

An Interview with Atsushi Watanabe (I'm here project)
by Yukako Yamada (Curator, the National Art Center, Tokyo)

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---In this exhibition, NACT View 03, you are showing some works that grew out of your ongoing project I Hate Free Hugs. You yourself have experienced hikikomori yourself and dealt with social issues such as isolation and loneliness. And in this project, you and a care worker hug and talk with people who are currently suffering from the condition and responded to your public call for participants. Can you please start by telling us what led you to start this project?

I have been dealing with social issues related to isolation and loneliness for the past ten years. I am often contacted by people trying to cope with *hikikomori* or people around them who are seeking consultations. A few years ago a friend of mine asked me if there was something that could be done to help an acquaintance with *hikikomori* who was repeatedly posting social media messages saying, "I'm lonely." The acquaintance had struggled with the problem for a long time, but he had never had any contact with a support group or welfare organization. That made me wonder how I could go about meeting him. But the reality was, there were a number of issues that had to be resolved before we could meet face-to-face, such as the cost of traveling from Yokohama, where I live, to the Kyushu region, where he lived. That's when I had the idea to apply for an art-related grant. In my recent projects, I don't start out with some kind of desktop theory. As in this case, there's a particular person I want to meet, and I do whatever's necessary to deal with the actual issues at hand. That's why when I began to recruit participants for the project, I said that if would go anywhere in the country to meet them.

When I started this project, I was thinking about a post-Covid world in which people would start having physical contact with each other again. At the time, the severity of the disease made it impossible to tell how long it would continue in the future. Society as a whole had entered a state of *hikikomori*, and this made people imagine what it might be like to be in a constant state of isolation. But once the disease began to abate, I had the uneasy feeling that people would once again find it difficult to imagine other people's isolation – people who, regardless of the virus, had

remained isolated because they were living with *hikikomori* or in a facility for the disabled.

Most people would like to treat other people kindly. Although we focus our attention on people who we have direct contact with and whose pain is visibly apparent, we tend to ignore the existence of people who are beyond our imagination. Yet, we are living side-by-side with these people in our society. There is an even greater need to take conscious steps to socially include those who are not visible to us, but the reality is much more complex. Some of these people choose deeper isolation or a more difficult lifestyle as a form of self-neglect. Many doctors and healthcare workers can only have an effect on people who seek their help or who are visible. At the same time, religion, philosophy, and art have the ability to make a connection with people via the imagination even without being directly accessible or understandable. I don't make works within the context of art, but rather I make use of art in a practical way as a form of social activism or social design. As I see it, this diversion is necessary to expand art and develop art history.

---In this project, you have intentionally chosen to use free hugs, which you say you hate. Can you please explain why?

The Free Hugs campaign started in Australia and America. In Japan, it came to be known following the emergence of YouTube. At the time that free hugs became popular here, I was living among unhoused people on the streets of Shibuya, and I frequently saw people giving free hugs. I disliked the idea then and I still dislike the idea now. To me, it seemed like coming to Shibuya to give free hugs in itself expressed a kind of superiority. It also seemed like an action that symbolized "living the life" by publicly engaging in physical contact. On the other hand, there have been a number of developments in the Free Hugs campaign, and I don't deny their practical use in dealing with disputes between Japan and South Korea, and gender equality. They have also led to an atmosphere of friendship and non-violence. But doing this in a country like Japan, which didn't originally have a hugging culture (i.e., only hugging people you actually meet), only reinforces the existing state of social inclusion.

---In this exhibition, you are showing four works from the project. Can you please give us some more details about them?

At one time, I served as an advisor for coming-of-age ceremonies in a certain city. The problem that the city faced was that some of the students, including those with *hikikomori*, were unwilling to participate in the ceremony, because a group of delinquent students might show up. To deal with this problem, they ultimately did things like change the seating arrangement, but the students who didn't attend were treated in a perfunctory manner. There is a tendency to focus on the people and problems that are readily visible and understandable, while overlooking those who don't make themselves heard. This makes it seem as if society has cut them off and left them to fend for themselves. While museums have an atmosphere of inclusion regarding local people, they don't usually have a chance to consider those who are unable to come to the museum. The main premise is to provide a space and share a love of art with others – very little thought is given to those who cannot visit the museum or the privilege of those who can.

On the other hand, I was strongly influenced by the movement that people with *hikikomori* started themselves. I'm still involved with that movement today, partly for my research. At one event I went to, one table was set aside for those who were not present. Six or seven tables were designated for a given subject, and while the participants engaged in discussion, there was also a table for those who were not there. Everyone deliberately avoided sitting there. One common misunderstanding is that having *hikikomori* doesn't necessarily mean that the person never leaves the house – a certain number of people attend events like that one. That event made people imagine something more than their own personal recovery – it made them realize that there are people in situations that are similar to your own who cannot even come to a place like that. That encounter had a huge impact on me. These people, who tended to be naive and delicate, put their sensitive imaginations to use in an attempt to immediately change society, starting with that place. My work *The Lights for the Absentees* (2021) was inspired by that table for people who were not present. Through my work, I created an opportunity for people who were not there to participate, and for viewers to discuss and imagine those people.

Over the last ten years or so, there has been a surge of movements started by people who find it difficult to live. This has in turn led to a variety of what might be called revolutionary realizations that have led to linguistic and systemic changes. One example is the idea that “independence means having more dependents.”* Social

media has enabled people in a variety of positions and situations to express themselves and engage in discussions. These words, conveyed by people who find it difficult to live, express a perspective that in the past was indiscernible. To me, this provides us with a treasure trove of hints about how to decrease and deal with the life's difficulties.

The exhibition space for *NACT View 03* is not a typical white cube, but rather a place where people are coming and going. When I was asked to show my work here, I had the feeling that I was being asked to figure out how to attract people's attention in that kind of space. But I intentionally decided to deal with the theme of the difficulty to understand and see. My video work *Free Hugs for Absentees* was shot in front of Shibuya Station, but the performance that I did there wasn't meant to attract people's attention. (laughs) For ten straight hours, I gave a lonely performance in Shibuya for invisible people. By projecting time-lapse footage of the performance on a cone in the museum's restaurant and showing an installation called *I Hate Free Hugs*, a sculptural work based on a door motif, in an open space in the museum, I created a very similar situation. In other words, I created a situation in which many people are constantly passing by with paying much attention or understanding what's going on. I guess that's kind of mean-spirited. (laughs) The door part of *I Hate Free Hugs* symbolizes the unknown, which exists on the other side. There are entities there that we would never notice unless we go around to the other side.

Looking back over the history of art, I became very critical about the way that contemporary art has exploited people as the subject of their work and research. Among other things, the allegations of sexual harassment that were leveled at [the photographer] Araki [Nobuyoshi] in 2018 were a key element in changing my thinking. As an act of resistance, I decided to devise a new method based on objectifying the process – things like research and the production period, which often remain behind the scenes – in my collaborative practice with people with *hikikomori*. At present, my relationship with these people serves as the core of my activities. I don't put any pressure on anybody; I encourage proactive participation based on an open-call system. I ensure their physical and mental safety after I explain my terms and we reach an agreement. I also agree to share any profits derived from sales or production costs with them. The exhibitions and works I make for museums and other venues are not ends in themselves; they are more like a

progress report meeting (dealing with an ex-post-facto or interim report) or an archive documenting the activities. This is a way of actualizing my practice and subject matter. In a museum or art spaces, art fans and those working in the art world are only excited during the exhibition period. They consume social issues and once an event is finished, they lose interest in the actual conditions. My main theme here (at the museum) is to create works that are critical of this structure, express the idea that reality exists outside, and try to make people realize that that is where the true center of gravity lies.

*This phrase was originally uttered by Shinichiro Kumagaya, an associate professor at the Research Center for Advanced Science and Technology at the University of Tokyo.

In Japan, *hikikomori* (severe social withdrawal) has become a serious social problem. The condition should not be confused with mental illness, NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) or laziness. In many cases, *hikikomori* is triggered by bullying or harassment at school or in the workplace, sexual abuse at the hands of parents or other close relatives, difficulties related to being a sexual minority or with interpersonal relationships, or the loss of a safe environment.

Based on a survey conducted by the Cabinet Office, as of 2023, some 1.46 million people are currently dealing with *hikikomori* in Japan. This massive population is believed to be the largest in the world. At the same time, the number of cases in other countries is also rising, and *hikikomori* is seen as a major factor in problems such as isolation and loneliness. Understanding why so many people are living in this manner and developing ways of dealing with the condition is one of the most important issues in contemporary society and a universal concern for the human race.

Translated by Christopher Stephens