

Writing on the wall for billboards

The Lions Clubs are supporting the Outdoor Advertising Association of Australia in an anti-vandalism campaign which is actually intended to discredit Bugaup, the Billboard Utilising Graffitists Against Unhealthy Promotions.

We contacted Brian Robson, a graffiti collector and self-styled graffiti analyst, who has been following the fortunes of Bugaup since its formation in 1979.

How did you get involved in the graffiti business?

During 1979 I started taking colour slides of graffiti on walls. The first slide I took said "Consume, be silent and die". Next thing the graffiti moved from the walls to the billboards and the insignia BUGAUP appeared. The graffiti by BUGAUP had a specific purpose or charter to expose the manipulations being attempted by advertisers. Some of their puns and jokes have been very clever.

Do you think Bugaup has public support?

The public support is staggering. People see BUGAUP as socially responsible even while the law is being broken. People can see the contradiction in alcohol and tobacco consumption, and I think they appreciate the humour that Bugaup tries to produce. There is a bit of the Ned Kelly ethic in every Australian that supports the underdog. Bugaup are out there actually doing what normal people only fantasise about.

During 1980 Bugaup produced the "Autumn Catalogue". It explains their philosophy and is still selling like hotcakes after three reprints. It makes a great wall poster.

How do people join Bugaup?

Bugaup is hardly a formal organisation with a secretary, treasurer and monthly meetings. The only criteria for membership is to obey the charter incorporated in the initials BUGAUP. Thus I would agree that BUGAUP has at least 100 members Australiawide, most of whom will never meet each other and will never be arrested. It's a movement, not a group.

It's probably the start of a worldwide trend since many copies of the "Autumn Catalogue" have surely been posted overseas. Just

like Bazza McKenzie comic books or vegemite, it's a very Australian product.

How is the outdoor advertising industry fighting back?

At first they wrote newsletters and demanded higher penalties against graffitists. Now they have launched a \$75,000 anti-vandalism campaign in conjunction with the Lions Clubs in NSW and Vic.

The Lions Clubs have been sucked into this "speak out" campaign which is really an anti-Bugaup campaign in disguise and at their expense.

One would assume that the Lions are just as opposed as Bugaup to the unhealthy promotion of alcohol and tobacco.

Can BUGAUP be classified as vandals?

Graffiti is not destructive vandalism like smashing windows or burning stolen cars. There is always an element of social comment.

The members of BUGAUP strongly refute the claims from the Outdoor Advertising industry that they are "vandals" engaged in "lawless and senseless activity". Bugaup campaigns with names such as "summer offensive" and "quit for life" have been distinctly directed against alcohol and tobacco advertisements plus a few

other items such as luxury cars, the news media and sexist ads.

Can you tell us about the poster campaign?

The first poster features a very pregnant girl distressed at finding a broken public telephone. Everyone I discuss this poster with concedes that this vandalism is wrong, but little discussion follows. Broken public telephones are hardly a major community topic at present. Given that 80% of Australian households now have the phone and that car ownership is universal, phone vandalism is more an annoyance that a life-and-death matter. The phone shown in the poster is an obsolete type which Telecom has largely replaced with their new "vandal resistant" public phone (the big green STD one).

Incidentally, the poster itself is in a "vandal-resistant" style with the lettering at the top, very little open space and an overall mottled appearance. This first poster can be seen all over Sydney, but it predominates in areas where BUGAUP has operated, such as White Bay, opposite Sydney University and along Moore Park Road.

It is common knowledge that a future poster will depict a cenotaph sprayed with graffiti. This poster will be a clear step toward

discrediting BUGAUP.

Who's winning?

The Outdoor Advertising industry is clearly on the run and are fast losing public credibility due to BUGAUP in particular and the healthy lifestyle movement in general. Australian Posters have many blank billboards around town, not to mention the 100 anti-vandalism posters. Many sites for Levingston Posters merely advertise their own company. A lot of Sydney councils, including Sutherland, Kogarah and Canterbury, have refused to accept free bus shelters (with posters) from Australian Posters.

Alcohol and tobacco companies must be very concerned about the social acceptability of their products. The true message of beerguts, bad breath and yellow teeth could destroy many years of careful image building. Using humour, BUGAUP graffiti often exposes the image-building process.

How do you analyse the latest advertising campaigns?

My analysis is that advertisers want the general public to see tall billboards as symbolic of their goals in life rather like a pilgrim viewing a distant cathedral spire in the 12th century. BUGAUP, of course, objects strongly to tobacco and



alcohol companies setting themselves up as arbiters of our lifestyle. It is farcical when the product is intrinsically worthless.

Tobacco companies say advertising is only to make people switch brands.

New tobacco brands are still being launched in an effort to expand the market. For example, the absurdly successful Stirling with its mock nonchalance, a huge silver yacht and the carry slogan "Why don't we head for Rio". On the North Shore train line I came across BUGAUP additions such as: "Why don't we head for Biafra", "Capsize corporate pushers" and "smoking takes the wind out of your sails."

Old brands become boring. Young people wouldn't be seen dead smoking Capstan or Craven-A.

What does the future hold?

Judged by their activities, the BUGAUP movement is the vanguard of a new public awareness where one of the basic tenets is freedom from manipulation. No one should be seduced into accepting phony lifestyle images that necessitate consumption of unhealthy products such as alcohol and tobacco. Social acceptability has become more important than the old health scare tactics. Smoking in particular could quite suddenly go out of fashion.