

## Forget block parties--how about a block gallery?

*The 700 block of Highland has become a plein air art exhibition*

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Visual artist Sabina Ott loves to say that home is where her art is.

Since October 2011, it has become an epidemic. That's when Ott, a professor of fine arts at Columbia College Chicago, began using the façade and interior walls of her 1920s brick bungalow, 704 Highland Ave. in Oak Park, to support the new works of area artists — every month.

The 57-year-old working artist and educator calls what she has been doing the Terrain Exhibition, inviting artists to contribute works that "challenge the space between public and private, decoration and function, figure and ground," she says.

"I got the idea for a front yard project space while hanging out with my students at the Poor Farm, Michelle Grabner and Brad Killiam's Kunsthalle in rural Wisconsin [they also run The Suburban, an artist-run gallery in Oak Park]," she explains. "The Poor Farm Experiment invites artists to do outdoor projects every August, among other events. I was invited to participate in 2010 and made a portable pond with a working waterfall out of Styrofoam and glitter that was both a sculpture, a seating area and a classic garden water element. Making that piece led my work in a new direction, and my new work has similarities with Terrain in that each piece is a hybrid of functional objects and art genres. I thought I



Parkway art: "Cocoon," by artist Alexandra Noe, is part of the Terrain Biennial in the 700 block of South Highland Avenue. (DAVID PIERINI/Staff Photographer)



Home Improvements: "Expansion (Trespass)," by Robert Gero, occupies the front of Sabina Ott's house on South Highland Avenue. (DAVID PIERINI/Staff Photographer)

work has similarities with Terrain in that each piece is a hybrid of functional objects and art genres. I thought I could offer a similar opportunity for expansion to others and became excited about inviting artists to produce outdoor projects that engaged the site of my front yard."

Ott says Terrain differs from many other alternative art "platforms" in that the artworks are accessible and visible 24 hours a day, in a neighborhood setting across the street from Longfellow Elementary School more or less kitty corner from Longfellow Park.

Over the last two years, her Terrain installations have included both huge and smallish "sculptures" and "lawn art" — the big ones often envelop the entire front of her home, which is hard to miss. The latest is a roughly 20-foot-high Robert Gero piece, "Expansion Trespass," which some may say evokes the feel of a Halloween decoration, even though it's not, Ott says, though it could understandably be interpreted that way.

Since mid-September, with the 700 block neighbors' "benign nod or yeah, whatever" response or, in some cases, enthusiastic participatory buy-in, Ott has been celebrating her first two years of exhibiting by staging the Terrain Biennial, a block-long open air art exhibit, which closes on Saturday, Oct. 19.

"For the last two years, my Terrain Exhibition public art projects have been just in front of, or on, my house," says Ott, who relocated to Oak Park from the West Coast in 2005. "But for this biennial event, we have extended the art down the block. We did neighborhood event planning, which was very fun because a lot of people have been involved in all of it."

Ott says holding a biennial of the al fresco art exhibit that began in her yard is funny, even if only she gets the joke, because in the art world, a biennial is usually an extravagant event involving lots of money and a stable of internationally-acclaimed artists showing their works. "On this block," she says, "visitors, people who live on the block, school children, teachers and their parents are being exposed to challenging contemporary art, so in a way, the biennial is offering everyone the experience of discovery and surprise."

And for those who don't like the art being presented, they can cross the street — or simply look away — she notes, laughing.

### **Please trespass**

In front of Ott's own bungalow is Gero's piece, "Expansion Trespass."

"I think it's kind of a spontaneous lattice work," Ott says. "It was really fun watching him and his two volunteers come and paint and attach this to my house," she says. "It is always a big event [especially for the school kids]. I think it's perfect, and one of the projects I am loathe to take down."

Two houses to the north is an installation by a collaborative team of internationally recognized artists, Dan Gunn and Karolina Gnatowski. Their exhibit, "Socks," says Ott, puts a clothesline in the front yard and plays with it by including overblown articles of colorful clothing, set up like wind socks, all in the spirit of a Japanese garden.

"What has been really great about this project is that even artists with very active careers have been excited about participating," Ott says. "So people who live here, or come to see it, are getting an internationally acclaimed, museum-quality art show, whether they know it or not. But the people who see these works do actually know it because the works that tend to be the most appreciated are usually by the most experienced artists."

Planted in the front yards and parkways of her street is "Un summary end," a work by Alberto Aguilar, a visual artist who is currently part of an exhibition called "Homebodies" at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. His projects have also been shown at the Elmhurst Museum of Contemporary Art, around Chicago and internationally.

The idea here, Ott explains, is that from a distance, the art placards represent a yard sign — a political one, for example — but the content is nonsensical punctuation and open to all sorts of interpretation.

"Alberto is a great artist," Ott says. "He has always been involved in how home and public and private spaces intersect."

### **Ott the artist**

With a BFA and MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute, Ott taught at the Art Center of Design in Pasadena, Calif. Over her career she has received numerous accolades and participated in over 100 solo and group exhibitions. Her paintings and prints are in museum collections around the country, and her installation work has been included in international exhibitions.

Nowadays, via her former garage, now a 500-square-foot home studio, she does works in "trans-media" — videos and sculptures, mostly.

Though the Terrain Biennial is winding down, the next Terrain art show will go up Nov. 3 and be on public display for a month, thanks to painter, Leslie Baum, whose work was recently on view at the Elmhurst Museum of Contemporary Art.

"We have an art opening every month, and everyone comes inside, so my house is open, too," Ott says. "The good thing about that is my walls support other people's art, too. There is an open group on Facebook, which is 'Terrain Exhibition,' and anyone can join and become part of this."