

Rafel Bernis

OLVIDO'S BAR



This exhibition presents in its entirety for the first time the photographic report that Rafel Bernis (Barcelona, 1945) carried out in 1979 in a bar located in the *Barri Xino* (Barcelona's former red-light district). Distant from the realism of the 1950s and 1960s but also from the "creative" photography of the 1970s, the images document the uses of spaces of social gathering that no longer exist.

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During the year 1979, Rafel Bernis (Barcelona, 1945) photographed the comings and goings of the customers of a bar located at the heart of what was then known as the Barri Xino (Barcelona's former red-light district), at the corner of Carrer Sant Ramon and Carrer Marquès de Barberà. Bernis mingled with the regular customers, and the presence of his camera did not disturb the establishment run by Olvido.

The result is a photographic series that documents a time and place in the history of Barcelona, portraying the use of spaces of social gathering and offering a backdrop to the urban planning inspired by the Spanish transition to democracy, which, taking culture as the spearhead, would transform life in the city in the near future.

The humanist realism that prevailed in Spanish photography between the mid-1950s and the early 1960s was based on a universal and iconic language, on the utility of photography. But Bernis's photodocumentary makes a shift from the neo-realistic approach that created highly sentimental and de-ideologized images. He sets his subjects in a complex analysis of their social reality, exploring links that take them beyond aesthetization or allegory.

Bernis is also far from the work of the Catalan photographers of the 1970s, who challenged the previous generation by adopting a "creative" or art photography, as it was called at the time, rejecting the naturalism of photographic work during the dictatorship and using the impetus of the new cultural studies and semiotic jargon to adopt a critical attitude towards photography.

This distance from two irreconcilable conceptions of photography, which are still in dispute today, could perhaps be explained by the fact that Bernis was younger than Colom, Miserachs, Terré, Masats, Maspons and Català-Roca and older than Fontcuberta, Laguillo, Formiguera, Esclusa and Rigol. However, the lack of adherence to an existing model or programme is precisely what makes these images a double testimony: they show the micro-social layers that were ignored by the more stereotyped photographic representations of the

lower classes, but also extend realism towards an epistemological richness that is currently in disuse.

Olvido's Bar inevitably recalls Anders Petersen's photographs of the Café Lehmitz in Hamburg, which appeared in a book published in the same period (1978), although they were taken in 1967. However, unlike Petersen's photographs, which are mostly portraits of people watching and interacting with the camera, emphasizing the photographer's extemporaneous position, Bernis's work shows an emancipation of the point of view, a kind of autonomy from the subjects and events captured.

Bernis's photographs also move away from visual rhetorics that take an affectionate, discriminatory and benevolent approach to marginalization. It can therefore be said that the real protagonists of *Olvido's Bar* are not the alcoholics, prostitutes or waitresses who work there. What perhaps grants his sequences a different status is the blurring of the boundaries between the political space of representation, the theatrical space of human relations and the fictional space of photography. The men and women photographed participate in some way in the "management" of the images that the author is taking. They contribute through their choreographies of spontaneous gestures and their occasional foolery, so we notice no distance between the photographs and reality.

Though the bourgeois were often fascinated by the revelry of the lower classes, with their exotic habits and naive or heroic idealizations, there are hardly any photographic documents illustrating the bars frequented by the immigrant lumpenproletariat in the Barcelona of the 1960s and 1970s. *Olvido's Bar* is not a tour of the establishments located around the Plaça Real and in the area near the port. Here we see vulgar day bars with no artistic pedigree, establishments that combined the village taverns with the suburban bars and, in the metropolitan version, added two specific social types: prostitutes and homeless people, united by their economic relationship with the street.

Perhaps the most striking images of Bernis are those in which people are drunk or call people's attention, but also the







ones that illustrate dialogues between neighbours, the daily lives of those behind the bar, the silhouettes of passers-by and people peering into the door.

Most of the people portrayed are immigrants who probably arrived from Spanish rural areas during the first wave of migration in the 1960s. They are therefore very different from the immigrants of the 1970s, and also from those who went to live in Barcelona's industrial belt.

In the absence of a more compact community cohesion, Olvido's bar is the meeting point for these citizens, whom we imagine to be excluded from the labour market, pensioners alongside homeless people, drinkers and employees of the bar.

Women play a significant role in Bernis's photographs. They drink like the rest of the clientele, run the business, organize the work, dance and chat with each other. There is a matriarchal air in many images that recalls the women who ran the hostals where newcomers to the city and people without access to housing found their first home.

Part of the importance of this photodocumentary comes from its anachronism, from the image that it projects on a Barcelona shaken by the impending transformation of the Barri Xino into El Raval during the 1980s and 1990s. Gentrification, combined with various urban interventions in the district, led to the disappearance of establishments such as Olvido's bar or a change in their clientele. The corner where it was located has been converted into a square containing several youth hostels, a medical centre and food shops run by the Pakistani and Chinese residents. Interestingly, it is called Plaça de Pieyre de Mandiargues, in homage to the author of the novel *The Margin* (1967), which portrays life in the brothels of Barcelona in the 1960s and is set in the same backstreets. In fact, one of the scenes in the novel describes the protagonist's sexual relations with a prostitute in a hotel on Marquès de Barberà street.

With no pretension of nostalgia, the low-life legend of the Barri Xino is now not even a tourist attraction but is merely related to the literary and artistic memory of the city.

The new socio-economic composition of the inhabitants of El Raval has changed the neighbourhood's human landscape. *Olvido's Bar* thus documents a moment of contrast: Barcelona retained features of a small town while striving to be a metropolis; it was seeking to become a model, but large areas were still reluctant for Barcelona to become a brand name for tourism at the service of neoliberal economics.

Curator: Valentín Roma

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