

# Beautiful Eccentrics

**Pablo Helguera**  
**Guise and Dolls**

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*On imaginary audiences  
(if you build it and they  
don't come, then you might  
have to build them too).*

On the Japanese island of Shikoku, in Tokushima Prefecture, there is a village in a remote area of the Iva Valley called Nagoro. In years past it had a population of about 300 but it has recently shrunk to about twenty-seven (as of 2019) and declining. There are no children or any young people in the area, and considering the rate of Japan's steadily shrinking population it is likely that the village will be entirely uninhabited in a few decades.

Tsukimi Ayano, a seventy-one-year-old resident, at some point took upon herself to symbolically repopulate her surroundings by creating life-size, scarecrow-like dolls\*<sup>1</sup>. Visitors to the village can find groups of these dolls sitting in outdoor porches or in classrooms inside the schoolhouse which closed years ago. As a result, the village has become a kind of somber tourist attraction, a museum for a ghost-town in progress.

Reportedly, Ayano started to make the dolls “to cure her sense of loneliness and despair each time she returns home,” as a recent news report describes. “Some resemble people who lived here or passed away,” she says. Her doll-making activity is seemingly therapeutic: “I just try to think positively without thinking too much ahead.”

There are not a lot of places out there exclusively populated by dolls. The closest reference in my mind is the Isla de las Muñecas<sup>\*2</sup> (Island of the Dolls) in Xochimilco, Mexico. Initiated by the island's late caretaker, Julian Santana Barrera, this island contains hundreds of dolls hanging from trees meant to appease the spirit of a young girl who allegedly drowned in the nearby canal and whose body was found on the island.

Other places, like the now extinct Doll House<sup>\*3</sup> at the Heidelberg project in Detroit, also come to mind.

However, the story about Nagoro is particularly unusual even in the realm of doll-populated places. There is something about this story that I think bears the characteristics of a parable about human connectivity today, and, perhaps in a counter-intuitive way, about what happens

when an audience is not that which the artist awaits to experience the work—instead the work consists in imagining an audience while the artist might be the primary spectator of their own creation.

The sudden absence of people in the streets and public spaces during the Covid-19 pandemic generated a desire in some to take an approach similar to Ayano's. Most of us are familiar with the cardboard

cutouts<sup>\*4</sup> that some sports teams placed in their stadiums where they were playing—a practice that ranged from the merely weird and creepy to the outright embarrassing, like when a South Korean soccer team was fined and threatened with expulsion for using sex dolls as stand-ins<sup>\*5</sup> for fans in their stadium.

While it certainly was an embarrassing episode for the team, it is hard not to think of the poetics around it: sex dolls, after all, as a post-human-kinship product, speak more to the human desire for companionship, something that has become exacerbated in the alienated world of today and even more so during lockdown. For those who do activities that depend on having an audience (such as sports and the arts),

it seems inevitable that one might resort to creating these fictional audiences that ironically serve the emotional needs of a sole audience member, who is the performer. Audiences are in search for performers, but performers also need audiences to perform the role of audiences for them.

These days, social media is the go-to sex doll of many artists. The simple fact that

social-media channels are the closest equivalent to a public square (albeit a curated one, primarily with one's friends, but usually open to everyone to see), that mere possibility that one is out in the open sharing one's career successes or any random personal histories, functions as a mechanism to satisfy one's need for self-affirmation. Buying followers on Instagram, in any case, is far more economical than purchasing

dozens of sex-dolls and placing them in a stadium. By some measures there are about 95 million bot accounts on Instagram<sup>\*6</sup>, used by advertisers to interact with real users and be sold as followers. In other words, if you build it and they don't come, you might have to build them too.

The research group Ghost Data often publishes reports<sup>\*7</sup> that show the connection



between fake accounts and nefarious criminal purposes ranging from selling counterfeit Apple products to spreading conspiracy theories for political goals.

The feeling that there is a group of people out there who is always paying attention to our actions was studied in 1967 by child psychologist David Elkind, who came up with the term “imaginary audience.” This concept<sup>\*8</sup>,

which is generally applied to children and adolescents, was used to understand the way in which individuals exhibit certain kinds of behaviors in response to how they believe others are focusing on them as a result of a heightened sense of self-consciousness. Elkind tried to measure this phenomenon through a system called the imaginary audience scale (IAS).

While the “imaginary audience” concept may not help explain the behavior of artists, it may be interesting to think of it in relation to at least two common instances of the artist/audience relationship. The first is the case of the artist who only do work for themselves and not for a specific public, and the second is the one who regards the audience as an extension of, the completion of, or the very central constituent of the work.

In the case of the solipsist artist who claims to work only for themselves, many comments and statements from various thinkers and writers question the notion that making art completely on your own is even possible. Lewis Hyde has beautifully articulated this argument in his book *Common as Air*<sup>\*9</sup>. While his work is a case for the fact that ideas never emerge in isolation, I would further argue that it also bolsters the argument that the

public not only pre-exists but also causes the artwork, and not the other way around.

John Cage's famous quote about the creative process is similar:

“When you start working, everybody is in your studio—the past, your friends, enemies, the art world, and above all, your own ideas—all are there. But as you continue painting, they start leaving, one by one,

and you are left completely alone. Then, if you are lucky, even you leave.”

Even if you were to move to Mars and never see a human being again, whatever comes from your mind, any creative language, is the product of what society has made you become—and they also are the hypothetical audience of what you produce, even if no one gets to actually experience it.

It goes without saying that in many of those instances the claim is basically false or disingenuous. It often functions as a defense mechanism against potential rejection: if I claim that I only make art for myself, this protects me from the expectation that others might not consider it worthy. There might only be one type of person who would realistically claim that they only do work for themselves, and

this is a true eccentric in the fashion of some outsider artists.

In the case of the artist who aims for the artwork to be part of the audience, what is usually not mentioned is that the audience who participates in the production or completion of the piece is in all likelihood only a component of the piece that will eventually be seen by a *tertiary* audience, be it art history or a public looking at

documentation of the work in the future. Or, better put, the audience who is supposed to be the work is not an audience but a group of unsuspecting performers for future audiences. Furthermore, in socially engaged art, while the aim may be to create a democratic artwork (a common aim in participatory practices), too often participants either don't have enough agency or become unwitting players in a project authored by the artist.

Sometimes, the unethical and manipulative nature of a participatory action is explicitly acknowledged by the artist. This was put in the most honest and blunt terms to me by the late conceptual Guatemalan artist Aníbal López when we were working on a series of projects in a community in Chiapas in 2005 and he was photographing groups of Indigenous families: “my work is not for them; it is for the art world.”

In both cases, artists operate on a type of “imaginary audience” which is not the public that partakes in the creation or even the first experiencing of the piece, but a future, hypothetical, or potential spectatorship that is separate from the action.

But the “imaginary audience” concept is not just the stuff of children, adolescents, or artists with instrumentalizing tendencies: it could be argued

that it is not too different from museums and other art organizations that think of their publics as figures, demographics, ethnic or racial backgrounds, endlessly theorizing what these groups might like to see or experience—and how to monetize that experience.

We have long known of the pitfalls of generalizing ideas about the public, but yet tend to forget those lessons. Back in

the eighteenth century, the empiricist philosopher David Hume declared that the abstract ideas that we form in our mind are nothing other than the product of our imagination governed by a “bundle of sensations.” According to Hume’s bundle theory, objects are nothing but a collection of properties; without those properties we cannot conceive of that object, but because properties are fluid and difficult to ascertain it is equally

difficult to establish abstract, fixed definitions of things—in other words, it is hard to establish what redness means but we know this red apple or that red apple. In terms of human beings, this is even more so. In a famous passage, he writes: “I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with inconceivable rapidity, and

are in a perpetual flux and movement.”

But beyond the discussion about abstract categories, Hume’s nearly-three-century-old ideas also point to a very simple, tried-and-true fact that we still contend with today: that even when we think we are being rational about something, we are still governed by our emotions.

And it is precisely emotions, not cold reasoning, that likely lie at the root of our very human search for an audience. Tsukimi Ayano’s doll village is an instinctive artistic gesture to recreate a society that has now vanished, in the same way that we perform for an Instagram audience that in the real world could be largely fictional, and that might primarily exist in our mind for the purpose of self-affirmation, and once



we affirm that identity, we perform it to this fictional audience as if in a self-feeding loop.

To worry whether something like art exists only along as it is being perceived (as another empiricist, Bishop Berkeley, also once argued) is perhaps not such an important question. The real question before us is if we truly understand the implications or differences for us between

performing to a real audience or to an audience of dolls.

In Adolfo Bioy Casares' *La Invención de Morel* (1940), the protagonist, a fugitive, arrives on an island that he believes contains groups of people in a villa, which he secretly spies on over the course of several days. Eventually he realizes that they all are three-dimensional filmed projections, forever repeating in a loop. Created by

a scientist named Morel, they have created an artwork for which there is no audience; a memorial to Morel himself and his guests that simulates immortality. No one expected the fugitive to be there; he is simply an accidental witness to the experiment. Morel and his guests are akin to the life-size dolls of Nagoro, only in film format.

At some point in the novel, when Morel's guests are asking him about his process for creating these eternal projections, Morel says:

“are you having a hard time admitting a system of reproduction of life that is so mechanical and artificial? Remember that in our inability to see, the movements of the illusionist become magic.”

This is perhaps the irony and the core reason we search for a public: while we aim for an abstract idea of an audience, we are ultimately the final audience of our own work, hoping for that possibility of magic—and not knowing whether there is a true public out there (but with the sufficient reassurance that there may be one) is a form of freedom. In any case, we prefer not to think about the possibility that we might be

performing before an empty  
auditorium.

## Footnotes & References

- <sup>\*1</sup> <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/cnainsider/village-dolls-nagoro-japan-ageing-declining-population-866156>
- <sup>\*2</sup> <https://isladelasmunecas.com/>
- <sup>\*3</sup> <https://www.tribpub.com/gdpr/nydailynews.com/>
- <sup>\*4</sup> <https://www.cbssports.com/soccer/news/coronavirus-german-soccer-club-to-fill-stadium-with-cardboard-cutouts-of-fans-upon-leagues-return-in-may/>
- <sup>\*5</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/sports/story/2020-05-20/fc-seoul-faces-sanctions-after-putting-sex-dolls-in-seats>
- <sup>\*6</sup> <https://www.basicthinking.com/bots-instagram-accounts-fake/>
- <sup>\*7</sup> <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/report-ghost-data-research-group-finds-active-qanon-related-network-on-instagram-despite-announced-crackdown-from-facebook-days-before-the-us-elections-301164038.html>
- <sup>\*8</sup> <https://dictionary.apa.org/imaginary-audience>
- <sup>\*9</sup> <https://lewishyde.com/common-as-air/>

## Colophon

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