Espace Sculpture

Aidan Urquhart
Locked Knowledge

Virginia MacDonnell Eichhorn

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Citer ce compte rendu
Locked Knowledge consists of twelve site-specific installations and a gallery exhibition. These installations question the accessibility of knowledge, referencing such issues as censorship, the dissemination of information, privilege and learning. In doing so, the artist, Aidan Urquhart, has intentionally raised some difficult questions. This is particularly significant given that the installations were located on the campus and in the gallery of a university, a setting he deliberately chose.

Urquhart undertook seven years ago in London, Ontario. At that time, he chose twenty-six used books and marked them each with a letter from the alphabet. They were then sealed so that they couldn't be opened, effectively becoming objects or symbols rather than "true" books. These twenty-six books were then taken by Urquhart to various unlikely locales in the city, arranged in random orders and then photographed. It was a private project, meant to be stumbled upon incidentally rather than having a public intention, and it was from this that the idea of Locked Knowledge came to be.

Locked Knowledge is divided into two components. The first is the installation within the gallery, and the second consists of twelve islands or "pods" (as the artist has named them) scattered about the university campus. Both the gallery installation and the pods consist primarily of used hardcover books. Each book has been sealed so that it cannot be opened. On the cover they have been marked with a letter from the alphabet. The letters are in different sizes, fonts, and colours. Urquhart custom mixed each colour such that each one is completely unique. The books are then chained together in groups that are then padlocked, further binding them and ensuring that the contents cannot be accessed.

Urquhart was unconcerned about the contents or titles of the books he used. The individual aspect of the book wasn't important — what was crucial to his installation was the symbolic, almost Platonic ideal of "book" as a repository of knowledge and understanding. This is particularly important within a university context. Books are an integral part of a university's raison d'être. They contain the experiences and discoveries of past generations, they stimulate present generations of students, and they convey information.

Yet, chained and bound, the books also remind one that this chance to learn can be denied. Not everyone has access to these opportunities. Lack of finances, support or encouragement can contribute to one not being able to go on in studies. What potential growth there could be is stymied, handicapped — effectively locked away. It is a poignant and powerful reminder that the university remains a privileged community from which many are socially or economically locked out.

The gallery component for this exhibition consists of twelve "pods" placed about the gallery floor. One of the books in a pod has had its lock and chain broken. Lying open, it appears as if the contents of the book has burst out. Hundreds of pages from an encyclopedia are affixed to the wall. Like a visual cacophony or an explosion of confetti at a child's birthday party, there is an unmistakably celebratory feel to this. As with the books, each page has a large letter in different fonts, sizes and colours, affixed to it. They are arranged in random patterns, swirling, twisting, and filling the space with colour and meaning. One is surrounded with information — and the effect is quite dazzling.

Undeniably, Urquhart's Locked Knowledge is a kind of visual cautionary tale. Books, and all the symbolic import that is inherently associated with them, are locked up, chained down and made but inaccessible to those who come in contact with them. It is about loss of knowledge, but also, with his placement of pods in incidental and unusual places, a reminder that one never knows where and when learning will occur. The letters on the covers of these books, and the book broken open in the gallery installation, insist that knowledge and information will come through, regardless of the constraints imposed on them, whether through censorship or lack of access.

Aidan Urquhart: Locked Knowledge
University of Waterloo Art Gallery
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