

**Published in Museo, 2000.**  
**A Tiger's Leap into Oblivion?:**  
**Photography in the Age of Digital Reproduction (2000)**  
**-by Noam Milgrom-Elcott**

Photography is constituted by its relationship to Time, its lacerating emphasis on the "that-has-been." Thus concludes Roland Barthes's final reflections on the photographic medium. In the work of Eugene Atget and that of the Surrealists, Walter Benjamin like wise locates photography's authority in its ability to capture the past--and then blast that past out of the continuum of profane history into in a revolutionary present. This is Benjamin's tiger's leap into the past. But in this computer age, so declaim the soothsayers of digital doom, the vital ties between the photographic image and a past reality have been severed. "The cultural production system now emphasizes processability. The digital structures that are produced and consumed do not just refer to each other, but are actually made from each other."<sup>1</sup> After the initial image is captured from the real world--a step that can now be circumvented through computer graphics--digital images enter a realm of potentially infinite relocation and transformation. Whereas analog images are debased in the process of reproducing reproductions (i.e. the infinite reproducibility of a photograph still requires the use of an original negative), a digital image that is a thousand generations away from the original is indistinguishable in quality from any one of its progenitors.

With the shift from photochemical to computational processes and the introduction of image-producing techniques that engage the referent without reference to light, the traditional elements of photographic medium specificity must be abandoned. More important is the rupture in the ontology of the photographic image. The most recent Star Wars film embodies the break in photography's already precarious claim to truth. There, traces of real people interact seamlessly with computer-generated graphics and whole scenes, including the climactic battle, have no greater physical connection to the real world than does a video game. We remember Barthes's definition of photography in terms of "spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority." Today, the temporal dimension is quickly dissipating as more and more images are perceived without time lag. Recent images of the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, relayed instantaneously via satellite in glowing nightvision green, transform the factual that-has-been into a simultaneous fiction closer to Star Wars animation than to documentary photography. In a reversal of Barthes's formulation, it is precisely the images' synchronicity that makes them all the more distant. They occur now, but in a parallel world, quite separate from our own.

Caught intriguingly between photography's intrinsic temporal dimension (its that-has-been) and the instantaneity-turned-fiction (characteristic of the post-photographic age), are a pair of recent works by the young American artist Alan Schechner. "Self Portrait at Buchenwald: 'It's the Real Thing'" (1993) is a

photograph manipulated in Adobe Photoshop. In this work, Schechner places himself in the barracks of the recently liberated Buchenwald, a digital meeting in gross violation of the sanctity of Holocaust images (of which the original 1945 photograph is among the most famous) and the uniqueness of the camp experience. Schechner is dressed in inappropriate inmate garb but all too eagerly displays a can of diet Coke. If Roberto Benigni's film *Life is Beautiful* flirts with taboo by using the Holocaust as a backdrop for comedy, *Self Portrait at Buchenwald* clearly violates that taboo. Benigni's images lay no claims to truth; his story is historical fiction. Though obviously false, Schechner's work retains a perverse truth claim, "It's the Real Thing." Schechner's digital manipulation throws the viewer of the newly constructed image into a catch-22: we are asked to either believe in the pseudo-factual narrative that belittles the camp experience or to call into question the entire image, and by extension, the veracity of the Holocaust. Most likely, the viewer (certainly one concerned with the historical reality and uniqueness of the Holocaust) will believe in enough of each interpretation to find the work thoroughly repugnant. But such is the situation of pictorial history that digital imaging is rendering fabulous. Schechner responds by politicizing art.

The image of Schechner does not engage in this transgression unabated. The commodity, a refreshing diet Coke, not only participates in the work but overrides the surrounding Holocaust narrative to dictate Schechner's posture and the placement of his image in the photograph: he is an advertisement for Coca-Cola. The work's subtitle, "It's the Real Thing" alludes not just to the documentary condition of photography, but to the diet Coke advertising slogan. Schechner's photomontage negotiates the truths and falsities of advertising and digital manipulation; the violation of the Holocaust drives the point home.

Were it not for his striped concentration camp clothing, Schechner could have been cut out directly from an advertisement. And so it is precisely the black-and-white inmate garb that comes under attack in "Bar Code to Concentration Camp Morph," a single work from a series of stills taken from the computer animation *Taste of a Generation* (1994). As numbers morph into human faces and the mark of merchandise becomes the dress of affliction, the troubling association of commodification, concentration camps, and digital imaging emerges. The larger message speaks of the barcoding of human life, the transformation of beings into numbers. But the upper part of the screen the metamorphosis of numbers to faces--alludes in reverse to a specific condition of digital technology, which transforms images constituted in reality into bytes of information, rhyming with the death camps as it transforms life into a sequence of numbers.

Yet the Holocaust is not the subject of "Bar Code to Concentration Camp Morph" so much as it is its source of shock. The harrowing Holocaust pictures create a sense of urgency that would not otherwise emerge from mere digital manipulation. No one raised a protest when, in a 1991 digitally created diet Coke advertisement, Elton John jammed with Louis Armstrong and other long

dead characters. There is no longer any sense of the that-has-been in such images, as time is no longer the constituent element. Elton John and Louis Armstrong can participate together in the phantasmagoria of the eternal present. In fact, it may be the strong link between digital imaging and the culture industry, as embodied in the diet Coke advertisement, which has drained photomontage of its shock and photography of its potentially illuminating leap back into the past. The revolutionary shock, temporal or otherwise, of photographic images has been so co-opted by the culture industry that Schechner must transgress a Holocaust taboo in order to reinstate it. This is Benjamin in reverse: even while photography sucks the aura from reality, it captures a piece of the past--the outmoded, the illuminating detail, the optical unconscious--that, in the right hands, can revolutionize the present. Photography thus engages in what Benjamin calls a tiger's leap into the past. Atget's photographs, central to Benjamin, take us from temporal shock to historical consciousness; Schechner moves us from historical consciousness to shock. With the loss of photography's that-has-been, historical reference begins to compensate for constituent time.

It is Schechner's *Taste of a Generation*, produced with the same software used for your favorite dot.com, that forces us to engage in conscious digitalized resurrections of the oppressed past with reference to the present, in order to wake us from our commodity dream. The oppressed continue to "forget both [their] hatred and [their] spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren," writes Benjamin.<sup>2</sup> Schechner links commodity culture to gassed ancestors and includes us along with himself. Again Benjamin: "Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins" ("T," 255). Schechner's images are threats against all that is most sacrosanct in our past. His self-referential, commodified, digitalized world says that it's the real thing so that we remember that it's not. "A tiger's leap into the past--in the open air of history is the dialectical one" ("T," 261). So is Schechner's. His dialectical use of digital images--disturbing our internal, self-referential, self-selecting image world--can replace the photochemical temporal index with an explicitly historical glance. Where we once had that-has-been, we are confronted with an ironic never forget. No longer does photography's impetus lie in its direct connection to a moment past. We must now make that connection ourselves--and revolutionize it. Benjamin speaks of a profane illumination that engages the past to ignite a revolutionary present. Schechner offers us such an illumination.

#### Works Cited

1 William Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 53.

2 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Schocken, 1968), 260. Hereafter abbreviated, "T."