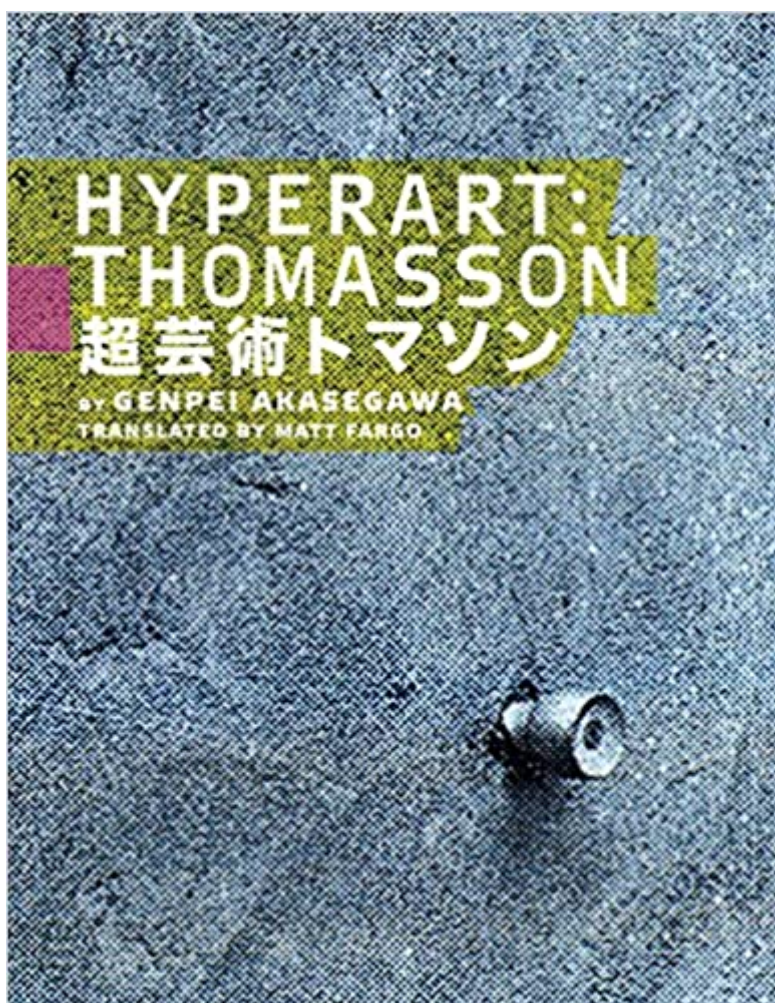


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Hyperart: Thomasson: By Akasegawa Genpei



Synopsis

Literary Nonfiction. Art. East Asia Studies. In the 1970s Tokyo, artist Akasegawa Genpei and his friends began noticing what they termed "hyperart," aesthetic objects created by removing a structure's function, while carefully maintaining the structure itself. They called these objects "Thomassons," after an American pinch-hitter recruited by a Japanese baseball team, whose bat never connected with a ball. In the 1980s, through submissions from students and readers, Akasegawa collected and printed photos of Thomassons in a column in Super Photo Magazine. He wrote these columns with a warm, goofy humor that seems intended to cast back nihilism, irony, and other common responses to 20th century urbanization. What emerged was a lighthearted, yet profound, picture of how modernization was changing Japan's urban landscape, and the culture that underpinned it. These columns, collected into a book, became a cult hit among late-eighties Japanese youth. What they saw in this assemblage of casual photos and humorous descriptions was, as essayist Jordan Sand puts it, "a way of regaining some sense of the human imprint on the city in an era when that imprint was being rapidly erased."

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Customer Reviews

Genpei Akasegawa is a rare phenomenon, an artist who successfully transitioned from the avant-garde to the larger realm of popular culture. He emerged on the Japanese art scene around 1960, starting in the radical "Anti-Art" movement and becoming a member of the seminal artist collectives Neo Dada and Hi Red Center. The epic piece Model 1,000-Yen Note Incident (1963-1974), which involved a real-life police investigation and trial, cemented his place as an inspired conceptualist. His irreverent humor and cunning observation of everyday life made him

popular as a writer, peaking with his 1998 book *R&A jinryoku*, in which he put forth a hilariously positive take on the declining capabilities of the elderly. *HYPERART: THOMASSON*, marks a crucial turning point in his metamorphosis from a subversive culture to a popular culturatus.

In 1981, the American ballplayer Gary Thomasson was traded to the Yomiuri Giants team in Japan (loosely inspiring the Tom Selleck film *Mr. Baseball*). However, Thomasson proved a disappointment as his bat never seemed to connect with the ball; nevertheless, he continued to collect his salary for the entire season. Thomasson's performance (or lack thereof - he may hold the record in Japanese baseball for lowest batting average) was the inspiration for "Hyperart: Thomasson," a collection of essays by the artist and writer Genpei Akasegawa on architectural features that continued to be maintained, despite their complete lack of usefulness. An early discovery was a stairway that led to a walled-up doorway; what struck him was the fact that someone had replaced one of the stairway's railings after it had been damaged. Subsequent essays examine the outline left on a wall after an adjoining wall has been removed, a railing at a train station that blocks off an area where no one would go anyway, another railing blocking access to a tall, stepped curb, a walled-off doorway with a working doorknob still attached, eaves that remained after whatever they protected from the rain had been removed, and sawed-off telephone poles with protective tin caps attached. One essay, "The Thin Line Between Bravery and Retardation," concerns a student, Akihiko Iimura, who took photos of himself standing atop a chimney that must have been at least 150 feet tall, the last remnant of a bathhouse that had been torn down. Today, a quick YouTube search will pull up videos of Russian youths cavorting on top of high-rises in Dubai, but back in the 1980s, this was unique and unnerving. The reason Iimura shared this with Akasegawa was that the finding and describing of Thomassons was for a short time a popular fad in Japan, with people sending their discoveries to him for publication in "Photography Times" magazine. The book includes several official "reporting forms" that were used for this purpose. Thomassons fall under the category of "hyperart;" that is, they are not "art" since art requires at least some intention on the part of the creator. Anyone setting out deliberately to create a Thomasson would by definition fail to do so - a Thomasson can come into existence only unintentionally. It's easy to see what is happening here. Rather than go through the trouble and expense of buying out Gary Thomasson's contract, or attempting to end it for non-performance, the Yomiuri Giants' management instead chose to simply pay him until it ran out. After all, it was always possible that he might hit the ball one day. In the same way, architectural Thomassons exist when the expense of removing something outweighs the aesthetic concern of just leaving it alone. For example, the

stairway to nowhere was what could be called an attractive nuisance, so when one of the railings deteriorated, it was easier to replace it rather than tear the whole thing down or risk a lawsuit from someone injuring themselves on it. The same goes for the doorknob in the walled-up doorway, or the useless eaves - they were left in place as this led to no harm and was cheaper than removing them. The remnants of demolished walls were not plastered over and refinished for the same reason. The bathhouse chimney was an instance of the construction company that was renovating the area removing it after it had demolished everything else; when Akasegawa returned to the site, it was already gone. He mentions the "transitory" nature of Thomassons, which may be nothing more than the viewer happening across a construction site in the middle of a demolition process, and not the careful maintenance of a useless feature. Akasegawa obsessively names and categorizes his discoveries; the wall remnants are an "atomic Thomasson" as it reminded him of the people's shadows burned into walls by the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bomb blasts. This offers an insight into Japanese culture; as the only country ever subjected to nuclear warfare, even decades later these events were still significant enough for Akasegawa to refer to them in this way. He also demonstrates the Japanese obsession with baseball; it's unlikely that an American artist or intellectual would bring up the sport so often, even though it originated in America. Sports are considered lowbrow entertainment here, an inappropriate topic for a serious artist. Other chapters discuss efforts to locate Thomassons in China and France; Akasegawa concludes that the best examples of Thomassons are in Japan. By the final chapter, he seems to be bored with the whole endeavor; he discusses some natural features outside of the city without making up his mind as to what they are. The Thomasson project apparently was exhausted by that point. Throughout the book, his style is informal and playful, often going on tangents as one thing reminds him of something else. The book includes an explanation by the translator Matt Fargo, where he discusses his approach and how he made certain decisions in rendering Akasegawa's prose into English. It's possible that the "style" of Akasegawa's writing is really Fargo's - at one point, he calls a fire escape that terminates high above the ground as a "dire escape;" I don't speak Japanese, but I would be surprised to learn that the Japanese words for "fire" and "dire" also rhymed in that language. The book also includes an essay by Reiko Tomii, describing Akasegawa's artistic endeavors before his Thomasson phase, including the infamous "1000 Yen Bank Note" trial in which Akasegawa was brought up on currency counterfeiting charges. By far the best essay is the final one by Jordan Sand, "Open Letter to Gary Thomasson." Sand explains that while there has always been an inflow of Western culture into Japan, diligently translated and discussed, the same has not necessarily been true of these internal discussions which have largely remained unknown outside the country.

"Hyperart: Thomasson" is unusual in that it describes a collaboration by Japanese people on a purely Japanese phenomenon. Sand also discusses the background behind the hiring of Gary Thomasson by the Giants, who until then had, unlike other Japanese "besoboru" teams, avoided the use of "gaijin" players. One problem with the book is purely physical - its format of 6 1/2 by 5 inches, necessitating a 400 page length. It would have been easier to handle if it had at least mimicked the "Aperture" format of 8 1/2 inches square, or even a larger one. The black and white photographs, which are described as having been shot with various Nikon cameras, are unfortunately printed at a level of quality approaching that of newsprint - however, they're not supposed to be "artistic;" but merely documentary. Although I was ignorant of his renown until recently, Akasegawa was one of the pre-eminent conceptual artists of the 20th century. Recently, in a museum gift shop, I came across his work in a book of subversive art, which discussed the banknote incident. I've also started looking for Thomassons on my own, but despite living in a city with a downtown area that predates the Revolutionary War, so far I haven't found anything close to the level of absurdity that Akasegawa and his collaborators documented. Nevertheless, "Hyperart: Thomasson" reminds us that there are countless examples of surprise and interest in the world around us, if we would only take the time to look for them.

First off, get this book. Since reading it, I haven't been able to walk a single block of New York without seeing it in a whole new light. It was really a paradigm shift, for me. Second off, the writer is hilarious. He manages to drop some very serious art discourse while cracking you up at the same time. Fantastic stuff. I recommend it to anybody who wants to rekindle their love for art in general.

Got this for a gift after hearing about it on NPR. Sounded interesting, and I thought it would make a great gift for the right person. Unattractive book, poor photos, unsatisfying writing. Ugh!

Hypertart was a quick read that served as a great way to commute. Reading about objects that are perfectly set about in the city for the sake of laziness, silly purpose, or half baked ideas inspires you to look around your own locale more closely. The examples are all submitted by citizens who are reading a column. Its like blogging in the 80's in that way. Very witty and thought provoking.

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