

Stellmach's dramatic impact

IN 2008, Australian artist Natascha Stellmach installed a joint in a commercial Berlin gallery, containing cannabis and the alleged ashes of Kurt Cobain.

An international call was sent out – via press release – inviting six volunteers to join her in smoking the ashes of the dead rock star, in a private, undocumented ritual, to explore commemoration and attachment.

Stellmach held no interviews and instead her press release to 200 selected journalists ignited a media-hype that spread across 58 countries, creating furor, public outrage and admiration, especially online.

Websites, blogs and chat-rooms erupted with the news and threats were sent.

If the smoking of the ashes was the final act, then *Complete Burning Away*, Stellmach's dramatic exhibition, is the epilogue.

The project boldly interrogates the public ownership of celebrities and critiques the role of the artist, the media and contemporary art in society.

More than that, this exhibition is a reflection on suicide and tragedy and the artist's chosen means to pay her respects.

The site-specific installation at the La Trobe University Visual Arts Centre, Bendigo includes six of the 10 works in the project and includes videos, painted walls and objects.

Painted across the five-metre high foyer walls is *Whatever Happened to Painting?* an installation of outrageous quotes questioning the ethics and merits of Stellmach's project in relation to art: red for angry, yellow for supportive and blue for quizzical.

Among this text a battered left-handed 1980s Stratocaster style guitar, *Commodity*, is suspended sacredly from the ceiling, to emphasize the absurd nature of dead celebrity auction rankings and the associated commerce.

One two-wall video installation, *Scream*, offers an intense sonic requiem where the aforementioned guitar howls as it is punched and smashed against

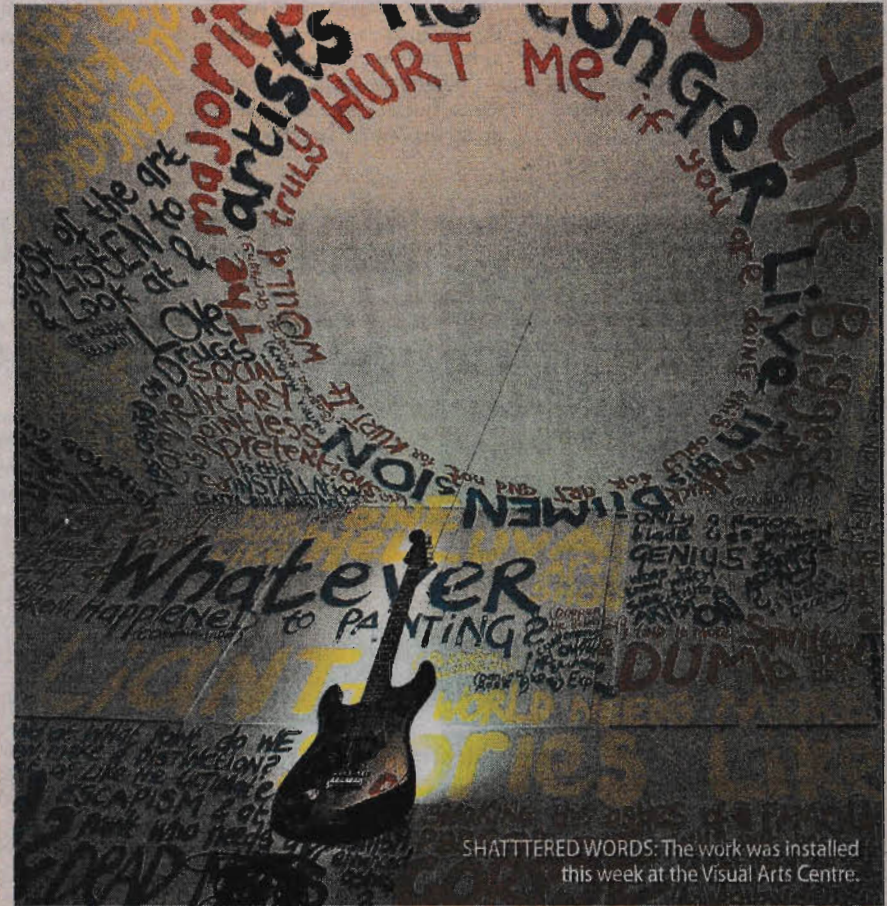
a wall by a shadowy figure until it 'dies', while another, *Who will smoke the ashes of Kurt Cobain?* is an intimate play of monologues by six volunteers from Russia to Sweden who answered the call to smoke the ashes.

They share their candid thoughts on suicide, death and commemoration and gradually the conversations overlap causing a Brechtian sense of rupture; reminding the viewer of the part they play. A small silver case, *Gone* sits reverentially in a spot-lit perspex vitrine and is on display without the infamous joint.

Complete Burning Away (the ashes of Kurt Cobain).

Australian artist Natascha Stellmach lives in Melbourne and Berlin and works with image and text, across a range of media including installation and *Happening*.

Gallery hours are Tuesday to Friday 10am to 5pm, weekends noon to 5pm and this installation runs until October 20.



SHATTERED WORDS: The work was installed this week at the Visual Arts Centre.

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