

## BERLIN

## “Querelle—Photographed by Roger Fritz”

VENEKLASEN WERNER

In 1982, the year in which Rainer Werner Fassbinder made his film *Querelle*, one of the actors, Roger Fritz, took several hundred photographs on the set. On the film's release, a book was published with reproductions of 119 of the images. Depicting the actors in still, dramatized poses that embody each character's attitude as well as narrative episodes, Fritz's photos distill *Querelle's* wild, colorful, indoor set into iconic images. Fassbinder is noted for having brought some of the theatricality and the directness of the stage into the cinema, in part through his attention to the dynamic among an ensemble of performers as well as through his habit of capturing a scene in a single take. Fritz's images offer another perspective on this aspect of the filmmaker's creation. But in a recent exhibition at VeneKlasen Werner in Berlin, which was organized in collaboration with White Columns in New York and will be on view there this fall, the tables were turned: Fassbinder's controversial film and Dieter Schidor's documentary *Der Bauer von Babylon* (The Wizard of Babylon, 1983) helped to contextualize Fritz's images, exhibited for the first time.

The photographs, however, could not escape the long shadow cast by Fassbinder's film, the mixed reception of which was strongly colored by its exaggerated handling of its source: Jean Genet's 1947 novel, which follows the depraved sailor Querelle in a story of theft, murder, and betrayal in the French port town of Brest, where he also reunites with his brother and has various sexual encounters with both men and women. What is more, the film's release was shadowed not only by Fassbinder's death of a drug overdose shortly before its release, but also the prison suicide of his former lover El Hedi ben Salem, the star of his magnificent film *Angst essen Seele auf* (Ali: Fear Eats the Soul, 1974), to whom *Querelle* is dedicated.

Moreover, Fritz's photographs do not stand on their own as autonomous works; in this exhibition, they were mainly a stimulus to return to Fassbinder's film. Yet it is as much to the legend of Genet as of Fassbinder that we owe their revival. A singular figure himself, the French poet, novelist, and self-proclaimed thief was characterized by a waywardness not unlike that of the various actors in these parallel narratives—Querelle, Fassbinder, Ben Salem. Genet has received a sizable amount of attention on the art scene in recent years, particularly through the eponymously titled exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary in the UK in 2011 as well as in the productions of artists ranging from Marc Camille Chaimowicz to Lili Reynaud-Dewar, Richard Hawkins (via Tatsumi Hijikata) to Bruce LaBruce. Without these points of reference to lend added allure, this exhibition would likely not have existed. Image after image, wall after wall, these tightly tiled photographs offer little more than a recapitulated view of the film. Fritz's perspective, though slightly altered from that of Xaver Schwarzenberger's cinematography, has the effect of further ensconcing the work in its original reception. Electric pinks and deep, saturated blues vibrate against a low-hanging, orange sky; handsome men mix with stylized toughs and the token grande dame, Jeanne Moreau. By holding sultry looks and dynamic poses, the actors overdo it with attitude and underwhelm the viewer—just as in the film.

—John Beeson



Roger Fritz,  
Fassbinder's "Querelle"  
Nr. 082, 1982/2011,  
color photograph,  
29½ x 19¾".