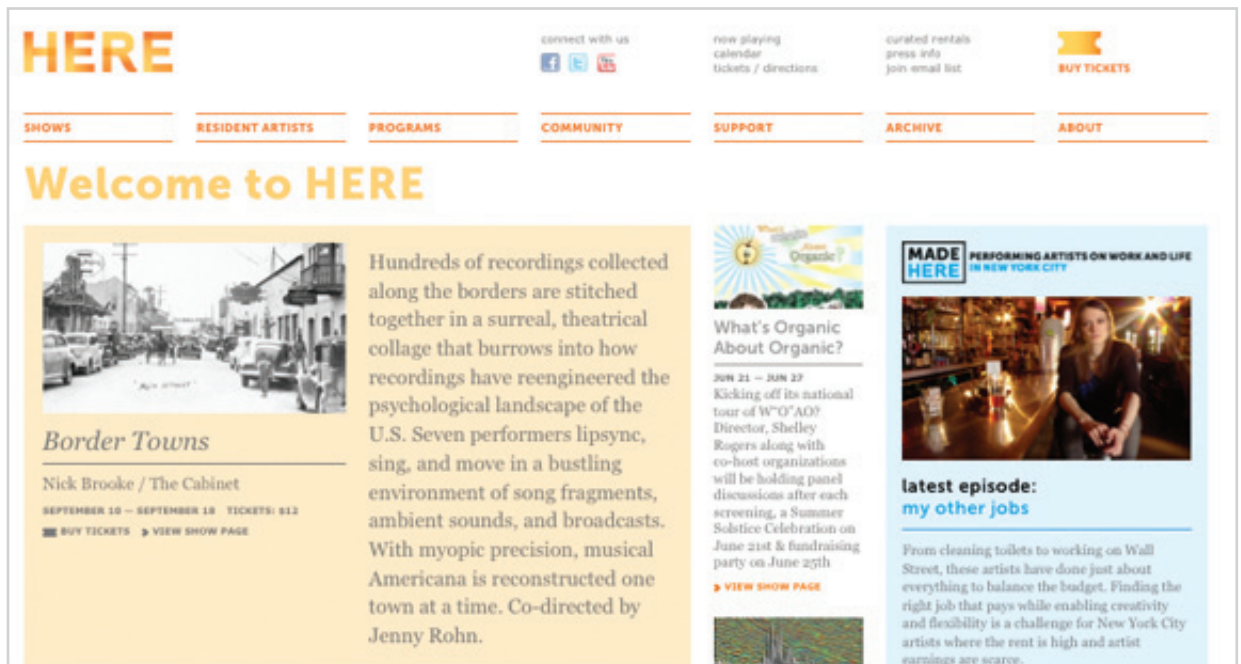


Doing Things Differently

Stories from innovation initiatives in the arts.



The Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts HERE Arts Center



The Innovators

HERE Arts Center (HERE) in New York City is dedicated to presenting new, hybrid performance work that seamlessly integrates music, theatre, dance, puppetry and performance art. Each season, HERE produces three to six projects – developed over a one to three-year period – through its Resident Artist programs. Through its Supported Artist Program, HERE provides creative workspace, equipment and administrative support at a subsidized rate to more than 300 artists and emerging companies. Over 15 years, HERE has served over 12,000 emerging to mid-career artists. HERE has an operating budget of \$1.6 million and a core audience of 45,000. The audience is racially diverse, young and urban – mostly under the age of 30 and with annual incomes of less than \$35,000.

Image: HERE's website www.Here.org

The Innovation

HERE created *HERE: On Demand*, a 24/7 online community that integrates all of the organization's social networking components. Essentially a technology and media-driven marketing strategy designed to expand the reach of HERE's programs, *HERE: On Demand* aims to attract, motivate and retain traditionally untapped audiences through a variety of online components that increase access, transparency, peer-to-peer interactivity, and participation.

Starting Conditions

Because its audience is young and adept at navigating a multitude of social networking options, HERE believed it needed a more powerful strategy to exploit audiences' preference for participation over observation and to respond to its expectation of on-demand information. How could an organization – already known for its cutting-edge approach to live art-making – find a new pathway into a culture that was traveling even deeper into internet isolation? When HERE submitted its proposal to the Innovation Lab, it was searching for ways to stimulate greater participation in its work – work that by its nature is mutable and reactive, and that takes place in an intimate community constrained by space, time and curatorial process. HERE wanted to find a new approach to communicating with audiences on their own terms while stimulating them to join the in-person community of live performance. Would such an approach, HERE asked, succeed in bridging the gaps it saw widening so rapidly? HERE was accepted into the Lab in March 2009.

The Lab

Transformative Moments

HERE's strategy was initially focused primarily on marketing – creating an interactive website that would pull people into the work the organization was producing. In Phase 1 of the Lab, the Innovation Team identified strengths and weaknesses of HERE's existing online presence and surveyed audiences about their habits and expectations. The organization also determined it needed an additional staff member to serve as a marketing and media specialist, and began raising funds to support improvements to its infrastructure. Finally, HERE examined various online platforms to determine which ones were most suitable for its organizational culture and aspirations.

Armed with this information, the HERE Innovation Team attended the Lab Intensive. The Intensive helped the Team articulate its expectations of the relationship between institutional and artist-generated material, understand the audience's role in *HERE: On Demand*, and develop an initial

information map of the site. Lab facilitator Richard Evans says a substantive breakthrough came when the Team considered the role of artists in making the project happen. With multiple artists in residence through its HARP artists' program (and two on the Innovation Team), HERE would be able to draw upon numerous artists undertaking creative journeys under its aegis. But the artists made clear they possessed very different levels of skill and experience in preparing online material for public engagement. The Team realized it would have to fundamentally review the nature of its contract with HARP artists, and introduce a substantial training component throughout the residencies. At the Intensive, the Team began to compile the areas of professional development that should be covered in the program and, on returning to the organization, they began to flesh these out with other and new artists in the program (calling it the HARP blueprint).

At the Intensive, the Team itself struggled to find a productive synergy. A pivotal moment came when Lab consultant Phil McArthur

talked with the group about *The Ladder of Inference*. This model of effective communication proposes that individuals all too readily articulate their own interpretation of data (inferences based on their particular worldview) and typically fail to lay out the data behind their conclusions. Two or more people conversing in this way rarely reach any constructive agreements, nor do they manage to debate real data that might lead to a common understanding. The solution lies in deliberately moving down the ladder oneself, and requesting the same behavior from others.

Prompted by the session with McArthur, the Team noted how dysfunctional their meetings often became and asked themselves, "Why do we have a problem?" Team members realized that individual styles of advocacy were getting in the way of productive dialogue – that they were talking past each other. Driven by a need to express their own ideas or positions, they couldn't listen objectively to others and build on what they were hearing. In a unique moment of self-awareness, the Team used McArthur's

approach to develop a new model to describe its own behavior. They called it *The Ladder of Passive-Aggressiveness*. The humor, mixed with chagrin, marked a turning point in the Team's efforts.

Shifts in Assumptions

Team members say that the Intensive produced a radical shift in their initial thinking about *HERE: On Demand*. Coming into the Lab, the Team imagined a stand-alone destination website. Working with Lab facilitator Richard Evans, the Team soon discovered that an aggregated site that pulled from various sources and used already-developed technologies, such as Vimeo and Flickr, made more sense.

New Pathways to Mission

HERE: On Demand is not so much a new pathway to the organization's mission as it is improved coordination of the marketing tools *HERE* was already using. The consolidation of information through a more efficient and interactive information management platform gives *HERE* opportunities to target its messages more strategically, gather feedback more quickly, and involve artists more effectively in communicating about their work to the public.

The Prototype

HERE decided to construct multi-faceted functional online prototypes and then survey audiences about each web tool's efficacy. The organization also planned to develop new artistic and administrative support structures to provide the necessary framework to implement and sustain *HERE: On Demand*. Central to this effort was the establishment of the *HARP Blueprint* through which highly informed and technically savvy participating artists would test and use the online tools.

The first step in the process was creating a draft architecture for the new website, including information sourcing, points of entry for users, and modules for user participation and feedback. Using this information, *HERE* then began researching information architects and consulted with other organizations, such as Dance Theater Workshop and St. Ann's Warehouse. It created a group of artists to serve as a control group during the prototyping phase, established a HARP wiki for current resident artists, and started an internal blog to share information throughout the development process.

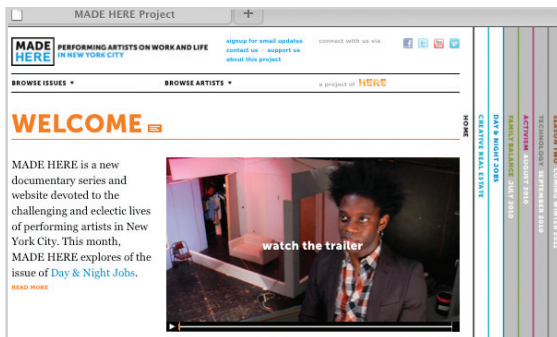
Over several months, *HERE* continued to assemble the components of its prototype. Via the Blueprint, it created institutional standards for current and incoming HARP artists. The documents were intended to train artists in using the new site and to serve as a critical part of their ongoing professional development. The Team also continued its research into best practices for aggregated websites, using funds from the Lab to consult with several online development companies, including FlyLeaf and Tender Creative. *HERE* also worked with its artists to expand the organization's presence on Flickr and create new marketing strategies for its Facebook page.

HARP artists were critical to the prototyping process. Marketing Manager Michael Bodel held individual meetings with artists to discuss their expectations, interests and abilities pertaining to *HERE: On Demand*. Working with the control group of artists, Bodel identified the online opportunities best suited for each artist and project. Soon afterward, *HERE* began Facebook marketing for *The Lily's Revenge* and uploaded video used in the show, as well as rehearsal and makeup footage, to its

YouTube channel. It also installed a Twitter kiosk in *HERE's* lobby where audiences could post immediate reviews of the show, and developed a Flickr photo booth where participants could take photos with their smart phones and upload them immediately to *HERE's* Flickr page.

HERE's approach to prototyping was incremental, research-based, and multi-faceted – much like its approach to mounting productions. Once individual components were tested and feedback received from artists and audiences, *HERE* solicited proposals from web designers and selected a content management system (Expression Engine) that is inexpensive, has an open-source ethic, and interfaces natively with Web 2.0 utilities. *HERE* ultimately selected the design firm Open as its information architect.

HERE: On Demand launched in spring 2010, and includes a 10-part online video and blog series called *MADE HERE*. Funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and curated over two seasons, *MADE HERE* is a monthly documentary series and website "devoted to the challenging and eclectic lives of performing artists in New York." Topics were selected in collaboration with artists in all five boroughs, exploring issues like day and night jobs, creative real estate, family balance, activism, and technology. *MADE HERE* gives visitors insight into the lives of working artists and encourages involvement in the projects the artists are developing. Visitors to *HERE's* aggregated site can get information about shows, read about current and past *HERE* artists, access the organization's core programs, join its community through the *HERE* blog, Twitter or Facebook, and explore the *HERE* archive.



MADE HERE features a series of documentaries about artists working in New York City. Online at www.MadeHereProject.org

Obstacles and Enablers

The ways in which HERE staff were used to working proved challenging to the team-building aspects of the Lab. However, HERE's experience in building projects from scratch, as well as its intense focus on artists, kept the project going even as the Team was learning to function more collaboratively. HERE recognizes that integrating the various Web 2.0 tools into an aggregated site was technically more challenging than the organization had imagined. For example, Expression Engine requires media from other sources to be reposted on the organization's own website in order for them to be searchable. Facebook, too, added hindrances to direct integration, making it difficult for HERE to integrate its Facebook page with *HERE: On Demand* and with the Facebook profiles of its artists. HERE is also wrestling with how to integrate existing donor and other organizational data bases into the new website.

The Impact

Working on *HERE: On Demand* enabled the organization to develop a more robust media platform. The organization's approach to integrating its media strategies by using existing resources not only created a rich and interesting experience for users, but also engaged artists in new ways. There are significant lessons here for other organizations seeking to use social media to market the institution by promoting interaction among artists and audiences. HERE also added to its long list of services for artists by creating training sessions on the basics of creating and uploading online videos, including the capture, compression and formatting of work. Thanks to the success of the prototype, HERE plans to construct a more permanent online kiosk in the lobby where visitors can sign up for HERE's mailing list, change their Facebook status, and participate in other social engagement activities that are unrelated to specific shows.

HERE's involvement in the Lab – which led to the development of *HERE: On Demand* – produced significant new resources for the organization, including a major grant from the Rockefeller Foundation's Cultural Innovation Fund for *MADE HERE*.

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All artwork courtesy of HERE Arts Center.

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