

Deborah Koenker
Bar-ba-loot: An Installation

Or Gallery
September 8th to October 3rd
1992

Within the four walls and modest scale of Vancouver's Or Gallery, Deborah Koenker has created an evocative memorial of that which is already lost to us, and a warning, both powerful and silent, of a deadly potential regarding the habitability of this planet. *Bar-ba-loot: An Installation* manages to be graceful, tender and playful, even while its solemnity seeps deeply into our spirit.

In spite of its highly charged content, Koenker's installation avoids the common pitfalls many artworks with a strong social/political agenda land squarely into. Often such work forfeits all aesthetic considerations in the service of its message. But never didactic, Koenker's artwork is an equal marriage of form and content. It is an example of the healthy relationship that is possible when the ideals of modernism and postmodernism unite, as in this installation, where Koenker employs the fruits of modernism's love affair with form and material to the full benefit of her postmodernist cultural critique.

Consistently throughout Koenker's work the content is carefully woven into every formal decision she makes and is carried by her use of materials, her choice of imagery, and her elegant, understated style. As in her previous installations, Koenker has inhabited the space here fully with a remarkable economy of means; wherein all the excess has been allowed to simmer away, producing a rich concentration of full-bodied ingredients. The elements blend together to create a whole which could not be suggested by any pairing of its constituent parts.



This synthesis is perhaps most evident in Koenker's poignant inclusion of items from a child's world. Upon one wall of the gallery is an excerpt from a children's story by Dr. Seuss which warns, in the rhyming whimsy for which he is celebrated, of the consequences of our careless exploitation of finite, natural resources. Koenker has reproduced parts of this text directly on the wall in a misty blue ink with a children's alphabet. Compulsively printed by hand from a set of rubber stamps bearing cartooned dinosaurs in each letter's design, the wall's surface creates a buoyant appeal that soon gives way to its ominous undercurrent. At once we are reminded of the enormous history of life on earth through a species which existed millions of years ago, and of the immediate future of this planet through the children whose territory we inhabit, both figuratively, while reading the hand-printed narrative, and literally, as we decide the viability of coming generations here on earth.

Upon the opposite wall, Koenker has stamped the last line of Dr. Seuss's story and then made it real by creating an artifact described in the story's ending, and placing it on the floor beneath the text: a row of six river stones, each carved with one letter to form the final word of the story, "unless."

Evidence of the exigency of Seuss's warning appears on the remaining two walls of the gallery. Again, hand-stamped in light blue ink with dinosaur letters, is a partial listing, in alphabetical order, of the more than one thousand

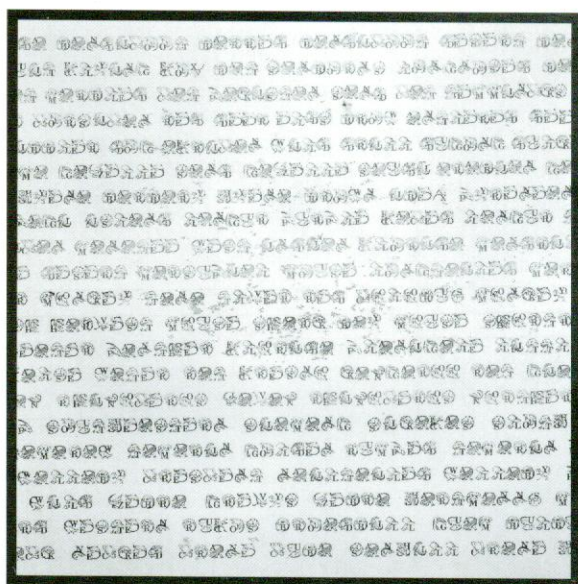
creatures found on the International Endangered Species List. Smiling dinosaurs spell out great varieties of mammals, birds, reptiles, fish and other members of the animal kingdom. Koenker lets the facts speak for themselves, as the very names of these creatures, and their regretful status on this list, conjure up their own vivid images. The Bumblebee bat, the Indigo Macaw, the Desert Bandicoot, and their too numerous companions on these walls face the fate of becoming an historical fact and the stuff of children's fancy, like the dinosaurs whose images sport their names around the room. However, their extinction will not be due to the progression of an ice age or the splashing of a meteor. Instead, it is human behaviour that threatens the future of the row upon row of life forms listed here. Though preventable, their destruction will continue "unless. . ."

In the center of this ethereal, watery text rests a huge sphere made up of driftwood roots, gnarled and interlocked, just as the complex systems upon this planet. It sits commanding the space, dark and foreboding and precariously balanced, in itself a fascinating piece of postminimalist sculpture. But, situated within the enveloping text, the sphere looms at the problem that won't go away, the stark reality that must be dealt with. The orb's ponderous materiality contrasts with the floating words upon the walls: a reminder that, though we can neither create or destroy matter, the life which infuses it is vulnerable and dependant upon the maintenance of a delicate balance. A balance, Koenker eloquently reminds us, which is dangerously close to loosing its equilibrium "unless. . ."

Bar-ba-loot: An Installation is itself exemplary of an approach needed to insure against the ills it portends. By working outside the marketplace, both in her selection of found natural materials, and in creating a non-commodity – an installation whose very nature is ephemeral – Koenker subtly speaks to the issues of waste and consumption which lie at the root of the problem she is addressing. In doing so, she offers up a work which is not merely about a concern for the environment, but which is sincerely borne of this concern.

—Sheila Lynch

detail of
stamped
text on
wall



detail of
river stone
carved to
spell the
word
"unless"

Cover photograph, installation view of driftwood sphere

Deborah Koenker is a Vancouver artist who currently teaches at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design. She received her M.F.A. from Claremont Graduate School in Southern California, and has exhibited in Canada and the United States.

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Or Gallery

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Gallery hours: Tuesday to Saturday 12 to 5 PM

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