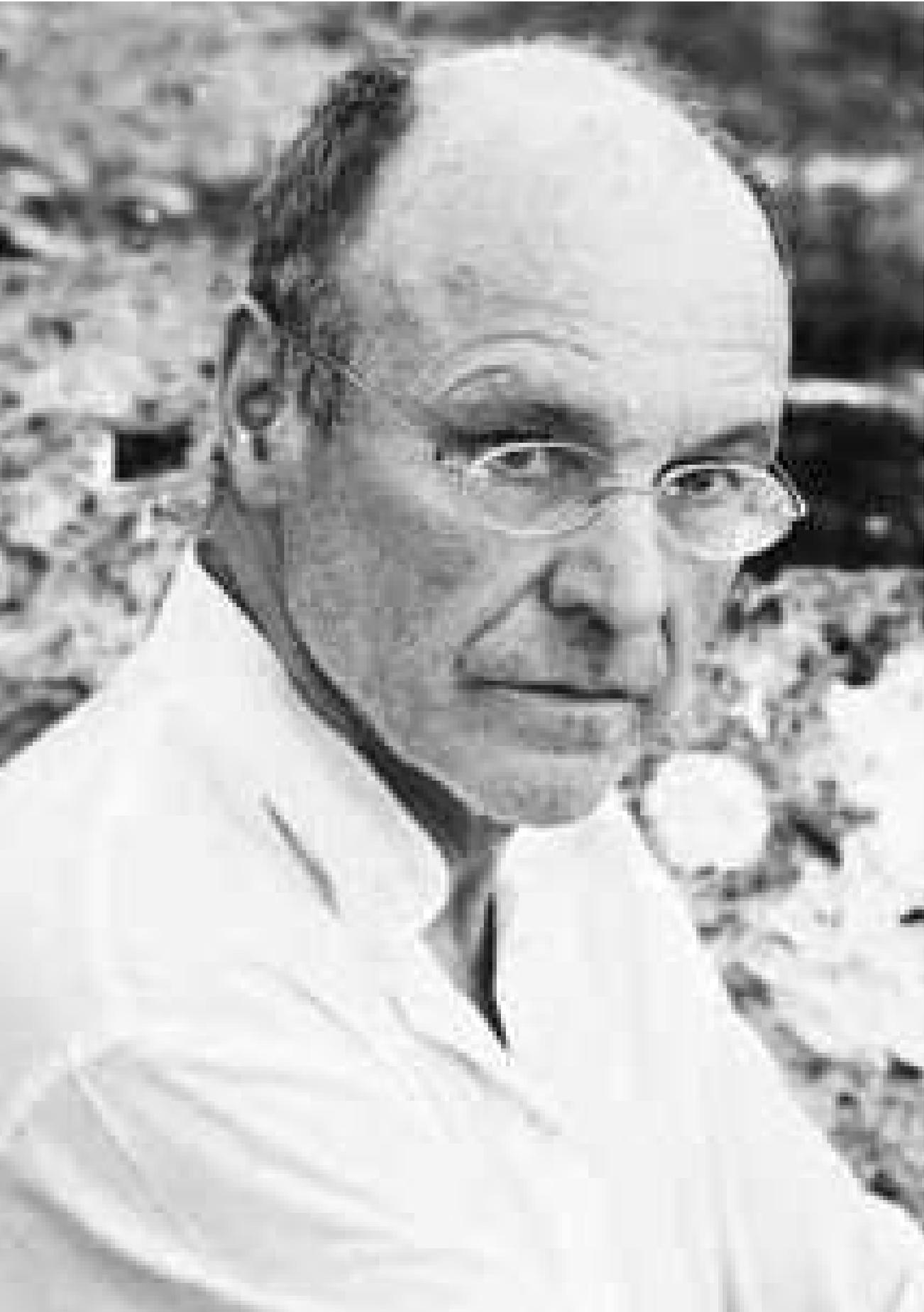


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## INVESTIGATING IDENTITY

For more than three decades, Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945) has been internationally recognized as among the most important German artists since World War II. Like Joseph Beuys (1921–1986) and Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), Kiefer has influenced not just his own nation's art but also that of his contemporaries in general. Indeed, Kiefer's global heft since the 1980s (years before Richter) has assured his status as a figure who has consistently helped to define the ideas and approaches that most matter in contemporary art. Through his mournful and monumental paintings, sculptures, books and large-scale installations, Kiefer addresses the issues of our times – war, energy, religion and politics – as well as broader historical themes. His sophisticated handling of multiple media reveals a profound understanding of how people communicate in a globally interrelated world. He has not only advanced painting but also sculpture, bookmaking, installation and land art.

Kiefer became famous in the early 1980s as a Neo-Expressionist, part of an international movement that brought expressive gesture and distortions back into painting. The drama within Neo-Expressionism was a response to the industrial abstractions of Minimalism as well as the deadpan nature of Pop Art and Conceptual Art, which were then dominant on both sides of the Atlantic. Although Neo-Expressionism quickly gained acceptance, this did not happen without heated debate. As Kiefer's art used German texts and symbols, he became a particular flashpoint for critics; early on, his work was accused of cynicism, commercialism and even fascism. However, by the end of the decade Kiefer was widely recognized as having created a body of work that convincingly engaged the subject of German identity, and which provoked questions about the social construction of memory, history and responsibility at a time when the country was still divided.

The importance of Kiefer's art lies in its articulation of a sophisticated form of identity politics, an examination of how we construct ourselves as individuals in the contexts of our cultures. Four years after Germany reunified in 1989, Kiefer moved to France, where he still lives today. There, his concerns became more global and his sculptures more environmental, as he began to build houses, towers and other architectural structures. Slowly, the politics of Kiefer's German identity art became cross-cultural – the creative self-fashioning of an expatriate living in France, whose monumental painting, that could be read as a self-portrait, now hangs in the Louvre. By suspending himself between different 'nationalities' through his work, Kiefer raised important questions about how to make art in a period of increasing pluralism and how to develop one's self through it – questions that remain central today.



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## A PAINTER FROM GERMANY

Kiefer's first major creative phase – his German years from 1969 to 1993 – is best understood as a response to a series of important prohibitions, against painting, against direct representation, and even against being German, all of which he confronted. Born on 8 March 1945, in Donaueschingen, near Freiburg im Breisgau, Kiefer gravitated to art in the mid to late 1960s, when West Germany experienced a turn to the left and its contemporary scene was moving in a socio-political direction. At that time, the medium of painting suddenly seemed less relevant to contemporaries, as suggested by the recognition given to the sculptures, installations and actions of Joseph Beuys, then the most influential German artist.

- [1] As implied by Beuys's cryptic performance, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, one of the harbingers of the new direction, West German aesthetics moved towards conceptualism between the mid 1960s and early 1970s, focusing more on ideas than on artefacts. In addition, through Beuys, the artist's body and actions received new attention as vehicles for meaning: thus, a West German 'body art' was born. Although advanced forms of paintings
- [2] were made during this time – for example, by Georg Baselitz, Sigmar Polke (1941–2010), Blinky Palermo (1943–1977) and Richter – the medium was, on the whole, less exhibited and influential than at any other time in its history. As art was required to assume an ever-increasing socio-political function, traditional forms of representation and abstraction seemed inadequate for the job, particularly to young artists like Kiefer.

### EXISTENTIALISM

From the outset, Kiefer also faced social and psychological prohibitions against being a German. Although as a child he had experienced the poverty of the immediate post-war aftermath, Kiefer grew up and became a young adult during the 'climate of forgetting' that characterized the country's economic miracle of the 1950s, a time of post-war boom when most Germans embraced materialism and denied collective involvement in the shame of National Socialism. The recent past was forgotten, personal memories were repressed. However, as Kiefer matured, this climate was changing: he took his first important creative steps during the time of radical social critique that emerged with the student movements at the end of the 1960s. Kiefer thus began as an artist at a moment when huge debates about West German history, memory and identity – on an individual and a collective level – began to arise, controversies that his work would engage for more than two decades.



1  
Joseph Beuys (1921–1986)  
*How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, 1965  
Performance at Galerie Schmela, Düsseldorf

Kiefer's interest in these controversies stems, of course, from his own personal history. He grew up in the Black Forest region in south-west Germany, and, after graduating high school in 1965, Kiefer read Law and Romance Languages at the University of Freiburg. After three semesters, Kiefer changed to painting, studying with the conceptual painter Peter Dreher (b. 1932), and graduating in 1969. The young artist then briefly worked with the figurative painter Horst Antes (b. 1936) in Karlsruhe, before having several intellectual exchanges with Joseph Beuys in the 1970s, showing and discussing his work with him. In 1971, Kiefer moved to the rural town of Walldürn-Hornbach in south-west Germany, an area in which he would continue to live and work as an artist until 1992. And throughout this time in his homeland, the decisions that he made as a creator, the ways he defined himself as a German, were among his primary concerns.

In the late 1960s Kiefer thus asked the existential question of how can one legitimately be a German artist in the wake of the Nazi state. Here lay the dilemma. On the one hand, all symbols of Germany and 'Germanness' were tainted by their association with National Socialism, as was much of the nation's high culture. On the other hand, if Kiefer was to present himself as a German artist, he had to define who he was and what he stood for in relation to his country's social, cultural and political history.

To tackle this impasse, Kiefer turned to existentialism. Already popular in Germany before the war, existentialism was a philosophy that explored the principles by means of which people should live, or rather, make their lives. It held that the world ultimately had no meanings other than those that human beings gave to it; and that it was each individual's responsibility to shape a worthwhile life on their own terms. Existentialists distinguished between authentic and inauthentic existences, lives lived well or poorly. Since both reason and instinct govern human actions, and because people conduct their

lives in terms of examples inherited from their own cultures, they must pay particular attention to the choices that determine the broader directions of their lives. Kiefer would use existentialism as a platform for making art. Taking Beuys's performances as his model, he produced artworks that documented his self-fashioning through both action and creation.

## OCCUPATIONS

[4–8] Kiefer's books from 1969 and 1970, and two series in particular, *Heroic Symbols (Heroische Sinnbilder)* and *For Jean Genet (Für Jean Genet)*, represented Kiefer's first attempts at asking how to become a German artist after the Third Reich. They are unique books presenting photographs from *Occupations*, a series of conceptual art 'actions' that he performed in 1968 and 1969. In them, Kiefer made a 'Sieg Heil' gesture in a variety of different settings, including standing on a chair in his studio as well as in front of various European monuments and sites. Like Beuys, Kiefer used costumes and action in his performances to craft a mysterious artistic figurehead, a character he used to evoke questions about art and fascism. Yet, unlike Beuys, who often performed for live audiences and the mass media, Kiefer acted primarily for the camera and his persona is decidedly more private than the one Beuys presented.

[4] Kiefer used the book format to conjure a portrait of a dangerous German creator who constructs himself through symbolic actions and artefacts. Many of these books collate photographs of military games that he had assembled with toy soldiers on a small table in his studio, as well as the traces of other symbolic or practical actions, while others show him nude or garbed in long nightshirts in a gender-bending parody of a Norse god. Beyond documenting photographs of his various performances, the books also contain Kiefer's

2  
Georg Baselitz (b. 1938)  
*Woodmen*, 1967–8  
248.7 × 200 cm (98 × 78 ¾ in)  
Charcoal and synthetic resin on canvas  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York



own small watercolours. Collating both abstract and representational examples of his paintings, the volumes amount to scrapbooks or photo albums recording the most important occurrences and memorabilia of Kiefer's life: a compendium of significant events and creations. This effect is heightened by the dried flowers and other objects that the sheets also contain, which suggest another form of biographical memorialization. Furthermore, the albums also encompass appropriated (i.e. stolen) images, cut from Nazi books and magazines, which evoke the clipping activity of a fan or aficionado. Aware of the mass media as a means through which a large audience may be encouraged to accept stereotyping and outright lies, Kiefer used these borrowed images to suggest cultural clichés that also affected his life.

The *Occupations* were revealing because they showed Kiefer investigating his parents' history through different forms of representation. Perhaps they were also a response to Beuys's performances and persona. In these books, the watercolours he collated were either organic abstractions or saluting self-portraits, references to the German Romantic artist, Caspar David Friedrich, who repeatedly used the motif of the isolated figure confronting nature's immensity. Friedrich did this to convey the idea of the sublime: that which exceeds human concepts and thus evokes a sense of spiritual or transcendental realms. In Kiefer's self-portraits, Friedrich's motif is mobilized critically to make the artist's drive for domination seem irrational, but the motif also suggests that when Kiefer creates himself anew, he does so on the basis of pre-existing models that he has internalized. Through his citations of German icons as well as his mixing of 'high' and 'low' media, Kiefer suggests that his creative possibilities are given to him through both fine art and mass culture. At the same time, he does not suggest that he is simply determined by his past. His active and consciously directed body, he implies, is a site of cultural transmission: a place where stereotypes defining his identity are both repeated and creatively varied.

### EARLY PAINTINGS

Despite acknowledging National Socialism in his early books, Kiefer did not invoke remorse or mourning. Instead, his performances appeared both distanced and ironic – one of the reasons they drew such criticism in the international art world when photographs from *Occupations* were published in the art magazine *Interfunktionen* in 1975.

An entirely different mood pervaded Kiefer's paintings during 1970–1: they were both lyrical and romantic. *Winter Landscape (Winterlandschaft)* depicts a woman's decapitated head superimposed against a snow-covered field with a fringe of trees and a melancholy blue horizon. Evoking both destruction and rebirth, the painting conjures the devastation of Germany during World War II, even as it traces the human form onto nature by juxtaposing the sky with the woman's head and the earth with her blood.

[5, 6]

[8]

[5]

[10]

[6]

[3]

[9]

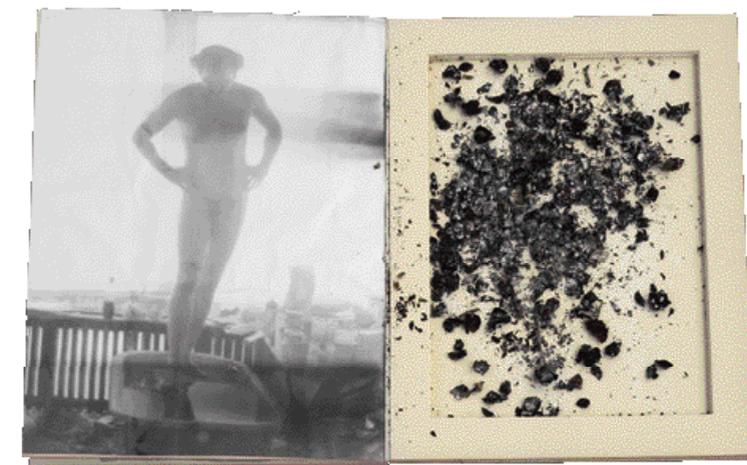
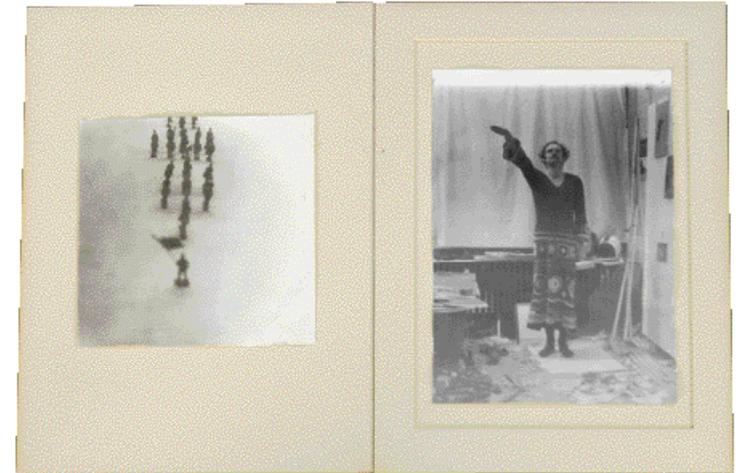
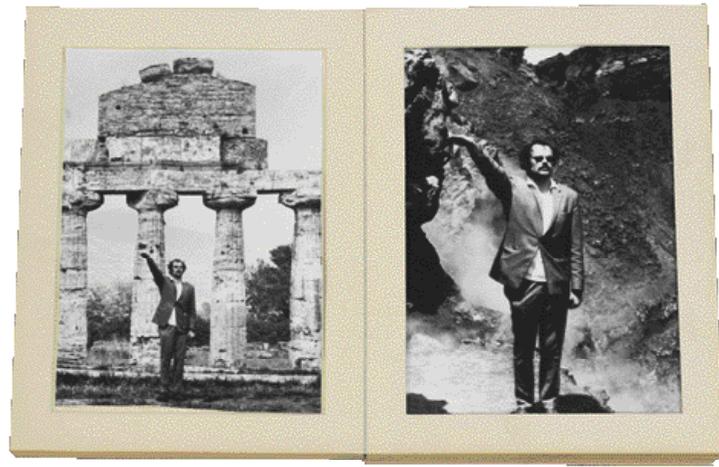
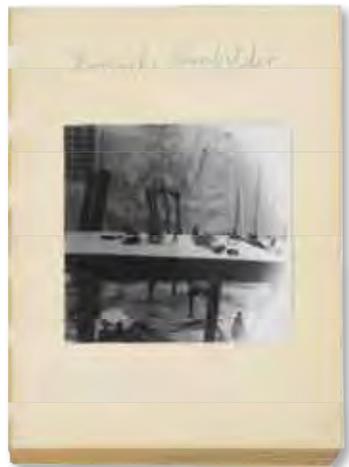
3  
 Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840)  
*The Monk by the Sea*, 1808–10  
 Oil on canvas  
 110.4 × 171 cm (43 5/8 × 67 3/8 in)  
 Alte Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen  
 zu Berlin



*Man in the Forest (Mann im Wald)* depicts Kiefer, again garbed as a Norse god, holding a burning branch and surrounded by trees that allude to the forest where the Teutonic chieftain Hermann's battle against the invading Romans occurred in AD 9, an event that helped to define Germany's emergence as a nation. Here the existential dilemma seems clearer, if by no means resolved. Kiefer, a stand-in for Hermann (whose Latin name is Arminius) seems ready to use fire against Germany and burn the forest to the ground, or, conversely, he will light the way and rally the troops.

After 1971, Kiefer's painting gradually moved away from depicting his own body towards evoking the implied presence of the spectator, a shift that took him from the conceptual, multimedia strategies of Beuys that had influenced his early books, towards a closer engagement with painting. In 1973, Kiefer began to depict huge wooden interiors – distorted images of his attic studio that he used as a theatrical stage or 'film set' in which to juxtapose symbols relating to a complex set of personal and public personae drawn from the Catholic Bible and Norse myth. As in his earlier books and paintings, both culture and identity are here treated suspiciously, as potential sources of danger and transcendence.

► FOCUS ① WOODEN INTERIORS, P.16



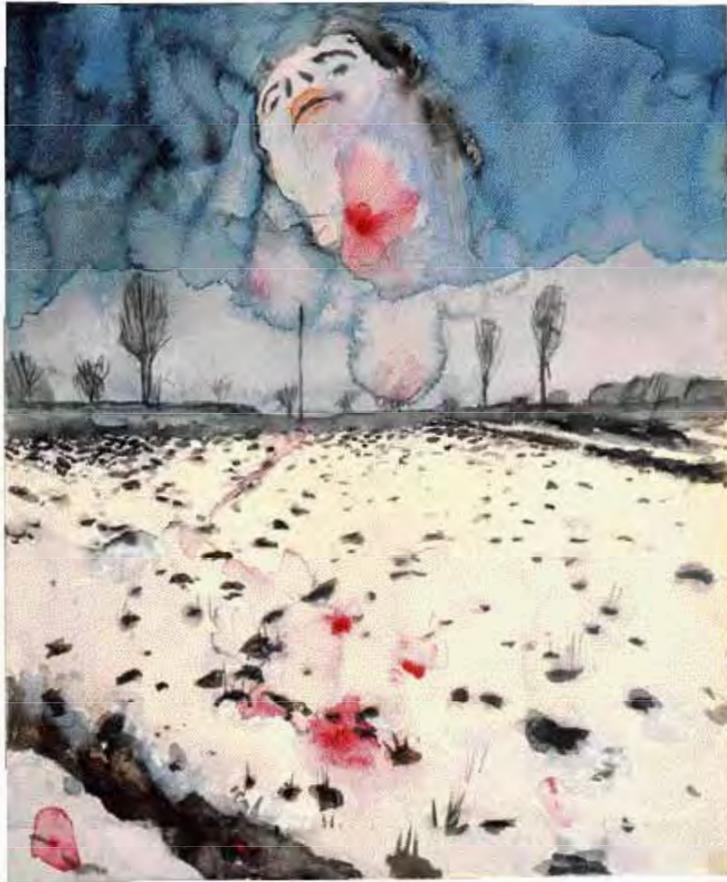
◀ 4  
*Heroic Symbols (Heroische Sinnbilder)*,  
 1969–2010  
 Cover and pages 10–11  
 20-page book with watercolour and gouache  
 on paper, black-and-white photographs,  
 and graphite on bound cardboard  
 60 × 45 × 8 cm (23 ½ × 17 ¾ × 3 ⅛ in)  
 Private collection

◀ 5  
*Heroic Symbols (Heroische Sinnbilder)*, 1969  
 Cover and pages 8–9  
 46-page book with watercolour on paper,  
 graphite, magazine photographs, postcards  
 and linen strips mounted on cardboard  
 65 × 50 × 8.5 cm (25 ½ × 19 ¾ × 3 ¼ in)  
 Würth Collection, Künzelsau, Germany

◀ 6  
*Heroic Symbols (Heroische Sinnbilder)*, 1969  
 Cover and pages 4–5  
 12-page book with black-and-white  
 photographs, watercolour and graphite  
 on paper on bound cardboard  
 60 × 45 × 5.5 cm (23 ½ × 17 ¾ × 2 ⅛ in)  
 Staatsgalerie Stuttgart

7  
*For Jean Genet (Für Jean Genet)*, 1969–2010  
 Cover and pages 14–15  
 18-page book with black-and-white  
 photographs, gouache, watercolour,  
 and graphite on bound cardboard  
 60 × 45 × 5 cm (23 ½ × 17 ¾ × 2 in)  
 Private collection

8  
*For Jean Genet (Für Jean Genet)*, 1969  
 Cover and pages 12–13  
 14-page book with black-and-white  
 photographs, acrylic, dried roses and  
 graphite on bound cardboard  
 60 × 45 × 5 cm (23 ½ × 17 ¾ × 2 in)  
 Private collection



9  
*Winter Landscape (Winterlandschaft)*, 1970  
Watercolour on paper  
42.9 × 35.6 cm (16 7/8 × 14 in)  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



10  
*Man in the Forest (Mann im Wald)*, 1971  
Acrylic on nettle cloth  
174 × 189 cm  
(68 1/2 × 74 1/2 in)  
The Doris and Donald Fisher Collection,  
San Francisco

# FOCUS ①

## WOODEN INTERIORS

The wooden interiors were Kiefer's first large-scale tableaux. In comparison to the earlier paintings and watercolours, these canvases are far more assertive and aggressive. Juxtaposing a pronounced linear-perspective scheme that invokes the objective world with repeated wood-grain patterns that convey abstract qualities, these mysterious rooms simultaneously draw the viewer's gaze into deep space while keeping it focused on the two-dimensional surface. Moreover, the gloomy chambers are never completely empty. Instead, bits of text (names and quotations) alongside painted objects (chairs, swords, snakes, trapdoors and burning fires) are carefully arranged within the spaces, signalling important motifs and individuals emblematic of German culture.

In *Germany's Spiritual Heroes (Deutschlands Geisteshelden)* [12], Kiefer used a linear-perspective scheme with a central vanishing point to create the walls, floor and ceiling of a gigantic hall that is empty except for burning torches. Across the work's rough burlap surface, and in conformity with both the reduction in size and the recession in depth created by the perspective, Kiefer has written the names of German cultural icons from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the artists Joseph Beuys and Caspar David Friedrich, the musician Richard Wagner, and the mystic Mechthild von Magdeburg, among others. As a whole, the painting appears ambivalent: a partly critical, partly admiring collection of exemplary German individuals. The setting recalls both a memorial hall and a crypt; and the fires commemorating departed 'heroes' are juxtaposed with what resemble actual burn marks along the lower edge of the image.

Other wooden interiors house different sets of symbolic possibilities. In *Father, Son, and Holy Ghost (Vater, Sohn, heiliger Geist)* (1973), fires burn on wooden chairs, suggesting the danger presented by Catholicism. In *Nothung (Notung)* [11], a sword and a trapdoor evoke the perils of mythology. (Nothing is the name of the warrior-god Wotan's sword, driven into the 'World Ash', or cosmic axis in Norse cosmology.) Kiefer thus questions his own identity through symbolic objects in a confined, claustrophobic world. Each painting leads the spectator from the experience of a world to the experience of interpreting, or projecting meaning onto that world as suggested by the writing and the symbolic motifs. It then encourages reflection on the artist who created the environment in the first place, allowing the viewer to see things from Kiefer's perspective as he investigates his identity. By working in series, Kiefer varies his possibilities for post-war subjectivity, changing the overall structure and dimensions of his attic studio as well as the symbols and names that appear within it. He could live his life, he suggests, with different goals uppermost in mind and with different sets of ideals and heroes. The dilemma comes in choosing.



11  
*Nothung (Notung)*, 1973  
Oil and charcoal on burlap, with applied  
charcoal drawing on cardboard  
300 × 432 cm (118 1/8 × 170 in)  
Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam



12  
*Germany's Spiritual Heroes*  
(*Deutschlands Geisteshelden*), 1973  
Oil and charcoal on burlap, mounted  
on canvas  
307 × 682 cm (120 × 268 ½ in)  
The Broad Art Foundation, Santa Monica