



# CityLife

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## Bold strokes

# Meet the new best last hope for serious contemporary art in Southern Nevada

by ANDREW KIRALY

The Las Vegas Art Museum closed last month, and Beate Kirmse is so over it. Kirmse doesn't have time to grieve. The executive director of the Contemporary Arts Center is too busy helping to reinvent the 20-year old CAC. Art aficionados might remember the CAC as a venerable valley institution that was a reliable, if somewhat insular, artists' collective.

Not anymore. Kirmse, who took the helm of the organization in 2007, has since made some bold strokes. She renamed the group, broadened its scope beyond Vegas artists, and essentially threw open the doors to the general public, launching an aggressive campaign for new members, donors and patrons. All this, while continuing to exhibit some of the valley's most exciting art and sticking to a grassroots philosophy.

Kirmse, who grew up outside Stuttgart, Germany and most recently worked in New York as a business consultant, spoke with CityLife about art, commerce and the place where the two meet.

**With the closing of Las Vegas Art Museum, the Contemporary Arts Center is now the oldest extant contemporary art gallery in Southern Nevada. Feel any pressure there?**

**Beate Kirmse:** I don't see it as pressure. I actually see it as a great opportunity for the CAC, as sad as it is that the Las Vegas Art Museum is closed. What I did [when LVAM closed] was I called an extraordinary board meeting just to talk about what it means for the city, what it means for the CAC and what we can do as an entity. The spirit was really great, because everybody on the board was behind it, agreeing that this is a good time for the CAC to step up and take on a leadership role.

Because there is nothing else. I mean, there are other commercial galleries that do great work and show great artists, but we're the nonprofit. That's why we think it's on us to maybe initiate something, to have the community re-evaluate the situation in Las Vegas and ask what we all can do to create a better environment for galleries and other institutions not to close but to actually settle down.



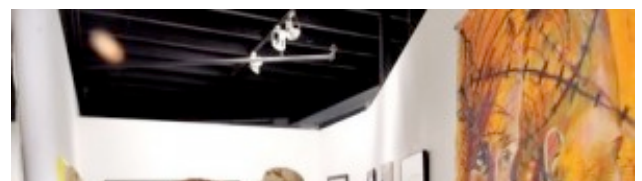
PHOTO BY BILL HUGHES

Beate Kirmse, executive director of the Contemporary Arts Center, speaks before the winners of the center's 20th Annual Juried Art Show are announced.



PHOTO BY BILL HUGHES

Shana Nys Dambrot explains some of the criteria for her decisions as juror for the Contemporary Arts Center's 20th Annual Juried Show.



I think also what we had a consensus about is that everything is so negative. The [Las Vegas Art] Museum is closing, Tamares Group wanted to create a contemporary art museum downtown and they just withdrew. So there's all this bad news, and we don't want to let it get to us. We want to be positive. I mean, it's an incredible success for the CAC, kind of a grassroots organization, to survive for 20 years. It means a lot.

**Many people still think of the CAC as an artists' collective. What does the name change mean? How has the group evolved?**

**Kirmse:** When I started in fall of 2007, we were still the Contemporary Arts Collective. But having me as the director -- I'm not an artist -- kind of is contradictory already to the collective. And it wasn't that spirit anymore, that artists come together anymore to create their own exhibitions. It was more that we wanted to get to another level where we invite people from out of town, mix it with local artists and just show a different level of contemporary art, really keep it up.

And for me, it was also important, since contemporary art has so many different media -- like paintings, photography, sculpture, video, installations, performances. For me, it was very important to show these different media to the community here.

For example, last year we had two installations. We had one installation where we transformed the whole gallery into a Coney Island boardwalk experience and then [artist] Aaron Sheppard performed. In the beginning I really wanted to show it, but I thought I'll probably get a lot of grief from people. "Oh, this is not art," or whatever. But people were great. They really enjoyed it on all levels. They really embraced it. And then we had [Brian Paco Alvarez's] show "Beneath the Neon," [based on the book by former CityLife staffer Matt O'Brien] and you know, people loved it, it was a big hit. And we had Catherine Borg's media installations, which just came out in Art in America, so that's a big success for us to be in that magazine.

**If I were the director of the nonprofit gallery, and one of the biggest museums in town just shut its doors, I'd be thinking, "Man, I have to get a hold of their donors list!" Is that viable?**

**Kirmse:** Absolutely. Whoever was interested in the Las Vegas Art Museum is interested in art. That was a topic too. It's time for us to really think about how we represent the CAC, what we're doing to court the public, or people who have a different idea of CAC in their head.

I do believe that in nonprofits that grow and succeed, there is somebody behind it with a business sense. At the end, it is a business. It is nonprofit, but we have to make money. You have to have a structure in place that works on a business level. It does have to have a mission that appeals to people. There has to be an audience.

**You're not an artist. Were you self-conscious about that when you took this job?**

**Kirmse:** Yeah, because people thought it was very important to be an artist to do this. The first question always was, "So, are you an artist, too? What do you do?" And they were quite surprised when I said no.

**Maybe that's the problem with a lot of these galleries that fold: They're run by artists.**

**Kirmse:** Exactly. I think you need a good combination of somebody with a business background, but that person has to have a deep knowledge, of course, of the arts too, and has to communicate with artists and other people involved in the arts.

**In the wake of the closing of LVAM, some have said this is proof there's no appetite for the arts in Southern Nevada. Is that true?**

**Kirmse:** I don't believe in that. I mean, it's not a town or area where people come per se for the arts, but there's a community of people who are interested, who want to see and want to participate.

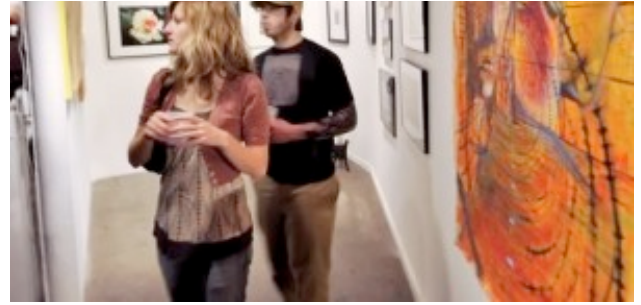


PHOTO BY BILL HUGHES

Alexandria Bevilacqua's "Concentration," right, took first prize in the Contemporary Arts Center's 20th Annual Juried Show.

I don't believe in that, but that's also why we want a conversation to see what needs to be done differently. What happens in Las Vegas is that people know New York and Houston and L.A., and kind of compare. "Oh, we should do this, we should be a New York." It's not. Las Vegas is very different, and Las Vegas does have a lot of different people, its education level is different and reasons why people come here are different. Maybe you have to just think who we are here and create something to support that type of community. It needs to be very unique, because it is a very unique town.

### **What brought you to Las Vegas?**

**Kirmse:** I quit my job. I had a job in business consulting, financial companies, and I was tired of corporate America. I knew for a few years I wanted a change, so I also got a degree in arts administration. I just needed to find out what I can do in the arts using my business skills. I didn't want to lose everything. I'm not an art historian, I learned about art through what I see at galleries, museums and readings. But I also have an extensive business background.

### **Was the consulting you were doing boring corporate stuff?**

**Kirmse:** It was corporate stuff. My work here is not that different, it's just that the topic now, it's what I love. Before it was implementing computer systems or creating strategies for companies to be more competitive, things like that.

### **Has the economy hit CAC hard?**

**Kirmse:** We're kind of underneath the current. We're such a grassroots operation. We operate on so little money that so far -- knock on wood and fingers crossed -- we do survive. And it's really just because of the help from volunteers and artists. When [video artist] Catherine Borg had her show here, she brought her husband and all the volunteers, and she installed everything. That's different than a museum that has more cost, that has to pay for shipments. Or when we had the show with New Mexico artists, [a volunteer] actually drove to Santa Fe with his truck and brought all the work here.

### **So your funding mix doesn't really rely on key corporate donors?**

**Kirmse:** Our key corporate benefactor here is [Arts Factory owner] Wes Myles, but we have started to look out for grants from the foundations, to really spread it a little bit. That was for me again to have the name change and reach out to a broader audience, so people would feel more invited to be part of it.

It's still a process. It took us the last year to build up our reputation again, having some good shows, and we're kind of in the center again. It's time for us to step up and also do some good publicity work, now we can really show we had some really goods in the last month and we're stable. Come and support us. You don't need a million dollars for us. I mean, I'll take it, of course. But we're talking a different dimension. A little helps a lot.

### **Who are some must-see Las Vegas artists?**

**Kirmse:** Come to see what we have at CAC, but also go to the UNLV thesis show at UNLV, like Dave Sanchez, Aaron Sheppard. Sanchez does installations, sound and light installations. Aaron Sheppard, he does paintings and mixed media.

### **Compared to what you were doing in New York, is this easier or harder?**

**Kirmse:** It's a lot easier for me. I mean, I work the same hours as before, and make a tiny little percentage of what I was making before, but I just love coming in and working with the art, working with artists. I'd rather work with an artist than a programmer or a business analyst.