

Shitposts as a Neo-Dadaist Movement

Griffin S. Nordstrom

West Virginia University College of Creative Arts

This paper explains and investigates a genre of internet imagery that has been termed as “Shitposts” and where they place in the history of art. Pre-existing research has defined the movement as a “Neo-Neo-Dadaist” movement (Dadaism being an art movement of the early 1900’s emphasizing irrationality, most popularized by Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*). However, it is questioned if the motivations and core aesthetics of Dadaism and the Neo-Dadaist movement of the 1960’s (a movement that included artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Yoko Ono) are really akin to what is behind the Shitpost style. This essay goes through manifestoes of the historical movements as well as artwork from the three periods to analyze where the similarities and differences lie, and whether Shitposts should be defined as Neo-Neo-Dada. It is ultimately deemed an unfit title due to significant distinctions in fundamental ideas and the direction and platform Shitposts exist in, also noting the context that the Dadaist movement has largely not been informing or guiding creators of Shitposts.

Keywords: Shitpost, Dada, Neo-Dada, Neo-Neo Dada, Meme, Fluxus

Introduction

In the internet-age, the growth of online communication networks has led to an establishment of an internet culture most familiar to the Millennial and Gen-Z generations. These online networks developed a new form of comedy, referred to as memes. A branch of memes, labeled Shitposts, extend into the realm of art and are often compared to the earlier Dadaist (1) and Neo-Dadaist (2) movements and are sometimes referred to as a Neo-Neo-Dadaist movement. However, this is not an accurate description of the movement. Despite the visual similarities and comparable attitudes and situations of artists, there are significant differences in the fundamental ideas and responses of contemporary Shitpost creators when compared to their predecessors.

In this essay the difference between the general meme and Shitpost will be established as well as the distinction between the artistic Shitpost and the Shitposting argument style before a visual examination and discussion of works from the Dadaist, Neo-Dadaist Fluxus,

and Shitpost movements. Manifestos of Dadaism and Fluxus will be analyzed to better understand the motives and direction artists of these periods were taking. Tristan Tzara’s ‘Dada Manifesto 1918’ and George Maciunas’ ‘Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art’ will be examined and will provide the primary background understanding for their respective movements. Tzara and Maciunas’ writings state the goals and significant ideas of their movements and will be useful when comparing the movements on a larger scale and analyzing the selected works. Shitpost artist Jeff Wysaski’s *Childless Couples - Matching Jetskis* (Figure 2), Fluxus artist Robert Filliou’s *Optimistic Box no. 3* (Figure 4), and Dadaist Man Ray’s *Cadeau (Gift)* (Figure 5), will be compared and discussed. The focus will be on recognizing the similarities and highlighting the critical differences between the Shitpost movement and the Dadaist and Fluxus movements. They will range from the specifics of the individual pieces being discussed to the general expectations and fundamental ideas of the movements.

Shitposts

The term “Shitpost” or “Shitposting” has been applied to a range of online media, most commonly the Shitposting argument style and the Shitpost art style which this essay deals with. The Shitposting argument style is the disruption in online conversations, usually of significant issues of discourse such as political and social issues, by making proofless and inflammatory claims that derail the conversation. The arguments are just reasonable enough that they come across as genuine beliefs and move the conversation to an irrelevant discussion. In a discussion about the border control policies of former Presidential nominees Donald Trump and Joe Biden, a shitpost argument may be that “All Mexicans are rapists.” This fact is completely incorrect and does not stand up in the most limited of examinations, but it moves the conversation from the policies of Trump and Biden into debating the morals of the Mexican populace and any other discriminatory beliefs related to the Mexican culture.

A (Internet) “Meme” is a concept, usually humorous, that is spread through social media or online forums. It can be purely text, image, video, or any combination of the three (3). Memes can easily be divided into several branches based on format, time, and style (4). Shitposts are a particular style of memes. They revolve around the creation of visually unsettling and upsetting imagery with a strong familiarity (5). Shitposts are primarily image-based and make common use of photography. There is a wide variety in the content, but some of the best known involve the degradation of household objects with baked beans, examples include; filling a pair of ballet shoes with baked beans, putting baked beans in an ice cube tray and freezing them (Figure 1), and dumping baked beans on a park swing. Many Shitpost creators are anonymous or credit is lost due to the reposting or sharing the image without providing the source (6). The pieces are created without expectations of compensation or praise. Some artists, however, break from this trend and create work to be sold and much of

their work is credited online. Jeff Wysaski, artist and sculptor, is responsible for the social media profile and online store Uncommon Plant. In his work, Wysaski parodies children’s toys and media with highly specific adult issues and language and reflects nihilist attitudes towards society in an abstracted method to achieve a comedic product. The particular work, *Childless Couples - Matching Jetskis* (Figure 2), will be used to represent his work and Shitposts in this essay.



Figure 1. Baked beans in an ice tray. Artist and date unknown.



Figure 2. *Childless Couples - Matching Jetskis*, 2020. Jeff Wysaski, plastic and cardboard.

Childless Couples - Matching Jetskis is a 3-D piece created in 2020, parodying and made using Playmobil toys. It consists of two ready-made figures riding matching jet skis in a fabricated box emulating the design style of Playmobil packaging. The box has text reading; “Childless Couples - Matching Jetskis, we can

afford it!, they have the time and money! it is very less stressful” on the front, and on the back it reads; “so much extra income! no diapers! no braces! no college tuition!” It also has a small warning; “WARNING: No one will take care of you when you’re old”

The Nihilistic attitude and absurd imagery of Shitposts often gets them compared to the early 20th century Dadaist movement and the Fluxus movement of the 60’s and 70’s. Artists of the three periods lived in socially, economically, and politically tense situations that led to grim views of society and its future, and the Fluxus movement has been accepted as a Neo-Dada movement due to the similarities and inspiration of the two. A deeper understanding of these earlier movements and works from them will enable a more critical analysis of whether Shitposts should be categorized as a Neo-Neo-Dadaist movement.

Dadaism

For a better understanding of Dadaism, Tristan Tzara’s 1918 ‘Dada Manifesto 1918’ will be examined. Tzara was a very significant writer of the movement and his manifesto is commonly used to represent the ambitions of the Dadaists (7). Tzara’s attitude in ‘Dada Manifesto 1918’ is very relaxed, he makes it clear that his goals are not to convince others to join the movement or follow the limited rules he presents about art. The only rule or guideline he presents is a fear of marrying art to logic; he is disgusted by science, objectivity and the current search for an ultimate truth or universal experience of all people. Tzara asserts the opposite that absolutely nothing has universal understanding or a single definition. Due to this idea, he encourages artists to ignore the audience to their artwork, and instead focus on art as a private affair and independent process. Tzara defines the disunity among Dadaists and the lack of a common theory. He describes Dadaism as a product of spontaneity, freedom, refusal of logic and history, and the embracing of contradictions.



Figure 3. Marcel Duchamp Fountain, 1917.
Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz.

Applying the ideas of Tzara to Wysaski’s Childless Couples - Matching Jetskis, there is a significant dissimilarity; the relation of the artwork to the audience. Childless Couples - Matching Jetskis focuses on familiarity and an understanding of its references from the audience. It builds upon the recognition of Playmobil toys and the financial difficulties of raising children in the USA with the high costs of college and medical treatment. Tzara emphasizes ignoring the audience and making the piece a private experience. While it is possible that all the imagery is specific to Wysaski, considering the range of his work and his highly commercialized practice, this is highly unlikely and irrelevant due to the widespread recognition of the imagery and ideas behind the piece. The Dadaist and Shitpost movements both lack common theories and have little to no organization or unity. Shitposts typically involve a rejection of logic, embrace contradictions, and have a level of spontaneity, but the movement doesn’t have a strong positioning towards objectivity, science, or a universal truth.

Neo-Dada (Flexus)

To understand the ideas of the Neo-Dadaist movement Fluxus, George Maciunas’ 1962 manifesto ‘Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art’ should be analyzed. Maciunas was

a leading figure in the loosely organized Fluxus movement and his 1962 manifesto focuses on the separation of life and art, and the resulting Fluxus goal of overcoming it (8). Maciunas defines the Concretists, who unite the form and content of their work. A Concretist sees and depicts nothing more than a rotten apple when presenting a rotten apple. They do not search for symbolism or pure, fully controlled work. Concretists reject pre-determination in art and value improvisation and the indeterminant characteristic of nature. Thus, a method of the movement is to provide only a framework from the piece, and let the choices of a performer or non-controllable methods create the finished work. Maciunas describes the most radical Concretists as the art-nihilists who reject art in its entirety and turn to anti-art. Anti-art is defined; “anti-art is life, is nature, is true reality- it is one and all. Rainfall is anti-art, a babble of a crowd is anti-art, a sneeze is anti-art, a flight of a butterfly, or movements of microbes are anti-art.”

There is very little to connect between Maciunas’ ideas and Childless Couples - Matching Jetskis. Childless Couples - Matching Jetskis is more than the pure object it is. The piece is not purely a repackaged mass-produced children’s toy. Wysaski isn’t considering the separation of life and art in his work or making any attempts to challenge it. There isn’t any natural indeterminism or lack of control in the piece, nor any improvisation. Shitpost creators do not engage in non-controllable creation methods beyond the inherent restrictions of their media. In reference to ‘Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art’, Shitposts and Fluxus have nothing in common.

Visual Analysis

To further the discussion of Childless Couples - Matching Jetskis and its relation to the Dadaist and Fluxus movements, sculptural works from both periods will be introduced and analyzed. Representing Dadaist sculpture is Man Ray’s Cadeau (Gift), originally created in 1921 using a readymade clothing iron and

carpet tacks. Robert Filliou’s Optimistic Box no. 3 (Figure 4), represents Fluxus and was



Figure 4. Optimistic Box No. 3, 1969. Robert Filliou, wood and labels.

created in 1969 presumably with a readymade wood box and displays the text “so much better if you can’t play chess” and “you won’t imitate Marcel Duchamp”. All three artworks rely on the use of readymade products and involve a corruption of the original object’s intended audience and purpose. Both Optimistic Box no. 3 and Childless Couples - Matching Jetskis involve the use of text that adds additional context to the piece. The message of Wysaski’s and Ray’s pieces comes across clearly and makes use of very familiar objects. Filliou’s readymade object is less clear in nature: is it a box? A chessboard with a box for pieces? The text additionally leads to questions: who won’t imitate Marcel Duchamp? Filliou, a specific viewer, or the widespread audience? Why is that text included? Is it referencing Duchamp’s use of readymades or perhaps the relations of the Neo-Dadaists to the Dadaists? The confusion and lack of straightforwardness in Filliou’s piece distances it from Wysaski’s Childless Couples - Matching Jetskis, again building a distinction between Neo-Dadaist Fluxus and the Shitpost movement.

Returning to Ray’s Cadeau (Gift) (Figure 5), background context explains that the work was made seemingly on a whim by the artist before a solo exhibition, and displayed as a “gift” for a random visitor to his show (9). The spontaneity of this creation aligns with Tzara’s

ideas for the movement but provides a significant distinction between it and Wysaski's work. *Childless Couples - Matching Jetskis* is a highly planned and thoughtfully processed piece. Wysaski started with a single kids product and built a narrative and social commentary around it and fabricated highly realistic packaging for the new art object. Ray's free "gift" element of *Cadeau (Gift)* does find a similar final treatment of the art object with Wysaski's work. Although *Childless Couples - Matching Jetskis* was a work that sold for \$350, Wysaski commonly places a copy of his smaller pieces in a store that can be taken by whoever gets to it first.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of Maciunas' 'Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art' and Filliou's *Optimistic Box no. 3*, there cannot be drawn any connections or comparisons between the Fluxus and Shitpost movements. The attitude, focus, and rules of the movements have no similarities or even a base point to build off of beyond their mutual comparison to the original Dadaists. Considering the larger span of artists of the Fluxus movement and the level of influence and common knowledge of their work in this era only weakens the possibility that the Fluxus movement has had a significant (if any) impact on the Shitpost movement.

When considering the original Dadaist movement, the significance of the influence and connections are less clear. Tzara's 'Dada Manifesto 1918' and Ray's *Cadeau (Gift)* present similar themes and ideas to the Shitpost movement, but these similarities are not overwhelming when considering the large differences. Additionally, the context of the situation is that many Shitpost creators are not referencing or building off of the work of Dadaists (10). Fluxus artists were very aware of the Dadaists and made references to them in their work, like in Filliou's *Optimistic Box no. 3*, and when they referred to themselves as Neo-Dadaists, they did so with a good understanding of the movement and their own

(11). By comparison, Shitpost artists may be aware of Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) but they haven't read Tzara's manifesto or had an adequate education in the movement holistically. Shitpost art does not require an education in the arts; it thrives on poor understanding of color theory, photography, and digital art skills. Creators come from a range of artistic skill and education and are being inspired predominantly by other Shitpost creations. If this movement is developing organically without the framework of Dadaism, should it really be considered a Neo-Dadaist movement?

It is with those distinctions and important context that it is concluded that there is a separation between Shitposts and Dadaism. Those who refer to Shitposts as Neo-Neo-Dadaism are coming from an outsider's perspective and don't fully grasp the nature of both movements. The Shitpost movement is still very active and its future cannot be determined at this time, rushing to categorize it under other movements only serves to limit future growth and stretch the definitions of Dadaism to accommodate more art. If in the future it embraces a larger amount of spontaneity and relates more heavily to the artist's individuality and specific thoughts, then this movement can comfortably be held within the confines of Dadaism. Until then, it should be identified separately and allowed to develop without premature terminology.

Acknowledgements

Competing Interests

The author declares no competing interests.

References

1. Ades, D. (2006). *The Dada Reader : A Critical Anthology*. University of Chicago Press.
2. Douglas, N. (2014). It's Supposed to Look Like Shit: The Internet Ugly Aesthetic. *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-23807-0_7
3. Filliou, R., Dezeuze, A., Richard Saltoun (Gallery), & Frieze Art Fair (New York, N.Y.). Robert Filliou. (2016). Edited by

Elizabeth Manchester. Richard Saltoun Gallery.

4. Kellein, T., & Hendricks, J. (1995). Fluxus. Thames and Hudson.
 5. Maciunas, G. (1962). Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art.
 6. Ray, M., Vanci-Perahim, M., & Wood, W. (1998) Man Ray (Great Modern Masters). Cameo/Abrams.
 7. McEwan, S. (2017). Nation of Shitposters: Ironic Engagement with the Facebook Posts of Shannon Noll as Reconfiguration of an Australian National Identity. The University of Melbourne, School of Culture and Communication.
 8. Milner, R. M., DeNardis, L., & Zimmer, M. (2016). The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media. MIT Press.
 9. Miltner, K. M. (2014). "There's no place for lulz on LOLCats": The role of genre, gender, and group identity in the interpretation and enjoyment of an Internet meme. First Monday, 19(8).
 10. Nissenbaum, A., & Shifman, L. (2017). Internet memes as contested cultural capital: The case of 4chan's /b/ board. New Media & Society, 19(4), 483–501.
 11. Nordstrom, G. (2019). Shitposts; a unique contemporary art movement. (unpublished) Shifman, L. (2013). Memes in digital culture. MIT Press.
-

About the Author:

Griffin Nordstrom is an undergraduate student planning on graduating in the spring of 2022 with dual degrees in Sculpture and Art History, with minors in Printmaking and Engineering in Society. He hopes to attend grad school in the fall for a Masters degree in Sculpture. Griffin is the Vice President of the Art History Club and Printmaking Club. His art and research interests lie in highly current themes such as global warming and the impact of the internet, and Medieval European Religious art and architecture. Griffin hopes to pursue a career in teaching at the collegiate level and continue researching and writing on the influence the internet will have on fine arts in years to come.

How to Cite This Article:

Nordstrom, G.S. (2022). Shitposts as a Neo-Dadaist Movement. *Mountaineer Undergraduate Research Review*, 7, 4-9.