A Trilogy

New Horizon

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Once artists have successfully developed a personal style, some of them feel the urge after some time to explore a new means of expression, to break with their previous work in some way. This can be said of Jessica Backhaus, who in past years has continually captivated viewers with the ingenious inventions she displays in her artistic, narrative photographs, presented both as individual images and as series. A distinctive feature of her work to date has been a fascinating interplay between the depiction of reality and enigmatic abstraction But with her new series, she has made a fresh start that is as surprising as it is consistent with what went before: For the first time, she refrains from using a camera, at least in part, and supplements her photographs with applications of other media on a neutral picture support to form collages. The work process for her current series, *New Horizon*, is thus no longer a dual one within the medium of photography—taking a photo and then editing it—but is instead extended onto multiple levels. Each work is produced through a sequence of reactions, with added elements and layers coming together to create a unique image. These successive steps are difficult to decipher and interpret, especially since she does not set out to inscribe meta-levels into her pictures. The question remains, then, as to whether she can succeed in that goal, because just as photographers can never aim at pure objectivity, it is presumably equally impossible for them to create an image fully bereft of meaning. This is why the new series can also be seen as a kind of line drawn under her previous work. The photographer by all means appreciates the possibilities her medium offers for representing the world and its phenomena, or for charging them with symbolic meaning, for alluring and dazzling the viewer. And yet, with *New Horizon,* which arrives on the scene with a bang, albeit a gentle one, she draws upon even greater imaginative force. The series is tantamount to an artistic act of liberation, one that is simultaneously an emancipation from the shackles of the mimetic or the gravity of meaning. And so the artist presumably hopes and expects from viewers an equally liberated attitude of reception, a type of meditation—as with Mark Rothko and his abstract color fields. The series is, moreover, a deliberate departure from the reproduction possibilities offered by the photographic medium, for the new group of works consists of a set of unique pieces. Through pasting and layering, as well as occasionally painting onto the sheets, Backhaus even creates, strictly speaking, three-dimensional objects. The abstract painter Robert Motherwell devised a similar approach in the 1970s with his mixed-media collages.

For Jessica Backhaus, her own photography has thus become a starting point for complex works produced in a kind of experimental setup in her studio which finally culminate in additive collages. The finished piece comprises different layers and materials mounted on a cardboard support, the materials ranging from strips of adhesive tape and transparent papers to splashes of paint that Backhaus applies over parts of the image in one or more sweeps of the hand. We have seen this method before—used by the American painters Helen Frankenthaler and Jackson Pollock. We encounter in Backhaus's work both art-historical quotations as well as the energy invested in motion and traces of paint that run counter to the structure of the underlying image. A certain unpredictability is inherent in her new work process, for some things succeed and others do not. Here, for the first time, Backhaus experiments consistently and systematically with coincidence as a design tool. The result is a game played with the unknown and the unconscious. It is as though she were capturing on paper her own inner visions, her idea-constructs. The image titles describe moods and associations, and sometimes the place where the photograph was taken, and thus convey the initial visual idea—ergo something specifically representational. Some of the photographs are in fact reminiscent of her earlier works, although they are in most cases more reduced, more

minimalist. On the collaged photos we discover, for example, twisted yellow ribbons set before neutral wood planks, indefinable objects perching on a window sill, imposing cloudscapes hanging in a blue sky, or a night view of a vast sea. And yet these depictions, if one can even still speak of depiction in the final work, seem in one case distorted in perspective, in another visually straightened out, in particular through the supplementary paper strips. The realistically depicted things, these snippets of meaning, are ultimately deprived of context through the successive working steps. Adding non-representational surfaces in a variety of shapes, with straight or torn edges and informal color structures, the artist creates numerous iterations, composed with slightly varying image modules, like letters chosen from a large letter case. The first addition invites a second and a third, initiating a creative exercise in which the artist continually takes herself by surprise, until in some pictures a painterly action is the final touch completing the composition. Everything in the image thus remains at once geometric and amorphous, complex and simple, occasionally recalling the simplicity of some of the paper cutouts Henri Matisse produced in his latter years. The neutral backgrounds on which the image elements are arranged and applied play an equal role in the final whole.

The handmade aspect of *New Horizon* emerged, the artist says, from her weariness with today's fast-moving digital world. Backhaus deliberately counters this trend with something that is slowed down, even though some of the images were created in a rush of inspiration, leaving the intuitive work-process transparent. As disparate as the individual works may be, the series amounts to a systematization and development of a new, personal system of signs. The subjects and the materials used are both objectified and sensualized—with minimal narration. Each image shows and represents nothing more than what we see in and on it. But that does not necessarily have to be as abstract as the images themselves. They appeal to both our cognitive and emotional understanding; in other words: to both our mind and our gut feelings. And yet, mere cool contemplation of what is shown doesn't get us anywhere; we should instead try to feel these pictures. Jessica Backhaus here breaks away from the traditional modes of representation in photography, including those in her own previous work. Perhaps she even creates a new reality and, in passing, makes the invisible visible.