

Foreword

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R. B. Kitaj is one of the most interesting and significant artists of the twentieth century who, both in life and art, occupied the uncomfortable position of being caught in the middle. Driven by an unwavering interest in the conditions of “Jewishness” throughout his entire life he sought to explore this against the background of anti-Semitism and tolerance in the wider society. With similar passion he pondered on the concept of a Diasporist existence, both to lend meaning to his way of life as an artist and an intellectual, and to substantiate the theory and practice of a form of Jewish art. His relationship to women, eroticism and sexuality was emotionally difficult and characterized by all kinds of theoretical considerations, particularly regarding a passion for prostitutes and the topos of the brothel as a metaphor for the complexity of modern life in the fundamentally hostile city. Ultimately, tragic deaths overshadowed his life and these were reflected in his work in the form of symbols and references. His first wife, Elsi Roessler, took her own life in 1969, and his second wife Sandra Fisher died suddenly and unexpectedly in 1994 in the middle of a flood of negative reviews, which Kitaj regarded as a smear campaign by art critics against his retrospective at the Tate Gallery. Kitaj himself was found dead in Los Angeles in October 2007, a few days before his 75th birthday. Now, the Jewish Museum Berlin is dedicating the first retrospective in fourteen years to this multifaceted artist, whose works were celebrated and collected throughout Europe and the USA into the early twenty-first century. The distraught artist’s withdrawal from the public eye in the final years of his life, motivated by illness, and despair over the death of his wife Sandra, have led to his unjustly falling into obscurity. The retrospective, which the Jewish Museum Berlin has entitled *Obsessions*, is the first for which it has been possible to draw on R. B. Kitaj’s extensive personal archive and estate, and thus present a more objective picture of the artist’s oeuvre independent of his quirks.