Website Case Study: Portland Institute for Contemporary Art
AAD 585 Multimedia In Arts Administration
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I chose to profile Portland Institute for Contemporary Art's website because I've volunteered with them often over the years, and their organization is very prolific in the Portland arts scene. I've come to find recently that they have a reputation for presenting quality contemporary art far beyond the geographical bounds of the Northwest. Their mission: "PICA acknowledges and advances new developments in contemporary art while fostering the creative explorations of artists and audiences. Established in 1995 by a committed group of artists and patrons, PICA features emerging and established regional, national, and international artists in all disciplines, and supports the creation of new work." PICA is best known for its annual TBA (Time-Based Art) Festival. Each year, the festival features international and national artists in a whirlwind, weeklong tour of performance art, film, and visual art exhibitions.

As a contemporary art powerhouse recognized for being on the cutting edge, it is essential to their image that their website be slick and up-to-date. Having visited their site many times in the past five or so years, I can say with authority that it has not changed much. This is one of my criticisms of the site, which I will get to later. The first design element one notices when navigating to the homepage of pica.org are the four colored blocks on the bottom of the screen. This block-style navigation is repeated on every page of the site. I'll go into detail about the homepage for the purpose of this case study.

On it, one block at a time changes from teal to green and grows to rectangle-sized, as the large image above changes with it. This feature is an automated gallery that shows viewers the top four upcoming events at PICA successively, preview-style. Viewers can also roll over the blocks and manually change the image above. I believe this choice was made to immediately

make website visitors aware of current happenings at the organization. Many people associate PICA only with TBA, and this feature helps remedy that misunderstanding. The other wonderful thing about the gallery function is that large photographs of current visual art exhibits are easily displayed. PICA often curates visually arresting pieces, and this web design feature allows a piece to grab a viewer's attention right away, encouraging them to explore more of the site.

Many organizations use this automated gallery function on their site's homepage, although theirs was one of the first sites I remember seeing with it. Below the "current events" blocks (which do not click through to more information; they just give small nuggets of info, which entices the viewer) are several more grey blocks (which do click through): Current Jobs and Internships. I think this bears noting because most websites do not so prominently display job and internship information. Generally, those links will be sub-navigation in the About section, or sometimes just standalone links in tiny font on the very bottom of the homepage. This speaks to the demand that PICA probably sees for information of this nature. Other information that appears in grey blocks is "Sign up for email" and "Become a member." These are also key navigation buttons. PICA chose all of these homepage shortcuts intentionally. They either wanted to drive the most traffic towards these pages (like upcoming events and membership info), or had to because of demand (like jobs, internship, and email list pages). This makes usability, dare I say, "intuitive." Other features prominently displayed on the homepage are social media icons. In addition, links to all the main sub-pages are at the top of the page (TBA Festival, Programs, Merchandise, and Support, to name about half).

This block-style navigation is very effective on the homepage of pica.org, but clicking through all the main pages, the design scheme gets tiresome. For one thing, the blocks (which at least are different colors on each page) are the main visual element, where photographs of

performances or art exhibits would be much more striking. The site starts to feel a little bit wooden. While I think this style was unique and eye-catching a few years ago (and I might be biased because I've visited the site for years), it sort of lacks pizzazz compared to other sites. Brooklyn Academy of Music's site, for example, uses a similar block-style interface. However, their site is much more dynamic and exciting to use (check out bam.org). In contrast to PICA's blocks, all of the BAM site's blocks are exciting photographs that roll over to display detailed info about the particular event. Additionally, you can click through each for more information. But the BAM site is configured differently from PICA's in one major way; it has *all* the event information on the homepage—one very long, scrollable homepage. Thus, a comparison is not totally fair.

I'll briefly cover a few other things that stick out about PICA's website. The TBA section of the site houses an archive of every TBA festival, organized by year and going back to 2003. Since this festival is the organization's crowning glory, it is very wise of them to include this back catalog of programming. It shows how the festival has grown, evolved, and included bigger talents throughout the years. This is one page where the visuals-light block style navigation makes perfect sense. The merchandise page, in contrast, is a little homely and sparse. It includes sub-navigation to two merchandise sub-pages. I don't think that is necessary; all merchandise could easily be displayed on the main merchandise page.

Overall, the look of PICA's website is clean and minimal, and the usability is good. I just wonder if the block style really benefits each sub-page equally. At minimum, I would recommend that PICA add more photographs of current (and past) events to their site to engage the viewer a little more aggressively, similar to BAM's website. PICA is a highly respected

contemporary art institution, and their website could more accurately reflect the innovative

nature of their organization.