

# Intelligent Billboards

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the write/here project is an example to us all of what can happen when ambition, determination and the kernel of a potentially great idea is given free rein. Like works by Christo, James Turrell, Janet Cardiff, Mary Miss or Michael Landy, many years of planning can go into an art project with no guarantee of success and certainly no guarantee of any financial return. Why do we, as artists and designers, take on such big and complex projects? Probably because for most of us in the creative arts making money is not the main driving force in our lives. Quite the opposite. We are motivated by curiosity, by asking the question 'What if...?', by our love of 'the spectacle', and by a subversive, undercutting of contemporary values with which we are not in tune. I would like to salute the work (although I won't, as I hate the idea of saluting anything) of Justy Phillips and James Newitt and how they have linked graphic design with fine art and made a double link with local community politics and the organisational structures of globalisation. I will try and place their work within an international context. At millennium's end I found myself on a round-the-world lecture tour, talking about my notion of 'Superfictions' and searching out new practitioners of that art. I flew in to Boston from London, exhausted after weeks on the road. It was Thanksgiving Day when I arrived, everything was closed, and both my credit cards stubbornly refused to work. Just when I thought things couldn't get any worse, they did. I was due to give a lecture two days later at America's largest and newest arts centre, MASS MoCA, in Massachusetts. All my not-too-carefully-read correspondence about this visit had led me to believe that this arts centre, with its eighteen galleries<sup>1</sup>, was located just outside Boston. A visit to the central terminus set me straight. I would need to catch three separate buses, and the entire journey would last just over five hours, taking me up close to the borders of Vermont and Canada.

Winter was howling in, and the further away we got from Boston the heavier the snow fell. I kept telling myself that three days later I would be in California, more lectures at CALARTS, but hopefully sunshine instead of the grey rain and sleet that had filled my last few weeks. For the moment, I was staring out of a frosty window at a desolate landscape that was seven parts Peter Booth and three parts *Twin Peaks*. As I looked, and wondered, the first of the giant billboards appeared – not on the roadside but angled in the middle of a field. It was unmistakably by Barbara Kruger. Odd, I thought. A few miles further on, and a different billboard materialised on the crest of a hill. It was in the signature style of Lawrence Weiner – a pithy anti-nuclear statement. The next one was, I think, by the Dutch collective Seymour Likely whose own *Superfictions* include film posters in which all three members of the group take on starring roles. I was beginning to cheer up. The horrors of turkey-throttling weekend were behind me, and I was re-entering the world of weird art. A Joseph Kosuth billboard – all dictionary definitions and grainy black and white images of chairs, or brooms, I can't recall – drew my curiosity out like a marlin on the end of a rod and line. The final part of my journey was completed by car, between Williamstown and North Adams. The young curator who picked me up sketched in the background to this astonishing place and its plethora of billboards-as-artworks.

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When I did finally reach it, the largest of these galleries was showing Robert Rauschenberg's *The ¼ Mile or 2 Furlong Piece* along the four walls of this space – the biggest single gallery space in America without supporting pillars. For an idea of just how big it is see the June/July 2007 issue of *Art in America*, p 65 lower image.

Briefly, it went something like this. The art collection at the nearby Clark Art Institute, part of Williams College where my third bus had set me down, was one of the

finest in America, including work by artists as varied as Raphael, Botticelli, and the Impressionists. Its endowment was in excess of half a billion dollars. The founder of the Clark Art Institute inherited the Singer sewing machine fortune and used it to build a world-class art collection. He originally thought of building his museum in New York, but just as he pondered suitable sites the atom bomb was dropped on Japan. Then, presumably in a cold sweat, he calculated the distance his museum would need to be from large metropolitan centres to survive a nuclear attack – and his place of choice was Williamstown, Massachusetts – three hours by fast car from Boston, New York and nearby Canada – possibly the most remote spot in North America.

In 1985, the director of Williams College Museum of Art was one Thomas Krens. Krens was actively looking for a big space, within the county, to exhibit large works of contemporary art that would not fit inside conventional museum spaces. And so it was that the vast Marshall Street complex in North Adams became MASS MoCA. The billboards I sped past on my journey to MASS MoCA were all recreations of ones made in the sixties and seventies by a range of international artists. What had started as a subversive statement, without any proper funding, had now entered the world of the museum. Later that day I was shown around the many galleries that make up this complex and discovered that several of these billboards had been permanently installed within the space.<sup>2</sup> So billboards as art are not a new phenomenon. They have been used as such for almost half a century and in many ways they are no longer revolutionary – they have become objects of sponsorship. However, as Phillips and Newitt have shown with what they have achieved in Hobart, new ideas and connections can be explored through them. Oil paint and canvas have been around for centuries and revolutionary paintings (both abstract and figurative) still continue to be painted. So it is not the delivery method (the billboard) that is important, but the content (the message) and the organisational structures built in to the project as a whole that matter.

I would now like to talk about how ambitious this project is, and how sheer determination and tenacity saw it through to its awesome conclusion. Over the years I have seen some of the most talented students fall flat on their faces when they leave art school, partly because they have never failed at anything in their lives. They are not used to failure. I've heard that in business school they teach you that you might have to make the identical 'pitch' seventy times before you get a sale. Similarly, my own favourite crime writer, Elmore Leonard, had his first novel rejected eighty-one times before it found a publisher. Talent is a lot harder to define, but tenacity is just the ability to keep pushing away at an idea you believe in. The ideal combination is a mixture of both – each supporting the other – and this project has that in spades. Consider the fact that Phillips and Newitt set out to secure every billboard in Hobart – 27 of them, including at the airport – and consider the even more astonishing fact that they succeeded. As Phillips told *Eye* magazine in 2007<sup>3</sup>:

*We could not have achieved so much with the project without the early assistance of local business. We approached individual organisations that had contracts on the sites we wanted to use, and forged relationships with each one, until we had secured all of the sites. . . it was the ambition and scale of the project that drew most of our sponsors to make their contribution, whether in kind or site rental or cash. We never gave up. If one company said no, we just found another way of asking them.*

<sup>2</sup> Seeing a full-size commercial billboard within the enclosed space of a gallery makes you realise just how large they are – easily dwarfing a *Blue Poles* or *Night Watch*.

<sup>3</sup> *Eye*, Issue 64, 2007, p. 84

And in the end it wasn't so much the words that ended up printed on the billboard that mattered, but the way they got there. Prison inmates were consulted along with Aboriginal elders; old people in nursing homes contributed with an honesty and wisdom matched only by those from recent immigrants and refugees. Everyone had their say. And what they said stayed very visible over the course of Ten Days on the Island.<sup>4</sup> As Margaret Woodward states in the article in *Eye* mentioned above, 'Conceptually and logistically this was a major achievement in a state where half the city's billboard sites are owned by breweries, and where images of a pristine natural environment dominate the marketing of beer, tourism, and real estate.'

So it is wrong to think about *write/here* as 'merely' another billboard project, just as it would be wrong to think of a Marlene Dumas or Lucien Freud portrait as 'merely' another painting. The before and after stages of this project are just as vital as the finished texts hanging above the Hobart rooftops and car parks. 'Before', there were the prolonged negotiations, the knock-backs and the successes. 'Afterwards', there is the reselling of the artworks through eBay, and the recycling of the vinyl skins into plastic bags. The same billboard fabric will be used as the covers on the next issue of *Typotastic*.<sup>5</sup> Before finishing this essay I typed *write/here* into Google (as you do). Two clicks of the keyboard and a map of Hobart was in front of me (for the record I was in Geelong but I could have been in Glasgow or Galveston – this project is out there, globally, for all to see). Needless to say it was a beautifully designed website: clear, to the point, click a number on the map and see a billboard. All those streets I'd known in the past, from early morning walks to midnight rambles: Hampden Road; Goulburn Street; Brisbane Street; Elizabeth Street; Sandy Bay Road. I set off on a web-based *dérive*. White letters on a red background jumped up at me<sup>6</sup>.

4

This event happened between 23 March and 1 April, 2007. Festival Director Elizabeth Walsh along with Visual Arts coordinator Jane Deeth put together twenty-five visual arts events that included over 250 artists in a program including three solo exhibitions, thirty-six installations, a major suite of videos, four design exhibitions and an art prize. The work was seen in fourteen galleries and museums across the state as well as in off-beat locations such as airports, paddocks, and on twenty-seven billboards.

5

The Australian design magazine.

6

'Using a uniform sans-serif typeface (Gotham, designed by Tobias Frere-Jones) on an opaque red background reminiscent of corporate advertising campaigns, these billboards delivered highly personal and poignant messages, causing the public to speculate about their origins.'

*Eye*, Issue 64. 2007, p. 85

'Everything's rigged' (was the first one I read)

(then):

'These kids have been child soldiers you know, walking around in the army with machine guns, and killing people. And then they come to Hobart and all of a sudden teachers are like "don't wear sneakers, do your laces up". Imagine having lived through that and then someone's telling you to tuck your shirt in.'

(then):

'I hope that I can beat the family voodoo. I'd like to see my son grow up and one day become a grandparent. None of my family went past fifty-three. I turn fifty two in March.'

(and finally):

'I can't see anything in my drawers anymore. I have to feel. I have to get people to come in and ask "Is that blue or black?" or "Can you see anything green in there?'

On the other side of the world there is an organisation called Artangel which helps artists realise ambitious projects. These include works by Rachel Whiteread, Matthew Barney, Douglas Gordon, Jeremy Deller, Tony Oursler, Roni Horn, and Ilya and Emilia Kabakov.

Justy Phillips and James Newitt have produced an equally ambitious and successful project compared to any of the above, and moreover, to their credit, they have project-managed it themselves, rather than through an agency like Artangel. This will serve them well in the future and give them an extremely high profile when applying for a range of grants, whether through the Australia Council, the ARC, or the Henry Moore Foundation. I look forward to writing about them again in the future.