

# THE GOOD WEEKEND



# SYDNEY'S HIT AND RUN ARTISTS

Two recent victims of the graffitists, who say their aim is to "raise public consciousness against billboards."

**THE** advertisers say they are a bloody nuisance. The police may soon fine them up to \$1,000 for malicious damage to property. But 'Sydney's graffitists B.U.G.A.U.P. and the Black Lung Liberation Front seem to be winning the war. The battleground is the outdoor advertising poster and the campaign is most intense wherever liquor and cigarette companies peddle their wares. **GERALDINE O'BRIEN** reports;

THIS week the Good Weekend did a run with the B.U.G.A.U.P. people, from Glebe to Summer Hill to White Bay, packed into a station wagon with a couple of bags of spray cans that were nearly empty by the return journey.

The last stop on this run was the Winfield billboard at White Bay, which was lavishly adorned with

slogans before the graffitists called it a day.

Twenty-four hours later the poster had been replaced.

For B.U.G.A.U.P. (Billboard Utilising Graffitists Against Unhealthy promotions) in the midst of their summer offensive, the fight has only just begun.



Graffitist at work, using a spray can fired by remote control on an extension.

Their renewed onslaught against outdoor advertising began after a public meeting last October and has concentrated on billboards along railway lines.

With the new hit-and-run merchants recruited at that meeting, B.U.G.A.U.P. managed to strike at billboards out to Seven Hills and south to Cronulla.

(The North Shore is already covered by another graffiti group, the Black Lung Liberation Front.)

Before B.U.G.A.U.P. can claim the summer campaign as a success they want to cover the Eastern Suburbs line and the City circle.

They believe they have public sympathy in their campaign against cigarette and alcohol advertising although there is some debate among group members over what should be their prime targets.

"A billboard without graffiti is something quite outrageous," says the headline in their autumn catalogue, but outrageous could also apply to those members of the group who are seized by a positive lust, for action at the mere sight of an untarnished billboard.

Indeed, one member of the group is notorious for his inability to drive past a virgin billboard.

Others pride themselves on their selectivity; as Tony (not his real name) says, "It's hard to get worked up about Dickie's towels! "

For some time, the group wondered whether they should attack soft drink ads - would they alienate their younger audience?

But the lure of the billboard proved too powerful and now Coke ads provide a vast field for their' gruesome warnings: "Coca Cola

Rots a Molar" or "Smile - while you've still got teeth!"

But the B.U.G.A.U.P. group won't deface hoardings and always signs its work "unless we run out of paint - or time!" one added.)

For most citizens, it was a cryptic signature until Christmas of 1979 when the group - which, a few months earlier, had brought together the work of three or four individual graffitists - seized its first blank billboard near Sydney University, spelling out the words of the acronym.

For Tony, who was doing a bit of paintbombing at the time, the advantages of joining forces were obvious. "The trouble with paintbombing is that 'you have to get' quite a lot there to get the effect whereas people will zero in on a single word!"

There are other problems associated with paintbombing, chiefly that of getting enough eggs (Tony found he was existing on omelettes). Eggs make the best missiles, especially when filled with a 50-50 mixture of paint and petrol.

"The missile has to be solid enough to get sufficient grip to throw it but fragile enough to shatter on impact." Light bulbs would be ideal except for the litter of broken glass. "

B.U.G.A.U.P. is developing an alternative technology of its own in an effort to strike at most of Sydney's estimated 30,000 billboards - without getting caught.

They buy their \$2 spray cans (chrome and black being the favoured colours) from Target stores. They tend to shop there because it's cheaper and because Target forbids smoking in its shops.

One member has devised a home made walkie-talkie using a battered transistor radio as a warning system and another member has invented an extension rod to get at high boards, obviating the need for a ladder.

"You can't help being conspicuous if you're walking around a night, carrying a ladder," he said.)

The extension rod is simply a length of dowel fitted with metal damps to hold the spray can, over which runs a length of plastic-coated wire with a ring-pull attached to depress the button on the can.

The 24-sheeter is the standard size billboard, the one we usually work on," explained Rick as we -drove up to Derwent Street, Glebe, last week- "You can do five to 10 posters with one can, though you can go through quite a lot of paint if you really go to town on a billboard.

"Here," he continued, "is a good place to work late at night because there's little traffic then and anyway, you're covered by that tree!"

Late afternoon, however, it felt decidedly exposed. According to Charles, "we tend to get more applause than abuse from passers-by. But it's nerve-wracking waiting for their reaction, not knowing if they're going to do you in."

"Doing White Bay is a real buzz because although it's one of the riskiest, you get so much feedback from the motorists . . . so many of them toot and wave!"

That's all very nice, but B.U.G.A.U.P. people are still getting arrested and an advertisement in this weekend's National Times is appealing for

public donations to help pay fines and court costs.

Captured graffitiists charged with defacing billboards can be fined \$100 plus damages but B.U.G.A.U.P. fears that NSW may soon follow Victoria's example of charging with malicious injury to property which, in that State, carries a fine of \$2,500.

Stripped of their folk-hero status, the group is modest in its aims.

"Our real, achievable aim is to raise the public consciousness against billboards," said Tony.

"And in the meantime to cost the companies money."

No one will say just how much the graffitiists cost the companies but Brian Tyquin of Australian Posters says they are "a bloody nuisance" and that the cost to his company in replacing defaced posters is quite substantial.

The graffitiists claim that, far from being "anti-social," delinquents they are in fact working for the public good.

In a heated exchange with one passer-by who shouted "Bludgers" (as he stood watching them work) the graffitiists quoted the statistics on hospital beds occupied by victims of alcohol and cigarettes.

"Who are the bludgers then?" they demanded rhetorically. "Our taxes pay for their hospitalisation."

The man left, subdued. And they got on with their work. "Were winning," said Tony happily

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## **Tobacco lobby says bad guys are all in Sydney**

**WHO'S** winning Sydney's graffiti war? The B.U.G.A.U.P. people claim they are. The opposition says this is nonsense

**Bryan Simpson, director of the Tobacco Institute of Australia (the industry lobby group) was pained by questions about B.U.G.A.U.P.**

**Graffiti had lost its topicality," he said. 'I don't wish to make any fresh or substantial comment.'** Pressed, he intoned that if society contains people who break the law, we're on the toboggan aren't we?

**Then the Melbourne-based spokesman introduced a new dimension to the argument: such "vandalism" was essentially a Sydney phenomenon, he said, "possibly a reflection of the kind of society you have in Sydney!"**

**In cities such as Melbourne, "you get the occasional breakout ... but it's people in an intellectual thing and it disappears overnight. In Sydney its not academics, it's not people of a high intellectual level. I hope it's a passing phase. "**