

THE SECOND LIFE OF RUBBLE

Time and Matter in Anselm Kiefer's towers

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ABSTRACT

The Seven Heavenly Palaces (Milan, 2004) is one of the most impressive installations bearing the signature of the German artist Anselm Kiefer. The work consists of seven towers – erected in the former industrial space of the Pirelli Hangar in Milan – and uses the archetype of vertical construction, as a number of other Kiefer's works do. The artist reinterprets and reiterates the theme of the tower on several occasions, charging it with complex symbolic meanings. His installations – alienating scenarios in which visitors can deep in his creative universe – rely on an act that is not necessarily artistic: the act of building. This is the starting point of this paper, which aims to analyse the Milanese installation from a semantic perspective, especially highlighting its spatial value. Kiefer's work leads to considerations on the meaning that building and destroying have in contemporary society and prefigures a new life for those fragments whose disposal is the only aspect we are interested in: rubble.

KEYWORDS

rubble, ruins, memories, matter, tower

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Charged with symbolic meanings, Anselm Kiefer's towers stand out in museums, on the stages of European theatres, and in French rural landscapes. They are among the most striking works of contemporary art, and they decline (and disrupt) one of the archetypes of the art of building: the tower. As artefacts conceptually between two disciplines – architecture and sculpture – they emblemize Kiefer's artistic action and ideology; he draws from very diverse disciplines and considers the thorny ambiguity of borders as the source of the most vigorous expressive power. The art of Anselm Kiefer – German by birth (Donaueschingen, March 8, 1945) and French by adoption – is based on the search for an historical identity everyone has to deal with, even when it is tied to social tragedies before which you may be left with no other choice than being silent.

According to Celant (2017, p. 13) for Kiefer, the possibility of being in the world does not lie in refusing cultural, social and ethnic birth, but in using it as a premise, albeit linked to the anxiety and anguish of a forbidden and fearful past. His creative process considers any intervention on matter as absolute protagonist, regeneration in transformation. Like a contemporary alchemist, he shapes and burns, oxidizes and overlaps, bi-dimensionally and tri-dimensionally, as if in the search of the light of gold in the 'nigredo' of lead. Memory is undoubtedly the other great constant of his work: both the disturbing memory of the recent past and the memory of a mythical past whose symbols and archetypes become powerful tools for metabolizing dramas which are not so distant in time. His towers materialize all this on a tremendous scale. As in his tragic childhood in the ruins of post-war Germany, Kiefer reassembles rubble that he redeems by endowing them with a new existence and new meanings. Infused by the artist with prodigious emotional values, rubble of a traumatic past is projected into the present and translated into a mystical journey exploring archaic roots.

By necessity, the state of the art of literature on Anselm Kiefer's work has a broader horizon. First, Anselm Kiefer is not a silent artist. His critical awareness and the expressive need of his complex inner universe emerge clearly in the collection of lessons 'Art will survive its ruins' and in his countless interviews he provides clues to venture along the paths traced by his work. Many and exhaustive essays were written by renowned authors such as Germano Celant or Paul Ardenne, just to name a few. Their writings try to unfold the artist's creative nature, explaining the many nuances that it has and thus representing an essential tool for approaching his work full of symbolic and metaphorical references. Such essays are often included in the catalogues of individual exhibitions, with the purpose of clarifying the assumptions of the most recent works in relation to past production, enriching their interpretation from time to time. This paper, instead, aims at examining the work of one of the most influential contemporary artists from a different perspective, i.e. analysing his architectural production rather than his original artistic field. The ultimate goal in reviewing the different manifestations of the towers is to outline a selective narrative of the artist's work and to evaluate the relationships that it interweaves with the spaces around it.

Drawing from different disciplines and joining emotional instances and practical



Fig. 1 | Anselm Kiefer, *The Seven Heavenly Palaces*, Pirelli Hangar Bicocca, Milan 2004 (credit: mam-e.it, 2020).

solutions involve the risks embedded in any multidisciplinary approach, but also the opportunity to go beyond the boundaries of the individual disciplines. This approach is based on the belief that Kiefer's attitude is an important conceptual reference at inter-disciplinary level, due to the strength with which the technical (and constructive) solutions adopted become an essential tool in conveying the artistic message. Nevertheless, a broader investigation on the documents concerning the setting-up of installations is needed for further study.

The study starts with *The Seven Heavenly Palaces* (Milan, 2004), the first and most famous public installation with Kiefer's towers, which can be classified as site-specific even if with some ambiguity. To clarify its expressive values, it is impossible not to look at the prototypes in Barjac and at the artist's demiurgic action on the landscape. Through the tower archetype the study then analyses the case of *Opera Bastille*, where the towers repeat differently¹ thus highlighting how those alienating scenarios ultimately lead to a reflection on the meaning of the ruins of the 20th century and of the contemporary world. In fact, if rubble – no longer ruins – are the product of the second half of the 20th century (Augè, 2004), Kiefer believes rubble has a great expressive power

and its shaping is a chance for redemption that art unquestionably needs after a century in which it served politics and propaganda with unpredictable consequences.

Architectural Sculptures | «[...] I worked without an engineer, without an architect, I constructed tall buildings. Just like when I was a child when I played with the bricks of some bombed ruins near our house» (Bouhours, 2015). During the interview with Jean Michel Bouhours, curator of the artist's retrospective exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris (December 2015 – April 2016), Kiefer reveals how the practical act of building, intended as manipulating the matter, is an integral part of his creative process. As a result of growing up amidst the ruins of post-war Germany, fragments of destroyed buildings exert a compelling fascination over Kiefer. He considers transforming them into essentials of his art an immediate gesture of redemption. Seven Heavenly Palaces (Fig. 1) is an artistic installation with a strong architectural dimension. Even the simple observation of the photos documenting the set-up phase suggests the activity of a building site: foundations, iron, formwork, reinforced concrete panels can be easily recognized (Fig. 2, 3). The dissonance revealing that it is not a standard building site is represented by the prefabricated elements in reinforced concrete. The panels are not new products resulting from an industrial process: the reinforcing rods sprout bristly from the concrete, the horizontal elements are chipped and shattered as if they had been hit by an explosion.

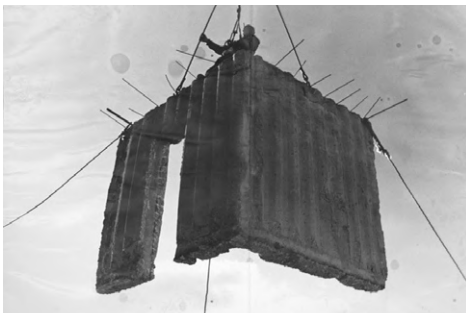


Fig. 2, 3 | Setting up phases of The Seven Heavenly Palaces, Pirelli Hangar Bicocca, Milan 2004 (credits: Galleria Lia Rumma).

Fig. 4 | Concrete L shaped panel (credit: A. Kiefer, Jericho, 2000).



Fig. 5 | Anselm Kiefer works settled in the arches of Chapelle de la Salpêtrière, Paris 2000 (credit: A. Kiefer, 2017).

Fig. 6 | Anselm Kiefer, Shebirat Ha-Kelim (Breaking of the Vessels), Chapelle de la Salpêtrière, Paris 2000 (credit: A. Kiefer, 2017).

Fig. 7 | Anselm Kiefer, towers prototypes in Barjac, 2000 (source: wikiart.org, 2019).



The towers are precast concrete modules. The artist used metal containers for freight transport as formwork. Every floor has L-shaped elements (Fig. 4) which are put near each other to reproduce the volume of the containers (2.5 x 2.5 x 2.5 m). The concrete elements maintain the surface of the containers, i.e. corrugated steel and spots of blue and red paint released by the rough coloured finish of their matrix (Tramontano, 2006). The concrete casting is not subject to vibrations and the result is an irregular material characterized by clumps and discontinuities. The latter together with the reinforcing iron emerging from the slabs and edges of the panels has a vigorous expressive effect which is functional to the re-use of rubble (Rossellini, 2016). The Seven Heavenly Palaces is the result of constructive experiments that the artist conducted in Barjac, in the South of France, near Avignon. In 1992, a 35-hectare estate, where once stood a silk factory, became a laboratory and theatre of large-scale creative interventions. The artist did not just move his home and atelier there, but actively carried out a profound transformation of what surrounded him, both the buildings and the land. La Ribaute constitutes the real possibility of interfering with places, something the artist started experimenting while working on an installation for the Parisian church Salpêtrière, as he himself tells in an interview with Karen Wright (2011).

In 2000 he was commissioned a work for the Saint Louis chapel in Paris, as part of the Festival d'Automne. On that occasion, Kiefer brought one of his personal declinations of a Judaist theme in a Catholic place of worship. The title of the work is Chevirat Ha-Kelim, one of the episodes of the world's creation described by the kabbalist Isaac Luria at the end of the 16th century. The title – which can be translated as the Breaking of the Vessels – is also the name of one of the six paintings in the arches of the chapel. Like enormous sacral altarpieces (9.4 x 5.1 m), the paintings alter the architectural perception of space (Figg. 5, 6). Kiefer does not illustrate, but rather materialises the phases of the creation of the world according to Lurianic mysticism: his work on canvases relies on the use of layers that generate thickness, of objects and fragments, of the traces they leave on surfaces. In this way he manages to express concepts such as Tsimtsoum, the retraction of the light from above (God), which creates void, i.e. an essential condition for the generation of a matter other than the divine; or the Chevirat Ha-Kelim, the destruction of the receptacles, the ten emanations of the divine light they result from and which they are meant to contain if it was not so powerful. The impossibility of limiting generating infinity within generated finite is reflected in the fracture of the vessels, the origin of chaos in the world in which fragments are dispersed and which hopefully will be recomposed in a process of reconstruction (Tikkoun). Tsimtsoum, Chevirat ha kelim and Tikkoun together with Atsilouth (emanation), Sefiroth and The Order of the Angels are the titles of the six altarpieces in the arches of the chapel, which enhance their circularity, defining a meditative space.

Kiefer's work is made for Chapelle de Saint Luis; its specificity creates an alteration, and its artistic reflections give life to a rare phenomenon: a coexistence of cults, one in the architectural system and the other in the decorative system, which results



Fig. 8-11 | Anselm Kiefer, *The Seven Heavenly Palaces*, Pirelli Hangar Bicocca, Milano 2004: lead books and wedges at the base of the towers; chaining system; Sefiroth and Melancholia (in the background); Tower of the Falling Pictures (credits: Pirelli Hangar Bicocca, 2015).

from the encounter of Catholicism and Judaism. This longing for an intimate and permanent dialogue between the work of art and the space destined to accommodate it affects both the artist's workplaces in Barjac and his other ateliers. «[...] showing my work in a gallery or a museum seems quite an unnatural thing for me to do [...] my works are very fragile, and not only in literal sense. If you put them in the wrong circumstances, they can lose their power completely. So, what I do in Barjac is give them a space» (Wright, 2011, p. 446). An unsuitable site annihilates the work and neutralizes the artist's effort. Although the Provençal estate is not the only place where Kiefer lived and worked for a long time, it configures as a materialization of his creative universe, made up of space-time connections between different eras and cultures which combine contemporaneity and archetypes.

La Ribaute is not only the place where Kiefer's works are conceived, but also the best place to experience them. Entering the property means venturing into one of the gardens of the artistic imagination, such as that of Niki de Saint Phalle in Gravicchio near Grosseto or the 16th century garden of Virginio Orsini in Bomarzo: it is a real art park, a landscape dotted with sculptures and architectures (Rossellini, 2016). Walking through the residence you come across the famous stacks of lead books; a light-filled greenhouse with a fallen military plane overrun with sunflower stalks; huge portals that act as a curtain to equally huge canvases; and above all what looks like a village of towers (Fig. 7). Indeed, an entire sector of the estate is used as a permanent construction site and through countless tests Kiefer fine-tuned the method of making the L-shaped modules and of giving the towers that apparently precarious balance that makes them magnetic and disturbing at the same time.

In a land populated exclusively by his works, the precarious balance could not even be apparent. Breaking down and rebuilding are actions that alternate in a creative *modus operandi* admitting the coexistence of destruction and construction, but especially considering the work as a result of the clash of these two operations. Without the intervention of architects or engineers, assisted only by a team of collaborators and a crane to lift the pieces, the German artist creates countless constructions, most of which turn out to be real prototypes of his most famous works. Alongside prefabricated panels made from containers, Barjac has evidence of two other versions of the towers, subsequently abandoned (Rossellini, 2016). One has a configuration in which the volumes of each floor are still readable, made up of grids of concrete blocks and element casted on site. The second version of the tower is reduced to its skeleton, realized with H-section steel beams, braced to form an irregular trellis. Both experiments show those characteristics that make Kiefer's towers a metaphor for the dramatic impossibility of ascent/descent to the Heavenly Palaces: smashed attics and impassable stairways. «[...] It is as if, interacting with each other, the images of Barjac house-atelier and the images of the works could paradoxically clarify each other. In my opinion, Barjac's house-atelier does not look like the remote place of the creation of works, from which they would later be detached, but as a sort of origin, which is infinitely



Fig. 12 | Anselm Kiefer, *Sternenfall (Stelle cadenti)*, Monumenta's first edition, Grand Palais, Paris, 2007 (credit: Pirelli Hangar Bicocca, 2015).

present in them. What is in Barjac is in the works and what is in the works is in Barjac» writes the gallery owner Lia Rumma (2004), curator of the Milanese installation, who has been exhibiting and promoting Kiefer's work for years. Barjac is therefore the fruitful soil of France that nourished the constructive vein of the German artist. It is the starting point, the original site of the towers, but also a private place of the artist, which nevertheless reveals much of the subsequent specificities.

The tower between archetype and mystical journey | In order to understand Kiefer's sculptures-architectures in Milan two fundamental aspects need to be taken into account: their appearance leads to a reflection on a constructive paradigm, while the title – *Seven Heavenly Palaces* – gives a possible interpretation of the installation, in which the seven objects symbolize the stages of an upward journey linked to Jewish mysticism. The title that Paul Ardenne gives to his essay, published in the catalogue of the permanent installation within the Hangar Bicocca, is polarized on the relationship between the Celestial Palaces and the archetype they relate to. With *A Tower is Sometimes a Tower*, the French curator and critic reveals that pervasive and disturbing ambiguity that Kiefer's art transmits to the observer (Ardenne, 2004).

If on one hand the proportions of the artefacts suggest the turreted landscapes of medieval cities, in which the buildings served social purposes, on the other hand the *Seven Palaces* gives the impression of mangled residues of a harsh post-atomic conflict, raised with primordial techniques. Evoking the archetype of the tower means above all dealing with an almost obsessive representation of the human desire for self-elevation, often accompanied (and driven) by pride and hubris towards pares and super-pares, i.e. men and gods. From the ambition to conquer a privileged observation place to that of obtaining on the third dimension a space which is not available on the ground, from Babel to the skyscrapers of Manhattan, the most advanced theoretical knowledge and the most daring techniques have been employed to achieve the ever-increasing height reached by a building.

To the imaginary of the ascent – supported by technology – and to the idea of stability (consolidated by literature) Kiefer responds with an archaic construction method which

consists in the obsessive overlapping of pieces. The reinforced concrete slabs and walls activate a constructive accumulation process, which does not include any structural skeleton. The constructive method that confers the sense of visual instability is the same that ensures static firmness. At the base of each tower and in the upper floors there are books and lead wedges. The towers arouse in the viewer a profound sense of unbalance especially because of the movement of the laying surfaces between the different floors. Nevertheless, the static firmness is linked to the compression of the interposed metal elements under the weight of the structures (Fig. 8). The technical solution has an evident expressive value, and it preserved the pieces' cohesion until a chaining system was set up (Fig. 9) during the renovation works in the Hangar in 2007 (Tramontano, 2008).

In the experimental lab of Barjac the towers become an integral part of the landscape and they are deprived of explicit symbolic references, whereas in the former industrial buildings of the Pirelli Hangar Bicocca – where the towers were officially presented – Kiefer uses the title to give an interpretative clue to the installation. The semantic association pertains to theories of Jewish mysticism described by Isaac Luria in the 16th century. Inside the Hangar (61.0 x 180.9 x 29.76 m) the seven towers embody the Seven Heavenly Palaces described in the *Sefer Hekhalot* (The Book of Palaces): they are mandatory stops on a journey leading to divine presence. The towers resemble each other, but they are not equivalent. They differ in height, between 13 and 16 metres, and they are unique pieces (there is no methodical control on the traces of paint that the concrete removes from the container or on open gaps on slabs and vertical panels). Nevertheless, it is the use of real props that generates the distinction. Sefiroth, Melancholia, Ararat, Magnetic Field Lines, JH&WH, Tower of the Falling Pictures: they are identified by elements that are not intrinsic to the construction, but arranged on the ground or on the top of the towers and constitute the starting point for decryption.

In the kabbalistic tradition the term Sefiroth indicates the ten emanations revealing the divine and giving shape to the world; the Hebrew names of Sefiroth hang from the reinforcing rods along the side of the tower as neon signs (Fig. 10); furthermore, seven lead books placed on the top of the tower evocate a commitment to mystic knowledge and the risk incurred when the latter is threatened. A glass polyhedron – a clear reference to the Melancholia engraving by Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) – flanked by glass fragments engraved with NASA's star classification codes suggests reflections on the ambiguity of the role of the alchemist between art and science and necromancy, between aspiration to the sublime and measurement of the immeasurable (Biro, 2018).

Ararat is the name of the mount where Noah's Ark landed. A lead sculpture depicting a German military ship is placed on top of the tower to show the ambiguity of an object that evokes both salvation and destruction. Reels and lead films descend from Magnetic Field Lines – the highest tower – thus exploring the close relationship between art and politics, between visual culture and propaganda. The fifth and sixth towers – JH and WH – form a diptych and their names (written in neon signs) are complementary in writing the Hebrew name of God. The link with Judaism is made explicit

by the presence of lead meteorites, which symbolize the shattered vessels of the Chevirat Ha-Kelim. Finally, the Tower of the Falling Pictures (Fig. 11) focuses the value that images and icons have taken in history and contemporaneity by means of lead frames and shattered glass plates.

Few words need to be spent on the planimetric distribution of the towers: Kiefer decided their position according to perceptive criteria evaluated on site during the installation phase. The artist configured a flat path, conducting the visitor inside the hangar where he can freely wander and even access some of the towers. The towers do not seem to identify stages of a journey in a predetermined sequence. Due to maintenance works in the Hangar, over the years the route was reversed, replacing the entrance with the exit (Tramontano, 2008). But then, if such a radical inversion is legitimate, how is the journey that Kiefer invites us to make inside the Hangar articulated? How is it linked to Jewish mysticism? Which form of Divine does he invite to reach? The literature of the Hekhalot is ancient and mysterious, Giulio Busi warns in his book *City of Light – Jewish Mysticism of the Celestial Palaces*. Those texts are remote in space and time. How can the description of mystical journeys that even precede the Kabbalah – the wisdom collection of Judaism dating back to 13th-16th century – resonate in the man of the 21st century? Kiefer's work boldly grapples with these questions in his usual experimental way.

The journeys of the mystics are inner journeys, aimed at crossing the boundaries between the human and the divine to reach the wisdom which can be brought back to human beings. Hekhalot's journeys lead to a place, a divine elsewhere, with its own topography and organization. Eternity, Busi points out, translated in an accessible way means 'temporal synchrony', the coexistence of past-present-future, since 'in the divine abode time is pure space' (Busi, 2019). In many Hebrew texts, indeed, the possibility of visually inspecting what belongs to different times is expressed by the concept of deposit. In my opinion, this reflection is fundamental to understand Kiefer's work. The title of the installation and the numbering of the towers suggest that those are stages of a journey on the ground floor of the hangar. But the bursting verticality, the objects that distinguish and characterize each tower, the references to the historical and philosophical themes dear to the artist, aren't they movements within a temporal synchrony?

Ultimately: Kiefer spatializes time, he creates timeless places, in which the visitor's present is alongside the past to think about the future. It creates seven independent journeys, the direction of which is clear, indisputably vertical, but the same cannot be said for the experiential sense. In an interview on the installation, the artist even enjoys quoting Goethe's Faust, who going down to the mothers says 'going up, going up, you go down', alluding to the ambivalence inherent in otherworldly journeys and in the mysticism of the Merkaba (Zanchi, 2016). If the personal declination of the Kiefer's archetype consists in materializing the fatigue of the ascent, the visitor does not even think that there is this possibility, rather feeling the vertigo of the fall. The towers attract the visitors and project them into the universe of the artist, populated



Fig. 13 | Anselm Kiefer, scenography for *Am Anfang* (At the beginning), Opéra Bastille, Paris, 2009 (source: theguardian.it, 2015).



Fig. 14 | Anselm Kiefer, *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, 2012; electrolysis on photographic paper on lead cm 307 x 440 x 4. The Work was shown during the exhibition *La Mezzaluna Fertile* in Galleria Lia Rumma, 12/09 - 15/10, 2012 (credit: Galleria Lia Rumma, 2012).

with those universal but historicized themes he had to deal with as a German born in a country pervaded by material and cultural rubble.

Conclusions | Kiefer turns and returns to the motif of towers as he always does with themes deeply affecting his creative sensitivity. He photographs the prototypes in La Ribaute and shapes their scenarios, imagining them as episodes of a two-dimensional

narrative, on whose supports he still intervenes materially (burning/oxidating metal sheets). He inserts a tower among other fragments of ruins in the installation *Sternenfall* (Falling stars) at the first edition of *Monumenta* in Paris in 2007 (Fig. 12) and in the same year twelve of his towers are used as scenography for the performance *Am Anfang* (In the Beginning) at the Opéra Bastille in Paris (Fig. 13). In the latter case, Kiefer brings his architectural sculptures to the theatre, invading all the backstage and the stage for the first time in the history of the French theatre. The scenography causes an intense sense of alienation: an unusual scenic depth, accentuated by real constructions and not by two-dimensional perspective representations. His experimentation on the aesthetic of rubble lands on the stage floor and on the costumes with dust and debris. The curtain seems not to open on a scenography, but on a dramatic real fragment of a world in ruins. Only the title contrasts the unequivocal sensation of the end: In the beginning it borrowed from sacred literature, the oldest of sacred books, the Bible (Searle, 2012).

Again, in a work in which the matter of art invades spaces more than ever, Kiefer leads us to reflect on time. Not the 'pure time' which we experience by facing ruins according to the anthropologist Marc Augè. In *Time in ruin*, in fact, he defines ruins as 'what remains' of a past whose historical value we are unable to identify. Art itself is a form of ruin or premise of it, since it cannot completely show its original instances or our different sensitivity cannot help us to understand them, especially if distant in time. The pleasure we derive from art comes from the perception of a gap between the generating sensitivity and the contemplating one (Augè, 2004).

It is not the time lag, the perception of which makes us deeply human, that Kiefer is interested in, but rather the temporal syncretism which, precisely as humans, we are unable to experience except on very rare occasions. In his writings he often tells how much he was struck by some passages of Proust's *Time Rediscovered* where a present sensory perception (the taste of a madeleine immersed in tea or the noise of the spoon hitting the cup) vividly evokes sensations of the past to the protagonist (Kiefer, 2004). His towers become objects of temporal convergence like Proust's Madeleines. That idea recurs in the series of works *The Shape of Ancient Thought* (set up at the Galleria Lia Rumma in Milan on the occasion of the exhibition *La Mezzaluna Fertile 2012*; Fig. 14), in which the artist superimposes images of Greek temples in ruins and Hindu places of worship to generate an impossible landscape in which those invisible connections between diversity of time and culture are made evident.²

He alludes to the rubble of his childhood rather than the lyric-soaked idea of individual duration induced by ruins. To those fragments that burden the bombed or wounded cities, or simply in search of renewal. The only possible product of today's society where the only admissible time is the present. Anselm Kiefer gives temporal depth to contemporary cities: as futuristic prefiguration of places in a state of abandonment, as fragments of past myths and archetypes, the rubble towers project art into a disruptive constructive dimension that gives it the aspired (auto) regenerative power and the coveted possibility of a new beginning, especially in dramatic historical moments.

Notes

1) The expression comes from the philosophical thought of Gill Deleuze elaborated in the book *Difference and Repetition* (1968).

2) *The Shape of Ancient Thought* is an explicit reference to the essay written by Thomas McEvilley (2002) where the authors traces parallelism between Oriental and Occidental philosophies.

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