Virality and the New Ostensive: Ai Weiwei's Leg-Gun Meme

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Introduction

Digital communication has amplified the rate and efficacy of the transference of cultural information, and has participated in the generation of a mode of symbolic exchange that demonstrates novel features. This modality—and the novelty associated with amplified transference—is often referred to as "virality," which is a label that resonates with Eric Gans's Generative Anthropology, and his articulation of the originary singularity that marks the successful emergence of human language. For the symbolic sign to emerge, it must have carried a viral quality, able to be shared with contagious effect because of its intersubjective condition: such a pattern need not have unfolded at any particular speed, but by contrast with the evolutionary (biological) changes that language appears to supervene upon, the sharing happened *suddenly*. This is a circular argument—that language succeeded because it was successfully shared—but any engagement with the paradoxical emergence of the originary something of language from no-thing requires such a presentation. Every act of representation captures the mood of this inexplicable originary success, and thematises the knowledge that language *is* because it is shared. The paradoxical originary circumstances of language show us that while communities of language users *may* have risen and disappeared many times over without sharing their invention, the *originary* group of protohumans will have shared its invention within the group, and then contacted other groups of protohumans and "infected" them, and so forth, as part of a genealogy that demonstrates the generative impulse that has motivated the sequence of such scenes—the sum of which constitutes human history.

Thus, language and the symbolic representation it involves is analogous to viral biological phenomena, and it is not surprising that with expanded access to digitally mediated communication has arisen the popular label "virality" as a means by which to describe the novel *suddenness* that marks the emergence of certain cultural phenomena. The *potential*

number of individuals one can conduct asynchronous exchange with has had a significant impact on a popular imaginary, and the staging of this imaginary upon public scenes of culture. These staging procedures are imaginary transactions that reflect the protean sense of this potential, which is performed by each individual participant on the scene of culture in question. As such, the colour and shape of the performances are in keeping with the historical circumstances of popular culture, and hold with its characteristics whilst updating them to reflect a paradoxical enhancement of the individuated conditions of the scene. That is to say, unlike the precedent popular cultural paradigm of one-to-many communication that leads to complex patterns of grass-roots sharing and appropriation, on this scene of culture exchange unfolds one-to-one and one-to-many in simultaneity(1).

The return to a biological analogy for this paradoxical intersection of the body with the symbolic is apropos, since (thus far) the scalable implication of language remains anchored by the originary force of the individual, embodied homo sapiens sapiens. There are immediately novel outcomes to this paradox, and interactions with what appear to be the markers of a larger shift toward a new set of epochal conditions. The current discussion pays particular attention to the aesthetic markers of this shift, and does so by examining a case study in virality: Ai Weiwei's(2) "Leg-Gun Meme," which began with a photograph of the celebrity artist in which he is holding his leg, aiming it like a gun (see *figure 1*). The purpose of this case study is not to explicate the conditions of so called "internet memes" (though it does employ this popular cultural title); instead it is to explore the large-scale reflexivity that seems to accompany the very use of the term in the first instance. The case study chosen is convenient for reasons too many to list here, but the ostensivity of the gesture in the image is crucial, in which he simply points with his leg. I argue that such ostensivity is a vital feature of media texts that inspire a viral response, because virality requires the parsimonious mode of the ostensive.

figure 1. Ai Weiwei's original leg-gun pose, posted on Instagram on 11 June 2014: Ai Weiwei/Instagram

Ai Wei Wei's Leg-Gun Meme

On June 11 2014, Ai Weiwei uploaded an image to Instagram of himself aiming his leg as though it were a rifle. He sits in his studio with only black socks and boxer shorts on, and a traditional rice picker's straw hat atop his head.

Over coming days, his many Instagram followers posted thousands of imitative versions of the gesture on their accounts, of which Ai "regrammed" (republished via his own Instagram account) over 500 images within five days. This feedback loop promoted the virality of the phenomenon, the intensity of which gained the attention of the world's news media. By the 13th of June this included stories in *The Guardian* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*, followed

by coverage from several tech news blogs including *The Daily Dot*, *The Verge* and *Cnet*, as well as a number of major U.S. news outlets, including *ABC News* and *The Washington Post*.

Attempts to discern the meaning of the gesture were made both from within formal media outlets and folksonomical circuits of exchange, which tended to focus on the proximity of the posting to the 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, and the strong similarity of the gesture with the choreography in a ballet from the Cultural Revolution entitled "Red Detachment of Women." *The Guardian* reported on the 13th of June that:

One blog retweeted by Weiwei, Beijing Cream, noted the similarity of the pose to one seen in the Chinese ballet The Red Detachment of Women. The ballet was one of the eight model operas that monopolised the 1960s Chinese national landscape during the cultural revolution; a state-sanctioned depiction of one woman's rise through the Communist party. ("Is That Leg Loaded?")

There does seem a strong similarity, though this was not directly confirmed by Ai whose silence on the matter certainly stimulated the discourse. He posted the image along with a caption that translates to mean "Beijing Anti-Terrorism Series," and commented on the 16th of June in an interview with the Associated Press (AP) that this was in reference to an anti-terror campaign being conducted in China at the time. Ai said to the AP:

"Power is being used in the name of protecting you," Ai said. "But what they are actually doing is something which deserves a lot of discussion. And what is terrorism doing to you? It is hurting lives? Or is it putting a huge burden on everybody?" ("Kicking")

Attacks on civilians over the preceding year attributed to Muslim militants from the country's far western Xinjiang region had seen many people arrested in Xinjiang, and security on subways throughout the China tightened, while police had now begun carrying guns. His comments on the need for a reflexive discourse about how these events inspired the use of punitive measures are clear in their intent, but perhaps more interesting was his interpretation of the strong response to his originary gesture. He discouraged any particular interpretation of the meme, observing that:

"The Internet is flowing. You come up with something basic, and everybody will find it easy to express themselves based on that." ("Kicking")

Thus, Ai comments that the original image is both laden with intent, in that he wishes to promote engagement with a particular agenda, but that this engagement should not be taken seriously, at least not at this, the primary tier of interaction inspired through digital networks of exchange. The intent, therefore, is caught up in a paradoxical arrangement with the exchange it inspires, since the attention gained in this way cannot be taken seriously. This I take as a primer for the discussion below.

Virality and Digital Exchange

Some important characteristics of memes(3) should be noted as context for this discussion. The meme, here, is interpreted as a kind of harbinger and indicator of less visible cultural impetus, and while the meme itself is not of any particular gravity or significance (it does reach a great many people but does not render a great deal of influence in its immediacy), the facility of the meme is of great interest. The meme-as-text discussed herein is taken to be an effect of patterns of symbolic *exchange*. This is related to Richard Dawkins' originary articulation of the meme in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), though as evidence against the reductive scientism it promotes. For Dawkins the meme is a selfish replicator of cultural information that copies itself after the manner of the gene. There seems no need to repeat here the many and convincing deconstructions of this argument, instead it is enough to observe that the appropriation of the term in the popular cultural expression reminds us that symbolic representation does not enact culture as simple transference of the kind Dawkins' theory presupposes, but as richly generative exchange. Subsequently, this discussion follows Eric Gans who argues that the meme has, in this way, become "a model of the cultural object and ultimately of the originary event of human representation" ("The Meme"). Indeed, the meme is of interest to us because of its basic emptiness, whereby as Gans asserts, "the meme does not convey useful information any more than the language of the sacred, it is an essentially esthetic object, a template for a minimal scenic event." The meme, in sum, provides for us a text that is paradigmatic of the originary circumstances of virality. The materiality of these circumstances bears inspection and consideration as an access to the context of representation that unfolds in contemporaneity, as it is associated with such integral dimensions of culture as social subjectivity and patterns of language use. These secular artifacts, and the architectonic infrastructure of the digital networks through which they appear are kinetic just as the originary scene of language was kinetic, and generative of a potential that participates in the ongoing creation of the originary symbolic potential.

The Subjective Paradigm of Ostensivity

Two such dimensional quanta are: the discourses of selfhood and individual expression that accompany the "democratising" influence of digital (qua "access") culture; and the paradoxical rise of ostensivity that seems to have accompanied the instantaneity with which digital modes of representation are shared. These two observations deserve some unpacking and will be further explored below, but it is worthy of noting that the typical meme is tangled up with broader patterns in culture associated with subjectivity that can be discovered to have been generated by shifts in scale and modes of attention on digital scenes of representation. Attention is drawn in real time via paradoxically asynchronous and aspatial mediation; paradoxical because these liminal qualities are a product of speed and access. In other words, this digital scenicity is generative of attention that is both sudden—potentially violently so—and scalable, but only because it is of mediation that is not

constrained by spatio-temporality in the manner that other, less "virtual" mediation is. This attention is both more volatile and more enduring simultaneously, a fact reflected in the enduring quality of the digital trace (depending on when the power is shut off).

Given that the individual plays a more prominent role in such a horizontally integral mode of representation and exchange, as it must for the virality to find its purchase, it follows that there is a paradoxical quality to the relation of individual and community in digital virality. The culture of the meme relies on the individual taking up and sharing via a variety of digital platforms of exchange ("social network" based ones in particular) information about or variations upon the originary meme event. This invokes the individual's "taste," or cultural discernment, and is thereby revelatory of any accompanying literacy as the subject stages "buy in," or a willingness to be aligned with the growing affirmation of the meme's value before the attention of the community. That value, however, is almost always based on the premise that *this* is a mode of attention predicated upon the destructible, or uncanny quanta in the meme that gave it traction in the first instance. This we see evidenced in the manner by which viral exchange unfolds, as the participants take up the media in question, modify it, and reinsert it into the network in patterns that reflect and update existing practices of modification. The individual thus delivers performances of selfhood in keeping with the abovementioned literacy by virtue of ritualistic deforming/reforming of the media on hand, which is transgressed after the fashion of the graffiti artist. Here, the surfaces of normally sacred artefacts such as audio recordings, photographs or films of domestic pets, celebrities and politicians are intruded upon and in some way treated as screens and stages available to the individual, permitting them to transact their relation with the community. This profane action is a reminder that such digital media and the modes of representation they generate are formats of culture at once removed from and intimate with the material reality from which they draw, elevating the intentional quality of the paradoxicality in play. Verisimilitude and distance are crucial to this sensibility, as the virtuous capacity of the digital for faithful representation is playfully disrupted with the effect of reminding the viewer just how far removed they are from the real Barack Obama/cat/Tyrannosaurus Rex/Wedding Fight/Einstein.

It is of interest that the performances in question are frequently humour driven, and given the specificity of the culturally determined parameters to humour the meme offers an unusually broad context for such a generative cultural force to function within. Thus, the humour often originates as benign misadventure or animal behaviour caught on camera that lends itself to existing anthropomorphic frames (think, goats that scream like people). But beyond humour there appears to be a mode of attention in play that involves a return to the primal form of human language: ostensivity. The mode of attention associated with such ostensivity operates in a fashion not dissimilar to that which accompanies the modern function of celebrity. In secular societies, operating on massive scales of mediation, the celebrity has taken on a role of increasing significance. However, the celebrity as a focus for attention is, like the meme, not to be taken seriously. Despite their centrality, they do not,

as Gans has argued, fill any integral societal function ("The Last Celebrity"). From such an instrumental perspective, their function would seem to lie elsewhere, as temporary foci for resentment. They are "prehumiliated" figures, and due to their lack of consequence are capable vehicles for resentment in the popular mode. Which is to say, they mediate the deferral of resentment via their centrality, becoming the victims of having successfully garnered attention. Thus, the *schadenfreude* that accompanies the unwarranted winning of attention by an individual on any given scene of culture is reserved for the celebrity. Similarly, though in more chaotic horizontally transmitted and mediated circumstances, the virality associated with the meme is wedded to a paradoxically granted attention: willingly individual and "democratic," but by its granting, communal and homogenous at a scale and speed not permissible in cultural exchange mediated by non-digital means.

Ostensivity and Eshelman's Monist Aesthetics

When we copy the desire of another; that model for our desire is in danger of becoming the obstacle to our attainment of the desired object. The threat of a mimetic crisis that places us in direct competition with the model for the object of desire is ever-present, and in the originary hypothesis adopted by Generative Anthropology is the driver for the emergence of the symbolic sign, and language. The mimetic impulse, in this explanation, creates a doubly paradoxical situation that marks all subsequent scenes of culture, rendering paradox the basic condition of the human, here considered to be coterminous with the originary emergence of language.

Let us follow this doubling of paradox forward in time. The originary scene of language is firstly paradoxical in that the becoming-obstacle of the model that accompanies mimetic behaviour leads to a crisis as the subject and model compete for an object of desire. The model now doubles as an opponent, and the system that emerges to defer the violent potential in this paradoxical situation and to initiate the human community is language. The symbolic sign, here first emitted by a proto human and understood to be so by another proto human, is charged with the auratic weight of this moment. It is mutually understood to be the means by which the two individuals competing for the object can move beyond animal means of differentiation via hierarchical organisation, which having failed will yield either violence, or something else. Something that indicates the shared understanding of the need to defer this violence, and the origin of the human animal who no longer relies on the differentiation achieved by animal means alone. That something is language, but language thus leaves us with the second part of the paradox, by simultaneously yielding the only means we have to explain language: language itself. Over time, this paradoxicality gives rise to the depths of human culture as history, which is constituted by the sequence of scenes generated from this origin. This paradoxical human situation we see unfold around us in real-time, where language mediates and is generative of the fundaments of human experience, such as love and resentment, in simultaneity. A readily available means of access to these phenomena is the case of objects of desire that are in small supply, such as

individuals. Romantic love, for example, is confirmed as a public phenomenon when we seek the affirmation from our close friends and family that this individual is indeed desirable, and a suitable partner. However, if in this situation my sister or brother covets the object of desire and eventually becomes a fellow suitor, the frequent result is eruption of sudden, ungoverned violence.

Thus, the sensibility of post-postmodern(4) aesthetics, which are generated through secular, virtual domains constituted by horizontal networks of exchange in which the participants are continuously and reflexively engaged by the structure of mimetic desire. Post-postmodern aesthetics are realised during the *event* of the undecidable: a scene on which is continually staged and restaged performances of ambivalence and unresolved oscillation between modern and postmodern sensibilities. Here, conditions seem to have emerged that promote acts of representation that appropriate formally aesthetic modes of practice and media types from both precedent epochs as part of engagements that are intentionally paradoxical. These can be understood as attempts to mediate the reflexive relation to mimetic desire that is, arguably, the prime achievement of modernity, such that post-postmodern aesthetics are driven by an ethos of active resistance to the potentially destructive influence of the mimetic impulse. This yields a broad sweep of reflexive aesthetic engagement with the action of pulling back from the generative drive excited by mimetic desire.

The rising motif of monism and the ostensivity it is marked by is a recurring feature of post-postmodern aesthetics. Raoul Eshelman (2008) renders an account of this patterning under the title "performatism," setting out to provide analyses of aesthetic phenomena that do not fit within the range of culture we usually regard to be postmodern. Contrapuntally, Vermeulen and van den Akker began in 2009 to map the growing presence of dualist texts under the title *metamodernism*, asserting the emergence of conditions that permit a liminal mode of aesthetic representation and experience that takes the form of unresolved oscillation between modern and postmodern sensibilities ("Notes"). In all cases, though, each of these conditions relies upon the next. Monism relies on dualism, undecidable doubling relies on singular dedication, and both rely on the emergence of an absurd reflexivity that emphasises the double framing – or fundamental paradox – of representation. Eshelman(5) notices this, and appropriates Gans in asserting that the sign creates an inner frame that serves as its immediate referential structure. The inner frame forms the container for the primary format of signification: ostensivity. An outer frame surrounds the inner, allowing the sign to become meaningful in a particular context. This paradigmatic frame shows us that all syntax – or primary signification, such as gestural – takes on its depth of meaning through an outer frame, that gives us paradigm and context. However, once the inner/outer frame is realised, the human understands that they are in language. Thus, beyond the outer frame is something that is nothing. Out there is the unknowable, sublimity, in sum, the sense of the abyssal beyond. So language brings us into paradox, since we know that we don't know what is beyond our knowing in language.

This relation is complicit with the fundamental paradox of signification, since the sign is mobile from the instant it is emitted and does not indicate any particular object, but the object that it indicates as a *performance*. Thus, the sign is structured as follows: sign->(object the sign has indicated). Or as Gans represents it:

(1) the sign refers to an *object* (S -> O)

(2) by this very fact, this object is no longer a part of the object world, but the *object-referred-to-by-the-sign* (S -> (S -> O)) ("Fundamental")

Paradoxically, the necessity for the emission of the sign is a mimetic crisis that accompanies shared desire for an object. Here, the model for desire has become an obstacle, and the sign emerges in order to designate the object as sacred and mediate resentment, deferring its violent potential and representing the status of the object, which is now designated as beyond appropriation. The object is thus no longer any old part of the real, but that which the sign points toward and therefore, part of the human world and its intricately structured performances of sacrality.

This intricacy changes with secularity, which by definition involves a shifting of emphasis away from formally designated centres of sacred attention, and the decline in significance of institutionally bounded spaces in which sacred rituals are performed. Instead, the secular scene of cultural exchange is marked by *implicit* sacrality, and when that secularity is mediated via digital networks that underpin growing horizontality of exchange, the effects are far reaching. Through digital mediation we are compelled to navigate the implicit sacrality of the secular scene of cultural exchange in a virtual setting, where the body remains integral, but representation is taken to a liminal space. Thus, undecidability plays a crucial role in post-postmodern aesthetics. What, after all, is at stake in the virtual is our humanity, since signification is a virtualising procedure, and our humanity is mortgaged on the back of a history that has generated culture through the sequence of scenes that constitute the passage of the sign forward in time. That non-space beyond the outer-frame of the human community, beyond context, gives us the continual sense of the impossible action of encompassing meaning through language, with its initial, virtual/transcendent removal of the sign from that which it represents. What occurs in the setting of viral cultural patternings mediated by digital modes of exchange reflects this founding in *différance.[(6)](#)*

The Paradox of the Meme

The unknowable beyond and the fundamental paradox of signification are not separable phenomena of course. Together, they create the human sense of the real, and mediated under the liminal circumstances of digital networks of exchange and the secular conditions of late modernity, become the ubiquitous condition of culture. It is fecund: it is the deep sense of the fertile universe exceeding its own boundaries and invading our attempts to

similarly exceed language. In making our continual attempts to exceed language, as we do in explicitly aesthetic modes of representation, we have begun to trip over into that state intentionally. We are deliberately paradoxical. This intent is evident in the example of virality that is at the origin of culture. That virality was necessary to the spreading of the virtualising potential of the originary sign. It is therefore not surprising that viral exchange via the digitally mediated horizontal mode we label "meme" carries with it the post-postmodern tendency toward a return to the parsimony of ostensivity. Ostensive gestures have the broadest syntactic availability, and as individuals introduce paradigmatic information during their exchange, a paradoxical superfluity of meaning emerges. The minimal container of the ostensive gesture is appropriated and deployed during later acts of representation on scenes that in turn become the basis for still further processes of representation that grow in complexity, as do the resultant modes of cultural exchange.

When the individual participants in such a community are "jacked in" to the "network," they are linked one to one, and one to many, just as they are in any community. However, this potential is realised with novel facility and scale via digital communication technologies, and the meme by virtue of its popular definition is understood to exceed its historical precedents in and of the contagion with which it spreads. This potential we group together under the aegis "virality," and in this discussion, I demonstrate an example in which the latency of the material that "goes viral" is attributable to its minimal ostensive intent.

The originary mobility of the sign permits such parsimony to become the catalyst for large-scale exchange and appropriation popularly referred to as *memish* ("meme"-ish). It would be irresponsible to claim that *all* instances of memish virality are the kinetic outcome of an ostensive container, but my enquiry into this originary pattern is intended less as a proof for a universal explanation as to the circumstances of all "memes," and more as an exploration of how it is that the originary hypothesis can permit us to explain the viral spread of individual instances of material culture through human interaction that we popular understand to be "meme"-etic. In establishing the originary and scenic parameters to particular circumstances of virality, we can thereby expose the machinery of a broader set of cultural circumstances, which in their richness display how it is that the participants in the network perform a reflexive engagement with the mimetic impulse.

Taken to its endgame, this hypothesis suggests that the ironic mode of engagement unfolding through memes—frequently parodic, but unerringly polysemic—takes advantage of the uncanny dimension of contemporaneous cultural emergences to promote a pulling back from the mimetic impulse. In other words, these are typically irenic gestures; gestures of deferral, and these are individuals demonstrating a sensibility associated with a novel set of cultural circumstances. In doing so, they challenge us to find a position for this activity on the continuum created by the delineation of popular from high culture set down by Gans, who writes:

Popular culture takes advantage of the world of representation to take revenge on reality, whereas high culture never loses sight of the fact that the originary function of representation is the preservation of the community through sacrifice ("Popular").

If we accept Gans's premises, it is possible to observe that in appropriating an instance of popular culture, altering it and rendering by virtue of some artifice or other the renewal of the original artefact for further activity of exchange, the participants in the meme are positioned between the conditions of popular and high culture. Indeed, irretrievably so, since on the one hand the promotion of the meme takes its revenge on reality by contributing to the volatility of its spread; whilst on the other, it comments on this very action and promotes the reflexivity that might turn our collective attention toward the *community itself.* The key, then, is the intervention of the agency of the participants who do not permit the circumstances of the original act of representation to go untested, but instead remediate these circumstances as expressly individual. The participants in the sudden community that forms up around the circumstances of the meme show their willingness to be part of yet apart from the mass of individuals that perform the assemblage that is the meme. Here, we see in evidence the intentional paradoxicality, and the ambivalence— the *inbetweeness*—that I have previously argued is a primary feature of the post-postmodern sensibility.(7)

The Context of Ai Wei Wei's Leg-Gun Meme

I would like to introduce key biographical information before expanding on the circumstances of the Leg-Gun meme. Section IX of this paper offers extended biographical notes about Ai for the interested reader.

Ai is a Chinese contemporary artist and activist who is openly critical of the Chinese government. He comments in particular on the issue of human rights abuses and takes advantage of digital modes of communication to reach a global audience. He gained large scale attention for his participation in the successful proposal for the famous "Bird's Nest" (see *figure 2*) design of the Beijing Olympic stadium (2008), on which he collaborated with renowned Swiss firm Herzog & de Meuron during 2003—though he would later adopt a critical attitude toward the stadium, and argue that it was part of the general pattern of deception associated with the Olympics, during which China presented to the world a "pretend smile."

figure 2. "Birds Nest at Night" by Chumsdock Cheng (CC BY-SA 2.0)

In typical fashion, Ai drove the point home with commentary on his blog and published photographs of his opinion in his social media, such as his series of photographs, entitled "Fuck Off," that capture him "flipping the bird" at Chinese government buildings during the

period around the Beijing Olympics. This is, itself, a reference to the "Middle Finger" meme.

His next major work was Sunflower Seeds, which opened at the Tate Modern in October 2010 and consisted in 100,000,000 individual hand crafted porcelain seeds, arranged as a very large, thick rectangular layer on the floor of the Tate's Turbine Hall ("Ai Weiwei's Sunflower Seeds"). Audiences were invited to interact with the seeds, to walk upon them, play with them and be immersed in them with no restriction.

His passport was taken from him after an 81 day period of incarceration in 2011, but far from restricting his activities, this has only led to a heightening of his status and an invigoration of his work which has taken on a new authenticity as commentary on both Chinese and global conditions of culture.(8) He works with sculpture, photography, audio, video, and site-specific installations, employing simple forms and methods from conceptual and Minimal art, and deploying traditional furniture, ancient pottery, and daily objects in ways that question cultural values and political authority.

His recent work continues to engage with ongoing investigation into the aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, and his detention and continual surveillance by Chinese authorities. He blogged frequently from 2006-2009, when his blog was closed down after vigorous and repeated criticism of the Chinese government, but he transitioned rapidly to *Twitter* and *Instagram* through this period, and posts to both platforms to the present day. His prodigious body of art has recently been represented in a twenty year retrospective entitled "Ai Weiwei: According to What?" which began in Japan in 2009 and was adapted for exhibition in 2012 at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington and progressed to major galleries throughout the USA through to 2014. It was updated over time to include more recent pieces including fibreglass models that portray his incarceration in 2011, and installations constituted by large numbers of ceramic crabs, bicycles, and stools. He has also recently exhibited a range of works at Alcatraz in the US and Blenheim Palace in the UK.

His work consistently incorporates aesthetic engagement with the paradoxical sense of a singular, protean mass made up of many individuals, and explores this moment via freighted symbols derived from the material culture of China. His oeuvre appears to be shaped by attempts to gain attention, responding to the media through which it realises publicity and in this way geared toward staging of spectacles that will command a larger audience than that typically dedicated to the consumption of works associated with the high cultural paradigm of art. He sets about contrasting historically and geographically delineated contexts of culture in order to generate comment, and the Leg-Gun Meme reflects this. He integrates the minimalism of an embodied, ostensive mode of delivery with his allusion to the high cultural format of ballet, and a paradigm heavily freighted with historical information. Paradoxically, his ostensive gesture intends the complexity generated by the reference. This effect is doubled, since the delivery adopts a popular photographic mode, but is not simply aligned with the popular because the pattern of consumption that becomes

viral in the format of the meme demands interaction.

As such, the Leg-Gun meme offers a convenient example of a minimal ostensive gesture. It is uncanny, in that it takes the leg to be a gun, and into the bargain is mimicry of mimesis itself: a paradoxical non-stance (pardon the pun). Who, after all, really needs to use their leg as a gun, when the fingers and extended arm will do quite nicely? No, the inconvenience of the gesture shows us that this is both ostensive and reflexive, whereby the extra step in the precession of simulated gestural behaviour takes the observer beyond minimal, monistic ostensivity and into the metamodern domain of oscillation between the pointing toward, and the pointing toward the pointing toward, ad nauseam.

Each appropriation of the gesture follows suit, maintaining the surfeit of monism that seems to accompany the initiating intent. But what unfolds is a personalised gesture, as it must be, for to participate in the meme individuals are compelled to either mimic it in an embodied fashion, or create a representation that is recognisably mimetic of the model. The initial patterns of appropriation reinvigorate the originary circumstances of the artefact in what will build to propagate mimetic contagion on the scale of the meme, by making much of an ostensive potential that grows to become the more broadly realised condition of its humour/uncanny effect. In other words, the basis for the potency of the virality that subsequently emerges is both maintained in the gestures that follow, and commented upon in their remediation. This Ai encourages by remediating those who mimic the gesture, "regramming" their mimetic behaviour, and putting in place a further phase of intervention that becomes the real catalyst for the meme. This synthesis of the mimetic pattern of behaviour would not authenticate the meme in the usual circuits of culture, where such plastic intervention would itself become lampooned. The "authenticity" of memes is crucial, and where they are discovered to have been deliberately propagated they quickly atrophy, since to align oneself with the farce of *intended* virality is to naively participate in the vertically anointed hierarchical structure of the popular.

Celebrities, for example, if discovered to have set about generating virality are lampooned for their sophomoric intent. The followers of Ai's Instagram account are not participating in the popular with such directness, however, and instead are complicit with the agency of a celebrity artist who is both dissident and activist. His status is generated by the attention he deliberately commands as a celebrity does, but his broadly recognised achievements under the high cultural paradigm of art, and his genuinely heroic public presence, intervene to calibrate this celebrity. The effect is such that Ai is permitted to occupy the centre of our attention without being subject to the usual pattern of prehumiliation to which a celebrity exposed. For example, his first works to gain a broader attention were exercises in experimental conceptualism: The Coca Cola Urn (1994); and Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn (1995). In the former, Ai emblazoned a Han Dynasty urn with the Coca Cola logo in red lettering, in the latter he was filmed dropping and destroying a Han Dynasty urn. He is able to play the clown, to destroy sacred objects associated with Chinese history, and maintains

his heroic status as a celebrity would not. One imagines that Jacky Chan would avoid such a course of action out of fear of public derision. Mind you, if Ai were to burn the American flag, a different reaction could be assured, and so this license is not extended indefinitely, but constrained by the parameters of his "cause." These observations invite reflection on Gans's hypothesis that celebrity adds to the secular scenicity of modernity "a supplement of sacred presence" that operates on "a supplementary scene of interaction" ("The Last Celebrity"). Thus, Ai's actions fall outside of the usual constraints on agency, and this is realised as he commands attention on such an appended scene of interaction. However, his public presence adopts a mode of sacrality that extends beyond the prehumiliated domain of the relatively inconsequential celebrity and into the world directly via his status as artist and dissident.

In his oeuvre of works we see a pattern of performances and stagings on scenes of culture that are aesthetically framed, and whose prehumiliated status seems to be acknowledged by the artist from the outset. These are quite definitely a product of globalised conditions of culture, and function according to the logic of a digitally networked audience-as-community.

Conclusion

There is a crucial discovery to be made about cultural exchange under conditions of late modernity in the viral patterning we associate with the "meme," and this is revealed through originary inquiry. The willing assemblage of the participants in the meme shows us that the secularity of digital networks relies upon a scenicity that holds forth the necessity for some supplement of sacred presence that is reflected in the popular mode—thus the agency of the collective is corroborated by the individuals who take up the originary artefact and remediate it, leaving their mark, and demonstrating their sense of the sacred need for the community to be maintained. If the digital scene is a secular one, it is in keeping with modernity, where growing connectivity is characterised by immediacy, by suddenness, and the speed of this moment is the speed of loss. As Eshelman has argued, this has been realised in the growing success of the paradigm of ostensivity: monism. But as the metamodernists suggest, this monism is very rapidly consumed to become the oscillation that results from processes of remediation.

If, however, there is some redemption to be discovered here it is in reflexivity that marks the viral speed and scale of exchange that is feasible under such conditions, whereby the likes of Ai Weiwei can escalate what is, in the end, the irenic intention of his gesture in the Gun-Leg Meme, whose convenient ostensivity reminds us that the originary intention was shared as a gesture of deferral, to prevent violence and promote peace.

Extended Biographical Notes on Ai Weiwei

Ai grew up during the Cultural Revolution, when a child's education was primarily made up

of working in the fields and studying the Little Red Book. The utopian socialism of this period is central to his work, but is also strongly influenced by the plight of his father, the poet Ai Qing, who was labelled an "enemy of the people" in 1957 just after Ai was born when he criticised the regime during the first Anti-Rightist Campaign. Before his political dehabilitation, Qing was a leading intellectual and supporter of the Chinese communist project. As a result, his family of five was sent to a prison farm, and his father made to endure:

> daily political humiliations, manual labour, re-education, and due to his particular fame and influence was assigned the most humiliating tasks. Ai Weiwei was too young to help, but he vividly recalls watching his father scrub the public toilets to nearly immaculate cleanliness. (*Ai Weiwei's Blog* xvii-xviii).

After the progenitors of the Cultural Revolution—the "Gang of Four"—were imprisoned, the family returned to the very liberal Beijing of 1976. Ai learned to draw, at which he excelled, and in 1978 enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy and participated in the so called Democracy Wall. This was a wall on which large posters were placed that commented on public affairs—its use was encouraged during the demise of the Gang of Four, but later became the site for growing calls for political change toward a more democratic regime. This led to severe punishment of the supporters and activists, and the result greatly upset Ai, who went on to participate in Stars from 1979, a loosely defined group of artists who resisted the prescribed dogmatic realism of the preceding decade and left the country as soon as the opportunity emerged.

In 1981 he move to the USA where he enrolled in the Parsons School of Design with a scholarship where his remarkable technical skills set him apart and he was exposed to Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, the two most influential artists on his work. He quickly dropped out after failing art history and losing his scholarship, but later claimed he was dissatisfied with feeling removed from the real world of art by the school. Instead, he participated in the art scene, making an income by doing manual labour, and obsessively attending art shows. He inhabited an East Village apartment that became a gathering place for Chinese expatriate artists and intellectuals, and while Ai exhibited few works of his own, he was immersed in the American cityscape with its cultures of resistance and creation for over a decade. This is evidenced now, as he obsessively photographed the period in a movement toward journaling his experience that is reflected in his later oeuvre of work. A small selection of the many thousands of photographs were exhibited in 2010 in Beijing and New York as Ai Weiwei: New York Photographs 1983–1993 . In one of these photographs you can see Weiwei with beat poet Allen Ginsberg. They became acquainted after a poetry reading where Ginsberg read out several poems about China—Ginsberg later travelled to China and met Ai Qing.

On his return to China, Ai became a central figure in the avant-garde Beijing art scene,

known as the Beijing East-Village, and helped author a series of underground publications, the Black, Grey and White "Cover Books" that gained cult status for their reflexive content, a new element in the Chinese art scene where self-analysis was alien. These emerged from 1994 onward, and Ai's engagement with experimental conceptualism was stimulated through this context resulting in his iconic works, The Coca Cola Urn (1994), Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn (1995) and a photograph that lampoons the tourist gaze depicting Lu Qing, Ai Weiwei's wife, lifting her skirt in 1994 to mark the five-year anniversary of the student movement that culminated at Tiananmen Square.

Ai went on to establish and expand spaces that facilitate contemporary art throughout China during the 1990s and 2000s, and build his oeuvre into the context of architecture, designing his well-known Beijing residence and studio based on a photograph of Wittgenstein's Stonborough house. He established an atelier called FAKE Design in 2003 (pronounced Fuck in Chinese) and went on to complete over seventy projects throughout China.

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Notes

1. The term "network" is applicable here, though used sparingly and largely replaced by the originary concept of the "scene" in this discussion due to the presence of an ongoing, over-determined discourse around the term that relies on a confusion of technological determinism. Here, networks of technological and subjective entities are too frequently imprecisely cited as being entangled in a poorly understood and articulated set of inter-relationships. As Adrian Mackenzie argued as long ago as 2010, "[a]fter a decade of heavily network-centric social, cultural, organizational, and mathematical network theory, there are reasons to begin to approach networks a little more diffidently. While it exhorts attention to relations, network theorizing can deanimate relations in favor of a purified form of networked stasis" (9). An analysis of this entanglement will no doubt form a very useful future engagement for Generative

Anthropology, wherein it might be successfully argued that the scene and scenicity offer a less cluttered, parsimonious lens through which to view phenomena typically clustered around and under the term *network*. (back)

2. Section IX of this paper offers extended biographical notes about Ai Weiwei. (back)
3. Meme in this discussion refers to the general g category of phenomena popularly referred to by the label "internet meme", unless otherwise designated. (back)
4. My previous article on this topic conducts a broader exposition of the post postmodern conditions outlined here, see "Victimary Thinking, Celebrity and the CCTV Building." (back)
5. See pp2-6 of Eshelman's (2008) *Performatism, or, the End of Postmodernism*. (back)
6. For a fuller discussion of this relation, see pp4-5 and pp30-33 of Eshelman's (2008) *Performatism, or, the End of Postmodernism*. Eshelman's analysis of *différance* and its connection to cinematic time shows a very interesting link to Derrida and digital *disturbances* of the linear flow of temporality-as-history. (back)
7. See "Victimary Thinking, Celebrity and the CCTV Building." (back)
8. After the completion of this essay, Ai's passport was reissued on July 22, 2015. (back)