

Interview with a counterfeiter

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Could you introduce yourself?

It's not important, really. You know I have to protect myself. I've lived in a few different places. I was in a small town, once, and now I live in a big city - or is it the other way around? I like the quiet. I have a job. Everyone has to pay the bills.

Tell us: where are we now?

Let's call it a service depot. This is where I stock memories. I still have some paper on the shelves, there's the printing press. As you see, most of that hasn't been used in years. All the ink is probably perished. But now and then I'll print something for a birthday or so...

What was your first motivation? Your motivations?

Well, it wasn't simply to make money, if that is what you're asking. Or - it was, and it wasn't. In this world it's about what you can get away with. I like coins - I've always liked coins - but I realised quickly that they were too small. I suppose that I loved money so much I decided to make my own.

I was born here, but my dad grew up in Austria. As kids we often heard him talking about the Wörgl Wonder, a kind of experiment in the 30's where a city decided to print its own currency to fight the economic crisis and it was very successful for some years until the state decided it was illegal. At the time, I did not understand all the implication but my dad carried carefully in his wallet one of those banknotes from Wörgl, I thought they were beautiful and unusual. You had to paste a stamp on them to make them valid.

Later around 2003, I heard of an Italian village that seemed to be trying something similar. They called it SIMEC. I got really excited and wanted to

join. But when I arrived, it was already over, after 3 months only. It was shut down by the state. And I realised, once there, that this guy Auriti and his friends were all officially Fascists. That's not where I am from.

After that, I decided to work on a small scale; I would only print when I needed to, mostly when I would travel to Europe.

Why did you start producing currencies?

I started because I hate working, and I thought it was a stupid thing to do. Why do we all have to do this? I don't get it. And yet everyone does it, they go to work five days a week, they come home tired, they have just enough time to put some food into their face and maybe watch some bad tv, then they go to bed and get a shitty sleep, then they wake up and go again. I felt like I was in a simulation. If I didn't work, I would have more time. You end up spending all the money you earn just to have some kind of semblance of a life that is tolerable. And I thought - if I didn't work I could rearrange my life so I didn't have to do all this. So maybe this whole time I could have just found a job where I could work from home? Whatever. I couldn't work anymore. I was shaking all the time. I gave it up like people give up drinking.

Anyway, it occurred to me at a red light: Why the hell go through all this hassle of 'making' money? Why don't I just cut out the middle man?

How are you different from the others? What separates you from some kind of organised crime syndicate?

Most counterfeiters are either drug addicts who are eager to raise a quick buck. ... After a few nights without sleep, they get the bright idea to bleach some \$5 bills and scan the image of a 20 and then print the artwork, the imagery of the 20 on that same \$5 bank note paper. Then on the other end of the spectrum, you have sort of mobsters and thugs, people who are involved in the drug trade or human trafficking, and they are really keen on mass production and, again, a fairly poor-quality counterfeit. Then there is this small group of true craftspeople out there, and a lot of them are really poor when it comes to criminal capabilities, but they are true artists. I'd say that is where I am.

What process do you use for the printing?

You know a very poor-quality fake, you can tell right away. It feels like flat paper out of your printer. And that's what gets people. Nobody looks at money, but everybody feels it, someone in a shop when they're counting it, on some subconscious level, they'll realise "This feels wrong". But there's a real textured feeling to high-quality fakes. This is because the authentic notes are made with these intaglio presses that really slam down on the paper, and the ink fills these depressions and you get a 3-D relief. So I used silkscreen right on top of the same image I'd created with the offset. And then I would use a particular UV lacquer that would dry instantly once I exposed it to an ultraviolet light. And that way, the silk-screened ink wouldn't slump off the top of the offset ink. And this was really the moment when everything clicked.

So who bought them?

So, I had customers. I made sure they were all overseas. After the financial crash I didn't want to flood my local market, things had been fucked up already for them. Mostly I sold through the dark web. You have to be super careful in there, one wrong click and you're looking at something you really don't want to be looking at. There are a bunch of scumbags in there. If you do something that someone doesn't like they can literally hunt you down. I got lucky and didn't end up with anyone on my case. I had a couple of payments go wrong, but nothing I couldn't recover from. I was printing about \$US50000 a month and selling to anonymous gangsters for 20-cents on the dollar. I was living like a king. It was much better than the boring office job I had before. What I really hated was having to deal with crypto-currencies - I don't see how they are any different from regular money. People think oh, it's so revolutionary, but what's it doing apart from inflating and then bursting, just like the regular, corrupted stock market?

Any advice for people who would like to do what you did?

Don't trust anyone. And don't get idealistic. You'll end up confiding in some undercover agent and fuck everything up.

Any thought on our monetary system?

The Yapese people live on an island in the Pacific Ocean. Their money is made out of stone, these huge limestone rings that are bigger than a man. But all different sizes. Always huge. They would trade them for things. And you know - often - they wouldn't even move at all. They would stay in the same place in the village, but everyone knew that the stone had a new owner, that the wealth had changed hands. One time they dropped one off a boat in the middle of the ocean, but they still kept trading it. It's still there and it's real, even though you can't see it. And now, all our money is just little sticky bits of data, some notes on a computer somewhere. What's the difference?

Any ideas about better ones?

It is also very likely that I did it because I was constantly being told that I was the only person far and wide who was able to make really good counterfeit dollar bills. In retrospect, I guess at least from an artistic perspective this both flattered and challenged me. I don't do this anymore, like I said. But sometimes I want to make one more. But perfect this time. You could take it to a bank, show it to the US Secret Service, anyone—they would say it's real. That's what I want, you know? I can't explain it. It's stupid, but it'd be my Oscar. And then I could just tear it up.

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