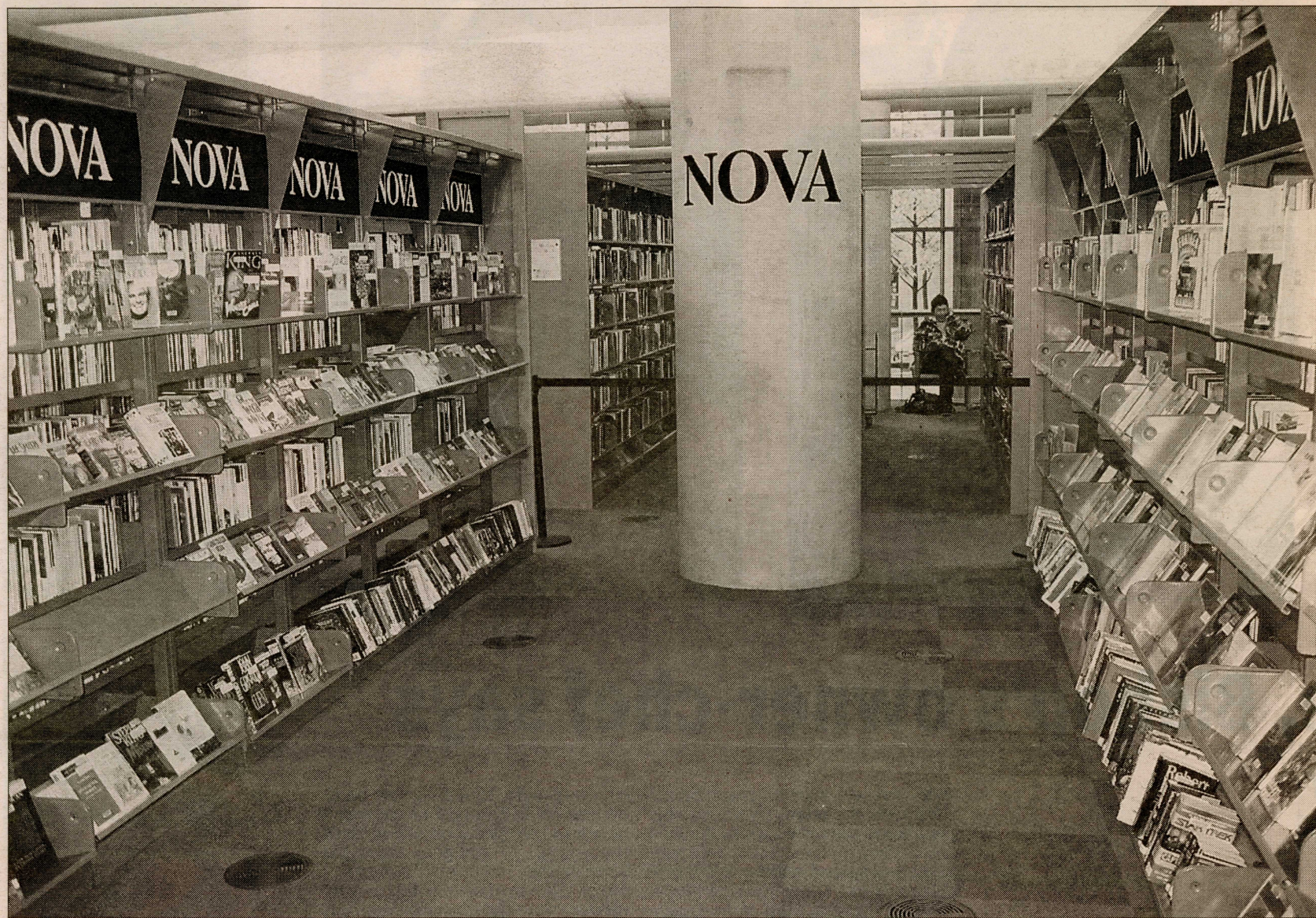


VISUAL ARTS



Nova Library, an installation by New York artist Hans Winkler at the Vancouver public library Central Branch.

Inside the brain of an addict

BY CLINT BURNHAM

Addicts read books too. This may be the most commendable message that a new exhibit at the Central Branch of the Vancouver public library gets out. *Nova Library*, a "social sculpture" by New York artist Hans Winkler, is up until Nov. 30.

This library-within-a-library is a collection of a few hundred books selected by drug users in the Downtown Eastside, responding to a survey by Winkler. The artist has worked in Europe and North America, carrying out actions and projects that intervene into popular consciousness. This latest project aims at the heart of Vancouver's shameful present: it humanizes the addict.

Nova Library is named after William S. Burroughs' 1966 novel *Nova Express*. Written in Burroughs' cut-up style, the novel fused science-fiction with social satire: "Your cities are ovens where South American narcotic plants brought total disposal — Brain screams of millions who have

■ NOVA LIBRARY Downtown Eastside drug users' book selections amassed in an installation that is an allegory for addiction

controller lives in that place screamed back from white hot blue sky — Can always pull the nova equipped now with tower blasts from Hiroshima and Nagasaki."

With the *Nova Library* we hear those "brain screams" — for we are in the brain of the addict, the junky, the user. Because what is most striking about this work is the sheer variety of books chosen for inclusion: from first nations literature to self-help, from children's books to literary classics, from genre fiction to West Coast classics.

So *Curious George* rubs shoulders with *Waiting for Godot*; *How to Draw Comics the Marvel Way* with *The High Times Reader*; *Geronimo's Story of His Own Life with Illegal Drugs: A Complete Guide to Their History, Chemistry, Use and Abuse*. Suddenly

all of literature looks to be an allegory for addiction. Just what is George so curious about? And maybe Godot was Samuel Beckett's connection.

So this plenitude, this wide range of titles, reference, interest and reading, also does something else. The *Nova Library* reminds us that we read some of these books — that indeed there is more that is similar in drug users and non-drug users than different. Indeed, with the range of drugs today from chocolate and caffeine to Paxil and Xanax, from pot to coke and sugar to heroin, who among us is not an addict, a junky, a user?

This might be the only criticism of the *Nova Library*. Why only survey drug users in the Downtown Eastside? We know that drug users live everywhere in this city — province — country — but it is the Downtown Eastside

that has been demonized as a junky haven, as though users aren't in Kerrisdale or Comox, Richmond or Regina, North Vancouver or North York.

Nonetheless, this is an affirmative project, an in-your-face affirmation that, yes, drug users, those pawns in the Drug Wars and the Four Pillars policies, have imaginations, have creative lives, and live in the world of books as much as any of us. For there is another *Nova Library*: the Carnegie Branch at Main and Hastings where, every morning when it opens, women and men are waiting, anxiously, to enter that world. It is to Hans Winkler's credit, and that of the grunt gallery that sponsored this project, that now we are aware of these connections.

Clint Burnham is a Vancouver freelance writer and educator.

■ ON THE SHELVES

Nova Library
Hans Winkler
Vancouver public library,
Central Branch
Until Nov. 30