

Man of letters, director and painter
Jean Cocteau in his apartment in front
of a glove maker's guild symbol,
Paris 1939 (Gisèle Freund). Right page:
Greenpoint (Jessica Backhaus)



All photographs Gisèle Freund © Estate Gisèle Freund



ONE DAY IN NOVEMBER ...

... in Paris, a young photography student from Berlin, Jessica Backhaus, was to meet an icon of photography, Gisèle Freund – who would have been 100 on 19 December this year. They shared a strong artistic bond and enjoyed a lasting friendship. What was it like? Backhaus gives us the story.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GISELE FREUND/JESSICA BACKHAUS



Gisèle Freund's life was filled with interesting encounters. The grand lady of photography, who used a Leica camera to become one of the 20th century's most important chroniclers, had countless friends amongst the artists and intellectuals of her time. Her portraits of Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, André Gide and others are legendary today. One fine day, however – it was in Paris in November 1992 –, the one-time "Life" legend was approached by a young photography student named Jessica Backhaus. Despite their sixty years difference in age – Backhaus was

born in Cuxhaven, Germany, in 1970 –, the encounter marked the beginning of what was to become a close and fulfilling relationship. Backhaus, a Leica M6 user and acclaimed author of photography books such as "Jesus and the Cherries" and "What Still Remains", today admits to having learned far more from Freund than just a new way of seeing and taking pictures. There was hardly a subject the two didn't talk about.

Gisèle Freund passed away eight years ago and would have been 100 this December. For many, her iconic status as a dedicated photographer and sociologist

lingers on through her work – in her inimitable pictures and books. For Jessica Backhaus, it is much more personal as she carries many memories filled with strong impressions and emotions. And so the New York-based photographer has attempted to honour these feelings by binding them into a book commemorating Freund's centenary – a book that wants to share with the world everything the young woman has learned from the much older Gisèle Freund. She introduces us to "One day in November" – a sensitive tribute to a special bond which Backhaus feels is still alive today. LFI seized the

opportunity to talk to her about her years in Paris and her views on aesthetics and people. Finally, she explains why the work of the woman who was probably one of the greatest photographers of the past century remains relevant today.

LFI: Ms Backhaus, in the nineties you became close friends with Gisèle Freund. Freund was the "grande dame de la photographie" and you were a young student. How did this unusual relationship come about?

Jessica Backhaus: Gisèle's work had impressed me at a young age. I read her



Left page above: author Simone de Beauvoir, Paris 1948 (Gisèle Freund); below: Chelsea, London (Jessica Backhaus). This page left: writer Stephen Spender, London 1939 (Gisèle Freund); above: Already Gone (Jessica Backhaus)



PORTFOLIO
JESSICA BACKHAUS
GISELE FREUND

book "Photography and Society" when I was 18 and always imagined how great it would be to get to know such a woman in real life. Our paths were so different, and yet there were also parallels. We were both from Berlin and living in Paris at the time, and both of us were fascinated by the arts and by photography. Still, I wouldn't dare to compare myself to Gisèle. There were plenty of other photographers I would have loved to have met just as much – but that was just student daydreaming. **LFI:** With Freund, the dream came true. **Jessica Backhaus:** Yes, it did! But I couldn't have planned it if I'd tried. I

remember the first time I saw her as though it were yesterday. It was on 5 November, 1992, in Paris, when I was attending a conference on copyright law. There was a podium discussion and Gisèle Freund happened to be amongst the speakers. I had not expected to see her there and suddenly it dawned on me that this might be the chance to actually say hello. I had no idea how I was going to approach her, but what I did know was that, in all probability, it would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. **LFI:** So you took the plunge. How exactly does one approach a legend?

Jessica Backhaus: Approaching celebrities is always awkward, and it's generally not my thing. But I was determined to at least show Gisèle Freund the respect I felt for her. That day she was surrounded by a crowd of people, and I really had to pluck up all my courage. Eventually I just walked up to her, introduced myself and told her I was a photography student from Berlin and that I greatly admired her work. We continued to chat for some time and, at the end of our small talk, she put a small piece of cardboard in my palm. Her telephone number was on it. "Call me when you have time," she said.

"Maybe we could meet up for a cup of tea." You can't imagine how I felt. It was like a miracle. I stood there with this small piece of cardboard in my hand and no idea what had just happened. **LFI:** The initial encounter evolved into a profound friendship between a woman in her mid twenties and another in her mid eighties. What happened then? **Jessica Backhaus:** We spent a lot of time together in the following three years, and it lasted till 1995 when I moved to New York for reasons of work. After that, sadly, we didn't see each other that often – only when I was in Europe. In



Above left: London (Jessica Backhaus); above right: author Virginia Woolf at her house in London, 1939 (Gisèle Freund). Right page top: painter and sculptor Marcel Duchamp, Paris 1939 (Gisèle Freund); below: Balloons (Jessica Backhaus)

Gisèle Freund and Jessica Backhaus in February 1996 in Paris (photo: Michael Benabib). Right page: the triptych "The Swan of Milano" (Jessica Backhaus)

those days we would take long walks together, or visit exhibitions. I did her shopping for her and took care of things if she needed help. Above all, we talked and talked. Gisèle became my friend, my grandmother, and my mentor. She taught me things I wouldn't have learnt in any auditorium in the world.

LFI: After completing your studies you became a rather successful photographer in your own right, assisting New York photographers such as David LaChapelle and later publishing books and putting on exhibitions of your work. In what way would you say Gisèle Freund influenced the way you approach the visual arts?

Jessica Backhaus: In infinite ways. Perhaps the most important piece of advice she ever gave me was that a good picture must always arise from a feeling. "Jessi," Gisèle once said, "it is important for a photographer to master the technique, but it is even more important that the pictures are an expression from the heart." I still agree with her today. The craft alone is not enough to take a good photograph. Pictures have to be honest. You have to develop an interest for whatever it is you are photographing – be it portraits or interiors.

LFI: Gisèle Freund once said that the reason why her legendary portraits of artists and authors had so much impact on people was because they arose out of friendship, not out of a fleeting encounter. How important is it for a photographer to be close to the people she photographs?

Jessica Backhaus: That's what it's all about. It's like I fall in love every time



I take a portrait of a person. It's so important to develop a connection to the subject because the portrait will reflect what occurred between the two parties – the photographer and the portrayed. A photo is the result of a collaboration.

LFI: One portrait that illustrates this interplay very effectively is Gisèle Freund's picture of Virginia Woolf. Why do you think this particular photograph became so famous?

Jessica Backhaus: It's probably the most beautiful portrait ever taken of the author. Virginia Woolf was both a difficult and a shy woman, but Gisèle managed to win her trust and – presumably – got her to abandon her reservations. And it shows in the picture.

LFI: Gisèle Freund was not only a very empathetic person but also had a pronounced political and social ideology. How, in your opinion, does her work affect young photographers today?

Jessica Backhaus: Gisèle was a very committed and involved individual. The picture of the unemployed English

miners in the thirties, for example, is one of my favourites. But times have changed, and so has photojournalism. Photographers were once driven by a desire to really affect the world. The modern approach is probably more sober – and yet there are still photographers out there who continue to work in the way that Gisèle did.

LFI: In her later life, Freund was increasingly involved with the visual arts. By the time her work was exhibited at documenta 6, the photographer Gisèle Freund had become the artist Gisèle Freund. In the 21st century, how significant is the line drawn between applied and artistic photography?

Jessica Backhaus: Gisèle didn't like being labelled as an "artist". I don't think she saw her work as art. Photography today is largely considered an art form – but art is a very big word. I can't even say if my work is art. Others can judge that. I take pictures.

LFI: On the subject of your work, you've now produced a photography book and



named it "One day in November" in honour of Gisèle Freund's centenary. What is the intention behind this?

Jessica Backhaus: The book's supposed to be a gift. A tribute to a friend. I remember her asking me on a number of occasions to show her my work. But I couldn't. At the time, I didn't believe I would be able to deal with her critiques. In all the years we were friends, I only ever showed her one of my photos. So the book is a belated effort to change that.

LFI: "One day in November" is a book filled with dialogues and triptychs and is rather poetic. How does this reflect your relationship with Gisèle Freund?

Jessica Backhaus: I spent a lot of time thinking about what to include in "One day in November". I wanted it to be an honest book – one that would express what I had learnt from Gisèle. So, I flew to Paris with the intention of retracing our footsteps, but it just didn't work out. All the pictures I took felt empty somehow. Then, I came up with the idea of creating triptychs and dialogues,



which is something I've always done on the side as it is an effective way to express my feelings and impressions. And when I think about it today, I believe that Gisèle was always present in my subconscious when I was taking these photographs. They touch on what she always said: that a good picture has to emerge from a feeling.

LFI: Just like Gisèle Freund's work, whose pictures were already taken in colour back in the thirties, your photography is teeming with colour. How important is this in your view of aesthetics?

Jessica Backhaus: I've been shooting colour film exclusively for the past ten years, at least. As far as I'm concerned, the world is colour. I love colour theory and I find the way in which different colours affect different people fascinating. But colour has an innate disadvantage, as the viewer can become overly fixated on it and less aware of the content or message. In this respect, black & white photography is less noisy, if you will – what really matters here is the composition.



LFI: What do you think Gisèle Freund would have said about these ninety-or-so pictures that you are now presenting her and the world in "One day in November"?

Jessica Backhaus: That's a really tough question. She'd probably take a moment to consider and eventually tell me how the photographs were affecting her. What I'd love most would be to know that the pictures had moved her somehow. INTERVIEW: RALF HANSELLE

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