



Dialogue of Revenge • ANNA VIRA FIGENSCHOU

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Anne Vira Figenschou

## Preface

When I travelled to London in 1994 to see the extensive retrospective of Kitaj's oeuvre at the Tate Gallery, it rekindled an old passion that had been ignited in Oslo in 1987. On that occasion the British Council had arranged an exhibition of the so-called School of London, which was shown at Kunstnernes Hus in Oslo among other venues.

The critics of the Tate exhibition and the tragedy that befell Kitaj when his wife Sandra died made a deep impression on me, as on many others, and I followed with great interest the ensuing 'Tate War' – Kitaj's own expression for what I call in my thesis the 'Dialogue of Revenge'.

One outcome of my concern was that I was lucky enough to be offered a job assisting Marco Livingstone as the Norwegian curator of the extensive 1998 Kitaj retrospective held at the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art under the title: R.B. Kitaj: An American in Europe.

Another outcome was this thesis, written for the History of Art Department, University of Oslo, and which ForArt asked me to make available to a wider, English-speaking readership. It is tempting in this connection to expand on several of themes that deserved far more attention than it was possible to give them in the thesis for lack of space. For instance, I would have liked to have explored more deeply the art-political landscape in London in the Nineties, the positions maintained by the critics and how their choices influenced their actions. This will have to wait for another occasion, however.

In connection with the translation of the thesis, I would like to thank Richard Arnesen, Hans-Jakob Brun, Rasmus Figenschou, Marco Livingstone, Bjørn Rønneberg and the translator Chris Saunders for helpful advice, and ForArt for casting their eyes on the project.

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## Introductory Note by Marco Livingstone

The relationship between creative people in any field and critics is never an easy one. Artists, musicians, writers, film-makers and actors all depend on the written response of journalists to disseminate news of their work and to help make or enhance their reputations. Critics naturally resist being seen merely as part of the support team and take it as a point of honour to express their honest opinions and to question the value of work even, or especially, by those judged to have enjoyed particularly great success. In their anxiety to assert their independence, however, critics can lose sight of the fact that their main duty is to inform and elucidate, not simply to pass judgment or foist their prejudices onto their readers. As fallibly human as the artists they write about, they are prone not just to making errors in their understanding and appreciation – errors that become more transparently apparent with the passing of time – but to letting jealousies, resentments, animosities and other emotional or irrational responses colour what are passed off as an objective or intellectual stance.

The English have a peculiarly ambiguous attitude to success. Where Americans have a tendency to applaud it for its own sake, and to encourage achievers to greater heights, the English have the habit of admiring the underdog and of encouraging those at the beginning of their careers, only to turn against them as soon as they are seen to be doing too well. Attacks on major artists have become depressingly commonplace: the better they do, the higher their prices, the more support they receive from the establishment, the more vicious the response can be. So it is that several extremely important and dazzling exhibitions at the Tate Gallery in London during the 1990s came in for particular opprobrium: Richard Hamilton's retrospective in 1992 and the large show devoted to the work of the late Ben Nicholson in 1993, just before the centenary of his birth, came in for attacks out of proportion to any criticism that a reasonable person might have of their work, and left a particularly bad taste in the mouth.

The retrospective accorded by the Tate in 1994 to the American R. B. Kitaj, who had been a major and influential figure in the London art world for thirty-five years, should have been the peak of his career marking the high esteem in which his engaging, profound and highly human paintings have been held by fellow artists, writers, collectors and the general public. For a contemporary show, it had a more than respectable attendance figure, and it received some extremely supportive and admiring reviews. What it will be remembered for, however, is the violence with which a small number of London critics attacked Kitaj on a personal level and set out to destroy his reputation. The complaints were often anti-intellectual in tone, railing against the artist's nerve in providing written responses to his own pictures, but there were also suggestions of anti-Semitism, anti-Americanism and pure envy at his success. Those of us who had long admired Kitaj's art knew that he had long-standing enemies in the British art world and expected him to suffer some attacks, but not even the most pessimistic could have foreseen such wholesale dismissal of the abilities of such an extraordinary artist. Nearly a decade later, it remains difficult to understand exactly why this happened.

Kitaj's reputation survived these assaults, and in the years immediately afterwards he not only won the Golden Lion for painting at the Venice Biennale and sold numerous works to museum collections, but was also showered with honorary doctorates. None of this could compensate, however, for the loss of his beloved wife Sandra Fisher only a matter of weeks after the closure of the Tate show. Kitaj describes her demise, in the view of some rather melodramatically, as an act of murder on the part of the critics. There is no doubt, however, that her death at the age of forty-seven from an aneurysm on

the brain could well have been prompted by the stress she suffered on seeing her husband attacked so vociferously. What began as a battle for intellectual territory ended in human tragedy. In the intervening years that very tragedy has become not just a spur but the central subject matter of Kitaj's art, keeping Sandra's memory alive. So something good has come from these terrible circumstances. But those of us who knew Sandra and admired her own figure paintings still mourn her loss, as we do the departure of Kitaj and his young son Max from London in 1997.

The extended and detailed analysis by Anne Vira Figenschou of the circumstances of what Kitaj himself terms the 'Tate War' is the first to be undertaken on the subject, bringing into relief the many layers of response to Kitaj's exhibition and to his art in general. It provides not only an extremely interesting and unusual case history, but an insight into a life-changing episode for one of the major artists of our time.

# DIALOGUE OF REVENGE

## Reception of R.B. Kitaj: A Retrospective, Tate Gallery, 1994

### Introduction

The year is 1994. R.B. Kitaj had been invited by the Tate Gallery<sup>1</sup> to mount a retrospective, no mean token of acknowledgment by any standards. The exhibition was called R.B. Kitaj: A Retrospective. The reviews in the papers following the opening confounded both the public and Kitaj himself. While few in actual number, they left a lasting impression. Kitaj was stripped of his credentials as a figurative artist. The reviews had a particularly devastating effect on Kitaj's wife, Sandra Fisher, who succumbed not long after from a cerebral haemorrhage. Kitaj laid the blame for her death at the door of the critics, whose personalised vitriol was laced, in his opinion, with anti-Semitic, anti-American and anti-literary sentiments common among the British cultural establishment.

Kitaj gave vent to his grief and outrage through *The Critic Kills*, later known as *Sandra One*. This work, shown at the Royal Academy's 1996 summer exhibition, was destined to become the first instalment in what Kitaj described as an avant-garde magazine named *Sandra* in memory of his wife. Appearing intermittently over the years in the shape of paintings, temporary installations, written material and a combination of all three, it has functioned as a vehicle for Kitaj's views on art and a means to get back at the critics. It has so far appeared in six 'editions'<sup>2</sup>. The installations and paintings comprising *Sandra One*, *Sandra Three* and *Sandra Five* were shown at the Royal Academy's summer shows of 1996, 1997 and 1999 respectively. *Sandra Two*, *Sandra Four*, *Sandra Six* and *Sandra Seven* appeared as interviews and visual art in catalogues for four exhibitions held at the FIAC in Paris in 1996 (arranged by the Marlborough Gallery); the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art in Oslo in 1998 (R.B. Kitaj: A Retrospective); Marlborough in Madrid and New York in 2000; and the National Gallery in London in 2001 (Kitaj in the Aura of Cézanne and other Masters).<sup>3</sup>

The period I want to explore here starts with the 1994 Tate exhibition and ends with the Royal Academy's 1997 summer exhibition, where *Sandra Three* was shown. Following the 1994 debacle Kitaj decided to return with his son to the US. As a token of the respect in which Kitaj was held at the Royal Academy, and to mark his imminent departure from Britain's shores, the Academy offered him a whole room to curate as he wished. He grasped the opportunity to fire back at his critics. In fact, *Sandra Three* portrays Kitaj firing away at a monster, a reviewer, in an attempt to avenge Sandra's death.

I have written this thesis with two objectives in mind. First I explore and discuss the reviews of that fateful Tate exhibition, give an account of the polemical dialogue between Kitaj and his critics, and place the whole episode first in an arts-political context and second in the context of Kitaj's past experiences with reviewers. Second, I examine ways in which Kitaj used the *Sandra* series as an artistic tool to delve more deeply into already familiar territory, i.e., the Diaspora and Judaism, literature and Modernism. I look at some of his earlier works by way of comparing past approaches with the *Sandra* work. I finally try to shed light on Kitaj's attempts to represent vengeance visually. Since the works are so intimately connected with Kitaj's private life, the historical-biographical method of analysis seems the most appropriate approach.

While I have attempted not to stray beyond the objectives set out above, it goes without saying that this type of analysis risks seeing Kitaj's works more in terms of their symptoms, metaphors and arguments than as works of art. In this thesis the works also act communicatively, which will influence the way in which they are described. A further point: Kitaj's oeuvre is richly associative and contains many fragments of his own experiences. I shall explore some of them, such as his relationship to Walter Benjamin. That said, I have decided not to probe too deeply because that would require a thesis at least twice as long as this one. I would also have liked to investigate Kitaj's relationship to Munch and his work. Munch is an important figure for Kitaj and they share several things in common. But for the same reasons I decided to bypass that subject as well.

There is a further limitation I intend to impose on this study. I examine in detail the first three editions of Kitaj's magazine because they shed light on matters of importance to the Sandra series: Kitaj's grief and mourning for Sandra, Kitaj's polemical dialogue with his critics, and the way in which Kitaj expressed his concerns visually. The later editions of Sandra are more or less repetitions of the same ideas. The idea of revenge as such permeates Sandra Two and Sandra Three; in Sandra Three it appears to be on the wane, which is another reason to stop there.

I treat the controversy between the critics and Kitaj in terms of what I call a dialogue of revenge, a dialogue whose origin lay in the Tate exhibition (Chapter 1). I do not give a separate account of that exhibition as it is one of the continuing preoccupations of the whole thesis. The thesis is broadly divided into two main parts; the first addresses 'The voice of the press' (Chapter 2), the second 'Kitaj's Voice: The Sandra Series' i.e., chapters 3 (Sandra One), 4 (Sandra Two), 5 (Sandra Three) and 6 (The Sandra Series).

In Part 1, 'The voice of the press', I go through the reviews published in the dailies and art magazines. I have emphasised the articles in art magazines because the picture they draw of Kitaj is broader and less obviously political, thanks no doubt to the advantages of time and space enjoyed by that medium. I also want to show that what the newspaper reviews were saying in 1994 did not come out of the blue. Echoes can be heard from as far back as the 1970s, at a time Kitaj was starting to become known as practitioner of and spokesman for figurative art and, not least, defining the School of London.

Part 2 consists of the chapters on 'Sandra One', 'Sandra Two' and 'Sandra Three' along with the final chapter on 'Kitaj's voice: the Sandra series' which deals with the part Kitaj played in the dialogue of revenge with the critics. I ask how Kitaj turned his new status as a grieving widower, rejected by the critical establishment, to explore and elaborate questions related to Jewishness and the Diaspora, the nature of literature and Modernism, and, indeed, of revenge, which he began to explore after Sandra One. While drawing frequently on his former work to illustrate my arguments, I go on to ask if Kitaj deliberately attempted to perpetuate this dialogue of revenge.

Books and articles on Kitaj both as a person and as an artist started appearing in the 1970s in art magazines and other channels. Edifying catalogues were published as exhibition followed upon exhibition. His first monograph, R.B. Kitaj, was written by art historian Marco Livingstone and published in 1985.<sup>4</sup> Kitaj is no stranger to public debates where he has made his views known on arts policy; he has also written a book on the Diaspora and Judaism, First Diasporist Manifesto, London, 1989.



Since 1998 there has been little interest in the British print media for Kitaj, apart from the occasional notice and, of course, the reviews of his last exhibition at the National Gallery.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, several anthologies have included essays on Kitaj. Marco Livingstone, who curated the Kitaj retrospective at Oslo's Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art in 1998<sup>6</sup>, and also edited the ample catalogue, published a revised and expanded edition of his monograph, now simply entitled Kitaj (Phaidon 1999). It also deals with the period of interest here. In 1998, the Stanford University Press published a book on Jewish representation and self-representation in art and literature with a chapter on Kitaj and the Diaspora by Sander L. Gilman: "R.B. Kitaj's 'Good Bad' Diasporism and the body in American Jewish Postmodern Art".<sup>7</sup> Further, Manchester University Press released a collection of critical essays surveying approaches to his work,<sup>8</sup> one of which takes a closer look at the Sandra series. I refer to some of these essays below and derive, indeed, aspects of my argumentation from them.

Given the quantities of literature on Kitaj, one must pick and choose. The list of literature found at the end of the thesis contains only works of particular relevance to the arguments set forth herein. And, as will be seen, those arguments are based largely on the newspaper and magazine articles in addition to the above-mentioned recently published anthologies.

Books, catalogues, anthologies and articles are entered alphabetically. Where I have made particular use of contributions in anthologies, I have entered them twice, once under the name of the author and once under the name(s) of the editor(s). Newspaper pieces are entered in chronological order by chapter. I found literature for the book in references, bibliographies and notes in the Kitaj literature. In addition I used Internet search engines like [www.lexisnexis.com](http://www.lexisnexis.com), [www.isinet.com/isi](http://www.isinet.com/isi) and <http://newfirstsearch.oclc.org>, all of which have a broad coverage of British and American newspapers and magazines. For a more detailed bibliography, I refer the reader to Marco Livingstone's Kitaj and the catalogue of the Tate exhibition, R. B. Kitaj: A Retrospective.

# 1 THE WELLSPRING OF THE DIALOGUE

## R.B. KITAJ: A RETROSPECTIVE TATE GALLERY, 1994

### 1.1 Kitaj's artistic position, 1994

Up until the 1994 retrospective at the Tate Gallery Kitaj's star had been rising ever higher in the firmament of the arts world. He studied from 1957 at the Ruskin School, Oxford University, while painting in the Ashmolean Museum every day. His tutor at Ruskin, Edgar Wind – with whom Kitaj was on good extracurricular terms as well – introduced him to Aby Warburg's theory of art. It was at Oxford, too, that he discovered The Journals of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, which he started to collect and would later use as a basis for his own works. This material, with its original compositions and persuasive theses on the power of the image to shape ideas, complemented Kitaj's already deep interest in Surrealism. Warburg, in Kitaj's eyes, was a Surrealist – like Breton – with the ability to juxtapose apparently impossible visual approaches.

In 1959 Kitaj moved to London where he studied at the Royal College of Art. It was there that he and David Hockney struck up a friendship – Hockney has remained a close friend to this day. Kitaj's first solo exhibition was held at London's Marlborough Gallery in 1963.<sup>9</sup> Two years later he was exhibiting at the Marlborough-Gerson Gallery in New York. Marlborough became in fact Kitaj's gallery of choice, and he has exhibited there on several occasions.

In 1976 the Arts Council offered Kitaj a job to buy works of art for them and curate an exhibition which opened in 1976 under the title of *The Human Clay*<sup>10</sup> and at the Hayward Gallery. In the preface to the catalogue he wrote:

There are artistic personalities in this small island more unique and strong and I think numerous than anywhere in the world outside America's jolting artistic vigour. There are ten or more people in this town, or not far away, of world class, including my friends of abstract persuasion. In fact I think there is a substantial School of London. [...] 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 orthodox vanguardism, a School of London might become even more real than the one I have constructed in my head. A School of real London in England, in Europe ... with potent art lessons for foreigners emerging from this odd old, put upon, very singular place.<sup>11</sup>

The show included works by other figurative artists like Francis Bacon, David Hockney, Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff and Michael Andrews. They would become known as the central figures of the 'School of London'.<sup>12</sup> Kitaj also called them 'a herd of loners': they never collaborated, they seldom met,<sup>13</sup> and their styles varied. Kitaj has always insisted on the open-endedness of the term 'School of London'. That said, Bacon's work provides a thematic point of departure for the two 'sub-schools' that evolved within the parent school. The one constructs paintings, so to speak, from layers of paint (Auerbach's work is the most typical example); the other, which also harks back to Cubism and Surrealism, looks for new ways of importing information into a work, Kitaj being the most representative example. But both sub-schools aspire to elaborate existential concerns by figurative means, with the painting as the essential medium.

In 1980 Kitaj got another invitation to curate an exhibition – this time from the National Gallery. The

exhibition was to be called *The Artist's Eye*.<sup>14</sup> Kitaj's remit was to select and write about some of his favourite works in the gallery's collection. He had had his first solo exhibition in 1981, after an initiative taken by the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution in Washington. That show travelled to the Cleveland Museum of Art and on to Die Städtische Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf, too. In 1982 the University of London awarded Kitaj an honorary doctorate, and the same year he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1985, as the first American citizen after Benjamin West in the 1700s and John Singer Sargent in the 1800s, Kitaj was elected to the Royal Academy. In 1991 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the Royal College of Art.

## 1.2 The Tate exhibition

When the Tate invited Kitaj in 1990 to hold a retrospective, they were inviting one of the most noted personalities of the arts world. It is an honour that is not conferred lightly and Kitaj was joining a very select band indeed, including artists such as Picasso, Francis Bacon, and Kitaj's friends David Hockney Peter Blake and Richard Hamilton.<sup>15</sup> The exhibition was due to open on 16 June and close 4 September 1994. It would then travel to the Los Angeles County Museum, and on in May 1995 to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York its final destination.<sup>16</sup> Richard Morphet, Keeper of the Modern Collection at the Tate Gallery from 1986 to 1998, was in charge of the selection process in close collaboration with Kitaj.

The invitation clearly prompted Kitaj into action: 34 of the 115 works on display were completed between then and the opening. They were done in a new expressive style which combined drawing and painting.<sup>17</sup> Eighteen of the selected pictures were from the 1960s, when his work was more fragmented, often with a collage-like effect. Sixty were from the 1970s and 1980s; they reflected a more focused and cohesive style and are generally considered his greatest achievement.

Kitaj had a strong say in the hanging of the paintings, too. In eight rooms in the innermost section of the ground floor the paintings were hung in chronological order in the atelier mode, i.e., above and below each other as well as side by side. Each room was devoted to a decade of Kitaj's career, though two rooms set aside for the 1990s. Rooms five and six had the drawings, pastels and paintings done in the period 1950s–1990s. Running concurrently with the Tate exhibition the Victoria and Albert Museum was staging a comprehensive exhibition of his prints, and the publication of Jane Kinsman's catalogue raisonné, *The Prints of R.B. Kitaj*<sup>18</sup>. Further, the Marlborough Gallery launched a sales exhibition of new works.

## 1.3 The catalogue

The catalogue for the Tate exhibition, which contained a wide-ranging interview with Kitaj, was edited by Richard Morphet, who had also written the introduction. The philosopher Richard Wollheim, an old friend of Kitaj's, had written an essay. Apart from the obligatory biographical information, collated by Joanne Northey, and the list of works, the catalogue contained small essays – or what the artist calls 'prefaces' – on the exhibited works penned by Kitaj himself. Many of these prefaces were hung as captions beside the works they discussed.

In his introduction, 'The Art of R.B. Kitaj: To thine own self be true',<sup>19</sup> Richard Morphet expands on the reasons why the Tate had chosen to honour Kitaj in this way. He describes the artist as one of dominant players on the British art scene over the previous thirty years, an artist who has played a crucial role in persuading politicians that people need art – above all figurative art – and who demonstrated that art can change society. In his dual role as artist and art catalyst, says Morphet, Kitaj walks in the footsteps of other Americans who settled in the UK such as James McNeill Whistler, Henry James, John Singer Sargent, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot among others. Not only has Kitaj influenced British art, says Morphet, he has resuscitated an almost forgotten quality, i.e., 'the sense of place'.<sup>20</sup>

Because Kitaj's childhood and adolescence were spent in the US, and his entire adult life in the UK, he was something of an outsider to both countries and could relate to them more dispassionately. A crucial element of his understanding of himself is associated with his quest for a Jewish identity, the imprint of which, according to Morphet, can be traced throughout his entire career, even though Kitaj had not realised its significance before the 1970s. In his chronological overview of Kitaj's oeuvre spanning 35 years, Morphet highlights the quest for an identity as a Jew and as an American living in a foreign country, which is why his work deals more with artefacts of the mind. There has always been that affinity with philosophy, religion – Judaism in particular – and literature – especially Modernistic literature – although his style changed over the years. His work also reflects influences from pop art, abstract art, Expressionism, Surrealism, Modernism and Postmodernism. Kitaj is highly conscious of his place in the history of art, from the Renaissance on, with Van Gogh and Cézanne as his most immediate influences. Even so, Kitaj remains unorthodox and relaxed in his relation to movements, '-isms', ideas that attract his attention and to which he gives expression. In this respect he was strongly influenced by the open mind of Matisse and Picasso:

When I worry at my waywardness, my false steps, my lack of consistent method, I find solace in those two geniuses of my century who seemed to do anything they liked, however various, who were never satisfied with signature tunes. [...] [and] the two greatest draughtsmen of the human figure in our time.<sup>21</sup>

In his essay 'Kitaj: Recollections and Reflections', Richards Wollheim, Kitaj's philosopher friend, recounts personal anecdotes and philosophises around Kitaj's work. His subjective and relatively personal slant is reinforced by the absence of references. Wollheim places Kitaj's work in a tradition where each new work contains fragments of works past. But of equal importance as this historical relation is the literary link, especially to Modernistic poetry. Here Wollheim discerns clear parallels.

In his interview with Kitaj, Morphet lights on his relationship to literature, art history and former artists, living as an American in England – and the Jewish issue.<sup>22</sup> What concerns Morphet is the content of the works, echoing Kitaj's own views.

The chronology of Kitaj's life parallels important events on the world stage. For instance, his year of birth, 1932, is the year of Roosevelt's election as US president and Hitler's rise to power in Germany. Both are historical persons who, from opposite directions, would affect Kitaj. The years 1940–45 are dealt with in a separate section, though without comparable events of importance in Kitaj's life. At the time Kitaj was living safely in the US, ignorant of the atrocities being visited upon a third of the world's

Jewry. But it would be these atrocities that would later make the greatest impact on his life and work.

A special feature of the retrospective was the aforementioned 'prefaces', Kitaj's observations and explanations, mounted beside the work and incorporated as a feature of the illustrated catalogue. Kitaj cites Matisse in his introduction to that section of the catalogue: 'I only offer some remarks, notes made in the course of my lifetime as a painter, I ask that one read them in the indulgent spirit generally accorded the writings of a painter.' And continues:

I have always loved the tradition of the new, which I believe a very old tradition. I know that many people have been brought up to believe that gentlemen don't explain – especially modern art gentlemen and gentlewomen, except that everyone and his brother and sister usually comment on paintings in our time except the painter himself. But if the following writings of a painter, reflecting the twists in the course of a lifetime, can be indulged within the tradition of the new or unusual, by the kindness of strangers, perhaps a modern art will be fleetingly served, as if by magic. In any case, these are not explanations of the paintings, whose chastity and autonomy remain, if not pure as driven snow, then only somewhat shopworn like people are in real life. I only offer some remarks about some of my paintings because we all talk about real life all the time and I hope my paintings are little imitations of my life. Some paintings have resisted my advances so far and their quietude persists. When a painting says no, I assume she says no.<sup>23</sup>

Morphet asks Kitaj whether it bothers him that his works require an explanation. Kitaj replies that the writing of 'neo-Talmudic' descriptions for the pictures, which, at the end of the day, really explain very little, gives him a sense of personal satisfaction.<sup>24</sup> He points out that he is far from alone when it comes to explaining works. For instance, in his letters, Van Gogh frequently deliberated over his use of symbols, the purpose of his paintings etc., and no less a figure than Mondrian held forth frequently on his own work. Kitaj adds that interpretations and observations have accompanied his experience of art all his life and it is therefore not unnatural for him to comment on his own works. That notwithstanding, it was these written accompaniments that caused the greatest stir in connection with the exhibition.

## 2 THE VOICE OF THE PRESS

### 2.1 The UK press

As the exhibition drew closer the leading British newspapers were busy publishing lengthy interviews with Kitaj. They delved into his past, his ideas, his artistic role models and his aspirations. Kitaj was generally considered something of an introvert by the press, renowned for hardly ever uttering a word about his private affairs and even going so far as to steer clear of exhibition openings of his own works. He seemed to conceal himself behind an impenetrable air of mystique. The sudden reversal of his feelings regarding publicity caught the press unawares. Kitaj said later that he felt he owed it to the Tate to let himself be interviewed.

The summer edition of the Tate's own periodical, *Tate: The Art Magazine*, contained an interview done by Tim Marlow. It covers much of the same ground as Richard Morphet's catalogue essay, but includes an account of the exhibition as well.<sup>25</sup> National newspapers such as *The Sunday Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph Magazine*, *The Independent*, *London Evening Standard*, *The Independent on Sunday*, *Sunday Times*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Art Newspaper*,<sup>26</sup> along with influential magazines such as *Art Review*, *Modern Painters*, *Vogue* and *R.A. Magazine*<sup>27</sup> joined in to offer their readers a picture of Kitaj by way of interviews and reviews. All offered insights into his life and work: as a figurative painter with a deep interest in literature, as an artist constantly taken up with a search for identity as a Jew and as an American in Europe. He was further described as a painter of ideas, for whom relationships – especially sexual – were absolutely central. He was depicted not least as a painter of the grand tradition rubbing shoulders with Van Gogh, Picasso, Cézanne and Matisse. Everybody was singing Kitaj's praises and extolling his work: 'Kitaj draws better than almost anyone alive',<sup>28</sup> 'Kitaj [...] has been a central figure in the development of British art, inspiring a resurgence of interest in the human form',<sup>29</sup> 'Perhaps the most sensitive and skilful draughtsman of his generation – he has been likened to Degas.'<sup>30</sup>

When the doors opened to the exhibition on June 16, the press suddenly changed its tune. Or, rather, certain critics changed their tune; a minority of the critical establishment, but a minority attached to some of the major papers like Brian Sewell in the *Evening Standard* on 16 June; William Packer in *Financial Times*, 18 June; Waldemar Januszczak in *Sunday Times*, 19 June; James Hall in *The Guardian*, 20 June; John McEwen in *The Sunday Telegraph*, 19 June; Tim Hilton in *The Independent on Sunday*, 19 June; Richard Dorment in *The Daily Telegraph*, 22 June and Andrew Graham-Dixon in *The Independent*, 28 June. Most of those papers had been full of his praise prior to the opening.<sup>31</sup> Three of these abusive reviews came out on a Sunday, the UK's newspaper-reading day par excellence; the rest appeared within five days, apart from *The Independent's* piece, which in afterthought-fashion came with its Sunday edition a week later. For Kitaj, as for the public, it all must have felt like being hit by several bolts from the blue. Few of the national papers were positive or neutral towards Kitaj. Of the positive reviews, Paul Levy's in *Wall Street Journal*, 17–18 June; Richard Cork's in *The Times*, 21 June; a review in *The Economist* 25 June and Emmanuel Cooper's in *Tribune*, 29 July are the most important.<sup>32</sup>

On the sixteenth, the day before the opening, the first review – by Brian Sewell – was printed by the *Evening Standard*.<sup>33</sup> The ironic headline gives a taste of the ensuing tone: 'Tales half-told – in the name of vanity.' Sewell first alleges that the flood of pre-exhibition interviews was a strategy cooked up by the Tate to draw attention to the impending event. In Sewell's eyes the interviews were little

more than ‘scribblings’ aimed at hammering home Kitaj’s canonisation as one of the world’s leading figurative painters, a view with which Sewell begs to differ. Kitaj’s increasingly close association with Judaism is linked to his fascination with sex. Similarly, his love of history, politics, philosophy and poetry is mentioned in the same breath as his dealings with the rich and famous. Sewell also touches on Kitaj’s reputed connection with illustrious forbears such as Masaccio, Degas, Cézanne etc. All this is advanced by Sewell in a single, long sentence, which he rounds sarcastically, if parenthetically, off with ‘I’d like to add Carpaccio’s Venetian tart’.<sup>34</sup>

Nor did the catalogue fare much better. His ironic flare undimmed, Sewell describes the catalogue’s introduction, written by ‘The Eximious Serota’<sup>35</sup>, as an excess of ‘expressions of the low kowtow’. The article by Richard Wollheim is roundly dismissed: philosophers are as silly when they write about art as psychologists. Wollheim concludes his article with the question ‘What is Art?’, which gives Sewell the chance to say: ‘Kitaj is the answer.’

Kitaj is surprisingly bad with portrait likenesses, Sewell continues, and his portraits lack, moreover, proportionality. He seduces the public with his models’ sensuous necks and many of his female nudes are close to becoming cheap pornography, especially the pastel *Marynka Smoking* (1980, ill. 1). The paintings, he claims, are so dry and ‘dead’ as to bear little resemblance to oils. Sewell suggests that Kitaj ought to think about starting to work with acrylics! The only two glimmers of light in the entire exhibition, in Sewell’s view, are the painting *The Arabist* (1975–76, ill. 2) and the pastel *Degas* (1980, ill. 3), which, apparently, have the body missed in all the others.



It is Kitaj’s most recent pictures that bear the brunt of Sewell’s lamentations, however. Claiming Kitaj’s talent to be erratic and fitful, he says of these later works that they are childish, ugly, almost crude, caricatured and overdimensioned enlargements of half-finished comic strips. Kitaj’s attempts to provide keys to his works do little to help, says Sewell. There is also little help in him claiming connections with the Renaissance: ‘what he now offers us from these masters is wretched adolescent trash unfit to hang with works of Otto Dix, Max Beckmann, Balthus and Chagall, the true 20th century masters of the veins he seeks to mine.’ Sewell ends with the following tirade: ‘A pox on fawning critics and curators for foisting on us as heroic master, a vain painter puffed with amour propre, unworthy of a footnote in the history of figurative art.’



Two days later William Packer’s review appeared in *Financial Times* under the headline: ‘Narrative painting gets lost for words’. While it lacks Sewell’s ironic bite, it is more informed by Packer’s sense of pity for Kitaj. This, however, belies a patronising attitude to Kitaj as a person. Packer starts with a biographical outline, describing Kitaj as the influential figurative painter he is and acknowledging him for having taken the initiative to and being one of the members of School of London. He goes on to describe Kitaj as an American outsider in England, like Whistler, James, Pound and Eliot – an artist aware that he stands outside British society, persistently aroused by his sense of being a dissident, stateless, ostracised individual. His discovery of his Jewish status made such self-acknowledgement even plainer. The Diaspora in general, and the Holocaust in particular, have become his leitmotifs.

Kitaj’s chief interest, stresses Packer, lies in the pictures’ content – their narrative aspect. And it is precisely this narrative aspect, along with Kitaj’s textual keys, that Packer feels indicates a desire to





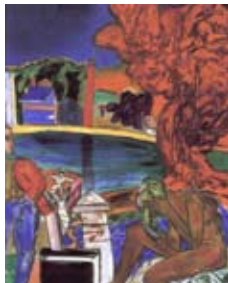
justify more than explain. The measure of a good or bad work is the visual aspect, he says, implying between the lines that Kitaj is not measuring up in this regard. He exemplifies what he takes to be Kitaj's complex allegories with *If Not, Not* (1975, ill. 4). The collage-like explanation, which ranges from Giorgione's *Tempeste* (c.1505–1507, ill. 5)<sup>36</sup> to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, corresponds to the collage-like execution of the painting itself, but conceals the superficial treatment of the contents – the Holocaust – which Packer feels is far too serious a subject to merit such treatment. “‘Oh how clever and thoughtful and serious an artist I am’, he would seem to say, “and so how clever, serious and thoughtful my works must be.” It doesn't follow.<sup>37</sup>



Nonetheless, Packer does commend the portraits in an elongated, vertical format from the 1970s, *Smyrna Greek (Nikos)*, (1976–77, ill. 7) and *The Orientalist*, (1975–76, ill. 8), for their beauty and skill, but says that they precisely for that reason highlight the failings of the exhibition's remaining works. Rounding off the article, Packer agrees that while the exhibition is important, it is not what it was supposed to be, a celebration of a great artist. It is more a re-assessment, a re-assessment that inspires Packer to say 'What is touching is his honesty, for there is no doubt that he believes in the significance of what he does. Here stands the Emperor in his innocent complacency, for us to see him in all his mortal fallibility.'



Paul Levy, in his article in the 17–18 June edition of *Wall Street Journal*, sees things differently. He describes Kitaj as:



by any standards a learned man, a serious thinker and a substantial and distinguished artist. He has abundant skills as a draftsman and is I think giddily in love with color – though the draftsmanship gets more critical attention. Yet he might well have been another sort of artist, a poet or playwright, perhaps.<sup>38</sup>

Levy speaks of the difficulties involved in understanding the complex narrative and, consequently, unfashionable works, especially for a public used to dealing solely with formalistic issues requiring explanation and interpretation. Levy feels, however, that Kitaj's later works are far more readily accessible what with the sophisticated humour evident to all who recognise the references to high points in the history of art.



The following day, 19 June, Waldemar Januszczak's review appeared in *Sunday Times* under the banner: 'Telltale brushmarks'. Januszczak notes first Kitaj's transformation from silent and enigmatic recluse to high-flying celebrity. Kitaj explains his pictures in writing and by word of mouth, while advising people at the same time not to take his words as gospel, which this reviewer nonetheless chooses to do. These prefaces, says Januszczak, have largely displaced the works' air of mystery and spoiled their quality: 'Indeed I have never seen a more be-captioned exhibition. A picture is supposed to be worth a thousand words, but not one of Ron Kitaj's. With Kitaj you get a thousand words, as well as the picture.'<sup>39</sup> Nor can Kitaj's mention of Cézanne's legendary doubt concerning when a work was finished erase the sensation that Kitaj's complex allegories amount, in the end, to very little.

Januszczak devotes a large section of his article to the sex scenes in Kitaj's works, linking them, as did Sewell, to Kitaj's Jewishness:





In 1949 Ronald Brooks, an American aged 17, had his second sexual experience with a Mexican whore in a dingy hotel room in Vera Cruz. His first (I read) had been in the same year in Havana. Forty years later, after he had become a painter called R.B. Kitaj, a pioneering Pop Artist turned Jewish Symbolist who lived in London and was trying to come to terms with growing old, Ron remembered this bedroom encounter in Vera Cruz, yearned for it again [...] The yankee seaman, whose young head was full of all that Hemingway/Gauguin bullshit (and still is).<sup>40</sup>

The sex scenes are simply tedious, says Januszczak, they all revolve round the same subject, 'the young Jew's search for identity'. Like Sewell and Packer, Januszczak commends the vertical type portraits from the 1970s, adding, in contrast to Packer, that *If Not, Not* (1975, ill. 4) is a beautiful, Gauguinesque landscape, depicting the most devastating cultural diaspora ever, i.e. the Holocaust. But he adds, ironically: 'The caption that accompanies it tells us all.'

That same day *The Independent* on Sunday published Tim Hilton's review: 'Draw draw is better than jaw jaw'. Hilton gets off to a good start by accusing Kitaj of arrogance and vanity, a person who thrives on giving interviews. And he has given loads of them recently. Hilton notes Kitaj's unerring tendency to create connections between his paintings and literature, unlike most other painters. And while a project of that nature demands respect, no exegesis can improve on a sufficiently well-painted picture. It does not help to hide behind claims that he is replicating the methodology of *The Waste Land* and T.S. Eliot's fragmentary approach and penchant for footnotes. Pictures need to stand on their own feet. Kitaj's early work attracted attention and appeared enigmatic, he says, but that that was before he started giving interviews. In terms of content, Kitaj's pictures are overloaded, they say something to the artist, no doubt, but not to the viewer.

Kitaj speaks of his ties to the old masters, but his work is more influenced by local factors, i.e. works on show in London, says Hilton. Kitaj has never had a personal style – apart from when he writes and speaks – it's more of an assortment of many styles. The result is superficial. Siding with several other critics, he sets about Kitaj's pastels and prints. They are emotionally disingenuous, and, moreover, the 'pornographic' scenes and nudes are tasteless and dubious: 'If this is the result of 30 years with books, then Kitaj has been ploughing in the sand.'<sup>41</sup>

Hilton is more positive – or at least more polite – concerning Kitaj's search for a sense of belonging as a Jew. He mentions that Kitaj in the early 1970s adopted a new, more integrated style. The paint had less pigment and the pictures possessed a mural-like tone. That was when Kitaj's interest in his Jewish background had started to lay hold of his imagination, or rather, a fascination with wider Jewish history, the common heritage of all Jews. He was recognised as a deeply conscientious painter, unlike many other figurative painters. But all that was before he embarked on the interview trail!

The *Sunday Telegraph*'s John McEwen sang from the same hymn sheet. His piece was entitled: 'A navel-gazer's album of me, me, me' (19 June). What annoyed McEwen, and the other reviewers, were the interviews, which he referred to as the Tate's PR campaign. Writing about the pictures, he says, is like waving a red rag to the indoctrinated, Modernistic critics. He would have liked to see more provocation in the pictures themselves. He then passes comment on Kitaj's neat handwriting. It is, he says, as anon-

ymous as the paintings, despite the fact that the paintings are supposed to be autobiographical, even confessional. Which, he says, is why the exhibition leaves him cold. The most arresting works, writes McEwan, are the early, collage-like ones, *The Ohio Gang* (1964, ill. 9) and *Walter Lippmann* (1966, ill. 10), for instance. They are pop art icons – he would have liked to have seen more from the period – and examples of Kitaj’s best work. He disagrees with Packer who feels they are messy. And he regrets that Kitaj abandoned that approach. Form and content go their separate ways, as if on completing the one he starts on the other. Which is particularly true of the loaded, though anonymous, scholarly drawings with their torn canvases and jagged lines, the point of which apparently is to demonstrate how difficult the process of drawing can actually be. And when the idiom is more direct, the paint is so shiny and the surface so smooth that it recalls street art. McEwan accuses Kitaj of letting his intellect get the better of him, of lacking feelings and spontaneity. The same general criticism applies to the two concurrent exhibitions. The self-centredness is even more obvious at the Victoria and Albert. The whole exhibition, he says, screams ‘Me! Me! Me!’. ‘As with his dedication in the Tate catalogue – “To my Family and my Cities” – one is left,’ McEwan sighs, ‘like Charlie Brown, muttering “Good grief!”’<sup>42</sup>

On the following day, 20 June, *The Guardian* headed James Hall’s review with the words: ‘Teflon Ron’. Because the paintings had never been seen together before, Hall says, pronouncing judgement over Kitaj necessarily had to wait until now. On seeing his works for the first time in context with each other, it has to be admitted that Kitaj has not redeemed the promise invested in him as a figurative painter. Despite the grand titles like *Juan de la Cruz* etc., despite all the good intentions, Kitaj emerges as an extravagant sphinx without a riddle. He is a dilettante, who at the first sign of political or intellectual controversy, gets into something ‘cooler’. He tinkers with big ideas in his writings, but in the pictures he either avoids them or turns them into parody. Here they are, floating around as if in an ocean of inane sensuality. ‘We are in the slushy world of Teflon Ron and his non-stick pix.’<sup>43</sup>

The *Times*’s reviewer, Richard Cork, was enchanted by the exhibition. While mentioning the inherent instability of the paintings, which he feels Kitaj exploits to emphasize his role as social outsider, he describes how Kitaj’s work developed from a youthful fascination with philosophy and literature towards the autobiographical. With *The Wedding* (1989–93, ill. 11), the most recent work in the exhibition, he suggests that Kitaj has found his spiritual ‘home’.<sup>44</sup> And, indeed, the heading of Cork’s piece reads ‘Spiritual home for the wanderer’. Cook is generally less enthusiastic about the works from the 1990s. They were made too quickly and risk becoming banal, he says. Nevertheless, they are more wildly expressive than before.

Richard Dorment’s piece in *The Daily Telegraph*, 22 June, starts with some friendly advice: ‘It’s time to learn that less is more’. Dorment’s main objection to the exhibition centres on the textual prefaces which, he feels, are so enigmatic and Surrealist that rather of imparting erudition, they cause irritation. Nor does the visual content mesh with the compact literary allusions. Dorment echoes other critics in his distaste of Kitaj’s fascination with the theories of Edgar Wind and Erwin Panofsky; the pastels pay the price, in his opinion, for his going into intellectual overdrive.

The *Economist* for 25 June feels, on the other hand, that the exhibition testifies to Kitaj’s love of painting, that his work since 1970 have a ‘grandeur’ of their own without being static or predictable. However, thanks to the wide, underlying range of influences, they resist verbal analysis. In the opinion

of *The Economist* the portraits and pictures with a Jewish content are exceptionally good:

There are wonderful portraits, combining a realistic image of their subjects with a kind of fantasia on their inner life. Dark meditations on Jewish history – the product of his mid-life return to his religious roots – alternate with ravishing studies from nature, as lyrical as Matisse.<sup>45</sup>

Three days later *The Independent* printed another unfavourable review. Written by Andrew Graham-Dixon and entitled 'The Kitaj Myth' it is an unremitting vilification of Kitaj the artist and Kitaj the person. It starts:

R.B. Kitaj, a man well versed in the literature of Western Europe, is doubtless familiar with the old French expression 'Il ne se prend pas pour un merde', which may be literally if a little clumsily translated as 'He does not take himself for a piece of excrement'. Kitaj, for one most certainly does not.<sup>46</sup>

Graham-Dixon then summarizes all the obnoxious things written about Kitaj up to now, before characterising the exhibition as destructive and utterly devoid of self-insight. It makes it difficult to understand that Kitaj has studied the old masters over a lengthy span of time. He comes over more like a middle-of-the-road illustrator. The pictures describe more than they elaborate the concerns he has tried to address. Graham-Dixon feels the works revolve incessantly around the same theme, which is why they never manage to move one. Kitaj has spent his whole life concealing an absence – or lack – of himself; he addresses emotions, but he does not experience them. Even the autobiographical brothel scenes, clearly of moment to the painter, fail to animate the viewer either with their sexual intensity or without it. Remarkable these pictures are not, according to Graham-Dixon, mainly irritating and banal. One would be forgiven for assuming that Kitaj was trying to be ironic or flippant in his treatment of the subject, but it turns out he is in deadly earnest. The worst example, says Graham-Dixon, is *If Not, Not* (1975, ill. 4), a sirupy landscape depicting the Holocaust in a trivial, cheap fashion. He finds the picture in very poor taste.

Graham-Dixon alleges that the myth spun by Kitaj around himself is false. He has got us to believe he is a significant painter, a painter in some eternal exile. He wants to be seen as a visual poet who, with his fragmentary style, attempts to reflect over the capriciousness of human nature. He is an inveterate name-dropper who wants to redo Cézanne and Degas after Auschwitz and the Gulag. In recent years Kitaj has developed a varied, pastiche-like style:

a little bit of fake Beckmann, a little bit of fake Picasso, but above all fake. These are all paintings of someone who feels he ought to be painting like this. [...] Their transparency is pitiable partly because, by painting them, Kitaj has finally allowed the myth of himself to be seen through. The Wandering Jew, the T.S. Eliot of painting? Kitaj turns out instead to be the Wizard of Oz: a small man with a megaphone held to his lips.

On 29 June Emmanuel Cooper's more charitable review appeared in *Tribune*. Cooper follows *The Economist* in his opinion of the portraits seeing them as grand, direct, psychologically astute and sensitive. He also feels that while the subject of sexuality is handled not without humour, there is less to be pleased about in the big compositions, which seem obscure and nebulous. He concludes nonetheless

that Kitaj's works bespeak considerable craftsmanship.

The last in the line of scathing reviews appeared in *The Mail* on Sunday, 3 July, signed Daniel Farson under the title 'Great Pretender'. Farson congratulates Kitaj on a successfully run PR campaign. Kitaj is primarily a gifted and inventive colourist. Farson notes that he himself had chosen *If Not, Not* (1975, ill. 4) for a TV quiz show, and that he, Farson that is, in contrast to Graham-Dixon, likes the references to T.S. Eliot. But after that, says Farson, Kitaj has not progressed much. He feels that using Auschwitz to make a point of his search for Jewishness smacks of arrogance. It is not the preserve of Kitaj himself, it is a universal nightmare, something Farson feels eludes Kitaj's imagery. He says he is sorry to have to write so unpleasantly about a talented and decent painter, but not a single work at the exhibition did anything for him at all: 'Of course I could be wrong [...] I urge you to visit the Tate'.<sup>47</sup>

## 2.2 The US press

The US reviews of the Los Angeles and New York shows took an entirely different approach. The Los Angeles papers in particular were positive. *Los Angeles Times* printed an interview with Kitaj 23 October, entitled 'Master of the Arcane'.<sup>48</sup> The reviewer gives the works a positive reception and mentions the Tate exhibition. The article links Kitaj's work to a variety of styles. The early pieces, like *The Ohio Gang* (1964, ill. 9) for instance, bear strong resemblance to pop art through a resemblance to film noir, but they differ from pop art by their cool detachment to their subject matter. The pictures express an intimate – almost neurotic – involvement with the motifs, the reviewer tells us, continuing: 'Each work in the exhibition is uniquely Kitaj, but he obviously quotes from Surrealism and Realism, from Max Beckmann and Cézanne. The sensitive drawings owe their debt to Degas; the emotional and chaotic compositions recall Van Gogh.'



On 27 October William Wilson published a detailed review in the same paper. The headline gives a taste of what is to come: 'Retrospective of a Virtuoso'. Wilson is as enthusiastic as the British critics are dismissive. Kitaj's work is 'heartfelt, intimate and a little neurotic'. It is characterised by a restrained erotic intensity which, in Wilson's view, seems troubled, but totally authentic. Wilson continues:



Kitaj's art has never lost that intimate, confessional touch. Portraits of the '70s such as *From London* (James Joll and John Golding)<sup>49</sup> are tricked out to have large symbolic meanings. Their real strength, however, comes from the vivid sense of contact between artist and subject.<sup>50</sup>



However, Wilson is sceptical of the comments in the catalogue;<sup>51</sup> he feels they are possibly more than nominally narcissistic. In a similar vein, the compositions seem to have been squeezed to the limit, that Kitaj has tried to explain too much, tried too hard. That said, Wilson declares his respect for Kitaj's work was greater when he left the exhibition than when he arrived.

New York Times introduced Kitaj to its readers twice, the first piece appearing on 24 October and the next, an interview, on 13 November.<sup>52</sup> None of them are criticisms in the strict sense, though they do refer to the generous reception enjoyed by the exhibition in Los Angeles. In her 24 October article, Nina Darnton is preoccupied with the British reviewers' 'appalling, personal and hurtful' treatment of the artist, a view she believes she shares with many Americans. The harrowing reviews say more about the art critical establishment in the UK than about Kitaj, she adds, and asks what he has done to occa-

sion such a wildly varying reception. The works' autobiographical strain may have irritated some critics for whom visual art should above all be autonomous. Or the British may be feeling slightly vexed over an American exhibiting on the same walls as a major British icon like Turner. She develops this idea further culminating in a fundamental clash of cultures, the emotional reserve of the British colliding with an open Jewish-American sensibility. Arthur Lubow's interview paints a panorama of Kitaj's life and work; Lubow concludes his interview by emphasising the importance of Sandra to Kitaj and how hard it clearly must be for Kitaj to carry on without her at his side.

## 2.3 The art magazines

In the wake of the Tate exhibition a flurry of reviews and opinions appeared in leading publications such as *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Apollo*, *Art in America*, *Time*, *Artforum*, *Art News*, *The Burlington Magazine* (the latter two with two editions). The territory covered does not differ much from that in the newspaper columns, i.e., Jewish issues, literature, the typical American. The difference is that they analyse Kitaj's work more closely and are all generally sympathetic and appreciative.

In July Timothy Hyman's contribution for *The Times Literary Supplement* appeared. It was, to all intents and purposes, a comment on the newspapers' performance:

Any retrospective of a living artist entails risk, and R.B. Kitaj, who is as he tells us 'very good at blotting his own copy-book', has pursued a riskier route than most. [...] yet across thirty years, one project remains constant: the creation of a new History Painting. Reappearing in different stylistic guises, we recognize the same canvas – squarish in format, altarpiece in scale, crammed and crowded with incident, readable on many levels. All imply the same argument. That modern painting (even now, once again, after all) might embody a complex subject-matter, might include all the world, anything and everything.<sup>53</sup>

August saw the publication of an article by Richard Kendall in *Apollo*. Kitaj, we are told, is 'a wonderfully unsettled artist', steeped in Modernism, who chose to represent the human form with the tools at hand, to rediscover it, without at any point erring on the side of the illustrative. What impresses Kendall most of all are the works from the 1990s, which had been practically butchered by the entire critical establishment:



*The Education of Henry Adams* (1991–93, ill. 13), finished just before the exhibition, swirls with energy and burns with muted colour, drawing us into its fantastical plot while denying a simplistic come-uppance. For those who demand lucidity or flinch from erudition, these pictures will continue to irritate; but for anyone who glories in surfaces and sinuous form, imagination and good humour, the seriousness and obtuse poetry of painting, such images offer the exhilarating spectacle of a major artist billowing along under full sail.<sup>54</sup>

In October *The Burlington Magazine* published a review by David Anfam, on whom the exhibition left a good impression:

Kitaj's engagement with the most provocative themes of love, death and other private as well as social

experiences, allied to the startling ways in which he has visualized them over the past thirty-five years or so, echo in the mind even after they are physically left behind [...] like a spark to ignite further images and associations. [...] While these works are obsessed with the self, the force of personality behind them points obsessively to a further constellation of things and events. As a result the art seems to have a design upon us.<sup>55</sup>

Because the way a curator handles this material may have a repressive effect on precisely this aspect, Anfam feels that Richard Morphet did right to give Kitaj a free hand in the selection and hanging process. What many reviewers criticised was what this freedom had resulted in: a third of the pictures on show had been painted within the past four years, and the hanging arrangement made the Tate look like a Renaissance studio bursting at the seams. Anfam notes this point, too, but disagrees with the verdict. On the contrary, he maintains, Kitaj's work from the latter years – works completed after Kitaj had suffered a heart attack in 1989 – mark a formal and substantive break with his earlier work, and contain definite parameters for as yet unexpressed possibilities.<sup>56</sup>

Anfam feels that the Tate show served to confirm Kitaj's uncontested position as the most original artist of his generation. Attracted as the artist was to Warburg's iconology at an early stage, as is well known, it was natural for Kitaj to use the whole of Western culture as a source of inspiration, where word and image have equal status. It was therefore just as natural for Kitaj to find inspiration in poets, such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, as in painters such as Cézanne or Titian. Anfam does, however, wonder why it took more than a quarter of a century before Modernism's fragmented and collage-like poems were given visual expression, and is at pains therefore to note that Kitaj was the first painter to realise their potential, as his first exhibition at the Marlborough Gallery in London amply demonstrated.<sup>57</sup> Kitaj found, moreover, that the fragmentary style could help give visual expression to the Diaspora just as Jewishness began to exert a pull on him in the early 1970s.

Anfam sees a new side in Kitaj's latest production, he tells the reader, and that is the grotesque. This grotesqueness, he goes on, may be understood as a type of disorder affecting the normal ego, a desire to express some unconscious, unstable matter. This sense of instability had been expressed in the pastels of bathing boys from the 1980s, which alluded to works by Cézanne. Kitaj's works from the 1990s share the same disordered instability in addition to the grotesque aspect. Anfam points to an intriguing difference between Cézanne's warped, grotesque bathers – which he feels are more expressive of his inner conflicts – and Kitaj's visual world, which is more resolute, identifiable by his intellectual approach to the things he wants to express.<sup>58</sup> The wall texts underline this intellectualising attitude: 'Unsympathetic observers will view them as attitudinising and eccentric, [...] though to me their inventiveness and subtle self-mockery win the day.'<sup>59</sup>

The September edition of *Art News* carried a review of the Tate exhibition by Ann Landi, or rather a review of the reviews of the Tate exhibition which she compares to the persecution of Dreyfus at the start of the century.<sup>60</sup> William Feaver writes briefly but nonetheless very optimistically in the October edition. The most interesting part of the show, he avers, are the pictures from the 1990s:

'Painting-drawing' or 'drawing-painting' as Kitaj puts it, gives him the go-ahead to draw freely on can-





vas and then color it, accentuating the picture while letting it off lightly. This practice [...] has enabled him to achieve something like spontaneity [...] Kitaj has admirable ambition, larky enthusiasms, and reverence for what matters. Happily every so often it all comes together for him. 'Western Bathers'<sup>61</sup> recently completed is a fine example.<sup>62</sup>



In the March edition of *Art in America* Ken Johnson embarks on a lengthy survey of the exhibition then showing at the Metropolitan. By way of introduction he asks: 'What is the glue that holds together a body of work that seems at times on the verge of going completely to pieces?'<sup>63</sup> and continues:

Kitaj has produced works of considerable interest and, occasionally, of great beauty in one mode or another, each of which ought to be taken on its own merits. But a deeper story is discernible in the body of work as a whole: the tale of a self striving for wholeness in the face of inner and outer forces of complication and disintegration. What you have in Kitaj is a kind of romantic mental traveler who, as he passes through the landscapes of modernity, struggles to integrate and intelligibly report his subjective experience of this fractured century.

Johnson points out that Kitaj is far from being the only artist to have sensed a lack of coherence and stability in modern-day society. But he suggests that Kitaj shows us deeper layers of contemporary history and culture by means of his narrative and associative imagery and his slightly nostalgic recycling of older art, among other things. Johnson is not particularly concerned about the risk Kitaj's numerous explanations represent to the works themselves. On the contrary, they may help uncover new layers of meaning which are beyond the powers of the works alone, exposing a poetic dimension that could enhance the artistic experience. However, Johnson proceeds, his art is not ideological in any sense of the word. It is full of half-digested ideas, incomplete in a way – constantly shifting and open to new interpretations. His work is, in sum, far more poetic than didactic.



Johnson discusses the portraits as well. Kitaj has been using live models since his student days. After a period in the 1960s focusing on collage-like works, he produced in the 1970s a number of character portraits on tall, vertical canvases with titles such as *The Arabist* (1975–76, ill. 2), *The Hispanist* (Nissa Torrents) (1977–78, ill. 16) and *Batman* (1973, ill. 17). These portraits do not pretend to be psychologically true or photographically correct. Their mission is to render a character, a sort of typology. Johnson asserts, moreover, that Kitaj, with these portraits, assumes a position antagonistic to Modernism:

Kitaj is taking a stand with these works. Most immediately he challenges the supposed obsolescence of portraiture in Modernist art. But more is at stake than issues of style – i.e., realism versus abstraction. For if we recognize that de-emphasis of painted portraiture is only a symptom of Modernism's drive to abstract and fragment the human subject [...] then Kitaj's investment in portraiture is a moral reaffirmation of the dignity and integrity of the individual. To William Carlos Williams's dictum 'No ideas but in things', Kitaj answers, 'No values but in human beings'.<sup>64</sup>

The sexual aspect is also important to Kitaj, as it is to Tom Wesselmann and Allen Jones. In Kitaj's works, however, sexual themes are interwoven with other material.<sup>65</sup> That said, argues Johnson, Kitaj's drawings and pastels are not just coolly academic, they embrace erotic intimacy too. Which is how



Kitaj expresses his Dionysian side: 'You feel this is not the cold eye of a perceptual empiricist or the formalist technician, it seems animated, rather, by personal affection and desire.'<sup>66</sup> Johnson senses in Kitaj's works from the 1990s a joy in painting that is missing from his earlier work. The artist is no longer, it seems, as obsessed with the grand moral questions, but is more open to other ideas that happen to cross his path. The pictures are therefore more thematically heterogeneous, focusing on everything from ageing, as in the Bad series, to recollections of a young man's sexual escapades, as in works with titles like *The First Time (Havannah)* (1991, ill. 19), *The Second Time (Vera Cruz, 1949)* (1991, ill. 20) etc.

Robert Hughes, of *Time Magazine*, was shocked by the behaviour of his British counterparts who, he said, managed to be more nauseating in the space of a few weeks than most artists had to endure in a lifetime. It made him wonder if the Kitaj he knew had a *Doppelgänger* on hand to send into the fray. What follows is a positive review of the exhibition in which Hughes also addresses the thematic side, in line with the other journals:

Kitaj's growing ambition, now fully realized, was to re-create something that was supposed to have been expelled from modern art: history-painting. It's as though his own sense of expatriation compelled him toward this gap, not as a witness to history but as a collector and combiner of its enigmatic fragments. Then his curiosity solidified into an obsession, as a Jew, with Jewish history, Jewish fate and intellectual character.<sup>67</sup>



Hughes writes that few painters, since Picasso painted *Guernica*, have made any attempt to reflect over the state of the world, apart from Robert Rauschenberg with his 1960s silk screen prints and James Rosenquist's Vietnam imagery. These pop works, rooted in the media's approach to the political crises, do not impress Hughes, however.<sup>68</sup> Kitaj is unlike these two, he suggests, in that he draws on the gamut of Western cultural history in his visual universe. He goes further, suggesting that Kitaj's difference from his own generation of artists comes from his being 'an illustrator of life' and taking figurative art as his starting point. Hughes accentuates the Jewish element as one of Kitaj's major concerns in recent years, and, as he says, 'why not? Today we have a lot of trivial art about identity, but that should not blind us to the qualities of serious identity-art when it appears — as, in Kitaj, it does.'<sup>69</sup> Hughes disagrees, though, with Feaver's buoyant assessment of the sketchy and expressionistic art of the 1990s, remarking of *Western Bathers* (1993–94, ill. 14) that it is a poor parody of Cézanne's bathers. He speculates, 'maybe a climactic late style lies on the other side of this interlude, maybe not. In neither case can his work be written off.'<sup>70</sup>



Artforum's review of May 1995 also provides an overview of Kitaj's works and the poet John Ash is most enthusiastic about Kitaj's simpler compositions, such as *The Room (Rue St. Denis)* (1982–83, ill. 21), a picture which, in all its simplicity, attests to pleasure and pleasure's reverberations, and finds Kitaj's Expressionist 1990s pictures 'something of a visual assault. I found this work hard to like, but its passion and feverish energy are undeniable, and in five or ten years it may look a lot better.'<sup>71</sup>



But the article is as much a riposte to the British reviewers, whose behaviour, Ash says, reminds him of the reaction of the Third Reich's cultural establishment to Max Beckmann's and Emil Nolde's works. It's likely that the strong focus on sexuality and Jewishness violated the British middle classes' sense





of decency:

Apparently the Brit Critics decided to get this Jewish-American in their midst [...] It is hard to understand how anyone could have mistaken work of this quality for 'adolescent trash'.<sup>72</sup> And what does it have to do with self-delusion or vanity? To say, for example, that Kitaj's drawings and pastels are not as great as Degas' is hardly damning criticism: they are still among the best by any living artist. It is not Kitaj who stands exposed by this retrospective but his critics. It is they who have made an 'admonitory spectacle' of themselves.<sup>73</sup>

The overall picture emerging from the art magazines is of a complex artist standing at the centre of developments in figurative art in the 1900s. An artist who attempted – and succeeded – in creating a new kind of history painting. An artist who successfully translated a fragmentary, poetic vocabulary into comparable visual terms, allowing him not only to paint the Jewish Diaspora but diaspora per se – in other words, the alienated one, the Modernist Ego.

## 2.4 Summing up

Criticism of Kitaj's work can be divided into two main brands: first the unprofessional criticism based on the reviewers' subjective opinion of Kitaj the person, Jew, American and/or man of letters represented by the venomous snipes in the British dailies; then we have the professional type founded on a sound knowledge of the arts represented by the reviews in the art magazines. Each paints an entirely different picture of the artist. So what exactly moved the British critics to pass judgement on Kitaj, dismissing virtually an entire life's work in the process?

On closer inspection it is possible to identify a number of features shared by the newspaper reviewers. For one thing, what clearly irked most of them were the allusions in Kitaj's work to literature – particularly Modernistic literature – and to literary models like T.S. Eliot and Kafka. They were further riled by his self-proclaimed placement in a Van Gogh, Cézanne and Picasso tradition, or rather what they felt as the conceited manner in which he did so. Kitaj's self-avowed quest for Jewishness along with his self-confessed sense of alienation as an American in Britain also told against him. But greatest umbrage was apparently caused by the prefaces and captions mounted alongside the paintings. Kitaj had foreseen this reaction in a pre-exhibition interview: 'In the Tate catalogue there are going to be a lot of pictures with a preface, and they are going to make people roll their eyes to heaven. "Here's Kitaj, the literary artist, doing it again. He doesn't even know yet that a picture is supposed to speak for itself."<sup>74</sup>

This already negative stance was aggravated even more, no doubt, as the interviewers visited and revisited the same issues. Now although Kitaj felt he was indebted to the Tate for honouring him, it was, in fact, Kitaj's son Lem who persuaded his once so reticent father to give the interviews. But their effect was to reveal a gulf between American and European cultural attitudes inasmuch as Americans are generally far more open and less constrained by the – often false – modesty that tends to afflict Europeans. To a certain extent, the Americans may also have been reacting to the attacks on Kitaj in the British press in defence of an American artist under fire.

One of the authors represented in the anthology *Critical Kitaj*, Janet Wolff, writes about the critics' nega-

tive attitudes to Kitaj's work, and she views them in connection with what she feels are anti-literary, anti-American and anti-Semitic currents in Britain.<sup>75</sup> As we saw above, those issues were covered relatively broadly by other US critics and art magazines. Wolff maintains that none of them are new to Britain, or indeed to Europe. She refers to the art-historical controversy between supporters of art as an autonomous means of expression and supporters of a figurative, idea-based art, an argument that has been raging since the emergence of Modernism. She suggests that both the critics' views and Kitaj's 'response' need to be seen in that light. Critics see the literary allusions as a weakness, she says, prompting, for instance, statements like 'Kitaj is imprisoned by his library', pronounced by *The Evening Standard's* Brian Sewell.<sup>76</sup> Wolff quotes Kitaj, agreeing with him about the presence of anti-American feeling in the UK. According to Wolff anti-Americanism may be related to a putative sense of inferiority that befell what used to be the hub of a mighty empire.

Evidence of British anti-Semitism, writes Wolff, dates from the large-scale immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe around the turn of the eighteenth century. British Jews tend not to advertise either their faith or cultural heritage. She quotes a Jewish writer of British origins residing in the US as saying: 'Being Jewish in England is not quite polite. It's rather like dropping your 'h's when you speak. [...] It never occurred to me [before] that there was no English Malamud, no Roth, no Bellow or Potok, no Jews who wrote about Jewish life.'<sup>77</sup> Kitaj has become increasingly outspoken about his Jewish project, and as an American it is natural for him to say so without blushing. '[H]e's never acquired the English art of understatement. [...] They don't like that he is a brash American Jewish name-dropper. But that doesn't mean they don't like Americans or Jews.'<sup>78</sup> In conclusion Wolff suggests that the combination being an American and a Jew – and, not least, Kitaj's written attestation of the importance of both in his work – was just too much to swallow for the critics.

But differences in political approaches to art or views on art per se have also caused differences among critics in their response to Kitaj. For instance, *The Times*, *The Burlington Magazine* and *Art in America* gave his first exhibition at the New London Gallery<sup>79</sup> in 1963 a varied response. For *The Times*, Kitaj was the artist who had introduced figurative art to Britain and, in his debut exhibition, had demonstrated flair and intelligence. The reviewer on this occasion went on to note the literary references and the wide-ranging associations and references, but maintained nevertheless the works' overall coherence:

[Kitaj's] gift as draughtsman and colourist are not inseparable [...] they are both brilliantly assured. In all this one clear – and in the general context of modern art, rather rare – conviction is being maintained. Kitaj's work stands for a firm reaction against any appraisal of a picture by its formal qualities alone. Against the immediacy of instinctive recognition by the eye, he demands the longer, more complicated experience which engages the whole intelligence.<sup>80</sup>

*The Burlington Magazine* was less appreciative of the content of the works and their criticism is coloured by a perception of Kitaj as a pop artist. But it is here Kitaj's significance lies; the exhibition, moreover, shows how superior he is to his fellow pop artists:

Mr. Kitaj reveals an instinctive feeling for a good design, an ability to draw forms neatly and economically and great delicacy as a colourist. He is never showy or vulgar. The pictures are visually satisfying,

but mentally obscure and this dichotomy greatly weakens their impact.<sup>81</sup>

Art in America's John Russell is simply enthralled by the exhibition, and says of Kitaj, whose American extraction he emphasises, that

He is an outstandingly articulate person, he began to have enormous influence. The idea got about, in this way that a picture should consist of a number of compartments, not always obviously related to one another, garnished when necessary with handwritten elucidations, and packed with ideas – which ideas. Not random references to the outer world, but genuine ideas which, if acted upon, might change the world completely.<sup>82</sup>

In connection with Kitaj's first appearance at the Marlborough Gallery in New York in 1965, two years later, Russell speaks of his importance as an artist:

Kitaj's genius – and I have measured the word before using it – is of a ruminative sort. In a painting by him [...] you are likely to find a reference to the Old Masters, a reference to popular illustration, a reference to the political history of 1900-14, a passage that relates to painterly abstraction, a page torn bodily from some seemingly irrelevant book and some experiments in multiple perspective that make the observer jump back and fro like a cat on an overheated stove. And yet there is, finally, no feeling of eclecticism: all the material is in control, and we are left, beyond any question with a unified work of art. [...] Kitaj's work is a matter of continual adjustment at a very high level.<sup>83</sup>

The intriguing thing about both the 1960s and 1990s reviews is that many of the same things attracted attention in both periods. During the 1970s and 1980s the division between the figurative and non-figurative camps, the latter including a range of other artistic genres as well, widened further, attested by the launch of the School of London in 1976, with Kitaj and David Hockney at the time as its most vocal advocates.

In The New Review's February 1977 edition, Kitaj and Hockney defended the traditional figurative rendition of the human body. Matisse and Picasso, they say, two of the most prominent Modernists, were immensely talented in depicting the human form. Neither of them at any point betrayed traditional rules of representation, and they succeeded in revitalising representation within those limits. They refused to follow the theoreticians, says Kitaj, viewing changes in art instead as signs of progress. In Kitaj's opinion, Rembrandt does not represent artistic progress in relation to Michelangelo, or Matisse in relation to Rembrandt: 'The consummate figures drawn by them seem to derive from a similar intelligence about what critical decisions to make in the description of people.'<sup>84</sup>

Kitaj and Hockney go on to wonder in the same piece why most people feel that Seurat's 1880 study of Piero della Francesca's artistic ideas has no relevance in 1997. Nothing has transpired in the intervening years, they say, that means that Seurat has nothing to teach us: 'If you think technical innovations change painting, do you think the typewriter changed literature?'<sup>85</sup>

Kitaj and Hockney stress that while the strict formalists view Matisse as their model, as indeed they do themselves, they fail to grasp a vital aspect of Matisse's work, which is the poetic and emotive content

of the pictures. They discuss further the difference between critics and artists when it comes to differentiating works of art. The artists, they say, know instinctively the difference between genuine art and imitated art:

The whole nineteenth century was a myth. The only people who didn't like the good artists were some critics [...] what they liked was pompous, overblown, high art: Bourgerau, Mesonnier and so forth. They hated the art that was closer to life. At times they called it unfinished and cheap. But the truth is it was the genuine art. They'd got it all wrong and been over-impressed by the pomposity and high moral tone they saw in the art they preferred. I think we're still going on like that today. What the critics call 'high art', with its high moral purpose, they still think of as wonderful. Art that's much closer to life they rather run down. It's still going on now.<sup>86</sup>

The reactions of the critics to this 'conversation' ranged from dismissal on grounds of superficiality and self-righteousness<sup>87</sup> to Christopher Butler's opinion in *The Times Literary Supplement*:

Kitaj's [view] is part of a campaign to put this right, 'to bring back figuration' and implicitly to demonstrate that a representational language will always be the richest one for painting [...] All this is part of the politics; [...] He is an American expatriate in the true Modernist tradition; not afraid to synthesize European influences. However foolhardy this may seem, it is better than the know-nothing attitude of those formalists who are trying to forget history.<sup>88</sup>

Kitaj's work had already taken on the appearance of the political statement, an extension of the opinions he expressed verbally, and the public and critics could like it or lump it. Kitaj's polemical tendencies gave those already ranked against him a hard time separating facts from feelings.<sup>89</sup> After a while, it therefore became fairly easy to predict what a particular critic would think. After the Tate exhibition Kitaj said moreover that some critics had waited three decades to inflict defeat on him.<sup>90</sup> In fact, Kitaj's 1980 exhibition at Marlborough Fine Art in London was the subject of some fierce attacks that set the pattern for the 1994 'Tate skirmish'.

London's cultural topography in the 1990s was not unlike that of the 1960s, which saw the British art market greet Kitaj with open arms. Both decades followed a period of economic recession and London town was the place to be with its clubs and life style, where art galleries and artists were important players. Just as Kitaj was considered innovative in the 1960s, the 1990s represented a time of transformation in British art scene as new modes of expression evolved more akin to Warhol and Beuys than to Cézanne and Matisse. The Young British Artists, such as Damien Hirst, Fiona Rae, Gary Hume etc., were just about to expropriate the British art scene.<sup>91</sup> But by the 1990s, Kitaj had become part of the establishment himself, and it was the establishment the Tate celebrated with a string of large exhibitions at the same time the young artists were mounting theirs in disused East End warehouses. And Kitaj may have become a symbol – a monument of sorts – of what had to go to make room for the new. It seems as if the critics were adjusting their sights too, because they soon started acting like members of a critical mafia, out to 'get' Kitaj, high priest of the establishment. Given Kitaj's artistic prominence, he must have seemed like fair game.

What shocked the American critics, however, was the lack of common civility demonstrated by their

UK brethren. As Johnson in *Art in America* put it, 'The negative reviews in question consist mainly of rather unpleasant ad hominem expressions of distaste and incomprehension, with little analytical substance.'<sup>92</sup>

Whatever the reason, the memory of those scathing criticisms lives on. In fact, the whole debacle and its aftermath surfaced again in connection with Kitaj's 2001 exhibition at the National Gallery. Waldemar Januszczak, one of the hardest-hitting critics in 1994, repeats on this occasion his assault, describing Kitaj a 'would-be great' and a person 'easily spooked and absurdly self-important'.<sup>93</sup> The exhibition is a total failure, in his opinion. He devotes nevertheless twelve hundred words worth of column inches to it, three paragraphs of which revisit the 1994 Tate exhibition:

According to Kitaj, you are currently reading the words of a murderer. At least I think you are. I have never been entirely certain if I was or wasn't one of the critics accused by Kitaj of killing his wife after his 1994 retrospective at the Tate. You may possibly recall – although it was an event of minor cultural significance – that Kitaj show received bad reviews [...] Since then he has waged a curious campaign against critics.[...] Certainly I have written hundreds of more scathing assessments in my time. And if Kitaj is right about the impact of criticism, then Britain would be littered with the bodies of my victims.<sup>94</sup>

Of course, that the bad reviews were not forgotten Kitaj must bear part of the blame himself. His response – which of course was due to a great extent to the tragedy of Sandra's death – has helped keep the memory of a critical assassination alive, something people still talk about, while the good reviews have languished in the shade of the bad.

### 3 SANDRA ONE



Even for a public as inured to the often harsh language of critics as the British, the Tate reviews cut to the quick. Kitaj and his wife Sandra Fisher were both clearly devastated. She succumbed from a cerebral haemorrhage in her forty-seventh year, two weeks after the doors had shut on the exhibition. Kitaj's mother died soon thereafter. Kitaj felt that the media were partly to blame for Sandra's death: 'They wounded me, they tried to kill me, [...] and they got her instead.'<sup>95</sup> Despair found expression in a work called *The Critic Kills* (1996, ill. 22). It was shown at the Royal Academy's 1996 summer exhibition, a year after the retrospective had closed in New York. This picture would be the start of a dialogue between the critics and Kitaj expressed in newspaper columns and through the magazine *Sandra*, editions of which would appear intermittently over the next six years.<sup>96</sup>

#### 3.1 The Venice Biennale 1995, From London Edinburgh 1995, and new commissions

From a professional point of view, the year following the exhibition was a good one for Kitaj notwithstanding the near total inability to work caused by grief over Sandra's demise. Early in 1995 he was invited to paint a portrait of President Bill Clinton for the University of Oxford where Clinton had studied as an exchange student. He was also commissioned to make a portrait of Gustav Mahler for the Vienna State Opera. Further, a large tapestry based on his painting *If Not, Not* (1975, ill. 4) was made for the entrance hall of the newly built British Library building at St Pancras, on the initiative of the library's architect Sir Colin St. John Wilson, a friend and collector of Kitaj's work since the early 1960s.

On top of all this, Kitaj was awarded the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale that summer for the pastel *The Rise of Fascism* (1979–80, ill. 23). This work was shown in the Identity and Otherness section, devoted to a century of views of the human form. Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud and Michael Andrews were represented there as well. Leon Kossoff represented Britain in the British pavilion. The choice of Kitaj provoked James Hall of *The Guardian*, one of the most outspoken critics in 1994, to lash out once again. Hall reminded his readers of the 1994 reviews, saying that 'The Guardian described *The Rise Of Fascism* (1980),<sup>97</sup> which consists of three women and a cat lounging around on a beach, as looking "like something Gauguin might have painted if he had taken out a subscription to *Penthouse* instead of a ticket to Tahiti".<sup>98</sup> Hall attributes Kitaj's success to the presence on the Venice prize committee of Robert Hughes, *Time Magazine's* art critic and long-time admirer of the School of London, adding that Hughes's appointment to the committee had been a case of political retaliation for the previous year's Tate imbroglio. Hall believes that the American reviews of the retrospective were for the most part pretty pedestrian and that one of few to offer Kitaj support was precisely Robert Hughes. Hall concludes: 'Still, the award can't conceal the fact that for Kitaj, this is only a Pyrrhic victory.'<sup>99</sup> Though other major London papers carried news of the award, no comments were forthcoming.

The Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh arranged in the summer of 1995 a show they called *From London* featuring some of the School of London artists: Francis Bacon, Kitaj, Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff and Michael Andrews. The reviews were largely encouraging, and Richard Calvocoressi, the keeper, was commended on his choice of exhibits. That the exhibition garnered favourable words from Richard Cork of *The Times* did not come as much of a surprise

since Cork had always been partial to the School of London.<sup>100</sup> What was something of an revelation, though, was the considerably more balanced – indeed positively constructive – tone in some of the previous year's most predatory papers. The Daily Telegraph, which last year told Kitaj that 'It's time to learn that less is more',<sup>101</sup> now wrote that 'it is interesting to see that Kitaj, unjustly mauled by the critics last year, holds his own side by side with the master.<sup>102</sup> At his best he has a nicely bilious sense of colour, and a seedy, soiled feel that is entirely Kitaj's own.'<sup>103</sup>

Most intriguing of all, though, was the Financial Times review penned by William Packer who a year ago had set about the Tate show and wondered if Kitaj self-perception – as a serious artist – might not be slightly misguided. A year on Packer is now witnessing on behalf of the accused:

His Tate retrospective was badly received, but nothing is immutable, not even the opinion of a critic, [...] some things I now see differently. [...] The well-chosen examples here now look strong and interesting. And when sometimes he forgets himself, even in the most resolved and narrative of his works, he shows the lightest of touches. The landscape through the carriage window of the 'Jewish Rider' of 1985, though it has within it the grim image of a crematorium chimney, is as fresh a passage of paint as any in the show.<sup>104</sup>

Needless to say, some newspapers remained critical, not only of Kitaj's own contribution but of the School of London as a whole. John McEwen – very gloomy in 1994 – accuses Kitaj of Mannerism and forever changing style. Of the School of London he says: 'as a label it just will not stick. The slogan is dreary, the concept false, the result disagreeable.'<sup>105</sup> In fact it was the School of London – nearly twenty years after its founding – that attracted most attention with questions asked as to what actually warranted membership to it.

### 3.2 Summer exhibition, Royal Academy of Art, 1996

As preparations were being made at the Royal Academy for the 1996 summer exhibition, relations between Kitaj and the critics became more enflamed and personal than ever. With four days to go to the opening The Independent wrote, 'The artist has painted a portrait of his late wife, fellow artist Sandra Fisher, who died in a brain haemorrhage last year. He has written on the canvas the words: "The Critic Kills".'<sup>106</sup> The article reminds readers of the reception given Kitaj in 1994 and the tragedy of his wife's death, and goes on to discuss the dilemmas that must have faced the Royal Academy when this particular work arrived on their doorstep from one of their most renowned members:

The clear message that the brain haemorrhage was caused by unfeeling critics is understood to have startled the Royal Academy. If the picture is hung in the Summer Exhibition it will be seen by hundreds of thousands of people. If it is not, it will be a slap in the face for one of the Royal Academy's most famous members. Sir Philip Dowson, president of the Royal Academy, said yesterday: 'It shall be hung in Gallery 1. It is a strong personal statement and there is no question of not hanging it.'

### 3.3 The Critic Kills

It was a powerful testimony, this four-panelled painting with collage, *The Critic Kills* (1996, ill. 22). The extreme left panel contains a photo of Kitaj's late wife Sandra. Above the portrait, Kitaj has written the words 'SANDRA ONE', and beneath, with the same fastidious script: 'Spring 1996'. To the right, a piece of paper is attached bearing the handwritten words: 'Instruction: This painting is a magazine. It is the first issue of an irregular art magazine called Sandra.' In the next panel is a piece of red paper on which is printed a quotation from Hitler: 'Works of art that are not capable of being understood in themselves, but require some pretentious instruction book to justify their existence will never again find their way to the German People.' Dominating the final panel of the collage the heart-rending statement in capitals: 'THE CRITIC KILLS', written in a relatively disorganized hand, by Kitaj's standards, as if in emotional turmoil. Surrounding these words, fluid, blood-coloured paint has been applied in rapid, expressive strokes. This extreme right-hand panel contrasts strongly with the pure, light representation of Sandra at the opposite end,<sup>107</sup> the large white background of which serves to accentuate all the more the work's limited number of signifiers. It is signed 'By Ron and Sandra'.

As one of the reviewers put it, *Sandra One* is stylistically reminiscent of a conceptual, text-based painting that could have been done in the 1970s – though not by Kitaj.<sup>108</sup> In addition to the abstract elements are the red and green geometrical areas, which may represent an homage to Mondrian, whose work had spurred Kitaj to take up painting again after Sandra's death,<sup>109</sup> or, more likely, are a reference to Hitler's views on *Entartete Kunst* noted above. In *Sandra One* Kitaj reverts to an approach he had used for a time in the Sixties where text is applied to image, a melange of painting and collage. There is a crucial difference between this new collage and that of the 1960s, the point of which was to explore how text and image could function together and how historical signifiers and symbols could be put to (re-)use. This time, text, image and reality are interlocked, the image an allusion of reality. *Sandra One* is a one-off in Kitaj's career. It falls between the stools of strict formal language and Expressionist content. It evokes a cry or scream – made so much more intense by its simplicity of expression. The disparaging reviews of Kitaj's work are compared to Hitler's words on *Entartete Kunst* and linked further to Sandra's death. The message, quite simply, is an unveiled attack on those critics: 'The Critic Kills'.

### 3.4 The reviews

And the critics lost no time in responding. The work affected deeply all who saw it at the summer exhibition. But the newspaper reviews had virtually nothing in common with the critics of two years before. Without exception, they were devoid of criticism of the work itself, they were either descriptive or explanatory. And most importantly, they were of the nature of a reflection over the role of the critic and the power he wields over the artist – and the artist's power over the public. On this occasion, the former critics of the Tate show remained silent. But they could not, of course, have been unaffected by Kitaj's words.

Two days after the opening of the summer show, 5 June, *The Guardian* printed an article by Michael Billington. He writes:

The Kitaj affair – and his current retaliation – raises vital questions. What is the relation between



critic and artist? Where does one draw the line between responsibility to one's critical conscience and regard for human feelings? Is the critic law-giver or mediator? And is critical reaction these days inevitably distorted by the hype and puffery that precedes any major artistic events? One thing is clear. Kitaj is not the only person to feel criticism can kill.<sup>110</sup>

A review of a play Billington had written had been blamed for an actor's suicide in the 1970s,<sup>111</sup> so he was aware of the often antagonistic relations between critics and artists:

It was much worse in the past. Clement Scott in *The Daily Telegraph* attacked Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* as 'a bad escape of moral sewage gas'. Ruskin described Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* as 'clumsy, blundering, boggling, baboon-blooded stuff'. And it was Ruskin who provoked one of the most famous lawsuits of all time by accusing Whistler in 1877 of 'flinging a pot of paint in the public's face': the resulting court-case led to Whistler being awarded a farthing in damages.<sup>112</sup>

As Billington sees it, the roots of this antagonism lie in the critic's ability to affect the financial value put on a new work. He tells the story of 'Tolstoy who announced to Chekhov that "Shakespeare's plays are very bad but yours are worse"' to show how awful artists can be to each other. He accepts that the criticism of Kitaj was personal and ill-mannered, but adds that a wounded artist should either maintain stoical rectitude in the face of opposition, or make his views known by publishing articles or writing letters to the press, opening for a public debate. And indeed, a letter did arrive in response to Billington's article three days later, in which it is pointed out that the debate in the written media is generally dominated by the critics, and that it is the critics who feel most at home with the media – giving them a good head's start in relation to the artists – it was therefore not unreasonable that Kitaj should choose to respond through his own medium, i.e., the painting.<sup>113</sup>

On 8 June *The Independent* printed another piece, by Tom Lubbock. Following Billington Lubbock reflects over the responsibilities of critic and artist for the impact their words may have: 'It's very true that critics, like other writers, hardly imagine the consequences of their words, or that their words might have consequence [...] Byron said that reviews killed John Keats, and R.B. Kitaj says they killed his wife.'<sup>114</sup> It is impossible, he continues, to apportion blame in such matters: 'The chain of cause and consequence is lost in hypotheses. If x had not written that, if y had not been in that state of mind or body...'. Kitaj has a responsibility, too, he maintains: 'If one or more of the critics concerned were now to acknowledge their responsibility, and to end their own lives... And who would be responsible for that?' Both players have responsibilities they need to attend to, he concludes.

In an article in *Sunday Times*, 23 June, Gilbert Adair asks what right critics have to judge works they themselves are incapable of executing. He highlights the difference between the time invested in a work of art and a review of that work. In defence of the critic, he reminds us that

whatever value his review possesses derives less from the circumstantial effort that he puts into its composition than the fact that it represents the distillation of a lifetime's reflection on whichever art it happens to be and also, it is worth pointing out, considerably more informed and wide-ranging reflection than most artists have either the time or temperament to indulge in.<sup>115</sup>

He pokes fun at Kitaj's condemnation of his critics, writing that 'The idea of critics colluding in a concerted assault, synchronizing their watches, deciding to "get" X or Y, is unacceptable to anybody at all familiar with that breed of secretive loners.' Adair concedes, however, that contempt and mendacity pervade the whole cultural milieu and confesses that unreasonable reviews do reach the pages of the press from time to time. He offers the artist some Scriptural advice, namely to turn the other cheek.

But Kitaj had no intention of following Scripture. Far from it.

## 4 SANDRA TWO



Sandra Two came out in connection with a solo exhibition arranged by Marlborough Fine Art at an international art fair in Paris, October 1996.<sup>116</sup> This second instalment of Kitaj's 'avant-garde magazine' included a written part – an interview with Kitaj – and a visual part – the artworks. Two things were taken care of simultaneously: one, the exhibition catalogue, two, the second instalment of Kitaj's magazine.

### 4.1 The interview



Susan Shaw, a young American artist and one of the many to commiserate in writing with Kitaj after the Tate show, did the interview. A brief introduction sets the stage. Shaw addresses issues surrounding Kitaj's life after Sandra's death, the malevolence of the critics and anti-Semitism in London, as well as Kitaj's interest in avant-garde and Jewish culture. The interview was entitled 'The gentle art of making enemies one hundred years later', a line taken from James McNeill Whistler's legendary 1890 collection of letters and essays, which gives an idea of the direction the interview will take.

Kitaj explains early on why he wanted to start a magazine like Sandra:



Sandra and I often spoke of doing a 'little mag' in the Modernist traditions of dissent, heresy and what is called avant-garde. I don't believe in Progress in Art, unless you think that standing on your head and jerking off in Macy's window is more progressive than Sassetta. Every good artist is both a revisionist and a pioneer and if one of those two impulses ain't there, God help that artist. The dictionary meaning of avant-garde I like best is new (in art and literature). Every artist worth his salt wants to make it new and I am sure that peculiar passion is a hell of a lot older than 1906,<sup>117</sup> may be even older than Sassetta in our shmearing tradition.<sup>118</sup>



Kitaj homes in on the way 'avant-garde' as a concept is reserved for young art, adding that 'I like fluttering youth as any old rogue but there is another avant-garde called Giotto – Michelangelo – Titian – Hokusai – Cézanne – Degas – Matisse, who made it new in extremely old age.'<sup>119</sup> Kitaj links his own work to the tradition represented by the latter, claiming that he practically stumbled by accident over a 'geriatric' version of the avant-garde after Sandra's 'evil death under fire'.<sup>120</sup> He is confronting this new art domain in a new guise: as revenging angel or demon. He senses, moreover, that this 'newness' holds some promise.

It means, as far as Kitaj is concerned, an entirely personal art. He wants it to give Sandra a new lease of life. He cites Van Gogh: 'What lives in art and is eternally living, is first of all the painter, and then the painting' – a philosophy he knows he does not share with the British critics, 'the Eliotic types', as he dubs them:

Some Brits are still brought up to pretend selflessness in art and life – also fake Brits like Eliot who tried to deny personality in art ('Art is the escape from personality')<sup>121</sup> [...] I think Eliotic types call Van Gogh's words the biographical fallacy; they can go to hell.<sup>122</sup>

Kitaj cites Sandra Two as an example of this personal art; the present edition of the magazine represents the end and a summing up of his life in London, with its pen portraits and drawings of



people who have meant something to him, for better or worse – mostly, it seems for the time being, for worse. The interviewer mentions an American reviewer who called the London press the ‘Killing-Field’.<sup>123</sup> Kitaj responds:

I know my Killing-Field alright. [...] When I won the Golden Lion for painting in Venice, one of my younger haters wrote in his regular London art column that I had won a ‘pyrrhic victory’ in the war he and his critical company had begun against me. He was dead right... Sandra was dead.<sup>124</sup>

Kitaj speaks of his sense of alienation – his diaspora. Both he and his art originate elsewhere, which irritates and annoys people who refuse to take that into account. Kitaj wants to return to his ‘elsewhere’, to that other culture, which for him means the US. Susan Shaw steers the interview towards the relatively inconsistent reviews of the 1994 retrospective in England and the US respectively and the reaction among Americans to what they perceived as anti-Semitic attacks on Kitaj. He maintains that anti-Semitism has always subsisted beneath the cultural and political veneer of all European nations, and that Britain is no exception. If an independent outsider like him emphasises the centrality of Jewishness to his work, it attracts derision. This is particularly the case in London, Kitaj says, where it is impossible to express in public one’s unease at its large concentration of talented Jewish artists, art dealers, collectors and art historians, for fear of re-igniting the anti-Semitic mood of a 1930s Berlin or Vienna. Kitaj admits to suffering from a Dreyfus complex, but he finds it impossible to comprehend how one is supposed to carry on as if anti-American and anti-Semitic sentiment did not exist among what he refers to as ‘the collection of sick losers reviewing art in London’.<sup>125</sup> Anti-Semitism exists in varying degrees from innocent tittle-tattle in the pub on Jewish influences in contemporary art, to Poland’s gas chambers. One instance is the way the School of London was referred to as a ‘Jewish idea’, or that ‘so-called School of London’. He also says that the Jewish subjects in his own works are so taboo that the critics use malicious propaganda and war-like methods to destroy him, for example by writing negative reviews about the School of London. Most artists would counter that sort of criticism with silence: ‘Don’t answer your critics – Just do your art and that will be your answer’.<sup>126</sup> An inconceivable strategy for Kitaj, however, on whom some critics, he says, had been waiting a full thirty years to vent their spleen. Rounding off the interview he says:

There is for me a Jewish aura which is a personal excitement (among much else), within Modernism itself, and I intend to die re-inventing it for myself, the nay-sayers be damned. The language of hate can never be silenced, so I don’t expect peace or imaginations from cowards addicted to evil and the protected politics of meanness. If I’m to be the wrong painter at the wrong time in the wrong place, so be it. I’ll just have to keep firing-up my adversarial painting and drawing after human natures anyway. But in the same breath I really want to try to address what Abe Lincoln called the “better angels of our nature” more often than I have in painting. In the end though I refuse to humble myself and say: ‘maybe my enemies are right’, because I don’t believe in them, let alone believe them. Meanwhile, lacking influence and common sense, living well in the moment is the best revenge... Onward!<sup>127</sup>

## 4.2 The pictorial content



Apart from the art-philosophical ideas that underlie the pictorial content of Sandra Two, the work rests on Kitaj's deep sense of bereavement and remorse at the loss of a wife and lover, resentment of the British critics and his diaspora – all of which were touched on in the interview. Throughout his career, Kitaj has exploited textual means to deepen and elaborate his visual work, a practice which caused a fit of pique among virtually the whole critical establishment in 1994. In Sandra Two he adopts the opposite technique. A photograph of Sandra figures on the cover of the magazine, the same one Kitaj used in Sandra One. Page three contains a photo of Sandra's gravestone. The inscription reads: 'Sandra Fisher Kitaj. American painter. 1947 – 1994'. The two photos stand alone, a page devoted to each. Kitaj signed Sandra One with his own and Sandra's names. On this occasion, too, he clearly wants to draw attention to Sandra's 'involvement' in the production of the magazine.

Two collages are reproduced on the next page. The first was begun in 1970 and was still awaiting completion in 1996. Called *Second Diasporist Manifesto (Work in Progress)*, (ill. 24),<sup>128</sup> it is a blend of photocopy and collage on canvas. The dominating element here is a book cover from a 1920s collection of articles entitled *The Jewish Question* by Henry Ford<sup>129</sup>. Some of the letters on the cover are concealed beneath a torn photo of Jesus bearing the crown of thorns. Attached to the cover are photos of Kitaj with his son Max, of Moses and the tablet with the Ten Commandments, and of Karl Marx. Frontispieces ripped from Karl Marx and the *Radical Critique of Judaism* and Sigmund Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* are glued in place alongside the dislodged spine of a book by Albert Einstein, *Out of my later Years*. What we see here is an early example a technique where Kitaj juxtaposes Christian and Jewish elements and which he would use later to symbolise the Holocaust.<sup>130</sup>

The second collage entitled *Good God Where is the King?* (ill. 26) dates from 1964.<sup>131</sup> It looks initially like a neat array of pages cut from newspapers, interspersed with pictures and texts that use different printing types. But on closer inspection these columns of print actually spill over into each other, hiding the text in some places while exhibiting more in others. Ranging across a wide range of subjects, these texts obscure lists of illustrations from John Milton, a compendium of wild flowers, army records, etc. This is no random amalgamation of texts and images, however. Associations with culture, politics and philosophy abound, as to Kitaj's own private life. Fragments and bits and pieces, each element can be investigated at will. For example, there is a photograph from an anti-Communist handout of the Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. The dictator's frozen countenance stands as a stark symbol of evil in Kitaj's world; Batista first appeared in Kitaj's work back in 1962 where he stands for the archetypal criminal and ruffian. That work was *Reflections on Violence* (1962, ill. 27) and backbiting, slating, maliciousness etc. were its themes. For some commentators it seemed prophetic of the Tate show controversy. In terms of ideas, the collage is representative of Kitaj's work of the period. As noted above, he was fascinated by Aby Warburg's theories and the Chinese box analogy whereby pictures are accessed step by step, conjuring up new ideas and revealing new possible meanings. Kitaj's caption beneath the collage draws attention to the work's anti-Semitic elements: 'Note: Man Ray photo of Proust on his deathbed and some lists from anti-Semitic books published in London.'<sup>132</sup>

*Good God where is the King* also harks back to Kitaj's desire to integrate text and picture. Concurrently with work on this collage he was writing an essay entitled 'On associating Texts with Paintings'<sup>133</sup>. While the essay is mainly devoted to painting, what Kitaj says in it embraces other forms of



work, too. He likes seeing text and picture represented together in the same work, he writes, where text is associated with the imagery. The two elements will gradually fuse, enriching and enlivening the work. In time they will melt completely together. Textual ingredients are therefore neither accidental nor peripheral, but integral to the work, an aspect of the means of expression.



The Artist (1996, ill. 28), a full-length self-portrait of the gown-clad artist in the process of painting a portrait of his late wife, clearly evokes Kitaj's sense of loss. The ripped canvas on which Kitaj is painting, is mounted on an easel. Sandra's body is only partly discernible, there is the one breast, her torso, a leg. Kitaj's right hand, placed close to her breast, keeps the canvas steady while his left hand carefully guides the brush over her cheek, obscuring part of her face. Sandra appears as if she could step out of this 'picture within a picture', into the space occupied by Kitaj himself. Sandra's right leg – which Kitaj paints in three dimensions in contrast to the two accorded the rest of her – looks in this self-portrait as if she has already taken the step out of her own picture frame into his. In 1992 Kitaj had painted The Sculptor (ill. 29). It shows a sculptor attempting to reincarnate his deceased wife by rendering her in stone. The text Kitaj attached to this painting for the 1994 retrospective now seems a terrible premonition of his own fate:



This is a painting of a sculptor I know [...] When his wife died a few years ago, he fell into utter depression. Angry, he refused to contemplate that their life together had ended just like that, because their marriage had been so very good [...] His grief was so profound that I was shocked into delight when he began to work on a larger than life sculpture in order to recall, if not to relive their marriage. It took me a while to see what he was up to...he wanted to keep the sculpture in a state of unfinish till the end of his own days. It is, perhaps, an original concept, to treat one's art as something which not only replaces that inertia of despair, which may be common enough, but to press art into a fiction which sustains an undying love.<sup>134</sup>



Four years later, in the magazine caption for The Artist Kitaj writes: 'After the death of his wife, the artist tries to paint her into a kind of life.'<sup>135</sup>

In another double portrait, I and Thou (1990–92, ill. 30), we see Kitaj acting as a sort of rabbi, teaching his son Max to read and write. There is the sense of intimacy and warmth about it which tends to be reserved for his portraits of his closest kin. It is especially in his portraits of Sandra that one senses their mutual love and affection despite the fact that Sandra did not really like posing at all. His portraits of his three children radiate the same tenderness and psychological insight. These portraits are often carefully located in time and space. For instance, Sandra in Paris (1983, ill. 31), dates from a time Kitaj himself says was the happiest of his life. There is Dominie (Dartmouth), (1978, ill. 32), which depicts his adopted daughter, youthfully independent of mind and pensive, and Lem, San Felú (1978, ill. 33), the son who lived in Los Angeles where Kitaj eventually would move himself. He has also done sensitive pictures of his youngest son Max, often in situations which show Kitaj the father, reading or speaking to his child, as in I and Thou. That was when Sandra was in charge of raising Max, but the motif's significance increases several fold in the light of subsequent events, and given that these two – father and son – are her survivors. Kitaj writes of this picture in Sandra Two: 'The fiacre, after Manet, was meant to chase DEATH off the canvas (top left) and away from me after a heart attack, but when Sandra died under fire, I saw the painting failed in that inten-





tion and Max and I were left alone.<sup>136</sup>



An additional picture contained in Sandra Two, *My Cities (An Experimental Drama)* (1990–93, ill. 34) presents a witty view of the three stages of the artist's life: the first as a young and strong man; the second stage of middle life with the onset of weakening powers; and finally the last stage of old age where it is becoming increasingly difficult to stand upright. This edition of the magazine also contains a pair of tongue-in-cheek self-portraits from a series mentioned above which Kitaj composed in the 1990s under the title of *Bad*. Despite the troubles and problems affecting Kitaj, humour has never been far off. The *Bad* series was made after Kitaj had suffered a heart attack and was sensing the vulnerability that comes with advancing years. It depicts the artist contending a bad back, bad knees, bad heart and – even – bad nature. Sandra Two reproduces two works, *Bad Hearing* and *Bad Teeth* (both 1994–96, ill. 35 and 36). While these self-portraits highlight different aspects of Kitaj's life, they offer little psychological insight and in that sense are representative of Kitaj's self-portraits, though they differ from those of his family.<sup>137</sup> The works in the *Bad* series are signed, ironically, 'Ron' or 'Ronald', names detested by Kitaj. As we will see, there are several points in common between the *Killer-Critic* and these pictures, including the self-irony.



*The Spirit of the Bed, Watching* (1991–94, ill. 39),<sup>138</sup> a double portrait of Sandra and himself, is virtually self-revelatory. Kitaj bears a deeply forlorn, troubled look; his right hand is clasped over his groin, the left covering his cheek as if to ward off a menacing alter ego figure advancing in the background. Sandra sits on the bed, facing her husband, her deportment expressive of peace and harmony. Although Kitaj and Sandra's marriage was free – if not always carefree – Kitaj always portrayed her as his rock and mainstay. This picture was painted before Sandra died, but in the caption he attached to *Sandra Two*, he is spouse no more: 'The Spirit of Bed incites and confuses the Widower'.<sup>139</sup>



A number of charcoals in *Sandra Two* have an erotic theme. Nudes, some of them of young girls, dominate several of the pages. They frequently evoke Jewishness, and have titles like *Elles* (1995–96, ill. 40), *Erotica Judaica* (after Giotto) (1996, ill. 41), *Bungee Jumper (Frances)* (1996, ill. 42) etc. Kitaj has never denied his interest in sexuality – his own or others' – and has painted several works that centre on his own erotic experiences, such as the docklands paintings that portray his life as a young sailor. He still visits red light districts wherever he happens to be. The bed in *The Spirit of the Bed Watching* suggests the other beds that recur so often in these painterly memoirs. Works refer frequently to a specific time and place, a touch that enhances the sense of authenticity. Examples are *The Third Time, (Savannah, Georgia)* (1992, ill. 43) and *The Second Time (Vera Cruz, 1949)* (1990, ill. 20). When the latter work was exhibited at the 1994 Tate retrospective, Kitaj attached the following explanation:



I've been possessed by a very occasional semi-secret life, not at all uncommon to judge only by erotic art and literature of many cultures, and its bittersweet addictions have fascinated me since my First Time in Havana forty-five years ago. (Flaubert says "He has not lived " who has not been drawn into and shamed by this ill-famed addiction), but when I think that a rare beauty has transpired in my secret life, not like any other experience of nature that one tries to commit to canvas, I feel it may belong to painting, [...] and so it seems to me that if I can recall some sense of sexual drama, as



in this bildungsroman about my youth, the singular tense in art may be faintly heard and one's youth may even seem regained.<sup>140</sup>



Kitaj's tense relations with the critics finds expression in the visual material. Some elements are taken from *Sandra One*, such as the aforementioned quote from Hitler and the exclamation 'The Critic Kills'. *London Bus* (1996, ill. 44) shows a double-decker carrying a poster for 'Cézanne and his critics at the Tate 1996. Ron'. A skull in the upper right-hand corner is spewing over the bus. In the upper left-hand corner a head is doing more or less the same thing, blood spurting profusely from its right eye. Inside the bus a passenger is being reprimanded, recalling *Against Slander* (1990-91, ill. 100), and a snake is disgorging a black, heavy object. Beneath the picture in *Sandra Two* Kitaj writes: 'This Cezanne bus appeared in London in 1996 along with his critics, still howling.'<sup>141</sup> Double-deckers are of course synonymous with London, and regularly act as mobile advertisements for, among other things, art shows. In a typical move Kitaj thus links his own age to that of Cézanne's, as he did to Manet's in *Killer-Critic*.



When *Friends Fall Out* (after Duccio) (1996, ill. 45) refers directly to Kitaj's sense of betrayal by his closest friends, who, Kitaj felt, did not rally round in sufficiently robust numbers in his defence after the Tate exhibition. Another work, *The Typist*, (1990-96, ill. 46), shows the artist concentrating over his well-worn Olivetti.<sup>142</sup> The body seems joined to the bookcase – only Kitaj's head and one hand are worked out. The typewriter stands on a plinth of Penguin classics by luminaries like Balzac, Schiller, Henry James and Stendahl. There is nothing to suggest Kitaj's announcement in the interview that he is in the process of committing to paper the story of the events surrounding the Tate affair.<sup>143</sup> But the words 'typing his novel' are inscribed as a sort of commentary in handwriting, creating a direct link to the title, and 1996 is given as the date of its completion. We are persuaded therefore to see the work as a pictorial comment on the statement in the interview. It shows how Kitaj adapts associative properties and interpretative opportunities which, when the picture was begun in 1990, would have been quite different, probably alluding to the literary themes that always permeate his works.



In addition to the autobiographical input of *Sandra Two*, the magazine includes portraits of men of letters, politicians and artists with whom Kitaj feels some spiritual kinship, as for instance, *The Lorenzetti* (1970-96, ill. 47), *Clinton* (1996, ill. 48), *Heine in Paris* (1996, ill. 49) and *The Fascist (E.P)* (1970-96, ill. 50). This latter work is based on a 1971 print, *Ezra Pound I* (ill. 51), where Ezra Pound's facial features are incorporated in Matisse's drawing of the violinist Eva Mudocci from 1915.<sup>144</sup> In Kitaj's revision of the motif, in *Sandra Two*, Ezra Pound has become the vehicle of an old man's anger, and on his face Kitaj has imposed a black cross. His caption for the work reads:



Ezra Pound, one of my two or three favorite anti-Semites, has disturbed my sleep since teenage and I don't know what to do with him. His pal Orage wrote: 'Mr Pound has shaken the dust of London from his feet (after twelve years) with not too emphatic a gesture of disgust, but, at least, without gratitude to this country. I can perfectly well understand... (He) has made more enemies than friends. Much of the Press has deliberately closed by cabal to him.'<sup>145</sup>

It's as if he wants to include Pound, his 'favourite anti-Semite', in his rebuttal of London and its critics. Kitaj's alleged name-dropping was precisely one of the critics' targets, a criticism Kitaj here either





ignores or deliberately defies.

### 4.3 The reviews

French papers, whose 'relationship' with Kitaj to all intents and purposes remained unruffled by events across the Channel, covered the exhibition with news and reviews. *Les Echos* and *Le Monde*, for instance, both carried articles about Kitaj, presenting him as the winner of the Golden Lion at Venice in 1995. *Les Echos* urged its readers to discover this American figurative artist while they had a chance.<sup>146</sup> On 5 October *Le Monde* carried a review of the FIAC art fair, referring to Kitaj's solo exhibition as of great significance. According to the reviewer, Kitaj deserves a place in France's cultural life that matches his value as a painter. While he feels the drawings pale slightly in relation to the paintings, which he says, are 'vifs, violents, railleurs, desinvoltés, obscènes à l'occasion',<sup>147</sup> he declares that *The Spirit of the Bed Watching* (1991–94, ill. 39)<sup>148</sup> made an indelible impression on him, recalling El Greco and Francis Bacon. He goes on: 'Des portraits, des paysages, s'enrichissent de citations détournées. La peinture est maigre, la couleur criarde, le geste court et précis. [...] Il sait se renouveler.' Sandra Two received no mention, though the irony of its omission would probably not have been registered by *Le Monde*'s readership anyway.



It is intriguing, given the media's level of interest in Kitaj over the past two years, that Fleet Street reported nothing from the FIAC show. To the extent that Kitaj was mentioned at all that autumn and winter, it was in connection with the sale of unsigned postcards by familiar and unfamiliar artists for a some charitable cause. Not a word was published on either the FIAC exhibition or Sandra Two. The general Jewish bias in Sandra Two may have had something to do with it. At the publication of the First Diasporist Manifesto in 1989, the critics were equally tongue-tied. Could it be that Kitaj in the interview provoked his critics to such an extent that they saw no point in responding? Was Kitaj right that anti-Semitism and xenophobia ran so deeply in the critical establishment that they wanted to assassinate him as an artist with their silence?



## 5 SANDRA THREE

Kitaj had been contemplating a return to the US for years. Now that Sandra was gone, he decided to depart England with his son Max and resettle in California, where his other son Lem and his family lived. As a parting gesture the Royal Academy, where Kitaj had been a member since 1985, invited him to organise a show for Gallery II:

The President gave me a wall for my magazine – the third issue, Sandra Three. And he asked me to do a spare hang in Gallery II, so I asked some of the geriatric Avant-Garde from The Human Clay 20 years ago [...] the first old timers I could think of [...] Some of them love me, I guess, and they wanted to say goodbye.<sup>149</sup>

This edition of the magazine would not be passed over in silence by the press.

### 5.1 Summer exhibition, Royal Academy of Art, 1997

In June 1997 the Royal Academy held their customary summer exhibition with works from a range of professional artists and more or less gifted amateurs. At the opening of what is generally perceived as the art world's answer to the Chelsea Flower Show guests milled politely about, champagne glasses aloft, while examining the exhibits. Everything was as usual in other words. That is, it was until they entered Gallery II, the gallery of honour, and saw the works Kitaj had selected and hung.

Three entire walls were filled with pictures by David Hockney, Peter Blake, Richard Hamilton, Lucian Freud, Allen Jones, Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff, all members of the School of London. All the paintings and drawings had come from Kitaj's personal collection. There was a Hockney drawing: a double portrait of Max and Kitaj – both shattered at the death of Sandra. There was a portrait by Freud of a slightly sexually provocative Francis Bacon, hands held behind his back, shirt unbuttoned and flies undone and eyes shut. There was also a small, richly hued Hockney oil, *The Vittel Bottle*, featuring against a red surface and green background a blue-coloured bottle containing water and a sun flower. Leon Kossoff was represented with a charcoal with his well-known swimming pool motif, Richard Hamilton with an oil entitled *People*, and Peter Blake with one of his Tarzan pictures from the pop art era and a Scottish landscape with a full-length portrait of the late Michael Andrews, *The Deer Park (In memory of Michael Andrews)*.<sup>150</sup> With the exception of Frank Auerbach's portrait of Sandra, judged by the critics to be both sensitive and fetching, these works received spare praise. Kitaj had said in interviews that he had had little time to make the selection since he was busy preparing to move back to the US. His own contribution was *Sandra Three* (1997, ill. 59), an installation which filled the entire end wall – unprecedented in the history of the Academy's summer show.

### 5.2 Sandra Three



*Sandra Three* comprises a mixture of painting, collage, photos, quotes and expletives on two oblong wooden panels painted crimson and bright yellow. Centrally placed are two large paintings, *The Violinist with the Spirit of his Mother*, (1997, ill. 60) and *The Killer-Critic assassinated by his Widower, Even*, (1997, ill. 61). On either side of them, as wings on a cross, are paintings with titles like *My Second Abstract* and *Nietzsche's Moustache*, a photo of a portrait of Manet by Degas and a lithograph of Manet's *Execution of Maximillian* (1868, ill. 64). Kitaj had framed the front page *Sandra Two* with its portrait of Sandra and a piece of paper bearing the words 'the critic kills' along with Hitler's musings



on modern art copied from a page of Sandra Two. The earlier two editions of the magazine extend hence incorporated in this latest edition as a sort of intertext. Alongside the magazine there is the same portrait of Sandra on a greyish-green background, above the photo are the words 'Sandra 3' and below it, in mirror-writing, 'Van Gogh'. The greyish-green tone occurs elsewhere, on something which looks like the cover of a Penguin paperback entitled 'Cézanne'. Mary and the infant Jesus feature in yet another photo, this time of Matisse's chapel frescoes at Vence. Additional items are book pages and quotes, one of which is Baudelaire's description of Manet: 'Monsieur: it seems you have the honour of inspiring hatred', and testimony from Manet himself: 'The attack against me broke in me the mainspring in my life', words that express fairly accurately Kitaj's sentiments on the eve of his departure from England.<sup>151</sup>



### 5.3 The Violinist with the Spirit of his Mother

The Violinist with the Spirit of his Mother (1997, ill. 60) depicts an absorbed Max playing his violin in front of the music stand, on which is pasted collage-fashion a page of music ripped from somewhere. The dark shadow of Sandra – or her spirit – looms behind Max, enveloped in the colours of the spectrum, formed like a mandorla. It is as if this light also envelops the boy, giving him a supernatural air. Between the almost pious rendition of the mother and child and Max's bare, green room, the contrast is stark. The attached quote, written on red paper, reads 'Painting in blood. A powerful story of love', an indication of the miserable state Kitaj must have been in at the time. Sandra loved going to the opera and concerts and made sure that Max practised the violin every day. It could not have been easy to nurture Max's pursuits in this area since music held little or no interest for Kitaj, a lover of film and literature.



In the autumn of 1995 Kitaj wrote a small Parisian travelogue for The Guardian where he recalls working on that picture. After Sandra's death, he says, it took him eight months before he managed to paint again. He had recently started work on a portrait of his son playing the violin and had travelled to Paris to see Matisse's Violinist at the Window (1918, ill. 62) at the Pompidou centre. The picture inspired him '[to] Make It New. It always makes me think hard about those utterly radical moments when extraordinary cosmopolitan minds and spirits fly in the face of the demon Philistine.'<sup>152</sup> Matisse's work was actually inspired by Cezanne's bathers, Kitaj writes, and continues:



Matisse fondles his way – great draughtsman that he was – among the contours and colours of nervous sensation, mind making astute and memorable demands on matter until, especially when you can see this painting in its flesh, it assumes the look of a thinly brushed battleground of what I shall call – for lack of a better term – cosmopolitan Modernism. It says: fuck the unimaginative bastards, I think therefore I am. It says: I will reinvent the human shape [...] It says: Arise and shine each morning to a new day and a new art. This is a startling painting-drawing for a brute century by its leading Psalmist.



Formally, however, The Violinist is more akin to Édouard Manet's The Fifer (1866, ill. 63).

## 5.4 The Killer-Critic Assassinated by his Widower, Even



The Killer-Critic Assassinated by his Widower, Even (1997, ill. 61) is the installation's central axis and predominating feature. From the right hand half of the picture two male figures with rifles are firing at an enormous, multi-headed monster that dominates the left half of the square canvas (152 x 152 cm). Both figures, painted red, also have erect, blood-red penises. A third penis, attached to the spine of a book, is parallel to the foremost one. A yellowish substance is flowing from the penises towards the monster's mouth, from which emerges a long, insect-like proboscis – or rolled newspaper pages. It weaves its way across the canvas bearing the words in handwriting 'yellowpressyellowpress killkillkillkill the heretic always kill heresy', which leaves little doubt as to the symbolism of the monster: the entire critical establishment gathered together in single, multi-headed monster. Bloody hands are raised in self-defence, others pull at the monster's blood-stained jaws. Its many glaring eyes are blood shot have a petrified look about them. Insects are glued onto them. On the left hand side of the work, in large, black letters on a red background, the words 'HATE HATE', explained as a 'hack poem'.

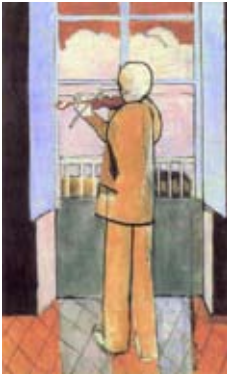
One of the men is one-legged and carries a blood-dripping pen as though it were a revolver in a holster. The blood red paint has been applied to the canvas directly from the tube. It is as if the canvas itself is bleeding.<sup>153</sup> The figure represents Édouard Manet. The other is identifiable by the Jewish character for the letter K – for 'Kitaj' – which stands in place of a head. The word 'VINDICE' is imprinted in large letters on a white cloth drooped over his rifle. Manet's gun bears the inscription: 'do not go gently', taken from a poem of Dylan Thomas.<sup>154</sup> There seems to be a third figure in the painting, or perhaps it is a vengeful angel, concealed behind the foremost figure. Only its erect penis, its gun and what could be its angel wings are visible.<sup>155</sup> The mise en scène is a paraphrase of Manet's Execution of Maximillian (1868, ill. 64), which hangs at the National Gallery and which itself is based on Francisco Goya's May 3, 1808 (1814, ill. 65).<sup>156</sup> Manet's work represents the execution of Maximilian (1832–68), Archduke of Austria, elected Emperor of Mexico by the occupying French and the country's ruling class and persuaded by Napoleon III to assume the title of emperor. Maximilian relied on the support of Mexican conservatives and Napoleon's occupying forces. The United States demanded however that the French withdraw their forces, and Napoleon complied. Maximilian remained, however, only to be taken prisoner by Benito Juarez's troops and tried and executed by firing squad in 1868. Substituting for Maximilian in The Killer-Critic Assassinated by his Widower, Even is the many-headed monster, the target of Manet's and Kitaj's bullets. The harm caused to Kitaj by his critics was once endured by Manet in a similar situation. Manet, however, was fortunate in having Zola's support. Zola is 'incorporated' in Manet's prosthesis, with his famous cry of indignation, J'accuse,<sup>157</sup> together with the names of some of Manet's critics.<sup>158</sup>

Beneath the critic-monster is a sign bearing the word 'predella' in Kitaj's handwriting, a word used usually for an extended band of pictorial explanations on the lower edge of an altarpiece. But instead of an altarpiece we have the critic-monster, and the predella consists rather of Penguin paperback covers with titles like The Murderer, Dialogue with Death, Capital Punishment, The Revenger's Tragedy, Men without Women, etc. Under them Kitaj has written 'the killer-critic assassinated by his widower, even.' The inscription, a reformulation of Marcel Duchamp's The Bride stripped bare by her Bachelors, Even. (1915–23) is also the title of the work. Between Kitaj's legs, a torn out drawing of





Pierre-Paul Prud'hon inscribed 'An eye for an eye: Head of Vengeance'. It seems as if Kitaj is soliciting support from the annals of Western art history as he avenges himself on the critics. This support may well be what the third penis alludes to; it is placed next to Kitaj's and is constructed from the spine of a book. Like the third rifle it is aimed at the critic-monster. The quotations 'Blood will have blood', from Macbeth, 'mean men' and 'painting in blood', which also figure in *The Violinist*, are being 'fired'.



Kitaj has crossed out, added and changed words on the Penguin covers to suit his purposes. For instance, the word 'poets' in Hugh Sykes Davies's title *The Poets and their Critics* has become 'painter', and underneath Kitaj has added: 'Manet to Kitaj'. On the composite book cover devised by Kitaj, *Capital Punishment, The Revenger's Tragedy*, the subtitle of which is *The Society takes Revenge*, Kitaj has inserted 'Ron' instead of 'Society'. Similarly, beneath *Men without Women* Kitaj has inscribed 'Golden Lion 1995', i.e., the prize for the best work awarded him by the Venice Biennale just after Sandra's death and dubbed by the critics 'a Pyrrhic victory'.<sup>159</sup> Kitaj combines that phrase with the phrase 'Golden Lion', and inserts the result into the book title *Men without Women*, thus creating yet another association to the sense of emptiness caused by the death of Sandra.<sup>160</sup>



All of the books sport Kitaj's name in addition to or substituting for those of the original authors. From left to right the various versions of his signature are 'R.B. Kitaj', 'Ron', 'Ronald' or simply 'K', as on the cover of *Dialogue with Death*, echoing Franz Kafka's literary protagonist 'K' of *The Trial*.<sup>161</sup> Kitaj is extremely particular about his name and its use. He generally signs his works 'Kitaj' or 'R.B. Kitaj', and wants to be called simply 'Kitaj', as if it were his given name. Signing some of his works 'Ron' or 'Ronald' may be allusion to Van Gogh, who also frequently signed his works simply 'Vincent'.



Across the top edge of the canvas a banner runs with the inscription 'art is the escape from personality', one of T.S. Eliot's aphorisms. Kitaj has interfered with it, though, exchanging 'from' with 'to', crossing out 'T.S. Eliot' and substituting his own name instead. This allows him to publicise his artistic programme, elaborated in *Sandra Two* and on which this installation is also based. It goes: 'Art is the escape to personality'. A razor is attached to the canvas together with a handout bearing the words 'protest and survive'. And it is in just such a spirit of protest that Kitaj is hitting back at his critics. At times these attacks have an ironic tone, as exemplified by the dripping penis and its explanatory caption, 'geriatric prostate drip'. The other penis, in the shadow of his own, is inscribed: 'Nice guys finish last'. But the work evinces tenderness and vulnerability with the outline of a weeping angel in Sandra's profile integrated into Kitaj's body bearing a quote from Celan, 'I stand with you', together with the expression Picasso used for his lover Eva Gouel in some of his cubist works: 'Ma jolie'.



On the forehead of the critic-monster Kitaj has drawn a face, an unkempt, bearded, unhealthy-looking face, with blood-shot eyes staring in the direction of the figures on the right hand side of the canvas. The face resembles Kitaj's self-portraits from the 1980s and 1990s, like *Self Portrait (Vermilion Sweater)* (1992–94, ill. 67). It also bears a resemblance to the numerous portraits Vincent Van Gogh did of himself in Paris around 1887–88, about which the Dutch art historian Jan Hulsker says: 'The look is that of a person who is fearful or suspicious'.<sup>162</sup> Van Gogh was going through a crisis of his own at the time and shortly thereafter would leave Paris for good. A picture postcard of Van Gogh's *Skull with burning cigarette* (c. 1886, ill. 69) is pinned onto the canvas beside the monster's





forehead. The actual portrait hangs in the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam, a place Kitaj loved visiting while living in London. A skull in profile, possibly also inspired by Van Gogh's images of skulls, is part of the work *London Bus* (1996, ill. 44)<sup>164</sup> illustrated in *Sandra Two*. Van Gogh's name is also involved in *Sandra Three*, as mentioned above, where it is written alongside the title and Sandra's image.



The choice of colours for *Killer-Critic*, the powerful reds, yellows, browns and black, underscore the contents, and recalls the palette Kitaj employed in the *Germania* series. In places, however, the oil is applied in thin, almost translucent layers, reminiscent of his early works from the 1970s and 80s. The rapid, apparently random strokes in evidence beneath the layers of paint bring to mind his 1990s 'painting-drawings'.<sup>165</sup> The areas of collage and the incorporated quotes point even further back, to works from the early 1960s.<sup>166</sup> *Killer-Critic* thus summarises in formal terms Kitaj's styles over the thirty years of his European sojourn.

## 5.5 Interviews and reviews



The press were as alive to this occasion as to that of the Tate retrospective in 1994. This time, however, Kitaj granted fewer interviews – only three in fact: one to Charlotte Wiggins for the Royal Academy's own publication; one to Lucinda Brendon of *The Sunday Telegraph*; and one to Andrew Lambirth of *The Independent*.<sup>167</sup> While the pre-Tate interviews had focused on Kitaj's life and work and his place in the history of Western art; these interviews concentrate on two main topics, the poor reviews garnered by the Tate retrospective and Kitaj's hatred of the critics and desire to get back at them. Kitaj now had an opportunity to give his side of the story, to express his sense of hurt as well as anger and in the interview with Charlotte Wiggins he sets out to explain why he started the magazine and how Modernist magazines like *Partisan Review*, *Dissent* and the *New York Surrealists' View* shaped his views on culture as a young artist. Marcel Duchamp, from whom Kitaj had 'stolen' the title of the work, had published his readymades in precisely that type of magazine, he says. So it is not unnatural to make editions of a magazine where he can express his thoughts on art by pictorial and written means.

While the failure of his London friends to rally round was obviously a disappointment to Kitaj, he felt even more betrayed by the city that let its critical establishment behave, in Kitaj's opinion, so dishonourably. As he says to Wiggins, London has no Zola to raise the alarm. Attacks Kitaj once attributed to British anti-Semitism he now feels are also due to insidious xenophobia. Kitaj also mentions the constant efforts of the critics to redefine the School of London as a Jewish clique. And to Lambirth he says: 'It's closed. The Brits don't want anything like a School of Paris or a School of NY. It's one of the many things some assholes hate me for.'<sup>168</sup>

When the exhibition opened, the Fleet Street kettle soon started boiling again. Between 27 May and 28 June 1997 the major papers published more than twenty features – on some days there were as many as three of them in the same paper. They all commented on Kitaj's contribution to the summer exhibition.<sup>169</sup> The pieces articulate in general a sense of shock over the sharp tone of the installation, of which they give detailed descriptions. Most of the critics dwelt on the 1994 retrospective and the *Sandra* series and its reception, leaving less space to address the current exhibition. Quite a few

of the erstwhile Tate reviewers also wrote about Sandra Three, and it is their contributions I would like to explore here.

Brian Sewell, who in 1994 was one of the least enthusiastic critics, is now even less encouraging.<sup>170</sup> He has little praise for the summer exhibition in general, which he feels the public should approach much as they would a slightly higher class of car boot sale. Of all the rubbish on display, he writes, one piece takes the prize as worst picture of the year. Predictably, it is Kitaj's Sandra Three.<sup>171</sup> Sewell writes:

This disorderly, even hysterical accumulation of book covers, photographs, prints, texts, and wretched paintings [...] is a polemic against art critics whom he accuses of anti-semitism. It seems that in 1994 [...] some of us found him gravely flawed, incompetent indeed, and dared to say so. Kitaj, however, does not permit impertinence, and as the adverse criticism mounted, accused its authors of prejudice against the Jews. [...] Why, if the fathers of the Royal Academy think of him kindly, do they allow him to expose himself to ridicule and make the mania worse?<sup>172</sup>

William Packer was not of the most polemical critics in 1994, when he felt the narrative content of the works to be more a distracting element and the texts more of a justification for than explanation of the works.<sup>173</sup> Both Packer and Sewell refresh the mind of the reader of what they wrote then, while Packer protests his innocence of any anti-Semitic wrongdoings. But he feels he is being put in the same boat as Kitaj's enemies: 'I don't believe I am a murderous anti-Semite, but to him I am.'<sup>174</sup> He says the Sandra project, including its latest edition Sandra Three, is a mission impossible: 'It takes up an entire wall and is made of two canvases extended by a row of texts, collages, and other illustrations of the general theme, which is that criticism, all criticism, any criticism, is inimical to art, not to say life.'

The work itself, in Packer's opinion, reflects Kitaj's old strengths but also something new, i.e., Kitaj the Expressionist. But this is totally overshadowed by Kitaj's begrudging attitude:

He allows us to ignore, or forget, quite how good, how interesting, how true an artist he is. If I wish he would stop the nonsense, it is only for his own and his work's sake. He has hijacked the academy to his own selfish purpose, which is bad manners. It is all too unfortunate.

John McEwen wrote for The Sunday Telegraph in 1994. The Tate show, he wrote then, reminded him of 'a naval-gazer's album of me, me, me', rounding off with a Charlie Brownian exclamation: 'Good Grief!'.<sup>175</sup> He writes now that although he understands Kitaj's deep sense of bereavement, blaming the critics for her death is like blaming the football if a supporter dies during the match. He realises that 'grief is deranging',<sup>176</sup> and feels that the Royal Academy is to blame for giving into to his megalomania. It is neither to their credit nor to Kitaj's.

Richard Cork, who had given a surprisingly upbeat reception to the Tate show,<sup>177</sup> sees in Kitaj's Sandra Three a 'Lear-like howl of rage [...] a deeply embittered farewell from an artist (who) blames hostile reviewers for the tragic death of his wife. [...] Far from tending his wounds in private, he here takes a very public and gory revenge.'<sup>178</sup> Cork defends the right of his colleagues to say what

they want, but adds that Kitaj would have been better served had he had simply kept quiet. It is sad, Cork says, that his grief should cause him to adopt such violent expressive means.

The Daily Telegraph's Richard Dorment, while not the most arrogant of reviewers in 1994,<sup>179</sup> was not among the most impressed either. He is now left marvelling at Kitaj's high-pitched reaction: 'I keep asking myself why he gives a hoot of what critics think of his work. For though you'd never guess it from the carry-on at the RA, he is at the pinnacle of his profession. His work sells for huge sums.'<sup>180</sup> Lots of eminent artists – Freud, Auerbach and, for that matter, even Picasso – have had their works torn apart by critics without it affecting their subsequent work. It's a price you have to pay for a lively debate, rather than the boring press the USA is saddled with, says Dorment.

The only contributor to support what he feels is Kitaj's obvious right to defend himself, and who picks up where the discussion of the role of the critic left off the year before, is The Times's Melvyn Bragg. He starts off by asking: 'Does Kitaj make cowards of us all? His venomous riposte to critics whose harsh words on his work, he claims, hastened the death of his wife, has thrown the relationship between artists and critics in the starkest way possible.'<sup>181</sup> Bragg feels Kitaj has put his finger on a publicly unacknowledged problem between artist and critic, adding that he has never met an artist who in private did not speak ill of critics. In public, however, there is an unwritten law that the critic shall have the last word. That is certainly not the case in the literary world, Bragg says, where it is common for writers to discuss each others' works, enriching their critical insights by drawing on their own writing experience. It would be interesting, says Bragg, to hear what artists might have to say about their own or others' work. Not only would it shed new light on a work, criticism generally would become more open and amenable to debate: 'Need artists be forced into the position of the last imperialists, the only people left in Britain who must command the posture of the stiff upper lip? [...] the idea of a feature called Artists Bites Back could be very welcome.'

Alan Riding diagnoses the conflict in New York Times:

An artist is meant to create, a critic is meant to criticize and no one expects them to be happy bedfellows. But occasionally conflicts between artists and critics come to dominate the art and the criticism. [...] The war has become the event.<sup>182</sup>

Somebody who testifies to the accuracy of Riding's analysis is Waldemar Januszczak. Relations between Januszczak and Kitaj reached war-like proportions with the former writing in 1994 that a picture should be worth more than a thousand words, as long as they were not Ronald Kitaj's.<sup>183</sup> Januszczak's silence is his only comment on the present exhibition, though he did mention to a fellow art critic – who went on to publish it – that if Kitaj was unable to take the criticism he ought to move to Italy where you can pay critics to write sympathetic reviews.<sup>184</sup> Januszczak is not one to let an opportunity to have a crack at Kitaj in public pass him by, however and in a review he wrote at the end of July that year of an exhibition of works by the British landscape and portrait artist Joseph Wright of Derby (1734 – 1797) – a 'petit maitre' who, in Januszczak's opinion, compares favourably with contemporaries such as Reynolds – he says:

Every nation has them. They provide the bulk of that nation's art. [...] there are two distinct types



of petit maitre. The first kind believes himself to be an artist of premier importance, and is only revealed to be an irretrievable minor one at a later date. I am thinking of Landseer, or Sir Godfrey Kneller, or, in our times, Ron Kitaj. [...] The latter type is the painter known, so disparagingly, as Wright of Derby.<sup>185</sup>

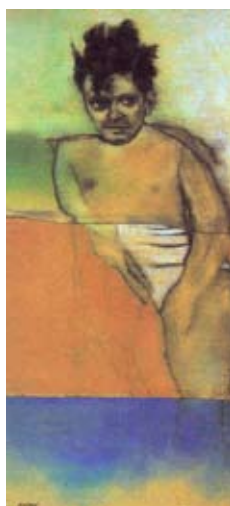
What is it that makes Januszcak write like this about one of the leading artists of the twentieth century? Where does this animosity come from? It is interesting to note the need of critics to defend their published views and how some take roundabout routes like Januszcak to get at Kitaj.<sup>186</sup> It is as if the personal tone of the Sandra series makes people feel they have been singled out for criticism. Gone is the ironic tone of the Tate critics. Gone, too, is the discussion on the role of the critic that emerged in the wake of Sandra One. What remains is a dialogue between critic and artist, which as far as the former is concerned, is now more defensive than offensive. It is as if Kitaj now has the upper hand and that what he said to Charlotte Wiggins, that he writes and paints better than them, has been vindicated. Did Kitaj deliberately plan to provoke the critics with this painting, to explore the essence of revenge? And is it a step further in his aim to create a Jewish identity – including the Diaspora and vengeance – as he did in Sandra Two?

## 6 KITAJ`S VOICE: THE SANDRA SERIES

A distinctive feature of Sandra One, Sandra Two and Sandra Three is Sandra herself. Along with her portrait there are numerous pictorial and textual references. It is as if Sandra's strength lives on in Kitaj, acting as a vital inner force. Sandra One gave expression to Kitaj's anguish and rage. And, indeed, there were indications in the critics' response to this first edition of Kitaj's avant-garde magazine that they considered it more of a reaction to a personal tragedy than a work of art. But what happened subsequently was that their culpability in Sandra's death, and responsibility in relation to artists generally, became a debated topic in the papers. Sandra Two differs from the magazine's first edition inasmuch as it shows that Kitaj had survived the initial shock of Sandra's death, and is attempting to work through his loss and pain. At the same time he continues his personal vendetta with the British critics, culminating in Sandra Three. But interpreting the Sandra series only along these lines would, however, be too simplistic given the nature of the artist we are dealing with.

Sandra Two and Sandra Three reveal hence an artist who, as a grieving widower and object of critical censure, is trying to elaborate decade-long projects. I sense that he wants to express through the Sandra series a personal art related to Jewishness and the Diaspora, to mix textual and pictorial elements in art, to freely translate literary – especially Modernist – elements into a visual idiom. He is beginning after Sandra's death, to show an interest in a new artistic theme, revenge. In what follows I want to gather the threads and trace the development of these projects in Kitaj's oeuvre, of which I consider Sandra Two and Sandra Three very important elements. As Sandra One, I feel, in terms of idiom, stands alone in Kitaj's production, I shall spend less time on this work.

### 6.1 A personal idiom – the Diaspora



The Diaspora runs deep in Kitaj's work. He himself believes it has exerted an influence on his work since he arrived in Catalonia in the 1960s. As he told Julián Ríos, 'I was a kid stranded on the strand of Modernismo.'<sup>187</sup> Familiarising himself with the history of the Spanish civil war and Catalonian culture created one of the building blocks of his Diaspora project. Kitaj would become strongly concerned with the Catalonian struggle for liberation, comparing the repression of the Catalonians to that of the Jews.

Cézanne's bathing boys were further key influences on his expression of the Diaspora. He told Timothy Hyman in a 1980 interview that 'I'd like to do Cézanne over again after Auschwitz.'<sup>188</sup> Cézanne's images of bathers were metaphors of the alienated individual.<sup>189</sup> Towards the end of the 1970s Kitaj made a series of pastels of bathing boys with typical Jewish features like the long, curly side locks and with titles like *Bather (Torsion)* (1978, ill. 70) and *Bather (Psychotic Boy)* (1980, ill. 71). He also made at this time a number of character portraits on tall canvases: *The Arabist* (1975–76, ill. 2), *The Orientalist* (1975–76, ill. 8), *The Hispanist* (1977–78, ill. 16), etc. all of which expressed a form of Diaspora sensibility. In the last years of the 1970s these character portraits started to resemble self-portraits in disguise, as in *The Sensualist* (1973–84, ill. 72)<sup>191</sup> and *Self-Portrait as a Woman* (1984, ill. 75).<sup>192</sup>

In a letter to Marco Livingstone Kitaj wrote in 1983: 'I happen to be in the grip of what I suppose to be great changes in my thinking and, I hope in my practice, which are related to what may be called autobiographical or confessional directions in my art.'<sup>193</sup> Two years later at a show arranged by the



Marlborough Gallery it was possible to see what these changes meant in practice. In the catalogue Kitaj expanded on what he had said to Livingstone:

A tremendous lesson began to form itself for my art: if it was Jewishness which condemned one and not the Jewish religion, then Jewishness may be a complex of qualities, a force of some kind; and might be a presence in art as in life. Can it be a force one declares in one's art? Would it be a force one intends for one's art? Would it be a force others attribute for better or for worse?<sup>194</sup>

Included in the exhibition were works destined to become icons of Kitaj's quest for his Jewish identity, among them Cecil Court, London, WC2 (The Refugees) (1983–84, ill. 76), The Jewish Rider (1984–85, ill. 77) and Germania (The Tunnel) (1985, ill. 78).

Cecil Court, London, WC2 (The Refugees) depicts one of the small bookshop-lined streets near Charing Cross Road – an area Kitaj loved to wander round – full of refugees both of the fictitious and authentic kind. We make out Walter Kitaj, Kitaj's then recently deceased step-father, standing alongside Joe Singer, Kitaj's Diaspora alter ego. Seligman, renowned for his excellent art bookshop, enters from the wings clutching a bunch of flowers. Filling the painting's lower plane, Kitaj lies reading on a Le Corbusier chaise longue. Describing how the work came about, Kitaj says:

I think I had a lot of experience of refugees from the Germans, and that is how this picture came about. [...] They were largely cast from Yiddish Theater, which I only knew at second hand from my maternal grandparents, but fell upon in Kafka, who gives over a hundred loving pages of his diaries to a grand passion for these shabby troupes, despised by aesthetes and Hebraists who were revolted by them.<sup>195</sup>

Yiddish theatre is full of mysteries, sensual undercurrents and a slightly daft form of humour. Its absurdity inspired both this and subsequent works. The prostitute, moreover, is an important figure in Yiddish theatre. In this work she lies, legs apart, in a scenic foreground bustling with people and movement, and a beckoning, virtually unpopulated street, redolent of a tunnel or chimney.

From a thematic point of view The Jewish Rider (1984–85, ill. 77) reflects an earlier work, The Jew. Etc. (1976–79, ill. 79)<sup>196</sup> which depicts a solitary figure lost in thought in a train compartment. The Jewish Rider is based formally on Rembrandt's The Polish Rider (c. 1655, ill. 80), considered by some to be a heroic portrait of a Christian crusader.<sup>197</sup> The outlines of a horse are visible next to the male figure – actually a portrait of Michael Podro – whose seated posture resembles that of the Polish rider. The interior is painted in clear, powerful colours, juxtaposed by brisk, expressive strokes that evoke Van Gogh's palette. The train in Kitaj's work is symbolic of the wandering Jew – alienated and homeless – and the Jew as victim, en route to the extermination camps. Beyond the train window we see a barren landscape, the colour of baked mud, and in it a cross and smoking chimney, Kitaj's symbols for the Christian and Jewish histories of suffering; both symbols often appear side by side in Kitaj's work. The right hand side of The Jewish Rider canvas is dominated by a corridor, which again evokes the notion of a chimney or tunnel and seems to exert the same pull on the viewer as the alley in Cecil Court. At the end of the corridor there is a man in uniform, a conductor perhaps? He holds a whip aloft, an indication of authority? The representation connotes other times and other authorities,





prison guards possibly?

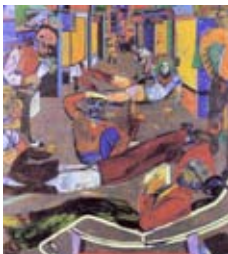


In *Germania (The Tunnel)* (1985, ill. 78) Kitaj renders himself with a slight hunch, an older, short-sighted father trailing behind his two-year-old son Max. The figure of a mother holding an infant, with her back to us, is to the extreme right of the canvas, echoing Matisse's series of bronze reliefs *Back I–IV* (1909–1929, ill. 81). The settings in which this small and apparently contented family finds itself evokes chilling memories of the corridors at Auschwitz which led prisoners to the gas chambers. One of Kitaj's legs is formed as a chimney; the same form seems to encapsulate the figure of the woman. The pictorial space surrounding the figures is based on Van Gogh's works *Corridor in the Asylum*, (1898, ill. 82) from the hospital at St. Rémy, and *Prisoners Exercising* (after Gustav Doré) (also known as *Prisoners' Round*, 1885, ill. 83). But it also points to Anselm Kiefer's *Shulamite* (1983, ill. 84), despite the different colour scheme. Amidst the harshness of the work's message, Kitaj is unable to check his sense of pride in and affection for his small child, ambling away on chubby legs, nappy remnants in tow, and reading before he can even walk! All of which reinforces the predatory atmosphere of setting, of course, highlighting the threat under which unknowing Jewish families often lived.



Kitaj produced a number of works in the 1980s and 1990s – including the *Germania* series – where he tackles the fate of the Jews and the Holocaust, often incorporating a self-portrait. It is as if he is accepting from now on the implications of his Jewishness and attempting to involve himself artistically in all things Jewish, including the Holocaust. To Kitaj it seems that the Holocaust is the most important element in an understanding of the typically Jewish, and he creates symbols associated with the Holocaust, i.e., the tunnel, the train and the chimney – often intertwined with the cross.<sup>199</sup>

In *Sandra Three* the installation's various components are fastened onto two oblong, tunnel-like panels, painted in powerful yellows and reds, the same colours that mark the corridor in *Rider*. In *Germania (The Tunnel)* a chimney-like form surrounds the female figure. In *Killer-Critic* the smoking chimney is alluded to as an association to what also could be Manet's prostheses. The palette used in these 1980s pictures is robust and the painting expressive and poignant. The works are palpably different from the almost mural-like paintings of the 1970s, with their delicate, translucent layers of paint.



In his chapter in the anthology *Critical Kitaj*, Giles Peaker discusses Kitaj's approach to symbols. He bases his analysis on another work of Kitaj, *Desk Murder* (formerly: *The Third Department (A Test Study)*) (1970–84, ill. 85).<sup>200</sup> The title *Desk Murder* was not used until many years after its completion.<sup>201</sup> The painting depicts an empty flat – a dark, middle-class, late 1800s interior – reminiscent of rooms in Kafka's novels. We know, partly thanks to the title, that something of a criminal nature either has already transpired or is in the making. To give a room a crime scene ambience, a particular visual perspective is required, that of a detective, a person who interprets allegories as evidence of a crime. Peaker illustrates his case by noting that Paul de Man defines allegory as entailing temporality, a temporal pause lodged between meaning and sign, or possibly more likely between sign and signified.<sup>202</sup> It is in this unoccupied space between sign and signified that the allegory can be read or decoded. Walter Benjamin writes of the tendency of allegorical language to solidify, to be imagined and to form an emblem. Allegory has an air of nostalgia, a desire for a fusion with a past: 'Within



allegory nothing is what it is, yet allegory as itself a sign, does promise a coincidence of sign and origin.<sup>203</sup> Peaker then relates this to Kitaj's oeuvre:

It often seems as if Kitaj's deployment of allegory is intended to hold on to or reinstate history. Sometimes clutching at the shards of that which is disappearing, at other times following Warburg on the persistence of visual symbols in the social memory. Kitaj's work can appear to lay a claim on the present in the name of the past.<sup>204</sup>



Kitaj's use of symbols – such as the Auschwitz chimney, supposedly an embodiment of a Jewish experience – Peaker finds unsuccessful. Behind this mute fabric lies nothing other than Kitaj himself. It is Kitaj that has to elucidate what these symbols stand for, much as he found it necessary to add Desk Murder to the original title of *The Third Department (A Test Study)* to create the right associations. Peaker asks if Kitaj, despite his clear objectives, has not failed to achieve his desires, that is, to meld present and past by means of allegory. Peaker also inquires why Kitaj is disinclined to allow for different interpretative possibilities.



In contrast to Peaker, Juliet Steyn maintains in "Painting another: other than painting", in *Other than Identity: The Subject, Politics and Art*, that Kitaj's use of symbols such as the 'chimney' can embrace a range of associations and mentions by way of example de Chirico, an industrial plant, a crematorium, the Auschwitz extermination factory – and that it could also be conceived as an attack on Christianity. She says that the symbols of Jewish identity in his works from the 1970s and 1980s can only be understood as negations of Christian symbols, and, hence, a manifestation of the age-old conflict between Judaism and Christianity. Jewish identity as shaped by Kitaj in his works has, she argues, an a priori existence, formed and stamped by anti-Semitism:



When [Kitaj] utters 'Jew' he seems to mean 'victim': someone trapped, someone imprisoned in and by an identity. Yet 'Jew' is itself unrepresentable: it is only through the title of a picture, such as *Jewish Rider* that we can assume that we are looking at a real Jew.<sup>205</sup>



Kitaj's *First Diasporist Manifesto*, published in 1989, becomes part of this autobiographical Jewish 'project', whose title also harks back to the Surrealist manifesto, which had such an impact on Kitaj's oeuvre.<sup>206</sup> He is attempting to express his credo as painter and human being. Kitaj characterises the manifesto in the interview included as part of *Sandra Two* as 'an unstable book about an unstable subject ... like an unfinished painting I let out too soon',<sup>207</sup> and compares it with the *Sandra* series which he describes as an 'imperfect, ongoing document of a modern art'.<sup>208</sup> Kitaj writes in the prologue to the manifesto:

Painting is not my life. My life is my life. Painting is a great idea I carry from place to place. It is an idea full of ideas, like a refugee's suitcase [...] I am a dislocated pretender. I play at being a refugee, at studying, at painting. All this is pretence in the sense Picasso meant when he said: 'The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies.'<sup>209</sup>

Kitaj compares life and art as two identical things, and refers to himself as a painter of the Diaspora; this he explains as living and painting in two worlds at the same time. It's like somebody who feels





alienated anywhere and everywhere, he says. This alienation manifests itself as a mood in his work, as a commentary to – or interpretation of – a fleeting restlessness that comprises a vital trait of his personality.

So although Kitaj's Diaspora works evolve from art as such, their most important source is Kitaj's life as a Diaspora Jew – or as an American Jew living in England. Rootlessness, according to Kitaj, is as typically modern as it is typically Jewish, and, moreover, as the Diaspora painting is avant-garde. The Diaspora painting is hence like life in the Diaspora: erratic and exacting. That said, Kitaj contrasts this inconsistency with the claim set out in the Zohar<sup>210</sup> to the effect that the Qu'ran changes its meaning every year, and suggests that the divine may reside precisely in the Diaspora. Kitaj points out that the Diaspora contains not only Jews but blacks, gays, Asians and Arabs etc. They are united in being despised, disliked, distrusted – at best tolerated. They stand as a universal enigma, as does the Diaspora painting.



Sandra Two is connected to the First Diasporist Manifesto inasmuch as both are text based. The illustrative content of both is presented in black and white, irrespective of whether the original source is in colour or not. Rather than an independent expression it becomes more of an illustration to the text. Some of the pictures in Sandra Two bear directly on the manifesto, such as the portrait of Heinrich Heine, who Kitaj characterises in the manifesto as an important messenger of the Diaspora.



In a 1995 article in *The Burlington Magazine* Michael Podro pondered the autobiographical tendencies in Kitaj's work: 'This biographical character [...] is not a matter of illustration – although it is sometimes that as well – but of giving painting a certain kind of voice,'<sup>211</sup> and continues:

The way in which Kitaj's painting asserts his personal identity through the interpretation of disparate discourse is matched by the role [...] of imagining himself from outside, not only through views of himself but through striving to interiorise, to adjust himself in his own mind to other artist.<sup>212</sup>



In my opinion it is as if Kitaj, despite the autobiographical undercurrent running through his works, is mediating his Jewishness, his Diaspora, through a personal interpretation of the works of other artists. He uses them virtually as a 'filter' for his Jewish project. And the consequence is the creation of a split or divide between himself and the ideas he wants to communicate. It makes his expression more universal as well. This is the big difference between Sandra One and the subsequent editions of the magazine. Sandra One is unfiltered. Sandra One can also be associated in terms of content if not form with automatic writing and Abstract Expressionism for which the young Kitaj nurtured such an interest. Later editions of the magazine seek to express mature thoughts in a mature form.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that Kitaj, at the same time as he seeks to identify himself with the Diaspora, with the outsider, is so self-assured when it comes to his place in contemporary art. On the one hand, as he says to the writer Julyán Ríos: 'I like Nietzsche's definition of art best: Art is the desire to be different, the desire to be elsewhere,'<sup>213</sup> on the other, however, he says in the Sandra Two interview: 'When I saw one of my most savage hatemongers on TV, explaining British Art, sticking his finger into a pool of sump oil [...] declaring the pool (as Chinless-Wonder<sup>214</sup> looks at his oily finger) as the greatest British Art since sliced bread, I knew I must have got something right at the



TATE.<sup>215</sup> Kitaj, it seems, needs a dual position – or gestalt – both as an insider and outsider to be able to define that other position he forms through his work and his remarks about his art.

In his 1988 collection of his essays dealing with the construction of stereotypes in fiction, medical literature and art Sander Gilman, professor of Germanic studies, comparative literature, and psychiatry at the University of Chicago included a description of Kitaj. Gilman sees Kitaj as an artist who has spent his working life making such role figures and who, through his ever more intimate association with Jewishness, has sought to create a 'Diasporic I' which at the same time is an 'I' that happens to be one of our leading artists.<sup>216</sup> Gilman compares Kitaj's reading of 'Diaspora' with Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's analysis of a concept of their own coinage, 'nomadic life', perceived as a sense of constant and creative exclusion. To attain this 'exclusion' essential to a 'Jewish consciousness', it is necessary to define oneself as a player on a wider stage. For Kitaj, this wider stage is the British art scene where, according to Gilman, he exploits his status as the founder of the School of London to impress on the other members his artistic philosophy. Kitaj describes the London School as a group of outsiders, 'some of whom are Diaspora Jews and some of whom may wander in a sexual Diaspora.'<sup>217</sup> But in alluding to Lucian Freud, Franz Auerbach, and Leon Kossoff as Jews,<sup>218</sup> and David Hockney and Francis Bacon as gay, he is simultaneously referring to some of the most important contemporary artists in the British Isles. As Kitaj, they are both insiders and outsiders, and, as such, 'allies' that confirm his own dual role.



Kitaj's realisation in the 1980s, says Gilman, that Jewishness is a state of being rather than something one grows into, was a turning point in his life. Kitaj claims that irrespective of their origins, their experiences, all Jews share a common heritage and affinity independent of time and place. Crucial in this context was discovering how Jews were selected for transport to the concentration camps, with no reference to faith or specific Jewish way of life. The sole marker was ethnic identity.<sup>219</sup> Sigmund Freud, to whom Kitaj refers in both Sandra Two and Sandra Three, describes also being Jewish as commensurate with sharing 'many obscure emotional forces, which were the more powerful the less they could be expressed in words, as well as clear consciousness of inner identity, the safe privacy of a common mental construction.'<sup>220</sup>

It is no coincidence that Kitaj's reading of Adorno influenced his quest for a Jewish identity – for many artists in the post-war era, the following would become a key text on questions concerning the contexts in which the Holocaust may be represented and by whom:

By being neutralized and processed, traditional culture in its entirety today becomes insignificant [...] Even the most extreme consciousness of the catastrophe threatens to degenerate into drivel. Cultural criticism exists in confrontation with the final level of the dialectic of culture and barbarism: to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that also gnaws at the knowledge which states why it has become impossible to write poems today.<sup>221</sup>

This was written with non-Jewish, West German poets in mind. But could a Jew render the Holocaust, and if so, how and in which context? For Kitaj, Adorno was demanding a dual ransom, i.e., the ability to represent an invisible world of memory which at the same time represents the Holocaust as a precondition for his own appropriation of the role of 'Diaspora painter'.



For Kitaj, says Gilman, the specifically Jewish entails a conflict between a settled life, which in general would be true of an American or British Jew, and a nomadic existence, a characteristic of the Diaspora Jew. Being a Jew for Kitaj is characterised by his sense of guilt for having spent a safe childhood in the US, in blissful ignorance of the dreadful violations being perpetrated at the time in Europe. But his Jewishness is also coloured by the fact that he knows of these violations thanks to his step-father's successful escape to freedom and from what his mother's friends told while he was still a child.

Kitaj's various roles appear in his paintings and in his texts. He frequently mixes fact and fiction and the distinction between the two is relatively blurred. An example is *Self-Portrait as a Woman*, (1984, ill. 75), the subject of which is an Austrian woman who, because she had slept with a Jew, was forced to walk the streets of Vienna naked, bearing a sign advertising her crime. The title of the work, along with Kitaj's 'preface', testifies to his desire to identify with the woman, but also gives rise to uncertainty as to whether this is a real experience or fiction:



My name is Hedwig Backer and I'm still alive, more's the pity. When the author of this painting was a nineteen-year-old student in Vienna in 1951, I was his landlady and for about six months we were also lovers [...] In order to save on heating, Ronald and I used to bathe together and one Sunday, in the bathtub, I told him the story of my little ordeal as we were clasped together in the tepid water. What a great idea for a painting, he said.<sup>222</sup>



Kitaj, in the *Killer-Critic*, sets himself beside Manet, and both are firing at the same critic-monster. As mentioned above, Kitaj placed the Jewish character for K where his head would have been. Manet plays a role here as a sort of alter ego to Kitaj, confirming the latter's actions by repeating it. At the same time, this alter ego/Manet figure also alludes to Manet's own skirmishes with the critics. Yet another reference is to the execution of Maximilian in Manet's interpretation, which Manet in turn built on Goya's work from the Napoleonic wars. As in *Self-Portrait as a Woman*, actual historical events unite with fictitious and personal episodes independent of time and place.

But even when portraying his own life Kitaj has constructed roles. His father disappeared soon after Kitaj's birth, after which the two never met.<sup>223</sup> His mother, Jeanne Brooks, of Russian-Jewish extraction, remarried a Jewish chemist, a refugee from Vienna, named Walter Kitaj. Kitaj adopted the surname and that is how he prefers to be addressed. In his youth, Kitaj's mother very nearly married a man called Joe Singer. Kitaj remembers him vaguely, and it is this Joe Singer that appears in Kitaj's work as the emblematic Jew, the metaphor of the Diaspora, a person Kitaj could despatch to times and places he himself had never experienced. Joe Singer becomes a sort of parallel to Kitaj's recurring literary figures, re-appearing in works like *The Jew* etc. (1979, ill. 79)<sup>224</sup>, *Bad Faith* (Riga) (Joe Singer Taking Leave of his Fiancee), (1980, ill. 88), *The Listener*, (Joe Singer in Hiding) (1980, ill. 89), *Cecil Court, London, WC2*, (*The Refugees*) (1983–84, ill. 76)<sup>225</sup> and *Germania* (Joe Singer's last Room) (1987, ill. 90). In each of these works we learn ever more about Joe Singer and his past. One of the pioneers in this use of a relatively permanent dramatis personae is the Jewish writer Philip Roth, whose alter ego Zuckermann features in all of his novels.<sup>226</sup> Another is Kafka's 'K', an archetype of the human condition. Joe Singer often appears wearing Kitaj's hearing aid, a further symbol of the alter ego. On the whole, then, these various characters make up a variegated picture



of the artist and his ideas.

For Kitaj the figurative idiom has always been the right idiom for subjects associated with the Diaspora, though at times, that stance has not been unproblematic. Jewish art has traditionally been associated with a non-figurative art because expressing oneself figuratively was considered a sin, as competing against God. Nor were there many Jewish role models in the figurative tradition for Kitaj to take after. At the time Chagall remained the most adamant practitioner of a figurative Jewish art. But he went on to become a corrupted 'Riviera painter', according to Kitaj, who prefers to keep Chagall at arm's length,<sup>227</sup> despite the references to Chagall's works in his own, for example in *If Not, Not* (ill. 4).<sup>228</sup> Many Jewish artists work non-figuratively, however, and although Kitaj feels related in spirit to painters, like Mark Rothko, he maintains that figuration remains the best way of expressing the specifically Jewish. He wants to develop a form of Jewish expression unlike that found in Jewish museum artefacts, which, he says, are intensely boring. He wants to get to the core of Jewishness, to express it with forms already available in the history of Western art.

## 6.2 Literary influences and Modernism – a literary content?



At the start of his career Kitaj was as interested in literary points of reference as in artistic ones. Speaking of this period of his life, he said to David Hockney in 1977: 'In a way I regret that Pound and Eliot often had more of an influence on my pictures than previous painting did. Sometimes I think I would be further on in my maturity as a painter if I had been moved by Rembrandt when I was eighteen as I was by Pound.'<sup>229</sup>

Kitaj's first show – called *Pictures with Commentaries, Pictures without Commentaries* – was held at the Marlborough Gallery in 1963. The inspiration to add explanations either within the pictures or as accompanying texts came directly from T.S. Eliot's explanatory footnotes in *The Waste Land*. The 'footnote' to the exhibited painting *The Murder of Rosa Luxemburg* (1960, ill. 91) was included in the catalogue:

The prophetic murder of the remarkable woman Harold Laski called one of the greatest Socialist thinkers of our time is described in hand-written notes which occur in the upper right-hand corner of the painting. The profile in the car window bears some resemblance to Field-Marshal Count von Moltke.<sup>230</sup>

Kitaj added further references to the books on Rosa Luxemburg and official sources on which he based the picture.

In a 1979 article in *Art International* Michael Podro discusses this work, and suggests that it must have been difficult for Kitaj to represent historical facts by pictorial means in the absence of a symbolic universe shared by both the painter and his public. Kitaj's response was to fill that vacuum by appending written commentaries which, in this early phase, were sometimes part of the work itself and sometimes included in the catalogue. He shows how Kitaj uses texts to fuse the pictures with his own fantasy world, often implying a Romantic agenda. During this period he made every effort to avoid pure aestheticism:

I say aiming his painting at these urgencies because he was clearly struggling to connect his intense and very sure figure drawing with the elements of a culture which had no ready connection to painting. Painting is unlike literature because language can be part of political action and at the same time saturated with complicated meaning.<sup>231</sup>



The art historian Norbert Lynton also sees in these early works an expression of what he terms 'Kitaj's Fork',<sup>232</sup> a desire on Kitaj's part to be both polemical and vague, public speaker and private commentator, to speak out and to keep quiet. A common feature of these early works is that painting and texts balance on the dividing line between the direct representation of ideas, on the one hand, and playing with them, on the other. The effect in some cases is to obscure the pictorial content, breaking it into fragments and making it so complex as to render coherent meaning virtually impossible. In later works, from the 1970s and 1980s, such as *Autumn of Central Paris (After Walter Benjamin)* (1972–73, ill. 92) – and even more in *If Not, Not* (1975, ill. 4) – Lynton and Podro agree that Kitaj displays a firmer grip. Despite the fragmentary composition and manifold associative possibilities, these later works seem to be the product of a more rounded conception. They are also considered to represent some of Kitaj's best work.

During a period straddling the 1960s and 1970s, Kitaj produced several lithographic series of prints with titles such as *Some Poets* and *In Our Time*,<sup>233</sup> which included portraits of poets Kitaj appreciated like Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley and Charles Olson. He found inspiration in his well-stocked library and used title pages either by copying them or just ripping them out. This type of motif, often used in his collages – we saw examples in *Sandra Two* – was abandoned in the 1970s.<sup>234</sup> In *Killer-Critic*, however, he returns to collage with the torn book covers, post cards and portraits in an effort to convey the meaning of the work.

In another article in *Critical Kitaj*, David Peters Corbett explores the relationship between word and image in Kitaj's works.<sup>235</sup> He argues that Kitaj brings out a tension – or conflict – between an experienced world, rendered by visual means, and a verbally conceived world which risks becoming authoritarian verbosity. For Corbett, the historian and art historian are examples of that type of authority inasmuch as they try to compel history to conform to an order and rationality it never possessed. He feels that Kitaj's intermeshing of textual and visual elements in his works might express a balance between comprehension and experience and in the process say something about history without subjecting it to an authoritarian interpretation. He notes Kitaj's efforts to make a historical painting:

R.B. Kitaj's ambitions as a painter were from an early stage to enter painting on the stage of history and make it meaningful as a register of experience and understanding. [...] Kitaj's intention is to extend art and history and to allow the work of art to express or apprehend on our behalf the realities of experience.<sup>236</sup>

Corbett then argues that Kitaj's oeuvre should be seen as a search for the most appropriate language – textual or visual – to express history and human experience. Kitaj's early works, says Corbett, express more of the struggle of that search, where the verbal element ran wild. Joining Podro and Lynton he argues that it was not until the 1970s, when Kitaj's interest in Jewishness was kindled and Modernism became his artistic frame of reference, that Kitaj found what he was looking for.<sup>237</sup>

Michael Peppiatt in *Connaissance des Arts* and Ken Johnson in *Art in America* both characterise this aspect of Kitaj's work. For Peppiatt, Kitaj's play with text and picture is an unrelenting reminder of the pictures' eccentricity. By means of an abundance of diversionary tactics, camouflaged references and other obstacles placed in front of the unsuspecting viewer, the works reflect the process of their commission. They resist a purely aesthetic experience – where image and viewer unite in harmony – they insist rather on being read, interpreted, requiring a visual effort to find a path through the labyrinth of intimations. Which is why, in Peppiatt's opinion, Kitaj's pictures succeed in being at once captivating, confusing and even irritating.<sup>238</sup>

Ken Johnson, in the aforementioned article in *Art in America*, argues that Kitaj's 'verbal undertaking' can seem selfish, as the literary quotes can seem pedantic and his apparent name dropping boastful. But Johnson argues that we need to investigate what might lie beneath this surface:

He often, as a result, seems to be making excessive claims for himself and his work. Once you get past the blustery surface, however, you find a very engaging and expansive artistic consciousness. Kitaj is a genuinely interesting thinker, and, judging by interviews in print, a spellbinding talker. But most crucial for Kitaj is the inextricable meshing of verbal and visual imagination. Indeed, his vision is only fully realized in the combined accumulation of words and pictures that he has generated over the years. [...] he is engaged in a never-ending struggle to reconcile the irreconcilable – the representational and the abstract, the visual and the verbal, male and female, life and death.<sup>239</sup>

Kitaj's project is to unite two basically irreconcilable means of expression. I count the Sandra series as an element of this project. In Kitaj's early works, the text was part of the imagery, often seeming to compete with the meanings of the visual matter, as Podro, Lynton and Corbett contend. From the 1970s on the text was presented as a 'preface' and hung beside the painting or included in the catalogue. These writers also agree that when this technique succeeds, the works have a unified quality, with image and text forming an amicable whole.

The pieces of text accompanying the Sandra series are either incorporated in the visual matter, as in Sandra One and Sandra Three, or are given equal or more weight than the visual matter, as in Sandra Two. It is as if Kitaj has regained the freedom to deploy the two devices as he feels fit. That a Modernist magazine should provide the spark that kindled the Sandra series may be part of the explanation. But that being so, they could hardly be characterised as works of art. Kitaj himself calls the series 'an ongoing document of a modern art.'<sup>240</sup> At the same time, Sandra One and Sandra Three have been exhibited as works of art, and should therefore be designated as such.<sup>241</sup> Are they literature, or are they art? Are they art in any sense of the word? Only one reviewer addressed the formal properties of *Killer-Critic*, declaring it to be Kitaj's first Expressionist work!<sup>242</sup>

Could one not also consider each instalment of the Sandra series as part of what, in time, may become a complete work, emulating the oft-used chapter-by-chapter appearance of Modernist novels? James Joyce, for instance, published *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in instalments in *The Egoist* before it appeared as a fully fledged novel in 1916. That being the case, one might well ask when the Sandra series will be considered complete. In addition, however, the Sandra series highlights a dilemma that has often puzzled art critics and others writing about Kitaj, and that is his

absolute refusal to conform to any particular theory, school or genre. Which makes him a veritable Modernist in the literary sense of the term!



Links have been drawn between Kitaj and a range of the schools and movements of the twentieth century, but it is mainly within Surrealism that he himself found an expressive starting point. That said, and as his works demonstrate, he is interested in the movement more as a philosophy than as a style. Erasmus Variations (1958, ill. 93), which he considers his first 'modern' work, he says represents a synthesis of Surrealism and Symbolism. It is a straight copy of the scribbles Erasmus of Rotterdam made in the margins of his manuscripts. Parts of Kitaj's picture are almost erased, and it is only possible to identify them by referring to the philosopher's drawings. The painting becomes interesting the moment the scribbles are transformed into authographic instances of Erasmus's unconscious thoughts.<sup>243</sup> Kitaj introduces us to a very early example of 'automatic writing' as a key to pure contemplation in the total absence of any thought control, as originally defined by Breton and subsequently adopted by American Expressionism. Kitaj makes this historical connection quite explicit by citing de Kooning's style and technique in the work.<sup>244</sup>



When Kitaj was looking for past examples of a Diasporic means of expression, he found them principally in Modernist literature, i.e., Franz Kafka, T.S. Eliot's poetical works and, probably most of all, Walter Benjamin. Walter Benjamin would come to play a vital role in Kitaj's development as an artist. In 1991 Kitaj wrote to Jane Kinsman:



I discovered Benjamin around 1965, before he became a cult figure [...] I would discard and ignore the Marxist aspect of his work, which bored me, and I would pick and choose (among his connections with Surrealism, Judaism, Bibliomania, Baudelaire, Paris, etc.) in his wake, as one does with precursors... with Degas, Pound, Cézanne, Giotto, Matisse, Kafka – all those I cherish though Benjamin was not an artist like those others, he was a kindred soul. Borges (another kindred soul) speaking of Kafka (the greatest Jewish artist who ever lived, I believe) said that we artists create our precursor (For ourselves he meant).<sup>245</sup>



His fascination for Walter Benjamin reached beyond the philosophical exploration of art, poetry and history. Benjamin's life and destiny as a Jew, along with his suicide on the French–Spanish border in 1941, fearing that the Spanish guards were planning to hand him over to the Nazis, spurred Kitaj's curiosity. The Autumn of Central Paris, (after Walter Benjamin) (1972–73, ill. 92) is a direct reference to this event. The scene is a Parisian pavement café with Walter Benjamin sitting at a table surrounded by people, evoking either intellectuals or the Nazis Benjamin was trying to avoid. There is an enigmatic and sensual undertone, but it is also characterised by the ominous mood prevailing in Europe after the Crystal Night, rendering free and easy café life totally absurd.



When Autumn of Central Paris was shown in the Hayward Gallery exhibition The Human Clay in 1976, it was accompanied by a wall caption in which Kitaj gave an account of the ideas behind the composition of the work, his deep sense of spiritual community with Benjamin and Benjamin's influence on him. It mentions the influence people like Theodor Adorno and Victor Hugo had on Benjamin's writings. The wall text also reproduced Kitaj's working notes for the picture, where he describes and characterises people and settings in minute detail. Not only the content but also the style of the wall

text is a broad emulation of Benjamin's fragmentary style. That style is reflected in the formal idiom of the painting, creating, in Podro's words, a unity of text and image.<sup>246</sup> In his 1979 article Podro says more about the painting:

Its allusiveness, its suggestiveness, is of a kind which is intrinsically interesting. The painter who writes like this is not commenting upon it. Quite the reverse. The painting [...] is reflecting across and re-focusing the ideas and facts to which the text allude[...] The painting belongs [...] inside a very sophisticated, introspective culture.<sup>247</sup>

The tone of the work is wholly Modernist, nostalgically Modernist in the literary way we are used to in depictions of European city life, as Baudelaire's Spleen poems in *Les Fleurs du Mal* or Marcel Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Richard Wollheim refers in his Tate catalogue essay to parallels in Kitaj with Modernist poetry, where Modernism and poetry are linked indissolubly to urban life:

Modern life is the life of that legendary metropol, of that mechanised Babylon where all the great writers and painters, and all the great idlers and noctambulists, and all the great madams and their clients, real and fictional, of the last hundred years and more, would have been equally at home.<sup>248</sup>

What fascinated Kitaj about Modernism was not only its association with the city but its lack of faith in chronology and temporal and spatial absolutes – a consequence of the movement's reaction against Realism. Alienation, the sense of a lost identity, the fragmented and referential form, and free association – 'stream of consciousness' – appealed to Kitaj in his quest for 'The Jewishness of Jewish art'.<sup>249</sup> In fact, some of Modernism's defining figures were Jewish: Walter Benjamin, Franz Kafka, Sigmund Freud.

The mixing of genres accepted in Modernist literature is something Kitaj carries over to the visual medium. Indeed, he interprets Modernism per se relatively freely, picking and choosing according to the needs of his current project. In the Tate catalogue Wollheim wrote that 'In Kitaj's world-picture, the term "modernity" has a denotation that has been distended over time: it is used to refer to everything that it has ever been used to refer to since it first gained circulation as a tool of criticism, now more than a hundred years ago.'<sup>250</sup>

When Kitaj tries in his substantial work *If, Not, Not* (1975, ill. 4)<sup>251</sup> to fashion a coherent representation of a tragedy beyond description, the Holocaust, the inspiration comes precisely from Modernist, fragmented literature. The atmosphere prevailing over parts of the landscape in *If, Not, Not* is based, according to Kitaj, on Giorgioni's *Tempeste* (c. 1508, ill. 5), a work he saw in Venice and which acted as a starting point for several of his works. Here, the only recognisable element from Giorgioni's pastoral landscape is the small pool, but the basic tone of the picture is nevertheless largely informed by natural drama. The title *If, Not, Not*, a double negation, is from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* – a fragmentary cycle of poems composed after the First World War, a time which saw the illusions of a culturally civilized Europe shattered.<sup>252</sup> *The Waste Land* has further connections with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad being another of the influential figures mentioned by Kitaj in his commentary to the picture. Conrad's book describes an apocalyptic journey into the further reaches of the Belgian Congo along a brown, gelatinous river whose banks are strewn with corpses.

Kitaj takes this Conradian landscape and transfers it to canvas, a barren landscape with stylised trees, the sky aglow as if on fire, corpses littering the blackened river bank. Running water, which generally symbolises life, stands for death in both Conrad and Eliot – and here in Kitaj. Dominating the foreground, a swamp appears to be swallowing everything on it: the Matisse bust dashed in two, the open books facing downwards. It consumes the lamb (symbol of victim/sacrifice), the tree clad in the greenery of spring (symbol of life) and the black raven (symbol of adversity). A man with a baby lies in a bed (a self-portrait as it happens). In the immediate foreground a woman who seems to have come from one of Gauguin's Tahiti works is sitting with her arm around a man, Joe Singer the Jew, whose hearing aid reveals him as Kitaj's alter ego.<sup>253</sup> The torso and legs of a man protrude from the painting's bottom edge: the figure seems to be clad in military gear though one of its boots is missing.<sup>254</sup> The scene is redolent of a military battle, and indeed the swamp is inspired by a detail from a Bassano battle scene, a reproduction of which Kitaj had in his studio. On the right of the foreground a figure is levitating Chagall-like. On the left, near the swamp, a gravelled path leads to a black doorway. On a mount in the background, the doorway is repeated, this time as part of a building we recognise as the an aspect of the station at Auschwitz where trains unloaded their cargoes of Jews who were herded into the concentration camp. Kitaj wrote in his notes for *If Not, Not*:

a train journey someone took from Budapest to Auschwitz to get a sense of what the doomed could see through the slats of their cattle cars ('Beautiful countryside, simply beautiful') [...] Since then I've read that Buchenwald was constructed on the very hill where Goethe often walked with Eckermann.<sup>255</sup>

John Ashbury suggests a connection between Eliot's poetry and *If Not, Not* and the constant flux in perspective that characterises both works, formally and thematically. 'Things come into focus for a moment and then fade away again, in which contiguous phenomena are compromised to a mysterious unity and the distinct contour suddenly becomes unrecognizable.'<sup>256</sup> For me, experiencing *If Not, Not* is not unlike reading a Modernist novel, where the separate parts form associations that first take flight in different directions, but which nevertheless combine to create a sense of completion.

In comparison with *The Autumn of Central Paris* and *If Not, Not*, the *Killer-Critic* can be summed up as 'Walter Benjamin and T.S. Eliot gone wild!' As in the writings of Walter Benjamin and T.S. Eliot, and like *If Not, Not*, *Killer-Critic* is also a collection of fragments, rich in associations and obvious and obscure quotations formally and substantively. In the definition of Modernism given above *Killer-Critic* is cited as a Modernist work.<sup>257</sup> But it is also the inverse of Michael Podro's description of *The Autumn of Central Paris* and *If Not, Not*, where text and image merge into a coherent whole. Once more, the text is allowed to invade the image in the shape of expletives, quotations – partly crossed out, partly corrected. As in the earliest works, book covers and portraits are ripped literally out of their original setting and settled in new surroundings, i.e., *Killer-Critics*. But they carry with them into their new home their original connotations, bringing to the new work new layers of meaning and enriching Kitaj's message. The quotations in *Killer-Critic* could have been excerpted from his own writings just as easily as from those of others.

The apparently chaotic idiom could stand for a man falling apart at the seams. It's as if he is shouting to the critics: 'I'm everything you've accused me of: quasi-Jewish, quasi-intellectual, a quotation-

monger, hyper-sexed!' But none of the picture's details are accidental. An emotionally crazed person would simply not have been able to make a picture like it. The only thing even close to a sensitively drawn line in *Killer-Critic* is the simple outline of Sandra enclosed within Kitaj's body and the words 'Ma Jolie'. *Killer-Critic* is intellectually and deliberately composed, like *If Not, Not*. It is precisely the ostensibly chaotic form that expresses the idea contained in the title: The *Killer-Critic* assassinated by his *Widower, Even*. However chaotic and multifaceted this urge for revenge may be, the act itself is carefully planned and deliberate. More than anything else, the painting expresses revenge, revenge over the critics Kitaj still feels ruined his professional and private life. It is expressed with a violence that incensed the critics far more than the Tate exhibition ever did.

### 6.3 Revenge

The aggression Kitaj had accumulated during the lengthy polemical battle with the reviewers overflowed in the years immediately following the Tate retrospective. It took on the nature of revenge, prompted by the critics' personal assault on Kitaj after the Tate exhibition and the allegations Kitaj laid at their door in *Sandra One*. In the dialogue that ensued over the following years with the critics voicing their views in the press and Kitaj retaliating through the various editions of the *Sandra* magazine, revenge permeates the material as a venomous backdrop. In *Sandra Three*, revenge is given pictorial expression.

Some time later, Kitaj explained why he decided to launch the *Sandra* series:

Sandra and I had always talked about doing a magazine. Now I have to do it alone, but I'll do it for the rest of my life. In part it has become a vehicle for revenge, a subject which [...] interests me more and more. But more poignantly, [...] it brings her back.<sup>258</sup>

The need to seek retribution became more urgent for Kitaj after the death of Sandra. Retribution against the people who had tried to assassinate him as an artist and the people he felt had killed his wife. There are two types of people he detests, says Kitaj in the *Sandra Two* interview. The first group is Nazis and the second people who hate him. The title of James McNeill Whistler's collected letters and essays, 'The gentle art of making enemies one hundred years later', defines Kitaj's project in a nutshell. Kitaj shared with Whistler the experience of being on the receiving end of the critics' scorn,.

When Kitaj wanted to give a visual expression to vengeance in *Sandra Three* he found a model for his undertaking predictably enough in literature. As he wrote to Marco Livingstone at the time:

Revenge Tragedy is a well-known tradition or genre in literature, drama and movies. Of course it attracted me because I wanted to Fight Back. [...] all blood and guts which suited my mood toward my enemies. But those plays were not only deadly; they bored me – I couldn't use the language. However the concept of revenge plus Tragedy has entered into my ideas for the art of easel-painting, like a heretofore neglected genre in the painting art. All the while Revenge is a great ongoing noir and Western movie device, convention etc. which I draw upon. The Revenger takes matters into his own hands, because, as in my case, one can't fight a Yellow Press on equal terms. [...] In any case, Revenge drama appeals to my various senses of what easel-painting can do now.<sup>259</sup>



The theme of *Killer-Critic* is death. But not any death. The death here is murder. Kitaj has reversed the situation that arose with the Tate exhibition. Then, in his opinion, the critics killed his wife. As he says to Charlotte Wiggins in an interview with *RA: Magazine*, June 1997: 'I 'm doing this issue of my magazine on the wall at the RA in a spirit of heresy and defiance of hatred, which is at the very heart of the Modernism I love most. [...] call it art or anti-art as you like.'<sup>260</sup> Wiggins tells us that the American critics said their British counterparts behaved like a 'firing squad' around the time of the retrospective. Kitaj also turns that particular table on them, she suggests. When asked to identify the main characters in the painting Kitaj replied:

The good guys are myself and Manet, both of us (Manet the far greater, Kitaj the lesser) among those many fools who have exposed themselves, not to art criticism but to warlike hatred and thuggery, with sometimes tragic results. So we shoot back in this painting as those attacked in war or those who encounter evil sometimes do. This picture is my little gift to Manet in heaven because he is one of my favourite artists.<sup>261</sup>



When Aristotle addressed tragedy, his object was poetic tragedy, tragedy in literature. But we might also explore the *Sandra* series through the lens of Aristotle's philosophy. The central character of a tragedy, says Aristotle, should distinguish himself neither by deed nor justice; which means that any of us could take on the role. Aristotle says, however, that it is not the character of the protagonist but his actions that determines the measure of tragedy. Those actions must be coherent and pass from fortune to misfortune, 'through fear and compassion to the catharsis that properly pertain to such moods.'<sup>262</sup> We could say that Kitaj, on that definition, undergoes a cathartic or purification process in *Killer-Critic*. The *Killer-Critic* was shown at the Royal Academy's 1998 summer exhibition, *The Enemy Within* (1990–98, ill. 97) at the summer exhibition the following year. It was with this self-portrait, with its distorted, indistinct facial contours, that Kitaj seems to have realised for the first time that his suffering was also due in part to his own confrontational personality. The possible self-portrait inside the critic-monster also suggests the beginnings of the self-insight of the *Killer-Critic*. And, indeed, his passion for revenge waned in subsequent editions of *Sandra*.<sup>263</sup>

Vengeance is deeply rooted in the Jewish faith for which one of the presiding tenets is the proverb 'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth', and, as Kitaj remarks in the interview with Charlotte Wiggins, 'God says vengeance is his, so it's a divine thing.'<sup>264</sup> But Kitaj has also wanted to understand why the Jews seem to make enemies wherever they choose to settle. In Richard Morphet's Tate catalogue interview he states his position:

Why are the Jews always in trouble? After the worst thing that happened to them (or anyone) in four thousands years of awful things, they seemed to have acquired a billion new enemies they never had before. I didn't want to gloss over what was unpleasant anymore in some kind of sheer art.<sup>265</sup>

One could say that Kitaj's life's project has been to 'get into trouble'. He has remained oppositional, and his polemical mode of expression has caused considerable ire.<sup>266</sup> The way the critics treated him is still a topic of conversation. In Kitaj's mind they killed his wife, although they reply that it is both insulting and untrue. But he also realises that there is something about his personality that just gets people worked up, as he confesses to Lambirth:

I seem to attract hatred, as Baudelaire wrote Manet did. There is no talent or style or balls or imagination in the haters. At least they've made me the most controversial painter alive! Not a bad thing to be. Since I can paint and write better than my enemies, the war ain't over yet.<sup>267</sup>

In spite of the sense of self-irony that characterised Killer-Critic – the avenger with the prostate drip – the reviewers did not take kindly to Kitaj's image of revenge, as the many column inches devoted to the summer exhibition testified. And the critics took seriously Kitaj's ruminations about seeking retribution. The Daily Telegraph's Richard Dorment put it succinctly:

One commentator described Sandra Three as a 'scream of pain and hatred'. But it is scarier than that. Among the many expressions of visceral loathing for critics you can find in it, the words that jump out at the viewer are 'kill, kill, kill' and 'hate, hate'. In one corner is the inscription 'The Killer-Critic Assassinated By His Widower'. One journalist who interviewed Kitaj noted that he spoke obsessively of revenge. What if Kitaj isn't messing about? Perhaps I am inclined to take his words more seriously than other journalists because I have had personal experience of his rage. When I ventured to criticise his work in the past – years before his wife's death – Kitaj sent me hate mail so frightening and threatening that my wife wondered whether we should turn the letters over to the police. I do not know whether Kitaj has a list of his *bêtes noires*, or whether my name is on it. But I strongly feel that the picture in the RA was painted by a man under severe psychological pressure. Perhaps writing menacing letters and painting works like it are his way of letting off steam. But can one be certain?<sup>268</sup>

There is something deep down in our collective consciousness that tells us that punishment must follow a crime. Crime distorts human relations. And out of this asymmetry, aggression and vengeance are born. Punishment and retribution both deal, obliquely perhaps, with the restoration of equilibrium, the reinstatement of harmony. I believe Kitaj used his own individualistic, existential and emotional experiences as the bricks and mortar of the Sandra series, and in doing so gave those experiences artistic expression. In Sandra One despair, disbelief and hostility were given free rein. In Sandra Two and Sandra Three Kitaj worked on those emotions, and succeeded in Sandra Three to give vengeance a coherent visual form. From 1994 to 1998, Kitaj's work went through stages not unlike those of a tragedy. The ultimate stage is catharsis, represented by Killer-Critic, and enlightenment, represented by The Enemy Within.

## SUMMING UP AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

It has been my goal to set out the criticism levelled at Kitaj on the occasion of his retrospective at the Tate Gallery in 1994, analyse the critics' hostility and the motivation behind Kitaj's response. Kitaj called it the Tate War. I prefer to call it a dialogue of revenge. I have explored this dialogue in light of Kitaj's artistic goals, his life and social history, which, in Kitaj's case, are essential aspects of his art.

It is a well-known fact that criticism of the Tate exhibition was particularly negative. What surprised me after having sifted through columns of newspaper print and magazine articles was that there was less of the negative criticism than I had expected, and that it was advanced mostly through the channel of the papers. The magazines were significantly more positive, presenting Kitaj as an artist who had made an important contribution to twentieth-century figurative art, who was willing to draw on the entire history of culture in his work without favouring any particular 'ism or leaping on the most politically correct band wagon of the day. It is intriguing to observe how the positive reviews disappeared in the acrimony created by the bad ones, and were forgotten both by the public and Kitaj himself.

While the bad reviews are memorable for the language used, it is a cultural phenomenon as well, the result of years of arguing with Kitaj, of anti-Semitic and anti-literary attitudes prevailing in the critical establishment. All of which was exacerbated by the circumstances surrounding Sandra's death.

Kitaj's continuous criticism in the Sandra series of the critics is partly responsibility for the process having dragged on for so long. I imagine that part of him wanted to keep up the heat because it gave him the energy to explore more deeply the Diaspora and other Jewish issues in Modernism and literature. Vengeance itself, and the attempt to give vengeance a visual expression, became a new pursuit in those days. The Sandra series therefore served a dual purpose, as a vehicle for the polemical debate between Kitaj and his critics and as a vehicle for artistic expression.

Kitaj adopts whatever methods he feels are needed in the Sandra series. As in his earlier works, he is not addicted to any one idiom, mixing freely the figurative with the non-figurative, collage and references to literature, literary and artistic schools and styles, and written and visual idioms. He relocates historical persons to different temporal contexts and he constructs characters, inserting them into his own past or himself into theirs. It is Kitaj's artistic project to tie fuse art with life, his life, though I feel he is constantly redefining who Kitaj actually is. He filters his own life and art through other art and literary allusions, distancing himself from himself – and us from him. Which is what makes the Sandra series – and his other work as well – seem slightly academic – despite him wanting us to take them as a personal statement. When he makes portraits of his family, especially Sandra, there is a totally different sense of immediacy and warmth of expression.

The Sandra series may hence be seen as an example of Kitaj's artistic endeavours where the dividing lines between the personal and the general, memory and history, symbols and allegories, fiction and reality, the visual and the literary dissolve. The ideas are shaped by Kitaj's many spoken opinions and interpretations within the work itself, as they are in other works through captions and titles. Understood as opportunities rather than obstacles, his written commentaries expand the interpretative possibilities and preclude therefore a definitive interpretation. This is Kitaj's great strength. One is never completely finished with his work.

## FOOTNOTES

1 Now Tate Britain.

2 May 2002.

3 According to Marco Livingstone Kitaj is in the process of committing the memoirs of his life in the UK to paper, which will include the 'Tate War', Kitaj's own term for this dreadful phase of his life. See Kitaj, London, 1999, p. 49.

4 Published by Phaidon, Oxford.

5 Kitaj in the Aura of Cézanne and other Masters, November 2001 – February 2002.

6 R.B. Kitaj: An American in Europe (January – March 1998). This exhibition, which travelled subsequently to Reina Sofia in Madrid (April – June 1998), The Jewish Museum in Vienna (June – August 1998) and the Sprengel Museum in Hanover (August – November 1998), was not mentioned by the UK papers, though it enjoyed broad coverage in the other countries.

7 Love+Marriage=Death, Stanford, 1998.

8 James Aulich and John Lynch (eds): Critical Kitaj – Essays on the Work of R.B. Kitaj, Manchester, 2000.

9 Entitled Pictures with Commentary, Pictures without Commentary, see below.

10 The title, chosen by Kitaj, is from a line in Auden's poem Letter to Lord Byron: 'To me Art's subject is the human clay'.

11 The Human Clay, An Exhibition selected by R.B. Kitaj (cat.), Arts Council, Hayward Gallery, London, 1976, unpaginated.

12 About 35 artists were represented at the exhibition all told including Howard Hodgkin, Celia Paul and Christopher Le Brun.

13 Two are now dead: Francis Bacon (1909–92) and Michael Andrews (1928–95).

14 Other years saw artists like David Hockney, Richard Hamilton, Howard Hodgkin and Patrick Caulfield also invited to curate exhibitions of their choice.

15 Peter Blake and Richard Hamilton also had a very mixed press after their shows. Hamilton, in particular was subjected to some vicious attacks that resembled those on Kitaj, though they chose not to respond to them.

16 Tate Gallery: June – September 1994; Los Angeles County Museum: October 1994 – January 1995; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: February – May 1995.

17 Kitaj called this 'new technique' 'painting-drawing'.

18 London, 1994.

19 William Shakespeare, Hamlet, act 1, scene 3.

20 Richard Morphet: "The Art of R.B. Kitaj: To thine own self be true", R.B. Kitaj: A Retrospective, p. 10.

21 Kitaj in conversation with Morphet, R.B. Kitaj: A Retrospective, p. 32.

22 Part of the interview was not published. It is in the possession of the Tate Gallery.

23 R.B. Kitaj: A Retrospective, p. 65.

24 According to Talmudic doctrine each paragraph of the Torah has 49 levels of meaning.

25 Tim Marlow: "Kitaj". The same issue also contained an article on Kitaj by Merlin James: "Identity parade", Tate: The Art Magazine, no. 3, summer 1994, pp. 25–33.

26 See literature for details.

27 David Lee: "R.B. Kitaj", Art Review, June 1994, pp. 6–10; Frederic Tuten: "R.B. Kitaj", Vogue, June 1994, pp. 35–37; Roger Bevan: "A day in the life of R.B. Kitaj", The Art Newspaper, June 1994, pp. 10–11; Martin Gayford: "A long lineage", Modern Painters, summer 1994, pp. 21–26 (expanded article from The Sunday Telegraph, 29 May 1994); Andrew Lambirth: "Graphically engaged", Marco Livingstone: "A condition of exile", David Hockney: "A romantic pessimist", R.A. Magazine, summer 1994; Rosanna Negrotti: "Figure it out", What's on in London, 15–22 June 1994.

28 Art critic Robert Hughes, quoted by Russell Davies in The Telegraph Magazine, 4 June 1994.

29 The Independent (unsigned), 9 June 1994.

30 London Evening Standard Magazine (unsigned), 10 June 1994.

31 However, most of those advance notices were written not by art critics, but by non-specialist feature writers; their pre-emption of the critic's role may have been a significant factor in the vehemence of the attacks that followed.

32 There was considerable interest in the exhibition abroad too, not least in Norway where art critic with the newspaper Dagbladet had an interview and a review, 'Messegutten som ble mestermaler' [The messboy who grew up to be a master painter], 21 June 1994 and 'Bilder med mange liv' [Pictures with many lives].

33 Brian Sewell is notorious in Britain for attacking almost all contemporary art and the Tate director Nicholas Serota.

34 Brian Sewell: "Tales half-told – in the name of vanity", The Evening Standard, 16 June 1994, Brian Sewell became, coincidentally, critic of the year for 1994.

35 Nick Serota is the director of the Tate Gallery.

36 Kitaj saw this painting while passing through Venice, and became fascinated by it. In fact, several pictures by Giorgione have inspired him, among them *Tempeste* (River Thames) (1992–93, ill. 6).

37 William Packer: "Narrative painting gets lost for words", *Financial Times*, 18 June 1994. See section on *If Not, Not*, below

38 Paul Levy: "Lavishing attention on Kitaj's work", *Wall Street Journal*, 17–18 June 1994.

39 Waldemar Januszczak: "Tellale brushmarks", *Sunday Times*, 19 June 1994.

40 Januszczak is referring here to *The First Time* (Havana) (1990, ill. 19) and *The Second Time* (Vera Cruz, 1949) (1990, ill. 20). See descriptions below

41 Tim Hilton: "Draw, draw is better than jaw jaw", *The Independent on Sunday*, 19 June 1994.

42 John McEwen: "A naval-gazer's album of me, me, me", *The Sunday Telegraph*, 19 June 1994.

43 James Hall: "Teflon Ron", *The Guardian*, 20 June 1994.

44 Richard Cork: "Spiritual home for the wanderer", *The Times*, 21 June 1994.

45 "Yankee doodles" (unsigned), *The Economist*, 25 June 1994.

46 Andrew Graham-Dixon: "The Kitaj myth", *The Independent*, 28 June 1994.

47 Daniel Farson: "The great pretender", *Mail on Sunday*, 3 July 1994.

48 Kitaj, in an interview with Hunter Drohojowska-Philp.

49 1975–76, ill. 12.

50 William Wilson: "Retrospective of a virtuoso", *Los Angeles Times*, 27 October 1994.

51 The wall captions were removed for the US exhibitions.

52 Nina Darnton: "An American artist displeases the English cousins", *New York Times*, 24 October 1994; Arthur Lubow: "The painter's life is cracking", *New York Times*, 13 November 1994.

53 Timothy Hyman: "The Comic High Priest of Diaspora", *The Times Literary Supplement*, 16–17 July 1994, p. 4761. Hyman had also written sympathetically about Kitaj's work in the past.

54 Richard Kendall: "Under Full Sail, the Work of R. B. Kitaj", *Apollo*, August 1994, p. 70. Kendall is better known for his scholarly writings on Degas, than a commentator on contemporary art, so he came to Kitaj's work with a different perspective.

55 David Anfam: "London and Los Angeles: R.B. Kitaj", *The Burlington Magazine*, October 1994, p. 709. Anfam is an art historian, best known for his work on Abstract Expressionism.

56 The interesting thing here is that Kitaj, after moving to Los Angeles in 1998, returned to this style and developed it further.

57 For the exhibition see below.

58 See additional comments on Cézanne's and Kitaj's paintings of bathers below

59 Anfam in *The Burlington Magazine*, October 1994, p. 711.

60 Ann Landi: "Teflon Ron takes on Brit Critics", *Art News*, September 1994, pp. 60–62.

61 (1993–94, ill. 14). The motive is based on Cézanne's *Bathers* (1906, ill. 15) which hangs in the National Gallery in London.

62 William Feaver: "London, R.B. Kitaj, Tate Gallery", *Art News*, October 1994, p. 197.

63 Ken Johnson: "R.B. Kitaj: Views of a Fractured Century", *Art in America*, March 1995, p.79.

64 Johnson in *Art in America*, March 1995, p. 84.

65 As, for instance, in *The Communist and the Socialist*, (1975, ill. 18).

66 Johnson in *Art in America*, p. 126.

67 Robert Hughes: "History's bad dreams", *Time*, 6 March, 1995, p. 54.

68 Johnson, in *Art in America*, also mentions how simplistically popular culture was dealt with by these artists, unlike Kitaj, who plumbs the depths of the spirit, p. 80.

69 Hughes, in *Time*, p. 55.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

71 John Ash: "R.B. Kitaj: Metropolitan Museum of Art", *Artforum*, vol. 33, no. 9, May 1995, p. 95.

72 Brian Sewell, in the *Evening Standard*, 16 June 1994.

73 Ash in *Artforum*, p. 94.

74 Gayford, Martin: "A long lineage", *Modern Painters*, summer 1994, p. 2, (expanded article from the *The Sunday Telegraph*, 29 May 1994).

- 75 Janet Wolff: "The Impolite Border", *Critical Kitaj*, pp.29–44.
- 76 Sewell in *The Evening Standard*, 16 June 1994, cited by Wolff in "The Impolite Border", p. 34.
- 77 Lezley Hazelton: *England, Bloody England: An Expatriate's Return*, New York, 1990. Cited by Wolff in "The Impolite Border", pp. 36, 37. Some British writers have addressed Jewishness incidentally, among them Clive Sinclair and Jack Rosenthal.
- 78 David Cohen in a New York-based Jewish magazine, *Forward*, cited by Wolff in "The Impolite Border", p. 37.
- 79 *Now Marlborough Fine Art*.
- 80 "An eagerly awaited first exhibition", *The Times*, 7 February 1963, p. 16. A further article appeared in *The Times* 12 February 1963: "Literary references in the new figurative painting", p. 14, which considered the exhibition from an art-historical perspective.
- 81 Keith Roberts: "Current and forthcoming exhibitions", *The Burlington Magazine*, 1963, vol. 105, no. 720, p. 136. (As the title suggests, the article covers a number of exhibitions.)
- 82 John Russell: "England: The advantage of being thirty", *Art in America*, 1963, vol. 51, no. 6, p. 96. The article discusses other contemporary artists like David Hockney.
- 83 John Russell: "London /Nyc: The two way traffic", *Art in America*, 1965, vol. 53, no. 2, p. 132. Other artists are discussed here too.
- 84 "David Hockney in conversation with R.B. Kitaj", *The New Review*, January/February 1977, no. 34/35, Kitaj's words, p. 75.
- 85 Hockney, *ibid.*, p. 76.
- 86 Hockney, *ibid.*, p. 77.
- 87 Gerry Hunt: "The Hockney/Kitaj view" (letter to the editor), *The New Review*, May 1977, p. 48.
- 88 Christopher Butler: "Figure-conscious", *The Times Literary Supplement*, 20 May 1977, p. 618.
- 89 In an interview with Roger Berthoud in *The Times*, 7 May 1977, "A love for pictures and an enthusiasm for life", Kitaj speaks freely about figurative art, calling those who disdained his work 'self-styled radical or Marxist art critics'.
- 90 Kitaj in *Sandra Two* p. 12.
- 91 The reviews of their first exhibition 'Freeze' in 1988 were lukewarm to put it mildly. Nonetheless, one of Kitaj's most inveterate critics, Andrew Graham-Dixon, defended them consistently. For a more detailed discussion of the Young British Artists, see *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection (cat.)*, Royal Academy of Arts, 1997, pp. 12–26.
- 92 Johnson in *Art in America*, March 1995, p.126.
- 93 Waldemar Januszczak: "Running on empty", *Sunday Times*, 11 November, 2001. See also reviews published 19 June 1994, p. 20 and 27 July 1997 p. 69.
- 94 Januszczak in *Sunday Times*. Of course, he is right in his final observation here. In an article on still life I discovered by chance at the Hayward Gallery, an American curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York is accused of being 'such a clunky and silly author that she ought not to be allowed near a jam-jar label, let alone an important theoretical essay.' Waldemar Januszczak: "Still Life, but not as we know it", *Sunday Times*, 12 October 1997.
- 95 Kitaj in an interview with Arthur Lubow in *New York Times*, 13 November 1994.
- 96 The last in the series up to now, *Sandra Seven*, saw the light of day in November 2001. See note 263 for more details.
- 97 III. 23.
- 98 James Hall: "After the fall the prize; Venice Biennale", *The Guardian*, 13. June 1995. Hall wrote a damning review of the 1994 Tate exhibition entitled "Teflon Ron". See above for discussion.
- 99 Hall in *The Guardian*. On 15 June, Marco Livingstone wrote a strongly worded letter to *The Guardian*, rebutting Hall and pointing to the popularity enjoyed by Kitaj in the US and 'the scant support [...] from the small band of self-appointed arbiters of taste who dominates the British Press'. The letter carried the heading 'Kitaj, a great artist brushed aside'. The insinuation concerning Robert Hughes proved unfounded, as Andrea Rose, director of visual arts at the British Council, was at pains to point out in a letter to *The Guardian*, also dated 15 June and bearing the same heading as Livingstone's, in which she repudiated the allegation that Hughes had sat on the committee.
- 100 Richard Cork: "Capital deposit north of the border", *The Times*, 11 July 1995. He also wrote an upbeat review after the Tate retrospective, called "Spiritual home for the wanderer". See above for more details.
- 101 The actual author of the article was, in fact, Richard Dorment. See above for more details.
- 102 Kitaj and Francis Bacon were presented side by side at the exhibition.
- 103 Martin Gayford: "The arts: capital assets", *The Daily Telegraph*, 26 July 1995.
- 104 William Packer: "The London Six go north to Scotland – The group of artists represented demonstrate that good old paint on canvas is as relevant as it has ever been", *Financial Times*, 26 August 1995. The title of Packer's antagonistic review in 1994 read: "Narrative painting gets lost for words". See discussion above. Not normally

known for hostility to artists, Packer may have felt guilty for his role in the 'Tate War', Kitaj's expression for his dispute with the press, and was trying to make amends for his behaviour.

105 John McEwen: "The arts: London label doesn't stick", *The Sunday Telegraph*, 9 July 1995. He too had been critical to the Tate exhibition: "A navel-gazer's album of me, me, me". See above.

106 David Lister: "Painter takes his revenge on 'thug' critics", *The Independent*, 1 June 1996.

107 This portrait has become the trademark the Sandra series.

108 Tom Lubbock: "The critic, the artist's wife and the unanswerable accusation", *The Independent*, 8 June 1996.

109 Kitaj says in *Sandra Two* that it was a Mondrian exhibition in the Hague that helped him 'to come alive again'. See *Sandra Two* p. 6.

110 Michael Billington: "Bloody barbs", *The Guardian*, 7 June 1996.

111 As Billington recounts in this article, he had once slated a performance by Mary Ure in a 1975 West End play. The next day she was found dead, overdosed on a cocktail of pills and alcohol. Part of the blame was laid at Billington's door. It turned out, however, that she had died before the morning editions had reached the streets and could therefore not have read it before she died. Naturally, the accusations took their toll on Billington and his article reads as an attempt to justify and defend his role as art critic.

112 There was another work at the Tate exhibition, *Whistler vs Ruskin* (1992, ill. 96), a depiction of this notorious court case in the guise of two boxers settling scores in the ring, a situation not unknown to Kitaj!

113 *The Guardian*, 10 June 1996, Letter signed Richard Coddle, Durham University: "The artist's enduring paintbrush is mightier than the critical pen." Kitaj received later that month an honorary doctorate from the University of Durham for his contribution to art and his courage to remain faithful to his artistic principles.

114 Lubbock in *The Independent*, 8 June 1996.

115 Gilbert Adair: "Truth hurts but did criticism ever kill?" *Sunday Times*, 23 June 1996.

116 2–7 October 1996.

117 The year of Cézanne's death.

118 *Sandra Two*, p. 6.

119 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

120 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

121 Kitaj touches on Eliot's aphorisms in *Killer-Critic*. See below.

122 *Sandra Two*, p. 5.

123 Nina Darnton in *New York Times*, 24 October 1994.

124 *Sandra Two*, p. 10. The columnist in question was James Hall in *The Guardian*, 13 June 1995. See above.

125 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

126 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

127 *Ibid.*, p.12.

128 It is also reproduced in Marco Livingstone (ed.): *R.B. Kitaj: An American in Europe* (cat.), Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo, 1998. (Cat. no. 45) Dating given as 1970–96. The collage has not been changed since its appearance in *Sandra Two*. In 1997–98 Kitaj did a painting with the same title (Ill. 195 in Livingstone, Kitaj), and the collage has since been known as *Study for Second Diasporist Manifesto*. See *Kinsman's Kitaj Prints* for an extended exposition of Kitaj's printmaking.

129 The cover gives no. 29 in the series *In Our Time* from 1969, there entitled *The Jewish Question* (1969, ill. 25).

130 See below on Kitaj's use of symbols.

131 Collage was the basic medium for all Kitaj's screenprints in the 1960s and early 1970s.

132 *Sandra Two*, p. 4.

133 *Cambridge Opinion*, no. 34, January 1964, pp. 52–53.

134 *R.B. Kitaj: A Retrospective*, p. 178.

135 *Sandra Two*, p. 16.

136 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

137 Sander Gilman suggests that the *Bad* series may also be alluding to Jewish stereotypes such as the large nose, the hunched back, the flat feet and even the bad character. "R.B. Kitaj's 'Good Bad' Diasporism", pp. 167–172. Kitaj's *Bad* series includes the works *Bad Foot* (1990–92, ill. 37) and *Bad Character* (1990–93, ill. 38). See also Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body*, New York and London, 1991, for a discussion of these stereotypes.



- 138 Later entitled *He and She (The Spirit of the Bed Watching)*, as a part of a series called *He and She*, the components of which were mostly completed in the years after Sandra's death and revolve around his love for her.
- 139 Sandra Two, p. 8.
- 140 R.B. Kitaj: *A Retrospective*, p. 220.
- 141 Sandra Two, p. 13.
- 142 Kitaj has never learned how to use a computer and relies either on his own neat handwriting or an old typewriter.
- 143 Sandra Two, p. 5.
- 144 See *Kitaj Prints*, p. 86.
- 145 Sandra Two, p. 20.
- 146 Judith Benhamou-Huet: "Patrimoine: Art et collections", *Les Echos*, 27 September 1996.
- 147 Dagen Philippe: "Kitaj, Hervé Télémaque et Jean Pierre Pincemin trois expositions personnelles présentées à la FIAC", *Le Monde*, 5 October 1996.
- 148 For details, see below.
- 149 Andrew Lambirth: "Kitaj and the Firing Squad" (interview), *The Independent*, 27 May 1997.
- 150 Ill. 52, ill. 53, ill. 54, ill. 55, ill. 56, ill. 57, ill. 58, ill. 59.
- 151 This description of the installation is based on a photo in *Royal Academy Illustrated*, 1997, pp. 10–11, and various reviews, discussions etc. in newspapers and magazines. Neither the Royal Academy, Marlborough Fine Art, which represented Kitaj, nor Marco Livingstone, Kitaj's biographer, had records of the texts. Kitaj had said that the installation was a temporary work and one which he had no intention of reconstructing at a later date. *The Violinist* was sold to a private collector in Boston, The Killer-Critic to the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art in Oslo.
- 152 R.B. Kitaj: "Arts: A brush with genius, R.B. Kitaj on Matisse's *Violinist At The Window*", *The Guardian*, 24 October 1995.
- 153 Francis Bacon uses the same technique in the left-hand panel of his *Triptych Inspired by the Oresteia of Aeschylus* (1981, ill. 66).
- 154 Dylan Thomas, 'Do not go gently into that good night', a poem Thomas wrote for his dying father in 1951, published in 1952.
- 155 In the pictures of Sandra and himself in *Kitaj in the Aura of Cézanne and Other Masters*, several figures have these types of wings which, Kitaj says, are supposed to allude to angels ('los angeles' in Spanish). See Kitaj's remarks in the exhibition catalogue (p. 15) and the example *Los Angeles no. 1* (still incomplete in 2001, ill. 99).
- 156 The motive hails from the Napoleonic wars.
- 157 *J'accuse* was the heading of Zola's celebrated 1898 newspaper article written in defence of Dreyfus.
- 158 For Manet's critics, see G.M. Hamilton: *Manet and his critics*, New Haven, 1954.
- 159 James Hall in *The Guardian*, 13 June 1995. See above
- 160 Kitaj discusses this episode in the interview which is part of *Sandra Two*, and concludes: he was dead right ... Sandra was dead; p. 10.
- 161 Franz Kafka, *Prosesen [The Trial]* (in Trond Wirje's Norwegian translation), Oslo, 1992. The novel starts: 'Noen må ha baktalt Josef K., for en morgen ble han arrestert uten at han hadde gjort noe galt' [Somebody must have slandered Josef K., for he was arrested one morning without having done anything wrong.]p. 5. Kitaj often signed his letters with a solitary 'K'.
- 162 Jan Hulsker, *The Complete Van Gogh*, Harrison House/Harry N. Abrahams Inc, New York, 1984, p. 302.
- 163 A Van Gogh self-portrait from about 1887–88 is reproduced as ill. 68.
- 164 See comments above
- 165 This was the style that aroused most vilification during the Tate exhibition.
- 166 A style he abandoned in the 1970s. See note 234.
- 167 Wiggins, Charlotte: "Struck Down", *R A: The Royal Academy Magazine*, summer 1997, pp. 40–41; Lucinda Brendon: "To hell with the lot of them" (interview), *The Sunday Telegraph*, 25 May 1997; Andrew Lambirth: "Kitaj and the Firing Squad" (interview), *The Independent*, 27 May 1997.
- 168 Interview with Lambirth, *The Independent*, 27 May 1997.
- 169 For complete details see the literature list.
- 170 Sewell in the *Evening Standard*, 16 June 1994. See above
- 171 The ironic thing being that Sandra Three won the Royal Academy's Wollaston Prize of £25,000 for best work at the exhibition.
- 172 Brian Sewell: "Hanging judges should be drawn and quartered", *Evening Standard*, 29 May 1997.

- 173 Packer in *Financial Times*, 18 June 1994. See above. See also discussion of the review, 26 August 1995, above.
- 174 William Packer: "A self-destructive campaign", *Financial Times*, 31 May 1997.
- 175 McEwen in *The Sunday Telegraph*, 19 June 1994. See above. See discussion of the review, 9 July 1995, above.
- 176 John McEwen: "Dignity as well as derangement Art", *The Sunday Telegraph*, 1 June 1997.
- 177 Cork in *The Times*, 21 June 1994. See above. For discussion of the review, 11 July 1995, see above.
- 178 Richard Cork: "Tears rain on the summer parade", *The Times*, 3 June 1997.
- 179 Dormont in *The Daily Telegraph*, 22 June 1994. See comments above.
- 180 Richard Dormont: "What it's like to be in Kitaj's sight", *The Daily Telegraph*, 28 May 1997. Kitaj put a price tag on this work of a million pounds sterling in the catalogue just to spite his enemies.
- 181 Melvyn Bragg: "The accused deserves the right to reply", *The Times*, 9 June 1997.
- 182 Alan Riding: "An artist Who Seeks Revenge Through His Art", *New York Times*, 7 June 1997.
- 183 Januszczak in *Sunday Times*, 19 June 1994. See comments above.
- 184 Dalya Alberge: "Painter studies art of revenge", *The Times*, 28 May 1997.
- 185 Waldemar Januszczak: "On the edge of greatness", *Sunday Times*, 27 July 1997.
- 186 See additionally Januszczak's November 2001 articles, discussed above.
- 187 Julián Ríos: *Pictures and Conversation*, London, 1994, p. 166.
- 188 Timothy Hyman: "A return to London", *London Magazine*, February 1980, vol. 19, no. 11, p. 26. The remark refers to Cézanne's desire to redo Poussin 'after the life'.
- 189 See Timothy Hyman: R.B. Kitaj: *The Sensualist 1973–84*, Oslo, 1990, pp. 8–13, where Hyman, referring to an article by Diane Lesko, links Kitaj's bathing boys to her analysis of Cézanne's *Bather* (c. 1885, ill. 73). Kitaj read Lesko's article with some interest sometime in the 1970s. Lesko claims Cézanne incorporated a self-portrait in the shape of the clouds, a conventional impossibility at the time, and that this self-portrait expressed Cézanne's disturbed state of mind. See also Anfam on bathers above.
- 190 The title *Torsion* is from one of the fallen figures in Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*. In Hyman's eyes it appears as if a sense of dread and fear is slowly dawning on these bathers (p. 13).
- 191 Both Cézanne's *Bather* (c. 1885, ill. 73) and Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas* (c. 1570–76, ill. 74) were incorporated in a female torso in which Kitaj's facial features can be made out (*The Sensualist* [1973–84] ill. 72).
- 192 See comments on *Self-Portrait as a Woman* below
- 193 Cited in Livingstone: Kitaj, p. 38.
- 194 R.B. Kitaj: *A Passion* (cat.), Marlborough Gallery, London, 1985, cited in Katy Deepwell and Juliet Steyn: "Readings of the Jewish Artist in late Modernism", *Art Monthly*, 1988, vol. 113, p. 8.
- 195 Livingstone: Kitaj, p. 194. Kitaj got to know about Yiddish theatre mainly from reading Kafka. Vivienne Barsky believes the sign in Cecil Court inscribed 'Gordin' is a reference to Jacob Gordin, Kafka's own favourite writer in this genre. "Home is Where the Heart is", *Studies in contemporary Jewry: An annual*, Jerusalem, 1990, p. 165.
- 196 Belongs to the type portraits of the 1970s and is also an early rendition of Joe Singer, see below.
- 197 See *The Frick Collection, Handbook of Paintings*, New York, 1985, p. 117.
- 198 In an interview with Andrew Brighton in *Art in America*, June 1986, pp. 98–105, Brighton touches on similarities he sees in Kiefer's and Kitaj's visual expression. Kitaj accepts the existence of likenesses and claims that Kiefer's desire to redefine post-Holocaust German history and German culture is not that different from his own aims in relation to Jewish history and culture. In the same interview, Kitaj speaks about his interest in issues related to nationality, identity and roots which, he says, must in no way be confused with nationalism (p. 100).
- 199 In an unpublished lecture Kitaj held in Oxford, 25 November 1983, he draws parallels between the Christian Passion and the tragedy of the Jews, adding that their representation may have a cathartic effect on Jews. See, in addition, Barsky in "Home is where the heart is", p. 167, Livingstone: Kitaj, p. 45 and *Critical Kitaj*, p. 18, where connections are made to other artistic idioms that utilise symbols in a similar fashion, such as films, literature and architecture.
- 200 Giles Peaker: "Natural History: Kitaj, allegory and memory", *Critical Kitaj*, pp. 69–82.
- 201 It is not unusual for Kitaj to rename works, but it does add to the difficulties of tracing them.
- 202 Peaker: "Natural History: Kitaj, allegory and memory", *Critical Kitaj*, p. 70.
- 203 *Ibid.*, p. 75. Peaker reads the article in light of Paul de Man: "The Rhetoric of Temporality" and Walter Benjamin: "Kunstverket i reproduksjonsalderen" [*Art in the Age of Reproduction*], and *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. For details on these books, see *Critical Kitaj*, p. 212, notes 2, 3 and 5. For a more detailed consideration of Paul De

- Man and Walter Benjamin on allegory, see *ibid.* pp. 69–81.
- 204 *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- 205 Juliet Steyn: "Painting another: other than painting", in Juliet Steyn (ed.), *Other than Identity: The Subject, Politics an Art*, Manchester and New York, 1997, p. 218. See also Katy Deepwell and Juliet Steyn: "Readings of the Jewish Artist in late Modernism", *Art Monthly*, 1988, pp. 6–9, which sets out the ideological background to Steyn's views noted above. See note 219 for critique.
- 206 R.B. Kitaj: *First Diasporist Manifesto*, New York, 1989.
- 207 Sandra Two, p. 9. According to Livingstone, Kitaj's sheepishness may have been caused by his disappointment at the indifference which greeted the book on publication. See Livingstone: *Kitaj*, pp.40–41.
- 208 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 209 *First Diaspora Manifesto*, p. 11.
- 210 *The Hebraic for Book of Splendour*, a key text of Jewish Cabbalism.
- 211 Michel Podro: "Kitaj in Retrospect", *The Burlington Magazine*, April 1995, vol. 137, no 1105, p. 242.
- 212 *Ibid.*, p. 245.
- 213 Rios: *Pictures and Conversations*, p. 50.
- 214 One of the nicknames coined by Kitaj for the art critic of Sunday Times, Andrew Graham-Dixon.
- 215 Sandra Two, p. 9.
- 216 Sander Gilman: "R.B. Kitaj's 'Good bad' Diasporism and the Body in American Jewish Postmodern Art", *Love + Marriage = Death. And other essays on Representing Difference*, pp. 156–184.
- 217 *First Diaspora Manifesto*, p. 47.
- 218 Freud and Auerbach both fled to London in the 1930s. Kosoff was born and raised in north London – and still lives in the same area.
- 219 For another argument, see Katy Deepwell and Juliet Steyn: "Readings of the Jewish Artist in late Modernism", *Art Monthly*, 1988, pp.6–9. Deepwell and Steyn argue that Jewish identity must be seen in relation to gender and social status. Anti-Semitism, which they compare to racism, contributes to the creation of the building blocks of the common culture of the Jews. Racists inject this culture with negative stereotypes, giving repression further justification.
- 220 Sigmund Freud cited in Gilman: "R.B. Kitaj's 'Good Bad' Diasporism", p. 159. See *ibid.*, p. 231, note 9, for references to Gilman's sources.
- 221 From Theodor Adorno: "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft", cited in Gilman: "R.B. Kitaj's 'Good Bad' Diasporism", p. 161. For details on Adorno's article, see *ibid.*, p. 231, note 10.
- 222 R.B. Kitaj: *A Retrospective*, p. 144.
- 223 Kitaj has tended not to speak of his father, Sigmund Benway, apart from noting that he was 'a looser, a gambler, a poor guy who was probably too embarrassed to look me up', cited in Claire Frankel: "Kitaj, Self Explanatory", *International Herald Tribune*, 9–10. July, 1994. But he has also described him as 'a nice guy, I'm told who loved books and horses', cited in Livingstone: *Kitaj*, p. 8. He appears in a couple of Kitaj's works as a tramp-like figure. See *Bill at Sunset* (1973, ill. 86), reproduced in detail in Kenneth Anger and Michael Powell (1973, ill. 87).
- 224 See details above.
- 225 See details above.
- 226 Philip Roth and Kitaj have been good friends since Roth's time in London in the 1970s. Roth now lives in Greenwich, Connecticut. Roth has moreover used Kitaj as a model for the not entirely sympathetic protagonist of *Sabbath's Theater*, New York, 1994. See Livingstone (ed.): *R.B. Kitaj: An American in Europe*, p. 25, note 16, for a description of Kitaj's 'role' in Sabbath's Theatre. In *The Human Stain* (New York, 2000, p. 13) he repeats word-for-word telephone conversations with Kitaj which took place after Sandra's death: 'They meant to kill me, and they got her instead'.
- 227 Works by both artists were included in a show in 1990 at Barbican Art Gallery entitled *Chagall to Kitaj. Jewish Experience in the 20th Century Art*. The exhibition aimed at demonstrating the breadth of Jewish art and the ways in which the Holocaust had influenced the artists.
- 228 See a detailed description of the painting below.
- 229 Hockney, *Kitaj: The New Review*, January/February 1977, p. 76.
- 230 *Pictures with Commentary. Pictures without Commentary (cat.)*, Marlborough Fine Art, London, February 1963, p. 5. When the work was shown as part of the Tate retrospective Kitaj's commentary accompanied it, linking the historical assassination of Rosa Luxemburg to the mass extermination of the Jews. See R.B. Kitaj: *A Retrospective*, p. 82.

- 231 Michael Podro: "Some Notes on Ron Kitaj", *Art International*, March 1997, vol. XXII, no. 10, p. 18.
- 232 Norbert Lynton: "Kitaj's Fork", *Modern Painters*, autumn 1994, no. 7, pp. 95–98.
- 233 See Kinsman, *The Prints of R.B. Kitaj*, pp. 58–64, for examples.
- 234 Kitaj has never quite wanted to acknowledge this part of his oeuvre. He said to Timothy Hyman in 1980: 'Collage emphasizes arrangement, an esthetic of conjoining, at the expense of depicting [...] Collaging seem banal to me now', "A return to London", p. 14.
- 235 David Peters Corbett: "Authority and visual experience: word and image in R.B. Kitaj", *Critical Kitaj*, pp. 44–57.
- 236 Corbett in *Critical Kitaj* pp. 46–47.
- 237 In connection with the Tate show, several writers in the art magazines highlighted Kitaj's talent with history paintings; see above.
- 238 Michael Peppiatt: "R.B. Kitaj" (in Bodil Sørensen's translation), *Kunst og Kultur*, 1983, vol. 66, no. 3, pp. 166–174. Original title: "R.B. Kitaj: Le tableau comme un roman", published in *Connaissance des Arts*, 1981, no. 355, pp. 36–43.
- 239 Johnson in *Art in America*, p. 126.
- 240 Sandra Two, p. 9.
- 241 Sandra Five, a Magazine (1998, ill. 98) was shown at the Royal Academy, summer 1999.
- 242 Packer in *Financial Times*, 31 May 1997.
- 243 Kitaj maintains in his text that these unconscious thoughts are 'women!' When he painted the picture he claims he named each of them after his female friends and acquaintances. For the text see *R.B. Kitaj: A Retrospective*, p. 68.
- 244 For a more detailed discussion of this work, see Marco Livingstone: "Iconology as theme in the early work of R.B. Kitaj", *The Burlington Magazine*, July 1980, vol. 122, no. 928, pp. 488–97, and Kitaj's own 'preface', in *R.B. Kitaj: A Retrospective*, p. 68.
- 245 Kinsman: *The Prints of R.B. Kitaj*, p. 41.
- 246 See ill. 94 for the wall text in its entirety.
- 247 Podro in *Art International*, 10 March 1979, p. 19.
- 248 Wollheim in *R.B. Kitaj: A Retrospective*, p. 39.
- 249 Kitaj's take on Nicolaus Pevsner's "The Englishness of English Art".
- 250 Wollheim in *R.B. Kitaj: A Retrospective*, p. 39.
- 251 Kitaj wanted originally to paint this work as a mural. That it later formed the motif of a tapestry, 5 x 8 m., currently hanging in the British Library, is quite amusing.
- 252 For alternative sources for the title, see, for instance, the quote from Gertrud Stein's account of Ezra Pound or Aragon's oath as cited by Goya. Cf. Martin Roman Deppner: "The trace of the other", *Critical Kitaj*, p. 184.
- 253 Kitaj's alter ego, betrayed by the hearing aid, also makes an appearance in *The Autumn of Central Paris*.
- 254 The person is taken from an image from Pudovkin's film 'Mother' (ill. 95).
- 255 *R.B. Kitaj: A Retrospective*, p. 120.
- 256 John Ashbury, cited in Martin Roman Deppner: "The trace of the other in the work of R.B. Kitaj", *Critical Kitaj*, pp. 187 and 240, note 19.
- 257 See above.
- 258 Lucinda Brendon: "To hell with the lot of them", *The Sunday Telegraph*, 25 May 1997.
- 259 Letter to Marco Livingstone, published in *Kitaj*, p. 50.
- 260 Charlotte Wiggins: "Struck Down", *R A: The Royal Academy Magazine*, summer 1997, p. 40.
- 261 *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- 262 '[e]t menneske som ikke skiller seg ut hverken hva dyd eller rettferdighet angår ... og gjennom frykt og medlidenhet fører den til den renselse som hører slike sinnstemninger til.' [Somebody who is neither outstanding in virtue and righteousness ... through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.] E. Eyde, A. Kittang and A. Aarseth (eds): *Europeisk litteraturteori*, Oslo 1992, p. 26.
- 263 When Sandra Four, 1998, was published in the form of an interview with Werner Hanak in the catalogue to *R.B. Kitaj: A Retrospective*, the discussion mainly revolved around Kitaj's trip to Vienna and Jewish issues. Sandra Five (1999, ill. 98) is a compilation of a portrait of Sandra and two earlier works, *Mendelsohn House* (1988–89) and *Bed and Sofa (After Abraham Room)* (1998). It touches on Kitaj's Modernist links, his sense of bereavement after Sandra's death – the empty sofa and chair – and is his homage to Jewish artists who succeeded as Jews despite the odds. In Sandra Seven, 2001, published as a catalogue for Kitaj's final exhibition at the National Gallery, the principal theme is his love for Sandra.

264 Wiggins in RA Magazine, p. 40.

265 R.B. Kitaj: A Retrospective, p. 53.

266 Kitaj's characterisations in Sandra Two will suffice as examples of his feelings towards critics: 'the Lynch-Mob'; 'the Living-Dead'; 'the Killing-Field'; 'the attack-slugs'; 'the philistines'; 'twit'; 'the great neurologist' and 'the Pishers of the Press'. The list is longer and the vocabulary more comprehensive.

267 Andrew Lambirth: "Kitaj and the Firing Squad" (interview), The Independent, 27 May, 1997.

268 Dormont in The Daily Telegraph, 28 May 1997.

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