Conceptual Memes for Dantonian Dreams: Aesthetic and ontological considerations

of the Internet Meme

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Abstract:

The genesis of the "Internet Meme" as an aesthetic phenomenon subverts the landscape of art and aesthetic judgment as we know it. The Internet Meme as a sociocultural, communicative, and political tool has had undeniable influence in the domains of political theory, media studies, and discursive formations. By contrast, philosophical aesthetics has been slow to investigate this topic. In this thesis, I hope to undertake an analysis of the ontological and aesthetic nature of the Internet Meme through its countless evolutions, reformulations, and assemblages. I hope to outline a genealogy of the Internet Meme, as well as to present theories of memetic interest relating to their comic, aesthetic, ontological, and political influence and appeal. I employ the Gautian defense in positing that the Internet Meme is a work of art in its own right. In doing so, I hope to delineate an aesthetic nature of the Internet Meme, as well as to elucidate the reasons for our enchantment with them. In the second portion of this thesis, I present a discussion of memes as they fit into Arthur Danto's "End of Art" thesis. I argue that Memes can be interpreted to fall within the confines of the existing "style matrix" which encapsulates the forms of art developing out of history, specifically within the category of "conceptual art" due to the self-consciousness of memes and their capacity to be considered as works of art subverting structure and narrative altogether. Lastly, I present the movement of art towards self-consciousness, wherein memes function as a reflection of this phenomenon with their complete realization of themselves through the qualities of "meta-ness" and self-referentiality.

Part 1

<u>Section I: A Brief History of the Meme</u>

The term "meme" was coined by Richard Dawkins in his book, *The Selfish Gene*, where he analogizes the concept of memes to the gene as an informational unit of self-replication in a chromosome. Dawkins defines the meme as "[conveying] the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation". I will separate my definition of "meme" from his, instead invoking a discussion of the Internet Meme and its meanings. The origins of the Internet Meme in a non-Dawkinsian sense can be traced back to the Baby Cha-Cha-Cha meme, also known as Dancing Baby meme[1], which was created by Kinetix Character Studios in 1996. It featured a GIF of an animated baby dancing. Since then, the memosphere has been propelled to new heights, and different iterations of classic memes (such as the trollface, as I will later discuss) have percolated throughout the internet. Early memes involved the circulation of macro images[2] (memes traditionally formatted with **Impact** font-style top and bottom texts, superimposed onto a conspicuous image of a well-known person, thing, or animal) which were disseminated on sites like The Taste of Awesome to be marveled at. Lighthearted, bizarre, and a little vapid, memes then were supposedly in a stage of infancy, paralleling the youthful innocence of those who dared browse. The infamous zany "I Can Haz Cheezburger?" LOLcat memes[3] -- which butchered spelling and structure -- gave rise to the formation of meme-based communities of voters, commentators and disseminators on meme-bearing platforms such as Reddit, 4chan and 9gag. Seemingly harmless online interactions with memes foreshadowed memetic power, which would later manifest themselves as social impact in the pushing of political and discursive agendas and social commentary, as well as the piquing of aesthetic fascinations. To be immersed in virtual life is to be cognizant of impressions, adaptation, flows, and change in the world of

exchanges. The internet has lent itself well to the creation and sustainment of internet art -- "This means that when an artist is using the internet as an artistic medium, she expresses herself through such interconnectedness of digitalised representations. In other words, we can assert that by using the internet as a medium, artists manipulate such digitalised interconnectedness to achieve some kind of artistic statement or purpose" (Šparada, p. 12). This statement, I think, epitomizes the world of mememaking in all of its metamodern grandeur. The internet births aesthetic life and human interdependence with the development of meme spaces and digital art. The memetic form has since undergone an unbridled revolution, a far-cry from the lighthearted kitty image macros, paving way for the new wave of memes containing elements of absurdism, meta, and postmodern thought, distorted much like our visions of the transcendent future.

Section II: The Ontology of the Internet Meme

Ontological considerations of the Internet Meme are essential to its study. Because of the relative lack of serious philosophical examination of the Internet Meme, I hope to illustrate an aesthetic framework that will be useful in understanding it. I will utilize a working definition of the meme employed by Raoul Titulaer which I believe best encapsulates the memetic "event":

"X is a meme* if and only if:

(M1) X is an image or video that may or may not contain text or be purely textual and can be subject to heavy editing,

(M2) X is either the paradigmatic example of a meme (the meme format), a variation on a known meme format, or it adheres to a style associated with (certain) memes,

(M3) X is intended to be shared to a certain extent, and is intended to make the viewer laugh, and

(M4) X has a certain lifespan or is closely related to a certain (cultural) phenomenon".

Because of this clear reliance on the capacity for memes to be edited, formatted, and engaged

with, there is an evident aesthetic nature that can be attributed to memes. Professor and meme

theorist Anthony Cross describes the image-based meme as being ontologically thick or thin.

Ontologically thick memes are memes in which "the set of rules strictly governs the form and/or

content of what will count as a particular instance of the meme", and ontologically thinner

memes are memes that "leave open a great deal of space for interpretation and revision on the

part of the user in generating an instance of the meme". An example of an ontologically thin

meme is the Wojak[4], a meme template which is subject to various reimaginations and

employments in various contexts, typically used in order to signify feelings of wistfulness (more

on this later). A meme that can be described as being ontologically thick includes the

Philosoraptor meme[5], which represents a thoughtful cartoon dinosaur being engrossed with

philosophical quandaries, ranging from silly semantic exercises to conundrums worth our

consideration. In this meme, format and execution is explicitly defined with the Velociraptor

being the centerpiece of the meme, the green background, and the posing of metaphysical

questions -- there is not much imaginative force at play with the execution of such a meme.

Some memes, however, seem to defy this dichotomous relationship in their adherence to

structure and form, while simultaneously subverting it. For example, the Brother in Christ meme[6]

does not seem to fit into the categories of ontological thinness nor thickness. The original meme

has undergone a pretty drastic semantic overhaul in an attempt to offer a "cleaner" rendition of

the meme (which originally contained the N-word). Various iterations of this meme have been

created in order to describe some conflict or cognitive dissonance as being self-imposed.

Recaptioning memes is one of the most popular ways in which instances of the meme are

recycled and crafted anew. We might ask, what is it about this meme that is so positively

engaging? In order to embark on the task of studying memes and their form, it would be prudent to inquire into what it is about memes that makes them so topical. I would like to offer a response to this question of memetic preoccupation with a three-pronged approach, invoking the domains of the aesthetic and ontological, the comic, and the political. I hope to delineate an aesthetic nature of the meme, elucidate theories of comedic engagement and connect them to aesthetic understandings of the meme, as welty-formation and in vested interests in the political.

The ontological examination of memes is perhaps best understood through *memographic practice*, a term coined by Simon J. Evnine to denote the "meta-level of activity" involved in disseminating, commenting on, ranking, critiquing, collecting and engaging with memes. In this article, Evnine wants to resist identifying memes as being simply image-based. The social impetus governing the transmission of memes should not be separated from the meme itself, because it is precisely the social element that allows for the modification, popularization and even the actualization of the meme. Some memes can be ontologically defined by their narrative and affective components, which are socially mediated through memographic practice. This social mediation presumes a certain memetic result in which "people start using the images in ways that connect them to certain affects and/or narratives, others respond and imitate, there is consolidation and refinement through the early stages of a meme's history" (Evnine, p. 307). The rules governing the production of a meme are *norms*. This description of memographic practice goes to show that the memetic form does not exist in a vacuum. Defining memes as being image-based is an extremely limitational encapsulation of an entire array of acts, utterances, and even Tweets. The author invokes the Planking meme[7], whose norms involve horizontally extending oneself on a flat surface. Carrying out this act in real life is an example of "memeing", wherein the subject becomes the meme itself, no flash photography. Memographic practice can

be construed as the thing which sustains and interlinks memetic networks of interaction, mediating the cultural memetry, replicating units of information in a Dawkinsian sense. Michel Foucault has this to say about the post-language, authorless world -- "I think that, as our society changes … the author function will disappear, and in such a manner that fiction and its polysemous texts will once again function according to another mode…All discourses…would then develop in the anonymity of a murmur". Memes capture the essence of this sentiment through their authorlessness, communality of contribution, and distaste for the culture of individualism wherein sole actors are able to make claims to fame for their artistry. The existence of memes defies this construct, because memes are dependent on collaborative efforts to create memeplexes containing different niche subcategories of memes. Memes possess inherent artistic qualities that contribute to the dissolution of the producer-consumer binary:

"As with art in general, people make them to express their feelings, to entertain, to comment on various things, or simply to exercise their skill, virtuosity, and wit. Memographic practice, then, should be seen as a kind of artistic practice. It is, however, an artistic practice that, relative to historical norms of preceding centuries, reconfigures…the relation between producer and product" (Evnine, p. 311).

In surveying the various definitions of art, expressivity and identification with expression seem to be oft-cited ideas of what it means to create art, and what constitutes artistry. But, memes go even further. They explore the effects of expression and identification on a much grander collective scale through the actuation of an imaginative potential. Memes help us to fashion our individuality and, simultaneously, embrace communality through expression. Art historian and theorist Hans Belting correctly states that "digital images pursue the mimesis of our collective imagination." The concept of a meme is taken for granted by many, but somehow, it is ingrained in the consciousness of nearly everybody in the digital cohort. Memes allow one to engage in the "social logic of participation", which is described by researchers Limor Shifman and Barry

Wellman as "networked individualism", where we simultaneously craft individual online personas and enthusiastically participate in social networking. Amazingly, memes can help us cultivate an actual identity while maintaining our position as bearers and sharers of memes -- while inadvertently forging an identity, laughter, and a sense of community in others as well.

The ease with which memes are replicated intrinsically demonstrates their form. It has been theorized that memes are not so different from other artistic works in the way that they are disseminated and modified. The Aristotelian notion of mimesis, or "imitation" is especially salient when considering the origins of the meme. Meme researcher Felipe Daniel Montero invokes the idea of mimesis to argue that mimesis is not merely imitational -- "To understand mimesis as a mere copy is not adequate. Almost in passing, the dictionary offers us the key to the essence of the meme: '(a meme is) an image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by Internet users, often with slight variations'". There is a dynamism, a certain flux that can be attributed to mimesis and meme creation arising out of it. Memes must undergo change to sustain their life force -- "A meme is alive (memes can die, they can fall into oblivion) as long as the meme is copied. However, the mere repetition of a meme ad nauseum only hastens its end". Memes are unlike paintings and photographs in that they are not static in their presentation or authorship -- but they do resemble musical works and live performance. Cover songs, live musical performances and sometimes improvisational works employ mimesis in their execution. Cover songs specifically resemble memes in their adoption of a certain musical contour and the possibility for reimagination to leave room for innovative artistic development. No two live performances are ever the same -- casts and crews are swapped out for the preservation of a work's artistic integrity. Live versions of musical works tend to exhibit some degree of sonic novelty in a freshened delivery, and the list goes on.

Reinterpretations of works have always existed alongside artistry itself. Memes, therefore, are not predicated on notions of fixedness -- frankly, it is the opposite. Critical theorist Walter Benjamin in his work, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* argues that mechanical reproduction of a work of art devalues its uniqueness. Mass-production of artistic works results in the detachment of the work from its artistic traditions, uniqueness, and authoritative influence on the individual consuming it:

"Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction… To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction."

What are we to say, then, about memes? Does a similar fate befall them? This question is not so easy to answer, however, given what we have just established about the intrinsic properties of memes lending themselves especially and completely to variation and reproduction, I believe that memes act as a case against the determinism of such a phenomenon. Perhaps it truly is impossible to envisage an alternative to the perversions of capitalism, and the stronghold it has over production and consumption alike. Are memes then some kind of twisted, teleological, dialectical manifestation of art in a late-capitalist society? Or will they liberate art from this bind as we know it? Are memes harbingers of the End of Art, in Dantonian terms? (Hint: I have a hunch that they are, read on!) Memes subvert this classical relationship to art altogether in their great refusal to adhere to structure, ownership, and other modes of canonical recognition. This distinction isn't even one that exists for memes to begin with, they conceptualize themselves in an entirely different way. The liberation of art as we know it is a near-impossible task that may bring about a stupor of utter helplessness -- we are defanged, stripped of our ability to even appreciate works for their authenticity in an authentic manner. The meme, (while not exactly functioning as an end-all be-all solution to this condition) is the layman's objet d'art. The meme

is even able to fashion a response to this absurdity, in its satirization and bastardization of art itself, alluding to the Dadaist tradition of offering criticism in regard to social ills. To reiterate, the memetic medium is the message, and not even the corporations could take this away from us (though they have certainly tried)[8].

Section III: A Gautian Defense of Memes as Works of Art

In proceeding to discuss memes as a subject of vast aesthetic interest, it would be prudent to elucidate how memes are works of art in their own right. I will be using Berys Gaut's cluster-concept approach to art in the defense of memes as constituting works of art in their own right. The ten criteria that he describes as "the presence of which ordinary judgment counts toward something's being a work of art, and the absence of which counts against it being art" include (1) Possessing positive aesthetic properties, such as being beautiful, graceful, or elegant (properties which ground a capacity to give sensuous pleasure), (2) Being expressive of emotion, (3) Being intellectually challenging, (4) Being formally complex and coherent, (5) Having a capacity to convey complex meanings, (6) Exhibiting an individual point of view, (7) Being an exercise of creative imagination, (8) Being an artifact or performance which is the product of a high degree of skill, (9) Belonging to an established artistic form (music, painting, etc.) and (10) Being the product of an intention to make a work of art. The only stipulation is that the work of art must be created by an action. That being said, I hope to illustrate the reasons why memes, which may arguably be a "borderline case" in the Artworld, are indeed artistic in their own right. It is a commonly held view that memes are capable of rousing pleasure in their capacity to make people laugh. I think there is merit to the idea that sensuous pleasure should involve the inclusion of laughter into its definition, simply because of the visceral intensity of such a response. I present laughter as a legitimate object of consideration in the contents of this paper, and while it

may be difficult to argue for the elegance or gracefulness of meme production and consumption, I do not wish to abandon the subject of sensuousness yet. Memes are certainly expressive of emotion (at times reflecting the emotional state of the producer), are intellectually challenging in the philosophical ideas they impart, are incredibly formally complex given the accepted properties and the familiarity of form with which memes are designed and recognized (albeit with the subversion of coherence at times), and they are certainly able to convey complex meanings (memetic "baggage" in the form of recycling of properties, terminologies, and ideas). As to the question of exhibiting an individual point of view, this is harder to answer. As I've discussed, memes are not wrought into existence by a single authorial entity, and are instead products of a linkage between different canonical practices, collective authorship, and varying degrees of intentionality, as opposed to with traditional works of art. At the same time, it can certainly be argued that memes do in fact reflect individual points of view -- what is any individual point of view if not an amalgamation of synergistic ideas, experiences, and constructs? Memes are a product of creative (albeit at times twisted) imagination, especially original cartoon drawings popularized through the memosphere. I would not argue that memes are a product of a high degree of skill -- their artistic accessibility and reformulations are precisely what render them so replicable. The artistic "craft" used to procure memes should not be confused with their aesthetic nature or appeal. The nuance of evocation tends to not imply or mirror artistic prowess. In fact, it is at times the opposite -- silly images evoke sober responses, following in the tradition of satire. I would not say that memes are instantiated in the Artworld as an established artistic form -- they have yet to reach this level of critical notoriety. Lastly, memes elude the very question of intention -- most memes (especially viral videos and reaction images with a clear human or animal subject in mind) are popularized nonconsensually, with the subject eventually

becoming "removed", sculpted into something larger than itself with every repost. At the same time, however, a creator may sometimes have the conscious intention to create a meme which they see as embodying the ideals of art, or taking works of art and memeing them. Take, for example, Nihilisa Frank memes[9], which take the quintessential Lisa Frank-style templates picturing cartoon animals and extremely vibrant, borderline psychedelic graphic design sensibilities which resonated with those growing up in the 2000s and turn these works on their head, adding a nihilistic spin with the inclusion of text. The original work, though not a meme, was appropriated to fit a memetic mold, purveying the aims of graphic design and internet art. Thus, it can be articulated that memes fit within the Gautian cluster concept framework quite well. It is for these reasons that I believe that the Internet Meme should be regarded as a work of art in its own right.

Section IV: The Aesthetic Nature and Interest of the Meme

Much like other forms of artistry, the Internet Meme has an undeniable aesthetic nature which captivates the average inhabitant of digital space. Meme researcher and professor Seong-Young Her in his manifesto *The Artist-Philosopher Manifesto* (Or, *An Escape from the Infinite Regress of Art-for-Art's-Sake and the Ego-Artist Ideal in the Age of Internet Art*) delivers a clarion call to action regarding liberating art from its state of creational bankruptcy:

"Art hitherto has been mere 'art about', with the 'art' of art-making acting only as the means to the end of making artworks, whether it be traditional or avant-garde. We call for the 'art-of-art', which accepts the function of art as not only the product to be consumed but a creative process in its own right: we aim to bring back the focus of art from the exchange value of products to the experience valued by people. We call for art that is as natural as telling a joke; sometimes as profound as the first words uttered by an infant; art that is not only meaningful but also accessible."

In this excerpt, Her is calling for the democratization of art, liberating art from the conditions of incessant production and valuation. At this point, art is created not for its own sake, but as a

means to an end. In reading these enumerations of how to conceive of digital art in a world that

has forsaken the true function of art as a whole (as a means of encapsulating the breadth and

depth of human experience, meanings, and representations), I could not help but liken the

importance of this process to the structure and dissemination of the Internet Meme. The nature of

the Internet Meme leads me to believe that there is something inherent to its structure -- and,

more obviously, its content -- that lends itself so easily to (not only our socio-linguistic and

cultural) but our creative aesthetic identification with them. The question of the meme, though

likely not always arising as a product of intention, becomes lodged in a larger discourse about

aesthetic interest because of its capacity to "welcome the rational, the irrational, the real or the

surreal, the true and the beautiful, all that which make up first-hand human experience" (Her).

The existence of memes represents a departure from the dictums of the Artworld -- most memes

are authorless, produced and replicated with no real gain. Memes elude accepted methods of

artistic classification -- it is not always clear which "style" a meme may be paying homage to, if

any. It is also unclear whether its creator(s) even have such a purpose in mind, or if memes can

be explicitly defined as viable artforms, though I posit that they can be. So, what is it about

memes that piques our aesthetic interests, having the capacity to rouse such powerful reactions in

the form of incessant scrolling, reposting, production, and reformatting? In my view, the richness

of the memetic form can only be described as a phenomenon that borrows from and subverts

different artistic structures in the ontological sense. For example, comics may closely resemble

image-based memes in their text-to-image structure and delivery. Masha Zharova in her article

Memes, Jokes & Visual Puns diagrammatically visualizes this phenomenon[10]. The same appeal

that existed with the pre-ironism of the daily paper is communicated through this digital

evolution of the same meme -- just in different forms. The reach extends beyond the syntactic

elements of the original memes -- syntax and the bind of grammatical rules are suspended in favor of a context and platform-dependent reimagination. The aesthetic interest pertaining to the meme resembles that of a comic, which can be argued to engage the senses in a kind of cognitive freeplay of the faculties with an appreciation for the distinct visual elements that comprise the image. Zharova cites another image in her work, one that melds together at least five memes in one[11]. This collage-like meme employs "no real linguistic component, it's purely visual imagery, which is still nevertheless meaningful, has structure. It operates purely on gestalt principles of perception, grouping, continuity, etc." (Zharova). Though the interpretative aspect of this meme is virtually nonexistent, the meme succeeds in the task of rousing a cognitive and imaginative freeplay of the faculties through its lack of structure. There is little interpretational room for the meme -- these disparate images don't really communicate anything apart from the wholeness of the collage given its lack of a linguistic component. The memetic form is strictly governed by this collage-like constraint -- it is what makes the meme. The employment of gestalt principles produces an intuitive, intelligible, and daresay creative image of the whole. The elements in conjunction with one another function in a manner most novel because the isolated memes are usually not presented in the same context. Therefore, a seasoned meme-viewer may bask in the aesthetic revelry of such an image.

Section V: The Comic Interest of the Meme

Understanding the affective components of memes is essential to the exploration of the meme as an object of aesthetic interest. What is it about memes that invites a laughter response? Raoul Titulaer in his essay, "Developing Conceptions of Humour: Irony and Internet Memes" sets out to present and apply various theoretical frameworks of humor to explore our

appreciation of the meme. He invokes Kantian and Schopenhaurian theories of humor, which involve the experience and resolution of incongruity:

"Kant discussed in the Kritik der Urteilskraft (KdU, 1790) how laughter arises in some cases due to a failure of the understanding to adequately grasp some absurdity. This then takes the form of an aesthetical idea: empty of content, but pleasing to the mind nonetheless, like beauty. Schopenhauer sought to explain this incongruity not in terms of an ungraspable idea, impossible to reconcile with itself, but as a difference between the perceived object as it appears to us and the abstract concept we assign it to and group it under. Because we realise that our conceptions of reality do not always mirror it exactly, this causes us to laugh" (Titulaer, p. 12-13).

Situating this theory within the context of meme "types" makes a lot of sense, due to the existence and transmission of something called (post)ironic memes. One conceptual or cognitive model that helps me to think about memes is the schema. Information about the world is assimilated or accommodated for the organization of knowledge, which in turn produces schemas. When a thing openly defies an existing mental schema, various reactions occur in the form of cognitive dissonance, confusion, or visceral responses. One of these visceral responses can include laughter. I hold that the reason there is such an appeal to ironic memes is because of their propensity to undermine our conceptions of reality, and (put more philosophically) to facilitate our confrontation with the absurd. In the case of ironic memes, we are always trying to reconcile notions of truth with utterances of absurdity and irony with sincerity in the case of post-ironic memes -- take, for instance, the meme wrought into existence by a fellow co-admin for our account @huntercursedimages[12]. The meme template being utilized for this poster is a well-known one amongst consumers of absurdist memes, and it is a near-perfect portrayal of the memetic content of ironism and post-ironism[13]. In understanding how this meme is ironic, I will invoke Titulaer's definition of ironic memes:

"It is mostly a kind of meta-meme (memes about memes) where the subject of the joke is usually an accepted format of memes, some real-world phenomenon perceived to be ridiculous, or both: It can be a paned comic or a loose image and often features 'meme man', a 3D-rendering of a

human head situated uncomfortably in the uncanny valley. Surreal memes are often absurdist and highly ironic, with multiple coinciding incongruities, relying on image editing" (Titulaer, p. 9).

This meme, whose content includes nonsensical utterances of nihilism and a bemusing page mascot photoshopped onto the original rendering of the meme imbues the characters with new memetic life. Seems confusing? That's because it is. The verbal and visual incongruities of this meme are successful in delivering the unsettling comedic result, and the meme -- which is self-referential, ("meta"), is ridiculing the Hunterian status quo of structural collapse and bureaucracy. In viewing this meme, the viewer is attempting to reconcile -- linguistically and visually -- the sincerity of a call to action (following @huntercursedimages) while sincerely processing strife in an uncaring and broken institution with the ironism of unintelligibility -- yet, the lucidity shines through, the medium is the message, the laughter imminent. There is light in absurdity, and this light is communicable, shareable, and likable — figuratively and literally.

Section VI: The Political Interest of the Meme

The reach of memetic appeal does not only reside in the realm of the aesthetic. It extends to the political theater, as memes have become a mechanism to reflect, reject and cope with the establishment. Worldly chaos is precipitated by a barely navigable state of politics. Amidst all this, we turn to memes for political insight -- "Memes thus expand the range of participatory options in democracies: citizens can express their political opinions in new and accessible ways, engage in heated debates, and enjoy the process to boot. But in nondemocracies, Internet memes are not just about expanding discursive opportunities—they may represent the idea of democracy itself" (Shifman). Shifman's observation that memes are a form of free speech is an astute one, given that Chinese memes are heavily monitored and even censored, resulting in their covertness. Shifman argues that memes produced out of "tightly-controlled environments" represent "more than just a ventilation of anger and frustration; [they] serve as a powerful public

display of criticism and distrust." Memes speak to the idea that not everyone in the world is rejoicing -- the nihilism to which we so dearly cling is what helps one see past the "facade of optimism and unity presented in official mass media." Morris Kolman in his thesis, "I Have No Mouth And I Must Meme: Internet Memes, Networked Neoliberalism, and the Image of the Economic" posits that "Memes also come with their own self-defense mechanism, at least to a degree. When non-memers (known colloquially as 'normies') like establishment politicians attempt to meme, they just don't seem to get it…" Memes function as coping mechanisms well, with politicians and older generations either berating my generation for poking fun at a doomed American patriotism where we refuse to sit idly by, in compliance with America's wrongs -- or, turning themselves into laughingstocks by imitating memes. Philosopher Slavoj Žižek terms this phenomenon "Kynicism". Žižek fundamentally disagrees that totalitarianism implies the lack of laughter and ironic detachment. Both Žižek and Kolman argue that "the ruling ideology can completely accommodate this humor," and "Kynicism is the 'popular, plebeian rejection of the official culture by means of irony and sarcasm'". The term is not to be conflated with cynicism, which implies acceptance of the status quo -- Kynicism is quite the opposite, manifesting itself as Metaverse memes[14] and @deleuzean_thembo[15] memes on Instagram. All in all, politics is not a joke -- but we have deemed it such, in an effort to reclaim our agency.

Part 2

Section VII: The Meme and The End of Art?: A Dantonian Analysis

Philosopher Arthur Danto in his seminal aesthetic work, *After the End of Art* regards the progression of artistic movements as having ended in the 1960s. To Danto, "It was not my view that there would be no more art, but that whatever art there was to be would be made without benefit of a reassuring sort of narrative in which it was seen as the appropriate next stage in the story. What had come to an end was that narrative but not the subject of the narrative" (p. 3). The artistic movements of representational, expressionist, abstract and conceptual art all had their place in the course of art history as art-relevant predicates that constitute a larger theory of a "style matrix", which encompassed all of these formal stylistic elements. Each row in the matrix holds the same amount of artistic weight as the others, and columns are added to the matrix when artistic breakthroughs occur. This is the case with contemporary art, which "manifests an awareness of a history of art but no longer carries it forward, [with] the relatively recent loss of faith in a great and compelling narrative, in the way things must be seen" (p. 5). Conceptual art is a type of art that places emphasis on the work's conceptual qualities over its form. The idea behind the artwork supersedes style. Contemporary art tends to be conceptual in nature, borrowing from various different artistic schools while representing a kind of deeper meaning that is inherent to the work itself. Conceptual art is considered an art-relevant predicate within the style matrix that Danto outlines. Danto does not so much lament this end of art and the existence of contemporary art as much as he reveres the contributions of artists -- we stand on the shoulders of these artistic giants -- "It is part of what defines contemporary art that the art of the past is available for such use as artists care to give it" (p. 5). The zeitgeist, however, may not be translated into the work itself. Danto likens the progress of art to the Hegelian teleological

notion of the progress of history, and his efforts are noteworthy as he attempts to offer a comprehensive theory as to the historical logic of art, the means by which it progresses -- the same way *Geist*, or Spirit, becomes self-realized. I hope to extend the ideas of Danto's end of art theory to the memetic sphere, and how the latter might be encapsulated by the predicate of conceptual art -- thereby fitting within the framework of the style matrix.

Alluding to my previous defense on the matter, the "Internet Meme" can be described as an aesthetic phenomenon in popular culture subverting the landscape of art and aesthetic judgment as we know it. The infinite formulations of memetry smash artistic and conceptual barriers while speaking to their simultaneous universality and nicheness. The incessant production, interaction, and consumption of memes renders them a viable artistic medium -- could it be that the funny jokes in pictorial form that we see on the internet are, in fact, forms of art? And, in proving that memes really do exhibit artistic qualities and embody the idea of what it means to be art, can they be said to fit into Arthur Danto's theory of "the End of Art" -- and be interpreted to fall within the confines of the existing "style matrix" which encapsulates the forms of art developing out of history, specifically within the category of "conceptual art"? That being said, in this section I hope to argue that the "Internet Meme" can be represented by the art-relevant predicate of "Conceptual" art within Danto's style matrix due to the self-consciousness of memes and their capacity to be considered as works of art subverting structure and narrative altogether. Danto's declaration of the 'end of the grand narrative of art' is not exactly premature, even with the existence and transmission of the "Internet Meme". Narrative developments are not exactly created anew, rather, old models are subverted. Some memes can be said to exemplify a form of surrealist/Dadaist[16] art that fits in within the framework of the style matrix through art-relevant predicates. I will argue that the notion of

"Conceptual art" is an all-encompassing enough term so that "the Meme" may be included in its reach.

Given that we have established memes as being works of art that as artworks denote concepts in every domain of life, it is hard to zone in on one work of "memetic" art specifically, given the sheer breadth and depth of the memetic sphere. Memes have the capacity to represent any topic visually and creatively -- ranging from politics, to philosophy, to gaming and cinema, to nothing at all. In recent years, however, memetic form has undergone countless revolutions which rendered them unrepresentable by merely one traditionally artistic or thematic category. As discussed previously, memes became extremely "meta", "ironic" and abstract[17], assuming a complete realization of themselves. This self-referentiality could be understood as a departure from traditional memes which transformed traditional cartoonish, whimsical structure, (such as with the primitive "troll face" meme[18]) and adopted a more twisted and surreal character that more seasoned consumers would come to recognize. This evolution could be visualized as such[19]. I hope to provide a case for memetic artistic merit with reference to Danielle Divola's essay "Original Content: The Conceptual Art of Memes". In the section, "Jimmy Barne's Screaming: Memes and Artistic Alienation in an Absurd Age", she argues that the modern meme as an artform descends from Duchampian and conceptual approaches to readymade art. Alluding to the Dadaist tradition of artmaking, "Dadaists turned to readymade art to illustrate the absurd climate of witnessing a collapsing culture built on European imperialism, capitalism and masculinity" (p. 32). This idea immediately struck me as bearing unmistakable similarities to the world of modern and postmodern memes, wherein memes become distorted much like our visions of the transcendent future. All of this reinforces this existential uncertainty[20] (and maybe even piques some interests in the philosophical, linguistic, and political) — yet it also alleviates

it, equipping us with the artistic understanding necessary for virtual human flourishing via discourse communities while improving morale in dealing with the financial crises of millennialism, alienation, a culture of divisiveness, and the debilitating stronghold of late capitalism. Duchamp's Fountain had shaken the Artworld by challenging traditional notions of "white male genius" through his satirization of an upside down urinal. This idea of producing readymades is likened to the processes of mememaking, preceding meme culture as we understand it -- "Readymades, like memes, look at culture and identity through an absurd and artistic lens. While earlier readymade art had plastic or linguistic concerns in revolutionising artistic discussions, memes can be seen as expressions of severe social isolation" (p. 33). Because of this capacity to tap into the existential, the thematic content of memetry is highly conceptual, self-referential, and completely unrelenting -- memetic artistic prowess is both minimal and maximal, nonsensical or incisive, and optically striking all the same -- "Memes emulate poor production styles in "deep frying" an image[21], wilfully using low resolution to make the meme illegible and obvious cut and paste efforts. Disorientation can be achieved in the chaotic layering of embellishments such as radial blur, loud clipping bass sounds and ironic emojis such as the crying laughing face[22]" (p. 35). Moreover, these aesthetic components lend themselves to the viability of memes as a grassroots art movement (anyone can make a homegrown meme, but memes are so universal that they are evocative of cultural memory). At the frontline of digital art is a whole new world waiting to be deciphered -- one that transmits cultural imagery, employs traditionally-lauded stylistic choices while simultaneously toying with the avant-garde, and can be said to rouse aesthetic pleasure. After all, the only thing distinguishing a meme and a work of art is "a certain theory of art", wherein an arbitrary

Artworld has not ascribed artistic meaning to the work (Danto, p. 455). It is for these reasons that

the Internet Meme deserves to be regarded as having its own space in the Artworld.

Section VIII: Case Studies of Conceptual Memes

The highly conceptual nature of memetic form could be compared to John Baldessari's

What is Painting, which was featured in the Museum of Modern Art. In the work, there is a

blank canvas with the words, "Do you sense how all the parts of a good picture are involved with

each other, not just placed side by side? Art is a creation for the eye and can only be hinted at

with words". This work is regarded as pushing the boundaries of traditional artistry with its

self-referentiality. This embodies Danto's theory that the end of art represents its own realization.

I posit that the meme cycle has followed the same trajectory, with the existence of all of the

varying iterations of traditional rage comics[23], the birth of Wojaks[24], and Baudrillard's theory of

simulation as represented in meme form. Due to prominence and percolation of meta memes on

various internet spaces including but not limited to: Reddit, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, 4chan,

and more recently TikTok, the ideas expressed within them are of a conceptual character,

borrowing from memetic earlier styles and transforming the internet landscape. According to

Dan Bristow in the chapter The Work of Art(iculation) in the Age of Memic Rhythmicality:

Memes between Form, Content, and Structure in a book entitled Post Memes, "Memes present

an indeterminate face; their messages, if in earnest, often verge so much on the absurd that it is

difficult to tell if they're irony or iron-fistedness. Indeed, with many memes, satire is in the irony

of the beholder" (p. 129). The notoriety of the troll face meme attests to this view. Originating

out of rage comics and online boards in the early 2000s, the troll face is the most classic example

of a recognizable work that has its grounding in the realm of the satirical. In its purest form it is

used to represent the act of "trolling" an unassuming character. The troll face has undergone

countless evolutions which render different iterations of it "meta". The depiction of the "schizo" troll face[25] in meme culture has mirrored cognitive shifts that take place as a result of conceptual shifts in the general episteme. For one, the bloodshot eyes, gun-toting, and Kubrickian stare are all meant to represent the descent into insanity -- a reaction to becoming inundated with hyperculture, forgotten by the establishment, and peddled antipsychotic prescription drugs. Inability to adjust turns into refusal, and the innocent meme that we all knew and loved -- the classic troll face -- becomes ungovernable, both by the standards of memetic form and the bind of socially normative responses to material realities and lost futures. All of this is coupled with the idea of memetic self-realization -- this meme, being built upon and borrowing from the troll face, subverting the trolling personality (of satirizing reality) and taking it to its logical conclusion (to simply negating it) is conscious of these facts -- "Memes become, and are infinitely open to becoming, overdetermined. As cultural creations, in their origination they are steeped in meaning (or even attempts at anti-meaning, amongst certain avant-gardists), but meaning and intelligibility are also articulated onto memes" (p. 129-130). Danto's definition for what qualifies as an art form is that the work has to "mean something". Meaning is transplanted, warped, and made ambiguous -- denoting concepts pertaining to the postmodern. There is an overabundance, an excess even, of meaning -- the meme becomes a medium for its own potentiation.

One other template which has gained traction in philosophy and theory communities over the years is the Baudrillardian Simulacra and Simulation meme[26]. According to his ideas, society has replaced reality and meaning with symbols and signs. As a result, human experience becomes a simulation. In this meme, the Baudrillard's four-stage concept of the sign-order is employed to represent an object's removal from reality, and transformation into something

utterly unrecognizable -- hence the fourth and final stage, "The sign bears no relation to reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum". In the template, the original Wojak -- a blank black and white cartoonish drawing of a man -- is meant to represent emotions of wistfulness and contemplativeness. The popularization of the Wojak and its memetic versatility has primarily served to represent (white, male) experience, in all of its supposed relatability. However, different iterations of the Wojak have memed their way into virtual existence, such as the archetype of the Doomer in the second panel (the embodiment of nihilism and dejection resulting from economic, climatological, and societal crises), as well as the e-girl (a reductive archetype of the online feminine experience) and, more recently, the black Wojak woman -- created by and for people of color, whose mission involves representing this experience. In the progression of Wojak development, each version bears similarity to the original -- this process of reproduction is thwarted when the the final stage Wojak abandons the belief that all modes of experience are encapsulated by an alternative white male one, thereby taking matters into its own hands by departing from this plane of phenomenological reality. Because of the meme's high level of "theoreticity", its inherent self-referentiality and consciousness of itself, the variation of stylistic mechanizations as well as the derivation from an original memetic "Wojakian school" of production, I believe that this meme can be considered as belonging to Danto's style matrix in the domain of artistry, and can be represented by the art-relevant predicate of "Conceptuality".

Section IX: Criticisms of Danto's Grand Narrative of Art

Danto's grand narrative of the end of art has been an extremely controversial view in aesthetics -- many have argued that Danto had offered a premature declaration of the end of art, arguing that there are still artistic leaps to be made in the Artworld. Aesthetician Noel Carroll in his essay "The End of Art?" is one of those people -- he argues that Danto's end of art theory is

predicated on the false notion that, because painting is perhaps the most traditional form of art and the avant-garde, that it cannot "advance the project of the self-definition of art", and as a result, "we have reached the end of the art of painting", and art in general (p. 22). This is because, in Danto's view, verbalization of self-definitions and meanings in art represent progress, and since "Painting is essentially not verbal", painting cannot do this. Carroll thinks that this notion is deeply flawed in that art and the avant-garde cannot merely be constrained by the parameters of painting. In addition to this, Carroll believes that there are many other artistic avenues that could utilize verbalization in pushing art forward -- "Visual artists engage in all sorts of inventions, including installations that frequently mix word and image in rebus-like structures where text, context, and visuals operate like cinematic montage, juxtaposing fragments in order to elicit inferences from spectators" (p. 21). I think that Caroll's claim regarding Danto's conceptions of the end of painting and its extension to all art is misguided. It seems like Carroll is trying to extrapolate what Danto says about painting and apply it to Danto's holistic definition of the avant-garde while arguing that Danto's views are very reductive and premature. However, I do not think that this is what Danto meant when he conceived of his end of art thesis. The emphasis on accelerating narrative should be placed on the existence of conceptual art and self-definitional art, and in order for art to be conceptual, it may also be self-definitional as a result. Verbal language is the most common medium for achieving articulations of self-definition, so it is plausible to say that conceptual art pushes the teleology of art forward, according to the framework of Danto's theory. Danto in his response essay entitled "The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense" argues directly in response to Carroll that "The 'end of art' instead is a theory of consciousness of how a developmental sequence of events terminates in the consciousness of that sequence as a whole. The 'death of painting' theory fits an entirely differ-

ent kind of model" (p 140). Carroll seemed to misconstrue Danto's thesis regarding the end of art, and as a result, it would be incorrect to criticize Danto on the grounds that he only regards painting as the supreme purveyor of artistry, and therefore a representation of the timeline of artistic expression. Connecting this idea back to memes, memes are clearly highly verbose, self-definitional and conceptual. As discussed earlier, memes can also be considered artforms in their own right, because of their surrealist and abstract qualities, also subverting structure and form of visual art, in either alluding to earlier styles of mememaking or not. For these reasons, I believe that memes offer a case for why Danto's thesis regarding the end of the grand narrative of art holds up -- they can be boxed into the art-relevant predicate of conceptual art, despite their seemingly-groundbreaking novelty and revolutionariness in the frontier of the internet. Even with an all-encompassing, widened definition about what constitutes art (with the permission of memes to enter into this sphere), art history nevertheless still hits the conceptual wall wherein all forms of artistic production can be said to become boxed into the existing category (which is more of an umbrella term) of conceptual art. In theorizing about memes and the artistic landscape that they inhabit and mold, it is almost instinctual to regard them as being "artistically revolutionary" in their expression. While I think this is the case in a purely communicative and sociolinguistic respect, I believe that Danto's theory is far-reaching enough so as to be able to delineate memes as originating from and describing concepts. The postmodern approach to mememaking is simply an extension of the idea that memes are becoming increasingly self-conscious. Memes -- and by extension, art -- have nowhere to go except deeper into themselves -- undertaking an eventual analysis of themselves. If everything in existence truly fits a schematic, conceptual mold, and could be described (at least in part) using language, how are memes excluded from this category?

Section X: Concluding Remarks

In this section, I attempted to demonstrate how the Internet Meme could be considered a form of art which subverts structure and narrative, how it could be represented by an art-relevant predicate of "Conceptual" art within Danto's style matrix due to the self-consciousness of memes, while in part salvaging Danto's declaration of the 'end of the grand narrative of art', arguing that it is not entirely premature since even the existence and transmission of the Internet Meme doesn't render Danto's declaration of 'the end of the grand narrative of art' obsolete. Of course Danto's theory is in need of conceptual clarification and revision -- I am in sympathy with those who are skeptical regarding whether the narrative of art could truly end with the conceptual and self-realized. However, there is a part of me that cannot conceive of art in any other way -- if the umbrella term of "concept" is inclusive enough, can anything be determined to fall outside of it? Perhaps there exists a predicate beyond concept that speaks to even higher forms of artmaking and aesthetic engagement, such as experience -- with the development of mixed-media installations and other artistic environments, there is much to be proven and disproven. The Internet Meme, in all of its communicative and stylistic grandiosity, may evolve to represent something completely beyond its own identification. But for now, I am unable to conceptualize such a grand departure from the current state of meta-concept, especially since we always-already inhabit the age of the "after"[27].

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