

INTERVIEW // JAN VON HOLLEBEN

By Aline Smithson



Jan von Holleben

The Astronauts, from the series Dreams of Flying

I first discovered the work of Berlin photographer, Jan von Holleben, when I was combing through the results of the PX3 Awards some years back. I came across his images from "Dreams of Flying" and was immediately hooked. My unbridled enthusiasm towards Jan's approach and work is simply because it makes me happy. I look at a lot of photography as an editor, blogger, writer, and curator, and Jan's images are always in a league of their own—he instills a sense of joy, fun, and thoughtfulness to everything he approaches. The element of "play" is vital to his work.

Born in 1977 in Cologne, Jan grew up in an alternative commune in the German countryside. His work reflects the strong influence of his parents, a cinematographer and child therapist. At 13, he picked up a camera and began experimenting with all sorts of approaches and developed his photographic imagination. He then began studies in teaching children with disabilities at the Pädagogische Hochschule in Freiburg, and later moved to London, earning a degree in the Theory and History of Photography at Surrey Institute of Art and Design. He worked as picture editor, art director and photographic director and set up two photographic collectives, Young Photographers United and photodebut, followed more recently by the Photographer's Office. Jan now lives in Berlin and approaches his fine art and commercial photography with the same amount of energy and enthusiasm.



Jan von Holleben

The Dogrider, from the series Dreams of Flying

Jan is a prolific photographer; just in 2011, he has created over 14 new projects, many about children and the joy of exploring who we are. He is also an active video director and has numerous books and items for sale on his site. His work will be part of the Dreams exhibition opening on December 2nd, at the Center for Fine Art Photography in Colorado.

I see that Kanye West professes: 'Jan von Holleben makes dreams come true!' Is that true and how did Mr. West come across your work? Yes it is true. I am not sure where Kanye came across my work, but some funny day, I received an email from a dear friend, who told me that Kanye blogged about my work on his own blog. I checked it out and was quite surprised, honored and excited! My work is featured on many hundred blogs across the World Wide Web, but that one was the first time, a celebrity had picked up on it. That was WOW!

How do you delineate "Work" and "Projects" on your website? That is a very good question as I just wondered about that myself the other day. Initially it was meant to differentiate between long term and intensive 'work' and rather smaller or short-term projects. Over the last year, I realized that this doesn't work that well anymore. Funny enough I feel more and more that my projects are exercises for me and my understanding of photography. Many of the projects are in collaboration with other people or ideas that I simply want to try out and test. As for the 'work' I feel much more intense about them. All is connected somehow. On the other hand, there are projects that I love to bits and think they belong to my best work. I am very torn. Sometimes I think that I have already produced my best work. Other times I feel that my best work is still due to come and I am just pottering around in the fields of photography trying all the fun and magic ideas I have to prepare myself for the BIG GAME! Lets see. It is very exciting.



Jan von Holleben

The Van Gogh, from Great Masters, 2007-2009

You seem to be the perfect hybrid of your parent's professions— a cinematographer and child therapist. How are you able to combine exuberance, joy, and sophistication with such ease and tap into your inner child's imagination so easily? As for the mix, I have taken my mums vision and combined it with my dad's means of expression. Then I put my own interest in play-theory to it and there I was: A concerned and playful photographer! I don't think that 'a child's imagination' might be the right term. To me playing has not much to do with kids at all. However in western world, we tend to put PLAY and KIDS always together. Historically and culturally that is easy to understand as kids play naturally – but theoretically play is something crucial for the development of a society. It is inherit in sports, dance, politics, relationships, ... in everything. Anything creative needs a basic understanding of 'playing'! Obviously kids appear a lot in my work, and the reason for that is simple: Kids are the easiest to play with. Recently I made it a mission to play with anything that comes my way. If it is nature, fashion, models, cars, philosophy, music, science... anything! I have a certain way of tackling and organizing the games that I play with those objects and people. This is the red thread through my work. The theory of the homo ludens builds the foundation for that. The homo ludens is the man who learns through play about himself and others. It is quite amazing once you understood that next to the homo faber, homo sapiens, homo politicus, homo socialis and all the other homis there is a promising homo ludens who can actually take care of culture and society by means of play! This is not at all just fooling around with things... playing is quite a serious venture. With this understanding I can easily combine all of my interests in my photography. I have a creative mind, a positive vision and a magical communication tool. I don't need anything else? Easy really!



Jan von Holleben

Memory, from Intelligent Dogs 2011

What sparks a new series? You have 4 new ones this year and I know there will be more. Do you have a favorite series? New series can be sparked by anything that comes my way. Somehow most of the work is biographical. I meet a person I want to work with and know things about. I am confronted with a theory and want to test that. I am told to think about this or that and images come out of it. I always have a personal motivation to take something in and spit out photography. The 4 series that you see on my website are only the tip of the iceberg this year. Checking my private archive, I have done more than 20 projects already and working on another 10 as I am typing this. That way I don't get bored and can use my energies to bring every single idea forward as and when its time to do so. Some work needs months, others takes days and some are done in a single hour!



Jan von Holleben
#23 from the series Snowbed

A favorite series? Very tricky, but I think that The Great Masters and The Snowbed are definitely in my top 5 of the last 10 years!

How does your fine art work inform your commercial work and visa versa? It is all the same. No difference in my position as photographer. There is an idea and I translate it in the best possible photograph according to my vision and abilities. Except that for my own work and ideas I choose whom to work with and on what parameters. When I do commercial or editorial work, the framework is defined by others. Over the last years I get more and more freedom in commercial and editorial, which makes most of the work extremely personal. As for choice, I wouldn't be able to choose what work is better for me. I love the freedom for my own work, but I also love the possibility to work with great editors and directors, with budgets, complex productions and publications who multiply the audience of my work by thousands.

I also see that you are teaching workshops. One in particular, The Playful Photographer, is the perfect marriage of your sensibility and what the photography world needs. Can you describe the workshop? This workshop is my favorite as it deals with the notion of 'PLAY' in photography. It explains me as a 'homo ludens' and juxtaposes my work with photography by other great photo-players. It explains the magical features of photography and how play can use those in order to change perception and then how perception becomes reality! To me, this workshop is a little wizard class in photography! Tricks and smoke for beginners!



Jan von Holleben
#11 from the series Snowbed

The last time I saw you, you were working with Steidl on some book projects. Is something coming out soon? When working with Steidl one has to throw all notions of bookmaking over board. That is the most exciting lesson I had to learn. At the moment I am working on three different books and the first one might get published next year. One says that making a book with Steidl takes an average of 5-10 years in reality. The first book that I started on 4 years ago is not the first one to come out. It might take another 2-3 years and it carries a lot of my basic understandings of photography. However the first one to come out was done last year over the period of a few months when I was asked by the publishers to play with a photographic piece by John Baldessari. It's a very funny project and I can't wait to have it printed and published. Its a very different thing and has stylistic nothing to do with my general photography (if at all there is a certain style in my photography). I would have never thought of doing it was it not for my editor to point my nose at it! I am very excited that I did it and can't wait to show it to John Baldessari in person.

What was your favorite childhood book? The Brothers Lionheart by Astrid Lindgren. She wrote many more exciting books and all are equally amazing (Pippi Longstocking, Ronja Robbersdaughter, Mio). She definitely defined the unlimited yet serious comprehension of the world around me and me within it!

Did you watch TV as a child? I wasn't allowed to watch as much as I liked to, but I hold very fond memories to the things I saw there. My mum was careful not to expose us to series or films we wouldn't understand and usually joined us watching. I haven't touched a TV for the last 10 years and feel very great about it!



Jan von Holleben

01, from Lily & Jonathan, 2011

Is there ever a day when you don't have fun? I am manic about turning everything I can into something good and fun! I can't help it. And funny enough, this procedure is not always good! That's a paradox, I know! But it seems to work in most cases!

And finally, your favorite candy? Licorice! I would claim that I have tried most of the widely available kinds across the globe. I eat all kinds but definitely have my preferences on the more sophisticated nordish flavors. I am a fanatic with licorice and started very early on. My aunts and my mom are the same. As a balance I eat sour tongues (sour sugar coated winegums) and in combination with licorice: That's a firework!

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