

# **Rosaline and Myer Feinstein Lecture Series, 2001**

## **Creativity and Its Imprint: Three Jewish Artists and Some Books About Them: Philip Guston, Charlotte Salomon, R. B. Kitaj By Leonard Gold**

Dear Friends:

When Zachary Baker and Jerome Chanes invited me to present this year's Feinstein Lecture I had to decide whether to speak about something related to my career as Dorot Chief Librarian of the Dorot Jewish Division of The New York Public Library or to lead you onto the new terrain I have begun to inhabit, the world of art. I shall do the latter. I have decided to speak about three Jewish artists, Philip Guston, Charlotte Salomon, and R. B. Kitaj, whose work I hold in high esteem. In so doing I hope to offer you a glimpse of what it is an artist does.

Before going on I would like to thank the following for their assistance with advice and material: Michael Blackwood of Michael Blackwood Productions, Christen Conrad of Marlborough Gallery, Anton Kras of the Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam, Musa Mayer, daughter of Philip Guston, and Kendra H. Schweitzer of the McKee Gallery. All the above are in New York except for the Jewish Historical Museum, as noted.

Since my retirement in 1998 I have been painting almost every day at the Art Students League in New York. I have also reflected on the difference between what it means to be a librarian and what it means to be an artist. In a sense, the librarian and the artist stand at opposite ends of the spectrum of cultural activity. The librarian is a mediator between a reader and, typically, a book that somebody else has written. The artist, the serious artist, is a creator. Neither is better than the other. Both are indispensable. Pushing the contrast to the extreme, one might say that the librarian digs into the record, while the artist digs into the self. Because this is an extreme statement, it is not always a hundred-percent true. Yet I believe that it points to a valid distinction.

And if the artist, for whom talent, skill, and intellect are as important as they are for the librarian, is a digger into the self, it must follow that whatever is found there is grist for the mill. If that self is a Jewish self, the person is a Jewish artist. Now I am aware that this is very different from the way I thought when I worked as a Judaica librarian. Then, in dealing with books by and about artists, I paid great attention to Jewish subject matter and to the outwardness of the artist's Jewish identification. In a large research library it was important to know where to put the book and which division's budget to charge for it. One often had to ponder the question: "Is this the work of an artist who just happens to be Jewish, or is it really Jewish art?" That kind of distinction does not apply to this talk.

You are entitled to wonder why I have chosen these three artists. I have chosen them because I

like their work very, very much. All three are or were amazingly talented and skilled. But more important is the fact that each has worked out of a deep internal necessity, each responded with courage and honesty to a call from within. And the internal voice was what mattered, not the critics or popular taste.

What else can we say about all three before approaching them individually? All three were born Jewish and remained Jewish. Guston, an American, was born in Canada in 1913 and died in Woodstock, New York in 1980. Salomon, was born in Germany in 1917 and was killed in Auschwitz in 1943. Kitaj, an American who lived in England for nearly forty years, was born in 1932 and now lives in Los Angeles. All three use figuration in their work, except that for part of his career Guston painted abstractly. It follows that narration is important in the work of all three. All were keenly interested in the motion picture. All have to one degree or another introduced the written word into their art. Guston and Salomon were both marked by the suicide of a parent in early childhood. If you count the fact that Guston was actually born in Montreal, though he even once claimed Odessa as his spiritual birthplace,<sup>[1]</sup> you could say that all three created most of their work in countries other than where they were born: Guston in the United States, Salomon in France, and Kitaj in Great Britain. Guston and Kitaj also happened to share a keen interest in the writings of Franz Kafka and Isaac Babel and were friends of novelist Philip Roth.

A.

Philip Goldstein was born in Montreal on June 27, 1913, the youngest of seven children. We shall discuss the change from Goldstein to Guston in a little while. His parents, Leib, later called Louis Goldstein, and Rachel Ehrenlieb Goldstein, had immigrated from Odessa some years earlier. As a child, Philip heard stories of the pogroms in Russia. Leib had been a blacksmith in Russia. In Canada he worked as a machinist on the railroad. In 1919 the family moved to Los Angeles. Leib, who had difficulty finding work there, ended up as a junk man with a horse and wagon. Rachel kept a kosher home and sent her children to cheder. Leib, an agnostic, opposed religious instruction. In 1923 or 24, in great despair, Leib took his life, and it was Philip, aged ten or eleven, who found his father's body hanging from a rope in a shed.

After his father's death Philip began to draw. He loved the comics, especially Krazy Kat and Mutt and Jeff. For his thirteenth birthday his mother gave him a year's correspondence course at the Cleveland School of Cartooning, but he soon grew bored and gave up. When he was fourteen he entered Manual Arts High School, where he made friends with a fellow pupil, also interested in art, named Jackson Pollock. The following year both were expelled for distributing satirical pamphlets attacking the English Department and protesting support for athletics and military training. Pollock eventually returned, but Philip studied on his own and worked at different jobs including bit parts in movies. In 1930 he was awarded a year's scholarship at the Otis Art Institute. There he first met Musa McKim, whom he was later to marry. He left Otis after several months in disgust at the pedantry of the institution, and is said to have made a pile of the plaster casts of body parts the students had to work from and drawn them all together. Remember this when we look at some of his later work.

Through a Los Angeles artist, Lorser Feitelson, Philip was taken to see the art collection of Walter and Louise Arensberg (now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art), where he was first

exposed to modern European art. Two artists who became important influences were the surrealist Giorgio de Chirico and the renaissance master Piero della Francesca.

[SLIDE 1: This painting, Mother and Child, was done in 1930, when Philip was seventeen. He later claimed he had used house paint. The influence of De Chirico is evident.]

In 1931 Philip had his first solo exhibition in a Los Angeles bookshop. He took an interest in social and political issues and attended meetings of the John Reed Club, a Marxist group. There he participated in painting panels based on the trial of the Scottsboro Boys, which were destroyed in a raid by the police “Red Squad.”<sup>[ii]</sup> Through the local activity of David Alfonso Siqueiros and Jose Clemente Orozco, Philip became interested in Mexican mural painting, and in 1934 he traveled to Mexico with two friends. There, with the support of Siqueiros, they were commissioned to paint a mural in the palace of the former emperor Maximilian in Morelia.

In 1935 Philip joined the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration and in the winter of 1935/36, at Jackson Pollock’s urging, he moved to New York. In 1937 he married Musa McKim and on December 13 of that year notified the WPA that he had changed his name to Philip Guston. In 1939 he received a major commission, to paint the mural Maintaining America’s Skills, for the façade of the WPA building at the New York World’s Fair. It won first prize at the Fair for art in the mural category. Some of Guston’s murals from this early period are still to be found on public buildings.

[SLIDE 2: WORLD’S FAIR PAVILLION]

In 1941 the Gustons moved to Iowa City, where Philip became an instructor in art at the State University of Iowa. In the same year he completed Martial Memory, which he considered his first mature easel work.

[SLIDE 3: Note the paper bag over the child’s head. This would reappear in paintings of a much later period as a Ku Klux Klan hood. The garbage can cover used as a shield, the iron kettle on the boy’s head, are also figures that would appear again.]

In 1943 his daughter was born, and in 1945 the family moved to St. Louis, where Philip taught at the St. Louis School of Fine Arts, Washington University, until 1947, when he received a Guggenheim Fellowship and moved to Woodstock, New York. In that year he completed the painting Porch, no. 2, which would be his last figurative work until the late 1960s.

[SLIDE 4: The space has flattened out to a great degree. Lines, color, composition are more important than lifelike representation. This has been called a “stiff and tortured painting where figures of despair dominate and the faces recall the prisoners liberated from the concentration camps.”<sup>[iii]</sup>]

In 1948 he was awarded the Prix de Rome of the American Academy in Rome. This enabled him to spend the year of 1948-49 in Italy, with visits to Spain and France. Guston had never before been to Europe, and he was able to see for the first time many of the paintings he had studied from reproductions. In 1948 he also completed The Tormentors, a painting that marked the

transition to abstraction.

[SLIDE 5: Here figures are gone altogether. Flatness and lines take over, even though there are still hints of a head, a city building, the sole of a shoe part of which is dotted with nails.]

In 1950, after returning to the United States and to New York, Guston produced *Red Painting*, the last of his transitional abstractions, which won acclaim when shown in the exhibition *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America* at the Museum of Modern Art.

[SLIDE 6: This has been called “an airless, choked image...the last of Guston’s expressions of imprisonment.”[\[iv\]](#)]

He went on to paint gorgeous abstractions. In 1962 a retrospective of Guston’s work was held at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, and in 1966 there was a major solo exhibition of his abstract paintings at the Jewish Museum in New York. As the sixties progressed the paintings darkened and large black shapes became prominent.

[SLIDE 7: This painting from 1962 is called *Dark Day*.]

He moved back to Woodstock permanently in 1967 and stopped painting. He concentrated on drawing and shifted from abstraction to cartoonlike still lifes and figure studies featuring images of Ku Klux Klansmen.

He gradually began to reinvent himself as an artist and in October, 1970 exhibited his new figurative work at the Marlborough Gallery in New York. This exhibition fell like a bombshell on New York’s art world. Reactions ran the gamut from incomprehension to outright hostility. Perhaps most extreme was the opinion expressed by Hilton Kramer in his review “A Mandarin Pretending to Be a Stumblebum,” in *The New York Times*.[\[v\]](#)

[SLIDE 8: *The Studio*, 1969, features the artist painting his own portrait. The Klan hood is a sign that even the artist is tainted by evil. The inevitable cigarette is in his hand.]

Philip and his wife immediately left for Venice, where they were staying when he received the review. According to Guston, he dumped it into one of the canals.[\[vi\]](#) Upon his return to America Guston threw himself into his work once again. His friend, William Corbett, explained: “Georges Braque admired Cézanne for ‘sweeping painting clear of the idea of mastery.’ Such an idea will not stay swept away for long. By the late sixties with the triumph of American abstract painting mastery had returned ... Among the reasons to admire Guston is that he picked up Cézanne’s broom and swept away this idea of mastery just when painting needed another good housecleaning. This is an act despised by many because it calls into question all that had been thought decided. For others it opens the door to what can be their own art.”[\[vii\]](#)

Throughout the seventies Guston painted and drew. He also taught at Boston University from 1973-78. In 1978 he was elected a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His work was shown in several exhibitions culminating in 1980 in a major retrospective at the San

Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

[SLIDE 9: This nightmarish painting, *Painter's Forms II*, 1978, employs images that recur again and again in the later paintings. Clusters of knobby legs, some hairy, some broken off, clumps of feet with their soles turned outward, some showing nails. Are they being swallowed or regurgitated? Is this the mouth of the artist? A nail lies on the floor. Part of a garbage can lid is in evidence. Is that a closed eye we glimpse behind the legs?]

In 1979 Guston had suffered a near-fatal heart attack, and on June 7, 1980, less than a month after his San Francisco opening, he died in Woodstock, New York.

[SLIDE 10: This small (18¾ x 26¼ inch) untitled painting was done in 1980, the last year of the artist's life, when he could no longer work on the large canvases he had preferred. The landscape is strewn with rubble. A rock-like cherry sits in the foreground. There are tin cans, or garbage pails, rocks or the soles and heels of shoes, and a large, welded-together head with stubble, patched, bandaged, helmeted, facing an uphill roll: the painter as Sisyphus at the end of his life.]

Guston does not usually come to mind when one says "Jewish artist." Yet even though he changed his name, he never denied his Jewishness, as such. There is much to suggest that late in life, when he felt he could not go back, he was deeply ashamed of having changed his name from Goldstein to Guston. He told his daughter it was his doing, that he had thought Guston would be more acceptable to his prospective wife's parents, who were not Jewish. But after Guston's death, his wife told his daughter: "He never forgave me." To the daughter's question, "Forgave you? For what?" her mother replied: "Making him change his name." Musa Mayer, Guston's daughter, goes on: "I knew that my father had felt tremendous regret about having changed his name, that in his eyes it had become a shameful, cowardly act. And I knew that after the Second World War and the revelations of the Holocaust, when it became crucial for him to reclaim his Jewish identity, it was too late to change it back. His reputation was already established with the new name."[\[viii\]](#)

Wanting to find out how the family in Los Angeles had reacted when Philip changed his name she asked a cousin who had been close to her father in age: "So what was the family's reaction when Philip changed his name? 'None whatsoever,' Fan says. 'None. We felt as an artist that was what he needed to do—nobody questioned it. When you get into that business—well, it's like show business, you know.'"[\[ix\]](#)

After her father's near-fatal heart attack in 1979, Musa Mayer came from Ohio to be near her parents. She went to Kingston, New York, where her father was hospitalized. After learning from the doctor how uncertain the outlook was she went to where her father was lying: "I want Kaddish said for me," he whispered. "It's very important. Tell Musa [i.e. her mother]. There are three men I want to say Kaddish for me. Do you understand?" I nodded. The three men were Morton Feldman, Philip Roth, and Ross Feld—the three dearest and deepest friends of his life."[\[x\]](#)

A word now about some books: *Night Studio: A Memoir of Philip Guston*, with a new afterword, 1997, is a compelling, readable, informative book by the artist's daughter, Musa Mayer. The

major study is *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, by Dore Ashton, published in Berkeley by the University of California Press in 1990 and originally published in 1976 as *Yes, but...* It contains, on pages 201-206, an extensive bibliography, including many articles. Robert Storr's *Philip Guston*, c1986, is eleventh in the Abbeville *Modern Masters* series. It is perhaps less penetrating than Ashton's book, but a better survey for the lay reader. It contains a selected bibliography on pages 123-126.

Two recent exhibition catalogs are *Philip Guston: Gemälde, 1947-1979*, published in Bonn and Ostfildern bei Stuttgart in 1999, with text in German and English in parallel columns, and *Philip Guston, A New Alphabet: The Late Transition*, published in New Haven by the Yale University Art Gallery in 2000. Both of these contain, in addition to essays, many fine illustrations. The catalog of an earlier exhibition, *Philip Guston, 1975-1980: Private and Public Battles*, by Kim Sichel and Mary Drach McInnes was published in Seattle and London by the University of Washington Press in 1994.

Michael Blackwood's 1981 film, *Philip Guston: A Life Lived*, incorporates an earlier film. It provides a wonderful opportunity to see the artist at work, hear him talk about his art, and witness the installation of the 1980 San Francisco retrospective.

B.

Charlotte Salomon was born in Berlin on April 16, 1917, in the midst of the First World War, and was murdered in Auschwitz on October 10, 1943, at the age of 26. We know her work chiefly through the masterpiece, *Life? or Theatre?*, a kind of novel in pictures based on her own life and the lives of those closest to her. That it survives is virtually a miracle. Many of her other paintings and drawings were lost. Charlotte Salomon was an artist. Not a Holocaust artist, but simply an artist. Michael Kimmelman, writing in *The New York Times* on December 29, 2000, states: "Put aside, as much as possible, the grim death that had boxed Salomon, like Anne Frank, into the eye-glazing, inviolate category of Holocaust artist, a disservice to her, distorting the real message of her work. That message, counterintuitively, seems to me upbeat. She was a young woman so outwardly undistinguished that people who knew her for years could barely remember her. Then, in her art, she becomes a gifted autobiographer, psychoanalyst, humorist and visual fantasist with, in particular, a precocious sense of film's potential to reshape the way painting can tell stories. She did this for herself. By herself. Without prospects of a career, much less fame. Without hope, really. Just for the sake of it."

*Life? or Theatre?* consists of some 1300 gouache paintings in various mixtures of the primary colors red, blue, and yellow, with some white. It is presented as a *Singspiel*, a form that is a precursor of the operetta. For many of the paintings accompanying pieces of music are proposed. Marthe Pécher, who saw Charlotte at work, reported that she hummed constantly as she painted.<sup>[xi]</sup> The material is organized into three parts: a prologue, a main part, and an epilogue. The style of painting changes along the way. Text figures prominently. At first it is provided in overlays of tracing paper. As the work progresses the text is incorporated directly into the paintings and becomes an element of the composition.

It is important to remember that Salomon was not an amateur. She had received artistic training.

Elements of German Expressionism and the influence of the motion picture are in evidence. This is not a diary, but rather a memoir expanded to include passages from before the artist was born and episodes in which she took no part. To me, the whole thing reads like an amazing novel in pictures.

While the work is closely based on the lives of Charlotte and those around her, it is also an autonomous work of art. This is underscored by the names given the various characters, all modeled after real people. The Salomon family name becomes Kann, pitcher. The grandparents, Marianne and Ludwig Grunwald, are Dr. and Mrs. Knarre, or rattle. Charlotte's stepmother, the singer Paula Lindberg, is called Paulinka Bimbam. Charlotte's mentor-figure and first love, Alfred Wolfsohn, is called Amadeus Daberlohn. The first name, with some irony, evokes Mozart. The second, starveling, refers to the man's penniless condition. The late Siegfried Ochs, Paula's teacher, is called Professor Klingklang, and Dr. Kurt Singer, a close family friend and founder of the Kulturbund, is Dr. Singsang.

Charlotte's father, Albert Salomon (1883-1976) was a physician. Her mother, Franziska, née Grunwald (1890-1926) had been a nurse working for the army during the War, when she met her husband. They belonged to an upper middle class, assimilated German-Jewish milieu. Indeed, Franziska's parents seem to have believed that their son-in-law was beneath them in social status. The family of Charlotte's maternal grandmother, Marianne Grunwald née Benda, may well have had a hereditary tendency to clinical depression. Members of Mrs. Grunwald's family, including her brother and her daughter, Franziska's sister, the aunt after whom Charlotte was named, had taken their lives. Charlotte knew none of this, and in 1926, when she was nearly nine, her own mother committed suicide.

[SLIDE 11: *Life? or Theatre?*, p. 72: The text reads: "Franziska died immediately, the apartment being on the third floor. There is nothing more to be done about the tragedy."]

This, too, was kept from the child, who was told her mother had died of influenza. In September, 1930, when Charlotte was thirteen, her father married the singer Paula Lindberg (1897-2000). Paula, who had changed her name from Levi at the suggestion of her mentor Professor Siegfried Ochs, came from a rabbinic family in Kreuznach. Charlotte's relationship with her stepmother was to be intense, marked by great love but affected by all the tensions and conflicts of adolescence. Paula had arrived in Berlin from Mannheim in 1927. She counted among her close friends Dr. Kurt Singer, director of the Berlin City Opera.

Following the rise of the Nazis to power in 1933, Charlotte's father, Albert Salomon, lost his professorship and then his right to practice medicine. Paula was forbidden to perform in public. Albert found employment as a surgeon at the Jewish Hospital, and Paula became active and performed within the framework of the Kulturbund Deutscher Juden, the Jewish cultural organization Kurt Singer was permitted to organize. In 1933 Charlotte's grandparents, the Grunwalds, left Germany, going first to Italy and, in 1934, settling in the south of France. Charlotte visited her grandparents in Italy and was deeply impressed by the art she saw there, particularly Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel and Pietà. In September, 1933, a year before graduation, Charlotte left the gymnasium to take private drawing lessons in preparation for the entrance examination to the art institute known as the Vereinigten Staatschulen für Freie und

Angewandte Kunst.

[SLIDE 12: p. 227: First we see Charlotte with her head in her father's lap. Then Paulinka speaks to Albert. Paulinka says: "Frankly, I don't understand how you can spend all that money. After all, she has no talent for drawing. Everyone's said so." And Albert answers: "If she's that keen on it, she should have lessons. It's the only thing one can give one's children today, a good education."]

She was accepted on approval in the fall of 1935 and unconditionally in February, 1936. That she was allowed to attend at all was due to her father's service at the front in World War I and to a provision in the law that permitted 1.5% of the student body to be of Jewish descent.

[SLIDE 13: p. 233: And here we see Charlotte industriously drawing away. She has finally caught on.]

The Salomons' circle of friends during these years included the architect Erich Mendelsohn and his wife Luise, the composer Paul Hindemith, Albert Einstein, Albert Schweitzer, Leo Baeck, and, especially, Kurt Singer. In 1937 a person entered the lives of Paula Salomon-Lindberg and her stepdaughter who was to become very important to Charlotte. Alfred Wolfsohn (1896-1962), an unemployed voice coach was sent to Paula in search of a job. As long as a Jew could show he had employment at that time he was temporarily safe from arrest.

[SLIDE 14: p. 253: This marks the beginning of the Main Section. Amadeus Daberlohn, the Alfred Wolfsohn character, makes his entrance to the Toreador's Song from Carmen. We see him ascending the staircase, approaching and opening the door to Dr. Singsang's, that is Kurt Singer's, office.]

Paula arranged for him to work as her rehearsal accompanist. Wolfsohn had been severely traumatized by his experiences in World War I and for a year suffered from amnesia. He soon became a fixture in the Salomon household, and Charlotte developed a relationship with him that to her was crucial. Wolfsohn had developed theories on singing and the connection between the soul and artistic expression that he tried to put into practice in his work with Paula. He took Charlotte's artwork seriously and challenged her. By all accounts, Alfred Wolfsohn was Charlotte's first love, though whether anything physical was involved remains unclear.[\[xii\]](#)

[SLIDE 15: p. 547: Charlotte and Amadeus embrace. In the previous frame Amadeus has said to Charlotte: "I knew you were gifted."]

After the pogroms of November 9, 1938, the so-called Kristallnacht, Albert Salomon was interned in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

[SLIDE 16: p. 685: The guard says: You've done enough loafing in your lives."]

It was Paula who managed to get him out. In January, 1939 Charlotte left Berlin to join her grandparents in the south of France, ostensibly for a weekend.

[SLIDES 17-18: p. 706, 709: Charlotte and Daberlohn take leave of one another. He says: “May you nev er forget that I believe in you.” In the next slide we see Charlotte alone in the living room before her departure.]

In France the Grunwalds were living in a sma  
ll cottage on the grounds of a villa, l’Ermitage, at Villefranche sur Mer near Nice owned by an American, Otilie Moore. There, Charlotte painted and drew.

[SLIDE 19: p. 722: Here begins the Epilogue. The colors have changed. Charlotte is in the south of France, painting and drawing.]

Mrs. Moore encouraged her and bought some of her pictures. As war drew near the situation in France worsened. With the loss of hope, Charlotte’s grandmother fell into ever deepening depression. At that point Charlotte learns for the first time how many of her relatives, and especially her mother, have really died. Finally the grandmother follows the route taken by her two daughters, her brother, and other family members and kills herself.

[SLIDES 20-21: p. 786, 795: The grandmother jumps. Note how everything but the bed has been reduced to spare lines. The angle of the window frame heightens the drama. In the next slide Charlotte, fearing she may do the same, exclaims: “Dear God, please don’t let me go mad.” Note how the oranges and yellows convey crisis.]

In May, 1940 Germany declared war on France, followed by Italy in June. The French authorities rounded up refugees from Germany living in the south, considering them, ironically, enemy aliens. Charlotte and her grandfather were interned in the camp at Gurs in the Pyrenees, but were released in July. It is interesting to note that while Charlotte depicted scenes based on her father’s imprisonment at Sachsenhausen in *Life?* or *Theatre?*, there is no image of the camp at Gurs in her work. After their release Charlotte pondered the state of the world. There is a shocking scene in which Charlotte says: “You know, Grandpa, I have a feeling the whole world has to be put together again.” And the grandfather replies: “Oh, go ahead and kill yourself and put an end to all this babble!”[\[xiii\]](#)

[SLIDE 22: p. 814]

They returned to Villefranche and matters grew worse both in terms of the general condition and the crushing nature of her grandfather’s presence. About a year later, in summer 1941, Charlotte says: “And she found herself facing the question of whether to commit suicide or to undertake something wildly eccentric (und sie sah sich vor die Frage gestellt sich das Leben zu nehmen oder etwas ganz verrückt besonderes zu unternehmen).”[\[xiv\]](#)

[SLIDE 23: p. 817: Here text completely fills the space.]

And that is how Charlotte came to produce *Life?* or *Theatre?* It was her wildly eccentric undertaking, her alternative to suicide. To accomplish it she withdrew from the world and worked furiously, for part of the time holed up at a small hotel, La Belle Aurore, in St. Jean Cap Ferrat. Mary Felstiner in her book *To Paint Her Life* quotes Marthe Pécher, owner of the hotel:

“[Charlotte] painted all the time, always while humming. We used to wonder when and if she ate, when and if she slept.”[\[xv\]](#) Charlotte saw herself living Alfred Wolfsohn’s theories of art based on the Orpheus myth: in a sense, she had already died and being reborn she could create this work. The cycle concludes: “And with dream-awakened eyes she saw all the beauty around her, saw the sea, felt the sun, and knew: she had to vanish for a while from the human plane (von der menschlichen Oberfläche verschwinden) and make every sacrifice in order to create her world anew out of the depths. And from that came: Life or Theatre?”[\[xvi\]](#)

The project was completed in 1942. In September, 1942 Mrs. Moore left France for America with her daughter, her nephew, and several adoptive children. A man by the name of Alexander Nagler stayed on at L’Ermitage to take care of four children who remained. Like Charlotte, Nagler was also a Jewish refugee. Grandfather Grunwald lived nearby in Nice and often spent time at L’Ermitage.

After the Allies landed in Morocco in the fall of 1942 life became even more dangerous for foreign refugees. Many were arrested and deported. Obtaining food became a problem. The word “Jew” was stamped on the papers of the Jews. Dr. Grunwald died in Nice in February, 1943. Charlotte and Nagler were living alone at L’Ermitage. Practically their only contact with the outside was Dr. Georges Moridis, a physician with whom they had become friends. Dr. Moridis had arranged to obtain an identity card for Nagler without the word “Jew” on it. Charlotte and Nagler decided to get married. According to one source, when Nagler applied for a marriage license he was refused because he, as an Aryan, could not marry a Jew. He is said to have exclaimed that he too was a Jew.[\[xvii\]](#) The marriage took place on June 17, 1943, but Nagler was forced to leave his false papers and his address with the police. Dr. Moridis found a hiding place for the couple, but after staying there for a while they returned to L’Ermitage for some reason.

On September 8, 1943 Italy concluded a separate armistice with the Allies. Thereupon German troops occupied the part of France that had been held by the Italians. On September 24, 1943 the Gestapo arrested Charlotte and Alexander Nagler. Charlotte was then four months pregnant. On October 7 they were deported to Auschwitz. Upon arrival there on October 10, 1943 Charlotte was killed. Alexander Nagler was killed on January 1, 1944.

Otilie Moore returned to L’Ermitage in 1946. Paula and Albert Salomon, who had survived the War in The Netherlands, visited her there a short time later. Following some conflict with Mrs. Moore over ownership of the many pictures, they managed to acquire the paintings that constitute Life? or Theatre? and one self-portrait of Charlotte.

The most important book consulted in preparing this section of the talk is Charlotte Salomon’s own Life? or Theatre?, published at Zwolle, Netherlands by Waanders Publishers with the Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam in 1998. Page 827 contains a list of previous editions of versions of this work in different languages. A bibliography is found on pages 828-829, as is a list of films on page 831. The collection of art work is available on the world wide web through the site of the Jewish Historical Museum of Amsterdam at [www.jhm.nl](http://www.jhm.nl) Another excellent book, particularly valuable for placing Salomon and her work in historical context is Mary Lowenthal Felstiner’s To Paint Her Life: Charlotte Salomon in the Nazi Era, first published by Harper Collins in 1994 and issued in paperback in Berkeley, California by the University of California

Press in 1997. The notes on pages 239-276, with their references to interviews and archival sources, constitute a valuable resource in themselves.

C.

Of the three artists we are considering today, the one who has made his Jewishness a central issue in his work is R. B. or Ronald Brooks Kitaj. Kitaj was born in Cleveland, Ohio on October 29, 1932, the son of Jeanne Brooks, the American-born daughter of Russian-Jewish immigrants, and Sigmund Benway. The couple soon divorced. Benway moved to California in 1934, and the young Kitaj never saw his biologic father again. As a child, Ronald attended art classes at the Cleveland Museum.

In 1941 his mother married Dr. Walter Kitaj, a refugee from Vienna, to whom Ronald grew very close and whose last name he took. Soon thereafter the family moved to Troy, New York. The young Kitaj was interested in drawing, books, which he began to collect, movies, and, then, girls. After the war Dr. Kitaj's mother arrived from Sweden, her place of refuge. She was to exert an important influence on the young artist's life.

In 1949 Kitaj sailed as a merchant seaman. In 1950 he attended Cooper Union in New York. He loved life in Manhattan, and especially the bookshops that then flourished along Fourth Avenue just north of the school, and he began life drawing.

In 1951 he shipped out again as a merchant seaman and ended up in Europe. After visiting Paris he went to Vienna, where he enrolled at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste, doing mostly drawing from life under the painter Paris von Gütersloh, who had been a friend of Egon Schiele.

He returned to New York, shipped out again, and continued his studies at Cooper Union. He was living with Elsi Roessler, an American student he had met in Vienna, and sat in on night classes with her at the New School, where one of the lecturers was Hannah Arendt. Around this time one of his teachers introduced him to such New York artists as Raphael Soyer and Louise Nevelson. Under the guidance of Joe Kling, a legendary bookseller, he expanded his reading and discovered, among others, I. L. Peretz and Isaac Babel. He continued to work on merchant ships and married Elsi Roessler in 1953. They returned to Europe.

From 1954 to 1956 Kitaj served in the United States Army in Germany and France. After his discharge he studied at the Ruskin School at Oxford, where a major influence was the art historian Edgar Wind. Kitaj's first son, Lem, was born at Oxford in 1958. The couple would later adopt a daughter, Dominic, born in 1964. In 1959 Kitaj moved to London and attended the Royal College of Art, where he immediately became a friend of David Hockney's. Kitaj notes that reports of the Eichmann Trial "began to disturb something asleep in me."[\[xviii\]](#) He had his first exhibition at Marlborough Fine Art in London in 1963. In 1965 he visited America for the first time in nine years on the occasion of his first New York exhibition.

After his return to London he discovered the writings of Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin, both of whom inspired his painting. He taught at the University of California, Berkeley in 1967-68 and was fascinated by "the spirit of '68," which he called "one of those

utopian stabs at delicious freedoms which seem to end quickly in sadness or madness.”[\[xix\]](#)

His wife died after their return to England, and he was deeply marked by her loss. During 1970-71 he taught drawing at UCLA and drew many of the old Hollywood movie directors in their homes. The drawing he did of John Ford at this time served as the basis for the 1983-84 painting *Amerika* (John Ford on his Death Bed), which now belongs to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

[SLIDE 24: Over the bed hangs a scene from the film *The Sun Shines Bright*. At the foot of the bed sit two figures from *Tobacco Road* being directed by Ford. To the left with his head partly cropped is Victor McLaglen, and at center left are the ghosts from Toulouse Lautrec’s deathbed scene in *Moulin Rouge*.]

During this year he first met Sandra Fisher, a young American painter with whom he would later live in London, and whom he would later marry.

By 1975, back in London, Kitaj’s Jewish interests were becoming a passion. In 1980 Kitaj and Sandra Fisher made their first trip to Israel, where they spent much time with their friend the artist Avigdor Arikha and his wife, the poet, Anne Atik (sister of Abe Atik, whom some of you may remember from the National Foundation for Jewish Culture). That same year Kitaj visited Rome for the first time. Of his visit to the Sistine Chapel he said: “Michelangelo’s Last Judgment wall is the best painting I’ve ever seen.”[\[xx\]](#)

In 1983, after twelve years together, Kitaj and Sandra Fisher were married at the Bevis Marks Synagogue in London. A son, Max, was born the following year. The painter continued his Jewish self-education under the guidance of Sir Isaiah Berlin.[\[xxi\]](#) In 1989 Kitaj published his *First Diasporist Manifesto*, about which we shall have more to say later.

In the mid-seventies Kitaj had begun a group of single figure paintings. Working partly from life, Kitaj was inventing his own figure types. The titles of many of these paintings end in the syllable –ist, as *The Arabist* (1975-76), *The Orientalist* (1975-76), *The Hispanist* (1977).

[SLIDE 25:] One of these, *The Jew, Etc.* (1976-79), featured an invented character Kitaj called Joe Singer, who was to show up again and again in later paintings.[\[xxii\]](#) Marco Livingstone writes: “Singer is for Kitaj what K. was for Kafka in *The Trial* and *The Castle*: an archetype representing a condition of man, and more specifically of the Jew, in the twentieth century, the anxious uncertainty of his fate made all the more urgent through the artist’s identification with him.”[\[xxiii\]](#) In other words, Joe Singer is Joe Everyman Jew. It was some time after naming the character that Kitaj realized where the name had come from. In the late thirties his mother had been dating a man named Joe Singer, whom the artist dimly remembered. She ended up, however, marrying Dr. Kitaj, a refugee chemist from Vienna. In the artist’s words, “I happened to chance upon a dimly remembered name from childhood to give to a character I would draw and paint and imagine, a figure who would offer a certain secular impression of Jewishness...and, behold, the guy almost became my dad and I almost became R. B. Singer!”[\[xxiv\]](#)

The fate of the Jews became a central theme in many of Kitaj’s paintings. The gatehouse of

Auschwitz-Birkenau figures in the upper left-hand corner of *If Not, Not* (1975-76).[\[xxv\]](#)

[SLIDE 26: The unusual title has been identified as a quote from Gertrude Stein, and may also have been an allusion to the royal oath of the Aragons cited in a book on Goya.]

The artist was aware of the comment of a traveler from Budapest to Auschwitz long after the war on the beauty of the scenery he passed. Inspirations have been found in Giorgione's *La Tempesta* and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. On the ground is a broken sculpture by Matisse. Kitaj appears in bed holding one of his children on the left. In the left foreground is Joe Singer, his hearing aid intact, being embraced by a nude woman.

[SLIDE 27:] *The Jewish School* (1980) is modeled on a nineteenth-century anti-Semitic engraving, *Die Judenschule*, by G. E. Opitz, which purports to criticize the alleged anarchy of Jewish behavior. By having the figure on the right draw the image of a golem, which is incomplete, and will not, therefore, come to life in time to save the Jews, Kitaj has transformed this into a metaphor for the Jews' inability to defend themselves adequately against their persecutors.

[SLIDE 28:] *Cecil Court, London WC2 (The Refugees)* was done in 1983/84, after Kitaj had returned from a year in Paris, where he saw *The Street* paintings of Balthus. This is an alley known for its specialist and antiquarian bookshops. At the far left is Seligmann, a refugee who ran an art bookshop. At the far right is Dr. Kitaj, the artist's stepfather. A sign over the shop behind him bears the name of Joe Singer. In the foreground, lying on a Le Corbusier chair is the artist, himself.

[SLIDE 29:] *The Jewish Rider*, done the following year in 1984-85, echoes the earlier *The Jew, Etc.* of 1976-79. The train seems an allusion to Jewish wandering. In both paintings the subject's body is tense. In *The Jewish Rider* it is actually contorted. The horse's head near the rider's left knee is a quotation from *The Polish Rider* by Rembrandt at the Frick Collection. The landscape, seen through the train window, is desolate. Especially important are the cross on the hilltop and the smoking chimney nearby. This is the first of a number of pictures in which Kitaj uses the chimney as an image of Jewish suffering, as a kind of counterpart to the Christian cross. The shape of the chimney is repeated in the dramatic red corridor to the right, which is surmounted by a conductor who may be brandishing a whip. The human figure in *The Jewish Rider* was based on the philosopher Michael Podro.

As I mentioned earlier, Kitaj published a short book entitled *First Diasporist Manifesto* in 1989. In it he set down some of his ideas of the diasporist as insider-outsider and of himself as a Jewish diasporist. One of his points is that a diasporist need not be a Jew, but could belong to one of several marginal categories. He went further to speak of diasporist art and of himself as a diasporist artist. Incidentally, the novel *Operation Shylock* published a few years later in 1993 by Kitaj's good friend Philip Roth is full of talk about diasporism.

*The First Diasporist Manifesto* is a rambling document which its author soon regretted publishing. Despite the author's reservations, the book is revealing about his work. He says, for example: "I imagined that I could paint a predicament then...like one paints a tree or an

angel...”[\[xxvi\]](#) And elsewhere: “I’ve always been a Diasporist Jew, but as a young man I was not sure what a Jew was. I was unaware that such questions were debated within Jewry, even in the Knesset itself. Jews were Believers, I thought, and I assumed you were whatever you believed in, that if you became a Catholic or an atheist or a Socialist, that’s what you were...My friend Isaiah Berlin says: ‘A Jew is a Jew like a table is a table.’ Now, that interests me greatly, but the thing was blurred in my youth. This was, I learned later, a classic assimilationist pose. My maternal grandfather had been a Socialist Bundist in Russia, on the run from the Czarist police. He passed on his religious skepticism to my mother, who brought me up as a freethinker, with no Jewish education...It would be many more years before I learned that the Germans and Austrians who did what they did in that time, when I was playing baseball and cruising girls, made no distinctions between Believers or atheists or the one and a half million Jewish infants who had not yet decided what they were when they got sent up in smoke.”[\[xxvii\]](#)

The years from 1990-1994 were very productive for Kitaj and in the summer of 1994 his first full-scale retrospective opened at the Tate Gallery in London. This was seen at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1995. As he came to work more rapidly his style became more spontaneous, corresponding to the artist’s idea of “painting-drawing.” Following the opening in London there ensued what has been referred to as the “Tate War.”

The exhibition was popular with the general public in London and was later reviewed favorably in Los Angeles and New York, but a number of London critics attacked the show and the artist in terms that were nasty and mean-spirited. One reviewer stated that Kitaj had lost all sense of direction. Another that “canvas after canvas tells us one simple fact: no amount of exegesis will improve paintings that fail for pictorial reasons.” Yet another concluded his review by saying: “A pox on fawning critics and curators for foisting on us as heroic master a vain painter puffed with amour propre, unworthy of a footnote in the history of figurative art.” And perhaps the most contemptuous: “Kitaj has finally allowed the myth of himself to be seen through. The Wandering Jew, the T. S. Eliot of painting? Kitaj turns out, instead, to be the Wizard of Oz: a small man with a megaphone held to his lips.”[\[xxviii\]](#) Why the virulence? Why the discrepancy between British and American reactions? The cultural critic Janet Wolff quotes Nina Darnton writing in The New York Times: “The reviews reveal a culture clash between the reserved, self-deprecatory English and the open, Jewish-American sensibility.” Wolff says Kitaj is “on the right track” when he refers to “a form of low-octane English anti-Semitism.” She concludes: “My own suggestion is that the critical response to the Tate retrospective makes sense in relation to the confluence of three separate, and normally unemphatic, English sentiments: a certain anti-literary prejudice in art criticism, a lingering anti-Americanism, and a persistent (though by no means pervasive) anti-Semitism.”[\[xxix\]](#)

A short time after the Tate show closed, on September 19, 1994, Kitaj’s wife Sandra Fisher died suddenly and unexpectedly of a brain aneurysm at the age of 47. Obviously the strain had been great. Blaming his wife’s death on the critics, Kitaj said: “They tried to kill me and they got her instead.”[\[xxx\]](#)

[SLIDE 30:] In 1997 Kitaj took his revenge with a painting entitled The Killer-Critic Assassinated by His Widower, Even. Here the artist, accused of being too obsessed with his

Jewishness, identifies himself by the Hebrew letter kuf, as in Kitaj, where the head should be. He is seconded by Manet, depicted in his final illness, after his gangrenous leg has been amputated. Kitaj deliberately plays on all the aspects of his work the critics found most objectionable. Since his allusions to great works of art from the past were considered pretentious, he based the whole thing on Manet's *The Execution of Maximilian* (1868), which itself was patterned after Goya's *The Executions of the 3rd of May* (1814). The words *Ma Jolie* refer to Picasso's Cubist portraits. The title of the painting, itself, alludes to *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* (1915-23) by Marcel Duchamp. To the claim that his work is too literary, Kitaj responds by putting some favorite quotes right into the picture. He even appropriates one by T. S. Eliot, changing "Art is the escape from personality" to read "Art is the escape to personality." Pursuing the literary claim, he slaps book jackets right onto the canvas. Taking aim at the opinion that his work is too crude, sexual, and violent, he has himself and Manet shooting with more than just guns. His second phallus, above the one with the note "geriatric prostate drip," displays the spine of a book entitled *Nice Guys Finish Last*. As a final touch, Kitaj announced the outrageously high price of £1 million for the picture. As Livingstone says, Kitaj had the last laugh, because the picture was soon bought by a museum that had constantly shown him support, the Astrup Fearnly Museet for Moderne Kunst in Oslo. [xxxix] In July, 1997 Kitaj and his son Max left England for good and settled in Los Angeles, near the artist's older son, Lem and his family.

[SLIDE 31:] In the first major painting begun after his move to Los Angeles, *Second Diasporist Manifesto* (Marx Brothers), (1997-98), Kitaj pays tribute to an earlier generation of Jewish diasporists and offers a glimpse of his new home in Westwood Village. It is still diaspora, and yet it marks a return to the country in which he was born. This painting was shown at the Marlborough Gallery in New York this past winter in the solo exhibition "How to Reach 67 in Jewish Art: 100 Pictures." It was the first New York showing of Kitaj's work since 1995. [xxxix]

[SLIDE 32:] We shall conclude this section with a look at Kitaj's tribute to Philip Guston, done in 1997-2000 from Kitaj's last snapshot of Guston.

I consider the most important single book about R. B. Kitaj to be *Kitaj* by Marco Livingstone, published in London by Phaidon Press in 1999 in the third edition, revised and expanded. It contains a biographical essay, color plates, prefaces to a number of the paintings by the artist, a select bibliography on pages 206-208, and a catalog of works on pages 209-221. A valuable recent collection is *Critical Kitaj: Essays on the Work of R. B. Kitaj*, published in New Brunswick, N. J. by Rutgers University Press in 2001. It contains ten scholarly essays. *R. B. Kitaj*, edited by Richard Morphet and published in New York by Rizzoli International Publications in 1994, is the American edition of the catalog of the retrospective exhibition seen in London, Los Angeles, and New York in 1994-95. It contains, in addition to plates, essays, an interview with the artist, prefaces by him, and a chronology, an extensive bibliography on pages 223-233. The catalog of the 2000 exhibition, *R. B. Kitaj: How to Reach 67 in Jewish Art: 100 Pictures*, published in New York and Madrid by Marlborough in 2000, includes reproductions of later works not found in Livingstone or Morphet. *Kitaj's First Diasporist Manifesto*, published in New York by Thames and Hudson in 1989, is recommended for anyone seriously interested in the artist. *Kitaj: Pictures and Conversations*, published in London by Hamish Hamilton in 1994, consists chiefly of talks between the artist and the Spanish novelist Julián Ríos. It contains many

illustrations in black and white chosen to complement the text.

In past Feinstein Lectures senior colleagues have talked about an area of special interest from the world of Jewish books or have related their own professional experiences. I have done something a little different. We are all part of the great humanistic enterprise. Just as my whole life as a Judaica librarian assumed that Jewish studies are a vital part of the larger civilization, so, too, do I believe that in different ways librarianship and art serve that civilization. I count myself lucky in having been able to pursue both.

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[i] William Corbett, *Philip Guston's Late Work: A Memoir*, Cambridge, Mass., 1994, p.13.

[ii] Musa Mayer, *Night Studio: A Memoir of Philip Guston*, New York, 1997, p. 19.

[iii] Dore Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, Berkeley, p. 76.

[iv] P. 99.

[v] October 25, 1970, section B, p. 27.

[vi] Mayer, p. 156.

[vii] p. 30.

[viii] Mayer, p. 229.

[ix] p. 24.

[x] p. 192.

[xi] Mary Lowenthal Felstiner, *To Paint Her Life: Charlotte Salomon in the Nazi Period*, Berkeley, Cal, 1997, p. 142.

[xii] Felstiner discusses their relationship. See especially, p. 53.

[xiii] Charlotte Salomon, *Life? or Theatre?*, Zwolle, 1998, p. 814. JHM no. 4920v.

[xiv] p. 817. JHM no. 4922r.

[xv] Felstiner, p. 142.

[xvi] Salomon, p. 822-823. JHM no. 4924v-4925r

[xvii] Salomon,, p. 25.

[xviii] Richard Morphet, ed., *R. B. Kitaj*, New York, 1994, p. 59.

[xix] P. 61.

[xx] P. 63.

[xxi] P. 64.

[xxii] *Bad Faith (Joe Singer Taking Leave of his Fiancée)* 1980, *Study for the Jewish School (Joe Singer as a Boy)* 1980, *The Jewish School (Drawing a Golem)* 1980, *The Listener (Joe Singer in Hiding)* 1980, *Cecil Court (The Refugees)* 1983-84, *The Caféist*, 1980-87, *Germania (Joe Singer's Last Room)* 1987.

[xxiii] Marco Livingstone, *Kitaj*, London, 1999, p. 33.

[xxiv] P. 33-34.

[xxv] On the title see Martin Roman Deppner in *Critical Kitaj*, New Brunswick, N. J., 2001, p. 184.

[xxvi] Livingstone, p. 41.

[xxvii] *Kitaj*, p. 29-33. See also p. 57.

[xxviii] Quoted by Janet Wolff in *Critical Kitaj*, p. 31.

[xxix] P. 32

[xxx] P. 33.

[xxxi] Livingstone, p. 51.

[xxxii] Also part of that exhibition was *The Eclipse of God* (1997-2000), a painting based on the panel of an altarpiece by the fifteenth-century Florentine Paolo Uccello called *Breaking Down the Jew's Door*. It has been acquired by New York's Jewish Museum.