

Distinction and Scepticism: Kiefer at White Cube

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When Tate Modern was launched on the edge of a long impoverished area of south London, it was part of a plan to draw in the rich, push out the old residents, and make the district suitable for upmarket businesses. One of the tendrils of this new gentrification runs towards Bermondsey, and on that street is an exemplary outpost of the shiny future envisaged by the planners: the White Cube gallery in Bermondsey.

Even so, it was an act of daring last year to launch a huge commercial art space in a period of global recession that appears to have no end in sight. An undistinguished warehouse has been graced with a large metal porch, and inside totally reworked to obliterate all traces of its past. The series of elegant, white-walled, top-lit rooms with their polished concrete floors are among the most refined places to show contemporary art in the capital, and in their vast scale rival everything, public or private, aside from Tate Modern's own gargantuan Turbine Hall.

On display until the end of February is a show of recent works by Anselm Kiefer. This is a safe choice in times of economic crisis: the prices of older artists with long-established reputations have borne up better than those of younger stars, being seen as less over-valued to begin with. Their work seems a safe haven for hedged investment in uncertain times. Painting, as always, is the most saleable of media, being unreproducible and flat. Given that there is a strong correlation between size and price, Kiefer's enormous works assure prospective buyers that they are at least getting a lot of stuff for their money.

Yet for those who remember the last deep art world recession, in the years following 1989, the choice of Kiefer stirs some strange associations. Then it was the big neo-expressionist beasts, whose large, macho, genius-laden canvases had represented the height of the 1980s bubble, which became the toxic brands of the recession era. Their work, Kiefer among them, had to be reintroduced to the market with the greatest of care and circumspection, and only after the passage of years had faded memories of their absurd inflation of reputation and price.

The associations seem all the stranger because Kiefer's works have barely changed in the interim: the viewer is still offered those arcane, apocalyptic, rusty, heavily Germanic, portentous alchemical machines, freighted with dark historical references. Those same combinations of material and allusion were in the 1980s the epitome of fashionable taste and the rapid accrual of value, in the 1990s of artistic and market hubris, and now of what may pass for the gold standard.

Seen in the grand rooms of the new White Cube, the works' grandeur and pomposity matches the space. While the state museum has been handed over to crowded and noisy entertainment, such private galleries retain the hushed air of reverence before the object that so intimidated those less-educated and less well-heeled viewers in Pierre Bourdieu's classic study of museums and audiences, *The Love of Art*. It still serves to keep out Bermondsey's long-term residents. In fact, White Cube's visitors generally appear as wealthily clad and coiffured, in an understated way, as the rooms themselves. So to see Kiefer's encrusted landscapes and heavy sculptural ensembles in that dour setting, in which everybody is behaving with such decorum, while remembering their chequered past, is to risk the giggles. Scepticism and laughter break the Kiefer and White Cube spell; it was, after all, disbelief in a collective illusion that started and still sustains the recession, and that evaporated (along with quite a few artistic reputations) trillions of dollars.