

Episode 37 | Jenna Reid Pt. 1

Sarah Smith 0:00

Hello and welcome back to Discover Stories on Re-Imagine Radio. I'm Sarah Smith, your host of the podcast and the student intern at the Vancouver Adapted Music Society. Today's guest is Jenna Reid. Jenna is an artist, an activist and the artistic director of Kickstart Disability Arts & Culture. Her identity doesn't end there, and you'll learn more about her as we chat in the episode. But before we start, it's important to take a moment to acknowledge the land on which we are fortunate to host this podcast. This is the unceded and ancestral territory of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations, and has been stewarded by them since time immemorial. Vancouver is located on territory that was never ceded or given up to the crown by these Peoples. The term unceded acknowledges the dispossession of the land and the inherent rights that Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh hold to the territory. The term also serves as a reminder that these Peoples have never left their territories and will always retain their jurisdiction and relationships with the land. Jenna, thank you so much for joining me today and welcome to the podcast.

Jenna Reid 1:30

Well, thank you for having me.

Sarah Smith 1:32

Absolutely, happy to have you here. Just to start off, could you maybe introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about you?

Jenna Reid 1:40

Absolutely. So my name is Jenna Reid. My pronouns are she and her, and when I introduce myself, I like to reference the late psychiatric survivor, Diana Capponi in saying that I'm a woman who wears many hats—artist, an arts administrator, so I'm currently the artistic director of Kickstart Disability Arts and Culture, I'm also an activist and a somewhat reluctant academic, I identify as a psychiatric survivor and a white, queer, cis woman.

Sarah Smith 2:17

Okay, thank you. That is a lot of hats like you said. That's a good way to sort of start off, but definitely gives us some context for who you are and sort of what you're up to in the world. I'm wondering what sort of inspired you, or led you to enter the field of Critical Disability

Studies. I know that you did a PhD, I believe, in Critical Disability Studies at York University. So what led you down that path?

Jenna Reid 2:43

Yeah, for sure, I did do my PhD at York in Critical Disability Studies, and I guess along the way, the places that I chose to house myself in academically were often a little bit happenstance, but always based on what was aligning with the community work that I was doing. So my decisions were never really super kind of straightforward or straight lines into why I ended up in what departments I ended up into, but I did come to critical disability studies through this kind of windy road in a way that it just felt like it supported the work that I was doing, both in psych survivor organizing, but also in cross-movement organizing.

Sarah Smith 3:33

Okay, can you talk a little bit more about those two elements of organizing, cross-movement and psych?

Jenna Reid 3:41

Yeah, definitely. So I guess, and I write and talk about this pretty publicly, but my relationship with psychiatric survivor organizing both stemmed out of academia, but also very much did not. And what I mean about that is that I came to psych survivor organizing before it was really well supported in academia, so I didn't take any courses that taught me about the psych survivor movement. What happened with me was that, kind of, I grew up in a small suburb just outside of Toronto, and like many folks who are Mad and queer, it can feel very hard to fit in in the suburbs. And so, as a young adult or late teen, I really wanted to get as far away from that space as possible, and I went out to Halifax, and I did that through school, but I wasn't really clear on what I wanted to do. And also, when I went out to Halifax, I just happened to go through a significant amount of crisis and distress, in a way where it felt really important to be around more of my informal supports so my family members, who I'm very close to, and my kind of loves and chosen family. And so I moved back to Toronto a little bit begrudgingly, because it felt too close to my hometown. And when I moved back, I was very, kind of overwhelmed by how much I was having to engage with the psychiatric system. It was not an enjoyable experience. I had a lot of kind of very violent experiences within the psych system, and that brought me to kind of needing community around that, in some ways, being engaged in the psych system felt like it maybe was sort of giving me answers, because it was naming things and experiences, and that can feel helpful, But because it was so violent, it was not helpful, and so I went seeking community. And the first place I went was like a disability group on campus. And I admittedly don't remember exactly what I would have said or what I was looking for, but it

must have been something in what I said. I do recall that very early on, some of the leaders of the group was like, "Well, we really don't do political stuff." And I remember being a little bit caught off guard, because I was like, "Well, why? Like, why don't you engage in political stuff?" But I also don't think that I was very clear that that was what I was looking for. But I was pointed in the direction of community members and scholars who were engaged in psych survivor organizing. And very early on, I got connected with Lucy Costa, who was starting to organize the Mad Students Society, was also working at the Empowerment Council within CAMH, and that was kind of the beginning of it, where I came to understand that you could both make community and develop those supports, but also be engaged in political work that is striving to make this world a better place. Through my psych survivor organizing, it was inherent, although is not always the case that it is an intersectional space, while our organizing spaces do tend to prioritize and privilege white bodies. It is also true that if you put just the smallest ounce of care into the work that you do, you can recognize that as a white body in those spaces, that it both matters for you to kind of step back and do a little more listening, as well as understand the ways in which your experience of marginalization is tied up around other experiences of marginalization, which necessitates doing cross-movement organizing.

Sarah Smith 8:10

Wow, absolutely. You phrased all of that very beautifully, and I love that you touched on the intersectionality piece, the privilege piece, given that a lot of these spaces I find, and as you mentioned, you know, generally white folks are sort of centered, and it's really important to step back and sort of create space and leave space for all of these other elements. And I love the way that you touched on community as well, and finding that community of support, as I get the sense that that's quite important to you as well, in having your own supports, I think that was really beautiful, the way that you put all of that. Thank you.

Jenna Reid 8:52

Thank you, I guess. [Laughs] And I think also one thing that I've noticed and recognized is like stepping back in making spaces both an active and proactive thing, but it's also not a thing that is necessary for me to do. Like, BIPOC, queer and trans BIPOC, survivor organizing is happening, has happened and will happen, whether I, as a white person, make the space for it. And so essentially, what I see is happening is you're either going to engage in this cross-movement solidarity or you're going to be doing work that is just really irrelevant. So it doesn't necessitate that I do that work of stepping back or stepping aside, but it also does, if that makes sense, it's not really benefiting others, and it is in that we have to work together. But I'm not doing some good act by doing that, because that work is

already happening. And so I'm really just in irrelevant spaces if I'm not recognizing what my role is in terms of supporting it or not.

Sarah Smith 10:05

Yeah, absolutely. I think that's a really good sort of a nuance to highlight that I think sometimes is missed in a lot of these conversations. And you phrase that much better than I did as well. But I think that's a really good point, and it's sort of timing, of when to step back and when to contribute, and how in those spaces. Because, like you said, it is already happening by all of these communities and that intersect. So that's a very good point. Shifting just slightly, and I'm assuming that it might be related as well, I'm wondering what your path was to working at Kickstart.

Jenna Reid 10:43

Yeah, definitely also a very windy road to get there. It took me a very long time myself to really see myself as an artist and understand that my own arts practice mattered. And before I was able to do that, I wasn't able to see myself within the art world at all. I didn't grow up in a family where, I mean, my family engaged in arts, but not really in formal fine art spaces. And so it was probably about 15 years ago that I really started to focus my work around my own artistic work and practice as a Mad artist. I remember going to an exhibit at the Textile Museum of Canada, and the exhibit was an artist named Richard Boulet, who does textile work that explores experiences of homelessness and being queer and having psychiatric diagnoses. And I remember that I was just kind of feeling a little bit maybe confused and lost, perhaps burnt out in my own kind of research work, and I was talking with one of my mentors and my committee members about the exhibit, and just had a whole bunch of "aha" moments, because I have grown up quilting, which is a practice of art that is, you know, has its own tricky relationships with the fine arts world, and I made a decision to centre that within the work that I was doing, which felt scary and vulnerable and not clear on why that mattered or how that would matter. But when I made that decision, I was in the beginning of my PhD, so I was able to immerse myself in studying art, in making art, and surrounding myself by other Mad and disabled artists while I was doing that work. Kickstart was actually formative in what it meant for me to learn about disability arts and culture from a ground up and community driven approach. So I read a lot about Kickstart, and I engaged Kickstart in, kind of, my research, whether formally or not, for a long time, well before I came to the space of working there. So it also kind of felt a little bit happenstance in that the job opened up in a time when I was looking for work. And it also felt meant to be, because it's unusual that you come out of a PhD and you feel like you can align all of the elements of what you have done into a job. There was this kind of magical moment. And I remember kind of preparing for the interviews and doing the interviews, and

Kickstart was about to have an exhibit with Persimmon Blackbridge. And I remember getting so excited in the interview and having kind of this little fan girl moment, because Persimmon Blackbridge was also very formative for me in understanding kind of the role of Mad art in the world. And it was just, it's bizarre to say, but it was exciting to be in an interview where I could talk about and think about the idea of being part of that exhibition and being part of presenting that work. So really, it was a little bit of this roundabout way of coming to it, a little bit of magic and happenstance. But also being at Kickstart is a job that feels like being at home for me, because it's rooted in a politic that allows me to be my full self, and it regularly challenges me in a whole number of ways.

Sarah Smith 14:53

Wow, that sounds very, very beautiful. I love that the way you describe finding Kickstart through your research, and then sort of that full circle coming back, and then everything just working out perfectly. It sounds like a perfect fit.

Jenna Reid 15:08

Most definitely, and like to be clear, like I certainly was researching in ways that I was reading reports and looking at a whole bunch of, kind of, gray literature and formal literature, but I also was researching Kickstart in terms of engaging in conversations with community members, right? Like it was very much I was being steeped in this cultural social movement piece that recognized that arts and arts organizations and artists are formative in how we bring ourselves together as communities and social movements.

Sarah Smith 15:49

Yeah, absolutely. I love this community piece that keeps coming out, and you mentioned before having that space to be working with and amongst other Mad and disabled artists as well, given that you know that finding of community and finding a sense of home, I just I think that's so important, and that's one of the things that I love about Kickstart. And that I don't know of a lot of other organizations in the arts world that are specifically intended to be a place of community for artists with disabilities.

Jenna Reid 16:22

Yeah, most definitely. And I think one of the reasons why Kickstart is able to develop that type of a space and maintain it is because one of the neat or unusual things about Kickstart is it's one of the few disability arts and culture organizations, not the only one, but one of the few, that was born out of leadership from disabled artists. So it wasn't developed or started or kind of born out of programming for disabled artists by well meaning, but not

disabled folks. It was born out of our own kind of social movement organizing and leadership.

Sarah Smith 17:05

Totally. So it kind of saturates the everything that Kickstart does and stands for, I imagine, is saturated with that lens of being created by artists who are disabled as well.

Jenna Reid 17:17

Mhm, and that obviously ebbs and flows over time. There's a fluidity to that, but it allows for the possibility to kind of turn back to that and to really see the foundations and the usefulness of what that can do when we hold ourself in that space.

Sarah Smith 17:38

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, from what you've been saying so far, it sounds like it is exactly reaching that goal, that it's intended to do along those lines. I'm wondering if you can tell us a bit about the programs that Kickstart offers to the community on sort of a more tangible of what's going on over there.

Jenna Reid 17:58

Yeah, for sure. So Kickstart did start as a festival organization, and we've moved away from that type of programming. We do engage a little bit in festival work, so we kind of support the ACCESSFest with The Gathering Place in Vancouver, but beyond that, we have really started to shift into doing more of a range of artistic programming that supports artists at all stages in their careers. So we do things like workshops where we are making space for artists to develop artistic skills and artistic techniques. We do things like community learning in workshops, we do panels, we do online learning pods, we do support in grant writing, we do access audits and things like that. We also present a lot of art. So we collaborate with different spaces, and we do exhibitions. We do group exhibitions and solo exhibitions and different types of presentations, so shows that engage not necessarily just visual arts, but also different types of arts. We do artist residencies, so spaces where artists can come together and really focus in on and work on their arts practices. We have bursary programs, and we also engage in and support researching as well as consulting work so that we are contributing to kind of the ongoing development of the field.

Sarah Smith 19:41

Very cool, so many things there. That's a whole wide range of offerings. I love that. And I mean, I'm personally, myself, I'm not an artist. I do not have an artistic bone in my body, but I find, from what I've seen, that a lot of arts organizations do have some of the things

you mentioned, you know, like the workshops for skills and online offerings and things like that, residencies, shows and yet, I don't know that a lot of them will offer things like those more on the less artistic side, but the more other types of skills, like the grant writing and things that you don't always see, so I think that's really valuable as well.

Jenna Reid 20:28

Yeah, and for us that's a really important thing, is to provide that kind of range of programming, because it is a recognition that disabled artists are creating work that is necessary for our world and also so need supports in ways that recognize the historical barriers that we've experienced in formal art spaces. So lack of access to university programs, lack of access to other formal art spaces. Being able to provide that range of programming allows us to house some things that might not deal with the fact that many art spaces are so inaccessible, but at least can offer a range of support that gets our membership into spaces that they might not have access to before.

Sarah Smith 21:29

Totally, I love that. I love how fullsome those offerings are.