

1. Roman Kalinovski; *Idol Text* for Atelier Melusine by the artist and author who is involved with fascinating work about the ritualistic but sometimes darker side of animee and digital avatar culture. <http://www.romankalinovski.com/>

## **Idol/Eye-Doll/愛 Doll/A.I. Doll/I, Doll**

Roman Kalinovski

### **Idol**

When God is silent and prayers go unanswered, the construction of an idol allows the desires behind those prayers to, for a time, be materialized and made manifest in our world, on our own terms. An idol, in some ways, is more useful than God because, unlike God, an idol is created to be controlled. The whims of the divine are unknown and unknowable, but an idol can be crafted to fulfill any desire whatsoever. It is not solely God that can be idolized; any human desire can be artificially recreated in a controlled environment. The idol is a machine meant to control God and desire. Its mechanism reverses the roles of sovereign and subject: The idolized god becomes subject to human whims, but the effects of that power come under control of those subject to it.

### **Eye-Doll**

An eye-doll mirrors the desires of its devotee: Jean-Luc Marion calls it an “invisible mirror” that reflects the gaze back at the viewer while halting its advance into infinity. The eye-doll has no gaze of its own, as to gaze means to exert agency over an object within sight. The eye-doll has no such interiority or agency and, thus, lacks the ability to gaze. Despite this, the eye-doll is an alluring and charismatic figure, whether embodied as a media pop idol or as a beloved doll. This allure is not her own: It is carried by the gaze-borne desires of her devotees that reflect off her. The gaze bounces off her reflective body as an object of desire. To Lacan, the gaze was the foremost untouchable object of desire—*objet petit a*—alongside the voice.

The eye-doll’s voice is one of the few attributes that can be thought of as her own, something that could possibly retain some indexical reference to the person behind the idol. This raises a few questions: First, why would a devotee seek a connection with this person in the first place? One would imagine that the idol would suffice to satisfy his desires. Even so, a devotee might see adoration of the eye-doll’s hidden personality as a higher, or more personal, form of veneration. The eye-doll, after all, is fake, but the performer who portrays it must be a real, natural, living human being. The mistake here is that there is no natural person behind the eye-doll, in the sense of the presence of a pure, uncorrupted being hiding behind its artifice. There is just another person, someone just as fucked up as everyone else, if not more so due to the stresses of constantly portraying the eye-doll in public. The mistaken devotee, who seeks a connection with this performer, is doubly removed from reality, as he seeks the fake hidden behind the fake.

Second, is the eye-doll’s voice indexical to any “real” presence beyond her artifice? Or is the process of vocalization just another level of performance? Can the eye-doll ever *not* be performing, or is she perpetually activated even during supposedly “private” moments? The eye-doll’s presence persists and exists outside of the performer’s body. The true material presence of an eye-doll consists of the media artifacts she generates. These, not the human body of the performer, are the true substance of the eye-doll. The human body is a raw material used in their construction,

as is the gaze, as is the voice. These materials coalesce into media fragments that are the actual objects of devotion through which the eye-doll is accessed. Thus, the eye-doll herself is a virtual database of these fragments. There is no complete, whole, intact eye-doll: Each one is always-already fragmented. The previously-described mistaken devotee, who seeks a connection with the eyedoll's personality, is now *three* times removed from the real, being devoted to a person who plays a character that is expressed through scattered media appearances. These media fragments are the sole points of contact between the eye-doll and those who venerate her. Everything else—the image, voice, and personality of the eye-doll—is anchored to them, and they constitute the real presence of the eye-doll in the world.

## 愛 Doll

The 愛 (*ai*) Doll is an idol of love. All idolatry contains some level of love and adoration—it's in the word itself, the *latria* in *idolatry*—but the media 愛 Doll is a being crafted specifically to be adored. In this sense, the 愛 Doll shares its purpose with the doll as an object: They are both meant to be loved, albeit in different ways. Adoration of a media 愛 Doll is public, occurring through widely-available media fragments, while one is expected to cuddle or play with a doll in private. This isn't an exclusive rule, as one can follow a pop 愛 Doll in private or take a doll out in public, but generally speaking each object of desire has its own form of devotion.

The love given to the 愛 Doll is of a different flavor than that given to a regular doll. Child dolls receive maternal or parental love; sex dolls receive love of another sort entirely. 愛 Dolls work through the media and give, receive, and reflect love and desire from a distance. The physical intimacy that comes with holding a doll is not found with an 愛 Doll, which fosters its own distant intimacy through the charisma exuded from its media fragments. An 愛 Doll devotee can collect and accumulate objects that are part of the 愛 Doll's collective being. When a fan listens to a song, watches a DVD, or handles a photobook or trading card, he is in the presence of his 愛 Doll. The act of devotional fandom is one of communion between bodies: the human body of the fan and the media body of the 愛 Doll. Her charisma reaches out through these fragments to physically affect the devotee, to solicit a bodily response.

What kind of affect is transmitted by and through an 愛 Doll? The precise sensations felt by a devotee in the presence of an 愛 Doll may be so interior and subjective as to render an attempt at description useless. Each devotee has his own reasons for his 愛 Dollatry. Does a particular 愛 Doll have some unique quality that others lack? Or are they interchangeable, barely distinguishable from one another? In order to function as commodities, 愛 Dolls must be interchangeable to some degree. Likewise, dolls need to be mass-produced (aside from bespoke artisanal creations). Both categories are selected and/or created for their default lack of uniqueness. What makes an 愛 Doll or a doll unique is the relationship to the collector that is fostered over its lifetime. Desire bounces off the 愛 Doll and is reflected back at the subject, but this act of reflection leaves a mark. 愛 Dolls are scarred by their interactions with countless fans. These inscriptions of desire are written on the media body of the 愛 Doll, just as a doll becomes uniquely worn as it is played with. Her interactions with fans mold and transform her into a new entity, a being crafted from media and desire. The omega point of the 愛 Doll—a unique entity—is the starting point many of us imagine ourselves to occupy. We want to believe in our uniqueness, but

the truth is that each of us is as damaged as anyone else. By being transformed into a cluster of objects, taking on an aura of artificial purity, the 愛 Doll can eventually appear to transcend this condition. This is, of course, a fiction: A doll isn't a real person, and an 愛 Doll is a virtual simulacrum represented by a real person. Outside of the desires of others, they are lifeless objects. When activated by desire, they briefly become something greater, or at least they appear to do so.

### **A.I. Doll**

Dolls and idols are artificially intelligent, as any apparent intelligence in an automaton is necessarily artificial, whether programmed as such or a trick like the historical Mechanical Turk. Either variety of intelligence—fake or false—is bound to the A.I. Doll's artifice. A hypothetical intelligent android, for example, could have its intelligence crafted with artificial neural networks, trained on massive quantities of data and then unleashed to make its own connections out in the world. This kind of machine learning imitates human learning, but that's just what it is: an imitation, an artificial approximation of biological neural processes. Then again, how are we to know that human intelligence is something "natural" that can be placed in easy opposition to the "artificial" intelligence of our creations? Human intelligence can be seen as already artificial, or at least bound to the artificial substrate of language. Non-linguistic intelligence is certainly possible—ask any animal—but this is not the same as anthropomorphic intelligence. Like A.I., which is bound up in programming languages with their rules and logical structures, human intelligence is bound up in so-called "natural" language and its various rules and grammars. A.I., then, is doubly artificial, twice removed from anything that can be thought of as "natural". It is constructed with codes that are, themselves, imitations of language. Is this another fake of a fake, or is A.I. just as "real" as human intelligence? Or are they both equally fake, just to different degrees? A.I. Dolls and humans are both artificially intelligent, both existing within linguistic feedback loops that allow for information processing, which we consider intelligence, to occur.

### **I, Doll**

The distinction between human and doll is one of perspective. From an anamorphic skew, humans can be seen as dolls, playthings of any number of greater forces—nature, biology, chemistry, physics, God—our precise master depends on how far we shift from our anthropocentric point of view. From an oblique angle, the human and the doll are indistinguishable. It's the viewpoint of human exceptionalism, anthropocentrism, that allows us to imagine ourselves as greater than the doll, more real, less fake, a natural entity rather than something artificial. Each of us is the plaything of something—or someone—else. This something could be the universe itself, with our behavior subject to its physical laws and determined by a causal chain of events going back to the beginning of linear time. Or, perhaps it's language that's playing games with us. As previously established, humans and dolls are inextricably bound up in it. On a social level, each of us is a doll to someone else, a plaything to be enjoyed and loved until it is worn out and thrown away. Each of us, despite our most noble and selfless intentions, does the same to others. The other is, to the subject, a fantastic object like a doll or automaton, something exterior to the self that can only be controlled to a certain extent and, to another extent, exerts control over the subject. Human relations can be seen as a vast tea party of dolls, all pulling each other's strings. Each of us has a collection of playthings, but we are each ourselves the plaything of countless others, personal and impersonal.

