

A brush with genius: 29

John Lynch on Kitaj's Murder of Rosa Luxemburg

THIS picture was painted in 1960 and exhibited at Kitaj's first solo show in 1963. It was the centre-piece of a show that made his reputation as a painter.

Painted in dark brown, the focus of the painting is the disfigured body of Luxemburg. In the bottom left-hand corner is a collaged piece of paper, with the title of the painting on it in Kitaj's "copper-plate" handwriting. In the top right, a more substantial piece of handwritten text is collaged. This overlays a crude outline of a hand and a gun/penis shape with a dotted line pointing to the head of the prostrate figure.

Various elements of the picture from the non-perspectival space to the free-floating symbols reminiscent of Surrealism place it in stark contrast to the standard memorials to socialist heroes. By placing a textual account of her death (a quotation from Paul Frolich's biography of Luxemburg) on to the canvas, the viewer is forced from contemplation to reading, an effect furthered by Kitaj placing "footnotes", next to the exhibited canvas, a practice he has since made much of. The text serves as an explanation to the choice of images, and its inclusion on the canvas raises the question of whether it is a constitutive part of the whole or is its role a supplementary one?

While not the most graceful of pictures, this is appropriate for the representation of the tragic murder of Luxemburg at the hands of crude and vicious men who would later become the Nazi's footsoldiers. Sur-



rounded by symbols of German nationalism, the painting is a deconstruction of what nationalism ultimately entails, which has an especially strong resonance today. Its fragmentary quality is a denial of a single coherent relationship between memory and meaning, rather

a reminder of the contested and second-hand nature of all such representations.

Kitaj's *The Murder of Rosa Luxemburg* is in the Tate Gallery, London.

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