The Forensic Annotation of a Fever Dream

An Ongoing Atlas of COVID-related Memes

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ABSTRACT

This exhibition/installation is made of a set of online-generated meme classics referring to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, in their variations, interconnections, and conceptual/historical dynamics. Formally, it takes the shape of a hybrid between a mind map and a forensic chart. Pandemic-related memes have been chosen as root content, given the context of particularly intense and focused online activity from which they emerged. Besides displaying the original items, the exhibition engages in their epistemological and historical referencing, annotation and connection. The primarily online nature of the source references is rendered tangible in the exhibition/installation, gradually occupying and saturating the locus. Memes are printed, drawn and photographed in a range of formats and media, and annotations/connections are made using handwriting and various forms of tape (including unspooled magnetic tape from discarded VHS cassettes).

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → Collaborative and social computing; Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing.

KEYWORDS

COVID memes, Hybrid media, Meme studies, Contemporary semiotics

1 PROCESS

Three processes intertwine throughout the gradual set-up of the exhibition:

1. Materialising online content, a likely obsolete activity by 2023, one would have argued, and yet it is by now evident that the expectation of digital pervasiveness (as well as a corresponding expectation of analogue redundancy) clearly underestimated the growing levels of epistemological density and complexity that allow for this binary conundrum not only to coexist, but even become a continuum - and

as such, foster unexpected hybrid dynamics. In the exhibition, memes are present in multiple material formats: as straight jpeg print-outs on paper and fabric, as projections, as commercial gadgets, and as hand-produced pastiches of traditional arts (namely drawing and ceramic tiles). Additionally, a cross-fading slideshow of visual, contextual and historical references are projected in superimposition with the materials on display.

2. Historical and semiotic referencing, despite their novelty factor, memes may be regarded as heirs to a range of creative and cognitive practices, from comics to remix culture, from Warburg's Mnemosyne [1] panels to 20th-Century avant-garde practices, Fluxus [2] and Cut-ups [3] at the forefront. Multiple references such as these are included in the exhibition, duly contextualised and linked with the specimens that reveal correspondences and affinities. These links are physical connections made through the employment of tape as connecting thread (Figure 1). Memes themselves contain quotation and appropriation as intrinsic premises, both appropriating and subverting historical and contemporary references, and acting as templates for seemingly endless processes of semantic re-signification (Figure 2, Figure 3).

3. The overall approach and aesthetic are humble, precarious, provisional. They are closer in appearance to a detective board than a sensory-driven artistic experience: although the aesthetic component is not rejected, it is not the driver, but rather a consequence. Annotations and inter-relations are themselves an ongoing process of logic, pattern recognition and epiphany, and therefore can occur during set-up, as well as throughout the display - as further connections and contextualisation are identified throughout.

2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Conceptually, there are epistemological, philosophical and pedagogical components at work: by displacing the expectations that memes live exclusively in digital form, we propose an entry point to a form of post-digital delirium - a prelude to a yet-to-be-written, archaeological narrative, a decipherment of an apparently random, psychoanalytical interchangeability of signs and their corresponding media. The exhibition also proposes a glance at the zeitgeist, at the rubble of the "wreckage [blown by the storm] we call progress" (Benjamin, W., cited by Wark [4]) - both through the visual lexica of memes, somewhere between cartoon-like hilarity and darker, cynical semantics - as well as through poetic deconstructions of COVID legislation, in the form of ironic soundbites and nonsensical discourse [5]. Perversely, this debris-like randomness, itself a symptom of excessive contemporary consumer habits, finds its
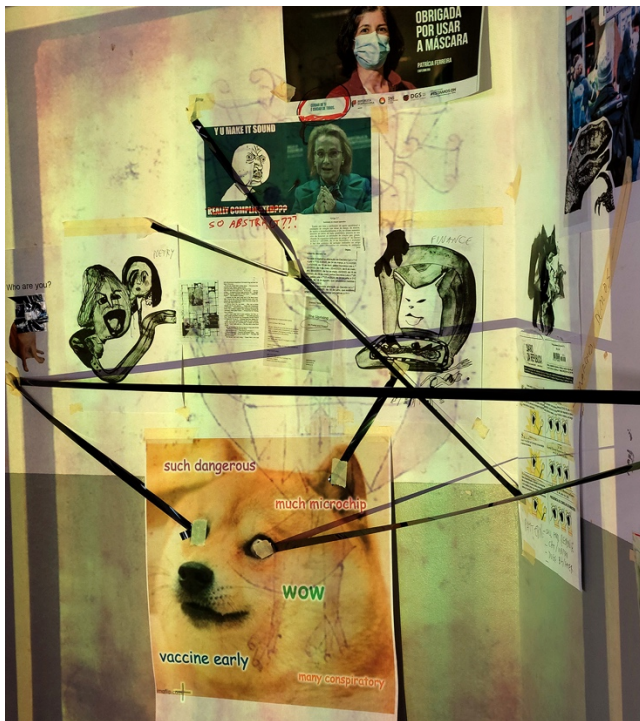
Figure 1: Draft model for installation (detail), 2023. Image by the author.

Figure 2: Classic meme renditions as t-shirt and flag (2023).

Figure 3: Original Covid-related Doge meme (2020), and hand-painted rendition by the author (2023).

Figure 4: Meme variation addressing vaccine hesitancy with potential pedagogical implications (2023); collage by the author.

regular antidote in the handmade niche product - just like conspiracy slogans may be regarded as a lexical catharsis of the current neurosis of over-legislation. These paradoxes themselves feed the ethos of the exhibition (Figure 4).

Beyond this conceptual framework, the employment of materiality signals the current, renewed interest in craft and process among segments of contemporary creatives - even as we witness an exponential rise in command-driven AI art: it is by now evident that the expectation of digital pervasiveness, and corresponding analogue redundancy, clearly underestimated the growing levels of epistemological density and complexity that allow for opposites not only to coexist, but even hybridise and foster each other reciprocally.

3 SUBJECT

An additional word on COVID memes as the centre point of the exhibition: the recent pandemic turned out to be a time of intense online content production, firstly as a mechanism of humorous solace in face of unprecedented experience and anxiety (confinements, statistics, tracing apps and protective behaviours), then as carriers of pandemic-related information and disinformation that would end up acting as both pedagogical and delirious. Once the pandemic subsided, what were at the time residual digital artefacts with a tangible role could be forgotten for all we knew or cared; and yet, we argue, they signal the subjective ways in which we faced the pandemic beyond clinical and authoritative discourse. We posit that they may hold an essence of our emotional responses to
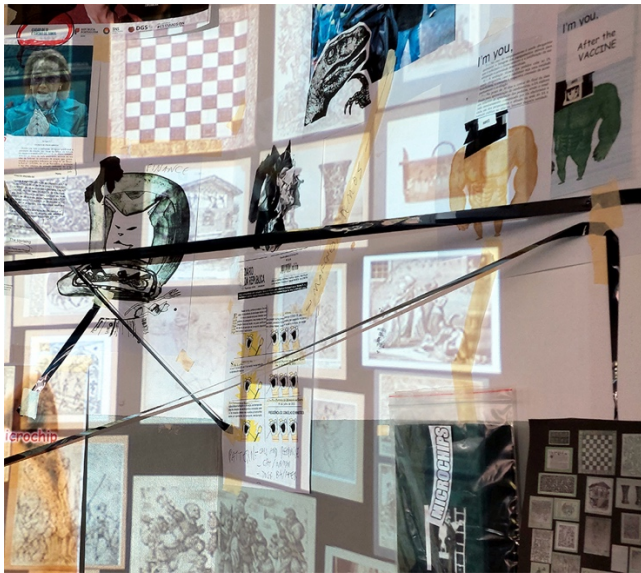
Figure 5: Draft model for installation (detail), 2023. Image by the author.

Figure 6: Aerial view of proposed setup

a unique global experience, a mutant form of poetic genre where metaphors and absurdity abound; and as such, COVID memes may be worth further historical, cultural and sociological scrutiny.

The exhibition, therefore, provides the destitute meme with a warp, a means of further resonation beyond its original, transitory context: it is, in a way, future archaeology. It embraces the paradox of contemporaneity, welcoming both online content and material tradition, lo-res aesthetics, residues of dead media, and a renewed presence of the crafted object (Figure 5).

4 SET-UP AND LAYOUT

The exhibition requires (Figure 6):

- a softly-lit room, roughly 16 square meters, balancing ambient light with a single, continuous projection; if necessary, the exhibition may be adapted to other room sizes;
- within that room, one blank wall will be used for display; materials can be pasted by employing masking tape and spray mount, without damage to wall finish; occasionally, a small nail may be necessary for heavier pieces (frames and tiles);
- one projector with RCA or HDMI for laptop connection (ideally, projector and laptop to be provided by the organisation, but this can be negotiated should the present proposal be approved);
- all other materials and requirements to be provided by the author.

Note: exact size, proportions and positioning of elements to be adapted in loco, according to space availability and properties.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The exhibition is presented in the scope of a research project dedicated to inventorying and activating online media as behavioural
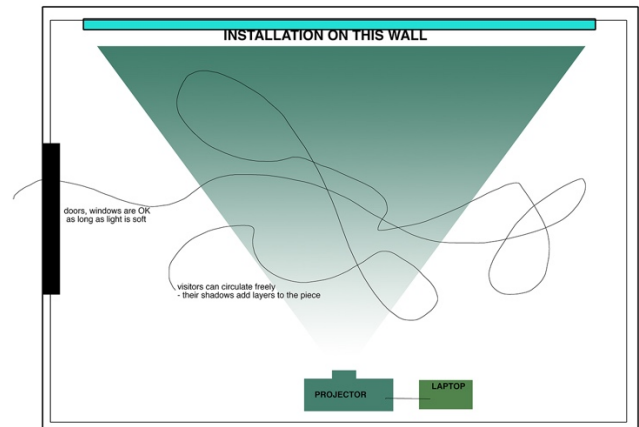
agents in health-related knowledge and policies. A test run was held in a classroom environment with MA Media Arts students in late 2022; both the original concept/briefing and the content of the exhibition's present version are entirely authored by the researcher. Images presented in this proposal are originally sourced from Facebook and imgflip.com, in various instances further manipulated by the author.

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