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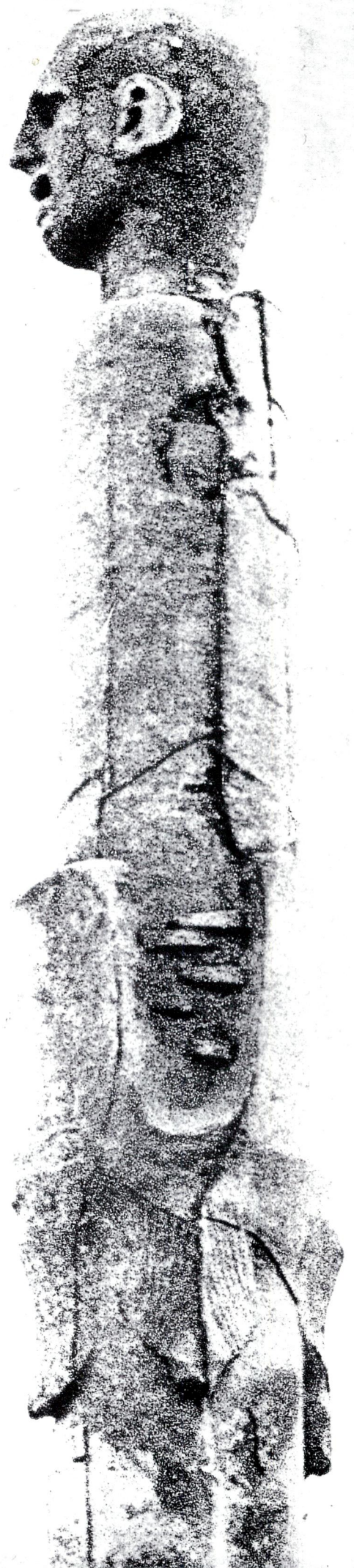
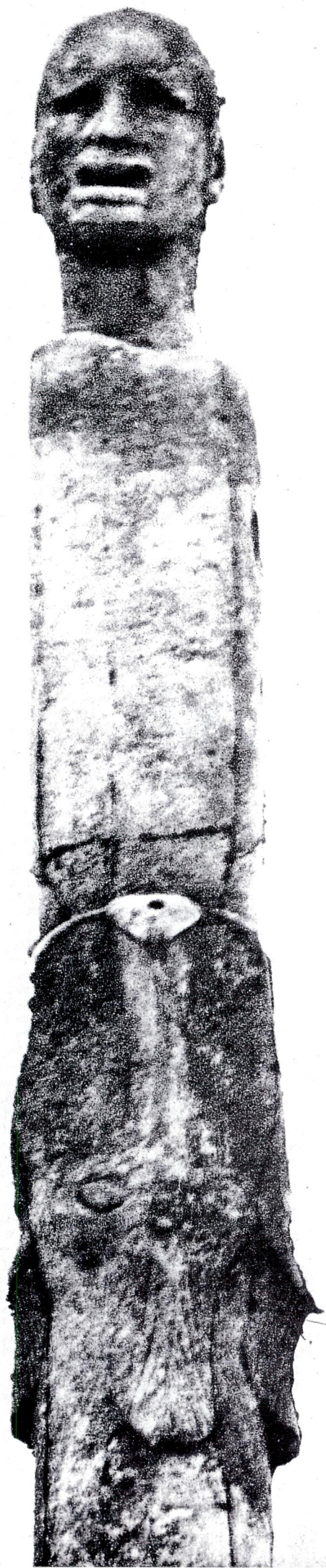
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ROMANTICISM, REPRESSION AND REGENERATION - COMMON LINKS

BETWEEN THE WORK OF JOSEPH BEUYS AND ANSELM KIEFER

KEVIN McLOUGHLIN

FINE ART PRINT



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INTRODUCTION

Joseph Beuys stands as one of the most influential milestones in the course of contemporary late twentieth century art. Through the radical nature of his theories and ideas on the nature of art, his expanded concept of art, his belief in the healing, transformative and unifying powers of art.

His legacy has proved rich and provocative involving as it did, spirituality, politics and proposals for social change and production.

The influence Joseph Beuys has had on the work and ideas of Anselm Kiefer cannot be underestimated. Though Kiefer was never formally one of Beuys's students, he can certainly be considered as one of his proteges. Kiefer did see Beuys to discuss his work in a series of critiques and discussions over a period of months between 1972 and 1973. The relationship between the various aspects of their work ideas, themes and outlooks, can be highlighted, revealing underlying similarities and parallels, though subject to the highly individual philosophies of both. Central to the work of both is the notion of art as a transformative power, with the role of a dialogue between it and society.

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Beuys freely employed the myths, metaphors, and symbols of

various cultures, and created his own from the wrenching personal experiences he had endured in World War II. No material or approach was anathema to him. Perhaps more important, Kiefer learned about conscience and integrity from Beuys, and he undoubtedly gained from him an enormous sense of mission and ambition. That is the wish to grasp great regions of human history within the boundaries of his art. 1

Art for Kiefer, like Beuys, is a unique exploration of history and art, a system of thought, an expression of philosophy, a dialogue between art and life.

'To my mind, art is the only possibility of making a connection between disparate things and thus creating a meaning' 2

Kiefer has not been the only one of Beuys artistic progeny to reach widespread recognition. Sigmar Polke, Imi Knoebel and Blinky Palermo have all established themselves, however it is Kiefer who:

'Since Beuys's death came out of hiding to claim his teacher's public mantle, while his work, particularly his photo-collages, look more than ever like Beuys's drawings - at once "povera" and piss-elegant.'

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NOTES;

INTRODUCTION

1. Mark Rosenthal: Anselm Kiefer; Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1987 p. 14
2. Armin Zweite: Anselm Kiefer; The High Priestess, Anthony D'Offay Gallery and Armin Zweite, Thames and Hudson, London, 1989 p. 98
3. Robert Storr: Beuys; Art in America, March 1988

MYTH

In true Herculean manner, Beuys defined his own biography as a sequence of "works" and made all historical reality disappear behind a self-created myth of the artist-hero. This self-mythification begins with the crash of Luftwaffe pilot Beuys in the Crimea and his acceptance by a local group of Tartars, who shelter him with fat and felt the myth continues in the invention of state and society. In the end, Beuys's audience is presented with a system of interconnecting links and mutually supporting interpretations and definitions that no longer permit a consideration of anything outside the system. This system can only be understood through its own carefully constructed "evidence";....."1

Beuys's efforts to construct a private and hermetic personal mythology, removed from the events of history, eventually developed into an integral part of Beuys's overwhelming cult of personality. The creation of this cult of personality, the role of artist hero which Beuys played indicates a large willingness on his part to play that role and contributes to it. Central to this mythology of course, was the Crimean plane crash from which Beuys claimed to have been saved by Tartars. The subsequent photographs of the event and the discrepancies between the several versions of this story that Beuys has given serve only to

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further doubt about the actual events. The post-war economic boom and prevailing materialism allowed for the creation of a gulf between them and now the past had to be forgotten for the sake of materialism.

Benjamin Buchloh observes that:

'Beuys "myth of origin" like every other individual or collective myth, is an intricate mixture of facts and memory material rearranged according to the dynamics of neurotic lie: that myth creating impulse that cannot accept for various reasons the facticity of the individuals autobiographic history.....2'

Paradoxically this event in Beuys career might have been far more believable had there been no photographic evidence, without which Beuys in this instance remained precariously balanced between the events of history and the need of mythology. Claude Levi-Strauss proposed that:

'While western society, has repressed this mythic mode of thinking into the unconscious mind, it hasn't been totally destroyed. Myths, as perceived by Levi-Strauss, are attempts to come to terms with the fundamental, but disagreeable, contradictions of human life. Their meaning is absorbed unconsciously, because they are subtly

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structured structures which allow the expression of aspirations and hopes that are incompatible with conscious experience. This meaning is not to be found in the elements of myth but in the way that they are combined. Myth, which functions on a symbolic level, manifests itself in emotional terms, but its fundamental power is intellectual.'

Beuys' myth of origin then can be read in terms of survival, in near death experience, mental and spiritual trauma, the means of rescue and healing offered by a primitive tribe, morally and spiritually whole against the fragmented disillusionment, sickness of modern society. This act of survival re-occurs again and again in Beuys's work. Out of this experience Beuys adapted the role of shaman with his characteristic fisherman's vest and shaman hat. The shaman was central to Beuysian philosophy and to his expanded theory of art which was essentially about language and communication, with the shaman as focus with his ability to move between many different levels, human, spiritual and natural. mediating between those worlds. Illustrating this Karen Berqvist Lindegren note:

'His work ... concerns the most fundamental relationship of people to myth and magic, a relationship that has been obscured by modern science and technology. His entire creation appears to be an heroic attempt to bridge the split between atavism and scientific domination which is reality

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threatens to devastate the contemporary world. He still has the courage to believe in the capacity for thought of free individuals and in the transformation and integration of archetypal ideas into the world of thought today'⁴

The construction of such a hermetic system of ideas and myths, necessarily leaves Beuys vulnerable to the obvious inconsistencies with history and art history inherent within such a system, Annette Michelson notes for example that Beuys's knowledge and use of electricity, consciously primitive, stops around 1830 with Faraday.⁵ The iconography within that system of ideas and myths can often seem elusive and ambivalent, this is especially so in linguistic terms. Language was central to Beuys's whole system of myths and ideas. Beuys was concerned with the widening of language especially through drawing, using signs and symbols in order to reach deeper levels of understanding "counter-pictures" - pictures of a mysterious, powerful spirit world.

'For me, it is the word that produces all images. It is the key sign for all processes of molding and organisation. When I use language, I try to induce the impulses of this power the power of evolution. But language is not to be understood simply in terms of speech and words. Beyond language as verbalization lies a world of sound and form impulses: a language of primary sound without semantic

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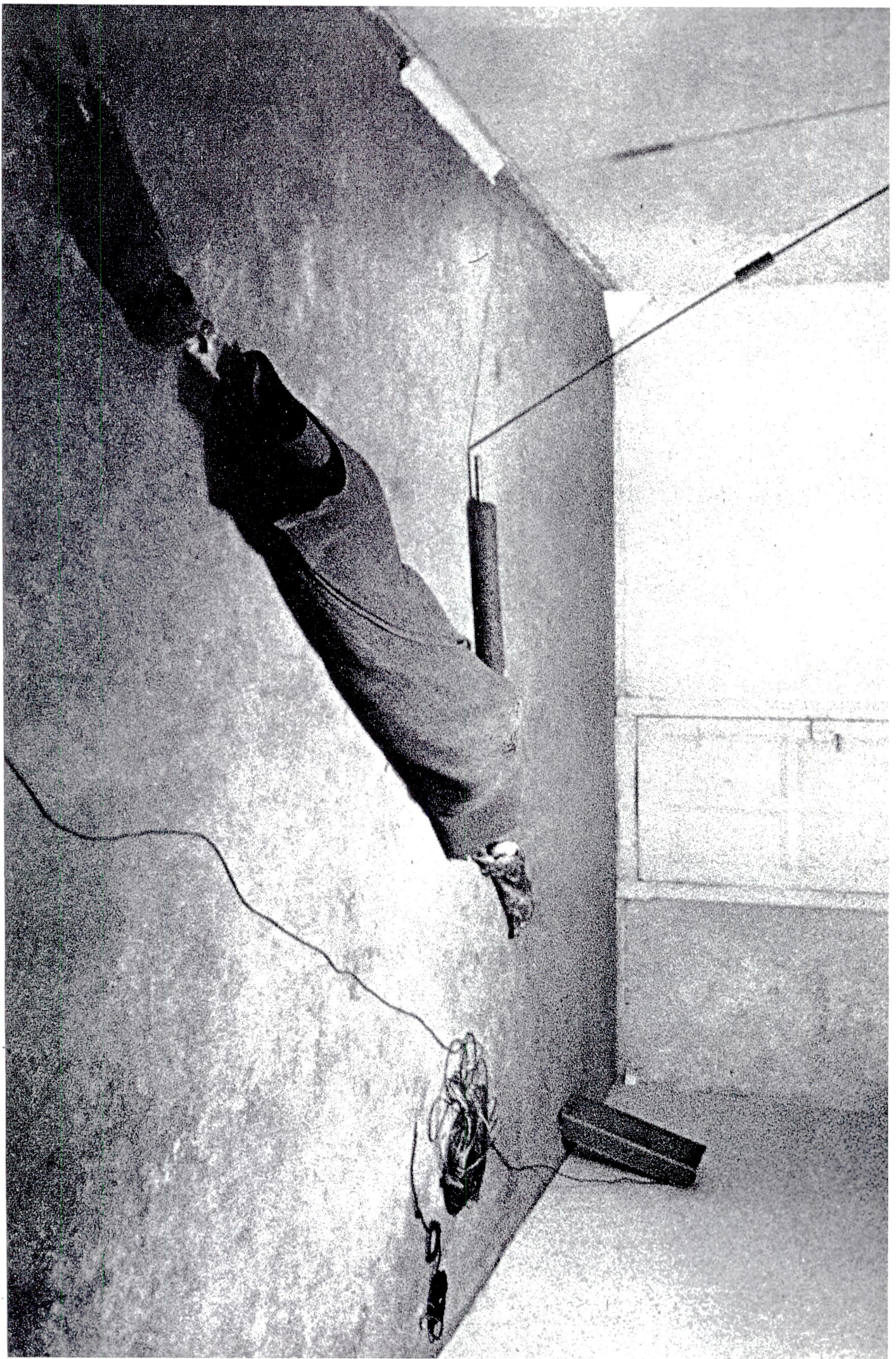


FIG. 2

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The theme central to the chief for instance was this exploration of language and levels of communication beyond human semantics by "appealing to atavistic and constructed powers.

'Such a performance always has a theory behind its partitur or score, which gives information without information. Acoustically its like using just the carrier wave as a conveyor of energy without loading it with semantic information. The wave carried the kind of sound found in the animal kingdom. The wave is 'unformed'; semantics would give it 'form' (Theory of Sculpture). The sounds I make are taken conscientiously from animals. I see it as a way of coming into contact with other forms of existence, beyond the human one'7

This action also illustrates Beuys's complex relationship with the natural world and with animals, who have always played an important function in Beuys's personal mythology. Hares, deer, horses, swans and so on are part of that personal menagerie, usually representing or expressing problems of language, thought and consciousness, areas we may not be able to deal with except through the special powers and personifications endowed on these animals, according to Beuys.

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'The animals bespeak immortal natural process because they in Beuys's words, "pass freely from one level of existence to another (and) represent the incarnation of the soul or the earthy form of spiritual beings with access to other regions'.⁸

Reinforcing Levi-Strauss's of analysis of the primitivism of myth Caroline Tisdall quotes Mircea Eliade on shamanistic beliefs in Siberia:

'The presence of a helping spirit in animal form, (or) dialogue with it in a secret languageis another way of showing that the shaman can forsake the human condition, is able in a word 'to die'. From the most distant times all animals have been conceived either as psychopomps that accompany the soul into the beyond, or as the dead persons new form. Whether it is the 'ancestor or the initiatory master', the animal symbolizes a real and direct connection with the beyond. In a considerable number of myths and legends, all over the world the hero is carried into the beyond by an animal'⁹

Beuys in his guise as shaman can be symbolized in the role of psychopomp, mediating between us and the animal world, or unknown, spiritual powers but especially as someone who is able

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to pass into the world of beyond confronting death, acting as a link, more specifically in a German context, a link between the material world and the spiritual, the here and now and the events of the past. Beuys is only is only effective in this role as an outsider, a visionary, distanced or apart from those events while attempting to transformation and evolution beyond the conditions of human existence.

'Mythology permits the artist to style himself as a creator who is unbound by historical conditions and is able to shape the world according to his own desires.'¹⁰

Thus Beuys's personal mythology, particularly his myth of origin can be read as working through the scars, mental blanks and repressions caused by the resulting involvement of Germany in the war. It can further, be read as an attempt to reconstitute the annihilated cultural memory, in Jungian terms Beuys is attempting to heal the feelings of 'alienation from a sense of purpose and fulfilment' through the role of shaman by reconnecting us with archetypal myths and symbols enabling us to unlock a spiritual dimension to ourselves and society.'

Myth and mythology are also key to the iconography of Kiefer, but Kiefer uses myths quite differently to Beuys. Similarly though, Kiefer deals with the trauma of the past, the consequences of war and fascism:

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.... Whereas Beuys derives his symbolism from direct experience of the war, Kiefer enacts an imaginative drama which fuses his observation of the landscape with a matrix of symbols culled from history and mythology.'12

Kiefer assembles myths and mythic fragments in order to exploit the different structures and levels created and achieved. It is only when fused together in this fashion that the new mythic drama acts, creating a new myth rather than illustrating old ones.

Kiefer then engages mythical tradition - in modern art as well as German history - only to deconstruct it to show how questionable and fragmentary it is today.'13

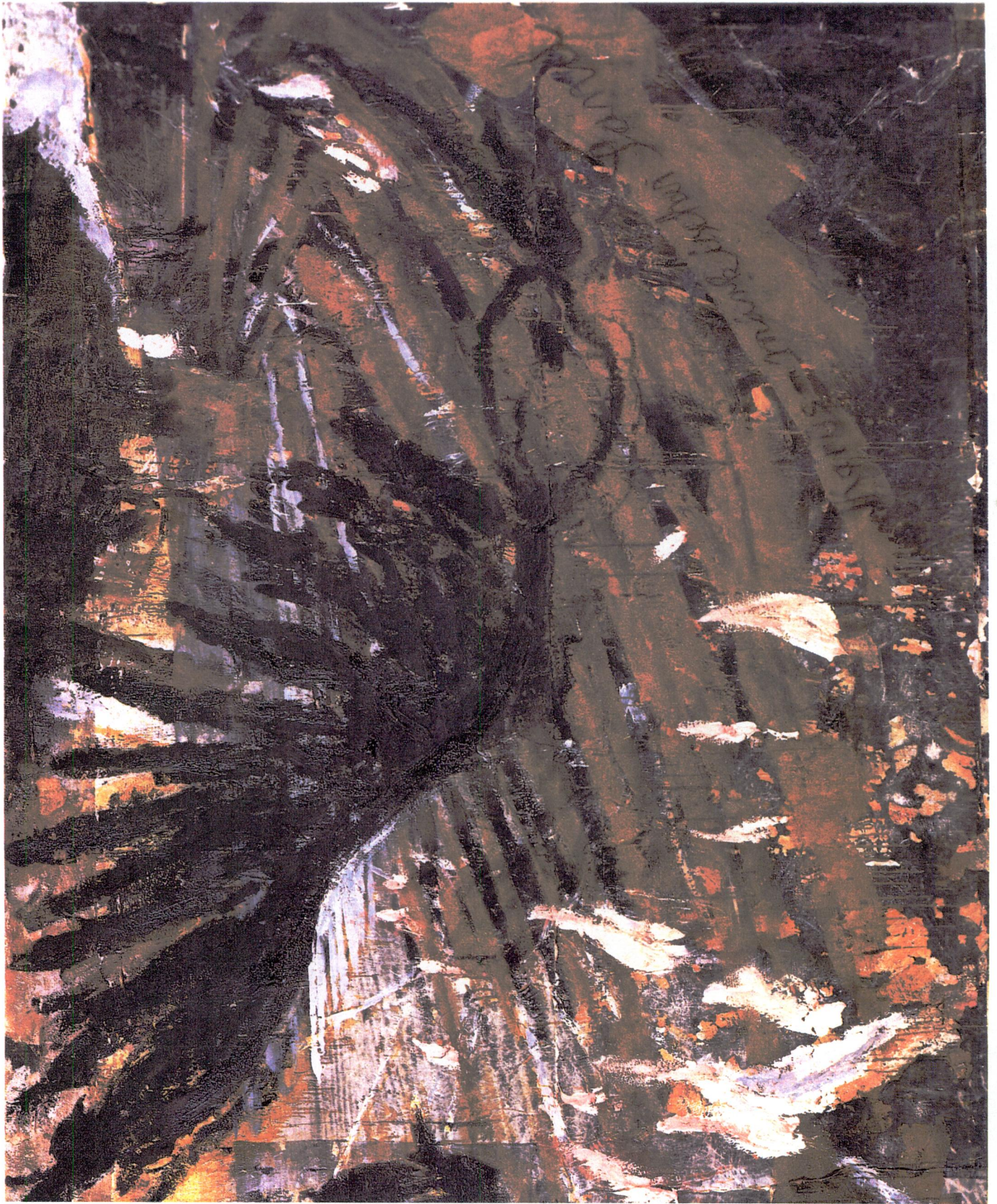
By deconstructing and then reconstructing elements of myth, Kiefer indicates the misuses and failings of myth in its past contexts, or more accurately, the abuses and misunderstandings of myth or tradition. This applies particularly to German myth and tradition but also to modern art. Myths then are used for their symbolic power in Kiefer's work but are prevented from becoming a glorification of teutonic ideals by distancing irony. In the Wayland series, for instance, Kiefer sometimes deliberately confuses the German words "Lied" and Leid", the former meaning sorrow, the latter joy. This punning also occurs with

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Nibelunglied and Herzeleide. The painting 'Icarus - March Sand' 1981 indicates some of the problems Kiefer encounters in using myth and history. The winged palette in the painting, flying above the north German landscape can be seen as representing the inescapable conflicts between art, myth and history. The winged palette seems about to crash into the ground below because the fires there, like the sun in the Icarus legend are melting the wax from his wings. The landscape is that of the Brandenburg Heath, the focus of many battles in the German history, the winged-palette seems caught against the high horizon of the painting, unable to escape and therefore unable to escape the fate of history. Kiefer acutely expressed the terror of history and how myth is linked to that history and never really escapes it. The palette too, of course, representing creativity signals an allegory of modern painting with Icarus the painter deemed against the pull of history yet attempting to transcend it though the mythic.

'Painting crashes, Redemption through painting is no longer possible, mythic vision itself is fundamentally contaminated, polluted, violated by history. The stronger the stranglehold of history, the more intense the impossible desire to escape into myth. But then myth reveals itself as chained to history rather than an history's transcendent order'.¹⁴

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The mythology Kiefer creates must finally be seen in the context of a personal mythology not a national tradition or identity. Of course Kiefer is questioning that identity and fragmenting that tradition.

'Kiefer does not and cannot offer a perfect solution, but can point to its relevance and necessity. By designing ways, possibilities and conjunctions, he prepares the climate for change, and in so doing, he joins the footsteps of old and contemporary system-makers in the same purpose: that of gnosticism, cabala and the so called science-fiction.'¹⁵

Both Kiefer and Beuys have developed their own myth systems to confront and work through the trauma of the past. In Beuys case it is through his role as shaman indicating the necessary rituals and beliefs for survival, while Kiefer points out the hollowness of certain aspects of myth in German history and uses myth with a greater degree of irony.

'Like Heidegger, Beuys attempted to regain a tragic world experience and a historic greatness that is surrounded by mythology. This is also at the core of Kiefer's work'.¹⁶

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12. Rupert Martin: 'Anselm Kiefer' Artscribe No. 43,
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HISTORY AND HEALING

'Kiefer offers art as a theoretical antidote for the terror of human history and the failure of mythic figures. It had served a similar function for Beuys, who has imagined it to have enormous, restorative power: "Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive offsets of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deathline".¹

Both artist were concerned with art as a dialogue with history, in Kiefer's case a sustained reflection on the events of history. By no means a straightforward narrative intended to relate historical incident in a conventional fashion, instead in Kiefer's work we see it dissolved and decomposed, then re-articulated into a new synthesis. Kiefer establishes a rhetoric between art and history focusing on historical figures, on fascism, on wartime operations, on architecture, on the Holocaust and on landscapes. Kiefer is also undoubtedly reviewing the German character and what it must mean to be a modern German, working as he does through some of the most aggressive and frightening episodes of German history. Donald Kuspit observes;

'By articulating German megalomania in profoundly abstract fantasies he reduces it to the symbolic fiction it always was. The "episodic" character of his works reflects the

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By articulating German megalomania in profoundly abstract fantasies he reduces it to the symbolic fiction it always was. The "episodic" character of his works reflects the



historical episodes that constitute the fiction, in effect dismembering it, denying its cohesiveness. With that loss of unity, the "German" evaporates into a series of discontinuous dream sequences, a narrative "tale told by an idiot'.²

The watercolour "To the Unknown Painter" 1980, the first of a series concerned with the dialogue between art and history, using monumental confrontational images of fascist architecture. In this series Kiefer suggests parallels between the artist and the soldier by substituting an artists palette for an eternal flame. Implicit in this seems to be a romanticism of artistic genius, possibly Kiefer's. This creates an ambiguous and uneasy relationship with the overpowering fascist architecture dominating these paintings, inviting a negative reading of the relationship between art and fascism in this series.

'Here then is the dilemma: whether to read these paintings as a melancholy fixation on the dreamlike ruins of fascism that locks the viewer into complicity, or instead, as a critique of the spectator, who is caught up in a complex web of melancholy, fascination, and repression'.³

These morbid interiors, open to the heavens, seem to symbolise a connection between earth and heaven through the medium of art represented by the artists palette. An indication maybe of art

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attempting to escape the ruins of fascism, the renewal of painting in the shadow of the violent past. But the melancholy fascination of these paintings and of the painter with their almost romantic evocation of the past, recalling the Nazi nostalgia and romanticism of the past, would seem in the German cultural context to be exerting a provocative influence on German recollection of the past,, confronting it with some of the more 'alluring' images of that buried past. Some sense of irony too, it seems Kiefer is mocking the modern artistic identity in light of the bankrupt pretensions of the past, In doing so Kiefer seems to be denying, the uniqueness of the modern German identity. Kiefer's contention then is that the German identity and character somehow became unbalanced, was too aggressive and materialistic and did not know how to control these impulses. Kiefer obviously doesn't intend to alter or correct these faults in the German self but rather he clears the ground for such a renewal to take place indicating that a wilfully sustained reflection on German history and traditions as well as an attempt to understand what it means to be German, must take place in order to work through the past, so often repressed. The emphasis though is not on the political or economic but the artistic as a means to effect that transformation:

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FIG. 5

landscape, the German people, and German history - in German insularity'.⁴

This effort of transformation can be seen in a painting like 'Shulamite' 1983, the title a direct link with the Paul Celan poem 'Death Fugue' a metaphoric description of Auschwitz., centering on two women, Marguerite and Shulamite. Celan was himself a survivor of the concentration camps and this poem is the inspiration of some of Kiefer's most powerful paintings. The setting for Shulamite is a blackened, vaulted interior, a hall at the end of which burn seven memorial flames, reminiscent of a jewish menorah, in memory of the victims of the Nazis. Implicit in the low, oppressive and blackened interior is the memory of the gas chambers. More successfully than in the 'Unknown Painter' series, Kiefer succeeds in subverting the meaning and intention of this piece of facist architecture. The transformation is from the morbid glorification of the Nazi death cult to the sombre remembrance of facism's victims. It is Kiefer's view that Germany maimed and lost part of itself when it set about destroying its jewish population and this painting to some degree honours both the jewish loss and the German one. Looking at images like this in Kiefer's work one feels like a deer caught in the lamp of history;

'yet isn't Kiefer's powerful analysis of the deadly elements in. German culture outweighed by the pleasure one takes in

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'yet isn't Kiefer's powerful analysis of the deadly elements in German culture outweighed by the pleasure one takes in

the heavy pathos of his paintings? It's impossible to escape the painterly intensity of these works. Yet at the same time uneasiness gathers. The underflow of Kiefer's cultic sites drowns spiritual or aesthetic distance. The emotionality, the monumentality, the gloomy pleasures of the flaming hearth in the close, vaulted rooms congeal Kiefer's subtle ambivalence into a theatrical shudder of horror'.⁵

Kiefer's 'subtle ambivalence' his use of a fascist iconography as well as his attempts to deal with and exorcise the ghosts of the German past are undoubtedly highly problematic, and have brought him much criticism especially when his work is read out of context. But Kiefer reminds us that the relationship of modern Germany to its past is a close one. This was highlighted during a conservative turning in German politics during the mid-eighties by a reactionary historical debate known as the 'Historikere Streit'.⁶ The debate by right-wing historians was an attempt to 'normalize' the past, the events of the Holocaust and Germany's fascist past, by 'historicizing' those events. The attempt it seems was to salvage the past or create a "usable past" for the benefit of the right-wing ideological agenda.

Kiefer's work, however deals with history in a double-edged fashion, there is degree of the ironic, even of humour in his work, lead wings, flying palettes, toy tanks or battleships in a bathtub and works like 'The Flooding of Heidleburg' and

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'Occupations':

'Kiefer quite directly mocks most of his thematic material, historical and mythic theatricalizing it into absurdity. In the process, some very serious, barely sane, perhaps poisonous meanings are released as an intoxicating poetic vapour.'⁷

In many ways it might be said that Kiefer is cultivating the ground already cleared by Beuys. Kiefer however does so by working through the issues of German history and identity. Beuys by contrast was almost ahistorical working within a political and revolutionary framework.

Kiefer is definitely not a history painter, rather he establishes settings in his paintings which may be historically based as in the case of his architectural paintings and which especially in the case of his landscape paintings functions as an historical stage upon which the various components, historical, mythical, cultural and so on are arranged into an allegorical form or composite structure which is then altered and deconstructed.

'(Kiefer) changes the context of paints employed in order for them to function differently in their new role or in the new plan.'⁸

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The need for an allegorical reaching or interpretation of Kiefer's work though can lead to an over literal interpretation of possible subtexts, not really addition to any understanding of a work of a work or its framework. An overly aesthetic response on the other hand to concentrate on the purely visual Kiefers intentions. The references in Keifer's work need a careful and balanced reading to achieve a meaningful equilibrium in the understanding of image, language, myth and so on.

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But does Kiefer, as is claimed actually expiate German historical guilt through his work and how does this related to his much fated position as the greatest contemporary European painter.

'By the provocative and varied nature of his work, it is evident that Kiefer accepts and embraces the notion of the modern artist who stands outside society, taunting it, its history, norms, taboos, myths and ideas about art craft'.¹⁰

Certainly Kiefer is a painter who raises troubling issues about

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German history to which he can offer no solutions but only indications of what is needed. Kiefer like Beuys realizes that forgiving and forgetting are not the same thing at all but Kiefer's need for a healing solution is artistic whereas Beuys's was motivated by wider social concerns. Beuys's work therefore was less overtly about the Holocaust or fascism though this could be read as implicit. The particular post-war context of Beuys's work and ideas is important. Germany had just passed its 'ground zero' and was focused very intently on economic rebuilding, not cultural or spiritual which would have carried with them the taint of the immediate past.

'The historical context for Beuys's hypothesis of individual creativity can be determined in a more specific fashion. Post-World-War II West German ideology has been characterised by de-historicization and concentration on the labour power of the individual. In an attempt to repress the memory of fascism, all historical context was obscured and all energies were directed to 'Wiederaufbau' ("Reconstruction"). In this perspective, the economic restration appeared as a 'Wirtschaftswunder' ("Economic Miracle"), and the work of the individual assumed mythical status'.¹¹

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Beuys was keenly aware of the striving for post-war prosperity in Germany, his work embodied that awareness with a certain sense of

irony, using everyday objects, materials of no real value, many of his sculptures or the remains of his performances seeming like leftovers from a quasi-scientific experiment, and anthropological investigation or a series of archaeological remains unearthed. Beuys in fact seemed keen to break any direct links with the historical in his work by endowing his work with a primitive, archaic ahistorical aura. In a discussion of Beuys's work at the Guggenheim Benjamin Buchloh argues:

"Historical thought on any level - whether general historical thought, art - historical thought, and attempt to acknowledge the specific conditions of a historical situation - is rejected by Beuys altogether. The history of post - Second-World-War Germany which is Beuys's own historical situation; the history of an emerging economically powerful society; the histories of specific art forms all of these are ignored, falsified, or mythified".¹²

It can be argued that Beuys was using this eclectic selection of history and its influences to remove himself from the immediate responsibilities of history in the aftermath of the Second-World War through his persona of shaman and healer. Beuys has been paralleled and superseded in this role by Kiefer. Beuys attempting to work through the framework of society but outside and apart from history, Kiefer addressing history rather than society. Beuys attempted to attach himself to the themes of

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German Romantic culture instead, cruelty, death, nature and time.

'I think I belong to this cultural tradition. But the historical continuity of the German Romantic tradition - the tradition of Novalis, and in paint Goethe - was broken by the positivistic concept of science with which which man carried out the industrial revolution. However the method I've taken up is not te same as relationship between man and transcendal powers, rather than that between man and matter'.¹³

There is some irony in Beuys's attachment to the Romantic in view of the immediate post-war situation of Germany and its subsequent economic drive. Donald Kuspit comments;

'Viewed in the context of contemporary German society, Beuys's is a penitential art reconstituting and reconsecrating the German mentality, restoring its umbilical connection with romantic nature'.¹⁴

Beuys's view of art was as a grandly utopian ideology, creative and having enormous therapeutic potential. Art was also essentially a language, a means of communication with his fellow man. Beuys was not only interested in renewing societies "connection with romantic nature" but also with renewing man's spiritual relationship with himself. Beuys's fundamental thesis

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was of course that "Each man is an artist" and this is repeated and reflected constantly throughout his work.

But although Beuys's work can be seen as ahistorical there are continuous references echoing through his work to the atrocities and notions of Germany's wartime past. In part his work can be seen as a homoeopathic process initiated against the trauma and horror of the past.

'Beuys's doctrines as well as his objects can be seen as a conscious parody, critical revision, or ambivalent reflection of early exposure to Nazi teachings. He himself has laid hints for such a reading, stating that "the human condition is Auschwitz" and preparing, on the twentieth anniversary of the attempt to assassinate Hitler, to raise the Berlin Wall by five centimetres. His art is indicating the specific traumas of a specific time, and it is doing so by subtle mimicry'.¹⁵

The elements of many of Beuys's sculptures, fat, blood, toe-nail clippings, moulds of teeth, bones, deer, hares, and images of skulls and the stags skeletons, all remnants of suffering or death. 'Tram Stop' (1976) for instance recalls the trains to the concentration camps with its odd of head and control suggesting the brutality of the 'final solution'. In 'Bathtub' 1966 Beuys suggests the piece is about birth, but equally the tub contains

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Fig. 6

sticking-plaster and fat-soaked gauze, the parallel here, cleanliness is again reminiscent of the 'final solution' the victims of the Nazis were after all fooled into believing the gas-chambers were showers. Beuys has said

"The whole thing is a therapeutic process. For me it was a time when I realized the part the artist can play in indicating the trauma of a time and initiating a healing process ".16

Beuys was speaking here in the late 1940's of his post-war impulses to become an artist, a therapeutic process for the artist as much as society. Beuys's 'Theory of Social Sculpture' was very much about process, change and evolution, every thing is in a state of change. Transformation of substance is central to Beuys's theory, it is the precursor of transformation taking place among people. 'Tallow' 1977 is about the transformation of substance. twenty tons of fat in five huge segments slowly melting, it is easier to read it though as past transformation of people into their basic substances rather than the future transformation of people through the liberating, spiritual creativity of art. Beuys' said;

"Similia similibus curantur, heal like with like, that is the homoeopathic healing process".17

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Is Beuys trying to reenact history, transforming tragedy into something less serious that can be accepted. The inexpressible horror of history mediated through art, suffering and trauma before a spiritual awakening;

"Chaos can have a healing character, coupled with the idea of open movement which channels the warmth of chaotic energy into order or form".¹⁸

Beuys was working with a past both escapable and impossible to deal with successfully. Kiefer like Beuys makes no obvious judgements in his work dealing with the past obsessively exploring a fascination with northern myth and Romanticism as well as with the traumas and ideologies of the fascist past.

"The taboos which Beuys illuminated in a subliminal fashion have been brought into the limelight by Kiefer, with a distancing of another generation".¹⁹

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NOTES:

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Beuys statement appears in his work "Directional Forces" 1974; quoted in London Institution of Contemporary Art,

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4. Donald Kuspit: Op. Cit. p.114
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6. Andreas Huyssen: Op. Cit. pp.27-28

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2. Donald Kuspit: The New Subjectivism, Art in the 1980's U.M.I. 1988
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3. Andreas Huyssen: Anselm Kiefer: The Terror of History, The Temptation of Myth, October 48 p.38
4. Donald Kuspit: Op. Cit. p.114
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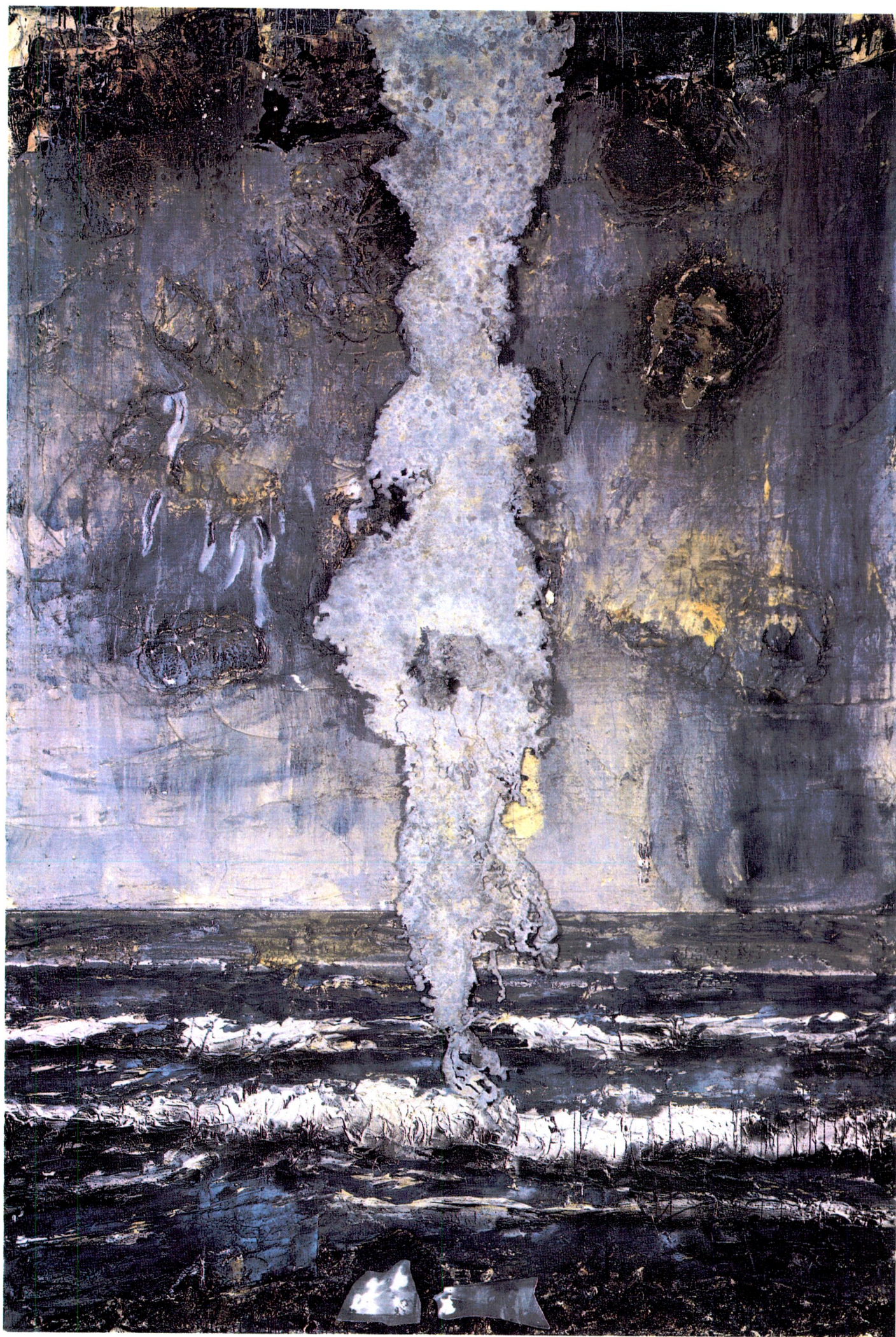


Fig. 7

EMANATIONS AND ALCHEMY

'Thus everything emanates from God only to be comprised in him at last and to be revoked in him'.¹

During the mid-eighties Kiefer became more interested in the themes of alchemy and jewish mysticism, moving away from specifically German themes. But Kiefer continued his explorations of themes of myth, the eternal and of sacred time. With this change in focus came a change in approach, from the opening of old wounds to be healed, the exorcising of old ghosts, to the transformation of the physical in which the search is for a mythology of the future. The transition is from the landscapes of northern Germany to more cosmic landscapes, settings for the exchanges between heaven and earth. In 'Emanation' 1984-86. just such a relationship is made physically manifest where a torrent of hot lead pours from the heavens into the sea.

'A flowing from heaven to earth is described both in jewish mysticism and in the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite. In the latter, the heavenly hierarchy is invisible to man until the appearance of the 'Divine Ray', the light that comes down and "restores us again to a higher spiritual condition". Likewise, the sixteenth-century jewish mystic Isaac Luria describes God's emanation; the outpouring of His attributes, as given in the ten sefiroth,

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are revealed as divine lights flowing into primeval space. As the lights rain down humanity attempts to catch them in vessels and thereby gain the benefit of these divine characteristics; evil, however, is included amidst the good. The vessels are understood to be flawed, and in the end there are more lights than the bowls can hold. The vessels shatter, loosing good and evil on earth. With the "Breaking of Vessels", there come still other worlds.' 2

In 'Emanation' 1984-1986 the top of the canvas, the heavens from which the lead pours, is burned and charred, below the lead are photographic fragments, images of fire, establishing the relationship between heaven and earth. The lead ray from heaven may be read as a metaphor for spiritual transformation, the flaming heaven signalling that transformation, mirrored below on earth by the photographic fragments of fire, maybe the spiritual attempting to transform the material. A similar work, 'Pouring (Ausgiessen) 1984-85;

..... suggests a possible source of inspiration: the once common New Years customs of Bleigiessen ('lead pouring'), where molten lead is dripped into a container of water and the resulting shapes are interpreted to augur the events of the coming year. Bleigiessen, a variant of ceromancy, was one of the many German folk customs that never really recovered from being officially 'discouraged' under the



FIG. 8

Third Reich.'3

This is one of only many associations lead has in Kiefer's work, at other times it is used with heavy irony, lead aircraft and propellers representing spiritual transcendence not so easily attained. It also has associations with magical talismen and in 'Women of the Revolution' 1986. It is used to preserve dried flowers against further change, at times in Kiefer's work it also serves to remind us that lead is resistant against the effects of radiation. Kiefer quite effectively combines the idea of lead's protective qualities with Egyptian myth in 'Osiris and Isis 1985-87. The basic myth relates death and dismemberment of Osiris by his brother Set who then dispersed throughout the world, the fourteen dismembered parts. Isis wife of Osiris scoured the world to recover all the parts which she did except for one, the penis. Isis replaced this with an artificial one which was then attached to the reassembled body in order to restore Osiris to eternal life.

The parallel is with nuclear fusion, the setting for which in the painting is a huge stepped pyramid, wired to seventeen pieces of china. At the heart of this is the idea of dismemberment and reunion. As with 'Emanation' 1984-86 Osiris and Isis, 1985-87 there is a relationship established between heaven and earth, the spiritual and the material. The tiers of the pyramid can be understood to symbolize different levels of a spiritual

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hierarchy, with the china shards representing Oisiris's body awaiting spiritual regeneration.

Transformation of the spiritual and the material were also part of Beuys vision.

'My intention is to stress the idea of transformation and of substance. That is precisely what the shaman does in order to bring about change and development; his nature is therapeutic.' 4

Important in Beuys's sculpture are self-transforming materials such as fat or felt. (felt is "inert chaos"), materials that correspond to spiritual change.

'I am interested in transformation, change, revolution - transforming chaos, through movement into a new order'.5

In 'Warm Time Machine' 1958 this is demonstrated, in the transformation of material, the generation of warmth, the production of energy. All these are necessary parts of the revolutionary process;

'..... a necessity for any evolutionary process. Transformation of the self must first take place in the potential of thought and mind. After this deep-rooted

change, evolution can take place. There is no other possibility in any understanding, and this was perhaps too little considered by Marx, for instance. The idea of revolution coming from outer conditions, in the industrial field or the so called reality of economic conditions, can never lead to a revolutionary step unless the transformation of soul, mind and will power has taken place'. 6

Rudolf Steiner's spiritual philosophy anthroposophy was deeply influential on the development of Beuys's theory of sculpture and of his spiritual outlook.

'Beuy's ideas about the construction of the trichotomy of the body, soul and spirit, about reincarnation, about evolution, the importance of the Crucifixion as a historical event, his theories about birth, death and rebirth, about intuition as the highest form of reason, power of will and the potential limitless knowledge - all have connections with Rudolf Steiner'. 7

Beuys's theory of sculpture, his conception of chaotic matter transformed into ordered form through sculpture movement and similarly warmth into cold;

chaos		order
undetermined		determined
organic	movement	crystalline
warm		cold
expansion		contraction 8

In his 'Lectures on Bees' given in 1923 Steiner expressed similar theories with honey, pollen gathering and comb structures. central to Beuys's Theory of Sculpture, is the idea of warmth to cold, a theme linked with metaphors of natural and social behaviour and analogies of social and spiritual production. Steiner in his Lectures on Bees had discussed this in terms of;

'..... two formative processes: the "crystalline - anorganic" construction of the honey combs, and the "organic - energetic" production of warmth within these combs. By analogy, Beuys could declare state and society (or, as he called them in a telling biologicistic metaphor, the "social organism") to be works of sculpture. In this fashion artistic practice was the paradigm of all human activity, and creativity was presented as a means to shape and change society'. 9

Beuys proposed this through social revolution and evolution of the self achieved through spiritual transcendence.

`but creative power must be released from its bondage to its own materials, and for Beuys this magical release of creative power was heralded by alchemy, at once the truly modern and spiritually archetypal art'. 10

Beuys art is alchemical in that it a search for a wider understanding of art, the effort to transmute the artistic and the personal through the seemingly incompatible ideas of both social and artistic revolution, through creativity. In this,

`Imagination is creative powerimagination takes precedence over all. Resolute imagination can accomplish all things' 11

Beuys was essentially alchemical in nature himself, change and transformation being so central to his philosophy. describing this rather gnomically Beuys said "I am the hare", the hare representing a sign of alchemical transformation and chemical change. 12

The alchemical art is then for Beuys a transformation of the material into the spiritual with art as the demonstration of the spiritual in material form.

'The whole aim of alchemy, as Paracelsus notes is to articulate" the inherency of a thing, its nature, power, virtue, and curative efficacy, with any foreign admixture' 13

Beuys's alchemical motivation is that of the philosopher or the poet, synthesis of knowledge, spirit and form.

'The alchemist and the artist share the same ambition: to make in order to know, and to know in order to transform both themselves and the world Alchemy and art aspires to become a system of knowledge and an instrument of transmutation' 14

Beuys's interest in alchemy is as a coherent part of his overall philosophy, and expansion of his theories of sculpture and transformation. Kiefer also employs alchemical, cabalic and gnostic influences in his work, though he is not so much interested in them as belief systems as in the idea that they explore common truths. In explaining the nature of these ideas Kiefer also provides personal insight into the nature of Beuys work.

'I do not portray despair. I am always in hope of spirtual purification. My work is spirtual/psychological (geistig/psychologisch). I want to show the conjunction of

the spirtual and psychological in a total environment.

Beuys was a total idealist, he wanted to change people. I want to show something, and then things may change . People think Beuys's work was dark, but this is to misunderstand it. He shows us the truth, which is one part of life. He gives us the truth to enjoy. His art is joyous.' 15

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5. Kim Levine: Joseph Beuys; The New Order, Beyond Modernism, Essays on Art from the 70's and 80's Harper and Row, New York p. 173

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CONCLUSION

Both Kiefer and Beuys have been remarkable for the breath of their efforts to establish a coherent synthesis in their respective ownes, a synthesis of history , myth, spiritually, philosophy and so on. Remarkable especially for their ambition. Since his death in 1986 the cult of personality that had grown up around Beuys has diminished considerably, to be replaced by a more level-headed appraisal of his work, action and ideas. Beuys himself claimed that his best work was his expanded concept of art.

'If one is willing to enlarge art - the concept of art- to such an extent that it would also comprise the concept of science, and thus the whole of human creativity, then it follows that change of the conditions is a matter of human volition, which means: If man realized the power of self-determination, then starting from it he will one day build democracy. He will abolish all non-democratic institutions simply by practising self-determination'. 1

To achieve this Utopian self-determination was Beuys aim, something he attempted through his efforts with the Free International University. Beuys does not seem to have been sufficiently aware politically, the idea of self-determination largely being dependent on economic and social factors. Rather,

this can be understood in terms of attempting to prove moral and spiritual values which Beuys attempted to prove were intrinsic to things.

In his welding of socialism and mysticism, Beuys reveals his roots in German Romanticism, a reaction against the analytic investigations of Kant in favor of ideas which encompassed the spiritual life as well. He shares the romantic ideal of knowledge seen in the poetry of Goethe and Schiller, expressing man's position in nature, part of the inner unity of all things, the sublime and exalted. Beuys's belief that every person is an artist is similar to Novalis philosophy in "Heinrich Von Ofterdingen", which postulated that poetry is the innermost essence of all things that every man is a poet, and that the mystical nature of the word reveals the nature of the world'. 2

Ultimately though it will be the sculptures and the remains of actions that will speak most eloquently about Beuys and his theories. Beuys will always have to be understood in the light of the context from which he emerged, war-torn Germany. The role of artist which Beuys attempted to redefine so radically will be one of the most important questions of his legacy and one of the keys to understanding Beuys. Kiefer has proved himself just as provocative in terms of his relationship with history and art history, his questions of himself and of those who view his work,

questions of identity, historical location and of culture. Like Beuys, Kiefer is interested in overcoming the fatalistic aspects of German history and culture.

'Kiefer's paintings definitely open up the hornets nest of German repression of history, and this achievement must be stressed. Yet to reduce the work to such "politicum" will not do. Between bunker and floating palette, between scorched earth and Wagnerian temple for the unification of art, between the catastrophic end of culture and the great creative vision, the painter battles for the life of painting for art's resurrection.' 3

Kiefers use of material on the painted surface, shellac, straw, oil, lead, sand and photographic collage recalls the link in Beuys work between idea and material. And like Beuys, Kiefer seeks to transform disorder and chaos, the chaos of the past into order through distillation into a purified spirituality.

Painting is that means then because painting equals burning, and the message is as much personal as cultural, the burning fire of the spirit overwhelming the past, trial by fire to temper art.

'"Scorched earth" is a technical term used by the army. Troops in retreat burn the area they are leaving behind so that the enemy will not be able to produce on this land

anymore. When applied to painting, this does not mean that I want to illustrate a regular military operation, but that I wish to portray the present day problems in the art of painting. If you wish, you can view it as the new beginning which each painting must make again, everytime. Each artwork destroys the one that precedes it. The earlier artworks still exist, but no longer for the artist. They live on in the museum and take on a different character'.⁴

Kiefer's outlook however is fundamentally different from Beuys, Kiefer is of a younger generation struggling against the guilt and responsibility of something he and his generation was not responsible for, hence a strong sense of ambivalence about being German in Kiefer's work. Beuys's work was essentially about the individual, primarily Beuys himself. His work expressed itself in terms of suffering, survival and transformation.

and yet Beuys remains a challenge to other artist, not because of the success he has had in creating a cult of personality, but in his sense of art's mission, which the cult of personality is a distortion of. Baudelaire once worth that artist had to face the choice of "art for arts sake" or " inseparable from social utility". Beuys, with his half-shamantistic, half-scapegoat stance, is trying to created a communally and personally useful art, redemptive of communal and social possibilities'.⁵

Within a German context then, Kiefer being amongst the most historically minded of his generation seems to have assumed the privileges of primogenitor since Beuys death, but Kiefer has a different agenda in mind as his recent development shows. Nevertheless Kiefers art has many points of common reference in Beuys's art not least the question of being German and what that means.

NOTES;

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