

# Cute, Good-Looking, Funny, Sweet

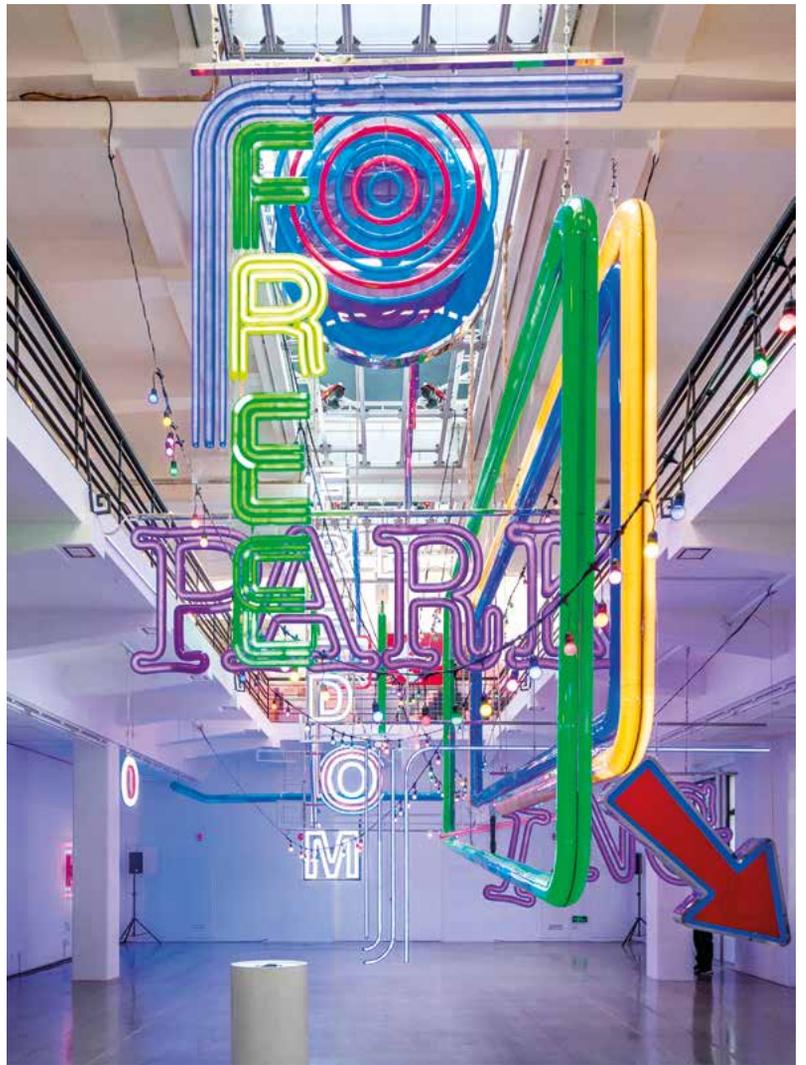
BY Jacquelyn Ross

(Opposite) Tobias Rehberger, *If you don't use your eyes to see, you will use them to cry*, 2019, *Tobias Rehberger: If you don't use your eyes to see, you will use them to cry* installation view at Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai, 2019. © 2019 Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai.





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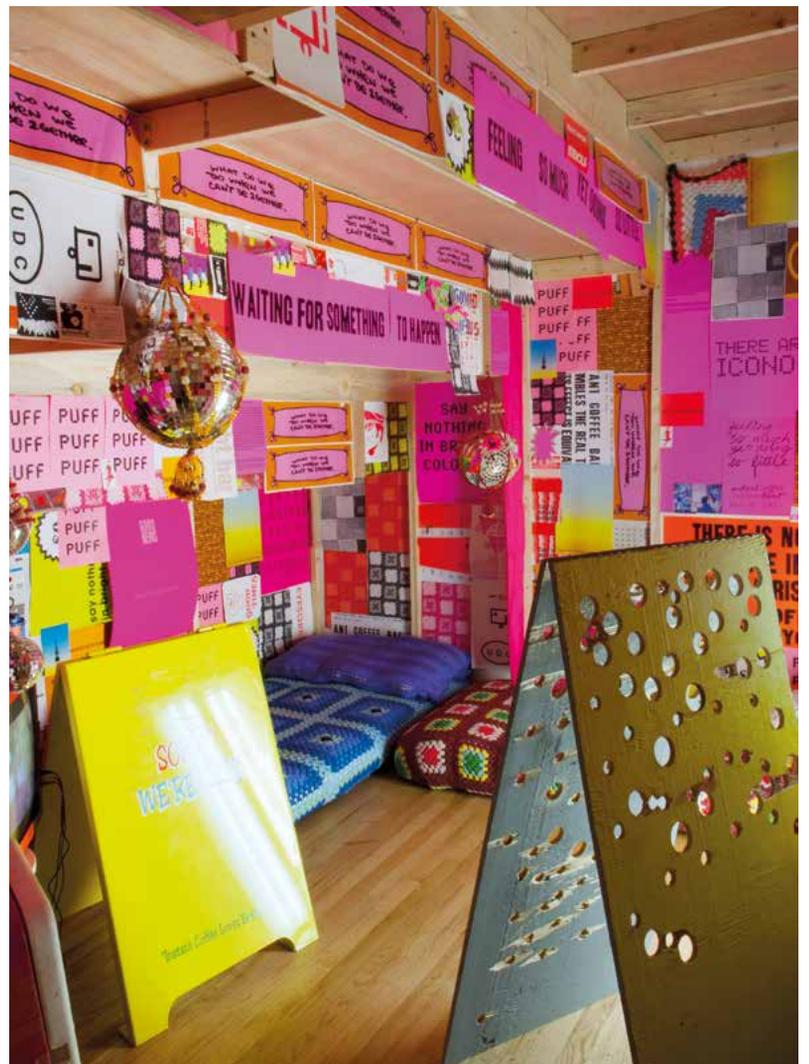
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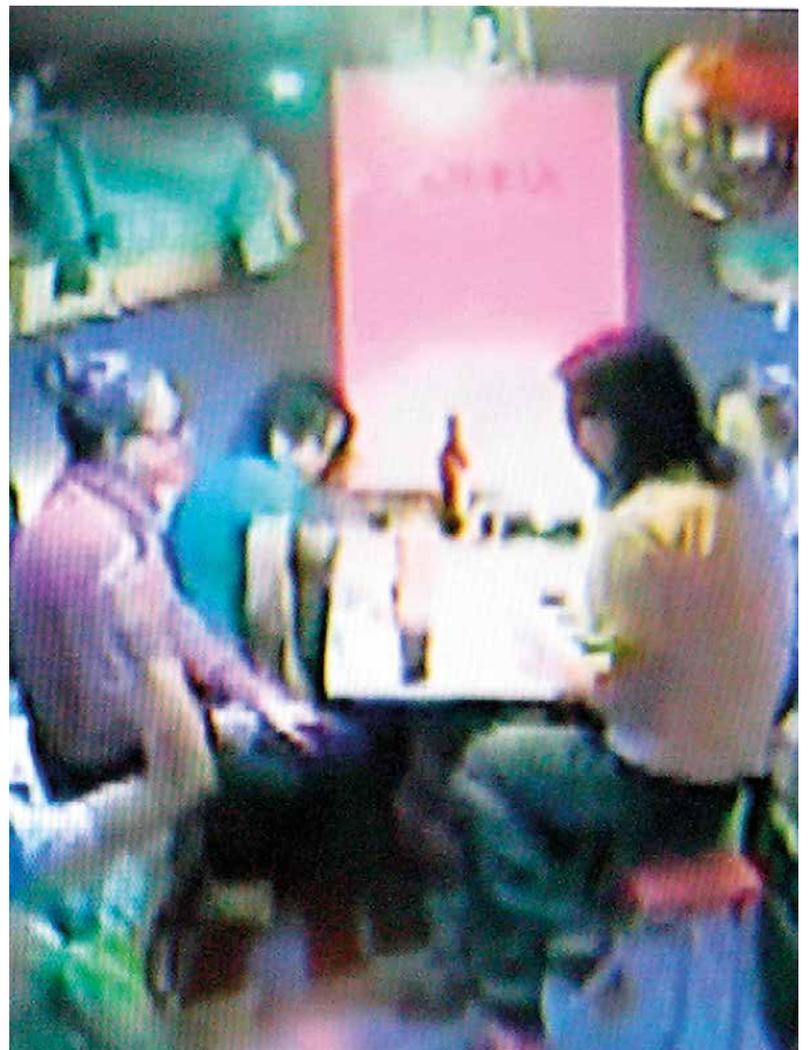
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Love Bucks, light bars, and extravagant tasting menus—these are but a few of the things that make art these days pleasantly easy to consume. But what happens when your favorite artworks begin to resemble the saccharine things for sale at the mall? And what difference does it make, anyway, if we all enjoy the same bad taste?

It starts out innocently enough: as a tickle, a curiosity. A glittery cell phone case purchased from a nondescript stall in a mall; a plush charm for my purse; a baseball cap with a funny slogan on it; chunky sandals revived from another decade. Traipsing around the megamalls of Shanghai this fine spring season while bearing all of these rather specific and obtuse objects on my person, I am only vaguely aware of just how naked I appear. Any half-observant gallery attendant can probably tell immediately what kind of person I am. Whether I have been to art school. Whether I have *that* kind of humor, *that* kind of intellect, et cetera. The predictability of all of this is deeply depressing for a person who would prefer to be unpredictable.

To make matters worse, this realization arrives on the heels of a certain trend I have observed lately in my personal and professional life: that is, the merging of my hard-earned critical opinions with my shameless consumer habits. Just as the things that I buy have no doubt fashioned me into a quantifiably niche millennial brand, so too, it seems, has my taste in art lately taken on an increasingly homogenous, candy-toned, and sarcastic palette to match. It's high time I considered what all of this is doing to my sense of judgment. Is it bad if the art I like is funny or cute? If it can be loved easily, and by the majority, rather than by an elite, intellectual few? Does this make me a bad critic?

To be clear, it is not the inauthenticity of this development that troubles me (everyone knows, after all, that authenticity is dubious, and never so much so as in the postmodern age); moreover, I have exactly zero interest in defending the art world's castle moat of "taste." Nor is it merely the consumer aesthetics of cuteness that are at fault (cute things can be weirdly subversive; more on this later). No, what concerns me about the lapsing of the critic into the consumer has to do, most of all, with the principle of the thing—specifically, the distinct image of capitalism raising its giddy flag over my body after I'm gone. Even for a teenage mall rat such as myself, this image is simply too much to bear. Oh, the ironies of the twenty-first-century personal brand! For this reason alone, I digress.

- 01 Tobias Rehberger, *Pee, Tea*, 2019, *Tobias Rehberger: If you don't use your eyes to see, you will use them to cry* installation view at Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai, 2019. © 2019 Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai. Courtesy: Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai
- 02 Tobias Rehberger, *Free Coffee Free Parking Freedom (plug & play version)*, 2018, *Tobias Rehberger: If you don't use your eyes to see, you will use them to cry* installation view at Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai, 2019. © 2019 Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai. Courtesy: the artist and neugerriem-schneider, Berlin. Sponsored by RCL
- 03 Tobias Rehberger, *Blackbird's Rockbund Art Museum Butcher Shop*, 2019, *Tobias Rehberger: If you don't use your eyes to see, you will use them to cry* installation view at Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai, 2019. © 2019 Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai. Courtesy: the artist; neugerriem-schneider, Berlin; Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing / Lucerne
- 04 Tobias Rehberger, *Forbidden in heaven, useless in hell (El Redomón version)*, 2019, *Tobias Rehberger: If you don't use your eyes to see, you will use them to cry* installation view at Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai, 2019. © 2019 Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai. Courtesy: Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai
- 05 Instant Coffee, *Feeling So Much and Doing So Little*, 2012. Courtesy: the artists and MKG127, Toronto
- 06 Instant Coffee, *Feeling So Much Yet Doing So Little*, 2012, installation view at Western Front, Vancouver, 2012. Courtesy: the artists and MKG127, Toronto. Photo: Kevin Schmidt
- 07 Instant Coffee, *Disco Fallout Shelter*, 2009, exterior sculpture, Hamburg as part of *Subvision* (2009). First presented at the Toronto Sculpture Garden. Courtesy: the artists and MKG127, Toronto
- 08 Instant Coffee, *Disco Fallout Shelter*, 2009. First presented at the Toronto Sculpture Garden. Courtesy: the artists and MKG127, Toronto

## PART 1 ON THE SIMPLE PLEASURES OF ENJOYING ONESELF AT AN ART SHOW

When it comes to the task of describing how an artwork is received, metaphors from the edible world are apt. Does it go down quickly (like popcorn or beer), or does it move around very slowly in your stomach afterward (like Korean hot pot or strong cheese)? Does it taste sweet or spicy or sour? Is it an acquired taste, or is it something you've loved since childhood but were warned not to eat?

Tobias Rehberger's recent exhibition at the Rockbund Art Museum is like eating an expensive hamburger composed of six separate elements quite literally stacked on top of each other (being that the gallery itself spans six narrow floors).<sup>1</sup> Regrettably, it's easy to get carried away with food-based similes—I am more than guilty of it here—and this becomes increasingly apparent the moment I am handed a "tasting menu" to guide my visit through the artist's hodgepodge culinary theme park. Of its various, and only partially edible, components: a dizzyingly checkered semi-functioning charcuterie on the main floor; an army of vases and dying floral arrangements conceived as portraits of friends; a tatami-clad toilet-teahouse combo that encourages the visitor to urinate in one room and then drink

<sup>1</sup> *Tobias Rehberger: If You don't use your eyes to see you will use them to cry*, curated by Larys Frogier and Billy Tang, Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai, March 23–May 26, 2019.

- 2 From the exhibition pamphlet—sorry, I mean tasting menu—for Tobias Rehberger’s *Forbidden in Heaven, Useless in Hell (El Redomon Version)* (2019).

- 3 From the Instant Coffee FAQ: <http://www.instantcoffee.org/about/faq.phtml>.

## PART 2

### SINCE CRITICS WOULD PREFER THINGS BE DIFFICULT, LET’S MAKE THINGS MORE DIFFICULT

It’s true that in my mind “the good critic” remains someone dressed in gray burlap standing solemnly with a pencil and notebook before a famished-looking portrait by Rembrandt. Of course I know that in real life critics can be quite fashionable people—that our attire, as it is for many artists I know, has been helpfully updated over the years from burlap sacks to other, albeit similarly shaped, garments bestowed on us by COS—but the problem for me remains that this sullen intellectual is just as much a part of my body as that other half who likes eating marshmallows and plugging my smartphone into a cord in a plinth just to hear my music blast in a public space. So while I may publicly say that I like a certain work of art because, for instance, it “speaks to the female experience,” or “alters our perception of time and space” or “models new forms of participation”—while all of these things might be absolutely necessary and true—failing to mention just how *easy it can be* to experience a work of art seems to me to be equally robbing it of something.

Just think, for instance, of the Dutch artist Lily van der Stokker, whose humorous wall paintings and confec-

her very own filtered (surprisingly delicious) green tea from the other; an explosion of suspended neon signs that blink to the beat of a user-inputted soundtrack; a selfie-ready, pixel-patterned wallpaper; and an artist-designed cocktail bar on the sixth floor that, in a gesture that smells embarrassingly of contemporary art, opens each day “according to the sunrise in El Redomon, Argentina, a location exactly at the opposite point of the globe to Shanghai.”<sup>2</sup> If I sounded unimpressed, it’s because I wasn’t. This is not the kind of work I rush to defend. But I don’t know if there was oxytocin in my tea that day, or maybe it’d just been a while since I’d last been outside (it had been), because I had a really good time at the show. I did. It wasn’t until I left the museum building and began to wend my way home on the crowded subway that I began to return to my usual, world-weary self. What had just happened to me in there, I wondered? Where had my inner intellectual left for lunch? It felt like the day after Halloween, the inside of my mouth caked with sugar. Like my teeth might fall out.

It wasn’t the first time I’ve felt this way. I’m a fan of the Canadian artist collective Instant Coffee, whose works since the early 2000s have wrestled productively with many of the same questions of taste and consumption that concern me here. In keeping with their namesake beverage, the group’s motto, “It doesn’t have to be good to be meaningful,” speaks to utopian ideals, and unapologetically sincere and modest proposals for engagement therewith. With a barrage of catchy slogans appearing on T-shirts, posters, and sandwich boards, as well as a totally useful listserv (the last time I checked, the popular e-newsletter for Canadian art event listings had more than eight thousand subscribers, myself among them), the collective has assembled light bars, kitchen nooks, communal beds, disco fallout shelters, mini amphitheatres, sunset slow dances, whittling workshops, and many a spaghetti dinner within the “service-oriented” genre.<sup>3</sup> When it comes to relational art practices, though, food is not only used as a playful metaphor for inedible things, but quite literally feeds people in order to include them. For Instant Coffee and others, the whole point of the exercise is to make work that can be easily digested; work that is inclusive, not exclusive; work that lets weirdos, and art and non-art people alike in on an experience that can be swallowed quickly and hopefully leave you buzzed. These seem like good things.

The problem is that while there are a million good and thoughtful reasons to articulate one’s appreciation for Instant Coffee, there are also a bunch of really dumb reasons to like them, too. They are, quite simply, fun. Their projects come in bright colors: pink, fluorescent orange, yellow. They throw cool parties. They serve you drinks. They write the kinds of slogans you wouldn’t mind wearing or hanging as a framed poster in your house just to show how fun loving and outgoing you too can be. So which one is it? The question beckons each time I find myself as I am now, engaged in some perverse intellectual acrobatics, and all just to confirm for myself and others that I am far more sophisticated than my pink smartphone case implies.



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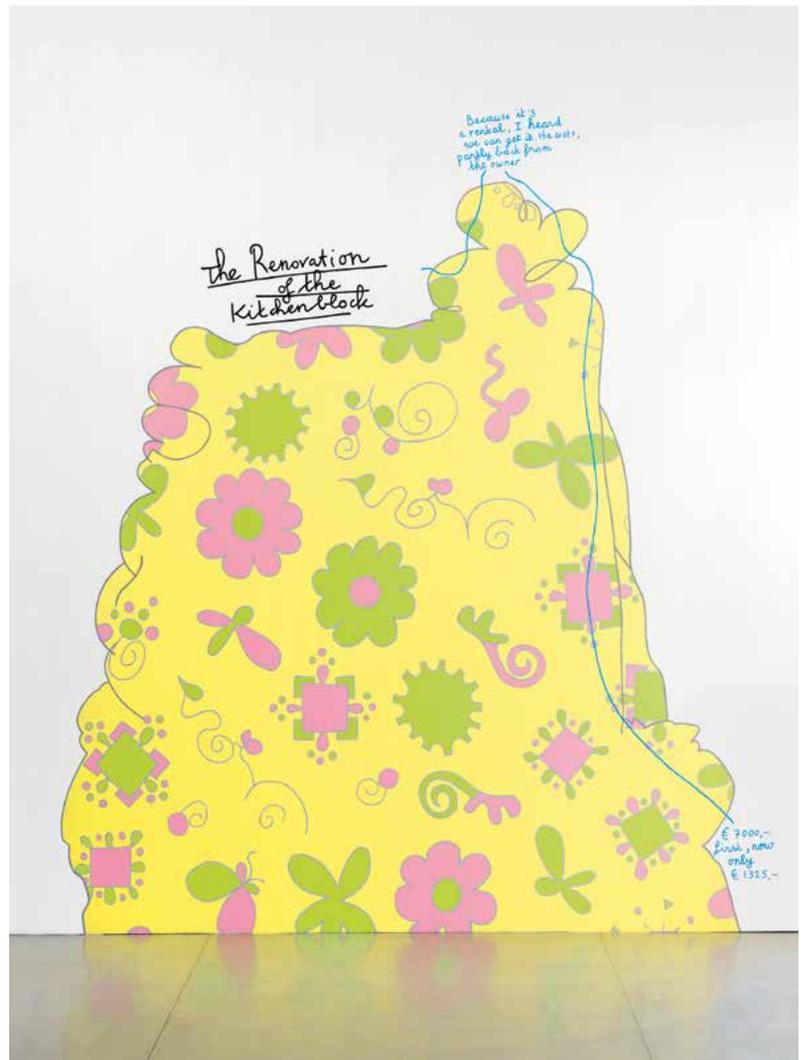
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- 4 From Lily van der Stokker's guided audio tour for her retrospective exhibition *Friendly Good*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, October 27, 2018–February 24, 2019. See <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/exhibitions/lily-van-der-stokker>.
- 5 Artist's statement, <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/exhibitions/lily-van-der-stokker>.
- 6 A collaboration with the luxury fashion label Miu Miu, no less!
- 7 Sianne Ngai, "Introduction," in *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), 12–13.
- 8 Claire Milbrath, "Nhozagri's Stuffed Babies," *Editorial Magazine*, no. 18 (2018): <http://the-editorialmagazine.com/nhozagris-stuffed-babies>.

tionery palettes can make a person blush with affection or repulsion or both. Drawing inspiration from the looping marginalia of a teen girl's diary and associated bedroom decor, her work beams with optimism and unapologetic too-muchness, brims with bubble letters and idle cross-hatching, stylized flowers and clouds. Whatever at first appears frivolous quickly gives way to deft hilarity, the moment the viewer grasps the total seriousness with which the artist is going about her slow world domination. "I'm going to make sweet, cute things," she says, self-assuredly, "so deal with it."<sup>4</sup> Clearly it's this frankness of intention that allows her work to be seen within a conceptual art framework, rather than that of outsider art or genuine naïveté, buoying her against the usual, and by now predictable, detractors. Van der Stokker knows exactly what she is doing, and just how she is manipulating your distaste. Then again, maybe I don't need to know any of that. "I am a beauty specialist," she says, rather precociously, in one oft-cited quote. "I have commissioned myself to research happiness and friendliness in my artwork, and with that I take a stand against irony and cynicism."<sup>5</sup> *Against irony and cynicism*. Is this what the consumer turn is all about?

It is true that maintaining an optimistic stance in this day and age has become practically radical; whether it is possible to do so without irony (at least in the art world), I'm less sure. I think of the artist, writer, and filmmaker Miranda July, whose entire oeuvre could be described as the staging of exuberant acts of wishful thinking in the face of obvious human impossibility. From the cheekily ineffective messaging app *Someone*,<sup>6</sup> to the DIY money-making photo booth erected at this year's Tokyo Art Book Fair that invited friends to output their faces on the artist's very own hand-drawn "Love Bucks" ("I've made a new kind of currency," July announced on social media. "It's extremely valuable. It's replacing the yen in Japan right now, really throwing the economy into flux"), it could be argued that it is the very consumability of such "cute" forms that allows them to poke fun at the capitalist logic. As the scholar Sianne Ngai puts it in her discussion of aesthetic categories, "Cuteness, an adoration of the commodity in which I want to be as intimate with or physically close to it as possible, thus has a certain utopian edge, speaking to a desire to inhabit a concrete, qualitative world of use as opposed to one of abstract exchange... The fetishism of cuteness is as much a way of resisting the logic of commodification—predicated on the idea of the 'absolute commensurability of everything'—as it is a symptomatic reflection of it."<sup>7</sup>

No one better epitomizes this than Beijing artist Nhozagri (能尖日), whose Instagram account I followed for a time until it eventually became too psychologically disturbing. Nhozagri makes drawings, stuffed animals, and other sculptures in paper and clay—objects that one writer for *Editorial Magazine* appropriately called "the first pieces of art I've ever wanted to kiss."<sup>8</sup> These small, unassuming things are so candy-like in palette and innocent, childlike appeal that they are practically erotic, grotesque: a crudely painted clay pop can that morphs into a blue hangnail from another angle; a floppy, iridescent book with handmade trinkets dangling precariously from it on strings; a soft, bunny-like creature with sparkly beads for eyes adorned with jewelry of the too-personal, homemade-Valentine variety. Nhozagri also sells things online via the popular Chinese marketplace Taobao, where one can find a further assortment of oddly sentimental zines, stuffed objects, and charm bracelets—modest extensions of a practice in which bedroom crafts merge blithely with what might be properly considered "art." Even if the artist *was* sincerely involved in the genre of tear-stained stuffies typically found on the pillows of young girls, the work itself, by sheer excess and force of attention, takes on an ambiguous, possibly subversive dimension.

It's that tricky word—"possibly"—that speaks most of all to the dilemma that remains. How is one to find their way in a field littered with so many consumer objects (artworks and otherwise) endlessly miming the good and the bad? And how can one be so sure that they are acting *against* something, rather than *for* it, if the goal is indeed to bar against political apathy, against the growing gap between the rich and the poor, against pending ecological apocalypse, and, frankly, against the megalomaniacs in our own backyards? If the art that I like really is as ambivalent as it appears—selfie-worthy and “maybe,” or “possibly” critical—who's to say that the whole project of criticism isn't just another extension of some higher power dictated to us through Miranda July–designed Uniqlo tees or the latest Pantone Color of the Year?

In art school, it always seemed to me that there were two kinds of artists: those who make work impulsively and then rush, retroactively, to find some kind of ad-hoc conceptual reason to justify what they've done, and those who work so dryly, methodically, reasoned-ly, that the result has a ninety-five percent success rate in sedating anyone within a few meters of it. The few students talented enough to avoid both of these traps would continue afterward to move up, up, and away in the world to become “relevant artists,” while the rest of us would presumably continue flexing one way or the other ad infinitum, feeling forever as if some number from a secret password was missing. What I've since realized, though, is that this distinction between “the good” and “the bad” in art has much less to do with thinking too much or too little, and much more to do with knowing how to be a critical, and also a generous, participant.

There's this sense that a work of art should not look or behave too much like the pleasurable things we buy or eat, because if it does, we risk forgetting what the work is really there to do. But what *is* it there to do, exactly? It is possible that nobody knows, and that, in our collectively agreed-upon bad taste, this ambivalence about what is nourishing to our survival and what is self-destructive may just be the single most defining aspect of our time.

- 09 Lily van der Stokker, *We also sell socks*, 2012. Courtesy: the artist and kaufmann repetto, Milan / New York. Photo: Roberto Marossi
- 10 Lily van der Stokker, *Subway painting with chair*, 2012. Courtesy: the artist and kaufmann repetto, Milan / New York. Photo: Roberto Marossi
- 11 Miranda July, *Love Bucks*, 2019. *Miranda July x Uniqlo* activation event at the Tokyo Art Book Fair, Tokyo, 2019. Photo: Hajime Kato
- 12 Miranda July, *Love Bucks*, 2019. *Miranda July x Uniqlo* activation event at the Tokyo Art Book Fair, Tokyo, 2019. Photo: Hajime Kato
- 13 Nhozagri, *Butterfly*, 2019. © Nhozagri and Space Station
- 14 Nhozagri, *Overlap*, 2019. © Nhozagri and Space Station
- 15 Lily van der Stokker, *Decent, Tidy*, 2014. © Koenig & Clinton, New York. Courtesy: the artist; Cabinet, London; Air de Paris, Paris; Galerie van Gelder, Amsterdam.
- 16 Lily van der Stokker, *Renovation Kitchen*, 2010, *No Big Deal Thing* installation view at Tate St. Ives, St. Ives, 2010. Courtesy: Air de Paris, Paris. Photo: Steve Tanner

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