Gallery director Jennifer Colby writes, [quote] “What happens when the scholar is making meaning out of her own art, or looking at a group of contemporary artists that includes her? In this situation, the scholar who is also an artist brings to her study the unique perspectives she holds as a practitioner of art. Much like a participant observer in anthropology, the positionality of the artist-scholar is complex because of self-identification with the process of making the art. This position presents unique insights…” [end quote]
This quotation is from Blaze: Discourse on Art, Women and Feminism, from the chapter, ‘Artist as Scholar: Scholar as Artist’. Had I encountered this chapter earlier, I might have named my presentation ‘Artist as Blogger: Blogger as Artist.’ One informs the other, which I had not expected when I began an academic blog a year ago called Artist in Transit. Before I tell you about the blog—about its formation, the strategies I’ve employed, and the role it’s played in my creative process—let me tell you briefly about my work. I work exclusively in fibre, and my work is about the concept of gender as a social construct. That is to say, the idea that our gender is malleable and informed by external sources. My focus is on female identity and until recently it centered around the role of clothing in gender socialization. [slide] This piece looks at signifiers of femininity like lace, floral patterns and the colour pink in formal wear. I stitched similar looking dresses side-by-side like paper dolls so that they formed three ruffles beneath the transparent outer layer of the skirt of a woman’s formal dress that was remarkably similar in appearance. I began exploring this theme by making abstracted cocoon sculptures [slide]. My intention is for the stuffed garment to stand in for the human form, and for the cocoon to seem caught in flux, with the viewer unable to tell if the form is breaking free or becoming further bound. The cocoons have been well received, but they’ve also generated confusion. At an outdoor art fair, someone asked me, “But what are they for? Are they pillows or something?” And at a holiday art sale, I overheard someone who was very upset that her painting had been hung underneath a ‘pink blob’. Also, although viewer response cannot be controlled, I was alarmed that some people saw them as singularly cute or funny, since I had made them with a serious tone in mind. They were intended to make a feminist statement. Thus, I thought it would be useful to have a blog to help explain the work. As Bhandari and Melber write, “Not all art ‘needs’ a blog....They are particularly effective for...anything where images alone cannot convey the full scope of the content.” I hadn’t had a lot of luck blogging up until this point. I started a blog through my institution to report on workshops and conferences, and one day it just disappeared, never to be recovered. Before that, I was required to start a blog in library school. I chose to make it about my artwork, but the title alone (Art by Heather Saunders) [slide] indicates my lack of inspiration. In this blog, I included photographs of my work, an artist statement, my CV, and press releases along with chatty anecdotes. Where I struggled was with going back and forth between the informational and the conversational. The second the class was done I purged the anecdotes. The blog still exists, but with bare bones promotional content. I wanted to create something more substantial, something that would be a creative product unto itself.
I began with great expectations, figuring I would post every other day. The reality has been an average of one post per week, but I am just shy of 40,000 words nonetheless. I did not expect to get so involved in the blog that I would spend more time writing the blog than working on my art.

Being a relatively new subject specialist, I felt it would be valuable to start a blog about my subject area to instill confidence in my colleagues about my abilities. And because I am an emerging artist working on a campus with mid-career and senior artists, I thought a blog could be useful in legitimizing my work in their eyes. It also became a tool for outreach, to interview a colleague who curated a show; to defend a colleague for not censoring a show; and to inform faculty about new publications by writing book reviews. It was also an opportunity to present myself as a model ‘2.0er’, to encourage colleagues to start a blog. Beyond the campus community, I hoped to connect with artists and art world professionals through the blog.

Besides having professional reasons to start a blog, I had creative reasons. I wanted to be creative in a new way. I don’t use a sketchbook, because I’m more word-oriented than image-oriented. In fact, when I was in art school, during a period of dissatisfaction, the head of the program asked me, “When I say the word ‘horse’, do you see an image of a horse in your mind, or do you see the word ‘horse’? I told her I saw the word ‘horse’ and she said, “Well, there you go.” At the time, this conversation baffled me. In retrospect, it makes sense to me because I went on to make text-based art [slide]—these works incorporate baby clothing with embroidered text in English, French, and in this last one, I have obscured portions of the word princess to comment on gender assignment for intersex individuals. The conversation about the horse also anticipated the merging of my interests in art and text by becoming publisher of the left-leaning arts magazine, Fuse. I learned a lot about art writing as publisher, but I also gained a sense of how I didn’t want to write. I wanted to cut through the ‘artspeak’ while still addressing art from a political perspective, specifically from a feminist perspective. And I wanted to write about the kinds of things I would put in a sketchbook if I had one, the kind of content that might be considered too low-brow for an art journal.

This is an excerpt of a post on a tabloid article. I’m going to skip portions throughout for the sake of brevity [slide].

I couldn’t resist this issue of Life & Style…because the cover practically screamed, “Why is Angelina turning Shiloh into A BOY?” As a blogger and artist concerned about gender socialization, I was anxious to read the contents.

Let’s not forget that Shiloh has two parents, so fixating on Angelina Jolie alone is ridiculous. If Shiloh were playing into social norms, would Brad Pitt be singled out as the hero? Let’s also not disregard the existence of agency. Androgyny could be Shiloh’s preference. If the article is to be believed, that seems to be the case, as Shiloh reportedly selects boys’ clothing from stores and insists on being called ‘John’….

The first image of Shiloh in the story shows her wearing a pale pink dress. Although it is a casual dress, the caption says, “Girlie in a Gown”. The caption goes on to compare her to a princess. In closing, I ask, why is it worse for Shiloh to be dressed as a boy (which she is not) than as a princess (which she also is not)?....

The heart of the issue is hinted at in an expression appearing in the subsequent article about Shiloh’s parents.... “Angelina wore the pants at first, but now Brad’s wearing them” (p. 32). Watch out: Shiloh could be a going concern like her mother. She’s wearing pants, and not just in the literal sense.

A few weeks before I launched Artist in Transit, I attended the International Congress of Medieval Studies to present on a panel called Gendering the Book. While there, I attended a session on female academic blogging, which ultimately influenced my own approach to blogging. Most of the panelists blogged pseudonymously—that is, under a pseudonym, but since my underlying goal is to promote my artwork, I knew this wasn’t the right choice for me. Also, as Mira Schor points out, it’s important for feminists to write as themselves rather than pseudonymously, to take a stand. Plus, I wanted to get credit for my work, especially if I didn’t have any publications under my belt for my first institutional review. Anyway, back
to the medievalist conference...Each of the bloggers described the content on their blogs, and I found myself uncomfortable with their disclosure of so much of their personal lives where I didn’t see a reasonable connection to the primary content. For example, one had blogged about her divorce as it unfolded, and another blogged about mowing the lawn late at night to emphasize the harried schedule of academics. I knew I wanted a more distanced tone, but I also knew that there was an expectation to reveal oneself to some degree when blogging.

So, I developed a persona through the title and ‘subtitle’ of my blog [slide]. The title, Artist in Transit, is intended to be a double entendre, implying that I am an artist who is developing. Literally, it refers to the fact that I am a commuter. I travel 2 hours a day between the Bronx and Purchase, NY and once or twice a month I take the bus between New York City and Toronto, where I am from [next 2 slides]. As to the subtitle, Heather Saunders is an artist, librarian, feminist and commuter, I only blog about content that fits into one of these categories. Although it may seem silly, commuting is the thread that ties the majority of my posts together.

Writing about transit gives the blog a distinctly urban setting. The New York art scene can’t really be separated from its location, and that’s why I write things like the following: [slide] This is about Mira Schor’s A Decade of Negative Thinking:

The only criticism I can make is that Schor’s writing is so luscious that I wanted to relish and reread each sentence before moving on, which slowed the entire experience. Her series of essays on contemporary art is so compelling that I forgot all about the overwhelming stench of urine as I began reading in the bus lineup outside Penn Station. Since Schor is a native New Yorker, I trust that she’ll perceive that as the highest form of compliment should she ever read this post.

Sometimes the anecdotes are just things I observe on the train. For example, in the context of pondering a series about women being associated with sweets, I wrote: [slide]

To quote a young girl seated across the aisle from me: “I want a pink um, I want a pink um, I want a pink um, I want a pink um...a pink lollipop. After she repeated this a second time, her father relented and she defiantly insisted, “IT’S NOT PINK! The transit element appears superficial, but I think it actually gives a sort of societal backdrop that is fitting since my work is about how society shapes female identity. And I feel like I’m absorbing society in my commute. I would also argue that it gives the blog a more humble tone by reducing my position as a privileged person, which is a risk of writing as an academic.

Sometimes the transit element sets up a show or book I’m going to write about. For example... [slide]

As I was walking briskly along Park Avenue towards Grand Central Station last night, a man sitting on a set of stairs called out to me. It wasn’t so much his initial comment that was infuriating (“Shake it when you walk, sexy bitch”). What made my blood boil was his triumphant-sounding “That a girl!” that followed a few seconds later. His implication that I altered my walk to please him and perform for him not only cast me as being complicit, but it defined our exchange incorrectly as mutual flirtation rather than harassment. Also, by calling me ‘girl’ and by using an expression of encouragement typically reserved for children, he went from sounding crass to perverted. If I needed justification for combining lingerie and girls’ baby clothing in my artwork, all I would need to do is remind myself of catcalls like this.

From here, I wrote about the consumption of women in two works in the New Museum’s Younger than Jesus show in which Chu Yun paid women ten dollars an hour to take shifts sleeping and Liu Chuang-Buying visited three cities in China and bought literally everything on one woman in each, down to underwear and personal identification.

The position I’m writing from is tricky. I’m writing about other artists, but between the lines, I’m writing about myself and my work. This is a delicate line to tread because no one likes to read self-absorbed texts, but my mission is not to promote other artists. It’s to understand my work in relation to its influences, including other artists [slide].
This is an excerpt from my review of a show that just ended in the lower east side, in which the artist asked women to make him a cake after one date, and he asked the same of ex-girlfriends, and then he photographed the cakes. You’ll notice that I discreetly slip in a reference to my own work [slide].

The press release encourages extrapolated meaning: [quote] “Is Saran Wrap code for safe sex or daddy issues? Because the frosting is messy, she's probably wild in bed”. [end quote] Really? Let me say that again. Really?! I can relate to the impulse to cast baked goods in a sexy light, having recently finished fabric cupcake sculptures with lingerie ‘icing’ but ultimately, I fail to see these photographs as sexy...

I’m also trying to relate my work to visual culture in a more general sense, which is an exercise in visual literacy. And, I’m trying to write about visual culture without ripping off images because as an art librarian, I feel that it’s imperative to respect copyright. This means enticing readers with pull quotes to break up the dense text and directing them to source images through links.

With shows that I’m critiquing, my focus is in on how the content of shows informs our understanding of the status of women in general. This emphasis on quality contrasts art criticism’s fixation on quantity. For example, the 2009 Artnews article, The Feminist Evolution, is essentially a tally of how many shows women artists are getting these days. So yes, there are a lot more shows by women artists, but how are women represented as the subject within the gallery walls?

In the process of preparing this presentation, I’ve concluded that writing the blog is not just an act of reportage. I feel an affinity with Kristine Stiles’ observation about Carolee Schneeman’s personal correspondence, which she used as the basis for a book: “...the artist uses her own writing practice as a confirmation of her intellectual and emotional experiences and existence...But Schneeman’s method of letter writing is saved from narcissism by her action of writing to someone else, creating interpersonal communication, while at the same time writing to and through herself.” (p. 222). Likewise, I am technically writing to the world, but I am really writing to myself, as if in a diary.

Now that I’ve spoken about the process of writing the blog, I’d like to talk about strategies for promoting and archiving it.

I’ve experimented with subtle strategies for promotion and more blatant strategies. Subtle strategies include putting the URL in my email signature, listing it as my website on Facebook, and when I learned last week that the Library of Congress would be archiving all public tweets, I immediately signed up for a twitter account under the name, Artist in Transit (for urls, pull quotes and titles of posts). Subtle strategies also include a lot of name-dropping [slide]. The bolded names are artists whose work I have discussed in detail, and the unbolded names are artists whom I have only mentioned in passing [show slide of artist names: main versus mentioned]. Another subtle strategy is tagging posts. I’ll tag the names of curators, gallerists, artists (if they’re discussed in detail), and authors, as well as the following: gender, feminism, sexuality, art, librarianship and social networking [slide].

More blatant strategies include contacting authors and artists whose books and shows I’ve reviewed positively; posting book reviews on Amazon and linking to my blog; and sending an email blast to my art contacts. I’m also thinking of printing postcards, leaving them in galleries on a roadtrip, and then checking Statcounter, that statistical analysis program I use, to learn the geographic location of my new readers.

My archiving strategies include keeping two copies of my blog: one on Blogger and the other on Wordpress, in case one disappears. I also keep a hard copy printout of all posts and comments, as well as colour printouts of all pages I’ve linked to (this is important because some of the links are already dead or the content has changed. I also keep drafts of the posts, most of which I write by hand on the train, as well as related material such as exhibition postcards, buttons, etc.

In terms of benefits, blogging has enhanced my information seeking behaviour. In striving to be current, I’ve been reading more books and seeing more shows than before, and I feel like the kind of art librarian I want to be.
I recently used the blog as evidence of my interest in feminist art, securing a role as bibliographer for the forthcoming Neuberger Museum of Art catalog for The Deconstructive Impulse. (That is our renowned campus gallery). The blog really has functioned like a sketchbook in that it has propelled my work forward. For instance, I had plans to attend the Center for Book Arts to write a post about five artists presenting on their work. I didn’t feel up to going, but I felt accountable, and I ended up having a great time and signing up for a course on embroidery at Pratt by one of the speakers, Iviva Olenick. She’s the first person I heard talk about blogging as an essential part of some artists’ practices, whereas I’d always seen them as two distinct acts. Where this way of thinking gelled for me was in response to the viral Facebook campaign that asked women to post the colour of the bra they were wearing as their status. I was annoyed by this campaign since it claimed to be promoting breast cancer awareness but it really seemed to be baiting male fantasy. So I wrote a post about it [slide]. In doing so, I recorded the colours of my friends’ posts and asked a few other friends to pass on theirs. I used one form of social networking to promote another form of social networking. I made a status update on Facebook about my blog post. StatCounter indicated that 23 people went to that post that day via Facebook. I started seeing trends with the colour status updates, like women making judgments: for example, ‘boring beige’ and ‘classic white’. I ended up embroidering the text on satin. If I didn’t have a blog, I probably would have stopped at feeling annoyed but because of the blog, I dug a little deeper and did something proactive.
Some of the Facebook embroideries and a copy of the related post are currently in a show at Diane Farris Gallery (Vancouver) on social networking. Without a blog, I never would have made work about social networking. My art would still be exclusively about gender identity. So now I have more breadth to my subject area. As the Vancouver Courier reports, in response to the show, “It's impossible to ignore the fact that social media is becoming the inspiration, subject and vehicle to promote art.” And this is reason enough for art librarians to take note.