



CUTE

An Exhibition Exploring the Irresistible Rise of Cuteness

25 January – 14 April 2024

Press Release



Graphic Thought Facility (1990, UK). Playing dress-up with AI, 2023

Embankment Galleries, South Wing

General admission £18.50 (concessions, child and family tickets also available), half-price tickets for 25s and under on select Tuesdays

Tickets on-sale now via somersethouse.org.uk

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

- Somerset House presents the first major exhibition to explore the extraordinary and complex power of cuteness in contemporary culture, featuring works by over 50 artists and contributors, alongside culturally significant objects.
- **CUTE** presents works by contemporary artists who use cuteness to explore their own identities and existential responses to the world around them.
- The exhibition delves into five key themes: **Cry Baby, Play Together, Monstrous Other, Sugar-Coated Pill** and **Hypersonic**, which aim to unpack cute's many guises.
- Coinciding with the 50th anniversary of **Hello Kitty**, **CUTE** features a disco, and a rare display of Hello Kitty memorabilia.

- Immersive experiences showcase cuteness across diverse mediums, including a visual and sonic music installation inspired by teenage sleepovers by **Hannah Diamond**.
- Other new commissions for the exhibition from artists including **Ed Fornieles, Sian Fan, Chris Zhongtian Yuan, Sean-Kierre Lyons and Bart Seng Wen Long**.
- A **video games arcade** shows how artists and independent game designers use cuteness within their work.
- *CUTE* takeovers animate spaces around Somerset House, including a flag by **Sean Kierre Lyons**, a Hello Kitty-inspired **Cute Coffee Shop by Artbox Café** and a large-scale Hello Kitty sculpture by **Hattie Stewart**, commissioned in partnership with Sanrio.

Somerset House presents *CUTE*, a landmark exhibition **exploring the irresistible force of cuteness in contemporary culture**. From emojis to internet memes, video games to plushie toys, food to loveable robotic design, cuteness has taken over our world.

CUTE brings together contemporary artworks, including new artist commissions, presented alongside cultural phenomena from music, fashion and toys, to video games and social media, to examine the world's embrace of cute culture and how it has become such an influential measure of our times.

Presented in partnership with **Sanrio**, the exhibition celebrates the 50th anniversary of one of the world's most iconic and ubiquitous figures, **Hello Kitty**, featuring a dedicated plushie space, immersive disco and display of Hello Kitty products throughout the decades, including rare and unique items from private collectors and the official Sanrio archives.

Contributing artists include **Mark Leckey, Sean-Kierre Lyons, AYA TAKANO, Mike Kelley, Karen Kilimnik, Nayland Blake, Cosima von Bonin, Hannah Diamond, Ed Fornieles, Juliana Huxtable, Rachel Maclean, Julien Ceccaldi, Paige K. B., Isaac Lythgoe, Alake Shilling, Wong Ping, Liv Preston, CFGNY, Ram Han, Maggie Lee, Bunny Rogers, Flannery Silva, Andy Holden**, plus **Somerset House Studios** artists **Chris Zhongtian Yuan, Sin Wai Kin** and **Sian Fan**.

Claire Catterall, Senior Curator at Somerset House, said: *“Cute is undeniably the most prominent aesthetic of our times. Yet, it has only now begun to be taken seriously. Like a tiny kitten waiting to pounce, its power and influence has slowly crept up on us and today its adorable aesthetic infiltrates almost every aspect of our daily lives. But as it saturates our digitally mediated age, cuteness feeds and compels us in ways that suggest there is so much more to it than its adorable and seemingly harmless exterior might imply. Morally ambiguous and sometimes paradoxical, its power lies not only in its ability to challenge the norm, but to transform it. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the work of contemporary artists and musicians who use cute as a key register, exploring its complexity and meaning to shape their own practice. I hope this exhibition will delight and surprise in equal measure – rather like cuteness itself – and show that cute may not only help us to process an increasingly overwhelming and complicated world but might also have the radical potential to change our way of being.”*

EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHTS

CUTE'S Cat Avatar and Kawaii

The exhibition's introduction to the culture of cute opens with a celebration of the cat. Riffing off a quote from Tim Berners Lee, the inventor of the world wide web, who when asked to name one use of the internet that he did not

anticipate and answered with a single word – ‘kittens’, visitors are invited to explore how cats have been at the forefront of cute’s march to global domination.

Here, visitors can encounter **Louis Wain’s** famous depictions of cats from the late 19th to early 20th century, which marked a shift in public perception of cats as working animals to lovable pets with very human characteristics; **Harry Pointer’s** *The Brighton Cats* series of small postcards from the 1870s, which allowed cuteness to proliferate and reach ever expanded audiences through the birth of photography and mass production techniques. Contemporary responses include **Andy Holden’s** *Cat-tharsis*, consisting of a collection of feline figurines bequeathed by the artist’s late grandmother, a meditation on the role of cats in culture, and **Karen Kilimnik’s** *The cat sitting in its favourite basket out in the blizzard, the Himalaya*, looking back to the tradition of Romantic painting, yet positioning itself within a renewed moment of cultural sincerity, which is the hallmark of cuteness today.

As part of its exploration of the early beginnings of cuteness, *CUTE* also spotlights the development of the Japanese culture of cuteness ‘**kawaii**’. Featuring artefacts rarely exhibited in the UK, including printed materials, figurines, illustrated handkerchiefs, sketchbooks and more from the archive of the **Yayoi Museum** in Tokyo, *CUTE* charts **kawaii**’s origins in the design of products from the 1910s to the 1950s geared towards schoolgirls and young women as consumers, which incorporated western motifs such as mushrooms and castles, and depicted a romanticised idea of girlhood. *CUTE* also foregrounds the rise of Japan’s female illustrators of the 1960s, who challenged the innocent cuteness expressed by their male predecessors, adding elements of fun and flirtation to their work. Artists featured include **Yumeji Takehisa, Kaichi Kobayashi, Katsudi Matsumoto, Junichi Nakahara, Rune Naito, Macoto Takahashi, Setsuko Tamura, and Ado Mizumori.**

Continuing forward to the 80s and 90s, *CUTE* touches on the cultural influence of Japan on the UK and US and vice versa, coalescing around a display of a girl’s bedroom, complete with posters, magazines, clothing and toys. Here, visitors are introduced to the ways cute begins to take on a darker more critical tone, as evidenced by musicians such as **Jun Togowa** in Japan and bands such as **Babes in Toyland** in the US, as well as in the explosion of the Harajuku streetstyle in Tokyo.

Hello Kitty’s 50th Anniversary

Bringing us up to the end of the twentieth century is the queen of cute herself: **Hello Kitty**. This space is dedicated to her in celebration of her worldwide popularity and unique ability to be familiar and appealing, yet cool and complex. Visitors are invited to immerse themselves in a complete Hello Kitty environment with a dedicated plushie space featuring the collection of super fan **Amy-Louise Allen** and a **Hello Kitty disco**, complete with mirror ball.

Those taking to the dancefloor can enjoy a playlist curated by American musician and producer **David Gamson** (formerly of pop band *Scritti Politti*), featuring the sweetest, shimmering pop and disco from the 60s, 70s and 80s, from **The Archies** to **Olivia Newton-John, Donna Summer** to **The Human League**, which prefigures the electronic dance music of today’s producers who draw on the perfect precision and sparkling electronica of their forbears to create their own hyper-cute dance-pop sound.

CUTE Commissions and Contemporary Artworks

The exhibition’s main focus centres around works by a selection of intergenerational artists. This includes artists whose work mined cuteness toward the end of the twentieth century as a way to explore their own experiences and

subjectivities. As well as those who have grown up with the internet, cute's natural home and have harnessed the aesthetic to explore a multitude of emotional and experimental registers; desire and longing, memory and place, ecology and capitalism, difference and belonging.

Highlights include Japanese artist **AYA TAKANO's** ethereal painting *The Galaxy Inside*, 2015, which depicts androgynous, large eyed-waifs suspended in a space which transcends reality, gravity and its restraints, constructing an alternative universe with a kinder, softer civilisation; Scottish artist **Rachel Maclean's** 2021 mixed-media work *!step on no petS Step on no pets!*, which presents notes of unease and uncanniness in a twisted fairytale world, where images synonymous with sweetness and innocence disguise a darker story beneath; **Nayland Blake's** *The Little One* explores the duality of the 'bunny', as a doll seen as cuddly and warm, but as an animal, seen as sexual, wild and fast moving, in a work which addresses the artist's own identity as a non-binary multi-racial artist; and Seoul-based digital artist **Ram Han's** works from her *Save our souls* series, which draws on her childhood memories of growing up in the cute-saturated landscape of Korea, cut through with her darker experiences of subcultural media, to create lurid digital imagescapes. A further highlight includes **Mark Leckey's** 2023 video work *DAZZELDARK*, an odyssey of cuteness featuring brightly coloured soft fairground toys from Margate's Dreamland, who find themselves contemplating the vast darkness of the sea.

Popular objects, materials and memes drawn from cute's pop cultural landscape punctuate the space between contemporary artworks, seeking to unlock routes into the understanding of cute's dynamic through five key themes - **Cry Baby, Play Together, Monstrous Other, Sugar-Coated Pill** and **Hypersonic**.

Each cluster is accompanied by a short film commission by visual artist **Bart Seng Wen Long**, capturing how subgenres of cute manifest in contemporary culture today, from gaming, internet memes and viral TikTok trends, to music videos, Instagram filters and more.

Crybaby unpicks how cuteness often appears helpless and vulnerable, pulling at our heartstrings and encouraging us to have tender feelings towards it. Exhibits demonstrate the powerful attraction of this aesthetic, from **Margaret Keane's** popular depictions of weeping waifs and strays, to crying figurines and toys, such as **Susie Sad Eyes** dolls, as well as products from the kawaii culture of Yami or 'Sickly Cute'.

Touching on cuteness's inherent playfulness, **Play Together**, showcases how, by inviting us to become childlike again, cuteness can provide a sanctuary from life's anxieties and encourage a sense of belonging and community, sharing and empathy. Visitors can see artefacts and memorabilia from games such as **Animal Crossing** and classic toys including **Tamagotchi, Sylvanian Families**, and **My Little Pony**. A 'Sweet Lolita' Harajuku streetstyle outfit specially commissioned from the artist **Kuniko Kato** shows how the fashion is deployed to encourage kindness and friendship.

Monstrous Other addresses cute's darker side. Cute's ability to shapeshift between opposites such as old and young, ugly and adorable, masculine and feminine, human and unhuman has enabled it to slip easily into the realms of the uncanny and the grotesque. On display are objects including robotic pets, popular toys such as **Furby**, characters including **Gloomy Bear** and **Sumikko Gurashi**, alongside fashion from Japan's 'Gothic Lolita' sub-cultural fashion community.

Sugar-Coated Pill looks at how cuteness is often used to soften the unpalatable. From far-right extremists to big pharma, cuteness has been co-opted in propaganda machines to disguise and control its messaging. But cuteness is

also used as a form of critique. As well as images of far-right propaganda and cuddly toys produced by pharmaceutical companies, on display are artefacts from activist groups such as the Russian art collective **Pussy Riot**, and cuddly plushies of weapons of mass destruction from video games such as **Portal**. A specially-commissioned outfit in the popular Harajuku streetstyle known as 'Decora' by artist **Haruka Kurebayashi** shows how cuteness is used as a mode of rebellion and resistance against the mundanity of society.

Hypersonic sees post-internet cuteness take on its most exuberant form. In today's globally connected, hyper-capitalistic world, cuteness has become accelerated, maximalist, super glossy and futuristic. This section features works from artists and designers such as **Super Nhozagri Kingdom, Xiuching Tsay, Ashley Williams**, and **MSCHF** which reflect this shiny new confidence and point towards cuteness' radical potential to help us find new ways of being human.

Hannah Diamond

In a new commission, *Perfect Dream*, multidisciplinary artist **Hannah Diamond** presents an immersive visual and sonic music installation, inspired by a girl's sleepover, featuring a curated collection of videos from the likes of **SOPHIE, XG, Kim Petras, Marky B, Charli XCX, Carly Rae Jepsen** and **Kyary Pamyu Pamyu** and more, as well as from Diamond herself. Diamond brings her own affirmative vision of hyper pink girlhood to showcase the best of the super cute electronic dance music, which centred around the now-defunct *PC Music* record label and music collective.

Games Arcade

A video games arcade curated by **Now Play This** Producer **Nick Murray** adjoins Diamond's installation space. The arcade shows ways artists and independent game designers use cuteness to evoke feelings of joy, excitement and nostalgia, as well as tackle unexpected subjects unflinchingly. Games available to play include **Peachy Keen Games' Calico**, where the player is tasked with re-building a town's cat café and fill it with cute and cuddly creatures and **Cantusmori's Froggy Pot**, a poignant visual novel where the player must help a character dressed in a frog onesie, suffering from depression, out of a boiling pot of water.

Catalogue

CUTE is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with essays by internationally respected cute scholar **Dr Joshua Paul Dale**, professor in the Department of English Literature and Culture at Chuo University in Tokyo, **Dr Isabel Galleymore**, poet and Lecturer in Creative Writing at University of Birmingham, and writer and art critic **Gabriella Pounds**. The book is designed by **Graphic Thought Facility**.

A selection of *CUTE* themed items, including the exhibition catalogue, are available to buy in the gift shop and online priced at £20.

Digital Experience and Documentary

Cute is extended into the digital world through an interactive character-creator tool, accessed via **iameverythingyouwantmetobe.com**. Appealing to a diverse range of ages and interests, the platform enables

users to customise their own character. Produced by **International Magic**, the platform is an exploration of cuteness that encourages people to express their unique and individual perspectives.

Documentary **The Power of Cute** unpacks the concept of cuteness in contemporary culture, presented on Channel, Somerset House's curated online space for art, ideas and the artistic process. The film features seven artists who use the extraordinary and complex power dynamic of cute in their work: **Rachel Maclean, Ed Forneiles, Chris Zhongtian Yuan, Hattie Stewart, Ram Han, Alake Shilling**. Accompanying the Somerset House exhibition, the film, directed by **Yvonne Zhang** shows how cuteness seeks to enhance, disrupt, and re-imagine the world we live in today. The film is available to view [here](#).

CUTE Upgrade Yourself Takeover

Thursday 22 February 2024

Upgrade Yourself, Somerset House's creative skills programme, takes over *CUTE* for one night only, providing emerging creatives aged 18-30 the chance to connect with likeminded individuals. The free events include development workshops, talks and networking opportunities with industry professionals, as well as free entry to the exhibition.

Exhibition Design

The exhibition is designed by award-winning architects **AOC Architecture**, with internationally renowned stage designer and former **Somerset House Studios** resident artist **Chloe Lamford**, and graphic design by **Graphic Thought Facility**.

CUTE is curated by **Claire Catterall**, Senior Curator at Somerset House.

NOTES TO EDITORS

Dates: 25 January – 14 April 2024

Tickets: General admission £18.50 (concessions, child and family tickets also available), half-price tickets for 25s and under on select Tuesdays

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ABOUT SOMERSET HOUSE

Step Inside, Think Outside

As the home of cultural innovators, Somerset House is a site of origination, with a cultural programme offering alternative perspectives on the biggest issues of our time. We are a place of joy and discovery, where everyone is invited to Step Inside and Think Outside.

From our historic site in the heart of London, we work globally across art, creativity, business, and non-profit, nurturing new talent, methods and technologies. Our resident community of creative enterprises, arts organisations, artists and makers, makes us a centre of ideas, with most of our programme home-grown.

We sit at the meeting point of artistic and social innovation, bringing worlds and minds together to create surprising and often magical results. Our spirit of constant curiosity and counter perspective is integral to our history and key to our future.

ABOUT SANRIO

Sanrio is the global lifestyle brand best known for Hello Kitty who was created in 1974, and home to many other beloved character brands such as My Melody, Kuromi, LittleTwinStars, Cinnamoroll, Pompompurin, gudetama, Aggretsuko, Chococat, Bad Badtz-Maru and Kerokerokeroppi. Sanrio was founded on the philosophy that a small gift can bring happiness and friendship to people of all ages. Since 1960, this philosophy has served as the inspiration to offer quality products, services and activities that promote communication and inspire unique consumer experiences across the world. Today, Sanrio's business extends into the entertainment industry with several content series, gaming offerings and theme parks. Sanrio boasts an extensive product lineup which is available in over 130 countries. Sanrio hopes to bring smiles to everyone's faces with their vision of "One World, Connecting Smiles."

To learn more about Sanrio, please visit www.sanrio.eu and follow on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.