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Brandalism: Street artists hijack billboards for 'subvertising campaign'

Street artists are targeting advertising billboards in a new movement nicknamed 'brandalism'

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An article about an artist who sneaks around London plastering verses of poetry over advertising billboards published in The Independent earlier this year elicited huge interest, gaining more than 2.5K 'Likes' on Facebook and starting a social networking frenzy.

Among your comments were: "I love an intelligent response to advertising. Who asked the public if we want our faces filled with adverts as we walk the streets?" and "Hooray! More of this. Everyone should start doing this to adverts".

The relatively unknown artist responsible, Robert Montgomery from Scotland, seems to have struck a chord with readers. His verses were presented sparsely in black and white typography. They appeared overnight and passers-by, used probably to blanking out colourful sales images, either didn't notice at all, or stopped transfixed to read the poems.

A new movement of advertising artists have followed in Montgomery's wake. Nicknamed 'Brandalism', because it feeds into the graffiti versus vandalism debate, it has been taken up by artists in Britain, Australia and America and elsewhere. It is, like all street art, illegal. But street artists and graffitiists are boldly exploiting the convenient rectangular spaces which normally purvey L'Oreal products or the latest albums.

Twenty-six artists, including Montgomery, have now completed the world's first international collaborative "subvertising" campaign, hijacking 35 billboards across Leeds, Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol and London. They seek "to challenge the destructive impacts of the advertising industry" as well as to tackle its detrimental impact on issues such as body image, consumerism and debt. They are also, they say, responding to the riots last summer.

Bill Posters, who famously subverted a Nike advert of Wayne Rooney clutching shopping bags with the tagline, 'Just Loot It', says: "The advertising industry creates pressure when they manipulate our needs and desires. Pressure to have the latest gear, clothes and phones. This pressure erupted when kids took to the streets across the country to claim what they had been told that they needed."

"We're lab rats for ad execs who exploit our fears and insecurities through consumerism. I'm a human being, not a consumer. So by taking these billboards, we are taking these spaces back. If Sao Paulo in Brazil can ban all outdoor advertising, so can we".