

THE PROTOCOL OF THE MIRAGE



The Folds' scribbled inscription is illegible in places, and some of the shorthand syllabics might be construed in more than one way. The directions below represent one attempt to reconstruct the text, which appears to adumbrate the four phases of an experiment in sustained attention. If we suppose the images painted on the Folds to commemorate one such experiment, we might conjecture that it once took place on a remnant of open prairie, though some evidence suggests it was not always performed outdoors. Experimentation is encouraged.



ROAM

Come out into the open.
See everything; look at nothing.
Near and far, it's all the same to you.

BEHOLD

Look! A mirage: an image of yonder.
Set it off from the rest.
What does it promise?

PLOW

Turn away from the illusion.
Go back to a familiar place.
Nothing to see here.

REGARDS

Return to the field of vision.
Honor the part that can't be parceled.
What remains to be seen?



THE LONE TREE FOLDS

PRAIRIE PHENOMENOLOGY
IN NEBRASKA, C. 1946



Readers of the PROCEEDINGS OF ESTAR(SER) will already be aware of the considerable efforts made by various scholars, collectors, bibliophiles, and editors to sift the historicity of that peculiar body known as THE ORDER OF THE THIRD BIRD. Despite the labors of ESTAR(SER) researchers, a great deal of uncertainty (and even some genuine confusion) persists concerning the nature and workings of THE BIRDS — a self-sequestering community that seems to function, at least in its modern incarnation, as a private association of adepts who convene to perform public and private rites of sustained attention to made things (often works of art). New documents bearing on the genesis, evolution, and practices of THE ORDER are continually coming to light, and we are pleased here to offer a brief discussion of a recently surfaced source. Details follow.

TEXT AND CONTEXT

Among the *bricolage* of documents, curios, and other arcana collectively known as the “W-Cache,” insufficient attention has until now been paid to the Lone Tree Folds, an ennead of tempera paintings on paper believed to have been made near Lone Tree (now Central City), Nebraska, in the mid-1940s. The accession notes source the Folds to the estate of Maidelle Platner, about whose life little is known save for her activity in the University of Nebraska’s notorious $\Delta\Phi\Delta$ sorority during the war, while she was under the tutelage of noted regionalist painter Kady Burnap Faulkner (1901–1977). The Folds, which appear to represent a *plein-air* practice of sustained attention to a work of art, could testify to the existence, however short-lived, of a small Nebraskan cabal of associates of the Order of the Third Bird. A possible reconstruction of the “protocol” depicted, extrapolated from an inscription in shorthand on the otherwise blank *verso* side of the Folds, follows on the back of this card. Research is still in its preliminary stages, but the Folds’ numerous quirks and aberrances must cast serious doubt on its historicity. Painters of the plains, including those affiliated with the regionalist movement then dominant, almost never depicted “empty” prairies, given the considerable difficulties they presented in rendering (and perceiving) certain spatial parameters — to wit, distance and scale — foundational to Euro-American landscape representation and aesthetics. The Lone Tree Folds not only depict the prairie, but seem to exalt an experience of disorientation that runs counter to regionalist concerns with place, belonging, and agricultural domesticity. Do the Folds, then, evince the glimmerings of a counter-regionalism — an atavistic, perhaps abortive “prairie phenomenology,” attuned to the complex perceptual oscillations that take place when the eye is trained on a figure without ground — as the sod homesteads of the frontier Midwest gave way to the first waves of industrialized farming? More work is needed.

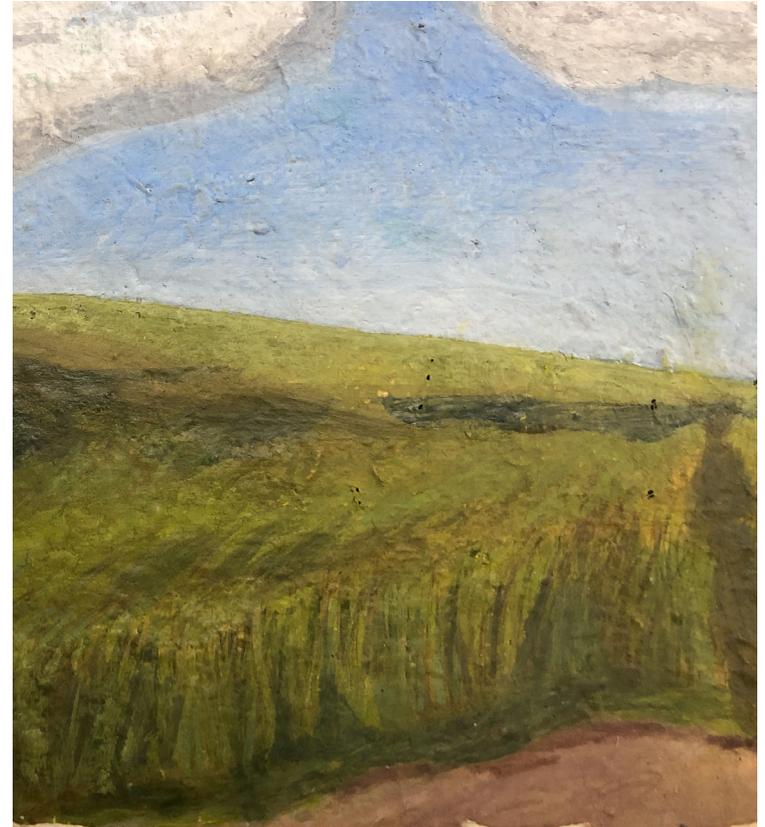


FIGURE: A detail from the first leaf of the Lone Tree Folds, nine tempera paintings on mulberry paper found among the personal effects of Maidelle Platner. The paintings, which are bound together with waxed thread in a leporello style, vary in size from 6.5" x 8" to 7.25" x 8.5", and appear to have been made c. 1946. On verso (not pictured), an inscription in a modified Pitman shorthand describes a rite of sustained attention entitled the “Protocol of the Mirage” (reconstructed overleaf). The apparently handmade paper, which has no known contemporaneous analogue, is of unknown origin. (Photo courtesy of Esteban Spatz)