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Author(s): Andreas Huyssen

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Anselm Kiefer: The Terror of History, the Temptation of Myth

ANDREAS HUYSSSEN

More than any other recent painter's work, Anselm Kiefer's painterly postpainterly project has called forth ruminations about national identity. American critics in particular have gone to great length in praising his Germanness, the authentic ways in which he deals in his painting with the ghosts of the fatherland, especially with the terror of recent German history. The use of profound allegory, the multiple references to Germanic myth, the play with the archetypal—all of this is held to be typically German, and yet, by the power of art, it is said somehow to transcend its origins and give expression to the spiritual plight of humanity in the late twentieth century.¹ The temptation is great to dismiss such stereotype-driven appreciations of national essence as a marketing strategy of the Reagan age. Pride in national identity is in. Even the Germans benefit from it since Ronald Reagan's visit to the Bitburg cemetery gave its blessing to Helmut Kohl's political agenda of forgetting the fascist past and renewing national pride in the name of "normalization." In an international art market in which the boundaries between national cultures become increasingly irrelevant, the appeal of the national functions like a sign of recognition, a trademark. What has been characteristic of the movie industry for a long time (witness the successions of the French cinema, the Italian cinema, the new German cinema, the Australian cinema, etc.) now seems to be catching up with the art world as well: the new German painting. Let me quote, perhaps unfairly, a brief passage from a 1983 article that addresses the Germanness in question:

Kiefer's use of paint is like the use of fire to cremate the bodies of dead, however dubious, heroes, in the expectation of their phoenix-like resurrection in another form. The new German painters perform an extraordinary service for the German people. They lay to rest the ghosts—profound as only the monstrous can be—of German style,

1. See the foreword to the catalogue for Anselm Kiefer's American retrospective. Mark Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer*, Chicago and Philadelphia, Art Institute of Chicago and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1987.

culture, and history, so that the people can be authentically new. . . . They can be freed of a past identity by artistically reliving it.²

Remembering that it was in fact the Nazis who promised authentic national renewal, resurrection of the German *Volk* from the ashes of defeat, remembering also that it was the Nazis who practiced mass cremation not for resurrection, but for total elimination of their victims, memory and all, this kind of rhetoric simply makes my hair stand on end. To me, a German of Kiefer's generation, the reference to laying to rest the ghosts of the past reads like a Bitburg of art criticism, if not worse, and I would claim that it fundamentally misrepresents the problematic of national identity in Kiefer's work. Kiefer's painting—in its forms, its materials, and its subject matter—is emphatically about memory, not about forgetting, and if flight is one of its organizing pictorial metaphors, it is not the flight of the phoenix, but the doomed flight of Icarus and the melancholy flight of the mutilated and murderously vengeful Wayland, the master smith of the classic book of Norse myth, the Edda. Kiefer's wings, after all, are made of lead.

The purpose of this essay, then, will be to free our understanding of Kiefer's complex and captivating work from the stereotypes of Germanness and from the cliché that names him Anselm Angst and worships his flight into the transcendence of art and the universally human. I propose to place Kiefer's aesthetic project in its specific cultural and political context, the context of German culture after Auschwitz out of which it grew and to which it gives aesthetic form, which energized it during long years of little recognition, and to which, I would argue against facile claims of transcendence and universality, it ultimately remains bound—in its strengths, in its weaknesses, and most of all in its ambiguities.

Even a first and casual look at Kiefer's work will tell us that it is obsessively concerned with images of myth and of history. Immersed in the exploration (and exploitation) of the power of mythic images, this work has given rise to the mystification that somehow myth transcends history, that it can redeem us from history, and that art, especially painting, is the high road toward redemption. Indeed, Kiefer himself—to the extent that we hear his voice through the paraphrases of art criticism (including Mark Rosenthal's problematic attempts at ventriloquism in the catalogue of the recent American exhibition of Kiefer's work)—is not innocent in provoking such responses. But ultimately his work is also informed by a gesture of self-questioning, by an awareness of the questionable nature of his undertaking, and by a pictorial self-consciousness that belies such mystifications. I take his work—and this will be one of my basic arguments

2. Donald B. Kuspit, "Flak from the 'Radicals': The American Case Against German Painting," in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, New York, New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984, p. 141.

—to be about the ultimate inseparability of myth and history. Rather than merely illustrating myth or history, Kiefer's work can be read as a sustained reflection on how mythic images function in history, how myth can never escape history, and how history in turn has to rely on mythic images. While much of Kiefer's mythic painting seems energized by a longing to transcend the terrors of recent German history, the point, driven home relentlessly by subject matter and aesthetic execution, is that this longing will not, cannot be fulfilled.

One way to discuss context (Kiefer's and our own) is to relate Kiefer to three West German cultural phenomena that have captured the attention of American audiences in recent years. First there was the international success of the new German cinema with the work of Fassbinder, Herzog, Wenders, Schloendorff, Kluge, Sanders-Brahms, von Trotta, Ottinger and many others. Much of that work was driven by questions of German identity—personal, political, cultural, sexual. All of this work was ultimately rooted in the acknowledgment that the fascist past and the postwar democratic present are inescapably chained together (examples are Fassbinder's films about the 1950s, Kluge's films from *Yesterday Girl* to *The Patriot*, and the various films on German terrorism and its relationship to the Nazi past). There are especially striking parallels between Kiefer's treatment of fascist imagery and Syberberg's major films, and it is no accident that both artists have been accused of sympathizing with fascism.

Then there was the rise to instant stardom of a group of painters, many of them from Berlin, who had been painting for almost twenty years—during the heyday of late abstraction, minimalism, conceptualism, and performance art—but who were recognized and marketed as a group only in the early 1980s: *die neuen Wilden*, the neoexpressionists, as they were most commonly called because of their return to the pictorial strategies of that pivotal movement of German modernism. Just as German expressionism had given rise to one of the most far-ranging debates about the aesthetics and politics of modernism in the 1930s,³ neoexpressionism immediately sparked a debate about the legitimacy of a return to figuration after abstraction, minimalism, and concept art.⁴

Thirdly and most recently, there was the so-called *Historikerstreit* in Germany, the historians' debate over the German responsibility for the holocaust, the alleged need to "historicize" the fascist past, and the problem of a German national identity. Indeed, as philosopher Jürgen Habermas observed, the historians' debate about the German past was in truth a debate about the self-understanding of the Federal Republic today. In that debate of 1986, a number of right-wing historians took it upon themselves to "normalize" German history,

3. Documented in Ernst Bloch, et al., *Aesthetics and Politics: Debates between Bloch, Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno*, London, Verso, 1980.

4. See especially Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression," in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, New York, New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984, pp. 107–136.

and one of them went so far as to put the blame for the holocaust, by some perverted logic of the priority of the Soviet Gulag, on the Bolsheviks.⁵ The *Historikerstreit*, outrageous as it was in this latter aspect, did make the pages of the *New York Times*. What did not become clear from the reporting, however, is the fact that underlying the whole debate was the conservative turn in German politics since the early 1980s, the Bitburg syndrome, the public debate about proposals to erect national monuments and national history museums in Bonn and in Berlin. All of this happened in a cultural and political climate in which issues of national identity had resurfaced for the first time since the war. The various factions of German conservatism are in search of a “usable past.” Their aim is to “normalize” German history and to free German nationalism from the shadows of fascism—a kind of laundering of the German past for the benefit of the conservative ideological agenda.

All three phenomena—the new German cinema, neoexpressionist painting, and the historian’s debate—show in different ways how West German culture remains haunted by the past. It is haunted by images which in turn produce haunting images—in cinema as well as in painting. Anselm Kiefer, despite his seclusion in a remote village of the Odenwald, is very much a part of that culture.

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Within West Germany, critics have been much more skeptical of the idea that Kiefer succeeds in dealing with and exorcising the ghosts of the German past in his painting. Criticism first emerged publicly on a broad scale when Kiefer and Baselitz represented the Federal Republic at the 1980 Venice Biennale, and Kiefer was accused in the feuilletons of flaunting his Germanness with his embarrassingly nationalist motifs. Some American commentators have dismissed such criticisms as bizarre, crudely censorious, and cognitively inferior.⁶ I believe that this is a serious mistake born of an ignorance of Kiefer’s context that ultimately disables the reading of the paintings themselves. The nationalism/fascism problematic in Kiefer’s work deserves serious attention, and Kiefer himself would be the first to insist on that. The American desire finally to have another major contemporary painter, after Picasso and Jackson Pollock, may indeed be overwhelming, but we don’t give Kiefer the recognition he deserves by avoiding the problematically German aspects of his work and by making him into an “art pathfinder for the 21st century,” as one recent headline had it.⁷ Certainly, I do not want to see Kiefer identified with a by now international postmodern triumphalism which has at least some of the critics in ecstatic rapture. Consider the

5. For comprehensive analysis and documentation see the special issue on the *Historikerstreit* in *New German Critique*, no. 44 (Spring/Summer 1988).

6. For example, Peter Schjeldahl, “Our Kiefer,” *Art in America*, no. 3 (March 1988), p. 124.

7. *Christian Science Monitor*, March 21, 1988, p. 23.

following preposterous statement by Rudi Fuchs, Dutch art historian and museum director and organizer of the 1982 postmodern art bonanza at Kassel, Documenta 7: "Painting is salvation. It presents freedom of thought of which it is the triumphant expression. . . . The painter is a guardian-angel carrying the palette in blessing over the world. Maybe the painter is the darling of the gods."⁸ This is art theology, not art criticism. Kiefer has to be defended against such regressive and mystifying appropriations. He is not in the business of salvation triumphant nor in the cultural trafficking in guardian angels that has become increasingly popular in the 1980s—witness the recent Wenders/Handke film *Wings of Desire*. Neither is Kiefer simply into resurrecting the German past, as some of his German critics complain. But, in a country like West Germany, where definitions of national and cultural identity all too often have led to the temptation of relegitimizing the Third Reich, any attempt by an artist to deal with the major icons of fascism will understandably cause public worries. Fortunately so.

What is it, then, that has Kiefer's countrymen up in arms? With what seems to be an incredible naiveté and insouciance, Kiefer is drawn time and again to those icons, motifs, themes of the German cultural and political tradition which, a generation earlier, had energized the fascist cultural synthesis that resulted in the worst disaster of German history. Kiefer provocatively reenacts the Hitler salute in one of his earliest photo works; he turns to the myth of the Nibelungen, which in its medieval and Wagnerian versions has always functioned as a cultural prop of German militarism; he revives the tree and forest mythology so dear to the heart of German nationalism; he indulges in reverential gestures toward Hitler's ultimate culture hero, Richard Wagner; and he suggests a pantheon of German luminaries in philosophy, art, literature, and the military, including Fichte, Klopstock, Clausewitz, and Heidegger, most of whom have been tainted with the sins of German nationalism and certainly put to good use by the Nazi propaganda machine; he reenacts the Nazi book burnings; he paints Albert Speer's megalomaniac architectural structures as ruins and allegories of power; he conjures up historical spaces loaded with the history of German-Prussian nationalism and fascist chauvinism such as Nuremberg, the Märkische Heide, or the Teuteburg forest, and he creates allegories of some of Hitler's major military ventures. Of course, one has to point out here that some of these icons are treated with subtle irony and multi-layered ambiguity, occasionally even with satirical bite (e.g., *Operation Seelion*), but clearly there are as many others that are not. At any rate, the issue is not whether Kiefer intentionally identifies with or glorifies the fascist iconography he chooses for his paintings. I think it is clear that he does not. But that does not let him off the hook. The problem is in the very usage of those icons, in the fact that Kiefer's images violate a taboo, transgress a boundary that had been carefully guarded, and not for bad reasons,

8. R. H. Fuchs, *Anselm Kiefer*, Venice, Edizioni La Biennale di Venezia, 1980, p. 62.

by the postwar cultural consensus in West Germany: abstention from the image-world of fascism, condemnation of any cultural iconography even remotely reminiscent of those barbaric years. This self-imposed abstention, after all, was at the heart of Germany's postwar reemergence as a relatively stable democratic culture in a Western mode.

Why, then, does Kiefer insist on working with such a controversial body of icons? At stake in Kiefer's paintings is not just the opening of wounds, as one often hears, as if they had ever been healed. Nor is it the confrontation between the artist, whose painting conjures up uncomfortable truths, and his countrymen, who want to forget the fascist past. The Bitburg Germans will forget it. They are determined to forget—Kiefer or no Kiefer. They want to normalize; Kiefer does not. The issue, in other words, is not whether to forget or to remember, but rather how to remember and how to handle representations of the remembered past at a time when most of us, over forty years after the war, only know that past through images, films, photographs, representations. It is in the working through of this problem, aesthetically and politically, that I see Kiefer's strength, a strength that simultaneously and unavoidably must make him controversial and deeply problematic. To say it in yet another way, Kiefer's haunted images, burnt and violated as they are, do not challenge the repressions of those who refuse to face the terror of the past; rather they challenge the repressions of those who do remember and who do accept the burden of fascism on German national identity.

One of the reasons why Kiefer's work—and not only the fascism and history paintings, but also the work from the mid-1980s that focuses on alchemy, biblical and Jewish themes, and a variety of non-German myths—is so ambiguous and difficult to read is that it seems to lack any moorings in contemporary reality. Despite this ostensible lack of direct reference to the present in his work, Kiefer's beginnings are firmly embedded in the German protest culture of the 1960s. He was simply wrong, forgetful, or disingenuous when he recently said, "In '69, when I began, no one dared talk about these things."⁹ He might have been right had he said "no one painted these things." But talk about fascism, German history, guilt, and the holocaust was the order of the day at a time when a whole social movement—that of the extra-parliamentary opposition and the New Left inside and outside the academy—had swept the country with its agenda of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, the coping or coming-to-terms with the past. Large-scale generational conflict erupted precisely on the issue of what parents had done or not done between 1933 and 1945 and whether former members of the Nazi party were acceptable as high-level political leaders. The German theaters performed scores of documentary plays about fascism and the

9. By account of Steven Henry Madoff, "Anselm Kiefer: A Call to Memory," *ARTnews*, vol. 86 (October 1987), p. 127.

holocaust (Rolf Hochhuth's *Deputy* [1963] and Peter Weiss's *Investigation* [1965] being the best-known), and scores of television programs addressed the question of fascism. After all, 1969 was the year in which Willy Brandt, a refugee from the Nazis and an active member of the Norwegian underground during the war, became chancellor and initiated a policy of détente with the East which was based on the public acknowledgment of "those things."

And yet, in a certain sense Kiefer is not entirely wrong. His approach to understanding and representing the past differed significantly from what I would call, in shorthand, the liberal and social-democratic antifascist consensus of those years. Let us take one of Kiefer's early works, the series of photographs entitled *Besetzungen* (*Occupations*) from 1969, as an example to discuss a central issue which governs much of his painting throughout the 1970s. The work consists of a series of photographs taken at various locations all over Europe—historical spaces, landscapes—all of which feature the artist himself performing, citing, embodying the Sieg Heil gesture. As the catalogue suggests, the artist seems to have assumed the identity of the conquering National Socialist who occupies Europe.¹⁰ The first reaction to this kind of work must be shock and dismay, and the work anticipates that. A taboo has been violated. But when one looks again, multiple ironies begin to appear. In almost all of the photos the Sieg Heil figure is miniscule, dwarfed by the surroundings; the shots are taken from afar. In one of the photos the figure stands in a bathtub and is seen against a backlit window. There are no jubilant masses, marching soldiers, nor any other emblems of power and imperialism that we know from historical footage from the Nazi era. The artist does not identify with the gesture of Nazi occupation, he ridicules it, satirizes it. He is properly critical. But even this consideration does not lay to rest our fundamental uneasiness. Are irony and satire really the appropriate mode for dealing with fascist terror? Doesn't this series of photographs belittle the very real terror which the Sieg Heil gesture conjures up for a historically informed memory? There just seems no way out of the deeply problematic nature of Kiefer's "occupations," this one as well as those that were to follow in the 1970s, paintings that occupied the equally shunned icons and spaces of German national history and myth.

There is another dimension, however, to this work, a dimension of self-conscious mise-en-scène that is at its conceptual core. Rather than seeing this series of photos only as representing the artist occupying Europe with the fascist gesture of conquest, we may, in another register, see the artist occupying various framed image-spaces: landscapes, historical buildings, interiors, precisely the image-spaces of most of Kiefer's later paintings. But why then the Sieg Heil gesture? I would suggest that it be read as a conceptual gesture reminding us that indeed Nazi culture had most effectively occupied, exploited, and abused the

10. Rosenthal, p. 7.

Anselm Kiefer. Pages from Occupations. 1969.





power of the visual, especially the power of massive monumentalism and of a confining, even disciplining, central-point perspective. Fascism had furthermore perverted, abused, and sucked up whole territories of a German image-world, turning national iconic and literary traditions into mere ornaments of power and thereby leaving post-1945 culture with a tabula rasa that was bound to cause a smoldering crisis of identity. After twelve years of an image orgy without precedent in the modern world, which included everything from torch marches to political mass spectacles, from the mammoth staging of the 1936 Olympics to the ceaseless productions of the Nazi film industry deep into the war years, from Albert Speer's floodlight operas in the night sky to the fireworks of anti-aircraft flak over burning cities, the country's need for images seemed exhausted. Apart from imported American films and the cult of foreign royalty in illustrated magazines, postwar Germany was a country without images, a landscape of rubble and ruins that quickly and efficiently turned itself into the gray of concrete reconstruction, lightened up only by the iconography of commercial advertising and the fake imagery of the *Heimatfilm*. The country that had produced the Weimar cinema and a wealth of avant-garde art in the 1920s and that would produce the new German cinema beginning in the late 1960s was by and large image-dead for about twenty years: hardly any new departures in film, no painting worth talking about, a kind of enforced minimalism, ground zero of a visual amnesia.

I am reminded here of something Werner Herzog once stated in a somewhat different context. In an interview about his films he said, "We live in a society that has no adequate images anymore, and, if we do not find adequate images and an adequate language for our civilization with which to express them, we will die out like the dinosaurs. It's as simple as that!"¹¹ The absence of adequate images in postwar Germany and the need to invent, to create images to go on living also seems to propel Kiefer's project. He insists that the burden of fascism on images has to be reflected and worked through by any postwar German artist worth his or her salt. From that perspective indeed most postwar German art had to be seen as so much evasion. During the 1950s, it mainly offered derivations from abstract expressionism, *tachism*, *informel*, and other internationally sanctioned movements. As opposed to literature and film, media in which the confrontation with the fascist past had become an overriding concern during the 1960s, the '60s art scene in West Germany was dominated by the light experiments of the Gruppe Zero, the situationist-related fluxus movement, and a number of experiments with figuration in the work of Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter. The focus of most of these artists, whether or not they wanted their art to be socially critical, was the present: consumer capitalism in the age of America and television. In this context Kiefer's occupations of the fascist image-

11. *Images at the Horizon*, Workshop with Werner Herzog conducted by Roger Ebert, Chicago, Facets Multimedia, 1979, p. 21.

space and of other nationalist iconography were as much a new departure for German art as they were a political provocation, except, of course, that this provocation was not widely recognized during the 1970s.

In that decade, Kiefer's work on myth, especially German myth and the national tradition, could still be seen as an art of individual mythology, as it was called at Documenta V in 1972. It was only during the conservative 1980s, when the issue of national identity had become a major obsession in West Germany, that Kiefer's choice of medium and the political content of his painting got the critics buzzing. Anselm Kiefer—painter of the new Right! But it would be a mistake to collapse Kiefer's development as an artist with the political turn toward conservatism in the 1980s. After all, the whole issue of national identity first emerged in the 1970s on the intellectual Left and within the orbit of the ecology and peace movements before it became grist for the mills of the new Right. Kiefer's focus on Germanic iconography in the 1970s still had a critical edge, attempting to articulate what the liberal and social democratic cultural consensus had sealed behind a *cordon sanitaire* of proper coping with the past. And his choice of medium, his experimentations on the threshold between painting, photography, and the sculptural, also had a critical edge in the refusal to bow to the pieties of a teleologically constructed modernism that saw even remotely representational painting only as a form of regression. Representation in Kiefer is, after all, not just a facile return to a premodernist tradition. It is rather the attempt to make certain traditions (high-horizon landscape painting, romantic painting) productive for a kind of painting that represents, without, however, being grounded in the ideology of representation, a kind of painting that places itself quite self-consciously after conceptualism and minimalism. The often-heard reproach against Kiefer's being figurative and representational misses his extraordinary sensitivity to materials such as straw, sand, lead, ashes, burnt logs, ferns, and copper wire, all of which are incorporated imaginatively into his canvases and more often than not work against the grain of figuration and representation.

While Kiefer's material and aesthetic employment of figuration does not give me ideological headaches, I think it is legitimate to ask whether Kiefer indulges the contemporary fascination with fascism, with terror, and with death. Fascinating fascism, as Susan Sontag called it in her discussion of Leni Riefenstahl, has been part of the international cultural landscape since the 1970s. In his book *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death* (1984), the historian Saul Friedlander has analyzed it in scores of cinematic and literary works from the 1970s, ranging from Syberberg's *Our Hitler* to Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* and Fassbinder's *Lili Marleen*, from Alain Tournier's *The Ogre* to George Steiner's *The Portage to San Cristobal of A H*. In addition, we have witnessed the rediscovery, often celebratory, of right-wing modernist writers such as Céline and Ernst Jünger. How does Kiefer fit into this phenomenon, which is by no means only German? To what extent might it explain his success



Anselm Kiefer. To the Unknown Painter. 1980.

outside his native Germany? Such questions are all the more urgent because, I would argue, Kiefer's own treatment of fascist icons seems to go from satire and irony in the 1970s to melancholy devoid of irony in the early 1980s.

Central for a discussion of fascinating fascism in Kiefer are three series of paintings from the early 1980s: the paintings of fascist architecture; the March Heath works, which hover between landscape painting, history painting, and an allegorization of art and artist in German history; and the Margarete/Shulamite series, which contains Kiefer's highly abstract and mediated treatment of the holocaust. Together with the Meistersinger/Nuremberg series, this trilogy of works best embodies those aspects of his art that I am addressing in this essay.



Anselm Kiefer. Interior. 1981.

Let me first turn to the watercolors and oil paintings of fascist architectural structures: the two watercolors entitled *To the Unknown Painter* (1980, 1982) and the two large oil paintings of fascist architectural structures entitled *The Stairs* (1982–83) and *Interior* (1981). These works exude an overwhelming statism, a monumental melancholy, and an intense aesthetic appeal of color, texture, and layering of painterly materials that can induce a deeply meditative, if not paralyzing state in the viewer. I would like to describe my own very conflicting reactions to them, with the caveat that what I will sketch as a sequence of three stages of response and reflection was much more blurred in my mind when I first saw the Kiefer retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Stage one was fascination—fascination with the visual pleasure Kiefer brings to the subject matter of fascist architecture. If seen in photographs, such buildings will most likely provoke only the Pavlovian reaction of condemnation: everybody knows what fascist architecture is and what it represents. Being confronted with Kiefer's rendering of the interior of Albert Speer's Reichschancellery was therefore like seeing it for the first time, precisely because "it" was neither Speer's famous building nor a "realistic" representation of it. And what I saw was ruins, images of ruins, the ruins of fascism in the mode of allegory that seemed to hold the promise of a beyond, to suggest an as yet absent reconciliation. True, there is the almost overbearing monumentalism of size and subject matter of these paintings, with central point perspective driven to its most insidious extreme. But then this monumentalism of central perspective itself seems to be undermined by the claims the multiply layered surfaces make on the viewer, by the fragility and transitoriness of the materials Kiefer uses in his compositions, by the eerie effects he achieves in his use of photography overlaid by thick oil paint, emulsion, shellac, and straw. Dark and somber as they are, these paintings assume a ghostlike luminosity and immateriality that belies their monumentality. They appear like dream images, architectural structures that seem intact, but are intriguingly made to appear as ruins: the resurrected ruin of fascism as simulacrum, as the painterly realization of a contemporary state of mind.

At this point I became skeptical of my own first reaction. Stage two was a pervasive feeling of having been had, having been lured into that fascinating fascism, having fallen for an aestheticization of fascism which today complements fascism's own strategies, so eloquently analyzed by Walter Benjamin some fifty years ago, of turning politics into aesthetic spectacle. I remembered the romantic appeal of ruins and the inherent ambivalence of the ruin as celebration of the past, of nostalgia and feelings of loss. And I recalled the real ruins left by fascism, the ruins of bombed-out cities and the destruction left in the wake of fascist invasion and retreat. Where, I asked myself, do these paintings reflect on this historical reality? Even as images of fascist ruins, they are still monuments to the demagogic representation of power, and they affirm, in their overwhelming monumentalism and relentless use of central-point perspective, the power of representation that modernism has done so much to question and to reflect critically. The question became: Is this fascist painting at one remove? And if it is, how do I save myself from being sucked into these gigantic spacial voids, from being paralyzed by melancholy, from becoming complicit in a vision that seems to prevent mourning and stifle political reflection?

Finally, my initial thoughts about Kiefer's "occupations" asserted themselves again. What if Kiefer, here too, intended to confront us with our own repressions of the fascist image-sphere? Perhaps his project was precisely to counter the by now often hallow litany about the fascist aestheticization of politics, to counter the merely rational explanations of fascist terror by recreat-

ing the aesthetic lure of fascism for the present and thus forcing us to confront the possibility that we ourselves are not immune to what we so rationally condemn and dismiss. Steeped in a melancholy fascination with the past, Kiefer's work makes visible a psychic disposition dominant in postwar Germany that has been described as the inability to mourn. If mourning implies an active working through of a loss, then melancholy is characterized by an inability to overcome that loss and in some instances even a continuing identification with the lost object of love. This is the cultural context in which Kiefer's reworking of a regressive, even reactionary painterly vocabulary assumes its politically and aesthetically meaningful dimension. How else but through obsessive quotation could he conjure up the lure of what once enthralled Germany and has not been acknowledged, let alone properly worked through? How else but through painterly melancholy and nightmarish evocation could he confront the blockages in the contemporary German psyche? At the same time, the risk of confronting contemporary German culture with representations of a collective lost object of love is equally evident: it may strengthen the static and melancholy disposition toward fascism rather than overcome it.

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.

Even the two elements common to several of the paintings and watercolors in this series—the inscription “to the unknown painter” and the dead center positioning of a palette on a black pole—will not help us out of this dilemma. Surely, as a double reference to the unknown soldier and to art, these linguistic and conceptual inscriptions in the midst of these fascist architectural monuments tend to break the spell of the image as pure and unmediated and to produce an estrangement effect. Here as elsewhere Kiefer relies on linguistic inscription and encoding as methods of undermining the false immediacy of visual representation. His images have to be both seen and read.

But how estranging are these inscriptions ultimately? If one remembers the classical topos of paralleling the heroism of the warrior with the heroism of the genial artist, then Kiefer's recourse to the trivial romantic motif of the monument to the unknown soldier could be read as a slightly displaced critique of the myth of artistic genius.¹² Such a reading, however, seems a bit forced. After all, the notions of the unknown soldier and of the unknown, unrecognized genius are themselves integral to the myths of warrior heroism and aesthetic genius that have been major props of middle-class culture since romanticism. A potentially critical strategy of breaking visual immediacy through linguistic markers and

12. Thus Jürgen Harten in the catalogue of the 1984 Kiefer exhibition in Düsseldorf, Paris, and Jerusalem, *Anselm Kiefer*, Düsseldorf, Städtische Kunsthalle, 1984, pp. 41ff.

conceptually estranging signs on the work's surface ultimately serves only to reinforce the myth it ostensibly undermines. Furthermore, the undocumented heroism of the unknown soldier is displaced here into the heroism of that very well-known painter Anselm K., who may himself have fallen for the lure he had set out to combat. Much the same, by the way, can be said of Kiefer's earlier attempts to construct German genealogies in paintings such as *Germany's Spiritual Heroes* (1973), *Icarus* (1976), and *Ways of Worldly Wisdom* (1976–77). Kiefer's need to position himself effectively at the end of a genealogy of German art and thought gets in the way of whatever critical intentions he might have had. To be sure, in *To the Unknown Painter* Kiefer does not celebrate the link between aesthetics and war as the Italian futurists or the right-wing modernists of the Weimar Republic did. Instead of an aesthetics of terror, one might say, we get melancholy and narcissism, the narcissism of a postfascist German painter whose frozen gaze is directed at two imaginary lost objects: the ruins of fascism (buildings, landscapes, mindscapes) and the ruins, as it were, of the house of painting itself. These two sets of ruins are pictorially equated. Kiefer ends up collapsing the difference between the myth of the end of painting and the defeat of fascism. This is a conceit that seems to draw in highly problematic ways on the phantasmagoria that fascism itself is the ultimate Gesamtkunstwerk, requiring a world-historical Götterdämmerung at its end: Berlin 1945 as the last act of Hitler's infatuation with Richard Wagner and Kiefer's work as a memorial to that fatal linkage between art and violence. *Nero Paints*—indeed.

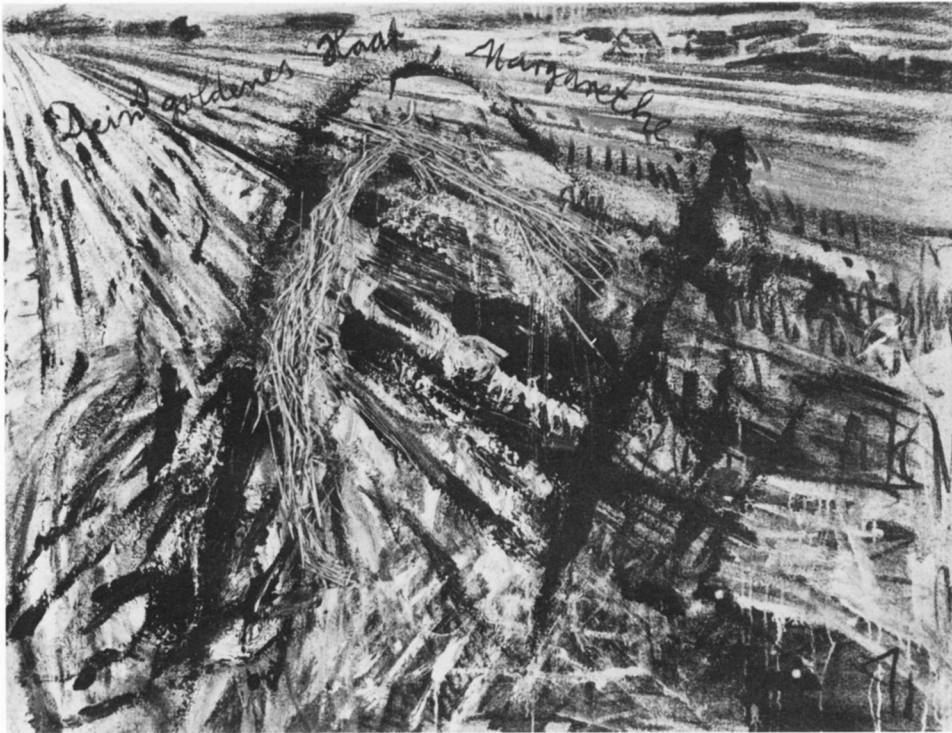
But such a negative reading of the architecture paintings is contradicted by the Margarete/Shulamite series, a series of paintings based on Paul Celan's famous "Death Fugue," a poem that captures the horror of Auschwitz in a sequence of highly structured mythic images. In these paintings, where Kiefer turns to the victims of fascism, the melancholy gaze at the past, dominant in the architecture paintings, is transformed into a genuine sense of mourning. And Kiefer's seemingly self-indulgent and narcissistic obsession with the fate of painting reveals itself here in its broader historical and political dimension. In the German context, Kiefer's turning to Paul Celan, the Jewish poet who survived a Nazi concentration camp, has deep resonance. In the 1950s, Theodor Adorno had claimed that after Auschwitz lyric poetry was no longer possible. The unimaginable horrors of the holocaust had irretrievably pushed poetic language, especially that written in German, to the edges of silence. But Celan demonstrated that this ultimate crisis of poetic language could still be articulated within language itself when he confronted the ultimate challenge of writing a poem about the very event that seemed to have made all language incommensurate.¹³ I would suggest that in the Margarete/Shulamite series, especially with *Your Golden Hair, Margarete* (1981) and *Shulamite* (1983), Kiefer succeeds in doing for painting what Celan did for poetry more than thirty years ago. In this context,

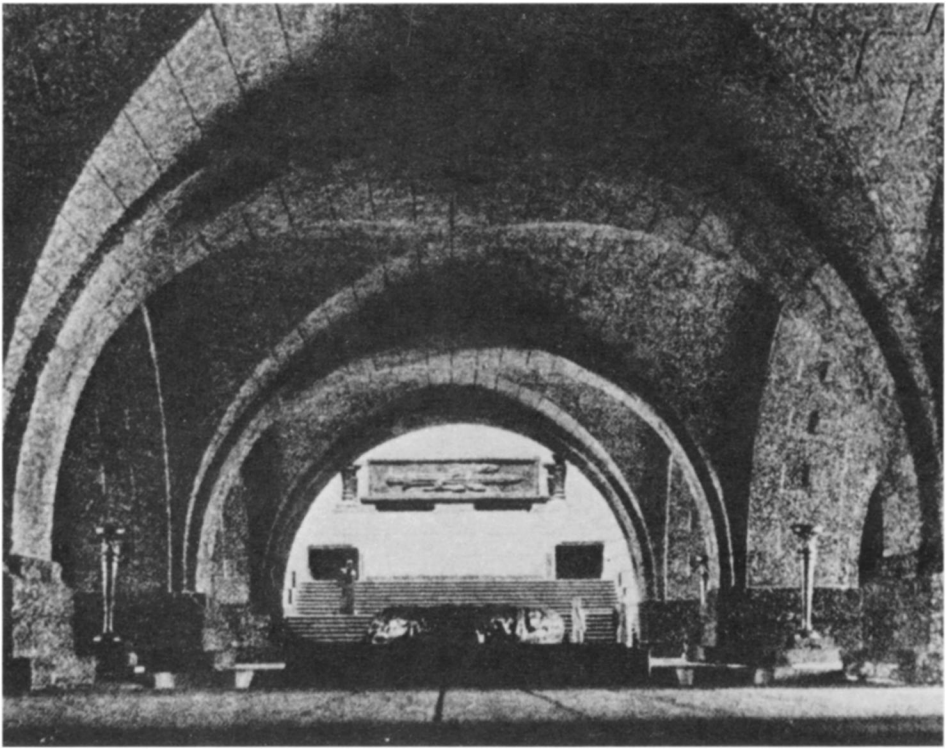
13. The poem's full text is given in Rosenthal, pp. 95ff.

Kiefer's equation of fascism with the end of painting takes on a different connotation. For him, too, as for Celan and Adorno, it is indeed fascism that has brought about the ultimate crisis of art in this century. Fascism has not only revealed the extent to which poetry and painting can never be commensurate to the world of historical violence. It has also demonstrated how politics can ruthlessly exploit the aesthetic dimension and harness it in the service of violence and destruction.

The Margarete/Shulamite paintings, which draw on the refrain of Celan's poem "your golden hair Margarete, your ashen hair Shulamith [Shulamite]," avoid figuration or any other direct representation of fascist violence. In conceptualist fashion, *Your Golden Hair, Margarete* conjures up the curvature of the German woman's hair with a bow of straw imposed on the center of a barren, high-horizon landscape. A painted black curve echoing the shape of Margarete's hair evokes Shulamite, and the title of the painting is inscribed in black above both. In this painting, the black of Shulamite's hair becomes one with the black

Anselm Kiefer. *Your Golden Hair, Margarete*. 1981.

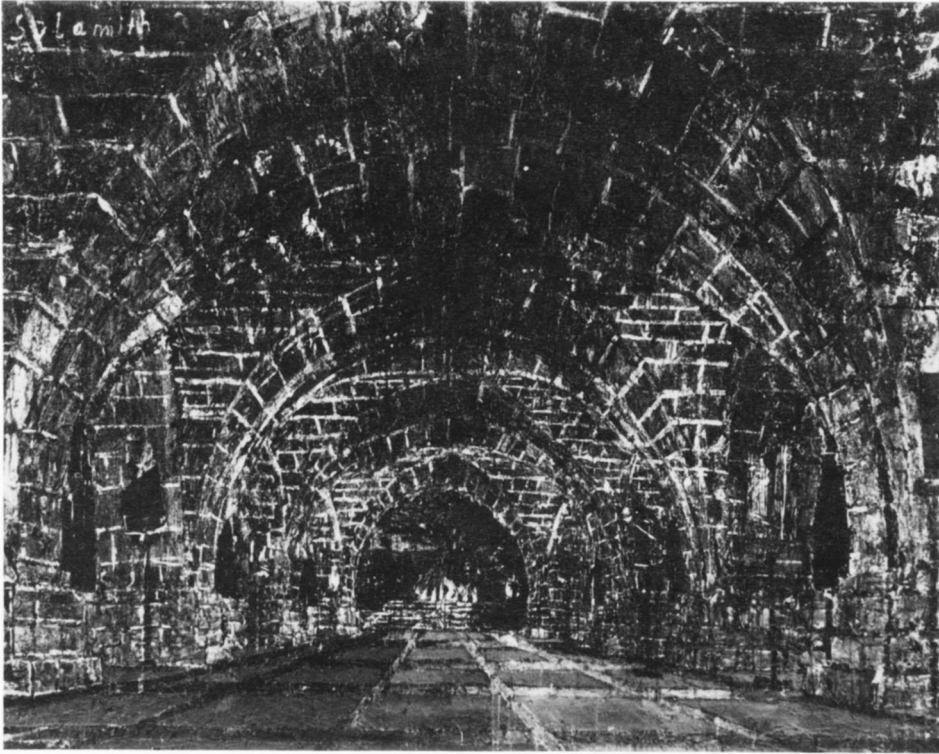




Wilhelm Kreis. *Funeral Hall for the Great German Soldiers, in the Hall of Soldiers.* c. 1939.

markings of the land — again an indication that Kiefer's dark ground colors refer primarily to death in history rather than to mythic renewal, as is so often claimed. And the combination of real straw with black paint furthermore points to the Nuremberg and Meistersinger paintings from the early 1980s, paintings that use the same colors and materials in order to evoke the conjunction of Nuremberg as site of Wagner's *Meistersinger* and of the spectacular Nazi party conventions filmed by Leni Riefenstahl in *Triumph of the Will*.

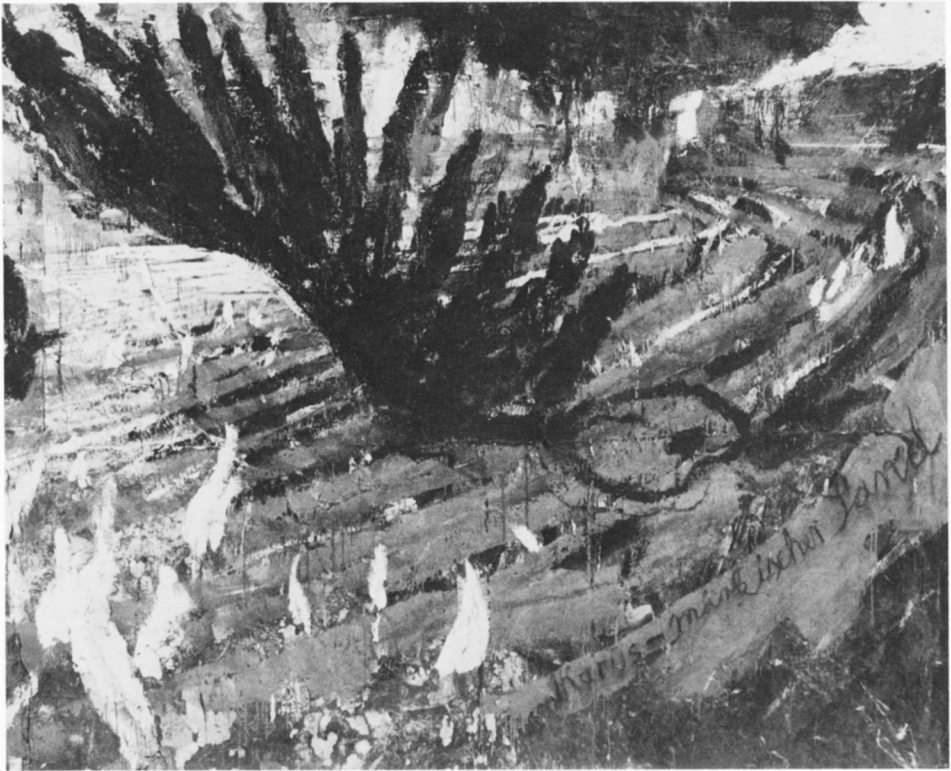
But perhaps the most powerful painting in the series inspired by Paul Celan is the one entitled *Shulamite*, in which Kiefer transforms Wilhelm Kreis's fascist design for the Funeral Hall for the Great German Soldiers in the Berlin Hall of Soldiers (c. 1939) into a haunting memorial to the victims of the holocaust. The cavernous space, blackened by the fires of cremation, clearly reminds us of a gigantic brick oven, threatening in its very proportions, which are exacerbated by Kiefer's use of an extremely low-level perspective. No crude representation of gassing or cremation, only the residues of human suffering are shown. Almost



Anselm Kiefer. *Shulamite*. 1983.

hidden in the depth of this huge empty space we see the seven tiny flames of a memorial candelabra dwarfed by the horror of this murderous space. Kiefer succeeds here in avoiding all the ambiguity that haunted his other paintings of fascist architecture. And he is successful because he evokes the terror perpetrated by Germans on their victims, thus opening a space for mourning, a dimension that is absent from the paintings I discussed earlier. By transforming a fascist architectural space, dedicated to the death cult of the Nazis, into a memorial for Nazism's victims, he creates an effect of genuine critical *Umfunktionierung*, as Brecht would have called it, an effect that reveals fascism's genocidal telos in its own celebratory memorial spaces.

Let me conclude these reflections on Kiefer by coming back to my theme of myth, painting, and history as it is articulated in one of Kiefer's most powerful works, the painting entitled *Icarus — March Sand* (1981). This painting expresses paradigmatically how Kiefer's best work derives its strength from the at times unbearable tension between the terror of German history and the intense long-



Anselm Kiefer. Icarus—March Sand. 1981.

ing to get beyond it with the help of myth. *Icarus—March Sand* combines Greek myth with the image of a Prussian, now East German, landscape that, to a West German, is as legendary and mythic as the story of Icarus's fall. The painting does not articulate a passionate scream of horror and suffering that we might associate with expressionism. Instead we get the voiceless crashing of the two charred wings of Icarus in the mythic landscape of the Brandenburger Heide, the March Heath, site of so many battles in Prussian military history. Kiefer's Icarus is not the Icarus of classical antiquity, son of an engineer whose hubris was chastized by the gods when the sun melted his wings as he soared upward. Kiefer's Icarus is the modern painter, the palette with its thumbhole replacing the head. Icarus has become an allegory of painting, another version of Kiefer's many flying palettes, and he crashes not because of the sun's heat above, but because of the fires burning beneath him in the Prussian landscape. Only a distantly luminous glow on the high plane of the painting suggests the presence of the sun. It is a setting sun, and nightfall seems imminent. Icarus is not soaring

toward the infinite; he is, as it were, being pulled down to the ground. It is history, German history, that stunts the painterly flight toward transcendence. 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 as history's transcendent other. The desire for renewal, rebirth, and reconciliation that speaks to us from these paintings may be overwhelming. But Kiefer's work also knows that this desire will not be fulfilled, is beyond human grasp. The potential for rebirth and renewal that fire, mythic fire, may hold for the earth does not extend to human life. Kiefer's fires are the fires of history, and they light a vision that is indeed apocalyptic, but one that raises the hope of redemption only to foreclose it.