

Howard Raskin

Can an art gallery thrive in a science library?

Communication through culture at Cornell University's Albert R. Mann Library

Why an art exhibition program in a science-oriented academic research library? Leibniz, a 17th-century philosopher, mathematician, and librarian said that science depends upon the ease of communication, and that the role of libraries is to keep open the channels of communication.

One way for libraries to keep open the channels of communication is through art; like libraries, art creates a synergy across disciplines.

Sara Alderstein, a self-taught artist and aquatic ecologist at the University of Michigan puts it this way, “art

can be a way to communicate . . . there are so many relationships between art and science . . . in art you have no boundaries. When that translates into research, the creative process opens your mind to consider the possibilities.”¹

Mann Library's exhibition program

The Albert R. Mann Library at Cornell University serves the Colleges of Agriculture and Life Sciences and the College of Human Ecology. The library's gallery exhibition program

celebrates the sciences, the arts, and the community at Cornell University. Through this program, Cornell faculty and their students have gained an important venue for showcasing innovative class projects. Additionally, the gallery has featured several prominent local artists whose work sits at the intersection

of art and science; artists who communicate science through visual imagery.

The library provides a neutral setting that is conducive to informal learning. Can you think of a more appropriate location for two students, each with a different academic focus,

to strike up a conversation about global warming? As Professor Thomas Bjorkman of Cornell's Department of Horticulture so succinctly stated, “Mann's public spaces meet an important need for intellectual interaction outside the departmental boundaries and on shared territory.”²



“The Light Cavity” student exhibit at the Albert R. Mann Library.

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“The Art of Horticulture” gallery show at Mann Library.

The gallery and its mission are marketed through faculty office visits, departmental meetings, selective mass mailings, and the Mann Web site. Word about the gallery is quickly spreading, as many faculty members, students, and regionally based artists have contacted the library and inquiring about exhibition possibilities. The library has just begun to explore the possibility of hosting traveling shows, and has recently scheduled *No End to the Banana*, a traveling exhibit sponsored by Bioversity International. We are cosponsoring this exhibit with the Cornell Plantations, and are incorporating other events to coincide with the exhibit, including a faculty panel discussion.

A look at three gallery shows

The gallery’s inaugural show in August 2007, was entitled “Visualizing Meaning.” Artist and Cornell research assistant Jeni Wightman took important visual representations of data (charts, graphs, etc.) selected by Cornell faculty and staff and incorporated them into household items, such as blankets and rocking chairs. Mixing the perceptual field of art and the conceptual field of science, “Visualizing Meaning” placed the relationship between lived and charted experience in a dialogue. Wightman gathered submissions for the project via a Web site designed and hosted by the library, and through a creative display on the library’s first floor. This process thoroughly engaged the Cornell community—charts, graphs, and diagrams were submitted by faculty and staff in a wide range of disciplines, from the humanities to the physical sciences.

“Clean Water,” the gallery’s second exhibition was a multimedia display installed by graduate students from the Landscape

Architecture department. This exhibit showcased examples of crossdisciplinary work exemplifying sensitivity to the issue of the availability of clean water, the most pressing issue facing the global community. This was the gallery’s first multimedia exhibit and included projection on enormous vellum screens positioned on cables throughout the gallery space. At the show’s opening the student artists participated in numerous discussions with the audience.

In conjunction with GIS Day activities in Mann Library, on campus, and within the local community, the library’s November show featured the map-oriented work of local artist Jay Hart. His large inkjet prints show elevation surfaces and natural color imagery of places both exotic and familiar. GIS Day talks, information booths, and demonstrations were set up in the room adjacent to the gallery. This provocative gallery exhibit added value to an already popular annual event.

“Miniature Landscapes” featured the fungal photography of Kent Loeffler, who uses a device called a borescope to reveal the small-scale majesty of fungi. Loeffler, who has been the photographer for the Cornell Department of Plant Pathology and Plant Microbe Biology for the past 23 years, captured the borescope images in this exhibit to illustrate the Cornell Mushroom Blog, a teaching and outreach project of Professor Kathie Hodge. This show’s opening attracted more than 70 students, faculty, and staff to come see the exhibit and hear Hodges’ comments about the show and to profess her love of fungi.

The gallery’s most recent show, the “Art of Horticulture,” featured the final student projects from Horticulture 201. An experiential survey course, this class has two distinct

units. Plants used in/as art and plants as a subject of art.

As lecturer Marcia Eames-Sheavly states in the course description, “taking this course will provide students with a unique chance to view the world of plants from a very different perspective—an important one, given that observation and creativity are cornerstones of advancement in science.”

Final projects in this show included sculpture, drawing, photography, botanical illustration, watercolor, and pastel painting. Eames-Sheavly has been a strong supporter of our gallery program and recently commented, “my students have a sense of Mann as being a hub of activity, and, more recently, as being a space in which the dedicated staff are willing to fully explore approaches to art, science—even, local foods and composting!

“I have appreciated their willingness to collaborate on unusual art that blends art with horticulture, and offers a unique perspective to the diversity of offerings that is Cornell University.”³

The gallery adds to students’ learning experience

With exhibits scheduled well over a year in advance, and requests for shows coming from many diverse colleges and programs at Cornell, the gallery has become an important element of Mann Library as an educational center.

Several faculty members have commented that the gallery is providing an important learning experience for their students—it’s one thing to display projects in the classroom and yet another to plan and design an exhibit for a professional gallery space.

I work closely with students to install their final projects in the gallery. Another staff member works with our student interns to design posters, post cards, and Web images for publicity purposes in addition to preparing and mounting the accompanying text for exhibitions.

Staff members from Mann’s information technology section provide guidance in de-

signing technologically rich installations and are available to teach the students how to use equipment they may not be familiar with.

An opportunity for more interaction

The gallery has created another pathway for the library to reach out to, and interact with, faculty and students.

For example, I am currently working with two faculty members (one from Landscape Architecture, one from Art, Architecture and Planning) to assist a graduate student with an independent study. We will be submitting a grant proposal to the Cornell Council for the Arts to fund an annual outdoor student sculpture competition. The winning sculpture will be showcased in a courtyard adjacent to the library. Another faculty member recently approached me and asked if his landscape architecture class could have their final project critique in the library, open to the public. Of course, I said yes.

The gallery has also helped to foster a stronger collaboration with the university’s Johnson Art Museum. Although we had paintings on loan from the museum hanging in the library before the opening of the gallery, the gallery has provided additional opportunities to use the expertise of the museum staff. Their counsel and advice has been invaluable to us as we designed the gallery space and moved our exhibition program forward.

The gallery is over 1,100 square feet, has 20-foot ceilings, and 75 linear feet of wall hanging space. For multimedia exhibits, LCD projectors, LCD screens, DVD/VCRs, and laptops are available. Staff support comes from two student gallery interns who work approximately six hours each per week, assistance from two staff members with marketing and publicity, and myself.

The Mann Gallery receives so many exhibit inquiries from faculty and students on a regular basis that we have to exhibit work in alternative library spaces.

At the start of last semester, an associate professor from Applied Economics and Management approached us and asked if she

could display the final research posters from a class project. She also wanted her students to host poster sessions, open to the public. Her first choice was the gallery space, but it was not available. Instead, we suggested the walls around our first floor elevator core. This is a heavily trafficked area, brightly lit, with an adjacent small alcove that was perfect for the poster sessions.

We have also used our lobby as an alternative exhibit space. Currently we are displaying a public art project created by the Cornell Garden-Based Learning Institute. The installation, "A Message from the Earth," features a darkroom cloaked in black velvet. Inside the darkroom a black-and-white photo negative is being projected onto a living grass canvas. The natural photosensitive properties of the grass are used to reproduce the photograph onto the grass canvas. This installation's message of sustainability has encouraged lively debate.

Our openings routinely attract large numbers of students, faculty, and staff. A prominent faculty artist, in a show of support for the gallery, offered an open-ended loan of four major sculptures; other faculty have commented upon the dynamic nature of the gallery program and how well it fits into the library's mission. And most rewarding of all are the many appreciative students who comment on how special it is to discover one of the library's gallery shows as they round the corner on the northern end of the library's second floor.

Notes

1. "The Art of Communicating Science," *Upwellings: Great Lakes News from Michigan Sea Grant* 27, no. 3 (October 2004): 5-7.
2. Thomas Bjorkman, e-mail message to Mann Library Director, October 17, 2006.
3. Marcia-Eames Sheavly, e-mail message to author, December 2008. *zz*

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