Photo: Robin Denevan

The Art of Making a Digital Art Community
How we made one online world for many types of artists and art lovers

The Problem
**Redesign an underused site to create new social opportunities.**
In our concept project for Hunter's Point Shipyard Association (HPSA), which runs a colony of 300 artists, our UX team focused on two main goals: *exposure* of the artists' work and ways to *engage* the artists and the public.

The Solution
The site has to be special in its own right to draw people to it.
Our idea to address these goals is to redesign the HPSA Web site with:
1) A site that has current, compelling content, much of it from the artists themselves
2) Innovative ways for the artists and public to interact.
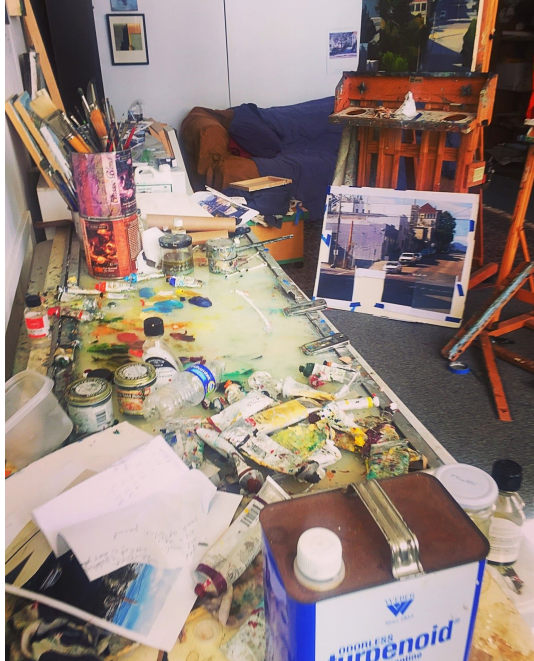
We wanted a site that reflects and celebrates the creative spirit of Hunter's Point Shipyard.

- The primary goal for the business that our solution supports is community-building, which in turn supports their product (studio real estate).
- The primary goal for the artist is to expand their outreach, which helps their craft and their sales.
- The primary goal for the public is give them access to great art and the artists who make it.

Team, Duration, and Focus
3 team members, 2-week sprint
*This case study focuses on **Research** and **Brainstorming**, which were my main contributions as a team member.*

The Process
Ask users what they really want, be creative in the answer.

Contextual Inquiry:
The power of the interview.
Spending time with users "in their natural habitat" is always the starting point. We ask them open-ended questions that invite their collaboration. We referred to these interviews again and again in our process, asking, "Would those artists want this?"

We arranged to interview several artists on site. I had to get security clearance because the public is not allowed. The setting is dramatic, off the grid, in an 1870s shipyard, in the shadow of huge shipping cranes on the San Francisco Bay. We learned that this artist colony has been around since the 80s and is the largest in the U.S. The buildings are beautifully dilapidated. There are old mannequins and wooden saws and an AirStream trailer scattered around. The studios are low cost and wonderfully eclectic like the artists themselves.

It quickly became apparent in our interviews that artists aren't using the current Web site much. One artist joked he hadn't heard of it. He then went on to say that he had actually led efforts

over the years to moderate HPSA's social media accounts and had become frustrated with a lack of community enthusiasm.

Another artist, less established in her career, said she would love to have a dynamic forum to market her work. She felt the current Web site is a wasted opportunity. She said her paintings on the site are 3 years old and she can't get anyone to update them. She gets hundreds of likes on social media for a new painting, but doesn't have a way to channel those into sales.

We started to see your our big challenge. We could make a better digital space for the young artist, but how to get the more established artist interested?

The artists all said they love being part of this community and benefit from the semi-annual Open Studios, which bring in 10,000 visitors each weekend they occur. But it's feast or famine: the rest of the year, the public does not come on site. So we started to think about how to fill that gap with our digital space. We had to start thinking about grabbing not just the artists but the public, too.
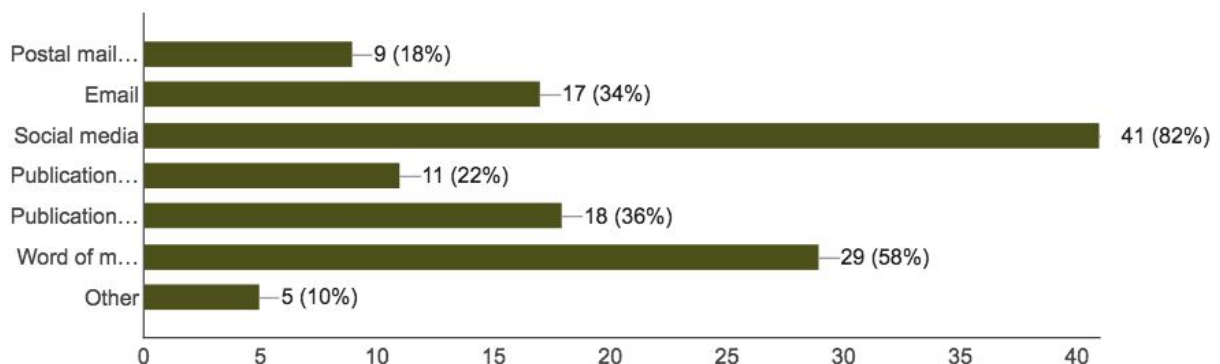

More Research:
How do people connect to artists? How do artists sell online?
We created a survey that we sent out to the general public.

How do you learn about the art exhibits and art openings? (50 responses)

Postal mail…	9 (18%)
Email	17 (34%)
Social media	41 (82%)
Publication…	11 (22%)
Publication…	18 (36%)
Word of m…	29 (58%)
Other	5 (10%)

Key findings:
- art lovers stay in the know through social media and
- they usually buy directly from the artists

I interviewed art lovers to get a feel for what takes them out of their comfort zone (hassle, mystery), and what drives their passion for the art scene (social, a love of the chase). We created several personas from novice collector to established artist based on all our research.

Alex, for example, is a real person who took our survey, then let us interview him and later tested our prototype. We referred to these personas continually as we designed and reiterated.

Alex "collector on a budget"

Alex is a 43-year-old lawyer from NYC who makes $200K. He's lived in the Bay Area for the past 2 decades. He frequents art museums and galleries and has a lot of artist friends and a modest personal collection.

Behavior

Alex likes to feel in the know and enjoys art events as a social outing. He gets mailings, social media alerts, and invitations from art-loving friends. and subscribes to Timeout Magazine. He is careful with his money but likes to update his collection.

Scenario

He sees a lot of great pieces for sale but is never extravagant when buying art. He often negotiates directly with the artist, emailing for a price.

Needs & Pain Points

Alex likes to know about yet-to-be-discovered artists. He likes to support talent out of the mainstream, but doesn't have a lot of time to research.

"If it's beautiful and reasonably priced."

I researched trends in selling art online by by interviewing Marketing Director Tiffany Wheat of Heath Ceramics, a well-established Bay Area design company that received the the Cooper Hewitt 2015 National Design Award. She gave me three trends:

- Maximize SEO (Search Engine Optimization)
- Embed links to an artist's site in Pinterest
- Instagram is the number-one way artists are marketing themselves online
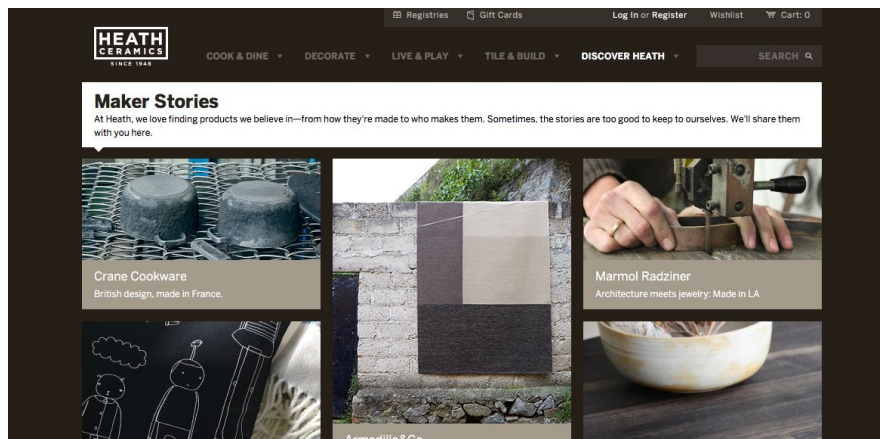
We interviewed successful artist Jim Zivic, who is selling his art online for $20,000-$50,000 per piece. He said he cannot overstate the importance of a Web site for bringing in random "foot traffic." He said his "Price Upon Request" button is his number-one sales tool: Users click and get his email, and negotiations begin. He said any artist not using a Web site to sell art is "short-sighted."

Brainstorming:
How to make a site with something for everyone?
The existing Web site has good basic information but the information hierarchy is strangely just a breakdown of the artists by building. The site does have artist pages with one or two paintings, but there's nothing creative in the presentation, nothing to draw a user back. We wanted a living, breathing site that feels inspired like the world it reflects.
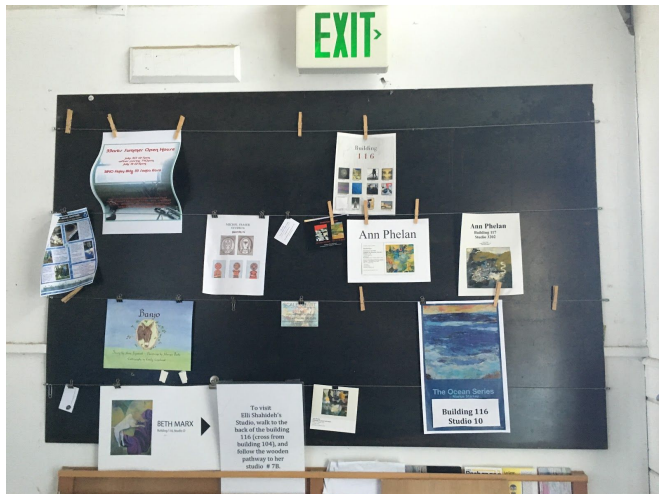
We did extensive comparative/competitive analysis to see what popular art sites are doing now. We sketched out our collection of ideas, like an online bulletin board modeled after a real bulletin board we saw at HPSA.

I brainstormed the following seven features:

- Gallery templates for each artist that are as customizable and updatable as a Facebook timeline
- Artists would have interesting new feature options for their personal gallery like time-lapse videos showing them at work in their studio
- A bulletin board for artists to interact
- A comments feature for the public to dialog with artists
- An artist of the month "mood board" feature to highlight even the artists who are less active on the site
- Price Upon Request buttons for each painting
- Social Media linking that drives sales

But Do They Like It?
User Testing
At the same time we added richness to the site, we didn't want to clutter it. Our new look and updated functionality had to flow easily. We took our prototypes to our users and asked them to click around, which revealed some confusing touchpoints. We went back to the whiteboard and tinkered with our user flows. One way we streamlined was by adding modals to quickly give bite-size chunks of information. We did some preliminary testing to validate that we were on the right track. Here's the wireframe we presented to our users:
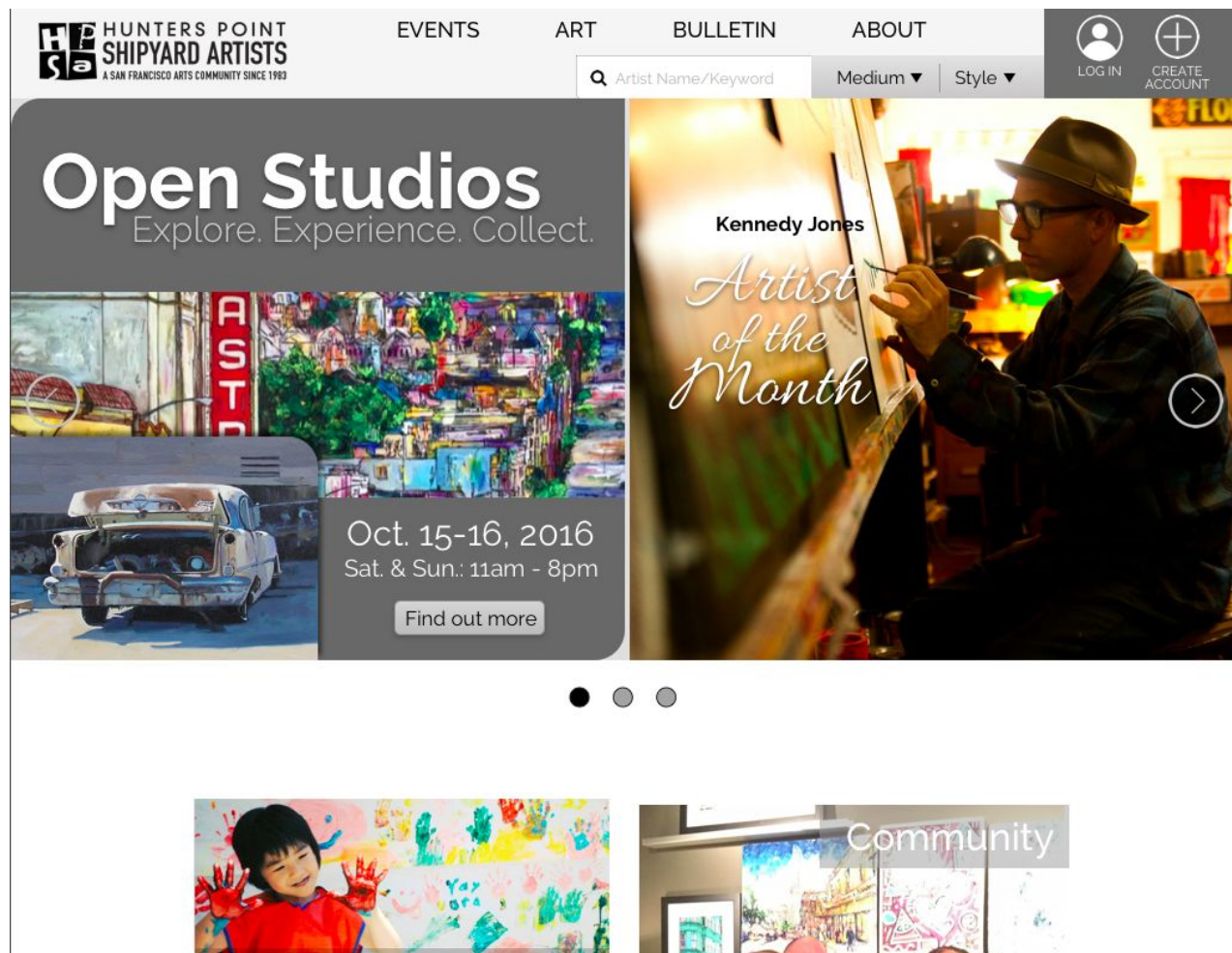

Our clickable prototype: https://invis.io/RM8XHTC8Y

Next Step: Content Strategy
A modular system to give the site a life of its own.
Beyond the planning phase, it's necessary to think about the entire lifecycle of the information. What sets this site apart is the feeling that artists are part of it. We wanted to make it easy for

many people to refresh content often. So I recommended a Content Management System (like Surreal), which is a standardized template that lets every artist upload their latest images, videos, and text. Artists can do as much or as little as they want. I used the following flowchart to make my evaluation:
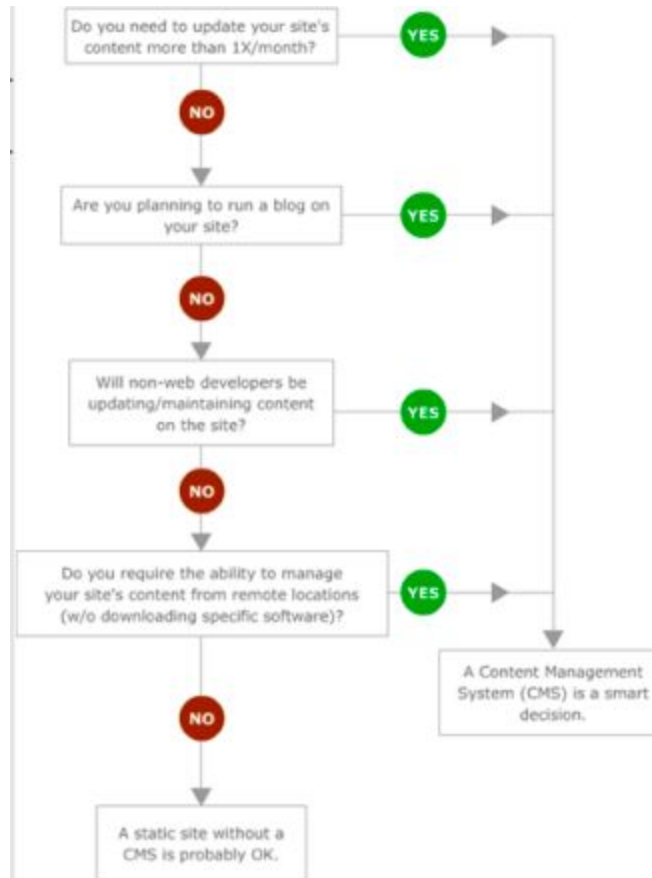
Reflections

Our job as a designer is to explain things.
Early on in the process, we discovered an inconsistency: some people want a richer site, and some people think they have no use for a site at all. I'm proud of the site we came up with because it has so many innovative, interesting features for everyone.

But in offering more, we had to walk a fine line: we had to avoid "featuritis"--in other words, an incoherent mess. The old site was too plain, but we didn't want the redesign to get in the way of the subject. The way we achieved this was to take each persona's happy path and make that path utterly clear to them via navigation and affordances. We thought of our site as a clear container that exists to transmit colorful information. And our result is a clean, inviting site that highlights the artists.

Photo: Robin Denevan