

PORTLAND, OREGON



Photograph courtesy of Portland Oregon Visitors Association.

Portland, Oregon, is a city full of artistic paradoxes. Proud, feisty, creative and fiercely independent, it manages to flourish despite a floundering economy. Located in a state with the nation's highest unemployment rate, Portland's arts organizations, both large and small, have been forced to adjust to falling ticket sales and diminishing budgets. Yet the city is now attracting a huge influx of young artists who are redefining its landscape.

Consider the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA), which was featured in the previous *Reporting the Arts* study. Founded in 1995 as an itinerant arts program, in just a few years it grew into a full-fledged organization, partly by securing its own space to house its performing-arts season, art gallery and educational and residency programs. PICA became the quintessential Portland success story—a grassroots alternative-arts group that has grown into a highly influential institution.

Then, in 2003, it organized the first annual Time-Based Art Festival. The 10-day event gathered local, national and international performing-arts and media groups. Participants included contemporary favorites like Miranda July and Daniel Bernard Roumain. The festival exempli-

fied Portland's strong sense of community, attracting 200 local artists and 500 volunteers.

Yet despite its from-the-ground-up success, PICA's institutionalization also represents the other, more difficult side of doing arts in Portland. Tough times forced it to restructure: In 2003 it closed its gallery, laid off its visual-arts curator and stopped producing its regular performing-arts series. All resources have since been funneled into the TBA Festival, which in its first year failed to break even. Even so, as its funding base grew for the 2004 festival, PICA was optimistic about its survival.

Historically, however, Portland does not have a strong tradition of philanthropy. The town does not house a large number of corporate headquarters, and the recent economic downturn has only made matters worse. Northwest Business for Culture and the Arts reports that corporate support for the arts dropped 22 percent in 2001-02 and another 17 percent in 2002-03. Individual and foundation giving likewise decreased. At the same time, state funding for the arts, which was never voluminous, is now dwindling even further: In 2003 the state halved the budget of the Oregon Arts Commission. In 1998 Oregon gave the Regional Arts and Culture Council (RACC)

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Byron Beck

special-sections editor

Willamette Week

\$45,000, while in 2004 it will probably receive a mere \$10,000 to \$15,000.

Portland arts institutions have also been battling inconsistent ticket sales, leaving them at the mercy of unpredictable audiences. Portland's larger groups have therefore had to tighten their budgets. In 2003, the Portland Opera cut its five productions down to four and reduced the number of performances from four to three. It also raised \$600,000 in emergency funds. The Oregon Symphony levied a 5- to 10-percent pay cut on certain of its administrators and musicians, and laid off others. Throughout the city, arts groups have been forced to cut arts-education programs. Even groups in the black have had to dedicate an inordinate amount of energy just to staying there. As Portland Center Stage CFO Eileen Day says, "We are going to meet our budget goals, but it's not like it's been a cakewalk."

Because of their flexibility, midsize groups have been able to maintain their footing somewhat more easily than large groups, according to former RACC Executive Director David Hudson. The modern dance troupe White Bird, for example, continues to grow, bringing in major international names such as Merce Cunningham and Twyla Tharp. But other midsize groups have had to make sacrifices to stay viable. Third Angle New Music Ensemble, for instance, scaled back its 2004-05 season from five to three shows.

One might think that the gloomy financial environment bodes ill for the arts in Portland. But in fact many arts professionals and journalists have witnessed tremendous growth during the last five years. The paradox that is Portland is based in its burgeoning youth population. According to the 2000 census, the number of young adults in the metropolitan area rose by nearly 45,000, an influx lured by low rents, a high quality of life and an open, collective artistic spirit.

Musicians perform in a highly collaborative scene, one that has attracted bands like Sleater-Kinney and raised local darlings like the late Elliott Smith. Dance groups like Conduit present work in their own small studios. The Tiny

Picture Club, a collective of Super-8 filmmakers, and Peripheral Produce, organizers of the annual PDX Film Fest, are producing experimental film. The hometown of director Gus Van Sant has

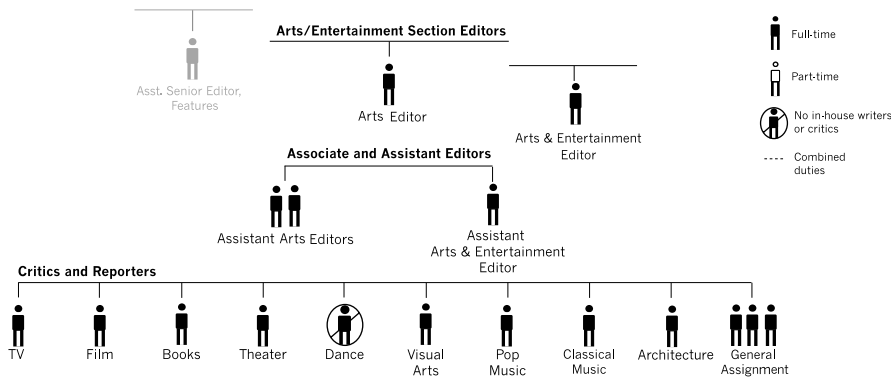


THE OREGONIAN

attracted other well-known filmmakers, like Todd Haynes, who are trying to escape Hollywood.

At the same time, Portland's abundance of independent bookstores, led by Powell's Books, has helped the hugely popular Portland Arts and Lectures speaker series become one of the most

In-house Arts Staff (does not include features staff, copy desk and freelancers)



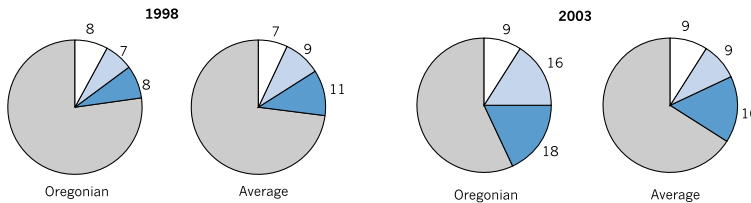
The Oregonian

1998-2003

- Daily circulation:
- Arts-and-culture newshole:
- Number of arts-and-culture articles:
- In-house arts staff:

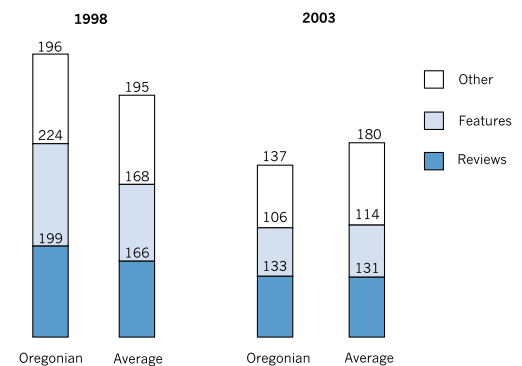
Prominence of Daily Sections

percentage of overall pagination assigned to A&L, business and sports sections



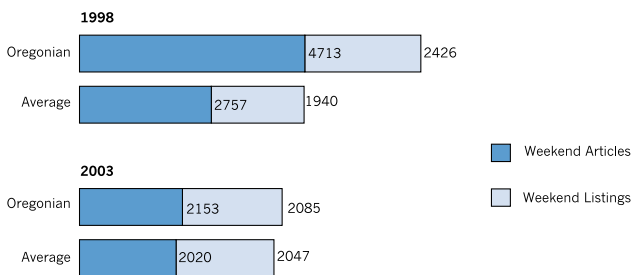
Story Count

number of arts-and-culture articles (listings excluded)



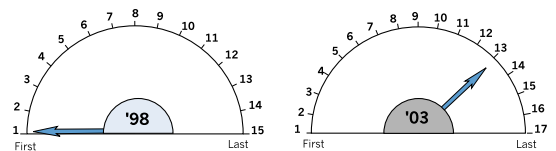
Weekend Newshole

space (in column inches) devoted to arts-and-culture in weekend arts supplements



Movie & Music Journalism

ranking among all newspapers studied for space (in column inches) devoted to articles on movies and music (listings excluded)



THERE HAVE BEEN MASSIVE cuts in arts-and-culture coverage at *The Oregonian* since 1998. Both its story count and its journalism newshole have suffered drastically. Only one other newspaper we tracked, the *San Francisco Examiner*, cut more of its content. In the past five years the resources *The Oregonian* has devoted to the arts beat have shifted from outstanding to below average.

It must be noted that in this study the arts-and-culture content of *The Oregonian* will be somewhat understated since we failed to acquire some sections. We were not sent the daily arts-and-lifestyles section *Living* for three days out of 24. Out of the nine issues of the weekend arts supplements A&E and Arts Week, we did not receive one Arts Week. These missing sections, however, do not account for *The Oregonian's* massive cutbacks in A&C coverage.

The relative standing of the *Living* section has eroded because of a major format change. While *Living* has maintained its share of the newspaper's pages—9 percent now vs. 8 percent five years ago—*The Oregonian* has shifted much of its advertising content away from stand-alone ads-only sections. *Living* was once virtually the

same size as its rival daily *Business* and *Sports* sections. In October 2003 it was dwarfed by them, making it by far the smallest of the three. Only 1 percent of its pages consisted of full-page ads.

A pair of distinctive features of *The Oregonian* that we observed five years ago has disappeared. Back then *The Oregonian* was a standout in the effort it put into its weekend arts supplements. Second, with only one-third of its entire newshole devoted to listings, just one newspaper was more articles-heavy. The subtraction of so many articles, especially on the weekend, has moved *The Oregonian's* rank from outstanding to average in both areas.

The severest cutbacks fell on movies and music. In October 1998 these two beats accounted for more than half of *The Oregonian's* newshole for A&C articles. Now that hefty share has reverted to the average. Unscathed, however, was *The Oregonian's* commitment to listings for those two art forms. By staying virtually constant in absolute terms they registered a huge increase in proportionate share.—AT

highly attended series of its kind in the country.

If anything will define Portland's future on a national level, however, it will be the visual arts. In addition to the TBA Festival, The Modern Zoo and Core Sample also presented their own citywide arts festivals in 2003. "It's a really exciting time to be in Portland because of its fresh voices and its fresh ideas," says Byron Beck, *Willamette Week* special-sections editor. "We're at the cusp of something new."

But what's new may not be what lasts. While active, Portland's art scene is also inconsistent, with a host of groups and galleries arriving with a bang but disappearing when they fail to make the giant leap from arts collective to arts institution. Ironically, it's that staunch independence and disdain for all things commercial that keeps Portland from becoming a major national arts center. "That do-it-yourself attitude, while wonderful, can work against Portland because there is an anti-elitist, anti-institutional stance that goes along with it," says arts publicist Cynthia Kirk. Success is fine as long as it doesn't come at the cost of selling out. Many artists do not move beyond their local circles. The ones who do, like Miranda July, often do so through alternative distribution channels. As for others who have established a reputation, many have left Portland altogether.

That rebellious attitude is partly why many in the arts community frown upon Portland's most successful arts institution, the Portland Art Museum. Considered the town's 800-pound

gorilla, the museum raised \$30 million during an economic recession for its new building for contemporary and modern art. The new structure will open in 2005 and occupy an entire city block. Over the last 10 years, PAM has never operated at a loss. Much of its success rides on what many artists in Portland find distastefully promotional: shameless fundraising and blockbuster shows.

As Portland Center Stage launches its own capital campaign, however, it hopes some of the museum's success will rub off. Too small for its rented 860-seat space at the Newmark Theatre, the company is building its own, more intimate venue; with the support of the city, it has undertaken a massive, high-profile \$28 million project to renovate Portland's 113-year-old Armory as two theater spaces.

Despite the disconnect between the alternative and the traditional, the divide between Portland's artists and arts institutions is not as huge as it seems. Just as the influence of the large often trickles down to the small, the youth and vigor of Portland's nascent groups permeate the city's main organizations. The ballet, symphony, opera and Portland Center Stage all have new artistic directors who have instilled in each group a newfound mission and optimism. "These are new directors, and they're hungry to succeed. Like their grassroots counterparts, they're also looking for creative ways to succeed," says Kirk. "It is the witching hour in Portland."

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Cynthia Kirk
arts publicist

BY LILY TUNG

ARTS COVERAGE IN PORTLAND A CRITICAL VIEW

IN 1998 *THE OREGONIAN* was an industry trendsetter in arts coverage. The innovative refashioning of its 75-page weekend guide, A&E, had made it a favorite among readers and advertisers and a model for small papers around the country. Yet, like the arts, media in Portland have experienced their own ebb and flow, and in the last few years *The Oregonian* has been sucked into an economic whirlpool, losing much of what it had gained. Newshole has shrunk, stories have diminished in length and editors say they're having a staffing problem amid the explosion of Portland's arts scene. "We have the same number of people as five years ago, while the sheer volume of stuff out there has grown immensely," says arts editor Barry Johnson. "It's a serious problem."

Besides A&E, *The Oregonian* also covers the arts in its daily features section, Living, and its newly named Sunday ArtsWeek, which was previously called Sunday Arts and Books. The three forums have generally attracted an older audience. But like many dailies around the country, *The Oregonian* is trying to reach out to a new generation of readers in a town whose arts scene is getting younger and hipper.

Since the staff is aging, and there is only one female critic/reporter, assistant senior features editor Karen Brooks says the paper is using freelancers in their 20s and 30s from diverse backgrounds to try to fill in the gaps. That may be its only recourse, as the economic recession prompted the paper to stop hiring in 2001. That's not to say *The Oregonian* lacks good veteran writers; revered journalists like architecture reporter Randy Gragg and Pulitzer Prize finalist David Stabler help establish its reputation. When they're too busy, however, editors fill the pages with a significant amount of wire copy.

Circulation has also dipped, from 347,538 daily and 431,137 Sunday in 1998 to 342,040 and 412,113 in 2003. So to attract new readers, *The Oregonian* is trying to tap into Portland's young zeitgeist with yet another redesign of A&E. Launched in October 2003, the new section sacrifices depth for breadth, featuring more photos, bite-size nuggets and humorous columns. Editors have done away with stock previews, but copy remains more event-driven than idea-based.

Of course, the arts community is far from happy about the shift from journalism and previews to listings and reviews. They are likewise not pleased that much of the space in A&E is dedicated to film, food and pop culture, while the performing arts receive minimal coverage near the back of the book. "Every time they remodel A&E, the arts go further and further back," says Erin Boberg, co-curator of Portland Institute for Contemporary Art's Time-Based Art Festival. "It should be called E&A." Although the staff compensates by focusing on the arts in Sunday's ArtsWeek, that section has also radically shrunk in size. There is growing interest in culture elsewhere in the paper, however. "We've had more stories on AI in the last year than at any time in our history," says Brooks.

In a town with only one daily, *The Oregonian's* main competition is the scrappy alternative weekly *Willamette Week*, aimed primarily at 18- to 49-year-old readers. *Willamette Week* presents its edgy arts coverage through critics' picks, previews, reviews, capsules, opinionated listings and the occasional cover story. While *The Oregonian* does a good job of writing about books, film and architecture, *Willamette Week* excels in its comprehensive coverage of music as well as its attention to local emerging artists. Since 1998, circulation has increased from 80,000 to 90,000, and the paper has also established an in-house Web site. Its news hole, however, has decreased during the economic downturn due to a drop in advertising.

Although one is a daily, the other a weekly, *The Oregonian* and *Willamette Week* consider each other rivals. Each has scooped the other, but they are decidedly different in tone. As *Willamette Week* arts editor Ellen Fagg says, "They're more likely to do Olivia Newton-John, and we're more likely to do an obscure musician from Russia. They're forced to cover Britney Spears. We're forced to make fun of Britney Spears." *The Oregonian* is not only more traditional in its choices but safer in its criticism, with one of its critics admitting, "We're not going to write something that's going to close a show." On the other hand, *Willamette Week's* penchant for controversy can seem at times to come from a need to be merely contrarian. "You feel they have an ax to grind," says one arts publicist. "They're often compelled to look at the negative."

With its five arts editors managing a host of freelancers, *Willamette Week* is known for developing talented writers, many of whom move on to dailies like *The Oregonian*. That

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The Oregonian

nurturing environment constitutes both a strength and a challenge: Because of the paper's high turnover of freelancers, the quality of writing can be inconsistent.

Two other publications have entered the Portland media scene in the last few years. Going head-to-head with *Willamette Week*, the new *Portland Mercury* caters to an even younger readership, with an average age of 30. Owned by *The Chicago Reader* and Index Newspapers—which runs *The Stranger* in Seattle—the alternative weekly adopts an irreverent, satirical stance on Portland, one that some readers find high on attitude and low on objectivity. The paper puts most of its efforts into its local-music coverage, paying special attention to underground bands. It gives cursory acknowledgement to film, books and the visual and performing arts through picks, previews, reviews and listings.

Launched in 2001, the *Portland Tribune* publishes twice weekly. Bob Pamplin, chairman and CEO of Mount Vernon Mills and one of the richest men in Oregon, started the general-interest publication after poaching part of *The Oregonian's* staff. The *Tribune's* thin Friday arts tabloid, *Cue*, was recently dropped in favor of a broadsheet Friday features section called *Weekend Life*. The paper specializes in photo-driven front-page profiles and event previews, which make it popular with the arts community. It also runs film reviews and a smattering of listings. However, its coverage is not nearly as

comprehensive as that of *The Oregonian* or *Willamette Week*. The *Tribune* has also undergone financial challenges that have led to the layoffs of about one-fourth of its staff.

Besides Portland's newspapers and weeklies, two city magazines—*Portland Magazine* and the brand-new *Portland Monthly*—cover arts and culture through feature stories, profiles and listings. *The Organ Review of Arts*, a boutique paper, brings an alternative voice to the mix. Launched in 2002, it enjoys a niche readership among a small circle of arts professionals and aficionados.

Arts coverage on television and radio, however, is quite limited. KBOO, the grassroots liberal radio station, runs alternative news and local music shows. Oregon Public Broadcasting airs some national radio programs, like *Fresh Air* and *Performance Today*. In 1999 its television branch launched *Oregon Art Beat*, a half-hour weekly arts show that covers local artists and presents a Portland arts calendar online.

Despite their differences, the media and the artists are in agreement about one thing: Arts coverage in Portland is lagging behind the flourishing scene. Both sides hope that an economic turnaround will allow the news outlets to find the resources they need to catch up with their beats. "The arts are becoming more important in Portland," says arts publicist Cynthia Kirk. "I think the papers are going to have to figure out a way to cover the arts in a way they deserve."

BY LILY TUNG

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