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DEFIANTLY CHILDLIKE: USING AESTHETIC RESISTANCE TO HEAL

Sarah K. Reagan
Virginia Commonwealth University

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

SARAH REAGAN
Bachelor of Fine Arts, Iowa State University, 2017
Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2022

Director: SCOTT BRAUN
Assistant Professor, Craft/Material Studies

Committee Members:

A. BLAIR CLEMO
Associate Professor, Craft/Material Studies

SUSIE GANCH
Associate Professor, Craft/Material Studies

NICOLE KILLIAN
Director of Design and Visual Communications MFA,
Associate Professor, Graphic Design

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May 2022

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Thank you to my fiendish foes for giving me something to laugh at.

Thank you to my peers and dear friends for laughing with me.

Thank you to my family for all of the above and everything else.

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DEFIANTLY CHILDLIKE: USING AESTHETIC RESISTANCE TO HEAL

By Sarah Reagan, MFA.

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This thesis examines an alternative processing mechanism surrounding the act of healing after traumatic experiences in life. Using a methodology of iterative patterning and tool-pathing, a collection of inflatable garments and wooden mannequins analyzes defense mechanisms learned in early childhood development. This work highlights an essential body of recent scholarship that takes cuteification seriously to restore a childlike approach to mastering fear. This paper will review the definitions of cuteness and childlike humor and then describe how visual culture has implemented these components to subvert established power.

DEFIANTLY CHILDLIKE: USING AESTHETIC RESISTANCE TO HEAL

My earliest memories coincide with my first suicidal ideations. Before I knew who I was, I knew I wanted to punish myself just as much as, if not more than, those who could exert their power over me. Through the trials in my life with power-hungry authority figures, sexual assault, abusive partners, and my mind that screamed out for escape, I've been reviewing difficult experiences on a loop in my mind like a late-night sitcom.

When I was a child, I would regularly get my mouth washed out with soap for asking too many questions. It was not a standard rubbing of bar soap on the tongue but instead several squirts of Dawn dish soap on my punisher's hand, which was then swiftly shoved down the back of my throat. This is a painful experience that I can still feel (and taste) to this day. Though, there was one pivotal time when my fear of this punishment began to diminish. I was getting soap sent down my throat. I was trying my hardest to be brave and not to cry. I started choking on the soap. I coughed, and a colossal bubble shot from my mouth and popped right on the person's nose that was doing this to me. I could not help but laugh. It turned something that was supposed to be grueling and punitive into something hilarious. Nothing defeats your fiendish foes like laughing at their attempts to take you down.

Beginning in early childhood, rules and restrictions are forced upon us: which toys we can't play with, which clothing we can't wear, the nuances of presenting ourselves publicly, and even how to curb our imaginations to remain realistic. These

regulations depict violence of position that disallows negotiation. I spent much of my youth trying to stick to the straight path expected of me, but ultimately, I spent my time reckoning with punishment and discipline (self-inflicted and otherwise). To navigate the gratuitousness of the penalty of youthful testing/trying, I learned how to hide my identity and regulate my responses through defense mechanisms: fight, flight, fawn, freeze... and humor.

Humor is observed in all cultures and at all ages (Kuipers, 2015). But only recently has the psychology field acknowledged it as an essential human behavior. Many have implemented a strategy to get through the hard times by viewing one's fears through a humorous lens. Humor has been utilized in visual culture as well. This phenomenon has led me to wonder; what are the symptoms of revolutionary aesthetic generativity in childlike defiance?

This thesis examines an alternative processing mechanism surrounding the act of healing after traumatic experiences in life. Using a methodology of iterative patterning and tool-pathing, a collection of inflatable garments and wooden mannequins analyzes defense mechanisms learned in early childhood development. This work highlights an essential body of recent scholarship that takes cuteification — a way of becoming cute or adding cuteness to surroundings to make oneself its protector, rendering it powerless in a nonadversarial manner — seriously to restore a childlike approach to mastering fear. This paper will review the definitions of cuteness and childlike humor and then

describe how visual culture has implemented these components to subvert established power.

THE CUTENESS OF THE CHILDLIKE AND THE CHILDISH

Cuteness describes an attractiveness commonly associated with youth and appearance and a scientific concept and analytical model in ethology. First introduced by Konrad Lorenz, the idea of the baby schema (*Kindchenschema*) is "a set of facial and body features that make a creature or object appear cute and convey a need for nurture and care from those surrounding it." (see Fig. 1) (Ngai, 2012) Cuteness encompasses subjects ranging from Pikachu and clumsy toddlers to baby animals and fish-shaped snack crackers, components with infant-like features of roundness, softness, and an exhibition of general powerlessness.
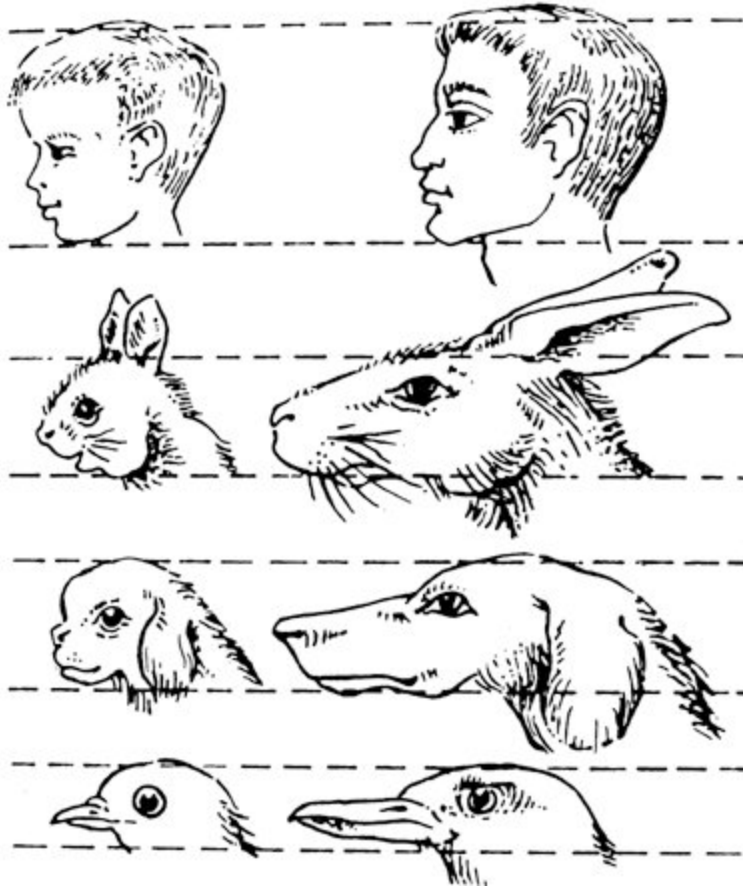
Fig 1. Lorenz' Illustration of *Kindchenschema*

While Lorenz's work continues to inform cute studies, recent research has expanded upon his understanding of the biological function of cuteness and its association with caregiving and the maternal. In 2011, psychologist Gary D. Sherman asserted that "cuteness is as much an elicitor of play as it is of care (Dale, 2017). It is as likely to trigger a childlike state as a parental one." As such, cuteness demands the release of a type of sociality in humans and invites a broad range of what they term "affiliative behaviors." These affiliative behaviors dictate how we act with objects deemed harmless, including various forms of social interaction like touching, cuddling, teasing, and playing. They have an immediate psychological effect on us. Bright or

pastel colors, smiling faces, and baby animals all have the almost narcotic power to induce comfort and happiness in the human brain (Ngai, 2012).

Though initially appearing harmless, cuteness contains a fluctuating power dynamic fueled by a person's innate desire to exert their ability to control an unthreatening object (May, 2019). The thing deemed "unthreatening" can then use its ability to appear sweet and docile to reverse that dynamic and use its influence against the looming authority.

Cuteness works fluidly in the liminal space between good and evil in ways we can compare on a simple analysis of the uses of "childlike" and "childish." The word 'childlike' is used positively to praise someone's youthful virtues; honesty, purity, dependency, innocence, and control ability— known to be "good." *Childlike* refers to the sweet things we associate with children; at its most basic, it simply means resembling a child. But the 'childlike' is not always innocent. "In plain terms, a child is a complicated creature who can drive you crazy. Childhood is cruel; there is anger to it." (Anderson, 2016) It reminds us that a child's world is not all sweetness and light; it has darkness too— extravagant, scary, wickedly entertaining darkness usually packed with tales of resistance.

In contrast, the word 'childish' has a negative connotation; it outlines a defiant person's bratty or silly attitude, which is decidedly unlikeable. Horror, pain, and the mundane are often exhibited through aestheticization (beautification) and cutification in

pop culture and adult-produced children's culture (Ylönen, 2020) — Children

themselves, however, often resort to a carnivalizing or an aesthetically demoralizing

approach that seeks to control possibly frightening experiences through queer

interpretations and re-iterations that focus on disgust and humor within the seriousness

of pain. This approach maintains its cuteness because it involves the childlike (or actual

children) gleefully announcing its dedication to resisting authority while promoting

eccentric behavior and sanctioning sacrilege. The insubordination and intentional

misbehavior associated with the word childish have pushed us to view it as evil.
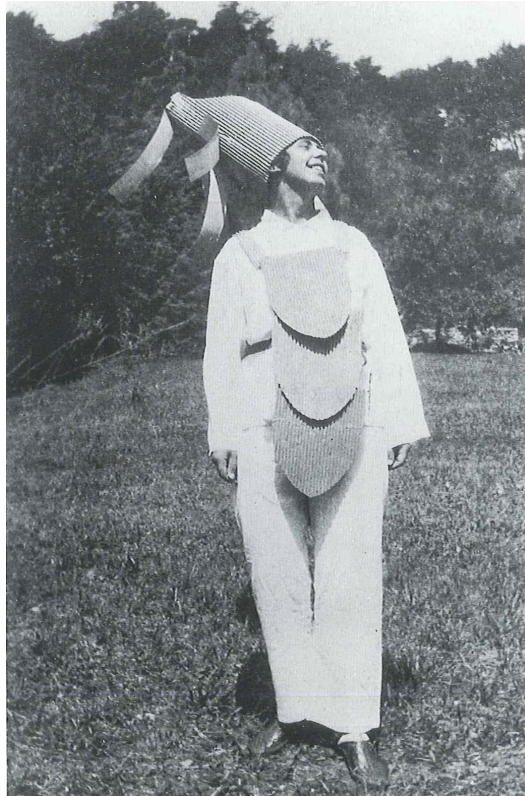
Fig 2. Sophie Taeuber-Arp, with her Dada dance costume, Ascona, 1925

The link between resistance as self-creation and aesthetics as a field devoted to

"taste" is exemplified by anti-authority and anti-art aesthetics. Dadaist ideas of absurdity

and "anti-art" came to fruition simultaneously as carnivalization was synthesized as

literary theory. Most notably, the Dada movement became a starting point for performance art, a prelude to postmodernism, which existed to go against sterility and somberness in favor of playfulness. This movement influenced pop art, celebrated anti-art, and laid the foundation for shock arts' rise to popularity in the '90s (Armstrong, 2007).

Shock Art is another form of anti-art but incorporates disturbing images, scents, or sounds to… well, shock people. The goal of shock art is to provoke viewers' visceral reactions and experiences of surprise in the face of non-normalcy. Viewed as a social commentary (negative or positive), the art form uses taboo, grotesque, or outrageous components. The most prominent example is Marcel Duchamp's "*Fountain,*" an autographed urinal.

Fig 3. Marcel Duchamp's "*Fountain"*

It famously went against the more rigid and formal art consumption culture at the time. *Fountain* is a perfect example of a fart joke that a kid would tell and get pleasure from (both gross and funny and a defense against the suffocating platforming of aesthetics against appropriateness.) It delivered something seen as disgusting, an insult to the art institution, and completely inappropriate (Mann, 2017). Like shock art, humor like that coming from the revolutionarily funny child telling the fart joke can be described as puncturing conformity's protective balloon. The idea is to make existence palatable, not by softening, but by transforming what controls us into sharp, shocking, disgustingly human, and "ridiculous." Which is neither inherently good nor bad; its neutrality represents the extrapolation of extremes.
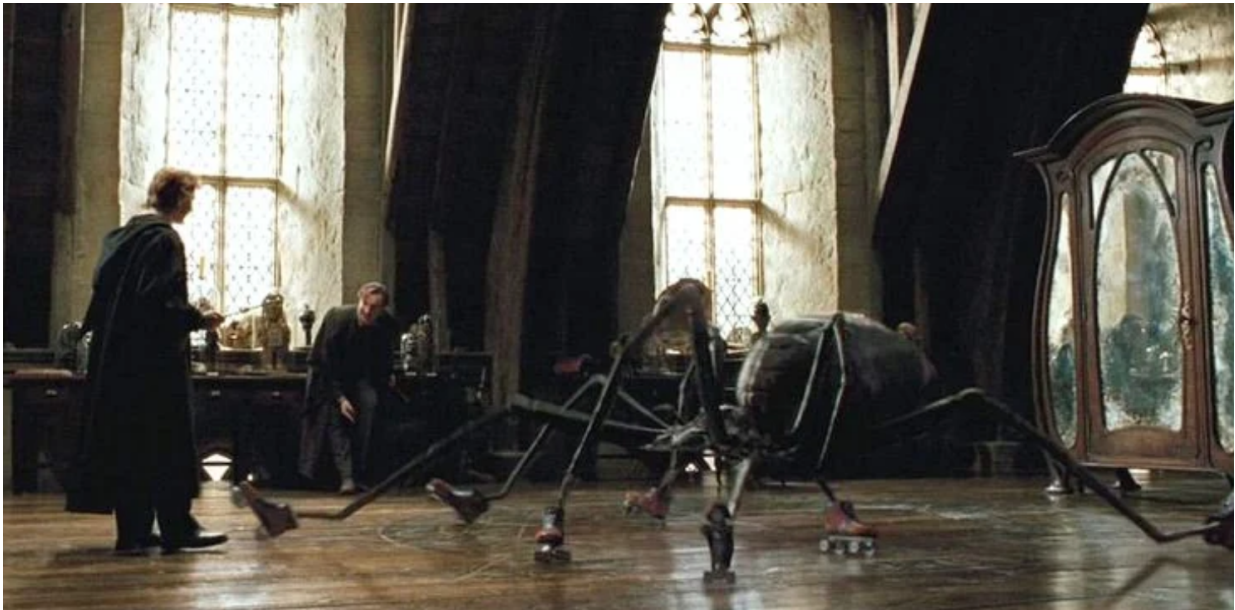

Fig 4. Still from the film, Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, the casting of the *Riddikulus Charm*

An example of this in pop culture is a scene in the film Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban where students are faced with a Boggart, a creature that

transforms to depict one's greatest fear. The students are then instructed to use the spell *"Riddikulus"* to diminish its power of instilling fear and control by transforming it into something clad with silliness, clumsiness, and clown noses (see Fig. 4). Riddikulus is a charm that causes the creature to assume a humorous form to the caster, counteracting the Boggart's ability to terrorize. Boggarts are defeated by laughter, so forcing them to take an amusing form is the first step to defeating them. Even the word "ridiculous" has an imminent (and youthful) multiplicity in its meaning and semiotics of how we now use it: it also can mean "very good," "cool," etc. This process of expressing enjoyment and laughing in the face of our enemies, foes, or even products has been characterized as an act of resistance in both subculture and children's culture (i.e., children's literature, children's "gross" sense of humor, etc.). "The desire to desecrate is a desire to turn aesthetic judgment against itself so that it no longer seems like a judgment of us." (Ylönen, 2020). We can see this in children – the delight in fart noises, make-believe, repetitive actions that help them distance themselves from the adult world that judges them and whose authority they wish to deny.

CUTE IN POP CULTURE

The Second World War forced many artists, architects, and designers to leave their homelands, causing a massive exchange of national styles and design philosophies. This enormous exodus brought children across cultural and nation-state boundaries as well. During this period after the war, rationing of materials played a significant part in challenging designers to use all of their flair and ingenuity to overcome the limitations imposed upon them. Timber and tubular steel were banned for furniture

manufacture in July 1940 (Baker, Fiona). In 1942 the advisory committee for utility

furniture in the United States was born and produced furniture sparing on raw materials,

but that was well-designed, manufactured, and priced following this restriction of tubular

steel and timber.

In *The Power of Cute*, Simon May references Japan's invigoration and creation of

"cute" following WWII as a way to heal after their defeat alongside years of violence,

death, and turmoil. Many countries suffered from lack of funding, scarcity of raw

materials, labor shortages, and unsuitable production facilities. However, the 1950s

heralded a new era and design worldwide with inspiration from Italy, Scandinavia,

Japan, and the United States that undoubtedly took cues from the generative potency of

the child as defiantly powerful and resilient. Light and spacious interiors and bright

colors were favored to counteract the darkness of the war period. New motifs included

space-age imagery, organic approaches, cartoonish iconography, and optimism toward

the future. They took full advantage of machine production using bold shapes and

curves. New materials became widely available through technology developed during

the war, offering a wealth of possibilities to designers.

Fig 5. Japanese powdered toothpaste advertisement, 1956

The "cute" and bright aesthetics that arose in Japan post-WWII undoubtedly made their way into pop art of the late 1950s and '60s (see Fig. 5). It began as a revolt against traditional views on what art should be. Artists were acting on the discrepancy between what was in museums and what was in their everyday lives, and they turned to other sources for their imagery. American Pop art took its visual inspiration from consumer culture- primarily from television, comic books, movies, magazines, and advertising. It rejected both the elitism of seriousness in art institutions and capitalized on the easily understandable images that drew the attention of people of all ages.

<mark>CUTE CARE IN THE AFTERMATH</mark>

Low theory is a term popularized by Jack Halberstam. It claims that rejecting heteronormative forms of success looks like failure to the strictly serious people of the world, but failing to meet these standards leads to queer freedom (Halberstam, 2011).

> *"I believe in low theory in popular places, in the small, the inconsequential, the anti monumental, the micro, the irrelevant; I believe in making a difference by thinking little thoughts and sharing them widely. I seek to provoke, annoy, bother, irritate, and amuse; I am chasing small projects, micropolitics, hunches, whims, and fancies."*

The low theory "micros" that I'm interested in are how we feel in the aftermath of traumatic experiences and how we respond to care for and preserve ourselves. The provoking, the annoying, the bothering, the irritating, and the amusing are how we address those *childishly*.

Though critics and the public didn't immediately love pop art upon its creation, its advocates (a minority within the art world) saw it as an art that was attention-grabbing and accessible, bringing together both art experts and untrained viewers. In 1957 pop artist Richard Hamilton listed the characteristics of pop art in a letter to his friends, architects Peter and Alison Smithson (Sotheby's, 2020):

"Pop Art is Popular (designed for a mass audience), Transient (short-term solution), Expendable (easily forgotten), Low cost, Mass produced, Young (aimed at youth), Witty, Sexy, Gimmicky, Glamorous, Big business."
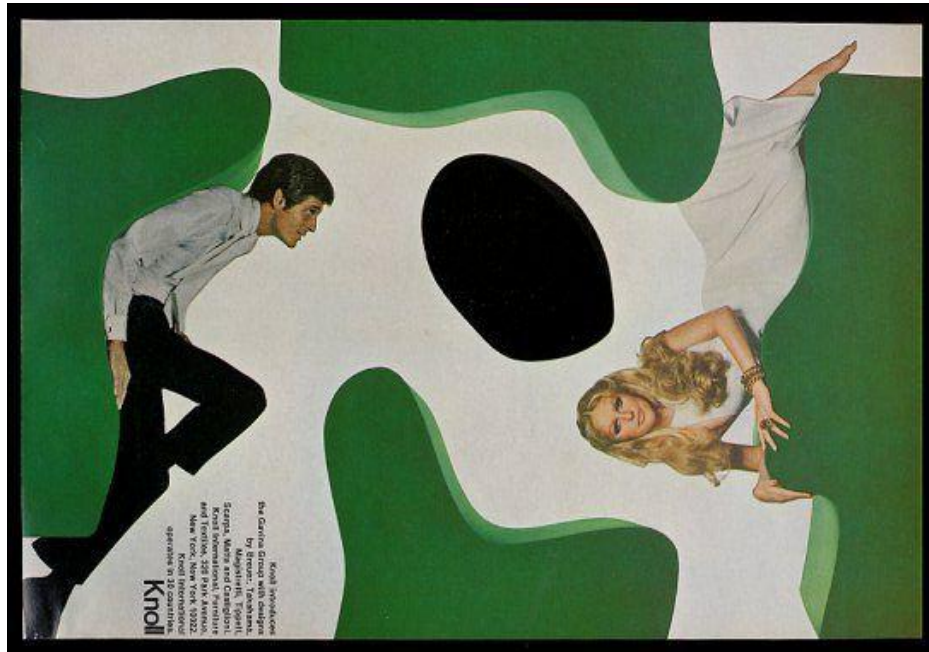
Fig 6. Roberto Sebastian Matta's Malitte Seating Advertisement

Today, we know and accept that technology moves extremely fast, and in the 60s, people were coming to terms with it. The 60s is the decade that saw the birth of youth culture; life was hip, cool, and cute, and being in fashion was of the utmost importance. The nuclear and mobile society brought smaller homes and apartments, which called for multipurpose room furniture. Roberto Sebastian Matta's Malitte seating system (see Fig. 6) shows a space-saving interpretation of domestic furniture that is visually stimulating. The blowup chair made from PVC (or vinyl) was another example of new materials permitting new forms. (reference photos) New technology and facilities available to designers extended the design process, often requiring specialist input from

engineers and consumer researchers. Highly individual designer Ettore Sottsass Jr initially trained as an architect in the rational style of the modernists; however, by the 1950s, he had rejected this style, and his work became the antithesis of functionalism, combining a love of prewar abstract with the ideology of pop art. In 1956, Sottsass moved to New York to work with designer George Nelson. Under Herman-Miller, Sottsass assisted George Nelson with creating the Marshmallow Sofa (Sudjic, 2015).

Fig 7. Marshmallow Sofa, George Nelson (and Sottsass)

This sofa included eighteen candy-like cushions floating above its steel frame in a playful Pop Art gesture. It had detachable cushions for easy cleaning and was interchangeable for equal wear and expression of individuality (see Fig. 7). This

experience led Sottsass to shift his focus from architecture to design. In response to claims that his work was becoming "tacky and no longer timeless," Sottsass said, "I do not understand why enduring design is better than disappearing design. I must admit that obsolescence is just the sugar of life." (Baker, Fiona).

Many pop artists and their theorists are included in lists of contributors to the 1960s "liberation movements." In her 1964 essay *Notes on Camp*, Susan Sontag famously located and described an aesthetically avant-garde queerness that bore a striking similarity to other contemporary definitions of Pop Art. Essentially, "camp is an irreverent attitude that shades into the subversive by first resisting, then reclaiming and repurposing, prevailing norms. For Pop artists like Andy Warhol, this camp sensibility or persona generated their kitschy images and objects and made space for reinventing the body itself. When camp was essentially a synonym for gay, Sontag declared 'being' and identity as a fluid and liberatory performance." (MacKay, 2020) These pop artworks often implied cultural metaphors and political-economic critiques, all under the obscuring guise of bright colors, rounded forms, and delicious candy for the eyes that one cannot help but feel lighter looking at.

Historically, feminine and cute are often seen as parallels, as they are both shallowly labeled as subordinate. As such, frequently, cuteness is used to erotize powerlessness and infantilism (like women's societal requirement to have noticeably hair-free bodies, remain agreeable, and smile essentially on command- much like a toddler.) Girls often must wield cuteness as a weapon or use it as a shield from violent

or otherwise hostile environments; this phenomenon has become particularly popular throughout history in literature, comics, and even contemporary entertainment- i.e., The Powerpuff Girls. The creation of The Powerpuff Girls is a riff off of the 200-year-old nursery rhyme, "What Little Boys Are Made Of" (Snips, snails, and puppy-dogs tails). In this rhyme, we are told that "sugar, spice, and everything nice" are the ingredients to make the perfect little girls. These exact words that are mentioned in the opening credits of the Powerpuff Girls may feel a touch regressive, if mostly harmless, as it is surrounded by stereotypically feminine visual elements like hearts, flowers, and stars- but because of "Chemical X," that accidentally was mixed with their compositor ingredients, they became superheroes. With adorable bows and doll-like appearance as their guise, they subvert the cultural expectation that women and girls belong in the role of "damsel in distress" and should avoid displaying their intelligence, physical strength, and power to defeat "evil." Instead, they use their influential power of cuteness as a subversive strategy to make intelligence palatable and subtle enough to draw others in and then squeak by as a deadly force undetected. From their vast heads and vast bug eyes to the fact that the show launched as part of Cartoon Network's Toonami programming (showing Japanese and American cartoons), The Powerpuff Girls take aesthetic influence from Japanese anime and Manga; mainly that which was shaped by 1920's illustrator Junichi Nakahara and then later, Eico Hanamura (See Fig. 8 and Fig 9).

Fig 8. The Powerpuff Girls illustration   Fig 9. Hanamura Heroin illustration

Hanamura took particular inspiration from her experience in post-war Japan. She creates heroines one could see themselves as because "They are good and lovely girls, but very poor- much like every person in post-war Japan. We love them because we identify with them. They are accessible to us." (Okazaki, 2013). Nation-state level violence, in this case, nuclear violence, is world-annihilating, and it is the "child" that must (according to this quote) rebuild from "poor" to something resembling a new nation of "selves": the child in its creative capacity is moving from utterly powerless to the generative subject position.

HUMOR AND CUTENESS IN STORIES

I have always had a natural affinity for children's stories, especially those that depict instances of dramatic triumph over fears, overcoming obstacles with flair, or even defeating evil— i.e., the Powerpuff Girls flying in, narrowly escaping bombs exploding, to save everyone from the evil of Mojo Jojo annihilating civilians and children. Darkness has forever been a secret (and not so secret) ingredient in children's literature, whether

it's tales by the Brothers Grimm and Disney or Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and

Harry Potter. If you have ever paid attention to the words of a nursery rhyme like Ring a

Ring o' Roses (Ring around the rosies, pocket full of posies…), you will know that even

the youngest children are exposed to horror in storytelling. As child psychologist Bruno

Bettelheim explained in his seminal study in 1976, *"The Uses of Enchantment: The*

Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales" (Anderson, 2016),

> *The use of enchantment, the macabre in children's literature, serves a critical*
>
> *cathartic function...Without such fantasies, the child fails to get to know his*
>
> *monster better, nor is he given suggestions on how he may gain mastery over it.*
>
> *As a result, the child remains helpless with his worst anxieties, much more so*
>
> *than if they had been told fairy tales that give these anxieties form and body and*
>
> *show ways to overcome these 'monsters.'*

… And who is the "Monster" here, if not the Big Other (in Lacanian psychoanalysis

theory), or just the Father, the Critic, or the Teacher. (Evans, 1996)

Literature containing alternative voices to dethrone the authority of official culture

also diminishes the intimidation of established power dynamics. The film Shrek, for

example, subverts the fairytale constructed stereotype that "a prince and a princess

must be perfect" by giving free rein to the bodily profanity, non-normative appearance,

and an open distaste for royalty. The character Shrek is cute, not particularly as the

anti-hero in the film, but as the commodified personality depicted on toys in shops for

children, collectible action figures, posters, housewares, and the McDonald's Happy

Meal Prizes that he evolved into after the overwhelmingly positive response after the release of the film.

THE COMMODIFICATION OF THE CHILDLIKE IMAGINATION IN ART OBJECTS

Fig 10. Florentijn Hofman, Rubber Duck

By the early '90s, due to the palatable and undeniably consumable nature of cuteness worldwide, it took over all forms of media and advertisement. It became something that society wanted to consume and *had* to consume. More often than not, people stick to defining cute by describing soft and small things, while they view big things as holding a sense of power and destruction, but what happens when we "Cuteify" things that are human-sized or larger? Perhaps it is as Dutch artist Florentijn Hofman, who made a massive inflatable "rubber" duck (see Fig. 10) that floated in the

canals of Osaka, says, "The work does not seem to change in size, but the world does" (Giaimo, 2015). A colossal version of an object requires the viewer to reflect on its surroundings and the world at large- making the world the thing that is pocket-sized and cute itself. Shrek and the duck are not actually "being" big but rather being "made" big by the gaze/a viewer, and the artist's job, as Hofman describes, is to allow the world itself to "adjust" to the object as a one-subject-among-many. One can apply this principle to fine art, large sculptures, and even functional objects often overlooked in the everyday world, namely furniture.

Fig 11. Saarinen Womb Chair

Fig 12. Jacobsen Egg Chair

The organic modernism of Finnish architect and designer Eero Saarinen is well illustrated in his Womb Chair (see Fig. 11). He tried to think of a different name if people were offended, but nothing else captured the maternal hug that this seat seemed to give (Baker, 2011). Saarinen envisioned an enveloping chair that would enable the user to draw up their legs while still supporting their back, arms, and shoulders. Following suit is furniture designer Arne Jacobsen. The Egg Chair makes a strong, almost character-like,

sculptural statement (see Fig. 12). The form echoes Eero Saarinen's Womb Chair and has been one of the most iconic post-war furniture designs for its sense of comfort and stability and triggers the feeling of, perhaps, being inside an egg (Baker, 2011).

Fig 13. Zanotta Blow Chair

Since the mass availability of plastic in the 1960s, inflatable furniture has been an object of infatuation. The Zanotta Blow Chair (see Fig. 13) was "among the first lightweight, inexpensive, commercially available products to be mass-produced," It ultimately became an icon of its 1960s Pop Furniture. (Francis, 2019) The creation of this chair, and many inflatable furniture pieces to follow, demonstrates designers'

responses to new challenges and interests in fashion and materiality, all with a degree of whimsy and toy-like cuteness that reflected the youthful spirit of the time. Even the boom of IKEA's furniture was primarily due to incorporating youthful design elements from design superstars like Saarinen and Jacobsen into accessible and durable furniture. (Bengtsson, 2010) IKEA embraced accessibility and applied this notion with its "PS for Children" collection in 2003. In addition to designers, IKEA invited various experts on children and several actual kids to participate in the development of the furniture, for their unfiltered creativity was exactly the innovation consumers crave. It was meant to "make the world a little less ugly and a little more fun and comfortable." The plasticity — taking form (as in the plasticity of clay) from and giving form to — of these material forms always take on these animal or otherwise anthropomorphic and cute qualities.

OBJECT LESSON

As a troubled subject committed to a liberatory project of consuming cute culture and causing trouble— being curious and "childish" whenever possible— what better way to do it than to see what it means to reroute my psychic/emotional damage to my own aesthetically expressive ends?

I set out on this journey through several material explorations as studio projects, "Stick Your Tongue Out" being the first. *Stick Your Tongue Out* is a 400-pound concrete cabinet with a twist reflecting my (literal and metaphorical) experience with inserting

childish humor into what should be quite brutal and popping a bubble on the nose of what holds power over me. To craft this cabinet, I first made a mold from foam with large blocks placed where I needed to have cavernous recesses to insert drawers later. I inserted a rebar frame that I tig-welded together into the mold to reinforce its structure. I mixed and poured concrete, lightened by the addition of empty bottles and foam. After a curing time of two weeks for the concrete, it was time to insert some whimsy. I crafted the drawer using recycled plywood that I painted with bright colors. The final step in this piece's process was standing it up (see Fig. 14).

Fig 14. Stick Your Tongue Out (and performance)

My limited knowledge about gravity led me to believe that as long as I used leverage from the ground, I— in my small stature— could raise this 400-pound block

cabinet in a gesture to reclaim my power as self and be as ridiculously defiant as possible to do this as an individual. Defiantly Resistant. Defiantly Childlike. My battle of lifting this cabinet was a physically grueling experience that turned glorious. I ultimately got it standing to open the bright and glossy plywood drawer to reveal its contents, a set of jumbo bubble wands.

Fig 15. Benchwarmer

The next project I used to explore the implementation of childlike humor to produce art objects was through finding a process that was as childish as the product. *Benchwarmer* is a sculptural bench utilizing a 12-foot log raised by a mattress spring and what appears to be a large malleable smiley face squished underneath (see Fig. 15). To make this giant squished smiley, I cast 50-pounds of plaster inside an oversized

latex balloon that I formed to fit under the log. I later carved in the smile that is permanently indented into its face. The fun— and chaotic— part of the process resides in actually mixing the plaster, transferring it into a narrow-mouthed container that can be fully sealed, inflating and stretching the balloon mouth over said narrow opening, flipping upside down, squeezing, and then waiting for the exchange of air throughout the two vessels to send the liquid plaster into the balloon… all in under the plaster curing time to allowed me to smoosh it underneath the log. The dance of running back and forth with those assisting me in a race against the clock and unsurprisingly failing, slipping in puddles of liquid plaster, bursting balloons, and then finally successful iterations exhilarated and reassured me that the process of childish failure and hopefulness is equally as productive as the "successes."

Fig 16. POWERPUFF #1

The final works I will reference are from my thesis exhibition, *POWERPUFF.* My show includes a series of digitally fabricated and hand-carved wooden mannequins wearing inflatable PVC vinyl garments to represent defense mechanisms (see Fig. 16, 17, and 18). These garments serve as a form of queer armor depicting the (sometimes futile) defense and survival mechanisms we implement in our reactions daily as "wearables." This camp-informed inflatable protective gear inflates and then slowly releases the air through the seams transforming them into gaudy garments that seem to serve no possible function.

Fig 17. POWERPUFF #2

The sounds and spatial distress created by the inflating and deflating works evoke a sense that living and thriving creatures are fueled by survival, comfort, and discomfort. The cyclical movements shift the focus from the exaggerated and glossy

garments to the rough exterior of the wooden mannequins— resembling crash dummies— wearing them. The three figures collectively represent plasticity as a defense mechanism, taking up space and giving form and collapsing and taking form. This reversal of their power in the space elicits the aforementioned affiliative behaviors Sherman asserted. The patterns, tools, and materials (Repurposed PVC Vinyl and douglas fir fence posts) I utilized in making these sculptures emphasize the necessity of resourcefulness, innovation, and general scrappiness in grappling with our individual internal struggles.

Fig 18. POWERPUFF #3

CONCLUSION

A space where fear is confronted by fantasy fosters healing; this is what I use my practice to investigate. By generating an alternative processing mechanism where stories confront painful experiences with fantastic (and maybe even snarky) creations, their comprehension is more accessible. This concept encourages us to explore a generative and expressive processing mechanism and how a childlike lens can play a role in transforming painful trajectories rather than escaping them. By surrounding oneself/the collective with— or as makers, by implementing childish and childlike processes to produce— objects that implement cuteness, sassiness, and humor as bulwarks against power and violence, one can queer the physical form of pain and present an image that reverses the power dynamic of those who perpetrate harm. This ultimately allows us to transform narratives in an effort to address the "micros" of emotional damage and care for ourselves— and one another.

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VITA

Sarah Reagan is a queer cross-disciplinary artist born August 16, 1995, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. After graduating with her BFA in Studio Arts from Iowa State University in 2017, Sarah spent three years serving as an education volunteer for the Peace Corps in Togo (2017) and Mexico (2018-2020). Following her service, she spent two years teaching and completing her master's degree at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia, receiving a Master of Fine Arts degree in Craft/Material Studies in 2022. Her work has been exhibited nationally, including at the Minneapolis International Airport, Studio Two Three in Richmond, Virginia, the Biorenewables Research Laboratory in Ames, Iowa, and City College Art Gallery in San Diego, California.