

The Grotesquerie of Cuteness

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Sarah Silverman recently hosted an HBO comedy special called “We are Miracles.” She is a raunchy, often offensive comedian who will make off the cuff remarks on just about anything, but in “We are Miracles,”¹ she makes a rather poignant remark about AIDS. She says, “people don’t like people as much as they like dogs, because they don’t see the hate in themselves looking back in a dog’s eyes, if Africa was just all labradoodles dying of AIDS, we would take care of it in one day.”² It is an interesting point because she seems to be suggesting that we value the lives of things we visually recognize as cute over the lives of things we do not. She is probably right, at least to a certain extent—the proliferation of kittens on YouTube, or most advertisements anywhere would back up her argument, or at least the notion that we place enormous value on all things adorable. But perhaps the part where Silverman falls short is the recognition of where that value system comes from, and what that value system in turn actually generates.

Sure, we can argue that a cute baby is an evolutionary means to ensure that it gets taken care of, and therefore maintains the existence of our species. However, the kind of care we express towards cuteness is something Silverman deems enduring, so much so that it could save Africa from AIDS. But is that true? What is the time span in which something cute garners our attention? Would we really save the labradoodles?

While the affection we feel towards a kitten could, as Silverman would argue, endure, it is just as, if not more arguable that that affection is fleeting, and even appallingly so. That is because, as much as we adore cuteness, we also dismiss it as a saccharine attribute, a heavy-handed strategy to ensnare our emotions, a strategy we can see right through. Look at a six year old’s room—one littered with toys—and it would not take long to assess not only a child’s, but anyone’s fickle interest in an object made intentionally to be cute.

We stereotypically identify cuteness with softness, gentleness, simplicity, and quietude. But we can just as easily argue that the affection we feel towards a puppy incites an uncanny, even wild aggression within us. The urge to hold, feel, touch, squeeze, nearly strangle the object can feel overwhelming. It can gurgle up in our throats, desperate to burst out of our mouths like a volcano or projectile vomit. So what Silverman sees as a life-saving trait can alternately be seen as an attribute that agitates the subject to the point of vile possession and of claustrophobic smothering. No, we would not save the labradoodles and cure AIDS: we would much more likely squeeze the shit out of them, and then five minutes later toss them to the side.

¹ “We are Miracles” featured on HBO on November 23, 2013.

² This transcribed, direct quote came from the article “Why It’s Not Shock Value That Makes Sarah Silverman an Edgy Comic” on Indiewire, by Alison Wilmore, November 21, 2013. <http://www.indiewire.com/article/television/sarah-silverman-we-are-miracles>

The aggression we enact onto the cute object may indeed be grotesque, but the object—inanimate or alive—inflicts and reflects our own aggressions right back onto us. The object knows its power, its shallowness and ability to incite powerful reactions. Because of this profound eliciting of emotion, and the rapidity in which it occurs, the cute object stunts the viewer's sense of looking as well as his ability to see and critically examine. It is this cutting short, the robbing of close observation, where the real problem lies.

Monsters

A cockapoo puppy bounds lightly on a carpet of similar color beneath her. Two kids, presumably the pet owners, roll a tennis ball across the floor in hopes the puppy will chase it. She doesn't; she takes a mild interest in the ball, her tiny mouth barely able to even grip it. She instead eschews her attention away, ambling around directionless until one of the boys picks her up with both hands around her torso, turning her 180 degrees and setting her back down, as if she was a remote control car or a Roomba. The boy once again sets the tennis ball near her mouth. After poking the ball with miniscule teeth with a fleeting interest, she stares confusedly into the camera, and then licks her crotch.

With 95,616 views as of January 25, 2015, "cockapoo puppy" posted by son6568 is one of the most frequently watched videos of cockapoo puppies on YouTube.³ In theory, the video is quite boring: for two minutes and twenty seconds, we are subjected to a dog vaguely paying attention to a tennis ball. But the reality is that it is difficult to watch this video without clapping one's hands together and squealing with near maniacal glee. Why?

The most obvious reason is that she is cute, and she is cute because she is small. What is less obvious, however, is why simply being a small dog, more specifically a miniature version of its adult self, triggers such an intense guttural reaction from her viewers. The miniature itself provides a compelling and confusing tension that Susan Stewart tackles in her text *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Any miniature object contains within it a perpetual jockeying between interior and exterior, microcosmic and macrocosmic worlds. Among many other subjects in the text she discusses micrographia, which is the writing of a book or text on an extremely tiny scale. Really any book contains inherently in its materiality the notion of interiority and exteriority: "The metaphors of the book are metaphors of containment, of covering and exposure, of taking apart and putting together."⁴ However, the tension of binary attributes such as these are ratcheted up exponentially with a micrographic book. The print being so small as to only be read with a microscope, authors were commonly compelled to write entire almanacs of Boston, for instance, or the Bible, or the New York City phone

³ "Cockapoo puppy" can be viewed at the following website: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWVEfo1q_qQ

⁴ Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Duke University Press: 1992. Page 37.

book.⁵ The oxymoronic scale of tininess versus the monumentality of the content inside compels the reader to feel at once god-like transcendence of the state of being outside the book, looking upon it, and the experience of being inside the book, or rather “‘between the covers’—the titillation of intellectual or sexual reproduction.”⁶ Therefore, the micrographic book not only exists as a repository of knowledge, but also additionally presents itself as a caricature of a microcosm of knowledge.

This is further perpetuated with the work of Charles LeDray, a sculptor who nearly exclusively renders objects proportionally in the miniature. He sews and fabricates miniature objects in all kinds of materials, but whether it be fabric or human bone, his *modus operandi* remains the same, which is to elicit from the viewer that notion of god-like transcendence, lending one’s gaze upon an entire microcosmic world beneath her. In *Men’s Suits* (2009), for instance, we see swaths of second hand stores that exist in size between model and actual scale.⁷ Within these pieces we see hanging ceilings and lights, makeshift ladders, and seemingly strewn about piles of clothes. It may read as haphazard, but given the miniaturization of the work, we conclude that LeDray himself has meticulously curated every part. Although these clothes are impossible to wear and the store impossible to shop in, given their accurate proportionality, they could plausibly be worn—that is if only someone small enough existed. Just as with micrographic books, LeDray’s work simultaneously exists as the thing as well as a caricature of the real thing.

Although with cute objects we find that size is often altered for the smaller, it is wholly common for things considered “cute” to be caricaturized in various other ways. For instance, Hello Kitty—neither girl nor kitten—⁸ greets customers (most of whom are young girls worldwide, voracious for pink, fluffy stuffed animals and accessories) in a vague pink jumpsuit, with a giant, horizontally oriented ovalesque head that is larger than her entire body combined. Two thirds of the way down her head are vacuous, unblinking tiny circles for eyes that stare back unwaveringly. Three large dashes of black whiskers spike outwardly on each side of her face, whiskers that are proportionally much too thick, nearing closer to blades or nails than strands of hair. Other than a miniscule yellow button nose, Hello Kitty’s face is blank: there is no mouth present. She is therefore incapable of voice, rendered mute. This image may read as unthreatening emblazoned on a backpack or a t-shirt, but when broken down into its parts, an aesthetic

⁵ *Ibid.*, pages 40-1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, page 37.

⁷ Here is a brief, three minute video on LeDray’s exhibition *workworkworkworkwork* (which, among other pieces of his, contains *Men’s Suits*), which was exhibited at the Whitney in New York between November 18, 2010, and February 13, 2011: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8a5gXYzK2A>. That exhibition travelled to the Museum of Fine Arts Houston between May 15, 2011 and September 11, 2011.

⁸ See Kozłowska, Hanna. “How a Revelation About Hello Kitty’s Identity Blew Everyone’s Mind.” *The New York Times*. September 3, 2014. http://op-talk.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/09/03/how-a-revelation-about-hello-kittys-identity-blew-everyones-mind/?_r=0. This article clearly states that Hello Kitty is, in fact, a little girl, not a cat. Due to the apparent confusion from the masses and multiple articles on the subject, I feel comfortable stating that Hello Kitty is neither girl nor kitten.

consideration of Hello Kitty, particularly when thought of as an actual real life entity, is a terrifying prospect.

In fact, it is fairly common to render the very objects we consider cute as horrifying, debilitated objects. With the video work *Cloudy* (2012) by FriendsWithYou⁹, the natural development of condensation into rain is turned into a Fordist, cultist, even suicidal enterprise. Much like Hello Kitty, we are greeted with blank white clouds that confront us with oval, black, harshly blinking eyes. They filter through pipes; they transform into obese raindrops, raindrops attached with barely functioning, too-short arms that clearly have no use and are simply supplied for our visual pleasure. The obese raindrops dumbly hobble and waddle along, slithering through pipes and bounding along on graying and accumulating clouds, performing their duty until they leap hand in hand to their deaths—their sole purpose to splatter as water upon the earth. *Cloudy* hands us a score and characters that at face value seem innocuous, but the truth is that the underlying content is a sinister example of the standardization of mass slaughter.¹⁰

Desire

As we've seen with *Cloudy* and Hello Kitty, objects intended for our visual consumption as “cute” are often wildly disproportionate people monsters that may be even missing body parts like mouths or fingers. What is even stranger is that these objects filter through our culture with seamless ease with little philosophical consideration, as most philosophy has historically focused on the aesthetic considerations of the beautiful and the sublime. Sianne Ngai, one of the few people who has dedicated major time and research into the serious consideration of cuteness as a legitimate aesthetic category, buttresses this further in a chapter from her book *Our Aesthetic Categories* entitled “The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde.” In discussing a parenthetical comment by Immanuel Kant regarding the majestic, the gay, and the tender¹¹, Ngai suggests that “yet the tiny kink it produces in the flow of his larger argument usefully points to a surprising lack of explicit attention to the metacategory of ‘aesthetic categories’—that is, to the idea or concept of a highly variegated class of aesthetic categories—on the part of philosophical aesthetics overall.”¹²

Although the metacategorical consideration (or lack thereof) of aesthetic categories may seem odd, perhaps the lack of seriousness designated to cuteness may, at face value, seem appropriate. It is important to keep in mind that many of the distortions we place upon cute objects are debilitating ones—distortions that may render a thing mute, or may make it incapable of facial expressions, or may vastly retard its capacity for movement with barely useable limbs. The obvious reason we attribute these debilitating features to cute

⁹ *Cloudy* by FriendsWithYou can be viewed at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kySziocrOmU>

¹⁰ *Cloudy*, along with several other short, mostly cute, whimsical video pieces were exhibited in Rice University Gallery's adjacent exhibition space Rice Cubicle, in an exhibition entitled *Creature Worlds* that ran from October 2, 2014, to November 23, 2014. My review of this exhibition, specifically *Cloudy*, can be viewed here: <http://www.thegreatgodpanisdead.com/2014/11/cute-at-rice-cubicle.html>.

¹¹ Ngai, Sianne. *Our Aesthetic Categories*. Harvard University Press, 2012. Page 55.

¹² *Ibid*, page 56.

characters, or find debilitating features of cute objects “cute” (for instance, the drunken looking waddle of a baby learning to walk) is because to debilitate is in effect to make docile, passive, and unthreatening. But it is precisely this passivity that allows the very notion of cuteness to seep into our culture, acting as agents of perpetual manipulation and subversion.

Terasa Younker, author of the article “Lolita: Dreaming, Despairing, Defying,” discusses a Japanese subculture of mostly young to middle aged women who dress in a manner called “Lolita.” Seeming as though they never escaped the mindset of childhood, these women commonly dress up in absurd doll clothes. Younker continues on to explain that there are in turn various subcultures within Lolita like sweet, classic, gothic, and pirate to name a few, but she provides as an overarching descriptive example the clerk at a store called Angelic Pretty: “the shop clerk is dressed in a long pink jumper skirt decorated with a gigantic bow and knee socks of the same pattern.”¹³ It may sound silly, like a frivolous passing fad, but as Younker states explicitly early on in her essay, Lolita is actually more of an institution, a type of fashion that has been in play since the 1970s.¹⁴ The idea of a full grown woman dressing like a baby doll likely sounds appalling to many, but we find out quickly that Lolita, at least in Kyoto, Japan, is here to stay. And of course everyone has his or her eccentricities, but the presence of Lolita is far from negligible. What compels so many Japanese women to dress like this? Younker believes the root of Lolita is less a benign one and more political. While adulthood in the United States and other North American, as well as Western European countries may feel like a pathway to freedom, personal expression, and responsibility, Japanese adulthood for many can feel like an intense burden with overwhelming, even crushing expectations. Therefore, Younker deems Lolita—as well as the wide expanse of cute Japanese objects, signs, and commodities—as a kind of release: “It is generally agreed that cuteness is used as sort of a cultural Prozac in Japan’s brutally rigid society.”¹⁵ In addition to being a kind of pacifier to soothe one’s anxieties from the pressures of adulthood, Lolita can oddly be seen in the same light as the Punk Rock movement in the sense of using fashion (among other things) as a form of rebellion. Again, Younker deems much of the militancy and commitment of Lolitas to their fashion to their stubborn unwillingness to grow up, as a way to “stick it to the man.”¹⁶ Now, the impact of this kind of passive aggressive rebellion is arguable: there are no protests, no violence. But it is, however, one way that many young Japanese women feel they can respond, even lash out, to a culture they find overbearing.

While the Lolitas may use cuteness as a tool for subversion and aggression against a larger Japanese culture, we frequently enact aggression onto the cute objects themselves. We typically imagine softly hugging a teddy bear or coddling an infant, but that is simply not reality. In fact, more and more research

¹³ Younker, Terasa. “Lolita: Dreaming, Despairing, Defying.” *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs* 11, no. 1 (Summer 2011): 97-110. Page 97. https://www.academia.edu/7217713/Lolita_Dreaming_Despairing_Defying

¹⁴ Ibid, page 98.

¹⁵ Ibid, page 100.

¹⁶ Ibid, page 101.

conducted within the last two years suggests the opposite. Yale University psychologists Rebecca Dyer and Oriana Aragón conducted a study in which they gave participants bubble wrap while watching a slide show of cute animals, of funny animals, and regular animals as a control group. Dyer and Aragón found that participants popped the bubble wrap significantly more often than the participants watching the funny or control images.¹⁷ While they surmise that we respond to cute things aggressively as a kind of emotional modulator¹⁸ Ngai pushes our aggression towards the cute even further, noting that “the cute object’s exaggerated passivity seems likely to excite the consumer’s sadism or desire for mastery as much as her desire to protect and cuddle.”¹⁹ Words like sadism, aggression, and desire paired with a fluffy baby bunny might feel counterintuitive, but as studies increasingly reveal, “cute images stimulate the same pleasure centers of the brain aroused by sex, a good meal or psychoactive drugs like cocaine.”²⁰

Knowing that the same centers of the brain that are triggered by cute objects are also triggered by sex, our intense desire to squeeze, hold, and possess cute things make a lot more sense. While we may associate the sadism Ngai is referring to with less conventional sex practices like S&M, it is important to remember—even as every stark Robert Mapplethorpe photograph flashes in our minds—that sexual intimacy on its most basic level revolves around the assertion and relinquishing of control, and also around undercurrents of protection and violence. In her experimental novel *The Lesbian Body*, Monique Wittig beautifully capitulates the violence and grotesquerie subsumed within sexual desire:

*“I spill m/yself into you, you mingle with m/e m/y
mouth fastened on your mouth your neck squeezed
by m/y arms, I feel our intestines uncoiling gliding
among themselves, the sky darkens suddenly, it
contains orange gleams, the outflow of the mingled
blood is not perceptible, the most severe shuddering
affects you affects m/e both together, collapsing you
cry out, I love you m/y dying one, your emergent head
is for m/e most adorable and most fatal, the sand
touches your cheeks, m/y mouth is filled.”²¹*

The Stunting of Time

Naturally, many studies have linked the desire to possess a cute object to being an evolutionary one, as a means to protect a baby or small animal from harm

¹⁷ Arnold, Carrie. “Cuteness Inspires Aggression.” *Scientific American*. June 6, 2013.

<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/cuteness-inspires-aggression/>

¹⁸ See Aragón, Oriana R.; Bargh, John A.; Clark, Margaret S.; Dyer, Rebecca L. “Dimorphous Expressions of Positive Emotion: Displays of Both Care and Aggression in Response to Cute Stimuli.” *Association for Psychological Science*. Published January 27, 2015.

¹⁹ Ngai, page 65.

²⁰ Angier, Natalie. “The Cute Factor.” *The New York Times*. January 3, 2006.

http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/03/science/03cute.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

²¹ Wittig, Monique. *The Lesbian Body*. Translated by David La Vay. Beacon Press, Boston. Copyright 1973 by Les Editions de Minuit. Page 52.

when he is likely incapable of protecting himself. As practical as that is, it does not belie the fact that the act of looking at a cute object elicits sadistic desires within the subject, which in turn transforms the act of looking from an attempt to understand or communicate to an act of possession or commodification—not totally unlike the feminist criticism of the male gaze. That is, of course why Hello Kitty paraphernalia is so popular with young girls, and why Cottonelle adorns their toilet paper with golden retriever puppies.

Therefore, the most obvious commodification of cuteness exists as objects produced and sold for mass consumption, and it doesn't take long to see all the cute babies, puppies, kitties, dolls, and so on, flying at us from every direction. In addition to the previously mentioned Hello Kitty and Cottonelle, cute things are pretty much everywhere from, well, every single toilet paper and paper towel ad to baby products to stores solely dedicated to dog clothes. And this is only the United States: Younker gives a harrowing tale of the state of cuteness in Japan. "... 'Cute' has become the new byword for Japanese culture...Cuteness screams at you: cute food, cute cell phones, cute key chains, cute characters telling you not to smoke in public, cute toilet paper, cute slot machines...Hello Kitty condoms? Yes, they're out there."²²

Whether it be here or Kyoto, it doesn't take a genius to realize we are being bludgeoned over the head by advertising companies to buy their products because something cute is displayed on them. However, this is not the only commodified form in which cuteness manifests itself. Because we can now, through science, assert a cute object has the ability to agitate, or to inspire aggression from its subject, we can also understand not only the object, but the act of looking at the object as a kind of commodity as well. This kind of looking—a looking that encroaches upon immediacy, placing favor of phenomenological experience—runs into direct opposition with the kind of looking that engenders immanence, that requires time, that asks not only of its subject a notion of feeling but also of reading. Again, it may seem counterintuitive to deem the kind of looking at something we perhaps so passionately want to physically spend time with or even possess as dismissive, but if we are trading the act of looking with the intent of understanding to looking with the intent to enact aggression, that completely collapses the possibility of immanence within the object to the subject.

We often associate our craving for immediacy to the advent of the Internet, where an entire universe of information is at our fingertips. Certainly the Internet has catalyzed our desires by simply being so prevalent in our lives and furthermore, so unavoidable, but would it not be accurate to say that our favoring of phenomenological experience over slowed critical understanding and visual discovery begat that desire in the first place? It would be a reach to assume that our need for immediacy stems solely from cute objects, but it is far from a stretch

²² Younker, page 99.

to assume that a favoring of feeling over reading was the very thing that whet our appetites, that prepared us for the postmodern explosion that the Internet was.

Additionally, we may imagine a sunscreen bottle adorned with a rendering of a toddler's butt hanging out because a puppy is yanking on its diaper and have simultaneous and ambivalent feelings of how adorable! and how garish! At a very basic level, yes, cute objects manipulate us, but we are also consciously aware of it and even welcome it. It is instead the robbing of time, of transmogrifying looking to commodity, where the real subversion exists. Its necessitating of immediacy becomes constantly reinforced, worming its way to all aspects of life, particularly contemporary art.

We could limit our understanding of the cute in art to Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami, becoming entranced with a giant shimmering balloon dog or an installation of bombastic cartoonish characters painted in Murakami's iconic Superflat style. But the work of these two artists really serves as little more than a symptom of our perpetual need to proliferate the spectacle within the greater international art scene—after all, these artists (certainly Koons) face nearly as much ridicule as accolades. Speaking of immediacy, a relatively minor and very recent incident comes to mind with Parisian artist Loris Gréaud. During his opening at the Dallas Contemporary, he staged the vandalism of his work: three men walked in, ripped several of the paintings off the walls, destroyed them, and left them strewn across the floor.²³ Of course Gréaud was behind the whole thing, and when critic Lauren Smart blasted the exhibition in her review for the *Dallas Observer*,²⁴ he sent her provocative, misogynistic private Facebook messages that Smart consequently publicized²⁵—claiming that it was all part of his master plan for attention, self flagellation, and public humiliation.²⁶ Of course all of this hoopla begs the question: why? and who cares? But for better or worse, people do care—as *Glasstire* editor Bill Davenport asserted in the article's comments section, for every one person reading a thoughtful exhibition review, twenty were reading about Gréaud's antics.²⁷

Another way looking has been collapsed and commodified is through many works located within the genre of Social Practice. Curator Charles Esche recently gave a lecture in Houston²⁸, showing charts of the plausibility of art to be able to save the world. He seemed bored with the traditional art object, the way we've

²³ See Rees, Christina. "Moving and Unmoving." *Glasstire*. January 19, 2015. <http://glasstire.com/2015/01/19/moving-and-unmoving/>

²⁴ See Smart, Lauren. "Loris Gréaud and What He Didn't Create for His Art Exhibition." *The Dallas Observer*. January 23, 2015. http://blogs.dallasobserver.com/mixmaster/2015/01/loris_greaud_the_artist_who_smashed_up_an_entire_exhibition_at_the_dallas_contemporary.php

²⁵ See Sutton, Benjamin. "A French Artist Demonstrates How Not to Handle Criticism." *Hyperallergic*. January 27, 2015. <http://hyperallergic.com/177874/a-french-artist-demonstrates-how-not-to-handle-criticism/>

²⁶ See Rees, Christina. "Of Course. Gréaud Claims He Planned His Own Public Shaming All Along." *Glasstire*. February 4, 2015. <http://glasstire.com/2015/02/04/of-course-greaud-claims-he-planned-his-own-public-shaming-all-along/>

²⁷ Rees, Christina. "Manchild Artist Tells a Dallas Arts Writer to Get Laid; Jezebel Weighs in Immediately." *Glasstire*. January 26, 2015. See comment #8, subsection 1. <http://glasstire.com/2015/01/26/manchild-artist-tells-a-dallas-arts-writer-to-get-laid-jezebel-weighs-in-immediately/>

²⁸ This lecture occurred at the Glassell School in Houston, TX, on December 4, 2014.

been conditioned to observe something from a distance in a white cube; the very notion seemed to him antiquated, irrelevant, irrevocably separated from the real world. He believed art's power lies in its ability to converse with everyday people outside the museum. It's an inspired thought, and one example he provided was a project entitled the *Quizhuang Project* (2013-present) in which Esche provided much of the collection of the Van Abbemuseum (of which he is the director) to a small public library of the village in which artist Li Mu grew up in. Li Mu recreated canonical artworks to be displayed outside the library: works from Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, and Carl Andre to name a few. He put notes in a preparatory drawing that Esche showed during the lecture: the notes said that the artwork on the building was meant to attract people to the library so they would in turn read more books. By giving us this information, the artist, as well as Esche, implied that the actual art was not the artwork on the building but rather the facilitation of attracting "real world people" to the library and getting them to read. If that is the case, then yes, the traditional notions of objects being bought and sold in the art market may be eradicated, but it still reinforces the problems of a neo-capitalist commodity within the greater art world. There is certainly no time for looking with this artwork, as there is nothing to look at. Although there is still an artwork per se to critically consider, the commodity has nevertheless shifted: it may not revolve around money, but it still revolves around generating a product within a neo-capitalist framework, which is the number of people visiting the library.

Conclusion

There are various facets in which the phenomenological overtakes us, stunting our ability to really see. But how is it that the notion of cuteness not only stunts our ability to really see cute objects, but also stunts our general ability to see? In what way does it make sense to discuss Social Practice and Hello Kitty within the same essay? As divergent as they can seem, we still come back to the attributes within our greater visual culture that birthed the notion of the spectacle and insatiable craving for immediacy within contemporary art. While we may not have paid much attention to the substantiality of cuteness as a legitimate aesthetic form, as Ngai points out, much of modern poetry has.²⁹

The surrealist, repetitive musings of Gertrude Stein can read as circular, nonsensical, a kind of linguistic tripping over oneself. However, Stein's preoccupation with quaintness, sweetness, and innocence sets the stage for our understanding of the kinds of semiotic codes inherent in any given cute object. Among other writings like *Tender Buttons*, she ruminates on sweet, small, innocent objects in excerpts from a lesser-known poem "Pink Melon Joy":

Webster

Little reinforced Susan.

²⁹ See Ngai, pages 68-9. Here Ngai explains how most literary critics avoided discussing cuteness in relation to Stein, for fear it would reduce her work to a kind of nursery rhyme status, citing Wyndham Lewis' assertion of the " 'child cult' of early twentieth modernism in general. But Ngai goes on to argue that Lewis displays "a grudging admiration for the way in which this 'child cult' aesthetic puts its displays of weakness to powerful or strategic use..."

*Actual.
Actual believe me.
I see it all.
Why shouldn't I.
Lizzie Make Us.
I believe it.
Why shall I polite it. Pilot it.
Eleven o'clock.*

Pillow

*I meant to say.
Saturday.
Not polite.
Do satisfy me.
This is to say that baby is all well. That baby is baby.
That baby is all well. That there is a piano. That baby
is all well. This is to say that baby is all well. This is to
say that baby is all well.³⁰*

From playing linguistic games such as “polite it” and “pilot it” to frequently embedding lesbian desire within her poetry, Stein keenly understood the subversive potential of not only the cute, but also the innocuous object in general. As shown in the final subsection of “Pillow” within the poem, Stein states, and restates assertions about a baby. We as readers are not privy to who the “baby” is, whether she is referring to an actual infant or her long time partner Alice Toklas. Either way, Stein is making a vain attempt to reassure the reader: she wants to convince us via repetitive action that the baby is fine. But it is this redundancy that also arouses our skepticism, as if Stein is making a feeble attempt to convince of us something that is not true. Midway through her brief diatribe she evokes a piano. Does the piano form a comforting, whispering background lullaby? Or is the baby a person who will be playing, dictating the sound—or maybe the baby is the one getting played? Of course these answers are not readily available, but we nevertheless are able to conclude where Stein’s mastery lies; it is not only in her revolutionary writing style but also her keen understanding of the multiplicitous power of the innocuous object. With a baby, with the resonant note of the piano, with playful word games—she knew that perhaps all objects, but especially the cute ones, harbor the ability to move us, control us, stunt us even as we simultaneously dismiss them.

³⁰ Stein, Gertrude. *Geography and Plays*. “Pink Melon Joy.” Page 347.

