CLUFFFALO: HAMBURG

STUDIES
PARTICIPANTS
MONOPRINTS
STILLS
COLLAGES
INSTALLED
Jack Edson, Director, Hamburg, New York Public Library invited Charles Clough to provide a mural for the library’s addition constructed in 2014 and 2015.

Aaron Ott is the Albright-Knox Art Gallery/Erie County Public Art Initiative Curator.

Tom Loonan is the Albright-Knox Art Gallery Chief Photographer.

Eric Jensen is a photographer

Elmer Ploetz is a Professor of Journalism at SUNY Fredonia and was assisted by Robert Burau.

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As soon as we started planning a large addition for the Hamburg Public Library, I started wanting one more thing: a major piece of art for our beautiful new addition.

A Buffalo News article last summer almost read my mind. The County of Erie was partnering with the Albright Knox Art Gallery and hiring Aaron Ott to serve as Public Art Curator! When Aaron came to Buffalo from Chicago, I contacted him and told him about our library expansion. We would be getting curved walls, fabulous natural light and Hamburg was the place with a strong desire for great art!

While talking with Aaron, I mentioned that we had a pretty famous artist who was back working in Western New York and showed him some examples of Charles Clough’s work online. I brought in a small green and yellow painting, “Blebby,” to show Aaron a closer look at the real thing with its thick and shiny enamel paint. I mentioned Charlie’s work co-founding Hallwalls and his “Cluffalo Arena Painting” events that involve crowds in the creation of works of art. The Center for the Arts of the University of Buffalo had a large show of his work in 2012 and there he demonstrated his ability to create large scaled paintings. His work had been included in the exhibition, “The Pictures Generation,” at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City. Why, the famous collector Dorothy Vogel had been a librarian herself and she and her husband, Herb, had collected something like 600 pieces of Charlie’s work. I had spoken to Charlie the day before and he assured me that he would love to be involved in a project like this and I knew that he would give us a sensational piece of art for our library.

Looking back through my lengthy career as a librarian, I have visited many, many library buildings. Nowadays, most every major library addition includes a piece of art in the project. I have seen every type of style in libraries, ranging from the John Singer Sargent murals at the Boston Public Library to the Tony Oursler video pieces along the escalator at the Seattle Public Library, designed by Rem Koolhaus. I felt that the community of Hamburg was more sophisticated and art savvy than people realized and we could definitely handle an abstract work of art in our library. This mural would definitely put Hamburg, New York on the map.

Our library would be the pioneer, the first branch library in Erie County with a major piece of contemporary art. This would be similar to the days of the Works Progress Administration, when murals were created for public buildings such as post offices and community centers in small communities. This would be a great way to push forward our library’s mission, notably, to “enrich lives” and “visit a comfortable place.”

Personally, I wanted to be the envy of other libraries. Our mural would certainly show the value of having art in public libraries and my hope is that other libraries will want art and find a way to get art for their communities.
Art is a public relation that focuses attention through various strategies. In my case, I chose a professional education based on my ability to draw well. Then I realized the opportunity for forming a meaningful life meant the overthrow of conventions I had been raised within. Being an artist involves risk in relation to developing a sensitivity to breaking rules—which, when and how to act. The risk is that the breakage may be harmful rather than creative. Notions such as reformation, alternative institutions, perpetual revolution, etc. come into play here.

The history of art is that of shifting concerns. As art has become more popular the scope of what is important has expanded. The forces that anoint cultural effort are Darwinian. I rest assured that I have made history and that that history is minor compared to that of certain other artists. When I committed to being an artist I set a force into action which has, and continues, to drive me toward some unknowable point of recognition. While artistic selfishness is essential to art-making, at a certain point, when art becomes an element of group identity a kind of “co-ego” combines with the artist’s ego to make the art a sort of “common wealth”.

Along the way I have engaged others to collaborate with making art. In the early 1970s I was investigating gestural abstraction, particularly in relation to Cy Twombly. I asked friends to scribble on sheets of paper for me to outline. This investigation continued with large sheets of paper and spray paint and then with my “big finger” painting tools, on canvas, in the 1990s. In 2012 I returned to this experimentation.

I love the painterly tradition. It took many years for me to come to terms with it. I find that in the best examples, a sense of ambiguous, precipitousness hovers. I have learned this emotion through looking at paintings throughout my life. The sublime in nature is parallel but lacks a crucial layer of intention.

There are art lovers and there are those who are indifferent to it. I understand that indifference and I understand the position of those who believe that gestural abstraction is “too easy”. I suggest that while it is easy to make certain kinds of art it is very challenging to be an artist. Through my painterly collaborations I offer a moment of coming together with me in realizing a constellation of works and experiences.

To be productive an artist must bring materials together in a place, in a time, with more or less effort. I come from a family that made parties. The effort of preparing food and a place, to celebrate those who attend, is richly rewarded. Likewise, to open the “circumstances of painterly creation” to those who care, bridges our separateness and establishes a common ground despite the variety of our particular degrees of personal “commitments to artist-hood”.

Abstract paintings are generally considered to be about form and have little content or “story”. However, the where, when, how and who of a painting are inescapable elements of the content of a painting. By naming my project, “Cluffalo”, I intend to draw attention to myself (in 1996 I coined cluffl as my url) and Buffalo, where I lived during my formative years and where I returned in 2013 to make my work. I claim that the content of my work is a reflection of my youthful experience of Buffalo’s institutions. Through returning to Buffalo I will interact with those institutions again.

Cluffalo, the event, consists of a large canvas presented on a platform raised a few inches above the floor to
allow for gutters that gather overflowing paint. In the past participants have consisted of all of the students of a school, conference attendees and those solicited through public posting, as in the case of Clufffalo: Hamburg. Methods for constituting the group of participants are aspects of the project that will benefit from future iterations. The participants choose colors from a broad spectrum and methods of application, from flinging to using the big finger painting tools to whatever comes to hand and mind.

Many artists such as Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Tim Rollins and Kids of Survival and Robert Longo, etc., use assistants. One of my cherished experiences was being given instructions for a wall drawing by Sol LeWitt that we executed at Hallwalls. Usually assistants’ involvement is strictly prescribed—not so with Clufffalo.

The participants in a Clufffalo painting event bring the content of who they are and how they act upon the painting. They are restricted by time and quantity of paint, but within those parameters, are free to use the resources as they will. Their effort is recorded by the overhead video of the work’s creation. They have the opportunity to press a piece of board into the painting to make a monoprint to keep and they are invited to provide texts and photos for the book that documents the event.

I participate by finishing the painting. The names of the participants are listed as the artist. Co-optation and certain asymmetries are undeniable as is the privilege of participation. Boundaries of inclusion and exclusion and cooperation and conflict arise. Proximity to authenticity becomes apparent. I want to be a conductor of generosity. The participants form an “emotionally and spiritually activated” ground for my final act. Drama is apparent in the execution.

I’m very pleased that Clufffalo: Hamburg fulfills my intention of working with a museum, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, to produce a commissioned work as part of its permanent collection, for display at the Hamburg Public Library. I would be happy to do Clufffalo at museums for as long as I can. Clufffalo results in a special, identity-forming experience for many people, one large dramatic painting, many collateral works, including take-aways for the participants, the overhead video of the complete process of creating the painting, a book of documentation and the opportunity to produce a feature film-like production to represent the museum.

With future iterations I hope that as participants become familiar with preceding Clufffaloes, new strategies for execution will evolve and Clufffalo will grow in unimaginable ways.

Clufffalo: Hamburg, was made possible through the effort and good wishes of many people: Jack Edson, Director of the Hamburg, New York Public Library, who identified the site to be celebrated, Janne Sirén, Ph.D., Peggy Pierce Elfin Director, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, who met with me to discuss my previous Clufffalo projects and approved this one, Aaron Ott, Curator of Public Art for the Albright-Knox Art Gallery/Erie County Art Initiative for coordinating this event, Mark Poloncarz, Erie County Executive and the Erie County Legislature for funding Aaron’s position, Cynthia Zane, Ed.D., President of Hilbert College, Kathleen Fairbanks, Dr. Zane’s secretary, and the staff and student volunteers who supplied tended the William E. Swan Auditorium at Hilbert for the creation of Clufffalo: Hamburg, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery Art Gallery staff who solicited participants and produced the platform to paint on, Elmer Ploetz and Robert Burau who videoed the event, Albright-Knox Art Gallery photographer, Tom Loonan and Eric Jensen for photographing the event and particularly the participants, identified below, who provided a special community element to distinguish Clufffalo: Hamburg.
The large abstract painting mounted at the Hamburg Public Library is the result of a public event led by local artist Charles Clough. On October 25, 2014, more than 170 participants and volunteers gathered at the Swan Auditoreum at Hilbert College to create one of Clough’s signature “Cluffalo Arena Paintings.” Over the course of eight hours, the public was offered the opportunity to add layers of paint by pouring or splattering a variety of colors onto the canvas. The large surface was purposely designed to invite grand gestures and broad strokes. The paint was then smeared, pushed around, and scraped using Clough’s giant and distinctively crafted “paint-brushes” called “Big Fingers.” Rather than directing participants, Clough empowered them to act freely upon the painting.

After the last marks were made, Clough scraped the canvas with his industrial-sized tools and added the final touches. The result is recognizably a work by the artist, but one which could never have taken its final form without the participation of each individual contributor.

Clough was born in Buffalo in 1951, is a dynamic leader and artist, at turns charismatic, forceful, funny, and conceptually experimental. A restless tinkerer and a romantic, Clough thinks of the act of Arena Painting as Performance art. This experience, the act of painting with a community, is at the heart of the work and facilitates Clough’s interest in producing art as a by-product of meaningful and shared conversations.

This project would not have been possible without the support of Cynthia Zane, President of Hilbert College; Mary Jean Jakubowski, Director of the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library; and Jack Edson, Director of the Hamburg Public Library, as well as the participants who collaborated to create this work and the volunteers who facilitated the event.

Cluffalo: Hamburg is presented by the Public Art Initiative, an innovative partnership between the Albright-Knox Art Gallery and Erie County established in 2013 to enhance our shared sense of place and cultural identity in the urban and suburban landscape of Western New York. The City of Buffalo joined the partnership in 2014. The initiative promotes the arts through its Collection, related programming, and creative partnerships.
Dear Charlie,

What a great project! I first heard about it at a meeting of the Centennial Art Center. Jack Edson described it and I wanted to sign up for it. Unfortunately, I was a day too late.

The next best thing was to go and observe. My daughter was visiting from NYC and went with me. We were able to sign in and participate. What great fun! The volunteers from the college were wonderfully trained to be helpful and encouraging.

Art and painting has become an important part of my retirement. The community at large needs projects like this to bring them into the hands-on art world.

Sincerely,
Diane Manuel

Dear Charlie,

Thank you for collaborating with the Albright-Knox and the community for this public art project experience. My thoughts on the process:

Working with your larger than average painting tools allowed me to make my mark in a way that I would not have otherwise had the opportunity to experience. From an arts in healthcare perspective, I experienced a state of stress reduction in a collaborative, positive and safe environment. My own interest in art ranges from painting to typography. I truly believe that art, in all its forms, has and continues to greatly define my life.

Thank you,
Caryn Sobieski-VanDelinder

Elizabeth Kamke: That was a good event, Charlie. You involved lots of people and it was fun, and they will be able to go to the Hamburg Library and admire their handiwork. A win-win-win. Bravo, and bravo to the folks who funded the project.

Kari Achatz: This was an amazing project to participate in. Thank you for sharing your time and talent with all of us. Bravo!

Hi Charlie,

I wanted to thank you for the opportunity to participate in the arena painting on Saturday. I am a high school art educator from Fredonia, NY. I was so inspired by the process that today I stretched two large canvases (24” x 48”) for my students. I am planning on introducing them to acrylics this week by completing a collaborative painting. This piece will then be displayed in our classroom. I will be sharing photos from Saturday with my students. I’m hopeful they will have as much fun as I did!

Have a great day and thanks again for the opportunity.

Brandy Noody
National Board Certified Art Educator
Fredonia High School
Hi Mr. Clough,

As a new Albright-Knox Gallery member, I was thrilled when I learned that I was selected as a participant for the Clufffalo: Hamburg art project. I was happy to provide a Canadian contribution (i.e. my splash and smear) to the project. It was a privilege to meet you and to be a part of a creative experience with strangers bonded through their love of art. I have lived “across the border” in Niagara for most of my life and I’m only beginning to discover the many treasures in Buffalo and the surrounding area. Thanks to you and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery for providing this opportunity to engage the local and international (me!) community in creating something beautiful.

Best wishes,

Nina Wojciechowska

Dear Charlie,

My husband and I both enjoyed participating in this project. The only thing I wish had been done differently would have been to have a test run so that we’d get a feel for the relationship between the distribution of the paint as we laid it down and as it wound up on the boards. It was quite a surprise, and I think I’d have worked differently if I’d done a second board. Still, it was fun to see the outcome. It came out rather well, perhaps better than if I’d actually planned it more knowledgeably. Thank you for the opportunity to make this little bit of art. I hope there will be more such opportunities.

Susan Udin

Re: Hamburg Arena Painting:

I participated in the project with my daughter, Sarah Miller Cook, and her daughter, Amelia Cook.

It was such an exhilarating and uplifting experience to be expressing ourselves and to be contributing to a larger product. We were proud to be part a project which will become a part of the library and the community we love to call home!

Thank you for the opportunity. We will remember it always!

Judie Miller

We so enjoyed participating in the Charles Clough Community Painting (Clufffalo) taking place at Hilbert College in Hamburg, NY,

It was very interesting to watch as the painting continually changed in color and design all overseen by Mr. Clough and his assistants, all of whom were very cordial to all the participants.

My daughters, Kimberly and Karen, myself and of course, Henry “the Blue-pawed” Dog, were very proud to have been given the opportunity to be part of such a grand work of art which will be hanging in a very
prominent place in our Hamburg Library.

The Picture taken by your photographer is of Henry and his owner, my daughter, Karen.

Thank you again for this memory.

Sincerely,
Barbara Barrett
Hamburg, NY

First, I want to thank you for doing this. What a wonderful opportunity for art enthusiasts and to introduce art to children.

My daughter, Emily has a natural artistic ability. When she was a toddler, she did not like coloring books. Put a blank paper in front of her and she was delighted. Big Tree School does a fantastic job of introducing various forms of art and history. It was exciting for the art museum to host this rare opportunity.

We enjoyed, seeing an actual artist and knowing we played a small part in our Hamburg library renovations. The set up was great with having excited art majors assist and letting the natural artist in everyone come out.

We look forward to seeing the finished product and reading about the process.

Susan Morrison: I would be glad to tell you how much I enjoyed the experience at Hilbert College. My best friend and I are a little older (74 and 65) and love doing things that are exciting and different. We didn't know what to expect but were surprised and happy to see people of all ages side by side, laughing and enjoying the day. Having no artistic abilities myself, it was fun to be creative and free and just create something that was for pure enjoyment, not to be judged. On the more serious side, it was one year to the day that my younger sister died and she was on my mind all day. I thought it would be a good opportunity to do something fun and distracting and it worked. I truly enjoyed the time spent there and even tried to incorporate what to me was a small bird in my section as her name was Robin.

I look forward to seeing the finished work and feel inspired to do a similar, smaller scale project with my 5 grandchildren next summer. Each of them have supplied me with their favorite artwork from their school portfolio at the end of the year and I have framed and hung them in my home. I think they would enjoy this type of project.

Thanks for the opportunity.

Mary Angiel

Sharon Gleason: my thoughts: 'Fun watching others dabble & create in the paints, I was more focused on what they were doing than what I was!'
Anticipating making the painting for the Hamburg Library erupted into drawing within the aspect ratio of the painting’s intended location. These “scribbles in boxes” progressed to color arrangements made in Photoshop. Eventually working in this format brought Paul Gauguin’s Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going? to mind. I like this title in relation to the mural’s location insofar as knowledge and values are a function of the library. As I studied Gauguin’s painting (I have visited it at The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, but for this purpose) in reproduction, I fell for its coloring and rhythm, which I hoped to effect in the loosest manner of paint application.

As much as I was concerned about the participants’ fulfillment of the freedom of Cluffalo, I was concerned that my final working of the painting would be beautiful and dramatic. Thus I made scale models of my big finger painting tools to work out the choreography of my “final act” on Cluffalo: Hamburg.
Final study: color map printed out for event reference.
PARTICIPANTS BY TOM LOONAN
PARTICIPANTS’ MONOPRINTS
Meghan Marong

Kerry V. Chiodo
Candy Ditkowski

Caryn Sobieski-VanDelinder
Cassi Zimmerman

Jennifer Liber Raines
Joy Peterson

Molly Hoppel
Adam Hoppel

Phyllis Furminger
Robin Ferris

Danielle Richter
Mary Angiel

Anita Metzger

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Jennifer Braun

Elaine Hardman
Layanna Sciandra

Jillian Berowski
Michele Manuel

Diana Manuel
Natalie Evans

unsigned
unsigned

Carole Laperriere
Diane M. Noody

Louis Morreale
Debbi Zamrock

Doug Lamb
Gabriella Williams

Brianne Williams
Jenna Watkins

Betty Kaiser

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Ross Schaner

Emily Morrison
Sharon Gleason
STILLS FROM ELMER PLOETZ’S OVERHEAD VIDEO
Cluffalo: Hamburg, Final
CHARLES CLOUGH’S
MONOPRINT/
COLLAGES

These works were produced for Hilbert College and the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library
INSTALLED
Cluffalo: Hamburg was installed at the Hamburg Public Library on April 27, 2015

On-demand, the wall-mounted monitor displays the 8-minute compressed version of the 8 hours of video documentation by Elmer Ploetz and Robert Burau of the making of Cluffalo: Hamburg located at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYG_Urk_7VM
On June 5, 2015, I visited the Library to photograph the installation. Coincidentally (really!), New York State Lieutenant Governor, Kathy Hochul (dark blue jacket), a long-time resident of Hamburg dropped in with New York Assemblymember, Sean Ryan (tan suit) and Hamburg Mayor, Tom Moses.