

The Periphery as Centre:R.B.Kitaj, Diaspora-ism and the "School of London"

The theme of this conference, Centre and Periphery, could almost have been chosen with R.B. Kitaj in mind. The American-born London-based artist has made intellectual and spiritual wandering the subject of his work, while a sense of alienation from both the geographical and conceptual "centres" of modernism has fuelled his polemics. In this thumb-nail sketch of Kitaj's position I will try to give some impression of how his support for the British drawing tradition, his concern with Jewish themes, his critique of late-modernism, and his sense of the artist as "Diasporist" all meld together.

Ronald Brooks was born in 1932 in Cleveland, Ohio. When his mother remarried a Viennese refugee, Dr. Walter Kitaj, in 1941, he gained a family link with the dislocated Jewish intelligentsia whose broken lives would come to haunt his pictures. In the 1950s he travelled the world as a merchant seaman and serviceman. He studied art in Vienna, and in France, before enrolling at the Ruskin School, Oxford, on a GI Bill. Without suggesting that he was an artistic exile, it was typical in view of his future stance that he should leave America at precisely the time of New York's rising artistic hegemony. Eventually Kitaj and his apologists would relate his personal history of wandering to the Jewish content which has since come to dominate his art.

At the Royal College of Art in London he became the leader of a remarkable group of students that included David Hockney, Allen Jones, Patrick Caulfield, and other important figures in British "Pop Art". Tom Phillips has written of his first show with the Marlborough Gallery in 1963 that "R.B.Kitaj, single-handed and with one exhibition, brought the intellect back into the forum of British art." The names of Eliot and Pound were cited, for once again an expatriate American was mobilising the London avantgarde.

SLIDE 1 Kitaj's work in the 1960s also recalls Pound and Eliot in its eclecticism and playful obscurantism. He sought

¹ Kitaj *The Murder of Rosa Luxemburg* 1960.

to absorb a vast spread of literature and art history in works which Hilton Kramer once described as "littered with ideas". By insisting that art should engage with wider cultural and political issues, Kitaj consciously battled with prevailing formalist dogmas. The connection of Kitaj with Pop has been misleading, for although he adopted the strategy of the found object, his range of sources were decidedly 'high' rather than 'pop'. SLIDE² His series of fifty screenprints, *In Our Time*, consists of reproductions of original book covers. These very "literal" collages include left wing tracts, antisemitic pamphlets, popular novels, critical essays. A bizzare cross-section of Kitaj's reading, they are impossible to interpret in a cogent fashion, and the battered covers can only allude to the mystique of reading, or of reliving the past. "For me, books are what trees are for the landscape painter," he has said.

In 1969 Kitaj was devastated by the suicide of his wife and artistic production came to an abrupt halt. He could not start painting again for several years, but his recuperation came about through intense drawing from the human figure. This marked a "return" not only to techniques abandoned since his R.C.A. days, but to a whole tradition of Western painting. Just as in the 1960s his stance was opposed to the prevailing formalism, so in the 1970s, this intellectual among painters pitted himself against the dominant "conceptualism" of the period. He experimented with styles rooted in Impressionism, Symbolism and the old masters, and with the encouragement of Sandra Fisher, who later became his wife, he turned particularly to pastels. SLIDE³

At the very time he began to question his allegiance to artistic modernism, returning to forms and techniques of the old-masters, he also started asserting his identity as a Jew. In the catalogue of his last one-man exhibition, held at the Marlborough Gallery in 1985, Kitaj quoted the Viennese composer Arnold Schoenberg: "I have long since resolved to be a Jew...I regard that as more important than my art." Grouped together under the title "A Passion", the works in

² Kitaj *In our time* 1969-70, *The Jewish Question*, *In Defence of Terrorism*, *Traffic in young girls*.

³ Kitaj *Degas* 1980

this exhibition used a specifically and newly devised Jewish iconography to deal with the subject which had come to obsess Kitaj, "that epochal murder", the Holocaust. In retrospect, however, earlier works of a political and intellectual nature invariably had Jewish connotations too SLIDE 4 .

The coincidence of Kitaj's spiritual, intellectual and artistic re-discoveries came together in 1989 in his extraordinary book, *First Diasporist Manifesto*. (SLIDE 5 A line from his friend Philip Roth's novel, *The Counterlife*, served as the epigraph for this manifesto: "The Poor bastard had Jew on the brain") For Kitaj, Judaism and Jewish experience are persuasive metaphors of the struggle between tradition and modernism.

Just as his Jewish identification took the public form of a manifesto, so his rediscovery of drawing did not remain private, either. Shaking off any suggestion that his reversion was "postmodern" or conservative in implication, Kitaj sought to convince fellow artists of the radicality and pertinence of what he was doing. In 1976 he curated an exhibition of drawings for the Arts Council which proved to be the seminal art event of the 1970s and initiated a "return to order" in avantgarde British art. "The Human Clay" showed figurative work by artists better known for their abstraction, (for example Henry Moore), or their Pop imagery, (Eduardo Paolozzi, Richard Hamilton), and introduced several important figurative artists hitherto ignored, (for instance Leonard McComb.) An artist whose work I follow, Maurice Cockrill, saw the exhibition when it came to Liverpool, and it provided the necessary shock for a revitalization of his art. He has described Kitaj's essay as "a voice in the wilderness". Kitaj argued in his catalogue that the selected artists, united by their common commitment to drawing from life, constitute a "School of London".

In belligerent tone, Kitaj declared that "If some of the strange and fascinating personalities you may encounter here were given a fraction of the internationalist attention and encouragement reserved in this barren time for provincial and

4 Kitaj *Isaac Babel riding with Budyonny* 1962

5 Kitaj *Philip Roth* 1985

orthodox vanguardism, a School of London might become even more real than the one I have construed in my head." "School of London" has been taken up by dealers and curators to refer to various groupings of artists, which almost always include Bacon, Auerbach, and Freud. (Significantly, these last two were child refugees from Nazi Germany.) More compelling than the commercial or critical uses of the term "School of London", however, is the network of artistic kinships, and the imaginary space of the city, connoted in the mind of R.B.Kitaj.

The title "human clay", incidentally, comes from W.H.Auden, as if to show that Kitaj's case for drawing did not entail a compromise of literary content. As an example of the conflation in Kitaj of artistic return to order and personal return to Judaism one can observe that in 1976 he clearly used the words "human clay" to mean human form, but the same phrase in his 1985 catalogue essay is used to mean ethnic origins.

Kitaj's affirmation of his Jewishness was strictly in the secular, intellectual, style of agnostic Jews such as Franz Kafka and Walter Benjamin. (Benjamin he identifies in First Diasporist Manifesto as 'the exemplary and perhaps ultimate Diasporist'). At first he adopted such men as angst-ridden intellectuals rather than as Jews, but he grew to realise the potency of Jewishness as a metaphor for their common alienation and malaise. Benjamin became his alter ego. Apart from a fascination with his brilliant and radical ideas, Kitaj identified personally with the melancholy, diletante nature of Benjamin. There is almost a case of "projective identification" with Benjamin as Kitaj symbolically carries on his mentor's life after the latter's desperate suicide in 1940. SLIDE 6 The Autumn of Central Paris (After Walter Benjamin), 1972-74, plays off sets of narrative which have lost their intelligibility; the layers of "citations" - the jigsaw puzzle proletarian, the animated talkers, the café as "open air interior" - all relate to aspects of Benjamin's theories and his "agitational usage" of sources and references.

⁶ Kitaj *The Autumn of Central Paris (After Walter Benjamin)*, 1972-74

Of Benjamin and other scions of the doomed German-Jewish civilization, Kitaj has written: 'Their dispersed lives have broken mediocre patterns and searched out cosmopolitan treasure'. Elsewhere in First Diasporist Manifesto he compares his own painting to 'a refugee's suitcase, a portable ark of the covenant'; he wants to be 'a tribal remembrancer, wrestling with my diasporic angel.' One sometimes senses in Kitaj a perverse regret that he arrived in England on a GI bill rather than on a refugee boat.

SLIDE 7 Cecil Court London WC2 (The Refugees) is packed with personal and literary references, not all of which have been explained. Kitaj has portrayed himself reclining in Le Corbusier's famous chair, (symbolic of Modernism). In a statement, Kitaj has identified one of the figures as a Mr. Seligmann, a refugee from whom he purchased many art books in this legendary London book street. Meanwhile, the distended and "meshugge" (Yiddish for mad) figures in this picture "have been cast from the beautiful craziness of Yiddish theatre", which Kitaj only knows second hand, from descriptions by his grandmother, and from the diaries of Kafka.

In his compulsive quotation and his parodies and self-parodies, Kitaj's paintbrush sometimes seems to stutter almost like the antisemitic character Beckmesser in Wagner's opera, *Die Meistersinger*. On another level, Kitaj's intensely bookish return to Jewishness has brought him into contact with religious commentaries like the Midrash and the cabbalistic text, the Zohar, which comprise exegetical fragments and stories and which consequently shadow his own practise as an artist and thinker. He even professes some affinity with 'the Diasporists of the Ecole de Yale', a rather wordy reference to the Deconstructionist literary critics, presumably on account of his advocacy of 'creative misreadings', although his paintings and his Manifesto, he admits, are 'underwritten by me, the Midrashist you can trust.' Kitaj has written of this painting: "Another day I'll tell who the other people in the painting are supposed to be, whether aesthetes find such Midrashic gloss and emendation revolting or not. For now I must confess that I

⁷ Kitaj *Cecil Court London WC2 (The Refugees)* 1983-84

wish I could continue to paint the shop signs in the spirit of a distinction made by my favourite antisemite, Pound, who said that symbols quickly exhaust their references, while signs renew theirs."

SLIDE 8 It is hard to reconcile this last idea with the major development which took place in Kitaj's paintings in the "Passion" series: the contrived introduction of a symbol to denote the Holocaust. Noting how Christianity took four centuries to incorporate the cross as the symbol of Christ's Passion, he demanded "why wait four hundred years after our (Jewish) Passion?" The symbol he has taken to using is the chimney, "my own very primitive attempt at an equivalent symbol, like the cross, both, after all, having contained the human remains in death." The chimney emerges in many disguises: SLIDE 9 in *The Jewish Rider*, for instance, as the long red carpet along the corridor of a train, carrying art historian and Jewish intellectual Michael Podro through the idyllic countryside to Auschwitz. (Kitaj is profoundly moved by the fact that "Buchenwald was constructed on the very hill where Goethe often walked with Eckermann", a paradigm for his inner conflicts as a Jewish artist.) SLIDE 10 The chimney recurs in the church tower in *Self-Portrait as a Woman*, 1984, in which Kitaj paints himself as a Gentile woman paraded in the streets of Nazi Germany with the placard "I have slept with a Jew"; and in SLIDE 11 *Germania (The Tunnel)*, 1985, as the corridor leading through arches borrowed from Van Gogh's *San Remy* paintings which double as the passage-way to the gas chambers.

Kitaj never clearly defines his idiosyncratic neologism, 'Diasporist'. It certainly doesn't mean, as its name might imply, an alternative to Zionism. On the contrary, Kitaj feels a close affinity with those thinkers who sought a "creative negation to exile". We are told instead that 'Diasporism is my mode. It is the way I do my pictures'; and we are told, 'You don't have to be a Jew to be a Diasporist';

8 Kitaj *The Painter Cross and Chimney* 1984/85

9 Kitaj *The Jewish Rider* 1984/85

10 Kitaj *Self Portrait as a Woman* 1985

11 Kitaj *Germania (The Tunnel)*, 1985

we learn that 'The Diasporist (Jew, Black, Arab, Homosexual, Gypsy, Asian, emigré from despotism, bad luck, etc) is widely despised, disliked, mistrusted, sometimes tolerated, even taken up here and there and shown a nice life'...but these are examples not definitions. By extending Diasporism to colour and sexual preference, Kitaj has effectively found another term for 'Otherness'. Revealingly, in this context, Kitaj added a postscript to the letter he wrote to me when he heard that I was going to give this paper to the AICA congress. "Since you're going to Vienna... I think you know I was a student of Paris von Gütersloh who was a student of Maurice Denis who was an acolyte of Gauguin. The other day I described Jewishness to someone as my Tahiti."