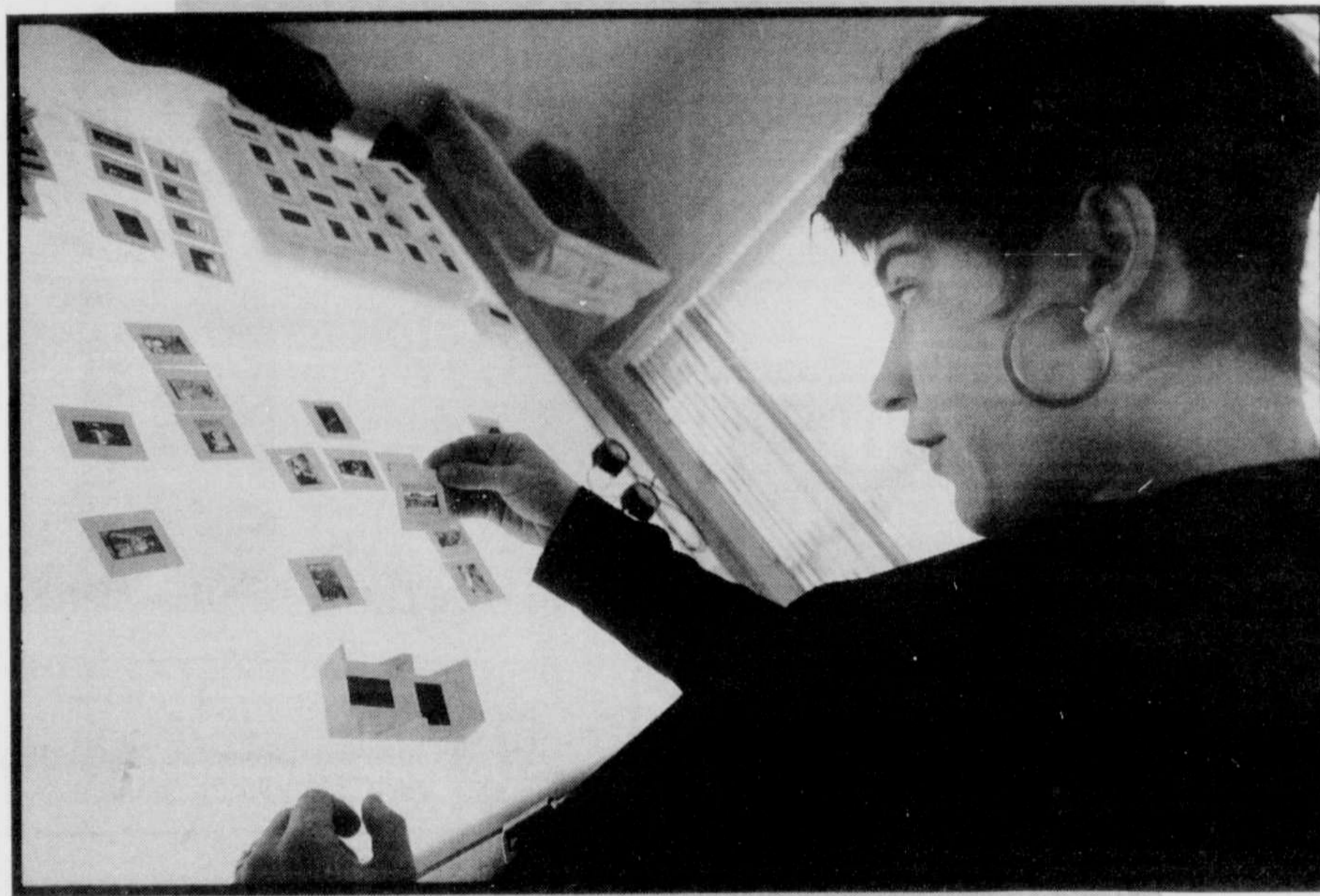


# RELUCTANT CELEBRITY

*Kristy Edmunds doesn't want to be a media darling, she just wants to make and show art*

by Kelly M. Bryan • photos by Linda Kliever



**K**risty Edmunds gets called a conceptual artist, a multimedia artist, and once—because she often works on projects with people such as elders and homeless teenagers—*The Oregonian* called her an “artistic community worker.” These monikers make her uncomfortable, but each seems to represent a fraction of the truth.

A series of installations/happenings in Portland have established Edmunds as an artist with wit and insight. The ice wall piece, called “Perusal,” was the first big public installation she had done. She was 28 years old. She’d been living in Portland for three and a half years, and had been curator of the contemporary performance program Art/On the Edge at the Portland Art Museum for three years.

“Perusal” was a massive effort, involving planning, permits, consulting with concerned citizens and officials, and overcoming the initial recalcitrance of five local ice factories. Even though she’d done as much preparation as possible in advance, “experimenting with ice trays at home and computing melting ratios,” the element of audience reception was a wild card that no one could predict.

As it turned out, the response was intense—a little *too* intense, from Edmunds’ point of view.

“We had some video cameras going on for the ice piece,” she says, “but when people started really getting, let’s say, extraordinarily interactive, I pulled the equipment out. So there’s a document that essentially goes to a certain point...”

Then chaos erupts?

“Yeah,” she laughs, “and get out of the way!”

Randy Gragg, art critic for *The Oregonian*, said of the scene: “Viewers attacked [the ice blocks] with everything from hammers to fingernails,” and in the process the event became “an orgiastic salvage party—and canny social commentary.”

Edmunds says, “How people responded to the fact that those objects, some of which were very valuable and some of which were only valuable to certain kinds of people [a bag of gourmet coffee, a \$100 bill hidden in an old purse, a box of condoms, a bottle of Thunderbird, lottery tickets]—commenting on socio-economic situations, or personal fetishes, or whatever—how people interfaced with

**F**ade in on a little girl sitting with her back to the television set. It’s 1971. The expanse of living room carpet around her is littered with pieces of felt, peach pits, socks and droplets of glue. She is making. Zoom in slowly on her serious, intent face as she considers the placement of the final peach pit. From the kitchen, her mother’s voice calls out, “Honey, time for dinner...”

Cut to the same intent face, now that of a woman, watching as yet another rectangle of ice—this one weighing 300 pounds—is lifted off of a truck. It is 1993. August. We’re in the North Park Blocks of Portland. Kristy Edmunds grimaces comically as she ponders with cohorts about what will happen when passers-by discover that valuable objects are buried within some of the frozen monoliths.

that installation changed its meaning quite a bit.

“It was something you could not practice at home,” Edmunds laughs. “Essentially, with the work of the last five years, I’ve been experimenting in the public eye.”

In April 1995 Edmunds was commissioned to do a piece at the Pioneer Place shopping center, a fact she divulges with a quizzical chuckle. What the



Kindergarten graduation, 1970: Her mom put cartoons on the dress to make Kristy happier about wearing one.

PHOTO BY JUDY MCKELLAR

merchants and shoppers got for their money was an invitation to muse on notions of buying and responsibility, in an installation titled “Point of Purchase.”

Evolving from the open three-story atrium where it would be located, the piece came to incorporate some 60 finches, each in cages suspended at different heights. People could adopt the birds, for a fee (the money went to the Rose City Exotic Bird Club, a nonprofit group that does bird rescue). In so doing, buyers signed a contract, etched onto a copper plate, affirming their commitment to the birds.

“It’s much different from how you think about a product, for example,” Edmunds says. “So in a shopping center it was a commentary about taking a certain amount of personal responsibility for other living things. And then it was also this series of caged birds, that had been domesticated, inside of what is essentially a very large cage that human beings come into.”

As each contract was signed, a print was made and given to the purchaser and the copper plate was hoisted in place of the emptied cage.

“It was this giant mobile that went from being a mobile of caged birds, over the course of a week, to being a mobile of these public declarations about a willingness to be responsible for something on its own terms.”

A month later she was at it again. The scale was even bigger this time, involving what Edmunds calls a “large-scale kinetic sculpture” whose primary goal was to get a crowd of people downtown

to look at, and consider, Portland’s east side. The piece was part of Portland State University’s International Performance Festival; the festival’s theme that year was “Building Bridges.”

Most of the civic focus in Portland is on the west side of the river, she says. Edmunds’ performance/installation was called “Over There.”

“It was about getting people to look at something differently, or even to pay attention at all. I wanted to get people to think about the freeway. Do we think about the city we live in?”

“It was a huge experiment involving 20 people, a 30-foot-by-18-foot sculptural installation, that had to appear on one day, happen at night and be gone.”

Dancers and performers moved on a scaffolding platform in the repetitive, machine-like patterns of industrial labor. High above, a figure painted the large canvas backdrop behind the workers black.

“It was a very abstract piece,” says Edmunds. “It wasn’t designed to have a lot of public appeal. It was accessible, free—yet challenging.”

One of the challenges was perspective: The only real way to see the piece was from the Morrison Bridge, from a boat on the Willamette, or from the west side’s Tom McCall Waterfront Park. The press had billed the piece as a performance, so the small scale caused viewers stonemasonry and frustration.

“People like miniature painting and prints and all that,” Edmunds laughs. “But they don’t like miniature performance.”

**E**arly in her life Edmunds was drawn to art. “I wasn’t interested in toys,” she says. “They were already made, you know what I mean? I wanted to be making something myself. I remember making these sort of puppet things out of socks and peach pits and felt and all this stuff.”

On a recent trip to visit her mother in Idaho, Edmunds found a Dr. Seuss book she’d had as a young girl, *A Book About Me*. In the book a child is asked to record all the details, small and large, of her or his life: facts and hopes for the future. How many

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