



Memes

"I'm trembling from excitement. We actually elected a meme as president" -Anonymous post on the online platform [4Chan](#), November 9, 2016

At a certain point towards the end of last year it seemed as if the fragile borders guarding distinctions between real and online worlds, indeed between truth and not truth had officially dissolved, and now like the film [Who Framed Roger Rabbit](#), animated goons and real life private investigators roamed the earth amongst each other. In the post-truth, alternative facts, fake news era that seemed to hit like a meteorite but had in fact been drawn in gradually like an eclipse, it wasn't only that truth seemed harder to distinguish than ever, but that belief on a mass scale had reached levels of fiction previously thought unimaginable. Among the constant online chatter, conspiracy theories, trolling, and genuine malfeasance, arose a new category that paradoxically seemed to lend simple, 'friendly' images to the id of our collective confusion: the meme.

The term "meme" was coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book, [The Selfish Gene](#). The term expressed the cultural equivalent of a gene- cultural information that is passed on and mutates through repetition. In the history of the meme, [chain letters](#), ['Keep Calm and Carry On'](#), the ["dancing baby"](#) and so on, are innocent precursors to the more recent, virulent characters circulated by the ['Alt-Right'](#) and other proto-fascist groups- most famously, [Pepe The Frog](#).



Trump/ Pepe



((((Lawrence))))/ Pepe

In many of my previous works, I've worked with the dynamics of our online lives, re-mapping them onto analogue, performing bodies. From virtual gaming in *Second Life*, Google searches in *The Lac of Signs*, dance 'tweets' in the last section of *The Middle Ages*, this methodology has proven fruitful for me, demanding new techniques to adapt to emerging online platforms and an understanding of how these platforms fold over and bleed into our everyday lives. Despite my fascination with contemporary meme culture though, I mostly don't understand it! Indeed, part of its success is its utter 'WTF' status: its unintelligibility which at the same time issues coded winks at distinct sub-groups. Memes operate within a world that's terrifying but also- whether we like it or not- increasingly relevant: a melting pot of cartoon, video game fantasy, abject psychology, and the politics of confusion. It's a world which has been seriously underestimated- dismissed as an online subculture of 'middle-aged, childless men in their mothers' basement.' A farce of power, until recently, when this subculture swiftly rose to the heights of power.

What is the correlation between the way these images operate, and the success of the ideas they represent? How do cultural icons and ideas transform via repetition, imitation, and mutation? When do they shift or radically change meaning? When are images that look nearly identical, radically different and vice-versa? How is confusion a powerful strategy today? Why do violent political ideas need cartoonish characters and vice versa? In these questions, I hope to find the direction for creating a future performance.

The research will develop in three directions. The first is theoretical- looking at the history of memes starting with *The Selfish Gene*. The second is physical-practicing mime- which is at once a pun and a movement language to explore my ideas. I've met a dancer, Calixto Neto who looks nearly identical to me (!) and I want to practice mime with him, developing a movement language of imitation and alterity. I want to explore ways that seemingly non-sensical expressions can feedback, loop, create self-similar echo chambers whose repetition mutates, corrupts, or increasingly perverts expressions. Lastly, with visual artist [Karthik Pandian](#) and [Triple Canopy](#), an online and print publisher for artistic research in New York, I will take a practical approach, creating and disseminating an original meme named "Larry of Arabia", or "(((Larry)))". We will design and insinuate

(((Larry))) into online forums where memes are circulated and manipulate invented rumors and controversies surrounding his identity to try and give him a (viral) life of his own. While this venture may resurface in an exhibition that Karthik and I will make at the Logan Center in Chicago in 2019, we don't know exactly how it will play out, or what (((Larry)))'s virtual navigations might teach us. The hope, however, is that creating a meme will inform my research and have valuable implications for a performance practice.



Calixto Neto



Andros Zins-Browne

I will begin this research with reading and writing on my own in July. (((Larry))) will be designed and launched in September. In the Fall, I'll have a first residency in Pianofabriek to try out physical practices and learn basic mime techniques. In winter 2018, I will continue theoretical research on my own, and work with Calixto for two weeks. In Summer 2018, I'll have a residency in Netwerk-Aalst to tie the research together and share some of my findings in an event hosted by Netwerk in Fall 2018.

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