My website is a shifting house next to a river of knowledge. What could yours be?

For TCI x Are.na's Library of Practical and Conceptual Resources, designer Laurel Schwulst encourages all artists to create and cultivate websites.

What is a website?

For the past handful of years, I've been teaching courses about interactive design and the internet.

I teach within art departments at universities, so we learn about the internet's impact on art—and vice versa—and how technological advance often coincides with artistic development.
In class, we make websites. To do this, we learn the basic building blocks of the web—HTML, CSS, and some JavaScript.

However, sometimes after the semester is over, I receive emails from students asking, "So how do I *actually* make a website?" I'm perplexed because I thought we spent the whole semester doing just that.

This sparked my own questioning. "What is a website, anyway?" It's easy to forget. Today there are millions of ways to make a website, and the abundance is daunting. But at its core, a website is still the same as it's always been:

A website is a file or bundle of files living on a server somewhere. A server is a computer that's always connected to the internet, so that when someone types your URL in, the server will offer up your website. Usually you have to pay for a server. You also have to pay for a domain name, which is an understandable piece of language that points to an IP. An IP is a string of numbers that is an address to your server.

Usually one of a website's files is an index.html. This file renders as the homepage. To connect your homepage to other pages within your website, you could "link" them. A link is the elemental building block of the web. Links, by default rendered as blue underlined text, are also known as hypertext— they're the "HT" in HTML. Not all websites have links, but all links connect to other webpages—within the same site or elsewhere. Without links, especially links to other domains, the web would not be the web.

But my students already know this! So when they ask me about *actually* making a website, they are referring to a website *in the world, today*. It's certainly healthy to acknowledge the web today is much

different than the web many of us grew up using. So when they ask this question, they are alluding to the technological friction and social pressures that often come along with creating and maintaining a website in 2018.

Although they may seem initially accommodating and convenient to their users, universally popular social media sites—like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Pinterest—are private companies that prioritize advertising above their users' needs. In this age of digital cacophony dominated by these platforms, no one is looking out for you ... but you. It makes perfect sense, when individuals tell me they want their website to do the job of "setting the record straight" on who they are and what they do.

However, clarity is one of many possible intentions for a website. There are other legitimate states of mind that communicate—a surprising, memorable, monumental, soothing, shocking, unpredictable, radically boring, bizarre, mind-blowing, very quiet and subtle, and/or amazing website could work. You also need not limit yourself to only one website—as perhaps you'd like to confuse or surprise with multiple.

There are endless possibilities as to what a website could be. Since a website is both its content and its structure at once, a website creator has full control, becoming both author and architect simultaneously. What kind of room is a website? Or is a website more like a house? A boat? A cloud? A garden? A puddle? Whatever it is, it allows for a feedback loop: when you put energy into a website, in turn the website helps form your own identity—and perhaps these metaphors can help us see it anew.

Why have a website?

Today more than ever, we need individuals to guide the web's future. The web is called the web because its strength depends on just that—an interconnected web of individual nodes supporting a vast network. This web needs to work for people instead of being powered by a small handful of big corporations—like Facebook/Instagram, Twitter, and Google.

Individuals can steer the web back to its original architecture simply by having a website. I think artists, in particular, could be instrumental in this space—showing the world where the web can go.

Artists excel at creating worlds. They do this first for themselves and then, when they share their work, for others. Of course, world-building means creating everything—not only making things inside the world and also the surrounding world itself—the language, style, rules, and architecture.

This is why websites are so important. They allow the author to create not only works (the "objects") but also the world (the rooms, the arrangement of rooms, the architecture!). Ideally, the two would inform each other in a virtuous, self-perfecting loop. This can be incredibly nurturing to an artist's practice.

To those creative people who say "I don't need a website," I ask—why not have a personal website that works strategically, in parallel to your other activities? How could a website complement what you already do rather than competing or repeating? How can you make it fun or thought-provoking or (insert desired feeling here) for you? How can the process of making and cultivating a website contribute to your approach?

A website can be anything. It doesn't (and probably shouldn't) be an archive of your complete works. That's going to be dead the moment you publish. A website, or anything interactive, is inherently unfinished. It's imperfect—maybe sometimes it even has a few bugs. But that's the beauty of it. Websites are living, temporal spaces. What happens to websites after death, anyway?

What can a website be?

Website as room

In an age of information overload, a room is comforting because it's finite, often with a specific intended purpose.

Louis Rossetto <u>*https://www.are.na/block/1763670*</u>

Simultaneously, a room can be flexible: you can shift its contents or even include a temporary partition, depending on occasion. You can also position elements in spatial juxtaposition, or create entrances to adjacent rooms through links.

In the early days of The Creative Independent, we sometimes thought of TCI's website like a [house next to a river](#). We considered the interviews the flowing water, as they were our house's nutrients and source of life. We would collect and drink from the water every day. But sometimes, depending on its potency, the water would change our house. We'd wake up to see a new door where a picture frame once was. Knowledge became the architect.

Like any metaphor, it's not perfect. For better or worse, it's much more difficult to delete a building than a website.

Orit Gat   https://www.are.na/block/2131808

Website as shelf

Zooming into this room inside this house, we see a shelf. Maybe a shelf is easier to think about than a whole *room*. What does one put on a shelf? Books and objects from life? Sure, go ahead. Thankfully

there's nothing too heavy on the shelf, or else it would break. A few small things will do, knowledge-containing or not. Plus, lighter things are easy to change out. Is a book or trinket "so last year?" Move it off the shelf! Consider what surprising juxtapositions you can make on your little shelf.

Website as plant

Plants can't be rushed. They grow on their own. Your website can be the same way, as long as you pick the right soil, water it (but not too much), and provide adequate sunlight. Plant an idea seed one day and let it gradually grow.

Maybe it will flower after a couple years. Maybe the next year it'll bear fruit, if you're lucky. Fruit could be friends or admiration or money—success comes in many forms. But don't get too excited or set goals: that's not the idea here. Like I said, plants can't be rushed.

Website as garden

Fred Rogers said you can grow ideas in the garden of your mind. Sometimes, once they're little seedlings and can stand on their own, it helps to plant them outside, in a garden, next to the others.

Gardens have their own ways each season. In the winter, not much might happen, and that's perfectly fine. You might spend the less active months journaling in your notebook: less output, more stirring around on that input. You need both. Plants remind us that life is about balance.

It's nice to be outside working on your garden, just like it's nice to quietly sit with your ideas and place them onto separate pages.

Website as puddle

A website could also be a puddle. A puddle is a temporary collection of rainwater. They usually appear after rainstorms. Like a storm, creating a website can happen in a burst. Sometimes it's nice to have a few bursts of creating a website, since *the zone* can be so elusive.

There is also no state of "completeness" to a website, like a puddle, since they're ephemeral by nature. Sometimes they can be very big and reflective. Despite their temporal nature, I've even seen some creatures thrive in puddles. Meanwhile, some smaller puddles may only last a day.
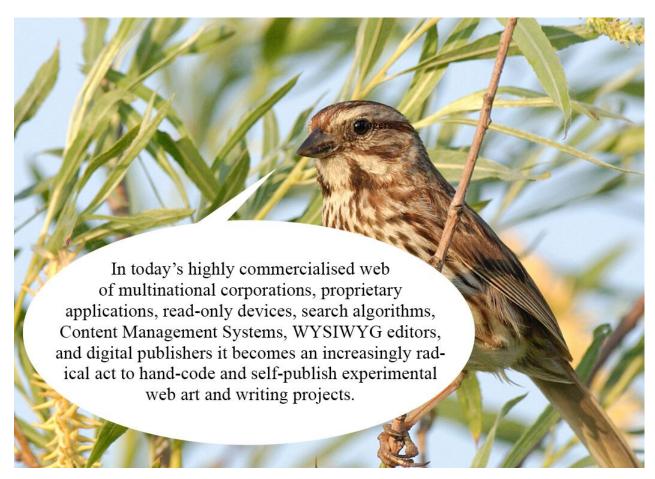
Not everything, even the most beautiful puddle with its incredible reflective surface, needs to last long. If the world doesn't end tomorrow, there will be another storm. And where there's a hole, a puddle will appear again.

Puddles evaporate slowly over time. It might be difficult, but I would love to see a website evaporate slowly, too.

Website as thrown rock that's now falling deep into the ocean

Sometimes you don't want a website that you'll have to maintain. You have other things to do. Why not consider your website a beautiful rock with a unique shape you spent hours finding, only to throw it into the water until it hits the ocean floor? You will never know when it hits the floor, and you won't care.

Thankfully, rocks are plentiful and you can do this over and over again, if you like. You can throw as many websites as you want into the ocean. When an idea comes, find a rock and throw it.

J.R. Carpenter https://www.are.na/block/2153053

The web is what we make it

While an individual website could be any of those metaphors I mentioned above, I believe the common prevailing metaphor—the internet as cloud—is problematic. (In early patent drawings depicting the internet, it also appears as a mysterious blob, brain, spider's web, or explosion shape.) These metaphors, which describe the internet as one all-encompassing mysterious and untouchable thing, obfuscate the reality that the internet is made up of individual nodes: individual computers talking to other individual computers.

Instead of cloud, let's consider the internet instead as a mesh of individuals cooperating together. This way, we can remember the responsibility we each have in building a better web.

The world wide web recently turned 29. On the web's birthday, Tim Berners Lee, its creator, published a [letter](#) stating that the web is currently under threat. He says that while it's called the "world wide web," only about half the world is connected—so we should close this digital divide. But at the same time, Berners Lee wants to make sure this thing we're all connecting to is truly working for us: "I want to challenge us all to have greater ambitions for the web. I want the web to reflect our hopes and fulfil our dreams, rather than magnify our fears and deepen our divisions."

When I made my first website about my imaginary horse stable in the late 90s, I learned HTML and CSS because it was, at the time, literally the only way to communicate my equine passion to a number of people at once.

Today I see so many websites producing communication signals … but not actually communicating anything valuable. Using templates for web design is easy to do, but is it the best way to communicate your vision? It's important to remember that a website is both content and structure simultaneously, and that you need the ability to change both in tandem.

If a website has endless possibilities, and our identities, ideas, and dreams are created and expanded by them, then it's crucial that websites are progressing with us. It's especially pressing when forces continue to threaten the web and the internet at large. In an age of information overload and an increasingly commercialized web, artists are the people to help. Artists can think expansively about what a website can be. Each artist should should carve out their own space on the web, for a website is an individual act of collective ambition.

To accompany this essay, I've created a channel on Are.na called "Birds Talking About the Future of the Web." There you'll find a handful of quotes from essays that informed this piece. Each quote links to its essay in the metadata, so feel free to explore.