

On Digital Otherness: Being ‘of Art’ in the Age of the Internet

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This paper will explore the notion of digital otherness by examining creative practice in a 21st century context of art that is neither belonging to or a part of classifiable genres of the academy. It will look to the notion of otherness through art in the proliferation of the internet of things and consider a position of how memes, creative apps, and fan art have replaced contemporary art as being ‘of art’ in a global context through the understanding of the space of social media and browser-based networks to derive at a conclusion which posits Hegel through *Das Absolute* as a means of coming to terms with digital otherness in the space of the academy for the purpose of aesthetic critique.

Keywords: Contemporary art, digital media, internet art

The term otherness is represented in contemporary art as a genre of unclassifiable artwork, existing without the artist being aware of cultural or intellectual rigour and that the artists themselves ‘were seen to exist outside established culture and society.’ (Rawvision, 2017) As movements such as Art Brut and self-taught art, for example, harboured artefacts from artists who practice outside of the academy fringe into what has been reclassified in an art history context as ‘outsider art’ simply because there have been no other serious archival categories for these types of artefacts to exist within the academy nor, until recently, a lack of sustained wider interest from the academy with the exception of enquiry from artists with disability, to recognise or validate outsider art as an acceptable - an ‘approved’ - intellectual integration within contemporary art, such practitioners have produced work that remains unaffected by critical and theoretical discourse by the traditional mediums of art including painting, printmaking, drawing, sculpture and mixed media. Yet for digital communities, the internet has allowed anyone with an online connection and the ability to use a computational device

to create, upload, distribute, exhibit, and archive unlimited digital medias without any form of peer review or aesthetic feedback in terms of the quality of the work thus, providing art in the age of the internet with tools, often facilitated by AI functionality, to achieve instantaneous authorship and unlimited viewership. As such, this paper will explore the rise of digital otherness with the intention of understanding how ‘another’ art has emerged, and specifically, come to terms with new approaches of an alternative online art made within the internet running parallel to the academy through the guise of kitsch, the ironic, the unaffected and the replicated.

What makes art into art? This question has fuelled a long standing debate amongst the academy no more prevalent than in the French Salon of the Nineteenth Century. At the time, Paris was the undisputed epicentre of world art and the academy was the foremost in art scholarship, represented by instalments which, up until 1890, measured and defined the aesthetic value of art as being ‘of art’ or ‘of not art’. The irony of such is that rejected artworks from the jury of the time have since become widely collected, articulated, and gained astronomical market values. For example, Manet's *The Luncheon on the Grass* was rejected by the salon in 1863 as ‘not being of art’ yet is now heralded as the birth of Modern Art, thus changing the way as to how the academy was to later think about art in the first place. French naive artist Henri Rousseau painted images which were scorned by Salon critics and mocked by audiences in the late 19th century yet, due to the changing ethos staged from the remnants of both the French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist movements, his work gained a wider acceptance in the Salon des Independants during the 1890s to advance naive art as a prototype of outsider art vested within the academy in the early 20th century. As the academy itself slowly moved away from the once revered private art schools, art societies, and public salons of which whom tightly controlled the bastions of European high art, the proliferation of such emerged again in the post war years from government regulated art schools, universities, and modern art galleries into a space where late Modernism and early Postmodernism was to change the way that the academy in the post-Salon years was to, again, understand art as being ‘of art’.

In the 21st century, the traditional boundaries of Western Europe once perceived as the heartland of the academy have essentially dissolved in exclusivity as globalism and capitalist market networks began to slowly establish definitions of art which were unthinkable even fifty years prior. Yet the boundaries of what is and what is not art still remains as an enforced necessitation of the global intellegesian network albeit limited by an alienating diminishment of high art, eroded by the populous practice of dumbing down intellectual rigour by the internet of things and social media. As contemporary culture is now engaged through the predominance of digital design, one might argue that the hierarchy of the academy has contracted in cultural value amongst to a somewhat smaller cultural niche market, shadowed by the dominant behemoths of browser experiences and mobile media.

Before the invention of photography, art was the primary medium by which to engage with the public on a visual level unprecedented for millennia. However, as fine art is no longer a primary source of public visual documentation, and with this, the polarisation of the intellectual elite, this paper argues that for the sake of digital otherness, contemporary art is now delegated into a cultural obscurity, and boldly declared to be an obsolete visual genre, replaced within a social context by the internet art genres of memes, gaming and apps.

Throughout human history, the value of intellectual discourse through art has long been devalued through hostility by frequented populist nationalism and dictatorial regimes. Likewise, the intelligentsia operating inside the academy have long dismissed artists who are disassociated from a binding intellectual treatise. Tensions between the two, and within, and outside of, the academy over the past two decades have divided the relevance of art in a public context to a furthering gap of mass audiences utilising being creative away from the confinements of the academy to instead follow a do-it-yourself ethos thus rendered as kitsch purely because the creators of such digital art lack the basic fundamentals of aesthetic critique or a willingness to mediate a broader conceptual intent beyond a conviction as to if the image looks nice. The notorious debates of Stuckism versus contemporary art on the matter, whereby both camps consider the premise of each other as being ‘not of art’ can be argued of the tensions between contemporary art and digital otherness in, say, the difference between a

Grumpy Cat meme image constructed by using an online template generator, and the artist Olga Shvartsur's watercolour painting *Grumpy Cat Tastes the Rainbow*. (Shavatsur, 2013) One might consider the difference between the two artefacts is that the intent of Shvartsur is to create an artwork by referencing an online image of Grumpy Cat to make an artefact using skills and conceptual values appropriated through postmodern irony outside of the internet to then upload a picture of the completed artefact back into the internet in comparison to a Grumpy Cat meme made on a meme website thereby conceived, manufactured and distributed solely online. The difference here is that the artist is intentionally using kitsch as a mechanism to critique itself whereas the self generated meme is not, thus manufactured as a populist image without an intended awareness of critique thus rendering the totality of its own aesthetic as unquestionably kitsch and, therefore, unaffected by the intent and from this, the agency of irony.

In terms of the latter, the notion of this particular meme as being 'of art' by digital otherness brings forth an understanding that art produced in the age of the internet enables 'art that is meant to be viewed on a computer [which] questioned the necessity of the institutions established to contain and present art.' (Jones) While the internet of things has established itself as a vast and incalculable treasure trove of both good and bad art, the fact that online technologies such as social media, for example, allows for a completely open accessed display of art to be judged on a system of social peer review algorithms, operatively classifying images filtered through a complex set of superficial metrics based on variants of offensiveness, popularity, and concurrent popularist opinions, the exclusivity of art distributed and published online in the 1990s and 2000s was that of exploration of the medium at a micro level until the 2010s when corporations and governments worked out how to exploit the internet at a macro level by enabling platforms which removed humans in the decision processes of the classifiability by engaging AI-driven censorship to then blend the permissibility of appropriateness garnered through populist trends into determining if art will be, in fact, allowed to be seen and digitally exchanged in the first place based not on cultural merit but rather, if it is deemed to be offensiveless. The public dismantling of the intellectual elite within art has not so much seen its hierarchy abandoned in these times but, more so,

overtaken by internet audiences whereby screen design, instantaneousness, and digital manipulation have given audiences widely accessible provisions to make their own art, bypassing the once studio and institutional traditions we once saw through Modernism to instead abandon aesthetic tradition altogether so as to forge a new genre of art; yet at the same time, disregard the traditional standards of aesthetic intellectualism to such an extent that any aesthetic critique can be now argued as being offensive in nature and therefore, ignored indefinitely simply because we might not agree with it.

We have seen this especially since the mass adoption of social media platforms, including Facebook and Instagram, understood as media participation networks made solely to be experienced through online browsers and mobile devices ‘in an era of blurring boundaries between interpersonal and mass, professional and amateur, bottom-up and top-down communications’. (Shilmon) With this in mind, ‘in 2014, according to Mary Meeker’s *Annual Internet Trends Report*, people uploaded an average of 1.8 billion digital images every single day. That’s 657 billion photos per year.’ (Eveleth, 2015) This is not to say that the cultural elite within the academy has been disbanded altogether in reaction to the mass cultural effect of the internet, but it does, however, contribute to the observation that the weight of internet-driven art is, for art itself, the first time in human history where art can to be produced, exhibited, and distributed without the confinement of privacy or exclusivity to instead have an accessibility of instantaneous experiences measured in the fact that billions of people can look at the same artwork in the same accessed location at any given point of time.

When observing meme practice as otherness, which, as a genre in itself, must be acknowledged to have existed well before the age of the internet and digital art, and back, in its infancy, into early Greek thought, this paper proposes the approach of Dennett who states that memes are of a Postmodern genre which elicits that ‘replication is not necessarily for the good of anything; replicators flourish that are good at... replicating’ (Dennett, p. 129) insofar as deliberating the agency from digital otherness as intrinsically intertwined within the process of replication, hence, understood as the cultural mechanism by which otherness can exist in art within context of the space of its online inhabitancy. For example, the way in

which Snapchat enables mechanised artworks to be generated from mobile apps not only propagates the space of digital otherness, separated from the academy and therefore, the created images without conceptual intent are being ‘of art’ within themselves as an otherness, yet not ‘of art’ as thought of in the academy because the intent is from ‘of otherness’, render themselves disposable due to the time restrictive nature of Snapchat messages which intentionally disappear after a short amount of time. The sense of replication makes the entire Snapchat transaction possible of which, in effect, polarises its otherness away from the economic commodification of art as collectable museum piece and, in turn, plays into the wider condition of creative mechanicalism brought about by the presence of kitsch argued against from Esman as a systematic issue where ‘everyone can be an artist, because everyone can take a photograph with a smart phone’ (Esman, 2012) and further, making and “creating things” online and “creating art” is the same distinguishment of intent as between “craft” and “art” (Esman) but doesn’t, moreover, turn craft into art and nor does it make the presence of kitsch through digital otherness into being ‘of art’ too, just because we might ought to consider, and self classify, the said artefact to be of art without any informed critical analysis. As memes ‘are especially prolific in participatory collectives’ (Milner), advancements in smart technology are impacting on the ability to create art affected by the academy and more so, that the role of peer reviewed validation in art has been ignored on such a mass scale that the academy itself is now competing for its own survival based on economic rationalist agendas in the face of reductive impositions not unlike the lament of ‘why visit an art gallery when you can visit deviantArt?’ (lostZone, 2014)

Addressing fan art as a key genre in digital otherness also locates itself by the notion of the internet as public gallery whereby portraits of celebrities, often lacking in conceptual and technical aesthetics, occupy a digital space which is, by and large, claimed from an associated network of fan art contributors who migrate to internet sites which allow these kinds of images to readily be made available for comment and cataloging. Taking note that ‘another related differentiation of fan textual productivity involves ‘old’ aesthetics of purely hand-drawn fan art versus a ‘new aesthetic of photo-manipulation, which remains controversial among some fans’ (Jenkins, p. 329), a particularly engaging sub-genre

dedicated to actor Nicolas Cage uses digitally manipulated images of the actor mapped onto other images to forge a Baudrillardian approach to fan art in opposition to the otherness of images created without the multiplicity of mashups. In comparison, the now defunct blog www.niccageiseveryone.com (2013) published images of the actor grafted onto a variety of other unrelated images including Abraham Lincoln, Thomas the Tank Engine, the Breaking Dawn film poster, rabbits, Elvis Presley meeting Richard Nixon, and the Wiggles, thus using internet irony as a mechanism for cultural critique is contrasted by the artefacts collected in the Pinterest page ‘Badcelebrityfanart’ (2018) which claims ‘this collection of Sincere Fan Art Turned into Lifelike Photoshops Will Give You Nightmares.’ (ibid) If memes were intended to ‘be something mundane that act as a catalyst for cultural developments’ (Wiggins, p. 5) then the meme allows its creator to think in broader terms as to what their image is engaging with, while also providing users an opportunity to create the exact same artefact without any awareness at all and making fan art a sub genre of special interest because of the sincerity by which it is created in and the unawareness of its creator that it is, in effect, bad art.

As the intent of this analogy is not to ridicule the authors of these images but rather, to understand the nature of otherness in the subsequent condition brought about by the images themselves, a value of its cultural position in art is highlighted by the key factor of determinism taken in the Hegelian sense that one ought to think about the world through an awareness of being and to engage within it knowingly through an identity by that of an absolute idealism. That said, this paper concurs with Hegel’s position of *Das Absolute* as a useful mechanism for the academy to embrace in order to come to terms with the art of digital otherness and, moreover, a way in which to unify the aesthetic critique of artworks which specifically lack awareness of aesthetics outside the boundaries of an absolute idealism irrespective of how speculative such idealism is surmounted through, paradoxically, the diversity of its own aesthetic nature.

With this in mind, Hegel’s position finds similarity in the place of digital otherness. While a connectivity between Hegel and Nicholas Cage fan art may seem to be at odds with each

other, therein lies connections towards the intent of the authors, and others, who employ these kinds of images without a reliance on the broader grounding of conceptual analysis just as *Das Absolute* propagates the same kind of idealism centred on the overall understanding of ‘knowing everything’. On the face of it, there would seem to be an opposition between *Das Absolute* and, say, the Grumpy Cat meme generator, yet this paper proposes that position simply dismisses a reading of Hegel’s phrase ‘it is only in absolute knowing that the separation of the *object* from the *certainty of itself* is completely eliminated: truth is now equated with certainty and certainty with truth.’ (Hegel, s. 51) If taken in the sense that creators represented throughout digital otherness are producing and distributing work with a certainty of appreciation for their craft, that is, a certainty of their own truth, unaware of the broader cultural issues at play within their work, then the act of doing so can be argued as a merger between “making” and “certainty” as being Hegelian as the combination of each other enacts a certainty of truth from their own perspective, not necessarily an atomic or absolute truth by that of which truth is unmistakably true and cannot, therefore, be anything else other than truth; that is to say, for example, the Earth is round and the sun revolves around the Earth, but truth that they themselves believe is being ‘of truth’ resultant in a belief that the truth of their artwork is vested by the garnishments of support from other stakeholders of digital otherness or even, more pronounced, of their own self-validation and, therefore, the truth of their work is that of a measurement of deserving quality, then the state of truth in the being of otherness plays a significant factor in how the academy can begin to understand digital otherness as a validated movement of artists recognised as being ‘of art’.

This reading of Hegel is one such way as to bring together an understanding of digital otherness within the presence of kitsch, the unaffected, and the replicated. We find this in the areas of both kitsch, deciphering what makes kitsch “kitsch” is what Calinescu claims as that ‘by its very nature, is incapable of taking the risk involved in any true avant-gardism’ (Calinescu, p. 231) - and the replicated - in the context of the reproduction of infinite versions of the same image with slight variations whereby the art is found in the act of replication itself, not necessarily in what the image exactly is, *visually* - as Hegel’s premise lends itself in ways to make us come to terms with art as being ‘of art’ justifiable so that the certainty of

truth surmounting, for example, a meme by a creator who is without an awareness of irony, that is to say, an effacement of cultural critique, is just as much enabling a truth in its own absolute idealism as to that of, say, an intended meme such as, for example, the Ducreux self portrait memes genre (2009) which iconoclastically positions art as an ‘other’ version of itself through variants of responding text, thus allowing the disaffected to exist within a metamodernist framework which oscillates between being aware and not being aware, and being of art and not being of art at the same time only if the understanding of absolute idealism is thought about as a truth of a truth and further, allowing the truth to be in absolute without establishing an atomic truth that would otherwise conflict with the truth of itself as being ‘of art’. This paper proposes that the reading of absolute idealism as a way for art to be inclusive of the discussion of art being ‘of art’ irrespective of whether the artefact hangs in a museum art gallery or exists inside the photo roll of a mobile phone. Yet, the awareness of such by those who engage with digital otherness need also to be considerate to the cultural implications of their creative outputs so as not to disbandon the academy altogether but rather, to embrace it as part of the changing climate of contemporary art and the future of art as being ‘of art’ in the years to come.

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