

Jessica Backhaus: One Day in November by Jessica Backhaus

Jessica Backhaus was born in Cuxhaven, Germany in 1970. At the age of sixteen, she moved to Paris where she studied photography and visual communications. Here she would meet Gisele Freund in 1992, who became her mentor and close friend.

In 1995 her passion for photography drew her to New York, where she started assisting photographers and pursued her own projects. Since then her work has been shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions, including The National Portrait Gallery in London and the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin. In Fall 2005 her first book, "Jesus and the Cherries" was published by Kehrer Verlag, Heidelberg. Fall 2008 brought two new books, both published by Kehrer Verlag. The first titled "What Still Remains" and the second book "One Day in November" which is a visual homage to Gisèle Freund, who would have celebrated her 100th birthday in December 2008.

While based in New York, Jessica divides her time and life between Europe and the United States.



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For Gisèle

Our experiences, our education, and the people in our lives are the essence of who we become. We grow, we change, we evolve and hopefully we keep growing and living in every possible way.

J.B.



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One day in November

It was Thursday, the 5th of November 1992. I had no idea that on this particular day I would meet the legendary photographer Gisèle Freund and that it would have such an impact on my life.

I came to Paris in the fall of 1987. Two years later I intended to study visual communications and photography. During my studies, when I was eighteen, I came across a book called “Photographie et Société” by Gisèle Freund. I was intrigued not only by the book, but also by the author. I started researching her work. As a student you dream of meeting other photographers or artists who influence you or whose work inspires you. Gisèle Freund was one of the people whom I thought would be amazing to meet. I felt there were some parallels in our lives. We were both from Berlin, studied in Paris, and had a passion for photography.

In November 1992, le Mois de la Photographie (The Month of Photography) took place again in Paris, like it does every two years. During that time Paris turns into a carousel of activities where you can visit exhibitions, lectures and talks. That year they had organized a conference with various well-known and established photographers to discuss the topic of copyrights. I had decided to go.

The hall of the Palais where the conference took place was filled with people. On the stage they had set up a long conference table with folded cards bearing all the names of the participants. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the card with Gisèle's name on it. My heart started pounding, and I became very excited about the fact that Gisèle would be there that evening. The conference lasted about four hours. Afterwards there was a big cocktail reception. I knew if I wanted to meet her, it would have to be that evening or I might never have another opportunity. In the midst of the crowd, I was trying to locate Gisèle. She was surrounded by many journalists and admirers, and I had no idea how to approach her. I was getting more and more nervous, and started circling. After a while, standing next to the buffet, I realized that she was standing right next to me, being interviewed by an American journalist. There was a moment of pause in the conversation, and with all my courage I introduced myself to her in French. My introduction was very simple, and I told her that I was also from Berlin, a photography student, and that I admired her work a great deal. She nodded and acknowledged my words. She seemed pleased, but continued her interview without reply. I stood there and listened to the interview, and then two minutes later, she turned around to me again and, while still speaking to the journalist, commented on how well she thought I spoke French. We started a short conversation about Berlin, and I still remember the small miracle of what happened next. She pulled a small card out of her jacket and on it scribbled her

telephone number. She then handed it to me, suggesting I give her a call, and that she would be very happy to invite me to her apartment for a cup of tea.



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I was in disbelief, but at the same time filled with joy. We said goodbye, and I remember it was one of those moments filled with a sense of enlightenment. I went outside and got some fresh air. It was a cold but beautiful evening, and the streets in Paris were filled with hope and anticipation of what the morning would bring. I felt alive. On that particular evening I didn't know that my brief encounter with Gisèle would lead to a very unique friendship that would last until her death in March 2000.

I called her a few weeks later and she invited me to her flat. I went to see her on Wednesday the 20th of January 1993, and I wasn't sure what to expect. I was just happy to be able to see her again. She lived in the 14th arrondissement, near rue Daguerre, in a charming apartment on the 6th floor with a balcony overlooking the rooftops of Paris. We shared many stories filled with laughter and curiosity. We had jasmine tea—which Gisèle loved very much—and cookies, and didn't realize the time flying by. Our conversations switched from French to German and back to French. She asked me about my life and why I was interested in photography and she told me stories about her life. It was fascinating to listen to her, because she had such a remarkable life. We had a beautiful afternoon. Then at eight o'clock in the evening, she asked me if I wanted to stay a little bit longer, to watch the French news with her and share a glass of whisky. Needless to say, I was happy to accept. When we finally said goodbye, I was standing at her door, and she asked me if I wanted to visit her again at some point. She said that she had very much enjoyed our time together and felt that it could be the beginning of a friendship.

From that day on we grew closer, and with time she had become so much to me: a teacher, a grandmother, and a mentor whose influence had touched me in many ways, not only in the world of photography, but in my whole life. Most importantly, she was my dear friend. Our friendship was a blessing, and one of those reasons why life can be beautiful.

She inspired me, encouraged me to dare and to follow my convictions. We shared many moments that are now part of my memory. Our 62-year age difference didn't matter. We spent our time sharing our various thoughts about life and photography. What I truly admired was her courage, which she used in her life and her work, to explore the world. She was brave and fearless. What fascinated me in her work was her integrity and honesty. I think of two photographs in particular, "Virginia Woolf's work table at Monk's House, Sussex, England, c. 1967" and "No future for the miners, England, 1936", as my favorites. Though very different from each other, both are filled with emotion, and it is from this emotion that they pull their force of expression. I believe she sought only to capture what was in her heart. She would rather photograph the faces of an audience than the spectacle itself. She was more interested in seeing their faces, their reactions and their emotions. She had her own unique vision that

allowed her to interpret the world. She photographed different places, different countries with their people, personalities, conflicts, issues and events. In 1947 she became the first female member of the legendary photography agency Magnum that was founded in New York by Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson, "Chim" Seymour and George Rodger. It was Robert Capa who invited her to join the agency. She mentioned him often to me, which is curious, because during my studies I read a biography about Robert Capa by Richard Whelan. He inspired me a great deal as well. I asked her how he was in real life, and what kind of relationship she had with him. She was part of his group of friends and said that he had an incredible charisma and was very special in the way he was able to communicate his enthusiasm. She also talked about Werner Bischof and Henri Cartier-Bresson. Cartier-Bresson was another very close friend of hers. She told me stories from when they were both printing their black/white photographs in his kitchen in the early years when they met. They had this mutual admiration for each other that lasted until her death. She did mention her years at Magnum quite a bit, and that she imagined that it must be quite different nowadays.

In general she was hesitant to call her work Art and did not try to experiment with new forms of Visual Arts. She stayed true to herself until the day she didn't want to photograph anymore, which had already happened when I met her. She was still very much engaged in the Photography world, but was simply not longing to take pictures anymore.

Did I ever take any photographs of her? Generally, I didn't dare. Besides, Gisèle really did not like to be photographed that much. Only once, when we were in Braunschweig together, did I feel like taking a picture of her—a single shot. That day she was happy and didn't seem to mind.

In Paris, we went for walks, did the grocery shopping together, fetched from the post office her large amount of mail, went out to restaurants or cooked in her apartment. She loved being outside in parks. Sometimes we also went to exhibitions together. In December 1993, when she turned eighty-five, she received a wonderful gift from a friend, who was a journalist for *Le Monde*. She was invited for a private tour of the Louvre on a day it was closed. Gisèle was very generous and invited me to come along with her. Another writer, Jorge Semprún, was also with us. At that time, Louis Malle was also touring the museum. I will always remember the silence in this mythical place, hearing only the echos of Louis Malle's footsteps while looking at the various paintings, and feeling so small in such a grand and majestic museum. It was surreal and beautiful at the same time.

Once in a while I invited Gisèle to have dinner with my friends at my place. Gisèle was curious about my friends and wanted to know them as well. She enjoyed very much being surrounded by young people. We often had conversations about education and she insisted that it is important to learn and to give back your knowledge to younger generations. Last year, the ICP (International Center Of Photography) in New York had invited me to give a lecture. I felt honored and agreed to participate in their lecture series, but was truly afraid of it. I had never done something like that before. I remembered Gisèle's words and thought that I should at least challenge myself to try and overcome my fear. In the end I didn't regret it, and even admit that I enjoyed the experience.

Now that I look back on these years I realize that Gisèle taught me things that I could never have learned in an auditorium. I remember another day, when it was very gray outside. I visited her, and we decided to go for a walk in her neighborhood. All of a sudden it started to rain very heavily. We were in a little garden just next to her house. I wanted to bring her home again, but she insisted on staying. We were sitting on this bench, and while I was holding the umbrella over us, Gisèle started drawing with her cane in the sand and started talking about her childhood and the years she spent in South America. She also told of her friendship with Frida Kahlo, who I believe meant a lot to her. She didn't want to go home, she just wanted to feel the rain and tell me more about her life. It was a unique moment, just sitting with her on a park bench sharing the umbrella under the pouring rain and listening to her stories.

She quite often told me stories about her dear friend Adrienne Monnier. Adrienne Monnier was without a doubt a very important person in Gisèle's life. She had translated Gisèle's thesis into French and published it herself through her own publishing company (she was the founder of the very well-known bookstore "La maison des amis des livres", situated, at the time when Gisèle finished her studies at the Sorbonne in 1936, at 7, rue de l'Odéon). "Photographie et Société" became, and still is, a milestone in the exploration of the modern visual culture. Adrienne Monnier, in taking Gisèle under her wing when she arrived in Paris, was a key player along with Sylvia Beach (from the famous bookstore "Shakespeare and Company") in shaping her future path, leading her to become one of the most important photographers of the last century. Her well-known portraits of arts and letters celebrities such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, André Malraux, Simone de Beauvoir, Henri Matisse have impacted and inspired countless photographers. Gisèle simply said to me: "I only took photographs of some of my friends and the fact that they became such legends in their own right is another story. I was simply lucky to have known Adrienne." While saying this, she had a big smile on her face, and you could sense that she was very grateful for the support of her friend.

One day in November 1994 she surprised me with something very unique. During that time I had just moved into a new apartment. As a housewarming gift, she offered me a print. My first thought was it

would be a print of hers, but I was wrong. I couldn't believe my eyes; in front of me was a beautiful print by Martin Munkácsi, "Boys running into the surf at Lake Tanganyika, ca. 1930".

"I saw a photograph of three black children running into the sea, and I must say that it is that very photograph which was for me the spark that set fire to the fireworks. I suddenly understood that photography can capture eternity in one instant. It is only that one photograph which influenced me. There is in that image such intensity, spontaneity, such joy of life, such a prodigy, that I am still dazzled by it even today." Henri Cartier-Bresson, May, 1977

I knew that the photograph played such a vital part in HCB's life. But I was shocked to see that Gisèle gave me my favorite photograph at the time. I asked her how she had known, especially because I had never mentioned it to her. But she knew and followed with: "This is exactly how I see you. You remind me of myself when I was your age. I knew that you would love it". I was speechless.

One of the lessons she taught me about photography which has stayed with me over the years is that despite the importance of knowing the technical aspects, the most important thing is to follow your heart in taking pictures. If you follow only the technical rules, your pictures will be empty, and your photographs will lack emotion. Never underestimate the viewer who can see or feel an image. Good photographs will stay with you, go beyond rules of composition and technical expertise, and convey or express a certain feeling. She always insisted that you need honesty in your work.

She also brought up another aspect that she felt was very important. She said that one who is involved in a creative field should always be open, interested in all sorts of areas: theatre, literature, music, culture, art. She mentioned that it is very important to be engaged in this world and to be educated. She felt strongly that living like that would allow artists to grow and to widen their horizons. One needs to stay curious. When I met Gisèle she was active in following events and keeping her inner child alive. She never lost her curiosity. I still see today the illuminated globe that she had beside her bed, and that she turned on once in a while, which then brought her to tell me stories about certain places or countries. She loved the ocean, and often mentioned Quiberon in France, where she had walks along the shore.

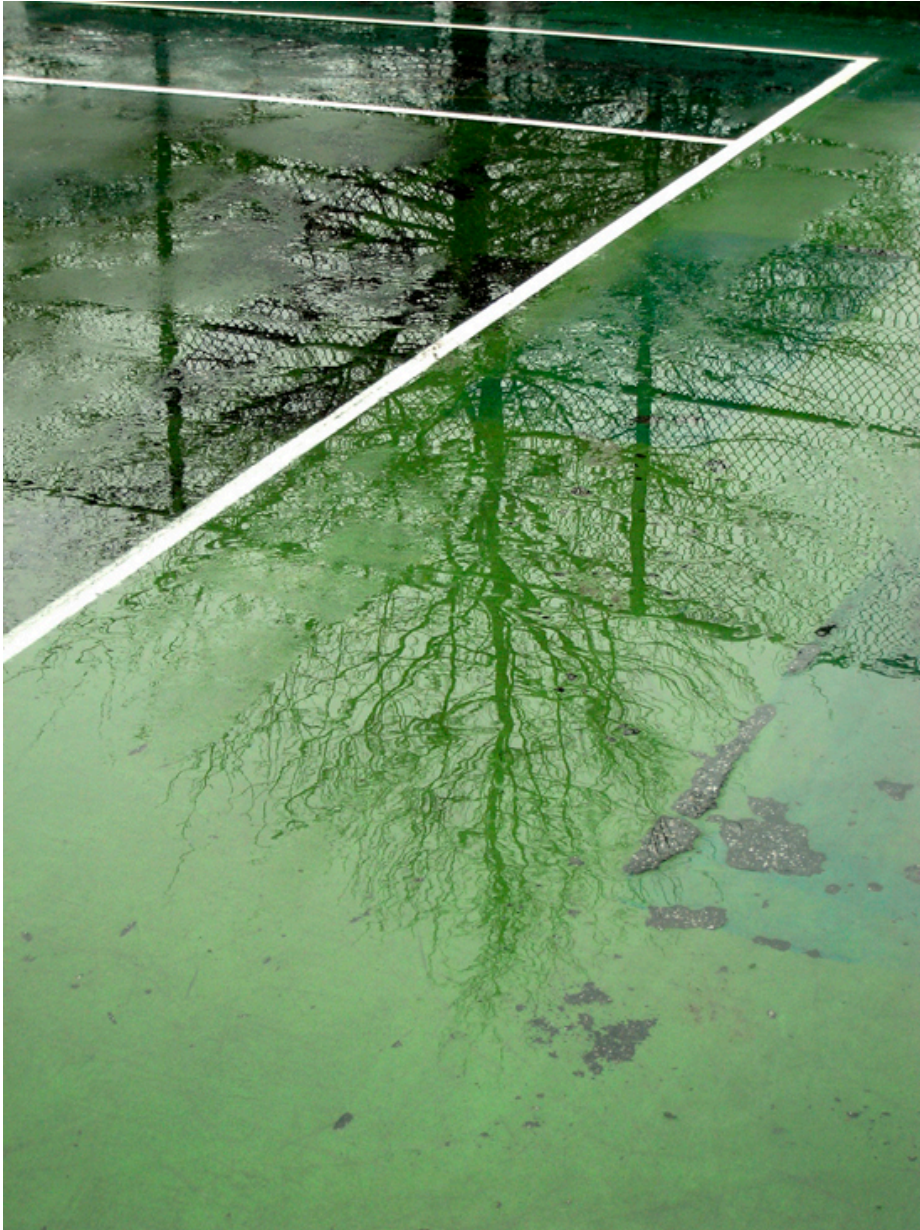
Gisèle herself grew up in Berlin and her father was a very well-respected art collector. He took Gisèle from an early age to exhibitions and initiated her into the art world. Gisèle often spoke of one particular painting that had influenced her: "Kreidefelsen auf Rügen" (ca. 1818) by Caspar David Friedrich, the Romantic painter of the 19th century who once expressed

"An artist should paint not only what he sees before him, but also what he sees within him."^[1]

When I was thinking about doing this book for Gisèle, I remembered all the various times I spent with her and how much she has influenced me. She encouraged my curiosity and my enjoyment of life. Photography is a necessity for me and while I'm in the act of taking pictures, my senses become awakened to the moment. I have days when my interest is held by a raindrop, by a swing or by a curtain, and then I have days when I'm inspired by people. I am curious about the many kinds of beauty in this world and it is in this spirit that I began to compile the images within these pages; to celebrate this world and Gisèle's teachings.

When I think about it again, I also feel that Gisèle has, in a funny way, initiated this book. One day when we were sitting in her living room—in the late summer of 1995, I believe, just before I was moving to New York—I was telling her about my plans. She seemed excited for me because she herself spent so much time in New York and knew the city well.

^[1]Gardner's "Art Through the Ages", Seventh Edition (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1980), p. 754.



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Even now, when I am walking in the streets in New York, I realize that Gisèle somehow did not leave, because sometimes I feel her presence—maybe in the light, that particular light that only exists in New York; that vibrant light that hits the buildings in the late afternoon, turning most of the buildings into a deep red ocean, which Gisèle loved so much. I look up, and I know she is there.

In our lifetime we meet so many different people. Some come and go, and some people stay with us. Gisèle will stay with me forever, and I was very lucky to have these years with her. I feel grateful that she was in my life. I miss her.

Going back to our late afternoon in Paris....she suggested that maybe one day I should write about our friendship. I said that I have difficulty writing, and that I prefer to express myself visually. But somehow she didn't want to hear it. I saw a certain expression in her face, perhaps telling me I should try anyway.

Gisèle often asked me if I could show her my work. She was inquisitive and wanted to see my photographs. But at that time, I wasn't capable of showing her my work. She was "la grande dame de la photographie" and I was a photography student simply not ready to receive her critique. I was intimidated by her and was apprehensive as to how she would react. In the end I never did show her anything, except for a single image. I took it in India in April 1994, and it's of a group of small Indian boys running towards a river. She liked it, but was quite annoyed that there was nothing else for her to

see. I don't regret this though, because that's how I felt at the time; however I wish now I could show her my photographs and share her thoughts and impressions.

Gisèle, these are for you...



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In May 1994, Gisèle had an exhibition at the Museum für Fotografie in Braunschweig. She invited me to come along. So, we flew to Braunschweig, Germany for the whole weekend, where we had a wonderful time with the curator, Ulrike Lahmann, among others. That same weekend we all went together to the Kunstmuseum in Wolfsburg, which had then its inauguration. There was a particular moment when all the guests sent purple balloons into the sky. It was quite magical and I took a picture.

Gisèle was standing next to me and smiled.

Jessica Backhaus

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