

“NOSSIS” (1999) by Anselm Kiefer

– given to the Palm Springs Art Museum in 2008 by Donna & Cargill MacMillan, Jr. –
PSAM spotlight-paper by Ray Warman, 2017



THE WORK – I: “NOSSIS” per se

Standing 5 feet tall on a 4-foot-diameter base, ‘she’ is a rather formidable presence – On the shoulders and raised arms of a life-size floor-length (size-two?) dress there rests a larger-than-life tome whose leaden pages are fused together, burnt beyond legibility. Notably devoid of any inhabitant, the frock, in virginal ivory, has the light pleating that conjures up ancient Greece and its colonies (such as the southern Italian settlement where the poet Nossis flourished some 2300 years ago); beyond such classic lines, its visual interest is a matter of fraying edges and of pervasive reddish-tan spatters that represent, as I see it, the natural deterioration of old fabric.

The composition, balanced in every sense, accords equal significance to the book and to its inanimate bearer: the book commands eye-level attention, but no less arresting is the dress’s powerful triangle. Given the piece’s rudimentary materials – plaster, fabric and lead, embellished with bits of pigment and strengthened by steel supports –, and its ostensibly simple content, we might be tempted (if only as a way of easing the tension it may well create in us) to dismiss it as just a whimsical fancy on the sculptor’s part. But no: *Nossis*, in empty silence, challenges each visitor to more vibrant self-actualization.

Atypically but commendably, *Nossis*’s didactic label leaves us entirely to our own thoughts in contemplating her. Elsewhere, Daniell Cornell has described her dress and

the book as the sculptor's way of using "... rough, aggressive, emotional expressionism to contrast two approaches to knowledge," adding that "[t]he paint-splattered dress topped by the weight of the lead open book figures the ecstatic intuitive wisdom of the Sapphic poet ... in opposition to the cold hard logic of dogmatic texts." Such a 'contrast' certainly appears, but the harsher reality is that both approaches are ultimately doomed: the voice of the poetess is just as silent as the book's (and in fact, *Nossis's* own words survive today in only a dozen epigrams of four lines each – by any standard quite a small victory that might be called, just as 'her' dress is empty here, a hollow one).

THE ARTIST: ANSELM KIEFER

More than two millennia after the Hellenistic poetess died, 'her' sculptor was born in Donaueschingen, a small town in Germany's Black Forest. It was March 8, 1945, and in just a couple weeks the Allies would cross the Rhine and initiate the final phase of the Second World War in Europe. For Anselm Kiefer and his countrymen, however, the war would remain a very real presence with its legacy of bombed-out cities and, above all, its dark and even crushing psychological burden. After three college semesters in pre-law and Romance-language courses, Kiefer began studying art at academies in Freiburg, Karlsruhe, and Düsseldorf. His early work (in photography, performance-art and especially painting) focused insistently – and controversially – upon the recent history that many of his countrymen preferred to forget or even to deny. Eventually, however, he would grow into broader themes – and along the way would come to produce a series of sculptures ('Women of Antiquity,' as he named them) that would lead him to *Nossis*. Since 1992, he has lived and worked – quite prolifically – in France.

The most deeply rooted influences upon Kiefer's work are of course the biographical circumstances already mentioned – the national, historical and societal factors bearing upon a mid-twentieth-century German boyhood – and, with them, the Catholic faith that would undergird Kiefer's wider-ranging explorations of spirituality. Intellectually, his studies have included mythology, literature, psychology, German and other philosophy – and, interestingly, alchemy. Kiefer's artistic influences are primarily Joseph Beuys and Peter Dreher, with whom he studied, as well as Marcel Duchamp, Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol – yet Kiefer's style as a Neo-Expressionist is his own. His thematic concerns include memory and its preservation, history and time's cyclical character, bereavement, spirituality, self-abnegation, and more – including (as amply attested by *Nossis*) keen awareness of the evanescence of all material things. Not only is Kiefer notoriously unconcerned for the physical durability or preservation of his art; he in fact celebrates impermanence: As a latter-day alchemist, he has said, "I only accelerate the transformation that is already present in the thing. That is magic, as I understand it."

THE WORK – II: "NOSSIS" AS KIEFER'S EXPRESSIVE VEHICLE

Not surprisingly, *Nossis* reflects Kiefer's interests and themes as if in a self-portrait. We note the fraying garment's impermanence and the book's no-longer-accessible writings (whether those of *Nossis* or of any other author whose words no longer speak to us). We observe his use of lead (which, with resonance in both alchemy and mythology, has

long been a 'signature' material for Kiefer, who found a great source of repurpose-ready lead when Cologne's cathedral was re-roofed); we should note, however, Kiefer's awareness that alchemy's true goal wasn't physical change, but rather the spiritual transformation, even redemption, that it might symbolize. As Kiefer himself once said, "Reflecting the process of change, which is a constant in everything, even stone, is, as it were, my kind of *mimesis* – not as a kind of replica of a face or an object, but *mimesis* as imitation of what I understand as basic movement of the world." Kiefer sees that 'basic movement,' however, *not* as a pointless passage into a void: Rather, he sees change as taking us outside of ourselves (literally, that is, into ecstasy) – he says it happens, by the way, when connecting with art – into something richer: With a psychic de-materialization taking place, he says, "[t]he space becomes empty. A certain emptiness and a certain descent are created in oneself. Ascend, ascend, sink down. ... I am engaged with filling up this empty space with things that can be named. ... [It is] a full emptiness." And of course, the constructive ramifications of such emptiness, long hailed by mystics as 'dark nights of the soul' – are well attested by the world's religious traditions: the empty tomb at Easter, ...the whispering breeze in which Elijah felt the presence of HaShem, ...the Buddhist concept of *Sūnyatā*, ...and Shiva Nataraja's destructive-yet-also-creative '*tandava*' dance, – to cite just a few examples. Music brings the same message – in, for example, the finale of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* – and we know it also in architecture and (notably as sculpture's 'negative space') in art.

THE CONTEXT: KIEFER'S PLACE IN THE ART-WORLD

Prolific and widely collected, Kiefer has had an impact upon the art-world beyond most artists' wildest dreams. His earliest work drew puzzlement and sometimes-angry criticism in Germany, but those days are long gone. Over the past thirty years, in addition to more focused exhibitions, he's been the subject of large solo retrospectives in London (Royal Academy, 2014), Bilbao (Guggenheim, 2007), and the US (Chicago Art Institute and MoMA, 1987) – and consistently to rave reviews. In reviewing the 1987 show, for example, Robert Hughes wrote in *Time* magazine:

... at 42 this German artist is the best painter of his generation on either side of the Atlantic. ... So what is the difference between his work and most Neo-Expressionism? The fact that he is one of the very few visual artists in the last decade to have shown an unmistakable grandeur of symbolic vision.

... Thanks to [Joseph] Beuys, younger German artists were able to connect with their own history and think about it without illusion, and Kiefer's work is the fruit of that process. ...

Kiefer's work is a ringing and deeply engaged rebuke – clumsy sometimes, and bathetic when it fails, but usually as pictorially forceful as it is morally earnest – to the ingrained limitations of its time. It sets its face against the sterile irony, the despair of saying anything authentic about history or memory in paint, and the general sense of trivial pursuit that infect our culture. It affirms the moral imagination.

[*Nossis* spotlight – RW 2017]

A more recent Royal Academy writer calls Kiefer simply ‘one of the most important artists of the last 50 years.’

THE WORK – III: NOSSIS’S CONVERSATIONS WITH ‘HER’ VISITORS

Nossis offers a fecund base of comparison with a good many other PSAM artworks. Currently nearby are Timothy Tompkins’s *After Caravaggio* (whose paparazzi, in line with generations of readers, turn their backs to the ancient poetess), Millie Wilson’s playfully serious *White Girl*, and Hung Liu’s *And the Last Fight Let Us Face*, combining a ‘Buddha’s hand’ flower (symbolic, in China, of happiness, longevity and good fortune) with a woman (associated, like *Nossis*, with a powerful triangle) valiantly soldiering on; in adjacent galleries are Lino Tagliapietra’s depiction, in his haunting *Saturno*’s deep blue glass, of the planet whose name has mythic connections with lead and with time, and – neither last nor least – the headless infants of self-aware ‘lipstick feminist’ Rachel Lachowicz’s *Conscious/Unconscious (Running, Standing, Sitting, Crawling)*.

Foremost among *Nossis*’s PSAM interlocutors, however, is another of Kiefer’s own works, *l’Ascension*, which – with its evocative *Ave Maria* surface-text – is currently hanging quite near to *Nossis*. Once again, we find Kiefer’s interest in transformation – in spiritual transcendence ultimately emerging from earthy reality (to say nothing of dense impasto!) ... and even, from emptiness. Thus, Daniell Cornell has duly noted *l’Ascension*’s “hopeful struggle to wrest bright form out of dark matter, spirit out of earth, winged victory out of tumult.”

Nossis confronts us with a vivid object-lesson in the impermanence of everything and, as much as any artwork, engages us all in conversation with ourselves: She invites us to ponder who we are ... and how our own lives might nourish others when we’re gone.

APPENDIX – TOURING NOTES

Some might jest that *Nossis* is a writer with a really bad hangover ... or perhaps, given her cerebral overload, might rename her 'The Docent.' Some – thinking that visitors might find her disconcerting and/or too heady, not literally but in terms of her philosophical demands – might feel she's for 'mature audiences only.'

But no! Quite apart from any alchemical-transformation psychobabble – or any talk of surprisingly constructive emptiness –, *Nossis* offers two straightforward lessons:

- a reminder not to value books more highly than human connection, and
- a vivid object-lesson in the impermanence of everything.

Thus, like the provocative teacher portrayed in a 1989 film (yes, *The Dead Poets' Society*), *Nossis* encourages all just to 'seize the day' according to their personal goals. As well, she particularly encourages us as docents to join T.S. Eliot in being "content at the last / If our temporal reversion nourish / ... The life of significant soil."

Above all, *Nossis* invites us all into conversation with ourselves. With a bench conveniently nearby, she suggests we sit quietly and contemplate who we are and how our various lives, when we're gone, might nourish others – not in material terms, but in spirit. If you bring to your musings what I call our lifelong three-R's – receptivity, respect and responsiveness – and listen carefully, that faint voice you might hear won't belong to a German artist or philosopher, nor, certainly, to a long-dead poet or of any divinity: Emerging from profound emptiness, and made all the richer for encounter with *Nossis*, that voice will be authentically your own.

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