

Zentrum für
Kritik und Memes

Cem A.

ZKM | Karlsruhe

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ZKM
Zentrum für
Kreativität
und Mumpitz
Karlsruhe



From mid-July 2024 onwards, the artist Cem A. staged an intervention based on the German name of the ZKM | Zentrum für Kunst und Medien Karlsruhe [in English: Center for Art and Media], turning its acronym ZKM into a meme template. Visible in places around the building as well as in various online spaces, a series of speculative names for the institution started appearing. They range from the critical “Zentrum für Kulturkürzungen und Mehrarbeit” [Center for Cultural Cuts and Overtime] to the whimsical “Zentrum für Kuriositäten und Mückenstiche” [Center for Curiosities and Mosquito Bites] and the nonsensical “Zentrum für Kuddel und Muddel” [Center for Hodge and Podge]. These name variations mark the first chapter of the project *Zentrum für Kritik und Memes* [Center for Critique and Memes], which in its second chapter also features an installation in the foyer of ZKM.

Cem A.’s work is an extension of his online presence as @freeze_magazine, a popular meme account on Instagram¹ which satirizes the art world with a hyper-reflexive and self-deprecating lens. The memes explore topics such as precarious labor, art-speak, elitism, and artist-curator relationships. He materializes these memetic strategies into interventions, sculptures, and installations—always informed by the networked nature of the internet.

As digital objects, memes are shared and re-shared online by many users. Appropriation is the essence of any meme practice: picking up something existing, giving it a spin, and watching how its meanings evolve through subsequent alterations. Memes can be unhinged, but also get to the heart of the matter and offer criticism or commentary in a way that is bizarre and insane—which is precisely what makes us laugh and, in some cases, makes us reflect on what is going on in the world and where we are heading. Far beyond funny cat videos, memes can be contested spaces where ideological struggles are hashed out across the political spectrum. As

¹ Instagram, alongside Tumblr, Facebook, Reddit, YouTube and TikTok are social media platforms and networks with each specific features, user demographics, and content formats. They enable users to create, share, and interact with content, thereby facilitating the rapid dissemination and evolution of memes. Memes often originate on one platform and spread to others through sharing, reposting, and remixing, fueled by user engagement and the platforms’ algorithms that promote popular content.



rhizomatic networks, memes have no central node or seminal root; they refuse any kind of solid state or definite framing.² With *Zentrum für Kritik und Memes*, Cem A. fictionalizes the concept of an institution—like artists Marcel Broodthaers and Claes Oldenburg,³ or curator Harald Szeemann⁴—turning it into a memetic spectacle of dynamic meaning-making.

Cem A.'s artistic meme practice delves into what it means to be a center for arts and media if, today, everything is media and everyone is a medium. Over the past years, media art has moved out of its niche position in the field of contemporary art as the role of technology became more and more prominent in society and popular discourses.⁵ *Zentrum für Kritik und Memes* experiments with internet logic in an institutional context. The “parasitic” intervention builds on a role-playing strategy, constantly taking up different names and identities as a means for exploring the constructions of future imaginaries.

2 See Phil Wilkinson, “Disassembly and Reassembly: Theorizing a Meme-Rhizome,” in *Critical Meme Reader III Breaking the Meme*, ed. Chloë Arkenbout and Idil Galip (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2024), 58–69.

3 See Clair Le Couteur, *The Fictive Museum*, PhD diss. (Royal College of Arts, 2019).

4 See Dorothee Richter, “Artists and Curators as Authors – Competitors, Collaborators, or Teamworkers?” *On Curating*, 19 (June 2013): 43–57.

5 See Mara-Johanna Kölmel and Ursula Ströbele, eds. *The Sculptural in the (Post-)Digital Age* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023).

The Year 2030 Meme

From August 14 to October 10, 2024, we encounter at ZKM a life-sized version of the *Year 2030* meme, also known as *Is Any of You a Doctor?*. First surfacing on Tumblr in 2012, the meme depicts a man in the year 2030 standing over another unconscious man, asking a group of bystanders if anyone is a doctor. They all respond that they are DJs.



From the 2010s onward, this meme has gained traction as it was re-posted on Facebook and Reddit with edited texts, characters, and contexts.⁶ Each variation presents us with the multiplicity of voices we encounter on any topic on the internet, ranging from the helpful to the absurd, from the measured opinions of experts to pure trolling. In the commercialized context of the internet, conversations online all too often consist of human and non-human users talking past each other, each driven by their own personal, political, or economic agendas.

Contrary to the prediction made in the first iteration of the meme, we have not yet all become DJs. Cem's version of the *Year 2030* meme presents us with a different projection of the future that might be much more frightening. Combining the absurd and uncanny with an element of satire, the textual elements of the unfolding series of memes are co-constructed

⁶ See "Year 2030 / Is Any One Of You a Doctor," *Know Your Meme* (May 16, 2023), <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/year-2030-is-any-one-of-you-a-doctor>.

with ChatGPT,⁷ fueled by the collective subconscious of the internet. Each variation is a microcosm of a meme-ified future: one in which commercial virtual environments have reached such a cult status that they fundamentally alter society. In some cases, this future becomes a slightly more dystopian version of 1990s futurism, featuring 3D-printed pets, emotion chips, and tech-savvy dolphins.

In Cem's version of the *Year 2030* meme, the individuals standing around the unconscious man are all Wojaks, a popular internet figure known as the "Feels guy" who embodies sadness, despair, and melancholy.⁸



From the isolation of their own screens, the Wojaks experience alienation from their environments and possibly themselves. Emerging as a life-sized scene, the meme invites people to reflect on their own position. Standing around the unconscious man—who symbolizes any number of crisis situations—Wojak's emotional state leads him to freeze and simply observe the suffering of others. Do we actually have an inability to act upon real emergencies? Or are we forever trapped in a cycle of critique and memes for the sake of taking part in the memetic buzz of the everyday?

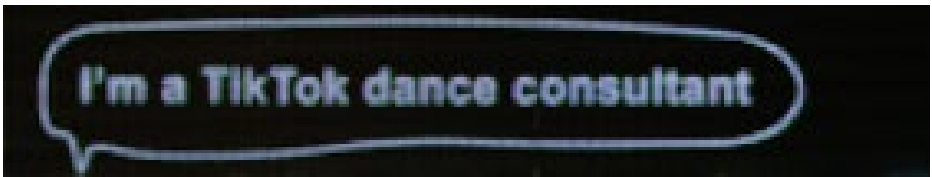
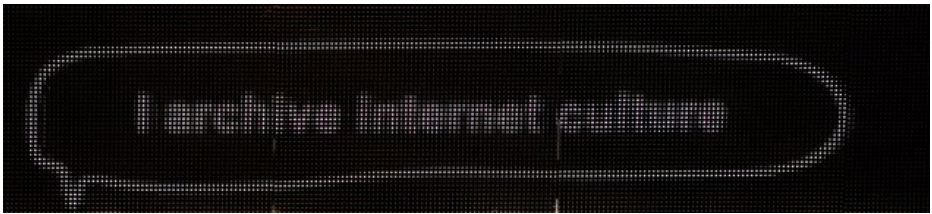
While memes can confront us with extremes, we must not forget that the memetic is already all around us. Every time a tech giant tweets something, a political debate is broadcast, or a new product is launched, we witness a stream of memes emerge on the internet. Existing content can be used to make memes; sometimes, however, real-world events seem to be memes in and of themselves without any intervention at all. According to the scholar Phil Wilkinson, "[i]t's not just that political discourse now features memes, it is that political discourse is becoming memier. Memes don't just appear as isolated objectivities, they are symbolic of an underlying mimetic force that subjectivates meaning."⁹ Absurdity and irony are no longer just features of memes but are symptoms of a larger socio-economic and political climate.

7 ChatGPT is a chatbot and virtual assistant developed by OpenAI and launched on November 30, 2022. It works based on artificial intelligence (AI), specifically natural language processing. The tool allows for human-like conversational dialogue, responding to user's questions and inquiries based on large amounts of data. For more information, see <https://openai.com/index/chatgpt/>.

8 See "Wojak," *Know Your Meme* (July 9, 2015), <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/wojak>.

9 Wilkinson, "Disassembly and Reassembly: Theorizing a Meme-Rhizome," 65.

Beyond a dystopian view of the future, *Year 2030* demonstrates that thinking about the future is only possible from a present position. Concepts and anecdotes that seem to come from a science fiction future have started popping up at various tech companies. For instance, a “virtual cashier,” as referenced in Cem’s installation, actually exists. It is just one example of today’s tech dystopia, in which companies make us believe the work is done by innovative systems powered by Artificial Intelligence, but behind the curtain is a human doing the labor under questionable conditions.¹⁰ The installation at ZKM plays on this absurdity, tying together different timelines to form an ambiguous composition of gloomy scenarios. It underlines a core function of memes as critical observations of current-day phenomena and as illustrations of how these phenomena may form a path toward the future. Are we looking at a dystopian future, or are we already living in it?



¹⁰ See James Bridle, “So, Amazon’s ‘AI-powered’ cashierfree shops use a lot of ... humans. Here’s why that shouldn’t surprise you,” *The Guardian* (April 10, 2024), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentis-free/2024/apr/10/amazon-ai-cashier-less-shops-humans-technology>.

The Meme in the Foyer

The *Year 2030* meme stands in the middle of the ZKM foyer, deliberately placed outside the traditional confines of a gallery space and its associated social norms. In this context, the work is not an isolated installation but functions in a larger dynamic network. The foyer is a place where visitors purchase exhibition tickets, attend conferences, have coffee or lunch, and engage in conversations. At its best, the space can function as an area for dialogue and debate, and just as the realm of memes itself, become a site for participation. The work then creates various bridges between the modalities of the meme as a digital object and its subsequent effects in physical contexts.

The LED screens of the installation go beyond merely serving as a display medium. They become sculptural in their chunky aesthetic and firm presence, and demand to be looked at. By cutting up and spatializing the image, the work emphasizes the flat and screen-dominated nature of digital culture.¹¹ Cem A.'s artistic practice is an embodiment of expanded internet art, a genre coined by art historian Ceci Moss for works extending out of the internet into the world, oscillating effortlessly between their presence in physical and digital environments. Beyond a binary understanding of the real and the virtual, the physical and the digital, expanded internet art exists in the interaction between these different states.¹² The installation is a means of transferring memetic strategies outside the confines of social media platforms, and is created with an awareness that photos of it may find their way back online as part of its dynamic image ecology. Its formal aspects as a meme-installation reflect the intertwining of digital culture and societal developments as they continuously and in complex ways affect each other.

The work's aesthetics is hardly a reflection of the high-fidelity new digital worlds that tech companies are offering to the market. Instead, it presents us with a quick, low-fidelity drawing of something that could have been done in the most basic image editing software, representing the actual

11 The installation at ZKM is a continuation of Cem's work *The Party*, which he presented in 2021 at We-serhalle in Berlin. For an extended discussion of the work, see Marijn Brill, "Memes in the Gallery: A Party Inside an Image Ecology," in *Critical Meme Reader II: Memetic Tacticality*, ed. Chloë Arkenbout and Laurence Scherz (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2022), 178–90.

12 See Ceci Moss, *Expanded Internet Art: Twenty-first Century Artistic Practice and the Informational Millieu* (New York City: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).



I critique influencer culture

Help... Is any
one of you
a doctor?



Anyone seen my drone?



effect of promised virtual worlds. Its aesthetics reverberate the well-known “expectation vs. reality” meme template, in which the advertised product looks nothing like the “real thing.” *Zentrum für Kritik und Memes* underlines how dreamed-up futures purposefully omit or fail to capture the social and ecological consequences of new technologies and gadgets. This strong discrepancy between the promise of innovation of tech giants and the reality of, for instance, exploited remote workers creates an overall experience of a gaslighted¹³ society, questioning if our experiences are “real” to begin with.

Like an elephant in the room, the massive LED screens in the foyer mirror the uncomfortableness of a meme in an art institute. It does not quite belong there, yet simultaneously inserts itself effortlessly into the digital ecology of the institution. Beyond its physical presence, the digital presence of an institution is increasingly co-constructed by the many ways people engage with it online. From their underdog position, memes can respond quickly and critically to developments in art, science, and technology while having an extensive reach thanks to their circulatory nature. *Zentrum für Kritik und Memes* builds on these inherent qualities of meme culture to perform sociotechnical imaginaries, visions for how the future may look under the influence of technological advances.¹⁴ Building on the prominent online position of @freeze_magazine, the work becomes a durational performance that operates as its own cultural entity. Cem inscribes a current-day perspective on what might lie ahead of us by performing the fictional institution in the context of ZKM, an institution that concerns itself with questions about the future. By asking questions about the entanglements between time, technologies, society, and institutions, the work elicits reflective—and not-so-reflective—queries in return. “What’s happening?” “Anyone seen my drone?” “Is this the escape room?”

13 Gaslighting is when someone tries to deliberately unsettle another person. Ultimately, this person can no longer distinguish between truth and pretense and no longer trusts their own perception.

14 See Thomas Hobson and Kaajal Modi. “Socialist Imaginaries and Queer Futures: Memes as Sites of Collective Imagining,” in *Post-Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production*, ed. Alfie Brown and Dan Bristow (Brooklyn, NY, Punctum Books: 2019), 327–52.



Merch of the intervention is available in the ZKM Shop!
→ webshop.zkm.de



Cem A.

Cem A. is an artist with a background in anthropology. He is known for running the art meme page @freeze_magazine and for his site-specific installations. His work explores themes such as virality and performativity, often through collaborative projects.

Cem A. has presented solo exhibitions and installations at venues such as Louisiana Museum (Humlebæk, DK), Barbican Centre (London, UK), Berlinische Galerie (Berlin), Künstlerhaus Bethanien (Berlin), and Museum Wiesbaden (DE). His work was also shown at documenta fifteen in Kassel, Istanbul Modern, Mudam Luxembourg, Klima Biennale Vienna, and the 14th Biennial of Young Artists at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Skopje (MK). He has held lectures at Royal College of Art London, HEAD Geneva (CH), HDK Valand at the University of Gothenburg (SE), and UDK–Universität der Künste Berlin.

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Marijn Bril

Marijn Bril is an independent curator and researcher with a focus on network cultures. She has curated exhibitions and programs for IMPAKT Centre for Media Culture, Utrecht (NL), CIVA–Contemporary Immersive Virtual Art Festival, Vienna (AT), and The Wrong Biennale, online. Furthermore, she published essays with the Institute of Network Cultures (INC). She holds an Erasmus Mundus Excellence Master's degree in Media Arts Cultures, awarded jointly by the University for Continuing Education Krems (AT), Aalborg University (DK), and The University of Łódź (PL).

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