

The following text was written four years ago as an introduction to a polemical exhibition of pictures I had bought for the Arts Council of Great Britain. The show was very controversial. I've agreed to have the text reprinted here because, even though I might put some of the ideas differently now, the words may have some interest in America, outside the original London occasion.

R. B. Kitaj
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THE HUMAN CLAY

SCHOOL OF LONDON

I have felt very out of sorts with my time. It is no great comfort to hear from one of the three or four finest poets writing in English (Creeley) that "poetry feels like a shutter banging in the wind . . . vague and diffuse." I hardly know why I agreed to buy pictures for the Arts Council. I should have stayed in bed like Oblomov. Anyway, the shutter banging in the wind did not defeat what became a labour of love and I'm glad I did it.

I told them I would only buy pictures representing people, for many reasons. One reason is that I am a poor judge of abstraction and an even poorer judge of the host of art things in the non-picture line, even when I have given in to those post-Duchampian temptations myself. Like good democrats, however, the Council will have been tending those flocks as well.

I thought I would try to look to what I believe to be the most basic art-idea, from which so much great art has come. I was looking mostly for pictures of the single human form as if they could be breathed on, whereupon they would glow like beacons of where art has been and like agents of a newer art life to come. Really good things, or at least things which would satisfy my own perhaps strange criteria, are rare

Hockney likes to quote the line from Auden's long poem, *Letter to Lord Byron*, which reads, "To me, Art's subject is the human clay."

enough but revelations from a master hand come up a few times in each century . . . as I write (1976), I'm looking through the Sanlucar Sketch-books which Goya only began when he was past 50. . . and it should be clear enough when all the pictures are brought together for this showing that revelations of that burning order have not found their moment. But I grow to love the way we fail. The seam never really gave out. It's only that so much of the sophisticated art stream has, for very interesting and for me often enigmatic reasons, been diverted away from even the most recent models of the art which has always responded to the human form and always will.

By recent models I mean the ultimate ones: the large black single figure drawings Van Gogh did of the miserable people he cared about (not seen often enough); the late, late pastel women, like no other women, made by near-blind Degas after 1900; the incredible riverbank bather-inventions Cézanne designed (again after 1900) and the Vallier things; Picasso, over and over again, from the faces of Sabartès and Junyat at Barcelona, the great G. Stein portrait-invention, the still astounding Demoiselles composition and almost any time he got serious with a pencil; the formal master Brancusi, responding every day to the near look of people, their heads, their postures in any delineation he cared to pursue right into our times.

I don't want to bore you with more of what I like best, but with the death of Matisse a quarter century ago a few interesting things happened, to my way of thinking. First of all, the last of these 'ultimate' and continuing human figure revelations were issued from some kind of master. Next, I would like to say that even in those last blue cutout nudes, among my favourite things, the old man couldn't really abandon the look of naked women any more than Cézanne could. Which leads me to observe with some interest that although many artists followed Picasso into the cubist adventure and then detached themselves from images of people and things (which Picasso did not), Cézanne could not have done so in 1906, Matisse did not do so into the 1950s unto death, and now, as you can see here, there are resilient painters conducting their own refusals.

It's not as if an instinct which lies in the race of men from way before Sassetta and Giotto has run its course. It won't. Don't listen to the fools who say either that pictures of people can be of no consequence or that painting is finished. There is much to be done. It matters what men and women of good will want to do with their lives.

There are artistic personalities in the small island more unique and strong and I think numerous than anywhere in the world outside America. There are ten or more people in this town, or not far away, of world class, including my friends of the abstract persuasion. In fact, I think there is a substantial School of London. If some of the strange and fascinating personalities you may encounter here were given a fraction of the internationalist attention and encouragement reserved in this barren time for provincial and orthodox vanguardism, a School of London might become even more real than the one I have construed in my head. A School of real London in England, in Europe . . . with potent art lessons for foreigners emerging from this odd old, put upon, very singular place.

Each one of you who reads this conducts his or her own very complex affair with London and yet how often does our art look as if it had been made here? Dickens and Tom Eliot knew this place and how I wish for a London art that would body forth at those levels of quality. There are still those who think that English art can be spoon-fed on the last feeble gruel trickling from the pens of art scribblers in distant places, but New York has its lap full of its own aging romance and that self-centered art culture, believe it or not, has a lot to learn from over here . . . You will not hear our art

experts saying that yet, but experts are wrong as often as painters, and it will have to be the artists who struggle alone each day at the source.

I cannot spell out for you what a picture could look like if it assumed a specificity and sense of place at the quality level of Dickens or Goya because it remains for that good an art to emerge again, but for a small island to have working within its harbour and town some of the people in this showing and some celebrated ones who were almost here, makes a serious case for London.

Speaking for my own life in art, Bacon is arguably the finest painter alive. As for my comrade, Hockney, I'll paraphrase Valéry on Degas: Hockney is the most intelligent, thoughtful, meticulous and tireless draughtsman in the world. When you think that Goya would have been forgotten if he had died at forty, the prospect of Hockney after forty is pretty compelling. For me, Auerbach is one of the very moving painters of Europe (with Balthus and some of the other artists in this exhibition) and a constant source, along with Hockney, of serious energies for my own very doubtful pictures.

PEARL-DIVING

The single human figure is a swell thing to draw. It seems to be almost impossible to do it as well as maybe half a dozen men have in the past. I'm talking about skill and imagination that can be *seen to be done*. It is, to my way of thinking and in my own experience, the most difficult thing to do really well in the whole art. You don't have to believe me. It is there that the artist truly 'shows his hand' for me. It is then that I can share in the virtue of failed ambition and the downright revelation of skill. I thought it would not be such a bad idea to assemble examples of these failures, not least because one is always being told how successful this thing is, or that thing is. I can never make those judgments (about exalted colour, for instance, or boxes, or holes in the ground) as well as others can.

I have always dwelled on the life and work of Charles Péguy who was so suspicious of what he called 'angelism,' which he thought to be the opposite of sanctity because it sought in eternal spirituality to leave the human condition behind. Like Péguy, I prefer 'temporal salvation,' but that leads me to make an important consideration:

It almost goes without saying, but a human image is only a part of the 'sense' of a picture. It may only be like a

first step. There will always be pictures whose complexity, difficulty, mystery will be ambitious enough to resemble patterns of human existence or speculative beyond what we know and expect. When I said at first that I was looking for examples of the basic art-idea, single figure invention, I do not mean to presume that a higher order is embraced there alone. In fact, the opposite may be the case for me. Ultimate skill and imagination would seem to assume a plenitude in painting when the 'earthed' human image is compounded in the great compositions, enigmas, confessions, prophecies, sacraments, fragments, questions which have been and will be peculiar to the art of painting.

In Hannah Arendt's beautiful introduction to Benjamin, she likens that wonderful man to a pearl-diver who wrests what he can from the deep past, not to resuscitate the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages, but because the rich and strange things he has found in the deep "suffer a sea-change" and survive in new form and shape. That is how I want to take human images to survive — as Arendt put it, "... as though they waited only for the pearl-diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living."

AGAINST THE GRAIN

Most of the people in the world are ordinary and sometimes extraordinary working people. Many others are exercised to make common cause with working people, most often I suppose as socialists of one form or another or as Christians (et. al.)

I have always thought how good it would be to be able to make at least some pictures keeping ordinary people in mind along with some of the other things kept in mind while making a picture. Maybe not to do that kind of thing every day in the week but to do it (and have the imagination to communicate the act) *some* of the time. It can only be a recognition of how ordinary one is oneself.

This instinct of mind runs against the grain among many artists I talk with, including some of the best painters in this exhibition. In my own work, the versions of late surrealism which I have often painted have also largely ignored the possible interest of many other people. I can only hope I am not beyond repair in this matter.

If some of us wish to practice art for art's sake alone, so be it ... but good pictures, great pictures, will be made to which

many modest lives can respond. When I'm told that good art has never been like that, I doubt it and, in any case, it seems to me at least as advanced or radical, to attempt a more social art, as not to.

It has given me some pleasure looking through the human figure inventions shown here as if there were hints for this far wider implication than what we are used to expect from our art. No one can promise that a love of mankind will promote a great art, but the need feels saintly, and new, and somehow poetic to me, and we shall see ... maybe it will never happen.

MONDRIAN

Mondrian's *life* has always fascinated me, not least because his abstraction was so heroic. But the man lingers in my mind, the *unusual* way he lived out his life in art. I suppose that interest of mine in the man to be consistent with my interest in pictures of men and in fictions after the life. To put it in a simple way: many of us like to make pictures of people because people and their lives interest us more than anything else.

Mondrian has been a great source for one of the pervasive ideas in much of our art — the idea of detachment — an art which has been urged toward autonomy. The consequences of a detached art are very seductive ... a very *high* act indeed is said to transpire there, an ultimate act or moment or feeling, so independent of anything else but its paint or shape, for instance, as to give that art its very value, an incredible purity. The idea took root in Mondrian's concept of art as a 'life substitute,' something apart, detached from a life out of balance. Mondrian said, "Art will disappear as life gains more equilibrium."

For myself, though Mondrian's dream of Arcadia has its attractions, I doubt either that art will disappear or that life will achieve equilibrium. Aside from that, it has always seemed to me that maybe an even larger spiritual purity than an art of detachment may lie in the very direction of sweating people in their unbalance rather than away from that life. There is no formula by which art can proceed but there are gifted painters in this exhibition who wish to prepare a very serious and ambitious romance — an art in the image of people.

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