

35 Cute Fashion

The Social Strategies and Aesthetics of *Kawaii*

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What is *kawaii*, the Japanese version of cute or adorable? How did it become so ubiquitous? This chapter traces the beginnings of the modern manifestation of the aesthetic of *kawaii* to the early 1970s, a period following significant political and social unrest. While some aspects can be found earlier, especially its prevalence in manga and anime, this is when *kawaii* fully entered fashion and self-styling.

While in English the word “cute” derived from “acute” in the eighteenth century and originally meant clever and shrewd, in a self-seeking or superficial way, it lost its negative connotations to mean simply attractive in a pretty or endearing way. In Japanese, *kawaii* derived from the phrase, “*kawahayushi*,” meaning a flushed face and implying embarrassment, and came to mean able to be loved, adorable, or cute (Maeda 2005). In both languages, the idea originated as something negative, either an ulterior motive or embarrassment, but became something positive without other connotations. Being *kawaii* now, like being cute, is an implicitly auspicious and good thing.

As I will demonstrate, while *kawaii* originally became popular in fashion and self-styling as a political statement of rebellion, it has developed its own self-sustaining logic. It gradually shed much of its rebellious role, becoming an aesthetic disconnected from its original purpose. As argued in our chapters on fashion, fashion often stands somewhere between high art and popular culture, claiming occasionally a central role in both. One thing that *kawaii* fashion does, however, is destabilize the distinctions of high and low by holding up a mirror to social and cultural structures that claim the space of maturity and seriousness by being deliberately neither. *Kawaii* is a central element of Japanese popular culture providing not just a contemporary look but also a set of behavioral norms and expectations.

To understand the evolution and function of *kawaii*, I first examine the scientific phenomenon on which *kawaii* is based and then track its adoption into illustrated popular cultures of manga and anime preceding its jump into fashion and other aspects of self-presentation and behavior. I establish an argument about the causes of *kawaii* by mapping its emergence onto key events in Japanese cultural history. While the timeline for establishing *kawaii* in this way—as an aesthetic—dating from just after and as a response to the failed

student riots is not perfect and cultural causality is not the same as historical chronology, the argument that *kawaii* enters fashion for political reasons, as a subtle form of rebellion, is compelling. And it has parallels with changes in how youths worldwide saw and expressed themselves.

The Science of Cute

In 1949 the Austrian scientist, Konrad Lorenz, published *King Solomon's Ring* (English version 1969), in which he established a number of fundamental and now commonly known zoological concepts. The title referred to the Seal of Solomon, which supposedly gave the biblical king of Israel the power to talk with animals. Through this metaphor, Lorenz explores scientific concepts of animal intelligence and communication, such as imprinting, a brief developmental period where animals, or humans, rapidly learn from copied stimuli. Lorenz also discussed how certain infantile features—a big head to body ratio, large round eyes, and awkward movements—trigger feelings of caring. This, he argued, was an instinctual behavior shared by humans. The features that he later called “*kindchenschema*” were facial and bodily traits that make creatures appear cute and activate in others the motivation to care for them (Lorenz 1969).

At its most basic, the science of cute is a biological imperative. It serves a clear adaptive function of impelling adult animals to take care of their young. Cuteness immediately incites nurturing instincts and, conversely, once the young are no longer cute, indicates an appropriate time when offspring are ready to care for themselves and should be moved on. What is interesting is that an animal does not necessarily have to be the same species to trigger these feelings in an adult. This is seen in instances of one animal placed in the litter of another and raised as an equal, something some species, such as brood parasites like cuckoos, have developed into an entire evolutionary strategy. This also explains, to some degree, human affection for their pets.

Further research has shown that animals, including humans, may have even evolved for greater cuteness as an evolutionary advantage. Barry Bogin (1997) has written that patterns of children's growth show an intentional increase in the duration of cuteness to trigger a corresponding increase in the period when resources and protection might be provided by older animals. There is longer allometry of human growth than in any other species, according to Bogin. Humans remain superficially infantile in appearance for a long time, as shown by the fact that the human brain reaches adult size when the body is only 40 percent grown.

The clarity of the science, however, is muddled by the addition of culture to the equation. Many behaviors and norms mimic natural processes. Historian Philippe Ariès is famous for the proposition that the concept of childhood is a development of the modern era (Ariès 1965). Ariès' thesis is that, in the Middle Ages, the nuclear family did not exist as the center of social organization, for children died too often to devote excessive resources

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to, were not protected from sexuality, and were not segregated in school systems but interacted with society as small adults. They had similar expectations as adults for work, play, and appearance; their clothes were simply smaller versions of adult clothing and not differentiated in any other way but size. Starting from the fifteenth century in France, childhood began to be seen as a separate stage of life. Children were kept separate from much of adult life, increasingly sent to school for longer periods, and protected from adult sexuality. In this way, cultural norms were mimetic of the evolutionary process, constructing social structures whereby children could remain cuter for longer. Bogin's evolutionary origins of human childhood, the uniquely evolved pre-reproductive stages of childhood and adolescence, are replicated in Ariès' cultural origins of human childhood.

The difficulty in determining exactly what cute is, however, lies in the overlap of an adaptive evolutionary strategy and a constructed social strategy. Cultural cuteness has become something more than a social strategy mimicking the biological function of impelling others to nurture. In Japan, it has more complex roles and meanings as a metaphor for rebellion against authority and as a symbol to contest patriarchal and hierarchical society by deliberately emphasizing the feminine and immature.

More Disney than Disney

Even before Lorenz had published his ideas, Walt Disney understood the unconscious appeal of things cute. Comics and animation, with their endless possibility for elasticity of form, provided the perfect place for the logic of cute to be exploited through drawn features. For example, progressively after his first appearance in *Steamboat Willie* (1928), Mickey Mouse evolved to become cuter. His head became proportionately larger, as did his eyes, his legs shorter and thicker, his face flatter, his nose smaller and more like a button than a snout, and he became generally more rounded. By the time of *Fantasia* (1940), he had developed many juvenile attributes, including the oversized wizard's gown he wears. Stephen Jay Gould (1980) argues that Mickey's cute changes parallel the cute changes that occurred in human evolution. Mickey evolved to be cuter for the same reason as juvenile humans: to inspire nurturing emotions (Gould 1980).

Tezuka Osamu, a pioneer of Japanese manga and anime, noticed the appeal of the large eyes and other cute elements of Disney's *Snow White* (1937) and *Bambi* (1942) and began to adopt, even exaggerate, these features in his own works like *Astro Boy* (*Tetsuwan Atomu*, 1952–1968). Tezuka, who was also responding to the trauma of the Second World War, drew his exaggerations of Disney with the conscious purpose of trying to erase the caricatures of evil, cunning Japanese with small eyes in American war propaganda (Gravett 2004: 26–28).

There are numerous theories about when the aesthetic of cute was incorporated into objects and texts in Japan. Several theories regard the

Edo period (1603–1868)—with its accelerated urbanization, pressure on living space to be smaller, and growth of wealth and accompanying material culture—to be the beginnings of a preference for things small and cute. Sugiyama Tomoyuki (2006) argues that this preference is exemplified in *netsuke*, miniature sculptures that became popular accessories in the seventeenth century. Others argue that, in Murasaki Shikibu's *Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*, circa 1021), there are characters with pitiable qualities that could be described as cute (Shiokawa 1999: 93–125). These explanations are speculative and tend to assume that Japanese culture is an unbroken continuum stretching into the past and always in strict opposition to all that is foreign, rather than a nexus of information flows and occasional radical disjunctures.

Tezuka's adoption of a cute aesthetic is clear by his own admission; manga and animation provide clear starting points because of the exaggeration that drawn images allow. The popularity of manga and anime in Japan might also provide a possible line of causality for the popularity of *kawaii* in other areas, including fashion. Yet while the inclusion of cute features into popular culture is one thing, the desire to be cute oneself and to include it in one's own fashion and self-styling is another. It involves a change in young people's sense of self and in their attitudes towards adulthood and social hierarchies. In Japan, as in many places in the world, these social norms, often based on age and gender, were radically questioned in the late 1960s.

"Youthquake" and "Cutequake"

In 1960s London, *Vogue* editor-in-chief Diana Vreeland noted that fashion was changing in unprecedented ways. For the first time, a generation was not looking up to fashion leaders, such as the aristocracy, movie stars, or great designers but were instead looking down to the street. Teenagers, like The Beatles (1960–1970) and The Rolling Stones (formed in 1962) dominated the music scene, and this was changing fashion. Miniskirts, jumpsuits, loud colors, and skinny boyish models were all the rage. Vreeland (1965: 112) called this musical, cultural, and fashion movement "Youthquake," and the *Vogue* of her tenure promoted this spirited youth movement, booking models like Twiggy and Veruschka and featuring designers like Mary Quant and Betsey Johnson. The first post-World War II generation sought to not imitate older peoples' fashion styles but to define themselves against their parents' clothing. This was the first reversal in fashion where top-down (or trickle-down) influence flows were replaced by street-up (or bubble-up) influence flows, with first designers, and then the upper classes, imitating the styles of the street. The postwar desire for participatory democracy and the potential of resistance, in the form of active protest and the symbolic form of clothing, was everywhere. It was, in large part, the result of knowing the horrors of war and nuclear terror, along with the rise of popular music and the revolutionary aspiration of 1960s social movements. Fashion trends and larger

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The 1964 Tokyo Olympics represented Japanese economic recovery from the war, but with wealth (although spread unequally) and reconstruction came various social tensions—for example between a younger generation keen to embrace the rebellious spirit and an older generation keen to protect the society they had sacrificed to rebuild. Student unrest at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s revolved in its specifics around the relationship between the university and the state (Takazawa 1996: 70–71) but can be viewed as a proxy for generational resistance to patriarchal, hierarchical social structure in general. In 1968, protest and resistance were generally seen, at least on Japanese university campuses, as an effective, and even cool, way to affect social change, challenge the acquiescence to the United States, replace hierarchical structures with more democratic ones, and resist the dominating logic of materialist, capitalist culture. The notion of struggle was central to the way student activism sought to redefine the character of Japan's democracy (McCormack 1971: 37–52). A distinguishing feature of the student agenda was an antipathy towards existing institutions and ideas governing Japanese society. There was a corresponding belief in individual and collective agency outside of existing institutions. Maturity, agency, active participation in democracy, and resisting authority were part of youth identity in this period.

Yet unable to effectively define itself and translate action into social change, the student movement collapsed by the early 1970s, as had similar movements in Paris in 1968. Partly, the symbolic space of the state over which groups were fighting was being abandoned as the logic of business and capital and the dreams of advertising and materialism replaced the nation as dominant in the public imagination. The government also decentralized the student movement by building rural campuses, such as Tsukuba University, moving potential protest out of Tokyo.

It is in this sense of the failure of action, the inevitability of social and economic structures, and surrender to materialism and popular culture that the modern form of the Japanese aesthetic of *kawaii* emerged. It emerged, however, not as an acquiescence to the sociocultural mainstream but as an ironic form of disassociation and resistance. The pleasure that derives from being and observing *kawaii* is not just the pleasure of desirability or of being deferred to or played up to in a normally gender-based power relationship but an ironic pleasure of knowing expression, similar to kitsch and camp, that undermines the seriousness of the dominant cultural values. *Kawaii* hides a political assertion of independence by pretending to be completely non-political. Self-styling and fashion use this perceived lack of political meaning to make potent political symbolism. Most ideological agendas seek to establish themselves as non-ideological and therefore true and natural (Zižek 1994). Both the patriarchal and hierarchical establishment of Japanese culture and undermining elements such as *kawaii* do just this.

The failure of the university riots to achieve reform was mirrored in another dramatic event played out on Japanese television. On November 25, 1970, author Mishima Yukio (b. 1925), went to the headquarters of Japan's Self-Defense Forces, tied up the commandant, and gave a speech to the assembled officers advocating a coup d'état to restore the Emperor to absolute power. When the officers mocked him and refused to take him seriously, Mishima committed ritual suicide (*seppuku*) with the help of his small group of followers. It is believed that Mishima did not think his coup d'état would succeed and instead was meant as a symbolic gesture of protest (Nathan 1974).

These events taken together, the student unrest on the left and the suicide of Mishima on the right, along with the left's increasing fragmentation and violence (evident by the 1972 Asama-Sansō Incident), can be seen as an end of violent action as political strategy; in addition, they perhaps can be seen as the high-water mark of resistance to capitalist material culture in Japan. Arguably, the symbolic concept of the nation state, over which both the political left and the right were fighting, was fading in importance as the logic of corporate Japan and its accompanying materialism fed by the dreams of advertising replaced it as the most important aspect of social organization.

This is the moment when *kawaii* becomes an increasingly important factor in Japanese fashion and culture. The emergence of *kawaii* in this period can be understood at first as a rebellious pleasure (although one not necessarily supported by Mishima or the student protestors) and the original *kawaii* fashion as an ironic mode of expression. Where Britain had a Youthquake, Japan was about to have a "Cutequake."

One of the first places this could be observed was in the handwriting of female secondary school students. In the early 1970s, teenaged girls began to use rounded handwriting with exaggerated circular letters (*maru-ji*), along with kitten letters (*koneko-ji*) and pedomorphic letters (*burikko-ji*) that included little drawings like hearts and smiles, part of a growing trend for "*gyaru moji*," or girl writing (see Chapter 10). Kazuma Yamane (1990) analyzes how *kawaii* handwriting began among students and became a spontaneous, underground trend, predating the technical means to produce round letters in manga. Sharon Kinsella (1995) has shown how graphological rebellion, which she has deemed the first form of *kawaii* culture, constituted an attempt by youth to establish their own language and express their own emotional needs outside the cultural establishment which placed the Japanese language as unassailable and highly serious. As this example shows, instead of conforming or openly rebelling, some youths acted in a cute way to undermine adult authority.

Thus *kawaii* undermines the seriousness demanded by the hierarchical nature of Japanese society and language. There is a rebellious pleasure in this, similar to the pleasure of kitsch: knowing something is in bad taste—or immature—but taking delight in the way it simply ignores the established rules of good taste or mature behavior. It is a reflexive pleasure of irony, knowing something would be socially construed as immature, but doing it anyway.

Fashion is a perfect example of how the no-longer-childish aesthetic could be interpreted as the absence of adulthood. Starting with the post-1973 by former-revolutionary designers used *kawaii* clothing to create a new femininity) and Shironaka, these brands sold women's designers' boutiques. Their popularity came to their rebellious aesthetic also recognized the one of the first and most popular silk printing and the cute characters and something cute was Sanrio launched the Chapter 3).

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Fashion is a perfect target for this type of ironic rebellion. Fashion that could be interpreted as childish or innocent was taken up ironically by the no-longer-childish and no-longer-innocent. In these fashions, *kawaii* is not the absence of adulthood but an ironic comment on it and its undesirability. Starting with the popularity of the fashion brand Pink House, founded in 1973 by former-revolutionary students from Waseda University, various fashion designers used *kawaii* styling. Other brands formed around this period included Milk (1970 by Okawa Hitomi) that made frilly, layered, "Lolita-style clothes" (fashion that uses elements of English Victorian and Edwardian clothing to create a look that is romantic and nostalgic for a bygone form of femininity) and Shirley Temple (1974 by Yanagikawa Rei). The *kawaii* styles these brands sold were broadly popular, in both the more extreme styles of designers' boutiques and in their subtler influences on non-designer clothing. Their popularity can perhaps be attributed to consumers being predisposed to their rebellious and ironic undertones. Mainstream commercial interests also recognized the changing mood and accompanying aesthetic; Sanrio was one of the first and most famous to do so. Established in 1960 and originally a silk printing and then sandal making company, Sanrio shifted focus to design cute characters and merchandise after noticing that sales jumped whenever something cute was added to a sandal design (Belson and Bremner 2004). Sanrio launched the quintessentially cute character, Hello Kitty, in 1974 (see Chapter 3).

The essential difference between these examples and the *kawaii* aesthetic, such as that seen in Tezuka's 1950s manga, is that, by the 1970s, consumers and creators did not simply want to enjoy seeing *kawaii* things; instead they wanted to be *kawaii* themselves. *Kawaii* entered fashion and self-styling as a desirable look and state of being. As such, it is no longer reserved for a period of childhood but is adopted as an aesthetic disconnected from the original referent of childhood. In other words, *kawaii* transformed from a recognized look of childhood into an aesthetic that could be used socially and politically. While the British "Youthquake" was demanding that youths be considered independent and mature, the Japanese "Cutequake" ironically rejected maturity.

An Alternate Social Strategy

Kawaii has also been used by those being rebelled against. Brian McVeigh (2000) has argued that *kawaii* fashion, particularly in school uniforms and their deliberate alteration by their wearers, constitutes a form of resistance against the dominant ideology of uniformity: "[For] the powerful bureaucratizing forces of statism and corporate culture, *kawaii* represents a form of resistance associated with women, children, leisure and self-expression" (McVeigh 2000: 135–136). However, McVeigh also notes this resistance was quickly co-opted by the institutions it opposed, as evidenced by *kawaii* advertising campaigns and *kawaii* police mascots and logos. In addition, Kinsella

(2002) argues that school uniforms, particularly those for girls, constitute a key anti-symbol of rebellion and sexuality, and the fact that the iconic sailor uniforms come directly from Japanese imperial ambitions and military reforms makes their use as a *kawaii* symbol especially potent and political. (Yet this uniform can also be used to objectify and belittle.)

As an alternate social strategy, *kawaii* self-styling is a kind of refusal to cooperate with established social values but also to some extent with reality itself. It denies reality but is all the more powerful for doing so. Just as the aesthetic of cool ignores mainstream tastes, so, too, *kawaii* does not directly enter into or challenge mainstream cultural and aesthetic values but establishes its own values and aesthetics by ignoring them (Pountain and Robins 2000). It does not seek to be sexy, serious, or maturely beautiful but instead establishes the desirability of paedomorphism, the silly, and the adorably dysfunctional. It is a "demure rebellion" (Kinsella 1995) unlike more aggressive and sexually charged fashions of British youth rebellion; *kawaii* emphasizes immaturity and lack of agency, acting pre-sexual and vulnerable, even while being neither.

Both Pink House and Milk boutique in Harajuku have laid claim to the origins of *kawaii* in fashion (Kawamura 2012: 67–71). (Pink House launched its Lolita theme in 1979 and is now a purely Lolita themed brand.) With these brands, *kawaii* performs a political function of undermining current ideologies of gender and power. The later appearance of variations like gothic Lolita juxtapose the immaturity of romantic childhood with gothic symbols, creating the appealing contrast of life and death together in the same aesthetic. This fulfills the political and social needs of *kawaii*, being both desirable and somewhat helpless, while also rebellious, laughing at death, and challenging the seriousness of the mainstream.

With these brands as style leaders and following Sanrio's success, Valarie Steele (2010: 46) notes there was soon an explosion of *kawaii* clothes, white or pastel in color and with puffy sleeves and ribbons, and accessories, including white tights and frilly ankle socks. The fashion magazine *An An* proclaimed in 1975: "On dates we only want feeling, but our clothes are like old ladies! It is time to express who you really are" (quoted in Kinsella 1995: 229). The implication was that a true identity had been somehow repressed, and this real identity was the antithesis of conventional female fashion. The fashion magazine *CUTiE* was launched in 1986 with the subtitle "For Independent Girls," again implying that *kawaii* emancipated its adopter. *Kawaii* in *CUTiE* was portrayed as something daring and rebellious, and the magazine published many photographs of young people wearing their own fashions on streets and in clubs (Godoy 2007).

A Logic of Its Own: Social Utility and Aesthetics

There is a point where the social utility of any look declines and fashion starts to lose its original meanings and becomes less focused on its original purpose.

Part of this was the co-optation of the state, diluting the rebellion. Another part is the increasing use of the past without regard for novelty.

A prime example is the character of the famous not because of her looks but because she is cute and cheerful (Kinsella 1973), Pink Lady (debuted in 1973), helped to create this pleasant looking bright role perfectly. And then she was used to make the audience of the careers rather than being a model. Her popularity was about always, popular through overexposure. This new appeal worked in the example of AKB48, the logic of *kawaii* market, the empowering look of *kawaii* structures and manipulation.

Thus through gradual change its meaning expanding perhaps the absence of a mature identity. Even though making her expressive. Looser explains in *Cute Manifesto* spoke of "the way both celebratory and a sense of meaning to the of *kawaii* is rooted in its now spoken as a feeling meaning that no one can be happy."

Searching for a reason, it flates otaku culture and *kawaii* is a mechanism for people to conform, and it acts to make people happy (Ozaki 1998) to the collapse of the grand narrative to give peror, God, or possibly absurd happiness, nothing in life was not un-

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Part of this was the co-option of *kawaii* into commercial advertising and by the state, diluting the challenge it originally made against these structures. Another part is the inevitable logic of fashion itself, constantly reworking the past without regard for any particular political agenda, in a perpetual desire for novelty.

A prime example is "idols" (*aidoru*), young manufactured stars, made famous not because of exceptional talent or beauty but rather because they are cute and cheerful. Early examples include Yamaguchi Momoe (debut 1973), Pink Lady (debut 1976), and Onyanko Club (debut 1985). Television helped to create this new type of star, as the medium demanded simply a pleasant looking brightness that could always be switched on. Idols filled this role perfectly. And their principle currency was *kawaii*. They were required to make the audience want to take care of them, support, and nurture their careers rather than be in awe of their beauty or talents. Arguably, movie stardom was about always remaining a mystery, but, on television, idols became popular through over-supply and cheerful familiarity. Knowledge of the way this new appeal worked became an entire business model, seen most clearly in the example of AKB48 that Patrick Galbraith discusses in his chapter. This logic of *kawaii* marketing is one way in which the previously rebellious and empowering look of *kawaii* became incorporated into corporate management structures and manipulated for profit.

Thus through gradual institutionalization, *kawaii* has become aesthetized, its meaning expanding until it was broad enough to include everything. But perhaps the absence of meaning was part of *kawaii* all along. As Yuko Hasegawa points out, there is an element of *kawaii* that resists final definition and mature identity. Even Hello Kitty, as analyzed in Chapter 3, has no mouth making her expression deliberately incomplete and ambiguous. As Tom Looser explains in Chapter 38, Murakami Takashi (1999) in his *Superflat Manifesto* spoke of "the shallow emptiness of Japanese consumer culture" in a way both celebratory and critical. Sugiyama (2006) concurs with this expansion of meaning to the point of meaninglessness, arguing the current usage of *kawaii* is rooted in Japan's consensus valuing culture. The word "*kawaii*" is now spoken as a form of group bonding, and it has become so broad in meaning that no one can dispute it.

Searching for a reason for this expanding logic, Ozaki Tetsuya (2011) conflates otaku culture and *kawaii* as two sides of the same thing. He argues *kawaii* is a mechanism for relieving stress in a society with great social pressure to conform, and it acts as a means of escape from a system that does not make people happy (Ozaki 2011: 54). Ozaki's reasoning is that *kawaii* is a response to the collapse of the grand narrative as understood by Jean-François Lyotard (1998)—the end of a single story of identity. In the postmodern absence of a grand narrative to give life meaning—such as that of the nation, or an Emperor, God, or possible Marxist revolution—*kawaii* provides a simple piece of absurd happiness, nostalgic for a childhood moment when the lack of meaning in life was not understood.

The Future of *Kawaii* Fashion

In 2010 and 2011 three major fashion exhibitions claimed to be representative of Japanese contemporary fashion; yet all were very different. *Future Beauty: 30 Years of Japanese Fashion* at the Barbican Gallery in London (2010) dismissed *kawaii* as not real fashion, reserving the term for designers like Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto, and Issey Miyake. The agenda was to reaffirm fashion as high art by means of belittling *kawaii* fashion as “childishness, simplicity... vulgarity, exaggeration, artificiality, and ornament” (Fukai 2010: 13). There was a lionization of the gesture to restore dignity to older women, an oft stated goal of the all black creations of Yamamoto in particular, that implied *kawaii* was one way this dignity had been taken away. *Japan Fashion Now* at the Museum of the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York (2010) took a more ecumenical approach, interspersing designer fashion with such subcultural styles as Lolita and cosplay, with the agenda of democratizing fashion. It was also more sociologically focused, contextualizing fashions by dividing the exhibition into Tokyo neighborhoods and including photos of the places where the fashion might be worn (Motoaki 2011: 20). As Hiroshi Narumi describes, the third exhibition, *Feel and Think: A New Era of Tokyo Fashion* at the Opera City Gallery in Tokyo (2011), sought to establish a new canon of Japanese designers after the great names of the 1970s and to remove clothing from the context of the body. All the designers featured or referenced the *kawaii* culture in which Tokyo is awash.

These three exhibits contested whether fashion was popular culture or high art. The element of *kawaii* seemed to be the very thing that was preventing fashion from being considered art. Yet this seems to be a somewhat old-fashioned, modernist distinction; whereas one of the key elements of *kawaii* is that it laughs at attempts at high seriousness, it undermines the assumed authority of such a classification, and, in doing so, shows how it is a social construction which can be torn down like all others. In much the same way as Susan Sontag (2001 [1964]) defines “camp” as an artifice and frivolity that plays upon naïve middle-class pretentiousness, *kawaii* can also be seen in fashion as an ironic attitude which acts as an explicit defense of clearly marginalized forms: gay culture in the case of camp and youth, particularly female, but not exclusively, in the case of *kawaii*. Both aesthetics depend on the hypocrisy of the dominant culture and show how norms are socially constructed. And both are in the form of a big joke: acutely analyzing norms and presenting them humorously to confront society with its own preconceptions. In fashion, *kawaii* would also appear to be a postmodern aesthetic, rejecting modernism’s abstraction, unity, subtlety, and fidelity to the body and pulling towards post-modern fashion’s arbitrary shapes, figurative patterns, and disunity.

The use of *kawaii* is not simply an act of self-objectification and the abdication of maturity but a more complicated gesture of challenging the hierarchy of seriousness which holds cultural establishments in high regard. *Kawaii* is a knowing absence of maturity, as it has to understand what the construct of

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maturity involves in order to renounce it. In this way, *kawaii* constitutes not just the lack of maturity but an ironic expression of maturity's undesirability. It knowingly uses silliness, play, and irony to establish an alternative to rigid, perhaps fossilized, mainstream culture and sociopolitical establishment which no longer seems to appeal to Japanese youth. *Kawaii* fashion continues to serve this rebellious function, although it now also constitutes the cultural mainstream and has proliferated in unintended forms and meanings. But this is part of the mechanics of fashion: clothing fashions always exceed their original instrumentality (Carter 2013), and *kawaii* fashions now assume a vast space in Japan's cultural imagination. Yet the pleasure to be found in *kawaii* fashion remains the same: a knowing, reflexive, pleasure of undermining and ignoring the seriousness of hierarchical Japanese maturity.

Introducing Japanese Popular Culture

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