

“Will I be the Herzl (or Ahad Ha’am) of a nu [!] Jewish Art???”

R.B. Kitaj’s Manifestos of Diasporism

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¹ For texts and excerpts from these manifestos see: Vivian Mann, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts* (Cambridge, 2000); Natalie Hazan-Brunet (ed.): *Futur antérieur. L’avantgarde et le livre*

yiddish (1914–1939), (Paris, 2009); Inka Bertz, “Jüdische Kunst als Theorie und Praxis vom Beginn der Moderne bis 1933,” in: *Das Recht des Bildes. Jüdische Perspektiven in der modernen Kunst*, Hans

Günter Golinski & Sepp Hiekisch-Picard (eds.), (Bochum, 2003), pp. 148–61; as well as Margret Olin, *The nation without art. Examining modern discourses on Jewish art*, (Lincoln, 2001).

Of all the texts that, since Martin Buber’s speech to the 5th Zionist Congress in 1901, have concerned themselves theoretically and programmatically with the question of a Jewish art,¹ Kitaj’s Diasporist Manifestos, written in 1988/9 and 2007, are the only ones to proclaim a new “ism” and to take the stage as “manifestos,” that text-genre so central to the twentieth-century avant-gardes.²

In 1984, four years before the *Erstes Manifest des Diasporismus* came out, R. B. Kitaj first aired his thoughts on Jewish art in the *Jewish Chronicle* in an article entitled “Jewish Art—indictment and defence: a personal testimony.”³ The questions he posed there form the starting point for his deliberations in the two following decades. Compared with his later, more aphoristic texts, here Kitaj followed a clear line of argument. He started by asking the question that was to interest him until his death:

“Why is there no Jewish art of any real consequence? I mean great Jewish art? Why do we not have a Chartres or a Sistine Chapel or a Hokusai or a Goya or a Degas or a Matisse? Both Rembrandt and Picasso seem to have loved the Jews but no artist of that quality has ever arisen among us, a people gifted way beyond our small number. We can only speculate.”

Hardly surprisingly, his first attempt at an answer tackled the issue of so-called aniconism. Visits to Jewish museums did nothing to lessen his sense of helplessness in the face of theological issues: “The Commandment could account for the thousands of years of mediocre adorning, hiddur mizvah the rabbis called it: ‘adorning the precepts,’ the result of which may be seen in the well-meaning museums of Jewish art we’ve all stumbled into. Full of what? Liturgical, archaeological tchatchkeles and even those are no match, some megilot and Hagadot (such as the medieval Bird’s Head Hagada) notwithstanding within that selfsame genre for, say, the Celtic Book of Kells, the supreme Girona Beatus Apocalypse, let alone Botticelli’s illustrations to Dante.” Kitaj developed the idea that good art requires a specific environment and tried to offer a second answer: “The next factor that comes to mind is that the Jews were kicked out of their land. Two things occur to me: one is that the exile, dispersal and relentless persecution of a people is not exactly conducive to the creation of either a collective miracle in art, like a great cathedral or a singular artistic miracle which requires a context, a milieu.” Secondly, he argued: “I believe the painters simply didn’t have enough *time* (as guests who were merely tolerated) to develop a tradition like the French and Italians, who had the time *and* a place. I simply don’t know.”

The notion that Jewish art could only arise in a “national home” is already to be found in Martin Buber’s speech to the 5th Zionist Congress, and the question whether there could be such a thing as Jewish art per se and how it would differ from non-Jewish art fired many a debate in the first half of the century. Initially Kitaj did not discuss this in any greater depth but reported on his personal focus on the theme: “The Jewish spirit in me was a long time in the forming and coming. It began to stir seriously about five years ago.” He realized that “one third of our people were being murdered while I was playing baseball and going to the movies and high school and dreaming of being an artist.” He was never to be able to shrug off the helpless sense of guilt given the parallel occurrences and this is repeatedly present in his later texts, too.

“Instinct led me through reading and thinking and meeting people, not to the rumoured origins of the Jews but to something that has proved far more seductive for my art

2 Wolfgang Asholt (ed.), *Manifeste und Proklamationen der europäischen Avantgarde* (Stuttgart, 1995); Friedrich Wilhelm Malsch, *Künstlermanifeste. Studien zu einem Aspekt moderner Kunst am Beispiel des italienischen Futurismus*, (Weimar, 1997).

3 R. B. Kitaj, "Jewish art – indictment & defence: a personal testimony," in: *Jewish Chronicle Colour Magazine*, Nov. 30, 1984, pp. 42-6.

4 Derived from the traditional concept of "Yiddishkeit," the term "Jewishness" became topical with the interest in cultural identity that arose in the 1970s and 1980s.

5 Nicolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art* (London, 1956).

6 R. B. Kitaj, "Brief aus London," in: Martin Roman Deppner (ed.), *Die Spur des Anderen. Fünf jüdische Künstler aus London mit fünf deutschen Künstlern aus Hamburg im Dialog*, (Hamburg, 1988), p. 10.

7 R. B. Kitaj, *First Diasporist Manifesto* (London/New York, 1989).

– a rumour of Jewishness. The famous phrase ranging in my mind – the Englishness of English art became for me the Jewishness of Jewish art." In other words, he did not seek Jewishness in the religious sense but a far broader notion of Jewishness, namely a style and feeling of life, a sensibility bound up with a sense of origin.⁴ Perhaps his reading of Nicolaus Pevsner's book, to which he alludes here,⁵ also shows what he was not interested in here, namely art geography or a history of style. In contrast, Kitaj found answers to his questions among the academic heretics of the Warburg school, whose interests he shared in the dovetailing of image and text, image atlases and library. And thus he turned his attention to Jewish intellectual history, to Achad Ha'am, Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin, and Franz Kafka. It was only via this detour that he found himself back with art.

This reference to Jewish writers and thinkers of the 1920s forced him to start thinking about the Holocaust and assimilation again. Walter Benjamin's fate made it readily apparent to him that assimilation was simply not an option: "It just didn't matter if you were a religious Jew or not, or if you thought you were any kind of Jew or thought you were not or willed yourself not to be. They'd kill you anyway. And they still might!" On the other hand, Kitaj found the path to religion blocked, too: "Like Kafka, I've never made a frank deposit into the bank of belief." For the avowed cosmopolitan, secular nationalism was out of the question. So what remained was art: "I've stumbled into an understanding that my own art has turned in the shadow of our infernal history. [...] Cézanne said something that's become very famous: he said he'd like to do Poussin over again, after nature. [...] I took it into my cosmopolitan head that I should attempt to do Cézanne and Degas and Kafka over again: after Auschwitz."

That said, what was "the Jewish" element if Auschwitz was not to be the sole reference point? "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 it is in life. Can it be a force one *declares* in one's art? Could it not be a force one *intends* for one's art? Would it be a force *others* attribute for better or worse?" Was that "Jewish" intention or interpretation? The questions went unanswered, the contradictions unresolved. For Kitaj there was at the end no answer but only, as in his later texts, fragments, quotes and further questions.

Das Erste Manifest des Diasporismus

Since the mid-1980s many of Kitaj's works revolved around the theme of the Holocaust. His "Germania" series was exhibited in 1985 at the Marlborough Gallery. Martin Roman Deppner and a group of Hamburg-based artists were prompted by it to organize an exhibition in 1988 in the Heine-Haus in Hamburg with a title borrowed from Emmanuel Lévinas: "Die Spur des Anderen." A small catalog was published, to which Kitaj contributed a "Letter from London"⁶ (see the essay by Martin Roman Deppner, |p. 105).

A few months before the show opened at the end of September, namely in May 1988, Zurich's Arche Verlag published Kitaj's *Erstes Manifest des Diasporismus*.⁷ Artist and typographer Christoph Krämer, one of the artists included in the exhibition, joined up

8 Such as the “Schwarze Reihe” books brought out by Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag.

9 Harald Hartung, “Schatten. Der Maler R. B. Kitaj,” in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Oct. 29, 1988.

10 R. B. Kitaj, *First Diasporist Manifesto*, (London/New York 1989), p. 109.

11 At about that time, above all French theorists such as Gilles Deleuze devised concepts of the Nomadic and the Minoritarian. US writers such as Paul Gilroy (*The Black Atlantic*, 1993) considered the situation of the Diasporic and Minoritarian to offer the basis for a “different Modernism.”

12 R. B. Kitaj, *First Diasporist Manifesto*, (London/New York 1989), p. 35f.

with graphic designer Max Bartholl to design the *Manifesto*—and presumably the small exhibition catalog, too. The two volumes are of the same format and use the same paper, whereby the *Manifesto* can be clearly recognized as an artist’s book. The sans serif font was set bold and in italics. The illustrations are always on the left-hand page, the copy on the right-hand page, and the pagination next to the gutter. Copy and image interact closely, showing that the artist and the book designers worked hand-in-glove.

The only element of color in the book is a bright pink vertical on the right edge of the front and back covers. It is the only indication of Kitaj’s strong use of color, as his works are reproduced only in grainy black and white in the book. The visual leitmotif is a deep satiny black. In this way, if only by its design, the book kindles associations with the books and exhibitions of the time on the theme of the Holocaust.⁸ While this alluded to an important aspect of its content, Kitaj’s considerations went far further. The second key leitmotif, namely the age of Kafka and Benjamin, is referenced by the Gill font, which was developed in the late 1920s in England.

The text has a foreword and then three parts: the “Manifesto” is the first, a text of some 45 pages, followed by a second piece, “How I came to make my Diasporist pictures (untimely thoughts),” that alludes to Nietzsche by offering terse aphoristic reflections on the topic of Diasporism, while the third section “Diasporist Quotations” consists of lengthier commentaries on quotes from Primo Levi, Isaiah Berlin, Max Beckmann, Pablo Picasso, Clement Greenberg, Gershom Scholem and others.

Unlike the established manifestos as written by Marinetti, Breton or the Dadaists, as the reviewers at the time saw, “there’s nothing strident or aggressive about it. The tone is very personal, intimate even to the point of pathos.”⁹ Yet Kitaj also announces his new “ism,” and not just with the wish to radically renew art, but also to link art with the world, history and life.

In 1984, Kitaj found the answer to the question he had asked in an extensive concept of Diaspora. In his 1984 text he only uses the term “Diaspora” once, in a purely descriptive manner. The almost coincidental mention in connection with Kafka leads us to the quote by Clement Greenberg that Kitaj reflects on in the third section of *The First Diasporist Manifesto*. “Kafka,” as Kitaj quotes Greenberg, “wins through to an intuition of the Jewish condition in the Diaspora so vivid as to convert the expression of itself into an integral part of itself; so complete, that is, that the intuition becomes Jewish in style as well as in sense... the only example I know of an integrally Jewish literary art that is fully at home in a modern Gentile language.”¹⁰

By pursuing this idea, Kitaj finds that the concept of the Diasporist enables him to link origin, situation in life, and artistic expression with Jewishness without relying on the category of the national or a tradition based in religion.¹¹ He reflects in the manifesto on the existential Diasporist situation, which he does not limit to Jews, but also to homosexuals, women, Palestinians, Afro-Americans, and many of the Modernist artists he so admired: “Diasporist art is contradictory at its heart, being both internationalist and particularist. It can be inconsistent, which is a major blasphemy against the logic of much art education, because life in Diaspora is often inconsistent and tense (...), that’s Diasporism, which welcomes interesting, creative misreading”¹²

13 For the reception in Germany, see in particular *Kunstforum International*, no. 111 (1991), with articles by Martin Roman Deppner, Doris van Drahten, and Klaus Herding.

14 Andrew Forge, "At the Café Central," in: *London Review of Books*, March 2, 1990, p. 11.

15 Hilton Kramer, "Memoir into myth," in: *Times Literary Supplement*, Sept. 1–14, 1989, no. 4510.

16 Gabriel Josipovici, "Kitaj's manifesto," in: *Modern Painters*, vol. 2, no. 2, summer 1989, pp. 115–6.

17 Linda Nochlin, "Art and the Condition of Exile: Men/Women, Emigration/Expatriation," in: Susan Rubin Suleiman (ed.): *Exile and Creativity. Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances* (Durham & London, 1998), pp. 37–58, here p. 45.

18 Richard Morphet (ed.), *R. B. Kitaj. A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (Tate Gallery, London, 1994), p. 64.

19 Alex Danchev took sections from the first and second manifestos for his collection of *100 Artists' Manifestos* that Penguin Books brought out in 2011.

The volume finishes with a section entitled "Error." Here, Kitaj quotes a notion of Maurice Blanchot: "To err means to drift, unable to tarry and rest... The land of the drifter is not truth, but exile; he lives in the outside." Here, wandering and wondering, topos and logos, interconnect.

First Diasporist Manifesto

The design of the English edition, which Thames & Hudson brought out in 1989, is not dissimilar to the German: a bold font (a Garamond), the black bars next to the page numbers, and above the picture captions, the black and white reproductions that run to the gutter, the coarse grain—all combine to create a slightly somber feel, but their stringency is reminiscent of the avant-garde journals.

Countless reviews took the book seriously, but they were not uncritical.¹³ Artist and art critic Andrew Forge, and writer and essayist Gabriel Josipovici, commented on the mixture of personal confession and general manifesto, asking: "Historical generalization or confessio? Both of course, but without clear borders, the two strands are ever more profoundly intertwined. And then behind all there are his pictures."¹⁴

Hilton Kramer, the *New York Times*' conservative art critic, was unable to follow Kitaj's drive to open out the concept of Diasporism to include other minorities and modern artists.¹⁵ He countered that Kitaj's theory did not provide a critique in the Kantian sense of an analytical tool to distinguish one kind of art from another—a point Gabriel Josipovici also criticized.¹⁶ The latter felt the real importance of the manifesto was that it offered a way out of the general view of the history of Modernist art as a history of formal solutions to formal problems artists and critics tended to adopt: "The cluster of associations Kitaj builds around the word 'Diasporist' has only one aim: to free him from the nagging modernist feeling that the art he creates in the peace and quiet of his studio is merely a private whim and nothing more than an indulgence, subject only to his own shifting moods and fancies."

Linda Nochlin was fiercely critical from a feminist perspective. Kitaj, she said, wrote "Old Boy's Diaspora [...] where women exist to swell the crowd in a sexy way, to pose as anonymous victims perhaps, but rarely to have a subject position offered them, either inside or outside the picture." She cited as evidence the selection of men he cited and his art, which she felt excluded her: "Turning away from his female nudes to his series of portraits of literary and art historical friends, I want to know why Anita Brookner (the novelist) can't turn around (charming and revealing though the back view image is), face us, and assert her dominion over the picture space as do Philip Roth, Sir Ernst Gombrich, or Michael Podro as The Jewish Rider? Obviously there is an exile within the exile so poignantly enacted by Kitaj's images: the exile of women." She criticized the fact that "I, as a Jewish woman, have been exiled from Jewish exile by the mere fact of my sex; it is men who lay claim to the diasporist tradition of Modernity."¹⁷

Yet over and above all these objections and Kitaj's later doubts as to whether he should have published the text,¹⁸ and all the private obsession it contains, *Das Erste Manifest des Diasporismus* offers an alternative view of the history of Modernism.¹⁹ Above all, it also makes a key contribution to the question of the Jewish identity after the Holocaust. Unlike the debates conducted in the 1990s, Kitaj is less interested in the issue of the possible representation of the Holocaust, and more in the impact the Holocaust has on art per se.

20 Excerpts appeared in 2005 in the catalog of the exhibition “How to reach 72 in A Jewish Art” and, in 2007, in the first issue of the new journal *Images. Jewish Art and Visual Culture*.

21 Esther Nussbaum, “Second Diasporist Manifesto,” in: *Jewish Book World*, vol. 26, 2008, no. 1, p. 34.

22 See the publisher’s announcement and the reviews by Benjamin Ivry, “Remembering Kitaj,” in: *Commentary*, January 11, 2008; Jude Stewart, “‘Paint it Jewish!’ What does ‘Diasporist’ art look like? R.B. Kitaj tried to show us,” in: *Tablet*, Feb. 7, 2008; Jed Perl in the *New Republic*.

23 Kitaj, 1991, quoted from Livingstone, *R. B. Kitaj* (2010), p. 43.

24 The reference to Ezra Pound (whom Kitaj forgave his anti-Semitism) is also to be found in *Erstes Manifest des Diasporismus*, p. 140f.

25 Livingstone, *Kitaj*, 2010, p. 56.

Second Diasporist Manifesto

The *Second Diasporist Manifesto* appeared in September 2007 shortly before Kitaj’s death as “a new kind of long poem in 615 free verses,” published by Yale University Press in New Haven.²⁰ The manifesto was mainly reviewed against the backdrop of his demise, with one critic opining it was seen “more as a poignant farewell than the provocative collection of thoughts about Jewish art and artists that it is,”²¹ commenting in admiration (if somewhat perplexedly) that was “wonderfully idiosyncratic,” a “provocative collection of thoughts,” and a “dazzling literary achievement.”²²

Kitaj wrote in 1991 to Marco Livingstone how he construed the second manifesto, which he had announced in the first: “If I were to write down a second manifesto it would be very short and I think it would wish to address what I have called assimilationist aesthetics because I find I don’t wish to escape the tremors of European host-art from Giotto to Matisse.”²³

Kitaj now, more clearly than in *Erstes Manifest*, placed his work in the lineage of the avant-garde manifestos, dedicating the volume to “the Manifest predecessors, Tristan Tzara (Sammy Rosenstock) and Marcel Janco, the Jewish founders of DADA.” The text’s form as a numbered sequence of brief, aphoristic sections is reminiscent of Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*,²⁴ Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*,²⁵ and not least André Breton’s Surrealist Manifestos. The number of 615 verses emulates the Jewish tradition of the 613 Mitzvots, with two added: Emil Fackenheim’s 614th Mitzva—not to hand Hitler posthumous victories—and another one, probably in memory of Sandra Fisher. Marinetti’s Futurist Manifesto had a similar numerical structure, adding an eleventh to the Ten Commandments.

As in the dedication, in the introduction, which Kitaj entitled “Taboo Art,” he referred to the lineage in art as of the beginning of Modernism, since Gauguin and Monet, Freud, theoretical physics, social utopias and the avant-gardes.²⁶ With his reference to Modernism, Kitaj was himself part of the tradition of proposals for a Jewish art. For Modernism had always been a central category in that project, even if the term assumed different meanings. While for Buber and his contemporaries around 1900 Modernism offered a path away from historicism to something “of our own,” for the Russo-Jewish avant-garde it pointed a path “out of the ghetto westwards.” By contrast, for Kitaj Modernism stood for the Diasporist and thus for the universalization of Jewishness. Yet unlike the status in the first half of the twentieth century, it is now no longer a utopia but a canon, from which the concept of the Diasporist can be derived and justified. For this reason, the absence of a Jewish champion of the fine arts in this canon poses a fundamental problem for Kitaj and is not just a matter of ethnic pride. What started in 1983 as reflection became ever more associative and fragmentary: While the 1984 version had a clear argument running through it, *Erstes Manifest des Diasporismus* of 1988/9 is a rambling text that vacillates between general statement and personal confession, and the *Second Manifesto* 2007 is more a flow of thoughts, sketchy aphorisms that primarily follow how he read things, his idiosyncrasies, his obsessions and how he staged himself: indeed, his “cult of the fragment.” Between them lay the “Tate War.” Like Kitaj’s overall work as an artist and publicist post-1994, the text was shadowed by his fight with his critics, whom he felt were responsible for the death of his wife Sandra Fisher:²⁷ “My enemies have increased my Jewish Aesthetic

26 While at the time the concept of the avant-garde was subjected to incisive critique, e.g. among those who contributed to the journal *October*, see Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985).

27 See on this Anne Vira Figenschou, *Dialogue of Revenge*, Oslo 2002 (MA thesis), online at www.forart.no (April 10, 2012), as well as the essay by Cilly Kugelmann in the present volume.

28 “My enemies have increased my Jewish Aesthetic Madness tenfold on their Killing Field. Werner Hanak, Interview with R. B. Kitaj,” in: *R.B. Kitaj. An American Painter in Europe*, exh. cat. (Oslo, Madrid, Vienna & Düsseldorf, 1998), pp. 131–4, here p. 134.

29 R. B. Kitaj, undated typescript with hand-written corrections and additions, in: *Kitaj papers*, UCLA.

Madness tenfold on their Killing Field.”²⁸ In memory of his wife, Kitaj now realized the project the two had planned together: a journal in the style of a small avant-garde magazine. He called the series *Sandra* and declared the *Second Diasporist Manifesto* its 14th issue.

The sense of alienation and the resulting critical impulse characterizing his earlier texts give way, in the *Second Diasporist Manifesto*, to a “battle” with his enemies. Kitaj links his private “Tate War” to the history of the artistic avant-gardes, relying on military metaphors. Thus at the end he seems to corroborate in a troubling way the famous dictum attributed to Schopenhauer that became a leitmotif of Modernism: “A happy life is impossible; the best that a man can attain is a heroic life.”

Third Diasporist Manifesto

In the Kitaj papers there are two short sketches on a planned Third Diasporist Manifesto. The first manuscript is entitled “The Jew Etc.” and addresses his relationship to Modernism and the avant-garde. The second text is titled “My Own Jewish Art / Third Diasporist Manifesto,”²⁹ consists of terse sentences, and begins: “Jewish Art is not a popular concept, nor I daresay will it ever be. A lot of Jewish artists dislike the concept of Jewish Art. Jews are not a popular people, nor will we ever be. That’s why I speak of My Own Jewish Art which is easier to defend.”

Here Kitaj avoids the oscillation between subjective confession and the wish for universal validity, something that forever irritated the reviewers, in favor of a radically subjective position, visualized by the use of the upper case “m” in “My Jewish Art.” He thus solved an old problem the avant-garde always faced in his own terms, namely the utopia of combining “art” and “life,” simply by declaring art to be life. In other words, he did not try and transpose the Jewish into art, or seek it in art, instead making art one form of Jewishness: “Jewish Art is one of the things I want to do with my life. (...) What one is! What we are! That’s Jewish art too.” Here, “Jewish art” is not understood as a style or concept, but as a way of life, namely that of the Diasporist. Unlike in aestheticism, life is not an artwork, but art a way of life.

Nonetheless, as in his early lecture in 1983–4, Kitaj continued to bemoan the absence of a “major” tradition of Jewish fine arts: “There has never been a Jewish Giotto or Matisse.” He seems to be reassuring himself when he points out that “Japanese, Egyptian art etc. flourished during certain periods, as a special style... thus Jewish art may too.” And it sounds like great fantasy—and perhaps also self-irony—when he then asks: “Will I be the Herzl (or Ahad Ha’am) of a nu [!] Jewish Art???”