

VINCENZO TRIONE
PROLOGO CELESTE
NELL'ATELIER DI ANSELM KIEFER



EINAUDI

Praise for Vincenzo Trione's work:

«A far-reaching, beautifully written and inspiring book on artists you'd like to know. A reading with a literary flavor.»

Orhan Pamuk

«Vincenzo Trione's monograph on this great artist, constitutes a cultural object of the first magnitude not only because of the subject matter, but because of the method followed, which not only fits the subject matter perfectly, but adds an innovative element destined to set the standard.»

Maurizio Ferraris, *Corriere della Sera*

Vincenzo Trione

Celestial prologue

In the atelier of Anselm Kiefer

About the book

Atelier as creative forge, scientific laboratory, anthro-alchemical, library, personal archive, Wunderkammer, device, polygon, small town in which imagination becomes thought and gesture. Among the greatest contemporary artists, Anselm Kiefer has succeeded in doing something that, in grandiosity and ambition, has few comparisons: giving voice to an epic profundity, he has transformed his studios, the spaces in which he materially creates paintings and sculptures, into interminable works of art. In a unique book, enriched by more than seventy photographs (many of them by Kiefer himself), **Vincenzo Trione, one of the most influential critics and scholars of contemporary art**, thanks to his personal relationship to Anselm Kiefer, could visit these mysterious and inaccessible places like an enchanted pilgrim, accompanying the reader on a **privileged itinerary into the artist's mind-atelier**.

In Barjac and Croissy, France, Kiefer has singlehandedly built authentic museum-workshops-archives-cities where, like a modern Prospero, he shapes and makes his visions real. Between towers resembling the famous Seven Heavenly Palaces and catacombs carved out of the rock, between theaters reminiscent of those of ancient Greece and hangars used for hypothetical exhibitions, Kiefer has set up authentic cosmogonies that seem to mimic the mechanisms of the mind. In them, the nightmares of the twentieth century are juxtaposed with illuminations of alternative futures. It is difficult to explain to those who have not visited them what these places are, the power they enclose, the overflowing variety of materials they hold. And there are few who have inhabited them: among them, Vincenzo Trione who with *Prologo celeste* writes a unique book, enriched by more than seventy images (many of them by Kiefer himself). Like a curious and wandering traveler à la Sebald, capable of placing the history of twentieth-century art in resonance with philosophy, mysticism, literature, and the history of the twentieth century in order to make the infinite suggestions underlying the works submerge, Trione delivers an **original critical account**, in which he accompanies the reader inside the ateliers in a true alchemical journey. Animated by an epic vocation, Kiefer, from time to time, becomes Prometheus, Hephaestus and Sisyphus. These are the three great mythical figures that orient an unforgettable crossing of the skies by Anselm Kiefer.

Q&A with the Author

What is the book about?

This is an essay written in the first person, a journey to the places where the work of one of the highest figures in contemporary art, Anselm Kiefer, was born. A way to enter for the first time inside the secrets of the poetic world of this great artist and to unveil his cultural, philosophical, mystical and literary references. And also an opportunity to look at his monumental and epic work from a different angle: from the inside.

What's the structure of the book?

It's something like an on-the-road book, divided into three parts.

The first part describes the discovery of Barjac, an immense atelier, which also becomes a city and a work of art formed by paintings, sculptures and installations: here the artist is inspired by the myth of Prometheus, engaged in daring undertakings.

The second part is dedicated to Croissy, arsenal, archive, laboratory, library: here the artist seems to look at the gestures of another myth, Hephaestus, prodigious in his ability to make things himself, with his own hands.

The third part, finally, recounts the return to Barjac, narrated as a "polis" of unintentional beauty and as a total work of art, where the artist behaves like Sisyphus, ready to make, unmake and remake his work uninterruptedly.

The text is accompanied by a rich body of images and an unpublished photographic reportage by Kiefer himself.

What kind of reader is it intended for?

The book is aimed at those who are interested in art, those who want to learn about painting through an educated but affable critical account, those who want to find out what lies behind a work of art, those who are fascinated by the mysteries contained in ateliers, and those who want to see Kiefer from a completely original perspective.

Why is it essential to translate it from Italian and why is the author the only person in the world who could write it?

It is the first time that Kiefer has allowed a critic to explore the places where his works are born. The book is being published simultaneously with **Wim Wenders' docu-film, "Anselm!"** which is underpinned by similar intentions.



About the Author

Vincenzo Trione is full professor of Art and Media and History of Contemporary Art at IULM University in Milan, where he is Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Tourism. He is President of the School of Cultural Heritage and Activities. He contributes to *Corriere della Sera*. He has curated exhibitions in Italian and international museums and the Italian Pavilion of the LVI Biennale di Venezia (2015). He is director of the Enciclopedia Treccani dell'Arte Contemporanea and has curated the critical edition of volumes by Alberto Savinio, Roberto Longhi, Mimmo Rotella and Umberto Eco. He is the author of the following books: *Il poeta e le arti. Apollinaire e il tempo delle avanguardie* (1999), *Dentro le cose. Ardengo Soffici critico d'arte* (2001), *Atlanti metafisici. Giorgio de Chirico: arte, architettura, critica* (2005), *Le città del silenzio. Giorgio de Chirico: architettura, memoria, profetia* (2009), *Effetto città. Arte cinema modernità* (2014, Premio Roma, Premio-giuria Viareggio and *Contro le mostre* (with Tomaso Montanari, 2017), *L'opera interminabile. Arte e XXI secolo* (2019, Premio-giuria Viareggio), *Artivismo. Arte, politica, impegno* (2022, Premio-giuria Viareggio).

A personal note from the author

There was the U.S. presidential election campaign. George Bush vs. Michael Dukakis. 1988. A cold, bright autumn. It was my first time in New York. ... Of that stay I cannot forget the sudden revelation of the skyscrapers, resembling gigantic constructions, Pieces of Lego peeking out at the bottom of Broadway. And the exhausting visits to museums. In particular, the MoMA. It was there that I "met" Anselm Kiefer. A major solo exhibition - the American consecration, in the temple of modern and contemporary art. On the walls, large-scale works, occupied by layers of leaves, of branches, of shrubs. Like walls furrowed by encrustations and cracks, made solid by to clods of earth, fibers, sands, minerals, oils. In the presence of those imposing tangles - bold combination of painting and sculpture - I felt Lilliputian. Small before an indecipherable and vast hellscape. Meanwhile, I was asking my father - stern and sweet teacher - to orient me in front of those rippling, textured expanses. Which were towered over me. And encompassed me.

Ages ago...

Since then Kiefer has been with me - like an obsession, like a fixed idea. I have looked for his works around the world: in museums and exhibitions. Often, I have met and hung out with him. On many occasions, I have discussed with him the reasons underlying his language, his outrageous techniques, his theoretical, literary, mystical, philosophical, scientific and art-historical references. I have spoken about this great desecrator in lectures, in seminars, in conferences. I have written about him in several texts. In the prologue of *L'opera interminabile*, I have delved into his secret thoughts by exploring The Seven Celestial Palaces exhibited at Hangar Bicocca in Milan. In the epilogue of *Artivism* I studied his political vocation.

[...]

From the spring of 2020, this adventure has led me to re-cross Kiefer's epic work from a different angle. Unlike what I had done on other occasions, this time I chose to accompany the moment of research with experience on the field. Therefore, after a long phase marked by study and notes, I went to the places of origin: where Kiefer's hermetic and visionary scenarios are born. So, the journey as a necessary transit. Not only Barjac, later renamed La Ribaute. But also Croissy, where the artist's intentions began to take shape. One needs to go to that chaotic arsenal to trace the genesis of the creative act. It was like going to the set of some blockbuster movie. Or a bit like when you participate in an archaeological campaign. For several days in the early to late summer of 2022, I visited and inhabited these endless workshops. The visual notes of those weeks are kept now in my i-Phone: by moving my thumb, in less than a minute, I can go over hundreds of frames and videos - frames of an unintentional, unedited film, episodes of a chronicle made up of discoveries, stumbles, shocks.

Going to Barjac and Croissy, enterprises destined to remain unfinished, interminable. Getting lost, being disoriented, wandering aimlessly. And like an exploration inside the mind and inside the gestures of an artificer who knows how to make a Prometheus of himselfand, at the same time, a Hephaestus and a Sisyphus. There have been inspections that revealed to me unseen sides of the Kieferian imagination, forcing me, often, to reconsider convictions and judgments.

En route

I arrive from Marseille. Highway to Avignon. Then, I take a provincial road. Finally, a deserted, gently sloping path between soft climbs, gradients, curves. An ascent around a limestone relief with a hostile air, soaring upward. A few low buildings, with wooden parts. Trees espaliered. Across a stony landscape, conveying a sense of impenetrable and quiet strangeness. Like a monumental coral reef, frozen in an almost motionless time. The real seems to take on the appearance of a primordial, fossilized realm. Destination, Barjac. All around, trees, hedges. Unkempt shrubs, scorched by the sun, moved by a thin wind. Dried-up meadows, stretched to the foot of rocky flanks. In the sky, clouds fleeing like a routed army and sliding over the face of the massif. A silence is perceived in which every slightest noise sounds like a whispered word. I turn off the radio.

The cell phone has no reception, in this world that seems to have fallen off the grid. I proceed slowly, into the whiteness of the mountain, free of expectation, free of anxiety. Crickets, cicadas and nightingales fill the air. I indulge in contemplation. My gaze caresses stones and corners and asphalt, as if they were the substance of a prayer.

To grasp the possible meaning of the scandalous gesture of an artist who has been "questioned" for years, I chose to go to the foothills of the Cevennes, in southern France, 650 kilometers from Paris and 170 from Marseille and Lyon. To trace the origin of Anselm Kiefer's art-a metaphysical yet deeply concrete - I decided to enter his atelier in Barjac. Which I chose to sacralize. I visited it. Inhabited it. Almost interviewed it, with a notebook in my hand and the cell phone camera always on. As if that place should speak to me. As if it had secrets to reveal to me about its landlord, the creator of lead libraries, the painter of the last day, the night gatekeeper of our declining modernity.

Barjac Studios

In the distance, no city lights. I arrive after lunchtime, on a warm day in early June. Through a small village, home to a church, a castle, small mansions. A winding path. Finally, a metal gate. Which opens. Here is La Ribaute. That is how this site has been renamed. Bastion or refuge? A thirty-hectare labyrinth. An intricate path, set in the bush, in the heart of southern France. Kiefer arrived here in the early 1990s. Until then he had lived in Germany. His studios, in the heart of Germany, on the Odenwald: Walldürn-Hornbach, a former school (1971-82); Buchen, an industrial hangar (1982-83); and Höpfingen, an old brick factory (1988-1992)¹. To encourage him to leave Germany, in 1992, the then French Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, had given him a list of about ninety properties to consider. Kiefer had evaluated many, before choosing an old silk factory of about seventy hectares, with a stone villa and several barns. In Barjac, precisely.

Seventy trucks transported part of the contents of his previous studies here. From Germany, Kiefer moved books, photographs, paintings. At first, he felt estranged in an unspoiled landscape. He decided, therefore, to appropriate that wilderness setting not on but within an uninhabited hillside. Perhaps, in the footsteps of some verses in Genesis: "The earth was deserted and empty, and the wind of Elohim hovered over the surface of the waters" (1:1-2). With the cooperation of a few helpers and a roaring maneuvered behemoth called Le Bull, the artist planted trees, sowed plants, laid out fences, built trails. He set up dozens pavilions with heights between five and 20 meters. Then, he dug for miles in order to create hypogeal spaces, a bit like an architect who wants to expand a dwelling: some are high, others claustrophobic. And he designed a kind of tunnel supported by pillars to connect different environments. An endeavor that he continually enriches with other instalments, ready to test new ideas and new materials.

La Ribaute, a body in perpetual change.

During the days of my stay in Barjac, I lived in a small white house, with essential furnishings, isolated, overlooking a pond full of rushes and croaking frogs. Almost by sorcery, there is no cell phone reception. After dropping off my luggage, I visit a kitchen, the size of a soccer field, occupied by equipment worthy of a fancy restaurant. Then, I begin a rambling exploration. An experience occasionally interrupted by the occasional shout from the manager of La Ribaute and the bustle of his assistants, carrying paintings and sculptures from one wing to another. It is like being on a movie set.

In the mind of Kiefer

Barjac's decaying Domus Aurea has grown day by day, like a forest, made up of objects, inventions, artifacts. As you walk around, you wonder whose hands, in silence, with obstinacy, patience and recklessness, devoted to an "interminable workday, "1 have given form to this impossible world, moving in the night of uncertainty, almost multiplying, to respond to an expressive urgency. Mindful of what Rilke had written in the presence of Rodin's sculptures, you ask yourself, "What kind of man is he? "2 Immediately you realize that he is an individual animated by the desire to "penetrate totally, with all his strength, into the humble and severe essence of his instrument."

I decided, therefore, to go north of Paris. About thirty kilometers from the capital. Not far from Charles de Gaulle airport. Direction Croissy-Beaubourg. In the sky, the continuous and deafening sound of airplanes. Around, offices and warehouses of multinational transportation companies. Suburban air, blowing like a beneficial poison, a "familiar and yet foreign medicine." An anonymous area, with deserted sidewalks. Long suburban arteries, traveled only by cars. The cab drops me off at the entrance to a strange industrial complex. Where am I standing? Beyond the gate, I see

greenhouses full of works, cages with heterogeneous fragments, disused gray planes. At the end, two cold pavilions, as tall as a palace: about twenty meters. Those architectures devoid of any decorative element have been given the names of two of the protagonists of the poem *Gilgamesh*: Enkidu and Ninsun. I pass through the entrance, and find myself in an immense expanse - like a small city. About 36 000 square meters, including streets, avenues, squares, intersections. You're immediately taken by different feelings: daze and hypnosis. You walk around, and it's like turning the pages of a rambling stone epic.

"This is how you might describe your studios: they are not gigantic let alone immense, but exactly big enough for the dogs to think they are outdoors," said Ransmayrin, with a mixture of affection and irony, in dialogue with Kiefer. This, the space Kiefer needs, an extension of the cosmic breath of his poetics. Within these walls he hides every day, to forget the night that weighs, with its forebodings. Daily, he celebrates here a liturgy that is always the same but also always different, wearing a classical stage dress: a simple gown, like a cassock on which splashes of color are deposited. It is in the refuge of Croissy that his Promethean gestures manifest themselves, pursued during days spent collecting, selecting and interpreting omens. In the knowledge that, behind life, lies absurdity, delirium, meaninglessness. I am in a kind of factory where, in solitude, an artist has been living and working for several years and has confessed: "I never cease to be fascinated by abandoned spaces, by the claustrophobic emptiness, by disused factories, which continue to be full of murmurs and traces of the people who used to work there. I discover similarities with my paintings when finally, after being covered with mud and water, they seem to find peace again, although they still bear on them the traces of despair, effort, failure, and whose surface is a reflection of lost wars. A real battlefield. ". And again, "The industrial environments show a tangle of pipes and conduits connecting the different elements, in a constant back-and-forth of flows, whose different functions

are difficult for a viewer to understand. "

Spending a few days in Kiefer's world – and in Kiefer's world only – is a very different experience than seeing his paintings and sculptures in a museum, a gallery or the home of some wealthy collector. Only in Croissy can you almost adhere to the muscular tension of the hand that paints, sculpts, sets up. Here you really have the chance to inhabit intimately, from the inside, the universe of a painter who never ceased to feel himself a stranger to the world and its commerce, inclined to protect himself in the silence of his craft, far from the dynamics of reality.

La Ribaute

La Ribaute has the grandeur and beauty of the most powerful tragedies and symphonies. A *polis* that tends to erase all limits, branching out, multiplying, affirming and, at the same time, escaping the principle of harmony, indulging in controlled dispersion, conscious disorder. Made of houses, buildings, streets and basements, La Ribaute undermines the Renaissance utopias of the "ideal city": here the rational conception placed at the origin of that philosophy has been shaken from the foundations, perhaps following a telluric event of dramatic intensity.

It is a place where thought seems to gain a consistency, a weight. There settle, in an unpredictable simultaneity, moments and imprints, memories and prophecies. Hybrid and impossible, built according to an unknown model, this citadel is a compendium of chaos and madness. Plural, diffracted, discrete, bent, suspended, it evokes the birth of a world and not the construction of a system. It is an organism in the making, the outcome of technical wisdom and visionary tension. A total work of art that, in its meshes, gathers other, simpler art forms.

Inside, this palimpsest carved out in the Cevennes accommodates a sequence of paintings, sculptures, monuments, buildings: natural elements, but also constructions, colors, volumes. A maze of palaces, towers and verandas, separated by paths and vegetation. La Ribaute is an absurd, decayed city resembling an uncleared table. A prophecy of certain dystopian science fiction scenarios, it is like a dazzling dump, majestically discontinuous. A vast archive, holding shreds of private and collective memories, amid wounds, mending and repetition. An Arcadian landscape of ruins, wreckage, debris, larvae, the outcome of reckless raids. A region in which different places meet, without blurring, mimicking the making and unmaking of time. A space that takes on a body in buildings, in monuments and in streets, reorganized into lines and contours, into horizontal planes and vertical instalments.

Unstable and asymmetrical, extroverted and oblique, disengaged from hierarchies and measurements, Kiefer's atelier-city becomes a topos of elsewhere.

Difference disarticulates this urban framework. Symmetrical forms dissolve into stellar textures. Fragments succeed one another that cannot be domesticated. Each image turns out to be equivalent to other images. Incessant alterations. Triumph of the unexpected. Imperfection. Loss of center.

You wander among the tiles of an exploded mosaic, juxtaposed with the technique of bricolage. The pavilions-neighborhoods are no longer enclosed in precise boundaries. Uninhabited, Kiefer's city is an icon of irremediable conflicts, it presents an expanding nervous network. It radiates from its heart. It overwhelms all persistence, in a momentum that cannot be calculated. It increases its power and, at the same time, loses its spirit. It gives itself as an intersection of knots: lines and points flow, turn, lace up, converse with other lines and points.

It is like a film without editing, heedless of all combinatorial rules. A unicum made of heterogeneous architectural traces. Contradictory, incomplete, de-programmed, with general relativity, marked by drives, instincts and non-contiguous actions, the spaces expand, between interruptions and pauses. They disseminate into the surrounding landscape as pure form, absorbing and consuming energies. Finally, they are continually rearticulated through new outcroppings of materials, visions, and techniques.

A dynamic unity, which cannot be held within the perimeter of the gaze. Here is La Ribaute.



Barjac, by Anselm Kiefer



The arsenal, Croissy, 2021



Barjac, by Anselm Kiefer

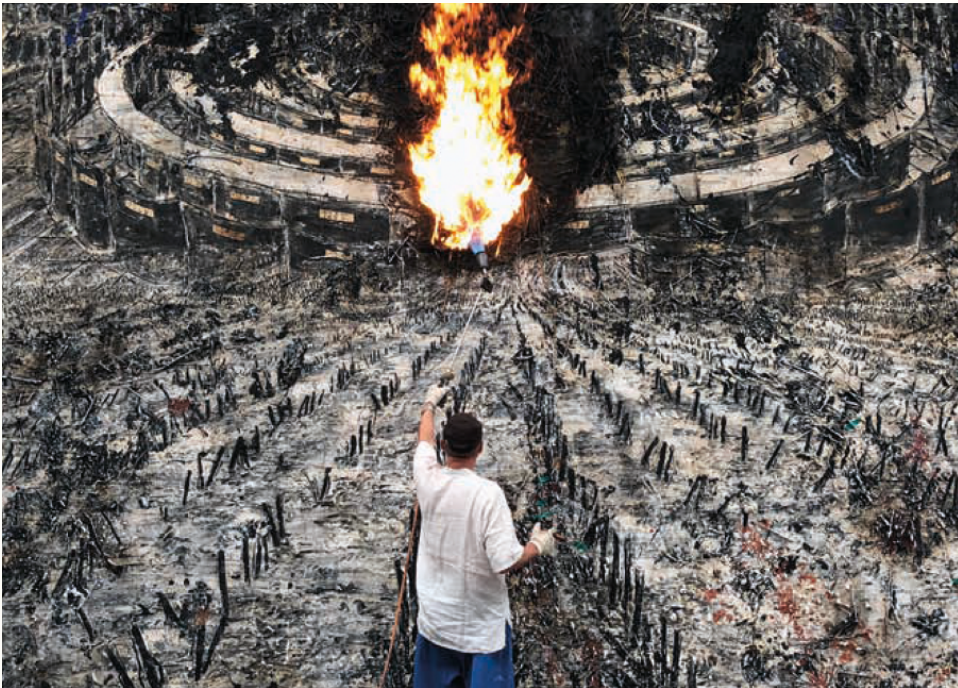


To mothers, Barjac, 2016

Barjac, by Anselm Kiefer



Aerial view of Barjac, 2023



Anselm Kiefer, Croissy studio, 2019



Anselm Kiefer, Croissy studio, 2021

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Photographs by Anselm Kiefer

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