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Art in the Library

by Ann Pettingill

The building project currently underway at Old Dominion University Library unexpectedly afforded the library a chance to sponsor a public artwork. During phase 1 of the project, the main library entrance was closed and a temporary entrance constructed at the rear of the building, just beyond the stairs to the second floor. This entrance was intended to remain in place for 12 or more months of the construction project's first phase. After some patrons quickly took advantage of easier ways to get around security measures, the construction company built a barrier to channel exiting patrons out through the security gates. Because they were only temporary, those barriers were designed purely on a functional, not an aesthetic, basis; raw wooden walls rise approximately 10 feet, boxing in the sides and rear of the staircase.

The reference librarians and the management services librarian had already explored the possibility of aesthetic improvement for an office floor where the tile had been stripped off in an asbestos removal project; after seeing the exit barrier, they quickly turned their attention to the question of improving its looks. By lucky coincidence, a reference student assistant, Shawn James, just happened to have a double concentration in painting and photography and was ready to enroll in a summer session open assignment class for senior art majors. His summer ses-

sion class was one in which the students go into the studio and work with the professor on projects they have defined. Shawn eagerly agreed to take on the library's offer of an opportunity to paint on the blank walls of the entrance barrier and arranged with his professor to make this his class

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project. This worked well since most supplies could be furnished by the library, and Shawn's time and work covered by his class credit hours. The library also offered Shawn a few extra work hours per week for the project.

With a short library deadline and just a four-week class session, Shawn had to move quickly to produce such a large piece. His first step was to spend some time thinking about what he wanted to say, and to meet with his professor, Ron Snapp, to discuss ideas and techniques. Shawn describes his work as non-objective expressionism in that he does not intentionally use literal images; he does

likes to include text in his work. He has been influenced by artist-photographer Duane Michals, pioneer of alternative formats in photography. Michals' work includes a focus on psychological issues, added text, paint on photographs, and staged scenarios.

In creating this public art, Shawn wanted to interact with the public. His goal was to make something which people could relate to and think about as they passed back and forth throughout the day, something which would neither be too simplistic or so complex that it would be impenetrable.

His next step was to start looking at the walls and to let them tell him what should be said. It was his first opportunity to work on such a big piece—10 feet high by almost 30 feet in length around the box shape. His color scheme was based on a lucky gift of latex paint in shades of blue and green, which went far to defray the overall cost of the project.

Shawn worked exclusively when the library was open; he would work, and the library patrons would pass by all day long, looking and, frequently, freely commenting on what they saw. His art making was completely public—every step he took was directly under the public eye. As he worked, his awareness of the people behind him and the walls in front of him grew: enclosures, museums, people, media. Enclosures of nature. Incorporation of

bad news into everyday life. Barriers. Computers as gateways and as barriers. Doors, and the interaction of doors. Unexpected walls—a wall behind the open door. He felt people responding to these ideas as they walked by.

There is an emphasis on texture; Shawn would watch as patrons would walk by, pause, and reach out to touch parts of the walls. Patrons made lots of comments, both positive and negative. One woman stopped by to ask him what he was doing. To his response that he was painting (a green fill area), she told him it looked like a green blob to her and asked if she could paint also. The experience gave rise to thoughts about what art means to people—and how little people understand sometimes about the nature of art. Sometimes people see it as separate, but art is always there, everywhere you look, everywhere in history.

When Shawn completed the

piece by his deadline, his class and professor came to critique the work, a standard practice for all the work in art class. From both negative and positive comments, he received much useful information from his colleagues. Overall,

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Shawn believes he had a great opportunity in getting to create a work on a grand scale; it was an exciting learning experience.

As Shawn has continued working in the library, he has noticed that the interaction between

patron and art has continued: batteries have been removed and added to his computer motherboard with the flashing lights; rocks have been left at the base of the walls; the "spilled" can of paint has attracted lots of attention.

The piece has been a good experience for library staff and patrons—to be able to watch the step-by-step construction of the piece, the bits of text and found objects added, the build up of colors and texture. The final piece has given the staff an aesthetic focal point to enjoy while the rest of the library is coming apart, bit by bit, as construction crews pass through taking up tiles, removing most of the ceiling, breaking through walls, and generally disrupting life. The depth, color, texture, humor, and thoughtfulness of Shawn's work have added a positive note to library life for both patrons and staff. ■

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