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### **Critical Inquiry into Art Forms**

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**Critical Inquiry into Art Forms**

What art is and is not has been debated for centuries and the discussion continues, allowing for differences in the definitions, theories and understandings of the underlying features and qualities that determine the nature of art (Dickie, 2004). What should and should not art require from the artist (e.g., imitation, transmission of emotions, social norms, truths or agendas) and what it should afford the audience—the viewers and respondents, are other related considerations with no conclusive answers (Davies, 2010). Some even doubt whether art may be defined exhaustively at all (Neil & Ridley, 2012). Accordingly, there does not seem to be agreement as to the universal criteria that can be used to evaluate the quality of artworks and of their aesthetic value and social utility, even though such claims have been made by aesthetic theorists such as Kant and Tolstoy (Goldman, 2004). As sceptics would have it, this is because, “there are no evaluative standards that apply across the arts, or more strongly, across artworks, or that all such standards are merely subjective or the result of social class programming” (Goldman, 2004, p.94). As with the question of the definition, the question of art evaluation remains unresolved.

Art forms have however changed over time and they are no longer limited to traditional forms such as painting, sculpture, architecture, music poetry, film, photography and printmaking. Today we have new media such as video game interactive designs, digital graphics and animation, virtual and internet art and media production, bio art, 3D art creation and even robotics.

A popular and widely distributed recent new media art form has been the Internet meme. As Knobel and Lankshear (2007) explain, “ ‘meme’ is a popular term for describing the rapid uptake and spread of a particular idea presented as a written text, image, language “move,” or

some other unit of cultural ‘stuff’ ” (p.202). Memes as an art form of the digital era and social media participatory communication are powerful cultural signifiers as they often reflect, critique and comment on important cultural, political and social events in contemporary society (Lamphere, 2018). They are “complex cultural objects” (Lamphere, 2018, section Meme-Oires, para. 3), “distinct social phenomena” and a means to “understanding mindsets, new forms of power and social processes, new forms of social participation and activism, and new distributed networks of communication and relationship—among other social phenomena” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 201).

What methodologies can be used to interpret these new forms of art? What pedagogies can help to understand what they signify? Perhaps more importantly, what acts of consciousness need to be activated to grasp what these art objects also imply through omission and exclusion, intended and unintended? What meanings are residing between and among the many compositional elements such as images, text, graphics, special layouts and digital animations that comprise these visual art forms? What ideologies and perspectives are projected into these creations and in whose service have they been employed?

Drawing from Kress’s (2010) social semiotics and Machin and Mayr’s (2012) Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis methodologies, Pavithra Raja explores in this issue “the distinct social phenomena” and the structure of online memes on the topic of education in Singapore. More specifically, Raja illustrates and analyzes the historical and cultural contexts that shape the ways in which different artists compose the memes and the ways in which the audience in this unique social milieu replicate and comment upon the source memes through imitation and transfer to the remixed memes they produce in response. What makes this study the most interesting is however the critical analysis of the update of the Western culture meme

macros and appropriation of their cultural information and value systems for the Singaporean local culture and contexts. In this particular cultural space, the Western referential and cultural resources have been either embraced, challenged or transformed into the meme mutations that found resonance with ideals of significance to the Singaporean cultural context.

Although the methodologies and pedagogies of the kind referenced in Raja's piece are also helpful heuristics for interpreting the traditional forms of art (e.g., painting and musical composition) and of their cultural implications, there are other demands associated with understanding works of art. Among these are knowledge of the arts of various kinds and art creation techniques as well as familiarity with relevant art history and criticism. In the article, "Using Inquiry to Develop Art and Music Preservice Teachers' Disciplinary Literacy Pedagogy," Lemley and Hart argue that what is likewise essential is disciplinary literacy.

Disciplinary literacy involves understanding and using the specialized practices and ways of thinking, reading, and communicating that experts employ in respective disciplines (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014). Lemley and Hart explored the potential of disciplinary literacy as inquiry in helping art pre-service teachers deepen their disciplinary knowledge and understanding of specialized practices and norms in different fields and the degree to which the preservice teachers have been able to transfer these perspectives, practices and knowledge gains to teaching their students. The researchers found the discipline inquiry approach effective.

If there is one quality that unites the articles in this issue of Ubiquity Research Strand, it is a call for a critical inquiry into art forms and the inherent perspectives, norms, and values they embody for both the creator and the viewer. I invite the readers to explore these investigations in detail.

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