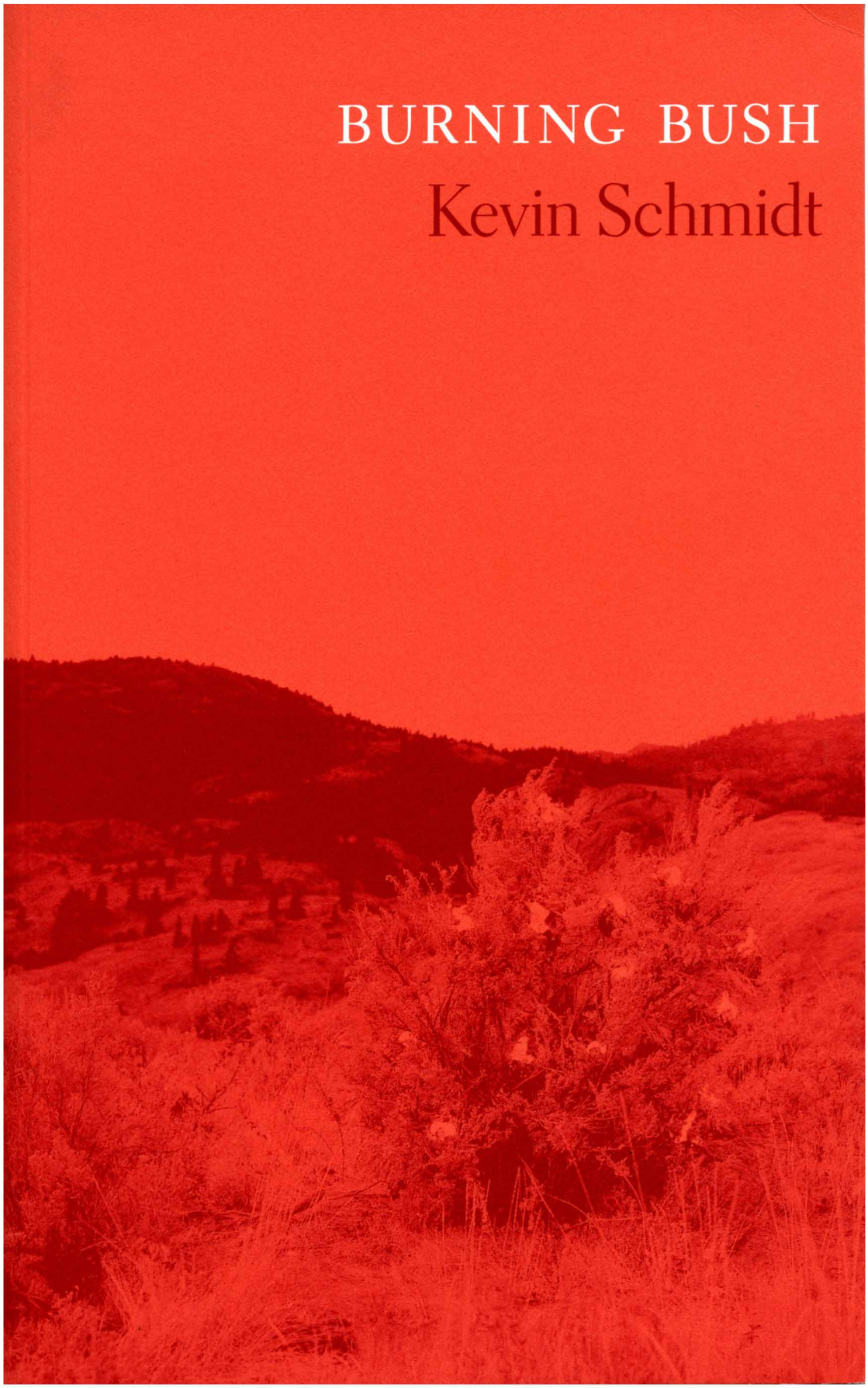

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WHILE, IN AN INDEXICAL SENSE, THE STILL LIFE SUGGESTS a natural landscape (even if imaginary) and the photograph a fragment of reality, the *tableau vivant* invariably turns our attention to the realm of representation, for it refers to another image after which it has been fashioned—an image that delimits it and that it strives to stage. As a "living picture," it claims to be a still image and a moving picture all at once. The ambitions of the *tableau vivant* are therefore extravagant, for it wishes to condense two incompatible phenomena: on the one hand, it wants to retain the power that the still image has to capture the instant and wrest it from the realm of experience, that is, from the time-flow to which it belongs; on the other hand, it also wants to persevere with the moving picture's aspirations to restore the instant in the flow of time, and thus make it possible for us to once again come in contact with its immediacy. In short, the *tableau vivant* offers the instant to our indefinite consumption as experience.

There are no actors in Kevin Schmidt's recent video project *Burning Bush,* but the format is that of the *tableau vivant.* The central figure appears to inhabit a space and a time completely its own, while the atmosphere that envelops it follows the pace of nature. As viewers we engage with the central figure and its surroundings simultaneously, and in our own time. A sage bush caught in flames in the foreground, the backdrop provided by an uninhabited, arid, barely vegetated land of tumbleweed, rattlesnakes, and rolling hills. Consistent with the original story of the burning bush (Exodus 3:2), Schmidt's projection presents a bush and a fire inhabiting each other's space; both breathe, flicker and tremble yet they can't extinguish each other. The bush remains miraculously unconsumed, "transfixed" before a sublime string of meteorological phenomena that indicate the regular course of time: passing clouds, shadows struck by the path of the sun, sunrise and nightfall, moonrise, winds, and so on. This image has been established for

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many centuries: a bush that burns, but is nevertheless not consumed, is set against the barren landscape of the desert, the place where everything has already been reduced to nothing, the place from which one can only begin anew, the place from which Moses' adventure begins. Representations of this image also abound, especially in the genres of the illuminated manuscript, and other kinds of biblical illustration. As a result, this image has long lost its pictorial specificity; it has long been open to interpretation and appropriation. Schmidt takes full advantage of this fact (as the scribes must have done in their time).

The seeming effortlessness presented in the video-projection at Artspeak contrasts with the huge production that *Burning Bush* entailed. It was re-shot four times, on location, a few miles west of Osoyoos in the southern interior of British Columbia. The first attempts were unsuccessful, each time calling for additions to an already large load of equipment, which included two generators, six tanks of fuel, a few hundred meters of cable, monitors, computers, cameras, microphones, camping gear, food, water and a rotating staff of professionals and volunteers. Countless adversities made this exploit almost epic, to use one of Kevin Schmidt's adjectives, by which he seems to propose an extraordinary connection between the scope of his undertaking and the deserted landscape in which it takes place. Schmidt has also pointed out that in his view this landscape has a biblical personality, an opinion that I was at first inclined to question but ended up accepting because both his and my idea of "biblical landscape" have been largely formed after a particular kind of popular imagination (Hollywood dramatisations of the life of Christ come to mind). Besides, we would be faithful to the tradition of biblical illustration if we said that for the purposes of representing one of its myths, the landscape of Osoyoos is as good as any: as long as it has the looks of "the backside of the desert," as the Bible puts it, it will provide the appropriate scenery for the staging of the *Burning Bush*.

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How are we to respond to this work of art that, without laying any claims, presents as its milieu a contemporary landscape that has been totalised by history, that brings to this landscape an episode of the Old Testament of great importance in both Jewish and Christian narratives, while placing itself between the romantic ideas of the contemplation of nature, and the misgivings about those ideas that led Land Art to claim the landscape as an extension of the gallery space? A mouthful? Yes. And perhaps, given the extent of the problematical topics that the *Burning Bush* ranges over, one would do best to remain silent, was it not for the fact that this work so earnestly attempts to offer us the experience of a miraculous phenomenon.

In fact, I suspect that Kevin Schmidt's work flirts with the idea that humanity has become immune to the power and the efficacy of conviction. And in this sense, the present work has the merit of summoning two alternatives that appear to be determining our everyday lives, but which in their purest form come equally unwanted: *scepticism* or *belief* (we will see that this dualism has a history in theology that involves the miracle). This dualism is in vogue (perhaps it has been since the beginnings of scientific thought), and not only from a spiritualist point of view. Against the popularization of metaphysical emotionalism, the appeal to belief does not necessarily mean that we must turn to (or in some cases return to) some form of spirituality: a continued tradition of Marxist thought has been arguing for a more flexible understanding of universal concepts, claiming that they are a necessary, if only temporal, compromise in the context of socialist strategies. According to this argument, the contemporary hatred towards "universal" notions finds support amongst the liberals because, insofar as it disables the possibility of creating allegiances across different interest groups, the promotion of individual values over common causes precludes any possibility of social change. [1]

1 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2001); Slavoj Zizek, *On Belief: Thinking in Action* (London: Routledge, 2001).

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Nonetheless, belief in miracles is a more specific concern, mostly attached to theology. Theologians teach us that if miracles are hard to believe, this is because they ask us to choose between devotion to God or a profound revision of our common sense. The most accepted definition of the miracle—also the most general—is that it is an *act contrary to nature*. According to the advocates of this definition, the miracle can only be a sign of God's intervention in "our" world, for He alone has the power to suspend the laws of nature. In this sense, miracles appear as signs of His existence and thus help non-believers to believe. But at the onset of scientific thought lies another theological argument. This argument tells us that the phenomena that people mistakenly recognise as "miracles," are but an indication that our knowledge of nature and its laws is incomplete, and in this sense the miracle is an authorless, purposeless sign whose meaning can only be retrospectively assigned and is therefore arbitrary. The miracle appears therefore as one of the elements upon which the emergence of scientific thought was staged. We could say that the humanistic tradition presents the artwork as the secular counterpart of the miracle. For the humanists, the artwork begins to question that which it confronts (this is something that it shares with science and experience). It is like the miracle in that it at once establishes a distance and mediates our relationship to the world. For a long time the artwork remained a vehicle through which doctrines were expounded, and its ambiguities had to remain silenced; it was during the humanist epoch that ambiguity began to form the subject matter of the work of art, which slowly crossed over to the ground of scepticism.

Kevin Schmidt's work vacillates between the image that the artwork wants to present as believable, and the scepticism that lies at the heart of representation. The *tableau vivant* serves him well, because in it the image is brought to life. One could hardly think of a miracle better suited for

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this project, for being an image at once unchanging and animated, the myth of the burning bush already presupposes the *tableau vivant*. We soon realise that we are already inhabiting the space of an old concept: suspension of disbelief. So we may ask: how are we to overcome the scepticism that we are invited to feel as we pass through the doors of the contemporary art gallery? As the advocates of relational aesthetics can testify, the fight against scepticism is futile...but admirable, insofar as it wishes to undo the cynicism with which we approach everyday life, and which the world of contemporary art does more to sustain than to resist. What is it then that Kevin Schmidt's project *Burning Bush* is asking us to do? Let us assume for the moment that it wants to call for our belief, that it hopes to restore some sense of certainty, and that it wishes to appear as a convincing recreation of the miracle of the burning bush that is caught in fire but is not consumed. This recreation is recorded and then projected inside the gallery, so that as we gaze upon it we may wonder at this miraculous phenomenon. Hence the question that lies behind Kevin Schmidt's production of *Burning Bush*: can the miracle be reproduced? Alchemy's delirium bursts out and continues to haunt the fragile sanity of modern technology.

Osoyoos—the location of Schmidt's *Burning Bush*—bears all the historical traces of a frontier town. It was a food storage station within the Okanagan Nation's economic network; at the turn of the 19th century it became a fur-trading post, which was moved further north in 1848 in order to minimise smuggling across the recently established U.S. border; shortly thereafter it became a gold-rush town, until the discovery of gold in the Cariboo drew people away; at that point, already nearing the 20th century, it became one of the many spots in the Okanagan where a modern agricultural economy (i.e. agrarianism) began to overtake, perhaps more in terms of technology than of spirit, the romantic arcadianism that had inspired most of the white settlers to

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stay. Today, a large portion of the Okanagan Valley near Osoyoos is carpeted with orchards, apple trees and vineyards, sprinkled with signs of a more or less anachronistic, more or less simulated bucolic lifestyle, heavily accentuated with some of the most unattractive architecture in the Canadian West, transited by tourists in RVs, thus making it difficult to find the deserted landscape that Kevin Schmidt required for his work's *mise en scène*. Nevertheless, as his video testifies, he has found it, at a private ranch no less, halfway up a hill at the base of which there is a logging camp. At the top of this hill lies the abandoned location of what, during the 1970s, was to become a large observatory, and which is still a popular gathering place for stargazers. Yet only a small fraction of this historic valley appears in Schmidt's video.

The selective representation of the Canadian landscape has been a recurrent and important theme in recent historical writings. However, today, when our understanding of nature in Canada is mostly framed through post-colonial perspectives, it is rare to find a work that brings up the side of agrarian capitalism that still bears all the marks of the puritanical mysticism that preceded and inspired it. The point was brought up in N.E. Thing Co.'s *Suite of Canadian Landscapes* (1969), in which different mirages of nature are presented through the most conspicuous of capitalistic equalisers: the banknote. The belief in nature that led the Romantics to seek transcendental values was effectively transformed into a belief in nature as a source of material wealth. This belief linked Canada to the agrarian developmentalist "ethos" that led many underdeveloped countries to hope that natural resources would save the national economy. A scientific and technological society, on the other hand, has established a relationship with nature that is still mostly nostalgic, and which thinks it has overcome the limitations imposed by nature. Several works of Land Art exemplify this scepticism about the role of nature in the modern world,

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presenting the landscape as a gradually shrinking void caught between civilized spaces. Buried within the agrarian unconscious may therefore rest an old battle between sceptics and believers.

The image of a burning bush resonates in the present with many ecological predicaments in British Columbia: forest fires and pine beetles being two of the most conspicuous. But it also resonates with a long and unhinged religious history that we must briefly turn to, which remains here as an afterthought, and which threatens to disturb the casualness with which Kevin Schmidt's present work rests in the gallery. In the Jewish tradition, the burning bush appears as the moment when God promises Moses to take the people of Israel to "the land of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites...a land flowing with milk and honey" where the Kingdom of David will eventually be founded, and which is said to correspond with the current state of Israel. As such, the burning bush is understood as a sign of God's presence and good will, and for contemporary political purposes, as the moment in which God promised the land of the Levant to the people of Israel. As far as contemporary Christianity goes, the burning bush is the official symbol of the Presbyterian Church, which formed sometime around the 16th century. The emblem of this church is composed of a burning bush underscored by a Latin inscription that reads "nevertheless not consumed." It seems that this latter epitaph was meant to make reference to the fact that the reformed church remained resolute even under the scorching attacks of the Catholics. The staging of the episode of the burning bush in Osoyoos may be a rare occasion, yet the relationship between this land and this symbol is not unique, since the Presbyterians were the first to establish church services at Osoyoos, in 1917, when a certain Mr. Brothwick made his appearance, holding services biweekly throughout the region between Osoyoos and Kettle Valley, and, according to legend, taking himself around on a bicycle. [2]

2 Geo J. Fraser, *The Story of Osoyoos: September 1811 to December 1952* (Penticton: Penticton Herald, 1952). The book is full of information of at least dubious import and veracity, but I can't think of a reason why this story would be invented.

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