

The Cuteness Factor

Jun 23 — Nov 12, 2023 | Ludwig Museum, Budapest, Hungary

The museum's new temporary exhibition will explore the theme of cuteness, a current phenomenon in contemporary art that is attracting increasing professional interest.

Cuteness first appeared in paintings and prints in Japan during the Edo period (17th–19th centuries). It then became popular in the 1970s with the rise of *kawaii* (the Japanese word for cute), a cultural phenomenon that permeated all aspects of life, and gradually spread throughout the world. Today, cuteness can also be seen as a global visual trend, with distinctive elements originating from the visual world of pop culture (e.g. manga and anime, cartoons and video games).

Today, we are witnessing the universality and widespread presence of “cuteness”. Alongside social media posts, emojis and gifs, this aesthetic is reflected in a multitude of logos, advertisements and anthropomorphised objects.

What is the source of its enduring popularity? What social processes or crises does its increased presence reflect? How does contemporary art relate to this visual phenomenon, and what potential or danger does it represent? These questions are not only of concern to professionals, but may also be important for the viewer to answer.

The rapid emergence of cuteness since the millennium and its increased social embeddedness have made it increasingly urgent to undertake more in-depth scientific (sociological, economic, psychological) and critical investigations to understand this global phenomenon. These explorations go well beyond the category of cuteness as a mere commodity aesthetics, and focus rather on the complexity of its performative role in communication.

The aesthetics of cuteness has also influenced contemporary visual artists due to the large amount of visual, mainly digital, content in constant circulation. The conditions offered by social media, and determined by the necessity of technology (square aesthetics), blur the boundaries between art and commodity, between self-expression and material gain (e.g. influencers), and thus public and private life often become inextricably intertwined. At the same time, the fact that cuteness in contemporary art draws much of its inspiration from visual means of expression that do not belong to high art but to comics, cartoons and video games, further reinforces the decentralised nature of contemporary culture as a phenomenon.

The exhibition explores the ways in which each artist has incorporated the cuteness factor into their own artistic practice: what theories they have drawn on and what forms of representation or evocative devices they have chosen to express the message they wish to convey.

The exhibition *The Cuteness Factor* is the first major presentation of the theme in Hungary and in the region. As an institution of contemporary art, the Ludwig Museum considers it a priority to keep abreast of changes and current phenomena in the world and to present them to the wider public. The exhibition is not primarily intended to convey value judgements, but to explore and understand a global visual and theoretical phenomenon through the works of international and Hungarian artists.

The international selection seeks to outline a transcontinental perspective that reflects the universality of art. The exhibition features 32 artists from 14 countries, including internationally renowned contemporary artists such as Cosima von Bonin, Eddie Martinez, Annette Messager, Austin Lee, Takashi Murakami, Katherine Bernhardt, as well as young artists from Hungary (Szabolcs Bozó, Mira Makai) and the region (Maja Djordjevic, Martin Lukáč).