



Anselm Kiefer

Where Have All the Flowers Gone

Anselm Kiefer, Simon Schama and Antje von Graevenitz

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam
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sag wo die Soldaten sind.

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Paul Gauguin
Vincent van Gogh Painting Sunflowers, 1888
Oil on canvas, 73 × 91 cm
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

and asked to have one of them for himself (fig. 34). Kiefer's sunflowers on the other hand *seem* dramatically ominous, scorched, moribund, their heads drooping or fixed in a state of botanical rigor mortis. And, of course, funereally black not radiantly golden, the light sucked out of them (fig. 36).

Except perhaps in one version. In August 1998 Kiefer records in his notebook: 'finished a watercolour painting: sunflowers on a table'. But then adds his habitual self-questioning about what it is, exactly he has done: 'what to do with

the sunflowers on the table when it's not a still life? because this isn't a still life, the sunflowers are neither in a vase nor lying on the table. they are upside down in the dirt, growing into the dirt on the table. well? sunflowers growing on a table, that means for a start that they begin at waist height. they don't grow from the ground but somewhere in-between. you could say they're already transcendent, or: they're already a bit closer to the stars.⁷¹ Although Kiefer makes no mention of it (or any of the Van Gogh precedents or sources), might he have seen any of the paintings of sunflowers lying on tables that Vincent painted not in Arles but in Paris, and which were in their own right startlingly original. They are all cut heads, the petals dry and withered. In one case two heads lie, one face up, the other face down as if primed for burial. From the look of them the flowers seem to have been severed from their hairy stalks many days earlier, or even longer, and the painting in the Kröller-Müller Museum has been given the title *Four Sunflowers Gone to Seed* (fig. 35). While this may not be entirely accurate, each



35
Vincent van Gogh
Four Sunflowers Gone to Seed, 1887
Oil on canvas, 59.5 × 99.5 cm
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

of the pictures is indeed dominated, as is not the case in the sunny sunflower pictures done in Arles, by the packed pistils of seeds, mysterious, potent, waiting for their delivery, from out of blackness, into prolific new life.

I am unsure when Kiefer began to immerse himself in the writings of Robert Fludd, the seventeenth-century Paracelsian mystical philosopher and occult hermeticist. Fludd's correspondences between macrocosm and microcosm, between plants and planets, the life-giving sun in the heavens and the life-preserving heart in the body of man, seem embodied in Van Gogh's Paris cut blooms. The radial petals are dead but the seeds are urgent with life, their appearance disconcertingly astral and planetary as if dropped from a remote corner of the universe; not in the least an image suitable for tote bags or postcards. I have myself seen visitors to the Metropolitan Museum of Art head for the small sunflower painting that lurks at the end of a wall, pause bemused, caught off guard, vocally disappointed that *these* were the sunflowers and after a minute or two walk off towards more welcoming oleanders.

It is this potent, dark heart of the golden bloom, the burst of seed that unsurprisingly (given his preoccupation with the inseparability of life and death, being and un-being) leads Kiefer time and again to feature the flowers, pistil blackness transferred to the whole plant. In some of his images the seeds, readable also as a starburst, shower down as if they were nourishing rain. In many more, like his *Sol Invictus* (1995), enormous stalks rise from or beside the body of a naked, supine figure, the artist himself (see fig. 49). In almost all of these sunflower pictures that find a place in his woodcuts as



36
Anselm Kiefer
Die Orden der Nacht (The Orders of the Night), 1996
Acrylic, emulsion and shellac on canvas, 356 × 463 cm
Seattle Art Museum, gift of Richard and Elizabeth Hedreen

well as paintings, the corona head of the flower hangs over the figure rather protectively than threateningly. The stalk itself is Fluddian, almost umbilical, a channel of life. Kiefer must know that this twinning of plant and human life – of the natural with the supernal – originates, at least in Christian iconography, in the 'Tree of Jesse' images that appear in the stained-glass windows of early Gothic cathedrals, most notably in the basilica of Saint-Denis and in the great west window at Chartres (fig. 38). The tree sprouts from the groin of ancestral Jesse, the father of

Profound meditations on the inseparability of life and death, of the earth and the heavenly vault, on microcosm and macrocosm, new science and ancient knowledge, obscurity and revelation, recur over and over again in Anselm Kiefer's most ambitious and compelling work. As always, the senses and the mind operate together to absorb their full measure of meditative power. None of which precludes his inspired playfulness. Walking with him in late spring 2024 down the driveway at the back of his studio, we stopped at a spot where a bright spray of poppies danced in the sunshine beside a resin and plaster sunflower, flowers alive and not alive sprouting from a pile of smashed concrete. This brought on one of Kiefer's not infrequent bouts of happy chuckling: the laughter of the magus. But it was nothing compared to the vocal glee that came from him as he stooped over cracks in the driveway surface through which weeds and moss were pushing into the light. 'Look!' he exclaimed as though we had never seen this before and that it was, not so much to be expected, as to be greeted afresh as a miracle. Vincent van Gogh would have understood that.

48
Simon Schama and Anselm Kiefer
in front of *De sterrennacht (The Starry Night)*,
Atelier Anselm Kiefer, Croissy, July 2024.







50
Anselm Kiefer
Nevermore, 2014
Emulsion, oil, acrylic, shellac, gold leaf and
sediment of electrolysis on canvas, 330 x 570 cm
Courtesy Eschaton Foundation



51
Anselm Kiefer
Beilzeit - Wolfszeit (Axe-Age - Wolf-Age), 2019
Emulsion, oil, acrylic, shellac, wood and metal on canvas,
470 x 840 cm
Collection of the artist, courtesy Gagolian

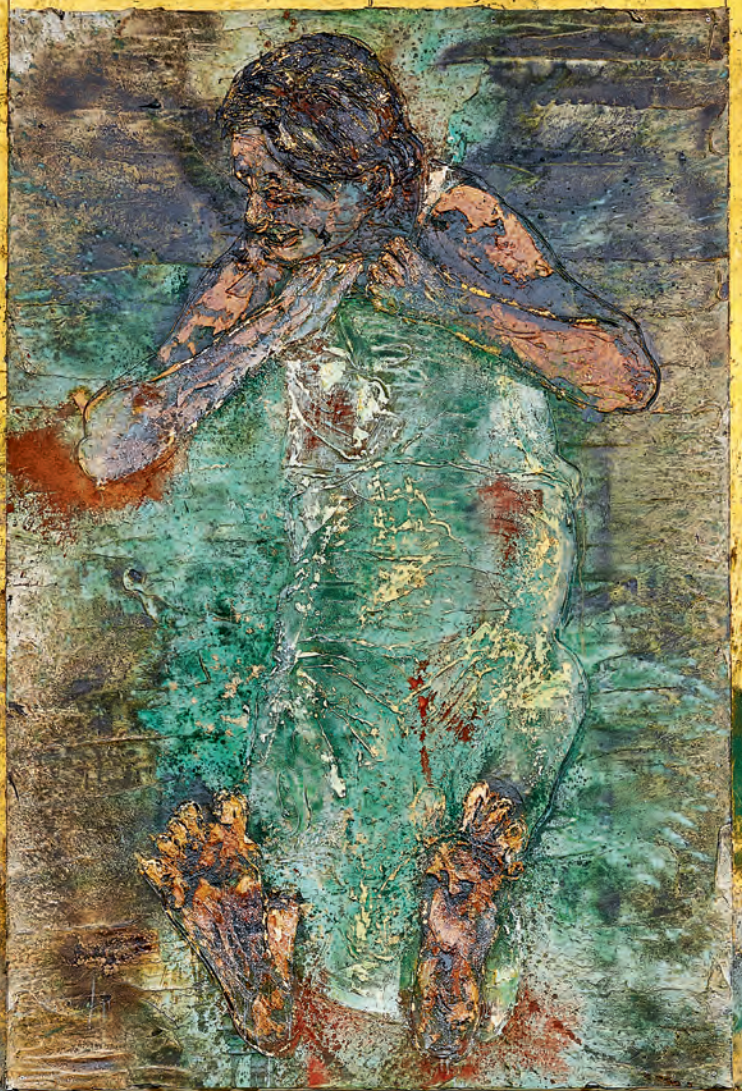


55
Anselm Kiefer
Das letzte Fuder (*The Last Load*), 2019
Emulsion, oil, acrylic and straw on canvas,
280 x 760 cm
Courtesy Eschaton Foundation



61
Anselm Kiefer
Schierlingsbecher (Hemlock Cup), 2019
Emulsion, oil, acrylic, shellac, steel,
wood, glue, straw and dried plants
on canvas, 280 x 760 cm
Collection of the artist, courtesy White Cube

sag mir wo die Blumen sind wo sind sie geblieben



wo sind sie geblieben



Männer nahmen sie geschwind - wann wird man je verstehen



wann wird man je verstehen



sag mir wo die Gräber sind

Blumen wehen im Sommerwind









91
Anselm Kiefer
Märkischer Sand, 1980–82
Oil, acrylic, emulsion, shellac, cardboard, charcoal
and sand on photograph on canvas, 330 × 555 cm
Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam
Acquired in 1982

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Credits

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Front and back: Anselm Kiefer, *Sag mir wo die Blumen sind*, 2024 (details fig. 63)

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