Performing Judaism

Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery
Reed College, Portland, Oregon
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Curated by Stephanie Snyder
with Karen Levitov, assistant curator,
the Jewish Museum, New York

Introduction by Silas B. Cook
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Memorial Art Gallery

Performing Judaism

Quite shy of a *minyan*, the eight artists that compose the *Performing Judaism* exhibition have nevertheless been assembled for an arguably sacred purpose: to circumscribe a space in which material acts envision, interpret, and perform the condition of being Jewish in the here and now.

Each artist in *Performing Judaism* makes work that wrestles with Jewishness from thoughtfully spiritual, moral, and highly personal perspectives. Building upon the wealth of ideas and Jewish "outness" in the groundbreaking 1996 *Too Jewish?* exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York City, the work in *Performing Judaism* has been assembled to further explore Jewish artistic response and reflection–examining the enigmatic, multifarious, and memory-soaked Jew within–and owning her, shaping her.[1] As Stuart Hall explains in his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," interpreting one's cultural identity is always a work in progress:

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere "recovery" of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.[2]

This self-aware, self-reflective "performance" of one's relationship to Jewishness and Judaism is the common thread that binds together the work of this group of artists.

It may be said that these operatively secular artists examine their Jewishness with as much thoughtfulness and scrutiny as a group of Talmud scholars. This comparison, perhaps controversial, is not meant lightly: it is meant to connote the deep similarity between the learning and discipline required of Jewish spiritual practice and ritual observance, and the learning and discipline required of Jewish artists engaged with their Jewishness. To be Jewish in the studio in addition to, or as opposed to, the synagogue, is not to be divorced from Jewish scholarly practice and discipline. These artists are equally engaged by the gloriously multifaceted processes, tropes, and life histories gathered together in the service of exploration and authenticity: the act of making art becomes a metaphor for being–or *becoming*–Jewish.

In organizing this exhibition we have employed ideas about identity performance that have their origin in the work of Jewish feminist and queer-studies scholars such as Susannah Heschel and Judith Butler, who examine societal and gender roles from the perspective that they are the products of continual and conditional restatements of identity.[3] Identity is thus conditioned by inherent tensions between established institutions maintaining long-held monopolies on the forms of identity expression, and smaller, grass-roots creative voices attempting to re-describe and re-define the terms of these roles and the nature of their expres-

sion. The artists in this exhibition lay bare and explore their own tensions within Jewish cultural and religious traditions, as well as within American and Israeli society.

As *Performing Judaism* contains a multi-generational group of artists, the exhibition offers the opportunity to view work examining Jewish identity by artists with widely different life experiences and histories. Each artist's milieu may be broadly described as follows: WWII and the birth of post-war American painting (Paul Brach); post-WWII Jewish diaspora and the development of post-Holocaust museology (Nicholas Stavroulakis); American feminism and the emergence of the "woman artist" (Miriam Schapiro); 1970s assimilation and the rise of women in American Jewish institutions (Gila Gevirtz); postmodernism and the emergence of textuality in contemporary artistic practice and interpretation (Ken Aptekar); Jewish renewal and the re-evaluation of Zionist ideology and Holocaust memorialization (Susan Silas, Stephanie Snyder); and post-feminism and the preoccupation with the body in artistic practice (Susan Sobeloff).

It is our hope that bringing together this wide-ranging yet related body of artistic exploration will contribute to the dialogue about contemporary Jewish artistic practice and aesthetic culture that has, of late, grown so rich.

1

The *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities* exhibition was curated by Norman L. Kleeblatt, Susan and Elihu Rose curator of fine arts, the Jewish Museum, New York City. Kleeblatt's exhibition catalogue essay "Passing Into Multiculturalism" is an invaluable document for understanding the complex cultural, historic, and aesthetic issues that involve any examination of American Jewish art since WWII.

2

Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in Nicholas Mirzoeff (ed.) *Diaspora and Visual Culture: Representing Africans and Jews* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 23.

3

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

Ken Aptekar

Ken Aptekar's work is a dialogue between traditional and personal identities. Aptekar places mostly autobiographical texts over images from famous master artists. The resulting exchange addresses the complex questions of his identity as an artist and an American Jewish man. By layering his texts over enlarged details from earlier masterpieces, Aptekar is at once asserting his individuality and taking his place in a lineage of esteemed painters. In "Red Read," his 1998 suite of lithographic and silkscreen prints, Aptekar plays on the multiple meanings and connotations of the homonyms "red" and "read." The color red refers to larger political ideologies and passionate emotions as well as to specific entities such as paint, hair, and wine. The word read refers to the reading of books and to how one "reads the signs" around them. Taken together, the words red and read become metaphors for some of the defining moments in Aptekar's life.

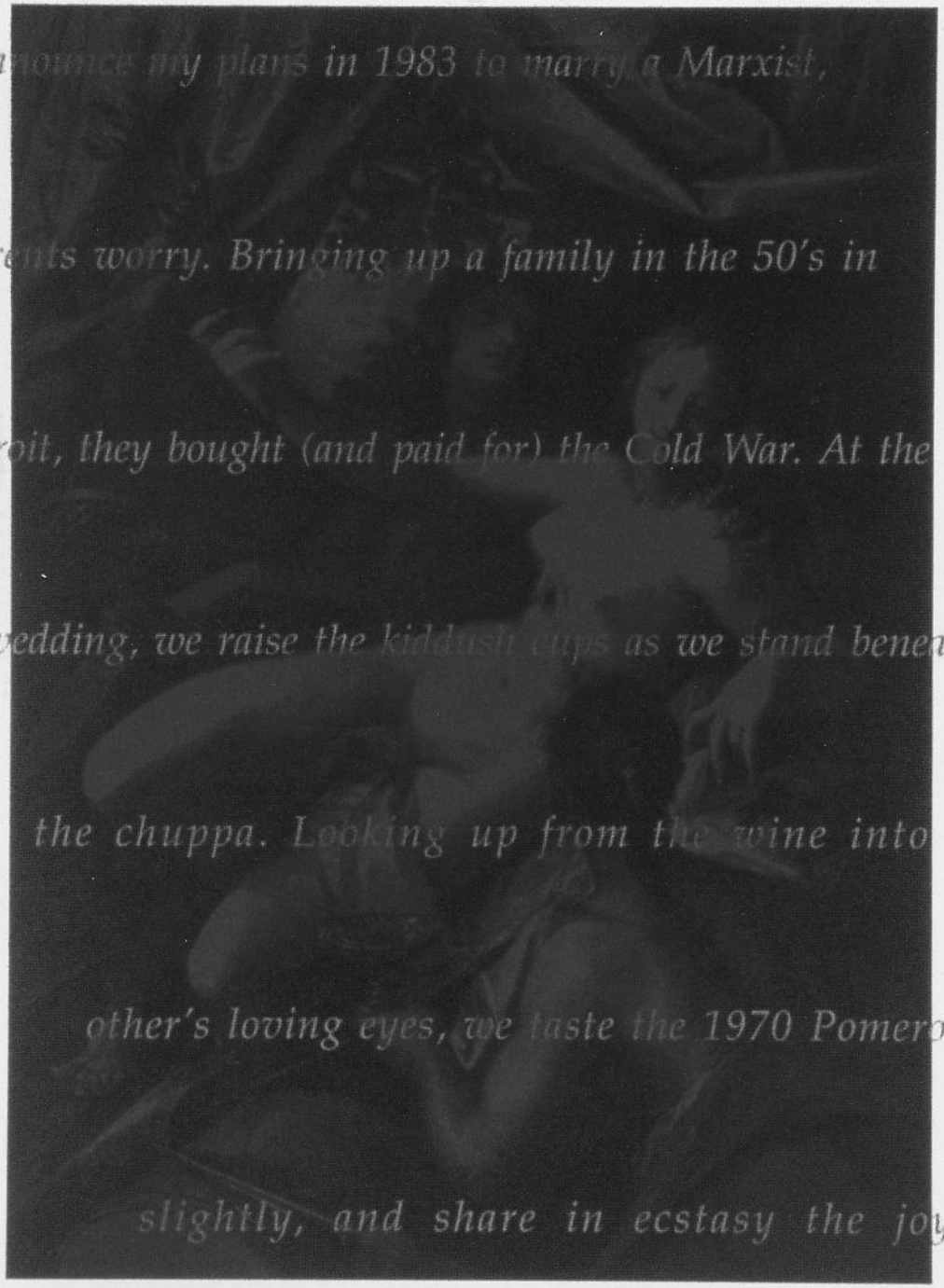
In *"Where'd you get the red hair?"* for example, Aptekar refers to his childhood trepidation that, as a redhead, people might think he isn't really Jewish. Despite this concern, he loves his red hair and is crestfallen to see the barber removing it at his father's command. The source paintings for this work are three late sixteenth-century works by the Italian painter Caravaggio, an artist infamous for his temper as well as his inflammatory works. Aptekar's selected details show the heads of dapper young men in feathered hats, perhaps covering their own red hair. In the case of a visible "Jewishness," stereotypes focus on a large nose, large eyebrows, and dark hair and skin, not red hair. So what is the significance of having red hair, or not looking Jewish? Not appearing Jewish is perhaps unwilling assimilation or the unintended parallel to changing one's name to sound less ethnically defined. For Aptekar, not appearing Jewish is a source of childhood anxiety that he does not belong to his own family, and an adult confrontation of "passing" in Jewish history.

In *When I announce my plans* Aptekar layers text over a reproduction of German painter Hans von Aachen's *Allegory of Peace, Art, and Abundance* of 1602. The text combined with the painting of a nude woman representing peace, art, and abundance forms a kind of *ketubbah*, or Jewish marriage contract, for the wedding of an artist and art historian. The text reads: "When I announce my plans in 1983 to marry a Marxist, my parents worry. Bringing up a family in the 50's in Detroit, they bought (and paid for) the Cold War. At the wedding, we raise the kiddush cups as we stand beneath the chuppa. Looking up from the wine into each other's loving eyes, we taste the 1970 Pomerol, moan slightly, and share in ecstasy the joys of red."

The "red" in Aptekar's text at once refers to the symbolic color of Marxism, good wine, the visceral passions of love, and the tone of the painting itself. Political concerns and the pleasures of life form a pair of bookends for the Jewish references in the text, the *kiddush* cups and the *chuppa*. These traditionally Jewish aspects of the wedding perhaps serve as the substance and the bond for the potentially contradictory stances of politics and pleasure. The paintings Aptekar uses as sources hang in such prestigious institutions as the Hermitage, the Louvre, and the Corcoran. Most of the painters he selects are dead, white (Christian) men. By connecting his work with the cache of museum paintings, Aptekar transfers the value and acceptability of museum pieces to his own work. Through the act of re-inscribing his own life over details from these established masters, Aptekar creates a place for himself as a contemporary American Jewish artist amidst the revered space of the museum wall.

When I announce my plans
from the series "Red Read," 1998
Lithograph, silkscreen, and digitally mastered image, 22 x 22.5 in.
Courtesy Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, Miami, Florida, and the artist

Source painting:
Barend Cornelis Koekkoek
***View of a Park*, 1835**
St. Petersburg, Hermitage



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