

## **Ralf Bittner – Herford, Germany**

- Born 1966 in Bünde
- Since 2002 free-lance photo-journalist; additionally, applied works and free projects
- Since 2005 student of Thomas Sandberg, Arwed Messmer and Professor Ute Mahler at Ostkreuzschule School of Photography, Berlin, first extra-occupational, then full-time.
- Graduation 2010, final exhibition work “Widukind's Land” with Prof. Ute Mahler

### **Exhibitions and participations in exhibitions**

- “Expressions by Young Photographers in Germany 2005.” Konica Minolta Plaza, Tokyo, 2005
- “Echoes” Work of Arts, Herford, 2006
- “Two worlds. Life in Germany between repeatedly extended permits of residence and 'voluntary' migration (e). Lagerhalle Osnabrück, 2007
- “Stechlin – twelve positions”. Köhler Gallery Berlin, 2008
- “Pictures from New York and elsewhere” (e). Town Hall Gallery, Hiddenhausen, 2008
- Stuttgart Photo Summer Award Show. Württemberg Artists' Society. Stuttgart, 2010
- “Faith, Love, Hope”. Graduation exhibition of the 4<sup>th</sup> class of Ostkreuzschule School of Photography. C/O Berlin, 2010

### **Projects**

- Participation in “A Day in Germany”, a campaign organised by FREELENSE Association of Photographers. 7 May, 2010 (book publication)

## **ARTISTIC STATEMENT**

### **Widukind's Land**

*Widukind's Land* is a work of art attempting to give a subjective status assessment of Herford, a medium-sized town in the former West Germany. The surrounding administrative district proudly calls itself “Wittekind's County” or “Widukind's Land”, a name going way back to the tribal Saxonian warlord who resisted being Christianised and thus

modernised by Charles the Great. This desire for persistence, a mixture of confidence, pride, and stubbornness, has shaped the region to this day. Close to 65,000 people – with a declining tendency – live there. Contrary to, say, the cities of the Ruhr Valley, the town of Herford, characterised by medium-sized enterprises predominantly in the engineering, textile and kitchen lines is not affected by a fatal decline of key industries but by creeping gradual changes. Even though the the town council has to reduce costs like many other towns, it spent 30m euros on the MARTa Museum of Contemporary Art which was opened in 2005 and has been the object of heated controversy ever since. The town is home to the North-West-German Philharmonic Orchestra and boasts a municipal theatre featuring guest appearances. The downtown district boasts one of the longest pedestrian precincts of all municipalities in North-Rhine Westphalia, the central department store has been standing empty for years. Various concepts to revive the location and boost the City's attractiveness failed. At the moment, a private investor is giving it another shot.

The attempts to redesign central squares or locations and turn them in to citizen-friendly hubs of social life have left behind marble deserts so bleak that their barrenness will only be visible after the shops close. There is a sense of lethargy that is barely tangible but can be felt all over town. Words like “ghost town” or “post-war place” vividly describe the situation. The shopping malls from the 1970s are standing empty, the first concrete blocks on the edge of town are being torn down, their tenants given notice. More and more residential homes in the rural surroundings are standing empty. The demographic change which had reached the county town later than it had its neighbouring communities finally makes itself felt.

All photographs selected for this work were taken in the town of Herford during the years 2009 and 2010, most of them in the evening hours of the winter months. The pictures try to evoke an intuitively-descriptive approach to a town which is neither really small nor really big, neither modern nor medieval, but strangely lost and dislocated somewhere in eastern Westphalia province. There is neither a critical decline nor is there any decisive progress.

Apart from the characteristic architecture from the era of the late 1960s to 1980s, leftovers from the decades before that can be found – as though the town had fallen out of time somehow. Besides black and white, the keen observer will detect numerous shades of grey as well. The piece of work casts an eye on this small-town atmosphere which is only rarely moved into the focus of attention. There is not even a touch of idyllic village or country life.

## **Land In Between**

### **Land in Between – an Essay on an Idyll**

A town of 65,000 inhabitants, not strictly urban, not rural either – that is the issue of photographer Ralf Bittner. Alongside working for a regional newspaper as a journalist and photographer, he focuses in his pictures on the long-term, often barely perceptible changes taking place in his immediate surroundings.

Applying a documentary approach, he gains access to his motifs. Superficially recording changes or stagnation, they reflect, at second glance, a delicate poetry that will either make you smile or send shivers down your spine. The pictures do not just show stories: They tell tales, too, but softly. Now and then, they leave objectivity, opening up spaces in which the beholder may explore their own world.

“Widukind's Land”, Bittner's graduation work of 2010 at Ostkreuzschule School of Photography, is underpinned by an almost romantic melancholy that descends onto the matter-of-fact soberness of the objects shown. In March 2012, Thea Herold of “Tagesspiegel” newspaper wrote about Bittner's work: “In his tableaux, the weariness seems to creep into the very architecture. Vistas of narrow alleyways with houses standing close turn into a depressive backdrop; looks from windows in the evening vanish in the desolate. Bittner forms the dreary stage-set for an eastern Westphalian society suffering from fatigue syndrome.”

Meanwhile, colour has found its ways into Bittner's pictures, and the photographs more and more reflect an uneasy feeling combined with cracks in the Herford persistence. Home becomes a safe haven in an increasingly confusing world. But that safe haven is only temporary – the cracks in and the signs on the walls are undeniable for those who take a closer look.

In times of personal insecurity, of demands for life-long mobility, of global markets and open borders that may be chances as well as hazards, one's home turns into an allegedly safe place. This castle, this fortress can be selected by oneself, can be designed invitingly or dauntingly, or, for lack of alternative, be built like a prison from which there is no escape even though the dwellers possess a key.

To the eye of the beholder, the facade appears as a borderline between inside and outside. Alas, this concrete security is deceiving. Flames on the horizon predict changes even the greyest concrete cannot offer protection against. Dream catchers tell of the longing for escape or departure, a desire to leave home. The ifs and buts, the feeling of unease in the face of an illusory idyll, all this becomes transparent in the pictures.