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THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE - THE POWER OF PUBLIC POETRY

From empty swimming pools to old vans, Robert Montgomery takes the written word to the most physical of spaces. People like it so much, they've taken to getting tattoos of his work



Artwork by Robert Montgomery

He has been called a vandal, a street artist, a post-Situationist, a punk artist and the text-art Banksy. Scottish poet Robert Montgomery has consciously made an “awkward space” for himself in between artistic categories – and he thoroughly enjoys it. His work puts poetry in front of people in eye-catching visual formats: from advertising billboards he has covered with poems, to words he has set on fire or lit with recycled sunlight in public spaces – including the Sussex seafront and a Berlin airport. Recently, he has been working on today’s World Poetry Day “Pay with a poem” campaign, through which customers can get coffee in exchange for poetry in cafes across the globe. Montgomery will then collect the public’s poems to create an installation in a secret location.

Londoners might remember his striking white type and black background from poems he installed on Shoreditch billboards in the days of the anti-Iraq war protests. The frustration around the war going ahead despite millions-strong protests is what prompted him to “go outside at night alone”

to adorn his first billboard with a poem that started: “When we are sleeping,/ aeroplanes / carry memories / of the horrors / we have given / our silent consent to ...”

The texts tend to be lyrical, dreamy and almost optimistic. “I feel it’s a kind of responsibility to critique things that you think are bad – but I also feel an almost moral obligation to propagate hope,” he says. A new global crisis has propelled him to focus his work on climate change and collaborate with the Climate Coalition. “I think the ecological crisis we are facing is the major historical crisis of our time and our generation will be judged on it.”

By putting poetry in our faces, Montgomery hopes to bring it into the public discourse. “I’m interested in Roland Barthes’s idea that mythology is essentially a type of speech, and that speech defines a culture. Poetry can define the dominant languages we have in culture – and now those languages are advertising and the news media.”

Despite his art being displayed in the most physical of ways, he also approves of another kind of page-leaping phenomenon: the proliferation of “Instagram poets” who also, to a degree, mix the written word with careful visual presentations. “The internet is a wonderful medium for poetry,” he says. “I don’t think that was the idea of its creators, but it has been a really nice side-effect.” He celebrates the fact that self-publishing is becoming essential online, and that these peer-to-peer demographics mean poets garner audiences that “bring their work alive” before they get a chance to get published.

His work seems to have developed into the realm of inspirational quotes for fans, with his poems often popping up on their selfies, clothes, walls ... and bodies. “Getting institutional recognition is great, but someone getting tattooed is such a personal compliment. My studio is gathering some of the tattoo examples. After all, the goal of art is, for me, to communicate our innermost feelings to strangers.”

Montgomery’s work on London billboards has, on occasion, provoked run-ins with the law. He was put into the back of a police van after he pasted his Poem for William Blake on a billboard in Bethnal Green. “But I got into a conversation about literature and one of [the police officers] was really engaged with it. I guess it was a lucky experience. I think most people wouldn’t be averse to having a poem at the end of street instead of another Diet Coke ad.”