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THE AFTERLIVES OF DOLLS

On the Productive Death of Terminal Commodities

ABSTRACT

Can dolls die? This paper examines memorial services for dolls (*ningyō kuyō*) in Japan as conduits to disposal. Dolls, once bought, are widely understood to be terminal commodities: they can only be passed down to a narrow group of relatives and often end up stuck in time and place. The ritual reanimates the “stuck” dolls by providing a symbolic death, after which disposal becomes possible. The ritual also enables—on a small scale—processes of repurposing and recycling of dolls or the material of which they were made. Based on six months of ethnographic fieldwork, I argue that the terminality of dolls is undone by the rite and that they can become available for other, strictly circumscribed material processes. In transubstantiation, the disposed doll is recognized as a museum-worthy object and is saved from disposal; in transposition, the dolls enjoy a second lease on life in dioramas of everyday scenes; and in transmutation, the material of the doll itself is reused to give newly made, playful dolls the luster and respectability of tradition.

A Heady Encounter

It was the eyes that first caught my attention. They were open, disdainfully looking ahead. The head once belonged to a Bunraku theater puppet, but was now kept separately in a wooden crate with a Plexiglas front. The shaved eyebrows indicated that it was the head of married woman. An elderly gentleman in a battered suit had brought it to the Shitenōji temple in central Osaka on November 9, 2019, for a *ningyō kuyō* 人形供養, a ritual of disposal for dolls and stuffed animals.¹ These rites have greatly increased in number since the 1990s and now take place all over Japan. Yoshida-san, one of the doll makers, beckoned me over and showed me the mechanism that makes the puppet’s eyes close and open again (fig. 1). The box was signed and dated in elegant calligraphy, and thus the head was clearly an item of value; but when Yoshida-san asked the elderly man about its provenance, he immediately denied any knowledge. There was a small wooden plaque in the crate that identified the head as that of Tamate Gozen 玉手御前, the main character of the Bunraku puppet play *Sesshū Gappō ga Tsuji* 摂州合邦辻 (Gappō and his daughter Tsuji) from 1773. I felt both pity for the marvelous head and the wish to acquire it. This, however, was not possible. The head had been brought to the temple specifically for disposal. This is where its path ended.

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FIGURE 1. The doll maker Yoshida-san demonstrating the mechanism that closes the eyes of the head of a Tamate Gozen puppet at the Shitennōji temple's *ningyō kuyō*, November 19, 2019, Osaka. Photo by author

It was a brilliant autumn day, and around us people were bringing dolls and stuffed animals of all kinds to the reception (fig. 2). I arrived early so that I could get acquainted with the volunteers, something that was considerably easier in central Osaka than it had been in Tokyo's periphery, where a few days earlier I had attended a similar ritual. The atmosphere was friendly and even festive, in contrast to the more liturgical and somber mood at the Hōkyōji temple in Kyoto that I had observed three weeks earlier. Most of the dolls in Osaka looked well used, especially the stuffed animals; others gleamed gaudily in the sunlight, proof that they were wrapped in polyester rather than silk. People wrote their names and a brief "thank you" on the wooden *goma* (護摩) sticks that would be burned instead of the dolls, and then entrusted the dolls to the temple, where they would be disposed of considerately and correctly (fig. 3).² The dolls themselves often contained too much plastic to be burned in an environmentally sound way. After everyone had left, they were unceremoniously thrown into a rubbish-compactor truck (fig. 4).

My own thoughts remained with the Bunraku puppet head for quite a while: I understood how the dolls could become rubbish after a ceremonial good-bye; but the head was a different story. Clearly the doll makers in attendance had recognized it as an important artifact. It was placed prominently on the altar of the temple, where the first step of the ritual, an official Buddhist service, was held. The head was signed with the seal of its maker and had an identifiable role to play. Many Bunraku puppet heads, especially in Osaka and Kobe, were destroyed in air raids during World War II.³ Such an object must have a complex history, as complex as the character the puppet performs in the play: Tsuji, daughter of the low-ranking samurai Gappō,



FIGURE 2. Participants bring their dolls to the reception and write a short message and their names on the votive sticks of wood. Note in the background the bunraku puppet head surrounded by other dolls representative of the types that were present at the Shitennōji *ningyō kuyō*. Photo by author



FIGURE 3. Accumulation of discarded dolls at the Shitennōji *ningyō kuyō*. Photo by author

FIGURE 4. Cardboard boxes full of discarded dolls are thrown into a rubbish-compactor truck following the *Shitennōji ningyō kuyō*. Photo by author



is married to a widowed man of higher standing and takes the name Tamate Gozen. She falls in love with her stepson but then poisons him out of jealousy, and generally behaves in a most unbecoming manner for a woman of her station. In the final dramatic act, the crime is discovered to be a deception in an effort to protect her beloved from the assassination plan of his illegitimate half-brother. Tamate Gozen finally sacrifices herself by offering her blood to cure her stepson from the poison she had administered earlier. Because of the scandalous nature of the relationship between Tamate Gozen and her stepson—reminiscent of the love Phaedra has for Hippolytus in Euripides' tragedy—the play was banned several times, most recently during World War II.⁴ Despite its historical and cultural significance, of which the previous owner may or may not have been aware, the head was still thrown away.

Despite my efforts, there were limits to how much light I could shed on the head's provenance: the elderly gentleman who had brought it said that he had done so on behalf of someone else, and he made it quite clear that he did not want to be involved in a discussion. I heard similar explanations many times during fieldwork, although I was not always convinced of their veracity. It is not unusual in Japan to mask one's agency by using or invoking a substitute, and such an act would not be considered deceptive. Moreover, whether a person acts on another's behalf or merely claims to, both stances have the same distancing effect: each allows the person to safely rid themselves of something of sentimental or commercial value without the action reflecting badly on them. To me this indicated that a first separation had taken place, and that the head was presented not as a personal possession but as a singular artifact that had already been isolated from its owner. The only thing I could do was to witness its demise. What would motivate someone to get rid of such an extraordinary possession? Yoshida-san had spoken earlier about the emotional work and precision that goes into doll making, and I asked him whether it did not hurt to see these intricately crafted works being destroyed. He responded without hesitation: "Oh not at all! A few years ago, a doll was brought here which I immediately recognized as one being made by my father. I was happy to see it again and that the people who owned it treated it so carefully as to bring it here to the *kuyō* ritual. It had fulfilled its duty and that was pleasing me more than I felt sorry."⁵

The idea that dolls have a particular duty to those who own them, and that this duty has a temporal horizon, was put to me by several ritual specialists. Implied in this perspective is also the normative idea that the duty of an object is that for which it was made. Arjun Appadurai has characterized such objects as “terminal commodities . . . objects, which, because of the context, purpose and meaning of their production, make only one journey from production to consumption. After that, though they are sometimes used in casual domestic ways, they are never permitted to reenter the commodity state.”⁶ These notions of orthopraxy circumscribe and constrain what the object can legitimately be used for and to whom it can be bequeathed—usually from one generation of an extended family to another or from master to student, thus rendering them “inalienable.” But it also means that in an affluent but spatially poor society such as Japan, inalienable possessions that come with a sense of “duty of care” compete for space with newly acquired things that are felt to be more expressive of modern life. It was this heady encounter that made me rethink divestment as a process through which things that are “stuck” in place can be animated to move again. When the limited pathways of passing on an object such as a doll have been exhausted—either because there are no successors to inherit it, or they do not want to accept the responsibility of inheriting—objects can only become “unstuck” by destruction.

Rituals such as the *ningyō kuyō* create a conduit to disposal: the cherished object has first to undergo a symbolic death before it can move on. But as I will show, the ritual also enables—on a smaller, more intimate scale—processes of reappropriation, reuse, and recycling of dolls or the material of which they were made. As terminal commodities that pass through a ritual of disposal, they become available to other material processes. What the ritual undoes, then, is the idea of terminality/inalienability itself.

Can Dolls Die? On the Fate of Terminal Commodities

Dolls are compelling objects because they are so closely entangled with human life. The same object can appear as a ritual implement,⁷ a child’s toy,⁸ a decorative object associated with luck,⁹ or an uncanny entity,¹⁰ depending on the quality of the relationships that dolls are part of, and on the spaces—material, mental, and symbolic—that dolls inhabit. Dolls can double people, stand in for them, become social others and playmates, or retreat into glass cases and become representative objects of heritage, tradition, and national culture.¹¹ Although they are not religious objects per se, their role as implements in purification ceremonies and later in doll displays on the seasonal Peach Day (*momo no sekku* 桃の節句) connects them to ritual and veneration.¹² Elaborate dolls manufactured with the finest silk become sought-after collector’s items.¹³ But while Japanese doll culture is historically rich and varied, different contexts have tended to blend into each other so that even the most recent, mass-produced dolls such as Peko-chan or KFC’s Colonel Sanders can move from secular mascot to quasi-religious object.¹⁴ Dolls and humans are thus entangled with each other in ways that render them salient in affective and instrumental registers. As Inge Daniels has put it: “The duty people feel towards objects is grounded in an awareness of the interrelatedness of human and non-human entities. In other words, things offer their services to people who, in return, should be thankful and treat objects respectfully.”¹⁵

How, then, can one dispose of such possessions? In what follows, I grasp this conundrum as a problem of temporal alignment. If all possessions would cease to exist when their owner passes away, no problematic accumulation would arise; in archaeology this is one interpretation

of personal objects given as grave goods. Burying them with their owner renders them unique to one person or a clan.¹⁶ In reality, dolls are enduring presences whose “social life” does not necessarily align with the lifespan of their owners. The death that renders inalienable possessions problematic, in many cases, is the death of the owner. One way of creating temporal alignment is to create a parallel social or symbolic death for the doll. But what does it mean for an object to die? Often disposal is taken to be some kind of death,¹⁷ but this obfuscates one core aspect that we ignore at our peril: that a thing rarely if ever just dies by itself (although we may want it to)—that things, in other words, outlive us, that the challenge they pose to us and to human society and the planet is not so much their social lives as their inability to die—so we must destroy them. There is a certain irony, then, in calling these objects “terminal commodities.” To “kill” the dolls aligns their lifespan with ours and enables the talk of “the social lives of objects” in the first place.

This social death is a complex process of disentangling the interdependence of owners and dolls. The doubling of duties—the duty of the owner to look after the doll and the doll’s duty to look after and protect the owner—also requires a doubling of death: the death of the doll in the mind of the owner and the death of the owner in the mind of the doll. This is achieved during the *ningyō kuyō* when the owners write their names on the wooden *goma* sticks that are subsequently burned, often in the presence of both owners and dolls. This double death is productive in two ways: First, it enables detachment and through detachment divestment; it opens up an absence, a mental and physical space in which new attachments can be formed. Second, it produces “rubbish,” a material excess that subsequently becomes available for further appropriation.

From this perspective, the disposal of the Bunraku puppet head is perhaps easier to understand: the head (*kashira* 頭) is the most expressive aspect of the puppet and is manipulated, along with the puppet’s right hand, by the main puppeteer (*omozukai* 主遣い). The other two puppeteers operate the puppet’s left hand and the legs. Acquiring the skill for each role takes at least ten years, and the expressivity of the puppet emerges out of a complex assemblage: the interactions of the puppeteers, the voice of the dolls (sung by a musician on the side of the stage), stagecraft, and music performed by an orchestra. Clearly, apart from representing an individual person (Tamate Gozen, for example), a head is also a highly personalized object—that is, it belongs to a particular puppeteer. But it is not only singularization and personalization that renders the head an inalienable object, as the following vignette from Jane Marie Law’s fieldwork on puppetry on Awajishima illustrates.¹⁸ In 2003 a woman living in a temple in Kyoto invited the director of the Awaji puppet theater to “repatriate” a doll that she mistakenly thought was an Awaji puppet, donated to the temple by the family of a deceased devotee: “The woman who was keeping the puppet wanted to get it back to a place it belonged, because she said that it was haunting the house. Every night, when the family was asleep, they would hear footsteps, and they realised that the puppet was walking the halls of the temple, looking for something. What was she looking for?”¹⁹ It turned out to be a Bunraku puppet in a pitiful state of disarray, but the director refused to take it back. He told Law: “I had a strong feeling that if we took it back, something bad would happen to us, so I refused. My sense is that the puppet was lonely, with a longing for the stage. Stage puppets are not decorations. They need to be on stage, in performances. The puppet was walking the hall looking to get back to the stage.”²⁰

What is reflected in this anecdote is the prohibition against using an object for a purpose other than that for which it was created. Imagining the puppet’s reaction to this misuse—despite

the director's assurances that he was not superstitious and did not believe that the puppet actually walked around—creates a sense of the uncanny. Puppet heads were often made for particular actors, sometimes with special requests, and this personalization made it difficult to pass on a head outside the master-student relationship. In other words, an artifact such as this is stuck: it cannot be passed on or given away; it cannot undergo the ignominy of being re-commodified on the antique market or burdened with signifying “Japanese puppet culture” in a museum; its “stuck-ness” can only be undone by destruction.

While the majority of the dolls at the *ningyō kuyō* are destroyed and end up in landfill, there are small conduits through which some carefully selected dolls escape this fate. Passing through the prism of death is productive both in psychological terms—the former owners' detachment from the dolls—and in terms of a doll's afterlife that allows a new “doll culture” to emerge.

The Invention of Death: Nishiyama Tetsuji and the *Ningyō Kuyō*

Contrary to popular opinion, rituals of disposal for dolls are not an ancient tradition. It is true that purification rites using doll-shaped pieces of paper or wood go back to the Heian period (794–1185 BCE)* and that the archaeological record suggests an even older origin.²¹ The rites of purification on the first Snake Day (*mi-no-hi-no-harae* 巳の日の祓え) of the third month of the lunar calendar had Chinese origins but became associated with dolls because of the widespread use of human shapes (*hitogata* 人形) as means of purification.²² The day became part of a secular system of ritual days later recognized by the shogunate: the odd-numbered days of an odd-numbered month became the five seasonal days (*sechinichi* 節日) in the lunar calendar (1/1; 3/3; 5/5; 7/7; 9/9). March 3 is called the seasonal Peach Day.²³

For the purposes of purification, subjects would rub the *hitogata* over their bodies or breathe on them so that the pollution (*kegare* 穢れ)²⁴ would be absorbed by the object. They would then be thrown into rivers to be transported away, thus creating a distance between impurities and the self. In other words, the value of the *hitogata* lay in their absence. This contributed to the general flow of energy, which had become stagnant with pollution.

The other ritual that is commonly described as predecessor of the *ningyō kuyō* is the “floating away of dolls” (*hina-nagashi* 雛流し) that became popular during the late Edo period and that is still practiced at Awashima Kada shrine in Wakayama.²⁵ As Ishizawa Seiji has shown, it owes its origin to itinerant religious entrepreneurs, the *Awashima gannin* 淡島願人,²⁶ who advertised the Awashima deity's efficacy in taking care of female ailments and whose intercession (*daisō-daisan* 代僧代参) could be purchased by a small donation. Over time this intercession was replaced by the sale of small dolls that, when carried away by a river, were thought to return to Awashima and deliver the prayers with which they had been entrusted. Neither the purification rites nor this form of indirect worship can be thought of as a conduit to disposal.

The first ceremony under the name of *ningyō kuyō* took place in a very different context at the Imperial Primary School (Teikoku-shōgakkō 帝国小学校) in the Sugamo neighborhood of Tokyo on September 14, 1918. Its instigator was the educator and founder of the school, Nishiyama Tetsuji. Born in 1883, he belonged to the first generation of Meiji Japanese who went abroad to be educated at European and American institutions. After studying English in Tokyo, he was the first Japanese citizen to receive a doctorate in education (at New York University), a recently created academic field. Enthused by new and foreign ideas, he was a pioneer of the Taishō-period “new education discourse” (*shin-kyōikuron* 新教育論), which argued for the introduction of a humanist, holistic education based on recent innovations

* Correction: “BCE” should read “CE”

in psychology and psychoanalysis.²⁷ Nishiyama was particularly interested in the use of dolls for educational purposes, and when he established his own school in Tokyo, he created an Imperial Doll Hospital (Teikoku-ningyō-byōin 帝国人形病院) on the school premises. Despite the word *imperial* in the name, which gave the doll hospital a veneer of respectability, Nishiyama's school was in fact a private enterprise that he sought to finance through his prolific writing. In this context, the Imperial Doll Hospital should be seen—apart from its pedagogical mission—as a marketing gimmick that attracted the attention of the press. A search of the *Yomiuri* and *Asahi* newspaper archives shows that all pre-World War II reporting on *ningyō kuyō*—five articles from 1919 to 1926—refer to the ceremony at the Imperial Primary School. These contemporary newspaper reports describe a simple ceremony that included Nishiyama reading a eulogy on the dolls, a Buddhist priest chanting a sutra, and children singing a song, followed by burial of the dolls, with each participating child throwing a handful of earth into the doll grave.²⁸

Nishiyama's decision to use the Buddhist term *kuyō* and to invite a priest to the ceremony suggested a link to tradition and obfuscated the innovative nature of his ideas. In fact, he was partly inspired by *A Study of Dolls*, published in 1898 by G. Stanley Hall and Caswell Ellis, who in their empirical study of doll culture in New York and New Jersey devoted a whole chapter to doll burials.²⁹ The rite of disposal for dolls can thus more accurately be described as an invention of tradition. Similarly, many memorial services for instruments such as needles, scissors, glasses, and calligraphy brushes emerged *after* the opening of Japan and did not have antecedents in the Edo period.³⁰

In 1918 Nishiyama published a condensation of his pedagogical ideas regarding dolls and their connection to patriotism in a tome called *Kodomo ga akogaruru ningyō no kuni* 子供が憧るる人形の國 (The land of dolls that children long for).³¹ The result is an ambitious mix of progressive ideas, reinvented traditions, and empirical data gathering, featuring a survey of thirty of his pupils about the dolls they owned, the dolls' names, and whether the children thought their dolls were alive (eighteen out of thirteen [54 percent] answered yes). He also criticized the moral education (*dōtoku-kyōiku* 道德教育) of his time, which relied on children reciting abstract moral texts in unison. In Nishiyama's view, no understanding of virtue could emerge from such mindless repetition. Instead, girls should play with dolls and learn how to feed and bathe them, taking care of them and expressing love toward them in an experiential way closely modeled on images of idealized motherhood. A similar argument was made concerning empathy and kindness: children may quarrel, but the doll will not resist, even if it is handled without care. Because dolls tolerate even the harshest manipulations, they are "heroic educators" (*eidai naru kyōiku-sha* 偉大なる教育者).³² Nishiyama also implied that children should learn to be stoic, to passively endure, just as dolls do. He considered dolls to be ideal instruments to teach children about etiquette, especially the "dignified upright *hina* dolls who never have messy hair, chatter, or slump. They are excellent examples that children should emulate."³³ Always on the horizon of this focus on empathy, love, and friendship developed through doll play is the nation: feeling love for an inanimate object cultivates the love felt for siblings, parents, relatives, neighbors, friends, schoolmates, teachers, and eventually the state itself. Interestingly, Nishiyama maintained that the male and female couple at the heart of the doll display were a "honorable portrait of their Imperial Majesties" (*Heika-dono no go-shinei* 両陛下の御面影)³⁴ and should be treated as such. This relates the dolls to the Imperial Rescript on Education (*kyōiku-chokugo* 教育勅語) that was hung in every school in Meiji Japan next to a portrait of the emperor, and was ritually bowed to every

time the children passed it. The doll display, mostly associated in the Edo period with bride wealth and teaching girls about marriage, emerges in Nishiyama's reinterpretation as a site of emperor worship.

In a similar vein, the *ningyō kuyō* as envisioned by Nishiyama was meant to offer an opportunity to express gratitude to dolls that could not be repaired at the Imperial Doll Hospital. In his address during the ceremony, Nishiyama explained: "The dolls to whom operations (*shujutsu* 手術) could not be extended are gathered here today, and I joyfully extend these words of gratitude to those who have fallen in the line of duty (*shoku de taoretaru mono* 職で斃れたるもの), for those who have given their all in educating our sons and daughters and perished in the process."³⁵ The language of sacrifice used here prefigures in many ways the more militaristic versions of *meshi-bōkō* 滅私奉公, the act of self-annihilation in service to the public/state that would become more prominent during the subsequent rise of militarism and fascism in Japan. But there is also a continuity in the language of duty that reappears in a more domestic version during the postwar years. The *ningyō kuyō* appears again in the 1950s as a small-scale ritual at the Zōjōji temple in Tokyo's Minato ward and at the Kiyomizu Kannon-dō temple in Ueno. As the numbers of dolls brought to these more intimate occasions increased, they gave way in the 1980s and 1990s to large-scale events.

Transubstantiation: Inducting Dolls into the Museum at the Meiji Shrine

The Meiji shrine in central Tokyo is the place of enshrinement of the spirit of Emperor Meiji and Empress Shōken. It is a popular site for domestic and international tourists and famous for being the most visited shrine for New Year's prayers (*hatsumōde* 初詣). Every October, on the Sunday closest to the ninth day of the ninth month in the lunar calendar—also called the Late Doll Day (*nochi-no-hina* 後の雛)—the shrine hosts the largest of doll-disposal events. Set up in 1989 in contradistinction to the more lugubrious *ningyō kuyō* that emerged in other cities across the country, the motto of the Doll Gratitude Festival (*ningyō kansha-sai* 人形感謝祭) is "bright, cheerful, beautiful" (*akaruku, tanoshiku, utsukushiku* 明るく、楽しく、美しく). It is organized by the Japan International Doll and Toy Research Association (*Nihon ningyō gangū gakkai* 日本人形玩具学会) and hosted by the shrine, which provides the ritual authority that facilitates disposal; many people who have brought their dolls to this event have told me that they felt it was easier to leave the dolls at a shrine than to throw them away themselves. In the description that follows, I pay particular attention to the flow of objects through the shrine precinct and to what happens to the dolls, symbolically, ritually, and practically. This requires a kind of double vision, with one eye trained on the overall path of the dolls and the other on particular scenes. At the event I attended, the challenge was twofold. On the one hand, things happened at the same time at different places: while the shrine maiden danced in front of the representative *hitogata* in the inner sanctum, for example, a group of priests walked around the perimeter and purified the dolls by waving a branch of *sakaki* 榊 leaves over them and throwing white paper confetti in a ceremony called *kirinusa-sanmai* (切麻散米) (fig. 5). Thankfully I was informed of this aspect of the ritual by one of the attendants when I disclosed that I was there to do research, as otherwise it would have been difficult to observe. On the other hand, to follow the dolls' movements meant to go against the grain of the ritual itself, the purpose of which was to make them disappear as painlessly as possible.³⁶ The following reconstruction of the path of each doll is a montage of different moments based on the observations on one day; it is important to keep in mind that most participants and visitors only have a partial experience of the entire event.

FIGURE 5. Shintō priests at the Meiji shrine purify the dolls by waving a branch of *sakaki* leaves and throwing paper confetti (*kirinusa-sanmai*).
Photo by author



October 6, 2019, was an early autumn day with occasional bursts of sunlight and wind. A light rain did not keep visitors from bringing their dolls to the shrine. From the early morning onward, a stream of people entered under the large Torii gate that signified the entrance to the shrine precinct, many carrying plastic or paper bags full of dolls and stuffed animals. A few elderly participants arrived carrying glass cases wrapped in a *furoshiki* (transport cloth); whole families with children brought plastic bags full of stuffed toys. A queue started to form at the reception tent that had been set up in the shrine's paved courtyard. Participants queued patiently to hand over their dolls and pay the fee (5,000 yen for a large box). In return they received a *hitogata* cut out of paper on which they could write a message for each doll. The dolls were then passed on to a group of volunteers in white coats and gloves who proceeded to distribute them along the perimeter of the shrine; simultaneously, the *hitogata* were collected in a special box, the *hitogata osame-dokoro* 人形納どころ, at the side of the main sanctuary. Most people then visited the main shrine and looked at the myriad dolls that had begun to accumulate while they waited for their dolls to be arranged on tables and shelves. Once that happened—and it often was a challenge to find one's own in the cornucopia of dolls—people took pictures with them, talked to each other or sometimes to the dolls, said good-bye, and left. Those with time on their hands could enter the courtyard of the inner sanctum, in front of which a single simple wooden *hitogata* stood—essentially just a cross made from wood with a round head. During the ceremony, the wooden container with the *hitogata* was presented to the deity, and two shrine maidens in elaborate costumes performed a *kagura* dance, a genre choreographed to entertain the deity who is invited to witness it. I could only see this at a distance from outside the inner sanctum, but the dance could be identified as *Urayasu-no-mai* 浦安の舞, a standard *kagura* performance without any particular relationship to the dolls.³⁷ The shrine maidens performed to the accompaniment of a *gagaku* 雅楽 orchestra,³⁸ which emitted

a slow, hypnotic sound as a fine rain started to fall, creating a wistful atmosphere. As this was unfolding in the inner courtyard, two junior priests were dispatched to purify the dolls.

The exchange that takes place at this annual ritual can be summarized as follows: Following payment, each doll is replaced with a standard white *hitogata*, which serves as a material link between each owner and their possession(s). The original function of *hitogata*, to carry away pollution and negative energies, has been reversed: they now mediate the separation of owner and doll, and, according to the priest I briefly interviewed, are burned after the ritual. Interestingly, some of the people I spoke to in passing about the ritual modalities had quite a different understanding of the *harai* 祓い purification. They spoke of it not as the purification of negative energies or pollution that became attached to the dolls by human contact, but as manipulating attachment itself: purifying the doll in this view means to sever the doll's attachment to their human owner and to return it to the state of a mere thing. It is from this process of alienation that new possibilities, short of recommodification, emerge. From personal objects invested with memories, sentiment, and attachment, the dolls revert to objects whose other potentialities can come to the fore. As Anna Tsing has argued, the process of "sorting out" is crucial for the commodification of already existing objects and for the creation of value.³⁹ While the dolls are on display at the shrine's perimeter, members of the Japan International Doll and Toy Research Association carefully examine the approximately thirty thousand dolls that are brought to the shrine and sort the wheat from the chaff. Those selected are first displayed in a special section separated from the other dolls by a green rope and later brought to the small museum in a side building of the shrine (fig. 6). I was taken on a tour by a member of the "appraisal group" (*kantei-in* 鑑定員)⁴⁰ who told me that since the inauguration of the festival in 1989, there have been quite astonishing finds: collector's items



FIGURE 6. Sorting the wheat from the chaff: dolls deemed worth keeping at the Meiji Shrine's "Doll Gratitude Festival," October 6, 2019, Tokyo. Photo by author

of considerable value, historically invaluable antiques, and even an Ichimatsu 市松 doll⁴¹ made by the first Living National Treasure (*ningen kokuhō* 人間国宝) of doll making, Hirata Gōyō 平田郷陽 (1903–1981). After the *harai* ritual, these dolls are retained and become museum objects to be displayed occasionally. In 2019 the dolls sorted out for conservation included a well-preserved Ichimatsu doll from the 1920s, two antique Heian-style *dairi-sama* 内裏様 dolls (depicting the imperial couple), a set of tiny carved wooden figurines, a large Western bisque doll, a stuffed Doraemon toy, and a first-generation Barbie and Ken couple. The Doll Gratitude Festival clearly has the secondary function of “flushing out” valuable dolls. The rest of the dolls are thrown away on the next day.

How can we understand these transformations of value that follow so rapidly one after another? A doll that is “held in place” by sentimental value is stripped of this attachment by going through a symbolic death and is purified of its human bonds. From this return to being a mere thing, there are only two trajectories left: depending on the judgments of the *kantei-in*, it is either deemed to be rubbish or “beyond” value. Here, useful hints can be gleaned from Michael Thompson’s seminal *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*.⁴² Thompson maintains that there are only two culturally recognized categories of objects: the durable, whose value increases over time, and the transient, the value of which decreases over time toward zero. Social systems in which class is a central structuring principle inhibit the mobility of things from one category to the other. Thompson’s contribution was to point out that there is a third, hidden category of rubbish toward which all transient objects gravitate, a surreptitious pathway from transient to durable. In other words, for something transient to be reevaluated as durable, its value must first decrease to nothing:

The rubbish to durable transition is an all-or-nothing transfer. An object cannot gradually slide across from one category to the other as is the case with the transient to rubbish transfer. The transition involves the transfer across two boundaries, that separating the worthless from the valuable and that between the covert and the overt. . . . It must leave its timeless limbo and acquire a real and increasing expected life-span, and since it has become visible it must also discard its polluting properties.⁴³

Thompson illustrates this thesis by referring to the Victorian Stevengraphs that have become collector’s items and the gentrification of Georgian slum housing in Britain; but the argument also applies to the dolls at the Doll Gratitude Festival and their reevaluation. It is only once the doll has been purified of “human contamination” that it becomes rubbish; only once it has become rubbish that it can be rediscovered as a valuable item. Crucially, the dolls are treated as anonymous, although their former owners may still mill about the event. The “unconnectedness of everything” is a necessary condition for the transfer from rubbish to durable, enabled by the “covertness of rubbish.”⁴⁴ The boundary between the worthless and the valuable is a simple green rope that cordons off the selected dolls from the rest. But how are such decisions made? Thompson, who deals with much longer time frames, has this to say: “Let us postulate that initially one individual suddenly in a blinding flash, as it were, sees an item not as rubbish but as durable and that his example is followed by another and another and so on, until eventually everyone is agreed that the item is durable.”⁴⁵ He contends that this is unlikely to occur, but argues that “individuals are continually making bizarre and eccentric evaluations, the great majority of which do not even trigger off a second such evaluation. . . . The reason why we tend not to see this seething mass of contradictory and



FIGURE 7. *Kantei-in* evaluating dolls at the Meiji Shrine's "Doll Gratitude Festival." Photo by author

threatening evaluations is that inevitably we must, most of the time, belong to that massive majority whose prime concern is to suppress such possibilities by simply refusing to admit to their existence."⁴⁶

While the decisions made by the *kantei-in* are bolstered by their expertise, there is no foolproof way of evaluating a doll, and a subjective, even eccentric, element remains. When I asked the two women who worked as appraisers at the Doll Gratitude Festival about the criteria, they referred to "the historical and cultural meaning" of a doll but not to the value (although they both admitted that a substantial sum could be made from selling some of the rarer dolls) (fig. 7). Further supporting this point is the head of the Yoshitoku doll archive, Kobayashi Sumie, who has participated as a *kantei-in* for several years. She writes in her memoirs about the difficult task of sorting out the wheat from the chaff:

The historical and cultural meaning that we are thinking of here is not necessarily limited to mere antiquarian or monetary value. Dolls are a microcosm of those who live in a certain era, a mirror of the customs and fashions of their time. What prayers people have entrusted their dolls with, what faces, hairstyles, clothing, or colors they liked, furthermore who has made them, how their use has spread depending on the era—we look at them from a broad angle in search of the dolls' documentary significance.

It follows that what is classified as "in need of preservation" is also necessarily broad. The *hina* and Boy's Day dolls that contain a parent's prayers for the flourishing of their child. The different forms of play dolls that girls once loved (they range from first-class products to extremely cheap things; among them are dolls stained by use that heartrendingly indicate just how cherished they have been. These often end up in the "in need of preservation" box against the better judgment of the sometimes biased evaluators with their own preferences). A simple folk doll that seems to

have retained the warmth of its maker's hand. Dolls of traditional dancers or traditional customs, or French dolls: how sumptuously have they adorned the desolation of Japan in the postwar years?⁴⁷

What is at stake here is the ability of a particular doll to represent its own context of production and consumption. In that sense, the chosen dolls are representatives that condense the meaning of the many. Here lies the crucial difference with Thompson's account, in which it is a whole category of objects that becomes reevaluated. In the case of dolls, individual objects come to represent a single category, the other members of which are destroyed. The chosen dolls do not reenter the market as antiques, but are transformed into what Krzysztof Pomian has called "semiophores": visible vehicles of meaning that represent in concrete ways larger, more abstract notions such as Japanese doll culture or cultural heritage.⁴⁸ They mediate what is removed in space or time—the faraway and foreign in the form of the "culture dolls" in local uniforms, the past in the form of Heian-period *hina* dolls—and make it present, visible, and thus accessible.

Their elevation into the pantheon of culture is indicated by the way the dolls are treated: they are handled with decorum when they are first delivered by their owners, but the moment they join the anonymous mass of dolls they are subjected to rougher treatment when they are arranged around the shrine precinct. Once a doll is chosen for the museum, however, it is systematically removed from human touch, handled with gloves and eventually put on separate display. In other words, from a haptic object the doll has become a visual spectacle. To sum up, what "moves" the doll—figuratively makes it change place and literally "animates" it—are the relationships that it enters into at different points of its trajectory. Passing through the category of rubbish—even if only momentarily—allows some dolls to become reevaluated and switch from one register of value to another: from the emotional inalienability that is dissolved by the ritual to a new kind of cultural inalienability.

The Transposition of Dolls: The Fukuyose Project

The second example concerns *hina* dolls, the decorative display dolls for the doll festival on March 3, also known as Peach Day. The display is more or less elaborate depending on the economic means of each family, but usually involves a pair of male and female dolls said to represent the imperial couple. Depending on the degree of effort and expense, the display can include ministers, attendants, court ladies, chamberlains, and a five-piece orchestra called *gonin-bayashi* 五人囃子. The art historian Miyazaki Momo has compiled many quotes from diaries of court nobles that illustrate the changing nature and associations of the seasonal Peach Day. She argues that courtly doll culture slowly trickled down to the military elites, who added the differentiation between girls' day (March 3) and boys' day (May 5), and then further down to the merchant elites of an emerging urban culture. As a result, the association of dolls with the learning of wedding etiquette became stronger, and by the middle of the Edo period, preparing daughters for married life was considered the main function of the "doll festival."⁴⁹ As part of a bride's dowry, the dolls manifested the wealth of a family and their investment in their offspring in a form that was easily transported, both geographically when entering a new household upon marriage and historically along the generations. The custom is still practiced, often in reduced or abstracted form due to limited space.

Hina dolls make up a large number of discarded dolls and contribute to the riot of scarlet, orange, vermilion, and crimson on display during many *ningyō kuyō*. There are two reasons for their disposal. One is demographic: a shrinking population and an increasing number of people

who do not—out of choice or lack of opportunity—get married. Thus, there are fewer children to whom the dolls can be passed down, and in cramped urban dwellings there is increasingly less space for keeping displays that are only put on once a year and for whom there is no appreciative audience. The other reason is that many of the *hina* dolls of the postwar era were made out of cheap plastic with polyester and nylon kimono and thus do not represent items of value that are worth saving (or handing down).

Some elderly women who bring *hina* dolls to these memorial services have told me quite openly that they are doing this as part of their “preparation to die” (*shūkatsu* 終活). These *hina* dolls thus implicitly come to represent the end of whole family lines. This is, however, not how the disposal is talked about by organizers and religious figures. The discourse surrounding the disposal of dolls is often formulated in terms of fulfilling one’s duty and official function by—perhaps unsurprisingly—those who carry out official functions at such events: Buddhist monks, Shinto priests, chairmen and the occasional chairwoman of doll associations, guests of honor. Despite similar references to a language of decommissioning, the Fukuyose 福寄せ (“bring luck”) project, as we will see, was deliberately set up against the practice of *ningyō kuyō*.

Started in Nagoya in 2009, the Fukuyose project had its first exhibition in 2011. In essence, it is a volunteer organization of bricoleurs who turn the discarded *hina-ningyō* into a different kind of display. But this reuse is not just a form of lateral cycling during which the dolls fulfill a similar function for a new owner. The formal dolls that were previously stiffly seated are re-arranged in dioramas that reflect contemporary leisure and everyday activities: playing tennis, learning the e-guitar, reading newspapers, doing each other’s elaborate hairstyles (fig. 8). These dioramas are locally exhibited but, more importantly, photographed and put on Facebook and Instagram. Lovingly arranged and provided with new props such as karaoke microphones and shopping bags, the dolls engage in exciting new endeavors. Captions provide speech bubbles in which the creators ventriloquize on the dolls’ behalf. At the time of writing, there were 2,800 pictures tagged with the hashtag *fukuyose hina*. The language used to describe these displays is explicitly one of retirement, relaxation, and fun. The exhibitions are meant to bring entertainment and merriment to the population. The tenor of these works is humorous and lighthearted, even mildly subversive when considering how the rigid formality of the dolls in their former lives was used to exhort children. One recurring motif is that *hina* dolls, who are seasonal themselves and thus have their presence temporally limited to late February and early March,⁵⁰ now enjoy additional seasonal activities such as Halloween, Christmas, New Year’s, and Valentine’s Day. Another genre of display references current events such as local elections and, in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic with the concomitant behavioral changes like social distancing and tiny paraphernalia such as face masks and face shields (fig. 9).

One way of interpreting this phenomenon is as a deliberate counterweight to the more lugubrious atmosphere of the *ningyō kuyō*. In this view, the dolls are not discarded but rather released from duty. The official website of the Fukuyose project is quite explicit about this:

The honorable *hina-ningyō* as seasonal dolls had the duty/function to watch over the honorable owner’s healthy development and to perpetuate the Japanese tradition of seasonal culture. The Fukuyose *hina* have finished their duty as *hina* in each household and are enjoying a second life as dolls. Because of that they are no longer bound by the preconceived notion of *hina* and are trying out many things they could not try when they were still on “active duty” (*gen-eki* 現役) as *hina* dolls. That is why, although the *hina* dolls on active duty and the Fukuyose *hina* may have the same form, they are completely different dolls.⁵¹



FIGURE 8. Two *fukuyose* dolls playing Van Halen's music on the e-guitar and shamisen. © Fukuyose-hina, Miyajima Prefecture



FIGURE 9. Two *fukuyose* dolls in masks enjoy an excursion to Nara's Ukimido, the "floating" pavilion. © Fukuyose-hina jikkō iinkai, Nara Prefecture

This is why the term *reuse* is too general to encompass the nuance of the change undergone by the dolls, especially because those involved in this form of repurposing insist that once the dolls are donated to the project, they are no longer *hina* dolls. I therefore use the term *transposition* to indicate that the shift that takes place leaves the dolls intact (in most cases) but puts them into a different context. The dolls are no longer viewed as discarded and unwanted, but rather they are understood in relation to their original function through the introduction of a shift between work and leisure, between on duty and off duty, between the exalted and the quotidian.⁵²

In an interview with the author, the founder and representative of the Fukuyose project, Yoshino Takako, emphasized that she did not recognize the practice of *ningyō kuyō* as a legitimate pathway to disposal.⁵³ For her, these events were dishonest schemes to raise money for financially struggling temples. Even worse, doll makers and sellers collude in the illusion that there was a proper way to throw away *hina* dolls, even going as far as to argue that each girl should have her own set of *hina* dolls rather than one shared display for the whole family. In the same vein, doll wholesalers sometimes argue that *hina* dolls should not be inherited, but bought anew for each child, only to be thrown away when the children have grown up. This, however, stands in direct opposition to the complex emotional and social ties that are mediated through the *hina* dolls:

The *hina* dolls are not bought by yourself. They are bought for you. . . . My parents buy them for my children. For example, I get married, and in my husband's household lives his mother. When my own parents bought *hina* dolls [for my daughter], they invested in a slightly more expensive set. They spend a little bit more to buy top-range dolls. They did this so my husband's mother cannot look upon me unfavorably (*iya na me de mirenai yō ni* 嫌な目で見れないように). . . . When you are little, you don't understand this, but when you reach my age, you realize what your parents have done for you. Their feelings [are embodied in the dolls]. At that time, your parents have already passed away, so to throw away the dolls would mean to throw away your memories of them.

What is at stake in getting rid of the *hina* dolls is not only sentimental attachment, but a complex mediation of social relationships between the generations, and also between wives and mothers-in-law. This relationship is often strained: wives are traditionally subordinated to the power of the eldest female presence in the household and are required to live up to often exaggerated expectations of gendered comportment. In this context, the dolls have the added protective function of preventing the mother-in-law from thinking of her daughter-in-law as inferior. Yoshino-san emphasized that things that you buy for yourself can easily be discarded, but objects that are bought for you are a different matter altogether. The *hina* dolls occupy an ambivalent status between gifts and commodities: unlike gifts, their semiotic saliency remains tied to their price and the reputation of the shop where they were bought; unlike commodities, they cannot be fully owned, but remain tied to the relationships they helped shape, tied by gratitude, obligation, and filial piety.

Yoshino-san saw it as her mission to provide an alternative trajectory for *hina* dolls that were no longer needed. Rather than pretending that there was an officially sanctioned way of disposal, why not decommission them by letting them circulate as Fukuyose-hina? If they are exhibited as *hina* dolls, the public will soon lose interest, but if they are given a new lease on life as Fukuyose-hina, in regularly changing arrangements—Yoshino-san mentioned how difficult it was to come up with new story lines—then their charm would become perpetual. This particularly applies to dolls that are almost new: “Sometimes we get shiny and new dolls, maybe not older than two or three years. I always think ‘something must have happened in that family.’ Maybe there was a conflict between the wife and the mother-in-law. . . . We even get some with the price still on! The *hina* dolls can’t speak, so we cannot know the exact circumstances. But whenever I see dolls like that I think, ‘You must have gone through a lot. Now you can come to me.’”

In other words, the trajectory of the *hina* dolls does not lead to death and disposal, but to relief from duty and the work of keeping in place difficult relationships. But I also detected in the strict differentiation between on-duty *hina* dolls and “mere” off-duty dolls an attempt to alleviate any possible criticism that such humorous reinterpretations could be disrespectful to the *hina* dolls, who after all represent the imperial couple. When I asked Yoshino-san about this, she mentioned that there had been some detractors, usually elderly citizens who were involved in dollmaking and took to social media to critique the Fukuyose-hina as improper and childish. In order to avoid such “misunderstandings,” the website clearly explains that the Fukuyose *hina* are not meant to make fun of the *hina* doll tradition. Even stronger are the reservations toward those of a more occult persuasion: “We think that it is immoral to treat Japanese dolls in an occult manner or to foster uncanny expressions in the displays.”⁵⁴ The latter statement addresses the “occult boom” in Japan, which since the 1980s has led to an interest in Japanese dolls as part of a culture of the uncanny. But it also is an extension of the idea of duty and the singularity of objects. Akin to Thompson, who argues that value attributions are a way of controlling access to “durability” and thus allow some degree of control over space and time (those who own durable objects can transmit them to their offspring, while those whose transient objects gravitate toward rubbish have nothing to pass on), the notion that cultural objects have one prescribed use/function has a normative, social dimension. Clearly, to reinterpret *hina* dolls in this playful way is implicitly considered a potential act of subversion that must be held in check ideologically.

What better way of doing this than by framing it within the binary category of “on-duty/off-duty” and thus still strictly within the frame of obligation? Despite the ideology of retirement,

the dolls are actually put to new uses of entertainment. Yoshino-san carefully described the efforts that go into putting “the right doll in the right place” (*tekisaitekisho* 適才適所): antique dolls are used to illustrate the tradition of *hina* dolls, while only the newer ones are reimagined in a more playful way. This throws wider light on how, in Beth Preston’s words, “systems of social order are imposed on individuals . . . through the generalised insistence on behaving towards items of material culture in accordance with their proper functions. Since the proper functions are stable historically and across groups of similar items, this generates norms of behaviour which persist from generation to generation and across large segments of the population.”⁵⁵

The notion of a normative “proper function” is both manipulated and reinforced in the Fukuyose *hina*. Note that the dolls are not reused in their proper function as *hina* and thus remain inalienable. They are recontextualized with careful reference to their proper function. When I asked Yoshino-san what would eventually become of the dolls, her response indicated that she saw them in a process of eternal circulation from the storehouse to various local places, where their reimagination would create renewed appeal and new traffic with each new exhibition: “Instead of disposal, we will have them work (*hataraitemorau* 働いてもらう) for the revitalization (*kasseika* 活性化) of the towns where they are exhibited.”

The idea of an afterlife here also has a rich metaphorical potential for contemporary Japan: like the dolls that are retired from duty, Japan’s ageing population is living increasingly longer retired lives of leisure. Putting the Fukuyose *hina* to work again to make people smile is an activity that also puts to work the often-retired creators of these displays.

Transmutation: From Dolls to Cats

The last form of transformation is what could be called recycling: the reduction of the dolls to the material of which they are made and the subsequent use of this material to create something new. This process could also be termed transmutation, because the transformation involves a change in the form and nature of the object, leaving only a material affinity that links the new form to the original dolls. My attention was first drawn to this phenomenon at a *ningyō kuyō* on the outskirts of Tokyo on November 14, 2019, an event that I initially perceived as comprising an element of scavenging. During the main part of the ritual, monks and children were offering incense in front of a metal brazier on which selected old dolls were burned (fig. 10). The burning dolls represented the vast majority of dolls that could not be burned for environmental reasons; these latter ones were stacked up in open cardboard boxes behind them. I noticed two middle-aged women rummaging through those boxes, picking up and comparing objects and materials. A labyrinthine wall of cardboard boxes hid this activity from the eyes of others (fig. 11). The two women seemed to know one of the attendants in charge, an elderly doll maker who had suffered a stroke earlier that year. I had talked to him briefly before the ceremony started and interviewed him afterward when he returned with his two small grandsons in tow. They were dressed in historical costumes for the procession and, having earlier performed in the Buddhist service (which involved sitting still for quite some time), were eager to run around and inspect the rest of the boxes. When I asked him what would happen to the dolls, he replied: “Well, for those who don’t want them, they are simply rubbish; for those who do want them, they are treasures. [Normally] you keep them until you become an adult, although some keep them until they become eighty! But after being ritually worshipped (*ogamu* 拝む), here they become mere things, and so we don’t mind if you take them home.”⁵⁶



FIGURE 10. The burning of a representative doll made from wood and silk, Saitama Prefecture. Photo by author



FIGURE 11. A wall of dolls and cardboard boxes at the *ningyō kuyō* on the outskirts of Saitama Prefecture. Photo by author

Thus, after the ceremony, the dolls have been emptied of their emotional charge, of their status of a personal and inalienable possession, and have returned to the status of “mere things.” Therefore, they can be reappropriated as new things. A woman who had earlier filmed the procession, and whom I later recognized as the wife of one of the owners of the stalls that lined the avenue leading up to the temple, took a large warrior doll and tucked it away behind the stalls. The two women scavenging explained to me that they were looking for materials to create new dolls (*sōsaku ningyō* 創作人形). One of them introduced herself as Ishiwata Ikuyo, a prolific doll maker who specializes in “luck-bringing animals” (*shōfuku-dōbutsu* 招福動物). She was searching for silk that she could reuse for her dolls and emphasized that it was the dresses that were most precious about these dolls; the more modern ones were mostly made from polyester and therefore not valuable to her. She asked the doll maker referred to above about the quality of the materials, and he offered his advice freely. Even I felt that I could take a memento home, something concrete to illustrate talks, but when I went into the labyrinth of cardboard boxes I felt conspicuous, with the eyes of imagined or real others boring into my back, questioning my motives. After a few furtive glances, I prepared my backpack to quickly grab two small seated dolls, but when I did so, I felt a sharp prick on my finger and dropped one of them. Upon closer inspection it turned out that I had grabbed two musicians from a *gonin-bayashi*—the tiny drum player had lost the *tsutsumi* 鼓 drum that had been fastened to his shoulder with a nail, which now stuck out. I could not help but sense that the tiny doll was resisting my attempt to appropriate it. But why did it seem as if I was breaking a taboo? My own prick with destiny confirmed for me the underlying problem of the doll that is not destroyed: it is the material continuity of the object that belies the elaborate symbolic manipulation that occurs during the ritual. The material itself clearly had not changed. It is a change



FIGURE 12. Laughing cat by Iwata Ikuyo, 2022.
Photo © Ishiwata Ikuyo

in symbolic status that the ritual invites us to imagine, rather than something clearly visible. My own fear of being seen to take a doll was triggered by the fact that others could not tell whether this doll was “on duty” or not, whether it had turned into rubbish or whether I was stealing a doll that still belonged to someone. In other words, the tactile sense of the material continuity of the object undermined the efficacy of the ritual.

When I later looked up the creations of Ishiwata Ikuyo, I found that most of the dolls she had made were anthropomorphic cats, wearing kimono and engaging in human behavior such as holding hands or walking on their hind legs. What was most striking, however, was their laughing faces (fig. 12). Again, this cheerful playfulness stood in strong contrast to the serious rigidity that characterizes *hina* dolls. She told me that she always mixes human and feline traits and that she preferred recycled material (*kofu* 古布) because of the delicate patterns and the “warm feel.”⁵⁷

Like the Fukuyose *hina* discussed above, the cat dolls stand in an interesting relationship to the origin of the material. There is a similar focus on humor and lightheartedness, but in the different register of anthropomorphic cats rather than human shapes. The beckoning cat with its wide smile has been a symbol of good luck throughout Japan, and thus the material transmutation from human to cat re-creates a ludic category of talismans and charms (*engimono* 縁起物).⁵⁸ In contrast to the Fukuyose *hina*, however, some of these cat dolls are made for sale and attain prices between roughly 20,000 and 150,000 yen. The material transformation is thus also a value creation, partly based on the use of old material, specifically the high-quality silk used in the clothing of antique dolls and kimono.

To sum up, in the act of appropriating material from old human-shaped dolls and recycling them into anthropomorphized cats, the value of the old material is built into a new commodity form that is in itself a creative interpretation of a similar tradition. The term *sōsaku*

(lit., “creation, production, fabrication”) is invoked when someone follows their own creative instinct as opposed to the world of traditional arts, the latter circumscribed by an austere and strictly adhered to aesthetic canon; an English term that perhaps conveys a similar meaning is “creative freestyle.” *Sōsaku* was first used with reference to “creative woodblock prints” (*sōsaku hanga* 創作版画), to differentiate prints more directly inspired by Western examples from the revival of traditional woodblock printing called *shin-hanga* 新版画 (“new woodblock prints” or “neo-ukiyo-e”).⁵⁹ The difference was not only in motif and style, but also in the mastery of the technical process. In *sōsaku* printmaking the traditional division of labor between artist, carver, printer, and publisher is replaced by one person who has complete control over the creative process, thus highlighting the artist’s autonomy and originality. A similar shift was triggered in Japanese dance when contact with modern Western dance in the late Meiji and early Taishō period inspired innovations that sought different degrees of liberation from the inherited form. In an essay on the meaning of *sōsaku* in Japanese dance, the historian Kanbayashi Sumio argues that the term, in use since 1935, was coined to capture the creative act as an expression of Bergsonian *élan vital*.⁶⁰ He adds that *sōsaku* should not be a search of the new for its own sake and that innovation does not mean the wholesale discarding of tradition.⁶¹

In doll making, *sōsaku* is closer to the category of arts and crafts or, alternatively, to the realm of kitsch. But in its emancipation from tradition, dolls are also, for a very small number of artists, recognized as high art. Hirata Gōyō deliberately broke with the formal tradition to create *sōsaku ningyō* that were more naturalistic and lifelike (*shasei* 写生). This notion of naturalism-as-art imported from Western aesthetics was crucial for his elevation to the status of a Living National Treasure. This is not to say, however, that such value creation on the fringes of a recognized art is necessarily a resistance to hegemonic canons of taste. *Sōsaku* artists and performers, whether doll makers or Japanese dancers, often told me that they see themselves as rendering the high-art equivalent of their practice more accessible and welcoming to a general audience that lacks the esoteric knowledge required to appreciate its nuances. This may suggest a democratization of art production and consumption, but it also reproduces, in a looser form, the hierarchies that define the high-art canon, together with art associations, exhibition prizes, and master-student relationships. This is enabled and legitimized by material borrowings that transfer both an artistic sensibility—the feel and luster of old brocade—and a reflection of the esteem of the original art.⁶²

Conclusion

What does the symbolic death of dolls produce? First, it produces movement: dolls that have been stuck in place for years become mobile again. Passing through a symbolic death detaches the dolls from their owners, thus making them available for a possible afterlife. A small number are transubstantiated into semiophores and represent Japanese and foreign dolls as a cultural and historical form. Others have a second lease on life as playful, “retired” dolls. Finally, new shapes may be made out of the precious materials of old dolls. The important similarity between the cases discussed here—destruction, disposal, eternalization, retirement, material reworking—is that the inalienability of the original doll is maintained throughout. In no case is the doll reused in the same function or as the same object. This points to the importance of singularity but also to the specificity of relationships between dolls and their owners. Once they become owned, dolls cease being fungible objects.

The different forms of value creation must thus be understood in the context of doll culture more broadly. The dolls that become accessible for transformation cannot be used freely:

the possible transformations are strictly limited and ensure that a vaguely defined Japanese tradition is respected and not undermined. This returns us to the Bunraku puppet head discussed at the beginning of this article. The owner must have decided that destruction was preferable when compared to the ignominy of being turned into an antique. Perhaps the *ningyō kuyō* at the Mondo Yakujin Tōkōji 門戸厄神東光寺 in Nishinomiya would have been a more suitable occasion. There, a few days before the annual ritual on November 19, a more recent innovation takes place. Since 2017 Bunraku puppeteer Yoshida Kazuo, a Living National Treasure, and his student participate in a *ningyō kuyō seremoni*, during which a Bunraku puppet is seen to offer incense, bowing and praying for the dolls soon to be discarded. If our puppet head had been present, it would then at least have been sent off by one of its own kind.

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Notes*

- 1 The term *kuyō* is derived from the Sanskrit word *pūjā*, “the act of bringing offerings.” It is used to refer to the memorial services for ancestors (at certain intervals after the funeral) and a range of rites concerning deceased or killed animals and pets, and the disposal of inanimate objects. How to translate the term has implications for the understanding of the ritual: “Mortuary rites” suggests that these rituals are imitations of human funerals; Barbara R. Ambros, *Bones of Contention: Animals and Religion in Contemporary Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2012). Thus, they imply the death of the object; Angelika Kretschmer, “Mortuary Rites for Inanimate Objects: The Case of Hari Kuyō,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 27.3–4 (2000): 379–404. I follow the pragmatic solution of Christine Guth, who simply calls the needle *kuyō* “ritual needle disposal”; “Theorizing the Hari Kuyō: The Ritual Disposal of Needles in Early Modern Japan,” *Design and Culture* 6.2 (July 2014): 169–86. “Dolls” here is a broad and elastic category that contains anything with a face, from antique dolls to stuffed animals.
- 2 The word *goma* is derived from the Sanskrit term *homa* and refers to the act of making offerings via a sacred fire. The wooden votive sticks are burned to release the prayers and wishes that the supplicants have written on them.
- 3 Betty McGee, “The Japanese Puppet Theatre,” *Educational Theatre Journal* 3.1 (March 1951): 44–48.
- 4 The Kabuki version of this play was staged in 1948 at the Tokyo Theatre by the Supreme Command for the Allied Powers to promote the “freedom” brought by the occupation. Nakamura Kichiemon 中村吉右衛門 starred as Gappo and Nakamura Baigyoku 中村梅玉 as O-Tsujii. Donald Richie, who wrote the advertisement and was in the audience, remembers that he at first was intrigued by the illicit love story, but then began to disapprove when the story turned out to be one of self-sacrifice related more to motherly than erotic love. Richie, *The Japanese Journals, 1947–2004*, ed. Leza Lowitz (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge, 2004), 43.
- 5 Interview with the author, November 9, 2019, Osaka.
- 6 Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 23; see also Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in *Social Life of Things*, 75. Appadurai proposes that “the commodity situation in the social life of any ‘thing’ be defined as the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature”; “Introduction: Commodities and the Poli-

- tics of Value," 13. This approach reveals that objects have many lives and can acquire radically different meanings in different contexts; but also that they can change what in classical Marxism is their nature as congealed labor. Objects can become commodities and cease to be commodities independently of how they are produced and consumed. The other body of theory that addresses this issue is Annette Weiner's notion of inalienable possessions. While Appadurai focuses on the "cultural biographies" of individual objects, Weiner is more concerned with how certain possessions are made inalienable and how history and continuity are constituted by these larger processes. Annette Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
- 7 Okamoto Makiko 岡本万貴子, *Ragyō to Chakusō No Ningyō-Shi* 裸形と着装の人形史 (A history of dolls naked and dressed) (Kyoto: Tankōsha, 2012).
 - 8 Masubuchi Sōichi 増淵宗一, *Shojo-Ningyō-Ron: Kindan No Hyakunen Ōkoku* 少女人形論—禁断の百年王国 (Discourse on dolls of girls: The forbidden hundred-year kingdom) (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1995).
 - 9 Josef A. Kyburz, "Des liens et des choses: Engimono et omocha," *L'Homme*, 31.117 (1991): 96–121.
 - 10 Kikuchi Kōhei 菊地浩平, *Ningyō Media-Gaku Kōgi* 人形メディア学講義 (Lectures in doll media studies) (Tokyo: Kawade shobo-shinsha, 2018).
 - 11 Kitamura Tetsuro 北村哲郎, *Nihon No Ningyō* 日本の人形 (Dolls of Japan) (Tokyo: Shibundō, 1967).
 - 12 Miyazaki Momo 宮崎もも, "The Development of the Doll Festival as Seen in Paintings: Focussing on Edo Period Family Action," in *Images of Familial Intimacy in Eastern and Western Art*, ed. Toshiharu Nakamura (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 218–48.
 - 13 Frederick Starr, "Japanese Toys and Toy-Collectors," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* 2.3 (1926): 101–16.
 - 14 Inoue Shōichi 井上章一, *Ningyō No Yūwaku: Maneki-Neko Kara Kāneru Sandāsu Made* 人形の誘惑—招き猫からカーネル・サンダースまで (The seduction of dolls: From waving cats to Colonel Sanders) (Tokyo: Sanseidō, 1998).
 - 15 Inge Daniels, "The 'Social Death' of Unused Gifts: Loss and Value in Contemporary Japan," *Journal of Material Culture* 14.3 (September 2009): 396.
 - 16 Heinrich Härke, "Grave Goods in Early Medieval Burials: Messages and Meanings," *Mortality* 19.1 (2014): 41–60.
 - 17 Kevin Hetherington, "Second-Handedness: Consumption, Disposal and Absent Presence," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 22.1 (2004): 157–73.
 - 18 Jane Marie Law, *Puppets of Nostalgia: The Life, Death, and Rebirth of the Japanese 'Awaji Ningyō' Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).
 - 19 Jane Marie Law, "A Heady Heritage: The Shifting Biography of Kashira (Puppet Heads) as Cultural Heritage Objects in the Awaji Tradition," in *Making Japanese Heritage*, ed. Christoph Brumann and Rupert Cox (London: Routledge, 2010), 112.
 - 20 Umezume quoted in Law, "Heady Heritage," 112.
 - 21 Okamoto Makiko, *Ragyō to Chakusō No Ningyō-Shi*.
 - 22 Miyazaki, "Development of the Doll Festival."
 - 23 There is currently an attempt by UNESCO to designate the seasonal culture of Japan as an intangible national treasure (無形文化財).
 - 24 For the notion of pollution in premodern Japan, see Klaus Vollmer, "Ordnungen des Unreinen: Zur Typologie von *kegare* in der japanischen Kultur der Vormoderne," *NOAG* 179–80 (2006): 197–208.
 - 25 Incidentally, the modern form of this "ancient" rite that can be observed on March 3 every year involves dragging small wooden boats out to sea with a motorboat. Once the onlookers have disappeared, the boats are brought back to the pebble beach, doused in gasoline, and burned.
 - 26 Ishizawa Seiji 石沢誠司, "Awashima-Shinkō to Nagashi-Bina 淡島信仰と流し" (Awashima beliefs and floating dolls), *Kyōgan-Bunka* 171 (2005): 24–36.
 - 27 Toyofuku Akiko 豊福明子, "Nishiyama Tetsuji No Chosaku to Kodomo No Kenri Ni Tsuite" 西山哲治の著作と子供の権利につ (The writings of Nishiyama Tetsuji and children's rights), *Kyōiku-Kisōgaku-Kenkyū* 11 (2013): 51–60.
 - 28 The earth burial here is a significant detail: earth burials became more common after the Meiji restoration because of the attempt to pry apart the syncretic interweaving of Buddhism and Shinto (*shinbutsu-bunri* 神仏分離). In the Edo-period division of religious labor, Buddhist temples were responsible for funerals and cremation was the default mode. To distinguish itself from Buddhism (which had recently been reevaluated as "foreign"), the early Meiji ideologues elaborated several Shinto rites for funerals. For this they could refer to the Yoshida Shintō school that had innovated forms of Shintō burial since the death of Yoshida Kanemigi 吉田兼右 in 1573. See Elizabeth Kenney, "Shinto Funerals in the Edo Period," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 27.3–4 (Fall 2000): 239–71.
 - 29 G. Stanley Hall and Caswell Ellis, *A Study of Dolls* (New York: E. L. Kellogg, 1897).
 - 30 See Guth, "Theorizing the Hari Kuyō," 169–86; Kretschmer, "Mortuary Rites," 380–404; Ōsaki

* Correction: "淡島信仰と流し" should read "淡島信仰と流し雛"

** Correction: "西山哲治の著作と子供の権利につ" should read "西山哲治の著作と子供の権利について"

- Tomoko 大崎智子, "Hasami Kuyō Wo Megutte: Tokyo-to Minato-Ku Shibazōjōji" ハサミ供養をめぐって—東京都港区芝・増上" (Regarding memorial rites for scissors: The Shiba-zōjō temple in Minato Ward, Tokyo), *Mingu Mansurii* 30.1 (1997): 14–24.
- 31 Nishiyama Tetsuji 西山哲治, *Kodomo Ga Akogaruru Ningyō No Kuni* 子供が憧るる人形の國 (Tokyo: Nanbokusha shuppanbu, 1918). All translations from the Japanese are my own.
- 32 Nishiyama Tetsuji, 52.
- 33 Nishiyama Tetsuji, 54.
- 34 Nishiyama Tetsuji, 65.
- 35 Nishiyama Tetsuji, 188.
- 36 I have addressed this problem of escamotage in "The Great Heisei Doll Massacre: Disposal and the Production of Ignorance in Contemporary Japan," in *Buddhism and Waste: The Excess, Discard, and Afterlife of Buddhist Consumption*, ed. Trine Brox and Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 103–24.
- 37 *Urayasu-no-mai*, despite its archaic appeal, was first performed at the 2,600-year anniversary of the (mythical) Kammu emperor's ascension to the throne in 1940. It was composed by the head of the imperial-household music section, Ō-no-Tadatomo 多忠朝 (1883–1956), based on his understanding of *gagaku* and *kagura*. The one line of text reads "Deities of heaven and earth, I pray for a world calm like the waveless morning sea (天地 (あめつち) の神にぞ祈る朝なぎの海のごとくに波たたぬ世を)." When sung, it is not intelligible to the audience.
- 38 A *gagaku* orchestra usually comprises a choir, percussion, *hichiriki* 篳篥 and *ryūteki* 龍笛 flutes, mouth organs (*shō* 笙), Japanese harps (*sō* 箏), and *biwa* 琵琶 lutes.
- 39 Anna Tsing, "Sorting Out Commodities: How Capitalist Value Is Made through Gifts," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3.1 (2013): 21–43.
- 40 The term *kantei* (appraisal, evaluation) has a long and complicated history in both European and Japanese art that cannot be addressed here. For the methodology of the trace paradigm that focused on small, seemingly insignificant details to make attributions, see Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). For a case study of how certain pictures have made and unmade people and the role that appraisal played in the process, see John Brewer, *The American Leonardo: A Tale of Obsession, Art and Money* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- 41 Ichimatsu dolls developed from the Edo-period three-jointed dolls. Because they have articulated limbs, they can sit and stand by themselves. They were originally made as likenesses of the Kabuki actor Sanogawa Ichimatsu 佐野川市松 (1722–1762), hence the name.
- 42 Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*, new ed. (1979; London: Pluto, 2017).
- 43 Thompson, 41.
- 44 Thompson, 125.
- 45 Thompson, 42.
- 46 Thompson, 42.
- 47 Kobayashi Sumie 小林すみ江, *Ningyō Saiji-Ki* 人形歳時記 (Seasonal almanac of dolls) (Tokyo: Fujokai shuppansha, 1996), 226.
- 48 Krzysztof Pomian, *Der Ursprung des Museums: vom Sammeln* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1998).
- 49 Miyazaki, "Development of the Doll Festival," 225–26.
- 50 In many parts of Japan, the doll display is put out weeks before the actual day, but it should be put away by midnight of March 3—otherwise the daughter of the house will have difficulty finding a husband.
- 51 <https://www.fukuyosehina.jp/cont5/main.html>, accessed February 10, 2022.
- 52 This raises the interesting question of how to conceive of the work that the dolls accomplish. I have argued elsewhere that they hold in place certain beliefs and thus relieve their owners of keeping them in mind. See Fabio Gygi, "Things That Believe: Talismans, Amulets, Dolls, and How to Get Rid of Them," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 45.2 (2019): 423–52.
- 53 Yoshino Takako 吉野孝子, Zoom interview with the author, February 21, 2022.
- 54 <https://www.fukuyosehina.jp/cont5/main.html>, accessed February 10, 2022.
- 55 Beth Preston, "The Functions of Things: A Philosophical Perspective on Material Culture," in *Matter, Materiality and Modern Culture*, ed. P. M. Graves-Brown (London: Routledge, 2000), 42.
- 56 Interview with the author, November 14, 2019, Saitama prefecture.
- 57 Interview with the author, November 14, 2022, Saitama prefecture.
- 58 Inge Daniels, "Scooping, Raking, Beckoning Luck: Luck, Agency and the Interdependence of People and Things in Japan," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 9.4 (December 2003): 619–38; Kyburz, "Des liens," 96–121.
- 59 Alicia Volk, *Made in Japan: The Postwar Creative Print Movement* (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Art Museum in association with the University of Washington Press, 2005).

- 60 Kanbayashi Sumio 上林澄雄, "Sōsaku-buyō no 'Sōsaku' no Imi" 創作舞踊の「創作」の意味 (The meaning of "sōsaku" in creative Japanese dance), *Buyōgaku* 5 (1982): 38–39.
- 61 Kanbayashi Sumio especially mentions abandoning the stage and costume, which in its extreme forms "amounts to nothing more than public streaking," possibly a veiled criticism of the more radical experiments of Ishii Baku that led to the emergence of *butoh*; "Sōsaku-buyō no 'Sōsaku' no Imi," 38–39.
- 62 Doll making was only recognized as a legitimate art in the twentieth century with the rise of the naturalism of Hirata Gōyō and the more-European line of doll making inspired by the Expressionism of German artist Hans Bellmer (1902–1975) that has influenced figures such as Simon Yotsuya in Japan. See Yotsuya Shimon 四谷シモン, *Ningyō-sakka* 人形作家 (The doll maker) (Tokyo: Kōdansha Gendai-shinsho, 2002).