# *A Trilogy*

## Shifting clouds

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Where do I start? When Jessica Backhaus showed me her new series *Shifting Clouds*, I was seduced right away by the beauty of the images and the coherence of the whole. She proposed that I write a text on this subject and it took me mere moments to decide. It was a challenge for me, a person who has maintained for years (wrongly, no doubt) that beauty is aware of itself but does not self-analyze. The consequence of this presupposition is that I write mainly on works that are a lot more "documentary" (the quote marks are indispensable here) than Jessica Backhaus's work is. Without doubt, *Shifting Clouds*, like the whole of her oeuvre, ought to convince us to leave this term to gather dust on the shelves of photography criticism. All photography is documentary, from the folded papers of Backhaus, to war photography, via the chemigrams of Pierre Cordier. Every photo has something real for a referent: a scrunched-up piece of paper, a battle, or a chemical reaction.

The determining aspect, for me, of Jessica Backhaus's work, and of *Shifting Clouds* in particular, is decontextualization. Ninety-nine percent of photos have a context. To take two Parisian examples, *Dovima with Elephants* by Richard Avedon has the Winter Circus and *Harper's Bazaar* as its context; *The Kiss* by Robert Doisneau, the square outside City Hall, Paris, of the 1950s. Publicity pack shots, one could object, elude context. But, in fact, they do not: they are conditioned by their period of production and by brand placement, mass market, or elitist product, for example.

So, Jessica Backhaus produces a singular decontextualization, whether she is photographing in her Berlin studio or finding her motifs outdoors, like a miraculous alignment of planets. The only certainty the viewer can hang onto is the artist's desire to create forms. The difficulty, once the enjoyment of aesthetic contemplation has passed, is trying to understand the author's intention.

Whereas her previous book *six degrees of freedom* was a quest for the origins, *Trilogy* understands itself to be a radical reduction of the photographic process: sunlight, an object, and color suffice to make an image. It is about an endeavor to surpass, to leave photography behind, and *Shifting Clouds* marks this passage.

In this partly studio-made series, therefore, Jessica Backhaus creates what she shows, she frees herself from the existent, from the constraint of the real. She places a colored ball on a ground of color, and one perceives an eye. A variation of this images returns a few pages further on. The globe and circle motif is omnipresent, the circle having the symbolic function of signifying perfection but also of signifying something that has neither beginning nor end. Several times, Jessica Backhaus multiplies circles in one image, suggesting that this ideal is either an individual experience or a utopia. Even more unsettling is the fact that the major part of these circular figures are imperfect: elastic bands placed on a ground of color in a vaguely twisted state, traces of paint on a plywood panel that have drooled. The author thus implies the impossibility of purity.

Two more motifs, equally essential, are characteristic of *Shifting Clouds*: the fold, recognized by Gilles Deleuze as being central to the philosophy of Leibniz, and the run-out. The one being doubtless the antithesis of the other. Jessica Backhaus soaks scraps of paper in watercolor and then observes the interaction of the paper, pigments, and water. In these two elements it is necessary to see, it seems to me, a desire to testify to complexity. The fold

corresponds to stacking: of knowledge, of codes, of the multiple elements that shape our lives, and the run-out to the simultaneous porosity of these same elements.

Decontextualization is revealed as a tool that allows Jessica Backhaus to "document", to bring into play, through the minimalist use of three simple figures—the circle, the fold, and the run-out—concepts that traverse art history: perfection, accumulation, and dispersion.