

Jessica Backhaus



ONE DAY
IN NOVEMBER

All images © Jessica Backhaus, courtesy of Yancey Richardson Gallery, New York; Robert Morat Galerie, Hamburg; The Photographers' Gallery, London

Jessica Backhaus was born in 1970 in Cuxhaven, Germany. She moved to Paris at the age of sixteen, where she studied visual communication and photography and worked as a picture editor. Eight years later her passion for photography drew her to New York, where she assisted photographers and developed her own style. Focusing on quiet moments and easily overlooked details, Jessica Backhaus' visual language is intimate and delicate. She worked for four years on the project that resulted in her first book, *Jesus and the Cherries* (Kehrer Verlag, 2005) which portrays in vivid colours the simple life in the small Polish town of Netno, where her family had bought a farmhouse. In 2008 Jessica Backhaus published two books, *What Still Remains*, a photo series of 65 works created since 2006 in various locations and *One Day in November*,

a visual tribute to her friend and mentor, the photographer Gisèle Freund. Jessica Backhaus' work has been shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions, including shows in The National Portrait Gallery in London and the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin. She is represented by Yancey Richardson Gallery in New York, Robert Morat Galerie in Hamburg and The Photographers' Gallery in London.

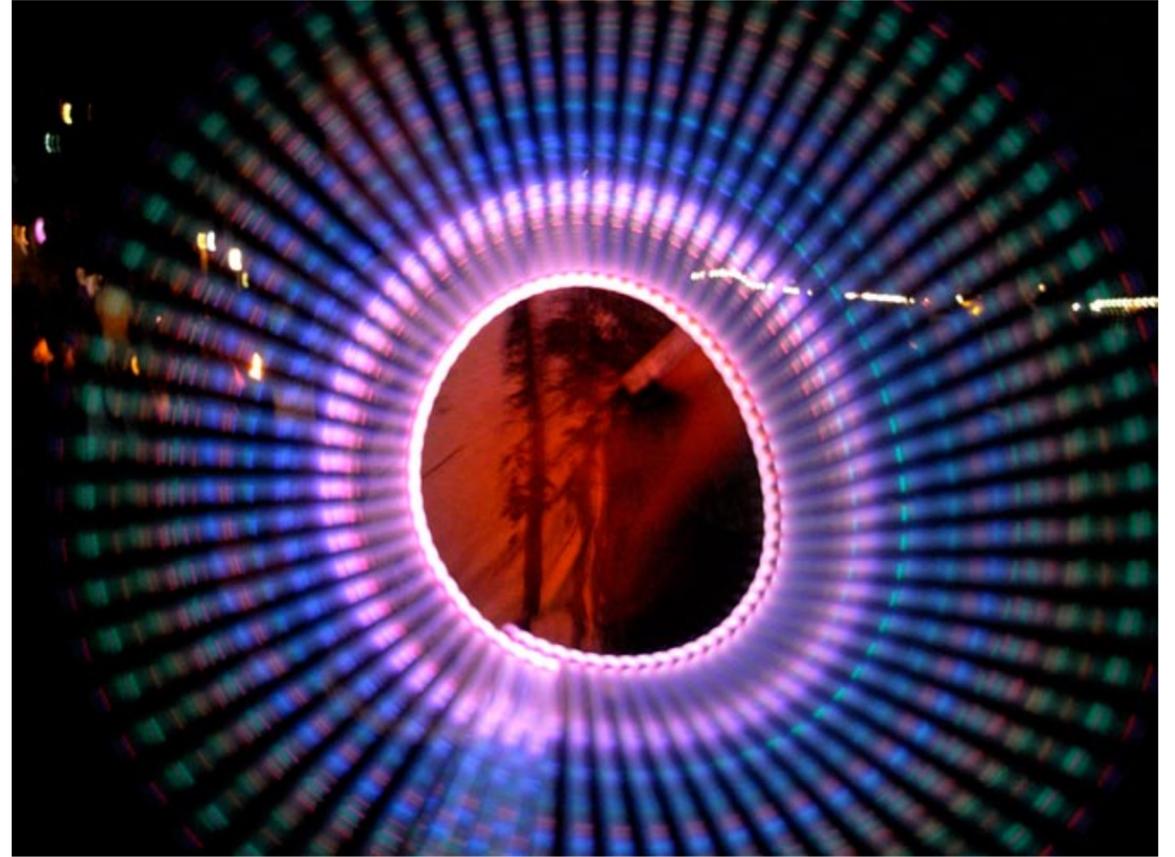
Jessica Backhaus lives and works in New York and Europe.

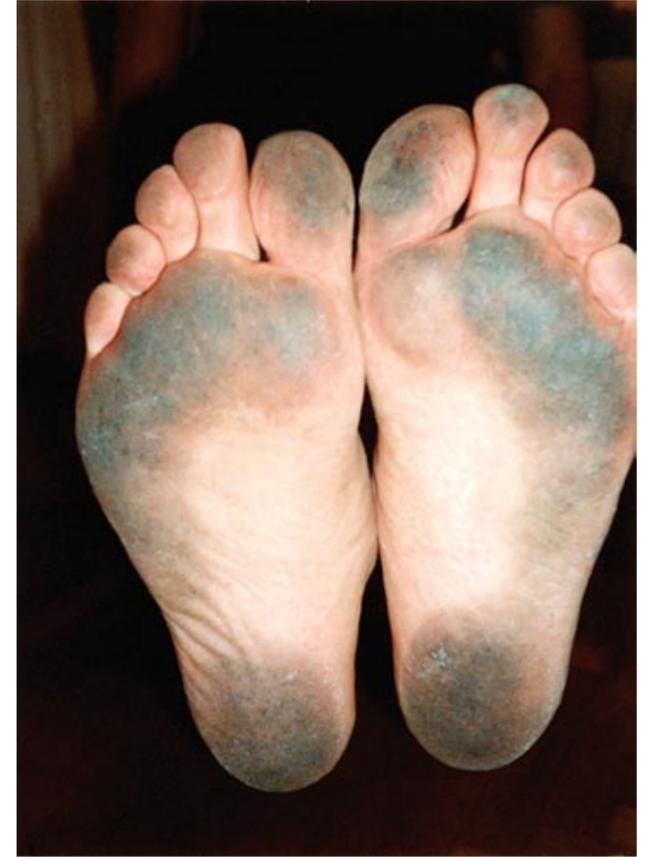
Eric Miles is a writer and bookseller specializing in photographic literature. He is based in New York. He is an advisor for *My Best Fred*, a creative company.

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One Day in November



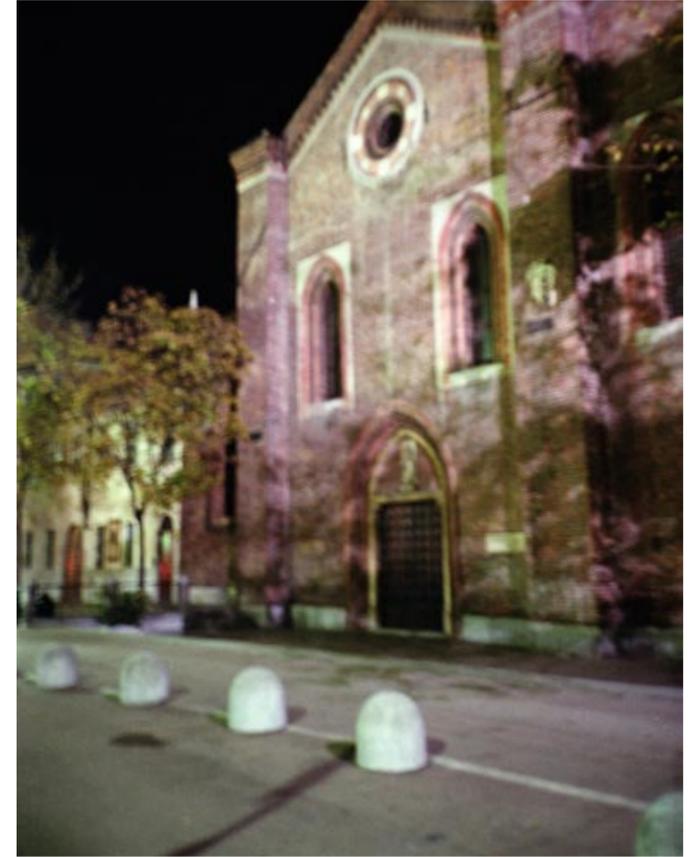
















Reverence and Wonder ~ On Jessica Backhaus' *One Day in November*

by Eric Miles

'Most artists are brought to their vocation when their own nascent gifts are awakened by the work of a master. That is to say, most artists are converted to art by art itself. Finding one's voice isn't just an emptying and purifying oneself of the words of others but an adopting and embracing of filiations, communities, and discourses. Inspiration could be called inhaling the memory of an act never experienced. Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void but out of chaos. Any artist knows these truths, no matter how deeply he or she submerges that knowing.'

– Jonathan Letham, *The Ecstasy of Influence*

The inverted shadow of a bare tree reflected on the water-slicked surface of a well-used, weather-beaten tennis court; it's off-season, clearly, and though the details of the image are banal, a thick melancholy hangs in the air. In another image from *One Day in November* a well-worn chair, perhaps of institutional origin, sits in an oddly-angled space formed by a room's corner and its pitched ceiling; it is likely that the room has not seen a fresh coat of paint in decades, the moisture causing the pattern formed by puckered and peeling paint, by default, lends the image its busiest compositional incident. In fact, most of the pictures in *One Day in November* are similarly spare in their inclusion of any extraneous elements that would give them some sense of dramatic incident or narrative pull.

One Day in November is Jessica Backhaus' pictorial tribute to her friend and mentor, the photographer and historian Gisèle Freund. The two met in 1992, following a panel discussion that was part of the biennial, *Le Mois de la Photographie*, striking up a friendship that lasted until the older artist's death in 2000. In her description of her relationship with Freund in her introduction to the book there is a depth of humility, a deference to the weight of tradition, the received wisdom of elders that can be rare in the world of contemporary photography. This is especially striking given that, as Backhaus reveals in the last paragraph of her essay, never during the course of her friendship with Gisèle did she offer her work up for comment or critique. Rather, they went for walks, shopped and cooked, visited restaurants and exhibitions. Which is to say their relationship was wonderfully devoid of the *instrumental*,



From the series *What Still Remains, Pillow*, 2007 © Jessica Backhaus

goal-oriented structures that permeate the art school experience (and, even more so, the world of portfolio reviews). It is hard to imagine another figure in twentieth century photography or indeed in the culture as a whole through whom one could be connected so intimately to so many of the artistic and literary luminaries of the immediate pre-and post-war periods.

Freund, born in 1908, came from a well-to-do German Jewish family in Berlin. Her father, an art collector, bought Freund a Voigtlander 6 × 9 camera when she was seventeen and a then a Leica in 1929. She studied sociology and art history at the famous Frankfurt School under some of the giants of social theory: Karl Mannheim, Norbert Elias and Theodor Adorno. Like many German Jewish intellectuals, especially those who protested against National Socialism as students, she emigrated to Paris following the Nazis' rise to power. She finished her PhD at the Sorbonne in 1936 and her dissertation was published in book form by Adrienne Monnier (1892-1955), whose bookstore, La Maison des Amis des Livres, Freund visited for the first time in 1935. With Monnier's help, as well as that of Sylvia Beach, owner of Shakespeare & Co., Freund was given an entree into literary circles. She played chess with Walter Benjamin on the Boulevard Saint-Germain and delved into the cultural history of the

nineteenth century with him at the Bibliothèque Nationale. After the German invasion, she hid out in the south of France before fleeing to Argentina and then on to Mexico, returning to Paris after the war. She was associated with Magnum Photos in its earliest years (her actual membership of the group is a matter of some dispute; she may have been asked to leave for political reasons after her story on Evita Perón got her blacklisted), and so befriended Henri Cartier-Bresson, David 'Chim' Seymour, George Rodger and many others. A short list drawn from the hundreds of people she photographed would have to include Louis Aragon, Frida Kahlo, Jean Cocteau, Walter Benjamin, Samuel Beckett, Jorge Luis Borges, André Breton, Colette, Marcel Duchamp, T.S. Eliot, André Gide, James Joyce, André Malraux, Jean-Paul Sartre, Virginia Woolf and George Bernard Shaw. Freund immersed herself in the work of her subjects; her portraits convey an intimacy while at the same time situating her subjects squarely in a Parisian milieu that is only slightly romanticized. Indeed, she perfected a type of environmental portrait that has since become conventional in depictions of the famous. In many cases she used early colour processes. In her portraits the subjects emerge as fully formed icons. Our images of Joyce or Beckett, Cocteau or Benjamin and many others are inseparable from Freund's portraits of them.

If Freund was a pioneer of the environmental portrait, Jessica Backhaus is adept at what one might call the environment *as* portrait. There is an uncanny sense in which the inanimate surfaces and objects depicted contain traces of something difficult to latch onto or to define. Certainly her attentiveness to the banal has ample precedent in the work



From the series *What Still Remains*, *Bottle*, 2007 © Jessica Backhaus

of Stephen Shore, William Eggleston – what young photographer working in colour today doesn't? In her earlier book, *Jesus and the Cherries*, part of the goal was to tease out a highly specific sense of place via scrutiny of the most ordinary and overlooked objects and surfaces (though a fair number of portraits are included as well). In this newer body of work the subject matter remains banal and prosaic. Furnished only with generalized clues to surroundings – urban or rural – the viewer is left adrift. But, in a way, the absence of any documentary imperative frees viewer and photographer alike to surrender to the seductive pull of the rich optical pleasure on offer.

If we call that optical pleasure 'aura', perhaps we can get a bit closer to how Backhaus' pictures 'preserve and hold on to something that has happened in the past', as she once said. In the same interview she added, 'the passage of time and time itself are issues that occupy me and play a more and more significant role in my work. It is true that I am fascinated with this experience of vanishing and slipping away'. The surrealists believed that even the most ordinary objects are possessed of a certain but intangible intensity that is in most cases dulled by everyday use and utility. Their goal was to reanimate this latent intensity; the camera was an ideal tool for doing so, because, as Walter Benjamin said, it has the ability to hone in on 'hidden details of familiar objects', revealing 'entirely new structural formations of the subject'. Commenting on Benjamin, Michele Frizot has written, 'The photographic act confers a presence on things, a corporeality that is almost tangible, the appearance of a relic, of a fragment saved through good fortune and chance from being entirely lost, the fragment of a lost body whose aura – the sacred fluid – through the photographic image, still leaves an authentic footprint'. While Benjamin famously lamented that photography sapped a work of art of its aura, severing it from its tradition and its origins, and thus its very authenticity, Frizot wonders whether 'photography's extraordinary power of mimicry imbues all things photographed with the aura of the original, the aura of generic type, of a timeless apparition which has been long awaited'.

And here we touch on what seems to me to be the real subject of Jessica Backhaus' recent work: removed from the specificity of time and place that was so crucial to the more implicitly documentary work of *Jesus and the Cherries*, what we are left with as we gaze at her images

is a sense of wonder, that instantaneous flash that removes us from the day-to-day particularities that anchor our senses to an ordered reality which allows us to move through the world without bumping into things in our path. Art historian David Doris recently described it in this way: wonder is that moment when we are 'left outside of the cultural and historical categories that constitute us... that moment when we look at the moon *as if* it were for the *first* time, that moment when we see fireworks exploding in the night sky and say, ooooh, and ahhhh...' How else to explain the affective *presence* of strangely anthropomorphic spruce trees set against the starlit sky; the shadows of bare trees – in one image cast upon a rain-slicked tennis court, in another on a featureless white brick wall; the seemingly viscous condensation on a window pane that renders the brilliant autumnal yellow outside even more brilliant and otherworldly? In these moments we are drawn *outside of* our immediate context, we become, for an instant, utterly childlike. Very often the qualities of an object or image that spark wonder are the qualities we associate with 'aura' as Benjamin famously used the word – qualities that are best exploited by photography: those of glow and of brilliance, luminosity and radiance. The word aura comes from Greek and Latin words for air in motion, breeze, breath; phenomena that extend beyond themselves and permeate the environment. The deliberately skewed and angular divisions of space in Backhaus' compositions, the saturated colours of her palette call attention to what would otherwise be completely ineffable.

Yet this feeling is fleeting. Wonder must ultimately resolve itself somehow, must be given meaning. And that meaning resides within the viewer. To grasp it requires not just discernment or sensitivity – certainly taste could be said to have little to do with it – but a humility, an openness. In Backhaus' work – *both* her narrative of her friendship with Gisèle Freund and her images – this is what comes across most clearly. A reverence before the world in all its glorious ordinariness, and the reverence of a seeker before a teacher of great wisdom – *One Day in November* shows us that the two can be completely co-extensive. +

Thanks to Professor David Doris, whose introductory remarks to The Experience and Use of Wonder, a conference he organized in September 2008 at the University of Michigan (available online at <http://lecb.physics.lsa.umich.edu/CWIS/browser.php?ResourceId=1181>), provided much help in completing this essay.