Jan Kempenaers / The Picturesque
With an essay by Dirk De Meyer

X

X

X

X

X

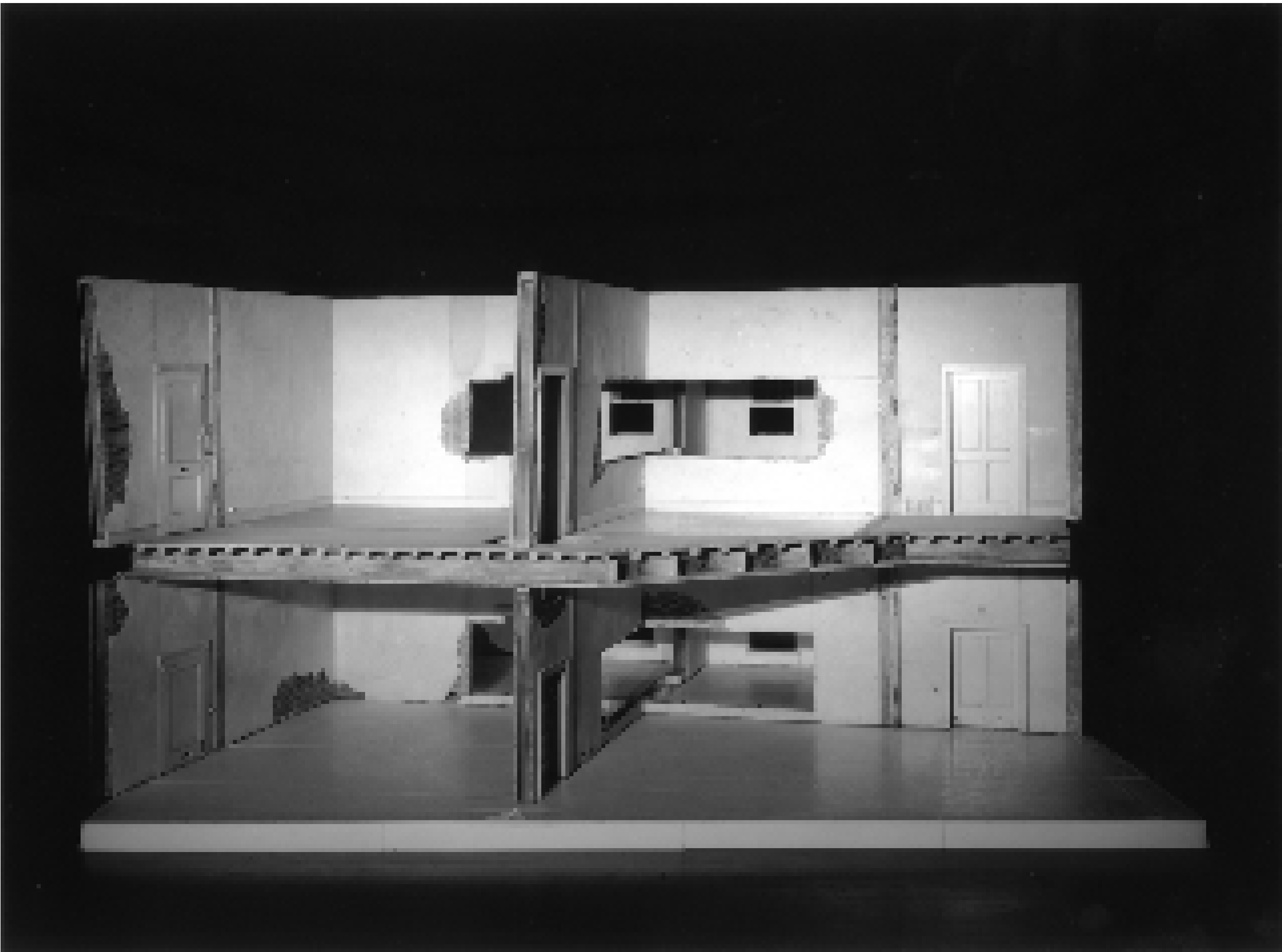
Suzuyo
海上バスのりば
シンフォニーのりば

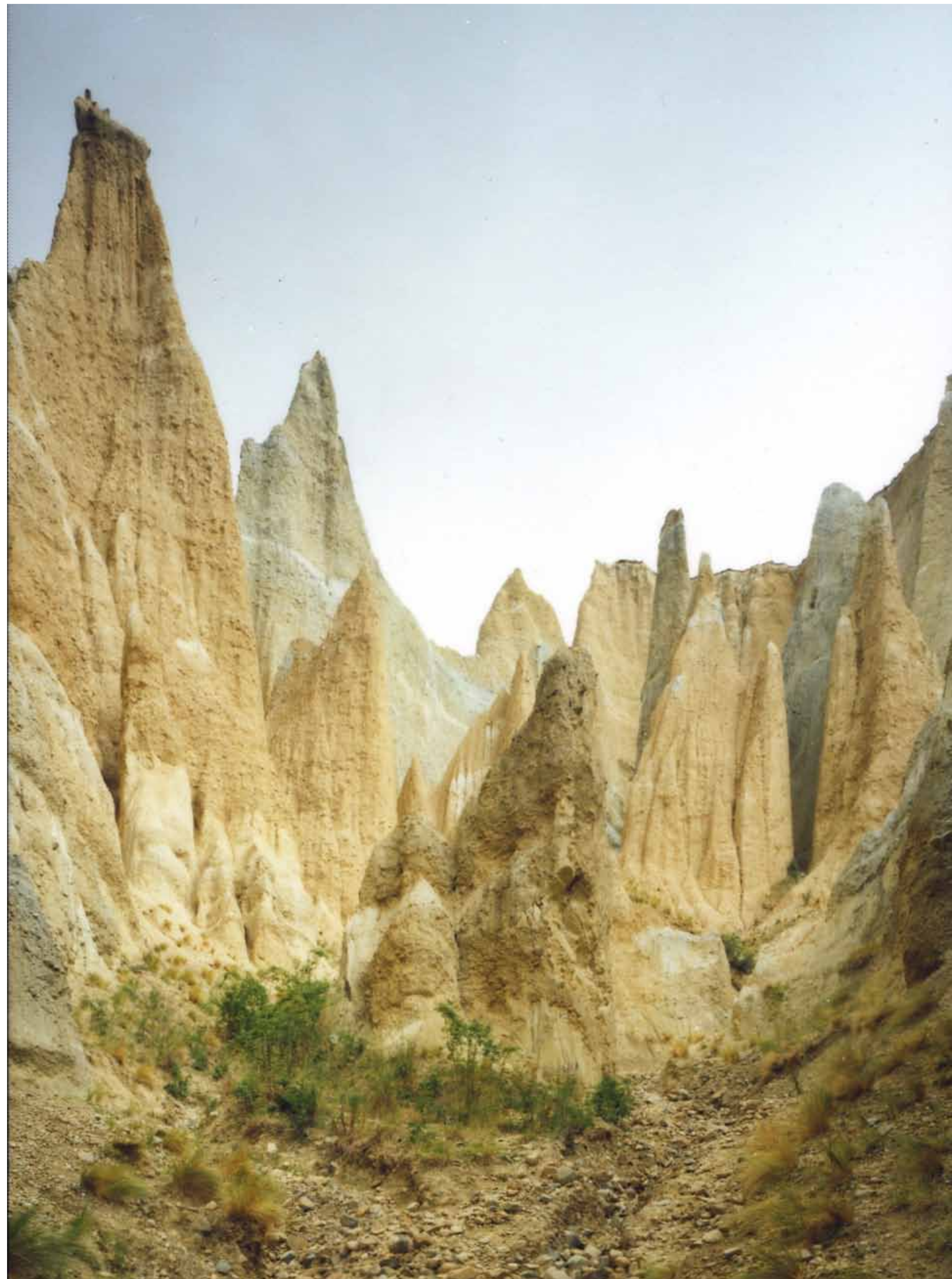
X

酒王 千福
大小宴会承ります
居酒屋 利根 本店
☎24-6166

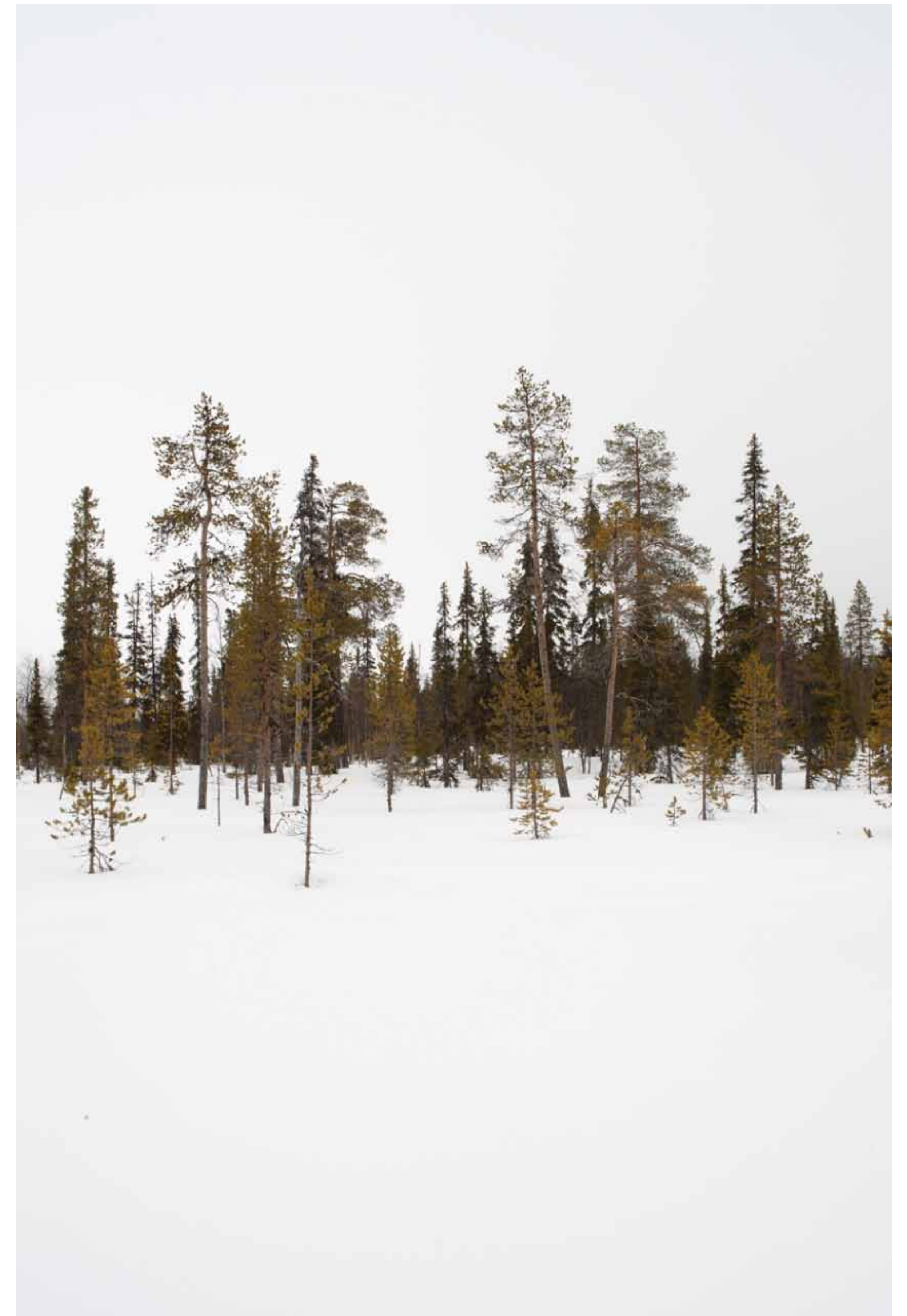
X

MILD SEVEN
Seiko
プロミス
Coca-Cola
National Kaikan
レイク





1945



On Jan Kempenaers' contemporary picturesque

"That's what I'm after: a normal view of the landscape. Almost."
Robert Adams

If artists are important to society, this is not the least so because they have the power to give new forms to matter, and to endow existing matter with new meaning and character. An early-modern illustration of such a transformation that was to affect modern culture for centuries is how artists produced 'landscape' out of what had formerly been referred to merely as land, or nature. The modern form of our conception of landscape, with its connotations of scenery, first appeared in the late sixteenth century, when Dutch and Flemish painters — on the verge of becoming masters of a new genre — used the term landschap when referring to paintings of inland natural or rural scenery. Land acquired the ability to become, in a depicted scenery, something that could be appreciated for its aesthetic qualities.

Following the proliferation of these landscape paintings, and the spread of the genre with the success of Claude Lorrain's visions of Italian mythical sceneries, the eighteenth century saw a radical change in the perception of land itself — not anymore restricted to its depiction on canvas. It created what we are now used to call landscape, a term introduced, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, only around 1725 to denote an actual, physical landscape. What had formerly been perceived in terms of ownership, production, agriculture, and military opportunities, became aesthetic material: something imagined, created, or viewed by man, as the mid-twentieth-century landscape theorist J.B. Jackson would point out.

In particular the new condition in which a spectator could appreciate a tract of land in the same way as one appreciates a well-composed painting, was soon to be called the Picturesque — i.e. "after the manner of painters". The picturesque has ever since altered the way we look at landscapes, to the point where it has completely ingrained in the way we see the world and we produce our own representations of it — by taking snapshots or by choosing a route for a walk or a ride. On a more theoretical level it has been hailed, during the course of the last century, as the true pioneer of modern design, by Nikolaus Pevsner in his The Englishness of English Art (1955),[1] and stigmatized as an adversary impossible to beat in Reyner Banham's The Revenge of the Picturesque (1968).[2]

Much of the works of the Belgian photographer Jan Kempenaers are artistic representations of fragments of our environment — landscapes as we have come to call them. Some of these landscapes are, or look like, 'natural' ones, but the majority of them are man-altered or even totally man-made. Often what is shown in the pictures feels familiar, yet how it comes across in the photograph does not to the same degree. At first glance Kempenaers' photographs may not respond to the traditional ideas we have about an everyday, default picturesque. To better understand the relationship of these compositions with this particular aesthetic category, we will need to look more closely to some of the original, eighteenth-century aspects of the picturesque. When we leave aside the afterlife of this popular genre, which has been prolific, yet of low status, and has at one point become synonymous for conventionally beautiful scenery, we will be able to discover its astounding modernity and topicality. The picturesque conceived as such, I will argue, is perfectly operational in our contemporary way of looking at and appreciating urban and natural environments, and it is firmly entrenched in contemporary practices of representation. As such, Kempenaers' photographs can be understood as a research into the continuing relevance of the picturesque in visualizing our environment.

Recovery of the artistically discredited

From its origin, the picturesque was a practice rather than a category of objects. It related both to the elements in a scene as well as to the artist's treatment of his subject. For the English artist and author Reverend William Gilpin, who is considered one of the originators of the picturesque, it was essentially just a set of rules for depicting nature. In his Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty, On Picturesque Travel, and On Sketching Landscape (1792), Gilpin achieved at virtually codifing the Picturesque as composed of such illustrative elements as ruins — à la Claude —, cottages, villages and twisting tracks; as characterized by roughness, intricacy, sudden variation and abruptness; and with foreground, middleground and background forming the more abstract and general picturesque paradigm.

The essential qualities of the picturesque were formulated in the most succinct way in his earlier Essay on Prints (1768): " … a term expressive of that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture."[3] Gilpin realised that the accepted definition of beauty — in his time most often marked by unity of composition and smoothness — was hardly suited for what he appreciated in nature: the picturesque, composed of roughness, irregularity and variety. The landscape he had in mind produced another kind of beauty — the beauty he admired in the lake shores, looming mountains, perilous rocks and crashing waterfalls of Ullswater, in the Lake District, as he described it in his Observations, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty, often mentioned as Observations on Cumberland and Westmoreland (1772): "Among all the visions of this enchanting country, we had seen nothing so beautifully sublime, so correctly picturesque as this".[4]

Gilpin, however, was not the first to coin this new kind of beauty. William Hogarth had introduced the key concepts of variety, curvaceousness and intricacy in his The Analysis of Beauty. Written with a view of fixing the fluctuating Ideas of Taste (1753). Hogarth's publication also predates by four years Edmund Burke's wider known A Philosophical Inquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful (1757). In this attack on dealers and connoisseurs, Hogarth puts to the fore the concept of "the Line of Beauty", in which he substitutes the classical figure of male heroic virtue for the charming female figure of Venus — on one of the accompanying plates in Hogarth's book the Farnese Hercules, representing classical taste, has turned his back to Venus. Hogarth centres his aesthetics on variety and he finds it in the beauty of women, their serpentine locks of hair, the way their hair is moving, their corsets… Hogarth's Analysis became the focus of ridicule, not at least by the English landscape painter Paul Sandby, but it was generally well-received and read. Particularly in landscape theory Hogarth's 'Line of Beauty' became associated with the principle of the most successful landscape architect of the later eighteenth century, Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, or with Humphrey Repton's landscape gardening and it was developed by Gilpin into the picturesque's preference for irregularity, roughness and variety.

As Hogarth with his aesthetics, Gilpin intended the picturesque to be utilized to counteract and correct the official Beautiful. Hence, at the very origin of the picturesque there is something quintessentially modern: it seems to be about the recovery of the artistically discredited — a landscape, a ruinous construction — as objects of sensuous pleasure and, subsequently, of aesthetic pleasure. The Picturesque movement, in providing the initial way of seeing landscape actually encouraged the viewing of landscape. It opened the scenery of England to enthusiastic travellers in search of the picturesque and revealed what had always been there, though never before been seen. It is with this attitude that J.B. Jackson, as a new Gilpin for the mid-twentieth century, recognized the existence of a new landscape, and that photographers as Robert Adams and Lewis Baltz saw its pictorial potential: two centuries after Gilpin exposed the picturesque landscape, they revealed the until then artistically ignored American expanses of tract houses and industrial parks. "The best place to find new landscapes is in the West", Jackson wrote. "Pictures painted on canvas is not what I mean, nor glimpses of pleasant rural scenery, but landscapes as we are now learning to see them: large-scale organizations of man-made spaces, usually in the open country."[5] Some of Jan Kempenaers' images of new urban environments in Asia, or housing developments in the Dutch polders refer to those pioneering series of the New Topographics, and often share with them that peculiar merger of being at once boring and interesting.

Kermpenaers' choice of light, that very first element of the photographer's practice, adds to this quality. Unlike Ansel Adams' dramatic skies, that underscore the drama of the imposing landscapes, Kempenaers' skies, as those of Lewis Baltz, are of a uniform, featureless white. Much like the early picturesque landscapes were no longer lit by the golden light of a fanciful Golden Age and by the grandiloquent skies of Lorrain or Poussin, his photographs consciously steer clear of the drama of earlier landscape photography: Kempenaers' landscapes are seen in a common light, undramaticly flat, sometimes even bleak.

An egalitarian art

While picturesque theory intellectualised the landscape, it was also transforming it into something that could be appreciated through learning, in a way similar to what neo-classicism had done previously for the classical canon. However, the rules of the picturesque were clearly intended to a public beyond that of connoisseurs. Some contemporaries, like Allan Ramsay in his friendly disagreeing response to Hogarth, the Essay on Taste (1755), understood well the egalitarian core in Hogarth's and Gilpin's picturesque theory. Not only was it intended to counteract the canonical beautiful, it could perfectly do without a solid education: it was a technique one could learn. 'Capability' Brown could compose his parks without great knowledge of painting and without an imagination well stocked by a liberal education — something that originally had been considered paramount to the appreciation of landscapes, let alone to their design. (Brown's practices will however be condemned by the more high-brow scholar and connoisseur Richard Payne Knight, on the grounds that Brown "knew nothing of pictures".)

The appeal of the ruin and of picturesque destruction can be understood in this context: rarely it has been pointed out how ruination could easily verge on a lay-man's revenge over classical connoisseurship. In the first of his Three Essays, Gilpin suggested: "Should we wish to give it [Palladian architecture] picturesque beauty, we must use the mallet instead of the chissel: we must beat down one half of it, deface the other, and throw the mutilated members around in heaps. In short, from a smooth building we must turn it into a rough ruin." And Hogarth, in his Analysis, had advocated a "break" in a building — that is, with its Vitruvian orders, and furthermore to avoid regularity — "by throwing a tree before it, or the shadow of an imaginary cloud or some other object that may answer the same purpose of adding variety".[6]

Unlike the the later versions of Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight, Gilpin's and Hogarth's picturesque does not suppose the gradual transformation of landscape by benign neglect but requires an energetic action by an artist. When following the rules, a ruin, like the one in Kempenaers' depiction of the demolition of an Antwerp hotel, could acquire a direct appeal without need not to be mediated by learned culture.

A disconcerting portrait of common life

Following the early years of its theoretical development, the picturesque was soon popularised through illustrated guides and fashionable sketching tours that tended to portray a populist and recognisable landscape. It made the picturesque one of the central conventions in the repertoires of traditional and popular visual culture. The picturesque became identified with a kind of quaintness.

However, at the origin of this process was something much more profound and meaningful. The formulation of the category of the picturesque encouraged artists to include subject matter which was neither canonically beautiful, nor emotionally heightened, but which instead had the idiosyncratic charm of the particular and the everyday. Moving away from seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century depictions of myth-laden Italian scenes, the picturesque embraced rustic England and took up a visual idiom from common life.

Following Uvedale Price's eighteenth-century definition of the picturesque as something suited to the interest in the near-at-hand and the ordinary, Kempenaers' photographs of suburban tract houses and his cityscapes show exactly this — with their cranes clumped like Gilpin's trees. These photographs eventually illustrate what John Macarthur has written about eighteenth-century aesthetic theory: the admiration of a painting of filthy cottages showed that one's interest was in art and not in the objects represented.[7]

In his cityscapes Kempenaers continues to adopt a visual idiom for what is now the common, rustic landscape: the tract house developments eating into the Dutch polders, the backsides of typical Belgian townhouses, or, even more so, the generic malls and high rise buildings going up all over the planet. Common life, after all is set against the backdrop of the generic.

But then, what to do with that peculiar quality of the picturesque that was its creation of a new, if not, the only, way of deriving aesthetic pleasure from landscape? Is the contemporary picturesque offering us a means of deriving aesthetic satisfaction from the built results of bland market capitalism? Already the eighteenth-century picturesque had a political and economical overtone with the license it provided for liberalism, for variety, for change, for originality. In addition to that, it even had a down-to-earth connection to early capitalism: 'Capability' Brown's clients appreciated his landscape gardens as much for their picturesque lay-out as for their excellent investment in wood — or at least a better one than could be provided for by their old formal gardens, erased for the making of Brown's landscape parks.

Yet, can one look today at these photographs of new urban developments, whether in Europe or in South-East Asia, with the same peculiar combination of pure aesthetic pleasure and total detachment of the forces behind their development, in the way Gilpin arguably could? In his Observations on Cumberland and Westmoreland (1772) Gilpin wrote, seemingly serious and not intending to be satirical at all, about his birthplace, Scaleby Castle near Carlisle: "What share of picturesque genius Cromwell might have, I know not. Certain however it is, that no man, since Henry the eight, has contributed more to adorn this country with picturesque ruins. The difference between these two masters lay chiefly in the style of ruins, in which they composed. Henry adorned his landscapes with the ruins of abbeys; Cromwell with those of castles. I have seen many pieces by this master, executed in a very grand style; but seldom a finer monument of his masterly hand than this. He has rent the tower, and demolished two of it's sides; the edges of the other two he has shattered into broken lines."[8]

Gilpin's picturesque musings exceeded the catalogue of elements and rules of composition. For all the asseverations on artistic theory, it was the visual art itself which most concerned Gilpin and which explains the focus of his reflection. Words, Gilpin insisted, "can not mark the characteristic distinctions of each scene — the touches of nature — her living tints — her endless varieties, both in form and colour. — In a word, all her elegant peculiarities are beyond their reach."[9] And while in Gilpin's conclusion it is "the pencil" that "offers a more perfect mode of description", that "speaks a language more intelligible, and describes the scene in stronger, and more varied terms",[10] this, nowadays, is the realm and ambition of photography.

Yet, even when gratifying by their composition, by 'their living tints and endless varieties', Kempenaers' photographs of man-altered landscapes forestall the nostalgia that has, over time, become typical for the picturesque. They force the viewer to remain in the present and think about its conditions and its future, and about the forces threatening our environment. Using Gilpin's by now 'classical' topoi of the picturesque, the photographs confront us with its slightly disconcerting aspects. As one visitor at the 1975 New Topographics exhibition at the George Eastman House in Rochester, N.Y., observed about what was shown in the photographs: "[The pictures are saying,] 'This is it, kid — take it for its beauty and its ugliness.'"[11]

Dirk De Meyer, 2011

Footnotes

1
Nikolaus Pevsner, The Englishness of English Art, Reith Radio Lectures, BBC, 1955. The text of Pevsner's lectures, expanded and annotated, was published by the Architectural Press in 1956 and issued by Penguin in 1964.

2
Reyner Banham, Revenge of the Picturesque: English Architectural Polemics, 1945-1965, in John Summerson, ed., Concerning Architecture. London, Allen Lane, 1968; pp. 265-273. Banham blames the eventual revenge of the picturesque and its triumphant victory on the Smithsons.

3
William Gilpin, An Essay upon Prints. London, Robson, 1768; p. 2 of 'Explanation of Terms'. In later editions the title becomes An Essay on Prints.

4
William Gilpin, Observations, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty, Made in the Year 1772, on Several Parts of England; Particularly the Mountains and Lakes of Cumberland and Westmoreland. London, Blamire, 1722. Here quoted from the 3rd ed., 1792; vol. II, p. 52.

5
John Brinckerhoff Jackson, A vision of New Fields, in John Brinckerhoff Jackson, Discovering the Vernacular Landscape. New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 1984; p. 141.

6
William Hogarth, The Analysis of Beauty: Written with a view of fixing the fluctuating Ideas of Taste. London, Strahan, 1753. Here quoted from the 1772 ed.; pp. 19-20.

7
John Macarthur, The Picturesque: Architecture, Disgust and other Irregularities. London, Routledge, 2007; p. 11.

8
Gilpin, Observations 1772 (1792); Vol. II; pp. 122-123.

9
Gilpin, Observations 1772 (1792); Vol. II; p. 10.

10
Ibid.

11
Jack, a visitor at the exhibition New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape, George Eastman House, Rochester, N.Y, in a tape-recorded conversation on Dec. 14, 1975, with a student, as part of an assignment for photography instructor and participant to the exhibition, Joe Deal. Partial transcript in: New Topographics. Göttingen, Steidl, 2009; p. 9.

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

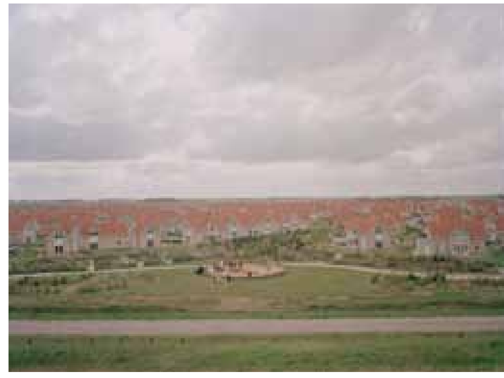
Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year


Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

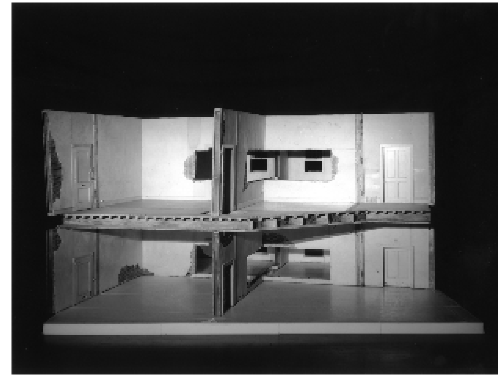
Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year


Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

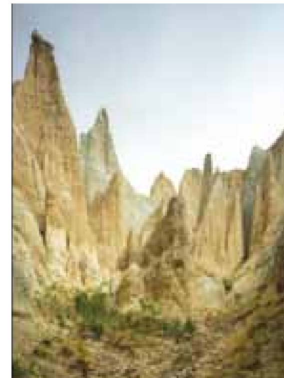
Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year


Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Place #, Year

Jan Kempenaers, *The Picturesque*

Concept and photography: Jan Kempenaers
Editors: Mark Manders and Roger Willems
Text: Dirk De Meyer
Publisher: A4A vzw, Antwerp, in co-production with
Roma Publications, Amsterdam
Lithography: Colour & Books, Apeldoorn
Print production: Belvédère, Oosterbeek
Design: Roger Willems, Amsterdam
Distribution: Idea Books, Amsterdam
Individual orders: www.romapublications.org

With the support of
the Flemish authorities

© Jan Kempenaers, Willem Jan Neutelings,
A4A vzw, Roma Publications, 2011

Jan Kempenaers is an affiliated artist at the Royal
Academy of Fine Arts (University College Ghent)

Roma Publication 163
ISBN 978-90-77459-##-#
Printed in the EU

Roma Publication 163