



A Free Course on the History of Western Art

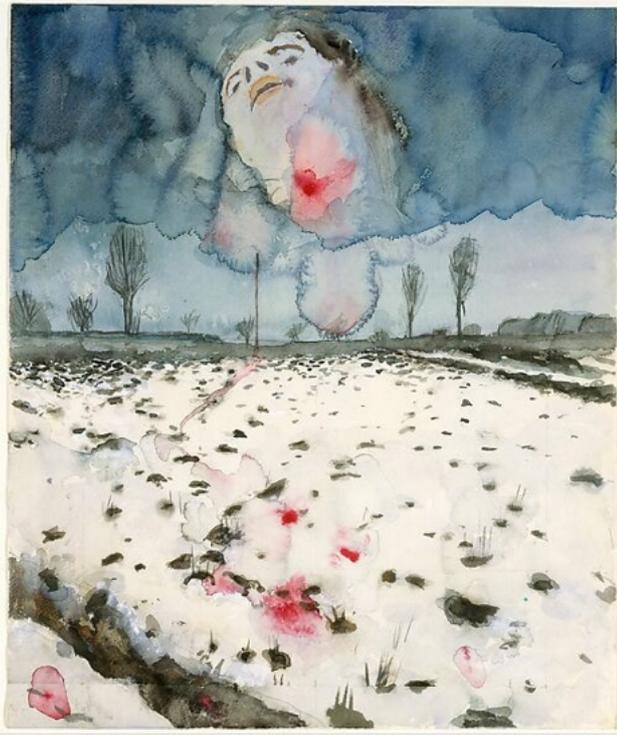
Dr Laurence Shafe www.shafe.uk



- Welcome. This is one of over 200 talks on the history of Western Art. I have arranged the talks chronologically starting with cave art through to art produced in the last few years.

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61-15 ANSELM KEIFER

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE

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Anselm Kiefer

Winter Landscape, 1970

Anselm Kiefer (1945–)

Occupations (Besetzungen), 1969

66.4 x 51 cm. (each) | Tate, London



Anselm Kiefer (1945–), *Occupations (Besetzungen)*, 1969, 66.4 x 51 cm. (each), Tate, London

- Anselm Kiefer burst onto the art scene with *Occupations*, a series of black-and-white photographs documenting his provocative 1969 performance. Dressed in his father's Wehrmacht uniform, the 24-year-old artist photographed himself giving the Nazi salute at various historical sites across France, Switzerland, and Italy. The gesture was not only taboo but potentially illegal in West Germany. Kiefer's caption was deliberately provocative: "Between the summer and autumn of 1969, I occupied Switzerland, France and Italy. A few photos."
- The work confronts Germany's collective amnesia about the Third Reich. Kiefer deliberately resurrected forbidden iconography to force his generation to acknowledge their nation's catastrophic history. The photographs employ Leni Riefenstahl's cinematographic techniques—low-angle shots that once heroicised Hitler—but here Kiefer appears diminutive, often dwarfed by his surroundings. No jubilant masses. No marching soldiers. Just one isolated figure in an absurd, mundane performance.
- When published in *Interfunktionen* magazine in 1975, the images caused outrage. Art critic Andreas Huyssen wrote that Kiefer was "violating a

taboo, transgressing a boundary that had been carefully guarded." Many critics couldn't see past the provocation. The German cultural establishment, still deeply uncomfortable with its Nazi past, accused Kiefer of aestheticising fascism.

- Kiefer presented these photographs at his degree show at Karlsruhe Academy in 1969, the same year Willy Brandt became chancellor and initiated a policy of publicly acknowledging "those things." Yet German society remained deeply conflicted. Kiefer's personal life was equally tumultuous—he had just completed his art studies and was establishing his first studio in a school attic in Hornbach.
- Little-known fact: The word "Besetzungen" carries a double meaning—military occupation and, in Freudian psychoanalysis, cathexis, the investment of psychic energy in an object. This duality hints at Germany's unresolved mourning process.

Pronunciation Guide:

Besetzungen (beh-ZET-sung-en)

Anselm Kiefer (1945–)

*Everyone Stands Under
His Own Dome of
Heaven*

*(Jeder Mensch steht
unter seiner*

Himmelskuppel), 1970
40 x 47.9 cm. Metropolitan
Museum of Art, New York



Anselm Kiefer (1945–), *Everyone Stands Under His Own Dome of Heaven* (*Jeder Mensch steht unter seiner Himmelskuppel*), 1970, 40 x 47.9 cm., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

- This watercolour depicts Kiefer himself, a tiny figure in military dress, performing the Nazi salute inside a transparent blue hemisphere set in a vast, snow-covered ploughed field. The dome isolates him, creating what Kiefer describes as a "lightning rod" for attention whilst simultaneously limiting the gesture's power. It's a brilliant visual metaphor for individual consciousness.
- The title comes from Robert Musil's novel *The Man Without Qualities*. Kiefer explained: "Each man has his own dome, his own perceptions, his own theories. There is no one god for all. Each man has his own, and sometimes it overlaps with or intersects another's." This represents Kiefer's conviction that no single teleological system—Christianity, Marxism, Fascism—is appropriate for all humanity. The discovery that the sun, not Earth, is our solar system's centre inspired this philosophy, which explains Kiefer's pencilled inscription "Erde/Welt" (Earth/World) on the work.
- The Met's label describes it as reimagining "the figure of the artist in a vast, snow-dusted field, isolated by a transparent hemisphere." Critics have noted the piece's philosophical depth. The blue dome suggests Kiefer's

own blue eyeball on consciousness's surface. The salute becomes less about fascism and more about individual sovereignty of thought.

- In 1970, Kiefer was studying informally under Joseph Beuys at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, whose influence on materials and symbolism becomes apparent here. Kiefer had just moved from his degree show controversy into serious artistic exploration. West Germany was still grappling with Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik—détente with the East—whilst confronting its Nazi past.
- The work was first exhibited at Kunstverein Freiburg in 1981, then Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London, in 1983. Little-known fact: The Met acquired this watercolour in 1995 for the Denise and Andrew Saul Fund, recognising its philosophical and art-historical significance.

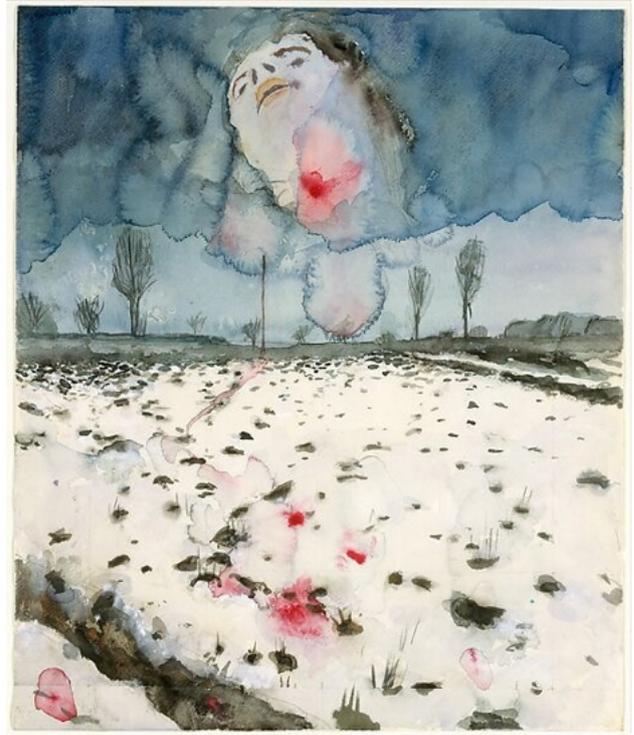
Pronunciation Guide:

Jeder Mensch steht unter seiner Himmelskuppel (YAY-der MENSH shtet OON-ter ZY-ner HIM-mel-koo-pel)

Anselm Kiefer (1945–)

Winter Landscape (Winterlandschaft), 1970

42.9 x 35.6 cm. | Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Anselm Kiefer (1945–), *Winter Landscape (Winterlandschaft)*, 1970, 42.9 x 35.6 cm., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

- *Winter Landscape* presents a haunting image: a disembodied woman's head floating above a snow-blanketed, roughly ploughed field, blood-red watercolour dripping from her severed neck onto the ashen landscape below. Bare trees punctuate the bleak background. This martyr personifies the German land itself, stained by human history's horrors.
- The work directly confronts *Blut und Boden* (Blood and Soil), the Nazi slogan that made the earth a symbol of German nationalistic identity. Romantic-era artists celebrated wild, sublime German landscapes. The Nazis weaponised this imagery. Kiefer subverts both traditions, showing the land not as triumphant but violated, bleeding.
- The Met notes that whilst "contemplation of wild or 'sublime' landscapes was a hallmark of Romantic-era picture making," Kiefer transforms this heritage into something disturbing. One critic compared the bleeding head to Bernini's *St Teresa in Ecstasy*—the degree of similarity is jarring. This "saturnine romanticisation of death" depicts ascension whilst blood and ash settle below, referencing Jewish extermination.
- Art critic for *Artcritical* observed: "Although mass shootings occurred across Eastern Europe's landscape, Kiefer's constancy in entwining the

Holocaust into the eternally recurring woodland heritage of German Volk is disconcerting." The work forces viewers to confront how Nazi ideology corrupted Germany's cultural landscape legacy.

- In 1970, Kiefer was 25, working in his cluttered Karlsruhe studio whilst studying under Beuys. West Germany was undergoing painful self-examination. The previous decade had seen documentary plays about fascism—Hochhuth's *Deputy*, Weiss's *Investigation*—on German stages.
- Little-known fact: Some scholars have suggested the head might reference Oscar Wilde, though the Met identifies it as female. The ambiguity enhances the work's unsettling power. Kiefer later explored similar themes in his 2006 painting *Black Flakes*, inspired by Paul Celan's poetry.

Pronunciation Guide:

Winterlandschaft (VIN-ter-LAHNT-shaft)

Blut und Boden (BLOOT oont BOH-den)

Anselm Kiefer (1945–)

Resurrexit, 1973

290 x 180 cm. | Stedelijk Museum,
Amsterdam



Anselm Kiefer (1945–), *Resurrexit*, 1973, 290 x 180 cm., Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

- *Resurrexit* marks a pivotal moment in Kiefer's evolution, superimposing two powerful perspectives: the Germanic forest—that mythologised space of German cultural identity—and his wooden attic studio. The Latin title means "He has risen," carrying Christian resurrection symbolism that addresses the artist's isolated situation in Hornbach, Odenwald.
- A serpent winds through the composition, accompanied by Latin inscriptions that function like Renaissance emblems. The wooden architecture carries profound ideological resonance. Scholar Mark Rosenthal notes that wooden structures define "a staging ground for memory that encompasses national history" akin to the Walhalla monument, Leo von Klenze's stone temple (1830-1842) celebrating Germanic heroes.
- But this is no triumphalist monument. It's an attic. A garret. The exposed wooden beams, boards, and rafters evoke something more sinister: the humbly constructed barracks of concentration camps. Critics have observed this "unheimlich" (uncanny) reminder transforms the Germanic cult of rustic Heimat building into something ominous. The Nazis promoted the Heimatschutzstil—wooden youth homes, schools, recreation centres.

Kiefer ironically reverses this, making worlds of victors and victims melt together.

- The work premiered at the 1973 group exhibition *Bilanz einer Aktivität* at Amsterdam's empty Goethe-Institut, organised by Swiss curator Johannes Gachnang. Alongside works by Georg Baselitz and Markus Lüperts, Kiefer's contribution signalled his arrival on the international stage. The Dutch reception was warmer than in Germany—the taboos Kiefer violated were less rigid in the Netherlands, despite their own vivid memories of German occupation.
- In 1973, Kiefer was 28, living in Hornbach in the Neckar-Odenwald-Kreis, working in that very school attic depicted in this painting. Little-known fact: This same year, Kiefer created *Notung* and *Der Nibelungen Leid*, exploring Wagner's mythology and German identity's dark underpinnings.

Pronunciation Guide:

Resurrexit (reh-suh-REK-sit, Latin)

Anselm Kiefer (1945–)

Varus, 1976

200 x 270 cm. |
Van Abbemuseum,
Eindhoven



Anselm Kiefer (1945–), *Varus*, 1976, 200 x 270 cm., Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven

- *Varus* presents what French critics called "l'origine et la fin de l'histoire allemande"—the origin and end of German history. A snow-covered path cuts through the dark Teutoburg Forest, stained with blood, disappearing into blackness. The painting is dark, creepy, ambiguous—yet signalled, according to *WhiteHot Magazine*, "the arrival of a major new voice in the German art scene."
- The title references the catastrophic Battle of the Teutoburg Forest in 9 CE, where Germanic tribes led by Arminius annihilated three Roman legions commanded by Publius Quinctilius Varus—18,000 men slaughtered. Van Abbemuseum curator Christiane Berndes explained: "It could be considered the moment when German identity was born." From the 16th century onwards, Arminius (germanised as Hermann) became a popular emblem of German identity against hostile powers like Napoleonic France.
- The forest itself carries enormous symbolic weight. Romantics saw it as enchanted, initiatische—a place of initiation. The Nazis transformed European forests into sites of horror: mass graves, death camps, crematorium chimneys. Kiefer forces us to see both meanings

simultaneously.

- The painting employs oil and acrylic on burlap, giving it a rough, material presence. The texture evokes both age and violence. The Van Abbemuseum notes that "landscape represents national identity" and that commander Hermann "deployed landscape as a weapon" against Romans unfamiliar with the terrain.
- In 1976, Kiefer was 31, living in the Odenwald, deep into what would be called "The German Years" of his career. West Germany was experiencing economic troubles and political tension—the Baader-Meinhof Group's terrorist activities dominated headlines. German identity remained profoundly contested.
- Little-known fact: Paul Celan wrote "Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland" (death is a master from Germany) in his poem Fugue of Death, which haunted Kiefer throughout this period.

Pronunciation Guide:

Varus (VAH-roos)

Teutoburgerwald (toy-TOH-boor-ger-VAHLT)

Arminius (ar-MIN-ee-oos)

Anselm Kiefer (1945–)

Ways of Worldly Wisdom:
Arminius's Battle
(Wege der Weltweisheit: die
Hermannsschlacht), 1978

343.7 x 348.7 cm. | San Francisco
Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco



Anselm Kiefer (1945–), *Ways of Worldly Wisdom: Arminius's Battle (Wege der Weltweisheit: die Hermannsschlacht)*, 1978, 343.7 x 348.7 cm., San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco

- This monumental woodcut collage depicts a tangled pantheon of German historical figures whose portraits are set within a forest and connected by superimposed rings of tree trunks. The title alludes to Hermann—also known by his Roman name, Arminius—who successfully led the Germanic tribes against the Romans at the Battle of Teutoburg Forest in 9 CE. This victory ensured Germania remained independent from the Roman Empire, but Hermann's myth was later weaponised by 19th-century nationalists and the Nazis to proclaim Aryan racial superiority.
- The figures represented range from 18th and 19th-century intellectuals, poets, and composers to Prussian leaders, industrialists, and Nazi military leaders. Kiefer's selection of medium is calibrated to the subject: woodcutting is deeply associated with German art, from Albrecht Dürer to 20th-century Expressionists like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner who self-consciously revived it. The composite woodcut technique allows Kiefer to interrogate the complex relationship between German cultural achievement and its catastrophic political history.
- When exhibited at SFMOMA, the museum notes described how Kiefer "highlights the subjective, emotional nature of both history and art." The work challenges viewers to confront how Germany's most admirable cultural traditions became entangled with its darkest political impulses. Scholar Nancy Spector observed that Kiefer deliberately "resurrects sublimated icons" to force examination of how Fascism corrupted German mythology.
- In 1978, Kiefer was 33, fully developing his visual vocabulary. West Germany was still deeply divided—the Berlin Wall stood firm, and the nation remained split

between capitalist West and communist East. The Red Army Faction's terrorism had peaked in 1977 with the German Autumn, leaving the country traumatised. Kiefer's work appeared in this context of national soul-searching.

- Little-known fact: The woodcut technique Kiefer employs here required 18 separate printing blocks. He worked over the assembled prints with shellac and dark acrylic paint, combining printmaking and painting mediums. The work belongs to a series created between 1976–1980 and revisited in 1993.

Pronunciation Guide:

Wege der Weltweisheit: die Hermannsschlacht (VAY-guh dair VELT-vice-hite:
dee HAIR-mans-shlakht)

Arminius (ar-MIN-ee-oos)

Anselm Kiefer (1945–)

Your Golden Hair,
Margarete (Dein
goldenes Haar,
Margarete), 1981

118 x 145 cm. | Private Collection
/ Christies, London



Anselm Kiefer (1945–), *Your Golden Hair, Margarete* (Dein goldenes Haar, Margarete), 1981, 118 x 145 cm. | Private Collection / Christies, London

- This work's title comes from "Death Fugue" by Romanian-Jewish poet and Holocaust survivor Paul Celan (1920–1970). Widely read in postwar Germany, the poem is set in a concentration camp and narrated by Jewish inmates who suffer under the camp's blue-eyed commandant. Singing "your golden hair, Margarete / your ashen hair, Shulamith," they contrast German womanhood, personified by Margarete (named after Goethe's heroine Gretchen in *Faust*), with Jewish womanhood (Shulamith was King Solomon's dark-haired beloved in the *Song of Songs*).
- Here, as in more than thirty works Kiefer devoted to Margarete, the German heroine is represented only by a symbol of her "golden hair"—sheaves of straw in a scorched countryside. The horizon line sits high on the canvas, creating a vast expanse of violently hatched black earth. A few wisps of straw struggle to brighten the darkness. Some critics have noted what appears to be a phantom face barely sketched behind the enraged hatchings—perhaps Shulamith, Margarete's double and opposite.
- When Kiefer encountered Celan's poetry in 1981, it reoriented his entire practice. Scholar Mark Rosenthal marvels at Kiefer's daring espousal of

the view that "Germany maimed itself and its civilisation by destroying its Jewish members," and by frequently alluding to both figures, he attempts to make Germany whole again. The Phillips Collection notes that Kiefer was echoing Theodor Adorno's famous lines: "Auschwitz demonstrated irrefutably that culture has failed."

- In 1981, Kiefer was 36, working prolifically. West Germany was experiencing economic difficulties and continued political division. The question of German guilt and what the loss of its Jews meant was being discussed in great detail for the first time. Kiefer's Margarete series appeared in this context, when German society finally began confronting its past systematically.
- Little-known fact: Kiefer began using straw in his landscape paintings with no particular theme in mind, but it naturally lent itself to the Margarete paintings. By placing straw beside a black painted curve, he arrived at the world of racial stereotypes with a vengeance—blonde Aryan versus dark-haired Jew—forcing viewers to confront these obscene categories.
- "Kiefer makes such work... not in order to quiet the consciences of the guilty, but in order to let justice be done to the dead, and to set an image in the stars." Hans Egon Holthusen

Pronunciation Guide:

Dein goldenes Haar, Margarete (DINE GOAL-den-es HAHR, mar-gah-RAY-tuh)

Shulamith (SHOO-lah-meet)

References:

<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6076415>

Anselm Kiefer (1945–)

Nuremberg (Nürnberg), 1982

280 x 380 cm. | The Broad, Los Angeles



Anselm Kiefer (1945–), Nuremberg (Nürnberg), 1982, 280 x 380 cm., The Broad, Los Angeles

- You stand on the threshold of a deeply riven ground, a vast field where mud, ashes, snow, and straw mingle in a wasteland stretching to the far distance. The famous city stands dark on the horizon, and the words "Festspiel-Wiese" (festival ground) appear in the upper right corner. This very field, which Kiefer illustrates with mounds of straw and acrylic paint, was chosen by Hitler to stage his large Nazi rallies. Nuremberg was also chosen after the war as the location of the international tribunal which dealt with Holocaust crimes and Nazi terrors.
- This is history painting. Nürnberg represents not just landscape or nature but das Land, that quasi-mystical ground from which German idealism extracted so much self-deceiving fatefulness. The Broad museum notes: "There are many ghosts in this field, represented by names on cardboard that are now mostly unreadable. Nürnberg is shown as a place of memory, a place of reckoning, a place not yet ready to be replanted."
- Art critic for Artforum wrote that Kiefer "asks in his painting that we look evenly upon all three Nurembergs, all three Germanies." Old Nuremberg was birthplace of Dürer, storied centre for music, setting for Wagner's Die Meistersinger—it embodied much of what is most admirable in Germany. Then came its incarnation as Nazi rally ground. Finally, its third incarnation as tribunal site. Kiefer asks that we look evenly upon all three, refusing to reconcile them or weight them differently.
- In 1982, Kiefer was 37, creating what would become some of his most celebrated works. West Germany was experiencing a conservative political shift under Chancellor Helmut Kohl. The peace movement was protesting NATO's deployment of nuclear missiles on German soil. Kiefer spoke in interviews of the

despair he felt whilst making work of this period.

- Little-known fact: Kiefer has scrawled "Nürnberg" across the top of the canvas in his characteristic hand. Critics have noted the "planned randomness" with which straw is stuck on, giving it a scratchy, messy look that evokes both harvest stubble and battlefield debris.

Pronunciation Guide:

Nürnberg (NURN-bairk)

Festspiel-Wiese (FEST-shpeel-VEE-zuh)

References:

<https://www.thebroad.org/art/anselm-kiefer/n%C3%BCrnberg>

Anselm Kiefer (1945–)

Sulamith, 1983

290 x 370.8 cm. | San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco



Anselm Kiefer (1945–), Sulamith, 1983, 290 x 370.8 cm., San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco

- This haunting, uninviting interior depicts the Funeral Hall for the Great German Soldier, a monument of the Third Reich designed by Wilhelm Kreis. Kiefer transforms Nazi architecture into a memorial for murdered Jews. The name "Sulamith" refers to King Solomon's dark-haired beloved in the Song of Songs—the Jewish woman contrasted with blonde Margarete in Celan's "Death Fugue." Here, the presence of the Nazi culprit appears as looming architecture.
- Kiefer restructures the architecture, collapsing building into oven. The perpetual night of Celan's poem manifests in an atmosphere of darkness and soot, under layers of oil, ash, straw, and wood. Scholar Eric Kligerman discusses how Kiefer's work consists of combinations of distinct forms of representation: architecture becomes memorial becomes crematorium. The life-size rendering of straw and brick makes materials feel simultaneously ephemeral and dense.
- Artist Stuart Robertson, describing his first encounter with this work at SFMOMA, wrote: "I felt caught between a memory that may or may not be real and an artefact of a consciousness that can never be erased." The scale—over nine feet tall and twelve feet wide—activates space within the painting in ways that transcend typical canvas dimensions. Smarthistory notes this work epitomises Kiefer's generation "horrified by their collective German 'past,' struggling to reconcile such shame."
- In 1983, Kiefer was 38, at the height of his powers. The Margarete-Sulamith pairing dominated his output. West Germany was still grappling with its dual identity—prosperity in the West, dictatorship in the East. President Reagan's controversial visit to Bitburg cemetery (where SS soldiers were buried) would occur in 1985, provoking renewed debate about German memory and

reconciliation.

- Little-known fact: Kiefer painted this in response to a poem about the Holocaust, yet he never depicts human figures. The absence is more powerful than presence would be. The vaults recede into darkness like an endless succession of ovens, each archway a repetition of industrial-scale murder.

Pronunciation Guide:

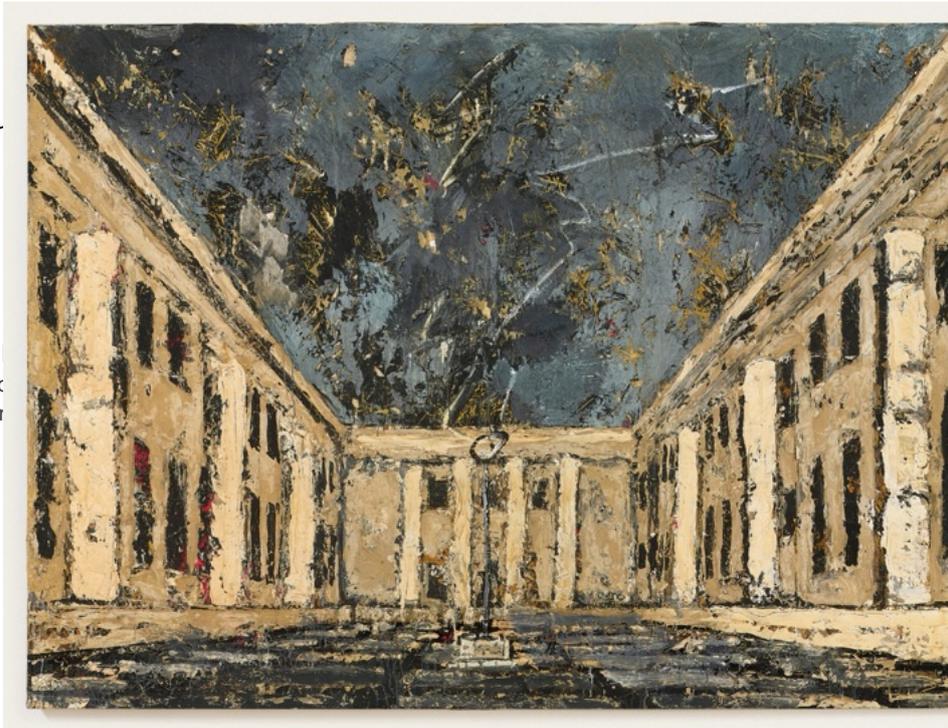
Sulamith (SOO-lah-meet)

Anselm Kiefer (1945–)

To the Unknown Painter (Dem unbekanntem Maler)

280 x 280 cm. | Carnegie Museum of Art,

[Image:
with palette c
ar



Anselm Kiefer (1945–), To the Unknown Painter (Dem unbekanntem Maler), 1983, 189.9 × 260.4 cm., sold at Christies 11 May 2011 for \$3.5 million

- A painter's palette adorned upon a pedestal sits in a vacated space surrounded by tattered columns whilst casket-like shapes lay on the ground around it. Dark colours envelope the horizon whilst reds, browns, and whites colour the columns. The palette sits directly in the centre, almost unrecognisable, with a thin pedestal that matches the dark blue and black of the horizon. Straw is stuck on with planned randomness, giving it a scratchy, messy look.
- The empty interior depicts Nazi architecture—specifically the courtyard of Hitler's Chancellery in Berlin designed by Albert Speer, the site of the bunker where Hitler committed suicide. Scholar Lisa Saltzman notes the space is filled with Kiefer's own victimhood and memories of traumatic events, used as a space for traumatic memories that will not be mourned or a space of internalisation. These "curiously uncommunicative buildings" are imaginary monuments to Art itself.
- When first unveiled, the painting was criticised because some felt Kiefer was ambiguous about Speer's grandiose architecture. Others felt the title—a reference to art's redemptive power—was self-aggrandising. Kiefer was unapologetic: "I always make them ambiguous, contradictory," he said, referring to Third Reich ruins that often feature in his work. Artforum noted how Kiefer "summons up the idea of art" through his inscribed titles.
- In 1983, the work sold at Christie's in 2011 for \$3.55 million, setting an auction record for Kiefer at the time. The painting's monumental scale—nearly ten feet square—emphasises the desolation. The thick application of paint, mixed with sand and straw like plaster, denies expressionist emotion despite the violent subject matter.

- Little-known fact: Kiefer made both a large painting and preparatory watercolours of this subject. The MoMA collection holds a 1982 watercolour study on three sheets of paper. The palette as artistic symbol appears throughout art history, but here it becomes a tombstone marking the death of German kultur.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Dem unbekanntem Maler (daym oon-beh-KAHN-ten MAH-ler)

REFERENCES

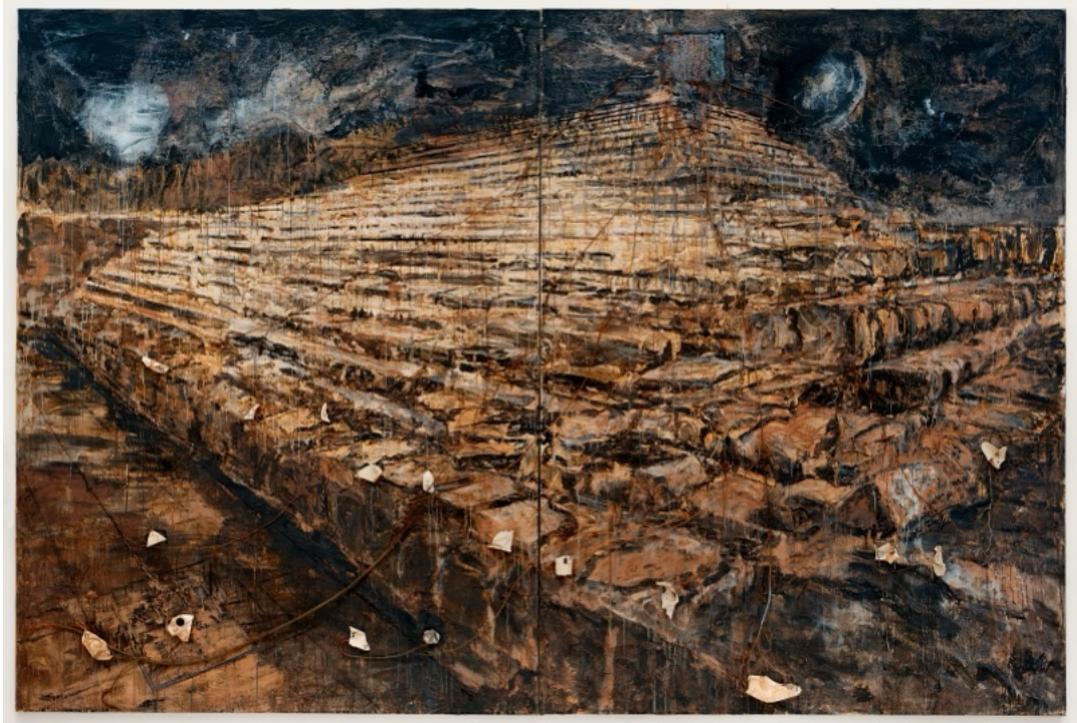
<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5437835>

<https://heni.com/news/article/anselm-kiefer-dem-unbekanntem-maler-to-the-unknown-painter-2011-05-11>

Anselm Kiefer

Osiris and Isis
(Osiris und Isis),
1985–1987

379.7 x 561.3 cm. |
San Francisco
Museum of
Modern Art, San
Francisco



Anselm Kiefer (1945–), *Osiris and Isis (Osiris und Isis)*, 1985–1987, 379.7 x 561.3 cm., San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco

- Kiefer's exploration into ancient mythology reaches its apex with this immense work depicting an Egyptian mastaba—a precursor to pyramids—with an electronic circuit board suspended above from which fourteen copper wires dangle, each terminated by a porcelain shard. The painting conflates the ancient Egyptian myth of Osiris with modern nuclear technology, creating what critic Kay Larson called "the possibility of dark redemption in the midst of violent times."
- The myth itself is harrowing: Osiris, god of the underworld, was murdered by his jealous brother Set, who dismembered his body and scattered the parts across Egypt. His grieving sister-wife Isis searched for his remains, literally "remembering" him and resurrecting him—though she could never find his penis. Kiefer became fascinated with the myth through his interest in correspondences between spiritual power and technology, arguing that both the Osiris story and nuclear power concern regeneration.
- In the ancient myth, Isis could not find Osiris's penis, and Kiefer controversially stated that a nuclear reactor is "a kind of penis." The circuit board—a real printed circuit board from a television set—connects copper wires to porcelain sink fragments scattered across the vast canvas. Scholar Donald Kuspit praised the work as "extraordinarily ambitious" in addressing issues of meaningfulness, matter, nuclear fission, creation, and destruction, noting how Kiefer presents history like "the Gnostics believed that matter is evil and that salvation comes through spiritual truth."
- The work premiered at Marian Goodman Gallery in New York in May 1987, hanging opposite *Burning Rods*, which depicted nuclear reactor control rods. SFMOMA purchased *Osiris and Isis* that same year for more than \$350,000—a

controversial acquisition at the time since the museum didn't even have its own building. In 1987, Kiefer was 42, having fully developed his signature technique of combining painting with three-dimensional materials.

- Little-known fact: The painting's surface dimensions are over 12 feet by 18 feet, with a depth of nearly 10 inches. The porcelain fragments are from an actual sink, echoing an earlier drawing Kiefer made of fragments from an ancient vase. The work's palette—blacks, greys, ochres—suggests both ancient stone and industrial ash.

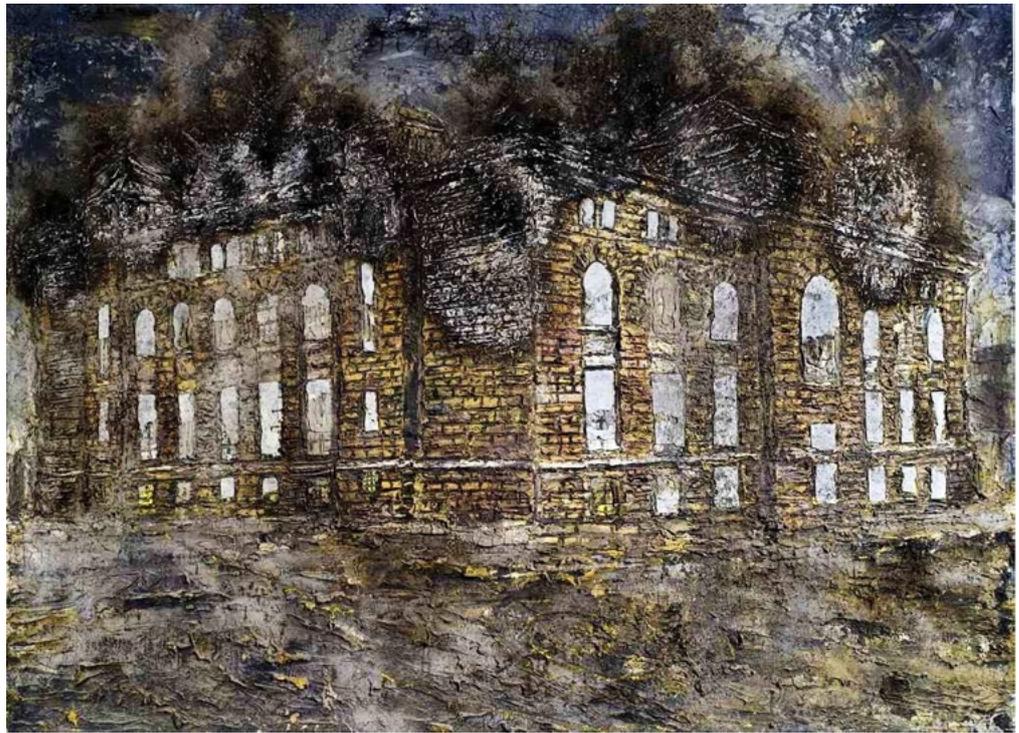
Pronunciation Guide:

Osiris und Isis (oh-ZY-ris oont EE-sis)

Anselm Kiefer

Athanor, 1991

oil, sand, ash, gold leaf
and lead foil on canvas,
282 x 382 cm. | Private
Collection



Anselm Kiefer (1945–), *Athanor*, 1991, oil, sand, ash, gold leaf and lead foil on canvas, 282 x 382 cm., Private Collection

- This monumental painting depicts the Honour Courtyard of the Reich Chancellery in Berlin—seat of the Nazi government designed by Albert Speer—transformed into an alchemical furnace. The title "Athanor" refers to the legendary self-feeding furnace said to have been used by medieval alchemists to transform base metals into gold. Kiefer inscribes the word twice: once on the lintel above the centre columns and again on the upper left edge of the sky, partially obliterated.
- The courtyard's architecture looms empty, oppressive, sinister. Black grid lines on the paving lead the eye towards the rear, suggesting the railways that transported Holocaust victims to their deaths. The partly obliterated "Athanor" over the doors alludes to crematorium ovens where millions were incinerated. As if utilising alchemy themselves, the Nazis pathologically believed they were "purifying" society through such destruction. Kiefer scorched sections of this painting with a blowtorch—his literal use of fire becomes metaphorical purification.
- The Toledo Museum of Art's label explains: "Kiefer uses the alchemists' symbolic 'secret fire' to purify and transform the terrible legacy of Nazi Germany into hope for the future of humanity. He becomes the alchemist himself." Although the alchemical process sometimes described the soul's quest for union with God, alchemy was also condemned as unnatural and contrary to God's will—therefore evil. This duality pervades Kiefer's painting.
- Created at the time of the Berlin Wall's fall in 1989, the painting evokes memories of Berlin's destruction in 1945 and the Reichstag fire of 1933. Kiefer believes artists, like alchemists, have power to transmute events—that art can

transform dross into gold, evil into good. The painting's singed canvas symbolises redemptive suffering through fire. The work sold at Sotheby's in 2017 for \$2.3 million.

- In 1991, Kiefer was 46, working at his large converted brick factory in Buchen before his move to Barjac, France, in 1992. Little-known fact: Kiefer made numerous Athanor works with varying iconography according to the emphasis he wished to place. This version employs oil, sand, ash, gold leaf, and lead foil on canvas, giving it extraordinary material presence and weight.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Athanor (ATH-an-or)

REFERENCES

<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5408926>



Anselm Kiefer (1945–)

Bohemia Lies by the Sea (Böhmen liegt am Meer), 1996

191.1 x 561.3 cm. | Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Anselm Kiefer (1945–), Bohemia Lies by the Sea (Böhmen liegt am Meer), 1996, 191.1 x 561.3 cm., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

- This immense double canvas—over 18 feet wide—presents an isolated country road cutting through a field covered with poppies described in paint the colour of dried blood. The surface is so thickly built up that conservator Corey D'Augustine describes it as "as much an object as a painting," with paint protruding two to three inches from the burlap canvas. Kiefer himself has been nonchalant about conservation, saying if pieces fall off, just put them back on. He's inviting decay.
- The title, inscribed along the narrow horizon and again on the path, comes from Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachmann's 1964 poem about longing for utopia whilst recognising it can never be found, just as landlocked Bohemia—annexed by Nazi Germany as the Sudetenland—can never lie by the sea. Bachmann's poem expresses her deeply held belief in the utopian potential of poetry and literature's ultimately redemptive capacity. Kiefer transforms this literary meditation into visual form.
- The poppies carry double symbolism: associated with sleep (opium) and also emblematic of military veterans (Remembrance Day). The Met notes the work addresses "the complications of history" through both "monumental and intimate forms." From a distance, texture is less noticeable; up close it's ugly, like a dying volcano or healing scar tissue. Parts look wet, parts look dry and cracked—Kiefer applied materials at different times, making time's passage felt.
- The painting employs oil, emulsion, shellac, charcoal, and powdered paint on burlap. Scholars have noted that Kiefer connects the celestial and earthly, blending history, mythology, and philosophical meditation. Curator Daniel Arasse observed: "Words are integral to the composition and to our understanding of Kiefer's art—images inhabited, haunted by words, visible or buried under newer

layers."

- In 1996, Kiefer was 51, working in Barjac, France, where he had moved in 1992. The Met acquired the work in 1997. Little-known fact: Paint chunks that fall from Kiefer's works are collected by conservators but sometimes can't be reattached because they don't know where the puzzle pieces came from. SFMOMA conservators have large chunks they simply save indefinitely.

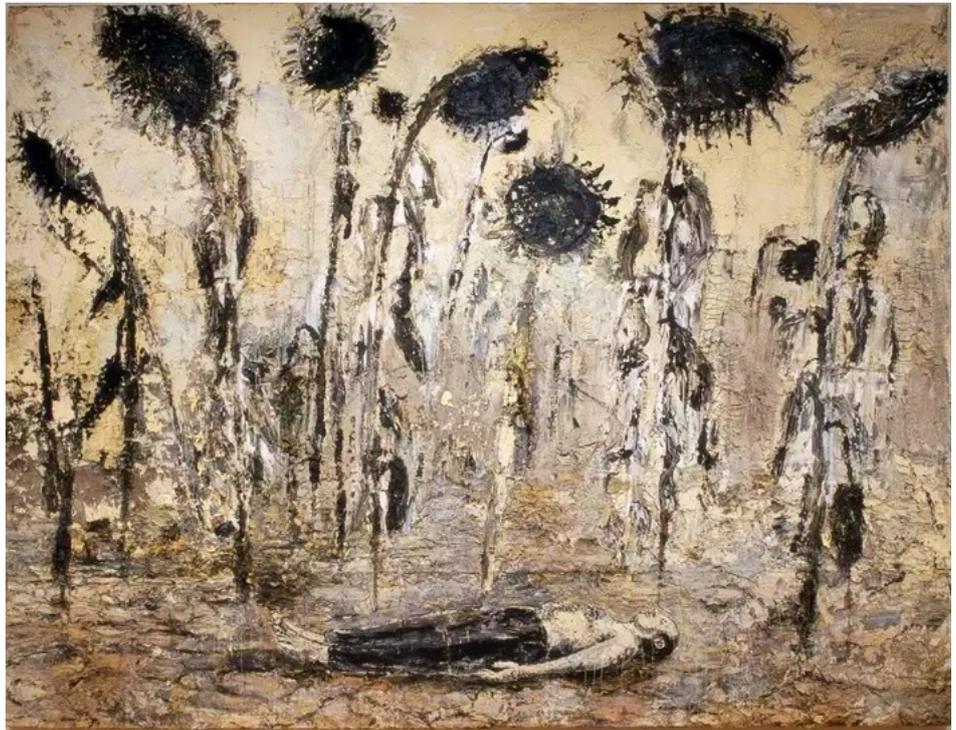
Pronunciation Guide:

Böhmen liegt am Meer (BER-men leekt ahm MARE)

Anselm Kiefer (1945–)

The Orders of the Night
(Die Orden der Nacht),
1996

356 x 463 cm. |
Seattle Art Museum,
Seattle



Anselm Kiefer (1945–), The Orders of the Night (Die Orden der Nacht), 1996, 356 x 463 cm., Seattle Art Museum, Seattle

- A supine figure lies beneath giant sunflowers whose seeds are black and charred, their wilting stems and downcast petals appearing simultaneously sad and malicious. The painting is huge, ambitious, awe-inspiring—over 11 feet tall and 15 feet wide. An oppressive energy emerges from the canvas. Kiefer has caked paint all over in thick sloshings, building the picture outward. The surface shows cracks from heavy paint application, like cracks in dried mud, leaving impressions of drying up and drought.
- Kiefer believes firmly that art should be difficult—to make and to understand—and that the challenge it offers can bring growth. Up close, one can see paint applied aggressively in big, slashing marks. The sunflowers in Kiefer's work carry multiple meanings: they track the sun (heliotropism), they were symbols used by the Third Reich, and here they appear scorched, corrupted, menacing rather than life-giving.
- The work figured prominently in two major recent Kiefer exhibitions: the Royal Academy of Arts in London (2014) and Centre Pompidou in Paris (2015-2016). Seattle Art Museum notes that it's one of three exemplary Kiefers in their collection, alongside Die Welle (1990) and an Untitled work (1983). Critics have described the feverish application of paint as though Kiefer "has been engaged in a violent struggle with himself to draw an image into the open."
- An earlier work shares the title—a 1988 illustrated book comprising 40 pages, drawn in lead and bedazzled with diamonds, measuring about three feet by two feet. This represents a different face to Kiefer's work: intimate territory, creating poetic images that approach beauty. Yet both bodies of work—monumental paintings and intimate books—come from the same artist, demonstrating his

extraordinary range.

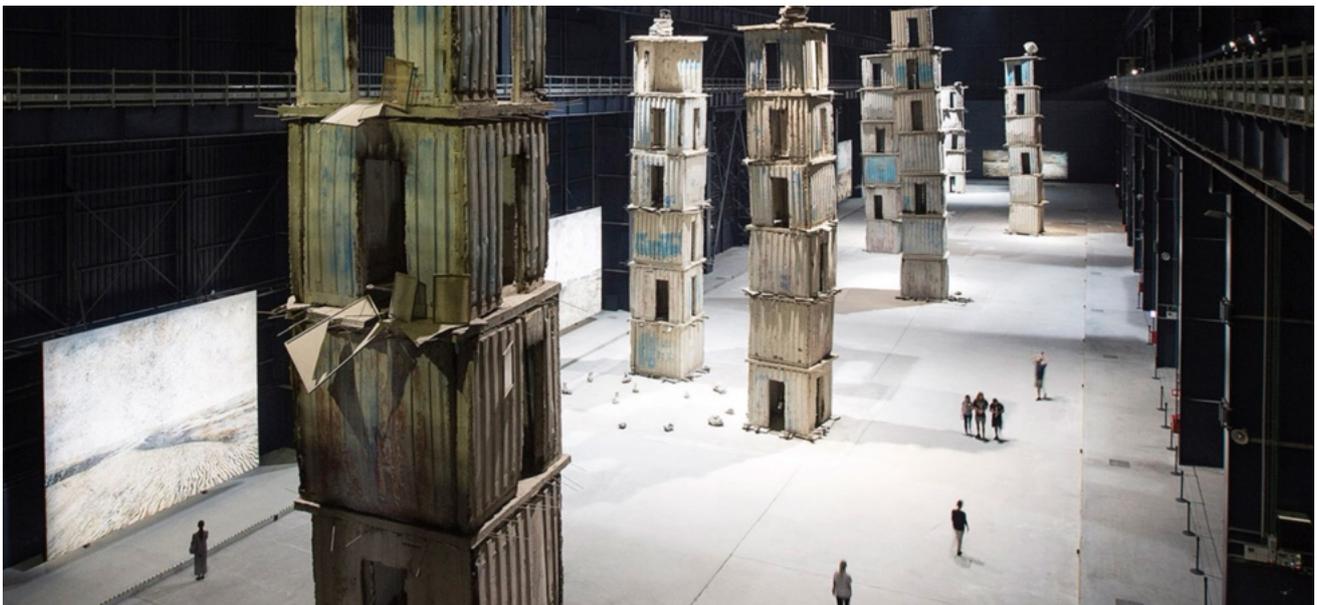
- In 1996, Kiefer was 51, fully established as one of the world's leading contemporary artists. The work was gifted to Seattle Art Museum by Mr. and Mrs. Richard C. Hedreen. Little-known fact: The title "Orders of the Night" references knightly orders and secret societies, adding layers of historical resonance to the already complex iconography of death, decay, and transformation.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Die Orden der Nacht (dee OR-den dair NAKHT)

REFERENCES

<https://samblog.seattleartmuseum.org> › all posts



Anselm Kiefer (1945–) The Seven Heavenly Palaces (I Sette Palazzi Celesti), 2004

1300–1900 cm. (height) | Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan

Anselm Kiefer (1945–), The Seven Heavenly Palaces (I Sette Palazzi Celesti), 2004, 1300–1900 cm. (height), Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan

- Seven monumental towers—each weighing 90 tons and rising between 13 and 19 metres (42 to 62 feet)—dominate the vast space of a former industrial complex in Milan. Created from reinforced concrete using angular construction modules of shipping containers, these towers represent humanity's attempt to ascend to the divine. Between the various levels, Kiefer inserted lead books and wedges which compress beneath the weight, guaranteeing the static nature whilst adding symbolic weight—books as repositories of knowledge crushed by architectural ambition.
- The installation's name derives from *Sefer Hechalot*, the ancient Hebrew "Book of Palaces" from the 5th-6th century CE, which narrates the symbolic path of spiritual initiation anyone wanting to become closer to God must undertake. The seven towers bear individual titles: *Falling Stars*, *Deposit of Stars*, *Die Sefiroth*, *Tzim-Tzum*, *Shevirat Ha-Kelim*, *Tiqqun*, and *The Seven Heavenly Palaces*. Kiefer has experimented with shipping containers as a "material of our time," symbol of globalisation's urban landscape.
- Since 2015, five large canvases created between 2009 and 2013 enrich and expand the permanent installation: *Jaipur*, *Cette obscure clarté qui tombe des étoiles*, *Alchimie*, and *Die Deutsche Heilslinie*. These paintings, exhibited in the Nave space, form with the towers a single installation titled *The Seven Heavenly Palaces 2004-2015*. The paintings address themes already present: large architectural constructions, man's attempt to ascend to the divine, constellations represented through astronomical numeration.
- Kiefer himself explains: "The space is included in the work—it is so special that it has become part of it. I thought long and hard about the space that houses The

Seven Heavenly Palaces, and only later did I decide how to place the paintings." The reinforced-concrete giants have achieved iconographic status, becoming emblems of HangarBicocca in popular imagination. The installation has become a permanent, living place.

- In 2004, Kiefer was 59, working in Barjac, France. The installation was conceived and presented for the opening of Pirelli HangarBicocca based on a project by gallerist Lia Rumma. Little-known fact: Kiefer finds it "almost impossible to understand when a work is complete," often going back over work, changing it, developing it, then abandoning it for years. Some paintings in his studio date from the 1970s and 1980s, still waiting.

Pronunciation Guide:

I Sette Palazzi Celesti (ee SET-teh pah-LAT-see cheh-LES-tee)

Sefer Hechalot (SEH-fer heh-khah-LOHT)

Die Sefiroth (dee seh-fee-ROHT)

Tzim-Tzum (tseem-TSOOM)

Shevirat Ha-Kelim (sheh-vee-RAHT hah-keh-LEEM)

Tiqqun (tee-KOON)

Anselm Kiefer

Questi scritti,
quando verranno
bruciati, daranno
finalmente un po'
di luce (Andrea
Emo), 2022-2023

Palazzo Ducale, Venice



Anselm Kiefer (1945–), *Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po' di luce* (Andrea Emo), 2022-2023, Palazzo Ducale, Venice

- For Venice's 1600th anniversary celebrations during the 59th Venice Biennale, Kiefer created this site-specific installation for the Sala dello Scrutinio at Palazzo Ducale—the magnificent Gothic space once used for electing the Doge. The title, loosely translated as "These writings, when burned, will finally cast a little light," derives from Venetian philosopher Andrea Emo (1901-1983), whose philosophical fragments Kiefer discovered in German translation six years earlier.
- The installation comprises fourteen monumental paintings created specifically in 2020-2021, plus two additional works, all responding to both the Sala dello Scrutinio's ornate historical decoration and Venice's unique position between North and South, East and West. Some paintings depict Piazza San Marco engulfed in flames—referencing the catastrophic 1577 fire that ravaged the palace. Others show the city frozen. Another depicts St Mark's empty casket—Venice's patron saint, whose relics were supposedly smuggled from Alexandria in 828 CE.
- Curator Gabriella Belli explains: "Kiefer's work arises from the past, from the fire which erased its memory, and out of the destruction caused new ones to grow." The works are arranged floor-to-ceiling, their textural surfaces feeling perfectly at home among gold gilding and ornately painted ceilings. Kiefer discovered to his "greatest surprise" that Emo's philosophy "can be understood as a directive for the creation of my paintings, although my artistic career had begun 50 years earlier."
- The installation presents an endless visual rollercoaster without narrative beginning or closure—a convergence of motifs, ideas, places, philosophies, and histories. Venice becomes not an object to be celebrated but a grand metaphor

for cultural transits and passages, bringing to the surface stratifications of millennial myths, solitudes, and anxieties. The cycle addresses the tragic and irresolvable unity of opposites, with works destined to "die" when removed from Palazzo Ducale.

- In 2022-2023, Kiefer was 77-78, living and working in Paris, one of the world's most celebrated living artists. The Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia invited him as centrepiece of MUVE Contemporaneo's fifth edition. Little-known fact: Kiefer realised after encountering Emo's writings that there is no masterpiece, that paintings are never finished, that they represent constant process with no ascertainable endpoint—a philosophy that had unconsciously guided his work for half a century.

Pronunciation Guide:

Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po' di luce
(KWAY-stee SKREE-tee, KWAN-doh vair-AHN-noh broo-CHAH-tee, dah-
RAHN-noh fee-nahl-MEN-teh oon poh dee LOO-cheh)

Andrea Emo (ahn-DRAY-ah EH-moh)

61-15 ANSELM KEIFER

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE

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- That brings me to the end of today's talk. Thank you for your interest, time and attention and I look forward to recording the next talk in my overview of Western Art.



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