

REFUGE IN AUDACITY:  
LET THE MEMES FALL AS THEY MAY

by  
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## Abstract

Through the presentation of memes created during the pandemic, the graduate exhibition *Refuge in Audacity: Let the Memes Fall as They May* explores manifestations of absurdism and dark humour as a means of catharsis and healing in order to befit the individual's desire to seek meaning in an otherwise meaningless existence. The rampant transmission of memes during the COVID-19 Pandemic revealed an outpouring of absurdism in the aftermath of this global crisis. A response that is similar to the Spanish Flu and World War I where, steeped in collective grief and trauma, the global population sought refuge in humour, the surreal, and the nonsensical. Contemporary visual creators also employ humour in their response to the existential crisis brought by the pandemic. The memes in this exhibition are all taken from the period starting with the declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic in March 2020 till the present—since the pandemic is still ongoing—and are printed and displayed in the gallery space. *Refuge in Audacity* showcases the usage of memes as an absurd expression of experience during the pandemic years and reflects on their identity as the storytellers of the period.

## Dedication

This could be dedicated to a lot of people but is dedicated to one person alone. To the man who believed when I didn't, who pushed the boulders off me when I couldn't, whose absence makes me encounter the real every day. Abbu, may you be in peace.

## Acknowledgements

My thesis is a compilation of what other people said, who may or may not be aware of the impact they had in shaping my reference points over the past two years. Thank you Rumman, aka TehGOATlord. You made me look at memes differently; the team at Rantages will forever remain my favourite meme collective (even when I disagree with it). Thank you, Rajiv, for listening to me rant and vent and setting my Imposter Syndrome pit on fire every time I descended into it. Dr Abrar, who knew psychology, philosophy, and memes had so much in common? Thank you for responding whenever my brain needed to know it wasn't falling apart. Thank you Fuppi for feeding me home-cooked meals when I needed comfort. To Maa, Afeef, Shejuti and Amayra, thank you for being the best tactical emotional support team.

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## The Proof is in the Memes—An Introduction, or Maybe Not

The White Rabbit put on his spectacles. “Where shall I begin, please your Majesty?” he asked.

“Begin at the beginning,” the King said gravely, “and go on till you come to the end: then stop.”

— Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*<sup>1</sup>

Once upon a time, there was— “A kingdom!” My dear readers will say at once. Yes, perhaps that may be. But, actually, once upon a time, there was a meme. And where there's a meme, there's a reference and an actor who unearths and triggers that reference. Who brings forth that intertextuality and breathes life into it in a new form: that of a meme. So, my dear readers, let us begin on that note of intertextuality, of references and of the stories they tell. To speak of the meme is to speak of references, both understood and not, and ours start at the mountain base of absurdism. And this is where we begin.

From conception to execution, *Refuge in Audacity: Let the Memes Fall as They May* took around 500 days, give or take a month. But, in actuality, this exhibition and thesis have been percolating in my imaginarium for close to 1085 days—11 March 2020 to 1 March 2023—from the beginning of the declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic till the day the exhibition went live. A show that ran for five and a half days, a blip in exhibitionary time and space. You blink and it's gone. Like public memory. Like the lifespan of a meme. But the strength of a meme lies in its

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*. Barnes & Noble Collectible Ed. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2015).

virality, in its power to engage, in its ability to provoke. As the memes took over the walls of Ada Slaight Gallery, they murmured and rambled, talking over one another, stepping on each other's voices. Clamouring for attention and space, it turns out that they had far more to say than I had anticipated. For the entire time the memes were hanging out on the walls of Ada Slaight Gallery, their stories overlapped in kaleidoscopic motion. These notes, my "curatorial casefiles" as I've taken to calling them, are notes on mounting the exhibition and observing the consequent interactions.

Allow me to start off with a brief visual rundown of the key exhibition components in the space and how they were placed. *Refuge in Audacity* was staged in a two-room gallery with a vestibule that opened into a bigger space where the major wall ran twenty-two feet in length on the right-hand side. The memes were arranged on this wall in a salon-style hang, spilling over to the adjacent wall (see Appendix A for exhibition photos). These walls are not visible from the doorway or vestibule and required people to come well into the room. In parallel opposition to the memes, I created a photo-wall with a green backdrop measuring eight feet by six feet. The original background had been created for pandemic Zoom meetings by some intrepid netizen. It referenced the "This is Fine" meme using the caption and the pandemic by replacing the flames with toilet paper rolls. It was the perfect choice for my meme walls, both in absurdity level and interaction as it provided audiences the chance to memefy themselves. Polaroid photos of visitors and their reactions to the memes framed the sides of the backdrop. The vestibule contained the exhibition's didactics on its front wall, designed in the form of a Tumblr notes thread. It introduced the central concept of the show, while giving a nod to internet culture, and the visual and textual aesthetics of the digital age.



Here, it becomes important to acknowledge the physical space of the gallery. After all, the memes were making their physical debut out of our screens on to those walls. Ada Slaight Gallery as a space is complex to work with for several reasons, all of them architectural: (1) The first wall you see when you enter the room has these barn doors (leading to a storage space) as a centre piece that render that wall virtually useless for display. (2) There is a weird recess on the main right wall that creates a random break in the space. (3) The left wall has two engaged columns and one door (leading to another storage room) that add further breaks to smooth spaces. (4) The ceiling is in an exposed industrial style that does not lend itself well to having anything stuck on it. All in all, the gallery space is filled with disruptions.

It is fair to say that I had a mini breakdown when I saw the space in its full empty glory in January (days to exhibition: T minus 50 days). The barn doors were my proverbial boulder, rolling back and demolishing every layout plan I had hypothetically constructed. And although I dislike binaries, much like Robert Frost, I saw two paths before me: I could fight the space, or I could work with it. In retrospect, I feel very much like a gladiator who's emerged victorious from this tussle. Ada Slaight Gallery forced me to think, navigate and negotiate with it in order to maximise the potency of the memes' impact. In the final presentation, I left the barn doors and wall alone, utilising the other surfaces to create the experience. The engaged pillars became the perfect spot for sticking the polaroid photos. The recess became the space to hang the sourcebook for the memes (see Appendix B for The Sourcebook). The sourcebook contained all the details on the memes from their original habitat: the username of the poster, the dates posted, the social media platform used, the URL and the corresponding number to the printed meme (all memes were anonymous of course keeping in line with internet tradition). This sourcebook hung

by a hook hammered 4.20 feet high. 420 is a numerical highlight of the worldwide web and meme culture, so 4.20 feet became the meridian line that the memes were arranged by.

Since I'm discussing numbers, there are 131 memes in this exhibition. This wasn't the original count or the expected count or even the desired count for the number of memes. The number was meant to be 69 as a nod to internet culture. But after seeing Ada Slaight Gallery, I knew that would fall far short of that sense of overwhelmingness I wanted. I knew there needed to be more memes and so they tacked themselves on until they reached 131. If I was a believer of numerology, I would tell you that 131 reduces to the number 5 which resonates with the energies of perpetual curiosity and a high sense of adventure. However, I will not be telling you that for it holds no bearing whatsoever on the curation of the memes. But, as a number, on a purely mathematical basis, 131 is interesting, for it is a prime number. And a palindrome no less. I love the symmetry of it, and the lack of symmetry. 131 is a number that is visually even, but functionally not - it looks one way and behaves in quite another. I quite enjoy the idea of a prime palindrome number being comprised of prime numbers—1 and 3 are primes number as well—the self-referential quality of this appeals to me.

One hundred and thirty-one, while not large, is not a small number either and so as expected, one of the questions I have been asked the most is on the curation of the memes. What was my selection criteria? I was asked before I had started the selection process. What were my groupings? I was asked as the exhibition was installed. Why did I select them as I did? I was asked as the memes took over the walls and sang their siren songs. Everyone who has queried thus has (I presume) expected a deep answer from me. Alas, I am clearly aiming to disappoint, for my answer is absurdly simple: there was no “deep” intellectual process that went in the original selection of my memes. There was no battle-royale that took place in my brain over their

selection. I didn't sit and obsess with them; I chose them as I randomly scrolled deeper and deeper into the nooks and crannies of the surface web. Every time I came across one that made me pause, I kept it for a second perusal. If I went back to it more than twice, it made the cut. It's only in retrospect that I can see the means to my madness.

I was clear on a few things: the memes had to perform absurdity at some level, i.e., they had to have thematic resonances with the tropes of absurdism and black humour; they had to be commenting about COVID-19 and our social realities; they had to exist in more than one iteration. Based on this, I created my search terms as I trawled through the net, through Reddit, KnowYourMeme, 9GAG, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, Pinterest, WordPress and even magazine websites. I added one more parameter of control: no dark web material. As someone who is quite familiar with how the dark web works, I explicitly steered clear of it.

I also was cognizant of the oddly gratifying privilege of knowing meme-creators personally, which meant that not only is my knowledge current on the trends but I could also view how the cultural flows changed in real time. I could also "request" as many memes as I wanted, which I did. Around ten percent of the memes in the exhibition are created by Rantages, a Bangladeshi meme collective, who were quite active during the peak pandemic times as well.

They say that hindsight is 20/20, but I am fascinated with exactly how absurd my thesis exhibition ended up being when I allowed the memes to speak for themselves. I cannot emphasise how literally I took the phrase "let the memes fall as they may" in the curatorial process. When the memes spoke to me out of the crevasses of the internet, I stopped to listen. Every meme in the final curated selection all had stories to tell, and I wanted to give them that space.

It is curious how carefully balanced this act is—curating with intentions and curating intuitively. I allowed the memes to lead me, but I also established criteria for finding memes, and for picking the ones that felt right for the exhibition. For instance, my selection of a Bangladeshi meme collective was definitely a lucid choice, along with the presentation of the memes with the salon hang, the meridian line, the anchor memes, and the sizes. By yielding control over the memes themselves, I regained balance in how the exhibition experience should feel. I am not trying to claim objectivity nor absolve myself of the responsibility of making decisions. That is part of my absurdity.

## The Meme by Any Other Name

“What's in a name?”

— William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 2, Scene II<sup>2</sup>

I start my exploration of the meme with the naming of it. To name something is to have some form of ownership over it, even if the naming was not intentional. For the naming of things is not a mere convention with no meaning behind it. Names have power. Names define you. Names identify you. This identifier has purpose. Otherwise, a meme by any other name could be called a collage. Or a photomontage? Or an assemblage?

But that’s just an absurd statement, isn’t it? A meme is most definitely NOT a collage, traditionalists will roar. Let’s quickly review what a collage is, formally. A collage (stemming from the French word *coller*, meaning “to glue”) is a “work composed of separate elements pasted together.”<sup>3</sup> They are at once serious and tongue-in-cheek, methodically re-examining the mediums they play with, imbibing each medium with some of the characteristics of the other. The two-dimensional technique has existed since the 12<sup>th</sup> century, dating back to, amongst others, early Japanese visual culture. It found popularity in modern art through Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso’s cubist interpretations with the physical incorporation of ready-made elements of life literally amalgamated into works of art. Picasso’s use of rope and chair cane in his 1911 *Still Life with Chair-Caning* is a good example of a collage, specifically in the way that he juxtaposes elements that never become whole.

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<sup>2</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, [http://shakespeare.mit.edu/romeo\\_juliet/index.html](http://shakespeare.mit.edu/romeo_juliet/index.html)

<sup>3</sup> “Collage,” Tate, accessed February 2023. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/c/collage>

This later led to the adoption of the technique by the Dadaists for their photomontages where they inserted fragments of found photographs and physical objects into two-dimensional artworks. The works fundamentally ended up becoming presentational rather than representation with the “insertion of reality fragments into the work of art”<sup>4</sup> through the conflagration of images and language. The photomontage is a means of expressing political dissent through the idea that art isn’t sanctified or set apart from life, such as *Cut with a Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany* (1919) by Hannah Höch which critiqued the German government and the possibilities of gender relations in the post-World War I cultural landscape.

And since we are going through this like a list, I might as well round it off with the assemblage. Conceptually, an assemblage works in quite the same manner as a collage and a photomontage. Formally, an assemblage is three-dimensional. Through the collaging of scavenged scrap materials, it presents abstract visual structures in idiosyncratic forms such as Kurt Schwitters’s *Merzbau* (1919 – 1923). The constant architectural sculpturing and re-sculpturing of the house has a distinct meme-like vibe to it, in that it’s reiterative without real purpose other than blurring the boundaries between art and life into an infinitesimal degree. Imagine staying inside a weird art installation all the time.

Well, I guess, conceptually, the meme is more representational than presentational, even though it is both serious and farcical at the same time. Except...think about the individual elements that make up both entities and suddenly the realisation that collages, photomontages, and memes have more in common hits you.

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987): 78.

Collages are arrangements of images juxtaposed together. Memes too are images and texts combined and juxtaposed together. Look at how the Star Wars memes (Figure 3.1) juxtapose screenshots of Darth Vader along with a listed text of why he is an ideal global citizen during the pandemic.

Photomontages are commentary about social realities. Memes are cultural commentary about contemporary society. From the current state of the global health crisis such as The Office Infinity Sign meme (Figure 3.2) represents the present war on eradicating COVID-19, which given its mutational nature feels perpetual. To Oprah's You Get to Homeschool meme (Figure 3.3), which drives home (pun-intended) the reality of online home-schooling that lasted till the middle of 2022.

The differences between the mediums lie in their historical contexts and so if we're simplifying things without context, my absurd statement stands.

Well, now that we've gotten that out of the way, onwards with the naming! With the meme, we go back to Richard Dawkins and his now infamous definition of the meme. In his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins coins the word 'meme' while trying to find "...a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*."<sup>5</sup> Not happy with the longer Greek 'mimeme', he abbreviated it to meme, while apologising to his classicist friends for the butchery.

Apologies must be par for course, for I apologise to Dawkins. His version falls far too short for me; it doesn't capture the breadth of what I feel the meme is or what it portrays so I'm going to start with the classical roots myself. There are three that interest me.

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Dawkins, "11. Memes: The New Replicators," in *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989): 368.

First, there's "mimesis", from ancient Greek, meaning to imitate. We can expand that to state mimesis is an idea that governs the creation of works of art that has correspondence to the physical world. Both Plato and Aristotle talked about the concept as a representation of nature, including human nature, especially in literature. The concept is given quite the five-star treatment by Erich Auerbach<sup>6</sup> as a representation of reality in literary works. Auerbach talks about how the tone, diction, syntax, and style of literature exhibit the specific historical context and the sociocultural moment in which they are produced. Through *mimesis*, creators project their perception of reality depicting everyday life in all its seriousness.

Then there is "mimos", also ancient Greek, meaning imitator or actor. Interestingly, the word mimesis is actually derived from mimos. The actor is significant to the action, and this brings to mind the conception of a creative act and how it cannot exist without the actor giving it form. It is utterly necessary to think about the mimos when thinking about the meme. The actor, the meme-creator, the "mimos", is crucial to the whole process of memeing for it is they who imbue the first referential meaning to the work before setting it loose upon the internet. Before the meme, there is the reference. All other meanings, regardless of the number of iterations a meme goes through will all stem from this first reference.

And finally, there is "mimus", a Latin term meaning mime, or a spectacle containing semi-improvised spontaneous clowning. Now, most times if you find a Latin term, it's the Romans trying to refine the Greek concepts. But for my purposes, mimus brings forth its own connotative significance. I see the mime act of antiquity being replicated in the image macro memes of today. What used to be a spectacle on stage appears well-contained in the image macro in its current iterations. And it references reality and the perception of reality its creator has or

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<sup>6</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003).



wants to present. For our intents and purposes, to think of the meme, to name the meme, we need to think of all three roots.



Figure 3.1: Meme showing Darth Vader as the ideal citizen during COVID-19 with a list of qualities and the caption, "Be like Darth Vader."

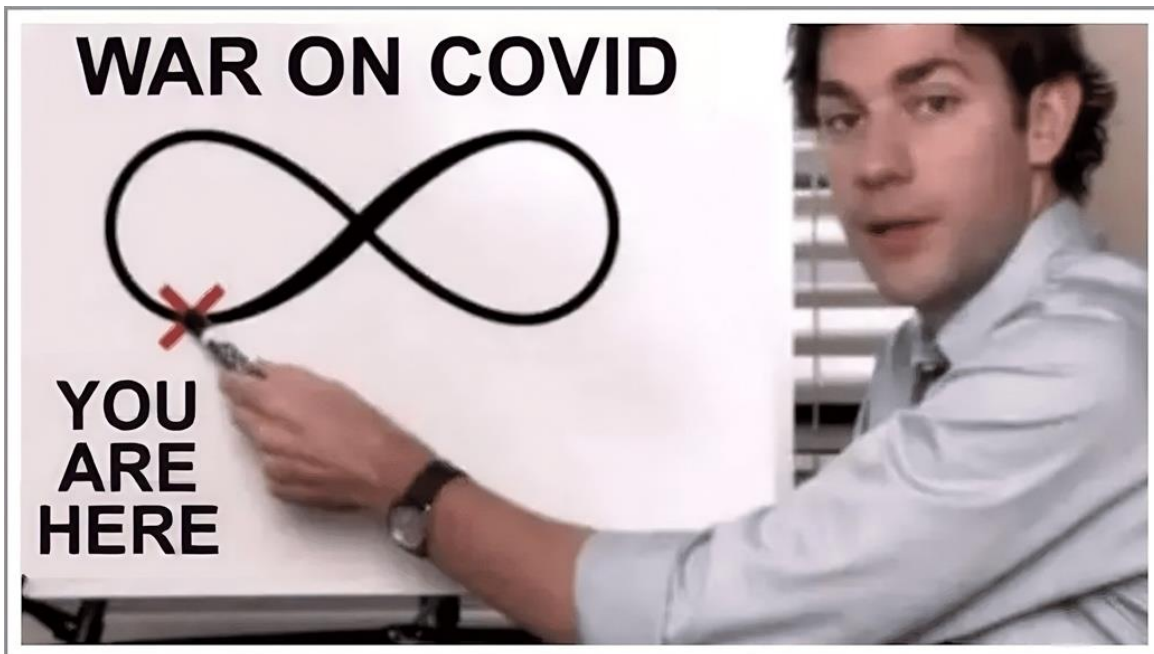


Figure 3.2: Presentation showing how the war on COVID-19 is infinite.

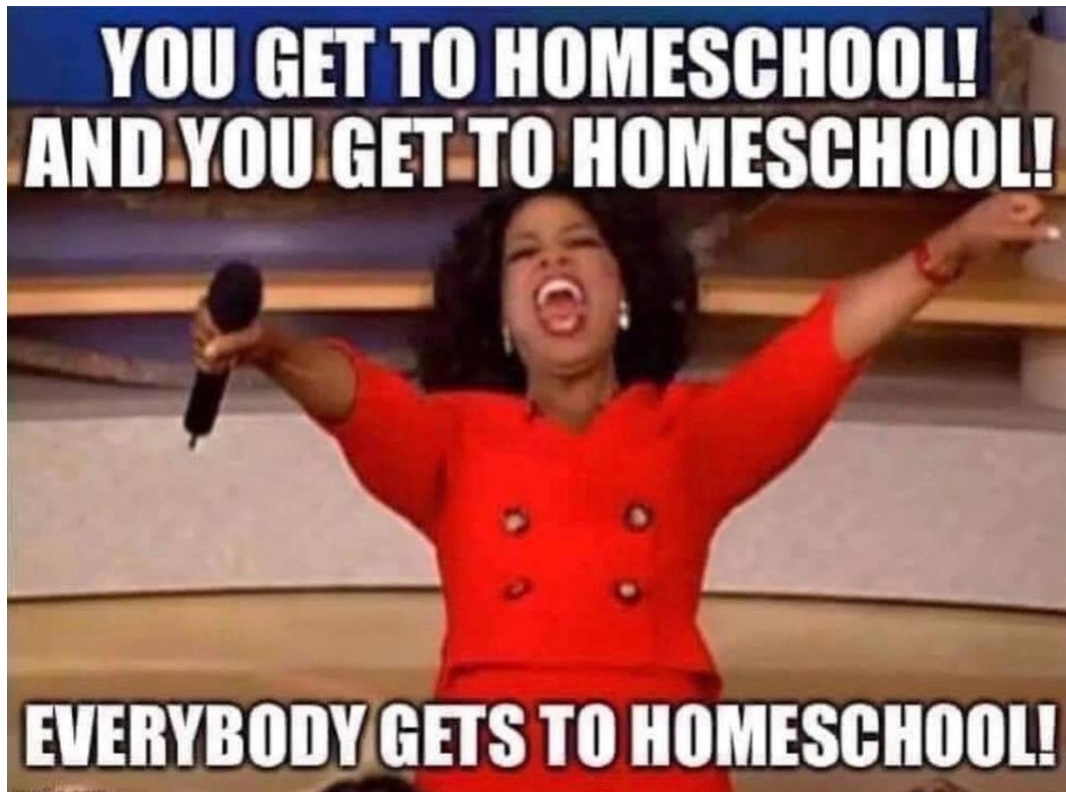


Figure 3.3: Oprah pointing and saying, “You get to homeschool! And you get to homeschool! Everybody gets to homeschool!”

## Precedence of the Meme

When disaster strikes, humour heals.

— The Royal Ontario Museum, *Aftershocks: Japanese Earthquake*

*Prints*<sup>7</sup>

It would be foolhardy of me to spiritedly claim that memes are “new.” As a component of visual culture, they are quite recent and don't have historical precedence as such—even though there are clear precedents. The meme as we know it today was coined by Dawkins in 1976 and co-opted by the internet in the late 1990s towards the turn of the millennium. It was proliferated by social media and given its status as a visual culture behemoth in the past decade or so. It was maximised to its infectious potential during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The conception and functionality of a meme isn't a recent invention by any means. Memes as they operate today in visual culture have existed in other forms throughout history. As proponents of humour, they can be called the latest iteration in a long line of humour-based media and art. It would be remiss of me not to talk about the precedence of the meme.

In 1855 there was a massive earthquake in Edo, Japan. In the wake of the earthquake, art prints were cheaply produced and distributed to share information and offer solace to the affected citizens. The ROM's online exhibition titled *Aftershocks: Japanese Earthquake Prints*<sup>8</sup> contains a series of these prints created in the direct aftermath of that earthquake. Called *namazu-e*, these prints acted as the social media of the day. Circulated for a very short time, these prints are

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<sup>7</sup> *Aftershocks: Japanese Earthquake Prints*, online exhibition, 2022, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto  
<https://www.rom.on.ca/en/exhibitions-galleries/exhibitions/aftershocks-japanese-earthquake-prints>

<sup>8</sup> *Aftershocks: Japanese Earthquake Prints*, 2022, ROM

impeccable examples of employing satire in the face of crisis. According to folklore, the *namazu-e* is a giant underground catfish that caused earthquakes in Japan. And so, in the aftermath of the Ansei Great Earthquake, it made sense to turn that reference into artistry and embed it in the narrative to rebuild and rejuvenate. Some of the prints adopted a documentary style approach in order to convey detailed information, while others found recourse in allegory and spiritual uplifting. The *namazu-e* also used classical satirical methodology addressing a range of emotions from sorrow, humour, anger, and ultimately healing in the public who saw them. The similarity between the *namazu-e* and memes most notably lie in humour and the usage of a visual material medium in the conveyance of it.

The precedence of satire and humour as methods of catharsis go back further still to Ancient Greek periods with the creation of the theatre. Dramas were either tragedies or comedies all crafted to elicit catharsis in the audience, so negative emotions could be purged. The act was performative using humour as a tool to negotiate reality that threatened rational comprehension.

The real is the reality that cannot be expressed, and which surpasses reasoning. Our response to the real is always absurd for as Albert Camus says, “the absurd is lucid reason noting its limits.”<sup>9</sup> I think of the phenomenon, of when reasoning collides with the real as atomic fusion, with the resulting reaction being absurdism. When I talk about the precedence of the meme, I don’t talk about the meme; I talk about what the meme functions as, what it borrows from, what is its essential quality. In simple terms, I’m talking about humour, the absurd. While the danger of essentialising anything remains, we absolutely cannot separate humour from the meme. This brings me to the functionality of the absurd in the meme.

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<sup>9</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 2018): 49.

In talking about the Theatre of the Absurd, Martin Esslin provides several definitions of the term “absurd”, exploring how it was used both by Camus and by the dramatists of the genre.

He states:

“‘Absurd’ originally means ‘out of harmony’, in a musical context.

Hence its dictionary definition: ‘out of harmony with reason or propriety;

incongruous, unreasonable, illogical’. In common usage, ‘absurd’ may

simply mean ‘ridiculous’, but this is not the sense in which Camus uses

the word, and in which it is used when we speak of the Theatre of the

Absurd. In an essay on Kafka, Ionesco defined his understanding of the

term as follows: ‘Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose. ... Cut off

from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all

his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.”<sup>10</sup>

In my case as well, I look at the absurd in the same way Camus did: the absurd is not merely ridiculous, it is the illogical state of the human condition in the face of shattered beliefs.

For Camus, the “divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, [constitutes] the feeling of *absurdity*.”<sup>11</sup> We bear an irresolvable emptiness at the impossibility of achieving any

adequate answer from the universe and yet we persist; this paradoxical state is absurd. That

dissonance was important for Camus and the Theatre, and subsequently me, in articulating how we function with that sense of metaphysical anguish in the everyday.

This absurd state of affairs is held up by memes, particularly during the pandemic, where they present the absurdity of the human condition through their content. Take a look at the toilet paper memes and what they reveal: at the beginnings of the first wave, while people were dying

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Penguin Books, 1988): 23.

<sup>11</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 6.

en masse and countries were scrambling to contain the spread, the everyman (of the Western world) was concerned—nay, *obsessed* with—stocking up on toilet paper. Hence the exhibition featuring so many memes with that theme (Figures 4.1 and 4.2). But it is not merely the content that make the memes absurd but the reaction to this as well: the fact that this commentary was taken in stride, like our ridiculous fixation with toilet paper in the face of potential death was normal, *that* is absurd. And utterly hilarious if you think about it.

Just as black humour juxtaposes morbid or ghastly elements with comical ones that underscore the senselessness or futility of life, pandemic memes are just plain stupid or dark and morbid. In viewing and engaging with them, we revel in the absurd because we need to find humour in our absurd reality or go crazy from quarantine. It really underlines that need to purge negativity through humour. The juxtaposition of morbidity and irony in the same frame of reference really enables us to understand the level of humour being employed for the creation of such narratives (Figure 4.3).



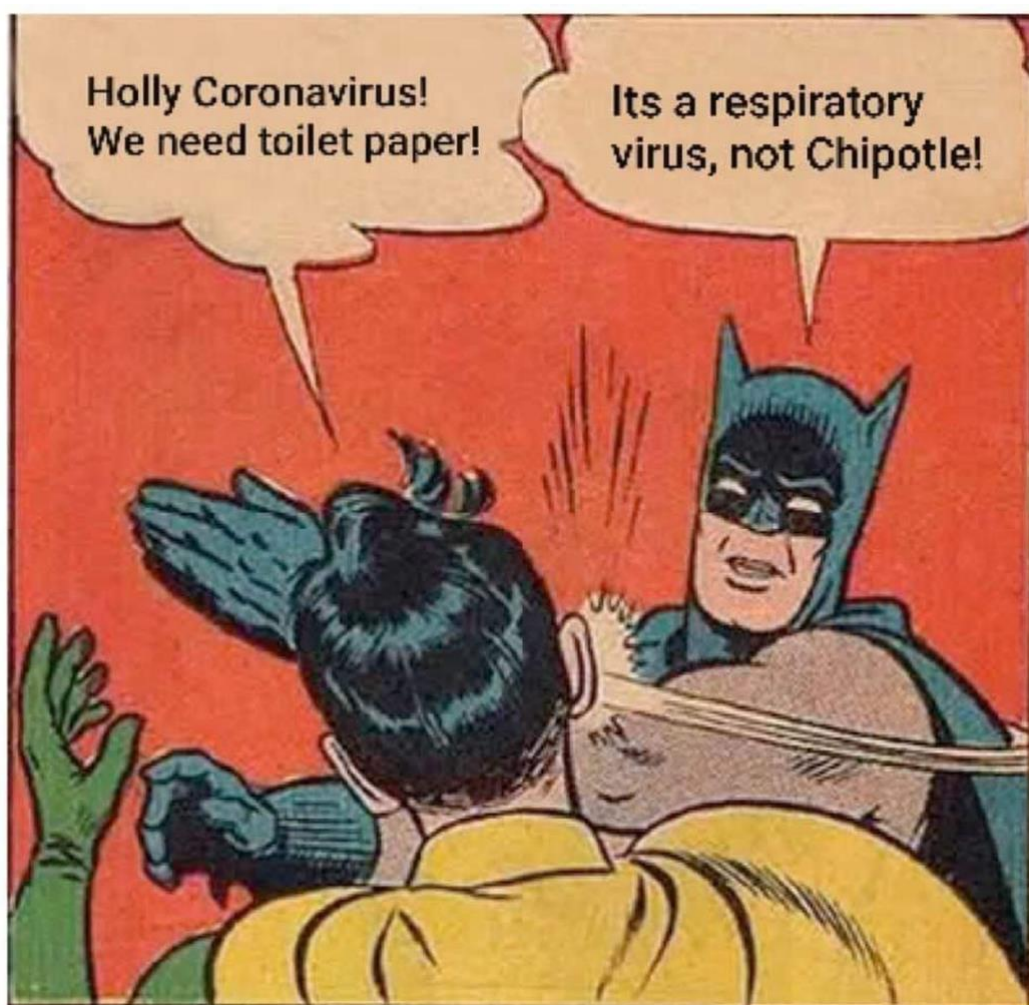


Figure 4.1: Batman slapping Robin for asking to stock up on toilet paper.



Figure 4.2: Dog sitting surrounded by toilet paper saying, "This is Fine."



Figure 4.3: Skeletons partying in a graveyard with the caption, “What a great time to be alive! It’s like the great plague but with WIFI.”

## The Palimpsest and The Meme

Everything is repeated, in a circle. History is a master because it teaches us that it doesn't exist. It's the permutations that matter.

— Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*<sup>12</sup>

The exhilarating aspect of working on the absurd is that the centre doesn't hold so you can find yourself traversing tangential offshoots when you least expect them. For example, while thinking about the form and functionality of memes, palimpsests came to mind, insisting—quite persistently I might add—that they have some sort of relevance to memes. It became aggravating to a certain extent so I picked at the threads hoping it would unravel gloriously.

The palimpsest is an intriguing piece of text that dates back to antiquity. It refers to a manuscript or scroll that is reused or altered for new iterations but still contains traces of the original work, where “the ink and faint imprint of the prior text underlies the new work, preserving a trace of something that had been rubbed out.”<sup>13</sup> An ancient form of recycling that's akin to a wall being coated over with white paint to make space for new graffiti—and there it was, the thread: the palimpsest gives me meme origin story vibes. As far as origin stories go, the connection is fittingly multi-layered. Conversations happened through the palimpsest. It works as the perfect code. Palimpsests are heteroglossic. In speaking to the intertextuality of palimpsests, I find that I speak to the intertextuality of memes.

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<sup>12</sup> Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*, trans. William Weaver (Mariner Books, 2007): 228.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Battles, *Palimpsest: A History of the Written Word* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015): 17.

I once shared the same meme with Julian twice and was aghast at my actions. I was a repeat meme offender! Except... where memes are concerned, you absolutely cannot be a repeat offender. The meme lives on repetition. It mutates. Therefore, repeating memes cannot be an offense and they cannot lock me up in internet jail for it. If anything, my repetitive usage of the meme speaks to its popularity. For textual work, the palimpsest presents the perfect metaphor for the tangled skein of overlapping figurations of text, image, and imagination. Palimpsests provide a medium through which dialogues happen. Likewise, memes too are iterated and reiterated and with each replication, the meme engages more and engages differently. The self-referential component and intertextuality of memes make them perform heteroglossia without much effort.

Then there is the temporality of it all. The palimpsest is temporary, its identity is fluid and everchanging. The meme too thrives in the temporal—its active lifespan rivals that of a cicada: three days if it goes viral, one day otherwise<sup>14</sup>. However, we need to also acknowledge that “the palimpsest is evidence that there is no true erasure. Some remnant trace will always escape the grasp of the author-eraser.”<sup>15</sup> In the combination of the overwriting with the undertext communing, palimpsest carry a mysterious aura that cements their heteroglossic qualities. The meme is the same, for you can always view the previous reference in some form, whether it’s the reiteration of the text or of the image. The KnowYourMeme website actually traces the lifespan of popular memes—I used the “Woman Yelling at a Cat” meme as a tester (Figure 5.1)—looking at the rise and fall of its trend and the level of search interest it garners over time, along with the meme’s origins and the various iterations it has gone through till date<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> This piece of tantalising information was given to me by Rumman of Rantages, who monitored their Facebook group’s page trends.

<sup>15</sup> Battles, *Palimpsest*, 17.

<sup>16</sup> “Woman Yelling at a Cat”, KnowYourMeme, accessed January 2023. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/woman-yelling-at-a-cat>

Finally, the palimpsest is also referential to something having diverse layers or aspects apparent beneath the surface. This of course is very Baudrillardian<sup>17</sup>. Modern culture is simply a multitude of layers, with images of images of images. It is an entirely mediated experience, a palimpsestic reality, where we lose our understanding of what is the original and where it could be. But in the loss of the original referent, we enable the generation of multiple meanings. A palimpsestic reality is possible through multiple meaning generation through participation where interactive audiences engage in the knowledge space. Byung-Chul Han talks about how the digital content is always shifting meanings<sup>18</sup> and I would like to argue that this quality is inherently important for memes to perform as they need to in order to generate the discourse they do. For example, the “Woman Yelling at a Cat” meme is originally made up of two different images which existed as memes. These are no longer referred back to in their original individual forms. Rather they are paired together for a new referent and with every new iteration, they take on newer diverse meanings, pushing them further and further away from the original as more audiences interact with them.

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<sup>17</sup> See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1994) for further understanding on the loss of the original referent.

<sup>18</sup> Byung-Chul Han, “Digital Ghosts,” in *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017): 84.



**"YOU DIDN'T  
JOIN THE ZOOM  
MEETING!"**

**"IT SHOULD'VE  
BEEN AN  
EMAIL!"**



Figure 5.1: Woman Yelling at a Cat, "You didn't join the ZOOM meeting!" and the Cat replying, "It should've been an email!"

## Refuge in Audacity: We Meme to Survive

Humour (is) the process that allows one to brush reality aside when it gets too distressing.

— André Breton, *Anthology of Black Humour*<sup>19</sup>

The true impact of COVID-19 hit me in June 2020. The first wave had swept in like a hurricane in our lives and left us in tatters when it was through. Time is relative - this was enforced for me with sobering reality checks during the first wave of the pandemic. The overwhelming feeling of the real versus refuge in the surreal was driven home for me that night as I hurried from the COVID unit to the pharmacy and back, bringing back medicines for Abbu. I remember telling my friend Adib that it was all like a scene out of a drama and that I was living it in the real. He asked how I could joke around in that situation, and I replied, “if I don't laugh, I will cry.” Those words have never felt heavier or weightier than they did at that moment.

When the human mind makes contact with what Lacan calls “the real”<sup>20</sup>, it cannot compute and so it seeks refuge in the absurd, in the audacious, in the surreal. This is how we cope; this is how we survive. Our response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the proliferation of memes was not to fill a void. As Breton says, “There is nothing that intelligent humour cannot resolve in gales of laughter, not even the void ... Laughter, as one of humanity’s most sumptuous extravagances, even to the point of debauchery, stands at the lip of the void, offers us the void as a pledge.”<sup>21</sup> For us, our response was a defensive move to protect ourselves against a reality we

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<sup>19</sup> André Breton, *Anthology of Black Humour*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (Lebanon: Telegram, 2009): 233.

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Lacan, “The Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real,” in *On the Names-of-the-Father*, trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013): 1-52.

<sup>21</sup> Breton, *Anthology of Black Humour*, 16.



couldn't compute. In times of war, soldiers sing to raise morale. In pandemic times, we joked around. We also sang—the balcony serenades in Italy immediately come to mind—but we took to our screens, hand-held or otherwise, to rush in droves and collectively participate in the voluntary sacrificing of our intellectual aloofness and descend into unrivalled ludicrousness and audacity. Think about all the Hunger Games memes (Figures 6.1 and 6.2), where we were using imagery from dystopian literature to talk about our absurd reality. With the simple captioning, “may the odds be ever in your favour”, a simple grocery run became equivalent to surviving an obstacle course of death.

Thus, you start thinking about the perception of the pandemic and how we dealt with it. The apocalyptic opening from W.B. Yeats’s “The Second Coming” feels summative of the feeling of aimless purposelessness of the period: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”<sup>22</sup> So, how to navigate a breakdown in the structure that destabilises meaning and allows mayhem to seep in? How do you pursue meaning-making that allows us to shed the disillusionment brought on by this breakdown? The answer, as we all experienced, lay in humour, that deadly creature. Where the internet provided recourse through memes. The memes become the simulacrum, they become the centre point where individuals flee from the “desert of the real”<sup>23</sup> into a simulation and the ecstasies of the hyperreal. Whereby the hyperreal is “more real than real”, the fake and the artificial becoming more definitive of the state of nature than reality itself.

Memes provide that perfect humour; sometimes dark, sometimes absurd, sometimes utterly bizarre, they traverse the interwebs and pick up meaning randomly from its various

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<sup>22</sup> W. B. Yeats, “The Second Coming” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43290/the-second-coming>

<sup>23</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1994): 3.

corners. Breaking spatial and temporal barriers. The Danse Macabre of the 16<sup>th</sup> century made a comeback in the Dancing Pallbearers of Nigeria, who carry the dead with song and dance and was subsequently memefied in video form<sup>24</sup> during the pandemic (Figures 6.3 and 6.4). In the aftermath of the great dad passing, my whole approach to the media content changed: previously I was only tolerant of this trolling sense of humour. It felt so trite and overdone. Now, they started to make a strange sense to me. The simulacrum, the meme, offers us a play of illusions and phantasms that distracts us from the more morbid realities of our time. When nothing else makes sense anymore, we turn to the nonsensical in earnest, we embrace the surreal and the absurd, we purge the meaninglessness and generate our own meanings. We meme because we must survive.

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<sup>24</sup> Helen Sullivan, “‘Why should you cry?’ Ghana’s dancing pallbearers find new fame during Covid-19.” *The Guardian*, May 14, 2020, accessed January 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/14/why-should-you-cry-ghanas-dancing-pallbearers-find-new-fame-during-covid-19>

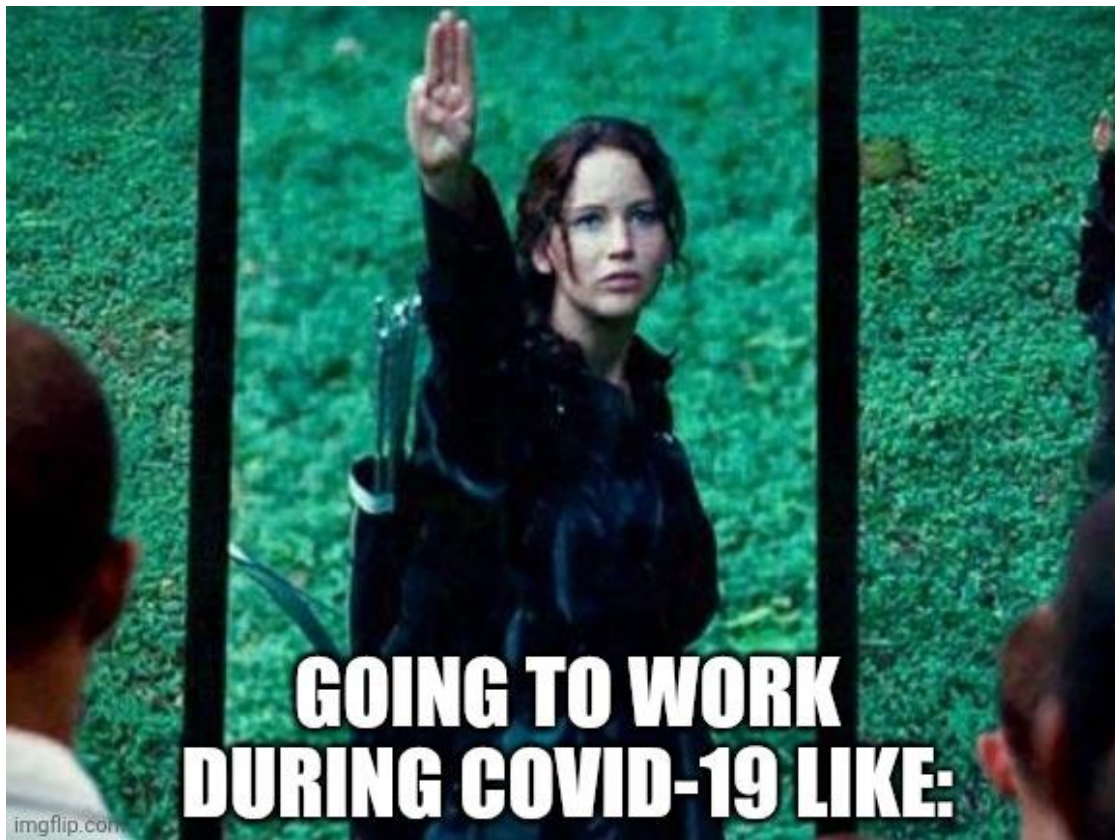


Figure 6.1: Hunger Games meme with Katniss raising her hand with three fingers and the caption, “Going to work during COVID-19 like.”

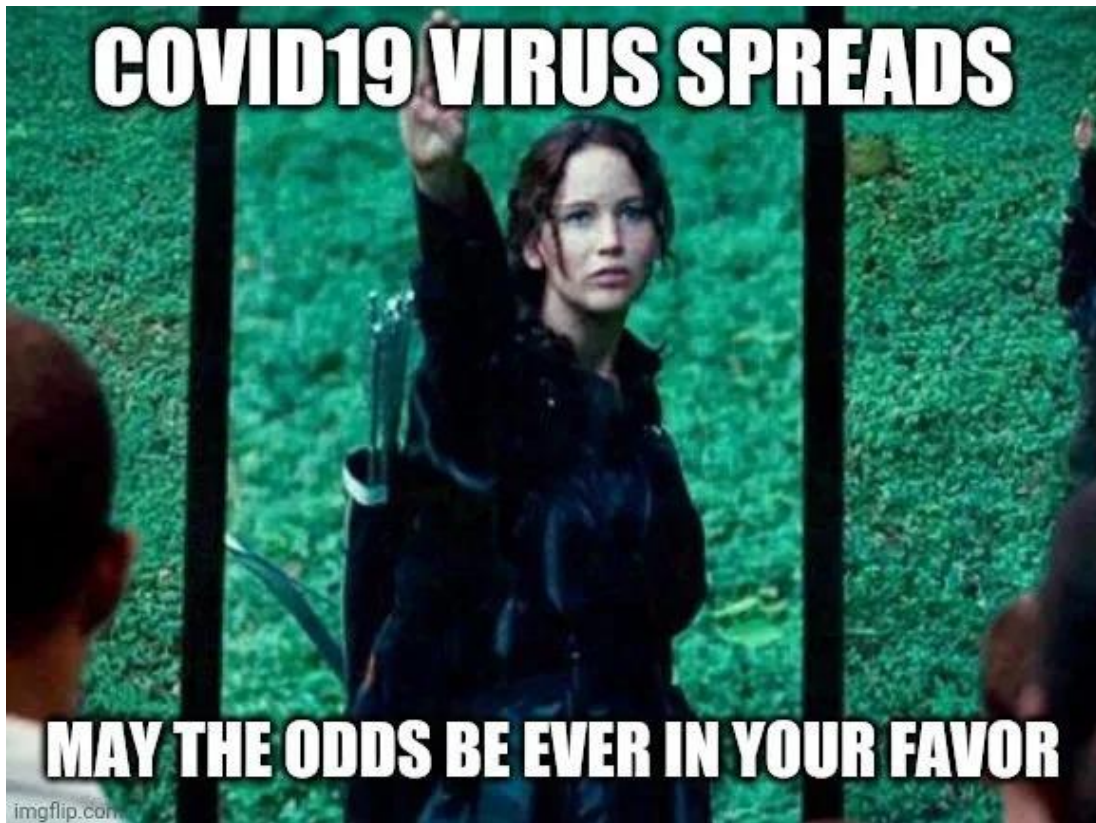


Figure 6.2: Hunger Games meme with Katniss raising her hand with three fingers and the caption, “COVID-19 virus spreads... May the odds be ever in your favour.”



Figure 6.3: Four men in suits bear a coffin while dancing. This image is a screenshot from the video meme created of the Dancing Pallbearers.





Figure 6.4: Double referential meme combining Drake with the Danse Macabre illustration and the Dancing Pallbearers.

## Schrodinger's Meme

Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said. "One can't believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*<sup>25</sup>

Of the many things that evade me regarding memes, meaning-making is one of them. When encountering a meme, it either has meaning or it doesn't. It's an inside joke, either you get it, or you don't. The text contains one meaning, the image another and the combination of the two a third meaning. The whole is different from the sum of its parts and the two of them (text and image) separately cannot and do not add up to the meaning of the meme. Deconstructing a meme to decipher the meaning to be "in-the-know" is a futile act and defeats the purpose altogether.

If you think about absurdism, it is a philosophy of performance. The absurdity needs to be performed. And it is performed at an individual level. You either are or you aren't an absurdist. To take upon the identity is to understand and acknowledge that the world we reside in is irrational, kooky, and nonsensical by turns. What happens when I don't talk about the meaning? What happens to the meaning then? Does it simply disappear into the ether? The meaning is there and not there at the same time. I look at this on the level of performance and

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<sup>25</sup> Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*.

activation. The meaning is only *performed* when there is an audience, a viewer, to activate the meme through engagement but this doesn't mean that the meaning doesn't exist regardless. For example, the "It is Wednesday, My Dudes" is a meme I don't understand all too well (Figure 7.1). I understand the irony but I don't understand the reference for the humour. However, it resonated deeply with my friend Rimaz who not only vibed with the feeling of bemusement evoked by the Budgett's frog's comedic expression but also caught the reference to the original Vine<sup>26</sup> video which imitated the frog's unusual voice complacently vocalising the phrase, "it is Wednesday, my dudes."

Before the thing, there is the feeling. Before the meme, there is the reference. Or is there? Are memes just like Schrodinger's cat? Is the act merely the culmination of an inside joke waiting to greet its kin? Or is there more there? Is the reference the consciousness that drives the creation? Is it the reference that teases out the thought and forges the connection? Or are all our assumptions just our own with no foundational basis of what the meme-creator actually wanted to say?

With Schrodinger's cat, there is the paradox of quantum superposition<sup>27</sup>. With memes, there is the paradox of meaning and humour. Between crystalline clarity and murky confusion, you oscillate. Sometimes, memes are immediately easy to grasp: you get the humour, you get the reference, you generate the meaning. While others evade you with all the power of a Special Forces tactical veteran: the humour doesn't land, the reference eludes you and the meaning disappears into an abyss. Sometimes, the meme is funny but the reference escapes you (as with

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<sup>26</sup> Vine was a social network platform service known for hosting short-form video clips that operated from 2013 to 2017. It was basically TikTok before TikTok.

<sup>27</sup> Quantum superposition is a key principle of quantum mechanics. Positions in mechanics are always well-defined but the quantum superposition is the ability of a quantum system to be in multiple states at the same time until it is measured. This makes it difficult to calculate or define.



me and the Budgett's frog meme). Other times, you understand the reference but the joke doesn't spark joy. As you seek to find the meaning behind it all, you realise that engaging with the meme is an absurd act in itself. This ties in well with an inherent quality of the Theatre of the Absurd, where the dramatists "renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; [instead] merely presenting it in *being*—that is, in terms of concrete stage images."<sup>28</sup> There is an integration between the subject-matter and the form that the Theatre of the Absurd strives for. This quality exists in memes.

The whole idea of form and functionality is a western concept of defining something. And we look at the concepts separately. Yet for the meme, to speak of one is to speak of the other for the form and functionality are intertwined and cannot be split.

The meme comes in several forms, two of which are important for us. The first is the image macro, which is the pervasive "form of transmission using a static image and superimposed text."<sup>29</sup> This is the most common template used for memes. Most of the memes in the show were image macros, combinations of stock or appropriated images combined with text captions such as the Dragon Ball Z memes (Figures 7.2 and 7.3). The second is the meme's depiction as an inside joke or reference within a community. Each community understands the meme that originates from it the best and they become an inside joke shared by the community. For example, the Dragon Ball Z memes use the image of Frieza (one of the characters) to comment on the various forms of the coronavirus. An anime fan would immediately be able to understand the inside joke since Frieza too has several forms and the caption is a dialogue he repeats several times in the anime. Reddit defines the meme as "a way of describing cultural

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<sup>28</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 25.

<sup>29</sup> Joshua Troy Nieuburt, "Internet Memes: Leaflet Propaganda of the Digital Age," in *Frontiers in Communication*, 2021, accessed August 2022. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2020.547065/full>

information being shared.”<sup>30</sup> The specificity of its reference is easily decipherable by the community it targets and not so much by anyone who is not from the culture. And so, the pendulum swings between crystalline clarity and murky confusion. Nevertheless, despite my frustrations with it, I am learning to take this as granted, particularly given the meme's referential identity. As Boromir (and the plethora of memes derived from that one image) would say, “One cannot simply understand a meme without context” (Figure 7.4 for an example).

This brings me to the historical context I started this journey from: the Spanish Flu and the World Wars. Absurdism as a philosophy really found fertile ground in the existential crisis of the early 20th century when the world was reeling from the devastation of back-to-back global crises. Thanks to the times, there was a lack of fatalism in viewing death and it's fascinating how normalised death had become in the aftermath. I draw a comparison to the news of death in the COVID-19 pandemic. After the first thousand, the first hundred thousand, it all became numbers. *The New York Times* even published an interactive article on the first thousand deaths in the US, which changed to the first hundred thousand deaths and so on. In death, every life lost was reduced to a name in a newspaper or tombstone. The COVID-19 pandemic ripped open the rich seam of very stupid memes. While the political and health experts debated the dire circumstances of our everyday real, and the media called doom upon our heads, the common populace leant into an undimming urge for daftness and decided to not-so-subtly rewrite history.

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<sup>30</sup> “Memes”, r/memes, Reddit, accessed December 2022. <https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/>

**when the world is falling apart but**

**It is Wednesday,**



**my dudes**

Figure 7.1: A Budgett's frog complacently smiling with the caption, "When the world is falling apart but it is Wednesday, my dudes."

covid with each new transformation



Figure 7.2: Frieza, with spiky horns atop his head, smirks, “This isn’t even my final form.” The top caption reads, “COVID with each new transformation.”

Covid coming with new variants:



Figure 7.3: Frieza, with hooked horns atop his head, brags, “This isn’t even my final form.” The top caption reads, “COVID coming with new variants.”

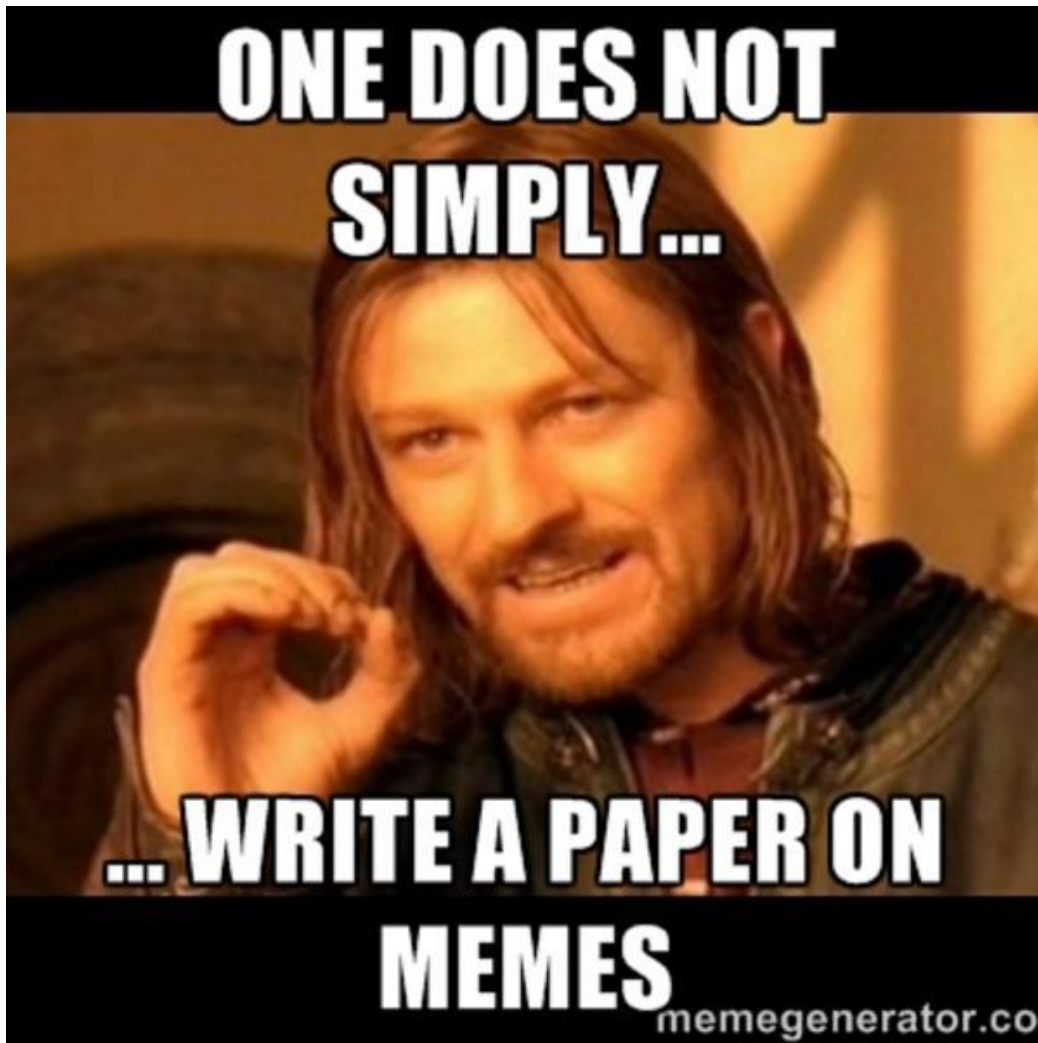


Figure 7.4: Boromir from Lord of the Rings stating, “One does not simply... write a paper on memes.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Boromir is correct. It is an absurd undertaking, not a simple one. And unlike the One Ring, but very much keeping in line with the nature of memes, you cannot write only *one* paper—there will be proliferation whether your brain agrees to it or not.

## The Methodology in the Madness

Sherlock Holmes: “You know my methods, Watson. There was not one of them which I did not apply to the inquiry. And it ended by my discovering traces, but very different ones from those which I had expected.”

— Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Adventures of the Crooked Man” (*The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*)<sup>32</sup>

My methodical reasoning for this thesis seems to parallel Sherlock Holmes. There wasn’t one single method fitting the theme.

For Holmes, every time he stated that someone knew his methods, it served a double purpose. Firstly, the dialogue works as a trigger for the audience who try to figure out what the methods are and how they led to the answer. It invites the audience in to partake in crime-solving, in meaning-making, at the end of which they feel involved and invested. The open invitation is much like the one that memes extend for the meme is also audience-based. Second, and more importantly, the dialogue is a retcon for Arthur Conan Doyle. It allowed him to build plot points as he went along, conveniently placing them at will to plug any possible plot holes he might have forgotten to address. Should anyone ask, he had already implied that the audience is intelligent enough to understand Sherlock’s methods, and if they didn’t, well then... It’s sneaky but effective. Now, Sherlock Holmes is one of the greatest literary detectives of all time and so I

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<sup>32</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Crooked Man,” in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, (Oak Park: Top Five Books, LLC, 2014): 1314.

would like to think he'd know exactly what his methods were, but he didn't have time to explain it to you. Better you come along for the ride, conjecture on the methods yourself and figure out what his methodology was. It made things easier for him; it allows him the freedom to have free-floating thoughts play in his mind palace.

I envy Sherlock for pinning down a methodology is the hardest thing to do. Writing this thesis has been like creating a meme: it is a collage of references, inferences, texts, images all bound together in one mould. And so, while it may sound quite out there and terribly non-academic, I would go so far as to claim that my methodology is a meme.

Like a meme, it is referential and intertextual. Like a meme, it is quite chaotic and absurd. Like a meme, it doesn't seek to conform but rather allows fluid meaning-making. Like a meme, it is dialogic. And like a meme, it provides commentary on a cultural phenomenon.



## The Curatorial Casefiles: The Memes Tell It Like It Is

ESTRAGON: In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent.

VLADIMIR: You're right, we're inexhaustible.

ESTRAGON: It's so we won't think.

VLADIMIR: We have that excuse.

ESTRAGON: It's so we won't hear.

VLADIMIR: We have our reasons.

ESTRAGON: All the dead voices.

— Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*<sup>33</sup>

Controlling stories and thereby the narrative is power indeed. As a curator you have the influence to sway the flow of the narrative, ergo this is also a decision I have asked about several times. What are my thematic threads? Is there a narrative and what is it? And, like my memes, I have changed my answer with every iteration, bending, twisting, and obfuscating. But the real answer is that in negation lies my answer for I made 100% effort to not have any narrative control over my memes. As Camus says, “the absurd is lucid reason noting its limits”<sup>34</sup> and the limit I placed on myself was no narrative intervention into the organisation of the memes, regardless of the certainty that I knew that they would organise themselves.

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<sup>33</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, (Grove Press, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 49.

To that end, the plan of my hanging was a balance of active intentionality and embracing absurd happenstance. Perversely, I still chuckle at the sense of mortification and horror that emanated off both Julian and Tairone when they first heard my declaration: “I will not plan the layout of the hanging until the day of install.” I envisioned a show that embraced the chaos of encountering memes on the internet, except in a gallery space. Because the memes don’t exist like that in reality. They are randomised in their original habitat. They needed to pop up in the same manner as they do online. When you’re browsing the internet you go from point A to point Z without releasing how you got there. The internet is a rabbit hole and the memes you see are random, chaotic, out of order. The vocabulary of the show needed to exemplify that as closely as possible. To deal with this, I needed to become an absurd curator. What would an absurdist curator look like? The absurdist curator would have a vision that breaks the accepted expectations, that expresses the futility of the ordered structures and exposes underlying truths about the world and our existence. I knew exactly what the exhibition looked like visually—in my head—I just needed to translate that, and it absolutely couldn’t be a basic grid.

At the Universities Art Association of Canada (UAAC) Conference 2022, Paula Burleigh presented a paper, titled “Zoom and the Modernist Grid”<sup>35</sup>, on the rote uniformity of Zoom’s virtual grid. She talked about how the modular Zoom gridding became amongst the most iconic facets of COVID visual culture and the necessity of breaking the illusionary interconnectedness it offers by creating art that upholds the messiness and vitality of life. At that time, I was still conceptualising the exhibition design and I recall thinking how the dispassionate flatness of the grid bothers me. The memes carry that flatness and modularity in printed form, and I need to figure out a way to overcome that. The answer was obvious: it had to be a mosaic salon-style

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<sup>35</sup> Paula Burleigh, “Zoom and the Modernist Grid,” (paper presentation, 2022 Conference of the Universities Art Association of Canada (UAAC), Toronto, Ontario, October 28, 2022). <https://uaac-aauc.com/2022/e6.html>

hanging, messy but self-contained. I just didn't know which meme would be placed where in my mosaic. I didn't want to be prescriptive with my narrative. For me, these memes don't educate. They're not meant to educate. They're here to speak. They're here to dialogue and communicate. They're sharing narratives about a broken world which found a route to heal through humour and laughter.

Once the memes were up on the walls doing their thing, they didn't want to come off. On de-install day, the memes felt sad: they had their moment and were once again being shuttled back into the internet. I wondered if I was projecting my need to prolong on to them. The first meme up was the first one we took down. As I took them off the walls, I apologised to them. It was time. This was fitting. Memes are fleeting—dopamine hits you indulge in while surfing the interwebs—so it only makes sense that the exhibition works in the same manner. The last meme I took down was “Ceiling Cat is Watching You Take Refuge in Memes” (Figure 9.1) peeling it from the ceiling. It was poetic really for there were no more memes to take refuge in...

Before I move on from Ceiling Cat and the odd solace of his quiet watchful gaze, I need to talk about his inclusion in the show for the meme wasn't part of the original horde. While cats may rule the internet, Ceiling Cat is not one of the more prominent memes of the pandemic. And although Ceiling Cat is not new, it has fallen out of popular discourse. However, this particular version of Ceiling Cat needed to be rehailed back into this curatorial conversation for two reasons: (1) it represents the presence of the meme in a material space and (2) it represents the influence of the meme in the works of contemporary visual practitioners.

UAAC was quite revelatory in more ways than one. In her talk “Digital Meme Culture and Practices of Reappropriation”<sup>36</sup> for a panel on appropriation, Nathalie Dietschy talked about the work of artists Eva and Franco Mattes, who reference memes to create sculptural and installation artworks, bringing the meme out of the digital space and into the material one. I was struck by how much influence the digital has on the physical as well, in that while classical art paintings become references for memes, the opposite is also true. Eva and Franco Mattes’ practice proves as much. Ceiling Cat was recreated into a taxidermy installation. And then photographed and digitised again. And then memefied once more for the purposes of this exhibition. Completing the circle.

The journey from the digital into the material has been important for this thesis. Indeed, location became a key method for my curatorial research, process, and choices. I locate the memes on the physical walls, I locate them in the temporal present, I locate myself in relation to them, the memes locate themselves outside the hyperreal, the audience locates themselves to the memes. During the pandemic, even as we dwelled in the hyperreal, we were still trying to anchor ourselves in the present, in the real. I think it was quite important for me to hold up that lens in this exhibition. By locating an extremely ephemeral virtual phenomenon in the very real tangible location of the gallery space.

After I had first presented my research and its theoretical underpinnings at UAAC in October 2022, I was asked, “where do memes go to die?” Five months on and one exhibition later, I’m starting to think I might have the answer. Or rather, my answer. Memes don’t *need* to go anywhere to die for they can die anywhere. Memes die when there is no engagement and

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<sup>36</sup> Nathalie Dietschy, “Eva and Franco Mattes: Digital Meme Culture and Practices of Reappropriation,” (paper presentation, 2022 Conference of the Universities Art Association of Canada (UAAC), Toronto, Ontario, October 29, 2022). <https://uaac-aauc.com/2022/j5.html>

while they were up on the walls, they lived their best lives, interacting within themselves as much as with audiences. I sat in my corner and listened to them converse amongst themselves. Mosaiced across the wall, they spoke: audacious, circuitous, nonsensical, repetitive, bizarre, dissonant. It was like listening to a conversation in a language I only half understood, darkly humorous and utterly ridiculous. I was hooked.

The narrative changes depending on which end of the walls you start viewing the exhibition from. I discovered this while giving virtual tours. One side started with a classical art meme depicting the portrait of a haggard old man paired with a caption about wondering about how many austerity measures are left in him (Figure 9.2). The other end contained a “tweet” from Coronavirus claiming, “honestly I did it for memes” (Figure 9.3). Read from tweet to old man, it reads like an audacious flourish, “et viola, here are the memes I created the pandemic for.”<sup>37</sup> Read from old man to tweet, the narrative is bathetic<sup>38</sup>. Either way, the memes tell it like it is and narrative remains absurd by random design.

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<sup>37</sup> As if the Coronavirus has Twitter and is speaking to us directly with agency, letting us know that it caused the pandemic only so that we could share memes and then presenting the ones in the exhibition with a flourish to show what kind of memes had enchanted us during the past few years.

<sup>38</sup> Both audacity and bathos are absurdity ascendants, which consequently make any narrative structure for the show absurd in turn.



Figure 9.1: Cat poking its head out of the ceiling while the caption reads, “Ceiling Cat is Watching You Take Refuge in Memes.”

**when it's the third unprecedented economic crisis in your lifetime and you're wondering if you got another austerity measure left in you**

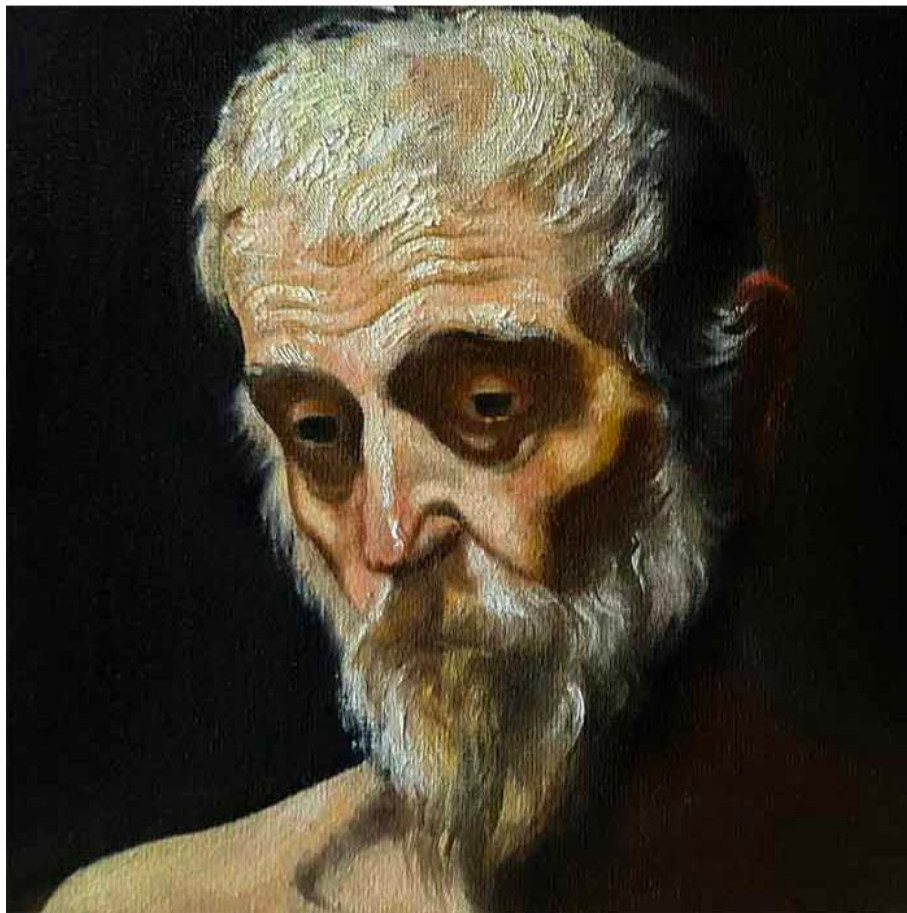


Figure 9.2: Painting of old haggard man with a downcast gaze with an overhead caption saying, “When it’s the third unprecedented economic crisis in your lifetime and you’re wondering if you got another austerity measure left in you.”



Figure 9.3: A tweet from the handle @coronavirus reading, "Honestly, I did it for memes."



## Letting the Memes Fall as They May

But I shall simply tell it as it happened, and describe the features of the disease which will give anyone who studies them some prior knowledge to enable recognition should it ever strike again. I myself caught the plague, and witnessed others suffering from it.

— Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*<sup>39</sup>

When I started this thesis, I was hellbent on the idea that the memes had to be from the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. My timeframe was important to tell the story I wanted to tell; that was my curatorial concept. But as this thesis started writing itself, I have come to realise that the memes do not wish to be contained within the strict two-year timeframe I had bound them to. No, as is in their nature of proliferation and virality they wanted to be all over the place, encompassing everything everywhere all at once. Does this change the fundamental questions I had placed at the core of my research, or curatorial axis? No. Because at the core of my research was an exploration of the absurd and the meme as an element of absurdism that allowed us to interact with the real and enable us to escape. Yes, the bulk of my memes are still from the pandemic era, or related to the pandemic; after all, the curatorial vision was conceived from that point. However, instead of historicising the moment of the pandemic, I'm looking at a larger present, where the pandemic is still continuing and we live with it contemporaneously.

This brings me to ask if we have stepped into a post-pandemic world or is it just a continuation of the same? In fact, what is a post-pandemic world and what would this consist of?

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<sup>39</sup> Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Martin Hammond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): 97.

Lexically speaking, this should be a world devoid of the Coronavirus or the eradication of COVID-19. After all, COVID-19 equals pandemic. Therefore, no COVID-19 equals post-pandemic. However, categorical syllogisms aside, as we have seen, the virus mutates and while there is herd immunity, COVID-19 persists throughout the world. We even have opinion pieces in the media demanding that we stop saying “post-pandemic”<sup>40</sup> since the virus continues to infect and kill even today.

During the peak pandemic times, we had websites dedicated to keeping track of the rising rates of infection. The Worldometer’s Coronavirus page was often at the top of search lists. The media had hourly updates with most noting the first thousand deaths in a specific country... as if the subsequent deaths didn’t matter or happen or needed to be hidden...

In response to this, the world adapted to a lifestyle it crafted during the pandemic and applied it as it fit afterwards in a “post-pandemic” era. The creation of what we call the “new normal” was maximised during this adaptation. In the face of global crises that break and reshape the world, there is always a before and an after that demarcates that breakage. The new normal has existed since World War I when Henry Wise Wood mentioned it<sup>41</sup> while ruminating on how to adapt to jarring changes with least amount of upset<sup>42</sup>. But for the pandemic, there is no clear “after” because we are living with the virus, weakened and less virulent, but still effective and still affecting how the balance works in the new normal—which by the way, is one of the phrases

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<sup>40</sup> Spencer Bokart-Lindell, “Stop Saying ‘Post-Pandemic’,” *New York Times*, June 15, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/15/opinion/vaccination-pandemic-world.html>

<sup>41</sup> Henry A Wise Wood, *Bulletin of the National Electric Light Association*, 1918 quoted in Santi Garcia, “The New Normal is Neither New nor Normal,” Medium (2021), <https://medium.com/santi-garcia/the-new-normal-is-neither-new-nor-normal-ce3f181f5d>

<sup>42</sup> The dilemma Wood posed was thus: “To consider the problems before us we must divide our epoch into three periods, that of war, that of transition, that of the new normal, which undoubtedly will supersede the old. The questions before us, therefore, are, broadly, two: How shall we pass from war to the new normal with the least jar, in the shortest time? In that respect should the new normal be shaped to differ from the old?”

everyone feels is overused<sup>43</sup>. The memes really want to be able to speak to this. As I went through the motions of curating my memes, I realised that they insisted on having this fluidity in how they are representing the reality of their functionality as cultural commentators.

There is a relationship between the verbiage of the pandemic, the “new normal” and memes. The memes capture everything that were happening in real time around them. Without censorship or restrictions, they are the storytellers of the “pandemic life”. Once a meme is set loose into the internet, it produces and reproduces unchecked and unmediated, driving conversation in a rhizomatic manner without hierarchical bindings. Once the memes settled on the walls, they loudly told their stories as cultural historians.

To tie this back to the exhibition, for the inquisitive and intrepid viewer, this functionality was given a nod in the exhibition’s didactics. I am fully committed to absurdity and since the memes insisted on narrating their whole pandemic knowledge, it felt only fitting to go all out. The exhibition started on 1 March 2023. From the declaration of the pandemic on 11 March 2020 till the memes went “live”, we had spent 1085 days living in the pandemic or ipl (in pandemic life). It was this contemporaneous period, this larger present that the memes were chronicling. The memes just wanted to acknowledge that as they fell. And I did.

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<sup>43</sup> “8 Pandemic Words & Phrases People Absolutely Never Want to Hear Again,” Dictionary.com, April 22, 2020, <https://www.dictionary.com/e/pandemic-words-people-hate/>

## Memes From Underground

“There are only patterns, patterns on top of patterns, patterns that affect other patterns. Patterns hidden by patterns. Patterns within patterns.

If you watch close, history does nothing but repeat itself.”

— Chuck Palahniuk, *Survivor*<sup>44</sup>

Sometime towards the end of summer 2022, Emily Dickson asked me a question that kind of made the Sisyphean boulder roll back down the hill. A formalist by nature<sup>45</sup>, she asked me what kind of memes I was looking into? Was there a specific style or form? Was there only thematic connection? As a curator, clearly I was looking for something specific in my selection, wasn't I?

I was stumped. I was a fraud. I knew not the form or style of my selection and it all ran on the nonsensical but there were definitely more thematic groupings than just one. I stewed for days, weeks, months on this. Until I realised that overthinking this would yield no answer. That is not the way of memes. You do not overthink the absurd, you dwell in it. As I let the memes fall as they may, patterns emerged. The memes I selected all tell a story. Together.

Together they uphold a common knowledge of the period in which they dwell. That knowledge, that narrative is universal, but not quite. Erwin Panofsky called this understanding

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<sup>44</sup> Chuck Palahniuk, *Survivor*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018): 196.

<sup>45</sup> Much like a meme, this is an inside joke between us since Emily is currently working on her PhD research which focusses on recovering formalist art histories and delivering them into the present. Ergo it is in her nature to be a formalist. And while this fascination with formalism is never-endingly entertaining, it has caused this particular curator-researcher all sorts of grief. My recent conversations with Emily confirm that she is quite gleeful at this turn of events.

the habitus. It's meant to solve a problem of defining a condition that is so universal that we all accept it.

For us, this was our perception and navigation of the pandemic. For memes, the habitus is the commonplace knowledge that creates the reference that drives the amalgamation of form and content together. This becomes the basis for memes to go beyond the simple and into the complex. Reddit defines memes as “elements of a culture or system of behaviour that may be considered to be passed from one individual to another by nongenetic means, especially imitation.”<sup>46</sup> Memes mimic in form but through this mimesis, they also represent the cultural landscape of its time. While in general, they cannot be called representational, in their state of being as cultural commentators they really are representational storytellers.

These days, classical art memes are the ones that crack me up the most. They're so out of place and yet they fit our current habitus perfectly. It's such a delight to discover how artists long dead and gone had such fatalistic senses of humour that they expressed them in their artwork. Take for example this painting I saw in the AGO in 2022.<sup>47</sup> Titled *Maria Luisa de Orleans, Queen of Spain, Lying in State* (1689), it depicts a queen of Spain lying in state and people mourning her. At the bottom in the foreground, there are two babies, cherubs if you will. I'm sure Sebastián Muñoz meant them to depict the deep devastation they felt for the dead queen but the expressions they have are hilarious and infinitely memeable. To drive the point in that this is a depiction of death that should be taken “seriously”, we have a scroll with a skull held up by the two cherubs. Ah skulls, the eternal symbol of the memento mori, that emblem of death... but it also enforces the fact that death and humour go hand in hand. Think about that uncontrollable

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<sup>46</sup> “Memes”, r/memes, Reddit, accessed December 2022, <https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/>

<sup>47</sup> The AGO ran the exhibition, *Faith and Fortune: Art Across the Global Spanish Empire* from June till October 2022.

urge to laugh at funerals when the realisation hits, that this is it—your life culminates in a party that people throw once you die. What I'm fast realising is that absurdism really is key to life's riddle: nothing will ever make sense and life is that staircase (you know the one that goes everywhere and nowhere all at once). So, if you're stuck on this plane of existence, it's better to laugh than to cry about it. Or perhaps, just meme about it.

## Through the Black Mirror: Adventures in Meme-land

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don't much care where—” said Alice.

“Then it doesn't matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

“—so long as I get SOMEWHERE,” Alice added as an explanation.

“Oh, you're sure to do that,” said the Cat, ‘if you only walk long enough.’”

— Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*<sup>48</sup>

When Alice fell through the rabbit hole, I wonder if she knew what she was getting into? Most scholars will tell you that no, her shock at everything she experienced was too *real*. Perhaps. But she clearly knew what she was getting into when she walked through the looking glass. And she still chose to walk through that. I am Alice. First time around in Meme-land, it was all shock and bafflement. I was unprepared for the internet's sense of humour. Coarse and annoying by turns, the content felt overbearingly cringe. However, when my subconscious propelled me through the black mirror during the pandemic, I willingly walked through the black mirror knowing full well that this rabbit hole was actually a warren. That awareness was key in shifting my perceptions to a more “academic” lens one might say. As I traipsed down the internet warren, I was curious to see what the memes had done, where they had gone, what they had

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<sup>48</sup> Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*.

created in their proliferation. I knew of the Reddit r/place<sup>49</sup> project<sup>50</sup> but was there some form of exhibitionary intervention or precedent? Memes have been around since the late 1990s. That's a quarter of a century. Twenty-five years if we're being precise, but a quarter of a century sounds much larger a number, doesn't it? A lot can happen in the cultural realm in a quarter of a century. And they did. And I see patterns so I'm going to briefly touch upon the four shows which piqued my curiosity. The first was an exhibition and forum held in September 2018 at the Museum of the Moving Image in New York City. Titled *Two Decades of Memes*<sup>51</sup>, the event ran for three days. The crucial element of this exhibition is that it was curated by the website KnowYourMeme, one of the leading internet authorities on meme culture. Though succinct in nature, the exhibition space was set up as a retrospective, looking at the most popular memes of the past two decades as a timeline. Projections and videos traced the evolution of memes online, with the highlight of the event being panel sessions held throughout the exhibition. Featuring social media executives, experts, journalists and meme creators, the panels discussed a variety of issues revolving around memes with the audiences and museumgoers.

The second meme-themed exhibition was launched in July 2021 by the Hong Kong website 9GAG, one of the most popular meme platforms in the world. Titled *In the Meme Time*<sup>52</sup>, the exhibition once again covers the history of the internet in parts, drawing a timeline through old and new memes. There are seven different areas set up through which audiences can look at and interact with memes. Visitors could walk through a tunnel and interact with 4D

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<sup>49</sup> "r/place" Reddit, accessed February 2023. <https://www.reddit.com/r/place/>

<sup>50</sup> Originally launched in 2017, r/place is a massive and chaotic collaborative art project that takes place over the span of a few days (72 to 120 hours). Beginning as a blank canvas, r/place allows users to place one coloured pixel every five minutes or so as they attempt to build a collective art piece.

<sup>51</sup> Luke Winkie, "Memes Have Finally Made It to the Museum," *VICE*, September 7, 2018, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/j54897/memes-have-finally-made-it-to-the-museum>

<sup>52</sup> Matthew Loh, "Hong Kong Has A 'Meme Museum' That Lets Visitors Relive Internet History in 4D" *Insider*, August 6, 2021 <https://www.insider.com/meme-museum-art-mall-exhibition-hong-kong-disappointed-cricket-fan-2021-8>



displays as well as watch an AR exhibit<sup>53</sup> which brought models of 2D memes to life as they pass a screen on a conveyor belt. Audiences could get temporary tattoos and create customised memes in photo booths. *In the Meme Time* was crafted to maximise audience interaction, increasing the "social interaction" factor that memes are known for. Both shows were organised by meme platforms, which provides a good idea about the content, authorship, and censorship aspects of the exhibits.

A third one, titled *The Memeseum* is a smaller more intimate affair that reimagined memes as a fine art form. Primarily promoted through Instagram<sup>54</sup>, the exhibition ran for one week in Brooklyn, New York in 2019. While the exhibition's theme was memes, it didn't display any. Instead, the exhibition featured eight artists, who created drawings, paintings and other artworks, drawing their references from memes. The intimate and community-based exhibition draws an interesting parallel to the work done by Eva and Franco Mattes who have also sampled cat memes for their art installations. The template for the Ceiling Cat meme used in *Refuge in Audacity* comes from the free use high-res image they uploaded of their installation for memefication.

And the fourth one is a graduate thesis exhibition from 2019. Titled *Know What I Meme? New Perspectives Beyond the Digital*<sup>55</sup>, the exhibition paid tribute to memes as “cultural icons and elevates them as a legitimate art form by placing them within a gallery setting.” Like *The Memeseum*, it used memes as inspirational prompts for artwork. Curated by Jeannine Gliddon

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<sup>53</sup> “World’s First MEME Museum” YouTube video, uploaded by Lisa Tang, July 21, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kF4MRC\\_2gP4&t=66s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kF4MRC_2gP4&t=66s)

<sup>54</sup> Memeseumnyc (@memeseumnyc), “Memeseum: Meme Art Exhibit,” Instagram. August 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/memeseumnyc/?hl=en>

<sup>55</sup> Jeannine Gliddon Owens, “Know What I Meme” (MA thesis, Old Dominion University, 2019), <https://www.knowwhatimeme.org/>

Owens, the exhibition (accompanied by the website) questions the ephemeral quality attributed to memes and records responses that attest to their influence.

Emboldened by my somewhat “curiouser and curiouser” foray into Meme-land, I made my curatorial decisions. The patterns are clear and the divide between art and visual culture is palpable: If it was purely based on existing memes, the shows were organised by meme aggregator sites. A meme-themed exhibition in the traditional artistic format only referenced memes but featured none or featured them as prompts. All the shows were based in the digital or mixed media. Even the one by artist and curator Cem A (using Instagram handle @freeze\_magazine) who wanted to bring memes offline and created a site-specific intervention across the Barbican using the information screens<sup>56</sup>. I was more certain than ever that I would most definitely be leaning into prints, into the material, the same way as the *namazu-e*.

Printing the memes allowed people to see the memes in relation to each other. This enabled a multitude of relationships and narrative threads to emerge between memes, rather than experiencing them in isolation, one at a time. I felt the digital needed translating into the physical for the absurdity ascendant to work as it should. The absurdity ascendant indicates the tropes about nonsense, the bizarre and surrealism. Seeking refuge in the audacious, the usage of bathos, non sequiturs, time loops, and the like are a few tropes that were explored in the show through the memes. While documenting the show I realised that in the digital, the individual memes seem strangely static and isolationary—sterile and limited within the frame, segregated from one other in a linear grid—depriving them of the heteroglossic quality I felt was integral to highlight the absurdity. There is something that shifts in experiencing memes with others, as a collective social

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<sup>56</sup> Frank Wasser, “‘Art World Disillusionment Led Me to Make Art with Memes’: Artist Cem A on His London Exhibition,” *The Art Newspaper*, May 5, 2022, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/05/05/my-disillusionment-with-the-london-art-world-led-me-to-make-art-with-memes-artist-cem-a-on-his-barbican-exhibition>

act (in an exhibition) rather than individually, alone, on your computer or phone. Printing them and laying them out in the salon-hang provided that space for conversations to happen, for a multiplicity of interactions to take place, for associations to be made that might not have been triggered otherwise. However, the most absurd thing about the show was not the printed memes, hanging out in the physical world outside their native digital habitat. The most absurd thing about show was that no one noted the absurdity of it all. They took it in stride normally and engaged without restraint.

In my original curatorial vision, and through the exhibition I had wanted to bring the dark humour residing in the depths of our psyches out, using the undiluted black humour in memes as a healing force, a cathartic influence to purge the negativity of the pandemic period. By reflecting on the pandemic era memes, I was attempting to make sense of the period as well. This was something that the *namazu-e* prints had done too, where they not only provided information, but also relief through humour. However, as the show progressed, it became clear that the exhibition might not have given the viewers a point of healing but rather provided a point of reflection. For me, at the end of the show, the reflection became more important.

## Be What You Meme to Be

“Who are YOU?” said the Caterpillar.

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, “I—I hardly know, sir, just at present—at least I know who I WAS when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.”

— Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* <sup>57</sup>

My game of hide and seek with the meme’s identity has kept me occupied throughout the thesis. A question at the forefront of my research was “is it a meme?” Each time I shared a meme that didn’t quite *appear* or *look* like a meme, I was confronted with a question on its identity. And every time, I instinctually answered that yes, they were memes. Even if they had changed several times since they were conceived.

For example, take the “This is Fine” meme. It was originally a multi-panel comic strip, but today it is one of the most recognised memes (Figure 13.1). The same goes for other comics which now surf the internet as memes. They have evolved. They might have started out as comics but they no longer function as them. That is to say that memes are constantly appropriating and expanding their territory. Like a black hole, they engulf anything that comes into their gravitational pull. Once anything enters the force field, few emerge or retain their original intentions or form.

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<sup>57</sup> Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*.

Okay, so that is a comic strip. How about the text-based meme: originally a Twitter or Tumblr thread that has found second life in meme-form (Figure 13.2). In essence it is a fragment of text out of context that we are reading, but in its functionality as a meme, it finds new meaning and identity as a cultural element.

I seem to be talking only of memes that weren't "originally" memes so let's take the "Distracted Boyfriend" meme as our final example (Figure 13.3). It is one of the most common meme forms: the object labelled stock image macro. This is where we basically take stock images and screenshots, slap on a witty or ironic caption to them and set them loose on the internet. After enough mutations, the original referent is lost and dislodged from the media text. The visual image becomes this floating symbolic gesture that compels audiences to find meaning in order to complete the connection.

For the collage, it is defined as something that takes something and recontextualises it, altering what it actually is. The alteration is significant for it needs to be "new" and different from its previous state. This is paramount, because you know, legal stuff and authorship. The meme doesn't care about authorship, it cares about engagement and thrives on being intertextual. The alteration need not be significant, because one referential change is all it takes to change the message. Create a new channel of meaning. The medium, though, the medium needs to perform its cultural escapades in every recontextualised form. Memes uphold Marshall McLuhan's notion of the "medium is the message"<sup>58</sup> effortlessly because of how intertwined content and form is. The important thing about the meme is not only the messages they carry but the way the medium itself affects human consciousness and society at large.

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<sup>58</sup> Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium is the Message," in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1994): 7.

I refer back to Panofsky and iconography<sup>59</sup> here: if you look at a painting depicting Christianity and don't get the reference, it is no longer painting of Christianity. But it's still a painting. For example, *The Last Supper* (1495-1498) by Leonardo Da Vinci is a Christian painting but as Panofsky says,

“A painter foreign to the Christian tradition based upon the gospels could never have produced Leonardo's *Last Supper* and the beholder foreign to this tradition could never be able to interpret it correctly. He may easily believe to witness a dinner party interrupted by some apparently painful event which, to judge from the conspicuous presence of a purse, seems to have something to do with the payment of the bill.”<sup>60</sup> (Figure 13.4)

Memes are the same. So, meme can be a meme and not a meme at the same time. It can change several times in but still be aware of its identity as long as the cultural iconography exists within it.

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<sup>59</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1972).

<sup>60</sup> Erwin Panofsky, “The Value of Error in the History of Art” (lecture, University of California, Los Angeles, November 19, 1967) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uVstFr\\_F0oA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uVstFr_F0oA)



Figure 13.1: A two-panel image where a dog in a bowler hat sits surrounded by flames with a coffee mug in front of him. The first panel shows a zoomed-out view and the second zooms in while the dog smiles as he says, “This is fine.”



Figure 13.2: A Tumblr thread about Sisyphus's boulder where the five texts alternate as "good morning kings let's push this boulder" and "bad news about the boulder everyone."





Figure 13.3: Distracted Boyfriend meme where boyfriend is walking with his girlfriend but turns around to check out another girl walking past them.

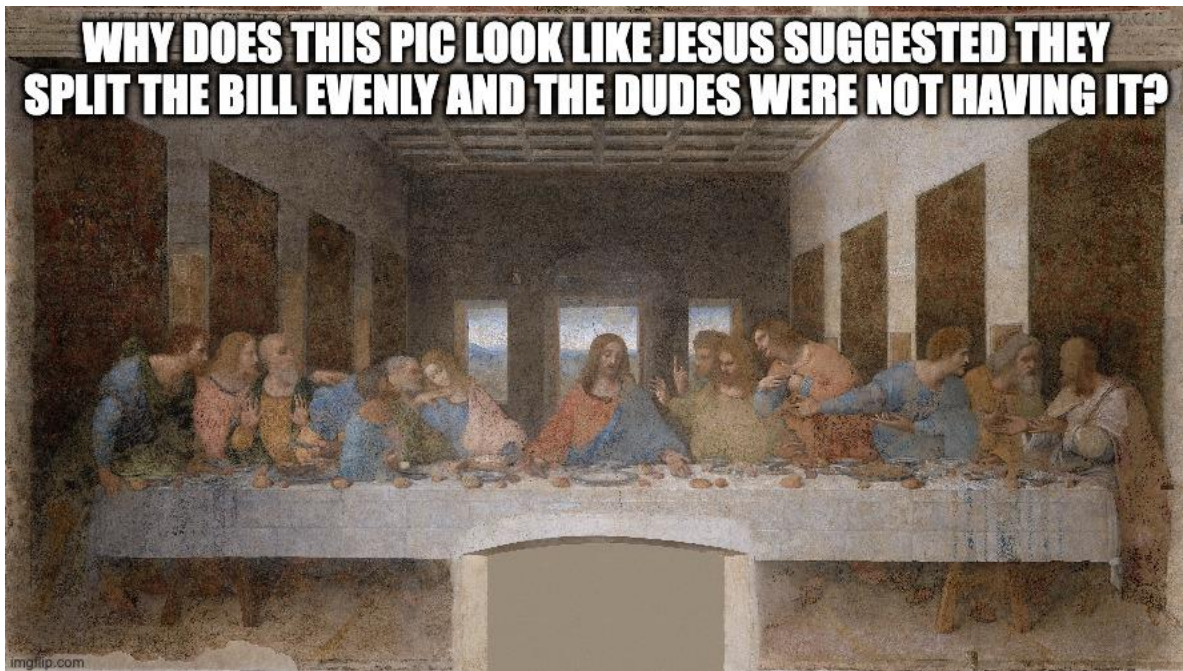


Figure 13.4: Meme of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* with the caption, "Why does this pic look like Jesus suggested they split the bill evenly and the dude were not having it?"

## I Say What I Meme and I Meme What I Say

“If there’s no meaning in it,” said the King, “that saves a world of trouble, you know, as we needn’t try to find any.”

— Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* <sup>61</sup>

As a philosophy, absurdism propagates the conflict between man’s desire for meaning in an otherwise irrational world. Sisyphus is punished to roll a boulder up the mountain for eternity. He rolls it up successfully to the summit and it rolls right back down. He follows it and rolls it back up. Repeatedly. His task is endless and there is no cumulative meaning in the repetition of his task. It remains irrational; it remains absurd. The more we seek to make meaning of the world around us, the more it eludes our desire to fit it within our humanly logical parameters. Chaos reigns supreme, order falls to the wayside. Like a serpent eating its tail, the seemingly circuitous and illogical state of affairs rule the day. We need to acknowledge this. Alice too navigated past the nonsense that surrounded her, recalibrating her senses in a new unexpectedly unfamiliar reality while carrying out previous “nonsensical” actions with uncertain composure, then with more ease until she constructed her own meanings. The answer here is simple: you need to find the meanings; you need to create the narratives that work for you.

This truth-bomb is one Camus delivers with emphatic exactitude: “There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.”<sup>62</sup> During the pandemic, the world fell out of what it deemed as “normal” and created new norms, often floundering in finding meaning in a suddenly topsy-turvy

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<sup>61</sup> Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*.

<sup>62</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 121.

world but still forging forward. Our usage of memes to catalogue and chronicle the everyday absurdities of our realities was done with humour and scorn. This thesis acknowledges that. The exhibition recognises that there was a moment where we were communicating through memes, responding through memes to the real and to our reality. Each meme curated for the show was selected based on the simple, the ordinary, the normalcy with which they performed the “abnormal”. The “This is Fine” memes are the representative memes of the pandemic for me (Figure 14.1) for a reason. To sit in pristine denial as reality warps around you—that performative disassociation in the face of the real is absurd.

I find that my discourse remains incomplete without foraying (somewhat hesitantly I might add) into intellectual depth (Figure 14.2). Is the meme shallow? Or does it have intellectual depth? I think the main answer that I might have received from this research is that the meme as an entity is an absurd one. It doesn’t conform to a single definition, it doesn’t conform to the single category, it doesn’t conform to a single meaning (Figure 14.3). It has surrealist and satirical roots and is often based off black or dark humour—what I would consider a key component of the absurd. Indeed, the metaphor of a virus suits it well for it is always evolving its appearance to better suit its needs.

In its spread, the meme isn’t burdened down by the weight of a single meaning; it holds down multiple perspectives and with each replication and node of contact, the digital content, the meme, gains new meaning. This both allows it the fluidity necessary for cultural transmission and augments the functionality of the digital sphere as “a medium of projection.”<sup>63</sup> Residents of the digital space project themselves and their identities into the Internet, playing with ideas and concepts, and these memes are one way to project our thoughts into the digital sphere, whether

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<sup>63</sup> Byung-Chul Han, “From Subject to Project,” in *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017): 69.

through creation or through engagement, such as likes, comments, and sharing. This sort of interaction afforded by memes allows both the mimos and audiences to engage in intertextual, referential, cultural and often satirical conversations which broaden knowledge bases mutually.

Our constant conflict with absurdism can only end with acceptance of the irrational world. Only then can we say, “This is Fine.”



Figure 14.1: A dog in a bowler hat sits inside a house with a toilet roll in front of him happily stating, “This is fine” as the world outside the house burns.



Figure 14.2: Double panel meme showing a sweating man trying to make a choice between two buttons labelled “intellectual depth” and “shallow”.





Figure 14.3: Double panel meme showing a cat happily pressing two buttons together that are labelled “existential angst” and “absurdist nonsense”.



## The Curatorial Casefiles: The Audience Before the Meme

Between the conception

And the creation

Between the emotion

And the response

Falls the Shadow

—T.S. Elliot, *The Hollow Men*<sup>64</sup>

These casefiles remain incomplete if I don't talk about audiences. Given my love for theatrics and the importance of The Theatre of the Absurd in the work, I entered the gallery every day and gave my memes a pep-talk. They needed to be ready to face their viewers (as did I) and engage. For this exhibition, engagement and response are crucial to its activation. That was obvious during the opening. The more people engage with it, the more the exhibition comes into its own. Like the meme, this exhibition dies from lack of engagement and so the moments of lull between visitors almost made it seem as if the space went into hibernation. The memes need to be seen to be heard.

From the plethora of responses on the show, there is one which I wish to chronicle. On the final day of the show, just a few hours before de-install, four people mistakenly came in: two children with their mom and aunt. I say "mistakenly" quite literally, for they were looking for another graduate exhibition and ended up at mine. My youngest visitors, a brother-sister duo (I'm placing their ages as five and nine) activated the exhibition in an entirely different way than their

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<sup>64</sup> T.S. Elliot, "The Hollow Men," All Poetry, <https://allpoetry.com/the-hollow-men>

adult counterparts. Nine (for that is what I am calling her now) walked around and read all the memes aloud—at least the ones she found at eye level—exclaiming at some, asking questions to the adults for others (which in turn re-engaged them), and giggling at the rest. Her biggest question was on the toilet paper representation and why there was so much of it, a commentary she bolstered in her Polaroid as well. Up until the moment they had to leave, Nine immersed herself in the memes. But it is Nine's parting comment that remains my favourite. Looking at a signage meme (Figure 15.1), she read aloud in tones of surprise: “Oh gosh. Oh gosh. Wash your hands or the devil will get you...The devil is coronavirus!”

I have been sitting with that final observation since I heard it. The innocence in that reaction is a direct opposition of our jadedness in the wake of the pandemic. Nine's mother's bemused response is an indicator of that for she had indulgently replied, “Is that how you feel?” as they walked out of earshot. Her answer brings to mind what Esslin says regarding “the sin of intellectual snobbery”<sup>65</sup> committed by Parisian audiences the first time they saw *Waiting for Godot* versus the response given by the San Francisco prison crowd. As in the case for the Theatre of the Absurd, Esslin notes that the plays were superciliously dismissed as nonsense or mystification even though they had something to say and could be understood if given the chance. I apply this to the meme and subsequently to an exhibition that features them. The meme is easily dismissed by the intellectual netizen. But like art, memes are rewarded for close-looking. For if you view closer you understand how much the humour truly camouflages.

The modern public memory is incredibly short-lived. In fact, we strive to forget. I don't disparage the necessity of this. Mostly. For I don't envision the human civilisation lasting very long if it remembered everything that transpired in its everlasting trudge towards “progress”. But

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<sup>65</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 21.

it is incredibly disconcerting nonetheless to realise how short-lived our memory is when it comes to trauma, particularly when we actively wish to forget. Sisyphus is the perfect example of this. As Camus notes of Sisyphus, “a face that toils so close to stones is stone itself”<sup>66</sup> for his tragedy lies in his conscious knowledge that his is a never-ending task. Sisyphus’s reprieve comes in following his rock as it rolls back to the foot of the mountain. It is at this moment that he surmounts his fate for he is free to ruminate on it and choose to not dwell on it. I felt this keenly, for this was not an easy show to pull off, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. Do you know how long it takes to perfectly cut and size 131 memes? Each with its own dimensions? Approximately ten hours. Ten hours while sitting with my feelings swiping the guillotine right to left and back, slicing off paper. It is no wonder that I gathered a deeper understanding of the memes and their heteroglossic nature. I was the first audience they rambled incessantly to!

In the world of memes, there are two kinds of people: the mimos and the audience. As I witnessed from my corner, there were three types of audiences present for show: the people who understood the meme, the Ariels. In *The Tempest*, Ariel is deeply connected to the flow of things in the play and drives forth action<sup>67</sup>. Ariel is the jester, the fool, the troll: it is he who builds the best connection with both the memes and the stories they convey. These audiences related on a deeper level to the humour, which was oftentimes dark, such as the meme with half a frog and the caption, “When the world is falling apart, but it is Wednesday, my dudes”.

The second kind are the people who acted like they understood the memes, those who pretended to “like a play they did not even begin to understand, just to appear in the know”<sup>68</sup>. Continuing my *Tempest* analogy, these are the courtiers. I am reminded immediately of a viewer

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<sup>66</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 121.

<sup>67</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/tempest/index.html>

<sup>68</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 21.

who loudly went around proclaiming “Why are there so many ‘This is Fine’ memes? Why?” because it triggered him, but he couldn’t put a finger on it.

And finally, the people who totally didn’t understand the memes nor pretended to, the Mirandas<sup>69</sup> as I took to calling them. Like my littlest visitors or even Julian who stubbornly but candidly stated that he didn’t agree with the Bernie Sanders meme (Figure 15.2) because it was illustrated (he is incorrect but that is beside the point)<sup>70</sup>. My standard for gauging the exhibition’s engagement and success was based on three parameters: if audiences were triggered, if it made audiences think, if audiences laughed. Three different audience-types, three different reactions.

I close these casefiles with one concluding observation: the creative act begins at one end with the mimos concluding at the other with the audience with the space between the two being where culture performs unfettered. *Refuge in Audacity* sought to do that by letting the memes fall as they desired. And they did.

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<sup>69</sup> From Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* of course.

<sup>70</sup> Julian is of the opinion that because the meme doesn’t appropriate an image but rather uses an illustration created from the original image, it isn’t a meme but just masquerading as one. I say he’s incorrect because the meme is more than just its form. Also, it’s a double referential meme since someone created an illustrated GIF combining the Bernie Sanders image with the “This is Fine” meme, which I then appropriated off the internet and turned into a static image... although this particular debate doesn’t matter here.



Figure 15.1: An advertising billboard saying, "Wash your hands or the Devil will get you!"



Figure 15.2: An illustrated image of Bernie Sanders sitting slouched over surrounded by flames labelling various crises, while proclaiming, "This is NOT fine."

## Nothing Makes Sense, But the Memes Do Matter

ESTRAGON: (giving up again). Nothing to be done.

VLADIMIR: (advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart). I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle.

(He broods, musing on the struggle. Turning to Estragon.)

So there you are again.

— Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*<sup>71</sup>

For a play that focuses on indecisiveness, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* starts with a decision: Estragon's resolution to give up juxtaposed against Vladimir's philosophical musings on his struggles and his slow acceptance of the same.

Like Vladimir, throughout this thesis, I too have brooded, musing on my struggles with etymology and the subsequent categorisation of memes, and how to find something that fits it all in. Like Vladimir, I was reasonable in my understanding that I haven't tried everything and so I applied several different inquiries to the matter. The questions poured out of me: Is the meme operating only as metaphor? Is this a form versus functionality question? What kind of memes am I including in my search? Art memes, or philosophy memes or just memes that are absurd? Until I finally pulled an Estragon, said "nothing to be done" and gave up on trying to define it and just let it be...

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<sup>71</sup> Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*.

I like to think of the following progression of affairs (which I have recorded above) to be perfectly rational and utterly absurd. For the meme, freed from my farcical attempts to conform it to some level of discipline, decided to allow me to dialogue with it and achieve some form of fluidity in figuring out its identity. As a curatorial researcher, this bodes well, for the art needs to speak and tell stories by itself. And the meme is a sneaky beast: it chooses to be an artform and not an artform at the same time. It is contemporaneous and antiquated. It is intertextual and self-contained. Ironic and meta-ironic. It is self-referential and not casts off any attempt at binary labels. Every time you think you know what a meme is, it categorically states that it is precisely not that.

As a component of contemporary visual culture, it is intertextual, self-referential, and meta-ironical by turns. The meme often dons the veneer of absurdity even though there is no subterfuge with it. In that, it simply states what has already been stated, implies what is there for all to see but not acknowledged and in doing so it rather inspires a revolt. As Camus posits, the realisation of the absurd state doesn't bring forth quiet acquiescence. Rather it allows you to operate away from the "rules" of normalcy...if nothing makes sense anymore, it matters not if I make sense as well. Memes operate on this level. They don't pretend normal; they are absurd and they revel in the absurdity of their existence. They don't presuppose any kind of reading from their audience; they just presuppose a familiarity of the mimos with the referential source. The humour they present is nonsensical, ironical, surreal and bizarre by turns, depicting the strangeness of the ordinary bluntly. For example, "ZOOM Meeting" and "Quarantine" memes (Figures 16.1 and 16.2) satirise the unprecedented global lockdown, where our familiar homes were unceremoniously thrust into reverse panopticon scenarios. One must admit that the strangeness of being a prisoner in your own home is quite a curious experience, and having that



knowledge shoved into your face without compunction (as memes are wont to do) is rather disconcerting. But memes don't dwell in artifice and confront the real readily, provoking wonderment.

Even though it may feel incongruent, Camus juxtaposes happiness and absurdity next to each other, stating “happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable.”<sup>72</sup> This relationship is important to note for we can only understand the absurd through our conscious understanding of our happiness. Sisyphus suffers because he is conscious of his never-ending burden as the rock rolls down the hill and he follows it to the foot of the mountain to begin again. The pandemic only hit us so hard because we were aware of all the luxuries and freedoms we had to give up. All the small everyday indulgences we were no longer privy to. Sisyphus's acknowledgement of the truth sets him free and in accepting his absurd reality, he negotiates his happiness— “one must imagine Sisyphus happy”<sup>73</sup>—and is content.

Each meme in the exhibition is a response to the absurdity of the pandemic landscape. Each meme comments on a facet of daily life that was disrupted in some form or manner and transformed. Whether it is simple grocery shopping or using toilet paper (Figures 16.3 and 16.4). Our acknowledgement of our reality allows us to negotiate and navigate the path we take to find our equilibrium in the aftermath of the pandemic. One must imagine that allows us to say, “This is Fine.”

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<sup>72</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 122.

<sup>73</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 123.



Figure 16.1: A mosaic of nine images showing various characters in ZOOM meetings with the caption, “ZOOM Meeting 2020.”

First day  
of  
quarantine



Second  
day of  
quarantine



Figure 16.2: Double-panel meme juxtaposing first day of Quarantine with the second day with the first image of the character McLovin smiling happily and the second image of the character Joker dancing in full clown-paint.

**PLEASE AVOID MASS GATHERINGS**

**Grocery Stores 10 minutes later:**



Figure 16.3: Image of The Simpsons characters crowded together in a small space with the caption reading, "Please avoid mass gatherings. Grocery stores 10 minutes later."



Figure 16.4: A commode surrounded by toilet paper rolls stacked on top of each other in the arrangement of a throne with the overhead caption reading, “Game of Thrones Corona Edition.”

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[absence-of-public-grief-the-1918-19-flu-pandemic/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/covid19/2020/10/26/fatalism-and-an-absence-of-public-grief-the-1918-19-flu-pandemic/)

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## Appendix A:

### Images of the Exhibition

Photos: Wenwei Chen

Dates: 1-2 March 2023

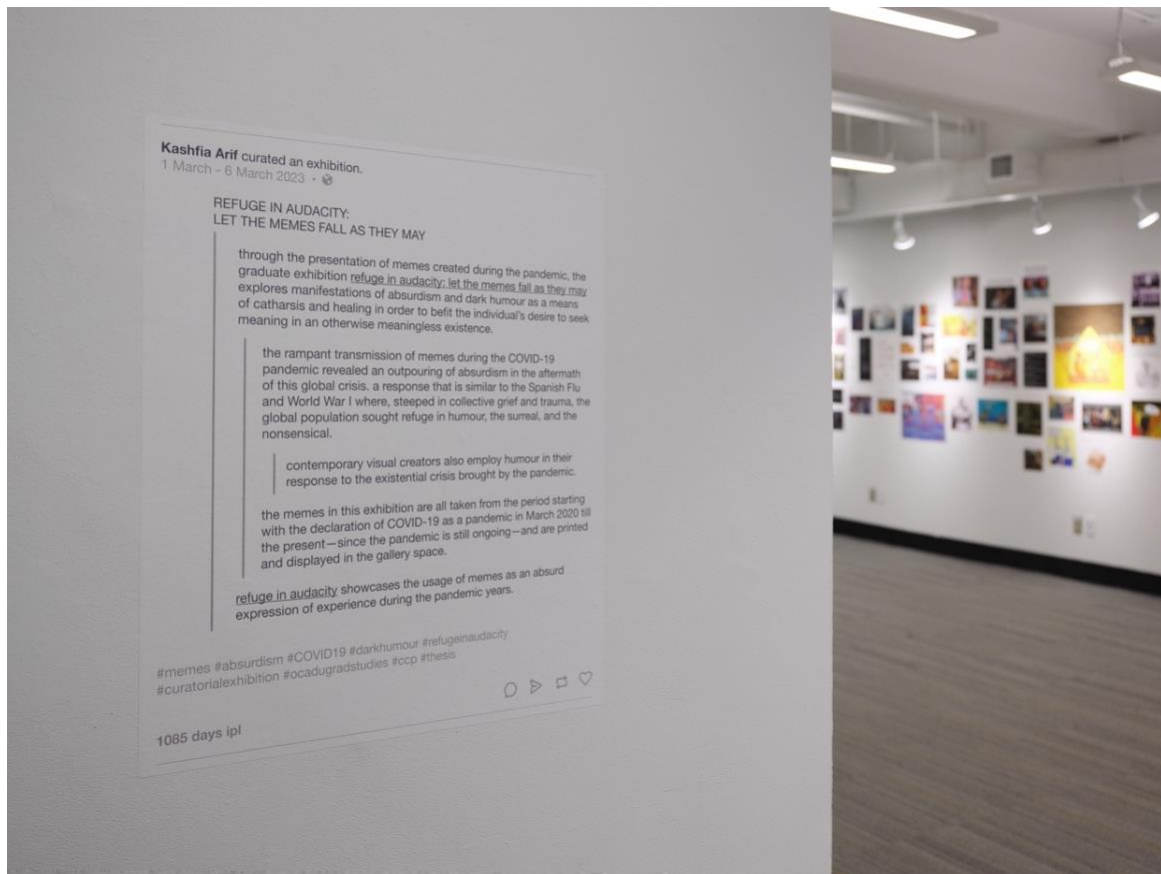


Image 1: Exhibition Didactic with glimpse into main gallery space



Image 2: Opening Reception Day - 1





Image 3: Opening Day Reception – 2





Image 4: Photo-wall and audience interaction



Image 5: Audience interactions with Polaroids



Image 6: Photo-wall master view



Image 7: "Ceiling Cat is watching you take refuge in memes."



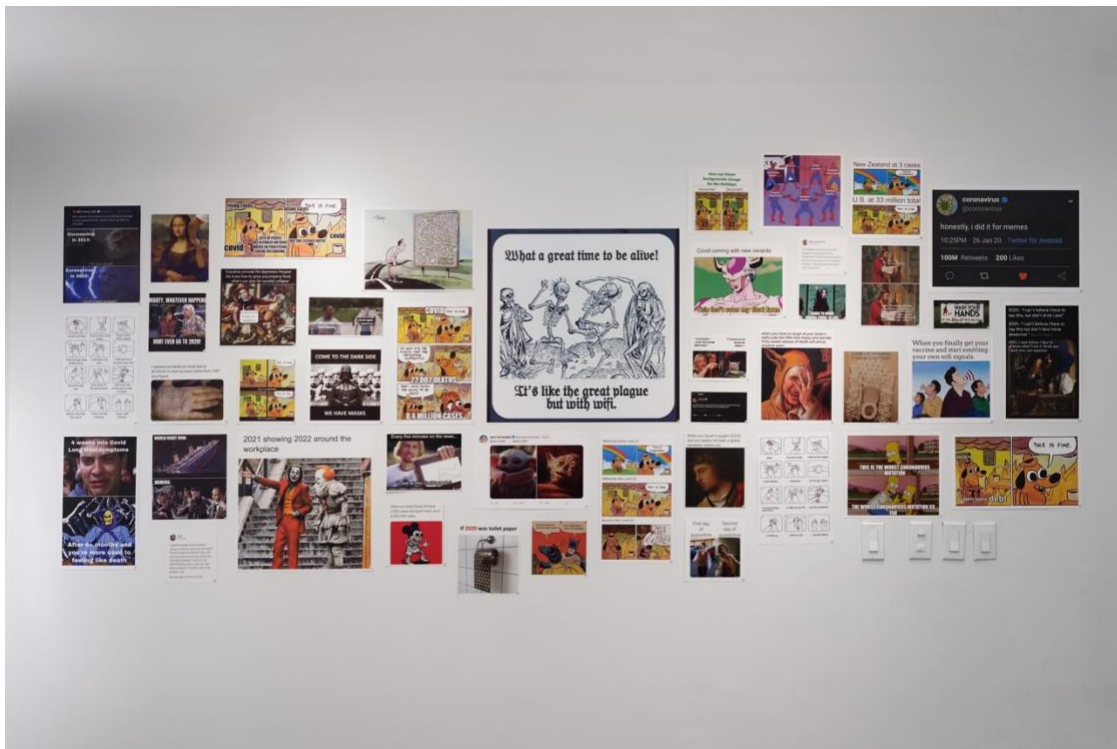


Image 9: Shorter wall master view





Image 10: Long wall master view

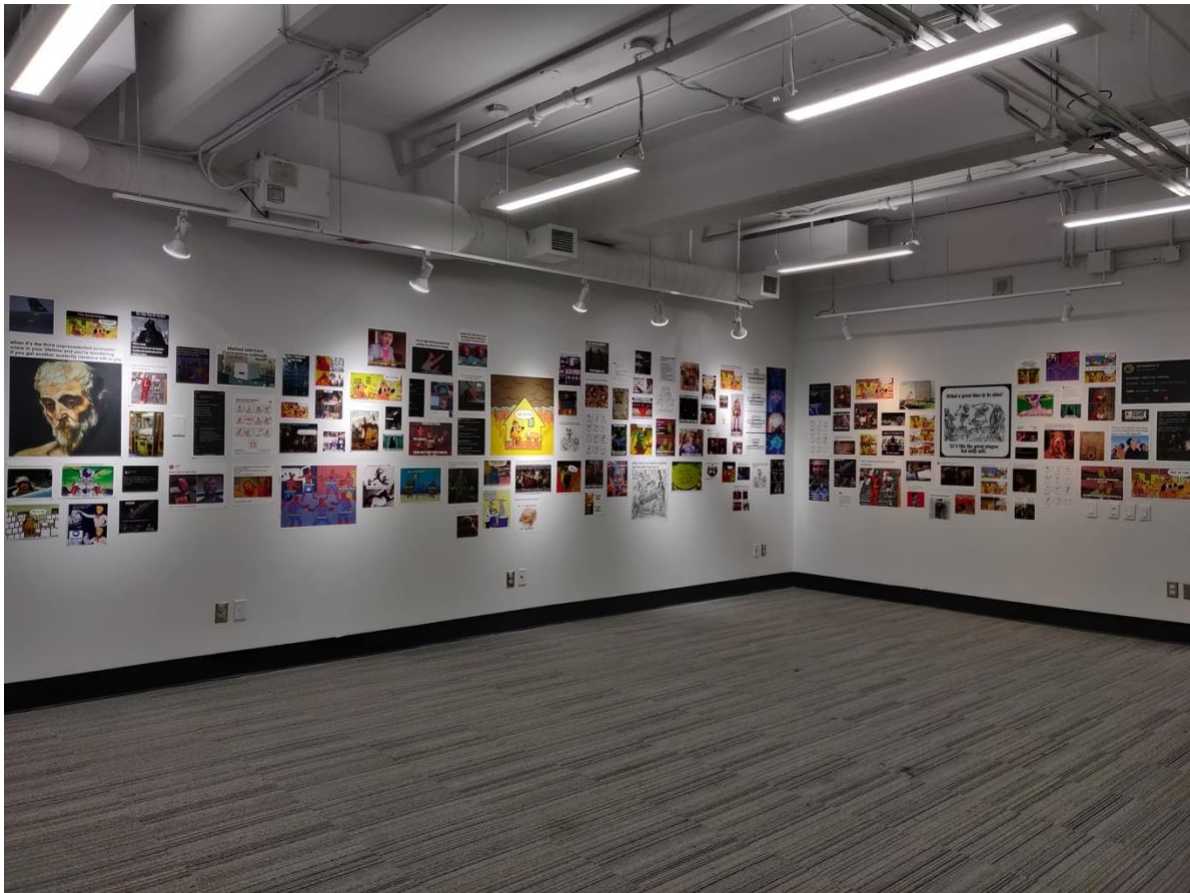


Image 11: Panoramic view of gallery space and both meme walls



## Appendix B:

### The Meme Sourcebook

#### MEME

#### SOURCE

- 1 Posted by TenYearsTenDays, March 2020, Reddit.  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/CoronavirusMemes/comments/fku43x/this\\_is\\_fine\\_coronavirus\\_edition/](https://www.reddit.com/r/CoronavirusMemes/comments/fku43x/this_is_fine_coronavirus_edition/)
- 1 Posted by Mikelitoris88, May 2022, Reddit.  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/comments/uugplv/2023\\_maybe/](https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/comments/uugplv/2023_maybe/)
- 2 Posted by tehgoatlord, December 2022, Facebook.  
<https://www.rantages.com/>
- 3 Posted by philosoraptor80, August 2021, Reddit.  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/comments/pe6vo0/apparently\\_there\\_is\\_a\\_new\\_potentially\\_even\\_more/](https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/comments/pe6vo0/apparently_there_is_a_new_potentially_even_more/)
- 3 Posted by uamsler, May 2020, Wordpress.  
<https://amslerartroom.wordpress.com/remote-learning/the-covid-19-meme-challenge/p2-alba-v-meme/>
- 4 Posted by [deleted], April 2020, Reddit.  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/CoronavirusMemes/comments/fvg1id/in\\_these\\_coronavirus\\_days/](https://www.reddit.com/r/CoronavirusMemes/comments/fvg1id/in_these_coronavirus_days/)
- 5 Posted by Tamnais, 2020, Imgflip.  
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- 5 Posted by uamsler, May 2020, Wordpress.  
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Appendix C:

Exhibition Invitation and Poster

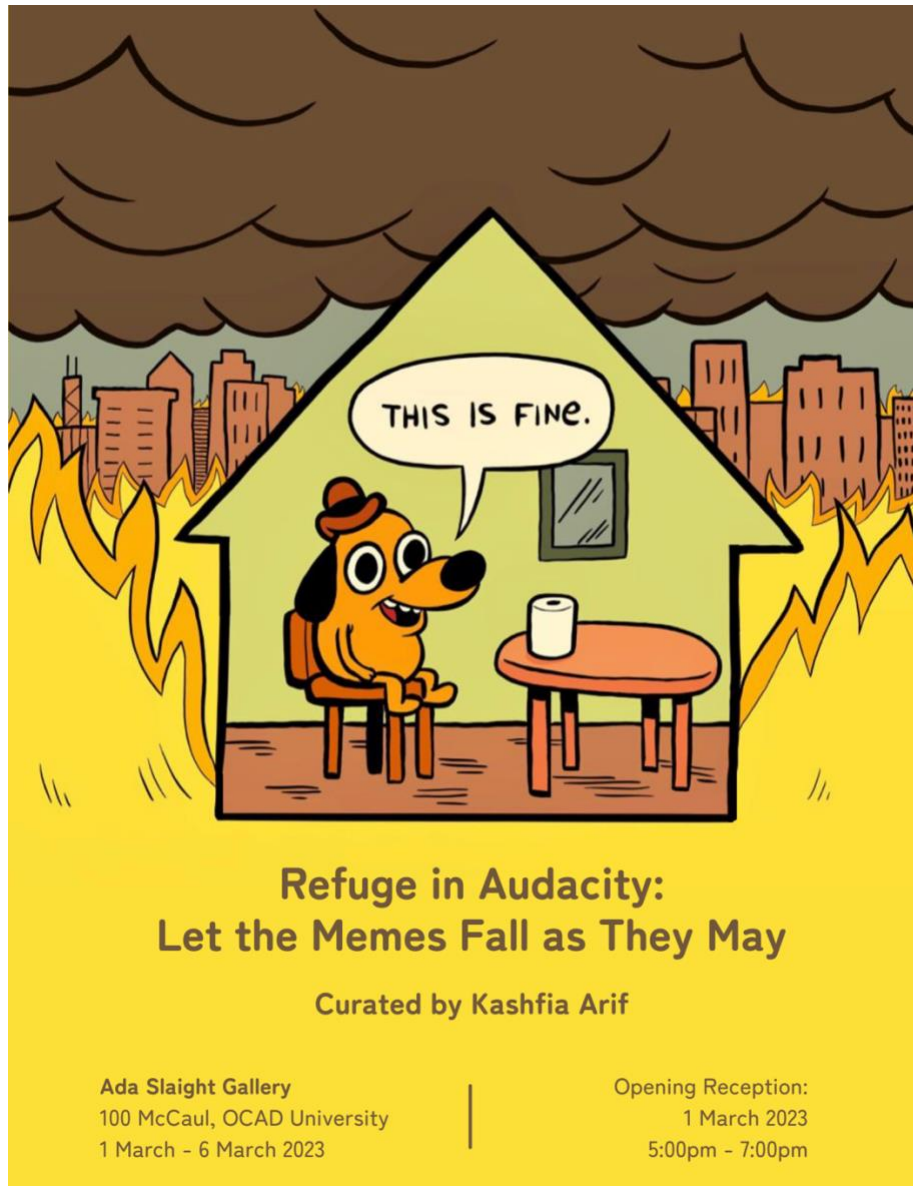


Image 12: Exhibition poster, single-sided

Design: Kashfia Arif

Measurements: Letter size, 11 x 8.5 inches



Image 13: Exhibition invitation, front side

Design: Kashfia Arif

Measurements: Postcard size, 7 x 5 inches

Through the presentation of memes created during the pandemic, the graduate exhibition **Refuge in Audacity: Let the Memes Fall As They May** explores manifestations of absurdism and dark humour as a means of catharsis and healing in order to befit the individual's desire to seek meaning in an otherwise meaningless existence. The rampant transmission of memes during the COVID-19 Pandemic revealed an outpouring of absurdism in the aftermath of this global crisis. A response that is similar to the Spanish Flu and World War I where, steeped in collective grief and trauma, the global population sought refuge in humour, the surreal, and the nonsensical. Contemporary visual creators also employ humour in their response to the existential crisis brought by the pandemic. The memes in this exhibition are all taken from the period starting with the declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic in March 2020 till the present—since the pandemic is still ongoing—and are printed and displayed in the gallery space. **Refuge in Audacity** showcases the usage of memes as an absurd expression of experience during the pandemic years.

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**Kashfia Arif** is a cultural scholar, writer, editor and curator. She is completing her MFA in Criticism and Curatorial Practice from OCAD University. As an interdisciplinary scholar, Arif has presented on Korean fanculture, Japanese visual culture and South Asian art initiatives in international conferences and her recent publications include the chapter "Looking at Fan Identity: The Bangladeshi K-pop Fan" in *Korean Wave in South Asia: Transcultural Flow, Fandom and Identity*. She recently worked with Brihatta Art Foundation for Dhaka Art Summit 2023. Arif's curatorial research interests include narration and storytelling, memory and trauma, catharsis and healing, humour, graffiti, and memes.

IG: @kashew02      E: kashfia.arif@ocadu.ca

Image 14: Exhibition invitation, reverse side

Design: Kashfia Arif

Measurements: Postcard size, 7 x 5 inches