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## On Your Mark, Get Set, Create Something Arty

By [SEWELL CHAN](#)

A boisterous crowd filled the arena to cheer two pairs of sparring contenders, as two announcers egged on the spectators and a panel of four stone-faced judges assessed the competition before deciding on the winners.

The arena was not Madison Square Garden but the outdoor sculpture garden at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in Long Island City, Queens, and the competition was not a boxing match but "Iron Artist," a competition that placed New York artists in an intense but good-natured rivalry on Saturday afternoon. It was loosely modeled after, and parodied, the television series "Iron Chef."

Like the contestants on "Iron Chef," who create multicourse meals based on a single ingredient, the artists were given a broad theme and asked to interpret it with help from teams of assistants, mostly art students. The judges then scored the works based on originality, execution and responsiveness to theme.

The two-hour show, billed as "an absurdist multimedia spectacle of competitive, real-time art making," drew more than 1,400 people who laughed, applauded and groaned through the event. Dozens watched from the windows and even the roof of the museum's Romanesque Revival building.

The event compressed the process of making and interpreting art into a frenzy of activity.

Along with the announcers and judges, two roving commentators offered play-by-play analysis and four critics wrote reviews as the works were created. The essays, written using laptop computers, were compiled in a 20-page catalog that was to be distributed immediately after the event. (A computer glitch delayed production of the catalog, which will be available online.) An organist provided musical accompaniment throughout the afternoon.

Despite the levity, organizers said the event, part of the series "Fine Print: Alternative Media at P.S. 1," was partly intended as a critique of how quickly art is produced and valued. "It sort of accelerates even further the speed of the art world today," said Sina Najafi, the editor of Cabinet, a quarterly arts magazine, who organized the event with Matt Freedman, an artist.

In the first of two 45-minute "duels," two sculptors, Jude Tallichet and Olav Westphalen, tackled the theme of "love and its discontents" using a medium they had agreed on in advance: giant blocks of foam.

Ms. Tallichet, 52, and her crew — dressed as ninjas, their faces covered except for the eyes — cut the foam into an olive-painted dome surrounded by smaller orbs jutting outward on wooden sticks. One assistant walked back and forth with handwritten signs referring to the solar system and its mythological references, while Ms. Tallichet re-enacted several theories about the death of the sculptor Ana Mendieta. (After she fell

from a 34th-floor window in 1985, her husband, the minimalist sculptor Carl Andre, was tried for her murder and acquitted.)

Mr. Westphalen, 42, and his assistants, who wore silver boxing gowns, worked more slowly and meticulously. With a chainsaw they trimmed their block of foam into a snowman, complete with carrot-orange nose and coal-black eyes, and suspended it upside down from a flimsy wooden frame.

"The art world is at the moment infatuated with entertainment," Mr. Westphalen, the winner, said afterward. "The idea of taking that on aggressively and humorously — to try to measure up to real entertainment, where the art world always comes out short of course, because we don't have the means and the talent and the time to do it right — that's a provocative approach."

In the second match two pairs of artistic collaborators addressed the theme of "man's inhumanity to man," from the Robert Burns poem.

Adam Ames and Andrew Bordwin, who collaborate under the name Type A, used metal studs, power drills and wallboard. The other pair, Julian LaVerdière and Vincent Mazeau, who design sets for film and fashion productions through their company, Big Room, worked with a blackboard, foam, giant black balloons and cylinders of compressed hydrogen.

Mr. Ames, 37, and Mr. Bordwin, 41, were sealed inside a makeshift room by their assistants, and in the final minute of the match punched and kicked their way out by destroying a wall of Sheetrock. Mr. LaVerdière, 35, and Mr. Mazeau, 40, chose a quieter surprise: After filling balloons with hydrogen, they attached them to a brown-painted foam brick with the inscription "Every Man for Himself" and set them aloft. In a close verdict, the judges proclaimed the Type A team the victor.

The event's low cost — less than \$4,000, according to Colby Chamberlain, programming coordinator at P.S. 1 — made it a bargain by art-world standards.

Brett Littman, the museum's deputy director, said he hoped "Iron Artist" demonstrated that "contemporary art doesn't have to be something that's off-putting or difficult."

Even so, despite — or because of? — the tight deadline, the critics lapsed easily into art-theory jargon. Thomas Zummer, for example, an artist who has studied semiotics, wrote that Mr. Westphalen's snowman "performs a beautiful transposition between conscious/unconscious, up/down and similar binary 'swappings.'" But it may have been Ms. Tallichet, the sculptor, who offered sharpest observation. "If you're an artist," she said in the heat of the contest, "you can't be afraid of making a fool of yourself."

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