

## Contemporary Social Media and Creative Practice 2018

Hosted by  
the Social Media Narratives Class  
Art and Technology Studies  
School of the Art Institute of Chicago  
Facebook, November 1 - 6, 2018

Transcript: Gary O. Larson



Gray Larson  
November 1, 2018

Not that it really matters (as I'm well shrouded in obscurity under either moniker), but the "Gary Larson" that Prof. Malloy invited to participate in this online forum is the self-same person as the "Gray Larson" under whose auspices my comments appear in this Facebook post. Although this marks the first time I've ever posted anything on Facebook, I actually joined that community over a decade ago (late 2006 or early 2007, I'd guess), not long after the platform had evolved from its collegiate roots into a social platform for all comers: "Give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses...." My own reasons for taking the plunge into social media, however, were decidedly anti-social. At the time I was working for a nonprofit Washington, DC-based internet advocacy organization, among whose concerns was online privacy. Facebook was one of the platforms we examined, and, in those early days, the only way to inspect Facebook's privacy policy was to sign up for an account. (We now know, of course, that Facebook's privacy policy isn't worth the paper it isn't written on: "... and we'll wring all of the personal information we possibly can from those huddled masses—and their friends—for the purpose of targeted advertising.")

Anyway, my initial request for membership under my given name was summarily rejected, presumably because Facebook's automated watchdogs enforced a strict quota on certain celebrity names (including the "Far Side" cartoonist's, apparently). I didn't take this rebuff personally (as I'm sure any number of honest-to-goodness Michael and Janet Jacksons, and countless others, were treated similarly back then). I simply transposed two letters in my first name—from Gary to Gray—which I never bothered to change, since I still haven't found a place for Facebook (or Twitter or Instagram or any of the others) in my daily life.

This is not to say that I'm not delighted to learn that so many artists do use these platforms, and not simply to share snapshots of their latest farm-to-fork extravagances, or to forward viral videos, or to weigh in on vile politics. As Prof. Malloy's Social Media Narratives course makes abundantly clear, these platforms have become fertile ground for creative expression. To which I say, bravo! Let a million messages bloom.

I'm not yet convinced, on the other hand, that social media represents a new promised land for the arts in the U.S. We've heard such claims before, after all—first with radio, and then television, cable TV, direct-broadcast satellite, and finally the so-called Information Superhighway itself (along with all of the toll roads, business loops, and red-light districts it spawned over the years). And yet, despite these various technological advances—or perhaps because of them—the vast majority of artists still labor in the margins of media culture—analogue and digital alike—overshadowed by corporate-sponsored entertainment, celebrity gossip, and various forms of vox-populism. Trending now: the decline of Western civilization....

No, it's not really that bad (yet). But life online for artists—and for arts audiences—could be a lot better than it currently is. Nor would it be the first time that we've endeavored to make the virtual landscape more accommodating to serious artistic expression. Most of these efforts, it is true, were too-little-too-late attempts to overcome the deficiencies of commercial systems (e.g., channel set-asides for noncommercial stations on radio and TV; requirements for public, educational, and government channels on cable systems; and a 4 percent reservation of satellite TV capacity for public-interest programming), which had only limited success. Even our crowning achievements in this regard—PBS and NPR—as indispensable as they are to the cultural health of the nation, are pretty much closed systems when it comes to providing access to independent voices.

Those voices have found a ready home on the internet, to be sure, where the barriers to entry are much lower than in the traditional media. But the odds of being noticed in what has been aptly described as “the world's biggest popularity contest” are astronomically high. Just a glance at some of the staggering numbers of social media—4 million “likes” generated every minute on Facebook, 500 million Tweets sent every day, 400 hours of video uploaded every minute—are suggestive of what online artists are up against. Suddenly the Mega Millions and Powerball lotteries start to look like sound financial planning.

None of this is news to those artists who have plied their trades online, of course. Most of them, I suspect, are not interested in either fame or fortune, but are committed to exploring social media as new forms of publication and performance—a way to get their work “out there,” and as all artists must at the conclusion of the creative process, simply “see what happens.” Moreover, to the extent that social media art is interactive and fluid, even participatory in some instances, these new platforms offer advantages that galleries, recital halls, and print publications generally don't: the opportunity to extend the creative process based on viewer feedback and response. Aside from the problem of inveterate naysayers and various other cranks that the internet seems to breed like mosquitoes (offering innumerable variations on the old “my-ten-year-old-daughter-could-do-that” canard), fluidity and feedback are good things, right?

So perhaps my skepticism about the potential impact of social media on art (and vice versa) has more to do with the demand side of the equation. How do audiences find social media art in the first place? Will the works they discover still be accessible next month? Next year? Where can users go to find similar works (or, ahem, for students preoccupied with midterms or finals, where can they turn for some last-minute contextual or historical information)? Where are the virtual

museums and libraries, the scholars and critics—all of the institutions and support structures, in short—that we've come to rely on in the real world for guidance and access to art and culture? Their online counterparts are out there, certainly, in various incarnations for the several disciplines, from the 79-year-old American Music Center (now New Music USA) website (<http://library.newmusicusa.org/>), to the 5-year-old, not-what-you-think U.S. Department of Arts and Culture (<https://usdac.us>, itself something of a work of art). But these resources, vital as they are to the cognoscenti, are generally distant, scattered icons in an online universe in which too often Google is our guide, Wikipedia our historical record, and YouTube our media archive. And Facebook, heaven forbid, our personal planner.

My basic question, then, is how can we contribute to a creative online environment that is even more accessible and accommodating than the nonprofit institutions that have served artists and audiences for the last hundred or so years? How can we map that nonprofit cultural sector, so clearly delineated in the real world, onto an online landscape that is still evolving—and growing more commercial every day? And how can we best organize, curate, archive, and promote the countless cultural treasures, major and minor, that are currently scattered across the vast reaches of the internet? These are among the questions that I hope we can discuss this week.

LIBRARY.NEWMUSICUSA.ORG

### **The Online Library | New Music USA**

The New Music USA Online Library is a vast and comprehensive digital database that contains over 57,000 works by more than 6,000...



[Judy Malloy](#)

Welcome, Gary!

The reason that you had to come on Facebook as Gray and not as Gary is in itself of interest to this class that is interested in identity on contemporary social media!

I'll be posting panelists bios as they come on. Here is Gary's bio:

Gary O. Larson worked in a variety of capacities at the National Endowment for the Arts between 1980 and 1996, and was a writer/editor at both the Center for Media Education (1998-2000) and the Center for Digital Democracy (2001-2007). The author of *The Reluctant Patron: The U.S. Government and the Arts, 1943-1965* and *American Canvas: An Arts Legacy for Our Communities*, he has also written numerous articles on culture, technology, and the nonprofit sector. He was guest curator of "DiverseNet: Building a Scenic Route on the Information Superhighway" at DiverseWorks Artspace in Houston in 1996; has taught at the University of Minnesota, the University of Maryland, and American University; and lectured at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Smithsonian Institution. A graduate of the University of

California at Berkeley, he earned his M.A. and Ph.D. in American Studies at the University of Minnesota.



Judy Malloy

In Gary's opening post to this panel, he sets forth a basic question that we will be exploring from different angles in this forum: He writes:

"My basic question, then, is how can we contribute to a creative online environment that is even more accessible and accommodating than the nonprofit institutions that have served artists and audiences for the last hundred or so years? How can we map that nonprofit cultural sector, so clearly delineated in the real world, onto an online landscape that is still evolving—and growing more commercial every day? And how can we best organize, curate, archive, and promote the countless cultural treasures, major and minor, that are currently scattered across the vast reaches of the internet? These are among the questions that I hope we can discuss this week."

Be sure and click "Continue Reading" in Gary's statement to read the whole of his words.



Judy Malloy

Hi Gary, in your opening statement, there is much information, many ideas, many places to begin. One of the students in my class is particularly interested in your ideas and will be "here" soon.

Meanwhile, I'd like to riff on just one sentence of your words:

"These new platforms offer advantages that galleries, recital halls, and print publications generally don't: the opportunity to extend the creative process based on viewer feedback and response."

We've talked in the SAIC Social Media Class about ways of building online community for individual works of social media-based work. This is important! It is one response to how to -- on an increasingly commercial infosphere -- build knowledge of contemporary art treasures online. We'll be looking at this in more depth as we head into the final-project-online-studio weeks

Additionally, last week, the assignment in the class was:

"Write a 2-3 paragraph proposal for a collaborative work on a social media platform or transmedia platforms of your choice. This is a conceptual exercise and probably won't be realized, although it could be used for a final project if approved. Consider how you will build

community, whether your work will be open to everyone or people you select. "

The responses were amazing! I don't have permission to reveal their ideas -- many of which were good enough to bring to fruition as a final project -- but the range of ways in which to involve online communities in creative online projects was heartening!



[Kate Pritchard](#)

Hello Gary and welcome!



[Samantha Travis](#)

Hi Gary!



[Gray Larson](#)

Greetings Samantha and Kate!

Judy, I think the distinction you make between “building online community for individual works of social media-based work,” and “build[ing] knowledge of contemporary art treasures online” is an important one. They’re two sides of the same community-building coin, I suppose, but in the hurly-burly, here-today-404-file-not-found-tomorrow world of social media, the latter, involving longer-term community- and knowledge-building efforts, is what’s really needed. Properly designed and executed, in fact, such efforts can represent new forms of arts education and audience building, tailored specifically for the online environment. As far as I know, there’s not an app for that, but once funders catch up to the realities of art and art-making in the 21st century, there may be a grant or two available.



[James Campbell](#)

Hi Gary, i think a more mature form of online art is music. It's has been running around on itunes, spotify etc for many years, and that industry is highly involved with commercial and etc. There're free musics online on other platform but eventually, the artist goal is to earn some interest of revenue or sort. Right now, arts online not only music has been treated in various

ways. Some people think it's not that important as the actual works psychically. It's extremely difficult to avoid getting commercial factors involved for online arts in my opinion. Cause the idea of internet is becoming to focus on revenue and views, eventually lead us to the profit. I have a couple of friends start a gallery last year in Chicago, and one of their show is not in their gallery but on their website. That I found quite interesting, the show they hosted is nothing but series but images that combine the virtual reality with offline resources. But comes back to the question again, the show lacks the communication between us and the work or any people at all, perhaps it doesn't need any.



Gray Larson

Thanks for your comments, James. I agree that music enjoyed something of a head start among the various art forms in establishing itself online. Even with some major stumbling blocks along the way (e.g., Napster and its copyright battles), music is now firmly entrenched as an online profit center (generating over half of all music industry revenues, and still growing). That's little comfort, however, to younger, more experimental, and a host of other composers and performers whose work isn't exactly tailored to the mass market. Still, a vast array of musical resources can be found on the internet, and, as your friends in Chicago discovered, online exhibitions/performances can serve as a vital adjunct to on-site gallery events.

It's a mistake, I believe, to think of online and offline art as either/or propositions, although artists are obviously free to work exclusively in one domain or the other if they choose. As audience members, on the other hand, I suspect many of us make our decisions to go to a concert or visit a museum in much the same way we make travel plans or restaurant reservations these days: by doing some research online, reading reviews, and getting suggestions from others in social media. For most arts organizations, moreover, maintaining a presence online is now much more a necessity than an option.

The real question (to me), is to what extent can the larger arts community ("viewers like you," in the words of PBS, or "the people formerly known as the audience," in Jay Rosen's description of citizen-journalism) weave together the various individual and organizational strands of digital culture into a much more powerful presence online?

Judy Malloy

Hi [Gray Larson](#) I agree that in your words: "involving longer-term community- and knowledge-building efforts, is what's really needed."

In the electronic literature community, a good example is ELMCIP: Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice -- <https://elmcip.net/> Done with a consortium with European funding and using Drupal 7, this is an excellent resource for the academic community.

Some sites -- such as New Music USA Online Library that you point to -- add a "spotlight" which is helpful. However, even with a "spotlight", if you don't know names or genres to search for, these sites are difficult for general audiences to use.

It would be great to have funding to provide resources for creative work on social media that would be useful for professionals in the field -- and at the same time, be approachable for arts education and audience building!

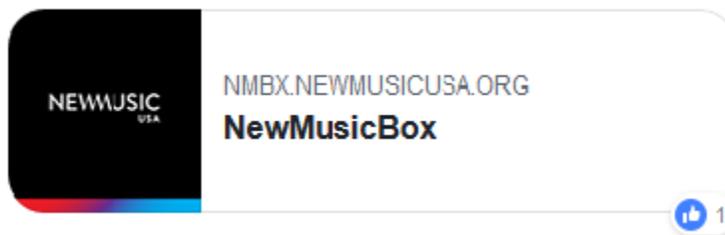


Gray Larson

Thanks for the pointer to ELMCIP. The home page is a little daunting for first-timers—the lead news item today concerns “V1.29 and deployment on NIRD (Sigma2)”—but a click on the “Anthology” tab yields a rich collection of “works, videos, materials, and references.” Sure, I could have used an online docent to show me around, but even a couple random clicks assured me that I was in the right place for a quick perusal (or a year-long study) of electronic literature.

You’re right, too, about the New Music USA Online Library and similar sites being “difficult for general audiences to use.” Fortunately, New Music USA has come up with two terrific solutions to this problem: NewMusicBox (<https://nmbx.newmusicusa.org>), an online magazine covering all of the contemporary composers and performers that the mainstream press generally ignores; and Counterstream Radio (<http://counterstreamradio.net>), an online music service presenting the kinds of new music and jazz that terrestrial broadcasters generally exclude from their playlists.

This is a model, it seems to me—essentially “doing for ourselves what popular culture and the entertainment industry won’t do for us”—that all art forms could follow to some extent. Another approach, which you and your students are exploring, involves infiltrating the mainstream (as represented by the vastly popular social media platforms) with various forms of creative expression. These approaches aren’t mutually exclusive, of course; many arts organizations use both. And both, as you point out, would benefit from funding.



Judy Malloy

Hi Gary

Earlier in this forum, you asked:

“How do audiences find social media art in the first place?”

In response, as you eloquently point out, there is a need for Internet-based resources, to in your words "weave together the various individual and organizational strands of digital culture into a much more powerful presence online" Thanks for bringing this to the forefront.

Additionally, thinking about early video art and the struggle to bring it to wider audiences, I'm remembering that the work of many artists, curators and critics was important. In San Francisco, La Mamelle's catalog sold video art, and their PRODUCED FOR TELEVISION series put artists video tapes on real tv, including works by Chris Burden, Lynn Hershman, among others. In Berkeley, Pacific Film Archive began hosting entire programs of artists videos. In NYC, Electronic Arts Intermix's long history is now on the web -- <https://www.eai.org/> -- and The kitchen, founded by Woody and Steina Vasulka, was important in the emergence of video and performance art.

In Chicago there's the Video Data Bank -- <https://www.vdb.org> -- founded by School of the Art Institute of Chicago video artists. Yes!

There is no reason that we cannot foster similar venues in support of social media-based creative work.

That said, we work on the Internet, so your focus on Internet-based resources is clearly within our grasp! onward...



[Gray Larson](#)

Not to steal from Tim Berners-Lee (as if that hasn't happened a million times already), but I always thought that "weaving" was an especially apt metaphor for the process of discovery, analysis, and aggregation of the online resources that we decide to keep on our virtual bookshelves. Personally, I'm not so good at periodically sorting through these resources and rearranging them into some semblance of categories and hierarchies, but I'm thrilled when some organization or expert performs that task—online or off—like the Video Data Bank you cited, which provides a valuable lens through which to assess the history of media art. Librarians and archivists call these "finding aids," (stealing from Berkeley's Bancroft Library this time) which "are inventories, registers, indexes, or guides to archival collections." Better still when these archives are housed online, but depending on the art form and the particular works involved, that's not always feasible or economically possible. Nor do these finding aids have to be restricted to older works. As you point out, "There is no reason that we cannot foster similar

venues in support of social media-based creative work.”

Especially in support of social media-based creative work, I would add (with the italics that Facebook doesn't allow for some reason), since I don't believe these platforms can be trusted to provide any kind of reliable and easily accessible archival functions in this regard.

Judy Malloy

Thanks, Gary! So, we are on our own as regards archiving Facebook conversations. The first Social Media Narrative panel -- convened at the [The Digital Studies Center at Rutgers-Camden](#) (DSC) . while I was a DSC Digital Fellow and Adjunct Prof -- has a primary focus on the range of creative work on contemporary social media and is documented at <http://www.narrabase.net/socmedianarrative.html> Soon I will document the SAIC ARTTECH Social Media Narratives panel we are holding here.

Meanwhile, understandably, the Library of Congress effort to archive Twitter has stalled -- at least according to this 2016 The Atlantic report:

"Can Twitter Fit Inside the Library of Congress?"

Six years ago, the world's biggest library decided to archive every single tweet. Turns out that's pretty hard to do."

<https://www.theatlantic.com/.../can-twitter-fit.../494339/>

**Social Media Narrative:  
Issues in Contemporary Practice**

hosted by  
The Rutgers-Camden Digital Studies Center  
and Judy Malloy and  
the Rutgers-Camden DSC Class in  
Social Media Narrative  
Language and Contemporary Practice

Facebook, November 16 - 21, 2016



**J**udith Adick - *Avatar Expertise Theater*  
James J. Brown, Jr. - *Social Media Narratives*  
Jay Bushman - *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*  
Robert A. Emmens, Jr. - *YOUTUBE CHANNEL*  
Jay Gornert - *Love Library*  
Dana Grigar - *J&M Mirror-Eye Project*  
Matt Held - *Facebook Paintings*  
Antonette LaFarge - *Mixed Reality Performance*  
Dennis Larson - *Marble Springs Wig*  
Mark Marone - *Nogoro*  
Cathy Marshall - *Who owns social media content?*  
Chris Rodley - *The Magic Kazam Dot*  
Chandri Sreedharan - *Epic\_Retold*  
Kara Tashberg - *Identity on Tumblr*  
Marco Williams - *The Migrant Trail*  
Keb Wang - *Nogoro*  
Alice Wong - *Duality/Visibility*



Gray Larson

I'm glad to hear that our forum here will receive the same scrupulous archiving that you managed with your 2016 Rutgers panel, which, as I've noted before, "is a perfect model for the way that such events should be captured and archived—all in one tidy package." It should be required reading for your students, but really anyone interested in social media art should take a look at both the panelists' statements and the links to the online conversations you hosted. And

let me caution such readers to be sure not to miss Judy's excellent Introduction and her encyclopedic Resources list (as I did the first time I went through this document earlier this year), both of which are linked at the bottom of the Panelists' Pages.