

Time Out of Joint

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Among the works of Seiichi Furuya, there is a portrait entitled *Izu, 1978*. The woman in the photograph, which shows the sea of Furuya's hometown Nishi-Izu in the background, is Christine Gössler. She was a twenty-five-year-old art history student at the time the photograph was taken. She and Furuya had first met in the ancient city of Graz in Austria, and at the time of their visit to Japan to announce their marriage plans, it was Furuya's first return to his hometown since his move to Europe in 1973. In this photograph, wearing rubber boots Furuya says were borrowed from his father, Christine is smiling in a bashful sort of way. Directed at Furuya, her husband-to-be, this smile might seem to bode well for the future, but the bright Izu sunlight reveals reddish marks on her neck and wrists. Apparently they are marks from a suicide attempt prior to her meeting Furuya. Five years after this photograph was taken, signs of mental illness appeared, and after repeated periods of hospitalization, on October 7, 1985, Christine threw herself from their apartment in East Berlin and ended her life.

It may be that we in the *present*, who already know about her *future*, end up reading a feeling of foreboding into this "happy-looking" picture of her. However, such "signs" must be obtained after the fact in the process of the reading and interpreting, and can only be something sensed after the facticity of her suicide. As Walter Benjamin asserts in "A Small History of Photography", in such photographs, sometimes "the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it,"ⁱ and we are compelled to search the would-be ever-healing wounds of *that day* and *that time* for some *ominous sign*. This is complicated by the fact that within this photograph filled with the past time, the marks of breakdown and healing end up being discovered both at the same time and after the fact. Her wounds are torn apart within a simultaneity fraught with contradiction, and we enter a state of indecidability, suspended in the fluidity of meaning. In other words, this would be the competition of plural times all jumbled together in one plane, the past-present as the future, or what Roland Barthes calls "a prophecy in reverse".ⁱⁱ What photography indicates, rather than "real meaning", is the certainty of what can be indicated as "really having been such a way", and one might say that this is where the excessiveness of photography itself is exposed. A photograph is an opaque substance that readily points out the intricacies of factors that are difficult to unravel, and waits in silence to be filled with signification. And while photography as "former present" seems to leave no room for argument, this is where time has fallen off its hinges.

In 1997, the twelfth year after Christine Gössler's death, Furuya produced a privately printed file called *Portrait von Christine* as a way of examining the "event". It is an investigative report covering a seven-and-a-half-year period, from their first meeting, through marriage, childbirth and illness, all the way up to her suicide, and besides containing previously unsorted photographs, this file also brings together various fragments of "events" that pertain to Christine, including their notes, letters and diaries. The negatives, material evidence that they are, were apparently left untouched in the corner of a room for years, and it was not until Furuya began looking back through them that he made notes of dates and places. Something was occurring that day, that time, but Furuya had no choice other than to delay the comprehension of the significance of his witnessing. Because his presence was followed by his seeing, too late, the left-behind "former present"; and this kind of temporal deviation is perhaps essential to the experience of looking at photographs. At this point, the photographer Seiichi Furuya, rather than being a "taker" of photographs, becomes a "re-viewer" of them. Furuya sheds light on the "event", searching carefully through the remaining traces like a detective hunting for clues; and yet, his being at the center of this vortex is the very reason it is necessary to distance himself from it. As both detective and witness, and furthermore as a party directly involved in the "event", Furuya, while accepting the conflicting, dual demands of moving closer and keeping distance, had no choice but to start the work of rereading. It is in this paradox-laden closeness that the first-person narrator cannot help but break apart.

The connections existing between Furuya and Christine were concluded at a point in the past; only those relations mediated by the camera have been preserved, as photographs. We may speak of this as a "former present", separated by a distance so far removed from the present as to be beyond recovery, a trace of the "scene of a crime" that Benjamin observed in photographs. No *certain* proof of an "event" is projected there; all that is *certain* is that something has occurred in that place. The fact that it is "already finished" then arouses the kind of discomfort one feels on seeing the "scene of a crime" after the fact, and this discomfort itself demands for the filling of its meaning. In honing his eye on the left-behind and after-the-fact as photography, Furuya is pursuing the work of bringing distinctness to things long submerged deep within his memory. It is precisely in the *non-central* details of enlarged photographs where the trigger that frees up memories buried in time's depths makes its furtive appearance. In the calendar hanging on a wall, in his son's freshly cut hair, in birthday candles, the length of the grass in the garden, the street signs of the town, in all these things lie hidden clues of when and where it was. To state it more clearly: lying dormant in abundance in photographs, there are things one loses sight of even though

nothing is hidden, and these only exist as “rediscovered things”. Things that one would only think of as insignificant or lacking in importance are, through focusing on left-behind photographs in the present, at last processed and discovered for their meaning.

It is therefore likely that even unreproduced pasts, existing in the gaps between plural photographs, may be invoked through the externally marked trace that is the photograph. Scraps of memory, having turned into *others'* possessions, gnaw at the membrane of oblivion and recur as instances of the Uncanny (Freud's *das Unheimlich*). And it is certainly the case that an encounter with this kind of past is something that is made in its distance from the present. It may be that oblivion itself makes recollection possible, and that the *lag* following an “event” is precisely what makes possible the recounting of it. On looking again, after some time has gone by, at photographs one has taken in the past, once-familiar sights come back as things estranged. Furuya himself describes it “like meeting my lover after a long time apart,” and perhaps the Uncanny that blends farness and nearness is a kind of transient time, in which the absent dead may live again.

The photography books put out by Furuya until now have used the same photographs repeatedly; this is probably due to his relationship with Christine Gössler via “death” being in a state of constant change. With each iteration of these countless photographs that are assigned places of residence as “works”, a continual slippage from original location is generated; and so, after having given them careful viewing, it becomes necessary to view them once more, and this is repeated again and again. The traces of the past persist ceaselessly, taking on in different forms with each iteration and reincarnation. As Furuya states, “I started off trying to clear up things that were mysterious, and by doing that, I ended up calling forth even more mysterious things,” and so, what was once an ending is linked to the following beginning, and everything is newly in conflict. There are no objective, firm truths to be attained, and through the mediation of photography all that comes to the surface for Furuya are doubtful truths. Therefore the “events” have neither time limitation nor clarification, and this becomes an act of approaching with no point of arrival. Although the past severed from the present always remains the past, it may cling persistently to the present. When talking about the lost, incurable past, consciousness and language always lag behind, and with regard to the “event” come to a halt in a state of imbalance. Therefore the left-behind photographs are neither laden with complete significance nor stopped or fixed, rather they are held within a suspension-pointed punctuation, and they exist simply as a continually arriving newness. With their leaving behind of places in the endlessly returning past, we can speak of Furuya's photographs as wide open, leaving specific significance as-is with the possibility of “variability”.

Ever since his wife's abrupt parting, it seems that Furuya has continually used

photography as an external memory storage device with which to toss about memories in a search for internal fulfillment. It is an activity like the peeling of a scab that has started to harden. Through innumerable re-viewings, Furuya hauls in the densely tangled threads of memory and then begins reweaving, from the points of their unraveling, a “present that coexists with the past”. He is playing on endless thematic variations via photography, and it is as if he performs a kind of re-processing that brings out fresh, yet-unprocessed *differences* within photographic images that are supposed to have been previously fixed. It is something that occurs through remaining latent over a long period of suspension, stocking up energy for surfacing, and waiting for the time of actualization. Within one photograph multiple layers of heterogeneous times are piled up, like geological strata, and Furuya, with his eye persistently focused on them, seems to run along their fault lines. This appears to be a repetition of the shooting/development process that is supposed to have been carried out already: the refocusing, enlarging and bringing out of the *excess* remaining in the photographs. In and out of photographs of never-ending richness, Furuya’s steps carry him beyond dead-ends to ever deeper places . . . and while he is neither able to recount at each occasion nor find completion, he makes the choice to move onward. To re-start, each time, in his own present.

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Furuya says that sometimes he feels the portrait of Christine hanging on a wall in his house is asking him something. And that those eyes that stare at him have made him face the photograph on countless occasions, never letting him forget her. This rather strange look, from the eyes of one who is both there and not there, is not something that would occur only within Furuya’s subjectivity. This may be a characteristic effect of photographs that have ways of bringing into existence that which no longer exists. Roland Barthes recounts this kind of experience in *Camera Lucida*:

I then had the certainty that he was *looking at* me without however being sure that he was *seeing* me: an inconceivable distortion: how can we look without seeing? One might say that the Photograph separates attention from perception, and yields up only the former, even if it is impossible without the latter . . .ⁱⁱⁱ

Although for Barthes *nothing is being seen*, he layers his own confrontational, *straight-in-the-eye* look with the photograph look. What Furuya has seen in that portrait of Christine, in those eyes that seem to stare back at us from within the photograph, must be an empty, unfocused look. The look in Christine’s eyes at the instant of the shutter’s opening

was severed from the receiving Furuya, and her look is still there, “like the delayed rays of a star.”^{iv} Barthes refers to this strange look that seems to stare at the past within the present as being “*noesis* without *noeme*, an action of thought without thought, an aim without a target.”^v And this is because through the pulling apart of her and the object of her looking, that look becomes suspended and abides in a never-tranquil state. The shutter, in one instant, seals her present and transfigures it into a “passed past”, and both the time and the look are thereby engorged. Without any linking of focal points, seeming *even now* to stare at what is absent *here-and-now*, this is a look of madness. Her look is only once, and it lingers on and on. Thus, it is not a look of madness from the eyes of the mentally ill Christine that is being conveyed; rather it is that the look in a photograph is always pregnant with such madness. And as her madness and the madness that the photograph itself is pregnant with exist as double-exposed in the portrait of Christine, with yet deeper dangers lurking, it is that silent persistence itself that continually invokes the discomfort of the viewer. Since only the “looking at” is held there, it is only the naked seeing that lacks “action of thought” that penetrates the distance of time and shoots through the viewer who comes to meet it. The visual exchange is severed, and “She of the Photograph”, transformed into the other, awaits in utter stillness eyes directed at her, thereby disrupting the present time of the viewer. Although Christine has been kept as an object, in negatives and prints, as “something that can never return again”, perhaps as if defying her objectness itself, she is there, ceaselessly casting a look in Furuya’s direction.

The “passed past” is no longer the object of reality, nor does it exist *here-and-now*. But, as Barthes says, since the photography medium (spirit medium) has the strange capacity to prove the *here-and-now*, with absolutely “clear evidentiality”, that the photographic subject “once was”, the photograph-attached Christine may well continue to face Furuya with all her surviving, still real-seeming potentiality. While located decisively apart from the world of the living, the deceased settles within him, arriving as a sort of echo. This kind of visitation of the dead becomes possible as far as one’s eyes are stolen by her look, which seems to stare back from the threshold of absence and existence, and Furuya, because he is compelled to position himself there, becomes the recipient of the repercussions of the past. “Christine”, as the other that cannot be internalized, is something anchored within Furuya, and is itself the actualized power that occasions the boundary of past and present, where the “passed past” recurs endlessly in present tense. Photography is not only the persistent preserving of single cross-sections of the past; it is a device that draws in the viewer and returns them through a labyrinth of discontinued time. The passed past draws out real-seeming aspects by being connected with the present of the eyes, and conversely, the present demands constant reconstruction via the past. Thus the past is not a “present that has ceased existing”, but can

be spoken of as something that stays on without disappearing and that continues now to be pregnant with the seeds of the future. This simultaneity of the “already passed” and the “yet to come” might even be spoken of as the inherent life quality that animates photography.

However, the grieving, the soothing, the past-tense memories of “Christine”, who has no words to speak for herself, are a form of rumination, what Derrida calls the “interiorization of the other in memory (*Erinnerung*)”^{vi}, and would amount to nothing less than having to lose her twice over. Rather than making a stable place to be within oneself, and constricting it as a story of sorrow, instead to continue undergoing recognition via difference while allowing recollection to arise from external traces: this is a transcribing of the deceased without being internalized under the subject, a continuing defiance of reconciliation with a singular “event”. It is mourning as a time that can be lived. Furuya welcomes the deceased into a time that flows fluidly from past to future, and while meeting all over again that past that has gone passed so irrevocably, he is continually *dislocating* the stable present time. There the tense is destroyed, and as when Hamlet screamed, “The time is out of joint,” on the arrival of the ghost, the time of the dead ones may be made apparent. Stated in another way, this is a blending of differing, plural times, a kind of strangely twisted “photograph time”. And then, although the persisting portrait of Christine, which has been spread across the world through the material of the photograph, is a “lifeless thing”, perhaps it has a kind of ghost-like, long-lasting “life-after-death” existence.

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What was once a family photograph, on the occurrence of an “event” was transformed into a portrait of the deceased; and after a long time had passed this became a “work” of Seiichi Furuya. The fact that the portrait of she who departed first is put out into the world by Furuya, who was left behind, likely relates to what Derrida calls “a responsible decision”.

. . . a responsible decision must be that im-possible possibility of a “passive” decision, a decision by the other in me that does not exonerate me from any freedom or any responsibility.^{vii}

This is a paradoxical decision made at the point where passivity and activity are inseparable, and here it can only take on a form that echoes the call of her who arrives in and inhabits Furuya. While compelled to transfigure through Furuya’s relationship with Christine, the countless photographs have continued, even as they infix hesitation and perplexity, to open themselves toward the viewer.

The photography book Furuya published in 2004 was entitled “*alive*”. From the

selection of this title, almost twenty years after being bereaved of his wife, it seems that he is receiving something from her, that he, who is “still alive”, is being brought out into the light. Furuya seems to be discovering the shape of the future dead self, which lasts longer in the material of the photograph than the things that are photographed. Christine brought an end to her life ahead of Furuya, and the one left behind is living out the reprieve until his own eventual death. While there can be no doubt that it was suicide, that she killed her self, she could not complete her own “death”. That is to say, the person attending the “death”, and receiving it as an “occurrence” was an intimate other, not the deceased herself. In the first place, *the deceased oneself* is not possible, and this name that is already no longer acknowledged by *the deceased oneself* would be taken on by others as well. The “deaths” that cannot be fulfilled either by being made one’s own, or through assignment to another, are in this way impossible “events”. Jean-Luc Nancy, in *La communauté désœuvrée (The Inoperative Community)*, states that “the impossibility of making a work out of death is inscribed and acknowledged as ‘community,’” and that this “community is revealed in the death of others.”^{viii} In other words, it is when the unaccomplished “death” of the deceased is *acknowledged without having been transferred* to others that the “death” is revealed as a communal “event” and is “shared”. Just as the shutter separates this side from that side, the dead and the living are parted by the singular “event” of “death”, and the only way we die in the world is as individuals. Furuya, through fixing his view on his meeting and parting with Christine, seems to be contemplating the other “death” that exists within him, and as well, our state of existence, which is necessarily both separate and finite. In the present, Furuya’s lens appears to be directed at things that live (i.e., things that will die) in a kind of process of gradual collapse. In mutual separation, one-by-one, finite parties resonate mutually, and places seeming to breathe with a living, strangely quiet “death” rise up from the spaces in these photographs.

The constant of being late for the “events”, the living of the other’s death, the being divided from the other, and further the impossibility of existing except as in the middle of the relationship with the other, these are just the same as given conditions that are inescapably compelling in our lives. While contemplating the “deaths” that are “shared” as the limit of what can be concluded alone, it may be that Furuya lives this finiteness as a given. And then, so as not to lose her again, he seems to listen for the pulse in the left-behind photographs, and keeps on walking, in a single-track time that is trespassed by all manner of non-presents, in a “time out of joint”. Wondering wryly to himself about his getting involved with a woman and his becoming a “photographer” in a foreign land . . .

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- ⁱ Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography" (*Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*), in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1979), p. 243.
- ⁱⁱ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida (La Chambre Claire)*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 87.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.* p. 111.
- ^{iv} *Ibid.* p. 81, from Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Classics, 2002).
- ^v *Ibid.* p. 111.
- ^{vi} Jacques Derrida, "Shibboleth: For Paul Celan" (*Schibboleth: pour Paul Celan*) in *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, eds. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 53.
- ^{vii} Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 87.
- ^{viii} Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community (La communauté désœuvrée)*, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 15.