Real Cute

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Essay by Matthew Shen Goodman
Images & Captions by **Simon Whybray**

The ideas and consequences of cuteness have become contentious topics in art and design. To talk about this, we gathered New York-based art writer Matthew Shen Goodman, **and London-based designer and founder of JACK댄스** Simon Whybray to offer two different perspectives.

DON'T ASSUME BB®, 2014. Sticker design for RADIO JACK 댄스 broadcast on NTS in London whose slogan is "Don't Assume."
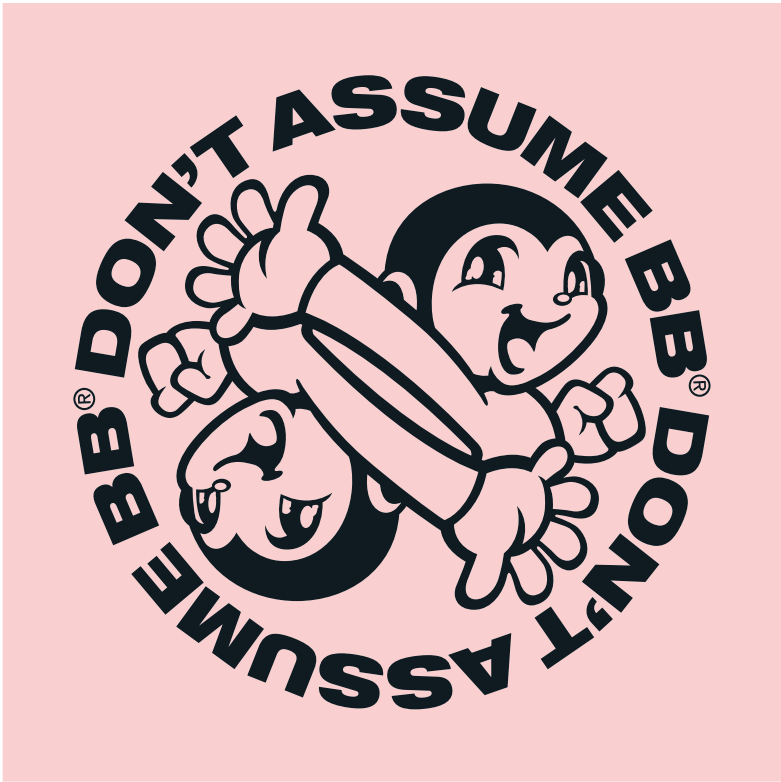
0 — Beforeimage

I almost started this with "I see a lot of white people trying to be cute," because I have noticed a number of white people—online primarily—creating specifically cute imagery, music and artworks, as well as presenting self-proclaimed personas of cuteness. Though in a world that includes Kim Kardashian's Rizzoli art book of Instagram selfies, it is increasingly difficult to even draw a distinction between producing cultural products and performing oneself.

This feels like a thing. But writing about this-as-thing and getting really specific with an exhaustive survey feels not quite right. Perhaps it's because this specific subset of cuteness is an online phenomenon, it seems to call for something more ephemeral as, say, a thumbnail on an Instagram grid, and that quick-scrolling temporality makes a mere catalogue of these images feel like an insufficient way to write about it.[01] Other reasons why it's difficult to write about this-as-thing: cultural products are generated now with such frequency that it's often difficult to pinpoint what exactly you're discussing—if you do manage to locate something specific, it seems ridiculous to have done so, for something new is always flitting about. And ultimately, why fixate on what's already old news? White cuteness is certainly a broader category than trends like seapunk or post-internet, as broad as those definitions may be, but feels still like the same family of zeitgeist. But unlike seapunk or post-internet (or normcore or punk and mod for

that matter), so eagerly spoken for in their initial stages, no one wants to come out and name "white cuteness" as a specific social moment.

This makes delineating what I mean by "I see a lot of white people trying to be cute" difficult and tedious—not only for me, but for others—as I've learned describing this essay to friends who have been generally bewildered, slightly aggravated and sometimes mocking of the fact that I'm trying to figure out something that seems too innocuous or low-stakes to merit the effort. Still, even if I struggle to articulate what "I see a lot of white people trying to be cute" means exactly, the sentiment persists.

Sometimes it persists with the intensity of a hallucination. I feel like I'm experiencing palinopsia, a visual disturbance in which your mind projects an image that, while you may have seen once, is not actually there in real time. But perhaps my brain is getting work done in advance, serving up a precognition rather than a memory and the palinopsic image is as much augur as echo. Right now aesthetics coalesce as soon as perceived and molder in public long after their critical death. Thanks to things like the pin-tumble-like-RT daisy chain, if we've seen something, or more precisely heard something, even once, we'll probably hear it again. To speak its name into the echo chamber is to make it manifest. A gentle hum becomes a saturated buzzing becomes a ghostly tinnitus whine.

1 — Real Cute

"I see a lot of white people trying to be cute" seems vague because of the possible uses of "cute" (and "white people," but more on that later). Let's say a young, white, creative class couple takes a photo of themselves trying on neon-colored Ultra Light Down jackets in the SoHo flagship of the Japanese fast fashion retailer Uniqlo. Eyes pop, brows lift, smiles form. Maybe a hand forms a V next to a face. The ideal here is looking attractive, but not sexy; young, but not pubescent. Second, third, fourth, nth-hand ideas of Asian self-presentation collide with the eliding of age we all

like to practice. The couple looks at the photo and says, "Oh, how cute." Someone else slips by, screwfaced as if sipping something saccharine, and says, "Real cute." What does that person mean by "real cute," which is obviously different than the couple's "cute"?

In *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, literary scholar Sianne Ngai writes that "cuteness solicits a regard of the commodity as an anthropomorphic being less powerful than the aesthetic subject, appealing specifically to us for protection and care."[02] Given the ambiguous dynamic between the fawning observer and the cute object, "the kind of tenderness or affection incited [...] is mixed with contempt and even a touch of disgust." If cuteness appeals by way of being unformed, childish, or fragile, there's a shrewdness to it that can seem underhanded. The cute yearns for affection so intensely that it seems to strain for it—nothing could be that perfectly cute, one thinks—and cuteness then seems performed, artificial. "Don't get cute with me," says the parent to the child acting the role of the Child.

This is a two-part conception of cuteness: One first feels compelled to care, and then tricked by such compulsion. In the second part of the reaction, it doesn't really matter if the perpetrator of cute is engaged in a self-aware performance of cuteness or passively being cute. By making the observer feel manipulated it can elicit feelings of contempt. It is this reaction that makes cuteness an interesting enough topic for Ngai, a Stanford English professor, to dedicate a third of her book to, and generally why people think and respond to cuteness beyond just mawkishly cooing.

Most often, the simple, primary response of "Oh, how cute" is what happens when one encounters cuteness. Look at the massive production of children's toys or the proliferation of dog and cat celebrities: people are happily compelled to care for cute things.[03] Some massive psychic wave of disgust has yet to crash the lulz industrial complex, and, alongside sex and violence and laughter, that primary engagement

01 Otherwise I'd simply present you with said catalogue.

02 Ngai, Sianne. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2012. Print. Pg. 60

03 Ngai, pg. 73–78

04 Though the statistics I'm citing concern art schools in the Untied States, they're arguably of a more global scope, both in terms of the New York-centric pseudo-cosmopolitanism

of the art world generally and in the very composition of the schools. As of this writing, for example, international undergrads make up 19% of RISD, 20% of SAIC, and 38% of Parsons.

of cuteness is at the heart of the click-bait economy we've acquiesced to, but love to bemoan. Imagine Youtube or Facebook or Twitter or Instagram without simple cuteness, and you have only the husk of what once was.

2a — Total Art School

When I say "I see a lot of white people trying to be cute" and make up a half-assed anecdote involving Uniqlo, that's a mean caricature of my own white friends. These white people are meant to indicate something that is half-demographic category, and half-symbolic institution. Let's be broadly, willfully facetious and call it "Art School." Think of it as art school's capital-lettered geist, however unfortunate that may be. Of course, there are people who went to art school who aren't of Art School, as there are people who did not go to art school who are of Art School.

With its ranks becoming increasingly glutted, Art School is expanding. According to artist research group BFAMFAPhD, the annual number of BFA graduates in the United States[04] has nearly tripled between 1987 and 2012, rocketing from 33,000 to 91,000 awarded per year (the MFAs have doubled, from 8,000 to 16,000).

Simon Whybray
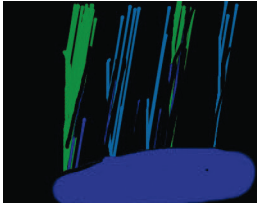
Cute is my favorite word because it's so passive and you can use it in any situation. If someone said to me, "look at this thing I designed" and I replied "Oh that's cute" it can either be dismissive as in "Oh, you tried" or enthusiastic as in "Oh, that's cute!" I self identify as cute. My Twitter bio describes myself as a "freelance cute boy." My work is cute because it's fun and clever with a quality of unknowing. There's multiple tongues in cheeks that I find really fun to play with. For example, there's nothing worse than someone who knows they're cute. If you say to someone they're cute and they reply with "Thanks, I know," then they're no longer cute.

JACK댄스
When I first started conceiving of JACK댄스, I was looking for a way to brand the kind of music my friends were making. Japanese and Korean pop are often referred to as J-Pop and K-Pop respectively. JACK is a very British name. It's a reference to the flag of the UK, the Union Jack, but also a reference to the style of dance. When designing the first poster for the event, I was looking for a symbol that said Jack and Dance,

I found that parts of the Hangul characters for dance (댄스) could be deconstructed and used to mimic the same shapes as the letters from JACK (재크). Hypothetically, someone from Korea attempting to describe the new music coming out of London could use that same naming system: J-Pop, K-Pop, UK-Pop. I imagined JACK댄스 as being a club in Korea putting on a UK-Pop night.

The JACK posters are printed on fluorescent

paper. They're cheap to print in black and white, but it comes from a very specific place. I grew up in Milton Keynes, where Sanctuary was a huge club in the mid-90s. Around town, there were a lot of very large posters for their raves, printed on fluorescent paper with big black type. Each poster would have all the names of the people playing that event, with contact details at the bottom within a reversed-out black box. I have a vague

impression of them. It's as if I just squinted at a particular genre, at the Internet, music, real life, and then just sort of regurgitated it. It's all visually based on an assumed style. It doesn't directly reference anything, it's a summation of low-fi music promotion. Again, a reference of a reference, but changing the context.

LAN
My ex-girlfriend Veronica So is an art director and editor, she used to be the

lead in my old band Teeth as well. The first issue of *LAN* was her final project at Central Saint Martins. Everyone's final project was a magazine, and she chose to do a fashion publication. I think one would describe it as if *WIRED* had made a fashion magazine, combining far far tech and fashion. I helped prepare the first and second ones for print.

After we found that pill that was featured on the cover of *LAN* issue 3, we

created this whole narrative surrounding the pill, how taking it would invert your vision which is why your tongue is going blue. You take the pill and everything you see becomes inverted. We designed all the actual content inside the magazine normally and inverted it before it went to press.

Art School is marked by cost and scarred by debt. The price of a BFA, including tuition, housing, and other expenses, hovers around two hundred thousand dollars. Though comparable to many other undergraduate degrees, this is expensive; per BFAMFAPhD's research, art schools make up seven of the ten most expensive schools in the United States, after factoring in scholarships and aid. It is also upper-echelon whiteness. BFAM-FAPhD again: while 63%[05] of the country is white, 81% of art school graduates are white. In New York, that Art School repository, the gap doubles: the city's population is 33% white, while 74% of graduates with art degrees are white.[06]

Art School does not necessarily produce artists. "Out of 2 million arts graduates nationally," BFAM-FAPhD tells us, "only 10%, or 200,000 people, make their primary earnings as working artists." This is in part because it is very difficult to make enough money making art to be identified as a working artist, especially with the added responsibility of student debt. But this also seems a misreading of Art School's aims: given what cultural production is currently, needing or wanting to identify as a working artist seems needless or conservative, not to mention critically myopic. Under late capitalism, goes the now truistic argument, everything is game for aestheticization, and everyone is game for artistry. Corporations think they're artists and artists think they're corporations (and they're both right), and "artistic" strategies are as commonplace in the office as in the studio. Art School toils for long hours in both places, and tends to revel in the increasing isomorphism of the two sites' working conditions and roles.[07] The flipside to this is the truistic notion that the border between art and non-art is incredibly porous. Art School knows art is not defined by some sort of perceptible quality like the harmonization of forms or the imbuing of artistic genius in the artwork, but instead by whatever codes and categories determined by a network of institutions says is art. Which means it's not only late capitalism that's made everything fair game,

but the historical development of the concept of art itself.[08] If Art School says it's art, it's art.

If it doesn't necessarily produce artists, Art School does produce art. Even if Art School doesn't say so—though it says so—anything that Art School does is art. This is a great boon for all of these white art students in a world where medium and disciplinary distinctions aren't so much dead as *eh*; where Red Bull runs a giant Chelsea projects gallery and Levi's charters an artist-filled cross-country train to create "happenings." Where its more important to be everywhere than to cultivate any one thing, not only because of the internet's high-volume of cultural production, but also because there's so many people going to art school and making art. Thankfully for these people, faced with hyper-competitive markets and an oversaturated labor force, Art School is able to point at things and call them art—hopefully new and novel things that have yet to be art or whose run as art has been forgotten.

How does this *suddenly-art* differ from what it was previously? As philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto wrote, "Any representation not an artwork can be matched by one that is one, the difference lying in the fact that the artwork uses the way the non-artwork presents its content to make a point about how that content is presented."[09] Art School takes up that challenge, the white art students not only making paintings, performances, and sculptures, but dance mixes, advertising concepts, music videos, energy drinks, poetry books, perfumes, philosophy tracts, and comedy routines. Those of Art School become not only artists, but consultants and polemicists and pop stars. It doesn't matter, however, if the poetry stinks, the comedy's flat, or the philosophy's sophomoric:[10] these things are firstly art, and secondly themselves, and by calling it art, Art School avoids having to answer to non-art standards. The point, repeated ad-nauseam, is that the non-artwork does not present its content as art and the artwork does, and as such there is a little asterisk next to Art School's

things and names—poetry*, DJ*, video games*—denoting "For Art School, By Art School."

Here I am echoing someone else's grousing. In his usefully grumpy "Design and Crime," Hal Foster describes "total design," what he sees as a contemporary recurrence of Art Nouveau. Practitioners of Art Nouveau attempted to imbue all things—from buildings to cutlery—with florid subjectivity in a craft-obsessed resistance to industrial reification. Foster sees the current culture of design as taking up this effort. To quote the well-known design practitioner Bruce Mau, design's work is "to wrap intelligence and culture around the product." As Foster points out, this leads to a tendency to treat things "as design construct more than an intellectual medium," a tendency

05 Statistics derived from the 2012 U.S. Census Bureau's American Community survey.

06 A statistic that also holds for those identifying as working artists.

07 That is, the sort of logic that asks whether there is really such a big difference between what you're doing at a computer on Adobe CS while chugging energy drinks at your advertising job, and what you're doing at a computer on Adobe CS while chugging energy drinks at your studio? This sort of semi-taboo category disruption becomes one-note navel gazing in the face of not having anything else to say. Or, *DIS*, what have you wrought?

08 This too is a false division.

09 Danto, Arthur C. "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art." Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981. Print. Pg. 146.

10 One should note that most of these failures are failures of different sorts of writing.

11   Art School is uncomfortable about its work being considered design, even though Art School essentially wants the same sort of maximum saturation designers have achieved. It's an anxiety betrayed by the need to continually reiterate the lack of boundaries between the art world and the commercial, whereas designers seem able to inhabit the latter without constantly talking about how crazy it is that they're doing so.

12   The unremarkable dick of a dead black boy is my art, Goldsmith seems to be saying.

13   Scanlan is an associate professor of sculpture at Yale; Kenneth Goldsmith has an endowed chair at the University of Pennsylvania, where he seems to be able to practice whatever white demonry he wants.

14   This charge is leveled by Hong at the lily-white avant-garde

of conceptual poetry, aka Messrs. Goldsmith, Perloff, and co. Replace avant-garde with Art School and the argument still holds up, however.

15   As Scanlan declared in an interview with *The New York Times*.

16   As I said, I'm not sure if I'm perceiving this before, during, or after the fact.

17   This isn't to say the second part doesn't exist, though those aren't necessarily better, often falling into a puerile sort of gross-out humor. Jon Rafman's jizz-covered hikikomori pillows come to mind. In terms of an indexical act, this is the equivalent of publicly smelling someone else's shit, pretending like you're honoring their beautiful humanity or some such, and then declaring it art so you can sell it for a fair amount of money.

accompanied by an expansion of design's reach. What exactly is to be designed, i.e., wrapped in intelligence and culture, is no longer so exact. "Everything—not only architectural projects and art exhibitions but everything from jeans to genes—seems to be regarded as so much design," Foster writes. Hence, design becomes an infinitely capacious and acquisitive category —much like what art has become.

If there is total design, there's certainly total Art School which wraps "art" around things until everything is regarded as so much art, a sort of shadow world[11] populated by the art equivalent of every non-art practice or object or representation Art School can index and embrace.

2b—Fear of Crits

While I'm shaky on "I see a lot of white people trying to be cute," I am happily behind "I see Art School being racist" The endless expansion of its shadow world gets Art School into trouble, as that expansion entails appropriation by privileged whiteness. Sometimes

what's pointed at points back. See the angry responses during the 2014 Whitney Biennial to the nesting doll of Art School indexicality that was the Donelle Woolford incident, in which white artist Joe Scanlan created a fictitious young black artist and hired an actress to perform her performing a Richard Pryor routine as part of the Biennial. More recently, consider the reactions to white conceptual poet and online art archive *Ubu-web*'s founder Kenneth Goldsmith's reading of Michael Brown's autopsy report at "Interrupt 3," a conference highlighting "text and/or as image, art and/or as language," in which Goldsmith edited the document to end on a description of Brown's "unremarkable" genitalia.[12] In print and on websites, in person and on Twitter, appropriate, real outrage meets these instances of Art School's vanguard professors[13] pointing and saying this is art.

Artist Coco Fusco writing about Scanlan and the artist collective HOWDOYOUSAYYAMIN-AFRICAN?'s (aka Yams) subsequent withdrawal from the Biennial in response to what the Yams described as the Woolford incident's "troubling model of the BLACK body and of conceptual RAPE," stressed the role of art school in all of this. Despite the institution of the art school crit—a useful but far from progressive pedagogical classroom tool for debating the merits of student work—this kind of critique seems new to art school, which tends to labor under what poet Cathy Park Hong describes as the "delusion of whiteness,"[14] or the "luxurious opinion that anyone can be 'post-identity' and can casually slip in and out of identities like a video game avatar, when there are those who are consistently, harassed, surveilled, profiled, or deported for whom they are." Fusco goes on to say that "to embark on a discussion of cultural politics or institutional racism during a crit […] would have been viewed as impinging on the absolute liberty of the artist that the institutional structures of art school, the studio, and the gallery are supposed to protect. It might be acceptable to express subjective impressions

as a person of color but an address to the context that informed race relations was viewed with suspicion." But once Art School's out of art school (i.e., the white art students have graduated), such discussions may transpire without warning. Suddenly, Art School feels besieged by outraged needling, protesting, trolling, sharp rebuking, patient debunking. "I am not racially insensitive,"[15] Art School might say. Or, in the case of Goldsmith, "My reading of [the autopsy] was powerful," as if the power of it was in question. But outrage forces Art School up against the exhaustingness of history, or statistics, or, even worse, lived experiences that look you in the eye and dare you to point and say, "that's art."

There are three ways of dealing with this:

1   Art School protests, "But the work of this art, in the sense of the work that this art does, is turning the non-artwork into an artwork." The outraged say, "So what?"

2   Art School takes up some semblance of the outraged's politics, possibly in earnest, probably in a way that comes across as inarticulate parroting or self-satisfied "allyship."

3   Art School heeds the example of others and their debacles, and wisely retreats to where they won't have to deal with any of this and no one can get angry, because, "Oh, how cute."

3—Art School Cuteness

Let's rework: "I see Art School trying to be cute." I propose that, in a climate of image saturation and novelty hunting and wanton expansion of that artwork shadow world, haunted by the creeping sense that someone somewhere might be outraged enough to call Art School out on some infraction despite the fact that Art School is just "making art," Art School, with its teeming hordes of white people, and ravenous need to wrap everything in "art," finds, has found, or will find[16] refuge in the one-part version of cute,[17] as it is much more difficult to sustain anger or prolonged critical discussion about this sort of cuteness. "We're just being cute" replaces "It's just

FIRST WATER TO TRIPOLI, 2015. Poster and gallery façade designed with Emily Jones for her solo show at Jupiter Woods gallery in South London.

It's my favorite thing that I've done recently. I did their branding and I've been doing vague identity stuff for the exhibitions—the posters or the identities for each show. We started showing an A0 poster, pasted on the front, and using

that front square as a canvas, but for this show that I wanted the whole façade of the building to be the poster. A bunch of people thought it had been vandalized, but it also didn't look real, it looked really photo-shopped. The text says "Is the mind a modular mechanism?" in Gaelic.

QT/PC MUSIC, 2014. Alex (Cook) and Sophie had found these two letterforms in a stationery shop. Before they approached me on the can design, they had laid them out in a landscape orientation in the middle of the silver can. They had a vision that happened to be silver and sparkling.

I approached it as if I was packaging a normal energy drink. I went to the corner shop and examined mainstream energy drink cans on display. It was simply trying to make it look legitimate. I certainly wasn't trying to make an aesthetic on its own. If you invert the can design, the white and

pink become black and green, like the vernacular of Monster Energy.

Eric Wrenn has since re-designed the new typography on the can. Kim Laughton did the illustration.

DRAKE NEUE REGULAR, 2015. Typeface design based on Drake's "If You're Reading This It's Too Late." Made the morning of the mixtape release to bait someone into making a generator—what I really wanted to make but lacked the skills. Rik Lomas built *ifyouretypingthisit-stoolate.com* in an hour later that day.

I like thinking about dumb stuff.

art" (or, more speciously, "it is Art") as excuse of choice.

How does Art School try to be cute? To speculate: there are some ways I can see these particular white people trying to be cute; maybe there are more. There is cuteness as yellowface, with Art School paintings replete with kawaii imagery and Sailor Moon squads, and Art School purikura booths and LINE-style sticker apps, and Art School music videos nodding to hallyu and other various Asian pop movements. This is cuteness by way of an infantilized, harmless Orient, in which Art School's attempt to claim Asian pop culture seems benign[18] because of the equivalence of Asians with cuteness, i.e. politically disempowered and fragile playthings who won't get too angry with you on Twitter. Of course, with regards to appropriation, these stakes do not quite match up to those of Scanlan or Goldsmith's acts. Relatedly, there might also be cuteness as cyberface, as Art School adopts a transhuman video game avatar sort of cuteness, which in its racial escapism—"my adorable cyborg self has no race"—manages to be even less dangerous ground to tread, though a lot of this sort of imagery is pretty racialized. Even less conceivable for Art School than a model minority uprising of Asian anger is someone getting mad because you appropriated a man-machine's culture.

The apotheosis of this might be cuteness as whiteface, which, in its perverse way, seems the ultimate panacea for Art School's woes. Whiteness acts as safe haven for those fleeing from possible recriminations of appropriation: who'd get angry with white people appropriating their own whiteness? Who'd even call it appropriation, this carefully calculated whiteness that sees your Beckys and Brads delving into Starbucks habits and Patagonia and Teva combos and happy hardcore and pop-punk and Hollister and VH1 and set and costume design from white '90s pop stars? Of course, whiteness is pretty inherently threatening to a lot of people; what's pushed then tries not to be explicitly aggressive about its whiteness—Art School isn't

repping a white nationalist neo-völkish movement, as far as I know—but relies on a caricature of implicitly white middle-class consumption habits of the past two decades that's a whiteness devoid of social responsibility or culpability, defanged, softened, made cute.

The question then becomes, is this gambit successful, especially in the case of white people in white-face? What does Art School really want from cuteness, if not the chance to point at something that doesn't point back, to wrap up the cute thing, yearning for the protective embrace in art? Of course, other people might experience the second part of cuteness, disgust rearing up at all of this straining: the boring Asian-aping, the rehashing of white adolescence, the transparent fleeing to safety.

The question then becomes, can white people ever be simply cute?

4—On Evidence

While I know more about what I mean by "I see a lot of white people trying to be cute," I realize that there's a paucity of examples in this essay. I haven't given the appropriate lure of such-and-such example to sustain anyone through the argument I've gone through, and omitting specifics operates contra the progression typical to whatever genus of cultural criticism this essay purportedly belongs—the anecdotal introduction, the laying out of evidence, the application of a theoretical framework, and the neat bow-tie of aphoristic, philo-sophical-waxing summary that makes tepid, inoffensive declara-tions about the state of things. This refusal to name names is also making a structural point that aesthetics right now exist pre- and post- their actualities, leaving you feeling certain sentiments towards something now absent or about to arrive. Either way, why bother with examples?

These are too easy and too valo-rizing ways out of backing up claims with evidence. I'm being lazy and self-satisfied with this crackpot proof I've devised. But think of reticence as a trap: Art School is a facetiously broad metaphor, after all. If one has a problem[19] with this

description of white people and art schools and cuteness because something seems inaccurate or, worse, because Art School is too facetious or too broad a metaphor to talk about white people and art school and cuteness, well, a point might have been missed.[20]

18   And often is benign—but, a) that's exactly the point, as Art School conspires to risk next to nothing because aw, cute, and b) again, when the primarily distinction being made here is that this is Art School and that is (Asian) non-art, it's offensive in its tacky laziness as much as anything else.

19   If the problem is simply that the writing is bad, that's different.

20   "You maaaaad," one might say.