'An Impossible Catalogue'

*Finnegans Wake*, Anselm Kiefer (White Cube)

It was always going to be interesting to see how a catalogue or book could try to re-present or document the monolithic exhibition of Anselm Kiefer's work at White Cube Bermondsey in 2023. At the time, in an Instagram post just after I visited the show, I wrote 'Anselm Kiefer at White Cube 3 is utterly astounding, a kind of strange museum documenting the mess we have made of the world; a world now full of dust and rust and decay and chaos. Best exhibition I've seen for years.' A friend responded 'Yes, extraordinary exhibition. Like a museum at the end of the world.'

I've never been a particular fan of Kiefer's work, often finding it polemical and clumsily made, sometimes over-reliant on size to dwarf viewers and try to overpower any criticisms they might have. However, one exhibition I saw in Hammersmith's Riverside Studios at the end of the 1980s did intrigue: massive lead books, an unreadable library of metal. Other works I have seen since, however, sometimes seem to lean towards a European Romantic sensibility or veer towards kitsch, as they (according to the [Gagosian website](https://gagosian.com/artists/anselm-kiefer/)) 'reflect upon Germany’s post-war identity and history, grappling with the national mythology of the Third Reich.'

It's not always clear, either, how (again in words from the Gagosian website)

 Anselm Kiefer's monumental body of work represents a microcosm of
 collective memory, visually encapsulating a broad range of cultural, literary,
 and philosophical allusions—from the Old and New Testaments, Kabbalah
 mysticism, Norse mythology and Wagner’s Ring Cycle to the poetry of
 Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celan.

This kind of statement has always seemed a bit pretentious to me: however relevant these sources and ideas are to the artist, it is hard as a visitor or viewer to pick up these kind of intertextual references unless directed to them by essays, labels or tour guides. It can feel like a form of cultural namedropping, alluding to such important texts and artists. James Joyce seems a strange addition to this referential canon but in the book's interview with Kiefer interviewer Rod Mengham suggests that *Finnegans Wake* is 'a book that thinks about the new ways in which humanity is connected' and notes that 'Joyce thinks of this last of his books as a "colliderorscope". A kaleidoscope where things collide.' This sets him up to ask Kiefer 'Is your work a "colliderorscope" – of things colliding?'

Kiefer's answer seems to me pivotal in regard to this specific exhibition, as well as the huge studio complexes and installations he has created:

 They collide all the time because even when I make a painting, it's often
 destroyed and becomes completely ambiguous. When things get mixed
 up like this, by accident, a new meaning emerges.

The 'mix-up' seems key to Kiefer's work 'Arsenal' which occupied the central corridor of White Cube, as well as a couple of adjoining spaces, and consisted of a dense jumble of sculpture maquettes, discarded metal, photographs, broken or discarded objects, specimens, models, dead plants, industrial detritus, rocks, grasses, tins and bricks... the list is endless. Seemingly casually gathered up and arranged on industrial shelving or placed within huge glass cases, the artist had then labelled them with phrases from *Finnegans Wake* and left us to make sense of his oversized cabinet of curiosities.

The dark, gloomy corridor felt overpoweringly sombre, unfathomably complex and strange. Was this a museum *at* the end of the world or *of* the end of the world? And what was its relation to the work in other rooms, which presented piles of concrete rubble and sand, or abandoned libraries of metal books, on the floor, with written texts and vast paintings on the walls surounding them? Whereas 'Arsenal' seemed intriguingly full of secrets, links and networks of meaning to be discovered, these more predictable and expected works seemed overbearingly bombastic and declamatory, even as any specific allusions or intentions remained unclear.

In his perceptive catalogue essay, Brian Dillon suggests that in Joyce's book 'everything is already embodied and nothing [is] abstract or mystified' as the author attempts to write 'a "total" book', although despite the book's 'inexhaustible energy' it is in the end an impossible ambition. Kiefer, Dillon suggests, is doing the same, attempting to embody everything in his work. For him, 'Arsenal' is 'a tunnel through five decades of work' and 'required infinite slowness and patience, a feast of attention', although 'at the same time [...] it is like being propelled or cannoned through a life or body of work: a life and a body that stand for *everyone*.'

Certainly, the work demanded attention: having spent several hours in the exhibition, I came out into the gallery's front courtyard only to realise that I needed to look again, look more, and dived back into the cave of objects' opening. Part of me wonders how specific each choice was, or whether Kiefer simply gathered up selections from the huge studios he owns – so vast he cycles around them, as shown in Wim Wenders astonishing film *Anselm*. But even to facilitate connection-making, let alone ask and provoke us to *create* connections for ourselves, is an achievement that few artists manage. And although every object, sculpture and painting is an object, it seems to me that the connections we are asked to make, invent or find, *are* abstract, because philosophy and other systems of understanding are abstract ways of finding meaning.

Dillon's essay is entitled 'Hieroglyphs' and in it he mentions alchemical transmutation (perhaps contradicting his own idea of nothing being mystified), the 'bypass[ing] of meaning in favour of bodily presence' and 'archaeological discoveries' that facilitate a kind of time travel, presenting 'an impossible catalogue of memories, references, resources for an unknown time to come.' This catalogue is an impossible one: nothing could or can document the physical presence of Kiefer's work but it is a brave attempt, the best anyone could do, and it does act as a prompt for those who attended to re-experience this immersive exhibition and to keep thinking about it. For as Kiefer tells Mengham in response to a question about secrets:

 When you do something, you are not always aware of what you do.
 Perhaps the meaning is revealed later.

This catalogue goes some way to informing the mystified viewer about the work, as well as acting as a record of a (necessarily) temporary exhibition that is part of Kiefer's ongoing exploration of and engagement with reoccurring themes and ideas. It is, of course, also a memento of my visit to the exhibition and has helped bring new ideas, associations and meanings to my understanding of Kiefer's art, indeed art in general.

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(with thanks to Geoff Hands and David Caines)

(1135 words)