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Anselm Kiefer and The Kabbalah

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# Introduction

Over the years Anselm Kiefers Art has progressed from that of a German perspective to a global vision of world history, myth, and events.

Born in 1945, Kiefer exemplifies the first generation of Germans who inherited the legacy of World War II and its events. The immediate era after the war proved to be problematic for many Germans. Perceptions of German culture, history, and identity were shattered and appeared to exist no longer, a colossal void developed within the nations collective consciousness. From an early stage Kiefer felt compelled to address the repression from which German society was suffering on such a large scale. He and many other artists recognised the necessity of establishing a new outlook regarding German identity.

Initially Kiefer's work was considered to have strong proto-fascist tendencies, causing a largely abhorrent response from his fellow Germans. Kiefer's methodology was to address the fundamentals head on, not to council a submissive or over sensitive artistic format, but to actually separate Nazi symbolism and imagery as grist for direct challenge, perverting its historical content and consequently rendering it obsolete. Kiefer found especial interest in the Nazi propagandist movement, particularly the third reichs construct of a corrupt political ideology through their abuse of numerous prolific culture figures such as Goethe, Schiller, and Wagner.

The underlying strategy of Kiefers imagery lies in his endeavour to draw a response from his viewer. A volatile, bipolar charge runs consistently throughout his work, be it revisionist / reactionist, Artist / Fascist, Divine / Demonic, German / Jew. It is this reciprocity of imagery and content which qualifies Kiefers artistic technique. Kiefer intentionally walks a thin line, exposing himself and his work to either rejection or acceptance at the same time.

"You decide what the pictures are and what I am" (A. Kiefer, A call to memory, S.H. Madoff, Art News Oct. 87.)

Essentially Kiefer's intention is to attempt to come to terms with the cataclysmic events of World War II. For Kiefer, purgation can only occur through reconciliation between Jewish and German cultures, a re-establishment of interaction which existed before World War II and which must

be nurtured once again in order to initiate change. It is principally for this reason that Kiefer began his investigation and interest in the Kabbalah, the Jewish gnostic corpus, exoterically based upon the writings of the Torah and handed down through generations.

This thesis cites two exhibitions, *The High Priestess*, Anthony d'Offay Gallery London 1989, and *Lilith*, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York 1990 as examples of the progression of Kiefer's work towards acquiring an insight on Jewish, culture, history and religion.

The first chapter looks at the *High Priestess*. It probes into Kiefer's work on two levels, first, from the point of view of its physical attributes, the use of photography and materials such as lead, copper, hair and peas. Their historical and scientific characteristics often explain their incorporation within the exhibitions.

Further to this, Chapter one inquires upon the multi-faceted symbolism and imagery of the materials running parallel to their physical qualities, serving as an introduction to Kiefers concepts on the Kabbalah, Tarot, Humanistic knowledge, and Civilisation.

The High Priestess exhibition also functions as a precursor to the second chapter which relates specifically to the gnostic teachings of the Kabbalah.

Chapter two "Kiefer on Kabbalah" seeks to inform the ancient history and teachings of the Jewish Kabbalists. Their conception of creation both in terms of images and text, and the system of discourse which has developed upon the manifestations of God, ie. the ten Sefirot.

This chapter discusses the particular features of the Kabbalah which relate to the work of Anselm Kiefer and vice-versa. It provides a cognitive and valuable exegesis which is of considerable importance to gaining an understanding of the mirrored esoteric and gnostic content of Anselm Kiefers imagery.

The "Lilith" exhibition, Chapter three, looks at Kiefers' use of the content of the Kabbalah within a contemporary artistic framework, giving particular attention to the concealed narrative which runs throughout the show. It questions whether Kiefer's use of the Kabbalah as an artist contravenes the Kabbalists ancient axioms, pertaining to illustrations of divine concepts. In addition to this it discusses Kiefers contemporary attempts to amalgamate Jewish and German cultures once again, forwarding, Lilith common to both German and Jewish history and mythologies.

The gnostic content of Kiefer's work exposes the absence of gnosticism in the modern world. In the final two chapters "Art Science and Spirituality," and "Deus absconditus", Kiefer's work is discussed in terms of its attempt to regain a lost sense of spirituality, he states his views upon the present role of science in the Modern World and proposes a change in ideas towards creative thought progressing co-operatively in all disciplines.

His view matches in many ways the ideals of Joseph Beuys and his outlook on the development of the modern world in creative terms. To many, the absence of Spirituality indicates the absence of God this notion is discussed in relation to developments of the twentieth century and the role that science presently plays in the negation of spirituality and faith.



*chapter one*  
the High priest / Zweisstromland



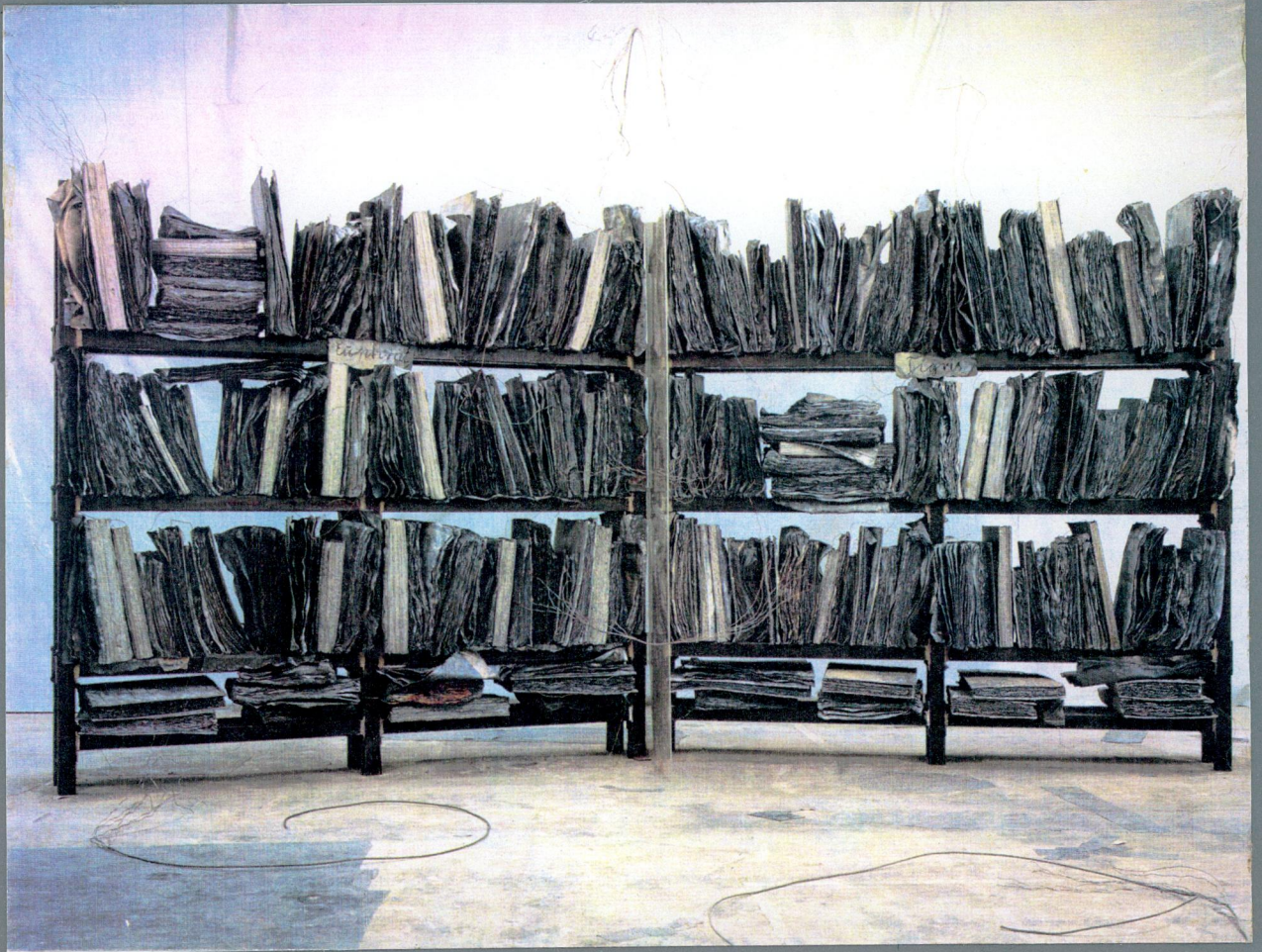


fig : 1  
The High Priestess / Zweistromland  
approximately two hundred lead books in  
two steel cases with glass and copper wire  
, c. 14' x 26' x 3'



fig : 1  
The High Priestess / Zweistromland  
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# High Priestess / Zweistromland

Kiefer's Kabbalistic interest is most notably in his work of the late eighties and early nineties. Between 1989 and 1990 Kiefer had six one man shows, five of these exhibitions had specific titles with specific themes:

1)Zweistromland: High Priestess, Anthony D'Offay Gallery, London.

2)Der Engelde Geshichte: The Angel of History. Gallerie, Paul Mavenz, Cologne.

3)Mohn und Geduchtris: Poppy and Memories. Galeria Foksal, Warsaw.

4)Lilith: Marian Goodman, Gallery N. York.

5)Jason: Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin.

The sixth being an exhibition at the Stadelsches Kunstitut, Frankfurt/Main These exhibitions illustrated Kiefer's progression of ideas and use of imagery concerning the exploration of Jewish Mysticism, Mythologies, and the valid and rightful place of Jews in German culture.

The work consists of two vast steel bookcases thirteen feet high standing end to end at a slight angle to one another. Each bookcase is filled with massive lead books, containing images and substances which record the realities of our time. There are photographs, often of skyscrapers and villages or bridges and factories and railways often disused, decomposing, demolished. There are pictures of the Middle East, a farmyard in Germany and studio interiors. The photographic focus sweeps from close up to a great distance, from lightness to heaviness, from the weight of lead to the tangibility of collaged substance. Kiefer's local red earth of Odenwald, human hair and dried peas, to the soft light cloudscapes of aerial photography.

The first title, the High Priestess Fig; 1, refers to the tradition of Tarot, which has its mystic foundations in the creation of the ten primordial numbers and the twenty two letters of the Hewbrew alphabet. The High Priestess is depicted as the woman wearing the triple crown. In Occult terms she represents the act of knowing the gnosis.

"Zweistromland" refers to the rivers Tigres and Euphrates, a region of the Mesopotanian empire. It is known to be the home of one of the earliest advanced civilizations. However, traces of human habitation and monuments have long since disappeared. This can be attributed to the fact that Mesopotarian monuments and buildings were constructed with brick. The Euphrates and Tigres burst its banks regularly, often destroying crops and reducing the buildings once again to mud.

Clay, a material common to Mesopotamia can be found within Kiefer's books, the substance has a transient temporal quality which is indicative of our knowledge of the Mesopotamian region and that time.

Kiefer's books contain, hair, photographs, clay, copper, and peas which are embedded in the lead sheeting. Lead has had a strong attraction for Kiefer over a number of years, he is drawn by its historical and mystical associations as well as its physical or scientific properties. As a base metal, lead is located at the heart of Alchemy, the ancient medieval science of changing base metals to gold and silver. Alchemists saw the transformation of lead into gold's purity as a metaphor for the working of divine activity, the purity of the soul, and as a result, the finding of God. This particular work of Kiefer, however seems to lean towards the much more physical and scientific characteristics of the substance. First, lead is one of the most stable of metals and has a strong permanence, secondly, and more importantly, lead blocks radiation. These become two very important points when the information contained within the books is revealed. Many of the photographs within the books are views of the Earth as seen from above. They run geographically from Israel to Europe, to parts of North and South America. Kiefer has expressed his intention of recording "the skin of the earth". (Arena B.B.C.1 1990)

There are other sites which indicate human civilization such as cities, train tracks and bridges (which will appear again in his Lilith exhibition).

The most disturbing element of the books are the photographs of simulated nuclear reactor sites which he assembled in his studio. These books cast an apocalyptic shadow over man, knowledge, and civilization. They serve to illustrate Kiefer's especial reasons for the use of lead sheeting for pages of his books. According to Armin Zweite.

"The drawings show the destruction of all civilizations. The world reverts to the state that prevailed hundreds of thousands of years ago." (The High Priestess p.p.76.)

Although Kiefer's vision does show the destruction of civilization it is not done with a view to the world returning to its natural state. That situation is irredeemable, in the same way that Kiefer accepts that there can be no return from the horrific Jewish extermination camps of the Second World War. The nuclear reactors located in Kiefer's book shelves are homocentric. Nuclear annihilation brings about a transformation that man will experience for the first and last time. Kiefer's use of lead as both a substance of permanence and protection appears to have a particularly fitting relevance.

Above this, the library itself acquires a sinister importance because within it is the possibility of transcending civilization an Humanistic Knowledge. Kiefer's High Priestess stands both as a celebration of human knowledge and a warning against its facility to destroy itself. In his view the machine as a modern, mythic symbol Joseph Campbell asks the question:

"Is the machine going to destroy humanity, or serve humanity? Humanity comes not from the machine but from the heart" (The Power of Myth p.p. 18)

Kiefer has very strong opinions on Science /Technology and its function in society. When asked if he distrusts science he gave the following answer:

"On the contrary, there should be much more science in order that it improves. And I will use any scientific findings made available to me in my work. But I am opposed to the world of science maintaining its cover-up function in our public life... Politicians rely all too frequently upon scientists instead of allowing their convictions to influence their decision making. Science is only partial. Warnings against nuclear power stations were first expressed by people without any scientific education, but the politicians did not react until Chernobyl had actually taken place". (Axel Hecht and Art, das Kunstmagazin Art p.p. 3)

Kiefer then goes on to describe science as being presently futile by virtue of the fact that it does not question itself.

It is interesting to note that a large number of the photographs are viewed from an ariel perspective, clouds are viewed from above, the landscape breaks down into blurred and cracked matter, the world appears to be in a ruinous state. The notion of flight has been a feature of Kiefer's work for many years notably in the winged palette of Icarus. Kiefer's flight comes clearly from the airplane when we see his views of the sky and Earth. This celestial perspective appears to continue in the photographs of his nuclear energy plants. The scale of the pieces is difficult to assimilate and the shots are run in a circular motion orbiting around the reactor. The view of the reactor which we are exposed to is reminiscent of media footage of the power plant disaster of Chernobyl.

*chapter two*  
Kiefer on the Kabbalah





# Kiefer on the Kabbalah

In his Kabbalist works of the late eighties and early nineties Doreet Le Vitte Harten puts forward the notion that Kiefer has for a long time been employing Kabbalistic methods in his work, long before he knew anything about the Kabbalah. How Kiefer discovered an ancient mirror reflecting his own ideas in the Jewish gnostic corpus. She then describes how the Kabbalah provided a more accurate glossary with ideas acquiring names and defining their own territory.

The presence or aura of words are of great importance to Kiefer. Examples of this include such words as 'Lilith' and 'Auschwitz'. Lilith appeals to Kiefer through her twin aspects of good and evil. She is the dark side of the Shekhinah (Divine Presence). Le Vitte Harten refers to the notion of "wording out the word" not as marginalia to the image but seeing the world as text, meaning that the world is regarded as the ultimate image and the picture surface looked upon as being void, an impossible task. Kiefer's work continuously deals with the Holocaust. He accepts that it is an impossible task to find a convincing image for it. In fact he resigns himself to the probability that he will never find it. He still believes however, that one always has to try, if for no other reason, than to prevent it happening again. The resonance of the word 'Auschwitz' has a tremendous effect upon Kiefer, he acknowledges that even from his point of view he can never experience truly the tragedy contained within the word; it is impossible. What Kiefer does instead is to show the remnants, the small things, the minutiae which provoke charged responses for the viewer' Kiefer's remnants are not about what can be seen, they are concerned with what cannot be shown.

"All the painting but also all the literature and everything associated with it is merely an attempt at describing something inexpressible, like a black hole or a crater, the centre of which cannot be reached... and whichever theme is seized upon will only ever have the character of a little stone at the foot of the crater, or road markings in a circle which I trust is continuously approaching the centre." (Axel Hecht and Art, Das Kunstmagazin Jan 1990 Translation A. Broad p.p 3.)

Similarly, the doctrine of the Kabbalah and its gnostic teachings which "hide" more than they reveal seek to explicate the ineffable, through opening the gates of the imagination to try and comprehend the inconceivable, that is, the knowledge of God.

Jewish culture has become very important for Kiefer and after several visits to Israel, seeing their antiquities, he became interested in the cryptic writings of the Kabbalah, notably "Zohar, The Book of Splendour", written by Moses De Leon, a thirteenth century Spanish Kabbalist.

An insight into the teaching of the Kabbalah/ Zohar is of vital importance to gaining an understanding of the many levels of Anselm Kiefer's lexicon. Kabbalah means "receiving" and refers to that which is handed down by tradition over a period of time. It denotes esoteric teaching techniques of meditation and a growing body of mystical literature . Zohar, the bible of the Kabbalists literally means splendour, radiance, enlightened state of being . The Zohar was written by De Leon and was gradually accepted as the ancient wisdom of Rabbi Shimon and his circle. By the middle of the sixteenth century it ranked with the bible and the Talmud (the body of Jewish ceremonial law and legend) as a sacred text. Countless Kabbalists delved into its mysteries and were inspired and uplifted by the Holy Zohar.

The Zohar takes its reference from the Torah, the will of God revealed in Mosaic law, the words of the Torah are considered to be sublime words, sublime, secrets, Zohar refashions the Torah narrative into a mystical novel. In many cases the biblical heroes are the protagonists and the Rabbis interpret their words, their personalities and their encounters with Holy or demonic forces. the commentary is often far removed from the literal meaning of the biblical text. The words on the Torah are used as a starting point, the source for the imagination.

Within the Zohar are the ten sefirot the divine attributes which formed a matrix of the world. The sefirot became stages of God's being, aspects of divine personality. Their pattern and creation encompasses all creation. Before emanation God is unmanifest, in Kabbalah this is referred to as Ein-Sof, (infinite) God as infinity cannot be described or comprehended from a human perspective, the sefirot have both a multiple and independent existence - ultimately all are one, the true reality is the infinite. There are certain similarities between the Christian Trinity and the sefirot. The Trinity consists of three personages of God all co-equal, co-eternal and indivisible. It is considered a profound mystery of faith. The sefirot are ten manifestations of the divine personality. "It is they and they are it". (Zohar 3:70a) They are called the mystery of faith. According to one Kabbalist of De Leon's time.

"The masters of the Kabbalah of sefirot intended to unify the name and flee from the trinity, but they have made it ten. As the gentiles say, 'He is three and the three are one.' So certain Kabbalists believe and say that divinity is the ten sefirot and the ten are one". ( Zohar, the Book of Enlightenment, Chatann Matt p.p.20)



Interestingly Christian trinitarian formulae appear occasionally in descriptions of the sefirot, as a result some opponents of Kabbalah cite.

“Christians believe in the trinity. The Kabbalists believe in the decade.” (Tishbyl, Mishnat Ha- Zohar 2:279).

Near the beginning of the Zohar appear the cryptic description of the emanation of the sefirot.

“Three emerges from one, one stands in three, enters between two, two suckles one, one suckles many sides, Thus all is one” (Zohar Book of Enlightenment p.p. 21)

In the Zohar, however, Ein-Sof is rarely mentioned; the focus of discussion is the sefirot the manifestations of Ein-sof, its mystical attributes. Here God thinks, feels, responds and is affected by the human realm. He and she comprise the divine androgyny. Their romantic and sexual relationship is one of the most striking features of the Zohar. Although ultimately God is infinite and undescrivable the sefirot are real from our perspective. They provide the individual with a way to know the untouchable. Through these gates the Holy one becomes known.

The sefirot are often pictured in the form of primordial Adam, or as a cosmic tree growing downward from its roots above (Fig. 2). These images are not literal they are used as symbols to express feelings and ideas which do not necessarily fall within human definition. The human being is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). The sefirot are the divine original of that image. From above to below the sefirot enact the drama of emanation, the transition from Ein-Sof to creation.

The first sefirah is “KETER” or (“Crown”) which is co-eternal with Ein-Sof. It represents the aspect of infinity towards manifestation, and hence is called “Razon” (“Will”). It is also called ‘AYIN’ or “Nothingness”. No differentiation or individuality exists in KETER. From ‘KETER’, ‘RAZON’ and “AYIN” all emanations flow ‘HOKMAH’ (“Wisdom”) shines. Though it is the second sefirah “HOKMAH” is called (“Beginning”) for “KETER” is eternal and has no beginning. The point expands into a circle to the sefirah of “BINAH” (“Understanding”). “BINAH” is the womb, the divine mother, from here the seven lower sefirot are conceived. Created being too, has its source in her and she is called the totality of all individuation also she is the world that is constantly coming and flowing. The three highest sefirot represent the head of the divine body and are more hidden than “BINAHS” offspring. First she gives birth to “HESOD” (“Love”) and “Din” (“Judgement”) these sefirah are also called GEDULLAH” (“Greatness”) and “GEVURAH” (“Power”).

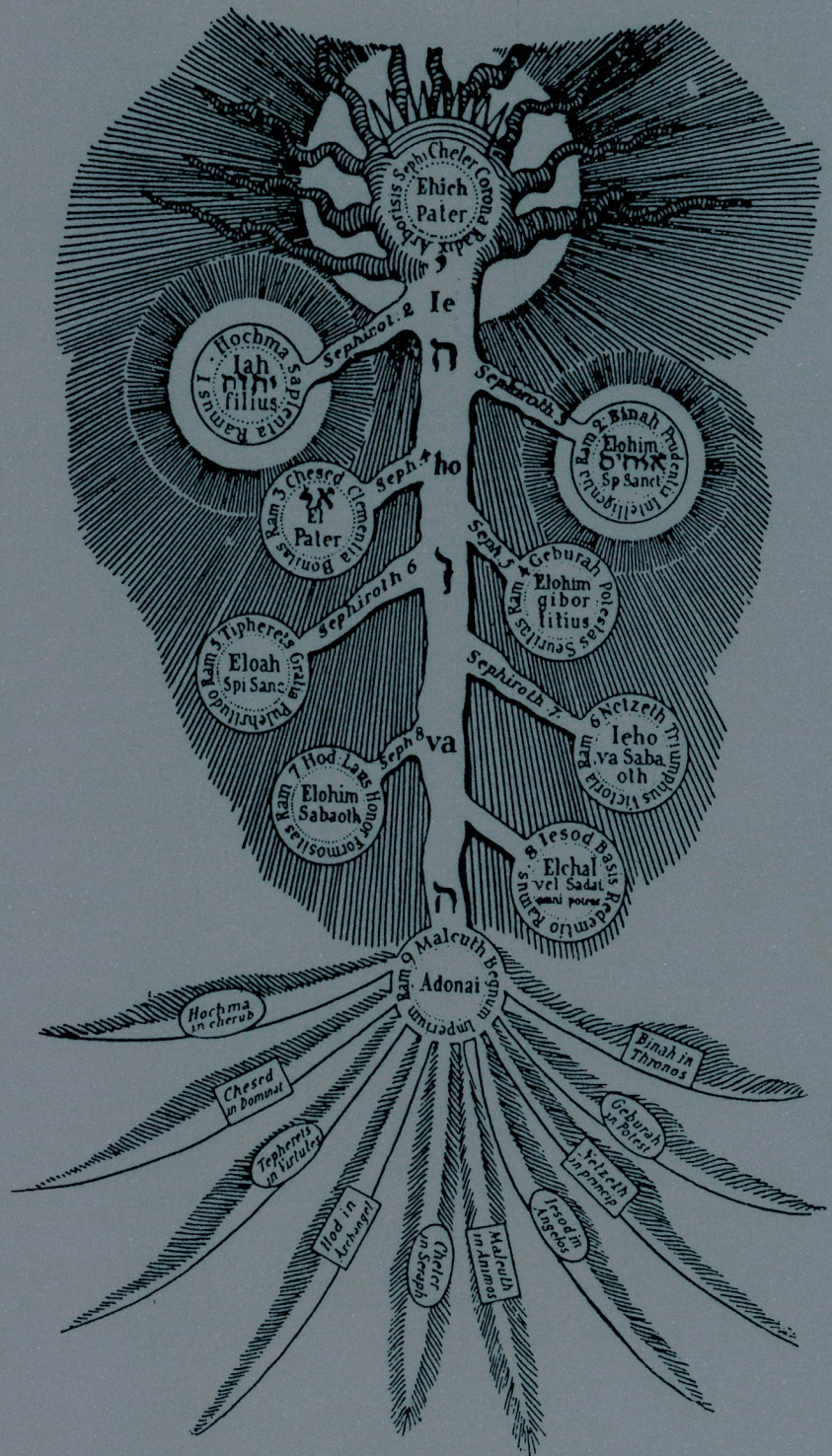


fig: 2  
 The Sefirotic Tree : from Robert Fludd ,  
 Pilosophia Sacra et Vere Christiania (Frank-  
 furt 1626)  
 republished in Henri Serouya , la Kabbale (Paris 1947)



They are the right and left arms of God, two sides of the divine personality, free love, strict judgement, grace and limitation, all necessary for the world to function. A balance is achieved symbolized by the central sefirah "TIF'ERET" ("Beauty") also called "RAHAMUM" ("Compassion"). However if there is not a balance between judgement and power "DIN" arises and threatens to destroy life.

Here is where evil originates called "Sitra Ahra" the other side. In Kabbalah evil originates in divine thought which eliminates waste before emanating the good. The demonic is rooted in the divine. TIF'ERET is the trunk of the Sifiotic body, he is called Heaven, Sun King, and Blessed one, a name for God, he is the son of "HOKMAH" and "BINAH".

Next are the two sefirot "NEZAH" ("Endurance") and "HOD" ("Majesty") praising the right and left legs of the body they are the sources of prophecy, "YESOD" ("Foundation") is the ninth sefirah and represents the phallus, the procreative life force of the universe, he is also called "ZADDIQ" ("Righteous one"). The light and power of the preceding sefirot are channelled through him to the tenth sefirah "MALKUT"

"MALKUT" ("Kingdom") is also called "SHEKHINAH" ("Divine presence and immanence"). Shekhinah is the daughter of "BINAH" and the bride of "TIF'ERET". The joining of TIF'ERET ("Beauty", "Compassion") and "Shekhinah" ("Divine presence") becomes the focus of religious life. Human Righteousness action stimulates "YESOD" ("the Righteous one").

The tenth sefirah appears under many names Earth, Moon, Matronita, Minor, Rose, Throne of Glory, Justice, Garden of Eden, Holy apple orchard. She reflects all aspects of divinity and sustains all the worlds below, though she has nothing at all of her own.



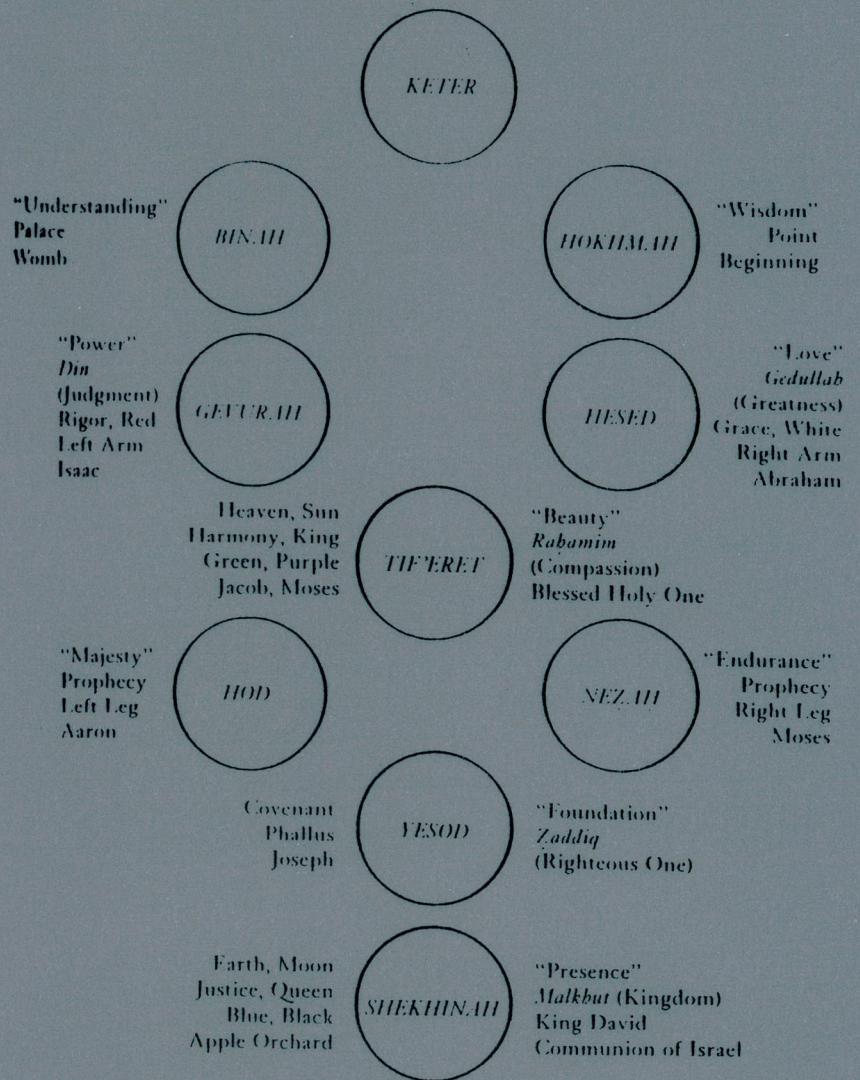
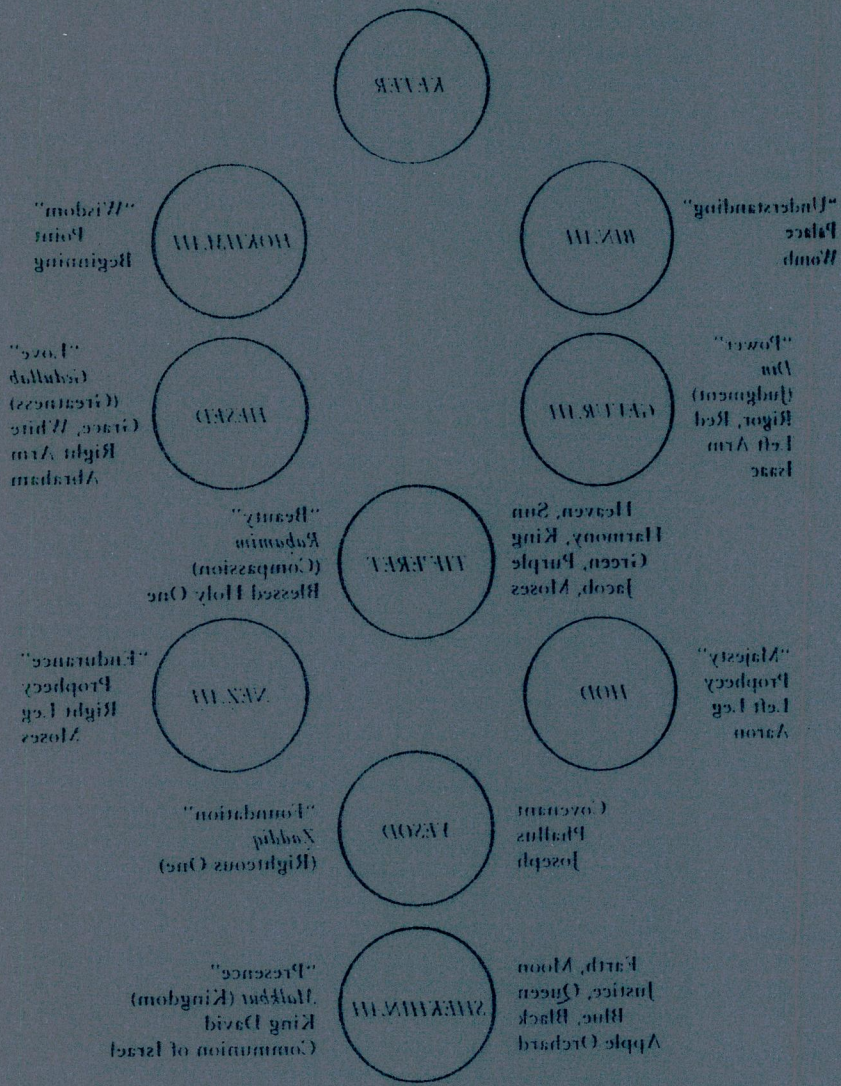


fig: 3  
The Ten Sefirot:  
from Zohar, The Book of Enlightenment  
Daniel Chanann Matt 1983

Fig. 3  
The Ten Sefirot:  
from Zohar, The Book of Enlightenment  
Daniel Chanan Matt 1983



*chapter three*

Lilith





fig: 4  
The Breaking of the Vessels ,  
Bruch der Gefäße , 1990  
lead books on iron bookshelf , iron, lead, copper wire,  
glass, charcoal and aquatec

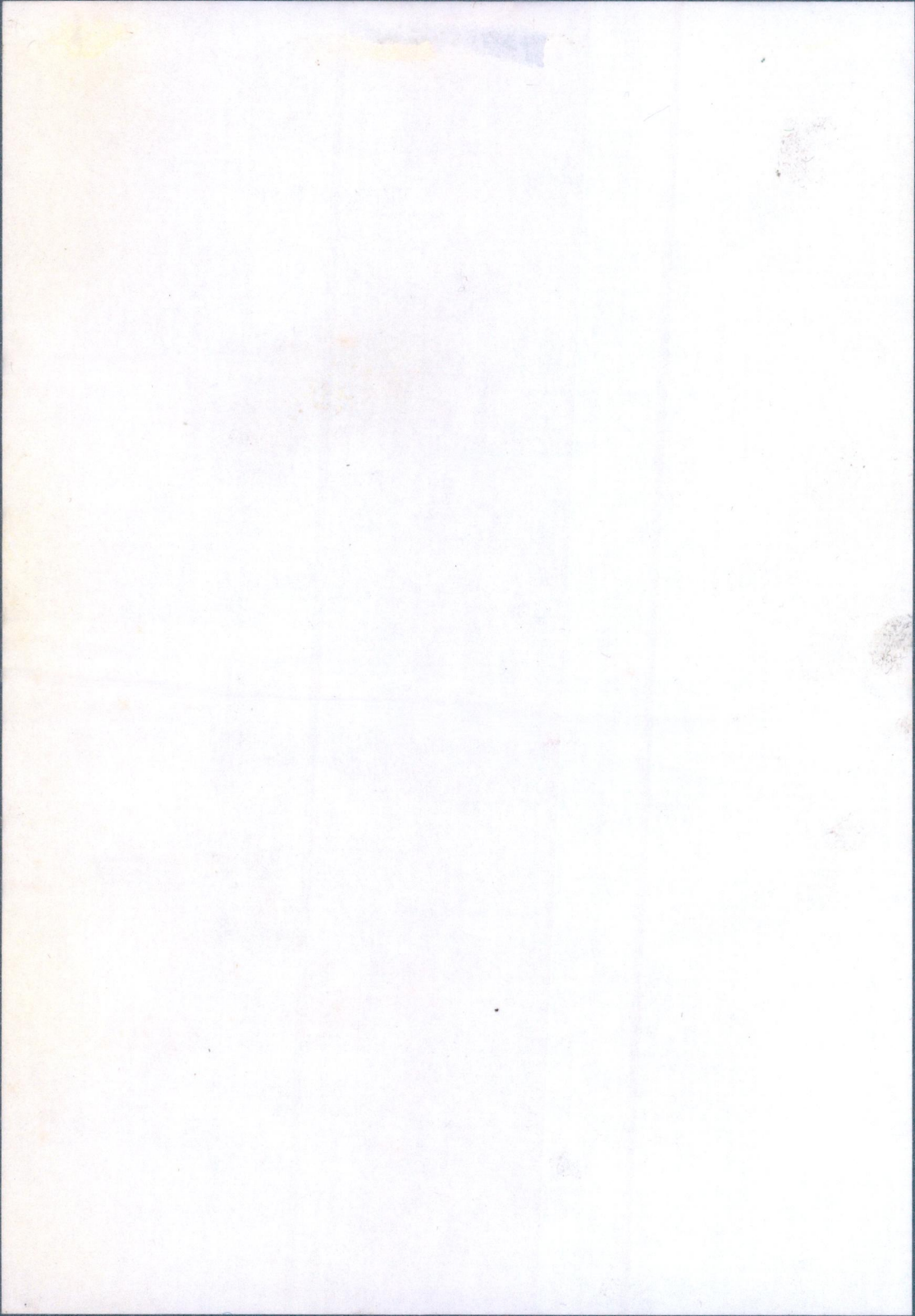


Fig. 4  
The breaking of the vessels ,  
Bruch der Gefäße , 1930  
lead books on iron bookshelf, iron, lead, copper wire,  
glass, charcoal and asbestos

# Lilith

In "The Breaking of the Vessels" Fig. 4, Kiefer draws attention to the Shekhinah, the female aspect of God, located at the base of the sefirotic tree, she is the last sefirah, the seven other aspects of God can only be reached through Shekhinah. Although Lilith is the antithesis of Shekhinah, they both share the same attributes. The divine and the demonic are interlinked and "The Breaking of the Vessels" illustrates how evil acquired its own identity through a process of elimination of waste towards divine thought, hence paving the way for a negative energy represented by Lilith.

In specific relation to Kiefer's work it becomes clear that the demise of Shekhinah (whose markings lie face down amongst the shards of glass covered in lead) results in the strengthening of Lilith, not only does this illustrate Kiefer's emphasis on the predominance of her negative aspect but it also serves to introduce Lilith who is referred to and appears consistently throughout the exhibition.

In German mythology Lilith is viewed from a christian trinitarian perspective. She is the complete opposite of the Virgin Mary: Liliths evil is drawn from the divine she is not of the same substance as Eve, who was created from Adam. In Kabbalistic terms Lilith is the wife of Satan (Samael).

In Zohar the use of Liliths name is avoided, she is identified with the serpent, or Haran, woman of whoredom. (The Zohar associates Haran with Haron - wrath). The care taken over the use of Liliths name directly mirrors the Kabbalists extreme caution in its expression of concepts of the divine.

"The divine structure itself a body capable of theurgic action in these sacred realms, this body never became for them an object of plastic exaltation or Aesthetic contemplation. In my ventures into the writing of the Kabbalah I have never come across any evidence of the adoration of the bodily form. This bodily form remains above all the bearer of signatures of the divine order, it is the true vector of Knowledge but it is not the object of visual fascination. This explains the restraint shown in the abundance of drawings and other diagrams produced by the Kabbalists, their, at times, very complex speculations. They always avoid figurative representations and prefer abstract drawings."

Charles Mopsick

From: (The Body of Engenderment in the Hebrew Bible, The Rabbinic Tradition and the Kabbalah: Zone 1989.)

The ancient Kabbalist Rabbi Shimon cites a verse from Deuteronomy which illustrates the Kabbalists attitude to literal worship.

"Cursed is the one who makes a carved or molten image, the work of the hands of an artisan and sets it up in secret." (Zohar Book of Enlightenment, Chantann Matt, p.p. 34)

Can Kiefer therefore be accused of violating the Kabbalists ancient axiom? It was noted in the previous chapter that Kiefer has inferred that the basic themes of his paintings describe something inexpressible like a black - hole, and how his personal philosophy reflects the ancient Kabbalists goal to define the ineffable. But Kiefer's tactic is far from illustrative, his works contain an allegorical representation alluded through the use of remnants, revealing a strategy of evocation. His landscapes appear as war zones without any signs of human life, in most cases the paintings have a pervading atmosphere of stagnation in which nothing happens, this method is further extended when we look at Kiefer's preference for the use of words rather than images to depict ideas or personages. This approach can be observed as far back as 1973 when Kiefer first became interested in the Byzantine Iconoclastic controversy. The Byzantines believed that images were more than mere representations, that they were in fact emanations of the deity. However the iconoclasts held that religious art ought not to exist at all, they proposed to replace it instead with secular subjects abstract decoration and historical narratives. The iconoclasts not only argued against the painting and worship of images they even enforced this belief militarily. The proponents of icons finally won out and veneration of the images was sanctioned . However Kiefer's tendencies lean towards the use of words, believing in the energy, presence and permanence they have over images. Kiefer's interest in the Kabbalist teachings and his subsequent reference to them in his work can only be considered a sympathetic extension of this idea which comfortably works within the parameters of the Kabbalah. If anything this sympathetic association has become increasingly overt since he began investigating the Kabbalah. Kiefer's paintings and sculptures cannot be condemned as "graven images" in terms of Jewish prohibition.

Through Kiefer Lilith manifests herself by the aura of her name and also through the remnants of her hair and garments. The garment has many layered meanings and associations. The ashened robes are a typical feature of Jewish ritual and of course refer to the death camps of the Second World War. In Kabbalah Lilith bedecks herself with refinements of beautiful jewelry and clothing, Zohar describes her as dressed in purple with forty adornments, minus one, (which corresponds to the number of lashes administered by the court according to rabbinic law: Deuteronomy 25:3; ) Lilith's allurements soon turn into punishments, through seduction she obtains her power, denounces her victims, and condemns them to hell.



We can see Kiefer's attempt to renew or amalgamate aspects of German and Jewish mythologies and cultures which were shattered by the events of World War Two. Kiefer recognised the ruins of German cities as a location for Lilith, who, throughout history as the carrier of destruction, is constantly looking for a home. In the Kabbalistic tradition Lilith has a strong demonic presence, as the first wife of Adam Kadmon ( not to be confused with Adam Rishon , the biblical Adam ) a configuration of light and Gods first form, Lilith demanded equality and refused to submit to what was later described as the "Christian position" in sex . When she was denied equal rights she fled to the Red Sea. God sent three angels to bring her back - Sanou, Sansanoi, and Sananglof - but she refused to return; stating that she had been ordered by God to kill babies and await her role as the avenging angel in the fall of Rome. In Zohar Lilith operates as a major danger in sexual relationships, the divine androgyne, as mentioned earlier , forms one of the main aspects of the Zohar, Lilith and Shekhinah are reverse sides of each other seduction above and below, Lilith being the demonic force and Shekhinah being the divine force. The act of love making is a pre - requisite to bringing the Shekhinah and God together, it is at this point that lovers are at their most vulnerable to suffering Liliths disruption. Through the union of male and female man seeks to acquire gnosis about the super celestial worlds as man is created in the image and likeness of God ( Genesis. 1:27 ). The process of engenderment is important to Kabbalists, for sex is not merely a physical act, it is a form of communion with God.

The key to Kiefer's work lies in his fascination with processes of transformation, both in terms of subject matter, and his materials and working methods. This in many ways echoes the work of Joseph Beuys whom Kiefer has described as his teacher in the largest sense of the word. Kiefer's initial introduction of himself in his occupations piece of the early 60's has often been compared to the Shamanistic concerns of Beuys.

It is interesting to note in both the Lilith and Jason exhibitions, Kiefer's introduction of the airplane. The aspects of flight is considered symbolic of the release of the spirit from bondage to the earth. The use of the airplane brings this symbolism into the twentieth century. So what significance do the planes have in his Karfunkel fee, Fig. 6 and Banner pieces, Fig. 7 ? Some critics such as Fiona Barber have forwarded the opinion that Kiefer's planes suggest the bombers of World War II . It may be interesting at this point to look at the recorded experiences of Joseph Beuys during the years of the second World War. In 1943 Beuys' Stuka Ju 87 dive bomber was hit by Russian flak and in a snow-storm crashed into the Crimea, he was found amongst the wreckage by the Tar Tars.

Upon crashing Beuys was thrown through the cockpit windscreen as he was not strapped in ( he had been disciplined on numerous occasions for not doing so). His co-pilot who was wearing a safety belt was atomized by the impact, very few traces were found of his body. Beuys received injuries to his head and jaw. He recalls the Tar Tars felt tents, and the dense pungent smell of fat, cheese and milk. His body was covered in fat to generate warmth and wrapped in felt to act as an insulator. This event had a shattering and complex effect on Beuys, he claimed that it was ultimately the reason he became an artist. Mark Rosenthal describes how Beuys created his own myths from the extreme experiences he had endured in World War II . Beuys' adoption of the role of Artist / Shaman is well known, as is the prolific part he played in the development of Modern Art in the later part of the twentieth century. In mythological terms the shaman can be described as an individual who undergoes an overwhelming psychological experience, his powers are symbolised by his own personal experiences which forms the kernel of his authority. Beuys considered art to have enormous restorative powers.

"Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter on the deadline " (Joseph Beuys, Caroline Tisdall the Solomon. R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.)

In Kiefer's paintings *Karfunkel Fee* (Fig. 6) we view a World War II era plane crashed amongst a mesh of mangled lead and copper there appears to be a strong possibility that Kiefer may be referring to Beuys' experience from a mythological perspective. After the trauma of the Second World War Beuys turned to Art, with interests expanding across a wide range of themes. What was important for him was the synthesising of art with life - for him art was located at the pinnacle of the spiritual pyramid - he used it as a beacon to stand out against the corruption and materialism of the world. No subject matter was anathema to Beuys. The enormous restorative powers in which Beuys believed is endorsed through the pioneering role he played for German art after World War II at a time when Germany was experiencing what was often referred to as collective amnesia, resulting in a void in national consciousness.

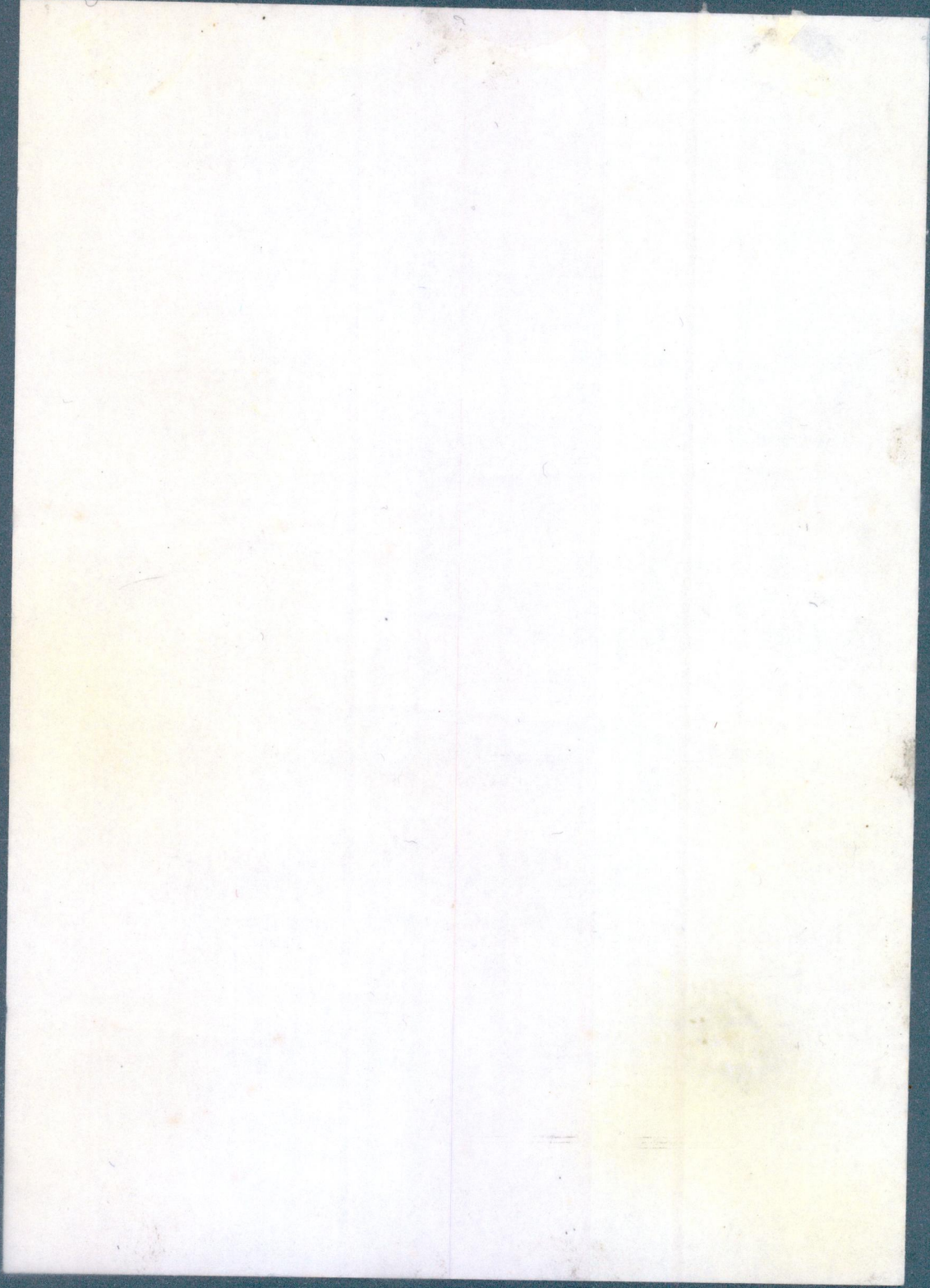
Similarly Kiefer attempts to offer art as a theoretical antidote for the terror of human history and civilization believing art to have the potential to reconcile the disillusionment of life.

John Hutchinson has referred to this idea as "the high road to redemption" in his essay on the Jason exhibition which took place in the Douglas Hyde Gallery in Dublin, 1990. However it has to be stated that Beuys and Kiefer do have two very different methods of procedure as Doreet Le vitte Harten has suggested.

"Beuys concentrated on survival rituals rather than redemption ways. He never ventured outside the security umbrella afforded by his world view which remained mythological to his dying day. Kiefer on the other hand finds strength in uncertainty."  
(Canticle for a God Unknown, Lilith, Marian Goodman Gallery N. York 1991)



fig: 5  
The Daughters of Lilith , Die Tochtel Lilits  
1990  
chemise, hair, lead airplane , copper wire ,  
oil and ashes on canvas



oil and ashes on canvas  
chromise, hair, lead silpiane, copper wire,  
1990  
The Daughters of Lilit, Die Tochners Lilitz  
fig: 5

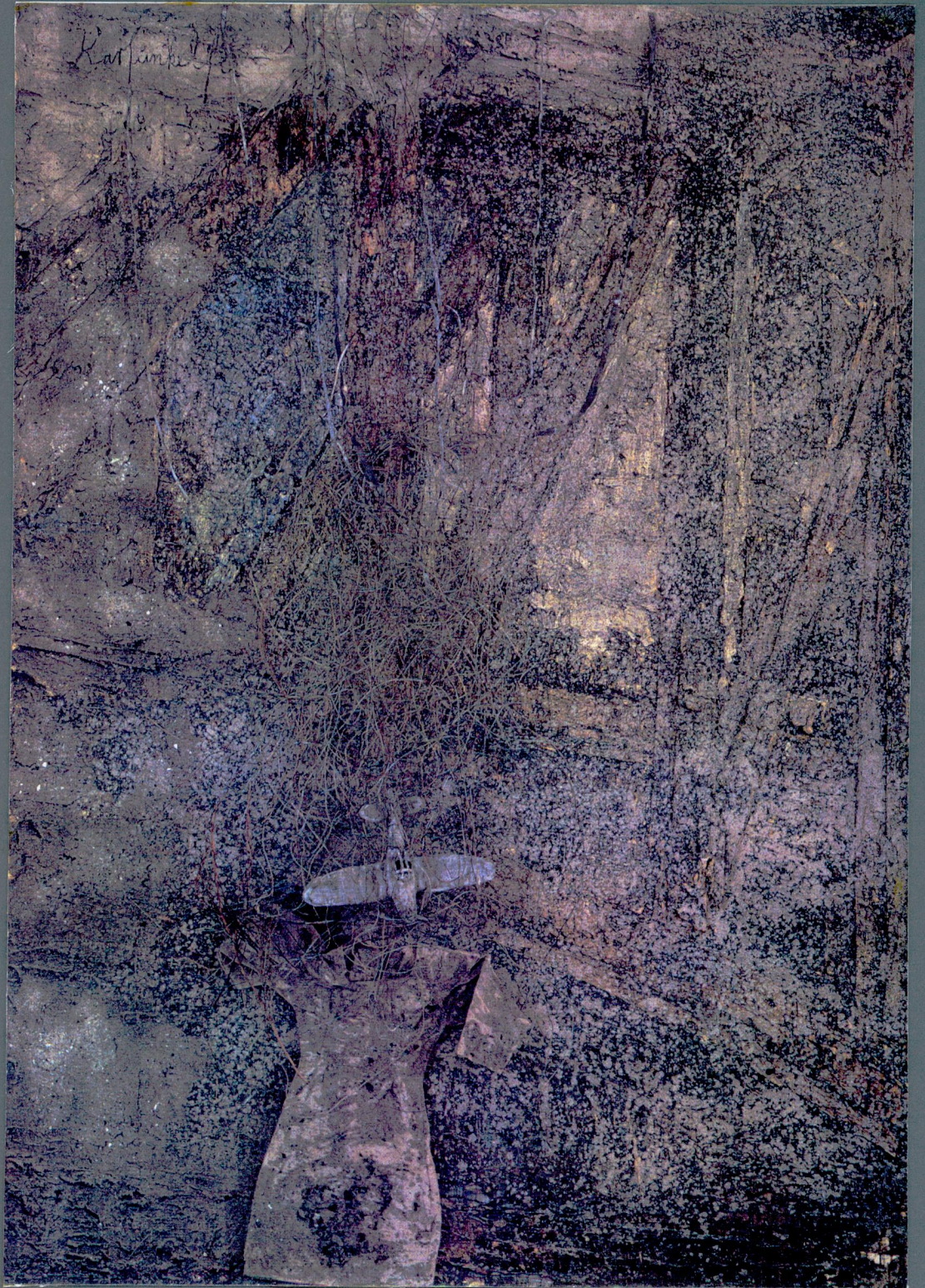


fig: 6  
Karfunkel Fee 1990  
clothes, lead airplane, copper-lead-steel  
wire, and poppy on canvas  
149.75' x 110.5'



140.25' x 110.2'  
wire, and bobby on canvas  
clothes, lead airplane, copper-lead-steel  
Kartmunkel Feb 1990  
fig: 6



fig: 6  
Karfunkel Fee, 1990 (detail).



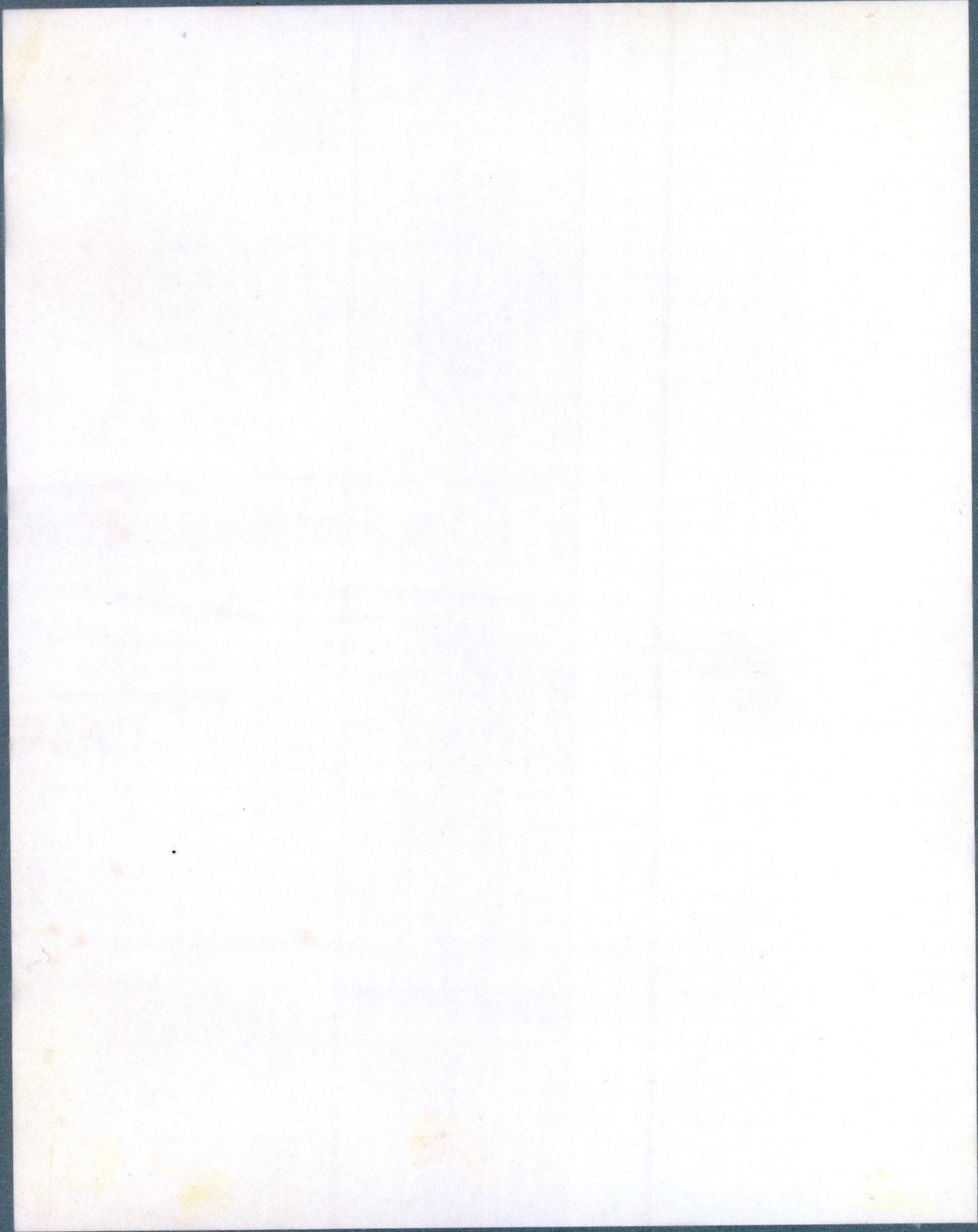
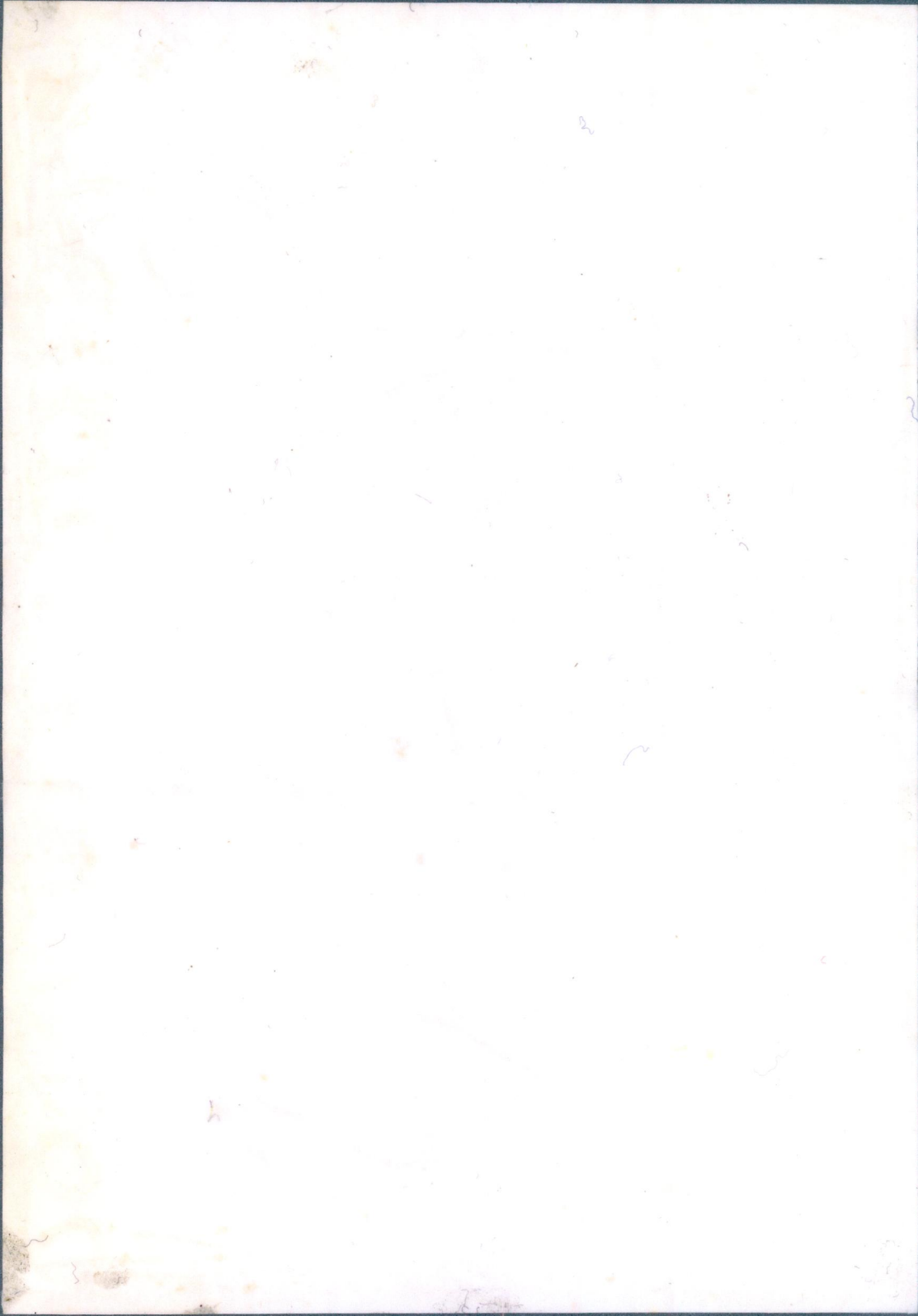


Fig. 6  
Kartfunkel Fee, 1990 (detail).



fig: 7  
Banner 1990  
oil, ashes, lead airplane, lead stripes and  
copper wire on canvas  
130' x 110.5' (unfinished)



130' x 110'2" (unfinished)  
copper wire on canvas  
oil, asphalt, lead stripes and  
Banner 1990  
fig. 7

*chapter four*  
Art, Science and Spirituality



# Art-Science and Spirituality

For Anselm Kiefer, current events constantly reveal echoes of Myth. He has described himself as “ looking to the past and moving through the future backwards.” (Arena BBC 1 1990) It is this viewing of time and history which gives both a sense of presence and absence to his work.

A large portion of Kiefer’s work seems to contain elements of despair which is never emphatically stated but stagnantly implied. Kiefer’s work has been attacked on many occasions, especially his tapping into history and myth, and unifying them within synchronous time. Andreas Huyssen has described Kiefer’s move from history into myth as an escape, this giving rise to accusations that his imagery “lacks any mooring in contemporary society”. (Art News, Oct. 1989 p.p.30)

Kiefer has never denied this accusation and on occasion he has even stated that his work is not contemporary, but to counter this, he states that his work is political. Kiefer, in an interview with Stephen Henry Madoff has described himself as a “political existentialist” , he uses history, myth, and politics as ingredients for a larger interpretation. (Art News, Oct 1987 p.p.53)

Joseph Campbell states in his book “The Power of Myth” that the function of the artist is the mythologization of the environment and the world, that the mythmakers of earlier were the counterparts of our artists.

Kiefer’s work stands as an example of the artists privileged access to the remnants of history and events of humanity. He has accepted this challenge and utilized the position of the artist, not out of an indulgent need to gratify his ego, but rather out of modern necessity. Kiefer firmly believes that the artist possesses a spiritual and redemptive power which can counterbalance the problematic questions of life. This belief is not exclusively Kiefer’s, one of the most insistent myths of collective modernism rests in the artist as seer, visionary, the voice of conscience and judge of humanity.

Kiefer has little interest in the precise rendering of events. Instead he focuses upon unlikely motifs to signify particular meanings. He synthesises history and myth with his own personal notions of subject through the powers of art. The element of doom which has been referred to in his work very much reflects the attitude of Post - Modernist art. It would be true to say that Kiefer’s work is fatalistic with undertones of desperation but when questioned directly upon this in an interview with D. Kuspit Kiefer responded:

“I do not portray despair. I am always in hope of spiritual purification. My work is spiritual / psychological. I want to show the conjunction of the spiritual and the psychological in a total environment.

Beuys was a total idealist, he wanted to change people, I want to show something and then make things change.”

This comment may serve to infer Kiefer's future outlook, but more emphatically, it serves to illustrate his present perception of the world in which we live. Contemporary western culture is becoming progressively de-mystified and de-mythologized. In many instances science is considered to be one of the main perpetrators of the destruction of myth. Within modern western civilization science and myth are perpetually in conflict, but this destruction really only occurs on a superficial level. The resonance of the underlying themes of myth, which are clues to the potentialities of human life remain intact.

The difficulties in finding a fusion between science and art have been well recorded. Scientists state that they have a far greater appreciation of the humanities than artists have of science, and vice-versa. Essentially, differences are mainly derived from the fact that art and science today, do not share the same syntax. The application of moral questioning in science is not a prerogative and is rarely considered. Science is constantly striving to emulate itself but it projects its questioning externally in a particular format, whereas art facilitates questioning which contains internal and external aspects. There is no lack of science or technology in Modern civilization but there is a lack of human feeling. One of the most effective roles of the artist is the expression of these feelings through turning his thinking inward. In an interview with Louwrien Wigers on Modern Concepts of Science, Art and Spirituality, the Dalai Lama stated:

"Our human mind is too much involved in external aims. We are launching ourselves into space, while we still have unexploited inner space. In this present time our thinking should take a more inward direction. It is all very well to have arms control, but how do we control armament if we are unable to control anger? The real arms control is to control anger; the quality of art is that it makes people who are otherwise always looking outward turn inward." (Art and Science meets Spirituality in a changing Economy, p.p20)

Presently there is a strong emphasis given to the views of science and its exponents. Very often society takes refuge in science by consulting it and seeking its advice. Kiefer cites Chernobyl as a cataclysmic example of how modern society ignored the moral objections of those without a scientific background and in direct contrast to this, the insistent importance given to science which operates upon the basis of empirical fact.

Kiefer's concern over science is due to its present role in society. However he does acknowledge its potentiality stating that he is prepared to use modern techniques and discoveries to aid his work. For Kiefer science acquires a more positive future outlook when it acknowledges and respects artistic values. He has described his interest in the connection of spiritual power and technological power, one might even say the technological possibilities of spiritual power.

Kiefer recognises that contemporary culture is highly incoherent and believes that culture should have a shared meaning with total participation throughout. Twentieth century culture is not like this because of its tendency to specialize and compartmentalize. Many things are seen as separate and not interdependent. This situation is sustained because of the modern world's mechanistic mode of thought which has been endorsed by science since the industrial revolution. For reconciliation to occur all ideas and areas have to be amalgamated under mutual participation, i.e., the development towards a cultural coherency. Science, art, and spirituality have been the basic features of culture throughout the ages. Understanding cannot occur unless one enters a dialogue, with cultural differences negotiated. Only then can the divide be closed between art, which is presently marginalized, existing at the sides of society and science, mechanistic in format in the modern world.

In this inter-relatedness Austrian born Fritjof Capra, one of the leading exponents of "new science" stated:

"All major problems are interconnected... we are embedded as individuals and as societies in the cyclical process of nature... we need a holistic or systemic vision of the world...this deeply ecological work views is ultimately spiritual... The essence of religious experience is the sense of being connected to the cosmos as a whole." (Art meets Science and Spirituality in a changing Economy p.p 29)

It is also interesting to note Joseph Beuys' views on science, from an interview with Achille Bonito Oliva ,

"Science on the basis of positivistic reasoning takes a polemical stand towards art, art is worthless, it has no social importance, it is useless, it is absolutely not a vehicle of revolution only science can be revolutionary. On the contrary, I affirm that only art can be revolutionary , especially when one frees the concept of art from its traditional technical meaning and passes from the area of art, to that of anti- art, from gesture, to action, in order to place it at the complete disposal of man. The only vehicle of revolution is an integral concept of art, hence a new concept of science is born... The moment artists, creative people realise the revolutionary potential of art (creativity), here again, equate art- creativity, - freedom at that moment they will recognise the true objectives of art and science."

In this modern age humanity has experienced the gluttony of materialism in many terms. Consequently civilization has wholeheartedly shifted its abilities towards the intellect as faith is no longer considered an acceptable means of understanding. People today seek to demystify, they wish to know the answers to their fundamental questions. Because of the methods of western civilizations, through which we demystify, and de-mythologize, physical laws and discoveries become the premise of nearly all assessment.



This is a model which prescribes an empirical exactitude. Through this artificial modern practice we often correctly assume that the process is natural. We presently have a history that does not respond to the environment because its perspective has changed from the view of God or spirituality, to the view of the self, that is the "I" of the individual, autonomous, first and foremost. This is one of the reasons why religion is considered obsolete for so many.

Strength of faith and mystery are no longer considered adequate. The thesis "God is dead" has arisen because materialism reflects the modern world's current perception. Evidence of this can be seen in society's conviction to knowledge of a purely physical quality.

Faith, mystery, and myth are believed to be facets or components of a so-called old tradition of culture which has little relevance to modern life.

These assumptions (which are truly wrong) are indicative of contemporary western civilizations' willingness to dismiss such ideas as useless today. As a result an imbalance occurs whereby man aspires to gain physical knowledge progressively, through a system of linear thought and reasoning, consequently he creates for himself a huge void or black hole in terms of human development of a spiritual nature. A dangerous imbalance, or even severance results, which directs civilization towards a confused outlook on the purpose of living.

One of the essential features of Christianity is the characteristic of the human soul which connects a spiritual force with a higher energy. This energy is inherent in faith or belief but materialism has considerably weakened our appreciation and understanding, which inevitably negates communion with pure spirituality.

The presence of Christ is the vital force in life but the God image is no longer relevant; it exists today merely as a remnant of traditional culture.

In the twentieth century the God image is dead but the presence of God still exists today as an energy. Art strives to re-establish a link with the spiritual but this time from the energy of the self, it no longer stems from tradition. Christ will no longer return as a person because the divine force is within man himself. Resurrection must occur on a personal level.

The absence of God in Kiefer's work serves to expose man's necessity to find direction in life, to rediscover the energy or presence through regenerating a sense of spirituality and by establishing a direction and potentiality through Art.

*chapter five*  
Deus Absconditus



## Deus Absconditus

When the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche stated "God is dead" (Thus spoke Zarathustra) he served to expose the "dreadful void" which has become such a major dilemma for contemporary man. Many German and French nineteenth century metaphysical poets were interested in the idea of the death of God and in 1911 Wassily Kandinsky wrote in his essay "Concerning the Spiritual in Art", "Heaven is empty, God is dead". Subsequent efforts were being made to find Artistic expression for the "dreadful void" in the twentieth century through open discussion on all aspects of the arts. As a result a process of separation began between Modern Art and Christianity. In 1937 Carl Jung came to realise the psychic phenomenon of the death of God, stating that he and many others know that the present time is the time of Gods disappearance and death. He had over a number of years, witnessed the Christian God image fading in his patients dreams, that is, in the unconsciousness of Modern Man. From this observation Jung asserted that the loss of the God image is the loss of the supreme factor that gives life a meaning.

From a contemporary viewpoint the "Deus absconditus" of Kiefer's work appears to condone aspects of Carl Jung's evaluations and re-constitute the concepts of the poets and philosophers of the nineteenth century. The presence of God in religion is the vital force in life, but today the image of God is considered no longer relevant, it exists today merely as a remnant of traditional culture. In the twentieth century the God image of Christology is dead, but the presence of God still exists in a different manifestation, as a spiritual energy of the self rather than from tradition. Jung described it as the necessity of the individual to find within himself "the church of the soul" (Man and his Symbols p.p 312). Christ will no longer return as a person, the divine force is within man himself, resurrection must occur on a personal spiritual level. The absence of God in Kiefer's work serves to expose mans necessity to find direction in life, to rediscover the spiritual through artistic regeneration. The ambivalence of Kiefers work emphasises his artistic strategy. His landscapes are uninhabited, devoid of life, his lead planes cannot fly, and his lead winged palettes are doomed to failure. A similar contrast appears in Kiefer's reference to Kabbalah, that is, its gnostic content emphasises the existence of a Modern World without gnosis. This is often the reason why Keifer's Art contains a dangerous tension. The obscurity of the work keeps it from immediate consumption, it re-establishes a separation between the artistic work and the viewer which can be ironic and often causes misunderstanding. Both the work of Kiefer and the teachings of the Kabbalah can be described as idiosyncratic. The Kabbalah, through its use of language is open to numerous interpretations, these interpretations act as evidence of mans quest to comprehend the inconceivable.

The idiosyncrasy in Kiefer's work stems from his use of parody and esoteric imagery, but most importantly an ambivalence that many other Germans such as Goethe and Nietzsche have experienced consistently throughout history.

The writings of the Kabbalah are notoriously obscure and it is because of this that Kiefer became interested in it. However, Kabbalah's obscurity is not purely related to its writings but can also be applied to its writers especially Moses de Leon who wrote a complete text from his head and then attributed the work to the ancient mystic Rabbi Shimon. Kiefer appears to have taken particular interest in Zohar. The reason for this interest becomes evident when one reads the text. The style of the Zohar was often Biblical or Mythological, Rabbinic or Medieval, fundamentally its essence was considered eternal. In his Kabbalistic writings De Leon transmitted something beyond himself, he felt free to cite sages who inhabited his imagination. De Leon displayed amazing creativity, in the Zohar, many styles and roles coalesce, the reader finds himself wandering through interlaced times and cultures, De Leon often played with the names and identities of his protagonists, as a result a fantastic fictional framework was created in which Rabbis who lived centuries apart walked together through the hills of Galilee discovering and sharing secrets of the Torah.

De Leon's thirteenth century versatility reflects with startling exactitude the workings of Anselm Kiefer, travelling through time and history to redevelop ideas and introduce them once again within a contemporary artistic framework. The process of unifying disparate styles and ideas, with a view to merging them in a system of discourse appears to be a phenomenon which both De Leon and Kiefer share, not only in terms of content, but also strategy and expression, De Leon's quest for the essence of the eternal determined the blending of many separated styles in the thirteenth Century. Anselm Kiefer's work is also concerned with the survival of its urgency rather than its material survival.

Although De Leon granted himself considerable license to inter-connect characters and styles. It is important to state that Zohar never lost sight of its goals, which was the creation of a mystical commentary on the Torah, with God hidden and revealed inside. It is the concealment and revelation that Kiefer finds most intriguing in the Kabbalah. As stated previously Kabbalists look extreme caution in the way they represented their often difficult concepts, figurative images and bodily representations were avoided because they limited and undermined Ein-Sof (God-infinity). It is due to this caution regarding the depiction of images that the Kabbalah has managed to maintain its integrity as a mystic corpus whose spiritual investigations have stood the test of time.

The Kabbalistic teaching enforced the necessity and importance of spirituality in life, and established an association with the divine source both, physically, through man, created in the image and likeness of God continuing the divine process of engenderment, but also through spiritual development, studying the Torah, and consequently aspiring towards a direct encounter with God.

The mystic constantly yearns to recover the tradition, to regain cosmic consciousness, the Kabbalist initiates this recovery through creativity. To Kabbalah, all creativity links the conscious and unconscious, the personal and transpersonal, from a mystical perspective. This creativity flows when man draws on its divine source. Today the artist has become the mystic, through artistic creativity he strives to encounter the divine force.

Finally, in an interview with Donald Kuspit, Anselm Kiefer describes art as being "a way of receiving". As stated in the second chapter the Jewish translation or term for receiving is Kabbalah. Whether or not Kiefer is aware of the direct relationship between his statement and its Jewish counterpart is impossible to say. But if nothing else it shows the very strong interconnection between the work of Anselm Kiefer and the teachings of the Kabbalah. The striking quality of both Kiefer and Kabbalah is that their theosophies are richly contemporary and yet strongly historical. It is a reflection of this synthesis which Kiefer seeks to gain in his work. The language of the Kabbalah has very strong connections with the spiritual questions that many artists are striving to answer today. Whatever the outcome the intimate relationship which Kiefer and Kabbalah share exists under the belief that gnosis is gained from study, study flowers into revelation, and creativity permeates all three.

*conclusion*







fig: 8  
Daath, 1990  
oil,ashes,charcoal and aquatec on canvas  
152"x 125"

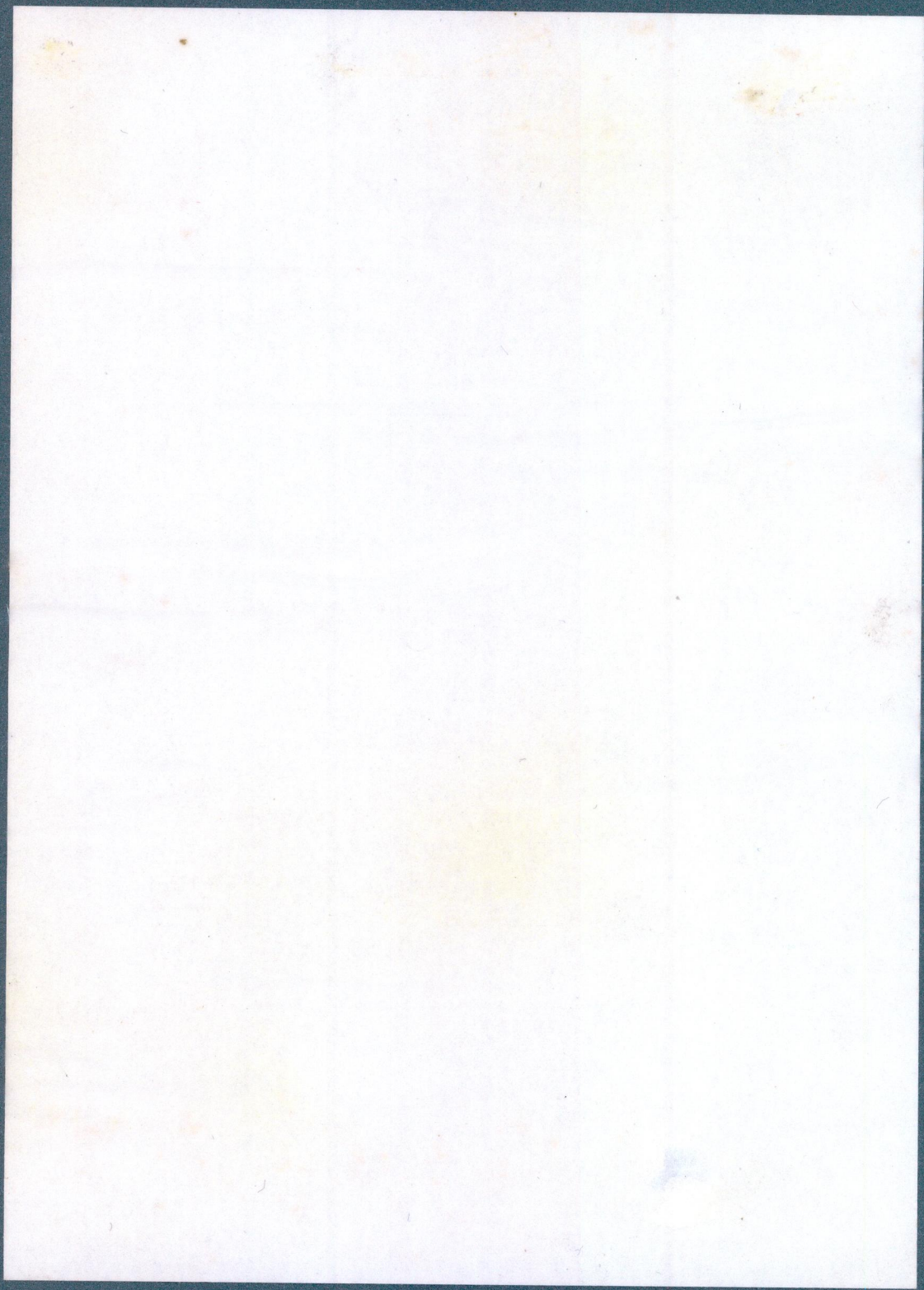


Fig. 8  
Death, 1990  
oil, ash, charcoal and aquatint on canvas  
152" x 152"

# Conclusion

Kiefer refers to the absence of God through his use of the Kabbalah, his painting and sculpture do not support the thesis that God is dead, Kiefer's works transform themselves into an area of consciousness acutely illustrating the situation of contemporary western civilisation, dependent upon physical laws, dismissing the concept of faith and spirituality. The resultant black hole which looms in the unconsciousness of contemporary man manifests itself in the form of negative energy within his work.

Kiefer's reference to "Lilith" and the "Breaking of the vessels" are examples of negative energy, an energy which, given the chance has the capacity of inflicting destruction upon humanity on a cataclysmic scale. However, to counter this vision of doom, Kiefer's work offers the possibility of redemption. Christ is absent, not dead, and the possibility of rediscovering the divine presence exists. The way to this discovery is through an acknowledgment of creativity and spirituality, Kiefer's "Daath", painting Fig. 18 in the "Lilith" exhibition illustrates the point very well. In this painting a huge Bridge stretches across from one side of the canvas to the other. In many illustrations of the sefirotic tree, "Daath" is represented as a vertical axis which connects the summit to the whole of the sefirotic body, it allures to the image of the spinal column, through which move the divine fluxes, like a seed from the head down through the entire organism in accordance with ancient physiological representation. From this observation one can see clearly that "Daath" unites right and left, high and low, masculine and feminine, it is the great unifier of the sefirot.

Kiefer's bridges show us the way to unity, the possibility of once again participating in spiritual journey. In a true sense Kiefer's work offers a life line to rediscover the path of wisdom and engage once again in the quest for the divine.

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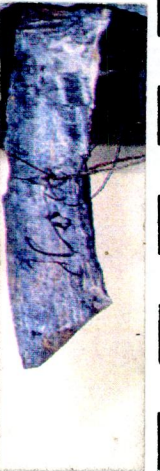
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