In the decades following World War II, a generation of Germans struggled to find a way to remember the horrors of the war while setting their sights on the future. Against the backdrop of recent events, beautiful things seemed frivolous—a sentiment reflected in the words of the German philosopher Theodor Adorno, who wrote: “After Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric.”

Few artists have navigated the difficult terrain between remembrance and the possibility of transcendence as provocatively as Anselm Kiefer. The works in this exhibition represent his lifelong meditation on heaven and our earthbound relationship to it.

Kiefer was born in Germany in 1945, only months before the end of the war. The violence and suffering of the recent past made him question the meaning of faith in a damaged world. He explored these themes in his early works, made between 1969 and 1993, as he grappled with the question: How would Germans come to terms with their history and national identity? The monumental scale, dark ironies, and discomfiting subject matter of these works threaten to overwhelm us with the weight of human history. Though they are specific to a particular time and place, however, the paintings also lead to more universal, existential questions. They draw us into a spiritual abyss in which we are confronted with the earthly presence of evil. They question whether the heavens can offer us hope, solace, or the possibility of redemption. One critic later said that in these years Kiefer had “melted a frozen curse on German civilization.”

In 1993, shortly after the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, the artist left his home country and resettled in France, reasoning: “I needed to move. I am not only a German.” That same year he had a two-decade retrospective exhibition at Marian Goodman Gallery in New York. The works were not mounted on the walls, as one would expect, but in a towering heap. The floor-to-ceiling stack contained three hundred paintings, prints, drawings, and photographs. The crevices between them were stuffed with dirt and dried vegetation, turning the presentation literally into a pile of refuse. Reflecting the dualities inherent in all of Kiefer’s works, the display seemed at once an exorcism of the past and a call for a new beginning.

Then, for three years, Kiefer made nothing. It was as if he had freed himself from the story of Germany’s past, perhaps from history altogether. When he began painting again in 1995 the new works introduced fresh subject matter, themes, and references. They looked beyond humanity to the heavens while keeping one eye on our earthly flaws and frailties. Kiefer says, “The artist is naturally spiritual because he is always searching for new beginnings....All stories of heaven begin on earth.”

“I’m not interested in being saved. I’m interested in reconstructing symbols. It’s about connecting with an older knowledge and trying to discover continuity in why we search for heaven.”

—Anselm Kiefer

Notes
1. This and all subsequent quotes by Anselm Kiefer are excerpted from an interview between the artist and exhibition curator Michael Auping that took place on October 5, 2004.

Learning Lounge
Learn more about Anselm Kiefer: Heaven and Earth in this special resource room in the fourth-floor galleries. Visitors are invited to explore an interactive multimedia feature, view footage of Kiefer discussing his work, and browse a selection of books on the artist and related topics.

Public Tours
Daily (except Wednesdays), 1:30 p.m.
Free with Museum admission.
Meet in the Haas Atrium.

Online Resource
www.sfmoma.org/kiefer

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Presenting Sponsor:

Cover: Buch mit Flügeln
(Book with Wings), 1992–94
Lead, steel, and tin
Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, museum purchase, Sid W. Richardson Foundation Endowment Fund
**Heaven**

“The beginning of the cosmos that we have conceived scientifically began with incredible heat. The light we see in the sky is the result of a distant burning...Fire is the glue of the cosmos. The light we see in the sky is the result of a distant burning....Fire is the glue of the cosmos.”

Kiefer’s interest in the stars is a testament to the way that the ancient past, or even from sources that burned up long ago. Since the light we perceive today can be thousands of years old, or even from sources that burned up long ago.

Celestial bodies were powerful entities: Our destinies were said to be written in the stars, and our movements inter-related to Kiefer’s interest in reassembling and reclaiming parts across the land. Osiris’s grieving widow Isis searched for his remains, literally “re-membering” and resurrecting him. The parable’s theme of destruction and renewal speaks for his remains, literally “re-membering” and resurrecting him. The parable’s theme of destruction and renewal speaks.

**Myths and Monuments**

“I follow the ancient tradition of going up and down. The palaces of heaven are still a mystery...I am making my own investigation.” —Anselm Kiefer

Though mythological and spiritually have always interested Kiefer, it was the presence of materials that first attracted his attention. In the 1960s, Kiefer began working with mud, a central concern for concrete roots and webs of a post-modern painting. He brought into play a contemporary dialogue with archaic imagery. Kiefer often works on the surface of」「(Heaven on Earth), 1998–2004

The monumental size of Kiefer’s work echoes its grand themes. The layering of symbols from disparate cultures, religions, and men in and of themselves is Kiefer’s work. The layering of symbols from disparate cultures, religions, and men in and of themselves is Kiefer’s work.

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