

Stephen Wischer

North Dakota State University | stephen.a.wischer@ndsu.edu

KEYWORDS

material resistance; imagination; language; spirituality; representation

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the spiritual works and practices of the German artist Anselm Kiefer and the lessons they provide to architectural thinking and doing in educational settings more and more driven by reductive material control. Considering Kiefer's emotionally charged works, and their ability to speak about a larger totality, the text examines the relationships between material and space, material and history, material and language, that emerge in the artist's working methods as a model for architects concerned with achieving spiritual awareness in a secular world. Through works and spaces experienced during the author's visit to Kiefer's former home and studio, La Ribaute, the paper examines how his work is a part of greater paradigmatic, spiritual works of theoretical architecture. By virtue of questioning the more banal practices of modernity, the author discusses how Kiefer's acts of creation enrich our understanding of the processes used to conceive architectural atmospheres that involve linguistic, expressive, and indeed spiritual possibilities that have not been previously considered in relation to representational making.

Italian metadata at the end of the file

Spiritual Lessons from Anselm Kiefer for Architectural Pedagogy



1

KIEFER, SPIRITUALITY, AND CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURAL REPRESENTATION

Art is spiritual yes because it makes a connection between things that are separated. It makes a connection that we don't have anymore. Science is very specialized; it separates things out. So, the only way to have some context is art.¹

This statement by Anselm Kiefer acknowledges the ways in which modern reason has depopulated religious associations once held to be self-evident in the traditional world. Following the response of Romanticism to Enlightenment ideals, it furthermore alludes to the fact that artists, poets, writers, and less often architects, have at times reinvented their own mythology and interpreted historical inspirations to open a space for the sacred in more artistic, ecumenical terms. In the remarkable book

Children of the Mire, Octavio Paz states that in the modern context individuals working in the arts are tasked with undertaking what was traditionally those of religion. This occurs not because of exclusively religious dogma but because the poetic imagination transfigures the world and reality. Common between them is that by using the tools of language and representation differently, they open gaps between the work and the world, whereby human experience is wholly transformed.

In this paper, I argue that Kiefer's works are precisely such creations, and that his interpretation of history through materials and tools (often quite familiar to our discipline) have profound implications for any architect with the desire to address the ultimate questions of human existence in the things we actually do. That is, in the tools we use,



2

and the representations we make, that engage historical realities, while returning us to a primary exchange between body, mind, and world in the act of configuring stories for architecture.

For this reason, Kiefer's work holds an affinity with many theoretical projects in architecture, which since the time of Piranesi have led to works that embody symbolic intentions in "autonomous" representations as an alternative to dominant technological values and the representation of architecture as isotropic space. As with his predecessors, his work implies that architecture may appear in representations themselves, which is a critical process intrinsic to the poetic character of his work. Additionally, because what we do leads thoughts and emotions in the act of producing work, Kiefer shows ways in which our representations might resist the current obsession with the smoothness and immediacy of conceptual approaches, demanding instead an interpretive approach that turns us back towards ourselves and the human condition from within the "density" of physical space. To make my case, we examine specific ways that Kiefer's work functions as a *model* for emergent discoveries in the dimension of materials and language as the forerunner to achieving spiritual settings, in critical, poetic terms.

ANSELM KIEFER'S LA RIBAUTE

My conviction regarding the effectiveness of Kiefer's creations as a *model* for architectural pedagogy at this level comes from my first-hand experience of his former home and studio, La Ribaute, situated outside the quiet town of Barjac in the Ardèche region in southern France.² Most astounding about the expedition through the field of towers, main amphitheater, various pavilions, and underground tunnels **Fig. 1**, is how the experience consisted of meanings of the entire place. This included reference to history, myths and poems for which the artist is well-known, but it was also the sound and silence of works and spaces, their tactile sensibilities, the resonance of materials, and even the scent and sense of humidity, all essential for images to arise through embodied perception.³ On top of a leaden room, glass houses, and broken staircases, even the rough-hewn concrete in the caves recall the artist's massive canvases of oceans made of congealed oils so thick that they too resemble the encrusted earth in some of his painted landscapes. At La Ribaute, meanings appear across the senses, as a situation or event, and this involves an ineffable exchange between inner thoughts and emotions and the external world of materials and atmospheres that



3

while going beyond language is also fully dependent upon language in a number of ways.

MATERIAL RESISTANCE AND KIEFER'S ARCHITECTURAL LANGUAGE

On one hand, the words and phrases written into books, onto walls and paintings across much of Kiefer's work indicate that he has always been involved with the interpretation of religious and mythical systems that in the traditional world sought to bridge humanity and the divine.⁴ This includes reference to Lurianic mysticism, the Old and New Testaments, Egyptian and Mesopotamian Myths, and modern works such as the haunting poetry of Paul Celan. Regarding his work, Kiefer states: "I was interested in the possibility of going back, not just through German law and history, but through the history of the concept of spirituality."⁵ Since establishing La Ribaute in 1993, the persistent broadening of his themes suggest a continuous struggle between a desire for cosmic reunion coupled with a loss of confidence in the spiritual mission of art after the tragedies of the Second World War.⁶

And yet, what may be of most interest to architects is how the physical processes undertaken in Kiefer's studios

almost always proceed with a derailment of intent that is quite different than the direct mode of language that appears in many of Kiefer's written words.⁷ Rather than transmitting stories directly, Kiefer's use of almost every tool conceivable—from paintbrush and canvas, to torches, cranes and excavators—shows how, like the myths and poems to which he refers, his act of making begets a form of language *born into the work as he makes it*. In a similar way that active living speech is a gesture, "a vocal gesticulation," wherein meaning is inseparable from the sound, shape, and rhythm of words bodying-forth into the world, we feel in Kiefer's work the need to communicate and this has as much do with the physical act of making the work as it does with the many historical paths and religious associations one can take reading into them.⁸ Speaking about the spiritual dimension of his creations, Kiefer states:

Starting is just to be in the material... To do something that is not so controlled... Then I have something in front of me that I can ask questions to. I cannot trust that another can take out the spirit [of the materials].⁹

And indeed, Kiefer's desire to be "surprised," to feel a "shock,"

1

Anselm Kiefer, towers, amphitheatre, the *Shevirat Ha-Kelim* pavilion, and tunnel at La Ribaute; photos by Charles Duprat © Anselm Kiefer, 2011.

2

Anselm Kiefer, lead chamber at La Ribaute; photo by Charles Duprat © Anselm Kiefer, 2011.

3

Anselm Kiefer, *Emanation* (Oil, emulsion, shellac, acrylic and lead on canvas, 950 x 510 cm); photo by Atelier Anselm Kiefer © Anselm Kiefer, 2000.

4

Anselm Kiefer, towers and crypt at La Ribaute; photos by Charles Duprat © Anselm Kiefer, 2012

5

Anselm Kiefer, *Shulamith* (Emulsion, shellac, acrylic paint, straw, and wood on canvas, 290.8 x 372.1 x 7.6 cm); photo by Atelier Anselm Kiefer © Anselm Kiefer, 1983.

6

Anselm Kiefer, *Walhalla*, main corridor (Lead, photograph on lead and mixed media, dimensions variable, 1992-2016), and the *Walhalla* (Oil, emulsion, shellac and lead on canvas, 380 x 380 cm, 2016) © Anselm Kiefer; photographs by George Darrell © White Cube Gallery, 2016.

where memory becomes a forward force to “mobilize” his creativity, has more and more come to depend on processes that link the transformation of materials to metaphoric dispositions of human consciousness that correspond with deeply held experiences which often extend beyond the individual who encounters them.¹⁰ This shows how the struggle, physically palpable in his creations, provides insight into an emergent dimension of architectural meaning that is not separate from his acts of making. Simply stated, in Kiefer’s work materials “speak,” and it is precisely at this level that images maintain their valence as discoverable actions that give rise to transcendent thoughts in the gestural event of producing work.¹¹

For instance, it is because Kiefer has taken lead from Cologne Cathedral, the tallest medieval structure in Germany, that the act of melting, forging, and burying it in the earth for a lead chamber **Fig. 2**, simultaneously returns the metal to a geological position, challenges particular religious associations, and sets up correlations with its traditional use as a lining for coffins and boxes used for the interment of hearts.¹² In other contexts, such as some of his paintings and sculptures, lead is also spatial **Fig. 3**, “as if liberated from the burden of the ground,” becoming “celestial, light and mobile.”¹³ Like lead, Kiefer also uses concrete in fluid or brittle form: casting it beneath the weight of earth, excavating columns in the crypt, or raising it up in towers and pulverizing it to speak of their inevitable tumbling down. **Fig. 4** Whatever the case may be—including leaving canvases outside for many years or dousing them in electrolysis basins to create patinas—it is by employing tools and materials against their typically refined and intended use that allows images to reflect and reflow, returning materials to their function of imagination. This focus on materials is not to detract from the vast literacy of Kiefer’s work, which is prolific. Rather to emphasize how his mode of producing work rematerializes language, giving the stories he is inspired by a new voice.¹⁴ For example, even movement through the spaces at La Ribaute evinces divisions of space and time that analogically relate to the material layering in paintings like *Shulamith* (1983) **Fig. 5** first inspired by the tense use of language “Black Milk of Daybreak” and “Ashen Hair” in Paul Celan’s poem *Todesfuge* about the historical nightmare of the holocaust. Like the straw, black paint, and photographic image of the Hall of Soldiers that simultaneously differentiate and unify various meanings in the overall facture of the painting, a cross-section through the hill at La Ribaute would reveal a comparable layering, burial, and exhuming, since architectural environments also function like memory, permitting many associations to intersect and overlap. Moreover, as with the procession between above and below ground throughout the compound, the verticality of Kiefer’s towers is inspired by the story of the Merkaba in the *Sefer Hechaloth*, which refers to the crossing of seven buildings towards heaven. In Ezekiel 1:4-26, the Merkaba are described as winged creatures that move in “any of the four directions” and Kiefer’s precarious towers suggest a similar omnidirectional movement, somewhere between

traditional and modern, mythical and rational, simulated and real.

According to Paz, even despite the acceleration of irony and the rotation of signs indicative of contemporary works, it is “the belief in correspondences between all beings and worlds” made possible through analogy that has “never failed to nourish Western poets.” Paz continues, “It was the principle before all principles, before the reason of philosophies and the revelation of religions.”¹⁵ Kiefer’s desire “To join together what has been separated” also encapsulates the separating and unifying tendency of metaphor that has become interwoven with the material processes of creating his work.¹⁶

In a world that tends to neglect material imagination and physical/bodily interaction in the conception of architectural projects, Kiefer’s vast range of productions shows how we may recover the primacy of embodied perception in the very development of our architectural ideas. This benefits the stories we tell by foregrounding unexpected relationships that emerge in the act of producing work, which is a form of discovery dreadfully overlooked in modern approaches to design. For architects who spend much time using language and pictures to efficiently shape and control material, Kiefer’s work reveals how “when materials become tense and alive” they enter a linguistic horizon, by becoming images that extend stories and meanings in particular, poetic terms.¹⁷

In the book *Material and Mind*, Christopher Bardt contends that senses and thought are inherently intertwined, yet our current tools allow them to become separated. He likewise asserts that because materials confront us, push up against our intellectual and emotional preconceptions, is why they necessitate imaginative acts that turn us back towards ourselves and the world. Yet, this only occurs when ideas are externalized in action and physical work. In other words, because Kiefer’s work requires struggle in both its creation and reception is why it involves a necessarily emotional, kinesthetic, and multi-sensorial dimension of communication that is far less abstracted from our experience of the world than the technical images and means of construction employed in most architecture. It is this very interaction that grants the possibility for recovering the spiritual dimension of architectural work, not in theological dogma but in an encounter with the strangeness or Otherness of words, materials, and space. As with the awareness one has in a conversation that comes with all the inflections and insinuations one might sense in spoken or gestural language, or as with the experience of music, which moves us well beneath analytical thought, the presence of Kiefer’s work shows how *pre-reflective*, bodily interactions are a fundamental condition for raising an awareness of qualitative *place* in being and thus for the appearance of sacred meanings that could be further translated into appropriate atmospheres for human events. We will return to this major point when we explore the production of student work. Before we do, we examine how Kiefer’s creations function like models and spiritual language in another way: in the sense that they allow thoughts to be





taken apart and put back together in ways that change how we see.

WALHALLA AS ARCHITECTURAL MODEL

Several years after my tour of La Ribaute, Kiefer's 2017 *Walhalla* exhibition at the White Cube Gallery in London **Fig. 6** presented a distinctly architectural participation at the level of representational modelling; not only because of the architectural themes, the monumental scale of the paintings, or construction of entire environments but because almost everything at this exhibition was made of fragments from La Ribaute. The construction of the main corridor recalls an installation in the lower regions at Barjac, towers physically constructed return in paintings, and piles of objects and materials allowed one to feel as though they physically stepped into a Kiefer painting or across the English Channel into other areas of the artist's former home and studio.

Cut off from the outside world and surrounded completely by lead, the materiality of these environments dramatically affects the mood of the place, amplifying the sound of footsteps, as if entering some of his painted interiors. Additionally, the wall-like scale of lead in the *Walhalla* paintings produces tensions between painted and physically constructed objects and spaces, combining various places and meanings all at once. In addition to the

title *Walhalla*, which refers to both a mythical afterlife for Norse heroes and the physical construction of a memorial hall for German soldiers, the darkness of Celan's poem persists in the gloom of the dimly lit corridor, in the repellent properties of lead and in traces of absent bodies in robes or empty beds. Although casting long shadows over modern optimism, still wrought with the incomprehensible horrors of war, such work shows how poetic images emerge across decades of production, on the other sides of different works. Because Kiefer's paintings and full-scale environments always give us something that needs to be reclaimed between various works, this metaphoric depth allows our senses to translate one another, showing how the lived perspective we perceive is not a geometric or photographic one. In so doing, Kiefer's work provides an example of the generative capacity of architectural representation that is dramatically different from the high-speed proliferation of images today. Using the power of projections to engage and transform, it shows how we too may employ strategies that preserve a space for the *invisible* in the creation and contemplation of architectural work.

For the very reason that the fragmentary and layered nature of Kiefer's work involves a multitude of tensions between tactility, optical depth, and the lived experience of space, it engages the narrative structure of reality at both emotional and cognitive levels. Holding traces and meanings that



6

while externally present, come into us, complete themselves in us, and “alter our outward awareness,” it presents significant alternatives for the joining of various models in the act of creating work that leads us back to the big questions of human existence in a profoundly spiritual way.¹⁸ Such an approach becomes especially relevant when brought in contact with architectural programs, and more commonly used tools of architectural design, because it shows how our own creations need not depend upon processing information like a computer but can be discovered through a search for symbolic interconnectedness arising from the enactive dimension of human meaning, always dependent upon language.

PEDAGOGICAL CORRELATIONS: EMBODIED ARTEFACTS AND EMERGENT LANGUAGE IN ARCHITECTURAL REPRESENTATION

In the preceding pages I have related works and spaces from La Ribaute to Kiefer’s *Walhalla* exhibition, endeavoring to show how the act of making is itself the most important part of the mutual relationship of theory and practice, thinking and doing, crucial for the appearance of spiritual meaning. Of specific interest is how Kiefer’s work raises ideas about architectural settings that involve spatial encounter as central to our personal and cultural understanding, even if these are unbuildable in conventional terms. Seeing

as Kiefer’s unyielding experimentation accentuates how material and mind interweave through various tools and modes of representation it shows itself to be a new model of value for designers concerned with bringing forth an imaginative, embodied engagement that involves ties between materiality, representation, and language. Moreover, because Kiefer’s work is like language, in the sense that it gathers previous expressions together in an eternity of possibilities always ready to be remade, it enables different times and meanings to be placed in special relationships. This requires a process of restoring continuity in the action of producing work that allows one to see the past as part of present experience and action, as something transformable. For these reasons, Kiefer’s work has served as inspiration for my teaching architectural thesis studios, which depends on an immersion in language and stories that become the site for parallel expressions in material works. Although differing from Kiefer’s explorations in the sense that architectural projects are aimed at fostering atmospheres and programs for other people, this approach also draws influence from Kiefer since it emphasizes the representational capacity of both unbuilt *and* built work that points beyond itself to bring what is far near.

To establish context, student thesis proposals are first broadened by research done in a lockstep seminar that traces a path through the development of Western thought

from preclassical Greece to contemporary debates between hermeneutics and deconstruction. The goal is to elucidate dramatic changes in culture after the rise of Positivism, exploring its residual effects on architectural thinking and doing. This alone is a crucial part of establishing a critical context for action. Understanding changes in the broader continuum of culture opens a space for students to sharpen their self-understanding in relation to specific topics, allowing them to effectively “use history as a material” in the sense that Kiefer has famously proposed. Importantly, such contextualization also indirectly addresses the migration of religious feeling “into the realm of the arts,” allowing the poetic image to be recognized as common to mythology and spiritual experience even in the modern context.¹⁹

Following this development, students then embark on creating an artefact (or series of artefacts) for the retelling of such stories, and to serve as a bridgework for further translations that help generate language towards specific programs and atmospheres. Like the research students begin with, which allows them to share their questions with other cultural works, the physical creation of artefacts proceed with a certain resistance to immediate ideas and common approaches; opening a space to reconcile their questions through different mediums and scales of work. Unlike most tools architects use to efficiently transcribe ideas into the design of a building, the intent of making physical artefacts is to deliberately interrupt conventional procedures to unlock potential alternatives by drawing various realities together. As with Kiefer, this hermeneutic process places the body at the center of both the creation and reception of the work, emphasizing the discovery and generation of meaningful plots and stories through the incarnation of space, time, memory and imagination, which remains intrinsic to spiritual architecture.

Over about a decade, these heuristic creations have at times drawn upon and transformed some of Kiefer’s topics and themes. **Fig. 7** This has involved imagining a better future even amid the horrors of the Second World War by implicating multiple stories and sites. In Daniel Ness’ artefact (2021) this included the unconcealing of the Yizkor Bikher Memorial Books, where broken narratives and fractured memories of the holocaust are metaphorically raised from a fabric terrain of sand and dust in a performative installation. Ashley Kilzer’s thesis (2017) explored the “reversible” dimension of death through memories that survive in the living, emerging from an analogical landscape made of a body-sized shroud of paint and seeds. Even a pataphysical machine by Hannah Langr (2018) borrows clues from the spiritual use of modern technology in Kiefer’s work through the creation of a participatory, linguistic algorithm. Most pressing, are projects that draw from Kiefer’s transformation of materials in the exploration of programs that attempt to mediate ecological disaster by showing the codependent and animate interconnection between language, consciousness and the “more-than-human world.”²⁰

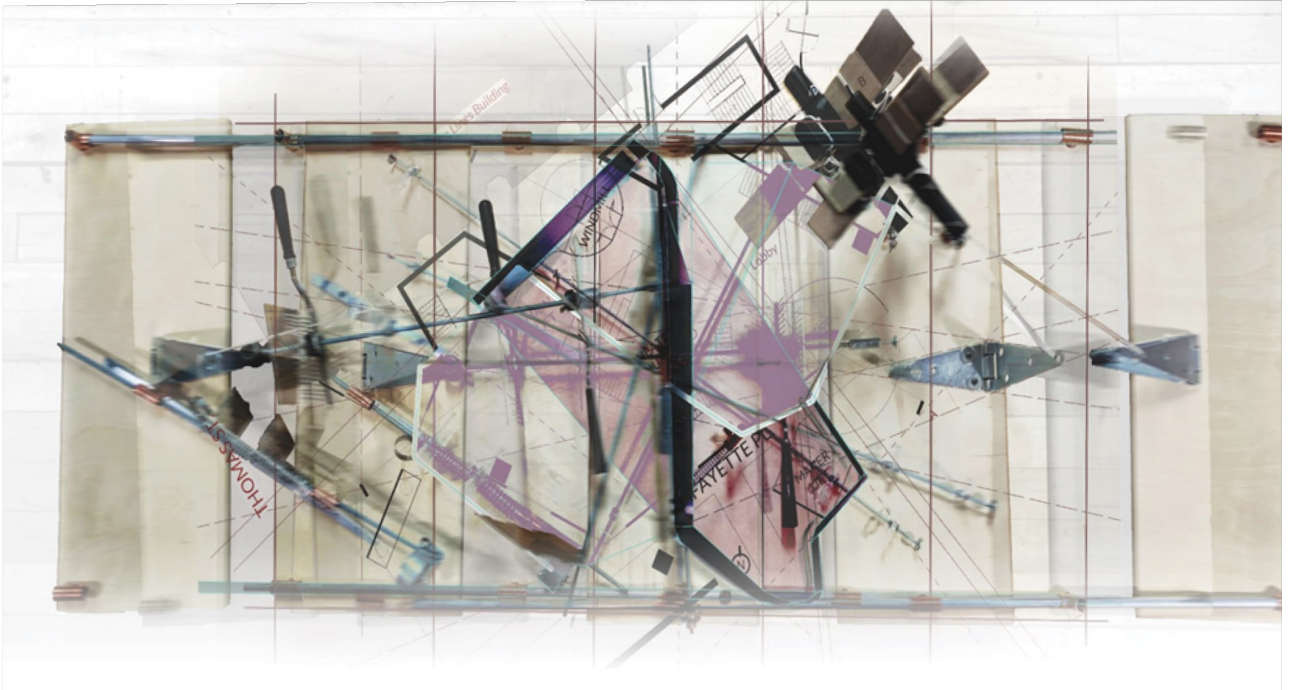
Drawing inspiration from Kiefer, all such projects endeavor to show how materials may exhibit cultural associations

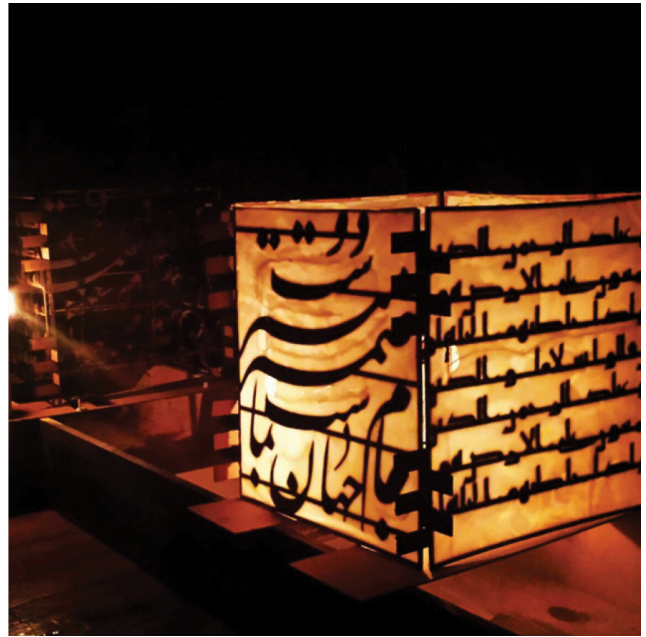
along with powerful physical and psychological effects that oblige those who encounter them to recognize more than just products of functional requirements. Rather than seeing imaginative projection as a conceptual system of casting information into the world, this process involves a reliance on meanings built up from a sensual involvement with material as central to the process of seeking out images. Here, students reimagine meaningful situations, not as an aesthetic or intellectual operation but through the projective dimension of spatial imagination. The creation of artefacts thus accentuates how material and mind interweave through various tools and modes of representation. In the best cases, this opens channels and pathways that direct materials into fertile combinations whereby unforeseen circumstances provide access to stories that emerge out of situations students’ form.

In the case of Niloufar Alenjery, whose topic dealt with the disappearance of languages amid the global dominance of modern dialects, a series of artefacts were inspired by the act of reading and listening to language precisely by engaging with silence. Her intent was to address the loss of entire worlds when languages go extinct, while also reinvigorating alienated languages through the program of a rare book library.

Instead of beginning with typical representations that apply ideas of time and space to architectural models, Alenjery drew inspiration from within the multisensorial situation of time and space itself. Her development of a cuneiform woodcut block and three lanterns **Fig. 8** with dead languages traced onto their surfaces produced moving shadows on the wall as they turned, expressing the vociferation of language that is woven out of silence by those who speak. Of this experience, Alenjery states: “Once the candle is lit, a parallel world opens up around them, starting a mute conversation with their surroundings, telling the story of the lost tongues.”²¹

Alenjery’s third artefact was an over-sized book **Fig. 9** that contained all the lost languages of the world; inspired by the mythic rivers of memory (Mnemosyne) and forgetting (Lethe). Just as Kiefer’s processes introduce an element of tension at a material level, the creation of this book arose in the struggle between matter and ideas, wherein images and words emerge and recede through mud, sand, melted wax, concrete and fabric mesh, as pages are turned. Most importantly, the process of leafing through and creating the book allowed ideas to rely on the manipulation of materials, where meanings shift and grow depending on how they are used. For Alenjery, this involved indications and utterances at a tactile and muscular level to inform the design **Fig. 10**, where the public library and rare book chambers “collide to charge the space with an ephemeral sense of awakening.”²² Like the flow of a book: the spatial-temporal experience was intended to allow memories to emerge, dissolve, and reappear, as one moves between the chambers; where “walking paths in the museum guide the body between the silent poetry of the structure, the historical weight of the cuneiforms, and ephemeral echoes from visitors passing by.”²³ Just as memory and forgetting are part of continuous

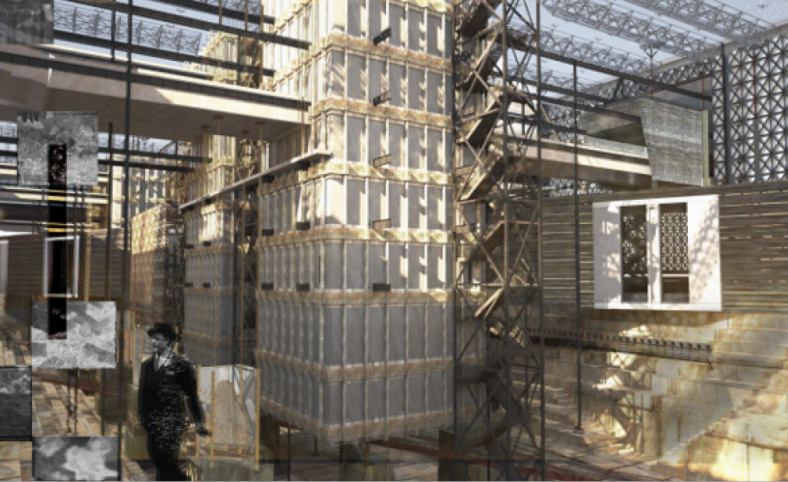
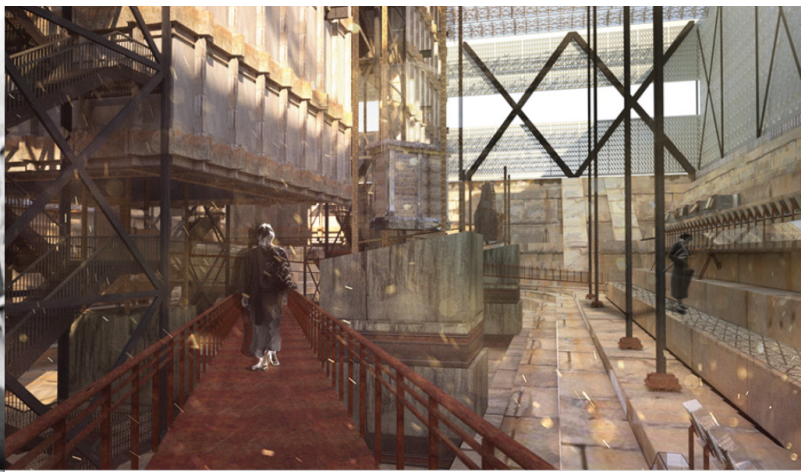
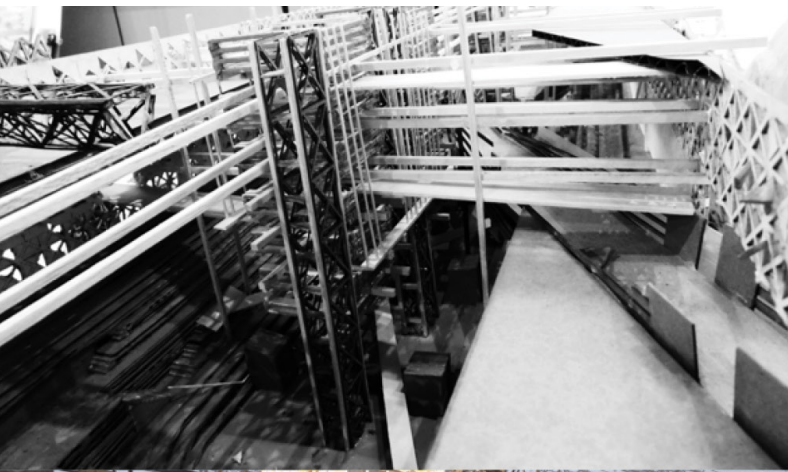




change in human perception, the light passing through layers of aged materials, objects, and movement of people, sought to allow recent history and more distant subjects and epochs to intertwine. Subsequent translations arising from the construction of these artefacts also informed the structural design of the building. Like the rod holding the lanterns in tension before being released, or as with the binding for the pages of the book, “main structural beams help keep the hovering archive chambers connected, as well as creating a sense of unity throughout the whole design.”²⁴ Like the ubiquitous yet always changing nature of language, such translations – from artefacts to more conventional architectural models – all focused on the interplay of revealing and concealing in human perception, bringing together the rerunning of themes in the book, the turning of the lanterns, and movement up and down vertical passages that correlate with the now absent rising and lowering of water in the abandoned historic Dry Dock 1 in the Brooklyn Navy Yard where the design is hypothetically placed.²⁵ Interpreting books as vessels of spiritual knowledge, the image of architecture as a massive ship, leaving and returning to various harbours, resounded with the weaving of languages and stories from the many travellers and immigrants that collectively make up the city and larger culture. Inadvertently, the design also recalled the two lines of language in Kiefer’s work: housing both written and therefore frozen yet presumably immortal language while providing a place to rematerialize stories in the gestural frame of architecture.

What must be emphasized is that like emerging language itself, which is not thought before speaking or even during speech but wherein *language becomes thought*, metaphors in such projects emerge not by knowing precisely what will happen, but by responding, discovering and thinking on the spot. Here, “meaning feeds on the density of imagery released by the poem,” in the “aura surrounding speech.”²⁶ Certainly, even when the artefact is left behind, metaphoric language moves meanings to other models to make sense of the whole. Yet, this only happens because the interaction with material preserves the interpretive distance necessary for meanings to be recuperated in the first place. Hence, in a similar way that Kiefer has folded relationships back-and-forth between many works or has used materials in ways that resist initial ideas, this approach depends upon a transformative process whereby ideas must go missing or be completely altered in order to be reimagined meaningfully. It is thus by leaving behind the directness of visual models and denotative language that such creations create a “coherent deformation” that compels further translations that drive forward the practice of storytelling whereby students find thoughts in the things they do.²⁷ Indeed, this enactment amounts to a process of “becoming language” in the sense that it impels an inner dialogue between materials and images enriched by the reality of the work itself. It is the act of creating tangible artefacts that therefore enables special moments, intense mood, and vividness of images to permit intangible stories to become





imaginatively “real,” presenting possibilities for a spiritual “world making” in architectural terms.²⁸ Although such projects draw upon a similar involvement with materials and representation as Kiefer (necessary to draw out associations that may otherwise remain hidden) it is also important to recognize crucial differences between the artist’s work and the work produced for architectural projects. Whereas Kiefer’s approach to spirituality seems to consecrate a succession of paradoxes that depend upon instability between many possible meanings, the condensation of mixed forms and content in architectural projects rely less on hermetic circularity than a gathering together of meanings that allow the present moment to shine in the creation of attuned atmospheres. According to Bardt, this depends on a crucial step “that leaves behind a contingent form in order to build deep ties with eventual construction logic.” Instead of the drawing up associations in the self-contained cosmos of an artist’s oeuvre, the work produced by architects “pivots material creations from being to meaning, through narrative language, towards the limits and values of particular cultural situations.”²⁹ In other words, while each depend upon a spiritual use of materials

to disrupt initial concepts in order to reawaken an embodied engagement with the world, the approach taken by architects involves an ethical and empathic imagination aimed towards the creation of meaningful atmospheres for the use and habits of other human beings. Consistent with the paradoxical essence of Kiefer’s work it is nonetheless its sustained sense of ambiguity that offers important lessons for architects. In our present context, more-and-more driven by the application of direct information, Kiefer’s work provides a model for “seeing as” and “imagining as if” that, like fiction, offers insight about the generative capacity of our own creations in terms of the conception and realization of architectural places.³⁰ It accomplishes this by firstly revealing how the external environment is not separate from the internal world of thoughts and emotions. Indeed the “emptiness” often associated with Kiefer’s work reveals a “codependency” between our environments, actions and perception.³¹ This likewise shows how achieving a non-dualistic, embodied consciousness resonant with spirituality in today’s world is not some form of mystical delirium experienced alone, but rather something deeply shared with others through

collective memory aided by actions and environments in the world. Kiefer's rhetorical act of building thus offers promising lessons for architects since it allows various materials, different spaces and ideas to be transformed in the fullness of the present moment, allowing us to see in a new light.

RITUAL MAKING AND SPIRITUAL ARCHITECTURE

While it is true that Kiefer's oeuvre can be constructed in numerous ways, when understood as both works of art and forms of representational modelling it demonstrates its essential value to the conception and production of spiritual architecture. It shows this task to be found not in prosaic construction but in unearthing dimensions of consciousness typically obscured by analytical approaches. Following insights of the historian and theorist Alberto Pérez-Gómez, Kiefer's work can thus be understood to achieve its spiritual status by "remaining open to further possibilities for the poetic to emerge as an embodied image in stark contrast with the optical (reductive image)" that remains predominant in our scientifically driven culture.³² Employing and reversing the tools and processes of our

7
Mixed media artefacts by Daniel Ness, Ashley Kilzer, and Hannah Langr (dimensions variable) from North Dakota State University; photos © Daniel Ness, Ashley Kilzer, and Hannah Langr, 2017–2021.

8
Niloufar Alenjery, lanterns, and cuneiform artefacts (Fabric, concrete, wax, mud and laser cut wood, dimensions variable) from North Dakota State University; photos © Niloufar Alenjery, 2016

9
Niloufar Alenjery, *The Book of Aletheia* and details of pages (Mud, sand, wax, concrete, fabric mesh, sealer, ink and charcoal on paper, 246 x 182 x 16 cm) from North Dakota State University; photos © Niloufar Alenjery, 2016.

10
Niloufar Alenjery, *The International Rare Books Library of New York*, models and drawings from North Dakota State University; images © Niloufar Alenjery, 2016. photos © Niloufar Alenjery, 2016..

post-industrial world, Kiefer's creations operate against prosaic or scientific language and therefore continue to weaken the strong values of our secularized culture. It accomplishes this by showing how our environments (which *are* our world) can beckon a bodily imagining that may awaken "the vividness and intensity of metaphor, which remains the basis of passionate spirituality."³³

Considering the current reductions that conventional as well as parametric or algorithmically generated software promote against human interpretation, it is therefore the metaphorizing of meanings in Kiefer's work that allows it to be seen as a critical form of architectural envisioning. Its principal value for designers is that it shows how we may employ almost any combination of materials or techniques in ways that put us in touch with a mythopoetic reality. As opposed to the capacity of digital software to "innovate" at the expense of context and meaning, Kiefer's exploration of twenty-first-century materials, forms, symbols, and their relationship to cultural storytelling reveal the ecumenical value of modern spirituality in art by employing technology towards building in a profoundly sacred way.

Unlike the picture-models of buildings we typically make, which place us outside the object being depicted and that lead us to misconceive buildings as objects in linear time, such lessons prove valuable in pedagogical settings because they imbue time and space with the powers of the student's own imagination, making possible the exercise of other specific operations in linguistic terms. Such an approach ultimately challenges the third-person picture (ultimately Cartesian belief), also the space of computers, typically understood as reality today. Very different from the reductive aims of typical architectural productions that since the eighteenth century have tended to disconnect language and physical making, Kiefer's creations speak to the importance of embodiment and ritual making as a fundamental prerequisite for spiritual architectural practice. In this way, such an approach is resonant with traditional grounds of cultural production which were always meaningfully woven into the world through stories and skillful action. As such, Kiefer's work continues to speak of possibilities for evoking a contemporary form of spiritual experience manifested through acts of translation towards the creation of poetic environments.

¹ From an interview between Anselm Kiefer and Tim Marlow about "Art, Religion and Spirituality," given on occasion of the opening of Kiefer's exhibition at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, September 2010. "Anselm Kiefer: Art is Spiritual," video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vIm5tjstqA>.

² Developed in 1993, La Ribaute occupies the site of an abandoned silkworm nursery and consists of an ensemble of installations, paintings, sculptures, and architectural environments crafted by Kiefer over a period of fifteen years.

³ Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement, Architectural Meaning after the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2016), 148.

⁴ As discussed by Daniel Siedell, Kiefer is perhaps the most prominent living artist "to presume art's capacity (and responsibility) to respond to religious and spiritual questions," because of the impermeable dimension of our scientific context. See Siedell's essay "Where Do You Stand: Anselm Kiefer's Visual and Verbal Artifacts," *Image, Art, Faith Mystery* 77 (2013). Accessed October 2022, <https://imagejournal.org/article/where-do-you-stand/>

⁵ Michael Auping, *Anselm Kiefer: Heaven and Earth* (Fort Worth, TX: Modern Art

Museum of Fort Worth, 2006), 18.

⁶ Auping, *Anselm Kiefer*, 43–4.

⁷ To query the experience of La Ribaute at level beneath the more common semiotic level it is important to distinguish this difference to better enable new lessons from Kiefer in the production of significant architectural places.

⁸ David Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), 74.

⁹ See Kiefer's interview with Tim Marlow at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art entitled "Anselm Kiefer: Art is Spiritual," January 20, 2015, video, 12:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vIm5tjstqA>.

¹⁰ Danièle Cohn, *Anselm Kiefer: Studios* (Paris: Flammarion, 2013), 240.

¹¹ I here follow Paul Ricoeur's suggestion that the "seeing as" through metaphor joins "verbal meaning with imagistic fullness [where] the non-verbal and the verbal are firmly united at the core of the image-ing function of language." See Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 213.

¹² Armin Zweite, *The High Priestess* (London: Abrams in association with Anthony d'Offay Gallery, 1989), 90.

¹³ Cohn, *Anselm Kiefer*, 28.

¹⁴ Janne Sirén, "Anselm Kiefer and the Realms of Language," in *Anselm Kiefer: Superstrings, runes, the norms, gordian knot* (London: White Cube, 2020), 50–2.

¹⁵ Octavio Paz, *Children of the Mire: Modern Poetry from Romanticism to the Avant-Garde*, trans. Rachel Phillips (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 56.

¹⁶ Cohn, *Anselm Kiefer*, 26.

¹⁷ I here follow Octavio Paz' suggestion that "as soon as brute sounds or colors are perceived by human consciousness and touched by human hands, their nature changes and they enter a linguistic horizon, becoming materials for works. Paz summarizes: "And all works end in meaning; whatever man touches is tinged with intentionality: It's a going toward... Man's world is a world of meaning. It tolerates ambiguity, contradiction, madness, or confusion, but not lack of meaning." See Octavio Paz, *The Bow and the Lyre*, trans. Rachel Phillips and Donald Gardner (New York: Arcade, 1990), 9.

¹⁸ Christopher Bardt, *Material and Mind* (Boston: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2019), 89.

¹⁹ Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement*, 218.

²⁰ Such ecologically focused projects have drawn influence from David Abram's interpretation of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's exploration of embodiment and language in the book *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017).

²¹ Niloufar Alenjeri, "Aletheia and the Unforgetting of Language: The International Rare Books Library of New York" (M. Arch Thesis, North Dakota State University, 2016), 205.

²² Alenjeri, "Aletheia and the Unforgetting of Language," 224.

²³ Alenjeri, "Aletheia and the Unforgetting of Language," 236.

²⁴ Alenjeri, "Aletheia and the Unforgetting of Language," 221.

²⁵ Bardt, *Material and Mind*, 170.

²⁶ Following Gaston Bachelard, Paul Ricoeur suggests that the poetic image places us at "the origin of the speaking being... The poem gives birth to images that become a new being in our language, expressing us by making us what it expresses." Thus, the poetic image is "at once a becoming of expression, and a becoming of our being. Here, expression creates being... one would not be able to mediate in a zone that preceded language." Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 214.

²⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, trans. John O'Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 91.

²⁸ Marco Frascari, "An architectural good-life can be built, explained and taught only through storytelling," in *Reading Architecture and Culture: Researching Buildings, Spaces and Documents* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 227.

²⁹ Bardt, *Material and Mind*, 272.

³⁰ Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement*, 204.

³¹ Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement*, 231.

³² Pérez-Gómez, *Built Upon Love, Architectural Longing after Ethics and Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2006), 109.

³³ Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement*, 230.

BIBLIOGRAFIA

- ABRAMS, DAVID. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. New York: Vintage Books, 2017.
- ALENJERY, NILOUFAR. "Alethia and the Unforgetting of Language: The International Rare Books Library of New York." M. Arch thesis. North Dakota State University, 2016.
- ARASSE, DANIEL. *Anselm Kiefer*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 2001.
- AUPING, MICHAEL. *Anselm Kiefer: Heaven and Earth*. Fort Worth: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, in association with Prestel, 2006.
- BACHELARD, GASTON. *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie*. Translated by Collette Gaudin. Putnam, CT: Spring Publications, 2014.
- BACHELARD, GASTON. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston MA: Beacon Press, 1994.
- BARDT, CHRISTOPHER. *Material and Mind*. Boston: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2019.
- BRÜDERLIN, MARKUS. "The Exhibition 'the Seven Heavenly Palaces, Passages through Worlds and Cosmic Spaces.'" In *Anselm Kiefer: the Seven Heavenly Palaces 1973-2001*, 32–35. Riehen: Fondation Beyeler, 2001.
- COHN, DANIELÈ. *Anselm Kiefer: Studios*. Paris: Flammarion Publishers, 2013.
- FRASCARI, MARCO. "An architectural good-life can be built, explained and taught only through Storytelling." In *Reading Architecture and Culture: Researching Buildings, Spaces and Documents*, 224–34. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- FRASCARI, MARCO. *Eleven Exercises in the Art of Architectural Drawing: Slow Food for the Architect's Imagination*. New York: Routledge, 2011.
- GRASSI, ERNESTO. *The Primordial Metaphor*. Translated by Laura Pietropaolo and Manuela Scarci. New York: Centre for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies State University of New York at Binghamton, 1994.
- KIEFER, ANSELM. *Anselm Kiefer Notebooks, Vol 1: 1998-1999*. Translated by Tess Lewis. London, New York: Seagull Books, 2015.
- McEVILLEY, THOMAS. *Anselm Kiefer: Let A Thousand Flowers Bloom*. London: Anthony d'Offay Gallery, 2009.
- MERLEAU-PONTY, MAURICE. "Eye and Mind." In *The Primacy of Perception*. Evanston, USA: Northwestern University Press, 1964.
- MERLEAU-PONTY, MAURICE. *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- MERLEAU-PONTY, MAURICE. *The Prose of the World*. Translated by John O'Neill. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991.
- PAZ, OCTAVIO. *Children of the Mire: Modern Poetry from Romanticism to the Avant-Garde*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- PAZ, OCTAVIO. *The Bow and the Lyre*. Translated by Rachel Phillips and Donald Gardner. New York: Arcade, 1990.
- PÉREZ-GÓMEZ, ALBERTO. *Attunement: Architectural Meaning after the Crisis of Modern Science*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2016.
- PÉREZ-GÓMEZ, ALBERTO. *Built Upon Love: Architectural Longing after Ethics and Aesthetics*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2006.
- PÉREZ-GÓMEZ, ALBERTO. "Poetic Language and Architectural Meaning." In *Timely Meditations: Selected Essays on Architecture Vol. 2*. Montreal: Right Angle International, 2016.
- RICOEUR, PAUL. *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*. Edited by Don Ihde. Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974.
- RICOEUR, PAUL. "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality." In *Man and World: An International Philosophical Review* 12.2 (1979): 123–41.
- RICOEUR, PAUL. *The Rule of Metaphor*. Translated by Robert Czerny. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977.
- SIEDELL, DANIEL. "Where Do You Stand? Anselm Kiefer's Visual and Verbal Artefacts." *Image Journal* 77 (2013). Accessed October 2022, <https://imagejournal.org/article/where-do-you-stand/>
- SIRÉN, JANNE. "Anselm Kiefer and the Realms of Language." In *Anselm Kiefer: Superstrings, runes, the norms, gordian knot*. London: White Cube, 2020.
- STONARD, JOHN-PAUL. "Walhalla." In *Anselm Kiefer: Walhalla*. London: White Cube Gallery, 2016.
- ZWEITE, ARMIN. *The High Priestess*. London: Abrams in association with Anthony d'Offay Gallery, 1989.

Lezioni spirituali da Anselm Kiefer per una pedagogia dell'architettura.

Stephen Wischer

KEYWORDS

resistenza materiale; immaginazione; linguaggio; spiritualità; rappresentazione

ABSTRACT

Questo articolo esamina le opere e le pratiche spirituali dell'artista tedesco Anselm Kiefer e gli insegnamenti che esse forniscono al pensiero e al fare architettonico in contesti educativi sempre più guidati da un limitato coinvolgimento nell'uso dei materiali durante la progettazione. Considerando le opere, particolarmente emotive, di Kiefer e la loro capacità di parlare di una collettività ampia, il saggio esamina le relazioni tra materiale e spazio, materiale e storia, materiale e linguaggio che emergono nei metodi di lavoro dell'artista come modello per gli architetti che tentano di raggiungere una maggiore consapevolezza spirituale in un mondo secolare. Attraverso le opere e gli spazi osservati durante una visita dell'autore all'ex casa e studio di Kiefer, La Ribaute, il testo analizza come il suo lavoro sia parte di grandi opere paradigmatiche e spirituali della teoria dell'architettura. Mettendo in discussione le pratiche più banali della modernità, il paper offre una riflessione su come gli atti di creazione di Kiefer arricchiscono la nostra comprensione dei processi utilizzati per concepire atmosfere architettoniche che coinvolgono possibilità linguistiche, espressive e spirituali che non sono state considerate in precedenza in relazione al fare rappresentativo.

Stephen Wischer

North Dakota State University
stephen.a.wischer@ndsu.edu

Stephen Wischer è professore associato di architettura e tiene corsi di storia, teoria e progettazione alla North Dakota State University. A partire dai suoi studi in arte e architettura (BFA, M.Arch, MFA, Ph.D.), i suoi temi di insegnamento si concentrano sulla rappresentazione materiale e la narrazione poetica nella formazione architettonica.

Mario Bevilacqua teaches History of Architecture at the Department of Architecture of the University of Florence. On urban and architectural images he has published, among many contributions, a monograph on G.B. Nolli's Map of Rome, and the book Piante di Roma da Bufalini a Nolli. Un modello europeo.