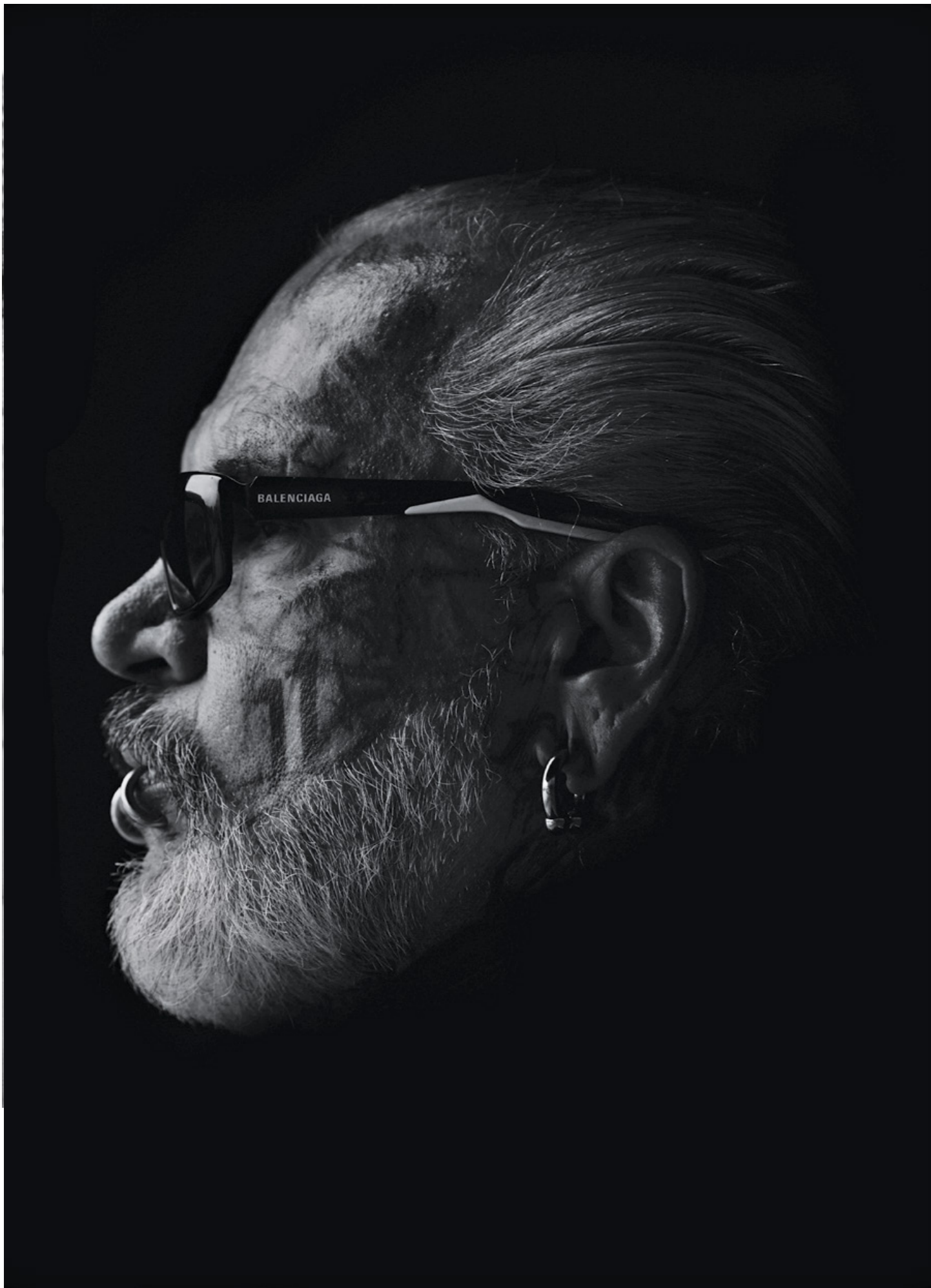


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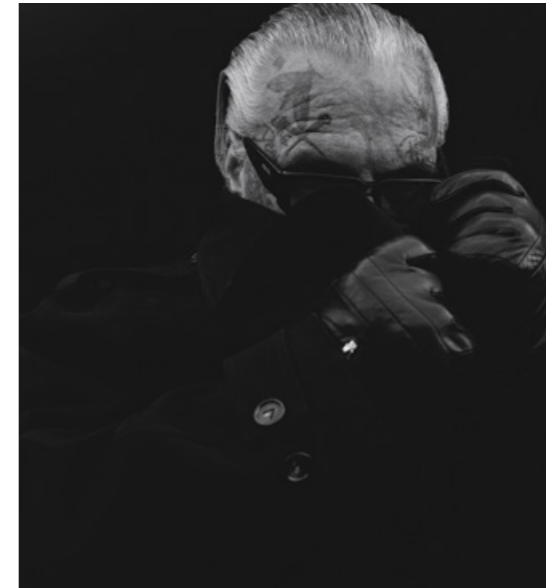
If you didn't already know that Sven Marquardt was the living embodiment of Berlin's underground club scene, you could probably work it out just by looking at him. One gray morning, he strolls slowly into the courtyard of the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in the city's Mitte neighborhood, thickset and deliberate, wearing an ankle-length black denim skirt, an ochre hoodie scrawled with anarchist graffiti and a bank heist's worth of jewelry and piercings.

Marquardt settles down at a table in the gallery's café. At 62, with slicked-back gray hair, his face invokes the punk spirit of Berlin's hard-partying music scene of the 1990s, from the two thick rings piercing his lower lip like fangs to the palimpsest of facial tattoos that reveals more the longer you look at them: thorns, moths, inverted crucifixes, the number 11, the word "pit-bull" written with a cursive flourish.

He's best known as the doorman of Berghain, the techno club of near-mystical renown set in the brutalist confines of a former East German thermal power plant.¹ It's synonymous with world-class electronic music, a skull-rattling sound system and a crowd that is radically liberated in both mind and body. Each weekend, hundreds line up for "Klubnacht," where music plays continuously from Saturday night until midday on Monday.

Many aspiring dancers will never get in, turned away for not meeting the standards of the club's famously obscure door policy. Marquardt, known to the techno community simply as "Sven," was the doorman when Berghain opened in 2004, and is still the unofficial face of the club, the one who decides whether you make the cut.

Despite this fearsome reputation, he speaks softly and explains—from behind thick-framed Prada glasses—that these days he spends more time working as a photographer than as a bouncer. He has been taking photos since he was young, growing up in Prenzlauer Berg, East Berlin, before the fall of the Wall.²



(above)
Marquardt was inspired to get his first tattoo—a cross of thorns on his leg—by the American model Tony Ward, who had a similar motif on his forearm.

It was here that he got his first taste of alternative culture, falling in with a gang of arty kids who chafed under the oppressive East German government and obsessed over the new wave and punk music filtering in from the West. "It was a very small scene," Marquardt recalls. "There were no clubs. Everything was hidden—in people's houses or even their

cellars."³ He discovered Patti Smith and the work of her close friend Robert Mapplethorpe, an influential queer photographer of the New York scene. Picking up the camera for himself, he began shooting the subcultures around him and was soon taken under the wing of East German photographer Helga Paris, who became his mentor.⁴

Marquardt, who was 27 in 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell, became heavily involved in the party scene that emerged from the rubble. He and his friends would break into empty buildings to create improvised club and bar spaces that would often last only a few weeks. "I would start dancing on Friday and end on Tuesday morning. It was very excessive," he says, chuckling softly. "I had always felt free in my mind, but this was the first time I was physically free. I felt it most at night, with all the clubs and dance and drugs and tattoos." He was part of the wave of Berliners that transformed the newly unified city into a playground that attracted artists, outsiders and radicals from all over, drawn by the promise of cheap rents and the chance to express themselves freely.

Marquardt stopped taking photos in those first years following reunification. "After they opened the border, I felt like a foreigner in my own country," he says.

"We all did. I had lost my identity and I needed to find it again." It was in the clubs that he discovered a sense of belonging. "The dance floors in the early '90s were the first place of reunion, where nobody cared about your gender, your background, whether you came from East or West." As Germany knitted itself into a single state, people came together in the clubs of Berlin to lose and find

Meet SVEN MARQUARDT, the photographer and doorman who can make or break your night.

themselves together on the dance floor.

Marquardt started working the door at a series of parties to earn some money. It suited him well. "I always felt comfortable in the club context, to be whoever I wanted to be," he says. He began by working for Ostgut, a gay fetish party, which moved into a disused power station on the border between the neighborhoods of Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain, and ultimately became Berghain. From the first night, Marquardt was stoically stationed at its door, a fearsome arbiter of the club's vibe and a statement of aesthetic intent.

Berghain will celebrate its 20th anniversary in December and seems more popular than ever. As the club has become world-famous, it has had to work out how to retain its identity—to still offer nonjudgmental, hedonistic freedom to its regular crowd even as casual techno tourists line up outside in increasing numbers. The notorious door policy ensures that the club always has the right people, and therefore the right atmosphere.

When asked why Berghain is so selective, Marquardt says they want to safeguard the club's heritage, rooted in the queer party scene of 1990s Berlin. "The term 'safe space' is from the last few years, but for us, it's always been the heart of club culture," he says. "People go there to show themselves as they are, without worrying about what the rest of society thinks."

There is a tension here: In order to be an inclusive and safe space, Berghain has to exclude many who want to enter. When asked about this, Marquardt stiffens, agitated: "Ja, we have so many Berghain questions, and they're always the same," he says. "Why is it so famous? Why do so many people come? It's not a mystery, it's a building. It's a club. It's a place for people to feel free and to be themselves." He admits to sometimes feeling tired of being seen as the face of Berghain.⁵ "So many people make [the club what it is], from the booking team to the bartender. It's a big business," he says. Then he softens once more. "But I am very thankful for the past years, and for the chance to work in the club."

Some of Marquardt's photos draw inspiration from the club and feature DJs and fellow bouncers, others depict abandoned and industrial buildings reminiscent of Berghain. His work has taken him around the world, with exhibitions in LA and Istanbul and a teaching position in Florence. Though the images have a timeless quality—monochrome portraits lit only by daylight, softened by the grain of analog film—modern club culture is still palpable in his work. It's there in an exhibition in a New York gallery accompanied by a soundtrack of booming techno, as well as in collaborative projects that pair his photography with the soundscapes of Berghain resident DJ Marcel Dettmann. His work often highlights the more unusual

“Art can make each of us visible... That is very precious.”







characteristics of its subjects. “Art can make each of us visible,” he says. “Each individual can represent themselves, where they come from; their religion, their heritage, what they have experienced. That is very precious.”

These days you’ll only find Marquardt on the door at Berghain on Sunday nights. He used to dance during those shifts, but not anymore. “I’ve had enough of dancing now,” he says. But he still has no plans to retire—provided he continues to find his work stimulating. His mentor, Helga Paris, died three weeks before this interview, and he refers to one of his final conversations with her. “She said she has no curiosity anymore, no more questions.” He looks pensive. “I think curiosity is the most important thing. I still look forward to my projects and my shift every Sunday.”

Marquardt continues to seek new things: He recently modeled for fashion brand 44 Label Group and had a cameo role in the action movie *John Wick: Chapter 4*, alongside Keanu Reeves. He also expanded into shooting video for the first time, making a short film during lockdown. “That’s a fresh moment of curiosity for me,” he says, “it’s a new chapter.”

Berlin has transformed during Marquardt’s tenure in its cultural underground; it has gone from a divided city to a wild artistic playground to a modern international capital, with changing demographics and the specter of gentrification haunting its trendiest neighborhoods. “I’m not someone who says: ‘Back then everything was better.’ It’s just different,” says Marquardt. He spreads his fingers across the tabletop, each gothic ring chiming in turn. “I’m not yet at the point of looking back. I’m part of the change, which is why I’m still working. To stay part of the world.”

- (1) The name Berghain is a portmanteau of the two city quarters that flank the south and north sides of the building, Kreuzberg (formerly in West Berlin) and Friedrichshain (formerly in East Berlin). The literal meaning of the German word Berghain is “mountain grove.”
- (2) Marquardt’s brother, Olivier, is a DJ. In 1995, he started his own parties, called Jauchomatic, giving Marquardt his first job as a doorman.
- (3) To be a punk in East Berlin was dangerous. Punks were labeled “asocial” by the authorities and often disappeared into the prisons of the Stasi, the East German secret police.
- (4) Helga Paris was best known for her portraits of life in East Berlin in the early 1970s. She found her photographic motifs in everyday life: apartment buildings, break rooms and factory halls, or on the streets and in train stations.
- (5) In 2016, the Swedish company behind a Berghain-themed card game called *Bergnein*, in which players could refuse or allow entry into the club, was ordered to pay damages to Marquardt for using his likeness without his consent.