Are Joshua Citarella and Brad Troemel Beating the Edgelords or Joining Them?

By Louis Bury
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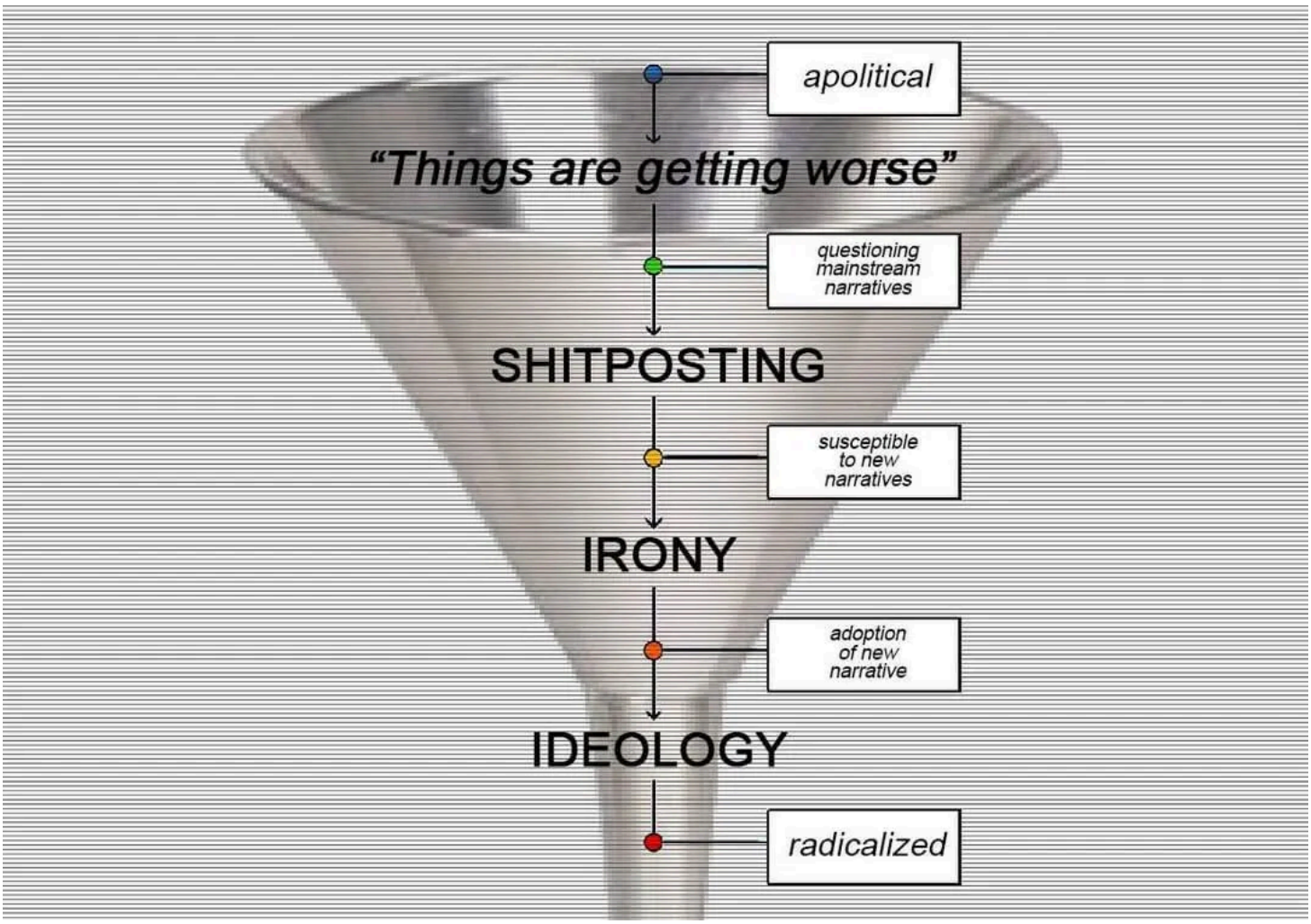


Courtesy Joshua Citarella And New Models

IF YOU ARE A MILLENNIAL AND ART WORLD ADJACENT, chances are you've come across the Instagram posts of artists Brad Troemel or Joshua Citarella. Originally famous for artistic gags and trolls, these days, Troemel posts curated

selections from TikTok that he appends with ironic captions referencing aspects of contemporary internet culture: hustle porn, new age manifestation, or therapy talk, to name a few. Citarella, meanwhile, posts about his research into niche online political identities, from graphs analyzing where Gen Z falls on the political compass test to his own artworks' meme-like iconography. Both figures use their social media accounts as portals to Patreon-funded content that takes such forms as videos, podcasts, newsletters, livestreams, and private chat servers, all scrutinizing trends in contemporary art and technology.

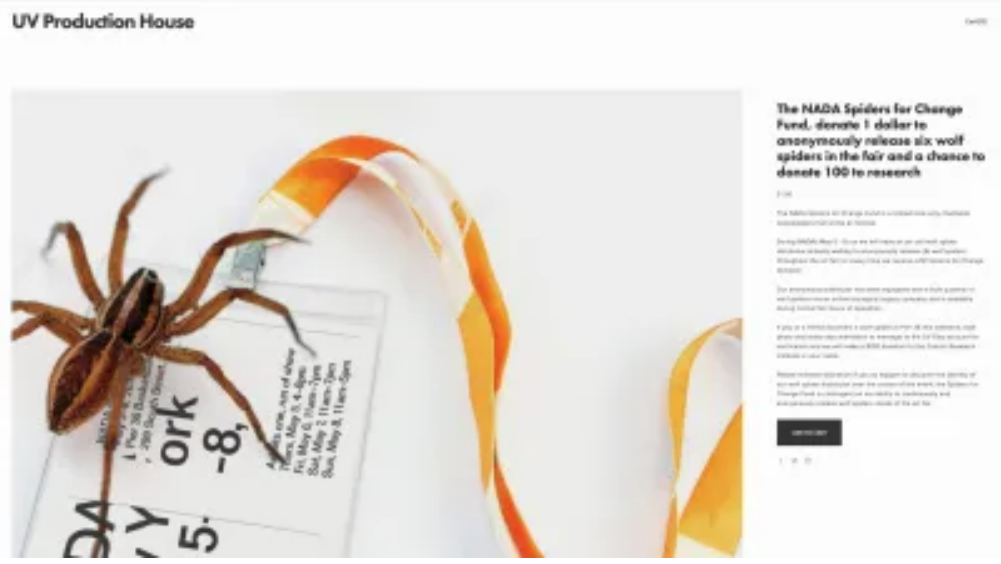
Their online presence marks an intriguing shift from post-internet artist to content creator. The two artists were closely associated with the post-internet scene, that notoriously amorphous movement from the 2010s whose predominantly millennial practitioners were "extremely online" at a time before that condition became an epidemic affecting almost all the 40-and-under population. Before finding their focus on Instagram and Patreon, Troemel and Citarella regularly exhibited in brick-and-mortar galleries. For a 2016 New York show at the now defunct gallery Feuer/Mesler, Troemel created sculptures following Pinterest tutorials. For Citarella's 2015 show at Higher Pictures in New York, he created photographic and sculptural works playing with the dual meaning of *rez*—gaming slang for "resurrection," though for most people online, just short for "resolution." The two also collaborated on projects seeking alternatives to the aesthetic and economic paradigms of the "trad art" gallery realm. Together, they ran the influential Tumblr group called the Jogging, which posted manipulated photographs and memes from 2009 to 2014, and in 2015, started the direct-to-consumer online art store, Ultra Violet Production House.

Since the beginning, the pair has had a somewhat polarizing reputation as artist-provocateurs. When the *New Yorker* profiled Troemel in 2017, in a piece titled "The Troll of Internet Art," the artist claimed that the duo's best-selling item was the *NADA Spiders for Change Fund* (2016). For every $1 donation, they claimed they would release six poisonous spiders at the 2016 New Art Dealers Alliance Fair. In exchange for receiving photographic proof of a spider found at the fair, they said they'd donate $100 to charity. The work was a frat house prank, presumably unrealized, wrapped in fine art packaging.

"WHERE ARE YOU NOW?" was the title of Orit Gat's look back at the post-internet movement last year in *Frieze*. In April, video artist Andrew Norman Wilson gave one answer in the form of an extended personal essay for the *Baffler*.

There, Wilson recounted in unsparing detail his seemingly unending financial precarity, despite his apparent success by traditional art world markers, among them acquisitions and commissions from MoMA, the Getty, and the Centre Pompidou. The story's particulars are specific to Wilson (a bizarre house-sitting arrangement involving a horny tortoise; chronic, undiagnosed illness) but its general patterns (underpaid gig work; high student loan debt; inadequate health insurance) are all too familiar to Millennials who don't come from wealth and chose to pursue a creative career at great personal cost.

All post-internet figures have had to adapt, and only some—such as Cory Arcangel, Hito Steyerl, and Simon Denny—remain in the art world. In this magazine last year, **Emily Watlington argued (https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/leave-society-hito-steyerl-ryan-trecartin-1234683149/)**that the rise of NFTs and AI caused many in the post-internet movement to abandon digital art and go back to the land. Other post-internet artists pivoted to different cultural pursuits in response to the economic conditions Wilson's essay details. Amalia Ulman, for example, known for her 2014 Instagram performance art hoax "Excellences & Perfections," continues to show work in galleries but has also branched out into the film industry. Artie Vierkant, known for his "Image Objects" series in which he printed digital images then fitted them onto 3D sculptures, now cohosts a leftist podcast, *Death Panel*, and in 2022 coauthored the book *Health Communism*, published by Verso.



Troemel and Citarella, meanwhile, shifted to content creation (though Citarella continues to exhibit in galleries and museums). Call it the post-post-internet hustle, if the original movement's name isn't confusing enough for you. For artists

who amassed sizable social media followings in the 2010s, monetizing their practices this way makes sense both as a bulwark against art market vicissitudes and as proof of concept that their practices can operate outside the art world institutions they were bent on critiquing. It also highlights the difficulties of maintaining an anti-capitalist practice in an industry where stable employment and livable wages are scarce.

HOW HAS THIS SHIFT to content creation impacted the work? Troemel's practice has mellowed with age. His principal output now comprises the aforementioned "reports," which, when not abridged as social media posts, take the form of 30-plus-minute-long video essays about contemporary arts culture, available to his Patreon subscribers. Wearing a T-shirt and gray Yankees cap, Troemel narrates heavily researched videos on topics such as the culture wars, celebrity art, and AI, while slideshows illustrating his points play onscreen. The tone is equal parts anthropological and bemused, as though Troemel were cataloging online arts discourse so as to marvel at its excesses.

For example, in the *Cloutbombing Report* (2023), he argues that early 2020s media schadenfreude toward the Dimes Square art scene's mythos was motivated by "culture industry Millennials [who] were forced, for the first time ever, to confront a scene distinctly younger than themselves." He calls this confrontation with aging "a wound to the ego everyone is forced to experience," and adds, as a tweak, "no matter how much they're babied." Yet his critique omits the simplest explanation for why Millennials and others remained wary of the Dimes Square scene, which is that they disagree with its post-left politics. Troemel's digs at what he calls "Millennial cultural liberalism"—2010s efforts toward greater inclusivity on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, and disability—are common in his reports. He sides with fellow Dimes Square edgelords in believing that such inclusivity values art solely for its moral instrumentalism, "rather than [to] nudge viewers toward asking their own questions."

Viewers would do well to ask their own questions about Troemel's reports. These first drafts of art history, written by a participant-observer, contain useful syntheses of recent zeitgeists. But they can be surprisingly moralistic—calling out call-out culture, in essence—and he often cherry-picks evidence for inflammatory effect. In the *Cloutbombing Report*, for instance, Troemel decries the "unrealistic behavioral and communicative standards" of online discourse, as a decontextualized July 31, 2023, post from @thefatsextherapist's 150K-follower

Instagram account appears on screen. “Don’t call it feminist art,” reads the post about that summer’s *Barbie* movie, “if there are no meaningful representations of fat people in the body of the work.” Troemel uses the post to argue that IRL human interactions require conflict negotiation skills that URL ones don’t, but the original post’s comments section shows users exercising precisely those skills, sometimes with considerable nuance. What’s more, a public post that readers can engage with invites more opportunities for negotiation than a private video monologue.

Troemel’s daily compilations of TikToks and memes, which decontextualize user-generated content from niche communities, pair earnest videos about mental health or trauma with overheated cringe, such as a clip of a shirtless male nutrition guru purporting to drink “aged urine” from a mason jar. The absurdist captions are stuffed with buzzwords from the Discourse: “The best healing remedies come from inside your own body; your waste contains everything you need to become your best self.” While it’s unclear what critique, if any, Troemel is making in such moments, his caricatures of the internet’s innumerable micro-trends perpetuate the same engagement bait dynamics as the original content.

Compare Troemel’s treatment of niche online content to Citarella’s 2020 book *20 Interviews*, which contains Q+As with members of online political subcultures, a practice Citarella continues to this day on his podcastDo Not Research. The subjects are young adults trying out niche political identities gaining new traction on Instagram, such as anarcho-primitivism, techno-libertarianism, and fully automated luxury communism. While Citarella’s interviews bear similarities to Troemel’s reports in their anthropological curiosity about online behavior, they are more neutral and respectful in tone, even when the subjects’ beliefs conflict with Citarella’s social democratic ideology.

Citarella approached his spoofy-sounding 2021 auto-ethnographic project, “Auto Experiment: Hyper Masculinity,” with similar open-mindedness. The artist undertook a year’s worth of manosphere diet and exercise regimens, from eating raw eggs to weightlifting programs, to see if they would change his left-wing politics. He didn’t become a rugged individualist, but he does continue to lift weights. With newfound common ground, he’s discovered that young men online who were predisposed toward right-wing politics became more willing to listen to his differing views—and in some cases even change their minds. Like Troemel, Citarella believes that in the past decade, too much emphasis has been placed on cultural inclusivity; in his case, on the grounds that it distracts from society’s

underlying class inequities. But rather than sneer at caricatures of liberalism, he endeavors to create space for intergenerational leftist solidarity.

Citarella chronicles others' behaviors so as to open lines of communication between siloed constituencies, whereas Troemel maintains an us-versus-them gadfly mentality whose core ideological commitments remain vague beyond the schadenfreude of mocking his over-earnest foils. Regardless, both men have found that "shitposting doesn't scale," as Citarella once put it. The trolling that he and Troemel utilized when younger, among friends and peers, doesn't translate as their audience grows and their context collapses. The shifts in both artists' practice—from provoking online arts discourse to chronicling it—are responses to these conditions.

AS THE YOUTHFUL AMATEURISM of online culture has calcified into atomized professionalism, some tech-minded artists have responded by pursuing alternative paradigms to platform capitalism. *The Dark Forest Anthology of the Internet*, published in 2024 by Metalabel, a digital space for the cooperative release of creative work, provides a handy introduction to these ideas. The title concept comes from Kickstarter cofounder Yancey Strickler's May 2019 newsletter and is adapted from Chinese sci-fi writer Liu Cixin's 2008 novel, *The Dark Forest*. Strickler's basic point is that, as social media and other public online platforms (called "the clearnet") grew in prominence during the 2010s, many people retreated to private, curated digital enclaves (called "dark forests") organized around shared interests. If you weren't already attuned to such communities, the dark forest concept likely flew under your radar.

The Dark Forest Collective's book *The dark Forest Anthology of the Internet*, 2024.

Courtesy The Dark Forest Collective And Metalabel

This *Anthology* should help change that. It presents a genealogy of ideas responding to Strickler's initial essay, from writer and consultant Venkatesh Rao's May 2019 concept of the "cozyweb," to designers Arthur Roing Baer and GVN908's February 2021 explanation of modular "moving castles." Contributions from visual arts–oriented content creators include two essays from New Models (Caroline Busta and Lil Internet) and one from Do Not Research (Joshua Citarella). Cumulatively, the book makes the case that niche digital communities not only provide bastions of "safety, meaning, and context" within today's adversarial clearnet but may also form the basis for tomorrow's social and professional institutions.

These counterinstitutions are emerging both from financial necessity and from fatigue with the polarization of online discourse during the Trump presidency and Covid years. Subscribers pay for access to both content and community, as

exchanges on dark forest platforms experience less context collapse—less bad faith antagonism—than exchanges on clearnet platforms. But curiously, these concerns with safety and visibility motivating dark forest withdrawals from the public fray echo liberal language concerning the safety and visibility of people with historically marginalized identities. This parallel is at odds with the reservations expressed by many dark forest community leaders, like Troemel and Citarella, who both operate communities through Patreon about 2010s-style identity politics.

This tension says something about where Millennials are now, in the arts and beyond. After a decade and a half of unprecedented access to everybody else's takes—or at least the performative versions of those takes—it's become easy to find your digital people, but hard to feel like you can be left in peace with them. The clearnet attention economy's context collapse makes even historically centered individuals feel overexposed. You can retreat into a like-minded enclave, and participate in the group's flourishing or ressentiment, but a big part of doing art and politics, and many things in between, involves sharing its fruits with strangers. For that, you need to open lines of communication and build a culture, maybe even an economy, that others like you, as well as others different from you, also want to see.