10 Automated alterities

Movement and identity in the history of the Japanese *kobi ningyô*

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The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics.

*(Haraway 1991: 150)*

Objects that are ascribed heritage value bear the weight of many interpretative pressures and strategic aspirations. They may be required to substantiate ideas about the past as tradition and the significance of the locality of their creation. These ideas fashion identities that may extend the significance of and even come to stand in for the individual situation and skill of their makers. At the same time these objects are recognised as having an ‘agency’ and a ‘biography’ that is based on their particular, even unique, material attributes (Gosden and Marshall 1999). This recognition is derived at least in part, from the notions of intentionality, aim and force implied by the term ‘object’ itself. The acknowledgement of the existence of these forces that act upon and arise from objects, has gone some considerable way in redressing a conservative and sometime conservationist view of heritage objects as historical entities, whose meaning is as rigid and prescribed as the processes available for preventing their material deterioration or their placement in repositories of knowledge.

The description and analysis of these forces show how heritage value may be construed as a determinant of the literal and intellectual position of objects in the display spaces, storage facilities and inventories of museums. These institutional arrangements condense and make visible the object’s movement across different networks of meaning and status, between categories such as artefact and art; craft and curio. The trajectories of objects through these networks reveal movement in terms of an effect or ‘trace’ of objects and locate the dynamic for these shifts and changes in overarching relations of power and authority. The heavy hand of discourse and the explanatory power of theories of modernity and globalisation (Appadurai 1997; 2001) and of property relations and copyright legislation (Strathern 1999) in these kinds of interpretations make the relations between object, context and human actor(s) the fundamental point of issue in the creation of value.

In the Japanese context and in the UNESCO criteria for universal cultural recognition, the tying together of object and actor is the basis of ‘intangible
cultural knowledge’ (Condominas 2004), whereby value is the expressive outcome of the artisan’s body in skilled motion. This is at once a romantic notion, of the artist genius whose skill is ever present and transferred directly to the materials, reminiscent of what Michael Taussig (1992) calls, following George Frazer’s thesis about ‘sympathetic magic’, ‘the magic of contact’. It is also a notion which draws attention away from a recognition that now is belatedly being made of the particular and sometimes peculiar force of the object. This force is not derived from a position within a network or system of social relations, nor is it the effect of materiality. It is a capacity for affect which emerges from the object’s ontological position in the order of relations between persons and things. Approaching object relations in terms of ontology is different from the anthropological emphasis on social relationships, by which and through which the ownership of objects and the skill that goes into their making are normally understood. It is also different from the Western attitude to objects as things that have ownership, tied inextricably to the location and creativity of their makers and protected by the laws of copyright (Strathern and Hirsch 2004). It is the anthropological influence which has been most instrumental in the construction of the idea of heritage, through various UNESCO declarations, in opposition to the idea of cultural knowledge being a ‘thing’ created and authored uniquely by a single individual (Bouchenaki 2004). What has emerged is a shift from ‘cultural property’ to ‘cultural heritage’ that has been based on a three-fold approach: first, on interpreting tangible heritage within a context of social relations and ties to place; second, on translating intangible heritage as ‘materiality’; and, finally, on supporting efforts to sustain practitioners and the passing on of knowledge and skill (ibid.: 9).

In the Japanese context, when these social relationships are systematised as a ‘family system’ iemoto, articulated through the bodily actions of a craftsperson and qualified through the application of aesthetic terms to an object, then they achieve an identifiable expression that can be appreciated as part of a value system, that is as ‘cultural heritage’. However, there are objects which create and are sustained by human relationships which are not systematic. They also lack a vocabulary for public or official recognition. These are strange and sometimes unsettling objects defying easy categorisation, transgressing boundaries and in their hybrid, ephemeral nature, separate from the world of the ordinary.

The objects I refer to and shall investigate here are mechanical dolls (karakuri ningyô) which were made not as children’s playthings, but as devices for the adult imagination and for playful diversion in the ‘shows’ (misemono) of curiosities and wonders that were a regular sight in the urban world of the Edo period. They are often sophisticated in design and the clockwork technologies from which they were developed were instrumental in introducing ideas and practices from western science, (rangaku) during the Edo period (Screech 2002). Probably the most famous example of a karakuri is the ‘tea-carrying doll’ (chakumi ningyô) originally made in the seventeenth century as an element in a form of popular theatre and recreated in the 1960s (Schodt
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1988: 60–2). This mechanical human achieved national recognition because of the age and complexity of its wind-up, clockwork mechanism, but is one of many types of automata, that include relatively simple hand-operated devices. It is also one of many styles and themes, the majority of which are only acknowledged for their local associations as ‘famous products’ (meibutsu) and as ‘folk products’ (minzoku geinô).

As inanimate objects that may be artificially animated so as to imitate the action and behaviour of a variety of figures from the human, animal and spirit worlds, these karakuri are part of dispersed networks of human and non-human agents with the power of intention. They are similar in this respect to the ‘good-luck’ amulets (engimono) described by Daniels (2003), which are bought at shrines and have a domestic and everyday usage. These amulets challenge the divide between artistic value and technological utility and through their material properties are attributed an agency and an intentionality to act upon the world (ibid.: 623). The important and interesting difference between engimono and karakuri, is that while acquisition and operation of the former have a causal outcome, resulting in good fortune, there is no determined causal outcome of the latter. It is a device that repeats and signifies itself, producing affect rather than effect. It is this distinction and what I shall argue is the intrinsic strangeness of automata as well as the peculiar situation of the karakuri I am interested in here that can help us to understand an object on the margins of what is understood by heritage, never quite achieving this valuation.

The karakuri I shall describe are particular to the city of Kobe and as such known as the ‘Kobe ningyō’. The analysis that follows is based on interviews with collectors and restorers, visits to museums and research carried out in Kobe’s city library archives. Here there was a particular unpublished thesis that I have come to rely on, for it contains a number of detailed interviews with significant individuals in the history of the making and collecting of the Kobe ningyō, who are now unfortunately deceased (Ushiro and Endo 1998).

The Kobe ningyō are hand-operated and approximately hand-sized wooden devices, depicting a hybrid figure that variously combines the features of a Buddhist priest, a ghost (ôbake) and a black man (Figure 10.1). The first two recorded makers of the dolls were both connected to the makers of the joruri puppets from Awaji island (Ushiro and Endo 1998). The first, a person named ‘Haru’ from Nagata (Nagata no Haru) is said to have been born in the early Meiji period and lived until some time in the 1940s. He sold sanshô kombu (seaweed flavoured with Japanese pepper) on the approach to Nagata shrine, and had experience as a craftsman making stage props for the Awaji puppet theatre. He was well known as an eccentric, who would regularly hide inside a coffin, displayed in the front window of his shop, so as to surprise passers-by. This grotesque sense of humour led locals to refer to him as Coffin Haru, a title which tied in with the ‘ghost dolls’ (ôbake ningyo) that he made. These were popular items, from the late Edo to the Meiji period and included ghost figures like the long-necked monster (rokuro-kubi) and dolls with three eyes (mitsume).
Most of Haru’s dolls are of plain undecorated, brown and reddish coloured wood, but their imaginative features which reference a connection between human and non-human agents suggests that the origins of these dolls from within the world of the puppet theatre of Awaji island are significant. The religious practices of the puppet tradition on Awaji which include a ritual process (*dokumbô mawashii*) of taking a puppet from house to house so that it might absorb within it the malign spirits inhabiting these homes are connected to the idea that a lifeless puppet can be a vessel for embodying the soul of spirits and deities as well as of persons (Law 1997). It is the quality and direction of mechanical movement in and the movement through space of these puppets that activate their shamanistic power and which would appear to inform the design of the *Kobe ningyô*, although in their case employed to achieve comic effect. The reference point for this humour is to be found in the ‘exhibits’ (*misemono*) of the Edo period which featured simultaneously crude and scholarly public performances of various oddities and curiosities (Markus 1985: 501). Among these were shows of ‘comic mimicry’ (*monomane*) and exhibitions of ‘freaks’, presented as an object lesson to the audience, in terms of the Buddhist doctrine of karmic causation (ibid.: 529).

There are other associations, of a human kind, at work in these dolls. For some are coloured black and connected thematically to the other early *Kobe ningô* originator, a doll-maker in Awaji known only as ‘Nakamura’. Nakamura
is said to have begun to make black dolls after seeing a lonely black sailor, on shore leave in the port of Kobe, who was either drinking sake or eating a watermelon (accounts differ). It was rare to see black people in the early days of Meiji, as the port had only just opened up to US ships, so the sight left an impression which Nakamura tried to imitate using the mechanism of the Awaji dolls. The types of dolls which Nakamura and Haru modelled on black people are part of the generic series, from which the Kobe ningyō derives its public image and reputation.

The ‘watermelon eater’ and ‘sake drinker’ are the most typical and well-known types. They recreate that first impression of the black sailors, in forms that we would now, properly consider demeaning stereotypes. At the time they were first made they were part of a well-established trade in black ethnic collectibles, popular in Europe and the USA so that by the 1930s, manufacturers like Louis Marx, famous for the wind-up ‘Popeye’ and racist ‘Alabama Coon Jiggers’ had even outsourced production to Japan (Allison 2006: xv).

The watermelon eater and the sake drinker exaggerate for comic effect, conveying a grotesque impression by a wide, red mouth and bulging eyes, offset somewhat by the poignancy of the lonely pose and sad facial features of the figure. The watermelon eater mechanism works so that twisting the knob at its base raises the watermelon to its mouth or cuts the melon with a knife. The sake drinker works by pouring the sake into a cup and bringing it up to the mouth to drink, just as it opens. There are small variations in the actions of these generic types of dolls as they were reproduced by different makers over time. Early examples of the sake drinker, for example, have a distinctive tilt to the sake bottle, timed to coincide with a drop in the doll’s head to suggest drunkenness.

Other popular types were the samisen player and drummer. The samisen doll in particular is very similar in pose and action to the ‘black minstrel’ figure that was produced in the USA in the late nineteenth century. The stereotypical imagery upon which such figures are based were known in Japan, through famously reported incidents, such as the ‘Ethiopian’ minstrel show performed by ‘blacked-up’ white crew members, after the conclusion of a treaty by Commander Perry in 1854 (Russell 1991: 10). There had been existing paradigms and visual schema for representing cultural difference in Japan since the sixteenth century, when the grid-like ‘charts of barbarian nations’ (bankoku-zu) and the scenes of Portuguese traders and missionaries being met off ships in Japanese ports (Namban Byôbu), were being produced (Toby 1998). These painted screens sometimes featured Africans relegated to the lower realms of classificatory schemes or hanging in acrobatically simian poses from the rigging of ships and were based on the conventions and iconography of European originals. These images were part of the visual inventory which appears to have been a background to the racial stylisation of the Kobe ningyō, although other more modern ideas also have resonances here.

These are ideas about ‘blood purity’ that were part of what Jennifer Robertson has referred to as ‘eugenic modernity’, meaning ‘the application of
scientific concepts and methods as a means to constitute both the nation and its constituent subjects (New Japanese) which were explored through ‘the application of eugenic principles to make connections between biology, kinship, and the plasticity of the human body’ (Robertson 2002: 191). The ideas that motivated these activities were not confined to the ‘scientific’ and the laboratory, but also prevalent on the street as part of the world of the ‘popular’ (ibid.: 192). The Kobe ningyô were part of this world which played with the fear and fascination of hybridity, expressed here as miscegenation, but also evoking the shamanistic power of mixing humans and spirits and anticipating, as we shall see, the mixing of humans and machines with the prescient figure of the cyborg. The playful combinations of these themes in the origins and design of the dolls, make it difficult to identify such consistencies in form and meaning that would constitute a ‘tradition’ and categorise these dolls within the rubric and conventions of ‘folk-art’ (minzoku geinô). If these objects can be said to have a ‘biography’, then their trajectory is characterised by happenstance and opportunism.

Consider the relationship of the two craftsmen who most successfully brought the Kobe ningyô to public attention. Dezaki Fusamatsu (1883–1967) was born in Wakayama prefecture. After a brief apprenticeship in Osaka he came to live in Hanakuma, Kobe, sometime between 1898 to 1903. He was a novelty hunter with many interests, including, it is recorded, foreigners and left-handedness. A photograph, from 1928 (in Ushiro and Endo 1998) shows Dezaki, dressed up and performing on stage as a black man. This proclivity was expressed again when soon after arriving in Kobe, he began to make dolls modelled on a left-handed black person, and through trial and error invented simplified movements using a system of reels. The mechanism to make the movements became the standard for the later doll makers and was believed by the Dezaki family to be an original invention. Dezaki took a lot of trouble in making the dolls but had difficulty selling them, because they were so expensive. Significantly, he passed on his knowledge of doll-making to only one man, his brother-in-law, Oda Tashiro (1883–1950). Oda had experience as a cabinet maker (sashimono daiku) and after being injured in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05) moved to live in Kamimisawa in Hyôgô prefecture in 1921 and began making the dolls himself.

The knowledge that passed from Dezaki to Oda, through the linear and familial nature of their master–student relationship appears to substantiate the origins of a ‘tradition’, because it is based at some essential level on a bodily transmission of ‘intangible knowledge’. However, the dolls made by Dezaki and Oda were not entirely constructed by each craftsman working alone from raw materials. Orders were placed with outside suppliers for parts of the dolls for mass production. The Jôtô woodworking workshop in Akashi supplied bodies and heads. A man named Gensui Nishizawa in Himeji supplied sake bottles and cups, and an abacus factory in Ono supplied the abacus pieces. These methods dispersed the knowledge and sense of propriety of the things created, but also helped to create a large stock of the dolls and Oda
was forced to employ apprentices to help him manage the orders and ensure distribution, albeit to a select group of rich customers. A standard Kobe doll was sold for between one yen and fifty sen to two yen, and a quality doll with ivory eyes would cost three yen. This was extremely expensive at a time when a 14 kilogram bag of rice cost 80 sen. The customers for these expensive luxuries were mostly foreign travellers, who often bought them from an outlet at the popular Nunobiki waterfalls on the hillside overlooking the city. Their comic movement and facial expression made them unusual and desirable oddities and their size, small enough to be held in the palm of the hand, made them easily transportable.

There were a number of other outlets for foreign sales. The company Yamamoto shôkai, based at the waterfalls, and a spectacle shop, Kiyoshiyama and souvenir shop Miyazakiya, both in the downtown Motomachi area of Kobe. So popular were these dolls as souvenirs that some regular customers from abroad placed an order for one or two dozen dolls when they arrived at the port and picked them up when they returned on their next visit. It is known that the Portuguese consul general Wenceslau de Moraes (1854–1929) in Kobe, was one of those with a particular fondness for the dolls. The inventiveness and enterprise of Dezaki and Oda in making and distributing these dolls, combined with the fascination of visitors from abroad for exotic souvenirs, to create an image that persists today of Kobe’s exotic foreign heritage, particularly evident in the presentation and popularity of the area in Chûô ward of original and reconstructed buildings in the styles of their foreign owners.

Among the Kobekkô, (native to Kobe), these dolls began to gain widespread recognition after the Russo-Japanese War. Few Japanese in Kobe actually bought the dolls, so their interest seems to have been based on the visible qualities of the dolls on display. As the dolls are made to move, they reveal what many Japanese at that time perceived as the primitive, childlike nature of the black race. In the absence of much direct contact with real black people, the image of the Kobe ningyô was part of a fantasy world of the foreigner; a world that was domesticated and controlled through the form of a mechanical doll.

When the Emperor Showa visited Kobe in June 1929, Oda formally offered five dolls to him as a present. The Emperor is recorded as having handled the dolls and been the first person to officially refer to them as the ‘Kobe ningyô’. This moment when, it might be said that the dolls received divine approval, confirmed the potential status of the dolls as symbols of Kobe’s heritage. A descriptive catalogue was written by Oda for the occasion and presented to the Emperor. Inside, it reads prosaically, as a properly modest and restrained acknowledgement of the dolls’ new reputation:

The history of Kobe dolls began in 1891 or 1892 and their production developed strongly after the Russo-Japanese war, but now only one shop sells them in Kobe. The dolls are toys for children in this country and
abroad, and comfort students fatigued by study. The number of varieties totals some 100, but the main motifs are some 50. All dolls are mechanical, black, and funny. They are distributed in this country and abroad mainly as souvenirs. I employ three artisans to produce them.

(Ushiro and Endo 1998: 38)

The claim made here for the warm, affective qualities of the dolls, as children’s playthings and comforters is not borne out by what is known of their relative expense and from the list of sales which were made mostly by foreign visitors. The claims are important because it connects them to contemporary ideas about dolls as envoys of internationalism and peace. A few years previously in 1924, dolls had featured in a well publicised international exchange between schoolchildren, part of an attempt to try and rebuild diplomatic relations between the United States and Japan, following the passage of the Immigration Act in 1924 (Kohiyama 2005). It was initiated by the USA who sent 12,000 dolls, explicitly excluding black dolls, and the Japanese who reciprocated with 58 very expensive ‘return dolls’ (tôrei ningyô) selected from famous types associated with the ‘doll festival’ (hina matsuri) (ibid.: 57; 55). In general terms, dolls and toys from the West had enjoyed a positive reputation in Japan during the Meiji period when they were understood to be instrumental in a child’s cultural development and educators recommended the use of western toys to enable a rational approach to life and to encourage the nation’s education in Western cultural values (Saitô 1969).

The hybrid nature of the Kobe ningyô, part Japanese ghost, part primitive and altogether comic, make Oda’s claims significant not only because of these wider associations, but also because the dolls could not otherwise accord with an image of Kobe that its official representatives could contain. The uncanny qualities of the dolls meant that although they were at that moment, perhaps the most distinctive folk-art associated with the city they were always too slippery in the mixture of their associations, to be a symbol the city could openly be proud of. The volatile nature of these associations came to light in the aftermath of the war.

The war brought Kobe ningyô production almost to a halt, as Oda moved back to Okayama for personal safety and made only a few dolls and it was only afterwards that Oda, with the backing of a shop, Kirishiyama, attempted to revive them fully. This revival was part of a wider attempt within Kobe (mirrored in nearby cities with the revivalism of ningyô fude in Arima and the straw crafts around Kinosaki), to rediscover and protect traditional folk crafts. The revival of the Kobe ningyô stalled however, for Oda died in 1950 and a year later the shop was banned from production or sales by an order of the Public Welfare Office of the General Headquarters of the American Occupation Army and a charge of racial discrimination was levelled against them. At the time, the owner of the shop was a member of the Hyôgô prefectural assembly and he complained to the office of the GHQ that: ‘Kobe ningyo has been regarded as a folkcraft (meibutsu) in Kobe since the Meiji
period and it has also been exported to the USA where it was well received. It is not meant to discriminate against any races.’

The response from the office was:

We understand your standpoint, however, we regret to inform you that we would like to ask you to refrain from the production and sales of Kobe ningyô, since we are still anxious that it may lead to misunderstandings among black people towards second generation Japanese Americans who had fought together in the war and thus might cause problems.

(Kiyoshimaya 1955 pamphlet)

This exchange and the legal threat that accompanied it brought existing tensions inherent in the hybrid nature of the Kobe ningyô into the public realm and established its ambiguous status in the urban consciousness of the city. As an object of negative memory in the city’s imaginary, it is an example of what has been called ‘negative heritage’ occupying ‘a dual role: it can be mobilised for positive didactic purposes … or alternatively be erased’ (Meskell 2002: 558).

Negative heritage is a term normally discussed in relation to monuments and remains of war and conflict that are an ‘undesirable heritage’ because of the perception that they objectify a past that people want to forget; examples would include sites such as at Nuremberg in Germany which played host to Nazi rallies (Macdonald 2006: 9). Sharon Macdonald’s anthropological study of Nuremberg has focused on the post-war problems associated with the ‘perceived agency of architecture’ which works against the national mood of reflection on a past that is not to be cherished (ibid.: 9, 10). This agency is located in the materiality of objects and spaces which cannot easily be contained within the exhibitive strategies of a museum or heritage classifications because of their performative excess. It is just such an unruly dissipation of meaning and feeling, the affect of the literal and metaphorical movement of the doll between states of object-hood and personhood that has made the Kobe ningyô so undesirable in the public presentation of Kobe city.

After the death of Oda Tashiro, the dolls would have disappeared from the public consciousness altogether had it not been for the efforts of a group of enthusiasts to remake the Kobe ningyô all over again and to attempt to bring them to the attention of contemporary Kobeites as a positive part of their heritage. Kazuoka Masatsu (1928–89) had worked in an employment office in Kakogawa until his retirement when he developed a hobby and then a passion for making kokeshi dolls. These dolls all had their own, existing associations, however, and it was in looking for something different to literally stamp his mark upon that he came across Arao Chikanari, a local historian at the Kôbe Namban museum who had collected a number of disassembled dolls and was looking for craftsmen to revive the tradition of making Kobe ningyô. There were a number of interested craftsmen besides Kazuoka and over a period of about ten years they all attempted to reproduce a copy of the Kobe ningyô that would be considered authentic by Arao and those who knew the dolls
well from the early period of their production. It took four years alone for any of the dolls to be accepted by them as authentic Kobe dolls. Eventually, so the story goes, it was only Kazuoka who had the patience, skill and stamina to continue to produce authentic Kobe dolls, working alone and by hand in his workshop.

The language that is used by interviewees to describe Kazuoka’s perseverance and artisanship is interesting because it adds weight to the idea of a legitimate local tradition in the making. He refused for example to compromise the quality of his dolls by trying to produce more than the ‘one-a-day’ rate he was satisfied with. This was an idea and through the presence of the dolls also an image of Kobe with growing appeal, for although the dolls were not usually considered items worth owning – one observer whom I interviewed described them as ‘expensive, grotesque and not pretty’ – they were increasingly associated with Kobe’s self-identity. The Sake Fukujû brewery company for example, featured the Kobe dolls as one of a series of stories about the city, printed on their bottle labels. Two enthusiasts, Mr Morio Kato and Mr Nobuo Suzuki were even led to compose an elegy, and a limited edition pamphlet, especially for enthusiasts of the Kobe ninygô. Here is one excerpt:

Oh, Kobe Ningyô,
Negro Ningyô
You have gone like all the others,
You were so much fun for boys,
Attracted my curiosity,
Storms in the war have washed you away
With young lives.
Oh Kobe Ningyô,
Negro Ningyô,
I see you in a vision.

(Kato and Suzuki, in Ushiro and Endo 1998)

Besides the obvious racial elements present here, there is also a strong sense of nostalgia in the invocation of childhood and loss. As the advertising pamphlet from the Kiyoshiyama store which sold the dolls at the time makes clear: ‘Souvenirs from Kobe, they will remain with you forever. The Kobe Ningyo are a local folk-craft since the beginning of the Meiji period and they will help create cheerful moments whether you are happy or depressed’ (exact date unknown).

There are many stories about how dolls have been objects of nostalgia, both for Japanese who admire kokeshi dolls and the tradition of the ‘doll festival’ (hina matsuri), as well as for early European visitors who have imagined Japan in an Orientalist vein as fragile, quaint and doll-like (Gerbert 2001). The exoticising and eroticising qualities attributed to dolls by western authors such as Pierre Loti with his story of ‘Madame Chrysanthemum’
(1893) are very different from Japanese authors who have embellished the ambiguous attractions evinced by their apparent perfection of form and motion. In Tanizaki’s work ‘Some Prefer Nettles’ (1928–29), it is a doll and the doll-like features of certain characters that seduce the protagonist away from the superficiality of the modern world, back, via the puppets of Awaji island into the stage world of old Japan (Gerbert 2001: 73). On a darker note, the collection ‘Memories’ (Omoide) (1911) and the poem ‘The Dollmakers’ (Ningyô zukuri) of the poet of nostalgia, Kitahara Hakushû feature images of dismembered, fragmented body parts as well as cruelly operated puppets and marionettes that express a sense of displacement, helplessness and horror (Gerbert 2001: 73). However, the sense of ambivalent strangeness that emerges from this literature did not prevent the re-emergence of the Kobe ningyô once again in the 1980s, a time of resurgent national and nationalist agendas.

News that the ‘phantom’ or ‘ghostly’ Kobe dolls were still being made could be expected to attract the attention of collectors of local folk toys, but local television stations and newspapers all over the country also promoted Kazuoka and his dolls. At the Portopia exhibition in Kobe in 1981, Kazuoka’s dolls were once again re-established as part of Kobe’s official heritage as they were offered to the crown prince and princess and presented to the Emperor Shôwa, who handled them as before. As in the previous occasion in 1929, it was the physical contact with them that was emphasised in contemporary accounts and seems to have established a kind of legitimacy for the dolls as Kobe meibutsu.

It is interesting and significant then that the fame and publicity surrounding the dolls at the Portopia display in 1981 are not part of Kobe city’s self-presentation today. There is a video about the dolls made at the time of the Emperor’s visit and held by the Kobe municipal museum, but no-one is allowed access to view it. The visitor centre, Kôbe Senta, no longer stocks or sells the dolls and the city council’s plans to erect a large mechanical model of the doll with moving arms, in the middle of the Sannomiya shopping district have long since been abandoned. The racial associations of the dolls are too sensitive an issue today and the Kobe dolls have become an anachronism that in the words of one interviewee, ‘just don’t fit in with Kobe’s chic foreign image’. This is not surprising in considering the story that was repeated to me by more than one interviewee about a Daily Yomiuri newspaper article on the Kobe dolls which claims they inspired the Takara company’s notorious Dakko-chan (essentially this means ‘gollywog’) children’s doll in the 1960’s and the obvious visual links of the Kobe dolls with the old kuronbo ‘black minstrel’ logo mark of the Calpis soft drink. The evocation in the Dakko-chan and Calpis corporate images, of blacks with children, resonates with the presentation and descriptions of the Kobe dolls as objects of nostalgia for a time when the world could be viewed as a source of exotic amusement.

There is only one site in the city where the dolls may still be found on public exhibition today, at a small private museum that was once part of a Kobe High School’s ‘Dolls of the world’ display. In this display all the dolls,
collected from different parts of the world, are mixed together in a fashion which simultaneously reveals an old-fashioned exoticism and contemporary anxieties about the place of these dolls in Kobe’s modern heritage. Locating the dolls in a toy museum, as politically innocent playthings for children, is a way of deflecting criticisms of their racist significances, but also obscures their complex history as marginal meibutsu; that is, as undesirable heritage. As items of positive heritage value these dolls might be expected to express a fixed, coherent identity, in keeping with Kobe city’s sense of history and place. Instead, as objects whose material qualities are deeply ambiguous and inherently uncanny, they reveal the shifting relations of the city with its foreign residents and traders since the beginning of the modern period.

Ernst Jensch’s study of the uncanny describes a fearful and yet fascinating quality of being ambiguously alive, that is the effect of any realistic doll (Bolton 2002: 745). But this effect is a consequence of movement and the uncanny qualities are latent and unrealised on a museum shelf. They have to be performed into being, made to move in order to be moving and to unsettle the ontological securities of separation between person and thing. This is the thesis or ‘Manifesto’ that Donna Haraway (1985) has argued for the cyborg, which as a mixture of the human and the inhuman confronts the distinction between the natural and the artificial. This distinction is figured differently in Japan where the transformative potential of devices like the Kobe ningyô is ‘part of a larger pattern in which vitality can be found in animate and inanimate, constructed and found objects’ and has to be performed into being (Ashkenazi 1997: 210).

Bolton (2002) has drawn attention to the importance of the performative action of the cyborg/hybrid figure in Japan, as they exist in tangible forms, like bunraku puppet theatre as well as in anime. He makes a comparison between the two to argue that they both share and express the same fascination with the questions of duality and ambiguity ‘between the real and the unreal, the unified and the dispersed subject, the violent de(con)struction of the body and a tender regard for it’ (ibid.: 730–1). One explanation for the source of this ambiguity of the mechanical body and why it is viewed with both ‘detachment and concern’ is given by the Japanese playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1724) who argued that ‘drama featuring artificial bodies succeeds by filling up those bodies with the humanity that they lack, until they become both more and less real than the flesh’ (ibid.: 739).

The Kobe ningyô, however, are performed into being by the simplest of hand-operating movements and not by the skilled dexterity of bunraku or anime artisans. They lack any narrative drama to act out other than the story of their own becoming which involves a strange, moving co-existence of the foreign and other-worldly elements. The notion of performance in the context of mechanical dolls involves the simultaneity and sometimes the collision of different kinds of movement: mechanical movement, movement of the imagination and movement of the object itself from place to place. It is this last quality of movement that I will address in the final section of this chapter.
In the late nineteenth century, curios and quaint relics of ‘traditional Japan’ such as the Kobe ningyō were avidly collected by foreign visitors and soon exported in large numbers to Japanese ‘fancy goods’ shops in London and Paris. They became a part of the fascination for what has been called ‘spectacular realities’, referring to the international exhibitions and popular entertainments, magic shows and displays of new technologies at venues such as the Musée Grivée in Paris and the Egyptian Hall in London (Schwartz 1998).

Treated as commodities, they were incorporated into the shop displays of ‘oriental’ goods and sold on the streets as ‘penny toys’. As souvenirs of exotic Japan, they became, in time, valuable collectables and antiques.

Jack Donovan’s antique automata shop on London’s Portobello Road and Pollocks Toy museum in Convent Garden and now behind Tottenham Court Road Tube station were two of the major importers of the Kobe (now called ‘Kobi’) dolls. Dealers and enthusiasts from around the world visited these shops to ‘buy Kobis’, and collections were formed that established a new regime of value for the dolls, based largely on their mechanical sophistication and material condition and dismissing or ignoring their complex associations in Japan.

The foreign collectors of Kobis I have met and interviewed in London, Switzerland and especially New York, have developed a close physical relationship with the objects and are especially fascinated by their internal mechanisms – that which the eye cannot see from the outside, but which when exposed becomes playgrounds for a tactile imagination. The material qualities of the dolls has held such an attraction for one enthusiast, Steven Leonard, on Long Island, New York, that he has spent 50 years creating a collection of over 150 Kobis without ever investigating their history in Japan. In his home they are part of a rambling assemblage of old phonographs, lantern slides and microscopes, all expressions of his passion for tinkering with machines. He sees himself and his collection as part of an American tradition in making and repairing machines. It is a tradition that he, like others, traces to the inventor Thomas Edison. Interestingly, and perhaps ironically, this collector recently sold some of his Kobis to a museum in Himeji city, where the owner and curator, Inoue Shigeyoshi, who has been active since the mid-1960s in researching, collecting and generally promoting Kobe ningyō incorporated them into his display of the history of Japanese toys (Shigeyoshi 1981).

The spatio-temporal movements of the Kobe ningyō described here are tied to their collectability and to the activities of collectors, for these are objects that create ‘longing’ (Stewart 1993). It is in the use that collectors make of the object that experience is embodied, and directed through certain material attributes of the object (Washburn 1997). This tangible, affective connection with the object is different from the application of skilled bodily knowledge by craftsmen in Japan. For these collectors it is a private obsession or ‘longing’ for intimate contact with a world in miniature, and for the ability to own and operate this mechanised world inside a box, that may move their imagination, connecting them to worlds of their own making. This is an individualised relationship with the object, based on use and different from that
typified by the Japanese craftsmen for whom the object is made by its position within an expanded network of relations between the animate and inanimate, the domestic and the foreign. These hybrid ontologies of use and composition reflect a deep ambivalence about the value of these objects as heritage. This ambivalence is partly the consequence of the simultaneous revelation of ‘affect’ and ‘ideology’ (Ashish 2006), meaning the touching, fascinating sensation of the duality of the object being revealed in its movement along with a troubling hybrid representation of racialised and non-human others. Like the monuments that arise out of conflict and contradiction, the Kobe ningyō are examples of ‘negative’ or ‘dissonant’ heritage, and involve a ‘discordance or lack of agreement and consistency’ (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996, in Ashish 2006: 348).

As objects of powerful affect and conflicting and indeterminate meanings, the Kobe ningyō are similar to the surrealist automata and mannequin, described as ‘exquisite corpses’ (Foster 1991). These devices both mock and embrace the order of relations between the organic and the artificial and between self and other, making them unclassifiable; neither person nor thing. Just as Foster describes in the case of surrealist mannequin and automata, the Kobe ningyō evoke this ambivalence through the estrangement of the body of figures such as the Buddhist priest/ghost and the black sailor, as machine and as commodity (ibid.: 51). These ‘psycho-physical effects’ are deployed ‘against the very social order that produced them’, not out of ‘reactive nostalgia’ but with ‘dialectical wit’, making it very difficult for them to ever enter the institutional and ideological regimes of heritage value (ibid.: 55). The hybrid identity of the Kobe ningyō is not merely, voluntarily performed into being by their makers or users. My argument here, is that as person and thing, self and other, they are anticipated and drawn to each other by underlying social and cultural trends and by the affect of their movements.

References


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