

GAGOSIAN

The New York Times Magazine

Into the Black Forest With the Greatest Living Artist

How does Anselm Kiefer conjure such brutal beauty, such overwhelming gravity? To find out, the novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard followed him back to the source.

Karl Ove Knausgaard



Anselm Kiefer at La Ribaute, his property in southern France. Credit...Paolo Pellegrin/Magnum, for The New York Times

There are some people who are famous in such a way that you would never expect to meet them, as if they existed in another world. This is true of actors, singers and politicians, whose faces are everywhere around us, while they themselves are always somewhere else. It is also true of artists, but in a different way: It is not their faces that are everywhere, but their work — and radiating from the work, their names.

Anselm Kiefer has always been such a name for me — more so than any other artist of our time, perhaps — because his works are so monumental, so charged with time, so burdened by history, and because the private sphere, the near and the personal, is so completely absent from them.

When I became interested in his work in my late teens, Kiefer was already one of the biggest names in contemporary art. Back then, in the 1980s, all art was ironic, at least in my own circles.

Everything, including authenticity, was seen as a construct. Crying over a book, a movie or painting meant that you had been tricked. Instead, we laughed. But it was impossible to laugh in front of Kiefer's dark, searing images of Nazi buildings or his lead-book libraries. No, standing in front of Kiefer's pictures, you fell silent.

Today Kiefer has long since been canonized, and his name has become a kind of trademark. If anyone is truly provoked by his work these days, it is by its price tag. And it's easy to find critical voices: There are plenty who say his art is that of a megalomaniac, that it consists of grand gestures and little else, that it is hollow and empty and perhaps not art at all but kitsch.

But if his name has changed meaning over the years and if his art is judged differently, the work itself has the same effect now that it did 30 years ago: Standing before it, you fall silent.

I experienced this in a fairly acute way at a Kiefer retrospective in London in 2014. Looking at one of his monumental paintings — “Black Flakes,” nearly 20 feet long and 10 feet tall, depicting a snow-covered field beneath an ashen sky, dark and apocalyptic, with rows of branches surrounding a thick book made of lead — all my thoughts seemed to be suspended, and only emotions remained. It wasn't as if I was looking at a painting; the painting was enveloping me and filling me with its mood, which was impossible to escape. Everyone else who came into the room fell silent, too, as if they had suddenly been transported to another place within themselves. Kiefer's pictures seemed to align with a gravity that we all knew but rarely acknowledged, a gravity that is solemn at times, horrifying at others.

How could a landscape evoke such feelings?

The question of who made these pictures was simply irrelevant. “Kiefer” was just an indication of the place of manufacture; it did not represent a person with individual characteristics. But toward the end of the exhibition, I saw some books lying in glass cases, their pages open to watercolors of buildings, seascapes and women in ecstatic poses. The pictures had been painted with an unusually light and confident hand; they were brimming with color — sparkling blues and brilliant reds — and radiated joy and vitality. When I looked at them, the feeling of being near someone, a particular person, was as overwhelming as the absence of anything personal had been throughout the rest of the exhibition.

I suddenly realized that Anselm Kiefer actually existed. And seeing him at eye level, fixed in that particular moment, after all the darkness, all the silence and all the existential weight, sparked an equally sudden and unexpected thought.

I'll write to him!

I'll ask him for some watercolors to use in my next book!

The thought was so stupid that I blushed, but it wouldn't let go of me, and a few weeks later I wrote him a letter. It was almost as if I covered my eyes with one hand while the fingers of the other darted across the keyboard.

Dear Anselm Kiefer ...

It was like sending a letter into a black hole: no reply. I contacted agents, gallerists and artists, asking for their help. Nothing happened. Then, six months later, in early 2015, everything happened at once. I received a file with lots of pictures to choose from for my book, all watercolors, followed by an invitation to have lunch with Kiefer and look at some more pictures.

One morning the following spring, I stepped out of a car in front of a huge warehouse in an industrial area just outside of Paris. Two fighter planes were standing nearby, strangely out of place in the otherwise empty parking lot. Kiefer's studio director, a trim, well-dressed and friendly woman named Waltraud Forelli, locked the car with a push of the remote and smiled at me.

"We go in over here," she said.

We went through the warehouse door and entered the reception area.

"Anselm is working right now," she said. "I thought I could show you around for the time being. Then you meet for lunch. Is that O.K.?"

"That's great," I said, following her into Kiefer's studio itself, which opened up like a canyon before us.

I had never seen anything like it. The hangar-like space was gigantic and filled to the brim with art. It was like a world inside the world. Huge metal slabs were leaning against the walls. Helter-skelter around them, on racks with wheels, stood large paintings of oceans and beaches, rivers and meadows, mountains and forests, some covered with corroded ravines of lead. Vitrines in every size were standing everywhere, filled with the strangest things: the roots of trees, rusty hammers, little clay pigs. Shelves that ran the length of the hall were stacked with balance scales, hooks, rifles, stoves, snakes, torpedoes, piles of bricks, heaps of dried flowers, even whole trees. There were more full-size fighter jets and a cage that was maybe 300 square feet that was filled with golden wheat and what appeared to be the cooling tower of a nuclear power plant with a bicycle dangling down the side.

It was as if our whole culture surged through this hall, raw and wild, like its subconscious. Could all this really come from one person? Who was this man?

All I knew were the biographical facts: that Kiefer was born in Donaueschingen, near the Black Forest, in 1945, grew up in Ottersdorf on the Rhine, attended the University of Freiburg and the Academy of Fine Arts in Karlsruhe, where he also kept his first studio — all places that lie within 75 miles of one another in western Germany. And all of them places with the landscapes Kiefer has painted over and over again: forest, river, plains. But this of course didn't explain anything about what was going on around me in the studio.

We had almost reached the back of the hall when I noticed a movement behind us. I turned around and saw a man dressed in blue pants and a white shirt cycling through the hall.

It had to be Kiefer.

He curved around in a small loop and stopped in front of us, one foot resting on the floor, the other on a pedal. He looked much younger than his 71 years. He was bald, except on the sides,

where his hair was shaved and had just begun to grow out again. He wore plain, round glasses and a few days of stubble.

“Aha, a Viking!” he shouted and gave a chuckle.

I said it was an honor to meet him. He waved it off and said something to Forelli in German, turned to me and, speaking English, said that we would soon be seeing each other for lunch. Then he sat down on his bicycle and rode off.



Kiefer at the studio in front of “For Paul Celan, Stalks of the Night.” © Paolo Pellegrin/Magnum, for The New York Times

It turned out that Kiefer actually lived in the studio. At one end of the main work space, a staircase led up to a mezzanine. The first three rooms, which were large and painted white, were workshops. Inside there was a strong smell of paint. All the walls were covered with enormous, colorful riverscapes that appeared to be works in progress.

When Forelli and I entered the innermost workshop, I realized that it also served as a dining room. A long table in the middle was set for three people. It looked strange, as if someone had planned an elegant meal in an auto-repair shop.

Kiefer was sitting on a sofa in the corner. He had changed and was now wearing a white shirt and white pants. With his shaved head, he could have passed for a cult leader. But something about his appearance counteracted the impression. A kind of sobriety reminiscent of an engineer. And a restless, boyish posture.

As soon as he saw me, he started talking about artists who had been bad fathers. He spoke with great ease, as if we were intimate friends who had discussed the topic many times. I smiled politely and nodded while feverishly trying to get my bearings. What was the connection? Was it because I had written about being a father? Did he himself have a bad conscience as a father? Or was there another reference I hadn't picked up on?

The whole situation was unclear. I wasn't there to interview him, and we didn't know each other — I wasn't even sure if he knew who I was.

Leaning back, his arms out to the sides, he talked about how Picasso had failed as a father. He looked down as he talked, occasionally throwing quick glances in my direction.

“How many children do you have?” he suddenly asked.

“I have four,” I said.

“Oh! I have five! Hee hee hee!”

He laughed or chuckled after nearly every sentence, regardless of whether it was meant as a joke or in earnest. He was obviously gregarious and engaged. But his eyes were withdrawn, more sentries than scouts.

“Have you seen these?” Forelli said.

She picked up a small volume of watercolors lying on the table. “*Ich bin der ich bin,*” it read on the cover, above a painted meadow with intensely colorful flowers.

She handed it to me, and I started browsing.

“You can use these pictures, too, if you like them,” she said.

“That's incredibly generous of you,” I said.

“*Ich bin der ich bin,*” Kiefer said. I am that I am. “It was what God said to Moses when he asked for God's name. It is a. . . What is it called again? That word?”

“I don't remember,” I said. “But I know what you mean.”

He reached for a phone.

“I'll call a friend,” he said. “He is a university professor and should know.”

“Hello?” he said and explained the situation.

“*Tautology!* Of course! Thank you!”

He hung up the phone.

“It is a tautology,” he said.

Shortly after we sat down for lunch, the cook brought in the food and wine, and Kiefer began to talk about flying, which he loved. He always took a helicopter whenever he was going anywhere, he said. It was the simplest option.

“One of the pilots I used the most died later, by the way,” he said. “In an accident in the Alps. They crashed when they were carrying timber over there.”

For a few seconds we continued to eat in silence.

“Do you have a helicopter?” he said and looked at me.

“No, unfortunately,” I said.

“You should get one!” he said.

“You have to come along some time,” Forelli said.

“You can bring your children!” Kiefer said.

“Yes, I’d love to,” I said. “But my second oldest, Heidi, is pretty scared of flying. So a helicopter is probably not her kind of thing.”

Kiefer nodded. “There is an old German song about Heidi. How does it go again? Waltraud?”

When she shook her head, Kiefer took out his phone and called the university professor once again. He turned on the telephone’s speaker, and the university professor began to sing a song about Heidi for us. The voice on the telephone, grainy and crackling, rose up from the tabletop while Kiefer was smiling and laughing and humming along a little.

“Thank you,” he said when the song was over, and ended the call. “Ha ha ha!”



A watercolor from Kiefer’s book “Ich bin der ich bin” (I Am that I Am), from 2015. © Anselm Kiefer, private collection. Photograph by Charles Duprat.

The meeting with Kiefer puzzled me. How could that man, with those particular personality traits, create all these works with their overwhelming gravity and brutal beauty? I couldn’t see any traces of him in them. At the same time there was a sentence I couldn’t get out of my head. It was just the fragment of an idea for a project, from his published notebooks: *A way to hide something by expanding internal space.*

A way to hide something? Was that what it was about? And if so, what was he hiding?

I decided to try to write an article about him. And the following winter, now with an assignment to write a profile of Kiefer and my book with his watercolors published, I went back to his studio.

This time Forelli didn't take me through the main space, but right to where the works were produced, another gigantic hall, freezing in the December morning. Two men wearing respirators stood near a wall, pointing blow torches at barrels. They were melting lead, she explained.

Kiefer, dressed in a white bathrobe, welcomed us upstairs in his personal quarters. He and Forelli had returned from a trip to New York and Miami the day before, he explained, and he was jet-lagged.

After we settled in, I asked him about the notebook fragment. "You said something in your notebook — I don't remember exactly what, but it was something in line with 'like an extension of the interior that you can hide in' — and I thought maybe that could be true for all of your paintings?"

"Hide what?" Kiefer asked.

I leafed through my notes and found the quote.

"'A way to hide something by expanding internal space,' is what you wrote."

"I wrote this? You wrote it?" Kiefer said.

"You wrote it. I quoted it. It is from your notebook."

"Ha ha ha ha! Sometimes I'm surprised by what I wrote. Sometimes I think, Oh, it's me? It is very interesting. I wrote about a very difficult time in the '80s, which of course was with my first wife. By accident I read this when I met my new girlfriend. And it was very helpful. So I made a decision that was better!"

There was a pause.

Forelli turned to Kiefer.

"Can I get one of your notebooks to show to —"

"Yeah, yeah," he said. "We have to show Klaus."

Klaus?

Didn't he know my name?

Forelli walked into the adjacent room where notebooks and diaries from Kiefer's entire life stood on a shelf and came back with two notebooks in her hand.

“I just randomly took them out,” she said. “This is the last one on the shelf, and this is the first one.”

“Oh, I was really young,” Kiefer said. “That was in 1969. I was 21.”

You would have turned 24 in 1969, I thought, but I didn’t say anything, and instead began to leaf through the book. I saw some sketches that looked like copies of Renaissance works.

“What were you doing then? Were you studying art?”

“No, no. In 1966 I started to study law in Freiburg, at the university. I always thought I was an artist. But I had a complex. I thought, I don’t need art school. I thought, I am a genius.”

“Really? You thought you were a genius when you were 21?”

“Yes. In one of these books I wrote once, ‘I’m the greatest painter, and there’s no doubt.’ Heh heh heh heh! Today I wouldn’t say that, it is complete nonsense. What is ‘the best’? But in those days, I believed it. I wrote it down like a law case, you know? That there’s no doubt, I am the best.”

Around noon, Forelli reminded Kiefer that the workers were melting the lead downstairs.

“Let’s pour some lead, then” Kiefer said. He looked at me. “Do you want to see that?”

“I would love to see that,” I said.

“Ah, good, good. It is a big action always. Before, I did it all myself, you know,” he said. “I poured it myself. And it was so dangerous. Once I was covered with lead, it was in summertime, I had only shorts, and then the handle broke. Then the lead was going down and gluing to my skin. I have a lot of hair, and I had to take it away like this. ...”

With his hand he showed me how he had removed the lead from his legs.

“Because it was a shock, you know, you have no pain. Then I put myself in white linen — it was the best thing to do, the doctor told me that — and, heh heh heh, then there was after some days a crust. The problem was that the blood didn’t circulate so well, because the crust was so hard. It was a problem for months. But I survived. I have a brother, you know, and he is a doctor. He said: ‘You should have died. From all the lead..’”

“What is it you like so much about lead?” I said.

“I like it because it was the material of alchemists. And then it’s toxic! I like this. I like this poison thing. Because it has an edge. You know in the Black Forest, there is one mushroom, Knollenblätterpilz. If you eat only a little bit, you die. I collected them because I got 25 Deutsche marks for one mushroom, for medicine. Once I had this mushroom and other mushrooms in one basket. And then a man who knows it said to me: ‘Throw out everything in the basket..’”

He looked at Forelli.

“But we don’t know Knollenblätterpilz in Finnish, no?”

Finnish? Did he also think I came from Finland now?

Forelli searched for the name on Kiefer’s phone: Death cap.

“Anyway,” Kiefer said. “I like this dangerous stuff.”



Works in progress at Anselm Kiefer’s studio in Croissy-Beaubourg outside Paris. © Paolo Pellegrin/Magnum, for The New York Times

About an hour later, Kiefer and his assistants laid out a large canvas on the floor of the icy-cold hall while Forelli and I stood by and watched.

The painting, about 12 feet long and six feet wide, depicted a forest at the far end of a snow-covered field. No people, no animals, no sky. Just the field and the trees.

Kiefer dipped a brush into a large bucket filled with a sticky brown substance and began applying it along the edge of the canvas with long sweeping motions.

A broad column of light from the low winter sun outside slanted through the hall.

“But it’s so beautiful,” I said. “Why would you pour lead over it?”

“All artists are iconoclasts,” Kiefer said and laughed.

I would have given my right arm to make such a picture. Even though it was simple, it captured more than the information about trees, snow and soil. Something opened up within me when I looked at it.

From the other end of the hall, a hydraulic crane with a forklift attachment came rumbling toward us. The assistants had clamped one of the rusty barrels full of now-molten lead to the forks. Kiefer, who seemed to be in constant movement, even when sitting down, reached for the end of a long rope attached to the barrel. As he pulled on it, the barrel tipped and a thick, shiny,

cylindrical stream of lead poured across the edge and hit the canvas with a little splash, then began to flow slowly across the painting. The air in front of us was soon filled with smoke. The paint, so thick that in some places it resembled tree bark, bubbled and hissed as the lead spilled into the pits and crevices and filled them, solidifying into various mineral patterns.

Kiefer grabbed a hose and began to spray the picture to cool it down, causing waves of steam to surge up. When he was finished and had turned off the water, the picture remained lying on the floor, smoldering as if in the aftermath of a disaster.

The smell of lead, which was new to me, was overwhelming.

Three of Kiefer's assistants lowered a wooden plate onto the painting, screwed it down and tilted the entire assemblage upright with the hydraulic crane. The painting was now completely obscured.

Kiefer lit a cigar and walked over to me.

He grinned.

“Are you ready for the next one?”

Kiefer poured lead over three paintings that day, and each of them was completely distinct, although the starting point for all of them had been similar. The third picture, of waves in the sea, he worked on the most. After bending up slivers of lead so it seemed almost as if the sea emerged from the picture, Kiefer got onto a scissor lift. He ascended high up into the air, some 20 feet above the ground, and from there directed the workers beneath him, who lowered the picture to the floor and began to modify it according to his instructions, which he called out in German.

Pouring lead across a painting clearly introduced an element of chance. Kiefer had his own ideas, but the inherent properties of the materials provided the starting point; he had to fight the material, and the fight — idea versus matter — became the art. Many of the resulting works give a wild and agitated impression; there is something violent about them, something chaotic. But their violence lies outside the human domain, even outside biology; it belongs to the mineral world. It is the violence of stone rubble and metal heaps. He pushes the representation of materiality further toward the material itself, until representation is suspended altogether and he is no longer painting ash, straw or wood but incorporating ash, straw and wood directly into the painting.

At that point, it is as if the world itself has become a language. We read ash, we read straw, we read wood, and they are charged with meaning. The meaning of ash, for example, does not end with its soft and leaden appearance, but carries through precisely to its properties — ash levels all differences, ash makes everything the same: The ash from a rococo desk is indistinguishable from the ash from an ordinary cigarette — and continues into history. The Old Testament provides specific instructions on how to dispose of the ashes from a burned offering, and for the generation of my grandparents who grew up in the 1920s, the associations with ash may have ended there. But we who live now, a hundred years later, have seen history change, and the most significant meaning of ash, at least when it appears in a work of art, is the extermination of the Jews.

None of this lies within the ash itself; it lies within us. It is we who give meaning to things, and on that basis create the world. We believe that we live in a fixed reality, a world in which culture is fluid and nature is rigid or in which the present is fluid and history rigid, but that is an illusion.



Kiefer at La Ribaute. © Paolo Pellegrin/Magnum, for The New York Times

Kiefer withdrew, and I was allowed to walk around the studio, alone among the innumerable objects and works of art. What he left of himself in them seemed to be the wrong question to put to this art largely devoid of human beings. At the same time, there was a strong sense of presence in his work. Where could that possibly come from, if not from him and his self?

That morning in the studio, I asked him if he remembered the first work of art that really attracted him. He said that his father painted copies of works by Bruegel, Pinturicchio and others and hung them around the house. His father wasn't yet a working artist; after the war, he was a teacher's assistant.

"He was nothing," Kiefer had said. "He couldn't study because he was an officer in the war. Not that he was involved in any crimes. Then he had to earn some money, because I was there, and then he developed new learning methods. He was on TV a little bit, and he got known by my drawings — he collected what I painted when I was 3, 4, 5 years old, and with this, he made a theory, and he got a professorship in Frankfurt. Today it's no longer possible to become a professor without studying. But he did. Because his wife was very ambitious."

"On his behalf?"

"My mother pushed him to get a title. Heh heh heh."

"And how was your relationship with your father?" I said.

"Bad. I wanted him to die."

"Why?"

“He was an authoritarian. It was really horrible. And my mother told me always that he was the second choice. I had another one, she said. Who was much better, but he was Protestant. She couldn’t marry him. In those times it was still very strict.”

He looked at me.

“It’s not good to tell this to the children, no?” he said.

“No,” I said.

“She reduced my father to nothing. It was a kind of an Oedipal situation, you know. But I hated it at home. I hated it. Because it was also small, it was a little room no bigger than a toilet where I lived with my brother and my sister. It was not good. I always thought, One day I will have more space.”

“Was painting a way out of this for you?”

“When I was really young, a small boy, I lived in Donaueschingen, and there was a castle. It belonged to the Donaueschingen Fürsten. I went to the park with my grandfather and saw the castle. I thought that the best thing is to be an aristocrat. They don’t work, and they are born with it all. And I thought to be an artist is like to be an aristocrat. Not like ... no, no, no. It is to be out of the classification. And I like to be out of any classification.”

He certainly got his space in the end, I thought wandering around in the enormous, freezing-cold hall. On the long shelf that I followed, a series of black boxes caught my attention. Dioramas cut out of cardboard or paper had been built inside of them, and all of them showed deep, black, snow-covered forests. In one of them hung a photograph of a girl with her eyes closed, looking as if she were dead. In another, a man was running into the forest. Black forest, white snow, night. In a third, a bride and groom were on display. In a fourth, a man had been hanged with his neck bent, half-hidden behind a snow-covered spruce tree. In a fifth, a woman stood wearing an old-fashioned national costume. In a sixth someone was going to a dance. All of it in the forest, all of it in the dark, all of it covered with snow.

I stood in front of them, mesmerized.

The Black Forest.

When I lifted my eyes and looked around me, I suddenly saw forest everywhere: tree roots hanging from the ceiling; back-to-back paintings of tree trunks; a tree lying on the floor with its roots, crown and all; an installation with a bed in front of a painting of a forest in the snow; another painting of a forest in the snow with a female figure hanging upside down with her face distorted in pain or rapture.

He seemed obsessed with trees and forests and has returned to them in his art again and again. I initially thought it was the forest of dark myth and history that he had painted, the one Goldilocks and Little Red Riding Hood traversed in the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, and where Germanic tribes vanquished the Romans, the one that the Nazis extolled as an exemplar of German purity.

But it had not struck me before that this was Kiefer's own forest, too, the place he came from, where he grew up with grandparents and aunts, uncles and cousins. What kind of place was it? And how, if at all, had it shaped him?



Kiefer's work "Varus," from 1976. ©Anselm Kiefer, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Netherlands. Photograph by Jochen Littkemann.

I kept meeting Kiefer, first in Copenhagen, where he opened an exhibition, then at a dinner in New York where he and the Peruvian author Mario Vargas Llosa were each being presented with an award. In Copenhagen he shouted "Knausgaard!" when he caught sight of me and came over and embraced me, kissing first one, then the other cheek, as if I were a long-lost friend or prodigal son. In New York, he spotted me and my wife, Michal, in the reception room before the event, which was chock-full of people with drinks in their hands, and called out my name; when he walked over to us, after getting the crowd to split into two by waving his arms, he burst out: "This! This is the center!"

Every time he participated in an event, a grand dinner seemed to follow. Many of the same people, mostly from the art world, turned up at these occasions. It was like a king's court. Everybody was there for him. I wanted to believe that his sudden amiability toward me came about because he really had taken a liking to a text I wrote about his watercolors for an exhibition catalog, but I was more than aware that I was writing a profile of him and in that sense useful.

The more I saw him, the more I wondered about the place he came from, the Black Forest. I felt more and more that I had to follow him there, that my whole understanding of him hinged on it. Because New York, Copenhagen, Paris — that was the world of gallery owners, art collectors, journalists and artists; that was where vernissages, exhibitions, reviews, auctions, interviews and performances were the order of the day, a world where everyone played their role, not least the artists themselves. It was around this time that Paul Holdengräber — who, as the former director of public programming at the New York Public Library, was another such player — told me about how he met Kiefer for the first time. Holdengräber had arrived for lunch at the Paris studio, and because Kiefer was working, Forelli showed him around. When they reached the innermost part of the main hall, Kiefer had suddenly come cycling out and said hello to him.

“Exactly the same thing happened to me!” I said, and we laughed about the scene that each of us had experienced as authentic.

Naturally, this didn’t mean that Kiefer was inauthentic. On the contrary, theatrics, role play, repetition and routines belong to the external world, and what they do, what they are there for, is to protect the internal world. And it is in the internal world that art begins.

I asked Forelli several times whether it would be possible to go to the Black Forest with Kiefer. She never gave me a definite “no,” but she explained to me how busy Kiefer was, how many exhibitions he had, how much he traveled, and — I understood — how important it was to protect his working hours.

But then, in the fall of 2017, I got an email from her, telling me that Kiefer was to receive an honorary doctorate in Freiburg and that after the ceremony we could visit his birth town, Donaueschingen.

And that’s how I found myself in an auditorium at the university in Freiburg just before Christmas that year, watching Kiefer talking onstage about his days as a law student there in the ’60s.

“I hoped to bring order and calm into my longing, confused being by studying law,” he said; he was fascinated by its idiosyncratic language, “apparently free of all emotions,” and I envisioned an 18-year-old with a chaotic inner life, filled with unprocessed but strong feelings that found no outlet anywhere.

On a large screen behind him, a picture of the young Kiefer in uniform, doing the Nazi salute suddenly appeared.

“I don’t remember which teacher introduced me to Carl Schmitt’s political science,” he told the crowd. “The warning of the forbidden fruit naturally made me all the more curious. It was the beginning of my thorough examination of National Socialism, which led two years later to my action ‘Occupations..’”

Schmitt was a political philosopher who had been the crown jurist of the Third Reich. “Occupations” was Kiefer’s final-exam project at the art academy in Karlsruhe, where he enrolled after dropping out of law school. Its photographs show Kiefer giving the Nazi salute in various European countries that had been occupied by Germany during the war. He performed the salute in forests, on beaches, on hills and plains. The photos were first made public in 1975, when some of them were published in a German art magazine called *Interfunktionen*. It became a full-blown scandal. Curators and artists were appalled; advertisers and funders fled. The artist Marcel Broodthaers, who also contributed to the magazine, said, “Who is this fascist who thinks he is an anti-fascist?”

This was Kiefer’s first major art work.

The society Kiefer was part of in 1969 had not long ago started a world war and exterminated six million Jews. The violence and depravities this society was guilty of were indescribable. But when Kiefer was growing up, no one talked about it. Even though every family was marked,

every neighbor, every friend, even though a whole generation had perpetrated the most atrocious and traumatic acts, nobody spoke about it.

Kiefer's exam project leapt right at the throat of silence.

But why of all people was it he, this young former law student from a rural town, with his eyeglasses and artistic ambitions, who found it necessary to begin with this, of all subjects? Art is not a charitable endeavor; it is not as if the artist unselfishly offers gifts to society. Kiefer must have found something exceptionally interesting there, something that perhaps also resonated inside him. It couldn't have been by accident that the uniform he was wearing in the photos belonged to his father.

The same year that Kiefer made "Occupations," he also made his first book. Its name was "Die Himmel" — the heavens — and perhaps it is here the leap can be found. Because the book — and all the books that followed — represented something radically different from the realist portraits and still lifes he had painted until then. The books mainly consisted of photographs, some original, some cut from magazines and all of them brought to life by their proximity to one another. One of the books depicts a battle with small toy soldiers on a table; another, titled "Die Donauquelle" — the source of the Danube — shows pictures of a bathtub and a basin full of water. The Danube could also be said to be the source of Germany, or of the myth of Germany, and it is precisely this area, between the mythological and the real, the past and the present, the sacred and the mundane, that Kiefer's art has explored ever since.

And then he starts pushing the envelope, because in his next book, "Heroische Sinnbilder," Kiefer is standing on top of the bathtub in full Nazi uniform, and then he is standing next to a river, his hands in his pockets in the first picture, his head bowed and his hand stretched out in a Nazi salute in the next — oh, the power in these two pictures — followed by small paintings of the same motif, a picture of a family inside an apartment, a picture of German soldiers in a field, a bright red and green watercolor of roses, a picture of a chaotic apartment, a picture of a classical statue.

The tension in this book is so great, what takes place here is so wild and dark, and at the same time so associative, that it is no exaggeration to say that it captures the rise and fall of an entire culture.

Kiefer was 24 when he made the book. And he did it in his kitchen. So forget the gigantic halls, forget the gigantic paintings, forget the overhead cranes and assistants — that is not where the core of his art lies, but here, in these small scrapbooks that only exist in a single copy each. All that was to follow in the next five decades was an expansion of this; from here, the ideas and concepts are hurled out into the world, into material reality where they become manifest.



Kiefer's self portrait "Besetzung, 1969" (Occupation, 1969), which was part of his final-exam project at the Academy of Fine Arts in Karlsruhe. © Anselm Kiefer, Art Institute of Chicago. From Atelier Anselm Kiefer.

The morning after the lecture, Kiefer and Forelli were waiting for me outside the hotel when I came out with my bags. They had hired a Mercedes with a driver for the day, and we would drive through the Black Forest to Donaueschingen, where we would first drop by to visit a princess, an old friend of Kiefer's, and have coffee. Then we would go and see the house where he lived the first five years of his life.

The fog was hanging in the streets as we drove out of the city, making the air seem almost fluid. Kiefer was humming to himself.

"How did it feel to be back in your old university?" I asked.

"It felt strange. It felt like yesterday. I think it was no time. Timeless."

Soon the city was behind us, and the terrain became more hilly. On both sides there were spruce trees covered with snow, and the road led into a valley.

Kiefer said he used to ride his bicycle here all the time. There was no telephone, so no one could check up on where he went. He would visit his uncle who lived miles away and tell his grandmother he was just out for a little ride.

"So you lived with your grandmother?"

"Yes. Six years, in the town we are going to now, Donaueschingen. I was with her because — I think my mother was not so interested in me. Heh heh heh." (When the checkers for this story

asked him about this, he amended his assessment — through Forelli — to say that his mother was glad his grandmother could look after him because her “situation in a small apartment with other family members was very, very difficult in the years immediately following the war.”)

“So I was alone with my grandmother,” he continued. “I had no other kids to play with. It was just the two of us.”

“How was that?”

“Huh?”

“How was that?”

“Oh. I liked her. What else should I do?”

He spoke with increasing intimacy. His voice was different now, lower and more friendly, and what he talked about was different, too — closer to who he was, somehow.

“Now behind the valley there’s a place,” Kiefer said. “I think it is here somewhere. There is a German fairy tale about a deer. The hunter was behind him, and it sprung from one mountain to another. I made a drawing of it when I was 7, 8.”

A moment later, he pointed up to the right.

“There! There it is!”

Up on the ridge of a rugged gorge stood a bronze stag, clearly delineated against the gray sky.

On the other side of the mountain, Forelli turned to Kiefer.

“When were you last in Donaueschingen?” she asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. I would say 20, 25 years ago. I visited another aristocrat then, he was head of Sotheby’s, and he invited me to his castle.”

Donaueschingen lay like a circle out on a high plain, nearly half a mile above sea level, enclosed by fields and forests that rose up toward the distant mountains. The Alps were not far from here.

The road we followed led alongside a park with tall, leafless trees, and soon we pulled up in front of a gate and drove onto the property.

On our right, the large, snow-covered park was spreading away from us. On our left, with its back to the city, lay an enormous palace. Its facade was yellow-white, with ornaments above and between the hundred or so windows that looked out onto the park.

Kiefer led the way to the entrance, where we were received by Massimiliana, born Princess of Windisch-Graetz, her son and the heir apparent, Christian Joachim Maximilian of Fürstenberg, and his wife, Jeannette, hereditary Princess of Fürstenberg. With his usual grand gestures and in a buoyant mood, Kiefer kissed them on the cheeks, joked and made witty remarks, something

they seemed to appreciate, because they were all eagerly chatting on top of one another as we continued into the hall. It had marble columns, a marble floor and a broad marble staircase leading up to the floors above. We, however, were ushered off into a dark paneled hallway where portraits hung along the entire length of one wall.

Prince Christian said to Kiefer that he had just read one of my books, and I realized that Forelli must have contacted the family to say that Kiefer would like to bring a writer. It wasn't as if we were simply dropping in on some old friends, as I had understood it. He wanted to show them to me.

Why would he want to do that?

Kiefer looked at me.

"It is a very remote town, Donaueschingen," he said. "Your fame hasn't come here yet!"

He laughed, and we entered a large drawing room with a long table in the middle that had been set for coffee. The head of the house, Prince Heinrich, a small, stocky man, joined us along with his two dogs. I had never been in a private castle before; I looked around while at the same time trying not to seem too nosy. On the walls hung a series of forest-themed lithographs. A tall Christmas tree was standing at the other end of the room, and besides cups and plates, the table, which was covered with a red-and-white tablecloth, was decorated with red Christmas stars. Between the stars stood several magnificent silver bird figurines, six in all, and in front of me stood a small silver stag.

Jeannette leaned toward me.

"It must be difficult to get this huge guy into a profile," she said. "How do you do it?"

"It is impossible," I said.

"Profile means already huge," Kiefer said. "Complete. Profile is complete, no?"

Everyone laughed.

The conversation flowed freely, almost elatedly, around me, part German, part English. Kiefer seemed relaxed and outgoing and constantly presented the grand company with small, friendly quips. They laughed every time, but when at one point in the course of the conversation he declared that the subject of an anecdote was "a high petit-bourgeois aristocrat," it was silent for a few seconds before laughter broke out again.

I looked at two of the shiny silver birds. Both were remarkably realistic, caught in action, one with its head bent low, the other on its way forward. All the details were visible, from the feathers in their plumage to the creases on their thin legs.

"You were telling me that your grandfather always took you on a walk from the castle?"
Jeannette said.

Kiefer nodded. “My grandfather was taking me on a walk, and I was asking him why I have no nanny — because they have uniforms, you know — and why I have no driver. I saw nannies, and I thought, Why do I not have this?”

“Now you do!” Christian said. “You have a nanny, and you have a driver!”

“Everything!” Jeannette said.

In the course of the short hour we had been sitting there, I began to form a picture of the princely family. It turned out that the Fürstenberg family could trace their ancestors back to the ninth century, that they had lived here since the 13th century, the current branch since the 18th century, and that their name was linked to the entire world of European nobility, royalty, papacy, wars, power struggles and culture — Mozart had spent the night here, and Heinrich’s great-grandfather, Prince Max Egon, had been best friends with Emperor Wilhelm II.

After coffee was served, Kiefer began to talk about a bold project from the old days, something that Charlemagne and Irene of Athens reportedly had planned — a canal system that would connect the Danube to the Black Sea — that had only been completed more than a thousand years later, in the 1990s.

“This was a great ruler, Charlemagne,” Kiefer said.

“When you look at it from a creative perspective, which ruler impresses you the most in history?” Jeannette said. “Was it Barbarossa, was it Charlemagne or was it Alexander the Great?”

“Barbarossa, because he subjugated Italy,” Kiefer said.

There was silence for a moment, then the laughter broke out.

“Napoleon was a feminist, did you know this?” Kiefer said.

“What do you mean, a feminist?”

“He changed the law. The Code Civil Napoléon. It is still in use. Before, if a woman was pregnant by a soldier and if she had been with more than one, she had to prove who it was. And Napoleon changed it and said the woman can choose.”

“Ah!” could be heard around the table. (The fact checkers for this article looked this up, and in fact the situation seemed to be much more complicated.)

“He didn’t like us,” Massimiliana said, meaning Napoleon. “We went on the Hapsburg side.”

“No, the most important ruler is Alexander,” Kiefer said. “The map had to be changed because of him. Alexander is the greatest.”

“Can you imagine the energy in such a man?” Jeannette asked.

“In six years, he changed the world,” Kiefer said. “And he was following mythological things. He wanted to find the chains of Prometheus.”

“He was not born a Catholic,” Massimiliana said. “And he converted.”

“*Who?*” Kiefer asked.

“Alexander the Great,” she said.

But Catholicism did not even exist then, Jeannette pointed out.

“Of course!” Massimiliana said. “I mixed him up with Constantine.”

After coffee they wanted to show us the museum, which was located in the streets behind the castle. Kiefer was dressed strikingly in a priestlike ankle-length black robe and a black hat that resembled a skullcap. The sky outside was almost entirely blue now, and the snow-covered surfaces in the park glistened in the light of the sun. Between the narrow side of the castle and the wall facing the city we stopped in front of a large well, some 30 feet in diameter, that was encircled by a wall that seemed to date back to the 19th century. There was something Wagnerian about it, I thought, bending forward and looking down at the water, which was black and full of small quivering ripples.

“This is die Donauquelle,” Kiefer said. “The source of the Danube.”

“Is that true?” I said. Was it possible that the source of this mighty, fabled river lay on a private estate? But, I thought a moment later, it actually made perfect sense: That is why they built the castle here.

Once I realized what it was, I recognized the decorative stone fence from Kiefer’s scrapbook “Die Donauquelle,” which he made as a 24-year-old in Karlsruhe; a fragment of it was displayed on the cover. Inside the book there were photographs of an old bathtub filled with water and an old, dirty slop sink, presumably from his apartment.

Was it really here that the Danube began?

The great German poet Friedrich Hölderlin wrote about the Danube, calling the river by its ancient name, Ister, and letting it flow into Greek mythology. Heidegger held a series of lectures about this poem and this river in 1942, when mankind’s night was at its darkest, and he himself played a part in that darkness.

The black surface of the water below was utterly impenetrable and tremblingly reflected the sky above us. Kiefer said nothing about the importance of the source, neither in terms of its mythology nor its artistic or personal significance, and after a few minutes we continued away from the property and up the sloping streets to the museum.

“This road here is quite interesting,” Massimiliana said, pointing ahead. “When they killed animals in the forest, they used to skin them, and up there they had the auctions. In those days, the fur was an important matter.”

A little farther up, on the other side of the street, stag heads with large antlers jutted out from the facade beneath the roof, and below them was a long, narrow fresco with hunting scenes in which people and the animals they killed were tightly entangled. It made me think of a short story that made an impression on me many years ago, “The Legend of Saint Julian the Hospitaller,” by Flaubert. It is about a man who starts killing animals uncontrollably on a hunting trip: foxes, beavers, deer, badgers, ferrets, hedgehogs; there is no end to it, and he thinks of nothing else. When he comes to a valley full of stags, “he almost chokes with pleasure at the prospect of so great a carnage,” and then he sets to work. The stags cannot get away, they climb on top of one another, as furious as they are fearful, arrow upon arrow flying into the herd, until after many hours all finally becomes still, the carnage is over and the animals lie immovable in “a great pile,” as Flaubert writes.

I had never seen this kind of slaughter. I had never killed an animal, but it was as if I recognized it when I read it, or at least understood how it was possible to enter into a state that is solely about putting an end to life and where all boundaries and all thoughts cease to exist. That had to be why all the animal pictures, the animal statues, the stag heads and the hunting scenes I saw that day had filled me with a vague sense of dread. This was the forest.

I didn’t know what was waiting for us inside the museum, but what I laid eyes on as we entered the rooms on the ground floor was nonetheless unexpected: snarling on the floor, with limbs spread wide, was a stuffed crocodile. In the corner behind it stood a huge bear on its hind legs with gaping jaw and forepaws extended; in the cabinets at the back, stuffed birds stood wing to wing; and in the middle of the floor there was a glass case with a leopard in it. When I started walking around, I saw a calf with two heads and four hind legs, cases filled with strange shells, a row of humanlike skulls that I realized must have belonged to apes.

It was a cabinet of curiosities, a collection of creatures from far and near, from a time when the world had not yet been fully mapped and science had not subjugated everything.

The animals were unusually well preserved; all of them looked alive where they were standing, as if they had been caught yesterday and not in the 18th century.

It was the opposite on the floor above, for here stood suits of armor, uniforms, sabers and other historical memorabilia — including Napoleon’s travel urinal, which Christian proudly pointed out — that bore witness to a culture and a way of living that no longer existed.

After having wandered through all the floors, we went up to the attic. Beside a cabinet filled with human skulls, hundreds of white busts and sculptures stood beneath the beams supporting the sloping roof. Legs without torsos, torsos without legs, Greek faces from antiquity, German faces from the 18th century, gods and officers, artists and noblemen.

I looked at Kiefer, who had become eager as a child — it was exactly things like these he had on the shelves in his Paris studio.

Jeannette pointed out a huge mace, and Kiefer picked it up appraisingly. It was a bludgeoning weapon with spikes at the top. He grinned and lifted it above his head as if to strike. Dressed in his black, priestlike robe and with his black headwear resembling a skullcap, he looked completely crazy.

He then placed the heavy end in his hand and began to scrutinize it. Jeannette and Christian stood smiling behind him. They told him he could keep it, and on our way back to the castle, Kiefer held the club in one hand and an old-fashioned pair of scales with two bowls in the other, while Christian walked next to him, carrying a few additional items. They put all of it in the trunk of the car, and then we said goodbye to them.

After walking through a park that Kiefer and his grandfather used to visit more than 60 years earlier, we followed a street down to the left, passing the railroad station.

Kiefer said he used to go there all the time with his grandmother to wait for his uncle to come back from Siberia. “She didn’t know exactly when he would come.”

“What was he doing in Siberia?” I said.

“He was captured until 1949. He was a prisoner of war. I was 4 years old, but I remember very well — standing on the bridge and seeing all the rails going infinite, and you think, They come from Siberia!”

“Was that the uncle you visited on bike?”

“Yeah, yeah. And he was quite good, he was not authoritarian. Because I hated my father. He was so horrible, you know.”

Without the slightest warning, Kiefer stopped and pointed at one of the brick buildings on the other side of the street.

“Oh, look at this! This house was bombed,” he said and then pointed to the house next door. “And this was my house.”

The house he pointed at was small and anonymous, white and rectangular, with a strip of lawn and a wrought iron gate in the front and a garage in the back. It looked like any other house from the 1950s in any European city.

He pointed up at the top of the house.

“We lived here, on the third floor.”

He walked into the driveway. Forelli and I followed behind.

“They have changed everything,” he said. “It was closed off here, so I couldn’t see the other house. And here was a little courtyard. Here I had my houses. I got the bricks from the ruin and built my own houses here. ...”

He began to hum, as if he had lost interest, and right afterward we left for the car that was waiting for us with the engine running a few blocks away.



Kiefer with his work "Ra" at La Ribaute, his property near Barjac in southern France. © Paolo Pellegrin/Magnum, for The New York Times

A few hours later, we drove to the little airport outside the city. There was no check-in, we didn't even need to go to the terminal building; the car simply rolled out onto the runway and parked next to Kiefer's plane.

Dusk had just begun to fall. The clouds hung low above the plain, which, with its faint shimmer, stretched all the way to the dark forest in the distance. The airplane was small and compact, and the fairytale-like atmosphere was reinforced when its door opened, because the small dimensions made the man who stepped out seem like a giant.

He took our luggage and showed us into the plane. There were three seats on each side of the narrow aisle, they were soft and comfortable, not unlike the seats in the Mercedes we had just left. I leaned back and looked out as the plane began to taxi down the runway, only to accelerate sharply right, and then take off a few seconds later. It ascended more steeply than any airplane I had ever been in and rose like a rocket before flattening out a moment later.

On the other side of the aisle, Kiefer had fallen asleep, still wearing the black hat. On the snow-covered fields above Donaueschingen, he said that he was looking for a new studio, and that it was going to be a kilometer long. His hunger for space seemed insatiable, I thought. His hunger for work, too.

There was so much that issued from Kiefer, both from the person, and from the artist — but what went in? All the times I met him, I had the strange feeling of being scrutinized on the sly, while at the same time getting the equally strange feeling that he was completely blind to me. Was that how he was, both scrutinizing and blind at the same time?

In the west, the sun was setting, and the clouds below us were blue and pink, while a fiery orange band lay above them along the horizon. Above us, the sky was slowly turning a deeper and deeper blue, and when the plane suddenly began its descent to Paris, and I soon after was standing on the runway with my suitcase in hand, and Kiefer, eager to work, had hurried home in a taxi, it was completely black.

Like most artists, Kiefer is reluctant to talk about the importance of his pictures. That is not so strange, because paintings and sculptures communicate something beyond what language can capture; that is the whole point of them.

But last summer, Forelli sent another invitation: Kiefer was coming to Tate Britain in London to talk about his relationship to van Gogh's paintings, which were on display there, and even though he was not going to discuss his own pictures directly, I suspected his views on his own work might shine through as well, so Michal and I accepted and sat in the second row as Kiefer, dressed in a light summer suit and a white shirt, came down the stairs to begin his lecture.

Instead of walking up to the lectern, he began to greet those he knew in the first row. It was an elaborate process, because he bent over and kissed them on both cheeks, one by one. The audience laughed. He straightened up and stretched out his arms. "What have I done?" he said. "Why are they all laughing?" His voice sounded aggrieved, but he said it with a smile on his face.

He loved his audience, I knew that now. He was a showman.

But the lecture itself showed a different side of him. He recalled that as a 17-year-old he followed in van Gogh's footsteps through the Netherlands, Belgium and France, and ended up on a farm in Arles where he worked for three weeks. The drawings he did on his way there were shown on a large screen behind him. The quality was striking. They could have been done by a fully mature artist, had it not been for the fact that they resembled van Gogh's drawings so closely and thereby were obviously student pieces.

"Looking at the drawings," he said, "it is evident that I, contrary to what you might expect of a teenager, was not overly interested in the emotional aspect of van Gogh's work or his unhappy life. What impressed me even then was the rational structure, the confident construction of his pictures — in a life that was increasingly slipping out of his control. Perhaps I felt even then that an artist's work and life are separate."

I was squirming in my chair when he said this, for what had I not been trying to do these past few years if not to search for the very connections between Kiefer's art and Kiefer's life? On the other hand, he talked about his fascination with van Gogh's paintings as he had done about his fascination with the language of the law: no emotions. Not once during the following hour did he mention any feelings in connection with van Gogh's pictures, neither did he elaborate on any events in van Gogh's life. He talked about how the pictures were built up as if by a mason, layer by layer.

"What we see is a picture constructed with workmanlike clarity," he said. "And yet we are moved, overwhelmed even. Despite the simplicity of the composition, the picture speaks to us. And we feel that our own uncertain approach to the world has been laid bare."

After the lecture, we headed to a nearby restaurant for what the invitation had referred to as "an intimate dinner with family and friends." Thirty people took their seats around a long table, mostly gallery owners and others from the world of art, as far as I could tell.

I sat next to Forelli, who brought me up to date on what had happened since we last saw each other. Kiefer had expanded his existing studio in Paris, and the paintings he was working on had grown even larger. Now he was up in his lift and painting nearly all the time.



Kiefer in a tunnel at La Ribaute. © Paolo Pellegrin/Magnum, for The New York Times

He sat on the other end of the table, and I watched him, noticing how he always put his hand on the person he was talking to, a few seconds' touch only, on the forearm or shoulder, and how he was beaming as he spoke. Then the smile and the enthusiasm could vanish as if cut off by an ax. The abrupt failure of interest — the humming during breaks in the conversation, the laughter that trailed everything he said — all created a kind of bubble around him, a zone of inaccessibility. Somehow this also applied to his home, where there was a remarkable mismatch between the size of the rooms and the furnishings. The effect was a bit like seeing a room on a movie set — up close it looked like any other room, but taking a few steps back, you realize that the room was inside a huge studio that did not relate to it in any way, but was merely a vessel for it and that feeling of “home” was leaking out of it in every direction.

He turned all his studios into artworks themselves, so it was as if he lived in his art, I thought. If Kiefer was similar to any mythological figure, it must be King Midas: All he touched turned into art. If that was a blessing or a curse, only he could know.

This January I saw the new paintings Kiefer had been working on. They were exhibited in the White Cube gallery in London. Kiefer was there, too, participating in a panel discussion. As the panel went on my eyes kept drifting up to the painting that hung behind the participants. It was enormous and reminded me of “Black Flakes” with its snow-covered plain, its rows of branches resembling runes, and its dark, apocalyptic sky. But there were seven red seals in the sky; they looked like bullet holes, and each of them was numbered. The panel discussion dealt with the relationship between science and art, and although it included both a pre-eminent astrophysicist and a mathematician, none of them managed to shed any more light on the relationship than the combination of landscape, bullet holes and numbers. Science describes the world in abstract terms, while the world is concrete, and only art, with its third language, is capable of bringing these two realities together. Not Kiefer talking, not Kiefer thinking, not Kiefer as a person, but Kiefer as a place. The place he enters when he is applying layer upon layer of paint, lead, straw

and ash to a canvas. A place that emerged toward the end of the war and that has existed for nearly 75 years now. A place where mythology, history, religion, literature, things and landscapes are brought together, and the meaning that arises is infinite, because it is activated by each and everyone who sees it. It is a place positioned between the river and the forest. Everything is flux, Heraclitus said and wrote about the river. Everything is immutable and always the same, Parmenides wrote in response, and Heidegger, the great thinker of the forest, let his philosophy begin there with him.

At the now requisite dinner that followed the panel discussion, there was no ceremonial shouting of my name, no kissing on both cheeks, and I was no longer seated beside Kiefer. Had I disappointed him? Had my profile taken too long to complete? Toward the end of the meal, Kiefer came over to our end of the table, and the conversation turned to evolution. Suddenly he couldn't think of a word, and looked around the table.

“What is it called when evolution changes? When great changes happen?”

No one could think of the correct word.

“Mutation,” I said.

“Ah, mutation!” he said. “That's it! Mutation!”

Then he looked at me, as if he had only just then become aware of me.

“What is your profession?” he asked.

Was he joking with me? Or did he genuinely not recognize me? I had shaved off my beard and cut my hair since last time, but surely he had to realize I was here?

“I'm a painter,” I said, trying to return the joke.

“A painter?” he said.

He turned toward Forelli on his other side and asked her who the person next to him might be.