

Interview with Vincent Fremont and Shelly Dunn Fremont

Until *Pie in the Sky*, Brigid Berlin was either a bright star in your firmament or terra incognita. A fixture of the Factory, a muse to Andy Warhol, a conceptual artist who pioneered Polaroid art, a star of the 1967 film *Chelsea Girls*, Berlin is the kind of celebrity who can walk through many airports unnoticed today but attracts fans of all ages on the street in downtown New York.

Now her longtime friends and colleagues in the New York art world, the husband-and-wife team Vincent Fremont and Shelly Dunn Fremont, have made a feature film that communicates across boundaries about this utterly idiosyncratic artist.

Pie in the Sky takes Berlin from her origins as the first child of wealth and high society, through her wild and drug-laced days at the Factory to her still-obsessional present in a highly ordered apartment. Filmed with top-line talent mostly in digiBeta with a touch of Mini DV, the film also incorporates a wealth of early media: early Warhol films, Polaroid pictures, audio tape of Brigid's conversations with her family and with her mother, and home movies. It also includes interviews with a variety of artists, and writer Bob Colacello and filmmaker John Waters interpret Brigid Berlin for outsiders with manifest affection.

Vincent Fremont, now sales agent for the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, produced television, video, and film projects with Andy Warhol. Shelly Dunn Fremont has worked as an art director in the fashion world. This is their first documentary film.

The Fremonts spoke (serially) with Pat Aufderheide about the challenges of making movies across formats, friendships and generations. Their comments are identified with their initials.

This is a project with a very long history behind it

SDF: I like to say this project started 60 years ago when her father started filming her. But it took a year of shooting, editing and postproduction. This is our first project together, but it involved family friends. I met Andy before I met Vincent, and got to know that whole crowd.

VF: It was an evolution. I met Brigid 30 years ago and I started working for Andy in 1969. The first time I met her was at the Factory, so this is a 30 year project. Soon after Andy died, I optioned Brigid's life story. I wanted her to write her story in book form. As years went by I showed her trip books and cookbooks [two of Berlin's artistic projects] at international art fairs. In 1995 I exhibited her books at the Gramercy International Art Fair. They hadn't been seen for 20 or 25 years, and they included contributions by many notable artists, so people came to revisit the work. Then in 1996, I got her to do her monologue at the Gramercy International Art Fair, which she hadn't done since Brigid Polk Strikes, the outrageous performance we recall in the film, in 1968. She wanted to do other monologues and have an exhibit of her prints, so I started talking with art advisors. At that point, I was still trying to get her to do a book, so the idea was to do chapter monologues, where she would perform, talk about her life and we would transcribe it. We only did three of them. During the one about the kitchen, where she was talking about her cleaning obsession, she said she would rather do her life story on camera, and we said let's do a movie.

Was Brigid Berlin a cooperative subject?

SDF: She was amazing. To have us filming in her house, where there wasn't room for a

toothpick, was hard, but she was very gracious. We did choose not to show some aspects of her life, which would take us in a different direction. But she didn't say one word about what to leave in or out. She wasn't involved in any aspect of it, she was really terrific, she stayed far away. She understood that. She's been an actress for years. Not that she couldn't make our lives difficult, but in that aspect she was very professional.

How did you find your production team?

VF: We worked with very good people, some of whom we knew and some of whom came to us through friends. We wanted to go outside the circle a bit, to people who could give us perspective, because we were so close to the subject matter. I think we were sensitive to the fact that we would have references that only a few people would pick up. This is also the first feature I've done, although I produced all the TV shows for Andy. We worked with a wonderful editor named Michael Levine, who was recommended to us. Michael is younger than my wife and me, with different points of reference. He played a key role in structuring, in finding and shaping the story.

SDF: We decided to have all original music--it's too expensive to get music rights. But we also needed original music to evoke meaning without prompting memories that take you away from the movie—Oh, I remember hearing that song when I learned to drive... Chris Stein, a founding member of Blondie, wrote the whole score, all original music except for “Honey” and “All the Way.” We'd known Chris for years, and it was a great collaboration. We'd give him an idea for, say, a Mexico scene, and he would come back with the piece that was just perfect for that moment. I love the theme song for her house. Debbie [Harry] sang “All the Way” at the end for us. She said, it's so corny, you really want it? Ok!

Our cinematographer, Vic Losick, was terrific—he had worked on a lot of “American Masters.” He had just made *The Cruise*, and we begged him to help us. He could do a one-camera shoot, he wasn't balking at carrying the camera. He's very handsome and charming, so Brigid liked that—it kept her interest. And he brought so much good experience and quality people. We wanted it not to be flat and videolike, and we wanted to light the house so you could see all the collections, so it would be as cinematic as possible—he made it possible.

The film also acts as a kind of interpreter of an intense scene and moment in the New York art world for audiences.

VF: Within the circles of people I know, and the artists Brigid knew in the late 1960s, those people understand who she is. A lot of people don't understand that now, that Brigid was not a groupie, she was considered one of them, not a hanger on. She's a conceptual artist with lots of ideas.

SDF: There was a temptation to go further, into Warhol or the 1960s or the art world, but we decided not to go there. It's about one woman, a brilliant conceptual artist, who has done an amazing amount of work. We wanted to show her brilliance and the work she is known for. We wanted to have people rediscover her. Brigid Berlin is a character whose obsessions and self-absorption could have alienated viewers or elicited pity.

How did you cope with the challenge of portraying her in ways that could engage viewers?

SDF: We grappled with the problem constantly. We tried to be even handed, keep it as neutral as

possible. We didn't want to exploit these struggles she's had all her life. There were three things we were dealing with: her struggles with her mother, her weight, and her relationship as an artist with Andy. Andy always had amazing women surrounding him, but Brigid and Andy's friendship was certainly something we wanted to bring out and illustrate.

VF: They had a singular relationship. They were like a married couple in a way. We also wanted to tell her life in a way that people could have a universal understanding. And I think people can identify with her. We also didn't want to make it a dark story. It's got dark aspects, but it's not all dark. You feel for her and the struggles she has with her weight and with her mother. But she actually has a good life. She's taken obsession to a kind of artform.

It's almost shocking to overhear in your film, so many years later, the conversations between her and Andy Warhol—phone conversations she audiotaped compulsively, it seems.

SDF: Those tapes of their conversations are little gems. There are wonderful insights into him as a person and their relationship in them. There's a caring that most people don't associate with Andy. You can also hear the contrast between the coldness of her family—those tapes of her conversations with her mother--and the warmth of the Warhol tapes.

One of the peak moments of the film is a split screen segment, in which on the left we see clips from *Chelsea Girls*—including the notorious scene of Brigid injecting herself through her jeans--and on the right Brigid today, imitating her mother ranting at her about her performance in that underground film.

SDF: The split screen of course was an homage to *Chelsea Girls*, which used the split screen. We decided we wanted to use that device somehow in the movie. Our editor Michael Levine, who's just a genius, figured it out. We kept doing these monologues with Brigid, and we were fascinated by them, but when we showed them to people we realized we lost them. With the split screens, it's, "Oh my God, it works!"

How different is the film from the one you started out imagining?

VF: We had kind of a script in the beginning, but it's very different from the finished film.

SDF: We showed it to an editing class at NYU, when we had a cut that was dark and bleak. They didn't get it; it was too negative. Thank God Brigid didn't see that one. She waited till we were 80 percent there, and then we showed it on the Avid in a little editing room and she really loved it, and what a relief that was. Going back to the NYU kids was just as scary. But this time they said, Hey, it's a different movie.

VF: That time time we got a round of applause. We kept honing it down, and the themes began revealing themselves to us--the obsession with her weight, which you see with all the weighing and measuring, the struggle with her mother, her work as an artist. People forget she was and is an artist.

Did you consider giving viewers more information about Warhol, the Factory, Chelsea, that whole phenomenon?

VF: We really wanted to concentrate on her. Therefore, there is no narrator, and there are few guests. Bob Colacello is wonderful as the person who articulates her background. John Waters is

there as another filmmaker. So you get a sense of Brigid without having someone tell you.

There are so many formats used in this film that it's like a record of 30 years of production in itself.

VF: Yes, and that created some headaches. We took clips of Andy's films, so that's 16mm that years ago was blown up to 35mm and then converted to 1 inch. We had the reel-to-reel half-inch video that Michael Netter and I shot in the 1970s. Then we have Brigid's family's 16mm color film, which I conserved and put together with the help of John Gartenberg. We shot new footage with digiBeta, and then in the scene where she's eating key lime pie, that was Mini DV. We took all the formats, mastered it on digi-Beta, and DuArt blew it up to 35mm.

SDF: It was lucky for us that DuArt had invented this tape-to-film laser process, because we could work locally. We sent a five-minute sample to Switzerland, to Los Angeles and to them, and they were the best.

The transfer to 35mm was an act of faith.

VF: It certainly was. We did it before we knew what we would get. But so far it's working out well. We got accepted to the Venice Film Festival. We applied cold to Venice; we sent a cassette in off the Avid, with no sound mix, so we were very surprised and happy with the news. We're waiting to hear about Sundance, and we'll be in Berlin in February. Then we'll open at Film Forum on April 25.

Did your notion of the audience change over time as the film evolved?

VF: I think we're still waiting to see what the audience is. Ideally, the audience we would like is 20-somethings to my age.

Did you have models in your minds for the kind of documentary you wanted to make?

SDF: We'd say it was Grey Gardens meets Unzipped. That character of Isaac [Mizrahi, the central figure of Unzipped] is the character of Brigid, a real character who's hilarious and a natural in front of the camera. And one of my all time favorite documentaries was the documentary Crumb.

Did you find that you learned a lot from your first production?

SDF: Oh yes--I never had a clue going into this how much I would learn! Of course, what I've learned mostly is what we've done wrong, but I've also learned I really like the process, the collaboration; it's a larger scale version of the kinds of working relationships I'm used to as an art director. I keep discovering things. Now that we're going to Berlin and we need to subtitle the film, I wish we had put the IDs for people's name and the names of films in the upper right hand corner. It's just one of those things that never occurred to me.

Can you estimate the cost of production?

SDF: It was all privately financed.

VF: I never give out dollar figures. Too scary.