

## Curatorial Essay

### The Meme Effect

by Tiffany Yeon Chae

1. Memes proliferating online refer to the phenomenon of certain contents being reproduced and mutating as well as their prolific propagation that exceeds that of the original.<sup>1</sup> Ok Seungcheol's paintings exhibit several features similar to these Internet memes. The first one is 'mutants.' For his works, Ok copies characters in Japanese animation from the 1970s to 2010s. As he reconstructs different elements, they are also removed from the original context. Similar to how memes spread in various versions, the faces in his paintings that all look alike are mutants in a way, in that they are transformations with the same origin; the JPEG file he created. Another parallel aspect is their omnipresence. Ok projects JPEG files on a canvas and carefully traces it. Those paintings amassed a cult following online and photos of his works are all over the Internet, just like a meme. They can be found on Instagram, Naver and China Weibo with the hashtag "#Aokizy" which is his Instagram ID. With certain aspects in mind, Ok tested a new medium to experiment the physical nature of his works in the offline space, which culminated in his second solo show *JPEG SUPPLY*.
2. Though the exterior of Ok's painting consists of acrylic paint, its fundamental characteristics are the same with those of a JPEG file. Thus, his paintings can be seen as another meme embedded with a JPEG file. The title of this exhibition, *JPEG SUPPLY*, also points to the potential of JPEG file that he uses as a tool to bring to the canvas in the analog realm a sketch from the digital world. Here, the gallery space becomes a place where the digital file Ok created is physically *supplied* to the reality. The exhibition presents new works that focus on irony and mutation. Departing from the irony of granting materiality to a JPEG file, which is something that it originally does not have, the artist goes further to create a heavy wooden sculpture out of the lightest JPEG file. In another installation on the contrary, he also converts a 3D rendering file, a type of a sketch for that wooden sculpture, into a digital video. Through these, the artist explores how the appearance of these mutant files with ambiguous originality would affect the exhibition space.
3. Internet memes often make a splash in the world outside the Internet. For example, in January 2020, K-pop star Zico posted on the online platform TikTok #anysongchallenge to promote his new song which went viral worldwide and a number of people uploaded clips participating in it. *Jalbang* or animated GIF posted online under titles ending with "JPG" or "GIF" are also a kind of meme.<sup>2</sup> Yet, meme does not only refer to the image or video itself but the overall phenomenon of the contents being copied and spread by various users. In making this exhibition, the artist's wish was that the visitors of the show would become the spreader of the meme. Highlighting a single motif by deliberately repeating it while keeping the design of the display minimal, he hoped that

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<sup>1</sup> The word meme was first used by the scientist Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976) to explain evolutionary biology from the point of a gene. In *Oxford Dictionaries* where it was listed in 1989, the definition is stated as "an element of a culture or system of behavior passed from one individual to another by imitation or other non-genetic means." It has now become a popular term used to describe the variation and transmission of cultural contents, particularly noticeable in the digital ecosystem. To reflect how the spread of memes online differ from that offline, the term Internet meme is also used. In this essay, the more general term 'meme' is used.

<sup>2</sup> *Jalbang*, abbreviation for *Jallimjangji*(TN: to prevent from being cut) originated from attaching eye-catching or interesting images, regardless of their relevance, to prevent from short posting being deleted by the website manager. They are also called *jal*, and in the same context, moving ones are called *um-jal*. It first appeared in early 2000s in one of the Korean online communities and is a subordinate concept of meme.

the images would permeate the visual perception of audiences and would spread in different forms. For this, the title of the show is not irrelevant from Yeezy Supply, the collaborative brand by the American celebrity Kanye West and Adidas. Despite the similarity of its pronunciation with the word 'easy', it is ironically one of the most impossible shoes to get as every time it is released the website is paralyzed.

4. While the highlights of the artist's first solo show were paintings, his second exhibition presents sculptures and video installations for the first time. As strange as the works may be, they also somehow come as a *déjà vu*. Titled *UN ORIGINAL*, Ok's first solo exhibition was an attempt to disrupt the myths of paintings about their originality through his series of works for which he exquisitely replicated his own digital drawings on a canvas. In *JPEG SUPPLY*, the idea is manifested even more boldly, offering a platform that enables an experience of staged sublimity. The gallery space resembles that of a sacred temple or a museum housing valuable treasure. Sunlight is completely blocked and silence falls in the space furnished with dark grey walls, warm yellow lighting and soft carpet. As visitors enter the space, they encounter two paintings. Strange but familiar, it is definitely a face of a child one saw in another work but with a slightly different hair color and face line. Combining other references with the original JPEG, the artist created a different face, perhaps a bit matured. Painting of a girl with bobbed hair and another of a boy with spiky hair are placed side by side, demonstrating how they are outcomes of cross-referencing.
5. In the meantime, also presented in the exhibition is a bust of the face of the boy with spiky hair. Based on a 3D modeling of the original JPEG file, Ok made a CNC carved wood sculpture which was then lacquered and gilded. For the finishing of the woodwork, Ok collaborated with Kim Tae Gil, Chungcheongnam-do Intangible Cultural Property No. 46. Ok also worked together with Kim Hyo Ran from Dongcheon Lacquer and Craft Research Laboratory for lacquering and gilding. At the stage of post-processing the CNC sculpture which is capable of mass production, Ok adopted the traditional production methods of making statues of Buddha. The sculpture made this way glows like a Buddha statue enshrined in a glass showcase at a museum. Then the contradiction of the space intensifies when you realize that the piece before you is not the only one but is instead made of an omnipresent JPEG file. *AU79* occupying the other side of the space is the very proof of this. Sometimes stretched and sometimes swollen, the golden face of the boy keeps changing in the animation which is produced based on the modeling file used in the production of the wooden sculpture. The animation consists of images that repeatedly appear and without following a certain narrative. In the exhibition, this functions as an animated GIF that demonstrates in a real space the infinite variation and proliferation of Internet memes. The artist uses transparent monitor to physically visualize the idea of printing digital image. The side, rear and circuit board of the display device deliberately exposed uncover the structure where images flow out of the LCD.
6. Works employing three different mediums that are brought together build a cycle of memes circulating from one to another. The original JPEG file (original meme) being modified and combined produces a mutant (new meme), after which those various memes, cross-referencing each other, create another narrative. Manipulating the nature of meme embedded in the works of Ok, what the exhibition embodies is the tension and conflict between the inside and outside of the Internet. In other words, it reveals how the viral reproduction and constant supply of the JPEG file the artist used as a tool for his practice could lead to the diversification of the media they invade and to the progress in the outcome and its characteristics.
7. Discussing with the artist while developing the exhibition, we came to focus on the quality of meme innate in digital drawing, which used to be more of just a frame of his work, and the sense of strangeness that digital images can bring about in a three-dimensional gallery space. Ok started his practice in painting and when he showed interest in video and installation, we started to talk about his work in relation to post-internet art. This was the starting point of this exhibition. Also, throughout the whole process from conceiving, producing and realizing the work, the artist had the opportunity to share and collaborate with experts from different fields. I hope this would inspire the artist to expand the genres of his image production as well as the breadth of its

circulation.