

I am a lifelong lover of books, a voracious reader, a gay man, writer, and librarian at the San Francisco Public Library. Over three years ago, SFPL staff members began finding books hidden under shelving units throughout the Main Library. The books had been carved with a sharp instrument: covers and inner pages were slashed and odd almond-shaped pieces were cut out, and then stuck into other books. Offending words and/or images of eyes, mouths, and other body parts were carved away.

Staff members united to stop the culprit by watching the bookshelves. One afternoon, a librarian on her day off saw someone shove damaged books under a shelf. The vandal was caught and arrested. Ultimately, more than 600 volumes were desecrated. Because most of them related to gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered themes, or HIV/AIDS, or women's health issues, the perpetrator was charged with, and found guilty of, a hate crime.

When the crime was reported, an outpouring of support came from sympathizers across the country, including offers to help replace the vandalized volumes.

After the trial, the books were returned to the library. Most of them were determined to be beyond repair and had been withdrawn from the

Initially I imagined that some librarians might want this embarrassing situation swept under the rug, so I was very proud when the entire library ultimately committed so many resources to ensure the project's success.

We circulated a public call for participation in the project. The response was immediate and intense. Some who answered were members of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender (GLBT) communities; some were visual artists, and many were people who fell into neither camp. People quickly understood that this vandalism was not a local issue, or solely about gay and lesbian concerns, or even about books—it was an opportunity to address a social climate increasingly filled with fear and hate. Artist Mary Bennett coordinated the participation of the Center for Contemporary Arts in Santa Fe where 44 of the vandalized books were offered to local artists for an exhibit set to open this summer.



Mixed Messages, Michael Lownie PHOTO COURTESY OF SFPL

through any medium can produce physical and emotional benefits for both the creator, and for those who view it. Many artists created something beautiful from the shreds of a ruined book. Some of the responses are whimsical, sad, angry, or political. Others added humor to the situation. Most impressive was the wide variety of responses. Using basically the same raw materials, artists contributed an unexpectedly diverse range of expression as they participated in proselytizing the importance of reversing vandalism. Some people got stuck along the way. One woman told me that working with the book brought up too many emotions; they overwhelmed her, rendering her unable to finish her artwork. I imagine that her story is not unique.

This wanton act sought to deprive others of much-needed information. My own response to the tragedy, like that of many of the visual artists, was initially one of fear, outrage, frustration, and sadness. This was quickly coupled with confirmation that queers continue to be grossly misunderstood by people in our midst.

In 1996, with Susan Stryker, I co-authored a book called *Gay By The Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area*. Seeing a stack of several copies of my own book defaced, I thought about a perpetrator threatened by ideas, and how he might feel about the people who embody those ideas. What, I wondered, is the leap from carving up books to carving up people? The murders of Matthew Shepard and Gwen Araujo sprang to mind, symbolizing the verbal, physical, and psychic abuse that queers frequently endure.

People ask me about the perpetrator and seem frustrated

collection. Before the books were actually discarded, we began taking digital photographs to document the destruction. The more I handled the volumes, the more I realized that throwing them away would only complete the vandal's crime.

During conversations with artist friends, the idea emerged that these ruined volumes might serve as raw material for artistic responses. Discussions with library staff led to the Reversing Vandalism project.

Artists have always used art in response to tragedy or hate, knowing intuitively that creating a visual image

Blackbird Singing, Sherry Karver PHOTO COURTESY OF SFPL



Mixed Media, Lynnè Averill PHOTO COURTESY OF SFPL

when I respond that I am less interested in theorizing about what makes him tick than viewing his actions as symptomatic of an underlying erosion of respect for others' differences in contemporary society. This energy explodes unexpectedly, like a volcanic fissure, releasing hot hatred that is deemed an anomaly. It is not. Since the new Main Library opened in April 1996, we have found the words "Kill Fagots" carved into the top of a customized wooden table in the library's James C. Hormel Gay and Lesbian Center. We have also seen the initials "HIV" carved into the mirrored surface of three of the library's four public elevator cabins as well as into tables, and the barcode labels sliced out of dozens of books on GLBT issues.

Rather than immediately repairing the destruction, hoping it would go away and pretending it would never happen again, I want to acknowledge it, try to understand the fear and ignorance that ignites hatred. I recognized it as an unfortunate fact, a function of the strides in the struggle for the civil rights of all minorities and marginalized people, sexual or otherwise. Rather than bury it, I want to bring it into

the light, to demonstrate how we all share this experience and can learn from it.

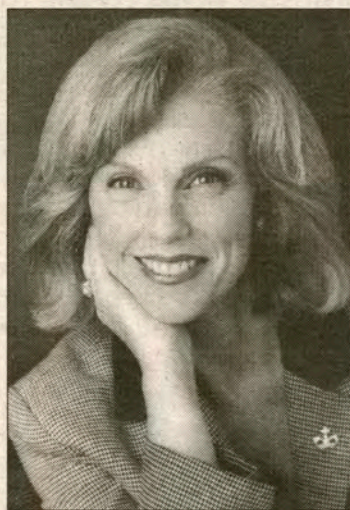
The Reversing Vandalism project was envisioned as activism — an attempt to move from being victims of an assault to empowered creators. It is appropriate that not all the artists involved identify as queer, because this was not just a crime against some of us but also a crime against us all.

Seeing the colorful cover of my book appear in several of the artistic responses to this horrendous crime illustrates the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity, and in the ability of art to point the way from hate toward healing.

Jim Van Buskirk's writing has appeared in a wide variety of books, magazines and newspapers. An excerpt from his forthcoming memoir "Body of Knowledge" appears in Dangerous Families: Queer Writing on Surviving edited by Matt Bernstein Sycamore (Haworth Press, 2004). He is the program manager of the James C. Hormel Gay & Lesbian Center at the San Francisco Public Library.

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