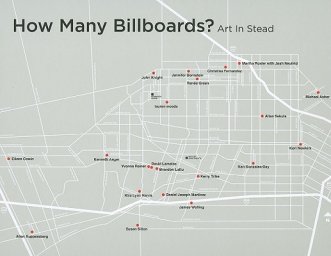


How Many Billboards? Art In Stead



VISUAL RELIEF IN A BLANK BILLBOARD

Interview with Anne Bray
Conducted and edited by Sara Daleiden

CONDUCTED IN-PERSON AT FREEWAVES IN HOLLYWOOD

I know we live in a mass culture so I want to approach viewers personally. I know we operate in a commercial arena, so I want to exchange with them without a price tag. I know we exist in a society that is alienating in both its specialization and its conformity, so I want to encourage dialogue and inclusion. I want to offer challenges at low risk in a milieu which usually associates change with fear. Most importantly, I want to activate people's imaginations and critical sense simultaneously.

Anne Bray, *Art Paper* 7, 1988

Since the 1980s, Anne Bray has been a seminal producer of media art in public space. In addition to being an artist, Bray is the founding director of Freewaves, which sponsors new media festivals in Los Angeles that showcase experimental videos, films, and media art from around the world. In 2008, the 11th Freewaves Festival turned Hollywood Boulevard into a multi-layered screening room, contrasting perceptions of "Hollywood" as mega-entertainment industry against the actual, multi-faceted neighborhood of Hollywood. Entitled *Hollywould...*, the five-day festival perpetuated the organization's objective of inserting the alternative messages of experimental media artworks into mainstream commercial sites in order to question our relationship to culture and the built environment.

As panel series curator for *How Many Billboards?*, Bray organized and moderated two panels: *Visual*

Rights to the City and *The Visual Ecology of Advertising and Architecture*. Bray designed both panels to encourage public discussion amongst lawyers, city planners, media corporations, journalists, scholars, activists, architects, artists, and audience members about current political debates surrounding billboards in Los Angeles. The following interview explores Bray's view of the dominant presence of outdoor commercial media and public art's potential to offer another form of speech.

Sara Daleiden: How would you describe Los Angeles' relationship with billboards?

Anne Bray: Did Los Angeles have billboards before housing? They came, they staked it with an ad, and then they settled into homesteading afterwards.

I think of billboards as the largest in a family of ads within the streetscape. Billboards, along with development in this city, are indicative of the high priority Los Angeles has given to commercialism. Land development is more important than community. Advertising is more important than visual environment. It has been this way since the city was formed—over 150 years of commercial priorities.

In 2007, several major billboard companies reached a settlement with the City of Los Angeles, which allowed them to begin legally converting over 850 static

traditional billboards into the upgraded technology of digital LED billboards throughout the city. This was in the face of a ban on new billboards that has been in place since 2002. Los Angeles already has an extensive issue with billboards because an alarming number of billboards are erected illegally. In 2008, *LA Weekly* reported that at least 4,000 of the over 10,000 billboards in the city aren't permitted. There are only three sign inspectors at the City of Los Angeles and the process of removing an illegal billboard based on an inspector's citation can be arduous and time-consuming. Neighbors to the LED billboards protested loudly to the city about the distracting brightness and motion of the LED boards. There was a public outcry and political disputes surrounding billboards; the city issued a moratorium on all off-site, supergraphic, and digital billboards until they could develop new signage ordinance language. Concurrent to this signage moratorium, there has also been a ban on new public murals, which are a long-standing visual tradition in Los Angeles. One challenge in defining signage and mural ordinance language is establishing clear guidelines for the production of visuals in the city to avoid visual pollution. That to me is a very interesting task because the differentiation between art and advertising plays a large role in the definition of culture for a city. The city's lawyers and staff have been working on the signage ordinance for more than a year and still don't have a resolution.



Each city responds to this question of differentiation according to its own priorities through zoning laws. Zoning laws here in Los Angeles have produced the huge difference in the advertising spaces of neighborhoods such as West Hollywood in contrast to Beverly Hills. Currently, numerous lawsuits issued by billboard companies are pending against the City of Los Angeles regarding who can place outdoor media where in the city. They are trying to determine why one neighborhood protects free speech in advertising while another neighborhood does not.

The outdoor advertising industry makes up \$7 billion of the \$300 billion a year overall advertising industry in the United States. On average, we each absorb 5,000 ads a day into our subconscious. It is amazing that we can possibly form our own opinions. Advertising sets the agenda for what we should be thinking about. Ads seem to tag the city by marking buses, benches, fences, and every other possible surface with imagery and text. They create so much visual clutter that it reaches the point where our eyes have trouble differentiating.

Ads either dangle a carrot of desire in front of us, or they threaten a knife to our back. They relay messages that "you are ugly, stupid, and lazy," or "you will be beautiful, smart, and rich if you buy what the ad is promoting." We are always placed between this dichotomy in a dizzying consumer role.

While teaching media literacy, I have seen students quickly transition from "I don't even think about that" to "Oh, I get it." In all age groups. But if no one teaches them media literacy, they go through their teens and twenties as prime advertising targets, being bombarded and manipulated unconsciously. Commercial interests form many of their ideas about who they are, what they want to become, and what society is. All of Stuart Ewen's books, and Adam Curtis's documentary *The Century of the Self*, are excellent resources for understanding the effects of all-consuming advertising on views of self and democracy, and questioning whose interests are involved. Kids can be taught to deconstruct advertising pretty fast, but it takes strong, habit-bending efforts on their part to consistently counterbalance advertising's seductions. Saskia Sassen links these issues with free speech, public space, and personal and collective empowerment. She recommends generating public space that she calls "urbanizing open sources."

SD: What is your opinion of the 2007 action led by Mayor Gilberto Kassab in São Paulo, Brazil? With his "Clean City Law," he pledged to remove visual pollution via billboards, thus making the world's fourth-largest metropolis essentially advertising-free?

AB: That's my idea of heaven on earth. I daydream of moving there because visual interruption isn't the norm



This page:
Tony de Marco
São Paulo No Logo, 2007
Courtesy of the artist.



Top and Bottom:
Anne Bray
White Out, 1985
Intersection of Lincoln and Broadway, Santa Monica, California
Courtesy of the artist.

and my eyes wouldn't be seduced to avert regularly. Without outdoor advertising, public space is not dominated by an imperative voice issuing commands to buy, spend, look, and capture.

I don't think it is politically possible for Los Angeles to do what São Paulo did. I am very concerned that Los Angeles is a city that could be used as a national model regarding signage ordinances for LED billboards. If we set a precedent, we directly influence the Ninth Circuit Court, and this could then affect a national ruling. I think as a city we should be careful.

As a regional issue, I do think the city government should re-examine Los Angeles the way that São Paulo has done. The mayor of São Paulo is the one who determined and enforced the elimination of all the

billboards. It has drastically changed the whole city.

SD: With *White Out* (1985), you created an earlier, local version of what happened in São Paulo at the intersection of Lincoln Boulevard and Broadway Street in Santa Monica. What was your experience in advocating for a day without signage?

AB: It was a visual and social experiment. Making art visible in a very commercial environment like Los Angeles is already a "belly of the beast" challenge. The project took place at an intersection on a busy commercial street, and it went one block in every direction from that corner. We used white paper to cover up 500 ads that were between the sizes of a Visa sticker in a storefront window to a rooftop billboard.

I went door-to-door for six weeks getting permission from every store, mostly through joking. Only half of the shop owners asked me why I was doing the project. I called it a visual experiment, instead of art. What if we had no ads? Everyone could relate to wanting to know that answer.

Every TV station in Los Angeles showed up to document the project. They interviewed the shop owners, the pedestrians, and me, and they reported on the project on television that night. In their voiceovers the reporters were saying sarcastic things about the project, but the images they showed clearly read as a "white out" of advertising. People could interpret it however they wanted to, but it was very clear and simple.

The main impression I felt while standing at the intersection once all the paper was in place was calm,

An elderly man walked down the street, as he did every morning. But on this day, he said, "Where am I?" He was lost, disoriented by not having any signage.

SD: Since you boldly claim that you would prefer a version of Los Angeles that abolished billboards, what would you suggest the visual field of the city could communicate? How would temporary art projects in public space play a role?

AB: I saw a beautiful book the other day from Spain entitled *Textura: Valencia Street Art*, by Luz A. Martin. It featured graffiti from that city, including stencils, paint, and spray paint. This type of graffiti is not like name-based tagging, which I don't appreciate. It's gorgeous visuals by a variety of people who create an exciting discourse on the street. While it does create visual clutter, which is one of my objections to advertising, it also expresses what people living in the city see and want. I can see street art becoming a really common form of public language. Because these street artists' cover each other's pieces relatively quickly, the result is an ongoing, shifting visual dialogue in the city. If we say that advertising is legal and graffiti is illegal, we are giving corporations permission to be in charge of our world and our thought processes.

As we have commercial zones, we could have free speech zones. Every time our society is trying to make a shift in our values and policies, we need to publicly address messaging. I find it ironic that we call our legal right "free speech." It is actually very expensive speech, often too expensive for alternative visions. Perhaps it would be a better use of LED billboards to take advantage of their rotating messages to allow for a greater diversity of voices.

The question *How Many Billboards?* brings up for Los Angeles is “What could be the relationship between public art and billboards?” This question has been asked by a number of contemporary art organizations in Los Angeles during the last thirty years including Freewaves, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), Clockshop, West of Rome, and LA><ART. As billboard photography gets replaced with video, our eyes will be even further seduced by the imagery in the streetscape, because we are biologically trained to look at the points of contrast between light and dark in moving imagery. I encourage art to exist in these advertising spaces because, unlike advertising, art tends to ask provocative questions and encourage new consciousness, often in contrast to the environment around it. I want a city that is open to discussion for us collectively. I think that many of the artists’ projects in *How Many Billboards?* address the idea of spectacle in a new way. Many of them are still big, loud images, but they are countering the mainstream spectacle to create a layer of questioning about media’s role in the city.

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Pegi Christiansen; Dennis Hathaway, President, Coalition to Ban Billboard Blight; Joshua G. Stein; and Jane Usher, Special Assistant City Attorney, City of Los Angeles provided editorial input.



Top: Intersection of La Brea Avenue and Pico Boulevard. Outdoor media corporations have less to say in these recession-charged days. With the infamous Hollywood sign in the distance, two blank billboards pop-out against a sea of signage lining the major north-south corridor of La Brea Avenue. Is Los Angeles starting to prefer white space in the streetscape, following São Paulo’s lead?

Bottom: 110 Freeway at Cesar E Chavez Avenue. An unfortunate casualty of a 2002 municipal moratorium on new outdoor media has been a parallel moratorium on Los Angeles’ historic public tradition of community murals. Skirting the moratorium’s definition of a mural, California’s Department of Transportation has invented a creative, vegetative solution for enlivening the driving experience. Rectangular floral murals composed of colorful annuals portray romantic, moonlit drives along the peripheral landscapes of the highly used 110 Freeway.