The Retro-Futurism of Cuteness

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A power struggle is inherent to cuteness, to the extent that this struggle, if unacknowledged and undirected, will manifest itself at the cute object’s expense. I examine this phenomenon through a close analysis of Katie Sokoler’s 2012 Tampax Radiant tampon print advertisement and television commercial, and through a comparison of Sokoler to the works of Yayoi Kusama. I work from the colloquial definition of cuteness as “applied to people as well as things, with the sense ‘attractive, pretty, charming’; also, ‘attractive in a mannered way’” (“Cute”). Identified by infantile physical characteristics and behavior, associated with the feminine and deemed powerless, cuteness is an aesthetic, an affect, and a strategy. My understanding of cuteness comes from personal experience and is influenced by the work of Sianne Ngai, who argues that

[t]here is no judgment or experience of an object as cute that does not call up one’s sense of power over it as something less powerful. But the fact that the cute object seems capable of making demands on us regardless, as Lori Merish underscores—a demand for care that women in particular often
feel addressed or interpellated by — suggests that “cute” designates not just the site of a static power differential but also the site of a surprisingly complex power struggle. (11)

Like many cute objects, tampon advertisements are so easily dismissible that even tampon companies, such as U by Kotex in their “Reality Check” advertisement, have chosen to sell tampons through parodies of tampon commercials’ normalized absurdity. Associative logic, like cute objects and tampon commercials, is similarly dismissed.

In Style in Costume James Laver pairs images of architecture, clothing, and furniture, one on either side of the page. Laver, the Keeper of Prints, Drawings and Paintings for the Victoria and Albert Museum between 1938 and 1959, demonstrates that connections can be made through seemingly superficial formal qualities like color and shape. As Elizabeth Grosz explains in Chaos, Territory, Art:
The capacity that all artworks have to be located within a milieu of other artworks—even as upheaval and innovation—means that they are constituted not through intentionality but through the work itself, through its capacity to be connected to, or severed from, other works. (70–71)

Since mainstream culture tends to dismiss cute objects, menstrual products, and at times associative logic as employed by Laver, I seek to use associative logic in examining Sokoler’s Tampax Radiant campaign as a site of the power struggle inherent to cuteness. My study is not a critique of Ms. Sokoler but an exploration of the power struggle inherent in the aesthetic and affect Sokoler had chosen.

**Katie Sokoler**

“Hi there!” Sokoler greets readers of her blog (fig. 1). A self-described “freelance artist and photographer living in Brooklyn” who creates, builds, styles, designs, performs, directs, and shoots, Sokoler studied photography at the Fashion Institute of Technology and has worked as a photographer for Gothamist, a New York City events and news website, and Improv Everywhere, a New York City–based prank collective. On her blog, Sokoler cheerfully announced her project with Tampax:

> Super fun news! [Katie Sokoler] was contacted by Tampax to be a part of their new campaign about stand out girls. They wanted to feature three creative, unique, real women with their art. A street artist, yarn bomber, and balloon artist. It’s the first time they’ve ever used real women in their ads instead of models!

Sokoler’s Tampax Radiant print advertisement features her shielding herself from a purple, magenta, turquoise, and canary yellow construction paper rainstorm with a matching canary yellow umbrella. Cloud cut-outs and open paint cans, remnants of Sokoler’s artistic process, lie beside her bubblegum pink
rain boots as a gust of wind innocently lifts up the skirt of her blue-and-white polka-dot dress. The text superimposed on the photograph reads: “NEW TAMPAX RADIANT HELPS KEEP YOUR PERIOD INVISIBLE. HOW YOU CHOOSE TO STAND OUT IS UP TO YOU” (fig. 2).
Sokoler’s Tampax Radiant television commercial opens with Sokoler scooting across the screen with paper clouds tucked under her arm. We see Sokoler climb a ladder in her polka-dot dress, polka-dot socks, and heels and tape construction-paper clouds and raindrops to the side of a white brick building. Pedestrians walk by, framed by the camera so that they are caught under Sokoler’s rainstorm (fig. 3). Sokoler’s Tampax activities are spliced with shots of her smiling through a piece of torn purple construction paper, and overlaid with audio from an interview with the artist:

My name is Katie Sokoler and I am a fun maker. I am a photographer. I am an actress. I am a blogger and a street artist. I wanted to try to try something new with photography. Instead of shooting models, I wanted to shoot real people. I thought of this idea of making interactive street art where I create a piece on the wall, and use my camera to photograph people walking under it. I like doing street art because I love making art, and I love putting art in public places so other people can enjoy them. Making street art helps me express myself. It all comes together when someone walks under it and I sort of almost think of it like they’re falling into this little trap. I have a few times had the cops called on me, and the cops come and they’re like, “Oh! This is just paper!” I think I stand out because I really like doing things that make other people happy. (“Tampax”)

Sokoler’s accessories are deliberately cute, as polka dots are a brightly colored graphic pattern most often used on children’s clothing, toys, and furniture; and her choice of artistic materials — brightly colored construction paper, scissors, and tape — are reminiscent of elementary craft projects. Wide-eyed and constantly smiling, Sokoler presents herself through a cute affect that reads as carefree, exuberant, pleasing, and genuine. Since her art exists in the public sphere, Sokoler deploys cuteness as an effective strategy to delight rather than upset her audience when they are caught in her trap-like installations and
to soothe the fears of police officers who are concerned about maintaining the neutrality, however false, of public space.

Language

Power struggle is evident in Sokoler’s introduction of her Tampax Radiant tampon campaign. On her blog, Color Me Katie, Sokoler writes: “It’s the first time they’ve ever used real women in their ads instead of models!” (emphasis added). By identifying herself, Jessie Hemmons (Tampax Radiant’s yarn bomber), and Jihan Zencirli (Tampax Radiant’s balloon artist) as real women, Sokoler implicitly argues that models are not real women. Although it might be useful to take Sokoler’s words, her art, and her choice of wardrobe and affect as her own rather than products of an artistic director, the distinction between real and nonreal women is problematic, as Sokoler gains leverage and authenticates her message by taking humanity away from professional models.
Katie Mellor, artistic director of Tampax, saw the fact that she “had to talk about something no one wants to talk about in an interesting way” as a challenge and envisioned the solution as a campaign that “used young girls who are doing visually creative things in the world and who don’t let their periods get in the way of standing out.” When Sokoler filmed her advertisement, she was twenty-five years old. Therefore, to speak of Sokoler, Hemmons, and Zencirli as “young girls” effectively infantilizes and disempowers them. Furthermore, to suggest that what keeps women who are doing visually creative work from standing out is anything other than gender inequality in the contemporary art world is dangerously misdirected. According to Gallery Tally’s October 2014 report, of the “over 4,000 artists represented in L.A. and New York […] 32.3 percent were women” (Reilly).

Why did Mellor choose to establish herself and her project by referring to the women who starred in her campaign as “young girls,” characterizing their subject matter as something “no one wants to talk about,” and identifying menstruation as what keeps women “who are doing visually creative things in the world” from standing out? Perhaps it is the same reason Tampax Radiant crafted products featuring “designer packaging and wrappers that compliment [sic] any girl’s unique style, making these products must-have accessories any time of the month” that are meant to help “KEEP YOUR PERIOD INVISIBLE” (“Tampax”). I’m getting mixed messages here. As a person who menstruates, I too can stand out with these accessories designed both to complement my style and to help me to keep invisible something no one wants to talk about.

Tampax’s “KEEP YOUR PERIOD INVISIBLE” is a mandate because if “you” failed to do so, you would be censored. On March 24, 2015, Toronto-based poet and artist Rupi Kaur posted a photograph of her fully clothed sister on Instagram (fig. 4). Within twenty-four hours, Instagram took down the photograph and claimed it had violated the platform’s community guidelines. Instagram eventually restored the photograph, but only after Kaur penned an open letter on Facebook that garnered a significant amount of attention and support. As Kaur told the Washington
Post, “They allow porn on Instagram, but not periods? How dare they tell me my clothed body, the way I wake up at least once every month, is ‘violating’ and ‘unsafe?’” (Dewey).

Reading Aristotle’s Politics in The Human Condition, Hannah Arendt discusses the notion of who can exist in the public realm and who must be resigned to the private realm:

The distinction between the private and public realms, seen from the viewpoint of privacy rather than of the body politic, equals the distinction between things that should be shown and things that should be hidden. […] Hidden away were the laborers who “with their bodies minister to the [bodily] needs of life,” and the women who with their bodies guarantee the physical survival of the species. Women and slaves belonged to the same category and were hidden away not only because they were somebody else’s property but because their life was “laborious,” devoted to bodily functions. (72)
Tampax’s dictate to “KEEP YOUR PERIOD INVISIBLE” falls within the tradition of relegating women and their bodily functions to the private realm. Before I can champion the exposure of two street artists who use feminized aesthetics, materials, and artistic processes to alter public space, I find that Tampax contextualizes their campaign by claiming to sell a product meant to help continue relegating women’s labor to the private realm. As two powerful means of cutification, infantilization, and feminization work to evoke cuteness as what Ngai terms “an eroticization of powerlessness” that evokes “tenderness for ‘small things’ but also, sometimes, a desire to belittle or diminish them further” (4). While attempting to empower people who menstruate to stand out, Sokoler and Mellor leverage their power by publicly belittling models — their chosen standout girls “who are doing visually creative things in the world” — as well as customers who menstruate visibly.

**Violence**

It is important to acknowledge and direct the power struggle inherent in cuteness; otherwise, this power struggle, which in-
includes elements of psychological abuse, such as the desire to belittle or diminish objects assumed to be powerless, will make itself visible. It is clear from Sokoler’s interview for her Tampax Radiant television commercial that something not entirely sac-

Figure 6. Jessie Hemmons’ Tampax® Radiant tampon print advertisement. “Tampax Radiant Print Advertising Campaign.” ishknits, 9 July 2012.
charine is transpiring. Sokoler claims: “I wanted to try to try something new with photography. Instead of shooting models, I wanted to shoot real people […]. It all comes together when someone walks under it and I sort of almost think of it like they’re falling into a little trap” (“Tampax”; fig. 5).

In her analysis of the power of photography, Susan Sontag argues that “to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge — and, therefore, like power” (4). For Sontag, photography bestows upon its viewer an imaginary possession of an unreal past and “of a space in which they are insecure” (9). To “load” film, “aim” a camera, “shoot” a subject, and “capture” an image are all common action verbs used to describe photographic processes that link cameras and guns, images and bodies, and representation and warfare. Distinguishing once more between real people and models, Sokoler deploys photographic idioms to describe her artistic process. Her language directs us toward an understanding of her street art as an act of aggression meant to claim a position of power and to gain control over public space, where she might normally feel insecure.

Hemmons, the yarn bomber, joins Sokoler as a standout girl who makes art that articulates itself through violent terminology (fig. 6). In “Craft, Gender and Politics,” Amy Gilligan questions the term yarn bombing because the contemporary craft deliberately does not distance itself from its “maternal” gestures and instead consciously acknowledges and validates an arena where, historically, women artists could “stand out.” Gilligan contends that “even if the identification of craft in protest with women isn’t shouted about, the ‘feminine’ nature of craft is still there below the surface, and used as a contrast to the ‘masculinity’ of war” (Gilligan). The contrast, Gillian argues, reinforces gender binarism that locates women as soft and caring and men as aggressive.

Neither the print advertisements nor the television commercials that Sokoler and Hemmons designed for Tampax Radiant speak directly of their choice of feminized aesthetics — the
materials and artistic processes with which they challenged the archetypical masculinity of warfare and the public realm. I wonder who exactly made the artistic and ideological decisions here. I am tempted to redirect the power I had previously seen in Sokoler and Hemmons because of the authenticity of their message and the politically relevant nature of their work, and to hand it over to anyone who can explain more clearly the participation of the two street artists in this Tampax campaign. But why am I so quick to dismiss Sokoler and Hemmons? Would I be so quick to question their knowledge of their own artwork if they had worked within another aesthetic framework? This could explain how two visually creative women seemed like the right “standout girls” to sell products and push a message that, in actuality, contradicts directly the value of their feminized aesthetics, materials, and artistic processes in gaining possession of the public realm.

Figure 7. White on black infinity net painting. Yayoi Kusama, No. F (959). The Museum of Modern Art.
I began this chapter by dismissing tampon commercials. I also acknowledged and examined the power struggle inherent in cuteness through Sokoler’s 2012 Tampax Radiant advertising campaign. But in trying to prove my argument, I too belittle Sokoler, Mellor, and Hemmons, women who I assumed were powerless in the first place. Have I joined them in being manipulated by the very aesthetic that I’m trying to deconstruct?

Yayoi Kusama

When I saw Sokoler’s television commercial, I immediately thought of Yayoi Kusama and her all-encompassing polka-dot installations. What solidified the connection was the fact that Sokoler wears a polka-dot dress in her advertising materials, which alludes to Kusama’s propensity to dress in the same type of pattern. Moreover, Sokoler’s project is sponsored by a corporation, a sponsorship only slightly less glamorous than that of Louis Vuitton, with which Kusama has a business partnership. Kusama functions as a valuable comparison to the lack of clarity surrounding Sokoler’s tampon project. (There I go belittling Sokoler again; this is a particularly nasty strain of cuteness…) Kusama’s early articulation of the power struggle and violence inherent to her polka-dot installations allows her to use, rather than be used by, cuteness to belittle others, only to remain ultimately disempowered.

Yayoi Kusama had her first solo exhibition at Brata Gallery in New York City in October 1959. The exhibition consisted of several white-on-black infinity-net paintings (fig. 7).

In her autobiography, Infinity Net, Kusama writes:

I often suffered episodes of severe neurosis. I would cover a canvas with nets, then continue painting them on the table, on the floor, and finally on my own body. As I repeated this process over and over again, the nets began to expand to infinity. I forgot about myself as they enveloped me, clinging to my arms and legs and clothes and filling the entire room. (20)
Already existing off the canvas, Kusama’s infinity nets took spatial form when she converted the nets’ negative space into polka dots. Kusama reflects on her intentions in using polka dots and on their connection to the infinity net:

My desire was to predict and measure the infinity of the unbounded universe, from my own position in it, with dots—an accumulation of particles forming the negative spaces in the net. How deep was the mystery? Did infinite infinities exist beyond our universe? In exploring these questions I wanted to examine the single dot that was my own life. One polka dot: a single particle among billions. I issued a manifesto stating that everything—myself, others, the entire universe—would be obliterated by white nets of nothingness connecting astronomical accumulations of dots. White nets enveloping the black dots of silent death against a pitch-dark background of nothingness. (23)

The first adventures of Kusama’s polka dots off the canvas took place in her solo exhibition, *Infinity Mirror Room — Phalli’s Field*, at R. Castellane Gallery in November 1965. According to Kusama,

The walls of the room were mirrors, and sprouting from the floor were thousands of white canvas phallic forms covered with red polka dots. The mirrors reflected them infinitely, summoning up a sublime, miraculous field of phalluses. People could walk barefoot through the phallus meadow, becoming one with the work and experiencing their own figures and movements as part of the sculpture. Wandering into this infinite wonderland, where a grandiose aggregation of human sexual symbols had been transformed into a humorous, polka-dotted field, viewers found themselves spellbound by the imagination as it exorcised sexual sickness in the naked light of day. (48–51)
Although Kusama arrived at the cute form of the polka dot, which delivers her ideas with humor, the polka dot developed out of the negative space of infinity nets that Kusama saw, experienced, and painted during episodes of severe neurosis. Kusama has spoken about the origin of her forms and their impact on the development of her ideas. Instead of her polka dots being used to possess space in the public sphere or to trap innocent bystanders, Kusama points out that the bystanders are already trapped, along with her, in a white net of nothingness that connects the accumulation of dots that are our lives.

Publics

As Michael Warner theorizes in *Publics and Counterpublics*, a public is a space organized by discourse. It is autotelic and exits only “by virtue of being addressed” (67). Not only do Sokoler and Kusama sell us tampons, handbags, and artwork through cuteness, they also create publics in which you and I participate. How is it that, regardless of their similarities, Sokoler and Kusama are creating different publics because of the differences in their manners of address? Looking at what kinds of spaces of discourse Sokoler and Kusama create is important because of the infectious nature of cuteness. This infectiousness, I argue, gives the artists the short-term power of constituting a public, which, in turn, makes cuteness seem like a suitable strategy. On the infectiousness of the cute, Ngai draws attention to the fact that “the admirer of the cute puppy or baby often ends up unconsciously emulating that object’s infantile qualities in the language of her aesthetic appraisal” (3), not unlike the automatic mimesis experienced by viewers of horror films, melodrama, and pornography.1

A similar kind of mimicry is evident in the space of discourse that Sokoler has created on her blog, *Color Me Katie*. Of the 109 comments Sokoler received on her blog post introducing her Tampax ad (fig. 8), “cute” comes in first place in the adjective

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1 See Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess” (1991).
race, with a total of eighteen mentions. “Cool,” “awesome,” and “fun” are not even close seconds, with thirteen mentions each. Adjectives used in the comment section, in order of their frequency, include: “cute” (including its variations of “super cute,” “very cute,” and “cutest”), “cool” (“so cool,” “really cool”), “awesome” (“beyond awesome”), “fun” (“super fun”), “great,” “adorable,” “amazing” (“pretty amazing”), “lovely,” “real,” “sweet,” “beautiful,” “fantastic,” “wonderful,” “creative,” “brilliant,” “addictive,” “funny,” “perfect,” “nice,” “phenomenal,” “fabulous,” and “pretty.” Furthermore, bloggers mirrored Sokoler’s enthusiasm in their choice of punctuation with no less than 182 exclamation points and twenty-five smiley-face emoticons: :-). On July 9, 2012, at 1:05 p.m., Anna L. Roeder posted, “How amazing! probably the best tampon ad ever made. Actually makes it kind of cute. Love your art and radiance!” By “it” Roeder appears to refer to the menstrual cycle. This means that the

Figure 8. Adjectives used by commenters on Katie Sokoler’s Color Me Katie “Tampax Ad” blog post. “Tampax Ad,” Color Me Katie, 9 July 2012.
infectiousness of cuteness has infected not only Sokoler’s audience, as articulated in the public space of discourse of a blog, but also her chosen subject matter.

In comparison, Kusama has used cuteness to ease adults into conversation around art, anxiety, infinity, nothingness, obliteration, death, sexuality, and sickness “in the naked light of day.” Kusama addresses her public with her severe neurosis clearly by her side, seeking a shared obliteration.

Conclusion

Although we have no choice as to what publics we participate in, we can choose what brand of cuteness we will deploy to address others, which will create other publics and infect other spaces of discourse. Not being trapped, shot, infantilized, rendered invisible, bombed, or obliterated seem like ideal options. But if I had a choice in my space of discourse, I would go with the kind of public that is created by an artist who speaks to me as an adult and invites me into a conversation about power through the aesthetic of cuteness, rather than a public created by an artist or an artistic director, that seems to control their chosen aesthetic only to belittle the power of its participants, yet not enough to avoid ultimately being disempowered by it in turn.
Works Cited


