

British Society and the 'Tate War'

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I feel very privileged to have been invited to what so far has been a truly fascinating, informative, moving and thought-provoking symposium. As someone who is not an art historian and who knew very little about Kitaj before Cilly Kugelmann very kindly, and very bravely I feel, invited me to speak, what I have heard and seen so far has been a unique and rewarding learning experience. I'm here because my expertise is in the field of contemporary antisemitism and Cilly thought that I might be able to look at the 'Tate War' and the argument that antisemitism was a key factor behind the critics' attacks on the 1994 Retrospective from a fresh, or at least different, perspective. And I want to thank her and all the organisers and sponsors for giving me this opportunity to offer my thoughts on this vexed issue. I should make it clear that I have reached some conclusions, which I think you'll find somewhat different from some of what was said on this very topic yesterday. But, Ladies and Gentlemen, I make no claims to have settled the matter definitively and I respect the views of others here. By the very nature of antisemitism, there are many instances in which it's ultimately impossible to prove one way or the other whether actions taken or things said were motivated by it. As I found, the deeper you look into this case, the more variables you discover that have a bearing on any judgment you might make. Nevertheless, I will do my best to make it clear where I stand.

I never met Kitaj and I did not go to the 1994 Retrospective. But, in the course of my research, I have had the good fortune of meeting, talking and exchanging emails with four people who did know Kitaj, none of whom have been mentioned here so far. Timothy Hyman, the painter and writer, who was a very close friend of Kitaj's for 19 years in the 1970s, 80s and 90s. Gabriel Josipovici, the literary critic, novelist and academic, who was also a friend

during the late 80s and early 90s. Anthony Rudolf, the poet and literary critic, who knew Kitaj more slightly but was asked by him to write an essay for the catalogue of the National Gallery exhibition of Kitaj works in 2001. And Glenn Sujo, another painter and writer who knew Kitaj and was very influenced by him. All spoke about Kitaj in the very warmest terms but were not unaware of the flaws and contradictions in his personality. I am very grateful to them. Their testimony has very much informed my work, but I alone am entirely responsible for my conclusions. I also wish to thank Anna Vira Figenschou whose comprehensive thesis on the ‘Tate War’ was of immense help to me in the task of accessing the key texts relating to the controversy.

Introduction

I begin with a quotation from Kitaj’s *First Diasporist Manifesto*, published in English in 1989: ‘One of the most recent of my hundred negative critics wrote in his review of my 1986 exhibition that it was “littered with ideas”. Heavens to Betsy, I hope that’s true.’¹ This shows the influential, confessional painter almost revelling in his ambivalent relationship with the art world. Before the 1994 Retrospective he told Richard Morphet, Keeper of the Modern Collection at the Tate Gallery: ‘Early on, I came under attack for being literary and obscure’.² He wrote of being ‘so disliked by those who think I’ve bitten off more than I can chew’³ and said he was ‘sorry and excited at being so difficult and unpopular’.⁴ Timothy Hyman, in his appreciative review of the Retrospective in the *Times Literary Supplement*, quotes him as saying: ‘I’m very good at blotting my own copybook’.⁵ And he knew that his self-confessed ‘obsession with the Jews’ would get up people’s noses. But he seemed to prefer it that way. He was an ‘outsider’. To be a ‘Diasporist’ was, as he put it, to ‘feel

¹ *First Diasporist Manifesto*, 39.

² Interview with Kitaj, 1994 Retrospective catalogue, 48.

³ *First Diasporist Manifesto*, 65.

⁴ *Ibid.* 75.

⁵ *TLS*, 1 July 1994, 16.

like a guest in the house of art'.⁶ He fought 'shy of the establishment embrace' wrote Richard Cork in his positive 1994 review in *The Times*.⁷ Nevertheless, at the urging of his son Lem, he broke the habit of a lifetime and before the exhibition made himself available for all the advance publicity. The result was almost universal, glowing praise, mostly, according to Hyman, 'fawning' pieces by feature writers rather than seasoned art critics. Nevertheless, he might have been forgiven for lowering his emotional guard and expecting a positive critical reception. Three years later he confessed: 'Never ever believe an artist if he says he doesn't care what critics write about him. Every artist cares.'⁸

Now while it's true that the critics who attacked him were not all unrelentingly negative about his work, there is a level of vehemence, personal animosity and stinging reputation-destroying rhetoric in their writing which, even today, in our 'seen-it-all' world, is quite shocking. Hyman, who thought that the exhibition did have some weaknesses, told me: 'It was the worst mauling I'd ever seen.'⁹ Some would say, for example, that there is nothing to equal the polarizing nature of art criticism in the London art world—but no amount of contextualising can alter the fact that, as Cilly Kugelmann writes, it was 'a turning point that would change his life and his career once and for all'.¹⁰ And for all that's been written and said, what led to the particularly devastating criticism, or the 'Tate War', as Kitaj dubbed it, continues to puzzle.

An attack driven by antisemitism?

Many commentators have offered explanations.¹¹ But no one can ignore the fact that one consistent, often-repeated and, apparently, widely accepted reason

⁶ *First Diasporist Manifesto*, 65.

⁷ *The Times*, 21 June 1994, 33.

⁸ As told to Lucinda Bredin, 'To Hell with the lot of them', *Sunday Telegraph Review*, 25 May 1997.

⁹ Interview with the author, 17 October 2012. All subsequent quotations by Timothy Hyman, Gabriel Josipovici and Glenn Sujo are from interviews conducted with them: Josipovici, 20 October 2012; Sujo, 21 October 2012 (email interview).

¹⁰ Cilly Kugelmann, "I Accuse!" Kitaj's "Tate War" and an interview with Richard Morphet, *Obsessions. R. B. Kitaj 1932-2008*, Berlin Jewish Museum exhibition catalogue, 195,

¹¹ For example, most recently, *Ibid.* 198.

given for the critics' hostility was antisemitism. The assumption was made that British society was characterized by a deep level of ingrained antisemitic sentiment that surfaced in the antagonistic critics' judgements of Kitaj and his work. But not just antisemitic prejudice—anti-Americanism and anti-intellectualism as well.

'[P]assionate and enraged',¹² the first to level the charge of antisemitism was Kitaj himself and he never wavered in his view. His friend William Frankel, former Editor of the London *Jewish Chronicle*, recalls in his memoir: 'He was crushed and angry, telling us (and no doubt others) [soon after the storm broke] that the critics were anti-American and anti-Semitic'.¹³ In an email interview with Stuart Jeffries of the *Guardian* in 2002, Kitaj spoke about one of his fiercest 1994 critics, Andrew Graham-Dixon: 'Then there's London's Chinless Wonder, called Anal Andy, who has compared London's four leading Jewish painters, including me, to shit in public print. Well, I was always homesick and I got tired of warfare and xenophobia and low-octane anti-semitism.'¹⁴ David Cohen, Editor of *artcritical.com*, said Kitaj viewed his critics as 'anti-Semitic, anti-American, anti-foreign and anti-intellectual'.¹⁵ David Myers, who gave us such a brilliant and elegant lecture yesterday, was already on record that 'Kitaj regarded such criticism as motivated by a thinly veiled anti-Semitism', and I sensed from his remarks last night that he thought Kitaj had good reason to believe this.¹⁶ Marco Livingstone, in the 2010 edition of his comprehensive volume *Kitaj*, concluded: 'these mean-spirited articles . . . not only failed to find a single virtue in his art but also seemed tainted with anti-semitism, xenophobia'.¹⁷ In one of the only substantive essays on this question, Janet Wolff, an art and culture academic, attributed the criticism to 'a persistent

¹² Janet Wolff, 'The impolite boarder: 'Diasporist' art and its critical response', in James Aulich and John Lynch, *Critical Kitaj: Essays on the Work of R.B. Kitaj* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2000), 33.

¹³ William Frankel, *Tea With Einstein and Other Memories* (London: Halban 2006), 215.

¹⁴ 6 February 2002.

¹⁵ *artcritical.com*, 24 Oct 2007.

¹⁶ Obituary in *jewishjournal.com* 25 Oct 2007,

¹⁷ London: Phaidon 2010, 50.

(though by no means pervasive) anti-semitism’, but relevant only in combination with anti-Americanism and ‘the excess of literary reference and written text’.¹⁸ Reaching for a comparison beyond the British Isles, Anne Landi in *Art News* compared the negative reviews of the Tate retrospective to the persecution of Dreyfus at the start of the century. In similar vein, John Ash in *Artforum* said the British reviewers’ behaviour reminded him of the reaction of the Third Reich’s cultural establishment to Max Beckmann’s and Emil Nolde’s works.¹⁹ And in a just-published preview article about the Berlin exhibition in the UK magazine *Jewish Renaissance*, the art historian Monica Bohm-Duchen confidently writes: ‘The adverse reactions can—especially in retrospect—be attributed to a toxic combination of anti-intellectualism, anti-Americanism and antisemitism in the British art critical establishment’.²⁰

I think I managed to read all or almost all of the very negative reviews, but before considering the charge of antisemitism, I do feel it’s important to point out that they were rather more diverse than most of the comments I quoted imply. It’s simply not true that the critics ‘failed to find a single virtue in his art’. Yes, there was fairly uniform dismissal of Kitaj’s written appendages, but there were differences on other points.

Turning to the claims that antisemitism motivated the destructive criticism, these assertions are mostly made without any serious supporting evidence. That British society is riddled with antisemitism is treated as unquestionable fact and therefore any criticism of a prominent figure who very publicly proclaims his Jewish identity must be antisemitic. This, I’m afraid, is far-fetched. As for the actual comparisons between Kitaj and Dreyfus and the Nazi treatment of Beckmann and Nolde, the less said the better.

¹⁸ Janet Wolff, ‘The impolite boarder: ‘Diasporist’ art and its critical response’, in James Aulich and John Lynch, *Critical Kitaj: Essays on the Work of R.B. Kitaj* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2000), 37.

¹⁹ May 1995, quoted in Figenschou.

²⁰ October 2012.

The obvious place to begin evaluating the accusations of antisemitism is the reviews themselves. Naturally, one looks initially for overt antisemitic expressions. But in my judgement, there are none. And I'm not alone in saying this. Interviewed by Kugelmann for the *Obsessions* catalogue, Morphet reflects on the possibility 'that Kitaj's belief that the attacks were anti-Semitic sprang not from any specific thing written—I am not aware of anything written that one could define in such terms [emphasis added]—but rather from what [Kitaj] perceived as the whole package of persecution of a person of such an identity'.²¹

Of course, the expression of antisemitism in a written text can be covert or implied and some writers claim to find evidence of this. For example, in drawing attention to the part that sex played in Kitaj's personal life and painting, it is suggested that some of the critics were alluding to the classic antisemitic stereotypes of Jewish sexual prowess, Jewish control of prostitution and the production of pornography. How so? Well, Brian Sewell, in London's *Evening Standard* newspaper, argued that Kitaj's increasingly close association with Judaism is linked to his fascination with sex.²² Waldemar Januszczak, in the *Sunday Times*,²³ after calling Kitaj's painting of the prostitute he encountered as a 17-year old seaman in Vera Cruz 'curiously odorless', then writes: 'As Sex scenes go, this one seems unusually well-themed, and the theme, as always, is the young Jew's search for identity.' But to draw from these references the general conclusion that critics were saying that Kitaj had a 'sexually charged notion of Jewry'²⁴ does not seem to me to be very convincing. And when Tim Hilton writes in the *Independent* that 'His pornographic scenes, also his straightforward nudes, are tasteless and sinister',²⁵ this is a strongly worded critical judgment, not an antisemitic statement. Even in Graham-

²¹ In Cilly Kugelmann, Eckhart Gillen, Hubertus Gaßner, *Obsessions. R. B. Kitaj 1932-2008* (Berlin: Kerber, Jewish Museum 2012), 201.

²² Quoted in Figenschou 15.

²³ 19 June 1994.

²⁴ Kugelmann, *Obsessions*, 195.

²⁵ 19 June 1994.

Dixon's relentless demolition of Kitaj's work, Kitaj's identity as a Jew is only referred to when Graham-Dixon characterizes his self-description as 'The Wandering Jew' as mythical and pompous. Insulting? Well, yes. Antisemitic? I don't think so.

We cannot know what precisely is in the hearts and minds of men—and they *were* all men—so the absence of any overt or covert antisemitic language in the reviews does not absolve their authors from consciously or unconsciously absorbing or being influenced by a climate of antisemitism expressed in language and behaviour that do not depend on classic antisemitic stereotypes to make their points. Kitaj himself told David Cohen in 2003 that 'Antisemitism runs the whole gamut from ignorant gossip in an English pub to the death camps, with infinite degrees and nuances along the way'.²⁶ Put another way, Jew-hatred can manifest itself in a coded discourse, in exclusion and distrust; in 'snub and insult, sly whisper and innuendo, deceit and self-deception'.²⁷ But to what degree was this or any other kind of antisemitism seriously influential in British society around this time and was it likely to have influenced the art critics?

Contemporary accounts of antisemitism in British society

Unfortunately, there is no standard, reliable history of antisemitism in Britain in the late 1980s and early 1990s to which we can turn for a straightforward answer. This does not mean that hostility towards Jews was being ignored or downplayed. On the contrary, the collapse of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 led to heightened concerns about a resurgence of antisemitism across the entire continent. In Western Europe this was largely expressed in increased vigilance. In Britain, the organized Jewish community's defence and monitoring operations were strengthened. In 1992, the country's principal race relations think tank, the Runnymede Trust, began an inquiry into

²⁶ artcritical.com 30 June 2003.

²⁷ *Trials of the Diaspora: A History of Antisemitism in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010), 350-1.

antisemitism headed by a very prominent Bishop in the Church of England, Richard Harries, a key figure in Jewish-Christian dialogue. (I was a member of the inquiry panel.) The final report and recommendations, issued in 1994, was entitled *Antisemitism: A Very Light Sleeper*.²⁸ In addition, in 1992 the Institute of Jewish Affairs in London, the research arm of the World Jewish Congress, launched its *Antisemitism World Report*, the first ever annual, human-rights style, country-by-country survey of antisemitism worldwide. The *Report*'s assessment of the situation in Britain in 1994 states: 'During 1994, antisemitism emanated from two main sources: the activities of Islamist groups and the activities of nationalist and neo-Nazi organizations'.²⁹ Putting matters in context, it concluded: 'Jews in Britain do not experience the same levels of racial harassment, violence and common prejudice suffered by the visible ethnic minorities.' These sober judgments were made notwithstanding the fact that 1994 was the first time in three years that incidents of 'extreme violence' had been recorded. 'They included two car bombs in London [in July], at the Israeli embassy and the offices of the Joint Israel Appeal (JIA), [and] a petrol bomb attack on the home of a rabbi'.³⁰ The *Report* also drew attention to an article by William Cash, a right-wing Tory member of parliament, in the respected right-of-centre political weekly, the *Spectator*, in October, in which he claimed that Hollywood was run by a 'Jewish cabal'. There was widespread public anger when the article was published and Cash subsequently said that he had been misunderstood because he is 'rude and impolite about everyone'.³¹ And there was also widespread condemnation of the car bombings.

Britain has never been a place where openly antisemitic and racist political parties or terrorism of any kind have had any serious public support. But it is a place where a mainstream politician can make light of anti-Jewish

²⁸ London: Runnymede Trust 2010.

²⁹ *Antisemitism World Report 1995 (AWR)* (London: Institute of Jewish Affairs and American Jewish Committee 1995), 244.

³⁰ *AWR 1995*, 239.

³¹ *AWR 1995*, 240. .

stereotyping by saying ‘Oh, it’s just my usual rudeness.’ To understand how these apparently contradictory attitudes can coexist in Britain, we need to drill down into the social fabric and look at personal accounts and experiences.

Anne Karpf, a well-known journalist, author and radio critic and daughter of Holocaust survivors, writes about the Tory politician’s article in an admired personal memoir, *The War After: Living With the Holocaust*, published in 1996. She describes it as ‘revealing the unchanging nature of British anti-Semitism’ but also draws attention to the fact that the editor of the *Spectator* at the time, Dominic Lawson, was Jewish.³² (And, I would add, the son of the Tory Chancellor of the Exchequer, now Lord Nigel Lawson, from 1983 to 1989.) Karpf explains this apparent incongruity by saying that Lawson was ‘following the accepted tradition of British Jews going out of their way to prove their impartiality and loyalty by giving space to anti-Semitic babblings’.³³ Whether this is true or not, what is more interesting is the very fact that a Jew in 1994 was editing something akin to the house journal of the privileged, upper class wing of the Tory Party, often judged to be a haven for snobbish, ‘genteel’ antisemitism, and that his Jewish father was Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s chief lieutenant for six years.

Karpf writes of the experiences of friends. An Anglo-Jewish filmmaker recalls growing up in Britain after the war and internalising a code which warned: ‘Don’t be too Jewish in public’. In a poem, the poet Sue Hubbard spoke of learning ‘to stitch on/ that elastic tennis-club smile/ to cover the slow dawning/ that I was a Jew’.³⁴ Rosemary Friedman, an Anglo-Jewish novelist, told Karpf: ‘I am aware that the declaration of my name to a non-Jew is greeted with a frisson, signalling the fact that the “Jew” is encountered before any attempt is made to reach the person.’

³² London: Heinemann, 219.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid. 216.

And yet, in contrast, Karpf writes about ‘British Jews [having] visibly gained in confidence over the past decade’ and describes an experience in 1994 when she and her ‘American girlfriend went to an evening of Anglo-Jewish humour in the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London, only to be greeted by a humour almost exclusively about lifestyle, and recurring jokes about synagogue and liturgy, Volvos and the awfulness of kosher wine. But almost nothing about living in a non-Jewish culture and being marginalised’.³⁵

In Stephen Brook’s *The Club: The Jews of Modern Britain*, published in 1990 and then reissued in 1996, among the impressive number and diversity of Jewish people he interviewed, there was no lack of awareness of distinctive attitudes to Jews. Professor George Steiner, the literary critic, philosopher and novelist, told Brook that while the ‘disparagement of Jews has a firm place in certain layers of British society [and] is deplorable, [it] may also function as a kind of jester’s licence, a safety valve. “Britain harbours much stronger feelings against Catholics than against Jews”’.³⁶ The philosopher Isaiah Berlin, who Kitaj claimed as a mentor, remarked that ‘for all [Britain’s] snobbery and xenophobia and penchant for hooliganism from upper as well as lower classes’, ‘there is no predisposition to anti-Semitism on the part of the population’.³⁷ Drawing his own conclusions from the sum of his interviewees’ comments, Brook writes: ‘Journalists or newspaper editors may on occasion be too casual and thoughtless in their inclusion of an irrelevant “Jewish factor”, but very few would argue that such slips reflect a deep-seated national anti-Semitism’.³⁸ ‘[I]f one wants to know whether anti-Semitic incidents still take place in Britain, then the answer has to be yes’ says Brook. ‘But if one asks whether there is a deep and rooted layer of anti-Semitic feeling here, then the answer, most

³⁵ Ibid. 218.

³⁶ London: Constable, 394-5.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid. 389.

observers would agree, has to be no. An anti-Semitic ideology has never taken hold of the British imagination in the way it did in, say, Poland or Germany'.³⁹

And, like Anne Karpf, Brook identifies a new assertiveness among British Jews that speaks of an awareness of the increasingly marginal impact of antisemitism: 'It is the younger generation of Jews who feel strongly that there is nothing to be ashamed of in parading their differences from the majority'.⁴⁰

Among the leaders of British Jewish organizations, there was much talk of the threat to Jewish life in the mid-1990s, but while 'threat' sometimes meant external hostility to Jews, it increasingly and predominantly meant the 'threat' of intermarriage, assimilation and the end to Jewish continuity,⁴¹ processes now driven far more by Jews responding to a welcoming, liberal society than by pressure to escape from a handicapping Jewishness. A new generation of Jewish leaders reacted to this by devising a strategy of Jewish renewal based around a modernised formal and informal Jewish educational movement, the renaissance of Jewish culture and greater outreach on the part of Jewish religious denominational groups. This was partly built on spontaneous grassroots Jewish initiatives beginning in the 1980s. But more significantly, it was made possible and achieved remarkable success because of Britain's burgeoning multiculturalism, which, as the historian David Cesarani argues, reached its 'apogee' in the 1990s. British Jews were able to exploit and benefit from multiculturalism, from 'the growing pluralism of European societies, the emergence of a protected space in which it was feasible to be Jewish in any number of ways'.⁴² The fact that this coincided with the palpable sense of optimism that, as a result of the 1993 Oslo Accords, the Israel-Palestine conflict was about to be resolved, was no accident. There was an atmosphere of vibrancy and innovation; 'the flourishing and renewal of British life [had] taken

³⁹ Ibid. 382.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 395.

⁴¹ Keith Kahn-Harris and Ben Gidley, *Turbulent Times: The British Jewish Community Today* (London: Continuum 210), 13.

⁴² Kahn-Harris and Gidley, 37.

place’,⁴³ but not at the expense of failing to articulate concerns about antisemitism. In her essay, Janet Wolff writes that ‘The expectation in England that Jews will keep quiet about their Jewishness persists today’,⁴⁴ meaning the year 2000. But in reality, by the mid-1990s many Jews were no longer keeping quiet and British society was increasingly comfortable with this assertiveness.

In the light of this necessarily short survey, it does not seem to me that the nature and penetration of antisemitism in British society can be legitimately blamed as a principal cause of the ‘mauling’ to which Kitaj was subjected. So what drove Kitaj to believe it was? It’s not as if Kitaj himself had no understanding of antisemitism. His statement to David Cohen that ‘Antisemitism runs the whole gamut from ignorant gossip in an English pub to the death camps, with infinite degrees and nuances along the way’ would not be out of place in a reasoned discussion of the issue. And yet, I would suggest that from what we know of Kitaj’s schooling in this subject, his understanding of it lost out to his obsession with it—and this was one element of his more general obsession with Jewishness.

The paranoid tendency

Although his parents were Jewish, Kitaj grew up an atheist in an atheist home. Hyman says: ‘He always emphasised that he had no Jewish background. [His Jewishness] was a construction and he recognised that.’ And it wasn’t until he was 29 that Jewishness began to become increasingly central to his life and work. As Kitaj told Stuart Jeffries of the *Guardian* in 2002: ‘Kitaj said: ‘At the Royal College of Art I followed the Eichmann trial in Hannah Arendt’s reports from Jerusalem, which led me to find out as much as I could about these fascinating people of mine who are always in trouble.’⁴⁵ That exploration covered a lot of territory: Kafka, Benjamin, Kabbalah, Buber, Rabbi Steinsaltz

⁴³ Ibid. 135 and 163.

⁴⁴ Wolff, 36.

⁴⁵ Email interview, 6 February 2002.

the Talmudist, Midrash, Scholem, the bible, Freud and more. In 2001 Rudolf wrote: ‘The ongoing myth and history of the Jewish people, from the Akedah (the Binding of Isaac) and the Burning Bush, via the Inquisition and the *Marranos* (secret Jews), to the gas-chambers and modern Israel—speak to him *de profundis*.’⁴⁶ Kitaj quotes with approval Schönberg’s observation that ‘I have long since resolved to be a Jew . . . I regard that as more important than my art’. It seemed as if ‘Jewishness explained everything: his love of texts, his instinctive empathy with themes of blame and persecution, his sense of exile’.⁴⁷ And yet it’s true that his ‘pantheon of exemplars’ (Rudolf’s phrase) and influences were much wider. But what Jewishness provided for him was an all-encompassing framework within which he could locate his personal sense of being an outsider, which he conceptualised as Diasporism. ‘Diasporism is my mode’, he wrote in the *First Diasporist Manifesto*. ‘It is the way I do my pictures.’

But for all Kitaj’s apparent immersion in Jewishness from a fundamentally secular Jewish perspective it was the Holocaust and the many centuries of Jewish persecution that were at the dark heart of his obsession with the ‘Jewish question’. There is truth in David Myers’ assertion that that obsession was ‘a complex forged at the intersection of a seemingly timeless anti-Semitism and the uniquely creative cultural genius of Jewish intellectuals’.⁴⁸ And yet for Kitaj the writer, the cultural agitator, the thinker, the polemicist, the interviewee, the poet, the diasporist—not the Kitaj expressing himself in paint—I suggest that the tragic side of Jewish existence dominated his understanding of the Jewish condition, overwhelming the significance of the long and deep history of ‘uniquely creative cultural genius.’ As he put it in his notes on the painting *The Death of Rosa Luxemburg* (1960), published in the

⁴⁶ Anthony Rudolf and Colin Wiggins, *Kitaj in the Aura of Cezanne and other Masters*. London: The National Gallery, 2002

⁴⁷ Obituary, *The Economist*, 1 November 2007.

⁴⁸ jewishjournal.com, 25 October 2007.

catalogue for the 1994 Tate Retrospective, ‘I would never quite be free of what is called the lachrymose view of Jewish history’,⁴⁹ a phrase coined by probably the greatest Jewish historian of the twentieth century, Salo Baron, who spoke out angrily against it. But Kitaj’s paintings that were ‘dominated by large allegories of the suffering inflicted in [the twentieth] century by anti-Semitism’,⁵⁰ and the paintings of himself and his friends that also invoked the Holocaust, work very well and do not display evidence of a proprietary obsession. As Glenn Sujo, put it in response to a question I asked him: ‘These works are raw, resistant, uncompromising, radical pictorially, and free of any sentimentality.’ Rudolf says the ‘[Jewish] question is quite clearly a psychically enabling device for the work to be done at all’;⁵¹ ‘Jewishness was a picture-trigger for him. It was “good for thinking with”.’⁵²

Hyman recalls the intensity of Kitaj’s Holocaust obsession: ‘By immersing himself so deeply in Holocaust literature, he did kind of drive himself mad. He knew that. Probably it brought on heart disease. He was really distressed some of the time. Tears would be pouring down his face. He kind of almost religiously gave an hour or two a day [to it] in the late 1970s. And he wasn’t, as we might be, a little bit horrified at the meretricious side of the “Shoah business”. He didn’t see it that way. He kind of swallowed it whole and it made him ill.’ It is therefore not surprising that he came to see a direct line connecting the earliest hostility towards Jews with the antisemitism that produced the Holocaust; bar-room disparagement of Jews with the gas-chambers—a determinist view of antisemitism as a continuous, unchanging phenomenon strongly disputed by prominent scholars of the subject as well as researchers monitoring and analysing current Jew-hatred.

⁴⁹ Morphet ed., 82.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 26.

⁵¹ Rudolf and Wiggins, 2002, 58.

⁵² Email to the author from Anthony Rudolf.

No doubt he came to these conclusions partly in the privacy of his library, but the influence of certain friends and acquaintances was surely of considerable importance. His friend Philip Roth— whose phrase ‘Jew-on-the-brain’, taken from the novel *Counterlife*, Kitaj embraced as aptly describing his condition—was well known for his obsession with antisemitism, not just in his home country, as crudely portrayed in his novel *The Plot Against America*, but, and especially, in England. Hyman thinks that ‘Roth spent a lot of time in a very exalted, aristocratic English circle, where there might be antisemitism. But anyway he was retelling stuff to Kitaj which I thought was just paranoia.’ Josipovici felt the same: ‘[Kitaj would] say “Philip Roth was here, antisemitism is everywhere” . . . I felt that Roth was just importing this from America.’ And as an American, who, for all his diasporism, remained deeply attached to his American roots, Kitaj was probably susceptible to Roth’s zeal.

Kitaj and Roth were neighbours in Chelsea for about six years. ‘We used to lunch together once a week at Tootsie’s in the Fulham Road’, he told Stuart Jeffries, ‘and we’d see Philip and Claire Bloom some evenings.’⁵³ Was it at Tootsie’s that Roth, as evidence of the public expression of antisemitism, showed Kitaj a newspaper with ‘a headline attack on Nick Serota [Director of the Tate, whose parents were Jewish] by Brian R Sewell [one of Kitaj’s bitterest critics] which said, “Let’s get rid of this Trotsky of the Tate!” Not Stalin or Hitler, but poor old Trotsky comes first into that clown’s mind.’⁵⁴ The mindset that reads antisemitism into Sewell calling Serota ‘Trotsky’, when for all sorts of reasons, alliteration being one of them, ‘Trotsky’ makes perfect sense if you’re flinging insults, is clearly one that’s manufacturing unjustified fears. And when Hyman told Kitaj that he had never experienced antisemitism, not even at the public school (meaning private and very expensive) he attended, it’s the same mindset that produced the response Hyman describes when he told me:

⁵³ *Guardian*, 6 February 2002.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

‘Kitaj just didn’t believe me when I said [that]. He just said “You’re blind”, “You’ve got some deficiency”.’

Kitaj’s attitude to antisemitism may also have been reinforced by the high profile Jewish lawyer, Anthony Julius, who he got to know in the years before the Tate Retrospective. Julius, best known for acting on behalf of Princess Diana in her divorce from Prince Charles in 1996, wrote a book published in 1995 comprehensively attacking T. S. Eliot for his antisemitism,⁵⁵ which reads like a barrister prosecuting a court case, and in recent years has argued that Jewish anti-Zionists contributions to antisemitism are significant—a key aspect of his huge, but deeply flawed, 2010 book on English antisemitism, *Trials of the Diaspora*.⁵⁶ Kitaj was also in contact with the prominent British narrative historian Martin Gilbert, widely lionised for his monumental biography of Winston Churchill, but also somewhat obsessive about antisemitism. Gilbert’s book *Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy*, published in 1986, was a very influential best seller. But it was not universally admired by experts. George Steiner called it a kind of archivist’s *Kaddish* (Jewish prayer for the dead), ‘a ritual commemoration and recitation of names, heroes and horrific actions’. A reviewer in the *Jewish Quarterly* magazine⁵⁷ described it as ‘an unrelenting and mostly incoherent catalogue of pain, suffering, humiliation *and* heroism—a criminal indictment of Nazism and its helpers’, and spoke of its ‘unhinged style and numbing effect’.

Both Hyman and Josipovici concur that while Kitaj was never a man of the political left, he had appeared to demonstrate concern for the plight of the Palestinians while supporting the Zionist claim on the land of Israel. But during the early 1990s he clearly moved to the right on these issues. Hyman says he became ‘very very pro-Israel in a very wayward way. It was delightful in a way but it was nonsense. He had to draw [Lord] Jacob Rothschild and he spent the

⁵⁵ T. S. Eliot, *Anti-Semitism and Literary Form* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁵⁶ 554.

⁵⁷ Ronnie Landau, ‘On Martin Gilbert’s approach to the Holocaust’, no. 4, 1986, 10.

whole sitting talking about his plan for Israel. He told me about this . . . you know, how Jordan ought to be incorporated in the state of Israel and then all the Palestinians [would become Israelis].’

In some respects the obsession with the Holocaust and antisemitism, and with Jewishness and the diasporist state of mind, can be seen as an expression of universalism. Richard Morphet suggested this in his interview with Kitaj for the 1994 Retrospective. ‘The result [of your treatment of the Jewish theme] has been a body of work which, while it ponders the richness and complexity of Jewish history, focuses, above all, on the issue of inhumanity per se. Thus although you dwell understandably on the exceptional horror of the Holocaust, your key theme is not specifically Jewish but is universal, namely the question of human values.’⁵⁸ Kitaj replied: ‘I’d love my pictures to be universal but that will be decided when I’m dead.’ From what we know about Kitaj and the way his art takes the particular and turns it into universal symbols, it’s not wrong to see his concern for the troubles of the Jews as a plea for *tikkun olam*, repair of the world. And perhaps his declaration that ‘the threatened condition of the Jews witnesses the condition of our wider world’⁵⁹ speaks to that. (Verse 103 of the *Second Diasporist Manifesto* reads: ‘Jewish particularity=Universal Humanity and Desire’.⁶⁰) But it could also be read as prioritizing Jewish suffering. In the Tate Retrospective catalogue interview with Morphet, Kitaj says: ‘Why are the Jews always in trouble? After the worst thing that ever happened to them (or anyone) in four thousand years of awful things, they seemed to have acquired a billion new enemies they never had before’. I tend to feel that it’s Kitaj’s destructive obsession with antisemitism that prevailed as he faced the world; that it’s an obsession that he *didn’t* work through. It drove his response to the reputation-busters of 1994, it was divorced from British social reality and it ultimately contributed to keeping the memory of the worst

⁵⁸ Morphet ed., 53.

⁵⁹ Obituary, *Daily Telegraph*, 24 Oct 2007.

⁶⁰ Yale University Press, Oct 2007.

criticism alive—‘something people still talk about,’ writes Figenschou, ‘while the good reviews have languished in the shade of the bad.’⁶¹

Ambivalence

I have tried to show how unlikely it was that antisemitism in British society in the early 1990s could have played a significant role in Kitaj’s ‘Tate War’. This was a time when hostility to Jews, relatively marginal anyway, was diminishing, at least temporarily, overall. The screeds of Graham-Dixon, Januszczak, Sewell, Hilton, Hall and a few other critics may well have been unprecedentedly savage, but the evidence that they were either overtly or covertly antisemitic is weak. Josipovici recalls: ‘We were terribly upset at the way he reacted because we felt it’s demeaning to be so dependent on critics, why didn’t he just shut up. Couldn’t Sandra just tell him . . . but no one could tell him, he was just like a bull in a china shop. And one felt that the more he went on that it’s because of antisemitism, the more they [the critics] would just be laughing at him, feeling that they were goading him and enjoying it.’ Justifiably hurt and angry, Kitaj was predisposed to see that it was his identity as a Jew the critics were attacking in classic antisemitic fashion since this was the eternal fate of the outsider Jew in a society he had come to believe was riddled with antisemitism.

But this doesn’t tell the whole story. First, focusing on antisemitism tends to marginalise other prejudices that clearly did play a significant part in the attacks: anti-Americanism and anti-intellectualism—subjects for another lecture. Second, and more important, by concentrating on claims and counter-claims of antisemitism, we can all too easily reduce Kitaj to a figure for whom people feel *either* hatred *or* love, and nothing in between. This is not just a matter of over-simplification. As a leading English literature scholar Brian Cheyette explains, ‘most recent historians and cultural critics have held that “anti-Semitism” is “too blunt a conceptual tool” with which to analyze “the

⁶¹ Figenschou, 29.

Jews” within the “English imagination”.’ It encourages us to make judgements using an antisemitism-philosemitism binary. In the words of the English Medievalist Anthony Bale, ‘the key point is that philosemitism praises an equally fictitious entity as that which antisemitism slanders.’ The underlying theme of most scholars now working in this area can be summed up in the word *ambivalence*. In practice, as David Cesarani puts it, ‘[a]mbivalence towards Jewish particularity, rather than unequivocal hostility, is probably a more useful category [than anti-Semitism] with which to explore ... a spectrum of attitudes’.⁶²

Of course, as has already been stressed here many times, one thing that Kitaj foregrounded very strongly in the pre-Retrospective interviews, in the notes appended to the paintings and in his writings, such as the *First Diasporist Manifesto*, was precisely his Jewish particularity. Hyman and Cork both took this in their stride, fully able to accept Kitaj’s Jewishness as a contextual element to be considered sensitively, but not uncritically, within an assessment of the work.⁶³ Graham-Dixon in the *Independent*⁶⁴ and James Hall in the *Guardian*⁶⁵ both virtually ignored it, G-D having judged that Kitaj had simply created a false myth of himself, rendering context irrelevant. Nevertheless, he did not question Kitaj’s choice to depict the Holocaust; he just judges the result very harshly. Richard Dorment in the *Daily Telegraph*⁶⁶ failed to engage with it; he decided that Kitaj had lost any sense of direction and therefore he could not even address the Jewishness angle, even to critique it. William Feather in the *Financial Times*⁶⁷ gave due weight to the significance of Kitaj’s Jewish influences as did Tim Hilton in the *Independent on Sunday*,⁶⁸ though his

⁶² From an unpublished paper by Brian Cheyette <http://www.isgap.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/bryan-cheyette-paper-4-15-10.pdf>

⁶³ *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 July 1994; *The Times*, 21 June 1994.

⁶⁴ 28 June 1994.

⁶⁵ 20 June 1994.

⁶⁶ 22 June 1994.

⁶⁷ 18 June 1994.

⁶⁸ 19 June 1994.

conclusions about Kitaj's oeuvre were dismissive and insulting. Janusczyk in the *Sunday Times*⁶⁹ and John McEwen in the *Sunday Telegraph*⁷⁰ both seemed to be embarrassed by Kitaj's emphasis on Jewishness. Described by Hyman as the 'malign jester' of art criticism, Sewell in the *Evening Standard*⁷¹ is in camp high dudgeon throughout, sniffy about Kitaj's 'revitalised faith as a Jew' and also everything else about him.

I believe that we do see here an ambivalence about an American Jew unashamed to broadcast his 'erratic Jewish obsessions', but only among *some* of the critics. This reflects a British society on the cusp of change: multiculturalism was becoming the new normal, but many had yet to catch up with it. The celebration of ethnicity and difference was still in the process of becoming a British national project, though in the country's most multi-ethnic areas, pride in your group culture and identity had been growing for many years. However, while the public celebration of Jewish culture and identity was increasingly evident, it was still alien to a substantial proportion of mostly older British Jews. In the note appended to the 1976 painting *The Jew Etc.* Kitaj writes: 'I've seen people wince at the title; sophisticated art people, who think it's best not to use the word Jew. Kafka, my greatest Jewish artist, never utters the word once in his fiction, so I thought I would. . . .'⁷²—and as we know he did, again and again. If some Jews were, at the very least, ambivalent about this kind of 'in-your-face' Jewish assertiveness, why would one expect anything else from a bunch of white male critics, most of whom were pumped up with literary testosterone, and seemingly battling with each other to produce the most satisfying put-down? In the circumstances, they could have shown even less understanding.

⁶⁹ 19 June 1994.

⁷⁰ 19 June 1994.

⁷¹ 16 June 1994.

⁷² Morphet ed., 132.

'Paint the opposite of antisemitism'

Had Kitaj *not* cried 'antisemitism' in 1994, it seems to me unlikely that any current reflections on the critical responses to the Retrospective would be considering the question. But identification with prejudice and persecution were integral to his Diasporism, both as a Jewish project and a universal one. Kitaj (Hyman told me) said that the critics saw him as 'an uppity nigger'. A sense of justice spurred him on to greater defiance. My impression from his London friends is that he combined great, naive confidence to be true to himself and not play to the gallery with a tendency to over-react. One told me: 'He should have seen it coming. I'm afraid he rather brought it upon himself and then was ridiculously thin-skinned about it.' We all know that he 'often wrote back to his critics' in language even cruder and more offensive than theirs. He told Andrew Lambirth that 'evil dogs should be muzzled lest they kill again'.⁷³

As a last word, one thing that intrigues me is that Kitaj's constructed Jewishness and Diasporism had very little resonance in Britain among those Jews reclaiming and renewing the authenticity of diaspora Jewish life, though his work *was* known among a small circle of Jewish intellectuals, writers and artists. Now that many Jews are living a new diasporism, in some respects deeply rooted, in other ways precarious, I wonder whether there is something in Kitaj's Jewish project that might speak to them? Or were his ideas ultimately *sui generis*, a personal potpourri of Jewishness and much else besides, only useful for his own art? In the *Second Diasporist Manifesto*, published in 2007, the year of his suicide, verses 6, 52, 93 and 109 proclaim in capital letters 'PAINT THE OPPOSITE OF ANTI-SEMITISM'. Did he mean by that: 'focus on the rich cultural and intellectual Jewish tradition'? Or was he thinking again of a universal symbol for Jewish suffering, like the Passion of Christ for Christianity? We'll never know. But I'm sure he'd have had something to say about it.

⁷³ *Independent*, 27 May 1997.