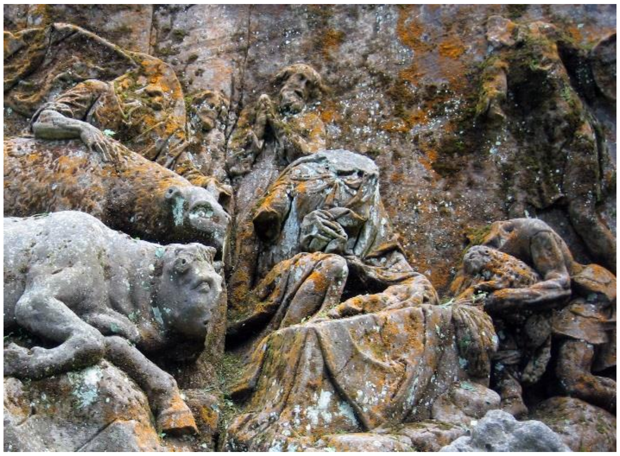
Low Relief:

or, articulation tied to embodiment

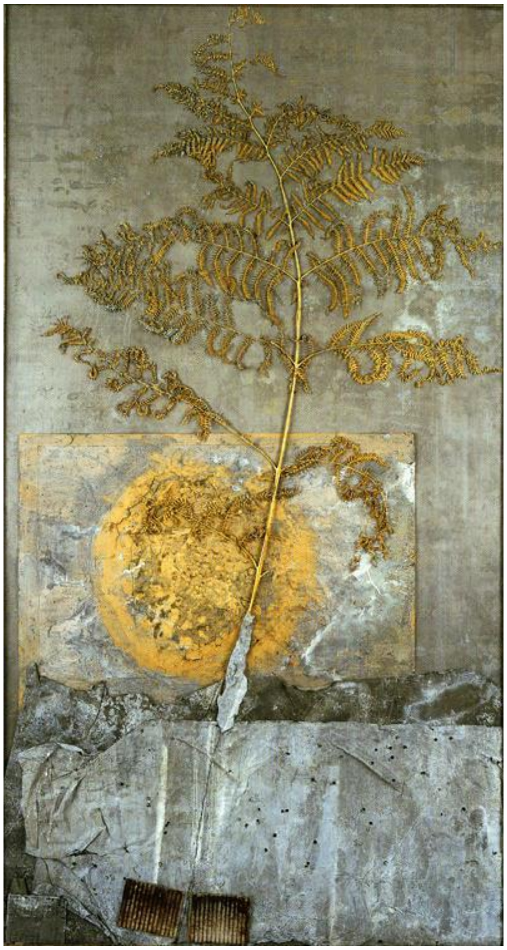
Each of these buildings has a history created by its own fiction and need to demonstrate its philosophy of existence. That fiction is part of the debris of history.

Heaven and Earth, Anselm Kiefer



The tension between articulation and embodiment was the subject to which Dalibor Vesely and I returned during our visit to the Kuks Forest Garden in northern Bohemia. The prompt for our discussion came from the stone sculptures of Matthias Braun (c. 1725). No less articulate than the pages of a book, the figures there cannot be detached from the earth-bound sandstone into which they have been cut—bedrock-relief. Though the iconography is ostensibly Christian, the half-human landscape was also famous for *Walpurgisnacht* (May Day) festivities, the rituals of which were likewise embedded in the forest.

Seven weeks after *May Day* comes *Johannisnacht* or *Midsummer Night*, the subject of a painting by Anselm Kiefer (1991), another study in low relief. The painting's materials include soil, acrylic paint, lead on cardboard, metal fragments, and a dried fern.



Although dried, the fern shows signs of life. It has a glow as bright as the sun and a twist that some critics see as dancing. Different expressions are implied in its physiognomic and motor indications, communications that couple two of Aristotle's three sorts of movement: change of state and change of position or posture. I add the word posture to the philosopher's definition because the fern is stationed in its spot rather permanently, with its foot in an oversized sock made out of lead. If dancing is to occur the wind will have to play a part. Alternatively, an accelerated period of development may have caused the changes we see:

growth, deterioration, and renewal, from green to grey to gold, substituting signs of life and death with another of rebirth, all in the course of a single night, the year's longest.

"*Johannisnacht*," Kiefer observed, "is a special night in which fields are set on fire and religion bares its roots in ancient mystical acts."[1] Again, low relief. To this very day, all across the European continent, peoples (rural populations especially) still recite ancient tales of special ferns and flowers blooming on Midsummer Night. Literature also recounts this natural history. Cossack Korzh sought such a flower in Nikolai Gogol's *St. John's Eve,* though his luck turned bad. In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Oberon made use of a plant that had been much strengthened by the sun's overnight stay. In his conflict with Tatania he made use of the "blood" of a flower that resembles St. John's Wort, secretly applied where "sleeping eyelids lay." In other tales, the fern blossom was said to have power over blindness, moral weakness, poverty, and loveless solitude. Its flower would burst into bloom the moment the sun touched the waters on the horizon, communicating flashes of light, despite distance, in nocturnal darkness.

Solstice derives from the Latin *sol* (sun) and *sistere* (standing still), a stunning conjunction that is particularly vivid in northern countries. Late in the night the enlarged but fading source stops just before it passes below the horizon, lingering longer than it should. I cannot say if the grey sheet that fills the bottom quarter of Kiefer's canvas is water (rather than post-war scorched earth), but if it is a lake the lumpy profile above (behind the metal smudge that gives the fern its foothold) would be distant mountains. Hills figure rather prominently in the lively activities of Midsummer Night. Not just in Czech lands, as Dalibor said, also in Polish villages, where men would ignite a wooden wheel, disk, or hoop and roll it down a hill, chasing or striking it, as it turned toward a body of water in the valley or onto the ground, where couples would jump over it—through the flame—for the sake of a good family life, or a good beginning of one.

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[1] Kiefer, *Heaven and Earth,* 90

Whether or not the fiery circle was meant to recall the sun's descent is hardly certain, but it is impossible to imagine a more articulate image of the Summer Solstice. Less literally, the scene also recalls John the Baptist standing in the waters of the Jordan River, for Jesus portrayed him as "a burning and shining light." Because Christmas coincides with the Winter Solstice, Christians identified midsummer as its necessary complement: first John then Jesus, one light following another, closing the gap between the times before and after, both out of reach though, edging the horizon. Drawing a pagan parallel and substituting a fern for St. John, Kiefer said:

> Ferns are very important…the first trees were ferns. They are primal. Charcoal and oil are made out of ferns that existed at the beginning of life. There are many stories and folktales about plants having memories. If this is true, ferns could tell us a great deal about our beginnings…but they are complex in relation to Christian symbols of light. They grow in the shade.[2]

Shade, however, is not what we see in this image, nor shadow, despite the fact that figures overlap one another, implying distance and therefore some ground on which silhouettes could be seen. Thanks to the shallowness of the relief, no gaps can be discerned, only shallow space, shining everywhere throughout in silvery light. Moonlight was doubtless Kiefer's intention. But that would mean two sources of illumination are at play, the sun and moon, whose effects are rendered as gold and silver. The two seem attracted to separate parts of the landscape, one to the dancing fern, the other to everything that stays in its place: the sky, mountains, and sea, as well as the fern's foothold. Despite these differences—support and resistance Vesely might have said—neither source produces effects that could be called flashing or sparkling; the coupled luminosity is rather soft, more like a glimmer or glistening than a blaze or flare, suffusing itself into the surfaces until they are saturated with its shine, a luster without weight, direction, or phase, but situated. The moon, meanwhile, keeps itself hidden. Its effect is thoroughgoing, rather like aging, which colors our lives without attracting notice. Still, because the silvery shine affects so much of what we see, the dancing fern's glow stands out as striking, as does the sun's late-night stay.

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[2] Kiefer, *Heaven and Earth,* 90

In his gloss on Arnold Gehlen's term 'relief' (*Entlastung*), Dalibor argued that symbolic articulations bring into relief 'events that take place in the depths of our human situation and experience.' The silent background that sustains such figures includes a range of embodiments and movements: the body's habitual and spontaneous gestures (dance-like signs of life), the earth's densities and the sky's rhythms (fertility at the time of the solstice), and the histories of social patterns and cultural norms (pagan-christian festivals surviving into the modern age). The key, though, is that architecture's basic task is to sustain the tension—bridging the gaps—between what can be articulated and what must necessarily remain silent.

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