AMERICAN MEMETICS

CAROLINE BUSTA Should we briefly sketch out what memes are and were, the status they had culturally in the '00s and how that changed in the '10s?

LIL INTERNET The term "meme" came from Richard Dawkins, Susan Blackwell, and others, thinking about media in terms of evolutionary biology and how ideas spread "virally." In terms of early Internet memes, you have the "Dancing Baby" meme, and "Mr. T Ate My Balls"—that's a really, really old one from the '90s AOL days. When 2channel started in Japan, that's when memes started functioning almost like a kind of slang; a language and set of codes that came out of a semi-isolated online community. 4chan was the American import of this culture. The interesting thing about 4chan is that it operated like the most extreme, instantaneous focus group that you could imagine. If you post something to a board and nobody replies, that post vanishes entirely, from the site in about two minutes. Essentially, 4chan cultivated an arms race for grabbing attention. At its peak, there could be 100,000 users on the site at any given moment. When you think about finding images with high memetic potential, high potential for going viral, 4chan was the perfect incubator. This is how Pepe the Frog went from being a Matt Furie comic to an open-source meme, how rick-rolling came about, etc. There was a time in the mid-aughts where every single big meme came from 4chan. As social media started scaling, Twitter and Instagram also functioned as incidental focus groups for memetic content—though they were always more tightly regulated and initially content posted there would have lower reach.

CB Josh and Dan, if we're doing this rapid history of memes, could tell us what happened to memes around 2008, '09, '10 with the rise of social media?

LI One thing—importantly, Instagram and Twitter started as chronological feeds. They didn't switch to non-chronological algorithmic feeds until the early '10s. 4-chan isn't algorithmic but essentially the "swarm" itself is an algorithm. It boosts the things that resonate the most with the most people to the top.

CB Right, and something did start to change in the early-10s, perhaps in part because of this proliferation of decentralized algorithmic content streams and its impact on pop culture, as well as politics as a kind of pop culture.

DANIEL KELLER In the '00s, memes generally tried to reach towards the universal, or at least that was the quality that led to a meme's success. Now, they operate more on the level of inside joke. I think sometime around 2015 (so, even before the "meme magic" of the 2016 US election), memes became vastly more politically significant. I'm not saying that memes first became political then, but that this is the moment that people recognized their political power.

CB At the same time that memes became political, didn't politics become a lot more meme-like?

DK Yes [laughs] I think that's fair to say.

JOSHUA CITARELLA Yeah, there are several contributing factors there—the memeability of the Trump presidency is certainly one. Also something that was discussed in a series of internal panel discussions at Rhizome (and credit to Michael Connor for this): the early adopter benefits of Web 2.0. Regardless of who was in

the public eye and who the candidates were in 2015–16, social media was set to explode. On top of that, you had the aesthetic phenomena of the Trump campaign consuming all of culture. Simultaneously, meme subcultures and other forms of "consensus reality," went from quarantining radical ideas to incubating them. (Of course in the absence of "dark forest" pockets, you just maintain a neoliberal decline and things get much worse on their own.) Potentially, the '00s were a period when 4chan acted as a space of quarantine, where people could get their frustration out and live their fantasies or post into the void and vent rage. But then at some point in the early '10s, 4chan became more of an incubator and that activity sprouted into real-world action. Since this was happening outside of the indexable "clearnet" web, it was quantitatively undetectable on Google Trends or whatnot, and then would spike enormously with almost no warning. During this time, there was a lot of discussion about detecting certain memes before they could go mainstream in an attempt to prevent stochastic violence. In some cases, that's been a beneficial approach. But as an artist, it means you're on this tightrope, navigating the changing sensitivities of institutions and platforms.

CB Yeah, every public-facing entity that was even remotely official became paranoid about platforming bad content—so the Overton window for cultural expression narrowed significantly. Any artist that acted outside would risk being actively deplatformed.

JC Yeah, I should mention that I've just exited 60 days of being shadowbanned on Instagram, which meant I couldn't use it to promote my show, or my book. It's become extremely clear to me that I essentially work for Instagram, and that my wages were docked for misbehavior on the job. Of course the day I made my first-ever tweet, the ban was magically lifted. Brad [Troemel] was also shadowbanned on Instagram and the day he started a Discord, his shadowban was lifted. So, ok, I am fucking paranoid right now.

DK You think the platforms are targeting you and they're trying to lure you back? That they somehow realize that you started a Twitter or that Brad started a Discord?

JC I think in the case of Brad—because of that viral Biden meme he made "His Brain? No. His heart"—that there's definitely someone working for the government who has a file with his name on it.

DK Yeah, that and his alleged vacuum-sealed bitcoin fortune.

CB It's interesting, Josh, when you say that you work for Instagram. Because even if we are increasingly spending our time in these subclearnet "dark forest" communities, we are still reliant on a light-leak to clearnet social media. Whatever "value" is being created outside of clearnet, whether political, cultural, or economic, it's only fully realized when "spent" or leveraged in the clearnet realm. And what we're seeing, perhaps for this reason, is that culture sector institutions have become totally subservient to clearnet rules and norms. If they are putting on a show and saying it's "radical," what they really mean is that it, 1. has the potential to go viral in clearnet spaces and thus, 2. is also compliant with—and therefore not actually threatening—big stack social media's hegemonic force. Is it worth discussing, for a moment, what we think it was that institutions were so afraid of in 2015–16 when they started so willingly bending to the platforms' ToS [terms of service]?

JC I'll say it. The issue is that, besides perhaps 1914, when children were forced to work in coal mines, we are living in the most rapacious era of capital in the last 100 years.
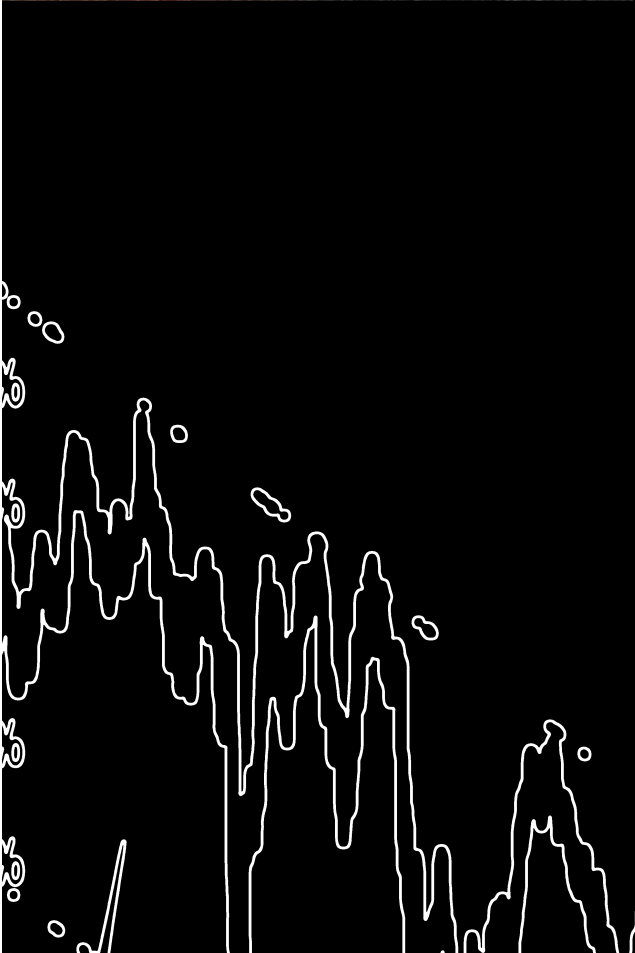
CB And we all own multiple devices made with rare earth minerals currently being mined by children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, even though maybe now there are rules against this in the UK.

JC Yes, we're on a pretty steep downward trajectory. And then there's the moral rhetoric of all of these, woke, diversity-prioritizing institutional funds. Ultimately what they are doing is engaging in the most effective form of recuperation and reputation washing. Meanwhile, there's art that tries to critically point to the relationship between arts patronage and its disconnection with the rest of the world, showcasing that is not particularly efficacious for attracting new patrons and retaining funding. Yet while institutions are often really bad—exploitative, built upon historical injustices—the [tech] platforms are so much worse. Tech platforms don't even give to cultural institutions, they don't care about culture. At least the aristocrats funded opera. The legacy cultural institutional model is visibly falling apart. The infrastructure doesn't work.

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CB Definitely. And as creator communities— such as New Models and your community, Josh—experiment with Web 3 structures, it will be interesting to see how institutions adapt. Dan, maybe you could briefly sketch out what Web 3 is for anyone unfamiliar?

DK Sure, it basically refers to applications built on decentralized digital networks, blockchain specifically (but not inherently). Given that these structures are decentralized, they are censorship-resistant, and there is a more direct relationship between the user and the stakeholder/creator/developer. With Web 3, the incentives are aligned and the relationship is more horizontal. Whereas with Web 2.0, the platform owner is an extractor, the creators are feudal underlords, and the users are under them. And I do think there is a good chance that creator communities could, via Web 3, become autonomous institutions themselves. If so, it will be funny to have been cast out of the legacy institutions only to be invited back in as consultants helping them to adapt to these new scenarios.

JC The explosion of the memeosphere was, I think, incontestably the most significant visual cultural shift in the last half-decade.

CB Or last several decades, really, in terms of cultural sea change.

JC The significance of the global political consensus that played out through these aesthetic materials—the importance of this shift really can't be overstated. And yet I can basically list on one hand the number of artists confronting this shift head-on. I'm going to paraphrase Brad [Troemel] here, "Why is it that teenagers on the internet are producing aesthetic materials that are more discursively significant than the stuff happening in the mainstream art world?" I also want to say that Rhizome did a singularly great job boosting those projects, giving them an art world stage and have been supporting this conversation continuously.

But now that mainstream art institutions are in a position to respond, it's too late. The whole thing is over. We're in a new world. There will just never be significant art about that period—other than screenshots of things that were posted, or some saved memes. It really feels like the art world of the '10s is essentially an empty vault.

CB And at a time when the art world, art institutions were probably better endowed than they ever had been historically. By contrast, magazines during this period were grappling with dwindling subscriptions and ad sales and not figuring out what it meant to be digital-first. But still it does seem like a massive failure of mainstream cultural gatekeepers that all of this content was explicitly not allowed. I cannot think of
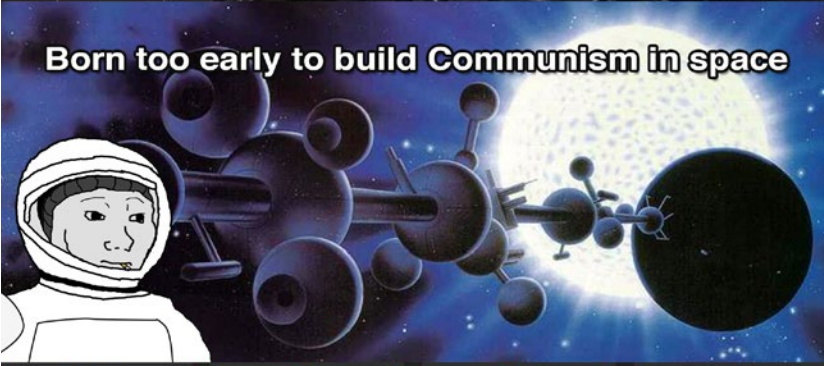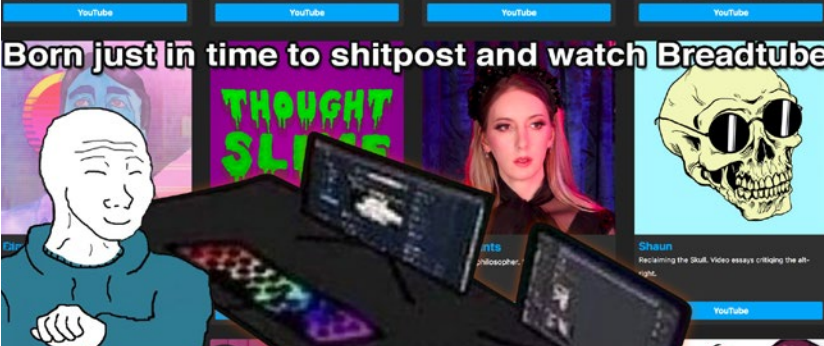

Image courtesy of the artist.

a parallel time in cultural history, except maybe Nazis in the 1920s and '30s deeming Fauvism and Dadaism "degenerate art." I mean, maybe that's too strong a comparison but ...

DK It's hyperbole, but the comparison is apt. Looking back over the second half of the past decade, I can barely think of any high-profile artwork that was shown.

CB Anne Imhof's Faust at the Venice Biennale in 2017. But otherwise, Sotheby's sale of KAWS Sergeant Pepper's cover, whatever it was called?

DK When was the last big sensational Jordan Wolfson work, 2015? 2017? That VR piece, *Real Violence*?

CB I do want to bring this conversation back to the American element. While message boards exist in lots of different languages—for instance, as James Whipple reminded us recently, Wojak (the feels guy meme) comes from the Polish-language boards. And certainly the German boards have been major drivers of right-radicalism in Germany and Austria. But I think it's fair to say that the American memesphere has been dominant, at least in the West. Dan, you've often said that politics or political media has come to be America's top form of entertainment, and also its top cultural export. Also related, here, is the fact that the platforms on which these memes circulate are also American. So even if it's someone in Germany posting about the AfD to their German-language Facebook, this activity is, in a sense, happening on American territory; like a form of extrastate-craft by America's corporate tech sphere. By this logic, the scaling of meme culture via Web 2.0 during the 2010s carries some inherently American qualities. Does that track?

DK It does. You can't separate the nature of the platform and what content the platform prioritizes. And of course, if those platforms are all mostly headquartered within, say, 15 square miles of each other

[in Silicon Valley], they are going to have a lot of similarities. This interactive morality play version of politics did become a main US export, but delivered by the internet stacks, as well as the forms of memeified financialization that it enables. In this frame, politics (and memes about politics) are the fuel that gets people to engage. This content feeds the expanding neural network built to expand and entrench American power around the world. TikTok is Chinese, and Telegram is Russian—but both of these examples only reinforce the point. Telegram is specifically notable in that it's often the last exit for people being deplatformed from American social media.

LI Telegram becomes the place to share sentiments that Facebook, etc., deem "anti-American." As a platform, Telegram works as Russian extrastatecraft to polarize and disrupt the internal fabric of America, which makes the US look weak in the eyes of Russians.

CB I do wonder though if the aggregate impact of America falling apart so visibly for four years was actually, on net, beneficial for America's brand because, 1. it kept the US continuously in everyone's consciousness and 2. it was clear that, good or bad, at least there was some kind of cultural pulse there—rather than, say, just a population of neoliberal automatons.

DK Yeah, we're clearly past the place of "bad" or "good" PR. It's now just neural activation, and over the past decade, American memetics has done a great job of activating the world's neurons!

Joshua Citarella (American, b. 1987, lives and works in New York) is an artist and researcher of Internet subcultures and communities.

New Models is a digital platform and content aggregator founded in 2018 by Caroline Busta, Lil Internet, and Daniel Keller.