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## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### History repeating: Anselm Kiefer goes back to the Beginning

Part art installation, part opera, the artist's new project puts the Bible on stage. He explains to Adrian Searle why it holds lessons for us all

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Theatre of miseries ... Anselm Kiefer on stage with the cast. Photograph: Charles Duprat/Opera National de Paris

The 20th anniversary of the Opéra Bastille in Paris is marked by a spectacle of ruins: dust, more dust and the tottering towers of a city in a grey desert. In the Beginning, which premiered earlier this week, is directed and devised by the artist Anselm Kiefer, working in collaboration with the composer and clarinetist Jörg Widmann.

The music rustles like dry leaves, rattles like a bag of bones. There are parched yelps, like jackals among the ruins, and crescendos and musical crises that seem to interrupt nothing at all. The atmosphere is restrained, yet full of portent. There is no singing, only declamatory recitations from the Bible, the occasional muffled wail, some low-key humming. Verses from Isaiah and Jeremiah are spoken by a disembodied voice, as if one were hearing in one's head. It is hard to tell if the recitations are being spoken by Lilith, the first wife of Adam, played by Geneviève Motard, or by Shekhinah, Geneviève Boivin, who Kiefer uses as a representation of the wandering holy people of the diaspora.

The words hang in the air, along with the dust. There is no plot, only lamentation after lamentation. "Even the carcasses of men shall fall as refuse on the open field, like cuttings after the harvester, and no one shall gather them," a voice says. There are images of broken vessels, of a world in ruins, of rivers turned foul, and of things that cannot be made whole again. These are desolate, homeless prophecies that might make men stop up their ears and drive them mad. As Kiefer wrote to Widmann when they were preparing this theatre of miseries, a letter that appears in the book accompanying the work, "everything has already occurred at the beginning, because the beginning is the end". In the Beginning feels like the end of the world.

"I am against the idea of the end, that everything culminates in paradise or judgement," Kiefer told me when we met in his studio in Le Marais the morning after the premiere. "The communists in East Germany also thought history would one day come to an end." History is cyclical, he suggests, "but we need some illusions to survive". He is planning a move to Portugal, where he can work with the sea on one side, a dying forest on the other. "It's the kind of situation that interests me," he says.

Born in 1945 and brought up a Catholic, Kiefer has never been afraid of big subjects or complex allusions. He has plenty of serious discussions when he's at work, he says, most of them with dead poets – many of whose words find their way into his paintings –

Friedrich Hölderlin, Paul Celan, Goethe. "I ask them what they think of what I'm doing. Mostly it's not very complimentary," he laughs.

Outside in the courtyard, huge paintings hang in the open air, exposed to the weather. There are seas, rocks, wings, churned terrains, the kind of things the artist has been painting for more than 30 years. The courtyard is also populated by freestanding white plaster dresses. One has a stack of bricks for a head, another sprouts thorns from her décolletage, another is wrapped in rusting razor wire. One is called Katarina, another Phryne. The names are scribbled on the stone walls. There are never any figures in Kiefer's paintings, though names are frequently written on their heaving surfaces. His work is full of allusions.

The Bastille project has allowed Kiefer, for once, to work with the living. He was first invited to do something for the opera house three years ago, but things only got off the ground when he teamed up with Widmann. Kiefer built a scale model of his set, and Widman came and played his clarinet. "I told them, I can only do this if you give me the whole of the Bastille, not just the stage," Kiefer says. Parts of the set are only barely visible from some parts of the theatre.

It is hard to know what to call *In the Beginning* – installation, theatre, tableau vivant? It opens with a map of the fertile crescent on a drop curtain: Egypt and Palestine, Anatolia, the Euphrates and the Tigris, arcing from north Africa to Iran. This is the region where the three Abrahamic religions were formed and divided, the so-called cradle of civilisation. And as much as we are in Nineveh or Jericho, we are also among the ruins of Baghdad and the destroyed German cities at the end of the second world war, what Kiefer describes as the last nano-layer of an interminable heap of ruins.

As an installation, we can only see this huge set from the auditorium, but it goes on and on, receding into endless gloom. The rear wall of the stage has been removed, and Kiefer's desolate landscape of towers continues right through the rehearsal studio beyond. Far away, Shekhinah wanders between the buildings, picked out by scant light. She listens at windows, passes through doorways. She appears far too small and

distant to even be inside the building, and is the most memorable image in the whole production. "The woman who is running between the ruins is a representation of the holy people going through the world in the diaspora. I wanted her to come from very far away," Kiefer explains. He sees the theatre, like his paintings, as a kind of threshold.

Also on stage is Lilith, first wife of Adam, and a group of women who spend most of the performance breaking stones and cleaning bricks in the rubble. This is Kiefer's depiction of the Trümmerfrauen, who cleared the stones of Germany's destroyed cities so that they might be used again. The noise of the group of women chipping away is both dry and liquid, deathly and weirdly comforting. It is hard to know where the noise of their labours ends, and where Widmann's percussion begins. "Twelve millennia of bricks are piled up here," reads the libretto. The women belong to no time and all times, but they have an acute sense of history. "They remember Bomber Harris," he jokes.

But the scene is not intended to be as grey or empty as it appears, says Kiefer. He sees the desert as an image for fertility; even the ash that falls is fertile. His own upbringing in postwar Germany, with its petit-bourgeois Catholic values, was a desert of sorts, he says, and explains that when he had a studio in the south of France, he was also in a desert. Maybe Paris is a desert, too – a desert in his head. Kiefer has a fondness for metaphors, something that makes itself felt in the geological crusts of his paintings. "Sometimes", he announces, "I think people are like stones. When we look for life on Mars we might not recognise it when we find it." He discussed these ideas a lot with Joseph Beuys, he tells me. Beuys was Kiefer's teacher, someone whom Kiefer regards as the most important postwar German artist. But they disagreed on some things. "Beuys thought mankind was the crown of creation," he says. "I don't."

What is evident from the performance is that Kiefer is not used to directing. "Having live people is a big challenge, it's impossible," he says. "But then, everything is impossible." Kiefer is still working on the production. "I want to do more craziness," he says. "Prophets are crazy people." The presence of the living on Kiefer's set, it has to be said, is at times little more than picturesque. He tells me he wants Lilith to roll and squirm in

the dust with greater abandon towards the end, when she smashes the few courses of bricks the Trümmerfrauen have managed to pile together. At present, however, this conclusion to the hour and half-long performance is too abrupt. Admittedly the actors have a lot to compete with: a rain of lead that plummets from the sky, clouds of ash, an autumnal drift of gold leaf, falling like manna from heaven. Ash falls through a doorway, covering Lilith where she rests. Maybe this is too much like Beckett in *Happy Days*, Kiefer wonders. Nevertheless, all these interruptions are astonishing, random acts that even the Bible can't explain.

Kiefer, who has a large show coming to White Cube this autumn, would like to bring *In the Beginning* to Britain. An admirer of Derek Jarman's films, he says he'd like to work with Tilda Swinton. Where could he possibly stage this huge production? He jokingly suggests Piccadilly Circus. I say the O2 might be just about big enough, though somehow it doesn't have the right atmosphere. I can't see it at Glyndebourne. In any case, it is not so much a question of what space *In the Beginning* could fill, as what fills *In the Beginning*: it brims over with desolation and the words of a vengeful god. It is assuaged by Widmann's ravishing music, which lingered with me as the greatest discovery of this complex, magnificently flawed work.