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Abstract: One of the primary modes through which the image or set of images of ‘Japan’ operates as a centre of global popular culture is that of kawaii, or what has been dubbed in English, the “cute.” Initially associated with cultural productions and consumer preferences of shōjo culture, images of kawaii now flourish throughout the globe, as ubiquitous in urban centers and suburban shopping malls as in the virtual worlds of the mass media and the internet. While the phenomenon of “cute” has been studied most frequently in relation to Japanese anime, manga, and what one critic calls “commodity animism” (Allison, 2006) and another “pink globalization” (Yano, 2004; 2009), cuteness has also been considered as an avant-garde aesthetic that often conflates the vulnerable with the aggressive (Ngai, 2005). The various readings of kawaii/cute highlight the proliferation of meanings and affective responses associated with this pop culture phenomenon. Yet attempts to explain cute, to account for its global impact, or to evaluate its influence often are bound up with assumptions of superficiality and shallowness, owing largely to the association with commodity culture as well as with the hyper-feminine and/or the infantile, particularly as expressed in the kawaii images of a feminized Japanese popular culture. Such assumptions, often dismissive or reductionist, evince an underlying uneasiness with kawaii, its manner of production, its emotional appeal, its Japanese origin. This paper will examine images of Japanese kawaii as these both undermine and reconfigure established aesthetic boundaries. Focusing on well-known icons of Japanese cute, such as Hello Kitty! as well as other representations from global visual culture, the kawaii aesthetic will be explored as a product of late capitalist consumer culture that troubles and disrupts the visual field of high culture and yet remains ultimately, cute.

Keywords: Japanese Popular Culture and Aesthetics, Affect of Cuteness in Commodity Culture, Hyper-femininity

“Kawaii (cute), kirei (pretty, clean), and omoshiroi (interesting and fun) are the three worst adjectives for art. When those three words are used, no intellectual discussion can continue.”

THE ABOVE STATEMENT (1992) by senior curator of Asian Art at the Guggenheim, Alexandra Munroe, represents a critically informed, yet ultimately anxious response to a cultural turn observable since the latter decades of the twentieth century -- the unmitigated success of Japanese cultural production in the global arena. Certainly, at the time the statement was made, notions such as kawaii, kirei, and omoshiroi were

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relatively unfamiliar in the U.S. as designators of cultural value. Today, however, of the
three Japanese words derided above by Munroe, the term kawaii has become one of the best-
known neologisms in current discourse on global popular culture and society. The terms
kirei and omoshiroi remain less well known and will not concern us here.

Owing to its new-found global currency, kawaii has begun to receive a great deal of crit-
ical attention. In addition to a strong link with popular culture and consumer products, kawaii
also has been identified as a minor aesthetic, with profound implications for contemporary
art and culture. Nonetheless, as evinced in the above comment by Munroe, a degree of neg-
ativity still attaches to this term. If we are to assume that the above statement is exemplary
of a common critical perception of kawaii (in association with its English equivalent, cute),
we need to ask what it is about this descriptor that tends to excite such a negative response,
particularly with respect to art and by extension, the visual image.

For Munroe, the problem of kawaii seems to lie in its lack of a supporting scholarly or
academic genealogy that would allow serious critique to take place. Kawaii is perceived as
a concept or notion that lies outside the pale of educated discourse and therefore is more
appropriately subsumed within the parameters of mass or popular culture. This paper will
examine the notion of kawaii as a term of evaluation as well as a new aesthetic that functions
within contemporary global visual culture and at the same time challenges certain established
aesthetic and affective norms in ways that may tend to provoke anxiety and/or unease among
critics and commentators in both Japan and Euroamerica. It will be shown that even though
this anxious response can be linked to existing national/cultural values and attitudes, the
anxiety of the cute is also the result of a profound shift in the dominant order of global cul-
tural capital.

**Kawaii as Minor Aesthetic**

In her ground-breaking work, “The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde”, Sianne Ngai contrasts
“prestigious aesthetic concepts like the beautiful, sublime. . . .” with cute, which Ngai sees
as a minor aesthetic concept, one that is “firmly rooted in visual commodity culture rather
than the language arts.” Although Ngai’s focus is on cute as applied to the poetry of the
Euroamerican avant-garde, Ngai is also interested in examining the history of cute as it has
been developed in the modern culture of Euroamerica and in Japan. It is this aspect of Ngai’s
work that is most relevant to the perspective of this paper.

Accordingly, Ngai traces the advent of cute and other markers of modern taste, such as
the glamorous, the cozy, or the zany, to the rise of what she calls consumer aesthetics, that
is, “aesthetic concepts directly engineered and developed by the culture industry.” For Ngai,
cute is notable primarily for its characteristics of smallness and vulnerability, which promote
feelings of affection in the consumer, yet at the same time, by virtue of its emphasis on
helplessness, cute may also encourage the “consumer’s sadistic desires for mastery and
control. . . .”, resulting in the cute provoking a certain amount of violent or aggressive affect.

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2 While there is clearly much of value in the development of other perspectives, such as multi-national corporate
marketing practices, economic and gender theory, and so on, the focus of this paper is on kawaii as a cultural phe-
nomenon connected to visuality, art, and popular culture.
4 Ngai, 813-814.
5 Ngai, 812.
6 Ngai, 816.
According to Ngai, cute is the only minor aesthetic that works in this way. Other minor aesthetics, such as the glamorous, do not possess the double-sided quality of cute. In order to achieve its effects, the glamorous, according to Ngai, must not embody any aspect of the trivial or the minor as does the cute. Other than this brief mention of the glamorous, it is not clear how Ngai’s view of cute and its contradictions may or may not be extended to other consumer aesthetic terminologies. This is not addressed in her article.

In the case of Japan, Ngai finds that the aesthetic of smallness represented by the cute developed immediately after the end of the Second World War. She agrees with Noi Sawaragi that the initial Japanese notion of cuteness is likely related to that “nation’s diminished sense of itself as a global power”. As we now know, the subsequent pursuit of cuteness in Japan led to an upsurge in the production of cute products and cute objects that soon overflowed national boundaries to become a global phenomenon. The Japanese fascination with the cute has not slowed. If anything, it has increased exponentially, currently finding further means of expression in the domain of artistic endeavor and production, as evinced in the work of artists such as Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara, among many others. In her article, Ngai takes up the work of Murakami as representative of the dualistic nature of cuteness. Citing Mr. DOB, a character created by Murakami in the early 1990s, Ngai notes the cute but threatening aspects of this figure (large head, big eyes, mouse-like ears, a huge smile with bright, white, sometimes sharp teeth), thereby underscoring her contention that kawaii (cute) may also be kowai (scary). Ngai makes use of this play-on-words to move her discussion away from cuteness as manifested in Japanese visual culture to an examination of the role of the cute in avant-garde poetry in English. Despite this shift in focus, Ngai’s attempt to historicize the cute within both US and Japanese consumer culture and to interrogate and contrast its inherent sweetness and violence offers solid evidence for consideration of the cute as a viable and credible aesthetic. At the same time, however, the foundation of Ngai’s argument rests somewhat precariously on an orientalist binary in which Japan’s development of cute is viewed as originating from and through weakness and vulnerability while in the US cuteness is seen as emerging from national concepts of strength and health. Since such generalizations can both reveal and conceal a variety of complex issues, images of cute will be examined in more detail with regard to both US and Japanese cultural contexts.

Images of Kawaii in Japan

The artistic production of Takashi Murakami provides a convenient lens through which to examine further the double-sided images of kawaii so notable in Japanese consumer society and elsewhere. Trained in the techniques of nihonga (modern Japanese-style painting) with a PhD from Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music (1993), Murakami (and his KaiKai Kiki art collective) rose almost immediately to international super-stardom. His

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8 Ngai, 822.
distinctive paintings, sculptures, videos, and an array of consumer goods branded with his work are now almost as widely familiar as the iconic Hello Kitty.

Arguably, unlike Kitty, however, Murakami brings forward in his work a critique of contemporary Japanese culture and society, delving into the problematic relationship between Japan and Euroamerica, particularly the United States. In an exhibition in New York in 2005 entitled Little Boy: The Arts of Japan’s Exploding Subculture, Murakami explored the “unresolved conflicts of Japan’s postwar evolution [which] comprise the explosive context for Japan’s pop culture forms…” Acting as curator as well as exhibiting some of his own pieces, Murakami elaborated these “unresolved conflicts” through a plethora of visual images and objects, executed in a style that Murakami has named the “superflat.”

In Murakami’s hands, superflat images turn kawaii into a graphic playground of orgiastic shape and color. In the Little Boy exhibition, for example, stylized skulls rise from the ground along tenuous vertebrae, with swirling happy-face flowers in empty eye sockets (Time Bokan, 2001). In other Murakami works, mushrooms sprout with multiple, jellyfish-like eyes and sharp teeth (Supernova, 1999); spirals of snarling, mutant DOB twist and writhe (The Castle of Tin Tin, 1998); phlegm-vomiting monsters appear (Tan Tan Bo Puking – aka Gero Tan, 2002); as well as exquisite summer gardens (Kawaii! Vacances d’été, 2002) and compressed globes of happy-face flowers (Flower Matango, 2001. For Murakami, the kawaii aesthetic is loosed to create a riotous extreme that harbors an altogether darker and threatening underside.

In the Little Boy exhibition, Murakami reveals this underside, conflating kawaii with the trauma of nuclear destruction (Little Boy being the code name for the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima). In this way, Murakami interprets kawaii in terms of Japan’s response to the catastrophe of defeat and subsequent dependence on the US, which he sees as resulting in a culture of infantilization, wherein “the Japanese have refused – or rather, have been refused—the chance to grow up.”

The culture of kawaii, embraced by the Japanese population

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13 Schimmel, The Castle of Tin Tin, acrylic on canvas mounted on board, 118-1/8 x 118-1/8”, Collection of Ruth and Jake Bloom, Marina del Rey, California.


16 Schimmel, Flower Matango, oil paint, fiberglass, synthetic resin, acrylic boards, enamel, iron, 157-1/2 x 118-1/8 x 98-7/16”, private collection, courtesy of Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris and Miami.

at large, encourages feelings of child-like pleasure, trust, protection, and safety, even though its origins lie in brutality and aggression. Thus, in Murakami’s view, the issue of Japan’s reliance on the US, and to a further extent, on the whole of the western world since modernization in the 19th century, remains unresolved, and more particularly, obscured by Japan’s spectacular postwar development. In this sense, Murakami sees Japan as the “ultimate ‘little boy’;” hence, his focus on the small and vulnerable as both cute and violently sinister.

Nonetheless, one aspect neglected by Murakami in his critique of kawaii is the implication that kawaii, by its open acknowledgement of the infantile, may in fact function subversively; that is, the refusal to ‘grow up’ may also be read as an assertion of difference rather than of subservience. In this case, kawaii may be viewed as a means of resistance rather than of acceptance and compliance.

Despite Murakami and others’ ironic treatment of the images of kawaii culture, some Japanese critics are less comfortable with the cute aesthetic, viewing the cute and cute products as implicated in generational conformity and denial of self, history, and responsibility. Social anthropologist and novelist, Ōtsuka Eiji, for example, examines kawaii with regard to the “cute” girl culture that arose in 1980s Japan in his book, The “Cute” Emperor of Young Girls (Shōjo-tachi no kawaii tennō, 2003). Dismayed to find that the Shōwa Emperor was perceived as both “cute” (kawaii) and “pitiful” (kawaisō) by some members of the kawaii demographic, Ōtsuka interpreted their reaction not only as evidence of lack of political knowledge and of the emperor’s war responsibility but also as a statement of their own social isolation.

Opinions such as this tend to reflect the values and attitudes of an older, often male, mainstream/elite that is uncomfortable with the rise of what is perceived as ‘feminine’ values, represented by the kawaii culture industry. Other commentators, however, including Tokyo-based art critic, Ivan Vartanian, view kawaii as ushering in “a new wave of creativity.” In his volume, drop dead cute (2005), Vartanian features the work of ten contemporary Japanese women artists he finds representative of the “new wave” in Japanese art. Unlike the otaku-orientation of much of Murakami’s work, these artists present distinctly different visions and versions of kawaii. From the endearing creations by Ban Chinatsu of elephants lapping up ice cream to the “arch-macabre” of Aoshima Chiho’s bleeding zombies and ghosts, these artists provide a variety of fresh perspectives on the kawaii aesthetic.

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19 Munroe, 247.
20 See Midori Matsui, “Beyond the Pleasure Room to a Chaotic Street: Transformations of Cute Subculture in the Art of the Japanese Nineties,” Little Boy: The Arts of Japan’s Exploding Subculture, edited by Takashi Murakami. New York and New Haven and London: Japan Society and Yale University Press, 2005, 209. Matsui discusses this work as well as another by Ōtsuka, entitled Folklore of Young Girls (Shōjo minzoku-gaku, 1989); she notes that the problematic or negative views of kawaii delineated by Ōtsuka in these volumes has been transformed in the work of Japanese artists, such as Murakami and others, including female artists, who have found in kawaii opportunities for critique, reinvention, and “new creativity.” (227)
23 Vartanian, 32.
Even though the culture of kawaii in Japan has received its share of adverse critical attention, the transformative vision of artists like Murakami and his Kaikai Kiki group has greatly eased the anxiety that may surround such kawaii representations. Whether manifesting as cool, sweet, adorable, quirky, or darkly provocative, the kawaii aesthetic has been and continues to be a major inspiration for contemporary art as well as an accepted part of everyday life. Continuing to flourish, Japanese kawaii has spread well beyond the country of its origin, moving into new geographical and virtual spaces.

Images of Kawaii in the U.S

Reaching North America in the mid to late 1990s, Japanese pop culture and its kawaii aesthetic found instant popularity with youngsters and teens although adults initially tended to ignore it. In its earliest manifestations, according to critic, Sharon Kinsella, Japanese cute emphasized the sweet and child-like in contrast to American purveyors of cute, such as Walt Disney. Kinsella explains

“….whereas Disney cute was based more on a sentimental journey back into an idealized rural society populated with happy little animals and rural characters taken from folk stories, Japanese cute fashion became more concerned with a sentimental journey back into an idealized childhood.”

In these attitudes towards cute/kawaii, Kinsella contrasts two forms of nostalgia, one directed towards the historical past (U.S.), and the other towards the personal past (Japan). In the case of the U.S., cute seems to have been associated with a romantic or idealized version of national experience whereas in Japan, kawaii became a ‘fashion’ that centered on the desire not to grow up, to remain forever young.

Nonetheless, by the turn of the millennium, images of Japanese cute had so proliferated throughout North America that the most popular toys (Tamagotchi; Pokemon), video games (Nintendo), television shows (Sailor Moon; Dragonball Z), clothing and accessories (depicting Hello Kitty, Chococat, My Melody, and other Sanrio images) were all Japanese, branded with the kawaii aesthetic. Arguably, one of the most successful of these images was the Hello Kitty logo, which even today graces a wide variety of consumer goods marketed to children, older teens, and adults, including clothing; fashion handbags; jewelry; numerous items for home, school, and office; electronics; cell phones and cell phone covers; car accessories; home appliances, musical instruments, and so on. Hello Kitty also appeals to large corporations, many of whom jumped on the Hello Kitty bandwagon, arranging to have Hello Kitty imprinted on their products (MAC Cosmetics; Tarina Tarantino; MasterCard; Bank of America, among others). Despite its mainstream connections, Hello Kitty quickly and steadily moved beyond its initial association with girly kawaii to forge links with alternative, antiestablishment, and/or subversive elements. Today, for example, a wide variety of Hello Kitty images are commonly found among tattoos worn by both women and men, not to


26 Myriad examples of tattoos employing the Hello Kitty image may be viewed online simply by typing “hello kitty tattoos” into one’s browser. See, for example, Hello Kitty is My Jesus, http://www.trendhunter.com/photos/69815.
mention Hello Kitty for Men products, as well as the proverbial Hello Kitty assault rifle and other weaponry. In short, over the past decade, just about anything that a consumer might possibly desire has become available in various shades of Japanese cute.

Not surprisingly, given the tremendous influx of kawaii cultural commodities, the Japanese cute was no longer possible for U.S. commentators to ignore. Accordingly, by the late 1990s critiques of Japanese cute began to appear in newspapers, books, magazines, academic journals, and especially on the Internet, providing myriad fora for discussion of the kawaii phenomenon. Similar to the critique of kawaii in Japan, North American commentaries tended to focus on affect, that is, on the emotional connections stimulated by and associated with images of kawaii. However, the general acceptance of kawaii in Japan marked by a relatively limited set of social concerns was quite different in the American case. Although critics in the U.S. demonstrated a fascination with, as well as an admiration of, the economic success of the kawaii phenomenon, there was and arguably continues to be a marked degree of ill-concealed apprehension.

The number of negative descriptors used to describe the kawaii aesthetic in Euroamerican criticism is particularly notable. Kawaii is by turns seen as “deadly;”27 “evil;”28 “not as innocent as [it] appears;”29 “saccharinely overdone;”30 and “polymorphously perverse;”31 to cite just a few. Perhaps one of the most common complaints is that the kawaii aesthetic promotes a mere façade of goodness, and thus suggests the corollary that its superflatness is best suited to portray the most superficial of trivialities. In this connection, the viewer is constantly warned that kawaii is only a commodity, artificial, insubstantial, and without depth or meaning.

The association of kawaii with the worst aspects of capitalist consumerism, not to mention the hyperfeminine, or the “girly” has in many cases relegated kawaii culture to the lower rungs of cultural production where critics bemoan its childishness, trashiness, cheapness, and antifeminism. At the same time, however, alternative subcultures have discovered in kawaii a means of social and political critique and have appropriated the aesthetic in ways that critic Lucy Nicholas views as “highly ironic.” In the case of Hello Kitty, Nicholas notes that third-wave riot grrl feminists use the iconic feline as a means of setting themselves apart from mainstream culture, having found that it may be

more effective to confuse the signified of the reader by taking elements of, for example, Hello Kitty, with its connotations of girliness, and simultaneously incorporate signs of

27 Kanako Shiokawa, “Cute but Deadly: Women and Violence in Japanese Comics,” *Themes and Issues in Asian Cartooning: Cute, Cheap, Mad, and Sexy*, edited by John A. Lent. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999. Shiokawa traces the rise of kawaii in relation to female manga heroines, arguing that even though these figures have become increasingly violent and independent of male domination, their lethal presence is tolerated owing primarily to the “palatable camouflage of cuteness” (121) that surrounds them.

28 See Loudwitness, “Hello Kitty is evil and her cultural propaganda must be stoped (sic),” http://loudwitness.blogspot.com/


punk imagery. This serves to create a look [that] cannot be read as merely girly or as merely punk, [and] which changes the function of both signifiers.\textsuperscript{32}

Arising from the 1990s underground female punk and/or punk rock bands of the Pacific Northwest, riot grrrl feminists continue to provide inspiration (and alternative images of kawaii) to contemporary indie and punk rock culture.\textsuperscript{33}

In addition to its association with contemporary subcultures, such as the riot grrrls, the kawaii image is also deemed desirable, stylish and/or ‘cool’ by large segments of mainstream society. This popularity has brought the added charge that kawaii functions primarily at the level of kitsch, or camp, and thus makes an ideology “of capital accumulation, profit-making, and expanding market share, all given a powerful aesthetic spin.”\textsuperscript{34} This and similar critiques that treat kawaii in terms of kitsch represent a fairly frequent Euroamerican view in socio-political and socio-psychological studies of Japan and Japanese culture. Such critiques tend to operate within a parameter of discourse similar to that found in the opening quotation from Alexandra Munro, that is, interpretations of Japanese culture and society are often subjected to essentialist discourses based on Euroamerican norms, values, and standards.

Despite the many Euroamerican naysayers, kawaii (along with its best-known icon, Hello Kitty) is everywhere, ubiquitous, popular, and more recently making a strong push for acceptance in the realm of high culture, where it clearly has made inroads. The representations of kawaii by Takashi Murakami; Yoshitomo Nara; Chinatsu Ban; Chiho Aoshima; Mr.; Aya Takano; Shintarô Miyake; Masahiko Kuwahara and others in Japan and beyond are prime examples. At the same time, there are also Euroamerican critics who, while not unaware of the anxiety generated by the Japanese cute, seek to locate the generating core of this affect elsewhere.

Citing a similar reaction to an earlier Japan-inspired cultural phenomenon, one critic notes how “…it was chastised for its artifice; its alliance of high and low art; its appeal to the middle classes (and, by default, its cheapness); and its perceived femininity.”\textsuperscript{35} Although this critique might seem like a quick appraisal of the critical Euroamerican reception of kawaii, this quotation refers instead to reviews of Puccini’s Madama Butterfly from over one hundred years ago. Castigated for its alliance with the Japanese preoccupation with decorative surfaces and thereby its lack of substance and depth, not to mention the focus on so-called femininity and the incorporation of other suspect international elements, Madama Butterfly was deemed, initially, at least, a disgrace for Italian opera. Certainly the kawaii aesthetic, its superflat rendering, enthusiastic reception outside of Japan, and accompanying critical assessments of admiration and disapproval are reminiscent of the craze of japonisme that swept Europe and America in the 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries. As such, one might be tempted to compare the cute and cool of kawaii to the recognition of the beautiful and exotic associated with the European discovery of the arts of Japan (and China), and also concomit-

\textsuperscript{32} Lucy Nicholas, “What fucked up version of hello kitty are you?” or: Is Hello Kitty as a logo for third-wave riot grrrl feminism merely mainstream gender hegemony in disguise?” M/C Journal, A Journal of Media and Culture 6, no. 3 (June 2003), http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0306/07-hellokitty.php
\textsuperscript{34} McVeigh, 242.
antly, to the ensuing critical attitudes that sought/seek to belittle the native artistic and cultural productions of Japan and East Asia as being minor, superficial, decorative, and not ‘true’ art.

In her article, “Monstering the Japanese Cute: Pink Globalization and its Critics Abroad,” Christine Yano views this type of criticism as ‘monstering.’ Yano notes that the tendency of Euroamerican critics to ‘monster’ or to demonize and dismiss the success and popularity of the *kawaii* aesthetic often shades over subtly into racialized anti-Asian or anti-Japanese sentiment. Japanese Cute does not inhabit the global marketplace with the same kind of authority or birthright that McDonald’s and Mickey Mouse do. Hello Kitty thus becomes not only the outsider to the global club, but also its yellow-peril nemesis.36

Yano’s interpretation strikes a similar chord to that of Alexandra Wilson who views the attacks on *Madama Butterfly* as “shot through with nationalist anxiety.”37 Thus, what we might call a nationalist or culturalist-inspired anxiety towards Kitty and by extension towards *kawaii* may account for much of the negative criticism directed towards the Japanese cute, particularly as the popularity of the *kawaii* image continues to increase.

In a later article, Yano moves away from her position as defender of *kawaii* to assume a more apologist stance. In “Wink on Pink: Interpreting Japanese Cute as It Grabs the Global Headlines,” Yano discusses the famous wink of the girly Hello Kitty image. Yano notes “Sanrio’s cleverness in exploiting Japanese cute and its mute vulnerability may make many of us shake our heads in bewilderment.” 38 Although it is not clear who is joining Yano in this seemingly nationalistic head shaking over *kawaii*, the article concludes with a claim that the cleverness of the giant corporation rests in “manipulating the wink on pink, leaving ambiguous the extent of its corporate knowing.”39 While Sanrio’s success in marketing its products is undeniable, the intimation that a sneaky global *kawaii* conspiracy is in full swing, led by an omniscient and omnipresent Sanrio, able to outwit, outplay, and outlast, or perhaps outwink, any and all competitors by virtue of its masterful manipulation of ambiguity and business skills feeds further the nationalist anxiety identified earlier. Such assessments also tend to deny discernment or agency to the much-maligned and manipulated consumer. In short, it seems difficult to claim that the *kawaii* image is popular owing simply to its successful commodification. Hand in hand with marketing success are the desires, attitudes, tastes, beliefs, motives, in short, the myriad “ways of operating”40 that belong to the consumer.

**Conclusion**

The enormous impact of the *kawaii* aesthetic on global markets and on global culture has not yet been fully evaluated or assessed. It is clear that the *kawaii* aesthetic no longer belongs simply to the market or to business; it has moved beyond these boundaries and into a common

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36 Yano, “Monstering,” 164.
37 Wilson, 112.
free-space, open and accessible to all. Thus, in addition to more ‘standard’ representations, we find kawaii images replicated and reformatted not only as symbols of ‘cute, camp, and cool’ (to borrow McVeigh’s title descriptors) but also as indicators of rebellion, defiance, othering, mockery, and critique of mainstream society and high art cultural productions and producers.41

The ubiquity of Hello Kitty and other kawaii images in the US as well as across Asia, Europe and elsewhere speaks to a new global visual reality. The double-sidedness of kawaii (cute and scary), as identified by Ngai, as well as the variety of its interpretation by contemporary Japanese artists has made kawaii a multi-faceted and many-sided phenomenon, reaching into almost every aspect of contemporary life. In Japan as well as in the US, the kawaii aesthetic has had a positive reception. At the same time, however, images of kawaii have also questioned, critiqued, and/or defamiliarized common cultural notions, values, and attitudes, producing varying degrees of trepidation and unease. Arguably, one of the strongest reactions to the kawaii aesthetic can be found in critical assessments of kawaii as viewed in US consumer culture; in these writings, the success of Japanese cute has triggered anxious nationalist responses in conjunction with popular acceptance and recognition. Nonetheless, the verdict is still out on Japanese cute. Where the kawaii aesthetic and the superflat will go from here is anyone’s guess. As Jean-Christophe Agnew has it in “The Give and Take of Consumer Culture,” “[t]he market – consumer culture – may set meaning in motion, but consumers take that meaning and make it their own – very much their own.”42 If this is so, and as Japanese cute continues to participate in the making of meaning and culture, it seems likely that at some time in the very near future kawaii will no longer be considered one of the “worst adjectives” to describe art.

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41 Some examples of the ironic and critical use of kawaii, in particular the image of Hello Kitty, may be found online at numerous sites, including Hello Cthulhu, www.hello-cthulhu.com, and Comrade Kitty, http://comradekitty.com/.
