

***“Ask anybody in Asia: Western-style cool is out. Everything Japanese is in - and oh, so cute!” Barbara Koh - Cute Power.***

***“We are always already deeply post-human.” Simon Pope & Matthew Fuller***

***“These childishly cute colours upset the theorists as much as they are adored by Kitty fans.” Yu-Fen Ko***



MM.GI



Saya, the Japanese receptionist robot

[www.asahi-net.or.jp](http://www.asahi-net.or.jp)

## Cuteology

### *Cute Culture*

Cute culture has a history of over forty years in Asia. Steaming from Japan in the late 1960s, cute or “kawaii”, meaning shy and embarrassed but also pathetic, loveable and small. With the increasing popularity of “manga” comics and Western style pop culture, a new subculture driven mainly by teenage girls grew to prominence. One of ways of communicating within this subculture was by writing and signing oneself via an alternative typographic form of writing that involved signs, symbols and fonts that fell outside the normal range of characters. Called variously kitten writing, comic writing and fake-child writing, this mode of communication that could be argued was a precursor to SMS included tiny hearts, stars, smiley or sad faces and other icons inserted in text. The chosen font style was composed of fine spidery lines and the text ran horizontally that is counter-wise to mainstream conventions.

*Cutiephiles* (or cuties) like to see themselves as free radicals, people who write against the grain of legibility. Mysterious in pink! As with many other counter cultural movements such as punk or grunge, the aim was to encode communication so that the dominant authorities (parents, school teachers, bosses) were unable or had a tough time deciphering just what cuties thought and felt. A host of antithetical signs of arrested or hypertrophic culture that refused to buy into the myths of normal, reasonable, sensible adult values and aspirations was adopted. Cuties reform themselves in semiotic rhizomatic plays via creative reconstructions of sign systems of clothes, behaviour speech and writing. A mobility of multiple identities corrosively and pleurably mix with the signs of pre-adulthood and the mythologies of minor states and acts of being to resist the politics of modernism. Kitty Hauser argues that cute culture is a form of performance art that creates its own audio-visual and textual discourse. “These teenagers have grown up amid a cacophony of cultural signs and information; there is art in the way that some of them have transformed this cacophony into often bizarre combinations of sartorial signs.” ([www.lrb.co.uk](http://www.lrb.co.uk))

Cute culture is self-affirming in identity terms and hyper real in symbolic terms. Cuties take the ideals of consumption and push them to extremes without any sense of capitalist reverence. The personification of the cute toy is extended to themselves as products in the eyes of society. Self as toy and toy as self caught in a loop of suspended animation fluffs-up the cold planes of a hard, sharp, colourless economies of desire that awaits in adulthood.

Cute culture has evolved from a pastel romanticism of the early 1980s to a more ironic, reflexive, androgynous style-blending form in the 1990s. In the last few years cute has become like punk and grunge before it – serving as a base culture able to be drawn upon for its codes and values of difference as young people see fit.

#### *Perverse Cuteness*

Cuteness is a mixture of the abject as well as the sublime. The perversity of cuteness derives from a collision between myths of frontal (facial) innocence boosted by flat colours and monster-like deformities of appearance. The preferred colours are pastels in an excess of the minor key reads as pale pink, powder blue, ice white – edged with gold and primary colours. The major key notes of physicality involve hyperbolic extremes – such as big eyes, no mouths, tiny arms, oversize bodies etc. Cuteness is a process of crossing lines, genetic splitting forms and growing heroic best in show specimens.

122

Cross cultural cartoon breeding programs (say a Chinese dragon married to Minnie Mouse) results in a hybrid creature that disappoints purists on both sides and celebrates mongrel thinking that both highlights the traits and peculiarities of pure bred forms and the strength of new tougher trans-cultural forms and languages. Cuteness is a perverse mix of an appeal to innocence made on the edge of amorality. On close inspection cute psychodramas set up then rupture the innocent little child image of many fairytales.

Cute culture ushered in the first signs of post-human society. The notion of an individual person with a single body broke down with the advent of *pattern identity* and rapid prototyping biotech processes. Implanting “inhuman” memory drives, enhanced infrared camera eyes, sensors and nanobots all soften up the idea of a sealed body and identity.

#### *The Year of The Robot*

2005 was the year of the cute robot. A recent comic book image of AstroBoy – the reborn 1940s electronic kid with a big heart - reveals a body made up of high-tech electronic organs. The caption asks “Does Astroboy really look like this on the inside?” (DMAG, 74) Only recently has the idea of a character made up of machine parts able to be considered cute rather than monstrous. The latest Japanese domestic robots such as Saya, the emotional cyber-receptionist have over 700 verbal responses and thousands of facial expressions that subtly range from joy to anger, surprise and despair. It is the cuteness of these robots that has prompted some scientists to declare that robots like Saya will “change human lifestyles

more radically than the advent of the personal computer or the mobile phone.” (Faiola, 11) In Japan (the home of robots) it is predicted that every household will own at least one companion robot by 2015. Already in service are personal assistants, night watchmen, hospital workers, guides and pets.

The Mandarin word for cute is *ker ai* – composed of *ker* = could be + *ai* = love. In Japanese cute translates as *kawaii*, and in Korean, *Yoepgi*. Each culture has its slightly different take on cuteness yet the common thread is of intelligent machines that can feel. The traditional Japanese (Shinto) and Chinese (Confusionist) animistic belief in all things having God within them, makes it easier to love your robot. The introduction of Paro, the cute robotic baby harp seal, into Japanese old age nursing homes has been a huge success. With over 30 sensors the seal learns to recognise people’s voices and gestures. “It coos and flaps its furry white down in delight at gentle nuzzles, but squeals in anger when handled roughly.” (Faiola, 11) Not to be left behind in the robot appeal stakes the Taiwanese President, Chen Shui-bian had the *A-Bian* doll, modelled after himself as a cuddly marketing gimmick.

Cute products range from the “HyundaiCutie” an external mini hard drive from Sarotech, to the hydrogen powered CUTE (Clean Urban Transport for Europe) project. Such is the enormous range of cute products across all categories featuring a host of characters including Pikachu, Doraemon, Paul Frank Monkey and Hello Kitty, we can now speak of a *cute culture* with its own aesthetic and iconic language. I have called the study of cute culture *cuteology*.

#### *Cute Genres*

To fight our way through the jam-packed toy store of cute characters we can sort out four common genres of cuteness. In the front window of the store is the *cute loveable/innocent* – as in “oh those puppies are so cute”. Over there is the *cute smart-arse* – as in “that was a very cute thing to say?”. Behind is the *cute “put-down”* – as in “those shoes are so cute they make me puke!” Up on a high shelf behind the smiling but bored shop attendant is the *cute ironic* – as in “don’t be so cute”.

The etymology (origins of usage) of the word *cute* has its root in *acute* – something sharp, pointed, fine and extreme. Cute signs present themselves frontally to you, head on and aim to prick your consciousness with their sweetness, fluffiness, charm, helplessness etc. Happy Paul Frank monkey faces, hyperactive Pokemons or coy Hello Kitty cats play out as a surface of appearances and the focus is on faces, brand names, logos and slogans.

#### *Fantasy Kitsch Cute (SOGO Store)*

Post modern pastiche architecture (such as the SOGO department store - Chung Li city Taiwan) focuses on cute decoration referencing classical Greek columns and lintels that have no structural function but a lot of connotations of richness in both food and wealth to excess – stacked money and tiered wedding-cake icing in white, gold and red equals good luck, wealth and exclusiveness. This is cuteness as impulsive pleasure that appeals to a nostalgic desire for a return to origins - the good times of plenty, freedom, childhood hedonism.

The stepped ziggurat style alludes to the Hanging Gardens of Babylon with flowing fountains of plenty. In such a crowded urban zone where every square centimetre is prized the overt allocation of 'free space' around these huge consumption palaces emphasises monumentality and the power of capital to buy 'elbow room' to move. Multiple copies of ultra white Classical Greek statues in front of SOGO building stand as guardians of exclusive yet affordable good taste against the filth of street bargains.

### *Magic Cute*

The magic of cute can arrest all the signs of the adult aging process in girls through fashion and body cosmetics. Pokemon is a hot mix of helpless innocence and outraged aggression - morphing from cuddly cute to angry cute in a flash. Cute has the power to transform emotions, to blur, explode and reduce things. This is power to work against nature, to play God and be a saint when all around you is only the hell and evilness of the body politic! Cute heroes as much as cute fashions are about transformation and the alchemy of turning the mundane into the extraordinary.

### *Cute Unisex*

Cute turns boys into girls and girls into toys. Cute has also lead to a blurring of gender identities if not roles. Girls and boys look equally feminine. Both engage in battles to the death with gadgets and trinkets. Both seek to escape the wage slave and social bondage of their respective limited roles at home and at work. By rendering themselves as constantly changing empty stages or blank screens for the hyper projection and consumption of ephemeral products, languages, songs, cuties cannot be pinned down to any formulated agendas. The question of being a fixed subject collapses under the virtual weight of a million pink and white fluffy toys. Identities turned helpless with the addition of a "y" such as "kiddy" "baby" "dolly" or "puppy" start to implode. The modern industrial cultural divisions between "child" and "adult" start to break down inside a post-media economy where people of all ages constitute a target market and have a credit card and a mobile phone. The myth of childhood innocence now only resides in products rather than children. A collapse of binaries within the grand narratives of modernism is neatly demonstrated through cute culture. Once upon a capitalist time during the 1980s cuteness symbolised an eternal pre-social Alice in Wonderland state of being. Now 21st Century cuteness within Taiwan, Japan or Australia is pointing towards a post-social culture of polymorphic beings. Identities are more like composite exquisite corpses than singular monolithic heroes.

There is also a certain anxiety attached to the fleetingness of present pleasures and the fear of a darker global future – in ecological, economic, social and cultural terms. At a recent international exhibition in Japan at Shiseido Gallery ([www.arttowermito.or.jp](http://www.arttowermito.or.jp)) engaging with the art of cuteness, the curators stated that "we are not using "cute" merely in the sense of being charming, lovely, or sickeningly sweet, but also to mean the fervent desire of artists to impart their works with the evanescent feeling of being happy "right now and here" – a feeling that may be lost at any moment."

### *Cuteness is in your DNA*

I am waiting for the gene for cuteness to be discovered at any moment.

To prove my case for the cute gene I need only cite the Taipei Telly Tubbies in football jumpers demonstrates, ([www.lakeheadu.ca/~ggenosko/cute.html](http://www.lakeheadu.ca/~ggenosko/cute.html)). The gene for cuteness is connected to

our ethnological mappings of *nurturing*. At the moment we all get a chance to nurture through consumption - we project our own desires (images of ourselves) onto children, pets, dolls, and robots we must care for on a daily basis. Through films, art, design, products and comics we usher in the next cute stage of "natural path of human evolution". As we improve our technologies and open up social boundaries of nurturing to include biotech subjects, we will embrace the hyperhumans amongst us. No doubt we will recognise that the cute gene predisposed us all along to a posthuman existence.

#### *Cute shock tactics*

Now hyperlink to <http://www.bigbadchinesemama.com>. Here is a great example of using shock tactics (flying ugly sticks) to subvert cute myths of beauty and subservience. See a range of image weapons being deployed in the never ending feminist battle to change ideological (hegemonic) silences and non questioning repressive attitudes to what is appealing, beautiful, innocent etc. Beware all mail order Chinese brides going to the "good life" in the West! The long flight is always a strange rite of passage.

#### *Cute Hackers*

While the massed military arsenals of China and Taiwan sit pointed at each across the straits of eternal restraint, an internet war is being waged in earnest. As reported in the media: "the hackers of Taiwan and China are bombarding each other's websites" (<http://zdnet.com>). One of the tactical 'missiles' or "web elements" being employed is the cute bomb. Cute songs, animations and cutting "apolitical comments citing popular culture" are being fired off as email attachments and web pages. This is an information invasion that really hurts where it counts - in the imaginary.

The political movement called Angry Little Asian Girls ([www.angrylittlesiangirls.com](http://www.angrylittlesiangirls.com)) is a great example of cuteness turned back on itself, to expose the negative social politics at work on young women. These little girls look like they could kill and enjoy it. On first glance the big eyes, heads and cute colours all conspire to portray a picture of fairytale stories (those happy ending ones at least). One a deeper level, these girls are rebels in their own pink rooms. Hello Kitty grows a mouth and learns how to use it for the emancipation of all Asian women! The web site for Angry Little Asian Girls uses the rhetoric of cuteness to subvert Western (and traditional Eastern) myths of Asian women as submissive, innocent quiet, non-complaining.

#### *Hello Culture*

Hello Kitty really softened us up to the rise of the soft post human robot species. The famous cat girl did this by being so much more than another cuddly little kitty cat. This 'catgirl' is a cyborg, a trans-human with attitude.

Hello Kitty was not so much an infantile regression as a polymorphic construction of "catty" identities. Predating Saya, the feisty humanoid personal assistant, Hello Kitty was made up of fantastic body parts and fitted with a psychological toolkit. Hello Kitty, along with a host of other comic characters, was a schizo transformer doll made up of traits or attributes that can reflect the moods of the user. The mapping of these features or social topologies may be read in the bodily makeup of the character and



Hello Kitty Mastercard

in its behaviour. At any time it is possible to privilege the child creature, the benevolent or judgmental adult; channel the friendly alien, the evil monster or the perverse cute creature.

As a cyborg these characters can morph from fur to plastic, or from metal to paper at will. In each case the iconic integrity of the image (face) remains intact. Much of the pleasure in playing with these characters lies in the mechanical manipulation of each emotional state (angry Kitty, happy Kitty, naughty Kitty etc).

126

#### *The Aliens Are Among Us*

The influences of Japanese, mainland Chinese and American popular culture in Taiwan and many and complex and are often the subject of Taiwanese art and design culture. Taiwanese culture has been populated by friendly aliens – most are not counted in the official population census but should be. And now these alien creatures of our own design have become our best friends. TV dramas, sub-culture fashions and animation characters all gain currency in homes, galleries and on the street. The import and consumption of cultural signs (products) changes their meaning.

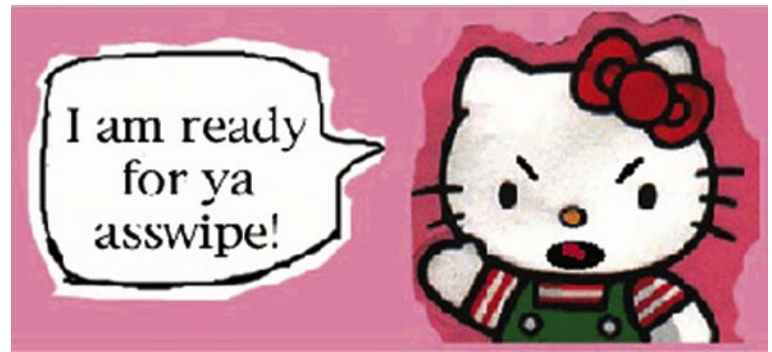
The cultural significance or role of Hello Kitty, Ronald McDonald or Chairman Mao in Taiwan can be conservative, subversive or perverse. As Yu-Fen Ko argues “there is no natural equation between consumption and cultural identity” (2000, 5). The consumption of products and the manufacturing of identity myths play an important role in everyday life. Cute critters serve as agents, proxy stand-ins, masks and protection suits against social radiation levels. To transform Tare Panda or Detective Conan into local variant hybrids involves inverting and reshaping advertising and public relation codes that come shrink-wrapped with the products.

#### *Cute Others*

Just as every generation rewrites history to its own ends, every culture seeks to transform the signs of otherness into friendly images. Otherness is strange, a bit scary and yet can be an escape too. Sub-cultures pounce on those signs of otherness especially if they resist appropriation by dominant powers (authority figures – parents, bosses, politicians, moral guardians etc) and offer an opportunity to forge new ways of creating real differences.



“So, go ahead Mr. Smarty pants. Come on in! After all, us "Orientals" are known for our hospitality and genteel demeanour. We aim to please...”  
(www.bigbadchinesemama.com)



### *Transforming Miss Natural*

The performance of cute culture is a means of differentiating one self from the dead, the static and the boring. The cute life style that can be a 24/7 addiction; a part-time pastime, or a one off fancy dress party piece. The degree of adoption can also vary from a few Hello Kitty products picked up at MacDonald's to the full action kit involving fashion gear, body posing and vocal antics. Taking on Western first names when studying overseas can also present a good opportunity to play with identity as well as the cultural signs of cute otherness. Every dress-up session ("putting your face on") is a *transformance*. Meanings are not naturally locked into signs, symbols or images. Part of the pleasure or the pain of creatively playing with cultural products, languages, brand names, logos etc is achieved by setting these signs into social circulation, at home, in the gallery or on the street. When cultural, political or social signs of difference are set into motion they create noise, draw attention to themselves and spark off heat and light of one kind or other. For the dazzled and dazed, the morally outraged or the simply confused and bemused, cute signifies negative interference on their screens of familiarity – of good taste, political or moral correctness.

### *The Terror of Pink*

Cute culture seems to saturate everything in a pastel palette. The terror of pink can take over your bedroom and dominate your life! The bubblegum pop aesthetic relied on stronger colours. Cute aesthetics has turned down the saturation dial and boosted the white levels. The celebration of excess extends laterally across a sublime *superflat* vectorised world. Vinyl clothes, plastic bags, peel off stickers, Flash animations and comic book illustrations all promote the flat aesthetic. Coming out of Japan in the 1990s with the work of artists like Takashi Murakami, Chiho Aoshima, Yoshitomo Nara and others came together under the title SUPERFLAT. The underlying movement came to the surface after the Japanese so called Bubble Economy (Neo-Pop) burst in the 1980s. Murakami declared that for him Superflat meant "a hyper-plane consciousness of space, the universe is never a closed sphere. It could be considered as a flatness that spreads everywhere indefinitely through infinite space." (Tachiki, 57) This thinking was informed by the nature of internet and the technological determinism of computer vector graphics software such as Flash, Illustrator, AutoCAD etc. Such technologies privileged values of sharp focus, surface space, fine lines, fill colours and smooth forms. Even the furry feely effects in 3D



animation films like *Monster Inc* conform to a uniformity of surface appearances. Both the superflat and superfurry co-exist within cute culture. Both can be a means of creatively and powerfully engaging with social and personal politics.

### *Schizo-Cute*

Cute culture can be a mirror that reflects and a prism that refracts. The perverse world of advertising promotes a *schizo-cute* culture of adoptive identities (“all the women you are”) that equate social power with material consumption and commercially sponsored cultural masks of a street feral at work, homey pussycat at rest and tiger in bed. Cute culture foregrounds this advertising rhetoric and yet also subverts it (turns it back on itself) along the way by producing a polymorphic montage of variants. The smiley face becomes the grin of fear or madness. The pussycat has no mouth but is all ears – Kitty hears everything and will not tell. Such cute tactics say “we will adopt your sacred signs, evacuate them of their meanings then restuff them with our own meanings and return them to you barely recognisable.” This process of evacuating comes from the Roman term *evocatio* – describing the political strategy of appropriating and absorbing the energies of the sacred idols of conquered cultures by dragging them back to the outskirts of Rome for display as trophies. Cute culture similarly absorbs all other sacred dolls into its pantheon of characters, idols and superheros. Taiwan as a creative cute culture behaves “like a sponge, absorbing influences from all over and internalising elements of foreign cultures.” (Lu, 21) Yet absorption is just the start of the *cutiefication* process. Cute creatures like “Atomouse” (hybrid of Atom and Mickey mouse) must take on traits of the new local cultural conditions in order to survive in the new environment. Adopt a new name, grow an extra arm or lose a few toes helps to become one of the locals.

128

Cute tactics aims to evacuate the icons of authority by casting back the unrelenting gaze of power upon itself. Every cute character and product has the disarming effect of concentrating the rays of innocence into a focal point of intensity. Cute can burn holes in your comfortable ideas of beauty and coolness. Cute culture is demonstrating that the gap between actual and virtual worlds is collapsing. As Frankie Su, a curator of the recent “Fiction.Love” cute survey exhibition in Taiwanese notes, artists are working in “the space between what is virtual and what is real, like reflections in a mirror, both dreamlike and seemingly real, they immerse themselves in culture, this becoming their personal lifestyle.” (Su, 39) Taiwan’s *schizo-cute* culture is getting flatter by the day. A fine surface network of connections is spreading across all strata of society, into every spatial zone and all planes of existence. Artists and designers sense more keenly than most that what we are sensing with our flesh and blood bodies is feed to us through digital filters. Increasingly we are living in a virtual world mediated by the trials and tribulations of the eco-tragic (dystopic) physical world. Just as we develop new cognitive and haptic systems of seeing, feeling and hearing the real, we are also creating new aesthetic visions and transmissions.

New media artists and designers, perhaps more keenly than others in society, can see that we have crossed the biotech bridge between human and post-human existence. The cute creatures we now relegate to the fantasy worlds of animations cartoons, toys and films will, in a matter of a few short decades, be seen as the first crude models of survival in our evolutionary race against ecological time.



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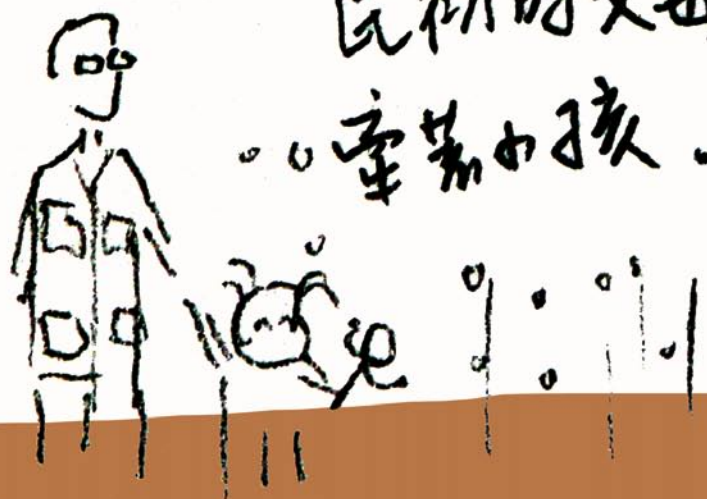
小孩玩樂的圖像。

"Cultural

民初的父母

牽著小孩。

American, Europe



**mélange**" (1995, 6