Episode 38 | Jenna Reid Pt. 2

Sarah Smith 0:17

This is sort of more on that side of Kickstart and what sort of programs are run. As the artistic director, what does your role entail on like a day to day?

Jenna Reid 0:28

Absolutely. So as a small arts organization, my role as a artistic director entails a lot. When I was hired first at Kickstart, we worked on a model of only two part time staff. So it was myself and the amazing administrative director, Kait Blake, and we are now at a point where we're building our operational capacity so that there is more support and less of the work is just on the two of us. So I do work full time now in my position, but we still are a very small arts organization, which is not unusual. That's pretty common within the arts, that organizations are really under resourced and stretched thin. But what it means for me in this type of work is that I'm engaged in such a wide range of making sure that everything is happening. So I both will develop the artistic direction of the organization. I work on kind of planning out the programming. I curate artists, I jury shows and bursaries, I lead residencies, I implement the programming, and then sometimes I'll supervise project leads and other staff to help keep stuff running. So we're starting to get to a point where we are hiring more people to be implementing programming, which means I can step back from that work, but I'll be supervising it happening. And then I do lots and lots and lots of grant writing.

Sarah Smith 2:12

Okay, you wear many hats over there. It sounds like that. Must be very, very busy.

Jenna Reid 2:18

It most definitely is. But also one thing that's really important to us at Kickstart is that we really do work on crip and Mad time in that we build into our organization the possibility to allow ourselves to be human bodies that have mess going on. So it also feels like a very supportive and very human workspace where we are all kind of showing up together and allowing each other to have things happening, that gives this kind of ebb and flow of how we work together.

Sarah Smith 2:59

That's awesome. I think that's really important as well when we're talking about, you know, intersectionality and all of the ways these different elements of someone's identity can show up. And yet, I think that a lot of spaces in sort of mainstream or run by very privileged cultures, folks end up feeling like they have to hide or suppress certain elements of themselves. So I love that, yeah, using space to sort of allow people to be their full human selves, whatever that looks like, and support each other in that. I think that's really, really powerful. Sort of shifting more to the integration of your educational and like research background and to the transition of working at Kickstart, I'm wondering how your studies in critical disability show up or inform your work at Kickstart, and how that integrates.

Jenna Reid 3:59

Yeah, yeah. I mean, I talked a little bit about this before, in that it feels unusual for me that I was able to come out of my PhD and move into a job that very much felt like it supported all of the elements of the research and community work that I have done for years and years. So it all shows up in there. It is. There's not an element of what I'm doing at Kickstart that's not informed by my kind of educational and research background. And yet, also, there are ways in which there are so many kind of tangents and lines within what I've done over the years that it might be hard to name it all. Coming from a background of research where I really focused my work on what was happening in the community and what was, you know what were pressing moments and pressing issues of the time. It does feel as if all of that kind of comes into the space of Kickstart, because Kickstart is working with folks who are making art, both in relation to their own experiences within disability and Mad communities, but also our existing as Mad and disabled artists within the world. And so how I work, what I choose to work on, the ethics and politics of the ways in which things are unfolding, those are all informed by my educational and research background. But if I'm going to be very honest, I don't credit that to the university. The university gave me space and time and resources to be able to read and engage and research and do action and activism, but that was not the place where I learned the most important lessons, the most important things I learned came from on the ground, community work. I find that when folks are engaged in critical disability studies, and they're only coming to it from academic spaces, are only engaged in academic writing, academic thought and theory that they're missing, a whole bunch of kind of ground up theory development, or ground up politics and ways of moving and ways of doing things. Ground up development of how and why you ask the questions you ask. That's where I credit my learning from, was being able to be engaged with actual activist work. I feel very fortunate to have been welcomed into spaces. I feel very fortunate to have been trusted, over the years, to apply both academic skill sets but also activist skill sets within those spaces. And so it all shows up in there, but in kind of tricky, tricky ways, I guess.

Sarah Smith 7:15

Yeah, for sure, I get the sense that the university side and the more academic side has given you one set of skills that, like you said, show up to be useful, and then that other grassroots or ground up work in the community with different organizations has sort of given you maybe a different perspective of all of these things that we've been talking about, and each of those things applies to the work, sort of in different ways.

Jenna Reid 7:47

Yeah, definitely.

Sarah Smith 7:48

Yeah. That's very cool. I mean, again, I just keep getting this sense that it is the perfect fit for you and for your background.

Jenna Reid 7:54

It often feels like it could not be any better.

Sarah Smith 8:01

Well, that's a great space to be in. I mean, yeah, I don't know how many people can say that about their jobs, that they just align so well and so perfectly. So that's that's really great. I love that. I'm wondering, sort of still along the lines of Kickstart and the offerings and the programs, and specifically the impact that Kickstart has had on the disability arts community. I'm wondering sort of what barriers to arts or arts programming are reduced through Kickstart's offering that disabled artists might otherwise face within the community.

Jenna Reid 8:41

Sure. So Kickstart does a lot to reduce barriers. We focus on kind of access in ways that are relational and developing, kind of from a perspective of things like access intimacy, which comes out of disability justice, thinking and organizing. We do things like we work on shifting to make sure that we are centering intersectional approaches within the field of disability, arts and culture. I think when that is not centered within the work, the reduction of barriers really works from more of a rights based perspective. And from what I kind of have learned and understood about the history of disability movement organizing and rights based perspectives is that while they have their place and that they are meaningful in a lot of ways, they do also often prioritize and privilege white bodies. And so we think about things like financial barriers, anything that we offer is it's very rare that it's not free. We think about things like having space for culturally relevant programming that is led by

programmers who identify within those communities. And my goal really is to build the organizational capacity of Kickstart so that we have permanent full time roles of leadership for queer, trans and BIPOC so Black, Indigenous and People of Colour, disabled artists in doing this, we try and make sure we also have space where that type of programming, so programming that is specifically for BIPOC disabled artists, has its own kind of sovereign and or space that is built that has built into it agency and autonomy so that when necessary, BIPOC programming doesn't have to answer back to us as the administrators. And that matters to me, given that right now, the team at Kickstart is predominantly white, we do programming that contributes to the development of artistic practice in ways that are low barrier, because they're free, because we build in different types of access, such as always having interpreters and captioning, such as always having online support. If our programming is online, we engage in access in a way that is relational. Meaning, when we plan and program things, we ask people to show up and indicate the things they need to be present in the space. Because there's no universal way of making something low barrier. There are many, many times where our access needs come into conflict with one another, and so at Kickstart, we don't pretend as if, just because we are a disabled organization, that we are going to know all of the ins and outs of what everybody needs in order to be in a space. It's not unusual for me when I'm working with people that I make sure that they're fed and they have the need, the things they need in order to literally be in a meeting, in a way where their body is tended to but I think it also matters to say that our work isn't really only focused on reducing barriers and creating access, because reducing barriers and creating accessible environments in the arts is really the bare minimum. It's like the literal conditions we need to show up to that proverbial table. So the work that we do at kickstart is to support the development, the advancement, the presentation of the field of disability arts and culture, which does need to be accessible, it needs to be low barrier, barrier free. But that really feels so basic. It's like saying you need to put a door on your gallery so that people can enter the building and engage with the art. So it's like, yeah, we need accessible and low barrier programming so disabled artists can flourish, but that's not what our work is actually about. We do that because we know we have to, because we know we need it, and we know the people we work with need it, but we don't always have to be focused on or talking about the fact that we actually installed the door, you know, like we want to be focused on the art, the artwork, the artists and the art practices. It shouldn't be remarkable that we do these kind of low barrier offerings, although I get that it should be that while we expect it to happen like we should in society, be expecting this to be happening in all of our spaces, and I get that it's not, so I get that it's important and important to talk about and important to work on. But at Kickstart, we really want it to be unremarkable, because we want it to be kind of the most basic element that is being attended to. It's not that it's easy work, but it should be just that most basic element.

Sarah Smith 14:20

Totally, yeah. I think that's a really important sort of distinction to highlight. Is that these accessibility and barrier issues really should be baseline across the board, like embedded in all of our systems and programs everywhere, really. So I appreciate when you say that it's something that shouldn't be remarkable in that it should just be standardized practice that, like all of our systems and public spaces and you know, in the arts community and outside of the arts community, this shouldn't be the way that it is. So I think that's a really, really great point to highlight, sort of along those lines of what you were saying with hearing what artists need. I was wondering to what degree Kickstart's programming and direction is influenced by feedback from the community that's being served.

Jenna Reid 15:25

Yeah, so my curatorial impulse is built out of care and relationship building. So the programming that we do at Kickstart is very responsive to community. It is engaged with what we see happening in communities around us. It is built out of the relationships that we are building. So one example of this is that I've been thinking about what it means to be a small arts organization and think about building relationships that have both breadth and depth. And the first place that I began to explore this was early on in my job at Kickstart. We had had an artist who had recently been awarded the Geoff McMurchy Bursary, and their name is Adele Lᵑᑲᒧᐃᐊᐧᑊᖅ° Arseneau. And we were really, really excited about Adele's application and Adele's work, and in coming to develop a relationship with Adele, what I was thinking about was, how do we take something that is a small-ish but meaningful bursary and grow that so that Adele feels supported in larger ways through our organization? So I had a meeting with Adele, and I asked about what was exciting them in their artistic practice, what were some goals they had within their artistic career, what would really kind of get them, get them excited about what is next, and what we decided to do was develop a solo exhibit for Adele, because Adele had never had a solo exhibit before, and what that felt like was the ability to support both with that breadth and depth. Because from there, we started to write grants with and for Adele, and we have begun to build out programming, and we're looking for resources to support that programming in ways that really is centering that relationship building and the trust building, and also what it means to work across our communities, both with differences but also similarities, and what it means to show up together. And so the programming that we are doing always is born out of community impulses, community direction, community requests. And I work hard to develop trust with community members who are coming to the organization with ideas and desires and things that they're wanting to see. I'm working towards developing trust so that we can offer a range of programming that both feels good, that feels well supported, but

also is supporting the arts and cultural workers who are making the suggestions or bringing the ideas to us. So it is important to me that kickstart is not doing programming to benefit Kickstart, and that in fact, Kickstart is doing programming in a way where we are benefiting community members, and not in superficial ways, but continuing to have ongoing conversations to think about, how do we support each other in ways that really open up spaces for people to be flourishing, for people to get excited, for people to have just the literal material supports we need in this world, and also to be doing artistic programming that feels exciting and not innovative for the sake of innovative, but exciting for the sake of, "This is what we want to see happening in our world?"

Sarah Smith 19:44

Wow, I love that. I I really like the way that you spoke about those relationships and sort of centering the relationship with the artists who are using Kickstart's programs or engaging with them. It almost feels collaborative, the way that you're describing it, that you're hearing their suggestions and their needs, and then you have this excitement of creating or expanding programs together with the artists that you know are directly responding to the whatever needs they've communicated. I think that's really, really cool.

Jenna Reid 20:17

Yeah. And I think that there's limitations, for sure, to seeing it as collaborative, and that's kind of also where I wear all these hats as an administrator, is that I also do want to recognize that, given that I am a person, that I work full time there, I exist in decision making, power roles. I have a lot of power in my role. It is also important to me that I continue to work on that building of the the operational pieces within the organization, because I do want it to be the case that I'm not just collaborating with people from a project to project basis that because that still feels as if it's a little bit at that superficial level. Yes, we do make sure that people are paid bare minimum CARFAC fees for things like exhibitions and work, and we are making sure that the pay that we're offering when it is contract work is well, well above minimum wage, although not you know, Vancouver is an expensive place to live. Turtle Island is an expensive place to live, so even going above minimum wage never feels enough, and so in my role as an administrator, I am constantly thinking about, what does it mean to build the organization so that there are jobs and positions that are permanent, that have pay that is not just competitive or within, you know, the general range in the arts world. But can we get ourselves to a place where we are a place where Mad and disabled folks both want to work because they can take risks and do work that is in line and aligned with their politics and their values and their experiences of the world. But also they want to work here, because they can make risky decisions, they can do programming that might not be supported elsewhere, and also they can make a

living that supports them in real and meaningful ways. So it is designed to be collaborative, but there are limitations, given that we're a small institution, and yet we are thinking about and working on that, and that's kind of a slow process, but a meaningful one and an important one that happens behind the scenes.

Sarah Smith 23:05

Absolutely, and thank you for that, that sort of clarification on that it sounds like everything that you're doing is really, really thoughtful and intentional, and I'm sort of feeling that coming through in the way you're talking about the community and the artists and all of the programmings. Yeah, I think it's really beautiful, and I really appreciate all that you've shared with us today, and you've given very like rich responses that I think just sort of highlight, I guess, a passion for the work there. Was there anything else that you'd like to share, either about your own story and your own research or about Kickstart and the programmings before we sort of wrap up for today?

Jenna Reid 23:46

No, I don't think so. I mean, it's been fun for me to talk with you. It's been fun to reflect on what's happening at Kickstart. And yeah, it is true that it's always important to me that both I think Kickstart is and can and does really amazing work, which is why I'm always excited to be a part of it. And also I think it matters to be reflective that organizations and institutions always need to continually be thinking about their impact on the world, and it's never going to be a clean and perfect impact. So no matter how, kind of, intentional or careful or thoughtful we are, there is always room for doing things better. And I think that that is kind of a fun and amazing thing, is to be in a space where thinking about, what does it mean to do things better, and what does it mean to contribute to making this world a better place is happening in a space where artists are contributing? Because I think artists have this capacity to think differently, to engage in ideas differently, and really to offer kind of just have really creative offerings. That's the nature and role of an artist is to is to take things that we take for granted, take truths that we can't see outside of, and posit something different. So it's exciting for me to be able to be in a space where making the world a better place is happening through such rich and creative practices.

Sarah Smith 25:30

Beautifully put. Thank you so much for joining me today and sharing all of your expertise. Do you want to maybe just drop like the Kickstart website one time so that folks can find it if they're interested in learning a little bit more.

Jenna Reid 25:44

Yes, I absolutely do. So our website is www.kickstart.disability.ca.

Sarah Smith 25:53

Awesome. Jenna, thank you so much for joining us. This was a really, really interesting and valuable conversation.