

Aidan Urquhart *Locked Knowledge*

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Aidan Urquhart

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Locked Knowledge

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.



AIDAN URQUHART:
Locked Knowledge,
2003. Pod Books, chains,
locks, paint. Variable
dimensions.
Photo: V. M. Eichhorn.

Urquhart has been working on this project for almost two years now; its genesis, however, was a guerrilla installation project he 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.

As such, it might seem at first reading that Urquhart's closure of the books is antithetical to the purpose of a place of higher learning. It implies censorship and denial. However, the letter placed on the front of the books indicates that, even though the books have been "locked" or silenced, the information within can still be accessed. Cumulatively, the sheer

number of books also gives one the opportunity to create meanings — viewers can discover and create words from the letters which are on the books. Although the presentation of the work renders much of book content inaccessible, Urquhart insists that one search out and find meaning regardless. The works challenge us to overcome the barriers that are imposed not just in learning, but in searching for knowledge and meaning around us.

The majority of the pods on campus have been placed at ground level. They can be found chained to the bottom of trees, to the base of a building, emerging out of a dense ground cover of ivy, and valiantly struggling along a railing, up some stairs. The ground-level placement of the books metaphorically reinforces Urquhart's overall theme. Here, the books and the information contained therein are seen as being at root or foundation level. From the "roots" of what is contained within the books, knowledge and learning can grow.

Likewise the books chained to the foundation of a building's pillar reminds one that learning and information is what the university is predicated upon; it is the purpose of the university's very existence.

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 a number of 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 all 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
September 11th to October 9th, 2003