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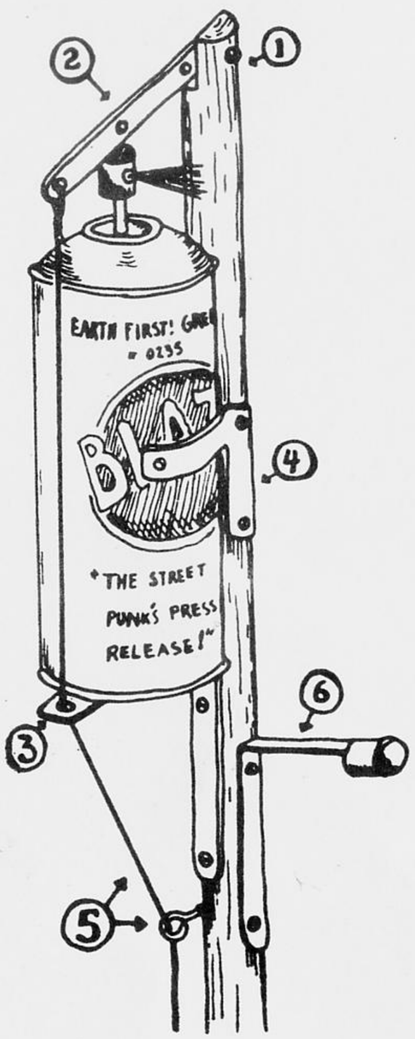
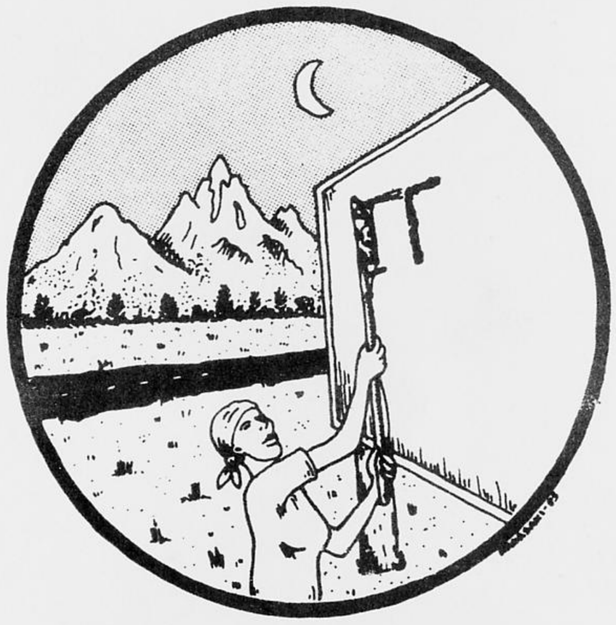


For those hard-to-reach spots!



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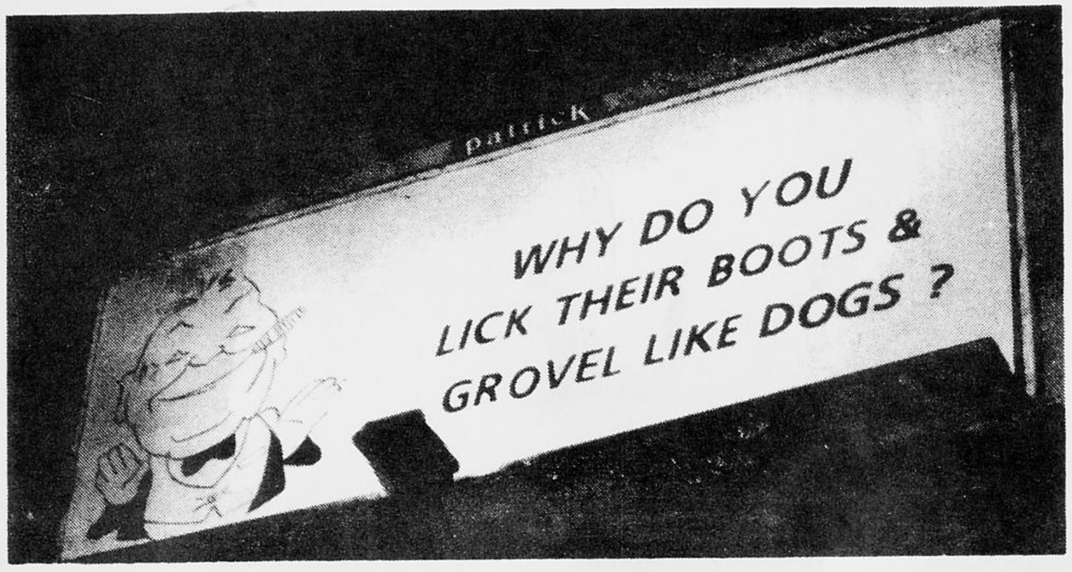
—*Los Cabrones Press*

The Art & Science



# of Billboard Improvement

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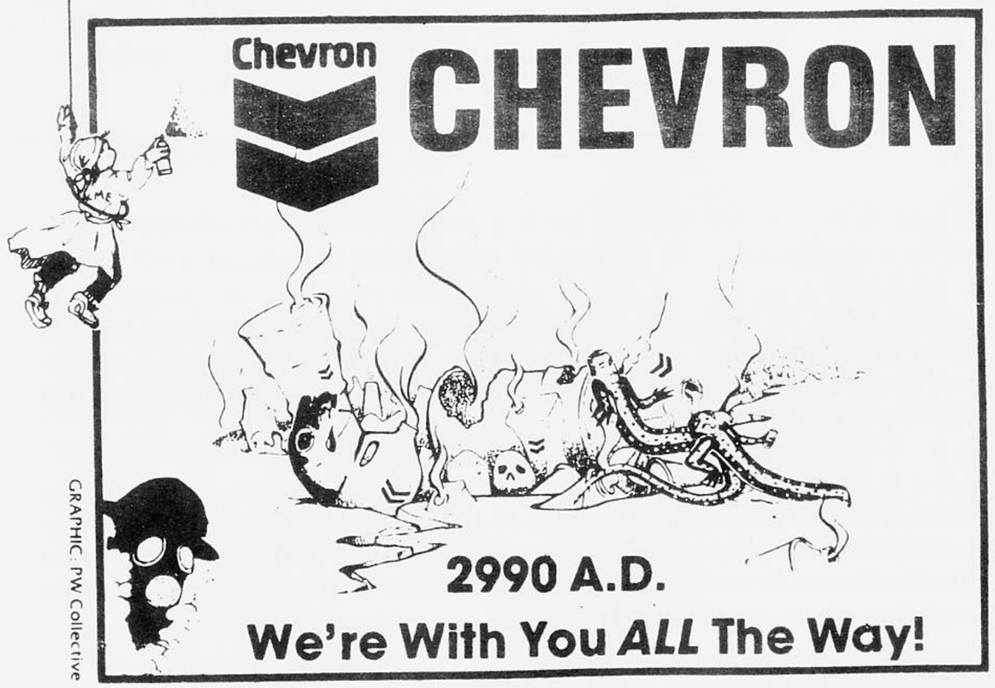
by

Billboard Liberation Front & Friends

The Art & Science of Billboard Improvement



by

Billboard Liberation Front & Friends

Introduction

The Billboard Liberation Front has been successfully improving outdoor advertising since 1977.

We hope you find the following primer useful and comprehensive. We have detailed methods for alterations ranging from the smaller, easily accessible boards, to the massive, more difficult ones on freeways.

In most instances, it should not be necessary to use the elaborate —even obsessive precautions that the BLF has resorted to for an individual or group to get their message across. A can of spray paint, a blithe spirit, and a balmy night are all you really need.

There are many different reasons for wishing to alter or in other ways improve an existing advertisement. In this primer we avoid ideology and stick to practical information only.

—Billboard Liberation Front

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Please Note: The Billboard Liberation Front is not responsible for improving all of the billboards described in this pamphlet.

I. Choosing a Board

Once you have identified a billboard message you wish to improve, you may want to see if there are multiple locations with the same advertisement. You should determine which ones give your message optimum visibility. A board on the central freeway will obviously give you more exposure than one on an obscure side street. You must then weigh the location/visibility factor with other crucial variables such as physical accessibility, potential escape routs, volume of foot and vehicular traffic during optimum alteration hours, etc.

In choosing a board, keep in mind that the most effective alterations are often the simplest. If you can totally change the meaning of an advert by changing one or two letters, you'll save a lot of time and trouble. Some ads lend themselves to parody by the inclusion of a small image or symbol in the appropriate place (a skull, radiation symbol, happy face, swastika, vibrator, etc.). On other boards, the addition of a cartoon "thought bubble" or "speech balloon" for one of the characters might be all that is needed.

II. Preparation

A) Accessibility: How do you get up on the board? Will you need your own ladder to reach the bottom of the board's ladder? Can you climb the support structure? Is the board on a building rooftop, and if so, can it be reached from within the building, from a fire escape, or perhaps from an adjoining building? If you need ladders to work the board, they may occasionally be found on platforms on or behind the board, or on adjacent boards or rooftops.

B) Practicality: How big are the letters and/or images you would like to change? How close to the platform at the bottom of the board is your work area?

On larger boards you can rig from above and hang over the face to reach points that are too high to reach from below. We don't recommend this method unless you have some climbing and rigging experience. When hanging in one position your work area is very limited laterally. Your ability to leave the scene quickly diminishes proportionately to how convoluted your position has become. Placing huge words or images is much more difficult.

C) Security: After choosing your board, be sure to inspect it during day and night. Take note of all activities in the area. Who is about

at 2:00 a.m.? How visible will you be while scaling the support structure? Keep in mind you will make noise; are there any apartment or office windows nearby? Is anyone home? Walk lightly if you're on a rooftop—who knows who you're walking over?

What is the visibility to passing cars on surface streets and freeways? What can you see from your work position on the board? Even though it is very difficult to see a figure on a dark board at night, it is not impossible. Any point you have line of sight vision with is a point you can be seen from.

How close is your board to the nearest police station or Highway Patrol headquarters? What is their patrol pattern in the area? Average response time to Joe Citizen's call? You can get an idea by staking out the area and observing. Is it quiet at night or is there a lot of foot traffic? When the bars let out, will this provide cover—i.e., drunks keeping the cops busy—or will it increase the likelihood of detection by passersby? Do they care? If you are definitely spotted, it may pay to have your ground people check them out rather than just hoping they don't call the cops. Do not let them connect you with a vehicle. Have your ground person(s) pretend to be chance passersby and find out what the observer thinks. We've been spotted at work a number of times and most people were amused. You'll find that most people, including officials, don't look up unless given a reason to do so.

Go up on the board prior to your hit. Get a feeling for being there and moving around on the structure at night. Bring a camera—it's a good cover for doing anything you're not supposed to: "Gee, officer, I'm a night photographer, and there's a great shot of the Bay Bridge from up here . . ."

Check out your escape routes. Can you cross over rooftops and leave by a fire escape across the block? etc., etc.

D) Illumination: Most boards are brightly lit by floodlights of some type. Most large boards are shut off some time between 11:00 pm and 2:00 am by a time clock control somewhere on or near the board. Smaller boards frequently are controlled by photo-electric cells or conventional timeclocks, also somewhere on the board. If you find the photo-electric cell, you can turn the lights on the board off by taping a small flashlight directly into the cell's "eye." This fools the unit into thinking it is sunrise—the time the lights are supposed to turn off.

As noted, most larger boards are controlled by timeclocks. These can be found in the control panels at the base of the support structure and/or behind the board itself. These panels are often locked (particularly those at the structure's base). Unless you are familiar with energized electrical circuitry and devices of this

type we caution you to wait until the clock shuts itself off at midnight or so. Many of these boards run 220 volts, and they could fry you to a crisp.

III. Graphic Layout: Lettering & Image Design

A) Scale: If you are changing only a small area (one letter, a small symbol, etc.) you probably do not need to go to any elaborate lengths to match or design your "overlay" (we'll use this term to describe the finished image/lettering you'll be applying to the board). Just take actual measurements of tracings directly off the board. If, however, you intend to create overlays of great size and/or number of letters and you want the finished image to look as much as possible like the advertisers themselves had made it, you should plan on more elaborate preparation.

Find a position roughly level with the board and looking at it square on (200 to 1000 or so feet away). Photograph the board from this position and make a tracing from a large print of the photo. Using measurements you have taken on the board (height, width, letter height, etc.), you can create a scale drawing of your intended alteration. From this, it is possible to determine how large your overlays will need to be and what spacing will be required between letters.

B) Color Match: There are two basic ways to match the background and/or colors of the lettering or image area.

1) On painted or paper boards you can usually carve a small (1"x1") sample directly off the board. This does not always work on older painted boards which have many thick layers of paint.

2) Most large paint stores carry small book paint samplers. It is possible to get a pretty close match from these samplers. We suggest sticking to solid colors and relatively simple designs for the maximum visual impact.

C) Letter Style: If you wish to match a letter style exactly, pick up a book of different letter types from a graphic arts store. Use this in conjunction with tracings of existing letters to create the complete range of lettering needed for your alteration. You can convincingly fake letters that aren't on the board by finding a closely matching letter style in the book and using tracings of letters from your photo of the board as a guide for drawing the new letters.

D) Application: We recommend not using overlays much larger than 4'x3'. If your message is larger, you should section it and butt the sections together for the finished image. It gets very windy on boards and large paste-overs are difficult to apply. Some nights there is condensation on boards, and the areas to be covered need to be wiped down. Use heavy pattern paper for overlays and gloss lacquer paint. The lacquer paint suffuses the paper, making it super-tough, water resistant, and difficult to tear. For making overlays, roller coat the background and spray paint the lettering through cardboard cut-out templates of the letters. For extremely large images or panels, use large pieces of painted canvas. The canvas should be fairly heavy to avoid being ripped to shreds by the winds that buffet most billboards. Glue and staple 1"x4" pine boards the entire horizontal lengths of the top and bottom of the canvas. The canvas will then roll up like a carpet for transportation and can be unrolled over the top of the board and lowered into place by ropes.

You can either tie the four corners and middle (top and bottom) very securely, or, if you can reach the face of the board by ladder or rope, attach the panel by screwing the 1"x4" boards to the billboard. A good battery powered drill is needed for this. We recommend hex head "Tek" sheet metal screws, #8 or #10 size. Use a hex head driver bit for your drill. These screws work well on either wood backboards or sheet metal.

To level overlay panels on the board, measure up from the bottom (or down from the top) of the board to the bottom line of where it needs to be in order to cover the existing copy. Make small marks at the outermost left and right-hand points. Using a chalk snap line with two people, snap a horizontal line between these two points. This line is your marker for placing your overlay(s).

Although there are many types of adhesive which can be used, we recommend rubber cement. Rubber cement is easily removable

(but if properly applied will stay up indefinitely) and does not damage or permanently mark the board's surface. This becomes crucial if you're apprehended and the authorities and owners attempt to assess you for money lost due to property damage.

Application of rubber cement on large overlays is tricky. You need to evenly coat both the back-side of the paste-over and the surface of the board that is to be covered. Allow one to two minutes drying time before applying the paper to the board.

To apply the cement use full sized (10") house paint rollers and a five-gallon plastic bucket. Have one person coat the back of the paste-overs while another coats the board's surface.

Both people will be needed to affix the coated paste-over to the finished board surface.

IV. The Hit

Once you've completed the preparations and are ready for the actual hit, there are many things which can be done to minimize the risk of apprehension:

A) Personnel: Have the smallest number of people possible on the board. Three is about optimum—two for the actual work and one lookout/communications person. You will probably require additional spotting teams on the ground (see below).

B) Communications: For work on larger boards where you're exposed for great lengths of time, we recommend hand-held com-

munications devices (CB units or FM-band walkie-talkies). Low cost CB walkie-talkies are available from Radio Shack.

Have one or two cars positioned at crucial intersections within sight of the board. The ground unit(s) should monitor oncoming traffic and maintain radio contact with the lookout on the board. (Note: Do not use the popular CB or FM channels; there are many others to choose from. A verbal code is a good idea since others do have access to the channels you will be using.)

It is crucial that your ground crew do not lounge around outside their vehicle(s) or in any other way make it obvious that they are hanging around a likely desolate area late at night for no apparent reason. A passing patrol car will notice them much sooner than they would notice you on the board. Keep a low profile.

C) Escape: If you've done your homework, you'll know the terrain surrounding the board quite well. In the event of detection, prepare a number of alternate routes out of the area, and a rendezvous point with the ground support crew. If a patrol is approaching and you are in a difficult spot for quickly ditching and hiding (hanging on a rope in the middle of the board, for instance), it may be better simply to stay still until they pass. Movement is more likely to catch the eye. Once on the ground, if pursuit is imminent, hiding may be the safest bet. If you've covered the terrain carefully, you'll be aware of any good hiding spots. Keep in mind that if the police do a thorough search (doubtful, but not impossible), they will use high-powered spot lights from cars and flashlights if on foot.

Stashed clothing in your hiding spot may prove useful. A business suit, perhaps, or rumpled and vomit-encrusted leisure wear. Be creative.

V. Daytime Hits

We don't recommend this method for most high boards on or near freeways and major roads. It works well for doing smaller boards lower to the ground where the alteration is relatively quick and simple. If you do choose to work in the light, wear coveralls (company name on the back?), painters' hats, and work quickly. Keep an eye out for parked or passing vehicles bearing the billboard company's or advertiser's name. Each board has the company emblem at its bottom center. If you're on a Sleaze Co. board and a Sleaze Co. truck pulls up, you're probably in trouble. It is unlikely that the workers will try to physically detain you (try bribery if necessary), but they will probably call the cops.

Postscript

If anyone reading this primer finds it of any use in their own advertising endeavors, we at the BLF will consider it successful.

We believe roadside advertising enhancement is a pastime more individuals should engage in. It's not that difficult to do smaller, low-to-the-ground boards. A quick hit-and-run on such a board will not require all of the elaborate preparations and precautions we have detailed.

The more "real" messages we have on the freeways and streets, the better.

—R.O. Thornhill, BLF Education Officer

We Also Do Boards

Our story begins long, long ago. . . even the statute of limitations has run out. . .

I've never been at my best at 3:30 in the morning; being acutely nervous doesn't help the experience. In the predawn darkness our voices are muffled as we wake and drink some coffee, some alcohol: Slivovitz. We leave silently, carrying anonymous black knapsacks, dressed in dark colors, wearing felony shoes (sneakers), get into our vehicles and depart.

At the prearranged area we park out of sight of each other, retrieve our sacks and bundles (rolls of paper, painting rollers with long handles, and mops) and walk calmly to the board. It's one we've hit before so we know access and visibility. Hopefully the watch teams are in place in each direction. We won't know until we all get home—or we are warned of an approaching cop by a blinking flashlight.

The board is low, so one person will work on the ground. The nimblest climbs up first, then the heaviest. Mops are passed up, a bucket appears, and plastic bottles of starch are emptied. On the ground the rolls are unfurled and wetted lightly with a mop, while above another wets the paper of the billboard the same way. The awkward sheet is handed up, maneuvered into position, pressed down, then rolled firmly. The process is repeated for another large piece, then for two small ones.

We are interrupted by happy cries from the street—skateboarders! One of them calls his friend over—unable to believe his eyes. His friend misses us at first, then focuses. They ask what we're doing, and I tersely explain, "We're correcting this billboard." They watch for a minute before heading down University

Avenue. We rapidly finish our work and collect our tools. The ground person has already vanished around the corner when we dismount and walk away calmly, pausing for a moment to admire our handiwork. A sign which used to advertise a condominium village in Richmond with the slogan "Once a Great Notion / Now a Great Life" now reads "Once a Great Nation / Now a Great Li e." A banner with 20-inch letters reading "US Out of North America" covers the real advertiser's name. (Let us not get into a debate about whether it has ever been all that great; we went for the cuteness.)

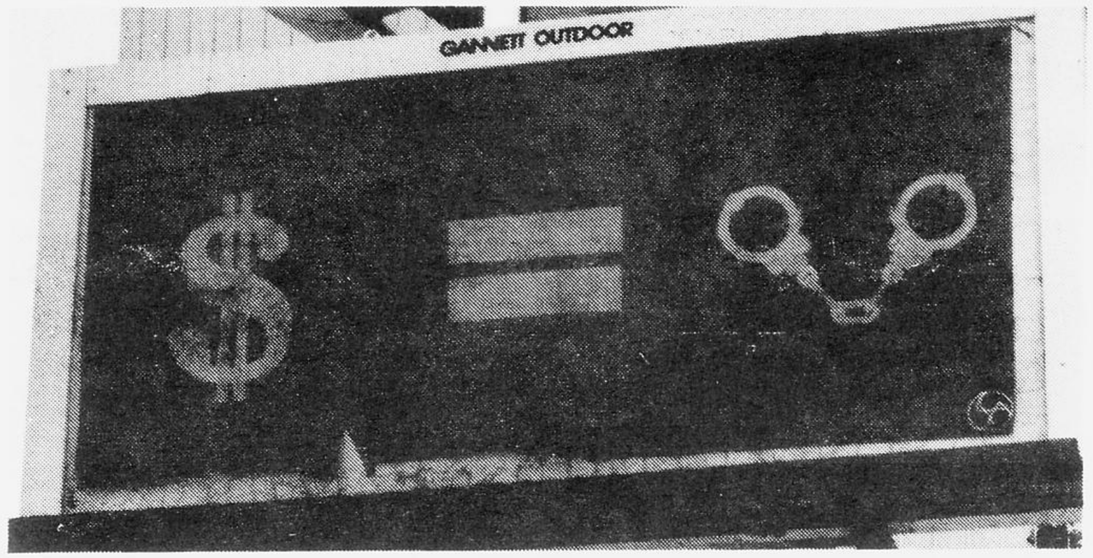
We corrected about a dozen boards in about a year. We were inspired by another group in Berkeley which was altering Selective Service registration boards ("It's Quick / It's Easy / It's the Law / Men turning 18 must register at the Post Office"). They had substituted—perfectly—the word "Deadly" for "the Law." Our first attempt was not as polished: we replaced the third line with "It's a Trap for Assholes." We specialized in these signs, our alterations including "It's the Pig's Law" and "Men turning 18 must register at the morgue." We also hit other targets of opportunity.

We regarded this as training for more adventurous endeavors. We had read *Without A Trace*—a manual useful to those who perform actions which they do not want to be caught doing—which emphasized the use of untraceable, ordinary items, and lots of caution about traces of the perpretator remaining on the crime-scene, and vice-versa.

We were indifferent to the ease of removal—we figured that the workers who did so would be paid anyway. One afternoon I saw a worker replacing an SS board that we had hit; we worked furiously, made calls, assembled the team, and had a new—better—version up by 4:00 the next morning. Fast service!

We never went onto a board in advance. We felt that it wasn't necessary and involved undue exposure. In fact, some LAGgards (Livermore Action Group—an anti-nuke group) were caught measuring a board and charged with trespassing. Needless to say, they became some of the "usual suspects" whan any billboard in the area was corrected. We worked with photos and visual inspections on foot, as we were mostly hitting small boards in urban areas. Freeways are a different matter.

Most of our work was "corrections" and small alterations. We learned the hard way that what the BLF says about small pieces of paper is not just a good idea; it's a law of nature. We only tried to take over a whole board once. A dozen of us worked on it. It involved a tremendous racket, lots of work, and was a big failure. If we had scouted first we would have known that the beast was enameled metal. Our staple-guns and starch were useless. But at



least we got the letter size right. They closed off the access after our attempt. Oh well. Wish we'd had the BLF's manual then.

Unwilling to limit ourselves to existing "authorized" locations, we also hung banners—two large ones. Both were produced by others; we merely provided "technical assistance." One, strung across the last overpass before the toll plaza on the SF-Oakland Bay Bridge, was in honor of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Imitating a movie marquee it read "LEBANON—Featuring: A Casket of Thousands / A US-Israel Production." It went up at 6:30 a.m.; CalTrans crews took the cotton sheet & rope creation down in less than an hour, but not before countless people saw it. The other was done in support of a LAG blockade, and was a light paper/balsa sign that read simply "US Navy Supports the Livermore Blockade." Intrepid climbers were dropped off on Yerba Buena Island (a US Navy & Coast Guard property) at about 6:15 a.m. They climbed up and hung the banner above the tunnel for west-bound traffic. We had several cars, each making a quick automotive stop—with excuses ready—on the lower deck (east bound) periodically until the party was retrieved (or captured). The sign was quickly removed, but at least one AM radio DJ reported it, wondering idly if the Navy knew about it. A cautionary note here—we were very careful about these—if a sign comes crashing down on traffic it will be very counterproductive. Make sure the sign can be removed safely.

You want to be careful with stencils. One of us applied anti-nuke slogans to the labels of cans going to a local "national security" company. His boss called him in and told him that he had just finished reassuring the place's head of security that the person who had done it was fired (the FBI proved that the paint was applied before the labels were put on the cans). Fortunately for him, his boss had lied.

So, what's the point? Get out there and have fun! Spread the good word! Sometimes it's disheartening—you'll find that *lots* of people never look at billboards, and some people who do don't see what they really say. But billboard improvements are an alternative which subverts commercial and social space.

We hope to see your writing on the wall, real soon, everywhere!

And remember—Be careful; Be funny; Be audacious!

—Primitivo Morales

Aim High

Once upon a time there were five tree planters from a cooperative who, having worked very hard, took a vacation in Seattle. They saw a billboard which had a very phallic jet aircraft torqueing across the sign with the caption, "Aim High." So they did.

They went onto the board, measured it, and got color samples. They pasted red painted letters onto white butcher paper, got squeegees and other gear, and one evening rush hour they posted a person at one end of the freeway bridge next to the board, and another near an on-ramp in the other direction, all armed with walkie-talkies. The others wheat-pasted the paper onto the sign.

Most observers were amused. Others were hostile. One father-son team got out of their car and demanded that the crew *"Come down here right now!!!"* The young vandals explained that they just had a job to do and ignored these "Love it or Leave it" types. The traffic flow soon compelled the all-American duo to leave. Indeed, it was so heavy that even with immediate warning—cellular phones hadn't yet been invented—the cops would have taken minutes to arrive.

Within 15 minutes the sign was "corrected" and our heroes departed, leaving their spattered overalls and equipment in a friend's boat, which was anchored in one of the city's canals. To celebrate they went to a local bar, whose tinted windows turned out to have a commanding view of the scene of the crime. As they entered it was clear that virtually everyone had watched them; they were fingered. . . and the room broke into cheers.

They had relaxed for perhaps 20 minutes when the police arrived like gangbusters, looking for people to assist them in their inquiries. As no one had seen a thing, the cops left.

By noon the next day the board had been re-covered. It looked great. . . until the next winter rain, when the added letters showed through the wet paper. Next to "Aim High" were the words "Blow Up the Pentagon!"

—Med-o