

Conversation with  
KRISTAN KENNEDY,  
Portland Institute for  
Contemporary Art

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I is for

Institute

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What's in a name? This is the question underlying our investigation into ICA: how it came to be, what it means now, and how we might imagine it in the future.

In a field so often defined by precarity, this project is grounded in a spirit of collegiality, a looking outward that aims to facilitate self-reflection. As such, we have engaged colleagues primarily from small- and mid-scale contemporary arts organizations to discuss their institutional histories and how they understand the stakes of their work. The *I is for Institute* website acts as a repository for these ongoing conversations, as well as archival material relating to ICA's history. We thank our many colleagues for their generosity, enthusiasm, and frankness. Their thinking has in turn energized our own.

— Alex Klein,  
Dorothy & Stephen R. Weber  
(CHE'60) Curator, Institute  
of Contemporary Art,  
University of Pennsylvania

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KRISTAN KENNEDY,  
Portland Institute for  
Contemporary Art

Kristan Kennedy is Artistic  
Director and Curator of Visual  
Art at the Portland Institute  
for Contemporary Art (PICA)  
in Portland, OR.

With Laurel McLaughlin

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LAUREL MCLAUGHLIN

Can you tell me about your role  
at the Portland Institute for  
Contemporary Art (PICA) and  
how long you've been at the  
institution?

KRISTAN KENNEDY

I am Curator of Visual Art and one of three Artistic Directors along with Erin Boberg Doughton, who is Curator of Performance, and Roya Amirsoleymani, who is Curator of Public Engagement. We work as a team to set the vision and programming for the organization. I began my career at PICA by volunteering in 1995, and I was included in an exhibition with my collaborator Topher Sinkinson in 1999. I joined the board in 2001, and I began working as a staff member in 2003. I've had a long trajectory here, and each role has helped inform the next.

LM

And you're also a practicing  
artist. I saw a work of yours  
yesterday at the Portland Art  
Museum.

KK

When I first moved to Portland, I was right out of college and I was part of a collaborative with my friend, Topher Sinkinson that operated under the name Swallow Press(x2). We interjected photo, text-based works, outdoor projections, artist books and posters into the world as a way of combating

a lack of empathy in public space. PICA, and specifically its founder Kristy Edmunds, was one of the first people to really support our work.

In addition to taking the time to guide us toward resources in town, she invited us to be a part of an exhibition called *Counter Canvas*, which engaged contemporary art in the context of its extrication from the public realm. In the late 1990s, there was an ordinance in Portland that was passed to try and stop billboards from taking over, but the city didn't care to distinguish between billboards and art that was at the same or similar scale. There was a lot of rogue stuff happening at the time, and in effect, the ordinance shrunk everything. If you were doing an outdoor project, you had to abide by those guidelines, and you could get arrested for putting up a public art project, even a sanctioned one.

LM

Is that still in effect?

KK

It changed a while ago, but I almost wish they would put it back, because have you seen some of the murals in Portland right now? I find them highly problematic. People have asked me what I'd want there instead, but why does every urban surface have to be covered with illustration? The cartoony murals feel like a blight on the city, and I mostly want to ask, what are they saying? What are they other than decoration? But in any case, yes, I was and am still a practicing artist. My work now lives in the big messy field of painting.

LM

Can you talk a bit about Kristy Edmunds and how PICA was founded?

KK

Kristy Edmunds is an artist herself and founded PICA in 1995 when she was 28. She had been working in the Art on the Edge Department of the Portland Art Museum with her mentor, the curator John Weber, to make a program of contemporary performance—and I'll use the term "performance" here lightly—installation, and other new media. It was a short-lived program, as new directors came in and really shifted the funding of that department away from supporting the work of living artists. I wasn't in Portland at the time, but Kristy really saw that there weren't any, or at least very few, organizations that were supporting international experimental work in the city.

We were at the tail end of the culture wars in the 1990s and there was some understanding that institutions had censored artists, and that there was exclusion within institutions. Globalism was also pushing its way into lots of different fields. Kristy, in her youth and passion, left the Portland Art Museum and was encouraged by some patrons, who had supported her and John's

work at the museum, to start her own thing. As the story goes, she went into a room with a legal pad and a pencil and wrote out an entire plan. She came out and talked to a couple of those museum patrons and they started writing checks. She started PICA with \$5,000 and Bora Architects lent her an office. She had no furniture and she sat on the floor until PICA's first volunteer showed up, and a little community of artists and others started to help shape what is now Portland's longest operated contemporary art organization.

All of PICA's original programming happened in itinerant spaces. Portland was a very different city than it is now. The Pearl District, in northwest Portland, was just train tracks and gravel and a few galleries. But there were all of these maverick people in town at that time—gallerists, restaurants, architects. Developers were trying to envision a 20-year plan to meet what they thought was going to be a city filled with creatives.

Kristy had vision and focused on core values, and never played the role of an expert. She saw herself as a collaborator and galvanized a lot of things, and inspired a lot of people to make the seemingly impossible happen. She was often invited to talk about her vision for a new institution or her advocacy for artists, both nationally and internationally. It wasn't unlike Marcia Tucker's role at the New Museum.

At the time, we had an organization called the Portland Center for the Visual Arts, which preceded PICA; a lot of the people that supported Kristy had previously supported PCVA. It was founded by a very small group of people. It gets historicized as if it was this massive effort, but it was about 40 people. It was artist-run, and brought contemporary artists of the time to Portland to work on projects in warehouses with them. It was funded by the NEA, but when the NEA faced challenges in the 1980s, it bottomed out. There hadn't been anything in town for a decade after that to replace it. The galleries were really holding the scene together.

LM

Wow, that's quite a stagnant period.

KK

I don't think it was for lack of trying. There was a lack of resources and institutional support, but there was a rich scene of artists and really dedicated gallerists and vibrant art school programs. There wasn't a leading voice to create the kind of art center that could serve all of those people and engage with curious audiences. The Portland Art Museum was focused on blockbuster shows. There was a void.

LM

It sounds like Kristy rallied the community around the need for a contemporary art organization.

KK

There's a phrase that those of us who worked with Kristy have internalized, and I'm paraphrasing, but it goes, "PICA is an organization about a community using its energy." PICA started with that idea and continues in that spirit. The original tenets of the organization that Kristy and the founding board set—to be ethical and nimble—are very much present in the work that Vic, Erin, Roya and the staff do. I think that core is what has kept us going through a challenging 25 years. It's how we stay relevant and it's how to keep an organization like this alive in a larger world system that continues to divest in culture.

Kristy was foundational, and in the time that she was here until her departure in 2005, she traveled a lot and was being called into service internationally. I had just come on staff and I remember her telling me that a good artistic director would only be in the office about 10 days a month because they'd be out in the world. She took a sabbatical, worked in Australia and married her partner, the choreographer Ros Warby. We shifted to having guest artistic directors, who mostly were curating the Time-Based Arts Festival, a programming initiative that Kristy began in 2003.

LM

So, the transition from itinerant organization to office space was under Kristy? Were the offices downtown?

KK

Yes, Kristy started over at Bora Architects, and then shared space with Literary Arts, and then we moved to another building. Kristy started having these conversations with Dan Wieden, who was thinking of moving his advertising agency Wieden+Kennedy to its own flagship space. They did the Nike Revolution commercial and they started off as a small firm, and by 1995, they had maybe 160 employees and they needed a building—this is what I mean by all these other people coming up at the same time. A lot of it centered around radicality, even if some of them were commercial in nature. It was about hiring artists, not buying into professionalism, pushing culture forward. There was a lot of that ethic that was running these organizations.

Dan Wieden and David Kennedy were ready to build this other kind of space, looking for architects and a few really interesting people were

up for the job. Eventually Brad Cloepfil, who is the founder of Allied Works Architects, got the job and this relationship between a really dynamic firm and architect has extended to this day. It was a creative partnership and they wanted PICA to be in that building, so we got a beautifully designed office, library and gallery in one of the corners of the Wieden+Kennedy building.

LM

Was there a connection between Wieden+Kennedy and PICA prior to this move?

KK

They weren't funding us, outside of Dan's personal support, but the perception in the community at the time was that we were taken care of because we were in this building. I think the alignment was a little ahead of its time. At that particular moment all the tenants in the building were trying to shift paradigms. Kristy wanted a flexible space to make programming and to host artists and the community. She was interested in accessibility.

For example, our resource room/library was a vision of Kristy's. It is made up of all the books she had been collecting, all the books from her trips, that people gave to her. She was like, "Why do curators get all these catalogues?" So, she put them in the public realm and convinced someone to give us a grant to buy more books. You have to understand that at the time, this wasn't standard practice. There wasn't the "Hub" at the New Museum, and there weren't educational spaces where the public could enter a non-collecting institution to touch books, and see what the hottest show was or read *Artforum*. You could barely find those publications in town. What PICA was trying to do was create a space where we could communicate with the rest of the world and exchange ideas.

But there was a lot of criticism about our communication with local artists and the community. Kristy would always say that this was so reductive. We showed artists who lived in Portland, but we never sent out a giant brochure to announce a local artist program—we just put them alongside other artists from all over the world. We were subsidized for three years. As you know in this field, you'll get grants for a three-year period and then you're on your own. After three years, there's no one else with a \$500,000 grant just waiting for you—especially for a burgeoning organization.

After trying out this exhibition program and having a performance season, and hiring a curator, Stuart Horodner, and using other spaces like theaters and warehouses, we quickly found ourselves in a financial crisis. This was around 2000–2001, with 9/11 and wars going on, and it was a global crisis of sorts. It wasn't profitable to be in the arts; people were directing their funds elsewhere.

There was also audience fatigue. We had a core audience of 150 people who were at everything, and they were very loyal, but the ambition we had was bigger than that and we needed more community buy-in. Kristy's vision was never to have an exclusive club. Watching everything wither on the vine after this huge leap was extremely painful, but it presented Kristy and the organization to return to its foundational values. What could we become to support art and artists in this new moment? We asked ourselves some really hard questions and took a leap, and what resulted was shuttering the gallery and letting go of the curator, which was painful and emotional. But we came out on the other side with the Time-Based Arts Festival.

LM

Can you tell me a bit about that?

It seems to be a structuring factor for PICA in a unique way.

KK

At that time, it was a figment of Kristy's imagination. It was a result of her international travels to cities in Asia and Europe that had these very tightly-curated and civically-minded moments to highlight contemporary dance, theater and visual art. Here in Portland, people can walk by foot and ride the MAX line to and from different venues so we thought, what if we constructed an event where the city was engaged? The city became the institution for a while.

LM

Considering this itinerant beginning that you've mapped out, it's interesting that it continued through the festival structure. Programming seems to be a very large part of PICA's line-up.

KK

We aim to bring international art of consequence concerning the issues of our time. We do that through many different programming initiatives between exhibitions, publications, dinners, lectures, happenings, symposia, and parties, but the TBA Festival is for sure a major driver in the organization. The festival is going into its 17th, and it's now one of many vibrant festivals of its kind in the US. In 2003, however, it was an extremely new and daring concept and made a lot of the staff scared. It was this weird thing and it looked like we were crashing. We were dreaming beyond our means, but it was a recognition

that there was a shift in contemporary art that we needed to rise and meet.

To go back to the itinerant part of it, I always use the term “unstitutional” to describe PICA. At the time, there was a thought circulating of “saving the institution,” but I thought instead that we ought to save the places that are in-between, the “unstitutions.” Regardless of whether we have a building, we will always be moving around, doing site-based works and keeping our home and programming responsive.

LM

What was the arts ecology in Portland like in this period you’re describing in the early 2000s?

KK

We didn’t have an art ecology at the time. We were all working towards that. We didn’t have any MFA programs in town at that time, or these small and mid-size spaces. What we did have was a lot of artist-run spaces, the museum, we had galleries and some programs embedded in the colleges that were coming up at the time—the galleries at Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA) and the galleries at Reed. They were really taking on the job that in a market-driven city like New York or LA would require six institutions. Portland was more like an estuary, an interstitial space where things mix and grow in new ways.

But we were really in a city that was changing. Portland, and Oregon more largely, has a complicated and nefarious founding. It was founded as a white utopia and that’s the truth. But in the 1990s, we were in this period of globalization and there was an understanding that we had to respond to the world.

To get back to the TBA Festival, Kristy wanted to bring something that was civically-minded and still engage in hardcore contemporary practice. There were a few things that I think were really great in her design of the festival. One was the festival having a late-night hub, a space where everyone could gather. At the time, when you went to a contemporary art festival in France or something, there would be little bar or club where the curators or artists went. That was important for her to have, but she wanted it to be open to the public and programmed.

The second thing was the Institute Program, which was a series of contextualizing lectures, but not in an academic sense. I wouldn’t say that we were anti-academic, but PICA is artist-driven most of us who work here don’t come with pedigrees. Our experiences are as working artists and with learning on the ground. What Kristy really wanted while we had living artists in our midst was to use their voices to contextualize their work. It was not a very heavy-handed program, and it brought artists of multiple disciplines together

to talk about their work. This was very early in the field for that.

There's also a third factor, which was building a network. We would try to keep artists in town as long as we could and give them tickets to everything. She wanted to give them time to get to know their peers' work without having to beg for comps. Having artists, audiences, and industry people in proximity to each other in a social space was key. Later, I think a lot of people would call this a "third space," creating a space for people to gather together around food and drink and hospitality.

For the first year, we were being criticized for shuttering the gallery and our commitment to the visual arts was questioned, which was really frustrating for us. We wondered why people were so siloed in their thinking about contemporary art, especially as walls were breaking down and blending. Tradition is important, but there was a lot of hybrid work going on and it needed a space. That felt urgent at the time. Why couldn't an institution be responsive? Why couldn't visual artists see performance and performance artists see visual art? It was confusing for us. It made us push further into that space. We were really criticized for it. If you go through our archives and look at our press, we might as well have been Enron at the time, or some other scandalous organization. But we knew we had to diversify and engage with community. We couldn't operate in an ivory tower and expect people to support us.

When the festival started, it was well-received, but it also nearly bankrupted us. But it accomplished what Kristy wanted—Eiko and Koma performing in a public fountain with 300 people there and all this other work that seemed to wake us all up, respond to the sense of urgency, and soothe the soul. This cumulative effect really began to change the city. And now, 17 years in, we have audience members who have attended all of the festivals, and they're just as informed as some of the leading curators about this work. I think reducing the divides between artists and institutions and audiences was important here; I can't stress that enough. It's all a long story to say that the festival became our primary programming initiative. We were always doing residencies, we were always doing exhibitions, we were doing public programming outside of that, but TBA was our most visible thing.

LM

Thank you so much for that detailed history! I'm curious about the spaces PICA has occupied and shift here to this building on 15 N. Hancock in Northeast Portland, which was at one point more of a residential area.

After being in the Wieden+Kennedy building and the TBA Festival, we eventually decided we needed a building of our own. This was partially in reaction to the changing dynamics of Portland and the watershed moment of realizing that gentrification and expansion was now shutting out artist-run spaces. There weren't a million warehouses around anymore that people would give us for free for projects. How were we going to survive in this new condition?

TBA also made us consider whether PICA was the festival or an organization. I've been programming visual arts since 2006 in a very robust way, and in that time PICA was accused of not having a visual arts program. I was investing all of this money and soliciting commissions and exhibitions, but it wasn't recognized because we didn't have this white box. While we were resisting that move to a building, we were learning from squatting in different buildings. They were helping us dream of how we could live inside a home.

From 2009–2012, we were based in a shuttered high school in Southeast Portland that had a large theater and classrooms, but it was completely dilapidated, with no electricity. We took it over for TBA and made it our hub. What I noticed in that moment was that we'd been in all of these warehouse spaces, but nothing operated like that high school did. The architecture of that space was more human-scaled—people knew how to be in that 19th-century building—which I had divorced myself from thinking was important. I saw that it was becoming a social space, and people felt that they belonged there. It was flexible and could adapt to our various formats, but could still feel raw and public as opposed to the first, highly-designed space. People felt like they could build it with us and it helped develop our values, but we knew that to stay nimble, we had to have our own space.

What we could afford at the time was a hub that had a little social space and presentation space, so in 2012, we moved to a loft downtown at 10th Avenue in the West End on a three-year lease. It really helped us bring audiences in and so they'd walk off the elevator and see us working. We operated there for several years, and it was a space that we could be in where the public could find us.

Our current building is in Northeast Portland. It has its origins in some strategic planning that we were doing around the time of the current regime change in the US government, when the idea of creating a safe space within institutions was floating around, and we thought, "Could we create that?" We started thinking about how we could react not only to contemporary art, but to politics in the social fabric of Portland. We had a strong identity, and in the beginning, it was important for us to claim our space as we moved around and articulated what PICA was.

When we entered into discussions of what our building would look like a funder named Allie Furlotti, a young artist with means, came into our lives. She

had been attending the Festival and was looking for a community that aligned with her values and politics, and an organization that was mostly women- or femme-led, and she found us. She had been funding the arts outside of institutional structures in Portland, but she came to us because she wanted to find an organization that could get money directly into the hands of artists. At the time, we were starting the Precipice Fund, which was funded by a grant from the Warhol Foundation. Though it was unusual to bring another funder into that program, we knew that it would align with Allie's values, so we presented her with a dream budget for commissions and asked if she would help us expand the Precipice Fund. She came in at a significant level to support the fund, and helped initiate a major commissions fund, which went to Jennifer West and Every Ocean Hughes, formerly known as Emily Roysdon, and some multi-year projects that I was working on.

Allie became a member of our board and was part of the search for a new space as she went into development in Portland. But instead of doing what a lot of others were doing, she didn't land-grab for herself and then just donate a lobby. Her first instinct was to buy a building for PICA, and we are currently under a 20-year lease thanks to her vision and generosity.

LM

That's great, and now your office spaces and exhibition spaces are in the same building. Do you pay rent?

KK

Yes and no. We have an ever-evolving subsidy plan, and currently have subsidized rent and pay utilities. We took on something really big by going into this building because it's larger than our previous office space. Now, we're serving the public more, staffing is different, and there's more of a balance between operations and programming in terms of budget, which is very different for us. Our utilities and facilities costs are more than what we used to pay in rent.

LM

Alongside the Precipice Fund, you also have granting initiatives like the Resource Room grants and the Creative Exchange Lab, so it seems that giving to artists was a founding principle of this new space.

KK

Yes, and we've always supported artists and we always pay fees. We've become better at it. In the beginning, the idea was that we were a scrappy arts organization and opportunity was a kind of payment.

LM

What kind of fees do you pay?

KK

We often pay above W.A.G.E. rates—and actually we hosted one of the very first W.A.G.E. lectures here at the Festival. A.L. Steiner came out and did a W.A.G.E.-Action. It's in one of the early TBA catalogs.

LM

Great. And how much is that roughly?

KK

It depends on the scale of the project. We've used other networks such as the National Dance Project and National Performance and Visual Art Network, and those organizations had been talking about ethical fee structures long before W.A.G.E. came along. But from the visual arts perspective, W.A.G.E. was the first to really be effective. It's really dependent on the project but for an exhibition, I would set aside \$3000–\$5000 for artist fees. We also cover travel, housing, offer per diems, and cover materials. It's not easy, and there isn't any wiggle room in the budget for extras. I am very transparent with artists about our limitations and our willingness to support them in an equitable way.

LM

Can you tell me about your exhibition spaces? I saw the Abigail DeVille show, *The American Future*, in the large space and then I saw the blackbox space that had Peter Simensky's performance unearth this past weekend.

KK

Yes, those are our two spaces currently.

LM

How large are they?

KK

The total space is 16,000 sq. ft. including the offices, and then we have back storage, a kitchen, and a green room

LM

Do you have other satellite spaces?

KK

We don't own them, but we program in other theaters and public space.

LM

How many people work at PICA?

KK

It varies, but we have about nine core staff and then we grow to over 100 during the festival. With a show like Abigail DeVille's, I have a preparator crew of about a dozen, which was the largest we've had. We also have a huge volunteer group as well.

LM

You also mentioned a board earlier that helped to steer these various building movements. Are they a financial board or an advisory board?

KK

They're a financial board, but we don't have a requirement to give a certain gift. That's also scalable because we want to keep artists on the board and have a variety of different people of different means. So, they're a working board, but I think in order to survive in the current landscape, we're trying to grow to a capacity-building board. It's interesting to make that shift.

LM

How many people are on the board?

KK

There are 20.

LM

That's fairly sizable. I wanted to circle back to how the institution articulates itself, and to think about your mission statement. You have this great language on your website that says the aim of the institution is "blurring boundaries at the edge of new forms and ideas." I loved that image of blurring boundaries on the part of institutions and hierarchy, but also in terms of the various media that PICA presents, from dance to film and visual art. Has this always been your mission statement or has it evolved over the years?

KK

It's evolved slightly over the years, but it's close to our original mission, which emphasized the intersection of art and ideas. The mission statement has always been around that blurry boundary. Sometimes some language creeps in from grant applications that require us to quantify and tick all the boxes, but it was foundational to Kristy, the working board, and our artists to note the intersection between art and ideas. Perhaps because they came out of a theater tradition, the artists who have been a part of the performance program, even master artists like Laurie Anderson, Philip Glass, Spalding Gray, or Ann Carlson, were ultimately interested in experimentation and weren't making distinctions that the art world was making about their work.

LM

Can you talk about your curatorial structure, which seems to also be aligned with this? As you mentioned, you're one of three artistic directors and each of you are also curators of visual art, performance, and public engagement, respectively.

KK

From the beginning, we in close proximity with one another as curators, and it's almost strange that Erin and I have a wall between us, since that didn't exist in other offices we had. But it's great because when I'm making an entire stage set for the Abigail DeVille show, like you saw, I know that I have Erin to discuss production with and crew to get lights and such. There have been so many times that we've discussed projects with one another, even before this three-headed Artistic Director structure was put into place. The idea of interdisciplinarity is really important to us and we're always thinking about things that we can't define. In the art world, there's really limited language for what's actually going on. A lot of the programming here is about revealing forms that are close in proximity and that elude language. Many times, history has gotten it wrong, but I think that we need new ways of bringing work into the public realm that would formally be marginalized.

In terms of the three-headed leadership structure, that was just the right thing at the right time. Erin, Roya, and I have worked under many different artistic directors and when Angela Mattox, our previous artistic director, left we discussed whether it made sense to hire another person. We wanted a structure that would articulate who we were. Institutions talk about transparency, but sometimes a preparator or associate curator is doing more work than a curator. So, we wanted to create a structure that was less hierarchical and would allow the different forms that we're mixing and representing to be held as equals. We wanted to make sure that collaborations were put at the forefront and public programming was seen as a curatorial practice—not just contextualization, but something that highlights research, ethics, and politics.

LM

With all of these collaborations and programming, I'm curious what a season line-up looks like here.

KK

Right now we're testing the building out. When we came to this building and started dreaming about our calendar, we acknowledged that we have to think about the actual seasons here in Portland, which might sound facile.

LM

Not at all. People in Portland seem to be very eco-conscious.

KK

Definitely. We have a long period of hibernation, where people basically do not go outside and interact. Spring, summer, and early fall are the most social times, and people will come out for anything. On the cusp of that is TBA, in the manic last days of summer before we enter the serious tone of the fall. Right before December, everyone crawls into their caves. So, we started thinking about January and February as potentially public-facing times to get people out and about and go to intellectual and experiential things they actually care about. There's been a sound symposium, and sometimes PICA works with other organizations to consider something like the anniversary of J20, or to respond to critical issues like recent attacks on LGBTQ people, and we offer the space as a hub for things to happen. Then as we move into spring and summer, we'd have an exhibition that might include performance and talks around it, or satellite programming that keeps it active for three months.

After that, we go into TBA, where we're all co-curating together. Erin is the lead on it, since her history is curating that program, alongside myself and Victoria Frey, our Executive Director, with Roya making the Institute programming during that time and also the Scholar Program. To clarify, the people who are involved in the Scholar Program might formally be in academia, but they also might be autodidacts, or just interesting thinkers. Then, we go into an exhibition in November and we have community events to end the year; for instance, we combined our Precipice Fund Awards with an end-of-year party. Essentially, there's a wave that crests at TVA Festival and then allows for longer sustainable engagement with exhibitions in the late fall and winter.

LM

What is your overall operating budget?

KK

The overall budget is crawling towards \$2 million, but it really should be somewhere around \$1.8 million.

LM

And this is to cover all of your programming costs?

KK

We're going through a process of finding the right fit for programming in the new building. In the first four months that we were here, we hosted about 70 public events. A lot of them involved sharing the space with different publics, and the need in the city right now for that kind of space is extraordinary.

Through our work with the Precipice Fund, Creative Exchange Lab, and the Resource Room Residency, PICA has become a space where other artists ask us for resources.

We had a conversation about what it means to be local, and we wanted to present a model of how to think about community, because the way that people are talking about it now is more rooted in bringing people that were excluded from these institutional spaces, while connecting people too. So, as we were considering this facet of our identity, our lack of place became unnerving to a lot of people who feel displaced already, especially artists in marginalized communities. We were thinking how we could address this new need in Portland more broadly—which I'm sure you're seeing in these interviews—because it's not about importing hot artists from other cities, but supporting those within your own community.

LM

That actually leads to my next question. Who do you think of as your community and do you see it differently from audience here at PICA?

KK

It depends. With the events that we did with Pop Mob and Q Center around LGBT politics, a lot of our "audience-community" and the PICA community were present along with a huge number of people that don't intersect with art. But through that event, those groups saw that our values were aligned. We got a thank you note from an organizer who lives in the neighborhood recently, who didn't know they could just walk in and talk to curators and be seen, and they understood without explanation why we might want to put in all-gender bathroom signs. Understanding that this space was for those conversations was important. I think we're doing a lot of work in this space to ask questions about what community and audience are. We're still learning and I don't know if I have a definitive answer.

LM

That's a great answer.

KK

I've used the word community in this interview a lot, but it is a loaded term because community—the idea of one community, or one viewpoint, or what's best for the community—is problematic. These can go towards places of exclusion.

LM

Are questions of accessibility raised in your discussions? ICA is rethinking their relationship to accessibility both in concrete ways in their building, but also in terms of interpretive strategies. How do you think about that at PICA?

KK

Depending on the artist project there's been different ways that that has come into play. We've always been in ADA accessible spaces, even when we were in warehouses. It was a big concern for us. We've started to work more closely with the deaf and hearing-impaired community to think about engaging sign language to interpret performance, which is a very particular field-within-a-field. We've used translation services for different texts. We're also now working with the artist Myles de Bastion, who is working on visualizing sound art for deaf and hearing-impaired people. I think it's a primary concern of the organization right now, and it feels like it's taken a long time to get some place that we should've been all along. Our performances have been pretty open and accessible over the years—and our exhibitions are for sure—but we're taking into consideration various needs, like the height of where art is displayed and how we make or write didactics. These are important questions that we're asking ourselves.

LM

Something I noticed from this weekend's Peter Simensky performance was the question of land acknowledgements. It was refreshing to hear you acknowledge the land of the Multnomah and Chinook peoples of Oregon in your introduction to the performance. A number of exhibitions that are up in the area right now, like *I've Known Rivers* at Disjecta, curated by Suzy Halajian, and *the map is not the territory* curated by Grace Kook-Anderson at PAM, are considering artistic practices

within these communities, which is important in light of Oregon's problematic foundation as a white utopia, as you mentioned earlier. It seems as though there are discussions about decolonization happening.

KK

Yes, though there is a lot more work to be done. There's a delicate boundary between giving a land acknowledgment and supporting indigenous work or acknowledging indigenous values and constructs around time, performance, care, and hospitality. Those things all enter into how we're thinking about "work" as well. The land acknowledgement is the least that we can do.

LM

Of course, and there's also so much important scholarship that is getting visibility and helping to bolster that thinking as well.

KK

The land acknowledgement is something we've adopted in recent years, and we've taken cues from other types of organizations who had already initiated these kinds of statements. Canada is a leader in that regard. We have artists in our midst who we have to answer to and these are artists who we are working with, who are gratefully and generously sharing the conditions that they need in order to feel comfortable to perform. Inviting those indigenous artists to present work and use their own voices in order to define it, whether it's in a lecture or talk or writing, is really important. We need to go beyond a statement or acknowledgement. We're also educating ourselves about work that has been unseen but has been done for a long time in the indigenous communities of Oregon, but also within the world.

Since 1995, we've presented work from lots of different artists all over the world, and I would say that especially as TBA Festival and a season of performances emerged, we concentrated on work from countries that were not in the first blush of where you would think contemporary performance was coming from and performance from communities that were in upheaval, like in the Balkan region or in Central or South America, or different parts of Africa, like Burkina Faso. That's where a lot of the international work was coming from as the festival grew. Now, there is also a concentration on learning about the indigenous communities in the world and we've presented work by indigenous artists from all over. We're not trying to homogenize one

indigenous experience or one black experience or any one experience, but we try to present different concepts. We tend to skew towards concepts of “radicality” and “survivance” in looking at indigeneity with emerging artists that are working now, and they are the ones that have done the work to help us get to that place.

LM

It’s important work and it’s good to hear that institutions are thinking through connections that were so broken by colonialism. You mentioned your peers—who do you think of as your peers either conceptually or programmatically?

KK

I think that we look at the artists that we present as our biggest influences. We have several peer organizations in the United States and beyond that we’ve worked with since our inception and a small group of leaders from those places that we talk to on a regular basis. Our peers are institutions like the Henry Art Gallery, the Wexner Center for the Arts, the Walker Art Center, ICA Boston, Diverse Works, On the Boards, Participant, and Women & Their Work in Austin, and we also value being a part of networks like Common Field. I could just go on and on and on Regionally, we have PNCA and Reed College as partners, with Mack McFarland and Stephanie Snyder, respectively, at their helms. We work with different professors in various institutions that have connected us with artists and their communities to share space and share equipment. We share everything—pedestals—and we work with the gallerists in town.

LM

That’s really great.

KK

Artist-run spaces are our biggest partners, and that was something that really came forward after the Precipice Fund began. I don’t think people really understood how much of a nascent and grassroots organization we were, and how much we interacted with those artist-run spaces—more so than the museums, or our peers nationally. Personally, I look to historical models like the New Museum under Marcia Tucker, who is huge influence. I heard her speak in college and it was life changing. Courtney Fink, who was at Southern Exposure for many years and now is running Common Field, is a valued peer.

There are also various spaces we look at that are coming up on the West Coast, like S1 here in Portland, who are involved in presenting sound and visual arts. They’ve inspired other such groups all over the country to start analog synth libraries. There is an organization, Public Annex, that came out

of doing public advocacy work with adults with disabilities who are artists. Cinema Project isn't as active now, but was when we first came to town. We co-programmed with them a lot, because they were working at the intersection of film and performance and historicizing experimental film and media. So, I'm inspired by a lot of different people. And I think a lot of people here are also inspired by a lot of people who aren't in the visual arts, such as chefs and others who are creative and inventive, and certainly, people who are on the edge of radical politics or cultural theorists. We don't look to one place as a peer, and that has opened us up to how we're working with different communities.

In the beginning, our mission was really directed toward supporting a kind of contemporary practice that was on the edge, that we didn't see in institutions. Our artists are now performing in museums, for better or for worse, and they are being historicized, and they will be part of the canon. But what else is coming? How do we expand what contemporary art is, and how do we push at the sides of a system that has historically been exclusionary, not only of form, but of people? That's what we're all turning our attention to and it's not only against neoliberalism; it's literally a shift of what art is and allowing these different forms to inform us and what we have to do and not just using the market or art history as our guide.

LM

And is that how you're thinking of the "institute" as well? "Institute" is one of the core programming elements on your website, but what is your conception of the "institute" here at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art and then more broadly?

KK

Yes, our "Institute" refers to our educational programming, from participatory workshops, talks, and salons to our Resource Room library and archive, and our partnership with academic institutions that includes schools from elementary schools to universities. But more broadly, I think that there are several words that are key in our name, and I'm specifically pointing to "for," which always gets changed to "of." For Kristy, the "for" was extremely important, maybe even more than "institute." Being "for" contemporary art and artists meant something different than being "of" it, which signifies owning or collecting it. In the organizations that Kristy named, you'll see "for" often. She's currently the Executive and Artistic Director of UCLA's Center for the Art of Performance, which she renamed from the Center "of" the Art of Performance. There were these semantic things which she was really interested in. If you read any of Kristy's writing or her speeches, she's always spinning language on its heels all the time. That was important in making meaning. "Institute" was about understanding that ideas were a central part of

the practice, not only the art itself. We were non-academic in our execution of what the institution was, and so it was really about artists taking center stage, even above the curators and speaking in their own voice, because none of us were experts here.

LM

In a way, are any of us? Can't we always be learning?

KK

If we're experts in anything, it's saying yes to artists and letting them lead where the institution is going to go. That is a foundational principle—saying yes to the artists and supporting them. It gets us into trouble all the time.

LM

I would imagine that can be tricky with balancing budgets and grant expectations.

KK

Projects balloon out of control. They look different than when they started. We say yes to an idea in a commission rather than an artwork. I didn't know what Abigail DeVille's show was going to look like until the night before, basically; we are building it all bit by bit in real time. There's a lot of shared risk and responsibility in working that way, and you can't be separated from the humanity in art production when you're working alongside someone. You can't just program someone and go upstairs and let a registrar handle it. "Institute" for us also signaled that we're working with other humans—that there's more than one person.

LM

What are some of the upcoming projects or personal professional goals that you're excited about?

KK

I'm looking forward to continuing The Creative Exchange Lab, which is a Mellon Foundation-funded program that's been going on for the past five years and has been really exceptional. It's a way for us to replicate or formalize something really amorphous that happens during the festival when artists of different disciplines are together, and they just meet and share ideas. We've seen all of these amazing works by just putting them together. We have two more classes of this Creative Exchange Lab, so we have six artists coming in during the spring to work in Portland, and then we take them out into nature for half of the time. That's been a small program, but very impactful and cumulative. I'm really excited about the artists that are coming, like

Manuela Infante, who is an artist from Chile who's doing a work about plant life and extra-sensory communication.

Roya and I are co-curating our first exhibition together with the artist Gordon Hall, which will also include a cast of local performers with Gordon's sculptures and an ancillary program with film, light, and sound. Gordon's working with minimalist sculptures that reference the body and architecture through theories of queer phenomenology. We're also publishing a Gordon Hall reader with the last ten years of his writing. Then, we'll go into TBA, which we're still programming, but we have some really key pieces set. We're working with artists from the Middle East, Asia, and the United States.

In the fall, Roya is taking on the spot that is normally my exhibition spot, because I'll be on sabbatical for eight weeks, which I'm really excited about. She's really bringing back that intersection between the programming, the Resource Room library and archives, and residences, and really working in a space between publication, performance, and exhibition. She's collaborating with a collective that works with sex workers and various other collectives from around the world to produce three small project-based works at the end of the fall. In 2020, we'll premiere *The Dreamers*, which is an ongoing cycle of projects that we've been thinking about for a number of years with Carlos Motta, who has been working collaboratively with queer dreamers to make films. We'll premiere the entire cycle.

We operate on basically a 6-month cycle, which allows us to be responsive, but gives us space to have these longer-range conversations about commissions and siting work here as well. Our spaces are fluid, sometime formal, sometimes raw, and it's project-by-project. Curatorially, Erin, Roya, and I are looking to work with artists and communities that will show us how this space evolves over time.

I think that what's being revealed right now in the field is really important. We've created our own monster with all of this institutional critique, and it went to another place where institutions started to embed some of that ethic, or were founded based on that ethic, but the public ultimately didn't see the work that we do in institutions. While there are frustrations that arise from these points of tension, revealing all of this and holding institutions accountable is really important.

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