

The Billboard Liberators

The Billboard Liberation Front (B.L.F.) always seems to attract inquiries as to our motivations; how we see our place (if any) in relation to various art “movements”; why we “hate” and want to attack advertisers and corporations.

Firstly, our little group has had well over two hundred people involved since its inception. Every single one of them is an individual with very individual beliefs, opinions and politics. Motivations in this ongoing parade of lunatics, anarchists and Republicans are typically in the direction of the refrigerator and the next can o’ beer. Specific billboard improvements are generally chosen contingent upon caprice and serendipity. Of course, it’s also necessary for the idea person to coerce, cajole, plead, threaten and do whatever else it takes to motivate the rest of us to tear ourselves away from our favorite computer games and TV shows long enough to plan and execute a successful “hit.”

Secondly we are not part of a movement unless it be as Blank DeCoverly so evocatively put it: “that most truly democratic of all human fellowships: The Bowel Movement.” We are certainly aware of many of the fine artistic cabals of this Century. My associates doubtlessly hold a variety of opinions about these groups and the many individuals that comprised them.

I can only speak for myself: I have been personally impressed and influenced by the fine marksmanship (and plays) of Alfred Jarry, the stout pugilism (and drawings) of George Grosz, the heroic drinking (and stories) of Charles Bukowski, the impressive sex life (and stories) of Henry Miller, the world wide gallivanting (and photos) of Margaret Bourke-White.

Altering billboards is an activity requiring total engagement of the senses. You are doing something NOW. It’s dangerous, exhilarating, a little stupid and entirely alive. It’s a PRANK, it’s a joke; you can thumb your nose at the wonderful institutions that control us. You are completely alive when you’re at it. However, as a politically revolutionary concept (in the sense of making the world a more fair or livable place for the most people) altering ad messages is not important in the least. If “billboard banditry” actually challenged the corporations control over their markets (\$) they would track down each and every one of us and kill us like dogs. A really good improved board might get a few people laughing at Exxon or R.J. Reynolds or the Government but we will continue to pay our taxes, drink Coke and watch *Survivor*.

Art? I don’t think so. Only an idiot

could think any of our work is art. Our friend and associate, the prolific billboard hacker, Ron English is an ARTIST: a talented painter who discovered a clever way to display his work when the commodity exchanges that are galleries refused to show him. There are a few other serious artists that do billboards but for the most part billboard “artists” are pranksters.

Thirdly I would like to once and for all clarify the BLF stance on our corporate benefactors and clients. Almost all of the active members of the BLF and many of the past members are employed by or contract with large corporations. Show me an American who will give up toilet paper for the rest of his/her life in order to save the life of an unseen/unknown infant in Mozambique or to stop the clear cutting of a virgin forest and I’ll show you either a saint or an idealistic middle/upper middle class white kid who will renege on the deal before they turn thirty. Corporations and the attendant commodification of everything are a fact of life (unless you’re hypersensitive to a fault and rich enough to isolate yourself from the daily commercial grind). Until the emerging corporate oligarchy that has replaced monarchies, nationalist based imperialism and state sponsored socialism is in turn replaced by a new (hopefully not worse) form of collective bondage of the human mind and spirit, it’s the only game in town.

For an individual or small group to pose any real threat to this dominant form of Control is to ask to be destroyed. You can make fun of them as long as you don’t threaten their money. Keeping your individual spirit and sense of humor despite this overwhelming oppression is about the best thing you can hope for. Sharing this humor with others is a prank and, short of actually helping people less fortunate than you or uplifting the human spirit through the creation of genuine art, pranking is humanity’s highest calling.

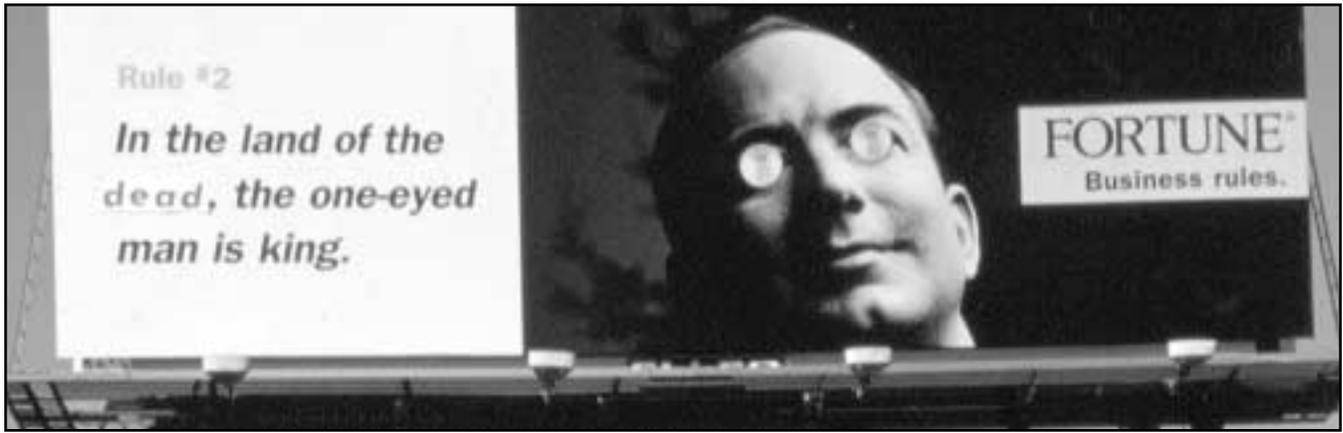
We at the BLF say: ***Prank Em.***

The Invoice is in the Mail!

The service we at the BLF have provided for advertisers and their clients is one that we can no longer allow to go undervalued. The logic of advertising dictates that any product placement or trademark exposure whatsoever (whether positively or negatively defining the product) actually results in moving more product units. This concept, still a radical one for the average citizen, has been a well-known fact to the marketing professional for years. Plymouth Neon ads a few years back made this clear by using the “look” of graffiti over their billboards.



Billboard Liberation Front publicity still



Billboard Liberation Front

At the BLF we realize that no matter how our work is perceived or judged by any observers based on aesthetic, political or social considerations, the fact is that anytime we improve a billboard it brings more attention to the original product campaign and by consequence sells more of that product. The language of advertising has taken its place as the language of our culture, trivializing and/or supplanting our previous modes of communication through language. America's Best Home Video's, Cops, Jerrysallygeraldopra Springer and all the other TV ad placement formats have carried out Andy Warhol's proclamation that everyone would be famous for 15 minutes. All that's left now is that everyone must advertise. We at the BLF are trying to stay a bit ahead of this emerging trend by actually charging for our ads. We've begun back charging and invoicing our corporate clients, Apple, R.J. Reynolds, etc. for improving their existing ads. It's obvious that advertising is the only way to enter the new millennium. If you can't sell yourself what can you sell?

—Jack Napier

Brief History of the BLF

Irving Glikk and I planned the first improvement campaign for "Fact" cigarettes. We made nine paste ups and installed six on boards all around San Francisco on Christmas day 1977. We were nearly apprehended on the



California Department of Corrections

sixth board (on the corner of Mission & Army Sts. Our associates on this first project were Steve Johnson (not a real name), Cecily Joland, Igor Pflicht and Robert C_____.

Simon Wagstaff, a friend who worked in journalism, became our press agent and introduced me to the much larger possibilities of communicating our advertising efforts through the media.

Arnold Fleck, Walid Rasheed, Mimi Bathory and others signed on for billboard work through about 1981. After the Marlboro campaign these three formed the splinter group: "Billboard Movement" (BM).

We went into semi-retirement in the mid-eighties returning in 1989 to help Exxon Corporation with a little copywriting.

Walid Rasheed rejoined in 1990 and initiated the "America" board that graced the cover of the S.F. Bay Guardian (after we kidnapped the editor, Tim Redmond at gunpoint and got him really drunk).

Harry Tuttle, Weaso, Dogboy, Ethyll Ketone, L.L. Fautleroy, Mabel Longhetti, Jason Voorhees, John Thomas, Sarah Conner, Timothy Liddy and others joined up in the early 90's as we launched campaigns supporting Plymouth, Zenith, R.J. Reynolds, Exxon and other fine corporate benefactors.

In 1994 Blank Decoverly signed on as Minister of Propaganda vastly improving our media outreach. He expanded and improved our policy of maximum saturation for minimum effort. The actual BLF output (never very great by the standards of say, Ron English) has always seemed much more substantial due to our successful media efforts. From our very first "hit" we have often done extensive outreach (press releases, phone calls to reporters, coercion, promises, threats) in order to maximize the visibility and impact of our work. From the Plymouth Neon hit in 1994 on, Blank has seen to it that we get way more attention than we deserve!

Conrad Hoc signed on in 1998 as our Web Master. His efforts in further publicizing our work on the net began with the relatively new concept of e-releases, immediately exposing our most recent work. Conrad's work culminated in our handsome and much visited web site:

< billboardliberation.com >.

A new generation of climbers and copywriters has helped us to maintain public visibility into the new millennium. Self-styled BLF "webslave" Erich Weiss has taken over the bulk of webmaster Conrad Hoc's work. Climbers C.J. DeSoda, Salty Dog and Dick the Dark Lord have stepped in quite effectively in the field installation department. There are dozens of others who have helped us over the years. Most of them are noted in the "Personnel" section of our website.



Billboard Liberation Front

Joe Camel Never Saw What Hit Him!

Some BLF hits actually involved a lot of planning, technically involved installation and comprehensive security. The Joe Camel board done in 1995 is a good example of our work taken to its most extreme level of involvement.

This operation took place during the middle of a weekday on a large board hanging above a donut shop parking lot alongside a well-traveled industrial highway. There were two on the board: B.L.F. tech expert Winslow Leech, and myself. L.L. Fauntleroy had radio position one, with a view of several hundred yards to the north and south. Sarah Conner was along the freeway to the west and John Thomas (dressed as a bum with his radio in a brown paper bag) was high up on a pedestrian overpass commanding a view all around.

The board was composed of a large set of self-contained neon letters reading: "CAMEL" and "Genuine Taste"; a fifteen by fifteen foot light box, back lit with fluorescent lamps, with a stretched, translucent canvas face with Joe Camel's leering visage displayed; a blue white neon border and a faux brick painted background. Winslow and I backed our van up to the board, lay a ladder onto the lower board ladder and proceeded to hump our supplies and tools up onto the platform above. To the entirely oblivious general

public (including the S.F. cop that stopped for a donut and parked briefly below us) we were exactly what we looked like: a sign crew in the middle of a commercial job.

In order to improve this Camel board we first simply turned off the disconnect switches on the letters "C" & "E" and the words: "Genuine Taste". We placed an opaque covering over the seraphed lower stem of the letter "L" making it into an "I". We opened the electrical panel on the back of the board and wired in a UL, NECA approved GFI electrical outlet. This electrical installation (a four hundred-dollar value!) was a permanent and legal improvement, allowing anyone coming after us to simply plug in any power tools they might require or perhaps a radio (to make the days work more pleasant). We used the new receptacle to plug in the two self-contained fifteen thousand-volt neon transformers we brought along in order to power the two new neon embellishments we had prepared for old Joe Camel. Once the wiring was done, we installed the new neon. The lettering: "Dead Yet?" was carefully tied onto the existing letters, "Genuine Taste". We hauled up the six-foot diameter red neon skull on a clear lexan (plastic) sheet. We tied off the skull directly over Joe's smiling face.

We were in touch with our security team by radio the entire time. At

one point they had us ditch while they checked out a fellow in a van who seemed to be taking an interest in our work. It was a false alarm.

The installation was well documented; there were two journalists on the ground photographing (Nicole Rosenthal) and taking notes (Brad Wieners). We had made a deal with them. They set up on a traffic island squarely in the middle of a busy street about two hundred feet away. Half way between them and the board was an attractive, scantily clad model posing up a storm. To any passer-by, they quite obviously were in the middle of a fashion photo shoot using an industrial cityscape as their backdrop, a sight not at all uncommon in San Francisco. Only the most Sherlockian of citizens might notice the camera was aimed just slightly above the model and to the left.

Our work finally finished, Winslow and I deposited a twelve pack of good beer and a note carefully detailing for the sign men how to completely restore the board to its original configuration. San Francisco, being such a small town, we eventually ran into a friend of a friend who knew one of the billboard company workers. The worker salvaged the neon skull for his garage, kept the note and (we assume) drank the beer.

—J.N.