

Contemporary reflections on science and ethics are often guided by the belief that the progress of science naturally leads to an enhanced responsiveness towards any ethical issues that might arise in relation to that progress. However, in the 20th and emerging 21st centuries, urgent concerns have arisen regarding the relationship of scientific and medical technologies to the moral and ethical dimensions of life. The tragic cruelties of modern history often have their source in the disastrous embrace by various societies of morally distorted practices - medical, scientific and technological - that become enmeshed with that society's culture, values and aspirations. For example, in one lesser known episode of the Holocaust which occurred between 1939 and 1945 the Nazi regime ordered the murder of hundreds of thousands of adults and children with physical and mental disabilities in a euthanasia program that was designed to eliminate anyone who, according to Nazi racial ideology, threatened the "purity" of the German race. In this nightmarish process, the children were usually murdered - often by injection - by their own physicians. That such a state-sponsored program could be successfully embraced and implemented in our own time is unimaginable. *Four Questions*, by Judy Chicago and Donald Woodman, is a work that seeks both to expose and imagine it. It deposits us into the midst of profound moral quandaries and ambiguities and then challenges us to find our way out, to imagine alternatives. Answers begin to emerge only when we ask the right questions.

Those familiar with Judy Chicago's history are aware that she is an artist who seamlessly integrates a robust and unflinching political commitment with work of great imagination - sensitive to the vulnerability, the fragility and the gnarled complexity of human beings, art which seeks justice yet knows that any remedy for our social ills also requires beauty - beauty that lives in creative tension with the requirements of justice. Though Chicago and her husband Donald Woodman are politically committed artists they are not prepared simply to critique and subvert current values and conditions. Nor do they insist on the kind of utopian schemes that used to be central to the political imagination. More radically, in their work *Four Questions*, Chicago and Woodman attempt to awaken our capacities for reflection, empathy, solidarity and moral outrage. The questions are simple and are posed to an audience that is already likely to be capable of empathic imagination. Each of the *Four Questions* is linked to a specific conflation of images and events, endowing them with potency, immediacy, and rousing our ability to look intently and steadily - ethically as well as aesthetically. This capacity is enhanced by the ingenuity of *Four Question's*

physical and optical construction. Alternating "slats" as in an "accordion fold" allow the viewer to see one image if looked at from the left and another if approached from the right. Looked at straight on, the images merge, blending illegibly. I've often encountered this clever technique in the folk and popular devotional art of Mexico and South America. It emerged in the fine-art context during the 1970's and 80's principally through the work of Israeli Op-artist Yacov Agam. In *Four Questions*, it becomes a strategy that perfectly expresses, in optical and visual terms, the conceptual underpinnings of the work - a work that both fulfills and is fulfilled by its medium and its making.

The *Four Questions* are a part of a much larger work called *The Holocaust Project*. The word, "holocaust," has become, in many ways a cliched synecdoche used to refer to every instance of evil and inhumanity perpetrated on innocent peoples and populations throughout history. Avoiding the cliché becomes a particular challenge when photographic images are imbedded in the work. Camera-mediated images of atrocity have become ubiquitous and ordinary. A further challenge for the artists in conceiving this work was to honor and retain the specifically Jewish dimension of the Holocaust while using it as a lens through which to encounter other monstrous distortions of power and policy in the modern and contemporary context. The four questions that Chicago and Woodman ask us to consider along with a brief description of the images that they juxtapose and conflate are: *Where Should the Line Be Drawn?* which joins images of the brutal use of humans (high altitude experiments at Dachau concentration camp) and animals (experimental facility, Silver Springs, Maryland) in "medical" experiments. The Nazi T-4 euthanasia program - referred to in the first paragraph - and current privileged access to extraordinary, life-extending medical technologies are juxtaposed in *What Determines a Quality Life?* The Nazi programs of forced sterilization of racially "impure" women and the current exploitation of Third World women in surrogacy programs blend in *Who Controls Our Human Destiny?* The triumphalism of a space program built with the assistance of slave labor and the active recruitment of Nazi scientists by the U.S. Army are superimposed in *When Do Ends Justify the Means?*

In the early 1980's Judy Chicago became aware that though she was Jewish and raised in a household with strong lineal ties to generations of revered scholars and rabbis, she had very little knowledge of Jewish religion or history. Her experience of being Jewish was through the fractious, humorous, critical, intellectually

combative and politically "progressive" aspects of secular Jewish culture in America. Neither she nor Woodman - also a "secular Jew" - could claim any informed sense of the social, ethical, and political dimensions of the tragedy that unfolded throughout most of Europe in the 1930's and 1940's. They had no specific knowledge of the extent to which medical, religious, scientific and academic institutions were complicit - actively or tacitly - in the various projects and initiatives that the extermination of Europe's Jews required. Like most people who came of age in mid-century America they were only vaguely aware of the fact that making the world "Judenfrei" (free of Jews) was of one the highest aspirations of a "civilized" national culture in the 20th century. For those familiar with Judy Chicago's history as an artist it will come as no surprise that she very quickly was consumed by an inner compulsion to understand the Holocaust and to confront the specific mechanisms through which "holocausts" are part of our own history and through which they remain with us into the 21st century. What have we not learned? What are the questions we haven't asked? And, more practically, how would Chicago convey the disturbing content of those inquiries through the sensuality that characterizes so much of her art?

The title of the project - *Four Questions* - links this work to the ritual meal called "the seder" that Jews celebrate at Passover, commemorating the events leading to the ancient Israelites' freedom from slavery in Egypt. The seder is not only a commemorative ritual. It is a drama that seeks to reenact, with vividly felt immediacy, the movement from slavery to freedom or, more metaphorically, from a place of narrow constriction to a condition of release, spaciousness and ease. At a particular point in the seder's unfolding drama, the youngest child present traditionally asks the "four questions." The questions - and their answers - function to ensure that all the participants are linking their presence at the seder meal to the ancestral events which the seder seeks to reinvigorate in the participant's contemporary experience. What did it feel like to be a slave? What does it feel like to be free? Choosing the youngest capable child present at the table to ask and answer the four questions ensures that the memory of this foundational story is "imprinted" on a new generation. The historical narrative is reanimated. Everyone present participates anew in the drama of redemption, further connecting the past to the present, our fate and destiny to the fates and destinies of others.

Although it looks to the Holocaust for its primary references, *Four Questions* implicates many of the major moral and ethical

predicaments of our own time. Through the juxtaposition and/or merging of Holocaust-related images with corresponding images related to contemporary issues and contexts *Four Questions* becomes not only a work of remembrance but of "not-forgetting." Which is to say, it is a work that seeks to ensure that remembrance not be simply commemorative but that it insinuate itself into our present awareness and inform our contemporary choices. What we remember shapes the future. *Four Questions* is, in that sense, a highly optimistic work. The artists' commitment to this project is based on their faith in their audiences' capacity to engage in serious moral reflection. *Four Questions* compels us to consider the mechanisms through which human and animal beings are tortured, terrorized, stripped of value, dignity - and in the case of humans - the right to shape their own destiny. That it should do so through a work of art so marvelously conceived and realized is amazing. This is the power of art when it aspires not only to be good but to do good.

The *Four Questions*, as part of the larger *Holocaust Project* involved an extraordinary amount of research, planning, travel, logistics, etc. An expanded view of the project's ambitious scope and of the problems, processes and resolutions that the artists encountered and negotiated in the course of its realization can be found in *The Holocaust Project: From Darkness Into Light* by Judy Chicago.¹ I acquired this book in 1999. It still sits on my bookshelf unlike so many other volumes that I've sold, bartered, given away, or left behind.

I'm grateful to Judy Chicago and Donald Woodman for directing me to this project, for lending *Four Questions* and for their belief that the Fulginiti Center for Bioethics and Humanities was the perfect place to exhibit it. I'm grateful as well to Dr. Therese Jones who, as always, contributes much-needed energy, insight and perspective to the Fulginiti Gallery exhibition programs.

Simon Zalkind, Curator
January 22, 2013

¹Chicago, Judy, *Holocaust Project: From Darkness Into Light*. New York: Penguin Books, 1993.



(view from left)

(view from right)

panel 1 - *Where Should the Line Be Drawn?*

1993, sprayed acrylic, oil, Marshall photo oils on photolinen mounted on aluminum

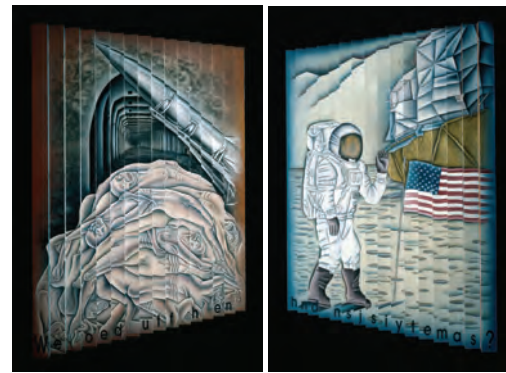


(view from left)

(view from right)

panel 3 - *What Determines a Quality Life?*

1993, sprayed acrylic, oil, Marshall photo oils on photolinen mounted on aluminum



(view from left)

(view from right)

panel 2 - *When Do Ends Justify the Means?*

1993, sprayed acrylic, oil, Marshall photo oils on photolinen mounted on aluminum



(view from left)

(view from right)

panel 4 - *Who Controls Our Human Destiny?*

1993, sprayed acrylic, oil, Marshall photo oils on photolinen mounted on aluminum

JUDY CHICAGO AND DONALD WOODMAN



FOUR QUESTIONS

March 7 - May 30, 2013 | Fulginiti Pavilion for Bioethics and Humanities, University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus

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March 7 - May 30, 2013

The Art Gallery

Fulginiti Pavilion for Bioethics and Humanities
University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus
13080 East 19th Avenue, Aurora, Colorado 80045
303.724.3994 • www.coloradobioethics.org

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Photos © Donald Woodman

Gallery Hours

9:00am - 5:00pm, Monday - Friday, free and open to the public

Driving Directions:

Visitors are advised to enter the Anschutz Medical Campus via Montview Boulevard to access easily visitor parking sites. The Fulginiti Pavilion is located on East 19th Avenue between Uvalda Court (east) and Racine Street (west). From the west, enter campus from Peoria Street on Montview, and turn south on Uvalda Court. From the east, enter campus from Fitzsimons Parkway on Montview, and turn south on Uvalda Court. The Georgetown Visitor Parking Lot is on the southeastern corner of Uvalda Court and East 19th Avenue.



Center for Bioethics and Humanities
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS



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