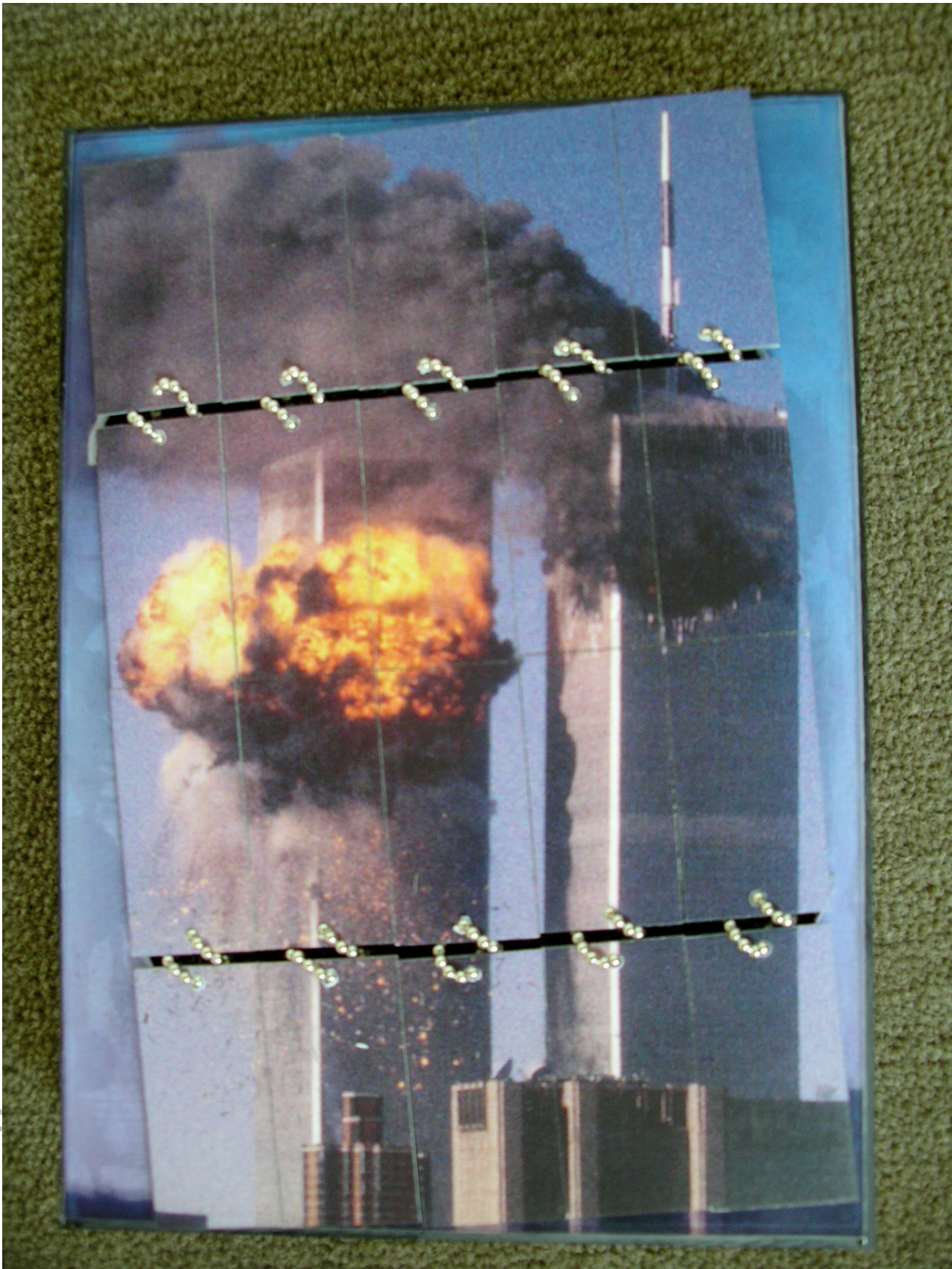

**ART HISTORY AND THEORY
HUSO2186**

SEMESTER II, 2004

STUDENT: KAREN MAY THOMPSON
Student number: [REDACTED]

DOCUMENT TO ACCOMPANY (UNTITLED) OBJECT



Where were you when the Towers came down?

Did you see the television footage and the newspaper reports?

Did you believe the footage you were seeing was real?

Did you watch the TV coverage over and over again?

Why?

Did you get 'compassion fatigue' as the coverage extended over weeks?

Did you become numb to the human suffering?

How do you feel when you see the images now?

Do you still feel the initial shock of the first time you saw them?

Are they just pictures of a past event?

Do you even still link these images with human suffering?

In modern society we are constantly exposed to images of the suffering of others – most usually under the pretence of ‘news’ and ‘current affairs’.

A few of these images may affect us and we feel for those involved – we may even want to help them.

But with bombardment of many such images we are overwhelmed – there is so much suffering – who do we help, where do we start. We feel powerless, so we do nothing. If we do not feel the suffocation of the images ourselves, it is pointed out to us by others – they ask if you help these people, why are they more important than the many others in need.

It is our basic human nature to help – but we don’t. To placate our conscience over our inaction, we convince ourselves that these images don’t hurt or affect us. In this the sheer volume of images in circulation facilitates the numbing – so many images convincing us that such suffering must be an inevitable part of life.

With time the initial pain dissipates and the images are further trivialised – being inserted into society as part of advertisements or even entertainment – fostering the numbness and further reducing our willingness to help others – amputating our humanity.

In creating this piece I am exploring the desensitisation to, and 'consumerisation' of, images – particularly images of suffering.

The image

There are many images that could have been used, but I selected this image as my own experience of desensitisation related to this event. In showing friends as the project progressed, I found that they had the same experience of a familiarity with the images that somehow circumvented real feelings.

My experience of the attacks of 11 September 2001 is similar, I suspect, to that of many not directly involved in the event. I wasn't in New York at the time and I did not know anyone there – not unlike most of the world's population. I was working just outside London and whispers went around the office that a plane had crashed into the Tower – inviting discussion of how such an accident could occur. Then the second plane hit – now speculation of terrorism and spectres of war. I went home that evening – Blaire drew a target on England with his 'shoulder-to-shoulder' announcement – and watched the footage for hours, over and over again. Glued to the screen, I had to pull myself out of a complacent film-watching fascination to properly conceive the magnitude of the human suffering.

The horror stayed with me for a long time – I found it difficult to look at images or footage. But being presented with the same image again and again numbs the pain of the initial shock.

In selecting the specific image to use in the work, I was disturbed to find that I came to look at these horrific images in purely aesthetic terms – that one didn't have enough colour, that one hasn't the right composition, that one is before the second tower was hit, that one doesn't have enough impact, and so on. The selection process had itself become a demonstration of desensitisation. The only images I couldn't bear to look at for more than a second were those showing people – calling for help out of the windows, falling from the buildings. I was relaying this experience to a friend with whom I had been discussing the construction aspects of work in progress, and her eyes widened and she seemed horrified with herself as she said 'you look at the pictures but you sometimes forget that this affected real people' – my point exactly.

Fragmentation

The image has been fragmented into smaller pieces, which are then converted into consumer items intended to be dissipated among the population, possibly even coveted. Therefore reducing the image, and so the event, into pieces that don't carry the importance and pain of the whole event – trivialising and devaluing the image – and by inference, the event and the suffering.

The shape of the fragments has been chosen to represent the dog-tags worn by military personnel*, reflecting the 'consumerisation' of all things related to war and conflict – 'camouflage' fashion, dog-tags as 'cool urban' decoration. However I do recognise that the use of the actual military dog-tags in this context, and perhaps still the reference to them, may invite interpretation of the piece as a comment on the military consequences of the attacks.

The overall dimensions of the object were carefully determined so to extract 20 fragmented images of dog-tag dimensions – 20 being the sum of 9 and 11.

Use of images

The use of images of suffering by Benetton also informed this work – particularly the poster of the murdered person in a pool of blood, and that of the Serbian soldier's blood-stained uniform.

It could be suggested that these posters serve the public: highlighting issues and creating a dialogue, and therefore providing a forum to address and hopefully prevent future events. And if the company is taking a risk – those who see it as important would view Benetton favourably, but it would create a backlash from those who are offended.

There is little argument that there are few ways of an image being given more exposure, but the Benetton icon is always in the corner – making the public aware of who is paying for the poster and therefore unavoidably 'promoting' the company. Thus contradictions surface and the motive questioned.

While I expect that Benetton believe they are doing a public service, their global distribution of such images does compound our desensitisation and encourages further use of such images in similar formats.

Presentation

The pendants / dog-tags are displayed on a box not unlike one that would be used if they were for sale on the counter-top of a clothes and accessories store. The overall arrangement of the tags is such that the overall image is slightly off-centre to the underlying box image: alluding to the distortion of such images.

Footnotes

* The length, width and placement of the drill hole are the same as genuine military dog-tags, the only digression being the curved shape expected at the top and bottom. I had originally intended to print directly onto the metal, thus allowing filing to the appropriate shape – however, the week this was to be done Dinkums suddenly stopped the service. With no other known facility and insufficient time to source an untested alternative provider, I decided to bond the image to metal. This different process introduced the danger of the edges of the image being damaged by using filing tools. Instead of risking this I decided to retain the rectangular shape and infer the relationship by the use of the ball-chain and the dimensions of the rectangles.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Patricia Contemporary Jewellery – The Australian Experience 1977-1987,
Millenium Books Pty Ltd, Sydney, 1988
- Contemporary Jewellery in Australia and New Zealand,
Craftsman House, Sydney, 1998
- Flusser, Vilem Towards a Philosophy of Photography, Reaktion Books Ltd,
London, 2000 (English version; 1983 original)
- Keenan, Catherine “On the Relationship between Personal Photographs and
Individual Memory”, History of Photography, Vol.22, No.1, Spring
1998, pp.60-63
- Schofield, A & Fahy, K Australian Jewellery – 19th and Early 20th Century, David Ell
Press Pty Ltd, Sydney, 1990
- Sontag, Susan On Photography, Picador, New York, 1977
- Where the Stress Falls, Jonathon Cape, Random House, London,
2002
- Sorensen, Sue “Against Photography – Susan Sontag and the Violent Image”,
Afterimage, Vol.31, No.6, May/June 2004, pp.16-17
- Sydney College of the Arts, Photo-Discourse, Sydney College of the Arts, Sydney, 1981
www.Outdoormedia.ru accessed mid-September 2004