

Jonas Bendiksen: Curiosity in Practice

4. Satellites

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The Star of David is scribbled on a broken apartment block window. Birobidzhan, Jewish Autonomous Region. Russia. 1999.

Birobidzhan

Following his spell as an intern at Magnum Photos' London bureau, Bendiksen, then 20 years old, received a grant from the agency to help him kick-start a project. Having been fascinated by Russia, the USSR, and his own family history, he set his sights toward Birobidzhan, the administrative center of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast. Travelling via Tokyo, including a two-day trip by sea in a rusty ship, Bendiksen arrived in Vladivostok, Russia. He recounts how, standing on the dock, alone and a world away from home, reality struck.

“I felt really, really alone in the world. I was way out of my depth...”

Continuing on to Birobidzhan, located on the Trans-Siberian Railway, near the China-Russia border, he began establishing roots; he secured a place to live, became more fluent in the language and, over time, built the confidence to head out with the clear intention of taking pictures.



Images courtesy of Laara Matsen



The first Jewish homeland of modern time, created 20 years before Israel, located in Far-East Siberia. People waiting for the morning bus in the freezing winter, which often reaches -40 Celsius. Birobidzhan, Jewish Autonomous Region. Russia. 1999.

The photographer explains how, even now, he employs a similar set of steps to “start the engine” when working on a project or assignment. Committing yourself to getting out, to building some “forward motion” for yourself and your work, versus overthinking it, is a positive approach to what can be a difficult aspect of photography. Starting something new is never easy, nor is maintaining it for that matter, but building a system or framework to work to – even if it is as simple as getting yourself out of the front door – can be a useful practice.

Street scene. Birobidzhan,
Jewish Autonomous Region.
Russia. 1999.



Bendiksen planned to spend a year in the region, looking to document the daily life of the remaining Jewish community that resides there, and searching for signs of the region's Soviet history. However, within ten months the photographer faced accusations of espionage from the Federal Security Service (FSB), the chief security agency of Russia, and the main successor to the Soviet Union's KGB. Fortunately, Bendiksen had become good friends with some locals who happened to have connections with the FSB agents, so rather than be deported, he agreed to board the next train out of town of his own accord. Swiftly gathering all his belongings, including his many rolls of undeveloped film, the photographer left Birobidzhan.



A Russian Jewish teenager at an Israel-sponsored summer camp. Birobidzhan, Jewish Autonomous Region. Russia. 1999.



Birobidzhan's first Rabbi in years, who was only 18 years old. Birobidzhan, Jewish Autonomous Region. Russia. 1999.

Every week, hundreds of Birobidzhani Jews left for Israel, once again in search of a Jewish homeland and a better life. Birobidzhan, Jewish Autonomous Region. Russia. 1999.



Shooting Blind

Having departed from Birobidzhan – a town which did not have a photographic lab, nor one nearby – the next step for Bendiksen was to have the countless rolls of film he had amassed across this ten month period processed. Nearly a year since starting this journey, he had still not seen a single frame. This ‘blindness’ represents a very different way of learning, but as Bendiksen reflects, it also “represented a kind of liberation” for him. Rather than think about aesthetics, composition or visual style, he was focusing on different aspects of what he was doing: “I said, what am I photographing? Who am I photographing? What is my relationship to these people? And how do I move through this story myself? And I guess it became a focus more like, what is the story I’m trying to tell?”

Inevitably this informed his development as a photographer placing the story at the very heart of his approach.

“I’m always driven by the story.
I’m driven by the questions I’m interested in.”

The Sunday Times Magazine

“I just couldn’t believe my eyes.”

Having developed the films, Bendiksen pitched the story, successfully selling it to *The Sunday Times Magazine*. Bendiksen’s “hunch” was right: the publication produced a 10-page feature on the work which included an article written alongside his images. “Most people didn’t know about this place and it was a fascinating story that was interesting for so many reasons. So they made a big splash out of it”.

This was a significant moment for Bendiksen; proof that living and working as a photographer was a possibility.





Stalin looks out on his creation while Raisa sews. Birobidzhan, Jewish Autonomous Region. Russia. 1999.

Crows circle a statue of Lenin in front of the Supreme Soviet building. Transdniester is in many ways one of the last bastions of communist nostalgia in the former USSR. Transdniester, Moldova. 2004.



Satellites

“Satellites taught me a lot of what I know about photography. Also, it was my first experience making a book, it became my first experience making an exhibition. It was my first real project. And I think it gave me the faith that it’s somehow worthwhile pursuing these personal passions you have.”

Following his ‘arranged’ exit from Birobidzhan, Jonas continued to live in Russia, working out of Moscow. After about a year and a half, his previous dealings with the FSB, combined with a growing awareness around his work, and the stories he was exploring, culminated in his expulsion from Russia. This testing moment acted as a trigger point, forcing Bendiksen to consider new ways for him to explore post-Soviet history. “Russia was only one of many former Soviet Republics: Uzbekistan, Moldova, Kazakhstan, the Ukraine. All these places and [others like it] were still open to me.”

Several years of travelling across the southern borderlands of the former USSR to explore the unrecognized states, breakaway republics, and remote communities that were born out of the collapse of the Soviet Union, culminated in his first monograph: *Satellites*. The project took Bendiksen from Eastern Europe to Central Asia, including the region between Russia and Kazakhstan where many spacecraft crash.

Left
With its lush Black Sea location, Abkhazia is trying to attract Russian tourists. Here, at a road stop on the tour bus route, an entrepreneur, who charges tourists 10 rubles to photograph his bear, catches his breath between busloads. Abkhazia. Georgia. 2005.

Below
Jonas Bendiksen poses alongside a bear. Image courtesy of Laara Matsen.



People sailing out on the
Black Sea. Gagra. Abkhazia.
Georgia. 2005.

Get the poster





Although Abkhazia is isolated, half-abandoned and still suffering war wounds due to its unrecognized status, both locals and Russian tourists are drawn to the warm waters of the Black Sea. This unrecognized country, on a lush stretch of Black Sea coast, won its independence from the former Soviet republic of Georgia after a fierce war in 1993. Sukhum. Abkhazia. Georgia. 2005.



Marketplace. Osh. Ferghana Valley. Kyrgyzstan. 2002.

Dead cows lying on a cliff.
The local population claim
whole herds of cattle and
sheep regularly die as a
result of rocket fuel poisoned
soil. Altai Territory. Russia.
2000.



Behind the Image

In this short interview, the photographer explores the making of the cover-image for *Satellites*, a situation that he describes “as the most surreal and magical single photographic moment” of his whole career.

What is happening in this photograph?

There are two young guys, local farmers I think, who are pulling copper wire from the hull of a crashed Soyuz spacecraft – specifically the second booster stage. I was chasing a story about people who live in the areas under the flightpath of space rocket launches from Baikonur, Russia’s biggest spaceport. As we know, everything that goes up eventually comes down, and each time a space rocket launches from Baikonur the massive booster stages fall down to earth once their fuel is depleted. At least at that time they fell down into populated areas. While some locals complained about health problems and mysterious diseases allegedly stemming from the rocket crashes, others made good money out of them selling the precious high-grade scrap metal.

So I was photographing these men who had started ripping up the spaceship. It had just rained heavily, and the storm clouds were passing in the background, giving that dark background. The sky filled with thousands of white butterflies. Farmers, space rocket, butterflies, sunlight on stormy skies: all in all this is probably one of the most surreal and magical moments ever to pass before my eyes.

Where and how was this image made?

It was taken in the Altai territory of Russia, just north of the border with Kazakhstan in 2000. It was taken with a medium-sized telephoto lens, which is what makes the butterflies compress to fuzzy white out-of-focus dots. But on some of the more distant ones you can see the wings beating.

What was happening outside the frame?

I’m definitely happy about this picture, it would be wrong of me to complain about anything. But having said that, right outside the frame there was a third guy on a horse. The image could definitely do with a guy on a horse in the middle there somewhere! Or maybe that’s overkill. Anyways it would have been fun to have seen it in there.



Villagers collecting scrap from a crashed spacecraft, surrounded by thousands of white butterflies. Environmentalists fear for the region's future due to the toxic rocket fuel. Altai Territory, Russia. 2000.

If you hadn't taken this shot, what would you have been doing instead at that precise moment?

I do remember right after this there was a great big picnic party. All the scrap metal collectors and locals gathered down at the river a stone's throw away from the scrap. Lots of food, salads, snacks and quite a bit of booze. So if I hadn't been photographing it I imagine I'd be lying down in the grass by the riverside, munching away on a great big juicy slice of watermelon.

Tell us a secret about this image?

Hm... Well, I can admit that the evidence suggests that I didn't really understand at the time that this would be a great picture. Maybe I just stumbled into it and it was pretty much down to luck, instead of buckets of talent and know-how. The contact sheet shows that I took three images in total from this angle, even though the situation went on for a while. I think I've got about half a roll of film of the entire scene. If I came across this today I suppose I would have recognized it for what it was and pushed that shutter button quite a few more times. But on the other hand back then in the film days, we were maybe better photographers who were better at trusting one's instincts at the right moments?



Jonas Beniksen maneuvering around the scene, surrounded by white butterflies with rocket ship debris and scrap collectors behind him. Image courtesy of Laara Matsen.



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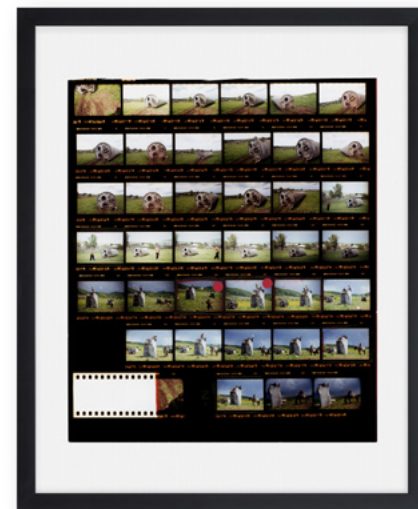


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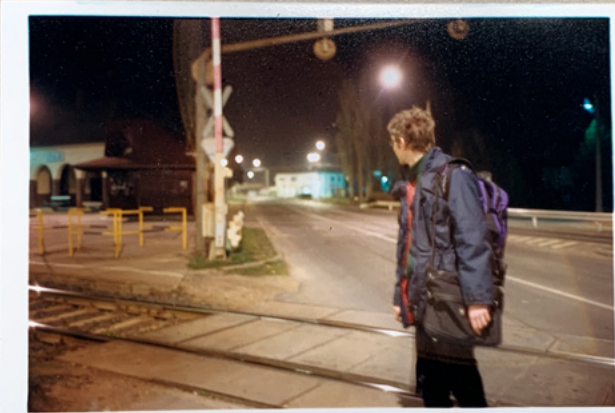
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A Soyuz rocket fuel tank lies on the steppe. Kazakhstan. 2000.



A collection of photographs taken of Bendiksen working in the field, as featured throughout this lesson. Colour images courtesy of Laara Matsen.



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