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Interview with Anselm Kiefer

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Hexagram. Mixed media

With twilight beginning to fall on this little French village of Barjac, I begin my tour of Le Mas(ion) – 40 hectares of the former artist Anselm Kiefer's studio, now open to the public. Everything around me seemed the following day without the having managed to see all of the towers, over and underground tunnels, crypts in a permanent state of transformation, an amphitheatre and pathways planted with sculptures that make up the "Parsifal" installation, a place that is emotive for its grandeur, for its timeless space and for its mysterious angles.

Anselm Kiefer is one of the most relevant artists of today.

I come back from the amphitheatre extremely impressed. In fact, I am overwhelmed by everything. I will need a lot of time to assimilate it all.

The amphitheatre developed in the same way a painting does. I had a big wall where of the big paintings are, and I thought, why not have some big giants inside. So, we made some containers and we put them together to form a ship, we continued our flow after another and it worked just like a drawing, step by step.

Amphitheatre. Photo: Elena Cue

You were born in 1945 in the twilight of World War II.

I was born in the cellar of a hospital. That is where my mother gave birth to me and that same night our houses was bombed.

Your trips were ruins and bricks, which you have gone on to use in your work, both as materials and as concepts. Are you still drawn to these ruins?

Ruins are the most beautiful thing and because children do not judge, they just take them and play with them. They are the last piece and that is beginning. Sometimes I break down a tower, they disappear, I put a piece just to watch how it falls. It is beautiful to see a tower, from which the keystone has been removed, collapse. The keystone is the last piece, the most important piece, without it the tower falls. It is a very fine process. The feeling is comparable to that of starting an airplane. Full throttle is engaged. The airplane quivers with the power that wants to bring it forward while the brakes still hold it in place, the machine, getting loose and faster. Finally lifts itself into the air.

At a time when Germany was spiritually and materially devastated, what were the values you grew up with?

I had a very authoritarian education because my father was an officer. On one side there was the authoritarian education and on the other side, the other, that of my father who was also my teacher. My grandfather also instructed me. My father was a doctor who operated during the Third Reich and, in the center, you find my childhood love of painting and drawing.

You said that building Rome was something that related to reconciliation. Rome was experience and then the concept.

If you mean whether my work follows a thought out concept then the answer is of course. I always have a concept, otherwise I wouldn't be able to start. However, during the work and over the course of days, weeks or years, the concept changes. The concept is necessary but not important.

What do you feel when you look at La Ribauder?

I feel it is unfinished.

La Ribaude. Barjac. Anselm Kiefer. Photo: Elena Cue

What particular need led you to build something so unique in Barjac?

When I moved to France, my idea was to no longer have assistance from anybody. I didn't even others. I wanted to simplify my practice and to do everything on my own. I wanted to make easy light paintings that I could roll and take anywhere. I wanted to work by myself, without any assistance. It was like a cultural revolution, I was everything between a crazy painting and Gaudi's work.

Here architecture, paintings, sculptures, and even music concerts come together. Are you trying to recreate Wagner's concept of Total Work of Art?

I do not use the word "Gesamtkunstwerk" it has an uncomfortable connotation. I would rather speak of a "Gesamtwerk" and the most important is not the result but the experience, the non-thinking, that which does not come to an end.

In 2011, you designed the scenography for the opera Elektra at the Teatro Real in Madrid. Do you intent to collaborate on another project?

Yes, when the right piece, and a director with whom I share an aesthetic, come together. Klaus Michael Grüber, who I worked with, collaborated on Oedipus at Colonus at the Burgtheater in Vienna and Elektra in Naples, was for me a great match. He, unfortunately, passed away during pre-production.

You have said that in your childhood Karsten Harpel you became a philosopher. Do you think that a state of literature could be really created?

Literature is the beginning of philosophy. If you are active, you do not reflect. Heidegger has a lecture series on boredom. He says when you are invited to an event and it is a little bit boring, you become aware of the fact you are. It becomes clear what it is like.

Which philosophers do you identify with?

Rudolf Burkhas, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Martin Heidegger, Leibniz, Carl Schmitt, Gustav Radbruch, Feuerbach...

What is it that normally forces you to think and create?

I do not paint because the canvas is empty or because I have nothing else to do. I start painting when I have a lot of things in my head and I need to organize them. I need to make them clear. I need to do it. I can be a book experience with a person is enticing a movie piece or with a poem. Enlarge my that I am to concentrate but in reality I am the one who is constantly overwhelmed. That is what happens when I start to work. If you are not feeling overwhelmed, why are you alive? We are here to be overwhelmed otherwise, there is no reason to be.

Where does your inspiration come from?

If you ask writers, they will tell you that all the material they have comes from their childhood. The same is true for me.

You said that you have always been drawn to the impossible. How many times have you tried to paint the impossible?

Very often, I am attracted to the impossible. You can only dream of it and try it. The word achievement is difficult because it is always a process. I could never say something is an achievement. It is only in our heads.

Your work is full of mythological references from Germany, Ancient Greece, Norse Sagas and Kabbalah, among others. Have you found an element of unity between them?

Yes, all mythology is connected. For example, the Norse legend of Parsifal and the Grail. Who was accused by the king and could not escape. That same legend exists in Egypt and Northern Germany. You can find connections in all of mythology.

You have been labeled as one of the biggest representatives of neo-expressionism. What does this artistic style provide that others do not?

I am fundamentally against style.

La Ribaude. Barjac. Anselm Kiefer. Photo: Elena Cue

What motivated you to include figurative objects such as submarines, sunflowers, tulips, etc. in your work? Why did you begin to combine painting and sculpture?

It is a question of variety. When I introduce an object, I do it because any additional illusion. What I make is what it is. Sometimes I want to be direct. Objects have their own symbolism.

Why did you choose painting instead of writing?

I cannot say that it was a conscious decision. It came to me this way. Throughout my career I have always had moments when I thought about writing a book. I have a lot of book concepts in my diary but I cannot say I have decided on one.

Then, is it a balance between writing and painting?

Yes, but it is not writing, it is rather experimenting with oneself. I do not write fiction or poetry. Poetry is something different, you arrange the words in a certain combination that has never been seen before.

What about painting?

It is innovation or self.

Do you reflect yourself better through painting than through writing?

Writing helps us analyze what we have done. Besides, it is a form of self-assessment.

Do you ask yourself if you are satisfied?

All the time.

How do you feel when you read your own work?

My writings are for me a way to remember. The now arises from memory.

And when you look at your paintings in retrospect?

Exactly the Paul Valery, sometimes I think they are marvelous, at other times they make me feel desperate.

La Ribaude. Barjac. Anselm Kiefer. Photo: Elena Cue

You have said that art is closed to the public. Could you explain this concept?

Art is never closer to the truth. It is truth.

Do you think that through art you are able to express who you really are?

I am not important. I am sometimes me and then many others.

The Holocaust is very significant in your work. It is depicted through a wide range of symbolism. What is your objective with the representation of the darkest moment in your country's history?

When I was growing up, the Holocaust did not exist. No one spoke about it in the 60s. I felt that there was something hidden. By accident I got a disc with the voices of Hitler, Goebbels and Goering. It was made by the Allies and it was very, very frightening. I was so impressed by Hitler that I began to study. I wanted to know what it was all about.

Was it necessity or curiosity that prompted you to investigate it further?

It was necessity. When you begin to study what happened during those times it is so horrible that it is hard to imagine. Only in 1979 Germany did Shaly Israel (an Israeli) exactly what had happened during the Holocaust. Even after the Germans have been good at revealing it. The French are still hiding a lot of it. At the time, Australia wanted no relation with anything German. An Austrian journalist complained that he was a Jew and he was not allowed to write about the Holocaust. Nobody was interested in it. Nobody wanted to hear it. It was a taboo. It carried on for a generation. It turned out they all wanted it already. They were even more efficient and accurate with their Jewish lists than the Germans. The French forcefully went about the Holocaust. Nobody in Germany wanted to discuss it. I never believed that there was a point zero. Democracy was brought by the Americans.

During the keynote address of your lecture series at the College de France, you said that you learned most about art through reading The Thief's Journal by Jean Genet. Could you explain why?

I was so overwhelmed by his writing. He literally turned everything upside down. He would take the most honorable things and turn its and kick it deep in the sewage, which the most horrible thing. For example, to kill someone, he considered a piece of art. He turned everything upside down and this was fantastic to me.

You said, "The alchemy of transforming the object into art is the true magic". Why are you so attracted to alchemy?

Alchemy is the first step to science, chemistry and physics. It is the teaching of transmutation. It is also a spiritual movement. People always say that alchemists try to turn lead into gold but the real alchemists do not do that. It is a process to transform yourself on another level. Alchemists are the first natural scientists.

La Ribaude. Barjac. Anselm Kiefer. Photo: Elena Cue

You were photographed dressed as a woman for the work Jean Genet. You depicted women in: Les Femmes de la Révolution Française, Les Reines de France, Les Femmes de L'Antiquité, Les Magicienne y Shulamith. What do women represent in your work?

I also paint overwhelming women and I think they are more connected with the roots of earth. They are more powerful than men.

You say that art should be subversive and disturbing. What do you think about the relationship between art and society?

I am going to refer to Jean Genet again. He is subversive because he preaches that stealing and killing are the best things that you have to become a traitor. Art can never be neutral. Art cannot be a judgement of the contemporary society. Contemporary society is not good. It is not. It is a society where there are those that pay one hundred million dollars for a work of art and a great photographer you have to be rich and have shows. It is all connected with certain times. Artist should not be connected with a specific moral behavior.

You have spoken extensively about the artist being a destroyer and a creator. It is key in your work. Could you elaborate on this concept?

The artist is an iconoclast, he or she destroys all the time. There is an anti and anti-art. If the artist is not an iconoclast, he or she is not an artist. I am not a painter. I am an artist and I am. I destroy what I do all the time. Then I put the destroyed pieces in containers and wait for the inspiration.

The idea of infinity is implicit in your work and provokes a sense of the sublime. Do you think it is?

Etchedself in his poem, lands his soul out in the world and then it comes back to him. It is a never-ending process. The Kabbalah says that God created the world by withdrawing himself. He withdrew himself into a globe as a sphere, a kind of a sphere that gives immunity. Before you are born, you share a sphere with your mother, you are connected in the womb. This is the first sphere. Then the sphere gets wider as you head more and more people. The romantic sphere is endless. It goes to the infinite and comes back.

The Women Of The Revolution. Anselm Kiefer. Photo: Elena Cue

The landscape with your figure in the middle of the Los Hermanos de la Revolucion room reminds me of Friedrich's landscapes and the concept of the sublime. Do you look for the sublime?

It is not really my world. Who invented the word sublime?

The first to say that term was a Greek from the Hellenistic era. It was a rhetorical term at the beginning of our time, and among others Kant also wrote a book about the beauty and the sublime.

There is a wonderful quote by Kant: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me."

Are there things that have come to the surface through your work that you would have preferred to keep hidden?

No. There is so much that is hidden. You can break as much as you want and still never get to the center.

What is your opinion of the film Documenta and Nazi Degenerate art.

I looked through all the Nazi paintings and architecture and did not find a decent painting. I studied them all. I thought that there might be something hidden but they were all nonsense. However, architecture was different. It was not fake architecture yet as it was the architecture of the time because it was constructed with the materials of the time. Architecture is a combination of art and science. Nazi Germany was a lunatic asylum of architecture so fast. For example, they was architecture should not overwhelm people. But why not? We are overwhelmed all the time, look at the stars, for instance. An architect must show this. I like Karl Marx Allee in Berlin.

Library. Anselm Kiefer. Photo: Elena Cue

What is your relationship to books? What significance do books have in your life and work?

Books I have made represent only percent of my work. I still have most of my earlier books as they were never really for sale.

And in relation to painting?

A painting is different from a book because you can stand in front of it and take an impression of something. When reading a book, you turn the pages. It is connected to time. I like to write books because I can carry them with me everywhere. I can read them in the train, in the car, in the plane. I can read them when I have a hundred different possibilities to devote from. For instance, when Picasso was stuck during the creative process he used to tell his wife, Francoise Gilot, to copy his painting as he came up with a different outcome. When you are painting you always have to make decisions. As you make a choice to go a certain way, you give up a hundred other possibilities.

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Anselm Kiefer with Elena Cué. Photo: Waltraud Forelli

(Introduction translated from the Spanish by Shauna Devlin)

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