

*Exhibiting Trauma:  
Ydessa Hendeles at the Haus der Kunst in Munich*

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## ABSTRACT

Exhibiting Trauma: Ydessa Hendeles at the Haus der Kunst in Munich

Anja Bock, 2004

This thesis is an effort to come to terms with the affective and theoretical implications of Ydessa Hendeles' exhibition of contemporary art, documentary photographs and vernacular objects entitled *Partners*, which was held at the Haus der Kunst in Munich, Germany, November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2003 to February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2004. It looks at Hendeles' practice as a collector as a means of securing an identity in the wake of the trauma of the Holocaust, the particular performance the exhibition asks the viewer to enact, the multiple ironies that arise throughout the show and their consequences, as well as the show's function as a counter-monument to the Third Reich and a memorial of *Pogromnacht*. Overall, it is an effort to discern how the exhibition speaks to the issues surrounding the representation of the Holocaust as they pertain to personal and cultural identity and the construction of history.

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Anja Bock, July 2004.

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Unless otherwise noted, all artworks are owned by Ydessa Hendeles or the Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation.

Images that appear in this thesis were provided in the press package or scanned from the exhibition catalogue, unless otherwise noted: Chris Dercon and Thomas Weski, eds. Partners. Köln: Walther König, 2003.

*Within our Pandora's Box there is supposed to be, at the very bottom, a winged hope: that art is fundamentally on the side of love rather than death, and that its kind of intelligence, the space it provides for deepened and independent thought through the variety of its forms of representation, will temper the demands of ideology and free the intellect rather than shut it down.*

Geoffrey Hartman, *The Longest Shadow*, 1996



## INTRODUCTION

*Ydessa Hendeles* and the *Haus der Kunst* – unlikely partners, it would seem: one, the daughter of Polish Jews who survived the mechanized killings at Auschwitz; the other, Adolf Hitler’s former platform for the reification and dissemination of Aryan ideals through art. But when Chris Dercon invited Hendeles to curate an exhibition to inaugurate his helm at the museum, she accepted without hesitation. After a year of planning, *Partners* opened on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2003. It brings together the work of twelve international artists with documentary photographs, vernacular objects and ephemera, all of which are part of her collection, “for the purpose of bringing out insightful connections between works that say something about what it means to be alive at this time.”<sup>1</sup>

According to the press release, “Because of the metaphorical and allegorical approach of the curator, the exhibition offers insight in the way that personal and national identity is formed in the context of the history.”<sup>2</sup>

Even with only a cursory knowledge of Hendeles’ biography and the history of the *Haus der Kunst*, we can guess what we will be in store for: the trauma of the Holocaust is inscribed both on the massive stones of the building and on Hendeles’ slight body, which bears the scars of her parents’ deprivation during their incarceration. If we don’t know this much, we will be informed thereof before entering the exhibition: seven large didactic panels documenting the construction and use of the *Haus der Kunst* from its design phase to its current state of restoration hang in the foyer and an interview with

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<sup>1</sup> Ydessa Hendeles as quoted in “Partners.” Press Release. Haus der Kunst, Munich. Nov. 2003.

<sup>2</sup> “Partners.”

Hendeles plays continuously. “There was a Jewish trauma and there was a German trauma; we are partners in this trauma,” she states, her voice ringing throughout the space.<sup>3</sup> Before we cross the threshold into *Partners*, our expectations have already been set: this show will contend with this traumatic history – the Holocaust – in some way.

*In what way* is the question underlying this thesis. Ydessa Hendeles does not show her cards. She states simply, “This is not a Holocaust show; this is a show about the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>4</sup> But even if this show is not “about” the Holocaust, it has repercussions for these issues. For several months *Partners* was in the local and international papers, followed by reviews in the specialized art press, all of which applauded the exhibition in superlative terms for its curatorial effort. But the questions it raises about Holocaust memory in the twenty-first century remain unresolved. My effort is not to find her hidden intent, but rather to investigate how this show affects our understanding of the past, the present in light of the past, and the possibility of envisioning alternative futures.

The timing of *Partners* is crucial. Speaking of *Him*, a sculpture of Hitler the size of a 10 year-old that is included in the exhibition, Ydessa Hendeles states “I bought a moment” – the last moment when the memory of the Holocaust is still fresh enough to incite real terror in those who remember it at first hand, and the moment when the succeeding generation can begin to let it go.<sup>5</sup> But where is the line between “letting go” and

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<sup>3</sup> as stated in Matthias Beckel. Interview with Ydessa Hendeles. Aired on Capriccio. Bayerischer Rundfunk. 29 Nov. 2003. My transcription.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> as quoted in Sarah Milroy. “Collective memories: the startling new show by Ydessa Hendeles is no mere teddy bears’ picnic – it’s a poignant take on coping with the horrors of the past.” Globe and Mail 8 Apr. 2002.

“forgetting”? Accompanying the desire for healing is a widespread fear of amnesia: what will constitute memory if not testimony? Survivors are dying; their children have an experiential and emotional understanding of the Holocaust but often have wide gaps in their knowledge of both their parents’ experiences and the Nazi’s genocidal program,<sup>6</sup> meanwhile, innumerable Hollywood flicks, from *Schindler’s List* to the *The Pianist*, threaten to be the primary history lesson for the second post-Holocaust generation. Hendeles asserts, “times have changed and we have to look with new eyes from the new generation, and we have to look to the future.”<sup>7</sup> But what does the future look like from here?

§

There has been a massive effort in Europe as well as America to establish the historical record in order to ensure that the Holocaust will not be forgotten and that its memory will extend into the future. *Partners* is part of this effort. Yet the Holocaust, even if we could gather it in its totality, signifies more than the sum of all the shards: no archive can contain it.<sup>8</sup> What transpired and how has been recorded in extensive detail— a sound historical framework is in place – yet the facts are no more comprehensible. As Giorgio Agamben states, “The aporia of Auschwitz is, indeed, the very aporia of historical knowledge: a non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and

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<sup>6</sup> Dora Apel. Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002. 11.

<sup>7</sup> as stated in Beckel, Matthias. Interview with Ydessa Hendeles. Haus der Kunst, Munich. Unpublished video. 2003. My transcription.

<sup>8</sup> Saul Friedlander. Introduction. Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution.” Ed. Saul Friedlander. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992. 3.

comprehension.”<sup>9</sup> On an individual and cultural level, the horror falls outside of the Symbolic and thus remains unarticulated: it exceeds our means of representation. Jean-François Lyotard likened the Holocaust to an earthquake, the magnitude of which obliterated everything in its wake, including the instruments of measure.<sup>10</sup> It is for this reason that the Holocaust is “unspeakable.”

Thus a twofold problem presents itself: how do we extend the purview of our means of representation so as to allow for comprehension, and how do we simultaneously impose limits on these means so as to guarantee that the magnitude of the event will not be trivialized? Saul Friedlander describes the crux most succinctly:

Our central dilemma can be defined as confronting the issues raised by historical relativism and aesthetic experimentation in the face of two possibly contrary constraints: a need for “truth,” and the problems raised by the opaqueness of the events and the opaqueness of language as such.<sup>11</sup>

History, due to its reliance on culturally specific codes, is relative. Hayden White asserts, “One must face the fact that when it comes to apprehending the historical record, there are no grounds to be found in the historical record itself for preferring one way of construing its meaning over another.”<sup>12</sup> The longstanding conviction that a precise description of the events would carry its own truth is thus called into question.<sup>13</sup> But this assertion meets the Holocaust with great difficulty, for it is, precisely, a “truth” outside of language.

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<sup>9</sup> Giorgio Agamben. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. New York: Zone Books, 1999. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-François Lyotard. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. Trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988.

<sup>11</sup> Friedlander, 4.

<sup>12</sup> as quoted in Friedlander, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Friedlander, 7.

Despite the inevitable opacity and the inherent limits of their means of representation, historical discourses, which subordinate themselves to the historical reality they purport to represent, are deemed to be the only ethical response to the Holocaust. The need for “truthful” representation sets survivor testimony as its ideal measure and gives preference to the practice of the archivist, who merely catalogues the events, over that of the historian, who transforms the events into a narrative based on pre-established rhetorical forms and structures of emplotment.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to the need for veracity that propels the historical discourses, the imaginative discourses, such as art and literature, are thought to render the events subjectively, and thus favour interpretation over facts. Their apparent lack of objectivity and their potential to solicit aesthetic pleasure had led to a widespread usage of Adorno’s famous dictum that art after Auschwitz is barbaric.<sup>15</sup> It is an unassailable axiom that “squeezing beauty or pleasure from such an event afterwards is not so much a benign reflection of the crime as it is an extension of it.”<sup>16</sup>

Although the reliance of historical data, testimony and the archive on discursive processing compromises their distinction from the imaginative discourses, their ends are thought to be mutually exclusive rather than reinforcing. But as Geoffrey Hartman writes, “Scientific historical research, however essential it is for its negative virtues of rectifying error and denouncing falsification, has no positive resource to lessen grief, endow

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<sup>14</sup> Ernst van Alphen. Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature and Theory. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997. 95.

<sup>15</sup> van Alphen discusses its usage in Caught by History. 17-20.

<sup>16</sup> James E. Young. At Memory’s Edge New Haven: Yale UP, 2000, 2. Ernst van Alphen discusses the distinction between historical and imaginative discourses in Caught by History. 16-37.

calamity with meaning, foster a vision of the world, or legitimate new groups.”<sup>17</sup> Adorno later redressed his statement: “But that suffering...also demands the continued existence of the very art it forbids.”<sup>18</sup> According to Adorno, we *need* an art form that keeps Holocaust experiences from being forgotten. As I will demonstrate throughout this thesis, imaginative discourses can work within the logic of testimony, as well, and may provide a valuable resource for mobilizing comprehension. Art, precisely because of its indirectness, “offers the possibility to give expression to extreme experiences.”<sup>19</sup> It is in this context that *Partners* must be understood.

## §

When I saw *Partners* in February 2004, three things struck me. First, Ydessa Hendeles’ incredible power. She buys some of the best artwork being produced, and, in this show, has somehow made this art all about her. As the accompanying didactic material and catalogue essays suggest, as well as each press review, Hendeles’ biography is the “key” for understanding *Partners*. Second, my sense of disempowerment when traversing the show. It seemed utterly pessimistic and highly manipulative. It leads the viewer repeatedly down dead-ends and the future is off the horizon. And thirdly, complete confusion as to how *Partners* speaks to the Holocaust, even though it was palpable all throughout. And yet I was fascinated by the unusual combination of artworks and the

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<sup>17</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996. 104.

<sup>18</sup> as quoted in van Alphen, 18.

<sup>19</sup> van Alphen, 12.

formal rhythm of the exhibition and was compelled to return to the exhibition again and again.

Using my reactions to propel my research and structure this thesis, I begin by asking, who is Ydessa Hendeles? The biography of Ydessa Hendeles inevitably bears on her professional practice, but in the case of *Partners* she has chosen to make this particularity the organizing principle: it is an autobiographical narrative and the artworks are a vehicle for her own voice. Hendeles' appropriation of objects for this end opens interesting questions from an art historical standpoint in terms of the determination of meaning, but also from a methodological standpoint: how do we use biography in the wake of post-structuralism, which eviscerated the intentional subject along lateral lines? In the first chapter I will approach these questions by looking at how Ydessa Hendeles' biography asserts itself in the show and to what effect. In this chapter I will also discuss the devastating effects of trauma on subjectivity and the importance of reconstituting it through the process of testimony. I draw on Mieke Bal's theorization of narrative texts, Philippe Lejeune's definition of autobiography, Cathy Caruth and Ernst van Alphen's work on trauma, and Marianne Hirsch's writings on family and Holocaust photographs.

My second and third chapters attend to my initial sense of disempowerment. In the second chapter, I follow the exhibition narrative on its level of focalization in an effort to discern how it positions the viewer as bearing the vision of Hendeles. There is a tension in *Partners* between what we have come to expect – a story, which positions us at its apex, and its formal structure – loops, which have us going around in circles instead. It is

my assertion in this chapter that by enacting these loops we produce a “Holocaust effect,” which enables us to empathize with trauma as a metaphor of the Holocaust. This comes with its own danger: over-identification and secondary traumatization. In this chapter I also point to the way in which our submission to the position that is scripted for us by the exhibition allows us to listen to what is “unspeakable.” I continue to draw on the theoretical models defined in chapter one and also draw on Carol Duncan’s work on museum narratives, Ernst van Alphen’s writings on the “Holocaust effect” in general and on *Partners* specifically, as well as Kelly Taxter’s work on psychic and artistic loops.

In the chapter that follows I take off the focalizing lens and allow the exhibition to shimmer in ambiguity. Throughout this chapter, I offer examples of how irony happens vis-à-vis various artworks, given their “hermeneutical helpers,” their juxtaposition in the show, and their circumstance in the Haus der Kunst. What is little-Hitler doing at home in his “house” for example? Playing the prodigal son or praying for the murder of six more million Jews? I analyze these ironies in terms of their possible repercussions for our understanding of the Holocaust. Because irony necessitates an attribution of intent, this chapter returns to the question of biography. Throughout this chapter, I draw heavily on Linda Hutcheon’s work on irony, as well as Saul Friedlander’s writing on Holocaust discourse.

My last chapter takes a more direct approach to understanding how *Partners* contends with the history of the Holocaust. First, I look at the precarious position of history in the midst of a memory boom that is sweeping across both Europe and America, especially in



Germany. Then I look at how *Partners* negotiates the history of the Haus der Kunst and participates in the process of turning it into a counter-monument. Lastly, I look at how *Partners* functions as a memorial of *Pogromnacht*, the Nazi-instigated pogrom against the Jewry that marks the beginning of what we now know as the Holocaust. By looking at these direct links with history, I try to discern *Partners*' current political significance. Here I draw on Andreas Huyssen's writing on the culture of amnesia/memory and James E. Young's work on Holocaust memorials.

This might seem backwards – working my way out of, not into the show – but this structure roughly approximates my experience of the exhibition: I went in knowing Ydessa Hendeles' biography and that it is “key,” I followed the show on the terms it established, then I opened it to interpretation, and ultimately I am left with the question, how does all of this fit into the bigger picture?

§

“Meaning” may be established discursively but there are rules to the game. In this case these rules are set by Ydessa Hendeles. My effort in this thesis is to try and determine what these rules are and how she has communicated them to me. My underlying assumption is that only by discerning the politics of address – how a communication-act constitutes a subject – can the performative effect of a statement be assessed. How does it characterize contemporary collective memory? What political values are served by it?<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> van Alphen asks these questions in *Caught by History*. 62.

In *Partners* I feel myself directly addressed, which propels my investigation. I am of German ancestry and am part of the “new” generation in whose charge the memory of the Holocaust has now landed. This puts me in a difficult position to speak back to a woman who is one generation closer to the Holocaust in age and experience, and bound to its trauma through both family and religion. Furthermore, as Dominick LaCapra writes,

The Holocaust presents the historian with transference in the most traumatic form conceivable – but in a form that will vary with the difference in subject position of the analyst. Whether the historian or analyst is a survivor, a relative of survivors, a former Nazi, a former collaborator, a relative of former Nazis or collaborators, a younger Jew or German distanced from more immediate contact with survival, participation, or collaboration, or a relative ‘outsider’ to these problems will make a difference even in the meaning of statements that may be formally identical.<sup>21</sup>

Due to this “unavoidable transference relation” that transpires in the interpretation of history, we need not only to ask, who is speaking? but more specifically, how does their historical position impose constraints – whether attributed or intended – on their representation of the Holocaust?

LaCapra’s assertion implicates me as much as it does Ydessa Hendeles. Throughout this thesis I draw attention to my own processes of interpretation in order to try and locate the responsibility for the production of meaning, which is always somewhere between me and the text that is before my eyes. My initial reactions to *Partners* have substantially altered in the process of writing this thesis. Indeed, they have almost disappeared from these pages altogether, because my understanding of the issues that caused them to rise has deepened. I now see a very clear place for both control and subservience, over the artwork and to the artwork, over the viewer and to the viewer. In the end it is this

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<sup>21</sup> as quoted in Friedlander, 12.

oscillation that I find to be *Partners'* most salient contribution. Despite my desire, borne of hope, that we can move from melancholy to mourning, from acting-out to working-through, I find the balance that Ydessa Hendeles strikes between these two poles to be poignant and compelling. How to connect the past to the present – and thus to the future – is the central question posed by this exhibition, and it a question of far-ranging implications.

*Partners* is both beautiful and brilliant, and it is dumbfounding. This thesis is an effort to find my own voice in relation to these issues. As such, I am doing exactly what Ydessa Hendeles had hoped: thinking about how identity is formed in the context of history.

## CHAPTER ONE

*Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narrative of the past.*

– Stuart Hall

Like a “phoenix out of the ashes,”<sup>1</sup> Ydessa Hendeles was born in 1948 in a Displaced Persons camp in Marburg, Germany, to Polish Jewish parents who survived Auschwitz. Two years later the family immigrated to Canada, where Ydessa, her son and her mother continue to live today. Despite her generational and geographical remove from the Holocaust, Hendeles’ identity is inextricable from the atrocities her parents suffered during the war and the relentless present tense that such trauma incurs. But it is also inextricable from their very survival, which necessitates the future tense. Hendeles sits on this edge, testifying to the inside of the horror by way of “postmemory” and to the outside by her very existence “as part of the generation that was not supposed to exist.”<sup>2</sup> Because her cultural inheritance was desecrated and almost utterly destroyed, her avowed ambition is to “contribute to and retain a history from the vantage point of being here.”<sup>3</sup> She states,

While existence is an accepted assumption for most people, it has not been for me, as the only child of parents who survived Auschwitz. As part of a generation without grandparents, I have had a personal sense of absent roots and truncated history. So there is much gratification in an active retention of human evidences.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ydessa Hendeles as quoted in John Bentley Mays. “Patron, Partner, Pioneer.” *Globe and Mail* 27 Dec. 2003. R17.

<sup>2</sup> Ydessa Hendeles often uses this phrase herself.

<sup>3</sup> Ydessa Hendeles as quoted in Pierre Théberge. “The Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation: building a museum as a life process.” Interview. *Parachute* 54 (1989): 30.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Her objective is to testify to her own existence – to make history – in the double sense of partaking in its construction and leaving an indelible mark for posterity, and to thereby forge her identity.

Hendeles' strategy to achieve this end is to collect and exhibit artworks with which she feels a strong personal affinity. Although this thesis as a whole is concerned with only one particular exhibition that she has mounted, *Partners* at the Haus der Kunst in Munich, this chapter will discuss her practice as a collector before offering an account of how the collection becomes legible in the exhibition. Both her practice as a collector and as a curator will then be discussed in light of her intimate connection to the Holocaust. Ydessa Hendeles' historical position as an offspring of Holocaust survivors, and the author-function attributed to her work, necessitate careful attention not only because they situate her practice within a particular sociological place at a particular time, which inevitably affects her production, but also because it is conceived as a means of bearing testimony. More so than any other representational means, testimony necessitates a consideration of biography: the speaker and the spoken cannot be separated.

## §

The acclaim of Ydessa Hendeles' collection has put her in the international spotlight. In 1993 *Artnews* listed her among the art world's fifty most powerful people: "she's defining the moment by what she buys."<sup>5</sup> She owns the work of many important artists,

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<sup>5</sup>"The 50: The Art World's Most Powerful People." *Artnews* Summer (1993): 157.

including Christian Boltanski, Bruce Nauman and Louise Bourgeois, as well as documentary photography by renowned figures such as Robert Frank and Eugène Atget. In 1988, with the real estate fortune she inherited from her father, she converted a former uniform manufacturing building in Toronto into a private museum, the Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation. This world-class exhibition space extends over more than 9000 square feet. This is the only venue in which we can view her collection; the Haus der Kunst is an exception and a demonstration that her curatorial vision can assert itself outside of the walls of her foundation.

What interests me in this thesis is not the content of her collection *per se*, nor its art-historical and monetary value, but rather Hendeles' practice as a collector – that is, her process of decision making and the larger project for which she mobilizes the work.

Ydessa Hendeles emphasizes the personal quality of the relationship she has with the art that she collects and she describes her process as follows:

I try to work as fast as possible... Which does not mean I am disrespectful to the art, or that I am just looking for the most theatrical hit. It is just that I have an elastic, analytical mind that can rationalize many positions to the point where I can lose touch with what I *feel*. I then only know what I *think*. I need to access my intuition... My unthinking, unconscious, gut reaction either engages me in the work's issues or not. I want to get at my own personal truth, my own particular unique reaction to the work...<sup>6</sup>

We can think of this affective response that Hendeles seeks in art as what Roland Barthes calls the *punctum* – that unique and very personal response to a detail in the work “that shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me.”<sup>7</sup> He opposes this to “a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment... so to speak, *polite* interest” that he calls the *studium* – “a kind

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<sup>6</sup> as quoted in Théberge. 54.

<sup>7</sup> Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981. 26.

of education.”<sup>8</sup> Whereas the *punctum* describes the emotional effect of an object on the viewer, the *studium* denotes the cultural codes by which we understand it. Ydessa Hendeles is only interested in the latter if the former has “pierced” her: “[then] I have an all-consuming need to understand not only the work and its implications in society but my own relationship with it.”<sup>9</sup>

In the sense that all the objects she acquires contain, for her, this *punctum*, they function as souvenirs of this affective relationship. By collecting these “wounds,” she pulls these experiences toward her as a way of coming to understand them and, in the process, defining herself. We can thus see how a collection of these works functions like a self-portrait: it takes on the shape of Ydessa Hendeles’ concerns. Because a portrait does not work without the assumption that the individual depicted has a social value,<sup>10</sup> portraiture is a way of both confirming and asserting an identity. Ydessa Hendeles writes, “the statement I am conscious of making is about the right to existence itself, and the security of an identity.”<sup>11</sup> For her cultural and familial ancestry, this identity was denied – destroyed – during the Third Reich. By amassing disparate objects with which she feels an affinity, she is producing her own portrait, and thus securing her social value in both an art and a historical context. The collection, as self-portrait, simultaneously bespeaks her identity and reflects it back to her for her self-inscription.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> as quoted in Théberge. 32.

<sup>10</sup> Philippe Lejeune. *On Autobiography*. Ed. Paul John Eakin. Trans. Katherine Leary. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989. 114.

<sup>11</sup> as quoted in Théberge. 30.

Ydessa Hendeles has said that, “the collection will eventually read perhaps like a meandering autobiographical dialectic on what it means to be living at this time.”<sup>12</sup> But how does a portrait of the collector’s concerns get transformed into a legible story? There is a tension between medium (artworks), and genre (autobiography). A historian could draw a series of lines connecting her purchases on one hand with the events of her life on the other, but such use of an anterior narrative would close the meaning of the collection unnecessarily. The resulting chronicle would not account for how an exhibition, a carefully curated selection of the collection, takes the viewer by the hand in the absence of the collector who could relate the personal experiences to which the individual objects attest.<sup>13</sup> This function of the *narration* of the collection must be articulated by the exhibition itself. It is Hendeles’ *curation* that must reveal to the viewer the *punctum* of the work, its affective “prick” on her. As such, her curatorial practice necessitates drawing attention to these injurious details, not to the work’s assigned place in the history of art.

In order to discuss how Ydessa Hendeles guides the viewer’s interpretation of *Partners*, it is important to understand that her historical position functions textually, not just contextually. How it embeds itself in the exhibition is best understood in light of Mieke Bal’s writings on the narrative aspects of texts, including exhibitions, as well as Philippe Lejeune’s work on autobiography. I will draw on the work of these two scholars in order to demonstrate how Hendeles’ biography is not just part of *Partners*’ frame; it is integral

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 33.

<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Fisher discusses various historical and contemporary models of narrating a collection in her dissertation. “Aesthetic Contingencies: Relational Enactments in Display Culture.” Diss. Concordia U, 1995.



to the exhibition itself. This is not to say that the stated *intentions* of the curator can serve as an explanation of the show. Mieke Bal writes, “The success or failure of expository activity is not a measure of what one person ‘wants to say,’ but what a community and its subjects think, feel, or experience to be the consequence of the exposition.... What display does to its addressees is the question.”<sup>14</sup> We can accept Michel Foucault’s proposition in *What is an author?* that the reader “makes” the meaning and yet define limits to the proliferation of meaning on the basis of how the text is structured.<sup>15</sup> How Ydessa Hendeles’ voice is embedded in the exhibition needs defining in order to be able to come back to the question of individual agency and responsibility, hers and that conferred upon the addressee.

In her book titled *Narratology*, Mieke Bal defines a *text* as a finite, structured ensemble of language signs, not necessarily words, which relates a particular story. An exhibition lends itself well to narratological analysis due to the necessarily sequential nature of the museum visit: “the ‘walking tour’ links the elements of the exposition for the ‘second person.’ Walking through the museum is like reading a book.”<sup>16</sup> But a text is not identical to the *story* it relates, for various texts, such as films, musicals and children’s books, can each tell the same story. Furthermore, the story itself relates a sequence of events, the *fabula*, in a particular way and is not identical to this sequence. Other ways of relating the *fabula* (other “slants”) would also be possible and could yield drastically different stories. Bal gives the example that it is on the level of the *story* of Tom Thumb that we

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<sup>14</sup> Mieke Bal. *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis*. New York: Routledge, 1996. 8-9.

<sup>15</sup> Mieke Bal. *Narratology: An Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1997. 11.

<sup>16</sup> Bal. *Double Exposures*. 4.

sympathize with him, not the giant who Tom tricks into eating his own children. Only the textual layer is ever directly accessible to a reader, viewer or museumgoer, but for the sake of analysis, narratology separates these layers – text, story, fabula – from one another in order to account for the particular effects that the text has upon its readers.

Corresponding with the tri-part distinction between text, story, and fabula is the narrator, focalizer, and actor, respectively. The narrator is the consistent voice that is established by the writer to relay the story that is to be told: it (the narrator) is the “I” that is telling the story (whether grammatically explicit in the text or implicit). The focalizer provides the lens through which the fabula is known: it is the point of view that “‘colours’ the story with subjectivity.”<sup>17</sup> Both the narrator and the focalizer may or may not also be actors in the fabula, and all three or none of the three may correspond with the writer herself: possible combinations are many. The narrator is often confused with the writer, though the dangers of this collusion are glaring: a writer, for example, might decide to tell the story through a fictional narrator, which might be evil or benign, etc., but this says nothing of the living breathing person with pen in hand.

The study of narratology does not extend to include a consideration of the historical person who is the writer or the attributed author-function. In the case of autobiography, however, there is an *identity* proposed between the author, narrator and actor that cannot be reduced to a textual function. Philippe Lejeune defines this identity as the *autobiographical pact*:

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<sup>17</sup> Bal. *Narratology*. 8.

Autobiography (narrative recounting the life of the author) supposes that there is *identity of name* between the author (such as he figures, by his name, on the cover), the narrator of the story, and the character who is being talked about.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, to be considered autobiography, “The subject [of the text] must be *primarily* the individual’s life, the genesis of the personality.”<sup>19</sup> Despite the fact that the personal pronoun “I” only denotes the person who is speaking at any given moment, not someone in particular, the “I” has the effect of the *proper name*: it is resolutely singular, specific to an individual and representative of their irreducible entirety, not their relative discursive position.<sup>20</sup> Lejeune writes, “it is in the *proper name* that person and discourse are linked even before being joined in the first person...the place assigned to this name is essential: it is linked, by social convention, to the pledge of responsibility of a *real person*.”<sup>21</sup> Of course the author is not a person, but she is the “connection” between the world-beyond-the-text and the text itself: “for the reader, who does not know the real person, all the while believing in his[/her] existence, the author is defined as the person capable of producing this discourse, and so he imagines what [s]he is like from what [s]he produces.”<sup>22</sup>

The reason I overlay Mieke Bal’s narratology and Philippe Lejeune’s work on autobiography is because Lejeune’s tri-part distinction of author, narrator and protagonist allows for a discussion of the necessary identity of name between them in order for something to be considered autobiography and thus restores the question of the author’s

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<sup>18</sup> Lejeune. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

responsibility for the production of the written text as whole.<sup>23</sup> Bal's tri-part distinction of narrator, focalizer and actor (which excludes the author as both an actual person and textual function) introduces the concept of focalization as distinct from the role of the narrator, and thus allows for a discussion of the role that is ascribed the reader/viewer: a narrative text asks us to see things from a particular point of view which is inscribed in the text itself, the view of the focalizer. With regard to *Partners*, I am particularly interested in the author and in the focalizer and how they may or may not correspond with each other and with the exhibition's narrator, which is the only voice given explicitly.

To consider a curator an *author* may run counter to a more traditional understanding of curatorial practice as being responsible for the presentation of art on its own terms, for allowing the viewer to understand it as it was meant – by the artist – to be understood. However, there has been a significant shift in how the curatorial profession is perceived.

As Nathalie Heinich and Michael Pollak argue,

it is in the name of the privilege accorded invention and creation – of the singularity of the individual creator of an artwork and his or her capacity for innovation when faced with the solidified traditions in the institutions – that the original work, the combination of works and documents which constitutes an exhibition, can be judged. In other words, *in extremis*, it is as *auteur* that an exhibition curator will eventually be regarded.<sup>24</sup>

This eventuality seems to be full force upon us now, fifteen years later, and it has paved the way for Ydessa Hendeles' exhibitions to be considered artworks in their own right.

Regarding *Partners*, she states: "I hope the exhibition itself becomes as transcendent an experience for the viewer as the individual works in it are, and not transcendent ONLY

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Nathalie Heinich and Michael Pollak. "From Museum Curator to Exhibition *Auteur*: inventing a singular position." *Thinking about Exhibitions*. Eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne. London: Routledge, 1996. 238.

because of the works...In other words I want to make shows that move people as much as artworks move people.<sup>25</sup>

In Reesa Greenberg's words, "Hendeles likens her installations to the construction of a novel or cinema, using words like intuitive, creative, choreography, theatrical, cinematic passage, dialogue, relationships to describe her process. She is an auteur-curator."<sup>26</sup> Her "artworks" are recognized by their "uniquely Hendelesian kind of logic:"<sup>27</sup> she combines work of different media and historical periods, typically contemporary art with historical photography, without regard for their original contexts; she is particularly attentive to layout, using contrast and focal points as expressive vehicles;<sup>28</sup> she makes unexpected metaphoric connections between artworks, which unfold in time, each work framing the following work; and she provides no accompanying information for visitors, such as brochures or didactic labels. As Hendeles puts it, "I'm careful to make the shows visually articulate, so they don't require wall texts that tell people what they should think. It takes no artistic knowledge to enjoy these shows. A sensitive person who makes the effort and trusts the curator has put together something coherent can easily explore the connections between the works."<sup>29</sup>

According to Philippe Lejeune, this recognizable, consistent factor in an author's production is important not only as a descriptor of the texts, but because it "gives the idea

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<sup>25</sup> as quoted in Chris Dercon and Thomas Weski. Foreword. *Partners*. Eds. Chris Dercon and Thomas Weski. Köln: Walther König, 2003. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Reesa Greenberg. "Private Collectors, Museums and Display: a post-Holocaust perspective." *Jong Holland* 16.1 (2000): 41.

<sup>27</sup> Carol Squiers. "The Curator as Collector." *Partners*. Eds. Chris Dercon and Thomas Weski. 142.

<sup>28</sup> Greenberg. 41.

<sup>29</sup> as quoted in Jocelyn Laurence and Elizabeth Legge. "Ydessa Hendeles." *The Governor General's Awards in Visual and Media Arts 2002*. Canada Council for the Arts, 2002. 70.

of a person who cannot be reduced to any of his[/her] texts in particular, and who, capable of producing others, surpasses them all.”<sup>30</sup> If the author is unknown, then “[s]he lacks, in the eyes of the reader, that sign of reality which is the previous production of *other texts* (nonautobiographical), indispensable to that which we will call ‘the autobiographical space.’”<sup>31</sup> The autobiographical space is the space in which every production, even fiction, is read by measure of the standard of “truth” that is aspired to (but never fully attained) in autobiography: “the reader is thus invited to read novels not only as *fictions* referring to a truth of ‘human nature,’ but also as revealing *phantasms* of the individual.”<sup>32</sup> Lejeune calls this indirect form of the autobiographical pact the *phantasmatic pact*. As such, Ydessa Hendeles’ proper name is the marker of her individual agency, a descriptor of her work, and of the name ascribed to the phantasms conjured by the viewers who experience her exhibitions.

If we read the reviews in the popular and specialized press of Hendeles’ previous exhibitions, the search for her phantasm is most evident: references to her biography are constant. Writing of a work by Christian Boltanski, which was in the first exhibition mounted at the Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation, Richard Rhodes writes:

The work, called *Canada*, referred not to the country but to the name of the room in Auschwitz where the clothes of the prisoners were sorted and kept, a room about which Hendeles’ mother, Dorothy, still had vivid memories. Most of the works chosen for the Foundation have this ulterior dimension. They represent a means of identification, ways of speaking to the particulars of identity.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Lejeune. 11.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 27.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Rhodes. “The Narrator: in her intense personal odyssey into contemporary art, Toronto art collector Ydessa Hendeles probes the terrors of the twentieth century.” *Canadian Art* 10.3 (1993): 40.

Similarly, in a review of Hendeles' large Diane Arbus exhibition, John Bentley Mays interpreted "the harsh, intimate disfigurations of Arbus' photographic gaze as a parable of the unrequited emotional dysfunction, suggesting Arbus' portraits were a kind of Hendeles' self-portrait."<sup>34</sup> In most cases, the seeds of such readings are planted by Hendeles herself, not by an over-zealous critic.

In *Partners* this appeal to Hendeles' biography is explicit. Chris Dercon introduced the show by saying,

It will be an autobiographical exhibition. Ydessa Hendeles also collects for therapeutic reasons. She was born shortly after the war to parents who were in the concentration camps. For her, it is all still a trauma.<sup>35</sup>

All the press reviews of *Partners* presented Hendeles' biography as crucial for the meaning of the show. For example, one reviewer writes that the "turn- and pivot-point of this exceptional show is the collector herself; her biography and her personality are the key to the exhibition."<sup>36</sup> Another writes, "the connections between the artworks arise due to the biography of the curator."<sup>37</sup> Most important, Ydessa Hendeles herself states, "this show is a triumph for my mother."<sup>38</sup>

As already mentioned, the exhibitions Hendeles mounts at her Foundation are not accompanied by any didactic material, and thus there is no mediator between the author and the content of the artwork. *Partners*, however, has a *narrator*: Ydessa Hendeles. In

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<sup>34</sup> as paraphrased in Rhodes. 40.

<sup>35</sup> Chris Dercon. "Das Neue zeigt die Aktualität im Alten." *magazin [ku:]* 3 (2003) :18. My trans.

<sup>36</sup> Katrin Fehr. "'Partners' im Haus der Kunst: Grauen des Krieges und Unschuld der Teddys." My trans. *Donau Kurier* 12 Dec. 2003.

<sup>37</sup> Andreas Kühne. "Was Kater Felix mit dem Führe zu tun hat." My trans. *Antiquitäten Zeitung* 18 Dec. 2003. 1134.

<sup>38</sup> as quoted in Christian Mayer. "Der Triumph des Teddybärs." My trans. *SZ* 8 Nov. 2003.

the wall text that greets us when we first enter the exhibition, she addresses the viewer directly. She writes,

The invitation to curate a show from my collection for the Haus der Kunst has given me an opportunity to create an exhibition in dialogue with the history of the museum and a *venue for my voice* in the country in which I was born.<sup>39</sup>

Her use of the first person singular in this first sentence, and the fact that the text is *signed* by her, establishes her as the “I” who speaks the entire exhibition. The text continues:

[I, Ydessa Hendeles, say,] The legacy of Hitler and Nazism is an indelible part of the identity of both the German and the Jewish people. *Partners* [for which I am responsible] does not articulate a position on the politics of the past, but, rather, looks at issues of identity that are relevant today. [I say,] Historical inheritance plays an important role in the formation of one’s personal and national identity.

We learn from this text that Ydessa Hendeles has returned to Germany to contend with this “indelible” aspect of her personal inheritance; that her intent is not to moralize but to explore; and that her voice will occupy, fill, inhabit the building: the Haus der Kunst is her venue, her stage, her house under her control – for the duration of the show.

Distinct from both the author and the narrator is the *focalizer* of the story, which, as already defined, is the point of view from which the fabula is interpreted. Ydessa Hendeles once stated in an interview, “I want to have the experience of being inside someone else’s head. That is ultimately what I offer visitors.”<sup>40</sup> With regard to *Partners* she states, “I can only tell you what it feels like to be alive now in this time and place with the inheritance of history that I have and that’s what I have to offer.”<sup>41</sup> What she is narrating, therefore, is her personal experience, what is going on inside her head, what the

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<sup>39</sup> Ydessa Hendeles. Wall Text. Haus der Kunst, Munich. Nov. 2003. My emphasis. See Appendix One.

<sup>40</sup> as quoted in Laurence and Legge. 67.

<sup>41</sup> as stated in Matthias Beckel. Interview with Ydessa Hendeles. Haus der Kunst, Munich. Unpublished video. 2003. My transcription.



world looks like from *her* point of view. As such, she positions herself as the focalizer of the exhibition as well as its author and narrator: “I try to focus in on what my interests in the work are. I try to make a logical passage to show what I am receiving from it. That is what I do.”<sup>42</sup> Her interest in the work is in “discovering the latent content – the pathology on a personal and societal level”<sup>43</sup> and, once found, she creates a context in which the viewer, too, can discover it by following the intention of her personal vision. It should be noted that the “latency” resides in her, not the work, and is drawn out by the work’s *punctum*. To follow her personal vision is to enter one wound after another in search of a “logical passage” between them.

## §

How Hendeles succeeds to convey this “being-in-her-head-ness” will be discussed at length in the following chapter but in this chapter I want to demonstrate how her personal biography and her status as *auteur* interacts with the Haus der Kunst as a signifier of National Socialism<sup>44</sup> to create a force field in which all the objects stake out their position. Before we enter the exhibition proper, we come to a “prep” room that contains the wall text written by Hendeles and three objects: a small metal wind-up toy of Minnie Mouse; a studio portrait of a group of men; and a tiny photograph of a young woman looking in a mirror. If Ydessa Hendeles’ biography and the history of the Haus der Kunst is written right on the cover, so to speak, then this room constitutes the preface: it is

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<sup>42</sup> as quoted in Rhodes. 40.

<sup>43</sup> Ydessa Hendeles as quoted in Théberge. 33.

<sup>44</sup> The history of the Haus der Kunst and how Ydessa Hendeles participates in its restoration will be discussed at length in chapter four.

where the tone is set and the lens is given through which we will see the rest of the exhibition. Unlike the rest of the exhibition, in which the sequence of objects is paramount, in this antechamber, each of these objects introduces a concurrent theme that runs throughout the exhibition.

In the centre of the room is Minnie Mouse (Fig. 1). This is the toy that we see on all the promotional material for *Partners*. She is standing on a pedestal and is protected by glass. She wears, suitably, a miniskirt with big red flowers, big white gloves and sturdy boots. Her iconic power overrides the seaming in the pressed tin and the notches that hold her together but, under the intense scrutiny that her situation in a gallery affords her, she becomes more individuated, less iconic, more personal somehow, especially upon seeing her little white teeth, which are clenched with the effort required to lug her cargo. She carries a cage-like suitcase in each hand; in them we see she has captured Felix the Cat, who is of course trying to escape: in the cartoons of the 1920s Felix was known for such things as pulling his tail and disappearing.<sup>45</sup> But it looks as though Minnie, with her head held proud, is going to keep moving forward, as she is designed to do, into perpetuity. Minnie has wheels and a key to propel her: she is a woman on the move.

For what reason is Minnie Mouse the chosen icon for this exhibition, given that she is not even “art” as commonly understood? She – it – is a vernacular object, a toy, specifically:

*Minnie Mouse Carrying Felix in Cages*  
Lithographed tin, key-wind clockwork toy.  
Made in Spain between 1928 and 1936 by the toy company R.S. (also called La Isla Toys).

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<sup>45</sup> Ydessa Hendeles. “Partners.” *Partners*. Eds. Chris Dercon and Thomas Weski. 21.

Ydessa Hendeles is explicit about the fact that she sees herself in this toy, as a collector who is lugging her stuff across the Atlantic, and as an immigrant who carried a few prized possessions across the same ocean in 1950. Ernst van Alphen writes, “after the Holocaust, suitcases, just like trains, evoke associations with the Holocaust.”<sup>46</sup> On her left cheek, Minnie Mouse wears her original cataloguing number, which Hendeles has maintained because it reminds her of the numbers tattooed on her mother’s arm.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, Minnie is here shown without Mickey Mouse, to whom she is usually relegated a supportive role. Now she is the star, and now she is also Hendeles’ phantasm.

In the opening wall text Hendeles asks, “Minnie Mouse...has captured Felix the Cat, but what does she have? Images, like Felix, are fugitive, with meanings that metamorphose, from person to person and over time.” This opens a question on the assignment and determination of meaning: if it is forever in flux, what criteria do we have to guide the interpretive process? This wind-up toy indisputably depicts Minnie Mouse and Felix the Cat but the significance that this nomination carries with it changes according to when and where it is presented. When she first appeared on the screen, for example, Minnie was not the sweet creature we know her as today: she was a smoking and cursing little vermin. Furthermore, it is easy to see how this toy would mean something different in the gift shop of a History of the Moving Image Museum than it does here at the Haus der Kunst. There it might signify the technological triumphs that synchronized sound with motion pictures for the first time. Here, presented by a Jewish woman in the building that once hosted the rallies of the Nazi exterminators, it takes on the additional significance of

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<sup>46</sup> Ernst van Alphen. “Exhibition as Narrative Work of Art.” *Partners*. Eds. Chris Dercon and Thomas Weski. 171.

<sup>47</sup> Ydessa Hendeles suggests this connection in Beckel.

a fantastical inversion of power: a mouse has captured a cat; a female has captured a male; the predatory order has been reversed. In light of Art Spiegelman's autobiographical cartoon books of 1986 and 1991 entitled *Maus*, which chronicle his father's experience of the Holocaust by depicting Nazis as cats and Jews as mice, this fantastical inversion of power takes on a more specific meaning: "a Jew has captured a Nazi,"<sup>48</sup> writes Ydessa Hendeles.

In the context of *Partners*, this reading of *Minnie Mouse carrying Felix in Cages* dominates even though, considering the toy itself was made before the Holocaust, it could never have been intended. (Not to mention that Walt Disney was himself antisemitic and the toy was manufactured by a fascist studio.) We can therefore say that there is an "over-determination" of meaning. "Over," not in the sense of a value judgment, but in the sense of a determination that overrides all other determinations. This is not to say that the tension between an object and its specific situation at the Haus der Kunst dissipates altogether due to the greater force of the latter. Quite the contrary: the schism between what could be considered the "original" context, the context traditionally privileged by art history of the artist's own milieu, and the "conditional" context of the curatorial proposition is operative, but the object's *function* is determined by the latter. Consider the fact that Minnie (and Mickey) are the first *speaking* cartoon characters, exercising their voices for the first time in 1928 in *Steamboat Willie*. Felix remained silent and by 1931 he was succeeded by Mickey as the leader in cartoons and character licensing.<sup>49</sup> This fact could be deemed "original" but given the "conditional" framing it

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<sup>48</sup> Hendeles. "Partners."

<sup>49</sup> Ydessa Hendeles. "Notes on the Exhibition." *Partners*. Eds. Chris Dercon and Thomas Weski. 210.

comes to take on a metaphoric value. *Minnie Mouse Carrying Felix in Cages* represents Ydessa Hendeles as a collector, as a woman, as a Jew, and as holding the power of language. The curator, like the cartoon character, gains control over her cargo by speaking/writing/curating: she has the power to articulate everything that falls into her purview as she sees fit. Hendeles has thus made her claim: she will tell her own story.

Across from the tin toy is a small photograph. It is definitely not a phantasm of Ydessa Hendeles: it is a studio portrait of the infamous American outlaws, the Wild Bunch (Fig. 2), who have been mythologized, romanticized and immortalized through folklore and in Hollywood movies such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. At the turn of the last century, this ruthless group of gangsters robbed banks and trains on the American frontier and their notorious acts “extended the era of the Wild West into the twentieth century.”<sup>50</sup> How can such bad guys become good guys in the popular imagination? By what moral standard? Due to their taking of arms for the cause of personal liberty at all costs? Their “cowboy justice”? This image directly implicates the United States of America and the “new world,” just as *Minnie Mouse Carrying Felix in Cages* references the “old world” (despite the American genesis of the cartoon character). Furthermore, within Europe the Wild West subculture is rampant, with theme parks, rodeos, country music trade fairs, historical reenactments, and a vast frontier literature, capturing the fascination of generation after generation of European youth since the early 1900s. Today thousands of Germans dream of what the Wild West stands for: freedom, individualism and the wide-open road.<sup>51</sup> This photograph speaks to those dreams.

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<sup>50</sup> Hendeles “Notes on the Exhibition.” 209.

<sup>51</sup> Ruth Ellen Gruber. “European fascination with Western culture.” *Dispatches*. CBC radio. 28 Apr. 2004.

How does this romantic tale relate to Minnie? Given what we know of Hendeles and the Haus der Kunst, how do we integrate these two disparate works? What jumps out immediately is the apparent gender difference: a lone “woman” is confronted by a large group of men. This is an image of men bonding through dressing up, demonstrating their solidarity by dressing alike, and consolidating their group identity by having their picture taken. As such, each assumes the identity and the power of the group as a whole. In a small leap of recognition, we see one of the propelling forces of Nazism being reflected in this image: as the haunting testimonies of former SS soldiers repeatedly state, more so than the ideological mission of National Socialism, it was the identity that Nazism conferred upon them – as manly men – that compelled and confirmed their allegiance.<sup>52</sup> This fact attests to the influence of images on the formation of identity: the lure of a certain masculine aesthetic contributed to the murder of more than six million European Jews. In his effort to gain complete control over the image of Nazism, Hitler even banned the image of the beloved Mickey Mouse on military property.<sup>53</sup> In the context of this show, which purports to address the legacy of Hitler and Nazism, *The Wild Bunch* (c. 1900) connotes homosocial power.

Also in this room, hanging alone on a floating wall across from the wall text, is a tiny photograph: Diane Arbus’ *Self-portrait with Camera* (February 1945) (Fig. 3). Although the label does not tell us when she was born or her nationality, we see that she is young, maybe in her early twenties. She cocks her head to one side, slightly submissive, but does

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<sup>52</sup> Ernst van Alphen discusses Klaus Theweleit’s study *Male Fantasies* in *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature and Theory*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997. 58-9.

<sup>53</sup> Hendeles. “Notes on the Exhibition.” 210.

not smile. Shadow befalls the left side of her face. She is indoors somewhere, in a domestic space, and likely beside a window that is off to the right. Soft light reveals the contours of her features, the line of her nose and lips, her collarbones, and modulates her white blouse with gentle grays. The photograph is black and white. Her hair looks black. A large camera with its eye pointing at us occupies the bottom corner of the photograph. The woman gently rests her right hand on it, and her left hand, it appears, pushed the shutter release. Her eyes look straight into her reflection in the mirror and so we have the sense that she is looking straight out at us.

Again we can ask, how does this photograph relate to the other two objects we have seen? In the exhibition catalogue Ernst van Alphen writes, “The striking differences between the three objects transform before our eyes into the kind of subtle similarities that, in [Peter] Brooks’ view of narrative, generate the desire for story.”<sup>54</sup> Is this a portrait of Hendeles, a way for her to sign her show? “It is and it isn’t,” writes van Alphen;<sup>55</sup> rather, it is a phantasm. What story begins to emerge here? Given the “likely” reading of *Minnie Mouse Carrying Felix in Cages* and *The Wild Bunch* as references to the Holocaust, an odd detail begs our attention: its date. Whereas the other artworks are dated only by year, this image is dated very specifically February 1945.<sup>56</sup> By reading the catalogue we can learn about Diane Arbus’ life at that time, that she was a Jew living in the United States, that her husband had been dispatched to Burma, and that she was pregnant; thus it indicates the continuance of Jewish life: perhaps it is a phantasm of

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<sup>54</sup> van Alphen. “Exhibition as a Narrative Work of Art.” 171.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 170.

<sup>56</sup> This date is also the only date that appears on the map of the exhibition that visitors are given at the entrance and, to reinforce its significance, the date is typographically more prominent than both the name of the artist and the title. See Fig. 29.

infant Ydessa and her mother. This anterior narrative, however, does not indicate the metaphoric function of the date itself. Due to the overall framework of the exhibition, “February 1945” reminds us of Anne Frank, who was killed one month later, and the subsequent liberation of the “work camps.” These are widely recognized dates and to some they mark the beginning of a new calendar: the abyss that is Auschwitz will never be bridged.<sup>57</sup>

These three artworks – two photographs and a toy – set the tone for what is to come. We have seen how our previously accumulated knowledge of Ydessa Hendeles’ biography and of the history of the Haus der Kunst determines a particular reading of the work. The viewer goes back and forth, so to speak, from context to text, drawing it in and making links that allow her to consolidate the objects into a coherent meaning. This interpretive process brings external information to bear on what is experienced in order to understand its implications. It is also an internal narrative process: it links together what is immediately given by finding similarity between them. Quoting Peter Brooks, van Alphen describes this similarity, which becomes evident through repetition, “as binding works toward the generation of significance, toward recognition and the retrospective illumination which will allow us to grasp the text as total metaphor, but not therefore to discount the metonymies that have lead to it.”<sup>58</sup> This metonymic linking simultaneously loosens the objects from their original referents and reins in the play of semiosis by generating a “total metaphor.” In the case of *Partners*, as we have seen, the metaphor that is generated by the text is somehow about Ydessa Hendeles and somehow about the

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<sup>57</sup> Shoshana Felman as quoted in Cathy Caruth. Introduction. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. 156.

<sup>58</sup> van Alphen. “Exhibition as a Narrative Work of Art.” 175.



Holocaust. It will gain precision as the show progresses and I will discuss it at length in the following chapter.

I want to state again what is obvious: I am not arguing that this meaning is guaranteed, or even suggested, by the artwork itself. That would be to fly in the face of post-structuralism as well as of common sense. In the case of *Partners*, assigning meaning by way of biography reveals rather than obscures the impossibility of interpretative closure. There is no pretense that this meaning was simply laying in waiting for a keen analyst to discover it: there is no such “depth.” “If the significance of an individual work is determined anywhere,” writes Debora Meijers “then it is by the place that it is assigned among other works.”<sup>59</sup> Customarily, art exhibitions are more concerned with an artwork’s *studium* than its *punctum*, which necessitates a consideration of the artist’s personal circumstance; here, however, Ydessa Hendeles’ biography is operative, not the artist’s, and it is directed toward the effort of understanding the artwork’s affective charge, not its historical “place.” As already mentioned, *Partners* disregards such contextual information: these artworks are presented like found objects, torn from their original context and integrated into a new narrative – Ydessa Hendeles’ autobiography. The flux of meaning is demonstrated by being precluded.

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<sup>59</sup> Debora Meijers. “The Museum and the ‘Ahistorical’ Exhibition: the latest gimmick by the arbiters of taste, or an important cultural phenomenon?” *Thinking about Exhibitions*. Eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne. London: Routledge, 1996. 8.

This dis-location of meaning will be further discussed in chapter three, where I momentarily bracket Ydessa Hendeles' biography in order to cast the exhibition adrift on the semiotic sea. At this point, however, I want to suggest that Ydessa Hendeles' radical recontextualization of these artworks into a new narrative bespeaks the process of reconstituting subjectivity in the wake of trauma in two interrelated ways: as a process of bearing testimony, it reconnects the subject with its ability to speak, and as a vehicle of communication, it asserts the subject in public discourse. This is especially relevant to Ydessa Hendeles' practice, which is about securing of an identity and being "a catalyst for an exchange of ideas."<sup>60</sup>

The latter point – how a collection publicly asserts the identity of the collector – is readily apparent and is not specific to trauma; rather, it assumes that the identity is intact *a priori*. Previously I discussed how collecting is a process of drawing experiences into the realm of the individual but *exhibiting* a collection is a process of projecting individual identity outward into the public realm. As Jennifer Fisher writes, "The relation between artifact and collector alternates between centripetal and centrifugal forces, being drawn to the self as constituent [of] a symbolic hunt or capture procuring ownership, and extending out from the self through practices of display and publicity."<sup>61</sup> In an interview with Hendeles, Pierre Théberge asks, "You said something about the Foundation not being a self-portrait," to which she replied:

I don't want it to be, if that's *all* it will be... Certainly my presence will be felt by visitors to the gallery. Inevitably, anything that I do is mine, but as long as there is a response

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<sup>60</sup> Hendeles as quoted in Théberge. 30.

<sup>61</sup> Fisher. 273.

from the audience to my choices, I know that whatever my issues are, they will serve some benefit in triggering off other people's reactions.<sup>62</sup>

As such, the collection becomes a vehicle to express private concerns within specific discourses, thereby establishing a dialogical relationship with specific audiences, not just with the self. In this way, collecting functions as a means to communicate: it demonstrates an "I," asserts its voice, and solicits responses that confirm its identity.

This process of interaction with the viewer that Ydessa Hendeles establishes is central to the former point – how *Partners* reconstitutes the self through testimony. In order to understand how testimony reconstitutes identity, it is important to understand the devastating consequences of trauma on individual subjectivity. These consequences show themselves most blatantly in the fact that victims are unable to narrate the harrowing events they survived. Cathy Caruth explains:

The trauma is the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge – that cannot, as George Bataille says, become a matter of "intelligence" – and thus continuously returns, in its exactness, at a later time. Not having been fully integrated as it occurred, the event cannot become, as [Pierre] Janet says, a "narrative memory" that is integrated into a completed story of the past... The trauma thus requires integration, both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure.<sup>63</sup>

To enter memory, the traumatic event needs to be made "narratable" – but how?

The Sisyphean task of resubjectification that faces every survivor is inconceivable in the language we have developed for describing reality: this reality is in "excess." As Geoffrey Hartman writes, "martyrdom," "victim," "suffering," "choice," "resistance," are inadequate phrases "even though we may use them to communicate and restore a

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<sup>62</sup> as quoted in Théberge. 30.

<sup>63</sup> Caruth. 153.

semblance of normality.”<sup>64</sup> Statements such as “I died in Auschwitz but no one knows it,”<sup>65</sup> are understood metaphorically when they are in fact literal: the self was killed in the camp even if the body survived. But here are no structures of language that allow one to have died in the past and still be living in the present and so this fact remains unacknowledged.

Testimony is a means of giving this knowledge back to the subject. As Mieke Bal explains, “While the subject to whom the event happened lacks the narrative mastery over it that turns her or him into a proper subject, the other crucial presence in the process, the addressee, is also missing.”<sup>66</sup> In contrast to memory, which is ratified by a listener, trauma is a solitary event.<sup>67</sup> It is by bearing testimony that the trauma gains a social component. Ernst van Alphen succinctly states the vital role of the listener:

Testimony not only provides a product, historical information; it is itself a process, a transactive process between a listener and testifier that reintegrates the Holocaust witness in the present. Thus the testifier is no longer isolated within a past event.<sup>68</sup>

The subjectivity of the victim of trauma is reestablished by the process of offering testimony due to the “transactive process” established with the listener. As such, testimony produces a transmissible memory.

The necessity of transforming trauma into narrative memory in order to release the victim from its relentless present tense indicates the basic human need to live in extended

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<sup>64</sup> Geoffrey Hartman. The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996. 3.

<sup>65</sup> Charlotte Delbo as quoted in Hartman. 154.

<sup>66</sup> Mieke Bal. Introduction. Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present. Eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer. Hanover: UP of New England, 1999. x.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> van Alphen. Caught by History. 13-4.

structures of temporality, but *to transform* may also mean to lose “the precision and the force that characterized traumatic recall,” as well as “the force of *its affront to understanding*.”<sup>69</sup> This dilemma underlies the reluctance of many survivors, and the philosophers on their heels, to translate the Holocaust into speech. Lawrence Langer has written, “The universe of dying that was Auschwitz...yearns for a language purified of the taint of normality.”<sup>70</sup> Thus the semiotic unrepresentability of trauma is accompanied by a call for non-representation on ethical grounds. But as discussed in the introduction, mediation is not only inevitable; it is also necessary. As Geoffrey Hartman writes, “it *enables* experiencing, it allows what we call the real to enter consciousness and word-presentation, to be something more than trauma followed by a hygienic, and ultimately illusory, mental erasure.”<sup>71</sup> Trauma is “failed experience.”<sup>72</sup> Art, therefore, can provide the mediation necessary for the outside to be transposed into the realm of the individual,<sup>73</sup> allowing her to claim her experience *as a subject*, rather than as an object of its happening.<sup>74</sup>

In the case of *Partners*, the trauma being attested to is not the Holocaust *per se*, but the secondary trauma Ydessa Hendeles has incurred in the continuing violence of its aftermath. A critic once told Hendeles that the common denominator of her collecting is “sadism and masochism, psychological vulnerability, victimization, and the emotionally

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<sup>69</sup> Caruth. 153.

<sup>70</sup> as quoted in Hartman. 3.

<sup>71</sup> Hartman. 157.

<sup>72</sup> Ernst van Alphen. “Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, and Trauma.” *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer. 25.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 27.

<sup>74</sup> van Alphen. *Caught by History*. 44.

wounded.”<sup>75</sup> “I’m part of a generation that wasn’t supposed to exist, trying to come to terms with the world,”<sup>76</sup> she states. But how does one come to terms with the world when one’s culture has been decimated? Very little remains of the European Jewry once living in the Third Reich. How does one understand one’s inheritance if it is inaccessible due to physical destruction of both life and property and inassimilable due to trauma? Her collection, and by extension her exhibitions, “try to come to terms with evil.”<sup>77</sup>

As a second-generation survivor, Ydessa Hendeles’ connection to the Holocaust is mediated not through recollection but through “an imaginative investment and creation.”<sup>78</sup> In *Family Frames*, Marianne Hirsch proposes the term “postmemory” to denote this connection:

Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated.<sup>79</sup>

In another essay Hirsch writes that postmemory “is a question of adopting the traumatic experiences – and thus also the memories – of others as one’s own, or, more precisely, as experiences one might oneself have had, and of inscribing them into one’s own life story.”<sup>80</sup> Ydessa Hendeles states, “I inherited something the same way everyone else my age inherited something. I can’t hear the things that happened to my mother, because they

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<sup>75</sup> Allan Schwartzman as quoted in Sarah Jennings. “Ydessa Hendeles: A Collector who Curates.” *Artnews* Dec. (1994): 98.

<sup>76</sup> as stated in Beckel.

<sup>77</sup> Hendeles as quoted in Greenberg. 39.

<sup>78</sup> Marianne Hirsch. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997. 22.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Marianne Hirsch. “Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy.” *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer. 9.

are degrading, humiliating.”<sup>81</sup> Postmemory resides not only in her psyche, but also in her body: a prenatal glitch left her without one ear and other physical deformations that took much childhood surgery to remedy.<sup>82</sup> Remarking on this, she states, “The fact that I came out partially damaged, I think, has to do with the deprivation, torture of my parents. I think my connection to the war is there.”<sup>83</sup> Whether or not this is medically the case is beside the point; for her, her scars mark the past – in the present – of her mother’s suffering.

Against this backdrop of inherited pain, Ydessa Hendeles maintains her faith in the recuperative power of art: as a “member of a generation that was not supposed to exist,” she has always experienced identity as an outcome of creativity.<sup>84</sup> Ydessa has stated that she “cannot imagine a history before the war”<sup>85</sup> but in *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)* (2002) (Figs. 4-6), she attempts to do just that – to both recreate and mourn her lost world of familial origin. Upon entering this “project,” we find ourselves in what looks like a turn-of-the-century natural history museum: the rooms are covered floor-to-ceiling and wall-to-wall with small, framed photographs of people posing with their favourite plush toy. Teddy bears sit in antique glass and wood cabinets. Lamps hang low. Their light bounces off of all the glass surfaces, all the frames, making the entire room shimmer. Photographs, writes Hirsch, “in their enduring ‘umbilical’ connection to life are precisely the medium connecting first- and second-generation remembrance, memory and

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<sup>81</sup> as quoted in Mays. R17.

<sup>82</sup> Mays. R17.

<sup>83</sup> as quoted in Mays. R17.

<sup>84</sup> Mays. R17.

<sup>85</sup> as quoted in Greenberg. 39.

postmemory.”<sup>86</sup> Hendeles has built a narrow mezzanine level to allow visitors access to the top half of the collection and sheltering us below, increasing the sense of intimacy with these small relics of the everyday and suggesting that each warrants equal attention.

The task is overwhelming – we learn from the label that there are 3000 photographs. Turning to the first wall on the right of the entrance, we see photographs of children holding the conical paper bags full of goodies, *Schultüten*, which are traditionally given to children in Germany on their first day of school to “sweeten” it. Close by we see a captioned photograph; it jumps out for being the only one on the wall with a label. It reads: “Jacob and Dorothy Hendeles, survivors of the Holocaust, with their daughter, Ydessa, born December 27, 1948.” Ydessa is seen in a baby carriage with her teddy bear just like all the babies to her left and right, also posing with their teddy bears. If we look in the first vitrine, we also find ourselves in Germany, but this time we are looking at photographs of Nazi officers and German soldiers with their families, each with a teddy somewhere in the frame.<sup>87</sup> These are the only other labeled photographs we see in this room. These initial references to Germany, Nazism and the Holocaust constitute a signpost by which we orient ourselves geographically and temporally in the archive.

*Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)* is an imaginary family album: “I’ve tried to imagine what it was like before,”<sup>88</sup> Ydessa Hendeles states, and in that effort she created a fantasy universe filled with teddy bears. This feat of “imaginative investment” is emphasized by the small taxidermied dog Hendeles included, which appears to be sleeping between the

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<sup>86</sup> Hirsch. *Family Frames*. 23.

<sup>87</sup> Regardless of which uniform they wear, they are all labeled “Nazi.”

<sup>88</sup> as quoted in John Bentley Mays. “Bears.” *Canadian Art* 19.3 (2002): 93.



vitines. This is an artwork by Maurizio Cattelan, *Untitled*, 1998 (Fig. 7). The dog is dead, of course, but we project a personality onto it nevertheless, suspending reality for the sake of our desires. This dead animal signals the gap between memory and postmemory, the difficulty of accessing that lost world. It will never be apparent to us as it *was*, only as it *is*, with the marks of our own projections.

But how can such an imaginative investment be considered testimony, with its pact of authenticity? Ydessa Hendeles' inclusion of her own family photographs in this archive – labeled with the fact of her parents' survival of Auschwitz – serves as a reminder that the protagonist and author are one and the same and that she is *real*. These photographs connote *reality*. In spite of the semiotic impossibility of realism due to the inevitable and necessary mediation of language, artists continuously attempt to rehabilitate realism, specifically documentary photography, testimony and the guise of archival objectivity, in order to “persuade their audience of their moral integrity – that is, of their reliance on cognitive intentions and their rejection of aesthetic considerations.”<sup>89</sup> Adopting a documentary “look,” however, is not the same as producing documentary: the text as a whole does not necessarily claim that what it represents was real. Rather, it creates a *sense* that what it represents was real – it generates what Barthes calls a “reality effect.”<sup>90</sup> Thus it still operates within the logic of testimony, albeit at a conceptual remove.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> van Alphen. *Caught by History*. 20.

<sup>90</sup> as discussed by van Alphen in *Caught by History*. 20-4.

<sup>91</sup> We can see how *Partners* operates in this mode on a three additional counts: Ydessa Hendeles' professional practice explicitly engages the trope of testimony; she adopts the archival mode in *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)*; and she presents other historical photographs, such as Arbus' self portrait and the studio photograph of the Wild Bunch, in order to maintain a connection with the actual, rather than fantastical, world.

I will discuss *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)* in more detail in the following chapters. Here, to summarize this chapter, I want to stress how it, and the show as a whole, bespeaks Ydessa Hendeles' effort to reconstitute her subjectivity against the background of the Holocaust. Ydessa Hendeles states in the catalogue, "Triumph is not only about the continuance of life but also about the survival of the spirit."<sup>92</sup> Richard Rhodes writes:

Her insistence that art bear witness to existential meaning seems one way of working through that family history, a way of confronting its horrors and discontinuities. And yet there is a rebellious dimension at work here too, a sense that the choice to live a life in art is not an evasion of history, or an escape into privilege, but a form of testimony...<sup>93</sup>

The autobiography she offers in *Partners*, as opposed to the self-portrait that her collection evinces, is "a vehicle for self-expression in the process of healing from trauma."<sup>94</sup> Enabling recollection is not the objective, but rather creating the memory in the first place. As such, collecting and exhibiting art is a life-making process.

The viewer is vital for this process in his or her role of the addressee to which Ydessa Hendeles' testimony is directed: rebuilding a self requires a witness to confirm its integration in the present. Hendeles has narrated her wounds to us – the *punctums* that have cut her – in order to produce narratable memories that she and we can then share. This is the "transactive" partnership in which we are bound in *Partners*.

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<sup>92</sup> Hendeles. "Notes on the Exhibition." 223.

<sup>93</sup> Rhodes. 40.

<sup>94</sup> Greenberg. 41.

## CHAPTER TWO

In his essay for the exhibition catalogue, titled *Exhibition as Narrative Work of Art*, Ernst van Alphen states: “[*Partners*] will be *about something*, but not in the didactic mode of the thematic exhibition. Instead, it will *perform* what it addresses.”<sup>1</sup> In the case of *Partners* this “something” is Ydessa Hendeles’ “genesis of the personality,” to use Phillipe Lejeune’s phrase. As we have seen in the first chapter, it is a genesis that is intimately connected with the Holocaust. But how does it come to be performed?

If we accept that every act of communication constitutes a subject, the way in which an exhibition positions the viewer is crucial to an understanding of its political effect.

In the previous chapter I discussed how Ydessa Hendeles can be considered the author, narrator and focalizer of *Partners*, thereby defining the exhibition as an autobiographical text. Hendeles’ curatorial practice is an attempt to reveal to the viewer the *punctum* of the work. As such, she develops exhibitions which recreate the experience “of being inside someone else’s head” – hers. In this chapter I follow the exhibition narrative on the level of focalization in order to demonstrate how Hendeles positions the viewer to enter into this experience. The focalizer is a narrative function that accounts for how the fabula is interpreted in the story. As such, it is the lens through which the viewer perceives the world of the text. By adopting the focalizing lens, “empirical” viewers cast themselves in the role of the “ideal” viewer: they put on the right blinders, so to speak, to enact the exhibition script. In the case of *Partners* this lens, these blinders, are those of Ydessa

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<sup>1</sup> Ernst van Alphen. “Exhibition as Narrative Work of Art.” *Partners*. Eds. Chris Dercon and Thomas Weski. Köln: Walther König, 2003. 171.

Hendeles. As such, this chapter is a description of the show on the terms she establishes – not an abstract overview but rather the protagonist’s embodied view: performing an exhibition text is a somatic experience.

How do viewers come to recognize the role they are asked to play? Despite the wide acceptance of the curator as artist, exhibition as autobiography is highly unusual, and indeed unimaginable with a public collection. A more common formulation would be an “expert” in the position narrator, who “objectively” presents a particular issue or artist. The focalizer, in this case, would be either the expert who “reveals” the issue to us, or the artist whose vision is made “apparent.” Titles of such shows might be *Images of Globalization*, or *Women look at Afghanistan*, respectively. More common yet would be a show of art history’s evolution, such as *From Manet to Pollock*. It is such teleological exhibitions that have formed our expectations. In order to understand the implications of *Partners’* narrative strategy we need to know how it operates in relation to this genre, which dates back to the consecration of the first public museums in Europe. How museums can constitute an audience through narratives of nationhood is of particular relevance to this thesis because it is the source of an exhibition’s ideological power: the “ideal” viewer is the mold, so to speak, of the subject that is constituted by (subjected to) the exhibition.

In order to see how this process of interpellation plays out, we can use the example of the Louvre as described by Carol Duncan. The narrative of nationhood that it displays under the pretext of an impartial art history has been emulated by national galleries across the

world. Still today, this remains the dominant exhibition model. When the Louvre palace was declared a public museum by the French Revolutionary government in 1793, the great tales of aristocratic luxury that lined the corridors needed to be re-scripted in order to reflect the rising bourgeoisie. This was no easy task: under the eye of the King, the agenda was to make all those who entered the palace immediately aware of their position as His rightful subjects. In order to represent an abstract entity instead – the *state* instead of the King – the collection was re-organized according to Enlightenment ideas: paintings were arranged by name, date and nationality starting in ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome. A walk through the palace thus became a walk through art history, with France proudly displayed as the pinnacle of cultural achievement, having evolved naturally from the classical past. Duncan describes how the ritual of walking through the palatial corridors is enacting a ritual of citizenship. By walking through the Louvre’s galleries, the visitor is/was to reenact the history of genius they depict/depicted, “re-live its progress step by step and, thus enlightened, know himself as a citizen of history’s most civilized and advanced nation-state.”<sup>2</sup>

This “ritual walk” provides the blueprint for the museum experience: over the last two centuries, we have learned to look for reflections of ourselves in the progressive narrative it establishes. The fact that this narrative remains implicit makes it no less effective, perhaps even more so for masking the mode of address and thereby obscuring the “you” position from which the viewer could potentially retort. Carol Duncan writes, “in all

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<sup>2</sup> Carol Duncan. Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums. London : Routledge, 1995. 27.

ritual sites, some kind of performance takes place.”<sup>3</sup> This performance is an experience structured by the exhibition in which the viewer enacts his or her assigned narrative role as the “ideal” viewer. It is on this deep level of the text that the politics of an exhibition are played out: it is a prescription for viewing. The “ritual script” presents the curator’s vision so as to become the subject’s own. But this is not to say that all viewers will have the same experience and that the interpellation is “complete.”<sup>4</sup> What I am investigating in this chapter is how the viewer comes to assume the “I” position of the focalizer.

Ydessa Hendeles exploits this narrative convention/expectation for her own purposes. The idea behind “performative curating”<sup>5</sup> is that an exhibition’s narration is equal part action: by following the story we bring it into being. In the opening wall text, she outlines her tactic:

The viewer progresses narratively and cumulatively, landing in culs-de-sac, as pauses for thought, before continuing by retracing the route and revisiting the artworks. Each work frames the following work, first upon entering and later upon returning through the works already seen. The return trip recontextualizes the works for the viewer, enabling them to be perceived differently than when first encountered.<sup>6</sup>

This “narrative” and “cumulative” effect could of course define exhibitions retrospectively, such as the ritual of citizenship Carol Duncan describes where we *do* history step by step. In *Partners*, the history that we are walked through is that of Ydessa Hendeles’ life, not that of *La France*. What is also interesting in this statement is

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<sup>3</sup> Carol Duncan . “Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship.” *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine. Washington: Smithsonian Institution P, 1991. 90.

<sup>4</sup> For distinction between “ideal” and “empirical” see Martha Ward. “What’s Important About the History of Modern Art Exhibitions?” *Thinking about Exhibitions*. Eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne. London: Routledge, 1996. 451-464. See also Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal “Semiotics and Art History.” *The Art Bulletin*. 73.2 (1991): 174-208.

<sup>5</sup> The term is Maria Lind’s. See Alex Farquharson. “I curate, you curate, we curate...” *Art Monthly* 269 (2003): 7-10.

<sup>6</sup> Ydessa Hendeles. Wall Text. Haus der Kunst, Munich. Nov. 2003.

Hendeles' use of the phrase "for the viewer," as opposed to "by the viewer." This choice of preposition indicates that the action has already been completed and the viewer will now re-enact it. It is by way of this reenactment that every step we take in *Partners* is one step deeper into Hendeles' personal vision.

We are forewarned, however, that this narrative will not progress along a straight line; rather, it will force us to repeatedly hit dead-ends. We are also warned that "*Partners* is a composition made of metaphors:"

Like a tapestry, the exhibition provides pictures woven with the threads of themes, but is ultimately not thematic, illustrative, or didactic. *Partners* offers a contemporary-art experience to viewers during which each individual can transcend the literal to search for new insights.<sup>7</sup>

If *Partners* is a metaphoric autobiography, then we will come to recognize Hendeles through indirection, hence the "transcendence." We will need to "transcend the literal" to find the unsaid part of the metaphoric equation. It is my assertion in this chapter that it is by Hendeles' cyclical itinerary of constant return, the fact that she forces us to repeatedly hit dead-ends, that *Partners* comes to perform what it addresses.

## §

In the first chapter I described how Diane Arbus, like Minnie Mouse, functions as a phantasm of Ydessa Hendeles – or, rather, of both her and her mother. It is effectively a self-portrait of Hendeles and a metaphor of her intimate connection to the Holocaust as a second-generation survivor. In this chapter I want to suggest that this little photograph is

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

also the “portal” through which we can enter the level of focalization. The photograph itself is intimate in scale and demeanor, and intensely private: if we see it, we are so close that any other viewer must pass behind us. Consequently it functions like a self-portrait of the viewer, as well: we stand as her reflection on the other side of the mirror. We can imagine ourselves pictured there, caught on silver as a testimony of our existence. By identifying with this image, we pass through the portal, so to speak, and reconstitute ourselves as bearing the vision of Hendeles. Her point of view will provide the focalizing lens through which we experience the rest of the exhibition; we internalize it as our own.

Once we pass through the portal and reconstitute ourselves as such, we are no longer in the historical space of the Haus der Kunst where a historical person, Ydessa Hendeles, has mounted an exhibition with a specific agenda; rather, we leave the historical world behind in order to enact the circumscribed world of the text. Let me underline that separating this textual layer is arbitrary and only for the sake of analysis: as “empirical” viewers we never lose sight of where we are and who is speaking. In this regard, focalization is not literal but literary: like the story of Tom Thumb, which asks us to empathize with the clever little boy at the expense of the giant, *Partners* asks us to empathize with Hendeles, not the gang of bandits. “Hendeles” in this case is the name of a role, a character in the story, the “ideal” viewer, the “we” constituted by the show, not an actual person. Due to the autobiographical pact, however, we understand this “Hendeles” as Hendeles; thus I have kept the name. It is through the eyes of this protagonist that we will see the works in the show.



Because I approximate the protagonist on two counts – I am female and I am a Canadian with European (German) ancestry – it is relatively easy for me to assume this role.

However, I am not Jewish, which, as we will see as we move through the exhibition, is an important aspect of its focalization. The further the “empirical” viewer is from the “ideal,” the more he or she will be asked to surrender in order for the exhibition to cohere and the less likely will the interpellation be felt as “natural.” If the viewer is male, for example, it may be more difficult to identify with the Arbus/Hendeles self-portrait.

Perhaps he will think of himself on the receiving end of this token, in the shoes of Arbus’ husband in Burma. Furthermore, given the alternative to this self-portrait – a gang of ruthless cowboys – it is a precarious moment in the exhibition narrative, for the romantic allure that envelops the Wild Bunch makes an appeal for identification, as well.

Inevitably every viewer will personalize the exhibition in his or her own way but this does not alter the script itself: the curator places “signposts that gently guide the visitor along.”<sup>8</sup> What happens when/if the viewer follows these signposts is what I am trying to discern in this chapter, for, in my estimation, they are far from “gentle.”

Upon leaving the orientation room, there is little uncertainty as to where to go first: straight ahead into the room that we see when we first walk in, *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)* (2002) by Ydessa Hendeles. As described in the preceding chapter, it is filled to capacity with vernacular photographs of people and their teddies, and some of these teddies themselves. Unlike the thousands of unlabeled photographs, these furry revenants of bygone affections are accompanied by stories of their provenance. For example, we

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<sup>8</sup> van Alphen. 173.

learn of Karen Grunthe's teddy bear, which held her pride of place in the family after her sudden death. We learn about Snezy, who was gift to Ted Able from his mother when he left for overseas during WWII. We learn of Victor, named in honour of the passing of Queen Victoria, who was bought to cheer a sickly child. We also learn about Uncle Edward, a teddy so beloved by his owner, Alfreda Elderfield, that she devised stories, games and even a family tree for his identity and perpetuation. We become immersed in these intimate details and realize simultaneously that every photograph in the archive has an equally intimate tale to tell. The stories seem endless but they also seem generic: their specificity is compromised by being "just like all the others." As we look upon these images after images of children and adults defining themselves to the outside world through their relationship – loving, symbolic or hostile – with their teddy bears, we are reminded of our own childhood bonds of fantasy: it could just as easily be us that is sitting there on that rug, or in that school photo, etc. Culturally speaking, we, as Westerners, are deeply embedded in this archive, with a teddy bear to mark our normalcy.

The second room of *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)* is also filled to capacity. We come across two more photographs of Ydessa Hendeles. The first is labeled "Ydessa Hendeles, born Marburg, Germany, December 27, 1948," and the second is labeled "Jacob Hendeles, survivor of the Holocaust, with his daughter, Ydessa." These captioned photographs serve to underline, once again, both Hendeles as a historical person and her role as the narrative's protagonist. But her fantasy of "what is was like before" is also a nightmare: in this room, on the far right in the last vitrine, are eight photographs

borrowed from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Although at first sight they do not look different from the rest of the photographs (the subjects are posed with their teddies in non-descript settings), they take on the weight of their history by being shown with extended stories of the people depicted in the photographs or the people who donated the photographs to the museum. The stories are harrowing and tell of both murder and survival, and the photographs themselves are stubborn survivors of the effort to eradicate Jewish culture.

Of special note is that each of these Holocaust photographs depicts a child. In an essay titled *Projected Memory*, Marianne Hirsch describes how the image of the child victim functions as an icon of human vulnerability and innocence and allows for us to think, “it could have been me.” According to Hirsch, the process of identifying with the child-victim is triangular: “The adult viewer sees the child victim through the eyes of his or her own child self.”<sup>9</sup> In this way it is possible to bypass the limits of identification:

When two children “look” at one another in the process of photographic witnessing, the otherness that separates them is diminished to the point where the recollection could easily slide into the idiopathic away from the heteropathic – where displacement gives way to interiorization and appropriation.<sup>10</sup>

As such, the child victim is a powerful medium of postmemory. In the first chapter I defined postmemory as an inter-generational space of remembrance, but this space is also “more broadly available through cultural and public, and not merely individual and

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<sup>9</sup> Marianne Hirsch. “Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy.” *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer. Hanover: UP of New England, 1999. 15.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 16.

personal, acts of remembrance, identification, and projection.”<sup>11</sup> Ydessa Hendeles is inviting us into this space.

Reaffirmed as “belonging” to the norm, we proceed to the next room. It is stark and empty. The contrast shocks us into alertness. Nothing is on the walls. The floor is bare. The room is bright, lighting up every empty corner. The only thing we see is a small kneeling figure in a tweed outfit with his back to us. He appears to be praying. It feels as though we are intruding upon a private space. When we come to the side of the boy, we see that he wears the face of Hitler. The likeness is undeniable: it is accurate to even the point of his nose and the bags under his eyes. He kneels before us as if awaiting judgment, shrunk to a safe size, just like a bear is shrunk to a teddy. But of course this is a fake Hitler, not Hitler himself. It is *Him* by Maurizio Cattelan (2001) (Figs. 8-9). Looking at its polyester face will no more betray a truth of the Holocaust than a small Ken doll. On an analytic level we know this but on the level of focalization, as Hendeles suggests in the catalogue, this sculpture functions as though it were Hitler himself – as though we saw him all of a sudden on his knees in the temple he built to house his ideals.<sup>12</sup>

With *Him* we have hit a dead-end: there is no exit to this room. Civilization as it was known stops here. Although the third person pronoun “him” semantically consolidates the viewers to his exclusion, he is in our midst: barbarism is *within* civilization, not its “other.” The room seems to roar in its empty silence. The doors to the left and to the right

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 8-9.

<sup>12</sup> Ydessa Hendeles “Notes on the Exhibition.” *Partners*. Eds. Chris Dercon and Thomas Weski. 216.

do not open to let us through. We need to leave the way we arrived, through *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)*. Having looked into the face of the instigator of the Holocaust, the archive takes on a funereal quality, as though all of a sudden all of these faces were of the culture that Hitler set out to destroy, or as though these were the personal documents of the culture that remained silent due to the same law of the norm that provided us our initial sense of security. What may have reminded us of a natural history museum now looks most unnatural and reminds us instead of the wall-to-wall photographs of the annihilated European Jewry that we have come to know in Holocaust museums.<sup>13</sup>

In her lecture about the exhibition, Mieke Bal describes this dynamic between *Him* and *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)* in terms borrowed from film studies. She talks about how the contrast between the dense, intimate photography archive and the lone figure seen from the back in an otherwise empty gallery is akin to a sharp “cut” between one episode and the next, catapulting us into a completely different time and space. When we venture further into the room to see its face, we see it first against the background of the archive but then we mentally “zoom in,” thereby abstracting Hitler’s face from the immediate surrounding. The resulting “close-up” in our mind’s eye is isolated from both sets of space-time coordinates in which we are moving. We carry it with us when we return through *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)*. It haunts us like a “dissolve,” a specter superimposed over all the unknown faces. In the final edit, the two works become inseparable.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Christian Boltanski, as well, take the aesthetic established by such displays as the departure point for his work.

<sup>14</sup> Mieke Bal. “Affective Syntax: Translating Emotion and World Memories.” Haus der Kunst, Munich, 9 Dec. 2003.

Thus the narrative becomes more psychological than chronological, unfolding before us but also insisting that we relive what was behind us. As such it does not follow the “arrow” of time but circles repeatedly. Like memory, rather than history, we read the beginning in the end and the end in the beginning.<sup>15</sup> As a mnemonic unit, this passage functions like a flashback of the Holocaust, of the millions of unnamed faces in unmarked graves, the families torn apart, and the silent collaborators. We are forced to pass by *Self-portrait with Camera* again, and it strikes us with sudden clarity: we have just returned from a trip into Hendeles’ postmemory, where we walked through the memory banks she has constituted for herself in the absence of any photographs that document her heritage, and now we are back in 1945 where the story begins: Ydessa was born in 1948.

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The identification with the feminine “I” that *Self-portrait with Camera* introduces and that is sustained throughout the first passage is reinforced when we enter the second passage: two plaster casts of a Venus Pudica, *Mimesi* (1975-6) by Giulio Paolini, stand facing each other as though dancing, practicing karate, or simply mesmerized by their own reflection (Fig. 10). By looking at each other, however, these Venuses are split between being subjects and objects of the gaze: she is not simply seen but also sees. Ernst van Alphen describes how we come to identify with this point of view:

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Ricoeur. “Narrative Time.” *On Narrative*. Ed. W.J.T. Mitchell. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981. 165-86.

Importantly, they are not only looking at their reflection, they are also looking at an artwork – just as we, visitors of this show, are doing. Hence *Mimesis* seems to suggest that visitors to art museums are ultimately looking for a reflection of themselves in the works of art.<sup>16</sup>

In van Alphen's formulation, we stand in the stead of one and look at the other, who looks back at us. In this way, we, in the role of the "ideal" viewer, reaffirm the focalization of the feminine "I," this time of a mythic beauty.

As we enter the next room – the large central hall of the gallery, its hull, so to speak – we find ourselves in a wide-open space amidst a sea faring fleet, Hanne Darboven's *Ansichten >82<* (1982) (Figs. 11-12). We see the same image over and over again on all four walls, making for an almost grid-like articulation of the space and a definitive horizon line. On each of these panels, we see a studio portrait of a sailor much like the anonymous images we see in *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)*, and an image of a large ocean-liner of the *Hamburg-Amerika Linie*, which connects Germany to the United States. Below these two images, there is a weekly calendar with scribbles filling the lines, numerical extrapolations of the date, and sparse handwritten notes. This format repeats for each week of the year 1982, hung sequentially from left to right around the room. Only the first panel differs substantially: it features postcards of the city of Hamburg and the calendar page is filled with handwritten encyclopedia excerpts that tell of the German sailor, who died in battle during the First World War, and Albert Ballin, the director of the *Linie*, who committed suicide when his life's effort to establish peace on the water was threatened by the war. This work is a memorial. A quote by Theodor Heuss, a writer

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<sup>16</sup> van Alphen. 175-6.

and the first president of the Federal Republic of Germany, is written on the first panel:

“There is no collective guilt. There is, however, a collective shame.”

Following the light that pours in from the east, we enter the next room. It contains another archive assembled by Ydessa Hendeles, *Ships (The Zeppelin Project)* (2002) (Fig. 13). Like the fleet we just saw, these liners also fared over the Atlantic, connecting the old world to the new world, and have militaristic associations. We see these silver giants over castles, cities, oceans, pyramids and deserts, casting shadows that recall the bombs zeppelins dropped in World War One. Of special note, this archive contains the photographic sequence documenting the Hindenburg disaster in New Jersey and captions from the Associated Press (Fig. 14). On the tail fins of this phallic-shaped vessel, we see the Nazi emblem: this lighter-than-air luxury ship was part of the Nazi propaganda machine, yet it was welcomed in the United States as late as 1937. We see it flying over the Manhattan skyline; we see it suddenly burst into flames, shooting out smoke behind it – like an ejaculation, according to Hendeles;<sup>17</sup> then we see it falling out of the sky entirely aflame, crashing on the airfield below in a mass of bent aluminum. Directly opposite these photographs is a small gold-plated sculpture of the “boot” of Italy hanging upside down by the toe. With the swastika in the corner of our eye, Luciano Fabro’s *Italia d’Oro* (1968-71) (Fig. 15) seems to reference the 1945 hanging of Mussolini, who had attempted to create an Italian empire in alliance with Hitler’s Germany. Another powerful “him” is thus captured metaphorically and anachronistically by Hendeles, this time hung upside down for all to see.

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<sup>17</sup> Hendeles. “Notes on the Exhibition.” 218.



The stark difference between the reflective, feminine *Mimesis* and the three works that follow, all of which connote war and violence, is emphasized as we proceed along the east colonnade to a group of photographs we see hanging at the left end. Here we are faced with the famous documentary photographs of the sacrificial protest of Thich Quang Duc: on June 11, 1963, in Saigon, he immolated himself for the sake of religious freedom by dousing himself in gasoline and lighting a match (Fig. 16). The entire sequence is presented here, including the get-away car and the crowds that gathered to watch the carefully orchestrated event. As Hendeles explains in the catalogue, these images by the reporter Malcolm Browne plastered the papers and contributed to President Kennedy's decision to end support of President Ngo Dinh Diem's regime – an action that led to the coup in which Diem was overthrown and killed. These are the actions of the big men of history.

As we look at these images, we hear a man's voice yelling "thank you thank you thank you thank you..." over and over and over again in the adjacent room. Upon entering this room, we see a close-up of the yelling man's face, gnarled with exertion, on a television monitor placed at head-height on a metal stand. His voice is so loud and aggressive that it almost slips into "fuck you fuck you fuck you..." It takes only a moment to realize that the video, titled *Thank You* (1992) (Fig. 17), does not oscillate in tone and that he, Bruce Nauman, will never say anything other than "thank you." It loops repeatedly. In Hendeles' words,

The simple switch in tone lifts the shroud on existing aggressive human instincts, resting threateningly close to the surface in us all...It repeatedly and ferociously copulates with

the viewer again and again and again and again. Power mirrored, squared, and confounded into absurdity.<sup>18</sup>

“Fuck you!” is a threat of sexual violence. The gender divide that was already palpable in the orientation room, is here confirmed. And here, with “thank you” slipping into its binary opposite, we are at another dead-end.

With Nauman’s voice still in our ears we reenter the colonnade and proceed to the opposite end, where we see another set of documentary photographs: the murder of a Vietcong suspect by Saigon Police Chief on February 1, 1968 (Fig. 18). In this sequence we see an unarmed man in civilian clothes being dragged out into the street and shot by police. The central photograph, which shows the Chief pointing a gun directly at the suspect’s head, was disseminated in papers around the world: it functions as an icon of the Vietnam War and supposedly changed the course of history by awakening the American public to what was being executed on their behalf. However, as Hendeles explains in her “notes,” the identity of the suspect was known to the police; he was not simply an everyman as it appears; he was a terrorist and lieutenant who had murdered a South Vietnamese major and his family. This was not a random spontaneous shooting; it was choreographed especially for the press to record. Without an explanation to accompany it, however, it betrays nothing of this context and effectively creates its own context in the imagination of those who view it. Without this knowledge, this image could continue to connote the story of unbridled violence, hiding the purposeful production of the assassination. Either way, arbitrary or orchestrated, it represents a deadly competition between men.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 221.

Moving along from war to war, from platitudes to violent spatterings, from suicide to murder, we enter the next room. It is almost bare, profoundly serene, and befallen in silence. Legible from the entrance we read “May 15, 1981” in white letters on a small blue canvas. This “date painting” by On Kawara seems to radiate under the spotlight. In a wall-mounted case on the back wall we see a small open box. The lid reads “May 15, 1981,” as well, as does the newspaper clipping from the New York Times pasted onto the inside bottom of the box (Fig. 19). This was the day of an assassination attempt on the Pope. A white circle indicates the gun but we cannot see the Pope himself. The headline reads “Pope, Still in Serious Condition.” This journalistic account of his near-death and survival now houses Kawara’s meditation on that day, which he sustained throughout the long and intensive process of making this painting. On the right hand wall is another wall-mounted display case. In this one we see four telegrams sent by On Kawara that read “I am still alive,” as though this is something that cannot be taken for granted.

If we proceed through the set of doors at the back of this room, we find ourselves in a pitch-black corridor, James Coleman’s *Box* (1977) (Fig. 20). As our eyes adjust and we move into the room, we hear the incessant sound of a film projector and a loud intermittent thudding. The contrast to the preceding room is shocking to the senses. An intense bright light flashes an image on the far wall. Two boxers are in a ring. The contrast is so high that it is difficult to distinguish them. The image appears for a fraction of a second, and then disappears leaving an after-image on the black wall, on our retinas. The next image appears as soon as the last one fades. We can discern movement across

the ring but neither fighter falls: no narrative is established. The soundtrack, the exaggerated thud of impact and the internal dialogue of one of the fighters, fills our ears but tells us nothing. Like Thank you! turns into Fuck you!, the fighter's groans oscillate between enticement and aggression. *Box* is a torn and battered headspace. Here the focalization is at its most literal. The video loops; the fight is fought continuously. We have hit yet another dead-end.

This is our third. The progressive narrative we have come to expect by viewing two centuries of museum exhibitions has stopped, spinning us back around the way we came not only once but three times. The past of the exhibition is relived in the subsequent retracing of our route, collapsing our sense of chronological time into an eerie déjà-vu. As we move out of *Box*, back through the On Kawara gallery, back through *The Zeppelin Project* and into the midst of Hanne Darboven's sea-faring fleet, we take a mental accounting of the repeating motifs. So far our movement through the show has been directed by *Him*, by a man yelling Thank you! / Fuck you!, and by a paradigmatic demonstration of machismo that is never resolved. So far we have three dead figureheads – Hitler, Mussolini and Diem – and perhaps we can also count the Vietcong terrorist, the Wild Bunch and the near-death of the Pope. Ernst van Alphen writes, “Each passage can be seen as a necessary detour, necessary because it is only within these detours that the viewer will have the space – literally as well as figuratively [...] – to activate repetitions through transforming mere difference into subtle resemblances.”<sup>19</sup> The resemblance here

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<sup>19</sup> van Alphen. 174.

is not so subtle: orders of power collapsing, symbolically at least, only to reappear in another guise, falling and rebuilding themselves repeatedly.

What is less readily apparent is the cyclical repetition of our movement, but by the third repetition, it imprints itself as a figure of its own to be contended with: the loop – as artistic device and psychic entity.<sup>20</sup> Both are historically and thematically connected to the notion of trauma, which Cathy Caruth defines as “a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind’s experience of time.”<sup>21</sup> The psychic loop arises because the victim of trauma is fixated on a violent event, looping its occurrence continuously in his or her mind. As discussed in the previous chapter, the event is thus isolated and without context, outside of the linear flow of time that would allow it to be assimilated by the individual. The artistic loop also continuously replays an event, thereby divorcing it from any traditional notions of narrative: there is no set beginning or ending. Instead it represents “a synchronic interpretation and segment of time.”<sup>22</sup> Kelly Taxter explains that, similar to the psychic loop, which originates in violence, “the artistic loop is inextricable from its origins in film, thus technology, war and fundamentally violence.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Kelly Taxter has argued the links between them in “The Loop as Artistic Device and Psychic Structure: How a Closed and Hidden System of the Past Signals a Coming Event.” Unpublished Essay. Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson. 17 June 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Cathy Caruth. Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996. 61.

<sup>22</sup> Taxter. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Taxter. 2-3. Loops are popular in contemporary video and film-based art, sometimes only for the sake of exhibition. Although Taxter traces the loop back to the military development of film and photography during the First and Second World War, only those that fulfill this (anti)narrative criteria are “traumatic.”

What is missing in both is the past, or the context that would provide the necessary means for comprehending the present; past and present are synthesized in the victim's mind, altering both. The victim is in the "in-between." Kelly Taxter writes:

Both of these loops represent a gap in time and understanding, which locates the event of the loop as in-between the real and the imagined, dreaming and consciousness, beginning and ending. The loop is a closed system of the in-between.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, since the past and present are not definable, what is at stake is the future.

The promise of the future is what beckons us forward in the traditional exhibition narrative, for the "ideal" viewer is positioned as its rightful inheritor. Following Peter Brooks' theory of narrative, van Alphen discusses how repetitions allow us to see the past and present as related "and as establishing a future that will be noticeable as some variation in the pattern."<sup>25</sup> But at our third dead-end, when we come to realize that no one will ever win this boxing match, the future slips off the horizon of expectation. We are still alive, we know, but no more. Why is the man locked in a curse?<sup>26</sup> We are not offered a narrative in the work that would allow us to discern cause and effect; the two are collapsed. Taxter writes:

The receiver cannot distinguish past from present, cannot make rational conclusions about the event's existence or purpose. In a sense *all* is manifest yet *all* is secret. How then can one conceive of a coming event?<sup>27</sup>

Taken on their own, in their own room, there is no reprieve from the repetition inherent to both *Thank-you* and *Box*, but as Hendeles has herself said, "the visual experience of

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<sup>24</sup> Taxter. 6.

<sup>25</sup> as quoted in van Alphen. 174.

<sup>26</sup> Nauman's video was a gift to Ydessa Hendeles for mounting an exhibition of his work at her Foundation.

<sup>27</sup> Taxter. 9.

going to a gallery is more inclusive than that.”<sup>28</sup> Drawing on both Gilles Deleuze and Cathy Caruth’s work on trauma, Taxter argues for a positive productive potential in the in-between time of trauma, relocating it between the projection of the artistic loop, or testimony of the psychic loop, and its reception by the viewer/listener: “[the in-between] is the moment between visual and cognitive understanding, the synapse between seeing and interpreting. The film’s subject remains trapped within the cycle, or the loop, but the viewer holds the potential for change.”<sup>29</sup>

This potential for change is manifest when new information is “grafted” onto the loop.

According to Taxter,

If the receiver of the loop is able to account for and actively engage with its unique time-space phenomena, then the potential for the creation of ‘the new’ is in place. The coming event is not a radical explosion or rupture of the loop’s cycle, but a subtle shift in its meaning. The shift becomes more complex over time. Once the receiver recognizes and engages with the production, each rotation of the loop carries with it the potential for a new meaning to be grafted onto it.<sup>30</sup>

In *Partners* this “grafting” is evident in the purposeful combinations of artworks Ydessa Hendeles establishes. Consider for example that our experience of *Thank You* is inseparable from the self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc, thus altering both: the event appears as the only possible cause for his “gratitude,” by which in turn, according to Hendeles, “the monk’s act is given voice.”<sup>31</sup> Similarly, our experience of *Box* melds with our contemplation of the private testimony of existence, *I Am Still Alive*; thereby we know the trauma was survived. These works have been grafted onto the two video loops, lending them a significance they are unable to generate on their own and a new place in a

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<sup>28</sup> as quoted in Piere Théberge. “The Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation: building a museum as a life process.” Interview. *Parachute* 54 (1989): 33.

<sup>29</sup> Taxter. 9.

<sup>30</sup> Taxter. 11.

<sup>31</sup> Hendeles. “Notes on the Exhibition.” 221.

new story, however precarious. The future does not show itself by this melding but, through our perambulations and the narrative it generates, the trauma becomes a “fluid entity,”<sup>32</sup> thereby allowing for a “variation in the pattern.”

Back in the hull, the ghostly regiment of sailors stands at attention, waiting silently for their next command. They will be waiting for a very long time: although the weeks are numbered, there is no other indication that time is passing. “And no more words / daily total: today,” writes Darboven on each panel, and each time “today” is crossed out, leaving us with no temporal anchor: *heute*. The word “*gedankenstrich*” (a dash to indicate a pause in thought) is crossed out as well: *gedankenstrich*. In this work the tension between the diachrony of narrative and the synchrony of the archive is most palpable: the image repeats relentlessly every week without change. “Repetition has become the dominant figure in its most literal manifestation,” writes van Alphen of *Ansichten* >82<, thereby “this memorial receives ritualistic overtones.”<sup>33</sup> Unlike memorials, however, which function to historicize an event, here in this monumental room, the circle is unbroken: the start and end of the year are undifferentiated, save for the numerical extrapolations, which look like nervous attempts to allow time to enter, or the opposite, to keep time at bay. We hang on to these little variations and search for them in every panel, desiring them to reveal some development, but their development remains a pure abstraction.

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<sup>32</sup> Taxter. 12.

<sup>33</sup> van Alphen. 177.



At this point, in the “heart” of the show, we are dislocated temporally: having been spun around by the two video loops of the second passage, we are in-between past and present. But also, having repeatedly witnessed male aggression and its consequences, murder and suicide, we are dislocated spatially: our protagonist *Mimesi* stands just outside of the ring. She is not a participant in this scenario: she belongs to the mythical world of timeless beauty. How, then, can we, who stand in her stead, effect change in this world of war and violence? How can the “ambiguous actantial position”<sup>34</sup> between a subject of history and an object of its happening be both acknowledged and mobilized?

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When we come to the first gallery of the third passage, framed by the archway, we see a very large photograph of a street scene that radiates light from behind its surface. It is a modern city: glass towers and communication wires block out the sky. A woman is falling over a man lying on the sidewalk: this is Jeff Wall’s *Stumbling Block* (1991) (Fig. 21). The man is padded with all the right gear to protect himself from his employment hazard, the bruises and possible broken ribs accrued from a day of being fallen over. The woman is in mid-fall, hands stretching out to find the ground. She has been tripped up by a man but is looking forward – to what? Is this another phantasm of Hendeles? Following

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<sup>34</sup> Lawrence Langer’s study of the testimonies of Holocaust survivors offers many examples of trauma’s stalling of the discursive process of experience. Of particular relevance to my discussion of *Partners* is what he calls the “ambiguous actantial position:” one is neither subject nor object of the events, or one is both at the same time. These survivors were “split” as a result of what happened to them in the camps. Language, however, only allows for one to be the subject of action or its object; there is no “middle voice,” which Hayden White calls for. Thus language fails to let these victims experience the position they in fact occupied, resulting in trauma. As discussed in Ernst van Alphen. “Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, and Trauma.” *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer. Hanover: UP of New England, 1999. 24-38.

her lead, do we fall as well – into or out of history? Or is this a purposeful fall on the protagonist's part? A businessman, who is recovering on the sidelines, is looking melancholic, briefcase between his legs, eyes turned inward. His habitual path has been interrupted and now he needs to determine his next move. *Stumbling Block* depicts a crucial moment – how will we land?

Judging by the multi-cultural populace that we see here, we are in the new world, the post-colonial and globalized world, not in the old world filled with the ghosts of history. The fleet has arrived to the other coast; the Hendeles are now in Canada. But on this new frontier, racism is still apparent: in another large backlit photograph by Jeff Wall, *Mimic* (1982) (Fig. 22), a fierce looking Caucasian man in a jean vest makes an aggressive hand gesture – pulling his eyelid with his Fuck you! middle finger – to mimic an Asian man that he passes on the street. The clash of cultures can be as violent now as it was historically: despite the words “never again,” racial prejudice is constantly brewing and acts on its behalf erupt unpredictably or with cold calculation. The Asian man is fully assimilated and as Western as anyone: his hair is permed; he wears khaki slacks and a button-down shirt. The “cowboy,” however, who drags his girlfriend along behind him, harbours a dangerous sense of entitlement over the streets he walks on: this is his territory and others are not welcome here, if he had his way, that is: he is both racist and misogynist.

Moving into the next room we see more new world city dwellers: black and white photographs of people riding the New York subway taken by Walker Evans between

1938-41, *Many Are Called* (Fig. 23). “But few are chosen,” continues the Biblical phrase: many are called few are chosen *for salvation*. Most of these commuters look like they may be immigrants; perhaps they fled Europe during the buildup to the war. They look ambivalent or indifferent, numbed by their daily underground voyages or listening to an internal dialogue. We see a blind accordion player, a woman clutching her purse, and another looking beseechingly into her companion’s face. Little joy emanates from these images. These people are all in limbo, caught, as we are, somewhere in the middle between the past and an uncertain future.

Directly opposite this series is a single image on a floating wall. A man is slouched on a bed, chin on his chest, limp and prostrate. Given the murders and suicides *Partners* we have seen so far, we take him for dead (Fig. 24). It is actually a self-portrait by Walker Evans (1928); he has shot himself with a camera. Unlike Diane Arbus’ *Self-portrait with Camera*, however, here we do not stand as Evans’ reflection: here we stand in the position of the camera – as his assassin.

On the other side of this wall is another image of a predatory animal, another cat. This one diligently watches over a caged bird (Fig. 25). We are instantly reminded of the mouse that captured a cat – the exact opposite – and note the reversion of power to the normalized pecking order. This cat sits here as a sign of violent potential, staring down his victim with a steady, unrelenting, malevolent gaze. We know he has sat here for a very long time: the image is caught on a palm-sized daguerreotype. The protagonist has landed in a cage. There is no escape for the bird or for us, we who have been given no

alternative but to identify with the feminine position. But the bird, perched at the back, is not caught on the plate. Perhaps this is a metaphorical setting-free, at least from the secondary prison of reification.

“The only power we really have is to murder or kill ourselves; that is the only real power,” states Hendeles, “everything else is a structure to make us feel comfortable because it’s not safe.”<sup>35</sup>

With the man dead and his victim – our focalizer – trapped, we move through the next archway. We see a makeshift barroom with swinging doors, Paul McCarthy’s *Saloon* (1995-96) (Figs. 26-8). It is the source of the ragtime music that we have managed to block out so far, not knowing its association with the exhibition. Now it overwhelms us. Loud gunshots go off suddenly and unpredictably, making us shudder every time. As we move toward the absurd contraption, which is roughly the size of a railway or transport container, we see oversized animated characters moving around: a pig-headed bartender pours a shot of whiskey and sends it down the bar whilst casually smoking a cigar and staring up into space. We see a blonde “bar slut” with bright red lips wearing only a corset, bending down with her hands on her knees to give us a glimpse of her cleavage. She shakes her booty and flaunts a prominent open anus. Center stage is a cowboy with his hat, shirt, boots and gun halter, but no pants. With his right hand he is stroking his gun-like metal penis and in his left hand he holds a gun by his side. This masturbating cowboy, we assume, is the source of the gunshots we hear: either his coming or his

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<sup>35</sup> as stated in Matthias Beckel. Interview with Ydessa Hendeles. Haus der Kunst, Munich. Unpublished video. 2003. My transcription.

compensatory firing. His mechanized movements back and forth across the stage and in continuous circles never seem to line up with the girl's beaconing anus, or with the other girl's, who is waiting on all fours. According to Ydessa Hendeles, ejaculation is impossible for this cowboy: his rod is solid steel; thus, like the man shouting Fuck you! he is perpetually frustrated.<sup>36</sup>

This second showgirl has a large pussycat head with big green eyes, a pink nose and red lips. She rocks to and fro, sticking her head out the back door of the saloon, looking around, and then rocking back into the frontier charade. She is wearing the guise of a cat, perhaps in an effort to assume power, but she is still subordinate and without substantial agency to walk out the door. She teeters on the edge, half subject, half object. Who can we identify with here? None of the other characters in the saloon seem to get what they want, either, and only the bartender, by abstaining from the sexual pageantry, fleeces rewards: cash. This pig is the only character in *Partners* that is not dead, captured, falling, or caught in a perpetual struggle. If we really want to be a man, this would be the man to be: he is getting fat, at least. Can we accept him as a role model? Hendeles' focalization seems to have dissipated entirely – Evans' "dead" body and the "empty" cage marked her adieu – leaving us stranded at the end of the story without a Hollywood hero. Two centuries of following exhibition narratives that position us at a pinnacle looking forward has been abandoned. This pinnacle is a gutter. Here we are at the ultimate dead end: a frustrated and powerless cowboy spins around in circles

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<sup>36</sup> Hendeles "Notes on the Exhibition." 228.

continuously, his horse is nowhere in sight; showgirls repeat taunting gestures by rote; capitalist pigs remain pigs.

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How does *Saloon* make sense as “the end” of the story? In van Alphen’s words, “in what way does the cowboy’s orgasm and the masturbatory act that produced it create a kind of final coherence in Hendeles’ exhibition *Partners*?” In answer to his own question, he asserts, “It ultimately suggests that sexuality, but in its particular guise of frustrated male sexuality, is perhaps at the root of all evil.”<sup>37</sup> This is the “total metaphor” he induces.

Peter Brooks writes, “a narrative... wants at its end to refer us back to its middle, to the web of text: to recapture us in its doomed energies.”<sup>38</sup> The longer we linger in the web, the more repetitions emerge: the cowboys, the guns, the cats, the dictators, sex, murder, suicide, loss. *Saloon* pulls everything into it that we have seen; it is the keystone of the narrative we have built artwork by artwork. Ragtime music, strangely out of date, pervades the entire space.

As we turn around to leave, *Mimic* faces us. We necessarily walk toward it and as we do we are reminded that “cowboy justice” is rampant and thinly veiled. Wandering back through the story without Hendeles’ focalization, will we step into the position of this cowboy’s girl instead, and turn a blind eye to his violent actions? Now we have a choice of which role to play. On our way out we circle around *Mimesis* again and, framed by the

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<sup>37</sup> van Alphen. “Exhibition as Narrative Work of Art.” 184.

<sup>38</sup> as quoted in *Ibid.* 166.

next archway, we see Diane Arbus' *Self-portrait with Camera*, the first work encountered in the show and the last work – its signature, so to speak. Suddenly we notice that she is the only *real* woman in the show, the only woman other than Ydessa Hendeles with a proper name. The other females are mythical, fictional (in the case of Wall), animal, or all three, except for the countless anonymous faces in the teddy bear archive. The function of this self-portrait as the portal through which we entered into the role of “ideal” viewer, the role of “Hendeles,” seems even more significant with this insight: *Partners* is her story, her place of memory, and she, unlike the others, *is real*. Everything else suddenly looks as if in a dream.

The autobiographical pact is thus secured: Hendeles is the only protagonist with whom we can identify. “I want to get at my own personal truth, my own particular unique reaction to the work, and that truth resides in my unconscious,”<sup>39</sup> writes Ydessa Hendeles. In *Partners* we were invited to walk through this residence, to make it our own through our enactment and, having accepted, it is now in our place of memory, too. Here we witness the development of a traumatized self who, despite the passing of time on the calendar pages, endlessly revisits the past. Capturing, hanging or shooting the antagonist did not break the cycle. Taking a purposeful fall only landed us in a cage. In the end, we are back where we started: 1945. *Partners* devolved into a literal and metaphoric impasse, leaving us not with the hope of redemption but with the corrosive sense of an unfavourable fate.

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<sup>39</sup> as quoted in Théberge. 31.

But what of the Holocaust? It is implicit throughout the level of focalization but barely caught by this web of narrative threads. Only the visitor's enacted performance of *Partners*, the repetitive movements that each recall the first dead-end of Hitler, maintains its reference to the Holocaust: the cyclical return becomes a formal metaphor for the incessancy of trauma. But can it be known on an intuitive, metaphoric level? Or is this the only way? In one formulation, called "via rhetorica" by Jonathan Culler, metaphor is a substitution for something that could be stated literally; therefore its gain is stylistic. But in another formulation, "via philosophica," metaphor assumes the situation in question cannot be expressed literally.<sup>40</sup> The event is thought of as something else; therefore the gain is cognitive. Thus Ydessa Hendeles' use of the video- and exhibition-loop as a metaphor of the in-between of trauma can be seen as an *extension* of realism: much like the historical discourses need a "new rhetorical mode" in order account for what falls outside of the purview of their language, imaginative discourses need to extend their figurative means in order to depict what cannot be depicted – the "excess" of trauma. As Ernst van Alphen states, "Only figurative discourse allows expression of that which is unrepresentable in so called literal, factual, historical language."<sup>41</sup>

But how does metaphor impress this excess upon us? Geoffrey Hartman writes, "Despite its imaginative license, art is often more effective in 'embodying' historically specific

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<sup>40</sup> as discussed in Ernst van Alphen. Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature and Theory. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997. 28.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 29.



ideas than the history-writing on which it may draw.”<sup>42</sup> And certainly in *Partners* “embodiment” is at stake, but *ours* as well as the artwork’s. By following the pattern of movement that Ydessa Hendeles establishes, we come to embody the *structure* of an experience of trauma: repetition, collapse of the past and present, and an indefinable future, although the *content* remains implicit. “This reenactment is an *effect*, not a representation; it *does* something instead of showing it,”<sup>43</sup> writes van Alphen of another work. In his book *Caught by History*, he coins the term “Holocaust effect:”

When I call something a Holocaust effect, I mean to say that we are not confronted with a representation of the Holocaust, but that we, as viewers or readers, experience directly a certain aspect of the Holocaust or of Nazism, of that which led to the Holocaust. In such moment the Holocaust is not re-presented, but rather presented or reenacted.<sup>44</sup>

In van Alphen’s definition, the Holocaust effect takes place within an artwork: it *does* the Holocaust, or rather a specific aspect of it.<sup>45</sup>

I would like to broaden van Alphen’s definition in order to account for an artwork’s external effects, as well – what an artwork does to its viewers. As the “ideal” viewer loops around and repeats its past and continues on only to hit another dead-end and loop around again, we are enacting “a specific aspect of it” – its aftermath. Ydessa Hendeles’ emphasis on performative effect and corporeal understanding is best exemplified by her inclusion of James Coleman’s *Box*: the “thudding” is set at 100 decibels, the maximum level for an outdoor rock concert, and vibrates through our bodies. The flashing images, or the imperceptible clear frames between them, burn onto our retinas. The room is claustrophobic; there is no air circulation. All of these physically palpable aspects have a

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<sup>42</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman. *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996. 104.

<sup>43</sup> van Alphen. *Caught by History*. 106.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 10.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

discomfiting effect, to say the least; Ydessa Hendeles uses the phrases “accosts the viewer viscerally,” “assaults their retinas,” and “the viewer is pounded audially.”<sup>46</sup> But can only being battered give us the “intelligence” of being battered? The question we need to ask of *Box* and of *Partners* is, does it represent trauma or does it traumatize us? What is the nature of such an experiential and emotional understanding – and is it enough?<sup>47</sup>

And who will we be with this insight? For if we are boxed into Hendeles’ head, so to speak, we cannot be in our own. The role she ascribes the “ideal” viewer, conjoined with her through the autobiographical pact, is not a “you” position, but rather another “I.” As such, dialogue is precluded: we cannot reverse the roles and say, hey you! On the level of focalization, Ydessa Hendeles necessitates a particular pattern of movement through the show, which renders us passive. She is the cat here, spinning us – the “ideal” viewer – around like puppets. But of course this is *only* on the level of focalization; such complete subjugation is never actual.

Now that we have seen the view from “Hendeles,” the question that needs to be asked is, what is the significance of playing this role? To recall Taxter’s words, “If the receiver of the loop is able to account for and actively engage with its unique time-space phenomena, then the potential for the creation of ‘the new’ is in place.” Only by handing ourselves over to Hendeles as such can we receive *Partners*’ testimony. In the previous chapter I discussed the importance of the listener in the “transactive process” of testimony for the

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<sup>46</sup> Hendeles “Notes on the Exhibition.” 223.

<sup>47</sup> see Ernst van Alphen. *Caught by History*. 166. Also Dora Apel. *Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002. 10-11.

production of narratable memories and the reconstitution of subjectivity. The listener listens for the event in order to give the knowledge back to the victim and thus reintegrate them into the present, with their past. To conclude this chapter I would like to supplement that assertion by adding: the listener must also listen for the impossible,<sup>48</sup> for the unrepresentable, for the in-between of trauma, in order to give voice to its *affront to understanding*. This affront is what Ydessa Hendeles has “caught” in her web of metaphors.

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<sup>48</sup> Cathy Caruth. Introduction. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. 10.

### CHAPTER THREE

Released from the stronghold of the text's focalization, we reenter the space of the here and now. It is winter 2003/2004 in Munich, Germany. We are at the Haus der Kunst, a monumental building built by the Nazis on the edge of the English Garden. "We" are no longer conjoined as the "ideal" viewer, as sharing the singular entity "Hendeles;" we are a disparate assembly of "empirical" viewers of different ages, political views and cultural backgrounds. Of course we never actually left our circumstances behind: it is only for the sake of analysis that I played the role of the "ideal" viewer. In this chapter I ask, what happens when we take off the focalizing blinders and allow the text to drift?

To appeal to Ydessa Hendeles' intentions for an explanation of the show is futile: the level of narration is all that is directly accessible to us. We cannot see the author or the fabula, whether real or imagined, behind it. But as the first chapter explains, in the case of *Partners* the author is pervasive throughout the text, operating on all three levels by way of the autobiographical pact. Due to this conflation, *Partners* creates a "stronghold of misconceived interpretive authority"<sup>1</sup> in which it is tempting to take Hendeles' words as the last word. If we accept Hendeles' statements in full, then we accept that *Partners* is not a Holocaust show. I disagree. As we have seen in the previous two chapters, *Partners* engages with the question of how to contend with this history, and I will return to this question again in this and the next chapter. Accepting Hendeles statements in full would also mean accepting that *Partners* does not articulate a political position. This makes me

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<sup>1</sup> Mieke Bal. *Narratology: An Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1997. 17.

wonder, would it even be possible to engage with this material without articulating a position? After all, curating is a practice of persuasion.

In her role as the narrator of *Partners*, Ydessa Hendeles offers 10 000 words in her “notes” in the catalogue. But nothing is said of irony. In my experience, however, upon hitting the final dead-end and spinning around with the barroom lot, irony “happens.” Our own willingness to play the role of “Hendeles” meant an equal willingness to allow the artwork to play a role, thus the masturbating cowboy was effectively just that and *Him* was effectively Hitler. Once outside of the level of focalization, however, what we took for reality looks like so many toys in a box. With the lens now widened to include the associations of our “empirical” selves and the historical burden of our specific circumstance at the Haus der Kunst, *Partners* looks completely different, not only triumphant and traumatic, but deeply ironic. But what are the implications of making a toy of Hitler, for example? This humourous device meets the discourse on the representation of the Holocaust with profound ambivalence. Throughout this chapter I will look at instances of irony in *Partners* in an attempt to define its political effect.

Irony is a “miracle of communication:”<sup>2</sup> given its slipperiness, it is a wonder that we can understand each other all, but sometimes not as we would like. Throughout her book, *Irony’s Edge: The theory and politics of irony*, Linda Hutcheon argues that “there are two participants in this act called irony,” not just the “ironist”:

Irony, therefore, is like all other communication acts in that it is always cultural-specific, relying on the presence of a common memory shared by addresser and addressee. While this means that an ironist may presuppose in the interpreter “a determined type of cultural

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<sup>2</sup> Linda Hutcheon. *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. London: Routledge, 1995. 89.

formation” that will permit “particular allusions, particular ellipses” without endangering comprehension, *so too might an interpreter infer the same from the text of the ironist...*<sup>3</sup>

Hutcheon places equal emphasis on the role of the interpreter, who is not simply decoding a message the “ironist” had previously encoded, but is rather constructing “a sense of the evaluative attitude displayed by the text toward what is said and what is not said.”<sup>4</sup> This insistence on the interpreter’s construction runs contrary to most theories of irony, which limit her role to *reconstruction*. It also breaks the habit of trying to ascertain the ironist’s *intention* as the measure of whether something is ironic or not. Regardless of intention or lack thereof, irony happens and it happens due to the interpreter’s *attribution*. “[I]nterpreters “mean” as much as *ironists* do,” writes Hutcheon, “and often in opposition to them: to attribute irony where it is intended and where it is not, or to refuse to attribute where it might be intended, is also the act of a conscious agent.”<sup>5</sup>

This is perhaps especially important when the author’s intentions are unknown or when ironies arise due to a given situation, not a discrete object, as is often the case within *Partners*. Very little information is available on the objects on display: only the artist’s name is given on the wall labels, along with the date and title of the work. The catalogue offers Ydessa Hendeles’ own insight into the work, which contextualizes it in terms of her curatorial vision, but says little or nothing of the objects’ original context or previous reception. Considering this lack of information, viewers can only infer that irony was intended based on markers in the object, on the object’s position among other objects, or on an object’s circumstance in the Haus der Kunst. Although it is possible that each

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. My emphasis.

<sup>4</sup> Hutcheon. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

viewer will attribute irony differently (or not at all), given that visitors are attending an exhibition at the Haus der Kunst, it is safe to say they/we will likely share some sympathies, especially nationality and an interest in the arts. However multifarious this “we” might be, we do not constitute a true public: we are a circumscribed audience that is created at the intersection of two “discursive communities,”<sup>6</sup> “German” and “arts-interested,” which is further delimited by the particular city – Munich is provincial, not metropolitan, and guards its Bavarian heritage carefully – and by the particular audience *this* exhibition attracts – *Partners* was promoted as a probing of national identity. Perhaps we can label the overlapping space between these communities “Germans interested in German culture.” This is the audience Ydessa Hendeles presupposes and directly engages in *Partners*, not the abstract audience created through the international dissemination of the catalogue.<sup>7</sup>

Regardless of how many overlaps we can safely presuppose, it is important to remember that every audience is always fractured within itself, for each individual also ascribes to other discursive communities that are not necessarily shared by other members of the audience. I, for example, am inarguably arts-interested, given my extensive schooling in art and art history, but remarkably unfamiliar with American visual culture, having grown up without a television and limited access to popular culture in general. My vocabulary in this regard is thus built in retrospect, not by childhood experience. I am a Canadian by

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 91.

<sup>7</sup> By being disseminated in catalogue form, *Partners* also reaches an international audience, but of such “latecomers” Ydessa Hendeles states: “If someone misses the experience of seeing the show, they have missed the movie. They’re not going to get the movie by reading the review [...] They’re just not going to have the visual experience.” As quoted in Reesa Greenberg. “Private Collectors, Museums and Display: a post-Holocaust perspective.” *Jong Holland* 16.1 (2000): 41.

birth, upbringing and residence, and German by the remove of one generation. My parents, who were both children during the war, subscribed to the silence that cloaked their homeland; thus my familiarity with German culture comes more from a curiosity about my heritage than from a “natural” understanding of it. Nevertheless, due to my dual citizenship and command of the German language, I am arguably more familiar with German culture than those without this familial link. I am not Christian and I am not Jewish. (Though some would say that I am more Christian than Jewish by virtue of the demographic in the midst of which I grew up.) On another note, I was born in the early seventies; thus schooled at a time when the lessons of post-structuralism had percolated into undergraduate courses, where their emphasis on the social construction of the self was perhaps insufficiently clarified to a green audience, making it almost impossible to understand how anyone could possibly say anything in the world that could have some consequence: power was nowhere and everywhere; language was not possess-able; relativism was the only absolute.

Such lists could go on and on and it all bears on this thesis, but perhaps most relevant is the simple fact that I am part of the “new generation” from whose vantage point, Ydessa Hendeles asserts, it is time to renegotiate history. “The image of the Third Reich is now very different than what it was,” says Hendeles, “this generation doesn’t have any relationship with it; they inherited something that they have no control over.”<sup>8</sup> With the primary witnesses drastically decreasing in number, how will we maintain our connection to the horror that occurred long before our birth and simultaneously attest to how we have

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<sup>8</sup> as stated in Matthias Beckel. Interview with Ydessa Hendeles. Haus der Kunst, Munich. Unpublished video. 2003. My transcription.



come to know it? And how will we locate ourselves in relation to Auschwitz when its mystical power is no longer absolute but relative? This generation did not witness the “final solution” or Vietnam, but Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo and the war on terror.<sup>9</sup> This generation has not watched the world turn into media spectacle, but assumes it was always so. So then how do we develop an adequate theory of agency that will allow us to act on more than the linguistic plane? I feel myself addressed as a “German interested in German culture” and as the part of the generation now beginning to carry the burden of transmission.

The reason I begin a chapter on irony by belabouring this point – by trying to define who “we” is that is now doing the looking, while simultaneously trying to maintain the fact that this “we” has as many pairs of eyes as “I”s – is because irony itself “relies heavily on mutually shared factual background information”<sup>10</sup> in order to make it “happen” and yet it remains profoundly subjective and unpredictable. Given that I will differ from you on some, many, or all of these counts, my appeal to you as the multifarious “we” that views this show is premised on the fact that this particular exhibition concerns itself with icons, which I feel it is safe to assume that we, regardless of age, as participants in Western culture, are all familiar with. The “we” I will deploy is thus not based on an expectation of consensus, but rather on a shared understanding of, to use Ydessa Hendeles’ words, “icons and belief systems embedded in the twentieth century that are now part of world memory.”<sup>11</sup> This “we” is not the “we Germans” that are being addressed, nor the “we the

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<sup>9</sup> Andreas Huyssen talks about Holocaust memory in light of subsequent genocidal politics in Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Hutcheon. 98.

<sup>11</sup> Ydessa Hendeles. Wall Text. Haus der Kunst, Munich. Nov. 2003.

‘ideal’ viewer” of the preceding chapter. Rather, this “we” bespeaks my assumption that, given the markers of irony that are offered by the author, “found” by the viewer, or established by *Partners*’ circumstance at the Haus der Kunst, my analysis of irony will be shared due to our mutual familiarity with such “icons and belief systems” and the overlapping of some of the discursive communities we inhabit individually,<sup>12</sup> specifically an interest in contemporary art.

As discussed in the first chapter, Ydessa Hendeles does not consider art history to be prerequisite to understanding *Partners*. According to Hendeles, if viewers are sensitive and thoughtful, they can work their way through the show: “if it is really true and clear it can be in common language,” she asserts, which we have due to a common history.<sup>13</sup> The shared identity we have based on media references and popular icons suffices, I agree, to follow the exhibition on the level of focalization and also to mobilize an analysis of the motifs, their repetition and their irony, but as we will see, it is our knowledge of art history that gives the “edge” to the overall irony of *Partners*. Ydessa Hendeles is of course keenly aware of the art historical value of the artworks she collects, even if this value is not the primary criterion in her purchasing decisions. Thus the particular intellectual frame I bring to the exhibition, art history, is not foreign to it, but simply downplayed in it. In the case of *Partners*, bringing it into the foreground will bring with it the specter of irony, which extends outward from the artworks, to the show, and into the discourse on the representation of history.

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<sup>12</sup> Hutcheon. 20, 92.

<sup>13</sup> as stated in Beckel.

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Where do I see irony in *Partners* and what end(s) do I infer? For me, irony first “happened” when I was walking around Paul McCarthy’s *Saloon*. I found myself standing in a dead space between the back wall of the contraption and the back wall of the gallery. It was different than the other dead-ends: “Hitler” animated the wall by his gaze, the documentary sequences kept us in procession, and the video loops spun us around, but this space was simply dead. Like puppet shows and stage shows, *Saloon* is only accessible from 180 degrees. In front or inside, we feel included in its tableau, but when the illusion breaks, it is hard to recover. As such I was catapulted out of the level of focalization. There I could take this barroom lot for signifiers of our cultural romance with the Wild West, but with their features blown to absurd proportions, here I see they are grotesque caricatures. This icon of virility and individual liberty has been set up for ridicule: even sex is precluded by a perpetual misalignment of the hydraulic gadgetry. Despite having all the right gear, he is powerless. He misfires. We no longer seek to identify with these characters; we seek to disassociate ourselves, and preferably quickly.

Deflating dreams is a *forte* of satiric irony, which has the ability to allow us to revel in the absurd and then snap us back to see the ground underfoot. In *Irony’s Edge*, Linda Hutcheon defines this “corrective function” of irony as “assailing:”

Yet, there does exist what could be interpreted as a positive motivation for “leaping upon” something, however vigorously, and that lies in the corrective function of satiric irony, where there is a set of values that you are correcting toward. ...[I]t is satire in

particular that frequently turns to irony as a means of ridiculing – and implicitly correcting – the vices and follies of humankind.<sup>14</sup>

*Saloon* effectively forces us to reconsider a cultural icon around which we congregate. Its target is the romance of the Wild West as it has been reiterated repeatedly in popular culture. In Ydessa Hendeles words, “It points out the confusion between a real cowboy and the myth. And, by analogy, it dismantles and diagnoses the whole myth of men who have grown up thinking of themselves as virile cowboys.”<sup>15</sup> Considering the longstanding fascination Germans have with American culture, and the vibrant Wild West subculture, *Saloon* satirizes a current role model, not a nostalgic hero.

Whether Paul McCarthy or Ydessa Hendeles are merely teasing or outright scornful in their making or deployment of *Saloon* can only be conjectured upon in reference to what we know of their objectives and social attitudes in general. The work itself cannot ascertain the particular “edge” of its use: the context of its viewing, and by whom this context is narrated, will inevitably inflect its tone. In this way irony always pulls the author back in, despite being a matter of “perception.” I will discuss my attribution of intent at length later in this chapter but first I want to indicate how, once irony is attributed, it compels the attribution of other ironies (much like my recognition of repeating motifs in the preceding chapter compelled the search for more repetition). Irony spreads throughout the show, moving from *Saloon* backwards. Everything that was filled with sincere pathos on the level of focalization now becomes corroded by irony’s acerbic devices. Isn’t it ironic that the “rough’n’ready” cowboy is now the (anti)climax of a

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<sup>14</sup> Hutcheon. 52.

<sup>15</sup> Ydessa Hendeles. “Notes on the Exhibition.” *Partners*. Eds. Chris Dercon and Thomas Weski. Köln: Walther König, 2003. 228.

“fine” art story? Isn’t it ironic that the bird landed in a cage, given that Ydessa Hendeles is a collector herself and sits in the “catbird seat of culture”?<sup>16</sup> And isn’t it ironic that the cat, gendered feminine in the German language, becomes a symbol for the male gaze, and even of Nazis? Such little ironies can be “found” all throughout the show and arise due to the tension between the artwork itself and its role within the exhibition narrative. In some cases a tension arises between two artworks instead, by fact of their contiguity. Isn’t ironic that when a “woman” assumes the guise of a cat she becomes a sex-kitten, a pussy-cat, objectified, infantilized, prey not predator?

When such tension arises between two works, they constitute a sub-narrative of their own. Consider the fact that we view Jeff Wall’s large allegorical tableaux, which look as though they might be candid photographs but always indicate their fabrication, after viewing documentary photographs of the Vietnam War, the referents of which are indisputably real and shocking, but also staged. Is art representing life here or is life presented as art? By juxtaposing these two genres, the fictional value of Wall’s work seeps into the truth value of the documentary photographs, and vice versa. What is ironic is that an ongoing horror must be staged before the camera, translated into art, into an icon that the public can recognize and consolidate itself around, before it becomes transmissible and before its impact can be fully comprehended. But then it is equally ironic that we have now become so inured to such horrific images that we require fictional ones to restore our sense of reality. In either case, when viewed in tandem, these

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<sup>16</sup> Lawrence Rinder. “Curatorial Cool.” Words of Wisdom: A Curator’s Vade Mecum on Contemporary Art. Ed. Carin Kuoni. New York: Independent Curators International, 2001. 140.

two bodies of work serve to point to the “vices and follies” that permeate our media-saturated world.

By reading the documentary photographs through the fictional, and the fictional through the documentary, we can see how the irony is not located in either of the objects but rather in their juxtaposition. Writing of another juxtaposition, that between Bruce Nauman’s *Thank you* and the documentary photographs of Thich Quang Duc’s self-immolation, Hendeles states:

The words are “Thank you”, but the authoritative tone is like the Führer’s in his speeches to persuade Germans to support his Fascist position in World War II. Located adjacent to Thich Quang Duc’s gift of his life, the silent aggression in the monk’s act is given voice.<sup>17</sup>

– the voice of the Führer’s? To my mind this is an unintentional irony, for certainly the affective edge of collapsing a victim of religious restriction and an advocate of religious persecution cuts the wrong way. In their ironic juxtaposition, however, these two works become inseparable. The sub-narrative subsumes their ability to denote their singular realities.

This example points to an important operation of irony – that it does not consist of a “literal” meaning and an “ironic” one – but rather that irony contains *both*. In *Irony’s Edge*, Hutcheon states:

What I want to call the “ironic” meaning is inclusive and relational: the said and the unsaid coexist for the interpreter, and each has meaning in relation to the other because they literally “interact” to create the real “ironic” meaning. The “ironic” meaning is not, then, simply the unsaid meaning, and the unsaid is not always a simple inversion or opposite of the said: it is always different – *other than* and more than the said.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Hendeles. “Notes on the Exhibition.” 221.

<sup>18</sup> Hutcheon. 12-13.

Thus the said meaning haunts the unsaid and vice versa, making for the two-forked tongue of irony. But these are not weighted equally: irony is “unbalanced in favor of the silent and unsaid.”<sup>19</sup> Consider, for example, *Italia d'oro*, which hangs amidst *Ships (The Zeppelin Project)*. Despite Luciano Fabro’s insistence that his work has “a very slender thread to iconography,” as Hendeles notes in the catalogue, “in this display, the iconography and association are highlighted.”<sup>20</sup> The ironic meaning that is mobilized by its exhibition context – that Hendeles hangs an Italian fascist by the toe – overrides any meaning that it might have had originally.

In the colonnade that extends between the two documentary sequences of Vietnam, is a work by Lawrence Weiner. In large green vinyl letters, he writes, in French and English:

THE RESPONSE OF AN OBJECT TO  
CONTACT SUFFICIENT TO LEAD TO  
A CHANGE IN INHERENT QUALITY  
(VIS INERTIAE)

This text melds with the wall, as backdrop and support, as though it were the underlying premise of the entire exhibition. It could have been written by Ydessa Hendeles herself to encapsulate her curatorial strategy and the effects of irony on an unsuspecting object. As we have just seen, irony becomes inherent to the object, not substitutive of the object: it cannot be distilled. “This is why irony cannot be trusted,” states Linda Hutcheon: “it undermines stated meaning by removing the semantic security of ‘one signifier : one

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 37.

<sup>20</sup> Hendeles. “Notes on the Exhibition.” 218.

signified.”<sup>21</sup> The ironic object has two signifieds; it is a duplicitous object, a medium of ventriloquism.

The inherent duplicity of the ironic mode becomes a point of contention when the two halves are at great odds, and when the “target” is not laughable or deflatable without transgressing normative ethical standards. On the level of focalization, *Him* is Hitler. But what of his size, posture and schoolboy outfit? Only by disregarding these “handy hermeneutic helpers”<sup>22</sup> can this reading be sustained: *Him* is *inherently* ironic. It is an *objet d’art* that quotes the long art historical lineage of religious imagery, of the pious devotee, to reference Hitler’s perverse self-promotion as the ultimate Führer, his “Christian” ideology, and the very impossibility of his ever yielding to a moral order other than his own. Seeing him kneeling here, pre-pubescent and awaiting judgment, serves to remind us not only of the hyper-masculine ethos that propelled his regime, but also that no trial, by the law or by God, can ever instate a penalty commensurate with the void left by six million murdered Jews. Despite his temporary deflation, the real Hitler is restored as the primary referent, perhaps even more so thereby.

For me, it “happened,” but the risks of incomprehension – that Hitler could be cute-sified and then left as such in our mind’s eye – are high. The cowboy in *Saloon*, for example, who was also set up for ridicule, was not restored by irony as a romantic hero; he was left deflated. Such is the “miracle” of irony, which we cannot rely on: some reviewers, who

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<sup>21</sup> Hutcheon. 13.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 141.



encountered the work in a different context, insist that he maintains his seductiveness,<sup>23</sup> thereby marking Paul McCarthy's complicity with the myth he "leaps upon." Even for some who do "get it," when it comes to targets like Hitler, whose evil is considered absolute and beyond measure, even temporary deflation can be intolerable. As one viewer states, "The sculpture may be meant ironically, but I can't recognize that humour."<sup>24</sup> Regarding *Him*, Maurizio Cattelan states, "You don't know if he's praying to have six more million people to kill, or for forgiveness... but when you're there it's like you want to give him another chance." He also states, "Hitler is pure fear: it's an image of terrible pain...I would just like that image to become a territory for negotiation or a test for our psychoses."<sup>25</sup> Herein lies the problem of irony: which is it, pathetic or fearful? mystifying or demystifying? It is impossible to locate Cattelan's position and thus the question of whether or not irony is an appropriate mode for dealing with such images remains hanging: does it endorse or erode them?

*Him* is also *circumstantially* ironic: he is praying in his own temple, the ultimate act of narcissism. Ydessa Hendeles, however, sees Hitler's "homecoming" as a forced incarceration. "A Jew has captured a Nazi," she writes of the Minnie Mouse toy discussed in the previous chapter, and then she writes, "the invitation to curate an exhibition for the Haus der Kunst has given me an opportunity to *reify* this inversion [of

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<sup>23</sup> See for example Dike Blair. Rev. of Paul McCarthy, Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York. Flash Art Nov.-Dec. (1996): 106.

<sup>24</sup> Herr Sørensen as quoted in Anneke Bokern. "Dreikäsehoher Diktator: Skandal um eine Hitler-Skulptur im Boijmans Museum." Frankfurter Rundschau 23 Sept. 2002. My trans.

<sup>25</sup> Maurizio Cattelan as quoted in Massimiliano Gioni. "Flirting with Disaster." Interview with Maurizio Cattelan. Flash Art 34:218 (2001): 117.

the political power structure of the Third Reich].”<sup>26</sup> In this story, Hendeles strikes Hitler against the back of the knees into repentance. Maurizio Cattelan conjures him up and she curates him, thereby gaining control over him, or at least over *Him*. Given the etymological association of the verb “to curate” with healing, this act is painfully ironic: in fantasy, it is Hitler himself that she gains control over and “cures,” but of course it is only a *Hitlerchen*, a diminutive doll that can absorb her fantasy as readily as a teddy bear. Hitler’s legacy and his iconic power are not so easily reined in and far surpass the ameliorative tableaux Hendeles sets up in order to capture him.

There are other artworks in *Partners* like *Him* that become ironic due to their situation in the Haus der Kunst. Given Hitler’s spiel of eternal values, certainly the documentary photographs are out of place here, as are all the vernacular objects and ephemera, especially Minnie Mouse, who would have been considered lowest on the ladder of the low, being a children’s toy, a female, a mouse, mass produced and popular, in contradistinction to Hitler’s “high” and elitist expectations for fine art. The Venuses in *Mimesi*, as well, who stand here in duplicate as fakes, mark the loss of the “original” and mock his aesthetic, which he based on classical art but only insofar as it depicted huge naked homoerotic men. *Mimesi* and Arno Breker’s *Wehrmacht (Armed Forces)*(1938), for example, may both be ideal nudes but, as Hendeles writes in the catalogue, “the philosophical differences are highlighted by this thematic link.”<sup>27</sup> Not to mention, the goddess of love was not the likely muse of the Third Reich.

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<sup>26</sup> Ydessa Hendeles. “Partners.” *Partners*. Eds. Chris Dercon and Thomas Weski. 22. My emphasis.

<sup>27</sup> Hendeles. “Notes on the Exhibition.” 216.

This irony that is created by the cross-reading of *Partners* and past exhibitions in the Haus der Kunst has the most edge in *Saloon*: in this hokey frontier barroom, garish characters are demonstrating “degenerate” behaviour – masturbation, solicitation, sodomy, bestiality – which defiles Hitler’s “purist” aesthetic. Hitler attempted to rid art and his Reich of such degeneracy, of “that part of the self that must be expelled for it to (continue to) be constituted as ‘clean and proper.’”<sup>28</sup> These amusement-park figures are not the farmers, soldiers and mothers that Nazi art sanctified. Furthermore, Nazism sublimated sex. Regarding Arno Breker’s statue *Wehrmacht*, Steven Kasher writes:

It is as if sexual excitation has been drained from the genitals and used to pump up the limbs and torso: the whole figure becomes tumescent...these are musclemen who are acting as guards...What they guard is *Führer, Reich, and Volk* – and Manhood itself.<sup>29</sup>

In contrast, Paul McCarthy’s *Saloon* dramatically stages the return of the repressed: the cowboy’s cock is cocked, even if he is otherwise powerless. *Saloon* demonstrates “the nitty-gritty matter of human fallibility,”<sup>30</sup> which Hitler abhorred. Now raucous music pervades his serene neoclassical temple, not Wagner.

According to one reviewer, Paul McCarthy “pioneered degeneracy.”<sup>31</sup> If we consider *Saloon* in the context of his work in general, we see that it also stands in contrast to much of the modern art that filled the exhibition program of the Haus der Kunst after the war. His work does not follow the vein of expressionism; it is not a defense against the contaminations of kitsch; and it does not propose to lead the masses out of the mire in

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<sup>28</sup> Neil Levi. “Judge for Yourselves!” – The *Degenerate Art* Exhibition as Political Spectacle.” *October* 85 (1998): 44.

<sup>29</sup> Steven Kasher. “The Art of Hitler.” *October* 59 (1992): 57.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Clark. “In Your Face.” Rev. of Paul McCarthy, Tate, Liverpool. *ArtReview* 52 (2001-02): 86.

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Hayt Rev. of Paul McCarthy, Luhring Augustine, New York. *Art + Text* 56 (1997): 84.

which they live, as Donald Kuspit laments.<sup>32</sup> Instead it is an embrace of all that is decrepit and culturally debased. McCarthy's work takes a scathing look at "the levels of violence we sustain in the process of becoming civilized"<sup>33</sup> and "parodie[s] those who want their art to be morally exemplary."<sup>34</sup> Jan Avgikos explains this in a letter to one of McCarthy's satiric characters:

Look at it this way: the old traditions of the Modernist religion have supposedly been put to rest. Yet there are those who lament the demise of time-honored values, and who ache for "origins" in a world they perceive as intolerably corrupt and post-Modern. Though they are sensible enough to have renounced essentialism, they still believe art is sacred, and attempt to restore its "truth," and to reinvent its sense of moral urgency.<sup>35</sup>

According to Avgikos, those "clinging to a notion of art's lofty mission" will applaud McCarthy's work as "therapeutic," or else condemn it as "immoral."<sup>36</sup> It "satirizes not only Modernist ideology but the idea, common on both the right and the left, that art must be socially engaged."<sup>37</sup> The fact that these characters have no place in the right, left, Nazi or modernist pantheon, gives them their place in *Partners*.

Yet *Saloon*, as previously mentioned, is also "corrective," thus restoring art to a moralizing function. Because Paul McCarthy's practice as a whole, however, is complicit with the degeneracy it displays, we can attribute this function to Ydessa Hendeles' deployment of *Saloon* in *Partners*. "My particular take on work is primarily to struggle with discovering the latent content – the pathology on a personal and societal level. With the goal of cultural diagnosis in mind, the vocabulary of each generation's production is

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<sup>32</sup> Donald Kuspit. "In the Anal Universe: the Para-art of Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy." *New Art Examiner* 27.2 (1999): 24-7+.

<sup>33</sup> Jan Avgikos. Rev. of *Clean Thoughts* by Paul McCarthy, Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York. *Artforum* 41.5 (2003): 137.

<sup>34</sup> Jan Avgikos. Rev. of *Heidi*, by Paul Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley. *Artforum* 32 (1993): 157.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

secondary,”<sup>38</sup> she states, indicating her evaluative end and her disregard of art history. By positioning *Saloon* as “the end” of her narrative, Ydessa Hendeles seems to be saying, “look what we’ve come to.” As such, Ydessa Hendeles “reinvents art’s sense of moral urgency” in opposition to McCarthy’s own objective. According to Linda Hutcheon, “irony involves the attribution of an evaluative, even judgmental attitude, and this is where the emotive or affective dimension also enters...”<sup>39</sup> What enters, for me, when Hendeles’ “judgmental attitude” is attributed, is the reinstatement of “art’s lofty mission.” To her mind art is “therapeutic” in that it can “express thoughts that are less than civilized and therefore allows people to be civilized.”<sup>40</sup> “Desublimation” is the key word<sup>41</sup> in McCarthy’s practice, whereas “sublimation” is the key word in Hendeles.’ For McCarthy, civilizing rituals make us sick; for Hendeles, civilizing rituals make us, as the word suggests, civil. Both are diagnostic, but their ends differ.

In a video interview Ydessa Hendeles discusses her intention. Although she states that she can only speak for the Jewish trauma, she views *Partners* as an opportunity to engage Germans in a dialogue in hopes that they will “think about how their identity was formed.” She describes *Partners* as a means by which to give Germans “permission” to express how they feel, “to feel how they really feel,” to explore how they feel “in a way you can’t just write about.” “Not to suggest that art has a therapeutic value, it does,” she insists, but that they [Germans] can have insight into their own lives.<sup>42</sup> In this sense,

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<sup>38</sup> Ydessa Hendeles as quoted in Pierre Théberge. “The Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation: building a museum as a life process.” Interview. *Parachute* 54 (1989): 33.

<sup>39</sup> Hutcheon. 37.

<sup>40</sup> as stated in Beckel.

<sup>41</sup> Tom Holert. “Schooled for Scandal.” *Artforum* 39.3 (2000): 136.

<sup>42</sup> as stated in Beckel.

Hendeles is not addressing an equal, someone who, like her, has already thought about how her identity is formed. She is addressing a hypothetical patient, someone in need of this personal exploration.

In Hendeles' tableaux, this "corrective" takes on another edge, as well. The cowboy jerks off in the gallery directly opposite the kneeling Hitler figure, drawing an analogy between them that is punctuated by a dead-end. Here we have two taboos – Nazism and frustrated male sexuality – brought into alignment, as if to say, as McCarthy does, sexual repression leads to forms of fascism.<sup>43</sup> But of course the cowboy is commonly thought of as the exact opposite of Hitler: he is after all the American icon of personal liberty. Whenever these liberties are threatened, it is common to hear in the U.S. accusations of "Nazi!" which effectively groups together every perceived evil, no matter how minor or major, under the same banner. As Steven Kasher asserts, the popular myth of the Nazi as supervillain is central to the political imagination in the United States, effectively masking their historic complicity with Nazi crimes and their own racist and genocidal histories.<sup>44</sup> Considering the timing of *Partners*, and Paul McCarthy's satirizing of President George W. Bush in another work (*Piccadilly Circus*, 2003), this cowboy starts to look a lot like a Texan who acts on his own volition, killing hundreds and thousands in war against one man. Perhaps this Marlboro Man will be mythologized and romanticized like the Wild Bunch, or perhaps he already is.

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<sup>43</sup> Paul McCarthy. "1000 words: Paul McCarthy talks about *Piccadilly Circus*, 2003." *Artforum* 42.5 (2004): 123.

<sup>44</sup> Kasher. 81.

If we accept this analogy between Bush and Hitler, then it becomes voracious. In *Partners*, they are just one repetition of the same, never-ending loop; thus the entire West is implicated, not just the mythic Wild West, and Hitler is seen to be a part of it. This has profound implications for how we understand the Holocaust and aligns the exhibition with the political scholarship that argues Nazism was symptomatic of Western values.<sup>45</sup> This scholarship argues that “the West is itself a story of oppression and massacres... and cannot serve as a point of reference to condemn Nazi barbarity.”<sup>46</sup> As the juxtaposition of *Saloon* and *Mimic* suggests, Western civilization “systematically eliminated and eliminates ‘otherness’”<sup>47</sup> Nazism is thus not a total aberration of the West, but one of its possible outcomes.<sup>48</sup> Because the pairing is emphasized by the dead-ends, *Partners* also seems to be saying, if the modernist project and its emphasis on the greater freedom of humanity collapsed with the Holocaust, then post-modernity has not gotten us much further. How, then, without appealing to totalizing narratives, will greater freedom now be negotiated?

As *Saloon* implicates the West, it implicates its capitalist economic system, as well. The pig stands as the stage master: the whole show is in front of him. As Ydessa Hendeles writes, “He’s in the position of power – he runs the bar. He’s the master. Why else would he be a pig?”<sup>49</sup> The only thing that accrues in the bar is capital, raked in by this blue-eyed beast of Orwellian proportion. This points to a reductive equation of capitalism with

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<sup>45</sup> Andreas Huyssen. *Present Pasts*. 13; Andreas Huyssen. “Monuments and Holocaust Memory.” *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. New York: Routledge, 1995. 251; and Geoffrey H. Hartman. *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996. 7.

<sup>46</sup> Saul Friedlander. Introduction. *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”*. Ed. Saul Friedlander. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992. 13.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 14.

<sup>48</sup> Huyssen. “Monuments and Holocaust Memory.” 251.

<sup>49</sup> Hendeles in “Notes on the Exhibition.” 228.

fascism,<sup>50</sup> which considers capitalism “as the overall carrier of oppression and exterminatory policies in various forms and degrees.”<sup>51</sup> Hendeles does not, however, say anything about Bush’s current actions, about capitalism, the West in general, or the representation of the Holocaust, though references to the Hitler and the Holocaust are pervasive throughout her “notes.” Instead, Ydessa Hendeles states, “but that is not my interest, not to make a commentary on the political, but to point things out that are interesting and ultimately try to reveal human nature.”<sup>52</sup>

But, as we have seen, *Partners* has repercussion for these issues. Here I want to emphasize that Ydessa Hendeles enters this heated political debate with an indirectly communicated, not definitive, position. Again the question of whether irony is a suitable mode of representation for such material looms. It is met by some with deep suspicion “for without the accountability that could come with intentionality, irony might well mean never having to say you really mean it.”<sup>53</sup> Perhaps this avowed indifference is feigned:<sup>54</sup> irony is said to be the ironist’s “weapon of contempt,” more powerful precisely because of its indirection.<sup>55</sup> In any case, irony is *provisional*, as Linda Hutcheon describes, “at least in the sense of always offering a proviso, always containing a kind of built-in conditional stipulation that undermines any firm and fixed stand.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Huyssen. “Monuments and Holocaust Memory.” 251.

<sup>51</sup> Friedlander. 13.

<sup>52</sup> as stated in Beckel.

<sup>53</sup> Linda Hutcheon. 120.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 41.

<sup>55</sup> Wayne C. Booth as quoted in Hutcheon. 41.

<sup>56</sup> Hutcheon. 51.



Here we touch again on irony's assault on language itself. In the words of Geoffrey Hartman, irony, by saying one thing and meaning another, is "language giving the lie to itself yet still relishing its power."<sup>57</sup> "For some," writes Hutcheon, "irony – with its emphasis on context, perspective, and instability – is simply what defines 'the present conditions of knowledge' for *everyone*..."<sup>58</sup> What slips away along with an accountable author is an ascertainable referent. In *Partners* this is most obvious in *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)*, an ironic collection within a collection that undercuts its own objectivity as an archive while simultaneously proposing itself as a depository of memory. The archive is organized into typologies. This seems only natural at first – toy wagons follow sleds follow bicycles, etc. – until we notice both the arbitrariness of a photograph's assignment to any one of these typologies and the sub-narratives that occur in their arrangement: soldiers are followed by flags and prostitutes, for example, and cameras are followed by guns, but what if the photo has both a flag and a camera? The archon managing the archive, Ydessa Hendeles, is thus brought to our attention, which has the effect of denaturalizing its order: this archive is the result of subjective decisions.

By way of this *mise-en-abyme*, Ydessa Hendeles implicates her practice as a collector. Indicating her self-reflexivity, Hendeles writes: "A collection is both a physical burden and a precious reservoir of information, providing a resource for scholarship.... However, a collection can also be baggage, insofar as a system can distort reality."<sup>59</sup> She adds, "the scholarship here is deceptive, because the use of documentary materials actually

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<sup>57</sup> as quoted in Hutcheon. 9.

<sup>58</sup> Hutcheon. 33.

<sup>59</sup> Hendeles. "Notes on the Exhibition." 210.

manipulates reality.”<sup>60</sup> Certainly not everyone in the world had a teddy bear, as it here appears. The reliability of this archive is in question, which is its particular edge, for how are we to constitute cultural memory if every depository is discriminatory? If an archive is textual, that is, arbitrarily constructed, then it is an unstable resource to draw on for knowledge, and so what can we draw on? This opens the door to a deep skepticism toward all notions of truth and an extreme relativism with regard to ethics. Such postmodern theories have caused heated debates within Holocaust discourse, because the Holocaust *is* a truth outside of language: it cannot be reduced to a textual problem. In the words of Saul Friedlander: “It is the reality and significance of modern catastrophes that generate the search for a new voice and not the use of a specific voice which constructs the significance of these catastrophes.”<sup>61</sup> Even the voice of one witness can allow us to get nearer to some historical truth.<sup>62</sup>

Ydessa Hendeles not only undercuts any claim to objectivity, she also parodies the archival effort itself: she has substituted the “noble” subject of most archives, such as an historical event, place or person, with an “ignoble” toy. In this way *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)* mimics celebrity archives more so than historical archives. Furthermore, she purchased almost all of these images on-line on e-Bay; they were available to anyone for any use and their provenance is unknown. As “context” they are volatile. This takes on an irony of its own in light of the fact that the teddy bear never seems to change even though everything around it does: the history of this icon is relatively stable in comparison to our own. Not to mention, the teddy bear usually outlives its owner.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 214.

<sup>61</sup> Friedlander. 10.

<sup>62</sup> Carlo Ginzberg paraphrased in Saul Friedlander. 9.

Is there such a thing that we could consider “context,” an immovable matrix against which we can test our theories? The small taxidermied dog by Maurizio Cattelan that Ydessa Hendeles includes reinforces the irony of *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)*. As mentioned in the first chapter, we project our desires onto it and grant it the personality we wish. In so doing we are also exercising our control over it, molding it into shape like the taxidermist did before us. This little dead dog thus functions like a meta-object similar to the text by Lawrence Weiner: both comment on the difficulty of locating meaning. But whereas the text comments on the consequences of ironic contiguity, the dog comments on our intentions. What *is* this dog? Dead matter, literally; yet it has no significance as a relic: it is not collected as a reminder of its lived existence. Nothing on its coat tells us that it is art; perhaps it was stuffed for a diorama in some sort of museum. Whatever meaning we attribute to it, we attribute to it in terms of its current context; for example, in *Partners* it “functions like a meta-object.” Wherever we would find it, it would foreground our own interpretive processes, which inevitably connect an object to the situation in which we encounter it. Linda Hutcheon surmises, “irony is thus an overt case of what has been argued as basic to all discourse, for it foregrounds the ‘evaluative accent’ that context gives any utterance.”<sup>63</sup> This “context” is always established in the present, in the analyst’s own time; thus it says as much about us as about the object in question.

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<sup>63</sup> Hutcheon. 39.

In this sense *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)* has both a centrifugal and centripetal force: it pulls the whole show and the curator into it and then reflects it back on the enterprise of writing history at large. “Operating almost as a form of guerrilla warfare, irony is said to work to change how people interpret,”<sup>64</sup> writes Hutcheon. It undercuts any certainty of intention or meaning. But, to return to the question, where is the referent in all of this? Irony’s attack on notions of truth has profound implications for our understanding of the Holocaust, the history of which is guarded by photographs and prized objects. It is imperative to maintain an unequivocal connection with the referents of these shards, not cast them adrift on a semiotic sea, for they are the only material traces of the six million lives that passed largely without any trace whatsoever. Holocaust museums have been instrumental in maintaining the singularity of the referents. Generally speaking, exhibitions within these museums center on relics – personal artifacts and letters, vernacular photographs, remnants from the camps, etc., and records – documentary photographs, news reports, etc., accompanied by didactic material that ascribes meaning onto them. These relics and records simultaneously function as indexes of particular circumstances and as icons of the Holocaust in general and have been powerful in creating a visual narrative.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Ydessa Hendeles’ teddy bear archive is supplemented by eight photographs borrowed from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. These hold a special place in this ironic installation by casting a shadow over the other photographs. Much like the images we encounter in

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 32.

Holocaust museums proper, the photographs that Ydessa Hendeles includes are accompanied by didactic information, which is their only distinction from the teddy bear archive in general. Nothing we *see* reveals the complicated history of loss and destruction to which they testify: these are not photographs from the Nazi's meticulous archives or from the aftermath of the atrocity documented by allied forces and the Red Cross; these are individual and group portraits that are connected to the Holocaust by their context, not content.<sup>65</sup> For example, in one we see a man pushing a boy on a swing; in others we see a child standing in a crib, a girl standing in a field, and one on wooden steps. By reading the descriptions, we learn that the swing was in the Lodz ghetto; the crib was in a children's center in Jewish quarter of Amsterdam; the one girl was hiding in the countryside and the other was standing on the steps of the barracks at a Gypsy camp in Germany. The accompanying stories, either of the people depicted or of the donors, tell of both destruction and survival.

In her book entitled *Family Frames*, Marianne Hirsch argues that Holocaust photographs in particular are "uniquely able to bring out this particular capacity of photographs to hover between life and death."<sup>66</sup> Each of the seemingly ordinary images we see here in *Partners*, due to what we know of its context, brings before our eyes the horrific images of this context that we have seen before. She writes:

These two photographs are complementary: it is precisely the displacement of the bodies depicted in the pictures of horror from their domestic settings, along with their disfigurement, that brings home the enormity of Holocaust destruction. And it is precisely

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<sup>65</sup> Marianne Hirsch. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997. 20.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

the utter conventionality of the domestic family picture that makes it impossible for us to comprehend how the person in the picture was, or could have been, annihilated.<sup>67</sup>

In both cases, Hirsch argues, the viewer provides the half of the story that has been omitted; in the case of the teddy bear archive, we fill in the horror of these people's near or actual destruction. By incorporating these Holocaust photographs, Ydessa Hendeles brings the referent – the piles and pits of bare, disfigured bodies – into the heart of *Partners*.

In the second chapter I discussed how we come to identify with the child victims depicted in these photographs. Due to our protective regard of the child, however, identification also has the potential of screening out “context, specificity, responsibility, agency.”<sup>68</sup> Complete and intimate identification with the child victim may sound like the ultimate act of compassion but, regarding Holocaust photographs, those that stand outside the event cannot appropriate its history without some violence – the violence of over-identification – that makes the subject disappear for a second time. According to Hirsch, it is imperative that identification “resist appropriation and incorporation, resist annihilating the distance between self and other, the otherness of the other.”<sup>69</sup> The challenge in displaying Holocaust photographs is to find a balance that will allow the viewer to imagine the atrocities but will disallow the “blurring of important areas of difference and alterity.”<sup>70</sup> It is precisely Ydessa Hendeles' use of irony that prevents this over-identification. While we extend our compassion to these child victims, we are

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 21.

<sup>68</sup> Marianne Hirsch. “Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy.” *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer. Hanover: UP of New England, 1999. 21.

<sup>69</sup> Hirsch. “Projected Memory.” 9.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 17.

simultaneously made aware that archival and photographic conventions construct, rather than represent, worldviews.

This does not mean, however, that the hard reality we see from this “view” is set in doubt. As Marianne Hirsch argues, Holocaust photographs, more so than any other photographs, have the ability to bring the referent into the present. Peter Haidu states this succinctly:

Our grasp of the Event must inevitably be mediated by representations, with their baggage of indeterminacy. But this is a context in which theory is forced to reckon with reference – as unsatisfactory as contemporary accounts of reference may be – as a necessary function of language and all forms of representation.<sup>71</sup>

To my admitted amazement, in *Partners* the Holocaust photographs are the only things that do not yield to Hendeles’ ironic and metaphoric strategies. They hold their own and, as Susan Sontag would say, are “impervious to deflation.”<sup>72</sup> To the list of architectural metaphors already used, we can add “hinge-pin.” These images, the only ones that Ydessa Hendeles does not own herself, prevent the entire show from total disjunction with the history it purports to represent.

This hinge-pin, which keeps the representation and its referent adjoined, makes the rest of *Partners* look all the more ironic. If *Him* is Hitler, then we can consider it a satisfying irony that he is now under the control of a Jewish woman, but if *Him* is just a doll, then the irony snaps around to remind us of the impossibility that Hendeles can ever reify her fantasy of capture. In this light the Minnie Mouse toy is perhaps the most bitter irony in the exhibition: she reminds us of the hard fact that the “mice” (in Art Spiegelman’s

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<sup>71</sup> as quoted in Hirsch. *Family Frames*. 23.

<sup>72</sup> Susan Sontag. *Fascinating Fascism. Under the Sign of Saturn*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980. 101.

terms) were methodically exterminated by the Nazi regime. Jews rather than Nazis were the ones carrying their suitcases to the gas chambers, or, if lucky, escaping into exile with a few prized possessions. *Partners* is like a nightmare animated by figures we can half-recognize, or like the fairy-tale film *Life is Beautiful*, which can only be understood as an fantasy of empowerment, not a possibility. The fact that Minnie is a toy strikes us suddenly with great pathos: toys are only ever carriers of fantasies; of course her suitcases are empty. In the end, the cat is back.

This opens another question: does Ydessa Hendeles, by her use of irony, endanger rather than engender her stated intention, which is to invert the power hierarchy of the Third Reich? In ironic discourse, “every position undercuts itself, thus leaving the politically engaged writer in a position where her ironic discourse might just come to deconstruct her own politics.”<sup>73</sup> The “fence-sitting provisionality” of ironic discourse can be valued negatively as a form of evasion of committed speech. It can be value positively as an undogmatic alternative to authoritative pronouncements.<sup>74</sup> Quoting D.J. Enright, Hutcheon writes that this function of irony is “an admission that there are times when we cannot be sure, not so much because we don’t know enough as because uncertainty is intrinsic, of the essence.”<sup>75</sup> But when it comes to the Holocaust, demonstrating “uncertainty” comes with great risk. As Terry Eagleton states, irony’s multivocal instability is usually at the expense of “necessarily univocal social commitments.”<sup>76</sup> In some cases, especially regarding the Holocaust, there is a desire of an “unambiguous

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<sup>73</sup> T. Moi quoted in Hutcheon. 16.

<sup>74</sup> Hutcheon. 51

<sup>75</sup> as quoted in Hutcheon. 51-2.

<sup>76</sup> as quoted in Hutcheon. 29.



discourse of engagement,”<sup>77</sup> which irony cannot provide. It is even in question, given its slipperiness, whether it can be political at all.

Now that irony has happened, we also need to ask, how does it relate to our enactment of trauma that occurred on the level of focalization? Does *Partners* comment ironically on our trauma? “How far is the reader asked to travel on the road to complete negation, and how does he know when to stop?”<sup>78</sup> Irony knows no bounds *but interpreters do*. I want to underline once again that I am not arguing that this is Ydessa Hendeles’ intention. I am arguing that this is one possible end of the ironies that were attributed to *Partners* for the reasons I have given. This attribution necessarily involves “the construction of a sense of the evaluative attitude displayed by the text,”<sup>79</sup> not by the writer. The bottom line is that irony “happened” and it cannot be refuted or authenticated by the author in retrospect. However, I want to emphasize that this is not to disregard Ydessa Hendeles’ overall mission. Quite the opposite: it is from Hendeles’ function as the exhibition’s author that the tone of the irony, its affective edge, can be inferred. Hendeles’ position of “no position” allows the text, on the level of narration, to have just about any interpretation. This is a problem endemic to irony, but it is a problem that can be mitigated by returning to the question of *who is speaking*. By considering her work as a whole – her function as author, not narrator – we can prevent irony’s momentum from ending in cynicism or even nihilism. Thus it is important to ask not only whether or not irony is a suitable mode of representing the Holocaust, but also who is speaking for the Holocaust *in this way*, because the latter question affects our answer to the former. But here I need to add a

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<sup>77</sup> Hutcheon. 27.

<sup>78</sup> Wayne C. Booth. *The Rhetoric of Irony*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1974. 234.

<sup>79</sup> Hutcheon. 12.

second note: attributing irony's "evaluative attitude" is not a matter of revealing the hidden politics that lurk behind her proposed neutrality, but rather of asking how the exhibition mobilizes the viewer's interpretation, which is *de facto* a political process that occurs on an uneven social terrain between "conscious agents" – real people. Only by considering biography can the irony of *Partners* come to rest.

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Ydessa Hendeles use of irony points to the complex suspicion that surrounds documentary claims in a postmodern world. As we have seen in chapter one and two respectively, the "realist mode" of artistic representation and "distanced realism" both operate within the logic of testimony, directly or indirectly, and thus maintain the essential connection between the unsayable and the sayable. But how can this conduit be maintained by a generation whose knowledge of the Holocaust has come to it through postmemory or the proliferations of the "Holocaust Industry"? For artists like Cattelan and Hendeles, who are working at a generational remove, the process of coming to know of the Holocaust cannot be separated from the knowledge gained thereby. Therefore, when it comes to representing this "vicarious past," as James E. Young calls it, the "memory-act" itself must be revealed as part of the reality. Due to the problematic nature of many popular Holocaust representations, however, exposing the "memory-act" also necessitates a critique of the representations on which it is based. The objective of many postmodern representations is thus twofold: to engage with the memory of the Holocaust

in a meaningful way and to critique the representations by which the Holocaust is commemorated.<sup>80</sup>

To this end – to create a meta-representation of the Holocaust that calls to question its sources of knowledge while aiming to establish knowledge itself – Ydessa Hendeles’ two tactics join in purpose: metaphor allows for identification and evocation; irony, as already mentioned, precludes over-identification and a lack of criticality. It is in this way that Hendeles’ use of irony must be understood. Here we can see how irony is still working within the logic of testimony.

It cannot be assumed, however, that this “postmodern mode” of representing the Holocaust has developed only in response to the question of how to best transmit it. The deployment of irony is also a result of what seems to be possible within the discourse of art itself,<sup>81</sup> which is now dominated by postmodern tactics, which typically skim the representational surface of its subject to reflect it against itself and willingly oscillate between exploitation and empathy, complicity and critique. Our knowledge of Ydessa Hendeles’ connection to the Holocaust through familial bonds stills the oscillation. To play devil’s advocate we could argue that Hendeles’ exploits her subjects and is complicit with the representational means she seeks to expose and that she thereby undoes her own politics, which is to reconstitute, not further unravel, both memory and subjectivity, but to do so would be to miss the point: passionate empathy and rigorous critique.

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<sup>80</sup> Dora Apel. *Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002. 7.

<sup>81</sup> For example, in post war decades, abstraction expressionism was dominant. Because of its affinity with surrealism, its non-figurative means, and its universal claims, abstract expressionism lent itself well to representing the Holocaust.

What I find most striking about Ydessa Hendeles' use of irony is the voice it gives to despair. D.C. Muecke writes, "It is the function of irony to ask whether we have any reason to suppose we inhabit a world whose meaningfulness irony could destroy rather than a world whose meaninglessness irony might make clear."<sup>82</sup> *Partners* gives voice to despair about the limits of representation – language still fails where we need it most; despair about the breakdown of the intimate communal bonds that could not withstand Nazism's forces to tear them apart – the Holocaust destroyed our assumption in a basic humanity common to us all; despair about Enlightenment reason that allowed ethics to fall away – the West still fails to adequately question and account for its systematic elimination of otherness; despair about precarious position of women in the twenty-first century – history is still *his* story; despair about a subjectivity that has survived but finds itself caged in the past – trauma knows no end. On *Partners*' despair I give Geoffrey Hartman the last words:

To integrate the Holocaust into our image of human nature is to despair of humanity, as well as of language. Yet to conclude that it cannot be integrated is also to despair – if it means abandoning the hope that a remedy may be available through collective action based on self-understanding and tradition. As new details or new perspectives emerge, can we draw any practical consequences from what we have learned?<sup>83</sup>

On Ydessa Hendeles' use of irony I give Charles Glicksberg the last words:

It takes tremendous courage for a writer to expose the deception that life practices and to bear up under this vision by giving birth to the still higher deception of art. In his[her] master of form he[she] achieves a fleeting victory over time and his awareness of the hopelessness of the human condition. He[she] keeps faith the vital fiction that is art, even though he[she] knows that in the end darkness will cover everything.<sup>84</sup>

*Partners* shows us all the shades of grey that cover us in the longest shadow of the Holocaust.

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<sup>82</sup> Muecke, D.C. *The Compass of Irony*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1969. 245.

<sup>83</sup> Hartman. 4.

<sup>84</sup> Charles I. Glicksberg. *The Ironic Vision in Modern Literature*. Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969. 249.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Ydessa Hendeles introduces *Partners* as an investigation of the impact of historical inheritance on the formation of personal and national identity. As such, she aligns it with the genre of exhibitions commonly found in history museums, which consolidate or establish the identity of a circumscribed group of people or nation. In light of this stated intent, *Partners* is grossly inadequate: it is not informative whatsoever. What we understand as “history” is impossible to locate in this exhibition: *Partners*’ historical narrative is not explicit and we leave with what knowledge we came with. Furthermore, what relevance the exhibition might hold for an understanding of national identity is obscured by its “worldly” scope, which seems to implicate all and only Westerners. Holding *Partners* to the measure of its stated intent is therefore of little cognitive value and I will not dwell on it here.

What I will call to question, however, is its (anti)narrative strategy for it belies a conception of history that needs defining. Ydessa Hendeles insists that “we have to look to the future,”<sup>1</sup> but in the second chapter I indicated how *Partners* precludes the future by way of its cyclical itinerary. This – the future or lack thereof – is the crux of the issue. In *The Longest Shadow* Geoffrey Hartman asks, “Through the focusing power of the Holocaust we look at both past and present, and what we see is insane. Yet how do we deal with that, how do we convert what lies plainly before our eyes into a potent and

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<sup>1</sup> as stated in Matthias Beckel. Interview with Ydessa Hendeles. Haus der Kunst, Munich. Unpublished video. 2003. My transcription.

thoughtful rather than simply an emotional and burdening part of education?"<sup>2</sup> As Hendeles asks, "where do we go from here?"<sup>3</sup>

"In times not so very long ago," writes Andreas Huyssen, "the discourse of history was there to guarantee the relative stability of the past in its pastness."<sup>4</sup> It was assumed that we learn from history. The "pasts" of nation-states were invoked "so as to legitimize and give meaning to the present and to envision the future."<sup>5</sup> *Partners'* cyclical itinerary collapses the past into the perpetual present of trauma. But what does it mean to represent history from inside trauma?<sup>6</sup> Can *Partners* even be considered a "history" show, or is it something else? For history looks forward, sometimes relentlessly: consider the great utopian dreams, Nazism among them, that mobilized politics in the pre-war period. *Partners* makes no promise of the future whatsoever, not even its inevitability. The future is utterly off the horizon. It bespeaks no master-narrative. The enlightened idea that we learn from history is disproved altogether by the constant repetition of catastrophe to which the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and *Partners*, attests. As such, it can be considered a "post-history" exhibition. So how do we envision the future?

Memory, which looks backwards instead of forwards, is *Partners'* modus operandi, not history. Although modern historiography has been delegitimized as far as its pedagogical mission is concerned, the seduction of the past and of the archive, with "its trove of

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<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Hartman. *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996. 2.

<sup>3</sup> as stated in Beckel. My transcription.

<sup>4</sup> Andreas Huyssen. *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 8-9. Cathy Caruth also addresses this question in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

stories of human achievement and suffering,”<sup>7</sup> has never been greater. In his recent book titled *Present Pasts*, Andreas Huyssen discusses this turn toward memory and how the past is now part of the present in previously unforeseen ways: museums, monuments and memorials are popping up everywhere across Europe and America; exhibition attendance is at an all time high; novels, biographies, poetry and history books related to the Holocaust are selling out; college courses are over-enrolled; and yet studies indicate that the generation now beginning to hold office, make policies and teach, etc., is unlikely to associate “Warsaw ghetto” with the Holocaust, and is more likely to identify Anne Frank than Adolf Eichmann.<sup>8</sup>

In this chapter I will first situate *Partners* within this “memory boom” and then see how it negotiates two explicit mnemonic devices: the monument and the memorial.

Arthur Danto has written that “we erect monuments so that we shall always remember and build memorials so that we shall never forget.”<sup>9</sup> As *Partners* makes clear, however, our cultural obsession with memory is not to be conflated with a revivification of history: whereas memory, especially traumatic memory, sees the past as part of the present, history places them one after the other in a continuum. In the late modern era, however, historical teleologies and the cult of progress called for a vehement shedding of the past: the avant-garde had only one line of sight. Museums, monuments and memorials were repeatedly declared as dead, as mausoleums. Consequently, we effectively lost the past in

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<sup>7</sup> Huyssen. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Hilene Flanzbaum. Introduction. *The Americanization of the Holocaust*. Ed. Hilene Flanzbaum. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1999. 1-32. Also: Dora Apel. *Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002. 9-42.

<sup>9</sup> as quoted in James E. Young. *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1993. 3.

late modernity and the future in postmodernity,<sup>10</sup> resulting in a profound lack of temporal anchoring. In Huyssen's words, "Both attempts inevitably are haunted by failure."<sup>11</sup>

In light of this shift in our "structure of temporality," the memory boom can be seen as an act of reparation to an unanchored subject and an expression of the basic human need for stable narration. As Huyssen states, "The struggle for memory is ultimately also a struggle for history..."<sup>12</sup> But the hypertrophy of memory, that is, its current state of excessive development, can have the adverse effect of obscuring the future altogether by indulging in "melancholic fixation" or "privileging the traumatic dimension of life with no exit in sight."<sup>13</sup> To these two counts I feel *Partners* submits, leaving the viewer disempowered to effect positive change. Andreas Huyssen insists:

It is all the more important that at a time when an avalanche of memory discourses seems to have overwhelmed an earlier activist imagination of the future, we actually do remember the future and try to envision alternatives to the current status quo. It just will not do to replace the twentieth century's obsessions with the future with our newly found obsessions with the past. We need both the past and future to articulate our political, social, and cultural dissatisfactions with the present state of the world.<sup>14</sup>

Alternatives are what is lacking in *Partners*: its relentless present pulls everything into it as if by fate. But there is one hope: if *Self-portrait with Camera* is the portal, so to speak, and *Saloon* is the keystone, then *Stumbling Block* is the emergency exit. This is the point in the narrative to which we must return in the hope of regaining a vision of the future. The businessman strikes the iconic pose of melancholia, but, hopefully, in our fall we will be able to break the cycle that encircles us in *Partners*.

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<sup>10</sup> Huyssen. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Andreas Huyssen. *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. New York: Routledge, 1995. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Huyssen. *Present Pasts*. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



In Huyssen's esteem, "Memory, whether individual or generational, political or public, is always more than only the prison house of the past."<sup>15</sup> *Partners*, however, collapses all of memory into trauma, marking it, as well as the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century, "exclusively in terms of pain, suffering, and loss."<sup>16</sup> Ydessa Hendeles' emphasis on trauma is not idiosyncratic, however; it is part of a widespread cultural phenomenon that haunted the 1990s, which can be attributed to the increasingly ubiquitous Holocaust discourse, as well as to trauma's location "on the threshold between remembering and forgetting, seeing and not seeing, transparency and occlusion, experience and its absence in repetition."<sup>17</sup> But what are the implications of using trauma as the trope for the whole of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the Holocaust as its primary metaphor? A notion of historical trauma is necessary to contend with the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which nations and groups of people are trying to come to terms with a history of violence.<sup>18</sup> As Dominick LaCapra asserts, "Acting out may well be necessary and unavoidable in the wake of extreme trauma, especially for victims."<sup>19</sup>

Transposing a psychoanalytic model into historiography allows us to discuss the effects of the past in the present. Exclusively using the cipher of trauma to understand history, however, "would deny human agency and lock us into compulsive repetition."<sup>20</sup>

According to Huyssen, "it is precisely the function of public memory discourses to allow

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Dominick LaCapra. *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994. 198.

<sup>20</sup> Huyssen. *Present Pasts*. 8.

individuals to break out of traumatic repetitions,<sup>21</sup> but historiography via Freud runs the danger of having the obverse effect. This is the profound contribution of Jeff Wall's *Stumbling Block*: it is the only image in the exhibition in which the protagonist is *active*. It is the woman's moment of decision that has the potential of altering history.

Also at stake in using the Holocaust as a metaphor for a century marked by trauma is our understanding of the Holocaust itself. By comparing it to the recurrence of genocidal politics in Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo, for example, it "loses its quality as index of the specific historical event"<sup>22</sup> and may inadvertently block insight into specific histories of the other events, as well. In *Partners*, as already noted, we learn nothing about the two World Wars, the Vietnam War or the recent American invasion of Iraq, though all four can be seen with "his" face in our mind's eye. If the memory boom is an antidote for the "significant entropy of our sense of future possibilities" that has resulted from the failure of history to fulfill its promises, and a source of comfort in light of a "global future that does not inspire confidence," we need to remember: "the past cannot give us what the future has failed to deliver."<sup>23</sup> Andreas Huyssen ends his argument in *Present Pasts* by stating, "Perhaps it is time to remember the future, rather than simply to worry about the future of memory."<sup>24</sup>

But where is the future in *Partners*, other than somewhere in front of the woman as she falls out of Jeff Wall's tableau? The Wild West anti-climax bespeaks our contemporary

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 27.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 29.

trauma, going around and around but never progressing. As Fredric Jameson remarks, in the postmodern, “experience becomes a kind of continuous present, with history as an assemblage of imagery, rather than actual linear events which culminate in the present.”<sup>25</sup>

We can testify and repeat and denaturalize, but how can we make history? Clearly Ydessa Hendeles has – her collection and curatorial practice is world-renowned. Her preoccupation with this question is bespoken in *Partners* by the narrative thread that connects infant Ydessa to On Kawara’s work. The exhibition itself seems to be saying, “I am still alive,” and seems to be begging the question, how can I insert myself into history? How can I orient myself in this constant stream of events that overwhelms us with its synchronic density? How can I stretch it out and slow it down, like Kawara has done, so as to find my voice? Trauma is always also a trauma of survival.<sup>26</sup>

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Monuments have been one way for the state to assert itself in history. They function to concretize and naturalize the authority of the powers-that-be. Due to their association with the “ever-lasting” ambitions of ideological regimes like Nazism, monuments were relegated to the margins of high-modern discourse. The Haus der *Deutschen Kunst* is a case in point: it was the National Socialists’ first monumental building, commissioned in 1933. It is a large neoclassical building designed by Paul Ludwig Troost, Hitler’s favourite architect; Hitler broke the first stone. It is perfectly symmetrical with a wide set of stairs leading up to a long colonnade that runs along the front of the Haus, reminiscent

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<sup>25</sup> Fredric Jameson. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1992.

<sup>26</sup> Cathy Caruth argues this in *Unclaimed Experience*.

of a Greek or Roman temple. Recapitulating classical architecture was a way for Nazism to connote stability and strength, as well as to suggest that German's have their direct ancestry in the classical past.

The design of the building also sets up a certain dynamic of subservience to a "higher" order: not to a god in this case but, placed in the back center where a god's throne would be, was Hitler's podium. As Carol Duncan states,

Museums do not simply resemble temple architecturally; they *work* like temples, shrines and other such monuments. Museumgoers today, like visitors to these other sites, bring with them the willingness and ability to shift into a certain state of receptivity...<sup>27</sup>

This is the building's script, regardless of what ideological use it will be put to. During the Third Reich, this was the way Hitler aligned himself with the likes of Zeus and Constantine. Here he delivered his propagandist, racist speeches while his cronies looked on from the floor or the balconies above. In the flanking rooms he presented kitschy god-like statues, proposing that classical values are alive and well in the German state. In this regard, Hitler's agenda parallels that of the Louvre.

Of course and thankfully, monuments fail to establish the certitude and consolidation they aspire to, and in some ways encourage forgetting. Following Pierre Nora, the more memory comes to rest in exteriorized material forms, the less it is experienced internally.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, as James E. Young states, "New generations visit memorials

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<sup>27</sup> Carol Duncan, "Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship." Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display. Eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine. Washington: Smithsonian Institution P, 1991. 90.

<sup>28</sup> Pierre Nora. Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer. New York: Columbia UP, 1996.

under new circumstances and invest them with new meanings.”<sup>29</sup> Despite their material perseverance, their significance erodes. But the association between fascism and monumentalism persists and for the decades following the war, Germany was guided by a deliberate anti-monumentalism. But now – in the midst of the memory boom – there is an overwhelming and widespread resurgence of every kind of memorial conceivable as the nation struggles with its identity in light of its fascist past. The “critical restoration” of the Haus der Kunst, which Ydessa Hendeles intensified for the purposes of *Partners*, participates in this mnemonic culture, the ultimate goal of which is redemption. The restoration will bring the building back to its monumental “cold beauty,”<sup>30</sup> albeit now with a very different inflections.

An “institution” is of course not equitable with a particular building, even if the building is designed to overwhelm and terrorize, as were many of the Nazi regime. An institution is a network of policies involving power and money that result in a sum-total that could be said to be its “identity.” Exhibitions are an institution’s medium of communication. As Bruce Ferguson states, “exhibitions are publicly sanctioned representations of identity, principally, but not exclusively, of the institutions which present them.”<sup>31</sup> From 1937 to 1944, the Haus der Deutschen Kunst held the annual *Großen Deutschen Kunstausstellungen* of German artists whose work glorified Hitler’s “blood and soil” doctrine. The art that Hitler endorsed was chosen for its functional value as propaganda. Joseph Goebbels emphasized the need to distinguish between “the arts of those days and

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<sup>29</sup> Young. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Birgit Kölgen. “Niedliche Teddybären erzählen vom Tod.” *Rheinische Post* 26 Nov. 2003. My trans.

<sup>31</sup> Bruce Ferguson. “Exhibition Rhetorics: Material Speech and Utter Sense.” *Thinking about Exhibitions*. Eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne. London: Routledge, 1996. 175.

the art of our days.”<sup>32</sup> *Entartete Kunst*, which contained confiscated work from artists such as Max Beckmann, Paul Klee and Kurt Schwitters, was held as its didactic counterpoint in the nearby Hofgarten. Both exhibitions traveled to several German cities and were visited by hundreds of thousands of people.

After the war the Haus der Deutschen Kunst, which lay untouched under camouflaged netting, was used as an officers’ club by the occupying forces. In 1948 the building was returned to the Bavarian state and soon after held its first exhibition, *The Blue Rider: Munich and Art of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. This exhibition featured many of the artists that were persecuted as degenerate a few years earlier. There was talk of the “denazification” of the building, which was now referred to only by the more generic name, the Haus der Kunst. In the following decades, under the director Peter A. Ade, solo exhibitions of modernist artists and architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Vincent van Gogh and Wassily Kandinsky were mounted one after the other as a kind of moral amends.<sup>33</sup> A milestone of this period was the 1955 Picasso retrospective, which included his anti-fascist painting *Guernica*. The Haus der Kunst quickly began to earn a reputation as an important venue for modern art and Cristoph Vitali, the director of the Haus der Kunst from 1994 to 2003, continued this tradition with blockbuster exhibitions that extolled modern painting. It was his assertion that *die Mauern tragen Keine Schuld* (the walls don’t carry guilt) and the building was deemed ideologically neutral.

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<sup>32</sup> as quoted in Neil Levi. “‘Judge for Yourselves!’ – The *Degenerate Art* Exhibition as Political Spectacle.” *October* 85 (1998): 43.

<sup>33</sup> Chris Dercon and Thomas Weski. Foreword. *Partners*. Eds. Chris Dercon and Thomas Weski. Köln: Walther König, 2003. 13.

By aligning itself with the artistic avant-garde, the institution recast its political role from being the harbinger of Germany's "natural" inheritance of the classical past to being the harbinger of an egalitarian future. This tactic was premised on the false syllogism that if Nazism was anti-modernist, then modernism must be anti-fascist. Furthermore, the work that played a very definitive political role – demonstrating "degeneracy" – a few years earlier was effectively de-politicized and presented as example of an art historical teleology. Once undercut as evolving in a purely stylistic narrative, as opposed to a political narrative, it could be brought into the Haus der Kunst to de-politicize its history in the popular imagination, in theory; in practice, of course, the art and the institution's exhibition program was and is *de facto* political. In keeping with the effort to shift the institution's identity, modifications were made to the interior of the building in order to turn the "temple" into a "white cube" so as its torrid history would not effect the "pure" art history presented within. The columns were painted over, the skylights were covered and partition walls were added in order to break the inherent narrative of the building and supplant it with one of professed neutrality. Homogenizing the interior space as such, abstracted it from both historical circumstance and the building's architecture. The idea put forward was that art hovers in a transcendental space high above all contingencies.

Of course, as Brian O'Doherty has clearly argued, this apparent "transcendence" is in fact a proposition of a particular class that would like to establish its own values as eternal, thereby guaranteeing its perpetuity.<sup>34</sup> Under the direction of Chris Dercon, the modifications are being removed in order to re-historicize the building. In contrast to his

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<sup>34</sup> Brian O'Doherty. *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. Expanded ed. Introduction Thomas McEvelley. Berkeley: U of California P, 1999.

predecessor Vitali, Dercon, maintains that, yes, the walls do bear guilt, and so the question is not how do we neutralize their past but rather, how do we engage with this past and demonstrate its political and art historical significance. Slowly, and under public discussion, he is enacting a “critical restoration,” that is, a restoration deemed necessary by ideological shifts, not by structural or cosmetic demands. As part of this critical restoration, the layers of paint obfuscating the architectural details that define the building are being peeled away; the post-war walls breaking up the large central assembly hall and flanking exhibition spaces are being removed; the skylights and windows are being uncovered; the balcony, where Hitler’s cronies once watched his pageantry, is being opened again to the hall below; the infamous private “meeting room,” with its kitschy golden murals of the world (or of world domination), will be open for public viewing; and a café at the back of the building will once again allow for taking leisurely pleasure in a view of the English Garden, as per design.

Ydessa Hendeles actively participated in the restoration and intensified the process for the purposes of *Partners*, removing the walls which blocked the windows in the East galleries and creating faux Troost doors for the archways. As such, she is aligning herself with Dercon’s position, and this fact bespeaks her motive for accepting his invitation:

When you paint over the past it means you are very engaged and it’s very alive for you, and it still affects you and you repress it, but repression doesn’t work, it ultimately leaks. But when you take the paint away and take a look away, then it becomes the past, then it’s over, then it becomes something that was of that era and doesn’t damage one’s life.<sup>35</sup>

The Haus der Kunst and Ydessa Hendeles share this mandate, despite being borne of binary opposites – the Nazi dictator and his ideological “other.” It is with the intention to

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<sup>35</sup> As stated in Beckel. My transcription.



make a “past” of trauma – to place it in historical continuum – that they chose to collaborate on *Partners*.

Rather than post-war iconoclasm, this restoration is an example of how the past can be turned against itself. Laying the Haus der Kunst bare for all to see will make this monument function as counter-monument, as defined by James E. Young.

Its aim is not to console but to provoke; not to remain fixed but to change; not to be everlasting but to disappear; not to be ignored by passersby but to demand interaction; not to remain pristine but to invite its own violation and desanctification; not to accept graciously the burden of memory but to through it back at the town’s feet.”<sup>36</sup>

Jochen and Esther Gerz’ *Monument against Fascism* (1986) is a paradigmatic example of this tactic: it counters the didactic function of monuments by inviting the community to inscribe it – literally – as opposed to being inscribed by it. As more and more names covered its soft lead surface, the pillar was lowered into the ground, until it disappeared altogether.

In the Haus der Kunst, a large bronze tablet, which formerly hung in the reception area, is now on display in the main gallery. It is bent and ripped in parts due to its removal after the war. It lists the names of all the major sponsors who financed the building, and now serves as a reminder that the Holocaust resulted from an exceptional combination of normal processes.<sup>37</sup> This “banality” undercuts the very power that the monument was intended to exert. Nazism and its Haus did not fall from heaven: it fell from the pockets of a select few. An exhibition documenting the history of the museum is slated for 2005. Furthermore, despite being restored, the building is not being renovated. Rather, it is

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<sup>36</sup> Young, 30.

<sup>37</sup> Huyssen. *Twilight Memories*. 259.

shown as the ruin it has come to be. The rhetoric of timelessness crumbles with it: the Haus der Deutschen Kunst loses its mythic stronghold and becomes integrated into historical, human time.

The “critical restoration” highlights the tension between the monumental building and its institutional identity. If the past is not painted-over, how can its architectural script be renegotiated on the level of narration alone? The Haus der Kunst explicitly challenges its authoritarian air through carefully planned programmatic moves. In the case of *Partners*, the burden of responsibility was handed to Ydessa Hendeles, but in a concurrent exhibition curated by Dercon’s team, the burden falls to a very different character, American singer/songwriter/poet/artist Patti Smith. In the exhibition *Patti Smith: Strange Messenger* we can see an alternate mode of address: unlike Ydessa Hendeles, Patti Smith is blatantly political. In her performance at the Haus der Kunst, this rock and roll renegade directly addresses the Munich public: “we have the power to turn the world around, to wrestle it from fools – don’t forget it!” Her drawings, which evoke the ruins of the Twin Towers, fill the central room of the building, and where once Hitler yelled, we hear her spoken word. Considering Patti Smith’s direct appeal to political issues, we can say that, unlike Hendeles, she is addressing the viewers as public constituents who are not *symptoms* of their historical circumstance but *agents* in its production. Although both exhibitions function to reframe the identity of Haus der Kunst, and both address the German public, the audience that each presupposes and constitutes is drastically different.

Chris Dercon's exhibition program makes a marked effort to open the doors to many different types of practices, rather than Hitler's "one art for one people" or the standard blockbuster favourites. In the foreword to the exhibition catalogue he, together with Thomas Weski, the head curator, writes:

We understand *Partners* to be an alternative to today's usual exhibition practice, whose presentations increasingly resemble each other in form and content. This situation of cultural uniformity and conformity is what we would decidedly like to oppose. *Partners* stands for just such a proposal.<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps this – a series of temporary exhibitions experienced as a process rather than a product – is the most effective counter-monument, keeping the discussion alive as to how we can "never forget" but also move ahead. As Ydessa Hendeles states, "I am not interested in an all-inclusive statement that will last forever. I am interested in this particular moment."

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At this particular moment genocidal politics and antisemitism are on the rise. In Europe as well as the U.S., there have been marked shifts toward the right. Nine/eleven has instigated new security measures, which often near racial profiling. As I write this thesis, there have been several reports in Canada of Jewish cemeteries being vandalized, and a Jewish School was maliciously burned in Montreal. And not two years ago, a Native Chief commended Hitler for his action against the Jews. The past may be over but we are not past it yet; we are "after" but not "beyond."

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<sup>38</sup> Chris Dercon and Thomas Weski. 17.

The weekend on which *Partners* opened, Munich held a ceremony to mark the opening of a Jewish Centre, which has a synagogue, kindergarten, school and museum. This date was chosen to commemorate the losses incurred during *Pogromnacht*, the Nazi instigated pogrom against German Jews exactly 65 years earlier, November 7-10<sup>th</sup>, 1938. It was known during the Third Reich as *Kristallnacht* (Crystal Night) to mock the broken shop windows of Jewish stores and residences that covered the sidewalks of cities across Germany and Austria with shards of glass. Severe economic and civil restrictions were already in place by the time of the pogrom, but a massive deportation on October 28<sup>th</sup> of 17 000 Polish Jews living in Germany escalated the violence to new heights. A son of one of the deportees shot a German official on November 7<sup>th</sup> in retaliation; the Third Secretary died of his wounds two days later. The Nazi administration, specifically the Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, seized this shooting as an opportunity to organize the pogrom, during which more than a thousand synagogues were destroyed and burned, Jewish stores and homes were looted, and Jews were attacked or killed. Afterward, over 30 000 Jews were arrested and deported to concentration camps. The Jewry was held legally and financially responsible, which allowed the Nazi administration to glean all insurance money, resulting in the elimination of Jews from the German economy. *Pogromnacht* sparked outrage all over the world and several nations severed diplomatic relations with Nazi Germany in protest. It was a crucial turning point in the Nazis' policies and is now considered the beginning of the Holocaust.

Two reviews draw attention to the fact that *Partners* also functions as a memorial of *Pogromnacht*.<sup>39</sup> By commemorating this turning point, which resulted in the Holocaust, Ydessa Hendeles directs our attention to the fact that it could have turned out otherwise: the Holocaust was not inevitable: it is an event in human history. This restores the question of ethical responsibility on the behalf of Germans and the international community at large, which was privy to news of the pogrom. Furthermore, by commemorating the beginning of the Holocaust, rather than the liberation of the camps, she precludes the possibility of heroizing the allied forces and the “happy ending” to the historical narrative. Instead, if there is a hero, it is the teenage Jewish boy, Herschel Grynszpan. The exhibition opened on November 7<sup>th</sup>, the day he killed the German official. His murderous action is thereby redeemed in spite of what followed.

Due to Ydessa Hendeles’ Polish Jewish heritage, her postmemory personalizes the event. By making it “local” as such, its magnitude can be brought into the affective, rather than strictly factual, realm, thereby allowing the viewer to identify with the victims. As we saw in the second chapter, the phenomenological aspects of traversing the exhibition give us an experiential and emotional understanding; they produce a “Holocaust effect.” Our reenactment of trauma expands the memorial circle and becomes a *milieux de mémoire*. More and more museums and memorials are using this abstract, metaphoric approach. This trend can be accounted for in part because trust in externalized forms of memory, *lieux de mémoire*,<sup>40</sup> has eroded, seeing as they exempt individual responsibility and

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<sup>39</sup> Matthias Kuhn. “Von Teddybären und anderen Ungetümen.” *GO Das Münchner Stadtmagazin* 1 Dec. 2003: 86-7. Also Cornelia Gockel. Rev. of *Partners*, by Ydessa Hendeles. Haus der Kunst, Munich. *Kunstforum* 168 (2004): 351.

<sup>40</sup> Pierre Nora has put forward these terms. *Realms of Memory*.

continue to recall the fascist past, and also in part because the particular contribution of the imaginative discourses to an understanding of history has become more widely accepted.

Daniel Libeskind's remarkable building, the Jewish Museum in Berlin, is another example of how the viewer's path can allow memory to be internalized. The viewer enters the museum by going underground. Here she stands at the intersection of three corridors. The floors and ceilings are sloped. One corridor, the "axis of exile," leads to the outdoor *Garden of Exile*, which impresses on the viewer a sense of disorientation and disconnect, and a sense of being underground: the trees grow high above. Another, the "axis of extermination," leads to the *Holocaust Tower*, which is a tall empty concrete tower. Inside it only the faintest sound of the city outside can be heard and only a sliver of light seeps through. It is both claustrophobic and overwhelming. The corridor we have taken underground is the "axis of continuation." At the very end, at the top of three flights of stairs that bring us back above ground, we come to the primary exhibition. As we traverse "two millennia of German Jewish history," we are repeatedly led across bridges from which we can see *The Void* – the absence of six million Jews and their children – that cuts through the middle of the building. The metaphor is here made literal and physically apprehensible by Libeskind's architectural design.

Both the Jewish Museum and *Partners* provide a stage on which viewers can establish a shared identity based on a memory of great pain, which may, potentially, help consolidate a discursive community with a definitive voice. Although we need to establish affiliations

in order instigate political change, Andreas Huyssen explains how “monolithic notions of identities, often shaped by defensiveness or victimology, clash with the conviction that identities, national or otherwise, are always heterogeneous and in need of such heterogeneity to remain viable politically and existentially.”<sup>41</sup> *Partners*, however, does not slip into victimology due to the slipperiness of Hendeles’ generalizations; here, they work in her favour. We, as Westerners, are all implicated. And Libeskind’s “void” is bridged.

The similarity of approach between *Partners* and Libeskind’s building is striking but it is important to note that such abstract approaches are a departure from more traditional Holocaust museums, which, as mentioned in the previous chapter, provide documentary evidence and factual information in unambiguous forms. We can see examples of such displays within the exhibitions at the Jewish Museum. Downstairs we see many family photographs that look, despite the lack of a teddy bear, much like the images in Hendeles’ archive. They are installed behind black glass on the viewer’s route to the *Holocaust Tower*. One display contains a leather wallet. The label reads:

In August 1942 the Gestapo arrested Walter Blumenthal and his wife Elisabeth in their apartment in Berlin Charlottenberg. They were to be taken away in a lorry. Shortly before it left, something was thrown from the vehicle. A neighbor saw this and later picked up the object. It was Walter’s wallet, containing his business card and two photos. Walter and Elisabeth, both in their 70s, were deported to Theresianstadt and later murdered in Minsk.

Time and again the family of the neighbor who found the wallet told its story, preserving the memory of the Blumenthals and their fate.

Now the viewer preserves their memory. Upstairs we can see a few remaining shards of the victims’ lives which were found upon the liberation of the camps. There is no room for (mis)interpretation: the violence is immediately apprehensible. These objects stand as

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<sup>41</sup> Huyssen. *Twilight Memories*. 5.

the focal point in the “Persecution, Resistance, Extermination” section of the two millennia on display. And such literal narratives common to Holocaust museums provide the departure point and counterpoint to Ydessa Hendeles (anti)narrative strategy.

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Despite the precarious position of the future in *Partners* and its resignation to the traumatic dimension of history, as a counter-monument and memorial it is, in my estimation, effective. This indicates how difficult it is to pass judgment on the show, positively or negatively, for only within externally enforced parameters can the question of *Partners*' effectiveness even be broached. These parameters have shifted throughout this thesis: as a vehicle for actualizing the self in the wake of trauma, *Partners* is triumphant, but at the expense of the artworks' *studium*. The exhibition's focalization of the viewer is more traumatic than triumphant and consequently disempowering, and yet this ability of the exhibition to seize the viewer is also the source of its communicative and affective power, which leaves the “unsayable” unsaid and yet brings it immediately before the eyes. This tactic differs greatly from the images of horror that pervade Holocaust museums. *Partners* presses against the boundaries of Holocaust discourse at every turn, most directly in its deployment of irony, which undercuts all certitudes and platitudes; however, the danger of inciting outrage is mitigated by the balance Hendeles strikes between critique and pathos. On all these counts there is room for critical oscillation, and this room, as I have demonstrated, is inherent to the exhibition itself: as Hendeles states, *Partners* is an opportunity for viewer to discover “how they really feel.”



Perhaps the ensuing debate, which participates in the larger debate on the representation of the Holocaust, is, as James E. Young suggests, the most viable and productive memorial possible for an event that continues to exceed representation.

This critical oscillation also indicates how important it is to know who is speaking: certainly if it were an avowed neo-Nazi that was restoring the Haus der Kunst and memorializing the murder of Jews, I would feel much differently, and if it was someone of the “new generation” providing the stage for an affective reenactment of the trauma of the Holocaust, the terms of analysis would need to change significantly. For this same reason, it is also important to know who is analyzing. *Partners* leaves itself open to being pushed in more than one way: is it facilitating mourning or fixating on melancholy? Is it relativising or rarefying? Contextualizing or generalizing? Because the exhibition itself seems to crisscross back and across these various viewpoints, it is ultimately up to the viewer to decide its political position, and that will inevitably involve a degree of transference. Is *Partners* a working-through or an acting-out, or both? And which do I want it to be?

Having now written this thesis I can see that my initial responses were borne of the desire for mourning, not melancholy: I wanted healing, not interminable pain. But to conclude I would like to insist that it is Ydessa Hendeles’ ability to speak to both simultaneously and to build bridges between them, as well as between disparate communities, subsequent generations and various discourses, that is its most salient contribution. The hope with which I entered into this project is not lost by coming to face the scars the Holocaust has

incised on cultural memory and historical thought; it has shifted to include the presence of the past and the necessity of incessantly reinscribing its memory. As James E. Young urges:

It is not enough to ask whether or not our memorials remember the Holocaust, or even how they remember it. We should ask to what ends we have remembered. That is, how do we respond to the current moment in light of our remembered past? This is to recognize that the shape of memory cannot be divorced from the actions taken in its behalf, and memory without consequences contains the seeds of its own destruction.<sup>42</sup>

Ydessa Hendeles' ends – passionate engagement and rigorous critique – have culminated in the action that bore this challenging exhibition that, in turn, calls for the subsequent action of questioning our preconceptions: regardless of the point at which the oscillation stills for each individual viewer, the oscillation itself “will temper the demands of ideology and free the intellect rather than shut it down.”<sup>43</sup>

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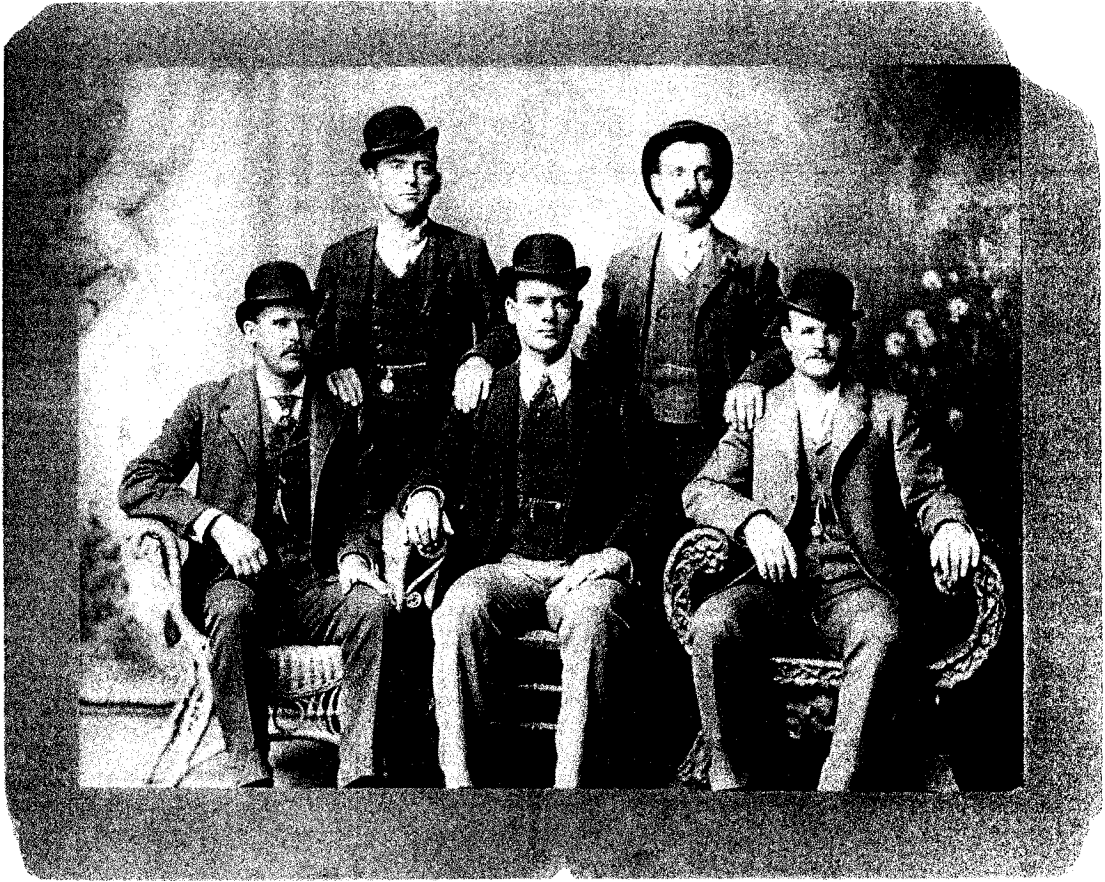
<sup>42</sup> Young. 15.

<sup>43</sup> Hartman. 13.



R.S. (La Isla Toys). Minnie Mouse Carrying Felix in Cages. ca. 1926-36.  
Lithographed tin, key-wind clock-work toy, 17.5 x 8.9 x 9.5 cm.

Figure 1.



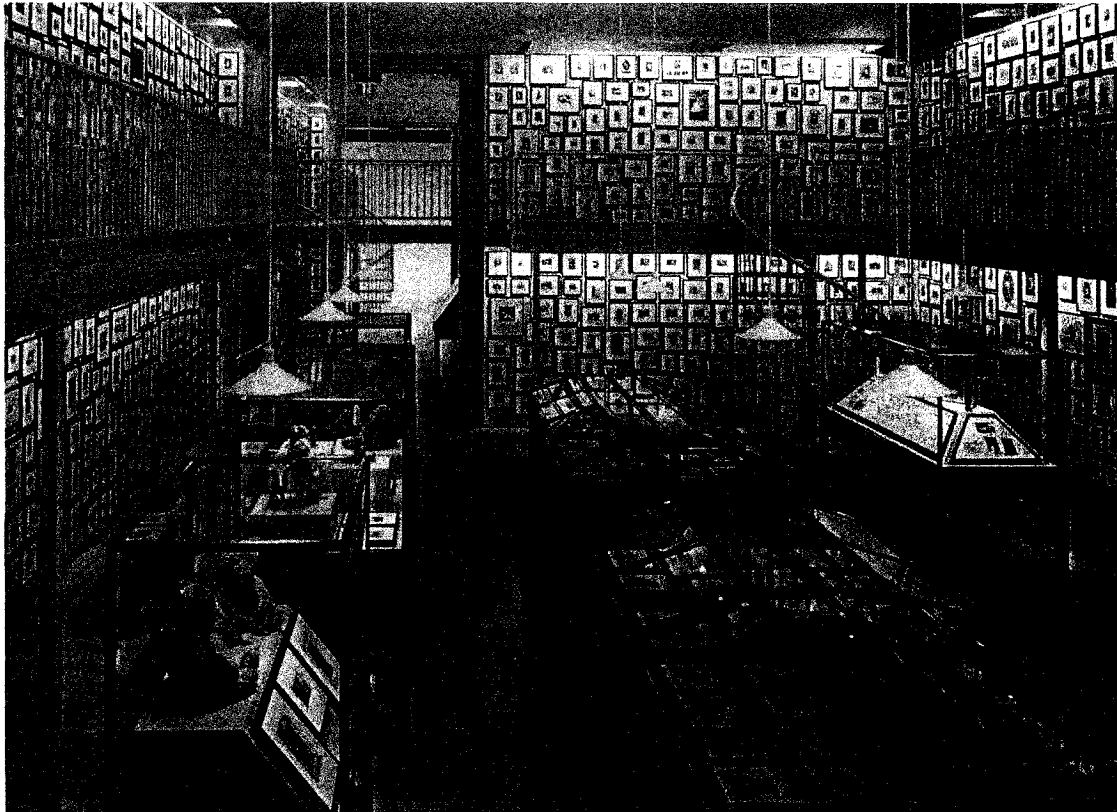
John Swartz. The Wild Bunch. ca. 1900.  
Vintage gelatin silver print, 16.5 x 21.6 cm.

Figure 2.



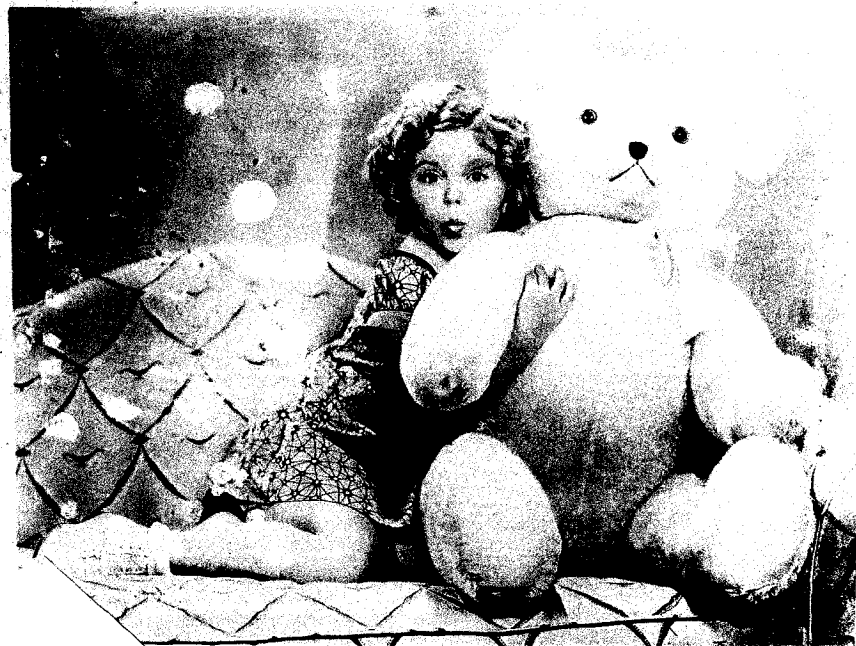
Diane Arbus. Self-portrait with Camera. February 1945.  
Vintage gelatin silver print, 7.6 x 5.6 cm.

Figure 3.



Ydessa Hendeles. Partners (The Teddy Bear Project). 2002.  
3000 family album photographs, antique teddy bears with photographs of their original owners and related ephemera, mahogany display cases, painted steel mezzanines and staircases, custom lighting, variable installation dimensions.

Figure 4.



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Ydessa Hendeles. Selection from Partners (The Teddy Bear Project). 2002.

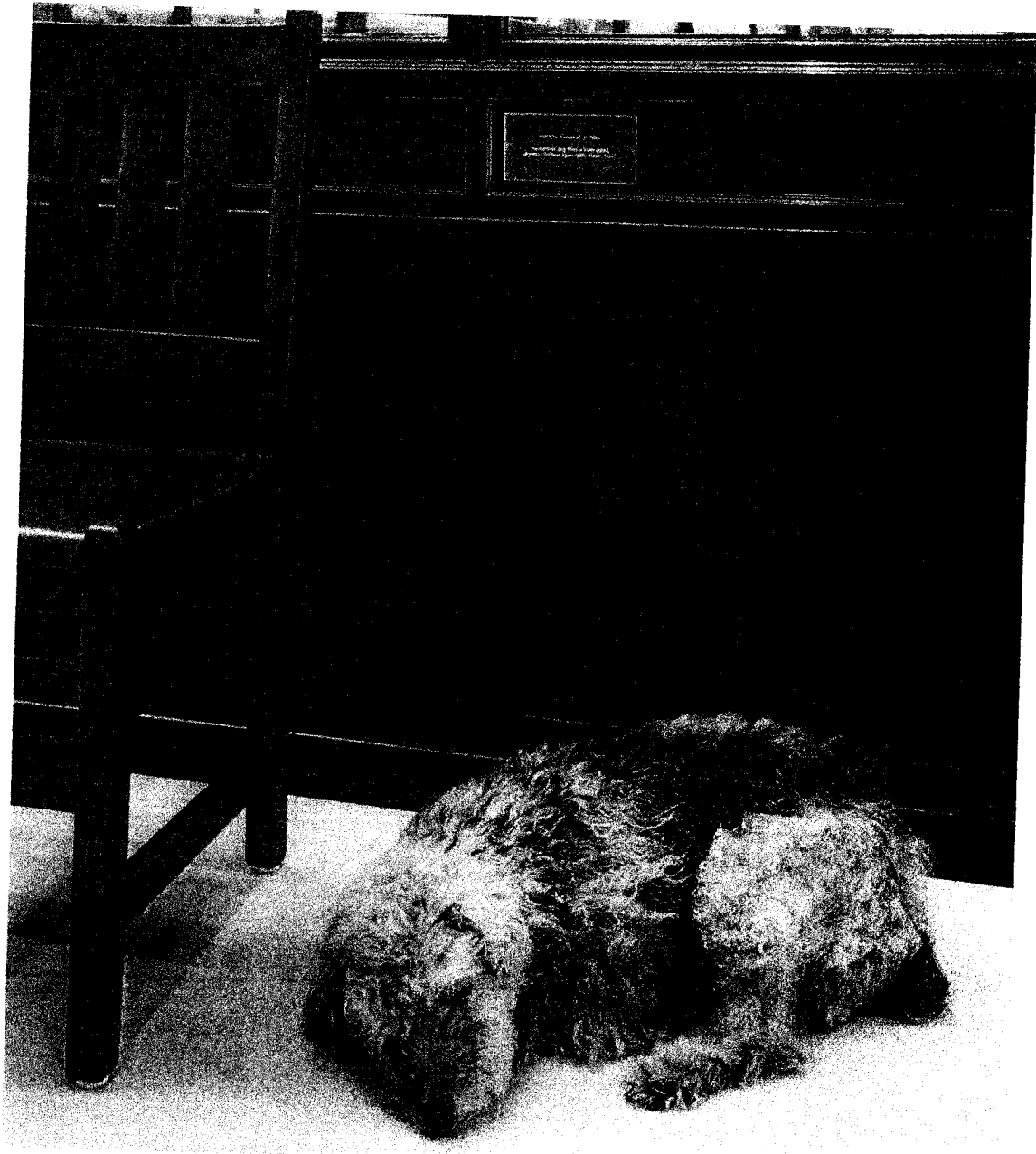
Figure 5.



Ydessa Hendeles. Selection from Partners (The Teddy Bear Project). 2002.

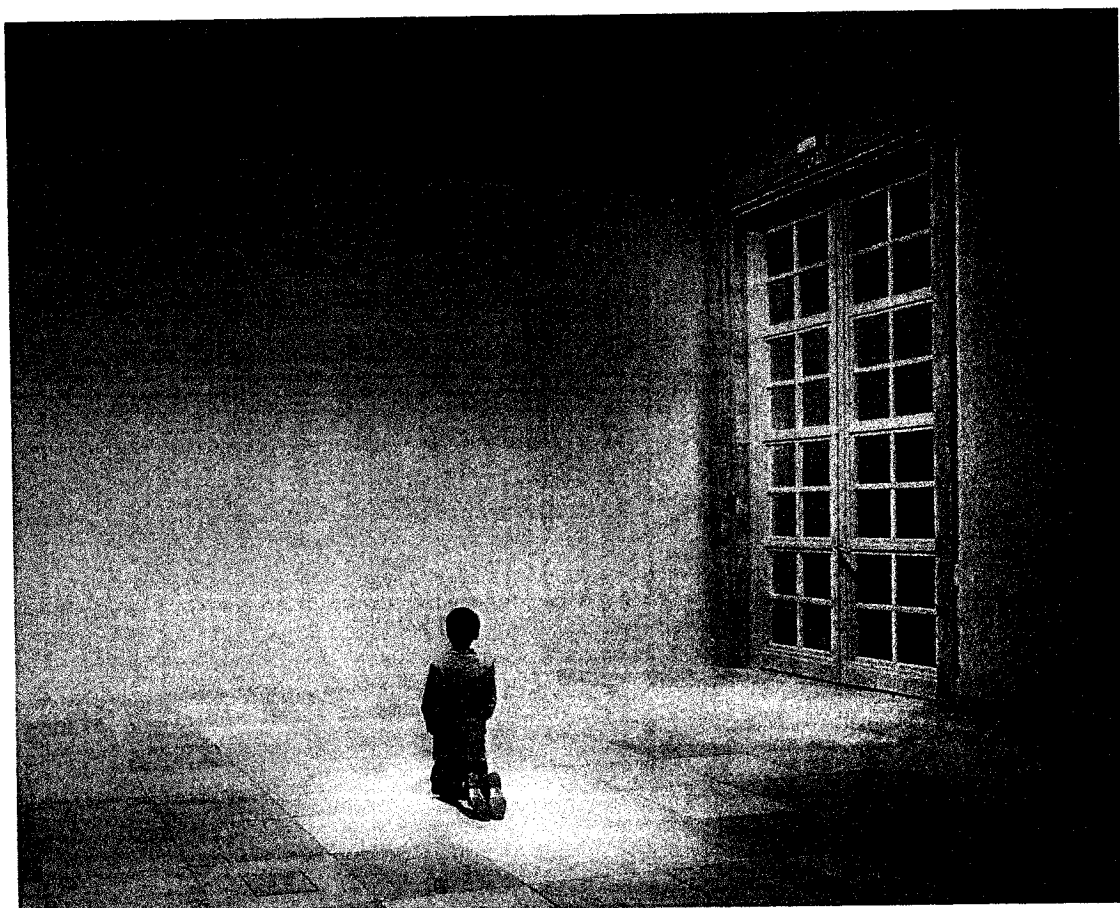
Figure 6.





Maurizio Cattelan. Untitled. 1998.  
Taxidermied dog, 20.3 x 53.3 x 30.4 cm.

Figure 7.



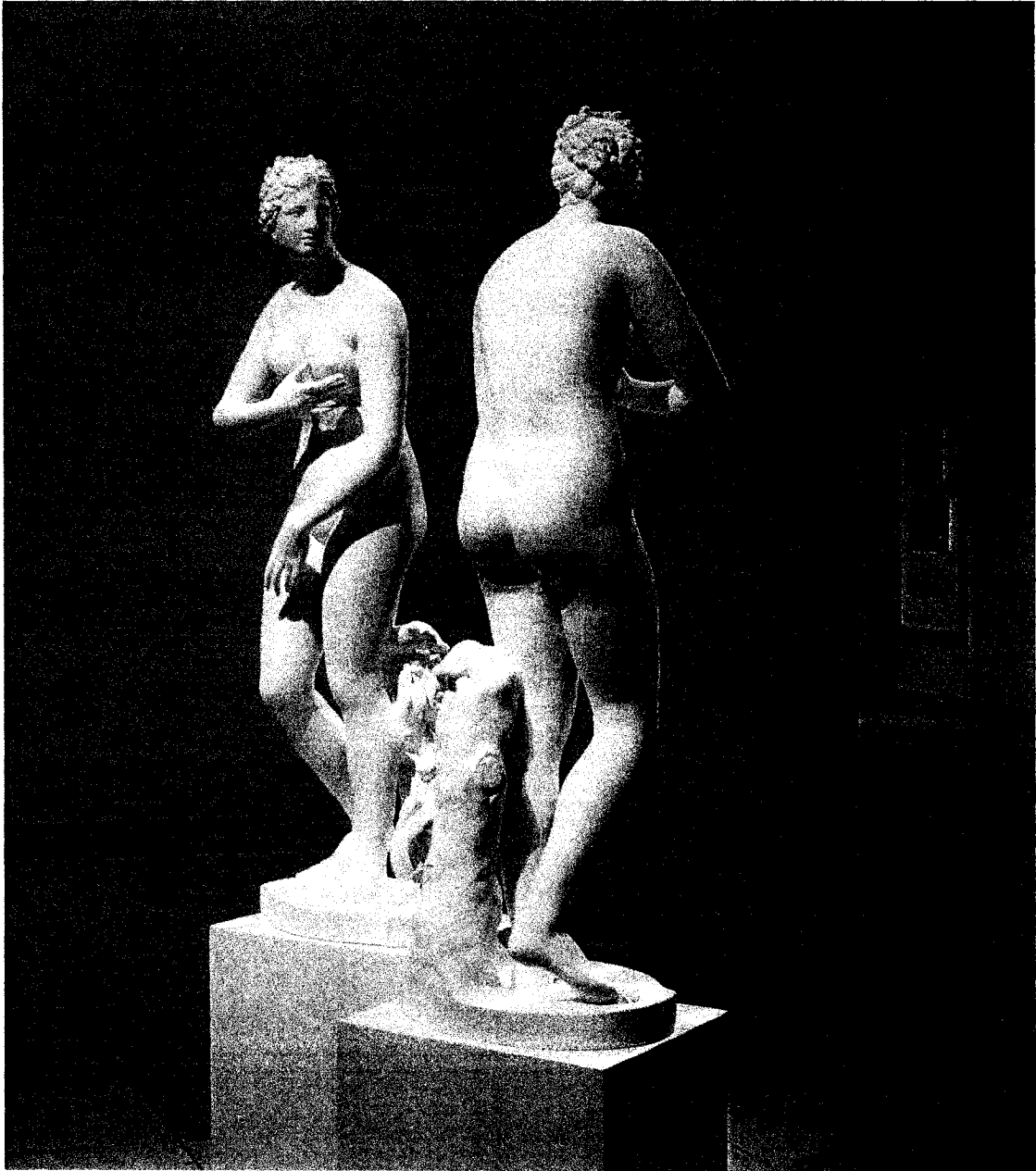
Maurizio Cattelan. Him. 2001.  
2/3 + 1 a/p, polyester resin, clothing, leather boots, human hair, 60 x 38 x 58.5 cm.

Figure 8.



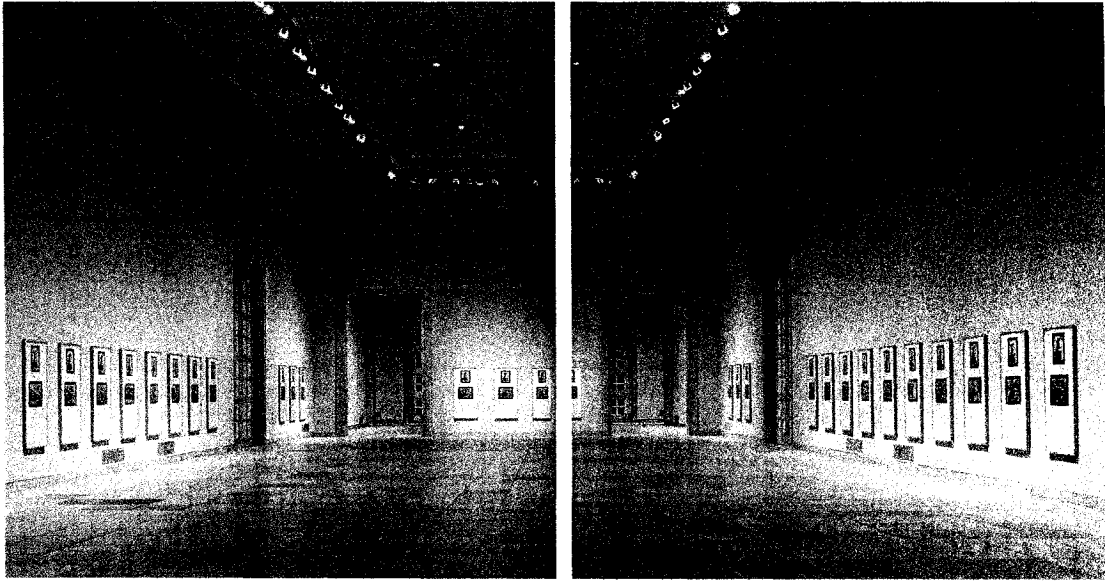
Maurizio Cattelan. Him. 2001. Detail  
[photograph from author's notes]

Figure 9.



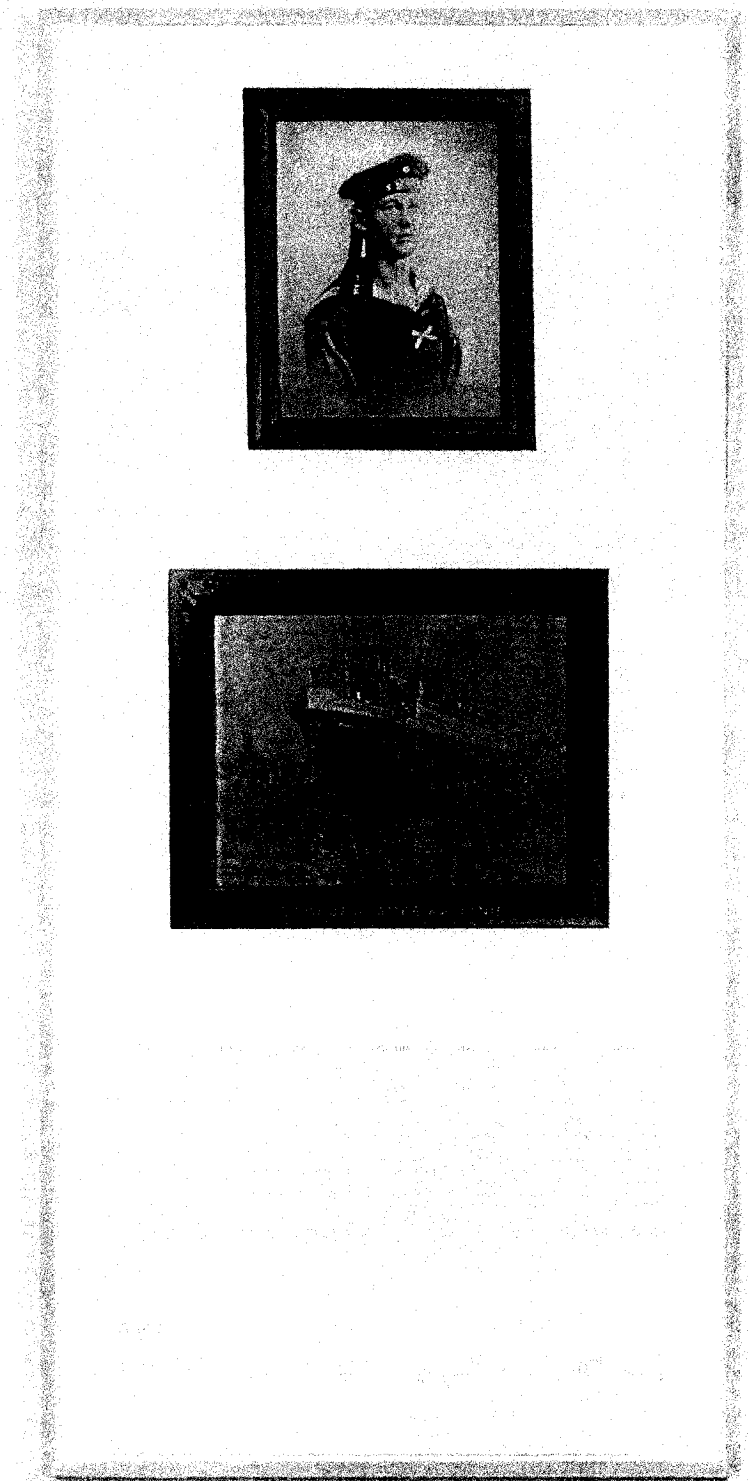
Giulio Paolini. Mimesi. 1975-6.  
3 + 1 a/p, two plaster casts, two wooden plinths, each 223 x 50 x 49.7 cm.

Figure 10.



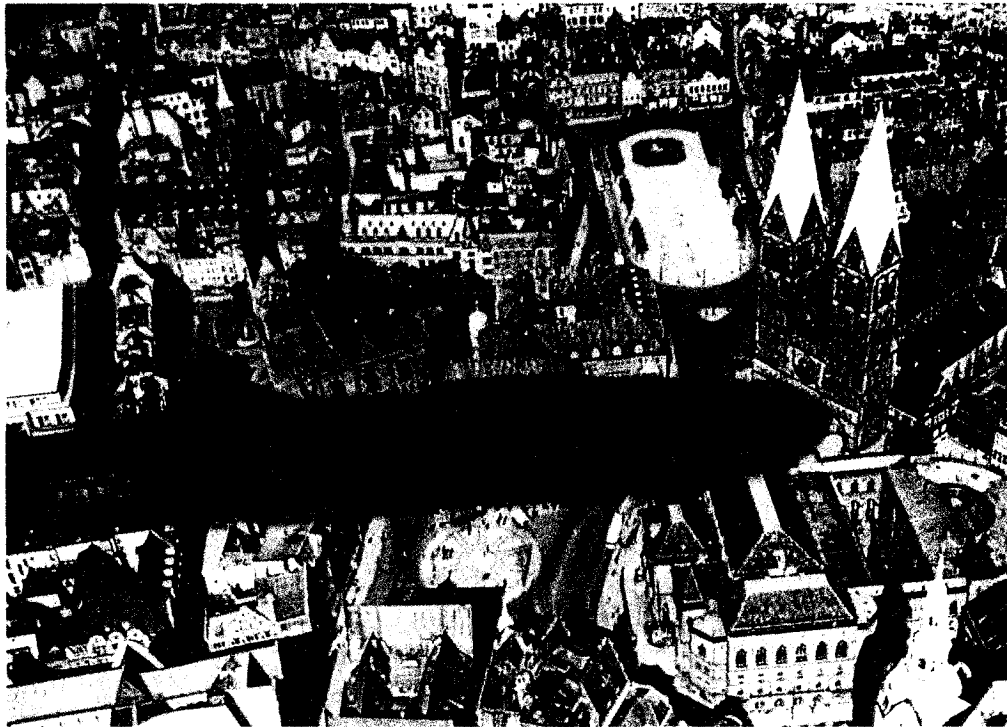
Hanne Darboven. Ansichten >82<. 1982. Installation view.  
Ink, lithographed photographs and collage on paper in wood-framed units, index and  
53 panels, each 150 x 70 cm.

Figure 11.



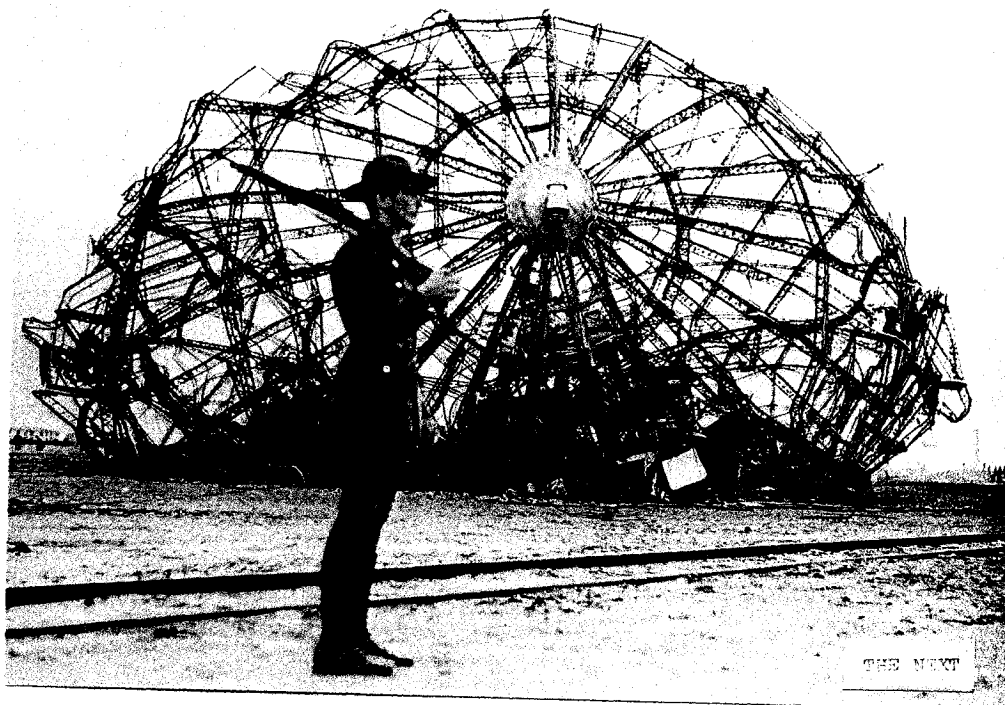
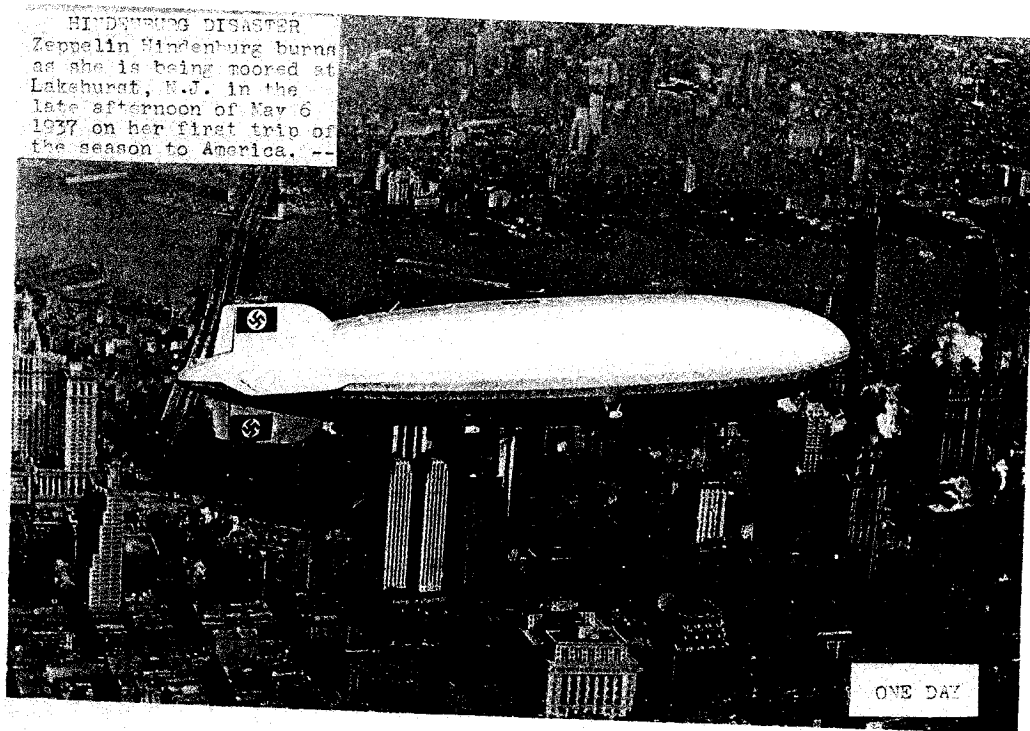
Hanne Darboven. Ansichten >82<. 1982. Detail.

Figure 12.



Ydessa Hendeles. *Ships (The Zeppelin Project)*. 2002. Selection.  
120 chrome pigment digital prints, each 20.3 x 25.4 cm.

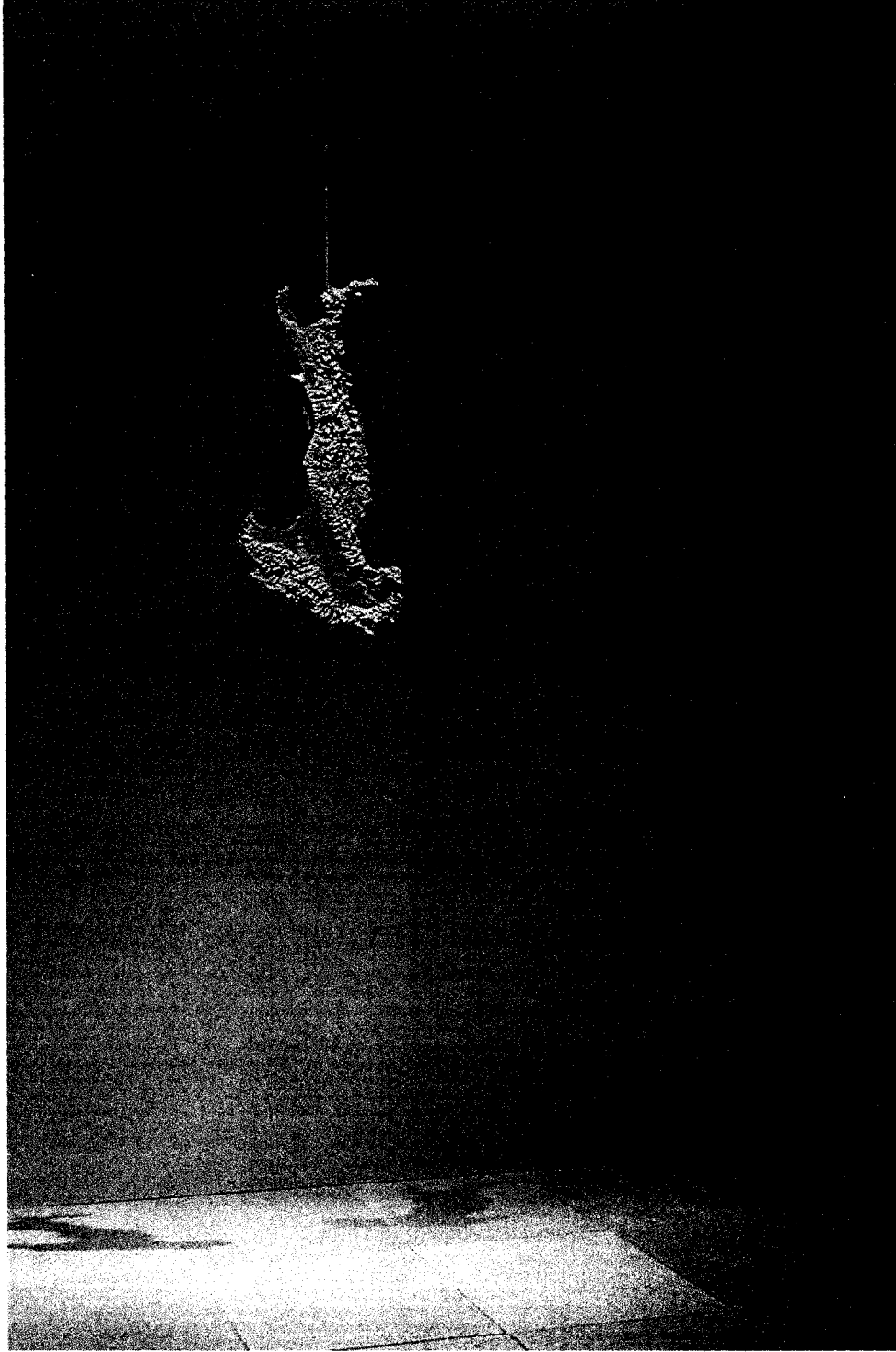
Figure 13.



Ydessa Hendeles. *Ships (The Zeppelin Project)*. 2002.  
Selection from *Hindenburg Disaster*, May 6-7, 1937.

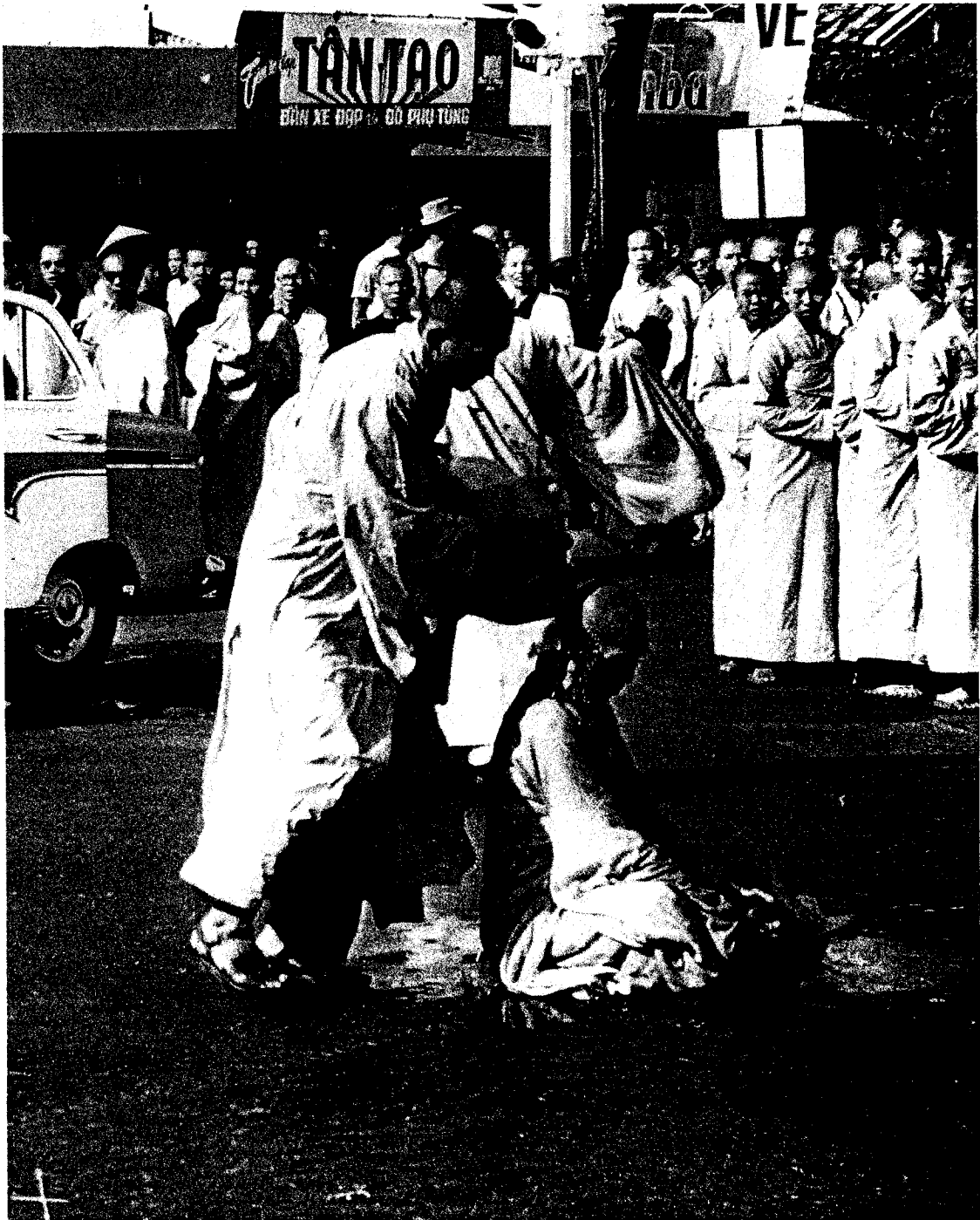
Figure 14.





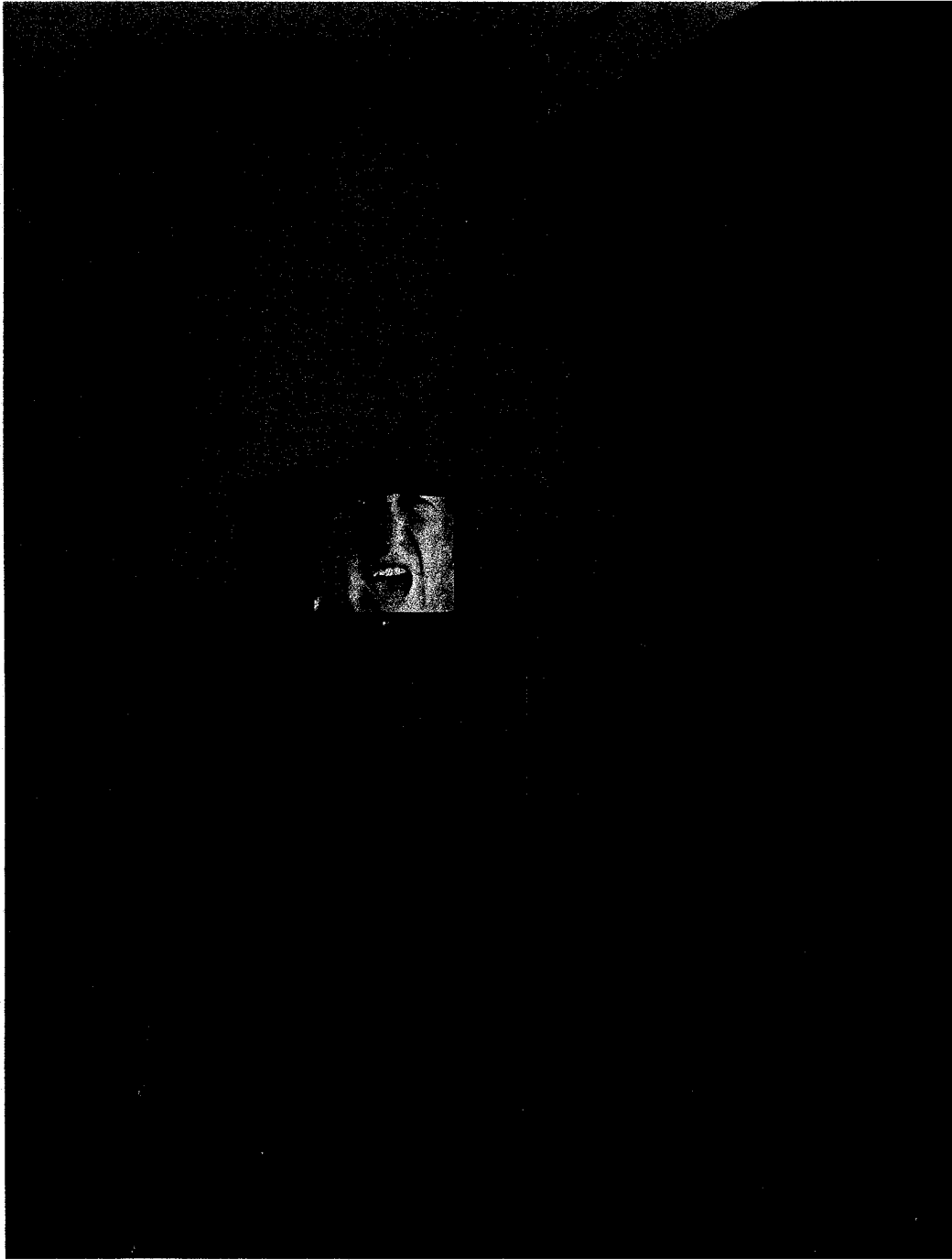
Luciano Fabro. Italia d'oro. 1968-71.  
1/3, gilded bronze, steel cable, gilded bronze templates of Sicily and Sardinia attached  
to the reverse, 91.5 x 44.5 x 4.4 cm. excluding cable.

Figure 15.



Malcome Browne. Selection from The Sacrificial Protest of Thich Quang Duc.  
June 11, 1963.  
Nine vintage gelatin silver prints, 34.3 x 27.9 cm.

Figure 16.



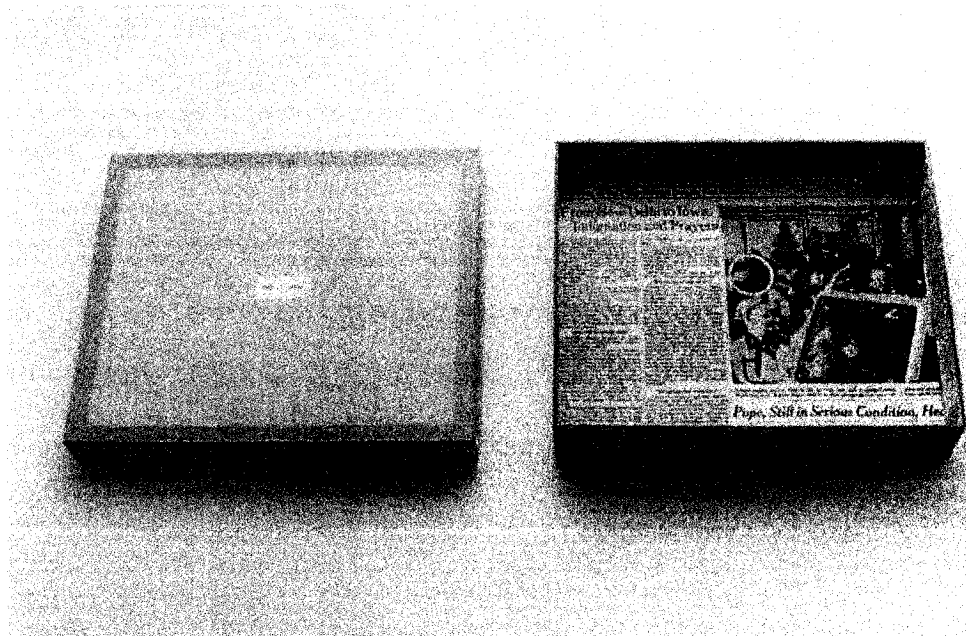
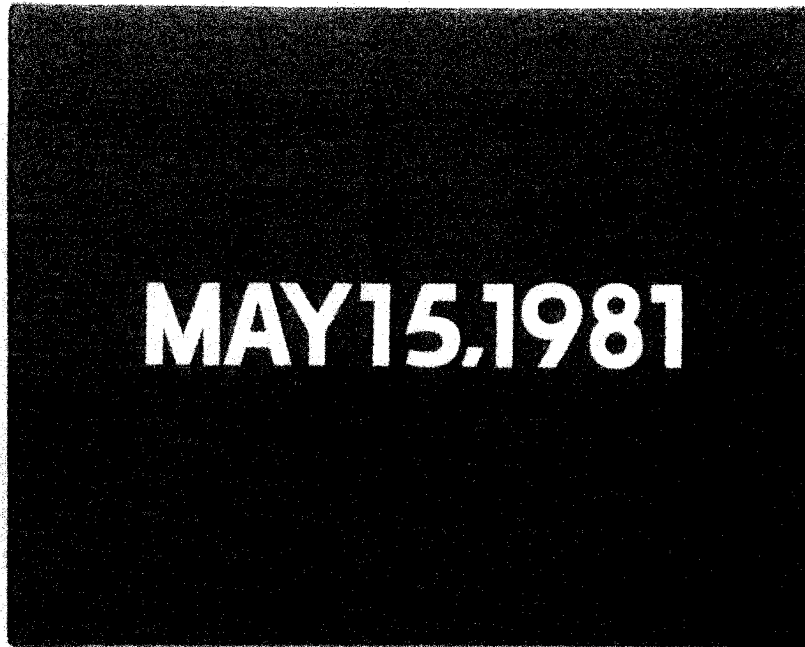
Bruce Nauman. Thank you. 1992.  
Laser video disc with audio, 53.3 cm. video monitor with attached side speakers, laser  
disc player, metal stand: 137 x 76 x 50.8 cm.

Figure 17.

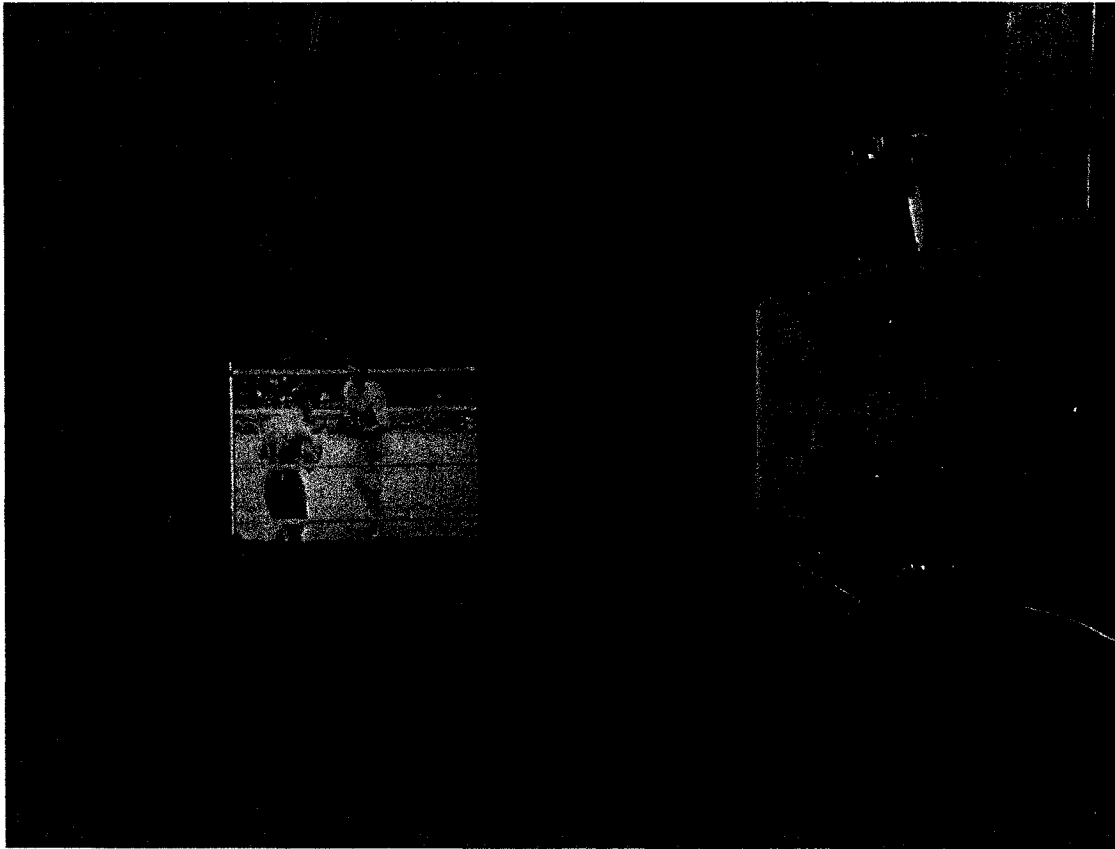


Eddie Adams. Selection from Murder of a Vietcong Suspect by Saigon Police (Vietnam). February 1, 1968.  
Eight vintage gelatin silver prints from the collection of Eddie Adams, 16.5 x 21.6 cm.

Figure 18.

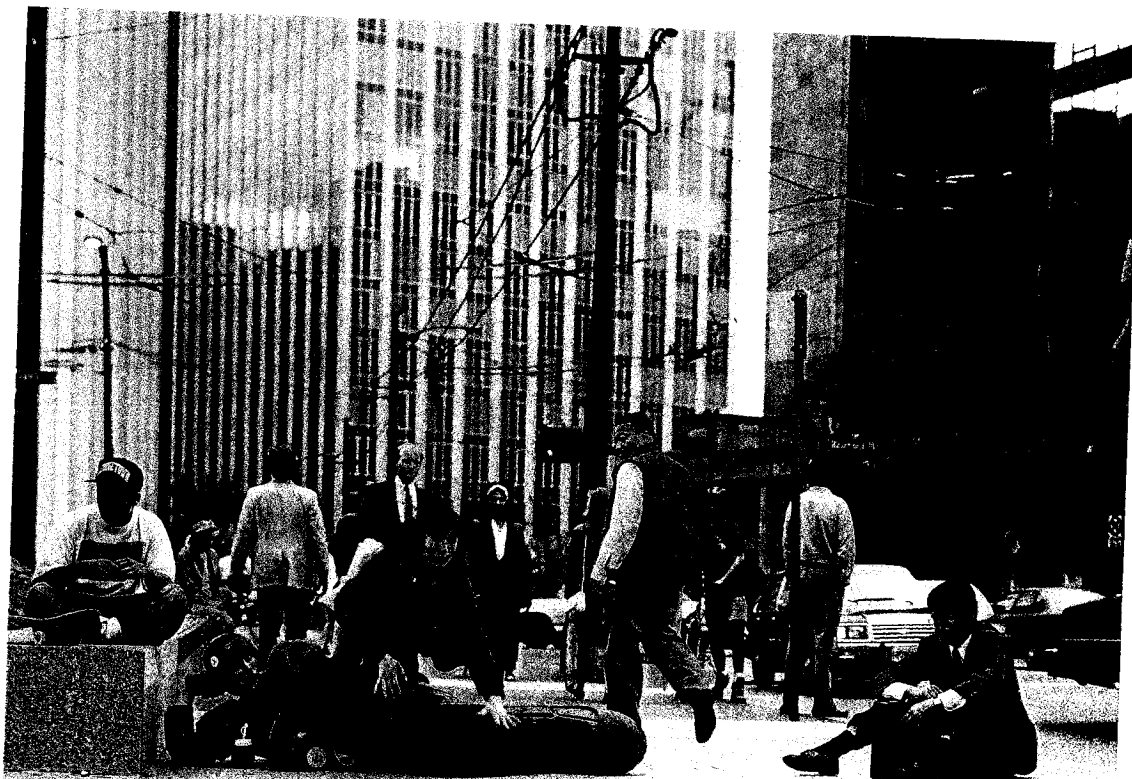


On Kawara. May 15, 1981. From The Today Series. May 15, 1981.  
Liquetex on canvas, custom cardboard box with newspaper-clipping lining,  
20.3 x 25.4 cm. Figure 19.



James Coleman. Box (Ahhareturnabout). 1977.  
2/3, black and white 16-mm. film loop with synchronized sound, film projector, film  
looper, sound system, projection stand, variable installation dimensions.

Figure 20.



Jeff Wall. The Stumbling Block. 1991.  
Transparency in light box, 229 x 335 cm.

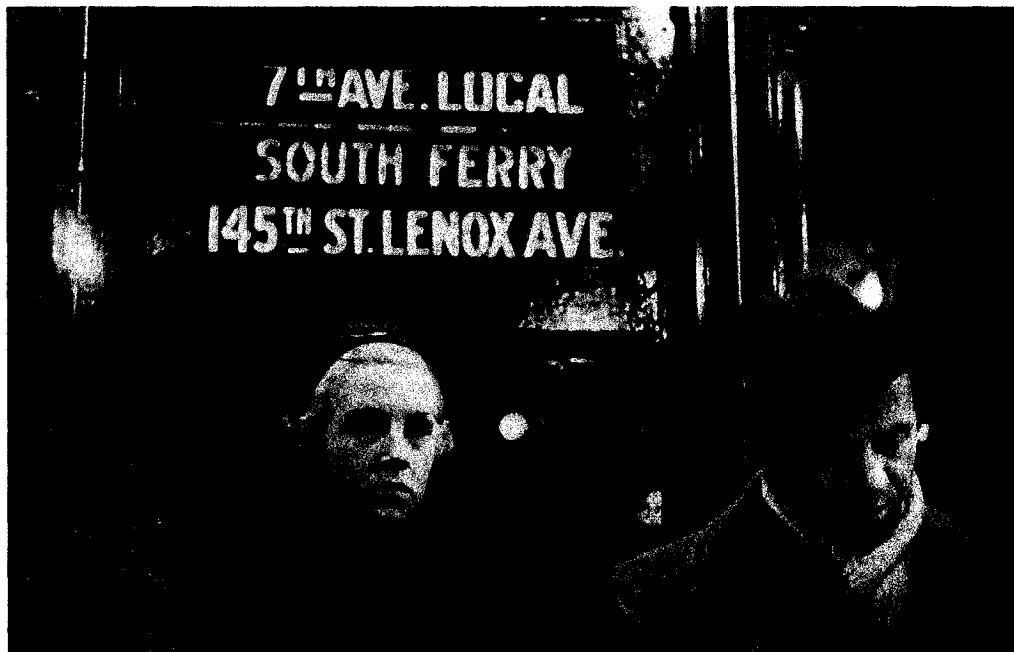
Figure 21.



Jeff Wall. Mimic. 1982.  
Transparency in light box, 198 x 229 cm.

Figure 22.





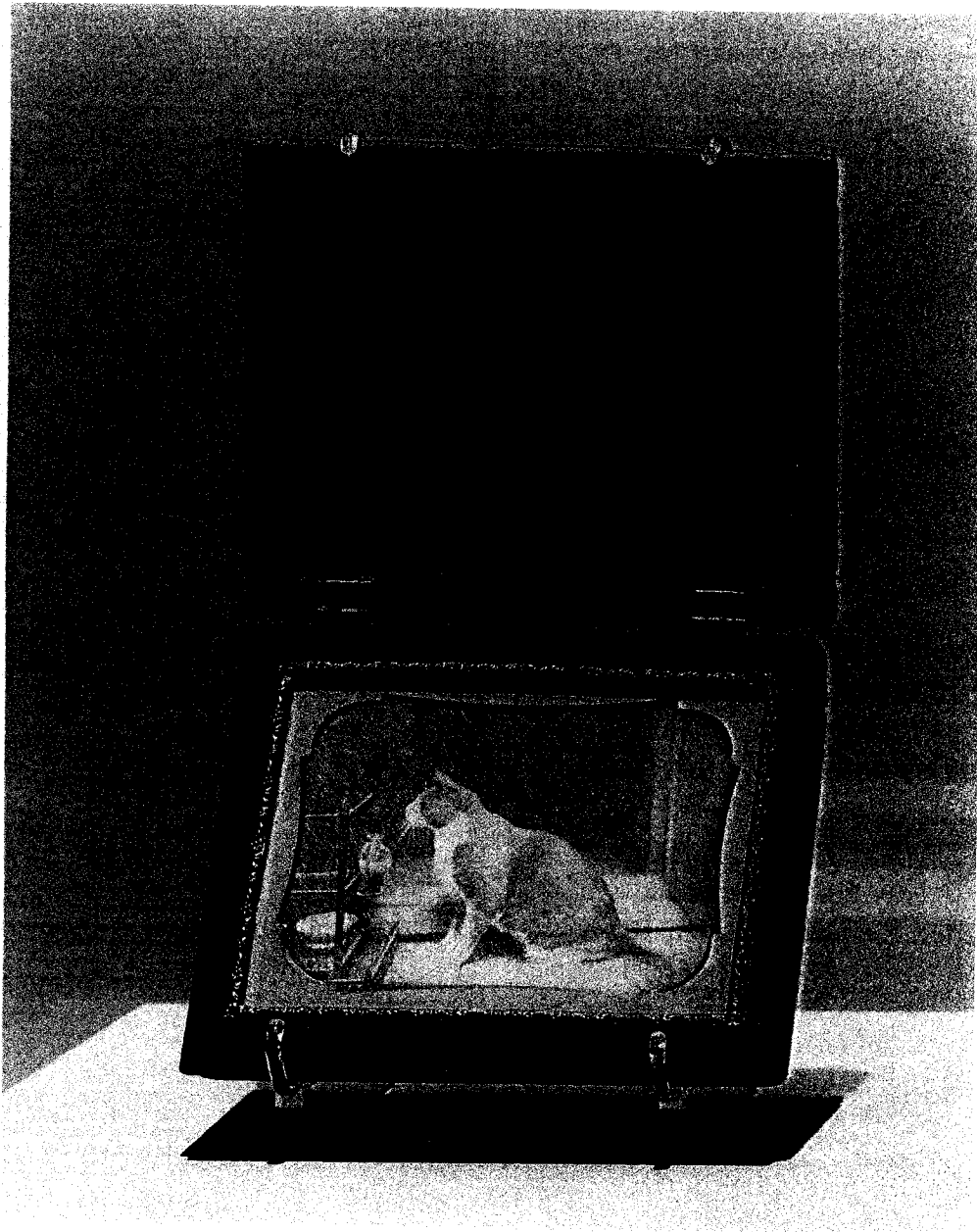
Walker Evans. Selection from Many are Called. 1938-41.  
Thirteen vintage gelatin silver prints, top: 12.1 x 18.7 cm., bottom: 12.7 x 19 cm.

Figure 23.



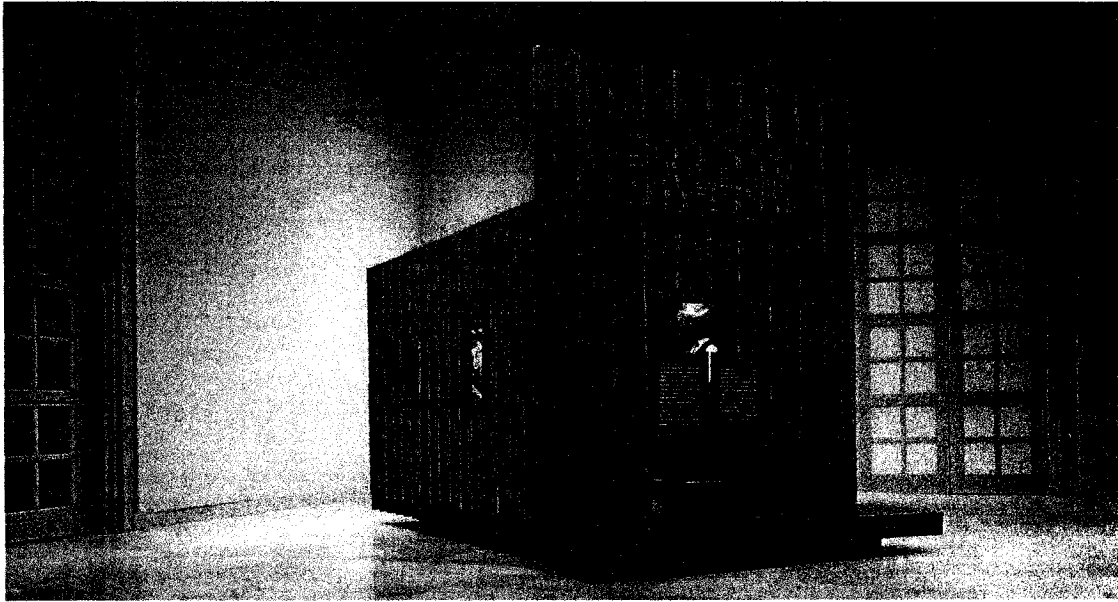
Walker Evans. Self-portrait. 1928.  
Vintage gelatin silver print, 17.1 x 12 cm.

Figure 24.



Photographer unknown. [Cat and Cage]. c. early-middle 1850s.  
American, quarter-plate daguerreotype, image size: 7.6 x 10.16 cm.

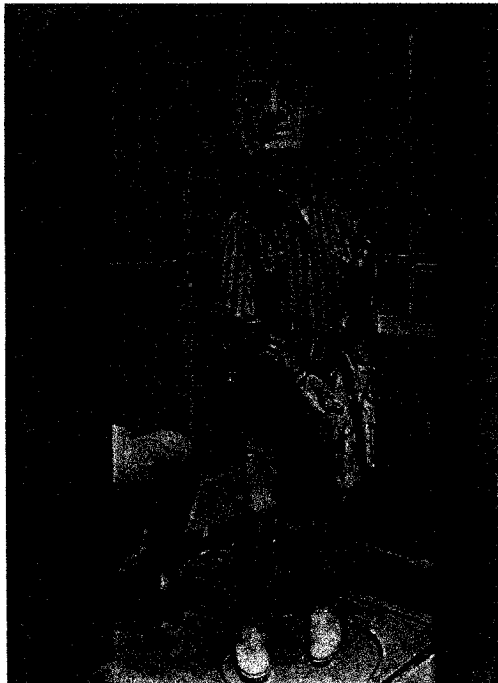
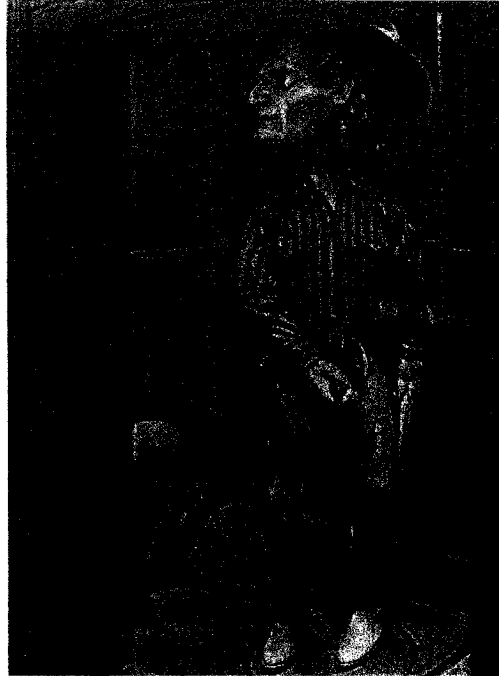
Figure 25.



Paul McCarthy. Saloon. 1995-96.

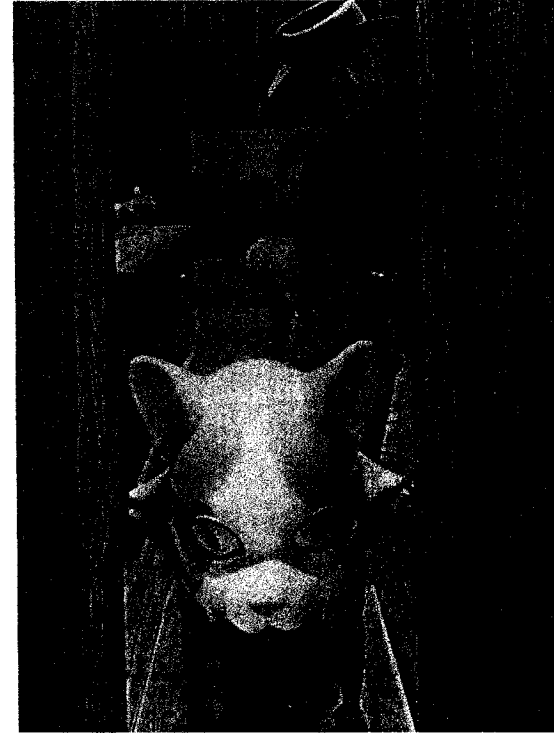
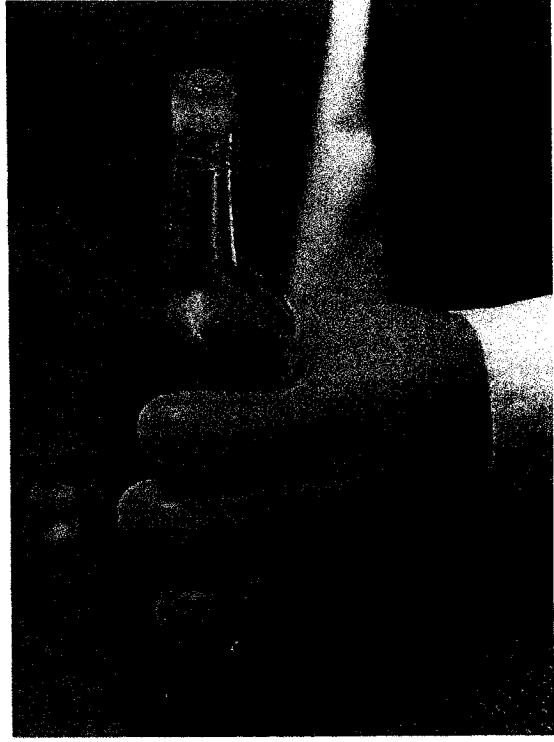
Freestanding enamel and latex painted and urethaned wood construction, support steel structure, four pneumatically driven painted Fiberglas and polyester resin figures with wigs, clothing and accessories, programmable logic controller, electric switches, preprogrammed compact disc, audio equipment, 353 x 485.1 x 279.4 cm.

Figure 26.



Paul McCarthy. Saloon. 1995-96. Details.

Figure 27.



Paul McCarthy. Saloon. 1995-96. Details.

Figure 28.

# Partners

Kuratiert von Ydessa Hendeles mit Werken aus ihrer Sammlung  
 Curated by Ydessa Hendeles from her collection  
 Haus der Kunst / Prinzregentenstraße 1 / D-80538 München  
 7. Nov. 2003 – 15. Feb. 2004 / Painters 10–17 h / Haus der Kunst 10–20 h

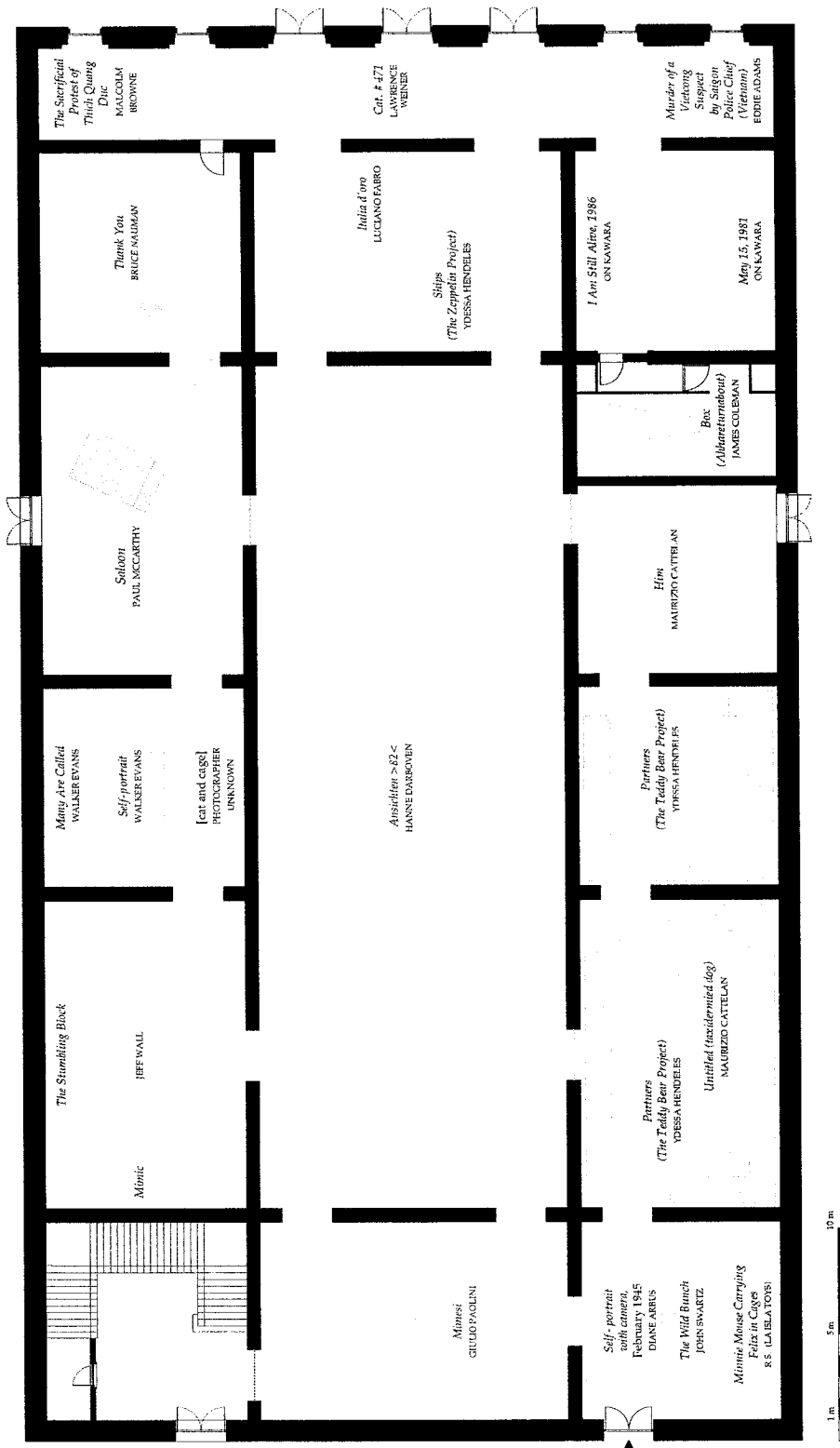


Figure 29.

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## APPENDIX ONE

### Introductory Wall Text of *Partners*

The invitation to curate a show from my collection for the Haus der Kunst has given me an opportunity to create an exhibition in dialogue with the history of the museum, and a venue for my voice in the country in which I was born. The legacy of Hitler and Nazism is an indelible part of the identity of both the German people and the Jewish people.

*Partners* does not articulate a position on the politics of the past, but, rather, looks at issues of identity that are relevant today. Historical inheritance plays an important role in the formation of one's personal and national identity. A series of tableaux invites the viewer to look at alliances formed by design and by fate, as well as icons and belief systems embedded in the twentieth century that are now part of world memory.

*Partners* has been presented in three passages, with scenarios of desire and frustration, murder and suicide, potency and impotency, sabotage and survival. The viewer progresses narratively and cumulatively, landing in culs-de-sac, as pauses for thought, before continuing by retracing the route and revisiting the works. Each work frames the following work, first upon entering and later upon returning through the works already seen. The return trip recontextualizes the works for the viewer, enabling them to be perceived differently than when first encountered.

To construct these passages, some entrances to galleries have been closed off. Faux doors replicating Paul Ludwig Troost's original, multi-paned pairs of doors are used, as part of the exhibition design for *Partners*, to maintain an appearance compatible with his architecture for the Haus der Kunst.

*Partners* is a composition made of metaphors. Minnie Mouse, for example, has captured Felix the Cat, but what does she have? Images, like Felix, are fugitive, with meanings that metamorphose, from person to person and over time. Like a tapestry, the exhibition provides a picture woven with threads of themes, but is ultimately not thematic, illustrative, or didactic. *Partners* offers a contemporary-art experience to viewers during which each individual can transcend the literal to search for new insights.

Ydessa Hendeles

Born in Marburg, Germany, on December 27, 1948, Ydessa Hendeles lives in Toronto, Canada.