

## Partners

Pictured here [Figure 1.19–1.21] is an antique tin toy, seven inches tall, made in Spain by Rogelio Sanchis between 1928 and September 1936, when Sanchis went off to fight alongside Francisco Franco in the Spanish Civil War, where he was killed.<sup>1</sup> Displayed, as well, is a photograph—a portrait of a child from a family album [Figure 1.7]. The toy serves several functions. In addition to its original intent to entertain, for me it stands alone as a metaphor for collecting. But on these pages, I propose a connection of a toy with a boy, to make another kind of statement.

Minnie Mouse, the girlfriend of Mickey Mouse, emerged on November 18, 1928 in *Steamboat Willie*, the first animated cartoon that successfully synchronized sound with moving pictures.<sup>2</sup> While Felix the Cat was the first silent-film cartoon star, by 1931, the talking Mickey replaced the silent Felix as the new leader in cartoons, making the toy into a comical commentary on cultural consumption.<sup>3</sup>

Minnie has captured Felix, but what does she have? Lithographed on the outside of both suitcase-like cages is an image of Felix struggling to escape. Seen from either side, Felix appears to be captured. However, viewed from other angles, the molded-tin construction of the toy reveals that the suitcases are empty. Felix the Cat was famous for being elusive, solving problems in ways unique to the world of film animation. He could pull on his tail and disappear. However, the Felix in the toy suitcase appears to be both present and absent, like a film still, caught in motion—in perpetuity. So, what is a collection to a collector?

Like the suitcases, a collection is both beacon and baggage. Minnie walks with the support of the enlightenment of art as well as the burden of its material weight. Furthermore, she has captured someone who does not want to be possessed by her, and indeed cannot be. Art, like Felix, is fugitive, with meanings that metamorphose, from person to person and over time. As well, copyright laws protect images from being owned by anyone other than their makers or their estates. What then is actually captured by the collector?

---

<sup>1</sup> Bertoia 2000: 86.

<sup>2</sup> Bal 2008: 24.

<sup>3</sup> Lambert, Pierre. 1998: 40.

In my case, I find myself captured by the object. I become engaged in my interpretation of what I encounter and make a commitment to what holds my attention by including it in the collection. I then choose works for exhibitions, which I compose by making metaphorical connections from one object to another to precipitate insights. Indeed, that is my purpose in linking this toy together with this photograph.

The toy shown, one of only three known examples to have survived, was deaccessioned from a Spanish museum, and still bears the original cataloguing number on Minnie's left cheek. The registration reminds me of the numbers tattooed on my parents' left arms, used to catalogue them in Auschwitz.

The family-album photograph [Figure 1.7] inspired my collection of photography. It is a vintage post-card-sized portrait of a three-year-old boy named Szlamus Zweigel. The photo is dated: Warthenau, May 31, 1942. The city, formerly Zawierce, Poland, was renamed once it was German-occupied.<sup>4</sup> For safety, my mother made this particular yellow and green outfit, with its Bavarian appearance, for her Jewish nephew, her brother's only child. The photograph is the only evidence of my cousin's existence. Shortly after the picture was taken, the child was put on a train and killed in Auschwitz.

The key-wind clockwork toy leads me to a fantasy of empowerment. It lampoons the natural predatory power structure by creating a scenario of a cat captured by a mouse. In Art Spiegelman's cartoon books, *Maus*, of 1986 and 1991, Nazis are depicted as cats, and Jews as mice.<sup>5</sup> This contemporary allegory suggested to me yet another interpretation of the antique toy, in addition to it being a metaphor for collecting. When juxtaposed with this particular photograph, the toy of a mouse who has caught a cat can now extend its realm of meaning to become an inversion of the political power structure of the Third Reich. A Jew has captured a Nazi.

The invitation to curate an exhibition for the Haus der Kunst has given me an opportunity to reify this inversion. It has also given me a 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. The show I have composed invites viewers to consider the mutating meaning of images in our cultural history through a series of narrative passages, with scenarios of desire and frustration, murder and suicide, potency and impotency, sabotage and survival.

The exhibition looks at the notion of alliances made by design and by fate. It articulates icons and belief systems embedded in the twentieth century that have inspired or precipitated connections, by choice or by circumstance, thereby defining the participants in history. I have named it *Partners*.

Ydessa Hendeles  
Toronto  
April 2003

---

<sup>4</sup> Spector 2001: 1181, 1494-5.

<sup>5</sup> Spiegelman 1991.