

INTERVIEWS



(Fragment) JH Engström. From the series Tout va Bien, 2015

Asking the wrong questions

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An interview with Swedish photographer JH Engström

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Swedish photographer JH Engström is an internationally acclaimed artist and photographer who seems to be best characterized by a love for the intuitive approach, as well as a constant avoidance of risking boredom. He has dedicated his more-than-25-year-long career to capturing emotion in the frame of an image, so as to be able to use it in all possible styles and media – of which the photo-book format seems to have been the key to his international success.

In total, Engström has published around 15 books, the breakthrough one being “Trying to Dance” (2004), a series from which the self-portraits were exhibited in his one-man show, *JH Engström “JHE”* (19.05.-26.06.2016), at the Latvian Museum of Photography as part of the exhibition program for Riga Photomonth.

Aside from his individual work, Engström also makes movies, gives lectures, curates festivals, and together with photographer Margot Wallard, runs a year-long web-based workshop – *Atelier Smedsby*. This year, JH Engström was also one of the curators of Riga Photomonth’s central exhibition,

“Territories” (13.05.-16.06.2016), which, together with the *Self Publish Riga* project, took place at the Railway Museum in Riga. During the project’s opening week, Engström conducted artist talks and visited the opening of “Mixtape. ISSP International Masterclass” (14.05.-3.06.2016), an exhibition held at the K.K. fon Stricka Villa. This newly-rediscovered place, right in the middle of Riga, seemed like a nice place to sit down and talk about territories and freedom – both in art and life. Finding the right questions worth asking proved not to be such an easy task, however.



From the series *Sketch of Paris*, 2013

Arterritory.com not only plays with the word “territory” but also tries to manifest it by standing true to the classic “regional circle” – the Baltic States, Scandinavia and Russia; but at the same time, they also kind of fail at staying inside those borders.

JH Engström: Who is not failing?! That’s what we do all the time. What’s the big deal? We are postmodern now. Everything is classic, everything is new, everything is old.

Indrek Grigor: **But if we go on from this point to the Riga Photomonth exhibition, which is also called “Territories”, then we encounter a similar situation: all the Baltic States have different languages and so do the Scandinavians. Our Lithuanian colleague, Gintarė Matulaitytė, said that rendering our art fields down to an Anglophonic common language gives us a common territory that makes us interesting and intelligible to each other. There is common knowledge, as well as enough distance from one's own closest scene.**^[1]

In the artist talks accompanying Riga Photomonth’s main exhibition, there was a lot of talk about one’s personal territory. Nevertheless, do you feel that the exhibition creates a common territory for the artists?

JH.E.: It’s just words, you know. And then we can contemplate those words.

Of course there are territories. It’s a fact. There are countries and borders; that’s where the word comes from. But then again, I don’t see people like that, and I don’t see art like that. I don’t divide things according to where it comes from, or whether it’s a young or old person, a man or a woman. I don’t read works like that. That’s not how I see things. But those words do exist; they are parameters, but for me, they’re not interesting.

I.G.: **But doesn’t it influence the way you get to the information, how you get to know the artists?**

JH.E.: No. I saw Boris Mikhailov’s book, “Diary”. I know he is Ukrainian. I know the history. And that may add something, but basically, when I see his works, that’s not what touches me. It’s the human side that touches me, the side I can recognize myself in. I don’t care about where he is from, or the history of Ukraine, or of the Soviet Union. Intellectually – when you analyze the work – it might make things more

interesting, but that's not what touches me.

Š.P.: Pushing the question of the exhibition's title a bit more... What's the most important aspect for you in the title? What does the title actually mean?

JH.E.: The goal was to show good works from the northern territories, because there is not often a place for them. Scandinavia, The Baltics, Russia – they are like a geographical “belt” that wasn't even defined as anything more than northern territories. What happens there in photography? That's the question.

Š.P.: Does photography have territory or borders? Sara Skorgen Teigen, the Norwegian artist participating in the exhibition, spoke at the artist talk about how you pushed her to use drawings in her photography.

JH E: Yeah, we were together in Marseille, in the south of France at that time; so what are we talking about?

Š.P.: Yes, but those are geographical territories. What about photography?

JH.E.: One can ask the same thing about filmmaking.

I.G.: I very much like the joke about making foreign language films, in which you first have to invent a foreign language...

JH. E: I am not talking about language in filmmaking. I am talking about the language of filmmaking. Filmmaking is filmmaking. You make films. You don't ask why you didn't put a drawing in this fiction movie.

I.G.: But don't you see any kind of national particularities among the authors participating in the exhibition?

JH.E.: No. I can't say that I do. And that is, of course, related to the internet and to the fact that we know what's happening all over the place. And that's good, in a way.

But, of course, there is a source for everything. The artists in Ukraine who lived through the war are affected by the war in how they make their pictures. And I grew up in the countryside in Sweden, and of course the source is Swedish, in a way. Where people come from affects them, but there is no judgment in this.

I.G.: I did not mean it judgmentally; actually, quite the opposite. I meant the value of the local-ness. When I look at the Estonian art field, then I see there an unquestionable desire to look international rather than local. And I feel that many works get lost in a strive towards an alien format.

JH.E.: It has to communicate. You can do whatever the f*** you want, but it has to communicate. I am reading a book with interviews that Andre Breton gave on the radio^[2] ... And I don't know. Maybe we should not talk about those things. We should just do them, and then show it. Maybe there is no way to explain these things. Of course, there are trends and things happening. Now it should look like this, and then it should look like that. But it's part of communication; it's human beings communicating. The surrealists had their magazines in which they launched their ways of seeing things. For what? And they had their politics... for what?

I.G.: To have fun.

JH.E.: I am convinced it was more serious than just fun. Those were serious statements. People killed themselves for not being included in the group.



From the series *Tout va Bien*, 2015

Š.P.: In a way, you have three identities: being an artist, being a teacher, and being a curator. Do you feel like you are three different persons?

J.H.E.: The only territory I protect is when I make my own stuff. Everything else is everything else; then I can do anything. When I do my things, then I do my things; then I am on my own, and then I am not sharing until I am sharing.

Š.P.: But still, doesn't the artist in you sneak in when you curate?

JH.E.: Of course it does! I am not a machine. It's totally subjective. And I am not even hiding it. It's my taste. It's my approach. But it can also be something I don't like, something that teases me.

I.G.: When you were selecting the artist for the Riga Photomonth exhibition, what was your approach? Were you looking for artists that interest you, or were you also trying to put them into a dialogue? What was your leading line for making your choices?

JH.E.: You cannot choose five artists that all have the same approach. It would not be interesting. You have to create a dialogue. Find that "something".

I.G.: Could you quickly recount the narrative that the exhibition forms for you? And are you happy with it?

JH.E.: I am really happy with it. There are different expressions in it, and I think that you feel from everyone that there is a strong personal voice.

I.G.: This seemed for me, too, to be the leading line. I must admit that when I was listening to the artist talks, it even came as a surprise to me how personal the works were.

JH.E.: That's the only way I go for. Personal. Even Bernd and Hilla Becher, who are known as the most objective photographers in the world, said in an interview that it always starts with the personal. They said that! Not I! There is a reason they photograph those factories. It comes from your own experience. That's art. What can you do? Where else can you search other than within yourself? You can take the most conceptual artist, Andy Warhol, and it's all about him. You cannot escape that. How is it formulated, how is it defined, is the next question. So, let's actually skip the question about the personal. It's always about the person who is doing it. That's basic, that's ABC.

Š.P.: You mentioned the geographical "belt" that you, Arnis Balčus and Alnis Stakle – as the three curators of the "Territories" exhibition – are knitting. Did I understand you correctly that the so-called "northern line" of Europe is not represented enough?

JH.E.: I am not saying not enough. The world works as it works. We all know that London, Paris and New York are more represented. That's how it is.

Š.P.: On the world scale, you mean?

JH.E.: Yes. People from Northern Europe do not get as much attention as when you are from Paris or London. We just wanted to show that this is happening here.



From the series *Trying to Dance*, 2004

Š.P.: When we look at things from the Baltic-, or at least Latvian perspective, then in the last five years there have been a lot of projects which are Baltic-Scandinavian collaborations.

This is, to a recognizable extent, based on financial grounds. There is Nord-Point, and

Frame, and some other programs based on Scandinavian foundations, which further this collaboration with the Baltic States. This has made things look a bit artificial, but it has also had a positive impact, as at the moment, a lot of Scandinavian artists are circulating here in the Baltics.

But not only here. Initiated by different embassies, the Latvian Contemporary Art Centre just organized the exhibition “Identity. Behind the Curtain of Uncertainty”[3], and presented in Kiev artists from the Baltics and Scandinavian region. They called themselves “the European periphery”. For us, Baltic-Scandinavian collaboration is actually a common formula. How do you see it from where you stand?

JH.E.: I thought about it while walking over here. And you know what? I don't care. I'm just happy to be here. And next month I will be in Paris. And the only thing I care about, is to keep on doing things. When you communicate with people, it does not matter where they are from. What matters is who they are as persons. I don't really think about the interactions between Scandinavia and the Baltic States. It's not something that occupies my mind. What I am interested in is people expressing themselves. What you're talking about is more administrative.

Š.P.: And political.

JH.E.: No, politics can also be very individualistic, so don't even go there. Politics does not have to be connected to anything. It does not have to be connected to a country, territory, ethnicity, sex or anything else. Politics can be private. It does not have to be divided into something. I hate it when things are divided. Based on my own experience, I like to see life as something that is totally open. Even if it's a naive point of view, I still like to see it like that.



From the series *Tout va Bien*, 2015

I.G.: It's not even about naivety. We are just jealous that it is possible for you to look at things like that. We are pushing with that administrative question because that is our daily life.

I am a manager of a non-profit gallery, and if my gallery has the wrong policy, then it won't be financed. I'm angry at myself for having to live like that.

JH.E.: Those are facts. I am privileged to be more free in this. That's how I live my life. I chose 25 years ago that I want to be free. That's why I am an artist. I don't want all of that. Freedom is even more important than my works.

Š.P.: I, too, feel that the format of the institution is becoming weaker. Because I see more and more independent agents emerging – be it curators, artists, critics – that are attacking the system in order to break out of it. This might not lead to anything. It has happened before that the institution has proved itself to be stronger. But that's how it seems to me at the moment.

JH.E.: It goes hand in hand with other tendencies made possible by the internet. Before, you had to listen to what the radio was playing, and now you can listen to whatever is presented on the internet.

I.G.: I would now like to ask you the question with which you opened the talk with the artists at the “Territories” exhibition: Why are you here? What drives you?

JH.E.: That's exactly the question I am working with all the time. Why am I doing this, and why am I who I am? That's my driving engine.

I.G.: So, looking for the answer is the answer to my question?

JH.E.: It's so cliché but yes, a bit like that.

But then you can have millions of more or less interesting ways of looking for the answer.

I.G.: I think clichés have much more truth in them than we like to admit.

JH.E.: I think in the postmodern world, the most common cliché over the last 30 years has been to deny something as being a cliché.



From the series *Sketch of Paris*, 2013

Š.P.: I'd like to pose another question directed toward politics and what is happening in Europe at the moment. During the artist talk in Kiev that took place at the opening of the exhibition "Identity. Behind the Curtain of Uncertainty", Swedish artist Matts Leiderstamm was asked how he defines himself between the Nordic-, Eastern- and so on

fields of influence; he answered that he is, first of all, an artist, then a gay man and a dog owner. But then he admitted that in the near future his priorities could change, and he just might start calling himself a Swedish artist.

This is, in a way, confirmation of the notion of nationalism spreading as a way to protect oneself.

JH.E.: I would say I am human. That would be my answer to that question. For sure.

I don't care about being Swedish, or about sexual orientation, or whatever.

Š.P.: So You don't sense any possible threats that might change your way of thinking?

JH.E.: I was 50 meters away when the shootings in Paris happened. I hate threats. I hate the people who put threats on the map. All of the previous values concerning how life should be, and how we should treat each other, have fallen. It's just a totally abstract void, one where there isn't any more of something to hold on to. That's where we are living now.

[1] On Compulsory Global Friendliness: An Interview with Gintarė Matulaitytė, by Kęstutis Šapoka <http://www.locomotive.press/2016/02/12/on-compulsory-global-friendliness-an-interview-with-gintare-matulaityte/>

[2] André Breton, Mark Polizzotti: "Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism"

[3] "Identity. Behind the Curtain of Uncertainty" Nordic, Baltic and Ukrainian Contemporary Art Exhibition. 19.03. - 22.05.2016. At the National Art Museum of Ukraine.

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