**Peter Berlin:** No, no, no. I had nothing to do with *Nights in Black Leather*.

**Jack Fritscher:** You were the actor.

**Peter Berlin:** I had nothing to do with the editing or the sound. None of that. On *That Boy*, however, I was the only one.

**Jack Fritscher:** You were the *auteur* director of *That Boy*.

**Peter Berlin:** I had never edited a film in my life. But I see myself as an editor because I always was very much strangely thinking what is so great about making a photo? You click, right? And a photo: what's the big deal? And then one day, I said, "It's not the clicking. It's the editing." That means you don't look here; you look there. You zoom in and do something. I grew up believing photography was not considered art. This is a whole other subject when I talk about art. I don't even like to mention that word. What is art? Of course, there

is fine art, but then there is the art business, and this is where I think I will lose people who do not agree with my take on these things.

Mapplethorpe loved the business of art. But the art business is the reason I basically stopped having anything to do with it in my life because I felt there's something in it I find very distasteful and fake. Basically, when art became a matter of business where suddenly, you know, it became all about galleries. "Oh, no, no. Don't do it in this gallery. Do it in the other gallery." All that networking. It's like Robert's picture. I can't remember the name. You mentioned it in your article [*The Guardian*, London: "He Was a Sexual Outlaw: My Love Affair with Robert Mapplethorpe," 9 March 2016, honoring the date Robert died in 1989.] You know. That ugly picture of that suit thing and the dick hanging out.

**Jack Fritscher:** *Man in Polyester Suit*.

**Peter Berlin:** I love black men. I saw it and said *Nah*. It is completely showing the insanity of the art world. It has nothing to do with anything but money-making. For them, art is not the object of the photography. It's the art of selling it.

**Jack Fritscher:** Sotheby's recently sold that *Polyester* picture for half a million dollars.

Artsy.net currently offers a Peter Berlin original for sale at the typical price for a signed Peter Berlin original: "Peter Berlin,' Studio Self Portrait Nude, Erect, ca. 1970s, Gelatin silver print, vintage, 13 × 8 1/2 in | 33 × 21.6 cm, Hand-signed by artist in ink lower right: 'Peter Berlin.' Frame included. US \$5,500."

**Peter Berlin:** I always gave away my stuff, you know? And when Mr. Sam Wagstaff [Mapplethorpe's wealthy lover] was in San Francisco, Robert told him you have to meet Peter Berlin. So Wagstaff came to my place and said he'd like some of my work. I gathered some of my prints together. Unlike Robert, I did all my prints, right? In my dark room. Wagstaff was sort of choosing, I don't know, two or three of my black-and-white prints, double exposures I made from color

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negatives of Peter Berlin in blue jeans. I had printed them blue. He chose one and asked. "What do I owe you?" I said, "Here." I gave it to him.

**Jack Fritscher:** Oh, Armin.

**Peter Berlin:** And he took it. I've thought about this millionaire attitude, right? [Laughs] I was thinking, my God! What a disappointment I am to the art world, just for being Peter Berlin, and living my life the way I did. That's just not done in the art world.

**Jack Fritscher:** You didn't want your art reduced to money.

**Peter Berlin:** I had many possibilities to meet rich people. I know you knew Edward DeCelle

My longtime friend, art dealer Edward DeCelle (1944-2002), was a gallery owner, curator, and fine-art collector in Washington, D. C., and in San Francisco where he built his international reputation curating his daring 1978 exhibit *Censored: Robert Mapplethorpe* at his 80 Langton Street gallery, South of Market. He was an artist in New York and Europe before moving to San Francisco in 1972 where he ran the Lawson-DeCelle Gallery from 1972-1983 in the SOMA leather district which helped make him a formative force in the gay leather renaissance of art in 1970s San Francisco. He was also on the Board of Directors of New Langton Arts which followed at the landmark 80 Langton Street address. In my two-hour interview taped on October 30, 1990, DeCelle talks of Robert Mapplethorpe and the kind of commercial gallery life Peter Berlin faced in San Francisco.

**Peter Berlin:** Edward approached me and said, "Oh, Peter, I have to introduce you to the high society here in San Francisco." So I met these rich women and I went here and I went there. You've been to those parties. Champagne and stuff. But, you know, if an artist doesn't show interest in those ladies, they lose interest in you. I didn't find that scene very amusing.

**Jack Fritscher:** Robert loved shooting rich San Francisco women. I remember in 1979 when DeCelle introduced him to Katherine Cebrian.

San Francisco *grande dame* Countess Katherine Cebrian whom Mapplethorpe shot in 1980 was so aristocratic she out-queened queens when she said, “I don’t even butter my bread. I consider that cooking.”

**Peter Berlin:** I wish I would have been more interested, but I didn’t need their money because back then was the only time in my life when I made some money. [Laughs] From my mail-order business selling my films in VHS and Beta and sets of photographs.

**Jack Fritscher:** Outside of bar owners, you were one of the first gay small businessmen after Stonewall, creating your own mail-order business. Your mailing list helped web gay popular culture.

**Peter Berlin:** But I myself never was a business. I never ran myself as a business.

**Jack Fritscher:** Mapplethorpe’s mentor [the New Orleans painter and photographer] George Dureau, told me Robert ran himself like a department store.

**Peter Berlin:** My only thought was Peter Berlin had some pictures to sell. To start out, I made five sets of each color photograph that I developed at Walgreens or Safeway. I offered the sets for ten or fifteen dollars, and when people bought the five sets, I said, “Okay, make ten sets.” Then I made fifteen sets. When somebody liked me, they bought everything I offered.

**Jack Fritscher:** That’s how you built Peter Berlin’s image in gay pop culture.

**Peter Berlin:** Yeah. The truth is I got really bored with all the work to choose and print and package the pictures and send them out. I was not professional. I never did anything really professional. I just didn’t feel it. I didn’t. I didn’t. When I’d send out an envelope of

pictures, I didn't feel it. It was sort of in a stupid envelope. So to be personal, I put a little note in it. Sometimes I made \$1,000 a day because I sold these videotapes for a lot of money. That was how I lost interest in Armin running Peter Berlin's business. All I wanted was to get laid. All my clothes I made myself so I didn't have to pay someone else. I was always doing everything on a shoestring. And for those reasons, I'm amazed that my name is sort of there in the annals of gay history.

Peter's pop-culture street styles encouraged French fashion designer Jean Paul Gaultier who followed street trends, and created, among other genderfuck bits, the skirt with suspenders that Madonna wore in *Desperately Seeking Susan*. When Gaultier reached out to discuss collaborating directly with Peter, Peter did not return his calls.

**Jack Fritscher:** Could you explain how you handled your photo prints as an artist? How you took prints that were blurry or discolored and worked each one over with airbrushes. That's what makes you a homosurreal artist. You shot reality from a unique angle, printed it, and then enhanced it by hand.

**Peter Berlin:** I never wanted to throw anything away. Sometimes I'd shoot a roll of film that turned out underexposed or overexposed. So I'd take my commercial prints from Walgreens, 5x7 or 3x5 inches, and sit and look at them, study them, and figure how to enhance them warts and all with watercolor or some oil color, whatever I had.

**Jack Fritscher:** As an artist layering basic frames, you upscaled your vision of Peter Berlin years before Photoshop. Think of what you could do now using artificial intelligence tools to interpret your images into enhanced images created through AI by your own hand. You could take all your zeroes and ones from 1972 and create Peter Berlin as a young hologram avatar who can live forever. Lots of men would like to watch a deep fake of you.

**Peter Berlin:** Yeah, the future. Let me tell you how in the 1970s this colorizing process happened. I was sitting in Jochen's big beautiful

loft in New York on 100 Grand Street doing nothing while he was painting his flowers.

**Jack Fritscher:** Cool. This could be a pivotal scene in the Peter Berlin Hollywood movie.

**Peter Berlin:** It struck me that since he had oil paints and acrylics everywhere, and I had all these gray pictures, why not touch them up? I experimented and put a lot of time into it. We had music and much laughter. Jochen liked what I was doing. He had a very rich friend, the heir to one of the biggest companies selling fragrances and perfumes.

**Jack Fritscher:** Lauder? Lancôme?

**Peter Berlin:** I don't recall his name. I'll think of it in a second. He was a "Von Something" like I am. He was always coming to Jochen's. They were friends. I had no idea he was rich. He saw me painting my photographs and he said he liked them. I said, okay, and sold him one for fifty bucks. And he bought maybe four or five more. Von Amerling! His name is Von Amerling. And he just died a couple years ago. I forgot about him after Jochen died because Jochen was my connection to him. Jochen got sick in 1988 and when he died my world went from Technicolor to black and white. When my book [*Peter Berlin: Icon, Artist, Photosexual*] came out [in 2019], that stupid book, I thought of him again. You know what? I should really now actually give my opinion about that stupid book.

**Jack Fritscher:** Yes, tell me about it.

**Peter Berlin:** My manager Eric [Smith] and I really tried to work with the publisher, but we were mistreated because the book has none of my input—even though I was very careful not to offend the publisher by demanding this and that, you know. We were treated badly, Eric and me. We were excluded. Not the way one should have been treated. The book has none of my input. None of it. Just my photographs. Right? They did the rest and it's a terrible book.

At the launch for *Photosexual* at the Tom of Finland house in Los Angeles, Peter, *immer lustig*, always jolly, and very Dali, covered his elder face with a large cut-out photo of his younger face mounted like a masquerade mask on a stick which he held up in front of his head when fans asked for selfies with him.

**Peter Berlin:** Even so, when the book came out in New York, I tried to look up Von Amerling, and sure enough, I found I still had his phone number. So I called him and said I'd like to give him my book. Unfortunately, I made a mistake in the date and time of our meeting, and missed him and never did meet him again. I gave the book to the concierge. When we had spoken on the phone, I asked him if he still had the photos he bought. He said, "You know, I don't know." He had no idea where the photographs were which was not good news. The photos were really beautifully done, very intricate, very one of a kind. If he had them, I would have liked to have photographed them to make digital copies.

On the internet, entrepreneurs sell unauthorized individual pages sliced out of *Photosexual* at ten dollars each.

**Jack Fritscher:** Are you glad your book is not in print anymore?

**Peter Berlin:** I think it's not in print and I don't think they have sold anything. We didn't even have a book signing here in San Francisco.

**Jack Fritscher:** You did get reviewed in the *New York Times*.

**Peter Berlin:** Sometimes people say I like your book, and when I say I don't, and the reasons, then they suddenly agree with me. Such a missed opportunity in content and layout.

**Jack Fritscher:** Just as your working your photographs with paints makes you a homosurreal artist, I think your mode of dress as Peter Berlin is very homosurrealistic. I know that you once met Salvador Dali [Spanish surrealist painter, 1904-1989; Warhol called him an important influence on Pop Art].

**Peter Berlin:** I lived for awhile in Paris, and Dali was living in that hotel [Le Meurice] in Paris. Somehow, I don't remember, I was invited to a party there. I knocked on the door and Dali opened it wearing a paper mask. We just said hello. There were a lot of people at the party, and a naked guy standing in the corner on a pedestal. Every Sunday he had these gatherings of different people. Was I invited because I was Peter Berlin? I have no clue. He and I never spoke after we said hello. So I ended up sitting there for three hours talking to his wife [and frequent model], Gala, in German. I wish I would remember what we talked about. I had a good talk sitting there with her.

**Jack Fritscher:** What a woman. What a moment.

**Peter Berlin:** Yeah, yeah.

**Jack Fritscher:** Dali no doubt appreciated Peter's style. The early Surrealists often ran around Paris wearing costumes they'd made for themselves. Did that have any influence on the young Armin going out into the streets of Berlin costumed as Peter Berlin?

### **Cell phone rings**

**Peter Berlin:** One, one, one second. Hang on, Jack. Hello, I'm doing an interview. Today at six? Okay.

**Jack Fritscher:** We can stop today if you need to.

**Peter Berlin:** No, no. A neighbor wants to come over. I always have my apartment door open and he always brings me some sweets. He reminded me at six o'clock there's a tenant meeting because the management wants to turn our building garage into apartments.

**Jack Fritscher:** Housing is more important than cars in a city.

**Peter Berlin:** Right, but this means a lot of big construction in our building. I live in a beautiful rent-controlled one-bedroom apartment with a beautiful view of City Hall and downtown. If I'd ever move out, they'd knock out the walls and make it a two-bedroom. Is that brilliant? My \$3000-dollar place will rent for \$5000. That's

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why they would like to have me move out. [Laughs] I have good rent because I'm here already since 1989. Anyway, what were we talking about?

**Jack Fritscher:** I was asking if Dali and the Surrealists influenced Peter Berlin to dress up. Mapplethorpe certainly dressed thematically with leather and occult jewelry. When people compare you to others like Dali or Warhol or Mapplethorpe or Tom of Finland, are they jumping to conclusions to make it easy to fit you into art history?

**Peter Berlin:** I think so. Yes. My image is about my life. I never worked to become anything. I just wanted to get people off. I don't see that personal force or drive in me that I see in Warhol or in Mapplethorpe. I'm all about discovering all the entities of myself that I can be in becoming Peter Berlin. I'm sort of famous, right? Most older gay people have heard my name and they know my image, and that image is from head to toe. There is also my dick. The dick is sort of always there, but it's not this overwhelming dick for dick's sake. Dressing my dick is a fashion statement, right? In most art, there are very few dicks to be seen. The only parallel to me that I see is in the drawings by Tom of Finland. He's the only artist, even if not an influence.

**Jack Fritscher:** So you feel bonded with him more than any other artist?

**Peter Berlin:** Not with him personally. With his drawings. I could appreciate his drawings, right? I looked at his work and said, "Yes, this is it. He's got it." I never felt I would appeal to Tom as a subject he'd personally choose. So when he had his showing here at [Oscar Streaker Robert Opel's] Fey-Way Gallery in 1978, I went and I timidly approached him and asked him if he would draw me. It wasn't like Tom approached me and asked, "Can I draw you?" He didn't approach me at all. No. I approached him and we agreed on some drawings at \$300 a piece. I told him, "I don't want to be naked. I want to be in jeans." And he said, "Yeah, I like that too." [Laughs] I'm glad I did that to get these drawings.

**Jack Fritscher:** As *Drummer* editor, I was one of the hosts at that opening. I wonder if Tom noticed that you have a Tom of Finland body? Tom, who was also very shy like you, told me on that same visit to San Francisco when I hosted a *Drummer* magazine supper for him and his lover Veli that he preferred men in uniforms and leather over nude men. He said he was turned on by the uniforms on both sides during the war.

**Peter Berlin:** Not one shred of Nazi uniforms ever turned me on. My uniform and boot fetish has nothing to do with Nazis. One of my dreams, like making a film of my life, would be the American government asking me to design a new uniform for the army. [Laughs] Tight pants and boots. A very Peter Berlin look.

**Jack Fritscher:** [Laughs] In the 1960s, the horrible President Nixon designed uniforms for the White House security police, but everyone laughed and said the uniforms looked like costumes in a Banana Republic musical comedy.

**Peter Berlin:** How funny.

**Jack Fritscher:** In *That Boy*, there's a sequence that shows a guy wearing a Nazi arm patch which was not an uncommon insignia among Hells Angels and leather fetish players in the 1960s and 1970s. In that scene, you tell him that you voted socialist. Very amusing.

**Peter Berlin:** You know, I don't remember that because I keep my distance from people and I don't watch my films.

The postwar 1970s was Nazi-obsessive as American men continued to re-fight the war in their psyches. Nazis were everywhere in American popular culture. Men's spunk-bank fascination with the enemy did not mean they were Nazi sympathizers. People deal with post-traumatic stress as best they can. Immensely popular straight men's adventure magazines like *Saga* and *Argosy* (that inspired gay men's adventure magazines like *Drummer*) featured cover paintings of scantily uniformed Nazi women topping shirtless muscular American soldiers tied up on lurid dominatrix covers and

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in soft-core S&M stories. Nazis were everywhere in pop culture.

In addition to Richard Goldstein's 1975 essay attacking leather culture as fascism in the *Village Voice*, Susan Sontag reacted with her 1975 essay, "Fascinating Fascism," in *The New York Review of Books* to analyze the 1970s obsession with Nazi uniforms, sex, and the power of "SS" S&M. Nazis were in homes on television in series like *Wonder Woman* and *Hogan's Heroes* as well as in mainstream John Wayne war movies and in *Cabaret*, *The Night Porter*, *Seven Beauties*, *Salò*, and *Ilsa: She-Wolf of the SS*.

Gay filmmaker Kenneth Anger (February 3, 1927-May 11, 2023) featured Nazi regalia prominently in his iconic leather-biker movie, *Scorpio Rising*. In San Francisco, the influential Catholic leather priest Jim Kane was collecting Nazi insignia pins and jewelry as gifts for friends, the pointillist artist Rex was drawing his pictures next to a video monitor playing Nazi rallies with Nazi marching music, and the most popular footage screened in leather bars was the "Springtime for Hitler" musical number from *The Producers*. Nazi fantasies did not make a man a Nazi. At *Drummer*, I who grew up loathing Nazis had to fight the publisher who loved to print pictures of Nazis in Hollywood movies. I begged him to stop inserting ads for the National Socialist League whose tag line was a spin on the title of the Hitler Youth song in *Cabaret*, "Tomorrow Belongs to Me."

**Jack Fritscher:** So, considering the gay *Zeitgeist* back then, I must ask. Because you're German, has anyone tried to get you to play a Nazi scene? Did anyone try to turn your nationality into a sex fetish?

**Peter Berlin:** No. I never was in a situation like that. I would never allow a situation like that.

**Jack Fritscher:** I know you never would, but did anybody ever ask you to?

**Peter Berlin:** No, no, no. Nobody asked me. I'm always careful not to get used. I wouldn't allow that situation to occur. If anything, Peter Berlin is a very un-Nazi image. Nazis would have killed me as a decadent artist. I'm careful who I meet. Sometimes I'm introduced to interesting people, but I don't know who they are. So I wouldn't know what they were into or wanted to get into with me in their fantasies. You go to a party and don't know who's who or what they want. Famous people should all wear name tags.

**Jack Fritscher:** Right.

**Peter Berlin:** I regret not developing friendships with people I met or with fans who bought my movies. Like Sam Steward had his *Stud File*, I have a cardboard box of my mail-order clients with names, addresses, and what they bought. When Gerard Koskovich [the San Francisco-Paris archivist and one of the founders of the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Historical Society] inventoried my papers and art collection two years ago, he was delighted he found that box. As I said, I sent some of them notes. Some of them were probably interesting people, but I've always kept my distance. So, I'm not really collected, but there is the Clamp Gallery in New York which is selling my work. I had an exhibition there once. I don't remember these things. Eric always has to remind me of my own history. "Oh, yeah, Peter," he says, "you have shown here and there." You know the Clamp Gallery?

**Jack Fritscher:** Yes, I do. I read the interview they did with you.

**Peter Berlin:** Thank you.

**Jack Fritscher:** Another question I have about iconography, about your stylizing Peter Berlin. In the 1960s when long hair meant everything, where did your Dutch Boy haircut come from?

**Peter Berlin:** I don't know. Is there a Dutch Boy thing? Is the Dutch Boy actually Dutch? What is it?

**Jack Fritscher:** The guy with the Dutch Boy haircut. That's how guys used to describe your look. A lot of us grew up watching our

fathers buy Dutch Boy Paint while we played with Dutch Boy coloring books for boys and girls. It comes from the popular advertising campaign selling Dutch Boy Paint. The blond boy in the ad wears a blue flat cap shaped like your leather cap, and has a Dutch Boy haircut.

**Peter Berlin:** Some long hair with bangs or what?

**Jack Fritscher:** Like a pageboy hair style. Cut in a bob, straight bangs, side and back hair chopped off right below the chin line all the way around the neck almost like a helmet.

**Peter Berlin:** Oh, oh, oh, you see, I didn't even know that. All I know is that Dutch Boy painting.

**Jack Fritscher:** Right. The drawing of the Dutch Boy brand is based on that famous painting. ["The Dutch Boy" by American Lawrence Carmichael Earle, 1845–1921.] It comes out of the story of Hans Brinker and the Little Dutch Boy who saved Holland from flooding by putting his finger in the dike.

American author Mary Mapes Dodge wrote the original Dutch Boy story in *Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates* in 1865.

**Peter Berlin:** Oh, oh. That all went over my head [Laughs].

**Jack Fritscher:** [Laughs] Of course. The Dutch Boy story is part of American pop culture, not European. So Americans trying to figure you out in the Pop Art scene of the 1960s and 70s looked at your hippie hair and connected you to him in the Pop Art of advertising. He is as iconic as a Warhol painting. People love the Dutch boy.

**Peter Berlin:** I hear you. [Laughs] I never had that explained to me.

**Jack Fritscher:** The Dutch Boy Paint Company should hire you and put some of your color-coordinated pictures of Peter Berlin on the paint cans. Not that you want to end up on a paint can.

**Peter Berlin:** My not knowing proves how I live so outside the box. I know nothing about business, but I am surprised that nobody ever approached me to make a Peter Berlin doll. It would sell, right?

**Jack Fritscher:** Yes. There are Tom of Finland dolls and Village People dolls and Divine's "Simply Divine" cut-out paper dolls. Even today a Peter Berlin doll would be snatched up as a collectible.

**Peter Berlin:** But I'm not interested in making money, or meeting people. Facebook is now where people contact me. Eric put me there. If he hadn't, I wouldn't be there. He posts and answers things to support the Peter Berlin image. I get links from the Tom of Finland store always selling something new. Tom of Finland cologne. Tom of Finland soap. They must make some money. But someone has to produce the goods.

**Jack Fritscher:** Right. Tom of Finland himself never did it. His guardians Durk Dehner and Steve Sharp work hard at marketing to keep the art and archive of Tom and many other artists alive. Durk says they sell all those things so everybody can have a little Tom in their lives.

**Peter Berlin:** Durk is a good friend. Maybe I should ask him. There was a guy who contacted me through Facebook. He said, "Oh, Peter, can I use your..." and I said, "George, you want to make, I don't know, magnets for the refrigerator and some of this and that?" And then he made all kinds of stuff. I let him do it until Eric said, "You know, Peter, you should tell him to stop it." But I said no. I always in my life gave things away.

**Jack Fritscher:** You've been very generous. I'm sure you've pleased many grateful people.

**Peter Berlin:** I'm just not a businessman.

**Jack Fritscher:** You're an artist.

**Peter Berlin:** I don't know. What makes an artist? Unfortunately, Eric had a stroke a year or two ago. So life's a little difficult.

**Jack Fritscher:** Did you ever meet the artist Rex whose studio was at the Magazine Store on Larkin Street?

**Peter Berlin:** I probably was introduced.

**Jack Fritscher:** He's very reclusive too.

**Peter Berlin:** I know his drawings from the magazines back in those days with *Drummer* and *In Touch*.

**Jack Fritscher:** I bring him up because like us, he's now eighty himself. He is living disabled in a wheelchair in subsidized housing in Amsterdam where he moved, an immigrant, ten years ago because he couldn't stand the politics and the way he was treated as an artist in the United States.

**Peter Berlin:** Ahhh.

**Jack Fritscher:** Rex left some of his belongings and some of his drawings behind in San Francisco with Trent and Bob at the Magazine store where he worked for years.

Trent Dunphy and Bob Mainardi, The Magazine, the gay pop-culture archive store, 920 Larkin Street, closed after fifty years in 2022 and is now the headquarters of the Bob Mizer Foundation, publisher of the revived *Physique Pictorial*.

**Peter Berlin:** I often used to stop in and say hello to Trent and Bob when I'm walking the dog.

**Jack Fritscher:** So Rex needing income has been trying to resurrect himself as a business in Holland. Then last year, I heard a couple guys from San Francisco, one a "millionaire," I think, have connected with him and rescued him, producing Rex drawings on T-shirts and in X-rated books. Rex now has a restored income which is helping him survive. I thought you might like to know how a person our age has managed to find guys younger who can produce him.

**Peter Berlin:** Yes, but, unfortunately, I never could survive on income from Peter Berlin. Like I said, that's because of me. I'm more concerned about other things, everything in life.

**Jack Fritscher:** Right, it's about the art, not the selling of art. Speaking of your life, may I go back to your roots and ask you about your famous uncle, Baron George Hoyningen-Huene.

Baron George Hoyningen-Huene (1900-1968), born in Russia into Peter's large clan, was a fashion photographer famous for his beautifully lit glamour portraits of Hollywood stars. He fled the Russian Revolution with his two sisters, Helen de Huene and Betty aka Mme. Yteb, who were fashion designers. His lover was fashion photographer Horst P. Horst. He was chief photographer at *Vogue* in Paris and *Harper's Bazaar* in New York. In Hollywood, his name is revered as a peer of George Hurrell and Cecil Beaton. He worked closely with gay director George Cukor as a visual and color consultant for the 1954 Judy Garland movie *A Star Is Born*, and the 1960 Marilyn Monroe film *Let's Make Love*.

**Peter Berlin:** It's often written that he is my uncle. He's not an uncle. We have the same name, but our whole clan of Hoyningen-Huenes is very big. So he is maybe a cousin or something.

**Jack Fritscher:** One source claims he's your paternal grandfather.

**Peter Berlin:** I only regret that I never contacted him when he was in Europe.

**Jack Fritscher:** Why not?.

**Peter Berlin:** I knew of him. I knew his name and his influence. I knew of Horst when Horst was still living in New York. I wish I could have met George, but I was too young and very shy, and then he was dead. I saw something on YouTube, a documentary about him that said what a beautiful human being he was. Frankly, I don't think I would have liked him very much because he looked sort of what I would call sort of gay, you know. But who knows? Like I say,

I never contacted him. Maybe I should have, but I never contacted anybody. Unfortunately, I don't reach out.

**Jack Fritscher:** Well, you were, let me figure, twenty-six in Germany when he died at sixty-eight in Los Angeles [in 1968]. I thought you might have had an interest in him because he photographed Marilyn Monroe, and you have identified with Marilyn Monroe's self-creation.

**Peter Berlin:** Yes. Yes. It's true. I think so much about Marilyn. She herself, Norma Jean, created Marilyn. She was not created by somebody else. I wish I would have met her, but I'd want to have met her as a person not as a star. I myself never want to meet people as the star. I want to meet them like you talk with me now as Armin. I never found that star thing interesting. I prefer the person behind it, and Marilyn would be the first one I'd like to meet from all the great names. She is on that level where there is no other level higher. Once, when you reach that plateau!

**Jack Fritscher:** [Laughs]

**Peter Berlin:** Like Robert Mapplethorpe reached a plateau of his own self invention. I don't want to come up with a number, but there are probably many, many, many, many, many other photographers as good and maybe better than Robert.

**Jack Fritscher:** Many of them think so.

**Peter Berlin:** So he made it, not, my God, that his art is so outrageous. No. It was ambition. Business. If you want to be on that plateau, you have to climb it; but I never climb. I feel fine with that. When you mentioned that Rex can't stand the politics in America, it reminded me of that singer Ozzy Osbourne who says, yeah, he wants to leave America.

**Jack Fritscher:** Him? He said if Trump tells you to do something, do the opposite.

**Peter Berlin:** He said he didn't want to die in America.

**Jack Fritscher:** He's British.

**Peter Berlin:** There's something bad happening here politically in America, and I am more concerned about that than the Peter Berlin thing. Peter left the building a long time ago. You've refocused me on Peter Berlin because Eric asked you to do this. I'm glad he did, but I wouldn't have presumed on our friendship to ask you because I don't want to put people in a position where they have to maybe say *no*.

**Jack Fritscher:** This is enjoyable for me. I always like our times together. Don't worry about that. [Laughs] I've always enjoyed our friendship. I just wish that as editor I could have convinced the publisher to promote you in *Drummer*.

**Peter Berlin:** I remember always you being so very nice, but because I don't keep contact with anyone, after awhile I lose contact. You live your life. I live mine.

**Jack Fritscher:** Mostly we've talked on the phone. Last summer, we had a two-hour phone conversation that I remember very well.

**Peter Berlin:** But you see, I have not even a clue that we talked. This is how bad my memory is. The only thing I remember is the time you and I did the questions and answers on stage with the audience at the Castro Theater [after the premiere screening of Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato's HBO documentary, *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures*, 2016]. I remember because there are pictures of you and me all over the internet and in the press.

**Jack Fritscher:** I love those [Getty Images] pictures. [Laughs] How you cuddled into me on stage and held my hand.

**Peter Berlin:** Memories come in my mind and then they disappear. In a way, I'm living without a memory. And there's something appealing to it, you know?

**Jack Fritscher:** Some things are better forgotten. "Some dance to remember. Some dance to forget."

**Peter Berlin:** On the other hand, while we talk, I'm reminded of all kinds of things. We are each of us like a comet with a big, big tail trailing behind.

**Jack Fritscher:** As the song says, we are stardust.

**Peter Berlin:** The older a comet gets, its tail diminishes and the tail is the whole history of our experiences. It's in our DNA and our memory. You, like most people, have a good memory, but I forget a lot of stuff. So, to tell the truth, for Armin the old Peter Berlin experience was yesterday, and it's evaporating.

**Jack Fritscher:** It's not just you evaporating. Even Polk Street, the street where you lived, is evaporating. The San Francisco we knew, like the Castro and Folsom world we knew half a century ago, is evaporating into the fog. The 1960s and 1970s were a different country. What did "Armin slash Peter Berlin" think in 1969 when you saw Joe Buck walking down the streets of Manhattan in *Midnight Cowboy*? You shot yourself in the 1970s as an urban cowboy wearing what looks like a boy's cowboy hat on your head like a crown.

**Peter Berlin:** I don't know. I didn't pay attention to movies then. I only remember two guys walking and one is in a cowboy hat. I don't remember anything else, but I assume I didn't like it much.

**Jack Fritscher:** One of the reasons I ask is that the film won the Oscar for Best Picture in 1969 at the same time as Stonewall while you were finalizing the creation of Peter Berlin. The first half of your *Nights in Black Leather* is as much a wonderful documentary of Polk Street in San Francisco as *Midnight Cowboy* is of cruising the streets of New York. In a sense, Peter Berlin was a midnight cowboy walking down Polk Street.

**Peter Berlin:** If only I could make a film of my life.

**Jack Fritscher:** You created your first movies just after Warhol shot Joe Dallesandro as the sexy lone-wolf hustler avatar in his films [*Flesh*, 1968, *Trash*, 1970, and *Heat*, 1972].

**Peter Berlin:** I don't remember Warhol's movies.

**Jack Fritscher:** Ha! Lots of guys who were there in the 60s don't remember the 60s.

**Peter Berlin:** One of the few films I remember is *A Streetcar Named Desire* because I saw it many times. I liked *My Dinner With Andre*.

**Jack Fritscher:** Which is two old men talking. Like now.

**Peter Berlin:** [Laughs] But when I see one film one time, it goes away. As for the *Tom of Finland* film, it's a good movie, but for me the scenes were too long. When the script made a point, I said, "Okay, I got it, I got it." I'd want a movie of my life to move faster. My own talent is limited. Looking back, it never has really been able to flourish and bloom.

**Jack Fritscher:** Even so, you've had an immense influence on several generations. Wait till the Millennials and Gen Z discover you.

**Peter Berlin:** My photos are remembered because their subject was honesty. As I told you, directing yourself creates a different picture than a photographer directing a model.

**Jack Fritscher:** What you call your honesty, I call your authenticity.

**Peter Berlin:** You should have seen me shooting myself in the mirror. So amusing. When I shot my double exposures [his famous signature doubles work, smacking of "twincest," which Peter Dubé who limns Peter Berlin so well in *Queer Surrealism: Desire as Praxis* called "the dialectic of look"], I had to remember with my bad memory whether I was supposed to stand on the right side this shot or the left. Little things. Sometimes I'd suddenly end up twice on the left side.

**Jack Fritscher:** [Laughs] What a comedy scene to put into your movie! Peter shoots himself.

**Peter Berlin:** Right. One thing I have acquired in America is a sense of humor. Humor is the main thing that gets me out of bed. I have a good friend in Holland. We've never met, but we talk on the phone.

He is my age. He was in the diplomatic sphere in Holland so he's had to work with the Queen, and yet, here he is on the phone. He said once, "I like to listen to your voice because you always bring me to laugh and laugh."

**Jack Fritscher:** You make me laugh.

**Peter Berlin:** That was the secret best thing with Jochen. We laughed constantly. Constant humor and constant good life, and my God, what a good life I've had. Poor Jochen. But the life I live now is a complete 180 degrees different. If you put a reality-TV camera in my apartment to livestream my life, or videotape it, theaters full of people would laugh at how Armin became Peter and Peter became Armin. Like with the Peter Berlin documentary Jim [Tushinski] made. A woman in Canada saw it and wrote me a letter saying she found it touching the way I talked about my lover James as a person. After twenty years, James died like everybody dies on me. So my daily life now is walking the neighbor's dog every afternoon for six years, sitting on a bench, feeding the pigeons. That's a scene for the opening and closing of my movie. I had to cut the dog's walk short today because I had to be here for you.

**Jack Fritscher:** Poor dog.

**Peter Berlin:** And, oh, that reminds me. Oh, I have to get him. Yeah. Uh, do you, do you think you have enough, or do you maybe call again or what?

**Jack Fritscher:** You've been most generous and forthcoming. I think we almost have enough, but if you'll indulge me, I have a couple more questions just to finish our train of thought.

**Peter Berlin:** Okay.

**Jack Fritscher:** I think that as influencer, you inspired Michael Zen's film *Falconhead* [plotted around an antique mirror that sucks each successive owner into a mirror-fuck sex fantasy].

**Peter Berlin:** Did I?

**Jack Fritscher:** I know you were an influence, a person under consideration, for casting in the iconic leather movie, *Born to Raise Hell*, in 1975 because director Roger Earl told me when I interviewed him [in 1997] that he wanted either Colt model Ledermeister [Paul Garrior] or Peter Berlin to star in what is now that leather classic.

**Peter Berlin:** That's interesting. I didn't know. I'm learning so much today.

**Jack Fritscher:** It would have been perfect dream casting if Derek Jarman had directed you as Saint Sebastian in his first film *Sebastiane* [1976].

**Peter Berlin:** But I, uh, don't take direction. I know there was a lot of interest in the persona of Peter Berlin in the 70s and 80s and 90s; but I was always sort of, "there not there." That I'm not forgotten is a miracle because I didn't do anything to further it.

**Jack Fritscher:** There's that old Latin saying, "Vita Brevis. Ars Longa." "Life Is Short. Art Is Long." I think it is your art that calls attention to you. I don't want to take any more of your time because that poor dog is probably dying to pee, but thank you. Thank you so much, Peter, for your time and the pleasure of your company.

**Peter Berlin:** It's too bad that there's always mileage between people. I, uh, would like to, you know, to be closer to you.

**Jack Fritscher:** If only we could be in the same room again. I'm still in quarantine because of Covid. So I'm not going anywhere soon.

**Peter Berlin:** Are you at some time in the future going out?

**Jack Fritscher:** Until Covid ends, I'll not go out again.

**Peter Berlin:** I no longer travel. I'm living completely sort of like you quarantined only that I don't do it because of Covid. Do you talk to friends?

**Jack Fritscher:** I used to, but I'm like you. The close ones are all dead now.

**Peter Berlin:** But some are left, not dead?

**Jack Fritscher:** Not really. No, because of AIDS and age, there's nobody left. Everybody from *Drummer* is dead. All my "Black Leather Swan" friends from Folsom Street are dead. My straight friends from school are dead. In fact, many of the university students I taught starting sixty years ago are dead so I no longer hear from them. Although one did email me last week.

**Peter Berlin:** Think of all the friends we've lost. Can you imagine the life we'd all be living now as old men if all our friends had lived?

**Jack Fritscher:** I think of that often. Would we all retire to Palm Springs? I try to keep them alive in my head and in my fingers when I write about them.

**Peter Berlin:** A whole different ball game. I think about it so much because I'm so basically by myself. Even with Reggie asleep in the bedroom. Not having a partner now is a very big problem in my life. It'd be a completely different life if those people we knew were alive. I can have sex with myself, but to share it is a whole different level.

**Jack Fritscher:** Armin, I figure those of us who survived AIDS have to live for those people who died and couldn't live. If you and I can tell their stories, say their names, that keeps them alive a little bit longer.

**Peter Berlin:** When you die and I die, then what is left in your case? The books, right?

**Jack Fritscher:** Right now in this moment, you and I have my words and your images that may survive us. We're both floating in a lifeboat from the *Titanic*.

**Peter Berlin:** Oh, yeah. It's a similarity.

**Jack Fritscher:** A metaphor for the Titanic 70s party that cruised on unaware of the iceberg of HIV that lay dead ahead.

**Peter Berlin:** I have so many stories. There are some episodes in my life like when I was nearly killed when some, some queen who was a mad queen, you know, uh, threw a sort of a, a, a beer bottle, a full beer bottle at my head in Rome, and it hit my forehead hard.

**Jack Fritscher:** That must have poured the bitters into *La Dolce Vita*.

**Peter Berlin:** Also in Rome, my interlude with [fashion designer] Valentino in the 60s is a vignette.

**Jack Fritscher:** Hey, another lovely scene in the script of the Peter Berlin movie.

**Peter Berlin:** It's a very beautiful little story. The Colosseum in those days was open at night, and it was a gay hunting ground.

**Jack Fritscher:** I know. I've been there at night. But after the 1960s.

**Peter Berlin:** Can you imagine? Inside that beautiful setting, people were cruising in the catacombs. And in front of the Colosseum, there was parking where the hustlers were. So I was in the parking lot being Peter Berlin and this beautiful guy comes to look, and we sort of start cruising, and he started talking, and I said, "Oh, you know what? I like silent cruising. I don't like talking." He said, "I have a friend who would like to meet you." I said okay."

**Jack Fritscher:** This is so Fellini.

**Peter Berlin:** So we walked out and there's this big black limousine parked, and then he opened the door and there was Valentino sitting there and, he said, "Hello," and I said, "I'm not into threesomes." But they gave me their phone number and invited me for tea. So I took Jochen with me. I said, "Jochen, I don't want to go by myself." So picture this very chichi apartment of this designer with his very beautiful, very elegant demeanor.

**Jack Fritscher:** This kind of scene is why Gore Vidal and Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote lived in Rome at that time.

**Peter Berlin:** So we had tea, and the music was playing. It was sort of a slow song I don't remember, but Valentino got up and bowed in front of me. He bowed! I was sitting and he asked me for a dance.

**Jack Fritscher:** Ah.

**Peter Berlin:** And I get up and we sort of embraced, sort of slow dancing, and I looked over Valentino's shoulder at Jochen, and I sort of rolled my eyes. Peter who was Armin who was Peter was slow-dancing with Valentino. Don't you think it's a beautiful scene?

**Jack Fritscher:** Yes, it is.

**Peter Berlin:** There I am, Armin, dancing as Peter Berlin with Valentino and then his friend, his partner, a very beautiful guy joined the two of us in the dance. He is still living with him. Now they're both very gray-haired. Both look fantastic because they have had a lot of work done. Anyway, that is the kind of a beautiful picture that I can see in the Peter Berlin film.

**Jack Fritscher:** [Laughs] I can see that too.

**Peter Berlin:** Yes. Don't you, when I talk, don't you see it immediately as a movie?

**Jack Fritscher:** Well, I was just going to say what you've given me here today and the way you've talked about these various scenes and the way you've thought about them and the way you hooked them together, there's a through-line here that's a kind of draft for the beginning of a film script.

**Peter Berlin:** Whenever I talk to people and they say they read books, I ask why don't you write a book? And then I tell them if you write a book in this day and age, you should write it as a screenplay.

**Jack Fritscher:** Exactly.

**Peter Berlin:** Because that is what people want. They sit in front of the TV and they look at Netflix, and then on the computer at my

stuff. So if you write a screenplay, people are more ready to invest in that because it's kind of "in."

**Jack Fritscher:** Calling all angels.

**Peter Berlin:** But it's so good to talk to you.

**Jack Fritscher:** Yes. If you're not too exhausted tonight, take a look at *My Policeman*.

**Peter Berlin:** Okay. Today, what is it? Monday? Oh, Monday at six o'clock I have to go to that stupid tenant meeting.

**Jack Fritscher:** Right. I better let you go.

**Peter Berlin:** No rush. First, I have to get the dog and then I go to the meeting. So I have to record Rachel Maddow on TV. Or I can just watch the repeat at nine o'clock. So say hello to your friend Mark. Your husband. It's good to talk to you.

**Jack Fritscher:** Thank you, Peter, for your time and all your information. You've been grand.

**Peter Berlin:** Thank you for you.

**Jack Fritscher:** As a journalist and friend, I thank you. May I say I love you.

**Peter Berlin:** Thank you.

**Jack Fritscher:** Til soon. Bye.

**Peter Berlin:** One never knows when it's the last goodbye. *Auf Wiedersehen*.