

In The Country of Last Images

MONOGRAPH

Seiichi Furuya captured a person and a country destined to disappear. While reorganizing his archive, the photographer discovered a new set of timeless subjects



Arles, 2000

No art work is immune to history. The meaning of one work or an entire oeuvre can abruptly shift in the wake of fresh occurrences, whether great or small. Yet among artists, photographers seem somehow more susceptible to the impact of history since their medium is so closely linked to the passage of time – or stops time in its tracks. A day – or a split second – can turn one frame into a unique document. While every photographer records time, some become chroniclers by accident.

This is the case for Seiichi Furuya, whose story is now well known in the German-language press. In 1973 at the age of 23, Furuya left Japan for Austria and found work in a Graz camera shop on the strength of his degree from the Tokyo College of Photography and with the help of fellow photographer Manfred Willmann. In February 1978, he met Christine Gössler, married her a few months later and started a family album: a snapshot of his wife sitting in the sun, their son holding a bunch of red flowers or radishes on the edge of a kitchen sink. In 1984, the family moved to Dresden and then on to East Berlin, where Furuya took a job as an interpreter with a Japanese construction firm. While he continued to photograph his family, he snapped the May Day parades, passers-by on Alexanderplatz and apartment blocks. But by that time, Christine had been diagnosed as schizophrenic. On 7 October 1985, during festivities to mark the 36th anniversary of the German Democratic Republic, she threw herself out of the window. Two years later, Furuya returned to Graz for good. And after another two years, the Berlin wall fell and eventually brought down real socialism.



East Berlin, 1987

The chance concurrence of these events – a private loss and a very public collapse – not only made Furuya into an accidental chronicler but also produced a strange fusion between an individual history and a collective one. However visual, the photographs he took in the GDR attest to a double disappearance, a permanent erasure. Sometimes, his wife's vacant stare seems to mimic the sparse East Berlin street scenes; the slogan 'Der Sozialismus siegt' (Socialism Is Winning) looks not only deceptive but also melancholic. Yet many photographs are strikingly vibrant documents of everyday life under real socialism – young women adjusting their bathing suits, dancers in a cabaret, garbage men at work – often reproduced in the rich, saturated colours that tend to be missing from snapshots of East Germany. As a foreigner, Furuya was permitted to travel to West Berlin, where he could stock up on colour film and have his rolls developed. As an amateur photographer in the emphatic sense, he ended up creating a private diaristic archive: akin to things you might scribble in a notebook, yet somehow more persistent than the type of snapshots we now take with our mobile phones.



Guessing, 1979

However intimate, Furuya's work is not quite individual. It is almost impossible to identify his photographs on the basis of recurring formal elements such as graininess, camera angles, lighting or poses. He is not concerned with taking the ultimate picture: technically perfect and aesthetically seductive. Instead, he devotes himself to sequencing, compiling and reconstructing his oeuvre. If he used to take pictures of his wife and their surroundings, he now evokes this past by constantly reordering his archive, by producing new combinations of personal and world history. The title of his exhibition at the Museum für Fotografie in Braunschweig – Hätte Wenn Warum (Would Have If Why, 2012) – expresses the idea of time as a conditional state, while the exhibition itself demonstrated that his art is one of recomposition. His main themes were spread across three rooms: one devoted to his wife, one to images of East Germany and one to his publications. Visitors were greeted by two pictures on separate freestanding wooden panels outside the museum. The first – taken in Dresden in 1984 – shows a paddle steamer with Kim Il Sung on board during a visit to East Germany, although Kim himself cannot be seen; only the North Korean flag on the ship tells us something about its unusual passenger. The other picture – taken on 12 June 1987 on East Berlin's grand boulevard Unter den Linden – shows people trying to listen to Ronald Reagan's speech on the West Berlin side of the Brandenburg Gate when Reagan called for the wall to be torn down. Here, too, as in many of Furuya's pictures, the subject remains outside the frame. His visions and colours may appear optimistic when seen in isolation, but the moments often bear the weight of world history.



Dresden, 1984

When asked what interests him more – a single photograph, an exhibition or a book of pictures – Furuya does not hesitate: 'The book'. For his generation, publishing pictures in books was a way to disseminate them more widely and democratically. In contrast to the limited print run of one photograph, a book of them can be endlessly reproduced without decreasing the market value of each shot. Moreover, the book format – with a definite beginning, end and sequence which can be read forwards or backwards – opened up new possibilities for telling stories. Nobuyoshi Araki, who was born a decade before Furuya, has called his numerous books 'monogatari', which can be translated as account or tale. Furuya is his own publisher and designer and takes a literary approach to his books, which now number a dozen, the first dating from 1981. In 1989, he published the first of five books featuring photographs of his late wife, but they all bear the same title: the French word *Mémoires*, a plural that mixes personal and collective histories in a foreign tongue. Even after almost 40 years in Austria, Furuya remains very much a Japanese photographer, influenced by the experimental book production that was so widespread in Japan in the 1960s and '70s, where traditional bookbinding mixed with the quick, easy and cheap technology of photocopying and where magazines let text take a back seat to photographic images and reportage. Given his knowledge of this practice, one can understand why he co-founded *Camera Austria*, one of Europe's first photography magazines, after he returned to Graz. Or why he organized the first exhibitions of works by other Japanese photographers, like Daido Moriyama, in Europe.



Czechoslovakia (Vienna – Dresden), May 19, 1984

The tactile elements of analogue photography play a significant role in Furuya's work as selecting, mounting and combining images, whether for publication, exhibition or both. Although the artist uses digital photography today and maintains a blog (ausdenfugen.blogspot.de), he continues to take analogue photographs and values the classic film negative as a physical object, something that can be touched, something that lasts, even before it is taken out of the camera and developed. The 24 or 36 pictures on a single roll can all be shot within a few minutes, over a year or even twice. He has both deliberately and accidentally re-exposed films – for example the series *Venice / East Berlin 1985* (1985), which overlaps pictures of a trip to Venice and images of East Berlin. The error gave this particular roll of film the status of a significant relic, a chronicle of travel through both time and space. He also explores the haptic qualities of the darkroom by taking pictures of pictures. *Graz 1987* (1987) shows a sheet of photographic paper

floating in a plastic tray, either being fixed or rinsed immediately after development. A woman's face appears under the stream of water, yet this image of a portrait emerging in the darkroom seems to have less to do with a nostalgia for analogue pictures than with handling the photographic paper, at that precise moment, just as the outlines and shapes of the image appear. Furuya not only captures time but also makes its passage somehow palpable. Most of his handwork in the darkroom and with his archive of negatives is not documented, yet such photographs give a private ritual a public visibility.



Wien, 1983

With the benefit of hindsight, one could say that time came to a standstill for Furuya in 1987 and for the GDR in 1989. This chance combination of a personal and a collective disappearance not only made Furuya into an accidental chronicler but also posed a problem for the photographer and photography. Time stopped at an individual and collective level, but, alas, the camera keeps on working. Furuya appears to be caught in the past by continually reorganizing his archive, but he has kept on taking pictures, mostly digital ones that he posts on his blog. Yet in contrast to his work from the 1980s, these photographs are almost adamantly ahistorical. Nature – gardens, flowers, fish, animals – is a reoccurring subject. Furuya may have become a timeless photographer, who produces unabashedly beautiful images which could have been snapped in 2000, 2010 or even 2020. Then again, in light of the fate of his earlier work, he may just be preparing us all for another catastrophic loss.

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First published in [Issue 6](#), Autumn 2012

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