

# ANSELM KIEFER THE SEVEN HEAVENLY PALACES 2004-2015



Permanent installation

**ANSELM KIEFER**  
**THE SEVEN HEAVENLY PALACES**  
2004-2015

**Museum Mediation**

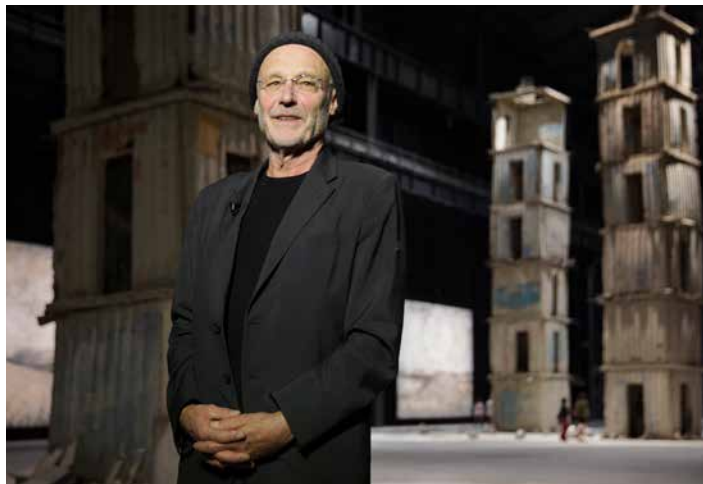
Museum mediators are present in the exhibition spaces to answer questions from the public, give information and context elements that can deepen the fruition of the artworks.

**Catalog**

The monographic book *Anselm Kiefer. The Seven Heavenly Palaces* is available at the bookshop at Pirelli HangarBicocca and on the e-shop on the website.

In addition to a new interview to the artist, the publication features critical texts and a comprehensive photographic documentation of the work.

Discover more on our website.



Anselm Kiefer, Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan, 2015  
Courtesy Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan  
Photo Lorenzo Palmieri

## The Artist

Starting from the events that strongly marked Europe in the twentieth century, in his works Anselm Kiefer—one of the most relevant and influential contemporary artists—explores major concepts such as history, cultural identity, and the creation of myths.

Kiefer was born toward the end of the Second World War, on March 8, 1945, in Donaueschingen, a small town in the state of Baden-Württemberg in southwestern Germany. Growing up surrounded by the wreckage caused by the war would leave an indelible mark on his memory and on the imagery he would later employ as an artist. After abandoning his law studies, Kiefer decided to devote himself to art and to enroll in the Academy of Fine Arts of Freiburg, studying under the artist Peter Dreher (1932–2020), thanks to whom he started conceiving art as a field for interdisciplinary research. His encounter with Joseph Beuys (1921–1986) in 1971 in Düsseldorf would reinforce this point of view.

Kiefer's production during the 1970s was guided by a need to question Germany's historical identity and mythology. He followed this line of inquiry by experimenting with different media including painting, photography, and an extensive production of artist books. In 1970 the Galerie am Kaiserplatz in Karlsruhe hosted his first solo exhibition, "Anselm Kiefer. Bilder und Bücher" [Anselm Kiefer. Paintings and books].

In 1971 Kiefer moved to Buchen, in the rural area of Walldürn-Hornbach, in the Odenwald forest, where he turned the attic of a former school building into a studio. The interiors of the Hornbach studio are depicted in a group of paintings known as the *Attic series*—including *Resurrexit* [He is risen] (1973) and *Quaternität* [Quaternity] (1973)—and were also chosen by the artist as the setting for works inspired by German sagas and Christian tradition.

In 1980 Kiefer and the painter and sculptor Georg Baselitz were invited as exponents of Neo-Expressionism to represent the German Federal Republic at the 39th Venice Biennale. The German pavilion featured Kiefer's books and paintings made between 1970 and 1980. He subsequently traveled for the first time to Jerusalem to exhibit a solo show at the Israel Museum in 1984, previously hosted in Düsseldorf and Paris. The trip to Israel was an important opportunity to study and research the Kabbalah, the set of Jewish mystical teachings. This cultural and symbolic imagery would accompany the artist's oeuvre for the years to come.

Few years later, the artist participated in the group exhibition "Saturne en Europe" (1988) at the Musées de la Ville de Strasbourg, showing a series of works grouped under the title *Saturn-Zeit* [Saturn time] (1987): all the pieces except for one were made of lead. In the latter half of the 1980s the theme of Saturnine melancholy appeared in numerous works created with lead, including *Saturn-Zeit, Schwarze Galle* [Black bile] (1989), and *Melancholia* (1990–91). The employment of lead and the idea of melancholy returned in another series of works that Kiefer presented in 1989 at the seminal group exhibition "Magiciens de la terre," curated by Jean-Hubert Martin in Paris, that gathered works by over one hundred artists from all over the world with the aim of over-



*Resurrexit*, 1973  
Oil, acrylic and charcoal on burlap,  
320 x 180 cm  
Private collection

coming colonial ethnographic categorizations. The use of lead brought an important change in the dimensions of Kiefer's books, whose production increased during the years and which were enriched with subjects from Egyptian mythology and the Old Testament. By creating larger and larger books, he transformed them from objects to sculptures.

In 1988, Kiefer bought an abandoned 19th-century brickmaking factory: restored in order to create an "extension" of his studio in Buchen, the Höpfingen factory, in Baden-Württemberg, Germany, it was quickly transformed into a single large installation in which artworks and architecture complemented one another. The following year, the artist produced a series created specifically for the spaces of the studio in Höpfingen: twenty-six sculptures titled *Himmelspaläste* [The heavenly palaces] on themes drawn from Jewish mysticism. A few years later, in 1992 he left Germany and moved to Occitania, in the south of France, settling in Barjac, in an abandoned industrial area of roughly 40 hectares called La Ribaute.

During the following three years, Kiefer took several trips through India, Thailand, Australia, Japan, and China. Following his experiences, he began to create large paintings introducing iconographic elements that represent ancient buildings and ruins emblematic of the places he visited: most of these are pyramids and brick structures, the shapes of which hark back to Sumerian ziggurats or Egyptian mastabas. His work during these years also included desert landscapes, often characterized by thousands of sunflower seeds affixed to the surfaces of oil paintings.

Following his move to Barjac, Kiefer expanded his imagery by investigating the numbering of the cosmos: starting in 1995 he referred to the Romantic theme of starry skies in a series of paintings such as the wellknown *Lichtzwang* [Lightduress] (1999), dedicated to the poet Paul Celan (1920–1970). Kiefer's starry skies, in which he uses NASA alphanumerical sequences to map the constellations, are inspired by the nighttime skies of southern France and by the theories of Robert Fludd (1574–1637), a philosopher, astrologist, and alchemist who brought together Christian traditions, Kabbalah, and scientific knowledge to achieve a unique, all-encompassing vision of the universe.



Set design for Richard Strauss' *Elektra*,  
Teatro San Carlo, Naples, 2003  
© Luciano Romano. Fondazione Teatro di San Carlo

Starting in the 2000s, the themes derived from Jewish mysticism took shape in environmental interventions, such as the series *Chevirat Ha-Kelim* [The breaking of the vessels], a project that Kiefer created at the Chapelle Saint-Louis de la Salpêtrière in Paris. In the same period, he shifted the mystical vision of the “spiritual journey” into a series of paintings inspired by late antique *Hekhalot* (literally “palaces”) literature, from which Kabbalists derived the notion of the soul’s ascension divided into seven cognitive levels, or seven Heavenly Palaces.

By adopting the building methods he already experimented with at La Ribaute, Kiefer’s imagery would materialize into a series of monumental, precarious “palaces” by assembling modules made of reinforced concrete. The same iconography would also recur in various projects in later periods: from the San Carlo theater in Naples, where he worked as set and costume designer for the 2003 performance of *Elektra* by Richard Strauss (1864–1949)—repeated in April 2017—to *Sternenfall / Chute d’étoiles* [Falling stars], presented in 2007 at the Grand Palais in Paris, and *Jericho*,

an installation constituted by two seemingly unstable towers also installed in 2007 in the courtyard of the Royal Academy of Arts in London.

In 2009, for the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the Opéra Bastille in Paris, Kiefer and the composer Jörg Widmann worked on the production of the opera *Am Anfang* [In the beginning], which premiered on July 7 of the same year. The artist revisited themes connected to the culture of the Kabbalah in 2011 for the exhibitions “Shevirat Ha-Kelim,” held at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art; “Anselm Kiefer. Sefer Hechalot” at the Museo de Bellas Artes in Bilbao; and “Anselm Kiefer. Salt of the Earth,” held inside the Magazzino del Sale, an exhibition space of Fondazione Emilio e Annabianca Vedova in Venice. Other major exhibitions include a show held in 2013 in collaboration with the Hall Art Foundation at MASS MoCa in Massachusetts, as well as important retrospectives at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 2014, and at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 2015. In 2017, the Musée Rodin in Paris inaugurated the exhibition “Kiefer Rodin,” which presented artworks inspired by Auguste Rodin’s (1840–1917) oeuvre.

Among recent exhibitions, in 2019 Kiefer has presented his works at the Couvent Sainte-Marie de La Tourette, a priory designed by Le Corbusier and located outside Lyon, France, which Kiefer had visited as a student. In 2020, the Kunsthalle Mannheim hosted a solo show by the artist, and the same year Kiefer’s permanent installation commissioned by the President of the French Republic was inaugurated at the Panthéon in Paris. In 2021, the Grand Palais Éphémère, also in Paris, presented “Pour Paul Celan,” a solo exhibition devoted to one of the artist’s most preferred poets.





*La Ribaute, Barjac, 2011*  
Photo Charles Duprat

### ***The Seven Heavenly Palaces 2004–2015***

***The Seven Heavenly Palaces 2004–2015*** is Anselm Kiefer's most imposing installation in an exhibition space. The work accomplishes the research and experimentation that the artist had developed over nearly fifteen years in La Ribaute, his studio in Barjac. A former industrial complex, La Ribaute presents a double nature. Both a work of art and a living/working space, over the years it has been transformed by the artist into a city-like environment made of buildings, galleries, amphitheatres, tunnels, green environments, and a lake. At La Ribaute the artist created his first series of works made of reinforced concrete: imposing and precariously balanced towers scattered across the landscape.

At the initiative of the gallerist Lia Rumma, in 2004 Kiefer received a commission to conceive a temporary site-specific installation in Milan, a project that coincided with the opening of the new contemporary art center first known as HangarBicocca. When the artist visited the space for the first time, it was entirely empty and its industrial past was clearly visible. Located in a sort of “middle ground” between the city and its suburbs, Kiefer’s installation transposes the osmosis between workspace and work of art—a recurrent approach in the artist’s practice—onto the former factory that is today the venue of the art institution.

Kiefer has described on several occasions how Pirelli HangarBicocca’s immense Navate, associated with its ever-changing surrounding urban fabric, suited to an installation that, despite being within an enclosed space, had the features of a public work of art. A work that is able to redefine with its iconic presence the building’s identity—which becomes part of the work itself—and to endow it with the character of an “open” and walkable place, accentuated by structures that create an environment similar to a street or a square.

Over the course of the years, the work has become a permanent installation and has been subjected to changes that have altered its use; in particular, its new configuration with five large paintings curated by Vicente Todolí in 2015. Transformation has in fact always been a central element in many of Kiefer’s works: in this respect, an example is the presence of breakable or perishable materials on the exhibition floor. With its ability to redefine the relationship between public and private space, and between work and spectator, *The Seven Heavenly Palaces 2004–2015* is a living place that harmonizes perfectly with the different moments of the institution’s life, from the contemporary art exhibitions held in the Shed and in the adjacent Navate, to the concerts, performances and theatrical productions that are sometimes hosted inside.



*The Seven Heavenly Palaces 2004–2015*  
*Sefiroth (detail)*

## **The installation: *The Seven Heavenly Palaces***

The name of the permanent site-specific installation by Anselm Kiefer, ***The Seven Heavenly Palaces***, was drawn from the Palaces described in the ancient Hebrew treatise *Sefer Hekhalot*, the “Book of Palaces/Sanctuaries,” which dates back to the fifth-sixth century A.D. The volume narrates the symbolic path of spiritual initiation that anyone who wants to become closer to God must undertake. It is composed of seven tower-shaped constructions between 13 and 19 meters high. By integrating elements and materials which are recurrent in the artist’s practice, such as lead books and wedges, the precarious buildings are made with modules made of reinforced concrete, assembled on different levels through blue and red containers used as formwork.

### **1. *Sefiroth***

The first and shortest tower is oriented toward the northern side of the building, where in 2004 there was the entrance to Pirelli HangarBicocca. ***Sefiroth*** is formed by five modules of reinforced

concrete surmounted by a flat concrete slab; on top of it, a pile of seven books made of lead has been placed. Books and wedges, all made of lead, have been set at several different points between the levels and at the base of the structure. The northern side is characterized by neon signs in the artist's handwriting bearing the names of the *sefirot*, which, according to mystic Jewish cosmology, compose the "sefirot tree" or "tree of life" and indicate the ten attributes (or principles) through which God reveals himself in creation. The neon signs are arranged along three vertical axes from the top to the bottom of the tower: along the central axis, starting from the top, we find *Kether* [Crown], *Tiffereth* [Beauty or majesty], *Yesod* [Foundation], and *Malkut* [Kingdom]; along the left axis are *Binah* [Understanding], *Geburah* [Strength], and *Hod* [Splendor]; while along the right one are *Chochmah* [Wisdom], *Chessed* [Loving-kindness], and *Netzach* [Eternity or victory]. Along the central axis we find the addition of *Daad*, a principle that combines the values of understanding (*Binah*) and wisdom (*Chochmah*), for a total of eleven signs.

## 2. *Melancholia*

The second tower is formed by six levels of which five are finished and one, the last, is characterized by a single pair of walls. Crowning *Melancholia* is a pile of books made of lead, upon which a glass polyhedron has been placed. Thousands of small strips of glass and paper bearing handwritten sequences of letters and numbers have been arranged at the bottom of one side of the tower. The small numbered strips reproduce the classification used by NASA for identifying stars, and they list some of their properties, such as distance, color, and size. Evoking a traditional image of the sublime, the starry sky, the artist alludes to humanity's obstinacy in rationalizing and measuring the immeasurable with scientific systems of classification. The tower derives its name from the 1514 engraving *Melancholia I* by artist Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), in which figures a polyhedron, identical to the one set atop Kiefer's tower. The reference to Dürer is a recurrent theme in the artist's oeuvre: in Renaissance culture, planet Saturn is traditionally linked to the figure of the artist, as an allegoric representation of creativity.



*The Seven Heavenly Palaces 2004–2015  
Melancholia (detail)*



*The Seven Heavenly Palaces 2004–2015*  
Ararat (detail)

### 3. *Ararat*

The third tower is formed by five finished levels and one, the sixth, is characterized by a single pair of walls of reinforced concrete. This tower also contains lead books and wedges set at several different points between the levels and at the base of the structure. Crowning the last level is a lead model of a ship from the Second World War. The tower derives its name from the Turkish mountain, which historically belonged to Armenia, upon which Noah's ark came to rest after the flood according to the Book of Genesis. The warship placed atop the tower thus becomes associated with the ark, a symbol of salvation commonly linked with the concept of resurrection in Christianity. The image of the boat reveals contrasting meanings that open the work to different interpretations: the warship, which in turn recalls Noah's ark, embodies the opposition between salvation and damnation, recalling at the same time concepts of tragedy and resistance.



*The Seven Heavenly Palaces 2004–2015  
Linee di campo magnetico (detail)*

#### **4. *Linee di campo magnetico* [Lines of a magnetic field]**

The tallest tower, formed by seven levels of which six are finished and one, the last, is incomplete, is characterized by lead wedges and books set at several different points. The artist has unfurled lengths of lead film from the top to the bottom of the eastern side, where at times they cross through the tower, falling to the ground; photographic prints have been applied to the film, scenes of clouds alternating with other prints bearing no images. On the ground at the foot of the eastern side is a cylindrical container for cinema reels: the lid has been moved aside to reveal other smaller lead films bearing miniature portraits of unknown people. Beside the container is a triangular-shaped element made of lead which encloses gears and might call to mind a movie camera. In the artist's vision, the juxtaposition of these materials generates a paradox: the property of lead to fully absorb light contrasts with the film function, which consists in letting a light beam pass through it to generate an image.



*The Seven Heavenly Palaces 2004–2015*  
JH&WH

## 5-6. JH&WH

These two towers of identical height, like two complementary entities, are formed by five modules and a sixth one made of a single pair of walls. The two architectures have matching top elements: the last level of each tower ends in a pile of nine lead books and a pair of neon letters, “JH” and “WH,” respectively. Read in this order according to the rules of Hebrew phonetics, the letters form the word “Yahweh.” The term means “God” in Hebrew and is traditionally considered an unpronounceable word, in order not to violate its sacredness. On the floor between the two towers are eleven irregularly shaped boulders of different sizes made of an agglomerate of various materials covered in molten lead; these are distributed in what seems to be a random arrangement and are marked by numbers—from 1 to 11—written by hand on cardboard tags. The eleven elements may evoke the shards of the vessels that shattered during the creation of the cosmos according to the Lurianic Kabbalah, the set of mystical doctrines revised and systematized by Isaac Luria in the sixteenth century.





*The Seven Heavenly Palaces 2004–2015*  
*Torre dei quadri cadenti (detail)*

## **7. *Torre dei quadri cadenti* [Tower of the falling pictures]**

Formed by five modules made of reinforced concrete and an incomplete one at the top, the seventh tower presents lead wedges and books set at multiple points between the levels. The architecture is characterized by a series of “paintings” set at different heights on all sides—except the northern wall—and at the bottom of the structure: these are lead-covered wooden frames of different sizes containing dusty sheets of glass that have been broken in several places. The frames hold no images and are arranged in what appears to be a precarious balance, as if they were falling from above. The idea of the fragment recalls the cultural role of images over the centuries and the themes connected to them, such as worship, idolatry, iconoclasm and the aniconic tradition of Jewish culture. The work also suggests a historical reading, alluding to the horrors of the Second World War, including the anti-Semitic violence that took place during the so-called Crystal Night. Between November 9 and 10, 1938, in fact, popular riots led to the destruction of Jewish-run store windows in many German and Austrian cities.



## The Paintings

Since September 2015 five large canvases—produced between 2009 and 2013, and exhibited for the first time—enrich and expand the permanent installation. In this additional display, these paintings form, together with the “towers,” a single installation entitled ***The Seven Heavenly Palaces 2004–2015***. Addressing themes already present in the site-specific work—such as large architectural constructions of the past as man’s attempt to ascend to the divine—the paintings represent other key considerations on the artist’s poetic vision, including the relationship between man and nature, and references to the history of ideas and of Western philosophy.



*Die Deutsche Heilslinie, 2012–13*

Exhibited on two walls of the exhibition space, the five canvases enclose on two sides the area in which the “towers” stand. Displayed on the end side of the area is **A** *Die Deutsche Heilslinie* [The German line of spiritual salvation] (2012–13), the largest painting on show, which symbolically and literally portrays the history of German salvation. The artist depicts a man, seen from behind as he gazes a river flowing, a scene that recalls the *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818) by the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840). Set on a rainbow trajectory that connects earth and sky and crosses the entire surface, Kiefer transcribes the names of German philosophers who supported the idea of sal-



*Jaipur, 2009 (detail)*



*Alchemie, 2012*

vation through the actions of a leader, within a philosophical path running from the Enlightenment to the Historical materialism, from Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) to Karl Marx (1818–1883). At the base of the canvas are featured the names of thinkers who believed that salvation can be achieved through the recognition of one's individual identity, such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) and Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961).

Continuing on the adjacent long wall, from right to left, there is **B** *Jaipur* (2009), which takes its title from the name of the city Kiefer visited during his several travels throughout India. The canvas portrays a nocturnal landscape and reminds of the measurement systems of the astronomical observatories built by maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II (1686–1743) in different cities of Northern India, including Jaipur: on the lower section, the artist has painted a concave architectural volume that reminds of an inverted pyramid; above, a starry night. The sky's constellations, connected with lines, are numbered according to NASA's classification system, similarly to the small strips of glass disseminated at the foot of the *Melancholia* tower. Proceeding leftwards, is located **C** *Alchemie* [Alchemy] (2012), a painting made up of two canvases set side-by-side that portray a dry, arid landscape in which the earth appears





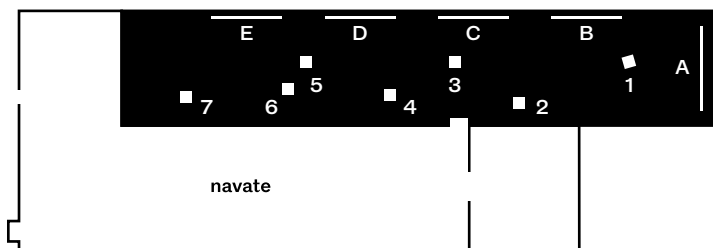
*Cette obscure clarté  
qui tombe des étoiles, 2011*

entirely sterile. A “rainfall” of sunflower seeds—recurrent elements in the artist’s practice—is the only sign of life and hope of regrowth. The two canvases are connected through a set of balance scales containing salt on one dish and sunflower seeds on the other: opposed symbols of sterility and fertility. The scales are clear references to the artist’s interest in alchemy, the esoteric science whose purpose was to transform lead into gold, allegory of the transmutation process of an individual’s inner self. The two following paintings are from the series **DE Cette obscure clarté qui tombe des étoiles** [This dark brightness which falls from the stars] (2011) and depict a desert landscape onto which Kiefer applied black sunflower seeds on a white background, emblematic representation of stars which appear as negative prints.



*Cette obscure clarté  
qui tombe des étoiles, 2011 (detail)*

## Map and list of exhibited works



### Towers

#### **1. Sefiroth, 2004**

Reinforced concrete, lead books,  
lead wedges, neon  
13.60 x 2.80 x 2.60 m

#### **2. Melancholia, 2004**

Reinforced concrete, lead books, lead  
wedges, panes of glass with inscriptions  
written with permanent black marker  
16.30 x 2.68 x 3.00 m

#### **3. Ararat, 2004**

Reinforced concrete, lead books,  
lead wedges, lead boat  
16.30 x 2.60 x 2.80 m

#### **4. Linee di Campo Magnetico, 2004**

Reinforced concrete, lead books,  
lead wedges, photographic prints  
on sheets of lead, lead-laminated roll,  
lead container  
19.60 x 2.60 x 2.76 m

#### **5-6. JH&WH, 2004**

Reinforced concrete, lead books, lead  
wedges, neon, bolts, sheets of cardboard  
on leadclad objects  
JH: 16.30 x 2.54 x 2.80 m;  
WH: 16.30 x 2.67 x 2.55 m

#### **7. Torre dei Quadri Cadenti, 2004**

Reinforced concrete, lead books,  
wooden frames covered with lead, glass  
16.30 x 2.75 x 2.94 m

### Paintings

#### **A. Die Deutsche Heilslinie, 2012-13**

Oil, emulsion, acrylic, shellac and  
sediment of electrolysis on canvas  
380 x 1100 cm  
Courtesy Galleria Lia Rumma,  
Milan/Naples

#### **B. Jaipur, 2009**

Oil, emulsion, acrylic,  
shellac and lead on canvas  
660 x 760 cm  
Courtesy Galleria Lia Rumma,  
Milan/Naples

#### **C. Alchemie, 2012**

Oil, emulsion, acrylic, shellac, sunflower  
seeds, metal object and salt on canvas  
660 x 1140 x 40 cm  
Courtesy Galleria Lia Rumma,  
Milan/Naples

#### **D. E. Cette obscure clarté qui tombe des étoiles, 2011**

Oil, emulsion, acrylic, shellac  
and sunflower seeds on canvas  
2 canvases, 610 x 760 cm each  
Courtesy Galleria Lia Rumma,  
Milan/Naples



This publication accompanies  
the permanent installation  
*The Seven Heavenly Palaces*  
2004–2015 by Anselm Kiefer

A project by Lia Rumma

New display curated by  
Vicente Todolí

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**Pirelli HangarBicocca** is a non-profit foundation dedicated to producing and promoting contemporary art. It was conceived and is supported by Pirelli. Established in 2004, Pirelli HangarBicocca has become a benchmark institution for the international art community, local public and region. It is a museum that is free of charge, accessible and open, and a place for experimentation, research and dissemination, where art is a point of reflection on the most topical themes of contemporary culture and society. It caters to a broad and diverse public with a program of major solo exhibitions by both Italian and international artists, a multi-disciplinary program of accompanying events and in-depth discussions, theoretical and informational publications, and educational courses. A team of museum facilitators is on hand at all times to help the public connect with the art. Vicente Todolí has been the foundation's artistic director since 2012.

Situated in a former industrial building, once a locomotive manufacturing facility, Pirelli HangarBicocca occupies 15,000 square meters, making it one of the largest single-level exhibition spaces in Europe. This vast area comprises the Shed and Navate spaces, which are used for temporary exhibitions, and the permanent display of Anselm Kiefer's *The Seven Heavenly Palaces 2004-2015*. This monumental installation with seven reinforced concrete towers has become one of the most iconic works in Milan. The building also houses a number of services for the public: a spacious entrance with reception area, facilities for educational activities, space for conferences and meetings, bookshop and bistro with a charming outdoor area.

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