

Seiichi Furuya - Berlin-Ost/West-Berlin 1985-8728 February - 12 April 2025

As the city of Berlin prepared to celebrate the 750th year of its founding, several important construction projects in the center of the city were completed. In May, the rebuilt Nikolaiviertel with the reconstructed Nikolaikirche were opened to the public. The reconstruction of the old city quarter on the banks of the Spree took several years to complete. In the competition between East and West for the “true Berlin,” the ruling SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany), despite scarce resources, placed an emphasis on reconstructing the historical city center. To mark the climax of the festivities on July 4, 1987 a ten-kilometer-long parade through East Berlin’s city center with around 43,000 participants made its way past a grandstand with party functionaries and honored guests. Around 300 episodes of Berlin city history were enacted and the achievements of “real existing socialism” celebrated. The parade reflected both the selective attitude of the SED leadership towards German history as well as a refusal to acknowledge the crises of the present. But the death throes were already underway, and just three years later the GDR itself was history.

Berlin-Ost/West-Berlin 1985-87 by Seiichi Furuya is a projection with 690 pictures, largely in black and white, sometimes in color. The series of pictures is random and reassorted in ever new ways. Most of the photographs were shown for the first time last year. The pictures, which Seiichi Furuya took as part of the 750-year anniversary festivities and other events from the period, are shots taken by an observer. His motif: a huge, absurd theater of history. On an old truck, the “activists of the first hour” are honored, a banner reading “Berlin: Center of the German Left” is carried across the street near Zeughaus in Mitte, Young Pioneers with trumpets, FDJ (Free German Youth) in blue shirts with red flags, a marching band in front of the Rotes Rathaus wearing uniforms reminiscent of the Rotfrontkämpferbund (Red Front Fighters’ League). Furuya, who lived in the GDR between 1984 und 1987, took pictures of the performances on the stages and streets and of the audience as well, showing dazzled children and less enthusiastic adults. There are often conspicuously non-conspicuous men and women at the edges of the crowd, looking on grimly, most likely plainclothes agents of the State Security.

Architecture is a recurring theme throughout Furuya’s pictures. One of East Berlin’s prestigious building projects from those years was the Grand Hotel at the corner of Friedrichstraße and Behrensstraße, which opened on August 1, 1987. This post-modern interpretation of classicist representative architecture was a project undertaken by the GDR building director Erhardt Gißke and the Japanese construction company Kajima Corporation. Furuya worked as a translator for the company. He also took pictures of prefab architecture as well as the Palast der Republik, Volksbühne, and Kino International. Furuya frequently took pictures of the Berlin Wall, the most absurd architectural structure of the entire twentieth century, shooting them from both sides. Photographs from West Berlin are fed into his narrative to offer a complete picture of the city.

In an interview, Furuya once said that he only took pictures for himself at the time. “Against forgetfulness. For if I try to remember and there is a gap in my memory, then I have an unpleasant feeling. So I have to document my life. I consider that my most urgent task.” The oddities of GDR life during these years are registered by Furuya’s camera with a certain coolness and distance, but entirely without arrogance. What might that well be, the “real Berlin”? A phantom, a fleeting myth and an eternal riddle. Furuya succeeded in approaching the spirit of Berlin in the mid-1980s. In his pictures, it shines briefly once again before it once again disappears in the storm of history.

Seiichi Furuya
Berlin-Ost/West-Berlin 1985-87, 2025
Digital slide show, 690 images
Size variable
Ed. 5 +2AP

Seiichi Furuya (born 1950 in Izu, Japan) lives in Graz.

Soloshows have been held at Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig, Kunsthaus Dresden, Heidelberger Kunstverein, Fotomuseum Winterthur, Museum für Photographie Braunschweig, Albertina, Wien, Vangi Sculpture Garden Museum, Shizuoka, and Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography.

His works are included in several major museum collections, such as Berlinische Galerie, Sprengel Museum, Hannover, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Albertina, Wien und Centre Pompidou, Paris.

Seiichi Furuya was one of the founders of the photography magazine "Camera Austria". He has published several photo books, most recently „Face to Face“ and „First Trip to Bologna 1978, Last Trip to Venice 1985“ with Chose Commune and „Our Pocketcamera 1985“ with Camera Austria.

The exhibition is part of EMOP Berlin 2025.

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