
Dogs fly, children breathe fire: it's all in a day's work for the German photographer, Jan von Holleben.

Daniel West meets him in Berlin

I am squatting on a bare concrete floor strewn with baubles. In front of me, two people are struggling to make tropical plants look like aliens. Their sighs of resignation are drowned out by a German radio station playing Hit Me Baby One More Time backwards, so that Britney Spears sings "Sleep with me; I'm not too young". Just another day at the office for photographer Jan von Holleben.

Given von Holleben's portfolio, and the fact we had arranged to meet in Berlin – Dada's spiritual home – surrealism was to be expected. The German-born, British-educated artist is known for the weirdness of his images: dogs fly, children exhale flames – reality is suspended by his camera. It's an aesthetic that's marked von Holleben out from his contemporaries. There are thousands of photographers peddling similarly fantastical imagery, but von Holleben's magic is lo-fi. Instead of air-brushing castles into skies, von Holleben serves up raw fiction. No Photoshop filters but plenty of smoke and mirrors – literally.

Mirrors are the basis of von Holleben's current project: a book for Steidl cataloguing an imaginary solar system. This morning's shoot will provide the vegetation for one of the planets, where all forms of life are precisely symmetrical. The shoot is located in the storeroom of a Berlin florist who happens to be an artist, too. Being an artist in Berlin is like being an 'actor' in LA, or an alcoholic in Moscow – it's an epidemic condition, not a profession. In any case, the owner's fraternal spirit means von Holleben gets access to lots of flowers. There are miniscule pineapples, wafer-thin crocuses and hairy green pods so sexual they remind me of Slavoj Žižek's argument that flowers are too obscene for children. Even the repetitive physical adjustments of von Holleben's two assistants recall a tiresome pornographic quest for the 'money shot'.

Like amateur pornography, the pleasure of von Holleben's work derives from its honesty. "People appreciate I'm not over-constructing an image: changing it in Photoshop 25 times, and their sense of reality alongside. I'm mucking around, but I'm not trying to cheat anyone," he says. 'Mucking around' is an unusual turn of phrase for someone who's worked with Agnes B and Sotheby's – plus exhibited in Paris, New York and Tehran – but it's an adept description of his style. Von Holleben likes to defocus the line between work and play. Whether rearranging household objects as fantasy machines, reconstructing modernist paintings with bare arms, or encouraging Londoners to expose their belly-buttons, his contact sheets brim with joy.

Nowhere is this more apparent than with *Dreams of Flying*, von Holleben's well-published series in which children are photographed from >

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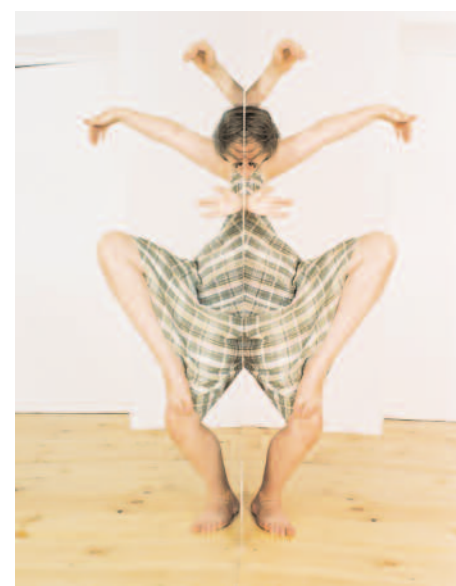


ALPHADOGS

◀ above while lying amidst various props. Sports socks become fishes, squash rackets become wings and sleeping mats are transformed into rockets. The effect is similar to Neil Buchanan's gigantic Art Attack assemblages on ITV: viewers must suspend their disbelief to see, and enjoy, the image. Dreams of Flying began in 2002, as part of a 24-hour photo marathon von Holleben undertook. He, a friend, her dog and a child drove 85 miles from Karlsruhe to Freiburg, stopping every 60 minutes to take a photo. "I had the dog and a friend's kid, and I wanted to do something with them together," he recalls. "Obviously the kid couldn't mount the dog because it would collapse. So I just thought 'Let's try them on the floor'. I had five minutes to shoot and two frames, but it came out perfectly."

The resulting image, named *The Dogrider*, was so fun to execute and so effective a print that von Holleben exploded the concept. Working with the children of former neighbours in a small German village, he has developed every viable permutation over the last six years, from pirates to King Kong. Scores of children now assemble in the village at the whisper of his arrival. Von Holleben tempts children to create an alternate reality like some latter-day Pied Piper, but the process remains collaborative and nonlinear. "There's always space for improvisation, so the image becomes a conversation between the sitters, the photographer and the location," he says.

In von Holleben's world everything has the right to play, whether children or adults, objects or landscapes. Even the photographs and the camera are fair game. Collage artist Sergei Sviatchenko sliced up his negatives in the recent *Mutatis Mutandis 01* series, and the results were then re-photographed. In *You Run*, I count 10 von Holleben took photographs of himself sprinting away from the tripod. Play shapes von Holleben's worldview – he sees it as a way to explore selfhood, relationships and ultimately reality. "Alongside *Homo sapiens* exists *Homo ludens* – the person who understands himself and the world through play," says von Holleben. It's an old idea, he points



out. Alongside the Dutch theorist who coined the phrase, references to the primacy of play can be found from Aristotle to the Bible. The perspective fits snugly with von Holleben's own past, too. He grew up in a commune, and spent innumerable afternoons building treehouses with friends. Seen in this context, his images are simply open games. Adopting the furniture and locations of everyday life lends them an immediate surrealism, and their deliberate crudeness makes the game explicit.

Von Holleben's viewers must invest themselves to consummate the image, and the outcome is magical realism. "The viewer has the chance to understand what I've done, but I do it in such a way that they don't want to understand it," he says. "No one wants to see a kid lying on the floor, they want to see a kid flying. They want to keep this shared vision alive." By exploring the fantastical potential of everyday life, the viewer discovers a mode of perception that reclaims life from the banality of fact. This strategy works best when the

magic relies almost entirely on the mind. *It Will Happen Here* is a series of liminal sites rendered extraordinary by imagination alone, so a vineyard's snow-covered terraces become *The Labyrinth*; a windblown marquee simply *The Thing*.

It Will Happen Here is von Holleben's most powerful work, paradoxically because it is so simple. His more complex images are still immediate, but here the fantasy and reality are combined into a hyper-reality. No props or models are required, just a name. This transformation, and von Holleben's oeuvre, are products of and reactions against the ubiquity of digital imagery. He returns the viewer's sovereignty in a world of CGI fantasy.

This conceptual evolution of photography parallels the way impressionists fought back against photography itself by depicting not reality but the effect of perceiving it. His endgame, like theirs, is the sublime. ■

PREVIOUS PAGE: *The Dog Rider*, from the series *Dreams of Flying* (2002–2008).

ABOVE LEFT: *Homo Garrulus Glandarius Heeneach*, from the series *Mutatis Mutandis* (2008).

ABOVE RIGHT: *No. 11*, from the series *My Army of Monsters* (2008).

BELOW LEFT: *The Jumpers*, from the series *Dreams of Flying* (2002–2008).

BELOW RIGHT: *The Thing*, from the series *It Will Happen Here* (2003–2008). To see more of Von Holleben's work, visit janvonholleben.com

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