

THE *OBJET* AFTER STALIN

AKASEGAWA GENPEI

Teargas bombs, stones, batons, Ramune bottles, manacles, bamboo spears . . . we could regard any of those as an “objet” (*obuje*). Inside a courthouse, on the other hand, they would all be called “evidence” (*butsu*). What is called “evidence” in the courthouse are things that have been used to perpetrate criminal acts or things someone planned to use in perpetrating criminal acts—but taken into the courtroom, where their “weaponness” has been coercively put to rest.

In addition, what we call “objet”—because of its autonomy—is similar to the condition called “evidence.” However, we “civilians” do not possess our own courtroom that could forcibly impose the tranquility of “evidence.” Hence, while we keep a foothold in daily life, we create a fictional courtroom-like space that intersects with daily life, where we carry out the naming of [something as] an *objet*. This is why, even if we have called it an *objet*, that thing can still be thrown against us at any moment and show itself as something that has the function of teargas, thus inevitably causing us to shed tears. Yet, in this case, our fear of teargas will be accompanied by another kind of anxiety—the anxiety provoked by the teargas bomb in the courtroom, a bomb whose function has been suspended. This anxiety arises from the fact that, although the mission of the teargas bomb is to be flung at one’s opponents, on the other hand, a teargas bomb inside the courtroom-like

space is just like “us” (including the opponents at whom teargas is flung) and is pleading for the same rights “we” do. In other words, the anxiety “we” (again, including those against whom teargas bombs are thrown) experience might well be that of being deprived of our position as teargas users.

The first time the name *objet* was attached to an ordinary thing around us was not in a courtroom, but in what could be called the courtroom-like space of the museum. The criminal (*geshumin*) who, in 1917, took a urinal into a museum in New York City was—needless to say—Marcel Duchamp. He liberated the urinal from the bathroom and chose for it the museum as a liberated space. We usually think of a urinal as something whose only mission is to receive our urine and conduct it out through the sewage pipes. Hence, Duchamp stripped us of our intrinsic power as managers and rulers of the urinal, thus setting it free, and consequently filling his own skull with freedom. The title *objet* was born under this condition of reciprocal liberation.

Something perfectly symmetrical happened in the same year, 1917, in Russia. With the same intention of attaining “freedom,” in October those people in Petrograd took over the power of ruling their own lives. To some extent, it could be said that they won and carried off the urinal. For instance, we heard a lot from our ancestors who served in the Japanese imperial army about episodes like the one in which the *Eighth Route Army*, stationed in an east even more distant than Russia, encountering flush toilets for the first time in the cities they took over, inadvertently used them to wash rice. While doing so, however, they also seized the power to rule the Chinese continent and gained control over its toilets.

Between these two cases—one concerning the urinal in New York and the other concerning the toilets in northern China—there is a point of intersection, an instant in which the two cases dwell at the exact same spot. On the one hand, for the sake of freedom, power is abandoned; on the other hand, for the sake of freedom, power is captured. This thing called “freedom,” which guides both cases, can only be achieved in the “over there” of their intention. Even if they can be said to intersect at some point, they do not stop at this intersection. At the moment in which their intended freedom is temporarily materialized, they depart once again from this intersection. Or, perhaps, they have no more than a project of intersecting at the “over there” intended by both of them.

The power that is over there, and which we planned to capture in the name of freedom, is connected to the power that was taken over and conquered; however, each of those powers faces a different direction. But at the moment we try to liberate ourselves from external rule, apart from turning ourselves to the power hanging over us, on the cusp of the act of trying to capture power, don't we also secretly renounce another kind of power, although not permanently—that is, the power to rule our interior self? By becoming an *objet*, the Ramune bottle can turn into a Ramune bomb; by becoming an *objet*, a flagstaff can turn into a bamboo spear (*takeyari*). However, the power inside us, which might have been renounced for a moment, comes to rule our perception once again as a Ramune bomb or a bamboo spear. It is perhaps at the precise moment in which someone renounces the power inside oneself, before the renunciation is threatened in this way, that the perception of an *objet* is born.

When we completely renounce everything, everything in us starts to revolt (*houki suru*). It might seem somehow insolent to put it this way. But even so, I don't think we renounce in order to revolt or that we revolt in order to renounce. These two extremes, if they are to be approachable by us, should present an element of unity. It seems a little exaggerated, but this is not merely a foolish attempt to unite both of them. Ultimately, the point is the birth of bureaucracy—and of bureaucratic art.

At any rate, the task of the *objet* after Stalin is probably latent in us, and the model 1,000-yen note (*mokei sen en satsu*) is one of those *objets*. This is also the struggle after Duchamp. This 1,000-yen note was abducted by the power of the state and placed within the courtroom as “evidence.”

By the way, have you ever seen the model 1,000-yen note? Of course, it is very different from a fake 1,000-yen note (*nise sen en satsu*). A fake 1,000-yen note—independently of it being discovered as such in retrospect—is something meant to be used with the same exchange value as the 1,000-yen note. In a way, a model is a substitute originally meant for observation—a decoration or ornament. Instead of painstakingly repeating here once again what I have written elsewhere about questions such as the dichotomy of fake versus original or the idea of a painted model (*kaiga no mokei*), I want to think about the different kinds of power which appear—and disappear—around this model. And speaking of something whose memory is awakened by the idea

of a model: just like the Emperor's picture hanging over the Shinto altars of our families' homes during the sacred war, what's the danger in hanging high on the wall a model of the original 1,000-yen note, whose reality is so difficult to preserve?

That said, what the state power fears is not only a force (*seiryoku*) that tries to capture power; it also fears this model that attempted to renounce its own internal power of having continuous control over the 1,000-yen note as a 1,000-yen note. Moreover, it seems that it is not only the courtroom that fears such an *objet*, but also its local agent, the civil subcontractors of the public prosecutor's office inside our daily lives. People like the "art critic" who published a waffle article titled "Concerning the 1,000-Yen Note Incident" in the October 1967 issue of a journal called *SD* are good examples of that. In an article published in the November 1967 issue of the same journal, I carefully demonstrated this point, but it might be necessary to reaffirm the fact that it is not only the courtroom that has the right to judge and punish. But we, as well, are originally entitled to judge and punish the courtroom itself.

A trial is also an incident in itself, but the courtroom is a place for the retrospection of an incident. Of course, retrospection is also important, but we need as well a second and a third model. No, certainly not just a model, but something newly born.

For the time being, instead of a model, I plan to issue an original paper bill, and its face value is that of a "0-yen note." I am taking orders from those willing to own it.

OCTOBER, 1967

TRANSLATED BY PEDRO ERBER