MEDITATIONS ON A LANDSCAPE

ANOTHER ARTEXT

INTERIM STATE

KENNETH COUTTS-SMITH
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Kenneth Coutts-Smith

Gallery 1.1.1

School of Art
The University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada

Curated by Helen K. Wright
Photography by Karl Beveridge
and Ernest Mayer
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Opening reception 2-5 p.m.
Sunday, April 6, 1986

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MEDITATIONS ON A LANDSCAPE

Uranium mining in the N.T.—Mount Brockman, sacred sites belonging to the Mirarar people—one is called Djarapddjideh, if it is disturbed, a great snake will come out and kill everyone—another, at Nabarlek, the Madjararo 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—Kenneth Coutts-Smith, from his unpublished Australian diary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—Kenneth Coutts-Smith, from his unpublished notes, "Meditations on a Landscape:"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 is 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 Letteristes 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 Wolheim. 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
made in arnhem land & taken from below cannon hill towards obiri rock. the very notion of an australian landscape must in itself, for anyone not possessing a personal & first-hand and experience of the site in question, be informed by other cultural implications. we undoubtedly "animat e" this landscape with stereotypes that we have acquired in general from the cinema, the novel and other media, and in particular from the tradition in painting that encapsulates different varieties of the national myth: drysdale, nolan, byrd & others. we transfer the remembered thin smeary paint, the dry earthy dunn colours, the subjective expression of a static & timeless land onto the image before us. a colon
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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 Staeck, 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
IT-CONTAINS A VAST AMOUNT OF HIGH GRADE URANIUM. THAT ONE OR BODY IS BELIEVED TO AMOUNT TO 50 PERCENT OF ALL THE WORLDS KNOWN RECURSES OF URANIUM! LISTENING TO THE ARGUMENTS OF THIS A BORGINAL LAND CLAIMS COUR T, ONE QUICKLY BEGINS TO RE ALIZE THAT THE MAIN ISSUE BEFORE THE COURT IS AS TO WHETHER FEDERAL OR PROVI NCIAL AUTHORITY SHOULD PRE VAIL. THE DELEGATES OF THE NORTHERN LAND COUNCIL CENTRE ON THE QUESTION OF THE POTENTIAL SOCIAL DAMAGE TO THE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITI ES. BUT THIS DAMAGE IS ALRE ADY DONE! THE MINING COMPA NIES ARE ALREADY BUILDING IN ANTICIPATION OF A POSITIV E OUTCOME-DEEP IN THE TROP ICAL BUSH, A MODERN FULLY S URBURBANIZED CITY TO HOUSE 5,000 WORKERS. FOR ALMOST A YEAR NOW A GANG OF ABOUT