

## When images make noise

Local graffiti artists and New Jersey collective consider art a language for a public space

by Ben Doak  
Hatchet Reporter

Behind the metal fence that surrounds a crumbling Bi-Rite Supermarket, the sound of construction work - power drills, sawing, hammering - has been the soundtrack of the Columbia Heights neighborhood for several weeks. Just a few blocks away people filled the streets, shops and cafes, but the area surrounding the old Bi-Rite on 11th and Park streets is remarkably empty.

This past Sunday from 9 a.m. until 6 p.m., a group of 10 graffiti artists set up shop for their own twist on a community service project. Spray-paint, oils and wooden boards were the weapons of choice for the kaleidoscopic graffiti they planned to brandish along the face of the fence, which would obscure the sight of construction developments.



Media Credit: Chris Gregory/Hatchet photographer  
Local artist Alicia Cosnahan puts the final touches on a piece of art while the project organizer, Peter Krsko, looks on. The art has been made by a collective of artists called Albus Cavus.

The project was not the work of vigilantes, nor was it the work of a local initiative. The Visual Arts Jam was spearheaded by a Brunswick, N.J.-based nonprofit arts organization called Albus Cavus, or "white cave" in Latin. Area graffiti artists were invited to participate.

Only a small basement exhibit space four years ago, Albus Cavus has grown into an international artist collective. Their mission is to promote strong and healthy communities by involving residents in projects by bringing art to underused public spaces. In doing so, they also hope to support local artists, according to their Web site.

Peter Krsko, founder of Albus Cavus, said he targeted D.C. as the site of a project after hearing of development in the area.

After contacting D.C.-area developers, he partnered with John Goldman of local design firm 3DG for the event. Participating artists include three from Albus Cavus and seven from the District.

Having done similar projects in communities near his home in Brunswick, Krsko spoke to the impact that art can have on a community.

"The effect is multi-layered," he said. "The visual aspect beautifies the neighborhood and adds some color to the point that it makes people more respectful of the space. People don't even litter around places like this. It becomes cleaner, and people begin to talk to each other more," he said.

To make his point, he noted a passerby: "You see how many people are walking by and paying attention to this. They stop and talk and try to figure out what it is. And that spills over. They turn from just walking and looking at the sidewalk to walking and looking around and noticing other people in the neighborhood. The dynamics change."

Krsko has no formal background in art. He just started hanging out with the right people, he said. He said he now understands art as a language, and when working with similar-minded artists, he doesn't feel like he has to communicate using words.

The event was a chance for Tim Conlon, aka "Con," a local graffiti artist, to display his vision. He was visibly excited as he painted the image of a king from a card deck while holding a can of spray paint. Con showcased a collaborative mural at the National Portrait Gallery in February.

Another D.C.-based artist, Alicia Cosnahan, aka "Decoy," worked on a piece involving bicycles, streets and religion. The event was an opportunity to work with religious themes she plans to incorporate in a future show.

The intersection of artistic inspiration and community support stopped Sara Stahlberg, a sophomore at American, in her path. She noticed a surreal rendering of an anthropomorphized pig.

She said, "I think it's a beautiful art form."