

# SVEN JOHNE

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Sven Johne cannot be pinned down to one artistic discipline. He is a photographer and video artist, but above all a storyteller, researcher and explorer. He uses a variety of media, including video, photography and prose, to describe (among other things) his search for a pack of wolves allegedly roaming free close to the Polish border, or Alfred Kleistner's spectacular escape from what was once East Germany. Then there are his amusing short texts about "Grand Masters of Deception" – characters with odd but lovable idiosyncrasies. One such was Joachim Boilstedt, who decided upon approaching retirement that he wanted to be an astronaut. So he built a space ship of scrap metal and plywood in his garden, called it "Mission Future", and lived in it for 63 days.

One recurring principle in Johne's work is a combination of text and image which serves his conceptual approach to documentary photography. The artist's words, inscribed within his pictures, are not merely of formal relevance. They reflect his meticulous research into miscellaneous snippets of information – found, perhaps, in the margins of a newspaper – and they highlight the narrative element in his work. But by echoing the sober style of the printed report, Johne's texts cleverly blur the boundaries between his own retelling of the incident he has researched and the original newspaper story.

In many of his works, the artist casts light on developments in East Germany under the old regime or after the Wall came down. While the subjects themselves vary – from landscapes in the former GDR to the reconstruction of Vinh, a city destroyed in the Vietnam War, by skilled East German workers – he displays a recurrent interest in the part of Germany where he was born, and where he experienced dramatic changes from the age of 12.

## *Elmenhorst (2006)*

On a Baltic shore in the Bay of Mecklenburg, the camera observes two men walking along a beach. The older one has a rifle slung over his shoulder, although the situation seems anything but threatening. On the contrary, the two men seem to be on familiar terms. Now and then their gait falters as they exchange a glance or else avoid each other's eyes. Are they resolving an argument or

thrashing something out? Instead of talking, however, the two actors use body language and facial expression to suggest something unspeakable and unspoken. Only the title of this video piece offers a possible clue to their behaviour. In GDR times, the coast around Elmenhorst was in the border zone and came under close military surveillance. From 1961 to 1989, 5,600 East Germans tried to escape from here to the West German state of Schleswig-Holstein. Only 913 of them made it to the West. "Elmenhorst" is a silent commentary on the question of guilt and on the troubled efforts of the younger generation to understand their elders' loyalty to the old regime.

## *Wissower Klinken (2007)*

With the assistance of a male voice choir from the north of Leipzig, Sven Johne composed a requiem – "Wissower Klinken" – for the tourist guide Klaus Bartels, who died in 2005 when he was crushed by rocks falling from cliffs on Rügen. Two years after his death, the guide known for his "Musical Rambles" across the island was accompanied to his grave with this song in the hiking tradition. But the respectful rendering by these motionless singers has little in common with the type of singing celebrated by Bartels. Rather, this work interprets a musical culture, mindful of the situation for which it is being performed. The narration and the singing, the two aspects to "Wissower Klinken" unfolding in parallel like counterpoint, make this both a radio play and a concert, but also a thriller, a classical tragedy and – many would even say – a fairy tale.

## *Tears of the Eyewitness (2009)*

Producing a culture of memory and presenting history in words are hallmark themes in the work "Tears of the Eyewitness". The film records the minutes before shooting begins on a documentary film about the Monday demonstrations in Leipzig. An eyewitness is about to describe what happened, but in Johne's video this man is not the narrator. That role is taken by someone else, who is evidently preparing the so-called eyewitness to play a part. It remains unclear until the end whether the latter's silent replies are prompted by the script that is being read to him or whether he is bracing himself to perform as the face of the protest movement. His tears, which mark the end of a

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monologue by the other man, doubtless have little to do with his own feelings. They seem, rather, to respond to an asymmetrical relationship in this dialogue and to the simplification behind official histories.

