The Room and The Riddle: Artistic Reflections on Hikikomori and the Question of a Meaningful

Life

by

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Abstract

This research explores the issue of self-isolation in contemporary society, focusing on the cultural phenomenon and figure of the Hikikomori, which first emerged in Japan. As societal structures and global situations continue to evolve —particularly in the wake of the pandemic — self-isolation and social participation demand renewed attention, reexamination, and redefinition beyond the confines of pathological and psychological studies.

Adopting a mixed-methods approach, this research is comprised of three case studies of Hikikomori in different fields of art. The theoretical frameworks are case-specific, integrates visual, content, narrative analysis. Through in-depth research on three selected works: *Goodbye Without Leaving* (2021), *Pull Stay* (2024), and *修復のモニュメント* (2019), to investigate how Hikikomori is represented across different artistic forms, how its discourse is shaped from diverse viewpoints, and how it intersects with social relationships across varying community scales.

By examining the portrayal and characteristics of the Hikikomori, this research ultimately seeks to answer a question: What does it mean to live a meaningful life in contemporary society as analyzed through Hikikomori art? This study offers a new understanding on self-isolation while also providing insights into the nature of well-being, healthy interpersonal relationships and the pursuit of a fulfilling life from the perspective of being and living with Hikikomori.

Keywords: Hikikomori Art, Self-Recognition, Intersubjectivity, Pull Stay, Kintsugi.

Acknowledgment & Dedication

Undertaking this project has enriched my knowledge and enhanced my research abilities. It has also deepened my understanding of myself, allowed me to see myself more wholly.

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This has been a long journey. I would also like to thank all my classmates in the Criticism and Curatorial Practice program, and everyone in the OCAD U community who has supported me along the way.

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Glossary

引きこもり: Hikikomori. The theme of this paper, which is introduced in the Introduction and the Historical Background Chapters.

Otaku: おたく. A Japanese term denoting individuals with obsessive interests, particularly in anime, manga, or video games.

Karate: 空手道. A Japanese martial art emphasizing striking techniques such as punches, kicks, and open hand strikes.

気配り: Kikubari. A Japanese ethical concept, introduced in Chapter four, Case two.

場の空気を読む: Ba no Kuuki wo Yomu. A Japanese ethical concept, introduced in Chapter four, Case two.

生き甲斐: Ikigai. A Japanese ethical concept, introduced in Chapter four, Case Two.

金継ぎ: Kintsugi. A traditional Japanese art of repairing, introduced in Chapter five, Case Three.

修復のモニュメント: Monuments to Restoration. Artist Watanabe Atsushi's art project, discussed in Chapter five, Case Three.

侘び・寂び: Wabi-Sabi. A Japanese aesthetics concept, discussed in Chapter five, Case Three.

ドア: The Door. Artist Watanabe Atsushi's work, discussed in Chapter five, Case Three.

わたしの傷／あなたの傷: My Wounds/Your Wounds. Artist Watanabe Atsushi's work, discussed in Chapter five, Case Three.

羅生門: Rashomon. A concept derived from Kurosawa Akira's film, referring to divergent or contradictory accounts of the same event.

Chapter One: Introduction

During my time living in Toronto, I have often felt a contradiction in how this city presents itself. On one hand, it resembles a typical North American metropolis, people are busy, focused on their own careers, and often seem indifferent or emotionally distant from others. On the other hand, Toronto also carries what is commonly perceived as a Canadianness: an emphasis on friendliness, politeness, and mutual support in everyday life (Weiner, 2022). These two contrasting social dynamics coexist in this city, often making me feel alienated and finding it difficult to understand others. At this point, in my daily life I spend nearly half of each week at home, managing lots of tasks remotely. Although the pandemic has largely faded from daily conversations, I still feel that parts of my body and mind remain confined to the room I stayed in during that time. Returning to the overwhelming pace of social life, I often experience a strange sense of disorientation, a lingering feeling of not quite belonging, and a persistent unease in social situations.

I still don't fully understand the trajectory of my life, nor the state in which I live. But for now, let me set aside these personal reflections, these impressions of culture, place, and everyday emotions. Because even if I remove the particularity of my own experience, it's clear that the world today is more turbulent, more uncertain, and more challenging to inhabit, making people want to keep a distance. You might think that war, trade conflicts, shifting international policies, protests, general elections result, or the latest spike in unemployment figures (Stewart, 2025; Otte, 2025; The dispute, 2025; Coletto, 2025; *Labour Market Report*, n.d.), all weigh on our sense of stability and belonging. In light of these broader social realities, and grounded in the feelings I've just described, I began to wonder: are there others who feel the same way I do? Is there any concept or framework that echoes these thoughts?

My research takes shape around a central question: in an increasingly uneasy world, where responding to reality and adapting to its norms often feels difficult, what forms of existence remain possible? Are these unseen ways of living valid in themselves? Are they 'good' enough? Through this study, I hope to find some answers for people who, like me, have felt similarly detached or displaced. I want to create a space where these experiences can be articulated, where these lives can speak, and, perhaps where alternative forms of living can be imagined. It was in this state of casual, everyday browsing online that I came across the term 引きこもり (Hikikomori). After going through some pages, I realized that its meaning resonated with my own life. The Hikikomori has remained largely out of the spotlight in current discussions both in pop culture and academia, which has further sparked my interest in exploring and researching.

The phenomenon of the Hikikomori originated in Japan at the end of the 20th century. It refers to a form of socially withdrawn living or a person living in a social avoidance condition. Hikikomori is characterized by prolonged isolation within a room and minimal engagement with society.[1] In an increasingly unstable world, levels of social engagement in areas such as careers, entertainment, interpersonal relationships, and personal development have become noticeably more volatile. Hikikomori suggests a global rise in behaviours and mindsets that involve reducing social contact, avoiding interactions, reassessing interpersonal boundaries, and reestablishing personal expectations for life.

More than thirty years have passed since the Hikikomori phenomenon was first defined; now it serves as a representative phenomenon in the study of self-isolation and social withdrawal. According to a 2022 survey, the number of Hikikomori in Japan reached approximately 1.46 million, an increase of around 300,000 compared to surveys conducted in

2015 and 2018 (Ishikawa, 2023; Kato, Sartorius & Shinfuku, 2024, p. 178). This rise has been significantly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. For contemporary Hikikomori, how has this image evolved over time? What does the Hikikomori phenomenon reveal about the current state of society? Has the definition of Hikikomori accomplished a generalized fusion with other similar concepts in contemporary times? Can Hikikomori inspire alternative existential meanings in contemporary life? It is time for a multi-perspective and interdisciplinary review, redefining and a reevaluation of Hikikomori.

My research of Hikikomori will be conducted from the perspective of artists who explore this phenomenon. The research method will be conducted primarily through literature review and art analysis. Studying art about the Hikikomori phenomenon[2] offers dual insights: how the outside world perceives the Hikikomori and how these individuals respond to the world. Using art as an entry point has made it possible for the study of Hikikomori to go beyond the traditional pathological or sociological studies as this approach facilitates the integration of Hikikomori knowledge into a broader framework, opening the door to constructing a unique theoretical structure for the phenomenon. It also helps to illuminate the function and role of art. In the artistic representations of Hikikomori, is art functioning as a bridge for communication or as a weapon of resistance? In what ways can artistic expressions broaden our understanding of the Hikikomori experience? In my case studies, I will place these findings in dialogue with various philosophical frameworks for comparison, analysis, and interpretation.

Overall, the key issues in my study centres on the Hikikomori phenomenon. I ask the following questions: What does it mean to live a meaningful life in contemporary society from the perspective of hikikomori art? And what new possibilities and challenges does shut-in life present?

The thesis is structured into five main chapters. The present chapter which you are reading is the introduction. In chapter two, I will present the historical background and diagnostics for Hikikomori. In chapters three to five, I will present three case studies: *Goodbye Without Leaving* (2021) by Atle Blekastad (Chapter 3), *Pull Stay* (2024) by Nito Souji (Chapter 4); and *修復のモニュメント* (2019) by Watanabe Atsushi (Chapter 5). I have applied different theoretical approaches in each case study as each analysis model is tailored to the specific issues raised by the respective artwork. Rather than imposing a single theoretical framework on the three cases for the purpose of forced comparison or verification, this approach encourages specific interpretations of the specific case, allows for enabling discussion in appropriate contexts, and fosters an understanding of how Hikikomori is expressed and constructed through different forms and narratives.

In case one, I have applied Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological concept of the customary body alongside Friedrich Nietzsche's eternal return. I discuss Gaston Bachelard's reflections on the inner experience of daydreaming. In case two, I have analyzed the work through elements of game studies with Lacanian theory, expanding the discussion into broader cultural and societal contexts with the sociological concept of 生き甲斐 (Ikigai). In case three, I have explored the visual and social significance of the artwork by integrating the Japanese aesthetic principle of 侘び・寂び (Wabi-Sabi), psychological interpretations, and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. In Chapter Six, I conduct a comparative analysis of the three case studies through the lens of Ikigai, seeking to connect these relatively independent inquiries and identify recurring patterns. This serves as a step toward formulating more generalizable insights on the research topic. The thesis conclusion wraps up the key findings, acknowledges the study's

limitations and structural constraints, and outlines possible directions for deeper future inquiry

rooted in the themes explored here.

Chapter Two: Historical Background

引きこもり (Hikikomori) literally translates to 'pulling inward,' 'pulling stay'. It is a social and cultural phenomenon, originally identified in Japan. In the latter half of 1990s, psychiatrist Saitō Tamaki defined Hikikomori in his book, *Hikikomori, Adolescence without End.* Hikikomori is *"a condition in which the person stays at home and does not participate in society for six months or longer, and that becomes pathological by the late twenties, and other mental disorders are unlikely to be the primary cause"* (Kato, Sartorius & Shinfuku, 2024, p. 178). The defining feature of social withdrawal exhibited in the Hikikomori phenomenon *"...involves cooping oneself up in one's own home and not participating in society for six months or longer, but that does not seem to have another psychological problem as its principal source"* (Saitō & Angles, 2013, p. 24).

In this chapter, I will briefly outline the historical counterparts of the Hikikomori figure; early research on the causes and symptoms of Hikikomori, primarily drawn from Saitō's foundational work; and the diversity of the Hikikomori phenomenon in the 21st century. Following these, I will focus on two key distinctions in the categorization of Hikikomori: pathological and non-pathological Hikikomori. These two figures serve as crucial frameworks for defining and understanding Hikikomori, which avoids reducing all Hikikomori to pathological cases and allowing us to discover those who choose to withdraw as a way to pursue self-satisfaction or reconstruct their meaning of life.

Reclusive Figures in History

The tradition of self-isolation has a long history, long before the term Hikikomori was coined and recognized as a social issue. Individuals and groups throughout history have chosen to isolate themselves from others for a variety of reasons, and these historical recluses[3] have been found in cultures around the world. For some, this secluded lifestyle was even considered an ideal way of life.

While historical forms of reclusion share certain motivational similarities, they cannot be considered direct predecessors of the contemporary Hikikomori phenomenon. Emerging in the late 20th century, the Hikikomori is viewed as a pathological cultural issue marked by disconnection at individual, familial, and societal levels, often tied to social integration difficulties (Saitō & Angles, 2013). Unlike traditional reclusion, it lacks a spiritual framework and presents more complex, less understood socio-psychological dynamics. Having outlined Saitō's definition and the historical image, the next section will examine its causes, symptoms and current developments.

Causes and Symptoms of Hikikomori

Research by Saitō links Hikikomori to social emotional developmental stagnation during adolescence, especially among eldest sons, with many cases citing interpersonal issues as the cause (Saitō & Angles, 2013, p. 31). Later studies suggest that the Hikikomori phenomenon results from a combination of environmental and interpersonal factors, such as childhood trauma, bullying, family dysfunction, and labour market pressures. Contemporary analyses further highlight the influence of digital hyper-connectivity, information overload, and the COVID-19

pandemic, which intensified social withdrawal by reinforcing isolation as a safer and more predictable choice (Chen, 2019, p. 12; Honcharova, Kyvliuk, & Chugueva, 2022).

Apart from the decisive feature of the Hikikomori experience —the shut-in life within the room, the symptoms of the Hikikomori and the symptoms of social withdrawal in Saitō's research also include the following points: nonattendance at school, fear of others, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, reversal of day and night, regression, the experience of despair, death-related thoughts, and feelings of guilt (Saitō & Angles, 2013). These symptoms can cause significant distress in the lives of relatives around the Hikikomori. Daily interactions tend to diminish gradually, and the symptoms typically worsen throughout the withdrawal period, occasionally manifesting as brief but intense violent behaviour (Saitō & Angles, 2013, p. 40).

Different Types of Hikikomori, and Factors in Identifying Hikikomori

Over time, the phenomenon of Hikikomori has been examined through increasingly detailed studies. As a result, the image of Hikikomori has become more diverse, and the characteristics used to identify them have continued to expand. Differences among Hikikomori phenomenon include factors[4] such as gender and age —for instance, female and elderly Hikikomori, as well as regional/cultural backgrounds and preferences for online communication and entertainment. While this paper does not focus on identifying or studying any particular subgroup of Hikikomori, these factors serve as evidence to support the thesis that a wide range of Hikikomori experiences exist.

Pathological and Non-pathological Hikikomori

Since the early 21st century, academic and institutional interest in Hikikomori has increased, leading to revisions in how the phenomenon is defined and diagnosed. Organizations such as the WHO, Japan's Cabinet Office, and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare have contributed to refining identification criteria (Kato, Sartorius & Shinfuku, 2024). Traditional markers —such as physical withdrawal and low social participation are now being reconsidered due to shifting societal norms, including remote work and digital socialization.

In the essay "Shifting the Paradigm of Social Withdrawal: A New Era of Coexisting Pathological and Non-Pathological Hikikomori," Kato, Sartorius, and Shinfuku distinguish between pathological and non-pathological Hikikomori. The DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) includes Hikikomori under *Culture and Psychiatric Diagnosis*, with a key criterion being significant distress or impairment caused by social isolation (2024, p. 179). Individuals meeting this criterion are categorized as pathological, also known as secondary Hikikomori.

For non-pathological Hikikomori, also known as 'primary,' the key diagnostic feature is the absence of *"significant functional impairment and distress associated with social isolation"* (Kato, Sartorius & Shinfuku, 2024, p. 181). Kato, Sartorius and Shinfuku designed a questionnaire in order to more accurately define the primary Hikikomori, including occupational and social status, current life stage, such as a gap year or unemployment, and lifestyle factors that naturally involve low social interaction (e.g. housewife, freelancer). Some of the new criteria include redefining the duration of social withdrawal, and introducing categories like mild, moderate, and severe Hikikomori. Low-engagement outings, like late-night store visits that may involve some chat at checkout only, are excluded from meaningful social activity measures. The

frequency of going out can be quantified by counting the days spent outside per week. The key purpose of these questions is to evaluate the emotional states during both staying home and going out (Kato, Sartorius & Shinfuku, 2024).

Concluding Thoughts

At first, the Hikikomori was regarded as a culture-bound syndrome discussed mainly within the context of Japan or East Asia. However, it has gradually evolved into what can now be understood as a contemporary society-bound syndrome. As seen in my previous review of the history of the Hikikomori, current research on Hikikomori generally follows two major paths: one focuses on individual pathology studies, approaching the issue from psychiatric and medical perspectives; the other adopts a sociological or anthropological approach, analyzing external causes and cultural influences. Both approaches have yielded substantial insights, yet there are still many subfields and associated domains that remain underexplored, especially from the latter perspective.

In my work on Hikikomori, some of the areas I have identified have not been fully explored. For example, what are the reasons why people can escape the Hikikomori state? There are also differences between those who have hobbies or engage in creative activities within their rooms and those who live in silence, with little known about their inner world. Another is the personal narratives and self-understandings of Hikikomori individuals which also deserve more attention. These questions have motivated my choice to explore Hikikomori through the lens of art, using a new research domain and diverse narratives to further investigate the Hikikomori issue. What new discourses have artists constructed through their practice? To what extent is art

involved in the Hikikomori phenomenon, and does it play a positive or negative role? The next

chapter will engage with some of these questions with the first case study.

Chapter Three: Case One —Atle Blekastad's Goodbye Without Leaving

3.1 Intro

Goodbye Without Leaving (2021) by artist Atle Blekastad is a photography collage work. It is a 3D model created in digital space, presented on a webpage as slides with storylines. The tiny room models, lego-like quality, exquisite colour schemes and arrangements seem to enter a dream world, features which first attracted me to this piece. In this work, the artist Atle Blekastad in recalling his memories of his late brother, a Hikikomori, created this work by making outside observations of a Hikikomori's life.

In this chapter, I will begin by introducing the artwork and providing an overview of its background. Next, I will outline the theoretical framework I will use to analyze the piece. Finally, I will critically examine Ali Shobeiri's analysis of this piece. The theoretical frameworks reflected in his interpretations and analyses of the artwork also form an important part of my own theoretical foundation, including ideas from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's fleshification of the body, Gaston Bachelard's daydreaming and immensity, and Friedrich Nietzsche's eternal return. In the end, I will compare the artwork to the photography of Maika Elan as a supplementary comparative study, because she also observes and captures images of Hikikomori as an external observer.

3.2 Artwork Description & Background

In the artwork *Goodbye Without Leaving* (2021), artist Atle Blekastad researches and recreates the life circumstances and personal history of his brother, who is a Hikikomori. In real life, his brother's shut in life spanned 20 years. He began withdrawing from social life in the late

1980s, living in the room where he grew up. Before falling into shut-in states, his brother attempted suicide once, but this suicide was ignored by his family, psychiatrists and doctors, and he failed to receive all forms of support, eventually falling into the Hikikomori life (Goodbye Without Leaving, n.d.).

The room the brother lived in was adorned with posters and merchandise from the concerts he used to attend, then he stopped going out, cut down on socializing, and turned his days and nights upside down, indulging in newspapers, albums, and music magazines. In 2009, neighbours noticed the brother walking out of his room, replaced by aimless midnight strolls down the street. He was eventually diagnosed with schizophrenia and hospitalized. During his treatment, the mother decided to sell the house, which left Blekastad's brother homeless after being discharged from the hospital, leaving him with no choice but to live in a welfare-provided apartment. In 2012, he ended his life (Goodbye Without Leaving, n.d.).

Goodbye Without Leaving (2021) is a work of remembrance of the brother. The artist tried to recall all the objects in the room from his memory and collected images of them online, pasting the pictures on a notepad. Then he drew sketches and a floorplan of the room as a blueprint and recalled the furniture and arrangements in the room. Finally, the artist recreated the model of his brother's room in the digital space as he remembered it (Shobeiri, 2023, p. 25).

The room on the webpage is shown on several slide pages from different angles and distances. The spectator sees the green wall, indigo floor, open red door, and brown furniture, looking through the door as though peeking into the Hikikomori's life. One can imagine the artist, his family members, or the occasional visiting friends taking a glimpse from the opening door. Going through the following slides, the room looks like a cube from a high angle, where

one side of the room is deliberately made transparent. The spectator can view and learn the full

extent of the room from this side.
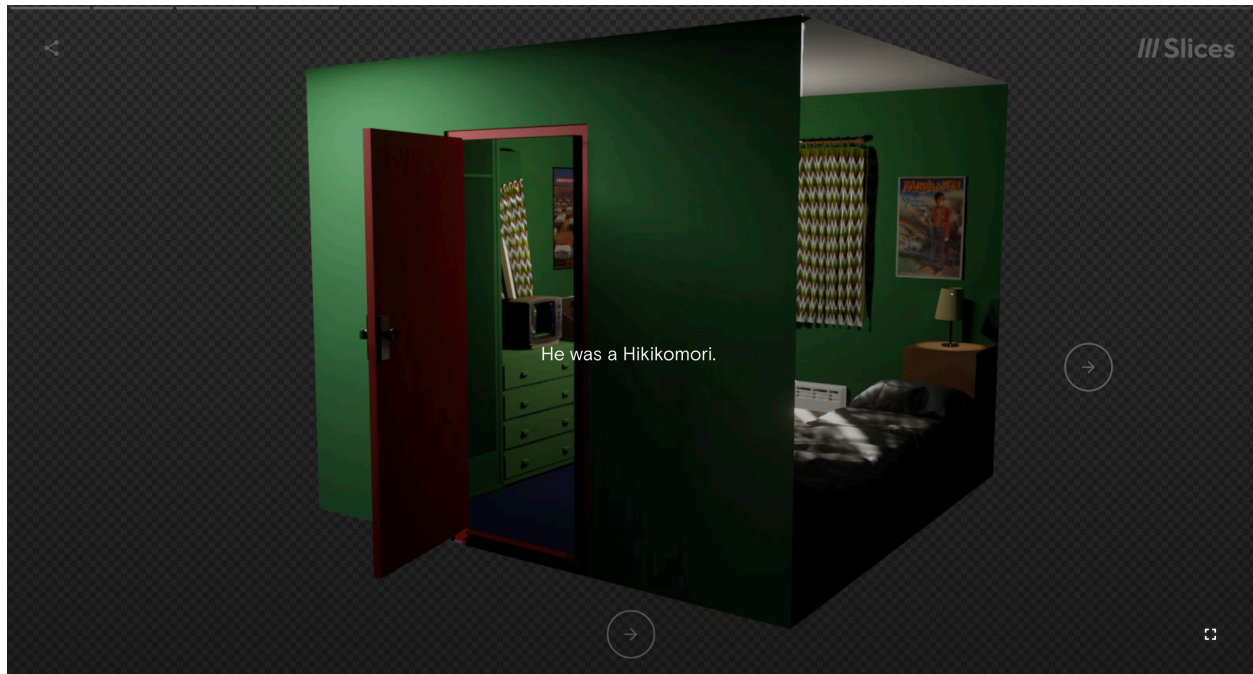
Figure 1

The Fourth Slide

Note. Screenshot From *"Goodbye Without Leaving",* by Atle Blekastad, n.d.,

https://player.slices.co/stories/-M4U874Ba3TEpULPMDhW, Copyright 2025 by Slices.

One single bed is placed against the transparent wall, and a bedside table is located on the

right corner with a lamp atop. The red door on the left, a window faces the door, a zigzag-

patterned set of curtains are drawn over. On the two opposite walls are posters of bands such as

Pink Floyd and Iron Maiden. A four-sided table stands in the middle of the room with a radio on

it. On the opposite side of the transparent wall is a small desk at the corner, band logo/slogan

stickers taped on, and next to it is a green cabinet. A small CRT TV and a mirror placed on it, one red chair beside the desk, keeps the decor unified.

For my brother, time stopped in 1988-89. Apart from an increasing pile of music magazines, a steady rotation of newspapers and a cd player I bought him in the mid 90's, nothing changed in his room.
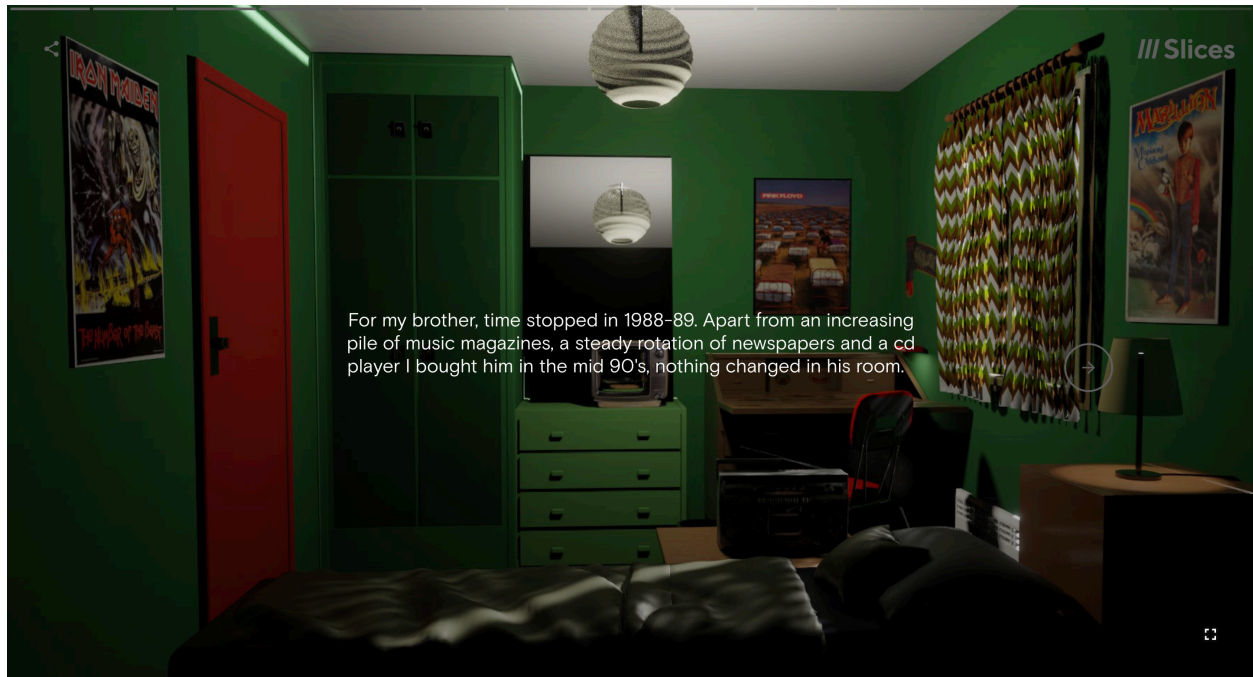
Figure 2

The Fifth Slide

Note. Screenshot From *"Goodbye Without Leaving",* by Atle Blekastad, n.d., https://player.slices.co/stories/-M4U874Ba3TEpULPMDhW, Copyright 2025 by Slices.

3.3 Theoretical Framework and Analysis Method

My analysis will be based on the essay "The Room Is the World: Reflecting on the Lived Life of Hikikomori Through Photography" from the book *Psychosomatic Imagery Photographic Reflections on Mental Disorders* by Ali Shobeiri. Shobeiri's article is one of the few detailed

analyses of Blekastad's artwork, *Goodbye Without Leaving* (2021). Shobeiri analyzes the artwork in two steps: the first step is to show how the artist has built the room with the methodology of photography, combining place and memory to recreate the room, and inviting the spectator to witness the Hikikomori's life. Shobeiri applies the concept of topo-analysis by Gaston Bachelard and place memory by Edward S. Casey to analyse the work. According to Bachelard, *"Drawing on geography, psychology, phenomenology, and poetry, he (Bachelard) defined "topo-analysis" as "the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives" (1958/2014, 30)—our room being the most profound instance"* (Shobeiri, 2023, p. 28). Shobeiri also explores the relationship between Hikikomori and the space in shut-in life through Merleau-Ponty. The second step is through the Nietzsche's notion of the eternal return with a reinterpretation of the concept by Gil Deleuze to understand the Hikikomori's experience of time in their shut-in life.

I will reflect Shobeiri's exposition and analysis by discussing the philosophers involved in his essay, including Merleau-Ponty and Nietzsche. I will state the perception processes and narratives from each perspective of the artist, the spectator and the Hikikomori. I include the artist's experiences about the Hikikomori's room, the artist's reflections on Hikikomori's life, the Hikikomori's possible feelings in their room, and the spectator's thoughts about the room. My study will evaluate the uniqueness of studying Hikikomori life from artwork, evaluating the Hikikomori's quality of life and their well-being. I conclude by presenting the pros and cons of depicting the Hikikomori's life from the outsider's perspective.

Edward S. Casey is an American philosopher whose ideas are cited by Shobeiri to explain how the human subject's emotional connection, experience and recognition are shaped by the space and environment. His place memory refers to the combination of bodily

remembrance and mental recollection, *"a place-cum-memory that requires bodily remembrance as much as mental recollection"* (Shobeiri, 2023, p. 27). Human memories of events and places are intertwined and indicative of each other —memories of events leading to memories of a place, where it happened, memories of places leading to memories of events, what's happened at that spot. *"Rather than thinking of remembering as a form of re-experiencing the past per se, we might conceive of it as an activity of re-implacing: re-experiencing past places (201, original emphasis)"* (Shobeiri, 2023, p. 24). As Shobeiri's analysis in the essay indicates, place memory has to do with the retrieval of the locale, the re-positioning of the body into place, and the experiencing of place in mind.

To use the concept of place memory, Shobeiri divides the holistic view of a location into three parts, the overall grasp in consciousness can be broken down into: (1) Location, which means a specific spot, a physical coordinate belonging to a system such as the Postcode, the Graticule, What3words geocode system;[5] (2) Locale, which refers to perceptible characteristics of this location that provide the appearance and details, these characteristics formed the locale, like volume, size, colour and shape; (3) the Sense of Place, speaking to the feelings and emotions linked to the place. In this place-based mode of remembrance, the locale is paramount because without the physical support and presence, the place will eventually be annihilated. The sense of place is left without the material to serve as evidence, and a geographic coordinate has no specificity whatsoever.

Shobeiri thought Bachelard's topo-analysis method as being the path to take the element —the sense of place mentioned above. A topo-analysis method unfolds by asking questions such as: in the place, is the light warm or not? At what angle is the furniture placed? Are the curtains

drawn or do they block the light? By asking questions and gathering specific details, the questioner can link emotions to the space thus create the sense of place.

To understand the Hikikomori's mental activities and their emotional feeling of their room, Shobeiri introduced the concept of the customary body by Maurice Merleau-Ponty.[6] Rejecting the traditional separation of mind and body, Merleau-Ponty introduced the concepts such as the body-subject and body schema. In his view, the body is not merely an object but the very medium through which we engage with the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). He considered cognition to be inherently embodied —shaped by movement, sensation, and lived experience rather than abstract receiving and reasoning. The customary body *"is based on the mental exercises of the body in space (as one imagines touching a doorhandle in the mind)"* (Shobeiri, 2023, p. 28). Behind this concept, Merleau-Ponty provides an in-depth analysis of the body schema and body subject.

In Merleau-Ponty's work on vision and perception, he summarizes vision as an embodied, immersive, active experience. The body schema is the body's intentional relation to the surrounding situation (the external world), not the body as it exists physiologically, or as it exists in mental activity or rational analysis. Purely visual representations (seeing), abstract movements (body activities), or possible definitions and descriptions of sensations (outcomes, orientations, goals) are not where the body schema resides. The body schema is built on trust in the whole body (Merleau-Ponty, 2012).[7]

According to Merleau-Ponty, the world is the fleshification of the body. The world and the body are mutually intertwined, sharing the same ontological and perceptual structure. We do not merely perceive the world; at the same time, we are also perceived by the world. The subject arranges the world through the body's position, which is the body's significance as a background

in experience, organization, and description, *"Bodily space can be distinguished from external space…it is the darkness of the theater required for the clarity of the performance"* (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 103). An example from daily life may help us to understand further: people would say I am holding an apple, not the surface of the apple against the palm of my hand. As Shobeiri cites Casey in the essay, the body and its movements evoke a sense of familiarity in similar yet unfamiliar spaces, thereby forming a sense of belonging to home.

In the second half of the Shobeiri study, to understand the temporality of the Hikikomori's life, he connects the Hikikomori's life to Nietzsche's eternal return. He argues that the Hikikomori has a special, transcendental experience of time in their room, because they choose to live in eternal return, *"…hikikomori are among the few individuals who temporarily exercise the thought of eternal return, by selecting the same over the new, by obstinately living the same life during the period of their voluntary isolation"* (Shobeiri, 2023, p. 32)*.* Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) put forward the concept of eternal return in his book *The Gay Science* (1882):

> What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence' ... Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: 'You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine' (p. 341).

A further interpretation of this passage from Nietzsche will be discussed in the subsequent analysis section.

3.4 Analysis

According to Shobeiri's analysis, Blekastad creates a mind map, recalling all the objects in the room that were cluttered upon the floor plan sketch. This step is recalling the Locale in those three elements. The artist imagines himself in the brother's room, memorizes the position of each item relative to artist's body and their senses and details, and rebuilds his brother's room. Blekastad's working process reflects the ideas of place memory and customary body. When audiences appreciate this work, they could imagine that they are living in the room. Using the concept of the customary body, they may feel all the objects around them and how a Hikikomori lives in the room.

It is easy to see that there is no image of the Hikikomori in the work. There is no image of the artist's brother. The work is presented partly from the Hikikomori's first-person point of view. Some slides offer close-up views of the room, which might be what the Hikikomori see in his eyes, while some slides are from a high angle and distanced view, providing an overall impression of the room. Perhaps by erasing the subject who is supposed to be present in the room, it facilitates the other subjects to project their consciousness into this piece. The disadvantage is that when the key element —the Hikikomori who defines the room disappears, the projection of consciousness and the emotional connection to the room by all those watching can be summarized as the experience of living in a small room, rather than the experience of a Hikikomori living in a small room.

Although it can be argued that the artist has restored the Hikikomori's life, I would prefer to say he mimicked the Sense of Place. Because according to Shobeiri, if the artist does use a topo-analysis method to ask questions, the emotions and feelings he gets will ultimately return to himself, an externally observing subject, rather than the subject of the Hikikomori, his brother. For subtle sensations, or here in constructing the deep structure of the situation, this approach is limited by emotions, motives of movement, and the uniqueness of self-experience[8] of the artist. The absence of the brother's voice in the artwork also deprives all the spectators of the opportunity to verify. That is to say, as an observing subject from outside, is the experience grasped from appreciating the artwork similar to the experience of the Hikikomori's life?

On the other hand, I believe that Merleau-Ponty's theory offers a possibility for the Hikikomori's shut-in life. My conjecture is that the Hikikomori's body and the room are intertwined. The room is the body itself. Because the Hikikomori lives in the same environment every day, if worlding can be understood as the fleshification of the body, and because the meaning of the customary body is to be organized by position/relationship between the body and the external environment, the boundary of inside and outside is gradually blurred. It is like spreading of one's consciousness or it is the repeated projection of the body schema into the landscape of the room that generates a sense of familiarity and control. From this perspective, then we can profess that external spectators —the artist and the audience —their retrospection of the room, as well as their mental projection and experiential engagement, are imbued with meaning. The significance lies in the fact that for all spectators external to the Hikikomori themselves, this experience is situated between the subjective and the objective, not fully accessible yet still perceivable is intelligible and usable. This accessibility is precisely made possible through the act of viewing the Hikikomori's room. The room is indeed a manifestation

of the Hikikomori's body, consciousness and subjectivity. These questions and conjectures will extend to deeper discussions. Two questions arise: is there any essential difference between one non-Hikikomori subject and one Hikikomori subject in terms of sense, language, and the system of evaluation for the external world? Can the feelings of different subjects communicate with each other within an articulable range?

Shobeiri applies the concept of daydreaming and immensity by Gaston Bachelard, to hypothesizes the Hikikomori's conscious activity in the room, arguing that daydreaming must be included in the Hikikomori's conscious activity. *"For Bachelard, getting lost in daydreams is the archetypical case for grasping the inner experiences of a person in the architectural space of a room, for 'daydream transports the dreamer outside the immediate world to a world that bears the mark of infinity' (201)"* (Shobeiri, 2023, p. 28). So based on this assumption, Shobeiri also gives the Hikikomori the immensity of existence that is experienced in the daydream process. By adding the immensity of existence, Shobeiri gives an aura to the Hikikomori's shut-in life, *"For Bachelard, it is the projective mental state of daydreaming that allows a solitary person to feel the "immensity" of existence as a whole in one's room"* (Shobeiri, 2023, p. 29).

In Bachelard's theory, the immensity dwells within each individual, adhering to an expansion of existence. Yet, everyday life imposes constraints, inhibiting this experience. When one is still, in solitude, the immensity resurfaces, and one's mind drifts toward the boundless. Immensity is the movement of the one who remains still.

On the discussion of whether the Hikikomori is daydreaming, first, Shobeiri's argument lacks evidence. Because the Hikikomori lives in the room, Shobeiri assumes that they must be daydreaming. He writes:

Beyond dispute, hikikomori, like Blekastad's brother who has lived most of his life in one room, master daydreaming during their lengthy social retreat, however, not only to distract their attention from the present but also to transport themselves into the outside world (Shobeiri, 2023, p. 28).

According to Shobeiri, daydreaming is something that occurs in the Hikikomori's life cycle and can be used to surpass the boundaries of the room (Shobeiri, 2023). Shobeiri's argument perhaps complements our conjecture about the customary body. Our previous assumption is that on the body-room scale, the boundary between body and room gradually melts. On the room-world scale, daydreaming is a movement of the mind, and the conscious activity in the room will allow the subject to go to the vast world and feel the immensity of existence. Then the boundary between room and world dissolves in the process of daydreaming. Following this line of reasoning, the Hikikomori through their own conscious activity, disrupt the boundaries of the body-room-world, this nested structure, allowing for an unimpeded flow. The room can serve as the embodiment of the Hikikomori's body, through which they attain a subjectivity of an expanded scale.

Shobeiri explains daydreaming by describing looking into a mirror. The momentary spiritual journey while gazing into mirrors is similar to the Hikikomori's daydreaming state, in which mirrors are like windows to the outside world. But the Hikikomori's room is not just filled with mirrors. In *Goodbye Without Leaving* (2021), Blekastad's brother is obsessed with rock music, keeping objects (concert merchandise) from before the isolation period. By reading the newspapers brought to him by the artist, by looking at the stickers of the band's logo on the table, by staring at the posters on the wall, the brother's consciousness might go beyond it. And it

could be that the memories and experiences evoked transcend the small room in which he is located. We can consider these objects as fuel for daydreaming.

My arguments and assumptions above build upon Shobeiri's application of Bachelard's theory in his analysis. Overall, Shobeiri's discussion rests on the idea that the Hikikomori suspends the experience of boredom and distract themselves from their solitude, creates a boundless augmentation of place by daydreaming (2023, p. 36). While I can agree that life within the room is not entirely defined by boredom or helplessness, I remain hesitant to affirm that the Hikikomori experience vivid, expansive daydreams that allow them to feel the 'immensity' of existence as a whole. After discussing the relationship between the Hikikomori and their room, as well as the room's representational and affective capacities, I will continue by exploring the Hikikomori's experience of time within the room through the lens of eternal return.

Nietzsche, Eternal Return

Shobeiri's Analysis. In the artist's account, Blekastad sees his brother's experience of time as relatively static. He writes that:

> For my brother, time stopped in 1988-89, Apart from an increasing oil of music
> magazines, a steady rotation of newspapers and a cd player I bought him in the mid 90's,
> nothing changed in his room… the only sign of time passing was the yellow staining of
> the magazine, newspaper and poster edges (*Goodbye Without Leaving*, n.d.).

Shobeiri argues that the Hikikomori blurs the distinction between yesterday, today, and tomorrow, blurs the temporal experience of past, present, and future. He mentions films and dramas that follow the theme of eternal return, such as Harold Ramis's *Groundhog Day* (1993).[9]

In the following discussion, Shobeiri suggests eternal return is the freedom from linear time and the choice to live a life of constant repetition. This choice itself carries the meaning of

transcending fate and spontaneous creation. He quotes philosopher Catherine Malabou who states: *"the eternal return is not only the hourglass turned over and over again of all things in their neutrality, their banality, of their anonymity, but a life that sees itself return" (24, original emphasis)"* (Shobeiri, 2023, p. 32). Based on this interpretation *"a life sees itself return,"* for one subject who faces their own destiny in eternal return, or for an observer witnessing this process, this is a kind of return that truly holds meaning.

Shobeiri applies Deleuze's perspective on Nietzsche's eternal return to demonstrate the potential of practicing this way of life as being creative and pointing toward transcendence. *"It is the thought of the eternal return that…eliminates from willing everything which falls outside the eternal return, it makes willing a creation (1962/2013, 64)"* (Shobeiri, 2023, p. 32). To summarize Shobeiri's point, the Hikikomori chooses this particularity of existence, creativity and generativity are implicated in their lives.

My Questioning and Connection to Nietzsche. However, the greatest possibility inherent in this eternal return life also extinguishes all other possibilities and potentials. This transcendence of life has no definitive outcome or destination. It resembles a tautological truth, merely affirming life itself and its unique temporality —nothing more. Does the Hikikomori make choices of their own accord? Does the Hikikomori see their life's return and embrace this fate? Or for what reason did they fall into this kind of life, and does the Hikikomori have the ability to shape themselves in the cycle? The unique temporality of the Hikikomori arises from their immersion in a life of eternal return —a mode of existence sustained precisely by the experience of infinitely recurring time. This existence corresponds to the tautological truth mentioned earlier, this mode of existence whose significance is exhausted in its very enactment. For an external observer, its meaning remains inaccessible, as it does not extend beyond itself.

Comparing Shobeiri's argument with Nietzsche's concept, tracing the deeper meaning of the eternal return, the following is my interpretation of Nietzsche's eternal return. To prevent the existence and moral order from descending into nihilism, Nietzsche proposed the concept of the eternal return, emphasizing the significance of present life, *"The core of Nietzsche's objection is that the unfulfillable desire for the other-worldly generates a false sense of the meaninglessness of this world"* (Thomson, 2011, p. 150). Therefore, Nietzsche's concept is a metaphor that this life is all you have; all the results of your choices will return. Every opportunity is vital; one should not live a life that goes with the flow.

The study of eternal return is also linked to another concept of Nietzsche, Übermensch. Those with the will to power will become the Übermensch, generating new values from within themselves rather than seeking them externally (Olney, 2020; Thomson, 2011). Therefore, the key point in interpreting the concept of the eternal return is that the Hikikomori need to demonstrate self-awareness, confront their own existence, and create values that they themselves recognize.

Disagreement with Shobeiri's Analysis. Based on the narrative of G*oodbye Without Leaving* (2021), it is not known why the brother enters into self-isolation, nor is it known whether the brother makes any choices, any emotional movements in his self-isolation. It also lacks the brother's perspective on time.

Most importantly, I had no way of knowing what thoughts and meanings were constructed in his shut-in life. Has he affirmed his life? Has the meaning of his existence emerged? Therefore, I have decided not to follow in Shobeiri's footsteps by further arguing how the artwork embodies the concept of eternal return through mediums such as photography and digital modelling, or by analyzing their temporal characteristics. In conclusion, if the concepts in

Nietzsche's original writing directly corresponded to the Hikikomori's life without interpretation, then the Hikikomori is indeed in the midst of an eternal return; if the state of the Hikikomori's life in the artist's narrative are carefully analyzed, then it is difficult for the spectator to know about the Hikikomori's experience of time, as well as the Hikikomori's specific view and practices of eternal return.

3.5 Comparison with Other Photography Works about Hikikomori

To address the limitations and singularity of an external viewing, particularly in the case of *Goodbye Without Leaving* (2021), where there are very few primary sources from the artist or artwork itself, I introduce the work of Maika Elan to expand the interpretive lens beyond Shobeiri's analysis. She is a photographer who also documents the life of the Hikikomori from outside observation through photographs.[10]

Having directly appreciated Elan's work and compared it with both Shobeiri's analysis and my reading of it, I ask whether the theoretical framework developed around *Goodbye Without Leaving* (2021) might also be applicable in interpreting Elan's work. My intention is not to draw upon visual similarities between the two works, but rather to consider Shobeiri's analysis as a transferable theoretical structure: one that might transcend the specific modes of expression employed by different artists, and still offer insight into the spatial condition of the Hikikomori.

Elan does not have the deep emotional connection that Blekastad has with his brother. Instead, she records the Hikikomori's life with relative objectivity and without assumptions of the Hikikomori's significance and life condition. Her perspective is rooted in interpersonal relationships and Japanese social patterns.[11] By viewing the photographs, it is difficult to apply Shobeiri's analytical method to Elan's photographs, as the daydreaming, the customary body, or

the experience of immensity.[12] However, Elan mentions that the Hikikomori feel safe, emotionally stable, and in control in their room. *"...in their room, where they feel the safest, they feel like they have mastered the space and their emotion already, so my job is simply to capture what I see"* (Loesch, 2017, n.p.). This mastery of the room seems to fit with our conjecture that the Hikikomori's body and the room are gradually becoming familiarized and united.

Figure 3

Image of Chujo, 24 years old

Note. From *"It felt safe here"*, by Maika Elan, 2017, https://witness.worldpressphoto.org/it-felt-safe-here-adcb41725fc2. Copyright 2025 by Medium.

3.6 Concluding Thoughts

By analyzing *Goodbye without Leaving* (2021), as well as reflecting on the analytical essay about this work, we can find that the image and lifestyle of the artist Blekastad's brother, the Hikikomori, in this work is superficially very much in line with the traditional image of Hikikomori as defined by Saitō in the last century: a male, who enters the state of shut-in in youth, refuses to socialize (Saitō & Angles, 2013).

Through the artist's expression and his brother's narrative, the spectator is able to partly visualize the Hikikomori's sensation of being confronted with a room through their own experience, especially their body-subject perception. The Hikikomori's world is arguably vast, and the room may gradually become a part of their body. Compared to the busy daily lives of the ordinary people —a utilitarian subject, a social being, a person who operates within the framework of late capitalist society —the Hikikomori may have recovered the fantasy and immensity of daydreaming in their room. For the spectator, such as the artist Blekastad, they could also daydream by reminiscing about his brother, merely by gazing into the room.

The passage and experience of time in the room in which the Hikikomori live are to some extent characterized by an eternal return. This allows them to dispense with the quantification of time; their day and night are upside-down, no longer following the uniform and manageable rhythms of life in ordinary society. All in all, according to Shobeiri, it seems that the viewer can believe, or might prefer to believe, that the Hikikomori are rich in perceptual and conscious activity in their rooms, possessing a vivid mind that has not yet been polished by mundane life. Elan's photo series seems to implicitly illustrate and corroborate the intimacy of the room, which speaks to the immensity of sense and the experience of the customary body. But it is still an external observation. The Hikikomori are sometimes glimpsed in open rooms, whereas

sometimes the door is closed, and they remain hidden behind walls. The Hikikomori captured by Elan are simultaneously present and absent. The above conclusions from Blekastad's work and Shobeiri's analysis, with my analysis of Elan's work reveal the limits of observing, studying and understanding the Hikikomori's life from the outside.

In Blekastad's work, because it is a work of external observation, and because of the limitations of understanding imposed by external observation, the brother's figure is not there. The artist does not share any recollections of conversations with the brother, of the brother's self-report, or of the brother's various forms of expression. His subject is not shown, his voice cannot be heard in the narrative. In Shobeiri's analysis, the brother's experience in the room is presupposed to be lonely and boring, but he still possesses a longing for the outside world, and he needs daydreaming to experience relief himself. With the help of daydreaming he allows his consciousness to go beyond this small room. This idea contradicts the immensity feature of daydreaming, which is vast and expansive. The process of daydreaming carries the potential for dissolving boundaries —between the body, the room, and the external world. So why would a Hikikomori need to leave the room? From the physical boundary to the psychological realm, the Hikikomori should remain within the room, as it is already vast and infinite enough. The act of wandering outside the room at midnight, as shown by Blekastad's brother, reflects the diversification of the Hikikomori phenomenon in the 21st Century. Such midnight outings are generally not considered meaningful social interactions. A more plausible interpretation is that the dreamlike quality of daydream fantasies coexists with the pain of social withdrawal experienced within the room. Life inside the room is not entirely filled with suffering and boredom, yet these immersive fantasies cannot fully resolve the negative responses and

functional impairment brought on by prolonged seclusion. For the idea of eternal return, it is difficult to observe how the subject of the Hikikomori has developed during the process.

Elan's work can serve as a reference from another perspective. She carefully selects her viewpoint to observe and describe the Hikikomori without inserting excessive interpretation. Hikikomori individuals may appear to have rich hobbies within their rooms, yet they also often seem to lack the ability to daydream, to organize and articulate their own version of life. These observations resonate with the previous discussion on the coexistence of pain and fantasy in the Hikikomori experience. We should also wait for her to complete this series before making further conclusions.

If we set aside Shobeiri's analytical text and refocus our eyesight on the direct viewing of the artwork itself, the recreated room is, in fact, indistinguishable from that of an ordinary person living in society. So, what exactly am I watching? Naturally, we need to ask: what image of the Hikikomori have we already pre-assumed in our minds? What kind of affect or atmosphere do we associate with the Hikikomori? What forms of representation do we expect when it comes to the Hikikomori? What defines Hikikomori life as opposed to the ordinary life? Regrettably, I cannot answer all these questions. In fact, an external view of the Hikikomori is like driving in a one-way line, with no room to get a U-turn, no room to explore to the left or right. The research process is full of speculation and critics' personalized interpretations. Many new questions remain unanswered. Why did the brother break away from 20 years of being a shut-in to become a midnight wanderer? If the Hikikomori's life is in a wonderland, then why did he leave and why is he wandering in the street? Questions such as these are not addressed in the artwork's narrative, and it is even less likely that the spectator will be able to derive possible outcomes from the analysis of the artwork.

In conclusion, the analysis of *Goodbye Without Leaving* (2021) provides the researcher with a unique perspective. The Hikikomori life has many wonderful possibilities, but no one can know if this life is really so. The Hikikomori life might have a certain attraction, the attraction comes from the unknown nature of external observation. When we as outsiders lack understanding of something, it creates space for imagination and idealization —daydreaming, immensity, a fantasy ego, infinite time…After the analysis, the attitude I maintain is to avoid overvaluing the significance and capacity of daydreams within the confines of the room. For the brother, his fate is marked by vicissitudes. More baffling than his death is his nocturnal wandering. To me, such a state of mind hardly seems predicable and desirable. Shobeiri's research is constructive, but his analysis is insufficient to support his conclusion, *"an endless expansion of place and a boundless cessation of time: a unique psychosomatic condition reconstructed through photography"* (Shobeiri, 2023, p. 19). This is a two-way dilemma for both the observer and the Hikikomori. Perhaps the Hikikomori did express something, perhaps the message was too brief, perhaps the medium that carries a message is difficult to retain. It could be a glance, a sigh, a gesture, a mark on the wall, a favorite newspaper, or the self-isolation life itself, all of this can only come from my speculation as well. Ultimately, his room is all he has.

Next, let's look at the example of the Hikikomori who are not living in silence, but create works in and about shut-in life, who have some hobbies and express their thoughts. This work will give us more room to understand the Hikikomori's life and conscious activities.

Chapter Four: Case Two —Nito Souji and the Game 'Pull Stay'

4.1 Intro

Pull Stay (2024) is a game developed by Nito Souji, a Japanese Hikikomori. We could regard Nito Souji as an absolute Hikikomori, because he experienced a long-time shut-in life up until 2025. In interviews and self-introductions, he appeared as a Hikikomori. We could also regard him a half-Hikikomori, because he never stopped socializing and working online. Nito has chosen to make a game about the Hikikomori because he feels that making games is like creating art, and that it is easier to stick to interests that fit with his life. Another reason for designing the game is its unique selling point: the Hikikomori life is a niche subject for the mainstream market (Souji, 2024).

In this chapter, I will begin by introducing the game, factors and interesting details in game design. Next, I will outline the theoretical framework and key concept I will use to analyze the game, including Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, game design studies and three Japanese ethical concepts: 気配り (Kikubari), 場の空気を読む (Ba no Kuuki wo Yomu) and 生き甲斐 (Ikigai). Finally, I will analyze the game as a reflection of the Hikikomori's ontology, their thoughts and their relationship with the external environment, the social context. This case study seeks to show that creative works by Hikikomori, particularly games, can serve as expressive media through which their subjective experiences and the inner logic of shut-in life become intelligible, allowing an emic understanding of the Hikikomori's worldview.

4.2 Descriptions of the artist and game

Nito Souji experienced job hunting failure and then fell into a state of Hikikomori from 2010-2025. In his daily life, he would check email and occasionally go outside for mailing documents. Over the past nine years, he has learned to make games from scratch and has spent six years to develop *Pull Stay* (2024). The full released version of *Pull Stay* (2024) hit shelves on Mar 31, 2025. The content discussed and analyzed in this study is based on the early access version (2024) on the digital game distribution platform Steam and the videos uploaded by the players and streamers. Nito now maintains a YouTube channel, actively engaging with fans on his Discord server and posts updates on Steam. In 2024, his family asked him to leave the apartment which they owned. With no place to live or work, he relocated to the Caucasus region of Georgia. Although he is no longer physically confined, he still leads a relatively reclusive life, continuing to develop games from abroad.

Pull Stay (2024) is a tower defense and fighting game, where player needs to manipulate the character Robo, a robot. By positioning the Hikikomori character in a sheltered state from the outset, and employing the rough aesthetics typical of indie games alongside minimalistic gameplay mechanics, Nito creates a framework through which players can engage with and comprehend the existential condition of a shut-in. Robo uses fighting skills, traps and props to defend Susumu, the Hikikomori protagonist based on Nito's own experience, who lives on the second floor of a house. Enemies to Susumu's room can enter through two access points on the ground floor of the house, at the left and right side of the player's screen. Their task is to pass all rooms on the first floor, reach the stairway, go to the second floor, eventually entering Susumu's room. Once Susumu's room is compromised, the player needs to restart the stage until Robo succeeds in protecting Susumu.

Resources & Characters

In the game, Robo has quite a lot of freedom compared to the Hikikomori, Susumu. He can go out of the house, while the protagonist Susumu is confined to the top bedroom. Susumu makes statements such as *"protect me,"* or *"they've reached the second floor"*. In his chat bubble at the lower left corner of screen, these messages also provide hints to players, letting them know the mission objective.

Figure 4

御握り (rice ball)

Note. Screenshot From *"PULL STAY Full Game + Final Boss & Ending",* by Video Game News, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=icD2iASAxKw, Copyright 2025 by Youtube.

Even if Susumu can only stay in the room, Susumu can make props (power-up items) for his robot guard, such as 御握り, a rice ball to recover health and power circuits to increase attack

power. Robo can also go into the room, tease or punish Susumu when he is lazy or when there is

no response. In Nito's later updates, Robo also cheers Susumu on as he makes props. Robo has

multiple tasks in the game. He can fight, set traps, also destroy the neighbour's house. After

destroying a building, Robo can collect three kinds of resources: timber, crystal and ore. The

player can consume these resources to build new rooms and increase the distance between

Susumu and external threats. For example, if you have three rooms in the beginning and then

build a new room, the enemy will have to go through four rooms to reach the stairway. Similarly,

the resources gained can be used to purchase traps that can be installed in rooms during the

game. These traps are common items found in everyday Japanese life, such as サンマ (pacific

saury), 抱き枕 (body pillow), toothpaste and more. For example, upon purchasing a pacific

saury/サンマ, a barbecue grill appears in the room. The player can fan the flames to intensify the

heat, igniting the saury's tail. Once lit, the fish launches like a missile toward enemies and explodes on impact.

Figure 5

サンマ, The Pacific Saury Missile

Note. Screenshot From *"THIS IS THE WEIRDEST TOWER DEFENCE GAME EVER!",* by Angory Tom, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sIw-c8pg5eI, Copyright 2025 by Youtube.

Style & Art, Character Design

The enemy characters vary from stage to stage as the difficulty level increases. The salaryman appears in the first stage. Later the player also will encounter Kikuchi, a fat otaku, Karateka, the karate practitioner, and Araki, the chef who enters with a bowl of noodles in his hand. They all have different moves, and the damage value of their moves varies. Robo can learn

their moves and skills in fighting with them to match the increasing difficulty. When these enemies break into Susumu's room and catch him, an animation sequence plays in which Susumu is pinned down by the enemies, pressed against a wall or a desk, in a gesture of bullying. At the end of each stage, the boss must be defeated for the player to progress to the next stage. Next, I will introduce the theoretical model and analytical method used in this case.

4.3 Theoretical Framework and Analytical Method

The analysis of *Pull Stay* (2024) will be conducted through four main aspects: game content, narrative, visuals, and social context. The core question is: how does the game designer, Nito Souji convey Hikikomori intentions through the game? Further, what unprecedented Hikikomori perspectives are revealed from an insider point of view?

Since this is Nito Souji's game, analysis will be grounded in his perspective. The analysis includes examining his video uploads on Youtube channel, his messages posted on the Discord server, and his thoughts expressed in interviews with influencer and media outlets. Nito's self-review includes his progress in developing the game and his understanding of the Hikikomori phenomenon. He also describes and reflects upon his living situation.

Game studies, in particular game design studies will serve as the entry point to this analysis. According to game theorist Cathie LeBlanc, the game objectives, such as capture, collection or territorial control, the in-game information and state displaying, the core and signature mechanisms, the theme and narratives, the visual characteristics, and the interaction with players will all be taken into consideration (LeBlanc, 2020). The interpretation of game

contents leads to a deeper understanding of its developer, Nito Souji, and further guides us toward an internal perspective of the Hikikomori experience.

Lacan's psychoanalytic theories are employed to analyze the character design, the protagonist's interactions, and the game's narrative. I will apply several key concepts, including the Mirror Stage, Lack, and Ego Ideal (Sturken and Cartwright, 2018, p. 102; Lacan, 1949; Kozicki, n.d.). Lacan's theory is well-suited to interpreting self-recognition and interpersonal relationships through the lens of structuralism and linguistics, emphasizing how the subject constructs self-awareness through the mirror stage and is continuously shaped and fractured by desire and the gaze of the Other. In *Pull Stay* (2024), through the Lacanian lens, we can understand how Susumu repeatedly affirms, escapes from, and reconstructs his unstable sense of self within virtual interactions. His theories are also applied to evaluate the developer Nito's perspective on his daily life and Japanese society in later.

In Lacan's exposition, the mirror stage is a critical period that every human subject undergoes. When infants see themselves in a mirror, they become deeply fascinated by their reflection, fixating on the image before them. Eventually, they come to accept this reflection as their own representation. In this context, the mirror is not necessarily a physical object; it can be any reflective surface, such as the face or the gaze of mother. In other words, a subject comes to recognize itself (ego) through encounters with the others (Mambrol, 2016; Sturken and Cartwright, 2018, p. 102).

The recognition and pursuit of one's ego are always accompanied by misrecognition. For the subject, the mirror image is an original, complete, and ideal self, one that has not yet been fragmented or subjected to the symbolic order of language (since this stage occurs in infancy). As the subject interacts with the others, the ego takes shape in the gap between self-recognition

and misrecognition. The formation of the ego is an ongoing process, continuously evolving over time as it seeks validation, or rather, seeks definition through the gaze of the others. The lifelong pursuit of this idealized self from infancy is, in essence, a lifelong pursuit of subject autonomy, a refusal to accept the inevitable alienation of the self (Mambrol, 2016; Sturken and Cartwright, 2018, p. 102). So, the human subject is not a singular, unitary entity, but rather a fluid and ever-changing construct.

This idea naturally leads us to the next key concept: Lack. Due to the absence of the ideal self, human beings exist in a perpetual state of lack. This sense of lack extends beyond the loss of the primordial subject; it is also intertwined with the loss of desire that follows the acquisition of language. The lack of desire here is the desire that does not speak through language, that has not been explained and presented in the Other. It is the desire that is outside the symbolic field, the desire that remain unspoken and, in many ways, unspeakable. For instance, consider the nature of happiness or the experience of ecstasy. In this sense, we can understand the lack as the unattainability and unbearable nature of pure joy, happiness, or rapture —a substance that transcends linguistic expression. Lacan refers to this as Jouissance (Sturken & Cartwright, 2018; Wang, 2019).[13]

Building on these two concepts, now we can go through Lacan's Graph of Desire, Graph II.[14] The key point of this diagram lies in the arrows, which illustrate how self-recognition and the external gaze functions in Lacanian theory to shape and revise the subject. It helps clarify the prior concepts of Lack and Desire, and the terms used in the diagram will also appear in the following analysis. In this graph, the barred subject 'S' represents the subject in lacking. The 'm' signifies the ego, while 'i(a)' corresponds to the ideal ego, how one sees oneself through the eyes of the others, a self-image that is constantly produced and reshaped through the interplay of self-

recognition and misrecognition. 'I(A)' is the point from which one perceives oneself in the eyes of the outside, from external judgment and evaluation. It is a complete, ideal subject, like a kind of illusion that resides within the Other. The 'A' signifies the Other, which is capitalized. The Other is a symbolic structure, a collection of all the established symbols, signs and languages, representing an external authority that defines meaning and ethics. Meanwhile, 'S(A)' is a specific other, letter o is not capitalized, as an individual that the subject touches and which can mirror the subject (Kozicki, n.d.; Lacan, n.d.). To summarize, Lacan's theory used in this chapter can be distilled into the statement that people are culturally/linguistically constructed, and that people are in a constant state of inadequacy and deficiency from their own idealized perspectives.

Departing from Lacan's theory, in considering the Japanese social background reflected in the game's content, I will use the following three ethical concepts as a foundation for understanding the social environment that Nito inhabits and for conducting a basic sociological study. The first concept is 気配り (Kikubari), which refers to care, careful attention (Tsuchiyama, 2023). It means being considerate of those around you, paying attention to the subtle changes, anticipating possible trouble in advance, and reading someone's mind. This concept is emphasized in the workplace and in customer service (気配りとは?, n.d.; Tsuchiyama, 2023). The second concept is 場の空気を読む (Ba no Kuuki wo Yomu), literally translates as reading air. It means to read the atmosphere of a place or the emotions of the others, choosing the right timing, taking the appropriate action, and using the right rhetoric for the situation (Yani, 2024). This concept is not only valued in professional settings but is also deeply ingrained in everyday social interactions (Yani, 2024). Both Kikubari and Ba no Kuuki wo Yomu point toward Japan being a high-context and indirect communication society. Living in

such an environment requires constant responsiveness, attentiveness to non-verbal messages, awareness of other perspectives, and efforts to maintain harmony in social interactions. The third concept is 生き甲斐 (Ikigai). At its core, it refers to one's life purpose —the things that bring value and joy to life. (KIZUNA, 2022). It is the meaning of living, the little pleasures of everyday life that can sustain a person in times of pain. Ikigai is often structured around four guiding questions: What do you love? What are you good at? What can you be paid for? What does the world need? The final question suggests that Ikigai is not solely about personal fulfillment but also about contributing to the well-being of the others (KIZUNA, 2022;「生きがい」について, n.d.). All these concepts will be interwoven with a Lacanian understanding of the ever-shifting self in the following analysis.

4.4 Analysis

Although Nito has accounts across multiple platforms, he has shared little about his family background, his support system, the details of living as a Hikikomori, or the specific ideas behind his game design. His content on YouTube and the Steam News Hub primarily focuses on game development progress and updates, funding status, production history, major personal changes, such as his move to Georgia, and his plans for the future. Therefore, the following analysis is based primarily on the content of the game itself, the limited information Nito has disclosed, and interpretive reasoning grounded in the theoretical framework previously outlined. While Nito does not explicitly discuss the Hikikomori phenomenon or articulate specific views, treating his game design as a medium of expression, as a form of his language, remains a valid and effective approach.

Analysis of Environment

The buildings in *Pull Stay* (2024) have resource benefits when broken. For game design, the destructible environments *"...create a sense of realism and make players feel their decisions truly impact the game world, deepening their connection to the narrative and gameplay"* (THE ART OF WORLD-BUILDING, n.d., para. 6). Destructive behaviour provides the player with an outlet for emotional catharsis, and the player also has to strategize to gain an advantage.

This strategy of destroying the environment indirectly reflects Nito's attitude toward the outside world and the Japanese society in which he grew up. At the very least he is discontented, he needs an outlet for expression, as well as greater attention and support. Looking back at Japan's modern history and social foundations, the country experienced rapid economic growth after World War II, culminating in the economic boom that lasted until the collapse of the bubble economy in the 1990s, marking the beginning of the Lost Decades (Guo, 2024; Suwa and Suzuki, 2013). In the 1990s, with economic decline and decades of cultural shifts driven by external influences, Japan's social foundation underwent disintegration, manifesting in the failure of traditional collectivist values, the cold detachment of social life —what some describe as orphanism, as well as deep-seated insecurity, loss of motivation, and growing intergenerational pressure and disconnect (Okutsu & Anzai, 2018; Suwa and Suzuki, 2013). Sociologist Mita refers to this as the Time of Impossible, signifying an era characterized by a loss of initiative (Suwa and Suzuki, 2013).[15]

To this day, the Greater Tokyo Area is the largest metropolitan area in the world (Karlsson, 2019). In Nito's game design, to break the house represents breaking the structure of reality and challenging what constitutes reality, questioning the stability and sustainability of contemporary life. As a Hikikomori, he expresses a desire to break down barriers in

communication and an indifferent social atmosphere. The destruction of buildings is also a

feature that reminds me of many Japanese anime works of the last century, such as the classic

1988 cyberpunk anime film *Akira*[16] by 大友克洋 (Katsuhiro Otomo). This undisputed classic

reviews on the individual's and society's quest for power, technological innovation, and endless

development.

Figure 6

Destroying Buildings

Note. Screenshot From *"PULL STAY Full Game + Final Boss & Ending",* by Video Game

News, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=icD2iASAxKw, Copyright 2025 by Youtube

Analysis of Resources & Characters

It is important to note that Nito has designed two protagonists. Rather than having the

Hikikomori fight directly, Robo defends the house and territory. Susumu in Japanese means to

proceed, advance; Robo's name is more obvious, a shortened form of 'robot'. These two characters have a lot of similarities with the king and queen in chess: the king is weak but the most strategically crucial piece. When the king is checkmated, the game is over. The queen is the most powerful piece but it has to protect the king, it could be traded or sacrificed.

There is no doubt Robo is a powerful figure. He can get out of the house, collect resources and repel enemies. He is a stand-in, an agent for Susumu interacting with the outside world. It can be said that Robo's raison d'etre is for Susumu's existence, because in terms of the strategy and core mission of Robo, all of his actions are for the protection of Susumu. He reflects the Hikikomori's low willingness to interact with others. As a vessel, Robo carries all of Susumu's wishes and ideas, including fantasies —he can do everything that Susumu cannot. For Nito, perhaps Robo represents his attitude towards the internet, online life, digital world. Robo might also represent the Hikikomori's supporters in their life, such as close relatives or the online friends they communicate with. These people act as a bridge for the Hikikomori's indirect engagement with the external world.

Robo has metallic-coloured skin and an antenna on his forehead, he is a robotic version of Susumu because they have identical appearances. The key question in this analysis is: who exactly is Robo to Susumu? Is he a part of Susumu's ego, or does he represent the external — someone who takes care of Susumu, such as a family member or friend on internet? There may not have be only one correct answer, and the answers may depend on how Robo fulfills Susumu's needs.

Using Lacan's theory, Robo could be interpreted as the ego-ideal —the version of Susumu seen from an external perspective, embodying the values that Susumu aspires to. This would suggest that Nito acknowledges values from the Other. Robo is his imaginary self, the

ideal subject and ultimate goal for him. When he is able to become Robo, he gains autonomy, he becomes capable of resisting the demands of the external world. Robo could also represent the ideal ego. He is a delayed and evolving version of Susumu's ego in the progress toward the ego ideal. In this sense, Robo may be a product of Susumu's mental activity within his room, a projection from fantasy of what Susumu regards himself. Under this interpretation, both Robo and Susumu are part of Nito's self-recognition, part of the Hikikomori ego. Robo could also be seen as an embodiment of Jouissance.[13] Since desire cannot be fully articulated through language, Nito creates a character in the game, attempting to show his narration of Jouissance. However, Robo does not become Jouissance itself; rather, Robo signifies it. Because Jouissance cannot be fully represented in any form, Robo functions as its signifier, pointing toward something that remains unspeakable. These unspeakable elements include the life Nito secretly longs for —a form of repressed desire, acts of revenge and destructive impulses, an unspoken yearning for care and connection, or a powerful self-image that embodies his hidden wishes.

Susumu can make props to enhance Robo's abilities, and Robo's actions depend on Susumu's messages, encouragement, and assigned tasks. In later updates, Robo is even able to cheer Susumu up or punish him. This evolving dynamic is more like a reciprocal partnership, and Robo is no longer just a role that follows orders and exists for the sake of Susumu. Or rather, this change dissolves the underlying tension and self-denial —Susumu can see Robo as a companion rather than an unattainable ideal subject.

Considering Robo in relation to the room, it is important to note that he does not represent the room. Instead, one of his tasks is to add more of the room, while Susumu remains inside. The room functions as a tangible barrier, shielding its resident from the gaze of the outside world, the outside judgments. The room significantly delays the process by which a

subject (Susumu) continually updates his self-recognition over time. This is because the room isolates him from others, cutting him off from external mirrors and thus blocking the chain of self-recognition described in Lacan's Graph Two —the movement from the ideal ego to the ego, and from the ego to the ego-ideal. Here, Robo, the figure that embodies Susumu's ideal, takes over all social interactions, while Susumu remains confined within the room, disconnected from the outside world. His agency is handed over to this imagined figure, an agent or a companion who acts in his place.

From these perspectives, Robo appears increasingly as an other, a subject with the same status as Susumu. Or rather, through external contacts and building rooms, Robo gradually becomes a part of Susumu's subject. I suppose that life inside and outside the room is part of the Hikikomori's ego and that they have equal status; they mirror each other from inside and outside the room. They also accept the room as part of their subjectivity. We can also assume that the Hikikomori's consciousness shifts between these different egos, highlighting the complexity of Hikikomori subjectivities and self-recognition.

Analysis of Fighting Game

Because the *Pull Stay* (2024) is a fighting game, like the destructible environment, the fighting game serves as a medium for emotional catharsis. In *Pull Stay* (2024), Robo uses violence to confront enemies, and every action in the game yields a tangible reward, like defeating enemies, learning new moves, gaining more resources. This sense of certainty and gratification from violent acts contrasts sharply with the unpredictability and lack of reward often found in real life. Furthermore, much like the themes explored in *Akira* (1988), Nito's design of Robo reflects a response to late capitalist society's obsession with efficiency and power. Robo has the ability to learn from his enemies —an individual is shaped by the system,

using its own rules to ultimately defeat it and advance through the stages. On one hand, adolescents need to establish their own identities/ego and grow into adulthood, and self-awareness and self-care are also growing under the influence of global culture. On the other hand, Japanese society, amid ongoing stagnation and decline, continues to uphold traditional values such as collectivism, social harmony, and reading the atmosphere. Caught in this contradiction, Nito drapes Robo in violence, allowing him to operate in a game world free from moral expectations and legal constraints. Robo's battle include acts of destruction, rebelling against every rule. We must analyze Robo's meaning to the outside world and to Susumu through these violent expressions. Again, it is precisely through these battles that Robo/Susumu becomes a powerful individual, fulfilling and even surpassing the expectations placed on a standardized adult figure by external society. This is Nito's aesthetic of violence, a form of satire and mockery directed at Japanese societal norms. *"Signing off from the dull absurdity of the adult world, hikikomori become the center of a story with endless restarts, a tale with magic and wonder as givens. Heroism comes with an online walkthrough. The terror and domination of one's desires are being overthrown"* (Chen, 2019, p. 14).

Analysis of Enemy

In game play, the visual features reflect the subtle feelings of how the Hikikomori regards the outside world and the others. Most of the enemies are common figures in Japanese society, they are involved in daily life and constitute the spectacle of society. For example, Araki, the delivery man, works in a Ramen-ya. Karateka, obviously participates in a karate club. Delinquent (Yanki), is referred to as an even more notorious word is 暴走族 (Bosuzuko), meaning a gangster-like group of teenagers who smoke, drink, behave rudely, ride custom motorcycles and rebel against mainstream values. These images of enemies reflects the

difficulties in the Hikikomori's interactions with people in society, the lack of fit with social values, and the failure of being defined by others.

Based on the ethical concepts like Kikubari and Ba no Kuuki wo Yomu, we can see that Japanese society still inherits traditional values that emphasize altruism and the maintenance of collective harmony in their interactions. It is also important to understand these enemies from the perspective of Ikigai, and how collective life and collective goals occupy an important place in the Ikigai of these enemies. Enemies —the Japanese who are depicted in this game, value community life, create a sense of community and share beliefs such as 愛社精神 (dedication to one's company), martial arts, craftsmanship, and 極道 (gokudō, the gangster culture). Their Ikigai and life endeavours are widely accepted. Even as gangsters, there are members of violent groups who follow a code.

I wish to argue that the Hikikomori's discomfort may lie in their inability to bond with this typical collective life, which results in self-isolation. Nito's innovation lies in his directness. Susumu votes with his foot, places himself in the room and removes himself from collective life. The ordinary is the enemy, the enemies are constantly trying to intrude into the Hikikomori life. The acceptance of collective expectations is placed in the position of opposition.

In applying Lacan's conception of the ego and ideal ego, when the enemy appears in the Hikikomori's life, they become a conflict between ideal ego and ego for the Hikikomori. Collective life emerges in front of Hikikomori individual once again, the concrete mirrors reappear one by one, impacting the Hikikomori's self-recognition in the room. This could be a tortuous experience for the Hikikomori. Looking at this plot, on the surface, it seems that the outside world generally believes that a life of isolation has flaws, and the Hikikomori need to be guided, corrected, and brought back into society, so the enemy invades Susumu's house. But a

deeper issue is at play, presented in the form of these enemies: are you satisfied with your isolated life compared to a collected and connected life with others? This is due to the contradictions caused by different values of the ideal ego.

For the player who is playing the game or the spectator watching from the side, the question arises: Does the Hikikomori still have an Ikigai in their shut-in life and if so, what is the Hikikomori's Ikigai? Will their Ikigai be more widely accepted by those seeming blended into wider society? The portrayals of Robo and the enemies reflect the contradiction between a powerful individual and collective values. As the individual grows stronger, the number of enemies they must confront increases. Between the individual and the collective, a fundamental and irreconcilable tension exists, one that is often concealed within the routines of everyday life. The Hikikomori emerges from this rift torn apart by the imbalance between individual and collective power, perhaps 'choosing' to retreat into their rooms.

After one stage of the game is cleared, the player is invited to play a bonus mini game featuring Susumu. In Pull Stay's storyline, these mini games are developed by Susumu, but he later puts them on hold. Corresponding to the real world, these are some games that Nito practiced before developing *Pull Stay* (2024). In one mini game, Susumu needs to march forward through the corridors of the school building, eating gold coins and dodging the uncle-faced high school girls in uniform. Here is an example of Nito's absurdist aesthetic design —a high school girl with the face of a middle-aged man, or a middle-aged man in a schoolgirl uniform. When Susumu bumps into a girl, she falls and instantly falls in love with him, causing the mini game to end in failure.

Figure 7

Uncle-faced High School Girl

Note. Screenshot From *"PULL STAY Full Game + Final Boss & Ending",* by Video Game News, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=icD2iASAxKw, Copyright 2025 by Youtube.

The uncle-faced high school girl in this mini game may reflects the intense relationship that Hikikomori experienced in their school life. In particular, it speaks to memories or experiences of gender conflicts. Giving the uniformed girl a middle-aged face seem like satire or irony —a middle-aged face clearly strips away a teen girl's gendered characteristics, mocking her youthful appearance. We can imagine the Hikikomori's discomfort with collectives during adolescence. After all, the classroom during adolescence is never short of love, friendship, and all the quarrels, frustrations, and heartbreaks that come with competition. In this mini game, if the player collides with a high school girl, the game ends. The only way to pass is by continuously eating gold coins in the corridor. Nito's intent here is subtle —it could be a personal reflection of his attitude toward female and adult society during his school years, or it might be an outsider's critique of the materialism and the gender relations in Japanese society.

Analysis of Traps

The traps in the game, like pacific saury embodies Nito's immense creativity during his shut-in period. Based on his description in his channel, Nito has to deal with scope creeps during game development. The 'scope creep' is a term describing the addition of too many ideas into the game. Nito wants to fully develop each idea (Nito, 2024), so he had to learn to keep creativity and development costs within reach. From this, it is evident that Nito's design ideas, or his fantasies about the objects in the room are abundant, to the point that he must consider progress and making choices between ideas. The game's diverse range of items and exaggerated, comedic action style reflects the Hikikomori's conscious activities within the room. These designs seem to confirm what is mentioned in my analysis of Blekastad's work in that they can be understood as daydreams, as the products of the imagination. Whether Robo serves as a vessel for daydreams remains a central question that ties back to our earlier discussion on the design of

the protagonist. Whether Nito's wandering consciousness ever truly escapes the room and flows to the outside remains uncertain. What is clear is that he has constructed his own world —his game. These fantasies give shape to Nito's absurdist aesthetic, as he modifies the foundation of reality, using it as a means to resist the invasion of the real world.

Analysis of The Ending of Pull Stay

In the endgame sequence, Robo leaves the room to defeat the final boss, The Discarded. In the game's plot, he is once again the protagonist of a game that Susumu initially developed but finally abandoned. The Discarded acts like a behind-the-scenes director, residing in a control centre and playing Susumu's unfinished game. He wields a mind manipulation machine, allowing him to control ordinary people and turn them into relentless enemies invading Susumu's life. The Discarded confronts Susumu with a truth he refuses to acknowledge —his loss of motivation to develop games, something Susumu cannot admit because doing so would mean facing the truth that *"you dumped your precious youth, time, and efforts in vain"* (Video Game News, 2024, 58:44). Provoked by these words, Susumu becomes hysterical and attempts to destroy the mind manipulation machine. However, The Discarded appears beside him, revealing a stupendous truth: the mind manipulation machine has always been inside Susumu's mind, hidden behind a concealed door next to his shut-in room. The Discarded states:

> Your machine seems to have helped you a lot, everyone has become hostile to you as you have wanted,
>
> It's YOU who became hostile to them in the first place, you wanted a reason to hate them,
>
> You wanted them to become your enemies so that you could rationalize your hatred,

The blood rushing anger is your true emotion (Video Game News, 2024, 1:01:41).

Figure 8

Robo's Hug

Note. Screenshot From *"PULL STAY Full Game + Final Boss & Ending",* by Video Game News, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=icD2iASAxKw, Copyright 2025 by Youtube.

Susumu can no longer bear it —he is determined to destroy both the control room and The Discarded. However, after he detonates everything and beats The Discarded, the once-menacing figure transforms into a trembling humanoid, curled up on the ground. Susumu keeps shouting, *"Kill Him!"*. But Robo approaches and embraces the humanoid instead. As this happens, the dark silhouettes of Susumu around this scene begin to fade away, dissolving into the surroundings. The humanoid becomes young Susumu, who then turns around and embraces Robo. In the final scene, Susumu wakes up in the real world. He glances outside the curtain at an

officer passing by, still filled with fear when the officer looks back, and instinctively retreats

behind the wall. Then, he shifts his gaze toward the PC next to his desk. After a brief hesitation,

he decides to turn it on. I believe he has made up his mind to finally develop his unfinished

game.

The game's ending seems to be both a response and a conclusion to our analysis, as well

as Nito's own reflection on Hikikomori life. The social life is constantly intruding —while the

Hikikomori hides inside their rooms they cannot ignore the presence of the outside world, yet

they remain unable to adapt to it. Through this ending, Nito conveys that viewing the external

world and ordinary people as enemies is one way in which Hikikomori rationalize their

existence. They are confronted with external standards —the Other, the structured language and

ethics, and the Ikigai. Simply put, their lives are different from those others. They need to

explain this difference to themselves, which is why hostility exists within Susumu's mind and

why ordinary people and social values manifest as enemies in the game. In reality, Hikikomori

attempt to change but struggle to take the first step. It could be that the Hikikomori resist

confronting the fact that they have accomplished nothing and refuse to accept external standards.

In the game's narrative, Susumu's refusal to face his unfinished game leaves him stuck, unable

to move within his room. When The Discarded is defeated, black silhouettes of so many

Susumus stand on chairs and desks around him. I believe these figures represent the alienated

part of the Hikikomori, the societal pressures that Hikikomori have internalized. This part

including expectations of ego-ideal and Ikigai, even perceptions and expectations specifically

directed toward the image of Hikikomori do not just demonstrate how an ordinary person should

behave within society, but how a Hikikomori should exist and act within the social order. This

corrective 'shaping' process of alienation intervenes not only after one becomes Hikikomori, but

also before. In other words, an entire life trajectory is shaped. The voices pressure Susumu to

erase the child who represents the Hikikomori's dream. This ongoing pursuit of one's childhood

self or childhood dreams reflects the Hikikomori's continuous longing for an initial, idealized

figure. It is a response to the suppression of one's agency and represents a lifelong search for

autonomy and self-determination.

Figure 9

Young Susumu

Note. Screenshot From *"PULL STAY Full Game + Final Boss & Ending",* by Video Game

News, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=icD2iASAxKw, Copyright 2025 by Youtube.

When The Discarded transforms into young Susumu, Robo embraces him. Against the

warm light, Robo seems to become more and more human as the game progresses, merging with

Susumu. Robo, as Susumu's companion, embodies the care that Susumu as well as Nito longs

for; it protects his Hikikomori identity. The Discarded as a character, represents the dream of a young boy consumed by resentment —the voice that has been constantly suppressed by the outside world, the part of Susumu's Ikigai that diverges from external values. This child image having been suppressed, loses their original form and ultimately becomes the final boss, positioned as the internal antagonist within the Hikikomori's psyche.

If we speculate on the emotional trajectory of a Hikikomori, it might unfold like this: because I harboured such childlike thoughts, I failed to adapt to society; because I failed to adapt, I became a Hikikomori; and because of that, I began to despise the child within me. Thus, the child transforms into a figure born of self-hatred. When Robo embraces Susumu, it signifies the moment when the pursuit born from the Hikikomori life meets an inner strength, the fusion of ideal images from two different stages of life. This is the moment Susumu stands at the threshold of leaving his Hikikomori state.

The real Susumu aka Nito wakes up in the 'real world,' finding the motivation to continue developing his game. This ending answers one of the core questions we have discussed: How does one reconcile ego instability and fundamental conflicts between self and others? What are some possible reasons for overcoming the Hikikomori life? As Della Chiara says at the end of her essay "Lost in communication: The relationship between hikikomori and virtual reality in Japanese anime," (2023) *"we must better understand that the infinite possibilities allowed us by the virtual reality are not meant to be seen as another dimension where to flee, but as a stepping stone to wholly fulfil ourselves in our everyday life"* (2023, p. 92). Nito's answer is: complete what you wish to complete, realize what remains unfinished, accept your vulnerability, and acknowledge your deviation from the ordinary life. Through this, the first step forward becomes possible.

4.5 Concluding Thoughts

Nito revisits his life step by step through the process of creating and promoting his game, gradually evaluating himself while also reflecting on the reasons that led him into Hikikomori life. His initial trigger was his failed job-hunting experience. What sets him apart is that he has continuously communicated and made a living online, maintaining virtual connections that may have allowed him to view his situation more objectively. He rarely mentions his relationship with his family, only stating that they provided him with an apartment where he lived for ten years. Beyond his online interactions, we know little about the composition of his support networks.

Through my analysis of the case, Nito's game provides details about the interior of his room life. The Hikikomori phenomenon is described from an internal perspective, it is a specific response to the norms of social life, and it can be understood as a form of passive resistance or a self-repairing strategy. This condition is accompanied by struggle, communication difficulties, evading and occasional outbursts of intense emotional expression.

Nito places the Hikikomori in a protected position at the beginning, and with the stylistic crudeness of an indie game, the simplicity of the gameplay mechanics, and his Hikikomori's ontology grants players an opportunity to understand shut-in life. The key objective of the game is to defend the Hikikomori, resisting the intrusion of the mundane life into the Hikikomori world. This resistance is established through destroying the buildings around the Hikikomori to create space for a cozier environment (new rooms). By assuming the Hikikomori's role, players explore the game from their perspective. Four key revelations emerge: the changing Japanese socio context, Nito's internal view as a Hikikomori, the psychological complexity of Hikikomori

subjectivity, and significance of multiple egos, selves, and the room. In my analysis, the latter two aspects are the main focus and also the most clearly structured.

Rather than completely affirming or rejecting either life inside or outside the room, Nito conveys his perspective in a playful, satirical tone, addressing the observer's curiosity. The Hikikomori's life depends on the room, it is a gentle rejection of the outside world. Based on Nito's design of the game's ending narrative, emotions of hatred and fear have been generated as a helpless psychological comfort mechanism during the shut-in time, then the gentle rejection sometimes becomes violent. While they do have a desire for interaction, it must remain within an acceptable range. A radical interpretation would be that the Hikikomori are indifferent to the outside world, needing only themselves, their room, and a mediator to act as the full executor of their will —represented in the game by Robo. However, this idea is refuted by Susumu's name, his interactions with Robo, the game environment's setting and ending.

A Hikikomori's self-awareness is in constant struggle, seeking balance between ego, self-recognition, ideal ego, and recognition from the Other. Everyone must navigate these elements, but for the Hikikomori, the gap between these stages of self-recognition can feel insurmountable at one certain stage of life. This unresolved tension gives birth to the Hikikomori subject. For Nito, he seems reconciled both with his shut-in identity and his external social ego. As evidenced by his real-life circumstances, he can go out at night, make bank deposits, get newspapers, pay taxes, fly to another country to live, and in this process get help from online communities. In this sense, he may have accepted and affirmed his existence, ultimately bestowing meaning upon his life. We can consider him as a non-pathological Hikikomori.

The room itself is indispensable to the Hikikomori, as Susumu never steps outside. If we apply the interpretation of daydreaming and bodily expansion from Case One to *Pull Stay*

(2024), then the act of constructing more rooms appears to reinforce this idea. The design of in-room props and the game's attack and defence strategies further confirm the imaginative activities of the Hikikomori's consciousness. Their home becomes a playground —chaotic, dazzling, and absurdly amusing.

In this chapter, the Hikikomori's perspective was presented. In the next chapter, we will move beyond the Hikikomori's subjectivity to contemplate intersubjectivities. In Chapter five, I will analyze Watanabe Atsushi's 金継ぎ（Kintsugi) project.

Chapter Five: Case Three —Monuments to Restoration by Watanabe Atsushi

5.1 Intro

渡辺 篤, Watanabe Atsushi is an artist who is also a Post-Hikikomori. He lived in reclusion after graduating from Tokyo University of Arts. After three years of reclusion he overcame his Hikikomori life by walking out of the room. His art practice revolves around loneliness, separation, reaching the limits of expressing internal emotions and personal experiences. As he writes down in his CV, he pins his hopes on art to intervene in social issues both physically and mentally and to have a direct impact on the process and outcome of the solution.

In this chapter, I will begin by introducing Watanabe's working methods and his artworks. Next, I will outline the theoretical framework I will use to analyze his pieces, including the philosophy of 金継ぎ (Kintsugi), a dialogical analysis from Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), and interweaving previous concepts about Lacan and Japanese manners, which were applied in Case Two. Finally, I will review Watanabe's storytelling and narrative techniques in his work, reviewing the interpersonal relationships of the Hikikomori, the impact of interpersonal relations on Hikikomori development, the evaluation of the Hikikomori life and traumatic experiences, and the unique role of art through multiple perspectives.

Watanabe utilizes his experience of being Hikikomori to make artworks. He has had a variety of collaborations and community-based artworks, introducing voices from current Hikikomori, lonely and self-isolated people, and people who have mental disorders and have experienced trauma. His art practice is interdisciplinary, including photography, video works, installations co-created with Hikikomori, and community-based, socially engaging works. Since

2014, Watanabe's practice has revolved around concrete modelling and utilizing the key

technique, 金継ぎ (Kintsugi), the art of repair (Watanabe, n.d.).

In his work, Watanabe has different roles including social activist, artist, post-

Hikikomori, mentor, colleague at work and son. Within the context of the research he has

established, he collects stories and weaves narratives with these figures. In his practice, we will

be looking at various ways of visualizing emotion, memory, and experience. We will examine

how the Hikikomori's emotions and experiences, ideas from other disciplines, and the unique

approach of the art form are organically combined, and how the discourse about Hikikomori is

enriched by mixed-media artworks.

5.2 Artwork Description

Watanabe started his art project *I'm here* in 2018 (Watanabe, n.d.). It is a comprehensive

art project that includes multiple sub-projects including seminars, workshops, collaboration

projects and exhibitions. The theme revolves around the Hikikomori, the experience of

loneliness, trauma, limitations and divisions in society. Watanabe aims to support the isolated,

hidden and disappeared subject in public space, to make their presence visible and bring their

voices back.

修復のモニュメント (Monuments to Restoration) (2019) is one sub-project. Watanabe

recruits five volunteer participants who are people facing loneliness, mainly the Hikikomori. He

collects the Hikikomori's ideas before their meeting and makes a sculpture with concrete. The

sculpture serves as a personal motif of the volunteers, representing the trauma or circumstances

that lead them to become the Hikikomori. For example, the theme can be a cause of the

Hikikomori, the environment in which they lived in isolation, or an uncomfortable factor in the Hikikomori's life. On the day of the collaboration, Watanabe and the Hikikomori sit face to face, then create the monument together.

The process goes like this: Watanabe and the Hikikomori use hammers to smash the sculpture, then use the Kintsugi technique to repair the sculpture. During the process they talk to each other, discussing what transpired before they entered the Hikikomori life, negative emotions such as anger, resentment, captivity, sadness, depression. They also discuss that their experiences of being a shut-in and how they perceived the outside world. The repaired object is considered a monument. The whole process is recorded by a camera hanging from the ceiling from an overhead view. Watanabe edits the original film and adds subtitles to accompany the conversations. One year later, all the monuments created during the project were brought together for an exhibition of the same name *Monuments to Restoration* (2020).

I would like to explore the initial works in the series, which is as the archetype and created from Watanabe's own stories. ドア (The Door) (2016) is a 1:1 duplicated of a door, made from concrete, broken and then repaired with Kintsugi. In his website, he uses one line *"破壊と解放の過去を再生させるドア"* (修復のモニュメント, n.d.) to announce this work, which means a door to reclaim a past of destruction and liberation.

Watanabe introduces the story of his experiences during his Hikikomori days through this piece. The story unfolds as follows: Watanabe is struggling in his shut-in time and realizes he cannot escape. He believes his mother can save him, because his mother shows a positive attitude at the very beginning of the shut-in. But after waiting for several months, his mother doesn't think of any measures to come to the conversation, open the door, and does not even knock on his door. Thus, Watanabe feels helpless, powerless and frustrated. Dark emotions well

up in his heart, and Watanabe's resentment grows by the day. He resents his mother for doing nothing. When the negative emotions accumulate, finally, one day, he kicks and breaks down the door and shouts *"扉はこうやって開けるんだよ！！"* (This is how you open a door! [translated by author]) with Watanabe in a hysterical state. This expression neither breaks the shut-in situation, nor gain his mother's affection. His father has heard the noise and comes near, seeing him as a monster, a demon. His father is also unable to do anything about it, and eventually has to call the police (Watanabe, 2018).

Figure 10

ドア, The Door (2016)

Note. From *"修復のモニュメント"*, by 井上桂佑, 2020, https://www.atsushi-watanabe.jp/monument-of-recovery/. Copyright 2025 by Watanabe Atsushi

Figure 11

わたしの傷／あなたの傷**,** My Wounds/Your Wounds (2017) made by Watanabe and his mother

Note. From *"修復のモニュメント"*, by 井上桂佑, 2020, https://www.atsushi-watanabe.jp/monument-of-recovery/. Copyright 2025 by Watanabe Atsushi

In his 2017 work *わたしの傷／あなたの傷* (My Wounds/Your Wounds), the method for creating *Monuments to Restoration* (2019) begins to take shape: sit face to face, break and repair a meaningful object, and talk about the Hikikomori experience. Watanabe invites his mother to create the monument—the house he lived in during his self-isolation time. In their

dialogues, they talk about the time they had and review their ideas and activities in the Hikikomori's period. The specific dialogue between the mother and son will be discussed in detail in the analysis section.

5.3 Definition, Theoretical Framework and Analysis Method

My research will focus on works that apply the technique of Kintsugi. Kintsugi means golden joinery; it is a traditional Japanese art of repairing broken ceramics by using 漆(urushi), the adhesive lacquer mixed with powdered metal, usually gold. Craftsmen first apply the lacquer to the edges for the shards, then glue the broken pieces together as though they were part of a puzzle. Then they remove the excess coverage, leaving the edges clean, flat, for applying the gold powder on the broken traces. Finally, the repaired ceramics reveal shining metallic crackles, or have a gold glittered rim or foot (Keulemans, 2016; Kintsugi, n.d.; Matano, 2023).

Instead of disguising cracks, Kintsugi embellishes and highlights them, embracing flaws as part of an object's history and giving a piece greater emotional meaning. The visual and aesthetic experience of Kintsugi is linked to the 侘び・寂び (Wabi-Sabi), a Japanese philosophical and aesthetics concept. There are many interpretations of Wabi-Sabi, such as aloneness and passage of time, enjoying the rust, dust, worn and the beauty of simplicity and aging. In short, Wabi-Sabi means a beauty of simply and imperfection. There is a longing at the same time as experiencing this beauty, while appreciating the impermanence of beauty (Keulemans, 2016; Kintsugi, n.d.; Matano, 2023). Beyond a technique, Kintsugi metaphorically

applies to personal and emotional healing; it symbolizes resilience, which turns breaks and scars

into something even more valuable.

Figure 12

金継ぎ, Kintsugi

Note. From *"サステナブルの前衛へ。知っておきたい、"金継ぎ"伝統工芸の今"*, by 清水

井朋子, 2021, https://www.25ans.jp/lifestyle/lifestyle-other/a36168911/kintsugi-210422/.

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While Kintsugi ethically and aesthetically frames the analysis of the third case study, I also draw upon the philosopher, literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's (1895-1975) concept of dialogism. The dialogism theory helps analyze the dialogues in Watanabe's work, revealing the multiple voices and tensions within narratives about Hikikomori. It allows us to understand how these voices collectively construct, or conflict over Hikikomori phenomenon. One of Bakhtin's central ideas is that all communication, including written and spoken language, is inherently a dialogue—a dynamic interaction within a single voice, as well as between speakers and listeners, between the text and its readers.

Dialogue comes from the relation between self and other, where 'other' implies person, plant, animal, object or idea. Dialogism's a priori is that all existence is a web of interconnections from which meanings are being continually generated. These are linked and in constant dialogue through different means, language being just one (Bakhtinian dialogism, 2014, para. 2).

Bakhtin proposes the concepts of polyphony and heteroglossia in his dialogism theory. A polyphonic structure is one in which multiple voices exist in the same text without one dominant. The narrator expects others to respond, and the narrator's voice will resonate with and influence the voices of others like weaving (Bakhtin, 1981; Robinson, 2011). The concept of heteroglossia provides a lens for exploring the complexities of identity, power, and interpersonal interaction in stories, meaning that the narration codes voices from different social consciousnesses, communities, and usages. The language of the individuals in the story comes from multiple communities, and the social language that develops within different collectives unfolds in the narrator (Bakhtin, 1981; Frank, 2012; Robinson, 2011).

In the analysis, I will put forward several questions as an entry point: What resources influence the narrative? What is left untold? How does time and space affect voice? What communities do the narrator's voices come from? Who is listening to the story? I will use these questions to explore the shared narration, in order to understand the intersubjectivities, the relationship between Hikikomori and the external other(s).

5.4 Analysis

In appreciating Watanabe's work, the spectator watches the process of conversation and restoration of the sculpture, which has been video-recorded. Watanabe collaborates with other Hikikomori, creates the space for dialogue and art creation. The final work documents the process of creation through photography text, video, and the monument is the final signature product.

When discussing Kintsugi, Watanabe mentions the research of psychologist Peter A. Levine. Levine outlines the similarities between Kintsugi and trauma care. In Levine's book *Trauma and Memory: Brain and Body in a Search for the Living Past* (2015), he employs Karim Nader's experiment[17] in the 2000s, which involved blocking the synthesis of memory consolidation proteins in lab rats, to explain the mechanism of long-term memory and the feasibility of recovery and reconstruction from trauma. Nader's experiment provides evidence for the potential of the subject to reconstruct the past and shape the present. For the traumatized subject, they can also reconstruct and repair the personal history that was, not by directly obscuring traumatic memories through medication, but through non-pharmacological approaches, such as reminiscing, conversation, behavioural guidance and intervention. Levine relays these practices as a form of dialogical Kintsugi. When one subject is able to recall

traumatic memory from a position of empowerment, the trauma changes with each recalling (Levine, 2015, Chapter 8). Each recollection does not change the fact that the event that caused the trauma occurred, and that the emotions left behind by the trauma (sadness/angst/regret) are important for the restoration of dignity and respect for selfhood. But the memories are softened, re-accepted, and woven into the acknowledgment of a subject's identity. It's as if a beautiful artwork is born out of brokenness, and that beauty is embedded in the broken traces and scars.

Watanabe's understanding of Kintsugi and its aesthetics is strongly influenced by Levine, *"When something has been shattered, treatment doesn't try restore it completely, exactly how it was before. Especially nowadays, this is the bedrock of the concept known as "recovery" in the welfare scene"* (Watanabe, 2021, 03:07). For Watanabe, the Kintsugi technique represents acceptance of one's present state, alleviating burdens and pain, and assigning value to the pain and scars of the past.

For the Hikikomori, they look back on their experiences in the Hikikomori time, including reasons, feelings, and relationships. The process of recalling trauma is also the process of reconstructing trauma. Visualizing this process through an object enhances the psychological implication of the process of reminiscencing. The Hikikomori see themselves breaking a meaningful object and then repairing it with their own hands, the occurrence of self-repair even more profound. In the restoration process, Kintsugi contributes its unique visual experience with its healing positive connotations, demonstrating the possibility of repair after destruction.

In the dialogical space, communication is not limited to language. Gestures, body movements, eye contact, the passing of tools, and the tactile sensations exchanged in the process of repair—all these elements contribute to the construction of an intimate relationship between the interlocutors. We can use the perspective of dialogism to try to understand communication

beyond language, considering that the object itself is a dialogue. This experience is also quite reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty's conception of the customary body. The oft-times unspoken collaborative process offers Hikikomori, who are usually confined to their rooms, a broader experience of the outside that involves being in dialogue which doesn't necessarily involve verbally speaking. When discussing their stories, this form of interaction proves to be more accessible than other modes of expression, compared to question-and-answer conversations or mandatory questionnaires. And in a Lacanian sense, the presence of others, both actual and potential, places the Hikikomori before a mirror—they consider their ideal ego and the Other they face, deepening both their narrative and self-evaluation.

Figure 13

Repairing process, Watanabe and his mother. The final work shown in Figure 11

Note. Screenshot From *"わたしの傷／あなたの傷"*, by Watanabe Atsushi, 2017,

https://vimeo.com/262427955/e9817e80ee, Copyright 2025 by Vimeo.

  For the spectator, watching Watanabe's video works reveals the birth of a monument

from fragments. The collaboration allows the Hikikomori to depict their own story, which

provides a more nuanced understanding of the Hikikomori phenomenon, avoiding unnecessary

imagination and prejudice. As a post-Hikikomori, Watanabe is better positioned to communicate

with the Hikikomori collaborator. Particularly in the group exhibition *Monuments to Restoration*,

spectators encounter six works by the Hikikomori. Each artwork juxtaposes the monument with

video of their dialogue, imbuing the piece with an aura—a sense of presence, an awareness that

these individuals once stood face-to-face, repairing the monument with their own hands. The

spectator can hear multiple sources within the voice from one artwork, and in the exhibition they

can hear the voices of six Hikikomori individuals. This aligns with what Bakhtin refers to as

polyphony.

Figure 14

Audiences in 修復のモニュメント Exhibition

Note. From *"Exhibition: 修復のモニュメント"*, by 中川達彦, 2020, https://www.atsushi-watanabe.jp/monument-of-recovery/. Copyright 2025 by Watanabe Atsushi

In the article "Emplotting Hikikomori: Japanese Parents Narratives of Social Withdrawal," (2016) Rubinstein discusses the role of narrative, particularly how different types of parents articulate the Hikikomori phenomenon as it unfolds in their children's lives. Narrative is the fundamental organizing method for one to establish personal order and to understand the world. Narratives organize and shape reality, mediate the relationship between one individual and the external world. For the Hikikomori and their surroundings, *"when the expected life course is disrupted, whether by illness or some other form of trauma, narrative can be a significant way to bridge the gaps between expectations and reality and create a sense of continuity despite changed circumstances"* (Rubinstein, 2016, p. 643).

To analyze the dialogue in the video between Watanabe and his mother, I draw upon Bakhtin's concept of polyphony and heteroglossia, which were introduced in the theoretical framework section. To do the dialogical analysis on *My Wounds/Your Wounds* (2017), the conversation between the artist and his mother is in Japanese, accompanied by English subtitles. The following analysis is based on the subtitles. The creating process between Watanabe and his mother is one of mutual listening, rather than an exchange of short phrases. Reminiscing, self-reviewing, and narrating along the trajectory of questions – these elements shape the entire dialogue.

In their conversation, Watanabe's mother reviews her character, her values and rules of behaviour first. She begins her statement with a hard truth, *"In my life, the sole focus was about*

putting an extra effort in whatever task I had in front of me, I never thought of realizing my dream or finding solutions to problems. I restrained my desires, all I could do was just tackle head on with my tasks" (Watanabe, 2017, 00:30).

When Watanabe's mother faces him, she is not very clear about how he struggles in the room. She says, *"I was working from morning till night"* (Watanabe, 2017, 08:55). And she gives an assumption that *"he probably could't understand what was going on himself"* (Watanabe, 2017, 08:46). According to Watanabe's mother, the situation shifted towards the point of irreversibility. By the time she noticed her son's unusual life, she had already missed the best opportunity to care about him, to understand his life and to get him to leave the room.

In the 30 minutes long process, Watanabe only speaks two times: he asks questions and bridges his mother's narration. Watanabe lets her talk about details she caught when he is in the Hikikomori time, her feelings, her mental activities and actual actions. Then his mother expresses a helpless, overwhelmed, complex feeling, stating she didn't know the seriousness of the situation. She mentions their family environment is a key factor, *"...my husband and I never discussed things. Accordingly, the children never discussed things with their parents. That's probably all the more reason things got complicated"* (Watanabe, 2017, 10:03). Overall, she recalls how the Hikikomori issue seemed to have happened suddenly, that her son suddenly fell into the room, and just as suddenly became angry with her. This alludes to the outburst that Watanabe shows in *The Door* (2016).

His mother mentions relationships, which people influenced each other, and how the Hikikomori phenomenon brings pain and suffering to close relatives. *"Of course, it's not just him, it's the people around him that's going to have a hard time too. Like they say, "We don't*

live alone, " "We all influence someone and someone influences you," "We influence someone strongly and vice versa, but we are not aware of these things" (Watanabe, 2017, 12:13).

I think the likely reason for this narrating is, as a Watanabe supporter, she was under tremendous pressure during the three years of Watanabe's withdrawal. Speaking from her own perspective, the Hikikomori experience may have been a necessary emotional catharsis for her, as it could be surmised that she has a lot of unspoken ideas. In the recorded conversation, the mother expresses caring about Watanabe, but she finds it hard to pass on her feelings to others, specifically to her son in the room. So, in Watanabe's view she has done nothing (Watanabe, 2018). She summarizes her lack of action as a lack of wisdom, a lack of competence, and a lack of awareness in this professional field. But she states that she did care about Watanabe, and she was willing to give her life for her son, which she expresses as a kind of an old-fashioned idea:

> I remember thinking, perhaps if I had known more vocabulary and was capable of reasoning someone down with good conversational skills, I may have been able to make a difference. At the same time, I wasn't convinced that such intelligence and skills alone would be enough to deal with my son (Watanabe, 2017, 15:17).

She cares deeply about societal judgment and believes that the Hikikomori situation would damage her reputation. To prevent such judgments from being associated with her son, she feels the need to conceal his situation, also to avoid Watanabe facing difficulties in his future social life:

> And also, I was consumed with how I could save face and what not…Maybe it would all just be one period in the long life he had ahead of him, but it was hard for me to consider how people may judge him once they found out about it. I wanted to keep it a secret and I wanted to do it as amicable as possible (Watanabe, 2017, 19:01).

At first, she holds onto these ideas, but in the end, she forgets about them. She only wants to bring her child out of the room. After her persistent knocking, Watanabe finally steps out. In her view, even if she gives her all, things might not necessarily go smoothly. She attributes her son's return to a coincidence, something akin to fate, destiny, or shared empathy. At the perfect timing, everything ends.

> I was trying to open the door and he was trying to open the door at the same time. It just happened at the right time, I think, his desire to get out of his room. I and my all-out effort to keep knocking on his door out of desperation coincided in the right way.
>
> It wasn't just him trying to get out. And it wasn't just me trying to get him out.
>
> I don't think we would have found the solution if our feelings were out of sync.
>
> The timing is crucial and a slight disconnection can make all the difference (Watanabe, 2017, 21:08).

When reflecting on the Hikikomori life, Watanabe's mother regards her son's return as mere coincidence. Aside from persistently knocking on his door, she does not mention taking any other actions. She takes this narration of return as a coincidence for several possible reasons. First, since she has no concrete solution, yet since her son eventually steps out of his room, she perceives his departure from the Hikikomori state as a coincidence. She is unaware of what has happened on the other side of the door. In this sense, by calling it as a coincidence she actually is relinquishing narrative agency. By invoking the word 'coincidence,' the reason for his return is entrusted to something unnamed and unknowable. This may suggest that the mother's narrative is shaped by discourses drawn from folk belief, mysticism, psychology, and other systems of meaning, discursive structures that made space for the emergence of the term 'coincidence' in her account. Interpreted this way, the ambiguity surrounding agency actually reflects the concept

of heteroglossia. The language used by the mother in her narrative draws from multiple communities, linguistic structures and vocabularies shaped within different collectives reveal in her account. Second, although she has few strategies to help her son, she still needs a narrative to explain his return. Thus, she frames the timing, the turning point as mere coincidence. Third, by calling it a coincidence, she is also acknowledging her own role in the process. After all, for an event is to be called a coincidence, at least two or more factors need to work together. In this case, the coincidence includes both Watanabe's will and her love/actions, both contributing to the outcome.

Throughout her narration, the mother repeatedly references how others perceive her — this includes her child's evaluation as well as broader societal opinions. She uses external judgments to articulate and confirm her people pleaser trait. She mentions her age, reflecting that in her youth, she never engaged in self-exploration. As she grows older and embarks on this process, she becomes increasingly unable to tolerate herself. In her account, the voices of others occupy significant space —these voices come from her immediate surroundings and the community she is embedded in. She emphasizes her hardworking nature and her perseverance. When it comes to problem-solving, she places her trust in authority and the opinions of others. She also explicitly states that she needs her husband's support, and it is precisely due to his absence that she was unable to follow her own desires.

Unlike in the previous two case studies, in Watanabe's narrative, he directly expresses that life inside the room was painful. The external environment was harmful in his view at that time. He mentions that being shut-in felt more painful over time. He directly describes the feeling inside the room that the room is safe, but also that all possibilities are lost, he cannot go up or down.

When Watanabe starts to respond, he reviews his thoughts in the Hikikomori period and describes his thoughts on the Hikikomori issue. He mentions his grandma's old house, saying he always remembers the well besides the house. Around age three, he was told never get close to the well. If not, he might be sucked in, drawn into this bottomless well, never to return. With his memories of the well, he offers an analogy, *"being a Hikikomori is probably close to being in a swamp"* (Watanabe, 2017, 23:59). Then Watanabe says, *"As a Hikikomori, you are literally shutting yourself behind closed doors to protect yourself from others and the society that harm you"* (Watanabe, 2017, 24:18). Watanabe mentions that the external environment is harmful to him. He talks about the significant changes that shut-in time will bring; the Hikikomori feels safer in the room but gradually loses all motivation and possibilities. *"It's kind of like being in your comfort zone, but you are neither going up nor down. It's like getting your feet caught in a lukewarm swamp. It becomes impossible to call it quits mid-course and come out"* (Watanabe, 2017, 24:55). In his idea, the Hikikomori receives the protection of their family, but through these protections the Hikikomori *"can't come out of it by yourself"*.

The memory of the well serves as a prototype of a real-life, like a foreshadowing of fate or a strange allegory. His mother once warned him as a child not to fall into the well, yet he eventually found himself trapped within it—entering the life of a Hikikomori. In Watanabe's account, he likens the well to the Hikikomori issue, describes the scene of him and his mother standing before it. This imagery offers the spectator a reference, allows us to imagine what it felt like for artist and his mother to live through his Hikikomori time. By invoking shared family memories, he encourages his mother to recall the past and uses these collective experiences to understand the Hikikomori state. The connection between the two imageries lay a crucial role in his narration, which from the well beside the old house to the lukewarm swamp, both spaces are

comfortable and terrifying. Watanabe's narrative strategy proves effective, as he employs metaphor, imagery, and storytelling to drive his perspective forward. As the prompting character in the dialogue, Watanabe steers the conversation, guiding his mother's responses and shaping the direction of the discussion. In the dialogue, I believe he was not seeking a 'standard answer'. He did not expect his mother's account to serve as a definitive response, nor did he position his own narration of the Hikikomori experience as dominant, which would be something the mother must follow or conform to. The progression of this dialogue follows a polyphonic structure. His self-narrative remains personal and introspective, avoiding references to external views. Watanabe's mother's views remain from her perspective as well.

Watanabe's self-narration ends with questions to his mother. He asks her how she views the increasingly prominent Hikikomori phenomenon in society and why this issue is so difficult to resolve. His mother acknowledges that life is full of suffering but continues to emphasize the importance of timing. She also shares her thoughts on time, mental strength, physical well-being, and energy.

> Also, when I'm feeling lively I can accomplish things, but there are times when you just feel empty. When I was young, I could never understand how it feels to be out of energy. Now that I'm depressed at times, I can relate to that feeling…the thought of living in that state for years to come had me terror-struck (Watanabe, 2017, 29:10).

This conversation ends here. While they are talking, Watanabe and his mother piece together the house like a puzzle, the very house they lived in together during his Hikikomori life. With gestures, body language, and the passing of tools, they collaborate and the overhead camera quietly records the process. The room is mended and reassembled, with golden cracks marking the trace repaired through the Kintsugi. The inclusiveness of their dialogue and this collaborative

art creating process echoes a polyphonic structure: the viewing perspective is not fixed on any single narrator; the use of multiple languages included verbal and physical language; all narrators occupy an equal footing; and different pieces of the house represent different perspectives or narratives.

In the video, the mother's voice fills most of the time, providing the audience with a perspective external to the Hikikomori. She acknowledges the occurrence of the Hikikomori and recognizes that even after her son leaves his room, the impact of the Hikikomori experience does not simply come to an end. As someone who has experienced it firsthand, the mother narrates calmly. She states her experiences without overly intruding on the other side. Certain details in her story are worth examining, such as her sensitivity to the issue, the influence of the external environment, and interpersonal interactions.

Watanabe and his mother's narratives are both separate and co-narratives, the main differences lie in their emotional experiences and the duration of their struggling times during the Hikikomori period. The mother mentions that she was working the whole day, when Watanabe's anger seemed to erupt suddenly. However, according to Watanabe's self-narration in *The Door* (2016), he had been in psychological pain for a long time before his emotions were finally released through shouting and destruction. The mother begins her narrative by reflecting on her own personality, which may stem from a question from Watanabe. If I describe the Hikikomori phenomenon from her point of view, I would most likely describe the son and my life first, rather than myself. From a Bakhtinian perspective, the narrating details and differences I previously analyzed all reflect the concepts of polyphony and heteroglossia. Building on Rubinstein's view, this narrative space deconstructs the voices of the two individuals while simultaneously repairing their relationship. Both the artist and the mother are positioned as equal, allowing for a

multiplicity and resonance of voices. Their differing narratives coexist, which is precisely why I describe them as both separate and co-narratives (Rubinstein, 2016, p. 643).

The mother's image is one of repression, overwhelmed by the Other. She picks the word desire to describe what she lacks, not need, not demand, nor her ideas, attitudes, or preferences. The word desire is more fundamental and reflects the extent of her self-repression, revealing her lack of personal expression and independent awareness. In fact, given that her primary focus is on the will of others, it becomes difficult to distinguish between need, demand, and desire in her case (Lacan, 1949; Lacan, n.d., Wang, 2019). It is hard for spectators to identify one specific object of her desire or any larger goal, much like our discussion of Jouissance in Case Two. She does not elaborate on the details of her desire in her narrative. We could say that a significant part of her need, demand, and desire is rooted in the recognition of the other, and in obeying the Other. Her tone in the conversation is noticeably passive—perhaps because she is accustomed to placing herself in a follower position. She attempts to empathize with Watanabe by describing her own hardships, or perhaps she is simply used to such an interactional dynamic. Her people pleaser features have placed her in a weak position in many of her life's dialogues.

The mother has lived for a long time following the inertia of social rules, her voice carries the values, the Other, and arguably the collective consciousness of Japanese society. When describing her son's struggles, she does not focus solely on his experiences but instead frames the hurts in terms of the impact on those around him, including herself as a relative. Her story gives the impression that there is much left unsaid, it also feels as though she is addressing an imagined audience, considering what she should reveal, and what shouldn't. In fact, I feel that both the artist and his mother have left many things unspoken during their 30-minute conversation. The moments of silence serve as pauses for rest, for organizing thoughts, or for

stopping at a moment when something should not be said… Silence is thought-provoking, the beauty of silence in the dialogue embodies the aesthetics of Wabi-Sabi, a beauty found in incompleteness, in the poignant regret of words left unsaid and responses never given. Wabi-Sabi, exists in the gaps between utterances, in the unfilled pauses suspended in time.

Based on the analysis of the mother's recollections, I regard her subjectivity as lacking a critical self-consciousness part to comprehend the Hikikomori issue, making a genuine understanding nearly impossible. When Watanabe isolates himself from society for self-protection, the mother's personality aligns with others' expectations, numbs herself, appeases others, and gradually allows her subjectivity to dissolve into the crowd.

Watanabe titles his work *My Wounds/Your Wounds*. This title communicates the idea that he sees his mother's suffering. He has a sense of otherness towards his mother, that she is not a supporter who can be completely relied upon to live entirely for him. He cares for his mother at least. Out of this artwork, when Watanabe talks about why he left his room, he describes that when he came to the living room after breaking the door, he discovered that his mother had bought many books about the Hikikomori. She was attempting to understand his state of life. Before this, his father had contacted a company that would force the Hikikomori to leave their rooms, throw them in a shelter and manage their life. Through the dialogical exchange, it becomes apparent that the mother and Watanabe both have a poor relationship with their father and cannot communicate well with him. After breaking the door, Watanabe also realized that his mother had undergone traumatic experiences and needed emotional support, which she did not receive from his father. Therefore, among the three paths —wandering outside, living in the shelter as planned by his father, or living with his mother, he chose to leave the room and live with his mother, carrying their shared pain together (Watanabe, 2018).

At the end of the story, Watanabe sees his mother's pain and chooses to share it with her, avoiding sinking deeper into the stagnant solitude of his room. His brief journey beyond the room becomes the turning point that has led him away from the Hikikomori life. His choice is also a response to the uncommunicative father within the family. Leaving the room may have been a passive decision —he had no real countermeasure against his father's plans. Not wanting to be forcibly confined, Watanabe has had to settle for a compromise. Watanabe's choice also embraces the expectations of the Other. He considers his family's feelings, taking care of their emotions, and reestablishing emotional connections through mutual support. This reflects the societal values and pressures we have repeatedly discussed. Overall, behind his departure from the room lies a web of complex reasons—this is the 羅生門 (Rashomon) of Hikikomori's return.

My Wounds/Your Wounds (2017) was created by the artist and his mother after he left his Hikikomori state, reflecting on his three years of isolation. It serves as a means of repairing their relationship, expressing mutual care, and acknowledging their shared pain, ultimately affirming his choice of a post-Hikikomori life. Smashing the house of the past symbolizes the reshaping of memories, narratives, and the recognition of trauma, while also acting as a cathartic release of past suffering. In my perspective, the use of Kintsugi bridges the gap between the narratives inside and outside of the room, filling the void between perspectives and providing a shared experience that unites both viewpoints.

5.5 Concluding Thoughts

Watanabe's narrative about his family situation corresponds to Saitō's research on the causes and symptoms of Hikikomori. Within the family, communication is ineffective, and even

when expressions are made, they fail to elicit responses. The Hikikomori, family, and society remain disconnected, with no overlapping space among the three, what Saitō's refers to as the *"point of contact".* This point could serve as a space where the mother engages with societal feedback on family dynamics while also allowing Watanabe to share his thoughts. The mother's numbness, as reflected in her personality, serves as a coping mechanism for external pressures, particularly in response to the father's absence. She also expresses the willingness to sacrifice everything for her children, a sentiment commonly found among parents of the Hikikomori. The father's absence raises questions about whether it stems from indifference, avoidance of the Hikikomori issue, or the need to maintain his authoritative parental image. The father cannot have a conversation and exhibits a lack of interest, yet he intermittently appears in Watanabe's life. This inconsistent presence leaves the Hikikomori feeling unsettled.

Watanabe's narrative is indeed influenced by psychology and psychiatry. His reflection on the Hikikomori life and his eventual departure from isolation is summarized as a process of receiving help, sharing trauma, and building support networks. Through artistic expression, he seeks to confront his trauma, believing that the Hikikomori either need to heal themselves or be healed. In his description of *My Wounds/Your Wounds* (2017), he states:

> 囚われは、自分を客観視できたときにその固まったロックを外すことができる。1人で心悩む時にこそ、誰かの傷に傷気づき痛みに寄り添う事で、自分の痛みへの近視眼的な執着心を和らげる。つまりそれは人を救い、また、自分自身をも救うことになる。

> Captivity can be broken when one gains the ability to view oneself objectively. In moments of solitary struggle, noticing someone else's wounds and empathizing with their

pain can ease one's own myopic fixation on suffering. In other words, by saving others, one also saves oneself (*修復のモニュメント*, n.d., [translated by author]).

I recognize the positive significance of the Hikikomori stepping out of their rooms. However, spectators might anticipate different experiences or hold higher expectations for collaborative artistic forms, hoping Watanabe would provide deeper insights into the Hikikomori phenomenon. His mother's narrative reveals the impact of family on the Hikikomori and the experiential gap between those inside and outside the room. To the mother, her repressed pain and desires make her resemble a hidden Hikikomori —not one confined within a room, but one who moves within society with a Hikikomori-like psyche. Her room consists of societal norms and external expectations, which both protecting and numbing her. The concept of Kintsugi seems to merge their narratives (*修復のモニュメント*, n.d.). As they repair the model of the room using Kintsugi, they also support each other in reality, sharing the trauma together. Their mutual effort to reconstruct their relationship creates new dialogues, making the monument and Kintsugi symbolic representations of their future life.

As Watanabe transitions into post-Hikikomori life, reconnecting with others, actively communicating, expressing empathy, and having a target or we say it Ikigai, these actions become both the signs and results of reintegration. Because Watanabe engages in these actions, he has left the Hikikomori state; conversely, because he has left the Hikikomori state, he is able to engage in these activities.

Regarding the work's directness, the Kintsugi technique and recorded conversations enhance the spectator's awareness not only of Hikikomori individuals but also of the Hikikomori's support networks. Watanabe's work demonstrates the complexity of narratives, the diversity of voices—polyphony and heteroglossia, and the layers of expression—both expressed

and unspoken, which all reflect the intricate subjectivity and relational dynamics of Hikikomori individuals. I believe Watanabe's most profound statement is: *"It's kind of like being in your comfort zone, but you are neither going up nor down"* (Watanabe, 2017). This statement serves as a summary of the three cases.

In this chapter, the relationships between the Hikikomori and others have been discussed through the analysis of Watanabe's *My Wounds/Your Wounds* (2017). In the next chapter, to conclude the analysis of the first three cases, I will use the concept of Ikigai as a framework to connect different portrayals of Hikikomori, thereby approaching the central inquiry of this study, the discussion on what constitutes a fulfilling life and its possibilities.

Chapter Six: Discussion —Hikikomori, Ikigai and Meaningful Life in Contemporary Societies

In this chapter, I will summarize and compare the analysis of previous three case studies, describe the scope and approach of my research, the narrative perspectives of artists, and their interpretations of the Hikikomori phenomenon. In the three case studies, I will analyze and distill several key concepts —such as the customary body, ego ideal, and dialogism to interpret the different types of the Hikikomori represented in each work. Following this, I will reintroduce the concept of Ikigai to respond to the question posed at the introduction of my study: What does it mean to live a meaningful life in contemporary society as analyzed through Hikikomori art? I chose Ikigai because this concept not only addresses the core question of this research but also serves as a unifying thread for the discussion, regardless of whether the Hikikomori figures in each case possess a clear life purpose or personal expectations, or how much their life goals differ in detail.

The analytical approach in Case One centres on observing the psychological perspective of the artist Blekastad's brother within the room in the art piece *Goodbye Without Leaving* (2021). It explores his possible mental states, thoughts about others and the outside world, and his understanding of self, being, consciousness in application of Merleau-Ponty's fleshification of the body and Nietzsche's eternal recurrence. Since the Hikikomori in this case has passed away in reality and is absent within the artwork, our study can only proceed through the artist's external narratives and critic's external response. If we imagine the shut-in life as the core of a fruit, and the observations from close relatives as the flesh, then the external recollections, imaginings, and psychological projections merely capture the fruit's outer appearance, its colour and scent. By examining the conscious activities and cognitive capacities of the Hikikomori in

the room, I arrive at a tentative conclusion: the room partially embodies the subjectivity of the Hikikomori, it is both a container and a tracing shape. The psychological state of the Hikikomori is marked by both suffering and dreamlike qualities.

In the analysis of *Pull Stay* (2024), Case Two delves deeper into the psychological perspective of the Hikikomori. Within the game world constructed by Nito Souji, the designer introduces his ontology and worldview —an internal perspective of the Hikikomori that is presented to the spectator. The game's narrative approach and my research focus extend beyond the Hikikomori figure or the small world inside the room. Throughout the analysis, I examine game mechanics, environmental and character design, and dedicate a substantial portion to discussing how the dual protagonists and the game's endings reflect the relationship between self-cognition and the external world from a Lacanian perspective. This broadens the study to include a sociological perspective as well. The conclusion drawn from the analysis is that Nito has come to accept the Hikikomori identity, becomes a non-pathological Hikikomori, or at least embraces it as a part of his ego.

The focus of the analysis in Case Three: *My Wound/Your Wounds* (2017) is on the self-other dynamic, specifically the relationship between the Hikikomori and their close relatives (mother and son). I closely examined the use of voice in the work. Watanabe employs an interpersonal narrative that incorporates multiple voices, using visual and physical collaboration to depict the Hikikomori phenomenon. In fact, it could be argued that the Hikikomori is fundamentally an interpersonal condition, as it deeply affects the social network formed by those surrounding the individual inside the room. Using the Kintsugi technique to repair a motif-like sculpture, the mother and son's memories gradually reveal the Hikikomori life's hidden details. Though brief, Watanabe's personal narrative conveys emotion with notable precision, marking

the first instance in the three case studies where we directly hear a Hikikomori individual reflect on their own shut-in life. Meanwhile, the mother's recollections provide an external perspective to her Hikikomori son, adding complexity to the storytelling. The spectator is thus invited to witness contrasting narratives of the Hikikomori life from both parties, including differences in duration, emotional intensity, methods of narrative, self-perception and review. By naming the work as a monument, and juxtaposing the collaborative creative process, final works, and other works with Hikikomori volunteers in exhibiting space, Watanabe amplifies both the impact and therapeutic potential of this project. For Watanabe, Hikikomori individuals need persistent emotional support from outside the room. He believes they should rebuild relationships, accept others, and learn to bear negative emotions.

Ikigai

 I chose Ikigai to synthesize the three cases, a concept already introduced in the analysis of Case Two. To review on the meaning of Ikigai mentioned previously, it denotes that which continuously brings a sense of purpose and joy to life —whether it be people, such as friends or relatives; or things, such as one's work or hobbies (KIZUNA, 2022; 「生きがい」について, n.d.). This concept is closely related to the key message, one individual with Ikigai can serve as an example in answering what constitutes a good and meaningful life in contemporary society.

 It is important to begin by emphasizing that Ikigai is a value-neutral concept. That is, discussions surrounding it in following do not inherently involve value judgments. It does not distinguish between what is considered productive or unproductive, socially acceptable or deviant (Gaines, 2020). Although the overall orientation of this paper leans toward a stance that

values self-inquiry, personal integrity, and a critical attitude toward external norms and social conformity, it remains reasonable that one's Ikigai may still involve the presence of others and the expectations of the external world.

In Case One, none of the others seem to understand the brother's Ikigai. Rock music, posters, concert merchandise, and nostalgic memories of these items serve as his hobbies and forms of entertainment in the room and may also have represented his Ikigai. In the later stages of his Hikikomori life, he begins wandering the streets at night. After such a long shut-in period, here the reason of wandering could have signified the emergence of his Ikigai. It may reflect a desire to re-establish contact with the outside world, an effort made within the brother's safe boundaries. Or perhaps, the brother simply lacks any sense of Ikigai. Paradoxically, it was after he left his room that those around him began to see him as abnormal, ultimately sending him to a hospital. This reversal suggests that the others perceived his Ikigai, or his life purpose, as simply continuing his life in the room, that he should be quiet, without adding to anyone else's burdens.

Through the analysis of Case Two, Nito's Ikigai appears to be his continuous development and dedicated work on the game while in his Hikikomori state. In *Pull Stay* (2024), Susumu's Ikigai is gradually uncovered through the final stage of game development. His initial goal is to remain inside his house, relying on Robo to fend off intrusions from the outside world. For most time of the gameplay, Susumu's Ikigai is a kind of anti-Ikigai, a deliberate rejection of all goals. He hides his body, stays absent, and minimizes interaction. As the narrative progresses, Susumu begins to understand himself more deeply through Robo. In the final boss fight, he confronts his own lack of agency and the core conflict between himself and the outside world. After cleaning all stages, Robo and Susumu show signs of merging as a singular ego, and Susumu gains a sense of agency. In the end, Susumu awakens from a dream and decides to

resume developing his game, thus achieving a unification between the Ikigai of the game's protagonist and Nito in real life.

In Case Three, Watanabe's Ikigai lies in reclaiming his former direction. After spending three years as a Hikikomori, he has drawn nourishment from his experiences in isolation to return to an art practice. He advocates for mutual care and emotional support for others, which also means bearing the weight of his mother's helplessness and her inability to perceive, to understand, and to communicate. His work is now creating new possibilities for other Hikikomori, and his projects may help guide them back into socially engaged life. Thus, his Ikigai bridges the goals of a Hikikomori existence with those of life within broader society. It reflects a new value system that has emerged from his post-Hikikomori life, much like the role of Kintsugi in his artwork: to mend the gaps, harmonize the broken parts, and generate an entirely new form of beauty.

Watanabe and Nito's practices raise a compelling question about Ikigai: can the Hikikomori life itself be considered a form of Ikigai? Since there are many ways of being, and both Nito and Watanabe have developed meaningful careers during or after their Hikikomori periods, is it possible to view the Hikikomori state as a new form of life narrative, as a legitimate occupation or life purpose? I would argue against legitimizing the Hikikomori life as a sustainable way of living.

Firstly, based on my analysis of three cases, Hikikomori existence is fundamentally a passive resistance to the external world. As Watanabe has described, it offers a sense of safety, but also draws individuals deeper into a narrow space, cutting them off from most possibilities outside the room. Some may counter this by pointing out that ordinary people also face limited opportunities in their daily work. This argument is embedded in Case One, in discussing the

experience of time inside the room. After all, doing one thing over a period of time necessarily means rejecting others, this is the linear nature of time. However, compared to a socially integrated life, the shut-in life offers clearly reduced possibilities —physically, materially, socially, and temporally. The range of physical activities, the room's capacity, the available objects, the people one interacts with, and the overall experience of time are all severely constrained. The viability of a Hikikomori existence is highly dependent on the resources and support systems they receive. Even though the Hikikomori phenomenon has developed to include both pathological and non-pathological distinctions, and even though some cases report no significant functional impairment or negative emotional states, its structural limitations and the psychological changes in this process are still difficult to anticipate. Here, Nito says, *"Also, I have no escape anymore elsewhere. Game development is a final resort of mine"* (Sean and Oreo, 2020, 11:21). Similarly, Watanabe says, *"またその時、私は荒れた部屋の様子も写真に収めた。室内には尿の入ったペットボトルや食べかけの物などが散乱して非社会的な状況が出来ていました"* (At that time, I also took photos of the messy room. The room was in an antisocial state, with plastic bottles filled with urine and half-eaten food scattered around) (Watanabe, 2018, [translated by author]). Even if there is daydreaming or the illusion of eternal return, life in the room is still cramped, weakens one's energy and vitality.

Secondly, the successes of these individual cases cannot be generalized as evidence of the phenomenon's validity. Beyond these three cases are countless unrepresented Hikikomori: women Hikikomori, pathological cases, and situations that deviate sharply from the narratives discussed. If we acknowledge the accomplishments of Nito and Watanabe, we must also reckon with the sparse legacy and tragic outcome of the brother in Case One.

Thirdly, in all three cases, the Hikikomori either physically left their rooms or expressed a desire to be rescued by others. In Case One, the brother eventually began night wandering. In Nito's game, Robo and Susumu care for each other, and Robo ventures into the external world, break through the surrendering environment. Watanabe literally breaks through a door, revisits his childhood, expresses a yearning for his mother's care and rescue during his shut-in time.

It is not that suffering cannot be part of Ikigai, but the suffering here is not something these Hikikomori actively chose or embraced. They do not love this life, as suggested in my analysis of Case One. The inner world of the room embodies a coexistence of both suffering and daydreaming, restriction and a sense of security. Therefore, I believe it is dangerous to recognize the Hikikomori as a profession, lifestyle, or life purpose. To affirm such a life, or to romanticize shut-in living with a dazzling aura, risks obstructing the Hikikomori's chances of stepping out of seeking other possibilities for living.

If the Hikikomori phenomenon as a way of life cannot be directly aligned with our core question, then what is the significance of the work done in this paper? How can the Hikikomori life be meaningfully connected to our central inquiry? Through the summary of the Ikigai of the Hikikomori, we can see that these aspirations implicitly contain the conditions for leaving the Hikikomori life. These conditions include establishing communication with others, understanding others' sentiments and offering mutual care, finding something one wants to pursue even if it is a simple hobby, and having a comfortable zone in life, whether psychological or physical. If the subject who holds these goals and aspirations were not the Hikikomori but instead other individuals or groups in society, these descriptions of Ikigai would still be widely applicable. In fact, compared to people participating in social life, the Hikikomori's descriptions might even be clearer. For instance, the brother's parents who sent him to the hospital, or

Watanabe's mother, I think these people lack autonomous Ikigai. Their values about a good life tend to follow societal norms and external expectations.

However, for the Hikikomori, it is especially difficult to bear the scrutiny of external values from their stuck life, to discover an Ikigai, and to maintain the motivation to act upon it. More often, the Ikigai of the Hikikomori begins in a simple form, an anti-mainstream Ikigai, a purpose rooted in rejecting external society, in isolating themselves, and one that constantly risks slipping into tension, conflict, and emotional collapse. When the Hikikomori are truly able to reach their aspirations, they can transcend the room and move beyond the Hikikomori life.

Perhaps we need to dive deeper into how each of the Hikikomori's Ikigai was formed, why they accepted their Hikikomori identity or eventually left their rooms? We find that these reasons are often shaped by the interplay of multiple factors. The three Hikikomori portrayed in the case studies each have distinct interests, lead different forms of shut-in life, and reach different outcomes. What if the brother's family had nurtured his interest in rock music? What if there had been no PC in Nito's room? What if Watanabe had been sent to a shelter instead? Each case contains countless alternate paths that could have led to a different ending. The journey to discovering one's Ikigai is never singular. And not only for the Hikikomori, the life trajectories and the possibility of finding Ikigai for all the individuals observed in these cases are shaped by a complex interplay of social environments, family backgrounds, physical conditions, educations, personalities, and self-awareness. Even within the confines of a room, these factors continue to exert influence. For example, Watanabe's idea about escaping from Hikikomori life is influenced by the discourses of psychology and psychiatry, like Levine's thought about Kintsugi and emphasis on healing and rehabilitation. In *Pull Stay* (2024), Robo is a manifestation of Nito's ideal form of social interaction —a strong persona capable of engaging with others and

transforming it. Therefore, Ikigai is closely tied to the uniqueness and irreproducibility of personal experience, and it is always, in some way related to others.

Ultimately, Ikigai is connected to the idea of spiritual sovereignty, or to put it more simply, the discovery of selfhood. It is found in the process of becoming oneself, while engaging with others through collaboration, the negotiation of power, and emotional coherence of self. From this perspective, Ikigai inevitably contains elements of sacrifice and negotiation. Without this, the so-called goals of Ikigai risk turning into the dangerous Jouissance or merely becoming the command of the Other.

Human Subjectivity

About Hikikomori, this figure often grows up under high expectations from the external environment. During adolescence, a crucial period for forming ego and constructing one's worldview, the individual may experience a mismatch between their capabilities and the overwhelming standards of the outside world. When life expectations and personal values fail to align, and when faced with difficulties in social environments, at school, or in professional life, or even simply the fear of failure, one can lose motivation and fall into social withdrawal. In this way, the Hikikomori emerges, is defined, and becomes a social issue, an issue of our era that is entangled with the relentless drive for progress, the formation of subjectivity, the spectacle of a carnival-like material world, the pressures of societal expectations, and the struggle to reconcile multiple voices. This reminds me of Byung-Chul Han's writing in *The Burnout Society*, *"It is not the imperative only to belong to oneself, but the pressure to achieve that causes exhaustive depression. Seen in this light, burnout syndrome does not express the exhausted self so much as the exhausted, burnt-out soul"* (2015, Chapter 2).

Through the journey of this research, we come to its final destination: what, after all, is the meaning behind the Hikikomori phenomenon? In my perspective, the meaning of Hikikomori lies in the meaning of refusal, lies in saying 'No' to the outside world. This refusal expands the possibilities of life itself. Because negation exists in language, because we can say no, the world we inhabit becomes more complex, more open to alternative paths, and more philosophically beautiful than a world of only yes and obedience (趙, 2024). It is precisely this power of negation that gives the Hikikomori experience its transformative power. After the act of refusal, life inside the room strips away most possibilities. The individual retreats from a pluralistic world into a singular one. Within that room, the individual faces the most fundamental issue: the question of the self, because in that room, there is only one person and all external questions flow inward. This is when the adverse aspects of life in isolation begin to surface, as previously discussed.

For those living a seemingly socially integrated life, Hikikomori serves as a mirror. Throughout the Hikikomori unconventional modes of existence, others gain an opportunity to reflect on lifestyle, morality, and life goals. We may also broaden our scope of reflection: through the lens of Hikikomori, we are invited to reconsider what constitutes the human world, where the boundaries of life lie, and what can truly be experienced. As Autrey quotes Franco "Bifo" Berardi:

> The hikikimori have decided to stay in their room, closing the door to societal participation. May their chosen isolation be a reminder to us all that we can distinguish our autonomous destiny from the destiny of those who want us to belong and to participate at all costs, even the death of our souls (2023).

And as Albert Camus (1913-1960) wrote at the beginning of *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942): *There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.* Is our mundane, everyday life worth living? That is the silent question asked by Hikikomori.

The spectator can believe, or may prefer to believe, that the Hikikomori individuals are rich in perceptual and conscious activity in their rooms, possessing a vivid mind that has not yet been polished by mundane life. This is partly because the spectator enjoys seeing the mystery that differs from their own lives, admires the courage to withdraw, takes delight in imagining unknown states of being, and cherishes the rare possibility of finding meaning in a case that escapes the mainstream's negative perception of Hikikomori. Although the Hikikomori conceal their physical presence, they cannot conceal their consciousness and spirit. When it comes to defining the good life, the experiences of Hikikomori and post-Hikikomori offer an important supplement: it becomes clear that carrying a room within the mind, or constructing a comfortable zone, is vital. This space is not a moral prison in Case Three, where the mother is trapped by the Other, but a shelter, a space for solitude, self-reflection, and retreat. It is a space where the individual can momentarily withdraw from the chaos, and simply be. This is an extension and internalization of the room concept in the Hikikomori phenomenon.

All in all, the problem of Hikikomori is a problem of the human condition. In contemporary times, how do we define the human? How is the image of the human being evolving? On one hand, with the rise of AI, data, biotechnology, gender theory, post-colonialism and environmental philosophy, the dominant status of the human seems to be fading. The current trend of decentralizing the human and blurring of the binary distinction between nature and culture are often used, especially within the context of post-humanism studies, to reflect on what constitutes new a subjectivity in the post-human condition (Braidotti, 2011). On the other hand,

various subjects and communities, especially marginalized and underrepresented groups are still insisting on empowerment, insisting on human dignity, insisting on the right to define what a subject is and what a human should do. Can we accept Hikikomori not just as a social phenomenon, but as a kind of lifestyle, or an ideology? Can we include Hikikomori in our broader reflections on what constitutes a good life? Personally, I hope that Hikikomori individuals can one day walk out of their rooms, but I also understand that as long as social life continues in its current form, Hikikomori will continue to emerge. In fact, it may become a defining element of the Zeitgeist of this century. On Hikikomori, the good life, and Ikigai, my final question is this: If we could keep only one identity, just one, to be remembered and to remain, what would we choose? I believe that question alone may guide us toward finding our Ikigai.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

In this thesis, I examined the historical context and ongoing development of self-isolation and social withdrawal, focusing specifically on the contemporary figure of the Hikikomori through the analysis of three selected artworks. These case studies were approached through multiple theoretical frameworks and analytical perspectives. In the final discussion, I return to the concept of Ikigai to reflect on the broader implications of Hikikomori in relation to contemporary life, ultimately engaging with the central question: what is considered a meaningful life in contemporary society?

Due to the ambitious scope of this research and the limitations of time, I was not able to establish direct contact with the artists or engage in extended conversations with them. Such dialogue would have enriched the primary source material and added further depth to the analysis. As a term still in the process of theoretical formation, Hikikomori intersects with numerous academic disciplines. Therefore, many of the arguments presented in this thesis remain open to further elaboration and critical cross-linking. The theoretical framework of this study draws heavily from philosophy, a field in which I have not received formal training. My limited familiarity with philosophical methodologies may have resulted in imprecise interpretations of certain concepts. Given the central role of Japanese scholarship in the study of Hikikomori, working across linguistic and cultural boundaries inevitably introduced interpretative gaps and potential misunderstandings. These limitations are acknowledged as structural constraints within the research process.

Nonetheless, by approaching this phenomenon through the lens of artistic analysis, I gained access to new perspectives, detailed visual and narrative materials, and subtle insights into the internal experiences of Hikikomori individuals. This approach offered a more nuanced

understanding of their subjectivity and worldviews. While this methodology may not have generated entirely new theories or fundamentally reshaped existing knowledge about Hikikomori, it provided a magnifying lens through which previously overlooked aspects of Hikikomori life became visible. The narratives embedded in these works can challenge prevailing stereotypes and extend beyond the confines of pathologizing or strictly clinical frameworks.

The findings and materials collected here can serve as a foundation for future scholars to expand upon any of the case studies in greater depth, fill the gaps left by conventional academic or therapeutic approaches, or inspire further interdisciplinary work. Potential avenues include philosophical inquiry, game studies, dialogue analysis, anthropology, and sociological studies within East Asian contexts.

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Footnotes

[1] This phenomenon shares temporal and conceptual parallels with others that emerged around the same period, such as 蒸発 (Jōhatsu, evaporation phenomenon), which describes individuals who abruptly disappear from their lives without a trace (Koyama, 2023); and the NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), a term originally coined in the United Kingdom (Abraha, 2025). In recent years, similar behavioural and ideological tendencies have continued to emerge globally. For example, the 躺平 (Lying Flat) movement gained traction around 2021. A growing number of young people in mainland China began to embrace or at least express admiration for a lifestyle defined by giving up ambition, reducing material desires, evading competitive work structures, and refusing to be shaped by mainstream social expectations (Bandurski, 2023).

[2] Throughout history, art creation has often been associated with phenomena such as reclusion, solitude, and self-isolation. In these works, artists either appear as recluses or depict self-isolation of varying degrees and for different reasons (*The Artworks Capture Isolation*, 2020; White, 2020; *Making Art in Isolation*, n.d.).

[3] In Japan, a type of monk known as 山伏 (Yamabushi) has a long history. These mountain priests spend years in the mountains, seen as spiritual spaces and domains of the supernatural. Yamabushi undertake practices such as hiking or long treks, meditation, standing beneath freezing waterfalls to withstand their force, praying at mountaintop shrines, chanting sutras (Cabello & Powell, 2021; Parkes, 2023). In medieval China, intellectuals and the literati class had already introduced and advocated the concept 漁樵 (the fishermen and woodcutters). The concept conveys a sentiment of withdrawal from 廟堂 (the ancestral shrine and imperial

court), withdrawing from a constructed order governed by human politics. The fishermen and woodcutters symbolized the foundations of civilization —food and energy, and they represent a philosophy of time and history, which observing human society and historical change from within the natural environment, while generating a unique perspective (趙, 2019). In Europe, the history of self-isolation is deeply intertwined with religious tradition, as the anchorite who appeared in England. An anchorite would undergo a religious ceremony that symbolically confirmed their death to the secular world. Once enclosed, they led a solitary life devoted to God, participating in religious services from within their confined space (Nickson, 2020; Wellesley, 2018).

[4] The Hikikomori phenomenon spans a wide range of ages and genders, challenging earlier assumptions that it primarily affects young males. Hikikomori can emerge from adolescence to one's thirties, and in some cases, individuals remain shut-in into their middle-age (Kato, Kanba, & Teo, 2019). Housewives and the elderly have also become part of this discussion. Recent surveys show a rising number of female Hikikomori, reflecting the growing social pressures and role conflicts faced by contemporary women (Morita, 2023; Kurotani, 2023).

Digital communication, remote work, and gaming culture have reshaped the lives of Hikikomori and altered their patterns of social interaction. Within this spectrum, individuals show different levels of engagement with gaming, ranging from casual use to problematic dependency. Early-stage Hikikomori, especially within the first three months of withdrawal, are at higher risk of developing gaming disorder (Kubo, Horie, Matsushima et al., 2024, p. 78). Those living with parents are particularly vulnerable, as strained family communication and interpersonal tension further increase the risk (Stavropoulos, Anderson, Beard et al., 2019).

For the regional differences, the Hikikomori is no longer viewed as a culture-bound syndrome. Since the late 20th century, similar phenomena have emerged independently worldwide, shaped by diverse social, economic, and cultural factors (Teo, Fetters, Stufflebam et al., 2015). Researchers now recognize global patterns that echo the original phenomenon in Japan.

Differences include the varying definitions of Hikikomori phenomenon across countries and regions, as well as differences in diagnostic criteria and treatment approaches. Compared to Hikikomori in Japan, those in the United States report stronger feelings of loneliness, greater self-isolation, and more severe functional impairment. In India, feelings of loneliness are slightly lower and social networks are relatively better preserved, though functional impairment remains high. In South Korea, the sample shows that symptoms are more severe in nearly all aspects than those seen in Japan. Korean Hikikomori experience more intense loneliness, deeper influences in functional impairment, and weaker social connections (Teo, Fetters, Stufflebam et al., 2015, p.6). Despite these variations, Hikikomori around the world commonly experience a strong sense of loneliness.

[5] A geographical coding system. The surface of the Earth is evenly divided into squares measuring three meters on each side, and each square is assigned a name with random three words. For example, the main entrance of OCAD University is marked by ///diggers.tooth.spring.

[6] Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), was a French phenomenologist and existentialist philosopher, best known for his work on perception, embodiment, and lived experience. He challenged Cartesian dualism in such works as *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) and *Eye and Mind* (1961), and argued for an embodied, situated understanding of cognition and consciousness.

[7] *"It will no longer be the mere result of associations established in the course of experience, but rather the global awareness of my posture in the inter-sensory world, a "form" in Gestalt psychology's sense of the word. But the psychologist's analyses in turn overflow this second definition. It is insufficient to say that my body is a form, or a phenomenon in which the whole is anterior to the parts…the subject actively integrates the parts according to their value for the organism's projects. Psychologists often say that the body schema is dynamic"* (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p.102).

An example from author: picking up the phone at the table, then this action does not require the use of coordinate points in the environment, the confirmation of direction, force, angle, or the preview of the body in the logic. This action occurs naturally with the linked to the intention. The body is thus naturally placed in the world, and we must perceive the world by means of it without having to attend to it. It is the context of conscious activity between one and the world, and our perceptual behaviour is a dialogue between the body and the outside.

[8] To give a simple example, even if two people are sitting in the same room, one may feel too humid, the other may feel just right; one may feel a little hot, the other may still feel cold.

[9] In this film, the man lead Phil Connors doesn't lose his memory and experience from all that days, previous Feb. 2. In the eternal return, he has memories of his previous experiences, can summarize, learn and make different choices in the next iteration. The ingenious point is that Connors suspends his past, to a certain extent from most of the provisions of his self-history, such as the town's residents don't know what kind of person Connors used to be. At the same time, Connors can step outside the inherent and irreversible features accompanying choosing in linear time. Thus, the film designs a free ground for Connors. He only has the present day. Finally, by embracing this kind of world and shaping himself in a process of active choice,

Connors escaped from the eternal return.

[10] Working with the local volunteer organization New Start, Elan meets the Hikikomori through their support program *Rental Sister*. Her photography series documents the Hikikomori living in Chiba, Japan. Therefore, the series is not just about Hikikomori's life, but also documents scenes between the volunteer and the Hikikomori, including communication and avoidance. These scenes have become an important part of the series.

Elan summarizes her state of mind in everything she does as sincerity and patience. It often took three to five visits before a Hikikomori would agree to meet with a volunteer and allow themselves to be photographed. In Elan's photography, the Hikikomori are almost always present within the frame, gaze at the shot, rather than merely represented through the spaces they inhabit. One image remains vivid in my memory —a door shut like an iron wall, with volunteer Oguri crouching outside, carefully placing a handwritten letter at the threshold. This photograph encapsulates the struggle of approaching, communicating with, and observing the Hikikomori — a silent testament to distance and hesitation.

[11] During her work, her observations and narratives have sparked some reflections on the social environment and different interpretations of the Hikikomori phenomenon, *"There are so many people out there working themselves to the ground; the hikikomori, in a way draw Japan into balance," "In Japan, where uniformity is still prized, and reputations and outward appearances are paramount, rebellion comes in muted forms, like hikikomori"* (Butet-Roch, 2018).

[12] Without contextual narratives, and without further interviews, the spectator, relying solely on these images, would find it difficult to grasp the inner world of the Hikikomori —their thoughts and consciousness. As I gaze upon the solitary rooms, the enigmatic eyes of those

within like Chujo, I wonder: What lies behind their gaze? Is it the vastness of daydreams, or the barren emptiness of a soul adrift in monotony?

[13] In the essay "The First Gram of Jouissance: Lacan on Genet's Le balcon," the author Chiesa discusses Jouissance as follows: *"Jouissance is primarily phallic jouissance, marked by castration, by the fact that the establishment of sexual liaisons among linguistic animals is given along with language's structural inability to represent sex. In line with the idea that what matters in our subjective constitution is "approaching" and "testing" jouissance at a distance, phallic jouissance consists of the actual enjoyment obtained from the impossibility to fully enjoy. In parallel, jouissance equally stands for the ideal, yet insuppressible, mirage of a mythical full enjoyment"* (2015, p. 8).

[14] Graph of Desire, Graph II
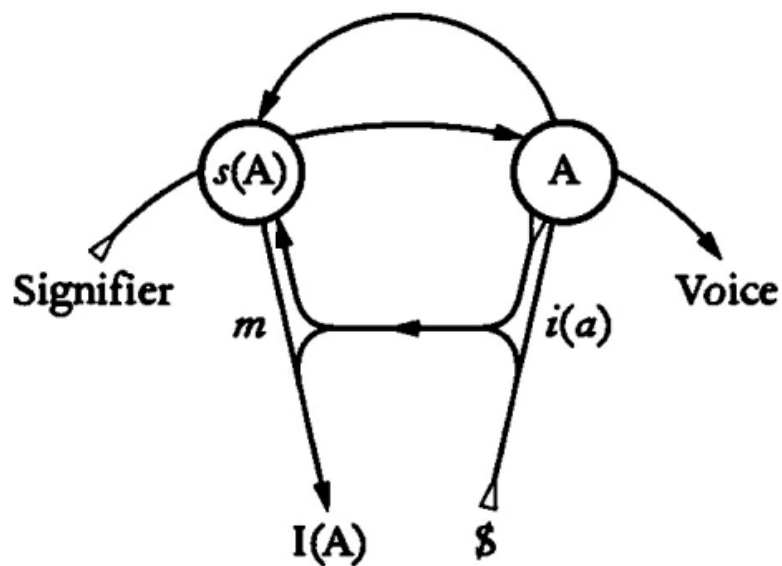
Note. From *"Lacanian Psychoanalysis and the Subversion of the Split Subject"*, by Jacques Lacan, 2020, https://iambobbyy.com/2020/05/03/lacanian-psychoanalysis-and-the-subversion-of-the-split-subject/. Copyright 2025 by iambobbyy

[15] An account from an interview: *"Hiroshi, who asked that his full name not be used, crashed out of Japan's corporate job market roughly 20 years earlier and was living off his aging, unsympathetic parents in their home… "Japan has changed," he told me, referring to the shrinking opportunities and hope available to his generation. He never once looked me in the eye"* (Kelts, 2022).

[16] The city Neo Tokyo is destroyed once again by the protagonist, 鉄雄 (Tetsuo Shima) in the finale. The mainstream interpretation is that when an individual suddenly gains uncontrollable power, the inevitable outcome is decline and destruction.

[17] Before this experiment, Nader already knew that the creation of initial, primitive memories required the synthesis of specific proteins. Therefore, his topic is, do the reminiscence, the long-term memories that requires later accessed and remembered, also need the synthesis of proteins to establish neural communication?

At the beginning of Nader's experiment, the lab rat gets miserable electric shock when a sound played. After a period, when the sound is heard, even without the electric shock, the lab rats showed signs of anxiety and fear. For blocking the *"synthesis of the memory consolidation protein,"* concealing the recollection of the sound, he injected the protein-inhibiting drug to lab rats' living brain. Then he played this sound again, this time these rats didn't respond to the sound, their memory was concealed, fearful memories established by the Pavlovian conditioned reflex are no longer evoked (Lavine, 2015, Chapter 8). This experiment demonstrated that at each recollect, the initial memory is reconstructed and redrew in the nervous system.