Beyond the Void

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This is the story of a search for origins. It begins with a folded sheet of paper which, carelessly cast aside on a stained table, resists its folds and rears up into a shape resembling a sail (like the wind, p. 3). The sea and the mountains are recurring themes in the series six degrees of freedom, the loose ends of the narrative that Jessica Backhaus takes up and stretches into a taut net. They stand for her maternal grandfather, who went to sea, and her unknown father, whose tracks lead to Switzerland.

In waves and mountains (pp. 80/81), the two forms become one. They appear for a moment as a reversible figure along a fringe of light above the striped background, before we tumble into the steep downward perspective and recognize them as a curtain with daylight shining through underneath. The dizziness that results gives us an inkling of what it feels like to have the ground sink away beneath your feet when contemplating your unknown origins. In dolomiti (p. 75), the mountain motif continues in an ice pop from the artist's childhood that has recently been revived. But this Dolomiti specimen has none of the gaudy splendor remembered from the colorful ice cream menus of the 1970s. It is covered with a pale layer of ice crystals, more frozen memory than real treat. The void left by the unrecoverability of the past is palpable in many of these images. Switzerland (pp. 36/37) shows a transparent piece of soap with a picture of a mountain panorama inside that will be gone before it can ever be grasped. As a clichéd landscape, it is more of a phantasm than a possible home, just as the artist's deceased father can never mean home to her.

The places where Backhaus spent her early childhood likewise seem strangely removed. The picture is peeling off a billboard showing the town where she was born and advertising trips in a horse cart across the intertidal mud flats (nordsee, pp. 96/97). The past vanishes before she can get any closer to it. A wonderfully nostalgic view of a ship landing stage in Cuxhaven, known as the "Alte Liebe" (old flame), is cast in glass, safely preserved and unattainable (alte liebe, p. 57). The artist has photographed the scene of her earliest memories, the Stuttgart residential area Asemwald (asemwald, p. 41), from the roof of a building and through a window so that the view appears as if in a mirror, taking on an unreal quality. Backhaus moved several times from town to town as a child, so questions about her biological origins and the lack of a place she can call home are central motifs in her work. shifting (p. 47) stands for the feeling of fragmentation that results, but at the same time strikes a hopeful note in the way that the parts come together to form a cohesive whole. cuxhaven (p. 13), which can be interpreted as an allegory of the strength of elective affinities, also has something of this confidence. The tightly stretched hawser leading to a boat cut off at the edge of the frame seems to be continued by a loose rope that leads after a few twists out of the picture on the other side. Despite the change in connecting strands, there is continuity here.

The corresponding changes in direction are the starting point for the series, whose title refers to the six degrees of freedom of a ship as a body in space (three for linear movement and three for rotation). They represent a mobility determined equally by steering maneuvers and the effect of outside forces. In this sense they become a model for an open attitude to biographical

imponderabilities, an attitude inspiring faith in how it is often the unexpected twists that make life interesting. Some of this joy is conveyed in slide (p. 9). It is fun to imagine that the pool slide owes its sideward-bending form to the special pleasure of riding a curve before splashing into the water, even though the shape is more likely a way of saving space. Another relic of the photographer's childhood is the intricately twisting drinking straw (strohhalm, p. 76). The pointless delay of the thirst-quenching drink serves no other purpose than the fun of watching the colored soda rush through the straw like the train cars on a roller coaster ride. Wasteful excess is likewise taken to extremes in the eraser shaped like a lightbulb (lightbulb, p. 51), one of many erasers that became a collector's item due to its unique form and thus escaped its destruction through use.

Their laconic staging before monochromatic backgrounds highlights a quality these objects share with photographs. Just like old snapshots of loved ones taken on seemingly long-forgotten vacations or during family celebrations, they have the power to trigger memories. They uncover memories of biographic fragments and thus create a real connection to one's own history, something that the merely imagined past could never do. In the tape cassette of the Flashdance soundtrack (flashdance, p. 84), memory and fantasy converge. What was perhaps the most popular dance film of the 1980s inspired Backhaus's youthful dream of a career as a dancer. The object depicted in the photo brings back those days, but at the same time represents a fantasy world that is far removed from real life. The same unattainability turns the artist's search for her biological father into an ambiguous endeavor. What might have been a shared history is lost forever. All attempts to investigate this hypothetical life must come to an end in the realm of imagination. It is like the open book in chapters (p. 19), which is photographed in front of a white wall so that it looks like a blank page busting through the image that memory is incapable of filling.

Only a shift of perspective allows us to make a different kind of connection. The ladder in the marble quarry shown in the picture finally (p. 17), tilting steeply upward into the sky against a cloudy background with no visible means of support, looks like a kind of stairway to heaven. It gives the artist symbolic access to a cosmos where everything has its place. With universe (p. 22), which presents tire marks that resemble a star chart, she revisits this motif, and then takes it a step further in marbles (p. 10). Here, the glass marbles are pictured on a gray ground like discrete heavenly bodies, their uniform shadows under the slanting rays of the sun bringing them together as part of a greater order. And they also harbor within microcosms that summon thoughts of a starry night sky or distant galaxies; a highlight on one of the marbles even resembles a rising sun. rehearsal room (pp. 44/45), an arrangement of abstract shapes, likewise recalls a sun, with a nebula in the background. The picture was taken in a location where the artist's father, an actor, rehearsed for many years. Finally, finding peace (p. 21) brings us back to a childlike perspective on the world, where the deceased live up above the clouds, in heaven.

By localizing herself with her father in a shared and cohesive cosmos, Backhaus is able to come to terms with the loss of a person who has inscribed himself in her memory as someone always absent. After the impossible relationship between two individuals has been dissolved in a higher order in which both have their place, the search for the artist's roots draws to a close. The last picture shows a sailing boat (six degrees of freedom, p. 109): and now the circle closes.