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Relation of Cute/Kawaii Aesthetics and Beauty in Street Art Production

Ljiljana Radosevic

As an independent visual expression, street art won its position in urban culture at the beginning of the 1990s. Different techniques used to present ideas, such as spraying, stencilling, putting up stickers or paste-ups, doing site specific interventions and so on, allowed artists to develop them more carefully and with a particular sense of the public space. Since 2008 and Lewisohn's study *Street Art; The Graffiti Revolution*, street art has been the subject of academic research on many occasions. However, the issue of cute/kawaii features in street art has not yet been the subject of extensive research.

This paper attempts to find out in what kind of relation within street art discourse we can place the aesthetic concepts of beauty and that of cute/kawaii, and whether a trend of producing cute/kawaii street art can be identified. Concepts of Western cute and Japanese kawaii will be compared, and the relationship between the concept of cute/kawaii and that of beauty will be addressed. Seen through different aesthetic theories an effort is made to understand the relation between these two opposing and yet today very close concepts. There is also the question of a possible natural affection on the part of the viewers for the small and cute things, which we can usually find in stickers and paste-ups. As a result this study raises a broader question: to what extent is cute/kawaii aesthetics taking over the place of beauty in street art.

Key words: street art, cute, kawaii, beauty, popular culture

Recently street art production has become a trend in the art world, many independent galleries and important institutions such as Tate Modern, Victoria and Albert Museum, Brookline Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, Foundation Cartier Paris etc. have hosted street artists and their shows. Its artistic value has been adopted from both high art and popular culture. The only ongoing discussion about the existence and legitimacy of street art is on legal level, which, of course, is essential to the concepts and philosophy of street art. And this problem, most likely, will never be solved. Therefore let us concentrate on street

arts relations to high art and popular culture, and more importantly to the aesthetic concepts of beauty and cute.

As an independent visual expression street art won its position in urban culture at the beginning of the 1990s, but its presence in high art institutions and auction houses became notable by Banksy's presence around the turn of the century. Since then we can trace two flows in street art – mainstream and off-scene. In the mainstream scene we can include all those artists who had their shows, art sales activities, and monographic books. Then there is the off-scene that consists of all those local, unknown artists who probably will never become part of the mainstream, and who represent the biggest portion of street art production.

Art world's opinion on what is and what is not art, and what can enter its domain is arbitrary, and has changed relatively often since the advent of modernism. But we can notice that, even though it cherishes innovation and independence, it is always more eager to accept expressions which are not too alternative and which can, even in some remote way, connect to previous tastes. For example, art world has on several occasions tried to include graffiti into its system, first at the beginning of the 1980s and last time with the street art hype, but it never fully succeeded. Graffiti being exclusive, a product of subcultural group and mostly non-understandable for an outsider became, as Baudrillard calls them, empty signs.¹ Graffiti can be interpreted as many things and as nothing, therefore they were too much for the art world to bear. With street art the situation is somewhat different; here we can see clear figuration and narration which could be easily perceived and analyzed. Different techniques used to present ideas, such as spraying, stencilling, putting up stickers or paste-ups, site specific interventions and so on, are quite imaginative but they all have been used in high art since the emergence of conceptual art, in particular the Fluxus movement, and graffiti. So the art world has the background and philosophical tools to read street art. As a result the artists included in mainstream street art are those who could be compared to producers of high art on visual level (like Swoon, Gaia, Blue, Bast, JR etc.) or on the level of ideas (like Banksy, Marc Jenkins, Zevs etc.).

Within the off-scene we can see production in which the visual and conceptual expressions are more closely related to popular culture. Just to be clear, street art in general is heavily influenced by popular culture but it has huge influence on popular culture as well. The only difference is that in mainstream street art this relation is used, let us say, in a more sophisticated manner. In an off-scene production the use of popular culture or its values and aesthetics is more literal. Cute/kawaii characters or aestheticization are omnipresent in this fraction of the street art production.

Cute as a minor aesthetic concept has tried to establish its independence both from the high art concept of beauty and low art kitsch for quite some time. The new trend of cute accessories, stationery, gimmicks, toys and clothes appeared in the 1990s. This aesthetic started to spread simultaneously in the Western cultural circle and in the East Asia, and its new characteristic is that it was mostly directed at young adults and grownups. But it is uncertain which of these two parallel flows had more influence on popular culture and more influence on one another. Concepts of cute and kawaii need to be positioned within contemporary philosophy of art in order to fully understand the influence of the phenomena. Only then we can compare cute with beauty and try to establish how they coincide and differ within the contemporary aesthetic discourse.

1. Cute and Kawaii in the Age of Consumerist Aesthetics

[W]hile prestigious aesthetic concepts like the beautiful, sublime, and ugly have generated multiple theories and philosophies of art, comparatively novel ones such as *cute*, *glamorous*, *whimsical*, *luscious*, *cozy*, or *wacky* seem far from doing anything of the sort, though ironically, in the close link between their emergence and the rise of consumer aesthetics, they seem all the more suited for the analysis of art's increasingly complex relation to market society in the twentieth century. ⁱⁱ

During the 1990s art became closer to life and its most important feature, according to Bourriaud, became relational aesthetics.ⁱⁱⁱ Beauty, as Danto says, became trivial and popular culture and the aesthetics of consumerism became stronger than ever.^{iv} The conclusion is that beauty left the throne at the top of the hierarchy within the philosophy of art for other aesthetic concepts to claim, but predominantly to popular culture ones.

When the public is left without 'beautiful' figuration and narration in 'high' art it usually turns to popular culture for resources. Cute was perceived as part of the everyday life and usually as a trait of kitsch objects, and as such cute art and design could not establish itself as an independent art form. What was required was a change in general opinion and new philosophical concepts that would not a priori exclude it. Thus cute aesthetics blossomed in the 1990s with Alessi design, Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami and the Superflat art movement, Mark Ryden and the Pop Surrealism, and others. That was also the period when the Western world became exposed to manga and anime which in a period of few years gained ground in comic markets both in the US and in Europe with a number of bestsellers. An

important influence spread by manga and anime was the aesthetic concept of *kawaii*. That is why, when we talk about cute art, we must not forget the notion of *kawaii* which is not synonymous with cute. Together they form basis for this aesthetic analysis.

In his analysis of cuteness in American contemporary society, Cross concludes that the children of today are more than 'pure' they are perceived as 'cute and spunky'.^v In contrast with the adults need to prolong the childhood of their children, the children are becoming more eager to grow up, and in that situation children prove to be easy prey to the marketing campaigns of different firms the fields of which range from clothes, video games and other forms of serious consumerism.^{vi} On the other hand many adults admire the freedom of youth and see it as a possible lifestyle rather than a stage of life. He explains that the popular psychology promotes regression as the only way to feel alive. Thus, he says, we have created a curiously contradictory culture of 'jaded children and youth-hungry adults'.^{vii} These accounts could be easily applied to Western European societies with minor differences. And it is clear that societies in this stage could have more preference for cute aesthetics regardless of the age of the consumers.

A similar state of mind can be found in Japan, and further more throughout the East Asia. One of the most important analysts of Japanese popular culture, Sharon Kinsella explains that youth culture, which has flourished in Japan since the 1960s, has been identified as the main production field of post-war individualism and viewed as a particularly painful spot by many leading intellectuals. Individualism in general and youth culture in particular have been interpreted as a form of wilful immaturity or childishness.^{viii} In her eye-opening study about Hello Kitty, Kristina Yano gives us several definitions of *kawaii* and we can clearly see the way they coincide and differ:

Sharon Kinsella, for example, defines *kawaii* as "essentially . . . childlike; it celebrates sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced social behavior and physical appearances" (Kinsella 1995: 220). Brian McVeigh's checklist of Japanese Cute includes variously: females, femininity, weakness, cheerfulness, bright colors, infants and children, light-heartedness, outgoing friendliness, and diminutive size (2000: 142). As Merry White notes, *kawaii* calls upon a sense of vulnerability as "something to be taken care of and cuddled."^{ix}

To these accounts we can also add some from other authors:

Kawaii means “cute” in Japanese, and denotes a common popular culture closely linked to aesthetic expressions of kitsch. The “cute” is defined as childlike, sweet, innocent, pure, gentle and weak. The aesthetics of cuteness (kawairashisa) has been developing in Japan since the 1980s, and in the late 1990s it turned into an explicit kitsch-culture... Wherever it appears [in East Asia], cute-kitsch culture is more than an aesthetic style, but a fully fledged way of articulating a subjective attitude that becomes manifest in design, language, bodily behavior, gender relations, and, most generally, in subjective perceptions of the self.^x

Cuteness is typically regarded in the Western cultural sphere as benign and non-threatening, and it is considered to be the basic trait of children and baby animals. From this point of view kawaii becomes somewhat threatening because it holds one more thing which is culturally unacceptable. Yano is concerned that most definitions of kawaii eliminate the erotic element (that later became one of the dominant elements) because kawaii embodies not only a childlike image, but also a sexualized one.^{xi} This of course, raises a lot of questions, and not only in Japan but throughout the world where ever kawaii has inserted its influence. Another element could be added to kawaii, and that is the horror or gothic character which was almost unknown in this form in the Western societies. That is why in street art we can very often see scary monsters and dark characters with cute characteristics.

2. Beauty in Relation to Cute/Kawaii

After the comparison of cute and kawaii, and the recognition of their particularities, what would be suitable discourse for the comparison of cute/kawaii and beauty? Since cute/kawaii as an aesthetic concept has not been discussed to such extent as beauty, we do not have different theories to compare. What we can do is to find a sphere which they both belong to, such as popular culture and everyday aesthetics, and try to see how they relate to each other within that particular sphere. It is important to keep in mind that we are not trying to put an equation mark between these two concepts but to look at them as two trains on parallel tracks that run between fine art and popular culture. Even though it has been mentioned that at the end of the 20th century beauty has been avoided by the art scene as something trivial, it does not mean that beauty has altogether disappeared from the aesthetic and artistic discourses. At the same time cute

aesthetics has spread into fine art production assuming some of the positions once held by beauty. When it comes to the sphere of popular culture every aesthetic concept is equal but it is the taste of consumers that decides which one of the many is momentarily considered as the 'prestigious' one. It seems that at the moment cute/kawaii holds that very position. As a natural part of popular culture, street art shares its aesthetic views to a certain extent. We could therefore say that this analysis might help us resolve certain aesthetic issues regarding street art.

The distinction between two kinds of aesthetic experience upheld in the Kantian aesthetic tradition - the agreeable and the beautiful, might help us make sense of the relation between the concepts of beauty and cute/kawaii. Kant defines as agreeable all the pleasures of the senses unmediated by reflection. This definition of agreeable could be applied to cute/kawaii to a certain extent, because cute does what it does – it gives pleasurable sensations. Kant also says that unlike beauty, the agreeable does not please but gratifies, which provokes a desire for similar objects. This is exactly what cute objects do by producing desire to have them. This is the reason why they are so suitable for mass production they enhance the consumerist logic and they may provoke the need to collect them. But this is only one way to look at the cute/kawaii concept and in this way does not change our perception of it. Cute art remains trapped in the high art/low art discourse which does not allow us to look at art with cute features as good art.

Instead we can take in consideration Leddy and his attempt to redo Kant's theory of the judgment of taste. Leddy sees the agreeable as possible definition of everyday aesthetics. But he goes further and explains that Kant's reasoning has to be re-evaluated because, as he says, recent aestheticians have questioned the idea that aesthetic appreciation could be completely disinterested. This of course undercuts Kant's distinction between the agreeable and the beautiful. But Leddy also argues that the concept of beauty should not be excluded from everyday aesthetics. Moreover, he proposes following modifications in order to use Kant's distinction between the beautiful and the agreeable. So he proposes the following: the agreeable is primarily a matter of the play of sense and imagination; the beautiful is primarily a matter of the play of imagination and understanding.^{xii} Yet, the agreeable may contain some play of imagination and understanding, and sense should not be excluded from the beautiful. This insight gives us better platform for putting cute/kawaii and beauty in relation, because it allows both of these concepts to exist in street art production and be regarded as equally good.

Thinking in terms of the pleasure-principle tradition, it is understood that beauty evokes a pleasurable response. If while perceiving an object one does not experience pleasure one is not experiencing beauty. McMahan criticizes this conception by arguing that when all pleasures evoked by the perception of the

object are counted as pleasurable responses to beauty, beauty is collapsed into the agreeably sensuous and the good.^{xiii} And it is exactly there that beauty becomes equal to cute and all the other minor aesthetic categories. In everyday life and in popular culture people get pleasurable responses from things that are far from beautiful, but are still cherished because they move something inside of the viewer.

There have been philosophic attempts to give evolutionary justification for our capacity to experience beauty. One has to wonder can these attitudes ever be proven, or can they be regarded simply as philosophical speculation. But when it comes to cute/kawai it has been scientifically proven that the recognition or cute has evolutionary basis.^{xiv} These infantile features are collectively known as the baby schema^{xv} and on graphic level this comes down to a circle with three dots, features which have been explained in the previous chapter. This represents the basis on which different artists elaborate in different manners. Also, different viewers have their own perception of the level of cuteness, but this feature is unmistakably recognized as being cute.

3. Conclusion

If we agree with Susan Sontag's statement that 'one cheats oneself as a human being if one has respect only for the style of high culture'^{xvi} then we can also embrace the aesthetic traits of cute culture. Not because it offers comfortable feeling of the agreeable but because it became one way of scanning the contemporary society with all its positive and negative sides. The gap that the absence of beauty has created in art during last twenty years has been filled with different concepts, one of which is cute. A minor aesthetic concept known from the everyday life, which had been thought that could never exist on its own, has won its independence. Contemporary social conditions have enabled it to blossom and to take its place in high art and popular culture. This form of art, cute/kawaii art, can be mistaken for pure kitsch if one does not pay attention. If one takes better look, she will see that cute art objects are laden with meaning, with social critique, with questions of morality and sexuality, and they are a bit freaky.

All these traits could be found in the off-scene street art production, especially in paste-ups and stickers. Many street artists have participated in the market of design toys for adults, a market which in the Western cultural circle was developed during the last decade. Some of the mainstream street artists such as Miss Van, Kid Acne, Buff Monster also include cute/kawaii features in their artwork. But an interesting point in the cute street art works is that grownups produce cute art and toys for other grownups that enjoy, collect and consume them. Moreover, quite large segment of street art production on the streets is marked by some variety of cute/kawaii aesthetics. Which brings us to the question: is this the reason why

people find street art more acceptable, agreeable, and less threatening than graffiti? It is possible that off-scene street art has accepted cute/kawaii aesthetic instead of aiming at classical beauty, because it allows the artists to provoke the sympathy of the viewers, hide unexpected issues inside their characters, and produce artworks which enhance the wish to possess them.

Notes

- ⁱ Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: Sage, 2002), 76-86.
- ⁱⁱ Sianne Ngai, 'The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde', *Critical Inquiry* 31 (2005): 811-847.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les presses du reel, 2002)
- ^{iv} Arthur Danto, 'Beauty and the Philosophical Definition of Art', In *The Abuse of Beauty. Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*, (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2003) 17-37.
- ^v Cross also points out that western society requires an image of purity, and explains that when the feminist revolution of the 1960s and 1970s removed that burden from women, it was shifted to the child. In Gary Cross, *The Cute and the Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children's Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004): 6.
- ^{vi} *Ibid.*, 11.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, 12.
- ^{viii} Sharon Kinsella, 'Japanese Subculture in the 1990s: Otaku and the Amateur Manga Movement', *Journal of Japanese Studies* 24:2 (*Society of Japanese Studies*, 1998), 315.
- ^{ix} Christine R. Yano, 'Flipping Kitty; Transnational transgressions of Japanese Cute.' *Medi@sia; Global media/tion in and out of context*, eds. Todd Joseph Miles Holden and Timothy J. Scrase, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 211.
- ^x Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, 'Wong Kar-wai's films and the Culture of the Kawaii'. *SubStance* #116, Vol. 37, no. 2, (Board of Regents and University of Wisconsin System, 2008), 95.
- ^{xi} Yano, 'Flipping Kitty', 210.
- ^{xii} Tom Leddy, 'The Nature of Everyday Aesthetics.' In *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, eds. Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 6.

^{xiii} Jennifer Anne McMahon, 'Beauty.' In *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, eds. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes, (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) 232.

^{xiv} Sanefuji Wakako, Hidehiro Ohgami and Hashiya Kazuhide. 'Development of Preference for Baby Faces Across Species in Humans'. (Japan Ethnological Society and Springer, 2006), 250. Viewed 02 March 2010, <http://www.springerlink.com/content/8448487913854735/>

^{xv} When compared with adults, babies have eyes located at, or below the midline of the face, prominent and protruding foreheads and non-protruding chins. In Wakako, Preference for Baby Faces, 250.

^{xvi} Susan Sontag, *Susan Sontag Reader* (London: Penguin Books, 1983), 115.

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