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WTD: What the Dada? The Resurfacing of Dadaism in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Meme Entertainment

Well, Merde! While Dadaism is considered a short-lived artistic movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is studied today as the black sheep of the arts community. The founders of Dada did not anticipate the popularity Dada would gain internationally and I doubt they would want it institutionalized, but Dadaist anti-art is resurfacing in meme culture. Millennials are the first generation to be raised with the advent of the internet, and the entertainment they are producing with their smart devices is worth artistic examination. The meme culture they generate is dialectic to the present socio-political landscape in the same way the founders of Dada responded to the horror of World War I. In the first section of this essay I will relay a brief history of Dadaism's features and influences. Then, I will provide evidence connecting it to user-generated memes and *The Eric André Show*.

Dadaism originated in Zurich, Switzerland at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1915 in response to the tragedies of World War I with Tristan Tzara, Hugo Ball, Marcel Duchamp, and many other artists. They fled to Switzerland to seek neutrality because they “resisted the acceptance of war and violence” (Richmond 449). Ball was “eating, sleeping, and working with the outcasts of society,” or intellectual refugees of World War I (Cabaret 153). Ball worked in the “alcohol-fueled” cabaret setting to be “hedonistic yet artistic” because it digresses from “any notions of performance that was favoured by the bourgeois” (Forbes 198). Dadaists reasoned if logic

brought chaos into the world, then art should “combat the insanity with even greater insanity” (Cabaret 164), and the name “Dada” was randomly selected from a French dictionary and originally meant “a hobby horse” (Wilson 130). Initial performances at the Cabaret Voltaire were bizarre readings from “plays and novels, modernistic songs” while “every imaginable form of experimentation with rhythm, sound effects and the human voice was tried” (Cabaret 164). The aesthetic protest transformed into a product of anarchy because the digression from logical semantics and decorum allowed artists to be free from “moral, political, and structures at the heart of bourgeois capitalist culture” (Franklin 106). Dadaism paved a path for art to not be contingent on enterprise.

While Dadaism is inherently against subjugated structures, it can be argued that Dadaism can influence international relations because it has the power to untangle manipulated, censored, and government controlled art (Richmond 452). However, Dadaism should not be credited as a movement meant to enact social change. Dadaism is not a prescription for artists to follow, but rather a means of coping with the downfalls of mankind. Furthermore, “The word ‘Improvement’ is unintelligible to a Dadaist” (Kristiansen 459). The techniques of Dadaists, or lack thereof, prove this notion. Tristan Tzara says it best in his *Dadaist Manifesto* from 1918:

Thus, DADA was born, out of a need for independence, out of mistrust of the community. People who join us keep their freedom. We do not accept any theories. We’ve had enough of the cubist and futurist academies: laboratories of formal ideas (Tzara 3-5).

Tristan Tzara wanted everyone to know that “DADA exists for no one” (Wilson 131) and intended to “bring home to the bourgeois the unreality of his world and the emptiness of all his endeavors, even including his profitable nationalism” (Richmond 449). Therefore, DADA was

not a new style of art to profit as political propaganda. While Tzara's thoughts today do not seem as radical as they were in the past, his attitudes towards formalized art were considered by the aristocratic arts community to be rebellious. For example, Beatrice Wood practiced Dadaism in New York City and her painting "A Little Water in Some Soap" depicted a naked woman with a bar of soap nailed over her genitals. You can imagine that the affluent New York art patrons did not take too kindly to such display, "Many of those who attended the exhibition were either morally outraged or pleasantly amused by Wood's decision to introduce a bar of soap—a cheap, mass-produced object from consumer culture intended for use in the privacy of the bathroom—into the pompous and sacred realm of the fine arts." (Franklin 112). Marcel Duchamp, a noteworthy practitioner of Dadaist printed media, influenced Wood's artistic choices. I mention this specific example because the reception of Dadaist printed media relates to the varying types of user-generated memes on the internet today.

After World War I artists like Tzara and Ball lived within a cultural climate of "disgust, disillusionment, distrust," and instead of avoiding such angst they embraced "the agonies of the chaotic universe" and redefined art (Kristiansen 457). Their universal pessimism and distrust translated into an artistic style of expressive spontaneity. Dadaism liberated language by deconstructing semantics and produced art that relied on impulsiveness, "not because it is better or more beautiful, but because it issues freely from us; it represents us" (Kristiansen 458). Duchamp disrupts Western logic and communication through "Word Games" which bring together similar sounding words but take away their meaning and only rely on phonographic worth (Pegrum 264). An example of a chance poem that exemplifies Duchamp's deconstruction of language is Louis Aragon's 1920 "Suicide" (Pegrum 265). The poem is simple: SUICIDE reads across the top, and underneath the alphabet is in an acrostic arrangement, but the spacing

between the letters does not adhere to any symmetrical form. Ultimately, the poem itself carries no meaning, but it signals the death of logical semantics (Pegrum 265). Dadaist text effectively created “profoundly disturbing” art because they refuse “all need to mean” (Pegrum 265). Dadaist recitations of such works at the Cabaret Voltaire were experimental, abrasive, and troubling.

It is intriguing to consider how a movement that had no clear objective and undefinable aesthetic spread so rapidly. While Dadaism faded out of practice after the 1920s, it left a ripple effect throughout the arts world. “Dadaism was a link in the chain reaction of impulses that swept over Europe in the early twentieth century,” leading to movements like surrealism (Kristiansen 460). Dadaism circulated across borders after Tzara produced Dadaist journals like: “*Dada*, as well as *Die Schammade*, *Dada Tank*, *Der Dada*” (Hage 34) to broadcast illustrative pieces. Dadaists did not have to “explain the connections, if any” between their publications and thus, “defied pervasive institutional classifications” (Hage 38). The journals provided Dadaists with the medium to validate the “originality, autonomy, and authenticity” of their art as well as to challenge “the nationalism that they blamed for the war” (Hage 34). Moreover, printed media mobilized the Dadaist movement internationally. The journal’s disorganized texts and images suggested an “open-minded, internationalist attitude,” which reflected Ball’s “stated goals in Cabaret Voltaire” (Hage 38). I emphasize Tzara’s innovation of Dadaist printed media because it compares to how the internet has revolutionized cultural communication.

Since I have imparted a short history of Dadaism and its nihilist impulses, I move now to the history of the meme. Memes are nuanced art forms which lack scholarship due to their obscurity and constant transformation. The term “meme” comes from Richard Dawkins’ 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* where he acknowledges that “humans have devised small cultural units of

transmission that, like genes, spread from person to person through imitation” (Shifman 197). The arrival of the personal computer allowed memes, as the quote suggests, to take on a new meaning. Dawkins described memes as “ideas, practices, or texts,” and from my experience as a part of the millennial generation, memes are ritualistically transmitted via smartphone or internet. It is difficult to describe a contemporary meme because memes are constantly changing. For example, in 1995 “40 million copies of Windows 95 sold” with the program MS Paint, the first application that birthed the meme (Davison 277). In the early 2000s, memes were basic due to the limitations of MS Paint, but the program was enough to generate “quick-and-dirty cut-and-paste photo manipulation as conversational volleys” (Douglas 315). While more “sophisticated” photo editing software is available since then, meme art stayed relatively the same because spending time to “polish” your meme means that the website’s “thread” could “be done before you are” (Douglas 315). In addition, meme art is unique because the artists rarely take credit, and if they do, it is hard to figure out the online identity of the original poster. Memes singularly are, “a mere whisper of creative expression, ephemeral and anonymous, too insignificant to be treated as a work of art. But together these whispers create a vast susurrant that restlessly adapts itself to new technology and new modes of expression and communication” (Evnine 303). Memes by themselves provide quick entertainment with limited relevancy, but memes collectively can become culturally recognized.

Moreover, a meme image is usually “copied by one user from another” and “undergoes mutation” with different aesthetic features added to it depending on the context of the meme (Evnine 305). Below are examples of this concept:

Back when I worked at petsmart I took this picture of this hamster who literally screamed every time I tried to feed him and omfg I'm crying



Unlike most memes, the internet has record of the original poster, [@dattebanyan](#) on Twitter. Somehow the meme went viral and evolved into a template for other meme creators. Here are two examples:



Person: you seem chill  
Me: I am  
My anxiety:



As you can see the basic image remains the same while the text changes its' meaning. The meme on the left is from the twitter handle @ScaredHamster, so the meme itself has morphed into an online character with an anonymous human moderating and generating the

content. The meme on the left adheres to the original post about a hamster being morbidly scared, fearing it will be tortured by little children. However, the meme on the right is from the twitter handle @juliovianco, who changes the meaning of the meme. The content creator makes the hamster a manifestation of the feeling of anxiety. However, it makes light of overwhelming anxiety. Consider how other meme artists handle anxiety:

when your life is aimless and you have no passion or big ambitions and ur depressed af but still tryna act chill and go w the flow



Literally anything happens  
Millenials:



The memes above are posted on Reddit's image sharing sister site, Imgur. The meme artist "SpookyNerd" posted these in part of a mass series of memes titled "Tiny Dump." The memes above are in conversation with the mental health of millennials but articulate it in unique ways. The meme on the left copes with depression nonchalantly like a Dadaist would: a chicken floating in a metal pot in the middle of the ocean. It is beyond random and absurd. The one on the right handles life's minor inconveniences morbidly. Sly Bugs Bunny puts a pistol to his head. The juxtaposition of the relaxed, almost condescending expression on Bugs Bunny's face as he is trying to kill himself aligns with the pessimistic attitudes of Dadaists who used "provocative, incongruous, nonsensical images that deceive the audience expectation in order to create laughter" (Forbes 199). The question under investigation as I analyze the similarities in Dadaists



style and meme culture is: What was it about the 1910s and now the 2010s that generates a nonconformist aesthetic?

Comparatively, the Dadaists resisted war and government control in the same way millennials worry about natural disaster and the apocalypse: “Since 2007, climate-changing technologies and other scientific developments” are considered “threats of life on the planet” (Resurgent 141), not to mention the overwhelming anxieties post 9/11 and the War on Terrorism in America. “Film historians argue that, in contrast to those of the Cold War era, in many contemporary films the cause of the Apocalypse lies within the natural world; however, humans can act to prevent it” (Resurgent 144). Typically, this media tends to be “anti-big government, and anti-cultural pluralism” (Resurgent 145). While the media grapples with these fears, there is an apathy connected to the anticipation of mankind’s demise, which has translated into an unusual artistic style. Meme culture promotes “glorifying the amateur, validating the unglamorous, and mocking the self-serious, formulaic, and mainstream” (Douglas 334). Meme culture counteracts the expectations of the “World War II generation” grandchildren to bring “order to the chaos of the modern world” the same way their grandparents did (Saucier 135). Memes have “dialectical purposes” as they can combat any institution, whether it be “political interests” or governmental suppression that tries to “hijack their aesthetic” (Douglas 334). The ugly, non-rule abiding, spontaneous, and ultimately meaningless meme style responds to the current state of humanity. In addition, the internet embodies a new type of theatre. Websites like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, and YouTube allow memes to circulate internationally and quickly. The user-generated content becomes moderated when “these image macros are discussed, commented on, up-voted, downvoted, criticized, collected,” which determines the meme’s life span and relevancy, as mentioned previously (Evnine 305). The nature of the work

upholds the values of Dadaism. While the internet allows for “perfectly cut and pasted” images and logical algorithms, the “intentionally terrible” memes “express the separation of humans from machines as strongly as the analog beauty of an oil painting.” (Douglas 319). Then, how can scholars not consider memes an art form? While I contend this is a subtle argument, the internet has provided a space for the common person to share their art without fear of having their personal identity attacked. The user is free to do what they want and guide how the content evolves; “memes are existentially dependent on memes” and “memes are conceptually dependent on memes” (Evnine 303). Furthermore, the content will reflect the collective creators.

Now I will turn to someone who I will name the son of 21<sup>st</sup> century Dadaism: Eric André. Adam Forbes offers a scholarly perspective of *The Eric André Show*, produced by Cartoon Network’s adult nighttime program, Adult Swim. Forbes references a LaWeekly article “A Toast to The Epic Dada Madness of *the Eric André Show*.” The premise of the show is to invert and make fun of typical late night shows like *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* or *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*. Ironically, Eric André interviewed Jimmy Kimmel in Season 3 Episode 8, “Jimmy Kimmel & Tyler The Creator.” The episode starts with André attacking the Jazz Band and destroying the entire studio in unjustifiable rage, and the stage crew slowly reassembles the set while he hyperventilates. During André’s opening monologue his co-host, Hannibal Buress shakes his head unenthused by André’s nonsensical jokes, and an audience member gets on stage and interprets him, “9/11 was perpetrated by people within our own government” (Jimmy). Unlike normal talk shows that revel in the celebrities on the show, André and Buress act nonchalant about their guests. Buress reminds Andre, “We got a guest dude” and André goes, “Oh bring him out dude” (Jimmy). They proceed to make Kimmel feel uncomfortable during the interview. The microphone operator pokes Kimmel with the hanging microphone, and Kimmel

notices it is dripping wet. Buress tries to painfully eat a hot pocket then gets in a fight with the microphone operator. Kimmel asks, “my seat feels like it’s alive or something” and of course, André and Buress take it in stride “Yeah we got snakes” (Jimmy). Buress combs Kimmel’s hair for lice. André destroys his desk. The episode is full of interruptions and filmed sketches of André on the streets in a jester hat with his nipples out, harassing the public telling them to “Ranch it up!” or “Bird up!” The band members eat porridge. André pulls down his pants and farts on his desk (Jimmy).

Obviously, *The Eric André Show* transcends more than the absurd: “Not only does *The Eric André Show* resonate with the idea of eclectic performances of the Dadaists, but also the sense of anarchy within the music hall style.” (Forbes 208). As I mentioned earlier, André and Buress do not treat guests with any special attention, which registers as not conforming to standards of social hierarchy. Also, the “chaotic” jazz-band mimics the Cabaret Voltaire’s rejection of formalized music and deceives the “audience’s expectation” (Forbes 210). Additionally, *The Eric André Show* undermines governmental authority and institutionalized art. For example, in one of their sketches, André destroys a police patrol car with a baseball bat and Buress, dressed like a cop, joins him as bystanders crowd around in panic (Pauly D). In another sketch called “Art Gallery” André walks into a public art gallery and destroys the installations. He yells, “This art hurt me!,” “Art sucks!” and “You’re living a lie!” (Seth). Furthermore, *The Eric André Show* reflects “the anarchy of the Dadaist’s cabaret” and “is used to subvert the notion of high-art” through “destructive comedic performances” (Forbes 209). Forbes’ article gestures to the episode where Buress claims André “broke comedy down to its bare essentials” after he recites his monologue: “words, words, words, words, words, punch line!” while stomping around the room. The monologue attacks religion when a group of people dressed in

punk rock attire dance and welcome “Penn Jillette” onto the stage. He chants: “magic, magic, magic, magic, magic, magic, ATHEISM!” while doing jumping jacks (Jesse). *The Eric André Show* conforms to modern day Dadaist psychedelic art experiences because his show features “throbbing lights, dizzying designs, electric sounds, and screaming poetry (. . .) aimed at inducing the hallucinatory effects and intensified perceptions of LSD” (Kristensen 462). André is without a doubt the outlier of the arts community, but he responds to the new millennium’s anxieties and indifferences. André is a true Dadaist. He attacks his public audience. He is not afraid to offend, surprise, or normalize the disturbing and grotesque.

In conclusion, I have relayed the brief history and styles of Dadaism and demonstrated how Dadaist styles are reappearing in internet meme culture and television performances. I have defined what a meme is, its cultural discourse, and how it is constantly changing. I provided examples of different types of memes, and how the users who create them are subconsciously responding to the cultural and social landscape of the 2000s. I named Eric André as the son of modern Dadaism because his show deconstructs art now in the same way Tzara, Ball, and Duchamp did a hundred years ago.

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