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**Aby Warburg:
His Aims
and Methods**

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Aby Warburg: His Aims and Methods

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Anselm Kiefer's Logic of Inversion*

On Anselm Kiefer's Exhibition: *Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po' di luce* (Andrea Emo), Venezia, Palazzo Ducale, March/October 2022

Salvatore Settis



1 | Anselm Kiefer, *Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po' di luce* (Andrea Emo), Sala dello Scrutinio, Palazzo Ducale, Venezia.

In a supremely important Italian city, Venice, a supremely important artist, Anselm Kiefer, puts under our eyes what I believe is a work of art supremely important for our time. Yet Kiefer, a German by birth and a citizen of the world by stature, education and choice, gives to his compellingly organic cycle in the Palazzo Ducale a title in Italian: *Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po' di luce* (These writings, once burned, will finally cast a little light). We find these words, in Kiefer's handwriting, in a sort of decompression chamber that he has dropped down into the little room of the Quarantia Civil Nova (between the huge Sala del Maggior Consiglio and the Sala dello Scrutinio), where a "waste land" stretches in a tall apse, inhabited by burned books and

topped by the flashing of leaden skies and sudden rays. Kiefer chose these words as a powerful statement of his world vision, as well as of his intention in assembling the grand cycle now on view in the imposing Sala dello Scrutinio; and he made clear this is a quotation from Andrea Emo Capodilista (1901-1983), an Italian thinker to whom the artist has paid significant attention for years (Kiefer 2018).

This sentence, that mirrors and condenses the fragility and uncertainties of the present day, can therefore be safely attributed to both Emo and Kiefer himself, meaning that these writings (by Emo), but also these paintings (by Kiefer), those in the Sala dello Scrutinio, live in the precarious interval between the creative act – birth – and a preannounced death by fire, but are destined nevertheless to shed their light. But Emo's sentence, in turn, has a highly probable precedent in Heinrich Heine's tragedy *Almansor* (written around 1821 and performed soon thereafter at the Nationaltheater in Braunschweig). In Heine's play, we find a very famous line:

Dort, wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man am Ende auch
Menschen (Heinrich Heine, *Almansor*, 1823).

[Where they burn books, they will, in the end, burn human beings too]

In the play, this was a reference to the burning of the Quran in an effort to eradicate Islam from Spain; but as a matter of fact in 1933 Heine's books were actually burned, among many others by Jewish writers, on Opernplatz in Berlin. The burning of books in late Medieval Granada in Heine's play embodies the Spanish Inquisition as much as the burning of books in Berlin embodies the upcoming Shoah. Let us pause for a moment to reflect on this outright *mise en abyme*: a German artist (Kiefer) quotes an Italian thinker (Emo); Emo, in turn, hints at a German poet (Heine), whose books were actually burned in public, while the works of Emo or Kiefer fortunately were not. The very title of Kiefer's cycle currently shown in Venice therefore conveys, by implication, what I would like to call a logic of inversion in space and time, as well as a staggering fluctuation between preservation and destruction, between memory and oblivion.

The very same can be said of Anselm Kiefer's paintings in their relation to the large hall in which they are placed. It is called Sala dello Scrutinio,

the room where votes were counted, in particular for the election of the Doge, a very complex operation with a carefully studied procedure that alternated phases of drawing names and of voting, a system meant to safeguard equality among the members of the Great Council and prevent fraud (Smith 1999, 41-66). Yet if walls and buildings have their own memory, this great hall, very much as in Emo's sentence and the title of Kiefer's work, has in its history innumerable books and a great fire. The Sala dello Scrutinio was originally called the Sala della Libreria, and served as a library twice, from 1468 (when it housed the manuscripts of Cardinal Bessarione) until the completion of Sansovino's Libreria Marciana almost a century later; and later from 1824 to 1905 when it held once again (in part) the books of the Marciana. Moreover, like a large part of the Palazzo Ducale, this room was devastated by a terrible fire in 1577, when luckily the books were no longer in it. A Flemish painter, Joris Hoefnagel, gives us an on-the-scene report, saying he was an eyewitness (*autoptes*, as he says in Greek) to the event (Franzoi 1989, 72): his drawing, originally bearing the date 1578, was later reproduced in an engraving that is part of the *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* (1598-1617). Tall flames leap from the Palace, someone throws burning beams down into the square and then into the water; a mute, stunned crowd watches the terrible spectacle while soldiers armed with halberds line up across the square and the deck of a ship, and there are those who, using tall ladders, dare to enter the palace in flames to rescue whatever they can. In that disaster, the original decoration of the walls, which had been installed starting in 1530, was burned completely and was soon replaced by a new cycle, which in large part repeats the same themes as the first one. Among the paintings destroyed by the fire, two were by Jacopo Tintoretto: *The Last Judgment* (a subject painted for the second cycle by Palma il Giovane) and *The Battle of Lepanto*, replaced by one on the same subject by Andrea Vicentino. By redecorating the enormous rooms of the Maggior Consiglio and the Scrutinio with equally huge canvases, and almost all identical in subject, the Serenissima sent itself and the world a powerful signal of political and institutional continuity. *Renovant incendia nidos* ('fires renew the nests'), one might say with the Latin poet Martial (V, 7, 1): like the phoenix, the Palazzo Ducale was reborn, renewed, from its own ashes. The old Republic remained just as it had always been.

Once we cross the threshold of the Sala dello Scrutinio, we find it inhabited (or haunted) by the documental memory of what it was over the centuries (Library, Election Chamber) and the two great phases of its decoration, 1530s and after 1577. There are still a few vestiges of the decoration before the fire, such as *L'ordine del cielo della Libreria* ('The Order of the Ceiling of the Library') reproduced by Sebastiano Serlio in his *Regole generali di Architettura* (1537), or a long inscription on stone set into *The Last Judgment* by Palma the Younger (c. 1590); or else the ghostly figures, predating the fire, winking out from the lunettes just under the ceiling, and still emerging behind Kiefer's painting in their current installation.

As for the second decoration of the Sala dello Scrutinio, done after the 1577 fire, this is almost completely invisible now, as Kiefer's paintings hide the walls completely, but the rich ceiling is fully visible, and above the upper edge of the newest canvases (the ones by Kiefer) emerge the lunettes of the portraits of the Doges, each one (except the last) holding his own scroll. Kiefer's cycle thus offers itself as a third phase (albeit ephemeral) of the long history of the Sala dello Scrutinio and invites us to read its images in a sort of cross mapping:

Which one does by arranging maps one on top of another in order to detect differences between them – and the truth lies the truth lies in these differences, *I believe* (Kiefer [2011] 2018, 43. Emphases by the author).

What is the new truth of the Sala dello Scrutinio transfigured by Kiefer's work? It is not, it cannot be the one vertiginously glimpsed by Pilate in his dialogue with Jesus (John 18:38 *Quid est veritas?*). On the contrary, it is a structurally ephemeral truth, which does not live in and of itself, but is identified with the system of relations – in time and space – to which it belongs and which it changes for the sake of simultaneity, as Kiefer himself wrote in his diary:

I do not intend to represent the history of Venice, with its constant ups and downs, in chronological order, but as simultaneity, the simultaneity of something and of nothing (Page from Kiefer's diary, 15 July 2021. Thanks to Manuela Lucà Dazio).

Three cycles overlap in one same space, and the most recent (Kiefer's) can be there only to leave that room soon afterwards. Each phase is intimately linked to the others in a (diachronic) logic of superimposition, substitution, exchange; and in each of these cycles the canvases connect with each other in a meaningful (synchronic) sequence, in the Italian tradition of grand domestic decoration (Kliemann 1993). But the two dimensions, synchronic and diachronic, are inextricably interwoven; the paintings of the second phase repeat the same subjects as the first, and in Kiefer's canvases we recognize potent signs of Venice: the recurring lagoon landscapes, the memory of Doge Marin Faliero, the presence of Saint Mark from the saint's zinc sarcophagus to the Basilica, to the majestic flag with the Lion of St Mark's flying in the wind.

Kiefer has no intention to compete with the painters who preceded him on these same walls, but masterly plays with time and space. He creates hiatuses and suspensions, intervals and lacunae. His paintings take (for a short while) the place of two successive cycles, both conceived in praise of Venice, yet this newest of Palazzo Ducale's cycles does not replicate the same intentions, but rather urge us to take our distance, viewing the whole Sala and its historical memory as in a *mise en abyme*. The Sala dello Scrutinio thus becomes a metaphor not just for Venice, but for our world today, suspended as it is between memory and oblivion, between the relentless growth of collapsing ruins and our irrepressible impulse to preserve, to rebuild, to survive. Kiefer treats the ruins of history as a material (pictorial and conceptual) like any other. He builds a bridge between the long, long memory of the Palazzo Ducale (and of Venice as a whole) and the creative process of the artist, with the performative traces stamped on the canvasses like so many stigmata.

When entering the Sala dello Scrutinio, we should never forget that for many centuries doges and patricians, painters and carpenters, architects and librarians used to enter and exit that room, at least once in order to extinguish a sudden fire. The memory of places and things is made of such indiscernible traces of those who have been there over time. Of their ghosts. The Palazzo Ducale today is mostly experienced as museum space: but it is that pulsating life, those presences now spent, that have made it the heart of Venice. Institutions and rituals of days gone by have soaked

themselves into the canvases and walls, taken root in memory and names. But against the background of this tradition, what about Kiefer's canvases?

Like the grand canvases that preceded them in the Sala dello Scrutinio, Kiefer's cycle now installed there is also the result of a public commission by the Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia, at the initiative of its director, Gabriella Belli. But, 328 years after the last addition to the room (the triumphal arch of Doge Francesco Morosini, 1694) and 225 years after the end of Venetian independence, the differences of intention from those of the earlier patrons are stronger than the similarities.

Public art in our time proceeds on a knife-edge between institutional manifesto and political protest, between the permanent and the ephemeral. Diego Rivera's murals were meant to be institutional and permanent, from Mexican history in the Palacio Nacional (c. 1929-) to the *Detroit Industry Murals* (c. 1932-), and so were those by Massimo Campigli at the University of Padua (c. 1939-); while the street art of our time is individual and ephemeral. From one extreme to the other, public art aims to speak to the crowd, and in this sense it inherits the ambitions of the fresco cycles in medieval town halls and churches. It unfurls events and personages, moral values, beliefs and hopes, because it wants them to be shared. This is why the sixteenth century cycles in the Sala dello Scrutinio were devoted to a series of Venice's (real or imagined) military successes, and thus display the inevitable, perpetual victory of Venetian arms on land and sea, the virtues of her citizens and the wisdom of her government.

Today, anyone who wants to manipulate history to their advantage uses the universe of the media, not art works. Asking a great artist like Anselm Kiefer to create for the Palazzo Ducale a cycle destined to measure itself against the historic memory of the site was an unusual move. At its root is a question that undoubtedly the public patron and the artist asked themselves, and which now we must ask ourselves too: what can "public art" mean today? Must it mirror a political or culture concern chosen by the patron or agreed upon with the artist? Present itself as a *summa* of current values? Or as an inventory of the culture wars of our time? Should it maybe act as a manifesto of universal values (or offered as such)?

The Venetian patron has given these questions a forceful answer by the very choice of Kiefer, an artist as free and profound in his thought as he is in the act of painting. In the large canvases that dare to cover (and thus challenge) those in the Sala dello Scrutinio, he does not celebrate anything, does not preach any truth, waves no political banner. By leveraging a logic of inversion that imposes upon us astonishment and reflection, he suggests something that today we lack most: to stop and think. To yield to the majesty of his paintings, to ask questions of them and let them ask questions of us. The historical reality that dwells in these rooms undergoes a temporary suspension, and as though in a dream or a game, the artist lays out before our eyes the fragments of another reality: his reality, which immediately becomes ours. By placing his own works on top of the huge canvases that call that room home, Kiefer brings off a radical shift: he renders simultaneous and interchangeable space and time, the Doge's electors and the visitors of today. He injects temporal dynamics into space, spatial dynamics into time.

Kiefer studs this grid of memorial simultaneities with carefully chosen icons: Saint Mark's Lion flies on a flag, the (zinc) sarcophagus of the Saint gapes like an empty eye-socket, a ladder climbs skyward, an ancient goddess hands the painter his palette. Furrows of lands and seas, invariably in the bottom third of the paintings, evoke the Lagoon, summon up its sandbars or *barene*. Such a weave of self-evident representations heals what Kiefer calls "the pain engendered by the sacrifice of figuration" (Kiefer [2011] 2018, 199 ff.): if seen from very close, a picture can very well have "an abstract structure, a kind of molecular system", but stepping back at a distance reveals "a singular composition, an overall view" (Kiefer [2011] 2018, 297).

And if, as Kiefer once wrote, "the only interesting thing about the process of creation is the shift from figuration to abstraction" (Kiefer [2011] 2018, 285), this course can also be inverted, passing from the abstract of the detail seen up close to the figuration of a vision of the whole.

In this context and this spirit, Kiefer tracks down canonical images and incorporates them into his compositional grid, revealing their unprecedented potentials. His poetics of *remake* or *repêchage* have very little in common with the post-modern obsession with quotation. Extracted

from a layer of memory, as in the ritual sequence of an archaeological excavation, a passively iconic message is by him “regenerated..., reintroduced into the world” in that it is an object of fascination for the artist (Kiefer [2011] 2018, 241):

The artist is not the final product of evolution, but goes up and down the evolutionary ladder, like the angels on Jacob’s ladder in the Bible story. Our representation of the world is merely a retrospective hypothesis. The truth remains unreachable (*Art and evolution, or Jacob’s ladder, A. Kiefer’s lectio magistralis* at the Collège de France in Kiefer [2011] 2018, 257 ff.)

The paintings of the past are no less subject to these oscillating interpretation than are the paintings finished yesterday. For instance: could the ladder that splits in two Kiefer’s canvas on the entrance wall, with the human traces placed around it (clothes, shoes) be the biblical ladder of Jacob’s dream? Or could it be the ladder imagined in the seventh century AD by the Greek monk John Climacus, where souls ascend to Heaven with the aid of angels, while devils try to drag them down into Hell (Müller 2010)? One more example. One of the two angels that flank the large canvas with the ladder is an imposing winged figure, her hands stretched out to hold a large oval palette like a painter’s. Her archetype is a goddess, the *Victoria Romana* on Trajan’s Column, holding a shield torn from the defeated enemy, while in Kiefer’s metamorphosis, she becomes a majestic palette-holding angel. Is this an allusion to the artist’s sovereignty over the precarious balance between figuration and abstraction? As much as we wander around Kiefer’s cycle in the Sala dello Scrutinio, question marks and intervals multiply: intervals between creation and fruition of the canvases; between remote models and their reactivation; between the large sixteenth-century canvases of the Sala dello Scrutinio and the equally large ones by Kiefer that now cover them. Finally, between the moment when Kiefer’s work changed the aspect of that room and the day when Kiefer’s paintings will have to find a new home (and it would be wonderful and fitting if this were in Venice itself).

In the years we are going through, we have learned to live with the idea of ‘interval’: an interval between the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of great historical transformations or massive migrations of human beings, and more recently between the before and after of a pandemic, between the ‘before’

of a European war whose 'after' we have no idea about. And we are unable to decide whether, after dramatic intervals like these, we would like everything to spontaneously revert to the way it was, or whether (on the contrary) we would be willing to take responsibility for radical changes.

But what do we mean by 'interval' in a work of art? A 'logic of inversion' such as Kiefer's, instilled through images and based upon merging space and time, memory and oblivion, ruins and rebirth requires primarily an intermediate mental space, a place 'in between' in which to stop, to ponder only to start again with renewed moral energy. No word seems more appropriate than that used by Aby Warburg, the great historian of European figurative culture: *Zwischenraum* (intermediate space), which is the empty space that lies in the middle, the interval occupied by mere thought (the artist's, but also our own), and that therefore can also be called *Denkraum* (thought space). For Warburg, *Zwischenraum* is the conscious creation of a distance between oneself and the outside world, an interval where both artistic creation and its reception take shape (Cirlot [2017] 2018). For Warburg, *Zwischenraum* is the conscious creation of a distance between oneself and the scenario of life and art (the outside world). It is in this interval that both artistic creation and its reception take shape, moving – both of them – in a pendulum swing between emotional intuition and intellectual dominion command.

Moving closer to Kiefer, we might situate the notion of 'interval', in the terms of Paul Celan (a poet much loved by Anselm), at an immediately experiential and physiological level, as *Atemwende* ('breathturn'), that is "the instant of suspension and void between breathing in and breathing out, in which time, the will, the I stop, as in the breathing meditation of yoga" (Pezzella [2007] 2015, 165); while at a cosmic level the rhythm of breathing (*Atemwende*) corresponds with that of the cosmos (*Sonnenwende*, solstice). Let's say it with Goethe, Celan's likely 'precedent':

Breathing has two moments of grace:
breathing air in and breathing it out.
One oppresses, the other refreshes:
thus, wonderfully, life mixes opposites.

Thank the Lord when he pursues you,
and thank Him again when he sets you free!

Or, in German as a tribute to Anselm:

Im Atemholen sind zweierlei Gnaden:
Die Luft einziehen, sich ihrer entladen;
jenes bedrängt, dieses erfrischt;
so wunderbar ist das Leben gemischt.
Du danke Gott, wenn er dich preßt,
und dank ihm, wenn er dich wieder entläßt!
(Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Buch des Sängers, Talismane*, im *West-östlicher Divan*, 1819)

In Kiefer's vision, "the artist, inasmuch as he reigns over history, plays with the past, the future, the sublime, the religious, the shocking, the unconscious, he roams through history" (Kiefer [2011] 2018, 230 and 260. On sovereignty of the artist: Kantorowicz 1961, 267-279). For Kiefer, "history has always been a material just as clay is for the sculptor who shapes it in order to create his own story" (Kiefer 2022, 44). He manipulates "the wreckage of history not as an end but as a beginning," and conceives of the work of art as an interval, the "intermediate space between history and its narration" (Kiefer [2011] 2018, 268).

History - the past with its burden of ruins - and art - the present, but also the prophesy of the future - achieve by this path a full simultaneity. As in Paul Celan's *Meridian*, art entails the coexistence of "a variety of accents: the acute accent of the present, the grave accent of history, the circumflex accent of eternity". The poet or the artist "bestows upon his own work an acute accent", since he has "no other choice" (Celan [1960] 2003, 40-41).

Captured by Kiefer's Venetian canvases, one wonders whether we humans are shaping the cosmos (and history) on our own inversion of breath (*Atemwende*), or whether it is the rhythm of a cosmic or global *Sonnenwende* ('inversion of the Sun') that shapes human experience. In this long, apparent interval of history that we are living through in this time of pandemic, of the suffering Earth, of ever-looming wars, of increasing injustice and inequality, we have no choice: we must look at

Anselm Kiefer's paintings, under the acute accent of the present, holding our breath.

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*This contribution is the so far unpublished opening speech held on April, 20, 2022 for Anselm Kiefer's Exhibition *Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po' di luce*, on display at Sala dello Scrutinio in Palazzo Ducale, Venezia, from March to October 2022. The text here published takes some cues from the author's contribution in the Exhibition catalogue: *Anselm Kiefer: A Venetian Solstice*, in *Anselm Kiefer. Palazzo Ducale a Venezia*, ed. By G. Belli, J. Sirén, Marsilio, Venezia 2022, 115-128.

English abstract

Taking his cue from Kiefer's title, Settis underlines "a logic of inversion between space and time, as well as a staggering fluctuation between preservation and destruction, between memory and oblivion", and questions the meaning of an "interval in a work of art". Settis, therefore, recalls Warburg's definitions of *Zwischenraum* (intermediate space) and *Denkraum* (thought space) extending them to contemporary art in an extraordinary short-circuit of memory.

Keywords | Anselm Kiefer; Andrea Emo Capodilista; Palazzo Ducale Venezia; Denkraum; Inversion.



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