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Social media penetrates the arts

Houston's cultural community gets a boost from Facebook, Twitter and Instagram

By Steven Brown

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The 24,000 plastic tubes dangling in a gallery at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, are only the starting point of Jesus Rafael Soto's "The Houston Penetrable." The work only comes to life, the late artist said, when viewers step into the cloud of translucent strands

and experience the sight, sound and feel of immersion.

When they do, they often give the work an additional layer: sharing what they experienced via selfies.

Since "The Houston Penetrable" debuted in May, more than 7,000 visitors have snapped photos of themselves within the work and uploaded them to Instagram, using the hashtag #sotosummer.

"It's something the artist could probably never have imagined. It's extending his whole concept," said Mary Haus, the museum's marketing and communications director.

The #sotosummer project is just one example of how Houston cultural groups marshal social media and other fruits of the Internet to spur creativity, engage their audiences and expand their reach. Others include:

During the Houston Symphony's summer concerts at Miller Outdoor Theatre, the orchestra tweets out tidbits that tie in with the music as it unfolds, giving concertgoers tips about the music and performers.

Houston Ballet's dancers open a window onto their lives backstage and offstage by posting photos and videos to Instagram at #houstonballet, which has attracted more than 6,000 followers since its launch last November.

DiverseWorks uses Facebook and Twitter to draw viewers to the gallery's website each February, when quirky videos - in the 2014 edition, staffers dancing - charm viewers into making \$5 contributions to a

A #Sotosummer at MFAH

See what museum visitors are capturing at the popular exhibit.

#sotosummer



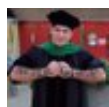
Kimberlie R. McGuire @Kymberlie 5 Sep
If you looked straight up, it looked like rain.
[#sotosummer](#) [#mfah](#) [#latergram](#) @ The Museum of Fine... [instagram.com/p/slGWxvrH9/](https://www.instagram.com/p/slGWxvrH9/)
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Elysia @LetsExploreArt 4 Sep
The truth about visiting immersive [#art](#) with small children is: wp.me/p41d7U-9q
[#sotosummer](#)
Show Summary



Kimberlie R. McGuire @Kymberlie 4 Sep
Final [#feministselfie](#) from @mfah's [#sotosummer](#). I look sassy. CC: mfah [#selfie](#) [#nofilter](#) [#latergram](#) @... [instagram.com/p/siLKlKlxCe/](https://www.instagram.com/p/siLKlKlxCe/)
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F Franco @altruist42 4 Sep
[@RachelGreen05](#) miss hang'n out w/ ju!
[#SotoSummer](#) [twitter.com/altruist42/sta...](https://twitter.com/altruist42/status/)



MFAH @MFAH 3 Sep
A big THANK YOU to all of you who made this a special [#SotoSummer](#)! The 24,000 PVC tubes that make up... [instagram.com/p/sgD9M0Jgda/](https://www.instagram.com/p/sgD9M0Jgda/)
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Chandni Rama @chandnirama 2 Sep

Valentine's Day-themed fund drive.

The River Oaks Chamber Orchestra, which last season began live-streaming its concerts free into nursing homes, will add on-demand video this season for patients at Houston Methodist Hospital and MD Anderson Cancer Center.

"We believe in better living through technology," says Alecia Lawyer, the chamber orchestra's founder and artistic director. Streaming allows the group to serve audiences who can't come to a concert hall; shout-outs from the performers and live audiences help the distant listeners feel the concert-hall aura.

"I think people really crave the intimate, live experience," Lawyer says. "They're seeking relationships.

Social media help cultural groups enrich their relationships with their audiences, tying into years-long efforts to destroy old stereotypes of stuffiness and exclusivity. Plus, the groups get feedback; viewers and listeners speak up, posting comments through Facebook or Twitter.

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, has more than 50,000 followers on Facebook and more than 20,000 on Twitter, Haus says. To encourage them to share their experiences, it relaxed a longstanding ban on cameras: Visitors now have permission to take photos in most galleries and in the house museums, Rienzi and Bayou Bend.

On Feedback Fridays, MFAH asks questions like: If you could study with any artist, who would it be? The queries draw hundreds of responses, Haus says.

"It's extremely active and very lively because people are eager to talk about what they know of the artists. They're eager to talk about their favorite works," Haus says. "It's a point of connection."

When Houston Grand Opera performed Johann Strauss' "Die Fledermaus" in May for its annual visit to Miller Outdoor Theater, it invited viewers to tweet using the hashtag #hgointhepark. During the show, it was the trending topic on Twitter in Houston, says Judith Kurnick, the opera company's communications director. A sample of the tweets:

@ryan_marshall: I'm cultured and my life is interesting.

@houstonzoodude: date night with my honey

@clavecatcher: The hills are alive with the sound of music at #milleroutdoortheatre

On #houstonballet's Instagram feed, visitors can see photos and videos of dancers at work, including shots with luminaries such as choreographer William Forsythe and pianist Lang Lang. When the company goes on

tour, dancers post photos that illustrate life on the road.

Harper Watters, a member of the corps de ballet, was in charge during a trip to Montreal. He saw the social media response to postings.

"I'd refresh the page, and there would be 20 likes. I'd refresh it again, and 20 more likes," Watters says. "We'd have 200 likes in about five minutes. When you think about that in the big picture, if we end up with 800 likes on an image, that's 800 people who have shared and seen it and want to know more about us."

Launched in 2010 and purchased by Facebook in 2012, Instagram now has 200 million monthly active users and more than 20 billion shared photos.

Instagram gives followers a glimpse at the ballet life.

"People only see one or two hours of what we do, and that's onstage," Watters says. "There's so much more that goes into it. There are classes, there are rehearsals, there are (costume) fittings. By sharing that, we're reaching into the curiosity of people."

For smaller groups, social media can help build an audience and reputation, person by person, says violinist Matthew Detrick, artistic director of the Apollo Chamber Players. A couple the group met at a social event spread the word about Apollo through Facebook; social-media contacts helped land the group a concert in Washington state.

"At a certain point, this kind of thing is the best advertising a group can get: a fan reaching out to their friends and spreading a group's reputation by word of mouth, or word of electronic mouth," Detrick says.

Social media also help smaller groups extend their limited resources.

DiverseWorks' "Love Injection" campaign attracted contributions through videos of staffers sacrificing their dignity by dancing on camera. They raised \$3,500, which surpassed their goal by \$1,000.

"It didn't cost us anything to raise that money," says external-affairs director Jennifer Gardner.

A.D. Players, the Christian theater company, will soon begin testing a mobile app that will give theatergoers cast lists and information about shows, letting them do without printed programs, says marketing director Ken Bailey. It's handy for the users and reduces printing costs, he says.

Social media may be a recent phenomenon, but it builds on the theater's beginnings, says Jeannette Clift George, A.D. Players' founder and artistic director. People have always been hungry for dialogue - whether it's between people sharing experience on Facebook, or between actors and audience on a stage.

"The immediacy of communication is how the whole thing started," George says. "Some of us look at (social media) as something new," George says. "But when I stop and think, it really isn't."

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