

SEIICHI FURUYA: *alive*

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Seiichi Furuya, the Japanese photographer living in Austria, has responded full of astonishment and at the same time critically to many "European" themes during the last 25 years. Themes such as the Iron Curtain, the Berlin Wall or the events in the Balkans: subjects that have already become history. His pictures in their clear-sighted astonishment are witness to a highly individual and continuous conflict, a questioning of the self. That Furuya's camera is his only, yet all the more precise, possibility to express himself in relation to events and facts is shown impressively in his "work of remembrance" on his wife, who died young. Furuya's work of the last years has focused on his garden: There he made pictures of nigh-on magical and breath-taking colour at the periphery of a European small-town.

Furuya's refusal to provide even the briefest of formal interpretations of his photographs – up till now he has published only short autobiographical texts – is intentional and almost impossible to break through even in conversation. Photography is his most important means of communicating with the world, whose verbal possibilities in a hard to define area between the Japanese, English and German languages do not yet, or no longer, appear to be trouble-free or precise. Thus everything he sees and experiences, feelings of strangeness or familiarity, only acquire a location and expression in the act of photographing; his pictures are analysis, commentary and question at one and the same time.

Furuya rarely tackles specific themes or selects his motifs according to plan: these groups of photographs seem to punctuate the flow of images that result from the correlations of his life, images without added details, titled only with the place and time of their origin, which document his constant compulsion to secure his individual existence through the photographic record. Thus he pursues no universal concept and adheres to no specific rules or even preferences; for his life and his work with the camera are too closely integrated, and photographs, of many different kinds, become possible and important on the spur of the moment.

What the viewer sees in these, the images the photographer has compiled and counterpointed, is closely connected with a path through life whose fundamental parameter is change of location – change of location in as much as Furuya regards the idea of settling permanently as unthinkable because he experiences every place he stays in as a kind of intermediary station, regardless of how long the sojourn lasts. The "journey", on the other hand, is something complete in itself, a unit of time beyond everyday life that is planned in advance and which it is worthwhile trying to read Furuya's photographs and his references to alterations in his life and significant changes of location parallel to one another:

In 1970, on Okinawa, he took his first steps as a photographer while still a student of architecture, fascinated and disturbed by the collisions between Japanese tradition and the American occupation civilisation. It rained, it snowed, no-one strayed before his camera. In 1973, we look with Furuya from the windows of the ferry from Japan to Russia, and from the Trans-Siberian railway, and then we encounter him in Moscow, then for the first time in Vienna, Italy, Turkey and finally, in 1975, in Graz. His earliest impressions of Europe were characterised by the hostility towards foreigners and anti-Semitism which he encountered on the long journey through Russia, and also by the fact that he was unable to leave the after-effects of his political activities in Japan behind simply by a change of locality: he was refused a visa to the USA, and once he was arrested near Vienna.

Then, 1978, the almost constantly melancholy expressions in the photographs he took at the time – whether in Istanbul, Vienna or Bologna – of hurrying people in unfriendly ambiances suddenly brightened: a young woman appeared on the scene, Christine. A few weeks after the first encounter in Styria, she appears in radiant pictures taken in Japan, in Izu; this was the scene of Christine's and Seiichi's wedding – to which no visual document bears witness. In Graz, Furuya became involved with a circle of other photographers for the first time since 1976. He joined the "Forum Stadtpark", an association of contemporary artists who, originating from the fields of literature and painting, had now expanded to include the technical medium of photography. In 1980, photographs by Furuya, pictures of Christine, were published for the first time in the newly founded magazine "Camera Austria". It was not by chance that Furuya was also interested in introducing Japanese photographers to his new environment: work by Daido Moriyama, Shomei Tomatsu, and much later also Araki (1991), was published in "Camera Austria" and, in connection with the Forum Stadtpark, exhibited in several European cities.

In 1980, Seiichi Furuya spent some time in Amsterdam, where he felt himself to be part of dense urban life for the first since leaving Japan. In order not to be recognised as a photographer, he held his camera at hip level and observed the people from this angle. The overlapping, intersecting fragments of the bodies moving in the streets almost exceed the scope of the picture format. Back in Austria, after moving to Vienna with his family (his son Komyo-Klaus had been born in the meantime), Furuya's attempt to give a visual expression to what he as an "outsider" regarded as so strange took on an almost diametrically opposite form to the spontaneity and coincidental character of the work he did in Amsterdam. For the work entitled "National Border" (1981– 83), he travelled along the borders between Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Yugoslavia, intending to include a plan in the portfolio to identify the places where the photographs were taken. Parallel to his work on "National Frontier", Furuya took a series of pictures in Vienna entitled "As far as the eye can see", concentrating on a rainy window that, while revealing little of the world outside, suggested a strange, hybrid impenetrability. Surface and depth, space and limitation, exposing and concealing are presented succinctly yet poetically as interdependent opposites. The fact that Christine was undergoing her first hospital treatment for progressive depression may have intensified Furuya's obsession with constantly photographing her. In 1984 he decided to resume regular activity as translator for a Japanese firm in order to give Christine more security. Moves to Dresden and then to East Berlin followed. But Christine's depressions continued; a number of periods in hospital and a temporary return to Graz became unavoidable, and in October 1985, after several unsuccessful attempts, Christine Furuya-Gössler committed suicide.

After the death of Christine, Furuya's feeling, which began in 1979, that it was his "duty" to photograph her constantly by no means left him, nor did he feel that the possibility of finding himself in this dialogue was exhausted. He was convinced that "time and space" remained fixed in the thousand photographs that he had taken during the seven years of his partnership with Christine. Furuya's new goal was to make these documents – and through them Christine – speak for himself and others and thus prevent the disappearance of his vis-à-vis.

In 1989 and 1995, Furuya presented his first two attempts at making the material from the past speak. They consisted of collections of photographs taken during his years with Christine, but also included some which, although connected with the retrospective introspection with which he reviewed the events and feelings of those years, were fact not photographed until later. In the selection made in 1989 ("Mémoires"), the emphasis is on Furuya's preoccupation with death, the extinguishment of life itself. Since the event per se eludes visual expression, Furuya attempted at least to gain control over the time that passed parallel to the event by printing film strips made immediately before, during and after the occurrence, unspeakable because unportrayable, in their entirety. In 1995, Furuya gave "Mémoires" quite a different timbre; colour photographs assumed a leading role, more space was given to his and Christine's child, pictures from new projects joined the already known and many hitherto unpublished pictures from the past, and a prospect of a future beyond the memories seemed possible. Once more, the backward-looking photographer exploited the artistic freedom of the associative sequence, his own interpretation through pairs of pictures and arbitrary compilation.

The great success of the two exhibition tours now took Seiichi Furuya back to Japan more and more often, where, in 1990, he was awarded the prize of the Tokyo Photographic Society for the first "Mémoires" catalogue. Perhaps it was this reunion that triggered a new way of using the preserved material in order to present it in an alien environment in a seemingly less disjointed and arbitrary fashion: in 1997, on the occasion of a series of exhibitions in Tokyo, Furuya started for the first time to exhibit a chronological series of pictures of Christine. What he showed in this sequence of photographs may have been more moving and shocking than the photographer's selective grief in the preceding volumes.

The radicality of Furuya's retrospectives, the obsessiveness with which he insisted on arranging and re-arranging the "document" (that is how Furuya referred to the entirety of his photographs) alienated him increasingly even from his closest friends. It was not until 2000 that a serious life-threatening illness wrenched him from his almost self-destructive isolation. It was only then that he began to feel that he could even consider looking at and analysing the photographs taken since 1985—there were thousands of them, at least for himself. First of all he arranged the pictures that he had taken in Berlin immediately after Christine's death, and he was forced to realise – as with the work of the "iron curtain" – that he had been engaged on a kind of "search for lost time", plumbing the depths of and renewing memories which had long since become strangers to him.

The way in which Furuya now, in 2004, deals with the material originating from East Berlin between 1984 and 1987, creating a oppressing mood picture of a city in something akin to a state of emergency, giving the succinct statements of visual facts an ironic twist through selection and confrontation, is fundamentally different from the compilations he produced from the other two cities in which he lived most of the time in the last 17 years: Graz and Tokyo.

When Roland Barthes refers to haiku as "an awakening to the fact, a strong emotion in the face of the fact as an event and not as substance", he perhaps leads us closer than any theory of photography to the conditions from which Furuya's pictures develop, and also from which the chain of associations between them evolve. And when we learn to understand the photographs as visual constellations which on the one hand are rooted in the past event of the photograph, and on the other invite us again and again to be moved by them, to awaken" to them, then it is clear why they can be rearranged over and over again.

Although Furuya constantly used the same starting material in a different life situation, it speaks a different language, the visual diary permits many options of reference: the sequence of the photographs of the fighting dogs in Mostar (2001) that seem so important to him, and the flower pictures that seem to have broken away from all earthliness and be floating up to heaven (from 1992) derive their meaning from the very present awareness that it is precisely the fact of having survived, with his own threatening death and the unpreventable death of his partner still clear before his eyes. It is, perhaps from the gaping contrast that he derives the certainty of his own ambiguous existence: Furuya feels alive, "alive" sees – the light-filled photographs from Aqaba speak in favour – a future ahead. The duty of keeping the past alive as well, of never slackening the permanent, Sisyphean appraisal and new arrangement of the visual document in memory does not, however, appear to have forfeited any of its significance.

This text is a shortened version of the essay by Monika Faber, published in *Seiichi Furuya: alive*, Scalo 2004.