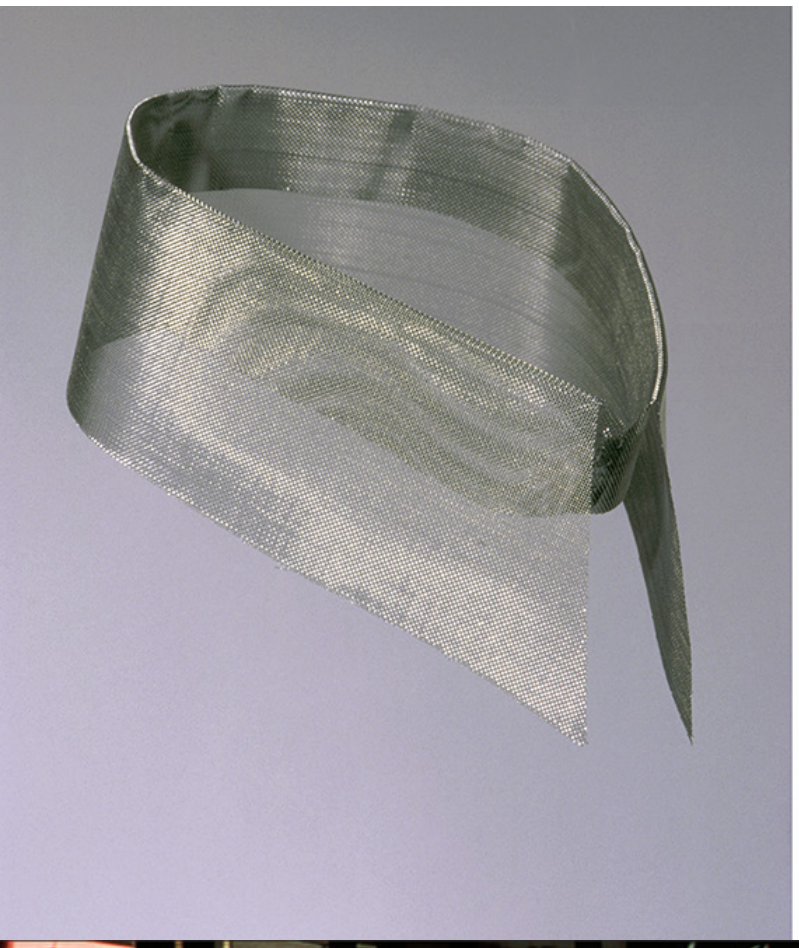
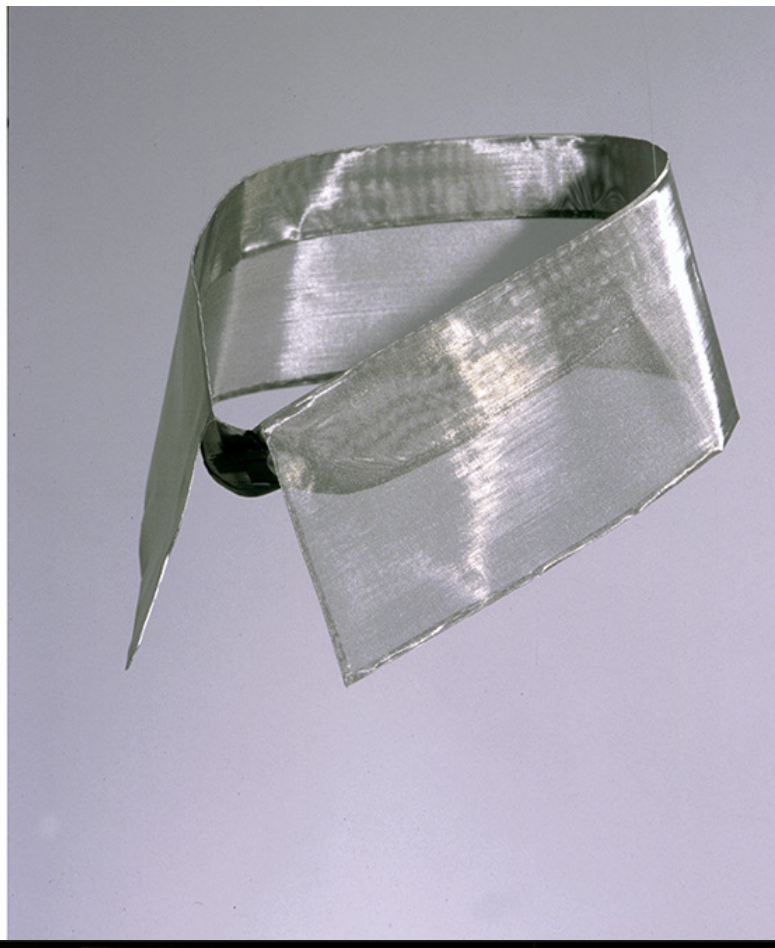
Deborah Crowe **collared**

Fingers Contemporary Jewellery, Kitchener St, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, 1999





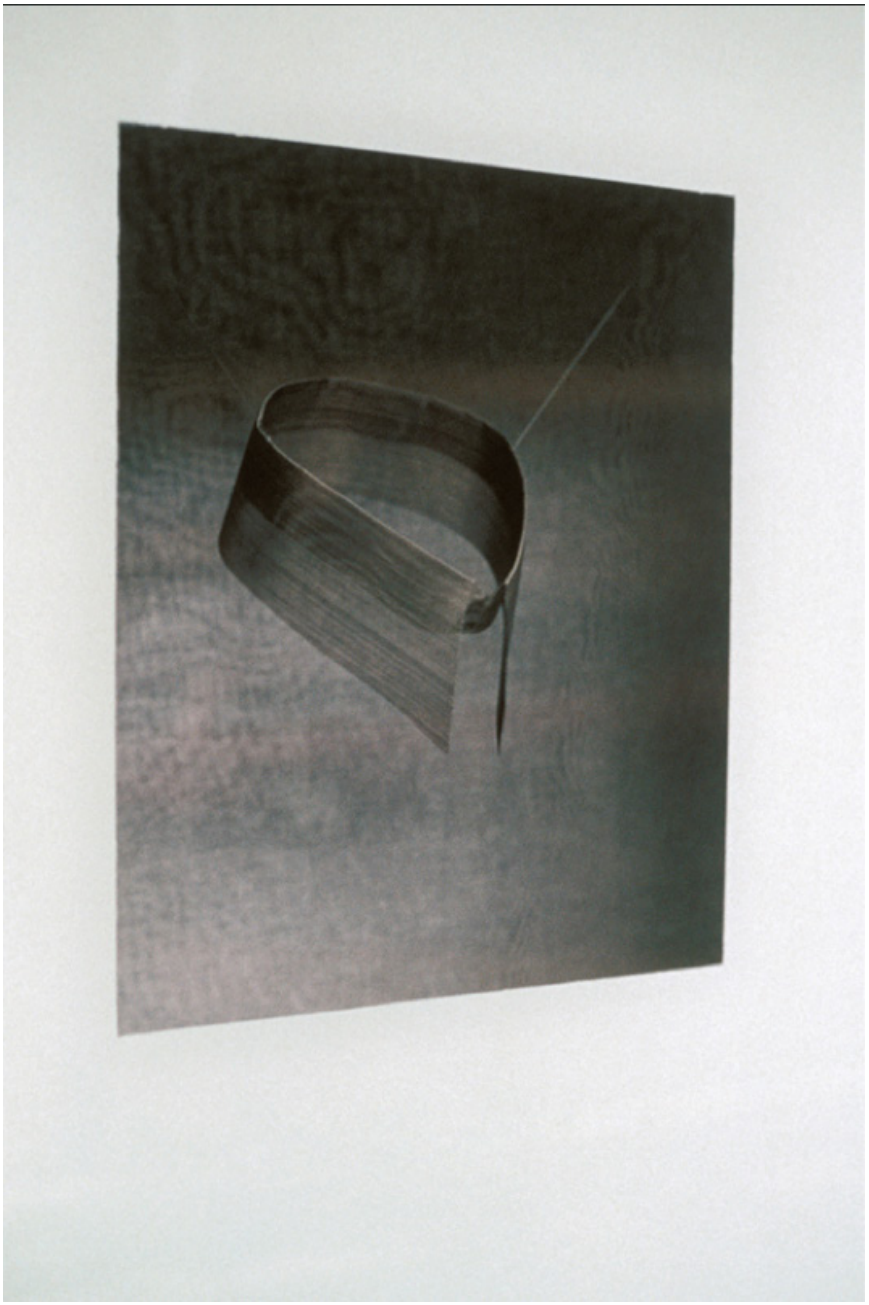
Deborah Crowe's work appears to have an identity crisis. Her present exhibition, collared, at fingers in Auckland, consists of fifteen objects which look like collars, but could be necklaces, or then again clothing accessories. The clothing references might make them fashion, if it were not for the fact that these collar look-alikes are not attached to shirts, in which case they potentially fall into the category of jewellery. The consummate understanding of materials displayed by Crowe, the immaculate weaving of wire and nylon and folding of delicate metal mesh, could make some see them as craft in the generic sense, but for the fact that they don't need to be used to be effective. That is, they are as at home hanging as objects in space as they are on a neck, which makes me want to call them art.

Crowe presents a new twist to an old argument about identity in the visual arts that has been philosophised in various ideological forms since antiquity. Marcia Tucker, among others, has shown how the issues that Crowe talks about are not limited to art[i]. Identity it seems has always been a contentious and politicised site, to the extent that Judith Williamson has suggested that we are all in a perpetual identity crisis[ii]. While her thesis focuses on how advertising positions itself between who we are and what we would like to be, her hypothesis is important for anybody concerned with the machinations of contemporary culture.

Crowe's strategy is to make work of miscellaneous identity. She aims to present objects which are not this or that, but maybe this and that, which exist in the difference between one and the other. It is then an art of strategic resistance, from which she entreats questions about the categories by which we organise our identities, or which, as Williamson, Tucker et al would argue, are organised for us. The relationship between art and fashion is very much a battle ground which is one of the trends in visual arts at the moment. This is testified to by the number of designers being sued by artists at present for breaches of copyright [iii]. Also, artists such as Sylvie Fleury and Richard Prince have returned the compliment and gazed into fashion from within the contemporary critical fashions of art and its scrutinising of popular culture. Their tendency though is to remain aloof from the utilitarianism of fashion, as they make it a subject of art. Crowe's objects analyse fashion with a similar critical eye. Her collars-come-necklaces-come-sculptures suggest that fashion is not so much about establishing an identity for oneself by engaging in the fashionable, as making yourself a victim of it. Crowe provides a literal consequence - as many of her 'garments' will chafe and or have potential to make the wearer bleed. However, unlike Fleury and co, and more in the manner of Viktor and Rolf, Crowe positions herself in the slippage between fashion and art [iv]. Hers is an identity posited in the discursive tension between each. Crowe's complex metaphorical references, and her concern about the body in absence are in coincidence with many of Caroline Broadhead's ideas, although the latter approaches the convergence from a career in jewellery. However, while Broadhead produces objects which are either utilitarian or not, Crowe conflates the functional with the useless in the same pieces, even if some of her objects are at times deigned to be uncomfortable.

In the creative hierarchy utilitarian objects are perceived as having less 'art value' than the useless, as are objects that are made for the specific purpose of making money, as opposed to making 'Art'. In all this, the points are ignored that the phrase 'art gallery' is often a euphemism for 'art shop' and that being an artist is very much a business activity. Crowe disputes the notion that art, unlike fashion, is immune to market forces, and as such she has no great problem with her objects being bought and sold. She is also aware of the particular importance of display in determining how an object is perceived in the mercantile environment of art. Daniel Buren has extrapolated on the issues of context in relation to the business of art in three very important essays on the studio, the museum, and the exhibition [v]. For Crowe fingers is the ideal location to show work that represents these ideas. Somewhat symbolically it sits between the high art environment of the Auckland City Art Gallery and the high fashion houses of Auckland's fashionable High Street. More particularly it seems to share the identity crisis of Crowe's objects. It is itself unsure if it is a shop that sells jewellery, or a gallery that sells art. Crowe's installation plays on these references. It includes a street-front window display where seven of her highly crafted objects are suspended within a refined white frame in the manner of both a museum and an expensive store. It is up to the viewer to decide on the identity of what they are looking at - whether it be a museological exhibition of precious art, or a retail display of expensive designer objects.

Mark Kirby



i
See Marcia Tucker's introduction to 'Mechanisms of Exclusion and Relation: Identity'. From Tucker et al (eds), Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1990, p91. This is an interesting section that includes interviews with Said and Derrida, among others.

ii
Judith Williamson explains this using Jacques Lacan's hypothesis about the mirror phase, which is the point at which a child realises their existence as an individual separate from those around them. From this experience, according to Williamson's interpretation of Lacan, the child perceives itself inadequate in comparison with its parental or sibling role models. Hence a perpetual life long identity crisis emerges as the child attempts to represent itself in the forms of the role models presented to it. This is what, Williamson argues, advertising conspires to exploit. Judith Williamson, Decoding Advertisments, Marion Boyars, Londoin, 1978, pp. 61.

iii
The Art Newspaper, No 70, May 1997, p7, provides the examples of-Calvin Klien incorporating some Donald Judd's furniture in an advertisement; Hugo Boss using images by Mathew Barney, Gianni Versace using images by Philip Taafe and Georgio Armani being sued by Anish Kapoor.

iv
For a discussion of Viktor and Rolf see Richard Martin, 'A Note: Art & Fashion, Viktor & Rolf', Fashion Theory, Volume 3, Issue 1, pp. 109-120. Martin describes Viktor and Rolf as '… brilliant Dutch conceptualists, [who] have always tried to put fashion and art back together', pp. 109.

v
'The Function of the Museum' , Artforum, December, 1973; 'Function of an Exhibition', Studio International, December 1973; & 'The Function of the Studio', October, The First Decade, 1976-1986, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1987.