

Anselm Kiefer and the Relevance of Painting as Social Commentary

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Thomas Lawson writes in his essay “Last Exit: Painting” that art-making nowadays is a confusing business: artists concerned with the “art world” feel pressure from opposing sides, yet the resulting message is similarly discouraging in either case. An artist can succumb to a purely aesthetic approach, drawing from various trends of the past few decades to create what is more or less “easel painting,” a self-contained, causeless, bourgeois art, or he can take a more intellectual approach and consider the social implications of whatever art he intends to make. In both cases, Lawson argues, modern art exists in a thoroughly negative environment that condemns the products of the art industry as either irrelevant or irresponsible¹. What we as viewers are subjected to is an astounding array of bad art—art that does its best to resurrect the standards of modern art in inventive ways, and fails. Modernism began as an exercise in rebellion—against tradition, against mainstream culture, against art as a mute and static commodity. It underscored the necessity of having art that came away from representation and delved into abstraction. But as art, following the trends of modernism, withdrew into itself and into the self-contained worlds of its makers, the purported “nothingness” and

¹ Lawson, Thomas. “Last Exit: Painting.” Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation. Ed. Brian Wallis. Cambridge: MIT, 1996. 154.

“meaninglessness” of the art consumed the movement itself. So-called “radicals” produced art that, while claiming to refuse the bourgeois authority, actually joined it. Art that proclaimed itself as outrageous and radical by incorporating a wide range of references only did so in an extremely self-conscious way, in a manner begging for attention and recognition as such. Lawson concludes with the affirmation that painting is the “last exit,” the last means with which to truly subvert the unthinking public. Painters, if they have enough faith in the medium, can act in such a way as to truly undermine established practices—but only if they are willing to possibly “endanger his or her own position².”

Taking Lawson’s stance into consideration, we are now better prepared to consider the German artist Anselm Kiefer, whose most recent exhibition entitled “Himmel-Erde” (or “Heaven and Earth”) showcased an enormous range of his works dealing with the metaphysical and spiritual experience as well as the impact of war and the Holocaust on landscapes and terrain. Kiefer has been creating works of art since the late sixties, works that draw directly from history and culture and present some kind of meaning that is both political and poetic in content. His photographic works are some of the most direct in terms of intent—a series of his involves him standing in front of various German monuments giving the Nazi *sieg Heil* salute. Many of his paintings include found objects such as twigs and most rely on heavily textural elements—clotted paint, cracked clay, lead objects, et cetera—to lend, from a distance, perspectival depth that describes various landscapes. The Himmel-Erde show features some sculptural

² Ibid. 164.

pieces and personal sketchbooks, but by far the most arresting pieces are his large-scale paintings, most of which take up whole walls of the exhibition space. It is not merely the size that invites further consideration but the fierce nature of the marks, the gestural yet precise way in which the boundaries of earth are represented. Many employ symbolism—a man on fire, a burning bush—or text drawn from poems or of the artist’s own making littered across the blank spaces between strokes. Even the materials that Kiefer chooses are imbued with symbolic meaning—ash, lead, gold leaf, dessicated plants and seeds³.

The painting *Your Golden Hair, Margarete* is a work typical of Kiefer’s style. It is fairly large, measuring some 52 x 67 inches, and done in oil, emulsion and straw⁴. Its title and content draws from the poem “Death Fugue” written by Romanian-Jewish poet Paul Celan. The poem is set in a concentration camp, and in the painting the golden hair is depicted as piles of hay in a field bordered by a few houses. The color scheme is minimal: blue for the sky, red for the houses, and earth-tones for everything else. The strokes are brutally gestural; the lines signifying the field sometimes stray into becoming scribbles, in other places sometimes morph into text, and are dark, thick and textural. The poetry is transformed into a tactile and visual experience, the straw rising off of the canvas three-dimensionally just as the oil paint does. In viewing this painting, it is difficult to imagine the work as something other than straightforward. It is true that the artist employs various methods of abstraction and symbolism in his paintings—not only this one, but almost all of them—but the juxtaposition of the “golden hair” upon this desolate and barren landscape is almost certainly a testament to the ravages of war and

³ Orr, William. “Heaven-Earth.” Arthur Newspaper. 2006. Trent University. 20 Mae. 2006 [<http://www.trentarthur.info/archives/001100.html>].

⁴ Boucher, Brian. “Anselm Kiefer.” The Artchive. 1999 [<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/K/kiefer.html>].

cultural strife. It is a theme Kiefer revisits again and again in his works, an exhaustive and sometimes exhausting exploration of his personal relationship with his culture's history. It takes a bullheaded skeptic to interpret this painting as derisive or ironic, as anything other than sincere.

His paintings beg the question of whether art must be subversive to be socially relevant. It questions whether modernism in its original, unsullied intention, is even a worthwhile undertaking. If Kiefer's work is genuine and not ironic, is it worth less? Does the recognition and celebration of Kiefer's work—as Kiefer is considered a major player in the modern art world—signify a larger descent of the art world into worthlessness and compliance? In terms of the modernist ethos, yes. A painting that exists without attempting to undermine the bourgeois repressiveness of the gallery space, the commerce of art or the passive complicity of viewers and artists alike is not in following with what a “true” modernist painting should be. It is regressive in its desire to be seen as narrative, descriptive or representational; too straightforward in its unthinking desire to illustrate, concisely, the themes the artist wishes to explore. Indeed, despite their size, Kiefer's paintings are “easel paintings.” They are both selfish and declarative. There is no intention in Kiefer's art to remark upon its own surroundings, no hint of self-reference that recognizes itself as a certain *kind* of painting taking up a certain *kind* of space. Kiefer's paintings are intensely comfortable in the confines of a museum space, exist with the knowledge that they are meant to be there, and question their environment no further. They are meant to be seen the way they are presented, not quite as empty as décor but certainly naive in its singular intention of *telling a story*. If we listen to Lawson, everything from Kiefer's desire to be “new” by using unconventional mediums to his

status as a narrative “easel painter” indicates that the artist is simply one of many “bad artists” practicing painting in bad faith. According to Lawson, *Your Golden Hair, Margarete* is a shallow painting, a painting that makes no dent in the social structure of the bourgeoisie. It plays directly to the museum-goer with whatever social commentary or plea it is making, and as such, has little impact on shaking the art world from the inside out.

But Lawson’s ideology is flawed because, as he himself points out, he views the act of painting, or of art-making in general, as a thing with a *theoretical* base. In the writing of his essay itself, Lawson is describing the act of art-viewing as not a visceral and emotional experience but as an intellectual exercise. One goes to a gallery and considers the supposed intention of the artist, weighs it as being either “good art” or “bad art” in terms of its wider theoretical impact, and leaves it at that. But Lawson leaves out—perhaps intentionally—the aspect of art-viewing that *is* emotional, instinctual and reactive for the individual who is considering the artwork, the personal worth that a viewer gives to a painting such as *Your Golden Hair, Margarete*. Whether the artist in his studio created a painting as an act of desperation or a call for attention, is, in a way, of no interest to the viewer of the artwork. It is of little importance in the here and now of experiencing a painting such as this whether, in ten or fifteen years, the work will have somehow destroyed the convention of galleries or led to its demise. Kiefer’s work especially comes from an intensely personal place, and deals with subjects that can potentially be as equally personal and meaningful to the viewer. In this way, neither Kiefer’s work nor any work signifies an “end” to modern artwork, nor does Kiefer’s or anyone’s choice in paint as a medium denote their salvation. Painting is not a “last exit”

any more than any medium can be generalized as such, because it is merely a potential vehicle for certain kinds of representation as intended by the artist. Lawson's essay, in a way, serves only to exemplify the difference between theoretical consideration of art—such as the essay—and the physical, direct, personal consideration of art—such as that of a museum-goer. The “end of good art” has not yet been reached, and, in all probability, never will.