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Welcome back to the Media at Risk podcast. My name is Roopa Vasudevan, and I'm a doctoral student at the Annenberg School for Communication.

Today we're going to talk meme tactics, which is the new art exhibit here at the Annenberg School mounted by China Residencies, the Center for Media at Risk, and the Center on Digital Culture and Society. The exhibition features the work of Amy Suo Wu, Elyla Sinvergüenza, Sponge Gourd Collective, and the Dalit Panthers archive, and was curated by Ania Mina, Kira Simon Kennedy, Jose Chavez, and Mikael Wright Quan.

I'm here today to talk about the curatorial process of putting the exhibition together and to get their thoughts on the value of memes as an amplifier for underheard and underrepresented populations.

So thank you both so much for being here with me today.

Thanks, Roopa. Yeah, thank you. My first question is taking a step back. What brought you all to this exhibit? And why do you think it's important to take a closer look at the function of the meme in these specific contexts and these societies? Now at this moment in time. Well, so the original idea for the exhibition came from An Xiao Mina's book From Means to Movements, which is a look into how online culture is influencing real world social protests and rights movements all over the world. We thought it was a really interesting overlap between a lot of the artists that we've been working with and some of our residencies, but also an enormous phenomenon that we see working in China so much. Um, because of how creative internet users have gotten in mainland China in order to get around the different blocks in their way. I mean, obviously it's the fastest and shortest way of getting a message across that catches people's attention, even though people are busy, they're overwhelmed by everything that's going on, but seeing a funny, clever meme or meme-like thing. Breaks through in a way that I think a lot of other things don't. Yeah, and I also think it relates a lot to the attention economy, right? And like the way in which our social and economic life is driven so much by like, how much time do we spend on a specific social media platform or like looking at a specific thing and the way in which memes are able to kind of keep our attention if only for like a couple of minutes on a day that capacity to be shared and be spread again like capture our thinking and our attention is I think really important. And we think that, yeah, the artists in the show all kind of understand that on a really fundamental level and are able to make work that just immediately hits people.

And speaking more about the artists in the exhibition, take us through the works in the show, both in terms of background and context, but also how they contribute to this larger conversation about the capability of memes and what they're able to do to get around censorship and blockades and repression. Amy Suo Wu's work, which is really interested in how you can hide things in plain sight so that people can find out about these things that we all should have known about forever, but her original idea was about resurfacing. A very phenomenal anarchist Chinese feminist from the early 1900s, He Yingzhen, who very early on was writing texts that they really thinking about how gender intersects with class and economics and language and just how if you want to talk about, you know, women's liberation, you need to also solve inequality and you read these texts now and you're just like, whoa, how have I never heard of her? She seems awesome. And of course, you can't really be out there searching for her on the Chinese internet or you might not even know what to search for because terms like feminism, anarchism, you know, revenge of women, not necessarily topics that are easy to find, and Amy, whose family is from China but grew up in Australia, was finding out about Heinzhen and applied for residency in Beijing, specifically to try to figure out how you could get more people to know about this work. And so Amy grew up around people sewing and got really fascinated both with how you could hide these messages in clothing, but also how in China, all of the knockoff brands and the amazing streetwear culture is a great place to hide kind of cryptic English messages and so she created these patches, and these ribbons and these little labels that have he and Jen's text on them, but in English. And QR codes and the only characters in Chinese say scan the QR code, but if you scan it, it will automatically download her text in Chinese and English onto your phone, on a PDF. And so she not only made it look super cool and fun, but she also does all these workshops where she teaches people like how to sew these things on. Invites people to remix them however they want, put them anywhere in their clothes. You can hide them. You can have them. I mean I have my bag right now like they're they're meant to be out in the world. The other artists Elalaimverguenza, they're performance artists from Nicaragua, and they were also kind of facing a similar challenge like Amy in terms of communicating and spreading a message. Their project Cartas Mojadas consists in like a hand delivery letters exchange system between people around Managua and people in Hutongs in Beijing. And so the basic premise was that. In back in 2015, 2016, Wang Jing, this telecommunications billionaire from Beijing, had created this company that was meant to create an interanic canal in Nicaragua. The Ortega government sold the land to Wang Jing for 100 years and brought out the military and they started expropriating the lands from the rural communities around the city. So what Delila did was they went to the different communities and interviewed different people like just asking them what their experience was, what do they think about this and just kind of telling them like if you could communicate with the people in China, what would you tell them? After that, they flew to Beijing and they translated the letters into Chinese and into English and they created. This installation with some suits, some the audio recordings that you could listen to and they created this website that host all the letters and has a portal that you can respond to them. So they did this whole physical but also online installation and then for the final performance, what they did. was that they wore the suits they created and they have the QR code as well and they went to different hutongs in Beijing that were also under the threat of destruction and Laila saw that the people in the Hutongs were basically facing the same kind of problem as the people in Managua and decided that they wanted to create some sort of like cross-continental empathy or at least try to facilitate that. So they went to the Hutongs and delivered these letters. And the letters themselves also had the QR codes so like people could actually scan them and respond to these letters. So what we have on view in the show is a selection of the letters in all the three languages, just kind of giving a sense to viewers of like what people were saying. It's a really fascinating study, I think of how do we create this empathy bonds, but also how do we talk about land rights cross culturally and like, yeah, what can you do as an artist who can have access to different spaces. That kind of goes right into one of the next artist projects is also dealing with the same people that Elyla delivered these letters to, which is the PRC government in mainland China has also been Notoriously for ever kicking people off their land for infrastructure reasons, for control reasons, just because, you know, it's still on paper, no one really owns that land. I mean, real estate in China works in a very, very different way. And this great collective of Chinese diaspora folks, Sponge Go collective has been really interested in in urbanism in general and how the landscape around Beijing has changed. So Spongebo realizes that these movements in Beijing. You can't protest them in the way that you can. There's a lot of resistance. It just looks really different. So they go and just talk to people and write these really beautiful um zines that have kind of just like mixture of quotes and illustrations and photography and they do great work around really just conveying the feeling of what it's like to have a neighborhood. Kind of have an unrequested face lift and kind of what that does to everyone, but then they, they also are really fascinated by the much bigger scale infrastructure projects that The government in Beijing is taking on, which is actually merging Beijing, Tianjin and parts of Hebei into a new surprise megacity in an area that they're calling the Jinjinqi. It's an enormous infrastructure project and a lot of it has to do with, you know, creating new government offices because Beijing is too congested and even just kind of a very just like let's have the biggest of everything, the most of everything. The fastest, so Spongebo has been going to this area called Xiong'an, which is in the middle of this new district and just talking to people who are there like, you know, what's life like, how are things changing and they've been filming a series of videos and they've been asking them, you know, how do they feel about this place, and the common answer is that it's extremely boring and that nothing ever happens here, which is the title of that piece, but also that they're not, they don't have this kind of Excitement for this brand new shiny thing the way the government's announcing for them. It's like, it's always been their town. It's not a new town, it's their town that's now getting paved over for some kind of nebulous future that's being promised and so Spongebord brought a green screen with them and ask people like what did they hope the future look like there and like what, even if it's not going to happen or if it's they can't do much about it, what would they like to see? And what other things could be there. And so that project, which here is in the form of video stills and will be in zines is one way of talking about, you know, what happens when your neighborhood changes. With It to me really focuses back on like the act of the green screen as a form of self-publishing, right? What is powerful about the act is asking the question to these people and letting these people kind of like craft their own image and direct their own little moment of the film with self-publishing in mind. The other, the other collective in the show, it's called the Delite Panther archive. And what they do is that they collect, they digitize, and then they translate artifacts from the Delite Panther movement in Western India. The Delite Panthers were a group of writers and activists who were very active in like the 60s, 70s, inspired by the Black Panthers in the United States. They were also very much inspired by the modernist movement. They, they were basically like advocating for the lead people and trying to call out cast atrocities in India and like make that something that actually can be spoken about. We wanted to like let viewers see all the different ways in which this movement rely on self-publishing. They wrote poetry on like bus tickets in the back of them and they created their own zines. They chose their own paper, which chose their own printers like they really. It was like a very DIY no infrastructure publishing and like through that they published really incendiary poetry and like short stories and what the archive did was send us some of the replicated materials, some of them translated, most of them not translated actually. The archive itself works again like online and offline through their Instagram and like their Instagram is always posting the the new things they're working on and the new things they're replicating. Yeah, we thought it was really important to have this kind of piece in the show to again like show that it's not only artists. It's a very interesting collaboration between movements and artists and where the distinction is is very unclear, I think, because here you have a collective that is working on like representing what a previous generation collective did very like haphazardly but in very in a very powerful way.

All of these projects are all about linking what will eventually be different generations through time and like these movements, it's so important, even at a base level to document that not only have these things happen, but along the way, people have always tried to either stop them or change them or make the world work better for everyone, so important to have, you know, Not only just traces of the material culture of the time, but to find new ways to show that they're still relevant. And that's where, you know, these Instagrams, these QR codes, making them as kind of interesting and reformatting them constantly is also You know, kind of our responsibility as artists and researchers and curators. And there's this one last piece, it's a note actually from a collective that wasn't able to show their work because of the political situation in their own context and it's a beautiful note. It's in a very small corner, very inconspicuous, but I hope people can get a chance to read it and it talks about silence. Silence is a tactic also of activists and silence is a tactic of resistance and. Just thinking about for every project and for every social movement that we've been able to kind of represent in the show, there's been others that haven't been able to do that. It's important to like. Keep space for that and show their presence one way or another. So you both have alluded a number of times to the fact that this exhibition kind of transcends the boundary of the gallery and exists in both an online and an offline context. And this also connects to the fact that you all opened a simultaneous show at Cochi Frito's gallery in New York, which ran in September and October of this year. So how do all of these pieces interact with each other? How do the works in the New York show and the Philly show, along with the pieces that exist in their own spaces, all compliment each other and contribute to each other's meaning? I mean, it's been really important for us to have everything go beyond just the art world, the ivory tower, or groups of people who You know, know about, you know, follow the news and geopolitics or our media researchers. It's super important that these can exist in a million different ways. The idea of these zines and so much of this work is portable is definitely to try to make it as accessible as possible and something we want to keep doing. That's something really important for the artists that we're working with because none of the pieces were imagined to be art, to be like hung on a wall. They're meant to like live in space, live among people. You, you had said this, Kira before in one of our conversations, the fact that we're showing artists is almost kind of coincidental, right? Like we, we call the meme tactics because we really imagine this as like. Social tactics that people can like use and learn from the projects themselves are imagined to be in this way like that aspect I think is one of the most important for us just don't even think about it as these are tactics like use them, take them with you, like appropriate them in however way you see fit in order to like. Assert your presence and like do what you gotta do to live. China Residencies has always been an online nonprofit network, you know, we know that we exist mostly through social media and through the website and through newsletters. For us, like all methods are good and when people offer us physical space and it makes sense and you know it's a budget, we can try to take it and do something with it. But we are very aware that all of these spaces are temporary, fairly precarious, pretty fraught. Like we're not really committed to rooting down into one location because also I mean everywhere we are is someone else's spot and we move in between and we're not trying to kind of lay down these permanent roots because all of these works are meant to disperse and we kind of are too. In your curatorial statement, the messaging on the whole seems pretty optimistic and encouraging of the idea that memes can do more than completely destroy our democratic systems, as has been the dominant discourse since, uh, I think the 2016 election. They can also be a really powerful tool of subversion and resistance and the ability of people to talk back and to push back. What about this collective work do you think is exemplary of that? All these works really encourage you to talk to each other, to talk to people, to listen to each other. Yeah, I agree with you. I was actually thinking about this yesterday, which I think is really funny because I personally think that I'm more on the pessimistic side of things. But overall, like we were responding to the fact that memes have been characterized as this particular way, and we really wanted to challenge that and push that further and There's a quote in like Ania's book that she talks about memes as seeds and like she talks about for the seeds to actually flourish, we need to look at the soil. And I think that my optimism relies on the seed but not in the soil. Tactics is, I mean, tactical, that's a military term. It's awful and it can be horribly devastating or it can be positive and these these tools like a lot of the internet, are fundamentally neutral, but the people with the most power have the most power to shape them, make money off them, control them, limit them, but that doesn't mean that everyone else can't also find ways. Unfortunately, whenever you have less power, you have to move faster, be more clever, constantly be shifting, which is devastating and frustrating and so many people, you know, die along the way and burn out. I mean, it has horrible consequences like it's not a light thing, but without the hope and the physical proof that it has worked so many times before, it's impossible to keep moving. These kind of things that help us understand how the world even works. Yeah. Is the start of something and so that's a big part of where my hope is. Yeah, and I like that you focus your hope on the tactic, right? Because I think that like our our emphasis on this think about them as tactics, it's in order to like encourage people to learn from them and to learn from each other and to learn from each other's histories because I think it's really dangerous to like imagine solutions or like think about justice limited by national or other other kinds of spaces. We need authoritarian governments to learn from each other. Therefore, as people like gotta learn from each other as well now, especially when we're talking about like challenges to freedom or to the ability to live through technology like technology is everywhere and if it works somewhere, it can work somewhere else.

To close this out, my last question is a relatively personal one. What do you hope that a viewer who comes and experiences the show takes away from it and carries with them out into the world? I mean, I'm actually really excited for reciprocity. Um, we have this big map where anyone who uses the hashtag meme tactics can submit their own version of what they, you know, and yeah, I'm excited to get some great gritty memes from Philly. I'm excited for the back and forth and for people to kind of take this out and be like, oh yeah, like. These things work the same way as this other thing I saw that is how I learned about something or this is what my group did when we wanted to get attention about this. Same here, really like I'm really excited for encouraging actually curiosity and like in exchange between people and just like someone who might have had no idea. But he and Jen hopefully like goes back home tonight and starts reading her essays or like we get some mean tactic from somewhere we had no idea something was happening and then like it allows us to also like learn more about that, right? And like this constantly like evolving and growing and learning together is like what I'm the most excited about. Working on this show has actually really been a kind of Anti-anxiety coming force of being like the problems are immense and the tactics are infinite. Like thinking about someone who walks through this atrium and spends time to read this zine. That's also time that they're not spending on something else and I'm very aware of kind of like wanting to redirect people's energy and resources towards something that's constructive and towards something that is generative and can build solidarity between communities who aren't necessarily aware of each other.

Thank you both again for being here.

Thanks so much.

Thank you.

Meme Tactics is on view on the 5th floor of the Annenberg School for Communication until summer of 2020. Make sure to drop by and check out these fantastic works. This episode was produced by me, Rupa Vasudevan, and edited by Jasmine Erdner. We'd like to thank Kira Simon Kennedy, Jose Chavez, Waldo Aguire, Emily Plowman, and Joanna Birkner. Barbie Zelizer is the director of the Center for Media at Risk. More information can be found at www.AScmediaisk.org.