

ANOTHER ARTEXT

# MEDITATIONS ON A LANDSCAPE



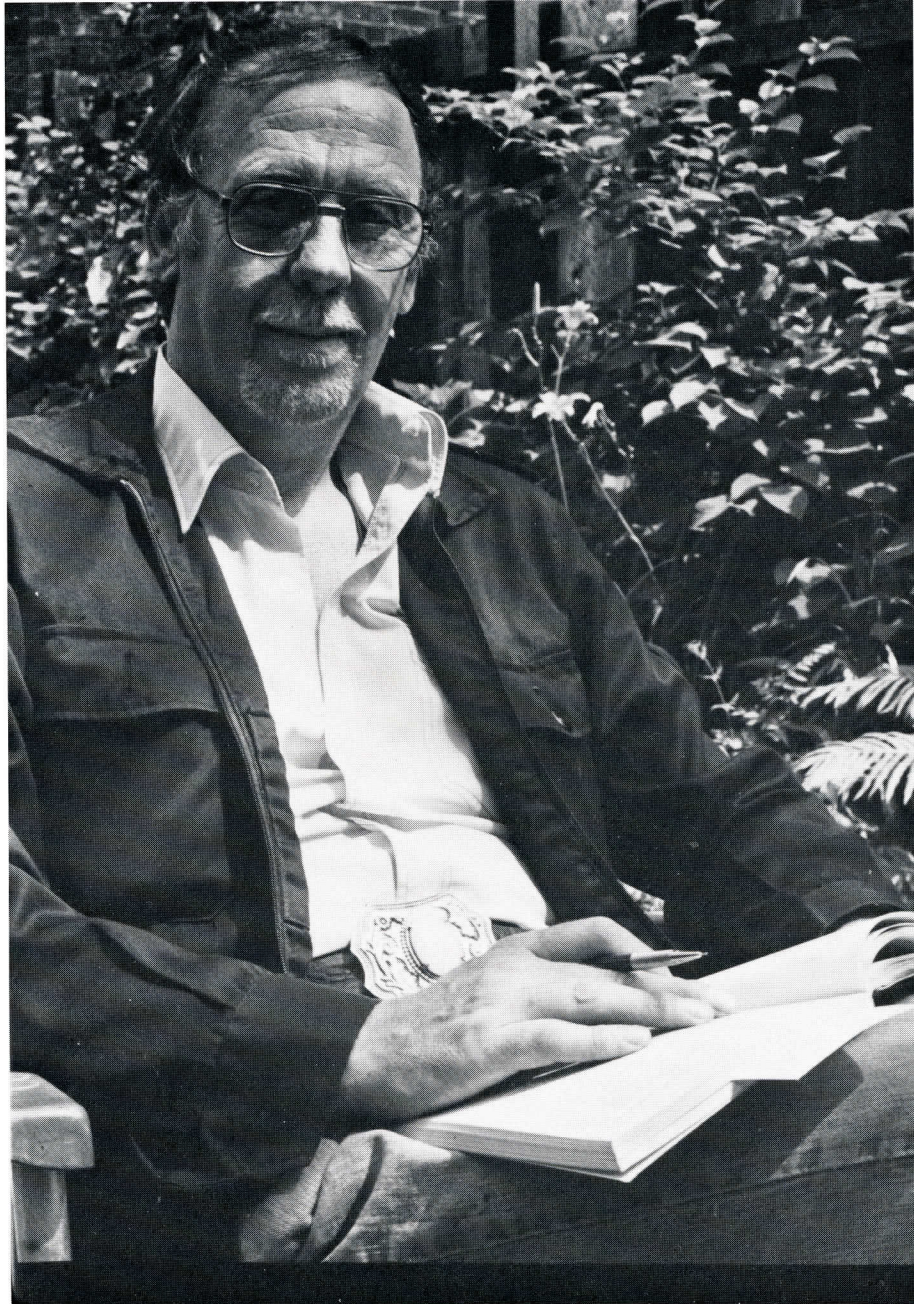
MEDITATIONS ON A LANDSCAPE  
IS AN EXHIBITION PLANNED TO  
EXPLORE CERTAIN IMPLICATIONS  
OF THE LANDSCAPE OF CENTRAL  
ARNHEM LAND.

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  
SACPED 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



***Kenneth Coutts-Smith***

Karl Beveridge

# 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:**

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The Manitoba Arts Council

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David Craig,  
Marina Stewart for  
advice and encouragement

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

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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

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Ernest Mayer

## MEDITATIONS ON A LANDSCAPE

Uranium mining in the N.T.—Mount Brockman, sacred sites belonging to the Mirarar people—one is called Djidbidjidbi, 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 Arttexts. Concurrently with critical writing, he participated in the Fluxus-inspired mail art or correspondence art movement. The Arttexts 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 “Arttexts 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 Arttexts 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 Arttexts show, by a beaux-arts format. Although not as visually thrilling as the first Arttexts 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  
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RD MADE IN ARHNEM 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 EXPERIENCE OF THE SITE IN QUESTION, BE INFORMED BY OTHER CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS. WE UNDOUBTEDLY "ANIMATE" 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, NO LAN, BYRD & OTHERS. WE TRANSFER THE REMEMBERED THIN SMEARY PAINT, THE DRY EARTH-DUN COLOURS, THE SUBJECTIVE EXPRESSION OF A STATIC & TIMELESS LAND ONTO THE IMAGE BEFORE US. A COLON

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Ernest Mayer

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

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Ernest Mayer



DISSIPATE 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'S TILL HUNT AND GATHER IN TH

## BIOGRAPHY

### **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

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

