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Information Literacy Through Site-Specific Installation: The Library Project

Stacy Brinkman and Sara Young

This article describes how a collaborative, multifaceted, site-specific installation helped to develop information literacy in studio art students. Through the process of planning, creating, and installing the project, students learned to find and evaluate many different kinds of information, from design ideas to historical precedents, site plans, and business plans. Working with a public installation within a library, students learned to consider the economic, social, and legal issues involved within the context of their audience and location. Finally, the conceptual framework of the installation encouraged students to think critically about the role of libraries in today's information and technology-saturated society.

[This article is based on a poster session prepared for the Association of College and Research Libraries conference held in Seattle in March 2009.]

Introduction

The 2009 Horizon Report lists the "growing need for formal instruction in key new skills, including information literacy, visual literacy, and technological literacy" as the first "critical challenge facing learning organizations" in the next five years.¹ Yet studio art students have been identified as a group that has been particularly difficult to reach in terms of information literacy: art librarians often note that it is a challenge simply to bring studio art students into the library.² For many studio art students, library research seems incongruous with the process of art-making.

This article describes a complex, problem-based project in fostering information and visual literacy for studio art students. *The Library Project*, as it was eventually titled, was developed through collaboration between an art faculty member and an art librarian; it resulted in a large-scale, multi-faceted public art installation at the Wertz Art and Architecture Library at Miami University (Oxford, Ohio) in the winter of 2007-08 (Figure 1). The project encouraged students in an advanced sculpture class to work with both a faculty member and librarian to consider how to expand the potential for using the physical space of the library as an exhibition venue as well as a learning resource. Students were required to research processes and materials, as well as design concepts, in order to deal with the real spatial restrictions imposed by using the library as an exhibition space. In addition, the fact that the project was a major public installation required students to research costs involved in the project, locate funding sources, secure funds through writing a grant proposal, establish a timeline, develop marketing strategies, and ensure that the project would comply with ADA accessibility guidelines in addition to the library's space policies.



Figure 1: *The Library Project*, 2008, site-specific installation in Wertz Art and Architecture Library, Miami University. View from library entrance at dusk. Photograph courtesy of Miami University Libraries.

Project Goals

The Library Project began with an informal conversation between the authors, a visiting art faculty member and an art librarian, at a new faculty orientation at the Miami University library. While the Art and Architecture Library housed examples of student work, including architectural models and sculpture pieces, we recognized that there was deeper potential for using the library as an exhibition space. In subsequent dialogues, we understood that while we had a common goal of realizing a complex, multi-dimensional public art project, we also had specific goals as librarian and art faculty member. The goals of the librarian were largely based on the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards:³

1. To encourage studio art students to think critically about the nature of information and the role of the library, particularly in the context of modern society, as it related to the process of art-making

(ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standard One: The information literate student determines the nature and extent of the information needed);

2. To engage studio art students in using multiple research methods (searching, browsing, using print and online sources, etc.) for finding information that helps situate their present project in current and historical artistic endeavors. (ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standard Two: The information literate student accesses needed information effectively and efficiently);
3. To enable students to evaluate and synthesize new information into their project plans, making changes to the project when necessary in response to new information. (ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standard Three: The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system);
4. To encourage studio art students to understand the value of information literacy and the library in studio and design projects.

The goals of the art faculty member also aligned with ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards:

1. To introduce the process of art making while working collaboratively as a team (nine students) and having students understand the complexities involved with such collaboration;
2. To encourage students to think critically about the function of a library, and conceptually unify the library's function as a temporary exhibition space with its "normal" functions, communicated in an artistic medium. (Includes ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standard Four: The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system);
3. To instill real-world problem-solving professional practices in students as emerging artists. This includes activities such as grant writing, marketing, working with clients and subcontractors, understanding the nature of public art, dealing with multiple and convergent timelines, and other logistical, ethical, and economic issues involved with realizing a large-scale project. (Includes ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standard Five: The information literate student understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally).

Installation Art and Libraries

The semester began with an overview of installation art, exploring not only the history of installation art but also examining the relationship of context and content in artwork. In his influential 1976 critique and analysis of the "white cube" of the modern gallery space, Brian O'Doherty drew attention to the role

of context in contemporary art, suggesting that "as modernism gets older, context becomes content."⁴ The primacy of context is particularly apparent in site-specific installation works that emerged in the last half of the twentieth century, where the context or site of the artwork extended far beyond the "white cube" and into public spaces, from prisons (Rebecca Horn's *Concert in Reverse*, 1987) to deserts (Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field*, 1977).⁵ Libraries have also served as sites for installation art, and students considered two libraries in particular: the Baker-Berry Library at Dartmouth College, the site of Wenda Gu's *united nations: the green house* and *united nations: united colors*, and the Seattle Public Library, the site of multiple public artworks including Tony Oursler's *Braincast*, Ann Hamilton's hardwood floor in the Evelyn W. Foster Learning Center, and George Legrady's *Making Visible the Invisible: What the Community is Reading*.⁶

Gu's Dartmouth installations are part of his *united nations* project, a series continuing since 1992 in which he used human hair as his medium to create temporary "monuments" around the world. Invited by Dartmouth to create a public work that would "engage the larger campus community," Gu selected the library for its "function as a campus 'crossroads' and the intellectual center of the college's academic life."⁷ While the installations addressed some aspects of the local environment, utilizing characteristics of the Baker-Berry Library architecture as well as local materials (hair), the many meanings underlying the monuments are more global in nature, including concepts such as the vulnerability of the human body, the intermingling of diverse races, and readings/misreadings of language.

In comparison, the conceptual frameworks for the site-specific installations at the Seattle Public Library are more local, concentrating on themes and issues that relate directly to the library's collections or roles. Ann Hamilton's *Foster Learning Center Floor* is fabricated from over 7,000 feet of hardwood, with raised letters in eleven languages that spell out sentences from books within the library's collection.⁸ Tony Oursler's *Braincast* is a video sculpture embedded in the wall of an escalator and is a "contemplation on the transmission of information ... reflect[ing] the tradition of the public library and its expanding role as a transmitter of myriad information forms: spoken, printed, recorded, and digital."⁹ Finally, George Legrady's *Making Visible the Invisible: What the Community is Reading* maps the circulation data of the library system in four animated "visualizations" that move across six plasma screens, revealing what community members are checking out and reading.¹⁰

Students were encouraged to study these examples not as "recipes" for installations within libraries, but as precedents to analyze and consider vis-à-vis their own ideas. Students discussed how each artist responded to the space of the library, and how the installations did or did not address the function or purpose of the space through their artwork. After considering these precedents, students began an analysis of the space that would be used for their site-specific installation: the Art and Architecture Library at Miami University.

The Library as Site

Early in the semester, students came to the library for a preliminary site analysis, talking with the librarian about the library space and various parameters for how the space func-

tioned on a daily basis, and where a temporary, site-specific installation might be constructed. We selected the reading and group-study area on the south side of the library as the site of the installation. The reading area is long and narrow, with two mirror-image group-study rooms flanking each end of a long and narrow reading area. Each group-study room has a curved window that looks into the reading area. The walls of the reading area and study rooms are constructed with the red brick that is used on the exteriors of most buildings on Miami's campus, and there are five floor-to-ceiling windows in the south façade. A long, central light fixture illuminates the reading room space.

The parameters for working at Miami University's Art and Architecture Library were extensive yet gave structure and good constraints for the students to generate ideas. From the outset they knew they could not structurally change the footpath or physically alter any architectural element (i.e., no nails, drilling, or taping material to the three physical spaces of the reading room area) and that the installation would have to meet accessibility standards and could not interfere with lighting, electrical, HVAC, or sprinkler systems. Students also conducted primary research on the history of the Art and Architecture Library to develop deeper context knowledge of the space. They visited the University Archives, examined floor plans of the site, researched the architectural styles used in the building, and researched building materials and elements, including the significance of the red "Miami brick" walls.

With the site of the library as the starting point of inquiry, students considered various aspects of the nature of information and the role of the library in contemporary society. They examined the etymological roots of the word "library" and researched how libraries have changed over time. They explored the relationships between information, text, and technology, and how the digital/virtual environment has changed not only the nature of research, but also how we perceive reality and physical materials. In addition, students had to consider how the installation would have a different audience than if it were in a gallery space. Questions asked included: "How does the scale and composition of the installation relate to the audience of the library user? What do we want the viewer to experience?" While these brainstorming sessions were facilitated by faculty member and librarian, this entire stage was an intensive process of gathering and negotiating ideas, exchanging knowledge, verbalizing artistic concepts, and building consensus from independent research and artistic interests.

Ultimately, *The Library Project* sought to strengthen community involvement in the library, and it also wished to explore, through an artistic medium, the importance of research and the function of the library in a global, media-saturated society. Through an artistic process, *The Library Project* addressed how knowledge is transcribed, revealed, concealed, and received. The installation would show that texts are dual in their representational nature: they serve as an informational bridge, but also represent a barrier between the original author and their receivers. The "information barrier" of text is created and duplicated in each of its iterations from mouth to pen to print to the World Wide Web. And yet, texts also enable community exchange of knowledge and interaction across time and space. Finally, as a public installation in a library, *The Library Project* would serve as another kind of text, a design built upon community exchange of

artistic ideas, received by another community in hopes of generating future exchange of ideas.

Praxis

Once students agreed upon an artistic concept, they began the process of realizing a design for *The Library Project*. Acetate panels would be suspended as curtains on the five large windows on the south wall of the library. Images of book spines and covers printed onto the translucent curtain would subtly refer to the iconic Miami University brick pattern. In the two group-study rooms, video installations would be projected on opposite screens so that they would be visible from the reading area. The content of the video installations would serve as a bridge linking textual, visual, and oral traditions in a digital format. All the elements would be connected by a large woven cord fabricated from discarded book jackets from the library.¹¹ The cord would be suspended from the ceiling and would span the length of the reading area, visually connecting one group-study room to the other. Reminiscent of the multicolored, interwoven fibers of a communications cable, the cord would emphasize the tangible results from community exchange of knowledge and interaction (Figures 2 and 3).

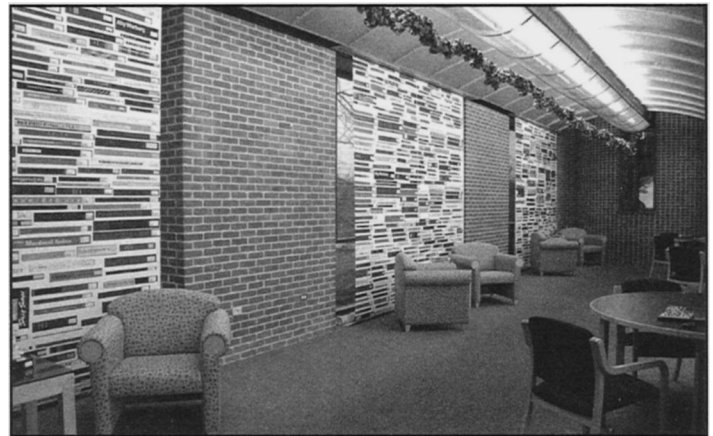


Figure 2: *The Library Project*, 2008, site-specific installation in Wertz Art and Architecture Library, Miami University. View of east end of reading area. Photograph courtesy of Miami University Libraries.

Even after agreeing upon a concept design, students had to continue to negotiate between what was ideal and what was feasible as they encountered new information. For example, it soon became clear that the design could not be realized without external funding, as the size of the five windows (12 feet wide x 10 feet high) necessitated the use of a professional printing company to print the acetate curtain panels. Rather than change their design completely, students found and applied for an internal grant through the student government office intended to "encourage and develop student creativity and ideas."¹² Preparing the grant application required students to engage in yet another kind of research: they found and contacted printing companies, procured bids, developed a business plan and budget, conducted a cost analysis of various proposals, and created a marketing plan. Furthermore, the grant-writing process challenged students to communicate their artistic goals in writing to an audience not familiar with installation art.



Figure 3: The Library Project, 2008, site-specific installation in Wertz Art and Architecture Library, Miami University. Detail of braid end against group-study room window. Book jackets were cut into long strips, and then braided and re-braided until they formed a cord that was approximately 12-14" in diameter. Photograph courtesy of Miami University Libraries.

While the grant application was being processed, students continued to work on fabricating components of the installation. The act of selecting and scanning book covers and spines for the eventual transparent acetate panels turned into an unexpected moment of information discovery: by spending many hours in the stacks, students began to notice differences in color and quality of images in different publications. These discoveries led to further discussions about issues such as print and digital technology. Students also learned the organization of the library inductively: through active browsing, they became familiar with the Library of Congress classification system, and they often ended up checking out new books for their personal use.

Students also created two videos to be projected in each of the two group-study rooms. The videos were intended to explore interplays in oral, written, and visual information in the digital environment, and they were expressed in two distinct narratives that engaged each other in visual dialogue across the reading room area. One narrative described the physical act of reading, and the metaphysical act of the text being absorbed and understood by the reader as the reader tears strips of the text from the book. The words being absorbed can be heard on the video's audio track. On the opposite screen, those strips torn from the book are being woven into a cord that resembles the one suspended from the ceiling that connects the two video projections across the space of the reading room (Figure 4). The information, while traveling "across" the communication cable (the physically suspended cord that connects the two group-study areas), becomes woven into the cable itself, the means of communication exchange in a digital world.

In late November the students received grant funding, enabling them to proceed with their first choice of using a professional printing company outside the university. We set a date for the opening of the installation for the beginning of the spring semester, and we began designing promotional materials and invitations for the opening. Students treated these promotional materials as extensions of the conceptual basis of the entire project and designed bookmarks, invitations that mimicked due-

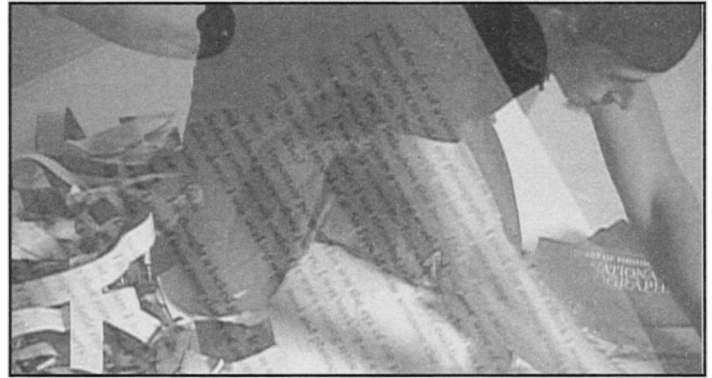


Figure 4: The Library Project, 2008, site-specific installation in Wertz Art and Architecture Library, Miami University. Still from video in west group-study room. Photograph courtesy of Miami University Libraries.

date slips, and a poster that unified the marketing of the event to the installation. In addition to these materials, we installed a three-dimensional display promoting the opening in one of the display cases in the front entrance to the main campus library. In total, the multi-stage, complex project spanned one and a half semesters.

The Library Project opened on the evening of February 7, 2008, attracting students, faculty, parents, and community members. Miami University's president and his wife attended the opening, as did associate deans of the School of Fine Arts and the University Libraries (Figure 5).

After spending so much time in the library, students in the class became active promoters of the library, and it was the students who initiated an additional outreach effort: each of the nine students in the class brought in ten other students who had never been in the Art and Architecture library (Figure 6). *The Library Project* remained installed for five weeks, and it



Figure 5: Miami University President David Hodge speaks with students at the opening of *The Library Project*, February 7, 2008. Photograph courtesy of Miami University Libraries.



Figure 6: Many students attended the opening of *The Library Project*, February 7, 2008. Photograph courtesy of Miami University Libraries.

Timeline of tasks and activities involved in *The Library Project*.

TASK	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March	April
Initial Stage								
1. Establishing Library as Site-Specific Installation								
Initiating collaboration with librarian and students	■							
Researching history of library: photo documentation	■	■						
Evaluating space: limitations and guidelines			■					
Approval of project parameters								
2. Brainstorming Project Goals								
Conceptual	■	■	■	■				
Artistic	■	■	■	■				
Community	■	■	■	■				
3. Material Research and Development								
Investigating printing companies		■	■					
Evaluating and testing materials			■	■				
Understanding bidding process and costs				■				
4. Project Management								
Delegating responsibilities	■	■	■	■	■	■		■
Defining roles	■	■	■	■	■	■		■
Body of Work								
1. Researching Funding and Grant Sources								
		■	■					
2. Writing Grant Application								
Artist statement and abstract			■	■				
Communicating project goals		■	■	■				
Photoshop mock up of the project			■	■				
Business plan (evaluating 3 budget plans)			■	■				
3. Studio Tasks								
Scanning books for the curtain			■	■				
Fabricating the book cover braid			■	■				
Producing the video and audio				■	■			
Designing publicity materials					■	■		
4. Community Collaboration								
Presenting project to grant committees			■	■				
Working with librarian and library staff	■	■	■	■	■	■		■
Working with vendors	■	■	■	■	■	■		■
5. Defining Deadlines and Creating a Calendar								
	■	■	■	■	■	■		
Execution and Follow Up								
1. Installing the Project								
					■	■		
2. Publicity and Marketing								
					■	■		
3. Opening Night Preparations								
					■	■		
4. De-Installation								
							■	■
5. Follow-Through and Recognitions								
							■	■

was de-installed in March 2008. The table above summarizes the timeline of activities involved in *The Library Project*.

While very successful, *The Library Project* was not without its challenges. The installation quickly grew to be a larger project than initially envisioned, and it required everyone involved (students, faculty, and librarian) to work and communicate effectively as a group. Time management was a major challenge, especially when working with the timetables of outside parties such as the grant-funding organization and the printing company. Throughout the process, the project required each

group member to exhibit a considerable amount of collaborative spirit, flexibility, humility, professionalism, and humor.

Conclusion

As a site-specific installation that utilizes the space of the library as the conceptual framework of the project's content, *The Library Project* is just one example of how to encourage studio art students to think about the library and information in a critical manner. Developing information literacy is an iterative process,

and a project that provides multiple opportunities for students to search, evaluate, and re-search for information helps them to internalize these research skills. The nature of *The Library Project* also required students to find and evaluate many different kinds of information, from design ideas to historical precedents, site plans, and business plans. Finally, as a public art work, students needed to consider not only how their project fit into a larger historical context of installation art, but also had to consider the economic, social, and legal issues involved with the context of their audience and location. By giving the library a central role throughout—in context as well as content—*The Library Project* is one example of how information literacy can be integrated into both the process and product of studio art.

Notes

1. Larry Johnson, Alan Levine, and Rachel S. Smith, *The 2009 Horizon Report* (Austin, TX: The New Media Consortium, 2009), 6. Also available online at <http://wp.nmc.org/horizon2009/chapters/challenges/> (accessed July 20, 2009).

2. Hannah Bennett, "Bringing the Studio into the Library: Addressing the Research Needs of Studio Art and Architecture Students," *Art Documentation* 25, no.1 (2006); Alessia Zamin-Yost and Erin Tapley, "Learning in the Art Classroom: Making the Connection Between Research and Art," *Art Documentation* 27, no. 2 (2008).

3. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2000), <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/standards.pdf> (accessed July 20, 2009).

4. Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica: Lapis Press, 1986), 15.

5. Mark Rosenthal, *Understanding Installation Art: From Duchamp to Holzer* (New York: Prestel, 2003), 27, 72, 85.

6. http://www.spl.org/default.asp?pageID=branch_central_visit_art&branchID=1 (accessed July 20, 2009).

7. David Cateforis, "The Work is Not Finished: Wenda Gu's *United Nations Series* and the Dartmouth Monuments," in *Wenda Gu at Dartmouth: The Art of Installation* (Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art; University Press of New England, 2007), 77.

8. <http://www.spl.org/pdfs/central/annhamilton-art3.pdf> (accessed July 21, 2009).

9. <http://www.spl.org/pdfs/central/tonyoursler-art2.pdf> (accessed July 21, 2009).

10. http://www.spl.org/pdfs/central/georgelegrady_art.pdf (accessed July 21, 2009).

11. Dust jackets are removed from books when they are cataloged and processed for the library. Rather than being discarded immediately, these jackets are kept for some amount of time at the Art and Architecture Library so that students have an opportunity to use these as materials for art projects.

12. http://www.units.muohio.edu/oars/funding_opps/grad/text/index.php#initiative.

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