Elizabeth Ashkinazi

Aesthetics

Sandra Shapshay

12/20/21

Internet Memes as Conceptual Art: Dantonian Conceptions of the End of Art

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 paper I hope to argue that the "Internet Meme" can be represented by an 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[1] 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.

Memes should be considered viable forms of art, and as artworks, they denote concepts in every domain of life. For this reason, 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. To put it shortly, memes became extremely "meta", "ironic" and abstract[2], assuming a certain consciousness and complete realization of themselves. This self-referentiality could be understood as a departure from traditional memes which merely subverted traditional cartoonish, whimsical structure, (such as with the primitive "troll face" meme[3]) and adopted a more twisted and surreal character that more seasoned consumers would come to recognize. This evolution could be visualized as such.[4] 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 both enables and reinforces this existential uncertainty[5] (and maybe even piques some interests in the philosophical, linguistic, and political) — yet it also alleviates it, equipping us with the artistic understanding and prowess

necessary for virtual human flourishing via discourse communities and protective armor to deal 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 realms of waking life, 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[6], 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"[7] (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). The memetic form in all of its expressive splendor has much to teach us in terms of artistry. 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.

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, abstraction 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 replicated and 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.

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 and conceptualization. I posit that the meme cycle has followed the same trajectory, with the existence of all of the varying iterations of traditional rage comics[8], the birth of Wojaks[9], 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 "schizzed out" troll face[10] 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.[11] 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, contemplation, or sadness. 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".

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 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. I think that 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. 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
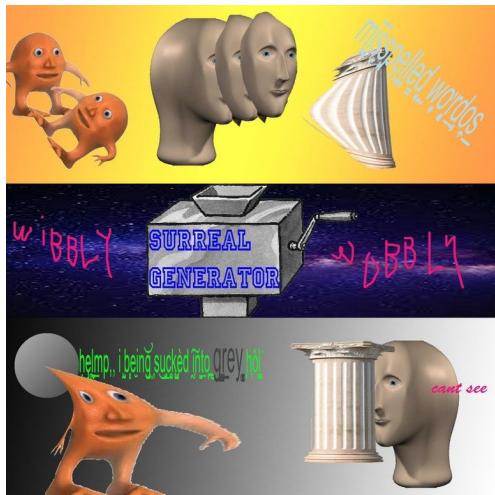
a schematic, conceptual mold, and could be described (at least in part) using language, how are memes excluded from this category?

In this essay, 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".[12]

Appendix

1. Surrealist Meme

2. Meta Meme

Me: yo pass me the meme template

Friend: You better not make a meta meme that crossreferences other memes

Me to me: say no more
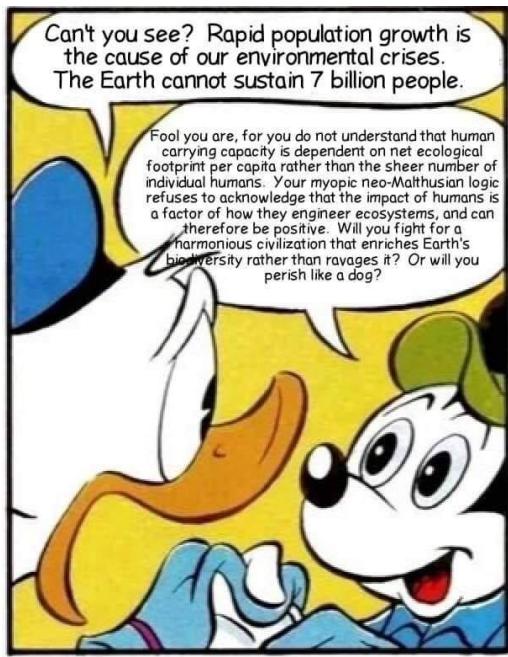
3. Troll Face Meme

4. Scary Troll Face

5. Existential Meme

6. Deep-fried Meme
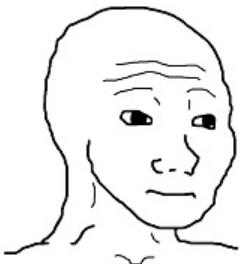
7. Bastardized crying laughing emoji

8. Traditional Rage Comic


9. Traditional Wojak

10. Schizzed Out Troll Face
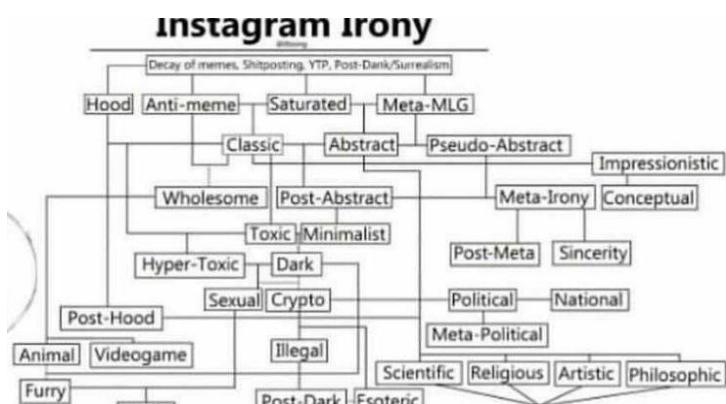
11. Baudrillard Meme

12.

Works Cited

Bristow, Dan. "Post Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production ." *JSTOR*, 2019,

    https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv11hptdx.

Carroll, Noel. "The End of Art?" *History and Theory*, vol. 37, no. 4, 1998, pp. 17–29.,

    https://doi.org/10.1111/0018-2656.651998065.

Danto, Arthur C. "The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense." *History and Theory*, vol. 37, no. 4,

    1998, pp. 127–143., https://doi.org/10.1111/0018-2656.721998072.

Danto, Arthur C., and Lydia Goehr. *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of*

    History. Princeton University Press, 2014.

Divola , Danielle Rose. *Original Content: The Conceptual Art of Memes*. 2019,

    http://www.danielledivola.com/content/Danielle%20Divola%20-%20Original%20Conten

    t%20BVADH%20Thesis.pdf.