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Allison Burda and Cameron Gee, **Fuwa Fuwa, Joie de Vivre**

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When you look at *Fuwa Fuwa*, how do you feel? Don't put this feeling into words, just remember your initial reaction (You may need to revisit it later). When artists Allison Burda and Cam Gee began showing their creation, viewers were sometimes confused about what exactly they were looking at. This mischievous-looking anthropomorphic character has occasionally been mistaken for a chicken, or even an egg yolk. The most frequent response the artists received was excitement, and this inspired them. Ultimately, however, this installation resists being understood in a singular reading.

The idea for *Fuwa Fuwa* came after a trip to Japan, a country renowned for its worldwide cultural influence. While some would categorize Japan as having an austere and work-oriented lifestyle, other visitors experience a dreamlike atmosphere. Allison and Cam were drawn into this contrast as they observed the way people interacted with “yuru-kyara” (Japanese for ‘living cartoon designs’) in their daily lives. These mascots, adored for their wacky behavior and unassuming nature, often reach celebrity status. You may be familiar with “Domo-kun”, a furry rectangular monster with jagged teeth and the official mascot of Japan's public broadcaster NHK, or “Kumamon,” a black and white bear, and the official mascot of Kumamoto prefecture.

Allison and Cam were struck by how *everything* in Japan has a mascot. Westerners who have only ever observed mascots as representatives of a school, sports team, or corporation, might be shocked to see how widespread this international phenomenon of creepy/cute is. Every restaurant, geographical region, sport, and even toilet paper brand seems to have its own unique ambassador. Most significant, perhaps, is that not only does *everything* seemingly have a mascot, but *everyone* earnestly embraces this phenomenon without irony, but rather devotion. Allison and Cam observed that the “kawaii,” or cute aesthetic does not have an infantilizing stigma. Instead, even

straightlaced workers and senior citizens can be seen with mascot-branded merchandise. Again, hard work, silliness, fantasy and reality converge in a world where life may not always be easy, but entertaining mascots can offer a possibility of escape.

With these observations in mind, Allison and Cam invented a mascot of their own: *Fuwa Fuwa*, a mascot for “Joie de Vivre.” As collaborators on a variety of light-hearted, yet meaningful illustration, animation and mixed-media projects, they found themselves impulsively drawing this character. For *Fuwa Fuwa: Joie de Vivre*, the design process included cutting and upholstering wooden forms, laser-cutting and sewing acrylic and fabric accessories as facial features, and lastly, combining all of these parts. Additionally, the artists reflected on what the feeling of “joie de vivre” means to them personally and how to communicate this concept to others through the mascot’s form. The result is a playful and eccentric character, shown here in various moments of daily life.

Wearing expressive clothing and accessories such as a floral swimsuit, boots or sunglasses, *Fuwa* is the embodiment of carefree confidence. Body language and facial expressions are minimalist, but meaningful. Whether aware of an observer or not, this living cartoon character continues living life in the same joyful way.

The instant appeal of *Fuwa* is in the aesthetic choices Allison and Cam have made; the ‘universal’ attraction to certain colours, soft shapes, plush textures and anthropomorphic features such as eyes and clothes draw in the viewer. The aim of these creative decisions is to engage the viewer with a shape that is soft, strange, simple and ultimately relatable. The artists muse that this connection is further brought on by *Fuwa*’s simultaneous appearance of being ‘confidently funny-looking.’

There are many reasons why ‘cuteness’ evokes strong and conflicting reactions, such as the instinct to protect, or the impulse to destroy.<sup>1</sup> Because “yuru-kyara” are instantly recognizable and able to effortlessly communicate a message, they have been representatives of abstract or serious concepts like regional tourism, cultural education, public services, even political ideas and current events. In this way, something that is seemingly cute and simple can in effect become a catalyst for education, social organizing and positive change. However, a significant portion of Japanese mascots were meant to be taken at face value for their cuteness. When speaking with friends

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<sup>1</sup> When seeing *Fuwa* for the first time, some viewers have told the artists that they are unsure if they want to befriend or punch this creature! Allison Burda, interviewed by Rachel Davis, Toronto ON, July 24th

knowledgeable about Japanese culture, Allison and Cam realized that the purpose of most mascots was simply to make people feel happy. When looking for meaning, maybe the viewer only needs to further examine their own initial reactions and accept them at face value.

With *Fuwa*, Allison and Cam have crafted a mascot that is a reminder of universal feelings of earnestness and innocence. The artists emphasize the importance of “celebrating the moments” when joy is experienced. Furthermore, they ask the viewers to reflect on what makes them happy *regardless* of what is going on around them. They concede that self-love is aspirational, but possibly unrealistic. Feeling joy all the time is a fantasy, because emotions are not stable like the wooden and plastic elements used to create this installation. Instead, happiness is as unpredictable as the zany character we imagine when we see this art. “Joie de Vivre” is the calm in the storm of daily life. Remember your initial reaction to seeing *Fuwa*. Pay attention to this feeling when- and wherever you may find it, appreciate it, and remember it for when you need it most!

-Rachel Davis