

**ANSELM KIEFER: THE ALCHEMY OF ART IN THE MAGAZZINO DEL SALE**

**by Alfredo Bianchini**

**President, Fondazione Emilio e Annabianca Vedova**

For a number of years, Emilio Vedova worked in the Magazzino del Sale on the banks of the *Canale delle Navi* – the Ships' canal – a large liquid thoroughfare between the stones of the *Zattere* and those of the *Giudecca*. Today, following the restoration planned in masterly fashion by Renzo Piano, the Magazzino, the first of nine 16th-century *Saloni*, has become the exhibition space of the Fondazione Vedova, equipped with the same technological systems as the most advanced museums in the world. Anselm Kiefer saw it, was fascinated by it and reproduced the forms, dimensions and shapes in his Paris studio, where he planned and created specially for the Magazzino del Sale a new series of works; inaugurated for the first time in May 2011, they will remain on show here until 30th November 2011.

*Salt of the Earth* is the title of the exhibition curated by Germano Celant and organised by the Fondazione Vedova. An exhibition that reflects not only the artist's interest for the alchemical process, of which salt is one component, which does not merely express the intriguing suggestion of works realised in a warehouse in which salt used to be stored, the precious *gold* of the Venetian Republic, but which also bears witness to the further phase of Kiefer's continuous quest around the essential values of the spirit, in the human progress in this world.

The exhibition, commented and illustrated in the fine Skira catalogue, opens at the same time as the *...in continuum* show of Emilio Vedova in his other nearby studio, in which the Venetian master worked for many years, and has been recently restored as a museum space of great potential.

The context of the two exhibitions reveals the overall sense of the Fondazione Vedova's mission, which is not merely that of promoting and studying the work of the Venetian artist, but also that of ideally continuing his dialectic relationship with the world and his "presence" in the contemporary scene; a dialogue between protagonists of contemporary culture, therefore.

It is not a case of comparison for the purposes of discerning similarities and differences between artists, and nor of determining scales of values of merit; the intention is to let the witnesses of contemporary artistic thought speak through the eloquent message of their pictorial works and installations.

Venice once more: Venice that has stimulated a great artist such as Kiefer, confirming itself as an eternal place for inspiration and original creativity and, hence, for the transmission of artistic thought.

But it is a case of history repeating itself: even without returning to the glory and triumphs of Venetian painting of the Renaissance, baroque and 18th-century landscape schools, of the Shakespearean visions in the Merchant of Venice and in Othello, how can one forget the inspiring force of Venice for foreign writers and poets of the 19th and early 20th centuries, from Henry James to Thomas Mann, Ruskin to Hemingway, Byron to Ezra Pound, to mention just a few.

But photographers, architects, town planners and directors have also found and still find in Venice a perennial source of stimuli and inspiration for their own work. And it is once more the Fondazione Vedova that acts as go-between and centre for original production and transmission of a cultural message that goes beyond the confines of the city (as has already been the case with the dialogue between the unseen works by Vedova and new ones by Louise Bourgeois); all projects requiring considerable effort and commitment, for which special thanks must go to the artistic and scientific curator, Germano Celant, the director of the collections, Fabrizio Gazzarri, Alessandro Traldi and Maurizio Milan who worked with ICCEM to design and produce the layouts and to all those who in Venice, Milan and Paris have worked to make the exhibitions possible.

In this way, the Fondazione plans to pay tribute to its founders, Emilio and Annabianca Vedova and participate in the configuration of the city of Venice, favoured not only by Vedova but by any sensitive artist and a historic point of reference for culture in the world. This city has been in a perpetual and never satisfied search for a new identity since the long-distant fall of the Serenissima Republic.

It has interestingly been said that Venice is a labyrinth not only in terms of its streets but also virtually, a sort of oxymoron, a phenomenon of duplicity because it is the city of life and of death, but also joy and of mystery. Without a doubt, Venice lives many paradoxes, but one above all others: the more time advances, the more it is a new time for the whole world and the more Venice grows old. It is an inevitable gap for a city that, to be itself, at least in its *forma urbis*, is differentiated from modern forms.

It is a city condemned always to remain itself, in its current *forma urbis*, with its monuments, its palaces, its *rii* and Grand Canal: everyone wants it like this, identical to itself, in its physical structures as defined by architecture, by the arts, by time. The *forma urbis* by definition conveys a message of the antiquity and of antiquity, as though it were a Pompey but visited so much as to become Disneyland.

*How to survive in the contemporary world? Perhaps like this: in the creation and transmission of a contemporary way of thinking, be it artistic or scientific.*

A city of the spirit. A city of intangible activities. A city of culture that manages to face down the most overwhelming aspects of tourism through the promotion of its plurality of faces in the most diverse connotations, including tradition, of customs, habits, language, behaviour and life styles.

The *form* of the city and its masterpieces convey a "cultural antique" message, whose topicality must be affirmed through the creation and transmission of a contemporary artistic and scientific way of thought, which can unstoppably run through its ancient walls and its waters.

Besides, is it not the artists themselves who work with the greatest incisiveness in creating an image of the city through their own *presence*? Vedova and Kiefer are, today, both *present* in Venice.