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Citation for published version:

Weikop, C 2019, “The History Boys” of Post-1945 German Art: Joseph Beuys, Gerhard Richter, Georg Baselitz, and Anselm Kiefer, *German Quarterly*, vol. 92, no. 2, pp. 271-274.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/gequ.12105>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1111/gequ.12105](https://doi.org/10.1111/gequ.12105)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

German Quarterly

Publisher Rights Statement:

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“The History Boys” of Post-1945 German Art: Joseph Beuys, Gerhard Richter, Georg Baselitz, and Anselm Kiefer

On 19 May 1933, Germany’s National Socialist party staged a book burning in the courtyard of a school in Kleve. This is where the young Joseph Beuys (1921–86), then aged 12, allegedly rescued from the flames Carolus Linnaeus's *Systema naturae*, first published in 1735 (Adriani, 13-14)—a pioneering work that framed principles for defining natural genera and species of organisms. While this rescue is most likely an apocryphal story, it is true that Linnaeus’s drive to interpret all things botanical impacted Beuys greatly and in part determined the direction his expanded concept of art, which he termed ‘Social Sculpture’, would take. One of Beuys’s earliest artworks, “Acer Platanoides” (1945) in the National Galleries of Scotland,¹ is a single Norway maple leaf stuck on to drawing paper and signed “J Beuys 45.” A regenerative symbol created at the end of the war, it marks his embarkation on an artistic journey in which he frequently embraced the arboreal. This culminated in his visionary *documenta 7* project, “7000 Oaks—City Forestation instead of City Administration” (1982–87).²

While Beuys had fought in the war and therefore belonged to the *Tätergeneration*, he would attempt to atone for his wartime experiences through cathartic performances aimed at healing the wounds of conflict. The drama of such a homeopathic performance at the Festival of New Art in Aachen, on 20 July 1964, escalated when after being punched on the nose by a student of civil engineering, Beuys seized a crucifix with his left hand and raised his right arm in a gesture that could be interpreted as a *Sieg-Heil* salute. The reference was only accentuated by the blood dripping down over his upper lip like some grotesque imitation of Hitler’s moustache,

¹ <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/93475/acer-platanoides>.

² <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/beuys-7000-oak-trees-ar00745>.

a moment captured in a famous photograph by Heinrich Riebesehl.³ Lisa Saltzman has argued that Beuys's belated "confrontation with traumatic national history", was "essentially a belated experiencing of his own traumatic history" (15), and yet it is also true that Beuys deliberately blurred his own biography by constructing a myth of regeneration. He had served in the Luftwaffe as a radio operator and then as a rear gunner, and his Stuka plane was shot down in March 1944. Beuys embellished this story, however, by claiming he was saved by nomadic Tartar tribesmen from the mountains, who wrapped him in insulating layers of felt and animal fat to keep him from freezing to death. This oft-repeated narrative, even restated as fact in Beuys's *New York Times* obituary (see Russell), was famously called into question as fraudulent myth-making by Benjamin Buchloh in *Artforum* in 1980, in which he effectively sought to challenge all hagiographic accounts that perpetuated such Beuysian "mythology."

In 1960s Germany, there were a few attempts to artistically deconstruct the image of Hitler, evidently a highly problematic subject, given the desire of those born after the war to bury his image for good. Besides from the huge publicity surrounding the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials (1963–65), there was a tendency during this period to repress discourse on Germany's recent wartime past. In 1962, Gerhard Richter (b.1932) painted a portrait of Hitler, although he later destroyed it because he found the motif "too spectacular," (Knöfel, 114) and was clearly worried his intentions might be misunderstood. Furthermore, Richter did not have much time for what he saw as the acolyte adoration of Beuys, and he kept his distance from the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf sculpture professor throughout his years as a student at that

³ <https://www.tate.org.uk/sites/default/files/styles/width-1200/public/images/fig2josephbeuys.jpg>.

institution. Yet the two would become faculty colleagues when Richter himself was appointed there as a professor in 1971.

Another artist who felt a considerable distance to Beuys was Georg Baselitz (Weikop, “Forests”), although it should be noted that Baselitz (b.1938) was detached from the 1960s art scenes in general, especially the cool Düsseldorf circle of Konrad Lueg, Blinky Palermo, Sigmar Polke, and Richter. Aside from his early collaboration with Eugen Schönebeck, with whom he produced the *Pandemonium Manifesto* 1 and 2 (1961–62), Baselitz worked mostly in self-imposed isolation. In 1963, he sensationally reintroduced the “figure,” as well as a sense of its history, into German painting. At this time, at least in the Federal Republic, painting was dominated by a bloodless abstraction that was ideologically inoffensive, and deliberately so. Baselitz challenged this paradigm with his “Big Night down the Drain” (1963),⁴ a painting which depicted a distorted dwarf-like and vaguely Hitlerian figure manically masturbating a club-like appendage. This sensational work led to legal proceedings against the Galerie Werner & Katz on the charge of obscenity. Due to its aesthetic of abject ugliness, the painting could be interpreted as subverting the National Socialist obsession with athletic “Aryan” bodies evident in the totalitarian mode of what was called at the time “heroic realism.” This propagandist mode was not dissimilar to the Socialist Realism that characterized the visual propaganda of the early German Democratic Republic in which the young Baselitz had grown up. Conversely, Baselitz could have been belatedly and ironically responding to the Nazis’ conception of the distorted bodies represented in Expressionist art as being “degenerate,” by provocatively taking this notion of “degeneracy” to some sort of outrageous extreme.

⁴ <https://www.wikiart.org/en/georg-baselitz/big-night-down-the-drain-1963-1>.

Baselitz, like Richter, was born in Saxony, East Germany, before the Second World War, and like Richter, he would, after the war, leave East Germany for the Federal Republic. Like others in his situation he had to process the very different art pedagogies of the two Germanys, before embarking on his own path. Intriguingly, Baselitz was the first patron of Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945), acquiring a number of Kiefer's "Attic" canvases from the 1973 show *14 mal 14* at the Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, an exhibition curated by Klaus Gallwitz. Baselitz was hugely impressed by the physical presence of these Kiefer paintings, which suggested the dark history of Germany and much else. Later in 1980, the two artists, nominated by Gallwitz, would be exhibited together at the Venice Biennale, where their work at the German pavilion generated a critical storm, with a number of critics objecting vehemently to the highly "Teutonic" quality of the pavilion (Saltzman 105–11). Kiefer had been courting controversy since the outset of his career, when in 1969, he performed the taboo *Sieg-Heil* salute in various European locations, an "action" that was photo-documented in "Heroic Symbols."⁵ This was an artist book of photographs juxtaposed with small watercolors and found images taken from Nazi magazines. In 1975, a sequence of eighteen of these photographs was published as a photo-essay entitled "Occupations"⁶ in the eleventh issue of *Interfunktionen*, a conceptual art magazine then edited by Buchloh. The scandal generated by this particular Kiefer issue, when these provocative photographs entered the public sphere for the first time, resulted in dealers pulling their ads, effectively cutting off funding for the publication. While upset that

⁵ <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/heroic-symbols-anselm-kiefer/artist-books>.

⁶ <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/heroic-symbols-anselm-kiefer/difficult-reception-occupations>.

taking the risk of publishing Kiefer's photo-essay led to the immediate demise of *Interfunktionen*, Buchloh had undoubtedly been impressed by the deconstructive quality of Kiefer's early work. He later argued that Kiefer's "Occupations" was "a real working through of German history" (Mehring 179). He was, however, rather less taken by Kiefer's apparent turn from such a startling performance practice to developing new forms of history painting. These he found regressive. And Buchloh would suggest that unlike Richter, Kiefer never questioned "the authenticity or auratic originality of the painting as a singular object" ("1988" 615).

Because Kiefer occupied the role of the saluting Nazi himself in these photographs, his work had greater potential to provoke than Richter's earlier blurred photo-painting "Onkel Rudi" (1965),⁷ which depicted the artist's maternal uncle smiling and posing in his new Wehrmacht uniform not long before he was killed in action in 1944. Buchloh, however, ultimately preferred Richter's reflections on German history, which he argued were "infinitely more complicated" ("1988" 614) than Kiefer's. By contrast, Donald Kuspit, in a critical contest with Buchloh and other *October* writers (a dispute played out across art magazine articles and other fora since the 1980s) has long taken an opposing position, adopting Kiefer as his champion. Kuspit would claim in a 2002 article on the merits of the artists' respective "gray paintings": "There are two kinds of German gray—the gray of the murky depths and the gray of the shallow surface [...] Kiefer is expert at plumbing the depths—risking the possibility of spiritual depth in a shallow world—while Richter is expert at skimming the surface: his art is insufferably shallow" (Kuspit).

⁷ <https://www.gerhard-richter.com/en/art/paintings/photo-paintings/death-9/uncle-rudi-5595>.

We should return to Beuys though to understand Kiefer's roots. As well as benefiting from Baselitz's friendship and patronage, Kiefer (unlike Baselitz or Richter) felt drawn to Beuys and traveled from his studio in Hornbach in the Odenwald, to visit him at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. Kiefer has discussed how his mentor approved of the "Heroic Symbols" work when he first saw it a year or so after he graduated: "He [Beuys] was the first one to say clearly that my *Occupations* photographs were art. My other tutors just wrung their hands: 'Is it morally right? Is this allowed?' Beuys looked at them and said straight away it was a 'good action,' and for him, action was art" (Weikop, *In Focus*). And Kiefer would also participate in one of Beuys's ecological "actions," "Save the Woods,"⁸ which took place in the Grafenberger Wald outside of Düsseldorf in December 1971 (Weikop, "Interview"). Kiefer's interest in performance, as well as his compelling use of organic materials that suggest the layering of history, his deep engagement with Romanticism, and his fascination in the transformative processes of alchemy, could all be related to the example of Beuys. Kiefer's practice is, however, not so politically committed. For instance, in the 1970s he was skeptical concerning Beuys's utopian belief in the possibilities of the "Organization for Direct Democracy through Referendum" (1971). Kiefer has stated in an interview with this author, that he told Beuys that "Direct democracy might function in a small Swiss canton like Appenzell, but on a larger scale it is disastrous" (Weikop, "Interview"). Some might argue that the precarity of the current Brexit situation in the UK, at the time of writing this essay, effectively proves Kiefer's point.

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⁸ <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/127.1990/>.