

## A Visual Dialogue: On the Art of the Soyev Brothers

**To Guillermo Agaze and David Soyler**

**and, full circle, to Gerard Degre**

## **Section 1: Introduction**

## Opening

### I.Beginning

*A Visual Dialogue* engages the creative struggle of the Soyer brothers, Isaac, Moses and Raphael, as passionately disciplined visual artists whose work profoundly and intentionally addresses the human condition.<sup>1</sup>

Their art matured in the 1930's. They are now deceased.

They were Jewish Americans, New Yorkers: born in Russia.

They were “on the left”, yet rejected the designation “social realist”, with its resonance of communist “agitprop”.

Isaac is my father. Moses and Raphael are my uncles.

### III. Focus

#### 1

In the literature, Moses and Raphael are almost always considered separately. Isaac is normally disregarded.

I discuss them together (questioning similarities and differences).

The basic structure and dynamics of the brothers’ work are usually approached outside artistic projects and problems.

It is classified by content. They are “regionalists” (“New York artists”) and “painters of the American scene”.

It is explained and critiqued as expressions of non-artistic group identities (primarily as immigrant, Jewish and leftist).

I follow Isaac, Moses and Raphael in foregrounding artistic concerns.

#### 2

I generalize Max Weber’s heuristic assumption that religion is normally influenced by “religious needs” to all disciplines including art (c.270): hypotheses of influence must demonstrate relevance to artistic problems and choices.

---

<sup>1</sup> I refer to Isaac Moses and Raphael as “the Soyer brothers.” There is another brother, Israel, and two sisters, Fanny and Rebecca. They were not visual artists.

Academic discussion of the brothers' artistic process focuses on limited tactical/technical concerns. I seek their creative commitments and strategic choices.

## B

### IV. On Literary Form

This manuscript was born in E-Mails...Most are to the archeologist and art lover Guillermo Agaze. Others are to family and friends.

I am interested in E-mail as a literary form mediating voice, print and cyberspace. I hope to retain dialogic resonance and avoid superficiality.

### V. Complications

I found (to my surprise) two commentaries on the brothers that I could not include in the group portrait: they are *Raphael Soyler*: and *the Search for Modern Jewish Art and Jewish Art?: The Case of the Soyler Brothers*. This work is discussed in an appendix.

Other appendices reflect on methodological and theoretical issues relevant to this manuscript.

### VI. Some Guiding Questions

#### (To Guillermo Agaze)

Our correspondence suggested guiding questions.

Do the Soyler brothers share an artistic process commitment and identity (e.g. a common understanding of the task and relevance of art)?

How do their chosen identities (artist, humanist) relate to their assigned identities (male, Russian-Jewish immigrant, American citizen) and to "external" identifications (e.g with women and African- Americans)

What do their "styles" have in common? How do they differ?

How did they hold fast and flourish while waves of change mutated visual art?

What is the aesthetic resonance of their work?

Does their art challenge dominant critical assumptions of their time and place?

Do the implications of their work transcend visual art (e.g. Does it have socio-political and/ or Socratic relevance)?

What are the strengths and weaknesses of their art? What is their historical place and contribution?

I want to show the brothers as I knew them. How did they appear to me?

Once I began to paint I experienced them as artistic as well as family elders. How did they react to my interest in art and to my work?

## Growing Up a Painter

((To Guillermo Agaze and Julia Soyer))

### I

My experience of the brothers was influenced by my emerging personal involvement in visual art.

You ask how my parents and uncles reacted to my interest in art and to my work.

My desire to become an artist was received nervously by the older generation, including my parents: “How will you make a living?” Art was seen as a chancy and uncertain profession, and (this does not necessarily follow) as a bad idea.

If bad for me then why not bad for them? No obvious answer...My parents and Moses thought I had the talent.

Perhaps advising young people calls up a different mindset than risking one’s own neck. Your guess is as good as mine.

The Wyeths are another painting family. Jamie, Andrew’s son, received in-house technical training.

When I was young no Soyer taught me anything about painting. No Soyer ever offered technical instruction ... Perhaps that’s why I habitually wander off alone to think things out.

### II

#### 1

My father and mother believed that I had talent

When I was fourteen I painted a self-portrait. They took me aside (isolating the moment from the normal flow of life as a special occasion) and said, “This is a work of art. You will do others. You will do better. But this is a work of art.” (Living Art)

#### 2

##### 2.1

The brothers practiced and were committed to the continued relevance of figurative art. “I remember the first time I made a purely “medial” (a.k.a. “abstract”/ “nonobjective”) painting. Isaac was napping in the bedroom. I felt like an orthodox Jew eating ham while his devout father slept.

The patriarch awoke, walked silently on slippered feet. He stood behind me unnoticed as I worked. Suddenly aware of him I turned. Fear and shame were on my face. He said, “It’s alright. Don’t be upset. Don’t worry...It’s interesting. I wouldn’t paint this way, but it might be right for you...Each artist must find his own way.” (Living Art).

## 2.2

My mother noticed me doing “a purely medial painting’ and expressed curiosity. We did one together, I believe successfully.

## III

### 1

In techniques of painting and drawing I am essentially self-taught (Helen Ridgway at Music and Art High School, and a term each with Stephen Hirsch and Harry Sternberg).

In the 1970s, conversations with Moses encouraged me to reflect on the spirit and requirements of art.

### 2

#### 2.1

I posed for Moses towards the end of his life (He insisted on paying “so that I can tell you what to do, and yell at you if you are late”).

#### 2.2

Moses was one of the most fluent draftsmen and colorists in America. My first time posing he worked for three hours then wiped it off. I said, “I thought that for you now it is easy.” He replied, “If it ever becomes easy one is no longer an artist.”

I realized that at every stage in art, difficulties even failures are normal and necessary. They are a sign that one is not “playing it safe”, that one is stretching, growing...reaching out. “(Living Art).



3

I showed him my work. He found it interesting, yet perhaps over stylized (i.e., too removed from direct dialogue with nature). He said, “This doesn’t let much in. It may be limiting. Where do you go from here?”

I was attempting extremely abstracted portraits with archetypical species resonance. He looked at a self-portrait. “How can you know this? It looks like an icon head of Christ. Not those one sees here. An icon in a peasant church” ... I still find this uncanny.

On my next visit after I finished posing he said, “You are an artist. Let’s talk about my work”. He put out some recent paintings for critique.

4

I did a pen drawing of Moses. He said, “paint me as I am”. He was tiny. His body, always small, was shrunken with Padgett’s disease. He took his hat and put it on my head. I was lost in it...I never realized before how huge his head was, how swollen through illness. He repeated “paint me as I am”.

5

Despite all differences in age and reputation he allowed me to speak freely. I remember saying. “You are a great colorist. Take it a little further and you would be Matisse”. He answered,” I am Moses. That is good enough for me”. I added, “You have been painting faces for over 50 years. Don’t you get tired of putting two eyes on either side of the nose? Wouldn’t you like once to paint an eye in the middle of a forehead”? He said “The way it is in nature is good enough for me. Don’t talk now. I am doing your mouth”. (This was a normal reasonable artist to model comment, and part of what he earned by paying me).

6

I remember after holding forth at length about my love life saying, “I am lucky to have a mature experienced person to talk to”. He left his stool (He could no longer stand while painting) and waddled towards me hand on chest, “People often say this ... I feel 17”.

The habit of conversation with models was not limited to posing nephews, or to Moses. It is a family tradition.

## Art as a Vocation

### I. An Intergenerational Tradition ?

A

(to Martin Altman and Maxine Kern)

1

One sign of dialogue is constructive disagreement

When I showed Moses my paintings one comment was “You are working in many different ways. I wonder which you’ll chose?”

My answer, somewhat to my own surprise, was “Why choose? I believe that Picasso and Marsden Hartley freed us from this. We have a right to express everything within us. Often this is through a single deepening style. Yet discontinuity and transformation are allowed.”

I experience Moses and I at opposite family extremes along the dimension of stylistic continuity-discontinuity. Isaac and Raphael were in between. Isaac had a brief final discontinuous style of “minimalist figuration” (frozen and intense). Raphael maintained consistency through subtle reconstructions.

2

Recalling this discussion, I am surprised to recognize shared beliefs and commitments mediating and limiting disagreement.

I cited chosen authoritative ancestors (Picasso and Hartley) as my elders would cite Eakins and Degas (perhaps as a religious Jew might say to an uncle, “Judaism is not only the rabbis it is also the prophets”).

B

1

I am afraid to substitute myself for the brothers: detailed discussion of my paintings would be irrelevant.

Yet if, as I now believe, my sense of art as a discipline derived from theirs I can write about it from inside

I accept the risk. Here, clearly labelled, is a personal commentary on an intergenerational search for disciplinary self- knowledge.

2

In my disagreement with Moses there was no talk on either side of financial success or “competitive advantage”. We took for granted that once art is chosen it is to be engaged for its own sake and in it’s own terms, as an autonomous creative project.

3

We were committed to art as a sacred calling yet did not claim supernatural sanction. People, thus artists, are not agents of “the other”.

The brothers experienced and passed on to me commitment to art as a sacred humanistic vocation.

4

Past styles remain action relevant. I quote from an E-mail to my department chairperson at The New School University

“As visual art is not strictly cumulative the great work of the past is not outmoded. It is permanently present... It is permanently relevant to practicing artists. It is (in that crucial sense) permanently contemporary.”

5

To conceive a notion (e.g. humanity, art) as a multicultural transhistorical unity in diversity can widen choice and deepen interpretation.

Yet the diversity might swallow and dissolve the unity.

When Isaac, seeing me work in a style he rejected for himself, said “Each artist must find his own way.” he did not mean and I did not hear “art has no boundaries and no requirements” and/or “all choices are of equal value”, and/or “It doesn’t matter what you do.”

Art permits and encourages diverse styles and approaches... Yet there is actualization and achievement, irrelevance, mediocrity and dead ends. (e.g. There is no one correct performance of Hamlet. Yet there are great, adequate and failed performances.).

The brothers believed that art, emerging from and open to personal-interpersonal choices, has inherent boundaries and requirements.

A. Covenant

(to Julia Soyer)

1

There was a strong taken-for - granted commitment to integrity, and especially to disciplinary integrity: to the honor of art... Not aggression (not looking for trouble), standing where you placed yourself.

It is a fact that when the ecology of art shifted and many of their contemporaries adjusted they remained themselves...They positively exemplified the Jewish proverb introducing Samantha Baskind's book on Raphael, "If I try to be like him who will be like me?" (1): under pressure they remained themselves (Baskind sees it differently),

2

Here is Raphael Interviewed by Barbaralee Diamonste

RS Some other contemporaries of mine would meet me in the street and say, "What's happening to us? What's taking place now? Look at all these abstract artists who became so famous while we are forgotten."

I said, "But it's not a question of just us, it's a question of art. What's happening to art? Let's discuss it, let's talk about it? "And I just sat down, and wrote a couple of postcards, to Edward Hopper, to Ben Shahn, to Yasuo Kuniyoshi, and to other artists of that time, and we began to gather.

(p.375 In side New York's Art World/ /Rizzoli/1979)

RS We had manifesto that critics are not the only judges of art, and museums are not the only judges, that the artists themselves have an idea of what art is and so on, and we tried to get together with the Museum of Modern Art and discuss the art situation and what was happening to art. We were accused of being communist in those days. Those were the McCarthy times. (376)

BLDD Do you think your career has suffered as a result?

RS No, my art didn't suffer, therefore my career didn't suffer. (p.377)

## A Dialogic Art

### I. Opening

We hypothesize that the Soyer brothers are artists in and through dialogue... We explore the Soyer brothers , art and dialogue through one another.

### II. On the Notion of Dialogue

1

1.1

At least in art, x is dialogic in so far as it recognize, questions and attempts to mediate patterns (e.g. insights, identities, orientations, “visions”) that appear opposed.

Here, for example, is the brother’s friend and Colleague Isabel Bishop

I'm interested in persons with definite class markings. I am interested in Bronx girls, mostly they are from the Bronx. They work in the neighborhood (the West Village, Manhattan). I want to express their character and also that they are not stuck in it: that they can become the Beacon Hill duchess of what-have-you. The limits, and also that they can get out of them. I feel their reality in this open ended way.

It is dialogic to conceive human history, art and their interplay as continuity in discontinuity and unity in diversity.

### III. Questioning Dialogue?

1

There was an apparent non dialogic total rejection of “purely medial (i.e non-objective) art... Yet the brothers never considered abandoning sensitive interpretation of “the logic of painting” in favor of pure fact.

In the 1950s “nonobjective art” was no longer an endangered challenging minority perspective. It was an established aggressive majority position with hegemonic ambitions (i.e. It was “the new academy”.) ... There was a powerful movement to exclude leaves (in firm spring tender budding and the glorious decay of autumn) waves (calm and in storm frenzy), bodies, clouds, deserts, cities, dawn, noon and night from the visual speech of art.

The issue was not whether purely medial art would exist but whether it would rule alone. This was the profound impoverishment the Soyer brothers resisted.

## **Section 2, Dream Vision Quest**



**Opening**  
**(To Guillermo Agaze)**

Your wonderful letters sent me on a family journey ... Wandered through memories: mourning...questioning ghosts.

## **Family Sketches**

### **I. Introduction**

**(To Martin Altman)**

1

My original plan was to sharply distinguish the artist from the person ...In an earlier draft I wrote “our focus is the artist...The artist has his/her own biography”.

I still find this distinction important. Yet Isaac’s silence and Raphael’s memoirs led me to relax the line.

I agree with Raphael that some sense of the person can contribute to interpreting the art.

### **II. Raphael**

**( To Martin Altman)**

1

Here are notes from Raphael’s memoirs exploring different stages of his life

2

One evening, a young man named Ivan Ivanovich Pozdniakov, came to our house and did a drawing of our father from life. That one could draw a living person was a sudden revelation to me. I stopped drawing for several days, then asked my father to pose for me as he had for Ivan Ivanovich. When the drawing was praised, elation was boundless. From then I became a confirmed realist. I drew only from nature rather than from imagination, like other children. In retrospect, I believe that this limited my art, but perhaps my love for painting people stems from that incident. Diaryp.181

3

Soon after joining our father in New York, I destroyed the notebook containing my Russian poems. I tore it up page by page and flushed it down the toilet. They were written under the spell of the romantic, altruistic Nadson and were about birds who lost their nests and about wandering children who had no homes. All the poems had quatrains added by my father to the effect: Thus art thou, my people.

Thou hast lost thy nest (or “home”, as the case may be) but one day thou shalt find it, recapture it and return to it”

The last poem in that notebook was one I wrote shortly before leaving Borisoglebsk. It was not about birds or children anymore. I described myself musing on the banks of the river Verona, watching its flow carrying heavy beams and stones, and asking it why it was unable to carry away my heavy thoughts. It was without my father’s quatrain. ( Self-Revelment:A Memoir)p.55)

4

I joined the class of Guy Pene du Bois. He was the most unobtrusive of teachers. I didn't know his standing in the art world, but somewhere I may have seen and liked one of his small genre paintings. Inarticulate and timid as I was those days, I was able to establish a rapport with this red-faced, also essentially shy man, who looked at me with sarcastic attention from behind his thick glasses. Actually he made no attempt to teach me anything. I realize now that he was not what is known as an "involved" teacher. As a matter of fact, there was something slightly cynical about him, as if he had said to himself, "I can't teach anyone to be an artist, but I have to teach to make a living." I liked and respected him, and my work changed merely from being with him. In the National Academy I learned to paint cleverly from models, like my older fellow students, a la Sargent and Chase, who were our standards then. But at the League I made a conscious effort to shake off all that I learned at the Academy. When I left the League I isolated myself in my parents' house and began to paint my immediate environment in an altogether personal manner’

After I left his class, I met du Bois at gatherings in Whitney Club. On one occasion he approached me and said in his friendly but sarcastic manner, "The trouble with you Soyer, is that you don't drink enough." This has since been rectified.

Slowly I was coming out of foggy existence. At infrequent intervals I would visit du Bois, overcoming my shyness in my desire to know him, and would show him the paintings I was doing. One day he said, "Take this one to the Daniel Gallery and tell them I sent you." (Self revelations pops.62 &63)

When I was young people would stop me and crudely say, “What is the matter with you, Soyer. You look terrible!’ Now that what is left of my hair is white, I am greeted by a “Mary Hartman” like exclamation: You look wonderful!”

I am aware of my age when people ask the inevitable question: “Are you still working?” I am puzzled by this. When I mentioned it to Marcherre Chute, she said, “Its like asking you are you still breathing.”. I work without ever thinking that someday I would stop. No matter what is going on around me, I always worked. I remember-like a dream, it was so long ago-a room in the art school of The National Academy I was painting. Only the model and I were in the room. From far away came sounds of celebration. It was Armistice Day, November 11, 1918 - and I was painting.

And again: War had just been declared after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The sky light in my studio was blacked out. Two young men already in uniform came in and exclaimed in disbelief; “look, there is a war on and he is painting!” Another occasion: I had an exhibition and nothing was sold. My vivid memory of that time is of a sense of embarrassment and a feeling that my paintings were of no value. We were in great financial need, and when someone offered to buy the contents of my studio-drawings and paintings, all for 1,000 plus an old Packard-I consented. Two men came with a pushcart, and while they were loading my work, I was painting.<sup>2</sup>

### **(To Gideon Rosen)**

My notion of a successful intellectual life derives from my impression of Moses and Raphael: work chosen, loved, appreciated, financially rewarded, and performed at their own pace. [I remember seeing Raphael unhappy when approached by fans...Perhaps they were “blessed” even in the limits of their fame (i.e. that they were not celebrates: not, for example, Picasso and Matisse)].

---

<sup>2 2</sup> Soyer, *Raphael Diary of an Artist* New Republic Books, Washington D.C. 1977 p. xi

### III. Moses:. Notes from Another Witness

#### (To Julia Soyer)

Here are some excerpts from David Soyer's *The Studio: A Memoir*.

“An old fuzzy lithograph of three girls lying on a bed. Depression days, earliest memories. No money, no studio and Moses Soyer worked at home. It was a tiny apartment in Greenwich Village, with two small rooms a bedroom (which also contained the “kitchen” stove). The living room was dominated by the double bed, a heavy oak table and an easel. On the wall above the bed hung a dark brown still-life of a loaf of rye bread, a knife, hard-boiled eggs and a green package of Lucky strike cigarettes. Moses used to say, “My message is people”, and he seemed to immerse himself in the syllables making up this message. The little apartment was always crowded. All were artists of one sort or another, or so they thought, painters, poets actresses. At the core were Ida Soyer (called Big Ida, at 5 feet 4, to differentiate her from her smaller friend, little Ida,) and “The Girls” – Tamiris’ dance group, the energetic and creative “barefoot girls” of modern dance. Big Ida was one of the first of the group to marry, the first to have a child and an apartment. “The Girls” gathered around her and her family, her generosity and liveliness. There was constant racing off together to rehearsal and returning noisily through the “Village streets and hallways with their clacketing high-heeled shoes, their high-pitched voices and high spirits.

Within the apartment there was commotion clatter, theatrical clasps to the bosom and shrill “Dahhhhlings”. Snatches of serious talk, depression, art, fascism, social consciousness, “The Dance” Martha Graham, Mother Bloor. Through the hustle-bustle Moses ( could he have seemed tall in those days?) painted- a girl entering the door, those three disheveled young women on the bed, nudes. A four year old drew laughs in demanding imperiously of a newly arrived model (and friend and sometimes baby sitter), Well, what are you waiting for, take off your clothes and let’s get to work.” The bohemian life seemed nurtured by the depression as people huddled together, drawing warmth and sustenance from each other, sharing food ideas and space on the rough wood floor for homeless ones to sleep on.

Artists lived largely on barter, trading paintings for the services of the doctor, for appliances, for hardware. Intimate days, warm days fearful times and brave picket line times. Nights of falling asleep to the buzz of grown-up talk and laughter. Mornings of dirty glasses with disintegrating cigarette butts in the red wine dregs.”.

This was not my life. My parents and I were isolated.

#### **IV. Isaac ( to Julia Soyer)**

##### **A**

1979

I had been reading Thomas Mann’s *Joseph and His Brothers*.

Isaac was often ill. I substituted for him teaching.

I would arrive early. I remember standing in an empty classroom: enormous windows, grey walls, winter daylight.

One morning \_ putting on his long blue-grey smock to teach \_ all boundaries between my father and I broke in my mind. \_ I moved as my father and as I...and as Jacob and Joseph: within the room, within “the ocean of voices.

##### **B**

1

Much of Isaac’s work is inaccessible and known only to the immediate family.

Isaac’s reputation depends almost entirely on one painting, *The Employment Agency* which remains in public space because owned by The Whitney Museum (It was, for example reproduced on the cover of a recent reprinting of Clifford Odette’s collected plays). Of course, this profound image is not “a one off”. There are many comparably excellent paintings.

2

Raphael and Moses painted many hours every day. So did Isaac through the 1930s. Here is Moses writing about a 1920s trip to Paris:

“We decided to return to America. A few weeks before we left, however, Isaac and his wife, a very good looking and talented young artist, came to Paris. During his comparatively short stay in Paris,

Isaac, working with his usual intensity, accomplished more than I did in two years. He returned home with many interesting canvases.”( p.44 Painters and Sculptors of Modern America Thomas Y. Crowell Company/1942)

Then, increasingly, Isaac’s and his brother’s lives diverged.

I don’t know my father’s young adulthood as a fully involved increasingly recognized painter in New York.

I was born in 1939, and became aware in Buffalo where he had two full time jobs, teaching at Buffalo University and working at Bell Aircraft, while painting wonderfully

After the war we moved back to New York.

Isaac lived by teaching...We ate and always paid the rent but knew that, unlike his brothers, he was poor, and increasingly anonymous... He painted less.

In the early 70s he created, as though whispering to himself, a few haunted, understated, radically unique images.

3

In the 1950s and 60s Isaac was very much alone. No professional artists except, rarely, his brothers...I say professional because his wife, Sofia, and son were painting in the same small apartment in an anonymity and isolation even deeper than his own.

I am not sure that Sofia’s and my work was entirely irrelevant to Isaac’s late style...He often spoke of the three of us exhibiting together. He was sad this never happened.

C

1

One surprise writing this is how little Isaac spoke to me about his art...How little he spoke.

I did not and do not now feel his silence as rejecting ...The texture was not rock or iron

He loved his brothers, Sofia, you, and I. Recently I came upon photographs of him holding you at five : holding you like life itself.

2

As a child I went through a brief morbid religious obsession. I told Isaac I feared going to hell. He said “I am only a man, but I wouldn’t condemn anyone to hell. Not even Hitler. If there is a God he is much wiser than I. Certainly he would know better than to have a hell....You need not worry .Don’t worry.”

He said, “Try to learn from my strengths not my weaknesses”. I say this to you.

3

Standing on a beach in winter I wrote a few lines.

“Randomly spaced on a deserted beach  
Gulls stand still in snow,

Only waves and their hearts move.”

Returning home I said to Isaac: “I saw on the winter beach that nature has moods as though it is a person”. He said. “I also feel this.”

We shared, surprised, that we had separately read and been influenced by Jung.

4

Although he came to America at 7 his Russian accent remained strong. I remember that it was very difficult for him to say “sheet” distinctly. His mouth moved slowly and deliberately the ees extended, “sheeeet”.

He never failed. He never felt secure...He always said the word when it came up.

**D**

1

There were two stories that my father used to tell me. Often after he told one he would smile and laugh.

I don’t think he made them up, but they were his. (Writing need not freeze the dialogic flow of speech).

I will honor his style. But it was long ago ...and now their mine.



His voice is remembered  
But the circle closes  
His memory is sweet  
And yet the song continues

2

### A Winter Story

An isolated tribe lives in constant winter.

When parents become old and frail they are carried in a sack to be exposed on ice to die.

A young man and his father are mending nets. The son sees his father shiver, sees his hands shake.

He says, "You are frail. Please crawl into this sack. I will carry you to die."

The son carries the sack. He sings the song of the good child, "He carried me. I carry him."

Hours pass. The son hears weeping from the sack.

He puts it down. "Why do you cry? Am I hurting you?"  
"You carry well."

Again and again, weeping father questioning son.

The son put down the sack. He asked his father to crawl out. They sat... Each looked silently into the others face. Sky and ice reddened then grew black.

"Why?"

"I weep because your son will carry you to die."

### 3. A Spring Story

An old man lies in bed.

His son stands near him.

“Do you know I love you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know I’m dying? “

“Yes”.

“You have my blessing.”

“Father, do you know I love you.”

“Yes.”

A long silence.

“Your inheritance \_ my last gift \_ is my friend.”

The son thinks, “We are poor. His friend is poor... I don’t need sugar coating.”

He holds these words inside,

Says “Thank you father”.

The father smiles,

“Thank you for your silence, but I understand.”

“Do you have friends?”

“Yes”

“How many?”

“Perhaps a hundred.... I don’t know.”

“I have a path to whisper in your ear.”

The son kills a calf and butchers it

He puts the carcass in a wicker basket

Blood drips out.

“He knocks on a friend’s door

Cries out

“I killed my girl, hacked her, threw her bloody pieces in this basket. Help me please.”

Lunatic!” “Get out!”  
“Forget you know me!”

Friend after friend  
Threats and curses.

First he pretended.  
Rejection made it real.  
Panic and despair.

Pants were blood soaked. Hands dripped red.

He wept  
wiped his eyes.  
Line of bloody tears redrew his face.

He stood before the final door.

## E

Until his middle fifties Isaac was in unfailingly good health. I remember him saying half seriously, “We spend a lot of money on Blue Cross/ Blue shield (health insurance). We never use it. Maybe we should save the money”

A few months later he had his first serious illness, a detached retina. We were concerned that he would lose the sight of an eye (frightening for anyone, especially for an artist who supported his family by teaching art.)

From then on his health insurance was in almost constant use: a heart condition, lupus.

He almost died of endocarditis. In the hospital we were surprised to hear him speak proudly about his time as a factory worker at Bell aircraft... Later he said “It is important in painting a portrait to express the work the person does”. . . . Recuperating at home he said with sad, quiet, excitement, “I had a vision. The details are fading now... but I remember. I saw that we all depend on one other. We are all part of everything”... He asked that when the time came he be buried not cremated, “to be a part of everything”.

He survived the illness. Years later he was buried as he wished

**Section 3: Soyer Brother Country (To Guillermo Agaze)**

## Opening

### I

**Guillermo** *I noticed that both Raphael and Moses – and particularly in the 50's and 60's -often shared models and even occasionally painted them in strikingly similar poses?*

**Avron** This goes counter to family narrative.

Yet, come to think of it, artists normally recommend good models. It would be extremely unusual and thus interesting if two artist brothers had no models in common.

Perhaps we (Soyers) have not examined their work painting by painting as closely as you have. I would welcome hypothetical examples.

If there are similar poses of the same models it is probably unintended.

### II

**Guillermo** *Were they consciously honoring each other's work or was it the case that their artistic sensibilities were simply so similar that they ended up producing pieces that sometimes appear almost interchangeable?*

**Avron** Isaac, Moses and Raphael insisted that none of their paintings are interchangeable.

After writing this I found a relevant statement by Raphael.

**BLDD:** Your brothers were all interested in art, and I guess we are most familiar with Moses and Isaac. Was having that kind of family environment a help or a hindrance to you? Did you help each other in your explorations in art? Was that a supportive experience?

**RS:** No. First of all my brother Moses was my twin brother and we always had a struggle for identity. Each one of us wanted to be himself and we always had a struggle for identity. Each of us always wanted to be himself, and that was a big problem, because we looked alike and there was a family likeness in the work we did, and therefore each of us really had to struggle to become himself, and from very early Moses and I decided to go to different schools, not to have a studio together, and I think we succeeded in becoming ourselves. There was this struggle, this sibling rivalry always, from childhood on. Each one wanted to be better than the other one, and this is a feeling that never subsides. But we also profited by showing each other our work, and we criticized very severely sometimes, and learned great deal from each other.<sup>3</sup>

Here is a clarifying observation by Mose's son David.

Every day the two brothers are in New York, sometimes twice a day, sometimes more there is the staccato, predictable, nearly toneless, telephone conversations with Raphael: "Hello...what's new...Talk louder...Who have you seen?"... A brief exchange about the paintings each is working on, who is posing, some art or family gossip and then goodbye until the next call",,, What's new?...Talk louder".<sup>4</sup>

A mutual struggle for autonomy within a profound loving, sustaining connection...Isaac was the, not a, relative outsider.

---

<sup>3</sup> Diamonstein, Barbara Lee *Inside New York's Art world*, Rizzoli International Publications, 1979, p.370

<sup>4</sup> Soyer, David *Memoir in ,Alfred Weber Moses Soyer A,S, Barnes and Co., New York, 1970 p.13*

When you send the images please don't tell me who did what

### III

I suggested that you send unlabeled images in order to test your suggestion that the brothers' paintings are sometimes indistinguishable. The test won't work. It requires paintings I am absolutely sure I've never seen.

Yet it set me wondering.

Can I write my intuitive (i.e. tacit) sense of who they are as artists?

Do the Soyer brothers share an artistic commitment (e.g. a common understanding of the task and relevance of art)? What do their "styles" have in common? How do they differ... How would I recognize a painting as a Soyer and assign it to Isaac, Moses or Raphael?

What are the structures and boundaries of "Soyer brother country"?

## Family Thematics

### 1

They are fiercely committed to "representation" **and** they disdain imitation. They recognize realism as a species of interpretation

M. Soyer (1993) Good painters never copy nature. Those who do are the most dreadful. Good artists interpret. *Arnolfini* by Jan Van Eyck is not a copy of nature. It is really an anti-copy. Could I copy you? I could paint you and express you but not copy you. Academicians copy.

R. Soyer: There can be banal representational art. No matter how awful these other things are, most representative work is worse...absolute platitudes

### 2

They focus on the human figure.

They are committed to the reality of the other **and** to their own inwardness: Every figure is in and through interpersonal dialogue

Here is Raphael

When I paint a human being I look at the person. But I know myself is there in all these people. Didn't Flaubert say that "Madame Bovary is myself?... I do believe that I paint people but I am there.

3

3.1

They are fascinated by inner life (their models and their own.)

3.2

I remember your comment:

There is something about the unutterable sadness in the faces of the people they (the Soyer brothers) depict that simply makes sense as an expression of the time they grew up in and, sadly, still remains quite applicable in today's world.

Yes, they often express profound sadness. Yet it is sadness modified by individuality and reason: sadness in its natural ecology (not, as in Munch, an embodied scream).

4

4.1

They are committed to the modern struggle to preserve permanence in change, unity in diversity \_ a recognizable vital humanity \_ within the breakdown of this order of life.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike their contemporaries Francis Bacon and George Grosz they rarely focused directly on the profound distortions of humanity within this struggle.

Figurative expressionism (e.g Kokoshka and Sperakis) and the brothers dialogic naturalism are complementary... The notion of distortion requires a living cherished memory of a natural order. If love and memory die then discontinuity is only one thing neutrally following another: each isolated moment simply what it is . . . The battle for recognizable humanity would be irrevocably lost

---

<sup>5</sup> What some contemporary authors designate "modern" I term industrial and post-industrial. I find the traditional association of "modernity" with an artistic and philosophical movement (Spender) too resonant to disregard.



## 4.2 .

The brothers' work is committed **to** balance. Yet this balance is not complacent. It exists in tension... The empathetic sanity of their art was not innocent. It is edgy. It is chosen.

Again and again the Soyers reached the borders of expressionism... Here is Raphael reflecting on his late paintings of Moses and the paintings of George Grosz

“I decided that (in) my posthumous portrait of Moses Soyer ... I could have painted his face, ravaged by illness, more expressionistically, but I held back for reasons I cannot fully explain... Even seven years before Moses looked at a portrait I did of him and said, “You missed doing an Otto Dix of me. Or you could have painted me like the portrait of the hunchback poet, Neisse, by George Grosz”. (*Diary of an Artist* p.288)”

“I...had the great satisfaction of seeing one of those extraordinary early paintings by George Grosz: a cross-eyed, cruel, duel-scarred Junker in the foreground: a blind ex-soldier tapping the sidewalk with his cane, and a Dostoevskian dog. A meager painting in color and meter, more a drawing in gray and black...In front of paintings by George Grosz I became so dissatisfied with the mildness, the “sympathy” the unexaggeratedness of my art (*Diary* p. 178)”

Raphael's admiration of Grosz , shared by his brothers, displays both a sympathetic openness to work far outside their own stylistic choices and a determination to remain oneself.

## 5.3

In a few final paintings and drawings by Isaac the tension between sorrow and stoic balance achieved unique uncompromised minimalist figurative intensity.

## 6

They are “representational” and in love with the autonomous medial potentialities of visual art.

They rejoice in and explore the sensuous medium of oil paint. Here, for example, is Moses,

One talks a great deal about harmony in painting: about congruity, proportionate relationship arrangement of color, etc. But harmony is not always attained through colors which are felicitous and go well together. It is often achieved with colors which clash, with colors which are opposites. In other words, discordance can often become harmony.<sup>6</sup>

and Charlotte Willard watching Moses paint

When I arrived at the studio for the second sitting, the model was already in position and Soyer was gradually developing his color theme. He was adding pinks and reds and nuances of color slowly and gradually. "I will decide afterwards where the big color splash will be to give it focus"<sup>7</sup>

Their drawings and etchings tend towards the sketchy painterly (Shades of grey as well as black and white).

7

7.1

The brothers are passionately committed to continuing "the main line" in the development of visual art and to interpreting their own place and time.

7.2

"I remember walking across The Brooklyn Bridge with my parents when I was a young boy. We looked down at the old stained worn wooden piers. I was surprised when Isaac said, 'They would be wonderful to paint'."<sup>8</sup>

Here is Isaac

So much has happened in the last thirty years in art that to express a thought - and it should have immediate impact - it has to be expressed in a more contemporary technique... It is not necessary to develop a new language but to use the old language in a new context.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> A.C.A. Gallery, New York, 1972

<sup>7</sup> Willard, Charlotte *Moses Soyer*, The World publishing Company, Cleveland

<sup>8</sup> Soyer, Avron *Living Art* Unpublished p.40

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* p,141

All artists of every age have mirrored in their work the times in which they lived. They will always do so. The contemporary scene is most conducive to great dramatic and artistic achievement. The tense atmosphere, the conflicting ideologies, arousing ... deep emotion in the hearts of millions, electrify the artist. They challenge his artistic ability. According to his talent, his command over his medium and the mastering of his technique, he will express upon canvas in vibrant colors and exciting forms, his reactions to our tempestuously changing world

and Raphael,

Tradition like nature has to be renewed. You can't return to Michelangelo and Rembrandt. You have to inject something new.<sup>10</sup>

8

They have an almost tribal connection to their favorite artistic ancestors.

Raphael,

We walked over to the portrait Rembrandt painted of himself in the role of St. Paul “How old he looks! He lost his teeth!” Rebecca exclaimed softly in compassion, as if Rembrandt was a living and old friend, whom one hadn’t seen for a long time, and now came upon him and found him sadly aged<sup>11</sup>.

Tradition\_ as nature\_ is interpreted not imitated. Participation in the great tradition requires innovation.

9

They followed the Greek- Renaissance focus on the human universal **and** Rembrandt’s sensitivity to individual uniqueness

They also followed the 19th Century focus on group (e.g. ethnic, gender and social class) variations...Marx was an influence, and, in visual art, Courbet, Daumier, Degas and Manet). Moses and Raphael were strongly influenced by Russian literature

---

<sup>10</sup> Soyer, Avron, *A Dream of Reason* Unpublished, p.141

<sup>11</sup> Soyer, Raphael *Diary of an Artist* New Republic Books, Washington D.C. 1977 p. 81

They prefer to paint the individual in his/her normal social context.

10

They were convinced that social recognition does not distinguish among painters between artist and non-artist

Art has inherent standards and requirements. The true artist \_as the competent scientist\_ can and should define disciplinary boundaries.

11

An orientation is dialogic in so far as it struggles to mediate apparent contradictions, and to deal justly with all relevant claims and voices.

. The Soyer brothers were artists in and though dialogue.

## **Personal Voices**

### **I. Opening**

I hope that the last letter's glance at shared patterns will help me distinguish individual voices".

### **II. Isaac**

Isaac died almost forgotten. This verdict is reversing: he was, for example, included in the Whitney Museum's exhibition *The First Fifty years of Twentieth Century American Art*.

In the 30s and 40s his work was generally more richly deeply colored and less textured than his brothers'.

*The Employment Agency* is an exemplary humanistic depression painting. The inwardness and solitude of the people is respected. Their humanity is wonderfully present. This restrained vision is precisely, freely, passionately rendered.

There are at least two successful large symbolic/ historical compositions, *Where Next* and *The Refugee*.

*Where Next* is placed in The Spanish Civil War. A dying Loyalist fighter rests his head on his mother's lap. A young couple looks on stunned. A distant town burns beneath a blue untroubled sky. It translates "the pieta" into modern

terms (as Christian art translated Greco-Roman images and themes). It was directly influenced by the neo-classicist Jacques Louise David and the pioneering expressionist Goya.

His drawing was normally less textured than that of his brothers. At its best it is often minimalist (closer to Ingres than to Degas).

In the absence of a unified tradition the almost perfect consistency and balance of a Van Der Weyden or a Giovanni Bellini is impossible...All twentieth and twenty first century painters are flawed... Raphael and Moses sometimes approach sentimentality (a slightly over stated pathos, a slightly over wistful female beauty).

In the 50s and 60s Isaac's flaw as an artist (not as "a family man) was emotional distance. There are a few lively paintings (e.g. images of a young boy drawing and of a woman in The Modern Museum garden).

A few paintings and drawings from the 70s are extreme and unique. Not the raw gestural exclamations of much "expressionism". Restrained. Minimal. Haunted... Images on the edge.

An old woman is seated behind a young seated man. Each has folded hands. There is something "slightly off" about her realistically rendered "normal" face. The young man is pressed up against \_almost breaks\_ the picture plane. His eyes with their darkly shadowed settings are almost circular. His uncombed black hair is thick and curly (a "Jewish Afro") His full mustache and short beard are unkempt and natural yet severe and geometric He looks trapped inside himself. There is an implicit unforced ancient Russian -Byzantine resonance. The distance between is curiously undefined. The woman stares at the man with fixed obsessive focus.

There is a painting of the brothers sitting in a row with their parents in a row above: the composition recalls African sculpture.

### III. Moses

Moses celebrated the everyday world.

I like the artist who talks with a low voice. A story in the bible relates to how God spoke with a prophet not in the voice of thunder or in the howling whirlwind but in a great silence. For me, the voice of God is

experienced through quiet painters like Vermeer, Cezanne and Degas  
12

Moses was a more bravura painter than Isaac and Raphael. The rich material presence of paint suggests sensitive flesh. He embraced strong chiaroscuro and dramatically simplified form...Daumier was a crucial influence. \_There is interplay of fluid brushwork and solid structure.

Moses development was unusually unified and cumulative.

Some of his prewar paintings are “over worked”. He improved steadily. His color became more beautiful and expressive. His brush work gained in spontaneous precision.

I am looking at a painting of the young Reid family, and an oil sketch of the mother Jean.

In *The Reid Family* Jean occupies the foreground. She looks directly at us, yet neither “catches our eye” or submits to our gaze. She is herself, at ease in her own space.

The man holds the child on his lap. They are set back and to the right. The baby’s lively delicacy is beautifully and lightly rendered.

Rectangles \_ windows and pictures\_ are in dialogue with human curves. An off- center picture/rectangle challenges stability.

Everything makes “naturalistic sense”. Yet there is an alternative “reading”. The realistically richly rendered man and child are hers: perhaps a living dream. Susan is psychologically as well as spatially central.

Painting and drawing are almost indistinguishable... Paint flowing into realistic shapes is itself and is about the world.

In the sketch, brush strokes are almost calligraphic: nothing unnecessary. Dynamic minimalism. Subtle articulate tender disciplined gestural improvisation.

Jean’s face in *The Reid Family* precisely balances softness and sharpness. She is suspended between inwardness and the common world. One could imagine her rising from the chair to speak or make the bed. Jean in the sketch is recognizably the same woman, yet in a different “psychological light”: softer, undefended, open: a moment, before crying or rising to making love.

---

<sup>12</sup> Willard, Charlotte *Moses Soyer*, The World publishing Company, Cleveland p.12

The accessibility and directness of Moses' art is supported by a complex synthesis of clarity, sensual openness and psychological insight

#### IV Raphael

1

I must devote more space to Raphael than to his brothers His development is unusually complex. He wrote extensively about his life and art. His identity is contested.

There were three stylistic resolutions.

2

Normally a "realistic" artist begins with a technical apprenticeship and slowly develops a personal voice.

"When I was in the Academy, they painted like Sargent...I learned very quickly to paint like Sargent.<sup>13</sup>"

Then he deviated from the normal pattern. He began again.

As soon as I left the academy...I made a conscious effort to forget Everything I had learned there...I started from the beginning again and painted in a frank and almost naïve manner subjects of ordinary interest that were part of my immediate life.

The resultant paintings are (from his perspective) technically limited. Yet they are not confused. They are tender, fresh and playfully "realistic". Perspective is loose yet functional. Local color is respected.

Compositions are readable. Colors are pleasant and harmonious...They are purely and coherently what he saw and felt.

3

Raphael avoided the permanent artificial childhood of the pseudo primitive and rejected expressionism. He embraced personal "naturalistic" focus on the common world.

---

<sup>13</sup> From Goodrich, Lloyd, Raphael Soyer, Whitey Museum of American Art, New York,1967 p.p. 21-22.

There are paintings where “realistic” technique and personal vision are seamlessly harmonized in paint. There is also work that approaches “product” (well-crafted paintings in the style of Raphael).

With years of painting...it becomes increasingly difficult to hold on to the indefinable freshness of youthful vision and to spontaneous reaction. (Diary p. 234)

“Make my eyes blue as hell,” Marsden Hartley instructed me emphatically in his quiet voice. Were I painting him today, I would follow his instructions, but was then, alas, engrossed in naturalistic rendering, and lost emphasis of any kind in the process of many repaintings (Ibid. p.p. 224-245)

The wonderful 1932 double portrait of his parents was an early triumph. The Composition was influenced by Degas’ “The Absinthe Drinker”. Yet Raphael makes it new.

The old couple stare straight ahead...They are together in mutual isolation. Soft lamplight gently touches flesh, fabric, and wood. Accustomed melancholy saturates the room.

They are together and each is alone. The vision is loving, objective and sad. The image is profoundly Jewish and profoundly universal. The painting is Regionalist (i.e. true to a particular American milieu) and in dialogue with European art.

4

In the early fifties Raphael attained extreme formal unity of figure and setting. The visually given shape of things is respected but composition dominates. This is an art of extreme nuanced “medial” sensitivity.

Here is Goodrich

...the balance of masses, of light and dark areas, and...the interrelations of straight and curvilinear lines. Screens are used as intermediate planes between the foreground figures and the further walls.

In *The Screen* an effective composition is built out of nothing more than a three-fold screen with brilliant-colored clothes hanging on it in strong light –simply a few planes, and space and light.



Containing walls, instead being at right angles to the eye, are slanted at varying angles to create a design of oblique planes surrounding the central forms. <sup>14</sup>

Color is clear yet subdued. Warm and cool harmoniously balance. This extreme clarity is mysterious (Because many rectangles are screens they hint at secrets).

This subtle realistic abstraction is deeply rooted in the complex, post Renaissance interplay of geometry and observation. I think of Ingres.

5

Here is a note I wrote to my cousin Gideon about Raphael's final style.

"Raphael became more profoundly personal and more directly 'painterly' late in life. I remember when it happened. Raphael visited. He was visibly tense.

He had just returned from Europe. He told us that he had been overwhelmed by the work of Velasquez. No one could do better. It had all been done. There was no point continuing.

I was about 18 and painting crude large heads with color worked through thick black drawing. He turned towards a painting of mine. "Maybe that is the way I should work"... I knew the man was in **deep** trouble.

Raphael worked it through...His style changed.

Around that time he had to move his studio. He made a large wonderful painting recalling his time there.

It was explicitly a painting of memory, almost Proustian... It was uncompromisingly responsible to shared visual reality. It was also uncompromisingly a dream.

There were also freely painted rather yellow nudes, all from the same model. It was a renewal.

I believe that this intensity and 'soulfulness' stayed with him until the end. The last show with its enormous vitally painted nudes was very strong.

---

<sup>14</sup> Goodrich, Lloyd *Raphael Soyer* The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1967 p20-21

## **Section4: Questioning Identifications**

## **Opening**

**(to Martin and Maxine)**

### **I**

The Soyer brothers were institutionally assigned male, white, Russian-Jewish immigrant and American citizen.

They were also assigned human. Normally common humanity is held in the background. The brothers chose to foreground it:

The Soyer brothers chose humanist and artist.

## **Enacting Humanism**

### **I. Clapping for Tinkerbell**

(To Guillermo Agaze)

Guillermo

*I have noticed with regret how little is published about them in the last three decades. Although there is some new work on Raphael (the recent books by E. Todd and S. Baskind), the interest seems more on the gender-related or ethnic context of the work and less on the universal humanistic characteristics of the art produced by the three brothers.*

Avron

1

I agree. Many of us who love the brother's work are touched by a humanism academic commentary neglects.

2

Why this neglect? I suspect an academic tendency to approach humanism as a covering rhetoric and seek the real identities, interests, themes and motives underneath.

Let's put this prejudice aside and entertain the possibility that our common humanity can be a deeply held identity,

To insist that humanism can be relevant to life does not deny its implication in a web of causation.

## **II. Humanism as Dialogic**

1

Many who accept the possibility of humanism misinterpret it as a one sided, universalism. Yet, humanity is such that to lose the individual in the species would destroy the species .

Humanism \_opening unity in diversity \_is inherently dialogic.

2

Commitment to shared humanity assisted relative freedom from the limitations of institutionally assigned identity. The brothers positively identified with women, African Americans and the homeless

### III. Painting as I-Thou Connection

A

1

One normally thinks of an artist painting as a relationship between eye , hand, mind, brush, paint and canvas. If you paint figures from life there is a model<sup>15</sup>...There are closely observed accounts of Moses and Raphael with their models.

Here is Moses by David,

The artist-model relationship goes deeper than the observation of a body surface by a recording eye. When Moses paints the studio is still. The radio plays music. Conversation is quiet, sporadic and intense, as the hours go by, session after session, painting after painting... the artist gradually gets to understand the model. The talk grows more intimate. The model describes the man she is sleeping with. One pregnant woman tells her well-nested pleasure, another smirks defiantly as she anticipates the shock to her par (enemies) ents when they see the complexion of their grandchild. One young dancer leaps

---

<sup>15</sup> Several times when models disappointed Isaac asked me to pose for students. I was 9 or 10 .I remember saying "You are merely artists. I am nature. You have to imitate me" . I am planning an essay on the relationship between artist and model

in spirit as she reports a tiny role in Martha Graham's ensemble<sup>16</sup>.

And in his own words.

People are equally interesting in their youth and in their old age. I like to record the changes in them. How they grow up; how children become men and women. I have painted many generations. There was a young girl from Boston whom I painted many times over a long period. She was about eighteen when she first came to me. She got married-I painted her then. She became pregnant. I painted her then.-I painted her that way. She had difficulties with her husband; she was psychoanalyzed; she had a baby; she was divorced; she had other alliances. I painted her through every stage of her life (Willard p.24).<sup>17</sup>

The intimate relationship of a boy and a girl is another of my themes. I want to paint love, tenderness, intimacy.<sup>18</sup>

## 2

One of Raphael's regular models Diane Di Prima<sup>19 20</sup> reversed the relationship of artist and model and wrote their double portrait

... mostly came here alone, and mostly to work for Rafael Soyer. Rafael and I had become fast friends. He seemed to know when he should work in silence, leave me to my reveries, and when we could chatter easily, nothing special on my mind. Sometimes he drew me out with what he probably thought were skillful questions, about my life and doings, my roommates and lovers. Or about the family I had left behind and their feelings.

Rafael could get away with almost anything, any question no matter how clumsy or impertinent, stuff that I would have met with a cutting silence or an angry, curt remark in most other places I'd answer for him, because I knew that

---

<sup>16</sup> Soyer, David *Memoir in ,Alfred Weber Moses Soyer A,S, barnes and Co.,New York, 1970 p.*

<sup>17</sup> Willard, Charlotte *Moses Soyer*,The World publishing Company, Cleveland P.24

<sup>18</sup> Idem++

<sup>19</sup> They are present in her words as people are present on a fine Soyer painting.... Di Prima, now over 70, still under appreciated, was and remains a wonderful poet, memoirists and "art activist"..

<sup>20</sup> Moses and Raphael as employers were helpful and supportive in the survival ecology of many young New York artists

somewhere under the persistent inordinate curiosity, there was a lot of caring. Compassion and fellow feeling<sup>21</sup>

## B

It is not only that they painted people. They painted interpersonally. Not cool psychologists of aristocratic distance like their beloved Degas and Ingres. They painted the model as s/he appeared in dialogue.

Again Di Prima,

His (Raphael's) paintings were full of women sewing. Holding babies. Worn women ironing, or leaning against a wall. A door jamb. As if the grief he felt, saw everywhere, could only be expressed by the female form. The eyes of the women who modeled for him: angry, sad, at bay, exhausted, kind. A few times he painted me fierce.<sup>22</sup>

Yes sadness. More deeply inwardness... Sadness as "the ground color" of mortal inwardness.

## C

### 1

The Soyer brothers' dialogic humanistic openness transcends their I-Thou relationship to models.

They understood their task as helping incarnate in their time a great intergenerational transnational tradition of visual art (e.g. of Rembrandt, Velasquez and Degas). A necessary process was to articulate their personal experience in its' contemporary significance and human resonance in drawings and paintings... Rarely either/or. Constant mediation between apparently incompatible alternatives.

### 2

Their openness to personal vision, determined individualism and principled humanism resisted total assimilation to standard positions ... They were unusually sensitive to and critical of cliché

Again and again (even posthumously) their pluralistic mediating openness is attacked as betrayal.

---

<sup>21</sup> Di Prima, Diane *Recollections of My Life as a Woman* Penguin Putnam Inc New York, 2001. p.134

<sup>22</sup> Ibid 135

Their' questioning brooding, dialogic, art haunts and challenges this impatient cliché ridden 21<sup>st</sup> Century world.

## Leftist Politics

### I.Introduction

#### (To Guillermo Agaze)

**Guillermo** *Back to my questions: in looking at the work of the three brothers in general, it seems to me that they are undergoing roughly parallel artistic trajectories, slowly moving from social and, more rarely, political (for instance, Isaac's *Where Next?* and Raphael's *Workers Armed*) commentary in the 30's to art that focused more on people's existential moods in the 40's and particularly later. So my question is this: Why did they, for the most part, shift later in their career away from the social criticism... that had earlier been so central to their art? Was this simply a reflection of ameliorating economic conditions in American society? Alternately, might it reflect personal disappointment with politics – or at least an increasingly less optimistic view of the ability of individual artists to “affect” the course of history? The reason I ask the latter question is because of a passage in one of Elie Weisel's novels, *The Town Behind the Wall*, which has always resonated with me since I first read it many years ago and which I suspect might also be applicable here. Paraphrasing it to the best of my recollection, it boiled down to something like this: “when I was young, I shouted so as to change the world, now I shout so as to prevent the world from changing me.”*

*Another question, and this one applies mostly to the work of Moses and Raphael, at least as published. It would seem to me that, at least after the late 30's early 40's, the work of Moses seems more withdrawn from public life than that of Raphael –with proportionally fewer street scenes and more emphasis on depicting individuals (mostly women) in interior settings. Is this a true pattern, reflecting differences in their personalities/life outlook or is it an accident created by the possibly unrepresentative nature of what has gotten published?*

Avron \_ The brothers insist on the continuity and integrity of their artistic, political and social commitment: It was the world that changed.



Here is Raphael,

**BLDD:** In the thirties and forties you painted troubled times, the uncertainties of the depression, and World war II, and in the fifties and sixties you gave us life in the east Village, the Vietnam protesters and flower children. Now many of the people that you paint are dressed in blue jeans. Is that what they symbolize, or is it the color that lures you?<sup>23</sup>

**RS:** I always painted what I saw. In the depression days I saw people sitting, and they were dressed very dingily, the colors were dingy: they were sitting in parks or, in the summer, lying down in parks, and I painted them. Now I am on Columbus Avenue, and I see all these people dressed in jeans. At the time when they wore miniskirts, I painted them in miniskirts. I paint what I see.<sup>24</sup>

**BBLD:** You have painted throughout this city for more than sixty years. What about the city continues to nourish you?

**RS:** The people of the city, the people of New York. We just came back from Los Angeles, for instance: people don't walk there, they are always in cars. Here the city teems with people, and I watch these people. When I walk now along Columbus Avenue I watch them. I look at the men and women both, I study their gestures. Every once in a while an idea occurs to me: I am going to make a painting,<sup>25</sup>

Yes, visual surprise in a familiar context was crucial and New York was a constant inspiration

Yet the brothers understood that to see is to interpret.

## B

The brothers struggled continuously to sustain their art in dangerous “cultural” ecologies: first communism then “nonobjectivism”

---

<sup>23</sup> Diamonstein, Barbaralee *Inside New York's Art world*, Rizzoli International Publications, 1979p.371

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*p.371-372

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid* p374

No shortage of proclaimed historical imperatives with their absolutist “marching orders”.

Their posthumous reputation remains shadowed by the art establishment, by competing ideologies within the modern crisis of Jewish identity and by cold war residues.

## II. Autonomus Voices

### 1

The Soyer brothers were on the left. Matthew Baigell: explores the implication of this commitment for their art.

Raphael Soyer, looking back from the early 1980s, said that ...“the John Reed club of writers and artists helped me to acquire a progressive world view, but I did not let it change my art, which never became politically slanted. I painted what I knew and what I saw about me”. And what he painted were the unemployed and the homeless. Left- wing critics did not respond positively to Soyers’ work. In a review of his solo exhibition in 1935 a critic for the *New Masses* found that his ‘rotting men” and flop house scenes did not “constitute a healthy tendency in revolutionary painting.” The critic wanted a more vigorous and positive statement.

The attitude an artist exhibited must have been almost as important as the making of paintings with an upbeat message. Moses Soyer, Raphael’s twin brother, wrote a touching review, really a confession, of his own exhibition in 1935, in which he explained that he painted the people he knew and with whom he lived-friends, family. He then said that he should paint the working class, but that he did not yet feel able to do so. “Indeed”, he said, “one would be utterly blind in these days of race hatred, depression and the Blue eagle [referring to the New deal] not to align himself with the class to which he feels he belongs.”

Several Jewish-American artists did come from the working class, but the Soyers grew up in a poor but educated, multilingual middle-class family.<sup>26</sup>

Here is the mature Moses

I don't want to paint muscle-bound men and women. Figures who could never have lived on this earth. I want to paint everyman, his hopes and his failures, his desires and his dreams. (Willard p.24)

and David.

Many of Moses friends and colleagues were called social realists, and some classified Moses (and Raphael and Isaac Soyer) with this group. But in his paintings were no cops beating strikers, no fat capitalists in top hats, no lynched Negroes, no Saccos, Vanzettis or Tom Mooneys. There was just "the message of people", and since it was the depression, this was a message of people in the depression darkly painted and somber, a heavy breasted black woman leaning out of a tenement window, a seamstress, tired dancers, men of the waterfront (David Soyer p.11)

2

"Social Realist" painting proceeds from certainty. It is propaganda. It would instill and reinforce a preset ideological agenda

Propaganda in mass industrial society is drawn to banal lowest common denominator images in standard relationships (e.g. exploited worker, vicious greedy capitalist\_ Joyous victorious socialist worker, benevolent comrade leader)... The painter "fills in the details".

---

<sup>26</sup> Baigell, Matthew *From Hester Street to Fifty-Seventh Street : Jewish-American Artists in New York* in Norman L. Kleeblatt and Susan Chuelow (ed.) *Painting A place in America: Jewish American Artists in New York 1900-1945* Indiana University press, Bloomington, 1991 p.p 60-61

The Soyers claim\_ I believe correctly\_ to question “everyday life”...They neither surrender to “the party line” nor abandon humanistic political concern.,

3

Because we began with the art we recognize that the Soyers’ people and everyday life are not, as in Norman Rockwell, lowest common denominator constructs or, as in “social realism”, political abstractions...They are the intimate existence of humanity...

Here is Moses,

Corot talks to me, I like the personal and the intimate... I want to paint love, tenderness, intimacy.<sup>27</sup>... The universal through the particular, that is what I reach for. (Willard p.24)

And Isaac,

The artist discovers beauty and meaning in whatever environment he is cast by chance... no matter where he is born and grows up, his life work is set for him, to glorify and describe intimately and sympathetically, the people and the physical appearance of everything about him.<sup>28</sup>

The brother’s art from beginning to end was profoundly dialogic and humanistic...They kept the faith.

Their message is people.

## **Insider/Outsider**

### **I. Opening**

Commitment to art, humanism and personal experience neither precludes nor leaves untouched the influence of received identities .

---

<sup>27</sup> Willard, Charlotte *Moses Soyer*,The World publishing Company, Cleveland p.24

<sup>28</sup> *One Hundred American Jewish Artists* (with an introduction by Louis Lozowick) YKUP Art Section 1947p.172.

The brothers were Russian-Jewish immigrants (I experience residual displacement).

## II. Russian - American

### 1

The Russian influence was weaker for Isaac than for his older brothers. (They spoke and read Russian, he did not).

Isaac came to America at 7. His Russian identity (but not his accent) faded.

In Moses and Raphael it was very strong.

Moses translated Russian poetry for fun.

Raphael, while affirming Jewish and American roots, asserted (at the height of the cold war) that his Russian heritage profoundly influenced his art.

**BLLD** Your work is known not only for the quality of the painting but for its psychological acumen.

**RS** I attribute the psychological element in my work to the fact that I have three cultures. I have the Russian culture. I have the Jewish culture, and I have the American culture 29[3]. The Russians especially are great psychologists. If you know their literature and their paintings, they always looked deeply into the so-called soul. From childhood on I read everything that my father had in his library. We studied some Hebrew when we were in Russia , but our mother tongue was Russian, and I read everything-I came here at the age of twelve and by then I had read everything that my father read: Chekhov, Gorky, Dostoevsky, Gogol , and so on, and I would call them all psychological writers. They delved very deeply into the human psyche, and I think this insight of mine into the human psyche is part of that environment, part of my childhood.

I just want to say something else. Now very often when I think of the American artists, like Edward Hopper, Charles Scheeler, or Georgia O Keefe, I call them the aristocrats of the so-called indigenous American art. When you see an exhibition of these artists, Niles Spencer and others like him, there is a lack of humanism, a

prophylactic quality about their work- I mean their houses, their clean streets, their architectural things- and even in a Hopper painting there may be one figure. It's like a desert; there are hardly any people there.

Now I am a different kind of artist. I think people are the important subject of art.

**BLLD** I can recall some of your early work, when you were also that kind of a painter, where many street scenes were painted.

**.RS.** No. I painted streets, but there were always people there. I painted, for instance, some side streets of New York City, where only the bums used to gather, and I painted them lying in the sun or in the shade. But my streets were always inhabited. I never painted just a street like, say, Charles Sheeler would paint. When he paints a factory, for instance, and he did paint factories, there was never a human being in the factory, He painted the outside of it., or the machinery of it, but never a human being. And the same thing with the other artists- and I think they are very great artists. They are always so clean and so meticulous, almost prophylactic. It is unlike the pictures I do. And I think this is how I do add something to American art, in my way. It's my addiction.

America and his art are conceived multi-culturally

## II. Jewish-American

### A. Opening

1

The brothers knew themselves as Jewish, almost as they knew that they had hands and feet.

2

Working in a factory Isaac \_ peaceable, soft spoken, not particularly athletic \_ was called a dirty Jew by a powerfully built co-worker. Isaac offered to fight him (The outcome was unexpected...The man embraced him. There were no more insults and they never fought).

It only occurs to me now \_ as an afterthought \_ to note that they (and I) were "not observant" ...Powerful Jewish connection outside received tradition is not unusual [Maxine (my wife) feels her Jewish identity so strongly that in the

chaotic immediate aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union she made a dangerous solitary pilgrimage to her grandmother's birthplace in Kaunas Lithuania .Yet her son and grandson (like me) were not Bar mitzvahed]... "Orthodox Jew" is not a synonym for Jew. A peony is not a rose. It is a flower.

## B .Autonomous Voices

### (To Daniel Soyer)

1

You say that some educated intelligent people

... resent the whole idea of calling Raphael a "Jewish artist," as if there were something wrong with being such a thing. They seem to believe that being Jewish is more limiting than being American or French or Puerto Rican or Navajo or anything else. The implication is that an artist cannot be Jewish and universal at the same time. I disagree strongly with these prejudices.

The position you describe is anti-Semitic.

Perhaps they misinterpret a reasonable, principled, non anti –Semitic, position held and asserted by many artists, including Isaac, Moses and Raphael,

Authentic artists struggle passionately for complexity and uniqueness in their work. Many resist the total identification of their art with **any** particular group identity. This principled position asserts the dignity and relative autonomy of art 30

2

An artist's resistance to the total identification of his/her art with a particular group identity does not imply that s/he denies or in any way disrespects that identity.

Here, for example, is the marvelous Alice Neel\_ much more direct than Raphael\_ asserting her identity as a woman and also "drawing the line".

**BBLD** (the interviewer) You have taken some pride in your own militant feminism

---

<sup>30</sup> In standing up for art one asserts the human right to individuality and complexity..Artists know this can be unpopular.... Artists\_ including Jews and Russians\_ have died for this.

AN I believe in feminism. I was born believing in it. My mother used to say, I don't know what you expect to do in the world, your only a girl. But if anything, that made me more anxious to do something.<sup>31</sup>

and yet

I really *have* a whole body of work now about Harlem. One of these pictures was out at the Los Angeles County Museum in an exhibit of "Four Hundred Years of Women's Art" .and what amazed me was that all the women critics respect you if you paint your own pussy as a woman's libber, but they don't have any respect for being able to see politically and appraise the third world. So nobody mentioned that I managed to even see beyond my pussy politically but I thought that was really a good thing. If they had a little more brains they should have given me credit for being able to see not the feminine world but my own world).<sup>32</sup>

In the 1930s many painters and writers "on the left", devolved into propagandists. Neel and the Soyer brothers emerged triumphantly as artists.

Isaac, Moses and Raphael took the statement "You are a Jewish artist" to mean "you are entirely and totally a Jewish artist" (i.e., as a claim that their work can be fully and exhaustively interpreted as a manifestation of their Judaism). It is this assertion, because it is untrue and because they experience it (I think with some justice) as ant-art, they rightly denied

This denial is not a denial of Jewish identity. It is a denial that they are Golem.

3

To live as a Jew it is not necessary to inhabit a real or imagined ghetto. To live freely in an open world is to speak to whom one wants as who one is.

The brothers sought to know themselves and speak out to the world.

C.Life is with People

(To Guillermo Agaze)

---

<sup>31</sup> Diamonstein, Barbaralee *Inside New York's Art world*, Rizzoli International Publications, 1979 p. 260

<sup>32</sup> Ibid p258



I recall the title of Mark Zborowski and Elisabeth Herzog's study of Shtetl culture *Life Is With People* <sup>33</sup>

For the Soyer brothers the statement "people are the important subject of art", had a resonance beyond the normal meaning of the words.

I recall your recognition of "*the unutterable sadness in the faces of the people they depict*".

and Diane Di Prima

Sometimes I'd stay while Rafael closed up the place: washed his brushes in the filthy sink, turned off the lights and the electric heater, and we would take that strange elevator together back to the street. Where the winter darkness was full of sadness. A wistfulness and grief, made somehow stronger when seen through Rafael's eyes. His sense of the essential tragedy of things. Of human life. <sup>34</sup>

Perhaps Raphael's reflection on Leonard Baskin is also a self revelation.

Baskin's art is as complex as he is, as his life is. Among other traits in it, I have been aware of what I would call a strain of Jewish lacrimosity, deep-rooted. His drawings ... recall to my mind such an intrinsically Jewish phrase as *teichen-treren-rivers of tears*.<sup>35</sup>,

I remember Isaac

Very often in painting, as in literature and poetry, the most beautiful pictures are those that tell the saddest story<sup>36</sup>

D.Resisting Distortions

. (To Martin Altman)

---

<sup>33</sup> Zborowski, Mark and Elizabeth Herzog *Life Is With People* International University Press Inc..New York New York 1952<sup>3</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Di Prima, Diane *Recollections of My Life as a Woman* Penguin Putnam IncNew York,2001.p.135

<sup>35</sup> Soyer, Raphael *Diary of an Artist* New Republic Books, Washington D.C. 1977 p. 78

<sup>36</sup> *One Hundred American Jewish Artists* (with an introduction by Louis Lozowick) YKUP Art Section 1947p.172.

It is important to distinguish between the “essential structure” of an identity and its “accidental” pathological distortions.

Here is Raphael :

:“The last time that Avrohom and Beyla came together to see an exhibition of mine was in 1933. Among the canvases was their double portrait painted a year before, somewhere in the Bronx. It shows them, not too old, but frail, in an atmosphere of melancholy foreboding, for my mother was already showing signs of her breakdown. It is emphatically not, as one of our “wise men of art”, Harold Rosenberg, expounded in a radio broadcast some time ago, when he cited this particular painting, “by one of the Soyers” as a possible example of “Jewish art a picture of an elderly couple sitting at ease after a Sabbath meal”. Nothing was father from my mind: I painted this under the spell of Degas” “Absinthe Drinkers,” and my aim was to convey not a Sabbath atmosphere but a mood of everydayness, like the gray mood in the Degas painting.

Avrohom died in 1940. I quote a line from his favorite Hebrew poet, Bialik; “*Hayah ish, v’ainenoo*” - There was a man, and is no more.”

I did not attend Avrohom’s funeral; it was my turn to visit Beyla. I tried to tell her that Avrohom had died, but could not reach her. Her eyes were lusterless, as if without irises.”(p.69 Self Revealment).

The image of “an elderly couple sitting at ease after a Sabbath meal” imposed on the eighty year old Raphael’s complex memories of Avrohom and Beyla in old age is justly experienced as a banal insensitive degradation of lived experience

I experience its banal insensitivity as an insult to Judaism.

Committed to the truth of their experience, fascinated by the mysterious reality of others the Soyfer brothers were enemies of cliché and kitsch regardless of its source.

4

To live awake in The United States now is to know in one's bones that it is an act of love and courage to oppose banal pathological distortions of traditions we honor ... To oppose banality is a defining imperative of art

### **E. An American Dream**

1

Reading about Weimar's assimilated Jews in Wolin's thoughtful challenging *Heidegger's Children* I sense commonalities, and differences between their situation and the brothers'.

One commonality is that my father and uncles \_ within the competing gravity of multiple identities\_ sometimes imagined themselves simply human (an image they passed on to me).

Yet unlike 1920s German Jews they left their homeland young for a relatively intact and (for Caucasians) open space.

Their native Russia\_ only a memory\_ could not force or threaten them.

America was born yesterday... Despite "melting pot" rhetoric, diverse potentialities coexisted, interplayed and reproduced, especially in New York.

New York Jews were immigrants among immigrants.

There are many American dreams. One is "we can have it all", local and universal, new and old: profoundly Jewish, Eastern European, patriotically American, passionately human.

### **F. Transposition: a Questioning, Faithful, Passage**

Commitment to humanism neither denies nor leaves untouched received identities.

Each received identity can authentically open from itself a dialogic path .

For Isaac, Moses and Raphael popular awareness that Judaism proceeds internally through intergenerational dialogue was transposed into art. The vision

of a chosen people embraced the human species. Art was lived as sacred humanistic speech.

In secular Judaism, the love and honor of humanity replaced the love and honor of God.

I recognize secular Judaism as one among many sensitive principled responses to the historical existence of the Jewish people

. The brothers were self- aware, faithful ,secular Jews.

## **Imaging the Other**

### I. Looking Through Gender

The Soyer brothers' psychologically sensitive humanism focused on women. There are portraits, group compositions and nudes.

They do not register the female body neutrally. Yet their nudes are not merely projections of desire.

These women do not submit, invite or resent “the artist’s gaze”. They are autonomous in their own space.

One might say, with some justice, that they are painted within love... The crucial disciplinary influence is Rembrandt.

## II. Looking Through Race

1

Ralph Ellison criticizes some white self- proclaimed champions of African-American life as actually imposing stereotypical images...I suggest that the brother’s images of “black” life are within their normal vision: I-Thou, personal.

2

There is a painting by Isaac of a young African-American woman ironing. It is freely and accurately rendered (equal balance between medium and subject). There are rectangles of shelves with wrapped and unwrapped laundry. The wrapped laundry paper glows golden ...There is an almost Venetian atmospheric beauty... She is slightly off the vertical in delicate subtle counterpoint to the surrounding rectangles. On one side clean white laundry\_ sparkling touched by light \_ is miraculously held within the composition.

The setting is geometrically structured but the young woman is not entirely contained

3

3.1

Once (to the best of my knowledge only once) a Soyler brother combined words and visual representation (as though a cartoon with a caption) to make direct, explicit propaganda.

A young white mother is holding her black baby. The words are Hebraic. They translate as, “You are to me as are the Ethiopians.”

The intended message is clear but not uncomplicated

## 3.2

Raphael asserts that all people of every race are equally valuable. (In current terms all lives matter equally.)

This affirmation of equal humanity is accompanied by an affirmation of difference. The Jew is accepted as a Jew and” the Ethiopian” as “an Ethiopian”.

The figures are not neutrally depicted... They are in Raphael’s personal style. They are set in late 20<sup>th</sup> Century New York not outside of history... Raphael personally unambiguously asserts our unity in difference

### **Section 7: The Soyer Brothers in Historical Perspective**

## **On the Art Historical Resonance of the Brothers' Work**

**(To Guillermo Agaze)**

1

Writing to you I have reached a surprising conclusion about the Soyer brothers' place in art history.

The Soyer brothers' work appears continuous with the past...At first glance they neatly fit established art historical categories. They are "traditional realists".

Yet they insist that reality is open to interpretation and that artistic tradition requires innovation.

2

Normally artistic traditions are spatially, historically and stylistically specific (e.g. Memling was along a line initiated by the Van Eycks and concluded by Gerard David. Nicholas Maes was a follower of Rembrandt)

Twentieth and twenty first century art culture is so broken and fragmented that there is no single art language unambiguously and authoritatively there for artists. We do not in the traditional sense have a culture.

. We awake from one dream to enter another (mirror in mirror). Afloat in the body of our species no space is particularly ours.

3

The Soyer brothers' tradition is all Western Renaissance influenced figurative painting. It is an artifact: an act of creative imagination. Not given. Chosen.

They feared for art's future...I remember Raphael in the optimistic 50s telling me that America was becoming a "temporary take away society" in which the very idea of art would vanish, and (before Danto... and less happily) that art would probably be displaced by criticism...Their dread was bone deep and personal.

4

The Soyer brothers in full consciousness summoned "the ancestors against chaos"...Their autonomous dialogic "traditionalism" was a strategy of desperation.

Isaac, Moses and Raphael are not minor artists in a hallucinated stasis of influence and imitation. They are not, "modest genre painters". They were sensitive to history. They recognized and responded to this crisis of art, and of humanity. Their strategy and work are integral to the history of modern art



## **Transcending Visual Art**

The Soyer brothers were born into the deepening modern struggle to preserve permanence in change, unity in diversity\_ a recognizable vital humanity \_ within extreme discontinuity and breakdown.

In this emerging reality human survival and fulfillment require dialogic mediation... Personal and shared uniqueness must be honored as human. Not only each their own, also equally each other's.

The intimate conversation of art must not be broken but deepened and expanded.

The Soyer brothers' dialogic humanistic art spoke to their time, and (whether or not anyone is listening) speaks even more crucially to ours.

## **Appendices**

**Level 1: Coding Judaism**

## Opening

1

Baskind, Heyd and, Mendelsohn interpret the Soyfer brothers as though Judaism was their predestined identity and constructing a purely Judaic art was the predestined necessary task and test they failed.

This interpretation disagrees both with the brothers' work and their repeated, private and public, verbal self-reflections

They were atheists.

They inhabited a pluralistic humanist world. Their dominant identity was artist. They interpreted art and artist dialogically and humanistically.

A humanistic orientation and commitment to personal experience does not preclude the influence of one's received identities (e.g. Jewish). It opens them to dialogue.

2

This discussion of Heyd's, Mendelsohn's and Baskind's work will draw on our attempt to place the Soyfer's orientation to Judaism in the context of their other commitments and identifications. This will require some repetition (not rewriting sections but brief reminders).

## **Reflections on *Jewish Art?* by Heyd and Mendelsohn'**

### I. Opening

Heyd and Mendelsohn's discussion of the Soyer brothers is a structure of decisive assertions.

Raphael has "contempt for Judaism". The Soyer brothers deny "the worth of the continued existence of any sort of separate Jewish world". Their art follows the communist party line. They represent pure, one-sided, universalism

A painting states that they want to dance away from Judaism. A drawing shows that Raphael's approach to Judaism shamed him before his father's memory

Few alternatives are considered. Questions are answered as soon as they are asked.

Complex crucial terms are unexamined and undefined.

To consider this work constructively is to open it to question.

### II. The Dancing Lesson

1

According to Heyd and Mendelsohn

"Reuven Rubin perceives immigration to Israel "as a liberating experience"(197)... "Rubin perceives the Jewish tradition in a positive sense, as a means of dealing with the problem of immigration and coming to terms with his roots(197)... In the case of (Raphael) Soyer

,however, one feels his desire to “dance away”, forever, from this tradition.(197)”

To jump from an image of a brother and sister dancing observed by their parents to the assertion that they are “dancing away from Judaism is projection offered as fact.

2

2.1

Heyd and Mendelsohn note that “The postures of its figures are bent, a little fearful and clumsy.” This is unquestioningly (e.g. without reflection on alternative interpretations) asserted as a negative comment on Judaism.

One counter clue is the place of the painting in Raphael’s artistic development. It was painted when he was consciously working to reject (in his terms “forget”) the stylistic gracefulness (derived from Sargent’s society portraiture) inculcated by his early training.

All of his wonderful work from this period could be described as relatively clumsy.

2.2

The young people represented are not only immigrants. They are also adolescents: a time of clumsiness, fear... openness and love.

The living family is together. No one old or young is rejected. The ancestors look down from the wall (as in Isaac’s late image of the aged brothers and their deceased parents).

Sister and brother trust and help each other. Two adolescents\_ Clumsy... perhaps frightened\_ learn together to dance (i.e. learn graceful movement).

3

Hoyt and Mendelsohn were not the first to criticize Raphael as inadequately “positive”.

Left- wing critics did not respond positively to Soyers’s work. In a review of his solo exhibition in 1935 a critic for the *New Masses*

found that his ‘rotting men’ and flop house scenes did not “constitute a healthy tendency in revolutionary painting.” The critic wanted a more vigorous and positive statement.

The brothers’ complex conflicted reactions to their life as new immigrants included moments of fear, experienced clumsiness, and loneliness. The artist qua artist has no obligation to falsify and sweeten his/her experiences and images to fit pre-established agendas.

One can, as in Jacob Lawrence’s migration series and Raphael’s The Dancing Lesson, accept the complex reality of a peoples’ experience without detesting it or them

### **III. Following the Communist Art Line?**

1

Here are Heyd and Mendelsohn

Like many members of their generation-immigrants or first generation American intellectuals reaching maturity in the 1930s - the Soyers identified with the left. Both Raphael and Moses were what came to be known as “fellow travelers”-highly critical of American capitalism, receptive to the great Soviet “experiment”, willing to cooperate with the American communist party if not actually to join it. Moses was for a time the art editor of the procommunist intellectual journal New Masses<sup>37</sup>.

“radicalism was associated with a desire not only to change the “reactionary” Jewish ghetto of their parents but, it would seem, with a denial of the worth of the continued existence of any sort of separate Jewish world (200”)

“The Soyers wished to play a role in building a new rational, secular world in which religious and ethnic differences would be minimized, perhaps even eliminated, along with the prejudices these differences engendered.” (200)

---

<sup>37</sup> M. Heyd and Ezra mendelsohn Jewish Art?: The Case of the Soyer Brothers in Jewish Art(1993-94) P.200

Heyd and Mendelsohn do not accuse the Soyer brothers of extreme antisemitism ( i.e. wanting “the Jewish world” destroyed and all other human variations preserved) .They assert that the communist “ art-line” demands and thus the Soyers’ work embodies pure one sided universalism.

2

Were the Soyer brothers politically sympathetic to Communism?

Yes, Raphael and Moses, at least for a while.

I never heard Isaac express sympathy for Communism.I believe that he was “A New Deal Democrat”. A possible influence was my maternal grandfather Samuel Borkson, a house painter and union organizer, who supported the AFL and it’s leader Samuel Gompers.

3

Is the brothers’ art a direct expression of the Communist art line? As discussed earlier, their paintings, their words and reports by close observers, disconfirm this assertion. Here, again, is David.

Many of Moses friends and colleagues were called social realists, and some classified Moses (and Raphael and Isaac Soyer) with this group. But in his paintings were no cops beating strikers, no fat capitalists in top hats, no lynched Negroes, no Saccos, Vanzettis or Tom Mooneys. There was just “the message of people”, and since it was the depression, this was a message of people in the depression darkly painted and somber, a heavy breasted black woman leaning out of a tenement window, a seamstress, tired dancers, men of the waterfront David Soyer p.11)

Heyd and Mendelsohn do not offer counter evidence. Here again unsupported opinion is projected as fact.

#### IV. Humanism Revisited: Notes on Universalism and Particularism

1

“Avrom Sho’er and his son Raphael represent two diametrically opposed positions within the Jewish world-particularistic Judaism on the one hand and universalism on the other (210)”

2



## 2.1

There is little examination of crucial notions

The contextually required notion is not universal and particular in general but in their direct human relevance, human universal and particular.

## 2.2

Human universal refers to generic unmodified humanity. It excludes all modifying categories (e.g. male/ female, young/ old, black/ white, Christian/ Hindu/ Moslem/ Jew/ atheist), and relationships (e.g. son, father, stranger).

Human particular refers to all that the notion of human universal abstracts out and disregards.

We briefly examine these categories foregrounding aesthetic relevance

## 2.3

Both particularistic and Universalist assert one sided purification.... Both are pathological.

Even surface examination strongly suggests natural interdependence between the human universal and the human particular.. “Humanity is such that to lose the individual in the species would destroy the species.

## 3. Human Universalism in it’s aesthetic/ stylistic relevance

### 3.1

Did the Soyer brothers create an art of one sided universalism? What would a purely universalist painting look like?

### 3.2

How does the notion of the human universal translate into the history of visual images? It would be generic<sup>9</sup> [Every style (except perhaps photo realism and “social realism”) can respond to intense personal vision and thus escape from cliché into art].

Academic (i.e generic) neoclassicism (.not for example David or Ingres) would represent the human universal through a received tradition of “noble” “poetic” images and setting ...Color and texture were suppressed as idiosyncratically emotional. Contemporary settings were repressed as vulgar.

### 3.3

Social realism is the normal style of visual representation where communism dominates. Personal and group uniqueness is explicitly repressed. Experienced complexity is wiped away by the illusion that, as the glorious revolution was achieved, the world is healed or healing.

Where (as in The United States) communism is in opposition the propagandistic manipulation of clichéd cartoonish caricatured images dominates.

### 3.4

In photorealism the sensitive inner life of art is directly invaded by mechanical reproduction.

### 3.5

Perhaps the generic “non- objective” tendency (not for example Kandinsky, Miro, Pollock, Styll, Baziotes and Raphael’s friend Gorky) is the closest recent approximation of one-sided visual human universalism: blue as blue and curve as curve for everyone alike...Geometrically modelled designs seem most relevant to the drive for human-universal invariant meaning. Yet I suggest that the generic gestural abstract expressionist brush stroke can signify excitement qua excitement as a human universal

Communist and nonobjective approaches claimed hegemony over visual art.

### 3.6

The Soyer brothers opposed all visual art variations on pure universalism. They did not attempt to revive neoclassicist insistence on mythical themes and settings, super human actors, smooth surface, grand gestures and restrained color. They passionately opposed limiting visual art to nonfigurative abstraction or photorealism or social realism or cartoonish propaganda.

## **Raphael Soyer: and the Search for Modern Jewish Art**

### **I. Raphael's One and Two**

Baskin's narrative displays two Raphaels.

Raphael One, manipulative, fame obsessed, ambitious and calculating, is introduced as the curtain goes up and dominates "the play"... Almost always "Soyer" summons Raphael One

Raphael Two is socially concerned, kind, altruistic and motivated to restore the world. Raphael Two is usually summoned by "Jew" and "Jewish."

### **II. Analysing "Soyer"**

One cannot compare the portrait to the person unless we see it "in its own terms".

Who is Baskin's Raphael Soyer (in our interpretation Raphael Soyer 1)? What is his "function" in her narrative? How does she animate him?

Baskin begins with the common assumption that Raphael's art is relevant to Judaism. She might have questioned this assumption through an empirical exploration of his work's reception. She might have sought and traced the Jewish thread in the complex tapestry of Raphael's art... There were many interesting open questions.

. She does not begin with a question but with a conclusion. She asserts that Raphael denied the Jewish relevance and resonance of his work. ..She goes beyond the artist to the man. Raphael went "to great lengths to conceal his heritage"<sup>38</sup> and,

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid p.4

“never willingly discusses his ethnic background overtly”<sup>39</sup> ... Baskind appears as the psycho therapist of Raphael’s ghost.

...the longer I have been immersed in Soyer's art and life, the more I have come to believe that were the artist still alive he might even be pleased with this book. For while I look at his work and describe the Jewish qualities I see encoded within his canvases, prints, and watercolors, I do so with a fair and probing eye that might have helped Soyer more honestly assess his motives. I am not presuming that I know Soyer better than he knew himself, only suggesting that perhaps my insights might have liberated Soyer from the constraints of personality and the promotion of public image that he so desperately tried to perpetuate throughout his life. <sup>40</sup>

“Ever mindful of his public image, Soyer did not want his art.... to be affiliated with Judaism in any way”<sup>41</sup>

## 2

The common place that Raphael’s work is relevant to Judaism becomes a controversial discovery.

Baskind’s “Soyer” is a walking pathology Her book becomes an original exploration of false consciousness, betrayal and bad faith.

## 3

Baskind’s Soyer lied easily and habitually in order to escape imagined dangers, “The repercussions (real and perceived) of being a Jew in America were one important reason why Soyer tried to hide his stigma”<sup>42</sup>... He was a cunning manipulator of disguise and indirection.

...it is possible Soyer conceived New York painter as signaling Jewish to those to whom the label might have mattered and concealing his background to those who might understand his heritage as a negative. <sup>43</sup>(p.50)

## 4

---

<sup>39</sup> Idem

<sup>40</sup> Ibid p.5

<sup>41</sup> Ibid p.1

<sup>42</sup> Ibid p.33

<sup>43</sup> Ibid p.50

No one dimensional character is believable<sup>44</sup>.

Baskind's Soyer is tempted by a ghost of authenticity towards a masked, good for business, Jewishness,

For an artist who played the success game, the moniker "New York Painter" was a clever way for Soyer to both assert and negate his Jewishness in the art world of 1920s America and as a compromise for himself as a man who wanted to somehow survive as both a Jew and an American <sup>45</sup>

5

5.1

Theoretical fragments are routinely juxtaposed to fragments of biography and projected onto Raphael.

Goffman continues, covering "is an important aspect of the 'assimilative' techniques employed by members of minority ethnic groups; the intent behind such devices as change in name and change in nose shape is not solely to pass, but also to restrict the way in which a known-about attribute obtrudes itself into the center of attention, for obtrusiveness increases the difficulty of maintaining easeful inattention regarding the stigma".... Just as the young Soyer attempted to disguise his verbal stigma, a foreign accent, he also tried to restrict or distract his viewer from applying, or even knowing, what he may have viewed as the most overt stigma of the Jews-the label "Jewish"<sup>46</sup>

Simmel argues that to cope with the discontinuities in the city, the metropolitan inhabitant "develops an organ protecting him against the threatening currents and discrepancies of his external environment which would up root him. He reacts with his head instead of his heart"...Soyers heart may have told him to hold on to his Jewishness in a more overt and tangible way. But Soyer was thinking with his head-his least sensitive organ <sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Even Shylock had a (narrow, misdirected) commitment to justice, and Fagin a (twisted.) playfulness.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid p.51

<sup>46</sup> Ibid p.31

<sup>47</sup> Ibidp.35

Misapplied sociological generalizations merge with clichés of popular culture and banal fiction.

## 5.2

Baskind's portrait fits diverse traditional stereotypes and expectations.

It synthesizes two stock characters, the unprincipled opportunistic, unscrupulous social climbing Jew and the timid frightened, lost and rootless Jew.

It is sentimental. Harsh outlines are “modulated with schmaltz”. . . Half-forgotten memories of early youth conjure residues of piety and regret within this frightened liars hardened mind (the organ he unfortunately thinks with):

By choosing the title “New York painter”, Soyer . . . found a designation that did not negate his heritage completely- which would likely have offended his observant mother and father”<sup>48</sup>

... Yet her introduction asserts an incomplete redemption.

### III. The Plot Thickens

#### 1

There is a bittersweet ending. Her Soyer \_at the end-after years of fame, honors and financial reward as a Jewish artist\_ is almost brave enough to present himself as Jewish.

Although “Soyer” denies his Judaism for practical advantage he can't entirely escape it. As he ages there is increasing yet never entirely complete acceptance of Judaism. We know that redemption was not complete because it would have required Baskind's presence “perhaps my insights might have liberated Soyer from the constraints of personality and the promotion of public image that he so desperately tried to perpetuate throughout his life”<sup>49</sup>

### IV. Challenging the Image

Baskind's Raphael , a manipulative, fame obsessed, ambitious and calculating careerist, partially redeemed by Judaism is not the person I and others knew...I do not find him in his art, actions or words.

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid p.51

<sup>49</sup> Ibid p,5

Alternative interpretations (e.g. that Raphael was a consistent, principled humanist) are neither stated nor engaged.

The real Raphael would hate the character she created

. I invite those who knew Raphael to join in the discussion.

V.Baskind,Singer, Soyer

## 1.Opening

**( To Martin Altman)**

In an interview, Raphael correctly rejects designation as “the Isaac Bashevis Singer of the painting world”<sup>50</sup>. The label\_ with its inability to distinguish one Jew from another\_ verges on anti- Semitism (almost as though one identified Thelonious Monk as the musical Joe Louis).

## 2.Questioning Process

**(To Daniel Soyer)**

### 1

Let’s look at a crucial slice of Baskind’s process slowly piece by piece.

There is an event. Raphael in an interview was surprised by and denied identification as “the Isaac Bashevis Singer of painting”. The natural question is to ask is “What does this mean?”. The reasonable process is to consider alternatives

Baskind’s chosen interpretation does not follow from the event but is rhetorically imposed upon it. The mind is made up... The context of judgement presupposes the outcome.

Her first words are, “If I try to be like him, who will be like me? —Yiddish proverb”. Raphael is not yet explicitly identified as such a masked outer directed and self-betraying person. Yet the innuendo is clear.

The second statement is an assertion “Raphael Soyer did not want to be known as a Jewish artist.”

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid p.367

Only after the context of interpretation and favored conclusion is hammered in is the event introduced.

“In an interview tape-recorded in the late 1970s, art historian Barbaralee Diamonstein and the then eighty-year-old Soyer shared the following exchange:

BD: Raphael Soyer is one of America's most respected realist painters, whose inspiration for over sixty years has been the streets of New York. Some call him the Isaac Bashevis Singer of the painting world... Did I see a quizzical response to that introduction, Mr. Soyer?

RS: Yes. This is the first time that I was called the Isaac Bashevis Singer of painting, and I really don't think there is any similarity or any relationship at all. I always was a nonparochial painter, and I painted only what I saw in my neighborhood in New York City, which I call my country rather than my city.

The tiny, white-haired artist sputtered and shuffled his feet some more when Diamonstein responded, "Actually several critics have referred to you that way." "Did they?" he hastily replied, "Well, I don't think too much of critics." [1] ( Is there a subliminal Rumpelstiltskin suggestion in Baskind's image of Raphael in motion? ...I saw a video of the interview and would not describe him as sputtering and shuffling his feet (the eye of the beholder?)\_ He was white haired and slight].

Baskind then reframes Raphael's statement with a re-assertion.

“Soyer did not want his art, an art almost exclusively dedicated to realistic representations of the human condition, to be affiliated with Judaism in any way.

## **VI .Exploring Interpretations**

**(to Daniel Soyer)**

1

Let's look at Raphael's rejection of identification as “the Isaac Bashevis Singer of the painting world” ... Artists normally resist identification with admired artists they do not basically resemble,

I love Sargent's paintings. But if someone called me the 21 st Century Sargent I would forcefully deny it.

Baldwin respected Wright. Yet he protested fiercely and correctly when identified as the new Wright... Would you assert that Baldwin forgot or betrayed his “blackness”?

2



Raphael moves from discussing his decision to illustrate Singer to affirming his own “realism”.

“Singer’s writings fascinate me. You can’t tell where the reality ends and the fantasy begins. I never collaborated with a writer before and am not an illustrator, but when Singer asked me to do it, I could not refuse...I was soon drawn into Singer’s world.

I have held back from surrendering to my imagination since I was a child in Russia... Even today I don’t trust myself without a model. I know how to draw the human figure from memory, yet I don’t do it. I need to get the individual facts down as I see them, and for this I must have a model.<sup>51</sup>.

Raphael was a principled realist... There are wonderful descriptions of “the everyday” in Singer, yet fantasy is central. (Perhaps Chagall was the Isaac Bashevis Singer of painting)...There are other differences (e.g. Raphael paints contemporary life. Singer normally wrote about the past.).

### **(to Daniel Soyler)**

The fact that Raphael and Singer are extremely different is an adequate explanation for Raphael’s denial that they are essentially identical.

Raphael was obsessively focused on precise nuanced accurate distinctions (One might reasonably compare him in this to Frost, perhaps even to Flaubert). He was hyper sensitive to misinterpretation.

When one is misidentified with an artist from one’s own “minority group” normal discomfort is heightened by suspicions of prejudice.

### Reflections

1

Is the image of Raphael that passes into history important only to those who love him ? No.

---

<sup>51</sup> Berman, Avis *Raphael Souer at 80* Art News, December 1979p. 40

2

The living have a duty to challenge misrepresentations of the dead...This duty is absolute not instrumental. Yet the mind breathes memory as the lungs breathe air.

3

Misinterpretation of the artist can distort reception of the work.

4

What one does others may hope to achieve...We follow paths our ancestors opened ( as the Soyer brothers followed Rembrandt, Goya and Corot: as, writing this now, I follow them).The image of a person that survives his/ her death is relevant to the interpretation of all the groups , projects and activities s/he engaged.

The reality of Isaac, Moses and Raphael's lives demonstrate that immigrants need not be trapped in or deny their historical identities...They can synthesize ... They can create.

## **VII. A Methodological Reflection**

**(to Daniel Soyer)**

1

In a previous letter you object to my labeling Baskind's work "mean spirited". You also state that her project is legitimate, but her scholarship flawed.

I apologize for "mean spirited" It is impolite and inaccurate. The term implies intent and I don't know her motives... I also find "flawed scholarship" inaccurate.

I sense distinctions worth examining. Best not leave language less sensitive than we found it...Let's put Baskind aside to briefly consider species of intellectual error

My first intuition is that x is “bad scholarship” if it is factually incorrect. (e.g. in Di Prima’s wonderful description of her relationship to Raphael she calls him Rafael and incorrectly refers to him as a member of “The ash can school”).

3

3.1

Is there a legitimate sense in which a text can be designated “mean spirited” without reference to its creator’s intent? Wrong question.

Can a notion be derived from mean spirited that is distinct from “flawed scholarship” and can be applied to texts without reference to its creator’s intent?

I imagine an extreme.

There is a text on landsman organizations. It correctly notes some internal relations and functions. The author discovered and correctly reproduces notes by participants in general membership meetings.

He also asserts that they were “fronts” for *The International Jewish Conspiracy*

Not all misunderstandings are equal.

3.2

I am interested in the methodology of accurate distinction, definition and labeling. Yet best reserve this for another time.

For present purposes I’ll just grab words to mark crucial distinctions. “Ideology” opens too many complications... I suggest distinguishing “errors of detail” from “structural malformations”. Structural malformations distort and misrepresent.

To help sensitive communication lets limit “faulty scholarship” to errors of detail”.

## A. Socratic History

1

The brothers engaged color, line, shading and composition. I seek an appropriate “soulful formal language” to interpret their art life.

I choose “Socratic history”, a species of reason.

Reason favors transparency. Processes should be worked through as procedures. Crucial notions should be defined (Error is preferable to evasion).

History is Socratic in so far as, choosing the particular, it remembers and honors the universal.

2

2.1

A normal Socratic exploration foregrounds a single human-universal project (e.g. love, justice).

A human particular (e.g. person, situation, product) is a unique constellation at an intersection of human universal projects. Thus each historical Socratic inquiry requires explicitly questioning many, perhaps all, human universal projects.

2.2

In human existence particular and universal interpenetrate... To begin by questioning human-universal patterns (e.g. deviance, dialogue) is sociological-psychological. To begin by questioning the particular (e.g. who were the Soyer brothers?) is historical... Not either/or. Shifting focus, more or less.

*A Visual Dialogue* explores universal notions (e.g. art, dialogue, discipline, identity) through the Soyer brothers and the Soyer brothers through universal notions

## B. Historical Justice

The living have a duty to challenge misrepresentations of the dead.

There are historical distortions that spread infection (e.g. misinterpretation of Van Gogh's thoughtful paintings as dictated by his madness distorts our understanding of art, and of the relationship between reason and imagination).

### III Identification: A Crucial Notion

1

Identification suggests a potentiality for common cause (bridging I and we). It is influenced by institutional maps and markers. Yet there are normally open spaces, creative potentialities and room for negotiation [ In the United States 2015 was more open to assignment negotiation than the 1930s... Yet there were signs of backlash (Weimar shadows)].

The term "identity" asserts extreme identification

### Appendices 3: Hearing the Visual Artist?

(to Maxine Kern)

1

Raphael Soyer ...

"critics are not the only judges of art, and

museums are not the only judges ... the artists themselves have an idea of what art is”.

2

In so far as discourse is reasonable the social status of participants (including academic certification) is irrelevant to the reception of their ideas. Potentially distorting prejudices should be examined and critiqued.

II

A

1

Samantha Baskind:

Harold Rosenberg cautions the art critic who consults an artist's own writings: "Statements by artists, though frequently of great value to criticism, are to be regarded with suspicion and never taken as the last word as to fact or attitude." [20].

I assume we agree that all people and testimonies are limited and fallible: that all sources should be questioned and none should be assumed to be the final word...I wonder if there ever is “a final word”

When you name a particular group the meaning shifts. You implicate that group as suspect...You call them out as an exception.

2

Rosenberg and Baskind write as though the reader would **not** find their put downs controversial...Perhaps we can question this through variations

Statements by physicists, philosophers and historians though frequently of great value to criticism, are to be regarded with suspicion and never taken as the last word as to fact or attitude”

I suggest that in academia the second proposition would normally be greeted more skeptically than the first.

Statements by women though frequently of great value to criticism, are to be regarded with suspicion and never taken as the last word as to fact or attitude”

Statements by African Americans\_ and Jews\_ though frequently of great value to criticism, are to be regarded with suspicion and never taken as the last word as to fact or attitude

## B

In many groups and contexts there is an image of the artist as normally\_ even necessarily \_unreflective.

I suggest that this image is an ancient self-interested prejudice of professional critics that supports and is supported by bias against the personal (Our speech about ourselves is shadowed by purifying rituals of depersonalization: the slightest acquaintance with “social science” reveals a life and death \_losing\_ struggle between reason and the exorcism of personal voice.)

I suggest that the application of these prejudices to visual art is enhanced by an ancient bias against “hand labor”

## II

In this story people who are “ put down” from all sides creatively resist and claim their own through “ put- on”.

“Writers who become “authorities” on Jazz leave themselves open to put-ons. Charles Edward Smith had begun to develop a reputation in the literary world as a jazz authority and Eddie Condon decided it was time to bring back down to earth. Art Hodes tells the story.

We all hung out at Julius’s Bar and Grill which was around the corner from Nick’s, That’s where we got our mail, it was our country store, it was our library, this was it. Eddie Condon would wheel his baby up and leave her outside in the buggy. This is where we lived, part of the day

Charles Edward hung out there and was getting to be a pain in the ass to Eddie. Eddie got a good mind, so he started thinking, “What are you going to do about it?” So, he set this up.

Smith came in one night, and Eddie introduced him to this guy who looked like a Russian. A little like Kenny Davern with a moustache. And a little hat.

“This is Vladimir Steenevitch, a great Russian jazz critic. And this is Charles Edward Smith, a great American writer, jazz critic.”

“Oh glad to know you.”

And the Russian says to him, "What do you play"  
And smith says, "I don't play anything". And the Russian looks at him and says,  
"You wrote a book on jazz music and you don't play an instrument? In Russia we shoot you!"  
Smith got the point after a while because the whole bar broke up. From then on, we got along very well with him.'(Crow, Bill *Jazz Anecdotes*, p174.)

Simple surface. Complex undertones. One pattern, Smith recognized that people whose music he loved were also listening to him: he heard himself through them and changed.

### III

#### A

I read "fact or attitude" as including artists' disciplinary interpretation of art. I find this disregard explicit in an assertion by the philosopher Hans-George Gadamer

Here is Gadamer,

First, we should not take the self-interpretation of the artist too seriously. We are not speaking against artists when we say this, but rather for them, since the claim implies that they must create in their own artistic medium. If the artists could express what he has to say in words, he would not wish to create and would not need to give form to his ideas. At the same time it is inevitable that language, the universal communicative element that supports and holds together our human community, constantly awakens in the artist a need to communicate and express himself in words, to interpret what he is doing, and to explain himself to others. And, as we might expect, the artist thereby comes to depend upon those who specialize in interpretation, such as aestheticians, philosopher, and all kinds of writers on art ...I would like to turn as a matter of principle to the tradition of aesthetic thought accomplished by philosophy (Gadamer, Hans-Georg *The relevance of the Beautiful* (edited



by Robert Bernasconi) Cambridge University Press, Cambridge  
1986 p.93

The strength of the myth that visual artists are necessarily unreflective is demonstrated by its influence on Gadamer, normally a thoughtful dialogic scholar .

**B**

**(to Maxine Kern)**

1

I suggest that it would be reasonable to consult “native speakers” and that it is not wise to legislate where one refuses, on principle, to consult.

Would artists really thank him for not listening?...I doubt that native consent actually matters...Gadamer will help us (interpret our life for us outside shared dialogue) whether we like it or not.

2

To be human is to specialize in interpretation...Art is a species of interpretation

3

I am a painter.

As a matter of principle, I reach to open dialogue

I will directly respond to Gadamer’s analysis and present disciplinary reflections by two historically significant visual artists.

**C**

**(to Maxine Kern)**

1

The inwardness of animals is non-symbolic. In human inwardness symbolic and pre-symbolic awareness interpenetrate...Human sight, touch and sound is each an interplay of meanings with an infinite potentiality for communication.

2

2.1

I am not sure whether Gadamer and I agree on the precise meaning and boundaries of language...Let's for the moment grab the phrase "symbolic media" and defer the question of whether all symbolic media are in the same sense, language.

The human visual field is a symbolic medium. All art (painting no less than poetry) is symbolic communication. Thus visual art is within and crucial to "the universal communicative element that supports and holds together our human community"

## 2.2

Visual communication is self-aware and self-critical (e.g. Raphael's paintings reflect and comment on the art of Rembrandt and Degas. His work also comments on and builds upon itself.). A visual artist's "need to communicate and express himself"... to interpret what he is doing, and to explain himself to others" does not require words. It can be done in paint.

## 3

The artistic interplay of visual images and word images (their natural irrepressible cross fertilization) suggests that they are of one species. Usually the visual is more receptive (e.g. Botticelli on the divine Comedy). ..Yet the interplay is in principle reciprocal [Recently two one act plays were (in my opinion successfully) inspired by my paintings].

## 5

### 5.1

Gadamer's remark that, "If the artist could express what he has to say in words, he would not wish to create and would not need to give form to his ideas." implies that word is first... Is it clear that word historically preceded expressive image and/ or that it is now inevitably the first expressive choice?

### 5.2

Writing developed historically from stylized representational images.

Gesture ( i.e. visual shape in and through motion) and pure patterned sound proceeded or accompanied word into symbolic resonance.

### 5.3

In personal creativity visual expression need not signal verbal failure. Paint may be a preference... There are moods and subjects (e.g. faces and landscapes, dawn and midnight) that cry out for paint.

Some, including Michelangelo and Blake, chose both visual image and word.

**To Maxine Kern)**

1

Thank you for your comments and question.

2

Maxine

*“ I agree that the human ”visual world” is symbolically meaningful.. I agree that paintings “speak” complexly and that their testimony is crucial in questioning visual art.*

*Are visual artists’ words as revelatory as their paintings?*

Avron

1

Perhaps not quite equally, but crucially.,”

2

2.2

I never met a disciplined visual artist who was verbally inarticulate about the discipline they live (have you?)...Do you agree that most useful writing on theater has been by practitioners?

3

I love hearing creators speak in words or paint (in any way they wish) of how and why they create.

Hand work need not silence thought or speech.

**(To Maxine Kern)**

Maxine

*It is my experience that the individual artist transcends his/her person in the process of making art. The transcendence and transformation, the synthesis of imagination and logic, in the seminal art work, is diminished by the need to analyze and report as an external viewer rather than an active creator.*

Avron

I

1

Historical outcomes are not either/or, always residues and shadows...always ambiguities. Fact is haunted by repressed potentialities.

I experience (or should I say I am?) a complex interplay of interpenetrating sounds, colors, scents, symbols, shaped by and shaping innumerable projects in and through infinite situations.

2

I have many reactions to your helpful comments.

I am not asserting and do not believe that we are perfectly transparent to ourselves. A self speaking about a work of art can misunderstand the self who created it, or can mistranslate from paint to word, even if they share a mouth and hands.

3

I am not asserting that the artist should control artistic interpretation. I am fighting for inclusion.

I do not accept that professional philosophers should control Socratic questioning.

There is no monopoly on self- knowledge as there is no monopoly on love... Socratic Reason flourishes in unprejudiced dialogue.

The potentiality for self -knowledge is omnipresent in our life together and apart as stars in the Milky Way.

5

I propose that the final authority is not any person or perspective. It is reasonable (e.g. unprejudiced) dialogue.

D

1

Van Gogh is an exemplary ancestor who questioned, in both paint and words, taken-for-granted assumptions about visual art

A man's head or a woman's head, well observed and at leisure, is divinely beautiful, isn't it? Well, one loses that general harmony of tones in nature by painfully exact imitation; one keeps it by recreating in a parallel color scale which may not be exactly, or even far from exactly, like the model.

Always intelligently making use of the beautiful tones which the colors form of their own accord when one breaks them on the palette, I repeat - starting from one's palette, from one's knowledge of the harmony of colors is quite different from following nature mechanically and servilely. (1989, Letter 429, p. 253-254)

I have tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green.

I should like to paint the portrait of an artist friend, a man who dreams great dreams, who works as the nightingale sings...to finish it I am now going to be the arbitrary colorist. I exaggerate the fairness of the hair, I even get to orange tones, chromes and pale citron-yellow.

Behind the head, instead of painting the ordinary wall of the mean room, I paint infinity, a plain background of the richest, intensest blue I can contrive, and by this simple combination of the bright head against the rich blue background, I get a mysterious effect, like a star in the depth of an azure sky. (1989, Letter 520, p. 313)

## Here is Kokoschka on Van Gogh

...no new elements seem to justify the revolutionary change, his subjects were not different from the flowers, portraits and landscapes chosen by the impressionists, from whom he had taken over. The next thing the connoisseurs, picking busily around their barnyard of traditional art, were to ask was, why, for instance, the art of the impressionists was still impressively compact, whereas Van Gogh's art does not give them this feeling of security any longer. The masterly constructed painting art of a Manet, Monet, Sisley, Pissarro and Renoir could be taken to pieces, studied in detail and analyzed in accordance with patched – up art theories drawn from classic art by experts of varying merit and reputation. These experts had the advantage of belonging to a world, whose general structure of mind depended on the spiritual heritage of the eighteenth century, just like their favorite painters, whose work they classified according to their favorite method. The eighteenth Century was neoclassicist....Alas, such a world has become alien from us, the fact alone of two world wars, with all their tragic implications for the common man, like transfer and expropriation of whole nations contains clear indications, that no illusions are possible about the changed reality. In a world of impropriety, human nature has substantially altered from progress to something close to regression. Millions of slave worker still in camps!...'

As I said before, Van Gogh's originality must not be looked for in the objective content of his painting, rather in his strange ability to catch the passing thoughts of *malaise de la vie* of our time. The sunflower, the basket of potatoes, the unavoidable self-portrait, undulating cypresses, and distant views gained under his brush a tension and finality as if, with the upsurge of the mechanical age, the last breath of everyday life would have come to an end. (Kokoschka, Oscar (1953) in p.p.101-102 Victor H.Miesel (ed.) *Voices of German Expressionism* Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1970

## End Notes

1. I refer to Isaac Moses and Raphael as “the Soyer brothers.” There is another brother, Israel, and two sisters, Fanny and Rebecca. They were not visual artist.
2. The terminal illness of institutionalized communism was, whatever else it also was, an infection by repressed poetry
3. ACA Gallery.
4. Several times when models disappointed Isaac asked me to pose for students. I was 9 or 10. I remember saying “You are merely artists. I am nature. You have to imitate me”... I plan an essay on the relationship between artist and model.
5. They are present in her words as people are present on a fine Soyer painting.... Di Prima, now over 70, still under appreciated, was and remains a wonderful poet, memoirists and “art activist”.
6. Moses and Raphael as employers were helpful and supportive in the survival ecology of many young New York artists.
7. In standing up for art one asserts the human right to individuality and complexity. Artists know this can be unpopular.... Artists \_including Jews and Russians\_ have died for this.
8. Jews and Russians-including artists\_ have died for this.
9. What some contemporary authors designate “ modern” I term industrial and post- industrial. I find the traditional association of “modernity’ with an artistic and philosophical movement (Spender) too resonant to disregard.
10. During a World War II a German who turned against Germany on humanistic principles behaved honorably.
11. Even Shylock had a (narrow, misdirected) commitment to justice, and Fagin a (twisted) playfulness).
12. Pure dialogue is “an ideal type”. The pure case is outside experience. It will be sufficient if we find that the brother’s work and art life is predominantly dialogic.

## Selected Bibliography

A.C.A Gallery, *Moses Soyer Personal Relations*, Introduction David Soyer,  
Forward Jeffrey Bergen, New York, 1972



Bagell, Matthew, *Jewish Art in America*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc, USA, and United Kingdom, 2007

Baskin, Samantha, *Examining Baskind's Raphael Soyer: and the Search for Modern Jewish Art*, University of North Carolina Press, 2016

Berman, Avis *Raphael Soyer at 80 Art News*, December 1979

Collingwood, R. G., Edited by Boucher and Smith, Oxford Univeristy Press, 2013

Crow, Bill *Jazz Anecdotes*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1990

Diamonstein, Barbaralee *Inside New York's Art World*, Rizzoli International Publications, 1979

Di Prima, Diane *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, Penguin Putnam Inc., New York, 2001.

*From Max Weber, Essays in Sociology, The Social Psychology of the World Religions*, Oxford Press, New York, 1976

(Gadamer, Hans-Georg *The Relevance of the Beautiful* (edited by Robert Bernasconi)  
Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1986 p.93

Gasset, Ortega Y. *The Dehumanization of Art And Other Writings On Art and Culture*, Doubleday and Company Inc., Garden City, 1956

Goodrich, Lloyd, *Raphael Soyer*, Whitey Museum of American Art, New York, 1967

*One Hundred American Jewish Artists*, introduction by Louis Lozowick,  
YKUP Art Section, 1947

Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit*, Lippincott, Philadelphia, 1923

M. Heyd and Ezra Mendelsohn *Jewish Art? The Case of the Soyer Brothers in Jewish Art*, 1993-94

Heyd, *Mutual Reflections*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 1999

Kampf, Avram, *Jewish Experience in the Art of the Twentieth Century*, Bergin and Garvey, Mass. 1984

Kuspit, Donald, *Redeeming Art: Critical Reveries*, Allwort Press, NY, NY, 2000

Mendes, Flohr , Reinhartz, *The Jew in the Modern World*, Oxford University Press, 1995

*Painters and Sculptors of Modern America*, Introduction by Monroe Wheeler, Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1942

Rosenberg, Harold, *The Dedefinition of Art*, Collier Books Macmillan, New York, 1972

Stanberg, Susan, *Interview with Raphael Soyer*, Smithsonian and PBS, 1982

Shahn, Ben, *The Shape of Content*, Harvard University Press, 1992

Spender, Stephen, *The Struggle of the Modern*, University of Ca. Press, California, 1963

Soussloff, Catherine, Editor, *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History*, University of California Press, 1999

Soyer, Avron *A Dream of Reason*, 2007, published online, Avronsoyer.com 2016

Soyer, Avron *Living Art*, 2006 published online Avronsoyer.com, 2016

Soyer, David *Memoir in* , Alfred Weber *Moses Soyer A,S*, Barnes and Co, New York, 1970

Soyer, Raphael *Diary of an Artist*, New Republic Books, Washington D.C.  
1977

Soyer, Raphael, *Self-Revelment A Memoir*, Random House, New York, 1969

Versenyi, Laszlo, *Socratic Humanism*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1963

Weber, Alfred, *Moses Soyer, Memoir by David Soyer,*, Barnes and Co, New  
York, 1970

Werner, Alfred, *Moses Soyer*, Barnes and Company, New Jersey, 1970

Willard, Charlotte, *Moses Soyer*, The World publishing Company,

Wolin, R, *Heidiggers Children*, Princeton Press, Cleveland, 1962

---