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Staatsgrenze / Border

“At what point does a state face its border?”ⁱ It is this rhetorically ambiguous figure that Seiichi Furuya purposefully employs to describe the motivation behind his work “Staatsgrenze / Border”, which was created between 1981 and 1983 in Austria. Detecting the borders of a state—this sounds like a utopian undertaking. Yet with a simple conceptual approach, Furuya has penetrated the unequivocally fragile core of nation-state regimes like those that sought to take root in Europe after the two world wars. The artist frequented the border regions of his adopted country of Austria, paced them out and questioned both their institutional bodies—customs officials or border police—and the nearby populace about their experiences. Black-and-white photographs of sites along the Austrian border to the former so-called Eastern Bloc countries of Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia were created in this way, along with several related written sentences penned by Seiichi Furuya, together with a map and an epilogue—all of which were compiled to form a twenty-three-part series, which was later expanded. A second epilogue on the work was developed in 1990 after the fall of the Iron Curtain. “Staatsgrenze / Border” was exhibited in Berlin for the first time in 2013,ⁱⁱ and in 2014 the work will be available for the first time in book form and will be expanded to include photographs of six further sites.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Staatsgrenze / Border” is a work about unfamiliar places to which no one ventures, but which encourage anyone who has ever traversed a border to tell stories of their border-crossing experiences. It is a work that, from a peripheral position, targets the heart of a state’s self-conceived political identity and its population. It is a work about international contract negotiations and treaties that result in state boundaries and their supervisory authorities, but also about the failure of territorial ascriptions. It is a work that, from a 1980s perspective, harks back to the past while simultaneously pointing to the future—for common parlance has a voice and continually cements real and imaginary borders, just as people continually surmount borders in real and imaginary ways. It is a work that, though rooted in a local context, extends far beyond boundaries and is thus open to universal interpretation. Ultimately, it is a work that, from a photographic angle, evinces a clear, documentary form, which arose on the basis of on-site research and which fathoms, in connection with text-based information, the suggestive fabric of all that is visible in the pictures and all that can be known and said about what is depicted there. In this respect, the work represents a

multifaceted contribution to discourse on the status of the documentary image. However, pursuant to his artistic practice and during a process of reorganisation in 2014, Seiichi Furuya has also added previously unpublished pictures from his archive to this series—which, appropriate to its period of creation, arrived at a conceptual form resulting from a stringently explored artistic approach—and this has in turn served to enhance and refresh the facet of his personal experience.

As a Japanese citizen whose country of origin is an island state and thus contained by a natural border—the Pacific Ocean—Seiichi Furuya (who has resided in Austria since the early 1970s) has felt disturbed by the act of repeatedly drawing new borderlines for landlocked countries within the framework of European states, as resulting from processes of political contract negotiations over the past one hundred years. His discomfort has to do with how the borders dictated “from above” have simultaneously ruptured the boundaries of his capacity for imagination. In order to—literally—make a picture of the border, one that would not only reflect the separation of political systems symbolically but also through a kind of physical manifestation, the artist approached the border area “from below”. He tread where only few people wish to go: in the place where a nation comes to an end, in its marginal zones, the borderland. In frequenting such national borders, Furuya has embraced, on the planes of visual experience and personal encounter, something that had previously been utterly unfamiliar to him. In the beginning, he was merely concerned with detecting the black or red line used in maps to delineate the contour of a country, to circumscribe and encompass it—and with capturing this spatially based graphic information through personal visual experience and photographic documentation on site.^{iv}

Seiichi Furuya started working on his project “Staatsgrenze / Border” in 1981, a year that was still fully immersed in the Cold War and subject to heightened political and military tension between East and West. It was the year that Ronald Reagan was sworn in as president of the United States of America and made the anti-Warsaw Pact arms race, cemented by the bilateral NATO agreement, one of his most urgent political goals. At the same time, major peace demonstrations against the positioning of US nuclear weapons in Europe were springing up between 1981 and 1983. Furuya himself is not politically active. What is more, living in Central Europe means that he has been positioned on “neutral”, non-aligned soil—yet, at the time, his unerring intuition told him that “silent, sad facts”^v awaited him at the Austria borderland to the East Bloc states. In the border itself he discerned a potent “symbol of political and human destiny”^{vi} that was bound to linger even in the period after the Iron Curtain, the fall of which seemed completely out of the question at the time.

“On my trips along the border I have tried to find places where there have been tragic incidences, and to find out personal stories,”^{vii} as Furuya commented about the selection of sites for taking his pictures. What has occurred in those places where one country gives way to another?

At Wurzen Pass in 1983, Yugoslavian border officials fired at four illegal Turkish border-crossers. At Loibl Pass between 1943 and 1945, forced labourers from the Mauthausen concentration camp built the Loibl Tunnel. At Seeberg Saddle there was a wanted poster showing the faces of the Red Army Faction terrorists. In the community of Globasnitz/Globasnica there was a banner featuring a Slovenian saying: “... the local community understands that better.” In the village of Ratsch an der Weinstraße it was asserted that: “If the soldiers come along, they’ll take you away!” In 1983, an IBM monitor responded to a border-control query on Seiichi Furuya in Spielfeld with “negative”. In Bad Radkersburg, a raft filled with smuggled coffee was sunk. In Rattersdorf, along the Hungarian border, an offer of help was made: “If you give three loud screams, I’ll come and help you.” In the village of Loipersbach in Burgenland, bathers sunbathing on the lawn felt harassed by Hungarian border guards who were viewing them with binoculars. In Schattendorf, tripflares were set off and Hungarian soldiers marched in: wild animals were crossing the border zone. In the village of Deutsch Jahrndorf, a swarm of birds passed across the border. In Weigetschlag in 1977, countless birds flew into the glass panes of the new customs building on a daily basis and perished. In Marchegg in 1980, a Czech man crossed the swollen Morava River: “... he succeeded at the cost of his life.” Over five hundred Jews were living in Drasenhofen prior to 1938:

“Thank God our Führer came and they disappeared!” In Wilden-dürnbach in 1983, a Polish man wearing only underwear and carrying travel documents swam across the Thaya River. In Unterretzbach, a woman told of her deportation from Czechoslovakia in 1945. In Hardegg, one was told how “Hitler came across this bridge from Znaim in a convertible.” In the village of Fratres, a military helicopter was patrolling the border. In Kautzen in 1982, a police officer ventured onto Czech land while hunting for mushrooms. Rottal marked the most northern point in Austria. And so on and so forth.

Along his journey, Seiichi Furuya directs attention to banal occurrences, daily routines, and everyday life along the border, but equally to transient or even structurally manifest signs of politically significant events. Moreover, the artist takes note of word-of-mouth stories passed on to him through personal encounter, along with the borderland residents’ opinions about these stories. The (equally weighted) juxtaposition of everyday routines, on the one hand,

with experienced and heard individual fates, along with the related ideo-logical ascriptions, on the other, testifies to how strongly war and the resulting borderline and territorial definitions encroach upon the consciousness and self-conception of affected individuals living in these border regions, and to how strongly life in these marginal regions is permeated by a politics of division and separation. To a certain extent, “Staatsgrenze / Border” confirms the inception of “greedy, jealous, immature, and economically incomplete, nationalist States”^{viii} as already predicted by John Maynard Keynes in 1918 after the First World War in view of the unscrupulous divvying up of land by the victors.

The work “Staatsgrenze / Border” thrives off of the tangible symbiosis of pictorial and textual information. In completing his twenty-three image-text panels in 1983, Seiichi Furuya purposefully chose to conceive text as part of the image and therefore exposed text together with photographs on the same respective paper. This decision was partly founded on the text obviously having been there first in some cases, with the image arriving later, but also on the cases where the picture was found first and then supplemented with text. Especially when we view the photographs from “Staatsgrenze / Border” without taking the text-based information into consideration, it becomes clear that the documentary image is not merely a visual element.

Indeed, a basic interdependence between word and knowledge is inscribed therein. Furuya renders the Austrian border—2,706 km in length—as “beautiful, romantic, unassuming”^{ix}. Attesting to this are the carefully wrought and richly contrasted black-and-white photographs, which do not initially reveal how barbed wire has been imposed on the landscape. If we allow our gaze to wander across the surface of his pictures, the eye encounters the placid flow of the Morava, the gently rolling hills of Hungary, the tilled farmland soil, meadows, forest groves, insignia of religious and rural life, et cetera. In some photographs the view is misaligned: thickets, undergrowth, and mighty treetops spring up under the beholder’s gaze. Views both close and far away intimate that there is at first nothing here worth beholding; there are but few traces that allude to the specificity of the place represented. The amazement or the meaning of the images is revealed through the text-based information. It is first this that directs precise focus onto the meaning. The depth of field of the artist’s photographs captured in analogue, for which the visible, image-generating grain on the paper surface vouches, causes some images to almost disappear in the distance, while all-the-more unsettling details emerge in turn: a watchtower far behind the presumed border, a border post at the shore of a lake with a tranquil water surface that appears unimpressed with the land division along its centre, a military helicopter traversing

the countryside and nearly vanishing into the grainy grey. Viewers with sharp eyes will strike it rich while scouring details for subtle hints as to the specificity of the site—meanwhile, the work has no need to play a trump card by displaying the insignia of division related to power politics. On the contrary: such expectations are quickly frustrated.

In the case of “Staatsgrenze / Border”, the necessity of differentiation in the broad field of documentarily connoted projects becomes apparent. With this project, Seiichi Furuya clearly calls into question traditional ascriptions of documentary forms of usage: his specific point of access functions by way of interest in ostensibly subordinate histories and events. In this way, reportage is asserted rather than redeemed as a promise made. He toys with doubts as to the referentiality of the photographic image, quite consciously falls short of representation here, conveys through the text “parasitic messages” that are connoted by the imagery in the first place, and brings up the issue of how meaning may be absolutely generated by the photographic image. So the status of the image appears to be uncertain here, being continually shifted thanks to the text material.

In 1983, Seiichi Furuya lent the work “Staatsgrenze / Border” a stringent conceptual form: a map with select labelling of the sites he had visited, each site systematically linked to a photograph and a text. And now—in 2014, forty years after Furuya first stepped foot in Austria, forty years of being a foreigner in Austria—the project has resulted in an artist’s book, just on time for the 25th anniversary of European unification. For this occasion, Furuya has rearranged his old negatives and added new photographs to the image-text panels for the book form, but also for this contribution to *Camera Austria International*. The enigmatic character of the original form is thus partially disrupted, with the atmosphere of the environment becoming more vivid and palpable; in some places the newly selected pictures serve to enhance the climate of frigidity, while in others a more humane, sometimes even humorous view emerges. In any case, a plane of personal experience enters the artwork thanks to this integration of new photographs into a dated project. The pictures of his young family accompanying him on the trip, for example, something that had hitherto remained separate from the work, speak to this. Also, this new approach to combining photographs reflects a productive softening of the hitherto intrinsic relationship between image and text, as had lent form and meaning to “Staatsgrenze / Border” up to that point: it attests to the promise that behind every photo a new one always lies in wait.

Perhaps it is a coincidence that Seiichi Furuya decided to both exhibit his work “Staatsgrenze / Border” and revise it for publication as an artist’s book in 2014. Against the backdrop of the outbreak of the First World War following the assassination in Sarajevo 100

years ago, the outbreak of the Second World War with the invasion of Poland 75 years ago, and the dismantling of the border facilities between Austria and Hungary 25 years ago, which directly led to the opening of the Iron Curtain—today, now more than ever, “Staatsgrenze / Border” invites us to read it with the fragile post-war regimes between 1918 and 1945 in mind, and in consideration of the related borderline and territorial issues that still today have political impact. The Yugoslavian wars that broke out in 1991, not long after the fall of the Berlin Wall, bear witness to this, which is what Furuya had in mind when speaking of the “eye of the typhoon” in his second epilogue on “Staatsgrenze / Border”. It is especially against this background that Furuya’s strategy of adding one new image to each already existing photograph in the series seems to resemble the discovery of a second flash drive: one picture confirms the other, at times opening new perspectives and horizons. Yet the question remains as to how long it will be possible to rediscover such drives, what they will show us, and whether they can help to realise utopias. In Furuya’s “Staatsgrenze / Border”, the—ironically refracted—vision of border dissolution resonates when we read that “such borders

... will only lose their importance when common defense against an extraterrestrial enemy is called for.”^x The fact that we are far from reaching this point and that borders are far from being dissolved but have at best been shifted, despite appearing obsolete in the face of the European unification process, is made clear even today in 2014 with a glance at a newspaper and the ongoing debate about European refugee policy.

ⁱ Seiichi Furuya in conversation with the author.

ⁱⁱ In the Galerie Thomas Fischer, “Seiichi Furuya – I prefer to be on this side”, Berlin, 16.11.2013 – 18.1.2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Staatsgrenze / Border. 1981–1983* will be published to accompany the exhibition at the Heidelberger Kunstverein (opening: 29 August 2014) by Spector Books, Leipzig, and the Izu Photo Museum, Shizuoka.

^{iv} For this reason, drafts of the artist’s book *Staatsgrenze / Border. 1981–1983* plan to have a line drawn by hand on each individual cover of the edition.

^v Seiichi Furuya, in his epilogue to “Staatsgrenze / Border”, 1983.

^{vi} Seiichi Furuya in his second epilogue to “Staatsgrenze / Border”, 1990.

^{vii} Seiichi Furuya in his epilogue to “Staatsgrenze / Border”, 1983.

^{viii} John Maynard Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion* (1931; repr., New York and London: Norton, 1963), p. 27.

^{ix} Seiichi Furuya in his epilogue to “Staatsgrenze / Border”, 1983.

^x *Ibid.*