

Anselm Kiefer's "The Book"

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[shortened version for online posting]



Anselm Kiefer's "The Book" on exhibit at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden is a monumental landscape painting made with oil, lead, photographic paper, straw and fabric on canvas. The colors of the murky, muted painting are greys, black, neutral browns, beige, gold and white. A large grey book is centered in the landscape. Small splashes of contrasting color in the lower right of the canvas and just to the left and above the book are swallowed by the expanse of neutrals. A strip of partly detached tape hangs from the surface, and paint and other matter sags from the surface.

Above the book, a dim, ethereal and otherworldly light gleams sparingly over an area of specular and diffuse reflection off the coastal horizon and highlights the breaking surf. The sky above the horizon crackles and glows in places as if charged with lightning or other energy passing between heaven and earth. These elements of the landscape all create an illusionistic space that evokes the infinite, above which the book, like a figure, implies an heroic presence who acts as cleric, prophet, destructor and/or creator – and perhaps the book is that presence. "The Book" is an expressionist painting that involves its

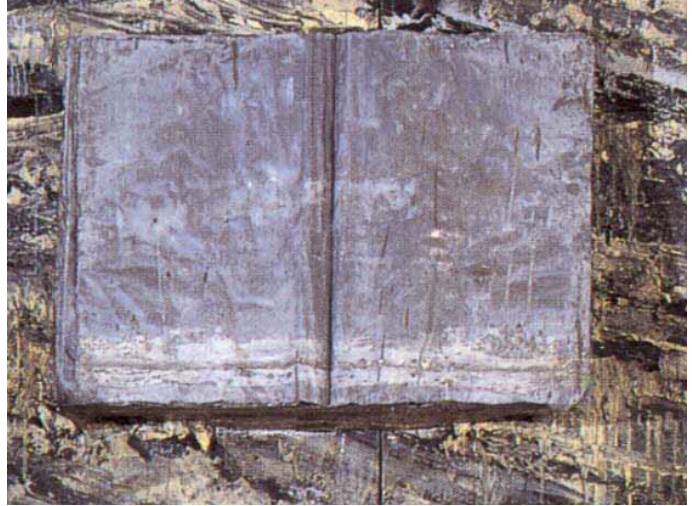
viewers in an immediate experience of a dynamic sublime full of paradoxes of awesome power versus personal powerlessness, and significant knowledge against the unknowable infinity.

Kiefer was born in Donaueschingen, German in 1945, a few months before World War II ended. He grew up in the “climate of forgetting” during Germany’s 1950’s economic boom when Germans denied National Socialism and embraced materialism. When he began as an artist, student movements were reawakening debates about German history and identity and were giving rise to radical social critiques. Kiefer’s first major creative phase, during which the painting “The Book” was produced, can be understood as his response to prohibitions against painting, direct representation and German nationalism, all of which he rebelled against. [Brio 7] Kiefer’s works during this phase are highly referential to German myth, history, literature, music, architecture, philosophy and religion and the majority of their subjects depict German culture and history. [Alteveer] He is best known for marrying Abstract Expressionist formalism to historical, political and literary subjects [MoMA] and for confronting Germany’s Nazi legacy by exploring visual and verbal icons of the Third Reich despite taboos against doing so. [Alteveer]

Kiefer’s painting, “The Book,” unites three subjects in which he worked separately: the book, the barren landscape and coastal seascapes. Since 1969, Kiefer has consistently worked with the book as subject. [MoMA] He also created vast, barren and damaged landscapes, such as “Nurmburg” and “Jerusalem,” that depicted vast ruin [Fürstenow-Khositashvili 37, 47] and seascapes where obscure light dimly reflected by waves create ambiguity between night and day. [Fürstenow-Khositashvili 87]

“The Book” shows its open leaded book hovering over the barren landscape and centered in it. The milky grey surface and curled edges suggest we are viewing the ashes of a burned or alchemically processed book. It signifies extraordinary power, though. Books are a powerful symbol of knowledge, law and religion for Kiefer, who also read law and Romance languages in college. [Brio] The combination of law and religion illuminate how society and culture come to exist and are defined ethically, spiritually and civilly.

Kiefer uses the motif of a book as a symbol of the accumulated wisdom of human knowledge, as well as the controversies and influence books have on society. [Brio] Prior to the creation of "The Book", Kiefer had made an entire body of work consisting of unique artist's books of lead layered with different materials combined in different ways, that



particularly focused on themes from Nazi rule. He had been making winged books since 1976. After completing "The Book," he began to display them as freestanding sculptures. [Rosenthal 133]

For Kiefer, the figure of a book can signify signification itself, and having no illustrations itself, "The Book" is his first such usage of one. It signifies language itself. [Haxthausen] The book's heroic placement above the devastated plane lit by the surreal golden, obscure atmospheric light, implies an impending action, the imminent revelation of truth or an insight of powerful or prophetic scope. The symbol and form of the book evoke, in fact, the imminence of genius; perhaps a revelatory voice that mirrors the compellingly transcendent expressionism of the artist. Poised and centered over the landscape, the book also suggests a preacher's pulpit, a lectern, or a podium – *a bimah* – at the center of the sanctuary of a temple from which the Torah is read. It directs one's attention to the land below by virtue of its vantage above it.

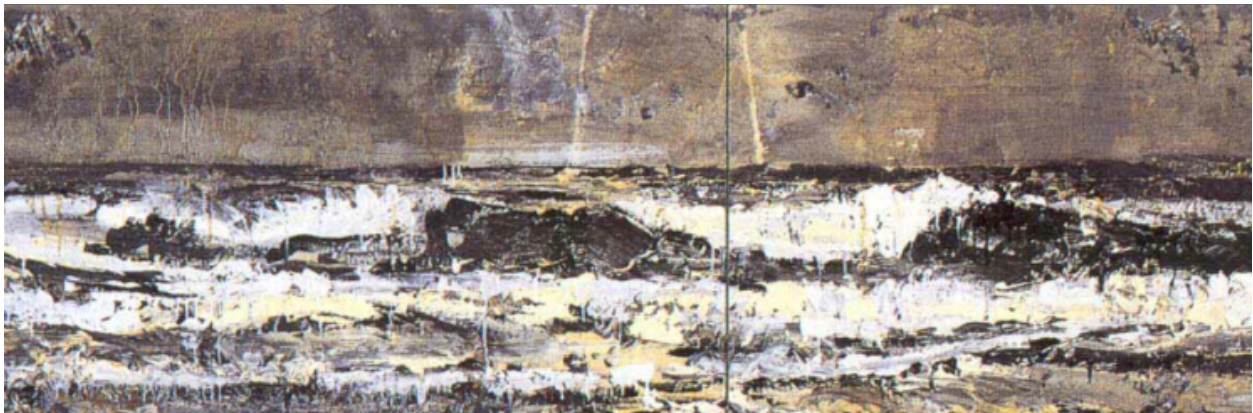
The landscape in "The Book" is furrowed but barren, with the grey of the book mirrored in greys on the ground, along with muted neutral browns, black, gold and off-white. Drips, gouges and masses of paint, and other matter such as straw sag off the uneven surface of the canvas. The tortured, scarred surface of the painting can be associated with the history of wars, destruction and ruin. The violent treatment of the "body" of the picture surface is related to the violence implied in the history of the land.



The divided, layered fields within the landscape evoke a segmented, abused surface whose form reflects complex biblical, mythological and historical contexts [Fürstenow-Khositashvili 37] Kiefer's landscapes continue a modernist tradition where he follows Cezanne, and reinterprets modernist planes in his work. [Fürstenow-Khositashvili 39] The thick, crusted, and layered surface flattens the plane like a Cezanne painting, and demands attention to the two-dimensional picture plane, even as the high horizon and perspective evoke a vast and deep illusionistic space behind it. This spatial paradox creates a sense of immediacy and infinity, both occupying the same space and filling it with alchemical potential to transform into something either more immediate, or something more infinite. Together with the high horizon that recedes deeply, with nothing but devastated land below it, the landscape contradicts the German tradition of landscape painting that had been appropriated by the National Socialists and represents change in the German soul. [Fürstenow-Khositashvili 39-40]

Kiefer's artistic language in his landscapes are characterized by fragmentation of

images, word and sentence breaks, and reduction of expression. The diversity of connotations are characteristic of Kiefer's semantic openness, focus on fracture and the need to speak to the unspeakable. The artist to whom his visual language best compares is the poet Paul Celan to whom Kiefer addresses the title of an artist book, "Das Lied von der Zeder - für Paul Celan," [Fürstenow-Khositashvili 107] "If [the poet Paul] Celan created poetry with focus on values in art that are not dominated by beauty, but rather the opposite of it, broken syntax, changing rhythm, distortion of form, accumulation of metaphors ad absurdum, Kiefer introduced all this into the realm of painting... Kiefer's works are appealing not for beauty but the traumatic expressiveness, inner tension, richness of metaphors, broken rhythm and innovative composition... Paul Celan and Anselm Kiefer respectively created qualitatively different poetry and painting, that cannot be evaluated in terms of beauty standards. Their works provoke strong emotion in the spectator due to the painful, traumatic, dark reality that they reflect. Kiefer's paintings reflect the historical continuum after Auschwitz, with its aesthetics of destruction and ruin." [Fürstenow-Khositashvili 53-54] The very unique and innovative formal properties of Kiefer's landscapes serve and enable the expressionist aim of the work; in particular the poetic voice with which he renders the details and their visual composition, and how the parts of his visual text relate to the whole mission of expression.



The surf that adjoins the high horizon of "The Book" creates a deep sense of distance at the horizon with an immediate sense of unrelenting movement toward The Book and the viewer of the artwork. In Kiefer's seascapes, there is no sense of perspective, and the water

sometimes merges with a thin line against a murky sky. The dim light gleaming in a specular reflection off the waves obscures whether it's day or night. There is no sense of time or place. [Fürstenow-Khositashvili 87] The coastal seascape's lack of temporal and physical reference, together with its roiling surf, create the visual analog of the artist's relentless and restless focus on the past, and the overlapping and overlayment of the past with the present. The unbounded sea in the distant horizon implies the absence of an end to such remembrance.

The layering of meaning in the painting, the layering of materials and the layering of the subjects/figures represented, create the heavy, physical sense of layers of unresolved experiences of a traumatized individual who is trapped in the re-experiencing of the intrusive memories of the moment of trauma. The spare splashes of bright colors that appear in a few places on the canvas without having any visual impact at all, resemble the anhedonia of depression, where one might take notice of sensations of pleasure without experiencing any pleasure from them.

The focus in myth like those in Kiefer's canvases is on the state of ruin, the fragmentation of the land and on efforts that have to be made in search of restitution, that would reveal the knowledge needed for redemption. The divine revelation that seems to portend appears to be a metaphorical and mysterious process, barely attainable and beneath rational interpretation. The artwork's suspense and the simplicity of the open, blank book implies that the mere search for knowledge itself might bring about the redemption. Such metaphorical search by means of art is apparent in Kiefer's works. [Fürstenow-Khositashvili 33]

Anselm Kiefer's work easily accomplishes its goal of putting the viewer into the moment of the dynamically sublime. We experience fear, powerlessness and smallness, but at the same time we experience the compelling verge of omniscience, the irresistibility of nature's power, and a vast, impenetrable infinity. Kiefer's sweeping historic and poetic voice and vision are those of a genius, an individual who has something of heightened importance to convey now. Despite the darkness, confusion of materials, and roughness of the rendered details of the painting, Kiefer's painting exudes his joy of painting with off-hand masterful execution. While there are instrumental qualities to the work, particularly

in how the painting embodies its social and cultural themes, the instrumentalism lies in the holistic redemption the expressionism itself achieves.

The incredibly rich, innovative formal aspects of the painting all serve, and intensify, the expression and the symbolic meanings in the work. He is one of the few neo-expressionists whose work will endure deep into the 21st century. [Madar] Kiefer's creative process appears to have been fundamentally ekphrastic as he channels the vision of a sage and judge who looks behind in order to transcend, with the voice of a poet and prophet in order to formulate new chemistries with which we can move forward. "The Book" successfully internalizes and then expresses unresolved cultural fractures and historic trauma. A work that exemplifies neo-expressionism and abstract expressionism, "The Book" is in a brilliant class by itself, effecting a game-changing impact on the art world.

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