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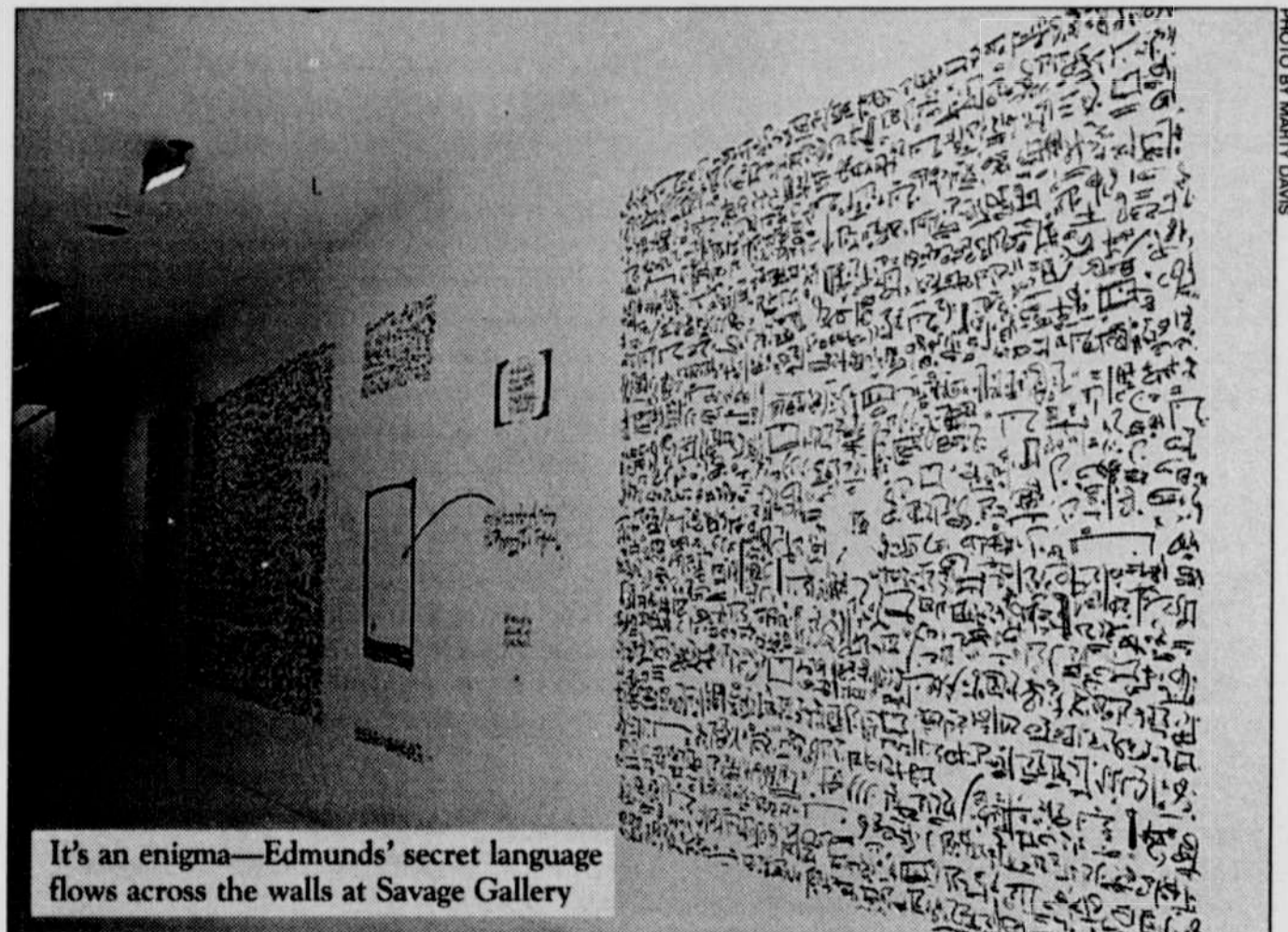
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**ART**



It's an enigma—Edmunds' secret language flows across the walls at Savage Gallery

PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

**K**risty Edmunds wants to push your buttons. Attend something she's curated or organized, and she probably will.

In 1990 Edmunds moved to the Rose City and landed the position of performance art curator at Portland Art Museum. She was employed simultaneously at the Northwest Film Center and after a few years began to see a void.

The National Endowment for the Arts had been deflated since the right-wing attacks of the early '90s, and the Portland nonprofits that provided access to contemporary art were gone. Edmunds saw a need for a local organization that would connect regional artists and audiences with national and international art concepts and movements.

So she left her jobs in 1995 and founded the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art. Since then, PICA has become a national leader in promoting and helping produce provocative artistic work.

"The city is urbanizing," Edmunds tells me in the airy space that serves as the Resource Room, "and we deserve to be able to have a nonprofit art center that is going to connect us to other aesthetic ideas in other cities so that we don't have to just read about them...through the filter of somebody else's words. Direct exposure to this kind of art is really critical."

"This kind of art" includes nearly anything that pushes boundaries or introduces challenging ideas. PICA plays host to ongoing visual exhibitions in its Pearl District location and sponsors unlimited types of performance art in various venues: dance, film, music, spoken word, theater. Often different media intersect in the exhibition hall or on stage, offering a fresh approach to the expression of ideas.

PICA also offers an artist residency program. "Essentially, we buy artists' creative time to make new work in an uninhibited environment," Edmunds explains. They find the residents an appropriate space in which to work and connect them with other artists and community resources.

Being an interdisciplinary artist herself, Edmunds realizes not only have individual grants decreased significantly, but "the work of artists in this country is becoming more and more marginalized and more and more economically starved unless it feeds a decorative purpose or main-

streams itself." PICA seeks artists who "are pushing against the traditional canons of what art practice is" and offers an avenue for those whose work is "beyond the means of commercial galleries, usually because it's not about selling objects, it's about expressing ideas."

Calling PICA "curator driven," Edmunds herself does about 200 studio visits a year locally, nationally and internationally. That's a lot of travel, but she finds it imperative for the organization.

"That's our job...to go out, look at what's going on, talk with other curators, talk with many, many artists, figure out where these pockets of influence to new ideas are happening. Then you develop the projects around a sensibility."

One recent project left the exhibition hall and went straight to the street. Artists Nan Curtis and Martin Houston created the 12th Avenue Project as part of PICA's Counter Can-

vas series. Many Southeast Portlanders will remember this street sign installation that last year ran along Southeast 12th Avenue between Division and Burnside streets.

The 52 signs, followed continuously, told a story about a girl on a journey. This was a collaboration with the Regional Arts and Culture Council, and Edmunds says they will continue to work together to create more temporary work in public spaces.

And then there's the Dada Ball. "Yeah, whew!" Edmunds responds, starting to laugh. Although its actual purpose is to raise money for PICA, "It now has a life all unto itself."

This carnivalesque Portland tradition has become synonymous with cutting-edge costume and décor, spectacle and, yes, debauchery. "They're given permission," Edmunds muses, "to create, innovate, have some irreverence, have some radicalism and have a great time."

It clearly is working—last year's ball attracted 3,500 revelers. Of course, that included more than a few drag queens. "The queer community has been tremendously supportive of PICA," Edmunds smiles.

The 35-year-old Washington native moved around constantly as a kid. She was born an artist, she admits, "constantly having an urge to make something out of nothing—peach pits, whatever—I'd make sculptures."

**Art for art's sake**

PICA's leader is on a mission to open your eyes to new ideas

BY LISA BRADSHAW