EMU Galleries Web Site: Design and Process

Christopher Cameron Kaufman

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EMU GALLERIES WEB SITE: DESIGN AND PROCESS

By

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A Senior Thesis Submitted to the
Eastern Michigan University
Honors College
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation
with Honors in Art

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Part I: Design Process and Methodology

In early November 2006 the new Eastern Michigan University Student Center opened its doors for the first time. The opening of this new facility not only created a new central hub for the University and its students, but also signaled a time of growth for the University Gallery Program, opening the doors to two new galleries. Before November 2006, the Gallery Program included Ford Gallery, which was the main gallery for the University at the time, and Intermedia Gallery, a student-run gallery located in the former student union building.

The new gallery space in the Student Center filled a void in the Gallery Program, adding another gallery for large exhibitions and a student gallery. With the addition of the new galleries, University Gallery and Student Gallery, it became apparent that the Gallery Program’s current web site would no longer be able to serve its purpose to get people the information they needed about exhibitions, events and lectures.

It was at this time that I proposed to the Gallery Program committee, that for my honors senior thesis I would design
an entirely new web presence for the EMU Gallery Program that would encompass all of the campus galleries, and provided much needed information accessible via the web. The committee thought it was a great idea, and planning for the new EMU Galleries web site began.

Based on feedback I received from the committee, I set out to design a web site that would position the EMU Gallery Program as a respected arts program, offering progressive presentations from some of the nations most respected artists and designers, and an eclectic mix of gallery shows, ranging from comic art to graphic design to contemporary painting, to name a few.

One of the most challenging steps in any design process, especially web, is planning. Since I was educated as a print graphic designer, there were many hurdles to overcome transitioning into a web-based medium. Unlike print, there are many components that come into play with a web site design, such as screen resolution, limited fonts, navigation, and color limitations.

According to the World Wide Web Consortium, although the majority of Internet users have screen resolutions at or
greater than 1024x768 pixels, there are still about 15% of users running displays at an 800x600 pixels resolution. A finding such as this is important to designing a web site, because it let me know what kind of audience I needed to design for in order to develop a user-friendly site. Since 15% of users is small, but still significant, I designed the EMU Galleries site to be optimally viewed in a 1024x768 pixel resolution browser, however the site is still completely viewable at lower resolutions, without any information being sacrificed.

It was possible to make the site optimal for larger resolutions, yet still “fit” smaller ones by designing all of the site’s crucial information to fit within the 800x600 dimension, while allowing decorative background elements to fill the remaining browser space on higher resolution computer displays.

Another challenge to designing a web site is the limited choice of fonts a designer has that are “web friendly”. Usually, when I am designing a piece for print, I have the option to use thousands of different fonts. Unfortunately, when designing for the web I do not have that luxury. Because there is only a small common set of fonts that are
installed on every computer, in order for a site to display correctly on all of your user’s machines, you have to use one of those fonts for page text. Fonts that are “web safe” include Helvetica, Arial, Times, Verdana, Courier, and Georgia—a rather limited group.

Although it would be possible to make all of the text on a web page into images, this approach would destroy any search benefit the site would have. Text that has been turned into images has been flattened, like a photograph. This allows the text to always be visually the same on every computer because a browser is not generating the text. Search engines work by “crawling” web pages for information, which basically means they send out an automated script that searches web pages for relevant up-to-date text. Search engines such as Google and Yahoo develop web crawlers that create a copy of all of the pages on a web site, which are stored and later searched by users. When crawlers create these copies it is called “indexing” the site, which allows the site to show up in search engines once a user searched relevant text on that site. Although it would allow for versatility concerning font use, if all of the text on the EMU Galleries site were
made into an image, web crawlers would not be able to “read” the site.

A good way around a purely search optimized site is to find a balance of searchable text and text that has been made into images. In order to add visual interest to the EMU Galleries site, I chose a font for all of the page headline and sub-headline text that is not a typical web-safe font. Instead of using Verdana, Times, or Arial, I found that the use of a font called Section was far more visually appealing, giving the site a progressive look and feel. By using Section for the EMU Galleries title on the homepage, and then using it again on the other pages of the site throughout the page titles, headlines and sub-headlines, I was able to maintain a sense of continuity that carries through the entire EMU Galleries web site. Although using a font that needed to be converted to an image takes away from search engine benefit, it more than makes up for it with the visual appeal it brings to the site. By accompanying the image headlines with a good deal of searchable text on the page, the site is still very user and search friendly, allowing people to find the information they need, whether it is via a search engine, or by directly viewing the page.
Though a common headline font was one way to bring continuity and interest to the site, there were several other ways I focused on developing a cohesive design, including the use of color, images, layout and graphic elements.

The EMU Gallery Program brings an eclectic mix of exciting, cutting-edge exhibits and speakers to campus, so the colors I used for the site design are meant to be bold and atypical in order to represent the personality of the Gallery Program. My goal was to pair a series of colors together that would typically seem unappealing, but arrange them in a way that would make the site daring and different. For this, I chose to combine a deep chocolate brown with a rich teal, and vibrant lime green. The process of arriving at a color palette is no simple feat. I went through countless trials and errors before finding a unique combination that worked together. By testing dozens of color swatches with each other, I was able to arrive at the brown, teal and lime green color scheme. The green is just enough of a hint to tie to the green of the University site, yet different enough to set the gallery program apart as a creative, expressive force at EMU.
The next tactic I used to build cohesiveness and continuity for the site was the style and placement of images. The images throughout the site were photographed from the same perspective, giving the viewer a consistent view of the subject in the photograph. Additionally, most of the photographs used are shots taken in the interior of the galleries, featuring people enjoying the art. This sense of activity is a powerful way to engage the web site users, connecting them not only with the content of the site, but giving them a sense of fun and activity. The photographs are consistent in style and placement on the site. In each of the sub-sections of the site that follow the homepage, the photographs are always found in the same location, highlighting the page content. Additional, smaller photographs and images will be used where applicable, to highlight individual gallery shows and lectures.

While designing this site, I was careful to make sure that the layout was consistent. Once users navigate from the homepage of the site, they are taken to one of five secondary pages that support University Gallery, Ford Gallery, guest speakers, maps and directions, and complete schedule events. All five sections are structured around
the same layout. Not diverting from a consistent design allows users to become familiar with the site quickly and use their knowledge of the site structure to easily navigate through the rest of the web site.

Had I created original layouts for each of the sub-pages of the site, users would have to re-learn the navigation for each new page. A consistent structure carries users through the site with ease, creating a cohesive experience and much more usable web site.

Graphic elements are another way to build continuity and consistency throughout a web site. Although the homepage structure is radically different than the rest of the site, the design has continuity because of color and graphic elements. The university logotype appears at the bottom of the page on the homepage, but it’s at the top of the page on subsequent pages. This arrangement works because this graphic element is treated in the same manor on all of the pages. Everywhere on the site it is featured in white on the chocolate brown background. Additionally, it is always the same size in and is always aligned to the left.
Another graphic element that carries throughout the site is the light colored band that runs behind the main white box on each page. Users first see the light band of brown color in a larger form on the homepage, along with the uniformed stack of dots and arrows that sits on top of it. As users navigate though the site, their visual experience is reinforced as this band, arrows and dots are seen of the rest of the pages of the site.

Well-structured site navigation goes hand in hand with graphic elements, images and color to create a successful user experience. Navigation is important in web design because it is the vehicle that delivers users the content of a web site. Unlike print design, there is nothing tangible for web site users to hold in their hands. There is no way for them to thumb through a web site and see all of the content that is available to them at once. Content must be arranged in a way that always reminds users where they are on a site, and shows them how to get to where they need to go. Because of the somewhat random nature of web site navigation, every page on the site also needs to be able to stand on its own.
There are several different types of navigation, for example, hub and spoke, branched, or linear navigation. In a linear navigation system, a user is taken through a web site one page at a time, in a specific order, like a slide show. A branched system, which allows a user to navigate to one of the branches of a site, and then move through that section in a hub and spoke structure, is far more complex and user friendly, but generally only lends itself to large commerce web sites.

In a hub and spoke navigation structure, the navigation menu serves as the hub, and all of the pages of the site are the spokes. This structure is a great solution to many navigation issues because it allows users to navigate to any page on a web site, from any page on that site, allowing users to structure their own experience.

I decided that a basic hub and spoke navigation structure for the EMU Galleries site would by far be the best option. I included a navigation menu on each page, and on each page the navigation menu element is designed the same. Further, on the secondary pages of the site, the navigation is always in the exact place. Continuity in design and
placement of navigation is important to ensure that users will always know what to look for, and where to find it.

Designing the EMU Galleries web site was a great project that allowed me to learn a lot. At the same time, the project provided a new, exciting web site for the University Gallery Program. This project gave me the opportunity to work with the Arts Committee to develop the new site, but I had complete creative freedom to develop a progressive, fresh design. By putting myself in the shoes of an average user, I was able to think about how to guide users through the web site, and to be sure that they would be able to relevant the information. By designing with consistency and continuity in mind, I was able to create a well-structured site with a clear and visually appealing navigation system that is simple and easy to follow.
Part II: Visuals of Web Site Page Designs

Figure 1, Homepage
Figure 2, University Gallery
Figure 3, Ford Gallery
March 2007

**Graduate Student Art Show**

This exhibition features the work of the Art Department’s graduate students and coincides with the annual Graduate Research Fair. A variety of media and concentrations are represented. All art is eligible for the Graduate Students’ Artistic Excellence Awards. The award-winning works are purchased by the Graduate School and become part of UM’s permanent collection.

**Michigan Collects Ruth Weissberg**

This retrospective exhibition documents the work of internationally recognized painter/printmaker Ruth Weissberg over her fifty-year career. Beginning in the mid-1960s when non-objective art was held in high esteem, Weissberg bucked this trend to concentrate on the figurative. Taking a poetic and layered approach to art, she has produced works that are deeply human and edifying in approach. Weissberg is a graduate of the University of Michigan and taught at EMU from 1960-1965.

April 2007

**International Student Gallery**

April 20-22

**Annual Student Art Show**

This juried show provides a special opportunity to present the work of our talented students to the public. Work in painting, sculpture, drawing, photography, printmaking, metals, ceramics, textiles, and graphic design will be shown in the new IGG Student Gallery and Ford Gallery. Award winners in various media and categories will be announced at a reception.

**Halle Gallery Auditorium, April 4, 6:00 p.m.**

**Lectures by Michael Puf, Charles Painter**

Professor of painting at the University of Texas at Austin, Charles creates graphically stylish works that investigate racial stereotypes drawn from the history of American advertising, product packaging, billboards, radio jingles, and television commercials. The works are highly staged and provocative and span a number of media. Charles has an extensive exhibition record and was recently featured in the popular PBS series Art 21.

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**Figure 4, Guest Speakers**
Figure 5, Maps and Directions
**Figure 6, Complete Schedule**
Works Cited