

Introduction

This text accompanies the exhibition *Partners*, which was mounted at the Haus der Kunst in Munich from November 7, 2003, to February 15, 2004 [Figures 1.0–1.4], and the catalogue that was published in time for the opening. *Partners* was created in the 24th year of the curator’s three decades of presenting more than 100 exhibitions.

While the catalogue contains elucidatory texts from the perspective of scholars, the curator did not attempt to interpret the show, preferring to write a short composition for the catalogue as a personal introduction to the exhibition and a section at the end, called *Notes on the Exhibition*, which evokes—in form and, to some extent, content—the traditional didactic role of footnotes. But, although themes are suggested, this text does not attempt to “read” or interpret the experience of the show for the viewer. The title, *Notes on the Exhibition*, was inspired by and intended to evoke *Pictures at an Exhibition*, a suite in 10 movements composed for piano by Modest Mussorgsky in 1874.

Like the audio guides in major galleries, *Notes on the Exhibition* was available in the catalogue to provide background historical information for viewers who wanted more information than could be provided on wall labels. *Notes on the Exhibition* attempts to preserve the mystery of the exhibition while allowing visitors to have a deeper experience and further means to gain entry into the works, separately and together.

Partners was created to offer a contemporary-art experience that interprets the past from the vantage point of the present.¹ It provides a provocative and poetic interpretation of twentieth-century history and culture. For decades, the curator’s work has focused on exploring modern and contemporary culture in relation to world memory. *Partners* explores the way art reflects on human nature by conjuring images of the twentieth century, underscored by themes of desire and frustration, murder and suicide, potency and impotency, sabotage and survival. It is, in effect, a work of cultural diagnosis.

Partners creates a narrative and tells stories through contemporary art using three narrative-allegorical

¹ This approach of making the past a “response” to the present, which the curator has been practising for decades, has been termed “pre-posterous history” by Mieke Bal; see: Bal 1999

passages created expressly to give the viewer the most engaging experience. The exhibition is composed of an assortment of items, not all of which would necessarily be considered as traditional art objects. It includes, for example, a contemporary artwork (created by the curator) in the form of an archive assembled from a source unique to our time (the Internet auction, eBay), as well as historical photography, photojournalism, vernacular objects such as a rare tin toy and images from popular culture.

The title, *Partners*, indicates the interdependencies of human beings and their tendency to congregate under the safe-seeming umbrellas of myths, moralities, conformities, philosophies and ideas. It also suggests that group consensus determines world memory. The twentieth century was the first in which historical events could be seen by many people through film, photographs and television and no longer primarily through paintings or drawings. Moreover, the importance of historical figures, from popular culture and historical incidents, are all promulgated by consensus of the media.

Partners not only invokes relationships between people in order to provoke possible meanings to take into consideration but also, through the works on view, looks at alliances between people in relationships that are documented in history, be they romantic, political or circumstantial.

Partners embodies an innovation in curatorial methodology in that it is a “curatorial composition.” It is a composition because the exhibition is a visual arrangement of elements that creates a sense of unity, comparable to a single artwork or a piece of music, dance, writing or film. The method is “curatorial” because it offers a selection of items chosen specifically to create a point of view. Through the encounter with this point of view, the exhibition provides an opportunity for knowledge, insight and a greater understanding of the works, individually and together, as well as in the context in which they are exhibited.

A curatorial composition is an exhibition integrated to such a high degree and to such a high level of insight that as a whole it can precipitate a transcendent experience for the viewer in the manner of an individual work of art. In other words, *Partners* proposes an exhibition that functions like a single artwork. It took the form of a group show, using specific works and the multiple connections among them. But it also has its own separate identity.

While the role of auteur-curator has a long history in the presentation of artworks, Harald Szeemann is largely regarded as the pioneer of creative curating in contemporary art.² He introduced the practice of curating group shows around a theme, a methodology that has now become the norm. Indeed, his *Documenta 5* in 1972 has a mythic position of reverence among art historians as a watershed example of the large-scale group exhibition that is presented every five years in Kassel, Germany.³

² Birnbam 2005: 55, 58, 346.

³ *Documenta 5: Befragung der Realität—Bildwelten heute (Documenta 5: Questioning Reality—Image Worlds Today)*, 30 June to 8 October, 1972. See: Derieux, ed. 2007: 91-148; Szeemann, et al., eds. 2007: 312-367.

Szeemann pioneered a style of contemporary-art exhibition following the form of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art), analogous to the later music dramas of Richard Wagner.⁴ Szeemann's themes were imaginative and his shows theatrical. They also suited the conceptual art and large installation works being made when he began as an *Austellungsmacher* (exhibition-maker). He was receptive to the art he saw, and created engaging titles that offered a broad opportunity for artists to make or provide works as interpretations of his initial concepts.

Naming his shows was the start of Szeemann's process, based on his intuitive appreciation of what artists were creating at the time. He then invited artists to provide works they felt would suit his idea. He bonded with artists, and realized partnerships that generated works that became what he called "poems in space." He also described his shows as "structured chaos."

In his final show as Director of the Kunsthalle in Bern, *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* (1969), Szeemann curated the first large survey of conceptual art in Europe. This exhibition became so controversial with the local press that he became disheartened and resigned. Free of the mundane, political tasks of a collecting museum, he moved through the world as an independent curator.⁵

His contribution as a co-presenter of art, working together with artists in the manner of a partner or, as he called it, an "accomplice," changed the methodology of how a contemporary-art exhibition was made. In the process, he opened the door to the creativity of curators to invent imaginative ideas for shows and act as cultural diagnosticians who identify trends and movements of art.⁶

Although several major curators have contributed consequentially to the history of presenting exhibitions of contemporary art, the lineage of the curator of *Partners* is most directly traced to the practices of Szeemann and of Rudi Fuchs. Curating was an act of empathy for both. They grasped the artists' art practices with deep understanding, almost as if they had, metaphorically speaking, climbed inside the heads of artists to see the

⁴ At the outset of his exile from Germany, Richard Wagner famously published a number of essays in quick succession to elucidate his ideas about the role of art in society in general and the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in particular, the latter evolving in Wagner's terms as an attempt to unite all the arts in an operatic performance that staged stories of universal (mythic) significance. Though Wagner's inspiration came from his understanding of the practice of Attic Greek theatre, his ideas were to some extent a reaction to what he regarded as the shallow and artificial spectacle that informed opera conventions of his own day. He would return to his ideas in theory and practice throughout his career, but he first laid them out in: *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (*The Artwork of the Future*, 1849), *Die Kunst und Die Revolution* (*Art and Revolution*, 1849) and *Oper und Drama* (*Opera and Drama*, 1851). See: Wagner 1993; Wagner 1995; Wagner 1995.

⁵ The exhibition was held from March 25 to April 27. Szeemann began a leave of absence from his position at the Kunsthalle Bern on April 30 and officially resigned on September 30, 1969 (Szeemann, *et al.*, eds. 2007: 260). This exhibition, and the reaction to it by the media, is thoroughly documented in Szeemann, *et al.*, eds. 2007: 225-261 (see also Szeemann's interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist: Obrist, 2008: 88-89).

⁶ But the process was not without controversy. The risk is that the artist and artworks will be subsumed within the authorship of the curator. In his essay included in Jens Hoffmann's 2003 project *The Next Documenta Should Be Curated by an Artist*, John Baldessari wrote, "Curators seemingly want to be artists. Architects want to be artists. I don't know if this is an unhealthy trend or not. What disturbs me is a growing tendency for artists to be used as art materials, like paint, canvas, etc. I am uneasy about being used as an ingredient for an exhibition recipe, i.e., to illustrate a curator's thesis. A logical extreme of this point of view would be for me to be included in an exhibition entitled 'Artists Over 6 Feet 6 Inches,' since I am 6'7". Does this have anything to do with the work I do? It's sandpapering the edges off of art to make it fit a recipe." (Baldessari 2003).

world through their eyes. They then externalized their comprehension through the curating of their shows. In the process, they were able to share with viewers insights into the times from the artists' points of view. The works exhibited by these curators did not "describe" the times, or express it with art co-ordinated into typologies, using consonances as a curatorial strategy for coherence. Instead, Fuchs and Szeemann used correspondences that displayed their profound grasp of the art they presented and the power of that art to express its time in history.

Both curators worked closely with artists and both worked poetically, with Fuchs referring to his ahistorical pairings of works as "stanzas," but their methodologies are different.⁷

Unlike *Documenta 5* by Szeemann, Fuchs' *Documenta 7* (1982) did not start out from a title but with the actuality of how Fuchs experienced artworks. He showed art in imaginative juxtapositions that were engaging and illuminating, and that established correspondences between works of both the same and different periods of history. When he showed works from different periods of history together, each retained its self-sufficiency. His approach was to search for the essence of a work of art—that is, its timeless dimension, which can be traced in visible form.

As if to emphasize the union of the curator with the art as rooted in material, empirical evidence, Fuchs wrote a brief introduction to *Documenta 7* that ended as follows: "When the French traveller who discovered the Niagara Falls returned to New York, none of his sophisticated friends believed his fantastic story. 'What is your proof?' they asked. 'My proof,' he said, 'is that I have seen it.'"⁸

Partners is a very different kind of curatorial "marriage." The curatorial practice of *Partners* is "relational." Indeed, the image of *Minnie Mouse Carrying Felix in Cages* [Figure 1.0], which served as the poster identifier of the show, encapsulates metaphorically and allegorically the way in which the curator's practice both comments on the curatorial practices of Szeemann and Fuchs while also differing from theirs. Like them, she eschewed the constructs of art historians and worked ahistorically—reinterpreting the canon of art history. And like them, she, too, has a responsive relationship to her particular moment in history. Her curatorial

⁷ See Meijers 1996: 7-20.

⁸ Fuchs 1982: xv.

Fuchs' *Documenta 7* of 1982 was the first one actually viewed in person by this curator and it had by far the most inspirational and long-lasting effect, to the point that a decade later, Okui Enwezor, curator of *Documenta 11*, 2002, made public reference to this being "Ydessa's favourite *Documenta*," when he talked about the history of *Documenta* at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto.

Richard Rhodes begins his 1993 profile of Ydessa Hendeles, "The Narrator," by describing how, in July 1982, she made a presentation of 350 slides she took of Rudi Fuchs' *Documenta 7* to the professional art community in Toronto over a 12-hour period, from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. The writer, then a curator for *Parachute* magazine, and now the editor of *Canadian Art*, stayed to the end. It was a filmic presentation, as described by the article as follows: "It was not just the technical quality of the images, it was the painstaking way in which the images had begun at the beginning and proceeded, almost work by work, through the entire exhibition. She would say things like: 'This is the third floor of the Friedericianum and Herman Nitsch's installation. (Click.) This picture is now about fifteen feet further along the corridor. (Click to detail.) You can see the way the red has been splashed up and allowed to run down like blood along the walls.' Slide after slide, precise descriptions of objects were linked with precise, almost uncanny descriptions of the spaces they were in." (Rhodes 1993: 42, 43).

compositions reflect a more relational perspective between objects with meanings that modulate. Boundaries between disciplines are being broken and redefined, and images have become unmoored and increasingly elusive. Images from reality have started to coalesce with images of art. Like the image of Felix, meaning that appears to be identifiable either mutates or flees. Truths are no longer limited to what the artist intended, or what the art itself expresses, and the art is no longer under the autonomous control of the curator or the museum.

The curator and the owner of the copyright—be it the artist or some other agency—have a relationship of equivalent power with respect to a particular artwork and its display. In the case of *Partners*, there is also a third partner—the museum itself, as a context that affects the choices and alters the reception of the exhibited items.

Partners began with a cultural context—an invitation by the Haus der Kunst in Munich to mount the flagship show that would announce the new direction by incoming Director Chris Dercon and Chief Curator Thomas Weski. The museum was originally built to showcase art that served the state as propaganda. Although its current role had long since been redefined to display contemporary art, the place had lost its urgency and its audience.

In response to the challenge to reactualize the museum, the invited curator created a composition that addressed the history of the past with specifically chosen examples of art and artifacts that foregrounded the present. But more than that, the composition put into place works that served to precipitate precise interpretations of history, past and present, on several levels. In effect, the composition wrangled with the profound cultural underpinnings of the museum's original intention as a context for its current role. By selecting pieces that resonate strongly in their own right, and positioning them as a narrative, the curator was able to use the context of the museum as a platform to enable those works to speak site-specifically, both individually as well as in a group. In other words, the curator did not utilize the works to illustrate a preconceived notion or theme, but worked with her understanding of the content of the individual artworks themselves to articulate her commentary on the museum's multi-faceted, complex identity.

The title of this exhibition, *Partners*, has many meanings. A first partnership emerged from the combination of the works and the building. The building was mined for meaning by virtue of the works and, as a result, became united with those works as if they were born in the spaces. Neither was subordinated to the other; there was a balance in the partnership between the items installed and the context.

But there was also another partnership—between the artist and the curator. As with Szeemann's connection with artists in the production of meaning, the curator of *Partners* also bonded with artists, but in a relationship with specific, individual works rather than oeuvres. The artworks were the site of a dialogue between the two. The curator was, in effect, reflecting back to the artist a close reading of the work. Indeed, it was the curator's intimate insights into the latent content of each specific work that enabled her to

co-ordinate and choreograph the works into an articulate, coherent curatorial composition composed of various interwoven narratives.

A central aspect of this curatorial vision is that while each object has inherent content, when placed in a specific space with other works it takes on additional meaning. As a result, a dialogue occurs between the items themselves, along with the arena in which they are placed, to the point where the voice of each artist through each work is not only heard but amplified by the works around it, as well as by the architectural context surrounding and situating it.

The partnerships in *Partners* access the content of the individual works and partner it with the historical, architectural statement of the space, suggesting a multi-layered approach. This differs significantly not just from Szeemann's approach but also, and perhaps most particularly, from the now-conventional curatorial practice he initiated. The Szeemann-style practice starts from a preconceived thesis or thematic title and then assembles artworks to illustrate or respond to that mold. *Partners*, in contrast, was the result of the curator interpreting individual works and then placing them in a specific context—both the galleries and the museum itself—so the works could, in effect, respond to one another, resonate and provide insight, separately and together.

Partners took special note of Haus der Kunst's historical and physical space. Haus der Kunst, originally known as Haus der Deutschen Kunst, played an important role in Nazi propaganda and is well known in art history for its place in the German cultural scene of the 1930s. On July 18, 1937, the exhibition *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung (Great German Art Exhibition)* [Figure 1.6] opened there as an opportunity to display state-sanctioned art. In a well-orchestrated propagandistic step, the infamous exhibition *Entartete Kunst* (*Degenerate Art*) opened at the Arcades of the Hofgarten across the road a day later. *Entartete Kunst* is notorious for exhibiting works of many important avant-garde artists—including Max Beckmann, Max Ernst, Wassily Kandinsky and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner—as insane, immoral and un-German. In this exhibition, modern art was the target for National Socialist attacks, and, indeed, the exhibition is a good example of the complex use of propaganda by the Nazi regime.⁹

Knowing Haus der Kunst's past is thus essential to the experience of *Partners*. The building's history echoes around the exhibited objects and creates a unique context for viewing and understanding them. The most poignant and straightforward example is *Him*, Maurizio Cattelan's child-sized sculpture of the adult Adolf Hitler [Figures 1.97–1.99]. Interpretations of this sculpture, such as Laura Hoptman's reading of it as questioning the limits of Catholic doctrine, have particular resonance in this building. In *Partners*, *Him* invites

⁹ For the exhibition *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung (Great German Art Exhibition)*, see Guenther 33-36. For the exhibition *Entartete Kunst (Degenerate Art)*, see Lüttichau 45-81. Among many publications on this moment in Germany's cultural history, see, in particular, Michaud 2004.

a reading in terms of its presentation in a space that Hitler commissioned, used for his propagandist aims and visited in person. The abstract question that Hoptman's interpretation poses about *Him* (Will God forgive Hitler?) turns into an urgent question directed to the viewer in Haus der Kunst.¹⁰

The installation of *Him* is one example of the way *Partners* makes use both of the building's history and its physical space—a space that, like many objects in the exhibition, holds memories of the past. But it is also a paradigm of the way in which the works have dual roles: as fixtures that pin down the cultural-diagnostic content of the show in the historical space while concurrently acting as autonomous contemporary-art gestures that are provocations and that hold positions in history, as well as in the history of art.

The curatorial approach to *Partners* actively embraces the Paul Ludwig Troost-designed building, and in so doing, makes him and it a partner in the exhibition. *Partners* was put together taking into account the context of its locale, both physically and as a cultural interpretation. Rather than starting with raw space and carving it up to suit the art, *Partners* retained an allegiance to the space in which the art was installed. Indeed, the curator returned much of the interior to Troost's original. This approach to the installation has more in common with the restoration and respectful refitting of a historical house ("Haus") than a drastic reconfiguration of the architecture to suit the art. It is, in some essential sense, an intervention on as well as of an existing space while also offering a diagnostic interpretation of that space.

The objects in the exhibition complement as well as comment on the historical context of the restored interior. In the case of the Hanne Darboven installation, *Ansichten* >82< [Figures 2.4–2.8], for instance, the work, with its repetitive, marching imagery, highlights the building's original history as a monumental Fascist space of pageantry. However, its humanistic content also undercuts that past. Meanwhile, at the other end of the scale spectrum, but just as referential to the past, a small antique tin toy, *Minnie Mouse Carrying Felix in Cages* [Figures 1.14, 1.17–1.2], hearkens back to Hitler's ban of this American icon from Germany because it annoyed him that Mickey Mouse was a beloved talisman for German fighter planes.¹¹

What defines the curatorial practice of *Partners* is that it projects first and foremost a visual, experiential journey created by and resulting from the works on display and the multiple connections among them. Every element has a connection with every other element, and each enhances the experience of the others. That is, each piece provokes reconsideration. Rather than statically retaining its initial content through the course of the exhibition, its meaning mutates and modulates as the viewer moves through the galleries, ultimately growing, as if organically, with alternate and additional layers of meaning. More readings are proposed as each gallery frames the next. The works are recontextualized and nudged into new realms of interpretation that arise from

¹⁰ "The problem with Catholic doctrine, which says that everybody is absolved if they ask for it, and here is Hitler on his knees, asking for absolution. The question is, if there's a God, will this God forgive Hitler? Very few recent works of art deal with issues like that." Hoptman as quoted in: Tomkins 2004: 88.

¹¹ Lester 2005: 222; see also Laqua 2009.

the viewer's progression while also hearkening back to what was already experienced.¹²

Contributing to *Partners'* coherence and the way it conveys its content is its physical composition, which is defined by three passages within a symmetrical, classically laid-out floor plan [Figure 1.5]. These passages suggest journeys [Figures 1.8, 2.0, 3.0]. There is the unfolding of a story as the viewer progresses through the galleries for the first time and another, upon reflection, having seen all the elements, and still others, upon review, re-examination and reflection, after returning through the passages. The exhibition offers continuing possibilities for insight as the viewer walks back through the galleries and can review their initial experience retrospectively. In this way, the show not only sets up the viewer for an original experience, as occurs in life, but also allows for a deeper consideration with the eyes of someone willing to contemplate the past by reconsidering what was just seen.

These viewing routes are sequenced so that each gallery frames those adjacent to it. But they are not labyrinthine. Viewers do not get lost in these passages, nor are they trapped. If one passage seems crowded, the viewer can head towards another. The experience is encouraging rather than coercive. Even in the most abundantly installed spaces, there is visible space either at the end, into an open space, or an escape onto upper levels where one can even traverse over doorways. Thus suggestions for itineraries and an experience of freedom combine to form an ideal of cultural production for the viewer.

The series of experiences, then, are optional to allow for individual choice and variance. The curatorial practice of *Partners* endeavours to recontextualize works by juxtaposing pieces on all sides of each work and each gallery, so there are no rules, no set order in which the exhibition should be viewed. It is a narrative, but one that is complex and layered. As referenced above, *Partners* is, in the end, a composition—a picture more than a road map.

Each passage is weighted in a way similar to the next, creating three that are in balance. Each starts out with an expository work, meanders through works that add meaning and complexity, and ends on works that jar and surprise the viewer, sometimes with sounds, or a combination of sounds and images, and sometimes solely with images that, because they come from real life, have a different timbre, functioning as visual pistols or as triggers that set off or detonate deep cultural memory. They can embed imagery into the brain, or sear it with a memory burnt into it forever. The image of the execution of a Vietnamese suspect photographed by Eddie Adams [Figure 2.62] and the horrific images of the immolation of the politically protesting monk captured by Malcolm Browne [Figures 2.49–2.57] are memorable precisely because they are unexpected in a contemporary-art gallery setting, and particularly because of where they are located, at each end of a majestic

¹² Due to this “moving” quality, the exhibition has been characterized as “narrative” by one critic (Alphen 2003) and as “filmic” by another (Bal 2008).

passage that is like a long processional corridor, where one cannot readily make out the images until one arrives up close.

Viewers are offered extended stages on which they can mingle with the art and artifacts in the manner of a *mise en scène*, in light-filled and darkened galleries, quiet spaces and noisy spaces, and music-filled spaces that are sometimes punctuated with the sounds of gunshots. There are higher and lower vantage points, and many different ways to see and experience objects in real space and time. It is as if one were invited to enter a work by Jeff Wall and be part of the “story,” part of the picture. The curator’s practice of making compositions aligns with Wall’s work, although in the case of *Partners*, the viewer can actually enter the scenario.

The show also creates a narrative with the curator functioning as narrator. The story connects disparate elements that comment on the history of the twentieth century, and the works are put together like a series of sentences. The curator, having responded to the objects viscerally and worked through the content with careful thought, puts them together to interpret what happens to their meaning when plucked out of one context and put into another. Each work frames the next, contextualizes it and others, and acts as a counterpoint to elements elsewhere in the show.¹³

Each gallery functions in the same way, as both a composition and a component. There are explicit symmetries and implicit ones that suggest mirrors and mimesis, much like the layout of the Haus der Kunst. One can view, for instance, the self-portrait of Diane Arbus [Figures 1.12], taken while looking into a mirror, in tandem with Giulio Paolini’s doubled images in *Mimesi* [Figure 2.1] and then extrapolate metaphorically to include Jeff Wall’s *Mimic* [Figure 3.2]. There are points and counterpoints, such as the life-like, diminutive figure of Hitler [Figure 1.52], akin to a doll in Hitler’s doll-haus, which is in dialogue with the cartoon-like, life-sized dolls in *Saloon* by Paul McCarthy [Figures 3.26–3.43], as if *Saloon* were an oversized toy. There are images of heroes and villains, of orchestrated cinematic pictures and of candid shots. Indeed, the shots extend into other realms and come in the form of pictures or what comes out of pistols or bottles of booze. The show is variously silent and audible. *Box*, by James Coleman [Figure 2.79], at the end of one long passage, packs a punch, viscerally, but so do the pieces at the ends of each of the passages, visually.

The text *Notes on the Exhibition* is meant to function in relation to the three passages just described. This guide is part literal content, part thematic tour. It correlates to the three passages and thus corresponds to the exhibition’s structure. Each passage of text is divided into short sections that follow the exhibition’s viewing order according to the floor plan. However, while the text recreates the concrete structure of the exhibition, it

¹³ Robert Storr, former curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, described the curator’s approach to her curatorial practice: “[Ydessa Hendeles] uses exhibitions as a way of phrasing her thoughts, and she [curates] the works that will make the sentence complete....” (Wallach 1996: 46).

cannot be understood as a linear depiction of the viewer's experience.

Notes on the Exhibition repeatedly raises several themes in relation to the various works and so veers away from the exhibition's path even as it follows it. Each instance is a variation on a broader theme, but raised in relation to a particular object. The themes are thus simultaneously general and specific. Moreover, the intertwining presentation of the themes affects the textual presentation of the artworks. Although prima facie presented as following the viewer's route in the exhibition, descriptions of the interrelations between works from different passages in the exhibition constantly interrupt the text's progress. Thus the text seems to jump back and forth and move laterally, in the way that the curator's thinking also does, and so undermines the structure of the exhibition it might appear to duplicate.

This form of writing is an attempt to make the text correspond to the experience of *Partners*, in which each object has multiple connections with the other objects. This again activates the analogy to musical composition evoked above. Indeed, this almost contrapuntal manner of representing the exhibition in words finds its closest analogy in musical composition. Every score is made up of musical phrases and themes that the composer develops through a series of iterations—sometimes just subtle variations, sometimes radical, though still related, restatements—that move the music forward even as they may hark back to what has gone before or even intimate what will be heard later. As a result, every piece of music has its own organic character, colouring and meaning as it flows from beginning to end, the whole depending on the particular relationships, correspondences and contrasts between the constituent parts. The textual representation of *Partners* in *Notes on the Exhibition* works in the same way. Themes are stated, then repeated or restated when necessary as the text progresses, to compose a verbal representation of the exhibition and the interrelationships of its constituent parts.

Every passage in *Partners* sets the viewer up to be surprised. The curatorial practice at work in *Partners* utilizes the strategy of those contemporary artists who take on the role of trickster and make jokes that shock, and in doing so, capture the attention of the viewer. In some ways, it resembles a comedian setting up a joke and then delivering the punch line. However, to invoke this analogy should not reduce *Partners* to such comedic moments for that would short-circuit this complex endeavour to an easy, cheap chuckle. The humour, instead, is a trigger in its own way. It shocks by its seeming inappropriateness and thereby incites viewers to reflect on what art is and can do, and on the place of humour in it. Contemporary art, by giving expression to latent issues underlying our current moment, provokes deeper and more thoughtful considerations that reverberate long after the exhibition is over. The moments of surprise, including laughter, are only the starting point of that process. In this way—and this is the theoretical point of this project—art has a unique and ongoing capacity to act as a civilizing force.

Cattelan's *Him* [Figures 1.97–1.99] is an example of an artwork that is particularly provocative as a

transgressive act in this setting. The inclusion of it and the way in which it was situated in the show provide a paradigm for the curator to elaborate upon the curatorial practice in *Partners*.

Him was made to be placed directly on the floor in an empty space, with nothing to distract the viewer from approaching it. Because it is a figure, and is placed with its back to the entry, the viewer is enticed to approach to see the face. As viewers progress towards what appears to be innocuous statuary and walk around the sculpture, they are suddenly taken aback. The art manipulates the viewer into a startling confrontation with the adult face of Adolf Hitler, on the deceptively diminutive body of what appears to be a 12-year-old choir boy.¹⁴

This work is also deceptive in the context of this exhibition. It sets up the viewer by introducing the stereotypical, superficial point of view that, since an image of Hitler is included, this must necessarily be a show mounted to lament the Holocaust. Not so. As an autonomous work of art, *Him* stands in its own right and does not serve as a simple illustration of the image of Hitler. As a work of contemporary art, it is not to be taken literally.

In its contemporary-art context, *Him* functions in some aspects as a prank by a trickster. The same strategy is then picked up by the curator. By showing this sculpture as a work of contemporary art in an exhibition of contemporary art in this particular context—of the building and its position in the curatorial composition—the curator makes a counter-move in terms of comprehension, as well as acknowledging the latent content of the work, and effectively tricks the trickster, along with the viewing public. In effect, she lobs the ball back to the artist in a dialogue about a specific work of art, while also creating a larger cultural dialogue about an icon in the world memory of history in a place that now showcases both the past and the present. By pushing against the boundaries, which is what the artist was also doing, the curator torques the inclination to irony and stakes out a new territory—indeed, makes a new frame for the reading of the work.

The Haus der Kunst offers an architectural context where one can approach the art and objects in it in different ways. How a viewer reads *Him* is complicated, because not only the frame but also the strategy of presenting contemporary art differs from displays of objects with historical content. *Him* appears to be just such an object. But when it is placed in a “ground zero” location like the Haus der Kunst, it can become confusing and contentious. When located in the curatorial composition immediately after *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)* [Figures 1.22–1.94], *Him* is set up to read even more persuasively as somber—and because of the supplicating pose, verges on the ecclesiastical. This then heightens the impact of surprise.¹⁵

¹⁴ This suggests that Cattelan may be making an oblique reference to the youth organizations of the Nazi Party, the *Deutsches Jungvolk* (German Youth), for boys aged 10-14, *Hitler-Jugend* (Hitler Youth), for boys aged 14-18, and *Bund Deutscher Mädel* (League of German Girls), for girls aged 10 to 18 (Dearn 2006:7-15).

¹⁵ Bal 2008: 24.

That is, the curator is working in tune with the work but taking the reading to one extreme aspect within it. The piece would read entirely differently in another context. But this curatorial partnership bonds with *Him*, and presents it in a way that so exposes its latent content, it aspires to trump all other presentations. Contemporary-art group shows are identified not only by the title but more importantly by the roster of artists. *Partners* is not about celebrating a body of work or the “brand” of an artist. One cannot visualize what this show is about from reading a list of the artists included. It is about mining the individual object and the context in which it is presented for meaning, each initially in its own frame of reference, be it contemporary art or a museum of historical objects, and then, as the artist himself did with this sculpture, cross over the boundary from emotional distance to the intimacy of personal alarm.

The process of not just featuring the work as an incident but also reading it through the frame of several contexts alters the dialogue between the artist and the curator, and elevates the intensity of the partnership while taking it to a new metaphorical plane. The curator’s practice has engaged in an alternative—even provocative—partnership with the artist, precipitating a new kind of dialogue that has to do with the interpretation of specific works, as well as a different kind of contrarian relationship with the viewer, who may think the show is about one thing when a closer consideration, through the lens of contemporary-art expectations, would reveal that it is actually about another. The curator thus proposes a different kind of relationship with the viewer, provoking insights into the work of art and what history can tell us about ourselves that goes beyond the literality of information.¹⁶

The subject of conformity by human beings—their desire to “fit in” and the manipulations by figures of authority and groups that influence them—is one of the abiding notions that animates *Partners*. However, unlike the dark humour of Sacha Baron Cohen’s mainstream comedic work, which sets up situations that mock the so-called “unthinking masses” and locates the movie audience as if comfortably outside the realm of attack, Cattelan’s work does not presume that he is separate from the group of those who are the target of his criticism. He also does not see the art community as sacrosanct and hence, safe from his satire. Everything is available to be looked at with an eye to uncovering some deeper human truth.

Cattelan is in a knowing dialogue with the works by artists working under the rubric of Young British

¹⁶ The placement of *Him* in a Catholic girls’ school in the 2006 Berlin Biennale was a “counter-response” to the contextualization of this work in *Partners* (see Cattelan *et al.*, eds. 2006). That is, the curating of this work precipitated subsequent partnerships with the artist, who himself partnered with a curator and a critic, all of whom became “partners” in the dialogue on the presentation of this particular work. This is acknowledged in this e-mail from one of the trio of curators, which includes the artist of the work, Maurizio Cattelan himself. In an e-mail to the curator from Massimiliano Gioni dated Tuesday March 25, 2008: “I have read over and over again your book *Partners*, which was also a major inspiration of the Berlin Biennale I curated with Maurizio [Cattelan] and Ali [Subotnick] in 2006. *Partners* still is one of the most incredible exhibitions I have ever seen.” (Gioni 2008).

Artists (YBAs), who have also been using transgression to get attention for their art.¹⁷ But there is a complexity in his work, and in particular in *Him*, that does not limit its readings to a visual one-liner that can easily be digested and dismissed. *Him* was a contemporary art “move,” to be appreciated for its “post-Duchampian” wit.¹⁸

While the YBAs aim for the newspapers and tabloids as their targets, Cattelan has courted the media of the art community. In keeping with the tradition of contemporary art to stimulate thought and break with tradition, the sculpture doubles as a prop for a photo-op that, so to speak, “stoops to conquer” the covers of art magazines so that the attention-grabbing image of the artwork becomes mythologized. The converse also occurs in this exhibition: photojournalists’ images of totemic events in history that are then shown in a gallery break the boundaries between “facts” and “metaphors” and invite new considerations of how much world memory, accurately and inaccurately, is determined by photographic images. These two strategies for how information that includes both fact and fiction enters into our collective image archive convene in the way *Him* is displayed in *Partners*.¹⁹

Additionally, when installed in the context of the curatorial composition of *Partners* at Haus der Kunst, *Him* invites thoughtful reflection by virtue of the precise place it is installed—at the end of the first of three passages, rather than as the punch line at the end of the exhibition. Since *Him* is positioned early in the show, it paces the narrative by significantly slowing down the viewing experience and preventing it from being something that runs headlong, like a speeding train rushing to an end, as if the whole show were about one single thing. The placement of this work functions in the composition like the proverbial reference used as a title for Jeff Wall’s artwork, *The Stumbling Block* [Figures 3.4, 3.5]. It trips up viewers in a way that invites them to stop and think, and to consider this work as a way of locating the context of the show in the twentieth century, and therefore not fall into the simplistic presumption that this is a show only about the Holocaust.

This single example suggests that *Partners* was curated to propose a provocative interpretation of the ongoing legacy of World War II and the Holocaust in the wider context of twentieth-century history. The exhibition was a way of talking not only about history but also about this moment in history and identity. Very importantly, the exhibition raised the larger issue of what creates a consensus that sets some figures and

¹⁷ The YBAs include the following three artists:

Chris Ofili (born 1968): Ofili affixed varnished elephant dung to his depiction of the Madonna, called *The Holy Virgin Mary*, 1996. When this artwork was shown in the touring exhibition *Sensation* at the Brooklyn Museum, in 1999, it created a scandal when then-mayor Rudy Giuliani threatened to cut off public funding for the museum (Plate 2002: 1-6).

Marc Quinn (born 1964): One of Quinn’s most notorious artworks, *Self*, 1991, consists of a frozen sculpture of the artist’s head made from several litres of his own blood, taken from his body over a period of several months (Kent 1994; Marsh 2008).

Damien Hirst (born 1965): Hirst has gained international fame for his works in which dead animals, such a shark, sheep and a cow, were shown, sometimes dissected, in vitrines filled with formaldehyde (Bonami 1996:112-116; Kent 1994).

For the YBAs’ rise in fame in the late 1980s and 1990s, see Ford 1996: 3-9; Shone 1997: 12-25.

¹⁸ Jonathan P. Binstock, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, as quoted in Weingarten 2005.

¹⁹ Hendeles 2005: 40.

events apart as totemic in the history of the world while others are not as recognizable. It is, on another level, a dialogue between who sees and who gets seen. The exhibition was not made to sing the song of victims. It was made to provide a context for the viewers to contribute their own experience. Nor does it normalize the Holocaust as being anything other than unique. Instead, it resolutely offers and supports the importance of a contemporary-art experience that allows each viewer to come to their own conclusion about how they themselves feel about the conundrums of history, the nature of humanity and their own personal identity at this moment in time.

In this way, the exhibition is interactive. The curatorial composition places a series of images that can read as facts or can be interpreted metaphorically. It is a co-ordination of specifically chosen objects that creates a context that offers a metaphorical floor or a ground on which viewers can stand and locate themselves and react in keeping with his or her personal experiences in life. It is a curatorial practice that is specific to what is seen, but is not literal. It is a pinned-down series of incidents that leaves room for the viewers to make up their own stories.

The result of this open-ended approach, as well as the specificity of the historical references, is that there is abundant room for the perspectives of different generations to contribute their interpretations and make meaning that is specific to their life experience. *Him* was made by an artist who was born in 1960. Like an earlier generation of conceptual Italian artists such as Paolini, who was born in 1940, there is an inherent difficulty in contributing something consequential against the backdrop of a long cultural legacy of the history of art in their native country. As a strategy, both artists have looked beyond the impact of the physical sculptures in gallery settings to the increasing importance and power of photographs to convey the content of their works.²⁰ Indeed, Paolini's plaster sculpture, *Mimesi* [Figure 2.1], like Cattelan's statue, is itself an endeavour in wit that utilizes historical iconic imagery to make an art statement, but harvested from the history of art—complete with pedestal—rather than from political history and made into a different kind of *mise en scène*.

Like Cattelan's *Him*, Paolini's plaster forms for *Mimesi* also double as images that stand in as “substitutes for” and “mimic” the originals. In this way, they function as props for the camera. The photograph of the substituted elements that together make an artwork then becomes a celebrated image in its own right, over and above the highly replicable cast-plaster pieces, which in and of themselves are much like photographic prints, in that they can be repeatedly generated. The image of the work is then published in magazines and books, and becomes a stand-in for knowledge of the original work. Yet another layer to this work is the

²⁰ In the case of Giulio Paolini, this subject is directly addressed in a work titled *Dal "Trionfo della rappresentazione" (cerimoniale: l'artista è assente) [Triumph of Representation (The Absent Artist)]*, 1985, shown at the Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation in 1997 in a group exhibition, *Observances*. It is composed of three slide projectors, mounted on three white sculpture pedestals. The projectors generate three images onto the walls. See: Disch 2008: 564. For Cattelan, see: Bonami *et al.* 2000.

“Certificate of Authenticity,” which is also in the form of a photograph that is signed by the artist. This document locates the work in the realm of art, as individuated from the literal plaster forms themselves (which can be readily acquired), and stands as a substitute in status for the sculpture’s materiality as an object.²¹ As with the work by Cattelan, the work by Paolini moves through the world as a picture in a publication—known and appreciated from its photographic image of a surrogate made to imitate life and art.

The two decades between these two Italian artists also identify the variable relationships that different generations necessarily have to totemic icons in world memory such as Hitler. Older viewers will have a different perspective on Cattelan’s *Him* than younger viewers. Those old enough to feel the effect of World War II through their own experiences or through those recounted or suffered by their parents or grandparents may respond more directly and emotionally to the image, while those young enough to feel this part of history is no longer relevant to their daily lives may respond to it with some emotional distance. The younger generation may dismiss it as another dusty subject one learns about in school or even as a camp trope. Or, because of the shock of humour, they may not.

The legacy of Adolf Hitler and National Socialism is an indelible part of the identity of both the German people and the Jewish people. From the point of view of history, they will forever be linked ironically as partners. However, this show was not made for a political purpose, nor to contribute to the process of healing. Instead, *Partners* is a post-Holocaust document that looks at “us” and “them,” and notions of sameness and difference, to precipitate insights into the essence of human nature and the inclination to belong, using new ways to articulate that which changes the least.

Both in terms of the particular artworks assembled and their considered and contextualized layout, *Partners* was designed and constructed to offer viewers the opportunity, through contemporary art and culture, to have an embodied experience that addresses human nature in relation to world history and world memory. The curatorial practice is a direct and physical manifestation of the author-curator’s own exploration of this relationship. While all viewers are partners in the exploration, the exhibition encourages an individual engagement by each.

²¹ Disch 2008:1046; Bal 2008:31-33.