

ANOTHER ARTEXT

MEDITATIONS ON A LANDSCAPE



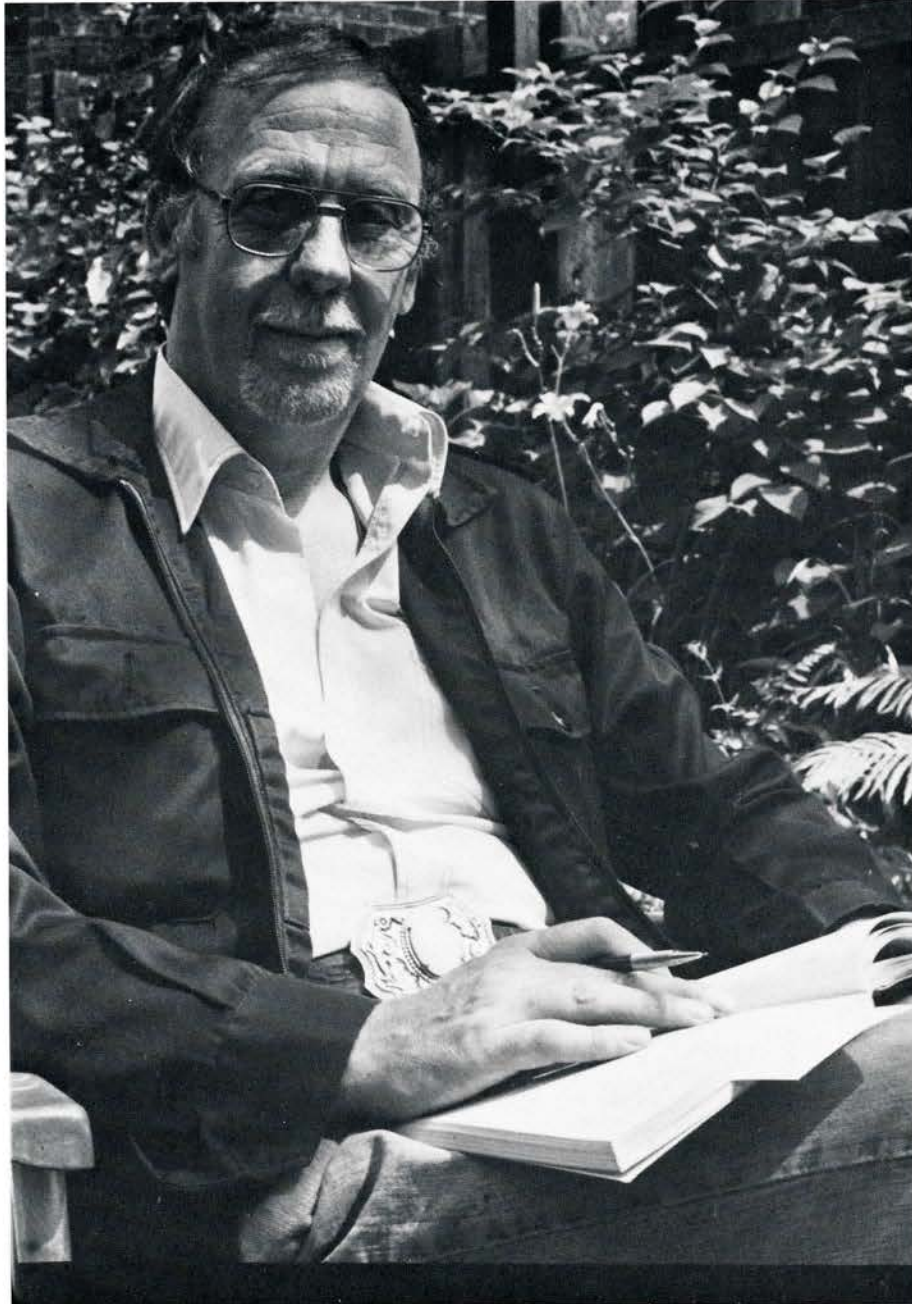
MEDITATIONS ON A LANDSCAPE
IS AN EXHIBITION PLANNED TO
EXPLORE CERTAIN IMPLICATIONS
OF THE LANDSCAPE OF CENTRAL
ARNHEM LAND.

THE AREA AROUND OBIRI ROCK
IS THE HEREDITARY LAND OF
THE GUNWINGGU PEOPLE WHO
HAVE LIVED IN THE DISTRICT
FOR OVER 10,000 YEARS. THE
LANDSCAPE IS DENSE WITH
SIGNIFICANT LOCATIONS AND
SACRED SITES.

THE GUNWINGGU HAVE BEEN LUC-
KY IN THAT THEY HAVE, UNTIL
RECENTLY, AVOIDED CONTACT
WITH WHITE MEN. THE BRUTAL
COLONIALISM OF SETTLERS AND
CATTLE STATIONS HAS PASSED
THEM BY, SINCE NO-ONE WANTED
THEIR LAND. BUT, NOW IT IS
DISCOVERED THAT THEIR COUNTRY
CONTAINS 50% OF THE WORLD'S
KNOWN URANIUM RESOURCES.

INTERIM STATE

KENNETH
COUTTS-SMITH



Karl Beveridge

Kenneth Coutts-Smith

ANOTHER ARTEXT

MEDITATIONS ON A LANDSCAPE

Interim State

Kenneth Coutts-Smith

Gallery 1.1.1

School of Art
The University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada

March 31-April 15, 1986

Curated by Helen K. Wright
Photography by Karl Beveridge
and Ernest Mayer
Catalogue Design by Leo Simoens

Acknowledgements:

The Canada Council
The Manitoba Arts Council

Dale Amundsen,
Grace Thompson,
Zared Mann at
Gallery 1.1.1.
and
Daine Augaitis, S. G. Buri,
David Craig,
Marina Stewart for
advice and encouragement

Opening reception 2-5 p.m.
Sunday, April 6, 1986

c Gallery 1.1.1., The University of Manitoba

IMAGINE A PHOTOGRAPHIC SLIDE PROJECTED LARGE UPON A SCREEN. IT DOES NOT MATTER WHETHER IT BE CONCEIVED IN TERMS OF AN ART-GALLERY, A THEATRE, A LECTURE-HALL OR A PRIVATE ROOM: THE RELATIONSHIPS SET UP WITH THE SPECTATOR REMAIN ENTIRELY IN THE NATURE OF SPECTACLE—SPECTACLE MODULATED, HOWEVER, BY THE EXPECTATIONS OF A BROAD “ARTISTIC” CULTURE. THE IMAGE IS ONE OF A VERY WIDE LANDSCAPE PROSPECT VIEWED FROM THE SECURITY OF THE EDGE OF SOME TREES. THE OPEN GROUND BEFORE US IS DOTTED WITH AN OCCASIONAL DRY EUCALYPTUS SCRUB & SOME RAGGED CLUMPS OF STUNTED PANDANUS PALMS. THERE IS A SENSATION THAT THE VEGETATION IS MORE LUSH AND MOIST BEHIND US. THE WIDE & FLAT FLOOD-PLAIN THAT STRETCHES OUT BEFORE THE VIEWER

MEDITATIONS ON A LANDSCAPE

Uranium mining in the N.T.—Mount Brockman, sacred sites belonging to the Mirrar people—one is called Djidbidjiddi, if it is disturbed, a great snake will come out and kill everyone—another, at Nabarlek, the Madjewaro people have a similar legend about their Gabo dreaming; if people dig up this country, big green ants will come out of the ground and kill many people—20% of all the uranium in the world is in this area.

—Kenneth Coutts-Smith,
from his unpublished Australian diary

"Meditations on a Landscape, Interim State," by Kenneth Coutts-Smith, is a series of stamped panels and slides documenting the results of the discovery of uranium on a site sacred to the Australian people near Obiri Rock in Central Arnhem land. The text is an explication of 78 photographic slides. One slide, that of Obiri Rock, is held while the remaining 77 are projected on a second screen. This exhibition was first shown at Eye Level Gallery in Halifax between March 19 and April 4, 1981. At the time, the artist was extremely ill with what was soon to be diagnosed as terminal cancer. The exhibition, however, was completed, in cooperation with the artist, by Marina Stewart in Halifax. Fragmentary notes, difficult to decipher, exist for its completion:

The Gunwinggu, of course, have been lucky in missing the brutal depredations, the murders and slave labour of the primary settler and cattle station colonialism. They have remained in their inaccessible forests only because no white man wanted the land. Now, they are in collision with international corporate colonialism, and their world will never be the same again. A unique culture of intact tribal ceremonial life will be broken. The suffering and waste of alcohol, gasoline-sniffing, prostitution and ghettoized urban despair is hardly calculable but inevitable.

—Kenneth Coutts-Smith,
from his unpublished notes, "Meditations on a Landscape."

It was planned that all the stamped panels be converted also into blueprints or transparency formats. Those that were complete are included in the exhibition. This choice of format seems to be a comment on landscape, with its echoes of techniques of geological surveying. The exhibition was

taken to Vancouver in September, 1984, where Diana Augaitis was consulted about the possibility of its installation in its present state. We felt that it could be installed; its message is still clear.

One problem with this exhibition involves the difficulty of completing someone else's work. The raw materials which were available for this task were the slides, the stamped texts in their unfinished state, the diary that Ken had kept during his travels in Australia and New Zealand, and his notes, written in 1981, which detail the conception of the exhibition. A progression is noted from descriptions of daily activities and individuals through the plan of the exhibition to its final realization. The sequence is from description of specific events and experiences to more abstract and considered conclusions. A paragraph from the notes forms a concise summary of Ken's conception of the exhibition:

The aboriginal sense of land and place imbues any anomaly of the landscape with significance. The land still lives for the present, as the ancestors of forty-thousand years of living history have left it, the echoes still guarded by the living. Every differentiated place is personal to someone, a Dream place, and that someone has a lifelong inherited obligation to guard and to curate that place. But with the erosion of ceremonial, with the decomposition of known and ordered ritual, an imported euphoria glosses a transient evasion of the social decomposition that alcohol itself compounds.

—Kenneth Coutts-Smith,
from his unpublished notes, "Meditations on a Landscape"

This exhibition, notwithstanding its textual dimension, can be understood as landscape art or art about landscape. As such, it falls within a certain art-historical tradition—that of the Lettristes immediately following the Second World War, the makers of concrete poetry, and Art and Language. In Canada, Greg Curnoe's work is a good example of the use of text for "landscape painting," but his work is without the political and critical analysis inherent in these texts.

Ken's visual production moved through various stages. After a period of cubist experiments influenced by Picasso, he seemed to find his format in successful

abstract expressionist works, part of the tachist movement in Europe. The best of these consist of large oil paintings with heavy layers of paint in shades of dark brown, gold and red, whose content is symbols that are almost hieroglyphic in shape. After a period of more than a decade, when his creative endeavors were more in the area of art criticism than visual work, Ken returned to print-making and painting with his Artexts. Concurrently with critical writing, he participated in the Fluxus-inspired mail art or correspondence art movement. The Artexts developed out of this activity. These were works of art criticism made first of all with rubber stamps and then produced as lithographs, monoprints and acrylic paintings in a beaux-arts tradition.

In August, 1980, Kenneth Coutts-Smith was invited by the Power Institute of Fine Art, University of Sydney, to Australia, where he delivered the Power lecture. He was the first Canadian to give this important lecture. His predecessors had been such art critics as Clement Greenberg, Max Kosloff, John Golding, and Richard Wollheim. He gave the lecture again in eight Australian cities and five New Zealand cities, and, in addition, delivered eighteen other lectures in these centres. He travelled during a two-month period over 5,000 miles in the Australian and New Zealand hinterland, where he contacted aboriginal art centres and studied aboriginal art. "Meditations on a Landscape" is a result of these travels and Ken's critical analysis of what he saw.

An exhibition of these texts, called "Artexts by Kenneth Coutts-Smith, a retrospective," curated by David Mole and myself, has circulated throughout Canada. It has been shown at Plug-In Inc., Winnipeg, the Anna Leonowens Gallery of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, The Western Front, Vancouver, Latitude 53, Edmonton, and Off Centre Centre, Calgary. The Artexts make comments, from a Marxist art-critical perspective, within a beaux-arts tradition, on the role of art within post-corporate capitalist society. "Meditations on a Landscape" goes further. These texts are more sharply critical of a specific political situation and less bound, as is the Artexts show, by a beaux-arts format. Although not as visually thrilling as the first Artexts show, I find this one more successful in its combination of political engagement and aesthetic concerns.

by Helen K. Wright, curator

AINLAND BETWEEN 10 & 12 THO
USAND YEARS AGO. ALREADY
THERE ARE IMPLICATIONS IN T
HE FIELD OF THE LANDSCAPE I
MAGE THAT CANNOT BE CONCE
IVED IN THE PROJECTED SLIDE.
CERTAIN IMPLICATIONS INEVIT
ABLY DEVOLVE FROM THE DIF
FERING SITUATIONS OF THE P
RIVATE EXPOSURE TO OTHER
S OF TOUIST SNAPS, THE COLL
ECTIVE EXPERIENCE OF ART-HI
STORY LECTURES & SIMILAR
DIDACTIC PRESENTATIONS OR OTH
ER GALLERY EXPOSITIONS S
UCH AS THIS PRESENT ONE. IN
EACH CASE, GIVEN THE CENTR
AL REFERENTS THAT PERTAIN,
AS WELL AS THE "NATURE" OF
THE IMAGE, IT IS EVIDENT THA
T THE PROJECTED SLIDE WIL
L BE INFORMED BY THE IMPL
ICIT CODEING OF A LONG TRA
DITION OF LANDSCAPE PAINT
ING. IN THIS CURRENT CONTEX
T WE ARE NOT MERELY OBSER
VING A SPECIFIC VISUAL RECO

RD MADE IN ARHNEM LAND & T
AKEN FROM BELOW CANNON H
ILL TOWARDS OBIRI ROCK. TH
E VERY NOTION OF AN AUSTR
ALIAN LANDSCAPE MUST IN IT
SELF, FOR ANYONE NOT POSS
ESSING A PERSONAL & FIRST-H
AND EXPERIENCE OF THE SITE
IN QUESTION, BE INFORMED BY
OTHER CULTURAL IMPLICATIO
NS. WE UNDOUBTEDLY "ANIMAT
E" THIS LANDSCAPE WITH STE
REOTYPES THAT WE HAVE AC
QUIRED IN GENERAL FROM TH
E CINEMA, THE NOVEL AND OT
HER MEDIA, AND IN PARTICULA
R FROM THE TRADITION IN PAI
NTING THAT ENCAPSULATES
DIFFERENT VARIETIES OF THE
NATIONAL MYTH: DRYSDALE, NO
LAN, BYRD & OTHERS. WE TRA
NSFER THE REMEMBERED THIN
SMEARY PAINT, THE DRY EART
H-DUN COLOURS, THE SUBJEC
TIVE EXPRESSION OF A STATI
C & TIMELESS LAND ONTO TH
E IMAGE BEFORE US. A COLON

IAL MYTH IS CONSEQUENTLY REENFORCED. WHAT THE PHOTOGRAPHER KNOWS, HOWEVER, IS THAT THE GUNWIGGU PEOPLE OF CENTRAL ARNHEM LAND ARE NOT THE ARCHIC STEREOTYPES REPRESENTED IN THE PAINTINGS. AT THE MOMENT OF TAKING THE PHOTOGRAPH, THEY ARE ENGAGED IN A SIGNIFICANT, THOUGH PROBABLY HOPELESS, CONFRONTATION. IN THE SHADE OF THE TREES, ON THE VERY SITE OF A LONG-SINCE ABANDONED CAMP, THAT OF THE FIRST WHITE MAN TO ENTER THE AREA IN THE 1920'S-A BUFFALO HUNTER CALLED WARBURTON-A SOLEMN COURT HAS BEEN ASSEMBLED. SOME TWENTY MEN, NEARLY ALL WHITE, ARE SEATED AROUND A HOLLOW SQUARE OF TRESTLE TABLES, UNDER A YELLOW TARPULIN AWNING THAT SHUDDERS & FLAPS IN THE BLISTERING WIND THAT FAILS TO D

ISSIPATE THE 100 DEGREE HEAT. THERE IS AN ODD DISCREPANCY BETWEEN THE APPEARANCE OF JUDGE & COUNCELS, DRESSED IN SHORTS, FLOWERED SHIRTS AND THONGS, & THE GRAVITY OF LANGUAGE & THE FORMALITY OF RITUAL. JOHN TOOHEY, THE COMMONWEALTH LANDS COMMISSIONER, IN ADJUDICATING ABORIGINAL LAND RIGHTS, IS ACCEPTING SUBMISSIONS FROM TWO MULTINATIONAL MINING CORPORATIONS, PANCONTINENTAL & RANGER, THE NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT & THE LOCAL BLACK POPULATION. EACH SECTOR OF THE COURT, INCLUDING THAT OF THE BENCH, IS CLUSTERED EACH WITH THEIR LINGUISTS & MERCENRY ANTHROPOLOGISTS. A LEADER OF THE BLACK PEOPLE, TOBY GANGALI, IS QUESTIONED AS TO HOW & WHEN & WHERE HIS PEOPLE STILL HUNT AND GATHER IN THE

Kenneth Coutts-Smith (1929-1981)

1929 — born, September 29, Copenhagen, Denmark, of British parents
— educated in England, served with the R.A.F.

1950-54 — apprenticed as a painter in England and France; studied with Leger, Szabo, and Picasso

1957 — sub-editor of *Anarchist* magazine, *Truth*; contributed widely to magazines in Britain, Europe, and North America

1962-65 — co-director of the avant-garde gallery, New Vision Centre, London

1965-67 — co-founder and Associate Editor of *Art and Artists*

1960's — taught at Liverpool College of Art and other British art schools

1970 — published *The Dream of Icarus: Art and Society in the Twentieth Century* (Hutchinsons/Braziller) and *Dada* (Studio/Vista)

1970-73 — taught art history, University of Calgary; chairman of Art History Division for one year

1974-75 — Associate Professor of Art History and Director of Exhibitions, Gallery III, University of Manitoba

1975 — published numerous articles in journals in North America, Europe, Asia, and South America; participated in international conferences and art exhibits

1977 — received Canada Council Senior Arts grant for travel and research on sociology of art

1978 — curated show of political posters by Klaus Staack, Plug-In, Inc., Winnipeg

— gave courses and lectures at University of Guelph, York University, Toronto, and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax

1979 — researched Inuit Art in Baker Lake, North West Territories

1980 — delivered Power lecture in Sydney, Australia, and eight other Australian cities and five New Zealand cities; travelled over 5000 miles in Australia and New Zealand hinterland

1981 — lectured in Peterborough, Montreal, Halifax, Sackville, and Toronto

— completed *The Demise of the Avant-Garde* (presently being prepared for publication) with the aid of a second Canada Council Senior Arts grant

1981 — died September 4, Princess Margaret Hospital, Toronto, of cancer

Exhibitions:

1952 — first one-man show, Archer Gallery, London

1952-70 — second to ninth one-man shows in Stockholm, Strasbourg, London, Bath, Florence, Rome, Venice, and many group shows

1970-80 — participated in numerous international group shows

1980 — tenth one-man show, Eye Level Gallery, Halifax

1981 — eleventh one-man show, "Meditations on a Landscape," Eye Level Gallery, Halifax

1982-85 — twelfth one-man show, (Retrospective), Plug-In Inc., Winnipeg
Anna Leonowens Gallery, Halifax, The Western Front, Vancouver, Latitude 53, Edmonton, Off Centre Centre, Calgary (travelling)

1986 — "Meditations on a Landscape," Gallery III, Winnipeg

Memberships:

Association Internationale des Critiques d'Art, British Society of Aesthetics, CARFAC, College Art Association of America, University Art Association of Canada

ITE-CONTAINS A VAST AMOUNT OF HIGH GRADE URANIUM. THAT ONE ORE BODY IS BELIEVED TO AMOUNT TO 50 PERCENT OF ALL THE WORLDS KNOWN RECOURSES OF URANIUM! LISTENING TO THE ARGUMENTS OF THIS ABORIGINAL LAND CLAIMS COURT, ONE QUICKLY BEGINS TO REALIZE THAT THE MAIN ISSUE BEFORE THE COURT IS AS TO WHETHER FEDERAL OR PROVINCIAL AUTHORITY SHOULD PREVAIL. THE DELEGATES OF THE NORTHERN LAND COUNCIL CENTRE ON THE QUESTION OF THE POTENTIAL SOCIAL DAMAGE TO THE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES. BUT THIS DAMAGE IS ALREADY DONE! THE MINING COMPANIES ARE ALREADY BUILDING- IN ANTICIPATION OF A POSITIVE OUTCOME- DEEP IN THE TROPICAL BUSH, A MODERN FULLY SUBURBANIZED CITY TO HOUSE 5,000 WORKERS. FOR ALMOST A YEAR NOW A GANG OF ABOUT

