**Truth in Advertising**  
A photograph of a man dying of AIDS, taken by a VisCom graduate student, is part of a controversial series of clothing advertisements. Its use in this context has raised serious questions of ethics and propriety for journalists and advertisers alike.

by Mike Woolson for *Keeping Touch*

When David Kirby agreed in 1990 to let himself be photographed in the final stages of AIDS, he set down one condition: that the images be used to communicate, not to generate profit. Whether or not that condition is being met is just one of many serious questions raised by Benetton's summer advertising campaign.

The controversial series of ads by the Italian clothing manufacturer features photojournalistic images from around the world. At the center of the controversy is a photograph of Kirby, surrounded by crying family members, taken at the moment of his death. Some AIDS activists and magazine publishers have condemned the image's use in an ad, saying it exploits human suffering and is offensive. Others have praised Benetton for exposing themselves to such criticism in order to raise public awareness of social problems.

The photograph was taken in May 1990 as part of a class project by Therese Frare, a photojournalist who was working on a master's degree in the School of Visual Communication. She was interested in doing a project on AIDS, she said, and began by doing volunteer work at Pater Noster House, a hospice for AIDS patients in Columbus. Although officials at the house initially told Frare they did not want pictures taken at the house, they eventually began to let local media in and gave Frare permission to shoot as well. She became acquainted with Kirby, and took photos of him and his family on several occasions.

When it became clear that Kirby's death was imminent, his mother asked Frare to photograph the family saying their final goodbyes. She stood in the corner, she said, "and took a few frames. It doesn't seem like I was really there for that long. He stopped breathing, and his father was embracing him and started sobbing over him. This moment happened, and I photographed it."

The image was run as a two-page spread in LIFE magazine that fall. It went on to win second place in the general news category of the World Press Association's annual competition. Frare gave the money she received to the Kirbys, who in turn gave it to the Pater Noster House. Some time after that, she and the Kirbys were approached by Benetton about using the image in their campaign.

Frare said she agreed because she didn't see the image's use as advertising per se, but as "an opportunity for this image to be seen by lots of people who had never seen it before. If it sells sweaters," she added, "that's sec-ondary. It's hard to imagine that it could or that it would."

Benetton officials, for their part, claim that they are more concerned with raising consciousness than raising sales. Creative Director Oliviero Toscani, who put the campaign together, said that while it is common for advertisers to use emotion to sell a product, "we are not selling a product. We want to show, in this case, human realities that we are aware of."

The manner in which these realities are presented, however, is as much style as substance. The images are presented with no text except for the Benetton logo and an agate-type block with a toll-free number to call for their latest catalog. While the AIDS image is fairly self-explanatory, others— such as a swarm of refugees attempting to board a ship, a man with an automatic rifle holding a human leg bone, and a car burning in the street— are not.

Toscani told *Interview* magazine that the lack of textual support enables viewers to see the images from many points of view, facilitating debate over the issues. While the relative merits of that approach are debatable, it cannot be denied that leaving questions unanswered ensures that the images— and the Benetton logo— will stay in reader's minds for a longer time. Decontextualizing the images also tends to free them from the tethers of reality, making it easier for someone not wishing to confront that reality to dismiss it.

The current campaign is only the most recent in a long line of controversial (and often award-winning) Benetton ads. A 1989 ad showing a black woman nursing a white baby, which Benetton's press kit said was meant to show "that equality goes beyond knee-jerk perceptions," was seen by many to evoke slavery. A 1991 ad showing a priest and nun kissing was condemned by the Vatican. Another image from the 1991 campaign, of a newborn baby covered in afterbirth, drew so much criticism that it was removed from billboards in Britain.

The current campaign already was drawing fire prior to its unveiling. Britain’s Advertising Standards Association issued an advisory to magazine publishers not to run several of the images, and many throughout Europe complied. The British tabloid press centered its attacks on Frare's photograph, calling it exploitive and claiming that the image, which was colorized from a black-and-white original, had been altered to make Kirby look like Jesus.

Frare said she gave the money she received from Benetton to the Kirbys, who who in turn donated it to Pater Noster House. She added that Benetton also has donated toward a new AIDS hospice the Kirbys are opening. Claims that Kirby was somehow altered to look like Jesus were dismissed by Frare as "absurd, because he looks as much like Jesus in the black-and-white image." Toscani maintained that the colorization "brings out a more contemporary aspect of the image, but it doesn't alter the reality of the people in the photograph."

Negative publicity, however, is still publicity. The campaign has generated extensive media coverage and use of the advertisements as story illustrations has been common (as shown with this article). The *Akron Beacon Journal*, for example, ran three of the ads in color across a section front as part of a story on the controversy.

The segment of the population which has condemned the campaign is not, by and large, Benetton's target market. The company's press kit proudly states that the recent distribution of condoms in Benetton stores "was met with general disapproval from older adults and enthusiastic approval from younger customers" [emphasis added]. The controversies surrounding the previous campaigns have had no apparent negative effect on sales, which have risen an estimated forty percent in the last two years.

Is Benetton co-opting the media, and the public, in a self-serving attempt to sell political edginess to the young and hip? Repeated calls to Benetton's New York office yielded no response, and written questions were unanswered as well.

It cannot be denied that the campaign has sparked productive debate, and served as a rallying point for many gay men. Frare noted that Kirby's father has received mail from several gay men who were impressed with the simple fact that he is touching his son, something they say their own fathers won't do. Thus, while the Benetton campaign may be no less exploitive than most other advertising these days, perhaps it offers the cold comfort of being exploitive in a more positive direction. ■