



**Lower  
Manhattan  
Cultural  
Council**

EMPOWERING ARTISTS,  
INVESTED IN COMMUNITY

## MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS FOR ARTISTS

*BOOST YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE*

### **QUESTIONS FOR KIANGA ELLIS: INTERNET & SOCIAL MEDIA**

In 2012, social media remains an evolving terrain in which artists and organizations must determine which platforms, levels of participation, and tracking methods are most effective and sustainable for their own needs. To inform this process, LMCC invited six artists and arts professionals effectively using social media to share their approaches, successes, and lessons learned.



**LOWER MANHATTAN CULTURAL COUNCIL (LMCC):** Briefly describe your work as an artist and any other roles or affiliations you have as an arts professional.

**KIANGA ELLIS (KE):** Following a legal career on Wall Street in derivatives and commodities sales and trading, I have spent the past few years as a consultant and producer of art projects. My expertise is in patron and audience development, business strategy and communications, with a special focus on social media and Internet marketing. I have worked with internationally recognized institutions such as The Museum of Modern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Sotheby's, SITE Santa Fe, and

numerous galleries and international art fairs. I am a published author and invited speaker on the topic of how the Internet is changing the business of art.

In 2011, after several months meeting with artists in their studios and recording videos of our conversations, I began exhibiting and selling the work of emerging and international artists through Kianga Ellis Projects, an exhibition program that hosts conversations about the studio practice and work of invited contemporary artists. I launched the project in Santa Fe, New Mexico —Kianga Ellis Projects is now located in an artist loft building in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn.

*Content updated 2012*

**(LMCC):** When and how did you start using social media professionally? How and why do you use it now?

**(KE):** I began using social media in the summer of 2006 when I launched my first blog, *Get(A)rtLife!*, using the free Blogger platform. This was before anyone was using the term “social media.” Before everyone was on Facebook. Before Twitter. I had organized a program called Summer Art Circle for over 300 law students working at leading law firms in New York and saw blogging as an opportunity to extend the work of promoting arts patronage using the Internet. Today I feel more strongly than ever that the social Web (all communication online is becoming increasingly social) is the most powerful method for reaching hearts, minds and eyeballs.

I currently have accounts at more than 21 social platforms (see links at: [www.mskianga.com](http://www.mskianga.com)) including Facebook, Wordpress, Twitter, Tumblr, Foursquare, Instagram, Pinterest, Flickr, and YouTube. Twitter and Facebook are the only two on which I am active daily. I am active on Foursquare 5-6 days per week. I visit Tumblr 1-2 times per week to re-blog or post. I have more than one account on some sites—for example, in addition to my main Twitter account, @Ms\_Kianga, I have accounts set up for specific projects such as @ModernChrist for my ongoing research on Christian iconography in contemporary art and @KEProjects which is dedicated to communicating specifically about my exhibition program.

My use of these platforms has varied dramatically over the years depending on the projects or consulting assignments I am working on. With every new idea or interest, I have typically started a blog to organize my related writing and other digital media content. For six months of last year, I experimented with video blogging and posted a video daily on YouTube, Posterous, Twitter, and Facebook. The videos included conversations with artists in their studios, which led to my interest in exhibiting art and moving beyond merely discussing it online. My own use of social media has primarily been driven by an interest in *testing the medium* to learn its potential and gain intelligence on how the space is evolving.

I believe social media technology is the single most important tool for maintaining and increasing the connections between people and art. These digital connections drive the awareness and relevance required to compel people toward an experience of art in physical space.

**(LMCC):** Do you use any tools or methods to track readership, website traffic, click-throughs, shares or other evidence that you are reaching and engaging people? If so, which tools and why?

**(KE):** I have never spent much time or energy analyzing traffic in my own use of social media. I use the Web statistics provided by Wordpress on what is now my main blog. With Facebook and Twitter, I notice the “likes”, mentions, shares and retweets. I do pay a lot of attention to the real-time dynamics of engaging in online conversation. I have developed a strong instinct and understand the culture on various platforms because I spend my time there listening, watching and responding. I have generally not set business or personal goals in terms of metrics about those I am reaching, but I have been interested in the quality of the connection. Are the people who are following engaged, passionate and responsive? Now that I am exclusively focused on my own projects and not

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consulting, I will be thinking more about monitoring such metrics and using that information in a focused way.

**(LMCC):** If you have one great success story about using social media, please share it.

**(KE):** I am proud of my collaboration with street artist General Howe in 2010 and [BrooklynStreetArt.com](http://BrooklynStreetArt.com) to present “The Battle of Brooklyn 2010,” a six-day art happening featuring new street art spread throughout the borough of Brooklyn by General Howe. “The Battle of Brooklyn 2010” was an artistic interpretation of the Revolutionary War’s Battle of Brooklyn, also known as the Battle of Long Island. The happening included installations ranging from arrangements with tiny red toy soldiers to clay icons honoring the dead in areas where battles between British and American soldiers were fought. The events of each day were shared live with the public through Twitter, Tumblr and Foursquare. BrooklynStreetArt.com posted a daily re-cap of the day’s events with photos.

I collaborated with General Howe to create a social media program for the happening that would allow the public to participate in a unique way and grant unprecedented virtual access to street art in the making. For the duration of the happening, my Twitter feed, Tumblr blog and Foursquare check-ins were dedicated to telling an integrated story of history and contemporary art. I Tweeted educational status updates about Revolutionary War times based on [David McCullough’s book, 1776](#), and other sources. Through social media, the public experienced the “Battle of Brooklyn” and art making in the actual locations where the Battle took place.

I connected with a whole new group of people through that project, some of whom I began to connect to other artists and art events afterwards. Someone who had been following our Tweets was able to locate us and gave us some Revolutionary War memorabilia. It turns out that the project had an impact I was not even aware of at the time —earlier this year, I spoke via Skype on a panel in Detroit with a writer and curator also based in New York. When an audience member asked her about the possibilities of the Internet to reach audiences, she mentioned “Battle of Brooklyn” as something innovative that had people talking at gallery openings. I was so surprised! A lot of your success online can remain invisible for a long time —or forever.

**(LMCC):** Please share the most important lesson you’ve learned using social media —or a “mistake” you think that others could learn from.

**(KE):** The most important thing I have learned about social media is that it is a place, much like a coffee shop or your kitchen table. It’s a place people go to for information, connection and conversation. People want to connect. They don’t want a sales pitch. Generosity is hugely important. By this I mostly mean promoting others, acknowledging others and thinking about what your audience would find interesting or valuable that has no direct benefit to you at all.

The social Web is a very democratic place. There is a kind of equality Twitter brings to interactions among people. Everyone gets the same amount of space and absolutely anyone with an Internet connection can join and contribute something. If that contribution is genuinely interesting, thoughtful, funny, helpful,

*Content updated 2012*

etc...it can get noticed.

**(LMCC):** How do you manage and prioritize your time and effort on social media?

**(KE):** It is a constant challenge to manage time and effort on social media. One important decision I have made is to rely heavily on chance and randomness in keeping up with information that is posted and shared. By this I mean that I don't keep a list of people, organizations or blogs that I try to stay current on everything they are sharing or doing. It is impossible to keep up with everything, so to set a goal of trying to do so would be far too stressful.

It worked out for me that as I started using social media more and more I hit a point of conversion and genuinely enjoy participating in the space. With mobile applications on my smart phone, it is easy to jump on Twitter or Facebook several times a day to see what is being discussed and add my voice. Just being a responder and sharer of other people's posts is an important and valuable use of time online. But importantly, your contributions gain their value or currency through the original content and work you do that is made available for others to see.

Producing digital content (that is, doing things in the "real" world then posting copy, videos or photos about them) is a lot harder than "liking" and re-tweeting. To keep and grow an audience requires consistent and regular production of new content. I haven't found a sweet spot to balance all this personally, but it's critical to have a set production schedule and stick with it. Have a plan about what content gets posted where, which posts auto post to other sites and which do not and when. Helpfully, many sites allow you to schedule your posts for a time in the future (particularly blogs and some Twitter applications). I know this to be the main way businesses and organizations keep a steady stream of content flowing.

**(LMCC):** What do you consider to be important "dos and don'ts" for using social media?

**(KE):** The most important thing for a person or organization looking to have an online presence is to have an authentic and human "voice." There should be a person perceptible behind all the communications. Think about how you can be a trusted resource about a particular topic. Don't just talk about what you are doing, but share what others in your space are doing and related news/information. BE PRESENT and responsive. The real-time nature of social media is incredibly important to appreciate. When people begin to interact with you, acknowledging and engaging them back in a timely fashion is critical to keeping and growing an audience.

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**Kianga Ellis** is a consultant and producer of visual arts projects with a focus on social media and Internet marketing. She is the founder of Kianga Ellis Projects, an ongoing program of contemporary exhibitions and artist dialogues.

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*Content updated 2012*