

# IC art group grows with 'no sugar-coating' attitude

Dick Hakes, Taking Liberties 3:02 p.m. CST January 19, 2016



(Photo: Special to the Press-Citizen / Public Space One)

There wasn't a lot of publicity about it, but last September a pretty amazing performance art event took place at Public Space One, a non-profit community art group housed in the basement of the Wesley Center in downtown Iowa City.

In front of an audience of about 40 or so persons, California performance artist Artemisa Clark sat nude on the floor and tattooed herself on the leg with an image commemorating the 30th anniversary of the controversial death of Ana Mendieta, one of the University of Iowa's art legends.

"People sat in total silence for about 40 minutes," said John Engelbrecht, the part-time director of PS1. A video camera captured a close-up of the tattooing as it happened and projected it onto a large screen beside the

artist.

"Personally, I liked it and thought it was meaningful," said Engelbrecht. "Ana Mendieta is probably the most famous artist ever to go through the University. Some people think they should name the School of Art after her. She was nurtured by Iowa and the university."

Still, he acknowledges that the event was a fairly extreme version of performance art. "It was pretty intense, but I was glad we could provide a place for this," he said. "Artemisa could probably not have performed this on campus."

Engelbrecht sees PS1 as a bridge between the university and Iowa City art communities, promoting a broad interpretation of what can be called art. Like Clark's performance, many exhibits are non-conventional.

For example, over the summer, an "experimental noise" event filled the PS1 hall as participants aired strange sounds made electronically or with conventional percussion or brass instruments. Another event featured a deliberately low-tech video game in which the creating artist, dressed to color-coordinate with his game as it was projected on a large screen, challenged audiences to figure out how to play it.

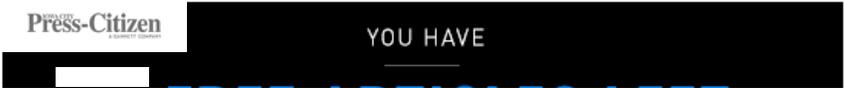
The formula of mixing "out there" art with more conventional workshops, exhibits and musical events appears to be working. Engelbrecht reports that PS1 had an "incredible" year last year, growing participation in almost every category.

PS1 hosted or sponsored 19 exhibitions and art events last year, 15 music shows, five film screenings and 79 workshops. There were also 42 performances, now that Dreamwell Theatre uses the space along with three improv groups.

Another key success last year was the revitalization of the PS1 print shop, now thriving as the Iowa City Press Co-op with about 30 active members.

Although its budget has grown from \$2,500 to nearly \$50,000 in the five years of its existence, PS1 is still working on a shoestring and offering much in return. Engelbrecht is the only employee and counts on a core group of less than 50 volunteers to keep programs running.

Besides a small donor base, PS1 gains some income from renting four artist studios on a monthly basis, plus its exhibition hall for certain events. Its leadership dreams of owning their own facility at some point in the future, expanding staff and continuing to broaden its scope.



Engelbrecht says although PS1 offers a wide range of artistic activities to a wide-ranging audience, maintaining an "edge" is still vital to its local mission.

"Frankly, everything is so sugar-coated these days," he says. "There is a trend toward more conservative art. We want to push what the definition of 'community art space' is in any way we can."

