



PROJECT MUSE®

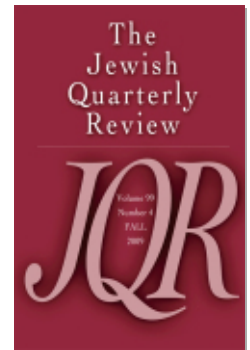
Kitaj's Napkin Map

David N. Myers

Jewish Quarterly Review, Volume 99, Number 4, Fall 2009, pp. 547-550 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jqr.0.0066>

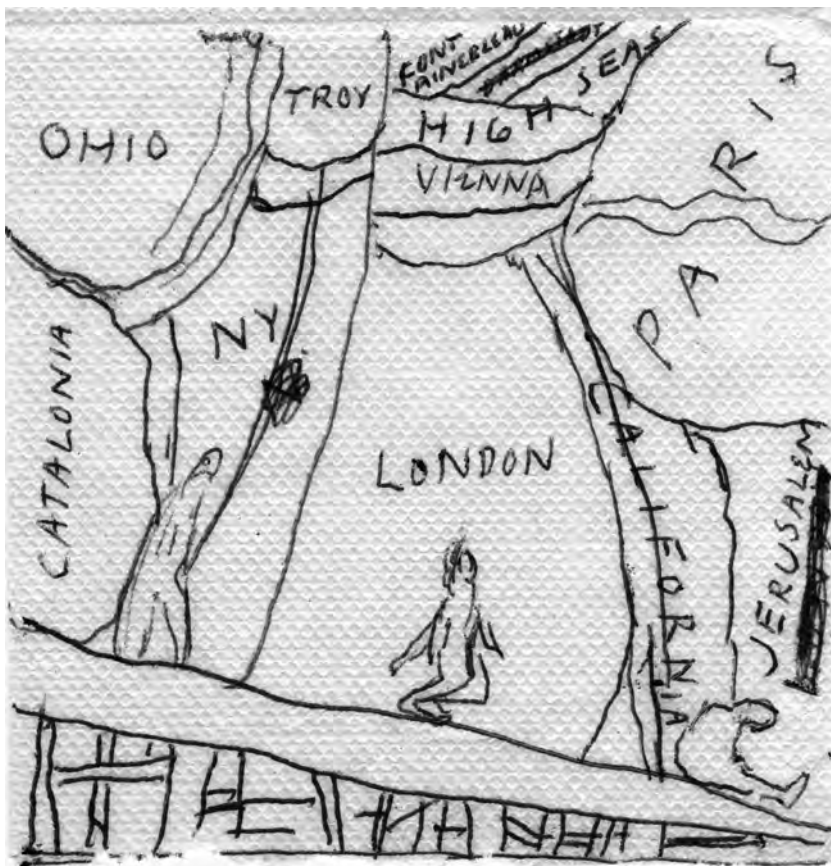


➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/363497>

Kitaj's Napkin Map

DAVID N. MYERS



THE JEWISH PAINTER R. B. Kitaj (1932–2007) was one of the most interesting of Jewish travelers in recent times. Not only did he live a life full of adventurous journeys. He also delighted in traversing, and

The Jewish Quarterly Review (Fall 2009)

Copyright © 2009 Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies.

All rights reserved.

transgressing, boundaries, particularly those between well-established genres and media. For example, while best known for his explosively colorful canvasses, Kitaj also developed a large audience of admirers—and critics—owing to the wild and erudite texts that accompanied his paintings. In writing these commentaries, Kitaj, who described himself as secular, became increasingly cognizant, and proud, of his place as a fellow traveler in the long history of Jewish interpretation. Embodying the famous principle (of Heine and Steiner) that the text had become the “portable homeland” of the Jews, Kitaj was a restless interpreter and an inveterate Diasporist. If for Gershom Scholem (one of his great heroes) the discovery of the vitality of Zionism went hand in hand with the study of Kabbalah, for Kitaj the Jewish interpretive imperative and the condition of Diaspora were inextricably entwined. In fact, he amply affirmed this connection throughout his two major works of Jewish writing, the *First Diasporist Manifesto* (1989) and the *Second Diasporist Manifesto* (2007).

After nearly forty years as an American expatriate in London, Kitaj returned to this country in 1997 and settled in Westwood, a few blocks from the UCLA campus. He commenced his day with a 5:30 walk to the neighboring Coffee Bean, where he would sit and write. Beset by a writerly obsession that rivaled his daily painting regimen, Kitaj would engage in ruminations large and small in his clear, block handwriting—Wittgenstein and kabbalistic speech theory mixed in with forgettable aphorisms or angry tirades against his London critics. Some of the more weighty musings made their way into published form, most prominently in the *Second Diasporist Manifesto*. Those of a more ephemeral nature were recorded on the small square napkins dispensed at the Coffee Bean, hundreds of which have been preserved in the Kitaj Papers at the UCLA Department of Special Collections.

Among these jottings is the particularly revealing one from the last years of Kitaj’s life reproduced here, a sort of autobiographical map charting the important stations of his peripatetic existence. Peripateticism was, for Kitaj, not merely a condition—both his own and his fellow Jews’—but also a virtue, the font of Jewish cultural and textual innovation. Toward the end of his life, he memorialized his own geographic—and by extension, intellectual and artistic—peripateticism in this cartographic napkin.

In the upper left-hand corner is **Ohio**, where he was born (in a suburb of Cleveland) in 1932. Moving immediately to the right, we find **Troy**, New York, where Kitaj went to high school, graduating in 1950. To the immediate right of Troy is the phrase **High Seas**, a reference to the fact that Kitaj joined the merchant marine right after high school, making his

way, among other stops, to Cuba, Mexico, South America, and Europe. Directly below Troy is **New York**, where Kitaj began the formal study of art at Cooper Union in 1954, following his time as a sailor. Moving to the right, he continued his studies at the Akademie der bildenden Künste in **Vienna**. While in Europe, Kitaj frequently visited **Paris**, home to many of his favorite and most inspiring artists, including, for a time, Paul Cézanne, whom he called “my most beloved painter” and to whom he dedicated an entire book-filled room of his Westwood home. In the center of the napkin-map is **London**, where Kitaj arrived in 1959 to study at Oxford and then at the Royal College of Art, the institution in which he made the acquaintance of his life-long friend, David Hockney. Kitaj would remain in London until 1997, joining with his friends Hockney, Frank Auerbach, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, and Leon Kossoff in a loose artistic and intellectual assembly that came to be known as the London School of painting.

Loved by admirers and reviled by critics, Kitaj journeyed more and more in the 1980s into the terrain of the “Jewish Question,” which he painted and wrote about it in great detail. In Kitaj’s own retelling, his obsessive attention to this Question, combined with his self-consciously Jewish practice of commenting on his paintings, triggered the anti-Semitism of the London art critics. Meanwhile, their mean-spirited response to a major retrospective of his work at the Tate Gallery in 1994 was responsible, Kitaj believed, for the sudden death of his beloved wife Sandra. Three years later, bereft and enraged, Kitaj moved to **California** (to the right of London), where he lived the last decade of his life. While in Los Angeles, Kitaj retreated into a state of seclusion, avidly consuming scholarship on Kabbalah that served his goal of transforming his late wife into the living incarnation of the Shekhinah (female Godhead). From his close reading of Scholem and Moshe Idel, Kitaj understood well that Kabbalah was deeply rooted in **Catalonia** (far left), a place he visited and loved from his first trip in 1953. In his last years, Kitaj, ever the Diasporist, though also the tough Jew—not unlike his good friend Phillip Roth’s Mickey Sabbath, for whom he was a model—grew increasingly connected to and concerned over Israel. **Jerusalem**, at the far right, was the ultimate destination at which the eternally wandering Jew never arrived and the site of a Jewish tough-mindedness that Kitaj admired.

For all of his vitality—and his vital commitment to art and Jewish culture—Kitaj was consumed by thoughts of mortality. The bottom portion of the napkin pictures a downwardly sloping passageway that captures Kitaj’s fixation with his own physical and emotional decline. The

upright figure on the left becomes a diminished and bent figure in the middle, not surprisingly smack in the midst of London with which Kitaj had a most fraught relationship. At the bottom right is a slumped figure, foreshadowing the self-imposed end of Kitaj's remarkable creative journey in October 2007.