

## Anselm Kiefer: Art as Atonement

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Born March 8, 1945, less than two months before the suicide of Adolf Hitler, German artist Anselm Kiefer is far too young to remember firsthand the Fuhrer and his "1,000-year Reich."<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the Nazi catastrophe is Kiefer's all-consuming subject. Hitler's perversion of the German nation and culture is the deep shadow that sometimes merely lurks in the background of Kiefer's art, but more often darkens the entire foreground. Somber, guilt-ridden, accusing, mocking, enigmatic – Kiefer's vision of life, religion, ideology, national identity, and history has been charred by the flames of the Holocaust. Many of his later canvases look like they have been worked over with a blow torch in order to bring them to completion. One of his favorite techniques is to pour a blob of melted lead onto his already ashen canvas, which serves to heighten the suggestion of incineration. One cannot help but ask - Are we looking inside the oven chambers of the crematoria?

Kiefer is a self-conscious, deliberately "German" artist. As such, he is engaged in profound dialogue with his heritage. Many allusions to German culture and history in his work are likely to go unrecognized by the first time American viewer, especially anyone who has not read some of the growing critical literature on Kiefer or the excellent guide by Mark Rosenthal to the Kiefer exhibition now touring the United States. For example, frequently appearing in his works are zinc bathtubs which function variously - sometimes as a crucible of blood, sometimes as a representation of the English Channel (and Germany's failure to cross it in World War II). In another instance Kiefer utilizes a photograph of a bathtub apparently filled with glassy smooth water on whose surface the artist himself stands while giving the Nazi salute. The irony of this allusion is compounded if one knows that in the 1930s and 40s the Nazi Party allocated such tubs for every German home to "insure a minimum standard of hygiene." Or that a joke current during the Nazi period was that Hitler walked on water because he could not swim. But such knowledge is not essential for the viewer to be seized by the biting force of Kiefer's use of the bathtub image.

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Two of Kiefer's works that bear the same title – "Ways of Worldly Wisdom" – gain impact if one realizes that he borrowed the title from Bernhard Jansen, a sanguine



Ways of Wordly Wisdom, Arminius' Battle, Anselm Kiefer

Jesuit theologian who in the 1920s, in his apologetic efforts to give rational justification for Catholicism, drew on the writings of a number of German philosophers who, ironically, also proved to be useful foils in the apologetics of Nazi ideologues. Yet one does not need to know such facts in order to be directly affected by Kiefer's paintings. The intent of both versions of "Ways of Worldly Wisdom" is evident, as the artist superimposes the faces and/or the names of various German thinkers against the background of a brooding dark forest, with lines of connection drawn in a random, snaky, and seemingly mindless manner from individual to individual like a psychotic flow chart. It matters little that the viewer may not be familiar with all the thinkers' names or their specific ideas. The larger point is powerfully made. Germany's present moral and spiritual crisis – and the residue of guilt that Kiefer contends still haunts its people – is a continuing development of the very Germanic mind-set which Nazism was able to draw upon, albeit in its own uniquely perverse way.

To what extent Germany is fairly represented in Kiefer's ideological campaign, the Germans themselves are in a far better position than I to decide. The value of Kiefer's work for Americans, however, lies in his ability to stand on his self-chosen Teutonic foundations and yet give universal significance to symbols which in the hands of a lesser artist would yield only a parochial, nation-bound statement (many lesser German artists are trying to plow the same ground as Kiefer but by and large they are producing works marked by shrill sensationalism) Kiefer's work asks us all such questions as: Is the German war guilt merely a peculiarly intense manifestation of the universal blood guilt of the human race? Are Nazi atrocities simply extreme examples of the atrocities required of all nations and classes if they are to survive? One need not even agree with the premise of such a question to grant the importance of its being raised. (One wonders what the Reinhold Niebuhr of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* would have thought about the working premises of Kiefer's art.)

Kiefer is a deliberately, if idiosyncratically, religious painter. Allusions to his own strangely skewed versions of Christianity, Judaism, Gnosticism and alchemy abound, and he has acknowledged that he thinks a great deal about religion "because science provides no answers." Consider, for example, his powerful two-paneled work

titled "Father. Son. Holy Ghost." On the upper panel is painted and drawn an architectural interior. Interior scenes of neoclassic National Socialist architecture are a frequent subject for Kiefer, but in this work he depicts the crudely built interior of an attic that looks much like the barracks of a concentration camp. With its three steamy windows, the interior is empty except for three faintly drawn burning chairs suggesting the Trinity as it is being consumed in the fires of the Holocaust. The lower panel pictures the floor of a dense pine forest – romantically mysterious, confining and bleak. From the living timber of stark, impenetrable nature comes the raw wood of human cruelty and the burning seats of our religious hopes. The "God is Dead" theologians and our current theological deconstructionists can claim a profound ally in Kiefer.



Father. Son. Holy Ghost.  
Anselm Kiefer

In "The Order of Angels," one of his later paintings using the ideas of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Kiefer paints a singed, forlorn landscape. Out of the cramped sky of the upper-right-hand corner, irregular and broken lead strips serve to symbolize a halting emanation of angels (each with its name painted on celestial placards), down from the sky to the earth's surface. Thus grounded, each angel's name is replaced by a number, and the emanated angels themselves are portrayed as snakes, wriggling on the scorched earth. Good and evil, God and death are intimately juxtaposed, like yin and yang. It has been suggested by some that Kiefer intends to leave the viewer bewildered by such pictures. But I find them about as bewildering as a roundhouse punch aimed at the nose.



The Order of Angels, Anselm Kiefer

A recent work, "Iron Path" (1986), shows a bleak, gray, incinerated landscape in which a railway track leads from the foreground to a junction at which the track splits and goes off in two directions to nowhere. "Iron Path" evokes the photographs of the rail yards at Auschwitz, and like most of Kiefer's recent paintings, it is very large.

His work "Osiris and Isis" (1985-1987), however, is downright huge (150" by 220 1/2"). It pictures a massive copper-toned pyramid. Copper wires lead from the top down to the base, where the wires terminate in bits of ceramic fragments. Combining in Kiefer's own personalized and enigmatic way elements from ancient Egyptian religion and modern electrical power, the work's specific message is imprecise, but its mood is



Osiris and Isis, Anselm Kiefer

oppressive and pessimistic. Is atomic power the new means by which the gods of Egypt and all other gods are to die again? Are the wires the tentacles through which is transmitted the hellish energy of the modern world - energy that makes our present environment as inhospitable in its own way as was that of National Socialist Germany in its?

The current exhibition of Kiefer's work is too vast to allow descriptions of each painting. The very cost of mounting and

moving so comprehensive a show makes it all the more remarkable that an artist who had generated so much hostility among so many critics at the beginning of the decade in both the United States and Germany would have survived the firestorm of criticism and receive solid support from such establishment stalwarts as the Lannan Foundation and the Ford Motor Company. It is a manifest indication of the extent to which, in our so-called postmodern context, alienation is still "in." In our age the right talent at the right time can become prominent by raking over the ashes of Auschwitz. Certainly Kiefer's success with the American art establishment is not unrelated to the fact that his art allows us to deflect our nagging awareness of our own national guilt (Hiroshima, Vietnam, racism, Imperialism) — to the *real* beast, Adolf Hitler. There is a certain perverse comfort in assuring ourselves that while national crimes may be inevitable, nonetheless we are not in the same class as the Nazis.

To say that Kiefer is a modern German artist is tantamount to saying that he is an expressionist, for German art in the 20th century has been overwhelmingly expressionistic and existentialistic. There is a distinct line from such early 20th-century expressionists as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, Max Beckmann, Lovis Corinth, Oskar Kokoschka, Max Ernst, George Grosz, Otto Dix, Paul Klee, Emil Nolde and the Russian emigre Wassily Kandinsky to late 20th-century German art in general and to Kiefer in particular. Expressionism is an art which seeks, as critic Wieland Schonied puts it, "to fuse feeling and the object of feeling." The real subject of expressionist art is not the object itself but the artist's feeling about the object. It is above all an art of "passion, the ecstatic assimilation and appropriation of the world." Critic Christos M. Joachimides is also correct in asserting that "judged according to the aesthetic canon which developed from Post Impressionism, art as an existential assertion of the self is ugly art." (Both Schonied and Joachimides are quoted in *German Art in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Joachimides et al. [Prestel-Verlag, 1985])

Even before World War I, German art had taken an expressionist turn. Often savage and always tinged with a sense of the tragic, it was an art deeply influenced by the existentialism and irrationalism of Friedrich Nietzsche. In many ways, the reason that the expressionistic, existentialistic, dialectical theology of Karl Barth's *Letter to the Romans*, in all its drastic negation, caused such a sensation in Germany in 1922 just *after* the war was that the expressionist and existentialist mood was culturally far advanced there *before* the war. For many, the war simply confirmed the prophecies of the great German expressionists. What is true of post-World War I theology is also true of German philosophy. The most influential German philosopher between the wars was Martin Heidegger, whose indebtedness to Nietzsche and his spiritual kinship with the expressionists were obvious.

Because Nietzsche's thought was appropriated by Hitler and Nazism (however legitimately or illegitimately the Nazis understood that self-contradictory philosopher – and the jury is forever out on *that* question), Nietzsche came under a cloud in Germany immediately after World War II. But such an eclipse could not be expected to last, and at present Germany is experiencing a Nietzschean revival, Kiefer is plainly indebted, as were his early 20<sup>th</sup> century German expressionist predecessors, to elements within the Nietzschean mind-set.

To be sure, Kiefer's art does not simply repeat that of earlier expressionists. Nor was his appropriation of Nietzsche as enthusiastically apocalyptic as theirs, his art is post-Holocaust, post-Hitler. With benefit of hindsight, Kiefer can see more clearly than they the dark side of Nietzsche's nihilistic exposure of the shallowness and hypocrisy, of 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois culture – an exposure that seemed liberating to the early expressionists. Furthermore, partly under the influence of his great teacher, Joseph Beuys, Kiefer's art is more historical and more self-consciously ideological than that of most of his expressionist forebears, whose orientation was generally more personal, psychological and sensual and far more coloristically vital. Nevertheless, like theirs, his art depends on passionate internalization of his subject - even if it is a subject he does not personally admire.

In explaining his early books of artistic photography - particularly *Occupations*, which contains many photos of him giving the Nazi salute against a variety of backgrounds – Kiefer offers a comment that is consistent with his expressionistic need to “fuse” himself with his subject: “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 be a fascist.”

With an almost messianic sense of mission, from the outset Kiefer took it upon himself to thrust the faces of his fellow Germans into the abrasive realities of their country's Nazi past. Clearly he believes that a sizable residue of Hitler's spirit still

resides in the German soul. Is he also aware that if this is true, then the Nazi residue must reside in his own soul as well, and not simply as a matter of his romantically extravagant but deliberately self-controlled program to “be a fascist” (a decision he can turn on and off at will) ? I cannot say. However, Kiefer’s art raises serious questions in my own mind as to whether it may unwittingly help to nurture some of the very beliefs and attitudes he hates.

Kiefer does not, in my opinion, consciously intend finally to end in nihilism. Yet his determination never for one moment to permit the horror of the Nazi regime to leave the foreground, leads him to create a pictorial world which is fundamentally without faith, hope or love. Even where these virtues of the One who alone is the only perfect atonement are wistfully alluded to in Kiefer's work, his constantly interjected reminder that *all* things are completely subject to the same corruption that Hitler brought upon German culture so overwhelms his visual field that nothing remains except scorched-earth, dead gods, and the shattered ruins of the Third Reich. How can there be healing when Kiefer is driven by a need to open and ever reopen old sores?



Margarete, oil and straw on canvas, Anselm Kiefer

In this decade Kiefer began a series of so-called “straw paintings” on which he glued stalks of straw, sometimes in patterns, sometimes randomly. As Mark Rosenthal observes, Kiefer “thinks of straw as a kind of manure that is a form of energy that provides warmth in the winter.”

Straw a symbol of hope? Perhaps, but it is also a symbol of fragility, impermanence, and combustibility. As Rosenthal goes on to say, “Kiefer is uncomfortable when his art is positive or perceived to be so.” Thus, the use of straw, hinting as it does of a certain “manure of hope,” is overwhelmed in the burned-out context of the artist’s larger vision. That which might have opened the door to hope is explored for its potential to symbolize despair.

Moreover, Kiefer’s bleak perspective is rendered in such massive, extremely well-crafted, grandiloquent dimensions! In their immensity, many of his works are vaguely suggestive of Wagnerian opera sets or perhaps the huge wall-sized Baroque paintings of Peter Paul Rubens – that is, if Rubens’s paintings had been reworked with a flamethrower. To give such monumentality to such unyielding hopelessness is to suggest - perhaps even to demand - that nihilism is the way and the truth and the life. Ironically, Hitler’s nihilistic starting point has been curiously surrendered to him by Kiefer, his sworn enemy.

In Kiefer's art, God, if not dead, is a serpent. A god symbolized by a serpent is a god in whom good and evil are equal principles. Many moderns have argued that this is what history reveals ultimate reality to be - sometimes benign and rich with the bounty of life, and other times cruel and unjust in its utter arbitrariness. Since life in this world is contradictory and brutally unfair, so too, such thinking concludes, must be the only God who is realistically conceivable. But is not such a schizoid god perfectly served by the schizoid ethics of those guards who could torture Jewish children in the death camps, then go home at night and gently bounce their own children on their knees? Did not the SS guards claim for themselves the status of heroes - men (and in some cases women) who had the courage to keep in balance the appropriate brutality and the appropriate gentleness that a nihilistic view of ultimate reality requires of the "superman"?

From the beginning the relationship between Nazism and expressionism produced bitter ironies. Hitler's repression of modern art is instructive in this regard. In 1937 in Munich, the Fuhrer began a bizarre campaign against "degenerate art." The works of 112 modern artists, most of them German expressionists, were gathered in a large-scale traveling exhibition designed to illustrate what he termed the "degenerate Jew-boy" tendencies of those so-called "artists" who wished to inflict their "humbug" on the German people. Modern artists, Hitler argued, are either the victims of appalling defects of vision, or they are genetic mutants, or perhaps simply criminal frauds. Eyewitnesses claimed that in at least one of his harangues against modern art, he actually frothed at the mouth.

Hitler's maniacal hatred of German expressionism stemmed, I think, from the fact that he had enough of an artist's eye to discern something of what was going on. Expressionism opened the window to the madness (Augustine might have called it original sin) that is in us all. But Hitler, who supremely exemplified the kind of disorder that the expressionists gazed at in rapt fascination, could not face the self that their art exposed. Thus the inflated rhetoric of his speeches, so perversely expressionistic, was his own artistic self's outlet, although visually he could abide only the dull, oppressive grandiosity of National Socialist neoclassicism. Since

Hitler could not face the searchlight that modern art turned on his personal madness, he was totally incapable of recognizing that in expressionism there was also a great deal of health - above all, the health of its extravagant affirmation of life despite life's ambiguity and tragedy.

Of course, not all the artists pilloried by Hitler would have seen themselves as his natural enemies. Indeed, Emil Nolde, whose subject matter was frequently the most specifically Christian of all the major expressionists, was himself a Nazi - even though his work was singled out for particular abuse by the Nazi regime. As scholar Georg

Bassmann (in *German Art of the Twentieth Century*) persuasively contends, had Hitler and Goebbels looked favorably on modern art, their support of it could have provided Nazism a bridge to the “liberal educated middle class.” The German Art Society’s Management Committee saw this possibility when it informed the Nazi government, “We beg to be of service.” Granting that modern art contained too many contradictions to have provided Germany with a “state art,” Bassmann is no doubt correct in claiming that as many artists that could have been co-opted by the regime were. I would add too many intellectuals, including Heidegger. Those artists who would have been willing to go along might have added powerful visual propaganda to Hitler’s own violent verbal expressionism.

For all his power and talent, Kiefer has not, I would argue, found the real truth of the human situation, and-so there is a basic contradiction running through all his work. If it were actually true that everything we are and do is inevitably corruptible (including art and the artist), and that all the fruit of human labor is but the meat and drink of corruption, why would Kiefer continue to create monuments to despair? It is evident that despair and nihilism feed upon themselves. A supposedly meaningless world is an invitation to the next “superman” to arise and impose his own version of order upon it. Granted, Kiefer expresses loathing for Hitler, but since that very loathing is itself corruptible, why doesn’t Kiefer sink into quietism and create nothing, thus giving the inevitable corruptive process nothing with which to work?

The answer is, in part at least, that Kiefer is driven by a kind of truncated, forlorn sense of hope, which nonetheless he cannot permit to surface because of his programmatic need to resurrect the horror of the Holocaust as if it were the first thing to be said about everything. If only he could let go of his self-acknowledged (and self-induced) pessimism and embrace the truth about human sin.

Kiefer is a salient example of the way in which modern culture has generally lost its sense of sin and thus has fallen prey either to a Kiefer-esque self-consuming sense of irony and pessimism, on the one hand, or, on the other, to the shallow bourgeois denial of tragedy which Kiefer set himself to puncture.

Without a faith in the living God, there can be no sense of sin. For sin is the radical acknowledgment that indeed something is wrong in the world, but it is also the recognition that at root what is wrong is our warped relationship to God. Therefore, since the living God is eternally in the right, we as God’s creatures can, by the righteous grace of the very One from whom we stand alienated, in fact be set right. The saying is true: a radical doctrine of sin is the most optimistic appraisal of the human condition possible consistent with realism.

Realism, however frank, however uncompromisingly critical, ought never to be the occasion for black despair. While it is the hard reality that the Lord of life came into

this world only to be brutally tortured and slain, it is equally the hard reality that he rose again and lives. As the ancients knew, "Christ became what we are that he might make us what he himself is,"

Thus the final reality is not that all works of human creativity are pervertible, but that they are redeemable.