



MEL ANDRINGA

ANATOMY OF AN ART SCENE

How a Slice of SoHo Sprouted in Cedar Rapids BY JON SPAYDE

CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA, IS A BLUE-COLLAR CITY WITH A UNIQUE ARTISTIC her-itage: In the 1930s it was home to Grant Wood, probably the most famous, certainly the most recognizable (American Gothic) American painter. The city's symphony orchestra has been praised in the *New York Times*, and its opera company draws upon an international circuit of first-rate young singers who work in Europe, Latin America, and New York.

But this sprawling grain-milling town's most distinctive arts institution is housed in an old ethnic social hall on the southeast side called C.S.P.S. (Czech and Slovak Prudential Society). Here performance artist Mel Andringa and his partner F. John Herbert preside over a mix of edgy art, local consciousness, and progressive music under the umbrella title Legion Arts (www.legionarts.org).

The sunny gallery space at C.S.P.S. fills with exhibits that are anything but down-home: a showcase of Asian and American digital-media and Web artists ended the 2001–2002 season. On weekends the hall's small theater is given over to major alt-folk and experimental musicians like Lucy Kaplansky, Bay Area accordion avant-gardist Beth Custer, and native Iowan Greg Brown. Multimedia and performance art shows range from Los

Angeles solo performer Tim Miller's searing examinations of gay life to a recent project in which video and text projections on the walls of an abandoned packing plant re-created Cedar Rapids' industrial history in the words of female workers. And Legion Arts' outreach program helps spread art and art-making into its inner-city neighborhood in partnership with community centers, housing projects, and high schools.

Artistic multitasking is second nature to Andringa, who has spent his 30-year international career creating performances that explore art and artists in ingenious ways. He'll re-create a figurative painting as a tableau with live actors, then "enter" it in the role of its creator or a commentator. Meanwhile, the composition deconstructs into scenes that illuminate the work, the creative process, and even Andringa's struggle creating the performance itself. He "became" Grant Wood in a piece called *The Man Who Invented Iowa*, and his latest show is about Cedar Rapids native Carl Van Vechten—novelist, photographer, Gertrude Stein's friend, a booster of the Harlem Renaissance, and a pioneer of gay identity. It's another instance of the way Andringa and company connect the artistic past of their corner of Iowa with the artistic future.

Jon Spayde is editor of *Utne Arts Extra* 2003.

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