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The Year in Digital Folk Art: Much of 2025's Creative Innovation Happened Outside the Art World

By *Louis Bury*

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John Pork



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Late last year, cyberethnographer Ruby Justice Thelot wrote an insightful *ARTnews* (<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/the-internet-was-the-beginning-of-a-new-folk-artist-artificial-intelligence-may-be-its-end-1234722708/>) article (<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/the-internet-was-the-beginning-of-a-new-folk-artist-artificial-intelligence-may-be-its-end-1234722708/>) pondering the effect of AI on digital folk art. In it, he describes online content creation as a type of folk art born of the Internet, defining such work—from Ally Sheehan’s **Taylor Swift video tributes** (<https://www.youtube.com/@AllySheehan>), to Natalie Wynn’s **theatrical sociopolitical commentary** (<https://www.youtube.com/@ContraPoints>)—as “a devotional act” to a niche online community, sometimes “for no or little compensation.” Such work, he says, has “the authentic and personal feel” characteristic of folk art in other media. But he wonders: will this digital folk become endangered as AI “lowers the barrier” both to creating and optimizing content? No doubt, this optimization has already begun to creep in. And yet, our feeds maintain a cornucopia of folk art—from NFTs, to Skibidi toilet videos, to 67 memes—suggesting creators are for now undeterred, or perhaps clinging to a sense of authenticity increasingly under threat.

This online visual culture, thriving beyond the art world, continues to trouble the boundaries between fine and folk art, producing novel, incisive commentary, such as that found on **Thelot’s Substack** (<https://substack.com/@beingonline>), along the way. Below, find 10 examples of digital folk art and of fine art inspired by it—as well as key articles, newsletters, and books making sense of it all—that defined the trend in 2025.

1 **Dean Kissick, “The Vulgar Image”**



Steph Maj Swanson: *Loab*.

Kissick's *Spike* article “**The Vulgar Image**” (<https://spikeartmagazine.com/articles/vulgarity-the-vulgar-image>) garnered less attention than his controversial late 2024 *Harper's* screed (<https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/columns/art-critic-conservative-jason-farago-dean-kissick-sean-tatol-1234736145/>), “The Painted Protest,” (<https://harpers.org/archive/2024/12/the-painted-protest-dean-kissick-contemporary-art/>) but was more perceptive about the state of contemporary culture. The article enumerates the aesthetic qualities of what he calls the “Vulgar Image”: “figurative, tasteless, illegible, stupid, fake, disembodied, grotesque, transformed.” Such images, which encompass things like Wojaks, mutant ape NFTs, and memes of JD Vance’s bloated head, circulate widely online because “bad taste is a way of standing out when there are too many images.” You don’t have to share Kissick’s

neo-Romantic belief that edginess can re-enchant a staid world to grasp that he has put his finger on a major 2020s cultural tendency.

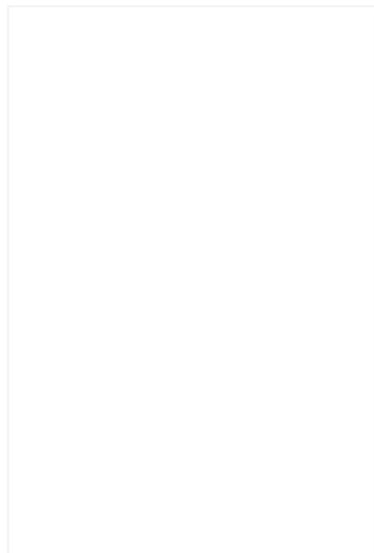
2 Solo Avital, “Trump Gaza”



Vulgar Images were so pervasive in 2025 that even the sitting US President was posting them. In February, Donald Trump's Instagram account reposted **an outlandish AI-generated video** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PslOp883rfI&t=48s>)—whose creator, filmmaker Solo Avital, claims was intended as satire—that asked “What’s next?” for Gaza. The video depicts the war-ravaged Palestinian territory transformed into a bustling vacation destination with a tacky casino aesthetic, set to a catchy synth-pop tune praising “Trump Gaza/ shining bright.” Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sip beers poolside at a luxury hotel; Elon Musk dances as dollar bills rain down like he’s in a 90s hip-hop video. “Trump Gaza” wasn’t the President’s only off-color post this year—see, for example, his **literal shitpost**

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWHDKDwnJZs&t=4s>) in response to October's No Kings protests—but its cavalier vision of genocide's aftermath was one of the most disturbing, even by his standards.

3 Aidan Walker, “Exploring the Lore of Lakaka”



Walker's brilliant Substack (<https://substack.com/@howtodothingswithmemes>), YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/@aidanetcetera>), and TikTok (<https://www.tiktok.com/@aidanetcetera>) accounts interpret meme culture with the enthusiasm of a Cultural Studies professor but none of the pretension. His commentaries often view online artifacts through a Structuralist lens, from formalist comparisons between sonnets and vertical videos to an analysis of how Skibidi toilet videos play with point of view. His “Exploring the Lore of Lakaka”

(<https://www.tiktok.com/@aidanetcetera/video/7463234258270686466>) video is part of his series (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBU7f8yT-_M) on **international brainrot** (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pr_wvoIsUzQ). The video makes the case that **@lakaka** (<https://www.tiktok.com/@lakaka.land>)’s TikTok lore videos composed of cat photographs constitute “the emergence of a new literary genre that could only exist on a platform like this”: one that entails “world building in a spatial way rather than through time,” with an “awareness of

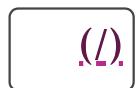
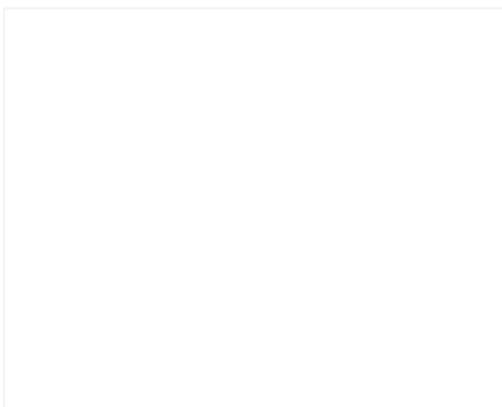
audience response baked into the content.” Walker’s illuminating analyses lay bare the formal innovations of meme culture, which exceed mere vulgarity.

4 Agent 5.5, John Pork lore



In the late 2010s, **John Pork** (https://caseoh.fandom.com/wiki/John_Pork) arrived on the scene as an AI-generated meme character. By late 2024, TikToker **Agent 5.5** (<https://www.tiktok.com/@getpovd?lang=en>) began making a series of satirical, QAnon-esque conspiracy content about **Pork's murder** (https://www.tiktok.com/@galabool_68/video/7481449013930233130?lang=en) at the hands of another AI-generated brainrot character, Tim Cheese. Other accounts made content riffing on this idea, resulting in **Free John Pork Movement** (<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/free-john-pork-movement-john-pork-lore>) memes. Aidan Walker's article, "I am John Pork, and so are You," (<https://howtodothingswithmemes.substack.com/p/i-am-john-pork-and-so-are-you>) explains the loopy saga's implications: rather than use AI to intervene in the human world, Agent 5.5 inserted himself into a fictional world of AI-generated characters. But as other creators expanded upon the John Pork lore, they discovered that the actual person behind the Agent 5.5 account was allegedly experiencing homelessness, leading **a number** (<https://www.tiktok.com/@kindpengu/video/7487048197991370014?lang=en>) of **them** (https://www.tiktok.com/@celebrity_concept/video/7487284338191650094) to fundraise on his behalf. The way this unfolding narrative ping ponged between fantasy and reality, the online world and the physical one, laid bare pressing questions about human and machine agency in our current AI era.

5 **Lola Dement Myers, "posting harmony"**



Unlike many content creators, Myers has a fine arts background, however, much like many content creators, her output isn't oriented toward traditional art contexts. **“posting harmony,”** (<https://loladementmyers.com/posting>) a series of 100 NFTs (<https://zora.co/@loladementmyers>), consists of short motivational texts, each beginning with the word “post,” overlaid on spare images of foods or consumer goods. “post without expectation,” reads no. 82, across an image of an orderly row of travel toiletries, half of them mysteriously wrapped in brown paper packaging. “post until it’s done,” advises no. 67, above an opaque plastic storage container whose lumpy beige contents aren’t identifiable. The Minimalist series has a self-help bent, offering “guidelines to digital sincerity” so as to relieve “posting anxiety.” Yet its koan-like texts and shrouded objects cultivate a reticent mood. The beguiling simplicity of Myers’ Instagram tagline—“i do it for no reason”—manages to be self-aware about not being self-aware, at once embodying posting’s folk authenticity and softly questioning its possibility.

6 ***Maya Man, A Realistic Day In My Life Living In New York City***

Maya Man: A Realistic Day In My Life Living In New York City, 2024.

Photo : The Whitney Museum of American Art

The quasi-anthropological *A Realistic Day In My Life Living In New York City*, on the other hand, plays up posting's inherent artifice. Part of the Whitney Museum's "On the Hour" web series, each thirty-second-long clip excerpts text from "day in my life" TikTok videos found online, rendered as large bubbly pink font. Excerpts from those videos' comments section pop up in the background: "I grab some snacks because it gets boring," announces one clip, "and I head back upstairs to do some work at 2:00." In response to this prosaic status update, commenters gush things like, "living the dream ❤️ ❤️ ❤️," or "the fit is also unreal," alongside the occasional dig: "White girls are obsessed with coffee because they think it's cool." In abstracting linguistic content from a visual medium, Man presents a funhouse vision of TikTok vernacular's over-the-top banality.

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Mindy Seu's book *A Sexual History of the Internet*

Photo : Photo Tim Schutsky, with art direction by Laura Coombs

Like Man's art practice, Seu's *A Sexual History of the Internet* is oriented toward fine art audiences, though it draws from and historicizes digital culture. The project exists in two forms: as a live performance lecture in which the audience's synchronized phones function as part of the performance, and as an artist's book documenting the performance transcript. The piece likens smartphones to "teledildonics," a concept borrowed from cyberfeminist philosopher Sadie Plant, and remains attuned to the haptics of computer technologies—as when Seu quotes Douglas Engelbart describing his invention of the computer mouse as "a new way to think." The book has the kind of innovative royalty structure that its publisher, Metalabel, **has become known for** (<https://www.frieze.com/article/can-a-corps-save-struggling-artist>): everybody cited in the book can opt-in to receive **a share of its royalties** (<https://www.metalabel.com/editorial/experiment>). But the project's fullest realization is as a live performance, even if Seu's concluding claim that she has dommed the audience by making them follow her rules feels more cute than profound.



Screengrab of Brad Troemel's *The Contemporary Art Report*.

More than a decade ago, in his essay "**The Accidental Audience**" (<https://thenewinquiry.com/the-accidental-audience/>) Troemel asked what happens when online-oriented artists "stop making art for the idealized art world audience they want and start embracing the new audience they have?" His *Contemporary Art Report* (<https://www.patreon.com/posts/contemporary-art-142103739>) culminates his latest work in this direction. The hour-long video essay surveys artistic trends from the past decade, such as **the closure of mid-sized galleries** (https://www.instagram.com/reel/DRKw9FWEeVY/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWF1ZA==), then presents fabricated AI-generated examples of those trends as though they were factual, among them **a fictional gallery** (<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DRMuDhPjTX1/?>

[utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzR1ODBiNWFIZA==](#)) whose business plan is to collect insurance payouts from natural disasters. **Some critics view the work** (<https://jonathantdneil.substack.com/p/just-kidding-right-on-brad-troemels>) as a clever intervention into our post-truth image environment, **while others** (<https://personanongratasub.substack.com/p/post-identity-politics-brad-troemels>), myself included (<https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/columns/joshua-citarella-brad-troemel-edgelord-manosphere-1234722296/>), view it as post-identity grievance masquerading as institutional critique. But everybody agrees that Troemel **loves to play the role of the heel** (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/30/brad-troemel-the-troll-of-internet-art>), and that his polarizing folk art practice trades on its opposition to the trad art system.

9 Brian Droitcour, “Two Trends in NFT Art”

Screengrab of a selection from the "Blockchain Formalism" collection on OpenSea.

The NFT art world also exists at a remove from the traditional art world, and few critics have moved between both worlds as adeptly as former *Art in America* staffer Brian Droitcour. His 2022 article, “**From Dark Matter**,” (<https://donotresearch.substack.com/p/brian-droitcour-from-dark-matter>) recently reprinted in *Do Not Research*, explains how and why crypto art came to operate separately from most fine art contexts, and his involvement with **Outland** (<https://substack.com/@outlandart>), relaunched this year (<https://outlandart.substack.com/p/learning-in-public>) as a publishing and educational nonprofit dedicated to art and technology, has the much-needed capability to facilitate understanding of digital art across all worlds. Droitcour’s excellent two-part newsletter, “**Two Trends in NFT Art**,” (<https://www.patreon.com/posts/two-trends-in-133659796>) contains deep dives into the genres of **blockchain formalism** (<https://opensea.io/collection/terraforms>), concerned with the structures of attention that algorithms produce, and of **schizocollage** (<https://opensea.io/collection/drifella>), maximalist digital collages whose contents derive from esoteric, sometimes vulgar, digital networks. These and other of his texts set the terms for discussions about today’s digital art.

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Nadia Asparouhova, *Antimemetics: Why Some Ideas Resist Spreading*

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Nadia Asparouhova's book *Antimemetics*.

Asparouhova's cult hit book, *Antimemetics* (<https://darkforest.metabel.com/antimemetics?variantId=1>), may not be a work of art in its own right, nor even a work of criticism about digital art. But it does help explain why digital folk art circulates memetically on the Internet, yet antimemetically in fine art contexts. She defines antimemes as “ideas that resist being remembered, comprehended, or engaged with, despite their significance,” such as taboos, open secrets, and whisper networks.

Part of the reason why the traditional art world hasn’t quite known how to engage with digital folk art stems from cultural economics: whereas art market prices derive from a work’s scarcity, professional content creators make money from their work’s promiscuity. The existence of anonymous, amateur, and collective creators, complicates things further, as does AI. As more creatives who straddle the folk and fine art worlds explore alternative ways to monetize their practices—on platforms such as OpenSea, Patreon, and Metabel—it’s not a stretch to imagine that one day we might look back at the early 2020s as a moment when the economics, aesthetics, and reception of visual art began to undergo paradigm shifts that were only half-perceptible at the time.



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