

- 5 pm Meeting and Gra

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Meeting around the exhibitions  
3 pm  
Every day of the exhibition

No reservation

No reservation needed.

why we eventually decided to turn it into a collective project, bringing together all our previous artistic research and activities involving memes.

We have never stopped archiving memes, studying the texts that are now part of our nascent Meme Studies and involving various communities in our work, bringing us up to the present day. The *MEME MANIFESTO* exhibition has been shown in various forms, in liminal places and established institutions that support and investigate online subcultures and digital art, such as Ars Electronica (Austria), Aksioma (Slovenia), Drugo More (Croatia) and Onassis Stegi (Athens). But during these years of the pandemic, perhaps what has made us feel most in touch with the worlds we have been able to interact with – both for participatory purposes and to learn new things from those who came in virtually – have been our workshops.

One of the main aims of our work is to make sure that memetic culture and memes are recognised as an art form by Culture with a capital "C", without letting the countless subcultures in the memetic landscape become diluted, misrepresented or exploited. This is an enormous challenge but we are trying to do our bit.

VP What do you think a meme and a work of art have in common? I've been wondering for some time if memes are ultimately going through a process of "artification". But I also wonder what the social indicators of this process might be. The most evident one is the emergence of a desire for authorship, and this is basically what I believe has been going on in the Italian memesphere for some years now. There are Facebook pages with stylistic features – whether graphic or literary – that have become perfectly uniform and recognisable, and clearly the work of one or more artists. But shouldn't memes, by their very nature, reject any form of authorship? In your [guide to the Detective Wall](#), you yourselves say that "The meme is always plural, never singular". Might it be that basically even allegedly individual artists act more like the ganglia of a single, large, unfathomable collective memetic unconscious?

C Increasing numbers of artists use some memetic characters in their works. A bit like Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans*, today Pepe, Wojak & co. are codes of a pop culture that make it possible to address a particular type of audience and make use of shared feelings drawn from the internet.

Perhaps we should speak not so much of “artification” as of a “gentrification” of the memetic subculture, and of becoming part of the mainstream. But it is true that, at the same time, something that could be called “artification” is also going on between the communities of meme makers and digital creators. This is something that touches above all on the concept of authorship.

People normally tend to say that the main difference between memes and contemporary art has to do with the aspect of participation and collective remixing, which is typical of the memetic subculture, which leads to a rejection of the concept of the author.

Unlike art, the meme emerged from a clearly defined habitat, which was that of forums and social-media platforms. This is why the power and special characteristic of the meme – beyond its

We'll start with: who on

# Vittorio Parisi

## what is Clusterduck?

# Clusterduck

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Clusterduck is a collective of people who love both the internet and the countless individuals that populate it, and who, against their will, have found that they are part of the digital creative class<sup>1</sup>. We work for the creative gig economy by day and we meet online at night, or on weekends, and we work together on projects we love. Unfortunately, this arrangement is proving to be rather unsustainable in the long run, since it means we have to hold down two different jobs – but that's another matter, which has to do with the precarious state of the creative class, and perhaps it's too long and complex to talk about here. We are five permanent members, currently floating between Berlin and Florence. We work together online, interacting with a network of friends and partners right across the world, but especially in Europe, who join us on a project-by-project basis, depending on their particular interests.

Over Christmas in 2016, after long conversations in chat rooms and a few evenings together, we all met up in Florence, with the vague idea that something very important was going on in the various internet communities, and we decided it would be nice to try and disentangle this “clusterfuck” together. To give you an idea, this was just a few months before the infamous Great Meme War was fought: a sort of vast cultural and media conflict that culminated in the unexpected election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. At the time, the whole chaos of fake news and post-truth was yet to explode, but its epoch-changing significance could already be sensed.

We initially thought we'd put our intuitions to the test in an as-yet unfinished documentary, then in a digital exhibition called *Internet Fame*, as part of the 2018 Wrong Digital Biennale. That year we launched #MEMEPROPAGANDA, our first participatory transmedia exhibition. Here the aim was to show that memes are much more than just the amusing viral images they talk about in the media: in other words, they are a powerful narrative vehicle, very useful for creating and sometimes destroying cultural, political and commercial visions – a means of propaganda that can be used for political or marketing purposes.

This experience was the start of our transmedia and participatory research into memes, and thus also of *MEME MANIFESTO*, the project we are showing here at Villa Arson.

VP I'd like to open a discussion with you on the by no means obvious relationship between the world of memes and that of contemporary art. Before you came here, had you already been able to show memes in – or at least give them access to – the so-called “white cube”, letting them coexist with its particular rules and rituals?

C The first version of *MEME MANIFESTO* was shown in 2018 at the panke.gallery as part of the Wrong Digital Biennale. Panke.gallery is a Berlin institution that is now well established on the international net art scene – so yes, in a certain sense *MEME MANIFESTO 1.0* was indeed born within the context of the white cube. The artist in the first version of the work was Jules Durand and we curated it – we immediately took to the idea and that's

proposes to investigate the agency of memes: their capacity to become vehicles for activism or political propaganda, and therefore to have consequences on our daily lives.

V.P

“When going down to Hell, there’s always a need for a Guide. Hence here we are, offering you our left hand and welcoming you to scan the wall where we collected countless little fragments from the Internet’s subconscious: the irrefutable evidence of our passage through the unfathomable seas of the memosphere.”

This is how Clusterduck (a European interdisciplinary collective of artists, activists, and web designers) chose to present the mural installation which is the central element of the exhibition *MEME MANIFESTO*.

One might define this *detective wall* – their name for the installation – as a wall covered with internet memes, in other words, the funny, sad, disturbing or merely absurd images which are created, remixed and shared every day on the web.

Complemented by an interactive web installation, the *detective wall* looks like one of those *crazy walls* popularized by numerous police movies or TV series – walls full of photographs and newspaper clippings pinned or glued on, often linked together by pieces of string indicating connections – or like Aby Warburg's *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*: a tool created by the German art historian in the 1920s to retrace recurrent themes and visual motifs throughout history, from antiquity to the Renaissance and beyond, up to our contemporary culture, and which has inspired Clusterduck in its charting of the “memesphere”.

But how can one chart and exhibit memes, which are in appearance unchartable and unshowable? “The Meme is always plural, never singular. It is perceived in a context, it is enjoyed in clusters; its very existence is by definition only possible as a variant of other memes and as a result of an interaction – be it only between a bunch of users.”

Thus the memes collected by Clusterduck are organized and hierarchized into ten groups according to criteria both chronological and thematic, aiming at escorting the visitors at the heart of a voyage inside the collective subconscious of the Internet and its representations: “We collected stories of how a user, or several users, experienced a phenomenon, an aesthetic tendency, a recurring semantic strategy; we then tried to outline and to represent a few brief but probably very influential moments of the history of memetics”.

Throughout the exhibition the visitors are guided through deeper and deeper levels of memetics, starting with the most popular and best-known formats, and moving towards the most occult and esoteric. The list is long: poorly made memes, memes with an original content, surrealist memes, fried memes, nuked memes... They are juxtaposed according to certain categories: wholesome, ugly, absurd, edgy, weird, cursed.

One question especially seems to haunt this urge to organize a shapeless universe, and to transform chaos into cosmos: how did memes end up having a hyperstitional power? A word coined by British philosopher Nick Land, the concept of “hyperstition” defines how fictional elements can become truths.

While exploring the ways in which memes and art are similar or different, *MEME MANIFESTO*





it can be said that a whole year of meme history was rewritten. Numerous articles in US and foreign newspapers screamed at the scandal, reducing the meme subculture – this unknown entity – to just a right-wing phenomenon. And there were academic articles, some prejudiced, like “On the Origins of Memes by Means of Fringe Web Communities” (2018), where the work of data visualisation was brought to bear by deliberately referencing content created in the strongholds of alt-righters and “hate speakers” like [/pol/](#), [8chan](#), and [Gab](#). The quintessential datasets tainted by bias.

Memes are by their very nature open to dialogue, which can only come from the interactions between many people, and their success depends to a large extent on how “relatable” they are – in other words, on how well they capture and sum up a particular social dynamic. Thanks to Bateson and his metalogues and to Watzlawick and his pragmatics of human communication, we are well aware that our brain considers messages that are reinforced through repetition as being more truthful.

The more the message remains internally consistent but repeated by multiple sources in different forms, the more it can become part of what Erving Goffman calls a “frame”, and thus an element that has the power to change our way of seeing reality. What is of particular interest to us in this whole process is that by changing a person’s interpretation of reality, and therefore their cognitive framework, it becomes easy to manipulate their actions. This brings us back to the 2016 US elections and the huge investment that the right-wing made in memetic culture and in the digital spaces in which it took hold.

We are not saying that Trump's victory in the elections depended solely on the memes, because that would be an oversimplification as well as inaccurate, but we are simply illustrating the role they played in the complex system of opposing forces that were involved in that election.

VP The alt-right has spread the buzzword phrase – which has itself become a meme – that “The Left Can’t Meme”, implying that left-wing memes are neither funny nor able to change anything. Might it be that, as Bergson claimed, humour always calls for a suspension of empathy, and that the empathy bar on the left is always (or at least should always be) rather high? If this is true, do you think it is still possible to make revolutionary use of memes?

C In actual fact, the meme you refer to is, one might say, a hyperstitional trap that prevents us from considering historical reality, because it rewrites it. And this is precisely where our contribution comes in! Some of the proto-memes we've included in our panels literally came about within "left-wing" demonstrations and communities: the legendary Techno Viking, on whom the director Matthias Fritzsche made an amusing documentary, was born during the Fuckparade in Berlin, and the diabolical figure of Gritty the mascot of the Philadelphia Flyers, is a recurring anti-Nazi symbol in many demonstrations and online sit-ins. Then there is Gondola, the armless bear that is a powerful symbol of non-violence, which came from a process of memetic re-appropriation of another notorious hyperstitional bear, Pedobear. One could go on, with lots of examples of recent memes that have gone viral, achieving great success, and that come from the LGBTQ+ activist community.

Not only is the left perfectly capable of meming, but memetic culture is the offspring of ideals that belong to leftist, anarchist and punk subcultures. Falling into the trap of “The Left Can’t Meme” means falling victim to a sophisticated media operation. In the aftermath of Trump’s triumph, as after any unexpected, traumatic political event, the media and commentators were looking for an explanation for what had just happened. From then on,

was the period of the so-called “meme magic”, which for us was an opportunity to examine memes as hyperstitional objects.

VP Since you speak of memes as “hyperstitional objects”, one concept that appears in your guide is that of Nick Land’s hyperstition, which is the phenomenon by which a fictional scenario ends up becoming reality. There was talk about this some years ago during Donald Trump’s campaign for the US presidential elections in 2016, and the decisive role that the [Pepe the Frog](#) meme is said to have played in Trump’s election. In your opinion, to what extent do memes have the power to make certain things happen? Is it the same old issue of art imitating life, which ends up imitating art, or is there more to it than this?

C That's a really good question, because as you'll see in *The Detective Wall Guide*, one of our panels – the fourth one – is indeed devoted to the game of hyperstition.

Our artistic practice and research work has taught us that the ability to create highly effective narrative mechanisms is one of the most important potential qualities of memes, so we agree in stating that, in some cases, memes can act as hyperstitional objects. Their narrative power – in other words, their ability to convey highly complex sensations that can also vary over time depending on the political or imaginative inclinations of the users – can be found in many so-called reaction characters, who are meme personalities. We have already talked about Pepe the Frog, Wojak and Doge, but also minor meme characters seem to retain this power, as we see in Gitty and Gondola, which we'll talk about shortly, and many others that you'll find information about in the Guide, such as Disaster Girl, Feel the Pain Harold, Dat Boi, Wednesday Frog, Chad and Meme Men. This gave us the idea of using them first as mascots, in the performative and political posters of #MEMEPROPAGANDA, and then as totems and guide animals, and as a beacon in a world of chaos, in the work of MEME MANIFESTO.

Broadly speaking, memes – in addition to their characters – are good vehicles for propaganda, both as objects that are open to dialogue, and for their ability to sum up and convey concepts. Trump's spin doctors were not the first to realise this: a proto-memetic campaign had already been put in place by Obama, the [Bernie Sanders Meme Stash](#) group came up with some masterpieces during the 2015 primaries, and also in the UK, during the general election campaign in 2017, Jeremy Corbyn appeared to have a crushing memetic superiority over Theresa May.

It was precisely in order to raise the alarm and warn the world, in our small way, about the danger but also the importance of memes as a hyperstitial form of communication, that we started our work on #MEMEPROPAGANDA. And it is with pleasure that, four years later, we can see how the message has spread (not thanks to us of course – it has been a general raising of awareness). With the parallel #MEMERSFORFUTURE project, which focuses on the use of memes in climate justice movements, we then investigated how memes are also remixed in the analogue world, such as on posters for events.

he believes he has detected a conspiracy revolving around a character named Pepe Silvia. In a fortunate case of apophenia, Pepe is the name of one of our favourite meme characters, while Silvia is that of one of our co-founders. So basically, it was a fateful omen we could hardly ignore.

To answer your question, the composition of the panels led us to some discoveries, which came about simply because we'd put the many meme folders in order, and we'd researched the origins of some formats and juxtaposed some remixes in sequence. We discovered, for example, that many of the early Rage Comics characters, such as the now famous Cereal Guy and Trollface, were actually taken from comics that had previously been posted on the Deviant Art platform, or that many of the relatable memes or Twitter memes that these days roam through the ether of the platforms, often came from remixing recurring phrases. We also noted that many of the “magical” mythologies exploited by the alt-right<sup>5</sup> actually derive from apolitical memes that emerged, months and often years ago, from the world of multiplayer gaming. And we saw how much of the symbolism of white suprematism used on the internet was actually taken, as fate would have it, from the meme communities of Black Twitter.

As with the history of philology, tracing the episodes and images that have emerged from the extremely volatile and performative subculture of memes, contributes enormously to the preservation of and respect for the voices that expressed themselves at that particular time, in that particular place on the internet, creating meanings that are as powerful as they are easy to exploit.

VP To what extent is your plan to map the recurrence of memes similar to Warburg's? Are memes also "pathos formulas"?

C Memes certainly thrive on recurrences, more than on pathos formulas, but we normally speak simply of formats. Formats work a bit like frames: they're easily recognisable and editable, and enormously accelerate the circulation of meme content. Many have now crossed the threshold of the internet, invading cinema and television, and are also very well known among the general public: Distracted Boyfriend, Expanding Brain and Drake Reaction are just three examples. We aren't attempting to classify every existing format – a taxonomic undertaking like that would be a Sisyphean task that we prefer to leave to such commendable initiatives as the Know Your Meme archive website. What we're trying to do is analyse memes from a historical and, one might say, also an anthropological point of view. In fact, the process of creating the panels did not only deal with meme formats.

Reference to the format is certainly a guide, especially in the case of panels such as [Advice Animals](#) and [Image Macro](#), or the one immediately after, which includes a painstaking selection of Twitter Meme (or “Relatable Meme”). But generally speaking, it was a transversal task that focused mainly on some significant historical periods in the life of memes, such as the emergence of the first troll communities, which coincided with the birth of the meme as an anonymous creation. Then there

used in this sort of setting – that “memes belong to no one and to everyone”. These factors, together with the sword of Damocles of the infamous “community guidelines” that can lead to the instant elimination of months of work by closing down a profile, help us understand why there have been attempts on Facebook and Instagram – sadly, it must be said, rather ill-fated – to organise strikes by meme makers and even to set up a “meme union”.

VP In the introduction to your *Guide*, you wonder how to “map the unmappable”, talking about what I have referred to as the “collective memetic unconscious”. This is the challenge at the heart of the *Detective Wall*. You partly took inspiration from the so-called “crazy walls” of certain detective films, on which investigators pin up documents, photographs, clues, newspaper clippings, and so on, creating a sort of mental map in the hope that the solution to the case they’re puzzling over will pop out sooner or later. What is it that you are investigating? What are you looking for?

C The panels of *Detective Wall* were created in response to a practical need we had. In the summer of 2020, as part of *MEME MANIFESTO*, we found ourselves having to put our hapless minds in some sort of order. We felt we were becoming befuddled by our constant, incessant exposure to memetic images, which had been going on for nearly a decade. What we mean is we felt a bit like Alex in Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, when he's forced to look at ultraviolent images with his eyes held wide open, while listening to Beethoven. We needed to get this "stuff" out of our minds, and to do that we decided it would be best to use an art project.

First, we wanted to find a way to take this vast number of images into the so-called Iceberg, a digital archive-site that forms part of the *MEME MANIFESTO* project and that will also be shown at Villa Arson. The idea behind the site was to recreate a sort of initiatory experience in the viewer, accompanying them down a path into the digital underworld, starting from the “easier” and better-known memes and leading all the way down to the most abstruse and disturbing ones. In a most fortunate case of serendipity, at around this time, the independent IMPAKT platform encouraged us to turn our project into an installation. The panels thus became the tool with which we arranged a small fraction of our archive in ten different stages, inspired by the ten sefirot of the Tree of Life in the Jewish Kabbalah.

While producing them, we let ourselves be guided by two references that are very important to us. The first was Aby Warburg's *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, which during that period had been exhibited, for the first time in many years, at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. It is indeed no coincidence that the panels of the *Detective Wall* recall Warburg's great panels, not just aesthetically, but also for their juxtaposition and combinatorial nature.

Our other guiding spirit during this period was the [Pepe Silvia](#) meme, a very popular format in those early months of the pandemic, which were filled with conspiracy theories and sinister omens. In the meme, we see a character from the television show *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* flipping out in front of a classic detective's crazy wall, in which

citationist element, or reference, and its syntactic “laws”, or format – lies in its ability to reproduce itself by going through various communities and platforms, changing its meaning depending on the context and on the power of re-appropriation by the community. Then there are obvious aesthetic analogies with some historical movements and periods of modern art, such as *Dada*<sup>2</sup>, but we can leave this matter to the excellent analysis by Valentina Tanni in her *Memestetica* (2020).

Coming back to the difficult question of authorship, the first exponents of memetic culture highlighted the anonymous and collective aspect of meme creation. In addition to creating memes, they were the first to give voice to this culture by talking about it in conferences such as *Mainstreaming the Web* (ROFLCon 2010) or in books such as *Makes a Meme Instead* (2013) by Linda Börzsei and *Memes in Digital Culture* (2014) by Limor Shifman. Later, however, when memes started skipping from platform to platform and being influenced by the various aesthetics, practices and community guidelines of the various social media platforms, the discussion started getting incredibly complicated, as you can well imagine.

Another very important factor has been the incorporation of memes into the mainstream, and their subsequent commercialisation. One consequence of these interconnected processes is that some meme makers have acquired a more clearly individual role, hybridising the original figure of the anonymous co-creator with that of the digital artist. This has vastly increased the importance of aspects that were originally quite marginal, such as the idea of authorship or of individual style, and naturally reaching all the way – and this is the crucial point – to the concept of the value of the individual work.

This process has now been taken to the extreme, with single memes being sold as NFTs<sup>3</sup>. This happened, for example, on the Foundation<sup>4</sup> crypto market platform in March 2021, when “golden era” memes like *Nyan Cat*, *Trollface* and *Doge* were sold as trophies, in some cases with stellar profits. When judging these developments, we believe it is necessary to make a distinction. In the case of *Nyan Cat*, a meme that became famous clearly as the result of a collective phenomenon of remixing, it does not seem fair that the authorship (and thus the proceeds of the sales) should be attributed to a single person, in this case Chris Torres. In cases such as those of the so-called OC memes – where “OC” stands for “original content” – a phenomenon that we first saw taking shape on social platforms like Tumblr and then on Instagram in 2014, it is much more difficult to come down on one side or the other. Here we find ourselves in a situation in which the person who creates the meme is clearly the author of an original and individual style and aesthetic. In a world often subject to considerable financial uncertainty, it is not surprising that many of these “meme artists” have a great interest in monetising their work.

At the same time – and especially on large proprietary platforms – there are lots of explicitly commercial profiles that commodify the work of these content creators on a grand scale. And this is often without any form of remuneration, based on the principle – which is perversely distorted when

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