"Maybe a work is only finished when it's ruined, no? You wouldn't believe how many people send me photographs of my paintings when they have fallen down from the wall! They are always afraid that the work will fall down, that objects will fall from them......It is not so easy, I think, having a painting of mine."

The aim of this paper is to address the issues surrounding the transportation, maintenance and future conservation of Anselm Kiefer’s art works. I will be focusing on his extraordinary, three dimensional monumental works which are a synthesis of painting, sculpture and architecture, often using unorthodox materials. These works exemplify some of the complex challenges faced by future conservators.
The huge painting ‘Nebelland hab ich gesehen, Nebelherz hab ich gegessen für Ingeborg Bachman’, ['I have seen the Land of the Fog, I have eaten the Heart of the Fog'] (1997) journeyed from Kiefer's Barjac studio in the South of France, to the Grand Palais, Paris in 2007, back to Barjac and then on to White Cube, London in 2008. ‘Heart of the Fog’ is the size of the front of a semi-detached house (570cm x 800cm). Due to their size, scale and the nature of the materials from which they are made, works such as this will inevitably change; there are liable to be 'losses' when they are transported.

Curatorial image of Heart of the Fog (Fig.2)

When ‘Heart of the Fog’ was installed at White Cube in 2008, Kiefer made a significant intervention that provides some insight into how the artist and gallery work together, and also how White Cube records the artist’s work, methods and intentions for future reference.

Even with the benefit of a ‘hotline’ to the artist however, the gallery still has to make independent decisions about material losses which occur. Fig.3 is a photograph of what we call ‘Moon rocks’. These are chunks of paint and shellac mixed with sand, glue and ash; small losses from the surface of the work, each approximately 2-3cm. Deciding whether, and where to re-adhere them onto the painting’s surface, or whether to archive them, presents a challenge.
Before discussing Kiefer’s works and examining ‘Heart of the Fog’s’ journey in greater detail, I will provide some general background to the artist’s life and work. It is useful to consider his sources and methods when approaching the issues surrounding the conservation of his art. As we come to understand more about the multiple possibilities inherent in Kiefer’s materials and in the symbols he uses, as well as the role played by the passage of time, it becomes clear that the conservation of his work requires a ‘holistic’ approach; one that looks beyond conventional norms of ‘preservation’.

The importance of knowledge

Kiefer has been an avid student throughout his life and the breadth of his studies is evident in his work. He initially studied law and then went on to study art at the Dusseldorf Karlsruhe Academy, under the professorship of Joseph Beuys. Kiefer has accumulated a wealth of knowledge about the
ancient and modern worlds including Teutonic history, Gnosticism, Mysticism, Jewish Kabbalistic lore, philosophy, political theory and Alchemy. He has also travelled extensively.

The preservation of knowledge is an important theme for Kiefer, who inscribes words in the form of poetry, quotes, names and tributes to the works of other artists on his paintings and sculptures. In an interview with the artist, Michael Auping observed that the orientation of his works only becomes fixed when he writes on the canvas. Kiefer replied that his writing is ‘an attempt to fix a moment or place to suggest a fixed state, but the imagery denies, it is active.’

In Kiefer’s work knowledge is contained within the protective lead covers of books which are stacked in sculpted bookshelves. As a German artist born in 1945, just before the end of World War II, Kiefer is pre-occupied with his own recent history and the Nazi regime, under which many books were denied or destroyed.
History and memory

A great deal has been written about Kiefer’s relationship to the Holocaust, particularly in his early work which focused heavily on the exploration of German identity. Like the poets Ingeborg Bachman and Paul Celan who have influenced his work, Kiefer grappled with the problem expressed by Adorno in the statement: ‘After Auschwitz to write a poem is barbaric’. ii

The ephemeral nature of many of the materials that Kiefer uses challenges the mythology of permanence that was propagated through the art and architecture of Fascism. Kiefer is also concerned with the dangers of looking only to the future after the holocaust, and what he sees as a collective German ‘amnesia’:

“After the ‘misfortune’ as we all name it so euphemistically now, people thought that in 1945 we were starting all over again…it's nonsense. The past was put under taboo and to dig it up again generates resistance and disgust”. iii

Like an archaeologist, Kiefer’s response to history, memory and myth is to ‘dig up’ items from the recent past and lay them carefully alongside other, more ancient findings. His landscapes are layered with fragments of visual ‘remembering’ which span millennia and encompass the cosmos, without the imposition of chronological order.

Sculpture, Dane 2007 (Fig.5)
I would argue that the way for conservators to consider such work is as a whole: to consider how the individual components interact to create an overall effect. No single material or element on the canvas has more ‘intrinsic’ value than any other, regardless of its history, associations or placement.

Work at Kiefer’s three studios:

The progression of Kiefer’s art since the 1970s can be viewed within the context of his three studios and their surroundings. They have been used like stages for his work and are hives of artistic and architectural activity.

Odenwald, Germany

At the end of 1971, Kiefer acquired an attic above an old school house, deep in the forest of Odenwald. Here he produced paintings using charcoal that he made by burning wood from the forests surrounding his studio. He depicted the attic in paintings of different scales in order to explore the themes of nature, religion, myth, culture and politics.

References and meaning are more explicit here than in later paintings, often employing text inscribed on the surface of the work to identify his sources. The ‘Parsifal Cycle’ paintings, which explore the myth of Parsifal and the Holy Grail, are staged in Kiefer’s own attic setting and tested against more recent events, such as the violent acts of the Bader Meinhof.

The cycle of four ‘Parsifal’ paintings (three are owned by the Tate and one by Kunsthaus Zurich) are on large stretchers made with lining canvas. They are traditionally primed using Muresko, a synthetic resin primer. Kiefer soaked course wood-chip wallpaper in fine linseed oil, giving it a translucent quality and a rigid surface. He then glued this to the canvas and painted over it and any remaining exposed areas of canvas. Heavy use of iron oxide painted over the paper provides the effect of a grainy wooden attic and a wash of translucent brown completes this.

There is some impasto in the iron oxide but in the context of Kiefer’s later work this is a comparatively ‘flat’ painted surface. The paintings are all in one piece; produced in cycles and often hung together to form a semi-enclosed environment. In terms of conservation they are more straightforward than his later work, painted in a more traditional manner on primed canvas and with paint that has not been mixed with other materials.

Buchen, Germany

In the late 1980s Kiefer acquired an old brick factory outside the town of Buchen. Deserted and with burnt out WWII tanks placed around the perimeter, the property was again surrounded by forest.
Kiefer was setting his art in a place that was resonant of the abandoned camps and battlefields of the 1940's.

At this huge studio Kiefer enacted one of the major hallmarks of his work, which I call ‘slash and burn’. He dismantled, burned and muddied existing works, reassembling them as new paintings or sculptural forms. In Buchen’s vast empty factories, art was made from huge piles of dirt, old disused brick ovens and from barbed wire fences. There were massive installations of rockets made of lead, dark pools of water of imperceptible depth and broken machinery.

In 1992 Kiefer gifted 100 paintings made in Buchen to the Kunstmuseum Wolfsberg in Germany. When he arrived to install them he stacked the paintings in a pyramid and covered them in earth and detritus that he had brought with him from Buchen, making new art work from the original paintings. He also did this for a show in New York in 1993 at Marian Goodman. The paintings were stacked as if in a pyre, ready to be burnt, and were re-titled ‘Twenty Years of Solitude’. Kiefer publicly destroyed older work and then moved on to a new studio in France. Conservation was not a concern at this time.

Barjac, France

Barjac is an old silk factory in Languedoc, France, which was acquired by Kiefer in 1993. This location befits Kiefer’s sensibilities; silkworms are exquisite alchemists who chew mulberry leaves and then produce cocoons of silk. The studio, La Ribotte, and the surrounding hilly estate is 200 acres and provided the artist with the raw material to fashion a world made up of a labyrinth of tunnels, towers, caves, bridges, greenhouses and even a coliseum created from stacked sea freight containers. There was a drawing atelier, workshops and builders yards as well as his family home. The factory buildings housed a subterranean library, row upon row of shelves containing metal trays storing 40 years worth of accumulated materials, some natural, some manufactured, all waiting to be recycled.
A visit to Barjac is a memorable experience. It is his imagination made real, in the landscape and under the ground. It is like a fantastical medieval town with a cast of characters no less diverse: builders, carpenters, welders, art technicians, crane drivers, registrars, a Michelin-starred chef, all zipping around in an incongruous fleet of slightly battered silver Mercedes. I associate this team with lavish picnics, rocket fuelled coffee and macho smokes as the working ephemera.

At this studio Kiefer produced increasingly monumental works, including ‘Heart of the Fog’. These works present serious challenges for conservators.

It is the job of Kiefer’s dedicated team to safeguard the artist’s intent and deliver his instructions to the letter. They help to create the site, build structures and stretch canvases, but it is always Kiefer himself who makes the work. He has sole authorship and consequently an in-depth knowledge of the technical processes.

At Barjac in the 1990s, Kiefer’s paintings increased in scale and ambition. He contrived a modular system of attaching stretchers together to form one enormous canvas, up to 9 metres in height. These vast paintings can be taken apart to facilitate transport and Kiefer has in mind that at this size they can still fit into the hold of a 747 jumbo-jet.

Thematically the Barjac works reflect the progress of Kiefer’s studies and post-Buchen travels, referencing his interest in history and lost civilisations, the Old Testament and Kaballistic myth, poetry and warfare. Memory, time and decay all remain central to the work.

As these themes develop and the scale of works increases so too does the variety of media used. Huge lead ships, planes and tanks are attached to the surfaces of the work. Paint and other media used become so heavy that the canvas and supporting structures groan under their load. The works shift and change to accommodate this.
The function of time in Kiefer’s work

“I need nature, the changing weather, the heat and the cold. Sometimes I leave my paintings out in the rain, I throw acid, earth or water over them. I do not use industrially manufactured paints. The colour red is rust, real rust.”

Kiefer’s art works evolve over long periods of time, often many years, during which time they may suffer real weathering and fundamental ‘damage’ purposefully inflicted by the artist. Time itself is a component in Kiefer’s work; not only actively changing its patina and texture but also ageing it. Works evolve and take on new dimensions.

The art works are never described as finished, even after being exhibited they are often returned to Kiefer’s studio for further amendments. ‘Finished is a difficult word. Sometimes I think that a work is finished and then 5 years later I start it again.’ The hardest part of being an artist, Kiefer has said, is ‘deciding when the image is complete or knowing when it holds the intent you want.’

The character of landscapes

Kiefer’s landscapes have been described as ‘taking anti-flatness about as far as it can possibly go’. They are thick with impasto, literally muddy, blasted, furrowed and worn. He uses organic materials including twigs, branches, straw, sunflowers, teeth, semen, nail clippings, hair and seeds, which are bound to deteriorate. By the time the art works get to the gallery – let alone to a museum or conservator – they have been through an ordeal that echoes that of nature. Kiefer expresses his need to physically act upon his landscapes: ‘This is not satisfactory for me....throw earth on it.’

Kiefer’s ‘strange’ materials

Kiefer’s use of materials and his interest in ruins, labyrinths and tunnels stems from his childhood in Germany, growing up in the post-war ruins and rubble. He never throws any materials away but puts it all to use: recycling and reworking.

The artist has always identified with the practice of Alchemy and this is made explicit in the titles of some of his paintings since the mid-80s, for example ‘Nigredo’ [1984]. Nigredo is a black, base material and the starting point for Alchemy. In Kiefer’s work it is the foundation for much of his painting. He associates it with Germany after World War II, with himself before his transformation to artist, the substance of dirt before he transforms it to paint and the lead that alchemists attempted to spin into gold. Ash for example, from hundreds of burned telephone books, is mixed with a base layer of shellac, mud, sand and oil. This does not emulsify and bind together like commercial paint does,
but is intended from the outset to dry and crack, adhering to the raw, un-primed canvas in a rudimentary fashion. It is a base material transformed: ‘A silk purse out of a sow’s ear’.

Kiefer is particularly interested in materials which have what he calls ‘energy’, from their multiple possibilities: straw can become wheat or be burned to stubble; shellac, the excreta of a bug, is processed to become protective varnish in multiple yellows; glass is made from sand and is not only fragile and transparent but can also be very strong it is a raw and natural product which can not only bestow civilisation but also represent destruction: hundreds of perfect shards of glass are used for writing out the coordinates of Kiefer’s exploded stars.

Kiefer has used lead as a component of his paintings since the early 1980s, much of which was reclaimed from the bombed roof of Cologne Cathedral. It is both a liquid and a solid, malleable yet enduring. The motif of Kiefer’s own palette, which he painted on many of his early pictures, was transfigured into a sculpted lead palette with wings in ‘The Book’ [1985]. This was attached to the front of the work but free of the painted surface.

The use of lead increased and was made more poignant following the events of Chernobyl in 1986. This affected Kiefer greatly and he observed the use of lead as a protective barrier against radiation. There are explicit references to Chernobyl in his lead book pieces. The protective qualities of lead are represented in the covers of these books, which are very much stronger than traditional material used for books binding.

Lead is ‘marvellous beautiful material’ which he has made into not only boats, tanks, planes and power stations but any number of objects. It ‘can transform itself in all directions through alchemy and is also associated with Saturn and creativity. Kiefer says:

“For me, lead is a very important material. It is, of course, a symbolic material, but also the colour is very important. You cannot say that it is light or dark. It is a colour or non-colour that I identify with. I don’t believe in absolutes. The truth is always grey.”

But even the colour of lead as used by Kiefer is multi-faceted. Daniel Arasse describes how Kiefer worked with the material:

“Sheets of lead which Kiefer laid on the floor of his studio or on the ground outside and then simply allowed time, weather and chance to take their toll. Walked on, driven over by the tyres of vehicles and exposed to the extremes of weather, the lead acquired an irregular texture and a huge range of colours: Ochre’s, reds, greens, yellows.”
Getting perspective: Movement in the Kiefer works

The perception of movement in Kiefer’s work is achieved through scale and texture, the depths of materials and use of light. The viewer can lose themselves to imagination and a world of ideas: there is earth you could literally feel, at a scale you could step into, and the ‘impossibility’ of towers that look on the verge of toppling over. The viewer has to be at a significant distance from the work to take it all in, however, the layers of materials give off an incredible light, whether viewed from afar or close up. Kiefer is a master at rendering skies, water and fields. He is studied, but his impasto and depth of materials belie his technical ability to capture light, the sense of movement, atmosphere and weather.

How ‘Heart of the Fog’ and similar monumental works are conceived and created

‘Heart of the Fog’ is typical of the monumental works from Barjac as it is created from multiple stretchers. In this case there are 6: 4 vertical, across the bottom of the painting, and 2 horizontal, on the top. Each of these stretchers is attached to the other by flat steel bars that are screwed into the wooden substructure.

The paintings are broken down for transport. They must travel by truck, plane or boat to reach their destination. Nearly all are under 305cm at their highest point so that they can be disassembled and shipped. This even applies to the modular sections of the very largest works.

The stretchers are produced on site by Kiefer’s assistants and covered in a heavy canvas. The canvas is not primed and has no lining or further structural support. It is the thick, earthy solidity of Kiefer’s materials that gives the canvas a rhino-like hide. The materials used may include mud, twigs,
straw, oil, sand, ash and shellacs built up over weeks or months. Kiefer’s giant ‘Manitou’ crane is used to haul part-painted canvases up onto a wall or to drop them flat on their back.

Thick, pungent material (you can nearly always smell a big Kiefer painting before you see it), is then smeared, scraped and painted by him with remarkable speed, intensity and a wiry strength. Tins of shellac, acrylic, fine oils, sand, earth and ash are blended, poured and spread until the canvas has its ‘background’.

The canvas is then left to weather, to gain miasma and weight, corrosion and a patina either in an unheated villa (a type of modular studio made of ashlar blocks and zinc), or leant against a couple of chariots (metal frameworks on wheels) and taken outside to weather.

‘Heart of the Fog’ aged naturally and was not subject to expedited ageing techniques that are applied to some of the other monumental paintings. Kiefer has been known to attach electrodes to paintings with a metallic content to cause colourful oxides to bloom, or thrown molten lead and acid on the surface to effect more rapid change. He also uses a burning and cooling technique, applying terracotta over the canvas and heating and cooling it rapidly to create surface cracks. The work may then be set on fire. Kiefer sprays water onto the back of smouldering stretchers in order to control the damage.

When the works have been sufficiently transformed, Kiefer continues to paint his landscapes, architecture, seascapes, constellations, skies and weather. A heavy impasto is achieved with the same range of materials. They are scraped and gouged into the furrows of fields, waves, clouds and architectural elements.

At this stage the seams between the six stretchers are covered over. As the great weight of materials matures and hardens, cracks appear and the surface becomes more rigid. This lends the artist’s painted surfaces the distinctive appearance they have had since the early 1980s: like looking at the dried muddy surface of an empty lake in a drought.

Change and character begins at an early stage. At the moment when many artists would be concerned with the preservation of their vision, Kiefer embraces the possibilities on an object in flux.

I suspect that the background for ‘Heart of the Fog’ started out slightly lighter than the sky behind the pyramid now appears, because the passage of time has darkened the paint and ash as it has dried. The stacks of bricks provide a solid architectural framework for the painting but the perspective is ambiguous: the bricks are perhaps a monumental pyramid or they could be a stairway to eternity. There is such richness in the tone, light and texture of the painting that you feel you could walk into it and start to climb.

The use of ash in the ‘Heart of the Fog’ and other works conveys the grim weight of the aftermath of the Holocaust, and this is echoed in the body at the base of the pyramid, which is suggestive of its victims. At the heart of the painting is a single soul, a life sized ceramic heart hangs from the centre
by a rusty wire. Possibly there is blood staining the steps, certainly there is fog. These are rust and ash respectively, both materials rich in symbolism.

**Heart of the Fog and the ‘Monumenta’ (2007) series at the Grand Palais, Paris**

The zenith of Kiefer’s production at Barjac was the 2007 inauguration of the ‘Monumenta’ series at the Grand Palais, Paris, an amazing building with a very high glass roof. There were 7 corrugated villas each containing a single large art work or cycle of works. Three of the artist’s huge steel and concrete ‘Babel Towers’ were exhibited between the villas.

The exhibition required an assortment of specialist teams including Kiefer’s core crew from Barjac, lighting designers, couriers, White Cube gallery staff, curators and a vast construction crew to undertake the fabrication of the villas.

*The technical team at work at Grand Palais (Fig.9)*

The tight installation schedules for exhibitions (in this case approximately 5 days) makes adherence to museum standards of handling, condition checking and conservation demanding. For example, following completion of the villas, there was only 48 hours in which to photograph...
and condition report complex works such as ‘Palm Sontag’ (2006) which consists of 18 paintings and a palm tree. Condition reporting is essential so that the condition of the piece can be monitored at the point of handing over control and liability to the loaning institution.

Palm Sontag (Fig. 10)

The scale of the Grand Palais permitted giant fine art vehicles and cranes to drive amongst the buildings and deliver the artworks, often directly into the villas that were being built at the same time.
Kiefer villas at Grand Palais (Fig. 11)

The vast concrete ‘Babel Towers’ were also constructed on site. These are made of ferrous concrete cast in sections over steel shipping containers. Each weighs 80 plus tonnes and is over 40ft in height. They were stacked in situ by crane. The towers appear to be deliberately close to collapse. Kiefer has said: ‘I like things on the edge, because you know art is on the edge all the time. It is not decoration for me.’

Kiefer and Babel Tower (Fig. 12)
Throughout the installation Kiefer was on hand, riding his bicycle around the huge building, constantly checking and editing. On seeing the third of the towers constructed he decided it should now be destroyed to make it ‘ruinous’. I watched as he told a crane driver: ‘You are my pencil! We will re-draw this tower together’. He asked the driver to knock the tower flat and break it apart. Dust and debris flew everywhere. This gave an incredible drama to the show: it looked like some kind of ruined city from the ‘Fertile Crescent’ and made the apparent threat of collapse posed by the other two towers far greater.

The transported Babel Tower (Fig.13)

The transportation of ‘Heart of the Fog’ from Barjac to the Grand Palais, Paris

To transport ‘Heart of the Fog’ to the Grand Palais, the steel restraints on the stretchers were unscrewed and then each of the 6 panels carefully snapped apart. Multiple edges had to be broken from their neighbours with minimal loss or damage to the surface. Kiefer gave this particularly tricky job to one of his long standing assistants, who will now attend and work with this painting each time it is assembled and disassembled, rather like a specialist mechanic.

It is testament to the skill and expertise of Kiefer’s team who had to swiftly re-assemble the piece and hang it, that the edges of each of the stretchers did not blur with their interaction. Friction or pressure
between the edges would have loosened material, making the lines across the painting more evident and demarcating the edges of the supporting stretchers.

The model for transportation is then to build a skeletal wooden transit frame around each stretcher so that it can be safely handled in and out of a very large fine art truck.

Two chariots are set up. The two parts of the painting, bottom right, and right centre, are placed on the chariots and wheeled up to each other. The trick here is to match the line of break very exactly: if it is a few millimetres out, the jigsaw will not fit and may send chunks of paint flying off the work. To avoid this, a careful system of clamps and metal guides are attached to the stretchers and are slowly drawn together on the chariots. When in place the flat metal brace bars are screwed firmly into the back of the horizontal stretcher bars.

Chariot and re-assembly of painting (Fig.14)

With the aid of a crane this process is painstakingly repeated until the whole work is assembled, which takes 6 people approximately 16 hours. A system of cleats is then attached to the rear of the stretcher bars and on the display wall, which allows the piece to be carefully hoisted into place by a crane. At over 5000kg the structural stresses and possibilities for damage are acute. The process,
which has been tried and tested, is carried out by experienced staff and sanctioned by Kiefer. Nonetheless it inevitably results in a change in the painting. Each time it is moved, the work alters.

After its exhibition at the Grand Palais, ‘Heart of the Fog’ underwent this process twice more in reverse: the piece was exhibited back in Barjac where it stayed for the winter and then it was broken down for transport to White Cube.

At White Cube, ‘Heart of the Fog’ looked colossal, entirely dominating the space. When Kiefer visited he found it to be over lit preferring natural light, so this was addressed. Kiefer also noted, as we had, that some of the seams between the stretchers had become rather too prominent and he wanted to make an intervention. A palette of materials was dispatched from his studio in Paris.

\[\text{Gaps between stretchers on Heart of the Fog (Fig.15)}\]

It was fascinating to see the raw, unblended range of materials: buckets, bottles and bags of sand, shellacs, oils and acrylics. Sand and PVA was sourced locally. We then rigged a ‘crows-nest’ to sit on the end of our forklift truck. In this contraption, equipped with his materials, Kiefer was hoisted into position in front of the areas he wished to work on. Areas were pasted into, scraped over and in-filled.

PVA was then splashed on by the gallery’s own assistants and Kiefer, observing from a distance, instructed a member of White Cube’s staff to fire handfuls of sand at the PVA. Some of it adhered, while great quantities fell to the floor, giving our facility the feel of the artist’s studio. Kiefer gave vigorous direction: ‘More there, throw harder...enough!’ The sand had blurred parts of the painting so
Kiefer went up in the contraption with his sticks of charcoal and reinforced the solidity of the title, a line from a Bachman poem.

Rather than having to move the painting again, we built a wooden framework with heavy-duty polyurethane stretched tautly over it in order to form a membrane. This acts as a protective wall in front of the painting and provides it with a stable climate for storage. It takes two days to remove. When the painting eventually goes on exhibition or acquires a new home this process of breaking and re-construction will be repeated.

**Working with Anselm Kiefer**

Kiefer has given very clear direction by taking action at various stages in the life of ‘Heart of the Fog’ and other works when he has felt that multiple transports and re-constructions have caused a focus on fabrication that is a distraction to their main function.

Kiefer’s response to a change in a work cannot always be predicted. (Fig.1) I am aware of an occasion at another gallery when Kiefer offered to re-inscribe a phrase of poetry that had been inadvertently cleaned off a vatrine installation. However, when the director of the Art Museum of New South Wales wrote to ask him if he would replace one word of text that had been rubbed and blurred, Kiefer responded: ‘Not really, the word concerned is FAITH, that it has faded seems to have kept track with the rest of the world.’

Even with the advantage of working directly for the artist it is necessary to make autonomous decisions about small ‘losses’ that arise. The moon rocks are bagged and tagged if they are not deemed significant, or prove impossible to re-locate. Larger areas of loss are mapped and re-attached using what we call the ‘Kiefer glue-gun’. This gun produces hot melt polyurethane adhesive. From a purely conservational standpoint we know that such glue is (Fig.1) to go brittle and yellow, that it is hard to reverse and therefore seems like a crude intervention. However, its use is the wish of the artist, and less dramatic than pouring hot lead or acid across the surface of a work!

**Conservation of Kiefer’s art**

In the near future, the tools required to make judgements about the conservation of Kiefer’s works will be within the collective experience of the studio technicians and gallery staff who have worked directly with the artist. From the handling of his work to its routine maintenance and repair, each artwork should be considered on a case-by-case basis, in light of data and experience gained from dealing with other pieces. The artist has given White Cube instructions throughout our working relationship, and he signs off every exhibition installation. He and his technicians have also given senior White Cube staff tutorials in dealing with losses from the paintings, both in transit and during assembly.
White Cube has created an independent archive that, in conjunction with our operational experience, can be used to devise strategies for the care of the works. We archive the artist’s intent (letters, plans, interviews, maquettes etc), the context in which works have been produced and exhibited, detailed information about the materials used and handling instructions.

We have archived Kiefer’s palette of paints and materials used to intervene on ‘Heart of the Fog’ in 2008. When the painting next travels this palette of materials, together with instructions for installation, maintenance and storage will travel with it. Each work has a biography taking the form of a series of condition reports. The ethnography of the material in the White Cube archive will be available indefinitely for reference. It is accessible to anyone who has practical involvement with Kiefer’s work.

The intent of the artist is considered sacrosanct by the gallery. However, once ownership and title to a work have transferred to a museum or collector, we have to recognise that priorities can also change. The best that we can do is to provide the new guardians of the work with the most comprehensive information possible, and to make it permanently accessible.

Some current conservation of monumental Kiefer works conducted by museums is focused on minimum intervention and maximum protection and maintenance, in order to stabilise or slow down the rate of change. It is hoped that this approach is setting a precedent.

I have previously described White Cube’s ‘three dimensional, brave and difficult’ contemporary art works as ‘future historic machines’. If we think about them in this way now, we can suggest appropriate methods of future conservation. Contemporary works are produced to generate vital ideas. Kiefer addresses this in the following way:

‘People mustn’t try to understand what I am saying through my works...They must see with their own way of thinking, their own history...Each individual perspective opens the door to other visions, other pictures, other interpretations. In a way each viewer ‘finishes’ the work with their own vision.’

I believe that the ability of an artwork to inspire this response should be the primary focus of conservation, over and above its singular materials. I have noticed that Kiefer may be concerned and intervene when the physical fabrication of a work – its stretchers, base canvas or grounding – becomes apparent and therefore distracting from this intent. Such observations may provide us with some guidance when future decisions are made. If Kiefer’s art works are maintained and cared for with both a regard for his recorded intention as well as close attention to carefully archived technical information, they may survive and retain the spirit of the artist’s intent.

However the field of contemporary art conservation develops, it is vital to bear in mind that decay and change in Kiefer’s works have been integral to their creation. Movement is inherent in every piece the artist produces and I think he intends this to be reassuring. As he says, ‘it is good to know all is moving, even the earth’.
Footnotes:

i Heaven and Earth: Interview with Anselm Kiefer, Michael Auping, Barjac, 2004. This endurance of language echoes a statement by Paul Celan (a poet and concentration camp survivor who has greatly influenced Kiefer and whom he tributes through his work) that after Auschwitz, ‘only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything it remained secure against loss’. (On receiving the Bremen Prize for German literature, 1958)

ii Prisms, Theodore Adorno, 1955, reprinted London, 1967. This statement is in the context of a wider quote from the essay ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’: ‘The critique of culture is confronted with the last stage in the dialectic of culture and barbarism: to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that corrodes also the knowledge which expresses why it has become impossible to write poetry today’.

iii Anselm Kiefer: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/kief/hd_kief.htm


vi Monumenta 2007/Anselm Kiefer, Sternefall ‘Falling Stars’, Grand Palais

vii Anselm Kiefer: The Independent wants to know if I am a Nazi!, Charles Darwent, The Independent, 11.10.09

viii Reflections on Painting, Alchemy, Nazism: Visiting with Anselm Kiefer, Albert P. Albano, JAIC 1998, volume 37, no.3, Article 8


x Interview with Anselm Kiefer, discussing his Aperituar Terra exhibition at White Cube, BBC 2007

xi Reflections on Painting, Alchemy, Nazism: Visiting with Anselm Kiefer, Albert P. Albano, JAIC 1998, volume 37, no.3, Article 8


xiv Heaven and Earth: Interview with Anselm Kiefer, Michael Auping, Barjac, 2004

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xvi Kiefer Monograph, Thames and Hudson, p.168

 xvii Attention: Towering Intellect at Work, Tim Teeman, Sunday Times, 24.01.07
“Notes on the subject of ‘The Fertile Crescent’ which inspired an Anselm Kiefer Exhibition of the same name: ‘The light of civilization first dawned in the Middle East along a crescent-shaped region stretching from just south of Jerusalem then northward along the Mediterranean coast to present-day Syria and eastward through present-day Iraq then southward along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers to the Persian Gulf. Ref: http://visav.phys.uvic.ca


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Acknowledgments:

Ms Honey Luard, Editor.
Ms Rachel Dani Witkin, Research and assistance.
Mr Simon Mitchell, Lay-out
Dr Christina Young, Conservation & Technology Dept., Courtauld Institute of Art.

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