

No arts organization in Portland exemplifies the aesthetic and economic challenges of the moment—and the creative successes in tackling them—quite like The Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA).

PICA was launched in 1995 by Kristi Edmunds, a 29-year-old curator and activist. She'd already made a success of a Portland Art Museum performance series that showcased the likes of Rinde Eckert, Spalding Gray and Holly Hughes. But when a change in museum leadership created doubts about that institution's commitment to edgy, contemporary work, Edmunds quit. After several months of quiet networking and planning, she started PICA with the help of a handful of artists and friends and a \$160,000 shoestring for a budget.

Since then, she's used her vision, energy and connections to turn it into Portland's most vigorous cultural programmer. Its dozens of performances and exhibitions, such as Diamanda Galas' gothic opera, Danny Hoch's hip-hop-steeped storytelling, sculptor Roland Brener's suburb of cardboard houses and Karen Finley's notorious performance art, have sketched an intriguing eclecticism.

And PICA has found a hungry audience. First-year attendance, 6,500 for ten events, was considered a surprising success. This past spring, the Robert Wilson/Philip Glass collaboration "Monsters of Grace" (co-commissioned by PICA) drew nearly 5,000 in one night. PICA devotees attend not so much trusting in a good time as welcoming something new to think about. Edmunds doesn't program what she thinks "is the best of X, Y or Z," but what she believes will connect Portland artists and audiences to "different pockets of aesthetic conversation around the country."

Even more than through programming skills, she's built the organization through a combination of grassroots volunteerism, innovative corporate partnerships, and patronage from the area's new money—computers and athletic shoes—more than its old—land and lumber. PICA's biggest coup to date was landing a 9,000-square-foot office/gallery/resource center in the headquarters of nationally known Portland advertising firm Wieden & Kennedy—with the first three years rent-free.

After all, even amid a fast-growing economy and population, money is a critical issue. Oregon long has been near the bottom in per capita state spending for the arts, and its class of traditional cultural philanthropists is relatively small.

According to the Regional Arts and Culture

Council, though overall public funding has increased from around \$1 million in 1992 to more than \$5 million, that's still far short of the \$12 to \$14 million goal for programs and facilities recommended in a set of regional benchmarks called "Arts Plan 2000+." As the plan's latest implementation report puts it: "Historically low levels of public and private support have left our cultural organizations undercapitalized and alarmingly vulnerable."

The Portland Art Museum has seen cash-strapped days. But John Buchanan, the museum's director since 1994, has led a turnaround, relentlessly marketing traveling exhibits such as "Imperial Tombs of China" (which drew 430,000 visitors, nearly the population of Portland proper) and using Southern charm and arm twisting to get trustees and civic leaders to pony up larger donations than ever. In 1992 the museum was \$5 million in the hole; in 1999 Buchanan announced a campaign to raise \$30 million with the news that he'd already lined up two-thirds of the cash. Much of that new money is for a 42,000-square-foot expansion to display more of the museum's 32,000-object permanent collection rich in Asian and Native American art, 19th century painting and English silver.

Portland's cultural funding swamp looks messiest in the theater. The city's second-largest dramatic company, Portland Repertory Theatre, closed abruptly in 1997, citing dire cash flow problems. As many as a dozen companies remain, ranging from the highly professional Portland Center Stage to tiny experimental troupes such as Stark Raving Theater. Yet most companies reported flat or declining attendance in 1998, and a lack of viable and affordable performance spaces put them in a double bind.

In a year-end evaluation, *The Oregonian* critic Barry Johnson wrote that "even at its most established companies, the quality of Portland theater is wildly uneven." Still, some rewarding work is being done, particularly at Imago Theatre. Though known nationally for its kid-friendly touring show "Frogs, Lizards, Orbs and Slinkys," at home the troupe experiments freely with film, masks, music, stylized movement and surrealistic narratives.

In dance, Oregon Ballet Theater has been strengthened financially and wooed larger audiences with splashy, MTV-oriented productions. But numerous talented contemporary dancers and choreographers work practically devoid of money and organizational synergies.

Conduit, a cooperatively run studio/rehearsal/performance space holds the center the best it can. The promotion company White Bird presents stars such as Bill T. Jones, but it's hard not to miss the vitality and cohesion the community had before Portland State University's vibrant dance department fell to the budgetary ax in the early 1990s.

Classical music, somehow, has escaped the doldrums, enjoying relative financial health and fan support. The Oregon Symphony satisfies mainstream tastes with Rachmaninoff-loving conductor James DePreist, and courts new audiences with Murry Sidlin's more adventurous programs. The advertising-savvy Portland Opera trots out the warhorses but also has the wit to complement Prokofiev's "The Love for Three Oranges" with scratch 'n' sniff cards. The casual summer series Chamber Music Northwest continues to delight its many faithful with its revolving cast of visiting players. The 75-year-old Portland Youth Philharmonic, the country's oldest youth orchestra, maintains its civic-pride status. And the Portland Baroque Orchestra, though searching for direction, plays to a small but enthusiastic period-music audience. More adventurous listeners can turn to Third Angle, the modernist Fear No Music and the percussion ensemble Wild Cheetahs.

Other arts operate outside institutional economies. Pop music is a fertile field locally, yielding critical darlings such as Elliott Smith and commercial powers such as Everclear. The annual North by Northwest music convention piggybacks on an active club scene. And while a city proclamation calling Portland the "Jazz Capital of the West Coast" sounds like boosterism, the combination of exceptional local talent and wide-ranging concert presentations makes it an arguable point.

The rainy weather might deserve some of the credit for the development of Oscar-winning animators such as Will Vinton and Joan Gratz, and for the standing of the giant Powell's City of Books as both local hub and major tourist attraction. The town's bookishness also is shown by the steady string of 2,700-seat sellouts for the Portland Arts and Lectures speaker series.

And since art cannot live on brains alone, the area's highly regarded restaurants, wineries and microbreweries increasingly are viewed as distinguishing parts of the cultural character. Sometimes it helps to meet challenges on a full stomach.

PORTLAND METROPOLITAN  
AREA POPULATION:  
2,078,357

TOP FOUR CULTURAL  
INSTITUTIONS  
(BASED ON ATTENDANCE)

1. Portland Performing Arts Center
2. Oregon Museum of Science and Industry
3. Portland Art Museum
4. Oregon Historical Society

# The Oregonian

Portland, Oregon and the surrounding region is attracting well-educated, affluent readers. Cultural activity is on the rise. The *Oregonian* is likewise prospering, and its newly refurbished and technically upgraded newsrooms are housed in a block-size building in Portland's spotless downtown.

To meet its new demands, *The Oregonian* has overhauled its arts and entertainment coverage. And just as Portland is emblematic of the demographic changes that have made the Pacific Northwest such a hot spot since the 1980s, the retooled weekend arts and entertainment section is seen as an industry trendsetter.

Often exceeding 70 pages, the hefty "A&E" tabloid was reconceived in 1996 to a length that surpasses similar sections in newspapers of much larger cities. This flagship weekend book has become the darling of management, readers and advertisers, and in the process it has lifted the profile of the arts at the *Oregonian*.

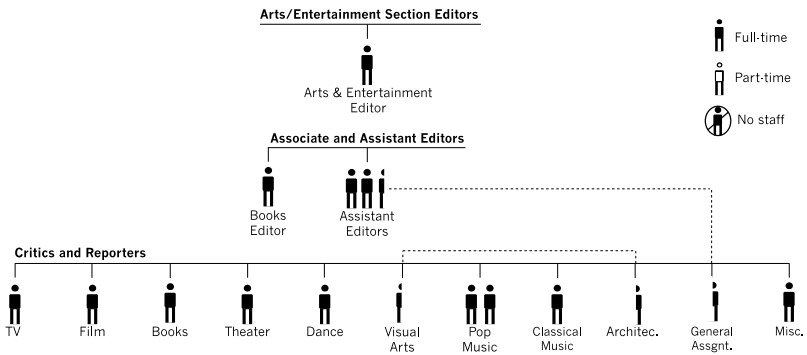
Unlike many listings-heavy weekend supplements found in other papers, "A&E" clearly favors journalism, which takes up about two-thirds of its editorial column inches. Popular arts such as rock music and the movies are emphasized over high arts. Performing arts, though, especially opera and dance, get short shrift. The section also has a second purpose. It serves as a consumer guide for Portland residents looking for things to do over the weekend.

The upgrade of the weekend section has required certain trade-offs. The paper has abandoned its dedicated weekday arts and entertainment section. During the week, arts coverage is now folded into the daily "Living" section on a page titled "Entertainment." In general, the "Living" section is long on gossip and wire copy, and short on reviews and in-house reporting.

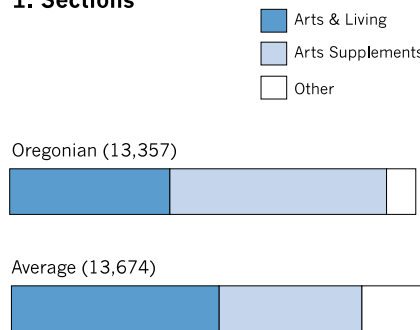
Staffing changes have reflected these structural shifts. The weekend tabloid's upgrade has produced some hires, while other areas remain understaffed. Flat staffing amounts to a de facto decrease since the growth of the city's cultural activities has increased the workload. While critics cover the local music scene, *The Oregonian* lacks a full-time writer to cover the visual arts. The paper also employs an unusually high number of freelancers.

Owner: Advance Publications Daily Circulation: 330,327 Sunday Circulation: 508,787

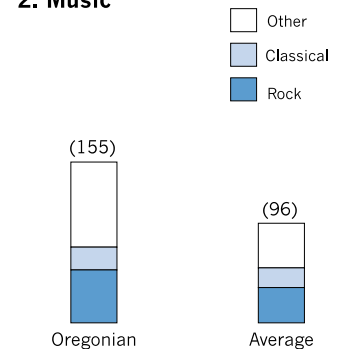
## In-house Arts Staff (does not include features staff, copy desk or freelancers)



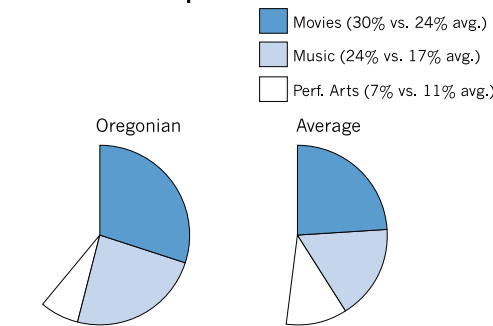
### 1. Sections



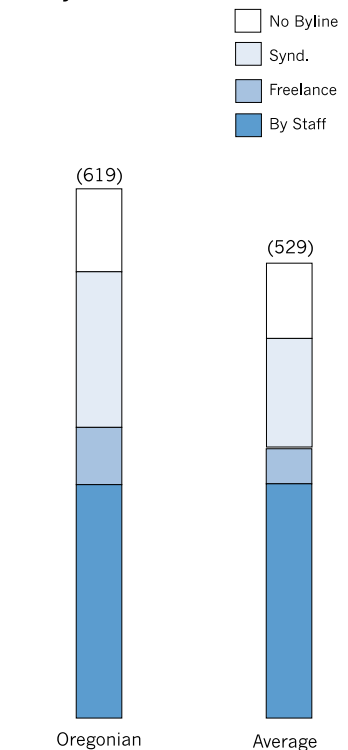
### 2. Music



### 3. Artistic Disciplines



### 4. Bylines



**Notes (All data for October 1998. Comprehensive data available at [www.najp.org](http://www.najp.org).)**

1. Volume of coverage devoted to all arts and culture stories and listings by type of section compared with the 15-newspaper average with the number in parentheses indicating total coverage in column inches

2. Number of music stories, listings excluded, compared with the 15-newspaper average with the number in parentheses indicating the total number of music articles

3. Proportion of editorial space assigned to all arts and culture stories, listings excluded, devoted to movies, music and the performing arts compared with the 15-newspaper average

4. Number of arts and culture stories, listings excluded, written by in-house staffers, freelancers and syndicated wire services compared with the 15-newspaper average with the number in parentheses indicating total number of articles

## ARTS COVERAGE IN PORTLAND: A CRITICAL VIEW

In 1995, facing flat circulation figures despite a growing market, *The Oregonian* geared up for a major marketing push. The plan called for building on the newspaper's strengths, and according to reader surveys, "A&E," the Friday arts and entertainment tabloid, was a top feature. Part of its popularity came from a major reformatting the arts staff had undertaken a year and a half earlier. But marketers wanted something they could tout as "new and improved," so the tab would have to be remade yet again.

After months of tinkering and input from consultants, surveys and focus groups, the new "A&E" debuted in May of 1996. The book was organized into "chapters" (movies, music, family fun, fine arts, etc.), with easy-to-read grids for nightclub, gallery and restaurant listings, highlighted "cheap" options, and a mix of reviews, previews, news and consumer tips. It was another hit with readers and soon was used as a model by such papers as the *Arizona Republic* and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* to give their arts guides more packaging punch.

Through "A&E," Sunday "Arts & Books" and arts stories in the daily feature pages, *The Oregonian* has solidified its place as Portland's principal source of cultural commentary. As one of the region's largest dailies, the paper has certain natural advantages. But it dominates also because other critical or informational voices are weak: The city's traditionally strong newsweekly has become aimless, alternative publications struggle simply to survive, and broadcast sources—with few exceptions—give even popular arts only superficial glances.

*The Oregonian* covers a lot of ground for a paper with a small arts staff. The Sunday section is built around three 30- to 50-inch stories and tends to emphasize theater, classical music, visual art and film. Art/architecture critic Randy Gragg mixes reportage and commentary on urban design issues in his standing "Drafts & Drawings" column. And the inside book section covers major releases while maintaining a strong regional identity. The daily pages are regrettably wire-reliant, though reviews, news and arts-related features also are a strong part of the mix on section fronts as well as inside. The Friday "A&E" flexes its readability and range, with regular columns on such assorted topics as the popular microbrew scene, urban recreation and a par-

ents' movie guide. Particular strengths are in critical analysis of film, local theater, architecture, design and local classical music. Restaurant criticism is notably more in-depth than at most mid-sized papers.

Yet there are numerous aspects to improve. Perhaps the central challenge, in an era that sees newspapers scrambling to retain time-pressed readers, is finding the proper balance of usability and depth. Kristi Edmunds, director of the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art and an astute cultural observer, laments the degree to which the paper's arts coverage is event-driven rather than idea-driven. She lauds the paper for providing basic information and "casting a really wide net," but finds context lacking. "The stories that tend to group things around an idea—rather than simply cover an artist or a gallery or a show—help people get their minds around things and maybe lead them to participate if it resonates with them," she says. "But I think there's too few of those." It may be, though, that the younger or suburban readers so prized by management are more comfortable with the particular and the piecemeal.

Diversity issues are just as vexing for the paper. Finding and spotlighting art and artists of cultural or racial minorities, amid an overwhelmingly white population, continues to be a shortcoming. And there's little attempt to discuss what multiculturalism can mean or show readers how it's changing their own experiences. "The View From Here," a recently added series of interviews with artists, civic leaders and other local characters, has brought Native American, black and female voices into the paper more prominently, and has been well-received by A&E readers. But it still is mostly a reconnaissance mission for the larger goal.

Other media outlets do not pick up the slack. "When you really get down to the media coverage, *The Oregonian* is what you have," Edmunds says. "You have the *Willamette Week*, but there aren't ongoing forums in it for some kind of critical discussion or thesis."

Well put. *Willamette Week*, the city's free alternative newsweekly, has sent alumni on to the *New Yorker*, the *Nation* and *Rolling Stone*, but in recent years it has focused on its business growth while editorial content has become woefully inconsistent. The writing in the *Willamette Week* can at times challenge the *Oregonian* for depth and readability. Yet frequently it reads like the work of novice or would-be journalists, which it often is. Maintaining a stable crew of

*"As respected as we are, there is still the feeling of 'You guys do the fun stuff. Do you guys have deadlines up there?' There is no real sense of what criticism is and what it takes to do it."*

Karen Brooks  
A&E Editor  
*The Oregonian*

freelance arts writers long has been the paper's Achilles heel. *Willamette Week* delivers worthwhile theater and restaurant reviews, covers alternative rock energetically, and sometimes beats the daily on minor local arts news. But instead of making strengths of *The Oregonian's* weaknesses, it falls farther from the mark in terms of context and diversity. Tone also is a problem; often what passes as an alternative or irreverent view is merely smirking contrarianism.

Underground publications have tried to fill the gaps, but most have been short-lived. For two years, the free monthly *Anodyne* covered the arts with a thoughtful, unpredictable urban perspective. But the shoestring operation folded this spring after about two years in business.

Electronic media offerings are limited. On radio, KINK, an atypically openminded rock/adult-contemporary station, airs local music and includes breezy but informed news

and discussion of music, film and cultural events. On the left side of the dial, community station KBOO supports non-mainstream music and poetry, and Oregon Public Broadcasting airs recordings of local classical groups, though less frequently than a few years ago. None of these, however, takes a critical or explanatory stance, unless you count Steven Cantor's two nights of artfully catholic music programming on OPB. TV news shows relay concert snippets when megastars play the Rose Garden arena, but they rarely acknowledge the local arts community. And the Citysearch and Oregon Live web sites still seem to be groping for direction.

The most recent marketing push by *The Oregonian* trumpeted a new slogan: "Practically Indispensable." Hokey as that sounds, in terms of arts coverage in the city, it might be correct. Because it sometimes seems like the daily is practically all there is.

*"We're still not going to get on AI, unless they are going to close down the arts center."*

Karen Brooks  
A&E Editor  
*The Oregonian*

#### VOICES FROM THE STAFF

Some of the things we cover aren't sophisticated, and in a lot of ways this is a small town that is very sensitive about criticism.

Where I grew up, running and jogging, or enjoying the quality of coffee was not part of how you spent your weekend. Here people's ideas about what is entertainment and how they use their leisure time are much broader. Part of the job at the *Oregonian* is getting a handle on the place, understanding what makes living here different and not always comparing it to Los Angeles or New York. At the paper we spend time trying to identify it. Film is very big here. We're sixteenth in the country in terms of arts films, so we make it part of our coverage.

Frankly, we can't compete on a national level. We have always been committed to the local scene, because that's where we make a difference. The key is not to be provincial. People can get information in so many places, and I don't believe in dumbing down. We think about what people are interested in and how we can offer them a broad range.

We have in-house focus groups and market research. There are two types. One is informal. We call people in and give them pizza, and ask them such questions as: "Where do you get your information?" We have a big, general open discussion, and then we make lists. The other is a formal focus group, with us behind the glass. A lot of it was eye-opening. We used it for the redesign of "A&E." The focus groups were responsible for maybe 50% of the final shape of the A&E section.

Most of my staff is in their 40s and 50s, and they are very resistant to popular culture. They don't listen to it. They don't know it. It is a struggle. If I decide to do a big hip-hop package on my Sunday cover, you will see hackles go up: "You are bringing that stuff into our sacred high arts space." This is a big problem for all papers. My coverage would be better if I had three or four reporters in their twenties.

Karen Brooks, A&E Editor, *The Oregonian*