

## Teachers' Notes

*Torn Poster, South Bank, London, 1984*

Dorothy Bohm (b. 1924)

Photograph on paper, 64 x 43.8 cm

### Content and Ideas

#### What can you see?

Ripped paper, posters, hoardings, layers, fragments of images

#### What is it a picture of?

It is actually a close up photograph of billboard hoardings in London. It is taken from real life and the image has not been manipulated in any way.

#### What do you think about this choice of subject?

Dorothy Bohm says: 'I like a sense of mystery in my photographs. Sometimes I want a picture to ask why and not to be too easily deciphered and decoded because our lives are often like that.'

#### What does Dorothy Bohm mean by this?

Is it always important to know what an artwork is depicting?

#### The artist often photographs torn posters; do you have any ideas why?

Consider the normal role of posters in our society and whether they have the same role in this artwork. Posters are intended to sell products, to inform people about events or to call people to action. Here, the posters have been eroded or rearranged, so that their original meaning is lost. In Bohm's work they show the effects of time, the ravages of the elements and chance occurrences, such as the deliberate removal of part of the poster for example. In many ways the ripped posters tell a story.

Each layer appears to reveal a glimpse of past events – in their distressed condition, the posters become a silent but reliable witness to history – an elaborate layering of fragments. In this way, Dorothy appears to work on both a metaphorical (the torn posters as metaphors for time passing) and literal level.

She also says: 'The photograph fulfills my deep need to stop things disappearing. It makes transience less painful and retains something of the special magic, which I have looked for and found. I have tried to create order out of chaos, to find stability in flux and beauty in the most unlikely places.' What do you think she means here? How does photography 'stop things from disappearing?' Look at the images of people in this work; what do the images have in common? Relate her use of the torn poster to her images of women. Which parts of the women remain 'whole'? Could there be any significance in this? Discuss possible interpretations.



## **Materials and Techniques**

### **How is this piece of art made?**

It is a colour photograph. It looks a bit like a collage, or as if it has been deliberately constructed, but in fact it is just a zoomed in section of ripped posters on a billboard. Bohm, perhaps unfashionably, remains a purist; refusing to crop or otherwise manipulate her photographs.

### **Do you think this art work could have been made in another medium altogether?**

The artist was very influenced by painters and also film-makers. Bohm admires filmmakers Fellini and Antonioni and admires painters Manet, Redon, Cezanne, Kandinsky, Braque, Modigliani and Sutherland. Her work could be seen to have affinities with the work of Giorgio de Chirico and Rene Magritte and Brancusi.

## **Form and Composition**

Look at the main formal elements; how many different shapes can you find?

The basic format that Dorothy employed, allowed for a clear structure of arcs, planes and segments holding one or two pieces of recognisable iconography.

### **Describe the colour palette....**

### **Describe the recognisable iconography (i.e. images of things you know)**

### **How many layers can you identify?**

## **Background Information**

Bohm started using colour photography in the mid 1970's and took it up seriously in 1984, when the posters began to emerge as one of the persistent themes in her work.

Posters are common to all cities and we take their messages in our stride; they add a background visual noise. Bohm observes cityscapes keenly and over time; 'I had to let that one mature over several weeks' she says, referring to a hoarding in a state of decay, and before deciding it was ready to photograph.

Part of the pleasure of these photos lie in the status of their subject matter as author-less collages, a kind of folk poetry of the streets. There can be a beauty in torn paper and energy represented by a tear. Paper can also be a metaphor for skin.

Female mannequins, advertisements, posters and photographic hoardings incorporating images of women have increasingly fascinated Bohm. Visually arresting, these images convey a strong sense of contemporary women constrained, even trapped by their representations.

The torn poster encapsulates the fragmentation of contemporary western life; it disorientates and yet it is visually exciting. Many of these posters include images of women, rendered more disturbing by the violence done to them by the tearing of images that comes with time and vandalism. However, the females, though fragmented, somehow retain their integrity and even their spirit; Bohm often focuses on faces and particularly on eyes.

## About the Artist

Dorothy Bohm was born in East Prussia in 1924. She was born in to a Jewish family and her father sent her to Britain in 1939, at the age of 14, for her own safety as the family was already experiencing Nazi persecution. It was to be many years before she was to be reunited with her family or even to know if they had survived the war.

During the Second World War, Bohm studied photography in Manchester; her first work was in studio photography, taking portraits. Following from this, she travelled widely and developed a large body of work with a wide range of subject matter, first in black and white and then in colour. She worked in the spirit of 'humanist' photographers (those photographers that documented human societies and individuals as a way of recording how people lived, often with a view to inspiring social change, such as photographers who visited poor and neglected communities)

Bohm took her cue from the innovative documentary photographers of the 1930's, who photographed human figures in relation to inscriptions, lettering and the paraphernalia of the street. After the war, there was a new concern with making human beings an integral part of the subject and not, as before, merely incidental. Artists often try to make something uplifting from unpromising raw materials. This poses a particular challenge to photographers, as their medium is by its nature, literal.

Bohm's tactic was to work within limits, to use a restricted range of motifs and colour palette and to make sure they connected. Bohm had a clear picture of how photography works; working within a framework, she also felt the necessity of taking a gamble, taking risks and seizing the 'right' moment in time.

The impulse to preserve a disappearing and changing world seems have influenced Bohm's long photographic journey. Although she never felt she truly 'belonged' anywhere, London became the place she lived for more than half a century. However, she has always enjoyed living in London and continues to respond to its mix of people, its sometimes dramatic juxtapositions of old and new, and to its energy and humour.

She currently lives in North London and is an important part of the London photographic community. She is instrumental in photographic initiatives, in particular as co-founder of the Photographer's Gallery in 1971, which continues to this day.

## Activities

- 'I had to let that one mature over several weeks' she says, referring to a hoarding in a state of decay, and before deciding it was ready to photograph. In your local area, photograph the same hoarding over a period of 3 weeks. At the end of that time, pick one photograph that best captures a sense of time passing, perhaps of both decay and regeneration.
- Perhaps you could use all of the photos you have taken over the three weeks and turn them into a new piece of art such as a collage or animation?
- How else might you represent time passing, and decay over a period of time?
- Consider the artist's background and life, how does her work reflect her identity? Make a list of words that describe your own background and identity and then photograph 'found' images in your local environment that somehow represent this.
- Alternatively, collect images from magazines and make a collage representing things about you. Photograph your collage and present finished work as a photograph.
- Finding art in the everyday. Dorothy Bohm 'zoomed in' on sections of the posters to create an abstract image which she then presented as an artwork, her 'finished' photograph. How could you use a zoom to find interesting images in the every day. Walk around and zoom in on things to create an image. Look at the floor, the walls, the sky. If you are at home, what about piles of washing, food, or furniture?
- Collect images of men and women from magazines and make a collage representing how both are portrayed. Photograph your collage and present finished work as a photograph.
- Paper can also be a metaphor for skin. How could you represent this idea in an artwork?