**Memes as Art**

It is quite hard to point out what really are memes for there is still a large ongoing discourse of what they actually are that makes it hard to make an empirical study of memes other than those relying in interpretation. Nevertheless, this doesn’t hinder the study of Internet memes for there are experts who try and develop ways to study them. Internet memes are invaluable tools in promulgating and shaping the digital culture proliferating ideologies in the most simple and uncomplicated way.

Being highly flexible and dynamic as to a chance given by the technological advancement of our century, there is no question to the ability of Internet memes to evolve through the years. These Internet memes are an interconnected content units that have shared characteristics and features that could be analyzed the same way we see art and that is through the analysis of the content, form, and stance backed up by dissertations capable of interpreting it. But the question here is, can the low – barrier of artistic approach in the Internet memes be considered art?

That question sparked debates all over the internet whether Internet memes could be considered art or not. This created wide and entirely subjective answers and where we cannot actually determine the right or wrong. An online page called”debate.org” allows its users to start a question and let other people in the community people agree or disagree. There is a query then with the same as the researchers’ that got the population of the page to respond. In the poll, 77% of the result posed positivity and in favor of memes being considered as an art opposite to the 23% contra. Given the comments made by users, the researchers took note of the defense each side gave. One anonymous user supporting that memes could be seen as an art form as well commented that,

“Memes are a gift from god.Memes are a way of expressing yourself and your everyday life. It is like any other form of art, maybe even better. Just like music, you can hear the sound coming from memes pulling you in for more. They express beliefs, hardship, happiness, or generally the common things everyone shares among them. Memes bring us closer. Just like a painting, memes are visually pleasing to look at since you can relate and understand. You have to decipher a meme and have background knowledge about it. It is just like analyzing a painting or a piece of writing. Memes are just heavenly; there is no other way to describe them. “

The contradictory party on the other hand sees meme as,

“Art is much more complex than pasting words on a picture. Though memes do take a certain amount of imagination, they aren't painstakingly worked on a canvas or sculpture or even in Photoshop. Memes take a format that has been preset by the original poster and is then altered by others to have a different meaning, but the same general idea. It's the same picture with another joke pasted on. Don't get me wrong, some memes are really clever, the way some of them are altered, but it's not art.”

This puts us in the line if subjectivity and the way one interprets for there cannot be one objective definition of art. Another online article discussing the credibility of memes as an art poses that popular philosopher Plato defined art as ‘***it is an imitation of life*‘.** Another leading artist in the 1960’s of the avant – garde of the decade, *Art Povera*’s Michelangelo Pistoletto sees art as:

“Above all, artists must not be only in art galleries or museums — they must be present in all possible activities. The artist must be the sponsor of thought in whatever endeavor people take on, at every level. “

However, those standing that memes cannot be art fronts the reason that those who create meme could create meme without thinking that it is an art form. It is argued by the anonymous user that one can make a meme content by copying an image and adding some new caption or text without a care about aesthetic. It is also questionable if the purpose of creating the meme is entirely different. It is also quite mentioned a lot that creating Internet memes is a lot less complex process than creating high quality art. It is not a mystery that anyone with MS Paint or Photoshop or any other access to meme generators can participate in the creation of new memes (Olsen 2018). This is seen then as a flaw on why Internet memes cannot be art for the process of creating it doesn’t take as much effort or skill as any high quality and aesthetically pleasing art. In conclusion, the problem lies with the intention of memes and the process of making memes that in the eyes of some: deviates it from being an art form. But to be fair, it is really not easy for all of the memes to be recognized as art or to be turned into art.

The way that memes are created is one of the reasons why it is hard for some to see memes as an art but in our age where the Internet is what binds us together, is it so wrong to use the digital power to create memes and consider them as art? We can bring to a close that memes as a way of communication and self – expression though lacking the established norm of aestheticism is still an art form of the 21st Century.

This question also provoked other online critics and tried to give an answer. There is still not yet an explicit study, dissertation or published article condoning that Internet memes are art but there are online critics who tried to (Oh 2017).

An internet article titled *The Rise of Memes as an Art Form* mentioned that memes has become an integral part of life of people that other than seeing it on Facebook wall posts, it can now be seen on walls of art galleries.

In the article, a Puerto Rican artist named *Jesús* “Bubu” Negrón crated an art exhibition for memes particularly about politics and art because it “resonated with the heart of his friends”. The theme of his exhibition was entitled “Nothing Conceptual: La Meme Era @ La Barra de Paquito” suggesting the laid back attitude of Internet memes in the 21st Century.

“When people notice that something is special, they’re the ones who are able to help bring it out into the context of the art world or the gallery world,” said Negrón.

It was also mentioned in the article that a *professional meme maker* that goes by the name Kash Jordan already produced two meme – based art exhibition and in which the number of attendees grow in numbers. The two meme – based art exhibition was titled *“by any memes necessary”* and *“Peaches: A Black Internet’s Experience*”. In the latter’s exhibition, the poster used was that featuring the woman who popularized the phrase, “Eyebrows on fleek” with a peach replacing her face. At the same time, the exact poster has mentioned that it was intentionally made as a meme to gather more attention and feedback.

With this, Jordan comments that there is this underlying connection with Internet Memes and the Pop Art that parallels the work of memes today with those of Andrew Warhol, one point which makes memes a modern day contemporary art. Jordan as an artist of the 21st Century wanted to create and shatter the distinction between “low culture” of the mass and the “high” art, legitimizing memes as an art form. It is also his goal to “to create an experience and give people a platform to share their messages” more so than to sell art but posses the idea that memes could also be sold and collected. The same idea was posed by popular website, The Odyssey, where memes are also paralleled to Popular Art where contents of mass media and popular culture merged with art thus creating works identifiable by everyone. (Mosiany 2015)

Regarding the critics saying meme cannot be an art form, he calmly dismisses them and that people tend to hate things that are new because they don’t understand it yet. It will take time, but memes, soon, will be seen normally in the future inside art galleries. Impressionism had been subjected at first and was labeled as “unfinished drawings” but actually became a part of the historical development of art into neo – Impressionism, fauvism, and even cubism. (Oh 2017)

On another interview with Kash from trendy magazine, DAZED, he was asked few questions with regard to his meme – based exhibition. When asked why he decided to curate a show based on memes, Kash said that it is because people don’t take them *meme makers* seriously because of the humor memes possess. Kash wanted the people to see their works as art. The last question sent to him was why does he think memes resonate so much with the generation today? He answered that the young generation’s lack of attention span, memes are convenient ways to connect and gather the attention of the viewer. Memes also taking great interest in the popular culture makes it easier for people to participate. (Goklani and Kane 2017)

Memes could also be categorized under the relatively new concept of Post – Internet Art. Paddy Johnson, an artist who participated in the *Art Post-Internet*at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing China quoted the head artist Karen Archey and Robin Peckham for their definition of Post – Internet Art,

“…art, consciously created in a milieu that assumes the centrality of the network, and that often takes everything from the physical bits to the social ramifications of the internet as fodder…This understanding of the post-internet refers not to a time “after” the internet, but rather to an internet state of mind — to think in the fashion of the network. In the context of artistic practice, the category of the post-internet describes an art object created with a consciousness of the networks within which it exists, from conception and production to dissemination and reception. As such, much of the work presented here employs the visual rhetoric of advertising, graphic design, stock imagery, corporate branding, visual merchandising, and commercial software tools.”

Memes come and go rather quickly but that’s just keeping pace with how fast our technology evolve. We’ve seen how memes gain and lose popularity throughout the years usually in sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr (Pasqual 2017). We’ve come across thousands of remarkable memes such as Grumpy Cat, Rage Comic, Socially Awkward Penguin, Obama’s crotch salute (Burroughs 2013 p 258), and many others though some still remain and show in comment sections as a reaction photo (or gif). Grumpy Cat for example, gained eternal stardom as it signed with a movie contract and an art exhibit with over 30 artists working on the event. A predecessor exhibit was made in 2012 simply titled ‘Memes’ which featured works on Honey Badger, Hipster Ariel, First World Problems and other popular memes of the time. (Knibbs 2013)

Another who has taken interest in art from Internet Memes is artist Lauren Kaelin. This artist take her inspiration from both from the Internet and popular theorist Walter Benjamin in which the outcomes she calls “Benjamemes”.

She describes that these Benjamemes are from Walter Benjamin’s essay from the 1936 titled ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’. In that essay, Benjamin theorized that an original art has an aura that cannot be replicated by any copies as the reproduced version downgrade’s the quality of the original work. Kaelin then said that for memes who die easily or are easily replaced, a successful meme is reproducible, shareable, and recognizable. (Knibbs 2013)

An online commentator based on popular social media platform YouTube, Mike Rugnetta of Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) channel is popular for dissecting popular culture, technology, and digital art. He started a web series titled, ‘Know Your Meme’ where in one of his videos; he featured the meme Super Mario Brothers as the new image of Surrealist art and going as far stating that anyone who apparently created LOLCat had also made art. The process of creating images, sharing simple ideologies with people and even strangers, the purpose of trying to communicate self-accumulated experiences, is an art. (Kim 2017)

Turning memes into art can also be done another way around. From a post in the popular meme page, Know your meme, in the August of 2012, a Spanish publication Heraldo released an article about a fresco painting restoration gone wrong. The woman who made the mistake Cecilia Jiménez turned Elias Garcia Martinez’ Ecce Homo (Behold the Man) into what meme community participants, “Potato Jesus”. Proving the ability of memes to spread like an outbreak, the next day the article was shared on 4chan where users feast on the butchered image of Jesus garnering thousands of edits into other popular characters like The Simpsons, one of Rage comic’s Troll face, and re-edited to popular paintings like “Scream” of Munich, “The Last Supper” and the ever popular “Mona Lisa” or Da Vinchi. By the third day, a twitter account of Potato Jesus was made with the first tweet being, “MY FACE!!! WHAT HAPPENED TO MY FACE!!! ” The account gathered an immediate huge following and established its own in the history of Internet memes. This instance also helped the town of Borja in Spain (where the Potato Jesus portrait s posed) to gather more tourist and even got petitions to keep the blotched painting. (LeCalum 2012)

The inter-relationship of art and memes was also discussed in another online article. In the article, memes was seen as the new weapon of the 21st century that will destroy elitism in the art world. In 2016, pop singer and rapper Drake released his music video for his song “Hotline Bling” which in no time gained thousands of reactions in the form of memes. One of the screen captures was placed side by side Vincent van Gogh’s portrait by John Peter Russells. There was nothing initially conceivable to be similar about the two photos; the color schemes are different, art style is different, eras are different. What turned it into a meme? It was the only similarity of the pose that got people laughing at the strange comparison. The thing that people find funny about the comparison is the “high art” eternally glorified versus the short – lived screen capture, viral meme, about music. Boticelli’s “The Birth of Venus” was also placed side by side with Beyonce’s “I woke up like this” meme. Memes has found a way to unite two art forms completely different; high art was juxtaposed with low memes creating a new set of phenomena of the new digital age, diminishing the raft between art elitism and art democracy. (Fustich 2017)

Memes then is a Post – Internet Art in the sense that it is an art form beyond the internet and embraces the societal move it’s a part of. This could also be related to Pop Art where the rift between high and low art is diminished. High art while still also subjective hold heavy ambiguity and memes on the other hand, is simple and to the point. Memes becomes a vent under chaotic times that is for everyone and at the same time belong to no one. This times where memes exists, the absurdity of world events gave birth to nonsensical memes, depicting the parallelism between the reality and the art and the art comes out as a holler against the absurdity of the world. Under the ongoing violence, fight for equal rights, more sociopolitical issues, memes became an outlet. This could also be traced to Dadaism, the avant – garde of early 20th century. It is anti – establishment, anti – bourgeois, anti – war, and basically anti – everything. They go against any kind of conformity, doing as they please and rebelling against the status quo of their time. Memes in this way is the Dada art of our times. (Gemmell 2017)

Furthermore, Dada art made little sense and, unlike previous art movements, did not necessarily have an aesthetic appeal. The senselessness of Dada art reflected the senselessness of the world circa WWI, in which conventional logic led to the senselessness of a world war. Consequently, artists created a sort of anti-art that rejected the conventions that brought about the atrocity in the first place. This is parallel to the millenial’s memes: The world doesn’t make any sense so let’s make some memes about it. Dadaist used everyday objects and absurdly turned them into art just like Marcel Duchamp’s The Fountain, where a male urinal was turned upside – down, signed, and was labeled art. Another popular example was Man Ray’s ordinary iron stacked with nails and called it The Gift. In these bizarre moments it is proven that anything could be art and becomes a protest against the established status quo. In our case, the Internet being the easiest access to release frustration and dissatisfaction with society, people of the meme community, flood walls, comment sections, and anywhere possible with self – made or borrowed memes. Internet allows the people to produce work that makes bold commentary on social, cultural and political issues that triggers discussions and debates. This shared characteristic with Dadaism is the perfect gateway to show that memes are art and are used to critique society for both art forms mock everything, including themselves. (Defares 2018)

News headlines nowadays feature the title, “Trump acts like a male chimpanzee” or “Hillary Clinton carries a ninja squirrel hot sauce everywhere” makes absolutely no sense but at the same time acts as an attack to American presidential candidates, criticizing them. Dada Art and Meme didn’t make any sense, absurd works of art, but at the same time, they did and they speak against the futility of the world. A professor in communication studies, Stephanie Tikkanen, thinks that since the world is in a bleak position and then uses memes as a way to escape the absurdist viewpoint of the world. Millenials cannot relate to the traditional ways of the older generation and thus making them veer towards the abstract and nonsensical. (Pasqual 2018)

Through memes, youth utilize irony, nonsense and black humor as a social commentary of the times in order to express their frustration, hopelessness and dissatisfaction with society. Memes serve as a coping mechanism for the millennial generation in an increasingly bleak world where normalcy, social convention and logic seem to deteriorate.

Some artists stands with the belief that art posted on gallery walls, sold on auctions and those part of exhibitions must be considered art. Art is widely encompassing and shall not limit to the elite. On the other hand, being featured on gallery and museums or exhibitions, seems to be the conventional and elitist way to legitimize art which kind of contradicts each other.

Art must be free and must be for everyone, there must not be rules to weigh down how one can express through art. If the internet is the place where people could express themselves rather than be chained to the conventional ways art is made, then so be it. We are progressing technologically and the art aspect of life cannot be left behind.