

Introduction

THIS BOOK makes a simple argument about the zany, the interesting, and the cute: that these three aesthetic categories, for all their marginality to aesthetic theory and to genealogies of postmodernism, are the ones in our current repertoire best suited for grasping how aesthetic experience has been transformed by the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism. This is because the zany, the interesting, and the cute index—and are thus each in a historically concrete way about—the system's most socially binding processes: production, in the case of zaniness (an aesthetic about performing as not just artful play but affective labor); circulation, in the case of the interesting (an aesthetic about difference in the form of information and the pathways of its movement and exchange); and consumption, in the case of the cute (an aesthetic disclosing the surprisingly wide spectrum of feelings, ranging from tenderness to aggression, that we harbor toward ostensibly subordinate and unthreatening commodities). As sensuous, affective reflections of the ways in which contemporary subjects work, exchange, and consume (and as the cute and the zany in particular will show, in ways significantly mediated by gender, sexuality, and class), the commodity aesthetic of cuteness, the discursive aesthetic of the interesting, and the performative aesthetic of zaniness help us get at some of the most important social dynamics underlying life in late capitalist society today. No other aesthetic categories in our current repertoire speak to these everyday practices of production, circulation, and consumption in the same direct way.¹

In this light it stands to reason that the zany, the cute, and the interesting are as ubiquitous in the postmodern literary anthology and museum

of contemporary art as they are on the Internet and television. The vertiginous zaniness of Thomas Pynchon's fiction and Ryan Trecartin's videos, the cuteness of Yayoi Kusama's polka-dotted phallus pillows and Matthea Harvey's poetic homages to domestic objects like the sugar bowl, and the "merely interesting" serial, recursive, variation-based projects of Sol LeWitt and conceptual writer Robert Fitterman are only a few examples. But although their unique reference to production, circulation, and consumption provides the best explanation for their pervasiveness, the zany, the interesting, and the cute are important for the study of contemporary culture not simply because they index economic processes, but also because they give us insight into major problems in aesthetic theory that continue to inform the making, dissemination, and reception of culture in the present. These include the implications of the increasingly intimate relation between the autonomous artwork and the form of the commodity; the complex mixture of negative as well as positive affects resulting in the ambivalent nature of many of our aesthetic experiences; the ambiguous state of the avant-garde, which in a zombielike fashion persists even as its "disappearance or impossibility" is regarded as one of postmodernism's constitutive features; the relevance of aesthetic to critical or other nonaesthetic judgments aimed at producing knowledge (or how one is permitted to link judgments based on subjective feelings of pleasure/displeasure to ones with claims to objective truth); the future of the long-standing idea of art as play as opposed to labor in a world where immaterial labor is increasingly aestheticized; and the "parergonal" relation between art and theoretical discourse itself, all the more pressured with the rise of an institutional culture of museums and curricula that has led art and criticism to internalize each other in historically unprecedented ways.² These problems are raised directly and indirectly in theoretical writings by Nietzsche, Adorno, Kant, Hegel, Derrida, and others, but they have also become central to contemporary cultural practice in ways distinctively transformed and amplified by the conditions of postmodernity.³ Indeed, the zany, the interesting, and the cute seem to offer ways of negotiating these problems affectively, both at the formal, objective level of style (cuteness as a sensuous quality or appearance of objects) and at the discursive, subjective level of judgment ("cute" as a feeling-based evaluation or speech act, a particular way of communicating a complex mixture of feelings about an object to others and demanding that they feel the same).

The zany, the cute, and the interesting are linked to major representational practices that span across different media: comedy, in the case of the zany; romance, in the case of the cute; realism, in the case of the in-

teresting. They are also linked to specific genres and forms. For example, it is easy to see how the commodity aesthetic of cuteness becomes a special issue for twentieth-century poetry, by way of a tendency within the genre that has made it widely, if not always correctly, associated with short, compact texts preoccupied with small, easy-to-handle things, from the plums in William Carlos Williams's icebox and the charms in Frank O'Hara's pockets to the assortment of neatly compartmentalized edibles in Lee Ann Brown's "Cafeteria": "Ice Tea / Cream corn / Fried okra / plus one meat."⁴ Cuteness could thus serve as shorthand for what Hannah Arendt calls the "modern enchantment with 'small things' . . . preached by early twentieth-century poetry in almost all European tongues," which she also acerbically refers to as the "art of being happy . . . between dog and cat and flowerpot."⁵ For Arendt, the "petite bonheur" of the cute is thus part of a larger cultural phenomenon, the expansion of the charismatically "irrelevant," which she links to the decay of a genuinely public culture: "What the public realm considers irrelevant can have such an extraordinary and, infectious charm that a whole people may adopt it as their way of life, without for that reason changing its essentially private character" (52). Yet as Arendt herself concedes, the cute/irrelevant object's charm is powerful enough to be "infectious," to a point at which, in an act of automatic mimesis similar to that induced by film's sensational "body genres" (horror, melodrama, and pornography, which, as Linda Williams notes, compel their audiences to reenact the screams, sobs, and orgasms they see on screen), the admirer of the cute puppy or baby often ends up unconsciously emulating that object's infantile qualities in the language of her aesthetic appraisal.⁶ We can thus see why Adorno makes such a point in "Lyric Poetry and Society" of singling out poems that depart from the genre's more representative "delight in things close at hand" in order to resist the bourgeois subject's desire to "reduce [them] to objects of fondling."⁷

Revolving around the desire for an ever more intimate, ever more sensuous relation to objects already regarded as familiar and unthreatening, cuteness is not just an aestheticization but an eroticization of powerlessness, evoking tenderness for "small things" but also, sometimes, a desire to belittle or diminish them further. The aesthetic categories in this study thus do not refer only to a range of objects and objective phenomena (commodities, the act of consumption, and the feminized domestic sphere, in the case of cuteness; information, the circulation and exchange of discourse, and the bourgeois public sphere, in the case of the interesting; performance, affective labor, and the post-Fordist workplace, in the case of contemporary zaniness). By calling forth specific capacities for feeling

and thinking as well as specific limitations on these capacities—a noticeably weaker or cooler version of curiosity, in the case of the interesting; an unusually intense and yet strangely ambivalent kind of empathy, in the case of the cute—they also play to and help complete the formation of a distinctive kind of aesthetic subject, gesturing also to the modes of intersubjectivity that this aesthetic subjectivity implies.⁸

Since cute things evoke a desire in us not just to lovingly molest but also to aggressively protect them, modern poetry might be regarded as cute in another problematic sense. The smallness of most poems in comparison with novels and films, in which the proportion of quotable component to the work as a whole (the paragraph or the shot sequence) is always substantially lower, has made poetry the most aggressively copyright protected of all the genres and thus in a certain sense the genre most aggressively protected from criticism, since anyone wanting to refer directly to the language he or she is analyzing will often have to pay a substantial fee. Susan Stewart's wry caveat in the preface and acknowledgments of *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* ("Like anyone who writes on poetic forms, I have been restricted . . . by the availability of permissions for reproduction") will thus be familiar to any critic who has tried to write on the genre that copyright laws have indirectly helped define as unusually "tender" speech.⁹

Poetry's complicated and ambivalent relation to an aesthetic that celebrates the diminutive and vulnerable becomes all the more problematic in the case of the avant-garde, which has historically defined itself in opposition to everything for which cuteness stands. Yet as reflected in experimental texts ranging from Gertrude Stein's tribute to lesbian domesticity in *Tender Buttons* to Harryette Mullen's homage to its sections on "Objects" and "Food" in her explorations of the language of women's fashion and groceries in *Trimmings* and *S*PeRM**K*T*, it is clear that the avant-garde has had as much stake in the issues raised by this aesthetic of familiar "small things" as it has had in the powerful experiences of shock, rarity, and/or estrangement that we more readily associate with its projects. The cuteness avant-garde poetry finds itself grappling with thus gives us surprising leverage on the ambiguous status of the contemporary avant-garde in general, and on the closeness between the artwork and the commodity. For it is not just that cuteness is an aesthetic oriented toward commodities. As Walter Benjamin implies, something about the commodity form itself already seems permeated by its sentimentality: "If the soul of the commodity which Marx occasionally mentions in jest existed, it would be the most empathetic ever encountered in the realm of souls, for it would have to see in everyone the buyer in whose hand and house it wants to *nestle*."¹⁰

If the commodity aesthetic of cuteness is warm and fuzzy, the epistemological aesthetic of the interesting is cool, both in the sense of the ironic detachment Friedrich Schlegel attributed to the "interessante," an aesthetic of eclectic difference and novelty embraced by his circle as part of a larger romantic agenda calling for literature to become reflective or philosophical,¹¹ and in the technocratic, informatic sense Alan Liu conveys in his book on postmodern knowledge work.¹² Part of the initial turn in eighteenth-century literature to the ordinary and the idiosyncratic (that is, to minor, not-too-deviant differences) that would prepare the ground for the rise of nineteenth-century realism, the interesting would also be linked to the new genre of bourgeois *drame* by Denis Diderot and to the novel by Schlegel and Henry James before enjoying a resurgence with conceptual art and its aesthetic of information a century later. Always connected to the relatively small surprise of information or variation from an existing norm, the interesting marks a tension between the unknown and the already known and is generally bound up with a desire to know and document reality.¹³ It is therefore also, as Susan Sontag suggests, an aesthetic closely bound up with the history of photography.¹⁴ Troubled by how the popular use of "interesting" as a notoriously weak evaluation tends to promote a general "indiscrimination" in the viewing public, Sontag trenchantly notes that "the practice of photography is now identified with the idea that everything in the world could be made interesting through the camera."¹⁵ If it has become "not altogether wrong to say that there is no such thing as a bad photograph—only less interesting [ones]," the reason why photography constitutes "one of the chief means for producing that quality ascribed to things and situations which erases these distinctions" is that "the photographic purchase on the world, with its limitless production of notes on reality," makes everything "homologous" or comparable to others of its same kind or type.¹⁶ We can thus glimpse the connection between late twentieth-century conceptual art—famously obsessed with acts of documentation, classification, and the presentation of evidence—and a range of realist, print-cultural practices from the previous century. Indeed, conceptual art's "crucial innovation," as Liz Kotz suggests, was its unprecedented pairing of photography with the language of ordinary/everyday observation: the "notes on reality" appealing in different ways to successive generations of novelists, from Theodore Dreiser to Alain Robbe-Grillet to Geraldine Kim.¹⁷

From Schlegel on "die interessante Poesie" to James on the novel, the interesting thus has a surprising pedigree in high literary criticism and theory that the other aesthetic categories in this study lack.¹⁸ Indeed, we find one of the modern aesthetic's most uncompromising advocates in

Doctor Faustus, Thomas Mann's postwar novel of ideas based on Adorno's theoretical writings on music (including atonal music). As Mann's Schoenberg-like composer puts it, explicitly pitting the aesthetic of the interesting over and against what he disparagingly calls "animal warmth": "Law, every law, has a chilling effect, and music has so much warmth anyhow, stable warmth, cow warmth, I'd like to say, that she can stand all sorts of regulated cooling off."¹⁹ Adrian Leverkühn's theory of a modern art coolly "regulated" by rational principles (much like the dialogue-driven "novel of ideas" itself) not only looks forward to the antigestural, systems-based art of the 1960s but also directly echoes the praise of the interpenetration of art and theory, and the advocacy of detachment over enthusiasm as the proper artistic and critical attitude, promoted by Schlegel and other theorists of the "interessante" in eighteenth-century Germany. Indeed, Leverkühn's way of justifying his preference for his coolly regulated aesthetic, "Art would like to stop being pretence and play, it would like to become knowledge," calls for the same rapprochement between art and science pursued by Schlegel in conjunction with his advocacy of "interesting" modern poetry: "The more poetry becomes science, the more it also becomes art. If poetry is to become art, if the artist is to have a thorough understanding and knowledge of his ends and means . . . then the poet will have to philosophize about his art."²⁰

Always registering a tension between the particular and generic (and thus raising the question of the role of generic concepts in aesthetic experience overall), the interesting's epistemological claims—its desire to know reality by comparing one thing with another, or by lining up what one realizes one doesn't know against what one knows already—have made it especially prominent in genres invested in the overall look or feel of scientific rationality: from the realist novel in the nineteenth century, with its social taxonomies informed by the proliferation of new scientific and academic discourses, to postwar conceptual art, formally as well as thematically preoccupied with technology and systems. An extension of what Irving Sandler pejoratively called the "Cool Art" of the 1960s, the decade's first wave of system-based painting "characterized by calculation, impersonality, and boredom,"²¹ conceptual art would in fact be eventually praised by critics for being "merely interesting" and even for being boring, as in an early essay by Barbara Rose linking conceptualism's serial, "ABC" aesthetic to that of Robbe-Grillet and his "theory of the French objective novel."²²

More specifically, as an effort to reconcile the idiosyncratic with the systemic, the interesting has been associated with genres with an unusual investment in theory. If, as Amanda Anderson suggests, the "novelistic

tradition, especially in its more intellectualist formations" is fundamentally "interested in the relation between ideas and life, or how one might *live* theory," we can see why James famously singled out interesting as the proper aesthetic standard for this discursively hybrid genre: one keen on "imagining the rigorous critique of custom and convention as a way of life; mediating between the moral life of individuals and a long sociological or historical view of communities and societies; and engaging the relation between existence and doctrine."²³ The novel's investment in the tension between life and theory is perhaps best epitomized by its major innovation, free indirect discourse, and its oscillation between first- and third-person perspectives respectively aligned with the "aspirations of a socially minded moral participant" and a "bleak[er] systems view."²⁴ It is precisely this tension between individual and system that undergirds the interesting and explains why it also plays such a central role in conceptual art, a body of work similarly preoccupied with the modern relationship between individuation and standardization, and committed to exploring the tension between "existence and doctrine" by staging various clashes between perceptual and conceptual systems. As Mikhail Epstein argues, the judgment of "interesting" is thus an effort to "bridge the gap between reason and surprise, at once rationalizing the improbable and extending the limits of rationality."²⁵

In contrast to the rational coolness of the interesting, the aesthetic of nonstop acting or doing that is zaniness is hot: hot under the collar, hot and bothered, hot to trot. Highlighting the affect, libido, and physicality of an unusually beset agent, these idioms underscore zaniness's uniqueness as the only aesthetic category in our repertoire about a strenuous relation to playing that seems to be on a deeper level about work. When brought out by the post-Fordist, service-economy zaniness of performers like Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy* and Richard Pryor in *The Toy*, the zany more specifically evokes the performance of affective labor—the production of affects and social relationships—as it comes to increasingly trouble the distinction between work and play. The formal dynamics of this seemingly lighthearted but strikingly vehement aesthetic, in which the potential for injury always seems right around the corner, are thus most sharply visible in the arts of live and recorded performance—dance, Happenings, walkabouts, reenactments, game shows, video games—and in the arts of rhythm and movement in particular. Yet as I argue in Chapter 3, "The Zany Science," contemporary zaniness is an aesthetic more explicitly about the politically ambiguous convergence of cultural and occupational performing under what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello call the new "connexionist" spirit of capitalism: the dominant ideology of a capitalism

that has absorbed and adjusted to the "artistic critique" of the 1960s—but also, as Nancy Fraser stresses, the second-wave feminist critique of the gendered division of labor—by now encouraging workers, through a rhetoric of "networking," to bring their abilities to communicate, socialize, and even play to work.²⁶ Yet for all its essentially performative nature, zaniness is by no means exclusive to the performing arts. From Ishmael Reed to Kathy Acker to Shelley Jackson; or John Ashbery to Bruce Andrews to Flarf, so much of "serious" postwar American literature is zany that one reviewer's description of Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* as a "staccato burst of verbal star shells, pinwheel phrases, [and] cherry bombs of . . . puns and wordplays" seems applicable to the bulk of the post-1945 canon.²⁷

What type of aesthetic subject, with what capacities for feeling, knowing, and acting, does this ludic yet noticeably stressful style address? The relation between the objects zaniness refers to and the kind of subject it implies or speaks to seems more complicated than in the case of other aesthetic experiences. To find an object interesting is obviously for the subject to feel interest—and often, under her compulsion to share or publicize that feeling, the first step in activating interest in other subjects as well. Similarly, cuteness prompts an inadvertent mushing or "cutification" of the language of the judging subject, turning her speech into murmurs and coos that recall the "oo- intensive names" of the cute snack cakes in David Foster Wallace's story "Mister Squishy."²⁸ This verbal mimesis of the object on the part of the subject reflects how cuteness always "entails a structure of identification, wanting to be *like* the cute—or more exactly, wanting the cute to be just like the *self*."²⁹ But zaniness does not seem to call forth a subjective response in any way mimetic of itself. This lack of accord between aesthetic subject and object seems all the more surprising given zaniness's unique history as a style explicitly *about* mimetic behavior. Once deployed in the English language as a verb (a rare thing for most aesthetic categories), "zany" designated an activity or practice of imitating the actions of others long before it became the name of an objective attribute or quality. One might therefore expect our encounters with this aesthetic of action to be all the more infectious. Yet there is something strained, desperate, and precarious about the zany that immediately activates the spectator's desire for distance. In fact, what is most striking about zaniness is how the image of dangerously strenuous activity it projects often seems designed to block sympathy or identification as a subjective response. Think here of the "zany Paraclete" in the Jacobean revenge play described as a "Road Runner cartoon in blank verse" in the middle of *The Crying of Lot 49*: a character whose escalatingly violent and yet

strangely and spectacularly redundant actions include his shoving a courtier's head into a box, stabbing him, poisoning him, tearing his tongue out with pincers, brandishing it on a rapier, and setting the impaled tongue on fire.³⁰ Much as we might admire the affective and physical virtuosity of their performances, zanies are not persons we imagine befriending. This discrepancy is the direct source of both the comedy and the pathos of *The Cable Guy* (Columbia Pictures, 1996), a film about a postindustrial zany whose efforts to become the real friend of the client he helps plug into networks become increasingly aggressive. If the cute object or person is one we by definition want as near to us as possible (to the point of phantasmatically crushing, smothering, or even eating it/her, like a "Mister Squishy" snack cake), the zany object or person is one we can only enjoy—if we do in fact enjoy it or her—at a safe or comfortable distance.

In addition to precarious situations, zaniness always seems to revolve around our experience of a zany character, which also makes it relatively unusual. Although all aesthetic categories invoke human agents endowed with specific affective and/or cognitive dispositions, these references to types of aesthetic subjectivity (and usually to ourselves in the first person) are very different from the act of calling up an objectified, third-person representation of a real or imaginary agent. It is telling here that in addition to once functioning as a verb, "zany" is the only aesthetic category in our repertoire that continues to be used as a noun, referring to the person charged with the affective task of activating our sense of humor by being, as it were, "a character." We can thus speak of "the zany" or of "a zany" in a way in which it is not possible to speak of "a cute" or "a beautiful."³¹ Zaniness more specifically calls up the character of a worker whose particularity lies paradoxically in the increasingly dedifferentiated nature of his or her labor. True to the aesthetic's dramatic history, in *commedia dell'arte*, Pynchon's zany is a servant or "administrative assistant," unusually flexible or capable of fluidly switching from task to task; Jim Carrey's cable guy is an all-around service provider (and, as his client is shocked to discover, a provider of a variety of affective and social networking services other than cable); Ball's Lucy is a housewife and would-be actor who, from one episode to the other, ends up taking on hundreds of different jobs.³² The specific jobs that these postwar zanies hold thus demand that they be able to take on virtually any job at any moment, in an incessant flow or stream of activity. This increasingly despecified relation to working is particularly characteristic of the growing informality of late twentieth-century postindustrial work (the cultural correlate of the economic casualization of labor), but it also defines the ideal worker of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism described by Marx: the

perpetual temp, extra, or odd-jobber— itinerant and malleable—for whom all labor is abstract and homogeneous.

The reference to the worker/character haunts our experiences of zaniness even, I argue, when no overt representations of laboring human beings are involved (as in the case of, say, a zany pinball machine or child's toy). What is most essential to zaniness is its way of evoking a situation with the potential to cause harm or injury—a feeling that could not exist without some reference, however implicit, to a being whom that harm or injury might befall. Post-Fordist zaniness in particular suggests that simply being a “productive” worker under prevailing conditions—the concomitant casualization and intensification of labor, the creeping extension of the working day, the steady decline in real wages—is to put oneself into an exhausting and precarious situation. This can be all the more so in postmodern workplaces where productivity, efficiency, and contentment are increasingly measured less in terms of the “objective exigencies and characteristics of the labor process (levels of light, hours of work, and so forth)” than as a factor of “subjective attitudes” about work on the part of workers.³³ As Nikolas Rose argues, these “subjectivized” images of work are “more than the froth of ideology”; they have fundamentally restructured the social organization of the late twentieth-century workplace (including factories as well as offices) and thus the qualitative or phenomenological nature of work itself. In tandem with this post-Fordist reorientation of the workplace toward the production of “productive subjectivity” (which, as Rose notes, makes strategic use of “all the techniques of the self . . . invented within the therapeutic culture of the 1960s”), late twentieth-century workers in the United States and elsewhere have found themselves working more intensively and for longer hours for equal or shrinking wages—a trend across (though with differing impacts within) a number of occupational and class divisions.³⁴

While certain kinds of work have always been affective—women's paid and unpaid caring work in the household, and jobs in the services sector implicitly or explicitly based on that work, such as health care, retail, and teaching—post-Fordist zaniness points to the increasing emotionalization of work in general, a phenomenon now well documented by an increasingly diverse group of sociologists, economists, and activists.³⁵ For all their playfulness and commitment to fun, the zany's characters give the impression of needing to labor excessively hard to produce our laughter, straining themselves to the point of endangering not just themselves but also those around them. Yet as I have been noting, zaniness forecloses identification with the workers in precarious situations it evokes. This foreclosure can be potentially felt as disquieting and adds an

additional layer to the aesthetic's already complex negativity. Indeed, given the fact that late capitalist subjects increasingly asked to put their affects, subjectivity, and sociability to work across preexisting divisions of labor (including that of gender) are increasingly likely to share the relationship to work that this aesthetic category indexes, one wonders if the zany's distinctive mix of displeasure and pleasure stems not only from its projection of a character exerting herself to extreme lengths to perform a job, but also from the way in which it immediately confronts us with our aversion to that character. Although the argument that zaniness is at the deepest level about work helps account for this savagely playful aesthetic's remarkably longstanding appeal to audiences from the sixteenth century to the present, the aesthetic hardly solicits a sense of workerist solidarity. Indeed, by turning the worker's beset, precarious condition into a spectacle for our entertainment, zaniness flatters the spectator's sense of comparative security, thus hailing her as a kind of phantasmagoric manager or implicit owner of the means of production. Yet the experience of zaniness ultimately remains unsettling, since it dramatizes, through the sheer out-of-controlness of the worker/character's performance, the easiness with which these positions of safety and precariousness can be reversed.

The zany, the cute, and the interesting thus call forth not only specific subjective capacities for feeling and acting but also specific ways of relating to other subjects and the larger social arrangements these ways of relating presuppose. In doing so, they are compelling reminders of the general fact of social difference and conflict underlying the entire system of aesthetic judgment or taste, making that underlying condition transparent in ways in which many other aesthetic categories do not. If this is perhaps most evident in zaniness, the asymmetry of power on which cuteness depends is another compelling reminder. There is no judgment or experience of a object as cute that does not call up one's sense of power over it as something less powerful. But the fact that the cute object seems capable of making demands on us regardless, as Lori Merish underscores—a demand for care that women in particular often feel addressed or interpellated by—suggests that “cute” designates not just the site of a static power differential but also the site of a surprisingly complex power struggle.³⁶ Finally, the very idea of “interest” points to aesthetic judgment's unique role in facilitating “precise comparisons and contrasts between individuals or groups” and thus in mediating (not to say resolving) clashes and disputes between them.³⁷ As captured best by the image of the political interest group, as Jan Mieszkowski notes, “interests never exist as unique, autonomous impulses, but only in and as their collisions with

other interests."³⁸ The fact that "before it can be considered as a preference or aim, an interest must be understood as a contradiction with other interests" means that "any interest—of a person, a tribe or a state—is [already] a counter-interest."³⁹

It is perhaps because the zany, the cute, and the interesting refer to social conflict in these direct and yet highly abstract ways that their meanings are so ideologically equivocal. On first glance, zaniness seems purely a symptom of the "perform-or-else" ideology of late capitalism, including its increasingly affective, biopolitical ways of meeting the imperative to endlessly increase productivity.⁴⁰ Yet for all its spectacular displays of laborious exertion, the activity of zaniness is more often than not destructive; one might even describe it as the dramatization of an anarchic refusal to be productive.⁴¹ The increasing zaniness of recent queer performance, moreover—Ryan Trecartin, Kiki and Herb, Felix Bernstein—is all the more interesting given that zaniness marks a specific deviation from camp that can also mark the site of camp's failure, dramatizing the conditions under which it runs up against its own limits.⁴² To be sure, zaniness and camp are not incompatible. The two styles of performing have much in common, which is why they are occasionally used to augment or amplify the other. Like zaniness, camp involves a "glorification of character" and makes failure a central part of its aesthetic.⁴³ As Sontag notes, "things are campy not when they become old—but when we become less involved in them, and can enjoy, instead of be frustrated by, the failure of the attempt."⁴⁴ Camp thus involves a "revaluation of failure, of a cultural ambition that in its time simply missed its mark, tragically or poignantly or extravagantly."⁴⁵ But while camp thus converts the pain of failure and loss into victory and enjoyment, zaniness highlights its own inability to do this; indeed, the desperation and frenzy of its besieged performers, due to the precarious situations into which they are constantly thrust, point to a laborious involvement from which ironic detachment is not an option.⁴⁶ It is in this sense that the zany marks a set of conditions under which even camp's way of revaluing failure fails.

The ideology of the performative aesthetic of zaniness is thus by no means straightforward. And cuteness, for its part, is by no means an unequivocal celebration of the commodity form, even if it does undeniably "graft commodity desire onto a middle-class structure of familial, expressly maternal emotion."⁴⁷ Since consumption is the activity in which one realizes a commodity's use-value, for Marx it technically belongs outside economics proper, "except in so far as it reacts in turn upon the point of departure and initiates the whole process anew."⁴⁸ Cuteness, an adoration of the commodity in which I want to be as intimate with or physically

close to it as possible, thus has a certain utopian edge, speaking to a desire to inhabit a concrete, qualitative world of use as opposed to one of abstract exchange. There is thus a sense in which the fetishism of cuteness is as much a way of resisting the logic of commodification—predicated on the idea of the "absolute commensurability of everything"—as it is a symptomatic reflection of it.⁴⁹ Finally, although nothing seems more apolitical on first squint than the interesting, we will soon see how its conceptual indeterminacy makes it the one category in our repertoire best suited for linking aesthetic judgments to nonaesthetic judgments, including judgments of a political nature.

The aesthetic categories in this study thus refer to basic human and social competences increasingly encroached on by capitalism over the past half century: affect and emotion, in the case of zaniness; language and communication, in the case of the interesting; intimacy and care, in the case of the cute.⁵⁰ Perhaps as a result of the increasing subsumption of these generic competences by capital, the economic processes these aesthetic categories index have also become increasingly intertwined. Indeed, each category indexes a specific conflation of one process with another. Post-Fordist zaniness, for example, points to how taste-driven consumer practices, including playful aesthetic ones, have become systematically integrated into the production process; a development famously allegorized by one of *I Love Lucy's* zaniest moments, the chocolate-factory episode, in which Lucy is forced to literally exercise her "taste" of the product in order to see it off the assembly line. For its part, the "merely interesting" conceptual art of the 1960s, and in particular its serial, publicity-based forms based on the transmission of messages through systems (the postal system, telegrams, telephones, and so on), provides a prime example of how the production of artworks could come to coincide with what Paul Mann calls the "continuous circulation of discourse-objects." For here "the art object as such need not . . . even exist; only its representation needs to circulate. A description will suffice: that is the lesson of conceptual art."⁵¹

It is because the zany, the interesting, and the cute index the uncertain status of performing between labor and play, the increasing routing of art and aesthetic experience through the exchange of information, and the paradoxical complexity of our desire for a simpler relation to our commodities that they are "about" production, circulation, and consumption. With the intensified integration of these economic processes—which are also, crucially, modes of social organization⁵²—it stands to reason that twentieth-century objects of varying scales abound in which we can see all three aesthetic categories in play at once, from Samuel Beckett's late

modernist corpus, with its recursive poetics of combination and permutation (interesting), themes of laborious or compulsive doing (zany), and sad/pathetic characters obsessed with cookies, dogs, and socks (cute), to Web 2.0 culture in its entirety, with its zany blogs, cute tweets, and interesting wikis. Consider also this passage from *One-Dimensional Man*, in which Herbert Marcuse is noticing how the violent fun and games of the zany, the softening or domesticating properties of the cute, and the informational, technocratic style of the interesting can be strategically deployed in combination to project the subjectivity of one of the world's most famous corporations:

The Happy Consciousness has no limits—it arranges games with death and disfiguration in which fun, team work, and strategic importance mix in rewarding social harmony. The RAND Corporation, which unites scholarship, research, the military, the climate, and the good life, reports such games in a style of absolving cuteness, in its “RANDOM News,” volume 9, number 1, under the heading BETTER SAFE THAN SORRY. The rockets are rattling, the H-bomb is waiting, and the space-flights are flying, and the problem is “how to guard the nation and the free world.” . . . Here “devices like RAND’s SAFE come in the picture.” The picture into which they come . . . is a picture in which “the world becomes a map, missiles merely symbols [long live the soothing power of symbolism!], and wars just [just] plans and calculations written down on paper. . . .” In this picture, RAND has transfigured the world into an interesting technological game, and one can relax—the “military planners can gain valuable ‘synthetic’ experience without risk.”⁵³

Global warfare reported in a “style of absolving cuteness,” further defused as merely “interesting” by the rational language of plans and calculations, and ultimately repackaged as just a zany/fun “game”; as both RAND and Marcuse recognize, the minor aesthetic categories in this study clearly have a certain power of their own, deployed here in an explicit effort to do nothing less than reorganize the relation of subjects to a postmodern geopolitical reality.

History

However suited for the investigation of contemporary aesthetic problems, the aesthetic categories in this study are not exclusive to the late twentieth or twenty-first centuries. Nor are their genealogies exactly contemporaneous. Deriving from commedia dell’arte’s stock character of the *zanni*, an itinerant servant modeled after peasants seeking temporary work in wealthy Venetian households, zaniness has a history that stretches back to

the sixteenth-century division of labor and the theater/marketplace culture of what is now Italy.⁵⁴ Two hundred years or so later, in tandem with the rise of a bourgeois public sphere made possible by the expanded circulation of printed matter, Schlegel, Novalis, and others in their circle of German romantic ironists felt compelled to identify a distinctively modern style of eclectic and irregular literature, the “interessante,” to be explicitly contrasted with the beautiful literature of the Greeks (*die schöne Poesie*). Coinciding thus with the expansion of the literary marketplace and the pluralization and professionalization of literary activity in the eighteenth century, the interesting is the only aesthetic category in our repertoire invented expressly by and for literary critics. The cute is the youngest category in this study, first emerging as a common term of evaluation and formally recognizable style in the industrial nineteenth-century United States, in tandem with its ideological consolidation of the middle-class home as a feminized space supposedly organized primarily around commodities and consumption. The invention of the cute thus tellingly coincides with what feminist historians describe as a crucial midcentury shift in the public conception of the domestic realm—from the site of republican virtue and a moral refuge from modern commercialism to the ultimate bastion of that commercialism—that would in turn enable domestic ideology to play a central role in the making of nothing less than American mass/consumer culture itself.⁵⁵

The individual trajectories of the zany, the interesting, and the cute thus seem entirely distinct. Yet all three categories are modern products of the history of Western capitalism, emerging in tandem with the development of markets and economic competition, the rise of civil society, and an increasingly specialized division of labor. As such, they cut across modernism and postmodernism, considered here, after David Harvey’s suggestion, less as distinct episodes in the history of culture than as diverging responses to a single process of modernization involving “new conditions of production (the machine, the factory, urbanization), circulation (the new systems of transport and communications), and consumption (the rise of mass markets and advertising).”⁵⁶ From the *zanni*-ness of commedia dell’arte to the zany sitcom of Lucille Ball, or from Henry James’s championing of “interesting” as the aesthetic of the nineteenth-century novel to the attempt to marry art and information in the notoriously discursive, “merely interesting” conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s, the aesthetic categories in this study have had a presence in Western culture—and significantly across both mass culture and high art—spanning several centuries.⁵⁷ But only in the late twentieth century, I argue, did categories