

R. B. Kitaj: Commentary on an Eccentric Jewish Life

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It is a pleasure to be here in Berlin for this extraordinary exhibition and a real honor to be able to speak to you this evening. I am humbled too, because everything worth saying about Kitaj and his Jewish life has been said by the contributors to the exhibition catalogue.

I'd like to begin by expressing my thanks to the Jewish Museum and especially to Dr. Eckhart Gillen, the curator of this exhibition and to Cilly Kugelmann, program director of the Museum and moving force behind this symposium.

I must confess to a real poignancy at this moment. It is strange to celebrate the life's work of R. B. Kitaj, but not to have him with us. His death 5 years ago seems like yesterday, and as I reflect on this great artist and dear friend, I forewarn you that I will be mixing the personal with the more sober analytic.

I first met Kitaj at UCLA, my university, when he came to give a lecture in June 1999. The theme of the lecture was one of his perennial obsessions: "The 'Jewish Question' in Art." The lecture, I must admit, was not an oratorical tour de force. It was long and a bit rambling, two qualities that I hope to avoid tonight. But it was so rich with ideas, so bold and provocative in its insights, that I was left speechless.

From that point until his death in 2007, Kitaj and I were conversation partners, brought together by a shared reading list, set of intellectual heroes, and themes of interest. His mode of thinking was unlike mine. It was explosively visual and unburdened by the disciplinary boundaries or footnotes of the scholar; but for all his wildness, Kitaj's thinking was deep and wide, as attentive to the text as to the image, which of course drove the London art critics mad, for they insisted that a picture that couldn't stand alone--without words--was unworthy of attention.

This already pushes me to the first of my main points for the evening: the imperative of commentary in Kitaj's work. But before we get to Commentary, or more specifically, my Commentary on Kitaj's practice of Commentary, I'd like to take a step back and declare that my

main goal this evening is to explore the eccentric Jewish life that Kitaj led—and to do so in a way that reflected his own proclivities.

And so I will compile a list, which is something he himself loved to do. Here is an example of Kitaj's list (SLIDE 2: KITAJ'S LIST) And here is my list. (SLIDE 3: DNM LIST) My list consists of five key concepts in Kitaj's Jewish life. To give them some firmer grounding, I will try to map them on to a cultural geography of Kitaj's peripatetic life journey. (SLIDE 4: NAPKIN)

This map was drawn by Kitaj himself on a napkin from the Coffee Bean café in Westwood, near the UCLA campus, where Kitaj would go at 6am every morning. He left behind hundreds of reflections and sketches on the Coffee Bean napkins, many of which are in the Kitaj Archive at UCLA. The napkin before us offers a mapping of the key stations in Kitaj's life, as well as an autobiographical figuration of his own decline (as represented by the figure who moves from left to right).

Let us begin in the top left, with Ohio, where Ronald Brooks was born in a suburb of Cleveland in 1932. His parents divorced in 1934, and his mother remarried in 1941 to Dr. Walter Kitaj, an Austrian Jew whose last name the young boy assumed. There was no demonstrable Jewish ritual or learning that took place in the home, but the experience of the émigré Central European Jew was very much alive in the household.

Kitaj's family moved to **Troy**, New York, when he was a child—and there he went to high school. On completion, he joined the merchant marine and sailed the world—this is the reference to the “**High Seas**.” Then began his training as an artist, first at Cooper Union in **New York**, then **Vienna** at the Akademie der bildenden Künste, and then in **London**.

I don't want to reprise his entire life here. What I do want to emphasize is that for much of his early life, from his birth through the beginning of his London experience, there was relatively little access to or engagement with Jewish concerns.¹ Direct engagement with Jewish themes and personalities came in the 1970s and 80s, as Kitaj turned his attention with increasing awareness and intensity to the Jewish question.

And yet, there are some tantalizing adumbrations of his later Jewish obsession, evident already in 1963 with the opening of his first solo show at the Marlborough Gallery in London. That was an intriguing period: the show opened in February, the same month in which a *New Yorker* article appeared that, as Kitaj later reported, “broke the Jewish Ice for me.” (*First Diasporist Manifesto*, 88). The article in question was Hannah Arendt's account of the Eichmann trial that would form the basis of her famous book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. At that critical moment in his Jewish formation, Kitaj was opening his

show at the Marlborough Gallery in London under the title “Pictures with Commentary, pictures without Commentary.”

1. COMMENTARY (SLIDE 5)

Why is this title significant? Already at this early stage, Kitaj chose to engage in an act for which he would become both famous and infamous: that is, he placed alongside his paintings written text: witticisms, aphorisms, philosophical and historical meditations, art criticism. He did not give voice at that point to what he would later come to embrace: namely, that he was a link in the long and dynamic chain of the Jewish interpretive tradition.

Nothing could be more integral to the evolution of Judaism the religion than this imperative to engage in commentary. “Hafokh ba ve-hafokh ba di-kula ba,” it reads in the 3rd century *Pirke Avot*, the ethical teachings embedded in the first major written embodiment of the oral law, the Mishnah: “Turn over the text of the Bible again and again, for all is contained within it.” (SLIDE 6)

This was not a marginal and neglected phenomenon in the history of Judaism, but a central animating impulse. Well before the time of Jesus, Jewish sages engaged in ceaseless commentary on the Bible, as well as on the accompanying Oral Law that lent Judaism its distinctive ritual habits. It is this Oral Law, associated with the Pharisees, which the early Christians, or at least most of them, left behind.

But for Jews, interpreting constituted their very being. The texts that resulted from their interpreting and commenting became, in the famous words of Heine and later George Steiner, “the portable homeland of the Jew.” Indeed, the Mishnah begat the Talmud which begat rabbinic commentaries—and it is these texts that regulated and ordered the lives of Jews, who, from the year 70 AD or CE, had lost sovereignty over their homeland.

With the rise of rabbinic interpreters came dynamism, flexibility, malleability in the interpretive process. It is that set of qualities which Kitaj loved and identified with as a commentator, as he relates in the second of his two *Diasporist Manifestos*. There he quoted the famous imperative to “turn it over again and again” (369) and then notes: “Fitful commentary waits patiently by some of my pictures as it does in thousands of years of Jewish Commentary.” (#15)

Although hardly a rabbi, and surely not an observant Jew, Kitaj boldly and proudly inserted himself into that millennial tradition. Commentary was not mere word play for him; it was constitutive, it defined, animated, and invigorated Jews. And it sustained them, especially throughout their long history in dispersion, which brings us to the second of the five core terms in Kitaj’s eccentric Jewish life: Diaspora.

2. DIASPORA/EXILE (Slide 7)

Diaspora is the Greek term for scattering or dispersion. In Jewish history, it is a somewhat more neutral term than Exile (known in Hebrew as *galut*), which implies not only a state of physical displacement, but theological estrangement between the Israelites and God.

In Kitaj's lexicon, it became a term of paramount significance. He saw himself as dwelling, for much of his life, in a state of displacement—as an American in London for nearly forty years, and even in the last decade of his life in Los Angeles. The significance of Diaspora in his life and thought became clear in the year 1988, when he published initially in German his *Erstes Manifest des Diasporismus*, followed the next year by the English *First Diasporist Manifesto*. (SLIDE 8)

And in 2007, the year of his death, he published his *Second Diasporist Manifesto*. (SLIDE 9) So thoroughly did he identify with the concept that he signed his name at the end of the introduction to the second manifesto as “The Diaspora.”

And yet, it is interesting to reflect for a moment on his choice of language in the titles: not “Diaspora Manifesto,” but “Diasporist Manifestos.” The difference is subtle, but significant. It suggests not merely an acknowledgement of physical dispersion, but an ideological commitment to the state of displacement from the homeland.

Why would that be? What is there to venerate and revere in Diasporism? Kitaj offers up those questions repeatedly though never systemically in his manifestoes. Among the features of diasporism as an affirmative path in life and art that he notes in the *First Manifesto* are:

- 1) Its ability to be both “internationalist and particularist.”
- 2) The fact that “People are always saying the meaning in my pictures refuses to be fixed, to be settled, to be stable: that's Diasporism, which welcomes interesting, creative misreadings.”²
- 3) Its status as “a universal conundrum, a most ancient mystery presence, a secreted reflection upon one's uneasy world.”

All of these aphoristic definitions point to the dynamic and unstable condition of Diasporism, a condition that was ironically well-suited for artistic and cultural creativity, for it allowed for, and even necessitated, iconoclasm and violation of the established rules. One needn't be Jewish to be a Diasporist, Kitaj hastened to add, noting that Picasso, Cezanne, and Mondrian—with their ferocious spirit of innovation—all belonged to the tradition.

At the same time, Diasporism was, for Kitaj, the quintessential Jewish condition. It was the condition in which the ceaseless interpretive imperative of the rabbis, as exemplified by the practice of Midrash, was incubated.

It was the condition of that historical figure who so fascinated him: the Marrano—the Iberian *converso* who, from the fifteenth century, outwardly lived as a Catholic and inwardly as a Jew—or as the well-known German scholar, Carl Gebhardt, famously described him: “Der Marrane ist ein Katholik ohne Glauben und ein Jude ohne Wissen.” (SLIDE 10) The Marrano has been a figure of keen and ongoing fascination to modern Jews, especially German Jews, who recognized themselves in the mirror reflecting the Marrano’s divided identity.

Beyond the Marrano, Diasporism was not only the condition, but the ideological predisposition of a whole strain of modern Jewish nationalists, who aspired not principally to return to the homeland, but rather to establish a state-supported cultural preserve in the Diaspora. Figures such as the great historian Simon Dubnow, who lived in Berlin from 1922 to 1933 or the writer and Territorialist Israel Zangwill make appearances in Kitaj’s *First Diasporist Manifesto*. (SLIDE 11) They were the ideological opponents of Zionists, who hoped for a revived Jewish presence in Erets Yisrael or Palestine.

I’ll come back to Kitaj and Zionism, with which he had a good deal of sympathy. And in this regard, he would have parted ways, as it were, with a recent visitor to this institution, American literary critic Judith Butler, who spoke in this building on September 15. (SLIDE 12) She lays claim in her recent book *Parting Ways* to Jewish “diasporic traditions” as part of her sharp critique of Zionism and the State of Israel. As I said, I will discuss Kitaj’s differing view, but I do want to finish off the discussion of his Diasporism.

Perhaps the paradigmatic Diasporist character in his artistic imagination is Joe Singer, the recurrent subject of artistic interest. (SLIDE 13) Who was Joe Singer? Well, Joe Singer, Kitaj tells us, was the name of a man his mother dated in the 1930s.” He also became the recurrent model for Kitaj’s Diaspora Jew, displaced, in transit, not fully belonging.

Of his painting of the mythic Joe Singer, “The Jew, Etc.,” Kitaj writes: “In this picture, I intend Joe, my emblematic Jew, to be the unfinished subject of an aesthetic of entrapment and escape, an endless, tainted Galut-Passage, wherein he acts out his own unfinish.” Entrapment and escape—the poles between which the Diaspora Jew moves, and the space, the middle ground on which the Diaspora Jew, liberated from convention but constrained by danger, creates. London was such a place for Kitaj, a site of both escape and entrapment, of creativity and hostility.

3. ANTISEMITISM (SLIDE 14)

This brings us to the third of our key terms in Kitaj's Jewish life: Antisemitism. It was antisemitism that ultimately drove Kitaj away from his home of 40 years, from London to Los Angeles, as it had for Diaspora Jews for millennia. In fact, Kitaj's first encounter with antisemitism must indeed have come early. He grew up with the consciousness of Central European anti-Semitism through the presence of his step-father, Walter Kitaj, who had come from Vienna after the *Anschluss* (and somewhat later, Walter's mother).

While he loved and, to a great extent, lived the cosmopolitan existence of *Mitteleuropa*, he also understood well the dangers and risks of cosmopolitanism. 1963—that fateful year when he read Arendt on Eichmann and “broke the Jewish Ice”—is also when he started to come to deeper awareness of the Shoah through major works of literature and history. He read, as he tells us, “Levi, Wiesel, Hilberg, Davidowitz and so on” throughout the 1960s, a process that transformed him from “a young caterpillar of the universalist pretension of art” into “a Jewish butterfly of particularist energies.”

That particularism was an unabashed, unvarnished, and unapologetic version of the Tough Jew, hardened by the persistence of Anti-Semitism and by a lingering obsession with the Shoah. In fact, when we think of it, this is what made Kitaj such a unique character—and thinker: his ability to hold on to and embody opposites, like particularism and universalism. On the one hand, his appreciation for Joe Singer, the displaced cosmopolitan for whom the text was his homeland; and on the other, an appreciation for the Tough Jew who acknowledged and confronted antisemitism head on—indeed, who defied it.

It became a living credo for the later and bolder Jewish Kitaj, especially after the Tate Gallery retrospective of his work in 1994, which unleashed a torrent of negative reviews that he not only regarded as antisemitic in origin, but as responsible for the premature death of his wife Sandra Fischer.

“Paint the opposite of anti-Semitism,” he wrote in at least five places in the *Second Diasporist Manifesto*. (6, 52, 109, 459, 520) He was haunted by the Shoah, which he called “an evil equal to God, infinite.” (*SDM*, 160) He tried to stop paying attention to it, but he couldn't: “I always swear off reading any more about the murder of 2/3 of the European Jews, and then I read some more.” (331)

The working through of that obsession yielded a variation of the philosopher Emil Fackenheim's famous 614th commandment. There are 613 commandments that observant Jews seek to uphold. Fackenheim's 614th was to not “hand Hitler yet another, posthumous victory.”

Kitaj's 614th aphorism in the *Second Manifesto* repeated Fackenheim's injunction and then continued: "so be it. Now, paint that!" Which he attempted to do in his painting "Passion," where he places side by side a Crucifix and the death camp chimney, playing on the meaning of Holocaust as a burnt sacrifice and hinting at the inextricability of Christian anti-Semitism and later genocidal impulses in Nazism. (SLIDE 15)

A logical consequence of Kitaj's defiant response to anti-Semitism was an appreciation for Zionism. And here we should distinguish between different kinds of Zionism. Consistent with his Tough Jew attitude, Kitaj expressed appreciation for the Sabra, the rough-edged Israeli type, who was the outgrowth of Max Nordau's famous fin-de-siècle call for a *Muskeljudentum* to take rise.

And yet, the Zionism that intrigued him most was of a different, more refined vintage; the Zionism of early twentieth-century Hebrew essayist Ahad Ha-am, who aspired not to a Jewish state, but to a center of Jewish culture in Palestine; among the followers of Ahad Ha-am's path toward a Jewish cultural revival were a number of Kitaj's Weimar-era idols: Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem. (SLIDE 16)

He admired the way that they navigated the course between Zionist particularism and humanitarian universalism. After all, he himself valued Zionism, the quest for a territorial home for the Jews, along with Diasporism, its seeming opposite. The two operated in his worldview not as irreconcilable foes, but as necessary, if tension-laded complements.

This was characteristic of his late-blooming and self-taught Jewish knowledge—its omnivorous nature and relative unconcern for consistency. It made for a rare ideological blend.

4. KABBALAH (SLIDE 17)

The time has come to move on to our fourth concept anchoring Kitaj's Jewish *Weltanschauung*: Kabbalah. Here too we see a mix of seeming opposites: on one hand, an avowed, life-long commitment to secularism, and on the other, a deep engagement with Jewish mysticism that yielded, at the end of his life, an idiosyncratic, even heretical theology. Kitaj's model for this mix, and a link to our previous concept, was Gershom Scholem (1897-1982), who came from a relatively impoverished Berlin family in terms of its Jewish commitment and knowledge, but would go on to become the most important Jewish studies scholar of the twentieth century.

It was not only Scholem's distinctive Zionist path that appealed to Kitaj; it was also his self-described status as a "religious anarchist," that spoke to Kitaj.³ Like Kitaj, Scholem came from a position of secular indifference to a place of respect for, if not always embrace, of the vitalizing effects of religion, especially Kabbalah.

But let us step back and ask: What is Kabbalah? The word comes from the Hebrew verb “to receive,” as in “to receive a tradition.” In the Jewish religion, Kabbalah refers to a powerful strain of Jewish mysticism that was attributed to the second-century rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, but most likely took rise much later, in the 13th century in Northern Spain and Southern France.

Jewish mysticism surely existed earlier, indeed in antiquity, and its currents nurtured the growth of medieval Kabbalah, particular strain of the mystical tradition. Scholem’s grand achievement was to excavate virtually every significant text of Kabbalah written—and there were thousands of manuscripts—and analyze them with philological precision and conceptual sophistication.

In doing so, he made a very compelling case to place mysticism not on the margins of Jewish thought and life, as 19th-century scholars often did, but at the center. He was particularly drawn to the subversive dynamism of Kabbalah, and linked it to his own youthful discovery of Zionism—which provided escape from his insufferably boring bourgeois family life.

Our hero, Kitaj, began to read Scholem early on in his Jewish education. And he was immensely attracted both to Scholem’s own path of “dissimilation,” as it has been called and to the animating force of Kabbalah, which challenged, provoked, and redefined the normative, law-based world of rabbinic Judaism. That said, Scholem makes no appearance, I believe, in the *First Diasporist Manifesto* of 1988, but is amply represented in the *Second* from 2007.

In the course of those 19 years, Kitaj’s sense of Diasporist estrangement, grievance from anti-Semitism, and personal loss took a decidedly mystical turn. Scholem was his guide, particularly in interesting Kitaj in the notion of the *Shekhinah*, which in the language of the Kabbalah refers to the female personality of God. This is a particularly powerful image in the liturgy surrounding the Jewish Sabbath, where the feminine quality of God’s presence as the Sabbath Queen is foregrounded.

For Kitaj, Scholem led him to an extraordinary artistic and theological point: the equation of the Shekhinah with his late wife Sandra, who died in 1994. This is not a wild pop psychology diagnosis. Kitaj says it unambiguously in the *Second Manifesto*: “SANDRA—SHEKHINA in my paintings, and it is SHE to whom I pray every dawn.” (562) (SLIDE 18) Or elsewhere: Sandra is “not only made in the image of God, but as Shekhina, she’s the aspect of what is called God, to which I cleave (DEVEKUT) in painting her.” (28)

This new mystical turn in Kitaj’s thinking—and painting—gained real momentum in the last ten years of his life, the Los Angeles phase. It is there that he came after the Tate debacle about which we will hear tomorrow, wounded, estranged, isolated, and yet very much alive—to

his art, to ideas, to his family. It was in that state that Kitaj crafted his heretical theology, a theology of estrangement whose redemption came through “clinging”—a technical term in the Kabbalah—to the spirit of his beloved Sandra.

Here I have to report on the basis of personal conversations with him that this act of apotheosis was not metaphorical; Kitaj, the lifelong atheist, the secular Jew *par excellence*, actually believed in and, in his own way, prayed to Sandra as the Female Godhead, the Shekhina. It was poignant, touching, quite literally incredible—and a reflection of the unique mix of arcane erudition, lingering hope, and loneliness that marked Kitaj in this last phase of his life. He performed this theology, we might say, in one of the two Jewish spaces that he favored most in LA—his own private *shul* or synagogue, namely, the Yellow Studio.

5. THE CAFÉ (SLIDE 19)

By way of conclusion, I want to discuss—as our fifth and final key concept--the other Jewish space that he favored, both in LA and throughout his life—we might call it his own portable homeland: the café. The café has a storied place in this city, and in the history of European Jewry. It was, at once, the university and parliament of the Diaspora Jew, the *beis medrash* and the Gemeinde house together.

Kitaj knew well of the café-culture of Berlin, the Romanisches where Jewish intellectuals, artists, and ideologues met and debated the key issues of the day, where East met West, *Ostjuden* and *yekkes* joined together in cacophonous chatter like “distant relatives happening onto the same inn,” as the Hebrew poet Chaim Nachman Bialik put it.

The café was where Kitaj made his way every morning in Los Angeles, arriving at the Coffee Bean in Westwood Village promptly at 6am. There he would muse, reflect, draw, sketch, and write—in his inimitable slanted block letters so familiar to his friends. It was there that Kitaj wrote his memorable letters and postcards, and conjured up his *Second Manifesto*, his autobiographical confessions, and the germ of a third Diasporist manifesto.

And just as he communed with Sandra in his studio, so the lonely Kitaj shared the company of his fellow caféists in the café, not his own contemporaries, but rather the great Jewish intellectuals of the twentieth century: Kafka, Ahad Ha-m, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Simon Dubnow, Hannah Arendt, Aby Warburg, Gershom Scholem, and, of course, Scholem’s great friend, Walter Benjamin, whom Kitaj called “the exemplary and perhaps ultimate Diasporist.”

In the rich imaginary life that he led in Los Angeles—and before that, in Vienna, Paris, and London--Kitaj debated, provoked, and entertained his café friends. Conversely, it was they who inspired and prodded him to write. It was they who pushed him to address the unsolved

“Jewish Question” again and again, who dared him to enter the labyrinth of the Kabbalah and assert his own voice as a commentator, and who encouraged him to remain true to his Diasporist roots—without abandoning his ingrained tribalism.

That rare combination of pursuits made Kitaj a unique figure in contemporary Jewish life—and permits us to say that to the pantheon—or should we say *yeshivah shel ma’alah*--of great Jewish intellectuals in the modern age, R. B. Kitaj justly belonged.

¹ Eckhart Gillen suggests that there was an unacknowledged interest in Jewish themes and personalities from the 1950s. See his “R. B. Kitaj: Secret Jew and Avowed Diasporist,” in Kugelmann, Gillen, and Gaßner, *R. B. Kitaj (1932-2007): Obsessions* (Bielefeld and Berlin: Kerber Verlag, 2012), 86.

² Or as he notes in a gloss on R. Akiva, “indeterminacy of meaning is quite compatible with truth and meaning.” See R. B. Kitaj, *First Diasporist Manifesto* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 63.

³ Michal Friedlander called Kitaj in her catalogue essay a “skeptical God-seeker.” See Friedlander, “The Skeptical God-Seeker,” *Obsessions*, 187ff.