先取りキャラクターグッズ大行進

チェック！
チェック！

瞬く間にブームとなった「キャラクターグッズ」。気がつけば、「え〜こんな物もある」というアイテムが街には、いっぱい。あなただけのお気に入りを見つけて、毎日の生活を楽しくしてみませんか。

PHOTO / KAORU KITAHARA

マイ メロディ

お店でも品切れアイテム続出の「マイ メロディ」は、赤いずきんがトレードマークのウサギの女の子。いま最もホットなキャラクターです。じつはピンクのずきんから、大変身していたんです。

この秋NO.1人気は赤ずきんのウサギちゃんに決定

キティちゃんに続き、今ひそかに愛好者が急増中なのが、キティちゃんとほぼ同じ歴史をもつサンリオのマイメロディです！ 価格ぬいぐるみ／1200円／（サンリオ）

バッグに忍ばせて！
マユゲつローム＆毛抜き
天然毛のブラシと毛抜きのピンセットが、透明なビニールケースに入っています。マイメロちゃんはまゆげがないけれど……。価格／500円（サンリオ）

思わず読み返したくなる！
ファックスシート
「連絡ください」「THANK YOU」など、5つのデザインが各6枚ずつ入ったFAX の送り状。ホームFAX を持っている人へメッセージを送るときにどうぞ。価格／200円（サンリオ）

大事なお友だち用に
名刺カードファイル
マイメロちゃんの留め具つきの、ポケット24枚分の名刺ホルダー。入れる名刺もかわいいものにしたいですね。価格／400円（サンリオ）

身だしなみの基本
ブラシ＆ミラー
赤いチェックの巾着に入った身だしなみセット。おしゃれに目覚めた幼い頃にもどった気分を味わえるかも。価格／700円（サンリオ）

オイリーさんはサヨナラ！
油取り紙入れケース
ピンクの油取り紙がビニールケースに入っています。1枚ずつ取り出せる80枚入りタイプ。価格／350円（サンリオ）

アイデア次第でいろいろ使える
仕切り付きケース
ピアスやリングなどに丁度よいサイズ。中にはミラーがついています。価格／400円（サンリオ）

サンリオファン必見！
いちご新聞
新商品やさまざまなトピックなど、サンリオのキャラクターに関する話題がぎっしりつまった月刊の小冊子。サンリオショップなどで購入できます。価格／180円（サンリオ）

飲み会の幹事さん、大助かり！
フォトミニソーラー電卓
プリクラシールを入れるキーホルダー。ふたをあけると、なかはミニミニ電卓になっています。価格／580円（サンリオ）

押すチャンスが待ち遠しい
印鑑ケース
深いクリアレッドがとってもきれいな印鑑ケース。もちろん朱肉付き。価格／500円（サンリオ）

週末はカジュアルネイルに！
ネイルシール
マイメロちゃんの表情が楽しいネイルシール。オフのネイルにはお茶目に演出／価格／（サンリオ）

11月1日はキティちゃんの誕生日

押しも押されもせぬ大人気キャラ、キティちゃんが登場したのが、1975年の11月1日。当のキティちゃんは、イギリス生まれの女の子。彼女は子供たちの夢の国を統べる女王。ワールドワイドに活躍するキャラクターとして、最新の「ICDシリーズ」の「M」や、クリスマスグッズなど……。〈写真上〉価格ケース／500円／（ジャバン）、キティケース／定価の携帯電話ブーム仕掛け人キティグッズは、ますます元気いっぱいです！

My Melody

© '76, '97 SANRIO

Fig.1 Scans of unknown magazine from the 90s, himedaria.exblog.jp

※サンリオの商品に関するお問い合わせ先は、P135 をご覧ください。　※サンリオの商品は、通信販売を行っておりません。

the layers of cute characters

Mentor:
Dr. Joëlle Bitton

Student:
Manami Galliker

Index

chapter 1.

Introduction

Cuteness has always played a significant role in my life, present from my childhood and shaping my every day. It became an integral part of my identity, and this connection with it has brought me to this research topic. I grew up surrounded by cute characters, in a Japanese household it is an intrinsic part of the girly experience and it is in fact, also the way my mother grew up. For as long as I can remember I was drawn the most by products featuring images and colors that evoke warmth and softness. Reflecting on my journey, I've come to recognize that each phase of my life was marked by different favorite characters, shaping the backdrop to my experiences. Over time, this seemingly personal preference evolved into an exploration of the interplay between cuteness, character design, girlhood, and popular culture.

Diving further into this realm, I discovered intriguing trends. The design of cute characters isn't arbitrary; it shifts with evolving tastes and cultural trends.

1.1 Abstract

Often dismissed as just a superficial aspect of aesthetics, cuteness is unserious and useless. However, there is an undeniable truth when it comes to its immense popularity. By taking countless forms, the adorable and harmless has taken over the world, but why did this happen?

This research explores this realm of cuteness through the lens of Japanese character design, as it represents a central element of cute visual products. By observing the variations in character visuals, I seek to unveil the relation between visual attributes and intended purposes. Moreover, with an analysis of design choices and narrative constructions, I aim on getting a better grasp on the strategic utilization of cuteness as a powerful tool, which can be utilized to invoke specific emotions to both conclude narratives and achieve commercial objectives.

1.2 Research question

Cute characters are undoubtedly extremely popular on a worldwide scale. What are the underlying mechanisms that sustain the constant high popularity of cute characters globally, even through periods of societal turmoil and change?

To what extent is the concept of cuteness intertwined with cultural shifts, and how does the design of cute characters reflect and adapt to these changes over time?

1.3 Method

Visual analysis
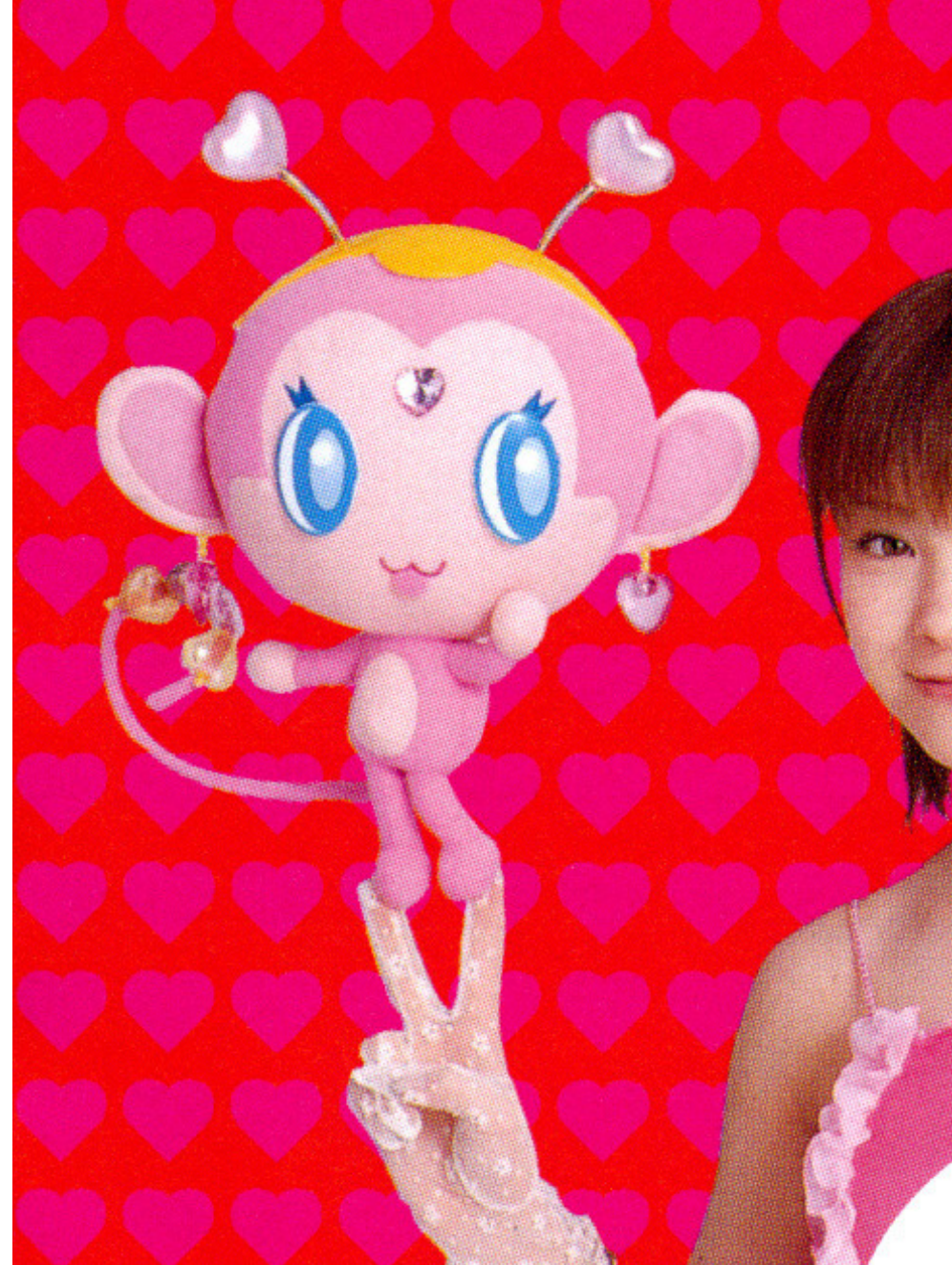Case studies
Interdisciplinary Approach

Fig.2:

chapter 2.

What's Cute?

2.1 Context

Visually cute things are usually associated with a specific aesthetic language, identifiable by the use of round shapes, and soft colors giving a sense of innocence, weakness, and pureness while still looking pretty and pleasing to the eye.

The correlation between kawaii and infant-like demeanor is also backed by Konrad Lorenz, an Austrian Ethologist who conceptualized the "Baby Schema" (Kindchenschema) in 1943. Suggesting the existence of a predefined set of aesthetical conditions, under which the human will perceive an object as cute. Said conditions are a series of physical features found in babies, such as a larger head, big eyes, rounded shape, and short limbs (Glocker ML, 2009). It is tought that peak cuteness in babies is reached at around six months, as babies are starting to get more aware. This theory backs the idea of cuteness being engraved in our brains as a needed instinct to survive as a species. Babies invoke the "aww" feeling and motivates us to take care of them, insuring their survival (Dale, 2023). However, other sources argued that although there is an undeniable link between what is considered kawaii and the image of a baby, infantility is not as central.

In two studies conducted in 2010 by Ihara and Nittono, university students were asked to rate the level of kawaii of various objects and images. The results of the survey indicated the presence of a cluster of items adhering to the Baby Schema, with infant-like images getting a high kawaii rating. On the other hand, another significantly big cluster was observed, which scored high in kawaii

in kawaii points without showing any baby-like element, with the top scorer being the simple "smile" (Nittono, 2016).

In a secondary study, Ihara and Nittono requested university students to evaluate a series of images using a six-point scale. The scale included criteria such as "infantile", "desire to be closer to it", "desire to keep it", "desire to help it when in trouble", and "desire to protect it". The results showed a tendency in which the higher kawaii points were mostly found simultaneously with longing for closeness and not with nurturing desires. Another point that was highlighted in the surveys is the fact that although infant-like aspects tend to rank higher, newborn babies were not perceived as cute as 2 to 3-year-old toddlers. This goes against the theory supporting that cuteness is inherently a response mechanism towards something fragile we want to protect. A new theory is therefore brought forward, suggesting that kawaii can also be defined as a positive sentiment that evokes a strong desire to keep the object nearby (Nittono, 2016).

> *"an emotion 'kawaii' may be characterized as: positive, unthreatened (in that the subject does not feel under threat), approach-motivated and socially oriented."*
> *(Nittono, 2016, p. 89)*

As Nittono asked a pool of participants to rate various objects on a series of criteria related to the feeling of cuteness, a new theory was brought forward, suggesting that kawaii can also be defined as a positive sentiment that evokes a strong desire to keep the object nearby. Meaning that cute objects are capable of creating a feeling of happiness and affecting our behavior.

> *"This study shows that viewing cute things improves subsequent performance in tasks that require behavioral carefulness, possibly by narrowing the breadth of attentional focus. This effect is not specific to tasks related to caregiving or social interaction. For future applications, cute objects may be used as a facile emotion elicitor."*
> *(Nittono, 2012,p.90)*

Ralf C. Buckley also sustains that cuteness invokes a certian emotion, however he notes how although there are words in a lot of languages indicating cute and cuteness in the visual sense, there is no specific word indicating the actual feeling the perception of cuteness triggers in humans (Buckley, 2016). Kawaii, as a word derives from describing feelings of pityfullness and loveable, but neither love or pity truly describe the "awww" feeling we are hit with when seeing something cute. He also points out how this specific emotions has not been well researched as much as other emotions such as fear have, which is interesting as the cute emotion is widely ustilized in our society especially in design and marketing, generating impressive revenues.

> *"I suggest that one possible reason for the limited attention it has received to date, relative to its social significance, is that it has not had a simple and widely recognized formal name."*
> *(Buckley, 2016, p.2)*

Fig.3: Series of Tamagotchi stickers for Line inspired by 2008 graphics, Bandai, 2022

2.2 History of cuteness in Japan

The term cute is usually translated in Japanese as "Kawaii", it is a positive adjective used to describe something endearing and appealing (Nittono, 2016). The meaning of the word kawaii as Japanese people mean it now is relatively modern but it is believed that "kawaii" as we know it, originally came from another word "kawayui". With records of "kawayui" aging back to the Edo period (between 1603 and 1868), the original word had a meaning more similar to ashamed, with kawa- meaning face and -yui meaning blushing/flushing. The word was mainly used to describe a sensation similar to pity, with an underlying sense of tenderness, and as the end of the Edo period arose "kawayui" lost the negative connotation allowing the endearing connotation to emerge(Nittono, 2016). The modern connotation we are familiar with started to appear during the 70s, it is usually written in Hiragana (Japanese phonetic alphabet characters) or by combining two Kanji (Chinese ideograms): 可 (possible) and 愛 (love), with the combination roughly translating to "loveable"(Sato, 2009).

Fig.4: Scan of advertising page of a Manga character Obake no Q chan chewing gum, unknown, skullbrain.org

Heian Period to late Edo period

Although the word itself is considered modern, the feeling "kawaii" evokes - the "awww feeling" as Dr. Joshua Paul Dale says, has been present in Japanese culture for centuries.

During the Heian period (years 794 to 1185) some first drawings clearly containing cute qualities were made. Considered now a national treasure, the first volume of the Scroll of Froliking Animals, known in Japanese as Chōjū-jinbutsu-giga (鳥獣人物戯画, literally "Animal-person Caricatures"). The scroll contains drawings depicting anthropomorphic animals such as rabbits and frogs as they get ready for a ceremony. The ceremony scene is followed by a secondary scene in which frogs and rabbits wrestle, in the third and final scene a monkey-priest is giving an offering to a frog seated on a lotus tree, a reference to Buddha. Other than rabbits, frogs, and monkeys a total of 11 animals are depicted in the Scroll (Fig. 8-11). Characterized by a drawing style using only outlines, these images are by some considered one of the oldest predecessors of modern manga and although at the time the term "kawaii" was not coined yet, these images do in fact convey an endearing feeling.

Another example of cuteness in ancient art can be found looking at the Wood Carved Puppy (Kibori no Kuji) attributed to the sculptor Tankei (1173 - 1256) in the Kamakura Era(years 1185 to 1333)(Fig. 5). Again, the term "Kawaii" was of course not present at the time, but an affinity for cute things can be seen in the subject the artist chose as a reference for his work: a puppy.

During the late Edo period (years 1603 to 1868), depictions of puppies can be observed again with Maruyama Okyo's (1733-1795) pieces. Highly respected, Okyo is the founder of the Maruyama school of painting, a master in reflecting his

teacher Ishida Yutei's naturalism, he was also known to research European painting styles such as Baroque and Neo-Classicism, which are closer to realism. The mixture of the two Eastern and Western styles is visible in his "Puppy Paintings" in which the artist focused on representing their playful spirits (Fig 6,7). The conservative painting schools of the time criticized him for these works, however, the public reception turned out to be more than positive, suggesting that cuteness as an aesthetic was more populist than elitist(Dale, 2022).

Fig 5. Wood Carved puppy, Tankei, 12th century

Fig.6 Maruyama Okyo "Bamboo and Dog", Right panel, Early Period, Cinefil.tokyo

Fig.7 Maruyama Okyo "Bamboo and Dog", Left panel, Early Period, Cinefil.tokyo

Fig.8 to 11: Details from the first volume of the Scroll of Froliking Animals,
height: 30.4 cm, width: 1148.4 cm, courtesy of Chojujinbutsugiga

From Taisho era to now

Poet and illustrator Yumeiji Takehisa is one of the key figures of modern kawaii aesthetics, following the Japanese Taisho (between Jul 30, 1912 and Dec 25, 1926) romanticism movement, Takehisa's work took heavy inspiration from Western art movements, especially Art Nouveau. His illustrations often depicted young women with large eyes and delicate features, contrasting with the traditional depiction of women at the time (Fig. 12). His illustration style also ranged toward graphic design, influenced by Western motifs, he used elements such as mushrooms, umbrellas, and fruits in his designs. In 1914 he opened a shop in Tokyo, mainly selling stationary goods it is now considered the first kawaii goods shop in history (Dale, 2022). The shop was popular among girls, but again his style was never appreciated by the traditional art establishments (japanesekawaiiculture.net, 2020).
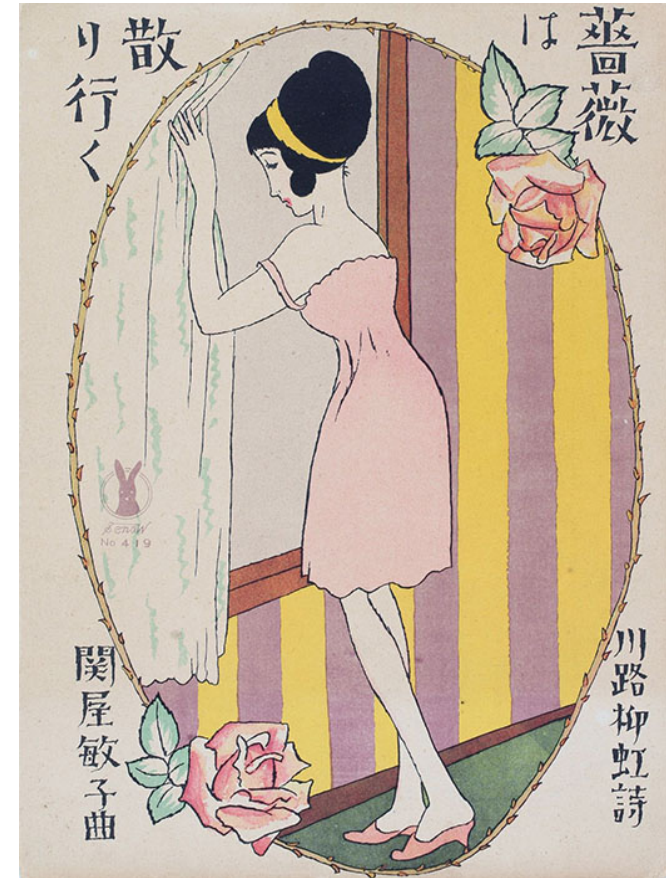

Fig.9: Yumeji Takehisa, Senoo Music Score "Roses Fall", 1926, Illustration-mag.jp

In 1899 it became compulsory for girls to attend education, the system required boys and girls to attend school in different buildings. This event marked a big change in the living experience of girls, allowing them to have slightly more freedom between living under their parent's strict watch at home and marriage. Girls started to be able to spend longer time together and as a consequence, a unique girls culture started to develop between the school walls.

In 1955, the first volume of the monthly magazine "Ribon" (りぼん) was published as a younger sister to the magazine "Shoujo Book" (少女ブック). Ribon was targeted towards young girls, with its content including fashion advice, tutorials, and short mangas for girls (Shoujo Manga). These magazines became widely popular in the 20th century, and it is interesting to keep in mind that these magazines continuously evolved through uninterrupted feedback from the readers, made possible via the reader's column found in each volume (Sato, 2009)(Fig 16 - 22).

In the 70s a phenomenon was observed in schools where young girls started writing horizontally with an until then unseen round-looking calligraphic style. This style of handwriting later became known as "maru-moji" (translating directly in "round letters") and it became hugely popular among middle and high schoolers. Students would further highlight the cuteness of this new handwriting style by mixing foreign words and adding small doodles such as hearts, bunnies, and stars around the written content. It is interesting to know that the students themselves purely invented this cute handwriting style, the incorporation of Western features such as horizontal writing and the inclusion of foreign language can be interpreted as a rebellion against Japanese tradition.

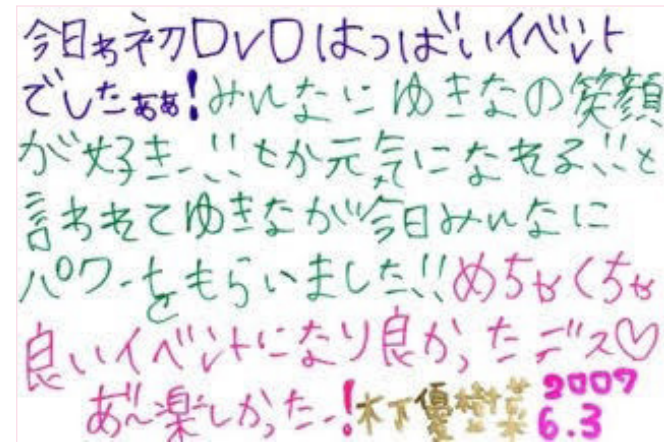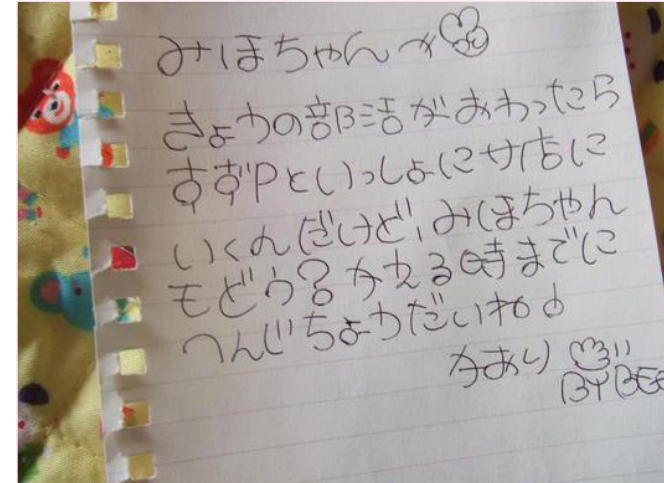Fig.10 Example of a note written in Marumoji, probably around the 80's, source unknown, girlschannel.net .

Fig.11 Example of girl writing from 2007, Kinoshita Yukina (born 1987), blog: ときには少女のように

Similarly to written words, the spoken word also started to morph under the influence of students in the 70s: girls especially, would intentionally cripple words to sound more childlike and adorable, later, by the end of the 80s a rich cute vocabulary was created(Kinsella, 1995).

As rounded handwriting and child-like slang began gaining popularity, in 1971 Sanrio started to experiment by incorporating round writings, bouncy characters, and foreign words on their stationery products to market it toward schoolgirls under the name of "fancy goods" (Kinsella, 1995)(Fig.15).

By this time Ribon shifted its main content into shoujo mangas, becoming a magazine, and originated the concept of "furoku", something similar to a freebie customers will get supplementarly when purchasing a volume (Fig. 23 - 28). The furokus, were mainly stationery products school girls would be able to use in class, the items would be decorated with pictures of their favorite main characters of the mangas included in the magazine.

The system of including furoku in magazines became a success, and still nowadays it is possible to observe a multitude of furokus included in various magazines of all kinds.
One of the most popular illustrators at the time was A-ko Mutsu (陸奥A子), became extremely popular among girls due to her "otome-chikku"[1] style, her works were featured numerous times until the mid-80s (Sato, 2009). During the 70s the core value of this cute/kawaii culture lay in the desire to remain young and child-like for the sake of avoiding adult responsibilities and societal pressures.

---

1   Translated to maiden-esque, it is a subgenre of shōjo manga of the 70's, focused on the lives of ordinary teenage girls.

Fig.12 Hello Kitty fancy goods from 70's on sold on Yahoo auctions, aucview.aucfan.com

Fig.13 to 18: Scans of Ribbon Magazine, Edition of January 1956,
found on the blog of Matsuzaki Akemi, girlschannel.net, 2020

夢の国のえりーぜ

アンデルセン・原作
相澤光朗・絵

こっくりさん

塩田英二郎

あたらしく
ぽりこちゃんと
おともだちになる
いろかみそうの
まきは
みんなのところで
はじまります

やあ
ゆりーこ
さんこん
にちは

ねずみの
じろう
ちゃんに
あいたい
とき

みんな
して
みんなの
たくさん
げんこな

三つの歌

望月和子ちゃん

渡辺典子ちゃん

歌のおばさん

三つのうたです
きみもぼくも
あなたもわたしも
ほがらかに
おもいだした歌を
わすれた歌を
うたいましょ

ひとりぼっちのえりーぜは、おうちのしごとがおわると、いつも森へいきました。小川の水は、やさしくうたをうたって、とおい国のおはなしをきかせてくれました。ほしの花は、えりーぜとおはなししたくて、ほしのてんしが空からきらきらひかるのですが、えりーぜはおちないように、しっかりつかまえますが、ほしのはなしはなさないように、ある日、えりーぜはゆめを

「そうだわ、王子さまをさがしにいこう」えりーぜはいく日もあるきつづけました。すると森の中で、石にはさまれたあじいさんにあいました。「わたしはゆめの国の王子です。いたずらなこびとが、どいめにあってしまいました。かれいにあってしまいましょう」といって、木のほらあなから、ひみつの「ゆめは、みんなゆめの国からあとをつけてきました。ぬすんだりするんですよ、えりーぜをおどろいて、とびあがいたことが

こばとは どこに

菊田一夫
勝山ひろし・え

りぼんのおへやにみなさんのさくひんを

おくるもの

154

ふたりのとも子

おともだちのさくぶん

あなたも さくぶんが じょうずにかけたら、おくってください

おねんがじょう
長野県　栄光小学校
二年　大日方和子

すいせんの花
高知県　下田小学校
三年　朝日洋子

テレビえばなし さくらひめ

南村喬・えと文

どうようかるた

ひとおい空から

Fig. 19 to 22: Scans of Ribbon Magazine, Edition of July 1985,
found on Twitter, @nori19732, Twitter.com, 2019

ングヒット爆笑変身まんが

★魔界人の敵ゾーンに、
られてしまった蘭世。真壁操
くんとの愛はどうなるの!?

ときめき
トゥナイト

恋

J♠

カラー
44
ページ

月の夜

星の朝

本田 恵子

愛のピアちゃんが、さらわれ
ちゃった！　どうすればいいの!?

萩岩睦
（はぎ いわ むつ）

Fig.23-24 Photos from Ribbon Magazine, Edition of July 1985,
sold on Yahoo auctions, aucview.aucfan.com

Fig.25 Yesterday's Dream (illustration by Mutsu Aiko) "Ribon" May 1980 issue cover, on loan from Kitakyushu Manga Museum, 文京経済新聞 Bunkyo Economic Newspaper.

Because of its roots in the Confucian principle of societal harmony, Japanese society is strongly based on the idea of prioritizing the collective over the individual. Consequently, a long list of unspoken rules was formed over time and individuals are expected to intuitively recognize and follow them to maintain balance. Conformity is for these reasons, very important to maintain harmony within society, but it can also easily turn into a major stressor.

Women, especially at the time, were above all pressured to adhere to said norms: getting married before turning 30 and becoming a full-time housewife was common and expected.

In the West, we often associate adulthood with an increase in freedom and individuality, yet in Japan maturity in age was usually linked to higher responsibility combined with pressure to conform to societal expectations. Rebelling against such rules also meant opposing adulthood, Japanese youth started to purposefully act immaturely and unable to carry responsibilities to escape from societal demands and duties (Kinsella, 1995).

The strictly childlike connotation of kawaii started to morph with the arrival of the 90s, when more self-conscious representations of girlhood started to arise in media with examples such as Banana Yoshimoto's book "Kitchen" (1988) and numerous Shoujo Mangas (mangas targeted to young girls) depicting young rebellious girls refusing to conform to the harmless and dependent trope expected in traditional families (Sato, 2009)

Cool Japan

Kawaii goods, such as games and character merchandise, have repeatedly been chosen by the Japanese government to internationally promote and represent Japanese culture and images.

This rebranding project was launched in 2002 as an unofficial initiative, nowadays known as the "Cool Japan Project"[2](Matsui, 2014). Kawaii has become one of Japan's main Soft Powers, the appeal of cute characters and designs fostered positive perceptions of the country and its culture, all extremely helpful aspects to distance themselves from their old reputation and image linked to their war crimes of the imperial era.

Japanese cute goods expanded across the globe with impressive speed. According to Tsuji Shintarou (Sanrio's founder), Hello Kitty was always supposed to cross the border as a global product. The phenomenon of Japanese kawaii byproducts such as anime and games becoming popular overseas was coined in 2002 by Douglas McGray as "Japan's gross national cool". The government was more than supportive of this new direction of Japan's identity and chose to capitalize on the new young branding of the nation (Condry, 2009).

Up until the post-war era, Japan's global image was still tied to its Imperial times. The numerous samurai and most recent and globally impactful World War II - when the empire of Japan took part in the Axis Powers alongside Nazi Germany and the Kingdom of Italy - stained Japan's international image.
Japan was in fact a colonial empire, colonizing numerous

countries in East Asia such as Korea, Taiwan, parts of Mainland China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Thailand.

During its wars, Japan stained itself with numerous war crimes (Tanaka, 1996), one of the most notorious being the Comfort Women System: during WWII an estimated 50'000 to 200'000 women were forcefully drafted and turned into sex slaves to serve Japanese soldiers. The women were taken from Japanese colonies, mainly Korea. This horrifying subject was kept hidden until the mid-90s, as Korean women started to speak up revealing the atrocities they went through. The government initially denied the accusations, but later, only after international pressures combined with further investigations, the crimes were finally admitted

Of course, these events do not contribute to the global impression of the country. The previous image was traditionally masculine, humorless, and adult, whereas the kawaii culture of the youth had a feminine, playful, and juvenile connotation, therefore the opposite of the preceding one.
To conceal this previous image, a new face was chosen. The new Japan had to be feminine, fun and exciting, characterized by cute characters, games, and anime girls. By highlighting these aspects of Japanese culture to the global public, Japan managed to rebrand itself, allowing its masculine imperial past to blur out of the frame (Yano, 2009).
In 2008 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced Doraemon as their "cartoon culture ambassador", and in the same year Hello Kitty was appointed as the official tourism ambassador to China and Hong Kong to incentivize tourism in Japan.

One of the prime examples of the Cool Japan promotion can be observed during the closing ceremony of the Rio 2016

Olympics.

To promote the Tokyo Olympics[3] of 2020 Japan prepared a presentation combining a movie and a live show: anime, games, and popular characters like Doraemon, Tsubasa and Kojiro, Super Mario, Hello Kitty, and Pacman all made an appearance in the pr movie, the video showed athletes preparing for the Olympics while a backdrop presented the technological excellence of Tokyo city. The show culminated with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe transforming into Super Mario and traveling to Rio in no time thanks to Doraemon's magical tools.

The affinity Japan has grown towards cuteness was criticized by artist Takashi Murakami, sustaining that Japan has become emasculated, calling it a "castrated nation-state". Murakami continues pointing out some of the main problems of the rebranding besides the "erasure of history".

One of his criticisms points to the fact that, due to the extent of the "kawaiification" happening in consumer goods, people are starting to be more and more used to finding cuteness in unusual objects and circumstances. This leads to cuteness getting mixed with serious organizations as well. The worry stays in the looks that everything can potentially be "cutiefied" blurring the lines between what's morally acceptable and not (Yano, 2009).

Another point of criticism brought by Murakami is the corporatization of cuteness, although started by female students as a way to rebel against traditions, cute culture is relatively easy to get into as its roots are embedded in consumption. Thus, an individual can enter the kawaii realm by simply purchasing merchandise (Murakami, 2005).

3   olympics.com, 22 Aug, 2016

The difference between kawaii culture and Western youth cultures such as Punk and Grunge, is that consumerism, materialism, and wealth display are not frowned upon. Meaning that there is no limit on what is considered an acceptable amount of money to spend on fabricating the ideal cute world(Kinsella, 1995).

Hello Kitty in the first place, is a product of capitalism.

Fig.26 Japanese Foreign Minister Masahiko Komura, left, shakes hands with manga character Doraemon, nbcnews.com, 2008

Fig.27 Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, dressed as Mario during Rio Olympics, New York Times, 2016

Fig.27A Scan of Re-ment flyer, unknown, skullbrain.org, 2015

chapter 3.

Character takeover

Cute aesthetics does not come without cute characters.

The world of cute characters in Japan is seemingly infinite, they can be found in every corner of the city including the most unexpected locations. Character goods are present in almost every household, with icons like Hello Kitty appearing on numerous common objects. When walking in the streets cute characters can be found on posters, promotional flyers, advertising LED boards, and even street signs. Game and anime characters regularly collaborate with commonly found product brands, seamlessly transporting them from the screens to the nearest supermarket shelves. Lately, the collaboration between the worldwide acclaimed anime Attack on Titans and Kao, went viral on the web, as Levi Ackerman appears on the detergent bottle dressed as a Japanese housewife.

Fig.28 Levi Detergent, Unknown, 2020, attackontitan.fandom.com

Fig.29 Opanchu Usagi x Komeda Coffee, March 2024, macaro-ni.jp

Taking this landscape as a starting point, in this chapter I will discuss the effectiveness of using cute characters as a marketing tool. To get a better understanding of the character's differences in purpose and designs, it is ideal to categorize the myriad characters into four main groups.

Characters in Japanese are usually referred to as "chara" (pronounced as "kyara"), directly taken from the abbreviation of the English word "character", is a Japanese word often used colloquially to refer to fictional characters found in popular media such as manga, anime, games, and other forms of entertainment. Based on the context, a character covers different tasks in media, ranging from representing institutions (for example: Pi-po kun), to being an integral part of a narrative (for example anime and game characters) to popularizing consumer goods (for example: Hello Kitty).

Moving on to the four groups I mentioned, Koshikawa Y. classified characters into the following way.

1.　Characters that support a business
2.　Characters as a form of content creation
3.　Characters found by public institutions
4.　Characters as brand expression

1. Character that support a business

Starting from the first category, characters created purely as a marketed product are found here.

With examples such as Hello Kitty, Rilakkuma, and Chii-kawa, these characters were designed with the only intent of selling, their backstories are not as important, thus very simple. Having an appealing appearance however, is crucial in this case, and that varies on the type of emotional bond the company seeks to tie with its customers.

Often tapping into nostalgia and soothing properties, the character still needs a series of elements to back them up. The concept, theme, name, personality, and background are used to convey the desired message to the consumer. The appearance is a tool to express its values. Additionally, for a company like Sanrio, having characters as their main product is very convenient as they can be adapted and incorporated into an infinite range of products.

Fig.30 San-X characters screen shotted from a Pucchigumi page, 2022, San-X

2. Characters as a form of content creation

The second category includes characters coming from anime, manga, games, and picture books. With examples including One Piece, Pokemon, Animal Crossing, and Totoro.
The characters in this group are products of stories, developed to back a narrative, which makes them in comparison, a secondary figure. Odagiri also adds that characters in this group will not be perceived as interesting by its supporters if the story ceases to exist, similarly, if a story is created as an afterthought to character design, the latter will often end up benign short-lived (Odagiri, 2010).

Fig.31 Dengeki PlayStation 269, April 9, 2004, Twitter account @retromags, 2018

3. Characters found by public institutions

The third category is about characters that were developed with the primary purpose of being used by public institutions to make consumers aware of their existence or to spread awareness. Divided into two main groups, the institutions they represent are either Japanese prefectures (local mascots like Kumamon) or governmental Institutions (see Pi-po kun). Prefectural mascot appearances are often taken from the prefecture's foods and local products, as their job is to promote the prefecture to attract tourists and create an overall emotional bond to bring awareness towards the efforts and struggles of the place (Koshikawa, 2013).
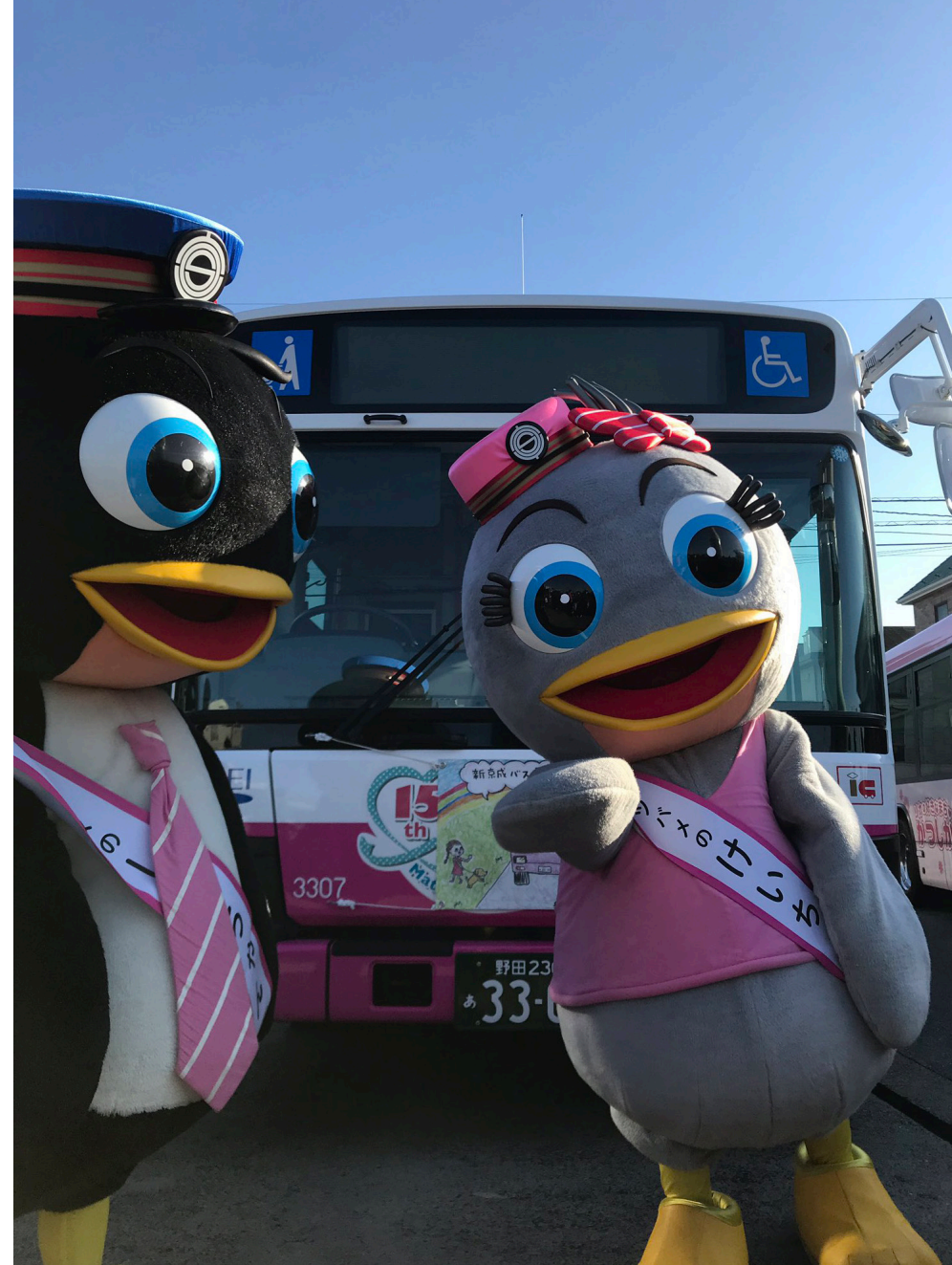
Fig.32 Shin-Keisei Bus characters "Shin-chan Kei-chan" at an event at the Chiba Inland Bus Mitsuwadai Depot, 2019, Twitter account @danchiing

4. Characters as brand expression

The fourth and last category includes characters used by companies as a way to express and promote the brand's identity, also known as spokes characters. Examples found in these groups are Rakuten Panda from Rakuten, Qoo from the juice brand Qoo, and Suumo from Recruit Holdings. In this case, the character is designed to maintain and strengthen the brand's image. Therefore, the character's purpose is to visually express the brand itself, including its philosophy, perception, and personality in a way that is easy to understand. An interesting fact about spokes characters is that nostalgia plays an important role during the design process, as it is very efficient in creating emotional bonds and consumer trust (S.Hosany, G.Prayag, D.Martin, W.-Y. Lee, 2013).

Fig.33 Suumo getting stuck, from Suumo Twitter account, 2013

3.1 Consumer goods - Hello Kitty

As discussed earlier, the character of Hello Kitty belongs in the first category, as it is developed purely as a product to be consumed.

In 1975 Sanrio launched the now worldwide superstar Hello Kitty, resulting in an overwhelming economic success, shortly after, the company took the monopoly of cute character goods, and in the 90's Sanrio sold 200 billion yen worth of goods (Shimamura, 1990, pp 60-62), furthermore, the fancy goods industry, in general, generated a 10 trillion yen income by 1990 (Japan Times, January 1991) .

The cute characters designed by Sanrio, were not only incorporated into stationery goods sold in shops, as during the 90s they started to seep into over 90 major Japanese companies as part of their marketing strategies. Sanrio characters started to get printed onto banking cards, promotional flyers, commercial posters, etc. adding to their services a more approachable and friendly feel. We can observe here a business shift, in which Sanrio starts to focus on the character licensing market (S.Hosany, G.Prayag, D.Martin, W.-Y. Lee, 2013).

Hello Kitty's design is fairly simple, drawn with simple lines and filled with block colors, a white cat with a red bow and no mouth. Having no mouth gives a neutral look, as Sanrio explains this choice offers the audience the possibility to project their own emotions onto her(Walker, 2008). Designed in the 70s by Yuko Shimizu,

the character was initially only printed on products catered to young girls, mainly stationary goods known as fancy goods. Characters that are part of this category are purely based on design and lack a storyline to create an emotional bond with the audience, therefore there is a need for constant updates and renovations in order to keep the consumers engaged and excited. For this reason, many of these characters are given additional media to appear on (anime, comics, figurines, etc.).

As the years passed the campaigns with external companies became gradually more complex and refined, with outcomes such as the Hello Kitty Happy Meal from McDonald's in 1999. These partnerships heighten the level of excitement and anticipation towards the next collaboration which keeps up the relevance of the character(S.Hosany, G.Prayag, D.Martin, W.-Y. Lee, 2013).

Fig.34 Calender and cash card, collaboration of Sanrio character Tabo and Hokkaido
Takushoku Bank (Takugin), 1998, pgyev.siapgas.com

Character engagement

The primary ways of generating revenue from characters involve selling character goods, licensing fees, and income from theme parks (Sanrio Puroland[4]). Moreover, collaborations with third parties are an excellent way to produce earnings via licensing fees. By associating with companies producing broad-ranging content, Sanrio manages to extend its presence across a larger market, and by doing so new connections are tied to the brand. Connections can be classified in different ways; of course, there is the main connection between a consumer and the loved character, however through collaborations Sanrio creates connections also between the vendor's product (third party) and in this case, Hello Kitty. As a result, consumers interested in the characters will also show interest in the vendor's product, hence sparking interest in the overall collaborating brand.

To further heighten the engagement level with the character, through the years numerous new characters were added to the Hello Kitty bubble, with the most relevant being Dear Daniel - the male counterpart to Hello Kitty also working as her supposed boyfriend. By adding family members, friends, and love interests, Hello Kitty was given a storyline to live in, which then got readily translated into an anime series. Incorporating these new characters can be a valuable strategy for improving collaborations: third parties will now prefer to collaborate with the whole set of characters in the Hello Kitty bubble rather than just with Hello Kitty ba

herself. Consumers are now more likely to be emotionally connected to more than just one character of the set, even if their favorite remains to be Hello Kitty, the character around her will also be affected by the emotional connection to her. Selling multiple characters will be more profitable as customers are now more willing to purchase multiple products linked to multiple characters(S.Hosany, G.Prayag, D.Martin, W.-Y. Lee, 2013).

Hello Kitty also morphed into various forms to move closer to different styles, jobs, and geographical areas; as the initial design is fairly simple and neutral it is relatively easy to morph her into various scenarios. Again, by doing so Sanrio extended their reaching area and brought innovation to an already existing character.

4   en.puroland.jp

これまでに一番よく売れたものや、反響があったデザインは？

やっぱり北海道のラベンダーシリーズです。人気のあるシリーズだけに、毎年リニューアルされるうえに、アイテム数や取扱店舗も多いんです。ほかには、沖縄シーサー・信州ミント・どんたく・なまはげ・たこ焼きなど、わかりやすい形のものが人気ですよね。

三重 伊勢エビ
大きくてゴツイ伊勢エビもキティちゃんになると…こんなにキュート。伊勢海老の頭はキティちゃんに抱えています。

静岡 あじの開き
編集部イチオシ！ざるにのせられたキティちゃん。さすがは開き、実にペラペラなんです。

茨城 アンコウ
うつぼぼでちょっとうつむきがち…

北海道 ウニ
北海道桧原湖 わかさぎ

兵庫 明石タコ
頭にタコがのっているよっ！キティちゃん。

神奈川 湘南サザエ
貝の中からこんにちは。ピンクとブルーでロマンチックなサザエです。守りたくなるってかはヒ・ミ・ツ。

静岡 伊豆稲取金目鯛

特産品 魚のなかま

カニやウニなど、斬新新なデザインが多い海産物シリーズ。あのキティちゃんが…びっくりしながら思わずニヤリ。

静岡 浜名湖 うなぎベビー

福岡 柳川 どじょう

高知 くじら

静岡 駿河 マグロ

静岡 サクラエビ
採れたての新鮮なものだけが、生きたサクラエビ。ほぼ生のエビそのものも含めてかわいい。

佐賀 竹崎カニ

富山 ホタルイカ
イカだけど、ハートのサングラスが似合います。

広島 カキ
ゴールド＆シルバーで、かなりゴージャス…!?

静岡 浜名湖うなぎ
おけの中でスイスイ泳ぎ、ひょっこり登場。

広島産

大分 関サバ
一本釣りでとれる高級なサバ。目がパッチリ。

佐賀 有明ムツゴロウ
干潟に住むムツゴロウ。ちょっとおとぼけ顔です。

北海道 ホタテ

かわいい！ 鳥や動物たち

やっぱりかわいい動物コスチュームはキティちゃんによく似合います。でも神戸牛や黒豚はおいしそう…!?

兵庫 神戸牛
鼻輪をつけた神戸牛。高級牛肉として有名ですが、キティちゃんを食べようとしないでください。

奈良 シカ
奈良公園のシカ。おすましして、かわいくポーズ。

高知 土佐犬

沖縄 ヤンバルクイナ

埼玉 秩父羊山

鳥取 因幡の白うさぎ
白くて耳がぴょこんとたれたうさぎ＆キティちゃん。かわい〜いもの同士のコラボ。

長野 上高地カッパ

鹿児島 黒豚
ブーブーブー！キティちゃんの顔の上にブタの鼻…かわいいというか、もしかしてちょっぴりコワイ？

岡山 蒜山高原シカ

広島 宮島シカ

栃木 日光サル

福島 五色沼カエル
カエルになりきったキティちゃん。しっぽはちゃんと見えてます。

佐渡 トキ
特別天然記念物のトキ。卵から生まれた〜っ！

大分 高崎山サル

静岡 富士山五合目

どこで手に入れられるものなのですか？他の地域のものがほしいときには？

現地に行かないと買えない希少性がお客さまに支持されています。どこでも買えたら、今の人気はなかったんじゃないでしょうか。売っている場所などの情報はホームページ（http://www.asunaro-co.com/）上の掲示板で、お客さま同士がやりとりされています。

意外？ 歴史上の人物

キティちゃんが武将に変身！？偉人の出身地をあらためて学習できちゃいます。

宮城 伊達政宗

山口 宮本武蔵

茨城 水戸黄門

福島 野口英世

福島 小原庄助
福島・会津磐梯山に出てくる人物。の〜んびりしているキティちゃん。珍しい入浴シーン!?

熊本 天草四郎

福岡 菅原道真
学問の神様と呼ばれ、大宰府天満宮にまつられています。抱っこしているのはオゴジョ？

京都 新撰組

アルペンルート オコジョしっぽ

アルペンルート 雷鳥しっぽ

企画からデザインまで、どのくらいの人数で製作しているのですか？

約10名のスタッフです。企画でデザインのテーマが決まったら、デザイナーが数パターン考え、その中から商品を作っていきます。地方には地方の良さがあるので、題材は限りなくなりますが、もの自体が版権を持っていないか、など確認すべき点は数多くあります。

大阪 たこ焼き
いつでも焼き型を持ち、背中にはタコをしょっている。たこ焼きはキティちゃん、頭にようじ刺さってます。

愛知 エビフライ
逆立ちしているようなポーズが気になるエビフライ。衣はキツネ色、おいしそうにカラッと揚がってます。

新潟 笹だんご
笹にくるまれて、すやすや眠ります。

徳島 祖谷そば
チュルッ。お箸の持ちかたが上手。

徳島 ラーメン
お店の人がラーメンを運ぶことも。

栃木 ギョウザ
この通り、どこから見てもギョウザ。大きなキティちゃんの顔が入って、ボリュームたっぷりです。

愛知 天むす
えび天の入ったおにぎり。いただきま〜す。

兵庫 明石焼き

茨城 水戸納豆

山梨 ほうとう
具だくさんのほうとう鍋。えっ！入ってるよ。しかも、自分で食べちゃってるってば！

岩手 わんこそば
キティちゃん、ただいまお椀で何杯目？

宮城 笹かまぼこ
かまぼこの中にすっぽり入っちゃいました。

おいし〜い 名物料理

地域の食材が活かされたお料理の数々。鍋や器に入ってみたり、キティちゃんの変身ぶりも上級クラス？

企画するうえで気を配るのは、どのようなことですか？

ご当地の名所や、名物を取り入れるデザインを考えることが大切。さらに、キティちゃんとコラボレーションさせたデザインで、その土地柄の良さをいかに楽しく表現できるかどうか。土台となるアイデアの部分が重要で、それなくして売れる商品にはなりません。

商品化することができないデザインがあれば教えてください。

キティちゃんのイメージに合わないものというのは少ないのですが、キティちゃんの形がくずれてしまうものや、ケガにつながるような危険なモチーフは商品化されません。特にたばこやお酒は、企画としてはたくさん持ちあがりますが、すべてNGです。

東北 みちのくこけし
なんだか連和感いです。顔一筋もほしい？

山梨 南アルプス
だるまじゃないです。しゃくなんですよ。

沖縄 シーサー
お家の前でちょこんと魔除け。

ちょっとびっくり!!

こんなのアリ？おもしろいからもちろんアリ！建造物そのものに扮したり、漫才したり、拍手モノです。

岐阜 白川郷
世界遺産に認定されている合掌造りの白川郷。本体と同化しています。

東京 渋谷モヤイ
モヤイ像をもって、携帯で話す自分がモヤイ像!?

東海 弥次喜多五十三次
キティちゃんとミミィちゃんのかわいい弥次さん喜多さん。お荷物持ってどこまでお出かけしましょうか？

神奈川 箱根大涌谷
まっ黒な黒タマゴのキティちゃん。温泉の良さをアピール。

山形 奥の細道

大阪 なにわ商人
もうかりまっか？ちょぼちでんな〜。ハッピ＆ハチマキ姿、なかなか似合ってます。

青森 津軽三味線

大涌谷 黒タマゴ

壱岐鬼凧

静岡 富士山
日本一の山、富士山。それを頭にのせて、日の丸持ってキティちゃんも日本一です。

岡山 桃太郎
桃を割ったら、ジャ〜ンとはだかんぼの桃太郎が出てきました。新しい桃太郎伝説の誕生です。

群馬 ぶんぷく茶釜

大阪 夫婦漫才
ラブラブのキティ＆ダニエル。まさかハリセンでどつき漫才まで、やっていたなんて…！

東京 日本武道館
ガシャーンと頭に武道館を装着。強そう〜。

これからはどんな新作、また展開を予定していますか？

新作は、東京限定シリーズ・北海道夜高あんどん祭り・越中おわらシリーズが予定されています。今後は地方自治体とのコラボレーション企画を推進したいと思うので、新しいタイプのデザインが生まれるかも知れません。ほかにもたくさん企画があるのでお楽しみに。

miaで買えるご当地アイテムはコレ！

バッジコレクション
◆8950
全国の名所や名物をデザインしたピンバッジが、なんと60個。
［フレーム／H48×W63×D2.5cm］真ちゃう、木、天然木他
固定価26,250円ほか

Fig.35 Scan from magazine Mia, 2004, skullbrain.org, 2015
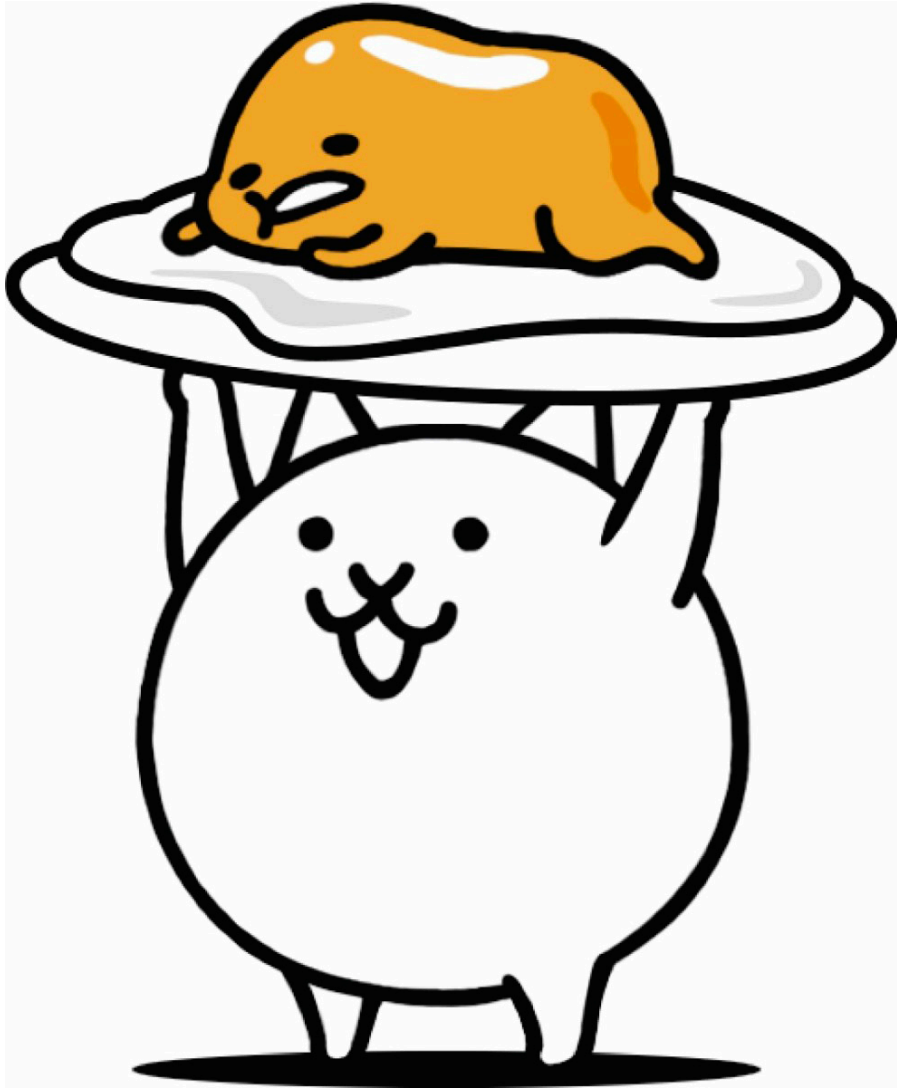
Fig.36 Collaboration Gudetama x にゃんこ大戦争, 2018, dtimes.jp

Fig.37 Collaboration Gudetama x Seven deadly sins, 2018, dtimes.jp

3.2 Local promotion - Yuru-chara

Moving away from the consumer-focused characters, I will now discuss characters used by local institutions to promote specific regions of Japan.

This branch of characters falls under the umbrella term created by Miura Jun: "yuru chara" a term made by two words "yuru" suggesting a feeling of looseness and lethargy, and chara a shortened version of the term "character" (Murakami, 2005).

To be considered a proper yuru-chara, some points have to be satisfied:

1. **The character has to have some type of tie to a local community and show it through its design**
2. **It presents itself in a wobbly and unique manner**
3. **It has to have a lovable quality mixed with a feeling of looseness and unpolishedness**
4. **Generally speaking, there is a Kigurumi[5] version of it**

Although now very popular, originally the term yuru-chara, as coined by Miura Jun, had a negative connotation. Yuru-chara is a term born from an observation of the "gotouchi-chara" which are mascot characters designed to promote a single Japanese municipality. A lot of these mascots represent regions that are not so known to people from the bigger cities and are designed by non-professionals.

Each region would design its own and utilize it to promote its community to the rest of Japan. The final product is often the result of multiple brainstorming sessions during which various local entities push for different aspects of the region to be included in the design. This process of cramming more and more elements into a single mascot would generally result in unbalanced characters with an unclear theme. The mediocre nature, amature feel, and messiness is exactly what Miura intended to encapsulate with the term "loose". Unable to fulfill their duties as promotional mascots, these loose characters are the result of a comical story about a group of passionate people about their own municipality failing to design an effective and attractive mascot, all because of their lack of skills as designers. The term "yurui" is therefore given with a slightly condescending attitude.

Nowadays, the term's meaning has shifted towards a more positive one. As people started to appreciate

5   Kigurumi: Japanese term for a costumed character, usually fuzzy and more structured than a onesie

Nowadays, the term's meaning has shifted towards a more positive one. As people started to appreciate the unpolishedness and looseness of these characters, some gotouchi charas gained a considerable amount of popularity. Naturally, the rise in their popularity caught the attention of character licensing companies, who by quickly understanding the reason behind the attraction, started producing characters with the same feeling of looseness and silliness. Unlike the original yuru-chara, these new characters are designed by professional designers and approved by marketing specialists, therefore more refined and clean. Not really tied to any municipality and lacking the unique charm of amateur design, this newer type of loose character does not completely fit the original definition of yuru-chara (Kotobank, source: Encyclopedia Niponica).

Characters such as Rilakkuma[6] and Gudetama[7] are produced by big companies, they are the final product of a long process of perfecting and fine-tuning. However, as the term yuru-chara became widespread and part of the mainstream vocabulary, the original case-specific meaning became blurred, then nowadays the term is often used to describe any character that contains some kind of loosenes in them.

With all this explained, I would like to introduce a few case studies of some of the gotouchi-charas I personally find interesting:

.

6   Rilakkuma: character designed by San-X, see chapter 5.4.5 San-x

7   Gudetama: character designed by Sanrio, see chapter 5.4.2 Gudetama

Fig.37 "5th Local Character Festival" in Susaki City, 2018, city.tosashimizu.kochi.jp

Kumamon

One of the most loved and well-known gotouchi character. Is the mascot representing the Kumamoto prefecture in the Kyushu region. Created in 2010, he gained immediate popularity winning first place in the 2011 *yearly yuru-chara grand prix*[8]. His duty was to attract attention to promote his native prefecture, and in 2016 when a big earthquake hit the region Kumamon helped the population by providing relief, making him a nationally recognized figure. An interesting fact about the communication strategy is that the design is free of licensing: the Kumamoto region allows anyone to use and distribute Kumamon's illustrations as long as it is intended with good means. This decision allows an easy and fast expansion of the design, in 2018 the license got lifted for the rest of the world as well. In 2020 Kumamon hit a record revenue of 169.8 billion yen (about 1.62 billion dollars[9]) (Steinberg, 2014).

Visual analysis: Kumamon's design is fairly simple, but effective in its role. As Kumamoto contains the word "kuma" meaning "bear", we can understand that its name and bear-like appearance are a play on the prefecture's name. Although cute, the color palette and facial expression do not completely fit the traditional image of feminine cuteness. Typical of goutouchi-charas, a feeling of looseness is still recognizible, however because the design is clean and balanced it lacks the unprofessional "flavor" older mascots had when the term yuru-chara was coined.

8   National yearly competition, yurugp.jp
9   Sales of Japan mascot Kumamon's goods reach record high of $1.62 billion, 2021, mainichi.jp

Fig.38 Kumamaon dancing for Emperor and Empress, 2013, thejapantimes.com
Fig.39 Kumamon in Kumamoto, 2015, sacurrent.com

Funassyi

Funassyi is the unofficial mascot of Funabashi city in the Chiba prefecture, it is a genderless pear fairy allegedly born thousands of years ago, its parents are pear trees (of course). The original designer is a local citizen of Funabashi who decided to remain anonymous. The pear fairy also became incredibly popular in the whole country, amassing over 1.3 Million followers on X (formally Twitter) and appearing on countless TV shows and commercials, Funassyi is mainly seen in its real-life physical form (kigurumi) rather than in 2D. Unlike other mascots, this one is extremely talkative and loud, (also it is fluent in Chinese and English), its movements are fast, sudden and comical (Adelstein, 2015). Overall, it does not really hide the fact that there is a human inside the rounded pear costume.

Visual analysis: Funassyi is a yellow pear wearing a light blue shirt with a name tag, reminiscent of Japanese kindergartener's uniforms. As it has been designed by a non-designer, it offers an imperfect but charming appearance. Its real-life kigurumi form is also weirdly constructed, the "shell" is thin and elastic which makes it very easy for the viewer to understand how the human inside is moving. Funassyi is exactly what Miura Jun meant with "a loose character".

Fig.40 Funassyi waiting for the elevator, unknown, pinterest.it/pin/674062269215308113

Fig.41 Funassyi cooling down, unknown, www.pinterest.it/pin/386394843048072867

G-nenjer

Not as known as the previous two, G-nenjer is another unofficial character from the Chiba prefecture, representing small Shiroishi city. Shiroishi is known for its abundant nature and fresh vegetables, one of which is a Japanese type of yam jinenjo, the inspiration behind G-nenjer's design. The character has been created by some locals with the ambinion (that no one asked for) of giving Shiroishi a comical image. G-nenjer is a cross between a potato, a ninja and a zombie.
This is the story behind him:

"Princess Tororo of the underground kingdom (commonly known as Neba-land), located underground in Shirai City, Chiba Prefecture, has been kidnapped by someone. The kingdom's ninja Jinenja desperately fought back, but was attacked by a mysterious and powerful enemy, and barely escaped with his life to a yam field in Shirai City. Jinenjaa was rescued by a kind farmer, and was given the most powerful weapon, the white yam, which is a source of power, and began special training to rescue Princess Tororo. (However, there is no sign that Princess Tororo will be found.)"

@tororo461　しろい地底王国忍者じねんじゃー, on X (formally Twitter), 2015.

Fig. 42 "Jinenja concentrates to maximize his mind, technique and body and master the special move "Sticky Jet Whip" that is passed down from father to son.", 2014, blog.goo.ne.jp

TV Tokyo: 2006 Yuru-chara walking

"A healing system that will save the rough times of modern society. Yuru-kyara is a loose character that will carry the future of Japan. This time it's a battle to decide the best in Japan."
(ゆるキャラ 日本一決定戦, 2006, tv-tokyo.co.jp)

This is the description given to a short TV program aired in 2006, during which characters from all over Japan have been invited to participate in a four-staged "battle royal" elimination show to determine the best yuru-chara of the nation. Out of the 161 people who applied, 30 passed the initial screening and were given the chance to enter the battle. These battles are described as follows:

1. A runway walk, characters are put on a runway and the 100 people at the venue will judge the lovable "looseness", those who receive 70 or more votes will advance to the second round.
2. An endurance run, characters have to race through a path, however there is a giant fan blowing in the opposite direction.
3. A trivia quiz test about the character's representative region. The characters get on a trolley, and if the answer is incorrect a white powder will fall on their heads. Only the ones who correctly answered all the questions will proceed to the final round.
4. Yuru-chara Battle Royale. All the winners compete in sumo, the last one to survive wins

The winner was Sugicchi, the pine-looking mascot representing Akita prefecture.

Fig.43 Sugicchi on a business trip to Senboku Research Station, 2014, ameblo.jp

Fig.44 Scenes from the 2006 Yuru chara walking's last battle royale, tv-tokyo.co.jp

NO.01 京都府京都市	NO.02 福井県高浜町	NO.03 兵庫県香住町	NO.04 和歌山県有田市

トロツキー
嵯峨野トロッコ列車マスコット

赤ふん坊や
高浜町の海水浴客減少を食い止めるべく奮走中

かすみちゃん
カニの町香住町をPR特徴は横歩きしかできない!?

タチレンジャー
和歌山の平和を守る紀州レンジャーの一人頭には特産太刀魚

NO.05 和歌山県和歌山市	NO.06 和歌山県みなべ町	NO.07 福井県鯖江市	NO.08 福井県三里浜

NO.09 滋賀県信楽町	NO.10 滋賀県守山市	NO.11 滋賀県長浜市	NO.12 兵庫県神戸市

匠ポン山
信楽陶器祭りキャラクター信楽焼きのタヌキがモデ

びわっちくん
ラフォーレ琵琶湖にてプラネタリウムで解説する謎の宇宙人

かずとよくん
「北近江一豊・千代博覧会」シンボルキャラクター

こうタン
兵庫県教育委員会所属コウノトリは兵庫県の県鳥

NO.13 兵庫県明石市	NO.14 兵庫県神戸市	NO.15 兵庫県尼崎市	NO.16 兵庫県洲本市

NO.17 京都府尼崎市	NO.18 京都府福知山市	NO.19 京都府京都市	NO.20 大阪府岸和田市

エコあまくん
エコロジーな町尼崎、で「エコあま」

ドッコちゃん
「福知山踊り」の掛け声"ドッコイセ"が名前の由来

きょうちゃん
第30回全国高校総合文化祭マスコット恋人は全国の高校生

チャリオン
岸和田競輪をPRするチャリンコとライオン合体キャラ

NO.21 大阪府大阪市	NO.22 大阪府大阪市	NO.23 大阪府堺市	NO.24 大阪府大阪市

Fig.45 list of partecipants, 2006, tv-tokyo.co.jp

3.3 Image softeners

One thing about cuteness is that superficially talking, is usually deemed as minor and unthreatening, associated with children and their innocence, its softness evokes positive feelings and lowers our guard.

"'cute', an aesthetic response to the diminutive, the weak, the subordinate, and above all, unthreatening,"
(Sianne Ngai, Our Aesthetic Categories, 2015, pg 53)

As Nittono argued, cuteness has the power to generate a desire for closeness, people tend to trust cute characters. All aspects that although seemingly positive, can turn into manipulation toos depending on the context. In this sub-chapter, I will be discussing some case scenarios in which cuteness and cute mascots have been used to soften and disguise not-so-cute entities to reach a higher level of public acceptance (Nittono, 2012).

Fig. 46 Japan's police mascots, 2010, injapan.gaijinpot.com

Pipo-kun

The use of mascots to soften a powerful organization has also been observed in Japanese governmental institutions, with the prime example being Pipo-kun created in 1987 as the mascot of the Tokyo Police Force, the anthropomorphic mouse can often be seen on posters and events, promoting ideal behavior in the city. McVeigh critically describes the existence of Pipo-kun as a case of authorities trying to "aesthetically soften controversial, sensitive, or troublesome issues"(McVeigh, 2000). The presence of Pipo-kun allows the Japanese Police Force to distance themselves from the authoritarian at times violent aspects of them. Sabine Frühstück states that its role is to cover the powerful organization with a fuzzy-warm and most of all unthreatening layer to the public eye (Frühstück, 2007). Although I am only talking about Pipo-kun the Tokyo Police mascot, it is to keep in mind that every prefecture of Japan has its own Police Force and with it, a unique mascot to go with.

Visual analysis: Pipo-kun is an orange mouse-looking character, with a permanent smile, sparkly eyes, and a rounded button nose. The body shape, the pose, and the fact that it resembles a mouse reminds us a little of the beloved American mouse, Mickey Mouse. Pipo-kun is part of a family of mice, with each mouse representing a different age range and gender. All members have the same base silhouette as Pipo-kun, differing from one another only based on color (males are orange and females are white) and clothing items. The character has been designed for a target audience of children, which explains the Mickey Mouse-esque visuals.

Fig. 47 Pipo-kun, upholding the law in Ginza, 2017, Twitter acount @mondomascots

Katakkuri-chan and other prison mascots

Another example of a "controversial" mascot is Katakkuri-chan, debuted in 2013 in Asahikawa, Hokkaido, to represent the Asahikawa prison. The round-faced character wears a police uniform-inspired outfit and a hat reminiscent of a flower that grows near the area. Japantoday reports prison officials desire to change the facility's - until then dark - image into a place of rehabilitation open to society, hoping for the mascot to help them with sensibilization in support of rehabilitation programs. Katakkuri-chan is not the only "prison mascot" present in Japan, other examples are: Waka-pi, representing Wakayama women's prison, Nashikan-Kun for Nara Juvenile Detention Center, and Nipo-Kun, the mascot given to the newer remodeled version of what was once considered the harshest prison in the country (Japantoday, 2013).

Visual analysis: Prison mascot's visuals are reminiscent of the yuru-chara also known as "gotouchi charas", which are amateur characters designed to promote Japanese municipalities. Like the gotouchi-charas, these mascots are characterized by a less refined wobbly look. Moreover, as I mentioned in the case of Katakkuri-chan, the designs include elements taken from the region where the facility is found. Which again, moves them closer to gotouchi characters, this closeness shifts the perceptions of prisons towards a more unthreatening and "family-friendly" position.

Fig. 48 Katakkuri-chan, 2013, Twitter account @JustGiving
Fig. 49 Waka-P, 2018, bloomberg.com

Omaneko

One final and most recently developed example of mascot characters used in a similar way to the previous two is Omaneko, the anthropomorphic cat representing the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force Omaezaki Branch Base went moderately viral on Japanese Twitter (or now X). Omaneko was originally a candidate character that was entered in the "Official Character Selection", a project held within the unit from February to early March 2022, all the designs submitted were fostered internally meaning that no designs were solicited from outside the Force. Upon online and internal voting, Omaneko was selected as the official mascot.

Visual analysis: Clearly, we can observe a contrast between the mascot's appearance and the organization it represents. In this case, the influence behind the design is very clearly taken from anime, this shifts the cuteness toward the otaku culture and the concept of "moe" which is a different type of cute than what I am mainly discussing in this thesis[10]. Moe characters are more often than not sexualized and adhere to the male gaze. These types of characters tend to have a higher engagement online, with Omaneko being no exception, shortly after his launch there was already a notable amount of fanart online depicting him in various scenarios

10   More about moe culture is mentioned in chap. 6.1 Takashi Murakami

Fig.50 Omaneko on the cover of MAMOR, the official Japanese Ministry of Defense magazine, 2013, jprime.jp
Fig.51 Omaneko banart, 2023, by Twitter account @_ninshiki_
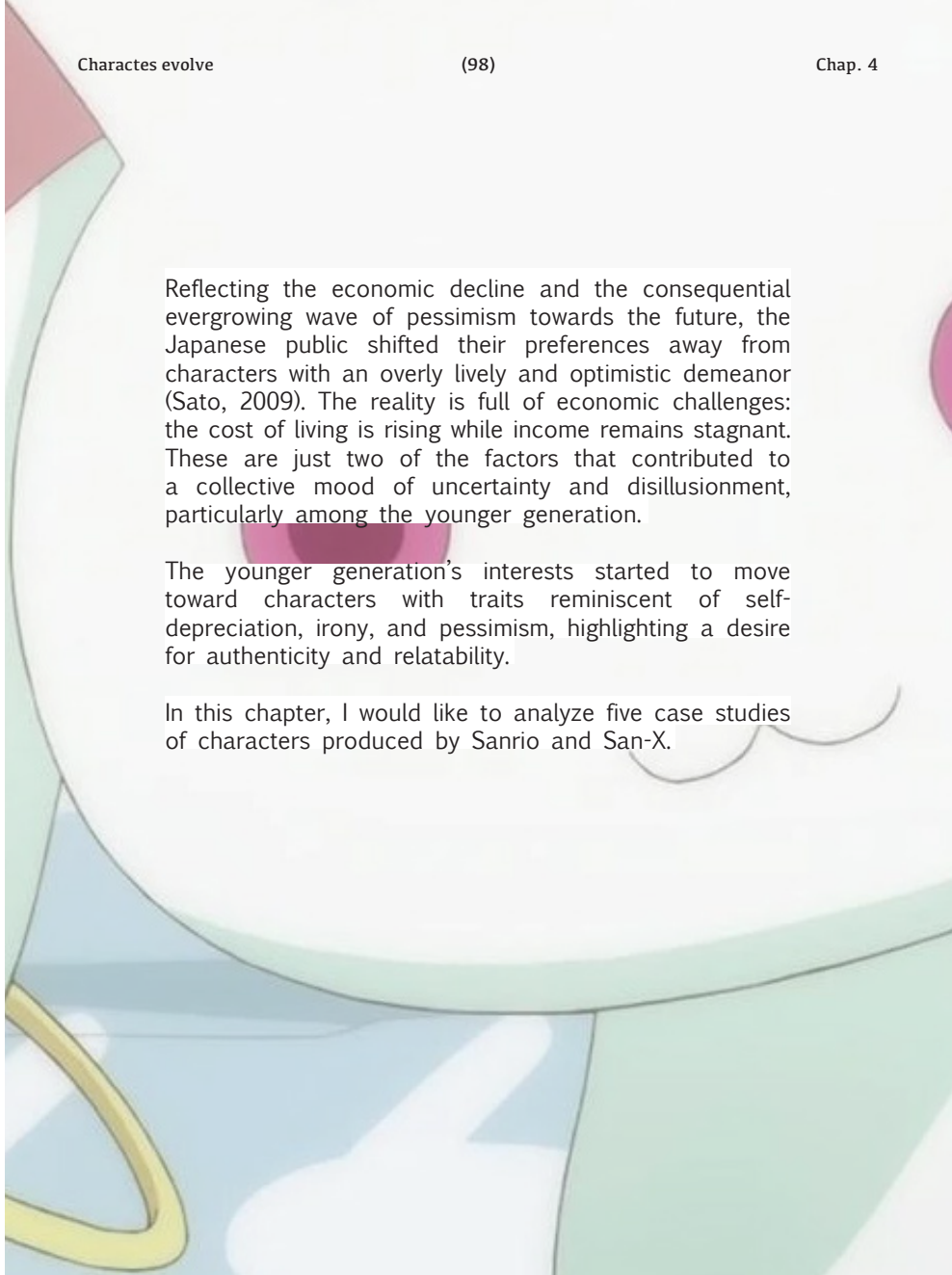
chapter 4.

Characters evolve

Reflecting the economic decline and the consequential evergrowing wave of pessimism towards the future, the Japanese public shifted their preferences away from characters with an overly lively and optimistic demeanor (Sato, 2009). The reality is full of economic challenges: the cost of living is rising while income remains stagnant. These are just two of the factors that contributed to a collective mood of uncertainty and disillusionment, particularly among the younger generation.

The younger generation's interests started to move toward characters with traits reminiscent of self-depreciation, irony, and pessimism, highlighting a desire for authenticity and relatability.

In this chapter, I would like to analyze five case studies of characters produced by Sanrio and San-X.

4.1 Sanrio reshapes

Throughout the 90s Japanese economy started to deflate while simultaneously more and more women joined the workforce, resulting in a decrease in the youngest population. This made Sanrio act in two directions, both to accommodate "older" women (meaning young students). The first measure Sanrio took was to tap into nostalgia: characters that were popular 10 to 20 years before were brought back on adorning products meant for a more mature audience (S.Hosany, G.Prayag, D.Martin, W.-Y. Lee, 2013). The second strategy was to develop characters more fitting to the less positive situation of the moment, often by putting a threshold on the carefree aspect of them.

Charmmy Kitty (Sanrio, 2004) can be taken as an example of this process: a toned down less childish version of Hello Kitty with some visual cues reminiscing of gothic aesthetics(Sato, 2009). This tendency of mixing darkness and cuteness became very popular in the early to mid-2000s, with its prime example being the fashion subculture known as Gothic Lolita. Following the trend, in 2005 Sanrio debuted Kuromi as the antagonist character to My Melody (Fig. 52). Kuromi (Fig. 52) is a white rabbit wearing a black hood with a pink skull printed on the front. Once again, her aesthetic is very obviously designed with the intent of incorporating darkness within a cute character, and it resulted in an important economic success, with the character still being ranked in a very high position as one of the most popular Sanrio characters to date.

Fig.52,53 Charmmy Kitty, unknown, pinterest.com

4.2 Case Study 1: Gudetama

Gudetama is a Sanrio character created in 2013 by artist and designer AMY. In 2013 the company held an internal competition to produce a new food-based character, the winning character would then become the protagonist of numerous goods. Gudetama did not win first place, losing to a salmon slice called Kirimi-chan. As a result, Sanrio started producing mainly merchandising for Kirimi-chan, however as Gudetama was second in place, the now-loved character also got the chance to have a few products launched on the market. Surprisingly, Gudetama's goods sell incredibly well, and in just a year, the new character's popularity skyrocketed, greatly surpassing the gold medal winner Kirimi-chan. As a result, right now in 2024, on the Sanrio official website, Gudetama's section can be easily found in the main menu together with all-time favorites such as Hello Kitty and Cinnamon Roll. Kirimi-chan can only be found through the "all character list", with only two merchandise goods available for sale (while Gudetama has 40).

The natural question at this point is of course why. Why did this character become so popular in such a short amount of time while also managing to keep its popularity high for more than 10 years?

Because it is an egg, Gudetama does not have a gender. Although the curious appearance can be charming to some, the main reason behind its popularity lies in its personality. Unlike his predecessors in the Sanrio universe, Gudetama is constantly in the depths of existential dread and nihilism. Gudetama was brought to this world against its will and for this reason, does not see much meaning in existence. The daily objective is to do as little as possible(Abad-Santos, 2017). With the breakout character, Sanrio extended its wings on multiple social media platforms, Gudetama, unlike Sanrio's earliest characters, is very vocal and expressive which is very fitting for these new communication tools. In this case, YouTube became the principal output to push the new character, with short animated videos showcasing the egg's everyday life, giving birth to iconic sayings. In Japan, the videos were also broadcasted on TV on the channels TBS from 2014 to 2020.

The short videos are all around one minute long and include two different scenes usually not related to one another. All the egg-based characters have the same face and attitude as Gudetama and exist in the human world knowing they are eventually going to be eaten (except for the spoiled one, which is going to be tossed in the trash).

As in many other countries, the last two decades have been marked by numerous discouraging events. From the stagnant state of the economy that does not give any signs of getting better anytime soon, to the tragedies caused by earthquakes, the Japanese population is growing more and more worried about their future. Although Japanese companies started to implement rules to reduce extreme stress in the workplace, the concerns of young people entering the workforce are countless. After finally finishing their studies marked by competitiveness and endless entry exams, young adults have to face a much tougher job market than the one their parents were presented with. At the time, pay rises based on seniority and guaranteed life-long employment were considered the norm, however, now young adults are entering companies aware of the fact that they will probably have to work over the retirement age just

to then get a pension insufficient for their needs (Hess, 2017).

This is just one example of the many worries Japanese millennials are dealing with daily, while anxiety is on the rise, mental health awareness is still underdeveloped compared to Western countries (for example the idea of getting therapy is heavily stigmatized), resulting in a lack of tools to deal with it (Hori, 2022).

Gudetama's outlook on life and lack of motivation to do any task somewhat resonates with the younger generation's tendentially negative perspective on the future.

Starting from the name, Gudetama is formed by two Japanese words: "gude" and "tama". The first part comes from the expression "gude gude" used informally to describe something sludgy with no energy or strength. The second part "tama" is an abbreviation of "tamago" which simply means egg. Being lazy and unmotivated are its main personality traits, but it is this very laziness that makes it so relatable to us as everyone has felt that way at some point in life. Gudetama gives voice to our lazy selves, it complains for us and makes us feel more understood. When we do not feel like doing life anymore, Gudetama understands and accepts us.
Another point of interest of this character is its looks. Although a bit different from traditionally cute Sanrio characters, Gudetama is still a cute character, meaning that it still retains the positive effects of cuteness. Visibly unthreatening, soft, rounded and small, this egg's appearance is very much approachable and "family-friendly". Despite being a darker character picking on some

heavy topics, the cute appearance and the bite-sized fun format of communication acts as a sugar coating, saving Gudetama from becoming "too depressing".

The emotional response this character gives us is therefore layered: together with the positive emotions cute objects bring us, there is also the concept of relatability and feeling understood. Which one stays on top does not matter, as it works both ways: someone who does not know the character will first be attracted by its cuteness to then appreciate it even more for its personality, and someone who is already accustomed to the character, might appreciate its words and still feel comfortable sharing them because they are coming out of a cute egg. About this last point, the popularity of Gudetama content on social media is also a unique aspect of this character. Sharing content such as quotes, clips and memes with friends can be a lighter way to complain about life, and communicate one's negative state without the fear of dragging the friend into a conversation that might be "too heavy"(Abad-Santos, 2017).

Finally, it is to keep in mind that although this egg might look like a critique of the capitalistic system, the character is still a Sanrio product, one of the biggest companies in Japan. Gudetama can be helpful for us to cope with the day-to-day stress, but ultimately it has been produced as a commercial product specifically aimed at millennials and Gen Z(Hess, 2017).

Visual analysis: as already mentioned, Gudetama's appearance is very wobbly, squishy, and limp, which makes sense since we are talking about a raw egg yolk. Limbs are short and the body is plump, somewhat reminding of a baby. The facial expression - or the lack of it - is more or less always the same, which matches the unchanging state of mind. Gudetama's ambiguous cuteness is not only contained in its personality but also in the visuals. As it lies stomach down with an unimpressed expression, although still cute, it does not exactly fit the stereotypical image of cuteness that usually comes to our minds when hearing the word "cute". Characters such as this egg, designed for us to relate to, are prone to visuals slightly off the pure form of cuteness. Mixing a touch of awkwardness, and creating an imperfection, might help the relatability factor.

Having said all this, I would like to share some of the best Gudetama quotes from the anime:

遊びだったら疲れない

"*if it's play I don't get tired*", meaning if I am not working I am not getting tired

おはようございません。

"*Not good morning*"

レールがしかれた人生なんて…ゴメンっしょ…

"*A life with already installed rails? That's a no thank you*"

価値って誰が決めるの？

"*Who decided these values?*"

土曜日に祝日とかKYじゃね？

"*A public holiday on a Saturday? Can't they read the room?*"

後悔役に立たず

"*Regret is useless*"

ダラダラするのに忙しくて1日24時間じゃ足りない…

"*I'm so busy loafing around, 24 hours is not enough*"

ぐでぐでしてたら一日が終わった。

"*I was doing nothing and a day went by*"

やる気がサヨナラホームラン

"*Motivation goodbye home run*" hinting at the ball flying far away in a baseball match.

来年から本気出す。

"*I'll get serious, starting next year*"
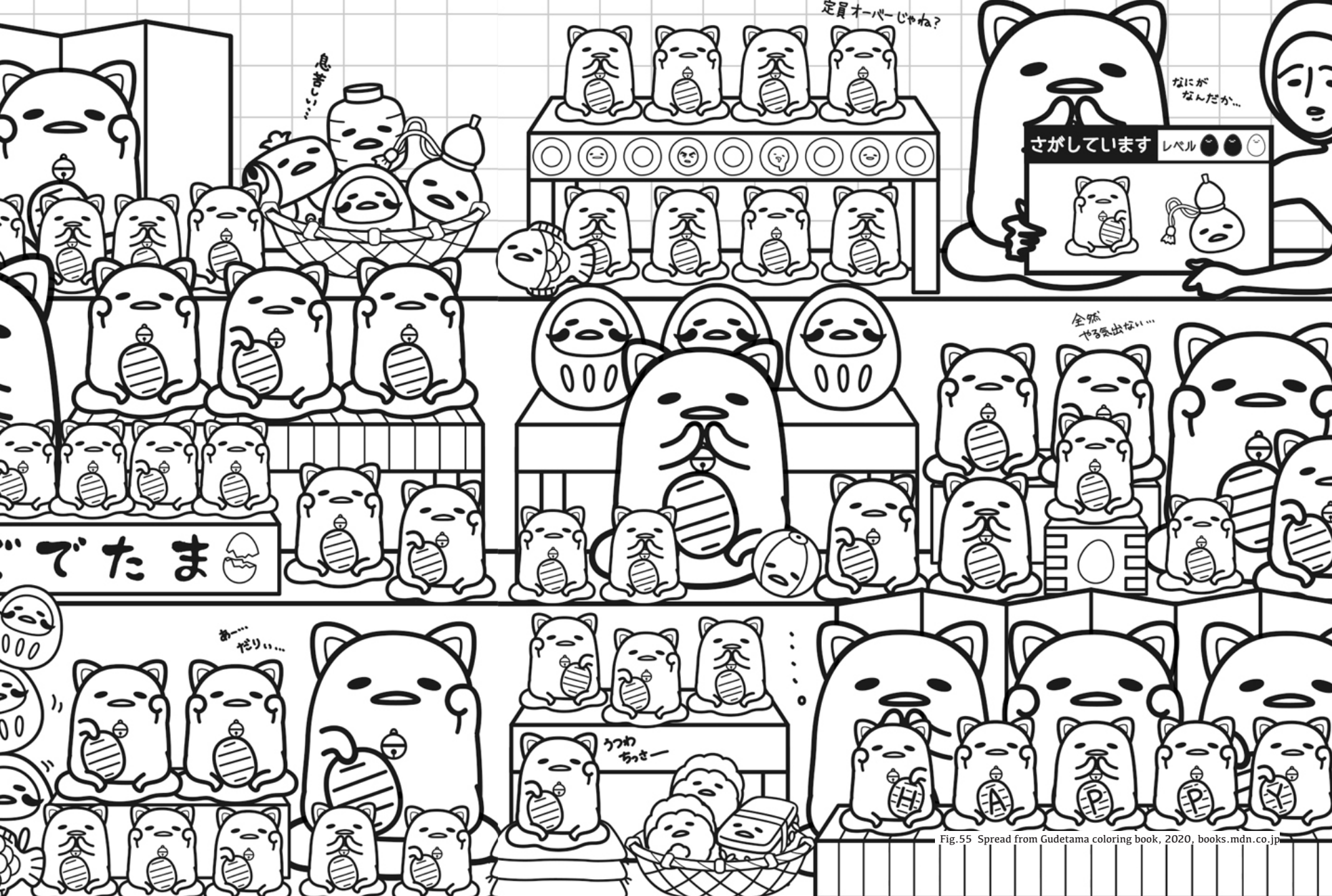
Fig.55 Spread from Gudetama coloring book, 2020, books.mdn.co.jp
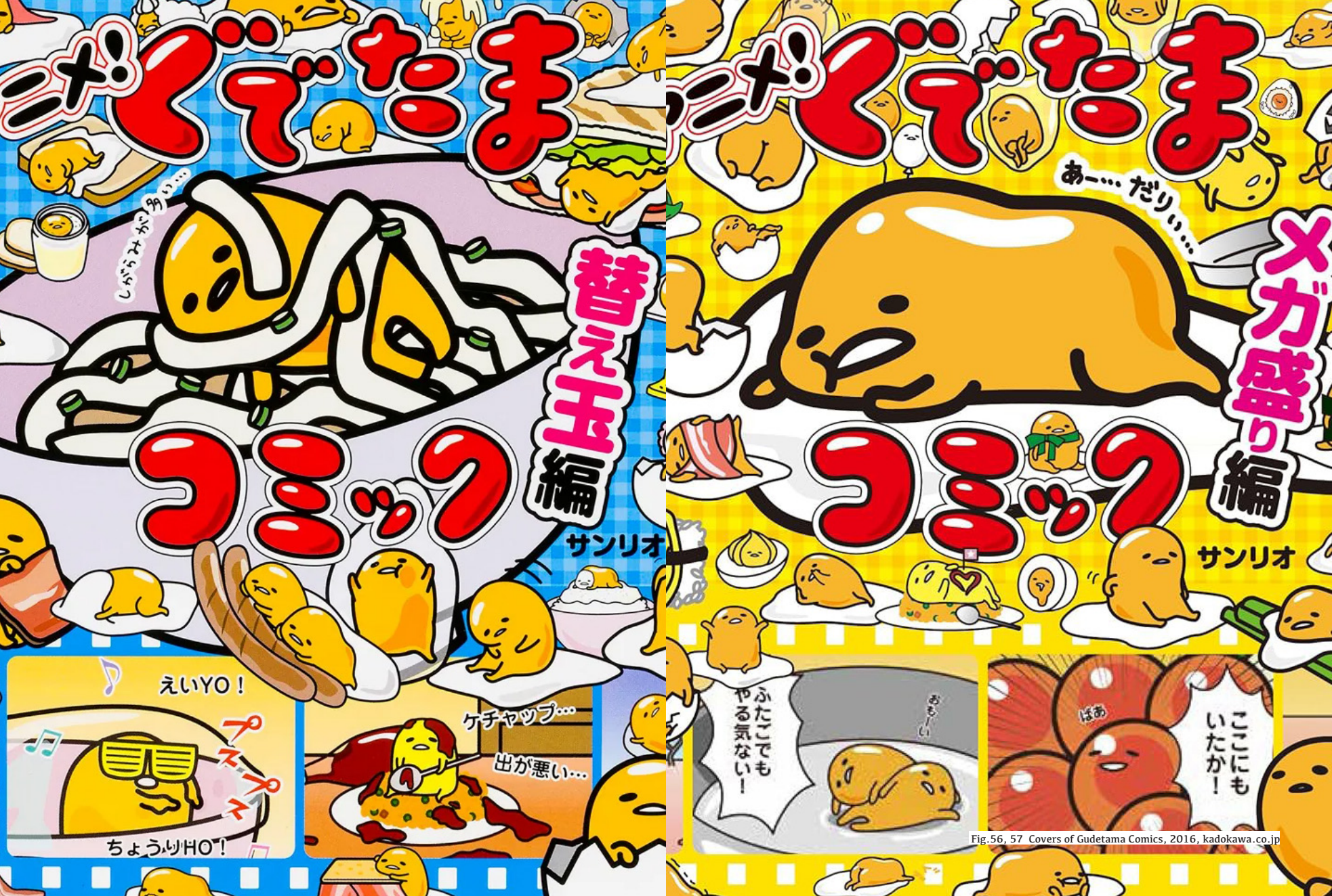
Fig.56, 57 Covers of Gudetama Comics, 2016, kadokawa.co.jp

Fig.58 Scene from Gudetama Netflix show, 2022, anime.eiga.com

4.3 Case Study 2:
Retsuko from Aggretsuko

Aggretsuko is a Sanrio TV series launched in 2016, the main character Retsuko is a female 25-year-old red panda working a corporate job.
The story is set in a fictionalized version of Tokyo, and Retsuko is at her first job experience in the accounting department of a trading firm. Her appearance is very conventionally cute, the big oblong head with cat-like ears and small body somewhat reminiscent of Hello Kitty. The storyline revolves around Retsuko's everyday life in the corporate world, dealing with the stress of her job and annoying coworkers. Once her shift is finished, she unleashes her built-up emotions by singing death metal songs at the local karaoke box.

The show interestingly tackles real-life problems the average Japanese working woman experiences in the workplace. Sexism in Asian workplaces still runs deep in the system and culture and Japan is no exception to it. With high gender wage gap values, women are at all times under the pressure of societal norms of being the sole caregiver of the child (by leaving the workforce) and are also expected to act docile and look cute. More generally speaking, in countries such as Korea and Japan, the skill to read between the lines is required to sail through society, in Japanese it is called "to read the air"（空気を読む）, especially at entry level, a worker is expected to recognize all the subtle cues and act accordingly in order to maintain harmony and equilibrium within the working space(Lee, 2018).

In the series we can observe Retsuko having to deal with misogynistic jokes, being expected to serve tea to her boss and other male coworkers as it is a "woman's job" and having to pour drinks to her male colleagues during the after-hours drinks[11]. She complies with everything with a smile on her face without losing composure as is expected from her, until she reaches her safe space to release her emotions.

The designer behind the character Yeti states:

"an emotion 'kawaii' may be characterized as: positive, unthreatened (in that the subject does not feel under threat), approach-motivated and socially oriented." (Nittono, 2016, p. 89)

Some people are surprised to find out that Aggretsuko is a product by Sanrio, which is an understandable reaction seeing that Sanrio has been associated with characters such as Hello Kitty and My Melody, postergirls of infantile and joyful cuteness for decades.
Aggretsuko is a character that caters to the contemporary generations, living in a never-ending economic crisis, their prospects for the future are uncertain and pessimistic. Therefore, seeing characters such as Retsuko living a life similar to theirs makes the audience feel understood and less lonely.

"Aggretsuko is a symbol and expression of the pent-up stress and irritation that is rife in the world today" (A.Hess, New York Times, 2017)

states Yeti.

---

11   In Japan it is common to go for drinks with colleagues after work, although it is not compulsory to participate workers often feel pressured to attend. Also, in old school companies women workers are expected to pour drinks to their male co-workers.

Visual analysis: Just like Gudetama, Aggretsuko is also a character with relatability as her strongest feature. Aggretsuko's appearance in her normal state is very cute, it has all the features of a stereotypically cute character: a big head, baby-like proportions, sparkly eyes, and is designed after a red panda (one of the most popular and cute animals in Japan). However, to communicate this relatability through visuals, there is once again the need to create an imperfection. This visual imperfection is brought forward in the karaoke scenes, where Aggretsuko shows her true colors and transforms into an aggressive metal head with sharp teeth and spiky black marks around her eyes.

Fig.59 Aggretsuko Netflix series season 3 poster, 2020, moshimoshi-nippon.jp

4.4 Case Study 3: San-X

San-X is a company based in Tokyo, considered Sanrio's main competitor, it sells stationary and miscellaneous goods and grounds its main business in character production and the management of its copyright fees. One of their earliest hit product was a chubby and soft bear cub named "Pinny Mu" launched in 1984 as part of a series called "Pencil Club". From then on, San-X characters are known to have a loose and laidback design, slightly different from the more traditionally feminine and stereotypically cute characters produced by Sanrio.

First launched in 1998, Tare Panda is the San-X character upholding its high popularity for the longest, still ranking third in the 2023 San-X yearly character ranking. Tare Panda is a panda-inspired character, with its name meaning drooping panda with "tare" coming from the verb "tareru" which means to droop. As the name suggests, this character looks like a half-melted panda and it is usually seen lying on the floor with an empty expression on its face. The release year was right after 1997, a critical year for the Japanese economy, marked by the Asian economic crisis of fall 1997, which unfortunately resulted in numerous layoffs. Rising stress levels and worries are thought to have influenced the popularity of Tare Panda, as many people felt sympathetic and understood by the lazy and seemingly emotionless creature. To add to it, the designer behind the beloved character, Hiraku Suemasa drew the panda in a moment of intense stress as he just entered the company. Making Tare Panda a character designed by a stressed person for stressed people.

Added to the looseness, San-X characters often emit a sensation of lethargy and helplessness, tapping into the notion of kawaii being linked to something small and defenseless, which results in a desire to be physically close to it and protect it (Nittono, 2012).

Because of their soft and wobbly appearances, San-X characters earned an additional power on top of just being cute: the power of soothing. Soothing type characters, fall under a subcategory of cuteness called "iyashi-key" (literally translated to "soothing type"). The term "iyashi-chara" is formed by the word "iyashi" coming from the verb "iyasu" which stands for "to soothe/heal" and kyara being again the short version of "character", the term indicates characters able to bring warmth and relaxation to the person looking at them. In a work-centered society, the concept of "iyashi" is very important, representing a brief moment in which one can relieve the stress built up in the everyday. One simple but common example of "iyashi" is watching short videos of cats, one of the most consumed forms of internet media in the world, an activity that has been proven to be beneficial to us humans, as it lowers feelings of anxiety and makes us feel energized(Palermo, 2015). The positive effects of soothing type characters became so apparent, that nowadays in some Japanese bookstores, volumes covering San-X characters can be found in the wellness section, right next to books about lifestyle and healthy living. Their roundness, clumsiness, and slowness in the movements compose their effective child-like quality of cheering people up.

Fig.60 Tarepanda plush sold on Mercari, unknown, jp.mercari.com
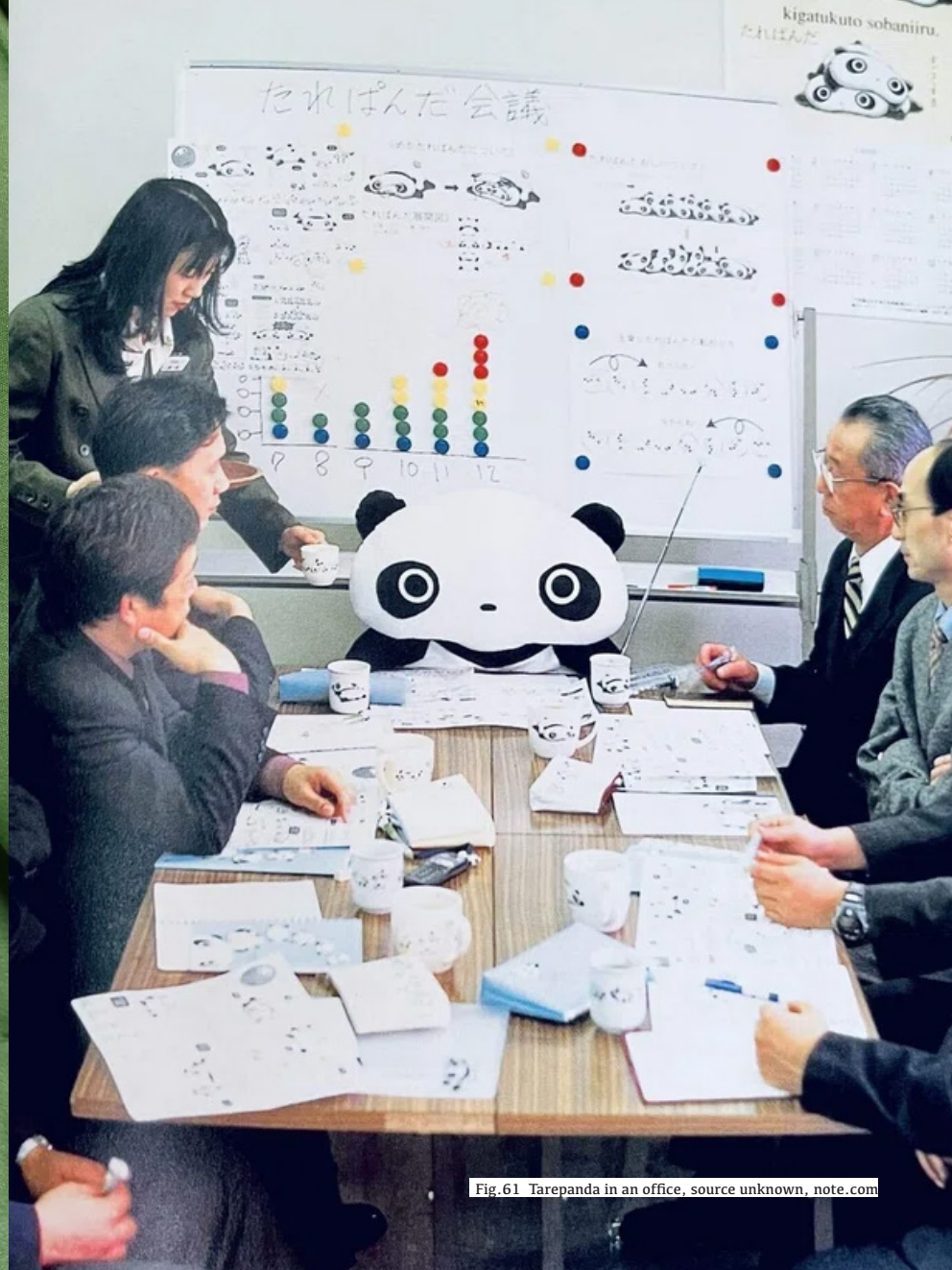
Fig.61 Tarepanda in an office, source unknown, note.com

父の頭の下

ちょうどいいところにいたらしい
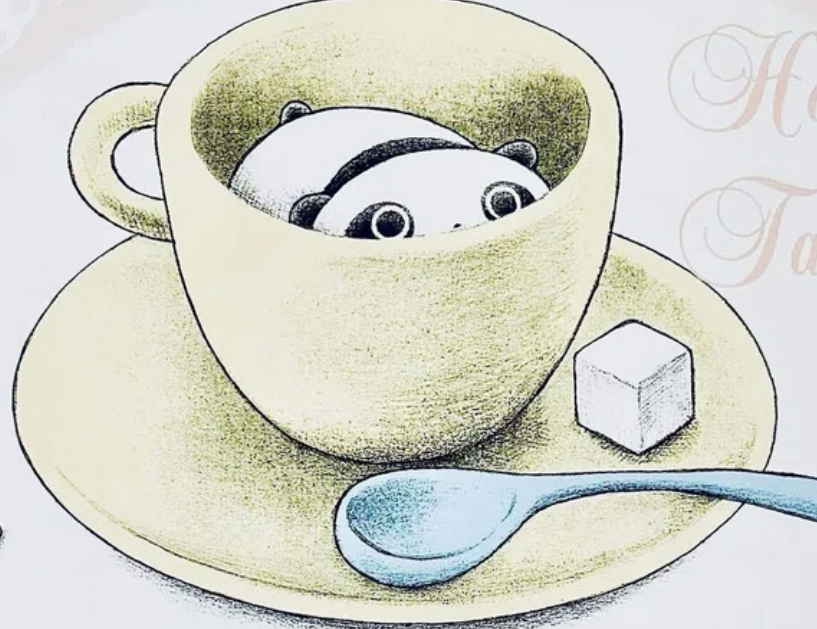
見たりさわったりしてほっとするひとときをお楽しみ下さい。

・Sサイズ一杯500円
・お砂糖を与えてもいっそうおたのしみいただけます。
・お持ち帰り用もございます。
・おかわりはできません。
・他にも各種とりそろえております。
ご利用ください。

Mサイズ

Lサイズ

大盛り

たれぱんだカフェ
タレール

Universally effective regardless of gender and age, iyashi-key characters represent an easily accessible companion ready to help in moments of stress and tiredness. This category is in fact, also highly popular among adults (Birkett, 2012).

After Tare Panda, throughout the years San-X continued producing soothing characters, giving birth to countless hit products. Here, I will present a few of the most popular and interesting San-X characters.

In the latest 2023 ranking, Tare Panda arrived third; the second place was achieved by a character unit called "Sumikko Gurashi" (translated as "living in the corner"), and the first place was ruled by Rilakkuma. The winner of the San-X championship Rilakkuma is another lazy bear character, with his name being a mix of the words "relax" and "bear" (kuma). First designed in 2003 by Aki Kondo, to this day Rilakkuma remains the most loved San-X character. Inspired by her desire to not only own a pet dog, but also by her envy towards dogs' lifestyle, Kondo designed a bear with a zipper on his back who loves to loaf around. In 2003 a short comic was also released offering some background story: Rilakkuma lives together with Kaoru, an "OL" (short for "office lady"), and her pet bird called "Kiiroitori" (yellow bird). He spends his days in her apartment relaxing and waiting for his roommate to come home. In 2019 a Netflix stop-motion series was released, documenting Rilakkuma and his friend's slow and relaxing daily life.

Once again, we can observe cute characters being targeted not only to children but also to the working population, as an instrument to ease the everyday.

"In Productive Japan, this behavior is not valued. In Precarious Japan, however, underemployment and nonproductivity takes the pressure away from individuals to judge this behavior as negative. Procrastination shifts from meiwaku to normality, and to be transformed into kawaii culture, accepted and even celebrated as such."
(Stevens, 2014, Japan. M/C Journal, p.17(2))

Coming in second, between Rilakkuma and Tare Panda in the 2023 San-X ranking, there is Sumikkogurashi (translatable to "corner living"): a set of small characters living together in the corners of the room. This character family is made up of 5 main characters and other numerous sub-characters. The characters are mainly divided into two groups: Sumikko and Minikko, in essence, the first ones are bigger and the second ones are smaller. Except for some, all characters are anthropomorphic creatures of mundane objects and foods available at all times, they feel more comfortable staying in the corners, and if put somewhere else they run back to their safe zone. The designer behind them Yuriko Yokomizo, explained how she took inspiration from Japanese culture and Japanese people's tendency to gravitate toward the walls and corners as they feel safer than the feeling of being in the center of the room. These cute beings not only resonate with people but also use their cuteness to highlight the small and at times insignificant things we tend to overlook (Cute guide of CUTE at Somerset House, 2024).

4.5 Other characters I personally like

Kogepan:

A burnt red bean bread bun, and lives in a bakery whilst trying to find friends out of other bread items. He often runs away from the store, but ends up going back.

Launched in 1999 by San-X, this character became very popular in the early 2000s, which are my childhood years. At the time I remember not understanding the popularity, because the character seemed sad and I preferred more "pop" characters. However, now it became one of my all time favorites.

Fig.64 Kogepan, early 2000's, source unknown, pinterest.com
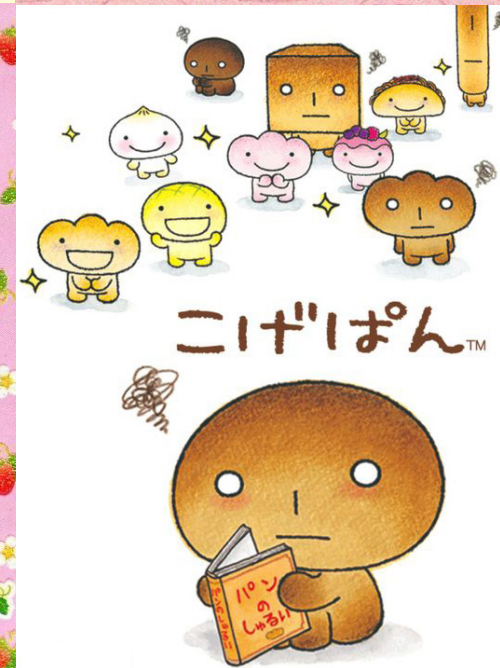
Inoue Toro

The main character of the game Dokodemo issyo (translated in: "always together), is a white cat that wants to be more human. He asks the player to teach him human words, and lives a slow life.

First released in 1999, by Sony as the main character of the game. It was one of the first character plush I was gifted as a child. Although the character design did not fit what I liked at the time, I remember playing with it a lot. As I was really young, at the time I did not know it was part of a PlayStation game.

Fig.65 Inoue Toro, early 2000's, source unknown, pinterest.com

Fig.66 Inoue Toro, early 2000's, source unknown, pinterest.com

Fig.67 Inoue Toro, early 2000's, source unknown, pinterest.com

Opanchu Usagi

Designed by designer 可哀想に！(kawaisouni!), she is a pink bunny who always finds herself in unfortunate circumstances.

One of my latest obsessions. I got to know about this character one or two years ago on Instagram. I as many people found comfort in seeing her pushing through life despite all the negative experiences.
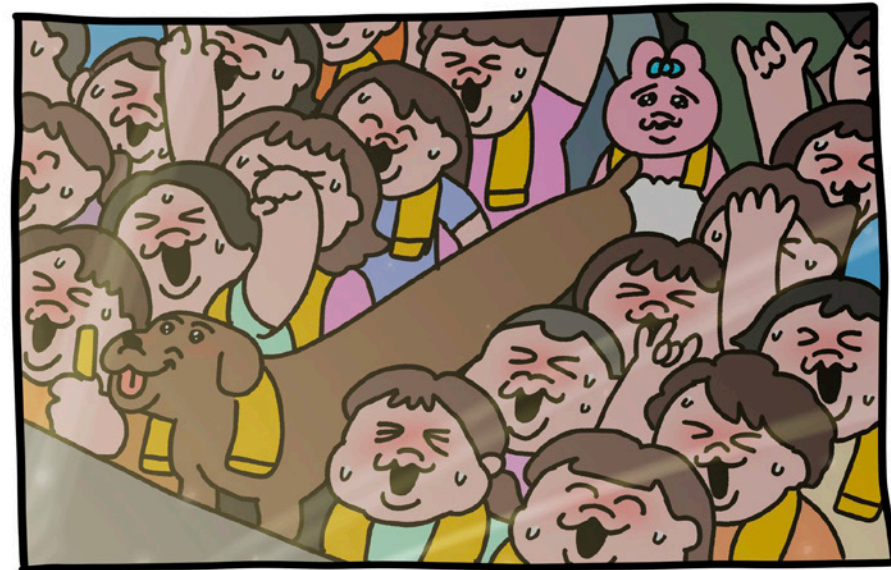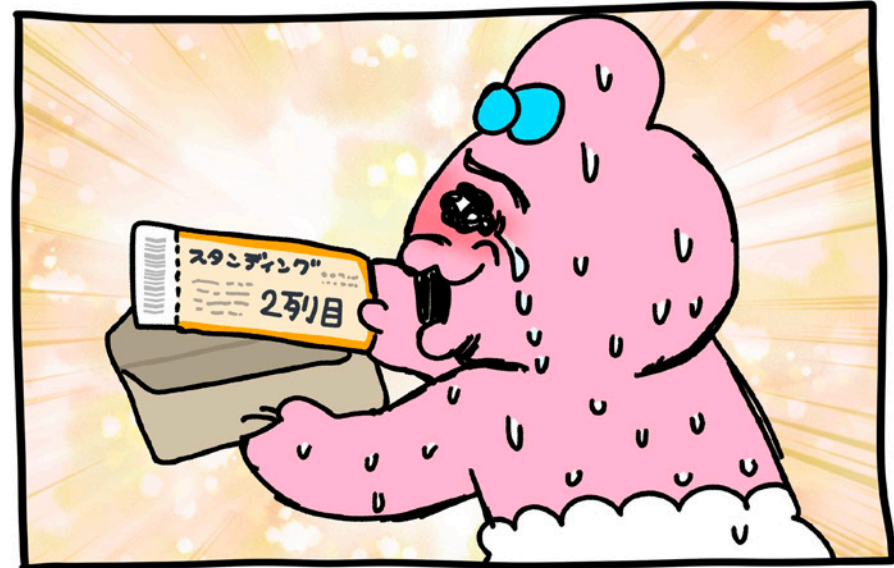
Fig.68 - 70 Opanchu Usagi comincs, from Opanchu Usagi Twitter account
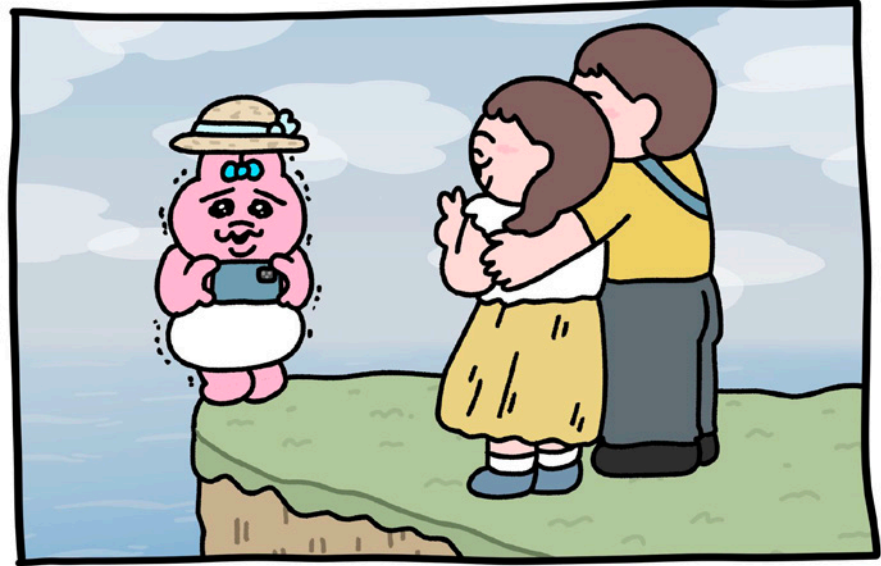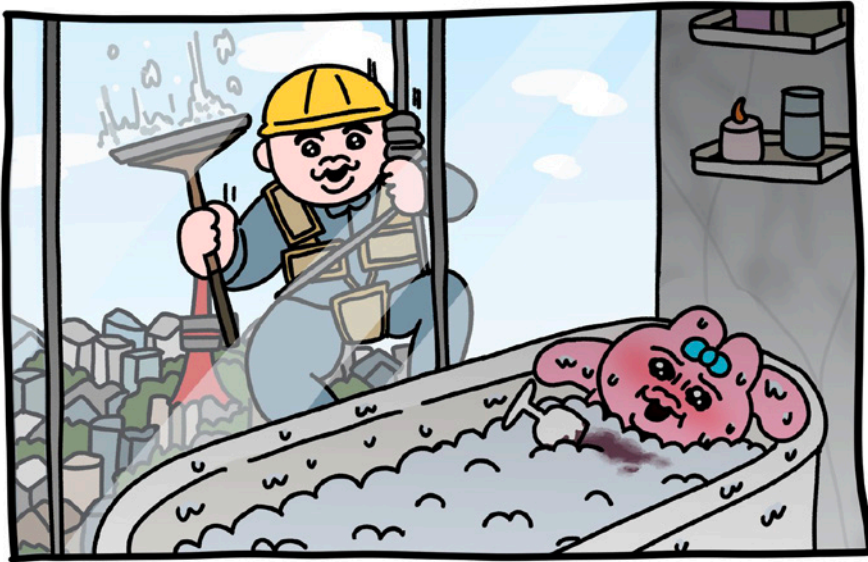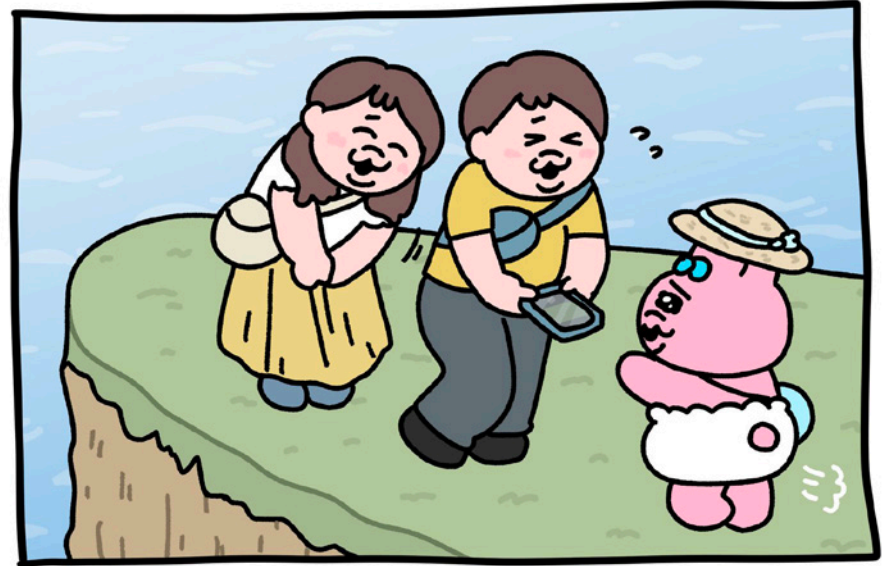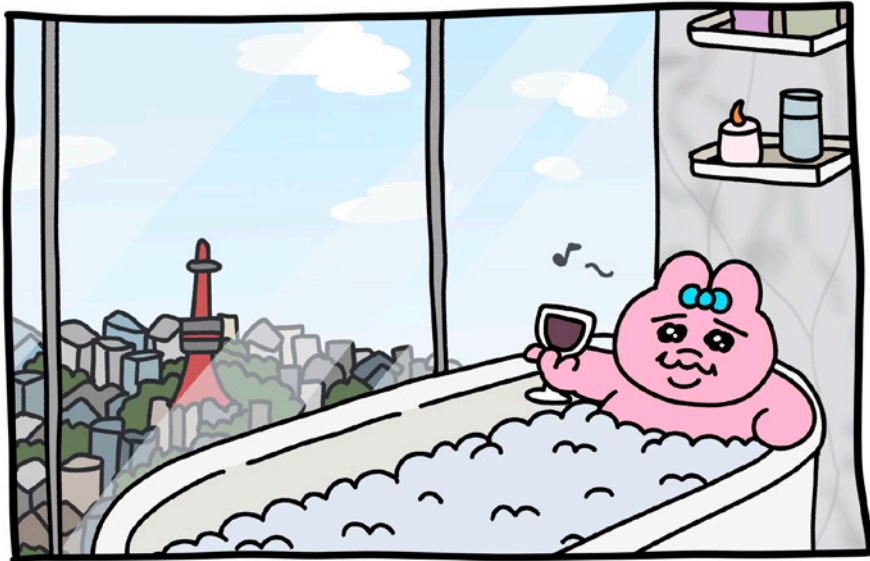
Chiikawa

A manga series created by Nagano, it tells the everyday life of Chiikawa, a cute small creature and her friends. The story encapsulates their daily happenings and struggles, sometimes contrastingly realistic to their adorable and soft appearances.

In the last years I noticed how characters from Chiikawa never ran out of popularity. I have seen them collaborating with countless brands, I remember in March 2024 they were having a collaboration with Kura Sushi, a big sushi restaurant chain.

Fig.71 Chiikawa anime poster, 2022, imdb.com

Fig.72 Chiikawa, Kura sushi collaboration, 2024, from Kura Sushi Twitter Account

Tarako Kewpie

A pollock roe version of the Kewpie Mayonnaise character Kewpie. Launched in the early 2010s to promote their fish roe pasta sauces, the TV commercial became very popular in Japan.

I remember being a big fan of the TV commercials (I still am). I also remember them going semi viral online and seeing people from the west being weirded out by them.

Fig.73 Tarako pasta sauce advertising, 2006, cgtejv.greek-mandarins.com

Fig.74 Tarako Kewpie wallpaper, unknown, kyupii.jugem.jp

Kobito Zukan

A series of gnomes/fairies illustrated by Nabata Toshitaka. Popularized in the 2010s, their funny and a little ugly appearances made them the posterchild of "kimokawa".

Example of how cute and kawaii can be different, they are put under the category "kimo-kawaii", meaning gross-cute.
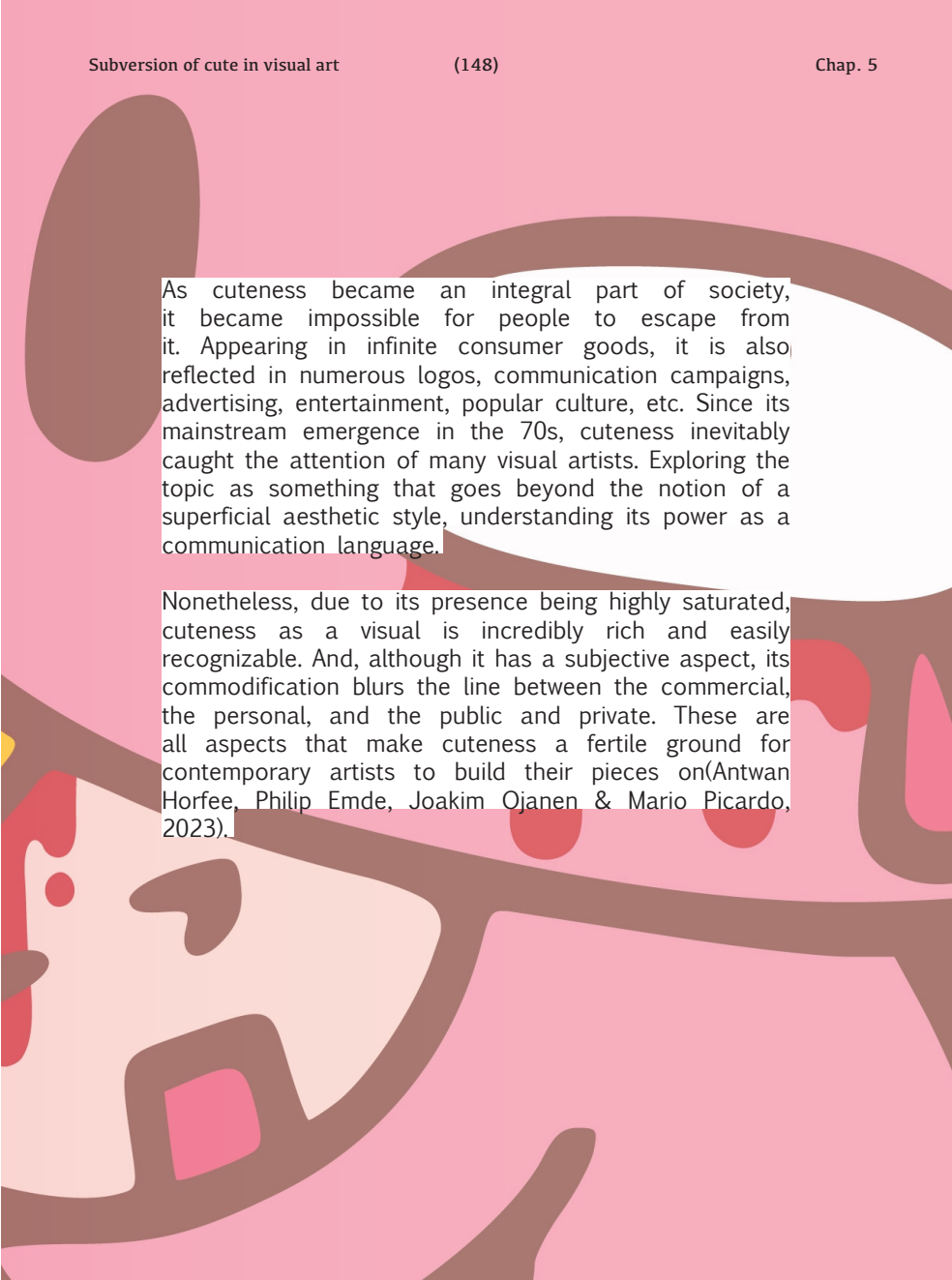
Fig.75 Kobito Zukan, from signing event in 2023, fude.or.jp

ロクリン社 © Toshitaka N

Fig.76,77 Kobito Zukan goods on sale, unknown, cognisgroup.com

chapter 5.

Subversion of cute
in visual art

As cuteness became an integral part of society, it became impossible for people to escape from it. Appearing in infinite consumer goods, it is also reflected in numerous logos, communication campaigns, advertising, entertainment, popular culture, etc. Since its mainstream emergence in the 70s, cuteness inevitably caught the attention of many visual artists. Exploring the topic as something that goes beyond the notion of a superficial aesthetic style, understanding its power as a communication language.

Nonetheless, due to its presence being highly saturated, cuteness as a visual is incredibly rich and easily recognizable. And, although it has a subjective aspect, its commodification blurs the line between the commercial, the personal, and the public and private. These are all aspects that make cuteness a fertile ground for contemporary artists to build their pieces on(Antwan Horfee, Philip Emde, Joakim Ojanen & Mario Picardo, 2023).

During an interview, while talking about a selection of art pieces presented in the CUTE exhibition at Somerset House in London, (April 2024), Claire Catteral stated that:

"In Productive Japan, this behavior is not valued. In Precarious Japan, however, underemployment and nonproductivity takes the pressure away from individuals to judge this behavior as negative. Procrastination shifts from meiwaku to normality, and to be transformed into kawaii culture, accepted and even celebrated as such."
(Stevens, 2014, Japan. M/C Journal, p.17(2))

In this chapter, I will showcase a series of visual artists who utilized the aesthetic language of cuteness as a communicative tool, by subverting and deconstructing cuteness.

5.1 Murakami Takashi

Recognized by many as the most famous current artist, Takashi Murakami is one of the earliest Japanese artists to heavily include themes of kawaii in his work. In this segment, I will be covering one of the characters he created through his career: Mr. DOB.

While some of his prints are sold at extremely high prices and exposed in galleries and renowned museums all around the world, his other prints (some of which are extremely similar to the previous ones) are printed on "common" objects and sold at fairly cheap prices. Murakami's art is known for being very present in retail settings, creating both expensive and cheap art; which logically goes hand in hand with the Superflat[13] movement he created (Ngai, 2012).

---

13   As Superflat aims at flattening things, it also flattens the height difference between high-end art and low-end art.

Fig.76 DOB-kun, NTWRK x Takashi Murakami, Painted Cast Vinyl 2022, artsy.net

Mr. DOB is a character designed and copyrighted by Murakami in the early 90s. Visually resembling a mixture between a mouse and a child with a very large head, Mr. DOB has been created appositely as a marketable figure. As the artist claimed:

> *"to investigate the secret of market survivability ... of characters such as Mickey Mouse, Sonic the Hedgehog ... Hello Kitty in their knock-offs produced in Hong Kong,"*
> *Takashi Murakami, Takashi Murakami: Summon Monsters? Open the Door? Heal? Die? (exhibition catalog, Tokyo: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001), unnumbered page. As cited in Sianne Ngai, Our aesthetic categories, 2012, pg. 83.*

Murakami's view on cute culture is in fact, rather negative: in his book Little Boy, the Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture (2005), a lot of opinions about kawaii culture, and cuteness in general, agree with Eiji Otsuka's books Folklore of Young Girls (Shojo minzoku-gaku) 1989, and Cute Emperor of Young Girls (Shojo tachi no kawaii tenno). In his books, Otsuka implies that the desire of adolescent girls to become kawaii is strongly linked to a sense of narcissism, born from the self-image of the "cute and innocent I". The book published in 2003 states that kawaii makes young adults not want to grow up, making them dependent and resistant to taking responsibility. While girl culture shields women from harsh gender roles, it does not equip them with any useful skills to navigate society, and instead of guiding them through it, kawaii culture blocks their growth. Kawaii culture then gets labeled as an "infantile infection" which sucks young

adults into a spiral of "narcissism, consumption, and dependency"(Murakami, 2005) for which we have to find a cure to obtain maturity.

Founder of the Superflat movement, as the base of his artworks Murakami holds themes such as pop culture, consumption, spiritualism, but more than anything otaku culture. As a self proclaimed otaku, Murakami incorporates elements taken from otaku culture, such as anime and manga, allowing them to infiltrate the world of fine arts and flattening the hierarchy present between "high" and "low" art. Contrary to girls kawaii culture which is tendentially non-sexual and in some cases born out of a desire to counter the sexualization of young girls. The otaku culture Murakami often identifies himself in, has a different notion of cuteness as it includes the concept of moe, which is heavily sexualized.

Roughly translatable in English as "desirable", the word itself sounds similarly to "moeru" which means "to burn" (as in with fire). Mainly used as a verb, moe describes the moment a gazer is overwhelmed by a mixture of excitement and desire at the sight of something incredibly adorable. Although it varies depending on the context, more often than not, moe is associated with some kind of fetish and sexual desire towards the gazed figure. Manga and anime culture is unfortunately still a place in which the male gaze rules over the vast majority of contents, while the female body becomes fragmented in single parts subject to objectification and sexualization(Maddox, 2019).
In an exhibition held in Paris in 2019 about Mr. DOB, Murakami exhibited a sculpture named Devil ko2, a piece

part of a collection of his hyper sexualized life sized anime figures, this time being a girl holding Mr. DOB on a plate. The character has been initially designed by an erotic-game illustrator Nishi e Da, which once again plays into the oversexualization aspect of Murakami's art. Although some might think that this oversexualization present in his woks might represent a critique of said tendencies, Murakami himself stated that it is not in fact a critique. Which for some, might signify a fail in actually subverting the cuteness he is referencing to (Fevral, 2022).

Fig.77 Devil Ko2, FRP, urethane resins and lacquer paint, 1780cm, 2019, Courtesy of Perrotin

5.2 Yoshitomo Nara

Yoshitomo Nara is another giant of the Japanese contemporary art scene. Primarily known for his raffifurations of angry little girls, Nara translates his understanding of cuteness into his work, manipulating emotions and imaginations of the familiar and innocent.

The children depicted in Nara's works have exaggerated forms fitting Konrad Lorenz's idea of Kindchenschema (baby schema) which are known to evoke the feeling of cuteness by resembling a baby. The childishness of his images is also found in his bold color palette the thick outlines and blank backgrounds, especially present in his works shown at the show In the Deepest Puddle (1995) at the SCAI BATHHOUSE in Tokyo. Nara takes these aspects of cute, two-dimensional, manga aesthetic and tries to subvert the assumptions we form about them. The girls in his works are often presented with a twist that disrupts the cuteness: some of them have a malign expression, some are holding weapons and some works are accompanied by dark or aggressive words (Koon, 2020).
One of the works present in the exhibition depicts a girl falling upsidedown into a body of water while playing some sort of guitar, the name of the piece is Rock'n Roll Suicide (1992) (Fig.78). Another piece also from the same exhibition In the Deepest Puddle II (1995) (Fig. 79) contains an image of a similar girl covered in bandages being trapped in a puddle. Although the unexpected aggressiveness of these children, they still evoke an undeniable feeling of cuteness (so called "Awww" feeling).

As to add to it, Nara also likes to add animals into the picture, with example such as Harmless Kitty (1994) (Fig. 81) and Abandoned Puppy (1996) (Fig. 80) and the well known white Dog found in various works.

Yoshitomo Nara understands the power of cute, by including these cute figures, he creates an empathetic bond with the viewer. As found in recent studies, the "awww" factor increases the desire of nearness towards a cute object, while also influencing feelings of companionship and protectiveness (Nittono, 2012). As mentioned in previous chapters, kawaii also includes feelings of pityfullness and innocence, both present in young children, which further enhances our empathy towards the characters inside his work(Koon, 2020).

Nara's works evoke a feeling of loneliness ans nostalgia, maybe due to the viewer overlapping the children before their eyes with their own inner child, as they feel empathy towards the two dimensional image.

Fig.78 Yoshitomo Nara, Rock n' Roll Suicide, 1992, acrylic on canvas, phillips.com

Fig.79 Yoshitomo Nara, In the Deepest Puddle II, 1995, Acrylic on cotton mounted on canvas, 47 1/4 × 43 5/16 in. (120 × 110 cm), Takahashi Ryutaro Collection

Fig.80 Yoshitomo Nara, Abandoned Puppy; Waiting, 1996, gouache on paper, mutualart.com

Fig.81 Yoshitomo Nara, Harmless Kitty, 1994, Acrylic on canvas, The National Museum
of Modern Art, Tokyo, yoshitomonara.org

5.3 Mori Chack

GLOOMY The Naughty Grizzly (いたずらぐまのグル〜ミ〜) also known as Gloomy Bear, is a character designed by Japanese graphic designer Mori Chack.

In the year 2000 Chack grouped some of the illustrations he had done in the past for a small job and printed them onto postcards to sell on the streets of Minami Osaka. As he added new designs every week, the street shop started to grow in notoriety to the point that people waited at the spot before he even came to set the shop up. Among the different characters, Gloomy Bear appeared to be the most popular, initially presented in different color variations, as the pink colorway sold the most it became the final official color for the character design (グル〜ミ〜公式チャンネル /Gloomy Bear channel, 2020).

Gloomy Bear is a grizzly bear who lives with a boy named Pitty. The story behind the character goes as follows: when Pitty was small, he had a favorite teddy bear plush, however, one day the bear's ear ripped apart and for this reason, Pitty's mother threw the plush away. Of course, this saddened Pitty a lot, until one day while walking outside, he found a box with a small bear cub inside. The cub looked incredibly similar to his old teddy bear, so, Pitty decided to adopt the bear, call it Gloomy, and care for it in his own house. However, because Gloomy is a bear, it grew much faster than a human would becoming much more tall and powerful than its owner. Gloomy who was sweet and cuddly as a cub is now a full-grown grizzly bear, with bear-like instincts, and

as bears do, Gloomy attacks Pitty whenever it feels like it. Despite the injuries, Pitty does not give up on caring for Gloomy, which eventually leads to Gloomy killing its owner Pitty.

Over the last 20 years, Gloomy became extremely popular appearing in countless collaborations featuring the bear in all kinds of goods ranging from Hello Kitty collaborations to designing car wraps for racing cars(Otaku USA Magazine, 2013). In 2021, an official anime series was launched including 12 short episodes showcasing Pity and Gloomy's everyday life.
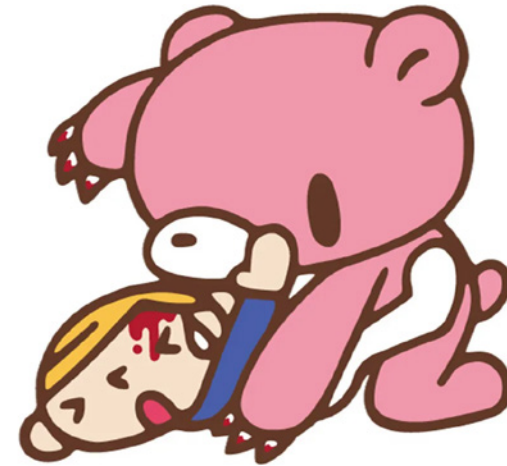
Fig.82 Mori Chack, Gloomy Bear attacking its owner, unknown, tokyoscope.blog

新色ヌイグル〜ミ〜
2体セット
◆0408

CHAX COLONY 限定版ソフビも！！

CHAX COLONYって？
森チャックのホームグラウンド、大阪に居を構える森チャックグッズ専門店。限定別注アイテム、オリジナルTシャツなど、ファンにはたまらない品がズラリ。
問：CHAX COLONY（チャックスコロニー）
☎06-6251-2557

グル〜ミ〜&ボディ〜ストラップセット
◆8431

ぷら〜んぶらんキーチェーンVol.1.5 4個セット
◆0407

グル〜ミ〜ソフビフィギュア
◆0404（通常版）
◆0405（ヘヴィーブラッド）

ハンドパペットセット
◆0406

筒型ポーチ2個セット
◆0403

トートバッグ
◆0402（技柄・クロ）
◆0401（エレクトス柄・ピンク）

ねじ式グル〜ミ〜3点セット
◆8432

Tシャツ・Sサイズ
◆8435（CHAXPO BEAR柄）
◆8434（MORI CHACK柄）

▼CHAXPO BEAR柄
▼MORI CHACK柄

CHAXPO 2004 Edition by CHAX COLONY

グル〜ミ〜立体消しゴムオトナ買いセット
◆8433

Fig.83 Scans of Mia magazine, 2004, skullbrain.org

5.4 Aoshima Chiho

Part of the Kaikai Kiki collective, Chiho Aoshima explores utopian worlds only inhabited by girls. As one of the first female artists to follow the Superflat movement, to create her pieces she takes inspiration from both Ukioe and modern Japanese pop culture, mixing the old and the new, she utilized Adobe illustrator to give life to surreal landscapes. Aoshima explores opposing themes such as past and future, nature and technology, and life and death. Technologies are often represented, showing worlds reminiscent of the ones described in Donna Haraway's A Cyborg Manifesto (1985):

> *"lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints."*
> *(Donna J.Haraway, A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Social-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century, 1985, as cited in Takashi Murakami, Little Boy the Arts of Japanese Exploding Subcultures, 2005, pg 231)*

Many cute girls are depicted interacting with other beings such as animals, plants and other girls. Some are nude, and some do not have a body, in any case Aoshima manages to deconstruct male voyerism and the Japanese consumer centered ideologies.

Fig.84 Aoshima Chiho, Japanese Apricot 2, 2005, Offset Lithograph, kumicontemporary.com

5.5 Other Artists

Nishimiya Minako

Born in 1965, Nishiyama Minako is a Japanese contemporary artist whose works explore the representation and customs of Japanese young women's culture in popular settings. In 1991 she showcased an installation of a pink room with a pink bed, draped in pink fabric and covered with feminine motifs such as hearts and flowers called the PINKU house. Referencing the sugar sweet fake Rococo aesthetics used in products

"explores the ideological construct of feminine identity fixated on adolescent fantasies through the ubiquity of cute products."
(Takashi Murakami, Little Boy the Arts of Japanese Exploding Subcultures, 2005, pg 215)
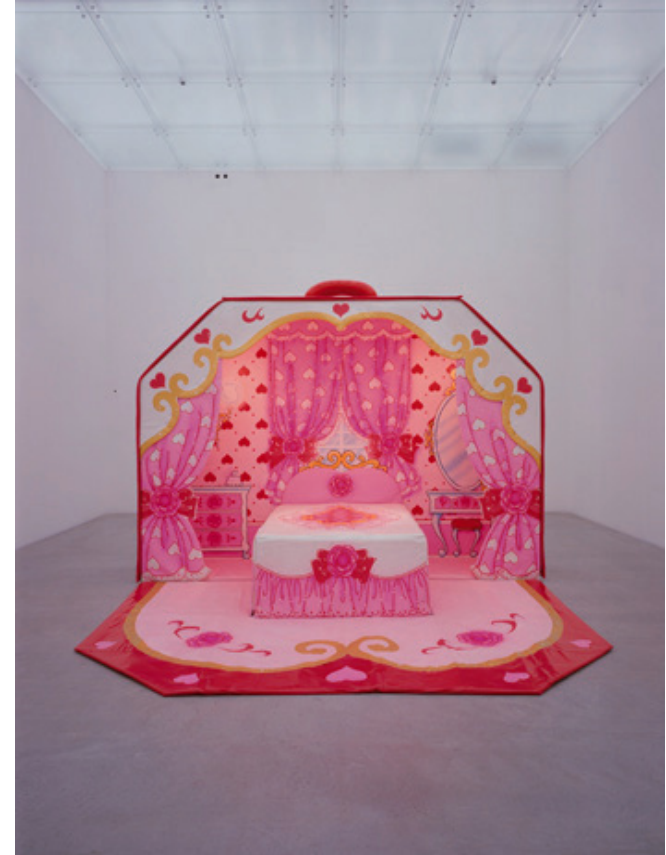
Fig.85 Nishiyama Minako, Pinku House, 1965, from Takashi Murakami, Little Boy the Arts of Japanese Exploding Subcultures, pg 215

Ban Chinatsu

A contemporary artist from Nagoya, Chinatsu Ban, born in 1973, uses cute imageries taken from her childhood one of which are the elephants, Ban explains:

> " These things are like talismans. It's scary to imagine that someday I won't exist in this world anymore. I am troubled by the urge to run away from this fear. Elephants make me feel safe. They have saved me many times."
> (Takashi Murakami, Little Boy the Arts of Japanese Exploding Subcultures, 2005, pg 59)

She uses creamy colors and soft shapes, transporting the viewer into a spacious and dreamy world brought back from her memory and fears

Fig.86 Chinatsu Ban, the Song of Passing, 2006, Acrylic on canvas, isaartanddesign.com

Likawa Takehiro

Born in Hyogo Prefecture in 1981 and graduated from Seian University Department of Design, Takehiro Likawa is known for his giant cat installation in open spaces. Particularly interested in the topic of innocent pranks he pulled when still a child, he uses his enormous cats to create the same sensation of wonder and surprise. He believes pranks are a innocent and fun way to see the world from a different perspective, reflected in the pure reactions people have then bumping into one.
The placement of the cats are always in spaces you would not expect them to be, as he said:

> *"If you put it (the cat) in a spacious exhibition room with white walls, then it's just a cute cat."*
> *(roppongi crossing 2019, 飯川雄大のピンクの猫が伝える、SNS時代における"共感のズレ"──六本木クロッシング2019, Interview #4, hillslife.jp)*

Fig.87 Takehiro Iikawa & the cat that doesn't fit the frame, unknown, pinterest.com

Fig.88 Takehiro Likawa, Decorator Cat, Hakone Open-Air Museum, 2023, hakone-oam.or.jp

chapter 6.

Different tasks
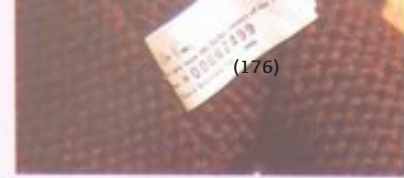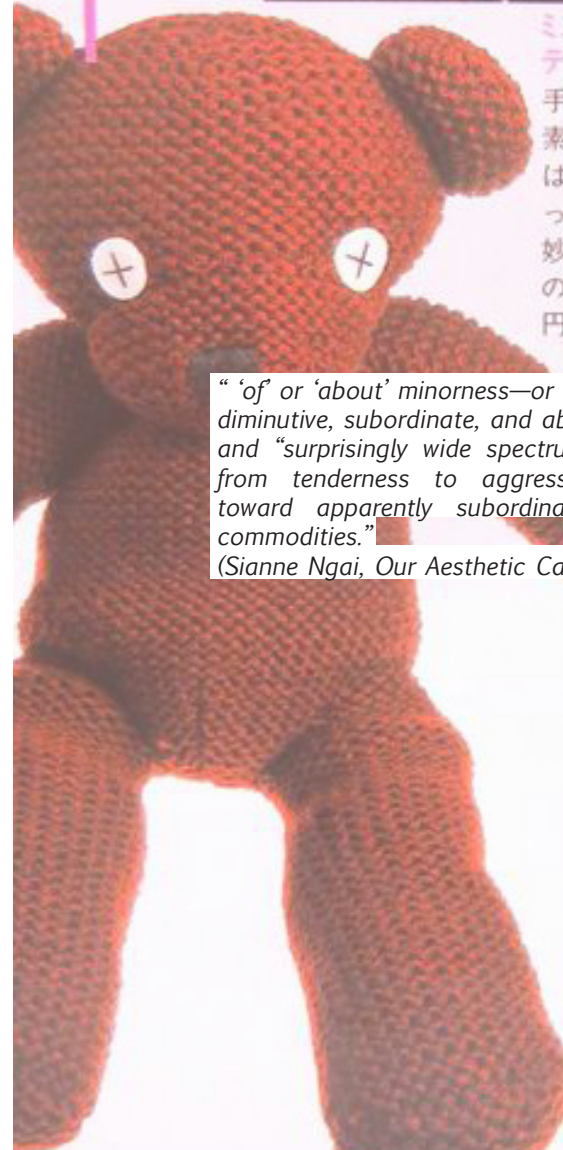
" 'of' or 'about' minorness—or what is perceived to be diminutive, subordinate, and above all, unthreatening," and "surprisingly wide spectrum of feelings, ranging from tenderness to aggression, that we harbor toward apparently subordinate and unthreatening commodities."
(Sianne Ngai, Our Aesthetic Categories, 2015, pg 186)

As Sianne Ngai explains in her book Our Aesthetic Categories, cuteness is generally perceived as something frivolous and minor, with no real use. This preconception is very present and I experienced it multiple times in this past year. When I tell people I am doing a masters, most of them will consequently ask what my research topic is, to which I reply: "I'm doing research on cute aesthetics" at this point, more often than not, I notice an unimpressed expression appear on their faces. A series of raised eyebrows, as if they are wondering, "That's what you're spending your brainpower on?". However, I do not really take offense from it, because that is the very thing about cuteness, it appears subordinate and superficial, it is not part of the "relevant" topics. Cuteness is harmless, powerless and definitely not in charge, but on the flipside, that is the very thing that makes cuteness interesting and a powerful hidden tool. Which is in my opinion, an interesting field of research.

Through this thesis I discovered how cuteness is not just about a pretty smile or a fluffy creature, it is something much deeper that taps into our complex human feelings, from tenderness to aggression.

Fig.89 Scans of Mia magazine, 2004, skullbrain.org

6.1 Sugar Coating

Exploring the many case studies present in this research, I often found cases in which cuteness acts as a "sugar coating" used to both alleviate the bitterness of some difficult subjects and soften the image of powerful and malign entities.

In the case of Gudetama and Aggretsuko, cuteness is used to discuss real problems most of us face at some point of our lives, without being too heavy and disheartening. It helps us process the daily hardships easier, softening the impact they have on us, it facilitates accessibility and engagement, limiting the potentially overwhelming nature of such topics.

On the contrary, I also observed cases in which the same non-threatening nature of cuteness is utilized by corporations and other influential figures as an effective tool of image management. This type of sugar coating is manipulative and especially needs to be looked with scrutiny. In this case cuteness is strategically utilized to warp perceptions and build a more approachable façade, the incorporation of cute characters, powerful organizations deflect the attention from their not-so-cute practices or policies

"cuteness can be used to disguise or soften the unpalpable. Systems of power, from political ideologies, to industrial corporations, often use cute as a tool for manipulation and control, harnessing its abilities to promote positive feelings for their own strategic ends. Increasingly as cuteness becomes part of our everyday language, it is used to simply make things that may seem officious or overbearing more appealing."
(Sugar-coated pill, from the Cute Guide for the Cute exhibition at Somerset House, London, 2024)

To understand the intricate charm we require a certain eye. Although it can be a tool for encouraging communication and nurturing compassion, its exploitation by those with alternative interests highlights the need for a critical approach. Acknowledging the role of cuteness - as both a tool of enhancing understanding, and a concealer for manipulation - allows us to navigate this topic, with better consciousness and honesty.

Also see chaper: Cool Japan

6.2 Soothing

With the most iconic of them being Rilakkuma, there is a category of cute characters especially appreciated by older generations for their soothing properties.

In a fast paced world like ours, full of responsibilities and stress, these soothing characters offer a short oasis of softness and calmness. The rounded figures calm us down with just their presence.
Of course, their soft looking visuals are part of the appeal, but there is also another aspect that makes them so calming, and that is the world they are set in. These characters live in landscapes distant but at the same time familiar from ours, a peaceful field where it is always sunny, a cozy living room. Their spaces have no worries and the time never passes.

The already mentioned Rilakkuma, Tarepanda and other characters from San-X are at the forefront of the soothing type characters, but yuru-charas such as gotouchi-chara are also part of this group, as their looseness and charm have the same properties as the iyashi-kei (soothing type). From Kumamon's cozy feel, to Funassyi's exuberant energy, these characters embody their respective regions, offering both a sense of familiarity and comfort.

Sumikko Gurashi, a group of characters, like the shy polar bear Shirokuma and the little pork cutlet Tonkatsu highlight the small details of everyday life that often go unnoticed. By doing so, they remind us to cherish imperfections and happiness in the small things we tend to overlook.

Fig.90 Sumikko Gurashi: Candy House: 1Box (6pcs), hlj.com

Fig.91 SSumikko Gurashi: Sumikko Schoolbag: 1Box (8pcs) hlj.com

6.3 Emotion carrier

Some emotions are more difficult than others to communicate, they do not present themselves in their pure and one-dimensional form. They are complex and often even hard for oneself to fully grasp. It is therefore more than normal to feel unsure or even embarrassed to verbally express them to a third person. Luckily cute characters revealed themselves to be helpful in this area too.

Sharing a cute picture of Kogepan puzzling over his problems as a burned loaf of bread, can express your state without being too specific. Gifting a sticker with a cute character to someone will gently get a thoughtful message across.

Some cute characters are also specifically designed to be filled with our emotions, the most lampant example is Hello Kitty, as the designer did not give her a mouth. Her expression is neutral, allowing us to project our current emotional state onto her. Hello Kitty feels with us, understands us and accepts us.

Artist Shimoda Hikari who mainly draws children-like figures, explains how these children are purposefully depicted with an black expression, so that the viewer could fill these vessels with their own emotions. Moreover, as her global attention extends progressively, she mentioned how her paintings are a way for her to communicate with viewers all around the world without the use of words.

Fig.92 Hikari Shimoda,Children of This Planet #30, Oil on canvas, 16 x 12.5 inches, 2015, Courtesy of the artist and Asahi Art Museum

6.4 Everything intertwines

The colorful world of cuteness is an intertwined web tying Japan's girl culture together. It all started with young girls expressing themselves between the school desks, they had a big say in what is popular, so enterprises started producing items that would cater to them. Leading to today's incredibly large industry of cute goods and character licensing. Adding characters on almost anything became the norm for consumer culture, reflected in everyday life, it inspired artists and regular people alike.

Cute is embedded in the culture, as the economy fell and girls grew, some got tired of the overly happy and frilly type of cute, which shifted some figure towards a more subdued appearance. Because of their imperfect charm, Yuru-charas started gaining popularity and inspired by this the industry started producing more loose-looking mascots.

It is like a big circle where everything is connected. The products stores sell reflects what girls like, which inspires designers and artists. Cuteness is inspired by the personal, but also reflected on the mainstream, which gets picked up as inspiration in the personal again. The distinction between amateur and professional blurs, and so does the line between private and commercial.

Following the people's evolving taste and mindset, cuteness changes appearance, demeanor and function. By mixing with aspects that although not pretty, are real and relevant, cuteness manages to remain part of our life.

At its core, cuteness isn't just about looks and ornaments, it's about culture. It's a reflection of what people like and how they express themselves. And as people's lifestyle evolves, so does culture, and so does cuteness. It's a cycle of creativity and inspiration that connects everyone who's a part of it.

chapter 7.

Practice

7.1 Prototype 1:
Japan and Shared Campus

Restless in the 1960s: The Tokyo Experience with the Avant-Garde

During summer 2023 I had the opportunity to participate in the Shared Campus.
Held in numerous art universities worldwide, the Shared Campus program allows students to participate in selected two-week workshops in one of the partner institutes.
As my topic is heavily related to Japanese culture I applied to the program "Restless in the 1960s: The Tokyo Experience with the Avant-Garde" held at the Tokyo University of the Arts (TUA or Geidai).
The program mainly focused on the post-World War era of Tokyo: a crucial era during which conflicts, cultural confrontations, and political movements started to activate.
During the '60s Japan went through a societal and cultural shift, reshaping the arts, economics, and politics of the country. As the program is held in the biggest most notorious Art university in Japan the whole program mainly focuses on the arts aspect of such shift.

Mainly followed by Yusaku Imamura, Professor of Global Art Practice at TUA, the program was held with professors and students from Zurich, London, Hong Kong, and Tokyo.

By participating in lectures, workshops, explorations, and museum and atelier visits I deepened my understanding of Japanese history and culture in the post-war era, which are essential to further understanding cute aesthetics's historical and cultural context.

Workshops

Following our visit to the Mori Art Museum in Roppongi for the "WORLD CLASSROOM: Contemporary Art through School Subjects" exhibition.
I participated in an insightful workshop. This workshop was centered around using the Tokyo Heterotopia app for an urban exploration of Tokyo.

Jun Kitazawa, the app's founder, delivered a short lecture at the museum right after the guided tour. He discussed the interaction between contemporary art and everyday life in Tokyo, a topic closely related to my research on the presence of cuteness in Japanese culture.

Open studio and exhibition of my output

"How does cuteness sell?"

Paper bags for an undefined brand and product, would you buy the product based on the package?

This is the title and description of the final output product I made for the final exhibition of the Shared Campus.

On the final day of the Shares Campus Experience, an open studio was held in which every student had to deliver an artifact to represent what we learned and discovered through the two weeks.

As I have a formation as a graphic designer I designed paper bags that featured super cute graphics. These weren't for any specific brand or product but were meant to show the power of cute packaging in swaying customers to make a purchase.
To make this happen, I created an adorable character, drawing inspiration from the charming Japanese character designs popular back in the 1980s and 1990s. I used colors and shapes that are typically seen as feminine, giving the character a soft and visually pleasing appearance.
This project essentially drove home the idea that cuteness, especially when presented in a way that brings back a sense of nostalgia, can be a real game-changer in marketing. It demonstrated how something as simple as packaging can have a big impact on consumer choices. It was a hands-on example of how design and aesthetics can be powerful tools in the world of marketing and sales.

7.2 Prototype 2: Character Creator

Concept

This prototype was realized in January 2024, for the MA prototype exhibition.
A semester after the first prototype in which I had my first try exploring cute aesthetics and graphics, for this second project I wanted to understand people's perception of cuteness.

What kind of character do people actually find cute?

I wanted to have a better understanding on what kind of character looks more appealing to people. Furthermore, at this point of the research, I was facing the question, "is cute considered foolish?" so I decided to incorporate this doubt in the project as well.

The prototype had to find an answer to these questions, therefore I chose to make a character creator. A mini game in which each person was given a random task and asked to compose a character accordingly. At the end the user was given the possibility to name the character. The character was then saved on my computer with the name.

By adding the possibility to store all the results in my computer, at the end of the exhibition I ended up having an archive of a series of characters created by the visitors, each stored according to the quest

The tasks were three questions, presented randomly at the start of each game:

Who's the cutest?
Who's the dumbest?
Who's the strongest?

The user was given the possibility to create a character by selecting the preferred head, body, legs and arms. For each component I made 10 different variations to choose from, some more feminine, some more masculine, some creepy and some weird. Initially I also intended to add the choice to choose the length of the limbs, in order to give the user the possibility to make the character look more or less infantile looking. However, because of lack of time I had to give up this last option.

Visually speaking, because I am trying to understand what people find cute, I decided not to make the interface too "stereotypically cute". The colors used for the background are dark and muted, additionally this helped the colorful characters stand out on the screen.

The game was made in Unity, as I am not really skilled in programming in general, so for this prototype I asked for help. Game design graduate Akira helped me to make this prototype.

Thank you Akira

Problems

Before settling for the character creator mini-game, I had a different project in mind to present at the January exhibition. On second thought, this initial idea was however rejected by both me and my mentor, because it was too complicated and broad. This change of mind in the last days before the exhibition resulted in leaving me very limited time to start and finish something I can actually exhibit. Of course, this is entirely my fault as I did not correctly plan the timing.

This restricted time limit to build the prototype, affected almost all areas of the making process. To start with I could not really ponder on the array of designs to present. I knew I would have to showcase a series of options varying from cute to creepy to dull, but I did not go through a visual analysis of case scenarios to fully understand what aspects made a character more or less adorable.
Once I started with the designing process, I focused on coming up with as many options as possible, so that I could offer a wider range of choices to the user. Which once again, ended up lowering the quality of the single assets.

Another aspect that lacked attention was the UI design. As I did not have time to test the user interface, I only realized during the exhibition that some things in the UI were not as clear as I thought. For example, when a person first starts the game a question/task first pops up on the screen, covering the actual game part. To get past the task, the user is supposed to simply click anywhere on the screen and the screen would switch to the game screen. Unfortunately this step was not clearly stated, therefore I saw some people struggling getting to the actual game part

Feedback

During the exhibition I approached some people while they were testing my prototype to get some feedback. Naturally I got both positive and negative feedbacks, so I would like to report them here below:

Starting with the positive aspects, a lot of people were smiling or even laughing while playing. I observed a lot of them had fun mismatching the assets to create funny looking characters and giving them weird names that did not match the visuals. I think it is very important for an interactive artifact to be fun, moreover if it is a game. Another positive observation they had is that the task was clear and easily achievable without any pressure.

Now moving on to the critiques, first of all there was a bug which sometimes did not allow people to input a name: sometimes the text input bar did not respond to the click. Another thing is that the questions were too vague, so although it was fun, they struggled with understanding what information I would be able to gain from it. I have been told that maybe it would have been more effective if I had added more iterations and made the questions more concrete.

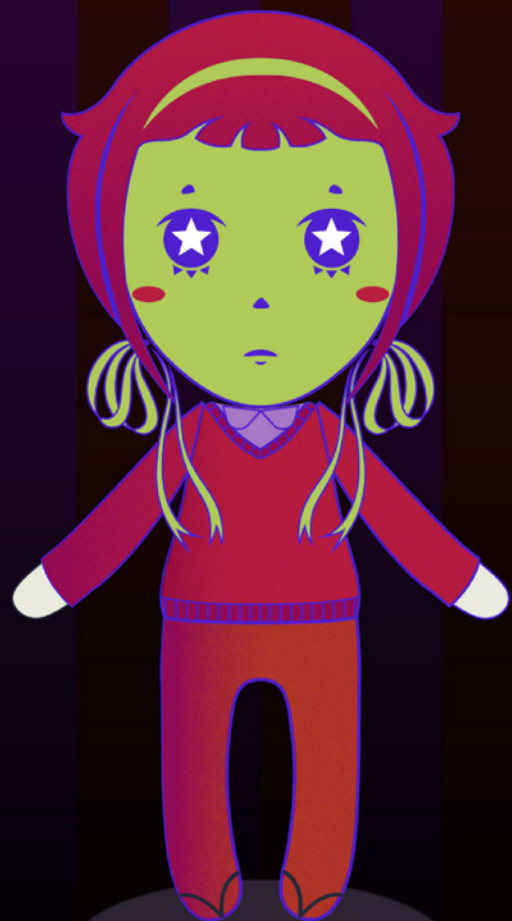Overall, although the game was fun, it lacked some necessary key elements to make it a useful tool for analysis.
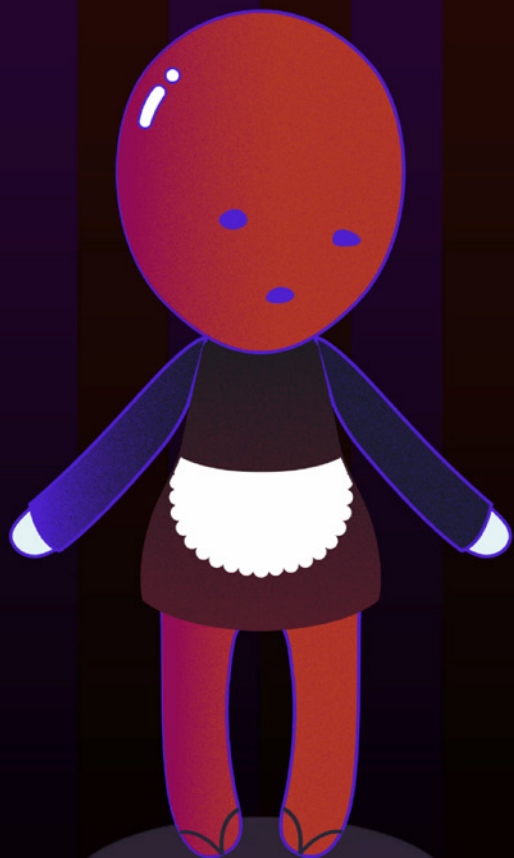
tomatoo

bob

Fiona

Gianbruno

7.3 Prototype 3:
Happy Egg

My field of research is cuteness with a focus on cute characters. I want to showcase characters, so I thought it would be a nice idea if I could somehow turn these characters into tangible entities. My initial idea was to create a mascot to accompany a storyline projected on the wall. The mascot becomes tangible as it is represented by a 3D printed round object.

For this prototype I started exploring different technologies to check if my skills are sufficient to create what I have in mind. This represents my first tries with the program TouchDesigner and Mad Mapper.

Concept

In April, during a module in the immersive arts space I started tackling my final artifact idea which involves an interactive 3D object/character. I had to do a mapped projection on an object, transforming the blank 3D printed figure into a character by projecting a face on it. As the user interacts with the character via touch, the character reacts by changing its expression. In this prototype I tried to recreate the initial step of the interaction.

Since there will not always be someone in front of the installation, I imagined it would be ideal to have some sort of "screensaver" mode in which the character will wobble around while waiting for someone to approach it. During this module I focused on this aspect, at the end of the week each person/group was to present the work they have done in a small exhibition setup.

I already mentioned this, but programming is not my forte, so I decided to use touchdesigner to realize the interactive character. At first I also tested another software for mapped projections, madmapper, however there were some technical issues with the computer I was using, so I ended up doing the whole project on touchdesigner only.

My goal for the week was to make some type of hand and body detection trigger, which allows the system to recognize two things:

1. That someone had entered the scene
2. That someone touched the object/character

The first one needs body detection, as the software recognizes if someone entered the scene, the artifact would snap out from the "screen saver" mode.
To realize the second interaction there is the need for a hand detection, when a hand approaches the surface of the character, it will change its face expression.

Problems

At this point I had only used madmapper a few times, I was not familiar with it at all, so for the first day and a half I mainly watched tutorials to at least learn the very basics. By Wednesday I watched enough tutorials to start working with the softwear, I chose 6-9 tutorials I thought were useful, and mixed them together to build my prototype. Again, as I was (and still am) just a beginner I could only do as much as I could find on the internet.

Another problem I had was the 3D object. On Tuesday I sent the 3D model of the character to the 3D printer, because I need it finished by Thursday morning at the latest, I could not go as big as I wanted. When I uploaded the 3D model on madmapper to have it mapped, I also encountered a problem: the 3D model had too many polygons, and to properly use it on madmapper I would of had to simplify it on blender, and as that is a very time consuming operation so I decided to just not use madmapper altogether, also because of other complications I had with it.
Additionally, as my exact spot for the exhibition got fixed I realized that the ceiling is too low to have projection on the wall, as the shadows created by people would be too big and get on the way of the projection.

Unfortunately as I used most of my time figuring out touchdesigner, I did not have time to do nice graphics, so the final character face looked rather basic.

Feedback

On Friday afternoon we had the small exhibition, and by that day I managed to do everything I had in mind - except for the madmapper part. I projected a wobbling face on the 3D printed egg-looking object, when no one is near it, the character - which I will call Egg from now on - wobbles up and down. For this part I was inspired by the way tamagotchi characters would wobble around on the screen when there is no input.
Once someone is detected by a camera placed in front of the Egg, the face animation stops as Egg gets ready for the interaction. Furthermore, when a person approaches Egg even more and places the hand on its head, Egg will make a happy sound and smile.

For this first prototype, to make both detectors I used a node called "blob tracking", this method did work in this setting, however, as a technology this is too imprecise, so for the final artifact I will use a more advanced detection method called hand tracking.
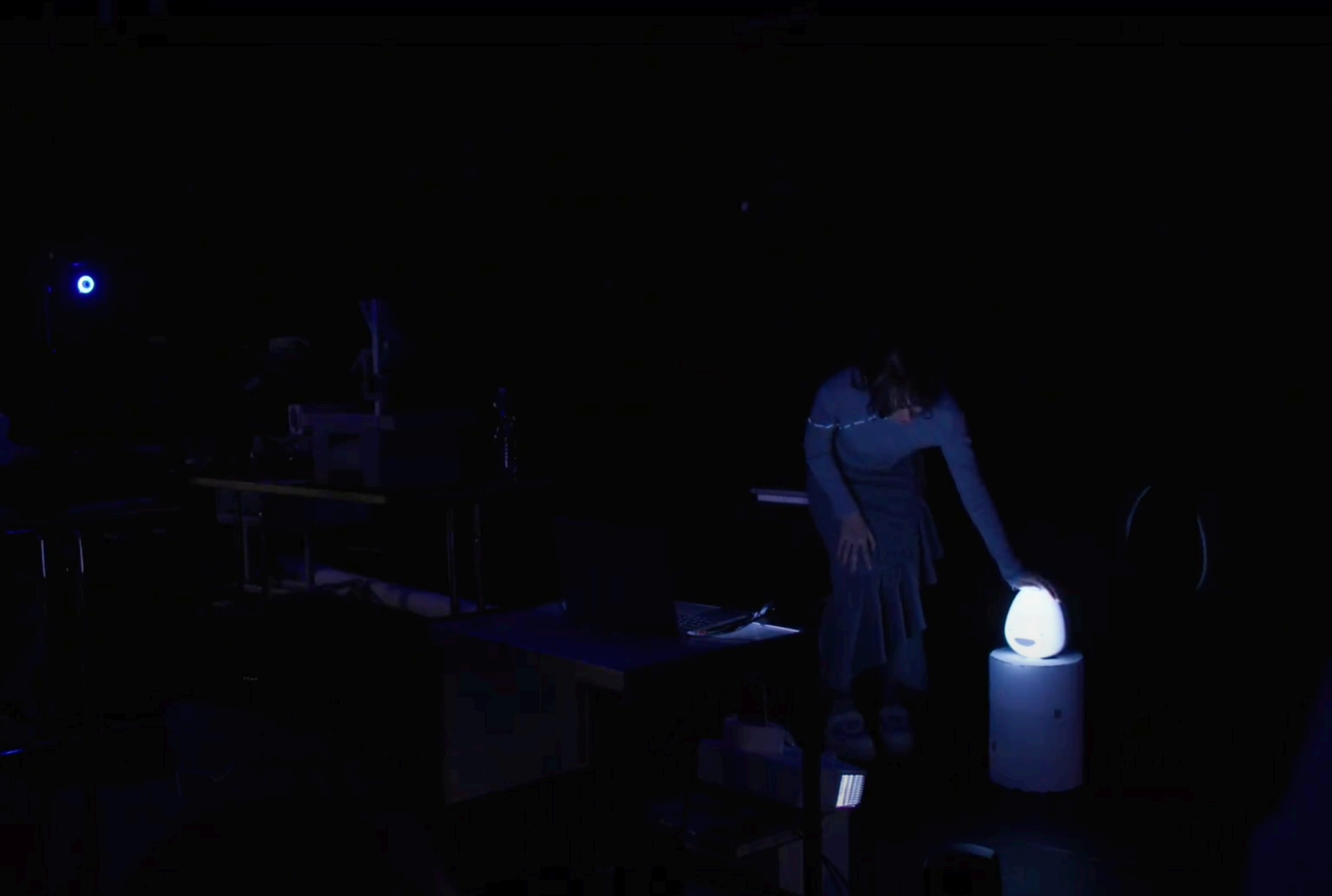
Although a very simple interaction, I managed to do what I wanted and Egg was pretty popular. As Egg smiled and reacted to the touch, people smiled and some even said "awww", which indicated for me a really good sign showing how cute objects are in fact able to trigger a positive emotion.
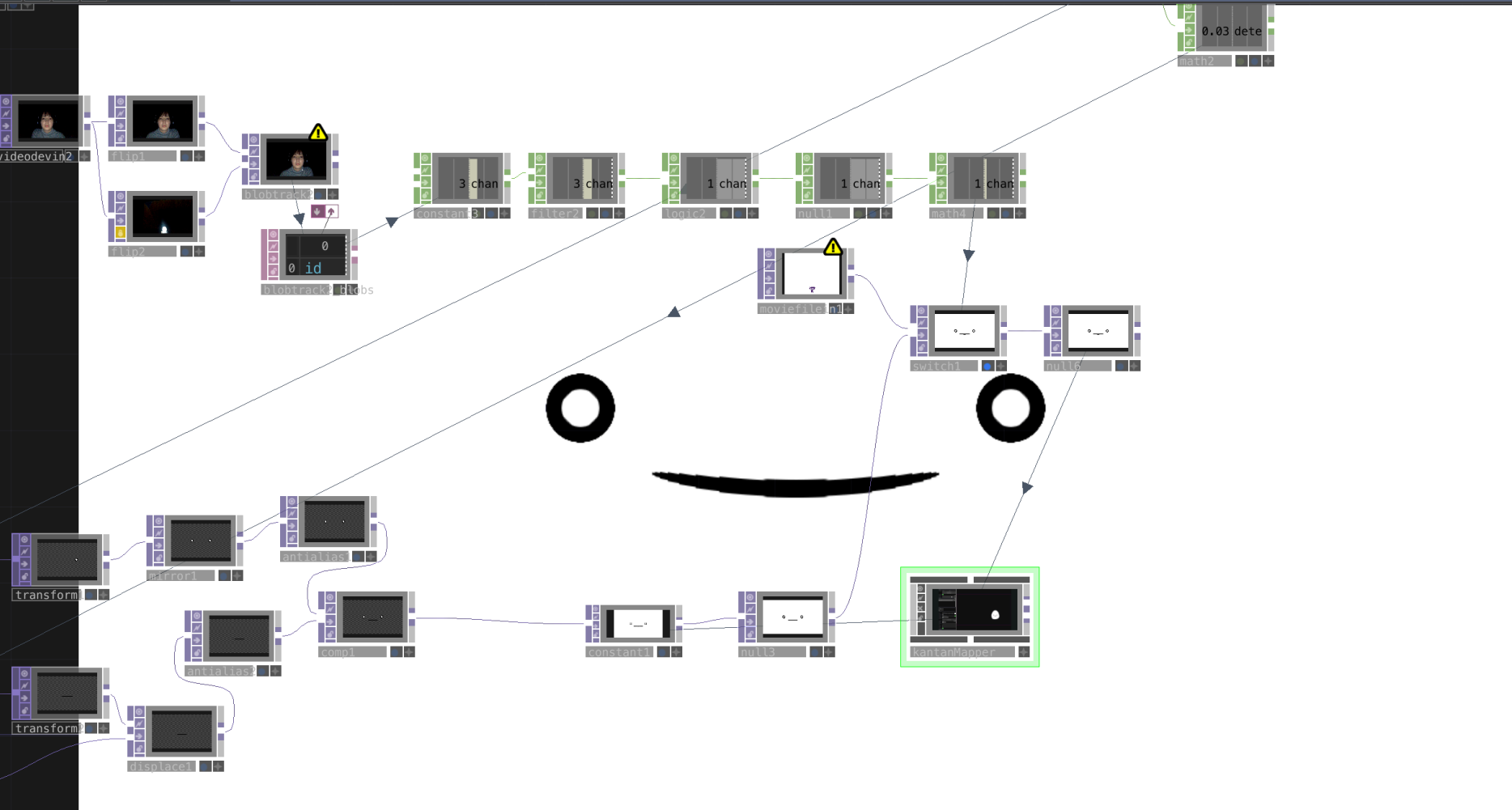
7.4 Prototype 4:
Final artifact

Concept

Of course, for my final concept I wanted to translate as much as I can, the findings I had so far in the theoretical research I presented in this thesis.

Cuteness and cute characters in particular, although generally perceived as superficial and of no use, are in reality a window to an incredibly layered world. All the subdivisions is task, origins, emotions, relatability, etc. are readily translated into visuals. There is a cute character specifically designed for every person, every situation and every emotion. And that is what makes them so attractive and intriguing, by just tweaking some visual parameters a character is able to perfectly fit different needs for different situations.

In this final artifact to which I gave the title "Always together", I will showcase three scenarios in which cute characters are used in different ways.

The first scenario is inspired by Gudetama: the character is relatable, it makes us feel understood while at the same time giving us the possibilities to communicate our frustrations with everyday struggles through the character. For this first scene, the character design does not need to be overly cutesy, as the character is supposed to be suffering the burden of life together with us.

The second scenario covers the theme of cute characters being used as image softeners. Especially appreciated and utilized by strong and masculine figures, such as corporations and authorities. In this case the characters are observed to have anthropomorphic figures, and a more traditionally appealing appearance. This is due to the fact that these characters are often required to have a physical copy in the form of a wearable costume, which of course has to fit a standing human inside. Another factor is that characters in this group have children as one of their main target audiences, therefore, rounded features and clear features are preferred.

As the first two scenarios covered forms of cuteness with a somewhat dark undertone, for the third scene I choose a more positive form of cuteness: the soothing characters.
Their purpose is to soothe our stressed souls. Waiting for us at home, their presence is similar to pets, we see them relaxing and being clumsy and we immediately feel a little less anxious.

Concept

Following the last prototype I kept the mapped 3D object as a character with which the visitor can interact. As for the projection on the wall, due to technical limitations I decided to use a screen instead. The project is in fact made of two components: the 3D character/object and the screen.

The 3D object, which I will be calling "the physical character" from now on, acts as a controller to navigate through each of the three scenarios. Just like in the previous prototype all physical interactions will consist in the user putting one or two hands on top of the physical character. Depending on the scene they are exploring, this interaction will result in different outcomes.

The physical character is 3D printed and projected on by two beamers positioned at a 45 degree angle from the top front. The screen is a 40 inch television hanged on the wall behind the physical character. To make the 3D printed object more satisfying to touch I covered it with flocking powder, giving it a fuzzy texture.

Character designs

Each scene contains a cute character specifically designed to fit the context and the message I am communicating. Therefore I designed three main characters.

1. Floo

Floo is the character for the first scene, as I explained earlier, the character for this example does not have to be traditionally cute and feminine. To make a character feel relatable, it is useful to add some negative quirks in the design, Gudetama is an egg yolk with a butt crack, Retsuko is a red panda who turns into a demon-looking creature when no one is watching.
Floo is a mysterious creature who appeared one day in the apartment of Guy, after Guy recovered from the flu. Floo's appearance is similar to green slime, its body is plastic, sticky and squishy. It has three main forms: opened, closed and partly open. The opened form shows its entire shape the most, there is a body, a head, a face and two ears and two arms, making it look like it is lazily lying on the stomach. The partly opened form conserved the head and the face, but everything else is absorbed into a shapeless blob-like body. The closed form is the form Floo takes when it is either napping or wants to be left alone. In this form all physical attributes are retracted into the body, giving it an aspect similar to a droplet.

Floo's head shape resembles a cat, but the beak-like mouth creates confusion in associating a specific animal to the character as a whole. The body also created confusion, as Floo only has two frontal arms and no legs. Of course this is all on purpose, because Floo, as the name and the slime-like texture suggests, is designed by using nasal mucus as a motif.

Floo's demeanor is negative, as the visitor interacts with it, it becomes more and more disturbed, telling the visitor to leave and overall communicating discomfort. If the visitor keeps interacting, Floo gets angry and shuts the roller shutters on them. Marking the end of scene one.

Floo is unsatisfied with life, it wants people to take its presence more seriously but no one does. Its size is small so oftentimes people do not even notice it being there. Floo is frustrated, but at the same time does not feel like it has the power to do anything. Afterall, Floo is just a bugger.
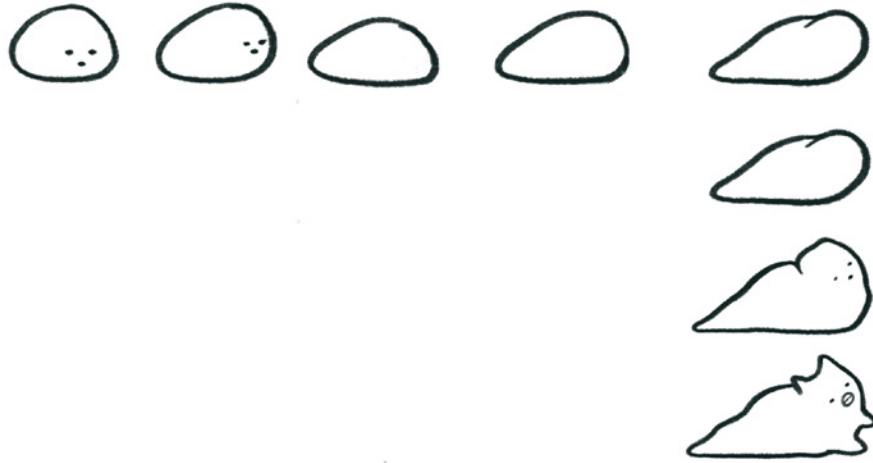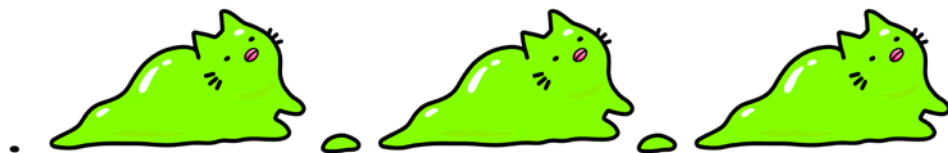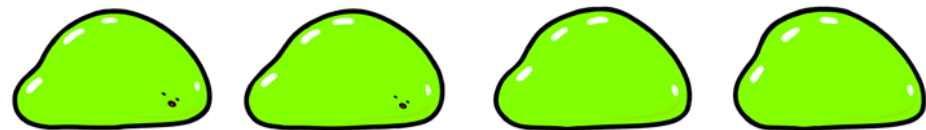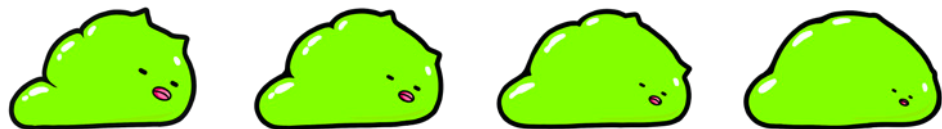
2. ○○くん - Marumaru-kun

Marumaru-kun is the character for the second scene, the second scene is about a cute character being a tool used by companies and authorities to make their public image appealing, approachable and overall unthreatening. As I am not tackling any specific organization, I kept the character design quite anonymous and generic. The idea behind the design of Marumaru-kun is that he is supposed to be a default character used as an image softener. A family friendly look, he looks unthreatening and overall a "good guy". Marumaru-kun is some kind of "base layout", by slightly customizing the character, he can fit any institution and act as a buffer. The name "Marumaru" also reflects this flexibility, literally speaking "maru" means circle in Japanese, however "marumaru" (circle circle) is colloquially used as "fill blank" in English. So in writing, a blank space is expressed with two circles: instead of "Mr.___" in Japan they use "Mr. ○○" .
Marumaru-kun is always accompanied by his helper Chibi-san (Mr. small in Japanese), a winged drop-shaped robot, who assists Marumaru-kun in his work.

The scene starts with a couple of images of Marumaru-kun, his appearance changes slightly every second, but overall it is always the unthreatening character. However when the visitor's hand is placed on the physical character for long enough, the image zooms out revealing a secondary image of an adult man in a suit, representing the organization and the true face of Marumaru-kun.
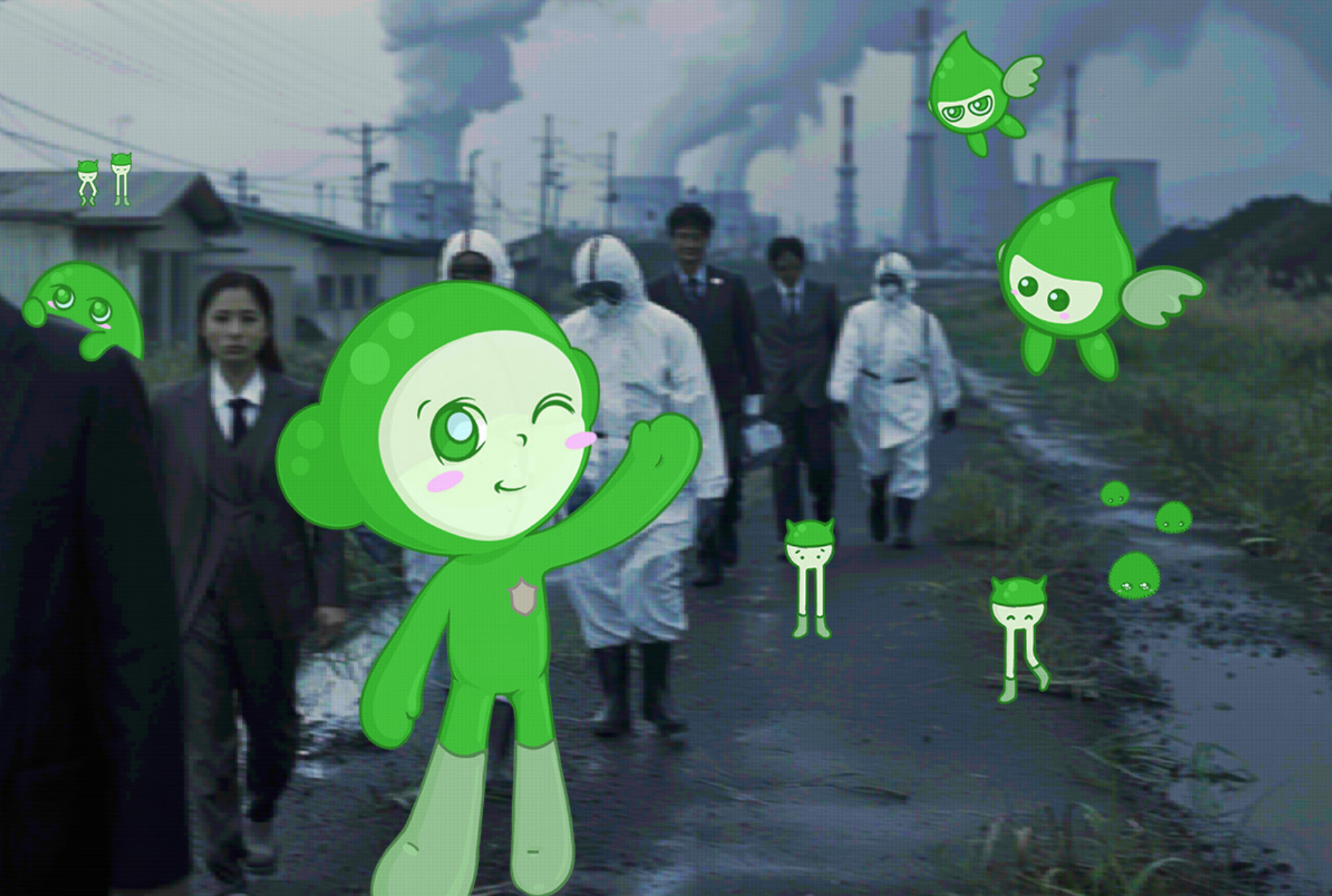
3. The face pack

The face pack is the name of the group of creatures found in the third scene. The third scene is all about soft soothing characters. These characters are characterized by generally having blank facial expressions, soft shapes and a sense of looseness and wobbliness. They are typically found in proximity to a human, in places like apartments and parks, and their presence is somewhat similar to a cute puppy or kitten. They are clumsy and soft, their warmth alleviates our stress a little.
The face pack is composed by oblong creatures called Luron, who live in apartments together with their favorite human. During the day they like to roll around and take naps, but above anything they love to decompress with some skin care. In this scene I reenacted the moment in which the owner of the apartment comes home and is greeted by the face pack. Each member of the pack has a skin care product on their face, the biggest and main member has a sheet mask on the face and a leaf on the head.

This scene is all about soothing, therefore I decided to slightly change the interaction format. In this scene the visitor is asked to pet the physical character, as the hand moves on top of the 3D printed object the creature on the screen expresses joy and moves as if it is being petted. Moreover, if the visitor puts both hands on top of the physical character, the character on the screen will move as if it has been squished.
The interactions are supposed to reflect the way we interact with cute animals, with the aim to create a small, but still present, emotional bond to the character.

How I made it

The whole interactive experience is programmed with TouchDesigner.

The main concept of this project is that I am showing three different case scenarios in which cuteness is utilized. Each scenario is separate from the other two, and the user has to be able to move from one to another in a smooth way. For these reasons I decided to use a component present inside TouchDesigner called "SceneChanger". SceneChanger allows the user to switch between different scenes by clicking on buttons, each button is linked to a scene. SceneChanger allows me to add as many scenes as I need, however in this case I did not need many.

Of course I can not use SceneChanger as it is, because what I am trying to make is definitely different from what the UX of this component suggests. Overall, my aim is to program a scene switcher, in which each scene has its own interaction response, visual and musical content. The switch between scenes has to be triggered not by the buttons in the UX, but either by the number of interactions the user had with the physical character , or by the time running out. This last point of the switch between scenes being triggered by a timer is important, as it allows TouchDesigner to switch to the beginning of the next scene in case the visitor leaves the artifact in the middle of a scene.

Steps to program the artifact:

1. The main concept is that the user explores whatever is presented on screen by interacting with the physical character by putting a hand on top of it. This means that I have to find a way to recognize whenever a hand is placed. In my previous prototype I used a node called blob tracking, which recognized blobs in space, however this method ended up being too imprecise. This led me to use the Mediapipe[14] plugin for TouchDesigner. Mediapipe is an open-source framework pipeline, which allows for a quick integration of machine learning and artificial intelligence in different applications. I used Mediapipe for hand recognitions, so that when a person puts its hand on the 3D printed object, the camera (which is placed above the object facing the object) will recognize the hand and send a signal.

---

14   https://ai.google.dev/edge/mediapipe/solutions/guide
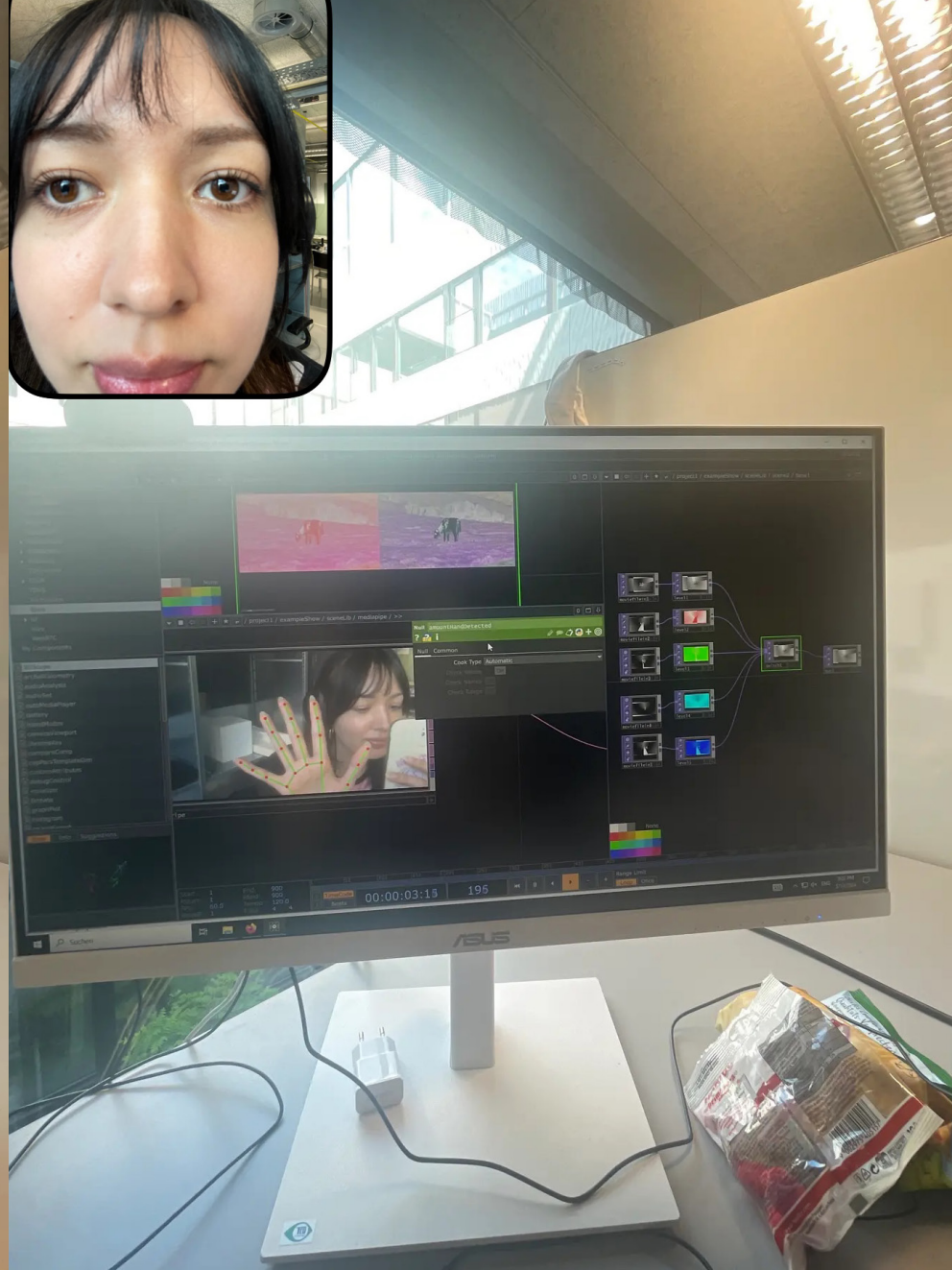
2. I made a system to send signals whenever a hand is detected. I made four different versions, as the scenes differ slightly in the type of hand interactions. For the first scene, the interaction is short and is triggered by a hand being placed for a short amount of time, even if the hand remains in the frame, the interaction does not change or go on. In the second scene the interaction depends on the time the hand remains on the physical character, so the signal keeps going until the hand is not detected anymore. Finally in the third scene the scene animation is only triggered when either a patting motion (so a hand movement) on top of the 3D object is detected or both of the two hands are present.

3. Once all the above is set I started setting each scene with the interactions I wanted to happen depending on the hand signals, and making the visual assets.

   For the first scene the character on screen visibly reacts to the hand detection, to do this each time a hand is detected a pre-defined animation is triggered. All the animations in this first scene were hand drawn frame by frame.

   For the second scene I used a shader I made by following a tutorial I found on youtube: "Real Time Photo Mosaic GLSL Shader (TouchDesigner)"

by Lucas Morgan (Morgan, 2018)[15]. By working with this shader I created the scene in a way that the image zooms out as long as the hand is detected on top of the physical character.

In the third scene the character on screen reacts to the petting motion, while this motion is detected an animation loops, when the hand stops moving or is no longer detected at all the animation stops and the character goes back to its default animation. When two hands are detected another animation is triggered and it loops as long as both hands are there. The visuals of this scene are realized on blender.

4. After setting the interactions I had to figure out a way to switch between scenes. The idea is that the scene switches to the next one either based on the scene reaching the end (like in scene 1) or on time running out (scenes 2 and 3).

---

15   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BtUkUp0Jtl4&t=527s

5.   When first approaching the installation, I imagined people would not know that they are supposed to put their hand on the rounded object, so before each main scene I put an additional introduction scene, which simply and quickly explains how to start the interaction. The visuals are very simple and inspired by 2000's nostalgia, in a white room the 3D printed object is visible and an animation shows a hand interacting with it. By adding these scenes, the one minute timers I just talked about will send the user to the next introductory scene instead of the next main scene.

6.   The visuals for the projector can be imputed with TouchDesigner as well. Because I am doing a mapped projection on a 3D model in real life, the texture to upload on TouchDesigner has to be an unwrapped UV texture which will later be wrapped around the object by using Madmapper. The images I project on the 3D object are also reactive, therefore I have to programme the interaction for them a well. Once this is done I can finally send the images meant for the projection out of TouchDesigner into Madmapper.

7.   The last step is to calibrate the two projectors so that their images align perfectly one with another and with the 3D object as well.

This is the workflow for the Touchdesigner part of the project. Outside of this I had to prepare the 3D printed object, to do this I had to do some test printing to see what shape would work the best. In the end I decided to go for a shape with a flatter surface on top, as it allows the hand to "sit" more open. Furthermore, to make the physical character interesting to touch, I used the flocking technique, which involves spraying velvet powder on the object (with glue on top of course).

Moreover, to further enrich the experience, I asked Andreas Strahm if he could make some short music tracks for each scene.

Problems

As I am operating with TouchDesigner which I have never used before April, in the beginning I struggled a lot with getting used to it. Which set me back for some time as I had to take a few weeks to learn the basics first. Once I started grasping it, I realized there is a problem called cooking: a term in TouchDesigner used for calculating the operators of networks. If the cooking time becomes too high, it starts losing frames, making the visuals less smooth. For this reason I made an additional system that stops scenes from cooking and pulling data from Mediapipe when not in use.

Another problem I had is also based on my lack of skills: TouchDesigner works in Python, however I do not know Python. Of course I could still use nodes instead and that is what I did, but I am aware that some parts would have been much quicker and easier to make if I knew the language.

Some technical problems were also due to the limits of Mediapipe, as it is exceptional in recognizing hand positions, but only when the palm of the hand is facing the camera, which is not going to happen in this project (the palm of the hand will be on the physical character).

Finally one of the biggest technical problems was calibrating the 3D object with the two cameras, and setting up the cameras in general. Madmapper has a built-in system to track the 3D object in space. But it turns out it does not work with rounded objects

Limitations

My research and consequently artefact only focused on Japan as a research field. Although Japan is considered one of the biggest influences in contemporary cute culture across the board, the cultural context will surely differ depending on different parts of the world. If I would continue my research on this topic an enlargement of the covered geographical aera will undoubtedly offer a more in depth and diverse view on the research. Furthermore, although until now I mainly focused on character designs, cute aesthetic surely branch to many other fields such as fashion, arts, literature, music, etc. It would have been interesting to compare two or more fields to see if the trends noticed in character designs remained more or less the same or differed one from another.

At the beginning of my research I was hosetly not completely confident in my research, topic. The idea of dissecting cute aesthetics was really appealing to me, as someone who is very attracted by cute objects and images I wanted to find out the reason behind my personal attraction, but above all the reason behind the enormous success of something so apparently trivial. However, despite my personal interest I was, and still am, aware that the general opinion on cuteness is of something superficial and almost stupid. This research helped me realize that my field of interests was in fact neither inconsequential nor frivolous as I initially feared.

chapter 8.

Conclusion

In conclusion my research analyzed and dissected cuteness into its multiple layers, by doing so I tried to explore the unexpectedly complex topic, revealing an intricate relationship between girlhood, capitalism, gender norms, Japanese counterculture and politics.

As I started diving into the history of cuteness in Japan I discovered how people have always had an inclination to appreciate imageries containing cute elements, the puppy drawings by Maruyama Okyo were especially well received by the general population, revealing a democratic aspect of it.

I also learned how the modern Kawaii culture as we now know of, was initially born as a counterculture initiated by very young girls between the school desks. A form of expression and rebellion against societal expectations which were particularly harsh towards women. These young trend setters gained power and saying on what is cool and what is not. Up until this point Kawaii culture grew to popularity in a completely organic way, however as the culture grew, businesses caught up with the trend and recognized a important commercial opportunity in it. Cute characters started to be produced by professionals with the sole intent to sell by appealing to younger audiences, and the growth of Kawaii culture became partially artificial. Kawaii culture however, is not opposed to consumerism, therefore girls did not feel conflicted about the commercialization of cuteness, in fact cute consumer goods became an incredibly successful industry togehter with the character licensing industry. Moreover, during the 90s and 2000s the demand for tourism in Japan increased, and Japanese export products such as anime and games proved themselves

as benign widely appreciated worldwide. This phenomena gave Japan the opportunity to fully focus on their soft powers as a way to redirect international attention away from their incredibly stained past (Tanaka, 1996). The Cool Japan initiative offered a new identity for the country, an effective wall made of popular cultural exports to hide behind. Aminds these new soft powers, Kawaii culture is surely one of the most effective in softening an image. Of course there are other reasons behind pushing internationally to promote cute products, such as economic gain, but either way this particular circumstance resulted in a further artificial growth in popularity of cuteness.
I found this artificial growth created by political figures and companies to be one of the reasons behind the popularity of cute characters, however I am of the idea that this is not the only cause of the success.

Cuteness get translated into cute characters and cute characters become commercial products. Companies create characters based on trends born form girls, who in turn take inspiration from whatever is going on in their life, which is influenced by the social state of their world. All these aspects constantly intertwine with each other, and I found this aspect to be the key behind the popularity of cute characters.

Cute characters and cuteness in general managed to stay on a constant high due to its ability to morph and conform to new situations, keeping the bond with girl culture is vital for cute aesthetics to survive and succeed, therefore as the culture evolves, cute designs will change with it. These transformations are subdle and

not immediate, so someone who is not involved in cute aesthetics might not pick up on them. Form an outside perspective it is easy to assume that cute characters all come from the same mold regardless of time and target audience.

In this research I analyzed numerous chases studies coveing an array of cute character designs. As a result, I came across a trend in visual design explaining the reason behind the popularity of some of the newest characters whose appearance is rather distant from the cute characters of the 70s.
Cute is embedded in the culture, and as the economy fell and girls grew, some got tired of the overly happy and frilly type of cute, which shifted some figure towards a more subdued appearance. Because of their imperfect charm, Yuru-charas started gaining popularity. Once again, a personal preference and trend in taste organically born aminds the Japanese youth got picked up by companies (Sanrio), and artificially imperfect characters were released on the market and expectedly encountered economic success. The market launches character based on the situations of their target audience, mainly women. It tries to find our needs and channels them into the designs and character back stories.

Following the people's evolving taste and mindset, cuteness changes appearance, demeanor and function. By mixing with aspects that although not pretty, are real and relevant, cuteness manages to remain part of our life.
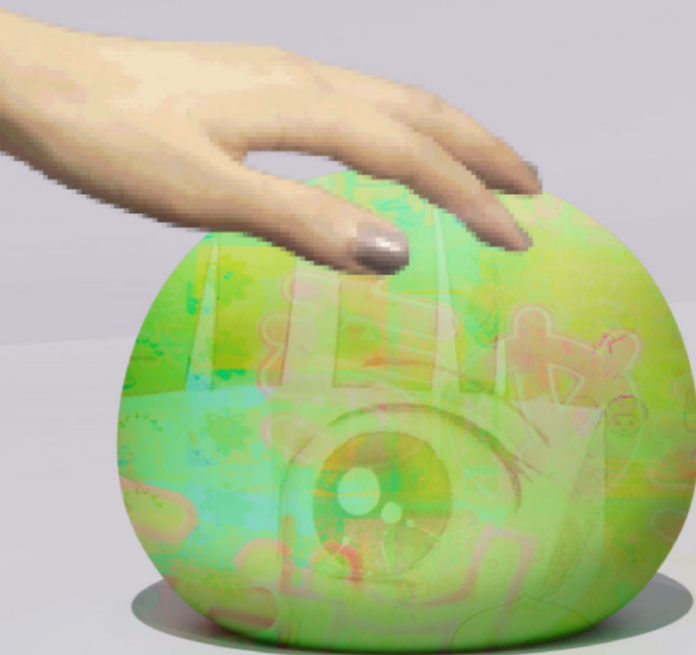
At its core, cuteness isn't just about looks and ornaments,

it's about culture. It's a reflection of what people like and how they express themselves. And as people's lifestyle evolves, so does culture, and so does cuteness. It is like a big circle where everything is connected. The products stores sell reflects what girls like, which inspires designers and artists. Cuteness is inspired by the personal, but also reflected on the mainstream, which gets picked up as inspiration in the personal again. The distinction between amateur and professional blurs, and so does the line between private and commercial.

Nowadays the number of cute character is immense, there is a cute character for every need and every situation. The design translates their purpose, each of us can find a cute character that perfectly meets our needs, but if a character manages to fulfill a common need that most of us have, then it maks a succesfull way to use character design.

In my artefact I tried to represent three of the main needs contemporary cute characters are often made to answear: communicating complex emotions, soothing and softening perceptions.

How to Interact

Lightly tap the top of
the object.
Between taps make
sure to pull the hand
away.

☺   OK

Tap t

chapter 9.

Appendix

9.1 References

Abad-Santos, A. (2017) How Gudetama, a lazy egg yolk with a butt, became an unstoppable cultural phenomenon, Vox. Available at: https://www.vox.com/2017/4/3/14685348/gudetama-sanrio-hello-kitty-explained (Accessed: 17 March 2024).

Adelstein, J. (no date) Funassyi: The Pacifist Pear Fairy Ready To Take On The World, 1.2 Million Japanese Already Love It, Forbes. Available at: https://www.forbes.com/sites/jadelstein/2015/03/23/funassyi-the-pacifist-pear-fairy-ready-to-take-on-the-world-1-2-million-japanese-already-love-it/ (Accessed: 25 May 2024).

Alisha Saikia (0000-0002-0028-8003) (no date) ORCID. Available at: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0028-8003 (Accessed: 18 October 2023).

'An Interview with the Creator of Gloomy Bear' (no date). Available at: https://otakuusamagazine.com/an-interview-with-the-creator-of-gloomy-bear/ (Accessed: 21 March 2024).

Baby Schema in Infant Faces Induces Cuteness Perception and Motivation for Caretaking in Adults - PMC (no date). Available at: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3260535/ (Accessed: 25 May 2024).

BBC News (2016) 'How Japan came to believe in depression', 19 July. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-36824927 (Accessed: 23 January 2024).

BBC News (2017) 'The angry red panda that is Japan's new working woman', 13 February. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-38606355 (Accessed: 25 January 2024).

Becheur, I., Bayarassou, O. and Ghrib, H. (2017) 'Beyond Brand Personality: Building Consumer - Brand Emotional Relationship', Global Business Review, 18, p. 097215091769316. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0972150917693160.

Birkett, M. (no date) '"AMATEUR" MASCOTS ON THE LOOSE: THE PRAGMATICS OF KAWAII (CUTE)'.

Brown, S. (2019) Brand Mascots and Other Marketing Animals.

Buckley, R.C. (2016) 'Aww: The Emotion of Perceiving Cuteness', Frontiers in Psychology, 7. Available at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01740 (Accessed: 7 January 2024).

Chen, A. (2016) The Serious Subtext of Japan's 'Cute' Culture, JSTOR Daily. Available at: https://daily.jstor.org/the-serious-subtext-of-japans-cute-culture/ (Accessed: 4 January 2024).

Chococo (2024) 「サンエックスのキャラクターシリーズ」人気ランキング！　2

位は「すみっコぐらしシリーズ」、1位は？ ｜ エンタメ ねとらぼ調査隊, ねとらぼ調査隊. Available at: https://nlab.itmedia.co.jp/research/articles/2235207/ (Accessed: 7 April 2024).

Condry, I. (2009) 'Anime Creativity: Characters and Premises in the Quest for Cool Japan', Theory, Culture & Society, 26(2 - 3), pp. 139 - 163. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409103111.

Cool Japan Strategy - Cabinet Office Home Page (no date). Available at: https://www.cao.go.jp/cool_japan/english/index-e.html (Accessed: 25 December 2023).

Corporation L.Y. (no date) リラックマはゆるキャラですか？ - 本来は、リラックマはそうでは無いとされます。「ゆるキャラ」としていま一番知られる定義付..., Yahoo!知恵袋. Available at: https://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q11133051191?fr=smp_ogp_other (Accessed: 9 April 2024).

Creighton, M. (1997) 'Review of Women, Media and Consumption in Japan', Journal of Japanese Studies, 23(1), pp. 238 - 242. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2307/133152.

Cute Studies top page - Cute Studies.org (no date) Cute Studies. Available at: https://www.cutestudies.org (Accessed: 4 January 2024).

Dami Lee, (2018) Netflix's Aggretsuko show is a shockingly insightful portrait of feminine rage - The Verge (no date). Available at: https://www.theverge.com/2018/5/1/17302544/netflix-aggretsuko-show-sanrio-character (Accessed: 25 May 2024).

Frühstück, S. (2010) 'Review of Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times', The Journal of Japanese Studies, 36(2), pp. 375 - 378.

Garretson, J.A. and Niedrich, R.W. (2004) 'Spokes-Characters: Creating Character Trust and Positive Brand Attitudes', Journal of Advertising, 33(2), pp. 25 - 36.

Furutani, Casey, (2020) Get to know Japan's strange yet adorable mascots (2020) Time Out Tokyo. Available at: https://www.timeout.com/tokyo/things-to-do/japans-strange-yet-cute-mascots (Accessed: 27 May 2024).

Gough, L. (2020) Material Multiplicities and Sanrio Danshi: The Evolution of Sanrio's Media Mix. electronic journal of contemporary japanese studies. Available at: https://japanesestudies.org.uk/ejcjs/vol20/iss1/gough_lee.html (Accessed: 24 January 2024).

Haraway, D. (1985) A Cyborg Manifesto : Science, Technology, and Socialist-feminism in the Late Twentieth Century. (Socialist Review (US)).

Hess, A. (2017) 'How Sanrio Makes Anti-Capitalism Adorable, and Profitable', The New York Times, 18 July. Available at: https://www.nytimes.

com/2017/07/18/arts/design/how-sanrio-makes-anti-capitalism-adorable-and-profitable.html (Accessed: 23 January 2024).

Hideaki Kawashima - Collaborations with Avant Arte (no date). Available at: https://avantarte.com/artists/hideaki-kawashima (Accessed: 21 April 2024).

Hori, T. (2022) 'Japanese youth's mental well-being a concern as many report low satisfaction levels', Mainichi Daily News, 29 June. Available at: https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20220629/p2a/00m/0na/031000c (Accessed: 20 March 2024).

Hosany, S. (no date) 'Theory and strategies of anthropomorphic brand characters from Peter Rabbit, Mickey Mouse, and Ronald McDonald, to Hello Kitty', Journal of Marketing Management [Preprint]. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/2566174/Theory_and_strategies_of_anthropomorphic_brand_characters_from_Peter_Rabbit_Mickey_Mouse_and_Ronald_McDonald_to_Hello_Kitty (Accessed: 23 January 2024).

Kind, L. (2017b) 'Understanding Sianne Ngai's "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde" ', Library Kind, 20 July. Available at: https://librarykind.wordpress.com/2017/07/20/understanding-sianne-ngais-the-cuteness-of-the-avant-garde/ (Accessed: 17 October 2023).

Kinsella, S. (1995) 'Cuties in Japan', in Women, Media and Consumption in Japan. Routledge.

Lachmann, R., Eshelman, R. and Davis, M. (1988) 'Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture', Cultural Critique, (11), pp. 115 - 152. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2307/1354246.

Lai, A.T.Y. (2005) 'CHAPTER FIFTEEN: Consuming "Hello Kitty": Tween Icon, Sexy Cute, and the Changing Meaning of "Girlhood" ', Counterpoints, 245, pp. 242 - 256.

Lombardi, L. (2014) Kawaii Japanese Food Characters, Tofugu. Available at: https://www.tofugu.com/japan/kawaii-japanese-food-characters/ (Accessed: 17 October 2023).

Lucas Morgan, (2018) Shader GLSL per mosaico fotografico in tempo reale (TouchDesigner) (2018). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BtUkUp0Jtl4 (Accessed: 24 May 2024).

Matsui, T. (2014) 'Nation Branding Through Stigmatized Popular Culture: The "Cool Japan" Craze Among Central Ministries in Japan', Hitotsubashi Journal of Commerce and Management, 48(1 (48)), pp. 81 - 97.

McCurry, J. (2022) ' "I'm more worried than excited about the future": Japan's Coming of Age Day tinged with anxiety', The Guardian, 10 January. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/10/im-more-worried-than-excited-about-the-future-japans-coming-of-age-day-tinged-with-anxiety (Accessed: 20 March 2024).

Neil Steinberg, (2016) Meet Japan's Kumamon, the bear who earns billions (no date). Available at: https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20160719-meet-japans-kumamon-the-bear-who-earns-billions (Accessed: 20 April 2024).

Mori Chack Explains the History of Gloomy (2020). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lZBF-X5AvFo (Accessed: 21 March 2024).

Murakami, T. (ed.) (2005) Little boy: the arts of Japan's exploding subculture. New York : New Haven, CT: Japan Society : Yale University Press.

Neil Steinberg, (2016) The emerging field of cute studies can help us understand the dark side of adorableness, Quartz. Available at: https://qz.com/740598/the-emerging-field-of-cute-studies-can-help-us-understand-the-dark-side-of-adorableness (Accessed: 6 January 2024).

Nippaku (2015) 'Anthropomorphism in Japanese Culture', nippaku, 12 November. Available at: https://nippaku.wordpress.com/2015/11/12/antropomorphism-in-japanese-culture/ (Accessed: 17 October 2023).

Nittono, H. et al. (2012) 'The Power of Kawaii: Viewing Cute Images Promotes a Careful Behavior and Narrows Attentional Focus', PLOS ONE, 7(9), p. e46362. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0046362.

Nittono, H. (2016) 'The two-layer model of "kawaii": A behavioural science framework for understanding kawaii and cuteness', East Asian Journal of Popular Culture, 2(1), pp. 79 - 95. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1386/eapc.2.1.79_1.

Occhi, D.J. (2012) 'Wobbly Aesthetics, Performance, and Message: Comparing Japanese Kyara with their Anthropomorphic Forebears', Asian Ethnology, 71(1), pp. 109 - 132.

O'Neill, S. (2023) 'Why Do People Love This Tiny Doll?', The New York Times, 6 April. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/06/style/sonny-angels-dolls-tiktok.html (Accessed: 9 April 2024).

Odagiri, 小田切博 (2010) キャラクターとは何か. 筑摩書房.
日本大百科全書(ニッポニカ) (no date) ご当地キャラ(ごとうちきゃら)とは？ 意味や使い方, コトバンク. Available at: https://kotobank.jp/

Palermo, E. (2015) Scientists Explain Why Watching Internet Cat Videos Is Good for You, NBC News. Available at: https://www.nbcnews.com/science/weird-science/scientists-explain-why-watching-internet-cat-videos-good-you-n378156 (Accessed: 7 April 2024).

Prison uses cuddly mascot in i¨mage makeover (2013) Japan Today. Available at: https://japantoday.com/category/crime/prison-uses-cuddly-mascot-in-image-makeover (Accessed: 6 January 2024).

Saikia, A. (2021) 'in Japanese Religious Spaces', Vienna Journal of East Asian Studies, 13(1), pp. 257 - 297. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2478/vjeas-2021-0008.

Sales of Japan mascot Kumamon's goods reach record high of $1.62 billion - The Mainichi (no date). Available at: https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20210209/p2a/00m/0bu/020000c (Accessed: 20 April 2024).

Sato, K. (2009) 'A Postwar Cultural History of Cuteness in Japan', 14(2).

Stevens, C.S. (2014) 'Cute But Relaxed: Ten Years of Rilakkuma in Precarious Japan', M/C Journal, 17(2). Available at: https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.783.

Superflat art movement - Ugh, As If! 1x02 (2021). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AaQ4DlfjrPU (Accessed: 18 April 2024).

Tabuchi, H. (2010) 'In Search of Adorable, as Hello Kitty Gets Closer to Goodbye', The New York Times, 15 May. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/15/business/global/15kitty.html (Accessed: 25 January 2024).

Tanaka, Y. (1996). Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes In World War Ii (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429040016

Tesar, M. and Koro-Ljungberg, M. (2016) 'Cute, creepy and sublime unnamed childhood monstrosities', Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 37(5), pp. 694 - 704. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2015.1075708.

THE CUTENESS FACTOR (no date) Ruttkowski;68. Available at: https://www.ruttkowski68.com/news/cuteism-between-abstraction-ans-figurality/ (Accessed: 18 April 2024).

Tokyo 1955 - 1970: A New Avant-Garde | MoMA (no date) The Museum of Modern Art. Available at: https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1225 (Accessed: 8 November 2023).

Tokyo 2020 delivers a surprise at Rio 2016 Closing Ceremony - Olympic News (2016) Olympics.com. Available at: https://olympics.com/en/news/tokyo-2020-delivers-a-surprise-at-rio-2016-closing-ceremony (Accessed: 6 January 2024).

Tokyo's adorable police mascot Pipo-kun is basically cuteness, weaponized (2017) Quartz. Available at: https://qz.com/1164167/tokyos-adorable-police-mascot-pipo-kun-is-basically-cuteness-weaponized (Accessed: 6 January 2024).

TVチャンピオン (no date). Available at: https://www.tv-tokyo.co.jp/tvchamp1/060420/under.htm (Accessed: 20 April 2024).

TVチャンピオン　ゆるキャラ　日本一決定戦 (no date). Available at: https://www.tv-tokyo.co.jp/tvchamp1/yuru/kinki.html (Accessed: 20 April 2024).

Walker, E. (2008) 'Top cat: how "Hello Kitty" conquered the world | The Independent', The Independent, 20 May. Available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/top-cat-how-hello-kitty-conquered-the-world-831522.html

(Accessed: 25 May 2024).

Joshua Paul Dale　Why cuteness needs to be studied - Joshua Paul Dale (2023). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JB5DthYnbtQ (Accessed: 25 May 2024).

Yano, C.R. (2009) 'Wink on Pink: Interpreting Japanese Cute as It Grabs the Global Headlines', The Journal of Asian Studies, 68(3), pp. 681 - 688.

Yoshimoto, M. (2012) 'Bye Bye Kitty!!!', Impressions, (33), pp. 118 - 127.

Yuru-Chara Grand Prix (no date). Available at: https://www.yurugp.jp/en/ (Accessed: 20 April 2024).

WONG KRISTIN, (2020) The Power of Kawaii: How Cute, Squishy Things Influence Us | WIRED (no date). Available at: https://www.wired.com/story/the-power-of-kawaii/ (Accessed: 17 October 2023).

キャラクターでもっと伝わるデザイン | PIE International (no date). Available at: https://pie.co.jp/book/i/4522/ (Accessed: 17 October 2023).

しろい地底王国忍者じねんじゃー (@tororo461) / X (no date) X (formerly Twitter). Available at: https://x.com/tororo461 (Accessed: 25 May 2024).

たれぱんだ (no date). Available at: https://www.san-x.co.jp/character/detail/?code=TPD (Accessed: 25 May 2024).

「ゆらぎ」を描く若手現代アーティスト　　きゃらあい個展『視界の端でぴかっと光る』。9月5日（月）まで、奈良 蔦屋書店で開催！ | MARZEL - ぼくらが今、夢中になるもの｜関西のカルチャーWEBマガジン (no date) MARZEL - ぼくらが今、夢中になるもの｜関西のカルチャーWEBマガジン. Available at: https://marzel.jp/topics/20220819/ (Accessed: 21 April 2024).

ゆるキャラグランプリ公式サイト (no date). Available at: https://www.yurugp.jp (Accessed: 25 May 2024).

ふなっしー⬛ (@funassyi) / X (no date) X (formerly Twitter). Available at: https://x.com/funassyi (Accessed: 25 May 2024).

しろい地底王国忍者じねんじゃー (@tororo461) con contenuti / X (no date) X (formerly Twitter). Available at: https://twitter.com/tororo461 (Accessed: 20 April 2024).

#おまねこ - Ricerca / X (2023) X (formerly Twitter). Available at: https://twitter.com/jasdf_omaezaki/status/1719527886401769697/photo/3 (Accessed: 6 January 2024)

9.2 Image references

8個★キューピー　あえるパスタソース　たらこ　明太マヨ - 1,620円 (no date). Available at: https://cgtejv.greek-mandarins.com/index.php?main_page=product_info&products_id=34247 (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

(20) おぱんちゅうさぎ (@opanchu_usagi_) / X (2024) X (formerly Twitter). Available at: https://twitter.com/opanchu_usagi_ (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

(20) 花梨〜かりん (@nori19732) / X (2024) X (formerly Twitter). Available at: https://twitter.com/nori19732 (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

(20) 認識 (@_ninshiki_) / X (2024) X (formerly Twitter). Available at: https://twitter.com/_ninshiki_ (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

'70年代のKawaiiキャラ「モンチッチ」とサンリオキャラのコラボドールが登場！： Japaaan' (no date) Japaaan - 日本文化と今をつなぐウェブマガジン. Available at: https://mag.japaaan.com/archives/83214 (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

A Morning Surprise for Japan: Shinzo Abe as Super Mario - The New York Times (no date). Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/23/world/asia/shinzo-abe-super-mario-tokyo-rio-olympics.html (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Aggretsuko Season 3 Netflix Release Date and New Poster Revealed | MOSHI MOSHI NIPPON | もしもしにっぽん (no date). Available at: https://www.moshimoshi-nippon.jp/342250 (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Back to School (no date). Available at: https://www.sanrio.com/collections/back-to-school (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Chiikawa (Serie TV 2022) - IMDb (no date). Available at: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt26997679/ (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Chinatsu Ban, The Song of Passing, 2006 (no date) isaartgallery. Available at: https://www.isaartanddesign.com/artworks/644-chinatsu-ban-the-song-of-passing-2006/ (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Hello Kitty movie targeted for 2019 (no date) EW.com. Available at: https://ew.com/article/2015/07/03/hello-kitty-movie-2/ (Accessed: 28 May 2024).
In the Deepest Puddle II, 1995 (no date) LACMA. Available at: http://www.lacma.org/node/39344 (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Japan appoints cartoon ambassador (2008) NBC News. Available at: https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna23716592 (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Japanese Apricot 2 by Chiho Aoshima (no date) Kumi Contemporary. Available at: https://www.kumicontemporary.com//view/japanese-apricot-2-chiho-aoshima.html (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Japan's Civic Mascots Are Here to Stay - Bloomberg (no date). Available at: https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-06-05/japan-s-civic-mascots-are-here-to-stay (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Jordan, E. (2018) My First: Hikari Shimoda Celebrates 10 Years of Work with Solo Show, Whitewall. Available at: https://whitewall.art/art/my-first-hikari-shimoda-celebrates-10-years-of-work-with-solo-show/ (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Kumamoto mascot Kumamon greets Imperial Couple - The Japan Times (no date). Available at: https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/10/28/national/kumamoto-mascot-kumamon-greets-imperial-couple/ (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Kyubey | Mahou Shoujo Madoka★Magica - Puella Magi Wikia | Fandom (no date). Available at: https://puellamagimadoka.fandom.com/wiki/Kyubey (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Meet SA's Newest Citizen: Kumamon, the Rosey-Cheeked Japanese Tourism Bear | San Antonio | San Antonio Current (no date). Available at: https://www.sacurrent.com/news/meet-sas-newest-citizen-kumamon-the-rosey-cheeked-japanese-tourism-bear-2479600 (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Mondo Mascots [@mondomascots] (2019) 'Pipo-kun on a motorbike. https://t.co/Vm3kb6tGEZ', Twitter. Available at: https://twitter.com/mondomascots/status/1112042307384074241 (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

No.YNF1102 - Harmless Kitty 1994 | YOSHITOMO NARA The Works (no date). Available at: https://www.yoshitomonara.org/en/catalogue/YNF1102/ (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Obsessive Observation: The Legacy of Maruyama Okyo (no date) artscape Japan. Available at: http://www.dnp.co.jp/artscape/eng/focus/1909_02.html (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Pinterest (no date a) Pinterest. Available at: https://www.pinterest.it/pin/161285230399637705/ (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Pinterest (no date b) Pinterest. Available at: https://www.pinterest.it/pin/6755468169836323/ (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Pinterest (no date c) Pinterest. Available at: https://www.pinterest.jp/pin/2674081023805976/ (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Pinterest (no date b) Pinterest. Available at: https://www.pinterest.it/pin/351912464219293/ (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Pinterest (no date c) Pinterest. Available at: https://www.pinterest.it/pin/12384967721220505/ (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Pinterest (no date d) Pinterest. Available at: https://www.pinterest.it/pin/674062269215308113/ (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

QuasariusLovesReddit (2023) 'San-X characters screen shotted from a Pucchigumi page', r/SanX. Available at: www.reddit.com/r/SanX/comments/15ejb06/sanx_characters_screen_shotted_from_a_pucchigumi/ (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Retromags [@Retromags] (2018) 'New Image: Dengeki PlayStation 269 (April 9, 2004) http://dlvr.it/QFpL70 https://t.co/cgYft5dhXm', Twitter. Available at: https://twitter.com/Retromags/status/962313493406924801 (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Revenge of the Retro Japanese Toy Adverts | Page 2 | skullbrain.org (no date). Available at: http://skullbrain.org/bb/index.php?threads%2Frevenge-of-the-retro-japanese-toy-adverts.48572%2Fpage-2 (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

So, Why Can't Hello Kitty Rejoin Our Rilakkuma Kigurumi Lineup? (no date) Kigurumi.com. Available at: https://www.kigurumi.com/blogs/kigurumi-news/san-x-and-sanrio-are-not-the-same-even-with-our-kigurumi (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Takashi Murakami | DOB-kun (Camellia Red) (2022) | Available for Sale | Artsy (no date). Available at: https://www.artsy.net/artwork/takashi-murakami-dob-kun-camellia-red (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Takashi Murakami's character Mr DOB looks at the lighter side of existentialism (no date). Available at: https://www.stirworld.com/see-features-takashi-murakamis-character-mr-dob-looks-at-the-lighter-side-of-existentialism (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

'Takehisa Yumeji: Master of Japanese Modern Illustration' - The Japan Times (no date). Available at: https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2018/05/15/arts/openings-in-tokyo/takehisa-yumeji-master-japanese-modern-illustration/ (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

無添くら寿司【公式】 [@mutenkurasushi] (2023) 'くら寿司 グローバル旗艦店 原宿店限定 2/10（金）～2/28（火）まで、原宿店限定！店内入り口やスイーツ屋台がちいかわ仕様に！ 店内入り口の提灯前では、フォトスポットになっていて、ちいかわ達と一緒に写真が撮れますぜひご利用ください！ https://t.co/XjzLg1OShc', Twitter. Available at: https://twitter.com/mutenkurasushi/status/1623853537527746560 (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

昭和31年「りぼん」1月号 (no date) まつざきあけみのブログ. Available at: https://matsuzakiakemi.seesaa.net/article/473213097.html (Accessed: 28 May 2024).

Ebay, https://www.ebay.co.uk/itm/275154571161
v

Acknowledgements

Aloha Rilakkuma
アロハリラックマ

Re-MeNT

オススメポイント

ハワイのかわいい
たべものとグッズが
いっぱい♥

サングラス◕◕を
フィギュアにつけて
あそべるよ！

全8種類
●全8種類のうち1種類が入っています。
●中身は外から分からない仕様になっています。
●納品時に「全種類のアイテムが揃います。」というシールが
貼られているボックスにつきましては全種類揃います。

ハワイでだらりんリラックス♥

1 ハワイへ Let's GO！
2 ホイップたっぷりパンケーキ
3 ハワイアンバーガー
4 マーケットで
5 ビーチでのんびり
6 アロハなプレートランチ
7 人気のハワイアンスイーツ
8 ハワイの定番

※実際の商品と写真とは多少異なることがあります。ご了承ください。

ⓒ2013 San-X Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.

ほっこり癒されちゃう♥
リラックマごはん

Re-MeNT

オススメポイント

本物みたいな
リラックマごはん

リラックマの
顔がいっぱい★

ほっこり
癒されちゃう！

リラックマ
ほっこり
ごはん

全8種類
●全8種類のうち1種類が入っています。
●中身は外から分からない仕様になっています。
●納品時に「全種類のアイテムが揃います。」というシールが
貼られているボックスにつきましては全種類揃います。

内容物
□フィギュア
□カード
フィギュア：中国製

のんびりモーニング
2 大好きホットケーキ
3 特製ランチプレート
4 お団子でほっこりタイム

リラックマ弁当

Fig.93 Re-ment San-X Aloha Rilakkuma Full Complete 8 Set, 2013, sold on Ebay, ebay.co.uk

商品と写真とは多少異なることがあります。ご了承ください。
San-X Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.

ⓒ2010 RE-MENT

Ⓐ

Ⓑ

Ⓒ

Ⓓ

Ⓔ

Le Grenier de la télé

チェック!
チェック!

ミ

英国で放送され大
の主人公。演じる
ップリンと評され
ます。ビーンズの

ミスタ・ビーンズ
テディ
手編みのセーターのような
素材で作られたぬいぐるみ
は、シリアルナンバーの入
ったあなただけの一体。微
妙に一体一体雰囲気が違う
のもポイント。価格／2800
円（ソニープラザ銀座店）

グリーティングカ
ビーンズのおど
る各種カード。
もあり。お友だち
プラザ銀座店）

ウォ

エアフレッシュナー