

Akasegawa Genpei as a Pirate

Pedro ERBER

It has been a pleasure to participate in the international workshop *A Pirate's View of the World History: A Reversed Perception of the Order of Things and Critical Assessment from a Global Perspective*. During the two days of discussions, one question kept returning to my mind that is related to my own research on piracy and to reversed perspectives on contemporary world history: the case of the Japanese avant-garde artist Akasegawa Genpei, who was prosecuted for producing monochrome copies of a 1,000 yen note. The pages that follow present an expanded version of my comments from the end of the conference. In them, I consider the understanding that sees Akasegawa's act as piracy. To do so, I will begin by contextualizing Akasegawa's writings within postwar Japanese art and then consider his notion of the objet as laid out in the brief essay "The *Objet* after Stalin." On the basis of this discussion, I will in closing inquire into whether Akasegawa's actions can be understood as piracy.¹

Akasegawa and Political Art in 1960s Japan

The political trajectory of Japanese postwar art from the socially engaged painting of the late 1940s and 1950s to abstraction, Surrealism, and Dada, and then the defiant avant-garde practices of the 1960s resonates deeply in Akasegawa's writings. Akasegawa Genpei (born Akasegawa Katsuhiko) belongs to a generation of artists who grew up amidst the dire social economic conditions of Japan's early postwar period and came of age during the politically turbulent 1950s—a generation for whom art and politics were virtually inseparable.

From the late 1940s into the 1950s, the newly legalized Japanese Communist Party (JCP) played a major role in the production and exhibition of politically engaged art and in Japanese intellectual life in general.² Thanks to the JCP's active involvement in cultural politics and its widespread network of members and sympathizers, paintings such as the famous Hiroshima Panels, which depicted the horrors of atomic bombing, were exhibited in the most remote corners of the country, raising consciousness about pressing political issues that were systematically suppressed by the mainstream media. By the mid 1950s, however, the JCP's adherence to the Stalinist doctrines of Socialist Realism was dealing a significant blow to the project of a politically participatory realist avant-garde. At the same time, French Informel painting was acquiring momentous popularity in Japan. This was due not only to a generalized

¹ This text draws on material previously published in Pedro Erber, "Introduction to Akasegawa Genpei's 'The *Objet* after Stalin,'" *ARTMargins* 4, no. 3 (October 2015).

² I discuss this further in my article "Art and/or Revolution: The Matter of Painting in Postwar Japan," *ARTMargins* 2, no. 1 (February 2013): 37–57.

desire to catch up with international trends and the multiple visits of the French critic Michel Tapié and his group of Informel painters to Japan during the 1950s, but also largely to the support of leftist art critics such as Hariu Ichirō, who opposed the Stalinist turn of the JCP and felt disillusioned with the realist avant-garde's project.

It was during this crucial period of cultural and political transformation that Akasegawa and his peers presented their first works at the Japan Independent Exhibition (1947–) and later at the Yomiuri Independent Exhibition (1949–1963). The latter was an annual no-award, no-jury exhibition that served as the breeding ground for Tokyo's 1960s avant-gardes. From 1960 to 1963 Akasegawa was a member of the avant-garde collective Neo Dadaism Organizers (later known as Neo-Dada). Besides Akasegawa, the group was comprised of core members Shinohara Ushio, Arakawa Shūsaku, Yoshimura Masunobu, and Kazakura Shō. The architect Isozaki Arata was also loosely affiliated. In 1963, Akasegawa joined Nakanishi Natsuyuki and Takamatsu Jirō to form a new collective called Hi-Red Center, whose name, despite its suggestive political connotations, was a combination of the English translations of the first characters of the family names of its three core members: Taka=Hi (高), Aka=Red (赤), and Naka=Center (中).

That same year, Akasegawa started his artistic explorations of paper currency. Before resorting to photomechanical reproduction, his first experiment with money was a manual copy of a 1,000 yen note magnified two hundred times, which he exhibited still unfinished in the 1963 Yomiuri Independent exhibition. In a cheeky reference to the Stalinist doctrine of Socialist Realism, Akasegawa called his meticulous magnified reproduction of the 1,000 yen note “capitalist realism”: “Magnifying glass in hand, I performed a precise analysis of the bill and copied it on a panel two-hundred times its size. The picture, which I copied while remaining emotionally aloof from the task, was shit realism—not socialist but capitalist realism. It was not the design on the flag to be planted at the end of the quest, but a map of the road we are presently walking.”³ It is unlikely that Akasegawa was aware of Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke's usage of the expression “capitalist realism” around the same time; although all of these artists emphasized the term's politically critical edge, Akasegawa used it in a somewhat absurdly literal fashion, in which realism came to signify an exact imitation of the “real thing” in a way that ridiculed both the romanticism of Stalinist aesthetics and its capitalist antithesis.

A few months earlier, Akasegawa had participated with Takamatsu, Nakanishi, and others in a symposium for discussing new forms of political action through art in the aftermath of the defeated anti-ANPO struggles in 1960. William Marotti remarks that Akasegawa himself credited the symposium with raising his consciousness about the nature and potential of their artistic practices.⁴ It is thus clear that the politically provocative character of his actions—including the 1,000 yen note copies—was not unknown to him, and was to some extent intended. Nonetheless, it would have been hard for Akasegawa to predict the major consequences of this particular experiment with money copying.

In January 1963, Akasegawa ordered three hundred photomechanical copies of the recto

³ Akasegawa Genpei, “Capitalist Realism,” *Concerned Theater Japan* 1, no. 3 (Autumn 1970): 33.

⁴ William Marotti, *Money, Trains, and Guillotines: Art and Revolution in 1960s Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 208.

of a 1,000 yen note at a local print shop in Tokyo; he then mailed the copies to friends and acquaintances using the Japanese Post Office's cash mailers along with an invitation to his solo exhibition at the Shinjuku Daiichi Gallery printed on the flip side. One year later Akasegawa received a first visit by a police officer inquiring about the copies. The one-sided, monochromatic copies of the 1,000 yen note were not sufficient to prove Akasegawa guilty of counterfeiting, and he was thus indicted under an old, ambiguous law dating from 1895, which controlled the "imitation of currency and securities."⁵ Accused of "threatening society's confidence in paper currency,"⁶ Akasegawa faced public trial eleven times between 1965 and 1967, and was finally sentenced to three months of imprisonment with hard labor, after the Supreme Court rejected the last appeal by his defense in April 1970.

The timing of Akasegawa's model of the 1,000 yen note contributed significantly to its wide repercussions. Between 1961 and 1963, the 1,000 yen note had been the object of numerous counterfeit attempts, including a major incident involving high-quality counterfeits known as *Chi 37* チ37号. The police were unable to solve these problems of fraud despite an enormous mobilization of their resources. Meanwhile, according to Akasegawa's lawyer, Sugimoto Masazumi, it was while investigating a lesser incident involving an avant-garde group called the League of Criminals (Hanzaisha Dōmei) that the Tokyo Metropolitan Police first took notice of Akasegawa's money reproductions. In an episode reminiscent of Oshima Nagisa's film *Diary of a Shinjuku Thief* (1968), a member of the League of Criminals was caught shoplifting a copy of *The Autobiography of the Marquis de Sade* from a Tokyo bookstore. One consequence of the arrest was that the police found a copy of a banned volume printed by the League of Criminals, to which Akasegawa had contributed a partial copy of his 1,000 yen note.⁷

During the trial, Akasegawa's defense strategy tried to demonstrate that his reproduction of the 1,000 yen note constituted a form of avant-garde artistic practice and was therefore not to be deemed a criminal act. The entire "who's who" of postwar Japanese art gathered for the trial, transforming the courtroom into an improvised exhibition space in which artists and critics lectured the police and magistrates on a wide range of practices and theories of avant-garde art. Although legally defeated, insofar as the defendant was eventually convicted, the strategy seemed to have succeeded as an artistic event. As art historian Reiko Tomii has suggested, the "Model 1,000-Yen Note Incident" may even be regarded as a multilayered collaborative artwork, for "the body of this work consists of the first set of readings—interpretations and decipherings—produced at the time by Akasegawa and other parties immediately involved (fellow artists and critics, the general press, the interested public, etc.)."⁸ Ultimately, however, it belongs to a long history of artistic experiments with copying money. Marcel Duchamp—himself one of Akasegawa's models—had produced "fake" personal checks since 1919. In 1962,

⁵ Cf. Akasegawa Genpei, "Saishū iken chinjutsu" (Final Statement), in *Obuje o motta musansha* (An Object-Carrying Proletarian)(Gendai Shichōsha, 1970), 118–144. English translation: "Final Statement," *Concerned Theater Japan* 1, no. 3 (Autumn 1970): 36–43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁷ See Marotti, 20–21.

⁸ Reiko Tomii, "State v. (Anti-) Art: Model 1,000-Yen Note Incident by Akasegawa Genpei and Company," *Positions* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 145.

Andy Warhol exhibited copies of a one-dollar bill at Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles. Throughout the 1970s, Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles produced zero dollar and zero cruzeiro bills that would seem inspired by Akasegawa's Zero Yen, were it not for the fact that Akasegawa's experiments remained mostly unknown outside Japan at least until the late 1980s.

The fate of *Model 1,000-Yen Note* can also be compared to that of Richard Serra's 1981 site-specific sculpture *Titled Arc* in downtown Manhattan's Federal Plaza in that it displaced art theory into the courtroom and was a case of the logic of art being defeated by that of a vaguely defined public well-being. However, in Akasegawa's case, the legal activation of the logic and theory of art had a very particular implication given the character of his artistic practices. Akasegawa was an artist who stressed repeatedly the importance of hiding the artistic identity of his own practices, of maintaining their "anonymity" (*mumeisei*). Explicating that approach for the court's benefit amounted to a form of capitulation to the state's methods of interpellation. Akasegawa had long described the activities of the Hi-Red Center throughout Tokyo in the 1960s as attempts to practice "secret art" (*himitsu geijutsu*). According to Akasegawa, it was important to hide from the public the artistic identity behind the group's actions in order to prevent the public from assuming the passive, contemplative attitude of spectators. Unprotected by the frame of art, yet testing the boundaries of established uses and habits, the group's practices were necessarily drawn to the neighborhood of crime, madness, and marginality. As critic Sawaragi Noi wittily remarked, under those circumstances, rather than "it is art therefore it is not a crime," Akasegawa and company could more consistently argue: "it is art, yet it is not a crime."⁹

In any case, this close proximity to and constant flirting with the realm of crime, an existence at the fringes of the law and established social norms, constituted for Akasegawa an essential aspect of avant-garde art: indeed, its inherently political facet. Rather than direct opposition to the established powers, straightforward criticism of the capitalist status quo, or revolutionary propaganda, Akasegawa described the politicality of his artistic practices as a way of "tickling" the establishment.¹⁰ Revealing the paradoxical nature of the rules that govern modern everyday life was one of the key operations through which his works and writings challenged the established order. In the Surrealist-inspired notion of the artwork as *objet* Akasegawa found the most cogent embodiment of this paradoxical nature of the laws and logic governing modern capitalist society.

Art as Objet

The French word *objet*, phonetically transposed from André Breton's vocabulary into Japanese as *obuje* オブジェ, was frequently used in postwar Japanese art in reference to object-based artworks. Its earliest usages date from the late 1930s, when the poet and critic Takiguchi Shūzō is credited with introducing the term in two articles published in 1938 in the Japanese

⁹ Sawaragi Noi, *Nihon, gendai, bijutsu* (Japan, Contemporary Times, and Art) (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1998), 218.

¹⁰ Akasegawa Genpei, personal interview, 10 November 2006.

photography journal *Photo Times*.¹¹ Transposed directly from the context of French Surrealism, the word *objet* was inserted into the Japanese artistic vocabulary stripped of its ordinary meaning of “object”¹² (that which is perceived by a subject and a thing we use or encounter in everyday life). The Japanese term *obuje* is thus deprived of the ambiguity inherent to its usage in the French original; it is defined as “a method of contemporary art after Dadaism and Surrealism,” which consists in the act of “isolating a ready-made article [*kiseihin*] or natural thing [*shizen butsu*] from its original function and place, and presenting it as it is as an independent work [*sakubin*] thus attributing to it a symbolic, illusionary meaning different from its everyday meaning.”¹³ In this way, it can be said that the transposition of the term *objet* into Japanese performs a similar operation as that of *objet-art* itself, as it isolates the term from its everyday usage and gives it the almost magical meaning conferred on it by Surrealism. In the early 1960s, when avant-garde painters transitioned into creating three-dimensional, object-based art, the term *objet* fit perfectly the need for a conceptual understanding and genealogy of their new experiments.

In “The *Objet* after Stalin,” Akasegawa’s appropriation of the conceptual framework of French Surrealism within the context of postwar cultural politics is announced in the peculiar combination of Stalin and the surrealist *objet* in the essay’s title. Written in 1967, a time of rising political tensions and shortly after Akasegawa’s first appeal against a guilty verdict was rejected by the High Court, the text is filled with references to the weapons of street protests, such as bamboo spears and Ramune soda bottles (used to make Molotov cocktails). Akasegawa traces a parallel between an artwork and criminal evidence and between the museum and the courtroom: like Duchamp’s urinal in the museum, a weapon “put to rest” as evidence in the courtroom is both tamed and liberated from its intended usage. Following this logic, Akasegawa compared, in his final court statement, the displacement of his 1,000 yen note into the courtroom by the prosecutors to the surrealist technique of defamiliarization (*dépaysement*): “This trial started because the Metropolitan Police Board and the Public Prosecutor’s Office, a certain group of men, attempted to apply one law to one of my actions. The same sort of method is used in artistic works. It is called the montage or *dépaysement*, and, although these are now thought to be classic techniques, they remain most provocative.”¹⁴

It is also important to keep in mind the “crisis of the object,” announced by Breton as early as 1936, which strongly resonates not only within the Surrealist movement, but in a wide range of artistic experiments throughout the twentieth century. According to Breton, the parallel developments of science and art since the early nineteenth century had brought about a dissolution of the object, which science reduced to a material thing and art turned

¹¹ Takiguchi Shüzō, “Shashin to kaiga no kōryū” (The Exchange Between Photography and Painting), *Foto Taimusu* (May 1938); “Buttai to shashin: Toku ni shururearisumu no buje ni tsuite” (Object and Photography: Particularly Concerning the Surrealist *Objet*), *Foto Taimusu* (August 1938). Cf. Anne Tucker, *The History of Japanese Photography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 150–151.

¹² In Japanese: *mono* or *buttai* as a synonym of “thing,” *taishō* in the sense of the object as “target,” *kyakutai* as the counterpart of the subject of action (*shutai*), and *kyakugo* as the grammatical object.

¹³ *Daijirin* (Japanese Dictionary) (Tokyo: Sanseidō, 1988).

¹⁴ Akasegawa Genpei, “Saishū iken chinjutsu,” 36.

into a mere support of aesthetic attributes;¹⁵ in response, surrealism sought to re-enchant the world by recuperating the inherent strangeness and absurdity of objecthood. After the Second World War, movements as diverse as Minimalism and Conceptual Art in North America, Brazilian Neoconcretism, Arte Povera in Italy, and the Japanese collective Mono-ha shared this preoccupation with the status of the object as a focus of artistic experimentation and questioning, whether through reduction and dematerialization of the art object or, on the contrary, through ever greater emphasis on things and their materiality.

However, Akasegawa's understanding of this re-enchanted, autonomous world of objects is fundamentally different from contemporary proposals of an "object-oriented ontology" by thinkers such as Graham Harman, who stress the agency of material objects independent from subjective apprehension. While arguing for a liberation of the *objet* from the rule of subjectivity, Akasegawa acknowledges that this liberating process must take place within "our interior self" (*onore no naibu*) or, as he puts it even more cogently, inside our "skull" (*zugaikotsu*). Therefore, the liberated *objet* itself cannot exist apart from a relationship between materiality and consciousness. In brief: artistic practice (or at least the kind of practice Akasegawa pursued) liberates the *objet* from the rule of subjectivity, that is, from its condition as a mere object. But this liberation is inexorably an act of consciousness; it has its point of departure in the mind of the artist. This relationship comes full circle insofar as the mind itself, as Akasegawa wittily stresses, is not simply a disembodied entity, but a realm of activity that exists within our skull.

In pointing out the striking contemporaneity between the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and Duchamp's first ready-mades in New York, Akasegawa reflects on the ephemeral character of liberation and the risks of bureaucratization—of both art and revolutionary politics. Stalin figures in the text as an index of this threat and fate of bureaucratization. For the artistic community in postwar Japan, even more immediately than the bureaucratization of the revolutionary process in general, Stalinism was intrinsically connected with the bureaucratization and canceling out of political art under the guise of Socialist Realism. Akasegawa expressed this frustration with the ineffectiveness of Socialist Realist painting as a mode of political intervention in a later account of Japanese 1960s art in a volume significantly entitled *Now Action is all that's left!* According to Akasegawa, what young artists in the 1950s most desired was a mode of "immediate correspondence with society" (*shakai to no chokusetsu na taiō*) through artistic practice. This desire for immediacy and social relevance, he argues, "Was what first attracted painters to so-called Socialist Realist painting. However, this quickly became a pattern, and this pattern ended up playing the function of a sort of dike conserving the distance between painting and real society. This is roughly the same as what happens in politics with the bureaucratization of the revolutionary government." It is precisely at this moment that Akasegawa resorts to the production of *objets* as an alternative mode of political art, liberated from the frame of Socialist Realism, and of representation in general. Akasegawa's works and writings in the 1960s deliberately reflect the inner workings of Japan's post-imperial, post-Occupation capitalist state, making them palpably absurd. His usage of the *objet* as a discursive and material device takes advantage of its numerous semantic layers to highlight the tense

¹⁵ André Breton, "La crise de l'objet," *Cahiers d'art* 11, no. 1–2 (1936): 21–26.

relationship between art and the capitalist state in their dispute for the right of copying, for the representation and “currency” of value and the political potential of realism.¹⁶

Akasegawa’s take on the *objet* as a material and discursive device thus highlights its eminently political edge. Akasegawa’s understanding of the *objet* is indebted to Takiguchi’s own spin on the term even more than Breton and French Surrealism in general. Indeed, the critic Tatehata Akira sharply pointed out the “surreptitious encounter” between Akasegawa’s title “proletarian who possessed *objets*” (*obuje o motta musansha*) and Takiguchi’s formulation “possession of the dispossessed” (*motazaru mono no monotsuki*).¹⁷ Throughout the 1960s Takiguchi played the role of a sort of theoretical guru for the young generation of avant-garde artists who resorted to the methods of Surrealism and Dada as an inspiration for their radical practices. Among those artists, Akasegawa was probably the closest to Takiguchi’s theoretical framework, particularly in what regarded his understanding of the *objet*. For both Akasegawa and Takiguchi, what is at stake in the *objet* is the paradox of private property: the impossibility of subjective possession and control over the world of things, of matter. As Tatehata puts it, “The *objet* for Takiguchi is the paradoxical fetish discovered from the point of view of non-private property [*hi-shiyū*], the incomplete, always itinerant, deviating matter. This non-private property, this deviation, Akasegawa grasps and explains, in a more strategic manner, as the renunciation of the power to dominate and control. The revolt [*hōki* 蜂起] of matter by means of abandonment [*hōki* 放棄].”¹⁸ As that which cannot be possessed or entirely controlled, the *objet* can only be the paradoxical possession of the dispossessed or, in Akasegawa’s vocabulary, of the proletarian (*musansha*: the one without property). Because to “possess” an *objet* is to renounce possession.

The *Objet* as the Pirate’s Chest

At this point it is possible to consider the question of Akasegawa’s piracy. During this two-day workshop we have discussed a wide range of conceptions of what piracy means. Although the pirate and the act of piracy have been historically perceived in a rather negative sense, the general attempt during the workshop was to throw a more positive light on the figure of the pirate and to perceive piracy as a subversive and possibly revolutionary act capable of providing us with a reversed perception of contemporary world history.

Precisely in this sense, approaching Akasegawa’s copy of the 1,000 yen note as an act of piracy seems rather tempting. Akasegawa’s work bears obvious affinities with piracy, insofar as it constitutes an unauthorized copy of the 1,000 yen note. On the other hand, in contrast to what is usually understood as a pirate copy, it does not attempt to completely erase its difference vis-à-vis the original. Instead, Akasegawa’s note emphasizes this difference, and thereby questions the very process through which the “original” 1,000 yen note is produced by the government. That is, it attempts to reflect, or more precisely to provoke reflection on the mechanisms that

¹⁶ I discuss this further in *Breaching the Frame: The Rise of Avant-Garde Art in Brazil and Japan* (University of California Press, 2015).

¹⁷ Tatehata Akira, *Toi naki kaitō: Obuje to chōkoku* (Answers Without Questions: *Objet* and Sculpture) (Tokyo: Goryū Shoin, 1998), 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

differentiate a mechanically produced (multiple) original from an unauthorized, pirate copy. It questions the government's authority to determine the difference between a real note and a fake one. According to Akasegawa, this reflexive power is constitutive of the specific kind of entity that he calls "objet." As the possession of the dispossessed, which escapes the realm of private property, isn't perhaps the *objet* the pirate's chest of contemporary art?