

ROYAL MAIL

Vs

McQUEEN

Jo Higgins

A very public memorial for the dead

At the time of writing a seventeenth Australian soldier has just been killed in Afghanistan. Here, in the United Kingdom, it is nearly 12 months to the day since 4000 people unofficially and spontaneously lined the streets of a small Wiltshire village to pay silent tribute to the eight British soldiers, also killed in Afghanistan, as their repatriated bodies were driven from the nearby RAF base to the morgue.

Contemporary society has never been more sophisticated, culturally or technologically, and yet in the face of 24-hour news channels, mass public outpourings of grief and protest and more than one morally tenuous war, our struggle as artists and communities to memorialise has never been more complicated - politically, socially or aesthetically.

Most academics and historians agree that the traditional public memorial – heroic, figurative, literal, definitive – was made all but obsolete by the crisis of representation that followed the Holocaust and Second World War. And yet our need as communities and individuals to remember remains unwavering and so the public monument, in both form and philosophy, has evolved accordingly since, though haltingly and not without contest. Aesthetically, contemporary forms of memorials are increasingly abstract or conceptual in form - deliberately avoiding an aesthetic literalism that might otherwise offer a convenient – and resolved - moral or historical lesson. Above all else these new forms of public memorial tend to require some level of viewer participation, physically or intellectually, to realise the work's meaning. One of the earliest examples of this style of counter-monument is Maya Lin's iconic Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. but it is arguably Turner Prize-winning artist Steve McQueen's recent work *Queen and Country* (2003-2010) that overwhelmingly embodies the complexities and possibilities for memorial-making and public art today.

Appointed as an official war artist in 2003 by the Imperial War Museum in London, McQueen was sent to Iraq and his resultant work is a complex, profoundly moving meditation on war, sacrifice, memory and the individual as both mourned

and mourner. Despite being a work that can only be seen within a gallery environment, *Queen and Country* is still very much a work of public art by virtue of its subject and its intent. And in identifying participation, process, catharsis, accountability and reflection as the work's true form, above and beyond its material existence, McQueen has created a universal and timeless meditation on sacrifice.

In its literal form *Queen and Country* is a large wooden cabinet with over 150 slim, vertical, double-sided archive drawers that can be pulled out individually or simultaneously to create an intimate booth-like space. Each drawer contains a large facsimile sheet of 168 stamps, each sheet bearing the face of a different British soldier killed in Iraq, their name, rank and date of death stamped at the bottom. These photographs, a mix of official regimental portraits and relaxed home photographs, were chosen by the soldier's next of kin and as more random drawers are pulled out two things become apparent. The first is the realisation that each sheet bears the face of an individual and the second, that they are ordered in the cabinets not by rank but by date of death. Sad but not strident, the overwhelming urge is then is of a responsibility to pull out every drawer and acknowledge each individual loss.

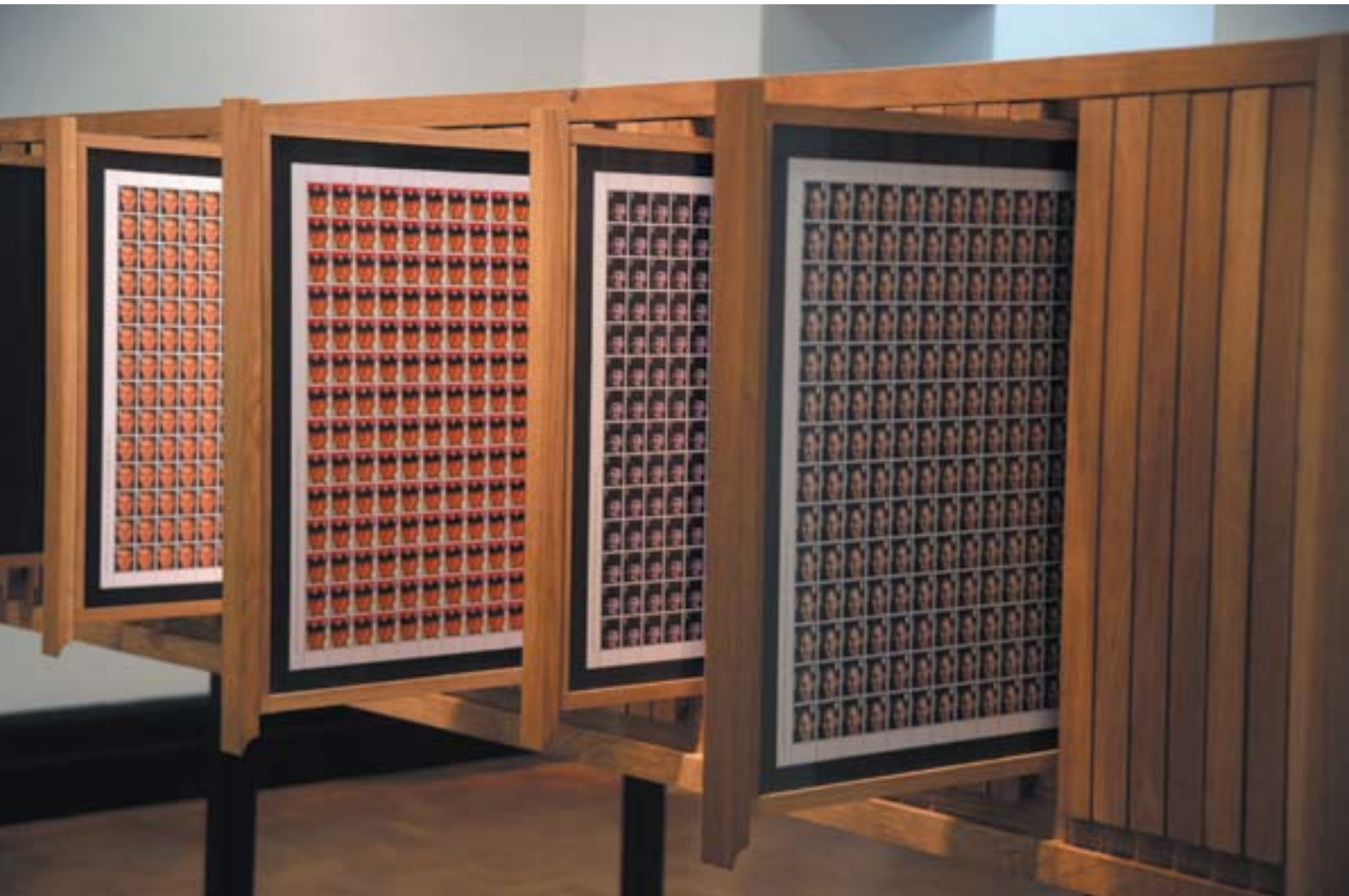
It is a powerful and profoundly moving experience; however these archive drawers are not the work. Says McQueen, 'My intention originally was not to make this artwork [the cabinet]. The idea of the artwork was always to have the stamps in circulation throughout the UK, so that people could go to the post office and be involved, to pick up an envelope with the stamp on it, to meditate and reflect on the sacrifice – not to just have something gathering dust in a museum.' The work, according to McQueen, will not be finished until the stamps are in circulation and as the work has toured the UK there has been a campaign lobbying Royal Mail to issue them. While the campaign is no longer actively being pursued by the Art Fund, the charity that purchased the work for the Imperial War Museum, over 26,000 signatures have already been collected and there is hope that the campaign will be taken up again in the future.

OPPOSITE: Steve McQueen *Queen and Country* (detail) 2003/- Lance Corporal Benjamin Hyde, Royal Military Police, Died 24 June 2003, aged 23.

LANCE CORPORAL BENJAMIN HYDE ADJUTANT GENERAL'S CORPS (ROYAL MILITARY POLICE) DIED 28 JUNE 2003 AGED 23



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Says McQueen, 'This is all about remembering and acknowledgement. The whole idea was to make a statement that everyone could participate in.' What makes McQueen's work so extraordinary is that this envisioned participation is so unwitting, and that this statement is neither pro nor anti-war. It is simply about the importance of acknowledging these individual sacrifices, made in the name of the country – and the community. With the stamps in circulation these mini-memorials would be encountered sending postcards, receiving bills, writing letters. Finding their way into the daily fabric of everyday life, these small, personal entreaties to actively remember would inadvertently make every member of society an active part of the remembrance process and ensure that there was no opportunity for these lost lives to be forgotten, even if we feel their deaths were in vain.

Queen and Country in its realised form would be the ultimate work of public art. In seeking to engage the public in such a complex and dynamic manner, and in eschewing the need for a bombastic spectacle or outrageous political statement about war, McQueen's work speaks very much of its moment of creation. It is a moment of moral and political uncertainty but it is also increasingly a moment defined by a desire to build connections, to communicate, to understand and as ever, to remember. ■

<http://www.artfund.org/queenandcountry/index.php>

Jo Higgins is former Editor of the Dictionary of Australian Artists Online and a freelance arts writer based in London.



TOP: Steve McQueen *Queen and Country* cabinet, National Portrait Gallery installation 2010. **ABOVE:** Steve McQueen *Queen and Country* (detail) 2003/- Lance Corporal Allan Douglas, *The Highlanders, Died 30 January 2006, Aged 22.* **BELOW:** Steve McQueen. Photo: David Parry, PA.

