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*The Epic Tableau: Verfremdungseffekte in Anselm Kiefer's Varus**

Anna Brailovsky

I am not nostalgic. I want to remember.
— Anselm Kiefer¹

In the course of his now nearly thirty-year-long career, Anselm Kiefer has been described as everything ranging from a neofascist megalomaniac to a guardian angel of painting.² Whether a given critic reacts with intense discomfort or hyperbolic praise depends largely on what he or she makes of Kiefer's use of motifs taken from Norse mythology and Jewish mysticism, and his citation of or reference to a wide variety of cultural artifacts associated with the Third Reich. Whatever meaning one might attach to such citations, the point of the present essay is to emphasize the extent to which any judgments about Kiefer's subject matter must be grounded in an understanding of the artist's material practice. That is to say, if Kiefer's works are not nostalgic, if they are a form of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* [coming to terms with the past] rather than an obsessive repetition of the past, it is because their historical references

* I would like to thank Michael Fried and Brigid Doherty for their comments on earlier versions of this essay. Special thanks are also due to Eric Baker, M. J. Devaney, and Charles Palermo.

1. Anselm Kiefer, Interview with Donald Kuspit, *Artwords 2: Discourse on the Early 80s*, ed. Jeanne Siegel (Ann Arbor: UMI Research P, 1988) 89.

2. An excellent summary of the vicissitudes of Kiefer's critical reception — particularly the stark differences between his early reception in Germany and his phenomenal success in the United States — can be found in chapter two of Lisa Saltzman's Ph.D. dissertation, *Art After Auschwitz: Anselm Kiefer and the Possibilities of Representation* (Harvard, 1995) 44-103.

are presented to the viewer as part of a deliberately orchestrated staging whose chief aim is to frustrate any nostalgic impulse.

Kiefer has a certain historical distance from the ideological discourses and modernist pictorial vocabulary central to his art. Unlike Joseph Beuys, whose use of materials is rooted in his personal experience as a fighter pilot in World War II, Kiefer (born in 1945) is one generation removed from the events to which his imagery alludes. Likewise, he is too young to have participated in the high-modernist exploration of the pictorial field evoked by the bravura brushwork, ambitious scale, and spacial tension of his paintings. As I hope to show, this historical distance is actually thematized — enacted in pictorial terms — in Kiefer's work of the 1970s.

I believe Kiefer's reworking of modernist practices during the first decade of his career can be interpreted as an attempt to create *critical* distance from the subject matter — to reflect on the nature of the myths he depicts — by foregrounding the beholder's *physical* distance from the fictive space of representation. In other words, the paintings emphatically (one might say explicitly) take account of the position of the viewer in front of the picture plane. As the title of this essay suggests, I propose that Kiefer's canvases from the 1970s can be understood as a pictorial form of Brechtian theater, and that the true object of the paintings' critique is not Nazism, but rather the contemporary German viewer's relationship to Germany's Nazi past.

I

One of Kiefer's earliest projects is *Besetzungen* [Occupations] (1969), a series of black-and-white photographs, bound in book form. These photographs show Kiefer dressed in something like a uniform and making the "Sieg Heil" [the National Socialist salute] gesture at various famous European landmarks, or against the background of generic landscapes identifiable only by their labels, and, in one vaguely comical picture (very likely set in the artist's own studio), standing ankle-deep in a bathtub filled with water.

Besetzungen already points in the direction Kiefer's interests were to take in the following decade. On the one hand, Kiefer's pictorial vocabulary evokes — here through direct quotation — symbols of Nazi power, causing some critics to view his work as a form of revisionism. On the other hand, his deliberate manipulation of this imagery, which

can perhaps best be described as staging, introduces a certain degree of ambivalence that invites the viewer to question whether the revisionism is Kiefer's or the viewer's own.³

More specifically, I believe the *Besetzungen* project prefigures, through the linguistic ambiguity of its title, the complex relation between trauma, remembrance, and representation that is made explicit in the paintings of the mid-1970s. The most obvious meaning of the term *Besetzungen* in this context, particularly in light of Kiefer's costume and gesture, is that of military occupation: the photographs appear to recreate the Nazi occupation of Europe. The project was deemed so distasteful that the publication of the photographs in *interfunktionen* in 1975 led to a boycott of the journal.⁴ Yet the definition of military occupation by no means exhausts the title's meaning.

In psychoanalytic discourse *Besetzung* [cathexis, or investment of libidinal energy] is a key mechanism involved in the recording and reactivation of the memory-trace and in the formation of object relations through identification. In the case of mourning, the subject must gradually withdraw the cathected energy from the lost object and attach it to a new love object, or risk an extreme form of melancholic incorporation of the absent object in which all the energy is directed inward, precluding any further identification with anything in the outside world. The role of cathexis in mourning is particularly relevant in the present context. In the 1970s, one of the most powerful accounts of Germany's collective relationship to Nazism was Alexander and Margarethe Mitscherlich's *The Inability to Mourn*, which posited that the Germans had suffered a traumatic loss of Hitler as love object/father figure, and that because this trauma had not been worked through, it

3. For a discussion of how the scale, perspective, and lighting in *Besetzungen* combine to preclude a straightforward reading of the "Sieg Heil" gesture as symbolic of victorious occupation, see Andreas Huyssen, "Anselm Kiefer: The Terror of History, the Temptation of Myth," *October* 48 (1989): 25-45. Huyssen describes his response to *Besetzungen* and later works of the 1970s as evolving from fascination with Kiefer's aesthetic effects to a suspicion that the works' ability to fascinate makes them complicit in a fascist aesthetic that "stifle[s] political reflection" (38), and finally to the supposition that it is precisely the ease with which even the contemporary spectator can be lured into fascination that is the point. However, he remains ultimately uncertain about even his last response: "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" (39).

4. Saltzman 142.

had been handed down to the next generation.⁵ It is in this sense that Kiefer's (mostly American) defenders in the 1980s understood him to be performing the task of mourning. His "identifications" both with the Nazi aggressor and the Jewish victim served, on their account, to bring the trauma to light, to direct the cathected energy outward, and thus to facilitate the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.

It is only by considering a third possible meaning of *Besetzung* that I believe the full scope of Kiefer's project can be understood. This third meaning is the term's theatrical sense: the cast of a play. In Kiefer's work of the 1970s, there is a crucial distinction between identification and something like playing a role. When Kiefer says: "I do not identify with Nero or Hitler, but I have to reenact what they did just a little bit in order to understand the madness,"⁶ he likens himself to the Brechtian actor who never loses himself in the character he portrays, but only recites that character's lines to make a point. In *Besetzungen*, Kiefer literally casts himself in a one-man production whose subject is the Nazi image of military power and its traumatic loss. But he speaks not as one who "identifies" with either the Nazi or the mourner, but rather as one who consciously, ironically, almost didactically, plays the role of both. I will return to the question of identification in a later section of this essay.

II

Kiefer's self-proclaimed favorite mode of production throughout his career has been book-making.⁷ Nevertheless, by 1973 he had begun to concentrate most of his effort on the production of large-scale works executed in oil or acrylic on cloth supports. While images of himself and his new wife Julia continued to appear in the small watercolors of the early 1970s, the human figure in Kiefer's works soon gave way to symbolic objects such as snakes, swords, and fire, and the modest-sized paper gave way to canvases up to ten feet wide.

5. Alexander and Margarethe Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior* [1967], trans. Beverly R. Placzek (New York: Grove Press, 1975). For a more recent analysis of German national identity in similarly Freudian terms see Eric Santner, "History Beyond the Pleasure Principle," *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992).

6. Mark Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 5 Dec. 1987-31 Jan. 1988; Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 6 Mar.-1 May 1988; Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 14 Jun.-11 Sept. 1988; New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 17 Oct. 1988-3 Jan. 1989) 17.

7. Kiefer, Interview with Kuspit 86.

Many of the paintings executed in 1973 depict Kiefer's attic studio, whose floor, ceiling, and walls are made entirely of coarse timber.⁸ The room is shown in deep perspective, yet the strong tendency towards perspectival depth is always undermined. In *Notung*, for instance, the uniform color of the wood and the swirling patterns of its grain assert the planarity of the surface. Orthogonal lines indicating the right-angle joining of wall and floor appear, in a different part of the picture, to separate two planks lying in the same plane. Faint parallel lines that have no apparent part in the representation of the attic's fictive space suggest the mapping of the canvas over a grid. The sword that sprouts from the floor in the middle of the room is a cardboard cut-out pasted to the surface of the work. And finally, there is one of the more prominent hallmarks of Kiefer's paintings — charcoal writing in a clumsy script across the painted surface. Here, the word “Notung” appears above the sword, and the phrase “*Ein Schwert verhiess mir der Vater*” [Father promised me a sword] between two ceiling beams. The writing labels both the painting *per se* (*Notung* is the title of the painting) and an object represented in the painting (“Notung” is the name of the sword carried by the Norse god Wotan). Note that the function of Kiefer's titles is intimately bound up with the question of identification. For the moment, however, I want to point out only that the title is one of the pictorial elements that affirm the canvas as a surface.

Despite the presence of writing, collage, and an overall surface pattern, perspectival space remains the dominant element in the attic paintings. Kiefer brought about the viewer's awareness of the flatness of the painted surface by making the construction of that perspectival space incoherent — that is, by introducing elements inconsistent with the particular set of expectations that the perspectival construction had created in the first place through its insistent illusionism. But by 1974, Kiefer found a different — more literal and material — means of foregrounding the two-dimensionality of the canvas, one that did not depend on turning the perspective against itself.

In *Maikäfer flieg* [Cockchafer Fly], the vast expanse of land is almost entirely covered over with large blotches of black paint. The paint is thick and viscous, nearly the consistency of tar. It drips down

8. For example, *Quaternität; Vater, Sohn, heiliger Geist; Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe; Notung; Deutschlands Geisteshelden*. Rosenthal likens the attic series to “a theater of few stage sets” (Rosenthal 22).

the canvas, sliding over thinner smudges of yellow paint, which in turn drip over other black blotches further down the canvas. The effect is partially one of layers of paint built up over one another, but also of something oozing through the crevices of a torn and compressed membrane.⁹ It is as if Kiefer wished to reaffirm not only that the canvas is two-dimensional, but also that it is a covering stretched over a support — that it has an underside as well as a surface. It is almost impossible to perceive the lower two-thirds of the canvas as the foreground and midground of a landscape receding toward a high horizon line. Here it is not a question of making reference to three-dimensional space and doing so in such a way that it cannot exactly be read as three-dimensional. In other words, the painting no longer sets up a fiction in order visibly to undermine it. Rather, the literal flatness of the canvas is acknowledged by making visible the physical relationship of one passage of paint to another.

In the top third of the picture, the thick paint tapers off. A strip of blue, a gently sloping curve, and a cluster of small, dark, vertical shapes read easily as sky, hill, and pinegrove in the far distance. The view is partially obscured by wisps of bluish smoke rising from orange flames at the bottom of the hill. The context for this burning landscape is provided by a children's rhyme written at the horizon line:

Maikäfer flieg,
der Vater ist im Krieg,
die Mutter ist in Pommerland,
Pommerland ist abgebrannt.

[Cockchafer Fly,
Father is at war,
Mother is in Pomerania,
Pomerania is burnt up.]

The words are subjugated to the illusion of perspective. The rhyme is written in a spidery, nearly vertical script, so that the tiny letters, stretching from the left edge of the canvas to the grove of trees in the center, appear to be almost like an endless line of soldiers marching over the hill and into the grove at the horizon. At the crucial point where smoke covers our view of the hill and trees, however, the word

9. The sense of compression and oozing is, I think, particularly strong in *Nero malt* and *Malen=Verbrennen*, also painted in 1974.

abgebrannt [burnt up] appears clearly against the background of the smoke, reasserting that the words are written across the canvas and have no place in the deep space of the landscape.

Throughout the rest of the 1970s Kiefer continued to explore the relationship between landscape represented in deep, almost exaggerated, perspective and a worked-up, all-over surface pattern. But the tension between the depth of fictive space and the flatness of the canvas that Kiefer rehearsed during this period was a problem that had already ceased to provide the impetus for new painting. Kiefer's move to revive perspective so that he could counter its effects with abstraction had the marks of a formulaic, perhaps even ironic, gesture — much like the mock “Sieg Heil” given in a bathtub. The art world had its own taboos, and in the so-called postmodern age, one taboo was the modernist concern with the purely physical properties of paint and canvas that had led to the supposed end of painting in Frank Stella and the minimalist object.¹⁰

In the 1980 *Wege: märkischer Sand* [Ways: March Sand], Kiefer made explicit the perfunctory nature of his landscape paintings by blowing up a photograph of a field and covering parts of it with sand and writing. Similar photographs supplied the ground for other paintings during the early 1980s, and most often the surface texture was provided less by the paint than by objects such as straw and sand affixed to the surface. In the two series of straw compositions executed during 1981 and 1982 — one based on Wagner's *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg* and the other on Paul Celan's “Death Fugue” — Kiefer experimented with eliminating landscape altogether. The columns of straw in *Margarethe* (1981), for instance, are mounted on a slate-blue, painted surface whose appearance is similar to the acid-treated lead supports Kiefer came to use frequently after the mid-1980s.

During the early 1980s Kiefer also returned to painting interiors, this time combining several techniques he had developed in his other projects. In *Innenraum* [Interior] (1981), we can see the tiled floor and ceiling reminiscent of the attic paintings, the drips of paint characteristic of the mid-1970s, the straw of the contemporaneous *Margarethe* and *Die*

10. It would be interesting, I think, to imagine the trajectory of Kiefer's career as a kind of reenactment (a playing out not unlike his recreation of “Operation Sea Lion” with toy battle-ships), on a massive, monumental scale, of the history of twentieth-century art from Picasso to Donald Judd. Certainly, Kiefer understands his art to stand in some significant relation to this history: “I think it completes Minimalism and Conceptualism” (Kiefer, Interview with Kuspit 89).

Meistersinger [*The Mastersingers*] projects, and the collaged woodblock prints that had previously appeared in Kiefer's books, and in the *Wege des Weltweisheit* [*Ways of Worldly Wisdom*] series of the late 1970s. By the mid-1980s Kiefer increasingly turned his attention away from the activity of painting and towards the construction of large-scale collages from scraps of photographs, dried plants, glass, and metal.

In the past seven years, Kiefer has moved away from the concerns of painting altogether, producing mainly large and heavy sculptures that retain a few referential elements derived from literature and history. These references seem to be an attempt to create the kind of irony and ambivalence present in Kiefer's pictorial work. However, I believe that Kiefer's recent attempts to sustain the various effects of distance that were present in the paintings and, to a certain extent, in the mixed-media pictures, have not been entirely successful. Some critics have described the sculptures (especially, and I think with good reason, the lead airplanes) as nostalgic and melancholic.¹¹ Because I feel that Kiefer produced his most complex and interesting images during the first decade of his career, I will concentrate my analysis on the work of the mid-1970s, and, in particular, on the 1976 painting *Varus*.

III

That Kiefer's art is theatrical is a commonplace in the criticism. The imposing dimensions of the paintings' supports, the displays of painterly flourish exaggerated by elements such as straw and sand, and the allusions to significant historical subject matter all combine to create works that are self-consciously ambitious, not only in size but also in scope. But "theatrical" is usually meant in the generic sense of giving a performance (not, as I have proposed, a specifically Brechtian performance that seeks to alienate the viewer). For Kiefer's supporters, "theatrical" is synonymous with lofty or impressive, for his detractors, with bombastic and histrionic. The use of the term "theatrical" as a vague value judgment sheds little light on Kiefer's pictorial practice. One

11. The most thoughtful account of the lead sculptures is Huyssen's review of Kiefer's 1991 exhibition at the Nationalgalerie in Berlin. See Andreas Huyssen, "Kiefer in Berlin," *October* 62 (Fall 1992): 84-101. More recently, Lisa Saltzman has interpreted Kiefer's projects dealing with Jewish themes — mainly Sulamith, Moses and Aaron, and Lilith — in light of the writings of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok and of Julia Kristeva on the roles of incorporation and the crypt in mourning and melancholy. See Saltzman, chapter four, 162-210.

critic, however, has proposed a theatrical model that seeks to give theoretical force to the term. I will describe it briefly here, since it stands in direct opposition to my reading.

In his *Fire on the Earth: Anselm Kiefer and the Postmodern World*, John Gilmour proposes:

. . . a comparison between Kiefer's practices and Jacques Derrida's notion of "original representation," a concept he introduces to help us understand Artaud's ideas about the Theater of Cruelty. This theme links Kiefer's tendency toward the tragic with pre-modern forms of thought having the potential to enrich our conception of reality.¹²

Gilmour emphasizes two aspects of Artaud's thoughts on theater as particularly applicable to Kiefer's art — first, that "Artaud's theater of cruelty was designed to produce a confrontation with 'the secret forces of the universe'," and second that Artaud "wanted to bring forward a layer of meaning more primitive than references to established forms of order could convey."¹³

Like Brecht, Artaud calls for formal innovations in the theater that would mobilize its full potential — sounds, lights, gestures, objects. However, while Brecht strives to achieve "a radical *separation of the elements* [Brecht's emphasis],"¹⁴ Artaud's new theatrical language is a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* that addresses all the senses at once — that "seeks to exalt, to benumb, to charm, to arrest the sensibility."¹⁵ Artaud's theater was to be a new kind of powerful spectacle that would destroy the distance between itself and the spectator. In fact, while Artaud himself uses the word "spectacle," his vision more closely resembles something like a ritualistic festival — that is, an event to be experienced rather than watched:

We are eliminating the stage and the auditorium and replacing them with a kind of single site, without partition or barrier of any kind,

12. John C. Gilmour, *Fire on the Earth: Anselm Kiefer and the Postmodern World* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1990) 14; see also Gilmour's "Original Representation and Anselm Kiefer's Postmodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46.3 (Spring 1988): 341-50.

13. Gilmour, "Original Representation" 343.

14. Bertolt Brecht, "The Literarization of the Theater," *Brecht on Theater: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964) 43.

15. Antonin Artaud, "The Theater of Cruelty (First Manifesto)," *Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976) 243.

which will itself become the theater of the action. A direct communication will be reestablished between the spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator, because the spectator, by being placed in the middle of the action, is enveloped by it and caught in its cross fire. . . . [T]he audience will be seated in the middle of the room, below, on moveable chairs, to allow them to follow the spectacle that will go on all around them.¹⁶

Artaud's spectacle eliminates the one aspect of theater held in common with painting — a physically delimited stage whose appearance can be taken in at a glance from a vantage point outside of itself. Artaud wishes to cleanse theater not just of the literary, but of any vestiges of the pictorial. While he does not mention painting as such, he does compare theater to the cinema — an art form that, like painting, is bound by the conventions of its medium to a specific relationship with its viewer, in which the latter must face a two-dimensional, delimited image.¹⁷ Artaud sees theater's ability to get beyond these limitations as a point of superiority: "From the point of view of action, moreover, one cannot compare a cinematic image which, however poetic, is limited by the properties of celluloid, to a theatrical image, which obeys all the exigencies of life."¹⁸

Derrida addresses precisely this aspect of Artaud's theater:

Since "in the 'theater of cruelty' the spectator is in the center and the spectacle surrounds him," the distance of vision is no longer pure, cannot be abstracted from the totality of the sensory milieu; the infused spectator can no longer *constitute* his spectacle and provide himself with its object. There is no longer spectator or spectacle, but *festival*. All the lim- its furrowing classical theatricality (represented/represented, signified/ signifier, author/director/actors/spectators, stage/audience, text/interpretation, etc.) were ethico-metaphysical prohibitions, wrinkles, grimaces, rictuses — the symptoms of fear before the dangers of the festival.¹⁹

However radical its break with mimetic representation, however mixed its media, an art object like those produced by Kiefer in the

16. Artaud 248.

17. It is not clear how something like the "medium" of film should be described — whether it is the projected image, the strip of film, or something else entirely. What I am concerned with here, however, is that the interaction between the film and its beholder, like that between a painting and its beholder, can be described as one of mutual facing.

18. Artaud 250.

19. Jacques Derrida, "The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation," *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981) 244.

1970s retains the most basic condition of painting — that of being a delimited surface facing its viewer — and it must acknowledge this distance of vision as one of the pre-conditions of its existence. It can seek to minimize the distance, or to mask it somehow, but to eliminate it altogether would mean nothing short of ceasing to be a painting. “Theater of Cruelty Painting” is therefore an oxymoron. More to the point, Kiefer’s complexly textured, multi-layered surfaces — his equation of painting not only with *Verbrennen* and *Verholzen*, but also with *Versenken* and *Versanden*, or, as Huyssen puts it, a process of “archaeology in reverse”²⁰ — make no attempt to deny or collapse the critical distance between the spectator and the object of speculation. On the contrary, I believe his paintings do not so much produce brutal confrontation as display an artifact to view.

As I have suggested, Kiefer’s paintings during the 1970s are related to a very different kind of theater — one in which self-conscious display of the mechanisms of representation is a primary technique, calculated to assert with a vengeance those conditions of spectatorship Artaud would destroy. Rather than seeking to create a total environment for primal experience, this type of theater — theorized by Artaud’s contemporary, Bertolt Brecht — aims to counteract the spectator’s desire to lose himself in the illusion of presentness that staged performance (and, to a certain extent, painting, too) can provide.

IV

The 1976 painting *Varus* exemplifies Kiefer’s theatricality. The canvas is imposing — roughly six feet by nine. Like most of Kiefer’s paintings of the 1970s, it is representational in that it depicts something recognizable, but clearly not something meant to be a convincing likeness. We are given a view straight down the middle of a path through a dense forest as it leads away into the center of the canvas. The bare trunks of the trees stand rigidly upright and the sparse branches grow closer together near the top, reaching to meet each other in a tent-like canopy whose apex is at the upper edge of the picture. The broad

20. Huyssen, “Kiefer in Berlin” 97. “Verbrennen, Verholzen, Versenken, Versanden” is the title of Kiefer’s entry into the 1980 Venice Biennale. Like *Besetzungen*, these forms have a variety of meanings. Saltzman provides a translation that maintains the tension I perceive to be in play between “Verbrennen, Verholzen” [burning/scorching, hacking/felling] and “Versenken, Versanden” [sinking, silting/sanding] (Saltzman 63, 69n.).

expanse of the path seems to narrow too quickly to the point of a nearly equilateral triangle. The exaggerated upward raking, shallow depth, and complete emptying-out of the foreground suggests less the mechanics of perspective than something like a field cleared for imminent action. That this path is to be read as a sort of site is further suggested by three names — Varus, Hermann, and Tuscelda — written across the light triangle of paint between the trees, and by a dozen or so prominent dark-red splotches of paint that drip down the surface of the painting.



Varus, 1976 by Anselm Kiefer

The red pigment is reminiscent of dried blood. However, because of the placement of these bloody spots (in a vertical plane parallel to the support, rather than in the illusory plane of the path), they do not read as physical traces of what has passed in the implied narrative of the representation; they seem instead to have a symbolic function — perhaps an injunction to remember, perhaps an omen of something we might imagine is about to take place. In other words, the blood/paint does not read visually as being in the same space as the forest, and therefore it seems to comment on, rather than participate in, the fiction. In this plane of commentary is also a series of names, much smaller than those

at the center of the image, written across the periphery of the canvas. The red blotches and the names, written in white script except for the black block letters of “Varus,” seem suspended as if literally in front of the represented scene. It is as though between the canvas and its beholder there hangs a transparent *scrim* — a screen — covered with writing and blood/paint that, were it lifted, would reveal an unobstructed view of some grand spectacle.²¹

I cannot agree with those critics who wish to see Kiefer as a history painter, but of all Kiefer’s paintings, I believe *Varus* comes closest in spirit to history painting. Its mood of expectation, of an infinitely suspended moment in which we can perceive a hint of what came before, and of what is yet to come, reopens the possibility — more or less foreclosed since at least the beginning of the twentieth century — that painting can be a forum for the representation of heroic human action. At the same time, however, the presence of what I have described as the screen denies — or, at least, seriously qualifies — that possibility. What is presented to our gaze is not the action of human figures, but only the names of the actors — linguistic elements that, like signs in general, stand in for what is not present. The substitution of a linguistic marker for the heroic body is jarring. In the words of Gudrun Inboden, “there is nothing to cushion the missing event.”²² It is perhaps this evocation of the space of history painting, now emptied of its actors — a stage set on which there is nothing taking place — that strikes viewers as most obviously theatrical.

Moreover, some parallels may be drawn between the visual effects of *Varus* and the appearance of the empty proscenium stage before a performance (more specifically, what the back wall of such a stage would look

21. Brigid Doherty has suggested to me, in conversation, that the blood/paint might also be read, more complexly, as a kind of fantasy of the moment after painting — as though the temporal structure of before and after implied in the blood/paint’s lying literally *on top* of the image belonged to the interaction of the painting and its beholder, rather than the painting and its maker. Such a reading is especially intriguing in light of the gradation of size and brightness — ranging from the largest and deepest red drips at the bottom of the picture, to the smaller and slightly paler spots in the middle ground, culminating finally in a thin smudge, half-covered over with a smear of white, in the very center of the painting. It is as if the painting’s resistance to penetration had to be gradually, and violently, overcome as the spectator progressed toward the painting’s center, and it is this trauma, rather than any imagined battle between Hermann and Varus, that has left its bloody trace over the surface of the painting.

22. Galerie Paul Maenz, *Anselm Kiefer, mit einem Essay von Gudrun Inboden*, (Köln, Germany: Galerie Paul Maenz, 11 Mar.-19 Apr. 1986) 5.

like before a performance of some version of the *Hermannsschlacht* [Arminius's Battle], whose protagonists are Varus and Hermann). The disproportionately expansive path in the foreground, the dark brown of the rigid trees flanking the path, and the canopy of branches overhead all seem to echo the physical structure of the stage — an empty expanse of floor enclosed on three sides and the top. But the deep perspective, leading to a light blue patch between the trees in the center, opens up the back wall. The painting looks less like the enclosed space of the stage itself than a backdrop in which the physical space of the stage is mimicked in order to suggest spatial continuity between the shallow stage and the imaginary, deep space of the painted scenery.

The suggestion of a coherent fiction of space is, however, minimal. The paint is thick, at times obscuring what it ostensibly depicts. The represented scene does not span the entire canvas. Areas of dark paint extend for several inches beyond the left-most and right-most trees, reading clearly on the left as a kind of dark ground that seems to extend under the painted representation, and more ambiguously on the right, sometimes as ground, and sometimes as a thin dark glaze that seeps over the trunks of the trees. One's feeling that the representation is somehow pasted over another surface behind it is especially strong at the upper and lower left corners of the painting.

At the bottom, the trunk of the left-most tree tapers off in a black curve that also suggests a root. Paint drips in long rivulets from this possible root to the bottom edge of the painting. The corner itself, below and to the left of the tree, is a flat area of brown, with only a few visible brush strokes. At a point on the tree trunk, a foot or so before the top, various hues of brown used for the modeling and shading of the trunk have become separated, like a thick rope unraveled into separate strands. The strands taper off at a diagonal boundary that marks the top edge of the representation. The swirls of white paint along the length of the diagonal boundary make the thickly painted tree tops take on the appearance of an old poster whose ragged, rain-soaked edges hang away from the wall. The initial response to *Varus* first as a space, and then as a surface, is modified once more through the recognition of the picture as a kind of palimpsest — a complex layering of one surface over another (although I do not insist on the temporal sequence of these responses). It is as though Kiefer has painted neither the stage itself, nor the backdrop that is to hang upon its back wall, but rather the appearance of that back wall together with the backdrop that hangs in front of it.

If *Varus* were a backdrop, its effect would not be to create a convincing illusion, but rather to make perspicuous to the audience that the presence of the backdrop is first of all a conventional sign of the scene's location. It calls attention to itself as a marker of the machinery of the theater. It says not only "this scene takes place in a forest," but more forcefully, "this is a backdrop placed here to inform you of the fact that the scene takes place in a forest." And so *Varus* does not give the viewer an image of the Teutonic forest, but places him in the position of being *shown* an image of the Teutonic forest. We are thus led to contemplate the possibility that Kiefer's theme is not the forest, but the viewer's response to it.²³

Most critics consider Kiefer's art to be a form of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* because of its visual and linguistic reference to events, texts, myths, and personages connected directly or indirectly with the Nazi era, as though the mere mention of these things would be enough to inspire critical reflection in the viewer. As Huyssen's analysis and the recent debates about the representation of the Holocaust suggest, however, the nature of our reflections is strongly shaped by the manner of the representation that provokes them. Nevertheless, the presence of so many recognizable references in Kiefer's work tempts many critics to see meaning as synonymous with literary subject matter. Charles Harrison wryly comments that:

[I]t is in the nature of Kiefer's work that it furnishes for amateur iconographers and *littérateurs* just the kinds of career-opportunities in pseudo-explanation and exegesis which were severely restricted by the abstract art of post-war Modernism.²⁴

This is especially true of the critical treatment of Kiefer's use of language. According to one critic, "Kiefer's strategy has been to impregnate the image with references to mythology identified through the work's titles."²⁵ This implies, first of all, that before the imposition of a literary title on the work, the image was somehow virginal. But, in fact, even without their linguistic elements, Kiefer's works are already "impregnated."

23. In fact, this kind of self-critical contemplation plays a central role in Huyssen's account of his own response to Kiefer's paintings. See note 3 above.

24. Charles Harrison, "Importance: Kiefer and Serra at the Saatchi Collection," *Artscribe* 60 (November/December 1986): 51.

25. Jean Fisher, "A Tale of the German and the Jew," *Artforum* 24.1 (September 1985): 106.

The objects that appear in his earlier paintings (snakes, swords, oak trees, palettes, fire, wings), as well as the materials (straw and lead) of his more abstract works all have a long history of symbolic use. At best, the identifying titles place the objects within a narrower context than the one the viewer might bring to the picture.

"Identifying" the image is only a small portion of the work the titles do in Kiefer's paintings. For the purposes of simple identification, it would be enough to place the title on the wall label next to the painting, with a brief explanation:

Varus, first century Roman general, defeated by the German chieftain Hermann in what is widely regarded as the first decisive German victory in the struggle for independence from the Roman Empire.

Even in that case, it would not be exactly like identification. In a representational painting, the title identifies the scene in the straightforward sense of specifying what the picture is of. David's *The Oath of the Horatii* is a picture of three young men swearing an oath before an older one; Courbet's *A Burial at Ornans* depicts a funeral procession; Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* may not present us with a spectacle we are ever likely to come across in a park, but it does show figures in a landscape with the makings of a meal. We are so used to this state of affairs that when presented with an arrangement of planes and curves labelled *Accordionist* (Picasso, 1911), we immediately attempt to reconstruct the accordion.

The matching-up of certain barely recognizable pictorial elements with some real-world or literary referent occurs in some of Kiefer's works as well — usually through a combination of metonymic and metaphoric processes. The golden-colored straw in *Margarethe* is understood to stand in for the blond Margarete of Celan and Goethe. The lead wing in *Icarus* is taken to represent the doomed youth himself, plunging to his death. But where is there any trace of Varus in *Varus*? There is only his name. We cannot even assume that this name is meant to refer to the Roman general, since (as with *Notung*) it also designates the painting per se. There are many other works in which such an ambiguity of reference exists. As Sanford Schwartz notes:

When [Kiefer] writes *Die Meistersinger* in the clouds that are above the field in *Die Meistersinger*, he may be saying that it's time for Germany to stretch its Wagnerian muscles and take pride in its past once again. Or

he may be saying, “Look what Wagner and his lofty conceptions have brought us to — a rank field, a mouldy legacy.” Yet when you see the words *Die Meistersinger* up in the pale blue and cloudy white sky, your immediate response, unless you come equipped with thoughts about this opera, is that the title has an audaciously grandiloquent ring, and that it fits this mightily proportioned, straw-embowered, orange-black European landscape in the same corny and stirring way that *Ile de France* fits a transatlantic luxury liner, or that *Man O’War* fits a racehorse. Putting the words *Die Meistersinger* up in the narrow strip of sky of a landscape that has clumps of brushy straw all over it, Kiefer emphasizes how much of an object — rather than a painting, this is. We feel the distant trees, the fields, and the sky together as one noble, immense, silent creature, one that might raise itself on its haunches and slowly move away.²⁶

Grandiloquence and nobility aside, I take this passage to bear out two important, and related, effects of Kiefer’s practice. The first is that placing the title of the painting across the painted surface, where it cannot be overlooked or momentarily forgotten, underscores the unity of the disparate elements of the work, including its title.²⁷ The second is that the continued presence of the title within, and simultaneously in front, of the work interferes with the viewer’s attempts to interpret the work — to identify, in all senses of the word, what the picture is *of*. In the remainder of this essay, I will explore the nature of this interference.

V

The linguistic elements in Kiefer’s paintings do not operate like words in a rebus. They are not integrated with the pictorial elements to enable a coherent reading of some message, despite the impressive efforts of catalog essayists to provide us with an extensive lexicon of the imagery. The words, especially the titles, appear as if situated at a kind of boundary between the world of the spectator in front of the painting, and the fictive, perspectively constructed, space within the painting. They prevent the spectator from losing himself in the contemplation of the possible meanings of the images. In Schwartz’s terms, the spectator’s attention is diverted so that he is not immediately led to

26. Sanford Schwartz, “Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Beuys, and the Ghosts of the Fatherland,” *The New Criterion* 1.7 (1983): 4.

27. Although I would not go so far as to oppose the notion of “painting” to that of “object” in this case. The presence of the title within the pictorial field stresses the fact that the various representations of objects, and the actual objects attached to the canvas, are all parts of one object that can be identified by a name. Quite clearly, however, this object is not just any unspecified object, but a *painting*.

wonder whether *Die Meistersinger* is meant as a celebration of Germany's cultural greatness or as an ironic commentary on the myth of greatness. It is almost as if there were a gap between the spectator and the painting that provided the space (or perhaps the time, since writing has a temporal as well as spatial dimension) in which the spectator can reflect, as Huyssen has done, upon the nature of his own desires.

The assertion with which this essay began — that judgments about subject matter must be derived from an understanding of representational practice — has, I hope, been borne out by my analysis of *Varus*. In order for a painting to function as a form of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, it is not sufficient to evoke a bloody Teutenborg Forest, place within the picture the names of various personages bound up in one way or another with the myth of German nationhood and cultural supremacy, and then refer to it by the name of a vanquished enemy of Germania. After all, the same names, and the same forest, can be evoked with nostalgia by the revisionists, who, instead of “working through” the recent traumas of German history, would rather pretend it had never happened, or at least that it did not happen in quite *that* way. If these objects — so dangerous to name precisely because so much of German identity was deeply invested in them during the Third Reich — are to be represented at last in the name of memory, then some pictorial strategy must be found to block the viewer's access to the representation so that nostalgic identification ceases to be an easily sustainable response.

This strategy in Kiefer's paintings; consists in the separation of the picture into distinct spheres: 1) figurative representation, in deep perspective, of objects and sites that have some connection to the Third Reich and its foundational myths; 2) modernist surface presence, which at times overwhelms and obscures the representation, and which offers resistance to the eye's propensity to follow the lines of perspective and 3) text and abstract pictorial elements placed literally on top of all other paint to form what I have referred to as a “screen” between the viewer and the first two spheres of the painting. The result is a kind of collection of disparate elements that can be examined separately and brought together by the unifying action of the screen.

In *Varus* one of the most prominent components of the screen is the title of the painting. It is the largest name on the canvas and the only one written in black. The presence of the title within the painting undermines “identification” both in the sense of recognizing objects and in the sense of empathizing. Unlike in the earlier *Notung*, or in the later

Margarethe, there is nothing in *Varus* that could be either identified as the Roman General Varus or understood clearly to stand in for him in effigy — other than the name itself. The absence of a figure that can be identified as Varus, together with the distancing effect of the screen, severely restricts the possibility of identifying *with* the image.²⁸ What I mean by identification with the image is an emotional response to any action portrayed, or the imaginary entry into the space of the representation — in Brecht’s terms, the response provoked by the illusionistic spell of traditional “Aristotelian” dramatic theater.²⁹ This identification is already undermined by what happens at the periphery of the painting, as well as by the various other visual effects that foreground the literal flatness of the support. The “screen” serves to amplify further the alienation of the viewer from the potentially seductive referential elements of the picture. The thwarted desire for a unified, natural, and imitable world turns inward as the viewer casts about for an alternate response. The path of least resistance becomes to examine the feelings of nostalgia that one wants to, but cannot quite, have.

28. It may seem untenable to attempt to separate the recognizable form of an object from the very paint of which this form is made. However, what I mean is evident in the majority of Kiefer’s landscape paintings from 1974-76. In these works, two very different modes of painting are juxtaposed. It is as though an abstract painting were superimposed over a representational one. The landscape emerges through the cracks, gaps are left between the viscous smears where a smoother surface is visible, and the horizon line is clearly legible. Rather than appearing to constitute the image, the topmost layer of paint acts like a crust that hides the “true” image behind it. The separation between abstraction and representation is made abundantly clear in the later landscapes, in which the representation is provided by a photograph, and then partially obscured by paint and other materials. But it was throughout 1974 and 1975 that Kiefer worked out the two levels in paint alone. In some paintings, like *Maikäfer flieg* or *Nero malt* (1974), the crust obscures the landscape almost entirely. In others such as *Malen* (1974), it is transformed into a semi-transparent curtain. In *Malen* the outline of a large palette appears to hover in front of the image, much like the blood/paint and the names do in *Varus*. The remnants of this more or less clear distinction between the abstract and the representational elements can still be seen at the periphery of *Varus*. The order of the layers is reversed — with the representation seeming to lie on top of an undifferentiated field of paint. The thick crust is replaced by the “screen” as the top-most layer. Possibly, Kiefer no longer felt able to sustain, in paint, a distinction between image and pure material. If this is the case, it may partially explain why he began to cover the surface of his paintings with straw and sand, or to attach lead objects to it.

29. Strictly speaking, if *Varus* were meant to function as a nostalgic identificatory model, the implied German viewer would identify not with the Roman Varus, but with the victorious Germanic Hermann. The viewer would project him- or herself into the imaginary space of the representation not in order to become Varus, but to do battle with him. The fact that the *Hermannsschlacht* is evoked through the figure of the enemy rather than the conquering hero could be, in a different kind of picture, a powerful incitation to repeat the military victory — a kind of rallying cry.

At its most extreme, empathetic identification becomes imitative identification. That is to say, the viewer identifies with the image so strongly that it becomes his ego ideal. Under the Nazi regime, monumental images of robust young workers, farmers, and athletes that operated on just such a narcissistic, specular model were deployed to great effect, and their real-world counterparts exhibited regularly at parades, festivals, and athletic competitions. Implicit in Kiefer's undermining of the process of identification with the specular image is a critique of the very means by which the German national body constituted itself through that specular image during the Third Reich.

Further, the structure of "self-estranged exhibitionism" in Kiefer's paintings literally enacts the relationship of Kiefer's generation to images of German national identity.³⁰ From initial horror and disgust to skeptical acceptance following his success abroad, the history of Kiefer's reception in Germany illustrates the extent to which the Germans' image of themselves is closely bound up with what they perceive themselves to be in the eyes of other nations, particularly the United States.³¹ One possible reading of the self-conscious being-on-display of Kiefer's paintings, in the context of this national self-estrangement, is that they illustrate in their pictorial structure the contemporary perception that, for Germans of his generation, identity can only be constituted under the scrutinizing gaze of the Other. If any identification is possible, it must be with that scrutinizing gaze, now turned back on the self, rather than with anything in the image.³²

VI

Varus can be read as a kind of summary of Kiefer's practice up to the mid-1970s. I believe it represents the end-point of his development

30. The phrase "self-estranged exhibitionism" is taken from Thomas Elsaesser's "Primary Identification and the Historical Subject: Fassbinder and Germany," quoted in Saltzman 87, 95n.: ". . . [T]he Germans are beginning to love their own cinema because it has been endorsed, confirmed, and benevolently looked at by someone else — for the German cinema to exist, it first had to be seen by non-Germans. It enacts, as a national cinema, now in explicitly economic and cultural terms, yet another form of self-estranged exhibitionism." The essay appears in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia UP, 1986).

31. See Saltzman, chapter two 44-104.

32. In psychoanalytic terms, I would propose that the model for Kiefer's paintings is not the Freudian one of mourning and melancholy based on specular identification, but rather the model of mimetic desire proposed by Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen in *The Freudian Subject*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1982).

as a *painter*. Throughout the early 1970s, Kiefer's major works were executed in acrylic and oil on canvas. The earlier works, like *Notung*, included one or two elements of collage, but these disappeared with the advent of the landscape paintings in 1974. As I have suggested in my description of *Maikäfer flieg*, the change seems to be due to a new notion of how the painting's surface could be affirmed.

Shortly after the completion of *Varus*, however, Kiefer expanded his production of paintings to include media other than paint. Most recently, he has stopped producing anything that can be called a painting, and is now considered an "installation artist." *Varus* is thus exemplary of Kiefer's pictorial concerns at precisely that moment when he had pushed paint as a medium as far as it would ever go in his career (at least until the present). The three levels of representation I have described exist to a greater or lesser extent in all of the paintings up to 1976. However, the separation of the painting surface into something like three distinct spheres is most apparent in *Varus*.

Of course, these levels are not entirely distinct. First, they bear a relationship to the canvas support, and are thus all pictorial, insofar as each level exists within the confines of the picture, even if one level has the appearance of being placed somehow in front, or outside, of the picture plane. Second, while there are places, particularly at the periphery, where either the abstract or the representational level is dominant — rendering the two clearly distinguishable — the "screen" unifies them by treating both like a two-dimensional surface on which to place words or splotches of paint.

As I have shown, the complex interaction of representational, abstract, and linguistic elements in Kiefer's paintings, particularly in *Varus*, results in a presentation of historical material that appears deliberately staged. And it is staged in such a way that the distance between spectator and object inherent in the act of vision is accentuated to a point at which the spectator's role in the act, rather than the object's, becomes the focus of critical reflection. This is not the "Theater of Cruelty," which seeks to eliminate the spectator/object distinction by making the spectator a part of the representation. It is a theater of alienation that has some important formal aspects in common with Brecht's Epic Theater. The function of textual and abstract elements in *Varus* can be seen, for example, as analogous to the alienating function of projections in Brecht's *The Mother*, in which:

... A big canvas at the back of the stage was used for the projection of texts and pictorial documents which remained throughout the scene, so that this screen was also virtually part of the setting. Thus the stage not only used allusions to show actual rooms but also texts and pictures to show the great movement of ideas in which the events were taking place. The projections are in no way pure mechanical aids in the sense of being extras, they are no *pons asinorum*; they do not set out to help the spectator but to block him; they prevent his complete empathy, interrupt his being automatically carried away. They turn the impact into an *indirect* one. Thus they are organic parts of the work of art.³³

I suggest that the function of these projections is remarkably similar to that of the "screen" in *Varus*. Brecht's projections are clearly not part of something like the representation of the events, since they are neither props integral to the action of the play nor suggestive of a locale, but their presence determines the *impact* of the represented events. Kiefer's screen of linguistic and abstract elements superimposed over a more or less legible image operates in the register of impact in much the same way. In both cases, the projection/screen is placed within the literal, but not the fictive, space of the *tableau*, achieving in *Varus* the alienation effects I have already described at length.

I use the word *tableau* here quite deliberately. Obviously, I do not mean it in the strictly Diderotian sense. Diderot's *tableau* depended on the fiction of the fourth wall between the stage and the spectator. In other words, the actor had to proceed as if the audience were not there at all, which in turn allowed the audience to forget the actor and see only the representation. What Brecht intends is precisely the opposite. Not only the gestures of the actor, but also the very appearance of the stage itself, should contribute to what Brecht calls the "making-oneself-observed."³⁴

If we light the actors and their performance in such a way that the lights themselves are within the spectator's field of vision we destroy part of his illusion of being present at a spontaneous, transitory, authentic, unrehearsed event. He sees that arrangements have been made to show something; something is being repeated here under special conditions.³⁵

What I mean by *tableau*, therefore, is a scene being made available to

33. Brecht, "Indirect Impact of the Theater," *Brecht on Theater* 57-8.

34. Brecht, "Indirect Impact of the Theater" 58.

35. Brecht, "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting," *Brecht on Theater* 141.

vision, a scene being shown. Its opposing term is not the self-conscious *geste*, but rather something like Artaud's *Gesamtkunstwerk* or festival. Brecht's theater is very different in spirit from Diderot's. Yet it is a kind of *tableau* because, like Diderot's theater, it is essentially pictorial.³⁶ We can well imagine that the deliberate gestures of the actors, the equally deliberate exposure of the mechanical equipment, and the prominently placed projections would retain much of their impact if, following Diderot's example, we were to watch the play with our fingers in our ears.

Varus is this kind of *tableau* — an epic *tableau*, to use Brecht's terminology. What occurs on the periphery of the painting — for example, the root of the tree tapering off into drips of paint, the unraveling of the different colors used to paint the tree bark — is a kind of exposure of the lighting, in other words, of what is involved in the production of the picture. The cleared foreground, framed by the forest, is a deliberate arrangement that clearly has the appearance of something being shown. The use of the "screen" to foreclose empathy — to impede the beholder's imaginary entry into the world of the representation and to keep him thus always aware of the world this side of the *tableau* — is similar to Brecht's projections in both form and intention. The titles, according to Kiefer, do not clarify:

The title is in contradiction to the material of the work. An irony is established. A precise distance is created. This obscures the work, keeping it from immediate consumption, easy familiarity. I don't mind if my titles lead to misunderstanding, because misunderstanding creates distance. The title is like the book the lecturer puts between himself and his public. The lecture is not about the book; it creates an ironic distance between the lecturer and the public.³⁷

It is Kiefer's attempt to distance the viewer from the work, rather than his frequent reference to myths of nationhood, that places Kiefer's

36. For a discussion of Brecht's theater as *tableau*, see Roland Barthes, "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein," *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985) 89-97. Barthes points to Brecht's and Eisenstein's use of montage as a point of comparison with the Diderotian *tableau*. The epic theater, according to Barthes, "proceeds by successive tableaux" (92).

For a reading of Diderot's understanding of the theater as pictorial, and for the relationship between Diderot's writings on the theater and the development of history painting in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1980) and chapter one of his *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990).

37. Kiefer, Interview with Kuspit 90.

work within the context of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. If *Varus* is an act of memory, rather than an act of nostalgia, it is because the act is literally, that is to say, pointedly, an acting out. For Brecht, the acting out of memory was essential if the represented events were to be understood in historical terms:

It should be apparent all through [the actor's] performance that "even at the start and in the middle he knows how it ends" and he must "thus maintain a calm independence throughout." He narrates the story of his character by vivid portrayal, always knowing more than it does and treating its "now" and "here" not as a pretense made possible by the rules of the game but as something to be distinguished from yesterday and some other place, so as to make visible the knotting-together of the events.

This matters particularly in the portrayal of large-scale events or ones where the outside world is abruptly changed, as in wars and revolutions. The spectator can then have the whole situation and the whole course of events set before him. He can for instance hear a woman speaking and imagine her speaking differently, let us say in a few weeks' time, or other women speaking differently at the moment but in another place. This would be possible if the actress were to play as though the woman had lived through the entire period and were now, out of her memory and her knowledge of what happened next, recalling those utterances of hers which were important at the time; for what is important here is what became important. To alienate an individual in this way, as being "this particular individual" and "this particular individual at this particular moment," is only possible if there are no illusions that the player is identical with the character and the performance with the actual event.³⁸

And so Kiefer, too, makes visible the knotting together of events — in *Varus*, quite literally, through the white, thread-like strands of paint that seem to ensnare the names of the "players" on Kiefer's stage. Perhaps we are meant to see the name *Varus* as the Brechtian character who speaks from memory the significant events of his life. Or, more to the point, *Varus* himself — *Varus* itself — is shown to be a series of significant utterances that became important, in this particular moment, in this particular place.

38. Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theater," *Brecht on Theater* 194-95.