Movement in Images from the Past

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When we close our eyes, we notice that the contours of remembered situations lose focus in as they move past our mind's eye. No matter how hard we try to remember a certain image, it instantly slips away. Sometimes a photograph can help to jog our memory or at least capture the flow of visual impressions for a fraction of a second by confining it to a clear-cut frame. But then it becomes even harder later on to know whether our memory of the moment has adapted itself to the photo or whether the photo is merely a footnote to a much more complex recollection.

These remembered and imagined pictures collect in our inner image memory. Their continuous mutability is arguably their main characteristic, as Goethe remarked in the essay *On Natural Sciences in General*: "I possessed the following capacity: when I closed my eyes and, with head inclined, envisaged a flower in the center of my vision, it did not retain its original shape for even a moment; it opened up and from inside it unfolded new flowers with colored and also green petals. They were not natural flowers but fantastic ones, symmetrical like the sculptor's rosettes." The photographic equivalent to Goethe's flowers would thus be pictures that reveal just enough for us to know what they are, but upon closer inspection unfold a complexity that eludes the observing eye.

During her trip to places she frequented in her childhood and youth, Jessica Backhaus tried to fill photographic gaps in her personal biography. Some of the resulting photographs show views looking through things or mirror reflections, illustrating in a compelling way the balancing act between revealing and yet veiling the answers she found. The mirror and what is reflected therein meld on the image plane. It is as though two spaces were combined into one: the here and now with the there and then. Especially when the past can only be zeroed in on through research and stories, holding it fast by means of the photographic recording process proves well-nigh impossible.

If you do not grow up with your biological father, you will at some point wonder about your roots in this unknown side of the family when trying to mentally trace the circle of your life. To what extent can character traits shaped by external influences be distinguished from your genetic make-up? And even if you were able to differentiate between them, how can you ever know that a specific way of acting ultimately goes back to that unknown parental line? Scientific research on memories and experiences that we inherit in the course of our lives along with the DNA sequence that we received at birth demonstrate that this part of our genetic make-up is especially difficult to comprehend. These particular genes work through radiation and vibrations, preventing us from researching their behavior except in a fragmentary manner. Molecules in precisely this DNA segment of inherited memory form a kind of crystal in which large amounts of "absorbed" information are stored in the form of, for example, images or language.

Based on the scant number of solid tips Jessica Backhaus had at her disposal, her search for her past oscillated between specific information and vague, tinged memories. In the photographs taken during her journey, she portrays things gathered up from the past. Beyond their mere material existence, these objects act as contemporary witnesses telling stories that may seem familiar.

At the same time, Backhaus detaches what she sees from its original significance and lets the viewer perceive it in a different light by creating a play of colors and shapes that emphasizes the geometric (ir-)regularities of the photographed scenes. Our gaze is distracted from immediately trying to interpret what is unfolding before our eyes. We have learned all our lives to use our eyes as an extension of our sense of touch in order to instantly associate what we see with a certain size and material quality. This interpretative ability allows us to unconsciously overlook the abstraction inherent in photography, which translates a three-dimensional space or thing into a two-dimensional surface.

We may recall being absorbed as children in the pattern of a tiled bathroom floor and imagining it continuing beyond the confined space. This mental extension of the existing grout lines is reflected in a different way in these photographs. With her unfettered gaze, Backhaus turns up visual structures that lend a different textural quality to what is pictured. The infinite elasticity of rubber thus becomes a one-of-a-kind static sculpture. Tire tracks are elevated to cartographic symbols denoting motion in the universe. Gently billowing curtains delineate a sharply contoured mountain range or dissolve at the same moment into frozen waves. Capturing the moment records the exact opposite of movement, which is marked by its ability to exist continuously in endless metamorphoses. I would add yet another paradox here: namely, the incomprehensible ability of water to remember. Water can recall substances to which it was exposed, but whose presence has been eliminated through infinite dilution. The presence of this absence is the only clue that remains. And this, too, is distinguished by its intangible nature.

The traces that our experiences and histories carve into our memories always remain in motion. The cycle of a human life materializes and manifests itself for a time before continuing on its journey. The beginning and end fuse with the here and now. The final direction of our life's journey is unknown to us, and so all that is left is the knowledge that every moment can again unfold the full potency of the six degrees of freedom: = 6. This formula establishes that we can move in any direction. Even the still, halting photographs of Jessica Backhaus will be carried forward and continue on their own paths. Backward, if they point to the past, and forward if they become part of our own pictorial memory.