

OUR AESTHETIC CATEGORIES

Zany, Cute, Interesting

SIANNE NGAI

Introduction

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 zainness (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 zainness help us get at some of the most important social dynamics underlying 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 Treccartini's videos, the cuteness of Yayoi Kusama's polka-dotted phallus 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 longstanding idea of art as play as opposed to labor in a world where immaterial labor is increasingly aestheticized; and the "parergonal" relation between art and theoretical discourse itself, all the more pressured with the rise of an institutional culture of museums and curricula that has led art and criticism to internalize each other in historically unprecedented ways.² 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.³ 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 in-

teresting. They are also linked to specific genres and forms. For example, it is easy to see how the commodity aesthetic of cuteness becomes a special issue for twentieth-century poetry, by way of a tendency within the genre that has made it widely, if not always correctly, associated with short, compact texts preoccupied with small, easy-to-handle things, from the plums in William Carlos Williams's icebox and the charms in Frank O'Hara's pockets to the assortment of neatly compartmentalized edibles in Lee Ann Brown's "Cafeteria": "Ice Tea / Cream corn / Fried okra / plus one meat."⁴ Cuteness could thus serve as shorthand for what Hannah Arendt calls the "modern enchantment with 'small things' . . . preached by early twentieth-century poetry in almost all European tongues," which she also acerbically refers to as the "art of being happy . . . between dog and cat and flowerpot."⁵ For Arendt, the "petite bonheur" of the cute is thus part of a larger cultural phenomenon, the expansion of the charismatically "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 object'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.⁶ We can thus see why Adorno makes such a point in "Lyric Poetry and Society" of singling out poems that depart 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."⁷

Revolving around the desire for an ever more intimate, ever more sensuous relation to objects already regarded as familiar and unthreatening, cuteness is not just an aestheticization but an eroticization of powerlessness, 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 (commodities, the act of consumption, and the feminized domestic sphere, in the case of cuteness; information, the circulation and exchange of discourse, 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

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.⁸

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.⁹

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 Hairyette Mullen's homage to its sections on "Objects" and "Food" in her explorations of the language of women's fashion and groceries in *Trimnings* and *S*PeRM*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."¹⁰

If the commodity aesthetic of cuteness is warm and fuzzy, the epistemological 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 philosophical,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 connected 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, Sontag trenchantly notes that "the practice of photography is now identified 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 "homologous" or comparable to others of its same kind or type.¹⁶ We can thus glimpse the connection between late twentieth-century conceptual art—famously 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" appealing 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, with 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,"²¹ conceptual art would in fact be eventually praised by critics for being "merely interesting" and even for being boring, as in an early essay by Barbara Rose linking conceptualism's serial, "ABC" aesthetic to that of Robbe-Grillet and his "theory of the French objective novel."²²

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 intellectualist formations" is fundamentally "interested in the relation between ideas and life, or how one might *live* theory," we can see why James famously singled out interesting as the proper aesthetic standard for this discursively hybrid genre: one keen on "imagining the rigorous critique of custom and convention as a way of life; mediating between the moral life of individuals and a long sociological or historical view of communities and societies; and engaging the relation between existence and doctrine."²³ The novel's investment in the tension between life and theory is perhaps best epitomized by its major innovation, free indirect discourse, and its oscillation between first- and third-person perspectives respectively aligned with the "aspirations of a socially minded moral participant" and a "bleak[er] systems view."²⁴ It is precisely this tension between individual and system that undergirds the interesting and explains why it also plays such a central role in conceptual art, a body of work similarly preoccupied with the modern relationship between individuation and standardization, and committed to exploring the tension between "existence and doctrine" by staging various clashes between perceptual and conceptual systems. As Mikhail Epstein argues, the judgment of "interesting" is thus an effort to "bridge the gap between reason and surprise, at once rationalizing the improbable and extending the limits of rationality."²⁵

In contrast to the rational coolness of the interesting, the aesthetic of nonstop acting or doing that is zainness is hot: hot under the collar, hot and bothered, hot to trot. Highlighting the affect, libido, and physicality of an unusually beset agent, these idioms underscore zainness's uniqueness as the only aesthetic category in our repertoire about a strenuous relation to playing that seems to be on a deeper level about work. When brought out by the post-Fordist, service-economy zainness of performers like Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy* and Richard Pryor in *The Toy*, the zany more specifically evokes the performance of affective labor—the production of affects and social relationships—as it comes to increasingly trouble the distinction between work and play. The formal dynamics of this 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 zainness 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.²⁶ 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.²⁷

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 musing 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."²⁸ 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*."²⁹ 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 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 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."³¹ Zaniness more specifically calls up the character of a worker whose particularity lies paradoxically in the increasingly differentiated 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," unusually 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.³² 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

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 zainness 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 zainness 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 zainness 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.³³ 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.³⁴

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 zainness points to the increasing emotionalization of work in general, a phenomenon now well documented by an increasingly diverse group of sociologists, economists, and activists.³⁵ 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, zainness 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 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 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 zainness is at the deepest level about work helps account for this savagely playful aesthetic'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, zainness flatters the spectator's sense of comparative security, thus hailing her as a kind of phantasmagoric manager or implicit owner of the means of production. Yet the experience of zainness 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 relating presuppose. In doing so, they are compelling reminders of the general fact of social difference and conflict underlying the entire system of aesthetic 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 zainness, the asymmetry of power on which cuteness depends is another compelling reminder. There is no judgment or experience 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 capable of making demands on us regardless, as Lori Merish underscores—a demand for care that women in particular often feel addressed or interpellated by—suggests that “cute” designates not just the site of a static power differential but also the site of a surprisingly complex power struggle.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 political interest group, as Jan Mieszkowski notes, “interests never exist as unique, autonomous impulses, but only in and as their collisions with

other interests."³⁸ 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."³⁹

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.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ The increasing zaniness of recent queer performance, moreover—Ryan Treccartin, 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.⁴² 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.⁴³ 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."⁴⁴ Camp thus involves a "reevaluation of failure, of a cultural ambition that in its time simply missed its mark, tragically or poignantly or extravagantly."⁴⁵ But while camp thus converts the pain of failure and loss into victory and enjoyment, zaniness highlights its own inability to do this; indeed, the desperation and frenzy of its beset performers, due to the precarious situations into which they are constantly thrust, point to a laborious involvement from which ironic detachment is not an option.⁴⁶ 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."⁴⁷ 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."⁴⁸ 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 utopian edge, speaking to a desire 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.⁴⁹ Finally, although nothing seems more apologetic 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.⁵⁰ 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 allegorized by one of *I Love Lucy's* zaniest moments, the chocolate-factory episode, in which Lucy is forced to literally exercise her "taste" of the product in order to see it off the assembly line. For its part, the "merely interesting" conceptual art of the 1960s, and in particular its serial, publicity-based forms based on the transmission of messages through systems (the postal system, telegrams, telephones, and so on), provides a prime example of how the production of artworks could come to coincide with what Paul Mann calls the "continuous circulation of discourse-objects." For here "the art object as such need not . . . even exist; only its representation needs to circulate. A description will suffice: that is the lesson of conceptual art."⁵¹

It is because the zany, the interesting, and the cute index the uncertain status of performing between labor and play, the increasing routing of art and aesthetic experience through the exchange of information, and the paradoxical complexity of our desire for a simpler relation to our commodities that they are "about" production, circulation, and consumption. With the intensified integration of these economic processes—which are also, crucially, modes of social organization⁵²—it stands to reason that twentieth-century objects of varying scales abound in which we can see all three aesthetic categories in play at once, from Samuel Beckett's late

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 absorbing 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.”⁵³

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 an 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 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 circulation of printed matter, Schlegel, Novalis, and others in their circle of German 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 century, the interesting is the only aesthetic category in our repertoire invented 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 commodities 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 domestic 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 increasingly 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 responses 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 *commedia 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 discursive, “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?)"—embodying the pluralism of the literary marketplace.⁵⁸ The centrality of the interesting to the genre viewed as the "end of genre,"⁵⁹ 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 zainness 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 muddled 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*.

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 impressionism). 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 captured and thus remain more difficult than other styles to delimit in time and in space. This by no means suggests that we abandon their historicization, 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 artifacts 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 together: 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 zainness. 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 circulation of discourse (and its transformation of the relation between the artist and the critic).⁶⁰ Thus, while sacrificing the satisfactions of a chronological 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 zanniness in its ineffectuality evoke intrasubjective discord as well as 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: "Suggle/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 zany, the cute, and the interesting call attention to their own weakness, or relative lack of aesthetic impact, in a way that is significantly not the case for other vernacular aesthetic categories. The glamorous and the handsome, for instance, do something like the exact opposite.

In accordance with their triviality as styles, the aesthetic categories in this study are also strikingly equivocal as judgments. As a direct result of the contradictory mixture of feelings at the foundation of each—unfun and fun, in the case of the zany; interest and boredom, in the case of the interesting, 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 *Rührung*, that alternates between an affective 'no' and 'yes.'"⁶⁵ 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.")⁶⁶ 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 Mukatovský could once state as a matter of course, that "lofty art is the source and innovator of aesthetic norms."⁶⁷ 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*."⁶⁸ 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 Mallarmé 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.⁶⁹ 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 megalexhibitions and biennales in global cities formed by massive alliances among businesses, national governments, universities, and regional bodies.⁷⁰ In this manner, art as luxury in the age of the "global art system" seems more removed from "everyday" existence than ever—an aptness novelist Geoff Dyer makes central to the surreal mood of *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi*.⁷¹ 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.⁷²

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"⁷³; "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 complications 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."⁷⁴ 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 "refine[d] and package[d]" for a smaller group of elite consumers.⁷⁵ 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 "weakness" that postwar U.S. art was to embrace in order to survive was the "gift both of 60s reductionism and of the assaults of the conceptual artists on the hallowed status of the object itself" (77). Since the "site of practice shifted from the hidden studio to the gallery," conceptual art "involved intense curatorial activity [that made] artists became more like commercial curators, middlemen for themselves" (82). It consequently evolved into a discursive, media- and/or print-based practice that increasingly sought to legitimate 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 post-modern 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 ineffectuality, the cute, the zany, and the interesting are fundamentally non-theological, unable to foster religious awe and unclouding 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."⁸⁰ 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 sublimine, 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 aesthetic 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 frivo-

lous, trivialized space in which such intersections are neutralized in advance."⁸¹ 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.⁸² 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 differentiated "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 "frivolous, 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 experience of objects as cute. Zaininess 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 "formless" 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 reverse 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 undiated 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 understander, a mitigation of the "alterity of the object" by "reason's capacity to integrate it."⁸³ 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.⁸⁴ 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 zainness evoke subjects under subjection to a number of demands (including, first and foremost, the division of labor).⁸⁵ 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.⁸⁶ 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 sex, a good meal, or psychoactive drugs like cocaine," acts or substances shown to stimulate the same regions of the brain. Yet because the aesthetic experience of cuteness is a pleasure routinely overridden by secondary feelings of suspicion, there is arguably something weak about it anyway. It is this weakness that allows and even seems to invite what Denis Dutton calls "the sense of cheapness . . . and the feeling of being manipulated or taken for a sucker that leads many to reject cuteness as low or shallow."⁸⁷ Note how, even in the context of a project describing cuteness in explicitly biological terms, we find the language of commodities entering the picture ("cheapness"), as if there were no better metaphor for how one might feel "manipulated or taken for a sucker" than our relation to this especially peculiar object. As Lori Merish puts it, the "very banality of cuteness—its mass production and display in a whole range of commercial contexts—suggests the fragility and tenuousness of the cute's hold on us."⁸⁸

Haunted by an image of failure that the experience itself seems to generate, the aesthetic of cuteness thus seems paradoxically coupled with an inability to carry out its own agenda.⁸⁹ The same can be said of the zany, defined in the *American Heritage Dictionary* as a "judicious" character who "attempts feebly" (that is, poorly) to "mimic the tricks of the clown" in "old comedies."⁹⁰ And the same can also be said of the interesting, always just a step away from the "merely" interesting and thus from being boring. Lydia Davis deftly captures this close margin in her microdrama of manners, "Boring Friends":⁹¹

We know only four boring people. The rest of our friends are interesting. However, most of the friends we find interesting find us boring: the most interesting find us the most boring. The few who are somewhere in the middle, with whom there is reciprocal interest, we distrust: at any moment, we feel, they may become too interesting for us, or we too interesting for them.

As this deadpan story of social competition makes clear, what is interesting is never inherently interesting but only so in comparison with something else. The objects or persons we find interesting are therefore never stable or permanent: "*at any moment*, we feel, they may become *too interesting* for us, or we *too interesting* for them." It is accordingly the image of "reciprocal interest" that produces the moment of most potential instability and therefore interest in Davis's story, for it is here that the social competition becomes most even and therefore most intense. A kind of dynamic balancing act in its own right, the interesting is an experience of something both stable and changing, predictable and unpredictable. Indeed, when "interesting" is applied as a characterization of

persons in the novel, what it means is often complex or contradictory,⁹² 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."⁹³ 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.⁹⁴ 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.⁹⁵ 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."⁹⁶ 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. Zanniness 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 obvious, entities whose "identification as such depends at least in some measure on [their] perceived failure to carry out [their] ends."⁹⁷ For "if the sentimental text did simply carry out its ends—if one were deeply moved by it, period—one would not use the word *sentimental* to characterize it; the use of the word automatically implies some distance from the sentimental effect," as Jennifer Fleissner notes.⁹⁸ Similarly, as Mieszkowski argues, the "very need to expose the obvious as obvious suggests that the obvious is never obvious enough for its own good."⁹⁹ Because the cute, the zany, and the interesting are aesthetic experiences that seem to undermine our conviction in them as such (and in which this seeming-to-undermine is paradoxically part of the overarching semblance or appearance that defines each as an aesthetic style), it comes as no surprise that they also appear to violate some of philosophical aesthetics's best-known idioms: distance, in the case of cuteness, an aesthetic about our desire to fondle things "close at hand"; play, in the case of the zany, an aesthetic ultimately or at the deepest level about work; disinterestedness, in the case of the interesting, an aesthetic about . . . interest. These traditional "symptoms of the aesthetic" are made to stand as close as possible to their antitheses in the cute, the zany, and the interesting, transforming each category into a kind of "turnstile" between them.¹⁰⁰ As overt reflections of desiring subjects, these three aesthetic categories are also shot through with libido, which may explain why each in its extreme form has a correlate in one of the three major Freudian neuroses. The experience of the interesting can quickly turn into one of obsession, and the experience of soft undifferentiated squishiness that is cuteness, into phobia (by way of disgust). And zanniness is always already a kind of hysteria.¹⁰¹

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,¹⁰² 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.¹⁰³ 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 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.¹⁰⁴ 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 zainness 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.¹⁰⁵ 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.¹⁰⁶ 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.¹⁰⁷

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.¹⁰⁸ "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.¹⁰⁹ 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.¹¹⁰ 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 cure object appears, the curer 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.¹¹¹ 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.¹¹² 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 uncanonically 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."¹¹³ 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."¹¹⁴ 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 chronologically restricted than styles like screwball, minimalism, or art deco, they can as easily be annexed to these more temporally and spatially circumscribed 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 noticeably 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"?¹¹⁵ 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 production, according to Bourdieu, ensures that in the works, genres, and movements 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 products 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 immediately 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 history.¹¹⁶ Pastiche's way of emptying out the content of any particular

style would thus reverse a trend in place since the early nineteenth century, when style first became a bearer of meaning or content in individual works of art, as opposed to serving merely as a taxonomic tool.¹¹⁷ 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 postmodernism that underlie this very point. Messiness and glossiness, in particular, 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 fashion, "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."¹¹⁸ 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 impli-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.¹¹⁹ 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.¹²⁰ Yet at a moment in which "poetic output was so rich and miscellaneous that the young Friedrich Schlegel called it a grocery shop,"¹²¹ the new understanding 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 Selection is thus transformed into a new problem that the "interessante," theorized by Schlegel as a style about stylistic eclecticism and hybridity, seems to have been expressly invented to solve. The style of the interesting further speaks to the situation of stylistic proliferation that gave rise to it in its strikingly diverse instances of manifestation, which, as we have seen, range 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 Baldessari'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 Mukarovsky

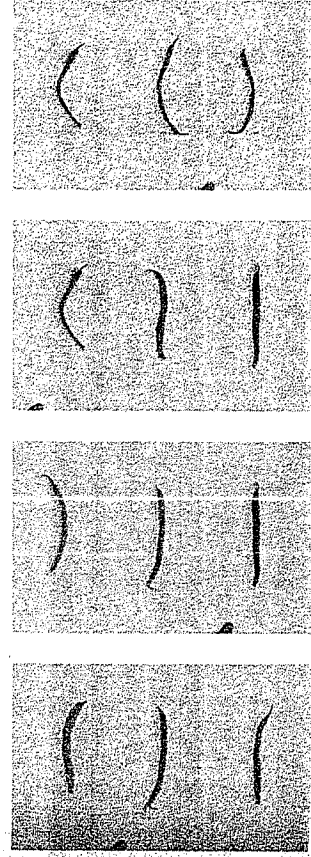


FIGURE 1

calls the "aesthetic function," which is simply to "isolate" and direct "maximal attention" to specific objects.¹²⁴ In the same blow, its merely interesting look invites us to read the series as a humorous comment on Leonard Mayer's oft-cited theory of style as "choosing within some set of constraints."¹²⁵ 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.¹²⁶ 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."¹²⁷ 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."¹²⁸ 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 recep-

tion of art in our time—as important, perhaps, as the loss of the antithesis between the work of art and the commodity.¹²⁹

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.¹³⁰ 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."¹³¹ 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."¹³² 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."¹³³

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

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."¹³⁴ 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."¹³⁵ 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."¹³⁶ 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.¹³⁷ 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, 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 Siegel, 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."¹⁴³

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 inexplicit rather than an explicit form. "Beautiful dress!" is a more auspicious

way of complimenting, for example, than intoning "I compliment you"—as if words were magic spells, Cavell notes.¹⁴⁴ 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.¹⁴⁵ 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 successfully taken place. Cavell illuminates 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). Although it seems entirely possible to form judgments of aesthetic quality privately in our heads, as if aesthetic pleasure was not a feeling reflexively 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 possible to judge something aesthetically without speaking, or at the very least imagining oneself speaking.¹⁴⁶ 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 perlocutionary act of complimenting. Although saying "I judge this cute" may be a more accurate description of what is really going on when I judge

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 demand¹⁴⁷—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 performatives 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,¹⁵¹ 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, 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."¹⁵⁴ 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.¹⁵⁵ 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."¹⁵⁶ 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.¹⁵⁷ 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.*"¹⁵⁸ 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 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).¹⁵⁹

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 nonaesthetic 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 ones—are, as 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 nonaesthetic 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."¹⁶⁰ 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."¹⁶¹ Whereas beauty tends to mask this "nonaesthetic 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 nonaesthetic 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.¹⁶² 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.¹⁶³ 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 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 runs ahead of any specific goal, object, or program,"¹⁶⁵ as Arendt notes, they also "constitute, in the world'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 underscores 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 detachment 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 somehow 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 discourse/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 accident 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.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 conjuncture of formal and historical analysis 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 imprimatur 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 (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 intimately related to sociopolitical evaluations than may initially appear; if they are performed at the proper scale (as when we "step back and attend 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 function 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 judgments 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 fundamentally singular), nor even just to bodies of work by an individual artist. As reflected by Jameson's remarks about the interestingness of contemporary 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 expect 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, surprisingly, 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 excuses and other emotionally complex speech acts—demands, apologies, compliments, insults—as sites for deeper philosophical investigation into the nature of action, J. L. Austin notes “how much it is to be wished that similar field work will soon be undertaken in, say, aesthetics; if only we could forget for a while about the beautiful and get down instead to the dainty and the dumpy.”¹ In this oft-cited remark, Austin gestures at a general class of aesthetic judgments, broad enough to contain both the beautiful and the dumpy, but also at a less explicitly defined subclass of “minor” ones: aesthetic judgments marked, it would seem based on the examples Austin provides, by greater descriptive specificity, and by affects more equivocal, or weaker in intensity, than those associated with the beautiful. Gertrude Stein’s unique way of “get[ting] down” to these less powerful aesthetic evaluations in *Tender Buttons* is not likely to be what Austin had in mind: “This which is so not winsome and not widened and really not so dipped as dainty and really dainty, very dainty, ordinarily, dainty, a dainty, not in that dainty and dainty.”² Yet in this chapter I will be suggesting that poets working in Stein’s modernist avant-garde tradition have had an ongoing interest in the subclass of aesthetic categories to which Austin’s remark directly but only glancingly alludes. Indeed, I will be arguing that poets have had a particular stake in the meaning and function of “cute,” an aesthetic response to the diminutive, the weak, and the subordinate (and as it turns out, an exact cross between the dainty and dumpy) that we might regard as particularly exemplary of the subclass of “minor” aesthetic judgments as a whole.

Notes

Introduction

1. What I mean by "circulation" in this book—the technologically-mediated movement and dissemination of information, discourse, and commodities—overlaps but does not entirely coincide with what Marx means by the term. For Marx circulation is sale, the ceaselessly renewed process in which commodities are exchanged for money and money is exchanged for commodities. Neither production nor consumption, circulation is the "process in which commodities are transformed into prices: their realization as prices." For this reason, "not every form of commodity exchange, e.g. barter, payment in kind, feudal services, etc., constitutes circulation. To get circulation, two things are required above all: *Firstly*: the precondition that commodities are prices; *Secondly*: not isolated acts of exchange, but a circle of exchange, a totality of the same, in constant flux, proceeding more or less over the entire surface of society; a system of acts of exchange." In other words, for Marx, circulation is also the market, a "circle of exchange" mediated specifically by money as its medium or instrument. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin, 1973), 186, 187.

By "circulation" I do mean to imply (as Marx does) a "system of acts of exchange," where "exchange [appears to stand] between [production and consumption] as formal social movement" (*ibid.*, 89). However, I also mean the term to refer to the kind of movement made possible by systems of transportation and communication, which for Marx actually belong to the sphere of production. For more on Marx's "reasons for classifying the transport industry in the realm of the production of value and surplus value, rather than in that of circulation," see Ernest Mandel's introduction to Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 2, trans. David Fernbach (New York: Penguin, 1992), 44-45. See also Marx, *Capital*, vol. 2, 226-227.

For Marx, the structure of exchange/circulation is ultimately determined by the "structure of production" (*Grundrisse*, 99). This, however, does not preclude Marx from speaking of an independent process of circulation. (Indeed, Marx devotes the entire second volume of *Capital* to "The Process of Circulation of Capital" precisely in order to show how only commodity production, and not the realm of circulation or exchange, can create surplus value for capital as a whole [see Mandel, introduction, 42].) Marx writes, "The conclusion we reach is not that production, distribution, exchange, and consumption are identical, but that they all form the members of a totality, distinctions within a unity. Production predominates not only over itself, in the antithetical definition of production, but over the other moments as well. . . . A definite production thus determines a definite consumption, distribution and exchange as well as definite relations between these different moments." Marx then immediately adds the following: "Admittedly, however, in its one-sided form, production is itself determined by the other moments. For example if the market, i.e. the sphere of exchange, expands, then production grows in quantity and the divisions between its different branches become deeper. A change in distribution of the population between town and country, etc. Finally, the needs of consumption determine production. Mutual interaction takes place between the different moments" (*Grundrisse*, 99–100).

On circulation as a "cultural process with its own forms of abstraction, evaluation, and constraint, which are created by the interactions between specific types of circulating forms and the interpretive communities built around them," see Benjamin Lee and Edward Lipuma, "Cultures of Circulation," *Public Culture* 14.1 (2002): 191–213, 192. For an example of Marxist geography that does in fact refer to systems of transportation and communication as "circulation," see David Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 23.

2. On the "disappearance or impossibility" of the avant-garde, see Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 167.

3. I mention just a few texts that take up these questions in a particularly focused way: art's relationship to the commodity: Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); the relationship between art and theory or criticism: Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974); Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), especially "The End of Art," 81–115; and Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2007); the effects of the institutionalized basis of artistic production, circulation, and reception on this same relation: Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford

University Press, 1996); and Philip Fisher, *Making and Effacing Art: Modern American Art in a Culture of Museums* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); the ambiguous status of the contemporary avant-garde: Daniel Herwitz, *Making Theory/Constructing Art: On the Authority of the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); and Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1991); the link or abyss between aesthetic and nonaesthetic judgments: Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981); and Jameson, *Postmodernism*.

4. William Carlos Williams, "This Is Just to Say," in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, vol. 1, 1909–1939 (New York: New Directions, 1991), 372; Frank O'Hara, "Personal Poem," in *Lunch Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1964), 32–33; Lee Ann Brown, "Cafeteria," in *Polyverse* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Books, 2000), 25.

5. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 52.

6. Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44.4 (Summer 1991): 2–13, 2.

7. Theodor Adorno, "Lyric Poetry and Society," in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 37–54, 51.

8. I owe this point and much of the language in which it is formulated to an extraordinarily helpful communication about this project by Daniel T. O'Hara, e-mail to the author, 10/16/2010.

9. Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), ix.

10. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: New Left Books, 1973), 55; cited in Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 32.

11. See Friedrich Schlegel, *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, trans. and ed. Stuart Barnett (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); and Kathleen M. Wheeler, ed., *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: The Romantic Ironists and Goethe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 32–40 and 46–47.

12. Alan Liu, *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

13. On the interesting as the "measure of tension" between known and unknown, or between "the alterity of the object and reason's capacity to integrate it," see Mikhail Epstein, "The Interesting," trans. Igor Klyukanov, *Qui Parle* 18 (2009): 75–88, 79.

14. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 2001), 111.

15. *Ibid.* As the reader may have begun to notice, many of the most direct commentators on the aesthetic categories in this study tend not to be fans.

16. *Ibid.*, 174.
17. Liz Kottz, *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 217.
18. Epstein, "Interesting," 78.
19. Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Everyman's Library, 1992), 67. Later in the same conversation, "interest" is described as "love from which the animal warmth has been withdrawn" (68).
20. *Ibid.*, 184; Schlegel, *Athenaeum* #255, in Wheeler, *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism*, 50.
21. Irving Sandler, "The New Cool-Art," *Art in America* 53.1 (February 1965): 99-101. See also Lawrence Alloway, "Systemic Painting," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 37-60, 59. Sandler's phrase was widely picked up by critics and artists as a signifier for postwar art in general. As James Meyer notes, an exhibition titled *Cool Art—1967* was held at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art (Ridgefield, CT) in 1968. See Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 279n.17. In 2009 an exhibit called *New York Cool: Paintings and Sculpture* from the New York University Art Collection traveled to various sites around the country, including the Bowdoin College Museum of Art (April 17-July 19, Brunswick, ME) and the Hunter Museum of American Art (August 23-October 25, New York).
22. Barbara Rose, "ABC Art," in Battcock, *Minimal Art*, 292; originally published in *Art in America* 53.5 (October/November 1965): 57-69. For a prescient analysis of boredom and interest in the art of the 1960s that focuses on Rose's essay, as well as on criticism by Donald Judd and Michael Fried, see Frances Colpitt, "The Issue of Boredom: Is It Interesting?" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43.4 (Summer 1985): 359-365. A longer version of this essay appears in Colpitt, *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993), 101-132.
23. Amanda Anderson, "The Liberal Aesthetic," in *Theory after "Theory"*, ed. Derek Attridge and Jane Elliott (London: Routledge, 2011), 249-261, 259; emphasis added.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Epstein, "Interesting," 79.
26. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2005), 132; Nancy Fraser, "Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History," *New Left Review* 56 (March-April 2009): 97-117. For both Fraser and Boltanski and Chiapello, the fact that capitalism finds itself forced to adjust to these critiques in the first place points as much to the critique's power as to its susceptibility to co-optation.
27. "Books: Come Back, Brothers Grimm," *Time*, May 26, 1967, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,843848,00.html> (accessed 1/15/2011); excerpted on front cover of Donald Barthelme, *Snow White* (New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1996).
28. David Foster Wallace, "Mister Squishy," in *Oblivion: Stories* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2004), 3-66, 4.
29. Lori Merish, "Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics: Shirley Temple and Tom Thumb," in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 185-203, 186. This fine essay, which I regret to have only discovered late in the writing of this book, anticipates some of the points I make in this introduction and Chapter 1, though with a more specific emphasis on the relationship between white cuteness and the abjection of blackness in nineteenth-century American sentimental culture.
30. Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1999), 52, 58.
31. The zany was a particularly prominent figure in early American alphabet primers, as Pat Crain shows in her study of these elementary vehicles of socialization, *The Story of A: The Alphabetization of America from "The New England Primer" to "The Scarlet Letter"* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000). I am grateful to Jacquelyn Ardram for the reference.
32. Pynchon, *Crying of Lot 49*, 51.
33. Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* (London: Free Association Books, 1999), 70-71.
34. *Ibid.*, 119.
35. The literature on this trend is now fairly extensive. See, for just a few examples, Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Hochschild, *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001); Heather Hicks, *The Culture of Soft Work: Labor, Gender, and Race in Postmodern American Narrative* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007); David Staples, *No Place like Home: Organizing Home-Based Labor in the Era of Structural Adjustment* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Boltanski and Chiapello, *New Spirit of Capitalism*. See also Chapter 3 in this volume, "The Zany Science." For every critical/historical book on the affective turn in postindustrial labor, there is one in the business and management literature on how to harness it. See, for example, Marian Izatt-White, *Leadership as Emotional Labour: Managing the Managed Heart* (London: Routledge, 2011); and Martyn Newman, *Emotional Capitalists, the New Leaders: Essential Strategies for Building Your Emotional Intelligence and Leadership Success* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008).
36. Merish, "Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics," 186. When imagined as an actively desiring agent as well as a passive site for the projection of our own desires, the cute object evokes this description of the snack-cake icon in Wallace's "Mister Squishy": a "plump childlike cartoon face of indeterminate ethnicity with its eyes squeezed shut in an expression that somehow connotes delight, satiation, and rapacious desire all at the same time." Wallace, "Mister Squishy," 4.

37. Jan Mieszkowski, *Labor of Imagination: Aesthetics and Political Economy from Kant to Althusser* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 115.

38. *Ibid.*, 136.

39. What this in turn means, Mieszkowski suggests, is that there is a paradoxical sense in which "interest always works against the logic by virtue of which it could appear as the expression of a given desire or end" (*ibid.*, 136). Strange as it may seem to speak of "interests" as counterinterests without referring to the particular agendas of individuals or groups (since interests seem intrinsically "particular"), Mieszkowski shows how in Schlegel's account of the interesting, these references to conflict can co-exist with a lack of subjective determination and also with a certain kind of endlessness.

40. This rather excellent phrase is Jon McKenzie's. See his *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (London: Routledge, 2001).

41. My thanks to Christian Thorne for stressing this via the example of MTV's *Jackass*.

42. I am grateful to Sam See for pointing this out. Thanks also to Petra Dierkes-Thrun for a similar observation.

43. "Glorification of character": Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Picador, 2001), 285.

44. Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" 285; cited in George Baker, "The Other Side of the Wall," *October* 120 (Spring 2007): 106-137, 130.

45. *Ibid.*

46. Put most simply, the camp performer tends to be the author of the joke, whereas the zany performer can only be its object.

47. Merish, "Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics," 187.

48. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 89; cited in John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 319.

49. "Absolute commensurability of everything": Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, 323.

50. Although this tendency has been observed by diverse commentators (feminist sociologists, affect theorists, Marxists), one of its best-known formulations, under the rubric of "general intellect," is by Paolo Virno. See Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (New York: Semiotext[e], 2004).

51. Paul Mann, *Theory-Death of the Avant Garde*, 21.

52. Raymond Williams, "The Means of Communication as Means of Production," in *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 2006), 50-66, 50.

53. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, intro. Douglas Kellner (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 80-81.

54. Robert Henke, *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell'Arte* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 23.

55. Mary P. Ryan, *The Empire of the Mother: American Writing about Domesticity, 1830-1860* (New York: Haworth Press, 1982), 36-37; cited in Bonita

Rhoads, "Poe's Genre Crossing: From Domesticity to Detection," *Roe Studies* 42 (2009): 14-40, 14; Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Avon/Knopf, 1978).

56. Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity*, 23.

57. Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," in Walter Besant and Henry James, *The Art of Fiction* (Boston: Cupples, Upham, and Company, 1885), 60.

58. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 260; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Percept, Affect, and Concept," in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Clive Cazeaux (London: Routledge, 2000), 465-488, 469.

59. Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 84.

60. But surely what 'interesting' meant to Schlegel in the 1790s is categorically different from what it meant to James a century later! Given the differences in national and historical context, how can you assume the two to be instances of the same aesthetic category, as opposed to qualitatively different categories only superficially designated by the same word? Or: "Surely the agitated style of doing that you refer to as 'zany' in *Rameau's Nephew*, *The Gay Science* and *I Love Lucy* cannot be individual instances of the same style. Are you not projecting the late twentieth-century zainness of Lucille Ball's comedy back onto the older artifacts, thus violating their historical/cultural particularity?"

Let me address the criticism of this imaginary interlocutor (not a straw man, because his questions are quite legitimate). The "historical/cultural particularity" that would automatically require a late eighteenth-century German literary critic and a late nineteenth-century American literary critic to be treated in isolation from each other often seems presupposed rather than justified (and often is invoked in a way that seems to feel no need to justify itself). It should also be noted that the proper objects of my study are precisely not these individual authors or artifacts but rather the aesthetic category of the interesting (and the zany and the cute). Moreover, in response to the idea that the shared use of "interesting" by figures like Schlegel and James is mere verbal coincidence, indicative of the imprecision of ordinary language rather than of a substantive meaning or problem under historical transformation, I am tempted to offer something along the lines of Austin's mild response when confronted with "loose usage" as a critique of the entire enterprise of linguistic philosophy: "People's usages do vary, and we do talk loosely, and we do say different things apparently indifferently. But first, not nearly as much as one would think." See J. L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses: The Presidential Address," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 57 (1956-1957): 1-30, 9. A stronger response from a *longue durée* perspective is that the contexts of Schlegel and James's different theorizations of the interesting, or even Nietzsche's and Ball's enactments of zainness, are not really all that different.

61. For as Althusser would argue, these concepts have histories that intersect with the histories of concepts in science, economics, politics, religion, and all the other various base and superstructural "levels," each with a "relative autonomy and independence . . . based on a certain type of articulation in the whole," and therefore on a certain type of dependence with respect to the whole." Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading "Capital"*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2009), 111; cited in Joshua Kates, "Period and Rupture; or, Le Tombeau de Louis Althusser" (unpublished manuscript), 1-35, 8.
62. Jacques Rancière, "Lyotard and the Aesthetics of the Sublime: A Counter-reading of Kant" in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009), 88-106, 97.
63. *Ibid.*, 92.
64. Although cuteness and zainness are prime examples of commercial aesthetics, they are also clearly central to the aesthetics of the postwar avant-garde. Lyotard's way of "saddling the avant-garde with the task of safeguarding artistic novelty against forms of reversion to outmoded expressions and compromises with commercial aestheticization"—as Rancière acerbically puts it, describing this move as "either the law of Moses or that of McDonald's" (*ibid.*, 105)—thus seems to have taken place in a strange vacuum, as if things like pop art never happened.
65. Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 68. Jacques Rancière provocatively argues that the experience of beauty, as theorized by Kant and Schiller, partakes of the same oscillation: "It is not necessary to go looking in the sublime experience of size, power, or fear to discern a disagreement between thought and the sensible or to ground modern art's radicality in the play of attraction and repulsion. The experience of beauty, which is apprehended by Kantian aesthetic judgment in terms of a *neither . . . nor . . .* [in that the judge 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'], is already characterized by the double bind of attraction and repulsion. It consists in a tension between two opposed terms, namely a charm that attracts us and a respect that makes us recoil. The statue's free appearance, says Schiller, simultaneously draws us in with its charm and keeps us at a distance through the sheer majesty of its self-sufficiency. This movement of contrary forces at the same time puts us in a state of utter repose and one of supreme agitation. There is then no rupture between an aesthetics of the beautiful and an aesthetics of the sublime. Dissensus, i.e. the rupture of a certain agreement between thought and the sensible, already lies at the core of aesthetic agreement and repose." Rancière, "Lyotard and the Aesthetics of the Sublime," 97-98.
- This is a bold but not a particularly convincing argument. My sense is that Rancière's dispute with Lyotard's "subliming" of the sublime, as it were (and his critique of what he takes to be Lyotard's peremptory dismissal and/or caricaturing of beauty), is pushing him to overexaggerate what he calls "agitation." This is certainly not the way Kant describes the pleasure of the beautiful in the *Critique*, which makes no reference to "recoil" or "repulsion" and is explicitly not derived from the judgment of an autonomous or auratic work of art. In any case, the "double bind of attraction and repulsion" in this extremely willful reinterpretation of Kantian beauty is not the same as the clash of contrasting emotions in our experience of the zany. Most important, the judgment of beauty, even when aggressively reinterpreted in the way Rancière does above, remains unequivocally positive in its axiological charge. To judge something beautiful is to praise it. This is not the case for the aesthetic categories in my study.
66. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 140. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 47.
67. Jan Mukařovský, *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts*, trans. Mark E. Suino (Ann Arbor: Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Michigan, 1970), 38.
68. Hal Foster, *Design and Crime: And Other Diatribes* (London: Verso, 2002), 17.
69. "Neo-Art Nouveau world of total design": *ibid.*, 25. Jacques Rancière, "The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy," *New Left Review* 14 (March-April 2002): 133-151, 139-140. See also Rancière, *Future of the Image*.
70. "Aestheticization of common life": Rancière, "Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes," 147.
71. "Global art system": Julian Stallabrass, *Contemporary Art: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 28; Geoff Dyer, *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi* (New York: Pantheon, 2009).
72. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters (English and German Editions)*, trans. and eds. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1983), 109; cited in Rancière, "Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes," 133. Schiller is speaking specifically of play, which he regards as capable "of bearing the whole edifice of the art of the beautiful and of the still more difficult art of living."
73. Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 77.
74. This is Crow's paraphrase of Greenberg, *ibid.*, 76).
75. *Ibid.*, 35.
76. *Ibid.*, 215.
77. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 4.
78. *Ibid.*, 146-147, 121-122.
79. Hal Foster, *Design and Crime*, 25.
80. To put this another way, the cute, the interesting, and the zany are incapable of reinforcing the "hubris of art as a religion" in the way the sublime and beautiful frequently do. See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 197; quotation in main text is from the same page. See also Joseph Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Bruce Robbins, "The Sweatshop Sublime," *PMLA* 117 (Jan 2002): 84-97; Amy Elias, *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction*

(Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). The sublime is a rare aesthetic experience, not an everyday one; one whose very significance resides in the fact that its intense feeling cannot be felt or sustained for long. Indeed, as Robbins in particular suggests, the fact that the experience of the sublime must be infrequent and fleeting is precisely what gives it its pathos (one in which intense feeling leads to a diminished sense of social agency) and makes it so well-suited for capturing the paradoxes and antinomies that confront postmodern representation overall. By definition, the sublime is not an aesthetic that can be diffused, as the aesthetic categories in this study are, into the pores of culture. Thus while the sublime does “get at” something true and important about representation in postmodernity, its prominence and ubiquity in postmodern culture (as opposed to the more restricted realm of postmodern theories of culture) has perhaps been slightly exaggerated.

81. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), xv.

82. *Ibid.*

83. Epstein, “Interesting,” 79. This makes the interesting, oddly, not unlike the Kantian sublime, which also involves two “phases” of subjective response (awe or fear followed by an “inspiring” satisfaction about the subject’s capacity for reason in its ability to mitigate that initial feeling of awe or fear). 84. Accordingly, when in a use of “zany” that was singled out by the mainstream media and given an unusual amount of attention as a politically significant, newsworthy use of language, Mitt Romney called Newt Gingrich “zany” during the race for the 2012 Republican nomination, it seemed a canny way to both discredit a political antagonist and to lightly dismiss him, on aesthetic grounds in both cases, as ultimately weak and unthreatening or “fun”: “Zany is great in a campaign. It’s great on talk radio. It’s great in print, it makes for fun reading . . . But in terms of a president, we need a leader, and a leader needs to be someone who can bring Americans together.” Jeff Zeleny and Ashley Parker, “Romney Warns of Nominating ‘Zany’ Gingrich,” *New York Times*, December 14, 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/15/us/politics/changing-tack-romney-calls-gingrich-zany.html?_r=1 (accessed 12/14/2012). Yet, ironically, Romney’s very use of the evaluation “zany” (and simultaneous invocation of its maniacal and frivolous style) was *itself* perceived by the media as rhetorically weak and ineffectual—and also as anachronistic. As one journalist blogger put it, “Using ‘zany’ is quintessential Romney—he’s a little old fashioned and he could have chosen a much harsher word.” Jennifer Rubin, “Morning Bits,” 12/14/2011. http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/post/morning-bits/2011/12/14/gIQAcbdmuO_blog.htmlw (accessed 12/15/2011). I thank D. A. Miller for emphasizing the synonymy between “zany” and “crazy.”

85. Rancière, “Lyotard and the Aesthetics of the Sublime,” 97.

86. Natalie Angier, “The Cute Factor,” *New York Times*, January 3, 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/03/science/03cute.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed 1/16/2012).

87. Denis Dutton, interview cited in Angier, “Cute Factor.”

88. Merish, “Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics,” 201.

89. Here I am applying an argument Jennifer Fleissner makes specifically about the sentimental. Jennifer Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 166.

90. *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., s.v. “zany,” www.thefreedictionary.com/zany (accessed 7/21/2011).

91. This fact is all the more striking given how much illocutionary force the term actually has; to call something “interesting”—singling it out for oneself or others as an object of attention—is often the first and most crucial step in making it so. Lydia Davis, *Samuel Johnson Is Indignant: Stories* (New York: Picador, 2002), 1.

92. I am grateful to Franco Moretti for suggesting this.

93. Epstein, 82.

94. Jan Clausen, “My Interesting Condition,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 27 (1990): 445–459, 453 (“euphemism”), 446 (“technically irreproachable”). Clausen’s essay was originally published in *OUTLOOK* 7, Winter 1990.

95. Mieszkowski, *Labor of Imagination*, 25. Yet for Kant, a judgment based on any sort of comparison, which would require apprehending the object in its generality, would not count as a genuine judgment of taste at all.

96. Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 5; cited in Epstein, “Interesting,” 86.

97. Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, 166.

98. *Ibid.*

99. Mieszkowski, *Labor of Imagination*, 158.

100. I have borrowed the “turnstile” metaphor from D. A. Miller, *Janet Austen, or, The Secret of Style* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 59. “Symptoms of the aesthetic”: Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to the Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 252.

101. I am indebted to Ken Reinhard for this observation.

102. On the split between genius and taste, see Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999). Precisely because Kant is one of Agamben’s primary culprits for producing this ideological split between maker-oriented and spectator-oriented aesthetics, it needs to be stressed that the contrast between genius and taste in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* is by no means as straightforward as Agamben makes it seem. For Kant, genius requires taste, as Hannah Arendt underscores: “Kant says explicitly that ‘for beautiful art . . . imagination, intellect, spirit, and taste are required, and he adds, in a note, that ‘the three former faculties are united by means of the fourth.’” Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, trans. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 62, italics in original. For this reason, Arendt argues, for Kant, “The public realm is constituted by the critics and spectators, not by the actors and the makers. And this critic and spectator sits in every actor and fabricator; without this critical,

- judging faculty the doer or maker would be so isolated from the spectator that we would not be perceived" (63).
103. Peter Rand, "Double Rainbow/Donald Judd Mashup" (2010), vimeo.com/14081289 (accessed 8/16/2011).
104. Hannah Arendt, "Labor, Work, Action," in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), 178.
105. James S. Ackerman, "A Theory of Style," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20.3 (Spring 1962): 227–237. For an edifying reading of Ackerman's argument, see Marsha A. Rockey, "An Analysis of Ackerman's Concept of Style," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 27.3 (Spring 1969): 331–334.
106. Frank Sibley, "Aesthetic and Non-aesthetic," in *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics*, ed. John Benson, Betty Redfern, and Jeremy Roxbee Cox (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 33–51, 35.
107. Richard Neer, "Connoisseurship and the Stakes of Style," *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Autumn 2005): 1–26, 21. In this essay Neer explicitly argues that "connoisseurship is a form of criticism" (20).
108. Rodolphe Gasché, *The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant's Aesthetics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). See in particular "The Arts, in the Nude," 179–201. Gasché suggests that "mere form" in Kant refers to the mind's active process of rendering an existing or predetermined concept indeterminate, a process he refers to as "denuding" (185).
109. Eric Blondel, "Nietzsche: Life as Metaphor," in *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, ed. David Allison (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 150–175, 150.
110. I want to thank Anton Vander Zee, who has long worked on this question of form in theory, for making me self-conscious about it as well.
111. Mieszkowski, *Laborers of Imagination*, 113.
112. Schlegel, *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, 77; cited in Mieszkowski, *Laborers of Imagination*, 25.
113. George Kubler, *The Shape of Time* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962), 4. Kubler tries to supplant the concept of "style" with that of "formal series" for this very reason, as well as because his idea of "formal series" makes it possible to track changes in the history of artifacts across a much wider variety of durations.
114. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 259.
115. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), viii.
116. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 16 and 17.
117. Caroline A. van Eck, James McAllister, and Renée van de Vall, eds., *The Question of Style in Philosophy and the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 17.
118. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 117.
119. Van Eck, McAllister, and de Vall, *Question of Style*, 10.
120. *Ibid.*, 9.

121. Edgar Wind, *Art and Anarchy: The Reith Lectures, 1960* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 11.
122. Van Eck, McAllister, and de Vall, *Question of Style*, 8.
123. The objective situation to which the style of the interesting emerges in response—that of an aimless pluralism—would find its subjective correlate in the figure of the romantic ironist, able to enter "lightly into diverse experiences, some familiar, others remote, without allowing himself to be caught in any" (Wind, *Art and Anarchy*, 14). Faced with the now-overdetermined act of selection from the sea of stylistic options, this ironic producer of interesting art remains radically undetermined by any style in particular, which is another reason that the "look" of the interesting appears to have fluctuated more than other aesthetic styles over time.
124. Mukatovský, *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value*, 22.
125. Leonard B. Meyer, "Toward a Theory of Style," in *The Concept of Style*, ed. Berel Lang (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 21–71, 25.
126. Stephen Ullmann, *Style in the French Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 6; cited in Nelson Goodman, "The Status of Style," *Critical Inquiry* 1.4 (June 1975): 799–811, 799 n. 1. Goodman explicitly disagrees with this thesis.
127. Niklas Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media*, trans. Kathleen Cross (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 26. Mark Seltzer, *True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 25.
128. Bourdieu, *Rules of Art*, 170.
129. "Literature has this constant advantage or disadvantage among the arts of occurring in the same medium as social relations themselves, that of language. All other arts in order to exist when not present have to be described instead of quoted." Fisher, *Making and Effacing Art*, 49.
130. On the "antihistoricism of business prophecy" and its "precision model of historical obsolescence," see Liu, *Laus of Cool*, 48. On the erasure of other kinds of history in management literature, see *ibid.*, 68 and 69.
131. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, 16.
132. Bourdieu, *Rules of Art*, 242, 243. Just as art in an institutional culture of museums finds increasingly creative ways to internalize commentary (and thus, in a certain sense, to integrate relations of circulation or publicity into the process of production), the avant-garde will thus be marked by a structural tendency—as opposed to a cynically manipulative or consciously calculating one, Bourdieu always stresses—to integrate the whole history that makes its own intervention and therefore identity possible. In contrast to the more passive goal of reasserting "control" over the way in which the artwork will be historicized and critically received (Fisher's emphasis), Bourdieu's account emphasizes that the aim of this internalization is the more aggressive and activist goal of surpassing.
133. Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*, 6. Daniel Herwitz underscores, "Constructivism is created simultaneously in the metal workshop and in the pages of LFF. De Stijl is brought into being through the paint brush and through the pages of *De Stijl*. . . . Words are part of the

- identity of the avant-garde, part of what makes it the thing it is." Herwitz, *Making Theory*, 179.
134. Fisher, *Making and Effacing Art*, 23.
135. *Ibid.*
136. Phyllis Tuchman, "Minimalism: Art of the Interesting," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 20 (1981): 210–215, 213.
137. For an overview and analysis of these debates, see Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, 116–125.
138. Paul Mann, *Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*, 21.
139. The British group Art and Language expressed skepticism, for example, about the validity of attributing "institutional critique" to Dan Graham's photo-essay *Homes for America* solely on the basis of its having been distributed in a magazine. See Art and Language, "Voices Off: Reflections on Conceptual Art," *Critical Inquiry* 33.1 (2006): 113–135, 114, 119–120.
140. Paul Mann, *Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*, 23.
141. *Ibid.*
142. Korz, *Words to Be Looked At*, 223. Fredric Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity," in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern*, 1983–1998 (London: Verso Books, 1998), 93–135, 125.
143. George Oppen, "Of Being Numerous," in *New Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 2002), 165.
144. Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), especially 1–6, 7–27, 61–82. "As if words were magic": *ibid.*, 172.
145. *Ibid.*, 155–191.
146. Judgment for Kant thus implies the existence of another: subjective faculty that, unlike other faculties such as the understanding and imagination, takes into account as a priori the existence of other humans capable of speech. See Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 75. Indeed, because for Kant what the pure judgment of taste refers to is less the object than the feeling of pleasure that counterintuitively follows from (rather than preceding) its judging and thus, in turn, the communicability of that feeling, as Hannah Arendt notes, "One judges always as a member of a community, guided by one's community sense, one's *sensus communis*" (75). There is thus, by extension, no aesthetic judgment without real or imaginary conversation, as Derrida similarly seems to hint in his reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* as concerned with "talk," or with the "discursivity in the structure of the beautiful and not only . . . a discourse supposed to happen accidentally to the beautiful." See Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 48 (emphases in original).
147. Mieszkowski, *Labor of Imagination*, 19.
148. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, eds. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 57.
149. Gérard Genette, *The Aesthetic Relation*, trans. G. M. Coshgarian (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 93; my emphasis.
150. *Ibid.*, my emphasis.
151. As Simon Frith notes, "Value judgments only make sense as part of an argument and arguments are always social events." Frith, *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 95; cited in Rita Feliski, "The Role of Aesthetics in Cultural Studies," in *The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies*, ed. Michael Berubé (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 28–43, 35.
152. Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, 282.
153. Genette, *The Aesthetic Relation*, 92.
154. Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 29.
155. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 68.
156. *Ibid.*, 74; Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 110.
157. Georg Simmel makes a similar point from a different angle in his efforts to use "aesthetic valuation" as a model for understanding economic value. Although it is indisputable that "value is never a 'quality' of objects," Simmel argues, neither value's "deeper meaning and content, nor its significance for the mental life of the individual, nor the practical social events and arrangements based on it, can be sufficiently understood by referring [it] to the 'subject.'" For this reason, Simmel writes, "The way to a comprehension of value lies in a region in which that subjectivity is only provisional and actually not very essential." Georg Simmel, "Value and Money," in Cazeaux, *Continental Aesthetics Reader*, 305–321, 316.
158. Ross Wilson, "Dialectical Aesthetics and the Kantian Rettung: On Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*," *New German Critique* 104 (2008): 55–69, 57. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 175; cited in Wilson, 57. (Emphasis added by me).
159. Tom Huhn, "Kant, Adorno, and the Social Opacity of the Aesthetic," in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 237–258. Huhn suggests that as an experience of subjective domination over nature, the main role of the account of the sublime is to highlight a constitutive misrecognition in the judgment of taste that in fact makes the critique of aesthetic judgment necessary: the "failure of aesthetic subjectivity to recognize itself as an agent" in the experience of beauty (240). Huhn describes this error as the "social opacity of the aesthetic," by which he means aesthetic judgment's blindness to its own social or intersubjective underpinnings: "In judgments of beauty, what we fail to discern—though it is just this failure that allows beauty to occur—is intersubjectivity, the versions of universal subjectivity unearthed by Kant's critique" (253). As evinced by our compulsion to speak of beauty as if it were a property of objects, "Subjectivity realizes itself in taste but fails to recognize itself therein, and thereby likewise fails to reproduce itself as social" (240, emphases in original). This success/failure "sets in motion the project of the sublime," since its very first task is to "remove from taste the presentation that allows it to misrecognize itself as objective." In this manner, the sublime

"registers the faults within the success of taste" in the same way in which Kant's critique of taste does, which is why it plays such an important role as a counterexample in that critique (thus seeming at once "inside" and "outside" it).

160. "Something cannot be barely beautiful; if something is beautiful then it must be in virtue of its nonaesthetic properties. Furthermore, realizing this is a constraint on our judgments of beauty and other aesthetic properties. We cannot just judge that something is beautiful; we must judge that it is beautiful in virtue of its nonaesthetic properties. In fact, we pretty much always do so, and not to do so would be bizarre. . . . Our aesthetic thought, therefore, is fundamentally different from our thought about colors, with which they are too often compared. Perhaps colors are tied in some intimate way to intrinsic or extrinsic physical properties of the surfaces of things, such as reflectance properties. But color thought does not presuppose this. One might think that colors are bare properties of things. But 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." Nick Zangwill, "Aesthetic Judgment," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2010 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/aesthetic-judgment> (accessed 3/11/2011). Zangwill continues, "Of course, we might not have in mind every single nonaesthetic property of the thing, nor exactly how the nonaesthetic properties produced their aesthetic effect. But we think that certain nonaesthetic properties are *responsible* for the aesthetic properties and that without those nonaesthetic properties, the aesthetic properties would not have been instantiated." (Emphasis in original.)

161. Cited in Shierry Weber Nicholson, *Exact Imagination, Late Work: On Adorno's Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 18.

162. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 247.

163. Frith, *Performing Rites*, 95.

164. Davis, *Samuel Johnson Is Indignant*, 48-49.

165. Mieszkowski, *Labor of Imagination*, 136.

166. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 182. The interesting's unique way of disclosing the intersubjective foundations of aesthetic judgment in general is thus, for Arendt, already visible in the between-ness of "interest." Both terms point to how "action and speech go on between men . . . and they retain their agent-revealing capacity even if their content is exclusively 'objective,' concerned with the manner of the world of things [which] physically lies between [men] and out of which arise[s] their specific, objective, worldly interests." Interesting conceptual art, as we shall see in Chapter 2, is explicitly preoccupied with the infrastructural in-between, including systems for the circulation of information in particular. On the indexical relation between physical infrastructure and media (and on the centrality of this very relation for the aesthetic of the modern novel), see Kate Marshall's "Sewer, Furnace, Air Shaft, Media: Modernity Behind the Walls in *Native Son* and

Manhattan Transfer," in *Studies in American Fiction* 37.1 (2010): 55-80. On transportation in particular as "media," see also Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 13.

167. Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, 48.

168. These acts of connoisseurship take place, in other words, in the simple act of selecting examples for discussion. Why single out *I Love Lucy* to elucidate the meaning of post-Fordist zaniness, as opposed to any of the hundreds of other artifacts (video games, cartoons, the novels of Thomas Pynchon and Ishmael Reed, the poetry of Madeline Gins and John Ashbery, and so on) which I also mention but do not in fact linger on in the same chapter? Because the zaniness of *I Love Lucy* is a more intense or concentrated, "better" or even "purer" zaniness; because zaniness comes to a certain head in the genres of performance and physical comedy. Some of my aesthetic choices (and therefore judgments) have required very little justification: who could contest the exemplarity of the cuteness of a commercial icon like Hello Kitty? In other cases, they demanded a great deal of justification immediately: what warrants choosing late twentieth century conceptual art as a particularly exemplary or privileged instance of the interesting when, as I myself note, virtually *anything* can be said to be interesting? Much of the work in Chapter 2 is thus devoted to answering this very question.

1. The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde

1. J. L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses: The Presidential Address," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 57 (1956-1957): 1-30, 9.

2. Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons: Objects, Food, Rooms* (1914) (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Books, 1991), 44; abbreviated TB in main text.

3. Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009), 104, 105.

4. Nick Zangwill, "Aesthetic Judgment," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2010 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/aesthetic-judgment (accessed 7/12/2011).

5. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 51; abbreviated AT in main text.

6. Nor is cute an epistemological aesthetic, as Elaine Scarry argues to be the case for beauty, a "starting place for education" for the way in which it "incites in us the longing for truth." Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 31. As we shall see, cute incites and encodes a variety of longings as well, but the longing for truth is not one of them.

7. Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: The Romantic Aesthetics of Individuation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 43.