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Text on the work "Explosion-Flight" by Seiichi Furuya

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Describing from a Distance

Expulsion-Flight is Furuya Seiichi's most recent work (it was produced as a contribution to the 1993 Austrian Triennial on Photography: WAR).¹ One might ask why war is a theme for artistic preoccupation in the Europe of the nineties. It seems that any image of Europe with contemporary relevance would have to be placed before the background of war. Not that war is an extraordinary phenomenon in today's world. A twofold scandal lies here in that firstly, to we Europeans war was not thinkable until this day, although it seems to be constitutive of this continent; secondly, in that we, while actually experiencing war at this moment, can only react in historic patterns, distinguishing between friend and foe, aggressor and victim while missing the point that it is precisely this construction of opposites that must lead to violence.

The intensity of the aggression has surfaced in the past three years of the Yugoslavian war, but also in the increasingly unabashed racism in the rich countries of Western and Central Europe. In the German language area, this rejection of anything foreign has been designated with a misleading euphemism: 'Fremdenangst,' literally: 'fear of strangers,' a term that would suggest an unspecific fear of anything foreign, while the so-called fear that manifests itself in highly industrialized countries is almost exclusively directed against people from the poorer countries of Eastern or Southern Europe or refugees and immigrants from Africa and South-East Asia. We are, therefore, justified in speaking of a continuing racism. The Western reaction to conflicts like the current war in former Yugoslavia proves that there is an increasing panic about defending economic stability and social tranquility as something unshakable and a natural right. We can characterize this situation as a resurrection of nationalism and racism, but this only describes the situation without putting it in a context of factual constellations of interests and powers.

We all know that war is wicked.² But can the moralizing discourse that we have been sufficiently fed by the information media, TV and the strategies of photo journalism — can this discourse be replaced by new models of analysis? How can one meet the theme of war in aesthetic terms? Can we trust the fragments that constitute our image of reality? Will they form a sound foundation for statements of truth — truth at least for ourselves? Can the theme be approached historically? Can it suffice to raise questions about the preconditions of war? How can the distant observer (the artist him- or herself as well as the viewer of the work) escape the obscenity of voyeurism or cynical affirmation?

In his work *Expulsion-Flight*, Furuya portrays refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina who were given accommodation by the Austrian Asylum and Refugee Service in Graz. In summer 1993, a total of approximately 60,000 refugees from former Yugoslavia were accommodated in Austria. Furuya portrayed less than forty of them, the work itself only includes 28 portraits. Information that could establish the identity of each individual — name, age, place of origin, family status — was collected by the photographer, who interviewed each portrayed person with the help of an interpreter. All of them were asked the same questions: 'What have you lost through the war?' And, 'Who or what is responsible for the war?' The very direct statements each person made about him- or herself, and the narrations of their fates were not assigned to individual portraits,

but all of the answers to the questions were written together on text sheets complemented by a map of the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The text sheets and the portrait photographs were the same format (40 x 30 cm) and had the same yellow background as the portrait photographs. The approximately life-size portraits were arranged on the wall in no apparent order, but viewers soon recognized the outline of the territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina: this map with its triangular, heart-shaped outline has been published again and again in recent years in various segmentations representing the innumerable suggestions as to how to split up the country as an alleged precondition of peace. Only its outer borders have remained more or less unchanged.

All of this information forms a background text, but it cannot be related to any individual person: this methodical decision allows Furuya to refer to the position of each individual within a group of indefinite size. At the same time, the viewer's interest in the exemplary individual fate of the victim — which could be the object of his projection of compassion — is made manifest but not satisfied.

What, then, is the position of the other in Furuya Seiichi's work *Expulsion-Flight*? How is the victim represented? After all, the photographer actually stands face-to-face with the person portrayed, he has chosen the persons he is facing and has placed him or her in a context that defines the person's identity. This fact distinguishes Furuya's position from that of a Christian Boltansky in whose work the identification of persons or the classification of any group takes place in a quite different way: 'Dead Swiss,' 'Children who are looking for their parents'³ or the people depicted in the book *Sans-Souci* — in Nazi amateur photos, retained and published in the format of a family album — these are categories defined by the origin of the photographs themselves: the images are always taken from an existing archive, from publications, in any case from a pre-defined body of material and from an existing context. The artist's work consists in selecting his material and accentuating his categorization. The challenge to the viewer is to bring his or her own story into the work.

Another position is that of the New-York-based Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar. Central to his work is a preoccupation with Third World problems. Working on themes comparable to that of *Expulsion-Flight*, he recently tried to deal with the predicament of Vietnamese asylum seekers in Hong Kong. His is always a dual strategy. In the course of his research he collects material, compiling his own extensive photographic archive. In a second stage, the work itself is created. In this process of selection and formation, the image material is reduced to a small number of individual pictures that gain importance through selection and whose convincing power opens up an emotional approach to the work.⁴

For Furuya Seiichi, the fact that he has crossed the borders of Japan (which, by the way, has no artificial, abstract borders) and left his country, raises questions about belonging, about being different and about the limitations of any cultural system — questions that have kept recurring in his work.

In two of his earlier works (that have meanwhile become historical because of political changes in recent years), Furuya tries to analyze the phenomenon of the border: in *National Border* (1980-1983) and in *Limes. Images of the Protection Wall in East Berlin, Capital of the GDR* (1985-1988). Both are serial works. The images are complemented by titles or short captions. In *National Border*, for instance, Furuya describes various locations along the border between Austria and its neighboring countries Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. The images as such do not visualize an actual drama; most of the photographs show landscapes, often buildings, and hardly ever people. From texts assigned to the images, the viewer learns about events in these

places. The captions are short, selected excerpts from the photographer's conversations with inhabitants of the places shown. They tell of things that had happened along the border which was, at the time, hermetically closed and guarded by the military. The second aspect of these texts is represented by memories and descriptions of changes that had taken place during the lifetime of the inhabitants of the respective regions.

In *Expulsion-Flight*, Furuya uses similar procedures. Once more, his methodical decision is to combine photographs — pure signs corresponding to the indexical character of the medium; photographs, whose factual character per se cannot produce a message — with text segments of the type used in 'oral history.' *Expulsion-Flight*, however, must also be read in the context of the questions directed in recent years at the information media and photo-journalism — questions that particularly concern photo works aiming, with an educational impetus, at the viewer's identification with the victim. In particular, the debate during recent years has made clear that assigning the role of the victim, as practiced by traditional photojournalism, seems no longer acceptable (think of the debate about this issue among various AIDS activist groups), and that the position of the one who makes a statement — the photographer as well as the recipient-viewer — must be also taken into account.

Central to Furuya Seiichi's work seems to be his own experience of foreign reality, an experience that is the sum total of all that challenges his preoccupations. His work has its place within the conflict between the given conditions of personal existence and the distanced vantage point of the describing observer. These issues correspond to the questions contemporary art must deal with in terms of production and reception.

[Translation from German into English: Klaus Feichtenberger]

Notes:

1.

'KRIEG. Austrian Triennial on Photography 1993,' Forum Stadtpark and Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz, September 16-October 30, 1993. Catalog with texts by Bogdan Bogdanoic, Burghart Schmidt, Fred Ritchin, Harun Farocki, Dzevad Karahasan, Herta Wolf, Dubravka Ugresic (volume I): Werner Fenz, Chritine Frisinghelli, Art in Ruins, Martha Rosier (volume II); German/English. Edition Camera Austria, Graz 1993.

2.

'War Wicked (Krieg bose)' is the title of a picture by Martin Kippenberger made in 1986. It shows Santa Claus confronting a tank with his index finger raised.

3.

Christian Boltanski, *La reserve des Suisses marts*, 1989; *Diese Kinder suchen ihre Eltern*, 1993, poster action in Cologne, Germany.

4.

Comp. Alfredo Jaar, 'a hundred times nguyen,' *Fotografiska Museet in Moderna Museet*, Stockholm 1994.