

MALGORZATA STĘPNIK  
Maria Curie-Skłodowska University  
Polish Institute of World Art Studies

THE AESTHETICS OF THE THE SCHOOL OF LONDON  
“DIASPORIC” PAINTING – ON THE BASIS  
OF RONALD B. KITAJ’S LITERARY MANIFESTOS

*Our Homeland, the Text.*  
(George Steiner)

TOWARDS A NEW GEOGRAPHY

We live in a time of the wandering of nations – both in terms of mental and spiritual spheres – the Great Exodus from the unitary visions of reality toward the Promised Land of Baudrillardian *simulacra*; from solidness of philosophical and ideological constructs, toward experiencing the liquidness and temporariness of our beliefs (see, e.g., Zygmunt Bauman’s *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*, 2011).

The present-day cross-cultural nomadism is, to a great extent, inherited from the age of Industrial Revolution, which gave birth to the mass tourism. What is more, the ever floating contemporary art world, or preferably – art worlds, are (still) governed by the principles of variability and transgressiveness – i.e. the basic tenets of *modernité*, as conceptualized by Charles Baudelaire, especially in his seminal essay *The painter of Modern Life (Le Peintre de la vie moderne, 1863)*. Therefore, today’s artistic nomad has much in common with the *flâneur*, or – as Janet Wolff would say – the *invisible flâneuse*. (It is worth mentioning that the *flâneur* – defined as a subtle aesthete and aristocrat of the spirit – became an emblematic figure in Walter Benjamin’s writings, in particular – *The Arcades*, never completed due to his suicidal death in 1940.) The burgeoning of styles and ideas, the multiplicity of creative “languages” can still be considered a consequence of the avant garde principle of revolutionary transgressiveness.

There is a growing need for creating “an alternative cartography;”<sup>1</sup> a need for drawing new maps of the altered world, in which the former outsiders have turned into insiders and old elites have been replaced by new artistic milieus. Since late 1890s, cross-cultural fluctuations have contributed much to the evolution of creative forms and ideas. Kobena Mercer, in his brilliant anthology dedicated to today’s *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers*, observes that critical reinterpretations performed in that context “modify the standard narrative of art [...] by revealing the vertiginous consequences of travel and migration as persistently recurring factors in the visual arts of modernity.”<sup>2</sup> Of postmodernity, as well.

Apparently, neither the concept of inter- nor even multi-culturality are relevant to the moving sands of postmodern art. (Our maps should be constantly redrawn.) But, transculturality – the notion described by Wolfgang Welsch – far better reflects the hybrid character of contemporary cultures and personalities they produce (see: Welsch’s *Transculturality – the Puzzling Form of Cultures Today*)<sup>3</sup>. Such “cross-cutting identities” (Daniel Bell) are a sign of our times.

The expression “shifting geographies of contemporary art” may be associated with many aspects, like for instance: the emergence of new values and creative strategies, rejecting the Eurocentric aesthetics with its predominant categories, changing centre-periphery relations etc. But here, several questions occur: Is there anything like wandering spirit in contemporary art? What are the characteristics of diasporic or – in a wider sense – outsider art? Can we still talk about “national character” of any creative production (obviously in neutral meaning)? And, last but not least: What are the points of convergence between unanchored, free art of diasporists and the category of “Englishness,” as described by scholars or artists themselves. I dare say, all the answers may be found in Ronald Brooks Kitaj’s *Diasporist Manifestos* published in 1989 and 2007, respectively.

According to Nikolaus Pevsner, “English art in nearly all ages escapes the system.”<sup>4</sup> (So do all who call themselves rebels.) Pevsner, a German-born art historian who entered England at the age of twenty eight, in his book entitled *The Englishness of English Art* (1956), explores the meaning of *The Geography of Art* (Chapter 1). His use of the notion of “national character” conveys a neutral

<sup>1</sup> Mercer (2008: 13).

<sup>2</sup> Mercer (2008: 7). Mercer also states that: “Migration throws objects, identities and ideas into flux. It has been a defining feature of modernity yet remains only hazily understood as a significant factor in numerous 20<sup>th</sup>-century artistic formations.” Mercer (2008: 7).

<sup>3</sup> Welsch: “What once may have applied only to outstanding persons like Montaigne, Novalis, Whitman, Rimbaud or Nietzsche, seems to be becoming the structure of almost everybody today.” (1999), <http://www2.uni-jena.de/welsch/Papers/transcultSociety.html> (27.09.2013) an excerpt from the original text: W. Welsch, *Transculturality – the Puzzling Form of Cultures Today*, in: *Spaces of Culture. City, Nation, World*, (ed.) Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash, London: Sage 1999: 194–213.

<sup>4</sup> Pevsner (1984: 10).

connotation and has nothing to do with nationalism.<sup>5</sup> He also manifests his special position as an outsider/observer in saying that: “the very fact of having come into a country with fresh eyes at some stage, and then of having settled down gradually to become part of it, may constitute a great advantage.”<sup>6</sup>

In the same way, Kitaj – spending nearly 40 years in London, actually the whole adult life – became a part of British art world. As a matter of fact, he found himself there on friendly ground and met things that resonated with his soul. (Though, “friendly ground” may sound a bit funny, considering his *Apotheosis of Groundlessness*. Such a title was given to a canvas from 1964.)

“Painting is a great idea I carry from place to place. It is an idea full of ideas, like a refugee’s suitcase, a portable Ark of the Covenant” – wrote Kitaj in his *First Diasporist Manifesto*.<sup>7</sup> (The sentence evokes associations with Duchamp’s *Boîte-en-valise – Box in a Suitcase*, as an idea of a “portable museum” and a metaphor of Exile). Living in diaspora, according to the literal meaning – existing in a state of dispersion (διασπορά), seems to be inextricably connected with the cult of *Logos*, with love for words. A diasporist dwells in the domain of parables, metaphors and the veiled language of allegories.

The origin of The School of London dates back to 1976, when Kitaj set up the exhibition symptomatically entitled *The Human Clay*. The metaphorical title of the show, which took place at Hayward Gallery, may be considered an allusion to mythical Golem – “the unshaped form,” (see: *The Jewish School. Drawing a Golem*, 1980). It is significant that the creature was brought to life by writing the Hebrew word for “truth” – *emet* (אמת) on its forehead. For it is the the *Logos* (λόγος) that animates things. It is the Word – so recklessly rejected by formalists – that animates art.

There is no doubt that Jewish émigrés – actually refugees – played a major role in shaping post-war art in Great Britain and America. Not only artists, but also humanities scholars contributed much to the dominant narrative of modern art.<sup>8</sup> Erwin Panofsky had been forced to leave Hamburg and emigrate to United States in 1933. In the same year, Warburg Institute was transferred to London

<sup>5</sup> As he claims: “everything ought to be avoided that glorifies obsolete national divisions.” Pevsner (1956: 11). In a quite funny way he associates the “national character” of art with the sound of a given language: “In act three, scene five of *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet says: ‘It was the nightingale and not the lark.’ If this line is pronounced aloud first in this form and then in Italian and in German, three national characters arise at once, each recognisable without hesitation: ‘É l’usignol, non é la lodola,’ and ‘Es ist die Nachtigall and nicht die Lerche’.” Pevsner (1956: 12).

<sup>6</sup> Pevsner (1984: 9).

<sup>7</sup> Kitaj (1989: 11).

<sup>8</sup> According to Steven A. Mansbach, the dominant narrative of modern art “was decisively determined by those intellectuals most deeply affected by the political outrages of the 1920s and 1930s; the legion of émigré humanities scholars and artists from Central Europe, whose lives were profoundly dislocated by the totalitarianism in their native lands.” Mansbach (2008: 96).

on the initiative of Fritz Saxl.<sup>9</sup> Inspirations drawn from those great intellectuals, are strongly reflected in Kitaj's writings, as well as paintings. The picture entitled *Melancholy after Dürer*, painted in 1989, echoes the famous engraving *Melencolia I*, and, at the same time follows a critical interpretation by Panofsky, calling it "a spiritual self-portrait," about "the tragic unrest of human creation."<sup>10</sup> Also in 1989, Kitaj published his *First Diasporist Manifesto* – a kind of an artistic Midrash, a creative credo of a Wandering Jew and Wandering Artist.

So, what it is that constitutes Kitaj's aesthetical program? I will try to give the answer in another part of this text. It would also be interesting to measure to what extent Kitaj's program is compatible with original aesthetics carried out by other members of The School of London, especially those of Jewish roots: Lucian Freud, Leon Kossoff and Frank Auerbach? I am afraid, however, that even a short reply to this question would far exceed the size of my article. It is partly because, in fact, the painters were, as Kitaj put it "a herd of differing loners."<sup>11</sup> According to David Cohen, "In coining the phrase 'School of London' Kitaj in fact reinforced, rather than challenged, an ethos of splendid isolation."<sup>12</sup>

#### THE OBSESSION OF THE TEXT

And that is how the painter explicates the "literary" nature of his *oeuvres*:

The compelling destiny of dispersion [...] describes my Diasporism, which describes and explains my parable-pictures, their dissolutions, repressions, associations, referrals and sometime difficulty, their text-obsessions, their play of differences, their autobiographical heresies, their sceptical dispositions, their assimilationist modernisms, fragmentation and confusions [...].<sup>13</sup>

*Our Homeland, the Text* is a title of George Steiner's article published in "Salmagundi" quarterly in 1985. (These words were chosen a motto for this article.) The prominent critic indicates that the supreme commandment to Judaism is given in the Book of Joshua I,8, which says: "The book of the law shall not depart out

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<sup>9</sup> Three years later Ernst Gombrich, escaping Nazi regime in Vienna, also found asylum in the capital of England.

<sup>10</sup> Overton (2010).

<sup>11</sup> Cohen (1995: 15).

<sup>12</sup> Cohen (1995: 16). Cohen: "What unites the pigment-loaded expressiveness of Auerbach and Kossoff, the fastidious, exacting representations of Freud and Andrews, the compelling, action-packed fictions of Bacon and Kitaj, is the conviction that – near as damn it – everything that matters can be said in paint. Touchstones of this conviction are to be found among the Old Masters" (Cohen 1995: 16).

<sup>13</sup> Kitaj (1989: 35).

of thy mouth.”<sup>14</sup> In *Second Diasporist Manifesto* text-as-homeland metaphor has been wrongly ascribed to a romantic poet, Heinrich Heine.<sup>15</sup> Undoubtedly, however, Steiner was under strong impression of Heine’s concept of the “transcribed Fatherland” (*aufgeschriebene Vaterland*). We can say that the portable homeland of words is what gives the artist an identity, regardless of nationality. As Susan Sontag – willingly quoted by Kitaj – put it: “The self is a text... The self is a project.”<sup>16</sup>

The word “project,” in turn, implicates an open, continuous form of literary composition. It is exactly what Kitaj describes as “the unfinished”.<sup>17</sup> His second manifesto’s subtitle, which is: *A New Kind of Long Poem in 615 Free Verses*, well illustrates the character of the creative process. What is more, it shows that the process itself, the experimental journey is far more important than the final “product”. Yet: *Navigare necesse est*. To travel, to be always on the run means: to achieve illumination, at the same time – to avoid intellectual stagnation.<sup>18</sup>

Kitaj remarks that his favourite book, *The Castle*, “has no ending. No ‘finish’.”<sup>19</sup> (As a matter of fact, the second manifesto as a whole is dedicated to “Kafka, the Greatest Jewish Artist.”) In this context, it is noteworthy that the painter often refers to Rabbi Menachem Morgenstern of Kotzk, simply called the Kotzker. He repeats his adage, that is to say: “He who thinks that he has finished, *is* finished.”<sup>20</sup> So, in Kitaj’s view, what counts most is the infiniteness of creative processes. Thus, painting or writing can take the form of an open, never ending narrative, or – in regard to Baal-Shem Tov’s thought – a kind of a “mystical prayer.”<sup>21</sup>

“As a Jew, I am *for interpretation*. As a post 20<sup>th</sup>-century painter, the very idea of *no commentary* bores me”, admits the artist.<sup>22</sup> In addition, he indicates three different sources of inspiration for the literary “Commentaries” that appear on his canvases, that is: Eliot’s notes to *The Waste Land*, Warburg’s iconographic interpretations and surrealist practices of inserting texts into pictures, (like *C’est ne pas*

<sup>14</sup> Steiner (1985: 4).

<sup>15</sup> Kitaj (2007: [266]). Note: In *Second Diasporist Manifesto*, the pages are not numbered. Kitaj numbers following fragments (from 1 to 615), instead. That is why, from now on, I am using square brackets while quoting that book.

<sup>16</sup> Kitaj (2007: [184]).

<sup>17</sup> “Endless Columns, mainly of quotations, suit my sense of UNFINISH, in art and life and maybe death...” Kitaj (2007: [371]).

<sup>18</sup> Proclaiming the necessity of escaping intellectual stagnation and spiritual laziness, Kitaj refers to the Book of Splendour: “People are always saying the meanings in my pictures refuse to be fixed, to be settled, to be stable: that’s Diasporism, which welcomes interesting, creative misreading; the Zohar says that the meaning of the book changes from year to year!” Kitaj (1989: 36).

<sup>19</sup> Kitaj (2007: [401]).

<sup>20</sup> Kitaj (2007: [352]).

<sup>21</sup> Kitaj (2007: [45]). See: R. B. Kitaj, *Self-portrait as the Baal-Shem*, 2005–2006.

<sup>22</sup> Kitaj (2007: [236]).

*une pipe*).<sup>23</sup> It is quite clear that the fragmented form of Midrash and a “hairsplitting” method of the *pilpul* are immediately reflected in his work. Interesting, that he compares the *pilpul*, as a way of studying the Talmud, to “the ghost lines” of the “beautifully unfinished Mondrians.”<sup>24</sup>

Kitaj feeds his imagination by reading novels, philosophical treatises, psychological studies, the great Books together with their theological interpretations; he devours Kafka, Roth, Wittgenstein, Panofsky, Saxl, Warburg, Celan, Greenberg, Scholem, Heschel, Sontag etc. It is just impossible to mention them all here... He cherishes Sigmund Freud’s work and refers to it many times.<sup>25</sup> (A series of paintings from 2004 is entitled: *Three Famous Jews: Ego, Id, Super-ego*.) The artist is well aware of the importance of Emmanuel Levinas’s concept of “the Other”. He perceives that intellectual similarity, especially when commenting The Venice Biennial in 1995. (Let me remind that he was awarded the Golden Lion then.<sup>26</sup>)

Moreover, in the scope of Kitaj’s interest, there is Walter Benjamin with his specific cult for fragment, Parisian *Arcades*, his philosophical dreams and *Constellations*, his longing for creative “aura” that had disappeared due to mass reproduction. That fascination is strongly reflected in two of his works: *Autumn in Paris. After Walter Benjamin* (1972–1973) and *Arcades. After Walter Benjamin* (1972–1974).

It is significant that the artist’s most favourite literary genre is an aphorism. He translates chosen fragments from Kafka’s *Züran Aphorisms* into the language of painting, (e.g. *Ronald licking the waves of the river of death*). The word “aphorism” has an interesting spatial connotation, indeed, as the Greek *aphorisein* means *to delimit* or *to define*. Prof. Tadeusz Sławek indicates that linear forms in painting are equivalent to those elegant, “defining” forms in literature.<sup>27</sup> Considering William Blake’s or Oscar Wilde’s aphorisms, we can say that such an aristocratic genre is to a great extent an English specialty.

Now, it is time to answer the question: What does the Jewishness – in other words, an artistic Diasporism – have to do with the Englishness? Well, here I would suggest several possible issues. Firstly, I think, we can draw some comparisons between Kitaj’s “text-obsession” and, for example, Blake’s love for metaphors, mystical transgressions and onyrial visions transformed into lines of words. Secondly, the weird nakedness in Kitaj’s paintings – a kind of non-erotic nudity – corresponds with the English tendency towards, as Peter Ackroyd put it: “denial of the body.”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Kitaj (2007: [83]).

<sup>24</sup> Kitaj (2007: [277]).

<sup>25</sup> “Reading Freud is a Jewish art therapy” – Kitaj (2007: [226]).

<sup>26</sup> “Strangely, I won the Golden Lion at Venice in 1995 in the name of Levinas Alterity! [...] Alterity was a theme that year. Thank you Venice.” – Kitaj (2007: [94]).

<sup>27</sup> Sławek (2001: 39).

<sup>28</sup> Ackroyd (2002: 85).

I assume, it has much to do with the awareness of the delusive character of perception (and with will to cleanse its “doors”). In addition, there is an intriguing connection between the “depressive” tendency of diasporic art and English “contemplation of dust,” that long tradition of shadowy melancholy covering writings by Burton, Chatterton, Keats etc.<sup>29</sup>

And at last, what is perhaps the most important here, the composition of Kitaj’s *Manifestos* – which, in my opinion, can be compared to Möbius strip, fractal layout or musical form of a rondo – coincides with the nature of English imagination, which, as Ackroyd observes, “takes the form of a ring or a circle. It is endless because it has no beginning and no end; it moves backwards as well as forwards.”<sup>30</sup> Which, I think, contrary to the stereotype, involves being non-conservative. Considering the etymology, intellectual *revolutions* (*to revolve*) find their analogies in visual compositions that bring the sensation of rotation. (Again, Blakean visions provide a good example; his *Last Judgments* in particular.) No wonder that Frank Auerbach, after reading larger fragments of *Second Diasporist Manifesto*, said: “It was crazy as Blake.”<sup>31</sup>

Roland Barthes, in his famous essay *The Death of the Author*, defines a text as “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.”<sup>32</sup> From that standpoint, Kitaj’s *Diasporist Manifestos* seem to be prophetic. That is because, as a matter of fact, they already *were* postmodern. But, Kitaj’s method may as well be compared to John Milton’s *modus creandi*. The author of *Paradise Lost* wrote in a prefatory epistle: “I have striven to cram my pages even to overflowing, with quotations drawn from all parts of the Bible and to leave as little space as possible for my own words.”<sup>33</sup>

According to Zygmunt Bauman, in the fluid stage of modernity, “we are witnessing the revenge of nomadism over the principle of territoriality and settlement.”<sup>34</sup> I think, we are able to see analogies between the “liquid modernity” and the specific, artistic obsession of never ending narrative. The strive for “the unfinished” is the common denominator for monumental, uncompleted novels (like *The Man Without Quality* by Robert Musil), for ephemeral and fragmented compositions of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Wanderer and His Shadow*, Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades* or Kitaj’s “long poem in 615 verses.” It is common for the Midrash and the Hypertext. It is a dream of infiniteness and freedom of living in an Exile. Infiniteness written in Words.

<sup>29</sup> Compare: Kitaj (1989: 73); Ackroyd (2002: 54).

<sup>30</sup> Ackroyd (2002: xix).

<sup>31</sup> Kitaj (2007: [202]).

<sup>32</sup> Barthes (1977: 146).

<sup>33</sup> Ackroyd (2002: 432). See also: Milton (2011: xviii).

<sup>34</sup> Bauman (2000: 13).

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