

## INTRODUCTION TO AKASEGAWA GENPEI'S "THE *OBJET* AFTER STALIN"

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Explosive, sharply witty, often paradoxical, and at times seemingly nonsensical, the writings of Japanese artist Akasegawa Genpei (1937–2015) provide a glimpse into a complex realm of postwar artistic practice through one of its most original and compelling voices. Published in the wake of Akasegawa's trial for mechanically reproducing single-sided, monochrome copies of the 1,000-yen note, "The *Objet* after Stalin" bears witness to a unique episode in the history of Japanese avant-garde art and casts light upon the singular circumstances that prompted the author to theorize on the meanings of artistic practice, its political potential, and the relationship between art and state power. Akasegawa's indictment, trial, and ultimate condemnation marked a watershed event in the relationship between art and the state in postwar Japan. His writings on the 1,000-yen note trial were collected in a volume suggestively entitled *Obuje o motta musansha* (An *Objet*-Carrying Proletarian). "Sutalin igo no obuje" (The *Objet* after Stalin), published here in English in its entirety for the first time, is one of the texts included in the volume.<sup>1</sup> More than just a historical document

<sup>1</sup> Excerpts of "The *Objet* after Stalin" have been published in William Marotti's *Money, Trains, and Guillotines: Art and Revolution in 1960s Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 303 and 309. A few other texts from the collection *Obuje o motta musansha* have also been published in English translation: "The Intent of the Act Based on the Intent of the Act—Before Passing through the Courtroom," translated by Marotti,

from a particular time and place in 20th-century art, Akasegawa's text lies at the center of a realm of artistic practice and discourse whose potential impact on the global panorama of postwar art is just starting to come to the attention of an English-language readership.

#### ART AND POLITICS AFTER STALIN

Indeed, the political trajectory of Japanese postwar art—from the socially engaged painting of the late 1940s and 1950s, through abstraction, Surrealism, and Dadaism, to 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 socioeconomic 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 recently 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.<sup>2</sup> Thanks to the JCP's active involvement in cultural politics, together with its widespread network of members and sympathizers, paintings such as the famous *Hiroshima Panels* (*Genbaku no zu*) by husband and wife artists Maruki Iri and Maruki Toshi, 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 realist avant-garde. At the same time, French Informel painting was acquiring momentous popularity in Japan. This was due not only to a generalized desire to catch up with international trends or to the multiple visits of the French critic Michel Tapié and his group of

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appeared in *From Postwar to Postmodern, Art in Japan 1945–1989: Primary Documents*, edited by Doryun Chong, Michio Hayashi, Fumihiko Sumitomo, and Kenji Kajiya (New York: MoMA Publications, 2012), 187–190; and “Capitalist Realism” and “Final Statement” appeared in *Concerned Theater Japan* 1, no. 3 (1970): 32–35 and 36–43, respectively.

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.

Informel painters to Japan during the 1950s, but also to the support of leftist art critics such as Hariu Ichirō, who opposed the Stalinist turn of the JCP and felt disillusioned with the project of a realist avant-garde.

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 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 comprised core members Shinohara Ushio, Arakawa Shūsaku, Yoshimura Masunobu, and Kazakura Shō, and included, among others, the architect Isozaki Arata as a loosely affiliated participant. 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(gh)” (高), *Aka* = “red” (赤), *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 the 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 referred to his meticulous magnified reproduction of the 1,000-yen note as “capitalist realism”: “Magnifying glass in hand, I performed a precise analysis of the bill and copied it on a panel at 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.”<sup>3</sup> It is unlikely that Akasegawa was aware of Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke’s usage of the expression “capitalist realism” around the same time: while all of these artists emphasized a politically critical edge to the term,

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3 Akasegawa, “Capitalist Realism,” 33.



Akasegawa Genpei. *Greater Japan Zero-Yen Note*, 1967. Courtesy of SCAI THE BATHHOUSE, Tokyo.



Akasegawa Genpei. *Model 1,000-Yen Note*. Courtesy of SCAI THE BATHHOUSE, Tokyo.

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 aimed at discussing new forms of political action through art. The symposium’s context was the aftermath of the demoralizing defeat in 1960 of the widespread popular movements against the renewal of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan (a treaty known in Japan as *anpo joyaku*, or ANPO). William Marotti remarks that Akasegawa himself credited the symposium with raising his consciousness about the nature and potential of their artistic practices.<sup>4</sup> 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

4 Marotti, *Money, Trains, and Guillotines*, 208.

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 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 his first visit from 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; he was thus indicted under an old, ambiguous law dating from 1895, which controlled the "imitation of currency and securities."<sup>5</sup> Accused of "threatening society's confidence in paper currency,"<sup>6</sup> Akasegawa faced public trial eleven times between 1965 and 1967; he was finally sentenced to three months of imprisonment with hard labor, after the Supreme Court rejected his last appeal 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*; 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.<sup>7</sup>

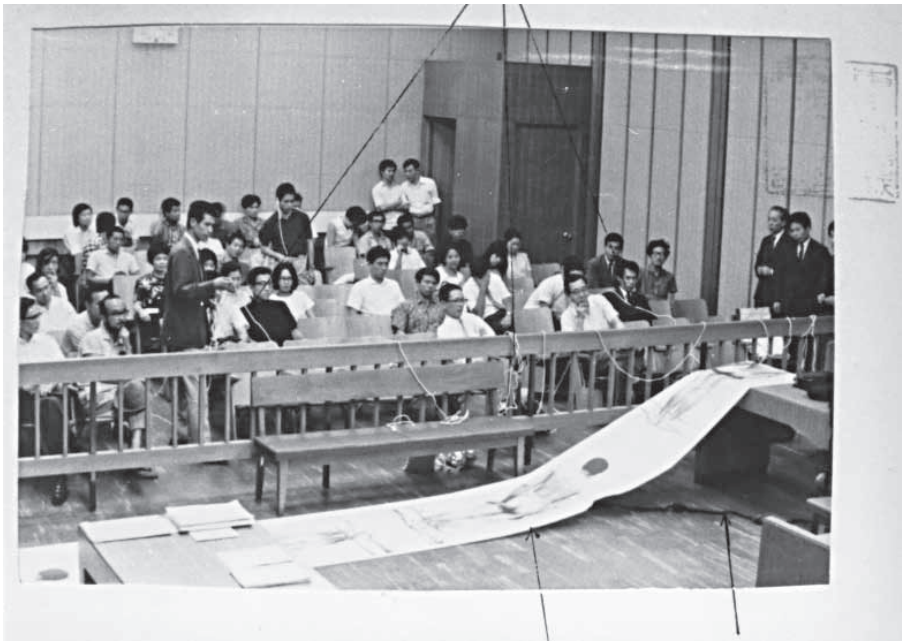
During the trial, Akasegawa's defense tried to demonstrate that his reproduction of the 1,000-yen note constituted a form of avant-garde

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5 Cf. Akasegawa Genpei, "Saishū iken chinjutsu" in *Obuje o motta musansha* [An *Objet-Carrying Proletarian*], 118–144; English translation as "Final Statement."

6 Akasegawa, "Final Statement," 41.

7 See Marotti, *Money, Trains, and Guillotines*, 20–21.



Model 1,000-Yen Note trial scene, 1966.  
Courtesy of SCAI THE BATHHOUSE, Tokyo.

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.).”<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, however, *Model 1,000-Yen Note* 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, Andy Warhol exhibited copies of a one-dollar bill at Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles. Throughout the

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.

1970s, Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles produced zero-dollar and zero-cruzeiro bills that would seem to have been inspired by Akasegawa's zero-yen note, were it not for the fact that Akasegawa's experiments remained mostly unknown outside Japan at least until the late 1980s.

For the displacement of art theory into the courtroom which Akasegawa's trial occasioned—and for the ultimate defeat of the logic of art by that of a vaguely defined public well-being—the fate of *Model 1,000-Yen Note* can also be compared to that of Richard Serra's 1981 site-specific sculpture *Tilted Arc* in downtown Manhattan's Federal Plaza. 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 nexus 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.”<sup>9</sup>

In any case, this close proximity to, and constant flirting with, the realm of crime, this existence at the fringes of 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.<sup>10</sup> Revealing the paradoxical nature of the rules that govern modern everyday life was one of the key operations through

9 Sawaragi Noi, *Nihon. Gendai. Bijutsu* (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1998), 218.

10 Akasegawa Genpei, personal interview, November 10, 2006.

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 uses 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 photography journal *Photo Times*.<sup>11</sup> 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,"<sup>12</sup> both as that which is perceived by a subject and as 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 (*sakuhin*), thus attributing to it a symbolic, illusionary meaning different from its everyday meaning."<sup>13</sup> In this way, it can be said that the transposition of the term *objet* into Japanese performs an operation similar to the method of *objet* art itself, in that 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 con-

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11 Takiguchi Shūzō, "Shashin to kaiga no kōryū" [The Exchange between Photography and Painting], *Foto Taimusu* 15.5 (May 1938), and "Buttai to shashin: Toku-ni sururearisumu no buje ni tsuite" [Object and Photography: Particularly Concerning the Surrealist *Objet*], *Foto Taimusu* 15.8 (August 1938). Cf. Anne Tucker, *The History of Japanese Photography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 150–51.

12 In Japanese, many other translations of "object" are available: *mono* or *buttai* as a synonym of "thing," *taisho* 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: Sanseido, 1988).



ceptual framework of French Surrealism within the context of postwar cultural politics is announced already in the peculiar combination of Stalin and the surrealist *objet* in the essay's title. Written in 1967, at a time of rising political tensions, and shortly after Akasegawa's first appeal against the 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, 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."<sup>14</sup>

In Akasegawa's use of the word *objet*, it is 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 20th century. According to Breton, the parallel developments of science and art since the early 19th century had brought about a dissolution of the object, which science reduced to a material thing and art turned into a mere support of aesthetic attributes;<sup>15</sup> in response, surrealism sought to re-enchanted 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.

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14 Akasegawa, "Final Statement," 36.

15 André Breton, "La crise de l'objet," *Cahiers d'art* 11, nos. 1–2 (1936): 21–26.

However, Akasegawa's understanding of this re-enchanting, 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* 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 introduces a reflection 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.”<sup>16</sup> 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 realism, and of representation in general.

In a more immediately political sense, the liberation at stake in Akasegawa’s understanding of the *objet* was a liberation from capitalism, and more precisely, from the system of private property. Aesthetic liberation and political liberation were for him necessarily contemporaneous, figured through the ready-made and the Bolshevik Revolution respectively. Even more than to Breton and French Surrealism in general, Akasegawa’s understanding of the *objet* is indebted to Takiguchi’s own spin on the term. Indeed, the critic Tatehata Akira sharply pointed out the “surreptitious encounter” between Akasegawa’s titular “*obuje o motta musansha*” (“proletarian who possessed *objets*” or “*objet*-carrying proletarian”) and Takiguchi’s formulation “*motazaru mono no monotsuki*” (“possession of the dispossessed”).<sup>17</sup> 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 his understanding of the *objet*. To some extent, 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, over 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).”<sup>18</sup> 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”). To “possess” an *objet* is to renounce possession.

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16 Akasegawa Genpei, *Ima ya akushon aru nomi!* “Yomiuri Andepandan” to iu *genshō* [Now Action Is All That’s Left! The “Yomiuri Independent” Phenomenon] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1985), 68.

17 Tatehata Akira, *Tōi-naki kaitō: Obuje to chōkoku* [Answers without Questions: *Objet* and Sculpture] (Tokyo: Goryū Shoin, 1998), 8.

18 Ibid.

The *objet* is, thus, neither a thing in itself, nor that which exists only in the mind of a subject, but both at the same time. It is simultaneously a mode of subjective perception of matter, an attitude toward things (of the renunciation of power), and a condition of matter itself, namely of revolt against the rule of subjectivity. This double-edged character of Akasegawa's understanding of the *objet*, of his materialism, is what makes it fundamentally political. Precisely this logic of liberation through revolt and abandonment constitutes the theoretical core of "The *Objet* after Stalin." Like a bolide, perhaps more than any other of the essays included in the collection, this textual *objet* condenses Akasegawa's intervention into its most concise, fiery form.