

Bears

by JOHN BENTLEY MAYS

When I was a child, I was an autodidact. Each day I would cross the lawn on the way to school, and would figure out something else. Something else made sense to me. I loved that feeling of Ah, HA!—the feeling of epiphany when something fell into place and made sense.

Ydessa Hendeles



When talking about “Same Difference,” an exhibition that opened last spring for an indefinite run at Toronto’s Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation, it’s probably best to start at the beginning. *I have very few pictures of myself, and there’s little before the war. I was part of the generation that was not supposed to exist, so I’ve tried to imagine what it was like before. What do I know and what do I want to know? This whole project is a question: What does it mean to live today, in this moment? I’ve tried to look to popular culture and see what it means to be alive today.*

Ydessa Hendeles was born in Germany to *mitteleuropäische* Jewish parents in 1948. She is alive today at least in part because



ABOVE: Ydessa Hendeles, early 1950s, 302 Glencairn Ave., Toronto. Timed photo almost included the photographer, Jacob Hendeles
OPPOSITE: Dog on stump pedestal with teddy bear, anonymous, provenance eBay auction



LEFT TO RIGHT: Boy in pedal car with teddy bear, anonymous, provenance eBay auction; installation views of "The teddy bear project," "Same Difference," photos Robert Keziere; photo of soccer team in striped uniforms, anonymous, provenance eBay auction

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she was not born in Germany a few years earlier. She was brought as a toddler by her parents to Toronto, where she has lived and worked ever since.

For her to be alive has long been a matter of engagement with visual art. A friend of local artists throughout her early years, she first came to the attention of the wider Canadian art world in 1980, when she established herself as a dealer by opening a commercial showcase first on Front Street, then on Queen Street West. This project, known as the Ydessa Gallery, closed after a few years, and was succeeded by a private museum, the Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation, which persists.

Since its opening in 1988, the Foundation has followed a strategy unusual, perhaps unique, among private galleries of contemporary international art. Most collectors are content to buy what they like, then show what they bought. In contrast, everything displayed at the Foundation has been bought (or, rarely, borrowed or commissioned) by Hendeles for presentation in an intellectually coherent, long-running installation curated by the collector herself. In the nearly 15 years during which these exhibitions have appeared, Ydessa Hendeles' international reputation as a briskly intelligent and restlessly inventive curator has spread and has been confirmed again and again.

But the opening of "Same Difference," Hendeles' most recent effort, immediately plants doubt in the mind of the visitor about its author's status. Hendeles resists, and seems to resent, charac-

terization as an artist. But it is surely the most compact way to describe her activity in the creation of "Same Difference." Similarly, the word *artwork* most succinctly describes the highly original instrument of cultural inquiry she has created.

One can, of course, view "Same Difference" as merely the most recent of Hendeles' curated exhibitions, featuring pieces that are universally recognized as artworks. In this category are vintage photographs by acknowledged artists Walker Evans and Gustave Le Gray, a video piece by Douglas Gordon and statuary by Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan.

But these high-art artifacts represent only a fraction of what there is to see. And it is when looked at as a whole that the gathering begins to assume the fugitive complexities and complex pleasures we expect from artworks.

Juxtaposed with shrewd sophistication to the deluxe art objects here—and offering the most mentally intense and visually exciting experience in the show—is a display of almost 2,000 studio photos and snapshots, all with a single thing in common: a teddy bear in the composition. The photographs on view here represent only a third of Hendeles' ever-growing collection of such mostly anonymous images of mostly unknown (or forgotten) sweet girls and boys and horrible ones, soldiers, soccer players, Nazis, prostitutes, movie stars, other folk of almost every age, situation, nationality. (After a study of French amateur camera clubs carried out in 1963, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu decided

that photography has always been a fascination of comfortably middle-class working folk, and spurned by wealthy aristocrats and poor peasants alike.)

I had developed a curatorial practice that involved the juxtapositions of things from different media and different periods of history. I didn't adhere to the conventions of finding a medium, finding a thesis, presenting it to someone for approval, and then going out and supporting that position with artwork. I work directly from the object and what happens to me—so no other piece, even by the same artist, could be substituted for what is there. It's not that I suddenly became interested in Douglas Gordon and Maurizio Cattelan, even though, of course, I was aware of them. It was what those particular works were saying that affected me in some way. In order to be insightful, which is what I want my exhibitions to be, I have to have some self-knowledge, and work through whatever I see and its impact on me—to interrogate myself as to what is neurotic in here, what is not, what it tells us about our culture. I become drawn to certain works and I want to know why I have a relationship with this work, why I'm gravitating toward it.

In any single review, a critic could tease out only a few of the prolific strands of meaning generated by this brilliant assembly of objects and images. It symbolizes so many wondrous curiosities:

collecting and obsession, the instant fame and remarkable career of the teddy bear as it has wandered through so many systems and worlds, the peculiar pleasure that people with family photos take in them, and the longing of those (like Ydessa Hendeles) who have few. If there must be a central theme to "Same Difference," then let it be collecting: the Otto Preminger film (*Whirlpool*) recycled by Douglas Gordon in his work stars a kleptomaniac, or obsessive collector (Gene Tierney); and this exhibition is nothing if not evidence of an obsession to collect.

But it is also a show about bears.

The italicized passages are quotes by Ydessa Hendeles from a failed interview conducted with her last spring—failed inasmuch as she had many answers and I had many questions, but her answers had nothing to do with the questions. Which is daunting for an interviewer, though not necessarily a bad thing.

Ydessa Hendeles lives with Max Dean, a Canadian artist. *It started with Max. Max has this little teddy bear. Max is not at all materialistic, in the sense he has very little from his life—very few objects, but he has this teddy bear which is about six inches long, with a mohair head and cloth body. Whenever you're a collector, you are really often held hostage to the objects of your passion, and I felt more and more locked into the art world, and I wanted to move into other areas. So I began to focus on objects that other people had thrown out. Teddy bears were a miracle to*



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price paid for most photos in "Same Difference" was very modest—well within the range of almost anyone prepared to haunt the eBay sales for pictures with teddy bears in them. Like photography itself (if Bourdieu is to be believed), this exhibition is a matter of middle-brow obsession.

And like a considerable number of conceptual artworks shown previously at the Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation, the work could have been made by anybody. But just anybody did not make them, and just anybody did not assemble the teddy pictures. Ydessa Hendeles did. I do not know all the reasons she did—*obsession* is her favourite word when asked about this, but it explains nothing.

I am nevertheless sure that many artists and writers do what they do because of an anxious awareness about the truest thing about time: that everything is slipping away into it, thence into nothingness. I have wondered whether anyone would make art at all in the absence of the general sense of menace in human existence. I have wondered whether making art and collecting art are parts of an anti-entropic impulse that may be the most peculiarly human thing about us.

What does it mean to be here? I have tried to make these exhibitions irreproducible. The Hitler figure here comes at a moment when you can address the subject, and the last moment when it can have its current force of impact. There are some people still around with real memories of Hitler. I only have the remembrances of growing up with these memories. I am not interested in making an all-inclusive statement that will last forever. I am interested in this particular moment, and what I perceive and sense. The show is my culture, myself. It is a show of scenarios. In each case there is a person, and the viewer, looking and listening. There are tin toys, an inventory of cast-offs, recycled meaning.

I am conscious of having a relationship with the viewer, and I would like the viewer to have that experience of discovery, from their own experience. So I don't lead them on, and this show in particular is not meant to be a political clobbering on the head of what is right and what is wrong. But the ambiguities about who has power have always been on my mind. I've always tried to interrogate the notions of evil which come in power relationships.

Bears (family *ursidae*) are dangerous land animals to humans, far more menacing than their nearest biological relatives, the raccoons and lesser pandas and dogs. In the wild, they can be unpredictable, quite as likely to scamper away from an intruder as to attack him.

Every teddy bear is a pastiche of certain physical features all bears have in common: small, round ears, bulky bodies, flat-

footed paws. Thus, every teddy bear has a bit of a polar bear in him, a tad of grizzly, a touch of the black and brown bears that roam the world's northern temperate forests. Only the long teeth and scythe-like claws of these carnivores are excluded from the toy, making the teddy a *harmless* bear, hence an unreal one.

An indication of the great success of teddy bears in creating mass false consciousness about the reality of bears is in the stern warnings issued by the wardens of all public parks within the ranges of bears. Though interesting, sometimes quite small and seemingly indifferent to the doings of people, we are told, they can be potentially deadly, and should not be fed or fondled. You don't need a warning like that about rattlesnakes.

In an interview with *Globe and Mail* art critic Sarah Milroy, Ydessa Hendeles said that Hitler was the Germans' teddy bear: "He made them feel safe."

What Hendeles meant, of course, was that the mass-produced and mass-merchandized *representation* of Hitler was Germany's teddy bear. Only by means of the transfigurative powers of mass media, especially photography, could the 20th century's most deadly embodiment of chaos become a reassuring icon of peace, order, tranquillity.

Of the thousands of images in "Same Difference," the most startling is Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan's statue of Hitler, entitled *Him*. In this realistic, half-size effigy, Cattelan has deployed all the traditional Christian imagery of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. This is how Hitler wished to be seen when in power and after all was lost, how he wished to be remembered.

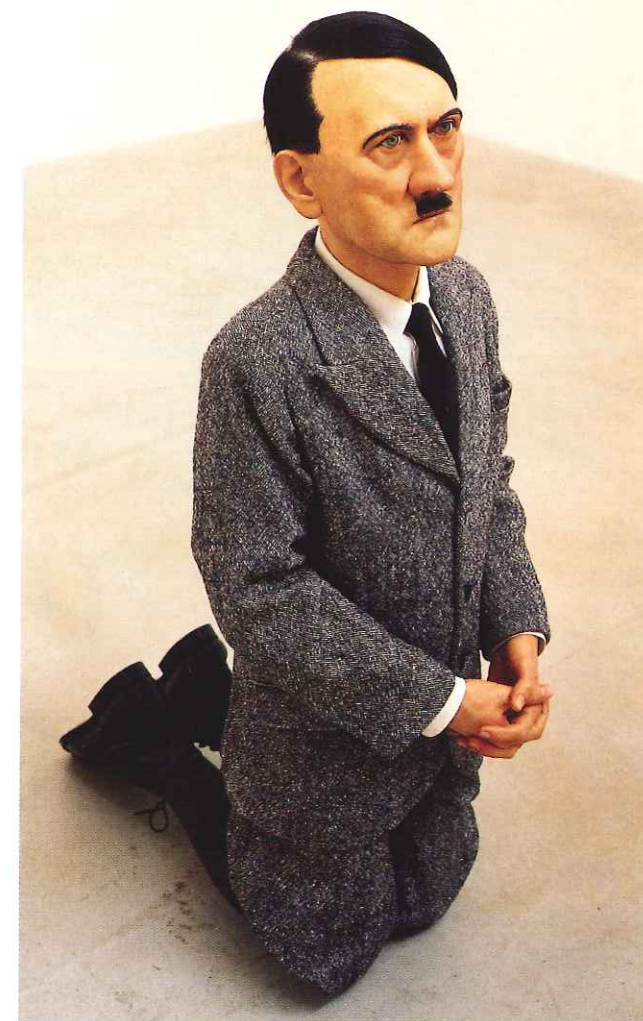
Isolated, vulnerable and the size of a child, he kneels in humble intercession to the Father. Pale face grooved by sorrow at the incomprehension of his disciples, who are soon to desert him, and by fear of his approaching death, he pleads to be released from impending humiliation, while submitting finally to the horror that is the end to which his divine calling has destined him.

The wickedly ironic pathos of Cattelan's work is heightened by its placement in a kind of Gallery of Gethsemane: a dead end, a stark devotional emptiness in which there is nobody but the viewer and the suffering one. The full pressure of art history and evocative sacred imagery pushes down upon us, summons us to extend hearts and hands to the victim of misunderstanding and hostility we see kneeling before us. For us, as for Christ, as for Hitler, as for the myriad people photographed with teddy bears, there is only one way out; the way we entered the world in the first place, and how we shall exit it: from nothingness, and back into it.

What does it mean to put together a collection? It's a commitment. It is both enabling, and it is baggage. Sometimes you have to go where people aren't going. People weren't buying teddy bear pictures. ■

Minnie Mouse Carrying Felix in Cages
Lithographed tin, key-wind clockwork
toy made in Spain between 1928 and 1936
Recently de-accessioned from a Spanish
museum Photo Robert Keziere

BELOW: Maurizio Cattelan *Him* 2001
Polyester resin, mixed media Edition 2/3
101 x 41 cm Photo Isaac Applebaum



me because they were the feast of moths and vermin, and they were thrown out because they weren't worth anything.

In 1993, Ydessa Hendeles paid £49,500 at a Christie's auction in London for a blue teddy made for Harrods department store around 1908 by the German toy manufacturer Steiff. The buyer for Harrods apparently took a look at the one-off stuffed animal and decided there was no market in London for a blue teddy. Hence the uniqueness of Elliot, as the bear was dubbed, and hence his extraordinary price (which was not the highest ever fetched at auction by a teddy bear, but close)—and hence his absence from "Same Difference." The market forces that drove Elliot's price to almost record levels are identical to those that drive up the price of all art objects: superb condition, desirability created by rarity, the hunger to be the successful bidder in a hot competition for an unusual, coveted thing, the pleasure of consuming opulently, whimsically.

The construction of "Same Difference"'s most conspicuous section was conducted using the same economic instrument by which Elliot came into the Hendeles collection: the auction block, in this case the virtual one created in cyberspace by the on-line house eBay.

But the process of acquisition took place within a significantly different field of energies. The goal of Hendeles' quest, conducted since December 1999 on eBay, was not a unique, precious object like Elliot, but merely the accumulation of studio or amateur photographs featuring a teddy bear in the composition; of which there are surely an unthinkable vast number in the world. The