INFINITE SCROLL

IRL BRAIN ROT AND THE LURE OF THE LABUBU

In the chimerical trend that is Labubumatchadubaichocolate, nothing is ever too extra. But those who embrace the aesthetic know that the only way out is further in.

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On a recent quiet weekday morning in Manhattan, I attempted to obtain a Labubu, the cutesy monster doll that has become the biggest international toy fad since Beanie Babies in the late nineties. Collected by children as well as by adults, the dolls were created in 2015 by the Hong Kong-born designer Kasing Lung, then were brought to mass market by the Chinese toy company Pop Mart in 2019. The K-pop star Lisa started sharing her collection on social media in 2024, sparking the recent explosion. Labubus have pointed teeth, rabbitlike ears, and wide, glaring eyes. Their faces and extremities are bare; the rest of their bulbous bodies are covered in a layer of fur. The creatures are usually found hanging from phones or handbags—tiny demons haunting our accessories—or clutched as a kind of pet. They come in a menagerie of more than three hundred collectible forms. They can be matched to a personal style or mood: pink fur for when you're feeling flirty; glowing red eyes for a bit of an edge; Dress Be Latte-scarved for a cozy vibe. The high-end art fair Art Basel released a limited-edition art-handler Labubu, a batch of which sold out in twenty minutes. As a result of their popularity, Labubus are difficult to get hold of, often out of stock both online and in physical stores. That scarcity made me want one even more—perhaps those who own them knew something that I didn't. So I turned to Partea, a Union Square boba-tea café with neon-lit claw machines that are perennially well stocked with Labubu boxes. I planned to win my own tiny monster by skill.

A friend and I picked up refreshments at the counter—sparkling grape yogurt and iced green tea with vanilla mousse—and traded twenty dollars for twenty Partea tokens, which would allow us a scant four attempts at grabbing one of the Labubus stacked and grinning inside their glass cages. Though the café had just opened, we were joined by a handful of patrons, both teen-aged and adult, all hoping to win the same prize. I chose a machine, inserted tokens, and maneuvered the claw above the holographic container. (Labubus come in opaque "blind boxes," so you never know how rare of a variety you'll get.) The claw descended, grabbed hold of a box, lifted it into the air, but then dropped it. The same thing happened three more times, to my mounting frustration. (Later investigation suggested that

the claws hold tight only at random intervals, chance upon chance.) A brand-new Labubu costs around the same price as my gamble had, so I decided to cut my losses. Not a single customer won one in the time we were there. Images of Labubus beamed malevolently from their packaging, as if gloating in their unreachability.

Why did I feel the need to own one in the first place? It seemed to be an accessory of a life style that I was missing out on and already late to adopt, one constructed of physical goods that have attained intense online fandoms, status symbols that are both Instagrammable and consumable. And yet this life style seemed demarcated by objects that were ugly, strange, and uncanny. There's Dubai chocolate, a candy bar stuffed with pistachio crème and phyllo dough that oozes pea-colored mush. There's matcha lattes, bright-green, caffeinated beverages that sometimes come cut through with red strawberry syrup, resembling blood splashed on a lawn. If you don't want to drink the matcha, you can spread it on your skin, with a Matcha Facial Mud Mask, or inhale it with a matcha-flavored Flum Pebble vape. And there's Crumbl, a company that partnered with the emerging pop star Benson Boone to produce a limited-edition cookie—a lemon-and-berry-flavored confection covered in an unearthly gradient of pastel-colored frosting. There were viral coffee mugs, advertised online as carved from gleaming crystal, that turned out to be A.I.-generated scams; buyers documented their disappointment in unboxing videos on TikTok, revealing cups covered in messy resin. And, in fashion, there was the throwback trend of jelly shoes—the plasticky, translucent footwear that resembles petrified seaweed—and Gen Z-oriented labels such as Tyler McGillivary, which print fabric covered in surreally magnified plants, insects, and fungi.

These products feel hallucinatory. They take the social-media mandate of self-modification to its logical extreme, embracing easy-breezy chemical additives and image augmentation: enhancing the self until it spills from its pores. The aesthetic

is as much a defense mechanism against the internet era as it is a self-aware in-joke: We can see what late-hyper-digital-artificially-intelligent capitalism is doing to us—isn't it a laugh? "It's very unnatural-looking," the cultural critic Dean Kissick told me, describing the dominant visual style of extremely online consumerism. "It kind of relishes its own artificiality." Any pretense of the pure or organic is undercut by a kind of willful alchemy; everything is an admixture. The skin-care brand Rhode puts peptides in lip gloss; the Los Angeles-based grocery-store chain Erewhon enhances multicolored smoothies with collagen and sea moss; Touchland makes "Power Mist"-scented hand sanitizers coveted in the schoolyard by Gen Alpha; the drug and beauty brand Hers produces an Ozempic knockoff that comes in a bottle the color of matcha, as if you're injecting yourself with Japanese tea. I can hear the barista now: *Would you like a shot of semaglutide with that*? These days, memes are to be ingested into the body, not just viewed on a screen. It all reminds me of the philosopher Donna Haraway's 1985 essay "A Cyborg Manifesto," which predicted, with optimism, a looming world of monstrous machine-human hybrids in which we take "*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries"—post-gender, post-capitalism, post-biology. With that reference point, it hit me: We *are* the Labubus, grinning ecstatically amid the wreckage of our rapidly dismantling, recombinatory era. They are our unbeautiful avatars of overexposure.

We've been through preposterous toy fads before; Furbies, popular in the late nineties, were grotesquely cute and could talk back to their owners. (Labubus are now being denounced in some quarters as satanic, but Furbies were once accused of being the devil's tools, too.) This isn't the first time that online trends have leapt into the physical world; one company deemed "digital lavender" the color of the year in 2023. Millennials had our own internet-inflected mood board of life-style aspiration in the twenty-tens, comprising Instagrammable latte art, selvage denim, early iPhones, and co-working-space memberships. That era represented the ideal of integration into austere Silicon Valley culture before it grew detestable. The online trends of the current moment aren't even brand new:

Labubus have slowly accrued popularity over years, building on a culture of art toys that has particularly taken root in Asia. Dubai chocolate was created by the Dubai-based confectioner Sarah Hamouda back in 2021. Starbucks has been selling green-tea lattes since 2006. Yet these products seem to be coalescing now into a new mood board of Gen Z-and-younger life-style aspiration, representing a horizon beyond the advent of generative A.I., vanity chemical modification, and digital-first reality. The ugliness is a feature, not a bug. Just in the past month, people have taken to stringing together these signifiers into one manic phrase, *Labubumatchadubaichocolate*, as a way to refer to a broader Zeitgeist and its elaborately artificial aesthetic. It may appear nonsensical, but its nonsense has a purpose.

In *Bloomberg*, Amanda Mull connected the cultural collision to the logic of algorithmic feeds and globalization, in which the ideal brands are "engineered to be devoid of meaning." W. David Marx, the author of "Blank Space," an upcoming book on contemporary culture, observed that these memes thrive as narratives as much as they do as objects; we feel we are all but required to know about them. But I think the sheer range and density of these products, as well as their collective cohesion, has real importance beyond the level of a fad. They represent a survival kit for the ecosystem we find ourselves in, in which we must manipulate our bodies and images for the screen; tune our moods to the vicissitudes of ambient or gig-based labor; and deploy magical thinking to navigate the incomprehensibility of shifting norms.

I've been thinking of this *Labubumatchadubaichocolate* phase as IRL Brain Rot, a culture that exists physically but is incomprehensible without the internet, a set of artifacts and beliefs that adhere to the post-digital self. We change our Labubu dolls as we swap out our profile pictures; we spread ourselves with meme-born unguents as if they will imbue us with their powers of engagement. Good taste is beside the question. "Brain rot," which was the Oxford Word of the Year in 2024, refers to a set of absurdist memes and phrases recognizable only if you have spent

a lot of time on TikTok since 2020: "Skibidi Toilet," a stomach-churning animation that is being turned into a Hollywood film; "rizz," for charisma; "delulu," for delusional. Brain rot "poked fun at the oversaturation of algorithmically trending memes," Adam Aleksic, the linguist, content creator, and author of the recent book "Algospeak," told me; the phrase contains an element of self-aware critique or even inoculation. Stringing all of this vocabulary together into a sentence is a way of testifying to how online you are, evidence that you inhabit the same feed as your friends. (Aleksic has referred to especially niche combinations of memes as "microbrainrot.") Algorithms tailor to our nigh-subconscious preferences; matching with a friend expresses a kind of innate affinity, as if to say, *We live in the same reality*. The only way to react to the excess of stimulating digital content is to meet it with more excess, absorbing the onslaught and spitting it back out. One must embrace the brain rot as Oscar the Grouch does living in a trash can.

A single trendy object can't capture the breadth of an algorithmic feed, which, after all, influences what we wear, what we eat, who we interact with, and where we go. Casey Lewis, the writer of the youth trendspotting newsletter *After School*, told me, "One signifier isn't enough; it has to be all of these things together to represent not just my in-the-knowness but my personality." You can't just have the Labubu; you have to have the peptide lip gloss and the Benson Boone cookie, too. One of the laws of IRL Brain Rot is that combining memes multiplies their power. "It's fighting fire with fire," the trend forecaster Kyle Raymond Fitzpatrick told me. Some customers hack their Starbucks orders by adding pistachio syrup and chocolate cold foam to a matcha latte, creating a D.I.Y. Dubai-chocolate flavor, an off-menu item that is doubly, dementedly on trend. In practice, the dull green and cream-brown combination looks a bit like algae slime.

Brain rot has become unavoidable, its grossness ubiquitous. The medium even comes in various flavors, of which Italian brain rot might be the latest popular spin. It's a batch of folkloric characters of mysterious origin that have gone viral in

animated TikTok videos. They are computer-rendered, cartoon mashups of machine, animal, and human parts with rhyming nonsense names. Tralalero Tralala is a three-legged shark with Nike sneakers; Tung Tung Tung Sahur is a piece of wood with a human face carrying a baseball bat, perhaps with vague Ramadan-ritual symbolism. These slop monsters, seemingly products of A.I. hallucination, are also infiltrating physical space. The science-fiction novelist Bruce Sterling recently encountered Italian-brain-rot figurines for sale on the island of Mallorca in blind boxes just like Labubus. Sterling was familiar with the characters from seeing his child watch them on YouTube, and decided to buy a box. It contained a crudely manufactured toy called Boneca Ambalabu, a frog head atop a tire and human legs. It appeared to be made from a plastic mold of a 3-D-printed object, not clean and smooth like a professionally designed toy but rough, ready, and cheap, similar to the product in the crystalline-coffee-mug scam. Sterling told me that encountering the internet critter in real life struck him as a significant harbinger. "It's not brought to you by Disney; it's brought to you by Indonesian cranks on TikTok. It's very classically cyberpunk," Sterling said. He described the toy as "the camel's nose in the tent" for the sneaking of A.I. and the ugly vernacular of the internet into the unsuspecting niches of the offline world. "It's common for technological innovation to show up as toys first," Sterling said. It looks innocuous and silly, until it doesn't.

For all of the superficial commercial trends involved, IRL Brain Rot strikes me as an almost radical aesthetic movement. In recent years, it's become widely accepted that consumer culture is stuck or static, that we haven't moved past the cul-de-sac of superhero blockbusters and millennial beige. Yet the items of IRL Brain Rot attain a hyperreality (Jean Baudrillard's term for the "precession of simulacra," the fake before the real) that is inseparable from their online spawning ground. That they look shocking and offensive to gentler sensibilities is part of their strange power. "Artists are not making the visual avant-garde anymore," Dean Kissick, the cultural critic, said, referring to the traditional fine-art world. Instead, the avant-garde comes from the basement levels of the internet. Kissick recently published

an authoritative essay titled "The Vulgar Image," in *Spike* magazine, in which he documents the grotesqueries of non-fungible-token art, pixel-decayed memes, and disturbing humanoid video clips made using A.I. editing. "Bad taste is a way of standing out when there are too many images," he writes. Perhaps cultivating mutation and extra-ness is a way of resisting Silicon Valley's siren call of optimization; if you are a monstrous shape-shifter, there is no reason to be anxious about perfection. Kissick said that artifacts of IRL Brain Rot reflect a modern condition of "picturing yourself as much as an image of yourself, or representations of yourself, as the real physical self." After all, what is vanity Ozempic use but image editing for the body?

This could be a freeing thought. The embrace of mongrel style is a recognition of the fact that nothing is pure. Our bodies are full of microplastics and the residue of matcha-flavored vapes and therapeutic ketamine nose spray. Our brains are irrevocably rotted. If we have reached the rock bottom of an ecstatically meaningless culture, in which all ideas and aesthetics are simply atoms to be smashed together, their energy harvested as engagement, then the only way out is through. Ideally, as Donna Haraway would suggest, with a sense of pleasure.

THE ADORABLE GROTESQUE: We've had enough of simple beauty; the garish, the intricate, and the oversaturated are in vogue. **Labubus (1)** with neon fur and spiky teeth adorn luxury bags. **Tyler McGillivary (2)** covers brown sweatpants in mushroom caps. Nothing is too extra.

OOZE: Everything is bulbous, liquid, and uncontainable. The pistachio crème of **Dubai chocolate (3)** spills out of its geometric candy shell. The ingredients of an **Erewhon smoothie (4)** swirl together without any mixing, colors clashing ostentatiously. Maximalist **jelly sandals (5),** first created in 1979, ossify around our feet, even as they represent all that is gelatinous.

MATCHA GREEN: The color signifies caffeinated energy, insight, refinement. Maybe that's why it's being used beyond the latte, for everything from **facial mud masks (6)** to **AG1 (7)** nutrient powder to generic drugs such as **Hers Ozempic (8)**, which appears in a light-green bottle. Health used to be wealth; now wealth is health.

FAKERY: Globalized manufacturing and Gen Z "dupe" culture mean that any authentic product has a knockoff instantly available online. You could buy a fake "**Lafufu**" **(9)**, generic drugs from Hims, or the bastardized version of an **A.I.-generated Geode coffee mug (10).** Embrace the spillage of slop into the physical world.

Leaning in to IRL Brain Rot can be difficult, however. After my Labubu loss at the claw-machine café, my friend and I walked through Union Square. Venders at folding tables were selling fake Labubus ("Lafufus") with slightly more humanoid faces and added clothing accessories, but I was only interested in the genuine article. Then we noticed an advertisement for "Dubai Viral Chocolate" on the façade of a sprawling New York City souvenir shop. I figured it would be a saving grace, my chance to reclaim my internet fluency. The version on offer was not a candy bar but a kind of soupy sundae of pistachio crème, chocolate sauce (white, milk, or dark), strawberries, and a sprinkling of *knafeh*, Dubai chocolate's signature shredded phyllo dough. Matcha sauce was an option on the menu, too, but I was disappointed to discover that it was sold out. I asked the confectioner behind the counter which chocolate option she preferred. She said she usually mixes all of them together. I requested her version and watched as the ingredients piled up into a swirling green-brown-red mess, for which I paid fifteen dollars.

My friend and I took the cup to a table in the sunshine. "It looks like you dropped it on the ground on some sawdust," she said. The flavor was sickly sweet, with a goopy texture and a bare hint of pistachio. The sole respite from the cloying ooze was the strawberries, which tasted wholesome by comparison. The sundae was too foul-looking to post on Instagram, though perhaps that was the point: no one could mistake the concoction for anything but a meme sprung to life. I walked

around the rest of the day buzzing with an unfamiliar energy. Either I was plugged into the Zeitgeist, participating in the popular style of the exact cultural moment, or I had just ingested more sugar as a percentage of my body weight than I had since I was a toddler. ♦

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