

## The Master of the Nigredo.

### *The Art of Anselm Kiefer*

Some time ago I saw the exhibition “Eating the Universe” in Düsseldorf<sup>1</sup>. My inner hunger could not be satisfied with outdated fiddling around with food. The exhibit only arouse my appetite, and when not in the halls than in the bookstore, I found satisfaction to it. The following image caught my attention on the top of an album:



*A. Kiefer: Star Picture (1996)*

A naked man, lying on the naked ground under the sky dusted with millions of stars... Finally, there I recognized myself as a human, between Earth and Heaven, lonely and defenseless, exposed in an enormous universe. This was my first encounter with Anselm Kiefer. Without hesitation, I bought the album which introduced me an artist of an extremely wide palette whose works seemed to be all somber and thoughtful.

Few months later came the opportunity to see Kiefer’s works in reality. Twenty-two artworks from the private collection of the Grothe family, dating from the 1980s to the present day, were exhibited at the Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp<sup>2</sup>.

Full of expectations, I entered the exhibition. It was a stunning experience. I saw huge and immensely dense creations. The monumental canvases, often reaching several meters in length and height, would include a wide range of materials: paint, plaster, earth, sand, straw, ceramic, lead, dried flowers. The whole collection exhaled an air of rust and decay and filled the space with the view of endless, monotonous, devastated, dark and lonely lands. However, these apocalyptic scenes were never empty: they were fully loaded with historical, mythical and spiritual references; most often Kabbalistic motifs. What was obvious at the very first sight: that Kiefer is an artist of extraordinary ambitions.

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<sup>1</sup> “Eating the Universe” Food in Art, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf. November 28, 2009 - February 28, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> The exhibition is jointly organized by Antwerp City Museums, Museum for Contemporary Art in Antwerp (M HKA) and the Antwerp Royal Museum of Fine Arts (KMSKA). The exhibition is open from 23 October, 2010 until 27 March (extended by two extra months due to high visitor numbers).



Bohemia Lies by the Sea (1995)

Whatever huge they are, Kiefer's creations are also extremely detailed. Every bit of them is intended to speak. What seems from the distance as a monotonous, devastated, destructed and infernal land proves to be an array of beautiful small worlds at a close view. It is in the nature of ruins (and most modern cities): they look tristful at first but they nurture miniature paradises when one gets near. Kiefer masterfully handles the different scales.

For many, Kiefer is a magician, an alchemist; the big kahuna of contemporary art. The German artist (born in Donaueschingen, in 1945) who abandoned his studies in law and literature in order to pursue art at the academies of Freiburg, Karlsruhe and Dusseldorf, entered the art scene in the '70s. He made name with performances reflecting on Nazism and German Nationalism, e.g. mimicking the Hitlergruß at the Coliseum or other landmarks. From the '80s he changed to more romantic, dark brown, earthy creations and from this time his themes include references to ancient Hebrew and Egyptian history and mythology. Although the general tone of his work has not changed ever since, his symbolism has gradually widened to almost cosmic scales.

Presently Kiefer is one of Germany's most lauded contemporary artists. And not just that. He inspires such mentions as "the most intellectually and spiritually ambitious creator in any medium at work today" or "Kiefer knowingly transcends the limits of any visual art"<sup>1</sup>. His paintings, drawings and installations appear all over the world in some of the most prestigious private and public collections. In 1990 he was awarded the Wolf prize, in 1999 the Praemium Imperiale. In 2007 Kiefer became the first artist to be given a permanent commission to install work at the Louvre since Georges Braque some 50 years earlier. In 2009 Kiefer was even commissioned to stage a piece for the Opéra Bastille in Paris.<sup>2</sup>

Kiefer is undeniably popular and it is despite the fact that beyond the more easily decipherable historical references interpreting Kiefer requires a good deal of mythology, theology, literature and occult symbolism. The art collector Hans Grothe, whose holdings were shown in Antwerp, confessed: "I identify with what I see, yet I don't understand it..." In order to provide some help for the average visitor, the organizers of the Antwerp exhibit compiled an electronic Kiefer dictionary<sup>3</sup> and handed out a short description of each artwork (Flemish-speaking visitors favored). Much as they struggled to make it plain, they could not avoid saying in the hand-out: Kiefer's work "... often contains Kabbalistic visual motifs that are hard or even impossible to decipher." In the face of all that opacity or, maybe even for that very reason, people like him. The grandiosity of the works and their decorative values make them fit into the postmodern idea of the sublime: huge size, despair and relative emptiness.

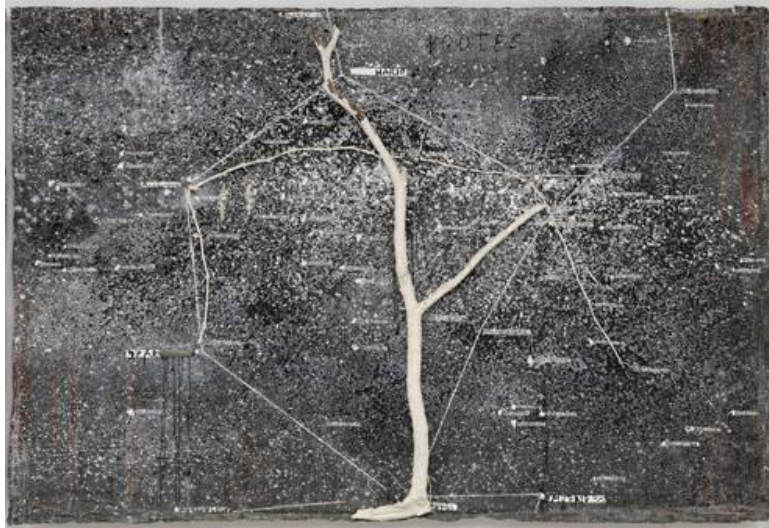
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<sup>1</sup> Quote from Yale's Sterling Professor Harold Bloom, in: Cohen, D. (2003)

<sup>2</sup> "Am Anfang", accompanied by the music of Jörg Widmann, was staged in seven performances between 7 and 14 July, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Available at

[http://www.kmska.be/export/sites/kmska/content/Documents/Tentoonstellingen/Kiefer\\_woordenboek.pdf](http://www.kmska.be/export/sites/kmska/content/Documents/Tentoonstellingen/Kiefer_woordenboek.pdf)



*The secret life of plants Nr. 12*

Yet the round of applause encircling Kiefer is sometimes interrupted by critical voices claiming that there has been no major change in his art in two decades, that he has “succumbed to late-blooming health and happiness”, that he is in “currency crisis”<sup>2</sup> or simply refer to his “Boom and Bust”<sup>3</sup>. Has Kiefer really become excommunicated by the time the wide audience discovered him? Or, isn’t it just the habitual unnecessary sesquipedalian loquaciousness and castigation that earmarks art critics?

After having spent an hour in the Antwerp’s exhibition among the heavily loaded, somber images a doubt started to lurk in the back of my mind: How sincere is Kiefer’s art? Is he really feeling accordingly or, is it just modish intellectualism in a brave coating? ...Tiny content in a big mystic haze which has more to do with fiction than with reality, because it refers to forgotten myths that he is not able to re-animate? Is it the reason for the feelings of heaviness and fatigue at the exhibition? Can we believe Kiefer being a prophet?



*Am Anfang (2008)*

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<sup>1</sup> Schjeldahl, P. (1998)

<sup>2</sup> Cohen, D. (2003)

<sup>3</sup> Saltz, J. (1999)

Talking about Kiefer, there may be no straight answers. His thinking is fundamentally converse: "Nothing in the world has one sense only. Truth is ... in a flux." "I would never say I am pessimist or optimist. I would say I'm desperate. I am desperate, because I do not know why I am here. We do not know. We cannot know. ... More we know, less we know. ... In this desperate situation I try to give, to create for myself to survive."<sup>1</sup>

Nigredo or, the black sate of the soul, is known as the first step in the process of individualization, the path leading to self-knowledge. The nigredo characterizes the undifferentiated, chaotic, unconscious mind, which is "the prima materia, the chaos"<sup>2</sup>. The 'prima materia' contains all the potential, all the dynamic oppositions in an undifferentiated mass. And Kiefer flings himself with inimitable energy into the dark and chaotic depths of the collective Western European unconscious. It is his unbeatable merit that he spares no pains on this voyage. There is no source of light there just the melancholic, earthy landscapes and the skinny reflections of some long-ago spirituality every now and then. And Kiefer has the capacity to give voice to this image beyond himself, to undertake this gigantic task of immersing into the depths where no piety or beastly cruelty occur, only a brownish mix of the two. He takes us on this voyage, he holds mirror to our very present.

This voyage needs courage and sincerity and he has much of both. Just consider his show entitled "Twenty Years of Solitude" from 1993, where –as a sign of beginning a new phase in his life- he exhibited a junk pile of his huge collection of his own artworks and an equally impressive stock of self-made books stained with his own semen. It gave "bibliophilia" a whole new meaning, as Peter Schjeldahl<sup>3</sup> cuttingly remarks.

The alchemists say that nigredo lasts forty days. The number is rather symbolic. It may even last for four decades. Whatever long Kiefer's journey lasts, it does the work for us. The thin threads can be collected and woven into a new fabric.

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The photos were obtained from the following sources:

*Star Picture:*

<http://www.ergodebooks.com/store.php?seller=SlickPurchase&navt1=42973&navt2=56672&pd=2305530#images>

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<sup>1</sup> Kiefer, A. (2007).

<sup>2</sup> Jung, C. G. (1944)

<sup>3</sup> Schjeldahl, P. (1998)

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*Bohemia Lies by the Sea:* <http://ooghout.wordpress.com/2010/11/23/anselm-kiefer-de-duisternis-en-het-licht/>

*The secret life of plants Nr. 12:* <http://jhkijker.blogspot.com/2010/12/anselm-kiefer-in-mska-antwerpen.html>

*Am Anfang:* <http://jhkijker.blogspot.com/2010/12/anselm-kiefer-in-mska-antwerpen.html>