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The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde

Sianne Ngai

Drawing attention to excuses as a rich site for "field work" in ordinary language philosophy, J. L. Austin notes "how much it is to be wished that similar field work will soon be undertaken in, say, aesthetics; if only we could forget for a while about the beautiful and get down instead to the dainty and the dumpy."[1] In this famous remark, Austin is not just broadly calling attention to aesthetic terms or aesthetic concepts but to a set of minor ones in particular. The minorness of the concepts in this subgenre might be ascribed to their derivation from feelings more ambivalent and diffuse, or weaker in intensity, than the strongly positive or negative feelings of pleasure/displeasure that ground the concepts of the beautiful and sublime. We might also suspect that their relatively marginal status *as* aesthetic concepts within the canon established by philosophical aesthetics stems from the fact that they bear witness to their historical contingency in a more explicit, even self-evident way.

Hence, while prestigious aesthetic concepts like the beautiful, sublime, and ugly have generated multiple theories and philosophies of *art,* com-

I wish to thank the audiences who responded to earlier versions of this essay when it was presented for the following events or occasions: "21st Century Poetics" (Berkeley, 2002); "Cultures of Looking" (Stanford, 2002); and "Why Aesthetics Now?" (Modern Language Association, 2002). Thanks also to audiences at "Narrative" (Berkeley, 2003), the Stanford Humanities Center (2003), and the Americanist Research Colloquium at UCLA (2005). "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde" has grown most in response to challenging questions and comments offered by Mark McGurl, Robert Kaufman, and Rob Halpern, whom I wish to thank for their intellectual generosity. Most of what I know about the relations between persons and things can be traced back to Barbara Johnson, to whom I would like to dedicate this essay.

1. J. L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses" (1956), *Philosophical Papers,* ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1979), p. 183.

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paratively novel ones such as *cute, glamorous, whimsical, luscious, cozy,* or *wacky* seem far from doing anything of the sort, though ironically, in the close link between their emergence and the rise of consumer aesthetics, they seem all the more suited for the analysis of art's increasingly complex relation to market society in the twentieth century. Examined directly as a class of language surprisingly late in the history of philosophical discourse on aesthetics (by Frank Sibley in "Aesthetic Concepts"), these taste terms would multiply and become increasingly specialized in postwar America and Europe, as corporate advocates of the industrialization of modernist aesthetics sought to develop a new commodity aesthetic in the rapidly expanding fields of design and advertising, one which would triumphantly show, as Benjamin Buchloh notes, "that mass culture and high art could be reconciled in a radically commercialized Bauhaus venture."[2] Though this supposed reconciliation of modernism and mass culture, or of art and everyday life via consumer aesthetics, was one "purged of all political and ideological implications concerning artistic intervention in collective social progress" ("AW," p. 467), aesthetic concepts directly engineered and developed by the culture industry, such as *zany, quaint,* and even *modern,* would seem to offer themselves as particularly handy encapsulations of some kind of reconcilation regardless. For, minor or not, what all taste concepts capture is the simple fact that while one does not necessarily have to have an aesthetic relation to artworks, one can very readily have aesthetic relations to entities which are *not* art and to the artfully designed, packaged, and advertised merchandise that surrounds us on an everyday basis in particular. As Gertrude Stein reminds us in *Tender Buttons,* even a cheese can

2. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Andy Warhol's One-Dimensional Art," *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), p. 467; hereafter abbreviated "AW." In the classic paper "Aesthetic Concepts," Sibley argues that while it is common and "legitimate" to support one's application of an aesthetic concept to an object by citing the presence of nonaesthetic features, the procedure does not work in reverse: there are "no sufficient conditions, no non-aesthetic features such that the presence of some set or number of them will beyond question logically justify or warrant the application of an aesthetic term" (Frank Sibley, "Aesthetic Concepts," *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics,* ed. John Benson, Betty Redfern, and Jeremy Roxbee Cox [Oxford, 2001], p. 5). Hence, unlike other kinds of language, aesthetic terms are not condition-governed except negatively, meaning that while no description of an object's nonaesthetic properties (however detailed or exhaustive) permits us to claim that a particular aesthetic term must therefore apply to it, the presence of certain nonaesthetic features *can* be used to rule out the application of a particular aesthetic term. As Sibley notes, "if I am told that a painting in the next room consists solely of one or two bars of very pale blue and very pale grey set at right angles on a pale fawn ground, I can be sure that it cannot be fiery or garish or gaudy or flamboyant" (ibid., p. 5).

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be "handsome" and a dining table "charming," much the way a statue can be beautiful or "quaint."[3]

Like *dainty* and *dumpy*, what terms like *handsome* and *charming* attest to is the widespread and broadly diffused nature of the "aesthetic relation," which some philosophers have adopted Kant to generalize as a special kind of attention paid solely to an object's appearance or "aspect" (as opposed to its origin, identity, or function) accompanied by an appraisal based on the positive or negative feeling that its apperception elicits. For George Santayana, Gérard Genette, and others these values are "objectified" or projected back into the object, treated "as if" they were one of the object's own properties or "an objective property, like any other."[4] Yet it is often hard to recognize minor taste concepts as encoding the appraisals that distinguish them from nonevaluative adjectives, like *red* or *round*; in fact, one problem posed by the dainty and dumpy is that these concepts often seem not to count as "aesthetic" at all. While it is unlikely that Austin had Stein's way of getting down to such matters in mind — "This which is so not winsome and not widened and really not so dipped as dainty and really dainty, very dainty, ordinarily, dainty, a dainty, not in that dainty and dainty" (*TB*, p. 44) — in what follows I will be suggesting that Stein and other avant-garde poets have had a very specific stake in venturing into the largely unexamined area his comment foregrounds and, indeed, by selectively focusing on one taste concept that might be thought of as the miscegenational progeny of Austin's two examples.

At first glance, nothing could seem more adverse to a traditional understanding of literary modernism or the avant-garde than the "culinary" idea of cuteness. While cuteness is a taste concept that cannot be fully enfolded into kitsch (cute objects can of course be kitschy but not all kitschy objects are cute),[5] it is one firmly rooted in visual commodity culture rather

3. Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons: Objects, Food, Rooms* (1914; Los Angeles, 1991), pp. 64–65; hereafter abbreviated *TB*.

4. Gérard Genette, *The Aesthetic Relation*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (Ithaca, N.Y., 1999), p. 70. In Genette's aesthetics it is precisely this phantasmatic act of objectification (hinging crucially on an "as if") that constitutes what he calls the "aesthetic illusion" and indeed the "aesthetic relation" itself. Genette's equation (aesthetic relation = illusory objectification) both proceeds from and is intended to provocatively underscore Kant's point in the third *Critique* about the subjectivism and claim for universality inherent to judgments of taste founded on "disinterested pleasure." Here, it is precisely because the subjective judgment of taste demands universal agreement that we are compelled "to speak of the beautiful *as if beauty were a characteristic of the object* and the judgment logical (constituting a cognition of the object by means of concepts of it), although it is only aesthetical and involves merely a reference of the representation of the object to the subject" (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard [New York, 1951], p. 46; my italics). While referring specifically back to Kant, Genette's description of aesthetic experience as illusory objectification also recalls Friedrich von Schiller's concept of *Schein*, the apparitional quality he attributed to all artworks regardless of their commitment to realism or verisimilitude.

5. I am grateful to Judith Goldman for this observation.

than the language arts. And while the avant-garde is conventionally imagined as sharp and pointy, as hard- or cutting-edge, cute objects have no edge to speak of, usually being soft, round, and deeply associated with the infantile and the feminine.

These associations immediately surface in the suggestive list of usages compiled by the *Oxford English Dictionary,* which begins in 1857 with a female exclamation (*Virginia Illustrated:* "'What cute little socks!' said the woman"), turns to a comment implying the term's national specificity in 1900 (*Daily News:* "A small and compact house, what the Americans would call 'cute'"), and then, in the postwar period, brings us to these two Aldous Huxley quotations: "The tiny boy . . . looking almost indecently 'cute' in his claret-coloured doublet and starched ruff" (*Grey Eminence* [1944]), and "a French accent so strong, so indecently 'cute,' so reminiscent of the naughty-naughty twitterings of a Parisian miss on the English comedy stage" (*Time Must Have Stop* [1945]).[6] The narrative suggested is an extension of the term *cute*'s applicability, as we move from the early to middle twentieth century, from things to persons and (socially) diminutive persons in particular (the "tiny boy" and young "miss"). The value of cuteness seems to expand in tandem with this shift, from the unequivocally positive (the charming socks), to the ambiguous or potentially negative (the indecent boy). While most evidently tied to the physical appearances of humans and objects, however, it is clear that cuteness also becomes identified with a "twittering" use or style of language, marked as feminine or culturally and nationally other.

Given also its associations with the pleasures of consumption, including the spectrum of aesthetic experience, running from what Adorno calls "tasteful savoring" to "physical devouring," that brings art into an uncomfortable proximity to "cuisine and pornography,"[7] it is fairly easy to understand why critics have actually gone to lengths to *avoid* the subject of cuteness when speaking about Stein's poetics in relation to high modernism. Indeed, the qualities the term *cute* encompasses have been the ones repeatedly summoned, from contemporary reviewers such as H. L. Mencken forward, to reduce Stein's writing to the "naughty-naughty twitterings" of the Mother Goose of Montparnasse—that is, to what Wyndham Lewis disparagingly referred to as Stein's "'child-personality'" and the primitive "'child cult'" of early twentieth-century modernism in general.[8] Lewis

6. *Oxford English Dictionary,* s.v. "cute."

7. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, 1997), p. 12; hereafter abbreviated *AT*.

8. Wyndham Lewis, "The Revolutionary Simpleton," *The Enemy,* no. 1 (Jan. 1927); rpt. as *The Enemy,* ed. David Peters Corbett (Santa Rosa, Calif., 1994), pp. 75–76; quoted in Mark McGurl, *The Novel Art: Elevations of American Fiction after Henry James* (Princeton, N.J., 2001), p. 8.

invoked this child cult, Mark McGurl notes, as "evidence of the permeation of even the most 'intellectualist' literary projects, such as Gertrude Stein's, by the 'hysterical imbecility' of the mass market" — a realm offering a glut of amusements and identified with sentimentality, preciousness, "and the complete absence of anything threatening."[9] But while remaining a sumptuous delight or pleasure, as we shall see, cuteness for Stein is anything but precious or safe. Our tendency as literary critics to overcorrect in this direction, refusing to acknowledge that there may in fact be something cute, or "indecently 'cute,'" about Stein's writing — even in the case of a work bearing the title *Tender Buttons: Objects, Food, Rooms*— points also to the longstanding embarrassment cuteness has specifically posed to *poetry*. For as a literary genre predominantly if not always correctly associated with small and compact texts, lyric poetry has always been forced to negotiate its relationship to cuteness in a way that other literary forms and genres, such as the novel, have not. And this is especially the case for certain traditions of modernist and avant-garde poetry strikingly preoccupied, from the imagists and objectivists to Black Mountain and New York School poets forward, with small, concrete, and everyday things: William Carlos Williams's plums and strips of copper, Lorine Niedecker's granite pail, Robert Creeley's rocks, John Ashbery's cocoa tins, Bernadette Mayer's puffed wheat cereal, Thomas Sayers Ellis's balloon dog.[10]

Though the relationship between cuteness and avant-garde poetics is my primary concern in this essay, it is crucial to begin by examining this aesthetic concept in its most prevalent, commercial context.

To use an everyday, ready-at-hand object as an example of commercially produced cuteness, this small and compact knickknack, a frog-shaped bath sponge (figs. 1a and 1b), shows how much the aesthetic depends on a softness that invites physical touching—or, to use a more provocative verb, fondling. It also demonstrates the centrality of anthropomorphism to cuteness. Yet while the object has been given a face and exaggerated gaze, what is striking is how stylistically simplified and even unformed its face is, as if cuteness were a sort of primitivism in its own right. Realist verisimilitude and precision are excluded in the making of cute objects, which have simple contours and little or no ornamentation or detail.[11] The smaller and less formally articulated or more bloblike the object, the cuter it becomes—in

9. McGurl, *The Novel Art,* p. 6. The "complete absence of anything threatening" is Kanako Shiokawa's definition of cuteness. See Kanako Shiokawa, "Cute but Deadly: Women and Violence in Japanese Comics," in *Themes and Issues in Asian Cartooning: Cute, Cheap, Mad, and Sexy,* ed. John A. Lent (Bowling Green, Ohio, 1999), pp. 93–125.

10. See Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago, 2003), pp. 2–8.

11. See Shiokawa, "Cute but Deadly," p. 97.

FIGURE 1a

FIGURE 1b

part because smallness and blobbishness suggest greater malleability and thus a greater capacity for being handled. The bath sponge makes this especially clear because its purpose is explicitly to be pressed against the body and squished.

From here it is only a short step to see how the formal properties associated with cuteness — smallness, compactness, softness, simplicity, and pliancy — call forth specific affects: helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency. There is thus a sense in which the minor taste concept of cuteness might be said to get at the process by which all taste concepts are formed and thus at the aesthetic relation all of them capture. For in addition to being a minor aesthetic concept that is fundamentally about minorness (in a way that, for instance, the concept of the glamorous is not), it is crucial to cuteness that its diminutive object has some sort of imposed-upon aspect or mien—that is, that it bears the look of an object not only formed but all too easily *de*-formed under the pressure of the subject's feeling or attitude towards it. Though a glamorous object must not have this mien at all (in fact, the meta-aspect of looking as if its aspect were subjectively imposed would immediately break the *Schein* of glamour), the subject's awareness, as she gazes at her little object, that she may be willfully imposing its cuteness upon it, is more likely to augment rather than detract from the aesthetic illusion, calling attention to an unusual degree of synonymy between objectification and *cutification*.

We can thus start to see how cuteness might provoke ugly or aggressive feelings, as well as the expected tender or maternal ones. For in its exaggerated passivity and vulnerability, the cute object is as often intended to excite a consumer's sadistic desires for mastery and control as much as his or her desire to cuddle. No one makes this point better than Daniel Harris. Citing the example of Little Mutt, "a teddy bear with a game leg that a British manufacturer has even fitted with an orthopedic boot," Harris writes, "the process of conveying cuteness to the viewer disempowers its objects, forcing

them into ridiculous situations and making them appear more ignorant and vulnerable than they really are." Hence things are cutest when "in the middle of a pratfall or a blunder: Winnie the Pooh, with his snout stuck in the hive . . . Love-a-Lot Bear, in the movie *The Care Bears,* who stares disconsolately out at us with a paint bucket overturned on his head."[12] As an aestheticization of the small, vulnerable, and helpless, cuteness, not surprisingly, is a taste quality first and foremost aligned with products designed for children.

The emergence of the manufactured plush toy that Harris invokes as an exemplary cute object, however, can be traced to a newfound awareness of the aggressiveness of children made possible by twentieth-century psychology.[13] Once children were no longer imagined as miniature adults or as naturally moral or virtuous creatures, manufacturers found new impetus to produce indestructible toys that could survive the violence with which children were increasingly associated. It is interesting to note, however, the surprisingly belated appearance of the plush toy in the history of American toy manufacturing. Though homemade rag dolls had been used to teach domestic skills to girls since the colonial period, in the decades after the Civil War that marked the emergence of the American toy industry proper, commercially manufactured dolls were made almost solely of hard materials, with easily breakable, finely painted bisque heads mounted on bodies made of wood, iron pewter, steel, and even "electroplated sheet metal."[14] Like the fully jointed, highly ornate, talking Big Beauty advertised by the American Mechanical Doll Works Company in 1895, most of these dolls were also mechanical or machinelike (fig. 2).

Yet as Miriam Formanek-Brunell argues, the preferences in late nineteenth-century doll design for hard substances, and for capturing the movements of the human body rather than its feel or texture, were less a result of the American toy industry's attempt to adjust to changing conceptions of the modern child than a reflection of a business economy dominated by male entrepreneurs fascinated with technology and the scientific management of production processes — including Thomas Edison, who had his own factory for the manufacture of phonographic Talking Dolls (see *MPH*, p. 41). Formanek-Brunell contrasts the scientific management of this toy industry with the "maternal materialism" of female Progressive Era doll-

12. Daniel Harris, *Cute, Quaint, Hungry, and Romantic: The Aesthetics of Consumerism* (New York, 2000), pp. 5–6.

13. See Antonia Fraser, *A History of Toys* (London, 1966), p. 224. On the impact of the new child psychology on furniture and industrial design, see Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire* (New York, 1986), pp. 67–72.

14. Miriam Formanek-Brunell, *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830–1930* (New Haven, Conn., 1993), p. 45; hereafter abbreviated *MPH*.

FIGURE 2. "The Girl from Paris" (American Mechanical Doll Works Company, 1895)

makers such as Martha Chase, who finally reintroduced "softness, portability, durability [and] safety" as values into the American toy market through the mass manufacturing of cloth and stockinet dolls (*MPH*, p. 68). Yet while designed explicitly to address new attitudes about children and play (and contributing to a general shift from the representation of adult women to that of babies), the Chase Company dolls still adhered to a standard of realist depiction antithetical to the aspects of cuteness stressed by

Harris. Even the more stylistically simplified, "wide-eyed, round-faced, and chubby-cheeked New Kid" popularized in the first decade of the twentieth century by the Campbell Kids and Rose O'Neill's Kewpies had a physical vigor that makes their invention yet another moment in the history of American mass culture where the fullest realization of cuteness seems curiously postponed (*MPH*, p. 90). Far from being helpless or dejected, as Formanek-Brunell notes, the Kewpies were depicted as energetic social reformers who rescued children and even educated mothers about the welfare of children, while the Campbell Kids just as tirelessly sold soup. Hence it was not until after the First World War, long after the invention of the Teddy Bear, that "cute" toys, in the strong sense of denoting an aesthetic of *accentuated helplessness and vulnerability,* began appearing in the U.S. in mass quantities.

In a sense it should not be surprising that an aesthetic of smallness, helplessness, vulnerability, and deformity might find its prominence checked in the culture industry of a nation so invested in images of its own bigness, virility, health, and strength. Conversely, in post–World War II Japan, an island nation newly conscious of its diminished military and economic power with respect to the United States in particular, the same aesthetic (*kawaii*) had a comparatively accelerated development and impact on the culture as a whole — not only saturating the Japanese toy market but industrial design, print culture, advertising, fashion, food, and even the automotive industry. There are historical reasons, in other words, for why an aesthetic organized around a small, helpless, or deformed object *that foregrounds the violence in its production as such* might seem more ideologically meaningful, and therefore more widely prevalent, in the culture of one nation than in that of the other. In this manner, art critic Noi Sawaragi traces Japan's postwar fascination with *kawaii* not only to the nation's diminished sense of itself as a global power but to the political image of the emperor in its parliamentary monarchy: "In the last moments of his reign, emperor Hirohito had a feeble, weak image. An old dying man is the weakest of creatures . . . Hirohito was very popular among the people *as* a cute, old man."[15]

Given what Kanako Shiokawa describes as *kawaii*'s unprecedented surge in popularity during the rapid expansion of Japan's own culture industry in the 1960s, in particular, it is unsurprising that a self-conscious foregrounding of the violence underpinning the aesthetic runs throughout the work of Yoshitomo Nara and Takashi Murakami — Japanese artists who grew up in the 1960s and began exhibiting in the early 1990s. This body of

15. As Sawaragi continues, "In one sense this cuteness was neutral, in another, it was controlling. Couldn't one call this 'rule by cuteness' rather than 'rule by power'?" (Noi Sawaragi, "Dangerously Cute: Noi Sawagari and Fumio Nanjo Discuss Contemporary Japanese Culture," *Flash Art,* no. 163 [Mar.–Apr. 1992]: 75). For an etymological history of *kawaii* from its classical usage in texts such as Murasaki's *Tale of Genji* to its expansion in the industrial era and late 1960s in particular, see Shiokawa, "Cute but Deadly."

work allows us to grasp cuteness in one of its most probingly or theoretically worked-out forms.[16] Whether in the form of drawings, paintings, or, more recently, sculptures, Nara's large-eyed children are frequently presented as maimed and wounded, or upset and distressed — as demonstrated by both the untitled drawing (fig. 3) in which the phrase "Black Eye, Fat Lips, and Opened Wound" captions one of Nara's signature little girls and *Slight Fever* (2001; fig. 4), one of a series of acrylic paintings mounted on white plastic plates. In its association with food, the dinner plate does more than merely supply a material support for Nara's images of mutilated or injured children. Evoking the expression, "You're so cute I could *just eat you up,*" Nara's use of food-related objects for his interrogation of *kawaii* becomes extended and exaggerated in *Fountain of Life* (2001; fig. 5), a sculpture in which seven of what appear to be disembodied dolls' heads are stacked on top of one another in an oversized tea cup with accompanying saucer, with tears/water flowing out of their closed eyes. Underscoring the aggressive desire to master and overpower the cute object that the cute object itself appears to elicit, the tie between cuteness and eating that Nara's work makes explicit finds its consumer culture counterpart in the characters generated by San-X, an edgier and more contemporary incarnation of Sanrio, the company that invented the iconic Hello Kitty. One of San-X's most currently popular figures is Kogepan, who is a slightly burnt and dejected-looking bread bun. Described on San-X's website as "a bread [that] has gone sourpuss for being burned . . . that can't help making negative words like 'You'll dump me anyway,'" Kogepan is not only occasionally depicted with a bite taken out of the top of its head, but even baking miniature versions of itself.[17] Kogepan's obvious state of abjection and simultaneous potential for acts of cruelty to less than fully formed Kogepans suggests that the ultimate index of an object's cuteness may be its edibility. Underscoring this link, an untitled drawing by Nara (2001; fig. 6), in which one of his stylistically simplified children pops out of a package with the label "JAP IN THE BOX," also highlights cuteness's role in the merchandising and packaging of racial difference.

There is a double irony here, however, insofar as Nara, like fellow artist and media darling Takashi Murakami, is a master of retail himself.[18] In the

16. Given the popularity of these two artists and of *kawaii* commodity aesthetics in general in the U.S., there is clearly as much to say about the ideology of America's fondness for what it perceives as a *distinctively Japanese* cuteness as there is about that of Japan's fascination with its own.

17. For more on Kogepan, see www.san-x.co.jp/pan/nenpyou.html

18. For instance, the title piece of one of Nara's recent solo shows, "I DON'T MIND IF YOU FORGET ME," consists of plastic box letters that spell out the phrase in English. Each transparent plastic letter is packed with stuffed dolls (over 1,000 in total), copied after his signature children and animals, handmade by 375 Nara fans and sent to him explicitly for use in his installation. See Yoshimoto Nara, *I Don't Mind if You Forget Me* (exhibition catalogue, Yokohama Museum of Art, 2001).

FIGURE 3. Nara, untitled drawing (2001)

FIGURE 4. Nara, *Slight Fever* (2001)

FIGURE 5. Nara, *Fountain of Life* (2001)

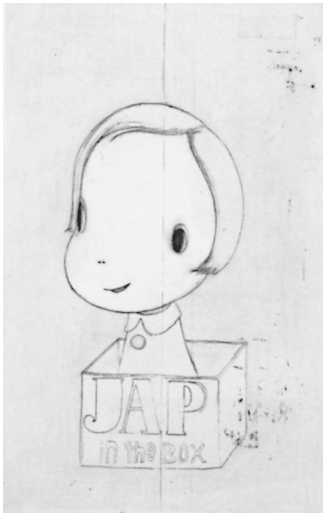

FIGURE 6. Nara, untitled drawing (2001)

tradition of Andy Warhol both artists highlight by continuing to attenuate the already thin line that separates art from commercial merchandise in a market society. Though one can buy Nara dolls, alarm clocks, wristwatches, postcards, ashtrays, T-shirts, and, of course, dinner plates, it is perhaps Murakami who has pushed these bounds furthest, not only by creating both cheap and expensive wares based on his gallery paintings and sculptures (including, in the spring of 2003, a series of Louis Vuitton handbags) but by inventing a character, Mr. DOB, a red-and-blue mouselike figure originally drawn with an exaggeratedly large head and tiny mouth, that Murakami officially copyrighted in the early nineties.[19] Created, in Murakami's own words, in an effort "to investigate the secret of the market survivability . . . of characters such as Mickey Mouse, Sonic the Hedgehog . . . Hello Kitty and their knock-offs produced in Hong Kong," Mr. DOB is often shown smiling as he is in this painting, *DOB with Flowers* (1998; fig. 7), situated in a "landscape" composed of anthropomorphized flowers as happy as he is. While things are changed slightly in the installation *DOB in the Strange Forest* (1999; fig. 8), which places DOB in a sinister or implicitly menacing environment and depicts him as confused or distressed rather than contented, the menacing objects—eye-studded and deformed mushrooms, recalling the mushroom clouds of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki—still arguably remain as cute as both DOB and the smiling flowers that surround him in the earlier painting.

In *And Then and Then and Then and Then and Then* (1996-97; fig. 9), however, an acrylic painting roughly nine by eleven feet in size, DOB's cuteness seems questionable or under stress, due in part to the huge proportions of his image and to the fact that he now has bared teeth. Suggesting a pun on *kawaii*'s sonorous proximity to *kowai,* which means "scary," the surprisingly menacing look DOB assumes in this image is pushed further in subsequent pieces like *GuruGuru* (1998), a vinyl chloride helium balloon 106 inches—or nearly nine feet—in diameter, and *The Castle of Tin Tin* (1998), an acrylic painting nearly eleven by eleven feet (figs. 10 and 11). In both, DOB has become virtually all eyes, teeth, and blisters, though the signature "D" and "B" on the character's ears still remain legible. These works blurring the line between *kawaii* and *kowai* are in fact only two of hundreds of

19. According to Amanda Cruz, Murakami was inspired to do so in part by the business savvy of American director George Lucas, whose foresight in registering his characters allowed him to finance his own films. As Cruz notes, Murakami's "registered character . . . has become so popular that there are barely altered counterfeits currently circulating due to the fact that Japan's lax copyright laws go unenforced in a society that shuns litigation" (Amanda Cruz, "DOB in the Land of Otaku," in *Takashi Murakami: The Meaning of the Nonsense of the Meaning* [exhibition catalogue, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, Center for Curatorial Studies Museum, Bard College, 1999], p. 16).

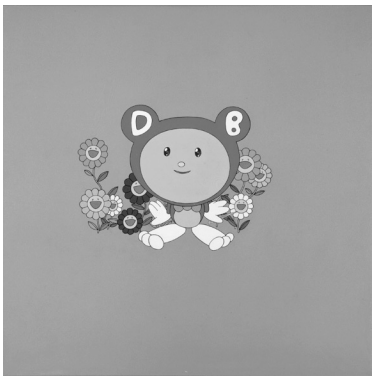

FIGURE 7. Takashi Murakami, *DOB with Flowers* (1998). Acrylic on canvas mounted on board. 40.5 × 40.5 × 4.5cm. Courtesy Blum and Poe, Los Angeles. ©1998 Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All rights reserved.

permutations, and increasingly distorted, deformational permutations, to which Murakami has subjected the original DOB ever since his debut as a painting in 1993. Hence while cuteness traditionally entails an absolute lack of anything threatening, as Harris emphasizes by noting that objects are cutest when maimed or hobbled, Murakami's stylistic mutilation of DOB calls attention to the violence always implicit in our relation to the cute object while simultaneously making it more menacing to the observer. The more DOB appears to be the object or victim of aggression, the more he appears to be an *agent* of aggression. Murakami's DOB project suggests that it is possible for cute objects to be *helpless and aggressive at the same time*. One could in fact argue that this paradoxical doubleness is embedded in the concept of the cute from the start — as even commercial generators of cuteness such as San-X seem to realize. Kogepan's cuddliness does not seem incompatible or compromised in any way by his potential to use and abuse the more diminutive Kogepans whom he seems to treat either like food or like pets.

Though it is DOB's visual or pictorial transformation that brings this paradox to the fore, Murakami's character originates not from an image but a word: one derived from a synthesis of *dobozite*—a slang term for *why?* (*doshite*), popularized by a contemporary *manga* character noted for his "strange accent" and mispronunciation of words (not unlike the "twitterings" of Huxley's Parisian miss)—and *oshamanbe,* a catchphrase of Japanese comedian Toru Yuri that puns on the name of a town and the sexual con-

FIGURE 8. Takashi Murakami, *DOB in the Strange Forest* (1999). Installation view at PARCO, Tokyo. FRP resin, fiber glass, and acrylic. 152 × 304 × 304 cm. Courtesy Marianne Boesky Gallery, N.Y. ©1999 Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All rights reserved.

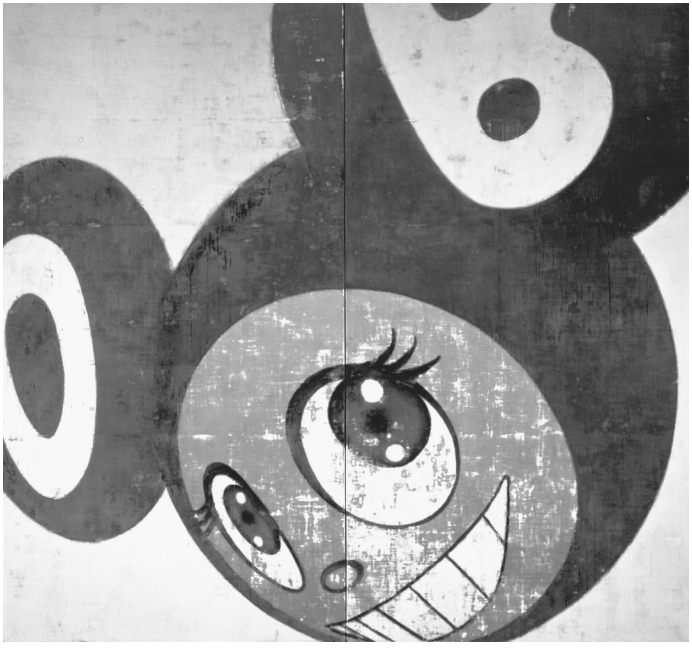

FIGURE 9. Takashi Murakami, *And Then, and Then and Then and Then and Then* (1996). Acrylic on canvas mounted on board. 300 × 300cm. Courtesy Blum and Poe, Los Angeles. ©1996 Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All rights reserved.

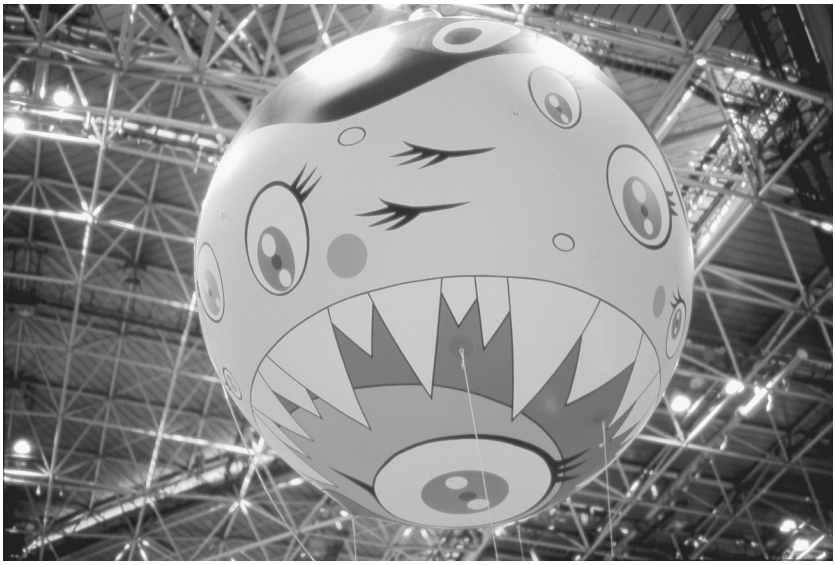

FIGURE 10. Takashi Murakami, *Guru Guru* (1998). Vinyl chloride and helium gas. 338 × 269 × 269 cm. Courtesy Tomio Koyama Gallery. ©1998 Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All rights reserved.

notations of the syllable *man.*[20] Murakami's initial wordplay with *dobozite* and *oshamanbe* resulted not in a drawing or visual prototype of the Mr. DOB character but a signboard with the two repeated words circling an oval. This piece, eventually titled *DOBOZITE DOBOZITE OSHAMANBE* (1993), was made explicitly for an exhibition on the subject of the jargon of commodity culture: "The plan of the exhibition [*Romansu no Yube* or "Evening of Romance"] was an inquiry into the custom of putting the emphatic suffix 'Z' and 'X' at the end of [every Japanese commodity] from beer to comic book titles. For example, the beer *Asahi Z,* or the *manga* title *Dragonball Z.* What makes these products so popular? I managed to make something that was under budget, and dwelled on the oddities of the Japanese language at the same time."[21] DOB, the perfect exemplar of cuteness with all of its violence, is a product of an investigation into the language rather than the imagery of commodity culture. In fact, Murakami elsewhere attributes DOB's origins to his antagonism towards an "anglicized pseudo-letter art" belatedly popularized in Japan by the work of Americans Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger: "DOB was my attempt to crush that art scene I de-

20. The *manga* character is Noboru Kawasaki's the Country General. See Takashi Murakami, "Life as a Creator," in *Takashi Murakami: Summon Monsters? Open the Door? Heal? Or Die?* (exhibition catalogue, Tokyo, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001), pp. 130–47.

21. Ibid., pp. 132–33.

FIGURE 11. Takashi Murakami, *The Castle of Tin Tin* (1998). Acrylic on canvas mounted on board. 300 × 300 cm (2 panels). Courtesy Blum and Poe, LA/Tomio Koyama Gallery, Tokyo.

spised."[22] With such a quintessentially cute object disclosed as originating in a form of wordplay itself antagonistically pitted against other kinds of "letter art"—and as the references to Holzer and Kruger suggest, an explicitly "engaged" American letter art in particular—we are now ready to shift focus from cuteness's significance in visual culture to its role in language and poetry.

Since *cute* derives aphetically, as the *OED* informs us, from *acute*, cuteness's etymology strikingly replicates the diminutive logic of the aesthetic it has come to name, since in aphaeresis words lose their initial unstressed syllables to generate shorter versions of themselves: *lone* derives from *alone*, *til* from *until*. But there is a key difference between *cute* and these other

22. Ibid., p. 132.

examples that result in conveniently abbreviated signifiers for the same signified. For while cuteness is an aesthetic of the round and soft that becomes amplified when its objects are depicted as groggy or sleepy,[23] the word *acute* means coming to a sharp edge or point, while *acuteness* similarly suggests mental alertness, keenness, and quickness. So *cute* exemplifies a situation in which making a word smaller, more compact, or more cute results in an uncanny reversal, changing its meaning into its exact opposite. While mirroring the flip-flopping of power relations dramatized in the DOB series, we can find a more ordinary version of this dialectical reversal in the fact that prototypically cute objects—babies, puppies, and so on—often have a deverbalizing effect on the subjects who impose cuteness upon them. In soliciting a response along the lines of a murmur or coo, the cute object shows its ability to infantilize the language of its infantilizer, dissolving syntactic divisions and reducing one's lexicon to onomatopoeia.[24] Note, for example, how Stein's admiring and critical reviewers alike seem compelled to approximate her language and, moreover, to savor these acts of bad imitation even when the intent is clearly ridicule: "Babble, baa, baa, Bull";[25] "her art is the sophisticated development of the child's 'Tiddledy-diddlety-fiddlety-doo.'"[26] Much in the same way Huxley seems to relish neologisms like "orgy-porgy" and "bumble-puppy" while attacking what Adorno would call the "culinary" or "lip-smacking" delights of his *Brave New World,* we find a member of the American literati as refined as H. L. Mencken pushed into saying words like "tosh" when negatively com-

23. See Harris, *Cute, Quaint, Hungry, and Romantic*, p. 7.

24. In this "softening" effect on the spectator, the cute may recall Edmund Burke's idea of beauty as that which "acts by relaxing the solids of the whole system," producing "an inward sense of melting and languor" (Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Beautiful and Sublime*, ed. Adam Philips [Oxford, 1990], pp. 136, 135; hereafter abbreviated *S*). There is thus a sense in which beauty is already "cute" (for Burke, at any rate) prior to the actual appearance of the latter aesthetic term. Defined empirically as a quality of objects and by the properties of smallness, softness, smoothness, and "nonangularity" or roundness in particular, beauty is associated with "the idea of weakness and imperfection," as brought out foremost in his discussion of "the beauty of the female sex." As Burke writes, "Women are very sensible of this; for which reason, they learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness and even sickness. In all this, they are guided by nature. *Beauty in distress is much the most affecting beauty*" (*S*, p. 100; my italics). In addition to the "inward sense" it produces of "melting and languor," note Burke's description of beauty's *bodily* effects on the spectator: "When we have before us such objects as excite love and complacency, the body is affected, so far as I could observe, much in the following manner. The head reclines on one side; the eyelids are more closed than usual" (*S*, p. 135). The person affected by beauty in Burke's account ends up having an appearance which we would today call cute. Might we not extrapolate from this to suggest that cuteness is simply the "new" form of beauty (as understood by Burke)? If so, his text provides yet another example of how the encounter with the cute object "cutifies" the subject.

25. Issac Goldberg, "As a Critic Has a Headache: A Review in Synthetic Form of the Works of Gertrude Stein, Past, Present, and to Come," in *The Critical Response to Gertrude Stein,* ed. Kirk Curnutt (Westport, Conn., 2000), p. 256.

26. Henry Seidel Canby, "Cheating at Solitaire," in *The Critical Response to Gertrude Stein,* p. 81.

menting on Stein's "bebble."[27] In fact, the process of verbal cutification that the aesthetic experience of cuteness seems to provoke ricochets back on the word *cute* to engender more diminutive versions of itself: the noun *cutie,* the adjective *cutesy,* and even the adjective *cutesy-poo,* all of which appear in the *OED.*

It is clear, then, that in addition to its capacity to convert a subject's veiled or latent aggression towards a vulnerable object into explicit aggression that seems to be directed toward the subject, *cuteness* names an aesthetic encounter with an exaggerated difference in power that does something to ordinary or communicative speech. More specifically, the concept names a relationship to a socially disempowered other that actively transforms the speech of the subject who *imposes* the aesthetic quality on that other—abetting a fantasy of the cute object's capacity for retaliation that we have seen Murakami explore. Such a fantasy sheds new light on why *Tender Buttons* features so many feminine and homey "little things" — a cup and saucer, a petticoat, a cushion, a shawl, a purse — described as "hurt" but also as "enthusiastically hurting" other objects of its own genre or kind, not unlike the way Kogepan relates to his pets. As Stein writes, "A hurt mended stick, a hurt mended cup, a hurt mended article of exceptional relaxation and annoyance, a hurt mended, hurt and mended is so necessary that no mistake is intended" (*TB*, p. 43). Indeed, "hurt and mended" seems as deliberate or "necessary" to the project of *Tender Buttons* as to the hobbled and bandaged Little Mutt. In the world of this poem, where even cups "need a pet oyster" (*TB*, p. 49), the prototypical murmur or coo to the cute object takes the form of an equally susurrous "alas." Throughout *Tender Buttons* this mournful apostrophe is directed at objects that seem to elicit it on the basis of their diminutive status alone: "Alas, alas the pull alas the bell alas the coach in china, alas *the little*" (*TB*, p. 53; my italics). Or as Stein coos in "CHICKEN": "Alas a dirty bird" (*TB*, p. 54). The world of *Tender Buttons* is thus one in which — alas — there is "abuse of cheese." However, it is also one noisy with "muncher munchers," an aggressive motif which we see returning in "A NEW CUP AND SAUCER": "Enthusiastically hurting a clouded yellow bud and saucer, enthusiastically so is the bite in the ribbon" (*TB*, p. 20).

Much as DOB sprouts alarmingly sharp teeth, Stein's ribbon bites. In keeping not just with *Tender Buttons*'s lesbian eroticism but what I am singling out here as its *cute* eroticism, this "sweet" but biting "trimming" underscores the extent to which the delightfulness offered by cuteness is *violent.* As Stein writes, "What is the use of a violent kind of delightfulness if there is no pleasure in not getting tired of it?" (*TB*, p. 10). The rhetorical

27. H. L. Mencken, "Literary Survey," in *The Critical Response to Gertrude Stein,* p. 248.

question suggests that the pleasure offered by cute things lies in part in their capacity to withstand rough handling, much in the same way that Mr. DOB, a character created to explore the phenomenon of "market survivability," manages to outlast his own violent disfiguration.

Murakami's and Stein's shared fascination with the aesthetic of cuteness underscores a surprising affinity between Stein and Andy Warhol, the artist to whom Murakami's work is most self-consciously indebted.[28] This link between two figures not conventionally paired can further our understanding of Stein's interest in the minor taste concept by highlighting aspects of her relationship to the market and the avant-garde that are often too quickly glossed over. In conjunction with their privileging of repetition and serial forms, both Stein and Warhol had an interest in celebrity portraiture that ran alongside their interests in the representation of pedestrian objects — a parallel that underscores Stein's oft-noted deficiency in what we might call anticommodity affect, along with the similarly antagonistic attitudes toward "master-pieces" and "genius," that have become hallmarks of avant-garde negativity.[29] Though her lack of *anti-* in these arenas by no means cancels out her avant-garde affiliations, Stein often seems to have positive affects where we tend to expect negative ones when it comes to consumer society as such, though it could be argued, in a corollary to Adorno's reminder that negative affects do not ensure that artworks will be critical, that her interest is in how artworks might be driven by positive affects without necessarily becoming *affirmative*. What Stein's Warholism avant la lettre most significantly illuminates, however, is that if *Tender Buttons* still contributes in one way or another to the modernist avant-garde's assault on the sentimentality of commodity culture, it does not do so merely or only by troping on cuteness in the way that, say, T. S. Eliot tropes on popular music in *The Waste Land* or Williams plays off of the language of popular journalism in *Paterson* — in both cases, to assert the distance of their own projects from these other cultural forms. Though the difference between appropriation and participation is often notoriously hard to gauge, it is Warhol's well-known innovation to have made work that turns on precisely this difficulty, placing it at the center of debates about the concept of *art in general* in an unprecedented way. *Tender Buttons* anticipates this achievement by managing to play on cuteness while also *being* cute — much like

28. Explicit references to Warhol abound in Murakami's work: from his flowers evoking *Flowers,* to the helium balloon versions of DOB alluding to *Silver Clouds,* to the statue of the ecstatically masturbating boy whose title, *My Lonesome Cowboy,* harks back both to Warhol's *My Hustler* and his own *Lonesome Cowboy* series.

29. Stein of course actively redefines "master-piece" in *The Geographical History of America* (New York, 1936) and *What Are Masterpieces* (Los Angeles, 1940) by radically divorcing this concept from the issues of time and identity. My point is simply that the masterpiece as concept, unlike, say, the manifesto, is not an avant-garde concept or category *per se*.

Warhol's uncanny knack for making art capable of commenting on the quality of decorative prettiness while simultaneously being pretty (*Flowers*), on a kind of bovine cheeriness while also being cheery (*Cow Wallpaper*), or on the diagram's aura of coldness or starkness while also being stark (*Dance Diagrams, Do It Yourself*).[30] Turning briefly to another model — this time from a midcentury, second-wave modernist poet — to build our account of cuteness (as well as to further illuminate Stein's simultaneously mimetic and constructive engagement with it), we can look at Francis Ponge's "The Potato." Recalling Ponge's early association in the 1920s with the surrealists, the international avant-garde most known for defamiliarizing the everyday, the deformation "suffered" by the "homey" objects in this poem also mirrors what we have seen happen to Mr. DOB. Apparently incapable of self-preservation, both are "shaken up, knocked around, abused" precisely in order to see if "their form survives." In this light, "The Potato" further underscores a crucial aspect of what we have come to call cuteness — the ability of the object to withstand the violence its very passivity seems to solicit. One might call this the violence of domestication or "tenderization":

> This taming of the potato by submitting it to boiling water for twenty minutes is quite amazing (and as a matter of fact while I write—it is one o'clock in the morning—potatoes are cooking on the stove in front of me). . . .
>
> A hubbub can be heard: the bubbling of the water. It is furious, or at least at a peak of excitement. It thrashes around angrily, steaming, oozing, sizzling, pfutt, tsitt; in short, terribly agitated on the red-hot grate.
>
> My potatoes, submerged down there, are shaken up, knocked around, abused, drenched to the marrow.
>
> The water's fury probably has nothing to do with them, but they suffer the consequences—unable to get out of this situation, they find themselves profoundly changed by it.
>
> In the end, they are left for dead. . . . If their form survives (which is not always the case), they have become soft and tender.[31]

30. *Prettiness, cheeriness, starkness:* I am reading Warhol's own corpus as not just a meditation on art and its relation to the commodity form but as an inquiry into the construction and function of taste concepts and minor ones in particular. This approach to the Warholian project already seems lurking in Buchloh's observation that "in his early career as a commercial artist [Warhol] featured all the debased and exhausted qualities of the 'artistic' that art directors and admen adored: the whimsical and the witty, the wicked and the *faux naïf*" ("AW," p. 470). Yet rather than being a mere phase in his transition from professional illustrator to gallery artist, I would argue that Warhol's engagement with such qualities *as qualities* takes the form of a much more deliberate and methodical inquiry throughout his career. In fact, we can see why Warhol might have explored the "qualities of the 'artistic'" loved by "art directors and admen" precisely as a way of approaching the question of the status of art in a consumer society.

31. Francis Ponge, *The Voice of Things*, trans. Beth Archer (New York, 1972), pp. 147–48; hereafter abbreviated *VT*.

As suggested by the "bebble" inadvertently produced by Stein's critics in their own aggressive efforts to "domesticate" her writing (make it more palpable, more digestible), cuteness might be described as an aesthetic experience that makes language more vulnerable to deformation—but, also, transformation. Similarly, in "The Potato" writing poetry is equated with an act of "submitting" small, round, and compact objects to a furious "bubbling" that makes them "soft" and "tender"—more malleable, (ab)useable, and, as it were, more cute.

The objects in *Tender Buttons* are similarly presented as "easily churned and cherished," so much that "CUSTARD" "has aches, aches when" and "a plate has a little bobble, all of them, any so"; indeed, in the world of Stein's poem, "a little called anything shows shudders" (*TB*, pp. 41, 51, 28, 25). Anticipating Ponge's repeated use of diminutive things as metaphors for words and poems, *Tender Buttons* calls attention to the "tenderness" of language in a broader sense, showing how grammar itself might be subjected to a "heat" that "loosens," "melts," and creates "stains": "Eating he heat eating he heat it eating, he heat it heat eating." And yet this process of "tenderization" also seems to produce something more ominous: "Looseness, why is there a shadow in the kitchen, there is a shadow in the kitchen because every little thing is bigger" (*TB*, p. 36). Stein's observation that "melting is exaggerating" (*TB*, p. 35) can in fact double as a description for the manner in which the more deformed or "melted-down" the originally compact Mr. DOB becomes, the more monstrously overstated his individual features become. "All the stain is tender," writes Stein near the conclusion of "ROASTBEEF," but while "the result the pure result is juice" (*TB*, p. 39), "a likeness, any likeness, a likeness has blisters, it has that and teeth, it has the staggering blindly" (*TB*, p. 45). Calling up the cruder gustatory meaning of *taste* that, as Pierre Bourdieu and others have noted, always returns to haunt the discourse of aesthetics, *Tender Buttons*'s meta-taste concept seems to demand not only the representation of delectable objects but the image of something less easily consumable—a blistered, toothy, and staggering something that we would not want to put in our mouths at all.[32] In fact, as *Tender Buttons* progresses from "Objects" to "Food," or as the poems' referents become more edible and therefore cuter, we are increasingly referred to the design of a "monster," or "monster puzzle, a heavy choking" in the text (*TB*, p. 45). Thus in "Rooms," a place where "there is a whole collection made" and "the whole arrangement is established" (*TB*, pp. 68, 64), we have

32. On the exclusion of taste as oral sensation from theories of aesthetic taste (and also on aesthetic "taste" as paradoxically founded on distaste or disgust), see Pierre Bourdieu, "Postscript," *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste,* trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), and Jacques Derrida, "Economimesis," *Diacritics* 11 (Summer 1981): 2–25. See also Denise Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven, Conn., 2005).

the announcement that "this is a monster and awkward quite awkward and the little design which flowered which is not strange and yet has visible writing, this is not shown all the time but at once, after that it rests where it is and where it is in place" (*TB*, p. 74).

Further light on this culinary matter can be gained by looking at Ponge's "The Orange," which begins with the image of a small, round, and anthropomorphized object being squeezed by a fist, "delighting its tormenter."

> Like the sponge, the orange aspires to regain face after enduring the ordeal of expression. But where the sponge always succeeds, the orange never does; for its cells have burst, its tissues are torn. While the rind alone is flabbily recovering its form, thanks to its resilience, an amber liquid has oozed out, accompanied, as we know, by sweet refreshment, sweet perfume—but also by the bitter awareness of a premature expulsion of pips as well. [*VT*, p. 36]

As a nonhuman thing given human features (though it is also quickly deprived of them), Ponge's orange can be read as a figure for a number of personification strategies, including one that Paul de Man likens to the act of "giving face" and that could be described, given the centrality of anthropomorphism to cuteness, as the aesthetic's master trope:

> Prosopopoeia [is] the fiction of an apostrophe to a . . . voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech. Voice assumes mouth, eye, and finally face, a chain that is manifest in the etymology of the trope's name, *prosopon poien,* to confer a mask or a face (*prosopon*).[33]

What Ponge's orange highlights, however, is how easily the act of endowing a dumb object with expressive capabilities can become a dominating rather than benevolent gesture. To make the orange expressive, in the sense of making it articulate and meaningful but also in the sense of forcing it to expel its "essence," is in effect to subject it to injury: "its cells have burst, its tissues are torn." Far from being a kindly or empowering act, in Ponge's poem "giving face" to an object is to make it *lose* face, an act not just of humiliation but mutilation.

Here it is worth noting that while cute toys always have faces, and often overly large or exaggerated eyes (a perverse literalization of the gaze that Walter Benjamin associates with the aura of autonomous art), other facial features—and mouths in particular—tend to be simplified to the point of being barely there.[34] Sanrio's Hello Kitty, for example, has no mouth at all. Hence

33. Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, 1984), pp. 75–76.

34. See Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Illuminations,* trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1969), p. 188.

while de Man metonymically equates the endowing of speech with "giving face," giving face here amounts to denying speech. The striking incompleteness of the cute visage implies that while the object must be given just *enough* face to enable it to return our gaze, a fuller personification becomes impossible because it would symbolically render that object our equal, erasing the power differential on which the aesthetic depends.

The aesthetic of cuteness calls attention, moreover, to the "latent threat" attending all strategies of rhetorical personification, as de Man discusses in his reading of Wordsworth. Observing that Wordsworth's *Essays upon Epitaphs* anxiously warns against the use of prosopopoeia even as it relies on and privileges the trope, de Man suggests that by making the dead or inanimate or inhuman speak, "the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token," that the living human speaker who personifies or throws voice into the nonhuman object can be as easily "struck dumb."[35] In other words, if things can be personified, persons can be made things. In this account, as in Marx's analysis of the commodity form, animation and reification constitute "two sides of the same coin."[36] There is a sense in which a later image in Ponge's "The Orange" calls attention to this reversal as well:

> Merely recalling its singular manner of perfuming the air and delighting its tormentor is not saying enough about the orange. One has to stress the glorious color of the resulting liquid which, more than lemon juice, *makes the larynx open widely both to pronounce the word and ingest the juice without any apprehensive grimace of the mouth.* [*VT*, pp. 36–37; my italics]

Hence while "The Orange" begins by highlighting the passivity of the small and compact commodity named in its title (a thing that in this redoubling serves, as is the case for most of Ponge's prose poems, as an even smaller stand-in for the already small and compact literary object that is "The Orange") it culminates by relocating this passivity on the side of the subject *consuming* the essence the object/artwork/commodity has been forced to expel.

With the aid of Ponge's allegory of consumption as *coerced rather than voluntary,* we are in a better position to understand why *Tender Buttons*'s succession of "little," "tender," "hurt," "abused," "shuddering," and "sur-

35. De Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," p. 78.

36. Jonathan Flatley, "Warhol Gives Good Face," in *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*, ed. Jennifer Doyle, Flatley, and José Esteban Muñoz (Durham, N.C., 1996), p. 116. As Flatley usefully clarifies, the reification/personification dualism in Marx's account represents the commodity as perceived from two distinct points of view: from the side of production and consumption, respectively.

rendering" objects needs to arrive, or become visible in its entirety as a "design," in the idea of a "monster." If the taste concept of cuteness is an especially apt index of the ease with which market society routinely turns art into a "culinary" commodity, we may begin to suspect that the unpleasantly blistered "monster" appearing in *Tender Buttons,* as well as in Murakami's DOB series, might less encode a fantasy of art's ability to inflict payback on the society that imposes minorness upon it (an idea that all the artists above would find ludicrous) than a more modest way of imagining art's capacity for offering *some* resistance to its rhythmic recuperation by becoming something *slightly less easy to consume*—or something that if indeed consumed might result in "heavy choking" (*TB*, p. 45). In this vein, the violent implosion of Murakami's tiny, smiling package of cuteness might also be taken as a testament to the falseness of the reconciliation between high art and mass culture promised by the postwar industrialization of modernist aesthetics, which seemed so neatly capsulated in the new taste concepts the new design industries sought to proliferate.

In its exaggerated passivity, there is a sense in which the cute thing is the most reified or thinglike of things, the most objectified of objects or even an "object" par excellence. Turning from the early and mid–twentieth-century examples of Stein and Ponge to one from the twenty-first century, we can see a similar fantasy of how this hyperobjectification might be impeded or even reversed, in Bob Perelman and Francie Shaw's recent collaboration *Playing Bodies,* a series of fifty-two short poems corresponding to fifty-two relatively small (eighteen by eighteen inches) white latex paintings, depicting two mouthless dolls or toys—one a humanoid, the other a dinosaur—interacting with one another in intimate and loving, but also violent and aggressive ways.[37] In most of the poems, the poet ventriloquizes or speaks as one of the two toys (usually the humanoid one)—addressing the other as if it, too, were not a mere thing but a subject capable of response, but precisely in order to highlight its dumbness or *incapacity* for response. If the speaker in the poem below, for instance, gives face to a voiceless entity, he does so less to endow it with agency than to emphasize his own ability to dominate and use it—in this case, as an instrument for writing itself. The dinosaur that becomes the tool of the writer/speaker once apostrophized as his poetic principle is initially shown in a semiconscious stupor or "trance," recalling Harris's observation that cuteness is not just "the aesthetic of deformity and dejection" but "the aesthetic of sleep."[38] And while this comatose object does eventually speak, its speech is reduced or limited to a "thin whis-

37. See Bob Perelman and Francie Shaw, *Playing Bodies* (New York, 2004); hereafter abbreviated *PB*.

38. Harris, *Cute, Quaint, Hungry, and Romantic*, p. 7.

per," which is to say a speech that calls attention to its negative status as barely speech at all:

37

So, poetry, I see you
swooned into steep trance

When I hear
Your thin whisper
My arms are too light
I need your tail to write

It looks like I'm saying this to you
tranced in one oblique line
but your ear is everywhere
without it I'm all over the place

Really, I'm only
using you to write
what you tell me I hear

[*PB*]

Just as Ponge's orange is forced to ex-press, here the literally mouthless object apostrophized by the subject ("So, poetry") is ruthlessly instrumentalized to write. In this sense, the speaker does not so much give voice to the object than to an *operation* more or less coextensive with the lyric tradition in its entirety, from Petrarch's instrumentalization and disfiguration of Laura to Wordsworth's Lucy poems and beyond. And yet by the end of 37, it is revealed that in spite of the aggressive handling of this object (that, in the first stanza, has already been turned into a mere transmitter for the words of others), it is actually the object that is in control — not only of

the poem's speaker but of the poem itself. By the end of the poem, it is the speaker who has become a recording instrument, writing what the object tells him he *is hearing*. So who is really the tool, as it were, in this situation? *Playing Bodies* 23 poses a similar question:

23

Take that, That
And try some of this, This
Be yourself, Be
And don't tread on me, Don't

Fuck you, You
And I love it when you call me that, Love
Pleasure always goes twice around the block, Please
So say it again, Sam

One more time, Time
And another thing, Thing
Don't stop now, Now
Or else I'm gone, I

[*PB*]

What is striking here, in a poem constructed primarily from already-said language, is the equation of poetic address with attack. The speaker's utterances are clearly aggressive in content ("Take that"; "Fuck you") but even more so in the form they assume: that of an imperative whose language actually gives rise to the proper name of the object addressed ("That," "You"). Implied here is a situation in which the addressee of a violent imperative appears to have no identity distinct from the one the imperative constitutes for him — a situation that becomes particularly ironic in the

case of "Be yourself." And yet the speaker's commands produce a kind of echolalia ("that, That"; "this, This"; "now, Now") that in its self-affirming circularity suggests a failure to establish the addressee as a fully independent and separate entity capable of responding to them. In this sense, the powerlessness of the addressed mute object returns as an impotence on the part of the speaker, whose hails stutter and emptily circle back on themselves precisely at the anticipated moment of their completion. It is as if the authority figure's "Hey, you!" in Louis Althusser's scene of interpellation fell short of arriving at the second-person pronoun, doubling back on itself to become an act of hailing one's own incomplete hail. Nothing makes this structural incompleteness clearer than the final line of Perelman's poem, "Or else I'm gone, I": a sentence fragment in which the unstated but implied "you" seems paradoxically erased in the act of being addressed, leaving the lonely and dangling "I" as a remainder.

What Perelman adds to our ongoing investigation of the cute aesthetic via Stein and Ponge is thus an emphasis on incompleteness at the level of poetic *address* — and one that oddly seems intended to highlight the immoderation of that address, the overambitiousness of its bounds or reach. The focus not just on incompleteness but on the address's exorbitant range or goal suggests that there is something much more at stake for Perelman, in his meditations on cuteness, than the aesthetic concept per se. Like the "monster-puzzle" in *Tender Buttons,* this larger and more ambitious something is nothing less, I would venture, than a meditation on the social status of the avant-garde and the criticisms its ambitions have received from the Left. In fact, all the poetic explorations of cuteness above, arrayed across the twentieth century, can be read as a way of acknowledging but also critically addressing oft-made observations about the literary avant-garde's social *powerlessness,* its practical ineffectualness or lack of agency within the "overadministered world" it nonetheless persists in imagining as other than what it is (*AT*, p. 53). While the cute is an aesthetic of the small, the vulnerable, and the deformed, the avant-garde's lack of political consequentiality is typically attributed to the short or limited range of its actual address, often taken as sign of its elitism as a mode of "restricted production" (the critical position of Pierre Bourdieu); its susceptibility to becoming routinized, in spite of its dynamism and commitment to change, and thus to being absorbed and recuperated by the cultural institutions it initially opposes (the criticisms of Raymond Williams, Peter Bürger, and Paul Mann); and a social overambitiousness signaled by the incomplete or unfinished nature of all its projects — an incompleteness that in turn betrays overhasty assumptions about "a harmony between society and artworks that has been preestablished by world spirit" (*AT*, p. 236) and thus, by extension, an oversimplistic identity between political agency and radical

form.[39] As Barrett Watten notes citing the same authors above, these criticisms from the Left offer strong challenges that cannot simply be dismissed or ignored: It "is true, the avant-garde comprises a small group of practitioners at a far remove from the mechanisms of social reproduction. Avant-garde criticality cannot make up for the gap between its stated intentions and actual effects, which must still be seen as relative to its restricted codes and marginal formations."[40]

Based on its smallness (of audience as well as membership), incompleteness (the gap between stated intentions and actual effects), and vulnerability (to institutional ossification), these observations about the avant-garde's ineffectuality in society, and by extension that of its productions, seem especially incontrovertible in the case of lyric poetry, the literary genre most broadly associated with small, fragmentary, and lapidary or rarefied literary objects. We can thus see why the commodity aesthetic of cuteness might be mobilized by the poetic avant-garde, particularly in times of war or global crisis, as a meditation on its own restricted agency in a totally commodified society of ends-means rationality, as well as on the social effeteness of its small and all too easily fetishized texts (a hyperobjectification that continues to haunt all poetry, though certain traditions have tended to embrace it more than others). But, more importantly, cuteness allows us to conceive the powerlessness of both poetic forms and the social formations built around their production in the arena of political action as the source of an unsuspected power in the domain of political imagination: a fantasy about the very capacity to fantasize or imagine an *otherwise* embodied in Stein's ribbon, Ponge's orange, and Perelman and Shaw's toys.

The notion of an agency preserved in the very ineffectuality of the inert and one could even say radically reified object is in fact one implication of Adorno's most significant thesis about artworks in *Aesthetic Theory*. Starting from the premise that "the immanence of society in the artwork is the essential social relation of art, not the immanence of art in society" (*AT*, p. 232), Adorno's claim is that society is most active in an artwork where the artwork is most distanced from society, which seems also to imply, most ineffectual with regard to instrumental action in society. This powerlessness, Adorno notes, makes all art not only seem undignified but even "ridiculous and clownish" (*AT*, p. 119). While it is always the case that "artworks fall

39. The Left criticisms of the avant-garde I have roughly summarized here are articulated in the following works: Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field,* trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, Calif., 1996); Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London, 1989); Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde,* trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, 1984); Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (Bloomington, Ind., 1991); and *AT*.

40. Barrett Watten, "The Constructivist Moment: From El Lissitzky to Detroit Techno," *Qui Parle* 11 (Autumn–Winter 1997): 64.

helplessly mute before the question 'What's it for?' and before the reproach that they are actually pointless," in the face of historical catastrophe art's impotence is so magnified it begins to look *silly:* "The manifest absurdity of the circus—Why all the effort?—is *in nuce* the aesthetic enigma" (*AT*, pp. 121, 186). Like the other figures of impotence ambivalently foregrounded by the poetic explorations of cuteness by Stein, Ponge, and Perelman (inert or passive thingliness; silence or muteness; woundedness or deformity), the comportment of "ridiculousness" becomes crucial for Adorno's more extensive reflections on the aesthetic agency paradoxically made available by art's social ineffectuality in *Aesthetic Theory*. For while "the progressive spiritualization of art in the name of maturity only accentuates the ridiculous all the more glaringly," for Adorno, art's ridiculousness is also "part of a condemnation of empirical rationality; it accuses the rationality of social praxis of having become an end in itself and as such the irrational and mad reversal of means into ends" (*AT*, p. 119). Hence while "the shadow of art's autarchic radicalism," Adorno notes, is always its "*harmlessness*," in the artwork "the unconditional surrender of dignity can become an organon of its strength" (*AT*, pp. 29, 39; my italics). It is this surrender of dignity, a sign that "art partakes of weakness no less than of strength," that grounds Adorno's oft-noted admiration for the "violent kind of delightfulness" exemplified by genres like the circus and slapstick cinema, for Paul Verlaine's ability "to turn himself into the passive tumbling instrument of his poetry," and for Klee's ability to produce a kind of "radicalized . . . reification [that] probes for the language of things" (*AT*, pp. 39, 60).

The above should remind us that in spite of the aggression involved in its production, the aesthetic of cuteness still involves a feeling of pleasure. As Stein puts it, "*All the pliable succession of surrendering* creates an ingenious joy"; indeed, "the persecution is so outrageous that *nothing is solemn*" (*TB*, p. 42; my italics). *Tender Buttons*'s organizing taste concept could thus be described as "lighthearted," if more in an Adornian than a colloquial sense. In his essay "Is Art Lighthearted?" Adorno does not employ this term to convey the affect of gaiety or "fun," just as Stein's abused cheese shows that cuteness is never *entirely* happy. If the cuteness of *Tender Buttons* is therefore "lighthearted" in Adorno's sense, it is not because of its capacity to serve as a "mechanism for delight" in a society where art is generally considered something "prescribed to tired businesspeople as a shot in the arm."[41] By "lightheartedness" Adorno is referring—via Kant—to the "demeanor" that characterizes *art in general* in its fundamental *purposelessness,* a demeanor available only to that which cannot be harnessed to achieve a

41. Adorno, "Is Art Lighthearted?" *Notes to Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, 2 vols. (New York, 1991–92), 2:248; hereafter abbreviated "IAL."

strategic end and that in its inefficaciousness is perceived as not serious from the standpoint of instrumental rationality—that is, as *inconsequential,* in both senses of the word. It is because of this inconsequentiality that for Adorno even works with an "expression of despair" can be "lighthearted." As he notes, "in Beckett's plays the curtain rises the way it rises on the room with the Christmas presents" ("IAL," p. 248).[42] Though lack of purpose does not necessarily imply inconsequentiality, and neither term necessarily implies powerlessness, it is precisely from the vantage point of an ends-means society—which is to say, *our* vantage point—that, in both cases, the former term inevitably drags the latter in its wake.

If cuteness is a lighthearted aesthetic, an aesthetic of ineffectuality par excellence, one might say that there is, astonishingly, no better theorist of this minor taste concept than Adorno himself, seemingly the dourest defender of high modernism from the Left. And for Adorno there is no better sign of art's *necessary* ineffectuality in the end-means society of which it is a part than what he calls its "thing-character." Here we might speculate that Ponge's equation of literary expression to an act of mutilation is designed to call attention to how a poem, like Adorno's exemplary artwork, "*suffer[s]* from its immanent condition as a thing" (*AT*, p. 100; my italics). By this "suffering" or "grieving" Adorno gestures toward what Fredric Jameson calls "the sheer guilt of Art itself in a class society, art as luxury and class

42. Even in his careful separation of the "lightheartedness" of the useless or inefficacious from the instrumental affect of "fun," however, Adorno is reluctant to divorce art from the question of happiness entirely: "If art were not a source of pleasure for people, in however mediated a form, it would not have been able to survive in the naked existence it contradicts and resists." He continues,

> This is not something external to [art], however, but part of its very definition. Although it does not refer to society, the Kantian formulation 'purposefulness without purpose' alludes to this. Art's purposelessness consists in its *having escaped the constraints of self-preservation*. It embodies something like freedom in the midst of unfreedom. The fact that through its very existence it stands outside the evil spell that prevails allies it to a promise of happiness, a promise it itself somehow expresses in its expression of despair. ["IAL," p. 248]

The issue of "survivability" that we have seen highlighted in Murakami's DOB experiment—where the dramatization of the violence that underpins cuteness provides a much-needed prophylactic against the "ordained cheerfulness" that Adorno *opposes* to art's lightheartedness, and which Murakami's work always comes dangerously close to approaching—returns above as a question related to art in capitalist society as a whole. Here, the ability of the noninstrumentalizable to endure in a society fueled by instrumental rationality rests precisely in its indifference to "self-preservation," an image that counterintuitively suggests that art's purposelessness or uselessness might be most vividly allegorized not by a show of *not* using an object, of contemplating it at some respectful distance or remove, but rather by a show of *using* it in the most disrespectful and even vehement of ways — precisely to emphasize a divorcement from the logic of strategic rationality on the part of that object that will extend even to a refusal to *preserve itself*. The fate of Stein's cute cups and Ponge's equally cute potatoes emerges here as a particularly poignant way of calling attention to this link between art's lightheartedness and its capacity to survive.

privilege"[43] but also "the complicity of the artwork's thing-character with social reification and thus with its untruth: the fetishization of what is in itself a process as a relation between elements" (*AT*, p. 100). On the one hand, the artwork's "objectivation, a condition of aesthetic autonomy, is [always] rigidification"; but, at the same time, "artworks themselves destroy the claim to objectivation that they raise."[44] As an example of this, Adorno notes that

> the gravitational pull [of the amorphous] increases the more thoroughly art is organized. . . . When artworks are viewed under the closest scrutiny, the most objectivated paintings metamorphose [much like Mr. DOB] into a swarming mass. . . . As soon as one imagines having *a firm grasp* on the details of an artwork, it dissolves into the indeterminate and undifferentiated, so mediated is it. [*AT*, pp. 100, 101]

With this imagined grasp or fantasy of mastery, we begin to see how the cute object, qua "most objectivated" of objects, might even serve as the best example of the *modernist* artwork that Adorno clearly privileges as a synecdoche for art in general in *Aesthetic Theory*. But even as my alignment of a culinary taste concept with the high modernism that Adorno remains notorious for defending from a position "easily reducible to 'elitist' opinions . . . or a social mandarinism which looks outmoded and culturally alien from within the mass-cultural democracy of the postmodern superstate" (*LM*, p. 134) may begin to seem "indecently 'cute,'" it is important to recall Stein's cup and cheese, Williams's plums, and Ashbery's cocoa tins—that is, the draw of certain modernist poetic traditions to simple objects that are not only easily grasped or fondled *physically* but, as one might gauge from the ubiquitous presence of similar objects in concurrent strains of twentieth-century philosophy, easily grasped or fondled *mentally* (Wittgenstein's cooking pot, Heidegger's jug and shoes). Indeed, Adorno's own strik-

43. Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London, 1990), p. 130; hereafter abbreviated *LM*.

44. Though "objectivation" here explicitly refers to "the result of the play of forces *in the work* and [is] related to its thing-character as an act of synthesis" (*AT*, p. 99; my italics), for Adorno it is also something that the subject at once undergoes and performs. "Objectivation" is thus closely related to Adorno's highly particular concept of mimesis, which as Shierry Weber Nicholsen argues, refers less to a type of representation than to a behavior on the part of the subject of aesthetic experience, who "imitates or follows the tensions and motions inherent in the work of art" much as one reads or follows along a musical score. As Nicholsen points out, in this mimetic "following along," a process by which the experiencing consciousness "disappears" into the artwork, a kind of "quasi-sensuous and quasi-logical" understanding is achieved that Adorno contrasts to an explicitly conceptual or rational knowledge (Nicholsen, *Exact Imagination, Late Work: On Adorno's Aesthetics* [Cambridge, 1997], pp. 17, 18). For Adorno's treatment of the dialectic of mimesis and rationality, which eventually leads to his discussion of "construction," see *AT*, pp. 53–58.

ing refusal to minimize the "thing-character" from which all artworks "suffer" seems to suggest cuteness's aptness as a frame through which to read the incomplete treatise on aesthetics he intended to dedicate to Beckett—aesthetic theorist, in his own right, of assorted cookies, sucking stones, and shoes.

This is certainly not to suggest that all modernism can be better understood through the paradigm of cuteness; there is nothing cute about Eliot's somber and elevated *Four Quartets,* nor about the militant futurisms of Wyndham Lewis or F. T. Marinetti despite the multiple links between cuteness and violence disclosed above. Rather, my claim is that as an aesthetic of powerlessness, cuteness offers a special propaedeutic for understanding what Jameson and other critics have described as *Aesthetic Theory*'s most complicated critical maneuver—Adorno's specifically *Marxist* defense of the social ineffectuality of the autonomous artwork and that of high modernist artworks in particular: "hermetic" artifacts that "through their powerlessness and superfluity in the empirical world . . . emphasize the element of powerlessness in their own content" (*AT*, p. 104). For the question still remains exactly *how* a work of art can be said to be "social through and through by virtue of its very antisociality" (*LM*, p. 177), a thesis that runs the risk (as Adorno himself notes elsewhere) of devolving or appearing reducible to a catchy saying precisely because of its counterintuitive and even singsong, jinglelike quality. Indeed, the thesis that art is most social when least social sounds a bit like an aphorism—Western philosophy's most folksy and, dare I say, cutest subgenre, where philosophical ideas take the form of popular wisdom dispensed in small, appealing, and easy-to-remember capsules and whose formal danger *of* cuteness Adorno seems provocatively to court and flirt with in *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life.* Even in their brief and pithy titles ("All the little flowers," "Grey and grey," "Wolf as grandmother," "Dwarf fruit," "Picture-book without pictures," "Little folk," "Cat out of the bag," and so on), these compact texts on ephemeral social phenomena and the minutiae of everyday existence seem designed to bear a superficial resemblance to modernist prose poems that in turn bear a superficial resemblance to pithy newspaper advertisements, jokes, or zingers.[45] In "On Lyric Poetry and Society" Adorno actually underscores the punch-line quality of the claim about art's asocial sociality, by comparing it to an actual punch line in a political cartoon:

45. See Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life,* trans. Edmund Jephcott (London, 1978). For the observation about the link between the modernist prose poem and advertising, I am grateful to Rob Halpern.

> You may accuse me of so sublimating the relationship of lyric and society in this definition out of fear of a crude sociologism that there is really nothing left of it; it is precisely what is not social in the lyric poem that is now to become its social aspect. [Here you might] call my attention to Gustav Doré's caricature of the arch-reactionary deputy whose praise of the *ancien régime* culminated in the exclamation, "And to whom, gentlemen, do we owe the revolution of 1789 if not to Louis XVI!"[46]

So how *is* art made social by means of its nonsociality? As Jameson notes, even "*Aesthetic Theory*'s ingenious philosophical solution to this problem—the concept of the work of art as a windowless monad . . . in fact, for all practical intents and purposes, leaves it intact" (*LM*, p. 177). I would suggest that what we now know about the minor aesthetic of cuteness can actually give us insight into this major question. More specifically, it will help us better see how Adorno himself comes to address the problem through a series of excurses on what we might now (for heuristic reasons) think of as cute-specific themes: art's dialectical oscillation between powerlessness and cruelty; its anticommunicativeness or muteness; its ability to objectivate the subjective; and the notion of artistic expression as mutilation.

Adorno begins the "Society" section of *Aesthetic Theory* by very clearly describing the doctrine of aesthetic autonomy most classically expressed in Kant's notion of "disinterested interest" as itself a sociohistorical phenomenon, a product of "the bourgeois consciousness of freedom that was itself bound up with the social structure" (*AT*, p. 225). Stressing the social origins of art's remoteness from society, Adorno writes that "if, in one regard, as product of the social labor of spirit, art is always implicitly a *fait social*, in becoming bourgeois art its social aspect was made explicit" (*AT*, p. 225). In becoming autonomous by becoming bourgeois, art becomes increasingly reflexive or preoccupied with the notion of itself as a bounded domain but also and at the same time increasingly preoccupied with its relationship to its constitutive outside. As Adorno puts it, bourgeois art's new and distinctive object or obsession becomes "the relation of *itself* as artifact *to* empirical society" (*AT*, p. 225; my italics). Since its relation to its outside can only become art's defining concern *after* it has become autonomous and since this relation to "empirical society" is always, in the last instance, one of "powerlessness and superfluity" (*AT*, p. 104), the project of autonomous art begins to resemble a masochistic one: an incessant, guilt-ridden meditation on its own social impotence. It is as if once art finally achieves its distance from society it no longer has the option of leaving the social question of its relation

46. Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society" (1967), *Notes to Literature*, 1:42; hereafter abbreviated "LPS."

to society alone. Hence, to reemploy images of bodily injury Adorno uses throughout his text, the art/society question becomes a "wound" that can never be fully healed because it is one that art incessantly worries, the "scar" at which it must constantly pick. The price of art's increasing self-reflexivity once it becomes autonomous is that the content of its reflection becomes painfully focused on its own inconsequentiality or powerlessness. And since the aesthetic of cuteness teaches us that powerlessness at its extreme is often figured as mouthlessness or deformity, it comes as no surprise that Adorno repeatedly describes artworks as both the "wounds of society" and "mute." A corollary of this, however, is that *nothing critically understands or reflects art's suspended agency in capitalist society better than art itself*—that theorizing powerlessness, and the multiple and politically ambiguous meanings of powerlessness in a society that worships power, is, in fact, a special or distinctive power of all artworks in their thing-character.

We have seen how this reified thing-character—employed as a synonym for a general inertness or passivity, as well as for its more explicitly Marxist connotations, throughout *Aesthetic Theory*—becomes the ultimate index of art's ineffectuality in a commodity society that privileges total abstraction or exchange value as much as ends-means rationality. For Adorno it is also, conversely, the strongest cipher of this society's presence in the artwork. In other words, it is the quality that simultaneously reveals art as *least* social (that is, most ineffectual in a society that transforms human relations into thinglike ones and invests material objects with what Jameson calls a "strangely spiritualized" or libidinal sheen [*LM*, p. 180]) but also as *most* social (in the sense of most visibly bearing this society's imprint or mark). In both cases, we can understand why this "thing" or "fetish character," qua reification in the traditional Marxist senses above, becomes increasingly associated with a scar or wound, becoming a quality from which art "suffers" or guiltily "grieves." And yet Adorno is just as adamant that both the "fetish character" and reified aspects of the autonomous artwork are precisely what allow it to *criticize* a "total exchange society in which everything is heteronomously defined" (*AT*, p. 226). Not only is it that "the truth content of artworks, which is indeed their social truth, is predicated on their fetish character," but, in Adorno's strongest variation on this thesis: "Art keeps itself alive through its social force of resistance; *unless* it reifies itself, it becomes a commodity" (*AT*, pp. 227, 226; my italics). It is precisely this dialectic that cuteness seems particularly suited for dramatizing, insofar as the aesthetic always involves a hyperintensification of the thingishness of things. Hence while the "fetishistic element [that] remains admixed in artworks" is one that they can "neither exclude nor deny," it becomes clear that Adorno's aesthetic permits a "good" fetishism: one that in resisting "the principle of heteronomy [that] is the principle of exchange" becomes the

"strongest defense of art against its bourgeois functionalization" (*AT*, p. 227). In a similar reversal, reification becomes "first and foremost a positive, that is to say a valorized, concept" in *Aesthetic Theory,* described as not only essential to any work of art but as a homeopathic "poison" that art needs to swallow "in order to permit the aesthetic a continuing . . . existence in a wholly reified world—from which, however the counter-poison somehow protects it" (*LM*, pp. 180, 181).

In this manner, as Jameson notes, both the "principle of death" (*AT*, p. 133) that is reification and the animistic principle of fetishism "change their valences as they pass" "from the social to the aesthetic (and vice versa)" in Adorno's aesthetic (*LM*, p. 180). I would add that in the same shift these indices of art's powerlessness in commodity society are reconfigured as indices of its distinctive ability to theorize powerlessness in general. Insofar as this is also, as we have seen, the shared preoccupation of both the commodity aesthetic of cuteness and the avant-garde poetries represented by Stein, Ponge, and Perelman, their convergence in the work of the aesthetic theoretician whose sensibility seems furthest removed from the domain of the colloquially "lighthearted" is less surprising than it would initially appear. Yet, even as I hope to have shown how the antagonistic and even violent dimensions of cuteness make it impossible to fully identify this aesthetic quality with the quality Adorno calls coziness [*Gemütlichkeit*], my intent is not to leave the impression that Adorno simply valorizes the qualities umbrellaed by *cute* (an American word that never once makes an appearance in *Aesthetic Theory*) without critical suspicion. Even when arguing, for instance, that "foolish subjects like those of *The Magic Flute* and *Der Freischütz* have more truth content through the medium of the music than does the *Ring,* which gravely aims at the ultimate," he warns that "the ridiculous, as a barbaric residuum of something alien to form, misfires in art if art fails to reflect and shape it. If it remains on the level of the childish and is taken for such, it merges with the calculated *fun* of the culture industry" (*AT*, p. 119). Adorno's wariness about the aesthetic misuse of ridiculousness mirrors his reservations about a nonreflective privileging of the ugly, which while allowing art a unique way of denouncing "the world that creates and reproduces the ugly in its own image," leaves the possibility "that sympathy with the degraded will reverse into concurrence with degradation" (*AT*, p. 49). Or, as he puts it even more acidly in *Minima Moralia*, in a comment on the tendency of guilt-ridden intellectuals to morally beatify the "simple folk," "in the end, the glorification of splendid underdogs is nothing other than glorification of the splendid system that makes them."[47] But in spite of these noticeably more cautious reflections, it is telling that for all the

47. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 28.

numerous literary examples Adorno draws upon to suggest art's ineffectuality, inconsequentiality, or powerlessness in a society of instrumental rationality as precisely the source of its distinctive capacity to draw critical attention to powerlessness (including the politically significant question of what it might mean to lack or refuse the kind of power most privileged by an ends-means society), examples consisting mostly of works by cosmopolitan modernists such as Baudelaire, Poe, Kafka, Mann, and Beckett, the only poem cited in its entirety in *Aesthetic Theory* is a very homey "little poem" by Eduard Mörike called "Mousetrap Rhyme" (*AT*, p. 123). Another poem by this "hypochondriacal clergyman from Cleversulzbach, who is considered one of our naïve artists," called "A Walking Tour," is predominantly featured in "On Lyric Poetry and Society," where Adorno points out that Mörike summons a "classicistic elevated style" to counterbalance the poem's overarching sentimentalization of hominess, "the clinging to one's own restricted sphere that . . . makes ideals like comfort and *Gemütlichkeit* so suspect" ("LPS," p. 49). But whereas Mörike's classicism in "A Walking Tour" is said to protect his poem from being "disfigured by *Gemütlichkeit*" or reduced to a "object of fondling," the Mörike poem integrated into the text of *Aesthetic Theory,* while taking similar "delight in things close to hand" ("LPS," p. 51), is overtly violent from the start:

> Mousetrap Rhyme
>
> *The child circles the mousetrap three times and chants:*
> Little guest, little house.
> Dearest tiny or grown-up mouse
> boldly pay us a visit tonight
> when the moon shines bright!
> But close the door back of you tight,
> you hear?
> And careful for your little tail!
> After dinner we will sing
> After dinner we will spring
> And make a little dance:
> Swish, Swish!
> My old cat will probably be dancing with.
>
> [*AT*, pp. 123–24]

Much like the diminutive victim addressed by the poem's infantile speaker, what we have here is a small and compact text that both thematizes and formally reflects in its sing-song prosody the oscillation between domination and passivity, or cruelty and tenderness, uniquely brought forward by the aesthetic of cuteness. Though, as Adorno notes, "if one restricted

interpretation to its discursive content, the poem would amount to no more than sadistic identification with what civilized custom has done to an animal disdained as a parasite," he reads the poem's very appropriation of the generic "child's taunt" as its strongest critique of the ritual, even if in this replication the poem seems to most passively acquiesce to it: "The poem's gesture, which points to this ritual as if nothing else were possible, holds court over the gapless immanence of the ritual by turning the force of self-evidence into an indictment of that ritual" (*AT*, pp. 123, 124). In this manner, once appropriated by the poem, the child's taunt "no longer has the last word"; in fact, to "reduce the poem to a taunt is to ignore its social content [*Inhalt*] along with its poetic content" (*AT*, p. 124).

These comments are preceded by a more general discussion of committed art's necessary abstinence from explicit acts of condemnation, illustrated by references to Williams, Georg Trakl, and Bertolt Brecht.[48] Yet Adorno ultimately foregrounds a canonically minor as well as formally diminutive text, one we might even call "indecently 'cute,'" to make his argument that art "judges exclusively by abstaining from judgment" (*AT*, p. 124), an important corollary of the central dialectic of *Aesthetic Theory* that cuteness enables us better to understand. Adorno's actual interpretation of "Mousetrap Rhyme" as "the nonjudgmental reflex of language on a miserable, socially conditioned ritual, [which] as such transcends it *by subordinating itself to it*" (*AT*, p. 124), not only reinforces what I take to be his most provocative if never explicitly advanced thesis—art's distinctive power of theorizing powerlessness—but stands out as the only close reading of a poem in its entirety in all of *Aesthetic Theory*. Surprising, perhaps—but less so if one reads this unfinished treatise on art and aesthetics not just through the lens of cuteness but the highly particular cuteness of the poetic avant-garde.

48. "When Brecht or William Carlos Williams sabotages the poetic and approximates an empirical report, the actual result is by no means such an empirical report. By the polemical rejection of the exalted lyrical tone, the empirical sentences translated into the aesthetic monad acquire an altogether different quality" (*AT*, p. 123).