

# EDITIONING ONE-OF-A-KIND MULTIPLES: NOTES TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF ANSELM KIEFER'S BOOKS

—Elisabeth Long

They stand over six feet tall—*The Secret Life of Plants*—human-sized tomes on the brink of losing the battle against gravity as they bow to the weight of their own lead pages. Monstrous creations that, like Anselm Kiefer's paintings—or even more to the point, like the themes he has ventured to tackle—have grown ever larger over the course of his artistic career. And yet there is a certain delicacy to these books—a fineness of image that belies the leaden pages and monumental size. Such tension is not unfamiliar in Kiefer's works—works which have posited rocks as angels and rusty cages as heavenly palaces. But to fully understand Kiefer's artist's books, one must examine not just at the elements inherent within each volume, but also its relationship with other of his works for Kiefer editions many of his books as one-of-a-kind multiples, repeating the same titles with different content, the same content with different titles, transforming books into paintings, paintings into books, books into installations—visual and conceptual themes repeated and transmuted, over and over again.

There is something in this repetitive production style that is core to his artistic endeavour, and yet it is almost impossible to discern this from many of the presentations of Kiefer's work. *Heaven and Earth*, the recently touring Kiefer exhibit, organized by the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, which prompted this essay, imparted an inkling of the interconnections between his works, but did little to reveal the extent or pervasiveness of his practice. Nor do many of the monographs and exhibit catalogs dedicated to his art—illustrations of individual volumes belie the many variant copies lurking in the background. Often his artist's books are described as being "one of a kind" books which does a disservice to his working methods and curtails exploration of its significance.

The problem is compounded by the inability for most critics to fully engage with Kiefer's books as books. All too often, commentary ranges from refusal to treat them as books at all to an acknowledgement of their status as artist's books which quickly gives way to an exclusively subject-based analysis, neglecting the question of why Kiefer chooses to make books in the first place.

"Is *The Rhine* a book?" Peter Schjeldahl asks in the opening line of an essay appearing in the most complete study to date of Kiefer's books, *The Books of Anselm Kiefer 1969-1990*.<sup>1</sup> He answers in the negative, defining the work instead as "visual art"—as though the two are mutually exclusive! Books must be published, claims Schjeldahl. Are for private consumption. Cannot be produced by hand. Therefore: This is not a book. Schjeldahl's simplistic definitions and proof

reveals an ignorance of the existing discourse on artist's books. Upon opening *The Rhine* the reader sees a woodcut image of the river traveling across the page spread, flowing around the back of the page, and on through the book. As one turns the pages, the view of the river changes at a pace which, while slow, is not monotonous. Kiefer uses the codex format to pace our journey down the river. Each page spread focuses our attention on a different section of the river and the narrative arc builds as our perspective changes, coming eventually to a cacophonous swirl of water which subsumes all perspective. The images alone do not tell the story, for the choice to put them in a book format allows Kiefer to incorporate issues of sequence, temporality, and narrative structure into the work of art. Schjeldahl's own pronouncement fails even him—a "nonbook" he resorts to calling it—"this book that is not a book"—struggling to speak sensibly within the confines of his own self-imposed negations.

Similarly, in the all-too-familiar inability of museums to treat books as books, the Hirshhorn Museum, in its installation of the *Heaven and Earth* exhibit, chose to display Kiefer's huge books such that, while fanned opened 360 degrees so that each page could be visible, they were nevertheless positioned close to the walls and alarmed thus preventing viewers from walking around and looking into the entire book. This, in a room that had more than enough space to place the book centrally to accommodate full access to the pages.

BEEP...BEEP...BEEP...BEEP

The alarm sounded over and over as each new person entered the room and tried in vain to see what was tantalizingly promised and frustratingly denied. Did the curators think that a quick glance at a couple of pages was sufficient to comprehend the piece? The best exhibit I've ever seen of Kiefer's books was at the Smart Museum at the University of Chicago where they held regularly-scheduled public viewings in which the books were removed from their cases and a curator paged through the volume from start to finish.

And yet, it is the very bookness of these works that should interest us—why Kiefer returns again and again to this particular format and why he produces them in his own unique way. That his books are in some way central to his work is acknowledged by many. Jack Flam calls them "among his most original and powerful work"<sup>2</sup> and Götz Adriani, along with others, points out how Kiefer uses his books to explore themes he will later paint.<sup>3</sup> While it is hard to deny that many of Kiefer's artist's books can, at first glance, appear problematic as books—opaque in their intent and structure—it was as I came to discover the nature of Kiefer's production

method that I began to see the clues it provides to reading his books.

Let me describe in more detail why I say that Kiefer editions one-of-a-kind multiples. Certainly each book that Kiefer produces is unique, no set of images or sequence of pages being exactly the same from one work to the next. At the same time, these works do not stand alone—solitary and contextless. Kiefer gives the same title to multiple books, as though they were part of an edition. And where other artists might call such works a series, numbering each piece to uniquely identify it, Kiefer rarely makes such distinctions. Not only that, Kiefer, a congenital interdisciplinary artist, may just as easily take these titles and apply them to one or more paintings or installations as well. James Hyman has detailed a similarly untraditional practice in Kiefer's use of woodcuts.

"Kiefer never editioned any of his prints: he does not count the number of impressions, nor is he concerned with consistency. As a result, the inking and paper size may vary dramatically. No version is 'correct' and each may play its part, depending on the context."<sup>4</sup>

This is a cataloger's nightmare—paintings are supposed to be unique, editions of books are supposed to be identical. There should be a one-to-one correspondence between title and work and where there isn't, one should stand in equally for the other. That is how to build a nice, neat catalogue raisonné.

But Kiefer does not work that way.

Take, for example, the book referred to at the beginning of this essay, *The Secret Life of Plants*, as displayed in the *Heaven and Earth* exhibit at the Hirshhorn Museum. The book is constructed of lead pages dotted with paint-spattered fields of stars which are labelled with the numbers NASA assigns in its star catalogs. As one progresses through the pages, white lines appear connecting various stars as if delineating constellations. The density of the stars, the connecting lines, the quantity of labels, all vary from page to page. Sometimes the NASA numbers are replaced with star names—EL NATH, SHAULA, SUBRA—primarily of Arabic origin and reflecting his interest in alchemical texts. Another version of the book, this one containing similar pages of labelled stars, additionally includes some pages spotted with larger pink blobs with black dots in the middle—what we come to find are abstracted flowers—the narrative progressing from star fields to fields of poppies. It is also worth mentioning two other pieces in the exhibit which are visually similar but with differing titles—another book entitled *For Robert Fludd* and consisting again of lead pages covered with painted poppies and stars and labelled with those NASA numbers, and a mammoth painting, *Andromeda*, which mimics the white spattered starry night on lead but gives it a horizon and



*The Secret Life of Plants*, 2001, paint and mixed media on lead; 122 inches (309.9 cm) diameter; 79 x 58 inches (200.7 x 147.3 cm) each page; Private Collection; © Anselm Kiefer; photo: Christopher Burke Studio

constellation lines that connect stars in the sky to stars on the earth.

Subsequent research revealed even more radical variants of works going by this title. Daniel Arasse's *Anselm Kiefer's* shows versions of *The Secret Life of Plants* whose pages are cardboard instead of lead and which consist of abstracted photographs of sunflowers (a stark white background with the flowers appearing as black shadows). The pages are coated with individual sunflower seeds—seeds standing in for stars—and again those NASA numbers. *Anselm Kiefer: die sieben HimmelsPaläste 1973-2001*<sup>5</sup> shows variant paintings using that same title—one that looks like the sunflower version of the book, and another that returns to the paint-spattered, star-studded lead, but this time the constellation lines are occasionally replaced with white-painted branches attached to the surface of the painting and small coats appear where major stars might be. A search of the Web sites of galleries and museums with Kiefer holdings reveals images of even more variants of *The Secret Life of Plants*—the lead books repeated in various sizes and with varying proportions of star pages to poppy pages.

So how does understanding Kiefer's artistic choices help us interpret his artist's books? The very use of the book structure implies an interest in narrative, but Kiefer's visual narratives progress at an extremely slow rate. Star field to star field, one moves through these landscapes at a human pace—observing the gradual changes in terrain that a walker sees. Out of step with the speed of modern transportation, perhaps this explains why curators, impatient with the subtlety of his narrative flow, deem it sufficient to show only a few sample pages. Add to this narrative style the