Warning Concerning Copyright Restrictions

The Copyright Law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted materials. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research. If electronic transmission of reserve material is used for purposes in excess of what constitutes "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement.
This book makes a simple argument about the zany, the interesting, and the cute: that these three aesthetic categories, for all their marginality to aesthetic theory and to genealogies of postmodernism, are the ones in our current repertoire best suited for grasping how aesthetic experience has been transformed by the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism. This is because the zany, the interesting, and the cute index—and are thus each in a historically concrete way about—the system’s most socially binding processes: production, in the case of zaniness (an aesthetic about performing as not just artful play but affective labor); circulation, in the case of the interesting (an aesthetic about difference in the form of information and the pathways of its movement and exchange); and consumption, in the case of the cute (an aesthetic disclosing the surprisingly wide spectrum of feelings, ranging from tenderness to aggression, that we harbor toward ostensibly subordinate and unthreatening commodities). As sensuous, affective reflections of the ways in which contemporary subjects work, exchange, and consume (and as the cute and the zany in particular will show, in ways significantly mediated by gender, sexuality, and class), the commodity aesthetic of cuteness, the discursive aesthetic of the interesting, and the performative aesthetic of zaniness help us get at some of the most important social dynamics underlyng life in late capitalist society today. No other aesthetic categories in our current repertoire speak to these everyday practices of production, circulation, and consumption in the same direct way.¹

In this light it stands to reason that the zany, the cute, and the interesting are as ubiquitous in the postmodern literary anthology and museum
of contemporary art as they are on the Internet and television. The vertiginous zaniness of Thomas Pynchon’s fiction and Ryan Trecartin’s videos, the cuteness of Yayoi Kusama’s polka-dotted phallic pillows and Matthea Harvey’s poetic homages to domestic objects like the sugar bowl, and the “merely interesting” serial, recursive, variation-based projects of Sol LeWitt and conceptual writer Robert Fitterman are only a few examples. But although their unique reference to production, circulation, and consumption provides the best explanation for their pervasiveness, the zany, the interesting, and the cute are important for the study of contemporary culture not simply because they index economic processes, but also because they give us insight into major problems in aesthetic theory that continue to inform the making, dissemination, and reception of culture in the present. These include the implications of the increasingly intimate relation between the autonomous artwork and the form of the commodity; the complex mixture of negative as well as positive affects resulting in the ambivalent nature of many of our aesthetic experiences; the ambiguous state of the avant-garde, which in a zombielike fashion persists even as its “disappearance or impossibility” is regarded as one of postmodernism’s constitutive features; the relevance of aesthetic to critical or other nonaesthetic judgments aimed at producing knowledge (or how one is permitted to link judgments based on subjective feelings of pleasure/displeasure to ones with claims to objective truth); the future of the long-standing idea of art as play as opposed to labor in a world where immaterial labor is increasingly aestheticized; and the “merely interesting” serial, recursive, variation-based projects of Sol LeWitt and conceptual writer Robert Fitterman.

These problems are raised directly and indirectly in theoretical writings by Nietzsche, Adorno, Kant, Hegel, Derrida, and others, but they have also become central to contemporary cultural practice in ways distinctively transformed and amplified by the conditions of postmodernity. Indeed, the zany, the interesting, and the cute seem to offer ways of negotiating these problems affectively, both at the formal, objective level of style (cuteness as a sensuous quality or appearance of objects) and at the discursive, subjective level of judgment (“cute” as a feeling-based evaluation or speech act, a particular way of communicating a complex mixture of feelings about an object to others and demanding that they feel the same).

The zany, the cute, and the interesting are linked to major representational practices that span across different media: comedy, in the case of the zany; romance, in the case of the cute; realism, in the case of the interesting. They are also linked to specific texts that have made it widely, if not always, easy to see how the commodity aesthetics issue for twentieth-century poetry, by way of early twentieth-century poetry in alms, is thus part of a larger cultural phenomenon, which she also acerbically refers to as the “art of cat and flowerpot.” For Arendt, this is thus part of a larger cultural phenomenon, which she also acerbically refers to as the “art of cat and flowerpot.” For Arendt, the object’s charm is powerful enough to be “in an act of automatic mimesis similar to the ‘body genres’ (horror, melodrama, and so on) that Williams notes, compel their audiences to imitate the performances they see on screen), the admiring of the object’s charm is powerful enough to be “in an act of automatic mimesis similar to the ‘body genres’ (horror, melodrama, and so on) that Williams notes, compel their audiences to imitate the performances they see on screen), the admiring of the object’s charm is powerful enough to be ‘in an act of automatic mimesis similar to the ‘body genres’ (horror, melodrama, and so on) that Williams notes, compel their audiences to imitate the performances they see on screen), the admiring of the object’s charm is powerful enough to be.”

Revolving around the desire for an affectively expressive relation to objects already regarded as commodities, the act of consumption, and the object of cuteness; information, the circulation, and the bourgeois public sphere; performance, affective labor, and the postmodern idea of contemporary zaniness). By calling for
ure on the Internet and television. The
Pynchon's fiction and Ryan Trecartin's
Sama's polka-dotted phallus pillows and
ences to domestic objects like the sugar bowl,
ial, recursive, variation-based projects of
Robert Fitterman are only a few exam­
ple. Reference to production, circulation, and
explanation for their pervasiveness, the
are important for the study of contem­
they index economic processes, but also
major problems in aesthetic theory that
implications of the increasingly intimate
us artwork and the form of the commod­
~ative as well as positive affects resulting
any of our aesthetic experiences; the am­
which in a zombielike fashion persists
mposibility" is regarded as one of post­
; the relevance of aesthetic to critical or
med at producing knowledge (or how one
based on subjective feelings of pleasure/
to objective truth); the future of the long­
opposed to labor in a world where imma­
tically "irrelevant," which she links to the decay of a genuinely public
culture: “What the public realm considers irrelevant can have such an
extraordinary and infectious charm that a whole people may adopt it as
their way of life, without for that reason changing its essentially private
character” (52). Yet as Arendt herself concedes, the cute/irrelevant ob­
ject's charm is powerful enough to be “infectious,” to a point at which,
in an act of automatic mimesis similar to that induced by film’s sensational
“body genres” (horror, melodrama, and pornography, which, as Linda
Williams notes, compel their audiences to reenact the screams, sobs, and
orgasms they see on screen), the admirer of the cute puppy or baby often
ends up unconsciously emulating that object’s infantile qualities in the
language of her aesthetic appraisal. We can thus see why Adorno makes
such a point in “Lyric Poetry and Society” of singling out poems that de­
part from the genre’s more representative “delight in things close at hand”
in order to resist the bourgeois subject’s desire to “reduce [them] to objects
of fondling.”

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

and thinking as well as specific limitations on these capacities—a noticeably weaker or cooler version of curiosity, in the case of the interesting; an unusually intense and yet strangely ambivalent kind of empathy, in the case of the cute—they also play to and help complete the formation of a distinctive kind of aesthetic subject, gesturing also to the modes of intersubjectivity that this aesthetic subjectivity implies. Since cute things evoke a desire in us not just to lovingly molest but also to aggressively protect them, modern poetry might be regarded as cute in another problematic sense. The smallness of most poems in comparison with novels and films, in which the proportion of quotable component to the work as a whole (the paragraph or the shot sequence) is always substantially lower, has made poetry the most aggressively copyright protected of all the genres and thus in a certain sense the genre most aggressively protected from criticism, since anyone wanting to refer directly to the language he or she is analyzing will often have to pay a substantial fee. Susan Stewart’s wry caveat in the preface and acknowledgments of *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (“Like anyone who writes on poetic forms, I have been restricted ... by the availability of permissions for reproduction”) will thus be familiar to any critic who has tried to write on the genre that copyright laws have indirectly helped define as unusually “tender” speech. Poetry’s complicated and ambivalent relation to an aesthetic that celebrates the diminutive and vulnerable becomes all the more problematic in the case of the avant-garde, which has historically defined itself in opposition to everything for which cuteness stands. Yet as reflected in experimental texts ranging from Gertrude Stein’s tribute to lesbian domesticity in *Tender Buttons* to Harryette Mullen’s homage to its sections on “Objects” and “Food” in her explorations of the language of women’s fashion and groceries in *Trimmings* and *SPeRM**K*T, it is clear that the avant-garde has had as much stake in the issues raised by this aesthetic of familiar “small things” as it has had in the powerful experiences of shock, rarity, and/or estrangement that we more readily associate with its projects. The cuteness avant-garde poetry finds itself grappling with thus gives us surprising leverage on the ambiguous status of the contemporary avant-garde in general, and on the closeness between the artwork and the commodity. For it is not just that cuteness is an aesthetic oriented toward commodities. As Walter Benjamin implies, something about the commodity form itself already seems permeated by its sentimentality: “If the soul of the commodity which Marx occasionally mentions in jest existed, it would be the most empathetic ever encountered in the realm of souls, for it would have to see in everyone the buyer in whose hand and house it wants to nestle.”

If the commodity aesthetic of cuteness is co-detachment Friedrich Schlegel attributed to the romantic agenda calling for literature to be eclectic difference and novelty embrace, conceptual art and its aesthetic of informality connected to the relatively small surprise of an already existing norm, the interesting marks and the already known and is generally linked to the new genre of bourgeois *dérive* novel by Schlegel and Henry James. It tends to promote a general “indiscriminate” tag trenchantly notes that the practice of the interesting thus has a surprising pedigree. It has become clear that there is no such thing as a bad photo, the reason why photography continues to be one of the modern aesthetic’s most flourishing forms. Its limitless production of notes on reality or comparable to others of its kind, the language of ordinary/everyday peering in different ways to successive Theodore Dreiser to Alain Robbe-Grillet. From Schlegel on “die interessante Poet’s theory that the other aesthetic categories find one of the modern aesthetic’s most
limitations on these capacities—a notice­club of curiosity, in the case of the interesting;
gangly ambivalent kind of empathy, in lay to and help complete the formation
subject, gesturing also to the modes of
subjectivity implies.8

in us not just to lovingly molest but also
lern poetry might be regarded as cute in
smallness of most poems in comparison
proportion of quotable component to
graph or the shot sequence) is always sub­the most aggressively copyright protected
tertain sense the genre most aggressively yone wanting to refer directly to the lan­often have to pay a substantial fee. Susan
pace and acknowledgments of Poetry and yone who writes on poetic forms, I have
bility of permissions for reproduction”) who has tried to write on the genre that
lped define as unusually “tender” speech.9
ivalent relation to an aesthetic that cele­beams becomes all the more problematic
which has historically defined itself in
which cuteness stands. Yet as reflected in a Gertrude Stein’s tribute to lesbian do­larryette Mullen’s homage to its sections
explorations of the language of women’s
ings and S*PeRM**K*T, it is clear that
ch stake in the issues raised by this aes­as it has had in the powerful experiences
ment that we more readily associate with
garde poetry finds itself grappling with
on the ambiguous status of the contem­and on the closeness between the artwork
just that cuteness is an aesthetic oriented
Benjamin implies, something about the
ems permeated by its sentimentality: “If
h Marx occasionally mentions in jest ex­asmatic ever encountered in the realm of
n everyone the buyer in whose hand and

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

From Schlegel on “die interessante Poesie” to James on the novel, the
interesting thus has a surprising pedigree in high literary criticism and
theory that the other aesthetic categories in this study lack.18 Indeed, we
find one of the modern aesthetic’s most uncompromising advocates in
Doctor Faustus, Thomas Mann’s postwar novel of ideas based on Adorno’s theoretical writings on music (including atonal music). As Mann’s Schoenberg-like composer puts it, explicitly pitting the aesthetic of the interesting over and against what he disparagingly calls “animal warmth”: “Law, every law, has a chilling effect, and music has so much warmth anyhow, stable warmth, cow warmth, I’d like to say, that she can stand all sorts of regulated cooling off.”19 Adrian Leverkühn’s theory of a modern art coolly “regulated” by rational principles (much like the dialogue-driven “novel of ideas” itself) not only looks forward to the antigestural, systems-based art of the 1960s but also directly echoes the praise of the interpenetration of art and theory, and the advocacy of detachment over enthusiasm as the proper artistic and critical attitude, promoted by Schlegel and other theorists of the “interessante” in eighteenth-century Germany. Indeed, Leverkühn’s way of justifying his preference for his coolly regulated aesthetic, “Art would like to stop being pretence and play, it would like to become knowledge,” calls for the same rapprochement between art and science pursued by Schlegel in conjunction with his advocacy of “interesting” modern poetry: “The more poetry becomes science, the more it also becomes art. If poetry is to become art, if the artist is to have a thorough understanding and knowledge of his ends and means . . . then the poet will have to philosophize about his art.”20

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

More specifically, as an effort to reconcile the idiosyncratic with the systemic, the interesting has been associated with genres with an unusual investment in theory. If, as Amanda Anderson suggests, the “novelistic tradition, especially in its more intellectually ‘interested in the relation between live theory,” we can see why James Maynard proposes the proper aesthetic standard for this discussion “imagining the rigorous critique of life; mediating between the moral life and the logical or historical view of community; relation between existence and doctrine, tension between life and theory is perhaps innovation, free indirect discourse, and third-person perspectives respectively a socially minded moral participant” and precisely this tension between individual interesting and explains why it also platitudinous art, a body of work similarly preoccupied with individuation and status, exploring the tension between “excessive clenches between perceptual and conceptual, Epstein argues, the judgment of “interesting the gap between reason and surprise, at least and extending the limits of rationality.”

In contrast to the rational coolness of nonstop acting or doing that is zaniness and bothered, hot to trot. Highlighting of an unusually beset agent, these idiosyncrasy as the only aesthetic category in relation to playing that seems to be on brought out by the post-Fordist, service like Lucille Ball in I Love Lucy and Ric more specifically evokes the performance of affects and social relationships—able the distinction between work and performing under what Luc Boltanski “connexionist” spirit of capitalism: the c
s postwar novel of ideas based on Ador- 
ic (including atonal music). As Mann's 
explicitly pitting the aesthetic of the in- 
the disparagingly calls “animal warmth”: 
effect, and music has so much warmth 

19 Adrian Leverkühn’s theory of a mod- 

only looks forward to the antigestural, 

and critical attitude, promoted by Schle- 

interestante” in eighteenth-century Ger-

of justifying his preference for his coolly 
nice, “calls for the same rapprochement 
by Schlegel in conjunction with his ad- 

“Cool Art” of the 1960s, the decade’s 

“characterized by calculation, imper- 

seemingly lighthearted but strikingly vehement aesthetic, in which the 

potential for injury always seems right around the corner, are thus most 

sharply visible in the arts of live and recorded performance—dance, Happenings, walkabouts, reenactments, game shows, video games—and in 
the arts of rhythm and movement in particular. Yet as I argue in Chapter 3, 
“The Zany Science,” contemporary zaniness is an aesthetic more explicitly 
about the politically ambiguous convergence of cultural and occupational 
performing under what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello call the new “connexionist” spirit of capitalism: the dominant ideology of a capitalism
that has absorbed and adjusted to the "artistic critique" of the 1960s—but also, as Nancy Fraser stresses, the second-wave feminist critique of the gendered division of labor—by now encouraging workers, through a rhetoric of "networking," to bring their abilities to communicate, socialize, and even play to work. Yet for all its essentially performative nature, zaniness is by no means exclusive to the performing arts. From Ishmael Reed to Kathy Acker to Shelley Jackson, or John Ashbery to Bruce Andrews to Flarf, so much of "serious" postwar American literature is zany that one reviewer's description of Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* as a "staccato burst of verbal star shells, pinwheel phrases, [and] cherry bombs of... puns and wordplays" seems applicable to the bulk of the post-1945 canon.

What type of aesthetic subject, with what capacities for feeling, knowing, and acting, does this ludic yet noticeably stressful style address? The relation between the objects zaniness refers to and the kind of subject it implies or speaks to seems more complicated than in the case of other aesthetic experiences. To find an object interesting is obviously for the subject to feel interest—and often, under her compulsion to share or publicize that feeling, the first step in activating interest in other subjects as well. Similarly, cuteness prompts an inadvertent mashing or "cutification" of the language of the judging subject, turning her speech into murmurs and coos that recall the "oo-intensive names" of the cute snack cakes in David Foster Wallace's story "Mister Squishy." This verbal mimesis of the object on the part of the subject reflects how cuteness always "entails a structure of identification, wanting to be like the cute—or more exactly, wanting the cute to be just like the self." But zaniness does not seem to call forth a subjective response in any way mimetic of itself. This lack of accord between aesthetic subject and object seems all the more surprising given zaniness's unique history as a style explicitly about mimetic behavior. Once deployed in the English language as a verb (a rare thing for most aesthetic categories), "zany" designated an activity or practice of imitating the actions of others long before it became the name of an objective attribute or quality. One might therefore expect our encounters with this aesthetic of action to be all the more infectious. Yet there is something strained, desperate, and precarious about the zany that immediately activates the spectator's desire for distance. In fact, what is most striking about zaniness is how the image of dangerously strenuous activity it projects often seems designed to block sympathy or identification as a subjective response. Think here of the "zany Paraclete" in the Jacobean revenge play described as a "Road Runner cartoon in blank verse" in the middle of *The Crying of Lot 49*: a character whose escalatingly violent and yet strangely and spectacularly redundant insertion of a character's head into a box, stabbing him, pouting with pincers, brandishing it on a rapier, and setting it on fire. Much as we might admire the actors' performances, zanies are not persons whose discrepancy is the direct source of biting. The *Cable Guy* (Columbia Pictures, 1996) is a film about a zany whose efforts to become the real person behind the credits of the networks become increasingly agonizing. The person one by definition wants as near a phantasmatically crushing, smothering, "Squishy" snack cake, the zany object or person to whom we do in fact enjoy it or her—at a safe distance. In addition to precarious situations, around our experience of a zany character there is something unusual. Although all aesthetic categories have specific affective and/or cognitive types of aesthetic subjectivity (and usually, although they are very different from the act of calling a representation of a real or imaginary action to once functioning as a verb, "zany" is a word whose repertoire that continues to be used charged with the affective task of activating as it was, "a character." We can thus speak of a way in which it is not possible to speak of a specific aesthetic subject as "a character." We can thus speak of a way in which it is not possible to speak of a specific aesthetic subject as "a character." We can thus speak of a way in which it is not possible to speak of a specific aesthetic subject as "a character." We can thus speak of a way in which it is not possible to speak of a specific aesthetic subject as "a character." We can thus speak of a way in which it is not possible to speak of a specific aesthetic subject as "a character." We can thus speak of a way in which it is not possible to speak of a specific aesthetic subject as "a character." We can thus speak of a way in which it is not possible to speak of a specific aesthetic subject as "a character." We can thus speak of a way in which it is not possible to speak of a specific aesthetic subject as "a character." We can thus speak of a way in which it is not possible to speak of a specific aesthetic subject as "a character." We can thus speak of a way in which it is not possible to speak of a specific aesthetic subject as "a character." We can thus speak of a way in which it is not possible to speak of a specific aesthetic subject as "a character." We can thus speak of a way in which it is not possible to speak of a specific aesthetic subject as "a character." We can thus speak of a way in which it is not possible to speak of a specific aesthetic subject as "a character." We can thus speak of a way in which it is not possible to speak of a specific aesthetic subject as "a character." We can thus speak of a way in which it is not possible to speak of a specific aesthetic subject as "a character." We can thus speak of a way in which it is not possible to speak of a specific aesthetic subject as "a character." We can thus speak of a way in which it is not possible to speak of a specific aesthetic subject as "a character." We can thus speak of a way in which it is not possible to speak of a specific aesthetic subject as "a character." We can thus speak of a way in which it is not possible to speak of a specific aesthetic subject as "a character." We can thus speak of a way in which it is not possible to speak of a specific aesthetic subject as "a character."
to the “artistic critique” of the 1960s—
chastic critique of the performances, zanies are not persons we imagine befriending. This discrepancy is the direct source of both the comedy and the pathos of The Cable Guy (Columbia Pictures, 1996), a film about a postindustrial zany whose efforts to become the real friend of the client he helps plug into networks become increasingly aggressive. If the cute object or person is one we by definition want as near to us as possible (to the point of phantasmatically crushing, smothering, or even eating it/her, like a “Mister Squishy” snack cake), the zany object or person is one we can only enjoy—if we do in fact enjoy it or her—at a safe or comfortable distance.

In addition to precarious situations, zaniness always seems to revolve around our experience of a zany character, which also makes it relatively unusual. Although all aesthetic categories invoke human agents endowed with specific affective and/or cognitive dispositions, these references to types of aesthetic subjectivity (and usually to ourselves in the first person) are very different from the act of calling up an objectified, third-person representation of a real or imaginary agent. It is telling here that in addition to once functioning as a verb, “zany” is the only aesthetic category in our repertoire that continues to be used as a noun, referring to the person charged with the affective task of activating our sense of humor by being, as it were, “a character.” We can thus speak of “the zany” or of “a zany” in a way in which it is not possible to speak of “a cute” or “a beautiful.”

Zaniness more specifically calls up the character of a worker whose particularity lies paradoxically in the increasingly despecified nature of his or her labor. True to the aesthetic’s dramatic history in commedia dell’arte, Pynchon’s zany is a servant or “administrative assistant,” usually flexible or capable of fluidly switching from task to task; Jim Carrey’s cable guy is an all-around service provider (and, as his client is shocked to discover, a provider of a variety of affective and social networking services other than cable); Ball’s Lucy is a housewife and would-be actor who, from one episode to the other, ends up taking on hundreds of different jobs. The specific jobs that these postwar zanies hold thus demand that they be able to take on virtually any job at any moment, in an incessant flow or stream of activity. This increasingly despecified relation to working is particularly characteristic of the growing informality of late twentieth-century postindustrial work (the cultural correlate of the economic casualization of labor), but it also defines the ideal worker of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism described by Marx: the

strangely and spectacularly redundant actions include his shoving a courtier’s head into a box, stabbing him, poisoning him, tearing his tongue out with pincers, brandishing it on a rapier, and setting the impaled tongue on fire.30 Much as we might admire the affective and physical virtuosity of their performances, zanies are not persons we imagine befriending. This

with what capacities for feeling, knowl-
not noticeably stressful style address? The
ness refers to and the kind of subject it
complicated than in the case of other
object interesting is obviously for the
under her compulsion to share or pub-
a activating interest in other subjects as
an inadvertent mashing or “cutification”
object, turning her speech into murmurs
insive names” of the cute snack cakes in
ister Squishy.”28 This verbal mimesis of
effect reflects how cuteness always “entails
being to be like the cute—or more exactly,
self.”29 But zaniness does not seem to
any way mimetic of itself. This lack of
and object seems all the more surprising
as a style explicitly about mimetic be-
dish language as a verb (a rare thing for
" designated an activity or practice of
thing before it became the name of an ob-
might therefore expect our encounters
all the more infectious. Yet there is some-
carious about the zany that immediately
r distance. In fact, what is most striking
of dangerously strenuous activity it proj-
sympathy or identification as a subjec-
zany Paraclete” in the Jacobean revenge
ner cartoon in blank verse” in the middle
acter whose escalatingly violent and yet
Our aesthetic categories are perpetual temp, extra, or odd-jobber—itinerant and malleable—for whom all labor is abstract and homogeneous.

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

While certain kinds of work have always been affective—women’s paid and unpaid caring work in the household, and jobs in the services sector implicitly or explicitly based on that work, such as health care, retail, and teaching—post-Fordist zaniness points to the increasing emotionalization of work in general, a phenomenon now well documented by an increasingly diverse group of sociologists, economists, and activists. For all their playfulness and commitment to fun, the zany’s characters give the impression of needing to labor excessively hard to produce our laughter, straining themselves to the point of endangering not just themselves but also those around them. Yet as I have been noting, zaniness forecloses identification with the workers in precarious situations it evokes. This foreclosure can be potentially felt as disquieting and adds an additional layer to the aesthetic’s appeal, given the fact that late capitalist subjects, fictions, and sociability to and of labor (including that of gender) are often conditioned to work that this aesthetic renders the zany’s distinctive mix of displeasure and projection of a character exerting herself at a job, but also from the way in which our aversion to that character. Although the deepest level about work helps aesthetic’s remarkably longstanding appearance to the present, the aesthetic has been transformed by the post-Fordist reorientation of the workplace toward the production of “productive subjectivity” (which, as Rose notes, makes strategic use of “all the techniques of the self . . . invented within the therapeutic culture of the 1960s”), late twentieth-century workers in the United States and elsewhere have found themselves working more intensively and for longer hours for equal or shrinking wages—a trend across (though with differing impacts within) a number of occupational and class divisions.

The zany, the cute, and the interesting subject are examples of how aesthetic subjectivity, or the way in which aesthetic subjectivities are constituted, changes the way we think about work and the nature of work itself. In doing so, they are often used to justify or support particular forms of labor, such as the use of affective labor in the service sector. The zany, for example, is often used to justify the exploitation of workers in the service industry, as it is seen as a form of entertainment that helps to mask the reality of exploitation. This can be seen in the way that the zany is often used to justify the low wages and long hours of work that are common in the service industry.

In conclusion, the zany, the cute, and the interesting subject are all examples of how aesthetic subjectivity is used to justify and support particular forms of labor. By understanding the way in which aesthetic subjectivity is used to justify particular forms of labor, we can begin to challenge the ways in which they are used to exploit workers and to create greater solidarity among workers.
ber—iterant and malleable—for whom
character haunts our experiences of zani-
ness is its way of evoking a situation
or injury—a feeling that could not exist
or be implicit, to a being whom that harm
zaniness in particular suggests that
under prevailing conditions—the cons-
sideration of labor, the creeping extent-
dly decline in real wages—is to put oneself
in that situation. This can be all the more so
productivity, efficiency, and content-
less in terms of the “objective exigencies
process (levels of light, hours of work,
of “subjective attitudes” about work on
as Rose argues, these “subjectivized” im-
forth of ideology”; they have fundamen-
ization of the late twentieth-century
es as well as offices) and thus the qualitative
work itself. In tandem with this post-
place toward the production of “pro-
Rose notes, makes strategic use of “all
vented within the therapeutic culture of
y workers in the United States and else-
working more intensively and for longer
ges—a trend across (though with differ-
class divisions.34
have always been affective—women’s
the household, and jobs in the services
used on that work, such as health care,
st zaniness points to the increasing emo-
, a phenomenon now well documented
of sociologists, economists, and activ-
commitment to fun, the zany’s charac-
ting to labor excessively hard to produce
es to the point of endangering not just
them. Yet as I have been noting, zani-
the workers in precarious situations it
potentially felt as disquieting and adds an
additional layer to the aesthetic’s already complex negativity. Indeed,
given the fact that late capitalist subjects increasingly asked to put their
affects, subjectivity, and sociability to work across preexisting divisions
of labor (including that of gender) are increasingly likely to share the re-
relationship to work that this aesthetic category indexes, one wonders if
the zany’s distinctive mix of displeasure and pleasure stems not only from
its projection of a character exerting herself to extreme lengths to perform
a job, but also from the way in which it immediately confronts us with
our aversion to that character. Although the argument that zaniness is at
the deepest level about work helps account for this savagely playful aes-
thetic’s remarkably longstanding appeal to audiences from the sixteenth
century to the present, the aesthetic hardly solicits a sense of workerist
solidarity. Indeed, by turning the worker’s beset, precarious condition into
a spectacle for our entertainment, zaniness flatters the spectator’s sense of
comparative security, thus hailing her as a kind of phantasmagoric man-
ger or implicit owner of the means of production. Yet the experience
of zaniness ultimately remains unsettling, since it dramatizes, through
the sheer out-of-controlness of the worker/character’s performance, the
easiness with which these positions of safety and precariousness can be
reversed.

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

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

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

The ideology of the performative aesthetic of zaniness is thus by no means straightforward. And cuteness, for its part, is by no means an unequivocal celebration of the commodity form, even if it does undeniably "graft commodity desire onto a middle-class structure of familial, expressly maternal emotion." Since consumption is the activity in which one realizes a commodity's use-value, for Marx it technically belongs outside economics proper, "except in so far as it reacts in turn upon the point of departure and initiates the whole process anew." Cuteness, an adoration of the commodity in which I want to be as intimate with or physically close to it as possible, thus has a certain need to inhabit a concrete, qualitative abstract exchange. There is thus a sense is as much a way of resisting the logi on the idea of the "absolute commons symptomatic reflection of it." Finally, political on first squint than the interes on linking aesthetic judgments to nonaments of a political nature.

The aesthetic categories in this study social competences increasingly encro past half century: affect and emotion on communication, in the case of the case of the cute. Perhaps as a result of these generic competences by capital on the idea of the "absolute commons symptomatic reflection of it." Finally, political on first squint than the interes on linking aesthetic judgments to nona.
before it can be considered as a preference stood as a contradiction with other inter- 
of a person, a tribe or a state—is [already] the cute, and the interesting refer to so-
et highly abstract ways that their mean-
al. On first glance, zaniness seems purely ideology of late capitalism, including tical ways of meeting the imperative to O Yet for all its spectacular displays of zaniness is more often than not destruc-
g zaniness of recent queer performance, i and Herb, Felix Bernstein—is all the marks a specific deviation from camp np's failure, dramatizing the conditions s own limits. To be sure, zaniness and two styles of performing have much in occasionally used to augment or amplify volves a “glorification of character” and aesthetic. As Sontag notes, “things are d—but when we become less involved of be frustrated by, the failure of the a “revaluation of failure, of a cultural missed its mark, tragically or poignantly np thus converts the pain of failure and zaniness highlights its own inability to ad frenzy of its besieged performers, due which they are constantly thrust, point to ionic detachment is not an option.46 marks a set of conditions under which sure fails.

e aesthetic of zaniness is thus by no ness, for its part, is by no means an-unmodity form, even if it does under-
to a middle-class structure of familial, once consumption is the activity in which rae, for Marx it technically belongs out-
so far as it reacts in turn upon the point le process anew.”48 Cuteness, an adora-
want to be as intimate with or physically close to it as possible, thus has a certain utopian edge, speaking to a de-
sire to inhabit a concrete, qualitative world of use as opposed to one of abstract exchange. There is thus a sense in which the fetishism of cuteness is as much a way of resisting the logic of commodification—predicated on the idea of the “absolute commensurability of everything”—as it is a symptomatic reflection of it. Finally, although nothing seems more apolitical on first squint than the interesting, we will soon see how its conceptual indeterminacy makes it the one category in our repertoire best suited for linking aesthetic judgments to nonaesthetic judgments, including judgments of a political nature.

The aesthetic categories in this study thus refer to basic human and social competences increasingly encroached on by capitalism over the past half century: affect and emotion, in the case of zaniness; language and communication, in the case of the interesting; intimacy and care, in the case of the cute. Perhaps as a result of the increasing subsumption of these generic competences by capital, the economic processes these aesthetic categories index have also become increasingly intertwined. Indeed, each category indexes a specific conflation of one process with another. Post-Fordist zaniness, for example, points to how taste-driven consumer practices, including playful aesthetic ones, have become systematically integrated into the production process; a development famously allego-
’s failure, dramatizing the conditions e, for Marx it technically belongs out-
so far as it reacts in turn upon the point le process anew.”48 Cuteness, an adora-
vant to be as intimate with or physically
our aesthetic categories

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

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

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

History

However suited for the investigation of contemporary aesthetic problems, the aesthetic categories in this study are not exclusive to the late twentieth or twenty-first centuries. Nor are their genealogies exactly contemporaneous. Deriving from commedia dell’arte’s stock character of the zanni, an itinerant servant modeled after peasants seeking temporary work in wealthy Venetian households, zaniness has a history that stretches back to the sixteenth-century division of labor of what is now Italy. Two hundred years later, the rise of a bourgeois public sphere marked the transition of printed matter, Schlegel, and some of the other romantic ironists felt compelled to champion the beauty of the beautiful literaturanew systems of transport and communication, and the rise of mass markets and advertising media dell’arte to the zany sitcom of the world, from the novel to the attempt to marry art and cursive, merely interesting” conceptually. The aesthetic categories in this study have spread and significantly across both mass cultural centuries. But only in the late twentieth
The poetics of combination and permuta- 
rious or compulsive doing (zany), and 
with cookies, dogs, and socks (cute), to 
the zany blogs, cute tweets, and inter- 
passage from One-Dimensional Man, 
ving how the violent fun and games of 
sorting properties of the cute, and the 
of the interesting can be strategically 
et the subjectivity of one of the world’s 

limits—it arranges games with death and 
work, and strategic importance mix in re- 
D Corporation, which unites scholarship, 
and the good life, reports such games in 
"RANDom News," volume 9, number 1, 
THAN SORRY. The rockets are rattling, 
ace-flights are flying, and the problem is 
see world." . . . Here "devices like RAND’s 
ure into which they come . . . is a picture 
up, missiles merely symbols [long live the 
d wars just [just] plans and calculations 
picture, RAND has transfigured the world 
, and one can relax—the "military plan-
xperience without risk."53 

of absolving cuteness," further defused 
ional language of plans and calculations, 
a zany/fun "game"; as both RAND and 
etic categories in this study clearly have 
yed here in a explicit effort to do noth-
 of subjects to a postmodern geopoliti- 

of contemporary aesthetic problems, 
dy are not exclusive to the late twenti-
ure their genealogies exactly contempo-
dell’arte’s stock character of the zanni, 
peasants seeking temporary work in 
ness has a history that stretches back to 

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

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

In addition to being emergent, gestaltlike qualities that we can attribute to objects of various scales (an individual work like Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* may be zany, but so is the genre of Dada cabaret), vernacular aesthetic categories are widely distributed across time and space, locatable in superstructural crannies too copious and diverse to enumerate. Although the cute, the zany, and the interesting are no less historical than any of the other concepts or categories used by critics to classify and interpret cultural products (“baroque,” “postmodern,” “novel,” and so on), from the standpoint of the historicism that has dominated literary and cultural studies over the past three decades, they will inevitably prove slipperier simply because they operate across much longer spans of time and across much wider swaths of culture. This book focuses on the peculiar dominance of these three aesthetic categories in the late twentieth century and the present. Yet the rise of the interesting as an aesthetic of information and as the “styleless” style of the distributed-media, often photography- and language-based work of conceptual artists in the 1960s and 1970s can be properly understood only if it is traced back to its significance for nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century theorists of the novel, an art form similarly perceived as “discourse that is not worked into any special or unique style” and thus as a fundamentally miscellaneous genre—an assortment of “memories and archives, our travels and fantasies … the interesting characters we have met and above all, the interesting character who is inevitably oneself (who isn’t interesting?)”—embodies the pluralism of the literary marketplace. The centrality of the interesting to the genre viewed as the “end of genre,” and perhaps above all to the substantial theoretical/critical discourse that came to surround it, is thus crucial for understanding its later importance for generically hybrid postmodern art and for the marriage of art and theory in the mixed-media forms of conceptual art in particular. Similarly, the historical uniqueness of late capitalist zaniness becomes fully legible only if we take account of how this performative aesthetic’s conflation of role play and affective labor, already prefigured in the zanni’s way of bridging the worlds of cultural performance and service work, gets mulled over by Nietzsche as a problem for the philosophy of art in *The Gay Science*, a late nineteenth-century work of aesthetic theory written in an aggressive, fast-paced, overheated style as arguably zany in its own way as an episode of *I Love Lucy.*
side one another as part of a single rep-
transformation in the meaning and
in general.

gestaltlike qualities that we can attri-
(anonymous work like Alfred Jarry's
the genre of Dada cabaret), vernacular
distributed across time and space, locat-
too copious and diverse to enumerate.
the interesting are no less historical than
categories used by critics to classify and in-
ue, "postmodern," "novel," and so on),
icriticism that has dominated literary and
ree decades, they will inevitably prove
erate across much longer spans of time

culture. This book focuses on the pecu-
aesthetic categories in the late twentieth
rise of the interesting as an aesthetic of
style of the distributed-media, often
work of conceptual artists in the 1960s
stood only if it is traced back to its sig-
early twentieth-century theorists of
ceived as "discourse that is not worked
and thus as a fundamentally miscella-
memories and archives, our travels and
acters we have met and above all, the
ably oneself (who isn't interesting?"
—
marketplace. The centrality of
ed as the "end of genre," and perhaps
tical/critical discourse that came to sur-
standing its later importance for generi-
for the marriage of art and theory in the
art in particular. Similarly, the histori-
anness becomes fully legible only if we
native aesthetic's conflation of role play-
d in the zanni's way of bridging the
and service work, gets mulled over by
philosophy of art in The Gay Science, an
esthetic theory written in an aggressive,
ually zany in its own way as an episode

Thinking in the way the analysis of an aesthetic category demands—
broadly, across traditional period divisions and heterogeneous domains of
culture—of course presents challenges that do not arise in the analysis
of authors, genres, and the more chronologically restricted styles associated
with artistic movements and periods. Particularly given their relative
resistance to institutionalization, vernacular aesthetic categories are
more difficult to locate in fixed slices of time and space (and for this reason
their analysis is more vulnerable to accusations of unscholarly impres-
sionism). Although it is common to find museum exhibits and university
syllabi devoted to styles like cubism, genres like the novel, and modes like
comedy, vernacular aesthetic categories like the interesting, the cute, and
the zany have not seemed capable of drawing institutional structures or
discourses around them in quite the same way. Although the interesting,
the cute, and the zany are associated with specific practices, they do not
give rise to practices stable or consistent enough to be institutionally cap-
tured and thus remain more difficult than other styles to delimit in time
and in space. This by no means suggests that we abandon their historicici-
zation, but rather that we historicize differently. To restrict the analysis of
the interesting or the zany to a single artifact, or even to a cluster of arti-
facts produced in a thin slice of time, would be to immediately cut off a
proper analysis of their meaning as aesthetic categories, which is to say
objects widely distributed across what most literary and cultural scholars
would consider culturally heterogeneous areas of time and space.

Indeed, the study of vernacular aesthetic styles not only permits but
in a certain sense requires relating artifacts that prevailing, period-based
methods of doing cultural history discourage us from considering to-
gether: Stein's Tender Buttons, Adorno's Aesthetic Theory, and the pop
art of Takashi Murakami, in the case of cuteness; commedia dell'arte, I
Love Lucy, and Nietzsche's Gay Science, in the case of zaniness. My point
in linking these disparate artifacts is not to create funky anachronistic
assemblages, but rather to track more carefully the cultural and theoretical
problems that the cute, the zany, and the interesting index as they mutate
and take on different inflections over time: the loss of the antithesis
between the work of art and the commodity form (which evolves into a
challenge for the avant-garde in particular); the blurring of cultural and
occupational performance (and its implications for the contemporary
performance artist); and the increasing mediation of art through the cir-
culation of discourse (and its transformation of the relation between the
artist and the critic). Thus, while sacrificing the satisfactions of a chron-
ological precision more readily available to and really better suited for
the analysis of artists, genres, and movements, what one arguably gains in the more panoramic reading of vernacular aesthetic categories is a stronger grasp of the historicity of some of the basic concepts and categories of aesthetic theory itself.61

Triviality

Yet the zany, the interesting, and the cute are undeniably trivial. In contrast to the moral and theological resonances of the beautiful and the sublime and the powerfully uplifting and shattering emotions of the sublime and the disgusting, each of these aesthetic experiences revolves around a kind of inconsequentiality: the low, often hard-to-register flicker of affect accompanying our recognition of minor differences from a norm, in the case of the interesting; physical diminutiveness and vulnerability, in the case of the cute; and the flailing helplessness of excessively strenuous but unproductive exertion (and unfocused rage), in the case of the zany. These images of indifference, insignificance, and ineffectuality all point to a deficit of power, which is significantly not the same as the suspension of power that plays a central role in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment theories of aesthetic freedom. In striking contrast to the autonomy from forms of domination and mastery promised by Schiller’s “aesthetic state,” in which the relations of power that inform the experience of the acting and desiring subject are momentarily suspended, the cute and the zany confront us with images of the domination and even the humiliation of others in a world fundamentally rent by the division of labor (and as we will see, by gendered and racialized divisions of labor in particular).62 Indeed, the cute in its insignificance and zaniness in its ineffectuality evoke intersubjective or social conflict. One finds a similar discord in the Kantian sublime, which continues to hold a prominent place in theories of postmodern aesthetics and art. Yet the feelings or images of powerlessness that the cute and the zany call up do not “throw the mind into disarray” by signaling its incapacity to cognize an object; nor do they result in shock or astonishment in the face of the other.63 While for Lyotard the sublime points to a radically self-sufficient “Thing” or “unmasterable presence” indexed by the unavailability of the avant-garde artwork, cute and zany objects present themselves as entirely available, as their commercial and erotic connotations make explicit: “Snuggle/play with me!”64 Most significantly, although the subject’s feeling of domination in the feeling of the sublime is itself powerfully felt, this is clearly not the case with the cute and the zany, where the image of powerlessness called up for us mirrors a certain lack of power in the aesthetic experience itself. Indeed, the call attention to their own weakness, in a way that is significantly not the categories. The glamorous and the ha like the exact opposite.

In accordance with their triviality, this study are also strikingly equivocal in the contradictory mixture of feelings and fun, in the case of the zany; interest, tenderness and aggression, something zany, cute, or interesting is whether one regards it positively or negatively: categories also derive their specificity in the Kantian sublime once again, for example that alternates between an affective ‘aesthetic feelings are not held in an inderminate laboring and lighthearted play are tenderness are by the cute. What makes the fact of its emphatic affective resolve feeling of discord ends up being unmissable: respect” (or what Burke calls “regular and unequivocal. And unlike the charge of the feeling of interest underlying, the intensity of the feeling is strong.

Yet it is arguably the stylistic triviality of the zany, the cute, and the interesting that is particularly suited for the analysis of art and aestheticized present, in which it can no longer be confounded but all but subsumed in the “neo-Art Nouveau world of total design,” Jacques Rancière, who for his part terms his commitment to “types” shared by Mukaťovský could once state as a maxim: we inhabit a world in which the “architectural projects and art exhi- genes—seems to be regarded as so much Behrens in their otherwise discrepant industrial engineering), as an indication of a new kind of collective life. In this refutes and undermines what he rega
the cute are undeniably trivial. In contrast to the nuances of the beautiful and the sublime, shattering emotions of the sublime and aesthetic experiences revolves around a kind of hard-to-register flicker of affect—minor differences from a norm, in the case of the beautiful and the sublime points to a radically self-sufficient experience. The Kantian sublime once again, for example, is an emotion, a Ruhrung, that alternates between a tenderness and aggression, in the case of the cute—to call something zany, cute, or interesting is often to leave it ambiguous as to whether one regards it positively or negatively. To be sure, other aesthetic categories also derive their specificity from mixed or conflicting feelings; the Kantian sublime once again, for example, is an emotion, a Ruhrung, that alternates between a tendentious and aggression, in the case of the cute—to call something zany, cute, or interesting is often to leave it ambiguous as to whether one regards it positively or negatively. To be sure, other aesthetic categories also derive their specificity from mixed or conflicting feelings; the Kantian sublime once again, for example, “is an emotion, a Ruhrung, that alternates between an affective ‘no’ and ‘yes.’” Yet these contradictory feelings are not held in an indefinite tension as the affects of desperate laboring and lighthearted play are by the zany, or as aggression and tenderness are by the cute. What makes the sublime “sublime” is precisely the fact of its emphatic affective resolution, the way in which the initial feeling of discord ends up being unmistakably overwritten by what Kant calls “respect” (or what Burke calls “delight.”) This final feeling is singular and unequivocal. And unlike the noticeably weak or low affective charge of the feeling of interest underlying our judgments of the interesting, the intensity of the feeling is strong.

Yet it is arguably the stylistic triviality and verdictive equivocality of the zany, the cute, and the interesting that makes these categories particularly suited for the analysis of art and aesthetics in today’s totally aestheticized present, in which it can no longer be taken for granted, as Jan Mukařovský could once state as a matter of course, that “lofty art is the source and innovator of aesthetic norms.” Rather, as Hal Foster notes, we inhabit a world in which the “aesthetic and utilitarian are not only conflated but all but subsumed in the commercial, and everything—not only architectural projects and art exhibitions but everything from jeans to genes—seems to be regarded as so much design.” Foster regards this “neo–Art Nouveau world of total design” with far more skepticism than Jacques Rancière, who for his part takes the concept of “design,” qua a commitment to “types” shared by modernists like Mallarme and Peter Behrens in their otherwise discrepant practices (symbolist poetry and industrial engineering), as an indication of art’s ability to call forth the forms of a new kind of collective life. In this manner, Rancière argues, “design” refutes and undermines what he regards as the false opposition of the
autonomy of art and the heteronomy of commercial culture. Yet today this “aestheticization of common life” manages to coexist with and even at times to covertly support what it would seem to stamp out, which is the elevation of “autonomous” art onto a socially and economically exceptional plane of existence: the world of major auction houses, corporate collectors, and megaexhibitions and biennales in global cities formed by massive alliances among businesses, national governments, universities, and regional bodies. In this manner, art as luxury in the age of the “global art system” seems more removed from “everyday” existence than ever—an apartness novelist Geoff Dyer makes central to the surreal mood of Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi.

If there is something false about the dichotomy between “autonomy of art” and “aestheticization of life,” I would suggest that it is not because the two have somehow been reconciled through “design” or an “art of living” (Schiller), but because under conditions of late capitalism both have become possible at once. In this hyperaestheticized world, neither art nor beautiful/sublime nature remains the obvious go-to model for reflecting on aesthetic experience as a whole, or for reflecting on art in its newly displaced relation to aesthetic experience as a whole. Paradoxically, in tandem with the new commercial powers consolidating around the global production and consumption of art, the hyperaestheticized postwar society of the United States was one in which “art was to survive by virtue of being weak”: “weak” in the sense of art’s increasing dependence on “selective appropriation” from both fringe and mass culture for its very existence; “survive” in the sense that the postwar “art economy was in fact stimulated rather than impeded” by the artists who sought to challenge “modernist complicities with the marketplace” through this route, directly contesting Clement Greenberg’s idea that “an art resolutely founded on the problems generated by its own particular medium would escape exploitation either by commerce or by the terrifying mass politics of the day.” As Thomas Crow notes, “The new art of simulation took that argument and turned it on its head”; rather than pursue how the arts could “be strengthened in the areas that remained exclusively theirs” (77), postwar artists increased art’s dependence on the artistically heterogeneous, beginning with the act of choosing an existing aesthetic that could then be “refined and packaged” for a smaller group of elite consumers. Crow is thinking not just of pop art, famously quick to embrace the commercialized styles of cuteness and zaniness (in which “weakness” and “survival” are central tropes), but also of “merely interesting” conceptual art, a practice that “while disdaining the trade in art objects . . . had the paradoxical effect of embedding the practice of art more fully into its existing system of distribution” (81). Indeed, the “weak embrace in order to survive was the ‘jibe’ against the assaults of the conceptual artists on itself” (77). Since the “site of practice is the gallery,” conceptual art “involved more like commercial art to which the conceptual artists became more like commercial artists” (82). It consequently evolved into a dilution practice that increasingly sought to exploit the public sphere. As Crow notes, “Characterized by Art-Language, laid down the requirement to critical interest that it conceive a chain of its transformations of practice.” But Harrison and Crow find the “group” “Realistically, Art and Language could not live which was not composed of the paral deliberaations.”

The rise of the weak or trivial aesthetic takes place in conjunction with an overtness of novelty, an increasing overlap between art and a loss of the longstanding tension between commodity form. The “frantic economy of ever more novel-seeming goods (for greater rates of turnover),” as Fredric Jameson insightfully structural function and position speculation.” In addition to posing the avant-garde and its theorists in particular, enable us to investigate in greater detail the concept of art in general. First, a work of aesthetic discourse in the eighteenth century of art’s more specifically modernist, twelfth century of economy and culture wreaks two great conceptual shocks. In tandem with these ideas of art’s vocation, weaker art where, testifying in their very proliferation, design and Internet plenitude,” aesthetic also becomes less intense. The most outstanding of art, however—the idea of as shock or radical surprise—are ones that zany and the interesting speak to dire blurring of the distinction between aest
economic structure. It would seem to stamp out, which is the socially and economically excluded major auction houses, corporate art businesses, national governments, universities, and art as luxury in the age of the "global turn." Everyday existence than ever—"central to the surreal mood of Jeff in there is something false about the dichotomy and "aestheticization of life," I would have somehow been reconciled (Schiller), but because under conditions become possible at once. Neither art nor beautiful/sublime model for reflecting on aesthetic experience in its newly displaced relation to Paradoxically, in tandem with the new global production and "everyday" existence, art economy in fact stimulated postwar society of the United States to survive by virtue of being weak**: concurrently, conceptual art "involved intense curatorial activity [that made] artists become more like commercial curators, middlemen for themselves" (82). It consequently evolved into a discursive, media- and/or print-based practice that increasingly sought to legitimize itself with the lingo of the public sphere. As Crow notes, "Charles Harrison, editor of the journal Art-Language, laid down the requirement for any conceptual art aspiring to critical interest that it conceive a changed sense of the public alongside its transformations of practice." But "on precisely those grounds" both Harrison and Crow find the "group’s own achievement to be limited: ‘Realistically, Art and Language could identify no actual alternative public which was not composed of the participants in its own projects and deliberations.’"76

The rise of the weak or trivial aesthetic categories in this study thus takes place in conjunction with an overarching habitualization of aesthetic novelty, an increasing overlap between the domains of art and theory, and a loss of the longstanding tension between the work of art and the commodity form. The "frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover," as Fredric Jameson puts it, "assigns an increasingly structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation."77 In addition to posing unprecedented challenges for the avant-garde and its theorists in particular (a problem that the cute will enable us to investigate in greater detail), this increasing interpenetration of economy and culture wreaks two particularly significant changes on the concept of art in general. First, a weakening of art’s capacity to serve as an image of nonalienated labor, as it had done ever since the inception of aesthetic discourse in the eighteenth century; second, a destabilization of art’s more specifically modernist, twentieth-century mission of producing perceptual shocks.78

In tandem with these seismic changes to longstanding ideas of art’s vocation, weaker aesthetic categories crop up everywhere, testifying in their very proliferation to how, in a world of “total design and Internet plenitude,” aesthetic experience, while less rarefied, also becomes less intense.79 The most fundamental changes in the understanding of art, however—the idea of art as unalienated labor and of art as shock or radical surprise—are ones that the aesthetic categories of the zany and the interesting speak to directly, as styles explicitly about the blurring of the distinction between aesthetic and work-related production
and about the dialing down of one’s affective response to novelty. They are also changes that cuteness as an aesthetic of powerlessness speaks to in an even more overarching way, insofar as all art in the late capitalist society of high-powered media spectacles is, in a certain manner of speaking, “cute.” Thus in what might otherwise be a truly inchoate sea of postmodern styles and judgments, the zany, the interesting, and the cute function something like quilting points, enabling us to conceptualize something like a bounded field or historically delimited repertoire of aesthetic categories in the first place. Moreover, it is telling that as aesthetic categories explicitly about our increasingly complex relations to commodities, performance, and information—utterly ordinary yet in many ways highly peculiar “objects”—the cute, the zany, and the interesting dominate not just mass culture but the most autonomous sectors of artistic production and are thus able to speak to changes in the concept of art and even the avant-garde in ways in which other “everyday” aesthetic categories cannot. Most significantly, as aesthetic categories that strangely dramatize their own frivolity or inefficacy, the cute, the zany, and the interesting are fundamentally non-theological, unable to foster religious awe and uncoupling the experience of art from the discourse of spiritual transcendence. By contrast, the feeling of the sublime never loses this theological dimension, never seems to fully shake off its way of abetting older forms of religiosity or what Adorno calls the “self-exaltation of art as the absolute.”

This is the case even when the sublime is invoked to explore resolutely secular problems, as in the case of Joseph Tabbi’s postmodern sublime, Bruce Robbins’s sweatshop sublime, Amy Elias’s historical sublime, and Jameson’s geopolitical or paranoid sublime—aesthetic experiences linked to overpowering confrontations with technology, fleeting epiphanies about the inaccessibility of history, and knowledge of a global capitalism that fundamentally exceeds our current perceptual and cognitive abilities to capture it. In each case the sublime refers to what is finally or properly unrepresentable.

Classical aesthetic categories like the sublime and beautiful thus make insistent if necessarily indirect claims for their extra-aesthetic power (moral, religious, epistemological, political), asserting not just a specifically aesthetic agency but agency in realms extending far beyond art or culture. In contrast, by foregrounding their own weaknesses and limitations, the cute, the zany, and the interesting enable a surprisingly more direct reflection on the relation between art and society, and more specifically on how “that very distance of art from its social context which allows it to function as a critique and indictment of the latter also dooms its interventions to ineffectuality and relegates art and culture to a frivolous, trivialized space in which such distance can advance.”

If “it is the very separation that inaugurates culture as it is—that which is the source of art’s alienation from society, of its advance as culture” [Marcuse, and Jameson argue], the ambiguity of this study seems to result from the same source of their ambiguity resides in modern development involving a de-centralized superstructural “levels” (Althusser) or de-contextualized “systems” (Luhmann): namely, the culturalization of everything cultural, relegates a cultural, trivialized place.

More specifically, in a culture that has become, every minute of the day, these aesthetic categories for taking stock of how art and aesthetic experience of objects as cute. Zaniness is also playful fun. The kinds of subjective experience linked to overpowering confrontations with technology, fleeting epiphanies about the inaccessibility of history, and knowledge of a global capitalism that fundamentally exceeds our current perceptual and cognitive abilities to capture it. In each case the sublime refers to what is finally or properly unrepresentable.

Classical aesthetic categories like the sublime and beautiful thus make insistent if necessarily indirect claims for their extra-aesthetic power (moral, religious, epistemological, political), asserting not just a specifically aesthetic agency but agency in realms extending far beyond art or culture. In contrast, by foregrounding their own weaknesses and limitations, the cute, the zany, and the interesting enable a surprisingly more direct reflection on the relation between art and society, and more specifically on how “that very distance of art from its social context which allows it to function as a critique and indictment of the latter also dooms its interventions to ineffectuality and relegates art and culture to a frivolous, trivialized space in which such distance can advance.”

If “it is the very separation that inaugurates culture as it is—that which is the source of art’s alienation from society, of its advance as culture” [Marcuse, and Jameson argue], the ambiguity of this study seems to result from the same source of their ambiguity resides in modern development involving a de-centralized superstructural “levels” (Althusser) or de-contextualized “systems” (Luhmann): namely, the culturalization of everything cultural, relegates a cultural, trivialized place.

More specifically, in a culture that has become, every minute of the day, these aesthetic categories for taking stock of how art and aesthetic experience of objects as cute. Zaniness is also playful fun. The kinds of subjective experience linked to overpowering confrontations with technology, fleeting epiphanies about the inaccessibility of history, and knowledge of a global capitalism that fundamentally exceeds our current perceptual and cognitive abilities to capture it. In each case the sublime refers to what is finally or properly unrepresentable.
such as novelty. They
are aesthetic responses to.

Aesthetic powerlessness speaks to
infusions, enabling us to conceptualize some
critically delimited repertoire of aesthetic
categories that strangely dramatize
the sublime never loses this theological
make off its way of abetting older forms
the sublime is invoked to explore reso-
the postmodern sublime, Amy Elias's historical sub-
paranoid sublime—aesthetic experi-
fronts with technology, fleeting
of history, and knowledge of a global
eds our current perceptual and cogni-
the sublime refers to what is finally
the sublime and beautiful thus make
aims for their extra-aesthetic power
asserting not just a specific
realms extending far beyond art or
ting their own aesthetic weaknesses and
of art and society, and more
ance of art from its social context which
indictment of the latter also dooms
relegates art and culture to a frivo-
ous, trivialized space in which such intersections are neutralized in
advance." If "it is the very separation of art and culture from the social—a
separation that inaugurates culture as a realm in its own right and defines
it as such—which is the source of art's incorrigible ambiguity," as Adorno,
Marcuse, and Jameson argue, the ambiguity of the aesthetic categories in
this study seems to result from the same splitting. Yet it is possible that
the source of their ambiguity resides in a more recent and properly post-
modern development involving a de-differentiation of modern society's
superstructural "levels" (Althusser) or autonomous, functionally differen-
tiated "systems" (Luhmann): namely, what Jameson describes as a "total
culturalization" by a process of radical commodification, which, by now
making everything cultural, relegates art and culture to the same "frivo-
ously, trivialized" place.

More specifically, in a culture that hails us as aesthetic subjects nearly
every minute of the day, these aesthetic categories are particularly useful
for taking stock of how art and aesthetic experience stand in relation to
each other once they become structurally decoupled. What better way to
think about the implications (for both aesthetic practice and theory) of
art no longer being the obvious model for theorizing aesthetic experience
than through a set of aesthetic categories each about the weakening of a
traditionally conceived border between the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic?
What better way to explore the ramifications of how aesthetic experience
no longer seems definable by the presence of a single exceptional feeling
(say, "disinterested pleasure") than through a set of aesthetic categories
based on complicated intersections of ordinary affects? The interesting
oscillates between interest and boredom. Aggression is central to our ex-
perience of objects as cute. Zaniness is as much about desperate laboring
as playful fun. The kinds of subjective agency or capacity called forth by
the interesting, the cute, and the zany are thus fundamentally different
from the kinds assumed and ratified by the beautiful or the sublime. Yet
it would be ridiculous to conclude from this that the cute, the zany, and
the interesting are not "genuine" aesthetic categories. All are experiences of
a particular kind of form (although, as we shall see, a particularly "form-
less" or amorphous kind). All are judgments based on feeling rather than
determinate concepts or abstract principles. All make the claim to universal
validity that every aesthetic judgment makes, and in the same performative
mode—if not with the same degree of affective force. Indeed, the equivocal nature of "cute," "zany," and "interesting" as judgments (neither
entirely positive nor negative) clarifies something that the beautiful and
the sublime tend to obscure, which is that to aestheticize something is not
necessarily to idealize or even revere it.
The zany, the cute, and the interesting thus help us imagine what the discourse of aesthetics might become when aesthetic experience is no longer automatically equated with awe, or with rare or conceptually unmediated experience. Something is interesting only if it seems to vary from others of a similar type. For this reason, as Epstein underscores, the interesting involves a checking of awe or wonder on the part of the understanding, a mitigation of the “alterity of the object” by “reason’s capacity to integrate it.” To call something or someone cute is not necessarily a compliment. And calling someone zany is often synonymous with dismissing him or her as “crazy,” a way of simultaneously acknowledging the negativity of the zany person but also that negativity’s lack of any real impact on us. In contrast to beauty for Kant, in which one is “subject neither to the law of the understanding, which requires conceptual determination, nor to the law of sensation, which demands an object of desire,” cuteness and zaniness evoke subjects under subjection to a number of demands (including, first and foremost, the division of labor). Yet, unlike the sublime, these affective experiences of one’s subjection to power are not in themselves always or necessarily powerful.

The affective response to weakness or powerlessness that is cuteness, for example, is frequently overpowered by a second feeling—a sense of manipulation or exploitation—that immediately checks or challenges the first. “The rapidity and promiscuity of the cute response makes the impulse suspect, readily overridden by the angry sense that one is being exploited or deceived,” as science writer Natalie Angier notes about biological cuteness; indeed, this susceptibility to being taken over seems paradoxically internal to the affective experience of cuteness. The implicit reason is that we judge things cute all too easily, as if there were a deficit of discrimination in the subject’s judgment corresponding to or even caused by the cute object’s oft-noted lack of articulated features. As Angier observes, the “human cuteness detector is set at such a low bar . . . that it sweeps in and deems cute practically anything remotely resembling a human baby or a part thereof,” from the “young of virtually every mammalian species” to “woolly bear caterpillars, a bobbing balloon, a big round rock stacked on a smaller rock, a colon, a hyphen and a close parenthesis typed in succession.” This atavistically regressive series of forms underscores that cuteness involves not only a certain softening or weakening of formal differentiation on the side of the object (the more bloblike it is, the cuter it will seem), but also of discrimination on the side of the subject. To be sure, cuteness can be a powerful and even demanding response to our perception of vulnerability in an object; according to the scientists Angier interviews, the pleasure that images of puppies or babies arouse can be intense as those “aroused by drugs like cocaine,” acts or substances of the brain. Yet because the aesthetic routinely overridden by secondary factors something weak about it anyway. It seems to invite what Denis Dutton calls the feeling of being manipulated or to reject cuteness as low or shallow. Haunted by an image of failure that erate, the aesthetic of cuteness thus inability to carry out its own agenda. Defined in the American Heritage Dictionary who “attempts feebly” (that is, poorly) in “old comedies.” And the same can always just a step away from the “mere sucker” than our relation to this species puts it, the “very banality of cuteness in a whole range of commercial contexts openness of the cute’s hold on us.”

Haunted by an image of failure that erate, the aesthetic of cuteness thus inability to carry out its own agenda. Defined in the American Heritage Dictionary who “attempts feebly” (that is, poorly) in “old comedies.” And the same can always just a step away from the “mere sucker” than our relation to this species puts it, the “very banality of cuteness in a whole range of commercial contexts openness of the cute’s hold on us.”

We know only four boring people. Though, most of the friends we find interesting find us the most boring. The dle, with whom there is reciprocal interest, they may become too interesting for us. As this deadpan story of social competition is never inherently interesting, something else. The objects or persons never stable or permanent: “at any moment too interesting for us, or we too interested in the image of “reciprocal interest” the potential instability and therefore interest that the social competition becomes more. A kind of dynamic balancing act in experience of something both stable and predictable. Indeed, when “interesting
The image contains a page of text from a book. The page discusses the concept of cuteness and its aesthetic experience. The text is a continuation of the previous page, discussing how the aesthetic experience of cuteness can be intense and how it is often associated with secondary feelings of suspicion. The text also touches on the paradoxical nature of cuteness, which is simultaneously appealing and problematic, as it can be both attractive and manipulative. The page concludes by discussing how interesting experiences are inherently unstable and unpredictable, much like the aesthetic experience of cuteness.
persons in the novel, what it means is often complex or contradictory, as in the case of two of the genre's most beloved protagonists, Isabel Archer and Dorothea Brooke. The fact that the interesting person is one who never seems exactly herself is dramatized also in a particularly vivid way by Nora/Blanche, the conjoined-twin protagonist of Shelley Jackson’s *Half-Life*. Epstein underscores this by noting how in Russian “interesting” can be synonymous with “pregnant”: “She is in an interesting state,” one can say. Although she herself is one, there is another entity within her. This, indeed, is precisely the situation of the interesting; it is a form of pregnancy, of potentiality.” In “My Interesting Condition” (1990), an essay noted for its anticipation of the shift from gay and lesbian to queer studies, Jan Clausen makes similar use of the interesting (“that old-fashioned euphemism for pregnancy”) to process her contradictory feelings upon entering, as a “technically irreproachable lesbian,” into a relationship with a man. Rather than recategorizing herself as bisexual, Clausen develops a “resistance to identity” and “willing[ness]” to “remain in identity limbo” that she uses the term “interesting condition” to index (454).

For Schlegel in particular, the interesting is thus “an experience with the possibility of difference . . . with what is different, with what makes a difference, and with what could make oneself or a given state of affairs different,” as Mieszkowski notes in his chapter on the “interessante” in *Labors of Imagination* (114). Its “comparative dynamic” thus brings us to the heart of aesthetic evaluation, since, as many have argued, there is no value without comparison. But for precisely this reason, an object can never be interesting in and of itself, but only when checked against another: the thing against its description, the individual object against its generic type. This makes the interesting both a curiously balanced and a curiously unstable aesthetic experience: “the sort of thing that can freely be regarded as indifferent the next moment and be displaced by something else,” as Heidegger writes, “which then concerns us just as little as what went before.” Although the judgment of interesting is clearly based on a feeling as opposed to a concept (and a notoriously indeterminate feeling at that), its status as an aesthetic judgment always seems strangely insecure.

The possibility of failing to interest is thus as closely coupled to the interesting as the feeling of manipulation is to the cute. Zaniness can be similarly described as an aesthetic about its own unconvincing nature, given its way of dramatizing the exorbitant amount of energy it needs to expend to make us laugh. In this manner, all three aesthetic categories self-generate images of falling short of their own aesthetic goals. The cute, the zany, and the interesting therefore participate in the same paradox as the sentimental, the ideological, and the sentimentalization as such depends at least in some degree on its ends." For “if the end is not the means—in carrying out one’s plans—then there is no longer power for that which should not be). To the contrary, we are confronted constantly, if indirectly, with aesthetic power, often in close cooperation with social, political, and military might. Moreover, the unhappy split between “genius” and “spectator-oriented aesthetics, which has prevailed in modern art and aesthetic experience as a whole, now seems bent on making itself coeval with the concept of spectators. From Nicola Barker’s entirely of conversations about taste and the debate about David Blaine’s 2003 no
The fact that feelings of being moved have become vulnerable to being displaced by or even conjoined to feelings of manipulation does not mean that there is no longer powerful aesthetic feeling (and certainly not that there should not be). To the contrary, we inhabit a world in which we are confronted constantly, if intermittently, with spectacular displays of aesthetic power, often in close coordination with displays of financial, political, and military might. Moreover, in a recent departure from the unhappy split between “genius” and “taste,” or artist-oriented and spectator-oriented aesthetics, which Giorgio Agamben places at the foundation of all modern art and aesthetic theory, contemporary art increasingly seems bent on making itself coextensive with the aesthetic responses of spectators. From Nicola Barker’s Clear, a novel consisting almost entirely of conversations about taste pulled together by an overarching debate about David Blaine’s 2003 notorious “hunger-artist” performance...
in London and the vehemence of the public’s response to it, to the hundreds of videos posted on the Internet documenting people moved to tears by “ugly-duckling” singer Susan Boyle’s first appearance on television, it is clear that what we might call Other People’s Aesthetic Pleasures have become folded into the heart of the artwork, essentially providing it with its substantive core. Yet the more intense of these experiences seem to have become as easy to ridicule as to sympathize with or admire. Consider, for example, the media sensation caused by Double Rainbow, an amateur video made to capture the beauty of a natural wonder by hiker Paul Vasquez. That natural wonder ended up becoming immediately upstaged, however, even as it was being viewed and recorded, by the emotional extremity of Vasquez’s aesthetic response (which was simultaneously recorded). The rainbow was then upstaged yet a second time in the tidal wave of aesthetic responses to Vasquez’s aesthetic response, when his video, uploaded to YouTube in early 2010, was viewed by over 20 million people. Aesthetic artifact and affective response were thus conflated in a way that ended up doubly short-circuiting the original object of aesthetic appreciation and leaving it behind. Indeed, the rainbow never seemed to stand a chance of counting as the true “aesthetic object” in this media event, whose epicenter was clearly Vasquez’s self-recorded scene of aesthetic praise/appraisal. Opening with laughs and exclamations followed by moans and sobs and finally the anguished question, “What does this mean?” there was something about the sheer intensity and duration of Vasquez’s act of aesthetic appreciation that millions of people also seemed to affectionately appreciate but also want to immediately make fun of or belittle, as if such a powerful reaction to an aesthetic spectacle could not be taken seriously or simply left to stand on its own. It was as if those who were aesthetically responding to Vasquez’s aesthetic response felt compelled to fill in a feeling of skepticism or manipulation perceived as somehow missing from his original experience, as if, paradoxically, these secondary feelings have become the most reliable sign of the authenticity of contemporary aesthetic experience. The possibility that the rainbow appreciator may have been on drugs was raised. Hundreds of parodies appeared all over the Internet, including an especially funny mash-up overlaying the soundtrack of Vasquez’s moans and cries with shots of the minimalist sculpture of Donald Judd. In a fitting sequel, Vasquez was briefly hired by Microsoft to film commercials for its Windows Live photo-editing and enhancing software. The hypercommodified, technologically-mediated conditions of production, distribution, and reception that made the entire episode of Double Rainbow possible are the same that have brought our equivocal aesthetic categories to the fore.

Style

The zany, the cute, and the interesting subjective, feeling-based judgments, and so on. Indeed, I would argue that it is impossible to discuss the signifi-

cance of any aesthetic category without considering judgment as style and as style relate to each other. Practices and modes of human interaction are part of the texture of everyday sociality for sharing and confirming our cultural beliefs (where interesting is rhetorically persuasive, and cute and zany are often part of the texture of everyday sociality for sharing and confirming our cultural beliefs). Judith Brown’s Glamour in Six Dimes makes links between the deathly style of late capitalism and the aesthetic categories of commercial culture, Cute, Quirky, and Viral. Links between the deathly style of global capitalism and the aesthetic categories of commercial culture, Cute, Quirky, and Viral, and the emergence of post-fordism in the late 20th century, have been, rarely as speech acts as well as culturally codified ways in which we understand the art of contemporary aesthetic experience. The possibility that the rainbow appreciator may have been on drugs was raised. Hundreds of parodies appeared all over the Internet, including an especially funny mash-up overlaying the soundtrack of Vasquez’s moans and cries with shots of the minimalist sculpture of Donald Judd. In a fitting sequel, Vasquez was briefly hired by Microsoft to film commercials for its Windows Live photo-editing and enhancing software. The hypercommodified, technologically-mediated conditions of production, distribution, and reception that made the entire episode of Double Rainbow possible are the same that have brought our equivocal aesthetic categories to the fore.
Because of the public’s response to it, to the human documenting people moved to tears by Boyle’s first appearance on television, it became clear that Other People’s Aesthetic Pleasures have the artwork, essentially providing it with an intense of these experiences seem to sympathize with or admire. Consider, caused by Double Rainbow, an amazement of a natural wonder by hiker Paul died up becoming immediately upstaged, viewed and recorded, by the emotional response (which was simultaneously re-performed yet a second time in the tidal waves) Vasquez’s aesthetic response, when his video, viewed by over 20 million active response were thus conflated in a circuiting the original object of aesthetic d. Indeed, the rainbow never seemed to be true “aesthetic object” in this media Vasquez’s self-recorded scene of aesth with laughs and exclamations followed the anguished question, “What does this put the sheer intensity and duration of motion that millions of people also seemed so want to immediately make fun of orotion to an aesthetic spectacle could not to stand on its own. It was as if those ang to Vasquez’s aesthetic response felt scepticism or manipulation perceived as al experience, as if, paradoxically, these are most reliable sign of the authenticity. The possibility that the rainbow rugs was raised. Hundreds of parodies including an especially funny mash-up Quez’s moans and cries with shots of d Judd. In a fitting sequel, Vasquez was commercials for its Windows Live photo-The hypercommodified, technologically- distribution, and reception that made Downy possible are the same that have categories to the fore.

**Style**

The zany, the cute, and the interesting will be approached in this study as subjective, feeling-based judgments, as well as objective or formal styles. Indeed, I would argue that it is impossible to grasp the full cultural significance of any aesthetic category without considering how its functions as judgment and as style relate to each other. As sites in which discursive practices and modes of human intersubjectivity routinely intersect with aspects of what Arendt calls the “thing-world,” aesthetic categories are double-sided in more ways than one: they are subjective and objective, evaluative and descriptive, conceptual and perceptual. Aesthetic categories are not for all this exotic philosophical abstractions but rather part of the texture of everyday social life, central at once to our vocabulary for sharing and confirming our aesthetic experiences with others (where interesting is rhetorically pervasive) and to postmodern material culture (where cuteness and zaniness surround us). Yet with notable exceptions, such as Daniel Harris’s landmark collection of essays on the styles of commercial culture, *Cute, Quaint, Romantic and Hungry*, and Judith Brown’s *Glamour in Six Dimensions*, which brilliantly tracks the links between the deathly style of glamour and the aura of modernist literary form, aesthetic categories have rarely been singled out as primary objects of analysis in literary and cultural studies, and when they have been, rarely as speech acts as well as objective styles. What bearing do the culturally codified ways in which we mobilize the cute, the interesting, and the zany as evaluations have on our perception of them as stylistic qualities, and how does our perception of these stylistic qualities affect our language of aesthetic judgment?

From “Ming dynasty” to “Henry James’s ‘late’ phase,” to speak of style is to speak of something that fluctuates among scales of spatial or temporal reference and degrees of institutional codification. Style itself is a “tension between change and stability,” as James Ackerman suggests, and as such provides an essential concept (not just a topic among others) for doing nonevolutionary art history. Moreover, all styles are semblances, referring to how things generally “seem,” “look,” or “appear.” As Frank Sibley argues about aesthetic properties, styles are also emergent phenomena, arising out of complex interactions among multiple parts of which they are always more than just a sum. Softness, harmlessness, roundness, and so forth do not automatically give rise to the appearance of cuteness when combined. Richard Neer suggests that styles might therefore be understood as what Wittgenstein calls “aspects,” “ways” of perceiving an object (seeing it as cute) as opposed to the set of objective qualities perceived.
Constantly shifting in range of spatial or temporal reference as well as degree of institutional codification, questions about style lead quickly to questions of scale and of form. This is true whether we understand “form” as the antithesis of matter (“what seems” as opposed to “what is”) or, as Rodolphe Gasché suggests in his reading of Kant’s Critique of Judgment, as a paraconceptual subjective agency or act, to be contrasted not with the objectivity of matter but with determinate cognition. Form here is to be understood as mental activity rather than objective thing, and as the opposite of the mental activity involved in the formation of concepts in particular. “We have been able to create forms long before knowing how to create concepts,” as Nietzsche puts it. In any case, it is striking that the forms on which the aesthetic experiences in this study are based tend to challenge some of our most deep-seated and conventional definitions of what “form” is. Zaniness asks us to regard form not as structure but as activity. Cuteness is a response to the “unformed” look of infants, to the amorphous and bloblike as opposed to the articulated or well-defined. Indeed, the more malleable or easily de-formable the cute object appears, the cuter it will seem. Similarly, since interest “always points toward something not yet realized: a wish, an objective, an endpoint to which no particular interest can coincide,” the experience of the interesting is essentially anticipatory as well as ongoing or serial. In this manner, the interesting asks us to understand form as temporal as opposed to spatial, diachronic as opposed to synchronic. “Even that which is most interesting could be more interesting,” as Schlegel writes. And one sees a similar indeterminacy in the kind of incessant performing we respond to in the zany, which always threatens to dissolve the performer into a stream of undifferentiated activity. The forms that our aesthetic experiences of the cute, the interesting, and the zany revolve around—the squishy or extrasoft blob, the open-ended series, the incessant flow—are thus relatively shapeless or unstructured. One is tempted to describe them as the informal forms specific to late capitalist modernity, and perhaps especially to “disorganized” capitalism and its culture of informalized, casualized work. In each case, the type of form at stake involves some kind of relation to change and/or indeterminacy that uncannily mirrors that of style itself.

For fluctuation and diversity are central to the very concept of style, a notoriously “unstable” category whose inconsistencies mirror aesthetic activity as a whole. This is especially true if one follows Bakhtin in rejecting the “separation of style . . . from the question of genre,” which he holds “largely responsible for a situation in which only individual and period-bound overtones of a style are the privileged subjects of study, while its basic social tone is ignored.” Important as Bakhtin’s correction has been for the study of both genre effects has been to make the two concepts sometimes to fully separate style from as well as from artistic movements or ism. Unofficial or vernacular styles like the zany, and the interesting are less in logically restricted than, styles like cinema can as easily be annexed to these prescribed styles as they can be folded in for organizing cultural objects (such as commodities, is arguably a kind of pastiche, and the robust, aesthetic qua rise to or congealed into recognizable the ones in this book.

Is it possible that informal and/or do useful for studying aesthetic culture as Pierre Bourdieu’s more trenchant argument to this effect. The autocorrelation, according to Bourdieu, ensures that the style produced in it, “states of the content will always be mediated by the positions and position takings: “What more linked to a specific history of the and more difficult to deduce it directly at the moment under consideration” (cute and the zany, unlike artworks, products of restricted fields (although the them), by this account they would serve indexing “states of the social world” in advantages for the analysis of culture.

However compelling it may be, this mediately against Jameson’s well-known effect in Postmodernism: that because today of what may be called pastiche by late capitalist culture’s “stupendous analysis of style can no longer coun
of spatial or temporal reference as well as
is true whether we understand “form”
questions about style lead quickly to
lis true whether we understand “form”
reading of Kant’s Critique of Judgment,
agency or act, to be contrasted not with
a determinate cognition. “Form” here
activity rather than objective thing, and as
veloped in the formation of concepts
to create forms long before knowing
In any case, it is striking
experiences in this study are based
most deep-seated and conventional defi­
annity asks us to regard form not as
is a response to the “unformed” look
bloblike as opposed to the articulated
seem. Similarly, since interest “always
rt realized: a wish, an objective, an end­
terest can coincide,” the experience of
inary as well as ongoing or serial.
asks us to understand form as temporal
as opposed to synchronic. “Even that
more interesting,” as Schlegel writes,
acy in the kind of incessant performing
always threatens to dissolve the per­
tentiative activity. The forms that our
, the interesting, and the zany revolve
blobs, the open-ended series, the inces­
less or unstructured. One is tempted
forms specific to late capitalist mod­
sorganized” capitalism and its culture of
each case, the type of form at stake in­
ange and/or indeterminacy that uncan­
more central to the very concept of style, a
whose “inconsistencies mirror aesthetic
pecially true if one follows Bakhtin in
... from the question of genre,” which
situation in which only individual and
re the privileged subjects of study,
d.” Important as Bakhtin’s correction
has been for the study of both genres and styles, one of its inadvertent
effects has been to make the two confusable. It can be similarly difficult
sometimes to fully separate style from modes like tragedy and melodrama,
as well as from artistic movements or schools like brutalism and surrealism.
Unofficial or vernacular styles like the ones in this study—“informal”
in more than one sense—make this already-tricky problem even trickier.
The zany, for instance, is a subspecies of comedy (mode), while cuteness,
a style that speaks to our desire for a simpler, more intimate relation to our
commodities, is arguably a kind of pastoral (genre). Although the cute,
the zany, and the interesting are less institutionally codified and/or chrono­
logically restricted than styles like screwball, minimalism, or art deco, they
can as easily be annexed to these more temporally and spatially circum­
scribed styles as they can be folded inside other, even broader categories
for organizing cultural objects (such as romance, realism, and comedy). To
complicate things further, vernacular, unofficial styles like the cute and the
zany can disconcertingly seem to exist on the same continuum as, say,
the stark and the robust, aesthetic qualities that have noneably not given
rise to or congealed into recognizable styles, not even ones as informal as
the ones in this book.
Is it possible that informal and/or dispersed styles might be particularly
useful for studying aesthetic culture as a “whole way of life”? One of
Pierre Bourdieu’s more trenchant arguments in The Rules of Art implies
something to this effect. The autonomy of any restricted field of produc­
tion, according to Bourdieu, ensures that in the works, genres, and move­
ments produced in it, “states of the social world” and other historical
content will always be mediated by the field’s particular configuration of
positions and position takings: “What happens in the field is more and
more linked to a specific history of the field, and hence it becomes more
and more difficult to deduce it directly from the state of the social world
at the moment under consideration” (243). Since vernacular styles like the
cute and the zany, unlike artworks, genres, and movements, are not prod­
ucts of restricted fields (although they are by no means unmediated by
them), by this account they would seem at least theoretically capable of
indexing “states of the social world” more directly, thus providing certain
advantages for the analysis of culture as a whole.
However compelling it may be, this possibility needs to be measured im­
mediately against Jameson’s well-known argument to the exact opposite
effect in Postmodernism: that because of the “well-nigh universal practice
today of what may be called pastiche,” a kind of metastyle made possible
by late capitalist culture’s “stupendous proliferation of social codes,” the
analysis of style can no longer count as a legitimate way of doing his­
tory. Pastiche’s way of emptying out the content of any particular
style would thus reverse a trend in place since the early nineteenth cen-
tury, when style first became a bearer of meaning or content in individual
works of art, as opposed to serving merely as a taxonomic tool. Yet
Jameson's argument about the contemporary decline of style's ability to
function as a reliable index of sociohistorical conditions needs to be
stacked against the way he compellingly relies on stylistic categories
throughout Postmodernism to make the historical claims about post-
modernity that underlie this very point. Messiness and glossiness, in par-
cular, stand out in this magisterial work as styles unusually pregnant
with sociohistorical meaning; the look of the photographed interior of a
Frank Gehry house in Santa Monica, for example, reflects the "messiness
of a dispersed existence, existential messiness, the perpetual temporal dis-
traction of post-sixties life," and thus, in a beautifully snowballing fash-
ion, "the general informing context of some larger virtual nightmare . . .
in which psychic fragmentation is raised to a qualitatively new power, the
structural distraction of the decentered subject now promoted to the very
motor and existential logic of late capitalism itself." Messiness and
glossiness are significantly much closer to cuteness and zaniness than
"official" or institutionally codified styles like art deco or brutalism, as if,
under the conditions of postmodernity, only radically informal and tempo-
rally dispersed styles can remain genuine bearers of "historical" meaning.

The informality and triviality of the aesthetic categories in this study is
thus, paradoxically, the locus of their historical meaningfulness. It is also
worth noting that pastiche, the postmodern metastyle Jameson implic-
cates as the direct culprit in the stripping of historical meaning from all
style, is a product of the same pluralism that enabled individual styles to
become meaningful in the first place. If before the nineteenth century
"contributions to a practice were regarded not as belonging to one style
or another, but rather as falling within or being alien to the practice," as
the editors of The Question of Style in Philosophy and the Arts argue,
by the turn of the century the individual arts had become viewed as
they continue to be today, as sites for individual artists to experiment—
selectively—with a variety of styles. Although "style" was originally
associated with ornament, or that "aspect of writing, painting, or
building . . . that could be varied without changing the content," the loss
of more traditional bearers of meaning or content in artworks—nature,
antiquity, absolute standards of reason—led to this "variable element"
taking their place, as precisely the new key element of any individual
artwork's meaning. Yet at a moment in which "poetic output was so
rich and miscellaneous that the young Friedrich Schlegel called it a gro-
cery shop," the new understanding of art as a site for stylistic experi-
mentation turned "style" into an unpr

With the interesting's late twentie
explicitly "rational" style of concep
arguably becomes even more central,
scandalously seems to suggest the re
selective attention itself. This is cern
sari's Choosing, a series of photogr
act of selecting grocery shop produc
garlic, rhubarb. Each row shows a fin
of an array of three, then another as
with two others, then another as the
and fluctuation are thus, in a certain
or meaning of the interesting but also
of the aesthetic style itself.

FIGURE 1
l in place since the early nineteenth cen-
tear of meaning or content in individual
ving merely as a taxonomic tool.117 Yet
temporary decline of style's ability to
sociohistorical conditions needs to be
mpellingly relies on stylistic categories
make the historical claims about past-
ypoint. Messiness and glossiness, in par-
erial work as styles unusually pregnant
look of the photographed interior of a
ica, for example, reflects the “messiness
ial messiness, the perpetual temporal dis-
thus, in a beautifully snowballing fash-
xt of some larger virtual nightmare ... in
raised to a qualitatively new power, the
ntered subject now promoted to the very
ate capitalism itself.”118 Messiness and
h closer to cuteness and zaniness than
ied styles like art deco or brutalism, as if,
ernity, only radically informal and tempo-
genuine bearers of “historical” meaning.
of the aesthetic categories in this study is
their historical meaningfulness. It is also
postmodern metastyle Jameson impli-
stripping of historical meaning from all
uralism that enabled individual styles to
place. If before the nineteenth century
regarded not as belonging to one style
within or being alien to the practice,” as
Style in Philosophy and the Arts argue,
individual arts had become viewed as
es for individual artists to experiment-
les.119 Although “style” was originally
that “aspect of writing, painting, or
without changing the content,” the loss
eaning or content in artworks—nature,
reason—led to this “variable element”
be new key element of any individual
oment in which “poetic output was so
young Friedrich Schlegel called it a gro-
ding of art as a site for stylistic experi-
mentation turned “style” into an unprecedented challenge for the modern
artist. Suddenly confronted with an “overwhelming repertoire of forms
left from the past” (all individually charged and pregnant with meaning),
the lucky or perhaps unlucky artist suddenly finds himself “at a loss to
find a reliable and justifiable criterion for selecting from these.”122 Selec-
tion is thus transformed into a new problem that the “interessante,” theo-
rized by Schlegel as a style about stylistic eclecticism and hybridity, seems
to have been expressly invented to solve. The style of the interesting fur-
ther speaks to the situation of stylistic proliferation that gave rise to it in its
strikingly diverse instances of manifestation, which, as we have seen,
rang from the novel, with its complex and self-contradictory individuals,
to the conceptual artist’s telegrams, lists, and postcards. Stylistic variety
and fluctuation are thus, in a certain sense, not only the “inner” content
or meaning of the interesting but also a formal, outwardly visible aspect
of the aesthetic style itself.123

With the interesting’s late twentieth-century mutation into the more
explicitly “rational” style of conceptual art, the problem of selection
arguably becomes even more central, for here the look of the interesting
scandalously seems to suggest the reducibility of aesthetic experience to
selective attention itself. This is certainly one way of reading John Baldes-
sari’s Choosing, a series of photographs foregrounding the eponymous
act of selecting grocery shop produce: green beans, carrots, asparagus,
garlic, rhubarb. Each row shows a finger pointing to one green bean out
of an array of three, then another as the nonchosen beans are replaced
with two others, then another as the nonchosen beans are replaced with
two others, and so on (Fig. 1). In what seems like a remedial exercising of
our ability to recognize very tiny differences, Choosing thus makes itself
coextensive with the most elemental feature of what Jan Mukafovský

![FIGURE 1]
calls the “aesthetic function,” which is simply to “isolate” and direct “maximal attention” to specific objects. From this perspective, the seemingly styleless style of Baldessari’s series, with its pun on connoisseurship by featuring acts of discerning fine differences between things of a particularly humble type, reads more like another metastyle: a style precisely about how there is “no question of style unless there is the possibility of choosing between alternate forms of expression,” as Stephen Ullman puts it. We might therefore read Choosing as an allegory both of style’s modern elevation to primary bearer of artistic meaning and of its concomitant drift into pluralized whateverness. In a sea of stylistic variety, the act of choosing becomes more important than ever to artworks, Choosing seems to say, but also, in a certain sense, less so. Eclectic and rational, idiosyncratic yet systematic, the interesting as style thus continues to be historically meaningful under conditions of postmodernity, although one of the things it points to is uncertainty about the significance of any particular style.

The style of Choosing thus directs our aesthetic attention to the affectively and cognitively minimal act of selective attention that William James simply referred to as “interest.” In its effort to reconcile the individual with the generic, Baldessari’s style might also be described as a specifically postmodern response to the modern routinization of novelty in a culture in which, because “the observation of events throughout society now occurs almost at the same time as the events themselves,” we routinely encounter what Mark Seltzer calls the “media doubling of the world.” One arguably sees this reflected in conceptual art’s fascination with the dynamic between pictures and labels, photographs and typescript, images and words. If the interesting speaks directly to this aspect of modern culture, it does so particularly in the case of what many commentators have described as a rising convergence between art and theory, a situation in which, as Bourdieu puts it, “the discourse on the work is [no longer] a simple side effect, designed to encourage its apprehension and appreciation, but a moment which is part of the production of the work, of its meaning and its value.” Although this trend would naturally become more of a scandal in the visual arts than in literature—which, as Philip Fisher notes, has had the “constant advantage or disadvantage” of sharing criticism’s linguistic medium—art’s identification with discourse about art, to a point at which the work or ergon comes to depend on a theoretical parergon for its internal integrity, has arguably become one of the most important problematics for the making, dissemination, and reception of art in our time—as important, perhaps, as the crisis between the work of art and the community it once addressed.

We have thus arrived at the convergence by Schlegel in conjunction with his account of how did this convergence of art and theory come about? In a culture of planarity and even enthusiastic forgetfulness about the field and distribution, as Alan Liu notes, people rely on histories of making libraries. A culture in which the multiplication thus encourages art’s internalization as Arthur Danto argues: “When art is not just an exercise in the interesting it becomes self-conscious of its history so that its consciousness of its history becomes unavoidable that it should turn into a self-conscious production: ‘To the extent that the field of restricted production’...” As Fisher argues, the museum’s basic task—identifying and distributing art—is the work of art—removes the original context and generates a new one, also a tacit “reading” of the Matisse. This tendency to try to exert greater control over some form of their own commentary
which is simply to "isolate" and direct objects. In the same blow, its merely the series as a humorous comment on style as "choosing within some set of things of a particularly humble type, a style precisely about how there is the possibility of choosing between styles: a style approximately about how there is the possibility of choosing between styles. Stephen Ullman puts it. We might legory both of style's modern elevation and of its concomitant drift into stylistic variety, the act of choosing as "choosing among stylistic acts of a particularly humble type, le: a style precisely about how there is the possibility of choosing between styles."

Choosing seems to say, Eclectic and rational, idiosyncratic yet thus continues to be historically modernity, although one of the things sector of selective attention that William James in his effort to reconcile the individual might also be described as a specifically modern routinization of novelty in a culture of events throughout society now oc with events themselves, we routinely enter the "media doubling of the world." In conceptual art's fascination with the sel, photographs and typescript, images asks directly to this aspect of modern culture, that between art and theory, a situation in discourse on the work is [no longer] a courage its apprehension and appreciation of the production of the work, of its high this trend would naturally become arts than in literature—which, as Philip has advantage or disadvantage" of sharing its identification with discourse about or ergon comes to depend on a theoreti
ginity, has arguably become one of the the making, dissemination, and recep-
tion of art in our time—as important, perhaps, as the loss of the antithesis between the work of art and the commodity.

We have thus arrived at the convergence of art with theory called for by Schlegel in conjunction with his advocacy for the "interessante." Exactly how did this convergence of art with theory come about, and how does the postwar style of the merely interesting come to be a particular reflection on it? In a culture of planned obsolescence devoted to the systematic and even enthusiastic forgetting of older technologies of production and distribution, as Alan Liu notes, it is increasingly institutions that people rely on for histories of making: universities, museums, archives, libraries. A culture in which the making of art is institutionally mediated thus encourages art's internalization of history and thereby theory, as Arthur Danto argues: "When art internalizes its own history, when it becomes self-conscious of its history as it has come to be in our time, so that its consciousness of its history forms part of its nature, it is perhaps unavoidable that it should turn into philosophy at last." Bourdieu makes a similar point, although he links the phenomenon more specifically to the development toward greater autonomy of the field of cultural production: "To the extent that the field closes in on itself, a practical mastery of the specific attainments of the whole history of the genre which are objectified in past works and recorded, codified, and canonized by the whole corpus of professionals of conservation and celebration—historians of art and literature, exegetes, analysts—becomes part of the entry into the field of restricted production." Although this is the case for all producers, the situation is felt most acutely in and perhaps even driven by the avant-garde, "who are [most] controlled by the past when it comes to their intention to surpass it." In much the same vein, Paul Mann argues that the avant-garde is best understood less in terms of its agon with institutions than as the "vanguard of [the] reflexive awareness of the fundamentally discursive character of art."

It could be said, however, that the cultural agent playing the most direct role in promoting the convergence of art and theory that the rise of the interesting comes to index is less "discourse" than the museum. As Fisher argues, the museum's basic technique of display—placing works removed from their original context next to and between others similarly removed from theirs—generates a frame of implicit commentary around each individual work. The placement of a Matisse painting next to a Japanese wood-block print as opposed to a Renoir, for example, functions as a tacit "reading" of the Matisse. This institutional practice spurs artists to try to exert greater control over their work's reception by offering some form of their own commentary in advance—and indeed, by making
Our aesthetic categories

use of the museum's own display or dissemination techniques in a preemptive or homeopathic way. Enter the series, which comes to replace the "no-longer-intelligible single work" as the "basic unit" of artistic production from the late nineteenth century onward. From Monet’s haystacks to Bernd and Hilla Becher’s grain elevators, the serial format offers the perfect strategy for internalizing commentary, Fisher argues, since "only one picture exists at any instant as a picture, the others are temporarily explication, frame, and criticism." Indeed, the “power of the series lies in the skill with which each picture can exchange roles; now a sensory experience, exhaustively commented on by the rest of the series; a moment from now, part of the explication for one of the other pictures.”

In this manner, the artist in the modern culture of museums (and, we might add, university syllabi and literary anthologies) finds a way of controlling the implicit commentary externally conferred by the work’s anticipated “neighbors” by supplying it with its own internal logic of betweenness. In creating meaning through this logic of things placed next to or between others placed next to others in turn, there is thus a sense in which the series is an inherently interesting form, one reminding us that *inter esse* means “to be between; in the interval,” or “among and in the midst of things.” In a related move, art in the modern culture of museums also becomes serial in its anticipation of itself “in some moment of the future, [as] a step within a sequence that anyone living at that moment of the future will think of as its past” (91). Serial and/or interesting art—an art of the ongoing and the in-between—thus comes to prevail in cultures in which the artist routinely “finds himself face to face with an intellectual world that articulates and surrounds his working life with a full-scale History of Art within which he is forced to see himself as an episode” (97).

Ever since its first major theorization as a style by a literary critic, the interesting has indexed this increasingly intimate relationship between art and criticism. Indeed, as Phyllis Tuchman notes in “Minimalism: Art of the Interesting,” it was the critical discourse surrounding the minimalist sculpture of the 1960s—serial, modular works typically made of industrial materials—that first “revived Schlegel’s ‘Cult of the Interesting’ for the late twentieth century.” In essays ranging from Rose’s “ABC Art” to Donald Judd’s “Specific Objects,” but perhaps most famously in Michael Fried’s “Art and Objecthood,” which explicitly critiques Judd’s use of the term “interesting,” debates about interest and boredom have become a canonical part of the history of minimalism. Yet my sense is that as an eclectic, discursive style reflecting the integration of art and theory, the style of the interesting as initially conceived by Schlegel and the German romantic ironists really comes most into its own with conceptual

art, a much more eclectic and miscellaneous made of a much greater range of materials—drawings, maps, transcripts, slides, blotters, minimalism-shared by the postbourgeois media and its “continuous circulation into its very form (chapter) and its early serialized novel, which integrated circulation into its very form (chapter) and its continuous circulation into its very form (chapter).” Pathways for the dissemination thus became an object of both positive and negative critique. Douglas Huebler, Robert Barry, and gallerist Seth Siegelaub, found multiple implications of the idea that in the process of any artwork becomes “defined ab initio, the course about itself.” As Liz Kotz “obsession with the most minimal, red as an attempt to make the process of movement of information and bodies and communication (for example, high lines), which as Jameson notes are also

It stands to reason that the interesting and the acts of comparison that self-prone to variation in ways that categories in this study. In other words, the forms or materials in which the art to fluctuate more dramatically than With its focus on interesting individuals and yet utterly typical), the nineteenth century in common with the informational
or dissemination techniques in a preeminent role the series, which comes to replace the work as the “basic unit” of artistic productivity onward. From Monet’s haystacks in elevators, the serial format offers the commentary, Fisher argues, since “only as a picture, the others are temporarily a.”¹³⁴ Indeed, the “power of the series lies not in changing roles; now a sensory exchange on by the rest of the series; a modulation for one of the other pictures.”¹³⁵ The modern culture of museums (and, we literary anthologies) finds a way of confronting externally conferred by the work’s logic can exchange roles; now a sensory external conferred by the work’s logic of things placed next to others in turn, there is thus a sense in the interval,” or “among and in the network, art in the modern culture of museums pattern of itself “in some moment of the moment that anyone living at that moment of art” (91). Serial and/or interesting art—an two—thus comes to prevail in cultures finds himself face to face with an intellectual surrounding his working life with a full-scale forced to see himself as an episode” (97). Critique as a style by a literary critic, the increasingly intimate relationship between Elis Tuchman notes in “Minimalism: Art critical discourse surrounding the minimal, modular works typically made of invented Schlegel’s ‘Cult of the Interesting’”¹³⁶ In essays ranging from Rose’s “ABC Objects,” but perhaps most famously in “dood,” which explicitly critiques Judd’s debates about interest and boredom have history of minimalism.¹³⁷ Yet my sense is style reflecting the integration of art and art, a much more eclectic and miscellaneous, often language-based art made of a much greater range of materials: index cards, invoices, pencil drawings, maps, transcripts, slides, blood samples, photographs. While sharing minimalism’s and, indeed, all modern art’s preference for serial forms, conceptual art was more explicitly concerned with the kinds of sociality bound up with print capitalism and specific communication technologies; with the postbourgeois public sphere projected by the mass media and its “continuous circulation of discourse-objects.”¹³⁸ Like the early serialized novel, which integrated the intermittent temporality of its circulation into its very form (chapters), conceptual art drew the dynamics of media distribution into the form of its works as well, which over the decade increasingly took the guise of media objects such as postcards, telegrams, classified ads, posters, magazine articles, and answering-machine messages. Although not all the artists associated with the movement viewed this use of “publicity as medium” as progressive,¹³⁹ conceptual art’s investment in the interesting seems directly related to its being gripped by the idea that at a “fundamental level works of art are determined neither by aesthetic nor by strictly ideological rules, but rather by their ability to move through and hence maintain the discursive apparatus.”¹⁴⁰ Pathways for the dissemination and exchange of information thus became an object of both positive and negative fascination for artists like Douglas Huebler, Robert Barry, and others, who, like the innovative gallerist Seth Siegelaub, found multiple ways of exploring the various implications of the idea that in the postwar “media economy,” the value of any artwork becomes “defined above all by its power to generate discourse about [itself].”¹⁴¹ As Liz Kotz implies, conceptual art’s infamous “obsession with the most minimal, redundant, and empty of messages”—which is to say, its investment in the merely interesting—can thus be seen as an attempt to make the process of circulation visible by tracking the movement of information and bodies through systems of transportation and communication (for example, highways, the postal system, and telex lines), which as Jameson notes are also kinds of “media.”¹⁴²

It stands to reason that the interesting, as a style explicitly about difference and the acts of comparison that make its perception possible, is itself prone to variation in ways that exceed those of the other aesthetic categories in this study. In other words, what the interesting “looks like,” and the forms or materials in which the style tends to manifest itself, tends to fluctuate more dramatically than in the case of the cute or the zany. With its focus on interesting individuals (persons who are at once unique and yet utterly typical), the nineteenth-century novel seems to have little in common with the informational aesthetic of late twentieth-century
conceptual art, which clearly prefers the representation of networks and systems over that of human beings. Yet it is the serial, epistemological, essentially comparative style of the interesting that allows us to see both practices as sharing a commitment to a certain kind of realism, and as efforts to grapple with a strikingly similar set of issues specific to modernity: the routinization of novelty, the tension between individualization and standardization, and the new intimacy between art and criticism. Invested in both cases in checking experiences of “reality” against one’s “notes on reality,” the style of the interesting speaks directly to the making and disseminating of art under conditions of stylistic multiplicity and variety in a fully mediatized culture; one in which, as George Oppen writes, “we will be told at once / Of anything that happens.”

Judgment

To consider aesthetic categories like the cute and the interesting not only as styles of objects but as subjective, feeling-based judgments—relatively codified ways of sharing our pleasure and displeasure with others—is to go straight to the heart of philosophical aesthetics in a way that might make us wonder why so much less attention in recent work on everyday aesthetics has been given to this arguably fundamental aspect of what aesthetic experience in general entails. For Kant, beauty is famously not a stylistic property of objects but rather, as the *Critique of Judgment* progressively reveals, a compulsory sharing of pleasure that refers the subject to a relation among his subjective capacities, which in turn refers him to a relation between the world in general and his ability to know it. Yet in a sense the asymmetry between the attention to style and judgment in current work on aesthetic categories is not hard to understand. The question of judgment can seem to open a can of worms—that of the undeniable relativism of feeling-based evaluations—that threatens to distract from the more concretely satisfying task of analyzing the stylistic properties of objects, by casting doubt about their very objectivity.

In addition, the discursive side of aesthetic categories, which is woven into the fabric of everyday conversation, is both less visible and surprisingly complex. For one thing, as Stanley Cavell shows, aesthetic judgments belong to the especially troublesome class of performative utterances J. L. Austin classified as perlocutionary: actions such as praising, criticizing, complimenting, soothing, or insulting, which, in contrast to illocutionary acts like betting and marrying, are more successfully performed in an implicit rather than an explicit form. “Beautiful dress!” is a more auspi-

uous way of complimenting, for example—as if words were magic spells, an aspect of perlocutionary utterances for which Cavell illuminates as evident by the subset he calls “passional praise” as the power to assess their accomplishment by the interlocutor. It is the person in the compliment or apology, rather than the speaker, who determines whether the act of complimenting or apologizing has successfully taken place. Cavell illuminates judgment as an analogue for aesthetic judgment, and perhaps even come off as self-aggrandizing for example, you suspect that my guess about that painting has more to do with the disappointment of the interlocutor. Yet the aspect of the art of judgment in the *Critique of Judgment*, in which the duality of the good, and the beautiful are laid out as how we converse about them, in Kant’s description, as a kind of computergenerated image that refers the subject to a relation among his subjective capacities, which in turn refers him to a relation between the world in general and his ability to know it.

In addition, the discursive side of aesthetic categories, which is woven into the fabric of everyday conversation, is both less visible and surprisingly complex. For one thing, as Stanley Cavell shows, aesthetic judgments belong to the especially troublesome class of performative utterances J. L. Austin classified as perlocutionary: actions such as praising, criticizing, complimenting, soothing, or insulting, which, in contrast to illocutionary acts like betting and marrying, are more successfully performed in an implicit rather than an explicit form. “Beautiful dress!” is a more auspi-
Introduces the representation of networks and
ings. Yet it is the serial, epistemological,
the interesting that allows us to see both
ent to a certain kind of realism, and as
gy similar set of issues specific to moder­
ity, the tension between individualization
new intimacy between art and criticism.
ing experiences of “reality” against one’s
be interesting speaks directly to the mak­
er conditions of stylistic multiplicity and
ature; one in which, as George Oppen
Of anything that happens.”

like the cute and the interesting not only
itive, feeling-based judgments—relatively
asure and displeasure with others—is to
osophical aesthetics in a way that might
ess attention in recent work on everyday
is arguably fundamental aspect of what
ents. For Kant, beauty is famously not a
rather, as the Critique of Judgment pro-
sharing of pleasure that refers the sub-
jective capacities, which in turn refers him
in general and his ability to know it. Yet
en the attention to style and judgment in
ories is not hard to understand. The ques-
 in a can of worms—that of the undeniable
ations—that threatens to distract from
sk of analyzing the stylistic properties of
their very objectivity.
e of aesthetic categories, which is woven
eration, is both less visible and surpris-
Stanley Cavell shows, aesthetic judgments
some class of performative utterances
onary: actions such as praising, criticiz-
insulting, which, in contrast to illocution-
g, are more successfully performed in an
form. “Beautiful dress!” is a more auspi-
cious way of complimenting, for example, than intoning “I compliment
you”—as if words were magic spells, Cavell notes. The most important
feature of perlocutionary utterances for Cavell, as is made particularly
evident by the subset he calls “passionate utterances,” is the way in which
the power to assess their accomplishment shifts from the speaker to the
interlocutor. It is the person in the position of possibly receiving a
compliment or apology, rather than the one who offers it, who ultimately
determines whether the act of complimenting and apologizing has suc-
cessfully taken place. Cavell illumines all this by focusing on infelicitous
praise as an analogue for aesthetic judgments that fail to be convincing
and perhaps even come off as self-aggrandizing or annoying (as when,
for example, you suspect that my gushing over the beauty of a Rothko
painting has more to do with the display of my cultural capital than
anything else). Yet the aspect of the aesthetic judgment brought out by
Cavell—its felicity or potential infelicity as verbal action—underscores
the philosophical and not just sociological significance of this class of
utterances.

Cavell thus brings out the surprising relevance of Austin’s philosophy
of ordinary language for high aesthetic theory, and particularly for our
understanding of “the feature of the aesthetic claim, as suggested by
Kant’s description, as a kind of compulsion to share a pleasure, hence as
tinged with an anxiety that the claim stands to be rebuked” (9). Al-
though it seems entirely possible to form judgments of aesthetic quality
privately in our heads, as if aesthetic pleasure was not a feeling reflex-
ively felt to require public confirmation by others, this is not the way in
which Kant describes it. As reflected in § 6 and especially § 7 from the
Critique of Judgment, in which the differences among the pleasant, the
good, and the beautiful are laid out first and foremost as differences in
how we converse about them, in Kant’s account it does not seem possi-
bile to judge something aesthetically without speaking, or at the very
least imagining oneself speaking. Nor does it seem possible to judge
aesthetically without making the necessary “error” of putting one’s
judgment in the form of a descriptive, third-person statement (“X is
cute”) rather than in the form of a first-person performative that looks
more transparently like the subjective evaluation it is (“I judge X cute”);
a form enabling the speaker to intensify the force of her necessary claim
that everyone else should make the same judgment. Note the parallel
between this error and the issues surrounding the felicity of the perlocu-
tionary act of complimenting. Although saying “I judge this cute” may
be a more accurate description of what is really going on when I judge
Our Aesthetic Categories

40 OUR AESTHETIC CATEGORIES

things than my saying “This is cute,” the former is actually far less effective as a judgment than the latter. For aesthetic judgment is less like a propositional statement than an intersubjective demand—which is to say, less like a constative than a performative that performs best when disguised as a constative. In the end, Kant’s judgment of beauty destabilizes the same opposition as How to Do Things with Words, when Austin discards his initial, heuristic constative/performative distinction for his account of locutionary, perlocutionary, and illocutionary force. Indeed, it is precisely by showing how utterances that look constative are actually performative, or how performativity by no means depends on the “use of the first person singular and of the present indicative active,” that Austin is able to develop his account of perlocutionary utterances in the first place.148

There is thus something covert or surreptitious, if in a paradoxically overt way, about the rhetorical work of aesthetic categories. One might say that as perlocutionary speech acts similar to apologizing, complimenting, or criticizing, or as performative that actually do their work best when they are disguised as propositional statements, they produce a kind of semblance or illusion at the level of discourse that corresponds to the more familiar semblance or illusion of style. What Schiller, Adorno, and Langer call Schein—a seeming or appearing—is thus central to aesthetic categories on both sides of the judgment/style divide. Building on Frank Sibley’s work on aesthetic properties, Gérard Genette underscores this in his account of aesthetic predicates as “persuasive or valorizing descriptions that bridge the abyss between fact and value without becoming too conspicuous.”149 Because the zany and the cute are “semidescriptive or semijudgmental,” they are essentially “means [by] which one judges under cover of describing.”150 The main difference between aesthetic and nonaesthetic predicates is thus that the “descriptive cover” under which the former “smuggle” their axiological charge (note the language of covert action here) enables aesthetic predicates to function as implicit justifications of themselves (92). This self-justification underscores the way in which all aesthetic judgments presuppose their embeddedness in arguments, which in turn once again reminds us, as John Guillory does, of the “constitutive role of conflict for any discourse of value.”152 Genette explains: “A value judgment does not follow from a factual judgment like ‘This painting is square-shaped’ [or] ‘This symphony is in C major’; however, it can create the illusion it does by putting forward as a descriptive term a predicate carrying a positive or negative appraisal: ‘This painting is balanced (or immobile),’ ‘This symphony is majestic (or pompous).’”153

Aesthetic judgments, once again, the apparitional quality at the level of rhetoric making it seem as if value judgments that this is “what our aesthetic predicates it is even “what they are for”—enables that this is “what our aesthetic predicates it is even “what they are for”—enables a provocative claim (92). Since aesthetic judgments always boil down to an act of projection of subjective feeling (as Genette’s notion of aesthetic appreciation”), aesthetic predicates become better “tools of objectification powerful as aesthetic judgments than such as ‘It’s beautiful’ or ‘It’s ugly.’”151 Classic appreciations should be reclassified as mere “statements of one’s positive aesthetic predicates proper, which need of evaluation with description (92).

Given the importance of this component of hand it enables on the part of aesthetic judgments just the case that the judgment “cute” becomes as an aesthetic claim as “beautiful” (or justification with description, or the act of judgment in which “beautiful” does not, by Genette’s greater force as an aesthetic judgment constitutive to suggest that our most effective with the greatest perlocutionary force propelled to implicitly or covertly justify it is precisely because “cute” seems to result that it becomes all the more forceful as a demand necessarily masked in a collaborative discourse, often deeply pleasurable act to participate in, in its own right, were at the own intersubjective and affective dynamic set of feelings we might feel when we public and check them against the proprieties what Elaine Scarry calls acts of public adjustment.”154 Yet, as the preceding aesthetic judgments seem to make this “beautiful and taste,” which, as Hannah Arendt notes possible opposition to the very nature, of the sense [of taste] itself,” as both Arendt and Lyotard underscore.
"cute," the former is actually far less effective. For aesthetic judgment is less like an intersubjective demand—which is to say performative that performs best when it end, Kant's judgment of beauty destabilizes Do Things with Words, when Austinian constituent/performative distinction for locutionary, and illocutionary force. In how utterances that look constative are performativity by no means depends on fact and value without becoming too any and the cute are "semidescriptive or initially "means [by] which one judges the main difference between aesthetic and the "descriptive cover" under which logical charge (note the language of poetic predicates to function as implicit justifi-
This self-justification underscores the way its presuppose their embeddedness in ar-
again reminds us, as John Guillory does, "in war for any discourse of value." Gen-
ent does not follow from a factual judgment-shapped' [or] "This symphony is in C the illusion it does by putting forward as carrying a positive or negative appraisal: immobile," "This symphony is majestic (or
Aesthetic judgments, once again, thus produce a kind of illusion or apparitional quality at the level of rhetoric, analogous to that of style, by making it seem as if value judgments follow from factual ones. The idea that this is "what our aesthetic predicates help us do"—and perhaps that it is even "what they are for"—enables Genette to make an even more provocative claim (92). Since aesthetic appreciation, positive or negative, always boils down to an act of projection or the externalizing objectification of subjective feeling (as Genette's stresses, "objectification constitutes aesthetic appreciation"), aesthetic predicates with descriptive specificity become better "tools of objectification" and, as such, more rhetorically powerful as aesthetic judgments than "undifferentiated appreciation[s] such as 'It's beautiful' or 'It's ugly.' " Indeed, Genette suggests that these classic appreciations should be reclassified as purely evaluative "verdicts," or mere "statements of one's positive or negative opinion," rather than as aesthetic predicates proper, which necessarily involve some compression of evaluation with description (92).

Given the importance of this compression and the rhetorical sleight of hand it enables on the part of aesthetic judgment in general, it is not just the case that the judgment "cute" has just as much standing or power as an aesthetic claim as "beautiful." Because "cute" conflates evaluation with description, or the act of judgment with justification, in a way in which "beautiful" does not, by Genette's account the former has even greater force as an aesthetic judgment. Although it may seem counterintuitive to suggest that our most effective aesthetic judgments—the ones with the greatest perlocutionary force—are ones that seem most compelled to implicitly or covertly justify themselves, Genette suggests that it is precisely because "cute" seems to need to make an argument for itself that it becomes all the more forceful as an aesthetic claim, which is to say, a demand necessarily masked in a constative form. It is as if aesthetic discourse, often deeply pleasurable and/or wildly irritating to participate in, in its own right, were at the deepest level a discourse about its own intersubjective and affective dynamics: about the complicated new set of feelings we might feel when we make our pleasures/displeasures public and check them against the pleasures/displeasures of others in what Elaine Scarry calls acts of perpetual "self-correction and self-adjustment." Yet, as the preceding discussion suggests, certain aesthetic judgments seem to make this "basic other-directedness of judgment and taste," which, as Hannah Arendt notes, "seems to stand in the greatest possible opposition to the very nature, the absolutely idiosyncratic nature, of the sense [of taste] itself," more transparent than others. As both Arendt and Lyotard underscore in their readings of Kant's concept
of the *sensus communis*, for Kant, what makes the faculty of judgment stand apart from all the other faculties is the way in which it presupposes or compels us to imagine other people capable of speech and judgment too: "Kant stresses that at least one of our mental faculties, the faculty of judgment, presupposes the presence of others." For this reason, Arendt writes, "One judges always as a member of community, guided by one's community sense, one's *sensus communis*" (75). Indeed, there is an implication that one creates or brings this "community sense" into existence by judging. And as Arendt stresses, judging not only presupposes others but others capable of speech: "The *sensus communis* is the specifically human sense because communication, i.e. speech, depends on it. To make our needs known, to express fear, joy, etc., we would not need speech. Gestures would be good enough, and sounds would be a good enough substitute for gestures if one needed to bridge long distances. Communication is not expression" (70). For Arendt, the "communication" that Kant's aesthetic judgment always presupposes and invokes—one that clearly goes beyond the making known of needs—is thus, as she says explicitly, "speech." There is thus, by extension, no *sensus communis* (and no aesthetic judgment) without speaking in response to real or imaginary others speaking.

For Genette and others, to make a judgment of aesthetic quality, with its necessary demand for universality, is to project one's negative or positive feelings onto the object in such a totalizing fashion that the subjective basis of the judgment—its grounding in feeling as opposed to concepts—by no means undermines the objectivity of the aesthetic quality as such. As Adorno puts it in *Aesthetic Theory* in an echo of what Ross Wilson calls the "Kantian Rettung," or the "attempt made throughout Kant's philosophy to salvage or rescue objectivity by way of the subject," "Even in its fallibility and weakness, the subject who contemplates art is not expected simply to retreat from the claim to objectivity. . . . The more the observer adds to the process, the greater the energy with which he penetrates the artwork, the more he then becomes aware of objectivity from within. . . . *The subjective detour may totally miss the mark, but without the detour no objectivity becomes evident." As Wilson notes, Kant's attempt to recuperate aesthetic objectivity through the subject in the *Critique of Judgment* is analogous to his attempt to recuperate objective cognition in the *Critique of Reason* (67). Indeed, in Kant the subjectivity (and performativity) of aesthetic valuation is disclosed as precisely essential, though in a way inevitably obscured by the judgment's necessarily objective (and constative) form. Kant discloses the aesthetic judgment of the beautiful in particular as referring to the subject's own cognitive capacities, if in a way strangely opaque to the subject.

The subject of beauty seems both to recognize and feel what calls for a "critique" of taste in the subject as explicitly opposed to a "pure" in the sense of being radically judgments like "This vase is red" or "This vase was made in China by people must prejudged that judgments of taste—and by Genette's argument, that the "Kantian Rettung," or the the "Kantian Rettung," or the "attempt made throughout Kant's philosophy to salvage or rescue objectivity by way of the subject," "Even in its fallibility and weakness, the subject who contemplates art is not expected simply to retreat from the claim to objectivity. . . . The more the observer adds to the process, the greater the energy with which he penetrates the artwork, the more he then becomes aware of objectivity from within. . . . *The subjective detour may totally miss the mark, but without the detour no objectivity becomes evident." As Wilson notes, Kant's attempt to recuperate aesthetic objectivity through the subject in the *Critique of Judgment* is analogous to his attempt to recuperate objective cognition in the *Critique of Reason* (67). Indeed, in Kant the subjectivity (and performativity) of aesthetic valuation is disclosed as precisely essential, though in a way inevitably obscured by the judgment's necessarily objective (and constative) form. Kant discloses the aesthetic judgment of the beautiful in particular as referring to the subject's own cognitive capacities, if in a way strangely opaque to the subject.

The subject of beauty seems both to recognize and feel what calls for a "critique" of taste in the subject as explicitly opposed to a "pure" in the sense of being radically judgments like "This vase is red" or "This vase was made in China by people must prejudged that judgments of taste—and by Genette's argument, that the "Kantian Rettung," or the "attempt made throughout Kant's philosophy to salvage or rescue objectivity by way of the subject," "Even in its fallibility and weakness, the subject who contemplates art is not expected simply to retreat from the claim to objectivity. . . . The more the observer adds to the process, the greater the energy with which he penetrates the artwork, the more he then becomes aware of objectivity from within. . . . *The subjective detour may totally miss the mark, but without the detour no objectivity becomes evident." As Wilson notes, Kant's attempt to recuperate aesthetic objectivity through the subject in the *Critique of Judgment* is analogous to his attempt to recuperate objective cognition in the *Critique of Reason* (67). Indeed, in Kant the subjectivity (and performativity) of aesthetic valuation is disclosed as precisely essential, though in a way inevitably obscured by the judgment's necessarily objective (and constative) form. Kant discloses the aesthetic judgment of the beautiful in particular as referring to the subject's own cognitive capacities, if in a way strangely opaque to the subject.

The subject of beauty seems both to recognize and feel what calls for a "critique" of taste in the subject as explicitly opposed to a "pure" in the sense of being radically judgments like "This vase is red" or "This vase was made in China by people must prejudged that judgments of taste—and by Genette's argument, that the "Kantian Rettung," or the "attempt made throughout Kant's philosophy to salvage or rescue objectivity by way of the subject," "Even in its fallibility and weakness, the subject who contemplates art is not expected simply to retreat from the claim to objectivity. . . . The more the observer adds to the process, the greater the energy with which he penetrates the artwork, the more he then becomes aware of objectivity from within. . . . *The subjective detour may totally miss the mark, but without the detour no objectivity becomes evident." As Wilson notes, Kant's attempt to recuperate aesthetic objectivity through the subject in the *Critique of Judgment* is analogous to his attempt to recuperate objective cognition in the *Critique of Reason* (67). Indeed, in Kant the subjectivity (and performativity) of aesthetic valuation is disclosed as precisely essential, though in a way inevitably obscured by the judgment's necessarily objective (and constative) form. Kant discloses the aesthetic judgment of the beautiful in particular as referring to the subject's own cognitive capacities, if in a way strangely opaque to the subject.
nt, what makes the faculty of judgment culties is the way in which it presupposes people capable of speech and judgment one of our mental faculties, the faculty of voice of others." For this reason, Arendt a member of community, guided by one's *communis* (75). Indeed, there is an impli­­

tation, i.e. speech, depends on it. To make a feeling, joy, etc., we would not need speech. h, and sounds would be a good enough eded to bridge long distances. Communi­

For Arendt, the "communication" that says presupposes and invokes—one that g known of needs—is thus, as she says by extension, no *sensus communis* (and speaking in response to real or imaginary
due to the completion of aesthetic judgments, the subject is not expected to objectivity... The more the observer the energy with which he penetrates the mes aware of objectivity from within... . . . ly miss the mark, but without the detour ." As Wilson notes, Kant's attempt to through the subject in the *Critique of empt* to recuperate objective cognition in leed, in Kant the subjectivity (and perfor­­
is disclosed as precisely essential, though the judgment's necessarily objective (and s the aesthetic judgment of the beautiful subject's own cognitive capacities, if in a

way strangely opaque to the subject herself. Indeed, the fact that the subject of beauty seems both to recognize and not to recognize what her feeling of pleasure actually refers to, a capacity or power on the part of the subject as explicitly opposed to a quality of the object, is, for Kant, what calls for a "critique" of taste in the first place (and as Tom Huhn argues, is what explicitly motivates him to bring in his discussion of the sublime, in which the subjective agency misrecognized in the judging subject's experience of beauty is finally acknowledged).

This reference to a relation among subjective capacities (as opposed to an objective property) is why the Kantian judgment of beauty is Concept­­less: "pure" in the sense of being radically disconnected from non-aesthetic judgments like "This vase is red" or "This vase is made of plastic" or "This vase was made in China by people making 64 cents an hour." But most judgments of taste—and by Genette's account, the most powerful one­­page we saw earlier, compressions of description and evaluation, underscoring Mukařovský's insight that aesthetic value is always a "chemistry" or dynamic interaction between aesthetic and extra-aesthetic values. For Mukařovský, this dynamic defines art as well as "development within the sphere of aesthetics"; indeed, "the degree of independent value of an artistic artifact will be greater to the degree that the bundle of extra aesthetic values which it attracts is greater" (91). Nick Zangwill puts the point even more strongly, arguing that however correct or incorrect, our perception of aesthetic judgments as tethered to non-aesthetic judgments is not only necessary for but constitutive of aesthetic thought: "One cannot think that beauty is bare; it is essential to aesthetic thought to realize that the aesthetic properties of a thing arise from its nonaesthetic properties." This is not very far from Adorno's argument that genuine aesthetic experience, while wholly dependent on a spontaneous subjective response, nonetheless requires a kind of reflection: "Namely, that the substance grasped through the completed experience is reflected and named in its relationship to the material of the work and the language of its forms." Whereas beauty tends to mask this "non-aesthetic dependence" on the part of all aesthetic judgments (including itself), the interesting, the cute, and the zany make it explicit: the interesting by overtly soliciting non-aesthetic judgments in justification of itself (we will see how this works in Chapter 2); the cute and the zany by wearing their descriptive content on their sleeves, producing an appearance of self-justification that in turn creates the illusion of judgments of value being logically entailed by judgments of fact.

Thus although "there is no realm of pure aesthetic experience, or object which elicits nothing but that experience," as John Guillory puts it
(noting in particular that it is “impossible to experience any cultural product apart from its status as cultural capital [high or low]”), the “specificity of aesthetic experience is not contingent on its ‘purity’” (336). Obvious as this last point may seem from the standpoint of content-laden aesthetic categories like the ones in this study, the fact that so many intelligent commentators have written as if the specificity of aesthetic experience did in fact hinge on its existing in a pure form, uncombined with other socially meaningful practices, underscores the disadvantages (which I am hardly the first to note) of an aesthetic theory modeled exclusively or even primarily on beauty. Guillory’s point about the “mixed condition” of aesthetic judgments—how, in an obvious and yet strangely not-so-obvious way, they can be broken down into any number of extra-aesthetic judgments informed by a variety of social affiliations and interests—also applies to their affective foundations. Although theorists continue to attribute the specificity of aesthetic experience to the presence of a single, exceptional emotion—what Nelson Goodman sarcastically refers to as “aesthetic phlogiston”—most of our aesthetic experiences are based on some combination of ordinary ones. Aesthetic judgments based on clashing feelings, in particular—tenderness and aggression, as in the case of the cute; interest and boredom, as in the case of the interesting—seem to allegorize by reflecting the way in which aesthetic judgments “only make sense as part of [arguments]” and thus disputes between subjects and social groups. Yet not all aesthetic judgments make this argumentative context transparent. Indeed, certain judgments not only seem incapable of acknowledging this underlying state of discursive conflict but also actively work to conceal it.

This strangely covert aspect of aesthetic judgment—its way of referring our feelings of pleasure and displeasure not just to objects or even our own subjective capacities, but also to the social matrix of others with whom we are compelled to share and confirm these feelings in public—is perhaps made most perspicuous by the judgment of “interesting.” As evinced by its sheer ubiquity in everyday conversation, “interesting” is in fact the one aesthetic category in our repertoire that explicitly reflects on aesthetic discourse—on how people actually talk about pleasure and value. Davis cleverly captures this discursive orientation in “Interesting,” another compressed story of manners consisting entirely of the narrator’s judgment of other people’s conversation and/or conversational abilities:

My friend is interesting, but he is not in his apartment.

Their conversation appears interesting but they are speaking a language I do not understand.

They are both reputed to be interesting but they are speaking a language I do not understand such as “I see” and “interesting.”

This man has a good understanding of it is interesting but they are speaking a language I do not understand.

Here is a woman I know coming up to me, an interesting woman. What excites her?

At a party, a highly nervous man talks about subjects that do not particularly interest me, but he is never interesting, and he is so smart and because he gives me so much that I am not interested of listening to him.

Here is a very handsome English traffic cop, and so animated, and has such a minute, I do finally find him interesting but he is never interesting, and he is so smart and because he gives me so much that I am not interested of listening to him.

Note the elusiveness of the aesthetic experiencing for. The one friend who is interesting expects to find him, while the two others could be interesting finally cannot be objects in languages that the speaker does not know how the evaluation of interesting furthers to particular ways of speaking: rapid, minute, animatedly, with an English a graph in which it seems like the narrator avoids, replaced for some reason by cause he is so smart and because he gives me so much that I get tired of listening to him.”
They are both reputed to be interesting people and I'm sure their conversation is interesting, but they are speaking a language I understand only a little, so I catch only fragments such as "I see" and "on Sunday" and "unfortunately."

This man has a good understanding of his subject and says many things about it that are probably interesting in themselves, but I am not interested because the subject does not interest me.

Here is a woman I know coming up to me. She is very excited, but she is not an interesting woman. What excites her will not be interesting, it will simply not be interesting.

At a party, a highly nervous man talking fast says many smart things about subjects that do not particularly interest me, such as the restoration of historic houses and in particular the age of wallpaper. Yet, because he is so smart and because he gives me so much information per minute, I do not get tired of listening to him.

Here is a very handsome English traffic engineer. The fact that he is so handsome, and so animated, and has such a fine English accent makes it appear, each time he begins to speak, that he is about to say something interesting, but he is never interesting, and he is saying something, once again, about traffic patterns.164

Note the elusiveness of the aesthetic experience "Interesting" goes searching for. The one friend who is interesting cannot be found where one expects to find him, while the two conversations that seem like they could be interesting finally cannot be experienced as such, since they are in languages that the speaker does not understand. Thus, while showing how the evaluation of interesting functions as a specific index of the ways in which language circulates between different discursive groups, each paragraph defines the aesthetic experience negatively, in terms of a missed encounter or insufficiency of knowledge. Indeed, six of the seven paragraphs in "Interesting" are accounts of why the narrator, in some dialogic context, did not find something or someone interesting. In each case the explanation or justification for the judgment’s withholding refers to particular ways of speaking: rapidly, with so much information per minute, animatedly, with an English accent, and so on. In the only paragraph in which it seems like the narrator may have indeed found the speech or speaker interesting, the term “interesting” is conspicuously avoided, replaced for some reason by a euphemism. Instead of "Yet, because he is so smart and because he gives me so much information per minute, I do finally find him interesting," we get: "Yet, because he is so smart and because he gives me so much information per minute, I do not get tired of listening to him."
Comically, with the exception of the missing friend with whom no conversation actually takes place, nothing finally does get judged interesting in “Interesting,” a series of accounts of noninteresting conversations. Or more precisely, no judgment of interesting takes place in the story. Rather, “interesting” appears over and over again in the discourse, with a peculiar, almost incantatory insistence that becomes most pronounced at the moments of its denial: “I am not interested because the subject does not interest me”; “What excites her will not be interesting, it will simply not be interesting.” On the one hand, we could read this repetition as underscoring the judgment’s phatic dimension: “interesting” as communicative static or noise, as an empty word sounded just to test the openness of the channel. On the other hand, it is as if the point of “Interesting” is to demonstrate that “interesting” has so much performative force that even in a story in which a judge repeatedly fails to find the discourse of others interesting, the narrative nonetheless feels saturated with interestingness. For all its dramatization of the act of not finding conversations or conversationalists interesting, in other words, we still feel that “Interesting” justifies its title. Indeed, the entire text of “Interesting” could be read as an effort to show itself as deserving of its eponymous judgment. “Interesting” thus makes the feeling-based judgment of something as interesting seem paradoxically coextensive with its concept-based justification (a distinctive, logically secondary speech act) in a way that parallels Genette’s account of all aesthetic predicates as compressions of evaluation and description. The conflation of judgment and justification staged in “Interesting” is in fact endemic to the use of “interesting” in ordinary conversation, where it is often used to implicitly invite others to demand that those who make this particular aesthetic judgment (already itself a performative demand) take the next step of explaining why. In addition to highlighting the affectivity and performative force of all aesthetic judgments (demands for agreement disguised as “neutral” statements of objective fact), the interesting thus calls attention to their specifically perlocutionary nature, or to the way in which the power to assess their accomplishment shifts from speaker to listener. Always calling for its confirmation by an implicit other (as if somehow aware of its incompleteness without it), the evaluation of interesting ensures the continued circulation of discourse (and information), lubricating the pathways of its intersubjective movement and exchange. In a much more explicit way than the beautiful, the interesting thus makes people’s membership in multiple yet potentially overlapping discursive communities as transparent as “interests” themselves. For although interests always “emerge out of a war of interests, a state of conflict that is the object, or program,” as Arendt notes, the most literal significance, something which people and therefore can relate and bind, Adrian Leverkühn’s piano teacher in scores the interesting’s ability to facilitate relationships mediated specifically by the subjects—just a few pages in the novel in which Leverkühn proclaims his preference of “interesting” over passion ("love") as Wendell Kretschmar honored the principle, his lips, first formed by the English tongue, question of the interest of others, but of one’s infallibly was, if one was fundamental that when one talked about it one could infecting them with it, and so creating an already existed.167

Judging something “interesting”—the measure how worthy of everyone’s attention—is making it so. As Mann’s narrator puts it, “infallibly” creates interest. Indeed, as the course/story relation in “Interesting” with even when, in a certain sense, it does not “interesting” is explicitly pedagogical as we fundamentally interested in a thing, when hardly help drawing others in, infecting the interest up to then not present or dreamed. The judgment of the interesting not only and extends the dialogic underpinnings incident that this aesthetic category, which of aesthetic and extra-aesthetic judgments aesthetic discourse, was first theorized by who did much of their writing on the present in dialogue form. As in the case of Mar conversation-driven text deeply informed about music, the interesting can thus help role aesthetic judgments might play in our aesthetic goals. This question is one that in it I have repeatedly had to practice a ki
ties of the missing friend with whom no
ting finally does get judged interest-
accounts of noninteresting conversations.
ent of interesting takes place in the story.
ever and over again in the discourse, with
insistence that becomes most pronounced
am not interested because the subject does
sher will not be interesting, it will simply
le

hand, we could read this repetition as
atic dimension: "interesting" as communi-
t word sounded just to test the openness
and, it is as if the point of "Interesting" is
1, the entire text of "Interesting" could be
as deserving of its eponymous judgment.
 feeling-based judgment of something as
coextensive with its concept-based justifi-
secondary speech act) in a way that parallels
et predicates as compressions of evalu-
ation of judgment and justification staged
mic to the use of "interesting" in ordinary
used to implicitly invite others to demand
icular aesthetic judgment (already itself a
 the next step of explaining why. In addition
y and performative force of all aesthetic
ment disguised as "neutral" statements of
thus calls attention to their specifically
he way in which the power to assess their
speaker to listener. Always calling for its
other (as if somehow aware of its incom-
uation of interesting ensures the continued
formation), lubricating the pathways of
change. In a much more explicit way
esting thus makes people's membership in
ipping discursive communities as transparent
although interests always "emerge out of a

war of interests, a state of conflict that runs ahead of any specific goal,
object, or program,"165 as Arendt notes, they also "constitute, in the word's
most literal significance, something which inter-est, which lies between
people and therefore can relate and bind them together."166

Adrian Leverkühn's piano teacher in Doctor Faustus further underscore-
cores the interesting's ability to facilitate this binding—a "web" of social
relationships mediated specifically by the circulation of discourse between
subjects—just a few pages in the novel before the famous moment in
which Leverkühn proclaims his preference for the quasi-scientific detach-
ment of "interest" over passion ("love") as the ideal aesthetic attitude:

Wendell Kretschmar honored the principle, which we repeatedly heard from
his lips, first formed by the English tongue, that to arouse interest was not a
question of the interest of others, but of our own; it could only be done, but
then infallibly was, if one was fundamentally interested in a thing oneself, so
that when one talked about it one could hardly help drawing others in,
infecting them with it, and so creating an interest up to then not present or
dreamed of. And that was worth a great deal more than catering to one
already existent.167

Judging something "interesting"—the mere act of singling it out as some-
how worthy of everyone's attention—is often the first step in actually
making it so. As Mann's narrator puts it, talk of or about the interesting
"infallibly" creates interest. Indeed, as Davis's manipulation of the dis-
course/story relation in "Interesting" wittily suggests, it seems to do so
even when, in a certain sense, it does not. For this reason, the judgment
"interesting" is explicitly pedagogical as well as performative: "If one was
fundamentally interested in a thing, when one talked about it one could
hardly help drawing others in, infecting them with it, and so creating an
interest up to then not present or dreamed of."

The judgment of the interesting not only highlights but also protracts
and extends the dialogic underpinnings of all taste. It thus seems no ac-
cident that this aesthetic category, which makes explicit the articulation
of aesthetic and extra-aesthetic judgments underpinning all specifically
aesthetic discourse, was first theorized by artist-critics (Schlegel, Diderot)
who did much of their writing on the practice of their contemporaries
in dialogue form. As in the case of Mann's novel, a highly discursive,
conversation-driven text deeply informed by Adorno's theoretical ideas
about music, the interesting can thus help us think more deeply about the
role aesthetic judgments might play in criticism with explicitly extra-
aesthetic goals. This question is one that this entire book raises insofar as
in it I have repeatedly had to practice a kind of surreptitious judgment or
connoisseurship of my own: that is, to put forward specific objects of varying scale (and these exact objects as opposed to others) as particularly or exemplarily cute, interesting, and zany—post-imagist poetry in Chapter 1; 1960s conceptual art in Chapter 2; certain films and television shows in Chapter 3—even before advancing to any actual discussion of these objects as particularly good examples of the aesthetic category being analyzed.\textsuperscript{168}

Coda

So, to conclude by more directly confronting a theoretical question that all the readings of aesthetic categories in this book raise, but which the style and judgment of interesting seems to embody in particular: how exactly might aesthetic judgments inform criticism with extra-aesthetic goals? What role, if any, might judgments of aesthetic value play in a self-consciously “engaged” work of cultural criticism, in particular?

Although Jameson’s Postmodernism is not often read as a work of aesthetic theory, its tour-de-force, 118-page conclusion, published almost a decade after the article-length version of its much more famous introduction, tellingly opens with a discussion of this very problem. Jameson notes how “despite the trouble I took in my principal essay on the subject to explain how it was not possible...simply to celebrate postmodernism or to ‘disavow’ it,” his act of analysis was repeatedly mistaken as either a positive or negative appraisal of the entire aesthetic phenomenon (297). This confusion leads Jameson to more sharply differentiate three kinds of intellectual activity: “taste,” a practice performed by “old-fashioned critics and cultural journalists” that involves appraisals ranging from personal opinions to aesthetic judgments proper; “analysis,” the “investigation of the historical conditions of possibility of specific forms”; and the more complex and explicitly sociopolitical work of “evaluation,” with which Jameson most closely identifies his own work as a Marxist critic.

Many of these reactions [to Postmodernism] seemed to confuse taste (or opinion), analysis, and evaluation, three things I would have thought we had some interest in keeping separate. “Taste,” in the loosest media sense of personal preferences, would seem to correspond to what used to be notably and philosophically designated as “aesthetic judgment” (the change in codes and the barometrical fall in lexical dignity is at least one index of the displacement of traditional aesthetics and the transformation of the cultural sphere in modern times). “Analysis” I take to be that peculiar and rigorous conjunction of formal and historical analysis that constitutes the specific task of literary and cultural study; to describe this historical conditions of possibility of specific way in which these twin perspectives (or incommensurable in the past) can be thereby to be inseparable. Analysis in the different set of operations from a cultural and opinion; what it would be now in between such journalism—with its indicator of what I will call “evaluation,” which not “good” (after the fashion of an older aesthetic) keep alive (or to reinvent) assessments of the quality of social life itself by art, or hazard an assessment of the everyday life rather than the imprints. (298)

This may seem like a surprising taphoon. Although a much wider gulf would seem titioners of “taste” (journalists) from pl “analysis” or “literary and cultural studies” (e.g. examples of the frequent overlap betweens the closer one between analysis and evaluation and taste. It is because taste and evaluates the difference between them becomes **

The paragraph just quoted in which taste, analysis, and evaluation is immediate acknowledges the presence of judgment in a desultory way that seems intended.

As far as taste is concerned (and as readers have become aware), culturally I write of postmodernism, at least some parts of the newer visual work...The music is read; the novel is the weakest of the new excelled by its narrative counterparts in fary novel is; subgeneric narratives, how that this is essentially a visual culture, with a linguistic element...is slack and flabby, out ingenuity, daring, and keen motivation.

These are tastes, giving rise to opinion analysis of the function of such a cultur
t is, to put forward specific objects of varieties (as opposed to others) as particularly or and zany—post-imagist poetry in Chapter 2; certain films and television shows are lacking any actual discussion of these examples of the aesthetic category being

confronting a theoretical question that categories in this book raise, but which the book seems to embody in particular: how
criticism with extra-aesthetic judgments of aesthetic value play in a self-critical cultural criticism, in particular?

Postmodernism is not often read as a work of aesthetic 118-page conclusion, published almost a version of its much more famous introduction of this very problem. Jameson notes that in my principal essay on the subject to... simply to celebrate postmodernism or analysis was repeatedly mistaken as either a of the entire aesthetic phenomenon (297).

more sharply differentiate three kinds of practice performed by “old-fashioned critics involves appraisals ranging from personal proper; “analysis,” the “investigation of possibility of specific forms”; and the more political work of “evaluation,” with which his own work as a Marxist critic.

Postmodernism seemed to confuse taste (or na, three things I would have thought we had i.e. “Taste,” in the loosest media sense of per- son correspond to what used to be notably and aesthetic judgment” (the change in codes and dignity is at least one index of the displacement and the transformation of the cultural sphere take to be that peculiar and rigorous conjunction that constitutes the specific task of liter- ary and cultural study; to describe this further as the investigation of the historical conditions of possibility of specific forms may perhaps convey the way in which these twin perspectives (often thought to be irreconcilable or incommensurable in the past) can be said to constitute their object and thereby to be inseparable. Analysis in this sense can be seen to be a very different set of operations from a cultural journalism oriented around taste and opinion; what it would be now important to secure is the difference between such journalism—with its indispensable reviewing functions—and what I will call “evaluation,” which no longer turns on whether a work is “good” (after the fashion of an older aesthetic judgment), but rather tries to keep alive (or to reinvent) assessments of a sociopolitical kind that interrogate the quality of social life itself by way of the text or individual work of art, or hazard an assessment of the political effects of cultural currents or movements with less utilitarianism and a greater sympathy for the dynamics of everyday life than the imprimaturs and indexes of earlier traditions. (298)

This may seem like a surprising tack for Jameson’s inquiry to take. Although a much wider gulf would seem to separate contemporary practitioners of “taste” (journalists) from practitioners of “evaluation” (Marxist and other committed critics) than the latter from academics who do analysis or “literary and cultural study” (Jameson himself is a prime example of the frequent overlap between the last two groups), the significant difference for Jameson is not the more subtle and/or sociologically closer one between analysis and evaluation but rather between evaluation and taste. It is because taste and evaluation are overtly judgmental that the difference between them becomes “more important to secure.”

The paragraph just quoted in which Jameson carefully differentiates taste, analysis, and evaluation is immediately followed by one in which he acknowledges the presence of judgments of taste in Postmodernism, though in a desultory way that seems intended to highlight their irrelevance:

As far as taste is concerned (and as readers of the preceding chapters will have become aware), culturally I write as a relatively enthusiastic consumer of postmodernism, at least some parts of it. I like the architecture and a lot of the newer visual work... The music is not bad to listen to, or the poetry to read; the novel is the weakest of the newer cultural areas and is considerably excelled by its narrative counterparts in film and video (at least the high literary novel is); subgeneric narratives, however, are very good... My sense is that this is essentially a visual culture, wired for sound—but one where the linguistic element... is slack and flabby, and not to be made interesting without ingenuity, daring, and keen motivation.

These are tastes, giving rise to opinions; they have little to do with the analysis of the function of such a culture and how it got to be that way.
Mixed in among other aesthetic predicates ("slack," "flabby") and some purely evaluative verdicts ("not bad," "very good"), "interesting" is clearly being used here as a judgment of aesthetic quality. In case of any doubt, Jameson underscores his judging in his next sentence: "These are tastes, giving rise to opinions; they have little to do with the analysis of the function of such a culture and how it got to be that way." Indeed, "even the opinions are probably not satisfactory in this form, since the second thing people want to know, for the obvious contextual reason, is how this compares to an older modernism canon." Jameson accordingly reformulates his initial opinions to accommodate this comparison, though with little difference in the language of his assessment: "The architecture is generally a great improvement; the novels are much worse. Photography and video are incomparable (the latter for a very obvious reason indeed); also we're fortunate today in having interesting new painting to look at and poetry to read" (299). Here "interesting" stands out even more sharply in its aesthetic function, as the only semidescriptive predicate in a cloud of purely comparative verdicts ("worse," "incomparable").

The next sentence, which also introduces a new paragraph, is as follows:

Music, however (after Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Thomas Mann), ought to lead us into something more interesting and complicated than mere opinion.

Suddenly, "interesting" no longer seems part of the aesthetic vocabulary of taste (or opinion), but rather the very sign of a movement beyond taste into the "more ... complicated" realm of evaluation that the judgment clearly helps facilitate. Why is it music whose study might "lead us into something more interesting and complicated than mere opinion"? Because music "includes history in a more thoroughgoing and irrevocable fashion, since as background and mood stimulus, it mediates our historical past along with our private or existential one and can scarcely be woven out of the memory any longer" (299). Regardless of what we think of this particular argument, the very idea of a shift from mere judgments of taste (such as the finding of painting and poetry "interesting") to "something more interesting and complicated than mere opinion" (evaluation) allows Jameson to arrive at his final suggestion—that perhaps aesthetic evaluations of postmodernism are relevant to its theorization after all:

We therefore begin to make some progress on turning our tastes into "postmodernism theory" when we step back and attend to the "system of fine arts" itself: the ratio between the forms and the "media" itself has taken on, supplanting which the generic system itself, as a rest Lifestyle

By toggling between and thus helping to form tastes and sociopolitical evaluations, "interesting" follows conclusion: judgments of aesthetic judgment and sociopolitical evaluations, "interesting" judgments related to sociopolitical evaluations, if they are performed at the proper scale, tend to the 'system of fine arts' itself, their judgments are more overtly political than the interesting judgments to political ones in the first place of "interesting" in his writing, Jameson judgments might be transformed into theoretical and critical judgments of aesthetic categories reflected by Jameson's remarks about the entire genre or medium—a simple poetic or artistic judgment and sociopolitical evaluation to land on larger or temporally more clearly.

Revolving as they do around erotically ideological repositioning of labor as part of more overtly political than the interestingly, that most directly addresses the question of judgments to political ones in the first place, the need for a shift from "interesting" in his writing, Jameson judgments might be transformed into the use of our current repertoire of aesthetic categories finding a way to grasp this historical, exactly "system" of aesthetic categories.
predicates ("slack," "flabby") and some bad," "very good"), "interesting" is clearly of aesthetic quality. In case of any doubt, in his next sentence: "These are tastes, a little to do with the analysis of the func­ tion got to be that way." Indeed, "even the factory in this form, since the second thing obvious contextual reason, is how this com­ mon." Jameson accordingly reformulates this comparison, though with little is assessment: "The architecture is gener­ novels are much worse. Photography and utter for a very obvious reason indeed); having interesting new painting to look at "interesting" stands out even more sharply only semidescriptive predicate in a cloud ("worse," "incomparable").

also introduces a new paragraph, is as

ner seems part of the aesthetic vocabulary or the very sign of a movement beyond cated" realm of evaluation that the judg­ day is it music whose study might "lead us g and complicated than mere opinion"? y a more thoroughgoing and irrevoca­ nd mood stimulus, it mediates our private or existential one and can scarcely my longer" (299). Regardless of what we ent, the very idea of a shift from mere finding of painting and poetry "interest­ esting and complicated than mere opin­ on to arrive at his final suggestion—that if postmodernism are relevant to its theo­

the progress on turning our tastes into "post­ back and attend to the "system of fine arts" itself: the ratio between the forms and the media (indeed, the very shape that "media" itself has taken on, supplanting form and genre alike), the way in which the generic system itself, as a restructuration and a new configuration (however minimally modified), expresses the postmodern, and through it, all the other things that are happening to us. (300)

By toggling between and thus helping the critic cross the divide between tastes and sociopolitical evaluations, "interesting" helps him arrive at the following conclusion: judgments of aesthetic value are not just more inti­ mately related to sociopolitical evaluations than may initially appear; if they are performed at the proper scale (as when we "step back and at­ tend to the 'system of fine arts' itself"), they can actually be "turned into" theory and criticism. What Jameson's text suggests about the feeling-based rather than concept-based judgment of "interesting" is that its very func­ tion is to produce an elision between different modes of evaluation, an elision facilitated precisely by the judgment's lack of descriptive or conceptual specificity.

Note how Jameson's use of the interesting to negotiate the relation among aesthetic taste, historical analysis, and sociopolitical evaluation overturns, along the way, certain presumptions we might have about the proper "unit" of aesthetic judgment. His text makes it clear that judg­ ments of taste need not apply exclusively to individual artworks, as the canonical texts of philosophical aesthetics would seem to have it (for Kant in particular, the object of the pure judgment of taste is funda­ mentally singular), nor even just to bodies of work by an individual artist. As reflected by Jameson's remarks about the interestingness of contem­ porary poetry and painting, one's object of judgment can be as large as an entire genre or medium—a simple point that makes the link between aesthetic judgment and sociopolitical evaluation, which we entirely ex­ pect to land on larger or temporally and spatially distributed objects, even clearer.

Revolving as they do around eroticized disparities of power and the ideological repositioning of labor as play, the cute and the zany seem more overtly political than the interesting. Yet it is the interesting, surpris­ ingly, that most directly addresses the question of how one links aesthetic judgments to political ones in the first place. Directly facilitated by the use of "interesting" in his writing, Jameson's argument about how aesthetic judgments might be transformed into theory could also be extended to our current repertoire of aesthetic categories. My wager in this book is that finding a way to grasp this historically specific configuration, if not exactly "system" of aesthetic categories, will be similarly salutary for
getting a handle on postmodernism (and "through it, all the other things that are happening to us"). If the first step in such a project is simply to notice which styles and judgments seem most central or pervasive, the next is to pursue the best explanation for why. This is the more specific quest on which the chapters that follow embark.

The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde

Drawing attention to excuse speech acts—demands, apologies, for deeper philosophical investigation—J. L. Austin notes "how much it is to be undertaken in, say, aesthetics; about the beautiful and get down instead..." In this oft-cited remark, Austin gestures movements, broad enough to contain both also at a less explicitly defined subclass. What is marked, it would seem based on greater descriptive specificity, and by an intensity, than those associated with the way of "get[ting] down" to these less. Tender Buttons is not likely to be what is so not winsome and not widened and really dainty, very dainty, ordinarily, dainty, and dainty." Yet in this chapter I will in Stein's modernist avant-garde tradition in the subclass of aesthetic categories but only glancingly alludes. Indeed, I want to have a particular stake in the meaning and response to the diminutive, the weak, an out, an exact cross between the dainty as particularly exemplary of the subclass as a whole.