Cute Affectivism

Radical uses of the cuteness affect among activists and artists

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I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature:..

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

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PHD IN MEDIA AND CULTURAL STUDIES

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AMONG ACTIVISTS AND ARTISTS

SUMMARY

This thesis approaches cuteness as an aesthetic and affective genre which inspires intense feelings of softness and kindness, as well as aggression and possessiveness. It investigates the affective properties and uses of cuteness, the embodied experiences of interacting with cute animals and objects, along with the feelings of performing cuteness. Contrary to earlier research, which tends to discard cuteness as meaningless, demeaning and manipulative, this research shows how it can also function as radical, empowering tool for political activists and artists.

 Of particular interest is the political and resistive uses of cuteness, analyzed in three case studies. The ethnographic materials are collected on site in Sweden and in the UK, through a "mobile ethnography". This consists of shorter fieldworks centered on specific events; the Internet Cat Video Festival; Cuteness Overload - a feminist performance art project; and two cute-themed night clubs held at a leftist culture centre. The fieldwork emphasized multisensorial experiences of cuteness, focussed on participant observations along with interviews, focus groups and limited textual analysis.

Drawing on affect theory, it understands cuteness as a relational category, emerging between subjects and/or objects. Of specific interest is the queering properties of cuteness functioning on several levels. It inspires radically lateral relationships between oppressed subjects; helps create safe utopian spaces; and lastly, it opens up new ways to experience and relate to one's own body.

However, cuteness, like all aesthetic genres, is subject to the politics of taste. Not all cuteness production or consumption is given the same recognition. There exits then, a hierarchy of cuteness wherein some producers/consumers, and some expressions of cuteness, are more well-regarded than others. Ultimately, the thesis concludes, cuteness has the potential for radical transformation, but as it exists on an uneven playing field, this potential cannot be readily unlocked by everyone, at least not to the same degree.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis starts in a very personal place. While writing up my Master's thesis, I foolishly decided to stop taking my medication. The combined stress of thesis writing, finding a new flat, working part time (as is the case for most postgrads), and some negative feedback from my supervisor, ultimately resulted in a tortuous night of never-ending panic attacks. In our desperation for anything that would just make it *stop*, my partner and I started googling for cute cats. Between numerous cups of herbal tea, we scoured every social media site we could think of for more examples of fluffy fur, round eyes, and goofy expressions. Their soft, vulnerable demeanour was the only thing that would curb the spikes of anxiety. These innocent, playful, arrogant and loving images somehow managed to break through my hyperventilation, replacing it with cooing, high-pitched sounds – as if I was trying to communicate directly with the kitties. One pear-shaped, ginger kitten in particular, proved especially efficient, dissipating my anxiety for several minutes at a time.

At the time, this seemed like nothing more than a fortunate fluke – I was simply grateful that there was something so readily available that could help me calm down, at least enough to get me to my family doctor in the morning. Later on, I found that this peculiar soothing power of the cute has been evidenced by others as well. It seems I am far from the only one who found relief in this type of cute therapy. Jessica Gall Myrick's quantitative study of cute Internet cats, has shown that they can function as a type of mood management, offering stress relief to the viewers of cat images, GIFs and videos (2015). It appears to be a crutch, used to manage the everyday stresses of contemporary life.

In a more critical turn, Allison Page (2017) has described this usage of the cute as "cruel relief". She notes how the Internet cat rose to fame simultaneously with the increased financial pressures on workers in neoliberal societies in general, and in the age of austerity following the 2007 financial crash in particular (Page, 2017, p. 79). In her words, "Cute animal videos help us to exist by providing a […] moment of respite. The relief is cruel because it normalizes neoliberal capital and work, thus intensifying

the subjection of the subject" (Page, 2017, p. 80). An alternative interpretation to Page's rather cynical view would be to regard cute relief as a way of "charging the batteries," in order to allow the subject to keep fighting. Cute Internet animals can be part of an emotional support system, allowing the subject to live to fight another day. This latter approach, would also open up for an understanding of the cute as a potentially radical category, though obviously not singularly so. Clearly, there is a strong, affective force in the cute, one that can be employed for multiple objectives. This affective power of the cute, also appears to inspire strong fear. In the last decade, these fears are closely aligned with changes in the media landscape, the alleged death of traditional media, or the perceived dangers of social media.

Hostile attitudes towards the cute in general, and the Internet cat in particular, is widespread in mainstream media. Often, the Internet cat – as a seemingly vapid piece of worthless pleasure – is pitted against the serious, difficult and honourable work of "real journalism". The Internet cat, in other words, could stand as a symbol for everything that is wrong with the world, and especially with the Internet. Such a critical discourse is present both in UK and Swedish newspapers. Sam Sundberg, in an article in the Swedish newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* (2015), despairs over the fact that crowdfunded project to create a card game based on exploding kittens (!), managed to raise 74 million SEK, a sum 878 times higher than its target. At the same time, the more *worthy* "Blankspot project", aimed to create a digital platform for (citizen) journalism, only managed 400 000 SEK halfway through its campaign (Sundberg, 2015). One may question what the problem was with this state of affairs, as Blankspot still happened, and were so successful that they were nominated for (and won!) several journalistic awards (Schibbye, 2015; Stakston, 2018).

In an opinion piece, alarmingly titled "So this is how the world ends: with us distracted by cute cats," Hadley Freeman of *The Guardian* lists a number of incidents where free speech was suppressed, journalists murdered or where politicians behaved atrociously. All of these supposedly went ignored because

> You were looking at a photo of a blue/black/white/gold/who-
> cares? dress. You were making comedy memes out of a weasel
> riding on the back of a woodpecker. You were watching two

llamas doing something in Arizona. You were almost certainly
looking at photos of cats.

(Freeman, 2015)

As Sverker Lenas reflects in *Dagens Nyheter* 2014, "The cute cat has become a symbol
for the click monster: an image, a video clip or a story which can attract readers, and in
the best cases, spreads like wildfire on social media". This rather insightful comment, is
then followed by similar alarmism:

> Academics [*forskare*] calls it the news gap [*nyhetsklyftan*]. It has
> probably always existed – animals and sex sold newspapers long
> before the spread of the Internet – but as long as the reader had to
> buy the whole paper to read about the latest entertainment scandal,
> or watch the entire news report to get to the weather forecast, the
> journalists alone could decide what was news worthy.

(Lenas, 2014) [i]

Now, Lenas suggests, people are left to their own devices. Without guidance in the
jungle of online media, they succumb to the call of the cute (and of sex!), completely
sidestepping any material of substance. I suspect there is a certain amount of nostalgia
here, for a simpler time where Lenas and his journalist colleagues were the ones to set
the agenda. All this alarmism, could lead one to believe that the cute is by nature an
inherently repressive category. The Internet cat in these accounts emerges as veritable
opium for the uneducated masses.

However, the cute has also been engaged in a radical and political fashion. The
celebrated street artist Banksy made the news with his painting of a cutesy kitten,
sprayed on the ruins of a house on the Gaza strip (Akkoc, 2015). The photo, posted on
social media, was taken during a trip to document the suffering of the Palestinian
population during the conflict with Israel. Banksy explains the work in this way, as
quoted in *The Telegraph*:

> A local man came up and said 'Please - what does this mean?' I
> explained I wanted to highlight the destruction in Gaza by posting
> photos on my website – but on the Internet people only look at
> pictures of kittens.

(Akkoc, 2015)

While he appears to subscribe to a similar analysis to the journalists above – casting the Internet cat in the role of a nefarious distractor – Banksy's work could also be interpreted as a cute tactic, cleverly using the attraction of the Internet cat to draw attention to the plight of the Palestinian people. Clearly, there is some radical potential in the cute cat.

An even more drastic use of the cuteness of the Internet cat can be found in the world of memes. For instance, this [*Figure 1*] rather despairing image depicting Keyboard Cat, an Internet cat celebrity lovingly rendered in glorious pixel art. The caption reads: "FUN FACT: THE INTERNET WAS ONCE A FUN PLACE FOR WATCHING CAT VIDEOS INSTEAD OF MONITORING THE REAL-TIME COLLAPSE OF LATE-STAGE CAPITALISM". It was found on the Facebook page of *8 Bit Communism* (2018), along with other posts celebrating communism, through remixes of video game characters and pixel art. Here, the entire discourse of Internet cats is turned on its head. The relaxing practice of watching Internet cats is under threat from the destructive forces of capitalism. Instead of a safe space away from everyday struggles, the Internet, it now appears, is dominated by reactionaries, trolls, sexists, homophobes and racists.

Cuteness, and especially Internet cats, has been used consciously, and cleverly, by political activists on the Left. A British example is the Facebook account Kittens for Corbyn (n.d.). It was launched in time for the election of the leader for the Labour Party, which Corbyn – rather unexpectedly – won in a landslide in September 2015. The account posts images of cute cats, often submitted by followers, accompanied with socialist slogans, or depicts them posing with pro-Corbyn, or pro-Labour buttons and flyers.[1]

In Sweden, the cutesy image of the cartoon cat Pusheen, has been appropriated by Swedish anarchists. On the Facebook account, *Pusheen vänsterkatten/Pusheen the lefty cat*, she is depicted engaging in various revolutionary activities, often sporting a black beret that evokes Che Guevara. [*Figure 2*] shows her waving a red communist flag

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[1] For those unfamiliar with British politics, Corbyn has a long, (in)famous career as a maverick back bencher, who suddenly became the sweetheart of radical, young Labour voters. Much to the chagrin of the more conservative establishment of the Labour party.

under the slogan "When the Purrletariat is Free Everyday will be an International Cat Day"(Pusheen vänster katten/Pusheen the lefty cat, 2015).

Another Facebook account, *Anarchy Cats* posts a disparate mix of memes, articles, and videos all reinterpreted as anarchist action. A link to a clickbait article about a cat bringing roses to their neighbours every day ("Cat Brings Flowers From Her Garden As A Gift To Neighbors Every Day Since Spring," n.d.) is accompanied by a quote from anarchist Emma Goldman: "I'd rather have roses on my table than diamonds on my neck. Emma Goldman"(Anarchy Cats, 2019). The Facebook page also posts a plethora of remixed, kitschy images of kittens, now with anarchist slogans, like [*Figure 3*], where a ginger kitten surrounded by flowers, proudly proclaims "I am creating a non-hierarchical safespace to express my intersections."

As I shall show below, the cute, here in the form of the Internet cat, has been accused by scholars, artists and journalists alike to be a vapid category of dangerous distraction. At the same time, in the hands of these activists, it is celebrated as a symbol (and tool!) for revolution and anarchy. Clearly, there is some controversy here regarding the political status of the cute. It appears that the cute can be an apolitical distraction *and* inherently political, even anarchistic at the same time. No matter how one regards the usages of cuteness, it is clear that it possesses a strong affective force. One that we as humans seem keen on cultivating for various purposes.

1.1. Aim

The overall aim of this thesis is to investigate activist uses of cuteness. As I will show in the literature review, previous research has primarily approached cuteness as a submissive, even oppressive, category. Instead this thesis aims to complicate this model, and look at the ways cuteness is used as a subversive and empowering genre. This is what I term *cute affectivism.* By this I mean the ways cute aesthetics, performances, relationships and/or emotions are used to sway, inspire, discourage or generally engage people affectively and effectively to a political end.

The thesis is organized around three ethnographic case studies, primarily based in Sweden, with an additional one from Glasgow, Scotland. All of them describe events

[Removed image: pixelart with a cat playing a keyboard.]

[Removed image: a cute cartoon cat wearing a black beret.]

Figure 1 Pixel art depicting Keyboard cat posted on 8 Bit Communism Facebook page. Caption: "FUN FACT: THE INTERNET WAS ONCE A FUN PLACE FOR WATCHING CAT VIDEOS INSTEAD OF MONITORING THE REAL-TIME COLLAPSE OF LATE-STAGE CAPITALISM".

Figure 2 Remixed image posted on Pusheen the leftist cat Facebook page. "When the purletariat are free – Everyday will be an international cat day." Courtesy of Pusheen the leftist cat.

[Removed image: colour photo of a ginger kitten surrounded by flowers.]

Figure 3 Posted on Anarchy Cats Facebook page. "I am creating a non-hierarchical safespace to express my intersections."

where the cute is activated for political purposes; a feminist performance group experimenting with cute practices; a leftist/anarchist culture centre that threw a cute-themed fundraiser; and lastly, an analysis of two local versions on the Internet Cat Video Festival, in Stockholm and Glasgow.

The approach I will employ, is not simply to regard cuteness as an aesthetics, but also in terms of embodied *affect*, those warm, squishy feelings that emerge when we are confronted with something we find adorable. This phenomenon emerges on several levels, which is why the collection of case studies in this thesis move from a micro scale (as experienced in the body, or between a few bodies in Chapter 5), to a macro scale (as the basis for collective emotion and action in Chapter 6), and finally as mediated for mass-appeal as seen in Chapter 7.

Of specific interest is the queering potential of cuteness. By *queer* I refer to Mel Y. Chen's expanded definition of queerness, which moves beyond descriptions of sexual relations between non-heterosexual subjects, and sees it more "in terms of the social and cultural formations of 'improper affiliation,' so that queerness might well describe an array of subjectivities, intimacies, beings, and spaces located outside of the heteronormative" (2012, p. 104). Primarily, I am interested in how cute objects may be used to create safe spaces for queer subjects, and other precarious lives, living in a capitalist, heteronormative world.

One of the obvious lacunae in earlier cute theorizations, is the absence of the cute point of view. Most models of the cute relationship assume an unequal relationship where the cute is dependent on, or even in servitude to a cute- consumer/-owner/-parent. The subject-position of the cute (what it's like to feel cute, to perform cuteness) in these models, is mostly ignored. This thesis is therefore also an exploration of the cute subject-position, and the queering properties associated with the embodied experiences of cuteness. In this way, I hope to move away from the sadistic model of cuteness, which constantly reiterate the master/pet, parent/child, active/passive, uncute/cute, and see what happens when two (or more) cute subjects form a relationship, when the cute is the aggressor, or when the cute becomes the caretaker.

However, while political cuteness is often used to create safe spaces, and equalize relationships, an investigation of the political uses of the cute, also needs to acknowledge that there are hierarchies *within* cuteness. This means that some individuals' uses of the cute, are considered worthier and more legitimate than others. A secondary purpose of the thesis then, is to explore the processes behind this hierarchization. This last theme is primarily explored in Chapter 7, complementing and contrasting the findings of Chapters 5 and 6.

1.2. Research Questions

- How is the experience of cuteness affected by the "situatedness" of our gaze/perception, in terms of embodiment and emplacement?

- How is the affective power of cuteness used for radical, political purposes? What roles do the queer(ing) properties of cuteness play in this activist use?

- How does cuteness inspire intimacy in affective relationships among large groups of people?

1.3. Disposition

This thesis is organized around three ethnographic field studies, each based around a specific event, where the cuteness is employed for activist purposes. They are all intended to explore a specific aspect, or usage, of the cute. Leading up to these, I contextualize the understanding of cuteness, from several perspectives: affective, relational, aesthetic and performative. The theoretical framework presented in Chapter 3, outlines the queer properties of cuteness as well as its affective force. In Chapter 4, I describe the ethnographic methods employed, including selection criteria, ethics, and the role of the feminist ethnographer.

The first case study found in Chapter 5, analyses a performance developed by the Swedish feminist performance group ÖFA, during their artistic fieldwork in 2015. These performances explore the embodied experiences of cute, as explored in the practice of wrapping, crawling, and care taking. In Chapter 6 I focus on the Utopian uses of cuteness, through the example of anarchist and feminist activists in a Stockholm culture centre. The last case study – in Chapter 7 – looks at the Internet Cat Video

Festival, a compilation of cat videos originally screened at the American Walker Art Center. My analysis looks at two local versions of the festival, at Södra Teatern in Stockholm, Sweden, and in Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) in Glasgow, UK. Here, the cuteness of the Internet cat is approached in terms of taste hierarchies, bringing the low status Internet cat into institutions of high art. This chapter also opens up to the complications of cute affectivism. This (ostensibly) radical move – mixing high and low culture – may in effect *not* lead to radical reformation of said institutions. It may even work to reify existing hierarchies.

The conclusion in Chapter 8, discusses the thesis's findings and points towards future research. This concluding discussion will mainly focus on cuteness as an affective, political category. In this sense cute affectivism aligns with Chantal Mouffe's definition of *the political* as "a dimension of antagonism". Importantly this is differentiated from – but deeply entangled with – *politics*, the public institutions and practices, ideologies and party systems. The cuteness as a political category, is similarly ordered around a certain antagonism – feelings of we/them – with the intention of attracting certain audiences, while excluding others. This aspect of political cuteness is perhaps most pronounced in Chapter 6 – Cute Utopianism, but is also strongly present in the other chapters. The political primarily takes places outside of established political systems, in what Mouffe calls subsystems. These could be various grass roots organizations like the activists in chapter 6, but describes more generally an individualization of the political and disruption of the traditional liberal division of private as non-political and public as political (Mouffe, 2005, p. 39-40).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this section, I shall address the relationship between cuteness and commercialism, as it has been approached in cultural studies, and in humanities in general. Of specific interest is the ambivalent position that researchers have traditionally taken vis-à-vis the cute. On the one hand, scholars tend to emphasize the fundamentally low, or rejected status of the cute, as an expression of popular culture – kitschy, sentimental and superficial - an attitude that some hope to rectify. On the other hand, the very same authors are constantly reinforcing the distance between themselves and the cute, placing disclaimers around the inherently low cultural value of cuteness.

John Morreall (1991, p. 46) traces the fate of cuteness as an "inferior aesthetic", as caused in part by the tender feelings it inspires. Feelings that were not appreciated in the male dominated fine arts. Our instinctive reaction to cuteness, renders it an "unsubtle property" which – similarly to melodrama – "requires no taste or aesthetic education to discern" (Morreall, 1991, p. 46). On the whole, exploiting this automatic response is "objectionable", and thus cuteness "can never be the stuff of great art" (Morreall, 1991, pp. 46–47). The latter comment seems quite ironic in light of the international success – and critical acclaim – of pop artists such as Murakami Takashi, Jeff Koons, or Igarashi Megumi "Rokudenashi-ko"[2] who all make use of the degraded forms of kawaii/cuteness in their art. From this perspective, cuteness can thus be likened to a *body genre* on par with horror, pornography and melodrama, all intended to evoke a certain involuntary bodily reaction, and not (supposedly) necessitating any extensive education to appreciate them (Ngai, 2012, p. 3; Williams, 1991, p. 3).

A similarly derisive attitude can also be found in Daniel Harris's work. Though not strictly an academic writer, his essay on cuteness has (perhaps unduly) influenced

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[2]Igarashi also known as Rokudenashi-ko, works with cute, vagina shaped objects in her kawaii-style art. In 2014 she was arrested for charges of obscenity, along with fellow feminist activist Watanabe Minori, for displaying obscene objects in the latter's shop. Igarashi was later on indicted on charges of obscenity after spreading information on how to 3d-print a vagina shaped kayak. (Osaki, 2015; "Vagina artist Megumi Igarashi arrested again," 2014, "Vagina artist Megumi Igarashi indicted on charges of obscenity," 2014)

several of the major players in the emerging field of Cute Studies,[3] among them Sianne Ngai (2012, 2010, 2005) and Christine Yano (2013, 2009, 2004) - a situation I find rather problematic. Rather than framing the low status of cuteness as a product of the bodily reactions it inspires, Harris's disdain for the cute is related to the highly artificial quality of the cute, as it is staged in "things like calendars with droopy-eyed puppies pleading for attention or greeting cards with kitty cats in raincoats" (2000, p. 2). This argument pivots on the assumption that an appreciation for the cute is ultimately a manipulating experience, especially for those less discerning (read *educated*) consumers. Paradoxically, cuteness, in these two texts, is dismissed both on the grounds of it being too base and "natural" on the one hand, and too "unnatural" and artificial on the other. However, as I shall expand on below, cuteness is probably to be found somewhere in between, as a product of the meeting between "nature" and "nurture".

The last decade has seen an increased academic interest in Western cuteness as a legitimate object of study, especially in the humanities. For instance, Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories: zany, cute, interesting* (2012), the anthology *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness* (Dale et al., 2017), Simon May's monograph *The Power of Cute* (2019), and the two special issues on the topic, in *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* (Dale, 2016), and in the online *M/C journal* (Meese and Lobato, 2014). These newer interventions complicate, and differentiate, the concept of cuteness through a plethora of approaches and objects of study. This thesis forms part of a wider project of diversifying the field of cute studies. With its focus on cuteness in a smaller cultural context, namely Sweden, it complicates findings from previous research primarily conducted in Anglo-Saxon contexts, or in cuteness cultures from East Asia.

2.1. The Concept of Cuteness

It has long been acknowledged by numerous studies within the social and natural sciences, that interacting with cute objects and images, have a distinct effect on human behaviour (Golle et al., 2013, pp. 1–5; Little and Fusani, 2012; Lorenz, 1943) for instance, making participants more careful and attentive (Nittono et al., 2012; Sherman et al., 2009; Sherman and Haidt, 2011). Most have experienced this affect. The instant

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[3]A trans-disciplinary research area concerned with the affect, function, and construction of cuteness.

attention a baby gets in a room full of adults, or when the family pet is addressed with high-pitched "baby-talk." The *cute response*, as it is known, have been connected to a particular set of features found in human infants and baby animals, formalised by the German ethologist Konrad Lorenz in his influential concept *Kindchenschema* or *baby schema* (1943)*.* These features are summarised as follows in an ethological definition of cuteness:

> 1. Head large and thick in proportion to the body;
> 2. Protruding forehead large in proportion to the size of the rest of the face;
> 3. Large eyes below the middle line of the total head;
> 4. Short, stubby limbs with pudgy feet and hands;
> 5. Rounded, fat body shape;
> 6. Soft, elastic body surfaces;
> 7. Round, chubby cheeks;
> 8. Clumsiness
>
> (Genosko, 2005)

The *Kindchenschema* provokes an "innate releasing mechanism" (or IRM) in the adult individual, prompting it to take care of the small, vulnerable infant (Genosko, 2005, p. 6). The cute response is probably an essential evolutionary trait, securing the survival of the species. However, there are some who question the ontological status of the cuteness response as described above. Joshua P. Dale finds the theory of IRM and the *Kindchenschema* problematic as it easily lends itself to casual racism. Perhaps not surprising, considering Lorenz's membership in the German Nazi-party and his production of research that supported human eugenics and the prevention of "interbreeding" (Dale, 2017, pp. 44–45; Vicedo, 2009, p. 287). Later additions to, and reinterpretations of, the *Kindchenschema* (like adding colour to the list of cute features), often ends up following an ideal form of specifically *white* cuteness (Dale, 2017, p. 45). Lori Merish, writing on Shirley Temple, has also shown that black children in white supremacists societies, are generally treated as less cute than white children (1996, p. 189). Though I find Dale's scepticism towards Lorenz's theories refreshing, I would still suggest that the *Kindchenschema* is useful in analysis. I would reiterate, however, that cute things do not necessarily have to embody all these qualities. Rather,

the *Kindchenschema* should probably be understood as a set of commonly used building blocks, put together in different ways through cultural work, with the possibility of emphasizing certain aspects of cute, while downplaying others.

The philosopher John T. Sanders holds that parents find their children cute simply *because* they are their children, rather than that there would be an essential quality inherent in the features themselves that invokes the caring response:

> [T]here is nothing essential about the link between any particular set of features and 'cuteness'; no set of features is intrinsically 'cute'. Rather, cuteness is just any set of features that is typical of babies. If human babies all (or usually) had six ears, four of which dropped off by the age of seven, we would find that cute.

(Sanders, 1992, p. 163)

Gary D. Sherman and Jonathan Haidt (2011), represent the clearest break with Lorenz's model. They suggest that the cuteness response, rather than triggering a parental instinct, instead allows us to recognize the social value in children (Sherman and Haidt, 2011, p. 245). Cuteness, humanizes and "mentalizes" the individual (human and non-human) or the object, and thus makes them part of a "moral circle" i.e. make them part of an "us" that we feel affinity, kinship and compassion for. It would thus be a socialising trigger, prompting us to engage with the cute, rather than a caring response. Cuteness, then, inspires a playful response in humans (Sherman and Haidt, 2011, pp. 248–250).

The "gooey," warm feelings incited by babies, can of course be, and constantly *is*, evoked by other (non-human) animals and man-made objects. In short, we appear to be hard-wired to react to basically anything and everything that mimics the *Kindchenschema* of human babies (Cheok and Fernando, 2012; Golle et al., 2013; Miesler et al., 2011; Sanefuji et al., 2007). Though this is obviously not the whole cause for the complex phenomenon of companion animals, the pleasure of cuteness can partly explain the aesthetic development of pets (Archer, 1997, pp. 249–250). Through controlled breeding – what the American zoologist James Serpell calls "Anthropomorphic selection" – of domesticated companion animals, humans have

gradually enhanced the animals' infantile traits, both in terms of appearance and behaviour (2002, pp. 446–449).

A key term here is *neoteny.* In an evolutionary context this refers to adult individuals who retain certain juvenile characteristics. This is in turn allows the species in question to adapt more easily to changes in the environment. However, in terms of cuteness, neoteny mostly refers to the retention of *Kindchenschema* in adults (LaMarre, 2011, p. 124). In a more sinister interpretation of the term, Gary Genosko describes it as *neotenization,* "a regime of cuteness in which maturation is stalled or suspended" (2005, p. 4). In his seminal work on the cultures of pet-keeping, *Dominance and Affection* Yi-Fu Tuan suggests that breeding encourages these juvenile traits as it creates more docile animals, that in turn are more submissive, and thus more appealing as pets (1984, pp. 101–102).

Dale describes how cuteness and domestication are more closely intertwined than even Tuan anticipates. In an experiment with domesticating wild silver foxes (*Vulpes Vulpes*) conducted by a team in Novosibirsk, the selection of a group of more friendly, sociable foxes, bred over a few generations also started showing a higher prevalence of neotenous morphology. Along with their more doglike behaviour, their physique changed to include more instances of "floppy ears, curly tails, and piebald coats." Later in the breeding program Trut and her team noted that "the foxes' legs, tails, snouts and upper jaws shortened, while their skulls widened" (Dale, 2017, pp. 48–49). Interestingly, a similar program with rats, bred to be more sociable, did not result in the same cute appearance (Dale, 2017, p. 50).

Undoubtedly, cuteness is an invariably complex construction, intermingling biological instincts and social practices. From this perspective, cuteness could be approached as a product of what Donna Haraway calls *nature-culture,* the interstices of biology and culture. And can be understood as just one of the many aspects of the *companion species* relationship, the way that animals (as well as other non-human species e.g. plants) and humans are co-constitutive of each other (2008, p. 17, 2003, p. 16).

2.2. Relational Models: Sadism and Playfulness

According to Anne Allison, cute characters and products are not simply defined by their

adherence to the baby- or *Kindchenschema*. Essential to the cuteness of these objects, is the type of relationships that people develop with them (Allison, 2006, p. 206). In this section, I shall look closer at how cuteness has been understood in terms of a *relational model*, in addition to the biological imperative, or as a formal aesthetic. The suspicious attitude towards the cute, especially from Western scholars, becomes explicit in many of these relational models, as in this illuminating quote by Genosko (2005, pp. 3–4):

> To be blunt: I am suspicious about cuteness, about its ordinariness. It is a vehicular term that drags along with it clusters of similar adjectives, generating an emotionally resonant but impenetrable fog. [...] Cuteness cultivates submissiveness, and it relieves one of the responsibility of understanding its physical and psychological consequences. It is easy to get lost in the fog of harmlessness and delight, in the Disneyland of cuteness if you will.

In other words, the dazzling surface of cute prevents us from asking the hard questions, and from identifying the sacrifices being made on the altar of cute. This specific rhetoric resurfaces from time and time, and relies on the assumption that cuteness is fundamentally a sadistic genre. Harris in particular describes cuteness as "an act of sadism on the part of its creator, who makes an unconscious attempt to maim, hobble, and embarrass the thing it seeks to idolize" (2000, p. 5). Even Ngai, who otherwise offers a more considered view, insists on the sadistic side of cute relationships, as cute objects are intended to inspire both the desire to cuddle, as well to control and master (2005, p. 816).

This discourse, I believe, obscures a more complex account of cuteness, as it - to a large extent - does not allow for cases of resistance within cute consumerism, and ignores the experiences of those *performing* cuteness. Furthermore, the critique of cuteness as regime, is more often than not conflated into a critique of the cute object, or cute consuming subject itself.

Harris is particularly caustic in his disdain for the cute, as he regards it as an oppressive regime, drawing an analogy between cuteness and pornography. Just as the "perfect" bodies of pornography offer up an impossible ideal to which we compare the bodies of our partners, so cute media – according to Harris – inspires parents to mould their

children in compliance with an arbitrary standard of cute (2000, p. 16). What he primarily takes issue with, is the way cuteness seeks to maim its objects, as it "aestheticizes unhappiness, helplessness, and deformity" (Harris, 2000, p. 5). Thus, while the viewer seems to direct a maternal and caring gaze towards the cute, it is in fact, only interested in its own pleasure and will stop at nothing, not even mutilation, to shape the object into its ideal form (ibid., p. 6). Rather than seeing cuteness as a blurring of nature and culture, Harris's argument hinges on a dichotomous model, as he assumes that children can exist in a "natural, unindoctrinated state" onto which we splice the artifice of cute. Ironically, especially considering his criticism of self-centred parenting, Harris still insists that children are ours to "enjoy," he just takes issue with the way we enjoy them (Harris, 2000, p. 16). Strikingly, in this vision, the problem is not one of *othering*, quite the opposite. The cute seeks to destroy nature, suppress anything that is different from us, to create a world of bland, oppressive sameness (Harris, 2000, p. 12).

Ngai, relying on Harris for part of her argument, presents cuteness as an indispensable contemporary aesthetic category, along with the zany and the interesting. Cuteness in this model is reliant on the affective response in the subject interacting with the cute object. What I find problematic however, is Ngai's insistence on the consumption of cute as fundamentally a consequence of the unequal relationship between the (consumer) subject and the cute object (2012, p. 11). Consistently, her texts take the position of the consumer vis-à-vis the cute (Ngai, 2012, p. 54) which results in a model of cuteness as a one-way experience belonging to the subject, and ultimately leaves little space for agency in and of the cute. To be fair, Ngai does describe the paradoxical qualities of cuteness, on the one hand, it is understood as "an absolute lack of anything threatening" but on the other, cute objects project a sense of aggressiveness. The cute can simultaneously provoke aggressiveness in us, as it is "intended to excite a consumer's sadistic desires for mastery and control, as much as his or her desire to cuddle"(Ngai, 2005, p. 816) as well as being the agent of aggression. However, this is the only type of agency permitted (Ngai, 2005, p. 823).

Through her insistence on the sadistic undercurrent in the experience of cuteness, Ngai, unfortunately, contributes to the objectification of the cute. The idea of *feeling*

cute, by *performing cuteness* (sometimes by surrounding oneself with cute things) is almost entirely absent in Ngai's account.

A more fruitful way forward therefore, would be to approach cuteness as an inter-subjective phenomena, which could include both positive and negative experiences of cute relationships. May (2019) offers a fundamentally ambivalent understanding of cute. While on the one hand, it can be hijacked as means for power, but on the other it represents a "nascent will to repudiate the ordering of human relations by power", a way to question who has power, and why (May, 2019, p. 9). This is where the concept of play comes into, well, play.

I shall delve further into this later on, in relation to Gergana Nenkov and Maura Scott's idea of whimsical cuteness (2014). For now, I would like to emphasize that there is more to play than projecting an air of "fun". *Cuteness-as-play* or *-playfulness*, could be a way around the sadistic model. Adrian Cheok and Owen Fernando, following Mitchell Resnick, view it as child-like attitude towards the world, which allows one to regard it with an inquisitive innocence (2012, p. 300). An alternative interpretation is to regard *cuteness-as-play* as a strategy to negotiate (at times unequal) relationships. In Japan, cute characters (*kyarakutâ)* are used to market all sorts of products, organizations and public institutions, a way of softening the interaction between members of the public and authorities such as the police (Allison, 2006, pp. 61–62; Avella, 2004, p. 212; Cheok and Fernando, 2012, p. 299; Miller, 2010, p. 69; Yano, 2013, p. 61).

Most successful in my view, is Yano's (2013) application of play in her analysis of Hello Kitty. Basing her understanding of play on the Japanese term *asobi,* Yano extends the concept beyond children's play into the domain of adult creativity. In relation to the cute, play encompasses a range of positions and practices: as performance, game and "sly pleasure" (Yano, 2013, 200). Though Japanese cute originates within a passive, feminized position, it has extended far beyond this, and now refers to a plethora of possible subject positions, which in turn creates a complex web of intertextual references. These subject positions also extends into the global interpretations, appropriations and resistive practices of cute icons (Yano, 2009, p. 686). It thus opens up for a plethora of interpretations and ambiguities, *double entendres*, a mix of

innocence and sexiness, the infantile and the adult (Yano, 2013, p. 200). Within the framework of this thesis, it would allow us to explore a range of interactions and relations with the cute, as subversive, casual, indulgent, consumerist, and critical, to mention a few, and avoid an essentializing discourse.

Cuteness-as-play is also expressed in closeness or intimacy. As it is articulated in the *kyarakutâ* or character industry, and hinges on a quotidian interaction with the cute, often in the form of zoomorphic products (Allison, 2006, p. 17). The projected personality of the character encourages the consumer to form personal relationships with *Pokémon*'s Pikachu, Moomin, or Mickey Mouse (Allison, 2006, p. 18; Cheok and Fernando, 2012, pp. 300–301). Having a small mobile-charm in the form of Hello Kitty or Totoro can be a building block in constructing one's own identity and personality, while at the same time connect with others of similar tastes or interests (Avella, 2004, p. 214).

2.3. Pets, Toys, and Safe Spaces

At times, this relationship between the cute and the consumer, takes on the dynamics of pet-master. In *Dominance and Affection*, Tuan underlines the similarities between our relationship with pets and with toys, his running thesis being that the relationship between humans and pets (be they non-human or human) is based on the one hand on (violent) dominance, and on the other, on a caring affection. Here, play is seen as a way for the child to practise the dominance and affection on its toys and pets, preparing it for a life of controlling and interacting with other humans (Tuan, 1984, pp. 163–164).

Though I am not convinced of Tuan's argument on the intrinsic sadism of these interactions, as he assumes that the child inevitably destroys its toys, or hurt its pets, I would agree that there is much to be said for how the relationship with toys, tends to mimic that with a pet. Obviously, many toys overtly exploit these parallels e.g. in the form of *Pokémon*, *Littlest Petshop* or simply in the form of the classic stuffed animal. In Ngai's view, the design of toys can be directly traced to the aggressiveness of children. Softer materials in toys, which also work to project an air of vulnerable powerlessness, were also the product of a need to create more durable toys that could withstand the

aggressive treatment from small children (2012, p. 75). Writing about Pokémon, Allison centers her analysis of the cute toy as pet, around the Japanese concept of *yasashisa*, "the 'gentle' aspect of cuteness" which evokes "feelings of possession, companionship, and attachment"(Allison, 2006, p. 226). This is not to say that these interactions are consistently benevolent. In the Pokémon franchise, affectionate kinship between cuddly monsters and their trainers, are juxtaposed against images of domination, domestication and sacrifice (Allison, 2006, p. 229). In general, however, accounts of kawaii, emphasizes the caring aspect of the cute relationship, the act of *kawaigaru* (to give loving care), and the feelings of pity and compassion than the cute inspire (Yano, 2004, p. 58).

What I am trying to get at here, is the need to differentiate between *dominance* and *sadism*. While sadism is dependent on dominance, it does not necessarily follow that dominance involves sadism, or a wish to inflict bodily harm. Dale (2016) even suggests that the cute might in fact be more of a masochistic genre, as it "cuts the subject." In this logic, the feelings of want that the cute incites, makes the subject inflict more control on itself as it can't have it (Dale, 2016, p. 10). In addition, it would seem that there is a sort of pleasure involved in this frustrating game of almost, but never having.

Essential in this relationship, is the cute characters' capacity to invite the consumer into an innocent, safe world, free from the pressures of everyday life (Allison, 2006, p. 206). The cute could then be likened to a safety vent, a cosy hug helping us get through life. However, in Allison's view, the cute commonly works in concert with capitalism, rather than outright breaking with it as it is designed to be consumed in the short, fleeting moments between work. Paradoxically, while the cute works to re-personalise consumer goods, and thus perpetuating the capitalist system, it can also be resistive to the same system, due to its idolization of the pre-social. This represents a break with the social contract, and strict work ethic in Japanese society, a refusal to take part in capitalist production (Kinsella, 1995, p. 251). This, I think, is a more complex analysis of the role of the cute in contemporary capitalist societies than the one Page (2017) offers, which I described in the introduction. While I do not deny that cuteness *can*, and *is* used in ways to perpetuate neoliberal systems, this is not the whole truth.

Thinking with Sara Ahmed's idea of bearable and unbearable lives could help us understand the uses of cute objects, texts, and perhaps pets in people's lives. A bearable life is one that is viable, that does not succumb to pressures and forces that threaten the aims and direction of that life. The cute could play an important part here, in the one hand, keeping up the strength of the subject to face various hardships, offering a break when things become "'too much'"(Ahmed, 2010, p. 97). According to Hasegawa Yuko, wilfully staying in an immature state of *kawaisa* (cuteness) can undermine the gender/power configurations of society, as the immature individual never reaches a stable identity, sexuality or gender expression (2003, p. 140).

I would like to explore how this safe space can be employed for more explicitly political purposes, as basis for a support network and revolutionary tool. This is where I believe that Ahmed's work on "happy objects," and queer phenomenology, could help us out. In her view, happiness is to a large degree performative, as we orient ourselves towards certain objects, places, and creatures, those are designated as "good" and as *goods* to be promoted (2010, p. 6). These play central roles in what Ahmed calls "happiness scripts," ideas that outline what men, women, and children should do in order to be happy, including what objects, places and other individuals that are prescribed to fulfil happiness. Choosing the correct objects is thus crucial in constructing the "social and sexual good" of heterosexuality, often seen as a prerequisite for happiness in heterosexist societies (Ahmed, 2010, pp. 90–91). In this model, heterosexuality is not a property of objects, rather it is in the accumulation, and ordering of sets of specific objects that form a background against which heterosexuality can play out (Ahmed, 2006b, p. 558). An example of this would be the way that 1950s American housewives were encouraged to surround themselves, their daughters, and their homes with shades of pink and pastels in order to ensure an unambiguous heterosexual femininity (Sparke, 1995, p. 198).

There is a coercive, oppressive quality of happiness, where following the correct, or natural script, should, and must, lead to happiness (Ahmed, 2010, p. 59). Consequently, finding joy in the *wrong things,* for instance a boy playing with a Barbie doll, becomes a subversive act. As Ahmed sees it, to be heterosexual, is to orient oneself straight towards those objects (physical objects, thoughts, feelings, judgments, aims,

aspirations, objectives) designated by heterosexual culture (2006b, pp. 553–554). Being queer, in the same sense, is to deviate from this correct course, and to orient oneself to other objects, to other spaces. It can also be understood as a type of disorientation, of viewing things from another angle.

> If queer is also an orientation toward queer, a way to approach what is retreating, then what is queer might slide between sexual orientation and other kinds of orientation. Queer would become a matter of how one approaches the object that slips away, a way to inhabit the world at the point at which things fleet.
>
> (Ahmed, 2006b, p. 567)

Orienting ourselves toward the same objects, in this case, a cute animal, text, space, or object, can create *communities of feeling* (Ahmed, 2010, p. 56). Communities of feeling can be oppressive, but also a source of strength, as alternative communities can form around certain objects, focussing on them as a source of mutual comfort. It seems to me that the cute would have significant political potential in this sense, being a "forbidden" object for so many social categories in Western societies (adults, males, social classes dependent on upholding refined tastes) but also as cute objects are charged with strong emotional and affective power.

This collective potential of political cuteness, is analogous with José Muñoz concept of queer utopia. Queerness is utopian in the sense that it is always just on the horizon, an imagined future wonderland where minorities can come together in a communal landscape of desire. This collective future is created partly through affective objects, which helps the queer subject survive in a heteronormative time (Muñoz, 2009, p. 27). This quality of cuteness is primarily explored in chapter 6 on Cute Utopia.

2.4. The Cuteness Response and Product Design
Product designers and market researchers are of course well aware of this supposedly evolutionary trait of the cuteness response, and have learnt to exploit it. The *Kindchenschema* can now be found in anything from toys – especially Teddy bears, and other stuffed animals – to stationery, clothes and, rather unexpectedly, cars (Nenkov and Scott, 2014, p. 326). This exuberances of examples also testifies to the plasticity of

visual neoteny, not only as a quality in the cute object itself, but in its ability to transfer from the organic over to the inorganic. Miesler et al. deem cuteness to be extremely effective, as cute products elicit an *affective response*, different from emotional response in that it is not reliant on a cognitive interpretation of the object (2011, p. 18). Even from this evolutionary approach to the cute, many scholarly texts, also within cultural studies, display an unfortunate preoccupation with the strictly visual impact of cuteness, while largely ignoring the importance of other sensorial experiences of cuteness (Brzozowska-Brywczynska, 2007; Harris, 2000; May, 2019; Page, 2017; Yano, 2013). Morreall, though allowing for cute sounds, still claims that "There are, I take it, no cute textures, tastes or smells" (1991, p. 39). Ngai does acknowledge that cuteness is dependent on exuding a soft quality that invites touching, or "fondling," but mainly concentrates on its visual and linguistic aspects (2005, p. 815).

In regards to cuteness, this situation has somewhat been corrected in later years, primarily in the area of marketing research, as well as industrial and product design. Ohkura Michiko and Komatsu Tsuyoshi, for instance set out to identify the tactile qualities of Japanese cute – *kawaii* – and conclude that the textures experienced as kawaii, were described with such adjectives as "bushy, fluffy, soft, smooth, and elastic" (2011, p. 4). Cheok and Fernando (2012) go further, and explore a variety of cute or *kawaii* qualities as texture, colour, sound, smell, taste and proportions. According to them, cuteness is especially useful in product design, functioning as the "flavoured coating" of the "bitter pill" of technology, making complex products more approachable, and friendly to the consumer/user (Cheok and Fernando, 2012, p. 299). Likewise, digital design is heavily reliant on cuteness, for instance in the form of the *squircle* (a square with softly rounded corners) or *blobjects* (a portmanteau for *blobby* and *object)*, objects with a curvaceous, fluid, and soft design (Holt and Skov, 2005, p. 12)). These cute forms are used for their ability to quickly grab our intention (Marcus, 2002, pp. 30–31; Wittkower, 2009, pp. 216–217).

The apparent limitations of the *Kindchenschema* as the sole definition of cuteness has prompted some scholars to push for an independent concept of cuteness. Nenkov and Scott (2014) propose that the overarching term of cuteness actually obscures two separate concepts, the *Kindchenschema* and *whimsical cuteness.* The latter refers to

the playful and fun aspect of cuteness which, according to Nenkov and Scott, triggers a more impulsive and indulgent behaviour, i.e. makes the consumer more prone to actually buy these products, as they mimic the object's whimsicality (Nenkov and Scott, 2014, p. 327). The underlying assumption here is that the careful behaviour induced by the *Kindchenschema* – as described by, among others, Nittono et al. (2012) – would not explain why people would act more indulgently towards them. I find this highly problematic. First of all, a *careful* behaviour does not necessarily exclude an *indulgent* behaviour. The drive to take care of something often overlaps with the need to have it, to control it, in order to protect it; for instance, when a child pesters its parents for a kitten. Cute inanimate objects, are interpreted as being in search of a parent, and gives the consumer the feeling that these object need caretaking, and promote a mothering behaviour (Yano, 2013, p. 56). Furthermore, taking care of things, especially if they make us feel all gooey inside, can in itself be a pleasurable experience. This pleasure of cuteness is what Morreall calls part of the "compensation" that the adults receives in exchange for the labour of taking care of an otherwise rather selfish and rude baby (Morreall, 1991, p. 41). Nenkov and Scott thus completely ignores the possibility that consumers might be more prone to buy these things partly because "taking care" of them is pleasant, and can be as much of a hedonistic self-reward as fun playfulness. However, this is not to say that playfulness or youthfulness is not crucial to cuteness, rather the opposite (Cheok and Fernando, 2012, p. 300; Yano, 2009, pp. 686–687).

Cuteness should be understood beyond the limited scope of the *Kindchenschema.* Here I find Cheok and Fernando's definition stimulating, as it includes both the cute objects and the feelings they incite.

> Cuteness includes the feelings and emotions that are caused by experiencing something that is charming, cheerful, happy, funny, or something that is very sweet, innocent, or pure. It can stimulate a feeling of adoration, sympathy, or stimulating the care response.

> (Cheok and Fernando, 2012, p. 301)

Taking inspiration from these articles, this text argues that cuteness is not limited to the visual, but is dependent on all our senses, especially touch and hearing. Furthermore, following Brian Massumi (1996), any project that is concerned with the

affective responses to cultural products, needs to acknowledge the *synaesthetic* quality of affect, as sensorial experiences bleed into each other. Clinical synaesthesia is defined by Richard E. Cytowic as "the rare capacity to hear colors, taste shapes, or experience other equally strange sensory fusions" (Cytowic, 2002, p. 2). Theoretically and methodologically speaking however, synaesthesia designates an approach wherein the embodied aspect of our perception is emphasised (Blackman, 2008, pp. 83–85). This also means that the affects of exposure to cuteness is defined by our bodies, and importantly, is experiences *through our bodies* (Massumi, 1996, p. 228). The cute has traditionally been approached primarily as a visual category, which sometimes lead to strange paradoxes as writers try to account for all the bodily appeals of the cute. Morreall who insists that the cute being a visual category, still expands on the synaesthetic quality of the cute.

> We also often say of the cute baby that it is 'sweet' and we playfully say to the baby things such as 'I'm going to eat you up!' A kind of natural synaesthesia is operating here based on the close relationship between nuzzling and kissing, on the one hand, and eating, on the other. Indeed a common way of showing affection for the baby is to take mock bites out its legs, arms, and belly.
>
> (Morreall, 1991, p. 40)

The synaesthesia of cuteness can for instance be experienced in the overlap of visual and tactile cues, like how seeing the softness of a kitten's fur, translates into feeling the fur against one's hand. Cuteness affect plays out (simultaneously) across multiple sensorial modes; taste, sight, touch, sound and, importantly, proprioception. All which bleed into each other creating a plethora of cuteness affects.

Though this thesis is not concerned with identifying the ultimate cute product or experience, this wider definition would allow for a more fruitful exploration of the everyday experiences of cute, acknowledging the links between the comforting feeling one gets from hugging a soft plushie close at night, petting one's cat, watching a cartoon, or indulge in shopping Hello Kitty bijouteries. For the sake of clarity, I shall throughout differentiate between *cuteness* as a quality of an inanimate object or a living creature, and the *cuteness affect*, the feelings prompted by our interaction with a

cute object or person.

2.5. Cultural Dependency

Despite his arguing for a biological and evolutionary foundation of the cute response, Lorenz (1943) did recognise that our susceptibility to cuteness is not stable. There are ways in which it can become more selective, and/or sensitive. In other words, the cuteness affect is to a great extent constructed and mediated through culture (Genosko, 2005). Furthermore, humans have a tendency to "cutify" objects and animals that do not strictly adhere to the standards of the *Kindchenschema*. Analysing articles in the *National Geographic Magazine* from the 1950s and 60s, Genosko describes how cute terminology was applied to such unlikely animal life as plankton, crustaceans and flying fish (2005, pp. 13–14).

This is sometimes known as the "Disneyfication" of nature, or variously as the Bambi-syndrome/-complex/-factor, named after the strong anti-hunting sentiment inspired by Disney's film *Bambi* (James Algar and Sam Armstrong, 1942), and its cutesy, adorable versions of deer, skunk and other forest animals (Lutts, 1992, p. 162). Even the cute impact of the *same species* is contextual, as Kate Milton (2011) has shown in the case of the brushtail possum (*Trichosorum vulpecula*). In Australia, the cuteness of this species is enhanced in the discourse for conservationist purposes. In New Zealand, where the possum was introduced in the 19th century, their predominant status is that of pest. Though they are described as cute, this is framed as a deceptive quality, and is not regarded as a legitimate reason for preserving the species (Milton, 2011, pp. 69–74).

One way of thinking of cuteness, is regarding the *Kindchenschema* as a shared denominator, more or less stable across cultures, while prettiness, whimsicality, playfulness, are more culturally dependent, and historically unstable. In other words, while the existence of a cute response appears to be universal, the meanings and interpretations of cuteness, as well as the (socialised) sensitivity to the cute response vary, both between cultural contexts and between individuals, depending on such social factors as gender, age and so on. This is not surprising, especially if one regards cuteness as a multi-sensorial experience. Generally, the human sensorium is not

entirely innate, but is shaped by a plethora of external factors, environmental, cultural and social. Or as the film theorist Laura Marks puts it: "our sensorium is formed by culture: it produces a map of the 'objective' world that reflects our cultural configuration of the senses"(2000, p. 203). This plasticity makes sense from an evolutionary perspective as individuals need to adapt to their environment in order to survive, though, to exactly what extent the senses are innate and socially constructed are still debated (Koureas and Di Bello, 2010, p. 6). Therefore, this thesis will investigate the cultural construction of cuteness more closely. Especially since cuteness exists in a global media culture, and is dependent on various understandings of the term, resulting in a plethora of appropriations, (re-)interpretations and applications. Cuteness should therefore be understood in the plural, as cuteness*es.*

2.6. The Cultural-linguistic Development of Cuteness in Three Languages

In this section I shall start out with tracing the development of the word "cute" in the English language, then move on to Swedish, as a large part of the material is collected in a Swedish context. Mainly, this serves to underline the cultural and historical specificity of cuteness, illustrated through semantic and philological shifts. Hopefully, this move could also break down the dichotomy of "Western" and "South East Asian" (especially Japanese), cuteness by showing the instability of cuteness within a Western (Euro-North American) context. It is also relevant as a substantial part of the material will be gathered in three, quite distinct, cultural and linguistic settings. Finally, I shall explore the concept of *kawaii*, the Japanese word that largely overlaps with cuteness and which has influenced ideas of cuteness globally (Yano, 2013, pp. 6–7).

2.6.1. The English-American Etymology of Cuteness

As many scholarly works on cuteness argue, the English word *cute* originates from *acute* (Brzozowska-Brywczynska, 2007, p. 214; Cross, 2010 [2004], p. 44), which in turn comes from the Latin *acutus,* translated as sharp, or sometimes, keen and quick-witted (Brzozowska-Brywczynska, 2007, p. 214). Originally, cute was used more or less as a synonym for cunning, crafty and clever. According to Gary Cross, the contemporary usage of the term originates from 19th century American slang, but at first only when applied to objects. When pertaining to people, it was strongly associated with

cunningness, using one's aesthetic appeal to manipulate others (Cross, 2010 [2004], p. 44). As late as 1991, Morreall felt it necessary to emphasizes that he does not refer to the older definition of cute as "'clever, keenwitted, sharp, shrewd', but the *newer sense* in which babies, puppies, koala bears, certain adults, and certain cottages, villages, and cars are said to be cute [my emphasis]." (1991, p. 39). Cross is of a similar opinion when he argues that cute has gone from meaning "shrewd in an 'underhanded manner'" to a positive quality, bearing connotations of childish adorability (2010 [2004], p. 44). Despite Cross's claim that the cute has an entirely positive air in contemporary (American) English, in my view, the negative associations of cute still linger. For instance in the colloquial line "Don't act cute with me!" These connotations of cunning cleverness has, as I intend to show below, consequences for the treatment of cuteness in Western contemporary cultural studies, which predominantly promotes a view of cuteness as manipulative, artificial, sadistic and oppressive.

2.6.2. Cuteness in Swedish

In my native language of Swedish, the English *cute* is approximated by two separate words, *gullig(t)* and *söt(t)* both which have, yet again, another etymology. The latter can also be translated as sweet, both in the sense of taste, and as an adjective or adverb. A person can be *söt* or *gullig* as in he or she can be kind, attentive, or endearing. However, when referring to behaviour, this usage does not bear the same connotations of manipulation as in English, but is a more genuine expression of kindness or affection from the part of the person being *söt* or *gullig*. Both words can also be applied to inanimate objects such as houses, jewellery, trinkets, clothes, and to living creatures such as animals, especially pets. Usually *söt(t)* refers to one's looks, partly overlapping with the English *pretty*. Similar to English's *sweet*, *söt(t)* reveals a synaesthetic quality to our experience of cute, almost as if we could "taste" the cute with our eyes.

Gullig(t) developed from the word *guld* and its derivative form *gull,* both meaning gold (Hellquist, 1980, pp. 311–312). The somewhat archaic noun *gulle*[4] is used similarly to

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[4]*Gulle* can also be used as a prefix to certain pronouns, e.g. *gulledu*, *gulledig*. *Du* and *dig* being second person singular.

beloved, darling, honey (Svenska Akademien, 1929). *Gullig(t)* itself, was not included in the official thesaurus of the Swedish language until 1950 (*Svenska akademiens ordlista över svenska språket*, 1950). The verb form *att gulla* translates roughly as to pet, to cuddle, but is also used with a more negative slant as to coddle (Svenska Akademien, 2006). Important to a "pure" experience of cuteness however, is avoiding any suspicion of coquettish artifice (*tillgjordhet*), or sentimentality, often associated with American popular culture. Cuteness has to appear unconscious and natural, like a toddler, or an animal in order to be considered "real." In short, in Swedish, the connotations of cuteness are more related to something precious and kind, on the one hand, and something tasty, and enjoyable on the other.

2.6.3. Kawaii

The role of cuteness is quite different in a Japanese context, in part due to the distinct history of the term. Japanese visual culture has in recent decades had an immense impact on Western audiences' consumption of the cute, and by extension, our concept of the cute as a category. Indeed, as Yano has shown, the Japanese government has consciously – and successfully – replaced its previous national image of masculine virility, with one of feminine, pink, playful cuteness, epitomized in the global success of the Sanrio character Hello Kitty (2009, pp. 283–284).

The Japanese term *Kawaii*, encompasses many aspects not usually included in the English word (Hasegawa, 2003, p. 128; Kinsella, 1995, pp. 220–222; Shiokawa, 1999, pp. 93–94). This is how Sharon Kinsella – in a widely used quote – sums it up: "Kawaii or 'cute' essentially means childlike; it celebrates sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced social behaviour and physical appearances."(1995, p. 220). *Kawaii* is derived from two terms, *kawayushi,* later *kawayui,* whose primary meanings were shy, embarrassed, and secondary, darling, loveable, and small – nuances that still exists in the term *kawaii* today (Kinsella, 1995, pp. 221–220).

Kawaii aesthetics emerged in the 1970's, closely related to the popularity of *fanshi guzzi* ("fancy goods"), small, pastel coloured, foreign-style objects, like stationery, small toys, little bags etc., often decorated with cartoon characters (Kinsella, 1995, p. 226).

This trend, also known as the "character" craze, is strongly associated with company Sanrio, creators of the iconic Hello Kitty (Allison, 2006, p. 16), and has remained a dominant feature in Japanese visual culture, peaking again around the year 2000. The dominance of *kawaii* has been so great that it in 1992 it was named the "'most widely used, widely loved, habitual word in modern living Japanese'"(CREA, November 1992, p. 58, quoted in Kinsella, 1995, pp. 220–221).

The appeal of *kawaii* for Western audiences is evidenced for instance in the success of Nintendo's *Pokémon* franchise, in which cuteness has become a "'crossover concept'" attracting a wide audience (Allison, 2006, p. 245; Kelts, 2006, p. 90). *Kawaii*, is thus consumed and construed as something apart from the simply cute. Often it is understood in terms of *cute-cool* as Yano puts it, *kawaii* can sometimes be seen as a resistance against Euro-American mainstream tastes. However, cute-cool works fundamentally as an oxymoron, a play on the juxtaposition of the often male-coded cool, and the female-coded cute (Yano, 2013, pp. 26–27). Similarly, Susan Jolliffe Napier and Iwabuchi Koichi – among others – have pointed to the importance placed on the aesthetics of *anime* and *manga* in the Western reception and fandom surrounding Japanese products and cultural texts (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 268; Napier, 2007, p. 137).

Anime and manga style, is generally thought to have been "invented" by Tezuka Osamu, also known as the "God of Manga". Though a simplistic account of the emergence of Japanese comics, indeed Japan has long history of visual storytelling, and had a vibrant comic scene before Tezuka's success, he is definitely a major revolutioniser of Japanese manga (Power, 2009, pp. 19–22), through such classics as *Tetsuwan Atomu* (*Astro Boy/Mighty Atom*, 1952-1968), *Ribon no Kishi* (*Princess Knight,* 1953-1956, 1958-1959, 1963-1966) to adult themed works as *Black Jack* (1973-1983). In part inspired by Disney aesthetics, Tezuka's style incorporates such key cute features as large, expressive eyes, small nose and a round head (Allison, 2006, p. 146). This particular style has also greatly influenced contemporary Western animation (often coupled with a retro 1950s cartoon look) for instance in the cases of Craig McCracken (e.g. *The Powerpuff Girls*, Cartoon Network 1998-2005) (Allison, 2006, p. 159) and lately, the newest incarnation Hasbro's My Little Pony brand, reimagined by Lauren Faust as *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (The Hub/Discovery Family 2010-).

Kawaii is often associated with the *Superflat aesthetic.* According to Hideto Fuse, Superflat has a long history in Japanese art, originating with the practice of leaving backgrounds in paintings blank, resulting in a lack of perception and depth (2006, p. 60). In more ubiquitous use, it refers to the visual style wherein (cartoon) characters are simplified to the point that their features are reduced to mere dots and lines, popularised in the pop art and art theories of Murakami Takashi (Fuse, 2006, p. 60; Yano, 2009, p. 585).

In the field, all these constructions of cuteness are at play, often simultaneously. At times, one type or style of cuteness dominates, creating a particular affective experience. However, cuteness is not the sole affective tool on site, it is also working in tandem with other, kindred aesthetics.

2.7. Cuteness and Kitsch, Prettiness and Camp

I would now like to turn to some of the categories that are generally associated or even overlapping with cuteness, namely kitsch, camp and pretty. Though these categories are commonly appearing in tandem with the cute, I argue that they are conceptually independent. This does not mean that the associated categories should be excluded from the analysis altogether. Indeed, there are interesting analogies between all these categories which have all have generally been derided for being worthless, superficial, manipulating, and ultimately distracting us from more serious issues (Galt, 2011, pp. 6–7, 263). Cuteness is, as Ngai points out, an aesthetic emerging from material consumer culture, rather than the fine arts (2012, p. 59). Because of its intrinsic links with commodities and commercialism, it is not surprising that cuteness is a common feature of kitsch. Recall for instance the many trinkets and figurines, paintings and postcards depicting children and animals in sentimental scenery.

According to Sturken, the term *Kitsch* originates in mid-nineteenth century Germany, designating an aesthetic of all "banal, trite, predictable, and in bad taste" (2007, p. 18). In other words, a product of modern society and especially mass production, cheapening both the price of products, and the cultural value of them (ibid.). However, even pre-dating the term kitsch itself, cute children and animals were a common (sentimental) motif in late 18th century art and onwards, part of a wider cultural re-

conceptualization of children as innocents (Barker, 2009; Cunningham, 1995, pp. 61–78).

But the cute in kitsch can also emerge in more troubling ways, like novelty taxidermy, a popular genre of 19th century kitsch, where stuffed animals were placed in funny, anthropomorphic situations (Olalquiaga, 1998, pp. 42–44). One such example is the cute, but disturbing, *The Kittens' Wedding* (1890) by Walter Potter, a tableau involving "twenty kittens wearing either morning suits or dresses of cream brocade, complete with parson, altar and rail, in a glass display case" (*Contents of Mr. Potter's Museum of Curiosities, Tuesday 23 September 2003* [auction catalogue] cited in Creaney, 2010, p. 7).

Kitsch is not limited to the cheap or mass produced. At times it refers to those exuberantly decorated and ornamented objects that are designed to exude a sense of richness and luxury. Therefore, many exclusive designer products may fall into the category of kitsch, often playfully so (Sturken, 2007, p. 18). May devotes an entire chapter of his book to differentiating between cute and kitsch, where kitsch comes off as inauthentic and fake, while cute is seen as authentic and true:

> Whereas cute objects, with their intrinsic vulnerability, evoke a struggle to survive—and, like Camp, a marginal, endangered existence, even […] when they are experienced as protective—Kitsch seeks to conjure a world that is only safe, solid, and uplifting. And to that extent, Kitsch portrays a fake world and Cute a truer one.
>
> (May, 2019, p. 164)

While I find this differentiation more than a tad categorical, there may be something to be said for the expected authenticity in "good" cuteness, versus the manipulations of "bad" cuteness. However, others are not as uncompromising in their characterization of kitsch as fake. Monica Kjellman-Chapin shows in a more complex account, how kitsch may offer a sense of fraudulence on the experiential level, as it purports to offer an aesthetic experience that it in the end only can approximate (2010, p. 28).

The low status of kitsch can also be traced to its connotations with frilly femininity. According to Penny Sparke (1995), pastel colours, and especially the combination of pinks and gold, became popular in the 1950s as part of the feminine aestheticization of

interior design. This design aesthetic sought to mimic the "'French taste'" of Madame de Pompadour and Louis XV (Sparke, 1995, p. 188, 198). Yano describes this aspect of Kitsch in terms of "acting beyond one's station," an air of nouveau riche, mimicking the upper classes without the sense of refinement (2013, p. 24). Still, Sturken argues that kitsch fills an essential function in contemporary societies, as part of "comfort culture," epitomised in the form of the Teddy bear, an object placed on sites of tragedy and trauma, as a promise of healing and comfort (2007, pp. 6–7). As with the body genres of pornography, melodrama, and indeed cuteness, kitsch too, is reliant on an excess of emotion, in this case sentimentality. In Yano's own words

> the sentimentality of kitsch suggests emotions out of control, knee-jerk pandering to the lowest common denominator of taste. The defining moment in locating kitsch lies exactly in the border line of taste crossing into the unrestricted territory of excess.
>
> (Yano, 2013, p. 24).

In this understanding of kitsch, cuteness is kitschy in the way it suggests an inappropriately childish behaviour among adults – grown people trying to act like innocent children, through the consumption of children's cultural products (Yano, 2013, p. 25). In addition to this type of cute kitsch, I think that cute excess on a formalistic level is also expressed in a complex intermingling of too much and too little, what I would call, *an excess in simplicity*. Cute objects frequently read as "too much", paradoxically expressed in a minimalist style. Ngai, through the example of a frog-shaped sponge, draws attention to how "crudely simplified" the form of the cute is, lacking unnecessary ornamentation, reduced to just a few lines and dots. The more blob-like, soft and un-articulated an object is, the cuter it appears (2012, p. 64). Conversely, these characteristics are also found within the *Superflat*, and can even be seen as the defining feature of the aesthetic.

The second category of interest to us is prettiness, which Rosalind Galt defines as "colorful, carefully composed, balanced, richly textured, or ornamental" (2011, p. 11). In her analysis of the pretty in film, Galt expands on the controversial position of the pretty, as distinct from, and less valued than, the beautiful.

> *pretty* so immediately brings to mind a negative, even repugnant,
> versions of aesthetic value for many listeners. Feminists hear in the
> term diminutive implications; a pretty girl is one who accedes to
> patriarchal standards of behavior and self-presentation [original
> emphasis].
>
> (Galt, 2011, p. 6)

This is probably why feminist and queer theory, especially in cinema studies, has in turn criticised the pretty as a fundamentally oppressive aesthetic (ibid.). This "anti-pretty rhetoric" as Galt calls it, is heavily dependent on the exclusion on the "wrong kinds of bodies", those that are too aesthetically pleasing to be taken seriously (2011, p. 20). In a polemical move, Galt instead regards the pretty neither as inherently subversive nor oppressive. Rather, it is construed in relation to such categories as gender, ethnicity, age and sexuality (Galt, 2011, p. 246, 264).

Cuteness may function in a similar way. The denouncement of cute, is just as much a denouncement of a female coded consumer, as the cute products are designed to elicit a "mothering" behaviour toward it (Merish, 1996, p. 186). From this perspective, consumption of cuteness, often in the form of "useless" knick-knacks, neatly fits into the gendered system of producer-consumer, where the former is male-coded "'hard', 'real', dignified" while the female-coded consumer is seen as trivial and lacking agency (Naya, 1999, p. 51; Sparke, 1995, p. 194, 202).

Cuteness consumption is an efficient power tool, carefully categorising people into "correct" identities. As Ahmed notes, orienting ourselves toward the "correct" objects, and away from others, is essential for the construction of heterosexuality (2006b, p. 554). Thus, when Harris discards the cute as "closely linked to the grotesque, the malformed" (2000, p. 3) he is actively marking the boundaries of what is – and should be – considered normal and healthy, in itself a power instrument (Russo, 1994, p. 10). This strongly gendered pattern of cuteness consumption, also leaves it open for subversion. Yano notes how the figure of Hello Kitty (along with other iconic cute and effeminate characters) were used among many marginalised groups, though in different ways. From the radical Riot Grrrl scene of 1990s third wave feminism, (Yano, 2013, pp. 202–203) to lesbians and gay males, especially among members of diasporic

Asian communities:

> Hello Kitty thus consistently represents Asia and Asians, but can represent both lesbians and gay males. For lesbians, Hello Kitty in politicized contexts symbolizes their sisterhood with one another; for gay males, Hello Kitty represents performative femininity.
>
> (Yano, 2013, p. 214)

The latter example in the quote refer (I suspect), to the idea of camp, our third category. Camp has two interpretations in the work of Richard Dyer. The first refers to "camping about" a certain effeminate, social performative style common among gay men, especially associated with the stereotype of the queen. A witty, bitchy, and often self-deprecating rhetoric, which creates a feeling of togetherness and defiance in the face of heterosexist society. In the second sense, camp is a particular taste or sensibility in art and entertainment, characterised, again, by excess and exaggeration, and enjoyment of such contrasting things as John Wayne, classic ballet, the Queen Mother, or velvet and brocade curtains (Dyer, 2002, p. 49, pp. 51-52). Most important is camp's potential as a political tool, as a type of counter-reading of culture, ironically de-mystifying by accentuating the artifice of "high art" and "low culture" alike, it creates a safe space, and simultaneously works as a socio-cultural critique (Dyer, 2002, p. 52). However, camp is ultimately a double-edged sword, one that can be turned against the marginalised group itself:

> Camp means a lot at a gathering of queers, or used defiantly by queers against straightness: but it is very easily taken up by straight society and used against us. We know two things about camp that straights, at any rate as the media and everyday jokes show it, don't: that it is nice to be a queen (can be, should be), and that not all queers are queens. The straight media have taken up the queen image, which we have created, but use it against us. To a limited extent, they appreciate the wit, but they don't see why it was necessary. They pick up the undertow of self-oppression without ever latching on to the elements of criticism and defiance of straightness. And they just never seem to realise that camping is only one way of being gay.
>
> (Dyer, 2002, p. 51)

This resistive counter-reading of mainstream culture, is key to understanding the

political potential of cuteness. As Alexander Doty – and later J.J. Halberstam – noted, the queer is more often than not, found in mainstream products and the receptions of them, not in the least in those aimed at children (Doty, 1993, pp. 3–5; Halberstam, 2011, p. 181). Halberstam (2012, xviii) celebrates the subversive potential of animated films, like *Chicken Run* (Peter Lord/Nick Park, 2000), *Monsters, Inc*. (Peter Docter et al., 2001), or the zany cartoon *SpongeBob SquarePants* (Nickelodeon, 1999-), especially when it comes to re-negotiating the boundaries between the human and non-human, and by extension upsetting the construction of gender and sexuality, of production and reproduction (Halberstam, 2011, pp. 27–31, pp. 42-45, 181). In other words, "[m]ost animated films for children are antihumanist, antinormative, multigendered, and full of wild forms of sociality." (ibid., p. 181).

Here one should underline, that the cute and/or girly in many of these children's media, does not necessarily translate as weak or helpless. As in the case of Pokémon, where the cutest Pokémon, is often the most powerful (Allison, 2006, p. 45). Sometimes, a character's power even increases with its cuteness. In the turn of the millennium cartoon classic *The Powerpuff Girls* the role of the superhero is taken by three pre-pubescent, super cute little girls. A tendency that is also found within other "girl franchises," such as the Magical Girl genre of Japanese anime (Thompson, 2007). According to Craig McCracken – the creator of *The Powerpuff Girls* – the girls' toughness would be emphasised as it is played out in contrast with their cuteness, by a surprising, and playful, juxtaposition of ideas (Allison, 2006, p. 159). In these cases, the cute primarily works to set off the tough through a contrast of soft/hard. I argue that these contrasts (visual, conceptual, affective) are key to understand the affective appeal of combining seemingly juxtaposed categories of cute, gory, erotic, and funny. Or in the case study on the Internet Cat Video Festival in chapter 7, the clash between "high" and "low" culture. At other occasions, the cute is understood as a superpower in itself. Bart King's children's book *Cute! – A Guide to All Things Adorable* (2011) lists four of these cute super powers, in a charmingly overexcited tone, according to this format:

Superpower I
Making the World a Better Place

Because cute things are innocent, we have kind feelings for them.
That means:
MORE CUTENESS=MORE KINDNESS
Yay!

(King, 2011, p. 98)

Because of its rejected status, as a quality constantly relegated to an *Other* (women, children, animals, gay men, South East Asia, especially Japan), I propose that the cute – like the pretty, the kitschy, the camp and the playful – *can* be seen as a subversive category, marking a space outside of what is designated as "right" and "normal" by the dominant discourse.

2.8. Of Rainbows, Sparkles and the Colour Pink

Bright, dazzling colours are a key element in the cute, the pretty, the whimsical, the kitschy and the camp, constructing a magical fantasy land "somewhere over the rainbow" as Dorothy sings in the camp classic *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939). Indeed, rainbows are prevalent in contemporary cute media directed at children, especially little girls. For instance, the tomboyish character Rainbow Dash in the latest rendition of the My Little Pony franchise, *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (The Hub/Discovery Family. 2010-). Another example is the rainbow-coloured, Korean-speaking unicorn Lady Rainicorn in Cartoon Network's *Adventure Time* (2010-2018). As with other cute qualities, rainbows are also strongly associated with the subversive. In this case in the form of the gay pride flag, or as a symbol of the multicultural society, notably in the post-apartheid South African "rainbow nation" (Myambo, 2010, pp. 94–95).

One colour in particular plays an essential part in the construction of cuteness, especially that of "girliness." I am of course talking about pink. Pink as a girlish colour, is a quite recent phenomenon. Before the 1950s, pink was actually more associated with boys, as it was regarded as a variation on red, a colour that represented strength, blood and belligerence. At the same time, blue was considered a more feminine colour, especially in catholic contexts where it represented Saint Mary (Ambjörnsson, 2011, p. 10). In her 2011 book, *Rosa – Den farliga färgen* [*Pink – The Dangerous Colour*] Swedish social-anthropologist Fanny Ambjörnsson investigates the political connotations of

pink. Apart from being a shunned, discarded colour, mainly associated with young girls, it also has a political edge. Reclaimed by queer-feminists, and femme lesbians it is seen as subverting both mainstream gender norms and power hegemonies, as well as re-valuing the feminine and effeminate as a radical category within LGBTQ-communities. Here too, the masculine, butch, and androgynous performances have been preferred over the overtly feminine and effeminate (Ambjörnsson, 2011, p. 122).

In Japanese culture, the colour pink has a similar ambivalent position, yet different from that of pink in the West. Strongly associated with *sakura*, pink cherry blossoms, and the practise of *hanami*, the viewing of the same in spring (Fuse, 2006, pp. 55–56). As in the West, there is a perceived ambiguity inherent in pink. On the one hand, pink is primarily a colour for little girls, in other words, an essentially *kawaii* colour. On the other hand, pink is associated with the sex industry, known as the pink industry (Nemitz, 2006, p. 70).

Just as others (e.g. Dyer, 2002; Galt, 2011; Kjellman-Chapin, 2010; Olalquiaga, 1998; Sturken, 2007; Yano, 2013) have done for neighbouring, devalued genres (like the pretty, the kitschy, the camp or the girly), this thesis will investigate the subversive potential of cuteness. While I would argue that cultural products can never exist in a political vacuum (i.e. the political permeates even ostensibly "neutral" objects) cute affectivism often functions through *(re)appropriation*. Using the likenesses of Hello Kitty, My Little Pony, or Pusheen the Cat, for alternative political work, questioning and unsettling the hierarchies and categories of neo-liberal capitalism.

A recurring issue in previous interventions in cuteness studies, is the tendency to universalize a singular experience to explain all instances of cute affect. One example of this, is the assumption that cuteness is fundamentally an unequal relationship based on manipulation and coercion. This thesis instead attempts a more complex approach to cuteness, investigating what agency is possible in the cute position.

To summarize, since cuteness is a composite concept, this literature review draws from a trans-disciplinary set of traditions ranging from biology, ethology and psychology, over to aesthetics, linguistics and queer studies. Cuteness also has a longer history, than simply the last few decades, which is evidenced in the overlap with other cultural

categories, especially kitsch. While the appearance of "cute" as an independent category as we understand it today, appears sometime in the 20ᵗʰ century, cute imagery can be found much earlier. Perhaps it is as old as human art itself. The variety of cultural categories that cuteness touches, also disturbs the claims that cuteness is necessarily sadistic and/or oppressive. Rather, the cute relationship can encompass a plethora of positions and power relations. Some which are decidedly empowering and subversive. Cuteness, then, describes a complex relationship between aesthetics and affect. In the next chapter, my theorization of cuteness is therefore based on a multi-sensorial understanding of the genre, defined through particular embodiments and emplacements.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework – Affect and the Cute Relationship

While cuteness is partially dependent on a specific visual aesthetic (e.g. the aforementioned *Kindchenschema*), cute affects tend to emerge in interaction with other bodies, reacting to what I would like to call "cute cues". These entail the type of high-pitched babbling, the jerky, unfocussed movements, seemingly with no clear aim, but can also be tactile experiences of caressing soft fur or skin. This multisensorial focus would be especially important with regards to cuteness, as it is often found in the bodies of Others, but at the same time, is defined by the specific body schema of the affected body. While human beings appear to share many affective experiences when interacting with the cute, no two cute experiences are the same, simply because no two bodies are completely identical. This is the basic tenet of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, that sensorial impressions are always co-created in the body's meeting with the world (Pink, 2009, p. 26). Merleau-Ponty construes a model of sense-making wherein all the senses are engaged in order to create a complete experience of the world. The different senses give us a different way of being in the world:

> each sensation gives us a particular manner of being in space and, in a certain sense, of creating space. It is neither contradictory nor impossible that each constitutes a small world within the larger one, and it is even because of its particularity that it is necessary to the whole and that each sensation opens onto the whole.

(Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 230)

Focussing on this performative quality of cuteness, I hope, would allow us a reversal of perspectives. Though I generally find Ngai's work somewhat problematic (primarily due to her insistence on the oppressive, and sadistic nature of cuteness) (2005, pp. 815–816), her suggestion that the twittering or babbling of the cute can be a speech mode similar to the poetry or the lyrical (Ngai, 2012, p. 98) is quite interesting. Apart from the aural pleasure in listening to cute sounds, it reveals the inter-subjective

performativity of cuteness as the adult mimics the high-pitched cooing of babies. Rather than the simple one-way communication of cuteness, as object to subject, I hope that this move might help us grasp the resistive qualities of the cute. Most importantly though, it could open up for understanding the point of view of the cute person, and allow them more agency. Why are people performing cuteness, and how does it make them feel? Furthermore, they allow for greater agency on the part of the cute person or animal. Cute performative agency can for instance be seen in *saojiao.* In Chinese culture, this is the term for a specific, coquettish performative style, characterised by high-pitched voice, cooing, pouting, and big puppy eyes, usually performed by children and young women (Zitong, 2013, p. 232). The Japanese equivalent, *burikko suru* (to fake-child it[5]) or *buri buri suru* (to fake it), includes writing[6] and speaking in a cute, immature way, and wearing childish, frilly clothes (Kinsella, 1995, p. 225).

What I appreciate in Zitong Qiu's and Laura Miller's analyses, is the attempt to move away from a discourse of performed cuteness as simply oppressive, and/or manipulative, and instead turn their attention to the performers themselves, their intentions, and uses of the performance.

Zitong, following Farris, sees Saojiao as a sort of informal power structure, allowing the underprivileged (women, children) a way of controlling and influencing men in a patriarchal system, though, ultimately, perpetuating the gender order (Zitong, 2013, p. 232). This is similar to how performative camp can both be a political strategy for queers to survive in homophobic cultures, as well as perpetuating reactionary, demeaning stereotypes (Dyer, 2002, pp. 50–51). Both burikko suru and saojiao are products of their respective cultures, as strategies for women to negotiate complex gender relationships. In the case of burikko, it can be a way for women to navigate the conflicting gender roles and responsibilities in corporate life (Miller, 2004, p. 152).

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[5]Miller explains how the word "burikko" is "derived from the term *buru* 'to pose, pretend, or act' and the suffix *-ko*, used for 'child' or 'girl.' to mean something like 'fake child' or 'phony girl.'"(Miller, 2004, p. 148)

[6]This refers to a round style of hand-writing popular among teenagers in the 1970's. Often accompanied by hearts and stars, it is known variably as *marui-ji* (round writing), *koneko-ji* (kitten writing), *burikko-ji* (fake child writing), or *manga-ji* (cartoon writing). (Kinsella, 1995, p. 226)

In addition, the cute as performance has expanded well beyond the category of the cute girl, to be a more encompassing, androgynous style also appropriated by young men, sometimes even white-collar workers (*sarariman*) in order to project an endearing quality that would secure their continued employment (Allison, 2006, p. 16; Kinsella, 1995, p. 243) However, the performance of burikko or saojiao is far from stable, as it is contextually constructed, differently evaluated depending on the performer, the observer and the circumstances (Miller, 2004, p. 151). These performative cuteness genres still have the potential to disrupt gendered power structures. According to Zitong, this is apparent in the case of *feizhuliu* practioners. These take pictures of themselves in cute outfits and make up – often referencing saojiao femininity – and in this way playfully explore their own cute subjectivities (Zitong, 2013, p. 235).

Similar uses of performative cuteness can be found in the *lolita* (or *roriita*) subculture, as well as in cosplay[7], and in the furry culture. This Japanese fashion style, also popular outside of Japan, is inspired by Victorian dolls, with ruffles, lace, petticoats and lots of makeup. Sharing its name with Vladimir Nabokov's iconic novel *Lolita* (2006 [1955])– about a paedophile's obsession with a teenage girl – it is often misunderstood in the West as a sexualized child (Winge, 2008, pp. 47–48). Lolitas themselves however, whether young women or men, emphasise the modest, and decent qualities of a mature body covered in layers of fluffy clothing. Lolita fashion relies on several cute mannerisms and behaviours, as well as hyperfeminine clothes, shoes and accessories. According to Theresa Winge, the cute Lolita performance creates as safe space for its subject, to feel empowered through the protective shell of childhood (2008, p. 47, 50, 60).

3.1. Cuteness as Trans- and Post-human

As hinted throughout this literature review, the human-animal relationship is key to the construction, performance and consumption of cuteness, though in different ways.

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[7] *Cosplay* (or *kosupure* in Japanese) is defined by Winge as a combination of "*costume* and *play* (or *role-play*). Cosplay also refers to the activities, such as masquerades, karaoke, and posing for pictures with other otaku [anime fans], that are associated with dressing and acting like anime, manga, and video game characters (Macias and Machiyama 2004; Poitras 2001)." (Winge, 2006, p. 65).

First of all, it can be seen in how pets have been "anthropomorphized" through breeding, emphasising those neotenous traits that we addressed earlier, or in the form of cute anthropomorphic cartoon characters, or in stuffed toys. There are of course several commonalities with babies and animals, for instance, where we cuddle with a baby the way we would a small animal (Tuan, 1984, p. 115).

The main focus here, is the queering potential of the cute animal. Animals in themselves can be regarded as queer, first of all as they mark a space outside of human categories, especially those relating to gender and sexuality. Chen notes that the animal in general, functions as a type of third term. It can thus open up a new playing field outside of human conventions of gender and sexuality, including those of nudity, and "decency" (Chen, 2012, p. 99). This queering quality of the non-human may seem counterintuitive, considering how anti-gay rhetoric often emphasises the "unnaturalness" of homosexuality, in reference to the supposed heterosexuality of the animal kingdom (Bagemihl, 1999, p. 77). However, as Bruce Bagemihl put it in his seminal *Biological Exuberance, "*the 'birds and the bees' literally, are queer." (1999, p. 9). According to Bagemihl, animals break with binary gender systems in several ways:

> Many animals live without two distinct genders, or with multiple genders. In hermaphrodite species, for instance, all individuals are both male and female simultaneously, and hence there are not really two separate sexes; in parthogenic species, all individuals are female and they reproduce by virgin birth. A number of other phenomena in the animal kingdom – for which we will use the cover term *transgender* – involve the crossing or traversing of existing gender categories: for example, transvestism (imitating the opposite sex, either behaviourally, visually, or chemically), transsexuality (physically becoming the opposite sex), and intersexuality (combining physical characteristics of both sexes).

> (Bagemihl, 1999, p. 37)

The non-human is thus a powerful queering tool, both by marking a space outside of human culture, but also as it may reinforce the similarities between humans and non-humans. Non-human animals and humans alike have an innate capacity for "'sexual plasticity'"(Bagemihl, 1999, p. 45). However, Bagemihl also observes that this alone cannot explain the plethora of sexual practices and variations even within the same

species. This is why it may be possible to talk about cultures of sexuality even among animals (ibid.).

An essential concept for understanding the subversive quality of animal queerness, is post- or transhumanism, also known as trans-biology (Halberstam, 2011, p. 33), or trans-speciesism (LaMarre, 2011, p. 125). As Thomas Lamarre has argued in an article on the iconic *mangaka* (*manga* cartoonist) Tezuka Osamu there is an under-researched trans-human and trans-species potential of cuteness, which can open up a field to explore new identities and (power-)relations via human-animal relations (LaMarre, 2011, pp. 125–128). In Lisa Blackman's definition, the posthuman "refers to the destabilization and unsettling of boundaries between human and machine, nature and culture, and mind and body that digital and biotechnologies are seen to be engendering." (2008, p. 117). This concept is closely associated with Haraway[8] and her spectacularly influential figure of the "cyborg" representing a (utopian) breakdown of the dualist thinking that has dominated much of Western thinking, between human and animal, the organic and the machine, even the physical and non-physical (Haraway, 2003b, pp. 370–372). Later on, Haraway remedies her position, and sees the cyborg as a sub-category of *companion species*. This includes the relationships and overlaps between the human and other species (including plants and even intestinal flora), and biotechnologies (Haraway, 2003a, p. 11). Fundamentally, it means that the human and non-human are mutually constitutive, and avoids human exceptionalism by acknowledging various modes of being (Blackman, 2008, p. 120; Halberstam, 2011, p. 33; Haraway, 2008, p. 120). Importantly, this does not mean that humans and animals are reduced to undifferentiated sameness. Haraway is overtly critical of the tendency, especially in American culture, where dogs are treated as furry children (2003a, p. 37).

The trans-speciesist potential of cuteness expands beyond the queerness of animals themselves. Kathryn Stockton sees the animal-child relationship as a key queering

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[8]Though Haraway later on abandoned the idea of posthumanism, she still is very much engaged in work that addresses the interstices of human, animal, and technology, in her own words:"I never wanted to be posthuman, or posthumanist, any more than I wanted to be postfeminist. For one thing, urgent work still remains to be done in reference to those who must inhabit the troubled categories of woman and human, properly pluralized, reformulated, and brought into constitutive intersection with other assymetrical differences." (Haraway, 2008, p. 17)

practice, a way of refusing the heterosexual matrix partly by finding an alternative life companion, or by extending the experimental stage of childhood (2009, pp. 97–98 and 100-101). Sally Munt sees the acquiring of cats as "an antidote to dyke drama," in the interaction with the cat, one can relax from the anxieties, risks, and social exclusion of lesbian life, and simultaneously, escape from the scopophilic scrutiny from straight society (2009, pp. xx-xxi). This queering potential can also be seen in other identities existing outside the norm, as in the character of the ridiculed crazy cat lady, refusing human contact for the sake of her cats. Interestingly, the crazy cat lady has in later years had a revival, in the shape of the crazy cat *person*, or crazy cat *man*. Especially in the latter form, it attained a more positive, even glamorous aura as many of the famous Internet cats have male owners, as in the case of Mike Bridavsky, carer of special-needs cat Li'l Bub (King, 2014; "Li'l Bub," 2012). I would thus take a similar stance to Jonathan Burt, who, rather than regarding animals as the constantly passive and victimized partner (Burt, 2002, p. 31), describes animals as "participant observers in visual culture" (ibid., p. 37) this would in turn allow for an agency on the part of the cute animal.

In Halberstam's view the "transbiological", as they call it, brings the possibility of various hybrid identities, offering new understandings of the body and bodily transformation (2011, p. 33). In relation to the cute, this trans- or post-humanism results in new, queer "life forms" that disrupt the categories of *feminine/masculine* and *human/animal*, and which allows for an intimate intermingling of the organic and the digital. One such pet/toy would be the tamagotchi, a digital toy in the form of an imaginary, post-gender pet (Allison, 2006, p. 187, 245). Another example is the character Beemo (BMO), a gender fluid, living video game console from the post-apocalyptic children's cartoon *Adventure Time with Finn and Jake* (Cartoon Network, 2010-2018). All this could perhaps be summarized with what May calls the "unpindownability" of cuteness, existing in between and beyond traditional dichotomies like masculine and feminine, adult and child, being and becoming, to mention a few (2019, p. 8, p. 183-184).

3.2. Synaesthesia and Affect

As mentioned above, this project employs a phenomenological framework, gathered from a number of works with a "synaesthetic" and embodied approach to aesthetic affects and experiences. This approach breaks with the Cartesian dualism of mind/body and acknowledges that we perceive the world through our bodies *and* our consciousness in what Vivian Sobchack calls "an irreducible ensemble"(2004, p. 4). The synaesthetic thus undermines the cartesian hierarchy of the senses in "higher" (sight, hearing) and "lower" (smell, taste and touch) (Blackman, 2008, pp. 84–85; Falk, 1994, p. 10). In this view, we all relate to the world synaesthetically, as our senses overlap and intermingle, working together to form a coherent experience (Blackman, 2008, p. 84; Highmore, 2011, p. 139; Laine and Strauven, 2009, p. 252; Sobchack, 2004, p. 4). Indeed, the synaesthic is so habitual to us, that we seldom notice it (Sobchack, 2004, p. 70). Our sensorium and the experiences it conveys, are to a high degree influenced by the cultural and historical context (Marks, 2000, p. 145). As Pierre Bourdieu noted, the capacity to appreciate art in general is predominantly a matter of training (2009, pp. 499–500). Therefore, I would like to explore how our practices of perception co-create the cuteness affect. While all three case studies engages with activist uses of the cute, they are also based around different *perceptive practices*, resulting in different cute affective experiences. Just as the cute is caught between nature and culture, aesthetics and affect, so the senses themselves are the result of socialization and environmental adaptation as well as an innate capacity. The splitting of the senses, has – at least in Western culture – been a way of disciplining the body, of defining a sense of acceptable embodiment, one that can be controlled and mastered. This "disciplining" is evident in the creation of spaces that are intended for one sense, as art exhibitions or concerts. One consequence of this sensorial regime, is that perceived boundary breaks between the senses opens them up to become sites of abjection (Koureas and Di Bello, 2010, pp. 6–7). I shall return to the subject of abjection further down.

3.3. The Nature of Affect

In cinema studies, the synaesthetic turn has led to a move away from politics of representations, to an increased interest in affects and bodily experiences of films and other audio-visual media (Laine and Strauven, 2009, p. 252). But before we go any

further into this, let's take a closer look at the concept of affect. Though commonly used interchangeably, affect and emotion differ on a number of points. While affect is usually thought of as an unconscious, autonomic bodily response to stimuli, emotion is more conscious and requires cognitive effort (Clough, 2010, p. 209; Massumi, 1996, pp. 221–222). This is what led Massumi to describe affect as intensity, as something "unqualified", "not ownable or recognizable" (1996, pp. 221–222). Emotions fill the affect with meaning, "qualifying" the affective experience, making sense by ordering it into a personal narrative of linear causality and continuity (Clough, 2010, p. 209; Massumi, 1996, pp. 221–222). Massumi emphasises that affect is fundamentally synaesthetic, and that one sensory effect – including interoceptive and proprioceptive sense – is customarily translated into another sense (1996, p. 228). Combining a synaesthetic, embodied approach with posthumanist perspectives may seem counter-intuitive, considering the former's emphasis on the boundaries between body and world, and the latter's "molecular gaze" on the body (Blackman, 2008, p. 114). However, I believe this might be a false dichotomy, as Massumi notes, there is no clear line between the physical/biological and the human (1996, p. 230). Furthermore, the body is continuously constituted in relation to material practices, as well as human and non-human others, it is, to follow Bruno Latour, an *assemblage*, always in the process of becoming (Blackman, 2008, p. 109).

In addition, our embodied perception is frequently mediated through various (media) technologies, limited and qualified by the social and cultural systems (Blackman, 2008, p. 87; Sobchack, 2004, p. 4). In relation to cinema and media studies, this means that cinematic affect always has to be understood in relation to our whole body, including its particular experiences and memories, this is what Sobchack calls the *Cinesthetic Subject* (2004, p. 63). In this model, the film viewer's body acts as a "carnal 'third term'" mediating between the objective image, and the subjective feeling. The cinematic image engages our sensorial system, even before we can make conscious sense of them, evoking the sensorial memories of smells, textures or tastes (Sobchack, 2004, p. 60). However, this does not mean that the experiences of cinematic texts can be equalled with our experience of the "real thing." The cinematic experience is in some aspects reduced, and simultaneously heightened (ibid., p. 77). Nor does it mean

that the viewer is conscious of the crucial role of his or her body in the cinema theatre, though the harmony of this subtle reciprocal structure can be upset, for instance when an experience becomes too intense (Sobchack, 2004, p. 79). The same thing could also be said for cute experiences mediated through digital video, or in picture form. Another conclusion that follows, is that analyses of affect have to take into account not only the content and form, but the social and historical *context* of embodied experiences (Massumi, 1996, p. 223; Sobchack, 2004, p. 5).

3.4. Body Genres and the Cute

Crucial to this project, is the need to differentiate between physical cute objects, representations of the same, the cuteness effect as experienced in the body, and representations of the affect. Many writings on the cute, seem to have difficulties with separating the discourse on cuteness, and the thing itself. I am not denying that the cute is to a large degree discursively constructed. This is not say that we as human beings are not affected by these representations, and to some extent model our own performances and consumption of cuteness on them.

Earlier I described cuteness as a "body genre." This is Linda Williams' way of describing those film genres that seek to inspire a particular bodily sensation, as pornography, melodrama and horror do (1991, p. 5). Though I am not alone in defining the cute as a body genre, Ngai (2012, p. 3) has made a similar observation, few, if any writers seem to take this analogy to its logical conclusion, and engage more closely with these affective theories of audio-visual media, which I intend to do throughout this project .

Body genres are characterised by the expression of bodily *excess.* Convulsing in fits of hysteria, orgasms, or fear, the female body becomes a projection screen of a body "besides itself". Similarly to how women in horror films tend to oscillate between powerlessness and being in power (Williams, 1991, p. 4), cute characters move from inciting cute feelings, to feeling cute feelings. As Shiokawa Kanako notes, the *kawaii* girl enjoys cute things, which of course prompts her to exclaim *Kawaii!* (1999, p. 118).

Cute media, tend to linger on the cute characters, sometimes allowing the narrative to halt, as the other characters – and the audience – stand in awe of the spectacle of the

cute (Balcerzak, 2005, p. 58; Merish, 1996, pp. 188–189). A contemporary example would be the notorious Internet cat. The short video clips of kittens playing, hiding in boxes, sleeping, meowing, purring, or riding vacuum cleaners while dressed as sharks, have all removed any surplus, unnecessary text or narrative, to completely focus on the cute, and instilling cute feelings. Of course, moments of the cute spectacle exists within other formats as well. As with prettiness, where the pretty is not just the pretty body filmed, cute media cannot be equated as the images of cute things (Galt, 2011, p. 260). Following Burt, neither can we assume that animal imagery is simply a replacement for the real deal, though it could probably work as an entry point for thinking and engaging with animals (2002, p. 47).

 The success of body films, Williams (1991) suggests, are constantly measured by their ability to affect our bodies. Does the porno make us horny, the horror film scare us, the melodrama make us cry? (Williams, 1991, p. 5). In the case of cute media, how many aaws, aaahs, shocked laughs, warm, fuzzy feelings do they incite? From this perspective, we can investigate the relationship between cuteness and other affective genres.

Most importantly though, is Williams's (2008) analysis of the relationship between the erotic image and its bodily affect. The problem with many contemporary theses on cute, is the tendency to conflate the *representation* of cuteness and concomitant affects on the one hand, and the experience of cuteness outside of the audio-visual media, as living animals, babies, or three-dimensional objects. As Williams puts it "there will always be a difference between screening sex and having sex" (2008, pp. 16–17). To paraphrase Williams, there will always be a difference between looking at cat videos, and petting a cat.

This is not to deny the very physical affect of watching pornography or cute images, quite the opposite, but this affect is not simply a case of mimicry, which Ngai seems to assume (2012, p. 98), as we do recognize the difference between the object itself and its "reproduced likeness." (Williams, 2008, p. 17). Furthermore, viewers are not simply mechanical structures and these images do not just provoke a completely predictable knee-jerk reaction. As social beings, we add to the viewing ourselves, though our own

experiences, memories, feelings, fantasies and, not in the least through the specific
viewing situation (Williams, 2008, p. 19) which opens up to a wider range of
interactions with the text. Once more, we return to the idea of play, as Williams
demonstrates how erotic images allows us to "play at sex" just the way that a child may
play at being a windmill (2008, p. 18). In a similar sense, cute media and products could
present us with opportunities to play at cuteness, e.g. to play at having a pet, to
fantasize about a certain type of intimate relationship and its associated sensorial
experiences.

The shock of the cute also becomes relevant here, especially in regards its comic effect.
Often, exposure to cute babies and animals make us laugh. Their awkward movements,
inability to comprehend the world make them amusing to us (Morreall, 1991, p. 41).
When attending a viewing of the Internet Cat Video Festival,[9] a programme of cat
videos, predominantly taken from YouTube, I was struck by the lack of cute sounds
from the audience. Yes, there were some naaws, oohs and similar, but overwhelmingly
the audience laughed loudly, at animals falling over, failing at different tasks, or
behaving unexpectedly. When I interviewed one of the attendees afterwards, she told
me that she had felt uncomfortable with making too many cooing sounds in the
cinema theatre, something she did quite a lot when watching cat videos alone on her
laptop. Williams suggest that laughter can be used as an alternative reaction to
affective genres (2008, p. 131), especially if the other reactions, i.e. arousal, fear, or
indeed making cooing sounds, are experienced as too intimate or embarrassing.

3.5. The Monstrous Cute: Disgust and Abjection

Many writing on the cute insists on its close connection to the monstrous and
malformed, mainly due to its exaggerated proportions, constantly threatening to fall
over into the grotesque (Brzozowska-Brywczynska, 2007; Genosko, 2005; Harris, 2000;
Ngai, 2005, p. 823). In most accounts of the monstrous cute, it has been understood in
negative terms. Especially Maja Brzozowska-Brywczynska, regards the cute as type of

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[9]This is a video festival consisting of cat videos curated by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, once a
year since 2011. The 2014 programme has been shown by other institutions, even outside of the
US, like Stockholm Internet Cat Video Festival, in Sweden, October 2014, and within the Glasgow
Film Festival, February 2015. Running time is about 80 mintues("Cat Video Festival," n/d, "Stockholm
Internet Cat Video Festival - Södra Teatern," 2014; Walker Art Center, 2014).

lusus naturae, as an abnormality, seen in the "astoma, [the] mouthless freak" of Hello Kitty (2007, p. 217). On the one hand cuteness is dangerous because it is a type of monstrosity, on the other, the monstrous is seen as the anti-cute, the antidote to the infantalisation of culture and false sweetness of the cute surface (ibid., p. 221). I would rather like to sees this, as Halberstam does, as a further queering potential of the cute, creating new and interesting hybrids, as well as new trans-human affinities and families (2011, pp. 44–45). In other words, cuteness has the potential to straddle juxtapositions and merge clashes into cohesive constructs. The monstrous cute also illustrates how cuteness is seldom found in affective isolation. Often it works in concert with other affective moods, creating a titillating shock. According to Sherman and Haidt, cuteness and disgust occupy opposing sides on an emotional continuum. While the cute humanizes the object and creates as sense of kinship, disgust dehumanizes and alienates (Sherman and Haidt, 2011, pp. 246–247). Where cuteness and disgust combine, it creates a type of affective rollercoaster effect, which in itself can be exciting or pleasurable (Leyda, 2015).

Another crucial term in relation to disgust is abjection, which Blackman describes as "that which becomes threatening because it disturbs the bodily boundaries we try to create and maintain between the self and other" (2008, p. 93). Usually, it relates to bodily fluids and waste products, all that leaves the body and stops being part of it, such as excrements, blood and menstrual blood, and vomit (ibid.). The ultimate abjection is the dead corpse. However, while the abject is all the deadness that threatens the life of the self, the abject is also necessary as it *defines* life (Creed, 1993, pp. 9–10). Similarly, cuteness tends to be marked out by contrasting affects, by the juxtaposition of disgust, abjection and other affective genres.

3.6. A Model of Cuteness

Cuteness is slippery. It changes shape, meaning and function as it moves between contexts and states of experience. Moving forward, I find it helpful to regard the cuteness affect as "empty". Similar to other affective states – fear, laughter, sexual arousal or disgust – the cute is filled with meaning and political potential when attached to other things. Such as political Internet memes, where cute internet cats

are coupled with radical slogans. The affective impact of cuteness gives the attached message force, functioning as a pleasurable beacon.

As shown in the last case study, chapter 7: Cute Taste Cultures, the same (re-appropriated) cute text, can be used for quite distinct, and diverse purposes. This chapter also stands out as a contrast against the other two cases studies. While chapter 5 and 6 primarily explores the subversive uses of cuteness, chapter 7 shows the potential pitfalls of cute affectivism, where it instead works (unintentionally) to uphold certain power structures. From this follows that cuteness is not stable. As illustrated in the review, the cute as an *aesthetic category* is constructed – cuteness means different things in different contexts. Cuteness also encompasses certain *learned* reactions, which are culturally specific, like how white children in racist contexts are posited (and depicted) as cuter than children of colour (Merish, 1996).

Affective experiences of the cute, are also determined by situatedness and embodiment. Certain situations and environments may encourage or discourage, enhance or diminish the intensity of a cute affective experience. The experienced affect also differs due to the sensorial makeup of a particular body, the relationship with other bodies, and other objects. The effects of embodiment and emplacement runs through all three case studies in the thesis.

However, cuteness as affect – feelings of intimacy, carefulness, aggression, yearning – is seldom experienced in its "pure" state. It often emerges concomitantly with other affective states and genres, for example anger, which we can see in chapter 6's case study on cute utopianism. In order to analyse cuteness affect this thesis employs a type of "triangulation", mapping out the associated and overlapping categories of culture, aesthetics and relationships. Throughout the thesis I approach the cute as:

- Multi-sensorial: cuteness is experienced through our whole sensorium. Even images of cuteness are accessed synaesthetically. We imagine the soft fur or kittens against or finger tips, feel the need to hug (or crush!) the object presented to us. When confronted with a three-dimensional cute object or organism, we do not simply access the cute through our eyes and hands, we also react to auditory, olfactory and even gustatory cues.

- Relational: it emerges in the meeting between bodies and bodies, or bodies
  and objects. We tend to form *relationships* with cute objects or organisms. As I
  have outlined above, much of previous research insists on the unequal nature
  of these relationships. However, as I will show throughout this thesis, there are
  alternative accounts of cute relationships, where cuteness even is an equalizing
  factor.

- Culturally and situationally dependent: experiences of cuteness vary in terms of
  cultural context, but also situations, spatial dimensions, individual or group
  based consumption, digital and physical spaces, and interactions between the
  two. And lastly, the bodily makeup of the cute-consumer and performer.

3.7. Summary

The theoretical framework of this thesis is trans-disciplinary, drawing on literature
from a range of fields: affect studies, philosophy, queer studies, cultural studies and
aesthetics, to mention a few. Cuteness is approached as a type of performativity, an
affective relationship emerging between two or several subjects, or between subjects
and cute objects. These relationships, and performativities , open up for queer spaces,
exploring the inbetweeness of human/animal, adult/child, masculine/feminine,
dominant/submissive. The experiences of the cuteness affect is complex, often
intermingling with other affective genres, like its opposite disgust (Sherman and Haidt,
2011), creating a shocking juxtaposition of affect. While it can be (and often is)
expressed in limited sensorial modes (like visual arts) cuteness is experienced
synaesthetically, for example where the image of a fluffy Internet cat, provokes
feelings in your fingers of touching its fur.

Chapter 4: Methodology

The methodology for this doctoral thesis is based upon a multi-sited ethnography, whereby the researcher followed a phenomenon over several locations, organized in a logic of "chains, paths, threads, conjunctions or juxtapositions" (Marcus, 1995, p. 105). Cuteness is too diverse to be found in just one type of location or context. This would also contribute to the field, by expanding cuteness research beyond the American/Anglo-Saxon and Japanese contexts, which tend to dominate most of the previous research. This doctoral thesis is organized around three case studies with one shared trait: they each engaged the affective qualities of cuteness for activist purposes. Furthermore, they all troubled the accusation of the cute aesthetics as always fundamentally manipulative and ultimately underpinning cultural narratives of capitalist consumerism.

4.1. Mobile Ethnographies - Delimiting the Field

All except one of these ethnographies, are geographically placed in Sweden. Partly, this was opportunistic, and a result of pure practicality and coincidence. Having grown up and lived in the Stockholm area for most of my life, I had a distinct advantage in choosing these cases. My shared cultural background, knowledge of the area, and of course the fact that I speak the language facilitated contacts, participations and interviewing.

No matter how "local" these events are, all these locations have global ties, even if it is just through the ubiquitous audiences for an Internet cat. While Swedish cuteness has far less of a transnational appeal than for example American or various East Asian cuteness cultures, other cultural interpretations of cuteness are continuously (re)appropriated and "glocalized" in the Swedish setting, often in the form of subcultures, as in Japanese or Korean fan cultures.

 Inspired by George Marcus's suggestion to follow a phenomenon (a metaphor/plot/ life/thing /people/conflict) over several locations (1995, pp. 106–110), this study is organised as a type of "follow the affect", or perhaps "follow the relationship" of

cuteness over several locations. Multi-sited ethnography is not intended as a holistic representation of the "world system" (Marcus, 1995, p. 99). The purpose of moving between physical locations, platforms and temporalities, is to capture many facets of a phenomenon and to acknowledge that in a globalized world, phenomena are seldom limited to one physical location. With cuteness, this may be exemplified with the global movement of cute goods from Japan (as in Yano's account of the Hello Kitty franchise [Yano, 2013]), or with the wide appeal of cute Internet cats, which can be enjoyed in all sorts of locations. Following this logic, the global only exists as the local (Marcus, 1995, p. 99), by which I mean, that all physical places where cuteness can be enjoyed, are local *somewhere,* to *someone.* Following Latour (2005), I concur that there are no separate spheres that can be said to be "truly global" i.e. disconnected and independent from the local. Having said that, certain places are "said to benefit from far safer connections with many more places than others." (Latour, 2005, p. 176). The global is in the networks between places, not in a separate sphere. Similarly, Actor-Network Theory, does not assume an inherent hierarchy of social space, it thereby breaks with the macro/micro structure whereby the "local" resides within, or below, the "global"(Krieger and Bellinger, 2014, p. 107).

In approaching the Internet Cat Video Festival, I attempt an Actor-Network analysis, inspired by Latour (2005), as well as David J. Krieger and Andrea Bellinger (2014). This approach has several advantages when it comes to aiding us in understanding the global, or at least, the transnational flows of cuteness culture, and cute texts.

A fundamental tenet in Latour's model of globalization, is the way it abandons a hierarchic ordering of the social world into macro and micro levels. The social world, can instead be described as a series of equally localized places that are more or less well connected with each other (Latour, 2005, pp. 174–176). Applied to the Internet Cat Video Festival, the venue of Walker Art Center cannot be said to be *more* global, or "larger" than for instance its European iterations, but it may be that Walker Art Center is connected to many more sites, than its Glaswegian, or Stockholmian siblings. Or as Latour puts it: "No place can be said to be bigger than any other place, but some can be said to benefit from far safer connections with many more places than others."

(2005, p. 176). In this way, the "global" is always "local", and always localized (Featherstone, 2003; Latour, 2005, p. 343).

Another crucial aspect of Latour's model is the role played by non-human, even inanimate objects. Treated equivalently to humans, these are attributed a certain agency of their own, and can be analysed as actors interacting with, and affecting, other actors in the network (Krieger and Bellinger, 2014, pp. 94–96). Krieger and Bellinger describes this in terms of methodological symmetry, wherein both human actors, and inanimate objects are involved in a mutual mediation of each other. To illustrate this, Latour uses the example of a man with a gun. The man holding a gun, is in a sense changed by it. Simultaneously, the gun, becomes something different in the hands of a criminal for instance. The gun and the man mediate each other, and in turn, form a *hybrid network* (Krieger and Bellinger, 2014, pp. 94–96). In our case, one could regard the very text or object of the cat video reel, as one of the key players on site at the various video festivals, both "mediating" human (and other) actors, and interacting in complex networks.

Latour also emphasises the complexity of these networks and interactions, which is crucial to acknowledge in analysis. First of all, no interaction between actors can be isotopic. Meaning that some of the actors, will not be "on site", but can still affect the action. Following from this, interactions are neither *synoptic*, nor *synchronic*. In other words, not all participants engaged in the actions will be visible at the same time. Also, not all agents or materials affecting a situation originate from the same historical era. A case in point is the individual cat videos and short films making up the video festival programme, where some (silent films) were produced in the early 1900s, and others (digital videos) in the 2010s, and then in 2014, assembled in a programme, and made to interact with each other as well as human actors, and the specific physical space of the museum or the theatre. These interactions are therefore neither *homogenous*, nor *isobaric.* The former meaning that the various agents and materials involved, vary dramatically; from humans, to animals, to organic, to non-organic objects. The latter suggests that different participants' wants and needs are more or less pressing, or taken into account in varying degree (Latour, 2005, pp. 200–201). The actions by Walker Art Center could be said to illustrate this last point. As the producers of the

festival, the museum had final say on who could organize an Internet Cat Video Festival elsewhere, and had some stipulations to how the events should be organized.

However, the move between settings (cultural, linguistical, spatial, geographical) does require a stricter attention to the nuances and ambiguities that emerge in the translation between sites. Cuteness is not the same in all cultures or languages. While the affect seems a near universal (human) constant, the associated sensorial categories are fleeting, situational and situated. Similarly, the interpretations, and uses of these specific cute texts, vary. These moves over locations, should in extension also facilitate a less dualistic relationship between the researcher and the field, (hopefully) avoiding a them/us figuration of the heroic ethnographer discovering exotic peoples (Marcus, 1995, p. 100).

4.1.1. The Digital as Part of the Field

In delimiting this field, the researcher must take into account the crucial role played by online spaces. I would here emphasise that in contemporary culture, our everyday social interactions take place just as much over digital platforms as they do face-to-face (Beneito-Montagut, 2011, pp. 2017–218). In other words, the events are not just happening on the physical site of the theatre, museum, or nightclub, they also take place online, over social media such as Facebook and Instagram. Research activities following hashtags, Facebook groups and "events" can give further insights to the impressions of participants, but also give another way of "seeing" the affective states inspired by the events. In addition, it can at least partly counteract the limitations of a relatively short participant-observation, extending and expanding the analytical material, and allowing an opportunity to check findings of the participant observation against online interactions. The digital traces of the events can be regarded as a type of queer ephemera. This term, borrowed from Muñoz, refers to the more lasting traces that remain after the performances and affective states (of cuteness) have ceased (1996, p. 10). These can function as a type of evidence of the "structures of feeling" that once emerged, and which, to some extent, still maintain the same "experiential politics and urgencies"(Muñoz, 1996, pp. 10–11).

4.1.2. Internet as Network and Culture

Even the Internet, by many thought to be a type of no-place or every-place, is dependent on physical hardware (and often the "wetware" of human brains). Following this logic, there are no non-local places, the process of delocalization refers to how phenomena are transferred *between* places, not from *a* place to *no* place (Latour, 2005, p. 179). In the specific locations of these cases, these networked entanglements take many forms. First of all, they are all related to certain types of Internet culture, often centering on cute animals, like the ubiquitous Internet cat, or classic Internet memes and videos.

The term meme in its modern use originates with the biologist Richard Dawkins (2016 [1976]), who understands them as the cultural equivalent of genes. Memes can be seen in the form of

> […] catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.

> (Dawkins, 2016 [1976], p. 249)

A less dramatic definition, closer to an everyday understanding of meme can be found in Merriam-Webster's Encyclopaedia which describes it as "an amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online especially through social media" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

These widely recognized images function as what Sara Ahmed (2010) has called "happy objects". By orienting ourselves towards the same (type of) objects, treating these objects as positive ones, we in turn also form social bonds with others who orient themselves towards the same objects (Ahmed, 2010, p. 35). As Joshua Dale, Katy Peplin, and Allison Page have separately argued, this cute imagery can create an affective community with others, through the (online) sharing of cute memes (Dale et al., 2017, p. 12). These digital objects tend to transcend any division of digital/analogue. As Limor Shifman puts it, memes are hypermemetic, and have a multidimensional presence (2014, p. 24). Indeed, at all places I engaged, participants

used highly recognisable imagery from the Internet to create affective spaces that mimic the digital milieu. The meme, and especially the Internet cat, early on in the history of Internet 2.0 was discarded as a "signifier of […] non-meaning"(Galt, 2015, p. 47). While in themselves pointless, Ethan Zuckerman (2008) regards the Internet cat as a key trailblazer, as the same Internet platforms that were made and used to spread Internet cats would later be used for more "worthy" political goals by activists (Galt, 2015, p. 47; Zuckerman, 2008). The meme has lately been acknowledged as political in itself. In Shifman's words:

> memes may best be understood as pieces of cultural information that pass along from person to person, but gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon. Although they spread on a micro basis, their impact is on the macro level: memes shape the mindsets, forms of behaviour, and actions of social groups.

> (Shifman, 2014, p. 18)

D.E. Wittkower (2009) proposes that the cute is a perfect fit for the Internet , due to the immediacy of the affective response. Partly, this is due to a process of desublimation. As the cuteness affect requires a minimal conscious engagement, it fits seamlessly with the speed of digital culture (Wittkower, 2009, p. 217). Perhaps especially, I would add, with social media.

4.2. Case Studies: selection and delimitation

This doctoral thesis is organized around three case studies. Case study research is a staple in traditional social sciences, defined by Helen Simons as

> an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution or system in a 'real-life' context. It is research based, inclusive of different methods and is evidence-led.

> (2014, p. 457)

Robert K. Yin (2017) offers an alternative, perhaps more inclusive definition, which also emphasizes the complications of case study research:

1. A case study is an empirical method that

- Investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident.

(Yin, 2018, p. 15)

Both Yin and Simons encourages a mix of methods and materials, sometimes quantitative but more commonly qualitative. No matter what methodology is employed in an analysis, a case study is intended to focus on a singular phenomenon, understanding its complexity and uniqueness. Yin sees this mix of methods and materials as a way of triangulating a phenomenon (2018, p. 15).

The main advantage with case study design in relation to cuteness, is the emphasis on analysing a phenomenon in context. The affective nature of cuteness cannot be properly understood without taking into account the circumstances of the immediate production and consumption of the cuteness affect. This emphasis on "real-world context", makes case studies fruitfully compatible with ethnographic methods. Ethnographic methods (by which I refer to my interviews, participant-observations, focus groups and performance/event ethnography) helps evening out the playing field between participants and researcher, offering opportunities for participants to take active part in the production of knowledge (Simons, 2014, p. 458).

This project is organized as what Robert E. Stake (1995) calls a *collective case study*, a collection of several *instrumental* case studies. The latter designates a case which allows us to understand a more general issue, in other words, they are not studied in order to investigate their own particularity as such (Stake, 1995, pp. 3–4), but as a way to understand how cuteness can function as an activist tool in more general terms. While *comparative* case studies are fairly commonplace in the social sciences, the selection of cases here is not intended for the sake of a comparative evaluation. However, a carefully selected and executed case study, can offer valid modification of generalizations (Stake, 1995, p. 8), by which I mean that it can fill lacunae within previous theorizations. For instance, describing how cuteness can function differently, in another set of circumstances that were not accounted for in the previous research.

The first criterion for selection, was to find cases where the participants engaged with the cute as a resistive, political tool, be it as part of a (queer)feminist performance project, a way of rallying support and camaraderie for socialist policies, or as a way for emotional bonding, or to encourage wider social inclusion. These cases primarily involved leftist-radical or feminist rather than right-wing or liberal groups. Sampling of case studies is not foremost a question of representation. First of all, because a sample of a few cases (or one) is not likely to be a useful representation of others, and secondly, as the point of a qualitative case study is to understand the case at hand, rather than generalizing (Stake, 1995, p. 4). As qualitative case study design tends to be emergent rather than predetermined (Simons, 2014, p. 460), certain potential cases that were considered at the start, were later dropped as the significance of certain issues becomes more or less apparent; the design of the case studies was iterative and developed throughout the process of data collection.

A secondary criterion for selection was finding cases that allowed for analyses of the performative and relational aspects of cuteness – including cuteness as a socializing force, rather than limiting the cute to a purely aesthetic genre. Having said that, aesthetics does play a crucial part in these events. Regardless of the aim of their activist interventions, each case study tended to appreciate the political potential of the cute-as-aesthetic. Far from being an elite project – like the view of aesthetics as the study of elevated "fine arts" – Judith Hamera regards aesthetics as an implicit social contract that regulate the consumption, perception, and interpretation of art in general, and performance art in particular. In this way, aesthetic judgments, and the uses of particular aesthetics, are suffused by politics, and are "inseparable from live experience and the imaginative work of meaning making" (Hamera, 2011, p. 320).

These activists then, employ cute-as-aesthetics, as "structures of feeling", but not only limited to performance. A term borrowed from Raymond Williams (1977), Muñoz describes it as process wherein "art conveys, translates, and engenders structures of feelings—tropes of emotion and lived experience that are indeed material without necessarily being 'solid.'"(Muñoz, 1996, p. 10).

4.2.1. Cuteness Overload (Extremt Gulligt): multiple locations in Sweden

Between April and June 2015, I followed the performance project Cuteness Overload, or Extremt Gulligt (direct translation: Extremely Cute). Funded by the Swedish National Theatre Organization *Riksteatern*, as one of several projects in their artistic development programme, the purpose of which was to involve young adults in the organization through various events and workshops (Wilhelmsson, 2015).

The project was proposed and organised by the artists Nadja Hjorton, and Lisen Rosell (Rosell et al., 2015), both members of the feminist performance collective, ÖFA (stands for Öppna Feminister Agerar – Open Feminists Act). They were also supported by the curator and director Anna Efraimsson.[10] Started in 2004, ÖFA is an all-female collective which functions both as an informal support network, where its members meet up regularly to socialize, and as an association and work community that creates staged performances. These are often participatory and interactive creations, where the audience are invited to actively take part in the performance, for instance in *ÖFA: Monster* (2015) and *ÖFA: What Happens in Uppsala, Stays in Uppsala* (2014).[11]

Key to the group's creative practice is its (queer-) feminist approach to the performative arts. This is how the members of ÖFA describe it:

> As an art collective with only women, we take the liberty to challenge the bipolar gender thinking, we perform without comment and make space for gender-free experiences. It is a bit paradoxical but real: We start from gender to dream about alternatives to gender. Breaking stereotypes is to break the system that controls and limits, molds and dictates – that's why ÖFA have a taste of creative joy, promiscuity, faith, hope, daring and do-it-yourself spirit!
>
> (Öfakollektivet, 2011)

The *Cuteness Overload* project has taken place at a number of locales. Workshops with young adults, recruited via Riksteatern's local groups were held in three Swedish

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[10] Anna Efraimsson also produced the 2014 *Stockholm Internet Cat Video Festival*, Södra Teatern, October 9 and 11, 2014.

[11] Also staged as *What happens in Kärrtorp Stays in Kärrtorp*, at Turteatern, Kärrtorp, Stockholm, December 2015.

towns, in different parts of the country. During the workshops the groups have engaged in performance practices that explores embodied experiences of cuteness, and discussed the concept of cuteness in informal focus groups. In addition, the group made field trips to a sheep farm, and two local kennels: one specialised in breeding Chihuahuas, and one breeding Flat coated Retrievers. For Hjorton and Rosell, the workshops and field trips all had the secondary purpose of gathering materials and inspiration for a staged performance that might later be developed into a full production. Twice throughout the project, Rosell and Hjorton invited friends and colleagues, as well as representatives of Riksteatern, to work-in-Progress staged performances held at Riksteatern's headquarters in a southern Stockholm suburb. This has been a way of receiving feedback and see how the practices they developed separately, worked in the interaction with an audience. The project later culminated with the premier the Cuteness Overload show at Kulturhuset Stadsteatern, the Stockholm City Theatre in April 2018.

This chapter analyses two distinct performance practises developed by Rosell and Hjorton, as a way of exploring the performative experiences of cuteness. The first practise, nicknamed *Kålmasken* ("the Cabbage Worm" or the Caterpillar) allows the participant to explore feelings of caretaking, and being-taken-cared-of, as well as positive and negative feelings of vulnerability in the cute position. The second practise, performed by Hjorton and Rosell, uses the cute to make the female body strange. This estrangement works to override our culturally conditioned responses to the female body as sexualized and fundamentally abject.

4.2.2. Cyklopen: a cute utopia

I will analyze the uses of cuteness at two different events held at a leftist, independent cultural centre, Cyklopen (=The Cyclops), in a Stockholm suburb. Taken together, they form the first case. Cyklopen could perhaps best be described as an independent, anarchist-socialist culture centre. Located in a southern Stockholm suburb, it houses various events: concerts, clubs, a library, art shows and workshops, talks, gardening, and activities for children, all with a radical anarchist ethic. It also functions as a hub

for autonomous left-wing activists (*utomparlamentariska vänstern*), and especially those resisting the gentrification of the local area.

The centre has a colourful history, coming out of a social movement that occupied various buildings and abandoned sites in the early 2000s, with the aim of creating a truly independent cultural centre. It is then, a hands-on example of resistance as it started with occupying a piece of unused industrial land close to the railway tracks (Andersen, 2013, pp. 59–67). After an arson attack in 2008 the project was reborn in a new communal building finished in 2013 (Andersen, 2013, pp. 93–103). In 2017 it was announced that the temporary planning permission would be replaced by a permanent one, and the centre's building site would be enlarged to include an outdoor stage and a greenhouse (Cyklopen, 2017; Matikka, 2018).

The first event I attended on October 11, 2014 was playfully named "✿¨*•OMG-WTF-SUPER-CUTE-DOUBLE-RAINBOW-PARTY•*¨✿", it was a cute themed fundraising party/nightclub for two local organizations, Planka.Nu and Linje 19. The event was organized primarily by three activists, "Olivia", "Hannes" and "Gustaf". The second event I attended was a separatist feminist pub night called "Unicorner: All Catunicorns Are Beautiful" which took place December 10, 2015. Started in the fall of 2015, it has since then arranged a handful of events at Cyklopen, such as parties, pub nights and film screenings. It is arranged by Olivia and 5-6 other women who are either active members of Cyklopen, or take part in many of their events. This was a much smaller affair than both the Cute Party, and the first Unicorner event[12] with about 15 attendees.[13] Overall, the activists I interviewed at Cyklopen, were all in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties, the youngest born in 1991, and the oldest in 1979.

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[12] The organisers estimated the number of attendees at the Cute Party to several hundreds, and at the first Unicorner to about 150.

[13] This lower number was – according to the organisers – probably due to a combination of circumstances, because of the bad weather, people being busy with work and assessments at the end of term, and the general phenomenon that the second event usually attracts less people than the opening night.

4.2.3. Internet Cat Video Festival Stockholm and Glasgow

The third case is two local versions of the Internet Cat Video Festival; The Stockholm Internet Cat Video Festival (October 9 and 11, 2014), and The Glasgow Internet Cat Video Festival (February 21 and 22, 2015). They were both based on an American invention, the Walker Art Center's Internet Cat Video Festival, held annually between 2012 and 2015.

Originally the brainchild of Katie Hill, with Walker Art Center's Education and Community Programs Department, the project was also supported by her colleague Scott Stulen. According to Sarah Schultz's account of the genesis of the project, Hill was inspired by a previous event Chat D'Oeuvres, a cat themed film festival at New York's Anthology Film Archives (Schultz, 2015, p. 154).

While both Stockholm and Glasgow screened this same programme, their staging, setting and performances surrounding the screenings varied wildly. From Walker Art Centre's Open Air events, via the decadent, queer feminist "Cat Night Club" hosted in a gilded, 19th century theatre in Stockholm, and then to the family oriented crafts tables placed under the auspices of a Modern museum and the Glasgow Film Festival. They both employed the popular appeal of cute cat videos (and indeed the iconicity of the Internet cat) to create spaces that attempted to challenge the liberal public sphere, with the goal of creating accessible and safe spaces.

The "programme" consists of short film clips, mainly from YouTube, but interspersed by silent shorts made in 20th century and music videos. A new hour long programme was created each year, often curated by famous Internet Cat owners. The 2014 edition, which is the focus of this chapter, was selected by Will Braden, creator of a series of black and white YouTube clips depicting "Henri le Chat Noir, an existential French feline philosopher struggling with ennui" (Braden, 2015, p. 89). In other words, his own cat named Henri whose views of the world are expressed through a laconic French voiceover. The video festival's extreme popularity led to it subsequently going on tour to other venues around the world, independently screening the videos, among them Stockholm and Glasgow. 2014 the number of festivals were 46, 49 in 2015, and 2016 down to 29 (Walker Art Center, n/a).

4.3. Ethnography and Affect

As I approach cuteness primarily as an affective genre, my ethnographic methodology emphasises the embodied qualities of these experiences, which in turn allows for a multisensorial reading of cuteness. I therefore take inspiration from Sarah Pink's *Sensory Ethnography*, wherein she proposes "an emplaced ethnography that attends to the question of experience by accounting for the relationships between bodies, minds, and the materiality and sensoriality of the environment" (2009, p. 25). Pink's methodology emphasises the need to engage with *all* the sensorial aspects of a situation, as opposed to a more traditional ethnography that often favours the visual senses (2009, p. 63). A sensory ethnography also includes sounds, tactility and even taste. It can then account for the type of modal transference, common in cute experiences. For instance, in how *sweetness* is associated with cuteness in several languages, or how certain audial cues (like babbling or high-pitched squeaking) are considered cuter than others. Furthermore, this approach also opens up to investigations on how different modes of sensorial information co-create certain affective experiences.

A sensory ethnography is not only inherently embodied, but also *emplaced* (Pink, 2009, p. 25). The environment, be it a theatre-*cum*-nightclub, a worn rehearsal room, or an industrial-looking culture centre, all impact the affective experiences. Depending on the physical space some performances, acts and experiences are made possible, others are limited or even made impossible. Similarly, the researcher also becomes co-constituent in place, as well as yet another agent affecting the happenings onsite (Pink, 2009, p. 64). I shall return to the role of the researcher below.

4.4. Interviews and Recruitment

In total, I interviewed sixteen people for this project. Two men and fourteen women, 5 of the women additionally took part in a focus group.

For Cuteness Overload, I interviewed the performance artists Nadja Hjorton, Lisen Rosell, and their co-producer Anna Efraimsson in a separate group interview. Anna Wilhelmsson, the producer from the funding body Riksteatern was interviewed on a separate occasion to talk about her involvement in the project and of her experiences

of the practices. Lastly, I also held a focus group with Hjorton and Rosell's colleagues in ÖFA.

At Cyklopen I interviewed three women and two men. Some of them preferred to use pseudonyms, those are generally marked out with first names only. Others have consented to my using their actual names, marked by first and last name, or only last names. "Gustaf", "Hannes" and "Olivia" were all organizers of the cute party, and members of three different leftist activist groups. While "Cecilia" and "Sofie" were organizing the Unicorner separatist club. For the two Internet Cat Video Festivals, I interviewed three people, Anna Efraimsson of the Stockholm edition, Katie Bruce curator of Glasgow Gallery of Modern Art, and "Saga" a regular visitor to the Stockholm event.

The interviews functioned as way of collecting materials on both affective embodied experiences, as well as informative materials: the how, when and how many. To some extent, the interviews were a complement to the participant observations, allowing the participants to explain and elaborate on some of the practices I observed in the field.

One of the striking features of the participant sample is the strong gender bias. Unsurprisingly, women appear more comfortable talking about cuteness. One of the males I interviewed, avowed that he used cuteness a way to avoid male chauvinism. The gender bias is also explained by the separatism involved in two of these cases, as ÖFA is a queer feminist arts collective and Unicorner is an event that excludes cis-males.

4.4.1. Snowball Recruitment

Participant recruitment primarily happened through snowball sampling. This means that my first participants helped recruit further participants via word of mouth, and recommendations through their peer networks. In one case, *I* was recruited by the participants themselves. The performers of Cuteness Overload invited me to take part in their cuteness project as a type of "cute consultant". I primarily helped out with finding useful readings and materials, and held two focus groups. Snowball sampling is

commonly used to access so-called "hidden populations", for instance, homeless individuals, or in Kath Browne's case, non-heterosexual women (2005).

One limitation to this method, according to Browne, is the danger of creating new "hidden populations" (2005, pp. 51–53), as the research mainly interacts with members from the same community or social circles, excluding those who are not directly members of friends of friends with the original informants. However, as with Browne's research, the aim was not foremost to achieve statistic validity, or find a selection of participants proportionate to populations. This type of categorization of such a small sample, would also tend towards an unfortunate tokenism, whereby individuals are made to stand in for particular categories (such as "disabled", or in the Swedish setting, "immigrant" – *invandrare*), while assuming an internal homogeneity within that group (Browne, 2005, p. 51). The criteria for selection was a connection to these events, either as organizer or attendee. Still, recruitment proved somewhat challenging at times. Partly this could be explained by ethical considerations related to the prevalence of underage participants at the events (for instance at the Cuteness Overload workshops), which I was hesitant to recruit on ethical grounds, and ultimately, my ethical approval was exclusively for adult participants.

Another explanation could perhaps be the setting. The two events at Cyklopen – an autonomous, left wing and anarchist culture centre in southern Stockholm, included participants who were wary of participating in the research. Negative experiences of engaging with police and other authorities, gave me the impression that they did not want to share information with just anyone.

Attempting to recruit participants via flyers, proved inefficient at times. At one event, the Stockholm Internet Cat Video Festival, I was asked not to leave any flyers by the entrance, and instead asked to approach participants one on one. At night clubs with loud music and similar, it was difficult to engage with strangers and have longer conversations.

Differently from Browne's work, my "snowball" started away from my own social network, with me getting in contact with the organizer of Stockholm Internet Cat Video Festival, Anna Efraimsson. With her as a gatekeeper, I was able to attend the

festival, where I met members of ÖFA, a feminist performance collective (also the subject of chapter 5: Cute Cabbage Worms), who tipped me off about a cute nightclub taking place later that week at Cyklopen. Other members of ÖFA later invited me to take part in the Cuteness Overload project, in which Anna Efraimsson, the organizer and producer of the Stockholm Internet Cat Video Festival was also contributing.

In the case of the Glasgow Internet Cat Video Festival, gatekeepers had no previous connection with the other participants in my study, but were contacted separately as a counterpoint to the Stockholm event.

4.4.2. Semi-structured Interviews

The interviews conducted in the project have followed a semi-structured model. According to Svend Brinkmann, this is perhaps the most common mode of qualitative interviewing in the social sciences (2014, p. 286). In practice, semi-structured have meant that the dialogue was based on a set of general areas of interest, as suggested by Brinkmann (2014, p. 285), sometimes adapted to the particular interviewee. This relatively loose format, allows more freedom to explore and capture unexpected materials and themes, and then to follow up on new angles. Brinkmann even suggest that these utterances that diverge from the set questionnaire are crucial to understand the interviewees' particular life-worlds (2014, p. 285). Furthermore, the semi-structured interview also gives the interviewee a clearer agency, as they are complicit in setting the agenda of the interview, and by extension, can become more active participants in knowledge-production. In order to realize the latter, the aim of an interviewer should be to provide a structure that is flexible enough for the interviewee to be able to "talk back", to disagree and to propose their own perspectives on the themes (Brinkmann, 2014, pp. 285–286).

The questions addressed the interviewees' affective experiences of interacting with cute objects in their everyday life, as well as allowing the participants to account for how they organized the specific event. Following Pink, I regard the interviews primarily as *representations* of their embodied experiences, as opposed to an objective account of reality (2009, p. 81). Pink describes the interview situation as a place where the participants' multisensorial, experiences are verbally expressed and defined using

sensory categories that are culturally specific. The interview should be regarded as an ongoing process of sense-making, made together with the researcher (Pink, 2009, pp. 85–86).

From an epistemic view, the interviews for this thesis are caught somewhere between what Brinkmann calls constructionist conceptions, and Postmodern-transformative concepts of interviewing. The former rejects claims of an authentic subjectivity that is "revealed" in the interview, the latter sees interviews as situations where knowledge is co-constructed between interviewer and interviewee (Brinkmann, 2018, p. 586). The interview, in this sense, is a verbal restaging of the interviewee's affective responses to cuteness. However, the interviewee does not only convey their experiences through words, and metaphors. Gestures, touch, a sharing of food and scents are often just as important tools for communicating information and experiences (Pink, 2009, p. 82). Quite literally, participants would quote their own exclamations when finding something cute, even acting out their reactions of cute shock, gut-churning feelings of want, or the tender (and/or aggressive) interactions with well-loved pets.

In my meetings with the participants, we regularly came back to specific objects that the interviewee found cute, or in some cases decidedly *un*cute. Since many of the interviews were conducted over video call, my interviewees usually sent me pictures of their pets, small trinkets, clothes, but also music tracks and videos proved popular. Conducting interviews over video call, limited the types of sensorial experiences the participants could share directly with me. Sharing tactile experiences, or offering food and drink was mostly not possible during the interview. As suggested by Pink (2009, p. 82, 86), since these interviews largely took place during, or right after an event or prolonged fieldwork, discuss the multi-sensorial experiences we had shared on site.

In analysing materials from qualitative interviews, one has to acknowledge that meaning making is not straightforward. Rather, they are polyvocal, and often contradictory. Sometimes it demands that the researcher stays in the contradictions, and keeps an open mind to alternative interpretations of statements and actions (Brinkmann, 2014, pp. 288–288). The researcher should also take into account any potential unspoken agenda with the participants. Some of my interviewees have been

interviewed several times for different media outlets, and are for lack of another word, rather media savvy. One of the participants from Cyklopen had been interviewed for another doctoral thesis, and had possibly some pre-rehearsed answers to my questions. Recognizing that the participants may have their own agenda, however, is not the same as accusing them of manipulation. Rather, this fact is yet another way of acknowledging the participants' inherent agency vis-à-vis the researcher.

However, like Brinkmann, I do not assume that qualitative interviews are inherently ethical, or even comparably more ethical than quantitative ones (what Brinkmann and Kvale [2005] call "the qualitative progressivity myth or a qualitative ethicism" [Brinkmann, 2018, p. 588]). Ultimately, while I do regard the participants as co-constructive in the knowledge process, and indeed, have strived to approach my participants as collaborators rather that research objects, a researcher must acknowledge that there are a number of factors that contribute towards an unequal power relation in research interviews. To start with, the interviewer has a scientific competence, and is the one that designs, and controls the interview. There are also certain expectations of what roles the interviewee and the interviewer play in interview; being asked/asking questions, which means that the researcher controls the situation to a large degree. In addition, the interview is not like an ordinary friendly dialogue. It is fundamentally instrumental, and conducted to serve the goals of the interviewer, which means that it can tend towards the emotionally/empathically manipulative. Lastly, the researcher often has a monopoly of interpretation (Brinkmann, 2018, pp. 588–589). Instead of ignoring these issues, I have sought to minimize them, for instance by encouraging participants to protest, in some cases letting them read drafts of chapters, and at one point, letting myself be interviewed by Hjorton and Rosell.

Figure 4 Cupcakes eaten during the focus group. Photo: Ingeborg Hasselgren.

Figure 5 Stuffed toys used for the focus group. Photo: Ingeborg Hasselgren.

[Removed image: cropped screenshot from a Youtube video. Baby crawling on floor and a small dog.]

Figure 6 Cropped screenshot from the Youtube video "BABY DOG WHISPERER! Cesar Millan has nothing on her!! Shorkie Puppy Talks to Baby mp4". https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQ7OGSoEnfs

[Removed image: screenshot from Youtube video. Octopus crawling over sandy beach.]

Figure 7 Cropped screenshot from the Youtube video "Little Octopus Climbing Over Rock - Parry Gripp" used in the focus group. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Lp5a-r3MJU&feature=youtube_gdata_player

[Removed image: screenshot of Youtube video. Black and white cat touching the back of another cat with its paw.]

Figure 10 Cropped screenshot from the Youtube video "Кошка просит прощения / Ржу не могу / Cat tries to apologize", used in the focus group. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNS7zzIzX-E

4.4.3. Focus Group and Group Interviews

In some cases, the interviews included more than one participant. For the Cuteness Overload project, I interviewed Hjorton, Rosell and Efraimsson together, in order to get a sense of their working relationship. It took the form of a semi-structured in-depth interview, only with several participants. I would therefore differentiate between this type of group interview and a more traditional focus group. The Cuteness Overload project also involved a focus group, in which 5 women participated, 4 of which were members of ÖFA, and of which the fifth, Anna Wilhelmsson, was directly involved in the project as a producer. The participants were recruited through an open invite by Rosell and Hjorton through their own social channels. In this sense, the focus group was fairly homogenous, in terms of age, gender, and social background. The advantage of a focus group, apart from its efficacy in terms of time saving (replacing several one-on-one interviews), is the opportunity to observe participants' interaction, as well as their similarities and differences of experience and opinion (Morgan, 1997, p. 10).

From a feminist perspective, the multivocal narrative that emerges in a focus group, can be helpful in "unearthing subjugated knowledge"(Leavy, 2007, p. 173). In the case of cuteness, I found it useful to encourage the participants to reflect on their often everyday interactions with, and unconscious reactions to, the cuteness of others, and their own performance of cuteness. The fact that the group consisted only of women, most of whom knew each other from before, was conducive to creating a relaxed and safe setting. However, as with all group interviews, there is the risk that the group's dynamics was affected by their relationship outside of the focus group, and that some participants would sway the rest to their opinion. I directed my moderation towards mitigating against making any one participant more dominant by inviting those less talkative to comment on the subject.

The discussions in this focus group also doubled as inspiration for the performances in the project. The focus group provided me with an expanded context and functioned as a way of situating the performers' concepts, interpretations and uses of cuteness. The topic was their experiences and ideas of cuteness, what distinguishes Swedish cuteness from other types. This focus group also made use of object elicitations by inviting the participants to engage with stuffed animals, cuddle, pet and hug them, watch videos of

cute animals and human babies, and consume pastel-coloured, sugary sweet cupcakes. This variety of objects where selected in order to allow the participants to explore cuteness in a synaesthetic mode, through multiple senses. This usage type of object elicitation also meant that the focus group was fairly strictly moderated, though participants were still encouraged to interject and engage with each other.

4.5. Participation and Participant-Observation

One effect of this emplaced, and embodied approach, is the emphasis on participation as a crucial element of the research. Indeed, Pink regards it as "fundamental" to sensory ethnography (Pink, 2009, p. 82). My starting point for this project is to regard the participants in this study as cute theoreticians and practitioners in their own right. Many of them had a personal interest and investment in cuteness, for instance as activists, artists, professionals, pet owners and/or parents. In a sense, they are what Antonio Gramsci calls "organic intellectuals":

> There is no human activity from which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded: *homo faber* cannot be separated from *homo sapiens*. Each man, finally, outside his professional activity, carries on some form of intellectual activity, that is, he is a 'philosopher', an artist, a man of taste, he participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought.
>
> (Gramsci, 1971, p. 9)

Approaching the participants this way, is also a intended to ensure that my own positioning vis-à-vis the participants was not one of simple "discovery", but rather following the logic of "conversation", addressing the participants as active actors with an agency of their own (Haraway, 1990, p. 198), and with an experience of cuteness that often differed from my own. In the spirit of this, I also participated in an interview conducted by Nadja Hjorton and Lisen Rosell, where they could ask me about my background, research interests, and personal relationship with the cute. In practice, this functioned as a way of counteracting some of the usual power inequalities of ethnographic methods.

Though the interviews provided me with key insights into the creative processes and

intentions of the participants, the participant observations allowed me to access some of the affective experiences associated with their cute practices. This could entail, among other things, participating in performance workshops, attending a cute night club, even leading focus groups could to some extent be part of the participant observation. The method of participant-observation then, played a more prominent role in this project than would perhaps otherwise be expected. Following the sensorial ethnography, these participant-observations, apart from documenting and observing the specific practices and interactions at the events, focussed on finding ways of empathetically engaging with their associated sensorial experiences (Pink, 2009, p. 65). By crawling on the floor like a "cabbage worm", taking part in a "danceoke" (a type of communal karaoke dance where participants dance together, mimicking the movements of a music video), watching video clips of cute kittens in an art gallery together with strangers, I became part of others' embodied experiences of the cute.

Cute experiences are entangled in the performance of cuteness, of feeling adorable, or playing up one's own cuteness, but also in the interpersonal relationships between the cute Other and the cute-consumer. This performative aspect of cuteness is always relational to some degree. This is further articulated in the staged performances analysed in chapter 5, but is fundamental to the category of cuteness in general. Even in cases where the performance engages a single individual, the event is dependent on the affective reciprocity between performer and audience, and between members of the audience (Dolan, 2005, pp. 10–11; Schneider, 1997, p. 22). This is also why my own sensorial experiences form a central part of the material.

The participant observations take the form of a *performance ethnography*. Hamera defines performance as "both an event and a heuristic tool that illuminates the presentational and representational elements of culture" (Hamera, 2011, p. 319). In other words, performances can take a plethora of forms, they encompass both live and mediated forms, theatre, rituals, expressions of state power (e.g. executions), and resistance to state power (e.g. demonstrations), as are everyday banal routines, and interpersonal conversations (Hamera, 2011, p. 319). In this sense, headbanging to a feminist punk rock band dressed in cute outfits, petting a beloved pet, watching Internet cat videos, can all be considered cute performances. Consequently, the

performance ethnography takes wildly different forms, depending on the performance at hand. Like exploring the feelings of caretaking, and being cared for as a "cabbage worm", or the communal excitement and intense affect of watching Internet cat videos. Performance ethnography puts emphasis on mechanisms, and processes that allow certain emotional expressions and behaviours, while disavowing others (Hamera, 2011, p. 319).

Fundamentally, my own experiences became key to understanding the experiences of others, as I can only get a first-hand experience of the cute practices through my own body. This would be true for all types of research to some degree, but it becomes acute in research that deals with the experiences of particular subject positions. The aim of a participant observation of a performance, is therefore not simply to produce a "graph" or a record of the event, but the performance itself is a tool to uncover specific cute experiences. While these fleeting moments, impossible to properly record, are the very core of the performance, Hamera insists that a performance ethnography is also expected to move beyond the "here/now" of the performance, taking into account how these experiences are formed by the wider contexts: "There is no 'now' innocent of history, and no 'local' fully exempt from global flows of people, resources, and capital" (2011, p. 318).

A performance analysis of this kind would share traits with an Actor-Network analysis. Especially as Latour attributes agency not only to living actors but to objects and materials as well (2005, pp. 109–110). Latour posits five guiding tenets in his ANT. First of all, he recognises that interaction is never *isotopic*; all actants may not be present at the same place, but can nevertheless affect the situation, sometimes even from great distances. Secondly, neither is it synchronic. "Times is always folded" he says, meaning that the objects and people on site originate from different points in time, and are affected by multiple events in time. Thirdly, and this, if I may say, coincides neatly with the partial view of the feminist researcher, interactions are not *synoptic*; not all participants are visible at the same time, some disappear from view, while others emerge. Fourth, Latour underlines that interactions are not *homogeneous.* Action is constantly relayed through various agencies made up by a plethora of materials. Lastly, and a crucial point when dealing with human subjects (but not limited to them!), is the

warning that participants are not isobaric. Certain actors push to be heard over the material-affective cacophony of the field, while other (perhaps as important to the goings on) are relegated to the background (Latour, 2005, pp. 200–202).

A potential limitation to this ethnography, is the relatively short time spent on site for some of the events. Sometimes this amounted to only a few hours at a nightclub. In general, I extended my participation to as many hours as possible. Attending a total of four screenings for the Internet Cat Video Festival, staying late at the night clubs and hanging out with the performers outside of workshops. In similar circumstances, Michaela Brockmann emphasises the importance of complementing the participant observations with interviews and other kinds of materials (2011, pp. 240–242). In this case, I have aimed for a wider contextualization of the events through the use of news media articles, autobiographical texts, and, importantly, materials from social media.

4.6. The Researcher Role - Self-Reflexivity

Ethnographic methods require a fundamentally (self-)reflexive mindset (Pink, 2009, p. 63). To ensure validity and transparency, it is crucial to account for the researcher's role and impact on the field. My role in these cases varied dramatically. From my deep engagement in the Cuteness Overload project, travelling with the performers, even being paid by Riksteatern for my troubles, to a more peripheral role at the two Internet Cat Video Festivals and Cyklopen where I attended more or less like an ordinary member of the public.

4.6.1. Complications with being a (Feminist) Researcher

Part of the complication of ethnographic research, is the fact that the researcher's social self and body is the tool for primary data collection. Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson describe how researchers and the researched often have opposing expectations of the role of the researcher in the field. Interacting with informants thus requires the researcher to engage in different types of "identity work", for instance dressing or acting a certain way. Accounting for this work, is also part of the self-reflexive process (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

Presenting myself as a (queer) woman and a self-proclaimed feminist, made it easier to gain access and be accepted in some cases. Obviously, in terms of access, my status as a woman (or at least the fact that I'm not a cis-male) was crucial to be able to even attend the separatist night at Cyklopen. The fact that I am a feminist with left-wing leanings, was never really discussed, but no doubt assumed by many of the participants, and also helped in the interactions with attendees.

On site in Glasgow, I sometimes found myself playing up my "foreignness". Admittedly, my being a white person who tends to pick up the accents of my interlocutors, made it relatively easy for me to "pass" as British, at least before I told them my name. However, this also made it difficult in certain conversations, as my interviewee would assume that I possessed a deeper knowledge of British and Scottish culture in general and would expect me to naturally pick up specific cues and pop culture references. Conversely, my trouble understanding certain (Northern) accents made me realize how overestimating my fluency and cultural savviness may have hampered my understanding at times. During the fieldwork in Glasgow, I realized that spending most of my time in the UK in the South (Brighton and London), had made my socialization into British culture rather specific, and limited.

At times playing up my Swedishness (mentioning my background, exaggerating an accent) could counter this, as it would allow me to ask interviewees "stupid questions" with no hard feelings. Presenting myself – whether consciously or not – as rather more clueless would often prompt interviewees to explain a concept for me in more depth, allowing me to access more materials.

On the other hand, I was on some occasions cast as something of an "expert" or "expert witness", when it comes to cuteness and cuteness affect. With Cuteness Overload, I was engaged as a consultant, to provide readings and ideas on cuteness, and to lead focus groups. After being recruited on site in Glasgow, by a producer, I was also interviewed by BBC Radio 4, as part of a documentary on Internet Cats (*Pussy Galore*, n.d.). Similarly, a journalist from the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, interviewed me for an article on the Stockholm Internet Cat Video Festival (Ritzén, 2014). At both these occasions I was expected to explain the extreme popularity of Internet cats,

questions I tended to evade during interviews. These experiences ended up forming a crucial part of my research on the cultural capital of Internet cats, discussed in chapter 7.

Throughout the fieldwork, I had to constantly re-negotiate my positioning and identities, sometimes ending up in contradictory and ambivalent situations vis-à-vis my informants and the field. This was perhaps most acute during the prolonged fieldwork with Cuteness Overload, where I was frantically trying to figure out what they "wanted" from me, while Hjorton and Rosell seemed to expect me to carve out my own role. Being paid a smaller sum for my participation[14] in this project clearly impacted my own attitude towards the field, wanting to be "professional" and desperately wanting to contribute something of value to the project. At the larger events, I was often read as a casual visitor, or perhaps a member of the media corps (with my huge camera slung around my neck), up until the point where I engaged one on one with participants.

No doubt, some of the organizers regarded my presence as something positive. This was expressed partly by them giving me free tickets to attend. Other times I insisted on paying for entry. By attending these events, and by extension supporting some of them through the ticket, the researcher is in effect supporting the activism of the participants, not only monetarily, but in the sense of one's bodily presence on site adding to the head count. Marcus calls this the work of an "ethnographer-activist", and encourages the multi-sited researcher to engage in this type of renegotiation rather than retreating into the role of a "detached anthropological scholar" (1995, p. 113). Still, the fact remains that when different expectations on the researcher's role clash, it can make their position an uncomfortable one.

I also found my performance in the field clashing with *my own* expectations of what a "cool" feminist researcher should be like, and what she should be comfortable with. Being a rather introverted, and nervous person, I found myself constantly having to work through my embarrassment with the casual (partial) nudity and sexual

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[14] 10 000 sek was worth around 760 GBP in the spring of 2015 ("SEK to GBP Rates on 4/26/2015 - Exchange Rates," n.d.).

playfulness of Hjorton and Rosell as they worked on their performances. When I would have liked to be the kind of relaxed, laid-back person who enjoys and encourages wild experimentation and exploration like a "good feminist" should, raring to give a big "fuck you" to the conceited and stale atmosphere of patriarchal academia. Instead, I often ended up feeling like a wet blanket at the different festivities, as I frantically tried to make ethically sound decisions on the go.

The fact that I am usually not too keen on inviting physical touch from strangers (even casual hugs from friends is sometimes awkward to me), probably didn't help. However, the fact that I was there as a *researcher*, and not in a private capacity, made me feel able to do things I otherwise would have found nearly impossible. Though my embarrassment did hamper me to some extent, I still had my moments of exuberant showmanship (especially when it comes to karaoke!), and I still enjoyed many of the practices and engagements I encountered in the field.

4.6.2. Autoethnography

A sensorial/performance ethnography share many traits with auto-ethnography, a method whereby the ethnographer's own experiences form part of the material (Pink, 2009, p. 64). Katherine Dashper (with the help of Holt) describes auto-ethnography as

> a form of reflective self-narration in which 'authors use their own experience in a culture reflexively to look more deeply at self-other interactions' (Holt, 2003, p. 19). As such it is an explicit attempt to link ideas about the self and personal experiences to the wider culture and to others within that culture.

(Dashper, 2016, p. 214)

In this thesis I employ a fairly limited autoethnography, primarily to capture affective states related to cuteness, and secondly, as a tool to increase self-reflexivity. Ideally, this would increase the transparency of the research, by accounting for the researcher's own situatedness, and would in turn allow the reader to evaluate the researcher's impact on the field. Furthermore, it can work to overcome the traditional dichotomies of subject/object, researcher/participant, potentially breaking down these hierarchies, as the researcher also becomes the researched (Dashper, 2016, p. 215).

Although, obviously the power of representation (and risk of bias) would still lie with the ethnographer. Apart from its advantages in creating a fairer relationship between researcher and field, it is a method in its own right, one that lets the researcher access the affective states of others, through one's own experience (Dashper, 2016, p. 220), and should be especially helpful to investigate the complex social and emotional phenomenon of cuteness.

In Tami Spry's concept of *performative autoethnography*, the Other is just as essential as the "I" of the researcher (2017). Indeed, the I is constantly made and remade through the interaction with the Other (Spry, 2017, pp. 636–639). Borrowing a term from Madison, she describes this fundamentally dialogic I as the *unsettled-I*, which is "*partial*, incomplete, co-present in a temporality of becoming since the performative-I exists in relational relativity with the Inappropriate/d Other, discourse, and context" (Spry, 2017, p. 639). Acknowledging the (cute) Other means attributing agency, to resist the gaze of the I, of working against, of questioning, of refusing to act according to the expectations of the I. In other words, the (cute) Other should be approached as an *Inappropriate/d Other*, one which cannot simply be a tool to prop up and serve the purposes of the I (Spry, 2017, p. 634).

However, it is crucial here to understand that autoethnographies are *not* intended to be autobiographies, hence my personal experiences are only included in the material to the point where they are relevant to the cases at hand.

4.6.3. Partial Knowledge and Feminist Positioning

In order to gain an understanding of the subject position of the cute, I shall attempt a phenomenological analysis of experience. Put differently, only through my own body, can I understand the bodies of others. Obviously, we cannot in practice turn ourselves into a kitty, baby, or stuffed animal in order to actually feel what they feel. However, what we can do, is trying to *feel with* the cute, to *see with* the cute, as Haraway might put it, to empathise with its position.

Like Haraway, I too am wary of the dangers of romanticizing the point of view of my participants, or inadvertently appropriate the position of the cute. Key in counteracting this tendency, is to underline the limitations of these positionings. This includes the

limitations of my own experiences, and to what extent it is possible to share the embodied experiences of the Other. In this way, I hope to avoid pretensions of an all-encompassing, "invisible" gaze, that pretends to know all, while in effect subjugating differences, and the situated experiences of the Other (Haraway, 1990, pp. 190–191). A crucial point to make here, is that there is in practice "no single feminist standpoint", and no fixed feminist body, or feminist location (Haraway, 1990, pp. 195–196). As Haraway points out, a feminist researcher must instead be able to "split" and stay in the contradictions and paradoxes of multiple seeings and of multiple positions. It is a way of *seeing together* without claiming to *be* the Other (Haraway, 1990, p. 193).

4.7. Ethics

This research has been approved by a Cross-Schools Research Ethics Committee (C-REC) with University of Sussex, at two separate occasions. The first for a low-risk assessment was approved in October 2014. A second, high risk assessment was approved in March 2015. This was deemed necessary by me due to the sensitive materials relating to political activism, and issues of sexuality. On certain sites, some attendees were under the age of eighteen (Cuteness Overload workshops, both Internet Cat Video Festivals), however none of these individuals were recruited for the focus group or interviews. All interviewees were over the age of eighteen, and able to give consent. Apart from the code of conduct enforced by University of Sussex, and the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council), I also adhered to the ethical codes from the Swedish Research Council (*Vetenskapsrådet*), as most of the fieldwork was conducted in Sweden (Swedish Research Council, 2017).

4.7.1. Confidentiality

The materials collected on site has been stored according to UK and European data laws. Digital storage has been encrypted, and any material that could identify individuals have been stored separately. In most cases, participants have remained anonymous, and have been given pseudonyms. Those presented in the thesis with their own name, have given their explicit permission for me to do so. Names of organisations and venues have, after consultation with gatekeepers and participants, remained as is.

In the field, research ethics are seldom straight-forward, and researchers are often faced with situations that complicate ethical consideration, as Dashper puts it "There can be no 'how to' or standard ethical criteria that applies in all situations." (2016, p. 220). The rule to avoid any covert data collection is one of these considerations. At larger gatherings (100-400 visitors), it was difficult to inform all present on site of the purpose of my project. However, as these places are considered more or less "public", it was acceptable and represented a minimal ethical risk. I never interviewed, or photographed, any single person without explicit permission. The exceptions were pictures of larger crowds, to document the spatial qualities of the rooms and halls. Before attending events, I sought and was given permission by organizers, who functioned as gatekeepers at the events. In the information letters sent to gatekeepers, I also mentioned that I would be happy to answer any questions or concerns about my research, and included contact information for myself and for my supervisors. Gatekeepers or organizers would most often inform other participants of my presence through a message on the events Facebook page or similar. The serving of alcohol at some of the events, was also an ethical concern. Ensuring informed consent, prompted me to avoid interviewing anyone on site at nightclubs, and other places where alcohol was served.

Consent forms and accompanying information sheets for participants in focus groups and interviews were provided in English and Swedish. All participation in the project has been voluntary, and the participants have received no reimbursement.

4.7.2. Online Ethics

Using online materials pose particular problems with regards to ethics. The general rule of ethical conduct in ethnographic fieldwork, that participants should give their consent before they participate in the data collection, is difficult, and sometimes impossible in some online environments. Especially in cases, for instance on social media sites, where members count in the thousands. For this project, I was mainly using online environments as a source of secondary materials, rather than conducting a full online ethnography of the interactions of users online. One of the main ethical complications are related to the conflict between validity and identity protection. Fan

studies researchers Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson encourages researchers to avoid direct quotes, or using screen names so that casual commenters can keep their anonymity (2012, pp. 45–47). After having obtained permission to collect materials from social media accounts, I still avoided quoting comments from individual users, and focused my collection of materials to status updates, photos and images from the events, accounts and pages of the gatekeepers and organizers.

In two cases, I included memes as a type of "quotation", without prior permission [Figure 1 and 2]. This is due to the collective quality of Internet memes, re-created and re-mixed so that authorship becomes collective and almost always impossible to pin down to one individual (Shifman, 2014, p. 23). The memes were found on open Facebook-accounts (for Facebook-users), meaning that they were "public" in an online sense, and have less expectations on privacy, and so represent less concomitant ethical risk. Indeed, even Busse and Hellekson's strict demand for permission, allows for instances like these when permission cannot be obtained, the material is public, and low-risk (2012, p. 52).

Still, as Roser Beneito-Montagut notes, the Internet ethnographer often finds themself conducting a type of covert observation as a "by-product" of the main research. To a large extent, this can be likened to the type of observations happening in ordinary public spaces, were you cannot avoid observing other people who are not part of the research material. Generally, the ethical risk of this kind of co-observation is negligible, as this material is not used in the final analysis (Beneito-Montagut, 2011, p. 730).

4.8. Methodology: Concluding remarks

All in all, the methodology in this study is dependent on multiple ethnographic tools. Primarily these were participant observations, and interviews. The materials were focussed on the affective experiences of participants, including my own with regards to cuteness. One potential weakness in the materials, is the relatively low number of participants, representing a rather homogenous population. More participants, could possibly have provided a more diverse material, but since my methodology is firmly qualitative, the diversity would still not contribute dramatically to the study's validity.

The use of autoethnography may be perceived as dangerously myopic, and self-indulgent. However, ignoring my own affective experiences in the field, would have created an unfortunate black box around my person, which functions as the means of collecting materials on site. Using my personal experiences, allows inclusion of other types of materials (intensively subjective-affective like the performance of the "cabbage-worms" in chapter 5) but also increases transparency. Furthermore, my own experiences are mediated by, and contrasted against the accounts by the other participants, ensuring a polyvocal description.

A methodology coupling the ethnographic with a textual analysis may have helped us isolate the particular instances where the cuteness affect is heightened and where it is less apparent. There are traces of this in chapter 7, about the Internet cat video festival. Considering that the absolute majority of previous research on cuteness in cultural and/or media studies (at least in the West), mainly employ textual readings, an ethnographic analysis of the cuteness affect offers insights that have previously been ignored.

Chapter 5: Case Study - Cute Cabbage Worms

It's a chilly Wednesday evening in May that I find myself in a rehearsal room at a local theatre in southern Sweden. I'm here together with two performance artists, Lisen Rosell and Nadja Hjorton, in order to investigate the very slippery subject of cuteness, what it is, and what it feels like. Along with a few volunteers – five women aged 16-30 – we've spent an hour and half trying out different acting and dance practices. It's now time to try something new.

We are divided into pairs and each pair is given a piece of fabric – a light green cotton. I end up with a blond woman, "Erika", who I've never met before today. Rosell asks us to spread the fabric neatly on the floor. Then one of us is to lie down on top of the left side of the sheet. The first step, is to have the other participant fold the edge of the sheet over the body, and snuggly tuck it around the feet and legs. Preferably, a small piece of the fabric should poke out between the feet, we'll need for later when we're going to tie it all together.

In the second step, the "wrappee" is gently turned on their stomach. The person in the sheet should be as passive as possible, but she needs to help a bit if the process is not to be too uncomfortable. The "wrapper" continues to tuck, and stretch the material so that it is tight around the body. We take care to make sure that the "wrappee" is comfortable and can breathe properly.

Third step: the wrappees are turned on their backs again. Rosell explains that depending on our body shapes, this might be the last step. The last piece of the sheet is stretched tightly and secured in a knot by the feet, and one by the neck. The fabric around the head is arranged like a veil, but not allowed to cover the face itself, and knotted together with the first layer of the wrap, found on the neck/shoulder. Finally, we've ended up with four light-green cocoons. They're simultaneously reminiscent of a wrapped baby, and shrouded corpse.

When all four are snug in the wrap, the rest of us start to pull and push them around the room, in a gentle, yet assertive way. It is hard work pushing a grown person around the room, partly because we're not wearing any shoes and it's hard to get traction against the wooden floor. I find it especially tough on the lower back. A completely passive body is very heavy to move. All four of us get sweaty and warm from the exertion. I feel almost jealous of the wrappees, who all look very content in their cocoons. They all closed their eyes (without prompting) early on, and now they're just lying there.

After a while Rosell asks us to swap places so that we can get a chance to push and pull every one of the cocoons. A couple of minutes later, we're instructed to arrange the wrappees neatly in a

line against one of the walls. Feet against the wall, and heads out to the room. After that that the wrappers are asked to leave the room for a bit. The three of us leave, and stand excitedly outside the closed door. What is going on in there? We chat for a bit, commenting on how heavy the pushing and pulling has been, how warm and sweaty we've gotten. I get a glass of water.

After a few minutes, Rosell opens the door and invites us inside again. We're placed against the opposite wall and asked to sit down. Hjorton turns on some music, it's "I Swear" by All 4 One, a very romantic 90s boyband ballad. When the music comes on, the wrappees instantly turn on their stomachs and start wriggling their way towards us, across the room. They look simply adorable! A bit like toddlers, trying to walk for the first time. It is clearly hard work, frustrating and exhausting. We all laugh loudly, and giggle as they move over the floor. It is impossible to keep a neutral face. The affective response is so powerful, I feel tears well up.

"Erika" who I wrapped, is slowly moving towards me with a painful, yet determined expression on her face. She gets a bit behind from the other three. I feel so bad for her, struggling to catch up. I start cheering her on. The others also make noises like "gud va söta ni är!" (God, you're so cute!) "kom igen då!" (Come on!) and "you can do it!"

The other three cocoons make it over to us well before Erika does. When she finally gets there, she lies down and rests for a bit. I want to congratulate her, she is such a good girl for making it here. But I stop myself, feeling a bit awkward about it. Rosell intervenes and tells us to gently pet the cocoons. I carefully stroke her hair, which has come loose under the wrap.

The pop music is very powerful, romantic and sets the tone for the atmosphere in the room. After carefully petting them, we're instructed to free them from the wrap. I untie Erika's wrap, which has partly come undone around her feet. When she finally gets out of the fabric, she is red and warm, her hair dishevelled.

We swap places for the next round. I feel a bit apprehensive before starting, what if I feel trapped, and panic? Erika and I spread the sheet again and I lie down on top of it. My back is a bit sore after a session at the gym the day before, but it is nice to lie down and rest a bit. It's been a long day and the workshop takes place between 6-9 pm. Erika is much more assertive in her wrapping than I was. While I hesitated, and avoided touching her in areas that I thought could be sensitive and/or uncomfortable, Erika doesn't seem to have many qualms about that. She tightly and efficiently wraps the sheet around my legs, and finds the end piece of the fabric that is stuck between my feet.

When we turn over, I try to help her turn me. I move my left arm a bit too much and end up on top of it. It is very uncomfortable, so I move it to the side again. Unfortunately, that means some of the clingy

cotton fabric goes with it and the wrap isn't so tight any more. Erika stretches and tucks, making it as tight as she dares. She frees my face from the wrap. She turns me on my back again, and finishes the wrap. Finally, she ties the knot by my feet, and arranges the loose fabric around my head. Surprisingly, I feel completely relaxed and secure. When she finishes touching me, I can't help but close my eyes, and just feel the snug wrap, and cool floor against my back. The tight wrap is strangely calming, I'm reminded of when my older brother tucked me into bed when I was little. The same sense of security and drowsy cosiness wash over me.

The pushing and pulling comes next. It's both nice and not so nice. The feeling of being pushed around is calming, I feel a bit like a baby being rocked to sleep. But sometimes the pushing is a bit rough, or you end up in a very uncomfortable position. Somehow, I find myself not really caring. It's almost like a meditative trance, as if I notice the pain but I don't feel like I have to do anything about it. I keep my eyes closed almost the entire time, only reluctantly open them once or twice.

At last we are placed against one of the walls. The shorter wall this time, so that we'll have a longer crawl. Rosell turns on the music, another song, but with a similar yearning romantic tone, it's Take That's "Stay" and we start crawling towards the others. Everyone against the wall start laughing almost hysterically. It is really hard work. We're on our stomachs and my breasts hurt a bit as I wriggle forward. Looking up towards the others from my position on the floor, I can't help but feel very small and childish, like a baby learning to crawl. Halfway across the floor, I realise I've unconsciously started pouting my mouth in a petulant, unhappy face.

I keep struggling across the floor, hot, itchy and uncomfortable. I really, really want to get across the floor to Erika and the others who are cheering me on. It's encouraging but a bit stressful, as I am far behind the others.

I partly release my arms under the wrap and use my arms under the wrap to wriggle a bit faster. When I finally make it, I completely collapse and let myself be petted by the others. They coo over us, and tell us that we are sooo "*duktiga*"[15]. Rosell turns off the music, and Erika releases me from the wrap. It's not until now that I'm starting to feel a bit panicky, I struggle to get out of the wrap, my hair dishevelled and partly blocking my view. It's a relief to get out of it, though I miss the calm of the original wrap.

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[15] The adjective *duktig(t)* has no direct translation to English. It can mean capable, able, canny or simply good. It is often used in a vaguely condescending tone, for instance *duktig flicka, duktig pojke* (good girl, good boy) can be used when talking to a pet.

5.1. Cute Subjectivity?

The quote above is an excerpt from my field notes, written during the *Cuteness Overload* project. This chapter will engage with a few performative practices developed by a team of feminist performance artists, Lisen Rosell and Nadja Hjorton, allowing me to analyse the experience the cuteness affect from the point of view of the *cute subject.* What's it like to feel cute? How do our bodies' spatial positions alter the cuteness affect? Does a cute position always equal a vulnerable one? In other words, this chapter explore the cute experience on a micro level of sorts; as it plays out over the field of proprioception. I shall start by providing some background to the practices, and situate them in their Swedish cultural context. After that I shall turn to a phenomenological analysis of this practise inspired by the work of French philosopher Merleau-Ponty (2003, 2002, 1968), and Elizabeth A. Behnke (2002, 1999), understanding the cute as an *inter-corporeal relationship*, and the cuteness affect as a multi-lateral flow between bodies and subjects. Following this, I also intend to expand on the queer potential of cuteness, and cute embodiment as a foundation for a resistive form of *being-together*.

5.2. ÖFA and Extremt Gulligt: cute, feminist performances

Between April and June 2015, I have been following the performance project *Cuteness Overload*, or *Extremt Gulligt*. Funded by the Swedish National Theatre Organisation *Riksteatern*, as one of several projects in their artistic development programme, the purpose of which was to involve young adults in the organisation through various events and workshops (Wilhelmsson, 2015).

The project was proposed and organised by the artists Nadja Hjorton, and Lisen Rosell (Rosell et al., 2015), both members of the feminist performance collective, ÖFA (stands for Öppna Feminister Agerar –Open Feminists Act). They were also supported by the curator and director Anna Efraimsson.[16] Started in 2004, ÖFA is an all-female collective which functions both as a more informal support network, where its members meet up regularly to socialize, and more structured as an association and work community that

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[16] Anna Efraimsson also produced the 2014 *Stockholm Internet Cat Video Festival*, Södra Teatern, October 9 and 11, 2014.

creates staged performances. These are often very interactive creations, where the audience are invited to actively take part in the performance, for instance in *ÖFA: Monster* (2015) and *ÖFA: What Happens in Uppsala, Stays in Uppsala* (2014).[17]

Key to the group's creative practice is its (queer-) feminist approach to the performative arts (Öfakollektivet, 2011). Crucial to ÖFA's success, according to Hjorton and Rosell, is the non-hierarchic, flat organisation of the collective. This normally means that anyone in the group can participate in the proposed projects, often on a needs-basis, i.e. those interested in the project, or those who are currently in more need of work, are allocated work.

> **Nadja Hjorton**: We have developed a working method which is sort of non-hierarchic – that means we make all decisions together, which in itself is a very feminist working method, but has become so established so we don't discuss it much anymore, and that [in itself] can be a problem that we've talked about, because, what does it mean that we are all white, that's been a discussion for a long time. But also, now that all of us have children, what does that mean for how we work, and for those of us who don't have children. It's an ongoing discussion.
>
> **Lisen Rosell:** Very simplified, we've been talking about, with a starting point in unconditional support, as the feminist, as you say, permeate everything, the private and political and work, […] and that it is about basic things like how to always support each other, but not just support, this support also includes room to criticize each other [..], usually, I think it is constructive when it happens.
>
> **NH:** But in the beginning our performances were also much more clear with the – we wanted to make a statement, for example, they've always been like, non-hetero, […] and because we talked a lot about love, and that meant it was same-sex love since we were all women, even if we didn't represent [*gestaltade*] it like that [as explicitly same-sexed], but it was also important in order to make statements in order to create some sense of community with the audience [..] [ii]

ÖFA then, works within a feminist tradition of separatism, creating a culture of support, but also of creativity and artistic exploration. It can also be understood as miniature history of feminist practices and ideas in Sweden. Where issues like

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[17] Also staged as *What happens in Kärrtorp Stays in Kärrtorp*, at Turteatern, Kärrtorp, Stockholm, December 2015.

separatism that were once provocative became *comme il faut,* new issues, like the fact that the group is all white, emerged as somewhat problematic (Rosell et al., 2015). The fact that ÖFA is a homosocial space also facilitated their exploration of queerness, which I'll return to below.

5.2.1. Danceoke

Perhaps the most popular of ÖFA's practices, is Danceoke, a portmanteau for dance and karaoke that could probably best be described as a type of karaoke in movement. Usually, it means that the participants imitate the movements in a music video that is screened in front of the crowd. Or, as ÖFA describes it:

> ÖFA: DANCEOKE is like karaoke but instead of singing alone you dance to music videos together with a full dance floor. ÖFA: DANCEOKE shifts the perspective of performer/audience and focuses on being and dancing together.
>
> (Öfakollektivet, n.d.)

In other words, Danceoke is part of a wider ambition of disrupting the inherent power hierarchies of performative art, the boundaries between audience/performer. This creative context seems to have influenced the *Cuteness Overload* project as well.

In practice, the *Cuteness Overload* project has taken place at a number of locales. Workshops with young adults, recruited via Riksteatern's local groups were held in three Swedish towns, in different parts of the country. During the workshops the groups have engaged in performance practices that explores embodied experiences of cuteness, as well as discussed the concept of cuteness in informal focus groups. As previously mentioned, the groups also made field trips to a sheep farm, and two local kennels, one specialised in breeding Chihuahuas, and one breeding Flat coated Retrievers. For Hjorton and Rosell, the workshops and field trips all had the secondary purpose of gathering materials and inspiration for a staged performance that might later be developed into a full production. Twice throughout the project, Rosell and Hjorton invited friends and colleagues, as well as representatives of Riksteatern, to work-in-Progress staged performances held at Riksteatern's headquarters in a

southern Stockholm suburb. This has been a way of receiving feedback and see how the practices they developed separately worked in the interaction with an audience.

5.3. Von Uexküll's Umwelt and Merleau-Ponty's Chiasm

As I indicated above, in order to gain an understanding of the subject position of the cute other, I shall attempt a phenomenological analysis of experience. Obviously, we cannot in practice turn ourselves into a kitty, baby, or stuffed animal in order to actually feel what they feel. However, what we can do is trying to *feel with* the cute, to emphasise with its position. As a starting point for our investigation of the cute subject position, let us take a closer look at the *Umwelt* (sometimes translated as *environment* [von Uexküll, 1985]), or sensorial life-world, of the cute.

In Merleau-Ponty's reinterpretation, Umwelt turns into a type of third term, a porous membrane between an individual's perception and the world (2002, p. 238). Organisms exists in "an Einfühlung with the world, with the things, with the animals, with other bodies" (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 209). This *Einfühlung*, often translated as empathy, literally means "feeling in" (de Waal, 2006, p. 38), and implies a more intrinsic feeling in concert with the world, rather than opposite it. Merleau-Ponty emphasises that we connect with the world because of our bodies, not in spite of them (2003, pp. 217–218). In addition, the body is also determined through the bodies of other, as we find ourselves in an *Ineinander,* or "togetherness", a lateral relation with other bodies (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 273). Crucially, this in turn refuses the subject-facing-object – or othering – mode of engagement, characteristic of a dualistic, Cartesian phenomenology.

In his Nature [*La Nature*] lectures presented at Collège de France between 1956-1960 (published posthumously in English [Merleau-Ponty, 2003]) Merleau-Ponty engages explicitly with communal sensing, the intertwining between human bodies (and perception), living others (other humans, non-human animals, plants etc.) and the material world in general. This is what he calls the Chiasm – from the Greek word *chiasmos*, which translates as diagonal crossing (Westling, 2013, pp. 25–26). Just as our embodied perception is inherently synaesthetic, and can never be understood separately from our physical bodies (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 238, 244), he asks

> Why would not the synergy exist among different organisms, if it is possible within each? Their landscapes interweave, their actions and their passions fit together exactly: this is possible as soon as we no longer make belongingness to one same 'consciousness' the primordial definition of sensibility, and as soon as we rather understand it as the return of the visible upon itself, a carnal adherence of the sentient to the sensed and of the sensed to the sentient.

(Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 142)

Behnke provides us with a way to operationalise these concepts in a kinaesthetic practice. In her view, Merleau-Ponty still retains a certain "separative" mode of relating to the world and the Other, especially animal Others (1999, p. 99). This separative mode of sensing, characterized by a detached, subject-facing-object attitude towards the world and other beings – represents only one possible perceptive mode, albeit the traditionally dominating one in Western culture (Behnke, 2002 [1984], p. 8). Instead, Behnke suggests to engage in a more connective, multi-lateral mode of sensing wherein the participants are perceiving communally, in an "intercorporeal/interkineastethic field" (1999, pp. 102–104). In her own "practice of peace" this is done in concert with two cats, BC (the stray "Bad Cat") and JoJo who tended to get into violent cat fights. In order to calm down the situation, Behnke goes through a set of steps to become a co-participant in the situation. "Grounding" means, in a sense, becoming aware of the ground, of our weight, and the contact between ground and the body, making the body relax, and not straining against gravity. This, Behnke argues, allows us to move from a visually oriented, spectator-position, to one that is actively part of the situation. It is not just shifting from exteroception (perceiving the world) to interoception (perceiving one's body), which would retain the subject/object division, rather this creates a "situated reflexivity" where bodies feel together (Behnke, 1999, p. 103).

"Inhabiting Visual Kinaesthesias" means becoming aware of our eyes and gazes, using them as communicative tools, sensing each other, rather than observing an Other (Behnke, 1999, pp. 104–105). In the last two, Opening the heart and Not-Knowing, the practice takes on almost a meditative character. The first involves physically opening up the chest, calming and deepening the breathing. Not-knowing, describes a sort of

non-judgmental attitude, being in the "now" and not categorising the event. It also means not resorting to predetermined actions, but to remain in a state of Not-Doing. This will allow the participant to become more responsive and open to the situation at hand. The settling of her own body, spreads to the cats who also calm down (Behnke, 1999, pp. 105–107).

5.4. Kålmaskar

The Cabbage Worm (*Kålmasken*), as it was playfully nicknamed by Hjorton and Rosell, illustrates the inter-subjective aspect of the cute, and the central role of *cute agency* in this relationship. Especially in its first stages, the give-and-take relationship of the Cabbage Worm represents a connective rather than separative mode. Both in the passive and active roles of the practice – as wrappee and wrapper, the participants are part of the same "intercorporeal field" communicating on a kineasthetic level. The wrapper has to continuously anticipate the needs of the wrappee, make sure she is comfortable; that the wrap is not too tight, and that the pushing and pulling is not painful. In an interview with one of the participants, in this case Riksteatern's liaison, Anna Wilhelmsson, describes how she experienced the position of the wrapper:

> Well, at first I was a bit concerned with not making it uncomfortable, because then I hadn't experience it [the wrapping] myself. And like, oh, is it too tight, what around the neck, and sometimes the fabric got in the face. But then we got this great connection. It was very obvious that she – she showed me very clearly in her face, and the feeling in her body, that she thought it was really nice.[iii]

Wilhelmsson and her partner both have to become "body" by "letting weight settle". In Behnke's view, this helps us shift our perceptive paradigm from subject-facing-object to one of proprioceptive "*Selbstung*" or as she translates it, "reflexivity, selfawareness" (Behnke, 1999, p. 103). The contact with the floor, as one lies passive against it, and the other participant struggles on it to shove the cabbage worm around, leaves one open to the situation and to more easily empathize with the Other. This is not to deny the inherent difference in their situation, the unequal range of possible actions and movements, or even sense of "power" over the Other.

5.4.1. On Wrapping and Restricting

According to the three creators of the practice, the cabbage worm was designed to explore the caretaking, as well as the controlling and constraining aspects of the cute relationship.

> **Lisen Rosell:** It ended up as the cabbage worm. But it started as – we didn't know that it would end up as a cabbage worm, it started with the feeling that […] we wanted to take care of – because we were interested in –
>
> **Nadja Hjorton:** restraining [18]
>
> **LR:** - restraining freedom of movement. This practice really originates with us pinning down what this cuteness is, when it borders on the grotesque.
>
> **Anna Efraimsson:** I think it's because […] it's been hard with cuteness, where is its political punch [*sprängladdningen*]? […] because right now we're extremely interested in the mechanisms behind it. I think that's what the cabbage worm has included in a nice way, it sort of talks about the mechanisms behind cuteness, this power relationship, all of these, this complexity in like, caretaking, being a victim, being a perpetrator, all of this. [iv]

Though the above quote might come across as a rather simplistic account, an analysis of the practice itself reveals it to be an immensely complex illustration of cuteness and the cute relationship.

The wrapping is key in creating the cabbage worm's positionality, and furthermore emphasises the ambivalent position of the cute. Simultaneously evoking a soothing and caretaking sensibility, as well as implying control, even violence. Wrapping of course have many different connotations in human culture. As I mentioned in the introduction, it is both the shroud of a corpse, and tight wrapping of a baby. As Peggy Phelan comments on another "wrapped" performance,[19] the " wrapped body itself seems to evoke images of dead mummies and full cocoons." (Phelan, 1993, pp. 153–156). Animal researcher (and prominent autism activist) Temple Grandin has shown, that this "deep touch stimulation" as in swaddling, hugging, or tightly wrapping the

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[18] *Att begränsa* can also mean to limit or to constrain.

[19] Angelika Festa "Untitled Dance (with fish and others)", 1987 (Phelan, p. 153).

body, without necessarily restraining it, has a calming effect on the anxious body (Grandin, 1992; King et al., 2014).

Wilhelmsson comments on her experience of being part of the practice as cabbage worm:

> [I felt] safe, […] and engaged in a sort of passivity […] where someone sees to that you experience something. So it's not apathy in that way, because you know that – it could be likened to some sort of spa-treatment, or that kind of situation where there are no expectations for me to do anything more than just lie here, and lie still. […] and there's a human being who makes me experience something nice.[v]

In this statement, the relational aspect of the practice is emphasised, the attention, and caretaking from another "human being" is key to the positive experience. Personally, the wrap evoked body memories of being tightly tucked in bed as a small child. My brother, twelve years my senior, was an expert at this. On the rare occasions he was asked to babysit me, he would tuck me in so tightly I could hardly move, or rather, I was reluctant to move, as that would mean losing the cosy feeling of safety, of being hugged by the duvet. In my childish state of mind, it was also a rare occasion where I got to spend time with my brother, otherwise so aloof and distant. The wrap becomes an extra shell against the world, and simultaneously invoking a deeper connection with the world, becoming one with the outside. It both marks the boundaries of the body, as well as opening up the haptic senses. This illustrates Merleau-Ponty's description of the body's boundaries as amoeba-like, and defined both by the Other, the world, as well as by our own body, felt from within our body (1968, p. 139).

The wrap also forces one to "lose limbs". Stubby legs, or an inability to move efficiently, for instance a toddler learning to walk, or a new born calf on wobbly legs, is a common feature of cuteness (Genosko, 2005). The restriction in movement, induces a new bodily state. Instead of the habituated, often unconscious mode or unrestricted movement, the effort in restriction demands a more creative relation to movement, forcing us, and allowing us to relate to the body in another way.

[Removed images: set of photos depicting Hjorton and Rosell demonstrating *Kålmasken*. Rosell is rolled into a light green piece of fabric by Hjorton. Background is black, contrasting with the light fabric. In the last image Rosell crawls on her stomach like a caterpillar.]

Figures 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26 and 27 Nadja Hjorton ("wrapper") and Lisen Rosell ("wrappee") demonstrate Kålmasken, *June 2015.*

Other parts of our bodies appear clearer, the stomach, the hips, the breasts. When the limbs are not in use, or when their range of movement is severely restricted, what the rest of the body is capable of – and incapable of – becomes more apparent. Flailing and wriggling, we still manage to move forward.

The eyes and the vision takes on a new role. So aware of the rest of our bodies, it becomes almost impossible to stay detached. Lying on the stomach, looking becomes much more of an effort, as one has to crane the neck to look up, strain the eyes as they have to open wide when gazing upwards.

5.4.2. Crawling – A Queer Perspective?

Crucially, the position of wrappee in the Cabbage worm, offers a change of perspective. First of all, it involves a physical change of position, going from straight up standing, and looking down, to lying down and looking up. Secondly, it also leads to a change in our perception, as it invites us to reverse relational positionality, which in turn results in a new *Umwelt*. Horizontally on the floor, our sensorial perspective is closer to that of a crawling baby, a quadrupedal animal, or even an inanimate object. However, simply lying down in the position of the cabbage worm, does not automatically mean that one completely understands what it is like to be a cute thing. First of all, because these experiences will vary between various cute subject positions. Secondly, there is a certain amount of effort needed, or at least a desire to overcome and understand the cute, if one does not ordinarily regard oneself as cute. While acknowledging that we cannot fully appreciate the experiences of organisms or objects very different from humans, Ian Bogost suggests that we can, at least partly, understand the subject position of the Other, through analogy (2012, pp. 64–65). In this sense, the practices presented here, are analogies of the experiences of the cute.

Merleau-Ponty rightly asserts that all sensations are spatial, the senses constructing space to us. However, various sensations offer particular experiences of space, that come together in creating the full sensation of space (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 230). In the cabbage worm, our sense of space subtly changes, as certain sensorial experiences are given priority of others. In Behnke's view, a change of positionality, not only upsets our spatial orientation, but can be the starting point for an alternative perceptive mode of engaging with the world, disrupting our proclivity for *looking-at* the world, and encourage us to *look-with* the world. Though Behnke

acknowledge that lying down, does not automatically lead us to take on a connective sensory mode, she does assert that the separative mode is strongly connected to a sense of uprightness (Behnke, 2002 [1984], p. 9). As most things cute are expected to be small, the cute-observer position implies a propensity for "looking down" at the cute baby, pet, toy or trinket. By lying down and crawling, we take the spatial position of the cute. In a sense, we can upset the boundary of the Other.

The horizontal position is interesting in yet another way. In her *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), Ahmed emphasises the importance of spatiality for the sense of normativity and queerness. Normativity, in this view, is a result of repeated "bodily actions over time", which tend to put certain things in reach and view, and others further away. In order to reach these alternative things, the body has to turn away from the norm, or in Ahmed's words, away from "the straight body" that "appears 'in line'" (2006a, p. 66). Here, the vertical axis plays a crucial role, as it is, according to Ahmed, "an effect of 'being in line'"(Ahmed, 2006a, p. 66). Breaking away from this vertical axis, the world appears disoriented, or *queer*. Which upsets our perception and embodiment but simultaneously, offers new ways of relating to the world and the Other (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 67). This new positionality, in extension thus creates a *queer Umwelt*, one where our conventional position as the non-cute observer is unseated.

As we see the other person differently, our spatial organisation changes. The floor is much closer, suddenly its cleanliness or dirtiness appears. Muscles that we do not always use in this way (at least in my case, as I spend most of my time standing, walking or sitting on a chair) become engaged differently, the body is outlined in alternative ways through the contact with the floor and the wrap.

5.4.3.Struggling

The movement and the struggle of the crawling stage is quite revealing. While the first part of the practice is about passivity, the second is about activity on the part of the cute. However, the cuteness of the cabbage worms does not seem to diminish as we the cabbage worms are active, perhaps even the opposite. Cute *action*, it seems, is just as important as cute *inaction*.

A common characteristics of cute movement is an inability to perform certain acts at all, trying and failing, or performing them inexpertly and inefficiently. Rosell and Efraimsson reflect on this aspect of the cute in relation to the concept of almost, which we shall return to below:

> **Lisen Rosell:** […] another aspect of almost which is [uses high-pitched baby voice] really cute [laughs], it's – what I'm thinking about is – there are a lot of cute videos of animals and babies who don't, I mean they get an impulse, but never entirely follow it through. Can you recall the penguin who's scared of jumping off an ice block or whatever. It *almost* dares to, but finally it's like fate itself, or the ice or something, and it just slips down, and that's extremely cute, it sort of almost… and there's this recognition in almost, for everyone I think, like when you run up to an obstacle, and is like, ooh I nearly got over it, but it didn't happen.
>
> **Anna Efraimsson**: and there are numerous, hundreds of thousands of clips of videos who almost jump or fail and it's also because they're supposedly so good at jumping, and that makes it so funny when they can't. [vi]

In this form, cuteness appears as a type of lack, of a yet unfulfilled potential. But it can also be understood as a failure, or perhaps reluctance to meet a behavioural norm. Halberstam sees failure as a radical political move, refusing the "toxic positivity" of a culture that celebrates and demands success (2011, pp. 3–4). Cute failure can, on the one hand, thus be seen as a queer move, undermining both capitalism and patriarchy. By remaining in a state of non-womanhood, or non-human-ness, failure upsets the boundaries between childhood/adulthood, and designates a freer space outside of the norm (Halberstam, 2011, pp. 3–4). However, Halberstam's somewhat optimistic view on the potential of failure for queer resistance is countered by Muñoz's, who rather sees the queer as always already failed, in relation to the majoritarian ideas of (white) heterosexuality. Still, Muñoz acknowledges the revolutionary potential of failure, but contrary to Halberstam, this is mainly in the way it highlights the lack in white/Western heterosexual culture (2009, pp. 173–1976).

On the other hand, the lack inherent in cute, is also where the cute becomes morally unstable, and, where many analyses of the cute ends. The pleasures of the cute affect, coupled with the common power inequality between the cute and the cute-observer, would tempt the latter to forcefully perpetuate this relationship, no matter the wishes

of the cute itself, summarised for instance in Harris's cynical comment "Cuteness […] is not something we find in our children but something we do to them" (Harris, 2000, pp. 4–5). The understanding of cuteness as oppressive, is probably also connected to the struggle inherent in cuteness, as the cute has to navigate a world for which it is not yet ready. Wilhelmsson reflects on her conflicting feelings on this part of the practice:

> **Ingeborg Hasselgren**: *but then, when we started crawling, what did you think of that?*
>
> **Anna Wilhelmsson**: mmmm… I mostly felt powerless [*maktlös*], I lost – it wasn't comfortable anymore, it was difficult, heavy. And it was so clearly difficult and heavy, and you didn't get any help. You also ended up feeling looked at [*betraktad*]. […] it was comical, I laughed very much, well because it was comical. But it was more this – it was difficult and hard and I'm restrained, and I don't have the proper conditions to do this, and I'm looked at while I'm in that situation [*medans jag har det på det sättet*]. Ah. So I'd say that's the physical experience. But like I said, it was very comical, there was a lot of laughter.
>
> [...]
>
> I'm something cute [*gulligt*] who's performed a cute and very hard act, and I come up to someone who pets my head. And that was pretty nice but it was also very, sort of conflicting feelings […] that I was someone's pet who didn't really have the right conditions to live my life […] the way I would like to.[vii]

Struggling is an essential part of the cute-consumer's role. Interacting with an Other that cannot take sufficient care of itself, prompts us to be ever vigilant, providing support both emotionally and physically. The lengths people are prepared to go to in order to take care of the cute pet or baby, is frequently astounding. Waking at odd hours to feed, comforting wailing babies and unhappy pets, cleaning out cages and aquariums, changing diapers, spending time and money to make sure the cute has what it needs. Morreall has even suggested that cuteness can be understood as part of the reward that carers reap for taking care of the ungrateful baby or toddler (1991, p. 41). This struggle of the cute-consumer in the Cabbage Worm, is mostly expressed in the first part of the practise. The care taken in first wrapping, and then pushing and pulling the inanimate worms over the floor, is not only physically, but mentally straining. The wrapper constantly needs to anticipate and appreciate, what the wrap and the pushing would feel like for the wrappee.

5.4.4. The Surprising Cute

Another explanation for the appeal of the cute, is its unexpectedness. This can come in many forms, the hilariously silly things children say, or in the sudden, seemingly random and illogical movement of pets. Obviously, laughter is an essential part of the cute. Morreall traces this amusing quality to the incongruity of the cute, both in terms of bodily proportions, as well as movement, and general lack of understanding (1991, p. 41). However, the cute's ability to amuse is not constant nor consistent. Often, a genuinely amusing cuteness comes with an air of unconscious effortlessness, as in a baby's instinctual laughter. When the cute performance takes on an edge of manipulation, which unveils its constructedness, it may diminish the affect. It should be noted, that this is very contextual. The same cute actions and mannerisms, which in one set of circumstances, appear absolutely adorable, may in another set of circumstances, come off as unattractive and phony (Miller, 2004, p. 151). This incongruity of the cute is conducive to a not-knowing state of mind. In Halberstam's view, surprise and shock is a key instrument in queer practices (Halberstam, 2011, p. 29).

The unexpectedness in cute behaviour, indeed the origin of so much cute pleasure, hinges on the assumption of a certain cute agency. If we constantly knew how the cute would behave, if we could constantly control its behaviour this would to some extent limit the pleasure. I would underline here that this agency is not equivalent to *autonomy*. As Martha Nussbaum notes, a denial of subjectivity does not necessarily follow a denial of autonomy, or vice versa (1995, p. 257). It is then possible that the cute is attributed a subject, but is lacking in autonomy and self-determination. There is also a certain pleasure in interacting with another from which we differ. For cuteness to appear "genuine," the cute should have an agency, the cute should *want us on their own accord*, but this does not mean that it should be allowed to be completely independent. There is a certain titillating wildness inherent in the cute.

This aspect of the cute overlaps with Behnke's "not-knowing." It designates an open-minded attitude which bears some resemblance to mindfulness, or a state of being in the now without prejudice, and not automatically categorise the present situation (1999, p. 107). However, Behnke underlines that not-knowing also means *not-doing*,

disrupting our habituated movements and bodily reactions to an already categorised situation (1999, p. 107). Interestingly, this state of not-knowing, corresponds with the type of elasticity of the mind associated with cuteness. The non-judging and playful attitude found among children, which can carry over to adulthood, has by Bruce Charlton been described as "psychological neoteny" (2006). In this view, this is a key characteristic for scientists and inventors allowing them to find creative solutions. I would rather re-conceptualise this as *cognitive neoteny,* in order to put emphasis on the perceptive/affective aspect of the attitude, implying a curious sensitivity to one's surroundings, though not necessarily a conscious one.

5.5. Passivity and Yearning

In the Cabbage Worm, the division between active and passive is upset. I am here not only referring to the fact that the cute and non-cute swap positions throughout the practise, but to an oscillation of active-passive within each position. Using Merleau-Ponty's concepts, it becomes apparent that the active, is always also passive – especially in regards to vision. The overlap, the chiasm between the seer and the world, means that the seer is not simply actively claiming the world. Being able to see, also means *being able to be seen*. In other words, the world can see us, as we see the world, we are always passive, as we are active (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 139).

Passivity, can in itself be understood as a revolutionary act, refusing to take part in production, radically breaking with a capitalist configuration of the self, active pursuit of happiness/money/self-fulfillment (Halberstam, 2011, p. 140). This radical passivity comes to the forefront also in analyses of *kawaii*-culture. Kinsella has noted that *kawaii*'s idolisation of the pre-social, breaks with the social contract, and work ethic of Japanese society (Kinsella, 1995b, p. 228). Hasegawa suggests that wilfully staying in an immature state of *kawaisa* (cuteness) can undermine the gender/power configurations of society, as the immature individual never reaches a stable identity, sexuality or gender expression (2003, p. 140).

There can be a distinct pleasure in being passive in general. Simply because it often relieves one of responsibility, of constantly doing, and anticipating. At the same time, being absolutely still, is actually a quite active position. Anyone who has tried *zen*

meditation or mindfulness, can testify to this. After a few minutes of unseeingly, unthinkingly counting breaths, the body starts itching and aching. Remaining in the preferred half-lotus position and clearing one's mind, takes an enormous effort, at least for a beginner.

In a similar vein, cuteness consumption can turn into a frustrating game as one has to control the urge to grasp, and control the cute. Dale even suggests that the cute might in fact be more of a masochistic genre, as it "cuts the subject." In this logic, the feelings of want that the cute incites, makes the cute-consumer inflict more control on itself as it can't have it (Dale, 2017).

Aragón et al. describe how cute stimuli can create *dimorphous emotional expressions*, that is, a person displaying positive and negative emotions simultaneously, for instance, crying while experiencing intense happiness. Aragón and her colleagues suggest that contradictory feelings emerge as a way of regulating emotion. This might explain why the cute-consumer, while enjoying the pleasurable emotions, simultaneously feel a more aggressive urge, as a way of controlling the otherwise overwhelming pleasure (Aragón et al., 2015, p. 264). Waiting for the cabbage worms, I'm consciously having to fight my body, preventing it from standing up and move over to "my" worm. Yearning, as in not-quite-having, is thus a key element in this play of active and passive.

5.5.1. Yearning

Waiting for the cabbage worms to come up to us, is also an intense affective experience. Seeing the worms struggling, and not being allowed to help, creates as sort of bittersweet emotional sensation. The closest description I could personally come up with was a physical feeling that "tugged at the heart strings." My chest felt constricted, my hands involuntarily reached out, frustrated by the slowness of the cabbage worms movement. I laughed hysterically at the sight of their pathetic struggling, aware of the absurdity of the whole situation. This slowness underscores the affective force of the practice: soon the worms will be here, and we will be able to pet them. The yearning feeling, stretched out in time and never entirely satisfied, is a crucial aspect of the cute relationship. It resembles the affective force of classic soap

operas, where the spectator is placed in a state a pleasurable, yet ambiguous state of never-ending expectation, never reaching resolution (Modleski, 2008, p. 84).

5.5.2. Gazes

Vision plays a central part in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, and, I believe in this practice. In his synaesthetic approach, the senses co-construct the world and space together (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 230). Waiting for the cabbage worm I experience a phantom feeling of the wrapped worms in my hands. I recall the heaviness of the body as I struggled to push her over the floor. A sensation made even more tantalising because of our previous close proximity. In Luce Irigaray's critique of Merleau-Ponty, the relationship between vision and touch takes on a new form. She asserts that Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the synaesthetic overlap between touch and vision is erroneous in its assumed equality (Irigaray, 1993, p. 164). In her view, touch is the more fundamental sense of the two, as it comes online before vision, already in the womb, as mother and child can feel each other through touch. Irigaray continues that the tangible emerged before "the dichotomy of active and passive", and is experiences both from within and from the outside (1993, p. 164).

The cute does not *have to* be regarded from "above." Indeed, the cute is commonly understood as an invitation to play (Allison, 2006, p. 206). One could say that they invite the cute-consumer to join them on their level. In the cabbage worm, the participants, through their mutual visibility, engage in what Behnke calls *visual kinaesthesias*, where the gaze functions as communication instead of objectification (Behnke, 1999, p. 105). Eyes, the assumed locus of vision, are commonly exaggerated in cute designs, for instance manga characters. Though it should be noted that having eyes is not strictly necessary for a thing to be regarded as cute, as long as it fulfils other criteria. In terms of gazes, however, the act of looking up is central. This makes us open the eyes more, and make them appear bigger, and in some sense cuter. As the cabbage worm cranes their necks to look at us, I was reminded of the look pets tend to direct at their owners, when begging for food or walkies. Wilhelmsson describes how she played up the cuteness, even basing her own performance on the other cabbage worms, which she had seen at a staged performance prior to this occasion.

Ingeborg Hasselgren: *what exactly felt cute? Could you describe it?*

Anna Wilhelmsson: ehm… I think because I was laughing quite a lot, I was a good little soldier and kept at it, [*kämpade på med gott humör*], I mean that feeling, it was sort of erm…[silence]. But then again, I had my own visual experience of – I mean because I'd seen the other cabbage worms, I sort of knew that I was cute, if you know what I mean. When you peek out of that blanket, you look pretty cute.

IH: *so you had an image in your head of what it must --*

AW: yeah exactly

IH: *but did you try to – I mean did you play that up?*

AW: yeah, I think so, I'd say so.

IH: *how did you play it up?*

AW: well, it was really because I, Nadja [Hjorton] was my – the person I crawled towards, I sort of mirrored her facial expression, because she, she looked at me with these enormous – and smiled and was all bubbly [*sprallig*], and that cutesy [*gulle-gull*] laughter that you have [IH laughs] ehm, so I mirrored that, and really engaged in that contact, not letting her go, but really – you're going think that I'm cute!

IH: *Did you keep your eyes wide open?*

AW: thing is, at the same time, I found it really hard to perform, so I didn't exactly have a clear erm, what I did with my face, I mostly just laughed and just [AW makes a face, IH laughs] and did it. [viii]

What I find interesting in Wilhelmsson's account is the usage of the eyes and her visual memory. The cute is "peeking out" of the wrap, implying an active gaze. She also emphasizes the intentionality of her cute performance, which depended heavily on the communication, the back and forth between Wilhelmsson and Hjorton. The cabbage worm does not only change the wrappee, it changes the wrapper too. This intentionality I believe, is partly dependent on her previous experiences of the cute. Indeed, the intensity of affect in general, seems to – if not diminish – then at least *change* with repetition.

For Hjorton, Rosell and Efraimsson, the outside gaze [*yttre blickar*] was crucial in their understanding of cute performance. Even during the development of the practices, the gaze was marked by a camera. The focus of practices like the cabbage worm, lies in

creating an affective state in the audience, or observer, rather than representing specific cute characters.

> **Lisen Rosell**: […] we've started talking about the audience as a projecting – they're projecting and we're more like the projection surface [*projektionsytan*]. It feels very liberating to think about it, and then as a performance [*föreställning* can also mean show] that's more interesting than trying to teach people something. Because, just like Anna [Efraimsson] said, […] it lets them experience the mechanisms behind it, rather than understand so clinically [*torrt*]

> **Nadja Hjorton:**[…] everyone just has so many opinions about cuteness and they're all pretty similar. […] there is quite a lot of consensus around cuteness, I find. When we're out working with it artistically, the goal is to find something that suggests something we don't already know… When we start from what we know, that's not very interesting, but if you start with the mechanism, or focus on one element and just work with that – it can be voice, or sound or time which we've worked with a lot, then suddenly things can emerge that are much harder, or you as an observer [*betraktare*] or audience has to start thinking about it and start producing, and that's when it becomes interesting for us. […]

> **Ingeborg Hasselgren:** *I was thinking about the small performance you did last Friday. Why did you chose those elements, because they were very distinct […]*

> **NH**: […] it was partly our latest work, but also the ones we felt were interesting to test with an audience. We've been working quite a lot with paint, body painting, something that might be more suggestive, where you know sort of what it will do with an audience because it's clearly suggesting something [*mera av ett tydligt förslag*]. These ones were more like, we don't know what will happen next, what will happen in the room.

> **LR:** yeah it was things we felt needed an outside gaze [*yttre blickar*]

> **IH:** *what do you expect outside gazes will contribute?*

> **Anna Efraimsson:** it's always completely different when you test material in front of an audience, that's when you notice things and – quote unquote -- understand things, and that's of course very valuable, it gives you feedback.

> **NH:** it creates sort of a time frame and a place. It's the frame we've been looking for, it's been a bit – when we've worked on our own, that's been the camera. But you only feel the camera when you look at it, when you're working in the room, and the camera is on, you forget about it and then there's nothing framing it, or something you can put through a filter, and somehow when you have an observer [*en betraktare*] that becomes the filter.

AE: talking about gazes, there is something voyeuristic with cuteness, and that's also a link with porn.

LR: yeah, it's overall very similar – if you'd say that this [project] is extreme sexy, that it would be about sex and not cuteness

NH: Extreme sexiness [IH and LR laugh] Sexiness Overload

LR: I think we would work in very similar ways

NH: I think so too

LR: maybe that would emerge [*uppstå*] in the observer too [ix]

In other words, the performers designed this practice to actively use the audience as co-creator or -producer in the cute. Even in instances when the observer is not physically touching, the gaze is actively shaping the moment – the practice wouldn't be the same without the gaze of the observer. The "blankness" of Hjorton and Rosell's performance style, where they refrain from actively representing specific cute animals or characters, could potentially transform the gaze of the observer. Hjorton recalls how one of the audience members commented that the blankness prompted her to become aware of her own subject position: "it was ["Johanna"] who was in the audience who said […] because it wasn't as cute as she wanted, she could see her own – why do I want this to be cute? So it might make some sort of reflection possible […]."[x]

Going back to Behnke, the blankness or inbetweenness of this cute performance induces as a sense of *Selbstung*, where the audience is prompted to question their own reaction to the cute, how the gaze focusses. This blankness was described by Hjorton and Rosell stemming from an idea of *nästan* "almost," and has permeated the whole creative process of *Cuteness Overload.* It was explored in several of the practices.

> **Ingeborg Hasselgren***: one thing we talked about last Friday, at your performance, was this feeling of almost* [nästan], *[…] What is this almost? Why is it important in cuteness?*
>
> [silence]
>
> **Nadja Hjorton**: well cuteness – I don't know if it is important in cuteness, I think it's important, I think it's exciting in a performance context [*föreställningskontext*] like we talked about earlier, it sort of forces – or creates some sort of, maybe desire, to fill in, to sort of

understand, because in some ways were so indoctrinated [*skolade*] in always trying to understand, to make our own connections, get and overview and so on. Erm, so it creates… I imagine it creates a sort of active viewer, I mean an active gaze. […] I mean it might be interesting in cuteness too, but for me it's more connected to performance… [xi]

5.6. Cuteness as Queerness

Though the performers intended the practice to represent an *inbetweenness*, not quite an animals, not quite human, not quite adult, not quite a child, it seemed to have acquired the nickname Kålmasken, fairly early on. I believe that this it is not a random coincidence that the practice ended up as an animal. The Animal, with capitals (i.e. in reference to the idea or the representations of animals [Derrida, 2008, p. 34]) can function as a an empty sign. In Chen's view, this leaves it open for "a vast range of imagistic, affective, and economic projections" (Chen, 2012, p. 99). In this way, the Animal marks a potentially queer space outside of human categories, especially those relating to gender and sexuality, but it may also reinforce the similarities between humans and non-humans. Not the least because non-human animals and humans alike have an innate capacity for "'sexual plasticity'" (Bagemihl, 1999, p. 45). With *queer*, I refer to Chen's expanded concept, moving beyond the simple interpretation of queerness as same sex relationships or gay/lesbian identities. In addition, it encompasses "the social and cultural formations of 'improper affiliation,' so that queerness might well describe an array of subjectivities, intimacies, beings, and spaces located outside of the heteronormative" (2012, p. 104).

Obviously, the cabbage worm in the practice the Cabbage Worm isn't supposed to be an actual caterpillar (or *Kålmask* in Swedish). As Chen – following Haraway— understands it, animals are deeply intertwined in human cultural, political, and social meaning, offering up often contradictory ideas associated with the same animal. While they often refer to actual animals, this referential relationship can take a wide variety of forms (Chen, 2012, p. 101).

The practice, then, refers to the aspects englobed in the *idea* of the Cabbage Worm. Even in reference to nature, caterpillars and *kålmaskar,* are not actually worms. One could here ask what an actual cabbage worm is, what is its original referent? In the

biological taxonomy, they are categorised as the larvae state of butterflies. The word is usually applied to different species of butterflies (*fjärilar*) and moths (*malar*), both in Swedish and British English, such as *Pieris napi* (*rapsfjäril*), *Pieris rapae* (Small cabbage white butterfly or *rovfjäril*), *Pieris brassicae* (Large cabbage white butterfly or *kålfjäril*), *Mamestra brassicae* (Cabbage moth) and *Plutella xylostella* (*kålmal*) (Haldén and Söderström, 2014; Royal Horticultural Society, n.d.). In other words, when we are talking about the cabbage worms or caterpillars, we are not just referring to the actual organisms as such. *Kålmask* in more colloquial Swedish usage extends beyond the actual animal, designating something tucked in tight. It is also the name of a classic rollercoaster ride which can be found at several amusement parks. *Kålmasken* then, represents a childish fantasy.

5.7. Cute Boob-Animals and a Female Phenomenology

> I and about ten other people have been directed to sit on red mats along the side of a larger mat placed to delimit a stage area. Two lines of apples adorn the left and right of the mat. I wonder what they are for. When they enter and sit down on the mat, Hjorton and Rosell are dressed minimalistic in large T-shirts and black hot pants. The first visual impact is not one of instant cuteness, though they do look somewhat vulnerable, dressed as one would for going to bed, or maybe just to hang out at home on a lazy Sunday.
>
> I am rather uncomfortable sitting on the mat. Both physically and mentally. My body has to keep shifting to keep my legs from falling asleep. The others in the audience, in total about ten people, are either friends or colleagues of Hjorton and Rosell's, or representatives from Riksteatern.
>
> After finishing eating the apples, they scooch up to each other on the middle of the mat. Both are wearing an expressions of utmost indifference. Hjorton pulls up the front of Rosell's T-shirt over her head, and places it around her shoulders. Underneath, she is wearing a soft sports bra. Hjorton then proceeds to take out one of Rosell's breasts. In a casual manner. She takes out a makeup pen and leans over. Her curtain of hair obscures what she's doing for a while. Now and again she draws back and lets us see the face that is forming. The other breast gets the same treatment.
>
> Rosell watches the action in a patient, yet vaguely curious way, sometimes helping out by lifting her breast so that it's easier to paint a mouth. The boob-faces are made in two styles, one has huge cartoon-like eyes, the other pin-prick eyes with gigantic lashes. In

both cases the nipples are noses, and the mouths happy and smiley. After that, the attention moves to Hjorton's boobs, her T-shirt and bra is pulled up, and Rosell proceeds to draw on her smaller breasts.

The music goes quiet. This makes it even more awkward, I feel myself getting thrown out of the "performance" feeling, and I become much more conscious of the fact that I am sitting on a mat, in a room with several people I don't know, looking at a woman painting another woman's boobs. In silence. It's embarrassing, I feel my face heating up, but it is also strangely sensual, and weirdly cute. The squishiness of the boobs are accentuated in the contact with the pen, the more the face appears, the less "sexy" and boob-like they appear, and the more pet-like they look.

What strange protrusions they are! So soft and unthreatening, inanimate, yet very much alive. People are giggling softly. Rosell is quite meticulous. The second boob gets a pair of glasses. Having finished painting, they move over to either side of the mat. They each pick up a fruit. Making a tutting sound, Rosell starts "feeding" the boob some apple. Everyone laughs hysterically. Hjorton bites chunks out of her apple, giving the smaller pieces to her left boob. She imitates a chewing sound, similar to when a child pretend plays that her stuffed animal is eating.

Hjorton then scooches over to Rosell and attempts to feed her boobs. They seem somewhat recalcitrant. Rosell jiggles her boobs as if the creatures are trying to get at the food (or avoid being fed?). They engage in an intense conversation, a questioning high-pitched sound "naNA? naNa? Nimimimimi? Nimimimi?" Is answered with a slurping sound and puppy like whine.

5.7.1. An Equal, Cute Relationship?

Hjorton and Rosell's staged performance addresses several aspect of cute embodiment and its potential for re-appropriating the feminine body and its experiences. Crucially, this piece of their performance, described in my field notes above, represents yet another type of *being together*, of a reciprocity that could potentially inspire a reinterpretation of Merleau-Ponty's chiasm in relation to the body of the Other. As is widely known, his writings has been the target of feminist critique, primarily from Irigaray (1993), Judith Butler (1989 [1981]), Iris Marion Young (2003; 1990a, 1990b), Elizabeth Grosz (1994, 1995) and Linda Martín Alcoff (2000). Generally, these critics recognize his theories as a fruitful starting point for discussing experience and overcoming the othering mode of engagement with the world. According to his critics, Merleau-Ponty's failure lies in the construction of the subject. Partly, as it is seen as strangely disembodied, as not completely overcoming the Cartesian mind/body

dichotomy, an ostensibly "neutral" construction which is intended to stand in for all genders, sexes and types of sexual desire, while being based on a glaringly male, heterosexual body (Alcoff, 2000, p. 256; Butler, 1989, pp. 93–98). This in turn makes it impossible to account for specifically female-coded bodily experiences, such as pregnancy and menstruation (Grosz, 1994, pp. 203–210; Irigaray, 1993, pp. 165–166; Young, 1990b, pp. 162–163).

Others take a more generous view of Merleau-Ponty's construction of the subject. Sally Fischer, while admitting that Merleau-Ponty never explicitly refers to "gender/sex/race relations" still asserts that his model does make room for embodied difference (2008, p. 154). In her view, this "preflective intersubjectivity" allows for various s*tyles of being in the world* (Fischer, 2008, p. 157), thus allowing for an experience of cute that may be affected by our very specific bodily construction.

Still, I would agree with Fischer that it is not necessary to conflate chiasmic intercorporeality with a relationship that completely erases otherness. Rather, this dialogical reciprocity and irreducible otherness, are two sides of the same coin (Fischer, 2008, p. 160). Afterall, without an Other, there can be no dialogue. However, Fischer, following Young and Irigaray, underlines that such an intercorporeality, must rely on an "ethics of difference," in order to not end up in an unfortunate consensus that in actuality, may hide a totalizing and dominating structure (Fischer, 2008, p. 164). In other words, there is still room for a multiplicity of experience, beyond the male/female.

5.7.2. Verbal Reciprocity

Crucial in this reciprocity, is the verbal interaction between the cute characters, the "conversation" of high-pitched sounds. Many have noted how babbling and "tweeting" functions as a type of performative cuteness act, associated with the young child (Ngai, 2012; Winnicott, 1971, p. 98). Ngai even describes it as a lyrical "style of language" (Ngai, 2012, p. 98). As we are by now aware, cute feelings, performances and interactions, extend well beyond the category of the infant or the child. The same type of behaviours and discourses, uses of pet names, baby talk, caresses and cuddling, can be observed – for instance – in the interaction between adult romantic partners

(Morreall, 1991, pp. 44–45). 44-45). There is an intimacy-inducing quality to the cute, one which Ngai says, "often fails to establish the other as truly other (Ngai, 2012, p. 98)." Maurice Hamington (2008) underlines the importance of non-verbal cues in creating this empathetic connection. These cues such as, gestures, smells, sounds in Hamington's words "makes it possible for us to care." (2008, p. 208).

In other words, the cute has an unparalleled potential to return us to a "pre-conscious stage," through a communicative style that is not dependent on the use of words (Fischer, 2008, p. 161). Sounds and words, played a crucial, yet complex part in the development of the cute practices.

> **Anna Efraimsson:** […] on the topic of the mechanisms of cuteness, it's a thing, that the cute should be unaware, and that's why we – it's very important that it's not [trying to be] cute, because then it fails right away.
>
> **Lisen Rosell:** like in our discussion yesterday, these sounds become very palpable, when you try to create a cute voice, or a cute sound. That's where we are in the process.
>
> **Nadja Hjorton:** we also felt that… Well, we did read some poems with like cute voices and so on, but it just came out really flat and boring.
>
> **LR:** But it was funny, and not flat, when we pretended that it was our bums who read the poems, then it got cute!
>
> **NH:** but that was when we didn't try to be cute.[xii]

Again, the performative cuteness appears to be at its best when carrying an air of unawareness, like a baby just acting out of instinct.

5.7.3. Cuteness and the Abject Body

Another aspect of embodiment, becomes acute in Hjorton and Rosell's performance, namely, the problem of abjection, and of the grotesque body. The abject is described by Lisa Blackman as "that which is commonly associated with bodily fluids and waste products that leaves via open wounds or bodily openings such as the mouth, vagina or anus" (2008, p. 93). It is thus closely related to the affective experience of disgust (Harradine, 2014, p. 72), which in turn, is commonly placed on the opposite side of the affective spectrum to cuteness. However, the perceived danger of the abject is not

primarily health or cleanliness, it is, as Julia Kristeva notes, its disruptive force, threatening the boundary of the body, the very sense of self, and in extension, our sense of order and identity. It thus marks out a space "inbetween" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). Traditionally, the abject have a distinctly female emphasis, related to the submission and othering of women (Young, 1990a, p. 193). Female-coded bodies are perceived as more fluid than male, with boundaries that are constantly overflowing and penetrated, for instance through vaginal sex, menstruation or child birth.

Abjection, is often concomitant with a grotesque aesthetic. The grotesque, marks that which is overflowing, or excessive, putting emphasis on the body's orifices, extremities and other protuberances. In other words, the grotesque underlines our connection with the world, with the very material basis of our existence (Spackman, 2014, pp. 12–14). In this sense, the grotesque body is marked out in relation to the norm, often designating an Other of the non-white, the non-male, the dis-abled, the non-straight (Spackman, 2014, p. 12). And, one could add, the non-human and the non-binary. As Mary Russo notes, the grotesque is "a space of risk and abjection" (Russo, 1994, p. 12).

Though the cute is instinctively understood as something fundamentally attractive, or pleasurable, with its exaggerated eyes and head, it constantly threatens to fall over into the grotesque. Brzozowska-Brywczynska regards the cute as type of *lusus naturae*, as an abnormality, seen in the "astoma, [the] mouthless freak" of Hello Kitty (2007, p. 217). There is a certain attraction-repulsion in the cute, similar to how Chen describes animals (Chen, 2012, p. 99). I would see this, as Halberstam does, as an additional queering potential of the cute, creating new and interesting hybrids, as well as new trans-human affinities and families (Halberstam, 2011, pp. 44–45). Similarly to the cute, the female-coded body is often construed in terms of excess, of a body constantly overflowing its boundary.

Hjorton, Rosell and Efraimsson appear to have worked consciously with the grotesque. Partly through the practice of *dislocation*.

> **Nadja Hjorton**: […] dislocation, taking something and then placing it in another body part, or in another context […]. For example, that's what we're doing with the T-shirts, and the nothing else on the lower part, that, for me, is a cute costume, even though we're not cute.

> But it's cute because of the connotations to a pyjama party, like
> sisterhood, […] but I don't really feel cute, rather sort of grotesque.[xiii]

Cuteness can here open up the body, overcome the anxiety of the leaking body in general, and the female body in particular. A way of *intimating* the female body. The question is not so much whether the cute can "save" the female body from abjection, but whether the cute is an alternative way of exploring what is frequently deemed excessive and rule-breaking aspect of female embodiment. Can we transfer the tender intimacy associated with cuteness onto specific bodies, and so de-dramatize them?

Complicating the model of a distinctly *female* phenomenology, is the inherent instability of gendered embodiment. Especially Irigaray have been criticized for the strict binary of her gender model, which according to Tim R. Johnston risks obfuscating the phenomenology (and existence) of transgender, intersex, and gender-nonconforming people (Johnston, 2015, p. 618). While the performers Hjorton and Rosell, to my knowledge, were both cis-women, their cute-grotesque engagements within and between their bodies worked to queer them. It underlined the arbitrariness of marking bodies as male or female. In the cute performance, the strangeness of the boobs, the jerky movements of the butts, disrupts the binary categorization of the bodies of the performers. They are no longer primarily "female", but "bodies", as characters, acting out a relationship.

5.8. Conclusion: the cute-queer body

This chapter has outlined the way that cuteness can be understood as a performative mode co-created between subject positions. Essential for a comprehensive understanding of the affective relationship of the cute, one has to take into account the experiences of the *cute subject.* The practices developed by the Cuteness Overload team, Efraimsson, Hjorton, and Rosell, provided ways of putting perhaps traditionally non-cute subjects into a cute position. Being wrapped into a cabbage worm opens the body up to an alternate bodily and spatial organisation, offering a new way of relating to your own body, to others and to the general environment. In von Uexküll's and Merleau-Ponty's terms, the wrap can help construct a new cute *Umwelt*. This involves both the pleasures of being cute, such as the feeling of being cared for, the calming

effects of the deep pressure wrap, as well as the problematic aspects, the restricted movement, the vulnerability, the effort, and uncomfortable experience of crawling. It does also underline the importance of cute agency, how the intent of presenting yourself as a cute, and manipulating your own body, affects how cuteness is experienced.

Turning to the relational aspect of the cute, this chapter has troubled the idea of cuteness as inherently oppressive. The popular dichotomy of Dominance/submission is not the only model of cuteness. Especially the second practice – with the squeaking boobs – explored what a more equal partnership would mean. In other words, a cute relationship is not fundamentally ethical or unethical, but has to be evaluated in terms of consent, or in cases when consent cannot be given, on the basis of an *empathetic connection* or a *being-together*, where we ask: are the needs of the cute taken into account in this particular relationship? What are context and rules governing the particular cute relationship?

Another crucial point, is that a cute relationship does not necessarily rely on an othering mechanism. Following Fischer, Young and others, it can retain, or might even be dependent on, an ethics of difference, one where we can enjoy the (inter)play between different types of subjects, of different styles of being.

Finally, a running theme throughout, has been the queering potential of the cute. This functions on several levels. First of all, the cute performances draw on the non-human, and the non-verbal, to move beyond assumptions of what it means to be human. Secondly, as the cute performance upsets our spatial orientation, it could be said to offer a queer perspective, one that breaks away from the normative perceptive style and sense of uprightness. The cute performances by Hjorton, Rosell and Efraimsson, create moments of utopian cuteness, where the world is open, and can be experienced in an exuberant togetherness.

[Removed image: cover image from the party's Facebook event. A collage of cute memes and imagery, mainly animals. Text against gold glittery background: "OMG-WTF-SUPER-CUTE-DOUBLE-RAINBOW-STÖDFEST".]

Figur 17 The cover photo for the Facebook event. Used with permission.

[Removed image: poster for the party. Picture of the Cyklopen building against a pink-reddish background. Photo of Cyklopen's building in the foreground. Images of cartoon characters and memes.

Text: "OMG-WTF-SUPER-CUTE-DOUBLE-RAINBOW-STÖDFEST"

"FÖRANMÄLAN KRÄVS FESTPLANKA.NU"

"COCOTAXI

AZARJOON

GAY'S ANATOMY

MATRARKATET"

"11:E OKTOBER 20-03

18 ÅR CASH IS QUEEN"]

Figure 18 Poster for the cute party, with a remixed photo of Cyklopen's building. Used with permission.

Chapter 6: Case Study - Cute Utopia

In this section, I shall look closer at the way activists employ cute pop culture, and Internet memes to stage the utopian. The two events discussed in this chapter, the "Cute Party" and "Unicorner: All Catunicorns Are Beautiful" took place on October 11, 2014 and December 10, 2015 respectively. Both were hosted and organized by a socialist cultural centre, *Cyklopen* ("the Cyclops"), based in a southern Stockholm suburb.

Cute Utopia, refers to how cuteness is employed in political collectives, helping to create safe spaces, and to imagine alternative futures together. While the cabbage worms, and the curious boob-animals, engaged primarily on a more intimate cute relationship (on a "micro-level" of sorts), these cute events function on a macro-scale, engaging larger crowds. Though both chapters present examples of cute synaesthetic experiences, the activists' happenings in this chapter, construct a cute atmosphere mainly through visual and audial cues.

6.1. Cyklopen – Cute Crowd Control

The first event I attended at Cyklopen, was - according to its Facebook page - called "✿¨*•OMG-WTF-SUPER-CUTE-DOUBLE-RAINBOW-PARTY•*¨✿". In a rather more helpful way, it was also made clear that it was a "Linje 19 & Planka.nu stödfest" – a fundraising party for the two local organisations Linje 19 and Planka.Nu. The event's cover art consisted of a glorious celebration of Internet memes, images of unicorns and of course, super cute baby animals, all coming together in a what looked like a crude MS Paint collage. These Internet memes, set off by sparkly colours, was a recurrent theme all through the night. The house, seen on the poster above, is placed on the outskirts of Högdalen, right by a large green area. The same area has also become (in)famous for housing a camp of homeless Roma immigrants from southern Europe. They live in camps of makeshift tents and caravans which are torn down by the police from time to time. The activists at Cyklopen has worked closely with the Roma to help their difficult situation (Cyklopen, 2014; Pehrson, 2014; Skarin and Ronge, 2015).

For the evening, this small plot of land with its tiny, anarchist "free state", is turned into a fluffy fantasy land inhabited by cute animals, rainbows, glitter and soap bubbles. From my fieldnotes:

> The building itself has an industrial feel to it, contrasted by the playful facade made of semi-transparent, corrugated plastic, in neon shades of green, pink, purple, yellow and white. Surrounding it, is a small haphazardly built stage, right next to it a derelict VW-van, covered in sloppy tags, and elaborate graffiti. The back of the building has a dedicated "legal wall," a wall that can be freely used by anyone who wants to paint graffiti. The only rule is that artists may not paint on the building itself. Tonight, there is also a foodtruck parked right outside the building, serving vegan food.

> For the evening, you enter the building through the glittery shower of a tinsel curtain. It is in a sense, a door to a cuter realm. The inside is divided on three levels. The entrance leads directly to a large dance floor and bar area with a high ceiling. The space is clearly decorated in a "cute theme;" a huge sheet with a large "double rainbow" hangs over stage, from one of the balconies there's another sheet with the words ACAB, All Cats Are Beautiful, and a stylized cat painted on it. This is a reference to ACAB *All Cops Are Bastards,* a classic counter culture, anarchist slogan. A disco ball hangs in the ceiling, reflecting and refracting the colours of the fairy lights, and shining garlands on the walls. The ticket office right next to the entrance is decorated with sun-flower print parasol, the table itself inhabited by an army of tiny Hello Kitty figurines.

> My contact at the event soon greets me, he's dressed in a leopard print top and matching hat with cat ears. Throughout the evening, I see many people either dressed as animals (entrance is free if you dress up!) or sporting some cute-themed outfit. This early in the evening, only a few people are mingling around. The mood is relaxed, yet filled with anticipation. Staff rush about, finishing the last preparations, and seeing to the bar.

> On the next level, there's a small box-like balcony, with a view over the dance floor. The Hello Kitty theme continues here on cheery garlands. The top floor is a smaller closed off bar area. This space is decidedly cosy. The dark green walls are again decorated with fairy lights, Hello Kitties, plastic flowers and pictures of fluffy animals. On the far wall, a projector shows cute YouTube videos. Nyan cat, with her trailing rainbow tail flies over the screen. In the adjoining room, there's a basic karaoke set up, for anyone who wants to sing.

> A feminist punk band starts off the evening, playing fast and aggressive songs. The audience nods along. I find myself wondering what this hard music has to do with cuteness. It's not very cute as far as I can tell.

> Later in the evening, the mood becomes more intense. The queue outside grows, and the dancefloor is full of people chatting and dancing. Three people dressed as animals in furry one-pieces stand out in the crowd. Three DJ sets follow the punk band, they all play fast paced electronic music, often sampling cutesy high pitched sounds. The organisers seem somewhat unsure as to what genre of music it is. One of the DJ's is described as playing "Speedcore? Breakcore? Gabber?"

> In between two sets, members of ÖFA lead a danceoke. Suffering from a cold, I look on from the balcony. The crowd moves in more or less coordinated waves. Their fanciful costumes shimmering under the disco lights. Some hang out around the bar instead, chatting animatedly. All in all, an excited, yet friendly atmosphere.

This short account of an evening at the cute party, illustrates how the cute objects open up to new space, a utopian realm as it were, separate from everyday life. At the same time, it also describes the intermingling (juxtaposition) between "softer" cute and kitsch, and "harder" stark elements, like the punk music, or the industrial feel of the building. It's a complex weave of sensorial inputs, that together creates the particular affective experience, inspiring a politically charged cute collectivity.

6.2. Cyklopen and Local Activism

These events have all taken place at a cultural centre (*kulturhus*) in Högdalen, a suburb in southern Stockholm. In the book celebrating its history, the centre is described as "an independent, socialist, self-managed cultural centre" [20] (Andersen, 2013, p. 13). It has a rather tumultuous history starting in 2003, when an abandoned building on Östermalm – the most fashionable area of inner city Stockholm—was occupied by a loosely organised group of activists and homeless individuals. The building had formerly been used by the public service TV-company, SVT and the occupiers were soon evicted. Over the next decade, a number of derelict buildings all over Stockholm[21]

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[20] "Cyklopen är ett frihetligt socialistiskt självförvaltat kulturhus, i Högdalen, Stockholm."

[21] The following buildings were occupied: SVT-huset (2003), Hammarbyhöjdens vänthall, a waiting room at the metro stop by Hammarbyhöjden (2003-2004), Albano Smide, a building on Stockholm University campus (2004-2005)(Andersen, 2013, pp. 33–40).

were occupied by the same group, now christened *Kulturmassakern*,[22] with the goal of finding a space for an independent, socialist culture centre.

After years of frustrating discussions with local authorities, the idea emerged to build their own culture centre. A plot of land close to Högdalen was allocated by the authorities. The first Cyklopen, built by volunteers, few of which were professional builders, was finished in 2007. However, it was burnt to the ground on November 29th, 2008. A new building, again planned and built by volunteers, was inaugurated on September 21, 2013.[23]

Since then, Cyklopen has become a hub for more politically slanted activism, for instance *Revolutionär Pride* (Revolutionary Pride), but has also hosted activities with a more mainstream appeal, such as markets, workshops for children (*Småklåperna*), a library, pub nights, music concerts and clubs. Cyklopen is a part of a larger movement resisting the commercialisation of public space, for instance through the privatisation of local high streets and city centres, leading to gentrification and expulsion of poor and various marginalised groups (Meijer and Hellström, 2013, pp. 48–54).

Several of the activists I interviewed for this chapter professed to being attracted to Cyklopen as a hub for resisting gentrification, especially in the immediate local area. In Högdalen, the main targets for the activists have been Citycon, the private owner of the high street, Ikano Bostad[24] (a private landlord accused of raising rents, and thus forcing low income tenants to move), and Veidekke Bostad (a Norwegian real estate

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[22] = the Culture Massacre, later renamed *Kulturkampanjen* = the Culture Campaign and then *Cyklopen* (Andersen, 2013, p. 39).

[23] According to the book about the house, 140 000 sek came from crowdfunding (Andersen, 2013, p. 98). Other funders were Artister Mot Nazister (Andersen, 2013, p. 94). Interestingly, while it pits itself against authorities and establishment, a significant share of the centre's funding (apart from crowdfunding and fundraisers) comes from government and private funds. Among these are Kronprinsessan Margaretas minnesfond (Crown princess Margareta's memorial fund) (Andersen, 2013, p. 67) and Arvsfonden, a fund which manages the inheritance for deceased persons without any known relatives. ("Om Arvsfonden," 2016)

[24] Indeed, an entire chapter of the book is dedicated to CityCon and its influence over the local area of Högdalen. Ikano Bostad was formerly a part of the IKEA company, but is now a separate entity, owned by the Kamprad family, and until his death, by Ingvar Kamprad ,the founder of IKEA ("About Ikano bostad," n.d.).

developer, strongly criticised for tearing down an old school in order to build expensive flats).[25]

Indeed, several of the activists I interviewed for this chapter are engaged in other local organizations. The "Cute Party" was organised as a fundraising party for Linje 19, an organization named after the local metro line, going from Hässelby Strand in the west, to Hagsätra in the south. It goes through several of Stockholm's poorer suburbs, like Rågsved, the station right after Högdalen where Cyklopen is located.[26] As described on their official website it is "a network for people and groups furthest south on the metro line 19. We live in Bandhagen, Högdalen, Rågsved and Hagsätra and work with political and social issues in the local area."[27] "Gustaf", at the time an active member of Linje 19, sees it as "a rather frustrated organisation –

> **Gustaf:** -- born out of discontent with not being taken seriously, a feeling of being steamrolled by builders and politicians as well to a certain degree… We've been working really hard [*jättemycket*] against rent increases and so on. Like Ikano Bostad for example in Hagsätra who renovates kitchens when they change the sewage pipes [*vid stambyte*] and then raise the rents by sixty-seventy percent so that people can't move back in. And this is really—we've met people who had this happen to them, and you can really see how awful it is. So that's the kind of things we worked with. On a very, on a housing block level.[xiv]

Hannes, the other male activist I interviewed, provides a succinct (and probably well-rehearsed) description of Planka.Nu's mission:

> **Ingeborg Hasselgren:** […] *can you tell me a bit about what Planka.nu is, how would you describe it?*

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[25] The building was occupied from May 23, 2015, for 25 days, during which time it was renamed Högdalens Folkets Hus, and hosted a number of activities. Finally, the school was raided by police. (By, 2015; "Efter vräkningen - Kampen fortsätter: ORT TILL ORT!," 2015).

[26] According to the official statistics of Stockholm city, in 2015, the unemployment rates (adults 18-64) were more than twice as high in Rågsved compared to Stockholm as a whole. Average income for adults in 2014 (16 and above) was 213 300 sek, compared to the Stockholm average of 340 800 sek ("Statistik om Stockholm - Områdesfakta- Rågsved," n.d.).

[27] "Linje 19 ett nätverk för människor och grupper längst söderut på tunnelbanans linje 19. Vi bor i Bandhagen, Högdalen, Rågsved och Hagsätra och jobbar med politiska och sociala frågor i området." ("Vad är linje 19?," n.d.)

> **Hannes:** we are an organisation working for a free of charge, tax funded [*skattefinansierad*] public transport system. We started a little more than thirteen years ago, [we] started in August 2001. Our big thing is P-kassan [*Planka*[28]-*kassan*] which is an insurance [*försäkringsverksamhet*] if you don't [want to] pay for your tickets, you can become a member for one hundred bucks [Swedish kronor], and we'll pay your fines if [inaudible, static] ticket inspectors. And then we use the surplus from P-kassan to lobby [*bedriva opinionsarbete*] for free public transport.[xv]

The third organiser, Olivia, is also a member of the socialist activist group *Allt Åt Alla* (= "Everything for Everybody"), and the national feminist network *Feminism Underifrån* (= "Feminism from Below"). All four organisations might be defined as parts of "*utomparlamentariska vänstern*,"(the extra-parliamentary left), that is, independent leftist organisations, and lobby groups that are not standing for election to the parliament. By their political opponents, and some parts of mainstream media, they have also been called "*extremvänstern*" (the extreme left)[29] or the autonomous left by the Security Service, SÄPO (Nationellt centrum för terrorhotbedömning, 2016). Hannes personally only uses "*extremvänstern*" ironically, and thinks that *utomparliamentarisk,* might be the most accurate way to describe this plethora of organisations.[xvi]

The second event I attended was a separatist feminist pub night called Unicorner. Started in the fall of 2015, it has since then arranged handful of events at Cyklopen, such as parties, pub nights and film screenings. It is arranged by Olivia and 5-6 other women who are either active members of Cyklopen, or take part in many of their events. I attended the second Unicorner event in 2015, called "All Catunicorns are Beautiful" on December 10, 2015. This second event was a much smaller affair than both the Cute Party, and the first Unicorner event [30] with about 15 attendees. This lower number was – according to the organisers – probably due to a combination of circumstances, because of the bad weather, people being busy with work and

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[28] *Att planka* is a slang expression that means to gate crash or to travel without a ticket.

[29] See for examples these article from three large, mainstream news sites, svt.se (Public Service television) (Lodenius, 2014), the newspapers *Svenska Dagbladet* (Arpi, 2014) and *Aftonbladet* (Franchell, 2016)*.*

[30] The organisers estimated the number of attendees at the Cute Party to several hundreds, and at the first Unicorner to about 150.

assessments at the end of term, and the general phenomenon that the second event usually attracts less people than the opening night.

Overall, the activists I interviewed, were all in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties. The youngest was born in 1991, and the oldest in 1979.

6.3. Utopias

Utopia, is a key concept for understanding the political power of the cute. This is primarily due to its affective qualities, creating an emotional impetus for imagining alternative worlds and spaces, and perhaps working towards making them real. Of course, the urge to create a space like Cyklopen could itself be seen as a utopian project, as it strives towards a fairer, equal world. Or, as the book about the centre puts it: "Cyklopen wants to be a glimpse of something better. And [is] a part of the global movement that is fighting to make the vision of a better world happen." (Andersen, 2013, p. 13).[31]

Utopia, as a concept, originates with Thomas More in his 1516 satirical exploration of the perfect society, in the imaginary island nation of Utopia. As Ruth Levitas notes, Utopia is a Latin play on words, possibly referring to either *eutopia* "the good place", or *outopia*, "no place" (2011, pp. 2–3). Levitas herself employs a rather loose definition of utopia, which I find useful in relation to the cute. Simply put, it is the "expression of the desire for a better way of being". In this way, the utopian can encompass both more objective aspects, e.g. institutional features, as well as subjective experiences (Levitas, 2011, p. 9). The way these activists engage with the cute, points both towards an experiential understanding of cute utopianism (i.e. the soft, "kind" feeling achieved by interacting with the cute, or performing cuteness) and a more institutional focus (i.e. using the cute to attract followers, secure funding, and/or gain political momentum in order to create a new society). Put differently, it can both show how a new world should be organised, and, crucially, what would it feel like. Importantly, utopia does not

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[31] "Cyklopen vill vara en liten skymt av någonting bättre. Och en del av den globala rörelse som kämpar för att göra visionen om en annan värld till verklighet." (Andersen, 2013).

need to be particularly realistic or practically possible. It only has to *appear* that way to a significant degree in order to inspire political action (Levitas, 2011, p. 221).

Muñoz in turn, understands the concept of utopia as a fundamentally queer phenomenon, as it describes a reality away from the present, which is predominantly toxic for queers and other non-majoritarian subjects, especially non-whites. However, Muñoz (as Levitas) does not equal utopianism with pure escapism. Rather, it is a way of handling the hostility of the present, to use it as an impetus for change (Muñoz, 2009, p. 27). In Muñoz's version then, queer utopianism is radically performative, a way of experiencing, or staging the feeling of a better future in this moment. Jill Dolan has suggested that performative acts can function as rehearsals for future civic engagement, a precursor to actual revolution, so to speak (Dolan, 2005, p. 7). As it lifts up the participants in short moments of hope, the performance is part of the *process* of utopia. Though Dolan admits that the utopian performance might not necessarily change the world in itself, it would change the *people* engaged in the feeling (Dolan, 2005, p. 19). That could in turn lead to political action.

6.4. (Anti)authority Cute

> All cute animals are kind to each other. Macho attitudes, sexism, and racism do not belong at Cyklopen![32]
>
> Don't forget that the cutest kittens hate macho attitudes, sexism and racism. Kisses![33]
>
> *Posts on the Cute Party's Facebook event.*

In interviews, it was hard to get the activists to define what cuteness is. Mostly, their answers tended to vague, and fairly generic examples of kittens and "pink things". However, when you look closer at the way the activists stage cuteness on site, they

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[32] "Alla gulliga djur är snälla mot varandra. Machoattityd, sexism och rasism hör inte hemma på Cyklopen!"

[33] "Glöm inte att de allra gulligaste kattungarna hatar machoattityd, sexism och rasism. Puss!"

express a very multisensorial understanding of the concept:

> ***Ingeborg Hasselgren***: *[…] what is cuteness to you?*
>
> **Hannes**: wow, that's a hard question. We've all grown up with Internet memes, that's something we've worked with a lot in Planka as well as a way of being popular, and like just using Internet memes and play along with things like that making your own versions of it, we've noticed that people really appreciate that. But what is cuteness, probably cats most of all. And pink things.
>
> **IH**: *so cats and pink things?*
>
> **H**: yes.
>
> **IH**: *Do they have anything in common?*
>
> **H**: naa.. No, I don't think so. But I'm thinking mostly of the poster [of the event] which is ehm… there's like a pink sun – a sunset, and Cyklopen [the building], and cats jumping around and that sort of things. I don't think people understood that there was a lot of inside jokes on the poster, or for people who spend a lot of time online. […] I think it was mostly me who appreciated the poster. Not many people saw all the little details, anyways, I had fun making it.
>
> **IH**:*[…] but how did you work, I mean at the actual party, how did you work with cute things at the venue?*
>
> **H**: well, partly we had a lot of decorations, with balloons, soap bubbles, and what the hell are they called, things you, like card board characters, Hello Kitty the like, we had the big double rainbow over, over the dance floor. Like the slushie machine… But also the danceoke we had, you try to do things that are inviting, so you have to join in, like the karaoke-room we had, we didn't have a mike and people didn't have to sign up and choose their own song, like they usually do, but it was just random songs and it was just some sort of, community creating atmosphere [*gemenskapande stämning*].[xvii]

Cuteness here, seems to entail both cute character from pop culture (Hello Kitty), Internet culture (Double Rainbow,[34] cute kittens and baby animals),

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[34] Double Rainbow (or "Yosemitebear Mountain Giant Double Rainbow 1-8-10" as it is actually called) is a YouTube video that went viral in 2010, after being featured on the Jimmy Kimmel show. The video was made by user Hungrybear9562, and shows a double rainbow caught on film in Yosemite National Park, to the sound of the user's excited expressions of awe (possibly made under the influence). The video also inspired a song by user schmoyoho (also known for Auto-Tune the News), where the words in the video are autotuned and set to a pop tune. (*DOUBLE RAINBOW SONG!! (now on iTunes)*, 2010; "Double Rainbow," n.d.*; Yosemitebear Mountain Double Rainbow 1-8-10*, 2010)

drinks (slushies[35]), and ephemeral decorations (balloons, soap bubbles). I would suggest that all these elements work in concert to create a safe, utopian feeling. Notable too, is the emphasis put on collective activities, primarily music and dancing.

> The atmosphere created as Unicorner, was characterised by an intimate, and cosy feeling. Rather than making use of the large dance floor, it was set in the walled off bar area on the top floor. I climb the stairs, trying hard to ignore the vertigo threatening to overcome me. The stairs are made out of some metal, a meshlike structure that allows you to see the floors below as you climb. I open the door, it's quite toasty in there, especially compared to the December cold in the stage area. A group of women (maybe 7?) most of whom seem to be in their twenties and thirties, sit around a table next to the door, they greet me. I say hey, and explain that I'm the researcher. I spot "Olivia", and come around the table to talk to her. She's wearing a black top and a dark skirt with a unicorn pattern. The unicorns are light purple, pink and orange coloured.
>
> The decorations are largely based around sparkles, rainbows (with the colour scheme emphasizing pink and purple), ponies and cats. The dark green walls are decorated with colourful banners. A pink one depicts a minimalistic cat with a unicorn horn. The text reads "All Catunicorns Are Beautiful". The cat itself bears the acronym A.C.A.B. The other banner, decorated with a stylised unicorn head, says "UNICORNER". The head is made up of a rainbow of sparkly sequins.
>
> The tables scattered around the room each have a centrepiece with a unicorn, either a plastic pony, or one made of porcelain with gold accents. There are two plush purple and pink unicorns sitting on the bar. They look a bit like they're guarding the suggestion box next to them. The box itself is also purple and sparkly, with a picture of a kitten. There's a "wishing well" placed on a table next to the bar. It encourages us to wish for something, for instance a song to be played. Several drops of crystals hang from the ceiling reflecting the light and sparkling subtly.

The main advantage of using the cute at these types of events, seems to be its, as Hannes put it "community creating" properties, the way that the cute seems to draw out a sense of playful togetherness (Dale, 2017, p. 25; Sherman and Haidt, 2011, p. 248). To further emphasise this feeling, the organisers also planned activities that would invite people to play together in a less socially demanding way. The Cute Party had a karaoke machine that anyone could use without signing up, and also invited the members of ÖFA to lead a Danceoke. Unicorner in a similar vein, arranged a communal

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[35] A sickly sweet soft drink mixed with crushed ice.

karaoke, where everyone could sing together at the same time. While very much a syneasthetic experience, music took centre stage at Cyklopen, as can be seen in this extract from my field notes at Unicorner:

> Until now, one of the women behind the bar has been DJ-ing from a laptop. It's mostly been 90s pop hits: Madonna, Leila K, the kinds that everyone can sing along to. Now it's time for some karaoke. People seem to hesitate to go first. Three women (at least one of them is an organiser) gets started with a pop song in Swedish, everyone knows the chorus and sing along. There's something weird going on with the sound system though, so half-way through the songs the volume goes down and you can hear people singing a bit too well. Everyone cheers and claps enthusiastically when the song ends.
>
> Later on I sing a song solo, Roxette's *The Look*. It's very hard to sing it, though I've heard it a hundred times, and know the words, because the key is so low. Though I'm not doing the best job, people cheer me on. I'm grateful, though I love karaoke, and any kind of singing really, I was a bit nervous. I don't really know everyone here, though I've interviewed "Olivia" at a previous occasion.
>
> Others take over after me, most of them sing hits that everyone can sing along with like *Survivor*, *Thorn in my side*.

In this excerpt, the communal singing is used to create a supportive, non-judging atmosphere, where it's fine to be silly, stupid and "make a fool out of yourself". Even I, as a virtual outsider, felt welcome to take part, to play as it were, with the others.

In this way, the cute events at Cyklopen represent a type of contemporary carnivalesque. As Mikail Bakhtin writes, the festivities of the medieval carnival represented a temporary suspension of ordinary rules and norms, hierarchies and privileges, living in a freer space (1984, pp. 7–10). Importantly, the carnival is not divided into performers and audience, though, clearly some people are playing music, while others are dancing, and still others are manning the bar. It is not, then, a spectacle to be viewed from the outside, but an "idea that embraces all the people", in which everyone can partake, though perhaps, in different roles (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 7). While certain attendees prefer to hold back, and not dance in the danceoke, they are still experiencing, and creating, the communal feeling. In Bakhtin's words: "While carnival lasts, there is no life outside it." (1984, p. 7). For the brief time of the Cute

Party, or Unicorner's pub nights, the crowd enters a "sphere of utopian freedom" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 89) where one can explore a more kinder way of being.

Along with the community creating use of the cute, the three Cute Party organisers I interviewed, Olivia, Hannes and Gustaf, suggested another crucial reason for making the fundraiser a *cute* fundraiser.

> **Ingeborg Hasselgren**: *But why did you end up with a cute theme this time?*
>
> **Hannes**: ehm, well partly because we who organised it, me, [Gustaf] and [Olivia], we all like cute things, but it also started a bit like a joke, but also a bit serious. Some parties have been sort of rowdy in a not very pleasant way [*ett ganska tråkigt sätt*] because of a gang of macho blokes who no-one can really control, though they're not very many. I went to a Cyklopen party when they were away [IH laughs], and it was a damn nice party, and oh yeah, that was because they weren't there! So we have to have some theme at this party that's really uncool [*töntigt*] so that people won't come and be – sort of aggressive. Some sort of nice theme that will make you happy, and if you're a troublemaker you just think it's silly [*löjligt*].
> So we were thinking, should we have like peace signs and so on, but that just felt a bit shabby [*sunkigt*], so then it was cute kittens and so on. It was something that felt both funny and sort of... [silence] and people – I mean people getting aggressive at parties is hardly something unique for a party at Cyklopen or anything. [xviii]

In this account, cuteness is employed as a repellent, scaring off the "macho" elements, the troublemakers and fighters. Obviously this thinking is not entirely new. In her 2011 book *Rosa – den farliga färgen* (=*Pink – the Dangerous Colour*) Ambjörnsson describes how the colour pink, which has decidedly cute connotations, can be perceived as a threat to the privileges of heterosexual men (2011, p. 132). She takes the examples of Thai police officers who were forced to wear pink Hello Kitty bracelets as a humiliating punishment, and also shows how pink was used to mark out "female parking spaces" in Bern, Switzerland, in order to prevent male car drivers to park on them (Ambjörnsson, 2011, pp. 132–133). This usage of the pink pivots on a perceived abject quality of the pink, and in extension, of the female, and effeminate. It appears, in Ambjörnsson's view, that pink can be *contagious* in this way, and therefore has to be avoided by all means necessary in order to keep one's masculine privileges (2011, p.

132). Similarly, the cute can function as the ultimate destroyer of hegemonic masculinity, effectively negating (or at least threatening to) undo all the efforts of upholding this particular masculine performance.

This might be why, in the case of the fundraiser, cute functioned as a type of crowd control, setting a calmer, kinder mood. Olivia, who also organised the Unicorner event, described the cute theme as more "respectful".

> **Ingeborg Hasselgren**: *could it be [a way] to get rid of macho attitudes?*
>
> **Olivia**: yeah, I think so [silence] that's sort what we were thinking.
>
> **IH:** *what were you thinking?*
>
> **O**: Well it was like, those bloody macho [people] might not go to a party where you're supposed to dress up as something cute, like cats and unicorns. Or at least, if you have that theme it sort of sets a standard, like this is how it should be.
>
> **IH***: is that usually a problem, people being macho?*
>
> **O**: I think so, especially at a party with alcohol it can become pretty macho.[xix]

In a sense, this could be a variant of Brian McVeigh's (2000) concept of authority cute. This describes instances where individuals or institutions of power use cute imagery or performances to appear less intimidating and threatening. This in turn makes it easier to influence and control subordinates. However, McVeigh's analysis tends towards the same suspicion of manipulation from the cute, and is dependent on a hierarchy of cute, as a relationship between masters and servants: "Being cute toward those above is often a way of obtaining favors and attention, while displaying cuteness to one's subordinates is a method of appearing non-threatening, thereby gaining their confidence, and perhaps more cynically, control over them"(2000). In contrast, the activists at Cyklopen seem to regard the cute as an *equalizing factor.* As Olivia puts it above, it "sets a standard" for a more kind and caring behaviour. If everyone were cute, there would be no hierarchies. This particular use of cuteness, then, lends itself to political anarchism. Both in the sense of it counteracting and resisting authority as a

dominating force, and in the way it facilitates the voluntary cooperation between subjects (Davies, 2018, pp. 64–65).

The organisers seem to have used the cute consciously as a "community creating" tool. Gustaf describes the difference in the mood between an ordinary political fundraiser and the cute party:

> **IH:** *but how come you had a cute theme this time?*
>
> **Gustaf**: Well. The main reason was actually, we were talking, and the other two main organisers you could say, [we were] talking about May Day [*första maj*] the same year, the May Day party at Cyklopen, it was so nice with a great atmosphere and everyone was sort of… excited [*uppeldade*] because it was May Day like in a very comradery and nice way, it wasn't… and we started talking, why was it so nice that time, what was extra except it being May Day, because we've been to other political parties [*politiska fester*] which hasn't had this feeling. And then we realised that, oh yeah, there's this Nazi demonstration in Jönköping [IH laughs] so all the militant antifascist went there, so we got rid of them! [both laugh].[36]
>
> So there wasn't a lot of, well they, I guess they do have a function, but they are often very macho and annoying [*jobbiga*] to deal with, and that's always, it's often, I shouldn't say always, but it happens that there's this uncomfortable atmosphere, even fighting sometimes, mostly between them. ˣˣ
>
> **IH:** *you mean internally?*
>
> **G**: yeah.
>
> **IH**: *in like AFA [Antifascistisk Aktion] or whoever they are*
>
> **G:** yeah and RF [*Revolutionära Fronten*] erm, so it was very nice not having to deal with them so we started talking about, "okay so how should we do it, should we have the party when there's some Nazi demo somewhere?" [both laugh] but we couldn't really do that, we couldn't really plan for that.
>
> **IH**: *no, it would be a bit hard to keep track of their – [laughs]*
>
> **G**: exactly. Er, so instead we thought about other ways of not making them keen on coming, and that would guarantee a nice mood so we went with a supercute theme instead. So it was like a strategy.

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[36] Physical confrontations with Neo-Nazis is a common tactic by left wing anarchists, also outside of Sweden. (Williams, 2018, p. 117)

> **IH**: *you said it was a strategy. To, sort of get a nice mood or to… Why did you think that they wouldn't come?*
>
> **G**: Because they are too cool [*tuffa*]. And if they still came, then maybe they would be affected positively by the mood and the setting [*inramningen*].
>
> **IH**: *do you think that's how it works, that people sort of calm down when they see cu—*
>
> **G**: yeah, I think so, we had pictures of cute kittens everywhere, and it's hard to be really hotheaded [*hetsig*] [both laugh] when they [inaudible] and rainbows, there's was a lot of that stuff.
>
> **IH**: *Why do you think that is? Is it because it's so silly or because it's…*
>
> **G**: well, it's the supercute thing it's silly and childish in a way, it's sort of infantile. Ehm, but it I think it also draws out a cute side in people, which is a contrast to the macho thing so to say. It's been eeehm at other political parties, it can be a fundraiser for someone in prison, and that's, I mean that's commendable [*behjärtansvärt*], but then the theme is completely different, and it easily creates a harsher, tougher mood.

Gustaf's last comment here that the super cute "draws out a cute side in people" recalls Sherman and Haidt's understanding of the cuteness response as inspiring a *playful response*. Rather than triggering a parental instinct à la Konrad Lorenz, it instead allows us to recognise the social value in children. Cuteness humanises and "mentalises" the individual (human and non-human) or the object, and thus makes them part of a "moral circle" i.e. includes them in an "us" with shared affinity, kinship and compassion. In other words, the cute prompts us to *see* the Other as a subject, and, crucially, to engage with eachother (Sherman and Haidt, 2011, pp. 248–250). As a political model, the cute in this form can be understood as radically democratic practice, as it allows "weaker" participants a place in the discussion, preventing others to talk over them, and instead engage in an empathetic listening. Part of this equalizing power, could be facilitated by the fact that these carnivalesque spaces exists outside of normal time and normal society. Just as it marks a disruption of the dichotomy of spectator/performer, it also suspends hierarchies, privileges, norms and prohibitions (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10).

While the cute's ability to facilitate collectivity and strengthen empathetic relations makes it helpful for rallying the troops, it can also make it appear overly affective, or

even threatening. Sofie, the Unicorner organiser, describes her ambivalence towards the enthusiasm for the cute within the queer movement:

> **Sofie:** […] In the beginning, I had a hard time accepting this happy go lucky thing that came with the queer movement. Like all the nice, all the happy, it was really hard for me to accept, because I didn't think everything is all that great or cute or funny, I'm not sure how to explain it, but as a person, I do like it when things are cosy or cute. But in larger settings, in larger rooms… like when becomes like a mass psychosis over how fun something is, that thing, how happy we are together, I've always found that hard, I've always had to be contrary, like "well, this is bad, and think about this", you know, I always remark on all the bad things, but with Unicorner it's… it's been a place [where] we wanted to create a cosy and happy and maybe even a cute space… but it's nothing obvious to me. [xxi]

Too much togetherness can be problematic as it tends to form a repressive normativity, albeit an alternative one. I believe that Sofie's comment here also displays a healthy wariness of cuteness being used as a type of "toxic positivity", one where all negativity, critical thought, or warning signs are ignored in favour of an all-encompassing cult of the positive (Halberstam, 2011, pp. 3–4).

6.5. Cute Separatism

Separatist practices have played an crucial part in feminist and lesbian activism since at least 2nd wave radical feminism of the 1960's. Separatism from men is both intended to construe a safe space away from the violence of patriarchal society, and as a place to empower, to rally and fight back (Browne, 2010; Weedon, 1999, pp. 35–37, 64-66, 92-93). All in all, ambitions with distinctly utopian properties. However, while separatism (to different degrees) has been a common practice in various feminist traditions marking out its boundaries has seldom been straightforward in practice. Especially when it comes to the issue of whether or not transwomen should be included in feminist separatism. The latter has been the focus of intense conflict and debate in certain feminist circles, at least from the late 1970s, but continues to this day (Earles, 2019; Smythe, 2018; Weedon, 1999, p. 74). Partly, this may be understood as a

generational conflict, between lesbian radical (cultural) feminism[37] and (postmodern) queer feminist alliances, though this is in no way a universal explanation[38] (Browne, 2010, p. 253).

In most contemporary left-wing projects in Sweden, it appears that trans-inclusion is the politically correct choice.[39] Still, the separatism at the Unicorner events, came with its own complications. Like the Cute Party, the Unicorner event appears to have been mainly advertised through social media, especially Facebook. On the Facebook event, the organisers explained the aim of the pub night through this rather ambiguous comment: "We want to create a trans* and female separatist space at Cyklopen. A corner of the world free from CIS-men. Everyone is welcome to get involved! Love!". The event also had a clarification written in Caps Lock: "EVERYONE WHO IDENTIFIES AS WOMAN AND/OR TRANS* IS WELCOME."[40]

Despite this, some confusion and discussion emerged over the terminology. It did avoid the trap of excluding transwomen on account of them not being considered "real" women, but prospective attendees still wondered who the event was supposed to invite. Were only trans*women* allowed? Was it demeaning to transmen to include them in the event, i.e. as it meant not regarding them as "real" men?

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[37] These are often branded with the acronym "TERF" – Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist, by their opponents (Smythe, 2018)

[38] As Weedon notes, "It is only since the arrival of queer theory that that increasing numbers of feminists have ceased to view transsexuality, transgender practices and bisexuality as betrayals of both feminism and lesbianism."(Weedon, 1999, p. 74) An notorious example of a negative, one might say downright transphobic attitude towards transwomen is Janice Raymond's the *Transsexual Empire: the Making of the Shemale* (1979).

[39] For instance, the 2018 Statement Festival created as a protest against sexual assault at other music festivals, was originally conceptualized as a *mansfri* – "man free" – festival (Adelai, 2017), but it also invited "non-binaries and transgender" to attend ("About Statement," n.d.).

[40]"ALLA SOM IDENTIFIERAR SIG SOM KVINNA OCH/ELLER TRANS* ÄR VÄLKOMMEN [sic]." The event also linked to a site that explains trans identities and issues. http://www.transformering.se/vad-ar-trans (RFSL, 2016)

As Sofie commented:

> […] on Facebook people questioned why trans men should be allowed to come. Because trans men are men just as much as other men. And many people who identify as women, or rather some people said then that I don't feel safe with trans men close by, like "a man is a man". And the second thing was "you write that cis men can't come, but a trans man can be just as much a cis man" like, it was transphobic to say that cis men aren't welcome, but that trans men are welcome.

> […] we wanted to create a space for trans people, persons with trans experience [*transerfarenhet*]. In this feeling, there [was a] need to unite and create a safe space, because there are hardly any safe spaces for women, let alone, and indirectly, […] there are hardly any safe spaces for people with a trans experience. And it was natural for us to include people with trans experience. [xxii]

This situation represents a near reversal of trans-excluding separatism, where trans-women are made out to be "men in dresses", and their participation in women only spaces considered suspect. Here, not only are trans*women* welcome, and offered a safe space, any transperson is also invited. However, some prospective attendees seem wary of the prospect of transmen appearing on site. Partly, this rationalised as a wish to respect transmen as real men, and that *including* them would be an act of transphobia. But there also seems to be an underlining concern of upholding the gender binary in these critical comments, a need to place people securely in the category of "man" or "woman."

6.5.1. Negotiating Safe Spaces

The intention to create a safe space for women and queers was also controversial with the rest of Cyklopen, perhaps due to the group's focus on the image of the "cis-man" as the object of exclusion. Sofie describes how the idea of Unicorner was met with resistance within the culture centre:

> **Sofie:** […] I got involved pretty late, everything happened pretty fast. I think some people in the group had been talking about it for a while because Cyklopen is pretty male dominated, a very male dominated place. Er, it's a very good place, and we do sympathise with it in general – […] many of the members of Unicorner, or all of us, have spent alot of time at Cyklopen, like [Cecilia] she's part of Cyklopen's board [*styrelse*] ["E"] has been part of it, and ["C"] organises a brunch there, a vegan brunch, like everyone has a connection to Cyklopen

somehow, and we felt that we needed a room at Cyklopen for – ehm without cis-men. It tends to be very like… macho left… youth club so to say. And people had been talking about having a pub night just for girls [*tjejer*], or persons who identify as women, […] I mean persons who identify as women or trans […] and we finally got it through [the board], many in Cyklopen […] didn't think it was necessary.

IH: *no?*

Sofie: Like I said, the type of blokes [*killar*] who went like […] "I don't understand why it should be separatist, why can't we have it together?" I guess it's the classic case of you as an oppressor can't understand the oppression, or what's going on. But we finally got it through, I personally wasn't at these meetings but someone got it through thanks to other people agreeing with us [*andra som faktiskt tyckte att det var såhär*]…

IH: *but you still had to get it through the board?*

S: yes, absolutely.[…] [xxiii]

Cecilia who is also a member of Cyklopen's board describes how her feminist projects, like Unicorner, comes from a frustration with the lack of attention and credit given to women and queers in the movement.[41]

Cecilia: […] what I'm working on right now, these feminist projects, comes from some sort of frustration with the left wing movement [*vänsterrörelsen*], the lack of a feminist and LGBTQ [*HBTQ*] perspective sometimes.

Ingeborg Hasselgren: *How is that lack expressed?*

Cecilia: well, I guess it's to do with this strange – maybe norms about whose work is seen and prioritised in different ways, especially in the radical leftist movement, there can sometimes be this macho jargon, or whatever you should call it. Not very [inaudible] mostly it's – what [type of] people get attention, like the important people are AFA [*Antifascistisk Aktion*] and the people throwing cobblestone at the police […] that creates a macho ideal, and the boring jobs are done by women [inaudible] like in the rest of the world. [xxiv]

The goal of Unicorner appears to be multiple: attracting more women and queers to Cyklopen, breaking the dominance of heterosexual cis-men, and creating a safe space,

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[41] Cecilia also started a queer feminist separatist graffiti group, *Juntan* (the Junta), at Cyklopen. *Junta* can both refer to *militärjunta,* like in English, the leadership in a military dictatorial regime, or *syjunta* or *stickjunta*, a sewing or knitting club, traditionally for women.

where one can relax, and so to speak, charge the batteries for continuing the fight for equality. As with the Cute Party, the Unicorner activists also identify macho men as the key problem, a demographic to be excluded or controlled through cuteness. However, the Unicorner members also identify many of their fellow male members, or macho "cis-men" of the radical left as part of the problem. This is summarised in the slogan, "*Krossa machovänstern!*" or "Crush the Macho Left". On entering Cyklopen on the night of Unicorner, I noticed a large, pink banner with the slogan. According to Sofie, the Unicorner members made it and put it there. However, it had been taken down repeatedly by other people at Cyklopen. Sofie speculated that this might be because the message "upset people" ("*det sticker i ögonen på folk*").

 In her work on radical queer and feminist activists in Gothenburg, Cathrin Wasshede describes a similar attitude towards feminists and feminism among anarchist men. As the class struggle was considered the most urgent issue to address, feminism was relegated to background, and often viewed as an expression of anxious political correctness, and most importantly, as having *nothing to do with socialism* (Wasshede, 2010, p. 244). Women's position within socialist and Marxist circles have always been a precarious one (Isaksson, 2007, pp. 117–121).[42] Still, the activists tend to avoid an outright denouncement of all leftist, or even militant anarchist men, claiming that they still have a place in the movement. For instance, in this comment by Olivia:

> **Olivia**: I also think that in general, leftist blokes can be pretty macho
>
> **Ingeborg Hasselgren:** *what is it they do, or how can you tell?*
>
> […]
>
> **Olivia**: Well, maybe not manly but this – what we were thinking about was this pretty violent segment, many of these extreme groups are pretty violent and, I'm not rejecting them, but it can be annoying. Sometimes when they throw their own parties, it can have a macho atmosphere, men who want to be manly, who want to be strong and tough, and I don't know, had fights with Nazis or the police, like that feeling, it's a harder climate[xxv]

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[42] The exclusion of female perspectives and women's rights prompted women to create their own, separatist activist groups, for instance Grupp 8 during the 1970s (Isaksson, 2007, pp. 117–121).

Wasshede describes similar caveats from informants in her study who, while labelling some leftist men as sexist, still considered them to be "better than men outside the movement" (2010, p. 243).[43] As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Cyklopen itself can be seen as a utopian project. In practice, this utopian drive is expressed in ways that are both contradictory and quite contentious. The resistance the separatist group originally met from the rest of Cyklopen, can be understood as a clash between different utopian visions.

The role that feminism and queer activism should play in practice at the centre is discussed by Ivar Marx (possibly a pseudonym) in the book about Cyklopen (2013). During the building process of the second house, the group, to its dismay, realised that it failed to live up to their ideals of an equal work place. Still, Marx holds that it was probably "the most equal building site in Sweden" (2013, p. 115). Marx further describes how the issues with equality came down to a blinding "*moralpanik*" or "moral panic" an anxious self-questioning over reaction, and the result of wanting to create a "perfect culture" within the project. His solution appeared to have been to find "constructive solutions" and to "have realistic goals". All very well, but who has the power to decide what goals are realist? And what are you prepared to sacrifice to make that happen? The text ends with this query: "One question to ponder is whether we should try to create a perfect island, if that's even possible in an imperfect world? Or should we try to make the world better?"[44] (Andersen, 2013, p. 115).

The rather dismissive tone of the text, echoes the criticism from the female activists and brings us back to Levitas (2011, p. 4), who notes that people are often quick to denounce the projects or ideas of others as "utopian", as a way of strengthening the case for one's own vision of the future. This is a fundamental part of the political process (Levitas, 2011, p. 4).

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[43] "En del män i rörelsen beskrivs som sexistiska, vilket leder till differentiering av vi:et. Det framhålls dock att de är bättre än män utanför rörelsen." (Wasshede, 2010, p. 243).

[44] "En fråga värd att fundera över är om vi ska försöka skapa en perfekt ö, om det ens e möjligt i en imperfekt värld? Eller ska vi försöka göra världen bättre?" (Andersen, 2013, p. 115)

6.6. Unicorns and Cybertwee: creating a wish landscape

Unicorns are perhaps one of the more "utopian" symbols in Western and middle Eastern imagery.[45] Originally deemed a real creature, the unicorn has become a peculiar "non-creature", a symbol of the unobtainable, a perfection so rare it does not exist. In the world of venture capitalists it refers to a (overvalued) start up tech company, a thing too good to be true (Investopedia, 2015). A recurring character in medieval legends, and a popular topic for the scholars of antiquity, they have now become a staple in popular culture. Or as Chris Lavers puts it in his *Natural History of the Unicorn*:

> If you have read your children to sleep or dallied with New Age mysticism your unicorn is most likely a soft-focus, airbrushed, magical beast, perhaps with a crystal about its person.
>
> (Lavers, 2009, xiii)

They appear as characters in fairy tales and children's books, movies and TV-series, and of course as toys based on the same. In addition, unicorns, though to a lesser degree than perhaps cats, have a strong presence on kitschy online environments. For instance in such classic examples as the 2006 short *Charlie the Unicorn,* an icon of early YouTube culture, or *Robot Unicorn Attack,* a game on the Adult Swim channel website from 2010. Unicorns have also been dominating certain aspects of fan culture, starting with the exceptional success of Hasbro's re-launch of the *My Little Pony*-franchise in the early 2010s, inspiring a plethora of pony and unicorn themed fan art.

Both Sofie and Cecilia emphasised the queer quality of the unicorn, though neither of them could explain, or give a clear example of how or why, the unicorn could be considered queer. Sofie described the name choice with the following anecdote:

> **Ingeborg Hasselgren:** *why did you chose this unicorn theme?*
>
> **Sofie:** well we sat and tried to decide on a name for a very long time. And then someone jokingly said Unicorn, like "haha" because unicorn has really become such over.. it's shown – you see unicorns

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[45] Various version of the Unicorn have existed since antiquity, in both Roman, Greek, Islamic, Persian, Chinese and Indian sources. See (Caillois and Walker, 1982; Lavers, 2009; Shepard, 1982; Suhr, 1964).

everywhere especially when it's about queer things. Like in that movement, everyone loves unicorns, and like "yeah, unicorners! Unitedcorners!" so it stands for Unitedcorner [laughs]

IH: *so it's like you stand united?*

Sofie: exactly, like we stand united. And so it became Unicorner, and in the beginning we were going to have different names [?] for every pub night, with some iconic person that we look up to, but straight away it just became too much to change the name every time, so we stuck with Unicorner.[xxvi]

In sexual slang, the unicorn usually denotes a bisexual woman who joins a heterosexual couple in a threesome or a polyamorous relationship (Joreth, 2010). Again this is a reference to the rarity, or the impossibility of finding this coveted person. Some bisexual activists, however, has criticised this usage of unicorn as an act of "bi-erasure" the way that bisexual identities, and bisexual identities, are ignored and made invisible both by mainstream society and by LGBTI+ communities (Bellamy, 2016). However, in an act of reclaiming the name, the unicorn has also been used as an eye catching symbol for bisexual (or pansexual) pride, for instance on T-shirts ("Bisexual Pride Flag Gay Pride Awareness Unicorn Sweatshirt," n.d.; "'Pride Unicorn - Bisexual' Classic T-Shirt by nationalpride," n.d.).

Still, I think it is the very impossibility of the unicorn, that makes it so useful in this case. The unicorn both connotes a camp, and kitschy imagery, an excess of colour and glitter, and, simultaneously, works as a blank canvas. Since it does not actually exist, it can be made to symbolise virtually anything. Similar to how Svetlana Boym describes the now extinct dinosaur, the unicorn has become a "toy of international kitsch, virtually indestructible, flexible, made of the progressive substance of the future."(2002, p. 37). Returning to the activist's comment above, the unicorn is also useful because it is *not* a white, straight male.

One should not underestimate the influence that fashion has on the activists' choice. No longer delegated to the children's room, unicorns can now be seen clothes and other fashion items such as mobile phone cases, intended for (young) adults. For instance, Wildthing.com, a site that sells "festival fashion" for discerning twenty-

something festival goers, has an entire section on their site dedicated to Unicorns ("Unicorn Shop," n.d.). In fact, in my room I now have a large poster in shades of pink, orange and purple. It depicts a white unicorn posing against an impossibly vibrant sunset and perfectly coloured rainbow. On it is written: "ALWAYS BE YOURSELF[.] UNLESS YOU CAN BE A UNICORN[,] THEN ALWAYS BE A UNICORN". Where did I buy it? At a poster sale at my university campus. Unicorns are a utopian version of oneself, one that is more fantastical, more fabulous, perhaps even more "you" than you.

As an example of this particular cute aesthetic, Sofie mentioned the photographer Arvida Byström. Her photos are characterised by a soft, pretty, aesthetic, and often depict women and men in sheer clothes, posing with sparkly mobile phones cases, and sporting pastel coloured hair in shades of pink, purple, peach and turquoise ("arvida byström (@arvidabystrom)," n.d.).

> **Ingeborg Hasselgren:** *when you say it's common in queer environments, can you give me an example?*
>
> **Sofie:** well… Not really, but maybe at parties loads of people wear unicorns on clothes or shirts, really when you're out partying and so on. This "cute stuff" […] there's a name for it, when adult women [*vuxna tjejer*] wear very like… like stuff you wore when you were little, like cute stuff, pink, glitter, this mermaid hair, like clothes. [xxvii]

Byström's aesthetic, and indeed the decorations on site at Unicorner, recalls that of the feminist Cybertwee movement. Started by three American artists and tech workers, Gabriella Hileman, May Waver, and Violet Forest. It is described as "a deconstruction of cyberpunk, coupled with a nod to 'twee' music"(Alexander, 2016). The vision of the Cybertwee movement is expressed in this way in the group's manifesto:

> The singularity is dear,
>
> far too long have we succumb to bitter edge of
>
> the idea that power is lost in the sweet and tender
>
> romantic is not weak. feminine is not weak. cute is not
>
> weak. we are fragmented and multifaceted bbs.
>
> lack of emotion is oft favored because [*ixxisxx*] success

is defined as the[*b*] ability to be mechanical and efficiant [sic]

but sentimentality, empathy, and being too soft should

not be seen as weaknesses.

("the cybertwee manifesto | ♡," n.d.)

The intentionally misspelled manifest, is then, a restatement of femme aesthetic, an affirmation of female tech skills, and a celebration of softness, femininity and empathy. Similar to how Galt (2011) acknowledges the transgressive potential of the pretty (an aesthetic closely related to both cuteness in general, and the girly in particular). Through the cute and pretty, Cybertwee functions as a way of reclaiming the dark, hard, masculine sites of technology and hacker culture, but also marks out a deviant space due to its excessiveness, it is deemed "too feminine, too effeminate, and too foreign" (Galt, 2011, p. 6).

Along with images of kittens and ponies, the décor at these events is characterised by more ephemeral and ethereal ingredients: a cascade of rainbows, coloured fairy lights, crystals, sparkles, glitter, bubbles and shiny surfaces. This intangible, reflective aesthetic, is – I believe – crucial in creating a utopian mood in the space. Muñoz sees shiny and luminous surfaces as a type of window into a different world, a different life (2009, p. 138). By seeing one's reflection in the surfaces, distorted or enhanced by "the artificial luster of painted gems" one can reimagine and perform oneself with a queer difference, and so make room for an existence that is impossible, or limited, in a straight time and place (Muñoz, 2009, p. 139).

Furthermore, the intangible, fleeting qualities blurry the space, and results in a hallucinatory, soft, no-place separate from the rest of the world: a land over the rainbow, so to speak. Rainbows were indeed prevalent at both events. A large, hand painted "double rainbow" hung over the stage area at the Cute Party and a rainbow photo booth was built for the first Unicorner event. Rainbows, obviously bring a host of associations with them: the gay pride flag, or as a symbol of the multicultural society, notably in the post-apartheid South African "rainbow nation" (Myambo, 2010, pp. 94–95). The activists are probably well aware of this political usage of the rainbow. Of all the utopian lights, the rainbow might be the most utopian. While they do

obviously exist, they are impossible to touch, and in practice, only exist as ephemera. Rainbow lights and representations help create an impossible "wish-landscape" to borrow a term from Ernst Bloch (1996). Through the use of impossible perspectives, where objects are "very closely painted", and fantastical lights in Rembrandt's paintings, the representations of the rainbow carries an "echo of a fairy-tale distant realm" (Bloch, 1996, p. 286). However, in the case of the rainbow photo booth , participants can place *themselves* in this light of hope, imagining themselves in another world.

6.6.1 Nostalgia as Resistance?

This use of cute objects also has a nostalgic edge to it. Yano, writing on Japanese *kawaii*, describes nostalgia of an idealised childhood as an important part of kawaii, as it "represents a temporary state of abnegation", a breathing space from the pressures of everyday life. Not simply a case of pure escapism, especially for women*, kawaii* can function as a safe space where one can simultaneously be the caregiver and the cared for (Yano, 2013, p. 57).

At Unicorner, the soft toys, *My Little Pony* toys, and kitschy porcelain unicorn statuettes, fulfil a key function in the construction of a queer, safe space. For me, born in 1987, these objects call up memories of playing with "pånnisar", rejoicing in their glorious pastels and neons, brushing their nylon manes and tails, the adorable expressions of the baby ponies, and the ecstatic joy when I *finally* was gifted a Pegasus pony at the age of five.

These cute objects, and surroundings help one return to a childlike state, perhaps even the singular playful mindset that Sherman and Haidt refers to (2011b, p. 248). However, this childlike state, does not have to be in line with one's *actual* childhood. It is just as much about staging the childhood of one's dreams. Boym has noted that nostalgia and its objects, function as a sideways look where "the past is remade in the image of the present or a desired future" (2002, p. 354). These childhood objects form what she calls "reflective nostalgia," a reorganisation of recollected fragments that calls to attention the very act of longing, rather than attempting to restore the past (Boym, 2002). Both Sofie and Cecilia appear to have a complex, and often contradictory

[Photo from interior of Cyklopen. Woman (?) with dark, long hair sits in a rainbow-shaped photo booth.]

Figure 19 The rainbow photo booth created for the first Unicorner event. Photo: Karoline Montero Araya.

relationship with the cute. They both return to their childhood, to explain how their view of cuteness, and importantly, their relationship to the colour pink, has changed over the years.

> **Ingeborg Hasselgren:** *What things do you yourself have childhood memories of [*en barndomsrelation till*]?*
>
> **Sofie:** I used to hate everything pink, and now I'm very, very pink myself. […] it's because when I was little, I didn't like pink when I was little […] pink always represented the girly and I hated that, because I was very, like, what you'd call tomboy. So I really hated pink, but now it's like I'm compensating for that loathing and I love pink instead. [laughs] like… stickers. I have lots of stickers on my laptop screen, which you can't see, it's cakes and things like that. [xxviii]
>
> **IH**: *[…] what is our own relationship with cute things? Do you like cuteness, or is it important to you?*
>
> **Cecilia:** Well, I think I've had a very ambivalent relationship to cuteness, but still thought a lot about it from some sort of gender perspective. But I've never liked -- I mean when I was small, I was always very tomboyish, didn't appreciate the cute and the pink, but in recent years I've reconsidered [*tänkt om*] and "re-felt" ["*känt om*"] and I think it is very interesting…
>
> […]
>
> I've had some sort of aversion to it from the beginning which I've tried to work on. I think that cuteness is so easy to bash, or the girly, […] it's so innocent in some ways. I mean there's no – it's not cool or powerful… You don't really achieve anything by liking the cute or achieving cuteness. That's my feeling, I don't really understand it. […]
>
> when I talk about the cute, I primarily mean the girly. But later on, I've reconsidered and still I think you can use the cute in some sort of feminist rhetoric, maybe because it is a world that excludes men. You know what I mean? It's something that's not for them at all, a room of your own. By doing something that others don't understand, you get that feeling of community or group, and that's important and interesting.[xxix]

Sturken, following Olaluiaga, notes how nostalgic kitsch can help us overcome trauma or loss. This type of nostalgia selects more acceptable parts, and orders them into a less intense, and more comforting memory (2007, p. 20). One interpretation of

Cecilia's and Sofie's accounts, is that overcoming one's hatred of the pink and cute, is a way of overcoming one's self-loathing, the humiliation and degradation of being born female in a misogynistic society, and instead celebrating it. Furthermore, because cuteness is so girly, "it excludes men," and in turn softens the trauma of being a woman, transgender, or non-binary. This specific reflective nostalgia then, both functions as a type of mourning of this trauma, but crucially, do.

Calling on childhood memories or symbols, even those not personally experienced, is also to call on a *queer space*. Stockton argues that children are always queer in relation to the adult, as they exist (culturally) in a pre-sexual, or rather, "not-yet-straight" stage (2009, p. 7). The past is therefore a fundamental building block in Muñoz queer utopia. The past is far from static, it is very much performative, and can be animated in a utopian fashion in the present (Muñoz, 2009, pp. 27–28).

6.7. Attractive Cuteness

These objects, whether tangible like the soft toys, and My Little Ponies placed around the room, or intangible like lights and sparkles, function as affectively "sticky objects". Ahmed has employed this term to describe the way objects, and their surrounding environment, becomes infused with certain emotions, positive or negative (Ahmed, 2010, p. 33). The nice feelings for cuteness can spill over to the fundraising goal, and onto Cyklopen as an institution and as a space. In the other direction, a shared affinity for cute objects can function as an affective focal point around which to build a sense of community. As Ahmed (2010, p. 35) explains it:

> Groups cohere around a shared orientation toward some things as being good, treating some things and not others as the cause of delight. If the same objects make us happy—or if we invest in the same objects as being what should make us happy—then we would be oriented or directed in the same way.

Generally speaking, appropriating the cute subject position, would appear unusually compatible for a political group fighting for the rights of the disenfranchised, and to achieve social and economic equality. As I have mentioned previously, in a traditional cute relationship, the cute is often cast in the role of the oppressed. Identifying with the cute, then, would place oneself on the side of the underdog and would perhaps

render one's aims as morally just. Olivia did not make this connection herself, but explained how cuteness is an attractive aesthetic for activists and prospective members of the movement.

> **Ingeborg Hasselgren:** *If I put it like this, what does cuteness have to do with class struggle? Do they have anything in common?*
>
> **Olivia**: I guess that – it doesn't really have anything do to with that, but that's why it works so good, to use that style […]. It's another way of conveying something and open people's eyes that it's not just about the hard, red star and the fist, it's like – "wow" you see a banner with unicorns which has a – what should I call it – revolutionary expression [*uttryck*] rather than the same old. So I don't really think it has anything in common, […] but it's also like, when communism comes everything will be so good, everything will be cute and fluffy, you're doing that thing where everything will be so cutesy [*gulleplutt*]"[xxx]

In a way, the cute represents a closer approximation of what the socialist utopia would be like, than the aggressive representation of the classic fist and "red star". Allt Åt Alla's unicorn banner depicts a smiling group of ponies, in the style of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic.*

The text "*Det är klassfest och du är bjuden*" means "It's a class party and you're invited!". *Klassfest* usually refers to a party with your classmates in school, but here of course, *klass* means social class, in the political sense. The cute ponies invite presumptive allies into a happy family, characterised by fun camaraderie. The cute appears to soften the impact of the political message. Miller has shown how using (cute) animals can function as a type of displacement, rendering troublesome topics safer to approach (2010, p. 69). Hannes also speculates that cuteness allows activists to not take themselves too seriously, and in extension, to help them manage the more depressing side of political activism:

[Removed image: interior from Cyklopen. Dark green walls, colourful bunting. A pink sheet with a jumping cat and the words "ALL CATUNICORNS ARE BEAUTIFUL".]

Figure 20 Interior from the Unicorner event, with the handmade banner in the theme of the night. Photo: Ingeborg Hasselgren.

[Removed image: interior from Cyklopen. A purple and sparkly suggestions box surrounded by two plush unicorns.]

Figure 23 Suggestion box at the Unicorner event. Photo: Ingeborg Hasselgren.

[Removed image: interior from Cyklopen. A whiteboard with a photo of a large hole in the ground. Surrounding it 18 photo cut outs of a police man's head.]

Figure 21 The game "Sätt Per i Gropen", played during Unicorner: All Catunicorns Are Beautiful. Photo: Ingeborg Hasselgren.

[Removed image: interior from Cyklopen. The "wishing well" – *önskebrunn*, a photo cutout of a Siamese cat on top of a black bucket with purple letters.]

[Removed image: interior from Cyklopen. Photo of a pink banner "*KROSSA MACHO-VÄNSTERN*"]

Figure 24 Wishing well for the Unicorner karaoke. Photo: Ingeborg Hasselgren.

Figure 22 Banner at Cyklopen with the slogan "Krossa macho-vänstern" = "Crush the Macho Left". To the left: a flag with Planka.Nu's logo. Photo: Ingeborg Hasselgren.

> **Hannes:** […] it's okay not to take yourself too seriously, even if you work with things that are very important, and very serious in a way. It would become unbearable, if you had such a serious relationship to political activism too. The world is awful and serious as it is. You want to do something about it, but that doesn't mean you have to be such an awful and boring and serious person.[xxxi]

The attractiveness of cute activism, could also lie in the jarring, or surprising juxtaposition between "soft" cuteness and "hard" socialism. Sofie is very appreciative of the shocking quality of this combination:

> **Sofie:** I think that when you take the girly, which has for so long been oppressed, and it stands for something wimpy, when you take that tool [*medlet*] and use it in a tough and hard way, like "fuck you" [silence]. That's how I think. And Unicorner is a bit like that too. […] It's like a paradox, I think paradoxes are bloody…strong. I like everything that's a bit paradoxical, or like contradicts eachother, I think that's interesting and fun in general. […]
>
> **Ingeborg Hasselgren:** *What is it you find interesting?*
>
> **S**: the unexpected, I think. Definitely the unexpected, things that make people raise their eye brows.[xxxii]

Sofie appears to regard the usage of the girly in this way, as a feminist act unto itself. Instead of letting the girly stand back, and be embarrassed, the girly becomes loud, takes up space and refuses to back down. There appears to be a certain pleasurable shock effect in cute activism. Parts of this effect might be explained by the so called "incongruity theory" of humour, which posits that we find things funny that break with our expectations. Literally, incongruity emerges when parts do not "go together" (Morreall, 2009, p. 10), like the tough or hard image of anarchists coupled with the pink softness of the cute. It is fun, and *funny*.

> **Ingeborg Hasselgren:** *What did you find funny about the cute theme?*
>
> **Olivia:** well, it's like [laughs] I like cute [*söta*] animals, and sort of, well it's fun to have that sort of theme among leftists [*inom vänstern*], because it is often like a police theme [*polistema]* or something like that, but not so much cutesy cute [*gulligull*]. And it felt like a very good thing.
>
> **IH**: *Is there something you think is missing among leftists, the cute?*
>
> **O:** [laughs] I don't know, not in Allt Åt Alla it's bit like that actually, and really, Planka.nu too. They're [both] starting to use like cats and…

Planka.nu, their profile picture on Facebook is this Pusheen picture –

IH*: yeah, I saw that*

O: -- who's jumping over the boundaries [*som plankar*[46]]. It's, it's become at bit more like that. And Allt Åt Alla has this banner with lots of unicorns.

IH: *oh, you do?*

O: yeah, it's sort of, I think it has become a new concept, or some kind of PR trick, to be a bit cute, cute animals are - are a bit "in" at the moment. [xxxiii]

Cuteness, at least a certain version of it, seems indeed to be popular at the moment. In 2014, *The Evening Standard* published an article, suggesting that the next generation of hipster has arrived. The *cutester*, as it was labelled, is described as the hipster's "younger sibling". A more colourful, childish and tech-savvy individual, the cutester refuses to give up childish past-time, such as Nintendo games, cartoons and breakfast cereal. Most crucially, the cutester is "friendly and open and aware that fun usually comes at the expense of cool." (Godwin, 2014).

6.8. Cute Violence

So far, we have seen how cuteness has been used effectively at these two events to create safe, kind spaces. I would now like to look at how the affective force of the cute can be used as a platform for social change. As mentioned above, the Unicorner event I attended, was called All Catunicorns Are Beautiful, a play on the anarchist slogan ACAB or All Cops Are Bastards, sometimes restated as All Cats Are Beautiful. The theme, in other words, was "police hate" as a celebration of the ACAB-day on December 13. Despite the overall safe, calm and cheerful mood at the Unicorner event, there were some instances of a more "violent" rhetoric, always directed towards outsiders or enemy "Others". This was most accentuated around two of the games that participants were invited to play. The first one was entitled *Sätt Per i Gropen*, a sort of anti-police version of put the tail on the donkey. A homemade poster on a whiteboard depicted a large hole in the ground, around it cut outs of male faces,

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[46] *Att planka* can also mean to gatecrash.

[Removed image: photo of a banner with colourful ponies. Text: "Det är klassfest och du är bjuden! ALLTATALLA.COM"]

Figure 25 Cropped image from Allt Åt Alla demonstration. Posted on Allt Åt Alla's homepage. Used with permission.

[Removed image: baby wearing a sweater with Pusheen jumping the barriers.]

[Removed image: a cartoon cat (Pusheen) jumping over the metro barriers.]

Figure 26 Baby clothes sold on the Planka.Nu website. Image courtesy of Planka.Nu.

Figure 27 Pusheen jumping the barriers. Remix courtesy of Planka.Nu

some with a police uniform hats, attached to magnets. A pink sign attached to the top

explained that you were to try place to faces in the middle of the whole, while wearing

a blindfold. In Cecilia's view, the event, despite the "police hate" theme, was not

encouraging actual physical violence, in the way that for instance AFA (*Antifascistisk*

Aktion) advocates.

> **Cecilia:** so that [police hate] was the theme. [...] we had the *Sätt Per I Gropen* [Put Per in the Hole], it was a police officer who, God I've forgotten the background story, I think it was at an occupation of – some police officer was going to evict, or keep an eye on the occupation and fell down a hole instead [...] [laughs] [...] I guess it is pretty radical to have that jargon against the police too, or how should I put it – I guess radical is the right word. It's also connected to like the feminist movement and the queer movement's relationship with the police. If you do it in a jocular tone is pretty, I don't know, more light hearted in a way. It might have something to do with, like we talked about before, AFA [Antifascistisk Aktion] and their rhetoric against the police is very like "a good copper is a dead copper". Which is very different from how we express ourselves.[xxxiv]

Sofie's reflections on the choice of theme, further illustrates the rhetorical complexity

of the situation, as she has a relative in the police force:

> **Sofie:** [...] Unicorner is a part of Cyklopen, so we sympathise very much with [...] what Cyklopen stands for.[...] We share the same views on the police... on the justice – how should I put it, I don't know, on authorities or something. We wanted to show them that we don't think that they're that great, and that we should change our system. But then again, my mum's boyfriend is a police officer.
>
> **Ingeborg Hasselgren:** *oh, he is? [both laugh]*
>
> **S:** So I didn't really tell them what the pub night was about, it would have been really awkward, they just met, or met just a year ago, and it's still a bit hard for him to bond, so I don't think telling him about the pub would be a good idea, or I told him about the pub, but not the theme. [...][xxxv]

In a recent article, Aragón et al. (2015) describes how cute stimuli can create

dimorphous emotional expressions. This refers to how a person can display two often

contradictory emotional states simultaneously. For instance, crying while experiencing

intense happiness. Aragòn and her colleagues suggest that these paradoxical feelings

emerge as a way to regulate intense emotions (Aragón et al., 2015). This might explain

why the cute-consumer, while enjoying the pleasurable emotions, simultaneously feel a more aggressive urge, as a way of controlling the otherwise overwhelming pleasure (Aragón et al., 2015, p. 264). Dale has interpreted these contradictory feelings to be a "safety mechanism that displaces this aggression, bending it back towards the subject in order to preserve a helpless, unthreatening object from harm". Therefore, he concludes, if anything, the cute affect is masochistic, rather than sadistic (Dale, 2017, p. 6). Differently from Dale, the Unicorner event illustrates how "cute aggression"can also be redirected towards another object, separate from both the cute and the cute observer.

A recurring happening at the Unicorner evenings was a piñata. At the first event, this had the form of Henrik Schyffert, one of Sweden's more famous male comedians. Sofie explained it partly by that his was the largest image of a man they could find. However, the fact that Henrik Schyffert was dating the female comedian Nour El Refai, also played a part. In comparison to the younger, hipper, and most of all, *feminist* El Refai, I believe Schyffert, with his 20 plus year career, appeared as a representative of a rather tired-looking comedy establishment, dominated by white, straight, males. Sofie described how the group reacted to the news of them being together: "They became a couple, and we couldn't understand how she could date Henrik Schyffert, like 'aaah she so cool, why Henrik Schyffert?!' so we thought we had permission to use Henrik Schyffert as a piñata." One could perhaps interpret the choice of Schyffert for a piñata, as a virtual punishment of him, for his symbolic defacement of El Refai as a feminist icon.

At the second event, the piñata instead bore the face of Chile's former military dictator Augusto Pinochet. This was partly, as Sofie explained, because he was a "horrible person", but also because December 10 was his death day. She continued to make the connection that both "Per" and Pinochet, though to a varying degree, were representatives of police violence and repression. In a dramatic moment, one of the attendees made short work of the green piñata, decorated with photos of Pinochet. She enthusiastically attacked it with a stick, while the others excitedly cheered on. The piñata finally exploded in a rain on Marianne sweets, mint and chocolates wrapped in

red and white paper. In a sense, it could be interpreted a symbolic death of the hated dictator.

These examples could perhaps be seen as a way of harnessing the cute aggression, as described by Aragón et al. (2015) and giving it a political outlet. The aggressive expressions towards authorities and however, should not necessarily be understood as an incitement to actual violence. The activists repeatedly insisted that the use of violence, was something that they disliked, or didn't support, but is part of the experience of being a woman, or being a queer person. Like in Wasshede's research on the rhetorical use of hatred by queer activists, where the hatred is directed towards the heteronormative (2010, p. 163). The police hate, or the hatred towards "*macho-vänstern*" or straight "cis-men" in general at this event, should probably be interpreted as an "ironic strategy," staging the same kind of violence, or threat of violence, that one experiences from mainstream society.

6.9. Conclusion: a cute utopia?

As we have seen throughout this chapter, the cute in the hands of these activists have fulfilled several functions. First of all, it was used, fairly efficiently, as a type of crowd control, especially for discouraging sexism and violent behaviour, expected from "macho-men" and heterosexual "cis-men". The cute, according to the activists, helps set a certain standard on conduct, one where people treat each other more kindly and engage in a friendly, playful way. The organisers of these events seek to further emphasise the feeling of collective togetherness, by inviting attendees to take part in activities than involve larger scale play. Apart from the visual "cute cues" music and dancing played a special part in this collectiveness for promoting a sense of togetherness, or "we-feeling". Paradoxically, this we-feeling is reliant on finding an Other, and outsider, in this case the aforementioned "macho-men" and "cis-men", along with the police and other representatives of oppressive power. I also suggested that these events harness, or redirect the aggressive side of cuteness towards political goals, towards changing the world, as it were.

From this follows secondly, that the cute helps create a safe space for women and queer individuals. Part of the aim of these spaces, one of which is separatist, is to help

attendees to feel safe and supported, to be able to "recharge the batteries" to then go out and fight back against oppressors. However, the aim of creating separatist space at this culture centre was not unproblematic, and was met with resistance from other activists. One crucial reason to use the cute then, was to attract other, or new people to the centre, to help counter the "macho culture" they felt was too prevalent, both at the centre, but also among extra-parliamentary leftist in general. In a sense, using cuteness works as a rebranding of the "extreme left" into something kinder, softer, and less harsh and hard. A key tool in this "rebranding" is the childhood, or "girly" nostalgia. This represents a type of reflective nostalgia, which remixes and rearranges elements of childhood, into a new interpretation of the past, and in effect, the now and the future. Finally, the carnivalesque quality of these events, constructs a queer utopia, one which is not just an emotional, and effective experience in the present, but one which inspires, and points towards future political action.

Chapter 7: Case Study - Cute Taste Cultures

It's a Thursday in October just before 5 pm when I arrive at the Stockholm Internet Cat Video Festival. The festival's taking place in one of the most well-known venues in Stockholm, Södra Teatern, an establishment celebrating its 150th birthday this year. Traditionally used as a theatre, with its gold and velvet interior still intact, the building now houses several separate bars and smaller venues. It has also become a hotspot for the hip inner city crowd, as it is located on Södermalm, one of the hippest, and recently gentrified, parts of Stockholm.

After entering the glass doors of the foyer, I walk up to the reception area where a girl is arranging piles of black T-shirts with a cat print. I introduce myself and explain why I am there. Apparently, it is the girl to the left of her who is in charge of the tickets. After a bit of fiddling, she finds my name on the printed list with free tickets. The event is officially sold out, but I have been in contact with the organiser Anna Efraimsson who has managed to get me an extra ticket for the day. [47] Having sorted out the tickets, I take some pictures of the foyer, and chat a bit with the girl selling T-shirts. Today, they cost 160 SEK. The T-shirts are printed with the same crude-looking, remixed style as the posters, though the T-shirts are only depicting a single cat against a dark background. Green laser beams are shooting dramatically out of the cat's eyes. Underneath is written in vivid, neon green letters, "#sthlmcatvidfest2014".

In the corner right next to the counter, there's a group of comfy armchairs and a sofa. There is a makeup set on top of the coffee table, and a hat stand with cat ears and tails for those who like to dress up as a cat.

The screenings will take place in the 400-seat theatre, consisting of an orchestra pit, and two overhanging balconies. It's a huge place, with gilded decorations, contrasted by scarlet walls and red, velvet seats. The high ceiling is dominated by a crystal chandelier, glinting softly in the low light. The theatre is less than half full when I get there. While waiting for the discussion to start, I mingle a bit, take a photo of a girl wearing a white, cat-themed t-shirt. The stage is already prepped for the event. Four chairs are placed in front of a large screen filled with various cute animals.

The theatre is slowly filling. The crowd seemed to be dominated by white, twenty-somethings, and appears to be made up by about half male, half female. Many sport some sort of cat-themed clothes, often

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[47] The tickets for the Thursday edition cost 150 SEK. This price included entrance to the screening of the cat videos, a panel discussion with academics, and a "Cat Night Club" in the theatre's bar/club area. The second screening on Saturday 11th of October, where the price only included entry to the screening, the price was 90 SEK ("Stockholm Internet Cat Video Festival - Södra Teatern," 2014).

a t-shirt with an Internet cat, or a dress with cat-patterns. The cat ears seem popular, the majority have settled for more discreet cat related objects, like ear rings or a necklace, or the popular van sneakers with cat pattern. I would probably describe it as a hip and alternative crowd - most would not look out of place at a night club.

According to the information provided on the official website, the first scheduled event is taking place at 17:30. It is a round table discussion with three academics, whose research to some extent are related to the theme of Internet cats. All of them are female.

The discussion starts a bit late, when the theatre is half-full. The organiser Anna Efraimsson steps out on the stage clad in a cat outfit complete with make-up, ears and tail, welcomes the crowd and introduces the three participants and the moderator. She also thanks the visual design company Bastion who created the T-shirt and posters. The theme of the discussion is presented as "Internetkattens roll i samhället" (The Internet Cat's Role in Society).

On the other side of the North Sea, we find another cat video event, held in the Scottish city of Glasgow.

The first day of Glasgow's Internet Cat Video Festival is a Saturday. It is scheduled as a part of the 2015 Glasgow Film Festival. I arrive shortly after 11 AM. The venue, GoMA (the Gallery of Modern Art) is located in an old, neoclassicist bank building, since 1996 housing the museum. As I step into the lobby I am immediately hit by the visual impact of the walls decorated with shards of broken mirrors, and weakly lit by a modernist chandelier of multicoloured lightbulbs. To the left, a door leads into the museum shop, marked with a large sign that reads "GoMA SHOP", black on white. Opposite the entrance, another door leads into the museum itself. A white room can be seen, much better lit than the semi-darkness of the lobby. That, it turns out is where the actual festival will start at 1 pm.

The doors are already open when I get there. I show my bracelet to the volunteers by the entrance. They are wearing the blue T-shirts of Glasgow Film Festival Staff. Just inside, a man wearing a red T-shirt with a white grumpy cat print on it, speaks into a megaphone. The megaphone is dressed as a cat, with cardboard cat ears and whiskers made of pipe cleaners. He welcomes me and tells me a bit about what you can do before the screening starts at 2 PM. He later turns out to be a sort of master of ceremonies for the various small competitions held.

Gallery one is a large space. The neo-classicist pillars of the building's facade is repeated in here. The lights are muted, pop music is playing somewhere, perhaps a bit too loudly for my taste. The ceiling is very high, the music and people's chatting reverberate, and bounce of the walls and floors, almost like an echo chamber. These ambient sounds are now and again broken up by the annoying wail from the megaphone, as the master of ceremonies accidentally presses the wrong button when he attempts to talk into it, and profusely

apologises.

> Opposite the entrance, the space is divided by a white, thick screen. In front of it, there's a long table filled with crafts materials. A poster for the festival is taped on the wall, surrounded by printed pictures of cats, some famous from the Internet. The posters, I realise later, are the same used by the original festival in Minneapolis, USA. A stylised cat against a white background. A couple of volunteers stand behind the table. They are all dressed in black T-shirts with the white grumpy cat print. You can make cat toys out of sticks, yarn, wool, bells and pipe cleaners. Right next to it you can make your own badges by cutting pictures out of the poster.

> Across the room from the white divider, there's a screen, onto which the cat videos will be projected later on. There are only two or three rows of red plastic chairs, and in front of them, a number of blankets and cushions are thrown haphazardly on the floor. Some people have already gathered in small groups on the floor, some lazily playing with their newly made cat toys. Perhaps saving the best spots for the show. It looks a bit like an in-doors picnic. Right now, the crowd seems to consist equally of younger groups of couples and friends, and families with children. There's a sharp contrast between the monolithic pillars of the former bank palace, and the frivolous, DIY feel of the set up.

7.1. Background and Aim

These two snapshots, are taken from two, in ways similar, but also dissimilar events. The Stockholm Internet Cat Video Festival (October 9 and 11, 2014), and The Glasgow Cat Video Festival (February 21 and 22, 2015). They were both based on an American invention, the Walker Art Center's Internet Cat Video Festival, held annually between 2012 and 2015. Originally the brain child of Katie Hill, with Walker Art Center's Education and Community Programs Department, the project was also supported by her colleague Scott Stulen. According to Sarah Schultz's account of the genesis of the project, Hill was inspired by a previous event Chat D'Oeuvres, a cat-themed film festival at New York's Anthology Film Archives (Schultz, 2015, p. 154).

The "programme" consists of short film clips, mainly from YouTube, but interspersed by silent shorts made in 20th century and music videos. A new, hour long programme was created each year, often curated by famous Internet Cat owners. The videos in the 2014 edition, which is the focus of this chapter, was selected by Will Braden creator of a series of black and white YouTube clips depicting "Henri le Chat Noir, an existential French feline philosopher struggling with ennui" (Braden, 2015, p. 89). In other words,

his own cat Henry whose views of the world are expressed through a laconic French voiceover. The festival's extreme popularity led to it subsequently going on tour to other venues around the world, independently screening the videos, among them Stockholm and Glasgow. 2014 the number of festivals were 46, 2015 49, and 2016 down to 29 (Walker Art Center).

While both Stockholm and Glasgow screened this same programme, their staging, setting and performances surrounding the screenings varied wildly. From Walker Art Center's massive Open Field events, via the decadent, queer feminist "Cat Night Club" hosted in a gilded, 19th century theatre in Stockholm, and then to the crafts tables placed under the auspices of a modern art museum and the Glasgow Film Festival. In this chapter, I would like to investigate how the festivals translate the affective experiences of the digital into physical spaces, and specifically, the role that the cuteness affect plays in this staging. A recurring theme in my interviews with participants and in their written accounts, is how (or whether) the immensely popular category of cute cat videos can be used to question common perceptions of what defines popular versus elite culture.

The hope of the original creators of the festival was to attract a new, wider audience to a space – the modern museum – which is often perceived to be a heavily guarded, elite project. Continuing the theme of the other chapters, the Internet cat is here activated as a vehicle for political purposes. In both Stockholm and Glasgow, cuteness (as represented by the digital genre of the Internet cat) is used in an attempt to bridge the perceived opposition between "high"/"low" culture and digital/physical space. In other words, cuteness is intended as a catalyst for social inclusion. However, the aim of this chapter is not to evaluate the effectiveness of the respective festivals as a social inclusion strategy, but to see how these ideas are expressed in their particular framing of the Internet Cat Video Festival. Therefore, it also ties into wider discussion of the politics of *taste* (Bourdieu, 2009). The Internet cat appears to be the focal point of a clash between different *taste publics*, each attempting to define what the Internet cat is, and where its values lies. In other words, I would like to explore the following

questions: What types of cute taste are valued? Whose cute consumption is legitimate (or legitimised) at the festivals?[48]

7.1.1. Internet Cats

The term Internet Cat encompasses a range of phenomena all based around digital images (moving or still, animated or live action) which are shared, posted, remixed and reinterpreted in online spaces. It often refers to iconic memes like Keyboard cat (a cat playing a keyboard), Nyan cat (an animated, pixelised cat wearing a Pop-Tart while flying through space, a burst of rainbow trailing behind it), or hover cat (an image of a fluffy cat in mid leap appearing to have no limbs).

Of course, the viewing pleasures associated with looking at cats have a history centuries older than the Internet. In her analysis of cinematicity of cats, Galt (2015, p. 43) mentions the cats of Da Vinci, Gainsborough's *Six Studies of a Cat* (1763-70) and Oide Toko's *Cat Watching a Spider* (1888-92). Early cinema also found cats a captivating subject. According to Galt, one may go so far as to call Lumiére's *La Petite Fille et son Chat* (*The Little Girl and her Cat*, Lumière, 1899) "an early cat video" (2015, p. 44). Indeed, the programme for the 2014 Internet Cat Video Festival, contained several short films from this time, perhaps as a tribute to the history of cinematic felines.

The Internet cat emerged as a genre unto itself, in the mid2000s in the form of LOLcats, images of cats with funny captions, for instance, the iconic cat imploring "I can haz Cheezburger?". According to *Know Your Meme* (a wiki of Internet history and lore), the notorious 4Chan community was a crucial hub for early Internet cat culture with its weekly Caturday event, where users flooded the community board with images of cats ("Caturday," n.d.). This event later appears to have migrated on to other, less obscure platforms, for instance Facebook and Instagram, in effect describing a mainstreaming of the Internet cat. At least early on, the consumption of Internet cats appear to be accompanied by a distanced, ironic appreciation. A type of

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[48]Apart of WAC and GoMA, Museum of Moving Images, New York City, had a whole exhibition dedicated to the Internet Cat "How Cats Took Over the Internet ", August 7–February 21, 2016..

appreciation often associated with the problematic figure of the hipster - a character I will return to.

The last decade have seen the emergence of Internet cat celebrities, like Li'l Bub, Grumpy Cat, Venus the Two-Faced Cat, Princess Monster Truck – all real cats – along with cartoon dittos such as Pusheen. The celebrity cats are often surrounded by a vast franchising operation, with full length movies, comic books, plush toys and other merchandise.

All in all, cute animal images and video clips are ubiquitous online, and in our lives. As I showed in the introduction, simultaneous with its immense popularity, the Internet cat has been the object of much ire. Provocative in its pleasure-inducing pointlessness, it represents the epitome of worthless culture, a fuzzy, soft genre that (supposedly) distracts us from more important things. As I also mention above, this critique is often tied in with a fear of the death of investigative journalism.

7.1.2. Taste

Crucial in this case study, is the concept of taste in terms of aesthetic judgments.

According to Bourdieu, the hierarchic relationships between various genres and schools of "art" are expressions of the power relations between different social groups that consumes/appreciates/produce them. "Taste", for instance, the type of cuteness consumption we engage in, can function as a social marker of status/group membership, of one's place in a cultural hierarchy (Bourdieu, 2009, p. 498). However, the boundaries between lifestyles are never watertight, but fleeting and fuzzy (Weininger, 2005, p. 144). It is possible for individuals, and indeed cultural objects, to pass from one category to another.

Taste is closely related to *class habitus*, the mainly unconscious "common sense" rules that govern our reactions, and behaviours. These are learnt practices, norms, ideas and values that are picked up over time and form a disposition which guides a person's behaviour (de Valcke, 2016, p. 109). The Habitus is not static, but flexes and bends to fit new situations, creating practices that "are highly spontaneous and inventive" (Weininger, 2005, p. 131). However, as the habitus is learnt, it will differ dramatically depending on lived experiences. Which in extension means that certain habitus are

Removed image: photo of a table. People are colouring masks shaped liked cat heads.]

Figure 28 Masque making at the Glasgow Internet Cat Video Festival. Photo: Ingeborg Hasselgren.

[Removed image: interior from GoMA. Space lined with Grecian pillars, in soft beige, white and grey colours. A freestanding cinema screen in the background. Pillows in the floor, and a few people mingling.]

Figure 27 Gallery 1 at GoMA turned into an indoors picnic space for the screening. Photo: Ingeborg Hasselgren.

Removed image: photo of interior
at Södra Teatern. Taken from de
first level. A theatre space in
several levels, with balconies and
gilded details. A cinema screen on
the stage with the text:
"INTERNET CAT VIDEO FESTIVAL.")

Figure 30 Södra Teatern, Stockholm. View from the balcony. Photo: Ingeborg Hasselgren.

[Removed image: interior from
Södra Teatern. A stand with cat
ears hanging from it.]

Figure 31 Södra Teatern, Stockholm. Cat ears and tails hanging in the lobby for visitors to borrow.
Photo: Ingeborg Hasselgren.

better adapted to certain situations. Taste and the habitus share common traits with affect. Like affect, the habitus is at least partly learned, a result of socialisation, yet pre-reflexive and automatic to a large degree. I would suggest then, that affect is one aspect of the habitus that develops over the course of one's life.

As the Internet cat is often placed as the epitome of useless, empty and distracting media, it would appear that there is an obvious dichotomy between the art museum/theatre and the cuteness of the Internet cat. However, the issue of the Internet cat's cultural capital, is a more complex one. This is because particular objects/phenomena, often travel up and down a hierarchy of taste, as demonstrated by Jeffrey Scones in his influential 1995 article, "Trashing the academy". The film scholar Scones describes how *paracinema*, once a renegade and underground genre[49] was legitimised as an object of academic study, through the display in art museums, and simultaneously (and perhaps paradoxically) became commercialised and mainstreamed (Sconce, 1995, pp. 372–373). The Internet cat's changing status, as picked up by museums, media, theatres and academia, describes a similar movement to that of paracinema culture, as it complicates the categories of high-brow/low-brow culture. The migration of this subculture into legitimate culture was troubling as it threatened the basic tenet of the paracinematic genre and its surrounding taste community, which was dependent on an opposition and resistance to both "good taste" and mainstream/elitist consumption (Sconce, 1995, pp. 374–375).

The Internet Cat, occupies an ambivalent position in terms of taste, but one different from paracinema. As an outcrop of meme culture, it is based on the act of sharing, and thus dependent on a mass appeal, created via mass audiences. The change in symbolic value, then, is based on what reading practices, what *gaze,* or *competence* is directed at the Internet cat, on *who* is gazing/consuming. A "valuable" subject directing its gaze towards a "worthless" object can elevate the latter status wise. Owning a valuable

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[49] A genre incorporating such diverse elements as "'badfilm', splatterpunk,, 'mondo' films, sword and sandal epics, Elvis flicks, government hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beach-party musicals, and just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries to soft-core pornography"(Sconce, 1995, p. 371).

gaze, is dependent on training, on *education,* which allows the subject to "decode" the

a work of art. In order to "see" (*voir* in Bourdieu's native French), one needs

knowledge (*savoir*) (Bourdieu, 2009, p. 499).

I will argue that cuteness in the form of the Internet cat, can function both as a tool for

social inclusion *as well as* exclusion. Introducing the Internet cat into academic, and

"legitimate" cultural institutions, not only changes the very institution, but more

importantly, changes the Internet cat. And not only in a way that is necessarily

compatible with ambitions of increased social inclusion.

7.1.3. Glasgow: GoMA

Glasgow – historically a working class city heavily dependent on its manufacturing

industry – was hit hard by the 1970s recession, and the following decades' decline in

manufacturing created a city known for high unemployment and problems with drug

abuse and poverty. From the 1980s, the city began a process of cultural regeneration,

culminating with Glasgow becoming European City of Culture in 1999 (Tucker, 2008,

pp. 26–28). While museums have traditionally been regarded as institutions of

exclusive culture (Sandell, 2012, p. 567), UK cultural institutions have since at least the

New Labour government of the 1990s played a specific part in countering social

exclusion (ibid., pp. 562–563).

Museums and other cultural institutions were encouraged to function as a type of

welfare institution, providing a service to all citizens (Beel, 2011, pp. 49–50). Primarily,

this has happened in two ways. First of all, through projects targeting specific

vulnerable audiences, and secondly, on a broader scale, using the museums as

platforms for communication, education and influencing public opinion (Sandell, 2012,

p. 570). According to David Beel, this was accompanied by a wave of postmodern

theory, which unsettled the high/low understanding of culture in UK public museums,

developing new criteria for collections and exhibition (2011, pp. 49–50).

GoMA, an institution created in 1996, has a strong profile in community engagement.

According to Bruce, this stems from a strategy document by the City's Social Inclusion

Strategy Sub Committee in 2001. GoMA played an expressed key role in this new

strategy for wider inclusion in the city's art institutions. Bruce spells out the aims of the new policy as follows:

- To raise public awareness of social exclusion issues through harnessing the power of visual art to reach a wide audience

- To give people from excluded groups a voice in major city centre venues,
  and to give them opportunities for creative self-expression.

- To counteract negative media portrayal of social exclusion issues, by showing that current issues are not new, and that Glasgow has a long history of engaging with these and similar problems.

(Bruce, 2012, pp. 3–4)

Of course one must be wary of accepting policy statements as proof of an institution's achieved equality or diversity. As Ahmed notes, it sometimes appears "as if having a policy becomes a substitute for action" (2012, p. 11). GoMA appears to view the video clips in an instrumental fashion, as a way to invite new audiences to the museum, and make it part of implementing the museum's wider public outreach programme. In this approach, the Festival is used as a way of increasing diversity, framed in primarily in terms of class. In comparison with its Stockholm sibling, the Glasgow festival had a distinctly family friendly air, with stalls where you could make your own cat toys from feathers and pipe-cleaners, make buttons from posters, colour your own cat-themed masque, or draw a "nine-line cat." Entrance was free, and at least the Saturday's screening was sold out. Despite being more of a DIY-setup, it still had more institutional support from Glasgow Film Festival, from other local museums, and of course, GoMA itself. In the interview, Bruce particularly mentions the collaboration with The Open Museum as a crucial player:

> **Katie Bruce**: [...] For me, I was just incredibly interested about the way that it brought people together, and it's all sorts of different people, it's not, it'll bring in a new audience to the gallery, but it will also bring in new conversations to the gallery. For someone organising the event so we can bring in something like – I'm pointing at the open museum, which you can't see on tape. The Open Museum we were able to bring objects from our collection in stores [storage?] that you don't normally see, like the mummified cat here,

> our big partnership with the library, and we can do fun things with
> our shop and our café that we don't always do, again just make an
> event out of it.

On site, the Open Museum had a dedicated stall in Gallery one. From my field notes:

> In a corner to the left of the screen, almost tucked away from the
> rest, I can see a table filled with curious objects. One of them is a
> taxidermy lynx, for some reason. As I approach them, I notice another
> bizarre thing, a plaster casting of a mummified cat. This is a table for
> the Open Museum, an outreach project working with bringing the
> museum and its collections to deprived areas and/or groups that
> have a hard time coming to the museum.
> Another object is a mug depicting a cat called Smudge. The text
> reads: "1990 GLASGOW'S CULTURE KITTY SMUDGE THE PEOPLE'S
> PALACE CAT". A woman behind the table holds it out to me, so I can
> take a photo. She tells me the story of it. Smudge was a cat that lived
> at the People's Palace during the 1980's. He was very popular with
> the people of Glasgow, and became something of a mascot for the
> workers' union.

In a way, this usage of the cute cat video, recalls that of the cute activists in a previous chapter. The irresistible attractiveness of the cute draws in people that might not have been interested in the things otherwise offered.

7.1.4. Stockholm: Södra Teatern

In contrast to GoMA and WAC, the Stockholm edition took place in a 19th century theatre, Södra teatern or Södran. It was organised by a private production company called *The Blob*, which in turn rented the venue. The Blob is mainly lead by Anna Efraimsson herself, in collaboration with others. On its home page, the organisation is described in this way.

> The Blob is an elastic boneless organisational body/alter ego/artist
> inititiating [sic], curating and producing art and culture with a special
> interest in dance and choreography. It creates forms and projects
> that stand alone or have the ability to "blobbing on" to [sic] different
> structures through collaboration/partnerships. The core basis of The
> Blob is to create spaces for working together and to elaborate around
> ways of organising and presenting art. The Blob is run by Anna
> Efraimsson or Anna Efraimsson is run by The Blob in collaboration
> with artists, researchers, organisations, and institutions in Sweden
> and internationally.
>
> ("About The Blob," n.d.)

Södran, was at the time, far from a purely commercial entity, as it was owned by Riksteatern (the same association funding the Cuteness Overload Project) since 1972.[50] An example of private/public cooperation that is fairly common in Sweden. Riksteatern is described as "an idea based cultural organization" with around 40 000 individual members. Based around "local non-profit theatre associations" with the express aim to "make drama, dance and performing arts available to all people"(Riksteatern, n.d.). All in all, an ambition closely aligned with that of other entirely public institutions, or indeed GoMA.

Despite operating as an independent organisation, run largely on a volunteer basis, Riksteatern has always been dependent on public funding. The organisation received 260 122 000 SEK for the fiscal year of 2014. In the case of the Video Festival, Södran appears to have functioned more as a rented venue, rather than an active organizer.

7.2. "Fin och fulkultur" – Video Festivals as Tastemakers

Walker Art Center originally conceived the festival as part of their public outreach programme Open Field, taking place on a green space outside the galleries. Sarah Schultz describes Open Field as "a cultural commons—a collaborative platform for artists, the public and the museum to jointly program and share" which worked as "an intentional mash-up of 'high' and 'low' cultural forms"(Schultz, 2015, pp. 154–155). The Internet Cat Video Festival, perceived as the polar opposite of the elitist, secluded art world, was then seen as an unusually effective tool for democratizing, and popularizing Walker Art Center (Schultz, 2015, p. 159).

However, WAC is not a monolithic institution. Despite the fact that the Center has a long tradition of working with more "populist" projects in order to reach new audiences, Schultz avows that the unparalleled attention given to the Cat Video Festival set some of her fellow colleagues on edge, perhaps fearing a "dumbing down" of the institution (Schultz, 2015, pp. 158–159). According to David Fleming, this is a common response from members of cultural institutions when faced with objects of

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[50] It was owned through a public company (later on sold off to a private realtor) (Södra Teatern, 2018, n.d.).

mass cultural appeal. This criticism can be heard both from the left (fearing that "'mass culture' suppresses critical reasoning") and from the right (fearing that populism will lower standards). Counter-intuitively then, an ambition to erase cultural elitism, can inspire more ardent opposition and resistance to change (Fleming, 2002, p. 219). Schultz herself instead sees the festival as part of a necessary reciprocity between the Art Center and the public: "show me your cat videos, and I'll show you my conceptual art."(Schultz, 2015, p. 159).

Fundamentally, the concept of the festival is dependent on a perceived clash between high/low culture. Almost to a comical degree, the originators of the festival appear to subscribe to Bourdieu's dichotomies of taste, such as high/low, spiritual/material, fine/coarse, light/heavy, free/forced, broad/narrow, unique/common, brilliant/dull. These pairings are simply expressions of the most fundamental opposition between dominant and dominated (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 468). However, Bourdieu also emphasizes, that these dichotomies create meaning that vary in relation to specific circumstances:

> Each particular use of one of these pairs only takes on its full meaning in relation to a universe of discourse that is different each time and usually implicit—since it is a question of the system of self-evidences and presuppositions that are taken for granted in the field in relation to which the speakers' strategies are defined. But each of the couples specified by usage has for undertones all the other uses it might have—because of the homologies between the fields which allows transfers from on field to another—and also all the other couples which are interchangeable with it, within a nuance or two (e.g., fine/crude for light/heavy), that is in slightly different contexts.

> (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 470)

The emphasis on this clash, or juxtaposition could partly be explained as a type of feedback loop – no doubt many of the employees of these institutions have read Bourdieu during their education. Katie Bruce, curator with Gallery of Modern art described how the idea of Internet cats in the museum creates some interesting "frictions":

> **Ingeborg Hasselgren:** *so how has the response been like from audience, that you've, erm 'cause obviously you've sold out, partly*

due to The Guardian'*s attention, what kind of reactions have you gotten about it like…*

Katie Bruce: Erm, I think there's a mixed reaction, from both, from colleagues that were just looking at me going [*makes a face*], and even when you kind of get from people that you know and it's like, you mean cats? [*both laugh*] there's still that sense about the notion of cat videos in the gallery, that I quite like, and the friction that that causes, and there are just people that, they are never going to set foot, and they are never going to engage with this, but I also think it quite interesting, because, A) there were families here that were cat owners, there were, I know there were artists that we've worked with in the past that had kind of come today, so that kind of brings a very diverse audience in, it also draws people tha might not necessarily come into the gallery space as well. And it just, you're coming around something that's together, I think is quite lovely.

IH: *but do you think it's more sensitive because it is in an art gallery, would it'd been different if it were in, I don't know in a cinema, or any other more--*

KB: I think it, we kind of spoke about this, in terms of the Walker Art Center text for the Internet Cat Video Festival and whether that has given it a gravitas and a kind of whole [?], and you know it's one of their annual pieces that they do, the context of art, I quite – for me, I quite enjoy, looking [at] ideas or work or artist's practice that kind of doesn't sit in a neat box, actually is often, it's slipping in the cracks of the pavement, it doesn't quite, and I guess one of the things about the film festival, when they approached us to see if we would be able to work with them this year on it, and a proposal on the table, and it didn't work with everything we got, so I said look I am doing the cat video festival anyways, would you make it part of the programme, and for them it was kind of...

IH: *was it* [*inaudible*]

KB: it was like where does it fit in the film festival either, it doesn't quite fit into the film world, it doesn't quite fit into the art world, it's something quite interesting about that.

Bruce's last comment here is quite telling. The Internet Cat Video Festival "slip[s] through the cracks of the pavement", like a prolific weed refusing to die, it invaded the orderly garden of the art world, not just troubling the expectations of the modern art gallery, but also the idea of the classic film festival. It was, or hoped to be, a whole new species.

The Internet Cat Video Festival, can then be understood as a *liminoid space*. This term is derived from Turner's understanding of ritual liminality, that describe an in-

betweenness, a (religious) ritualistic action wherein someone, or something passes over from one state (or stage) to another. Ritual action in this sense has a meaning that encompasses society as a whole, beyond the very action on site (Couldry, 2003, p. 32). In modern societies, ritual action is rarely seen to be purely liminal, in the sense that they are segregated from "normal" everyday life, hence the term *liminoid* – "'liminal'-like" (Couldry, 2003, p. 33). In the liminoid, liminality is dispersed into everyday life, and often integrated into other, often commercial events and pastimes. These can be various sports events, or, like here, a video festival (Couldry, 2003, pp. 33–34). However, while the festival might not take on the import a religious ceremony would have in a small tribal society, the various Internet Cat Video Festivals imply that there are wider issues at stake, as they are posited as a stage for a ritual passing over. Nick Couldry emphasizes this point in his definition rituals, describing them as

> actions which, because of their patterning, stand in for wider values
> and frameworks of understanding. This connection (or 'framing')
> works as follows:
>
> 1. The actions comprising rituals are structured around certain
>   *categories and/or boundaries.*
> 2. Those categories suggest, or stand in for, an underlying *value.*
> 3. This 'value' captures our sense that *the social* is at stake in the ritual.
>
> (Couldry, 2003, p. 26, italics in original)

The festival is intended as a two-way street, and as a contradiction in terms, of bringing "bad taste" into an institution of "good taste". On the one hand, the festival is a very instrumental (yet to some provocative), idealist attempt at democratizing culture (by attracting "new" audiences). On the other, it is intended to upset the structures of the elite art world. *Video festivals* occupy a peculiar space in contemporary popular culture. *Video* or *film festivals*, are far from arbitrary designations, but comes with their own historical connotations, which in turn will impact our analysis.

Marijke de Valcke sees film festivals primarily as places where filmmakers and their creations acquire symbolic capital. Classic institutions such as Berlin, Venice and Cannes festivals function crucially as tastemakers, carefully giving their stamps of approval to a selected few, effectively legitimizing their activities and productions (de

Valcke, 2016, p. 104-105, 109). For instance, it was no coincidence that the first Venice film festival in 1932 acted under the auspices of the Arts Biennale. Through the association with the Biennale, cinema could take its place as a high art in itself (de Valcke, 2016). The Glasgow edition was arranged by the art gallery in association with the Glasgow Film Festival, but in a fairly independent fashion.

These connotations, however, appear to have been very influential in the choice of venue for Anna Efraimsson, who avowed that the choice was "very well thought through" as she wanted to "play with the festival format". As she explains it,

> partly I wanted to have an authentic theatre [*en äkta teater*], [51] that connotes like gold and velvet, this old, erm, theatre to underline the theatre as a meeting point, which it was originally. I'm not sure how old Södran is, but from that time, or if it was even earlier, you met at the theatre, and looked at each other. Erm, so that was important, and then, the actual spatial aspect of a theatre, but also that Södra Teatern is almost the only place in Stockholm with a very wide understanding of culture [*ett brett kulturbegrepp*] so that both high and low culture [*fin- och fulkultur*] and popular culture, can be found under the same roof, and they also have a lot of queer – that's where the queer scene is, so that was important. I'm extremely picky in general with choosing venues [*platser*] for my events because it so… how should I put it… Because it colours [*färgar*] the experiences so much. [xxxvi]

As in the case of Walker Art Center, it appears that Efraimsson aimed for an event with wide appeal, but, which also demarcates a safe space for the non-conformist, one that simultaneously connotes "high culture" [*finkultur*], and "low culture" [*fulkultur*], one that adheres to these categories, but also aims to deconstruct them. In Swedish, the language separating the categories is even more damning, as the terms *finkultur* and *fulkultur* directly translate as *fine* culture and *ugly* culture respectively. Like Bruce, then, Efraimsson is interested in a liminality, a *crossing over,* an overlap between clearly demarcated categories. However, there appears to remain a certain ambivalence. While it is not the epitome of cultural elite in the way that the Royal Dramatic Theatre (*Dramaten*) is, Södran would not be the most accessible space.

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[51] *Äkta* can also mean genuine, real, true, good, pure and legitimate. Interestingly, in its verb form *att äkta*, it is a rather archaic term meaning to marry.

7.2.1. Vetting and Social Capital

Both Bruce and Efraimsson managed to get the rights to the festival through personal contacts with WAC. Bruce being personally acquainted with Sarah Schultz at WAC, and they having talked about GoMA hosting the festival. These personal connections appear to have functioned as a vetting system of sorts. Obviously, being able to access these contacts, demands a certain social capital, being in contact with crucial networks,

> **Ingeborg Hasselgren**: *[…]what's your role within the Gallery of Modern Art, and like the Glasgow Film Festival*
>
> **Katie Bruce:** I'm a producer curator with the Gallery of Modern Art, which is a role that I've had the last four years, and before that I was a social inclusion coordinator. So, I don't work for the film festival. This is actually the first time that we've been part of the film festival this year. We've talked about it before, but we never had the capacity to do it. […]
> the cat video festival has been on my radar since November since 2012 when I was at a conference with Sarah Schultz […] the director of public practice for Walker Art Centre. We were at the same conference, she was talking about Open Field my speaking about the social justice work that we used to do here, but I also I'd also done an exhibition called Atelier Public 2011-12 where we left materials in the gallery and the public made the art work, so we had a huge conversation while we're at there about the notion of public space, how public space is used, how institutional public space is used by artists, by visitors the idea about encounter, the idea about participation in the galleries, and what is educational and what's curatorial, and the Internet Cat Video Festival, had just literally been screened for that first time... erm, as part of open field their large programme when she spoke about it, we... jokingly said wouldn't it be interesting if it ever came to Glasgow?

The extreme popularity of both Internet cats as phenomenon and in the festival, meant that there was a also a level of competition to be allowed to organize it. Efraimsson seems to have had a great advantage through her personal connections, as she comments in the local Stockholm entertainment magazine *Nöjesguiden*:

> I knew about the original in the US. I looked at their homepage and I have friends who worked with the festival. I just thought it sounded cool [*fett*]. Then I read about it in DN [the national newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*], and I thought, if even DN's writing about it, I need to do something with it, or someone else is going to.[xxxvii]

(Ewald, 2014)

In the interview with me, she elaborated on the checks WAC did before allowing Efraimsson to proceed with her version of the festival. This "quality control" appeared mostly concerned with avoiding exploitative commercialism.

> **Anna Efraimsson:** […] They [WAC] get lots of petitions from all over the world, but mostly from the US, from different places that want to display it. […] it was interesting with my proposal, because it was much more intellectualized, and not like "shit, what a crazy thing!" I never wanted to make into a crazy thing, rather the opposite, to approach it as a social phenomenon [*ett samhällsfenomen*].
>
> **Ingeborg Hasselgren**: *Did you have to work with them in any way, did they check the venue or something, or could you just go ahead?*
>
> **AE:** We did have some Skype meetings, and conversations, so there was some kind of… they did want to check what kind of context this would be. I think they had had some cases with really commercial forces, since this has such an insane, inexplicable commercial potential, they had cases where people had set really high ticket prices and so on, one of their stipulations was that it needs to be non-profit and pro animals rights…
>
> **IH:** *So they did have some stipulations to let you arrange it?*
>
> **AE:** I also had – because I attended and course in the US, and by chance, two of my class mates worked at WAC, so they knew who I was. [xxxviii]

Again, these quotes display how WAC in both cases, appears to promote certain values, steering the festivals in order to avoid sensationalism. Efraimsson points to her "intellectualized" approach, while Bruce mentions her discussion with Schultz about public participation in art institutions.

7.3. The Cat Hipster – Cute Taste Hierarchies

I would now like to return to the issue of taste, and specifically, what types of cutenesses are expressed on site, and what type of hierarchical relationships are represented. Again, it is worth reiterating that cuteness can never be just one thing, but has to be understood in the plural. This also means that cuteness is not only culturally constructed, by historically contingent as well. The particular cuteness of the Internet cat, has gained a popularity, and a certain *coolness*, that historically, was not part of Western cuteness culture. Will Braden, the curator of the 2014 video festival,

speculates that the popularity of cat videos is related to the rise of geek culture. Suddenly, a genre that evolved on obscure Internet fora is widely shared and enjoyed (and exploited for financial gain)

> Something began to change for cat videos in 2012. I think part of it was the rise of geek culture. Comic book movies were making millions of dollars, zombie shows were giving cable channels their highest ratings ever—niche markets were breaking into the mainstream, a lot of things that were previously thought of as marginal were gaining real acceptance. It was becoming cool to like stuff that was uncool before.
>
> (Braden, 2015, p. 91)

This development is concomitant with a wider coupling of cuteness and coolness. Yano has shown that certain genres of Japanese *kawaii* (but far from all), has a strong coolness factor (2013, p. 58). Japanese cute, then, functions as an umbrella term that encompasses more subversive, playful and ironic elements. This is part of what she calls "the wink on pink", illustrated through the example of a Hello Kitty Fender guitar:

> Hello Kitty (cute) on a Fender guitar (cool) suggests that the guitar is made more accessible to the kawaii world of shôjo, at the same time as Hello Kitty and kawaii are given a new tongue-in-cheek wink of meaning. The wink defines cute as newly cool.
>
> (Yano, 2013, p. 62)

Elsewhere, we find examples of more conscious efforts of "coolifying" the cat, and by extension, the cat owner. The California-based CatCon, started in 2015, is a fan convention for cat lovers, described as "the biggest cat-centric, pop culture event in the world dedicated to all things feline, with a community of cat lovers that spans the globe." (CatCon, n.d.). Part of this highly commercialized event (though it also partners with charities, and offers an adoption service), is the ambition of "Debunking the Cat Lady Myth". As they write on the website: "We are changing the negative perception of the 'crazy cat lady' and proving that it is possible to be hip, stylish, and have a cat, simultaneously." (CatCon, n.d.). However, this transformation is not unproblematic. Rather than making the Crazy Cat Lady (with its association of mental illness, loneliness, social exclusion, borderline bestiality), acceptable, or even cool, CatCon, are

imbuing the cat person with "cool" by association to other cool things, by attaching the prefix to "the right kind" of people. By making the cat lady cool, companies can access (middle class) markets with more financial clout.

 Much of (digital) cute culture, then, caters to, and is embraced by, the financially powerful, yet discerning niche market of *the hipster*. This much ridiculed, even hated, stereotype is described by Schiermer as

> …young, white and middle class, typically between 20 and 35 years old. They contribute to the 'gentrification' of former 'popular', working-class, ethnic or 'exotic' neighbourhoods in the bog Western cities … Hipsters generally vote to the left, typically study at the humanities or work in the 'creative industry' or in cafés or bars or music or fashion stores.

> (Schiermer in Scott, 2017, p. 63)

All part of a wider cultural trend, of rediscovering discarded objects of nostalgia, and making them "cool". Richard Godwin of *The Standard* (which I also discussed in chapter 6), even recognizes *the cutester* a cute subspecies of the hipster, one that enjoys cartoons, cereal, bright sparkly things, childhood nostalgia and Internet cats. While Godwin describes this subspecies as less condescending and blasé, and more enthusiastic and open (2014) than the typical hipster, it still, as it remains a rather exclusive, and guarded project. The cutester possesses a cultural capital dependent on tech savviness, being comfortable with the fast-moving tempo of social media, and engaged in a constant search for "authenticity", often in the form of vintage media, clothes, artisanal foods, or childhood memorabilia.

This "cool" cuteness was more pronounced in the Stockholm edition, and especially at the Thursday screening. In contrast to the family-friendly, something-for-everyone event of GoMA, the Stockholm event took on a decidedly more "adult" air. Not only for its more intellectualized approach with panel discussion, but also for some of the content at the cat night club. This was set in the bar/club area upstairs from the theatre, with a stunning view of the Stockholm skyline.

> I go up to the bar area where the nightclub will be. It is still very subdued at 20:30. I am wondering why this event was planned for a

Thursday. It's not a night when people in Stockholm like to go out. That might explain why not that many people are here. Also, importantly, the nightclub (as opposed to the screening) has an age restriction: only aged 20 and over are allowed. This is a common thing in Sweden, even though the legal drinking age is 18.

The space itself is divided into three main sections; the bar itself is located in the largest space, which also includes a small dance floor and stage; a smaller room with mirrors, sofas and coffee tables; and finally, a "middle sized" room with a panorama window showing an exquisite view of the Stockholm sky line. The walls are cream white with details in gold, starkly accentuating the intense red of the staircase leading up to the theatre. On the walls are (artsy) photos of male nudes in suggestive poses.

The smaller rooms are decorated with a distinct cat theme. A space - themed garland spells out "*Katt-Salong*" (Cat Salon), each pane of the semi-circle panorama window has a photo of a cat attached to it.

Some do arrive specifically for the nightclub. I talk briefly with a pair of thirty-something women who shows up dressed in cat-themed clothing. We chat a bit about what cuteness is. One of the women wonders if there will be interviews with children, her kids love cute things and would love to talk about it.

After a while, the T-shirt stall moves into the bar area and is placed right in front of the DJ both. Two women are Dj:ing. The next event for the evening is a concert with the band Psycho Kittens. The programme describes them in this way:

Psycho Kittens "is a Stockholm based trio consisting of Fancy Cat, Sassy Cat, and Shady Cat. They call their music 'schitzo cat punk' with influences from hip hop, post punk and performance art. Psycho Kittens are uncomfortable, unreliable, cute like kittens with razor sharp claws." [xxxix]

Harsh sounding, punk rock music, sharply contrasted by the sweetness of their outfits. One of the three band members, a girl who also plays the drums, is dressed in white; a frilly fluffy dress, with a large pink bow on her chest, and to finish it off, fluffy bunny ears that move lazily. Her face is made up as bunny, with white snout and whiskers. The guy on the guitar (bass?) is dressed in fish net tights, a short skirt, fluffy multicoloured sweater, and black cat ears. The last member, is a woman dressed in a pinstriped pant suit, cat make up, and black cat ears.

This strong association of the (Internet) cat with the hipster was commented on by "Saga", who attended the Saturday screening, where the crowd was arguably more diverse. In Saga's view, adding the prefix "cat" to hipster, is superfluous.

Ingeborg Hasselgren: *What did you think about the other attendees at the festival? Did you feel… Was it as you expected, the kind of people who were there?*

Saga: I think.. I had expected more like cat hipsters. There quite a lot of, oh yeah, I saw quite a lot of families, and children and so on. I didn't really expect that, even though it was an early screening [*matiné*], I thought it was going to be more, I didn't think it was going to be so respectable [*städat*]. I thought it was going to be more, I mean it was on a Saturday I think, so I thought it was going to be like two hundred hipsters with hip flasks in their inner pockets. [IH laughs] like drinking beer and looking at cats.

IH: *yeah.*

S: that's the mental picture I had.

IH: *so what's a cat hipster?*

S: a cat hipster is… I don't know really. I don't think I need the prefix "cat" [IH laughs] it's like, it's part of being a hipster, you like cats, or use them as… I see a lot of prints, on like clothes and hats, I mean with cats. It's something that speaks to these people. Not necessarily because they like cats, I guess it has become some sort of cool thing [*en innegrej*], that it's cats.

IH: *you mean that it's the fashion right now, having lots of cats? Do you think it will change?*

S: yeah… I think it probably will. Erm and then, it will just be us left, the real crazy cat ladies-people.[xl]

Saga's reaction illustrates some of the complications of courting a cool, urban crowd like the hipsters. While she at least superficially does tick off several of the boxes in the definition of hipster (visually white, educated in an art school, club kid), she personally rejects the label hipster. Saga makes a clear distinction between the vapid cat hipsters, and herself, one of the "real crazy cat ladies-people". Hipster culture is notorious for the way its subjects refuse any type of self-identification, as Ico Maly and Piia Varis put it "The hipster, it seems […] is always someone else" (2016, p. 645). Saga recognizes that (Internet) cats are on trend, but insists that her personal interest and love for felines extends beyond a temporary fancy: she has a cat of her own, a vast collection of cat porcelain figurines, and a large tattoo in the shape of a cat's head on a prominent place on her chest. All this points to her authentic appreciation of Internet cats. She doesn't attend the festival because it is "cool" but because she genuinely loves cats. Still "A 'real' hipster does not wear hipster identity markers because he or

she wants to be a hipster; rather, one wears them because 'that is how one is'." (Maly and Varis, 2016, p. 646). Still, paracinema and Internet cats describe a similar situation whereby a taste public is defined partly through their opposition against an Other, an "enemy".

While paracinema crowned the cineaste as this ultimate foe, for fans of the Internet cat, it appears to be our elusive friend, the hipster. Everyone seems to agree that hipsters love cats, but no one proudly identifies themselves as a hipster. Hipsters, to fans of Internet cats, are the ultimate nemesis, supposedly being shallow, inauthentic, ironic, yet exclusive and excluding in their engagement with the cats. Counterintuitively then, the lack of hipsters – replaced primarily by families with children at the Saturday screening – can be seen as a breath of fresh air, as more *authentic* experience of cuteness. The hipster is then the ultimate nemesis, from all angles: they are either too superficial and trendy, or too pretentious and condescending.

7.3.1. Queer Spaces?

If the Saturday screening in Stockholm was surprisingly "respectable", the one on Thursday night was less so. In comparison to Glasgow, the Stockholm festival engaged more closely with the text of the cat videos themselves. Indeed, the idea of having a queer feminist night club, and a panel debate on the Internet cat in society, was a direct response to the cat video programme itself, offering as sort of feminist counter reading to a, in Efraimsson's eyes, problematic text.

> **Ingeborg Hasselgren***: Exactly, how did you change, and how did you create the [visual profile] you ended up using?*
>
> **Anna Efraimsson**: yeah, good question, I have to backtrack.
>
> **IH**: *yeah*.
>
> **AE:** Like this. When I looked through their [Walker Art Center] programme, the way they did it the year before, that reel was online and then how – all the documentation of their event, it was out doors, it was a festival with a wider appeal [*en folkfest*], and I thought the whole thing was very macho. There was this typical, to me, nearly all the videos had this male gaze, and around the event too, they were talking in a very – this generic bro like American bro humour

[*snubbhumor*], that's very familiar to us in various pop culture
phenomena and movies and I thought it was there, in their event,
and I really wanted to move away from that.
Instead, I wanted to focus – the feminist – the cat as feminist and so
on. And then I contact- originally, I was going to show the reel, but I
was also going to have our own competition, like a call for cat videos,
with one of the categories being the most feminist, and the most –
there was going to be rather special categories, like the cutest, the
most feminist, the most political, and people would be invited to
submit work, because I wanted to broaden the idea [*bilden*] of... cat
videos that existed at the time, but I wasn't given any public money
for it, and I really couldn't afford putting a lot of time on making a call
for videos, it would be fairly time consuming. And that whole thing,
and I felt that the profile, the visual, I wanted to do something new,
so I contacted- just when I started thinking about this, I contacted
some people called Bastion, they work in a way that's very norm
critical and queer feminist, in their design language so we created it
together in a way, the content too.[xli]

Not knowing exactly what she had bought, Efraimsson appears dismayed with the
male gaze she experiences in many of the videos. She is also troubled by the thought
that she personally would be associated with this problematic text. The surrounding
activities (the panel debate, the cat night club) are in a way, there to contain, or to use
a Latourian term, *mediate* the cat videos (Krieger and Bellinger, 2014, pp. 94–95). By
placing the videos in a critical framework, other aspects of the cats emerge. The
festival is an invitation to the audience to perform an analysis of their own, guided as it
were, by the panel debate, and other activities. While the Queer Cat Night Club was
aimed at adults, Efraimsson, like Bruce, also arranged more inclusionary activities.
ÖFA[52] held a Danceoke, where the attendees were invited to dance together,
mimicking the movements of various cat-themed music videos. In a way, it's an
invitation to not only watch the cat videos, but through movement *become* a cat in a
video. Perhaps the most spectacular event at the Cat Night Club, was dance
performance by the members of ÖFA, who Efraimsson engaged specifically to help host
the Queer Cat Night Club.

Four of the ÖFA members are on stage. They introduce themselves
and say that they are about to perform a piece from their show
"What happens in Uppsala, stays in Uppsala" currently playing at

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[52] A performance group I discuss more in-depth in chapter 5: Cute Cabbage Worms.

Uppsala Stadsteater.[53]

> The music starts playing and the dancers move. Suddenly, all of them pull their trousers and underwear down. The audience gasps, and the interest suddenly increases. The four performers turn their backs to the audience. They've painted stylized cat faces on their naked butts. They shake their hips slowly to the beat of the music, takes some steps to the right and left. This continues throughout the performance. If feel embarrassed, but try to keep up, and hide behind my camera in order to capture the show and the audience reaction to it. Excited cheers from the audience, cameras flash, but there are no cat calling or sexist commenting.

This performance ties in nicely with Södra Teaterns long tradition of hosting burlesque performances, and in extension, aligns with a certain "cool", perhaps queer cuteness. In previous chapters, I have discussed the queerness of cute primarily in terms of its disruption of embodied categories and creation of new affective relationships. These are indeed present the Stockholm festival's use of cuteness. However, access to this cool-queer cuteness is not equal, and it may function as an exclusionary practice. In most Western democracies queerness, despite its origins as anti-mainstream project, often end up dominated by white, middleclass subjects (Riggs, 2010, p. 349). Especially lesbian and gay subjects, tend to be well integrated as "well-behaved, spending consumers" (Taylor, 2009, p. 201). Queerness, then, as with most identities in under capitalism, is to a large degree dependent on consumerism, where making money a necessity for participation. While the intention is to create a safe space away dominant culture, queerness often comes with unfortunate exclusionary taste politics, marking those who cannot (or will not) consume in a certain fashion, as others, and as "wrong, unentitled and inauthentic" (Taylor, 2009, p. 201).

In a Swedish context, queerness is often associated with a certain urban cool. Fairly early on, Swedish mainstream media and politicians took to the word *queer* to an extent not seen in for instance the UK. Partly, this can be explained by the diluted version of queer that spread in the Swedish mainstream. Queer in this sense isn't necessarily a radical approach to gender and sexuality, but is rather a consumption

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[53] Uppsala is a university town about 1 hour on the train north of Stockholm.

trend, a representation of urban cool, of "cozy middleclass gay men"[54] (Kulick, 2005, pp. 13–14), of a way of playing with clothes and attributes in gender defying ways, but ultimately never challenging the fundamentals of life in the neoliberal capitalist system. Should one really expect a video festival to change the world? Perhaps not, but the "queer" is often bandied around in this way to attract a cool urban audience. In general, when creating safe spaces, one assumes a protection against something, a shell warding against the outside world. This warding means accommodating some audiences, and in effect, excluding others. On the other hand, an event that aims to invite a wide range of audiences, often ends up promoting the dominant culture. But the queer of this safe space, is often geared towards invisible normative categories, able-bodied, white, middleclass. Ironically, those same categories that might not actually need the most protection. Both the Glasgow and Stockholm event hoped to attract a diverse audience, and neither looked to exclude any one potential audience. But does the exclusivity of safe spaces necessarily mean that they are elitist? Obviously, creating an event that is solely intended for children with families, can also be exclusionary, promoting a space for dominant heteronormative family constellations, many of whom are middle class.

In the interview with me, Efraimsson seems concerned with emphasizing the diversity of the crowd, listing families with children, middle aged cat lovers, cool hipsters, and recounted to me how she gave an elderly man a free ticket when he showed up at the door. While all these groups were definitely present on site, and welcome to attend the screenings, the activities framing the festival inevitably catered to a certain section of the audience, or a specific taste culture, with its intellectualized approach, and late night age restriction, constructing the feel of a vibrant, fast moving, collaborative online culture translated into a physical world. The fact that the event was ticketed, may also have affected the makeup of the audience. While the cost of tickets –150 SEK (around £12.50) for the Thursday, and 90 SEK (around £7.50) for the Saturday—was certainly not exploitative (it sits comfortably around the costs for a normal cinema ticket), it would still be a considerable expense for a family of several people.

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[54] "med mysiga medelklassbögar"

According to Efraimsson, it mainly covered the cost of renting the venue. Similarly, the fact that the event was very quickly sold out, meant that you had to be *in the know* in order to get your ticket. Possibly even more so taking into account the fact that the festival was only promoted via social media, according to Efraimsson. In other words, subjects with particular social and cultural capital, would have a much easier time to get the tickets. While the Glasgow event was also sold out, the fact that it was free of charge meant that categories of less financially strong families were able to attend. But it also seemed that not all tickets booked for the Sunday screening were picked up.

7.3.2. Marginalized Cuteness

The *coolness* of this Stockholm event, was destabilized by an interesting impasse at the Thursday night screening.

> One of the couches in the corner of the lobby, contains an aged, scruffy-looking man. He asks me in a loud voice if I am a journalist. I say, that no, I am not, and attempt to explain to him that I am there as a PhD- student, collecting materials for my dissertation. He seems a bit disappointed, but asks if he may show me something, it is cat-themed, he insists. I hesitate; the man is dirty, with an unwashed beard, and clad in a T-shirt with unidentifiable stains. He reeks of alcohol.

> The rest of the crowd keeps well away from him. If I hadn't been there in a "professional" capacity, I probably would've avoided him too. We stay in a small bubble, everyone keeping a couple of meters of safety margin between them and the man. I feel ashamed over my disgust, and thus allow him to go on. He pulls out a thin stack of papers. They're crayon drawings that he made himself. Each one depicts a simple "stick cat," basically a stick figure with cat ears and whiskers. Some of them are made to commemorate a special occasion. For instance, a celebrity's birthday.

> They tend to contain awkward puns on famous peoples' names. He laughs when reading them out for me. I try to project an air of interest, but the man makes me very uncomfortable. When the bell rings to alert the visitors that the show is about to start, I hastily excuse myself, and run up the stairs again. I promise to return after the screening, to let him show me more, and take photos of the drawings. I'm not sure that I actually will. During the screening I decide that I have to search him out again. Just because he doesn't fit with my expectations of what the film festival would be like, doesn't mean I should ignore him. Rather the opposite. With a heavy heart I head down to the lobby again after the screening, fearing what is probably going to be a very awkward experience. The man is no-where to be seen. I wonder whether he tired of waiting for me,

> seeing through my excuses, or if he was chucked out by security. He was clearly inebriated after all. As far as I saw earlier, none of the staff bothered him. When I hand in my coat, I ask the staff if they've seen him. "Was anyone escorted out by security?" But the man working in the cloakroom hasn't seen anything.

In my mind, there are two ways of looking at this incident. On the one hand, it illustrates the universal appeal of the cute, as it attracts a marginalized individual, along with the hipsters, cat lovers, academics and middleclass families. On the other hand, the type of *un*cool cute production/consumption that this man represented (far removed from "digital cool" of the other attendees), occupies the lower end of a sort of hierarchy of cute taste. One that I myself am very much part of constructing. Just like the bad taste of paracinema, cuteness, despite its mass appeal, represents a taste hierarchy unto itself (Sconce, 1995, p. 384). In other words, there are "correct" or "worthy" ways of consuming (producing) cuteness, and "unworthy" or "incorrect" ways. While the "cat hipsters" mark their authenticity, and group belonging via the consumption/production pattern of certain Internet cat-themed objects, engaging in the "wrong" type of cute cat culture (drawing stick cats celebrating "uncool" celebrities), or engaging with it in the "wrong" way (showing up inebriated, not dressed in appropriate clothes like the cat-themed designers sneakers other participants wore), can mark people as outsiders (Taylor, 2009, p. 201). Not only is his cuteness "wrong" but his approach is problematic, as it lacks a certain level of (educated) distance, or ironic appreciation. To talk with Bourdieu, this man's *habitus* appears ill-adapted to the space of the festival, or rather, the festival is constructed to anticipate other types of habitus.

While other chapters in this thesis have shown that cuteness can be used an object for a community to rally around, cute taste, or lack thereof, can – like all taste cultures – be exclusionary. The irony in the whole situation, is the fact that this man probably has more in common with a "traditional" crazy cat lady, celebrated by the festival, and in this way could be considered more "authentic" than many of the other attendees. Yet, he is excluded from the same event. We could see these groups (hipsters, families, cat lovers, academics, performance artists) attending the Internet Cat Video Festival as different *taste publics.* While they are engaged in the same *taste culture*, they often

have diametrically different views and approaches, and sometimes end up clashing (Sconce, 1995, p. 375).

7.4. Theorizing the Cat

A striking aspect of the Internet Cat Video Festivals, is the immense media coverage, both in numbers of article produced, and the number of media outlets present on site. In Glasgow, *The Guardian* and BBC Radio 4 documented the event, resulting in a documentary entitled Pussy Galore, led by comedian Susan Calman. In Stockholm, a team from Public Service TV SVT filmed on site, as did the TV crew from the national newspaper *Aftonbladet*. A journalist from Sweden's largest newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, wrote a two-page spread for the Saturday edition (Ritzén, 2014), but also more niche publications like *Kattliv* – a magazine for cat fanciers, were represented. According to Efraimsson's personal press archive, there were 13 articles (some published in several outlets), 3 radio interviews, and one morning TV-show appearance (Efraimsson, 2015).

In general, ANT assumes that the researcher (or "scientist") always contributes to the network they are studying. As Krieger and Bellinger puts it, "Science as interpretation does not merely describe the world, it changes the world" (2014, p. 99). In my case, I was actively sought out by various representatives as a researcher, interviewed at both events. Questions related mainly to *why* I studied Internet Cats, but also, crucially, why people are so obsessed with Internet cats. In a way, then, I have functioned as a type of "expert witness" asked to explain this "weird thing" and to provide useable sound bites (the latter, I have to admit, is not my forte). The interest from various media outlets, has also been promoted as a unique selling point by Walker Art Center itself, for instance in this quote on their website.

> What began as a social experiment testing the boundaries of online communities and crowd-sourcing public content resulted in attention from local, national, and international audiences and press, including the *Los Angeles Times*, *Wired*, *Newsweek*, *Huffington Post*, the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, the *Atlantic*, AP, and the BBC.
>
> (Walker Art Center, 2012)

The media attention was also mentioned on GoMA's blog, including a reference to myself.

> It's amazing what Internet Cat Video Festival sparked off. We had a PHD [sic] student who came for both days and will use the interviews she took as part of her thesis on cuteness; Radio 4 were up, recording for a programme about cats and their owners for later this year

> (GoMA and playablespaces, 2015)

At times, the presence of the media crews and cameras became almost comical, like at the Stockholm Cat Night Club, where, early on in the night, more people seemed to take photos of the dance floor than actually dancing on it. In this sense, the festivals, the surrounding media coverage, and academic interests, could be understood in terms of a media ritual.

Couldry describes media rituals as "*formalised actions organised around key media-related categories and boundaries, whose performance frames, or suggests a connection with, wider media-related values*" (2003, p. 29, italics in original). The media attention is yet another way that cuteness in general, and the Internet cat in particular, is legitimized as a phenomenon worthy of attention. The festivals taken as a whole, is about "taking cat videos seriously", re-conceptualizing a frivolous expression of popular culture into high art.

Along with the festival WAC published an anthology of texts by artists, academics, curators and cat video producers entitled *Cat is Art Spelled Wrong.* The events of the festivals is couched in a feeling that the people involved are doing something remarkable (and provocative!) by elevating this genre to high art. For instance, in this quote by Will Braden – himself a producer of Internet cat videos.

> In every interview I've ever given about Henri or the festival, there has been a variation of the following questions: 'So what's with cats and the Internet ?' Sometimes the questions will be delivered with feigned excitement. Sometimes it's asked with the muffled exasperation of a reporter who doesn't seem terribly enthused to have been given an assignment that's fluffier than a Persian's tail. Sometimes, though it's infrequent, people are so dubious they can't even be bothered to hide their incredulity.

> (Braden, 2015, p. 90)

There is an underlying contradiction in the media coverage. A constant insistence that the cat videos are *important*, but not in their own right. It is not, for instance, their formal aesthetic value that is emphasized. Rather it is in the way that important people find them interesting, and in the way that they "say something about society". Especially the articles reporting on the Stockholm edition follow this tendency of emphasizing the contrast, or contradiction in terms – here in the local entertainment magazine *Nöjesguiden*, where Efraimsson is interviewed by Hugo Ewald.

What do you think makes them so popular?

I've been thinking about that a lot. From a political point of view [*om jag ska slå på stora politiska växlar*] I think it's a symptom of political depression, it comforts us, when we share in global atrocities on the Internet . And then it's about routine, like a micro break when so many people are working with their computers. It gives us a small kick, and some humour. So, on the one hand, I think it is super political, and on the other, wholly apolitical.

(Ewald, 2014) [xlii]

Similar views are also promoted in a two pages spread in *Dagens Nyheter*. Journalist Jessica Ritzén interviews the psychologist Jenny Jägerfeld, one of the presenters in the panel debate. Here, the emphasis is more on the psychological function of the Internet cat:

Cat videos decrease anxiety, instead of using psychotropic drugs. It cleanses us, and makes us laugh out loud. If I could prescribe medications in my job as a psychologist, I'd give people prescriptions for cat videos for mild to moderate depression, says Jenny Jägerfeld jokingly. […]

 -It's not sexual, and it's not political, rather the opposite, a counter weight to all the evil in the world. You cleanse yourself with cat videos. There's nothing ironic or hipsterish about them, everything is very pure and innocent, says Jenny Jägefeld.

(Ritzén, 2014) [xliii]

The Internet cat is a beacon of light in a harsh, unforgiving world. Strikingly, the cats themselves are left behind. The analysis here, again, is concerned with the instrumentality of the Internet cat. While jokingly put, Jägerfeld and Efraimsson (and the journalists Ewald and Ritzén respectively), suggest that something else is at stake

here than simply the enjoyment associated with watching images of cute cats. Rituals, according to Couldry (and Bourdieu), tend to be interpreted as having wider power implications, no matter if they do not involve any explicitly "ideological 'content'" (2003, p. 28). It is not, then, the Internet cat itself that is at stake, but it is rather seen as an illustration of the state of the human psyche in late capitalism (or an experiment overcoming the division of high/low culture, or broadening the appeal of an art institution). Of course, this often means that the media rituals are contradictory, as different interpretations clash.

In Stockholm, Efraimsson and the invited scholars function as *expert witnesses*, affirming the importance of the Internet cat, but at the same time reifying the categories the event is said to disrupt. Vanja Hermele is quoted extensively in an article on svt.se, the public service television news site. Here, she confesses to her deep love of Internet cats, while expressing her concern with overconsumption:

> Vanja Hermele is a PhD-student in Gender Studies, and is one of the panelists on stage during the cat video festival. She is in two minds about the Internet cat as a phenomenon. – I think that I personally have reached "peak Internet cat". Not a day passes without someone sending me a cat video. We need to stop soon. It can't be healthy. At the same time, she thinks that the digital interaction with the cats can function as an air bag, [helping] our senses handle the harshness of reality on the Internet . – The world in burning up and at the same time we're watching Internet cats. In the same way a coffee bean can cleanse the palate between perfume samples, the cat washes your eyes between horrible events. It's been hard and difficult to follow the news this summer. The Internet cat can help us endure, and navigate the flow of information. I don't know if that's good or horribly dangerous.

(Veerabuthroo Nordberg, 2014) [xliv]

Again, the Internet cats are only really interesting in the way that they "say something" about society. They are instrumental for *something else*, as signifiers for something other than their pure aesthetic value. Both Hermele and Jägerfeldt appear to refer to what Page (2017) has called "cruel relief". It describes the way that cute animal videos allow us short moments of respite in our stressful everyday life, helping us endure. Page deliberatively calls it cruel because normalizes and perpetuates the conditions under neoliberal capitalism, rather than instigating any change (2017, p. 80). Hermele,

compared to the others quoted here, is more ambivalent to the worth of Internet cats, stating: "it can't be healthy", yet "it can help us endure". To be fair, I myself am not really interested in the cats for their *own sake* at this point, as described by Ritzén in DN.

> A PhD-student who is hunting for materials for her thesis on the attraction of cuteness, is documenting the whole phenomena [the Internet Cat Video Festival].
>
> -I am writing about how cuteness affects us and how it is exploited in the media. Cat videos are a part of that, and I doing my first field work to see how people react to the videos. The media circus is really interesting, how many people are here to look at people who look at cute stuff, says Ingeborg Hasselgren PhD-student with the university in Sussex.
>
> (Ritzén, 2014)[xlv]

All in all, scholars play a crucial part in the discourse surrounding the festival, especially in Stockholm. In Jeffrey Sconce's view, the grad students were vital in changing the cultural status of these low brow genres, subjecting "trash" media to the same meticulous study, and even reverence as one would previously give opera or other examples of fine arts (Sconce, 1995, p. 375). Concomitantly with the legitimisation of paracinema, came a need to defend or even reify its underdog position vis-à-vis the establishment. This represents a core part of the paracineast's identity construction, and is a crucial raison d'être for the whole genre and its social community. If trash cinema wasn't discarded as bad taste, what would then set it apart from "good taste" and "good cinema"? Striking a balance between describing the intrinsic value of Internet cats, beyond themselves (as anti-depressants, as dangerously distracting, as disrupting low/high culture) as objects worthy of study, simultaneously, threatens to undermine their value as props for crafting an identity as a newly-minted (or in the process of "minting") academic.

Academia is based on a constant need for new objects of study, of (re)interpreting, (re)discovering, or at least, for new approaches and applications. Internet cats are "valuable" in this sense due to their previous "worthlessness", and this represents something new to study. However, the act of studying, makes it less accessible and

more established, but also less "dangerous," and thus less useful as "new objects of study". This is why academics (in which I include myself) have a vested interest in emphasising the dangerousness and worthlessness of the cat, even while actively aiding in making it established and a proper object of study. This may be especially true for graduate students that already occupy a precarious position as scholars, half-way between student and legitimate scholar. Openly engaging with, or even celebrating, cat videos, represents a resistance to academic culture, a way of carving out a research space of your own.

 The cute Internet cat, then, can also be said to embody an affective contradiction. Elsewhere in this thesis, I have shown how cuteness often inspires simultaneous twin feelings of attraction and repulsion. In an academic setting, the attractiveness, or easy likability and ubiquitous visibility of cute Internet cats, in taste terms, is what makes it repulsive, for certain taste publics, is counterintuitively what makes the genre attractive as an area of study.

The ability to engage with the "low" category of the Internet cat, and cuteness in general, while simultaneously upholding a position of a museum curator or academic researcher is to occupy a position of great privilege. Bourdieu writes: "nothing is more distinctive, more distinguished, than the capacity to confer aesthetic status on objects that are banal or even 'common'" (2009, p. 502). This double access, as Gripsrud calls it, means that an individual can access both high and low culture. The position is one of *class* privilege, as only a minority can access multiple practices and codes in this way, while a majority, generally those unable to pursue academic education, or without the appropriate social background, can only access "lower" cultural expression (Gripsrud, 1989, cited in Sconce, 1995, p. 383-384). Someone enjoying double access, has the ability to acknowledge the "bad taste" of certain cultural expressions, but then go ahead and say "I am going to like it *anyway*". This does not mean that (for instance) a PhD-student does not genuinely appreciate Internet cats because of their education. The privilege lies in the distancing gaze, the reflexivity vis-à-vis the object of research and its affects, the awareness that one "shouldn't" spend so much time watching kittens ride around on Roombas.

Kjellman-Chapin has described this double-access (in relation to kitsch) as a type class tourism (2010, p. 32). This appropriation of kitsch (or of cuteness) and through a distancing from "uncritical, nonironic appreciation […] which does not dissolve social distinctions but reconstitutes them in a more covert form" (Kjellman-Chapin, 2010, p. 32). In other words, there is a privilege in one's ability to employ one's training in critical thinking, knowledge (of Bourdieu!), and the time and means to do so. Double access, could also be seen in the instrumentalisation of Internet cats, whereby they are made to serve a higher purpose. It can also be found in the assumption that displaying them in the museum (as in Glasgow), will also attract new audiences, supposedly those who are *not* privileged.

In summary, this coverage given by scholars, curators, organizers and media functions in two contradictory ways. First of all, it legitimizes the phenomenon of the Internet cat, and various acts of consumption by giving it time and attention. All in all, Internet cats are not only interesting, but important, if one is to understand the state of the world. The very act (or ritual) of gazing, analysing and/or consuming, fills the Internet cat with symbolic capital.

Simultaneously, this attention tends to emphasize the strangeness, the shocking quality of placing Internet cats in art museums, or theatres. As Couldry writes, rituals tend to naturalize order, rather than disrupting them (2003, p. 27). The performative happening of the festival, results in a type of fetishisation of the crossing over, which highlights the contrast between high/low, rather than challenging the border between the two.

The festival, and the coverage, pivots on a perceived contradiction between high culture and low culture. An Internet Cat Video Festival taking place in an art museum, is a contradiction in terms, it is a titillating clash of categories. This clash is dependent on the two categories being separate, *and* opposite. By emphasising the juxtaposition, the passing over from one category to another, one actually end up reifying these categories.

7.5. Screening Affects – Digital/Physical Intermingling

There remains to this day a pervasive idea that the Internet or the digital is unreal – or at least *less* real than the physical. In extension, this would mean that Internet should not be considered as important as physical space. This could partly explain the fleeting, worthless quality of the Internet cat, as an ephemeral image disseminated at will, supposedly accessed by anyone and everyone. The Internet and other digital spaces are often regarded as "excessive" in this way, lacking control and boundaries, overcoming national borders, blurring the line between legal and illegal. With smartphones specifically, the Internet permeates the everyday (supposedly) to an alarming degree, to the point where people are encouraged to do a digital detox, or to limit their screen time (Davis, 2018; Thompson, 2019; Wells, 2016).

The excessiveness of the Internet and the digital is also related to their function as places of play, for adults and children alike. Like cuteness (though for different reasons) digitally connected spaces invites a playful response and childish (neotenous) behaviour. Wittkower has noted how the digital is often coupled with a cute aesthetic (2009), which may contribute to an understanding of the Internet as a sphere of make believe and unrealness. However, as Tom Boellstorff writes, "Reality is not an exclusive property of the online or offline."(2016, p. 395). In his view, it is not that the digital is unreal, rather, it is an *additional* reality to the physical one (Boellstorff, 2016, p. 395). While this understanding of reality is no doubt an improvement of the "digital as unreal", it still suggest that the digital, is somehow a separate space from the physical. Rather, I would regard it as *differently real*.

The Internet cat video festival is not simply a blending between the popular/elite, high/low, good/bad, it is also a way of merging the realities of digital and physical space. This merging or mingling, was differently done at GoMA and at Södra Teatern. While planning the event at GoMa, Bruce and her colleagues proposed different ideas on how to display the videos. One suggestion was to have the videos projected continuously throughout the weekend, letting visitors enter and exit as they pleased – a common practice when displaying video-based art. However, they ultimately settled on keeping the festival format, with clearly demarcated start and end points. This collective screening, emphasizes the ritualistic aspects of the event, and offers the

participants a framing of the videos, helping the sense-making of the videos, suggesting a way of reading them. The surrounding activities were "crowd sourced", either directly engaging the visitors or suggested by the visitors. The latter was the case with the competition segments, which, like everything else, was done "on an absolute shoestring":

> **Ingeborg Hasselgren:** *[…] I know you haven't been to see it [the American festival], but I was wondering, would you have to adapt the screening, or the program for like more a British or Scottish audience, is that anything you--*
>
> **Katie Bruce:** I mean because I see it as a kind of an art work, and when you get an art work you kind of don't interfere with it. I don't know if other venues asked people to submit their own cat videos. So for us, A, we didn't have the resources to be able to do anything on top of what we've actually done just now. [silence] And erm... and I –
>
> **IH:** *'cause you've been mentioning-*
>
> **KB:** and I guess it could have been an interesting 'cause people were actually asking whether they could submit [videos], but we couldn't do that. It would have been one thing if you had the resources, then you could have been kinda a more localized screening, but that's one way that the cat wall came in, we can't do Golden Kitty 'cause that
>
> **IH:** *no no no*
>
> **KB:** and things. So...That's- so if you had the cutest cat, or cat competition, we would be able to do things that would be more local, so that sense of the prize giving belongs to kind of a gala or a festival-
>
> **IH***: 'cause the cats on the wall, is that people who sent in their own...*
>
> **KB:** yeah, via Facebook. I don't know if we actually got any for tomorrow, we need to do a little of a social media call out, everybody was e-mailed and was asked if they wanted to bring a cushion, and if they wanted to bring a cat to the wall...

The wall, Bruce mentions here, was the competition of "cutest cat" and "craziest cat", in which attendees could post pictures of their own cats, competing in the two categories. Others could then vote by placing little stickers on their favourite cat. This showcases the entanglements between digital and non-digital spaces. While digital spaces have long been made to emulate physical spaces and objects, (e.g. dungeons, walls, journals), it also works the other way around, with physical space displaying characteristics of the digital (Boellstorff, 2016, p. 397). The "cat wall" can be seen as

physical continuation of the virtual Instagram feed, or Facebook photo album, where you can "like" a cat. This is also a physical representation, or a ritual re-staging, of the continuous co-creation that is fundamental to social Internet culture in general, and Internet cats in particular. The Internet cat is "made" and remade as a collaboration, through the posting, sharing and reposting of images and videos, it is a meme-based phenomenon. The cat wall can be understood as a meme of a social media, mimicking the online. This co-creative participation, was also emphasized in the surrounding activities, the colouring of cat face masques and making of cat toys and badges, a mixing and remixing of the "text" of the Internet cat.

At the end of each screening, an award ceremony was held to celebrate the winners, whose owners were asked to step up and receive some cat-themed gifts. In addition to this, an award for best costume and best-made cat toy were also awarded, mainly to the children attending the event. Part of this localizing crowd sourcing, is already built into the original format, as the first Walker Art Center relied on the people's votes for deciding on the winners of the "Golden Kitty". Similar requests for a local competition was also heard in Stockholm, but weren't realized because of time restraints and lack of resources, according to Efraimsson. This competitive aspect of the festival is central to its legitimizing factor, according to de Valcke (2016, p. 105). This playful competition held at GoMA transforms the local Glaswegian kittens into Internet cats, and by placing them in the museum in this way, elevates them to objects of cultural value. In extension, the owner too can experience an increase of cultural capital, of being the owner of an esteemed feline.

7.5.1. Staging the Digital Cute

The Internet Cat Video Festival should also be understood against the wider backdrop of the move to digital platforms. This has not only meant that contemporary audiences mainly access moving images in smaller, mobile screens, and in some cases, can afford to install cinema-like set ups in their homes. A development that Francesco Casetti (2008) has named "relocation", in which the cinematic experience has migrated to other contexts and media.

With this term, Casetti describes two opposing trends, *transfer* and *staging*. In the former, the filmic text itself is consumed in a new setting, perhaps on a new media platform. Here, it is the film text as an object which assures a cinematic experience. The Internet Cat Video Festival, represents a very complex case of Transfer. Rather than a feature film moving to a smaller screen, the festival takes moving images most commonly made on a smartphone, and blow them up to (comparatively) gigantic proportions, projected onto a movie screen. The videos in the programme, also originate from different time periods, making the transfer multidimensional. Some materials, like the silent shorts, no doubt having been transferred over a multitude of media platform, and consumption settings.

 The second trend *Staging*, would be of particular interest in our case. The process of staging describes situations wherein a locality, be it an outdoors green field as in Minneapolis, or the white space of GoMa's Gallery 1, is furnished with a screen, or otherwise rearranged in order to mimic the space of the traditional cinema (Casetti, 2008, pp. 7–8). At the same time, this development has also meant opening the cinema theatre up for screenings of works other than "pure" feature films (Gaudreault, 2016, pp. 323–324), for instance, cat videos. Other common examples could be live opera and theatre, or broadcasts of sports events to local cinemas. This development is simultaneous with a wider phenomenon, the return to (obsolete) analogue media and platforms. Evidenced in the rising sales and production of vinyl records, Instax cameras and similar. Moreover, a trend intimately associated with the hipster.

As is continuously reiterated in the discourse around the Internet Cat Video Festival, there appear to be something special about looking at cat videos *together* as opposed to alone in front of your laptop or smartphone. Scott Stulen of Walker Art Center summarizes this idea in a short video clip posted on the Internet Cat Video Festival webpage:

> Watching cat videos is usually a solitary thing, either at your laptop or on your phone, and putting it into a collective atmosphere, so instead of just you watching it, you are with a bunch of friend or with new friends. Kinda sharing that moment together, and I think there something about the social nature of this that makes it special.

(*Internet Cat Video Festival*, 2012)

Though one could question whether cat videos really are a solitary pastime, at least if seen in the context of simultaneous online viewing, or the phenomenon of sharing cat videos with others on social media suggests that we at least regard our individual viewing as part of a larger, Andersonian "imagined audience" of fellow feline lovers (Anderson in Featherstone, 2003, p. 346). Similarly, Casetti argues that there *is* a sense of the communal online, though it is *virtual* (Casetti, 2008, p. 9). Interestingly, it appears that the mere physical presence of others, engaged in a communal, simultaneous consumption of the same material, is an experience of particular worth. Page, writing on the Internet Cat Video Festival, argues that this communal watching is attractive partly because of the apparent accumulation of affect (2017, p. 87). The more people watching together, the more intense the affective experience. I would rather see it as a *different* experience, not necessarily more intense than a viewing in a private setting. This same idea is repeated over and over again by the organizers of the Glasgow and Stockholm, to the point where the importance of the cats themselves is sometimes actively downplayed. Efraimsson on the webpage of her production company writes: "This festival is not about watching the cat videos, it is about watching the cat videos together."(The Blob, n.d.). This is probably partly an inheritance from the original festival, where this tagline is repeated by several commentators. Still, I would now like to take a closer look at what role specific viewing practices play in the consumption, and experience of cute cat videos. This I believe, can give us crucial clues to whose experience of cute affect is considered genuine, and worthy of attention. Obviously, the issue of what characterizes the cinema experience (as opposed to the experience of moving images in other viewing practices) has a long history in cinema studies, not all of which I am able to address in this short chapter.

Moving images, both video art, and features film, have made their presence known more loudly in the traditional museum spaces, creating a sort of "hybrid screen-space" (Bruno, 2016, p. 23). According to Giuliana Bruno this means that moving images has returned to earlier forms and ideas of filmic projection (Bruno, 2016, p. 29), sometimes seemingly more haphazard or improvised, like the museum spaces are reworked for the screening in Gallery 1.

However, the Internet Cat Video Festival also display other connections to the history of cinema. Allison Page has noted that the genre of online animal videos, has become a new type if *cinema of attractions* (2017, p. 87). Originally this is a term used by Gunning (1986) to describe early cinema's tendency towards exposition, as opposed to narration. In other words, it was the film as a technology, its ability of show the world and its wonders, that attracted the audience, rather than any particularly engaging storytelling. Similarly, Page argues, cute Internet animals are usually not watched in order to follow an engaging narrative, but rather for the affective pleasures involved (Page, 2017b, pp. 86–87).

7.5.2. Cute Affects in Public

Though the attraction of the Cat Video Festival, may partly lie in the opportunity to watch cat videos together, there may also be other reasons for attending the event. "Saga" with whom I attended the Saturday viewing in Stockholm with, explains why she went.

> **Ingeborg Hasselgren:** *this might sound like a stupid question, but why did you want to attend?*
>
> **Saga:** [laughs] because, like, we – it's such a unique thing. I'm thinking, like it's not something you can see in the cinema every weekend, and watch cute videos. So partly because it was such a unique event erm… and then the format, instead of sitting at home and like, watch videos on YouTube, there's a large screen which is, amazing [said in English]. Also, the fact that you do it in an audience were everyone is – you know no one's there because they hate cats [both laugh] or at least I hope they didn't, everyone was there because they love cats, and cute animals. It felt like a very sympathetic group of people to sit down with. Not like when you go to an ordinary cinema.
>
> **IH:** *[...] what was it like to watch it together with others? Was it any difference from watching them on your own?*
>
> **S:** erm, yeah... I think, I thought it was a bit… well it was fun, but also a bit awkward [*halvjobbigt*], because it's a fairly – to me it's a fairly intimate thing, this cute thing and how – I feel really strongly about it that it becomes a bit, I mean to be with other people and look at things that induces so many emotions, it was a bit weird to be honest.
>
> **IH:** *but did you feel like you had to hold something in, or could you –*

S: yeah, I have to say I did, actually

IH: *what sort of things did you hold in?*

S: I think that if I'd been at home, I'd probably have cried more at home. Maybe I'd have cried at the cinema if I, because I often do when I watch cute animals, and not because, not because it's uncomfortably [*jobbigt*] cute, it's more like tears of joy, and I feel tenderness towards cute things, it's like a pressure valve in many ways, to look at cute animals. Maybe I held back on tears, and a lot of these cute exclamations [*sötutrop*] that I make when I watch at home, I was pretty collected at the cat festival.

IH: *what sort of cute exclamations do you usually make?*

S: well, I usually speak in made up languages with my cat, like [in high pitched 'baby voice'] mimimimi bubshibu, aw it's so cute! [both laugh] lots of that kind of thing that erm, I guess there are few people I know who can, with whom I can do this sort of things, like my sister, and my mum, and my ex since ten years. [silence]^{xlvi}

Interestingly, Saga's experience does not appear to have been unequivocally a positive one, or at least not an uncomplicated one with regards to the affective experience of the cute. The original attraction appears to have been based off an expectation of being able to watch the videos together with fellow cat lovers, which would somehow enhance this everyday experience, making it special. The logic here, which the various organizers were keen to emphasize, was a sense that shared affect, is more affect. While I do agree that the particular cute affect of Internet cats is associated with their memetic nature (that they are continuously shared, remixed and reposted) I would argue that it is means that its cuteness affect is accumulative – it builds up, but *changes*, over time. Defining the cute affect of Internet cat is complicated by the fact that there are multiple genres. Some of which are more dependent on being highly recognizable than others. The cat meme is a referential category, dependent on recognition (but not necessarily of a knowledge of the original source) in order to achieve "full" affect. Every rewatch of a particular video, will not afford the exact same experience, partly because one is not the exact same person the first time as the next. In these cases, the subject not only experiences the affect of the present viewing, but layering on top of it, is the memories of previous viewings, and the concomitant nostalgia. This is a different affective experience from watching a funny video of a cat falling off a window ledge for the first time, your body shocked into laughing out loud.

Of course, Internet cats *may* have a relational function, as they are shared with friends and family, sending (or receiving) love in the form of a fluffy kitten. My point here, is that one *may not want to* share this more intimate cute affect with all and sundry. A larger audience (whether in the physical space of the theatre, or as a digital, Andersonian (2006) imagined community) describes a *different* affective experience, rather than necessarily a more intense, or "better" one.

Further to this, affect is not just embodied, it is also emplaced. It appears that the theatre setting, perhaps felt to be too "public", made Saga contain her more dramatic expressions, such as crying, or not using the made-up language she uses with her cat. In Saga's account, the clash between different viewing practices becomes acute. Both museums and cinema theatres are products of a particular spectatorship or mode of structuring the gaze. According to Bruno, it is a place where "intimacy occurs in public" (Bruno, 2016, p. 19). Not only are we often physically close to other people, many whom we don't know, but we are also encouraged to feel, and express emotions that may, in other public places, be inappropriate in some way (Bruno, 2016, pp. 19–20). Michael Warner has described how certain emotions and affects, in this cute affect, are so closely interlinked with experiences of privacy, that experiencing them, almost regardless of context, places us in a moment of privacy (Warner, 2002, p. 23).

According to Casetti, relocation is concomitant with a process of privatisation of the sight (Casetti, 2008, p. 7). Commonly, watching cat videos (like other online media) is a private, even individualized experience. The relocation of cat videos to a public sphere, clashes with the expectations of control, and perhaps more crucial, of intimacy. Affective expressions that she felt were appropriate together with her close relatives and friends, became slightly embarrassing in the theatre.

Apparently, not everyone in the audience felt equally intimidated by the public setting. At both the festivals I attended, the audience was quite audibly engaged in the screenings. At the Thursday screening in Stockholm, one could frequently hear cuteness coded exclamations such as "naaaw", Gud va söööööt (Oh my god so cuuuute!), asså ja dööööör (you're killing me!). The 80 minute programme is organized in sections marked out by intertitles: *Drama*; *Comedy*; *Vintage*; *An interlude: Cats vs*

*Thing*s; *Action/Adventure*; *A Musical Interlude*; *A Brief Interlude = Kittens!*; *Documentary*; *Cats and Boxes*; and finally, *Animation*. Here follows an excerpt from my field notes from the Thursday screening.

> One of the first shorts shows a pigeon teasing a cat by repeatedly touching it with its beak, making a cooing sound. The audience laughs out loud several times.
>
> In the following clips, the audience tends to laugh more naturally, like a shock effect, by the everyday actions of cats and kittens, acting spontaneously, without too much prompting from the humans in the clips, or through the editing of the clip itself. The audience remain mostly silent during music videos, or those where the "naturalness" of the cat it is diminished. The section with "vintage" videos, i.e. short silent films featuring kittens from the turn of the century, makes the audience go completely silent. Seeming to impatiently await the next set of Internet videos.
>
> Some clips even get applauded. Like the one where a cat heroically climbs up a curtain rail to get a toy. The whole thing is set to the Mission Impossible theme.
>
> In the section Cats and Boxes, a cat desperately tries to fit in an impossibly small cardboard box. After much hardship, it finally succeeds. The audience claps enthusiastically. This section is also presented differently from the others.
>
> Mostly the videos are not edited, just screened as they would be seen on Youtube for instance. In the *Boxes* section some of the clips, like the one above, is broken up into pieces, repeatedly returning to the cat who still hasn't given up, or managed to get into the box.

Overall, the audience at all the four screenings were very vocal in their appreciation for the programming, with a few exceptions. The programme curated by Will Braden also contains older clips, (the *Vintage* section) silent films of kittens from the early 1900s and some excerpts from 1940s newsreels, covering a cat show, and film about a cat living in a fire station. The silent films were *The Sick Kitten* (George Albert Smith, 1903), where a girl feeds a kitten, and *The Boxing Cats* (Thomas Edison, 1894). When these sections started, the audience fell remarkably silent. In the Glasgow screening, the sound quality in the hall was very poor at times, the acoustics garbling the mono sound of the older material, which may have impacted the audiences experiences. A similar tendency towards less affecting audience, though perhaps less articulated, was also

noticeable during the few music videos. When I asked Saga about her experiences, she commented in this way:

> **Ingeborg Hasselgren***: I was going to ask, when we were at the festival, part of the programme, it wasn't just cats doing cute things*
>
> **Saga:** no
>
> **IH:** *there were also like music videos, what did you think of them? Like the more constructed videos.*
>
> **S:** well the music videos, they weren't anything I recognized from before, I even liked that much
>
> **IH:** *no*
>
> **S:** it was more- there were cats in the video, so that made it more okay to watch it, but I thought… the cats were good but [both laugh] they did their job, but other than that I didn't think they were that great. I think cats work best on their own. [xlvii]

One could speculate whether this decrease in vocal expressions has to do with the lessened affective experience when engaging with the older material. First of all, the older material is probably less recognizable for an audience, who may need more time to adapt to the new genre. To be fair, these shorts are not technically *Internet* cat videos (though they can be found on YouTube), if by that we mean a video made to be distributed primarily online. These older materials and the newer music videos, both clearly break with many of the conventions of Internet cat videos, and offer an affective experience that diverges quite dramatically from the short clips with their simple drama. If Internet cat videos are primarily a "cinema of attraction"(Page, 2017b) – consumed for their affective qualities – then material that do not provide this experience would be seen as inappropriate. The more structured, or "controlled" examples could also render the cats' behaviour less authentic, and in extension, less cute. Or as Saga put it: "cats work best on their own".

7.6. Conclusion: How to make cuteness respectable

In some aspects, this chapter serves as a counterpoint to the previous ones. While the case studies of chapters 5 and 6 analysed the subversive uses of cuteness by grassroots activists, this case instead shows the unreliable nature of cuteness as a political

platform. Previous chapters illustrated how the political cute is employed in a primarily performative, embodied mode. The video festival instead shows us the complications of *cute consumption*, in the form of cat videos. While there is an affective energy in the cute, which can give a political movement impetus, cuteness isn't an instant fix to more complex institutional problems, like the lack of representation in, and access to, cultural institutions. The radical intentions of cute affectivism, can even end up effectively counteractive. Cuteness as any other affective categories, has its limitations as political tool. Sometimes cuteness is *just cute*.

The coupling of high/low culture that I describe in this chapter, does to some extent, function as a disruptor of cultural categories, leading new audiences to exclusive institutions, and introducing "old" audiences to "new" materials. However, this disruptive force of the Internet cat, is heavily dependent on a perceived opposition between Internet cats (low culture) and art museums/theatres/academia (high culture). A simplistic juxtaposition that results in a type of affective shock, apparently immensely attractive for both audiences and organisers alike and which lends itself to many different discourses and projects.

The Internet Cat Video Festival was launched as a project for democratizing culture, using the affective force of Internet cats to create a ritual of togetherness. This togetherness, underscored by all three organizers, presents the festival as an event of communal celebration. The well-meaning intention of creating this third space, where high and low can intermingle, often results in a situation wherein the categories are *reified*, rather than upset. The Internet Cat Video Festival, can be understood in terms of what Couldry (2003) calls a *media ritual*, a liminoid space outside of everyday life, where things are happening that in some sense, have a significant meaning for society at large.

In previous chapters, I have shown how cuteness can incite a certain feeling of intimacy, closeness, tenderness and togetherness. However, this it is not a given. An intimate setting, may also inspire cute affect. In other words, the physical setting of cute consumption, impacts the cuteness affect. Moving from a solitary, or small social setting in front of a laptop or smartphone, to the relative vastness of the theatre or

gallery space, can dramatically alter the experience of the very same cat video, upsetting the supposition that more people sharing in the affect, would automatically equal a more intense experience.

The Internet cat in the festival space becomes an object made to cross over from one state to another, from "low" to "high", from popular to academic. Simultaneously, one hopes, new audiences, following the call of the cute, *also* cross over, with lower working class individuals (for instance) conquering the undiscovered country of the art museum. The festival in this sense, offers a very instrumental view of the Internet cat, and its affective properties. The Internet cat appears as a gateway onto the museum or theatre, but one that ideally should lead the visitor to move further into institutions, perhaps into more "challenging" materials.

However, this emphasis on clashing categories, or crossovers, tends to highlight the boundaries between categories, underscoring irreconcilable differences in the categories themselves. Cuteness, like all other affective genres, cannot be separated from general culture and has to relate to the hierarchies expressed through culture and art. Internet Cats, which originated within the "wild" ecology of online fora of the early 2000s, are in the format of the Festival, subjected to institutionalized control and vetting. From WAC, the originators of the festival, from Scott Stulen who curated the programme of videos, to the local institutions that host their own versions of the festival, the material appears highly moderated. Though additional materials were contributed by local audiences in Glasgow, in a collaborative approach, the power over the Internet Cat Video Festival predominantly lies in the hands of the organizers.

WACs "vetting" of local festivals, which would counteract rampant commercialism, and exploitative practices, can also be interpreted as a way of keeping high culture elevated and 'pure', controlling their product and avoiding unnecessary populism. On the other hand, it can be seen as an attempt to create a safe space, for diverse audiences to experience the joys of cute affect without commercial pressures. The Stockholm festival's aim of "taking Internet cats seriously" has also added to the cats "respectability" in a sense, which in turn make them less accessible. This is because of the practises and educated gazes focussed on the Internet cat. As a high-status subject

is directed towards an object, this also redefines the status of said object. This is why the appropriation of Internet cats into established cultural institutions isn't necessarily a progressive move. Submerging the Internet cat in academic discourse, could to some degree make it less approachable. Internet cats are not just changing the institutions, the academic interest also changes the Internet cats, and the people who consume them.

Chapter 8: Conclusion - The Emptiness of the Cute

This doctoral thesis has employed multiple understandings of cuteness, in order to triangulate a definition of cuteness. Cuteness has primarily been approached from the perspectives of affect, performativity, aesthetics and relationality. In the field, these four aspects are found simultaneously. With regards to aesthetics, it goes beyond mere analyses of visual genres. Instead, I employed an extended understanding of aesthetics inspired by Hamera (2011), Muñoz (1996) and Williams (1977).

Part of the complication in analysing cuteness, is its functional "emptiness". By this I mean that cuteness as a concept, is dependent on its association with other categories. Its chimeric nature changes as it is attached to other *things*; feelings, bodies, objects, ideologies. The common denominator here is *affect*, understood as those autonomic bodily shocks that comes with interacting with, or performing, cuteness. Cuteness affect then emerges in performative relationships, between cute and uncute subjects and objects. Following Massumi (1996) and Clough (2010), I approached (cuteness) affect as fundamentally synaesthesic experiences, including the senses of interception and proprioception. A key point I make, is that these relationships are neither universally unequal (or sadistic), nor are they all equalizing (or community creating), though the potential for either exists. Categorizing the cute as either fundamentally oppressive or liberating, is just as unproductive as outright damning or celebrating the entire genre of pornography, or horror films on the basis of a single example.

As demonstrated throughout this thesis, cuteness is a powerfully affective and symbolic tool, functioning on several levels. Most obvious perhaps is its usefulness for rallying support for various causes. The inherent attractiveness and playfulness of the cute, make it exceptionally powerful as a political strategy. The cute works as an exclamation mark, an affective pinprick, that draws our attention, and makes us more susceptible to the message attached to the image. Therefore, cuteness *does* lend itself to manipulation, but not necessarily so. Neither is the cute inherently associated with a conscious ideology, or agenda. This political usage of the cuteness affect, is what I called affectivism, a portmanteau of activism and affect.

8.1. The Queer Cute

Despite its symbolic "emptiness", as demonstrated in this thesis, the cute functions as a queer category in a number of ways. First of all, its transspecies appeal, evidenced for instance by the popularity of the Internet cat, means that the cute transcends divisions of the human/animal as well as between organics and technology. The Internet cat can be understood as a composite creature, formed by physical cat, technologies of video and photography, and of course the Internet as a form of dissemination and reproduction. Cute characters often take androgynous forms, upsetting and unsettling the gender binary. Among the activists at Cyklopen, the unicorn emerges as one such character. The unicorn represents a utopian queerness, an impossibly wonderful character of campness, fantasy and play. It is often a symbol of queerness, especially on the bisexual spectrum, but also bears connotations of childhood and innocence. This use of cuteness recalls Muñoz's (2009) concept of queer utopianism, where aesthetics and affect are engaged to imagine impossible futures, in extension a way to survive the present and hopefully change the world.

The queer cute is also present in the type of performative embodiment that I explore in chapter 5 – Cute Cabbage Worms. Here, in the form of yet another imagined animal, the participants in the performance workshop are offered ways to relate to their bodies in new, queer ways.

8.2. Creating Safe Spaces and Changing the World

One of the more widely recognized affective powers of cuteness, is its ability to create soft, appealing images to whatever it is attached. In this way, cute objects function as what Ahmed (2010) calls happy objects. These create social bonds between those individuals that are oriented towards (or attracted to) the same objects (Ahmed, 2010b, pp. 29–33).

There's also an affective shock effect resulting from mingling the opposing images of "rough" anarchism and "soft" cuteness, which in itself can be attractive. Indeed, this clash of seemingly contradictory categories, have been addressed by others, often in cases where cuteness overlaps with disgust, or where cute objects are simultaneously perceived as monstrous (Brzozowska-Brywczynska, 2007; Leyda, 2015; Ngai, 2005, pp.

814–823). In this case, the contrast between two concepts (hard, masculine aggressiveness of certain anarchists, and the soft, perhaps feminine kindness of the cute) result in a shock effect, a clash of categories resulting in amusing reactions from participants. A similar shock effect/affect is also employed in the case with the Internet Cat Video Festival. Rather than a clash of soft/hard, the contradiction here is between high and low culture, represented by the fine arts of museums and theatres, and the popular appeal of the Internet cat.

8.2.1. Cute Crowd Control

At Cyklopen and at the two Internet Cat Video Festivals, cuteness was consciously activated to create safe spaces for particular audiences. Especially at Cyklopen, the softness of the cuteness affect orchestrates a utopia, a shimmering non-place where anything and everything is possible. The way these activists employ the relational aspect of the cute, encouraging caretaking and compassionate emotions within the groups, emphasises the cute's "levelling" or equalizing power. At the same time, they also harness the aggressive quality of the cuteness affect, directing it towards the groups' perceived enemies.

As it is readily associated with the weak, the childish and the feminine, the cute effectively functions as a strong repellent, appearing as a threat to hegemonic masculinity. Some of the activists at Cyklopen were quite conscious of this effect, and even used cuteness as a way of controlling the more destructive and macho segments of anarchist culture. Here, cute functions as a type of crowd control, countering machismo culture. Using cuteness as a social control is common in many contexts, for instance in Japan, where cute imagery and mascots are used to convey information, and steer behaviour in a friendly, non-confrontational way (McVeigh, 2000). However, in the case of Cyklopen, it emerges more in terms of an (*anti*)-authoritarian cute, deflecting and disrupting attempts of control from would-be oppressors.

At the two editions of the Internet Cat Video Festival, the cuteness of Internet cats doubles both as an attractor bringing in new audiences to the Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow and to the 19th century theatre of Södran, Stockholm, and as a way of marking out a safe space. The Internet cat encouraged people unused to these

museums and theatres to enter and take part. Coupled with participatory practices, such as paper crafts, *danceoke* and cutest cat competitions, the festivals used the safety of cute as springboard into "high culture". The popular appeal of Internet cats, was intended to disrupt the elitism of these institutions, and hopefully create a space of mutual exchange between masses and elite. However, while the Internet cat may disturb the perception of certain institutions are guarded and exclusionary, this mutual exchange also suggest that the status of the Internet cat may change by it being incorporated into the same institutions. In this process, scholars, journalists and artists play a crucial role, as it is their (our) recognized expertise, their (our) *refined gaze*, that lets the Internet cat evolve into something worthwhile. This thesis, then, may itself be part of elevating the Internet cat into a respected cultural object, perhaps a type of bourgeoisification of the Internet cat.

The ambition to create an inviting space, is complicated by the fact that even these social fields aren't wholly flat or equal. Certain individuals will possess more cultural capital than others on site. Some will get excluded, deliberatively or by accident, while certain individuals' appreciation or performance of cuteness will be, if not celebrated, then encouraged.

8.2.2. Cute Emplacements

This multi-sensorial approach also looked at cuteness in terms of emplaced experiences. Similarly to how cute affect is dependent on our bodily make-up, spatial organisation plays a crucial part in how we experience the cute. A tendency that has held over the three case studies, is the way cuteness is employed to bridge perceived oppositions between private and public spheres. The soft, caring feelings associated with the cute affect, can help make public spaces (such as clubs, museums and theatres) more intimate. Cuteness appears especially effective in creating temporary communities (the sense of *communitas*) of togetherness between virtual strangers, which in the thesis is evidenced primarily in the chapter on Cute Utopianism. In the case of the Internet Cat Video Festival, the cute Internet cat was both used to create this togetherness or intimacy in large groups of people, and as a re-staging of digital

spaces offline. The latter offers similar affective situations to that of the online through the use of cute objects.

8.2.3. Cute Embodiments

This thesis also offers one crucial contribution to the field of cuteness studies, the focus on cute experiences in the first person. It breaks with the conventional model of cuteness, where the cute is a constant Other. Through the practice of the cabbage worm, a performance piece created by the team of Nadja Hjorton, Lisen Rosell, and Anna Efraimsson, participants can take the form of a caterpillar. By crawling along the floor, the practice allows one to inhabit the body in a new way, in a sense approach it from another angle. As an affective category, cuteness is (partly) dependent on our specific bodies, our unique body schema, both in the interaction with others, and when performing our own cuteness. This performance, and especially the section where two individuals are engaged in the wrapping and caretaking/restraining actions, highlights the multiplicity of the cute relationship as one that can at once be caretaking and controlling, as well as letting oneself be swayed by the cute.

Additionally, cuteness's close relationship with the grotesque, gives it a capacity to make the body strange. By cutifying abject body parts such a breasts and buttocks, turning them into strange animals, the performance artists manage to disturb preconceptions of female bodies, and the way we relate to them.

8.3. Limitations and Future Research

Swedish cuteness, in its twin forms of *gullighet* and *söthet* offered a new perspective on the meanings and experiences of cuteness. With the Japanese and Anglophone dominance of earlier cuteness research, other European cuteness cultures have been rather under-researched. Making Swedish cuteness the focal point of the thesis, has facilitated an original gaze on the topic. If not entirely free from preconceived notions of cuteness, then it has at least offered a way of discovering inconsistencies between previous theorisations, primarily based on Japanese and Anglophone cuteness. This means that the conclusions drawn, are primarily based on a particular cuteness culture, however diverse that one may be. All three case studies, apart from the Glasgow Internet Cat Video Festival in chapter 7, are based around fairly closely-

connected actors and audiences, consisting of activists and cultural workers in Stockholm. To an extent, this limits the possible expressions of cuteness available for analysis. The focus of this thesis has been on the leftist and queer feminist, empowering uses of the cute, as a radical way of countering oppression and inequalities.

This begs the question: what is specific to the repressive, reactionary, or simply conservative uses of cute? Considering the "emptiness" of cuteness I mentioned above, it would be illuminating for instance to see how cuteness is engaged in (neo-fascist) Alt-Right meme culture. What role does the cuteness affect play in the notorious case of Pepe the frog? This character created by Matt Furie, made its debut in the comic *Boy's Club* (Furie, 2016) in 2006, and later became a common Internet meme. However, it also became a popular meme in Alt-Right online communities, to the point where the Anti-Defamation League branded it a hate symbol in 2016 (Anti-Defamation League, n.d.; Huffpost, 2019). One may perhaps draw parallels here between Pepe, and the unicorns and kittens were used in chapter 6. Simultaneosly, ADL also launched a #SavePepe campaign together with Furie, resulting in a $15 000 settlement with the far right site Infowars, for copyright infringement (Swinyard, 2019). Pepe apparently functioned as a sticky, affective object (Ahmed, 2010a, pp. 29–35) within the Alt-right/Neonazi community, appropriated as a symbol. Here, the grotesque cuteness of Pepe, becomes the field of political conflict, its affective properties claimed by several factions.

8.3.1. What about "Real" Animals?

Further research should look into the problems of human relations with actual animals. Having said that, the actual cats and animals are not absent from the cute world in the thesis, primarily they are present as images of cats, the cyborg like creature of the Internet cat, and other digital animals. In other words, the animals in the thesis are either mediated, or impossible (or both). Future intervention in the field, would do well to explore animals' agency in the cute relationship. While I contend that cuteness is a mutual relationship (if not necessarily equal), it remains to see what role animal agency can play in this relationship, rather than simply assume the

subservience of animals to humans. Can cuteness be seen as a survival trait, strengthening the bonds with human Others? In what ways are the cute animals' agency circumscribed (and not circumscribed)?

8.3.2. What about Food?

This thesis set out to problematize the dominance of visual over other cute modes dependent on other senses. As part of this aim, it has approached the cases in a multimodal way, rather than separating the sensorial modes. This is because cuteness isn't experienced through a singular sense. While I have considered cuteness in terms of touch and sound, the aspects of smell and taste may have been somewhat neglected.

Future research could profit from a focus on the interstices of cuteness and food culture. The taste of sweetness and the experience of cute, often overlap, in Swedish quite literally with the two alternative terms *gullig* and *söt*. What happens when the worthlessness or frivolity of cuteness is combined with the supposed nutritional worthlessness and unhealthiness of sweet food? One place to investigate such interactions could be animal cafés, businesses where patrons can enjoy cake and coffee while they (under ideal circumstances) pet an animal. These cafés exist in many forms, where they most commonly hosts cats. They have been criticized by animal rescue charities, as in the case with a pop-up owl pub (!) in London, where the backlash from among others, RSPCA forced the owner to open in a secret location (Peek, 2015; Rucki, 2015; Stafford, n.d.). All in all, there is still much to explore in the realm of the cute, especially in the spaces where human and non-human relations play out.

This thesis' greatest contribution is in its exploration of cuteness as a type of social mood "stabilizer" or controller, through ethnographic methods. Cuteness can inspire outwards action, as well as encouraging a sense of internal community. I have also showed instances of failures in this cute social engineering, marking out the boundaries of cute communities. Cuteness is not separate from other social hierarchies and relations. However, it can encourage certain aspects of said hierarchies and relations, while discouraging others.

Cuteness is a vital affective category in contemporary life. Sometimes ubiquitous to the point of invisibility, and at other times, attention grabbing bordering on intrusive. It is seldomly found in its "pure" state as it were, but attached to, and mixed in with, other categories and affective states. Which is why cuteness can be experienced both as liberating *and* oppressive, sometimes simultaneously.

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Appendix – Quotes in Original Swedish

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[i] "Forskarna kallar det nyhetsklyftan. Den har sannolikt alltid funnits där – djur och sex sålde lösnummer långt före Internet s genombrott – men så länge tidningsläsaren var tvungen att köpa hela tidningen för att läsa om den senaste nöjesskandalen, eller se hela nyhetsprogrammet för att ta del av väderprognosen, behöll journalisterna kontroll över nyhetsvärderingen."(Lenas, 2014)

[ii] Nadja Hjorton: ja, å hur stå i relationen till normen å liksom såhär ganska konkret å idag så – å sen har ju vi utvecklat en arbetsmetod som e nån slags icke-hierarkiskt, det vill säga vi tar alla beslut ihop å som i sig också e en väldigt feministisk arbetsmetod, men den har nu blivit så pass, på ett sätt förankrad så att den diskuterar vi inte så mycket, å det e ju också nåt som ibland kan va ett problem som vi har pratat om också, för vad betyder det att vi nu är, dels att vi är vita då, det har vart en länge då, diskussion, men också såhär nu har alla såhär barn å, alltså vad betyder det, liksom för hur vi jobbar, och för dom som inte har barn och sådär, för det.. eh en diskussion hela tiden.

Lisen Rosell: Väldigt förenklat så har vi ju pratat om, utifrån unconditional support, i att det här feministiska som du e inne på genomsyrar allting, privat och politiskt och arbetsmässigt, å att det, det handlar så mycket såhär grundläggande om att vi alltid stöttar varandra i allting, men inte bara stöttar, utan i stöttandet finns också att vi kan kritisera varandra för att , asså jag tycker oftast att det e konstruktivt när det händer.

NH: Men i, i början var våra föreställningar också mycket mer tydliga med, att dom ville liksom göra ett statement, till exempel då, att dom alltid att vi alltid har såhär, icke-hetero, så att vi förhöll oss, eftersom att vi också liksom vi pratade jättemycket om kärlek, och då blev det ju bara samkönad kärlek eftersom vi är bara kvinnor även om vi inte kanske gestaltade det såhär, men det var liksom, det var liksom viktigt för oss då att göra tydliga statements som man drog för att också skapa nån slags gemenskap med den publiken som vill ville rikta oss till, inte.

[iii] jamen först var jag ju lite upptagen med om det skulle liksom vara obekvämt, eftersom då hade jag ju inte varit med om det själv heller. Och liksom, oj, blev det för hårt, hur blir det runt halsen å liksom ibland kom ju tyget för ansiktet. Men sen så fick vi väldig kontakt. Det var väldigt tydligt att hon – hon visade väldigt tydligt i ansiktet och i känslan i kroppen att hon tyckte att det var jätteskönt.

[iv] Lisen Rosell: Kålmasken blev det till slut. Men den började ju, vi visste inte att det skulle bli en kålmask, utan det började med en känsla av att vi ville, hur var det vi ville ta hand om – för vi var inne på att—

Nadja Hjorton: å begränsa

LR: å begränsa rörelsefriheten, ja. Ehm. Den övningen kommer ju verkligen ifrån att vi pinnade ner vad är det här gulliga, och när det gränsar till det här groteska.

Anna Efraimsson: Det tror ja e för att själva, det här, en del av varför vi också har känts svårt med gulligheten, att ere liksom, var ligger egentligen sprängladdningen i det, varför ska vi – och det kan vi ju intervjua dig om [all laugh] men eh, för nu känns det mer att man e oerhört fascinerad av mekanismerna bakom, det var väl det till exempel som den där kålmasken fått in på ett sånt fint sätt tycker jag, att det e, det e liksom den pratar liksom om mekanismerna bakom gullighet, det här maktförhållandet, alla dom här, den här komplexiteten i liksom, att ta hand, att va offer, att va förövare, amen allt det här liksom.

[v] Anna Wilhelmsson: ja ggt, eh tryggt och ehm… amen att ge sig hän i en slags ehm… passivitet, där man ändå så att säga nån ser till att man e med om nånting. Så det är ju liksom inte apati på det sättet utan man vet liksom att, om man, det skulle ju kunna jämföras med nån såhära du vet spa-behandling eller den sortens situation där man e såhära, det finns inga förväntningar på mig, mer än att jag ligger här och ligger typ still. Eh… och eh… de finns en människa som samtidigt ser till liksom att jag e med om nånting fint.

[vi] Lisen Rosell: mmm jag håller med, å en annan aspekt av nästan är [baby voice] jättegullig [laughs], de e, jag ser framför mig, det e såhär, det e ganska många gulliga klipp på djur å bäbisar som inte gör, alltså får en impuls, och inte följer den fullt ut, ser ni framför er den hära pingvinen som inte vågar hoppa ner från ett isblock eller vad det är, den nästan vågar ju hela tiden, till slut så är det ju ödet själv som, isen eller nånting, den halkar ju bara ner, å de e ju extremt gulligt, att den liksom nästan, å det finns en igenkänning i nästan, hos alla tror jag att man såhär när man springer fram till eh, till hindret, å naej, det var när att jag kom över men, det blev inte så.
Anna Efraimsson: det finns ju otaliga, hundratusentals klipp av katter som nästan hoppar eller misslyckas
[IH laughs] å de e också sådär, för att dom ska supposedly ska va så bra på å hoppa, så e det jättekul att dom inte kan det.

[vii] IH: men sen när vi eh, började krypa då vad tyckte du om det?
Anna Wilhelmsson: mmm men då, då kände jag mig faktiskt mest maktlöst, då tappade jag, då var det inte behagligt längre faktiskt, utan det va svårt, tungt, eh, å det var tydligt att det var svårt å tungt å man fick inte hjälp. Eh, och man hamnade väldigt mycket i att man var betraktad av. Sen å var det ju liksom komiskt så att det var, jag skrattade väldigt mycket, för det var så komiskt, helt enkelt. Men det var mer det här, att det var svårt å jobbigt och jag e fastspänd, och har inte rätt förutsättningar för å göra det här och jag är iakttagen, medans jag har det på det sättet. Ah. Så det var egentligen den fysiska upplevelsen skulle jag säga, men som sagt, sen var väldigt komiskt, det var ju väldigt mycket skratt liksom.
IH: men det kanske inte va lika, vad ska man säga, positivt som hela det andra?
AW: nej, nej. Nej men precis.

IH: Men hur var det när du kom fram då? Liksom, fick du nån känsla då? När du väl hade lyckats krypa den dära sträckan.

AW: jamen känslan var ju såhär att, nu eh, nu e jag nånting gulligt som har eh, utfört en gullig och jättejobbig handling, å så kommer jag fram till nån som klappar mig på huvet. Åh, det var ganska skönt men det var också väldigt såhära, dubbel känsla skulle jag säga, att, att, att jag var nåns husdjur som inte riktigt hade förutsättningar egentligen att leva mitt liv på det sättet, nu broderar jag ut lite här, leva mitt liv på det sättet jag skulle vilja[…]

[viii] IH: vad var det som kändes gulligt? Kan du beskriva lite?

Anna Wilhelmsson: ehm, jag tror att eftersom jag också skrattade ganska mycket, så blev det ju nånting i att, jag kämpade på med gott humör, alltså den känslan, där var såhär ah, ehm… [silence]. Sen hade jag ju en egen visuell upplevelse av hur jag, -- asså eftersom jag hade sett andra vara kålmaskar, så visste jag ju nånstans att jag va gullig, om du förstår hur jag menar. Att man tittar fram ur det där täcket liksom som är man ganska gullig liksom.

IH: så du hade nån bild i huvet hur det måste…

AW: ah precis.

IH: men försökte du, asså, liksom spelade du på det eller

AW: ja, det tror jag, det skulle jag säga att jag gjorde också.

IH: hur gjorde du då om du spelade på det?

AW: jamen det, det var ju egentligen för att jag, jag hade väl Nadja som va min, den jag kom fram till, att liksom spegla hennes ansiktsuttryck, för hon, hon tittade ju också på mig med såhär enorm liksom oj, oj, oj, och log å va såhär sprallig, liksom det dära åh gulle-gull skrattet som man kan ha [IH laughs] äh, så det vart ju att spegla det, och att verkligen gå in i den kontakten, och att inte heller släppa henne i det, utan verkligen nu, nu ska du tycka att jag är gullig liksom.

IH: Var det liksom att spärra upp ögonen eller?

AW: grejen e, att samtidigt så e ju, jag tyckte det var så sjukt svårt att utföra det där så att jag hade inte direkt en jättetydligt eh, jag gjorde med mitt ansikte utan det var ju mest att jag skrattade och bara [AW makes a face, IH laughs] och utförde det.

[ix] Lisen Rosell: ja de va – dom sakerna som vi upplevde behövde ha yttre blickar

IH: Vad tänker ni då, yttre blickar då ska bidra med?

Anna Efraimsson: men alltid, då blir det helt annorlunda när man testar materialin inför en publik, de e då man, man märker saker, helt enkelt, det e så enkelt, det e då man fattar om saker inom citationstecken, de e såklart jättevärdefullt och det ger feedback prat.

Nadja Hjorton: De skapar ju liksom såhär en tidsram och en plats. Den där framen som vi liksom har letat efter, den har ju varit lite – när vi har jobbat själva har den vart en kamera men den kameran, den upplevde man ju bara när man tittade på det, för när du väl gör i rummet och har en kamera så glömmer man ju bort den så att då finns det ju egentligen inget som ramar in eller som du kan såhär pressa

igenom nån slags filter på nåt sätt blir det ju såhär när du har betraktare då så blir det ju det där, liksom filtret.

AE: Det e nånting apropå blick, de e nåt voyeuristiskt över gullighet och det är där också det e länken till porr tänker jag.

LR: Ja, det är överhuvudtaget väldigt likt – om man skulle säga att det här skulle heta extreme sexy eller att det skulle va sex och inte gullighet då

NH: Extreme sexiness[IH and LR laugh]Sexiness overload

LR: att de skulle – jag tror att det skulle va ganska liknande sätt som vi skulle kunna jobba på

NH: ja det tror jag också

LR: för då skulle det också va såhär uppstå kanske hos betraktaren mer

[x] Nadja Hjorton: mmm verkligen. Och precis, o det här som vi sa med displayen att vi publiken då kan själv, det var nån [Johanna] som satt i publiken som sa att, hon sa så här att, hon får syn på sin egen, eftersom det va inte så gulligt som hon hade velat, då fick hon liksom syn på sin egen, varför vill jag att det här ska va gulligt? Så att det blir på nåt sätt kanske möjliggör det, liksom, nån slags egen reflektion. Reflektion. Det kanske man inte vill, men..

[xi] IH: jo en sak som vi pratade om rätt mycket i fredags på er performance, det var den här känslan av nästan, att man inte riktigt är där, men man är liksom på väg. Vad är det här nästan? Varför är det viktigt i gullighet?

[silence]

Nadja Hjorton: alltså gullig – jag vet inte om det är viktigt med gullighet, jag tycker att det är viktigt, jag tycker att det är spännande i nån föreställningskontext lite sådär som vi snackade om innan, att liksom det, tvingar eller fram – skapar nån slags, kanske desire, att fylla i själv, att såhär förstå, för att på nåt sätt så är vi så himla skolade i att alltid försöka föstå såhär, skapa egna kopplingar, överblick å sådär. Eh, så att det skapar. Jag föreställer mig att det kan skapa nån slags aktiv tittare. Alltså nån slags aktiv blick, eh till skillnad från om man förslår nånting, som är så här man förstår direkt vad det är, för då tar jag mina erfarenheter av för att jag ska förstå det. Det kanske e också intressant i gullighet, men för mig är det mycket kopplat till föreställning å...

[xii] Anna Efraimsson: exakt, det är det, jätte så bra, för de apropå gullighetens mekanismer så e ju en grej, dom som e gulliga e ju själv omedvetna och e, så jag tror att det e därför vi, det e jätteviktigt å inte ska vara gullig, för då fallerar det direkt LR: det e som också våran diskussion som vi hade igår om det här med ljuden som blir väldigt påtagliga när man försöker göra en gullig röst eller ett gulligt ljud det är där vi är nu nånstans i processen.

NH: mm å där vi också känner att jo vi har läst lite dikter med såhär gulliga röster och sånt, och det kändes jätteplatt och tråkigt. LR: Det vart roligt och inte platt, när vi låtsades att det var stjärtarna som läste dikterna, men då, då vart det gulligt NH: Men då var det ju inte att vi försökte vara gulliga

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xiii Nadja Hjorton: dislocation, asså tar nånting å sen placerar det i en annan kroppsdel, eller i en annan kontext eller i en annan [inaudible]. För så är det till exempel med att vi har T-shirt, eh, och ingenting på underkroppen, det ja, det är för mig en gullig kostym, fast vi är ju inte gulliga. Å då är den gullig utifrån att den konnoterar liksom pyjamasparty, såhär sisterhood, sitta å va såhär, asså massa såna, men det e finns liksom inget, jag känner mig ju inte gullig, snarare ganska grotesk, ju liksom.

xiv IH: […]hur skulle du beskriva Linje 19… Vad är det för organisation, vad är syftet med Linje 19?
Gustaf: det är väl en ganska frustrerad organisation
IH: jaha ja
G: -- som fötts ur ett missnöje av att inte bli tagen på allvar, å en känsla av att bli överkörd av typ byggherrar å politiker i viss mån också. Ehm, vi har hållt på jättemycket med arbeta mot hyreshöjningar å såhär så. Som Ikano Bostad till exempel i Hagsätra som renoverar kök i samband med stambyte å sådär å så höjer dom hyrorna med sexti sjutti procent [60-70 %] så att folk inte har råd att flytta tillbaka. Å det har verkligen, vi har ju träffat många människor som råkat ut för det här liksom som man ser på riktigt liksom hur, hur illa folk far av det här. Så det är många såna saker som vi har jobbat med. På väldigt, på kvartersnivå ibland liksom.

xv IH: mmm men kan du berätta lite om vad, vad Planka.nu är för nånting hur skulle du beskriva det?
H: jaa, vi e en organisation som jobbar för avgiftsfri och skattefinansierad kollektivtrafik. Vi har funnits i typ lite mer än tretton år nu, startade i augusti tjugihundraett [2001]. Och den stora grejen e ju att vi har den här P-kassan som e som en försäkringsverksamhet om man plankar så, man kan va medlem, det kostar hundra spänn i månan och då betalar vi eventuella böter man får om man [static] biljettkontrollanter. Å sen så använder vi liksom pengar som blir över från P-kassan använder vi för att bedriva liksom opinionsarbete för fri kollektivtrafik.

xvi Hannes : obs också, att extremvänstern e ju bara ett begrepp jag själv använder på nån form av ironiskt sätt för jag tycker att det e så löjligt – ett löjligt begrepp, såsom det används liksom, men eh. Jag vet inte riktigt, det finns väl en inte riktigt nåt men egentligen kanske utomparlamentarisk e väl egentligen det mest beskrivande uttrycket för det, eftersom att de e väl de enda gemensamma kanske som alla dom olika grupperna har i att man inte e partipolitiska, utan att man jobbar mer med direkt utomparlamentariska saker, och det kan ju verkligen göra på tusen olika sätt. Det e ju så, extremvänstern e ju mer nån slags… ja, [laughs] väldigt intern sak som jag kallar det för bara för att jag tycker de e löjligt när folk kallar det för de. Det låter så konstigt. Nämen jag vet inte, det e ju flera som asså… det här med å ha gulliga å ro—en gullig å liksom trevlig approach, det känns ju inte som att vi e ensamma om heller, jag tänker typ Allt Åt Alla dom har ju väldigt mycket My Little Ponies i sin, eh… i sin kommunikation typ o så.

xvii Hannes: ehm, asså dels för att vi som främst ordnade det, jag [G] och [A], vi tycker väl alla om gulliga saker, men sen var det också lite asså började det lite som att vi skämtade, fast också lite allvarligt, att typ, det har varit lite stökigt på en del fester på ett ganska tråkigt sätt på grund av ett typ gäng macho-snubbar som ingen riktigt kan hantera, men som är väldigt få, men jag var väl på nån cyklopen-fest när dom var bortresta [IH laughs], det var så jävla trevligt på den där festen, ah just det ja, det var ju för att dom var borta alltså. Men vi måste ha nåt tema på den här festen som e väldigt töntigt så folk inte vill komma dit och va – bli aggressiva typ. Nåt sånt här snällt tema som gör att man blir glad, om man är en bråkstake så tycker man bara att det är löjligt. Så det var lite så, ska vi ha peace-tecken och så, fast det känns sunkigt, men då blev det typ gulliga katter å sånt. Det kändes både som nåt som vi tyckte var roligt och att det var liksom [silence] och folk – jag menar det där att folk blir aggressiva på fester är ju knappast nåt unikt för att man går på en fest på Cyklopen eller nånting   IH: nej

H: folk blir ju aggressiva av alkohol generellt. Men det känn som man – det var väl nån idé om att om man gör det för töntigt alltihop, det skulle va svårt att vara såhär snubbe som blir arga och dricka sprit på festen typ. Det funkade ju väldigt bra på festen, det var ju väldigt lugnt på festen. IH: det gjorde det också? Men kom det gänget på festen.

H: näej. Asså, jag tror att vi slängde ut två personer på typ sex-sjuhunda [6-700] totalt så det måste ju räknas som extremt bra.

IH: ja

H: asså jag antar att man inte kan få siffror på sånt där från vanliga krogar men jag utgår ifrån att det e en herrans massa folk som man måste slänga ut från såna ställen för dom e för fulla å jobbiga.

IH: ja det låter ganska lite. Ehm, men nu ska ja se vad det var jag tänkte.. Ehm. Jo precis. Men, vad skulle du säga att gullighet är då? H: oj, svår fråga, men är så, vi är ju alla uppväxta i såhär Internet memes, det är väl nånting som vi ganska mycket har hållt på med i Planka också så som ett sätt att såhär bli poppis å typ såhär amen bara använda sig av Internet memes och liksom hänga, spela med i såna grejer och göra egna versioner av dom å sånt å har vi ju märkt att vi alltid e väldigt uppskattat liksom, men ja, vad som e gullighet, det är väl framförallt katter. Och saker som är rosa.

IH: så katter, och saker som e rosa.

H: jaa.

IH: har dom nånting gemensamt?

H: näej, jag vet inte… Nej jag tror inte det. Men jag tänker typ som på affischen som eh… de nån såhär rosa sol- solnedgång, och Cyklopen, och katter som hoppar omkring å sånt dära. Jag tror inte att det var så många som fattade att det var väldigt mycket internhumor i den där affischen tror jag eller för folk som hänger på Internet . Dom där vargarna som var inne på Cyklopen så att jag tror inte de var så många som… jag tror mest att det var jag som uppskattade affischen. Det var inte så många som såg alla dom där smådetaljerna, men det var ganska roligt att göra den i varje fall. IH: ja, jag kan säga att som en överforskad mediemänniska så var det ganska mycket som stog ut på den. [H laughs] men hur jobbade ni, alltså på själva festen sen, hur jobbade ni med gulliga saker i lokalen?

H: alltså dels var det väl att vi hade pyntat väldigt mycket, med e ballonger å såpbubbler, och olika såhära vafan det nu heter, saker man hänger, olika pappfigurer, Hello Kittys å sånt, vi hade den där stora double rainbowen över, över dansgolvet. Å typ slushies-maskinen, nån.. Men också typ såhära att eh, den här danceoken vi hade, man försöker göra saker som blir såhära, inbjudande å man måste liksom va lite, va lite med också som med typ karaoke-rummet vi hade, att vi inte med mick och man skulle skriva upp sig och välja sin egen låt å liksom som det brukar va på karaoke utan att det bara var att det bara var random låtar som kom å så fick det bara va som nån sån där… eh, lite mer gemenskapande stämning på nåt sätt.

[xviii] IH: Men varför blev det just ett gulligt tema den här gången?

Hannes: ehm, asså dels för att vi som främst ordnade det, jag [Gustaf] och [Olivia], vi tycker väl alla om gulliga saker, men sen var det också lite asså började det lite som att vi skämtade, fast också lite allvarligt, att typ, det har varit lite stökigt på en del fester på ett ganska tråkigt sätt på grund av ett typ gäng macho-snubbar som ingen riktigt kan hantera, men som är väldigt få, men jag var väl på nån cyklopen-fest när dom var bortresta [IH laughs], det var så jävla trevligt på den där festen, ah just det ja, det var ju för att dom var borta alltså. Men vi måste ha nåt tema på den här festen som e väldigt töntigt så folk inte vill komma dit och va – bli aggressiva typ. Nåt sånt här snällt tema som gör att man blir glad, om man är en bråkstake så tycker man bara att det är löjligt.

IH:aah

H: Så det var lite så, ska vi ha peace-tecken och så, fast det känns sunkigt, men då blev det typ gulliga katter å sånt. Det kändes både som nåt som vi tyckte var roligt och att det var liksom [silence] och folk – jag menar det där att folk blir aggressiva på fester är ju knappast nåt unikt för att man går på en fest på Cyklopen eller nånting

[xix] IH: kan det va ett sätt att slippa, liksom macho- attityd?

Olivia: Ah, jag tror det. [silence] det hade vi faktiskt lite I tankarna också.

IH: Hur tänkte ni då?

O: Amen då var det liksom lite det här att dom som e jävligt macho kanske inte går på en fest där man sk såhär, får klä ut sig till något gulligt, liksom massa katter å enhörningar liksom. Eller att man iallafall, amen, genom att ha det temat så sätter man liksom nån form av standard, eller vad man ska säga, amen så här ska det va här.

IH: Men e det ett problem annars att folk e macho, eller liksom?

O: men jag kan tycka det, o speciellt, är man på fest och det är alkohol och så kan det va ganska macho

[xx] IH: men hur kom det sig att det vart ett gulligt tema då?

Gustaf: eh, asså. Den främsta anledningen var faktiskt, vi satt å pratade och dom två andra som var huvudarrangörer kan man säga liksom om Första Maj samma år Första Maj-festen på Cyklopen som var hade vart så himla trevligt, och det hade vart så fantastiskt bra stämning och alla var liksom…uppeldade av att det var Första Maj och såhär liksom på ett väldigt [IH laughs] på ett väldigt kamratligt och trevligt

sätt liksom, det var liksom inte.. och så började vi prata, varför var det så trevligt just den här gången, vad var det som var extra förutom att det var Första Maj liksom, man har ju varit på andra politiska fester där det inte alls har varit riktigt samma känsla. Å så kom vi på att, jomen just de, nazisterna skulle ju demonstrera i Jönköping [IH laughs] så alla såna här ofta ganska macho å jobbiga å ha å göra med liksom, militanta anti-fascister hade dratt dit, så vi slapp dom [both laugh] så det var inte en massa, för dom, dom eh dom fyller väl kanske sin funktion men dom, dom e och det blir alltid, det blir ofta inte alltid ska jag säga, men det händer att det blir otrevlig stämning och till och med bråk ibland mellan dom framförallt IH: asså menar du internt, G: ah IH: inom typ AFA [Antifascistisk Aktion] eller vilka dom nu e G: ah, och RF [Revolutionära Fronten] ehm så det var väldigt skönt att slippa dom så började vi prata om, okej hur ska vi göra nu, ska vi lägga festen när det e nån nazistdemo nånstans [both laugh] men det kunde vi inte riktigt göra, det kunde vi inte planera efter riktigt

IH: nej det blir lite svårt att hålla koll på deras [laughs]

G: ja precis. Eh, så då tänkte vi då gör vi på nåt annat sätt så att dom inte e så peppade på att komma liksom och som garanterar en trevlig stämning liksom så då körde vi supercute-tema istället liksom. Så det var en strategi. IH: du säger att det var en strategi. Just för å, liksom få en trevlig stämning eller för å.. Varför tänkte du att dom inte skulle komma då? G: För att dom e för tuffa. Å om dom kommer så kanske dom ändå skulle påverkas positivt av stämningen å inramningen liksom. IH: tror du att det kan va så, att folk liksom lugnar ner sig när dom ser gulli – G: jaa, det tror jag, vi hade bilder på gulliga kattungar överallt liksom, det e svårt å va riktigt hetsig [both laugh] när dom [inaudible] å regnbågar å amen de va massa såna grejer liksom. IH: Varför tror du att det blir så? Var det för att det blir så löjligt eller för att det liksom… G: asså, det e supercute-grejen den e ju fånig å barnslig på ett sätt, den e ju infantilt liksom. Ehm, men det lockar ju också fram en gullig sida hos folk tänker jag liksom, som ah, kontrasterar då mot macho-grejen liksom. Det har vart eeee, jamen på andra politiska fester så kan det har varit såhär insamling till nån som sitter i fängelse å såhär, å de e också, det kan väl också va behjärtansvärt, ehm, men då e ju temat ett helt annat å det blir, ja, det blir ah, det blir lätt en hårdare, råare, hårdare stämning.

[xxi] IH: vilka saker tycker du är gulliga?

Sofie: asså jag tycker, ja, jag tycker ju om gullighet. Typ såhära... jag tycker ju saker är gulliga nästan hela dagen [both laugh] "ah vad gulligt! aaah va gulligt!" typ så. mmm...sen så är jag inte så förtjust i dom här cute cats, tyvärr, det är bara en personligt grej dom hära gulliga katterna [inaudible] som älskar dom. En kan jag titta på sen såhär, amen ibland kan man få överdos av gullighet helt klart, det kan jag verkligen få, om det såhära, om det liksom matas på mig på nåt sätt.... ehm då kan jag överdoseras å tycka att det är jobbigt istället gullighet kan nog lätt övergå till å kännas jobbigt. IH: hur menar du då?

S: asså att det blir lite såhär ååååh men gud typ såhär jag vet att det är gulligt, men nu har sett [?] för mycket av det typ. Ehm... jag är också, jag tror att jaa... asså för mig, jag har väl ändå vart tvungen att såhär visa...[silence] jag har ju också jätte-- i början har jag haft -- hade jag väldigt svårt för amen, den här happy go lucky ehm... som kom med queerrörelsen. Som är allt det här fina, allt det glada, jag hade jättesvårt att ta åt mig avdet för att jag inte alls tyckte att allting var så jävla bra eller gulligt eller roligt

såhär, jag vet inte riktigt hur jag ska förklara det, men som person så tycker jag väldigt mycket såhär väldigt mycket om när saker känns mysigt elller gulligt å såna saker. Men i större sammanhang i större rum. Amen när det blir en sån här masspsykos över hur kul nånting är, asså lite den grejen, över hur lyckliga vi är tillsammans det har jag nog alltid [inaudible] haft lite svårt för, att jag då alltid börjar tänka på tvärs, "amen det här, det här är dåligt, tänk på det här, å typ såhär... amen att jag alltid istället anmärker på vad som inte är bra på en plats men med unicorner så, det har varit en plats vi velat skapa istället mysigt och glatt å kanske till och med gulligt rum är... ja det är ingenting som är givet för mig att göra.

[xxii] Sofie: på Facebook ifrågasatte man varför dels var det dom som ifrågasatte varför transmän skulle få komma. För att transmän...ehm... är lika mycket män som vilken man som helst. Och många personer då som identifierade sig som kvinna upp--eller några då sa att känner mig inte trygg om det finns en transman i närheten man som man och sen det andra var att... ehm.. men det var ju det och det här "vadå ni skriver att det inte får komma cismän, men en transman man ju va lika mycket cisman" att det är transfobiskt att säga att cismän inte är välkomna men att trans är välkomna. Ehm... men vi, jag tro-- jag hoppas att vi gjorde det ganska bra för dom och det är för, dels personer som identifierar sig som -- eller personer som identifierar sig som kvinnor och eller transpersoner. Men, inte personer som identifierar sig som cismän. Så för mig , jag kan bara prata om min [inaudible] och vi ville skapa ett rum för transpersoner asså personer med transerfarenhet. för att... i den här känslan att behöva ena sig och skapa ett tryggt rum, för det finns ju knappt några trygga rum för kvinnor ehm... let alone --och indirekt -- det finns ju knappast några trygga rum, eller finns det några trygga rum för personer med transerfarenhet. Ehm... och för oss jag tror det var väldigt såhär naturlig tanke att såhär inkludera personer med transerfarenhet, det var ingenting vi ifrågsaatte överhuvudtaget. Sen så blev ju vi ifrågasatta såklart, hur vet man om -- om man är transman men också cis, får man komma då... blablablablabla... men...jag tror att-- nu verkar det som det löst sig, så nu -- eller det vi försökte göra var att såhär, amen personer med transerfarenhet är välkomna, oavsett om man är transkvinna eller transman... ehm...och att -- amen... känner--jag tänker såhärm känner jag man sig träffad när det står inga cismän...

[xxiii] Sofie: ehm vi hade ju vår första pub i eh, höstas nån gång å jag minns inte när det va, kan det ha vart oktober nån gång? Å sen ... eh jag blev ju lite in...jag blev involverad ganska sent, eller allt gick ganska fort, jag tror att några i gruppen hade snackat om det här ett tag eftersom Cyklopen är väldigt mansdominerat, en väldigt mansdominerad plats. Eeeh... och det är en väldigt såhär bra plats... generellt som ju vi sympatiserar med --- IH: förlåt jag måste koppla in min dator, det borde jag gjort innan , jag ska bara koppla in datorn här. [silence] Ursäkta förlåt vad sa du? Cyklopen?
S: jo att vi har eh, jomen det börja med att många utav dom som är med i Unicorner eller alla har varit mycket på Cyklopen, typ [Cecilia] hon är ju aktiv i Cyklopens styrelse, ["E"another member] har varit det ["C"yet another] är med och har en brunch där, veganbrunch å såhär eh amen alla här har en anknytning till Cyklopen på nåt sätt och kände att det behövdes ett rum med eh, utan cis-män på Cyklopen [yawns]

som lockar fler personer som kan ta del av Cyklopen för... ja, det har haft en tendens av att bli väldigt så... macho-vänster...gård liksom. Och då så hade det väl ganska länge snackats om att göra en pub bara för tjejer eller för personer som identifierade sig som kvinnor nu säger jag tjejer... nu kommer jag säga tjejer för att jag inte-- men jag menar personer som identifierar sig som kvinnor eller trans, och eller trans. Ehm... men eh, a så det hade väl snackats om det ett tag, och sen så fick vi igenom det, för många i Cyklopen, många av dom som e mä som har [inaudible] tyckte inte att det behövdes.

IH: nähä?

S: För att som sagt, det e den typen av killar som ibland är där som va såhär, varför ska man ha, jag förstår inte varför man ska ha separatistiskt, varför har man inte tillsammans istället. Men det e väl för att det klassiska tänket att du som förtryckare inte själv kan förstå förtrycket eller vad det är som försigår liksom. Men sen till slut så fick vi igenom det jag var inte mä på det här mötet men det var nån... som fick igenom det tack vare att det var andra som faktiskt tyckte att det var så här, varför ska..

IH: men det var ändå nånting som ni var tvungna att få liksom igenom styrelsen?

S: ja, absolut. Ehm... och nu så har vi haft de två gånger, två pubar å det har gått jättebra

[xxiv] Cecilia: [...]det som jag håller på med nu har ju varit dom här feministiska projekten, och det kommer sig av nån slags frustration på vänsterrörelsen, och bristen på feministisk och HBTQ-perspektiv ibland.

IH: Hur tycker du att det kommer sig till uttryck, den där bristen på dom delarna liksom?

C: ja det handlar väl asså, jag tänker det handlar ganska mycket om, ja kanske nån märklig, kanske normer om vems arbete som ehm..som uppfattas och prioriteras [?] på olika sätt framförallt inom den här radikala vänstern ibland kan det finnas en sån här machojargong eller vad man ska säga. Inte jätte[inaudible] mest att man, dom personerna man lyfter dom liksom viktiga personerna är såhär AFA och dom som kastar gatsten eller såhär, och de [inaudible] då bygger det såhär machoideal [inaudible] å så finns det tråkigare arbete som görs av kvinnor liksom [inaudible] som i resten av världen

[xxv] IH: [silence]Tror du att ni kommer ha nå mer gulliga event?

Olivia: Jag vet inte, jag hoppas.. Det kändes som ett väldigt bra koncept, att ha liksom en vänsterfest, men att va liksom såhär, amen va gullig, för det blev, det blir liksom. Det kändes som att det var mer... Respektfullt på nåt sätt, och liksom... amen att folk fick va lite gulliga.

IH: Vad menar du med att det var respektfullt?

O: Amen jag vet inte, att det va så, att det inte var den här hårda liksom, macho-attityden, utan det skulle liksom va gulligt

IH: mmm

O: det kändes verkligen som att, det var inte macho, liksom.

IH: kan det va ett sätt att slippa, liksom macho- attityd

O: Ah, jag tror det. [silence] det hade vi faktiskt lite I tankarna också.

IH: Hur tänkte ni då?

O: Amen då var det liksom lite det här att dom som e jävligt macho kanske inte går på en fest där man ska såhär, får klä ut sig till något gulligt, liksom massa katter å enhörningar liksom. Eller att man iallafall,

amen, genom att ha det temat så sätter man liksom nån form av standard, eller vad man ska säga, amen så här ska det va här.

IH: Men e det ett problem annars att folk e macho, eller liksom?

O: men jag kan tycka det, o speciellt, är man på fest och det är alkohol och så kan det va ganska macho

IH: ah

O: sen så tycker jag så här att över huvudtaget såhär, snubbar inom vänstern kan ju va ganska macho

IH: vad e de dom gör då eller hur märks det?

O: fjaaa, jag vet inte [both laugh] men det e ju såhär vara typiskt manliga liksom IH:ah. Förlåt om jag tjatar men jag vill bara liksom [both laugh] vad är typiskt manliga [M laughs]

IH: om du har nåt exempel eller sådär

O: amen inte, kanske inte manligt, men det här, det som vi tänkte var det här ganska våldsamma liksom, och vi tänkte väl ganska mycket på dom mest extrema grupperna som är ganska våldsamma och, såhär, jag tar inte avstånd från dom, men det kan va jobbigt liksom, ibland när dom har egna fester kan det va lite såhär, då e liksom macho stämning, det är män som ska va manliga, som ska va starka o råa, och ha liksom, jag vet inte, har liksom bråkat med nassar eller poliser eller såhär lite liksom att den känslan, att det är hårdare klimat

xxvi IH: Hur kom ni på det här enhörningstemat?

Sofie: Asså vi satt å försökte komma på namn, jättelänge. Sen så var det nån som sa unicorn på skämt såhär- haha som att unicorn verkligen har blivit såhär – man ser unicorns överallt, den har blivit såhär i den queera rörelsen, alla älskar unicorns typ. Så sen bara ja, men Unicorners, Unitedcorners, så nu står det för Unitedcorner [S laughs].

IH: som att ni är förenade också?

S: Precis, så det fick bli Unicorner. Och sen tänkte vi ha olika namn för varje pub, nån ikonisk person, som vi er upp till, men det blev lite mycket att byta namn på puben varje gång.

xxvii IH: varför har ni valt just det här enhörningstemat?

Sofie: eh, alltså vi satt å försökte bestämma namn, jättelänge. Å sen så vare nån som sa Unicorn på skämt för att såhär haha för att Unicorn verkligen har blivit såhär över... amen det visas, man ser unicorns överallt framförallt när det e det queera lite såhär. Amen den rörelsen, alla älskar unicorns, typ och sen så bara, ja, men unicorners! Unitedcorners! typ så, så står det för Unitedcorner[laughs]

IH: så det blir lite som man står förenade också?

S: ja exakt att vi e förenade, å sen så, det fick bli Unicorner, å sen så i början tänkte vi ha olika namn [?] för varje pub, med nån såhär ikonisk person som vi ser upp till typ, men det blev lite för mycket vita män på en gång, så då fick det bli unicorner.

IH: men jag tänkte på när du sa att det är vanligt i queera miljöer, har du nåt exempel på det?

S: Åh nej, men typ såhär...Nej inte direkt, eller jo kanske på fester så är det jättemånga som är såhär unicorns på kläder eller tröjor, verkligen när man går ut och festar och sådär. Amen det här cute stuff

[?] å det är också en del a såhär, ehm... vad ska man säga det är väldigt mycket den hära just nu... Där jag kan tänka mig att jag liksom, man ser det är ju att -- det är väldigt mycket pony-grejer, å ... amen ... vad heter de typ... det finns ju ett namn för det, typ som när vuxna tjejer som jag har på sig väldigt såhär... amen typ grejer man hade när man va liten typ så cute stuff, såhär rosa, glitter, det här mermaidhåret å, liten såhär kläder -- IH: tänker du såhär nostalgi?

S: vad sa du?

IH: tänker du såhär nostalgi eller?

S: ja eller det är såhär många som eh...vet du vem Emma vahettere, en fotograf Emma Byström

IH: nej det tror jag inte

S: jag kan skicka den länken, det kan förklara lite vad jag menar med hela den här cute grejen.

xxviii IH: men vilka saker eh...finns det vissa saker som man återanvänder? Vilka saker är det som du själv har nån slags barndomsrelation till?

Sofie:ehm... Förut, så hatade jag ju allt som var rosa, å nu så är jag väldigt väldigt rosa. Men det är ju också, det beror på att när jag var liten, jag tyckte inte om rosa när jag var liten heller, jag hade nog inte gjort det när jag var typ tolv hade tyckt om rosa. Amen rosa fick alltd stå för det flickiga och tjejiga och det hatade jag, för jag var väldigt såhär, en sån som man kallar tomboy. Så jag verkligen avskydde rosa men nu e de som att jag tar igen den avskyn och istället älskar rosa [laughs] typ en sån sak... amen klistermärken. Jag har jättemycket klistermärken på min dataskärm som du inte kan se, på tårtor och grejer. [...]

xxix IH: [...] vad har du själv för liksom personlig relation till gulliga saker. Gillar du gullighet eller är det nåt som e viktigt för dig?

Cecilia: Asså, jag tror också att jag haft väldigt ambivalent förhållande till gullighet eh, men ändå tänkt mycket på det eller det känns som jag konfronterats mycket med gullighet eller sådär. Jag har liksom, eller typ funderat på det väldigt mycket utifrån nån sådär eh, könsrollstänk liksom eller sådär, men jag har aldrig gillat, när jag var liten och sådär var jag väldigt pojkflickig då hade jag svårt för det gulliga och det rosa liksom. Men senaste åren har jag liksom såhär tänkt om och känt och tyckt att det är väldigt intressant liksom, eller med ehm, vad ska jag säga jag kan känna att jag har nån slags motvilja till det där liksom från början som jag försökt arbeta med på något sätt, att ta till mig det gulliga så kan jag tänka att det är en sådär lätt grej att hacka ner på, det flickiga att det står för nånting som inte, det e så långt ifrån... Asså det e såhär oskyldigt på nåt sätt som gör, det finns liksom ingen, asså det e liksom varken coolt eller har nån sån här maktgrej med sig utan det bara är asså såhär, ehm eller det känns som att man uppnår liksom ingenting genom att gilla det gulliga eller använda det gulliga, det e känslan jag har liksom såhär, att jag liksom inte förstår mig på det, sen vad man menar när man pratar om det gulliga jag tänker främst på det flickiga liksom. Men sen har jag väl tänkt om och tänkt att man kan använda sig av det, kanske i nåt, asså i en feministisk retorik eller estetik för att det e... kanske liksom på ett sätt för att det utesluter män liksom på nåt sätt, förstår du hur jag menar, att det e... nånting som inte är till för dom överhuvudtaget, som e en eget, såhär det egna rummet, liksom där man inte...genom att hålla på

med nåt som nån annan inte förstår, asså den känslan av typ såhär gemenskap eller grupp såhär e viktigt eller intressant liksom.

xxx IH: Men om jag säger så här, nu var ju det här för att samla in pengar till Planka, men jag tänkte såhär, om man säger det lite hårt, vad har gullighet med klasskampen att göra? eller liksom har det nånting med det å göra?

Olivia: nej men det e väl d som, egentligen så har det väl inte det, och just därför så funkar det så bra att köra lite på den stilen, vilket såhär, har gjorts lite, det blir som ett annat sätt att förmedla nånting och få upp ögonen att de e liksom inte bara de här hårda röda stjärnan å knytnäve, utan det blir såhär, jaha oj, man ser mer på en banderoll med enhörningar fast som har ett, liksom ah, vad ska man säga, revolutionärt uttryck än såhära det vanliga gamla eh, så jag tycker att de e, det har ju inte direkt nåt med det å göra, men men det är också såhär, eller jag tänker också att, det är lite såhär, när kommunismen kommer då kommer allt va så himla bra, då kommer allt va såhär gulligt, och fluffigt å, man kör ju lite på den grejen också, såhär åh, det kommer va så himla gulleplutt, liksom

xxxi Hannes: men jag tror mest att det e att man känner att vafan man vill väl göra det man vill göra. Om man gillar gulliga katter och My Little Ponies då ska man väl få ha det i sin organisation. Å de e ju trevligt att – det känns ju också som att det blir – att det e okej att inte ta sig själv på så stort allvar även om man liksom jobbar med saker som man tycker e väldigt viktiga och väldigt allvarliga på ett sätt så. Det blir ju typ outhärdligt å ha en sån, allvarlig relation till den politiska aktivismen också, det räcker me att de e tillräckligt… hemskt och allvarligt i världen liksom. Det vill man göra nånting åt, men man behöver ju inte va en sån hemsk å tråkig å allvarlig person för det.

xxxii Sofie:[…] -- ja tänker att när man gör det här flickiga som så länge har varit förtryckt å står för nånting mesigt, och tar sig an det medlet och är jävligt typ såhär tuff å hård fast med det, typ såhär fuck you[silence]. Det tänker jag. å Unicorner är väl också lite så. Det är inte så att vi är gulliga små unicorner lovers för att vi är -- vi tar ju ändå an det mer, vi tycker -- jag tycker unicorner är gulligt [both laugh]. Det är typ en paradox, jag tänker att paradoxer är jävligt... ehm... starka. jag tycker om allt som är lite paradoxalt, eller såhär som går emot varann, tycker jag är intressant å kul [?] över lag. Sen har jag ändå tänkt att, men det tycker ja verkligen.

IH: vad ere du tycker e intressant ?

S: det oväntade tror jag. Helt klart det som är oväntat, att det som kanske folk höjer ögonbrynen.

xxxiii IH: Då tänkte jag fråga om just själva festen, hur kom det sig att du blev involverad i den?

Olivia: Amen det var liksom att [A] och [E] vi satt å snacka om, dom ville göra en stödfest för linje 19 har liksom inga pengar och har inga resurser, och då tyckte jag att det lät kul komma å fixa med festen å så. Å då hade vi väl redan tänkt då att ta nåå, nåt så här gulligt tema, så vår, det tyckte jag lät jättekul.

IH: mm när vare ni började planera festen, vet du det?

O: ehm, jag tror att det var i början av Augusti, som jag liksom, blev – gick med i alla fall [silence]

IH: vad var det som kändes kul med ett gulligt tema? O: vad sa du?IH: vad var det som kändes kul med ett gulligt tema?

O: ämen det e liksom [laughs] jag gillar söta djur, och lite såhär, amen de e kul med ett sånt tema inom vänstern, för de e liksom ganska ofta såhär, polistema [??] eller nåt sånt där, men inte så mycket så här gulligull. Å då kändes det som en väldigt bra grej.

IH: men e det nånting du tycker saknas annars inom liksom vänstersvängen, att det e gulligt eller?

O: [laughs] ja vet inte, alltså, inte Allt Åt Alla är lite så, faktiskt, Planka.nu egentligen också, det e lite såhär, det börjar va lite såhär katter, å lite. Planka.nu, deras sån här profilbild på facebook är ju den här, pusheen-bilden--IH: ja, ja har sett den O: – som plankar. De e liksom, de har blivit lite mer sådär. Och eh, Allt Åt Alla har ju en banderoll med massa enhörningar

IH: jahaa har ni?

O: jaa, de e liksom, jag tror att det har blivit liksom ett nytt koncept, eller nåt sånt här PR-knep, att vara gulliga, liksom, gulliga djur att det är lite inne. IH: […]Men hur i, på festen i lokalen, hur använde ni er av gulliga saker? Där på plats?

O: då försökte [skype freezes]

IH: Ånej, nu fastna det

O: de e ju ganska stort å, de e ju så här, högt i tak å, oj nu hackar det – eh, men asså, vi asså tanken var egentligen att maxa så mycket som möjligt, så att vi skulle liksom fylla ut så det skulle vara saker överallt. Ehm, å då, vi hann inte med allt som vi hade planerat men det var ju liksom att på nåt sätt fylla ut, å liksom ha bilder på djur, å ha små klistermärken som var jättesmå, så jag vet inte hur mycket det kändes, eh ha liksom affischer, banderoll, å just såhär amen såhär såpbubblor, som också liksom kändes så här gullliga, liksom. Ähm. Sen hade vi ju snömaskin, eller snökanon, men det var, det var.

IH: var det de det va, för jag har för mig att, jag får nån slags vag minnesbild att, nu hade jag ju 39 graders feber den här kvällen, men att det var nåt glittrigt i luften, vad det de som var snömaskinen eller? O: ja, det var nog det, för vi hade liksom en såpbubblemaskin på ena sidan, och smökanon på den andra. Det var ju som såhär jättesmå skumbitar liksom IH: jahaaa, det var det de var.

xxxiv Cecilia: Förra gången var det väl inför polishatets dag

IH: jo precis

C: så vi hade det som tema. Jaa jo jo vi hade den, gud vad hette den då... sätt knorren på...nej, sätt Per i Gropen, så var det en polis som vid, gu nu kommer jag -- nu har jag tappat bakgrundshistorien, jag tror det var en ockupation av så var det nån polis som skulle vräka eller hålla kolla på ockupationen ramlade ner i en grop istället det blev nån sån där [inaudible C laughs] nån [inaudible] på det liksom. Jaaa och det är väl kanske nån ja va ska man säga. Det är väl ganska radikalt att ha den jargongen mot polisen också, eller det är väl...vad ska man säga...ja... jomen radikalt är väl rätt ord Men det hänger väl ihop också med såhär med feministiska rörelsen och queerrörelsens typ relation till polisen, så. Och att göra det med en skämtsam ton är också ganska, ja vet inte lättsammare på nåt sätt liksom, eller såhär, kanske också hänger ihop med såhära, som vi var inne på tidigare med AFA och deras retorik mot polisen e

väldigt mycket sådär ehm "en bra snut e en död snut" liksom. Vilket e ju väldigt lång ifrån liksom hur vi formulerar oss då.

xxxv Sofie:[...]unicorner är ju en del av Cyklopen, så vi sympatiserar ju också väldigt mycket med Cyklopens eh...vad Cyklopen står för helt enkelt. Å vi har ju alla...[silence] en ganska... vad ska man säga... vi delar samma uppfattning om...polisen om...rätt -- vad säger man...[silence] jag vet inte kanske om auktoritet eller nånting. Vi ville väl liksom ja, visa att vi inte tycker att dom är så jävla softa att vi borde typ förändra vårt system ibland. Sen är min mammas kille polis

IH: jaha han är det [both laugh]

S: så jag berätta inte riktigt vad vi haft för pub det hade vart såhär jobbigt, dom träffades precis, eller dom träffades för nåt år sen, så det är fortfarande lite svårt för honom at såhära bonda, så jag tror inte det skulle va så bra om jag berätta om våran pub, jag har berättat om puben i sig, men inte vad vi haft för tema.

xxxvi Anna Efraimsson: [...] Ehm när jag tänker tillbaka. Dels så, ehm så tänker jag heh, jätteproblem med eh många av filmerna, jag tyckte att dom var skitdåliga, och just hade det där grabbiga som jag inte kunde står för, så vi... jag var ganska brydd innan, såhär hur ska åååh, det här blir så fel, jag tyckte att jag skulle stå för det, men då kom jag [silence] för mig blev det en räddning att säga såhär, men det här, men dom här filmerna handlar ju om människor egentligen och dom blir som ett lackmuspapper på vårt samhälle, så det finns nu kommer ni få se lite av varje, lite poetiskt, lite hårt, lite grabbigt, lite feministiskt, lite så så, jag hoppas att det kunde öppna upp för folks… Men sen, just med tanke på det så var jag förvånad över att det var så många som gillade den där ingenjör-filmen om du kommer ihåg. IH: Ja den som e på slutet nånstans?

AE: ja den e

IH: jag tyckte också jättemycket om den[laughs]

AE: tyckte du det? För jag har haft så jävla svårt för den, jag var verkligen, asså det som det som jag kan uppskatta var att dom gjorde det inte på katternas bekostnad utan, men jag har svårt för den typen av humor, amerikansk gubbhumor, men det var jättemånga, såhär verkligen feminister som ah, det var typ den bästa, och det vara jag förvånad över.

[highpitched singing in the background, IH laughs]

IH: ehm, det här e, eftermiddagsintervju blir alltid såhär förvirrad lite.. Men just det riks – nej inte riksteatern, Södra Teatern ska det va ehm, hur kom det sig att det var på Södra Teatern?

AE: Ja, det är bra att du frågar, för det var noggrannt utvalt.

IH: Det var det?

AE: Mm, dels så ville jag ha en en äkta teater, som konnoterar liksom nån sån här guld och sammet, den här, en gammal eh, teater för att också understryka teatern som mötesplats, som den var ursprungligen. Ehm, jag vet inte när Södran e ifrån men liksom på den tiden, eller om det var ännu tidigare, så var det ju väldigt mycket att man ba träffades och kollade på varandra.Ehmm, så det kändes viktigt, å sen så, själva rumsliga aspekten av en teater, men sen också att Södra Teatern är nästan den enda platsen i

Stockholm som har ett väldigt brett kulturbegrepp så att fin- och fulkultur och populärkultur, samsas under samma tak och så har dom mycket queer, queer-scenen e där å det kändes också viktigt. Ehm, jag e extremt noga överlag med o vad vilka platser mina evenemang e på, för att det e så.. vahetter… Amen för att det helt enkelt färgar hela upplevelsen så mycket.

xxxvii – Jag kände till deras förlaga i USA. Jag hade kollat på deras hemsida och har kompisar som har jobbat med festivalen. Jag tyckte det lät fett helt enkelt. Sedan läste jag om den i DN och då tänkte jag att om till och med dem skriver om det måste jag göra någonting på det, annars kommer någon annan att göra det. (Ewald, 2014)

xxxviii Anna Efraimsson: och dom sål-- dom eh, för dom e ju det här ett enormt evenemang, det är ju en person som jobbar halvtid bara som Internet Cat Video Coordinator, ehm, och dom får jättemycket förfrågningar från hela världen men mest från USA, från olika ställen att liksom, köra det där. Men dom var ganska, dom tyckte nog, det var väldigt roligt med mitt förslag, för det var mycket mer intellektualiserande, och inte såhär shit vilken crazy grej. Eller jag har ju liksom inte alls varit intresserad av att göra det till en crazy grej, utan tvärtom belysa det som ett samhällsfenomen [silence, excited talking in the background] Så... mmm.

IH: Men fick du liksom jobba med dom på nåt sätt, kom dom liksom och kollade lokalen eller nånting, eller var det bara att köra?

AE: Nej, i hade, vi hade faktiskt några skypemöten och samtal, så det var som nån slags.. Ändå att dom ville kolla, kolla upp såhär va skulle det här va för en kontext. För jag tror att dom hade varit med om att det va väldigt kommersiella krafter också eftersom det har en så sjukt, oförklarlig kommersiell potential så skulle, så hade dom vart med om att det var folk som tagit jättehöga biljettpriser och så vidare så dom, ett krav var ju att det skulle va non for profit [non-profit] och man skulle ta upp för djurens rätt...

IH: Så dom hade ändå några villkor ändå för att du skulle få ta det

AE:ah, plus att jag hade, eftersom jag gick en utbildning i USA så hade jag också, så slumpade det sig så att två av mina klasskamrater jobbade på the Walker Art Center så dom hade ju liksom lite koll på vem jag var och så.

xxxix "är en Stockholmsbaserad trio bestående av Fancy Cat, Sassy Cat och Shady Cat. Själva kallar dom musikstilen "scitzo cat punk" med influenser ur hip hop, post punk och performance art. Psycho kittens är obehagliga och oberäkneliga, söta som kattungar me sylvassa klor."

xl IH: Vad tänkte du om dom andra som var på festivalen? Eller kände.. Var det som förväntat, den sortens människor som var där eller..

Saga: Jag tror nog, jag hade förväntat mig lite mer katt-hipsters liksom

IH: mmm

S:Ehm, men det var ju ganska mycket, just de jag såg ju ganska många familjer, och barn och så där liksom, så det hade jag nog inte väntat mig direkt, trots att det var så tidigt liksom, en matiné så trodde

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jag ändå att det skulle va, lite mer, jag trodde inte det skulle va så städat som det va liksom, jag tänkte att det skulle va såhär, de va på en lördag tror jag, så jag tänkte att det va kommer såhär tvåhundra stycken hipsters mä liksom pluntor typ, i såhär innerfickan,

[IH laughs]

S: typ dricker öl och typ kollar på katter liksom

Ih: aah. ehm, men vad e en katthipster?

S: en katthipster är väl, asså jag vet inte, egentligen tror jag inte att jag behöver prefixet katt,

[ih laughs]

S: det känns att det ingår i att vara en hipster liksom att, man gillar katter liksom, eller använder dom som.. asså katter, jag ser ganska mycket så här tryck liksom, på kläder såhär på kepsar och så, som är, alltså att det är katter.

IH: mmm

S: det känns att det är nånting som talar till dom här människorna, kanske inte nödvändigtvis för att dom älskar katter utan för att, det har väl blivit lite utav en innegrej liksom får man väl ändå säga liksom, just katter

IH: men det är liksom bara modet just nu, som har mycket katter på sig. Tror du att det kommer liksom förändras?

S: deee, de tror jag nog att kommer göra

IH: mmm

S: Ehm, och då är det liksom, då är de liksom vi som står kvar

[ih laughs]

S: dom riktiga crazy catladies-människorna liksom

S: eeh, jag hade mer den bilden

[xli] IH: bra ehm. Då tänkte jag börja lite rakt på, hur kom du på idén att ha kattfilmsfestival

Anna Efraimsson: jag fick nys om det här via kolleger i USA att det gjordes på the Walker Art Center i Minneapolis och jag tyckte... väldigt mycket om att det var på en anrik finkulturell institution, och eh.... jag kände direkt att det här vill jag göra, okej då gör jag det [banging sound in the background, hard to hear what AE is saying] då kom idén att importera... Å de var väl då egentligen kanske – tvåtusentretton [silence] och sen bara liksom. Tiden gick och jag kände bara att jag var tvungen att göra det.

IH: Men hade du sett programmet då, när du hörde

AE: nej

IH: å du har inte varit på Walker Art Center heller?

AE: nej.. Åh jag köpte verkligen grisen i säcken, jag hade inte sett [loud bang in the background] det programmet när jag köpte det och när jag ju bestämde evenemanget.

IH: Ehm men du fick liksom betala för rättigheterna att betala för rättigheterna att visa dom, eller hur?

AE: ah

IH: vill du, eller vågar du säga hur mycket det var?

AE: absolut, jag måste bara komma ihåg. Ehm.. Jag vet att det skulle kosta [silence] trehundra... E de okej att jag tar fram

IH: jomen visst, kolla du

AE: dålig på siffor

[NH and LR talking in the background]

AE: Men jag tror att jag fick lite rea, säg att det kostade sextusen kronor, eller nåt sånt.

IH: ah. SÅ det var inte sån helt galen kostnad –

AE: nej,

IH: – ändå?

AE: och dom sål-- dom eh, för dom e ju det här ett enormt evenemang, det är ju en person som jobbar halvtid bara som Internet Cat Video Coordinator, ehm, och dom får jättemycket förfrågningar från hela världen men mest från USA, från olika ställen att liksom, köra det där. Men dom var ganska, dom tyckte nog, det var väldigt roligt med mitt förslag, för det var mycket mer intellektualiserande, och inte såhär shit vilken crazy grej. Eller jag har ju liksom inte alls varit intresserad av att göra det till en crazy grej, utan tvärtom belysa det som ett samhällsfenomen[silence, excited talking in the background] Så... mmm.

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IH: Så det kanske gjorde, tror du det gjorde det lättare å få till det?

AE: ah. Precis, absolut.

IH: Men sen eehm. Du sa att dom tyckte att det vart bra att det blev lite mer intellektuellt. Men sen styrde du lite med, för du använde ju inte deras vad ska man säga, såhär visuella

AE: nej. Profil?

IH: precis, hur bytte du och hur jobbade du fram den som du hade sen?

AE: Ja.. Det är en bra fråga, måste backtracka lite.

IH: ah

AE: Jo.. Såhär. När jag kollade på deras program, hur det hade varit året innan, ehm, för den reelen låg uppe på Internet och sen hur, när det var dokumentation från deras evenemang, som ju var utomhus, mycket mera av en folkfest, då tyckte jag, att det var väldigt macho, faktiskt, det som en typisk – för mig

var det som en manlig blick på nästan alla dom där kattvideosarna, och även såhär kring själva evenemanget, dom pratade på en såhär, det finns ju en ganska generisk såhär snubb-- såhär amerikansk snubbhumor som vi är väldigt välbekanta med i olika popkulturella fenomen och filmer och jag tyckte att den var där, i deras evenemang, och jag ville verkligen bort från det. Jag ville istället lyfta, den feminist – katten som feminist å så. Och då kontakt – åh originally, ursprungligen så hade jag tänkt att göra en … jag skulle visa den där reelen, men jag skulle också göra en egen tävling asså call for cat videos, där det skulle va en kategori den mest feministiska och den mest, det skulle va liksom ganska såhär speciella kategorier, typ den mest gulliga, den mest feministiska, den mest politiska, å så skulle man få komma in med såna bidrag för att jag ville bredda bilden av... kattfilmer då som fanns, men jag fick inga offentliga medel, och ja, egentligen betalade jag, jag gjorde liksom filmfestivalen ur egen ficka och jag hade liksom inte råd att lägga massa tid på att gör en call for cat videos, vilket skulle ta ganska mycket tid. Å men asså det var ju hela det där, och då kände jag också att profilen, det visuella, jag ville göra något nytt, och då kontaktade jag, precis liksom när jag började tänka kring att göra det här då kontaktade jag några som heter Bastion, som jobbar väldigt normkritiskt och queerfeministiskt liksom i sin formspråk å så liksom vi bollade ganska mycket fram på nåt sätt även innehållsligt på nåt sätt.

xlii "Vad tror du det är som gör dem så populära?

– Det har jag tänkt mycket på. Om jag ska slå på stora politiska växlar tror jag att det är ett symptom på att vi är politiskt deprimerade, det ger tröst, helt enkelt, när vi på Internet alltid tar del av globala vidrigheter. Sedan tror jag också att det handlar om slentrian, som en mikropaus nu när så många människor arbetar framför en dator. Det ger en liten kick och humor. Så å ena sidan tror jag orsaken är superpolitisk, och å andra sidan helt apolitisk." (Ewald, 2014)

xliii – Kattfilmerna fungerar som ångestlindring i stället för psykofarmaka. De renar oss och får oss att gapskratta. Om jag skulle få förskrivningsrätt som psykolog så skulle jag börja skriva ut kattfilmer på recept för lindrig till måttlig depression, säger Jenny Jägerfeld skämtsamt.

[…]

– Det är inte sexuellt och det är inte politiskt, utan tvärtom en motvikt mot allt ont i världen. Man renar sig med kattfilmer. Det finns inget ironiskt eller hipsterartat över dem heller, allt är snarare väldigt rent och oskuldsfullt, säger Jenny Jägerfeld."

(Ritzén, 2014)

xliv "Vanja Hermele är doktorand i genusvetenskap och en av dem som ska samtala på scenen under kattvideofestivalen. Hon är kluven till Internet katten som fenomen. – Jag upplever själv att jag har nått en "peak Internet katt". Det går inte en dag utan att någon skickar mig en kattvideo. Vi måste sluta snart. Det kan inte vara hälsosamt. Samtidigt tror hon att det digitala umgänget med katterna kan

fungera som en krockkudde när våra sinnen ska ta in hårdheten i den verklighet som också drabbar oss på nätet. – Världen håller på att brinna upp och samtidigt sitter vi och tittar på Internet katter. På samma sätt som en kaffeböna sägs rensa luktsinnet mellan parfymprover så tvättar katten dina ögon mellan fruktansvärda händelser. Det har ju varit så svårt och tungt att följa nyheterna den här sommaren. Internet katten kan då fylla en funktion för att stå ut och navigera i informationsflödet. Jag vet inte om det är bra eller fruktansvärt farligt." (Veerabuthroo Nordberg, 2014)

[xlv] "En doktorand som jagar stoff till sin avhandling om gullighetens dragningskraft dokumenterar fenomenet.

– Jag skriver om hur gullighet påverkar oss och hur det exploateras i media. Kattfilmer är ju inkluderat i det och nu gör jag mitt första fältarbete för att se hur folk reagerar på filmerna. Den mediala cirkusen är väldigt intresserant [sic], hur många som är här för att titta på folk som tittar på gulliga saker, säger Ingeborg Hasselgren, doktorand vid universitet i Sussex."

(Ritzén, 2014)

[xlvi] IH: ehm, vi kan prata lite om kattfilmsfestivalen, om du vill

Saga: ah

IH: hur hörde du, hur hörde du talas om den

S:ehm, oj! Det minns jag inte, jag tror att jag, jag såg nog nån länk på Internet , att nån hade gillat det på facebook eller sådär å jag bara Oh my god! Vad är det här för nånting!?

[silence]

IH: när var det, var det när det fortfarande var, var den redan utsåld då? Eller var det

S: ehm, jaa, det tror jag, jag har för mig det, att jag när jag hörde talas om den jag skulle köpa en biljett dit liksom, då var det, jag tror det var [en vän] som sa det, amen dom e redan slutsålda

IH: mhm

S: å sen så fick jag reda på att amen, det fanns en till visning, liksom

[tystnad]

IH: det kanske låter som en dum fråga, men varför ville du gå?

S: [laughs] för att, alltså, vi, alltså för att det är en så unik grej, liksom. Jag tänker att det är liksom inte, det är inte nånting du kan se på bio varje helg och kolla på gulliga videos, liksom. Så dels för att det var en ganska unik händelse äh, å sen, asså, formatet att istället för att sitta hemma liksom o såhär Youtube-kolla videosarna så e de på en stor skärm vilket va, amazing, äh, men sen också att man gör det, asså i en publik där alla är, alltså det var ju ingen som va där för att dom typ hatar katter liksom

[both laugh]

S: jag får hoppas att det inte var så, utan alla där var ju liksom där för dom gillar katter och söta djur, och det känns, det känns som en väldigt sympatisk grupp att sitta med i liksom. Till skillnad från när man går och ser på vanlig bio liksom

IH: men eh, vart det liksom, hur var det att titta på det med andra människor, var det nån skillnad än att titta på det själv?

S: ehm, ja, ehm, asså jag tror att, jag tyckte nog att det var lite halv, alltså roligt men ändå lite halvjobbigt för att det är ganska så, för mig så är det en ganska intim grej liksom just det här med gulligheten och hur, jag känner så starkt för det att det blir lite, asså, att va med andra människor och titta på något som är så känsloframkallande blir, det var lite konstigt, liksom, faktiskt.

IH: men kände du att du liksom, höll tillbaka nånting, eller kunde du ändå--

S: ahh, det skulle jag säga att gjorde, faktiskt

IH: vad var det för nåt som du höll tillbaka då?

S: Asså jag tror att, hade jag suttit hemma, ehm, jag hade nog gråtit mera på bion om jag, kände liksom, för det gör jag ganska ofta hemma när jag kollar på söta djur liksom, och inte av, asså inte för att det jobbigt sött, utan det är mer såhär, glädjetårar, och jag känner som ömhet inför söta saker, att jag liksom inte, det är liksom min ventil på väldigt många sätt liksom, att kolla på söta djur, ähm, jag hade nog kanske, jag höll nog tillbaka såhär tårar liksom, och väldigt mycket såhär eller sötutrop som jag gör när jag sitter hemma och tittar liksom, jag var ganska, jag var ganska samlad på kattfestivalen.

IH: vad bruakr du göra för sötutrop? [unintelligible] S: asså jag sitter och pratar typ låtsasspråk med min katt och typ är såhär [in highpitched "baby" voice] mimimimi bubshibu[trackmark 39:41]åh kolla vad söt den är!

[both laugh]

S: mycket såna saker som, eh, ah, det är väl få människor som jag känner som får, ah som är me när jag gör såna där saker liksom, det är typ min syster, liksom, och mamma och mitt ex sen tio år tillbaks liksom

[silence]

[xlvii] IH: men e, jag tänkte också när vi va på festivalen, en del av de där programmet, det var ju inte bara åh, katter som gör gulliga saker

Saga: nej

IH: utan det var ju också typ musikvideor med katter, vad tyckte du om dom? Alltså dom mera, konstruerade videorna

S: ehm... Alltså . Just musikvideosarna å sådär, asså musiken var ju ingenting som jag kände till sen innan eller tyckte var jättebra

IH : Nej

S: utan där var det ju mer, det var katter i videon, och då var det såhär, då var det extra okej liksom såhär att kolla på den där musikvideon. Fast dom tyckte jag väl va.. Katterna va bra, men [both laugh] dom gjorde jobbet liksom, men annars så tyckte jag inte att dom var så bra i övrigt. Utan katter tycker jag gör sig bäst när dom får vara sig själva liksom