Peace Prize of the German Book Trade 2008
Greeting Gottfried Honnefelder
Laudatory speech by Werner Spies
Acceptance Speech by Anselm Kiefer

Anselm Kiefer

2008
Friedländer 2007
Lepenies 2006
Pamuk 2005
Esterházy 2004
Sontag 2003
Achebe 2002
Habermas 2001
Djébar 2000
Stern 1999
Walser 1998
Kemal 1997
Vargas Llosa 1996
Schimmel 1995
Semprún 1994
Schorlemmer 1993
Oz 1992
Konrád 1991
Dedécou 1990
Havel 1989
Lenz 1988
Jonas 1987
Bartoszewski 1986
Kollek 1985
Paz 1984
Sperber 1983
Kenna 1982
Kopelew 1981
Cardenal 1980
Menuhin 1979
Lindgren 1978
Kolakowski 1977
Frisch 1976
Grosser 1975
Frère Roger 1974
The Club of Rome 1973
Korczak 1972
Dönhoff 1971
Myrdal 1970
Mitscherlich 1969
Senghor 1968
Bloch 1967
Bea/Visser ’t Hooft 1966
Sachs 1965
Marcel 1964
Weizsäcker 1963
Tillich 1962
Radhakrishnan 1961
Gollancz 1960
Heuss 1959
Jaspers 1958
Wilder 1957
Schneider 1956
Hesse 1955
Burckhardt 1954
Buber 1953
Guardini 1952
Schweitzer 1951
Tau 1950
It was the power of the book that in 1949 inspired the Börsenverein to set up a Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. Because the Börsenverein had become aware – extremely painfully – of the fact that with the commodity book, it was responsible for an instrument of power, and had become involved in the misuse of this powerful instrument by the unjust regime of the years 1933-45, serving early on as an accomplice in a policy that began as discrimination against inconvenient worlds of thought and swiftly continued with bans on authors and book burnings. As never before, image and language had become instruments of lies, of hate and of destruction. After the war, a declared belief in the book as a vehicle for language and images that unites and reconciles was the only response for the Börsenverein to the experience of shameful misuse and its own guilt.

A greater sense of responsibility must accrue from one's failure. And today, this is more imperative than ever. Because the ability to misuse images and words has not diminished. Through the new discipline of "visual studies", we know more than ever before that alongside the logic of words, there is one of images, and that the language of the image profoundly determines us and our world and influences us more than we ever suspected. But it is precisely this knowledge that reveals not only the suggestive power of words and pictures, but also enables us to recognise the ambivalence of the swollen flood of signs and images created by reproducibility and digitisation, truly threatening to swamp the reader and the viewer. Because nothing needs greater care in its handling than the word – and perhaps even more – the image.

If the availability of the technical sequence of signs bearing intellectual meaning expands into the immense and arbitrary, everything is in danger of becoming immaterial and thus meaningless in the end. So much will depend on the forms and laws to which we choose to commit ourselves in dealing with the new world of signs. Because "culture" quite literally refers to the manner of a behaviour that responds to words and pictures with respect, because they are not just randomly available items of information, but can have a reliable, public and lasting significance.

Is it not inevitable for words and pictures to be devalued if their intellectual authorship vanishes, their form is left unprotected and economic exploitation marginalises cultural significance? Of course we no longer live in the days of the sacred commodity, the book. But anyone who in cultural ignorance and adherence to false economic considerations pursues a policy of giving unlimited scope to the piracy of digital books and of allowing the resultant developments to run their course, should bear in mind the consequences for a culture that depends on the indispensable cornerstones of individual creativity and intellectual property.

The Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels is grateful that year after year, it can give expression to this trust in the power of the word and the image, a power that unlocks the truth and facilitates understanding. And it is delighted to be able to do so this year by presenting the prize to an artist who, more than almost any other, has explored the ambivalent power of pictures, their depths and shallows, their meaning and their limitations.

Pictures with the power to face the facts of our age do not portray an image of peace, nor – like the art of times past – do they even conjure up the hope of auspicious promise. If the art of our time were to attempt this, then surely only at the expense of lying. Because only "the marks of destruction – according to Adorno’s clear-sighted diagnosis – are the authentic hallmarks of the modern age". Nothing characterises the language of literature and of the analytical thinking of our time as much as the experience of having first and foremost to win back the power of speech from the prevailing speechlessness. "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" – Ingeborg Bachmann made use of this final proposition from Wittgenstein’s Tractatus to be able to name the experience of her own speechlessness.

But can the visual art work still speak, when we are left speechless? Probably only if art gives up on the attempt to find for itself yet again the evocative and reconciliatory formula for interpretation and allows itself to be "overwhelmed" by the negative dialectic which our enlightenment seems unable to dispel. Only art that does not evade the "conflicitive area of history", that goes "further and further back", back to "what cannot be said", to
the "abyss" that opens up because "we don't know why we're here", that conjures up the "truth of bygone myths", in order to give visibility to our own lack of place – that art can perhaps discover the place of truth in the labyrinth in which we are entangled.

And what does art that is capable of that, have to do with peace? Is it not more likely to reveal the "war in one's own head"? Does it not lead into the "desert within", where the paths to the anticipated destination all come to nothing? Or is it precisely art that does not lead us out of the labyrinth, but into our own labyrinth and – shockingly enough – confronts us with the marks of destruction, the blackest depths, the not yet humanised within our being, that grants us those insights without which there can be no capacity for peace?

Anyone who is familiar with Anselm Kiefer's work will know that with these questions and propositions surrounding art, I have been talking the whole time about him, and to no small part, using his own words to do so.

In the seventy-fifth year after the Nazi book burnings, it is very important to the Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels that with the award of this prize to Anselm Kiefer, it can emphasise once again its declared belief in the power of the book to bring about peace, the belief to which it resolved in 1949 with the endowment of the Peace Prize – against the background of the most bitter experiences.

To listen to words in praise of Kiefer's work from someone who from Paris has been observing the world's art and literature for decades, is a particular piece of good fortune: we are delighted that Werner Spies – author of catalogues of the works and monographs of the most important 20th century artists, professor at the most famous German art academies, director of the Musée national d'art moderne in the Centre Pompidou, the moving spirit behind globally successful exhibitions and a leading critic in the daily press for decades – has accepted our invitation to pay tribute to Anselm Kiefer. I very much welcome Werner Spies here today.

Thank you all for coming and for the sense of common bond thus demonstrated – with the Börsenverein, with the cause of books and with the blessing of peace. But in particular, with the Peace Prize laureate of 2008: Anselm Kiefer.
Werner Spies
Laudatory speech

This distinguished award goes for the first time this year to a painter, a world-famous painter from Germany. It is safe to assume that the discussion sparked by this choice, surprising for some, will have repercussions beyond the art scene. It is important to emphasize that artists are just as indispensable intellectual partners for society as composers, scientists and authors. Kiefer’s involvement with the past and his own period represents a contribution that is extremely relevant to the purpose of the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade: to fight against forgetting and for enlightenment, even if it means annoying people in the process. The award winner’s paintings and installations are shot through with large-scale and often painful texts. As if written in letters of flame, they are impossible to overlook. In a purposely childlike hand, Kiefer inscribes quotations from Ingeborg Bachmann, Paul Celan, Chlebnikov, or Bible verses on his works. His choices by no means merely provide titles – we immediately realize that the texts are integral parts of the works. This attack on the semantic autonomy of painting is so baffling that, in an essay on Kiefer, one commentator stated that this process reflects an “astonishing doubt regarding the power of imagery.” This judgement is perfectly apt. For it says something fundamental about the disturbance to which Kiefer intends to subject painting.

To put it figuratively, Kiefer’s works continually close like doors that do not shut properly. And these doors, in turn, open on the spaces of literature. We frequently find ourselves wandering through landscapes and architectural settings. We are confronted by a complex, precipitous, often eerie topography. We come from one place to the next, where a surprise tempts us to a further location. It is not easy to form an idea of the interweave of space and time with which Kiefer operates. No exhibition, no museum can convey it. His gigantic formats require gigantic walls, as seen in “Athanor,” this undatable waiting for a resurrection created by the artist for the Egyptian Department of the Louvre. This was the first commission given by the French state since George Braque’s ceiling painting for the museum fifty years ago. On the other hand, we wait expectantly for a coming monumental staging in which, as in the Grand Palais in Paris last year, the artist will again set words and sentence fragments like fermati over images and Babylonian celestial palaces caught in the horrifying moment before their fall.

It would be wonderful if we could explore together the labyrinthine structures, the mine shafts full of secrets that Kiefer has furnished in the Odenwald forest, in Barjac in the French Cevennes, and most recently in a huge warehouse in western Paris. Like a hermit crab, he establishes himself again and again in gigantic, abandoned industrial plants and sheds. Each one of these unprecedented locations of memory is suffused with a unique atmosphere that inspires images and the words stored within it.

Kiefer is not only a voracious reader who undertakes transfusions from literature into visual works. He has himself created several hundred books. In a former schoolhouse in Hornbach, in the Odenwald, where one of his first studios was located, he began decades ago to conceive a personal library. The process brings to mind a wonderful idea in Jean Paul’s “Life of the Merry Little Schoolmaster Maria Wutz in Auenthal.” Wutz fabricates his own versions of the classics and other favorite titles he wants to read. Kiefer, for his part, seems to imagine books that could never exist. The artist thinks he will likely never cease making books. For he is convinced that we all harbor a lasting yearning for things we will never be able to achieve on our own. He refers to his own yearning, or better, envy, by saying “I would like to have become a writer.”

Seen in this light, and especially worth emphasizing today, there is hardly another artist who has devoted himself so strongly to reading and the sensuous existence of books. The great New York publisher George Braziller underscored this in the foreword to one of the artist’s books issued by his company by saying that his goal was to publish a book which, like Kiefer’s own book production, would confirm the vitality of the book as a medium of continuing significance for the creative people of our time. This passion of Kiefer’s cumulated in “Zweistromland” (Mesopotamia), 1985-89, a gigantic accumulation of volumes made of lead. These books are by no means empty and blind; they are merely inaccessible. One could take them for herbariums in which the artist’s own life, his marvelling, his discoveries, and his horror are
collected. They contain much that points to the realms of plants, animals, topographies, myths, history, poisoned things, the heavens and the constellations. Things under lifesize and over lifesize enter a dialogue, as in the beautiful phrase, “Every plant on earth corresponds to a star in the firmament.” It is no coincidence that titles such as “Heaven and Earth” recur in Kiefer’s work. In this massive, unhandy library only our imagination is capable of leafing through the volumes, in the course of which it moves from the light of day through twilight into the dark of night. Kiefer favors gigantic formats that are oriented to the human scale, the reader’s scale. In one combine painting, rather than a meditating monk in front the infinite sea, like Caspar David Friedrich, Kiefer sets an enormous book. Its seal challenges us to break it. Obviously, the book stands here for humanity. And we can sense how Kiefer’s monumental volumes surround us today in a compelling way, in view of the fact that this spring marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Nazi’s burning of the books. The volumes have the effect of protective shields, sheathed in lead. Or of a forest refuge of folios planted by the artist, which, when you enter it, gives you the sensation of hearing the murmurings evoked by François Truffaut in “Fahrenheit 451.” There is an unforgettable scene in the film where people walk back and forth in a copse of trees like living books, reciting memorized texts in order to preserve them for posterity. In Ray Bradbury’s novel, on which the film was based, the possession and reading of books is strictly prohibited and severely punished. All printed literature is consigned to the pyre by official arsonists organized along the lines of a fire department.

Kiefer presents his book forest in ever-different variations. The volumes alternately combine script with paper, gessoed canvas, tar, shellac, sand, woodcuts, shards of glass, sawdust, ashes, sheet lead, straw and photographs. The diversity of the materials rises to a veritably Wagnerian tutti. The same materials and objects determine the paintings and installations. In almost every work, tin soldiers, toy armies, barbed wire, rusted relics of war protruding from brackish water, charred and aged objects, and faded articles of clothing evoke a gloomy, moribund world. These reflect the memories of a boy who grew up in the postwar period playing among ruins and piles of rubble. The tongues of fire in the furrows of the early paintings, the burning sand of the Brandenburg Marches, the scorched earth in “The Gutting of Buchen County,” reflect obsessions fueled by the anxiety of early experiences. The same holds for the vortices, the clouds of lead falling out of the sky in the artist’s installations. In the chapel of the Paris Salpêtrière, these hemorrhages of metal are profoundly compelling in effect. The eerie grayish-silver clouds bring to mind the Big Bang, detonations, and atomic bomb mushroom clouds. They evoke the “Waste Land” that T.S. Eliot suggested as a metaphor for the dessicated chaos of the modern age.

The materials Kiefer employs are charged with mental associations. They reflect an obvious leaning to Saturnian melancholy, yet invariably contain direct references to current events. The installation “Women of the Revolution,” 1986, consisting of plaques and frames of lead, invokes the mood conveyed by Margarete von Trotta’s film “The Leaden Age.” All of this belongs in the log-book of someone who wishes to be left alone, who avoids the media so conscientiously that a frustrated New York critic was moved to compare Kiefer’s unsociability with Greta Garbo’s. This unaffected desire to be alone, so foreign to the inquisitiveness of the art market and media, is something the artist addressed over thirty years ago, in a series of books collectively entitled “20 Years of Loneliness.”

In the discussion concerning the award of the prize to Anselm Kiefer, something came to light that has long been suppressed in the development of modern art: the natural and fruitful mutual envy between poetry and painting, ever new variants of which emerged following Horace’s “Ut pictura poesis.” At the start of the twentieth century, not much trace of this dispute remained. The avant-garde painters vehemently rejected all literary content in visual art. This can be seen not least in the incredibly obstinate reception of Surrealist painting, which was long accused of being not painting but literature. The concept of autonomous painting, which arose in the late-nineteenth-century revolt against the pedantic programs of the academy, caused the relationship of imagery to texts and content to be viewed with extreme suspicion.

Kiefer belongs to a generation of artists who are concerned with overcoming the ban against the word and history in painting. His training and first steps as a painter fell in the period when the dictate of nonobjectivity ruled almost unchallenged in Western art. Virtually everyone was convinced that the disappearance of the subject, the development of an autonomous visual language, belonged to the teleology of contemporary painting, to a liberated art. Yet this retreat from content was
often tacitly based on arguments that were anything but aesthetic in nature. The demand for a tabula rasa had to do with an overcoming of history, an exoneration from guilt. It was able to rely on a consoling argument, intellectually underpinned by current aesthetics. After 1945, no painting worth mentioning emerged that could compare with the outcry of “Guernica,” of 1937. We should recall that it was likewise Picasso who countered the escape into abstraction with an image that expressly referred to a theme of recent history. “The Charnel House,” done shortly after the end of the war, after the discovery of the extermination camps, recurred once again to the genre of history painting, to visualize a mass murder, an atrocity against humanity. Picasso was fully aware that the encrusted paint and gestural traces of postwar abstraction were intrinsically incapable of saying anything about these horrors. Only a painterly sacrifice would do. This is why, both in “Guernica” and “The Charnel House,” Picasso consciously relinquished every feature of fine peinture, anything that might appeal to a sophisticated aesthetic taste. In his sinister, as if bloodless grisailles, he virtually turned the lights off on painting and color. In contrast, not only Pollock and Motherwell but Europeans such as Fautrier, Dubuffet, and Tàpies celebrated a “painting per se,” in which thick paint spread across the canvas with a culinary wordlessness. Everything was left up to the empathy of the viewer, who was free to decide whether the agitated paint surfaces evoked injuries and destruction or reflected an autonomous revelling in aesthetic stimuli.

A younger generation of artists, German artists, were not prepared to accept this waiver of legible content, of the datability of their own origins. In their eyes, the mild, condoling art of the postwar period, which, rather than making a radical statement, believed it could rely on the self-expression of inwardness, must have seemed insufficient as a final reply to a period that had been dominated by exterminations and slogans like “decadent art.” These developments demanded more sensitive reactions. In a certain sense, it was not until the 1960s that artists arrived on the scene who were prepared to bring a bitterly needed end to this crisis of interpretation. They countered the clear conscience of internationalism with shocking subject matter linked to Germany’s recent history. Their revolt against an avoidance of the past can best be compared to what had occurred after the end of the First World War. The vehemence of the imagery of Grosz, Beckmann, Dix and Max Ernst was unmatched during their period. These artists directly addressed war, destruction and amputation. The sole added value presented by the artists who had survived World War I was something entirely new: the aesthetically ruined. To convey this, they required shocking visual means, an adequate, ultimately “murderous” technique based on dismemberment, laceration, suturing. This technique they found in collage, with which they pieced together repellant depictions from the waste dumps of time, from rejected, banned imagery. What took place in Cologne and Berlin had nothing to do with the faith in progress reflected in the contemporary art that was celebrating triumphs in Paris and Moscow at the time. Something doubtless appeared here that might well be termed the iconographical imperative of German art.

The uproar triggered by these works was unprecedented. They were an affront to good taste and decorum. In a certain sense, Beuys, Kiefer, Baselitz, Immendorff, Richter and Lüpertz can be seen to have linked up with this interrupted tradition of critical and painful imagery. They, in turn, became actors in the involvement with history which the Germans sorely needed. Anselm Kiefer is obsessed with this duty. He recur to much that was common parlance in the art with which he was confronted during his studies in Karlsruhe and his travels through Europe. The tortured and injured surfaces which he also found in the work of van Gogh, were transplanted into his own compositions. Kiefer proceeded like a brilliant, conscious usurper who appropriated the potentials of a deeply textured, expressive painting for his own ends, transferring them like booty into his own imagery. This made him receptive to Courbet’s “Wave,” Munch’s melancholy, the rudimentary landscapes of Brücke Expressionism, and for the calcinified forests and hordes of Max Ernst. All of these oeuv-
vres share a common ground: that of expression. In Kiefer’s case, we must proceed from the premise of a continual suspicion with respect to painting as an autonomous field, in order to discover the gaze of fear and shame that watches over his oeuvre.

Already as a young man, Kiefer began to seek out information that would help to explain his own origins in a devastating past. For this reason alone, his paintings and sculptures remain dependent on a familiarity with written sources. From these, he sifts what might be termed a utilizable and unrepressible past. Emotionally, his compositions surpass anything his contemporaries have to offer. What other artist of his generation has brought together with such verve and precision the material inventory of arte povera, assemblage, Happenings and Fluxus to form a critical mass? What is known in the context of nonobjective art as structure or texture, or familiar from “miserabilism,” attains in Kiefer’s hands to the status of unmistakable statement. Freshly plowed fields, the charred ruins of neoclassical buildings, abruptly lend a legible, disturbing message to what had previously had the effect of pure painting. The artist works with historical dates and names. Evidently crucial was his encounter with Joseph Beuys, who with his objects, display cases, and other materials conducted an excruciating and terrifying alchemy of horror. Kiefer translates the cryptic liturgies of a Beuys into unmistakably concrete visions. In the context of the collective pact of silence that surrounded him as a young man at home and school, this certainly represented a revolt.

Even in his earliest paintings, Kiefer played with fire – intentionally, as indicated by the prominent role played by straw in his work. He provokes, sets fires fueled by things tabooed and repressed. There is no second artist from Germany who has turned to the country’s history in such an obvious and risky way. Initially Kiefer was almost universally misunderstood. It could not have been otherwise. His first international appearance, at the Venice Biennale in 1980, bore the title “Verbrennen, Verholzen, Versenken, Versanden” (Burning, Overgrowing, Sinking, Slining Up). The bafflement over the works Kiefer showed in the German Pavilion and the exhibitions of these early years was immense. Kiefer permitted proper names and insignia to enter his art which were absolutely taboo in the postwar period. Evil, mined terrain was strikingly present. Ruins of Nazi buildings, invocations of Nordic myths, Arminius’ Battle, Valhalla under a timber roof, where Kiefer billowed “German Intellectual Heroes,” runes – such things had never been seen before. The evocation of granite, the Reich Chancellery, and Speer; the deeply plowed rich fields, which inadvertently brought Blood and Soil to mind, were spine-chilling. It seemed impossible to remain unaffected by these challenging compositions, tersely monumental, combining great names from history and the history of ideas on an apparent level of equality with death cult and ancient Teutonic assembly sites. Kiefer’s works were just as frightening as Baselitz’s mighty wooden figure, standing at attention and saluting visitors in the central hall of the German Pavilion in Venice. Kiefer literally talked of the devil, employing quotations and recollections that dangerously – and consciously – approached a morbid fascination.

I myself entitled my rejection of this art at the time “An Overdose of the Teutonic.” Actually, Kiefer’s macabre temptation aimed, so to speak, at turning viewers upside down and shaking them until their brains released concepts and names that still slumbered in their subconscious mind. He mounted a counterattack against repression. This turning upside-down seemed generally to belong to the iconographic repertoire of the young artists of the day. A passage from Büchner’s “Lenz,” which explains the meaning of the inverted motifs in Baselitz’s paintings, is relevant to Kiefer as well. Büchner describes the moment when Lenz, hiking through the mountains, is no longer able to bear the force of habit. We are told that “he felt no weariness; it was just that it was sometimes unpleasant for him not to be able to walk on his head.”

We come across provocation at an early point in Kiefer’s biography. When, as a young man, in the comprehensive series “Heroic Symbols,” he posed for photos in front of various European landscapes in top boots with his arm extended, he obviously intended to make the Nazi salute look ridiculous. Only malicious minds could dare to explain the artist’s act in terms of a retrospective fascination.

In the compositions Kiefer presents, the possibility of viewing painting as allegory and an expression of universal pain is no longer given. After brief, definite hesitation, his appearances in the 1970s were perceived like epiphanies. The large-scale paintings, sculptures and installations became the talk of the town. Like no other artist, Kiefer tied his work to key locations of recent German history. He needed these precise places which had been misused by fanaticism. Yet rather than listing them like a historian of the period, Kiefer invoked the evil of these sites of cruelty as if it still
clung to them. The point was by no means to represent the crimes of National Socialism as a metaphysical, inexplicable evil, but to bring them into an obtrusive and frightening here and now.

By taking this uncomfortable stance, Kiefer has surely done much more for peace than many another. At every opportunity, the artist has stressed how deeply involved in every way he feels in a collective past. “At least theoretically,” he once said, “I count among the perpetrators, because I simply cannot know today what I might have done back then. After all, human beings are capable of anything. This is the source of my concern.” Kiefer is now a world-famous man. Especially outside Germany. For in his own country he is still viewed by many as a messenger of bad tidings.

*Translation from German by John W. Gabriel*
Anselm Kiefer  
Acceptance speech

You can find many strange things in the large storage halls, depots and courtyards of an old abandoned barracks in Trieste. Some are lined up next to one another, and some are scattered about untidily, almost like the skeletons of sea monsters a tsunami has washed ashore. There are discarded tanks, slit-open submarines, anti-tank guns, armoured reconnaissance vehicles and airplanes with broken wings. Smaller war relicts are on display in other rooms: dented tin bowls, torn-off field-telephone receivers, cartridge containers, steel helmets and heaps of war posters. These spaces were once the realm of an eccentric professor named Diego de Henriquez, who devoted his entire life to collecting untold amounts of war material – and, in the process, sacrificed both himself and his family. As he once wrote, his dream was to found “a historical war museum in the service of peace” and “a centre for the interpretation and transformation of past and future”. In the mind of its creator, this universal war exhibition would generate a horror scenario of such magnitude that it would banish once and for all the thought of war from the heart of man and, thereby, usher in an era of everlasting peace.

I think in images. Poems help me do this. They are like buoys in the sea. I swim to them, from one to the next; in between, without them, I am lost. They are the points amidst the infinite vastness at which something masses together out of interstellar dust, a bit of matter in the abyss of antimatter. Sometimes the rubble of things past coalesces into new words and associations. Some poems lead us to believe that there is a meaning, one that might be indescribable, but still points towards there possibly being an end – an Eschaton. And that the word might perhaps become flesh precisely because there, in the snow, on the white paper, it has already melted away. Ingeborg Bachmann writes of this in her poem Das Spiel ist aus (The Game is Over):

Nur wer an der goldenen Brücke für die Karfunkelfee das Wort noch weiß, hat gewonnen. Ich muss dir sagen, es ist mit dem letzten Schnee im Garten zerronnen.

Only he who by the golden bridge still remembers the name for the karfunkelfaerie has won. I must tell you that it has melted with the last snow in the garden.

We are here in an empty room. What was once a church – with the walls of a church, the pews, the altar, the pulpit - has left behind only this podium, with its three steps. The space in which we find ourselves today, the Paulskirche (Church of St. Paul), is like a cylinder that penetrates into the depths. To me, it is like the entrance to a mine. I see the colours of the sediments, the black-violet of Nelly Sachs, who stood here in 1965, the ultraviolet of Ernst Bloch from 41 years ago.

When we speak of descending into history, of descending into ourselves, into our innermost being, I see the mine of Heinrich von Ofterdingen and the mines of Falun, as described by E.T.A. Hoffmann or Johann Peter Hebel, before my eyes. It is strange: both a descent and an ascent take place in these texts, just as in Goethe’s Faust in the realm of the mothers: “steigend, steigend sinke nieder” (“rising, rising, I sink down”). Novalis speaks of miners as being reverse astrologists, and E.T.A. Hoffmann says that in the deepest depths, by the faint light of the pit lamp, the eye becomes clairvoyant and is able to see in the wonderful stones the reflection of what is hidden by the clouds. I grew up in a small village in the country, without a TV, without the Internet, without the cinema or theatre – in a wonderful, empty space. Boredom. In this empty space fell the words, the not-yet consumed sentences of the poets and philosophers, voices from the Paulskirche. I could hear them over the radio, even though at first I did not understand their meaning. I can still hear the fragile voice of Nelly Sachs, the striking and intense voice of Martin Buber.

1 English translation by Angelika Fremd
The voices fell into this empty space like drops in a cave, building the stalactites out of which I am made today. Nobody creates alone, and especially not *ex nihilo*. The work emerges at the intersection of different lines. I feel that I belong to this special space, the Paulskirche, indeed, I am made of it. I was made from the thoughts contained in it.

According to a Hassidic legend chronicled by Martin Buber, upon every child in its mother’s womb there shines a “light on its head;” and “it learns the entire Torah. But when it comes time to emerge into the air of the world, an angel comes and strikes the child on the mouth, causing it to forget everything.” Before our birth – in our empty, heavenly homes – we knew everything. But the angel’s smack on the nose results in each child’s coming into the world as what appears to be an empty vessel, able to fill itself anew. Human beings would go mad if they possessed complete knowledge of the disastrous course of the world. For this reason, each child comes into the world in an empty space. And this empty space is at once empty and full, in the same way that empty factory buildings are full of the traces and sounds of past labours. Every empty theatre is a room full of images and consolidated words.

Filled emptiness is like loud silence.

And yet, it doesn’t stop with the angel’s merciful slap. Later, one fills this empty space. We learn, recognise and – just as a hard drive is never completely erased – after a while, some of the signs reappear. The lower layers of the palimpsest become visible once again.

The angel’s smack on the nose: the “Stunde Null” (*zero hour*) in Germany?

But there was no benevolent angel to create a wonderful empty space, a site of beginning. Because the empty space was plugged up, filled with things and words that were soon used up...

The ruins were quickly cleared away, the blown-up shelters disposed of...

The space of silence is not the empty space of the angel.

Rubble represents not only an end, but also a beginning. In reality, the so-called ‘Stunde Null’ never existed.

Rubble is like a plant’s blossoms; it is the radiant highpoint of an incessant metabolism, the beginning of a rebirth. And the longer we can put off refilling empty spaces, the more fully and intensively we can produce a past that proceeds with the future as if reflected in a mirror.
history, into which the people could have descended – descended into themselves.

Incidentally, I find a similar thought in Merkabah mysticism, the same reversal of directions – upward and downward.

In the Sefer Heichalot, the “Initiate” passes through the seven heavenly palaces and simultaneously into the depths, namely within himself. He rushes through the macrocosm and the microcosm. That which is inside turns outside, and that which is outside turns inside.

I was in Berlin again after being away for a long time. There, I saw the buildings that had been erected to replace the melancholic emptiness at Potsdamer Platz.

A singing contest for architects!

If this place had remained as it was, it would have become a marvellously empty space, filled to the brim with history. Such a work would have contained all the parameters of art. Its material, the border itself as fortification, would have been, for its part, usurped, occupied, turned into its opposite. It would become a paradox like Duchamp’s Urinal in the museum: useless as a political tool and therefore going all the way as art, “From the Etsch to the Belt,” as it were.

An empty space? It would appear that there are no empty spaces in our material world. In one cubic centimetre of air – a sugar cube in size – there are roughly 45 billion atoms whizzing around. This unimaginable abundance is at the same time an inconceivable emptiness. If we enlarge an atom to the height and width of the Cologne Cathedral, the neutron is a pea – though a pea as heavy as thousands of cathedrals – and the electrons run their course somewhere high up beneath the arched roof. In between, there is nothing. In between, only unidentified forces are at work. We consist of empty space.

According to the laws of nature on the preservation of matter, no atom is ever lost. Scientists argue that each of us carries within ourselves an unbelievably large number of atoms that have already been present in very different kinds of matter for millions of years before becoming part of us.

Within ourselves, we carry atoms from the beach at Ostia and the stones of the Gobi desert, atoms from dinosaur bones as well as some from Shakespeare, from Martin Luther, from Einstein and from the victims and oppressors of centuries past.

We are connected to each other via atoms in a very material way. I feel connected with human beings both alive and dead, with Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celan, with Ernst Bloch, Isaiah and the last Psalmists. I feel connected to people and stones that existed long before me and will continue to do so after I am gone.

Ich steh im Flor der abgeblühten Stunde
Und spar ein Harz für einen späten Vogel:
Er trägt die Flocke Schnee auf lebensroter Feder;
Das Körnchen Eis im Schnabbel, kommt er durch
den Sommer.

I stand in the bloom of the withered hour
and save up a drop of resin for a late bird:
it carries a flake of snow on a life-red feather;
the grain of ice in its beak, it will get through the
summer.

(Paul Celan, Ich bin allein/I am alone)3

What a wonderful image of passing and of asserting oneself against the laws of nature. The Cabalist theory of the emergence of the world, as formulated by Isaak Luria in the 16th century, sees the creator as a god who withdraws.

He gives up a small part of his space, in which He then allows the world to develop. He creates an empty space.

I am and have always been fascinated by Jewish mysticism. All letters in the alphabet are considered holy. No matter how arbitrarily we line them up, the letters come from God and always formulate a meaning – even if it is only revealed thousands of years later.

I found a distant similarity to these mystic images in the poetry of Hölderlin, such as when he speaks of the space the gods left us upon their retreat.

I grew up on the Rhine, the border river. But, even at that time, it wasn’t just a geographical boundary. You could hear the clapping of the water

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2 The sixth line of the now-prohibited first stanza of the “Deutschlandlied.” The current national anthem of the Federal Republic of Germany is limited to the song’s third verse.

3 English translation by Vivian Smith
against the rocky bank, see the lights on the opposite shore and the dangerous turbulence of the river itself.

The country on the other side was not just one among many. For the child who could not reach it, it was a promise of the future, a hope. It was the Promised Land.

When I look back today, there are roots that trail off at the threshold to the prohibited area, the area that, in a wondrous way, is always empty owing to the incongruence between desire and fulfilment.

As a child, of course, I still had no concept of that country called France.

There were rows of poplars, the beginnings of roads. But, for me, behind this lay an empty, uninhabited area, which would have to be filled up at a later point.

The border, though, was fluid, not only because a river flows, but because the river swelled in the spring after the Alps thawed; it spread out formidably, flowed into the old tributaries of the Rhine, flooded the land and filled the cellar of our house.

Where was the border now? Where the bed of the Rhine was in calmer times, or in your cellar? The border had come into our homes.

Where are our own borders? Are we blocked off from the environment, nature and the cosmos? Do we not consist of that which meets us, strikes us and radiates upon us from the universe? Are we blocked off from those closest to us? From the thoughts of other people? From the influences of the living and the dead? Are we individuals who can be solely responsible for everything we do?

In the poems and sketches of Paul Valéry, too, the barely comprehensible borders of the “I” are touched upon on many occasions.

I am myself for a moment, and the rest of the time someone else. Passe dans mes regards sans briser leur absence. (Paul Valéry, Intérieur)

Grenzt hier ein Wort an mich, so laß ich’s grenzen.
Liegts Böhmen noch am Meer, glaub ich den Meeren wieder.
Und glaub ich noch ans Meer, so hoffe ich auf Land.
Bin ich’s, so ist’s ein jeder, der ist soviel wie ich. […]
Ich grenz noch an ein Wort und an ein andres Land,
ich grenz, wie wenig auch, an alles immer mehr.

If a word here borders on me, I’ll let it border. If Bohemia still lies by the sea, I’ll believe in the sea again. And believing in the sea, thus I can hope for land.

If it’s me, then it’s anyone, for he’s as worthy as me. I still border on a word and on another land, I border, like little else, on everything more and more.

(Ingiborg Bachmann, Böhmen liegt am Meer/Bohemia Lies on the Sea)

I border, like little else, on everything more and more. Every border is an illusion, set up in order to calm us and to lead us to believe in a permanent location. And yet, without borders, without this illusion of borders, we are incapable of living, either as individuals or in relation to others.

I border, like little else, on everything more and more. This wonderful sentence artfully leaps over and translates the dualism, arriving at something completely different, something deeper and something whose mystery occupies my thoughts time and time again.

Bohemia lies on the sea. I subscribe to the truth of this image of Ingiborg Bachmann more than to that of any map or geography.

There is a special border, the border between art and life, which often shifts deceptively. Yet, without this border, there is no art. In the process of being produced, art borrows material from life, and the traces of life still shine through the completed work of art. But, at the same time, the distance from life is the essence, the substance of art. And, yet, life has still left its traces. The more scarred the work of art is by the battles waged on the borders between art and life, the more interesting it becomes.

Artists are border dwellers, experts in transgressing boundaries as well as specialists in drawing borders.

Happenings, Dada and Fluxus all increased and radicalized the frontier traffic between art and life. They drove mimesis to its highest point. However, this mimesis could no longer be imitated. Duchamp’s Urinal is wonderful, but something like that can only be done once or twice at the most. The third time turns the “readymade” back into a urinal.

What is a work of art? I can only describe the process of how a work comes into existence.

It begins in the dark after an intense experience, a shock. At first, it is an urge, a pounding. You don’t know what it is, but it compels you to act. And, at first, it is very vague. It must be vague, otherwise
it would just be an visualization of the shock experience.

I am then in the material, in the paint, in the sand, directly in the clay, in the darkness of the moment.

Because the spirit is already contained in the material. This idea puts me at complete variance with Plato’s teachings. What takes place in this proximity, with my head practically in the paint—this vagueness is at first the most precise. It is a strange, contemplative internal state, but also a form of suffering in its lack of clarity.

This changes when I withdraw from the canvas, whether after a longer or a shorter time. Now I have a counterpart; I refer to something out there. The painting is there, and I am there in this painting.

Then, disappointment immediately follows: Something is missing. This ‘something’ is not something that I have not seen, that I have perhaps failed to uncover. No, I cannot find what’s missing. This work, begun and now recognised as unfinished and deficient, can only succeed if it associates itself with something else that is itself incomplete, such as history, nature or natural history.

The painting turns the world into its object; it objectifies itself. And when I say that I call on nature to help, it is not only meant metaphorically. I actually do put the paintings in the rain, under the sun, under the moon …

In this moment of objectification, decisions must be made. The painting that is coming into being must be examined for its latent possibilities, so that a decision can be made about the direction it should go.

And, at this point, the war in the mind begins. Perhaps this was the war Heraclitus was referring to when he said that war was the father of all things.

There are so many opportunities, and each option not taken is a loss while, at the same time, a reflection of all the internal contradictions.

At some point, the inner war becomes an outer peace.

Because the longing – the despair over the loss of so many works that must perish in the inner battle – would only be satisfied if that which came into being were to correspond to the original proximity.

Thus, since the fulfilment can never correspond with the wish, the result will always be only a temporary one.

Only if the inner were to become the outer and the outer the inner, if the ascent into the completed relation were to correspond to the descent inwards, only then could the work be finished, perfected. But for how long?

The process of a work’s coming into being that I have described to you can repeat itself with the same object at any time. This means that the objectified painting, which I believe to be finished, can fall back into the state of material, of the dark moment. And the process starts again from the beginning.

I have containers full of such works waiting in the darkness.

A spiralling cycle is at work here and not an ascending line.

No Eschaton.

I do not mean to say that peace is to be found beyond humankind, as in the songs of the poem Fadensonnen by Paul Celan.

But in the alliance with something greater, something that is equally not yet reached, equally unsaved.

In such a future lies the Archimedean point.

Man, says Rabbi Eleasar, is a piece at whose ends God and Satan are pulling; in the end, God is clearly the stronger.

I, on the other hand, believe the outcome is undecided.

Über der grauscharwen Ödnis.
Ein baumhoher Gedanke greift sich den Lichtton: es sind noch Lieder zu singen jenseits der Menschen.

Over the grayblack wasteness.
A tree-high thought strikes the light-tone: there are still songs to sing beyond humankind.

(Paul Celan, Fadensonnen/Threadsuns)5

5 Translation by Norton Poets Online
## Winners of the Peace Prize and their laudatory speakers

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