

Sven Johne – 52 Happy Places

Klemm's Gallery, Berlin

1 November – 20 December

On 9 July 1975, the (later) revered conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader set sail from the east coast of the United States in a quixotic attempt to traverse the capricious Atlantic Ocean. The mid-part of an intended triptych, optimistically entitled *In Search of the Miraculous*, his vessel was discovered six months after his departure, part submerged, off the coast of Ireland. Ader was never seen again.

Sven Johne's markedly elegiac artwork evokes similar notions of longing, of concurrent personal endeavour and dissolution, orientation both spatial and metaphysical – a psychogeographical¹ exploration, analysing the individual's position in, and relationship with, their surroundings. Analogous to Ader's intrepid, perhaps knowingly futile embarkation, Sven Johne presents the real through a lens imbued with the fictitious or mythologised. Realities become frozen recollections of a fictional auteur, and the outwardly banal or prosaic coalesces with the poetic to give all a new light.

In '52 Happy Places', an exhibition of the resulting works of a recent residency in New York, Johne displays, with deft clarity, his ability to harness conceptualist tropes and minimalist aesthetic sensibilities to induce reactions of reverie and contemplation. Ten large-scale cartographic studies, *Seafaring Discoveries of Our Time*, show the navigational paths of young mariners bound to a peripatetic existence at sea for months at a time. Each demarcation shows the ostensible 'discoveries' made on their voyages, the accounts of their experiences transposed and visually represented with the help of a graphic designer. Among all ten of these nautical charts no trace of land can be seen. Whilst solidifying the inherent desolation within the maps, this stark absence paradoxically gives rise to a residual hope that there might lie something physical, palpable, amongst the void of nothingness.

Message In A Bottle – Seven Observations of Helplessness shows the artist in seven locations of barely perceptible difference, facing outward from the shore in the action of throwing a bottle into the muddied waters off the New York coastline. Is this perhaps a sardonic parody of this archaic communicative gesture? Or is it a helpless, (as the title would suggest), and genuine, if slightly romantic, attempt to defy the intangible? The sea, present here too, a recurring motif for an indeterminate quest for the other, rests passively as if to taunt the artist with its obvious inefficacy as a means to transport his message, the contents of which is presented to us alongside each photograph; a blank page – a reflexive metaphor for the ocean.

The title work, '52 Happy Places', shows fifty-two of the total eighty-three islands of the South Pacific Island State Vanuatu, in the form of appropriated thumbnail images. Uniformly presented in small white frames, each colour-saturated image sits sonorously, centralised, surrounded by a vacuity of white. According to the www.happyplanetindex.org published by New Economics Foundation, of the 178 nations examined, the inhabitants of Vanuatu proved unanimously the happiest. In learning this, Johne proceeded to request, via the *Vanuatu Daily*, a description of the islander's daily lives in the hope that the cause for their happiness might be elucidated.

The presentation of each of the fifty-two Islands – shown unaltered, as they were found via internet searches, with their intense colouration emitting an almost radiatory glow – for me elude more to the dystopic than to the utopian idealism that such images might represent.

Perhaps this is a simple reaction to apparently unnatural imagery. Or maybe this instinctive aversion emanates from a subconscious reaction to something wholly unfamiliar and antithetical to my normative experience of place. Their aesthetic perpetuates the viewer's sense of removal from these uncannily alienating places, whilst Johne's inquisitive gesture works to humanise something otherwise unknown or unattainable. The unifying emotion – happiness – is formless, unquantifiable, yet the thing most universally sought.

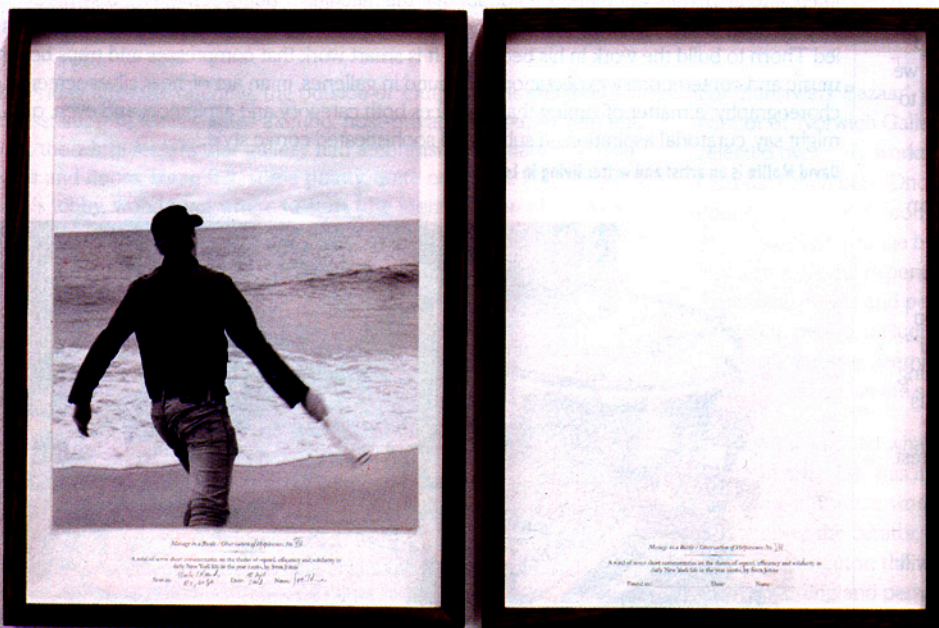
In *Sounding the Event*² Yve Lomax describes 'the meanwhile' as a "resistance to the present, to what is. Nothing of the present happens in the meanwhile, yet what the meanwhile does is to keep becoming from never ending. In the meanwhile, becoming is perpetually renewed." Sven Johne's work seems to exist in the meanwhile, prefiguring its own continuation, denying the intrinsic insignificance of our impression on the ever-transient world around us. At a time when the dramatic shifts in our economic, environmental and political climates are beginning to catalyse social unrest and an increasingly nihilistic outlook, Sven Johne provides alternate strategies of perception. Dealing with the ever-present dialectic between hope and irrefutable loss, between optimism and lamentation for the rapidly disappearing or already faded past, Johne presents us with an insight into more compelling ways of seeing and methods of reacting to what we perceive.

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¹ A term defined by Situationist, Guy Debord as "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals."

² Yve Lomax, *Sounding the Event – Escapades in Dialogue and Matters of Art, Nature and Time*, IB Tauris, 2005.

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1 Sven Johne, *Message in a bottle – Seven observations of Helplessness*, #7, each 55x26.5cm, photography, silkscreen, silver gelatine print 2008.

2 'Straylight Cavern' installation shot including sculpture by Jonathan Baldock, *Bells Palsy (Two Faces)*, salt-dough, dolls eyes, hair, foam, pins, food dye, 2008.