

I ›secrefy‹ matter by divesting it.

A Conversation with Anselm Kiefer



Anselm Kiefer, Buch mit Flügeln, 1992–94
Blei, Stahl und Zinn, ca. 189.9 x 529.9 x 110.2 cm
Lead, steel and tin, approx. 74.76 x 208.62 x 43.39 inches
Collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth

Mr. Kiefer, in recent months, you have prepared the exhibition *Maria durch ein Dornwald ging*.¹ The former title of the exhibition was *Ave Maria*, the beginning of the Latin version of the prayer *Hail Mary*.

Ave Maria is also the beginning of the Laetian Litany, the text of which goes »Ave Maria ... Mater castissima, Mater inviolata, Mater intemerata, Mater amabilis, Mater admirabilis, Mater boni consilii ... Turris eburnea.« (you most chaste mother, you unharmed mother, you immaculate mother, you amiable mother, you most admirable mother, you mother of good advice). Mary is compared to all sorts of things, to philosophers and towers. The »turris eburnea«, the ivory tower, is of course derived from the Old Testament. *research this*

How did it come about that in your work you turned to Mary, the Mother of God? You have been very much concerned with Gnosis and Jewish mysticism. A year ago, in Salzburg, I saw your painting *Palmsonntag* (Palm Sunday), which is of a great transformative energy, and Mary, the Mother of God, too, is of an energy that breaks conditions up and transforms them.

This is a subject or a field that has been with me forever. Very early, I did the paintings *Vater, Sohn, Heiliger Geist, Quaternität, Trinität* (God Father, God Son, Holy Spirit, Quaternity, Trinity). Mary accompanied me through my whole youth, she was very important in the times I grew up. The May Services come to my mind. In May, altars are decorated with a host of flowers. Their smell was really bewitching. The song *Maria, breit den Mantel aus ...*² alludes very much to the senses and the body. I grew up with this sensual conditioning, it is my childhood, my past. Later I learned that adoration of the Virgin Mary had not been invented by the Christians but dates back to earlier cults, for instance that of Isis. I was educated in an intensively Catholic way, I was a ministrant. In former times, I knew a lot of poems by heart, which meanwhile, I have forgotten. But what I still remember is the Mass in Latin. I learned the Latin Mass by heart before I learned to write. My mother taught it to me. As you refer to Gnosis and Jewish mysticism: Mary is quite their contrary. Jewish mysticism is rather abstract, »Zimzum« and »Tikkun« are abstract processes.

The archangel Gabriel appears to Mary, he announces to her that she will conceive. The angel also tells her the name of her future child.

The child almost exists already before the Annunciation. What I am interested in today about Mary, apart from my biographical conditioning, are the dogmas. There are five dogmas regarding Mary. The last of them is of the year 1950: Mary's Ascension to heaven with body and soul. The dogma of Virgin Birth and Virgin Conception is of the 19th century, when people already knew where children come from. I have always found it foolhardy of the Catholic Church to proclaim such a dogma – such a challenge to common sense. To make a statement that is completely untenable has something of an artistic act. The Catholic Church proclaiming that Mary was thrice a virgin – before the Annunciation, during delivery, and afterwards – can be seen as parallel to the complete authority an artist may have in his/her work. This statement has always fascinated me. I would almost say it is like Dadaism. It is crazy, really crazy.

Maria – semper virgo: the dogma of Mary's virginity has the meaning to identify Jesus as God's son: Jesus is God's son, who has come to the earth to redeem mankind. The Word was made flesh, as it says in the prologue of the Gospel according to St. John.

As to the Gospel according to St. John, this gospel is the most abstract one. The verses: »In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (...) And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth« – describe a fantastic process, denote an abstract thing. Jesus' birth by Mary is a substantial thing. It is not abstract to declare that Mary was a virgin. Last year, I had an exhibition in the Louvre of various drawings regarding my chosen subject »limits«. For this exhibition, I selected many depictions of Mary, of the Annunciation, of Mary's conception, and in doing so noticed how much the different representations varied. In one picture, Mary was frightened, overwhelmed by the incident, in another, it was the angel who was almost

not true
there are 4
He's using dog
in a non
Roman Catholic
way

frightened, since he already knew that Mary had God's son in herself, had God in herself. The different theological dimensions interested me very much in these drawings.

In the 5th century, it was heavily disputed whether Mary gave birth to God or to Christ, was ›theotokos‹ or ›christotokos‹. Bishop Nestorius understood Mary as christotokos, but his view was banished at the council of Ephesos in 431 A.D., and Nestorius was condemned as a heretic. According to the Catholic doctrine, Mary gave birth to God.

Your explanation refers to the declaration of an impossibility. How can God be given birth? Mary gives birth to a part of God, she gives birth to a part of the trinity. As a certain impossibility, this has interested me for long, since it is actually the negation of scientific insight. It is something artistic to transfer scientific insight – although not denying it, not negating it – to another level where it is relativized. Each scientific finding is preliminary, will be falsified in the course of time or modified into another insight. To declare that Mary gave birth to God, was a virgin, without original sin, is of course terribly bold, and of course it is also terribly bold to declare that this is an eternal truth. It is, so-to-speak, the precedence of mythology over science.

Is the mythological structure stronger than the rational one?

Mythology is always more complete than science.

Science always deals only with partial insights, in particular today, at a time when everything is decomposed into components, when everybody is only working at one tiny spot of the whole. Mythology comprises a knowledge that, although not directly readable, although having to be interpreted, is more holistic.

The religion sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann have pointed out in their studies that the mythological structure serves a deep human longing, that of complexity reduction. Because mythological structure sets its statements as absolute ones.

It is a simplification, but I would not say that a mythological image is simpler. The image is simpler, but what is behind it is more complex than scientific findings. Now the difficult point is that a dogma is basically impossible. A dogma is impossible by definition, because you cannot determine anything forever with words. For language is changing, it changes already in ten years. Hence a dogma is something impossible, and this impossibility has always interested me from the artistic point of view. To declare in the 19th century that Mary had been a virgin in conceiving can be understood by a narrow margin today, but that Mary had been a virgin after delivery is a monstrosity, a folly. The use of that folly was not meant as a folly, though, it was meant to create an illusion for humans: »Maria, breit den Mantel aus, mach Schirm und Schutz daraus, lass uns darunter sicher stehen, bis alle Stürme vorüber gehen.« (Mary, spread your coat, make it a shield and a protection, let us find safe shelter under it until all storms have passed), etc. This is simply the need for an illusion. For shelter and safety. Any safety is an illusion. As a child, you adopt this need. Today, my interest in Mary is no longer an infantile one. My interest is in the artistic, the madness in the statement. An artist states something; mythology states something, without being able to prove it. I concern myself with what I have. I concern myself with what I am. I am a human being to whom Mary, the Mother of God, appeared. She appeared to me as a figure of Nazarene-art. I think I was 6 or 7 years old, maybe already 8.

Had you prayed just before the appearance?

No, Mary appeared to me one morning. It was not in my dreams, I was already awake. The appearance occurred in the room where I slept. I can exactly tell you how Mary was dressed. She wore a light-blue »Pesch« dress. It was exactly the appearance of a pre-Raphaelite or Nazarene picture. Today I would call it mawkish. Mary didn't talk to me, she smiled. I remember her mouth moving. Appearances of Mary are often linked to the request to build a church. When Mary appeared to me, there was neither request nor command. As a child, I didn't know anything about

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Mary's appearance in Lourdes; I had neither read nor heard about them. Recently, I asked my assistant to do research into the history of dogmas about Mary, as I no longer remembered exactly when which dogma had been issued. There are only five dogmas that have been proclaimed by the Catholic Church, but there are a great number of alleged appearances of Mary. Evidently, they are a psychological phenomenon.

There is always some structural similarity in the appearances of Mary. In most cases, they are linked to a prophecy. When Mary, the Mother of God, appeared to the three child shepherds Lúcia dos Santos, Jacinta, and Francisco Marto on May 13, 1917, in Fatima, she foretold them the conversion of Russia. An appearance of Mary always also initiates a healing process. Did Mary have a wreath of stars in your appearance? No, there was some shining around her head, but she had no wreath of stars. This would have been the direct copy of a pictorial representation, as Mary is often depicted with stars.

Have you been interested in Mary's connection to the cosmos? By the wreath of stars, Mary is set into the universe. In the Laurentian Litany, Mary is called »Stella matutina«, the morning star. And in the horary prayers of the Catholic Church, she is called »Stella maris«, sea star, after the hymn *Ave maris stella* of the 8th or 9th century, the author of which is unknown.

Mary also stands on the moon. Her embeddedness in the cosmos is, of course, interesting. It also exists already with Isis, who procreates the son Horus with Osiris. With Mary, an interruption comes into effect. The era that had been effective up to then is completed, and a new one begins. Thereby, for the first time original sin is overcome. A Utopian potential is contained therein. Original sin had been necessary because Christian theology had not been able to explain the evil in the world. It was impossible. In Jewish mysticism, the world is explained differently. Clearly, the Virgin Mary, who gives birth to God, cannot have original sin. This annulled the theodicy, the explanation of the world.

Loretto is not dogma
it is the same as Lourdes
+ Guadalupe + Fatima

The question of the theodicy is: If God is good and almighty, where then, does the suffering in the world come from?

This is the question anyway: It is the line from Adam to Christ, who overcomes this line – from birth in original sin to its being overcome. Actually, it is a double interruption, because the theology of the Old Testament is an abstract one: I am who I am.

Or, as it is put in another translation: »I am who I will be«. This translation with its dimension pointing to the future always meant more to me and touched me more.

But this translation is less radical. Because »I am who I am« is a cynical answer. Somebody asks you who you are and receives the answer: »I am who I am«. This is absolute cynicism. A high-handedness, a cynicism that makes humans bang their heads against a wall. And at the same time, this is highly interesting, since from there the prohibition of images comes. I have always been much engaged to work just against that, to work with this prohibition, to work in this abstraction. The descent of God's son is an embodiment, which had not existed before. And in the Eucharist, too – »hoc est enim corpus meum« –, it is an absolute embodiment.

Through transubstantiation, bread and wine become Christ's body and blood. In the Eucharist, another body is created. The question how some matter changes into another state of being plays a central role in your work, too.

Yes, transformation. Mary was introduced into theology from the fifth century on, or even later. It had been noticed that there was the need for still something different. The whole religion was very much humanized, above all in the religiousness of the common people.

At first, Mary was depicted as a very sensual woman, with full breasts and open hair. From the 19th century on, a process of de-sexualization begins in the pictorial representation of the Mother of God. To talk about another field of subjects: Mary overcomes the law of the world, she annuls it. She opposes the government

The myth
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Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564)
Auferstehung Christi
The Resurrection of Christ
Musée du Louvre

of the powerful and attends to the poor and the sinners. Thus, it says in the *Magnificat*: »My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For He hath regarded the lowliness of His handmaiden. For behold, from now henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. (...) He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He hath sent empty away.«

Mary is also interesting with respect to the wandering between two worlds. Through the Annunciation, Mary is part of another world. There are many stories about Mary, one of them says that she ascends to heaven with body and soul and comes down to earth again after three days, her descent. I made a picture of the Ascension and one of the Descent. Mary's re-descent is very interesting. There are wonderful drawings by Tiepolo showing Mary in her re-descent, accompanied by the first three orders of angels, the seraphim, the cherubim, and the thrones. These three angels accompany her in her descent to the humans – this change, this wandering across the border, from above to below.

Mary's wandering between the worlds is imbued with light. Mary is seen as a light figure or a light person who brings light to the darkness of the earthly valley. Yes, Mary brings the light – as opposed to Gnosis which takes the light off the earth so as to finally leave the earth to its own darkness and morass. The Manicheans, above all, take that view.

Mary's descent is not followed by a definite stay on Earth, it is followed by another ascent to heaven. Mary ascends with the saved humanity.

I see Mary constantly ascending and descending, I see

her constantly wandering around the border. Mary ascends, she descends. She suffers everything you can suffer on earth. As an assistant goddess, she ascends again with the redeemed humanity. With Mary, it is a constant ascent and descent.

Until final redemption sets in.

In Christianity, at some point in time history will end, eschatology, the final history, will happen. I do not feel that there will be an end of history. I think there will always be an up and down, a permanent cycle. I found the cycle of ascent and descent for the first time in Tiepolo, in his drawings kept in the Louvre, they are wonderful drawings. I found it fantastic that Mary ascends and descends again; she doesn't stay in heaven but goes back down to earth. In that, I see a rhythm, a cosmic rhythm so-to-speak. I don't believe in a definite ascent, I don't believe in the end of history.

This is a conception of history as the philosopher Giambattista Vico developed it, ›corsi‹ and ›discorsi‹ alternate and advance.

I don't believe in an advancing. I think that things just go on. We are not the ultimate invention or the ultimate development in the world. If there is a catastrophe – and at some point in time there will be a catastrophe, that is predictable – we will no longer be. Then, there will be a new evolution with some kind of bacteria, in Greenland, in the ice of 3000 metres thickness.

An evolution with a higher intelligence than that of humans?

I don't think so. Perhaps, evolution will begin from scratch. I cannot say where intelligence will remain. Intelligence is nothing which is bound to a place.

Intelligence is not only in our heads, it is general. It is in any gene particle, in any cell. There is a field of intelligence which knows what happens anywhere.

This intelligence has no teleological dimension?

I would not say teleological. This intelligence is something that links anything to anything else. It exists everywhere; insofar it comes quite close to a theology, but is none. I cannot say what it is. I can only say that there are links from anything to anything else. I feel connected to persons who lived long ago. I feel attached to thoughts of Ingeborg Bachmann or to thoughts of other persons who lived even earlier. This is some connection which is not mental but not completely material either, a connection hard to define, but I feel that it exists.

What does the name Mary mean for you?

Mary is for me like a land where I grew up, a land that I once visited, to which I once travelled. It is for me a memory which I can recall. Regarding fertility and creativity, all that, regarding the seasonal cycle, too, I have pictures and sensations at the levels of all senses. I don't know whether there are still May Services today. They are held in spring, when everything begins anew and will later die again. The whole cosmic process is included in this memory.

Think of the *Ave Maria*, this prayer is placed between birth and death. It says »and blessed is the fruit of thy womb ...«, and at the end, we pray: »Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen«. Both poles of human life are named in this prayer.

Birth and death, sin and salvation, and intercession.

In your cyclical thinking, sin has no function. Sin has a meaning only in eschatological thinking?

Yes, later than redemption. Sin has no meaning for me. Sin is the reason why I disapprove of the Catholic Church. The threatening with sin, the threatening with damnation, the threatening with hell and grinding one's teeth was predominant for me in my childhood, maybe today no longer. This was, or still is (which I cannot assess) a perversion of the Christian religion. Sin is a

very problematic word for me, because it immediately implies guilt.

In the Easter Mass, »felix culpa« is talked about, the happy guilt that found such a redeemer. Access to happy guilt has remained barred to you?

In my childhood I experienced the Catholic religion as an absolute threat, a threatening and an endangering.

By annihilation?

Yes, by annihilation and eternal hell. The whole theory of guilt is very hard to understand. In guilt or a crime, many moments coincide. The whole life is of relevance, how somebody grew up etc., it is terribly complicated. This I remember from my law studies, since we often were present at trials. The notion of guilt is very complex. Actually, Judas should be canonized because he advanced the whole history of salvation (laughs). Without Judas' betrayal, there would have been no Calvary and no redemption. Judas was annihilated.

He hanged himself.

He hanged himself, and someone who hangs himself will go to hell straight away. In former times, those who committed suicide were not even buried in the cemetery.

Yes, this damnation of those who committed suicide. I am touched by a thought of the Russian film director Alexander Sokurov that God particularly likes those who committed suicide.

That is a diverging opinion, not the official theology. Suicide is obviously a slap in the face of the Catholic doctrine.

I thought a reason for suicide might be that those who commit suicide want to be with God earlier.

But according to the doctrine of the Catholic church, suicide is a provocation: Thou shalt not tempt me. It is the negation of Creation. Maybe you can interpret it as you just did, as a short cut of the earthly wandering, but that is not the doctrine (laughs).

In 1976, the German psychoanalyst and psychotherapist Tilmann Moser published the book *Gottesvergiftung* (God-Poisoning). What you say of threatening and endangering by eternal damnation goes in the direction of a God-poisoning. Think, however, of the Latin-American liberation theology – there, God is seen as the liberator. Gustavo Gutiérrez, the ›father‹ of liberation theology, understands Christ as the liberator. Gutiérrez even understands the God of the Old Testament, the God of Isaiah and Jeremiah, as a liberating god who leads out of captivity and slavery. The way to a liberating god was difficult for you, or even impossible? No, God was a threatening god.

A God of the Old Testament? Is this linked to a conception of God dating back to a time when believing in him meant fearing him?

In texts of Jeremiah and Isaiah, threats are frequent: I will send your enemies upon you; I will dry up the Euphrates to make them reach you sooner. I will punish you up to the coming generations. This is a strange passage in the Bible. I often listen to the books of Jeremiah and Isaiah; I have a disk of them. I have not yet understood quite clearly what the texts of Jeremiah and Isaiah actually are. Because reading them is, at the same time, music. Almost like minimal music, with a strange power. In their repetitions, in their constant repetitions, you almost seem to find a neutralization of the threatening.

So that you are thrown out of the orbit through repetition.

A centrifugal force in repetition. It is very strange if you read or hear it that way. Perhaps I will soon make a piece with passages of Isaiah and Jeremiah, since they have always fascinated me. »Grass will grow over your towns« – this I used in many works. I am not yet quite sure about what it actually is. The repetition, which actually de-materializes the threatening, fascinates me very much. It really becomes theatre. It has something of a God theatre.

The rhythm of the repetitions in the texts of the prophets

Isaiah and Jeremiah is found in another form in the rosary, too.

The rosary is actually a meditation. This prayer is also something astonishing, because in the rosary, the worst things are said: He was flagellated, he was crucified. And this, too, dissolves in repetition. Actually it becomes only a mantra. The process which is in fact described no longer appears at all. A de-materialization takes place. The space becomes empty. A certain emptiness and a certain descent are created in oneself. Ascend, ascend, sink down.

Empty space is of great relevance in your work. You once told me that in your diaries you wrote a lot about the empty space of childhood. In this context, the empty space originates in de-materialization, which, in turn originates in meditative repetition. The empty space is very important for me, because my childhood, on the one hand, was quite full of impressions and smells but, on the other hand, was a very empty space. A very, very empty space, of unlimited time. From a purely external point of view, this was due to the fact that nothing happened. I grew up in a village where there was no radio, no television, no entertainment whatsoever. It was a very empty time, but a very rich time. This space, which is not poverty but wealth, was later filled up. I am engaged with filling up this empty space with things that can be named.

To say it with a paradox: It is a full emptiness.

Yes, a full emptiness, which is now being named when I talk, give interviews, when I work. The empty space is being named. When you say the rosary, meditate, or say the mantra, the empty space is being created.

I once was in Japan, in Kamakura, where I visited the big statue of Buddha. I also entered the statue from the back, and what touched me in its interior was the emptiness. If you look at Buddha, he is resting in himself, smiling. A different image is related to Christianity, the image of the ›ecce homo‹. And as to Mary, the related image is the pietà at the Descent from the Cross. Has the empty space in Buddhism interested you? The ›ecce homo‹ is a brutal thing. I am still surprised

The repetition of the rosary is taken to the strike of the whip of flagellato

use this!



Anselm Kiefer, Palette am Seil, 1977

*Öl, Acryl, Emulsion und Schellack auf Leinwand, 130 x 160 cm
Oil, acrylic, emulsion and shellac on canvas, 51.18 x 62.99 inches*

Südtiroler Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München

today when I see a crucifix. You see them less and less, they have become abstract, but in former times there was a crucifix at every crossway, dripping with blood. To see such a crucifix is something very brutal and comic. Whereas the idea of the empty space comprises much more, because we consist of empty space. Indeed, we are empty. If you see it from the point of view of nuclear physics, an atom is composed of the electron and the neutron, and between them there is a terribly empty space. The neutron is in the centre, and the electron is circling around it. If the electron had the size of a football, the space between electron and neutron would have the size of a football field, that is, in between there is nothing. As such, we are empty space. Once you see it that way, your ideas about everything will change. Just as there are gamma rays that penetrate the earth and come out at the other side of the globe. This would provide a banal explanation of the empty space, or an associative one, with the aid of most recent scientific findings. But I have had this feeling of the empty space for long already.

Can you still remember from what time on you had the wish or the feeling to name the empty space?

I had this awareness only twenty years ago – at most. Of course, knowledge of it already existed in me. But it is only twenty years ago that I formulated this awareness, in particular the mutual influence of empty space and named space.

When I look at your paintings, I have the feeling that they are both empty spaces and quiet spaces. They are spaces where silence is present.

Yes. In former times, I used to be very much attracted

by old factories that were empty, where work was no longer done. In these old factories, the interplay, the contrast of empty and full was very present. Evidently, nobody was there any longer, but at the same time, the traces of work were there, the traces of thousands of workers. This would be a rather trivial example of the interdependency of empty and full space, of empty space which is basically filled very much, almost claustrophobically filled.

Of a space in which horror is contained in the traces.

If you think of the war, it is the horror, if you think of labour, it is the efforts and the sweat which are preserved as traces, perhaps they are even not that much found as actual traces but rather as something you know.

In your stage design for Klaus Michael Grüber's staging of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* at the Burgtheater in 2003, in the end the traces of the persons who had gone through the holy grove could be seen in the sand and dust on the stage floor.

Yes, negative forms emerged, above all through the ash that was continuously falling from the gridiron. As you went on, all at once a negative form existed. Like in Hiroshima those hands or figures on the wall.

I once wondered if the Buddha resting in itself and smiling were not superior to the Christian image of the »ecce homo« which is so much determined by pain and by blood, by cruel torture. What this »ecce homo« image may affect in a child once it starts to imprint itself into the child's soul. Have you, too, sometimes thought that Buddhist philosophy is superior to Christian theology in some way?

*like
Anish
Kapoor
use this in
tour*



Raffaello Sanzio (1483–1520)
Der brennende Busch
The Burning Bush
Musée du Louvre

It certainly is more comprehensive, it reaches further. It just includes more of being. Indeed, this image of suffering is only a part of being. It is the brutal side of being, the unredeemed side.

Which is given with being a human?
 It is one side, but that is not everything.

Does the perception of the world shift or change in the course of life?

On principle, there is always a shift. You never stay with your world view. It is constantly changing, it cannot remain the same.

Has Buddhist theology influenced you more in your later life than the Christian one?

I haven't really studied it more than anybody else. I haven't got deep insights regarding Buddhism, but I think that some of my thoughts go together with Buddhism.

In Tokyo, I saw a performance of a Kabuki theatre, where cherry blossoms were called a symbol of transience. A Kabuki player said that everything that comes into being in the morning will pass away in the evening. And in saying this, he moved the fan like a cherry blossom falling down. This is a very beautiful picture of emerging and perishing in nature, without needing that ideological superstructure of redemption and ...
 ... of standing the test, resisting the devil – the constant possibility of failure, of damnation, etc.

Were you also concerned with Dante in the context of your exhibition *Maria durch ein Dornwald ging*? In the last canto of the *Divine Comedy*, Mary plays a very important role, and so does the image of love that moves »sun and stars«. The first four stanzas of canto 33 go:

»O virgin mother, daughter of thy Son, / Created beings all in lowliness / Surpassing, as in height, above them all, / Term by th' eternal counsel pre-ordain'd, // Ennobler of thy nature, so advanc'd / In thee, that its great Maker did not scorn, / Himself, in his own work enclos'd to dwell! // For in thy womb rekindling shone the love / Reveal'd, whose genial influence makes now / This flower to germin in eternal peace! // Here thou to us, of charity and love, / Art, as the noon-day torch: and art, beneath, / To mortal men, of hope a living spring. // So mighty art thou, lady! and so great, / That he who grace desireth, and comes not / To thee for aidance, fain would have desire / Fly without wings.«³

When I look at the gospels, Mary seems to me to be the most unfamiliar of all persons. As to Jesus, you know his character approximately; you know what he has done. Mary, however, appears to be a complete, neuter. You don't know anything about her character; you don't know who she was. You know nothing. There is no description of Mary in the Bible. Mary Magdalene is characterized in much more detail than Mary. Mary is actually a hollow form.

Mary is a woman who devotes herself to the divine will. Mary stands near the cross: *Stabat mater dolorosa*. And there is the image of the *pietà*. Mary suffers and then holds her son in her arms. But that scene doesn't show her as a living woman but instead as Our Lady of Sorrows, as her role prescribes it. Mary Magdalene is much livelier. She anoints Jesus' feet and dries them with her hair. She is sensual. When Jesus has risen from the dead, she immediately wants to embrace him and is not allowed to – *Noli me tangere*. She thus learns that now there is another being, now there is Christ.

The time when the risen Christ is on earth is very interesting. He appears to the Emmaus disciples and accompanies them some part of their way, he shortly appears here and there and disappears right away. Christ is there and not there. Seen from the point of view of an author, this presence and absence is done in a very clever way. The evangelist creates a time, a space, where presence can be and also can not be.

Christ is there, but he is not there for everybody, only for a certain group, for certain persons, and has quickly disappeared again. Nor does Christ come through the door. Suddenly, he is just there. This is interesting, because it creates an intermediate level, he is there and he is not there. Christ is not really there; otherwise he would be constantly there.

Christ is present as the one risen from the dead.

He has not risen as the one he was before. He appears shortly, like a flash of lightning. You can easily imagine that Christ did actually appear. You can imagine that a person has died and his relatives and friends suddenly see him in the corner. This happens, we know that. These people are that much linked to him that they really see him. And the gospel, too, is formulated in that way. The appearances of the risen Christ can also be seen in a psychological perspective. But viewed philosophically it is an intermediate area. Jesus is someone disintegrated into components, into atoms. As dead persons, we are no longer constructed but, because of the entropy, we are disintegrated into components, which, from time to time form to some shape again. Jesus is pan-theistically dissolved into the general and can materialize now and then. This time is an interesting time. The women came to the grave, entered the grave, and did not find the corpse. Two men in shining garments, as the gospel according to St. Luke tells, came to them and said: »Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here. He has risen!«

The question of the empty grave is connected to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The grave is empty and at the same time evokes the thought of the risen Christ's real presence.

The hole, the empty space of the grave is the proof that he has risen from the dead. You cannot maintain this, though, because he might have been stolen.

It was indeed considered whether Jesus had been taken away.

Yes, this was the first idea, that somebody might have stolen his corpse. But then it became clear, he has appeared; he is there; consequently the empty grave is the representation of the miracle of the risen Christ.

Of the miracle that overcomes history. God's raising Jesus from the dead gives the whole history of humanity a new perspective.

That he will return as the Messiah at the end of time. From the Jewish culture, there is the idea that he will come back, will redeem and judge the world.

You don't share this idea?

I cannot think of a final reckoning, a final decision, final redemption.

What do you think why you were born?

This is the main question – I don't know. This is our despair, the fact that we don't know. We have a conscience, we can think, we can understand so many things, we can express it – we don't know why. It is a yawning abyss. It is an unimaginably deep vertiginous abyss.

What is your answer to that?

I have no answer. I cannot say why. It seems to be interesting enough for me to continue, but I cannot give any answer. I have absolutely no answer.

How do you stand this?

Yes, with difficulties (laughs), by creating my own world. I create my space in the nothing. But it is all an illusion.

An illusion that materializes in your work.

In my case, yes. Sometimes I pretend there were an above and a below. I make a picture in which there is an above and a below, but all that is but an illusion. I only pretend it.

Anish Kapoor

he discusses atoms again

Kierulff's a Christian

In the pictures I saw today in your studio, there is – between above and below – the movement of a wing, a movement of lifting up or sinking down.

This has been borrowed from iconography. These are the angels, the two levels; this is the ancient mythological idea of above and below, of divine and human, of mind and body, etc.

Ascending and descending is also found in your paintings with the San Loretto motive.

San Loretto has always fascinated me very much. I saw it for the first time in a picture by Tiepolo, it is the church that flies from Jerusalem to San Loretto at night. This is, of course, a wonderful idea and a very modern one: a solid body which moves, dissolves, and reconstructs at some other place. It is an idea and a statement as mad as that of Mary's virginity. Insofar, one of these pictures will be seen at the exhibition, because it matches very well.

It represents the overcoming of gravity?

Sure, with virginity it is the same, it is the overcoming of any physicality already understood at that time, of the physical conditions. Therefore, San Loretto exactly relates to our subject.



Let me take a leap from the name of Mary, the Mother of God, to your name. In your Christian name, belief and understanding are constantly changing into one another, borders are intermixing: believing in order to understand, understanding in order to believe, as Anselm of Canterbury put it. Could we say that your work takes place in the interplay of mythological and rational level?

Yes, because today I have explained mythological facts by scientific examples. When you talk about DNA, when you talk about intelligence in each cell, these are insights we have gained by science. We have only known that since 50 years. I took this as an illustration of mythological basic experiences.

The mythological basic experiences take place at a synchronous level, whereas scientific findings are related to the diachronous time structure.

For me, this is constantly merging. Some insight helps to elucidate mythological experience, and some insight only develops through mythological experience. Alexander the Great, for instance, marched off to find the chains of Prometheus in the Caucasus. He believed in the myth. He set out for Turkey to find the chains. In that case, the mythology was an impulse for action, a motivation. In that way, scientific insight and mythology are constantly merging, in that way they are constantly interlocked.

As regards the meaning of names, the Russian poet Vladimir Chlebnikov thought that in the first letter of the name everything was contained. Did you also think this with respect to your name?

No, I didn't relate that to a specific letter. I have always been fascinated by Hebrew mythology. Each letter is holy. You may combine letters as you like, there will always be a meaning, one that will be de-codable only in 500 years. This idea is also linked to the mysticism of numbers. In the Cabbala, it is a mysticism of numbers. After all, there are also the proportions of numbers in Pythagoras' tenet, the correlation of the lengths of the sides. There is a scientific insight about relations of numbers, and there is a mythological one in the Cabbala. These mutually fertilized each other. And they also fertilize my work.

research this -

Your family name (Kiefer = pine) is related to nature. In Japanese poems, the pine is seen as a tree with a very long life. An anonymous Zen poem goes: »The pine lives thousand years, / the gentle morning breeze only one day. / But both fulfil their destiny.«
I hope to reach 100 years.

The pine is a beautiful metaphor for strength, endurance, and duration. For a duration lasting beyond one's own life time. In a poem of the tea master and Zen monk Senno Rikyu (he lived from 1521 to 1591 and is seen as the founder of the Wabi-Sabi aesthetics), the pine is in the centre, too: »The court lies covered / under the needles / of the pine. / No grain of dust is flying / and my soul is calm«. Did you feel connected via these pictures in the Japanese poems?

I didn't reflect about my name.



Giovanni Battista Trotti (1555–1619)
Die Verkündigung
The Annunciation
Musée du Louvre

Have you never thought that your Christian name is a beautiful name?

It is a beautiful name. When I became aware about the name I have, I rather thought of the whole family Feuerbach, the philosopher, the artist, the historian, the archaeologist. This family produced many important artists and scientists, the critic of religion Ludwig Feuerbach. And there is also a well-known lawyer Feuerbach. The Feuerbach family covered the whole spectrum of science and art, and many of its members were called Anselm. The one after whom I was named was the classicist painter.

The name ›Feuerbach‹, (fire creek) contains two elements which are of great importance in your work: water and fire. As to your work, one could talk about a *coincidentia oppositorum*. Through the clashing of the two opposite elements, a third reality is created.

Water and fire – which as such annul each other. The contrast of fire and water is found already in the works of Heraclitus. Anyhow I see myself as living in complete contradiction. After all, it is already a contradiction to live at all. We don't know why. In view of this abyss, we would actually have to stop living, but we continue to live nevertheless, hence it is a contradiction. We are permanently living in contradiction.

The tipping over from the horizontal to the vertical has a strong dimension in your work. Thinking of the painting *The Dead Christ* by Hans Holbein and associating it with your *Palm Sunday* paintings, in

your *Palm Sunday* paintings an energy can be perceived that shoots up.

A tilting over. This is constantly happening: What had two dimensions suddenly has three, and what was horizontal becomes vertical. As regards painting, artistic activity, there is the horizontal plane when an object is represented, be that in the first place a field, a wood, or a sea. In the course of painting, in the course of proceeding, there is a point when the picture tilts over into the vertical and gets a so-called meaning. I then know why I paint that picture or what that picture means. That is the vertical plane. The picture stands like an exclamation mark. Before, it was only a landscape.

And how does the secret develop?

The secret is something which the artist conveys to the things. In the first place, a tree or woods are a tree or woods. But if insight appears and tells me why it is there, or if the picture tells it to me, the tree is thereby ›secretified‹. The word ›*vergeheimnissen*‹ (to secretefy) was coined by the German poet Novalis.

The secret is of a revealing meaning in your work.

Yes, if you take it in the sense of meaning, it is of a revealing function. Meaning I always understand only as illusory meaning. A secret is something veiled. So I don't unveil the secret. I create the secret.

Could we talk about a ›becoming apparent‹?

Yes, or we can say it is the appearance of the external skin of the secret. Or, referring to the youth of Sais⁴: the appearance of the curtain. A secret is something you create.



And from what?
Not from nothing.

From empty space?

Yes, also from matter. Matter also has a secret. I don't believe that the secret is above and the matter below and that it is only the idea that gives life to the thing. I think that the idea is contained in the thing. The secret is already contained in the things.

Thinking in this context of the medieval dispute over universals: would you say that the secret is ›in rebus‹?

Yes, right. The one group were the realists and the others the nominalists. I would say I am a materialist, no nominalist. What they disputed about represented an interesting theological process. It meant the catching up on Platonism, or the dissolving of Platonism. According to my insight, the ›nature‹ is in the matter, as Gnostics think, too. Gnostics think you have to take it out of the matter so that it will then perish.

In that case, your work would be a going-into-matter?

An opening of matter, a divesting of matter. You might say: I secrete matter by divesting it.

With the metaphor of clothes or of divesting, the veil comes to mind. The veil is at the same time veiling and showing. The veil before the Ark of the Covenant. And to come back to Mary, she is praised as Ark of the Covenant in the hymn *Ave maris stella*.

The Ark of the Covenant is the secret per se. It already begins with the burning bush: I am who I am. The Ark of the Covenant is the materialised secret.

The burning bush – today I saw in your studio fire flames on branches of black trees.

The bush that is burning but is not burned up. In my paintings, the rock burns.

Even the petrified form of matter burns.

Even stone burns. This was depicted by the Romantics: They dissolved the difference between animated and inanimate objects. At least Adalbert Stifter did. He

described objects, trees, stones as if they were living things. And he described human relations as if they were dead, as if they were stone. Stifter described the effortless transition from the inanimate to the animated. He declared the animated to be inanimate and the inanimate to be animated. That is the interesting thing about Stifter, he is, after all, no Biedermeier poet, as many think. He goes much deeper.

I also have this feeling with regard to your paintings: sand, ash, stone are life.

Yes, right. It is simply limited if you think only what lives is living. A stone also lives. I found that above all in Stifter. Therefore, Stifter has always fascinated me, in contrast to any opinion that he was a Biedermeier poet and unreadable. Stifter gave value to the things. That is what I understand by discovering mind in matter. I find this thought above all in Stifter. Insofar, you can say that Stifter was a Romantic in the philosophical sense, not in the Biedermeier sense.

As mentioned before in the context of the tea master and Zen monk Senno Rikyu, there are the aesthetics of the Wabi-Sabi in Japanese tradition and culture, aesthetics determined by the following central consideration: objects, like leaves, branches, etc. will, as it were, crystallize their ›nature‹, their actual substance at the transition to disintegration, at the threshold to putrefaction.

Yes, of course, matter dissolves, a stone dissolves, becomes sand, is carried to the sea, etc. This whole dissolution is essential to the things, everything is always dissolved. In dissolution, the actual nature shows. I am always fascinated by mountain ranges, by mountains of 6,000 metres height that dissolve into sand and are transported into the sea. That is fantastic.

You have a particular affinity to mountains in the Salzburg region.

The photographs you saw in the studio, I took them last year. I have always been fascinated by rocks. In Hans Henny Jahnn's trilogy of novels *Fluss ohne Ufer* (The Shoreless River), I think, there are passages



Anselm Kiefer, *Wülldied*, 1982
Oil, Acryl, Emulsion, Stroh und Blei auf Photographie auf Leinwand, 208 x 380 cm
Oil, acrylic, emulsion, straw and lead on photography on canvas, 81.89 x 149.61 inches

where the author describes over several pages a walk through a rock landscape. That is almost like in Stifter, who describes it differently. This passion that is aroused in Jahn for these rocks – as if they were alive. The rock paintings are new beginnings. In part, they have wings and fly away, or fire comes out of them.

In some paintings, the massif and the individual boulders are depicted at two levels. Below, the pieces of rock, and above ...

... the stock lying behind ...

... a picture of eternity ...

... which is no eternity ...

... which disintegrates ...

... permanent change ...

... which is why I thought you were influenced by Buddhist philosophy, since permanent change is its central idea.

I am certainly influenced by it. You reach that insight also by having lived long enough and having looked attentively long enough.

The inconstancy of things.

The constant change, of course. All my pictures are changing, too. They are not, like some other pictures, produced that well in a technical respect, mine are changing, there is always something falling down.

The falling of the ash could be observed very well in Grüber's staging of *Oedipus at Colonus*.

The idea of the ash was that everything takes place within dissolution.

And the human body, too, is caught by dissolution, it becomes thin like a layer dissolving and changing into another state, into another form. I find the transitions from one state of being into another central in your work.

I am concerned with the constant change of everything. It is most conspicuous in mountains, but a mountain being eroded and carried to the sea is a most banal appearance. Yet change exists also at completely different levels, in photons arriving from the sun, the rays of light which change into heat, the points of light, waves. It is impossible to understand certain atomic appearances and movements. You cannot grasp them, since they are always in flux. New insights may be gained in astrophysics, and above all in nuclear physics. In a particle accelerator, nothing solid can be photographed any longer. Nothing can be held. You can only indirectly reproduce what happens by the clash of two particles.

To give yourself over to the process of change – do you see your work in that way?

That is, as it were, my kind of mimesis. 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.

The conversation with Anselm Kiefer in his Paris studio was held by Klaus Dermutz, on April 10, 2008.

The foundation
of his being
is flux

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1 title of a German song to Mary 2 another German song to Mary 3 translated into English by Rev. H. F. Cary, M.A. (1772 – 1844) 4 figure in Schiller's poem ›Das verschleierte Bild zu Saiss‹



Maria 1978–2008

Öl, Emulsion, Acryl, Schellack, harzbeschichtete Farne auf Leinwand

330 x 190 cm

Oil, emulsion, acrylic, shellac, resin-coated ferns on canvas

129.92 x 74.8 inches



Maria Descendant le 3ème jour 1978–2008

*Öl, Emulsion, Acryl, Schellack auf Leinwand
280 x 190 cm*

*Oil, emulsion, acrylic, shellac on canvas
110.24 x 74.8 inches*



L'Ascension 1978–2008

Öl, Emulsion, Acryl, Schellack, harzbeschichtete Farne auf Leinwand
280 x 190 cm

Oil, emulsion, acrylic, shellac, resin-coated ferns on canvas
110.24 x 74.8 inches