



# Akasegawa Genpei as a Populist Avant-Garde An Alternative View to Japanese Popular Culture

When we discuss “Japanese popular culture” and visual-art practices informed by it, it is almost obligatory to examine manga, anime, games, and such. However, postwar Japan boasts a long and diverse tradition of popular culture, not all of which has been known outside the country. A notable example is Akasegawa Genpei, an artist who emerged as a young practitioner of Anti-Art (Han-geijutsu) in the 1960s and since made a remarkable transition to the realm of popular culture. In his work, marked by his vanguard spirit and conceptualist strategies, art, society, and popular culture intersect in often unforeseen and strange ways. Note: The Japanese names in this article are written in the order surname – first name. All translations from the Japanese material are by the author.

By Reiko Tomii

Today, when we think about “Contemporary Art and Social Concern in Japan”, it is imperative to examine the place of popular culture in contemporary art practices. In fact, as the by-now commonly used term “Cool Japan” attests, Japanese popular culture asserts such a strong global presence in the form of *manga*, *anime*, games, and such—with or without *otaku* inflections. It is therefore almost impossible to think of anything else when we discuss “Japanese popular culture” and contemporary art practices informed by it. Take for example, Murakami Takashi, the best known outside their native country among Japanese artists who have incorporated popular culture in their works. A leader of Japanese Neo Pop, he intelligently examined this connection at Japan Society, New York, in 2005 under the title of *Little Boy* (Murakami 2005). However, postwar Japan boasts long and diverse traditions of popular culture, not all of which have been well known outside the country. This essay focuses on an aspect of Japanese popular culture “not popular” (that is, not so widely known) outside Japan and its relationship with contemporary art practices.

Among many manifestations of popular culture in today’s Japan, one that reveals an intriguing confluence with contemporary art is the case of Akasegawa Genpei. He emerged as a young avant-garde artist in the 1960s and since made a remarkable transition to the realm of popular and mainstream cultures (which feel like the one and the same in Japan), while maintaining his vanguard spirit and conceptualist strategies. In his unique practices from the 1960s to the present, art, society, and popular culture intersect in often

unforeseen and strange ways. In this essay, we will first understand his place in popular culture of 21st-century Japan, and trace his path from a cult figure in fringe culture to a celebrity in mainstream culture.

**Akasegawa in 21st-century popular culture:  
*Cheerleaders for Japanese Art* (2000)**



Fig 1: Book cover, *Cheerleaders for Japanese Art* (2000)

The popularity of Akasegawa today is phenomenal. A good starting point to understand it is one of his collaborative undertakings, *Cheerleaders for Japanese Art*, with Yamashita Yūji, an art historian specializing in medieval Japanese painting. In 1996, Akasegawa established this partnership under the name of “Cheerleaders for Japanese Art” (*Nihon bijutsu ōendan*), in order to take masterpieces of Japanese art down from the canonical pedestal and making them truly accessible to the general public. The first project was serialized on the pages of the art magazine *Nikkei Art* through 1999 and later published as a book using their collective handle as its title in 2000 (Fig 1).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Nihon bijutsu ōendan* [Cheerleaders for Japanese art]



"It's a pity to treat such fun things as Art (*geijutsu*)" (p.217).<sup>2</sup> The title for a roundtable discussion included in the end of the book summarizes their spirit. In this essay, "Art" as translated from *geijutsu* is capitalized because it is the key concept to understand Akasegawa's aesthetic theory. In the Japanese language, while *geijutsu* and *bijutsu* are overlapping meanings, the former bears a more metaphysical import. To highlight this fact, I am capitalizing its translation in parallel to the way the authority of art is emphasized, as in "Art with a capital A."<sup>3</sup>

Their populism is hard to miss on the book's dust jacket, designed by Akasegawa's longtime associate, Minami Shinbō. Against the background of Hokusai's famous *ukiyo-e* woodblocks, *Red Fuji* and *The Great Waves of Kanagawa*, the two partners stand in *cosplay*, dressed in a *gakuran*, a high-collared uniform favored by male cheerleaders on college campuses.

A special place the male cheerleaders occupy in the country's popular imagination can be gleaned from a serialized gag *manga* of 1975, *Ah! Magnificent Cheerleaders! [Ah, hana no ōebdan!]*, which chronicled outrageous exploits of a team of cheerleaders. The tacky *manga* was subsequently turned into a film in 1976, spawning two immediate sequels and honored by a remake two decades later.

Inside the book, each chapter of *Cheerleaders for Japanese Art* centers on a well-known master in Japanese art history, such as Maruyama Ōkyo and Ogata Kōrin, which Akasegawa and Yamashita discuss by looking at his works frequently in person, or *nama de miru* (p.8–12). *Nama*, which literally means "live" as in "live musical performances," is an important concept in their work. Since objects of Japanese art, due to their fragility, are frequently not easily accessible to the general public, their mission is to exercise their privilege to see them in person. This constitutes the first step of their cheerleading. They are not merely comical, but dead serious in their endeavour of releasing Japanese art from the fossilized state and returning it to a "live" state. For example, in the chapter on Kōrin, their dialogue begins with how to see *Irises*, a pair of folding screens that is a textbook-gracing masterpiece that exemplifies Japanese aesthetics. They argue against the

<sup>2</sup> "Konna ni omoshiroi mono o geijutsu atsukai shitara kawaisō da." Hereafter, related pages in hardcover edition, are given in the text enclosed in parentheses, while the original Japanese are given in notes, where necessary.

<sup>3</sup> For more about *geijutsu* and *bijutsu*, see Tomii 2007:36.

common museological practice of hanging it flat on the wall behind the protection of the glass case; instead they prefer to see it folded and standing on the floor, as it was originally viewed. Indeed, their discussion is based on their having actually viewed it in person in what they believe to be the true form. Hence, the chapter title: "Liberate Kōrin from the glass cases!"<sup>4</sup> (p.93).

The whole volume is filled with frank, tongue-in-the-cheek, yet revealing and penetrating commentaries. Their list is extensive, ranging from Jōmon pottery to Negoro laquerware, from the medieval ink painter Sesshū to the modern oil painter Saeki Yūzō. References not related to art history are deployed for a populist effect, especially in each chapter's title page. While their shared interest in antique cameras can be used to highlight "Beauty of Negoro laquer comparable to worn-out Nikons" <sup>5</sup> (p.200), Akasegawa's ballgame fandom manifests itself when he compares Sesshū, the purported god of painting to Nagashima Shigeo, the god of baseball (p.13).

Playing his ignorance frankly and asking questions to Yamashita, Akasegawa combines two key components of his conceptualist strategies: a sense of humor and his finely honed skill to detect fault lines in the status quo. To this, Yamashita adds a solid scholarship, as a scholar. Or, in Yamashita's own words, whereas Akasegawa is a genius of "not seeing historically," Yamashita, trained to see things historically, enjoys not to see historically (p.232–33). Taken together, contrary to the breezy tone, their dialogues do not devolve into a mere anti-intellectualism, as demonstrated in the chapter on Saeki, whereby they try to demystify a prewar painter who died young, by closely looking at his works in the chapter entitled, "A wealthy volunteer soldier died a tragic death" (p.169).

In light of his linguistic gift (which will be examined later), if Akasegawa coins no new concept, he is not doing his job. Indeed, he comes up with *ranbōryoku*, literally "violence-power," which means an ability to transcend the inclination to make a perfectly executed painting in the conventional sense. Akasegawa came to recognize this characteristic while comparing two Rinpa painters, Tawaraya Sōtatsu and Ogata Kōrin. To Akasegawa's eye, Sōtatsu, the founder of Rinpa School, is a painting genius who has *ranbōryoku*, whereas Kōrin, of a succeeding generation, is a sophisticated designer

<sup>4</sup> "Kōrin o garasu kēsu kara kaihō seyo."

<sup>5</sup> "Tezure Nikon-teki Negoro no bi."



who lacks it (p.102). Elsewhere, looking at the Edo *ukiyo-e* painter Sharaku, he explains the difference between “artist” and “designer”: if the designer works backward from the expected goal (final design), the artist works forward without knowing the goal (p.58). (Sharaku, to Akasegawa is a designer.) This became one of his talking points as he went on to explore various examples of *ranbōryou*, as indicated in the chapter on Aoki Shigeru, a modern oil painter, entitled “*Ranbōryoku* blows away romanticism”<sup>6</sup> (p.105).

Their project, in which they identified Japanese art as “a new entertainment of the 21st century”<sup>7</sup> (p.239) proved to be so popular that the book was followed by sequels and pocketbook editions. *Kyoto, Grownups’ School Excursion* was published in 2001 as hardcover and turned into pocketbook in 2008 —the fact which in itself testifies to the book’s success.<sup>8</sup> In 2002, it was followed by *Cheerleaders for Sesshū*, a 15th-century Zen painter (and Yamashita’s specialty) and in 2003, *Grownups’ Social Studies Visits*.<sup>9</sup> Yet more on Japanese art followed: *Japanese Art Sightseeing Party* in 2004 and, with a slight change of subject, *Industry Museum* in 2007.<sup>10</sup>

The formula of book-making established for these volumes, regardless of publishers, is obvious both in packaging (cover designs) and contents (populist reassessment of familiar and not-so-familiar landmarks). The tradition of their *cosplay* covers are at once self-explanatory and visually appealing, especially on the hardcover format. For their *School Excursions*, they dutifully wear male students’ stiff-collared school uniforms, complete with caps and cameras, with Kinkakuji, or the Golden Pavilion Temple, in the background (in the pocketbook edition, due to its small format, the background is eliminated, and the two authors appear in different poses). For their *Social Studies Visits*, they newly acquired cheap dark suits in order to visit their first site, the Diet, which also appears on the cover. Their Sesshū book diverges slightly from the formula, borrowing one of the

<sup>6</sup> “Roman o fukutobasu ‘ranbōryoku.’”

<sup>7</sup> As stated in the profile of Nihon Bijutsu Ōendan.

<sup>8</sup> *Kyoto, otōna no shūgaku ryōkō* [Kyoto, grownups’ school excursions] (Tokyo: Tankōsha, 2001); pocketbook edition (Tokyo: Chikuma Bunko, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> *Sesshū Oendan* [Cheerleaders for Sesshū] (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 2002); *Nihon Bijutsu Ōendan: Otōna no shakai kengaku* [Cheerleaders for Japanese art: Grownups’ social studies visits] (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> *Nihon Bijutsu Kankōdan* [Japanese art sightseeing party] (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbunsha, 2004); *Jitsugyō bijutuskan* [Industry museums] (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 2007).

masterpieces by Sesshū in Japanese art history, a depiction of Huike presenting his severed arm to Bodhidharma, the first patriarch of Zen Buddhism, to demonstrate his commitment. Instead of *cosplay*, their faces are imbedded in the painting, naturally with Akasegawa as the master and Yamashita as the disciple.

The concept of a paired authorship may invoke the famed postmodern precedents of Deleuze and Guattari (*Anti-Oedipus*, among others) or Negri and Hart (*The Empire*). Despite the intellectual agility of the Japanese duo, however, their *cosplay* covers seem to point to the desire to market and play up their comic capacities. This is especially true in the cover for *Sightseeing Party*, which compares their journey throughout the country in merry exploration of Japanese masterpieces to the tradition of Yaji and Kita, two protagonists in the picaresque Edo-period travelogue, *Tōkaidōchū Hizakurige*, or *Shank’s Mare*, by Juppensha Ikkū in the early 19th century. (Coincidentally, the enduring and endearing nature of Yaji and Kita in popular culture can be found in the recent manga-inspired film *Yaji and Kita: The Midnight Pilgrims* [Mayonaka no Yaji-san, Kita-san] in 2005.) In fact, their pairing is closer to the Japanese tradition of *manzai*, a pair of stand-up comics—in which one plays a dummy (*boke*) and the other a smartass (*tsukkomi*)—than academic joint authorship.

Obviously, if Yamashita, an academic, made those amusing yet to-the-point observations on his own, nobody would have paid much attention. In this sense, their collaboration on *Cheerleaders for Sesshū* is telling, as Yamashita has been known for a Sesshū specialist in his academic career. Three essays by him included in this volume were previously published in 1999 not in a popular magazine in any sense but in *Chadō no kenkyū* [Tea ceremony studies] published by Dai Nihon Chadō Gakkai/Japan Association of the Tea Ceremony.<sup>11</sup> The plain language and accessible tone he employed to reevaluate Sesshū deviated far from the protocol of scholarly texts. But Yamashita’s name alone would not have made a popular Sesshū book. Though a collaborative project, *Cheerleaders for Japanese Art* and subsequent books owed their success very much to the brand of Akasegawa’s name and his keen observational skills.

The way these book covers exploit the cult of personality becomes shockingly clear when they are

<sup>11</sup> They are his studies of three major works by Sesshū serialized in the association’s monthly journal from March to November, 1999.



compared with one of Akasegawa's pre-*Cheerleaders* publications intended for the general readership. On the cover of *How to Enjoy the Louvre Museum* of 1991, (Akasegawa and Kumasegawa 1999) he shows his back to the reader in an un-photogenic posture of squatting before the monumental *The Coronation of Napoleon* by Jacques-Louis David. The design's focus is not Akasegawa but a well-known painting by the French master. Something changed the publishing industry's perception of Akasegawa between the *Louvre* book and the *Cheerleaders* series. Indeed, a great deal had changed since the 1960s when he was known primarily as a cult figure of underground culture.

#### From Model 1,000-Yen Note Incident to Tomason

Akasegawa was a major player in what I called the "expanded 60s" in Japan. What I define as the expanded sixties spans from 1954 to 1974, from the avant-garde group Gutai to the collective Bikyōtō, characterized by the rise of Anti-Art (*Han-geijutsu*) and Non-Art (*Hi-geijutsu*). In plain terms, Anti-Art and Non-Art are Japanese manifestations of the radical experimentation in the areas of conceptualism, installation art, and performance art. As such, the expanded 1960s is the time of dematerialization and ephemerality, when the idea of *gendai bijutsu*, or literally "contemporary art," emerged in Japan, distinct from *nihon-ga* (Japanese-style painting) and *yōga* (Western-style painting), two major areas of modern practice established in the late 19th century.<sup>12</sup>

A member of Neo Dada (initially known as "Neo Dadaism Organizer[s]"), a short-lived yet important group, Akasegawa was a central figure in Anti-Art, which constituted the fervent assault on the modern construct of "Art" with a capital A, or *geijutsu*. As the critic Miyakawa Atushi theorized, Anti-Art is characterized by its "descent to the everyday," which could manifest itself through the proliferation of everyday objects and the infiltration of everyday space.

One of Akasegawa's contributions in the object making was *Vagina's Sheet*, he created in 1961 with rubber linings of discarded automobile tires and vacuum tubes. He showed it at the Yomiuri Independent Exhibition

held at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, which had become the hotbed of Anti-Art since 1958. He was also a member of Hi Red Center, another short-lived Anti-Art group (act. 1963–64) known for performance-based events. In the iconic act of infiltrating the public sphere, Hi Red Center staged *Cleaning Event* in 1964, in the midst of the Tokyo Olympic Games. In critique of the official beautification campaign, through which the government aimed to present the capital to foreign visitors in the best possible light, the group members and associates painstakingly cleaned the busy streets of Ginza in Tokyo, using such household cleaning tools as a toothbrush, a floorcloth (or *zōkin*), and a *tawashi* brush. Akasegawa swept the paved street with a short-handled soft bloom made for sweeping a *tatami* floor.

To understand Akasegawa's transition from a subversive vanguardist to an accessible public figure in mainstream culture, we need to look at three projects that intersected with the public sphere with far greater consequences than *Cleaning Event*, which remained clandestine and thus "nameless" (*mumei*).

#### Model 1,000-Yen Note Incident



Fig 2: Model 1,000-Yen Note [Green] (1963)

His epic-scale *Model 1,000-Yen Note Incident* came straight out of his Anti-Art experiment. Spanning from 1963 to 1974, *Model 1,000-Yen Note Incident* is a vast matrix of conceptualist works and discursive practices produced by Akasegawa with other artists and non-artists. As an artist's project, it began with Akasegawa's photomechanical replica of the 1,000-yen note fabricated in 1963, which he came to call *Model 1,000-Yen Note* (Fig 2). This money work inadvertently

<sup>12</sup> For 1960s art in Japan, recent literature includes Merewether et al. 2007, which offers an extensive bibliography in pages 130–33. Other key publications in the field are Munroe 1994 and Tomii 2005. For Akasegawa's works, see Tomii 2002a; Marotti, 2001.



entered the real world in 1964, bringing about a police investigation of Akasegawa for currency fraud and resulting in the artist's guilty verdict finalized by the Supreme Court in 1970. It was followed by the second incident in 1973-74. The whole matrix of *Model 1,000-Yen Note Incident* encompasses, among other works, the legendary collaborative performance, *Courtroom Exhibition Event* which materialized on the first day of trial at the Tokyo Regional Court in 1966, and Akasegawa's post-trial money works, as well as copious comments published outside the courtroom and uttered therein. The whole affair reached a "logical" conclusion with his *Declaration of Independence: Akasegawa Genpei Capitalist Republic* in 1974 (Fig 3).

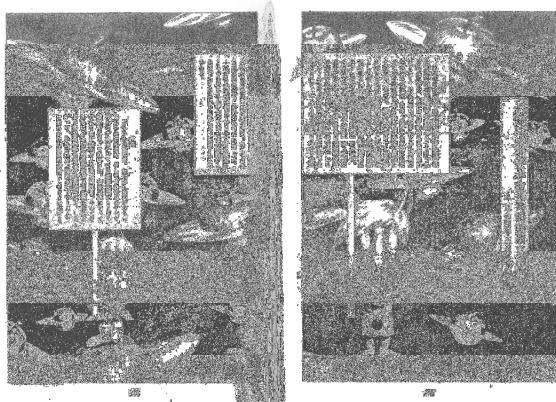


Fig 3: *Declaration of Independence* (1974)

I have extensively written on this project elsewhere (Tomii, 2002a) and the detailed discussion goes beyond the scope of the current essay. However, suffice it to say that at the core of this multifaceted project lay his re-interpretation of "fake money," hingeing upon the concept of *mokei*, or "model," which he developed immediately after the police interrogations in January 1964. In his thesis on "capitalist realism," the model—as in "model airplane"—must be distinguished from two legal concepts about "reproducing" money: *gizō*, or "counterfeit," as in "counterfeit money"; and *mozō*, or "imitation" as in "imitation diamond." They are respectively defined in the penal codes and the "law to regulate the imitation of currency and bond certificates" (*Tsūka oyobi shōken mozō torishimari-hō*), the latter banning practically every single kind of money lookalikes, ranging from toy monies to illustrations of money in flyers and such; and Akasegawa was charged with this latter crime of "currency imitation." He claimed that his fake money was "unusable" and thus "a model the 1,000-yen note stripped of the function of paper currency," which was instrumental to his investigation of "capitalist realism." (Akasegawa, 1964). Unlike "socialist realism," which embraced the

ideological and cultural construct of socialism, Akasegawa considered "capitalist realism" as a realist strategy to critique the capitalist apparatus of the currency system.

In brief, his clash with society caused by his fake money constituted the first occasion for Akasegawa to make an impression on the country's popular consciousness, although this entry entailed notoriety, branding him as a criminal denizen of the avant-garde realm outside mainstream culture. At the same time, this experience helped him to discover his hitherto uncultivated talent for language and humour, and in the process he began to learn how to use the popular print media (Tomii, 2010a). While *Model 1,000-Yen Note Incident* as a legal affair concluded with the second 1,000-yen incident in 1973, its end as an artistic project was marked in 1974 by his declaration of independence as *Akasegawa Genpei Capitalist Republic*, inspired by the second incidence and published as part of the next key project, *The Sakura Illustrated*.

#### *The Sakura Illustrated*

*The Sakura Illustrated* (*Sakura gahō*) began as a serialized *manga* carried by the nationwide weekly *Asahi Journal*, from August 1970 to March 1971. *Asahi Journal* was among the favorite reading material of rebellious college students, who were supposed to hold "The manga weekly *Shōnen Magazine* in the right hand and *Asahi Journal* in the left hand." As a part of the journal's effort to exploit the recent *manga* boom, Akasegawa was the third artist assigned to the journal's new *manga* section. The first was Sasaki Maki, who had debuted on the avant-garde *manga* monthly *Garo* in 1966 and was known for his innovative yet cryptic style. Akasegawa was preceded by Mad Amano, a photo-based parodist and followed by Takita Yū, yet another regular of *Garo*.<sup>13</sup>

If the mid-decade politics affected *Model 1,000-Yen Note Incident* in anticipation of 1970, casting Akasegawa in the role of "thought pervert," or *shisōteki henshitsusha*, *The Sakura Illustrated* arose in the midst of the volatile politics around 1970, into which the antiwar protests, the student radicalism, and the anti-Anpo (U.S.-Japan Security Treaty) struggle all converged. This environment shaped not only the tenet of left-leaning *Asahi Journal* but also the expressive strategy of Akasegawa. Although both Sasaki Maki and Takita Yū maintained a visibly political stance in their *Asahi*

<sup>13</sup> For the vanguard *manga* monthly *Garo* see Holmberg, 2010



contributions in the tradition of political *manga*, Akasegawa was openly political, with his hard graphic (*geki-ga*) style enhancing the sense of urgency. Furthermore, Akasegawa went a great distance to create a coherent series with a deliberate structure of parody.<sup>14</sup>



Fig 4: "The Flowering Old Man: 1" from *The Sakura Illustrated*, No.5 (1970)

Even though each installment is three pages long, it has its own masthead, complete with publication date and issue number, the fact of weekly publication, the total page number, the price, and the publisher's and the artist's names (Fig 4). The title panel mimicked that of *Asahi Newspaper*, the published of *Asahi Journal*, including the cherry flowers in the background down to the typographical design.

The meaning of *sakura* is also explained on the masthead, which reads:

*Sakura*, or cherry, is the king of flowers and the national flower.

*Sakura* is a humble [horse] meat and the "hecking horse."

*Sakura* is an audience who cheers in conspiracy with the performer.

In other words, by designing this masthead, he conceptualized *The Sakura Illustrated* as a weekly magazine in its own right. Most outrageously, in his conceptual parodic scheme, its printing and distribution was "subcontracted" to *Asahi Newspaper Company*. He even claimed to use *Asahi Journal* as a *tsutsumigami*, or "wrapper."

In his own word, he "hijacked" (*nottori*) the mainstream magazine, as unambiguously spelled out on every page: "third-class mailing hijacked" (*dai-san-shu yūbin nottori*), again mimicking the established custom, "third-class mailing permit," wherein a publisher is allowed to pay only the subscription-rate postage. Hijacking was a topical word at the time, especially with the Japan Red Army's highjacking of the airplane Yodo in 1970 still fresh in memory. (In this incident, nine members of the militant anti-government group highjacked a Japan Airline plane which left Haneda for Fukuoka, and successfully landed in North Korea.) Notably, in art, "hijacking" is tantamount to "appropriation," or borrowing. In devising the design and content of *The Sakura Illustrated*, Akasegawa made an extensive use of appropriation, beginning with the magazine format and extending to the texts of the wartime elementary-school readers.

The most notorious example is found in the final and 31st installment, in which he put the phrase "*Akai / akai / asahi / asahi*"—which means, "Red, red [is] the rising sun"—borrowing from the wartime elementary-school textbook, nicknamed *Asahi dokuhon* or *Asahi Reader*. As parody, he turned what he borrowed into something funny, frequently slipping his biting critique of the original into it. In this case, the phrase "Red Asahi" is often construed as his mockery of the left-leaning tenet of the *Asahi* newspaper. (In retrospect, it could also be interpreted as an allusion to *Asahi*'s significant role in the war efforts in the cultural sphere in wartime Japan.) *Asahi* duly responded to Akasegawa's mischief by recalling this issue of *Asahi Journal* from the newsstand and bookstores. Naturally, once again, Akasegawa became an object of scandal in the mass media, expanding his portfolio of notoriety.

In brief, *The Sakura Illustrated* offered Akasegawa the first occasion to use a mainstream print outlet, while

<sup>14</sup> For further discussion of *The Sakura Illustrated*, see Tomii 2002b



deploying a popular media of manga. As he devised a gamut of parodic strategies within the format of magazine, he further cultivated his observational and discursive skills, although his knack for parody resulted in a scandal.

One element that ran through his Anti-Art activities, from Hi Red Center's *Cleaning Event* to *Model 1,000-Yen Note Incident* to *The Sakura Illustrated* is collectivism, or collaboration with others. In the famed courtroom exhibition, he appropriated the courtroom as an exhibition hall. But this would not have been possible without the collaboration of his colleagues. With *The Sakura Illustrated*, when there was a misprint in No. 13 issue, Akasegawa quickly devised a mail-in program and offered replacement for the misprinted page. Having received 229 mail-ins, he took liberty of organizing these devoted readers into his Sakura Army/Sakura Militia.

#### ***Ultra-Art Tomason***

In the next major project by Akasegawa, *Ultra-Art Tomason*, appropriation and collectivism became the core strategies (Akasegawa 1985). In nutshell, Tomason is a project of *flaneurs* who find properties called Tomason. The first "property" (*bukken*) of Tomason was discovered by Akasegawa and two of his associates in Tokyo's Yotsuya in 1972. It was a "pure" stairs in that they went nowhere: all one could do was going up and down (p.14–16, Fig 5).<sup>15</sup> However, he was shocked to find a trace of repair made to this seemingly useless appendage to architecture. Who would repair something useless? If somebody repaired the handrail, these steps must have some meaning, which can only be called, he thought, Ultra-Art (*Chō-geijutsu*).

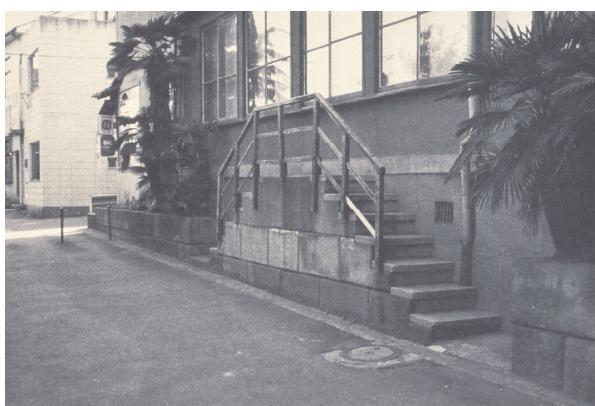


Fig 5: *Ultra-Art Thomason* (1972)

<sup>15</sup> Hereafter, related pages in the pocket edition are given in the text enclosed in parentheses.

His theory of Ultra-Art, which primarily encompasses "useless appendages to architecture which are beautifully preserved" (p.26) such as the Yotsuya stairs, can be summarized as follows: whereas an artist makes Art, an ultra-artist makes Ultra-Art, although he doesn't know he has made it. In that sense Ultra-Art has no author but only an assistant. This is to say, the only conscious agency of Ultra-Art is one, who assists by discovering it.

This is a beautiful thought, based on the observation of everyday life. This is also a clever way to appropriate what others did and make it your own, à la Marcel Duchamp. A major difference from the French master who appropriated readymade objects is that Akasegawa sought out something unnoticed in everyday life.<sup>16</sup> Because he by then became weary of continuing in the direction of parody, a straightforward appropriation came as a relief to him. At the same time, this manner of appropriation functioned as a form of collectivism, with the original ultra-artist turned into his unwitting and nameless collaborator.

He further extended the mode of collaboration by mobilizing his students at Bigakkō, an alternative art school in Tokyo where he taught from 1972, to look for Ultra-Art properties. In 1982, he, or rather they (he and his students), came up with the label *Tomason* for the discovered properties of Ultra-Art based on the name of an American baseball player Gary Thomasson, then playing for the Yomiuri Giants (p.26–28). They also made their search more official by founding "Tomason Observation Center/Ultra-Art Exploration Headquarters" (Chō-geijutsu Tansa Honbu Tomason Kansatsu Sentā). They even devised a very formal report form (*hōkoku yōshi*). Those who discover and endeavor to discover Tomason properties are called Tomasonians (p.28). The mobilization of unknown

<sup>16</sup> Tomason properties are in essence the Readymade objects, which John Roberts has recently theorized as the dialectic site of deskilling and re-skilling in *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade* (London: Verso, 2007). It is important to note that in Roberts's discussion, the Ready-made-based operation of Duchamp, Conceptual Art, and post-conceptualism is ultimately premised upon, if not outright situated within, the context of the museum, while Akasegawa's Tomason project was primarily sited *outside* the museum, rarely put on gallery displays. Furthermore, Akasegawa was never a distant executive to administer collective authorship (in the mold of Warhol at the Factory), but a (re)skilled artist who solicited unskilled labours from his volunteers and collaborators.



people in this manner prefigured the loose and anonymous social networking of the 21st century.

In 1983, when Akasegawa began to write on Tomason properties in his essay series in the magazine *Shashin jidai* (literally "Photography era"), the reader mobilization was added to the mix of the collective activities surrounding Tomason. The mobilization of students and readers were a logical step for the project, because to find hidden Tomason properties required a good deal of walking around on the streets. The more people participated, the more Tomason properties would be found.

His serialized essay was first anthologized into a book in 1985 by Byakuya Shobō, the publisher of *Shashin jidai*; it was quickly turned into a pocketbook edition by Chikuma Shobō in 1987. In 1986, Akasegawa founded "Street Observation Society" (Rojō Kansatsu Gakkai) with the architecture historian Fujimori Terunobu and others, which represented a peculiar subdiscipline of modernology (*kōgengaku*), the study of modern life in the mold of Kon Wajirō. His Tomason search became an integral and key component of the society's activities, which were then presented at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2006, when Fujimori was appointed the Japanese pavilion's commissioner.

Crucial in this development was his association with *Shashin jidai/Super Photo Magazine*, a photo monthly that aimed to at once critique the high-mindedness of such photo journals as *Camera Mainichi* and the proliferation of *binbon*, or vinyl-wrapped adult magazines, commonly sold from vending machines.<sup>17</sup> The star of this cult magazine was Araki Nobuyoshi, who maintained three serialized features from its inaugural issue: "Scenery" (Keshiki), "Girl Friends" (Shōjo furendo), and "Araki's Photo Life" (Araki Nobuyoshi no shashin seikatsu). During its run from 1981 to 1988, this subculture magazine enjoyed tremendous popularity. The inaugural issue in September 1981 sold 140,000 copies, and by 1984, it almost reached the readership of 300,000 (which was comparable to the mainstream *Asahi Journal*). The popularity of *Shashin jidai* was in part informed by the innovative editorial contents, which included the contributions by Aksegawa, as well as such notable writers as Hashimoto Osamu, Minami Shinbō, and Ueno Kōshi. Like Araki, Akasegawa contributed from the first issue a serialized photo essay under the title of "Unearthed Photography" [Hakkutsu shashin], which was changed

<sup>17</sup> For the history of *Shashin jidai*, see Iida 2002

to "A Course in Modernology" [*Kōgengaku kōza*] in July 1984, then to "Tomason Street University" [*Tomason rojō daigaku*] in July 1986, and continued through August 1986. Tomason became his topic from January 1983 onward, after he focused on the photos related his 1960s exploits.<sup>18</sup>

In writing for *Shashin jidai*, Akasegawa was highly conscious of the magazine's readership who would likely enjoy semi-pornographic visual contents in a literally physical manner.<sup>19</sup> By then, his sometimes abstruse prose style in the 1960s was transformed into a plainer style, as demonstrated by his Akutagawa Prize-winning novel, *Father Disappeared* [Chichi ga kieta], in 1980. Still, writing novels that thematize his everyday life scenes for literary magazines was one thing, writing for a semi-adult magazine was quite another. Most noticeably, he devised catchy titles to accompany his photo essays. Particularly ingenious in his pre-Tomason installments is "Bodies at Imperial Hotel" [*Teikoku Hoteru no nikutai*], whose first page features three fully naked men showing their backs in the March 1982 issue. Within the context of nude female bodies graphically exposed, the solid bottoms of Akasegawa and his Hi Red Center colleagues presents a stunning view. Furthermore, the use of the word *nikutai*, instead of the more abstract *shintai* carries a certain reference to the postwar *nikutai bungaku* (literature of carnal flesh), a genre of literature known for explosive depictions of eroticism and decadence. After Tomason became his topic, his reference to Abe Sada as "Tomason's mother" in the January 1984 issue is another tour de force: an inexplicably truncated electric pole reminded him of the woman who castrated her lover in the prewar Shōwa (who was the real-life female protagonist of Ōshima Nagisa's film, *In the Realm of the Senses*).

His writing style, too, assumed an increasingly colloquial and frank tone, creating a close affinity with the readers, some of whom would send him their discoveries of Tomason properties. Through writing for a subculture magazine, he learned to write for the mass audience. (The English translation published in 2009 aptly captures the lighthearted character in the original Japanese.)

His transition from the domain of subculture and popular culture to that of mainstream culture was helped by his collaboration with the architectural

<sup>18</sup> The table of contents for the entire run of *Shashin jidai* is found in ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Akasegawa, conversation with author, 5 June 2010.



historian Fujimori Terunobu under the rubric of the Street Observation Society. Fujimori's academic credential was extensive, with his teaching position at the University of Tokyo and his unique views, such as the naming of *kamaban kenchiku*, or billboard architecture, intended for live-and-work shop buildings constructed after the Great Kantō Earthquake. Akasegawa's collaboration with Fujimori anticipated a joint project with another academic, Yamashita Yūji, in *Cheerleaders for Japanese Art*.

In summary, *Ultra-Art Tomason* afforded Akasegawa a chance to write for the subculture readership, while casting an intent gaze on everyday scenery—which was about to change, as the Bubble Economy kicked in toward the late 1980s.<sup>20</sup> His use of collectivism, both implicit and explicit, was part of his populist practice, which went far beyond the avant-garde collectivism of the 1960s. From here, it is only a small step to *Rōjinryoku*, which amounted to an observation of everyday life per excellence narrated for the broader audience in plain language.

### Breaking into the Popular Realm: *Rōjinryoku*, 1998

Akasegawa's decisive crossover from vanguard cult to mainstream culture happened in 1998, when he published the book *Rōjinryoku*, or Geriatric Power, which made a bestseller list in an explosive way. As with most of his recent book publications, it was also initiated as a magazine serialization, on *Chikuma*, in 1997–98.) *Rōjinryoku* is a hilariously positive take on the declining capabilities of the elderly. Instead of saying "I am getting senile lately" or "I am losing my memory or sight or hearing," one may say, "I am gaining *rōjinryoku*." (Akasegawa, 1998: 8–9). His Copernican conversion, so to speak, captivated the imagination of a rapidly aging nation. So much so, it was selected as "Top 10 New and Vogue Words" of the year by the annual publication *Gendai yōgo no kiso chishiki* (Basic Knowledge of Contemporary Vocabulary).<sup>21</sup>

The brilliance of Akasegawa's neology lies in the unlikely pairing of *rōjin* (old folks), which has a negative connotation, and *ryoku* (power or ability), which has a positive connotation. Granted, the Japanese language has a built-in word making capability of using *ryoku*, as in *kiokuryoku*, which means "memory power"

(記憶力); *keisatsuryoku*, which means "police power" (警察力); *keizairyoku*, which means "economic power" (経済力); and *masatsuryoku*, which means "power to cause friction" (摩擦力).

However, Akasegawa's pairing 老人力 was so unusual yet so inspired that it encouraged a host of similar neologies, using the *ryoku*-suffix in unconventional way, although they are not always in consistent with Akasegawa's humorous combination. They include *joseiryoku*, or "woman power" (女性力), *chūnenryoku* or "middle-age power" (中年力), *jugyōryoku* or "class-teaching power" (授業力), *kanjaryoku* or "patient power" (患者力), *muchiryoku* or "ignorance power" (無知力), and *kodokuryoku* or "loneliness power" (孤独力) among others (Iima 2003).<sup>22</sup>

The proliferation of neology by adding the *ryoku*-suffix is such that there are a score of books that bear *ryoku*-neology as their titles. Perhaps, the psychologist Tago Akira was the first, after Akasegawa's *rōjinryoku*, to use it in his series of books on *teinenryoku* or "retirement power" (定年力) that launched in 1999 (Tago, 1999). The doctor-cum-novelist Watanabe Jun'ichi embraced *donkanryoku* or "insensitivity power" (鈍感力) in 2007, which was immediately countered by the photographer Asai Shinpei, who advocated *han-donkanryoku*, or "anti-insensitivity power" (反鈍感力) or more positively "power of sensitivity" or *binkanryoku* (敏感力) (Watanabe, 2007). By any measure, these *ryoku* spinoffs testify to a tremendous degree of influence that Akasegawa has exerted in the cultural sphere and made his name an immediately recognizable brand among the general public.

### Conclusion

Akasegawa's populist strategies, which encompass discursive facility, the use of parody and appropriation, and collaborative collectivism, date back to his Anti-Art years. Over the course of the next four decades, he learned to use the popular media and reach out to the general public. For those who see a revolutionary mind in his 1960s projects, especially *Model 1,000-Yen Note Incident*, his recent populist works may appear to

<sup>20</sup> For street observation and Tokyo's landscape, see Jordan Sand 2008

<sup>21</sup> <http://singo.jiyu.co.jp/nendo/1998.html> (accessed 19 July 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Iima is an editorial board member of Sanseidō's Japanese dictionary.



constitute a betrayal of the avant-garde ideal. If the avant-garde signifies a timeless concept or practice, such a view may have validity. However, it should be noted that the practice and ideal of *zen'ei* (the avant-garde) underwent a fundamental transformation during the expanded 1960s. By 1970, the vanguard practices were codified under the rubric of *gendai bijutsu* (literally “contemporary art”), as a separate legitimate entity from *yōga* (Western-style painting) and *nihon-ga* (Japanese-style painting).<sup>23</sup> This *gendai bijutsu* was “incomprehensible” to the general public, and Akasegawa saw its practices merely following the formula that appropriated the ideas and strategies developed by Anti-Art in the early 1960s.<sup>24</sup>

Although the legacy of 1960s art to the subsequent generations of Japanese artists makes a productive yet separate topic, it is evident that Murakami and his Neo Pop peers who emerged in the 1990s have been critically inspired by the precedents set by 1960s practitioners, especially Akasegawa. It is important to note the vast difference of their institutional milieu from that of the 1960s pioneers. Back then, there were only a few museums of modern art that only slowly began to show contemporary art and practically no market for contemporary art. If the “descent to the everyday” (Miyakawa Atsuhi’s theoretical formulation) is the ultimate goal of Anti-Art, it did not really mean a simple departure from the museological white cube, which in actuality did not exist for vanguard artists. Unlike today’s socially oriented practices, to put this ideal in practice and infiltrate into the public space was a risky business, as proven by Akasegawa’s *Model 1,000-Yen Note Incident*. If the vanguard work could command any value outside the non-existent market, that was publicity value, as famously embraced by Ushio Shinohara, a Neo Dada colleague of Akasegawa.<sup>25</sup> Even so, to garner publicity in the mass media was an elusive proposition in their daring challenge to the artistic and social status quo.

All the more so, Akasegawa’s successful transition into the sphere of life is remarkable. Never losing sight of his core value of Anti-Art, Akasegawa have made the

<sup>23</sup> For the legitimization of *gendai bijutsu*, see Tomii 2004

<sup>24</sup> For “incomprehensibility” of *gendai bijutsu*, see N.N. *Geijutsu Shinchō* 1968 Akasegawa’s view of *gendai bijutsu* is saliently encapsulated in his depiction of *Tokyo Biennale 1970* in Akasegawa et al. 1972; reproduced as Plate 2 in Tomii 2004

<sup>25</sup> For Shinohara’s publicity courting and its context, see Tomii 2010b

print media his stage, in contrast to Murakami and others of 1990s art who enjoyed both the institutional and commercial space as their birthright. If Murakami’s populism constitutes an ironic (and, perhaps, knowing) exploitation of late-capitalist popular culture, Akasegawa’s populism in essence (and, definitely, in earnest) empowers our grassroots instinct partaking the ideal for democratic culture. In a sense, this is an ultimate avant-garde achievement.

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## Captions

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### Figure 1

Akasegawa Genpei (right) and Yamashita Yūji, *Cheer Leaders for Japanese Art*, 2000, jacket cover. Reprinted from *Nihon bijutsu ōendan* [Cheerleaders for Japanese art] (Tokyo: Nikkei BP-sha, 2000).

### Figure 2

Front: Akasegawa Genpei, *Model 1,000-Yen Note (Green)*, 1963, Printed matter, double-sided, 7.4 x 16.1 cm.  
Back: invitation to the exhibition *On Ambivalent Sea*, Shinjuku Daiichi Gallery, Tokyo, 5–10 February 1963.  
Photo: John Kiffe

### Figure 3



REIKO TOMII

Akasegawa Genpei, *Declaration of Independence: Akasegawa Genpei Capitalist Republic*, 27 March 1974, from *The Sakura Illustrated*, 1977. Reprinted from *Sakura gahō taizen* [The complete sakura illustrated], pocketbook edition (Tokyo: Shinchō Bunko, 1985)

Figure 4

Akasegawa Genpei, "The Flowering Old Man: 1," *The Sakura Illustrated*, No. 5 (September 6, 1970). Reprinted from *Sakura gahō taizen* [The complete sakura illustrated], pocketbook edition (Tokyo: Shinchō Bunko, 1985)

Figure 5

Akasegawa Genpei, *Yotsuya Stairs* (1st "property" of *Ultra-Art Tomason*), 1972. Photograph courtesy of SCAI The Bathhouse, Tokyo