

THESES ON “CAPITALIST REALISM” (1964)

Akasegawa Genpei

THAT FAKE THINGS [*nisemono*] have begun to peck at the flanks of real things [*honmono*] is certainly nothing new. Things called fakes appear because real things assert that they are not merely things but are in fact real things. In principle, fakes are always the aggressor toward real things, while real things always take a defensive stance toward fakes in order to protect themselves.¹

This is because, just as an unexpected photo might expose another side of that face of yours you are always seeing from the front in the mirror, fakes bear within them testimony that real things cannot explain away.

In order to investigate what real things are, I have taken more than a little interest in fakes. And yet, in spite of everything, unexpectedly, what I ought to call a fake of a fake, a strange, inexplicable thing, nonchalantly showed up before me (ever since Kafka coined the phrase “suddenly one morning” to describe the arrival time of such strange things, they have been always showing up suddenly one morning.)²

On the morning of January 27, it slipped in under the gap below my door. When I opened up that morning edition of the *Asahi Shimbun* and looked, I was utterly astonished. Emblazoned all across page 3 [the feature page] were the words “young painter and self-styled ultra-avant-garde member,” “Akasegawa Genpei (27),” “1,000-yen imitation” offender “connected to the *Chi-37* incident.”

I was assaulted by a completely bizarre sensation, as if suddenly one morning I had found my younger sister changed into a giant tin toy. And, apart from my surprise, I worried about the future of the *Asahi Shimbun*.

Taking my imitation [*mozō*]³ of a 1,000-yen note as their material, they had made their own imitation news connecting it to the *Chi-37* incident; they had made an imitation of the news to rival the *Chi-37* forgery. There I was printed in the paper, just like Shōtoku Taishi in one of those *Chi-37* notes, to be looked on with curiosity, and with misunderstanding.

In other words, the *Asahi Shimbun* had taken the new method of fake art, “imitation art,” from the art world and introduced it into the technical repertoire of journalism, debuting themselves as the “self-styled ultra-avant-garde” of the newspaper world. I worried how far the *Asahi Shimbun* might continue their new “news forgery” racket.

¹ [This translation draws from my close analysis of Akasegawa’s essay in the context of his prosecution. William Marotti, “Naming the Real,” in *Money, Trains, and Guillotines: Art and Revolution in 1960s Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 245–283. Thanks to Andrew Maerkele for collaborative editing on this new version.]

² [The Japanese phrase is conventionally associated with the narrator’s sudden, horrific awakening as an insect in Kafka’s short story “Metamorphosis,” but in fact is from the first sentence in the translation of *The Trial*, describing Josef K.’s sudden arrest one morning and transformation into a criminal suspect. Here it refers to Akasegawa’s unexpected, libelous condemnation by the *Asahi Shimbun* as a participant in a major criminal conspiracy, combining aspects of both Kafka works in Akasegawa’s sense of unrecognizable metamorphosis through accusation (the sister as “tin toy”).]

³ [Akasegawa’s term here, *mozō*, references the 1895 Law Controlling the Imitation of Currency and Securities (*tsūka oyobi shōken mozō torishimari hō*) under which he was indicted on November 1, 1965. In contrast to *gizō*, the category for counterfeiting in the 1907 Criminal Code, the earlier *mozō* statute broadly prohibited “the manufacture or sale of things with an exterior confusable” with currency and securities. In practice, the preservation of

While they're no Murata Hideo, once they decided to do it, they would encounter any number of obstacles on the way—though I hope that they will bravely continue this work of news forgery.⁴

But getting back on track, to make a fake, you must look squarely at that thing called a “real thing;” yet this is a thing [*shiromono*] which cannot be simply viewed straightforwardly.

Cameras have focal distances. If something exceeds that limit and approaches too close to the lens, it becomes unphotographable. For example, a thread stuck to the lens will never be revealed on the film, no matter how many times the shutter is opened. To take a picture of it, you must move the thread to a set distance away from the camera. It is the same for human eyes: it is not always the case that the more familiar, the closer to the eye a thing is, the more precisely you can see it.

For example, a person cannot clearly see the undersides of their eyelids. To look directly at their eyelid, they would have to try cutting it off. This would be accompanied by a degree of resistance from one's body, and the object for scrutiny would not go undamaged. For this reason, this procedure is abjured. And so the currency that circulates through our pockets between our work and our meals, as represented by the 1,000-yen note, is also something like an eyelid.⁵

Even if we know the received explanation of the monetary system, its “henchman,” currency, constantly shadows our persons, clinging to our labor and deeds as eyelids do to our bodies; right before our eyes it sneaks into our pockets [*futokoro*] and, aided by the speed with which it heedlessly circulates away before we can get a good look at it, it wraps us in the long cord [*himo*]⁶ that it drags, leaving us no time to even pluck at the cord; and so this too becomes our vulnerability.

Human eyes have this defect, which we might call a blind spot.

Trachoma, developing in the eyelids from the infiltration of bacteria, results in swelling that makes it difficult for us to differentiate things, though we only notice this defect once our whole body, and not just our eyes, is assaulted with discomfort. But the defect gets overlooked in our current, untroubled bodies.⁷ When we go to observe something through human eyes, which incorporate this structural defect, we require not only our eyes, but also a certain kind of “movement” [*undō*] in our relative distance to the object for scrutiny.

I arrested a 1,000-yen note that had leapt into my pocket before it

this statute even under the 1947 Constitution gave prosecutors broad authority to criminalize all resemblance short of outright counterfeiting, and thereby to defend the reality of official, “real” money. The infringements upon the latter constitution's guarantees of freedom of expression drew upon case law concerning obscenity that rejected freedom of expression as a defense against criminality in the name of “public welfare” and social hygiene. I consider Akasegawa's money works, his prosecution, constitutional law, and extra-legal imperial authority in Marotti, *Money, Trains, and Guillotines*, 15–109.]

4 [An indirect quote from the *enka* song by Murata Hideo, “Jinsei gekijō” (Life's theater): “Yaru to omoeba, doko made mo yaru sa. Sore wa otoko no tamashii ja nai ka” (If I decide to do it, I'll do it all the way! That's what it is to be a man; or, literally, that's a man's spirit, isn't it?).]

5 [*tsūka* 通過, “passing through,” echoes its homonym, *tsūka* 通貨, “currency.” I thus render it as “circulate.” *Futokoro* (lit. breast pockets) refers metaphorically to money circulating through our very bosoms.]

6 [Akasegawa's cord or rope imagery references a series of works by his fellow Hi-Red Center compatriot, Takamatsu Jirō, that were exhibited in group exhibitions, on the platforms of the Yamanote train line, and at the last Yomiuri Independent

could smoothly circulate away. To take down a suspected chief culprit, one must first seize hold of clues left by the henchman.

Using a magnifying glass, I analyzed the 1,000-yen note exactly, and copied it onto a panel at 200-times magnification. This painting, which I copied down utterly without adding sentiment of any sort, was shit realism—not Socialist Realism, but what we may call Capitalist Realism. It’s not about designing a flag to be hoisted above our destination; instead it’s about making a mold [*igata*] of the road on which we are now walking. And it was a kind of torture for this henchman, money.

However, this was but one observation method, and not enough to discover the hideout of the chief culprit.

Just as one requires two points on earth for astronomical observations, in terrestrial observation, too, a contradictory movement [*mujunshita undō*] in the observer is necessary. For observation, we have the method of quarantine/suppression [*kakuri/inpeisuru*] of the object for scrutiny.

Were we to quarantine/suppress one of the innumerable *objets* hiding within the everyday world, for example, taking all the chairs in the world and quarantining/suppressing them, then people who had been seated at their desks on chairs would find themselves half-kneeling at their desks, and would have to lengthen the desks’ legs to eat on them while standing, or cut off the desks’ legs to do work while lying down. Or again the number of straps on trains would increase; barbers would need step stools; human legs would swell up; railings in movie theaters would multiply; and there would be one less Ionesco play. The worldwide conventions that we had up to that point would be agitated, and at the same time that the fundamentals of chairs might be surveyed in their entirety based on the transformation of human movement and desks, we would inevitably end up observing the world system attendant to and governing chairs.

Or conversely to observe the world—including people—it would be enough to quarantine/suppress any single species of object.

The quarantine of all clothing, the quarantine of all nails.

For example, the “strike” looks at a glance like a struggle for higher wages, but as the quarantine of labor, it is an “act of observation” [*kansatsu kōi*]. Yet strikes nowadays fail to completely quarantine all of

in 1963. The works notably featured a black “cord” in which various everyday objects were embedded. The performance was repeated in Courtroom 701 of the Tokyo District Court during Akasegawa’s criminal trial, and the cord was entered as a defense exhibit. See Marotti, *Money, Trains, and Guillotines*, 193–95, 220–40; 274–75; 297. The “cord” may also reference Kosugi Takehisa’s various performances in which he wound himself with string. See KuroDalaiJee, “Performance Collectives in 1960s Japan: With a Focus on the ‘Ritual School,’” *positions: asia critique* 21, no. 2 (2013): 422. Akasegawa’s discussion of money as a henchman whose speed prevents interrogation may also reference his works featuring his printed model bills bolted securely onto plywood, two bolts per bill, arresting their circulation—works seized by the police and photographed in police custody by Hanaga Mitsutoshi in anticipation of their likely destruction. See Marotti, *Money, Trains, and Guillotines*, 274–77.]

7 [The phrase, “our current, untroubled bodies” (*genzai no heiwa na nikutai*) has the double meaning of referring also to our “contemporary peacetime bodies,” that is, our bodies or flesh in the postwar world.]

labor, and so the chief culprit, the system connected to labor, cannot be rooted out. They are, in a word, model strikes [*suto no mokei*].

If we were to take the currency on which everyday life [*seikatsu*] ceaselessly depends—just like the chairs upon which we ceaselessly sit—and to which everyday life is functionally connected, take all of the currency in the world and quarantine/suppress it in a huge vault, then the seat (as with desks and chairs) of the monetary system in relation to currency would be gone, and the system of private property that thrived on it would crawl out in confusion like a mole coming out to the surface.

If such a vault were possible, this would be among the best of all methods for observing the world. And so a cash box with a welded padlock can be a model of quarantine [*kakuri no mokei*], just as a chair wrapped in craft paper and rope is a model for the quarantine of chairs.

Moreover, a giant vault is not the only method of quarantine, no more than bank notes⁸ large enough to contain the whole world are; in fact, quarantine itself is not the only method of quarantine: a massive injection of increased quantities of *something* into the world may also conversely function as a method of quarantine for observation.

Produce a vast supply of chairs, until all the land on earth is packed tight with *chairs*, leaving not a gap, and chairs for sitting on will disappear as an entity. Actually, the increasing quantities of nuclear weapons being produced are heading in the direction of a quarantine condition as weapons which cannot be fired, despite the intentions of their makers.

It is the same for currency too, and it wouldn't matter whether you made counterfeits or real notes in order to achieve that increase. The point is to inject a massive quantity into the world.

(I might emphasize here that the observer is an active onlooker of the world. And therefore such contact and agitation [*sesshokushi kakuransuru*] of the things around them results in transformations in the facts of those surroundings—although this is not the goal for the active onlooker, whose only purpose is to observe through this.)

In that case, if we set aside one's being a counterfeit and the other's being a real thing, then what exactly is the difference between counterfeits and real things? Is it just the difference between the maker being called the printing bureau or a print shop, or is it a difference in

8 [*chikyū o ireru hodo no shihei*. Akasegawa's image here is ambiguous. If we interpret the reference on the basis of his works, it could be a planet-sized enlargement of a bill, or prints of bills sufficient to wrap the planet.]

the user, with those with money using real notes, while the poor use counterfeits?

Either way, when the observer looks at this in terms of quantitative increase, there is no great distinction between the two; they are both 1,000-yen notes. That is, the real thing is not an absolute entity [*zettaiteki na mono*], but a dictatorial system [*dokusai taisei*] that asserts itself to be a real thing and enforces itself as such.

At any rate, those printed items of mine that have, against my intent, become somewhat problematic legally are not counterfeits: they are models of 1,000-yen notes [*sen'en satsu no mokei*]. Their difference with both counterfeit 1,000-yen bills and official bills is in the fact that they are models of a 1,000-yen bill shorn of its function as paper money; that is, in both intent and in actuality, they are “unusable” [*shiyō fukanō*].

Counterfeits are things which strive to become real things; at face value they have the countenance of a real thing, and, sneaking in between real things, they go on to be used; while in the case of the model, it has a countenance differing from the real thing from the very start, and is placed in contradistinction to real things.

In a word, it is something like a shiv made out of balsa wood. A useless white elephant, an undecorative decoration. It is a mold of the 1,000-yen bill in place of the mold of the road, a presentation of mere fact that doesn't serve anything. The point where it differs from the 200-times magnification copy is that it is a model in the mold of quantitative increase.

Although it lacks the ability to directly attack actual things, the model is a peephole through which to glimpse the thrust and parry of real and fake in the world of actuality, where the monopoly enterprise of real things is on shaky ground, and thus can become an aid to observing that world.

As for the model of the 1,000-yen note for the purpose of observation, it ended up, ironically, getting quarantined by the law ahead of the actual ones [*jitsubutsu*]. Misunderstandings and obstacles constantly follow along when you're an onlooker—or an artist or scientist. They are like a little dog.

Perhaps as the next option to be selected a model human might appear, with mass quantities of fake humans [*gizō ni yoru nise ningen*]

injected into the world by counterfeiting. What would be quarantined/
suppressed by that is, as with the 1,000-yen note, an eyelid-like entity—
the system of private ownership of consciousness and flesh [*ishiki to
nikutai no shiyūzaisan sei*].

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