There are many sides to every story:
Alan Schechner looks at the Holocaust

by Anne Swartz, Ph.D. © 2002
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Alan Schechner's art dealing with the Holocaust has been the subject of recent controversy. Currently a professor of computer arts at the Savannah College of Art and Design, Schechner has been at the center of a media discussion about his work and its inclusion in the group exhibition Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art, scheduled to open on March 17, 2002 at the Jewish Museum in New York City.

Curator Norman L. Kleeblatt of the Jewish Museum began noticing a trend in representations of the Holocaust as more confrontational, more interesting - work like that of Schechner. Kleeblatt contacted Schechner after seeing his art reproduced in Art Journal and invited him to participate in this show. Realizing that the work would generate discussion, the exhibition catalogue came out in advance of the show to help focus the dialogue. Additionally, the artists participated in a round table conversation in January to frame certain aspects of their involvement.

That round table was reported on in an article in The Wall Street Journal and a controversy was born, begetting articles in the New York Post, the New York Times, Reuters, and most of the Jewish press here in the United States and in Israel. Schechner's pieces have attracted particular scrutiny because he inserts himself into archived images of the Holocaust, as well as using digital technology to morph humans into bar code forms.

In a series of interviews with Schechner, it is obvious that his work prompts the viewer to consider important questions about the Holocaust, as well as the rights and responsibilities of artists to create. His art (and this exhibition) have engendered a steady stream of queries from the press and the artworld with no end in sight. Schechner explains that the controversy thus far has centered on artistic freedom and issues of Jewishness. His work has entered the political arena of the artworld and beyond. Perhaps most at issue in the dialogue surrounding his work and this exhibition is, he expressed, that "no one clarifies what constitutes art."

Schechner described his personal experiences that resulted in the images included in this exhibition. Like many young Jews, he found
himself completely entranced by the idea of Israel. He found this
notion so powerful, that he moved there from England, remarking on
the emotive response he had to Israel as "the sense of going home." So
powerful were his feelings that he joined the Israeli Army as a way
to feel like he was "being a good full citizen," a very common desire
among young Jews around the world. Serving in the Israeli Army
proved a challenging and enlightening experience for Schechner who
saw first-hand ideological quandary presented by Israel as a nation-
state. This dilemma centered on the way that the Israeli government,
including Menachem Begin, then Prime Minister of Israel, described
the bombings of Lebanon as justified by the evil perpetrated on the
Jews by the Nazis. He found it disturbing that the marginal social
treatment of Palestinians was also being justified by Holocaust
rhetoric. Further, he found the use of the Holocaust Museum of Israel
by the Israeli Army as a tool for propagandizing the handling of the
Palestinian community additionally problematic. Schechner noted that
these usages of the Holocaust pointed to "aims over and above
memorializing."

From these experiences, Schechner began questioning the role of the
Holocaust in his life and using it as source material for his art. This art
is at issue in the current controversy. Schechner asked the audience
about the appropriate treatment of tragedies. His ironic use of
Holocaust imagery has been touted as trivializing the Holocaust. But
such questions belie "very disturbing assumptions" about who owns
imagery and Holocaust images, Schechner said. He outlined a
hierarchy of ownership about the Holocaust as beginning with
survivors, going to the families of victims and survivors, the Jewish
community, then everyone else.
In the recent media reception, Schechner's work has been deemed a
mockery of the tragedy of the Holocaust. To the sensationalist media
response, he replies, "there are some very disturbing assumptions
about art as aesthetic escapism." His work challenges the viewer to
think about political realities produced by manipulating history for
ideological gain. Ultimately, Schechner remarked that "there are all
kinds of art" and "art has become my politics." It remains how the
reception for the exhibition will develop and, ultimately, what the
regard for the show will be.

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