

**ARTrepreneur: The New Arts Leader,
Americans for the Arts 2003 Annual Convention
Innovator Interview**

Kristy Edmunds Interview, Artistic Director, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art

Abel Lopez interviewer; Craig Dreeszen recorder and editor

Lopez: Kristy Edmunds is the founder and director for the Portland Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA). She has been an important artist and resource in Portland and for the contemporary art movement internationally. What was your motivation to establish the center?

Edmunds: In the Portland area we had the large mammals: symphony, opera, and museums. We had the healthy underground of small plant life. We didn't have the nimble, small mammal. I wanted to diversify the ecology.

We were coming upon the tail end of the culture wars, and the arts groups had been hammered. There was a depressed mood. I wanted to establish a dialogue with a city that had the capacity to respond. I considered how we could create an organization to facilitate this.

Lopez: Who was your intended audience?

Edmunds: The audience was regional and national artists. The facilitating of dialogue among artists was first and foremost. Our mission was that through exhibitions, performances, artist residencies, and educational programs. PICA enables artists and audiences alike to push the limits of artistic expression and explore provocative new ideas that illuminate life in the here and now.

There is a wide audience interested in contemporary forms. The artists are pushing the boundaries of their aesthetic. I was looking for people not interested in complacency but for adventure and direct art experience.

Lopez: What other challenges did you face?

Edmunds: At the time, I was 29 so I wouldn't have perceived a challenge. It was about recognizing certain opportunities and how do you ethically and successfully go after them. There were opportunities around establishing the organization to give continuity among the artists trying to deepen their work. I thought of it as an imperative.

Looking back, the challenges were establishing an organization with the mission that was unlikely to establish large-scale funding. It was about disrupting sensibilities and risk taking.

I also faced the challenge of being an artist and a curator. I had to learn to be an executive director and what was a 501 (c) 3. I turned to those who could teach me. My learning curve was strictly vertical. Mach 10. Hair on fire.

The board was a group of people willing to invent a nonprofit, willing to ask, “What do we want to become?” We didn’t keep building, but we built and contracted. It was very inventive. This was our chance to do it right. It was a chance for people to bring their highest and best to an idea to create a very values-based organization.

Lopez: How did you identify board members?

Edmunds: I looked for people with a passion for the mission, who are crucial leaders ethically. I wasn’t looking for names for instant credibility. It was about people who are respected who would bring that sense of personal identity and risk and personal philanthropy. I sought people who inspired me.

When I resigned as a curator for the Portland Art Museum, I realized that a number of important nonprofit arts organizations no longer existed. There were artists and a local set of audiences about to lose programs. I recognized that I was a continuity thread of something that could re-emerge. Some patrons asked to me imagine what this would look like. I said it would look like a contemporary arts center. They said, “Would you run it?”

Lopez: What is the dialogue that happens between artists and the larger community?

Edmunds: PICA stands as part of the connective tissue of the dialogue about city identity, city planning, and urbanizing.

Artists are part of the education. We provide the context and facilitate. We don’t teach. We don’t prescribe. We don’t say how to see this work. Understanding art isn’t always the most important part of the discussion.

Sustainability is an important question at all levels with discussions in the artistic community: artists, funders, government, and business. How do you respond to the impulse to sustain? It isn’t always about sustaining the institutions but also about sustaining the behavior, about sustaining the artists. We need to sustain the intent to make an ideal real.

This discussion among artists, nonprofits, commercial interests, government, and universities has evolved to consider the creative economy and how the arts catalyze. How do we internationalize? How can we have an identity as a creative city? Then, how do you sustain it and re-animate it so it doesn’t move? That this is happening in the midst of a recession is interesting.

Lopez: Your work was international from the start.

Edmunds: PICA programs in all disciplines: dance, experimental theater, music, printmaking, photography, computer imagery, and installations were all about people not staying within their own silos of artistic experience. We don't want dance audiences to only come to dance. Can you get music audiences to see photography?

We want to see ideas emerge in one art form and percolate in another. This discussion is global; to not work internationally is ridiculous.

PICA's history and mission tries to take international ideas and discussion and relate them to diverse issues here in Portland. Our diversity hasn't been as apparent. As Portland diversifies, it is through immigration not American migration. Portland is internationalizing as it ethnically diversifies.

Lopez: What is the opportunity in the face of this immigration?

Edmunds: People coming from different urban centers internationally find PICA quite quickly. They look different, but they will find like mind: an openness, curiosity, and intelligence. A group of adventurous explorers in the arts find themselves in this program space. Our opportunity is that we maintain a sophisticated, diverse network of relationships in multiple languages, ethnic cultures, gay community, artists, underground, established, and political.

We brought in avant-garde Chinese artists. To prepare, we worked with our Chinese community to help them appreciate this work. If you want them open to find themselves in a different way through the art, this dialogue and bridge building is very important.

Lopez: What other issues do you see facing contemporary artists and organizations?

Edmunds: There is loss of leadership facing artists and the arts community. Economics is a tremendous challenge. There is the dismissal of our value.

The biggest crisis is that we've moved away from funding artists directly. We're degrading the future when we're not investing in new work. We have been eating our seeds, not planting.

We have a profession that relies on artists creating new work. We are not the maker. That artists have lost direct access to funding means an erosion of the quality of R and D [research and development] of what they do. There is the crisis of mid-career artist. You can "emerge" but we see less opportunity to move through mid-career to mastery. This is a profound loss of leadership among artists.

Arts organizations step up to meet the gap. We commission new works. Curators act as producers with the artists. This means less programming to allow the deepening of experience with the artists to make the work. Now with the recession there is further cutbacks in programming. Commissioning of residencies was the first to go. The catalogues that gave credibility are gone. We're degrading the future when we're not

investing in new work. We have been eating our seeds, not planting. That is a major challenge.

After 9/11 we saw an interesting moment aesthetically. We've spent years doing outreach. People come together for a specific moment. Challenging work made sense in a cultural moment of chaos and pain. Instantly, we had another economic toll. What people don't understand is that the work we relied upon to be there for us so that we could continue to find us was here before September 11 that buoyed the projects that we relied upon. All that had been economized [funded]. What is happening now is not. We go forward with less and less for the makers of our cultural expression in a mood where different possibilities are available to connect with each other.

Lopez: You recently returned from a sabbatical. Why was this the right time for you and PICA?

Edmunds: When we started, the board set up policies to do things right. We set up early that the visible leader should take a battery-charging sabbatical. We also planned for three-months research sabbatical for curators.

I can't stress too much the courage of the board to send me on sabbatical. When I look at my colleagues I see a massive workaholism. Sometimes this is required. Sometimes we become addicted to our own martyrdom. We don't recognize the signals of burnout, but it happens. I look at the generation after me, and they look at us and can see the wear and tear of this industry. The new leaders don't want that. There is an erosion of new leaders based on how we don't take care of ourselves in certain ways. We need to set an example.

I've also seen among colleagues the feeling that if you make yourself completely irreplaceable you have job security. But you don't build capacity of the organization and, in fact, you're eroding the capacity of yourself. This is a deep irony.

The cult of personality is a cultural habit. But there is staff and board leadership in PICA that I've tried to make visible. The sabbatical made it very important for the board and staff to work together to transfer relationships, responsibilities, and to collaborate for when I stepped away. This is the precursor for my eventual leaving.

Don't take a sabbatical when you need to leave but before you need to leave. Then you come back recharged to do what you need to do next. We have an obligation to continuity of memory, and we need a freshness to continue to give.

Open to questions

Nancy Wolter: You curated a show in Mesa. I'm interested how you started the dialogue with our community in Mesa, AZ. We're a conservative community.

Edmunds: Artists are often the first ones in the door. They can bring and build an audience. Artists are the best ambassadors. Make your intentions transparent to the artists' community. Help them see how their work fits your mission. It's person-by-person cultivation.

Naming new, challenging work as the "best" sets trust back. Rather, inquire about what makes this work valid: what is this artist trying to do; why do I feel uncomfortable; and why did that just pierce my soul?

There are more interesting and useful questions than asking, "Is this the best you've ever seen?" But in marketing we set up a design that is not connected to the artists aesthetic but to our own sense of branding, complacency, or safety. How many times can we present the best? We need hype and momentum to introduce the unfamiliar but be judicious, be honest.

Emerson Byron: Often startups are the victims of predatory grant making where grants makers are using them to accomplish their purpose. As you grew, how did your relations to funders change?

Edmunds: A foundation has an obligation to build in sustainability over time and not abandon them after they've changed tacks. We've seen funding come and go with different alignments. If funding wasn't diversified when funding directions changed, course organizations depending on foundations failed.

We focused on who really cares about our work. We needed that care to be economic advocacy. We did not pursue foundations for three years. Partly, it was that foundations want a track record, and, partly, we wanted to build a sustainable constituency a history of practice and art that is sustainable. We didn't want to be the starving baby bird. We wanted mutual benefit, not pure need.

PICA's board gave 100 percent, which was a third of our first annual budget. No minimum gift, but a collective will and number that they established. Earned income was a third. And a final third was membership, gifts, and in kind. That felt like a good sustainable balance to start.

As we became a national leader we were invited to enter foundation initiatives, but, at first, we were too young. We'd be pulled off course. I care about foundation initiatives when those align with what PICA wants to do, but when they don't I need to say, "No," both for our benefit and the foundations.

Don Vickers: You must think of the organization as an art form itself. So many of us think of artistic product as the painting or dance. You have delightfully crafted an organization. Does this make sense? Does your being an artist inform that?

Edmunds: The creation of PICA was a challenge: how does one do that creatively. I do think that certain organizations are about living, breathing things; it's not just a trophy that we shine.

You can't look at PICA as a model. Rather look at our values and our modes of risk taking and use these as a mode to liberate another organizations. The closer that we stay to that level of thinking -- of integrity, transparency, and risk -- the more viable we are over time. There is nothing worse than becoming bored with an institution. Organizations need to develop the capacity to recognize the ingenious moment.

Kathleen Moran: How do you support startups when you're in the public sector?

Edmunds: Look at it from artists' interests. Artists need space and vehicles to get their ideas out to the world. But artists won't support trophy institutions. Artists won't give it soul. Trophy institutors don't want to ask artists. You can imbue an instituting with a soul if you sit down and talk with artists about what they need. Otherwise artists can protest it, which is another way of getting to the problem.

Question: Public perception is that you have star power, yet you want the institution to be the star. When the star leaves, the new leader is always judged in comparison to the founder. Can a great institution continue when the star power leaves?

Edmunds: The test is if it is better or different after I leave. Look at a sports analogy. If you start with five basketball players and don't have back up on the bench, you're heading for trouble. That has been the state of our field. You can choose to take more pay or to diversify to create more staff leadership. If history bears out, I'll become staid, stuffy, and boring and people will say that founding director should move on. The trick is to anticipate this, build leadership capacity within the organization and move on.

Question: What is your own artwork?

Edmunds: I've worked in film and theater. I was interested in the different codes of different disciplines saying the same thing. I've been interested in the cross-pollination of art forms. I work to get the ideas out to make room for new ones. I may learn a new medium to execute an idea. I'll never be a master of an art form. I also do choreography, public art, and prints. When presented with a creative problem, I'm interested to find a solution through different mediums.

Lopez: What opportunities do you see for artists in our communities?

Edmunds: When faced with a great problem, artists have a great deal to say and offer. How do the coffers fill up with our creative potential? We have a lot right now and those problems become opportunities if made real through expressive means.

The economic challenge is a bitter pill right now. There is a chance for leadership from artists. At least people are in the same boat. Nonprofits have struggled for years. Now

universities are struggling. There is tremendous opportunity with institutions, funders, with philanthropy, and with government. Artists are more welcome at the table.

The culture wars we knew. We could blame and protest and mobilize around and lay judgments and change to betterment. These times are so amorphous there is no point of blame. Instead of blaming, we need to seize opportunities to define a future.