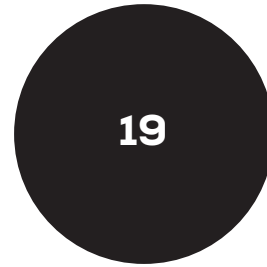




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Natalia Sielewicz

Bunny Rogers. Child's Play.

Translated by Arthur Barys

Adorability is fuckability
because children are adorable
and men want to fuck children
Acknowledge or die wow
You are dead to me
Bunny Rogers, “@ one with the screaming in my head”

Purple face Rollie like some Teletubbies
Baby diamonds wet, shinin' like some guppie
Ayo & Teo, *Rolex* (prod. BL\$SD)

The American artist and poet Bunny Rogers likes animals. Even the diminutive “Bunny,” a popular pet name for Elizabeth in Anglo-Saxon onomastics, brings to mind the hyper-eroticized, cream-haired Lola Bunny, a character in the popular 1990s cartoon *Looney Tunes* (Bugs Bunny’s love interest and the seductive basketball player in the sports comedy film *Space Jam*). This nickname is one of many animalistic pseudonyms Rogers uses online - her digital avatars assume a variety of attributes: the Lambslut, Pones, a Very Young Rider, and early-twenty-first-century American cartoon characters. Born in 1990, Rogers was, by her own admission, shaped by American pop-culture of the nineties, a period marked by an explosion of television programs for children and teenagers, and after 2000, by Internet communities, surf clubs, and role-playing games like Neopets and Furcadia, which feature virtual worlds created by players whose main objective is to look after various types of creatures. Using Twitter, Rogers has archived every Facebook post she has made since 2008 with downright obsessive meticulousness, and publishes



Bunny Rogers, *Lady train set*, 2017.
Courtesy of Société Berlin. Photo: Bill Orcutt

all her artistic endeavors and poems on her [blog](#) and [Tumblr](#). The emergence of new art distribution channels involving social media, online galleries, and blogs has meant that the production (and consumption) of the work of artists like Rogers occurs in a field that is much more susceptible to the theater of affects than the sterile white cube of the art institution. As Nicholas Mirzoeff correctly observes, the 2.0 revolution launched formerly elite practices such as photography and conceptual art into the realm of global visual culture,¹ and the unprecedented freedom of communication and expression enabled the pioneers of so-called post-Internet art to create their own presentation channels and community spaces, including "surf clubs" (e.g. Nasty Nets and Loshadka/blog), image boards, discussion groups, and online curation platforms.

The groundbreaking work carried out by the artists associated with this genre in the second decade of the twenty-first century bore traces of institutional critique: the pieces remixed avant-garde art conventions, challenging the status of the original, the copy, and other determinants of the art ecosystem. What is noteworthy, however, is that Rogers' early online efforts, relatively modest in formal terms, stemmed more from her need to launch new forms of identity politics into a broader, affected field than from any conceptual or structural contemplation of the Internet. As an environment shot through with emotions – from affective status updates and emoticons on social media, to anti-social cyberbullying and flaming – Internet 2.0 has been, since the 2000s, a crucial platform for direct communication between Internet users, and has been particularly relevant to the relationship between the art creator and consumer. It is precisely in this hyper-communicated, affective realm of the Internet – which structures relations among digital representations of ourselves – that we should examine the intensity of the visual depictions of adolescence, love, alienation, depression, and pathos that Rogers executes in her rich, heterogeneous art. The artist employs affective models of self-presentation with near-compulsive regularity: on the one hand, she engages in youthful flippancy and sentimentality, while, on the other, resorting to seemingly unrefined affectation and exhibitionism, examining her subjects through the lenses of teenage anxieties and fantasies, sexual arousal, and existential angst. Like in a diary, autobiographical strands



Bunny Rogers, *Kinderschule*, 2013.
Courtesy of Société Berlin

intertwine with the artist's visual explorations: playful My Little Ponies gazing flirtatiously from behind long eyelashes, lonely cleaning mops decorated with ribbons, computer-game animals demanding attention, handmade crochet, black roses, and other elements of a teenage girl's gothic imaginarium. If this catalog of infantile girlishness has you grinding your teeth, dear reader, it is a sign that helpless, delicate objects, people, and animals leave you suspended between aesthetic pleasure and anxiety. This impasse, one underpinned with visual delight as well as irritation and a patronizing attitude of dominance, can be based on an (often unjustified) sense of superiority in aesthetic judgement of good taste, coherence, and maturity. It is a phenomenon that the American cultural and literary scholar Sianne Ngai calls a minor affect, a labile and non-cathartic emotion that does not produce a definite reaction such as anger, irritation, bliss, or satisfaction, but leaves our sensuous experience stranded at the peripheries of stimuli.²

In this essay, I examine the problematic artwork of Bunny Rogers through the lens of a concept suggested by Sianne Ngai in her book *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, in which she analyzes the paradigm of contradictory emotions by introducing a conceptual framework based on three ambivalent aesthetic sensations: the zany, the cute, and the interesting.³ Ngai demonstrates how the above conventions of triviality and colloquiality structure our relationships with everyday objects, consumer goods, and cultural products. Crucially, she regards them as full-fledged objects of critical and aesthetic analysis, and investigates how consumer fantasies become effable and what affect they evoke in the consumer. It is significant that the author circumscribes the space shared by the realms of consumption, production, and art, explaining how the cute, the zany, and the interesting have become idioms for modernist movements such as expressionism, cubism, and minimalism, as well as postmodern genres such as: Internet Flarf poetry, retro, ghostology, hauntology, post-Internet art, and others.⁴

In the case of the affective aesthetic of cuteness, Ngai examines ambivalent articulations of weakness and helplessness – soft, seemingly trivial categories that are tightly linked to how we function in a domestic space, among familiar, intimate objects that are at once charming and awful. It is precisely in this tricky terrain of the domestic – a place whose function surpasses that of a mere safe asylum, and is located somewhere at the intersection of pleasure, consumption, and oppression – that we fall victim to the sweet revenge of objects. Ngai in fact points out an intriguing relationship associated with the affective aesthetics described in her

book. As she observes, the cute, the zany, and the interesting have a subversive effect on our emotional barometers in that these qualities don't necessarily produce a positive reaction towards the objects that embody them.⁵

In order to illustrate the problematic artwork of Bunny Rogers, I would like to take a critical look at the political and aesthetic project of the cute as expressed through that which is sweet, located dangerously close to kitsch and camp, the domestic activities of women, sentimentality, childishness, and affective work. It should be noted that the subversiveness of these categories hinges on the assumption that the figures, objects, and commodities which display qualities described as childish evoke feelings of care and tenderness.⁶ They thus effect us primarily at the emotional level by evoking compassion and empathy. To praise cuteness means to consent to a tender, sensuous relationship with an object that is familiar and that tempts us with its innocent appearance (a teddy bear, for example), or with a fetish-object which we address with a coquettish pet name that conveys our feelings of tenderness, fondness, and approval. Consumption and care thus lie at the heart of dangerous relationships with that which is delightful and worthy of desire. A perfect example of this tender-yet-patronizing relationship between the subject and a commodity that is at once the object of fantasy can be found in a verse of a song by young R'n'B stars Ayo & Teo, which features a "Purple face Rollie like some Teletubbies, baby diamonds wet, shinin' like some guppies."⁷ Commodity fetishism reduces the object of desire to a delicious product which we are invited to sink into or consume; in this case, it is a "Rollie with a dab of ranch," the last word meaning diamonds, whose exclusive aura is "domesticated" with a reference to the homely flavor of a potato chip variety (or "sauce", hip-hop slang for self-confidence and a predilection for luxury items). In the accompanying music video, the performers surrounded by teenagers sing about expensive trinkets, designer clothes, and the trappings of stardom, all while strutting and dancing through the cold interiors of a shopping mall.⁸ The adolescent body – an object and brand constantly subjected to enhancement, regimes of self-creation, and disciplining by the media – finds spaces of play not just in the digital world, but also at the mall: an unreal, hybrid space that bridges the gap between the realms of the Internet and material reality. As Marx writes, "Hunger is hunger; but the hunger that is satisfied by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork differs from hunger that devours raw meat with the help of



Bunny Rogers, from *Pones* series.
Courtesy of Société Berlin

hands, nails and teeth.”⁹ It goes without saying that the same applies to binging on capitalism’s glossy, delicious packaging and carbonated content.

While the above examples illustrate how the affective field and aesthetic of the cute are expressed more or less consciously in language and in mass commodities, art produced by third-wave feminism rather consistently and deliberately explores visual codes associated with girlishness, infantilization, and other practices traditionally ascribed to women. In the early 1990s, third-wave feminism introduced a new, sometimes self-deprecating, unbridled, and exhibitionist tone into the discussion about the image of women, their social role, desires, physiology, and identity (including their racial identity). Many artists – from 1990s feminist art icons like Tracey Emin, Frances Stark, and Sophie Calle, to Amalia Ulman, Rachel Maclean, Michelle Rawlings, and other artists of the younger generation – have deliberately appropriated the above tropes and have abandoned the approach of directly confronting patriarchal rhetoric, opting instead for pathos and openly sentimental expressions of emotion, in an attempt to assume control over representations of the female experience. Ngai’s book is relevant in that it enables us to take an oblique view of the above practice, and search for the eerie side of cuteness and its subversive potential peeking out from behind the smooth edges. Ngai’s analysis compels me to apply her observations in my own analysis of the art of Bunny Rogers as a representative of a group of artists who venture beyond post-ironic explorations of girlish aesthetics. Rogers seems, at first glance, to be performing a critique of the violence inscribed in systems of looking at and consuming images. The artist doesn’t always express these accusatory statements explicitly, however. By employing the strategies of identification and over-identification, Rogers alludes through her alter-ego to the visual codes and narrative connotations associated with the objectification of children and animals in mass culture. She builds narratives around the categories of age and gender in an ambiguous and ephemeral manner, signaling the universal nature of desolation and the personal sense of loss that comes with the passing of life and the innocence defiled.

For a piece titled *Blankets*, created in 2013 with the artist Filip Olszewski, Rogers scoured the websites of child modeling agencies for watermarked images, which she then used to create a series of fluffy pastel-colored blankets. The artists avoid any figurative representation of the subjects depicted in the original portraits. The photographs of children are replaced with the portrait’s dominant color palette. The sole elements hinting at the source of the image are the watermark and an ad

slogan embroidered onto the soft, plush fabric. The writing on the wool and satin duvets reads: "Dark feelings," "Ukrainian nymphets," and "Veiled pages"; none of these inscriptions bring to mind the names of agencies representing adolescent models. What they signal are the sexualization and commodification of the images of children in a world where, in Rogers' words, "Adorability is fuckability." Although Rogers and Olszewski clear the foreground of any evidence of a crime or ethical abuse, they leave the viewer suspended and experiencing a palpable sense of discomfort. The conspicuous lack of children in the photos says more about violence than their presence would. As Bunny Rogers observes, "Presence is the slowest dissipating substance."¹⁰ It is not without relevance that, according to the psychologist Donald Winnicott, the "blankie" is a transitional object, one that is beloved by a child and has a special emotional and sensuous importance to him or her.¹¹ It is the object of compulsive emotions and gestures such as chewing, squeezing, love, and anger; as a parental substitute, its purpose is to withstand abuse from the child.¹² Rogers and Olszewski redirect the viewer's scopophilic attention to the sexual experience of the subject itself: the child who squeezes and hugs the blanket. More crucially, reducing the erotic image to an abstract visual code does not repeat or reproduce the violent gesture of looking at the picture of the child.



Bunny Rogers, *Nymphets Studio*, 2013.

A different artistic spirit can be observed in an ongoing series of self-portraits titled *Pones*, in which we find Rogers assuming a kneeling, pony-like position in settings that include abandoned buildings, meadows, monuments, parking lots, and other public places. Instead of flexing her body seductively, the artist adopts semi-grotesque poses, the ambiguity of which places them at the intersection of children's play and fantasies about being an erotic object. Rogers' *Pones* destabilize the violence of looking at and consuming "weak" images, as the portraits reveal the very brutality directed against them. In Ngai's words, "the cute object might arguably be the most objectified of objects, but its extreme objectification is key to its potential resistance."¹³ In its passivity, the sweet, weak object compels the



Bunny Rogers, from *Pones* series. Courtesy of Société Berlin

voyeuristic consumer to react, unmasking his or her susceptibility and submission to the very object s/he longs to dominate.

It should be noted that similar instances of ambiguous play accompanied by the internalization and exposure of the violent aspects of the cute and captivating are not exclusive to younger artists; examples can be found in the much earlier work of mid-twentieth-century feminist artists, who can easily be regarded as pioneers of third-wave feminism. I am referring, for instance, to the Surrealist collages and sculptures of Louise Bourgeois, and to *Sweet Sixteen*, Hanna Wilke's delicate, ceramic vagina-objects, which appear to be on the verge of shattering. When it comes to Polish art, meanwhile, we could look to Maria Pinińska-Bereś, who expanded her practice as a sculptor in the mid-seventies with a repertoire of soft, oval, subtle shapes made of quilted blankets, pillows, and sponges. Because of the form and characteristic color palette of these pieces, comprising delicate shades of pink, white, and violet, critics often remarked on the corporeal, sensuous aspect of Pinińska-Bereś's work, occasionally dismissing it as infantile and pigeonholing it as "subtle women's art." Yet one can hardly deny the ironic, almost disturbing nature of her installations. The artist deliberately manipulated the aesthetic in question, choosing diminutive titles to indicate, at the linguistic level, words and objects associated with the most quotidian activities performed by women. In keeping with Ngai's claim that the system in which we are entangled by cute things often produces the opposite effect, a similar correspondence can be observed in the cute-yet-revolting objects made by Pinińska-Bereś (particularly the installations embroidered with the words *piezozek* ("little dumpling") and *pokoik* ("little room/maisonette"), as well as her papier-mâché and wood "psychofurniture"). There is a fine line between forgiving adoration and disgust or revulsion; our emotional reactions to something cute and clumsy are sometimes accompanied by stifled anger arising from the sense that we have fallen victim to manipulation and emotional blackmail.¹⁴ Note that "cute" is not necessarily a complement. Cute diminutives can have a sarcastic or self-deprecating tinge, conveying masked aggression that may be intended, for example, as a disparagement of one's own body ("my chubby bum," "little boobies").

Like Pinińska-Bereś's *Psychofurniture*, Rogers' cute mops, ribbons, and melancholy furniture acquire human qualities, almost begging to be touched, yet resisting the violence their passivity provokes. The artist has a particular predilection for animating girlish chairs, masking traces of their use and their permanent ennui. Her

series titled *Sad Chairs* (2015) features wooden chairs, painted gray and bending under the weight of sadness and mourning. The poet Hannah Black writes about the objects: “[some of them] lie on their backs for the first time and hold their limbs to the ceiling ... set free into uselessness, they will become... trash.”¹⁵ Like submissive lovers, Rogers’ chairs literally perform weakness, while the perversity of their cute, worried appearance also hinges on their ambiguous and timeless aesthetic. In stylistic terms, it’s difficult to tie them to any particular era. The overwhelming charm of their ingenuousness brings to mind the pragmatic frugality of Puritan design in Colonial America, yet one cannot shake the impression that the objects are mass-produced on 3D printers. This irresolvable nature of things associated with the

mysterious, tension-racked domestic space, with *das Unheimliche*, lends them a nostalgic, almost *vanitas*-like quality and evokes a mood of uncanniness. Is it not emblematic of the phenomenon that the American scholar and poet Joyelle McSweeney refers to as the “necropastoral” in her book *The Necropastoral: Poetry, Media, Occults?*¹⁶ She uses the term to describe the “infectiousness, anxiety, and contagion occultly present in the hygienic borders of the classic pastoral.” As McSweeney reminds us, the “premier celebrity resident of Arcadia is Death.”¹⁷ Death and passing also have a permanent presence in Rogers’ digital Arcadia, in the space located at the crossroads of play and violence. Her art confronts the homely, tender, and helpless with that which is impossible to symbolize and which poses a potential threat to the existing order. One constantly recurring theme in her art is Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Nestled in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, this picturesque town where “everyone was friendly and was part of a community bound by shared values”¹⁸ became the site of one of the largest school shootings in U.S. history.

The tragic events took place on April 20th, 1999, when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, both of them students at Columbine, brought automatic weapons to school and opened fire, killing twelve students and one teacher, and injuring twenty-four other people. The two committed suicide before police stormed the building. A subsequent investigation revealed that the gunmen had spent a year planning the shooting. They had intended to detonate two bombs on campus in order to kill



Bunny Rogers, *Sad Chair*, 2015.
Courtesy of Société Berlin

as many people as possible, but when the explosive devices hidden in their backpacks failed to explode due to technical malfunctions, the two continued the attack with their guns. Rogers was only nine years old at the time of the Columbine shooting, but the power of the media coverage, the moral panic, and the mysterious aura surrounding the young gunmen left an indelible impression in the artist's mind. Harris and Klebold achieved godlike status among a large community of teenage girls, who gathered on Internet forums to debate the duo's spiritual condition, express their love, and even dress up as the gunmen. One website in Poland that enjoyed significant popularity was columbine.blog.pl, now accessible at columbinepolska.wordpress.com, where the author posted copies of Eric Harris' journal, among other Columbine-related content.

Throughout three large-format installations – *Columbine Library* (2014), *Columbine Cafeteria* (2016), *Moving is in every direction. Environments* (2017) – and *Brig and Ladder* (2017), Rogers' latest production at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the artist reconstructs the key scenes of the crime committed at the American high school: the library, the cafeteria, and the auditorium. What is remarkable about these models is how precisely their elements correspond to specific artifacts. Yet one can hardly describe them as evidence-grade details; they are more like glorified tokens of memory and trophies than evidence from the scene of a murder. The bookshelves, plush backpacks, and the chairs upholstered with soft, pastel-colored fabric and pierced with bullet holes are charged with a mix of extreme emotional registers: eroticism, violence, kitsch, and mourning. Rogers contrasts the dual aspects of reconstructing a subjective reflection on alienation and passing, juxtaposing the disturbing setting with video animations featuring her in the role of anti-social icons from American cartoons: Gaz Membrane and Joan of Arc. Standing in the cafeteria, library, and the site where school assemblies were held, the anti-heroines recite Rogers' poems in her own melancholy voice. Yet these animated sequences are far removed from the idealized representations encountered on stock photo sites. As if experiencing symptoms of some neurotic disease, the digital characters glitch repeatedly between readings of Rogers' poems, which are written in plain, direct English, and occasionally veer into pathos and teenage drivel.

Andrea Model

Andrea has porcelain skin
Andrea is not vegan
Andrea makes difficult work
Andrea writes a lot
Andrea does her homework
Andrea looks young
Andrea is sexually inexperienced
And unaware
Andrea has a fetish for constrictive fabrics
I am perceptive
Everyone is in love with Andrea
Three straight men in our grade
One shop tech
And a handful of L train commuters
Andrea needs love too
Andrea doesn't deserve to die
Want to start fund to save Andrea

touch

It is important to keep my cellophone [sic!] charged
I have to provide the tools by which to reach me
they have reason to touch you
I need to keep doors "open"
Weirdos get killed that's why¹⁹

Is it possible to articulate the aesthetic-emotional dimension of trauma and grief through coldly precise digital technology, bringing to life inanimate matter the way Rogers does with her avatars, furniture, toys, and other household objects? How do we speak about violence and mourning without being gushy? Rather than providing unambiguous answers to these questions, Rogers' art complicates their perception and focuses on an array of problems inherent in representations of childhood, adolescence, eroticism, and violence. Rogers revises stereotypes associated with the domestic and the innocent, seeking a testimony that would express longing without shying away from weaker, minor registers such as frustration, boredom, failure, loneliness, and alienation. As public life grows increasingly infantile and theatrical, we must not only find alternative formulas for the articulation of pathos, but also a new idiom that would allow us to navigate the murky waters of affects. Perhaps some hints can be found in Jack Halberstam's book *The Queer Art of Failure*, in the chapter on animated films, in which the author argues that, unlike the linear narratives of traditional cartoons, motion pictures made using CGI technology entertain revolutionary fantasies about survival, self-organization, and resistance.²⁰ Halberstam maintains that, to children, animated films are laboratories for utopias; they are articulations of the belief that "'things' (toys, nonhuman animals, rocks, sponges) are as lively as humans."²¹ The scholar defends the potential of the "silly archive" to imagine a better world and an opportunity to challenge the capitalist, patriarchal order.²² Children, after all, belong to the queer paradigm in that they are not subject to the heteronormative expectations of adults: "children are not coupled, they are not romantic, they do not have a religious morality, they are not afraid of death, they are collective creatures, they are in a constant state of rebellion against their parents and they are not the masters of their domain."²³ If we were to seek a parallel revolutionary archive of gestures, notions, and feelings, it would certainly be found in Rogers' repository of ingenuous objects and digital avatars – unmoving things that move us.



Bunny Rogers, *Lady Amalthea (mourning mop)*, 2013. Courtesy of Société Berlin

Footnotes

- 1 Nicolas Mirzoeff, *How to See the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 31.
- 2 Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005).
- 3 Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015).
- 4 Flarf: a type of poetry mined from search engine results; its defining feature is its heavy use of the Internet as a content generator; Flarf poetry often incorporates vernacular language and grammatical errors. Hauntology (*duchologia*): the aesthetic study of the visual culture of the 1980s and '90s; see Olga Drenda, *Duchologia polska. Rzeczy i ludzie w czasach transformacji* [Polish Hauntology: Things and People in Times of Transformation] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Karakter, 2016). Hauntology: a concept proposed in 1993 by Jacques Derrida in the book *Spectres of Marx*, in which he argues that, following the end of history, society would veer towards aesthetics currently regarded as weird and old-fashioned, or towards "specters" of the past. See *Spectres of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 2012).
- 5 Ngai, 4.
- 6 Ibid., 3.
- 7 Ayo & Teo, *Rolex*, 2017.
- 8 Ayo & Teo, *Rolex*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwk5OU1I9Vc> music video, 2017.
- 9 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (London: Penguin, 1973), 92.
- 10 Zach Sokol, *Bunny Rogers on her deeply intimate solo show at the Whitney*, „i-D Vice”, September 1, 2017, https://i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/9kkjb3/artist-bunny-rogers-wants-you-to-know-she-acknowledges-your-hurt, accessed February 28, 2018.
- 11 See Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 89.
- 12 Ibid., 89.
- 13 Ibid., 98.

14 Ibid., 24.

15 Hannah Black in Hannah Black, Bunny Rogers, Elliot Spence, *Columbine Library* (Société Berlin: Berlin, 2014), no page numbers.

16 Joyelle McSweeney, *The Necropastoral: Poetry, Media, Occults* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2015).

17 Ibid., 3.

18 *The Columbine High School Massacre*, CBS Reality, undated, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LK93UGeZBxg>, accessed May 2, 2018.

19 Bunny Rogers, *Poetry Reading in Columbine Cafeteria with Gazlene Membrane*, video, 2014.

20 Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

21 Ibid., 27.

22 Ibid., 29.

23 Judith Halberstam, "Pixarvolt – Animation and Revolt," *Flow Journal*, August 30, 2007, www.flowjournal.org/2007/08/pixarvolt-%E2%80%93-animation-and-revolt/, accessed February 28, 2018.