

The Watchman

Maik Schlüter

Views of the city at night—display windows, diners, the façades of buildings, streets, and squares. Jerry Berndt calls his series, which begins in Boston in 1973, *Nite Works*. This is a period in his life when he seeks solitude and concentration. He sleeps during the day and does not leave his one small room, which also serves as his bedroom and study, until it is dark. The absence of any kind of activity allows him to concentrate solely on the light conditions, the atmosphere, and the architectural structure of each situation. Although this central work exhibits clear references to photographs by Lee Friedländer, Stephen Shore, Ed Ruscha, or, in a further historical arc, to Walker Evans and Eugène Atget, Jerry Berndt's focus is less on the conceptual or typologizing element and more on a psychological state of emergency and a specific, symbolic nighttime mood.

At this point in time, Jerry Berndt is nearly thirty years old, and he has gone through ten eventful years of political activism in the movement against the Vietnam War, being involved in the student opposition, and beginning his creative work as a photographer. As one of the organizers of student resistance, his path in this period leads him from Milwaukee to Madison in Wisconsin; to Boston, Chicago, New York, Havana, and Detroit; and finally back to Boston. Now, in the early 1970s, he is working in Detroit as a newspaper photographer, a bread-and-butter job he had to accept after the political situation became increasingly radicalized and the student protest movement gradually split up into resignation and violence. At the latest since his trip to Cuba at the turn of the year 1969/70, Jerry Berndt was on record with the FBI and the authorities began to harass and trail him. It was impossible for him to find a job without the FBI surfacing and putting pressure on his (potential) employer to either fire him or not employ him in the first place. An old newspaper publisher in Detroit, who had experienced the paranoid anti-communist hearings conducted by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s, was the only one who was not easily impressed by the FBI and offered Berndt this job as a photographer. Work as a newspaper photographer, however, was monotonous and undemanding. Jerry Berndt stayed there for two years and then left Detroit for Boston. He was no longer listed as a “national risk factor” at the FBI. Once in Boston, he completely

withdrew and made a new start, not only in his personal life but with respect to photography as well, beyond all excessive political and social activities. He had for years been a powerful presence at demonstrations, protest actions, and discussions; now he is alone and opts for the nighttime hours and solitude as his sphere of activity. He substitutes photography and a kind of existential poetics for political activism and indignation.

Jerry Berndt was born in 1943 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Even before the outbreak of World War I, his grandparents had immigrated to the United States from Posen, which was then in East Prussia. His father worked in a factory in Milwaukee before going into business for himself in the 1940s as the proprietor of a bar. This is where Jerry Berndt spent his childhood, and according to his own information, he learned to read while sorting the different brands of beer.

In the early 1960s, Berndt occasionally moves in student circles. He works at the university bookstore without being registered as a student. At this point in his life, he has no formal training and no clear ideas about his future. At a party that took place around 1963, he accidentally meets Paul Goodman. Goodman is a writer, poet, and university lecturer in the areas of sociology, gestalt therapy, and poetics, and sees himself as a pacifist and anarchist. His book *Growing Up Absurd* (1956) is a widely respected contribution to the social sciences. It is required reading for all left-wing students and is a protest-movement bestseller.

Goodman advises Berndt to register as a student and helps him gain admission by writing a recommendation. However, he has to leave college after only a year.

Despite everything, Berndt is in the thick of things and learns very quickly. Within only a short span of time, he is one of the chief organizers of protest actions. He works full-time for the “the movement” and counsels conscientious objectors, organizes demonstrations in Madison and Boston, delivers militant speeches, even steals and burns conscription orders. All of these activities are illegal and punishable by law. He is apprehended and arrested several times during this period.

In addition to this, in the mid-1960s he takes on a job in the college’s darkroom. It was pure coincidence—he had no previous training and no previous knowledge. He was in dire financial straits, and had no concept whatsoever of what it means to develop photographs. Within a year, the autodidact acquires the necessary skills and gains access to the higher

school of enlarging. He studies Ansel Adams's books and learns the highest degree of photographic perfection. For Jerry Berndt, this period of learning pays off all his life. A year later, Berndt begins taking photographs himself and accompanies student demonstrations or takes pictures in the city of passers-by, the homeless, and the less representative aspects of urban architecture. These early works already exhibit the multiformity, precision, and creativity that will later become manifest in his series and sequences. Jerry Berndt becomes an obsessive photographer who declines genres across the board and from now on earns his living as a professional photographer.

Jerry Berndt's oeuvre begins in 1964 when he receives first prize in a photo competition in Madison, Wisconsin. Between 1967 and 1970, what is initially a loose assembly of images, which he in subsequent years compiles parallel to his political activities, leads to his first coherent work: *Combat Zone*. The red-light district, which Bostonians refer to as the Combat Zone, is the subject of a field trial by Harvard University, which commissions Berndt as a photographer. This conflict-ridden milieu consisting of black pimps, both black and white prostitutes, white johns from the middle and upper classes, and members of the navy, combined with all of the implications of racism and the black power movement, of open and latent violence, affords a wide spectrum of sociological and psychological analysis. Jerry Berndt starts taking photographs for the project, and with occasional interruptions, works non-stop on it for the next three years.

In many respects, *Combat Zone* is exemplary for Berndt's artistic approach. He works with sequences, series, and individual images. Sometimes he impulsively focuses on the one or the other decisive moment, and others he creates reserved views that have a conceptual basis. This blend of classic Street Photography with a conceptually oriented pictorial concept is characteristic for a large share of his works. Even his project *Missing Persons: The Homeless* (1984), a social reportage, displays these conceptual features: combinations of images and texts that press for a statement, and a well-thought-out graphical and typographical design characterizes the presentation of the accompanying book.

The focus of the series *The Babies* (ca. 1980–92) is the striking power of imagination and fantasy of Jerry Berndt's daughter, who was born in 1978. For a period of about twelve years, he continuously recorded the imaginary worlds she built and her explanations for them, thus

providing us with a unique documentation of a child's development. At the same time, he creates an entirely independent photographic work. The probing eye, the father's sensitivity, and the photographer's creativity enter into a symbiosis. Berndt's achievement is that he does not produce a purely subjective image or an inner-familial finding, and thus more or less personal photographs with little aesthetic value. A distinct image and text concept result in a conceptual form of photography that in equal measure allows reflecting on a child's power of imagination and development as well as on the possibilities of photography in a personal and intimate sphere.

The 1970s and 1980s are important years for Jerry Berndt, years during which he exhaustively defines himself as a photographer. The outcome of his sociocritical socialization, his social and political interest remains constant through the 1960s. Beginning in the 1980s, Jerry Berndt sharpens his interest for photojournalism and increases his social and political involvement as a war photographer and social documentarian. He produces extensive series on San Salvador (1984), Guatemala (1985), Haiti (1986–91), Armenia (1993–94), and Rwanda (2003–04), all of which mark an additional comprehensive part of his complex oeuvre.

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