



MARCO LIVINGSTONE

# KITAJ



The most  
comprehensive  
survey of Kitaj's  
entire career,  
with 43 artist's  
prefaces and over  
200 colour plates

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*Author's dedication*

This fourth edition is dedicated to the memory of four people very dear to me whose conjunction of deaths has cast a deep shadow over my life:

the painter Patrick Caulfield, who died on 29 September 2005;  
my father, Leon Livingstone, who died on 29 September 2006;  
my mother, Alicia Livingstone, who died on 18 October 2007;  
and R.B. Kitaj himself, who died on 21 October 2007.

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FRONTISPIECE: Lee Friedlander, *Kitaj*, 2001. © Lee Friedlander, courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.  
PAGE 8: *Interior/Dan Chatterton's Town House* (detail), 1962. Cat. no. 44.  
PAGE 62: *Scream* (detail), 1994–9. Cat. no. 727.  
PAGE 228: Lee Friedlander, *Kitaj*, 1983. © Lee Friedlander, courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

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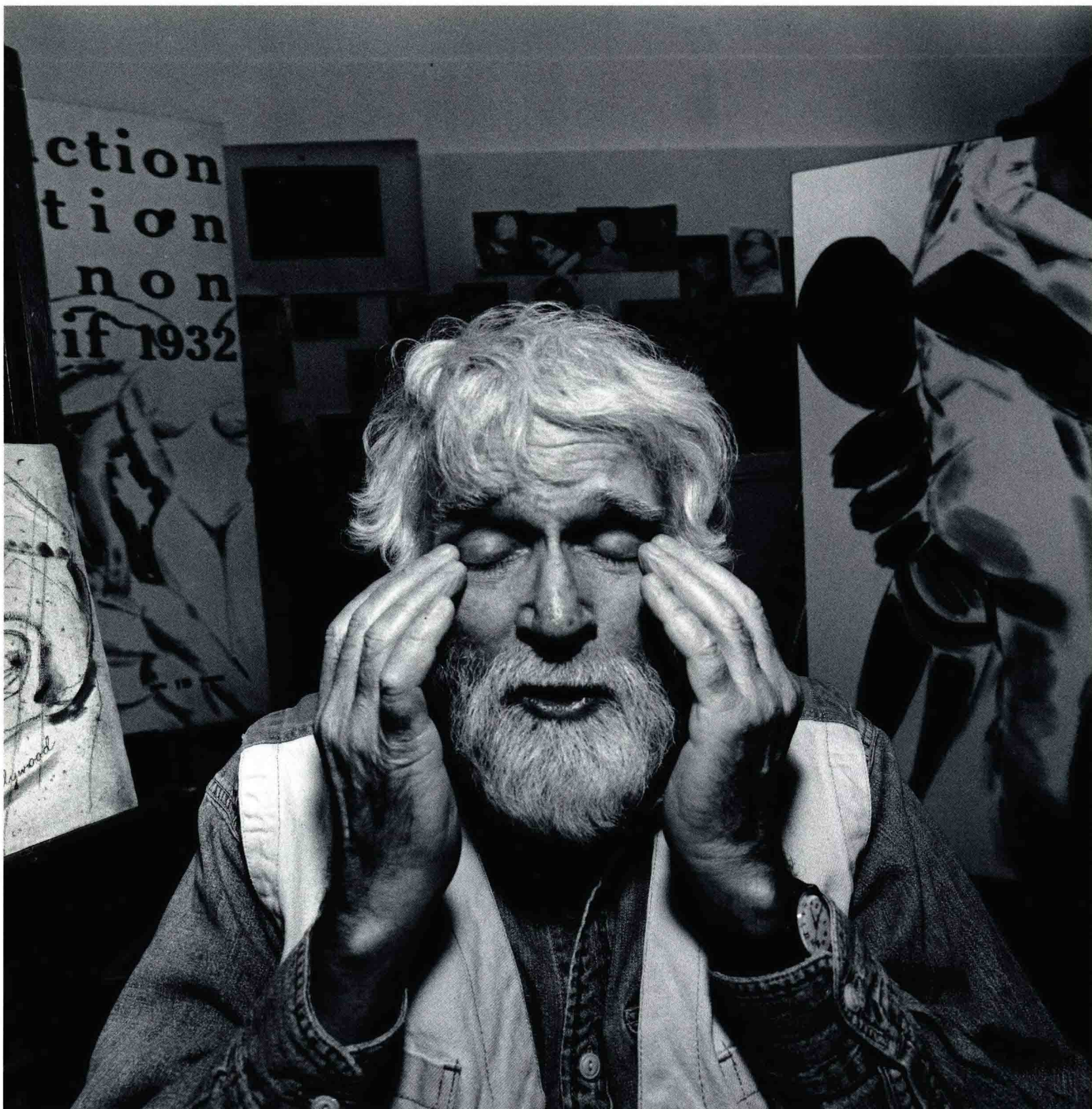
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## PREFACE

It is nearly a decade since I first met R. B. Kitaj, thanks to an introduction from my tutor, John Golding. In the intervening years I have had the good fortune of maintaining contact with the artist, an exchange of ideas and information which has been especially close in the two years since I was commissioned to write this study. The immense and revealing correspondence by which we have conducted a series of interviews on diverse aspects of the painter's work forms, in a real sense, the very core of this book. It is to Kitaj himself, therefore, that I express my first and most profound thanks, for the honesty, frankness and thoughtful care with which he has so patiently answered my many questions and by means of which he has helped unravel both the intimate circumstances of his life and the complex implications of his work.

Marlborough Fine Art, London, have greatly simplified my task in making available their complete photographic documentation of the artist's pictures, as well as their press files and published items which would otherwise have been difficult to trace. My thanks especially to Geoffrey Parton, for giving me early access to the list of paintings and drawings compiled by him for inclusion in this volume, and for showing me works by the artist in store at the gallery. I am grateful, likewise, to the staff of the Tate Gallery Print Department and to other public bodies and individuals who over the years have allowed me to look at works in their collections.

The chapter concerning Kitaj's early work, *Certain Forms of Association*, is closely based on my article 'Iconology as Theme in the Early Work of R. B. Kitaj', published in the July 1980 issue of the *Burlington Magazine*. I am much obliged to Richard Shone and his colleagues at the *Burlington* for granting me permission to re-use this material.

I might not have taken on this project at all had it not been for the support of David Pears, until recently Chairman of the Museum of Modern Art Oxford, and of David Elliott, its Director, who together with the Museum's Council of Management generously granted me time in which to complete my writing. To them and to all my colleagues at the Museum I should like to express my warm appreciation.

MARCO LIVINGSTONE    Oxford, July 1984

## PREFACE TO THE FOURTH EDITION

In the preface to the third edition of this book, published in 1999, I wrote: 'The seven years that have lapsed since the publication of the first revised edition of this book have been momentous but also tragic ones in Kitaj's life. The prospect of his Tate Gallery retrospective in 1994 stimulated him to produce an unusually large number of new works in a far looser and more spontaneous style, but the exhibition, while widely admired, was also the subject of vicious personal attacks. The death of the artist's wife, the American painter Sandra Fisher, only two weeks after the close of that show was the final blow. Feeling that London was now also dead for him, he returned in summer 1997 to the United States.'

The chapter about that phase of his life is now succeeded, with unbearable sadness, by one last chapter detailing the events and works of what Kitaj termed his third and final act, his years in Los Angeles ending in his sudden death just short of his 75th birthday. He closed this period with a final flourish, an unexpected outpouring of two extended series of paintings, his *Los Angeles Pictures* – in which he depicted himself and his late wife as angels forever devoted to each other – and well over a hundred *Little Pictures* that are full of verve and humour. These are the focus of the book's new closing chapter.

That this monograph was commissioned and first published by Phaidon long before the change of ownership makes it all the more welcome that Richard Schlagman has now commissioned three revised and updated editions at regular intervals. It was his decision that this final version be by far the definitive one, with the addition not just of the new chapter but also of some 80 new colour plates throughout the book, the conversion of more black-and-white to colour illustrations, the updating of the bibliography and the catalogue of works, and the inclusion of a further 25 'prefaces' by Kitaj to those already featured in previous editions, gathering together for this book one of the most substantial bodies of his writing. I am thus greatly indebted to him, and to Craig Garrett, my dedicated and immensely capable editor, for making this possible. I would like to express my particular thanks, too, to Tracy Bartley, Kitaj's assistant during his last years, for her indefatigable work on the catalogue of works and on the transcription of Kitaj's texts; to Kitaj's family, Lem, Dominic and Max, for giving permission for the publication of further texts by their father; and to Geoffrey Parton at Marlborough Fine Art in London and Tara Reddi at Marlborough Gallery, New York, who so ably looked after Kitaj at these respective galleries. Thanks to these communal efforts, this book should serve as a worthy memorial to one of the most gifted, original and memorable artists of our time.

MARCO LIVINGSTONE    London, May 2010







# **A SECRET LIFE**

## **THE ART OF R.B. KITAJ**

## INTRODUCTION

R. B. Kitaj's life has all the makings of a novel, filled with incident and romance, with memorable personal encounters and different cultures. The intricacies of his experiences, together with the artist's constant practice of reinventing himself – dramatizing his changing situation by devising new self-images and by identifying with people he has known, with artists and writers whose work and lives have caught his imagination, and even with figures from the realm of fiction – provide in themselves a worthy subject and one that would go far to explain the context of his work as a painter. The intimate snatches of autobiography that Kitaj conveyed to me in our thirty years of correspondence must, however, remain as fragments within this study of his art.

'As you may guess,' Kitaj wrote as we embarked on our course of written interviews, 'I'm always keen to confound the very widespread idea among our art people that nothing matters but the damned thing itself and that thing has to "work", as if there could be any real agreement about what "works" and what does not. Even artists I most admire, many dear friends, really shy away from making connections between art and what may be called the life, one's life ... Not me.'<sup>1</sup> On a separate occasion, however, he warned against taking too much account of what he himself had said in earlier interviews, admitting that 'My pictures had and have secret lives ... and so there were things I did not tell, a lot of stuff I did not say back then which I'm saying now. Also, what I did say was not always well put and was tempered by the secret lives of various pictures. I intend to continue, by the way, allowing forms of secret life to paintings I'm working on right now because it excites me to do that, which excitement can't be all bad, can it?'

Kitaj's contradictory but related impulses towards self-confession on the one hand and, on the other, towards secrecy and ambiguity lie at the root of his art. The work's intimacy and wide range of reference offer points of access, which are, however, often made impenetrable by their frequently private and esoteric nature. Kitaj from the beginning distrusted the notion, prevalent in our time, that a work of art can be totally self-sufficient and that it can communicate its meaning almost at once without the benefit of additional information; even those forms of painting most rigorously dedicated to questions of perception are modified by the viewer's knowledge of their philosophical standpoint and theoretical intentions and by their place within the history of the avant-garde. Rather than simply accepting that his work, like that of other artists, will be viewed in different ways according to the frame of reference of whoever sees it, Kitaj sought to incorporate intellectual, emotional and sensual forms of experience into his pictures so that everybody can find the point of entry most pertinent to his or her own personality, knowledge and experience.

Inevitably there will be aspects of certain pictures and perhaps some of Kitaj's general concerns that will remain unclear to those viewers who lack the motivation to make their own investigations. There is a real danger of an artist putting off his prospective audience by making their task as demanding as his own, as I know from my own frustrations in trying to understand the poetry of one of Kitaj's earlier exemplars, Ezra Pound. For their part, Kitaj's pictures, when I first came to know them, seemed threatening in their difficulty and in their constant allusions to historical and political figures and to literature with which I was not always familiar. Even now I must confess that I am unable – even unwilling – to follow Kitaj in the full diversity of his intellectual and cultural explorations, for they do not all touch me in the same way. My experience and intellectual preoccupations, after all, are not identical to his. But an instance of the power of Kitaj's work – assumed by some of its detractors to appeal primarily to literary minds – is the hold it has had over me, by no means a conventionally 'bookish' person, since my student days. Kitaj's work has long prompted me to extend my knowledge through reading and to reconsider the implications of the art of our time in the context of earlier art. Gradually, and, I must admit, with Kitaj's help as well as by my own

investigations, I have experienced the pleasure of deciphering plausible meanings of particular pictures, always keeping in mind the possibility of other, equally convincing, interpretations or contexts in which the works could usefully be viewed.

Kitaj consistently used all means at his disposal to ensure that the life of his pictures should not be circumscribed by the period of time in which they were made. The pictures generally have a long gestation, formulated by a mixture of impulses which reinforce one another while controlling excesses in any particular direction: the structuring of a picture was as likely to arise from free association from the subconscious, a legacy of Kitaj's grounding in Surrealism, as from a deliberate urge to integrate found images, direct observations from life, personal circumstances and subjects drawn from sources in art, literature and history. The significance of a painting or drawing could change even for the artist because of the complex relationship between conscious intention and subconscious impulse, just as events in one's own life can be reinterpreted through recourse to memory and later experience. It is an issue that interested Kitaj greatly, as he explained in a letter written in August 1983:

Flaubert liked to identify what he called an 'unconscious poetics' which brings work into being. I believe that pictures have many lives and selves and intentions... I am a revisionist. The ancient injunction – Remember! – has become a force in my life and pictures and, like other sublimations, has always been there I guess. I try to recover that remembrance of past things. I tend to refuse the notion that pictures should just linger and be left to their autonomous moment. It is never so. They can be taken up again and they always are in history. For one thing, they can be taken up again physically... I've tried to reclaim pictures to work on or cut up and sometimes I've been able to do that. I would destroy many of my pictures if I were allowed to. Instead, I content myself with seeking out what interests me or/and what I like about them and also remembering, in the spirit of the great Midrashic traditions (I've only recently discovered) which for thousands of years have sought meanings other than literal ones in spiritual texts long past.

## AS A YOUNG MAN

Kitaj was born Ronald Brooks in Cleveland, Ohio, on 29 October 1932. He never knew his Hungarian father – 'a nice guy, I'm told, a drifter who loved horses and books' – who left when Kitaj was aged about one and died in California a decade later. His mother, Jeanne Brooks, raised him alone, working first as a secretary in a steel mill and later as a schoolteacher; the daughter of Russian Jews, she married for the second time in 1941, taking as her husband a Viennese Jew named Dr Walter Kitaj, whose foreign background, like that of his mother, who came to live with them after the War, 'was a striking infusion and counterpoint in my otherwise rather normal American youth' (fig. 1).

Characteristically, Kitaj cited two novels as indicative of the milieu in which he was raised: *Studs Lonigan*, the first of James T. Farrell's trilogy, which he read in his early teens and in which he recognized his own experience of big city life, and Edward Dahlberg's *Because I Was Flesh*, 'a Portrait of the Artist as a Young Jew', to use Kitaj's description, in which many years later he discovered an even more accurate mirror of his own youth.<sup>2</sup> The happiest memories of the ten years that Kitaj spent in Cleveland are of the art classes that he attended as a small child in the Cleveland Museum of Art and of the favourite pictures that linger with him to this day: Albert Ryder's *Race Track (Death on a Pale Horse)*, John Singleton Copley's *Portrait of Nathaniel Hurd*, El Greco's *Holy Family* and Jacopo Bassano's *Lazarus and the Rich Man*, a picture that appeared to him as 'a tantalizing study in humiliation and persecution' and which produced in him



Fig. 1 Photograph of Joe Singer's apartment, Cleveland, Ohio, in the late 1930s. Jeanne Brooks is on the far right, Dr Kitaj in the centre, and Joe Singer is standing.



one of his earliest sexual *frissons*. During the War years Kitaj made regular visits back to Cleveland to see his grandparents, encountering Picasso's blue period masterpiece *La Vie* (1903), which was acquired in 1945 by the Museum and which long remained a favourite picture of his.

'Above all there was drawing. I was always a little old kid mad about drawing and although there were times I would have settled for a career in baseball or at sea later on, I never wanted to do anything other than art – and long before Freud's claim that it was really about fame, money and the love of women could take hold of me (I think).' Describing the 'agnostic, left-liberal milieu' in which he was brought up and in which 'political and literary instincts and turmoil colored and overwhelmed more stable or traditional absolutes', Kitaj pointed to the combination of forces that from the beginning helped shape his ambitions for art: 'Not to labor the point much more, my earliest years knew a confluence of art and books and political life overshadowed by the distant storm in Europe.'

In 1942 Kitaj's stepfather got a job as a research chemist in Troy, a small town in upstate New York, and it was there that Kitaj spent the subsequent six years.

Troy was heavily Irish Catholic and I would huddle with the others to hail Mary before baseball, basketball and boxing. Troy was a lot of sport, pals who endure as close friends to this day, the beautiful Hudson River Valley, refugees, the death of Mr Roosevelt (a big thing), the Truman years and the end of the war (another big thing), more refugees (and by that, I mean – very much in our lives), the McCarthy era and the blooming of an ever newer political soul in me, cruising cars for girls (almost untouchable Catholic girls), the discovery of a modern literature (Whitman, early Joyce, Hemingway, Hart Crane) ... and somehow, beyond the girls and movies and refugees there was always to be art, always drawing, always going to be an artist. I didn't have the Cleveland Museum any more so my focus switched to art books and one of the unsung art-classrooms of America – *Life* magazine. *Life* was always jam-packed with terrific reproductions in full color. I've always kept these reproductions. I use them every week of my life. They are tattered, treasured survivors pinned to my walls and stuffed into folders.

On leaving high school, his head 'brim full of Thomas Wolfe and Conrad and O'Neill's *Long Voyage Home*', Kitaj hitch-hiked to New York in the company of his closest friend, Jim Whiton, and with him signed on as a messman on a Norwegian ship called *SS Corona*, headed for Havana and Mexican ports. This was to be the first of a series

of voyages that Kitaj was to make over the following four years, alternating with periods of training at the Cooper Union and at the Academy in Vienna. Kitaj's time as a merchant seaman, often spent on what was referred to as the 'Romance Run' on ships of the Moore-McCormack Line – Santos, Rio de Janeiro, Montevideo and Buenos Aires – had a lasting effect on him. On the one hand it was a period of intense reading, with Kafka and Borges among those whose writings he consumed as part of his daily routine; on the other, it pushed him headlong into maturity while intensifying his taste for romantic adventure. 'Port life', he later recalled, 'has marked me in many ways, sexually and otherwise, and themes for an art can be traced there.' The memory of his introduction to brothel life in Havana on his first voyage at the age of seventeen lingered with him his whole life, and it was to this area of experience, which insinuated itself into his pictures over the years, that he continued to pin his ambitions for a type of painting that would synthesize his achievements, as Cézanne did in his late *Bathers* or Picasso in the *Demoiselles d'Avignon*. In 1990 he produced two paintings, *The First Time (Havana, 1949)* (1990, pl. 189) and *The Second Time (Vera Cruz, 1949)* (1990, pl. 194), in which for the first time he explicitly rendered precisely these events from his early life.

Kitaj arrived at the Cooper Union in the autumn of 1950, excited at the prospect of living in New York but resistant to the Abstract Expressionist ethos, which then held sway. Though he admired De Kooning and took notice of contemporary developments in painting, his secret ambition – admittedly unfulfilled – was to paint like Hans Memling.

Nevertheless, I would, for better and often for worse, become rather addicted to the surreal–dada–symbolist strain in our modern art which I haven't been able to get off my back yet. There were remarkable teachers there and memorable students. The Cosmopolitanism of the place was, in retrospect, its distinguishing aspect for me and I suppose, come to think of it, it is the Cosmopolitan nature of Modernism which I find most attractive still.

He paid tribute to the teaching of Sydney Delevante, 'a genuine early American modernist of the surreal–symbolist persuasion', but perhaps the most profound part of his education took place outside the school in the bookshops along Fourth Avenue. 'I had discovered Pound and Eliot and Joyce and Kafka and an innate bibliomania was rekindled there as it would be, on and off, manic and depressive through my life, feeding and bloating the pictures I would do.'

In the autumn of 1951 Kitaj passed through Paris on his way to Vienna, which he later recalled as being very much as shown in Carol Reed's 1949 film *The Third Man*. He registered at the Akademie, where Klimt and Schiele had been students at the turn of the century, and entered the studios of Albert Paris von Gütersloh, who himself had been a friend of Schiele. He drew regularly from the figure and also produced watercolours and drawings of the bombed ruins of the Opera and of the Danube Canal in the Russian zone; none of these, however, seems to have survived. In the anatomical dissection class that he attended he met an American girl from Cleveland, Elsi Roessler, whom he began courting and whom he married in the following winter, after his return to New York.

In 1953 Kitaj and his bride returned to Vienna and then travelled on through North Africa and Spain, spending the winter in what was then the quiet port of Sant Feliu de Guíxols. It was during that first stay in this town, to which he made several return visits during the fifties before beginning his regular pilgrimages there in the summer of 1962, that Kitaj met José Vicente Roma, 'an extraordinary man who would become one of my many brothers and a very great influence on my life'.

Having made his last journey to sea, Kitaj was conscripted into the American Army in 1956 and was posted to AFCE headquarters at Fontainebleau, where he drew pictures of the latest Russian tanks and installations for war games. He lived with his wife at Thomery-sur-Seine, a town set in the forest near many of the sites painted by



the Impressionists, and at the weekends they generally drove into Paris. On finishing his duty as an enlisted man, he decided to avail himself of the further art training offered at two British colleges under the terms of the American G.I. Bill, choosing the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art at Oxford in favour of Edinburgh. He and his wife made the journey by car.

It was a lonely drive because Suez had just been invaded and there was no petrol to be had in Europe. I had a supply in cans from the Army and I was just about the only car on the road. I had just read the two volumes of Will Rothenstein's *Men and Memories* and so I knew something of the life I was driving into.

## CERTAIN FORMS OF ASSOCIATION

By the time Kitaj arrived in Oxford at the beginning of 1958, aged twenty-five, he had led several lives and educated himself about a considerable range of art, politics and literature. An indication of the diversity of his artistic interests alone can be gleaned from his recollections of *Life* magazine:

First, it was where a lot of us saw mainstream modernism for the first time if one didn't live in N.Y. – Picasso to Pollock in technicolor. But also there were alternative conventions which many artists of a certain age must carry somewhere in the back of their mind. Along with the great European Moderns were pages and pages of what I guess you could call American Romantic art, swerving from downright realism to surrealism and symbolism: Blakelock, Eilshemius and the magnificent Albert Ryder; Eakins and Homer (best of breed); the Ashcan School; Hopper, Marsh, Soyer, Bishop, Bellows, Tchelitchev and Ivan Albright; I first saw Arthur Dove there and O'Keeffe, Marin, Nadelman, Cornell and Marsden Hartley, as well as the Romantic Surreal roots of abstraction in Gorky, Pollock, De Kooning and Rothko ... I could go on and on because these pictures, first in reproduction, and a few years later in N.Y. in the flesh, are printed inside me.

It was above all to the Surrealist tradition, however, that the young Kitaj looked for guidance. Referring to himself even two decades later as 'a grandchild of Surrealism', he openly acknowledged the parentage as early as 1961, when he appropriated the title of his mysteriously wispy canvas, *Certain Forms of Association Neglected Before* (pl. 20), from André Breton's first Surrealist Manifesto of 1924:

ENCYCLOPEDIA. *Philosophy*. Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of association neglected before, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought.<sup>3</sup>

It is telling that it was to Breton's second definition of Surrealism, as a philosophy or frame of mind rather than as a technical method of 'psychic automatism' as outlined in the first, that Kitaj made reference, since from the start he was a neo-Surrealist in attitude rather than a follower of orthodox Surrealist painting.<sup>4</sup> The intuitive means by which Kitaj composed his pictures in the early 1960s found further sustenance in the artist's encounter, later in the decade, with Carl Gustav Jung's concept of the 'active imagination', by which, as Kitaj explained, 'consciousness is only an agent noting what comes up in one's fantasy as it arises ... One is instructed (by C.G.J.) to be "uncritical" of these fantasies, to actually write them down, as if describing a dream or a play, without editing or criticism! This was a revelation for me because I'd been in the habit of painting like that anyway.'

The deliberate scattering of attention across the surface of Kitaj's early paintings provides an inducement for the mind to wander, focusing attention randomly on