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The Nova Library at the downtown library: bringing the lives and thoughts of drug addicts out of the shadows and into the wider public sphere.

Willy Burroughs would be proud

Guess what? Junkies read.

Anyone who says that's something they knew already — that they'd never assume drug addicts can't maintain a rich, literate lifestyle, just like middle class, comfortable folks all over the city — well, those people are lying.

They're lying, and covering up fear. The idea that the general public shares such an intellectual hobby — and therefore an intimate connection — with drug addicts can be disturbing, to say the least; it's one more hole in the wall of "us" and "them".

At the downtown branch of the Vancouver Public Library, the proof is on the racks, thanks

to Berlin-based artist Hans Winkler, and Glen Alteen, director of the grunt gallery.

The Joys of Motherhood by Buchi Emechata, *The Catcher in the Rye*, Alice Munro's *Runaway*, Kafka's *The Trial*, Stephen Mitchell's *Tao Te Ching* — dozens of books enjoyed by the average thinking reader sit in the Nova Library, a quaint corner on the library's first floor.

The difference here is that every book has been chosen by drug users in the Downtown Eastside. This is their reading list.

Winkler, a Berlin native who works and lives in the U.S. and Europe, got the idea a couple of years ago while strolling through the Downtown Eastside on a visit with the grunt gallery's Glen Alteen. "In Vancouver I walked a lot around in the Downtown Eastside and I saw many drug users sitting and reading," he says. Once the idea for a drug addicts' library took shape, he got a great response from organizations like VANDU (Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users), who corralled a list of about 500 books — "a beautiful, wide-ranging collection", says Winkler. "I had the feeling they got the idea immediately and they liked it, so it became a very democratic public intervention for the public library."

Inspired by writer and renowned drug user William Burroughs, who authored *Junky* and *Nova Express*, Winkler called the project, appropriately enough, Nova Library.

The Nova Library project turned into a lesson in organizational culture. "It seems that everything that started easily became more and more complicated ... ultimately, that negotiation became part of the Nova Library project — 'getting two worlds into a conversation or dialogue.'"

Alteen echoes that frustration, laughing at the memory of a struggle that sounds bizarre today.

"It took a huge amount of work to get a bunch of books into the library," he says. "The

funniest part of it was negotiating between the library which works on a three-week timeline, with groups in the Downtown Eastside, who are so often in emergency crisis mode they don't know what they're doing in two hours much less three weeks from now. There's a completely different sense of time and priorities."

Though he's worked for the past decade as a guest artist at the San Francisco Art Institute, Winkler has kept residences in New York City and Berlin. But the effect of his work has

ARTSCETERA

BY MARY FRANCES HILL



rippled through communities the world over.

As a master of "social sculpture" Winkler sets up situations to provoke social action and interaction. In 1997 Winkler sunk a gondola in a Venice canal (see the photo of the sinking on the front of his home page, hanswinkler.de). In the mid-1990s, Winkler and some cohorts skirted security guards at the Statue of Liberty, snuck into the structure and placed red gel screens over Lady Liberty's lights. It took officials three hours to fix it.

For one of his most innovative projects, Winkler talked a shepherd into giving over his shack high in the Italian Alps. The artist then outfitted the shack with bookshelves, stacked them with books donated from various European philosophers, and offered brave visitors a key to the shack at the base of the mountains.

Even with an uphill trek to the shack that took visitors hours, Winkler's shack was wildly popular for seven years (until it collapsed under the weight of an avalanche).

That Winkler hails from world-class cities far from Vancouver's shores has not been lost on some critics. The grunt gallery even published an article critical of Winkler's outsider status — as someone not entrenched in the Downtown Eastside culture — in its magazine *grunt*.

That outsider status may be part of Winkler's point. He's the intervener — the observer who sets up the work, and then walks away. "I try to intervene in the city, work with their symbols, my impression of the city, and with people to involve their ideas into the art piece, to build a kind of 'social sculpture,'" he says. "The work should be part of the fabric of the city and intervene on it carefully." **WE**

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