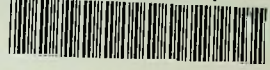


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**Anselm Kiefer — An Abiding
Obsession With
Change Both in His Work and Through it**

**Anne Marie Ryan
4th Year Painting, 1991
(Niamh O'Sullivan)**

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Introduction

Anselm Kiefer was born in Germany in 1945, in the same year that the Second World War ended. As a world renowned contemporary German artist, his fascination with German history and culture has been based on a social background of guilt and repression. Kiefer's unrelinquishing obsessions with the taboos of World War Two have perhaps been reinforced by his experience of the apparent disappearance of the national consciousness which emerged in the 'white years' of German history. This first appeared as a complete breakdown of community spirit; individual self-interest replacing Nazi ideology and propaganda. Secondly, 'national amnesia' materialised, a rather appropriate denial or rather aptly timed forgetfulness of the recent past. With the exception of filmmaker Juergen Syberberg, no other artist working after 1968 has so knowingly used German subject matter as Kiefer. Lacking inhibitions, he was radically challenged and attacked the narrow moral judgement and shame of German history. Revealing this shame to the world, Kiefer has successfully found an original voice to express his country's complex cultural and spiritual dilemmas with the underlying belief that art can help man to comprehend reality and help him to bear and face it.

Art and nothing but art! It is the greatest means of making life possible; the seduction to life, the great stimulant of life.

Art as the redemption of the man of action, of those who not only see the terrifying and questionable character of existence, but live it, want to live it, the tragic war the man, the hero.

Art as the redemption of the sufferer, as the way to state in which suffering is willed, transfigured, deified, where suffering is a form of great delight (Nietzsche, 1901) (1).

The concept of art in twentieth century Germany prophesied and inspired by Nietzsche was to make powerful and significant claims for itself. From artists as various as Kirchner, Kandinsky and Beckman working at the beginning of the century, to those of more recent years such as Beuys, Baselitz and Meter, are all concerned with style, but more importantly with the problems of ideology and expression. Their concern is with art as a therapeutic activity, a means towards a better, more optimistic form of life.

Contemporary German art primarily raises questions which go beyond the works and touch on areas of personal, historical and social experiences which Kiefer demonstrates. □

— Part 1 —

Kiefer belongs to the second generation of German expressionist painters whose visions is as much formulated by the spectre of war as the first. Kiefer, Jorg Immendorff, Marius Iupertz and A. R. Penck seek to re-establish the continuity of German art which was interrupted by the Nazis and by a war which deprived Germany of many of its artistic geniuses, not only in the field of painting but also in music and theatre. The Nazis' ignorance of the subtleties of modern art subsequently led them to want to liquidate it as a threat to the health of the community.

In 1937, the Nazis labelled an exhibition in Munich 'entartete Kunst' (degenerate art). It tried to persuade the public to reject rather than accept the art it exhibited. The exhibition put avant-garde art on the defensive, scrutinising it, probing and exaggerating all its radicality. The Nazis implied that it was 'degenerate'. It communicated unwholesome suggestions about the modern world and therefore they persecuted it. In an article by B. Broch (2), are mentioned the comments of 'Der Spiegel' editor, Rudolf Augstein on Germany's 'crazy history of leaders.' Frederick the Great, Bismarck, William II and Hitler acted with a horrendous consistency that was by no means coincidence. Their attitude and that of their thousands of subordinate 'fuehrers' can be characterised by the statement that Hitler made in April 1945 in his last will and testament, concerning the disaster he had created: 'If our political and military decisions should result in a catastrophe, the German people deserve no better.'

The Germans considered philosophical, literary and artistic works as if they were down-to-earth operating manuals for the translation of ideas and imagery constructs onto everyday life. That is why it seemed natural to German leaders that they should decide which philosophical and artistic thoughts could or could not be admitted. To the majority of Germans, it was quite natural that Hitler should act as the supreme arbiter of art and science. This manifested itself in the systematic liquidation of the Jews as a 'disciplined sacrifice supposedly made in the name of unpleasant duty,' the widespread acceptance of censorship as being necessary to demonstrate the honour and purity of true Germanness and in the public destruction of 'degenerate' art and the hounding of the creators of art. To eradicate art as Sander L. Gilman writes, 'the Nazis took the equation "artist = mad = Jew" as a programme of action'. In Hitler's Germany, to label it as 'Jewish' was to destine it for destruction. First, there was the eradication of modern 'degenerate' art and secondly, the eradication of 'degenerate' Jews. For the Nazis, degeneracy meant anarchy; modern art highlighted this unlike the Nazis' ideal art which acted as a passive propaganda instrument with no point of view of its own, there simply to service the state.

From the end of the War in 1945, through to the 1960's, German art was understandably in disarray. Throughout the 1950's, various forms of abstract expressionism prevailed. In the 1960's, German artists largely succumbed to the overpowering worldwide influence of American, pop, op and minimal art. However, it was the German artists of such independence as Georg Baselitz and Markus Luepertz who, fearing a loss of their own identities, sought to develop an individual and personal style.

It was Joseph Beuys, founder of the 'Free International University' who first began the German exploration into art, history and modern day life. Beuys saw society as both just and corrupt and through his art he felt he could initiate a healing process, starting with his own personal experiences of World War Two. No other artist has done as much this century to bring contemporary German art to international attention as Joseph Beuys. His aim was to unify art and life in a world freed from political compulsions and social taboos. Mark Rosenthal writes that Kiefer 'undoubtedly gained from [Beuys's] an enormous sense of mission and ambition, that is, the wish to grasp great regions of human history within the boundaries of his art.'

Beuys and Kiefer were in close contact in the early 1970's and in a way they share the same goals, both trying to stimulate and enrich our lives. However, differences in character, vision and artistic necessity have resulted in two divergent bodies of work: Kiefer is historical and produces works as the end to his scrupulous inquiries. Beuys, in contrast, was forward looking and mainly social in vision, his resulting art objects acting almost as signposts. His overpowering and rather 'exhibitionist' personality and commitment to the issues of modern day Germany have led him to acquire a high public profile. He enjoyed and preferred to 'act' out his desires and concerns on the largest stage possible, something that Kiefer's rather reclusive nature prevented him from doing. Kiefer's urge for solitude has meant he gives interviews but very occasionally and he prefers to ruminate over history rather than press forward to social change.

I can only make my feelings, thoughts and will in the paintings. I make them as precise as I can and then after that....you decide what the pictures are and what I am. I go in as deep as I can in order to get farther away, do you see? That's why I live out here. There is no intellectual centre, no competition, no fashion, no theatre. I'm over the centre, not in it. I live in the distance. (Madoff, Oct. 1987) (2). □

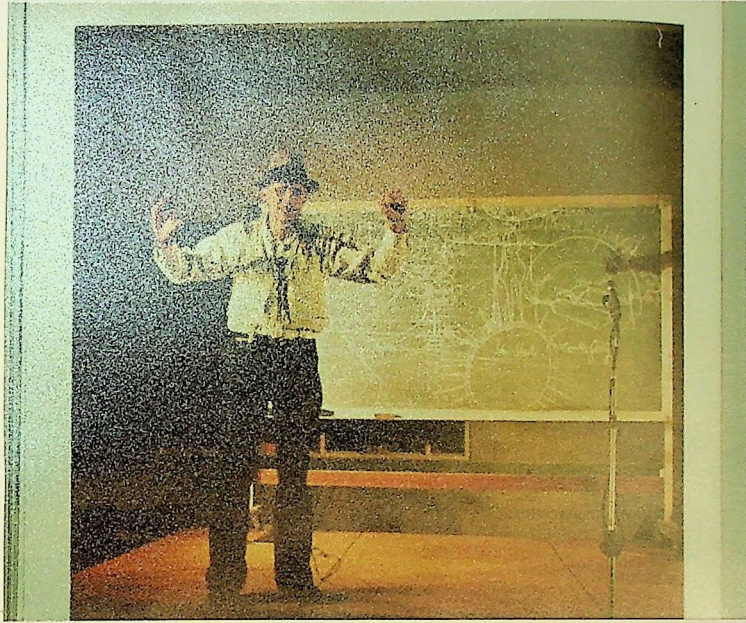


fig 1

— Part 2 —

In 1980, Kiefer stated, 'I do not identify with Nero or Hitler, but I have to re-enact what they did just a little bit in order to understand the madness. That is why I make these attempts to become a fascist (3).

Kiefer's investigation into fascism has proven problematic for some critics, artists and members of the public both in Germany and elsewhere. The nature of his enquiry often evoking images and symbols of the Third Reich has led many to fear that his art may 'bring back into power' what it attempts to examine, or that it may awaken dozing fascist urges in his audience. In a recent rare interview with Steven Henry Madoff (4), Kiefer answers his own question 'Are you a fascist or an anti-fascist?' as follows: 'I need to know where I came out of. There was a tension between the immense things that happened and the immense forgetfulness. I think it was my duty to show what is and what isn't. Now I don't say we have a fascist state. But it's still there. Circumstances are quite good now. But they can change, and then we'll see what happens. In '69, when I began, no one dared talk about these things.'

What he and the German people ought to remember, he suggested, was a terrible part of themselves — but not as terrible as pretending that the events of the War were just history, never to be spoken of, better to be ignored. 'It's wrong to confuse the man who makes the building with the man who shows it...whoever does that kills the herald.'

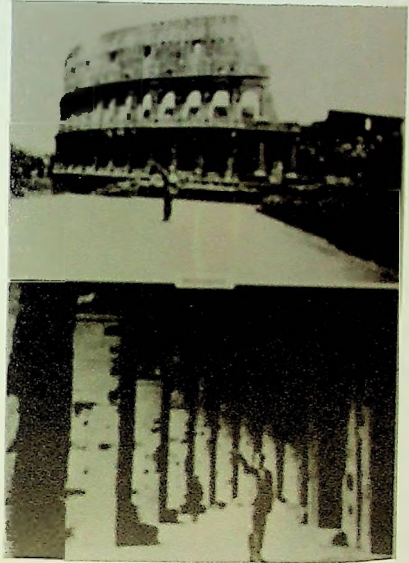
In 1969, Kiefer produced a series of works entitled 'Besetzungen' (occupations). The series involved a set of photographs of the artists re-enacting the Nazi salute 'Sieg Heil', the intention being to release the suppressed symbol of German fascism and present it on a world stage. Kiefer felt that by adopting the identity of a Nazi he could 'transpose history directly into [his] life.'

In one scene of the series, Kiefer salutes — without any military official sanction or convention — the Roman colosseum. A figure is seen walking away with obvious disinterest and disrespect. By means of the grand reference to the colosseum, Kiefer demonstrates that once meaningful symbols of power and obedience can lose their content altogether. The 'Sieg Heil' salute is an identifying symbol of Germany and the Nazi regime. The disrespect shown by the person walking away could perhaps personify Europe and the rest of the world's repulsiveness towards and abandonment of Germany in the years preceding the rise of Hitler.

Concluding the series, Kiefer awakens the spirit of Germany in the years preceding the Nazi period. Kiefer stands on a rock saluting out to sea, an image which closely resembles Caspar David Friedrich's early nineteenth century painting, 'Wanderer Above the Misty Sea' in which contemplation of nature is the theme. Kiefer offers a sobering comparison of a past Germany in which the beauty of nature was of utmost importance and the Germany that emerged in the 1930's and 1940's. What had been a natural respect for the land and for nature in earlier decades had been replaced — through man's craving for power — by the destruction of the land and with it the essence of German spiritual life.

To contemporary American audiences, just starting to get glimpses of his work, the allusions to Nazism aroused a deep 'ethical revulsion'. The Germans were outraged by bad memories but equally the Americans were stunned at what they considered the flaunting of the evil German spirit, several critics attacking him as a 'Nazithematizer'. 'In these early pictures' he states, 'I wanted to evoke the question for myself "Am I a fascist?" That's very important. You cannot answer so quickly. Authority, competition, superiority....These are facets of me like everyone else. You have to choose the right way. To say I'm one thing or another is too simple. I wanted to paint the experience and then answer.'

In these early works Kiefer was working purely for himself, trying to exorcise the evils of Germany's past to enable him to enlarge his mission to free the shame from the rest of his countrymen and remove any lingering taboos towards Germany and Germans the rest of the world might hold. □



— Part 3 —

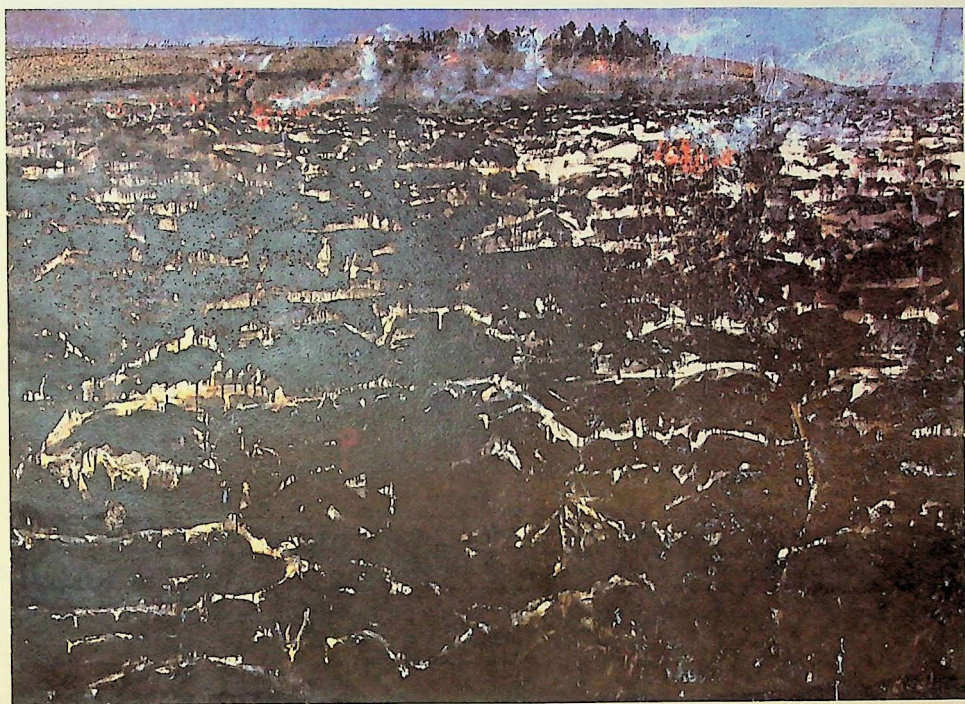
The age-old German preoccupation with the land and nature altered by history is one of Kiefer's abiding obsessions. For him, land stands for the spiritual heart of Germany, an undivided Germany. As Mark Rosenthal writes, 'landscape is the central motif by which he [Kiefer] expresses a disintegrating, violated, or suffering condition of Germany for much of his career, the bleached, burnt landscape has dominated his subject matter.' Time and again, 'Kiefer returns to the land and the forests of Germany to find a purity of soul where, as Heidegger puts it, 'poetically man dwells'.

Kiefer's landscapes appear as kinds of war zones, or no-man's-land, all are uninhabited and devoid of human existence. He imparts to every painting an emotion, an emotion which appears obsessed with death. The landscapes are portrayed as wasteland images of a scorched earth which involves visions of a rotting world. However, these landscapes do not appear in total desolation, the flames which score the earth persist in winter with no obvious nurturing, thus suggesting that certain elements can survive in an alien and unsuitable environment, suggesting perhaps that the innocent pride of one's country can survive through the complete destruction of both spirit and land. The fire is also used by Kiefer as a symbol of regeneration, where life may once again begin. R. H. Fuchs writes 'mythical fire as a pure force of regeneration recurs time and again in Kiefer's work'. Fire's powers of creation and destruction, both divine and demonic, treated with extraordinary reverence among different cultures, has become an integral part of Kiefer's art.

In 1974, Kiefer painted *Cockchafer Fly*. Inscribed across the top of this landscape is a German nursery rhyme. The rhyme, it could be argued, brings the destructive theme of the painting down to the level of a child, which in a way begins to humanise it and alter it as a signal of redemption.

*Cockchafer fly,
Father is in the war
Mother is in Pomerania
Pomerania is burnt up.*

The name 'Pomerania' mentioned here was at one time a treasured region of Germany, lost in World War Two to neighbouring Poland. Primarily, both the poem and the landscape indicate the desecration of the land, either by invaders or by its own inhabitants rendering it useless to the encroacher. The fires feeding from the ground, shining as the only glimmer of hope and life in an otherwise desolate view could also, on a more pessimistic note, symbolise the burning fires of hell, emerging and surviving as a rather harsh monumental symbol to the cremation of millions of Jews. The writing over the painted image may also be taken as inscribing into the landscape a sense of abandonment and loss that is inevitably still acutely felt in Germany today. Peter Maus Schuster described Kiefer's landscapes as 'empty interiors and landscape panoramas with straw, sand and ashes. Germany appears as a poor



wretched country' in which every name that is called out anew throughout the centuries only awakens memories of more disasters'.

Kiefer's materials are varied, ranging from straw and sand to lead and photographs. Kiefer sees his role as an artist as a kind of alchemist, working towards a closer relationship with his materials rather than with his public, each enormous painting demanding a theatrical scale for its motifs. With his basic material, Kiefer uses fire to purify them, each holding specific properties once they subjected to this sacred flame. Straw is reduced to ash, lead is purified, and sand does not burn at all. These then become a hallmark for numerous related subjects and become a vehicle for Kiefer's exploration of their physical implications. The results of the effect of time, visual and chemical changes are absolutely accepted and almost inherent to his work. This element could also suggest that the beautiful but physical fragility of the materials converges with the same fragility of German history and, perhaps, of Germany's looming fate. If we look at Kiefer's many books (for example *The High Priestess*), we can see that photographs were the main starting point. He elaborates on them applying paint or other materials or adding further photographs to the images. In this manner, he creates multiple and sometimes conflicting 'realities' with the result that an air of fantasy emerges. Mark Rosenthal writes about these images stating that 'these very real objects contain invented situations founded on photographed "lies"'.

One such painting is '*Yggdrasil*' (1985), based on Jewish mysticism, in which 'the heavenly is made manifest and meets the earthly in a rapprochement of seemingly great significance.' In this case, *Yggdrasil*, the ancient tree, grows upwards to meet a descending flow of silver lead. Implicit in all these pieces, including '*Emanations*' (1984) and '*Pouring*' (1985), is the idea and conquering image of hot lead descending from a flaming, melting sky where it will be cooled by the earth and by water. The 'cycle' is renewed throughout Kiefer's work, perhaps establishing a continuum derived from the concept that God exists in everything and eventually all elements flow out from and back to him, redeeming us. This 'flowing' or bond from heaven to earth is described in both Jewish mysticism and in the writings of Dionysius and Areopagite where it is claimed that heavenly emanations are invisible to man until the appearance of the 'divine ray', the light that comes down and 'restores us again... to a higher spiritual condition'. □



— Part 4 —

Without mythology, every culture loses its healthy, creative, natural strength: only a horizon surrounded by myths seals an entire cultural movement into unity (Nietzsche, 1905)

Kiefer's disdain for current events has led him into the realms of mythic, eternal and sacred times, believing that by focusing on these spheres it is perhaps possible to re-invent himself and history. He believes and hopes that beyond this lies his ultimate redemption and an ideal, mythical, heavenly land. Thus, Kiefer's apparent pessimism and almost obsession with death and morbidity are tinged with an underlying idealism and faith in a better world, where 'blemishes' or discrepancies in one's character are removed. It is in this 'new world' that liberation from the past is automatic. The new world that overpowers history in Kiefer's art 'consists of a series of momentous, even cataclysmic events and a dramatic shift in the order of the universe'. Using mythic symbols and protagonists, Kiefer presents the earth at a time of apocalypse. It is a world deeply involved with alchemy' (Mark Rosenthal).

In Kiefer's outlook, the act of painting resembles that of alchemy, both involve physical processes and both involve an overriding confidence and knowledge of the materials. 'Athanor' was painted in 1983, an architectural piece apparently derived from Speer's design of the courtyard in Hitler's Chancellery. The painting is burned or equally 'blemished' in many areas with the title 'Athanor' suggesting the alchemist's pure belief in the 'secret fire' in which a substance or ordinary presences may be transmuted into the ultimate gold property. Although the goal of the alchemist is purely physical, the transformation of substances represents a 'spiritual quest by which the soul achieves perfection in heaven and ultimately becomes one with God'. However, on a completely opposite train of thought, the actual ancient alchemist or witchcraft process of hastening physical change is considered so unnatural that it is believed to have derived from the devil. This alternative association of evil with alchemy and fire therefore alters all interpenetrations of Kiefer's paintings. 'Athanor' now appears as an enormous 'Jewish oven', a purifying oven, portraying nothing but death.

Arguing against Kiefer's belief in mythology and his abiding obsession with the varying and contrasting connotations associated with alchemy and its results, Robert Kleyn in 'Vanguard Canada' (Summer 1987) in an article entitled 'Guilt Edge' argues that his 'rhetorically overstuffed Germanicity arouses interest in those countries that suffered severely from the consequences of the national myth. He notes that Kiefer no longer splatters his materials expressionistically but has collected a set of pictorial elements that act like a symbolist vocabulary.'

Perhaps one of Kiefer's more important symbolic elements is lead, whose physical appearances alter throughout the drying process. In many of Kiefer's paintings, the lead appears to be an overpowering force pouring from heaven, connecting the mystical and the real, heaven to earth, it being the only substance with properties to resist the effects of radiation (therefore enabling it to be considered a 'life saving' force). The enormous weight of lead is

another consideration in Kiefer's paintings, the pure heaviness almost symbolising the weight of thought and the weight of the world on Kiefer's shoulders. □



— Part 5 —

Out of all the German artists such as Rupert, Baselitz, Penck and Immendorff, Kiefer is the closest is arriving at a new visual vocabulary embodying the 'indigenous, the emotional and the irrational, based on his fundamental belief that 'through expression lies redemption'. This art makes no accusations, assumptions or judgements, leaving all interpretations up to the viewer. By exposing the consequences of the nature of the war and confronting the dogma of National Socialism, Kiefer offers us, as already suggested, a way of coming to terms with the traumas of the past. He tries to act as a healing force within society, supporting his belief that art should move beyond pure visual experience and effect change in society at large.

His paintings can perhaps be read as symbols of states of consciousness in which myths, history, ideals and personal convictions merge. The themes and traumas of German history and Nordic mythology keep appearing throughout his work. Yet Kiefer should not be mistaken for a historical painter, as an illustrator of past events. Kiefer is seeking to interpret the actions of his fellow countrymen and the fears of the people who suffered as a result of these actions. History for Kiefer is a history of illusions, false ideals and undoubted mistakes. He registers this 'angers' or 'disillusionment' by 'destroying' or rather altering the nature of his paint by, as already mentioned, burning, scratching off layers and integrating foreign material into the paint surface, ie. painting = burning. His obvious disinterest in the precise rendering of events has enabled him to focus on alternative, unlikely motifs to signify the particular meaning of his subject. The integration of mixed media with photographs or painted images unites subject matter and content into an intensely physical presence. In summary, Kiefer synthesises history with his personal impressions through the intensity an power of art. Kiefer feels that art and only art can reconcile the disillusionment of life. He uses his art as escapism for his own personally felt guilt for the atrocities felt by his fellow non-Jewish Germans during World War Two. He appears to admit with courage his shame as though he and he alone killed and tortured the millions of Jews who died. His art not only embodies these emotions, but also stands as a monument or dedication to the innocent Jews who died and to those who survived.

In 1978, 'Ways of Worldly Wisdom' was painted. It centres around a group of portraits of personalities from German history whose credibility and popularity were lost through their association with, or known approval of the Nazis and the fascist regime. The main personages were political poets and soldiers.

I chose these personages because power had abused them (Kiefer)

In the centre is a ceremonial fire which will dutifully consume and serve to cleanse. This fire, however, is also subjecting these so-called wise Germans to the same treatment that they pronounced for Jews in the war years. It seems more than apparent that anger and revenge are the central themes of this painting with the optimistic note that with the burning away of the memory of these individuals, regeneration can occur.

Only art is capable of dismantling the regressive effects of a senile system that continues to totter along the deathline (UK 'Ascribe', 1986).

Using art, Kiefer feels capable of approaching the most daunting subjects and feels confident he can make them confident (indeed, almost obliged to do so). This is indeed an important mission. □



— Part 6 —

Kiefer's concern with evil and death, plus his will to understand the savagery that can be found in a group of people has made him seek for its causes in his own German being and his activities. His recollections of early German culture and mythology act as a kind of enquiry where he can locate the roots of modern day assertions, with the underlying hope that understanding will aid their uncovering. Kiefer's obsession with Jewish history and spirituality reflects his desire to make good the indiscriminate repression of the Jewish people during the Third Reich.

In 1983, Kiefer painted a series of oil painting and watercolours based around Paul Celan's poem *Todesfuge* ('Death Fugue'), which centres around his own personal experiences in the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz in 1945.

Even early in 'Death Fugue', the personal anguish is transposed into distancing imagery and a musical structure so intricate that a terrible beauty is arrested from the ugly theme. Realists and literalists among Celan's critics objected to this 'aestheticising' of the death camps. Yet the power of the poem arises from the extreme tension between its grossly impure materials and its almost pure form. A great deal has been written about the impossibility of writing poems after Auschwitz let alone about Auschwitz. Even Celan could not do so directly, realistically, but only by an art of contrast and paradox that celebrates beauty and energy while commemorating their destruction Michael Hamburger (4).

'Death Fugue' was published in 1952. Celan suffered the loss of his family in the death camps plus his own imprisonment, these were to haunt much of his poetry and inevitably led to his suicide in 1970.

*Black milk of daybreak we drink it at
sundown
we drink it at noon in the morning
we drink it at night.
we drink and we drink it
we dig a grave in the breeze there
One lies unconfined
A man lives in the house he
plays with the serpents he writes
he writes when dusk falls to
Germany your golden hair
Margarete
he writes
it and steps out of doors
and the stars are flashing
he whistles his pack out
he whistles his Jews out in earth
has them dig for a grave
he commands us strike up for the
dance*

*Black milk of daybreak, we drink you
at night
we drink in the morning
at noon we drink you at sundown*

*we drink and we drink you.
A man lives in the house he plays
with the serpent he writes
he writes when dusk falls to
Germany your golden hair
Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith we dig a
grave in
the breezes there are lies unconfined*

*He calls out jab deeper into the earth you
lot you others sing now and play
he grabs at the iron in his belt
he waves it his eyes are blue
jab deeper you lot with the spades
you others play on for the dance*

*Black milk of daybreak we drink you at
night.
We drink you at noon
in the morning
we drink you at sundown
we drink and we drink you
a man lives in the house your
golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith he plays
with the serpents*

*He calls out more sweetly play
death death is a master from Germany
He calls out more darkly now stroke
Your strings then as smoke you
will rise into air
then a grave you will have in the
clouds there one lies unconfined*

*Black milk of daybreak we drink you at
night
we drink you at noon death is a
master from Germany*

*We drink you at sundown and in the
morning we drink and we drink you
death is a master from Germany
his eyes are blue.
He strikes you with leaden bullets
his aim is true.
A man lives in the house your golden hair
Margarete
he sets his pack onto us he grants us
a grave in the air
He plays with the serpents and daydreams
death is a master from Germany*

*your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith*

Kiefer's series on the theme of Margarete and Shulamith, inspired by Celan's poem has created a 'visual elegy' which activates our conscience and probes the remarkably recent past of the war years with an almost serene detachment. Kiefer has abstracted from Celan's poem in order to construct a meaning incarnate in a few symbolic images, manipulated to achieve a new effect and new understanding.

In Celan's poem, two figures are contrasted, Margarete and Shulamith, personifying the dominating Aryan and Jewish ideals of beauty and therefore come to illustrate the power and pure tragedy inherent in genocide. Margarete evokes the identity of the true ideal superior Aryan. She is the one to whom her blue-eyed fellow Aryan guard devotes his love letters, her blond hair and blue eyes immediately categorise her and determine her life. In contrast, Shulamith is the downtrodden Jewish woman whose race has endowed her with black hair, but which is now 'ashen' from burning, her looks or characteristic markings committing her to torture and finally death.

The paintings act as a kind of acknowledgement for our and Kiefer's guilt. To achieve this, Kiefer employs the same allusive, indirect method as Celan. Kiefer transforms historical fact and human identity into a symbolic landscape in which the golden hair Margarete is metamorphosed into straw and the ripe ears of corn while the dark hair of Shulamith is depicted as dark diseased corn or equally burnt straw. Margarete and Shulamith are inseparable appearing as a contrasting duo throughout the entire series. Their portrayal through the use of materials from the land must come under consideration. Margarete's golden straw perhaps exists as the one-time Germanic love and respect for the land, and Shulamith's burnt and diseased symbols embody the evil of the war, the transience of time and, ultimately, western civilisation.

Until recently, some would contend that there was a virtual taboo in Germany about the mention of the War and their humiliation of the Jews. Kiefer maintains that by exposing the consequences of war and confronting the dogmas of National Socialism, he offers a way of coming to terms with the shame of the past. By representing such subjects, Kiefer deprives them of their taboo status and therefore demythologises the War. By depicting in the devastated landscapes the consequences of the war, he offers us a vision of potential peace and by visualising the fugue of death he in a way celebrates and reinforces the beauty that was destroyed. He resurrects this beauty to again heighten our guilt and to let us realise that beauty is not a dictated subject and certainly not one which can determine one's status in life and more importantly one's chance to live or die.

Shulamith's naked body is often juxtaposed with an urban environment to suggest that the monstrous act befalling her are those perpetrated by civilisation against a defenceless victim. It may also give us an insight into Kiefer's feeling of modern day Germany, a Germany he feels is modern, powerful, and urban. To connect the tortured Jews with modern civilisation stands as a symbol of the hatred of the Jews and now Kiefer's hatred for modern day civilisation, following the equation made in the 1940's by Hitler and stated by Sander L. Gilman, 'Jewish = mad = degenerate'. Shulamith is depicted in a representational form, which contrasts with Margarete who possesses no figurative form. Only words and straw evoke her presences. Her existences through these beautiful, natural materials leave her unaffected by the events of the war and history with the use of such varied and natural materials.

The surfaces of the paintings develop from the obvious tactile working of materials that (for Kiefer) successfully establish a link between painter and painting. They also transform painting into a vehicle for action and redemption.

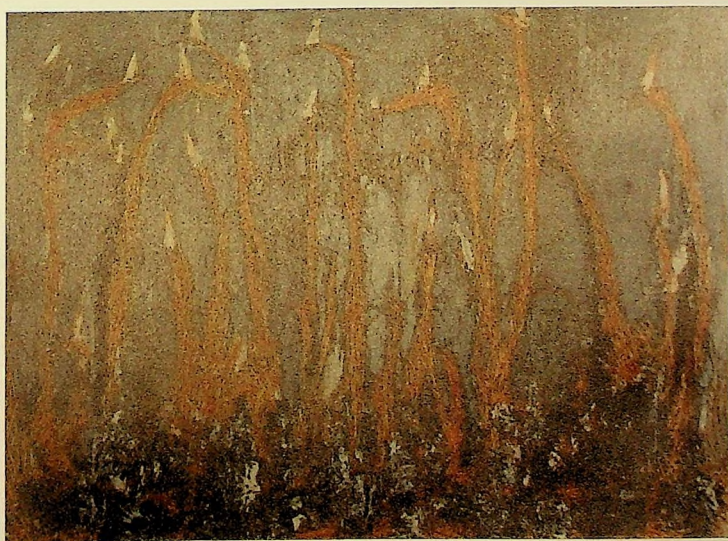
Margarete, as noted by Mark Rosenthal, assumes the German idyllic image of woman, formed in part by the heroine in Goethe's *Faust* — an image hinged on the belief in woman as the 'sacred preservers' of moral values, though undermined by the weaker male. Goethe's vision of 'Gretchen', like Margarete, is a model to which Kiefer often refers. Yet his work also alternatively reveals an ambivalence about the implied purity of such women, as though his love for beauty and innocence is of prime importance, while power portrayed in any form or strength is detestable.

The series concludes with a depiction of Margarete assuming her role as the golden, ripe corn blowing dreamily in the wind. This image of noble, spiritual Germany, appearing tall and strong, seems to want to grow beyond the confines of the canvas. The ceremonial, almost life-giving fires which appear at the top of each plant characterises Kiefer's wish for renewal and hope that these sacred fires may rekindle the Germans' spirit and their love for their land, and conquer the black shadows of bad memories and western civilisation symbolised by Shulamith's haunting black shadows pushed to the side by Margarete.

Straw and earth have always been a symbol of mother nature and fertility. In the painting, these elements never change, yet their chemical and physical properties and therefore their meaning is transfigured. Through time, everything is altered. Once beautiful objects may lose their attractiveness but their inner beauty and status never changes: Kiefer's straw paintings including the Margarete and Shulamith series and the later Mastersingers paintings are among some of his most poignant. The straw is one of the most apt symbols Kiefer employs to symbolise his range of emotions about the German character and the history and future of his country.

In murdering the Jews, Kiefer believes that Germany murdered a part of herself. Facing up to it using mythology seems to Kiefer one way of overcoming the seemingly inherent perversity, the fatalistic aspect of German culture.□





— Part 7 —

It is perhaps to the American public that Kiefer's work appeals most. Firstly, to the Americans he offers the comforting spectacle of Germany 'contritely purging itself of its unmastered past' with the desire to emerge as a liberal democracy and take its place alongside other free market states. To the ever attentive American audience, Kiefer's work reincarnates their mixed and rather complicated feelings towards World War Two. Secondly, the American obsessiveness with European history (that springs out of its own lack of historical 'glamour') has led them to a pure fascination stirred and fed through Kiefer's work. Thirdly, Kiefer is courageous for having attacked such a taboo subject and is therefore seen as a true individual, individuality being considered a trait that involves pledging non-allegiance to accepted fashions. His undauntedness faced by the challenge of the immense subjects he has chosen (German history, mythology and culture and the many peculiar modalities of German social structures) have all remained a closed book to the majority of contemporary artists. It is perhaps here that Kiefer's immense appeal lies, his unrelinquishing compulsion to place these taboos at the very heart of his art. Fourthly, the Americans have an unquenchable desire for drama, and Kiefer's work suitably expels a natural, unprecedented, dramatic pitch achieved in his receding architectural and landscape images that amplify illusion.

On a contrasting note, Kiefer has been criticised, along with Baselitz, mainly by his fellow countrymen for addressing Nazi history and wallowing in the past while almost blatantly ignoring current issues, such as the previous existence and subsequent demarcation of East and West Germany. For these reasons, he is often seen by his fellow countrymen as an unlikely standard bearer for contemporary German art. A retrospective exhibition was held at the German pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1980. It was an event that provoked heated critical attacks from his countrymen. Werner Spies wrote a review titled Overdose of Teutonic Zeal: 'the harvest and heritage are reaped', the piece read, '....the sower spells danger'. Kiefer was seen as 'flaunting his Germanness' and 'flirting with the ghosts of his fatherland'. Some also accused him of being a neo-Nazi as if his probing of these subjects was itself a regressive display. However, from Kiefer's quite stubborn point of view, it appears that the country is still imbued with attitudes and precedents that run like a strain through German history. Indeed, by confronting and attacking the still disturbing bogies of German society, he seems to live up to the radical, avant-garde stance taken by those artists branded as degenerates in the 1930's by the Nazi government.

It is perhaps notable also that Kiefer's work not only aims to exorcise the lingering burden of an inherited past but also acts to remind us and the American public that the will to destruct is not confined to a single historical moment in one country but is broadly characteristic of a modern condition.

Regarding Kiefer's individuality, Baselitz is perhaps the only other alternative German or even European artist whose work likewise chooses to quarrel with both the past and present. Every piece stands as an individual discovery with an imagery and a technique which makes no concessions either to tradition or to the contemporary art

scene. In his direct approach when dealing with disturbing and often offensive themes (for example, Die Grosse Nacht im Eimer, portraying a man with a faraway look who seems to be listlessly masturbating), Baselitz is deliberately violating the code of good taste and decency. His objective is a form of painting in which an attitude manifests itself that seeks openness and finally redemption in a similar way to Kiefer. Both have succeeded over the years in infusing their work with a vital originality which derives from their subjects. Their art lives by taking chances, it has dedicated itself to constant change, not to slow development or stasis. Blatant indiscipline and extreme violations of the rules have been an aid in staving off the threat of 'artistic paralysis'. Over the past thirty years, both have repeatedly 'chanced their arm' by making a clean break with all other previous achievements, opening up a prospect of new discoveries that are seemingly unpredictable and yet are deliberately provoked. In contrast with Kiefer, Baselitz is a more representational, figurative painter using a heavyweight oil technique in order to imbue his rather poignant figures with intense, 'heavy and earthbound' emotion, (eg. Heroes). His 'coarseness' of paint and vividness of colour appears to him to free painting from the conventions of form and technique and therefore almost invalidating any pre-existing ideas or rules of representation and 'pictorial construction' thus giving his art an immediate, striking impression. Perhaps the most concrete common bond between Kiefer and Baselitz is their complete devotion to the unconventional — their success in evoking and striking attitudes and emotions in their audiences being perhaps of prime importance. Both dedicate themselves to their self-chosen missions with extraordinary passion and staying power and without any apparent fear of not being accepted. Their work and their worldwide success over the past thirty years demonstrates that they have both accomplished their missions. □



— Conclusion —

At the moment, when how paintings 'look' has assumed a heightened importance and when the tactile and 'didactic art forms' seem to hold a special fascination and enormous popularity, Kiefer undoubtedly possesses one of the era's most profound and sought after voices. It is both impressive in its intellectual focus and in its amazingly successful ability to convey clearly the idea of what we, in modern civilisation have created and subsequently destroyed.

The process of 'conveying messages' through transformation is never concluded in Kiefer's art. Perhaps in the past two years, the ultimate idea of harmony has become the implicit goal of his work. His focus on German history and mythology has now grown to encompass worldwide history and Greek and Nordic mythology — all of which neatly and naturally interconnect. It therefore leads us to acknowledge that the transformation of German history cannot be separated from that of the world and that ultimately none of this can be achieved without individual acceptance, atonement and — inevitably — freedom. It is obvious through Kiefer's art that he cannot abide an alternative art form which lacks the powerful impulses of life.

Kiefer's paintings attack the problem of German guilt in a way that would perhaps be impossible for anyone who lived and participated in the Nazi regime. Almost fifty years onwards, with the memories and shame of the war still very alive in the German people, Kiefer's work opens up emotional wounds and reinstates issues that perhaps his countrymen prefer to block out, reminding them that perhaps their society is still accountable for the sins of their past. Kiefer cannot eradicate the past, but he can deal with and alter not only his own feelings of guilt and shame, but also, he believes, those of his fellow countrymen. Criticising him, Ted Perl, in an article in *The New Criterion* (USA), Dec. 1988, entitled 'A dissent on Kiefer', reflects on Kiefer's use of Nazi imagery and argues that his actual use of 'Nazi Kitsch' may appeal to audiences in a similar manner to that which Hitler employed in the 1930's and concludes that the Holocaust is a subject of such magnitude that no artist may be equal to it. No other has gambled more on its appeal as an image than Kiefer and thereby, Perl states, he risks belittling it. Kiefer alone can answer this:

Our moral behaviour is still in the Stone Age. So I can't say I know the way. But I want to do something between man's aggression and the transforming energy. I want to be a catalyst, a small quantity that affects a large thing and that's all that an artist can hope to be (*Art News*, October 1987). □

— Footnotes —

- (1) Nietzsche, 1901, The Will to Power. Dier Philosophic. 1. Stuttgart, 1928
- (2) Axel hecht and Werner Kruger, Venedig 1980
- (3) Steven Henry Madoff, 'Anselm Kiefer: a Call to Memory,' Art News, Oct. 1987
- (4) Michael Hamburger, Paul Celan — Selected Poems. New York, 1980
- (5) Paul Maenz and Gerd de Vries, Anselm Kiefer
- (6) Mark Rosenthal □

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