

Eight Years Out

Once upon a time in the now halcyon summer of 2001, a half dozen young women baring lithe, toned, stomachs sashayed across a gazillion TV screens. Set against a background of Manhattan's downtown streets, the women's cropped tops and super-low-rise jeans framed belly buttons which, thanks to clever digital manipulation, appeared to sing Donna Summer's pop anthem "I'm Coming Out" – with intention.

Flash cut.

Prior to September 11th of that year, if one looked at the World Trade Center – whether up close, from a distance, or in a mass mediated encounter – those gigantic buildings appeared as a kind of architectural special effects. Unacceptable to us as actualities, we constructed images of them outside the realm of everyday life. This was how we protected ourselves from their overwhelming scale and, by extension, their monstrous implications. A hundred and eighty degrees out from Levi's lip-synching navels, these tower creatures were simply too scary to be true.

Hence part of our psyches continued to defend us that morning – and still does today – by projecting their destruction as the climax of an already running film. Certainly it had always been difficult to imagine that every workday, fifty thousand flesh and blood people inhabited these vast abstract sculptures. Though it might appear as if the towers stood tranquilly one moment, were set alight by planes the next and disintegrated soon afterward, clearly this was not possible since they had never been "real" to begin with.

Now, eight years out, as the 9/11 moment continues to ramify in evermore nightmarish ways, some part of us remains rooted before the TV waiting for the commercial to end, for the corporate logo to fade up and out.

Once upon a screen – myriad screens – a bevy of triumphant navels chorused: "I'm coming... I'm coming out. I want the world to know. I'm going to let it show..." It took concrete experience, thousands of tons of it, to show us once again that the margin between what we see, or think we see, and that which we come to know bone deep, is a permeable thing indeed. On one side the navels of summer, on the other, fall's harrowed ground. And both of them not just once, but twice real.