

Outlaw graffitists are giving the megabuck outdoor advertising industry a bugger of a time

THE WAR OF WORDS

BY GREG HUNTER

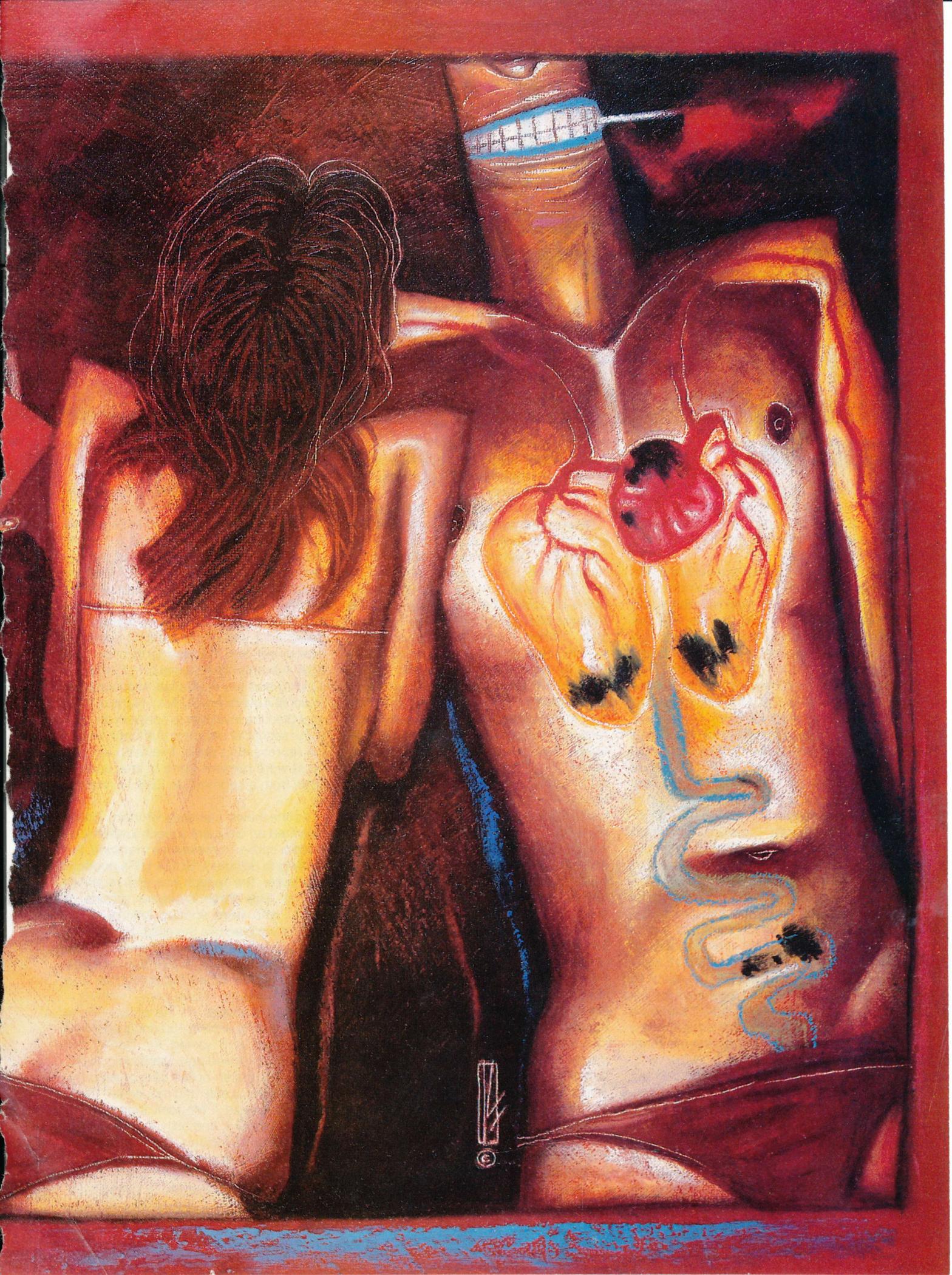
Dr Arthur Chesterfield-Evans used to work in Sydney in the field of industrial medicine. He had to treat a great many people who were, in his opinion, suffering from diseases related to smoking. Often he performed head and neck surgery on such people, using procedures which he describes as "very mutilating." In some cases, according to Dr Chesterfield-Evans, "you end up with a person who hasn't got a face any more." He also did a lot of arterial reconstructions on patients whose circulation had allegedly been clogged as a result of smoking. When that failed, the next step was amputation of the affected limb. In 1981, after six years of performing this work, Dr Arthur Chesterfield-Evans — a 30-year-old certified Yuppie and card-carrying member of the Liberal Party — began to transform, somewhat in the manner

of Dr Jeckyl, into a cigarette advertiser's version of Mr Hyde.

The metamorphosis did not occur overnight. First Arthur joined the Non-Smokers Movement and organised a campaign of letter-writing to politicians. The few replies he received amounted to "fatuous nonsense." At about that time he came into contact with Fred Cole, an activist attached to BUGA UP (Billboard Utilising Graffitists Against Unhealthy Promotions). He decided to join the ranks of these urban guerillas who'd been "refacing" billboards since 1979. "I recognised that the BUGA UP people had achieved more in three years than everyone else put together over 30 years. So then it became a question of whether I was going to accept \$50,000 a year for end-stage pathology of the victims, or get out and help those who were

ILLUSTRATION BY FRANTS KANTOR







THE WAR

getting to the root of the problem." When he took up a can of spray paint and made his first mark on a billboard cigarette advertisement, upwardly mobile Arthur became a criminal.

Because of his rather conventional upbringing, Arthur had to overcome an "emotional taboo" against damaging property. "I found I was only an effective graffitist when I was angry, and that was usually after someone had died. If I'd had a quiet night, I'd just go home." However, deaths were not infrequent on Arthur's late-night tour of duty (he'd left the hospital to do after-hours work for GPs). On one occasion, after he'd failed to revive a heavy smoker who was suffering from bronchitis, he "refaced" so many cigarette billboards that he ended up halfway across Sydney.

On August 21, 1982, the doctor's run of good fortune deserted him. "It was 10pm on a Saturday night — a stupid time to go bugging," he recalls. "But I had a couple of spray cans left in the car and I thought I'd just finish them off." While motoring through the Sydney suburb of Lewisham, Arthur spotted a Rothmans Extra Mild billboard which depicted a man and a woman smoking. Next to them, in large letters, were the words "MOVE UP." The billboard was not difficult to reach so Arthur didn't need an extension for his spray can. He carefully altered the word "MOVE" to "GIVE", then added a few more words. The doctored billboard read: "DARLING, LET'S GIVE UP AND SAVE MONEY."

As he finished his handiwork, Arthur poked his head above the gully he was standing in and saw a police car waiting at the traffic lights just a couple of metres away. It was an each-way bet as to who was more startled: "He sort of went: 'Fuck! It's a BUGA UP!' I wondered whether I should run away or not. I hadn't cased the area for an escape route. But then I

thought, well, why should I?"

The doctor stood his ground until, inevitably, he was asked: "What do you think you're doing, son?"

"I suppose I'm working," he replied.

Down at the station, Arthur was subjected to the "Smoothie and Crunchie" interrogation technique, labelled a "communist", and asked whether he thought he was a hero. During his four hours of confinement in the lock-up, the radicalisation of Arthur shifted into high gear: "When you see these guys happily pushing cigarettes, happily saying there's nothing wrong with them, and getting knighthoods for it, while for telling the truth you get dragged away and put in a cage and then hauled in front of the courts, it really brings home to you the difference between 'right and wrong' and 'legal and illegal.'"

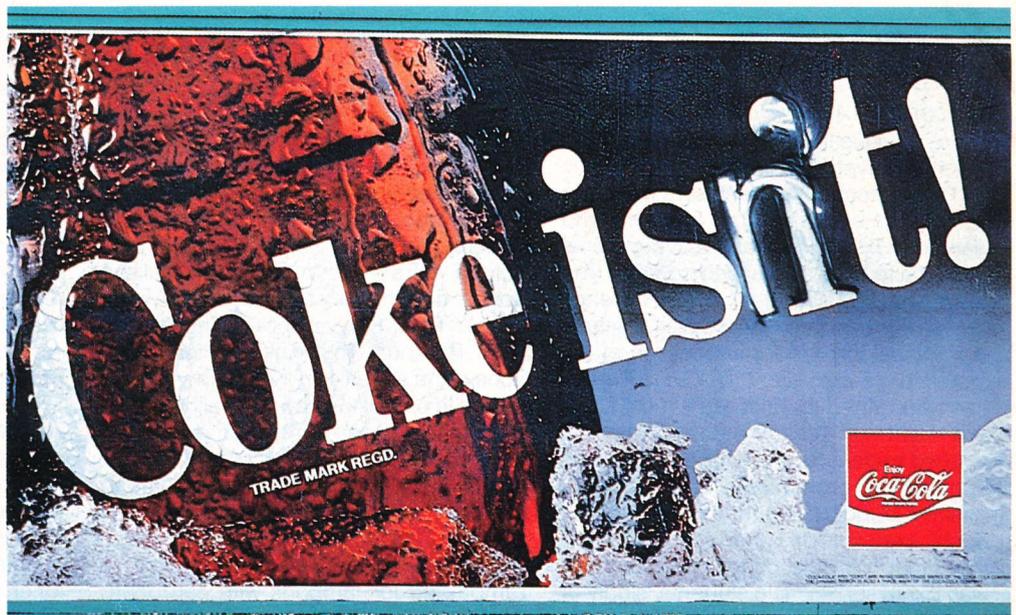
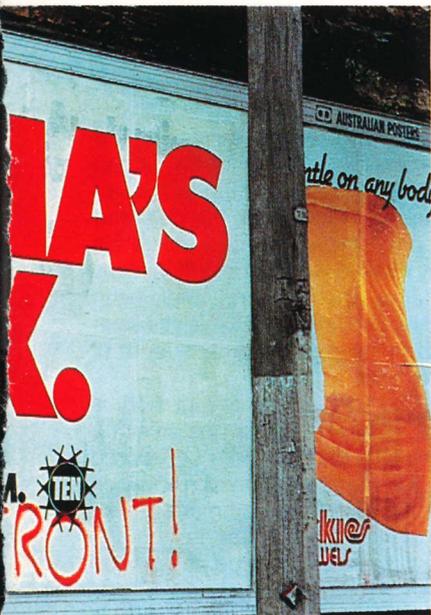
On September 7, 1983, Arthur faced a charge of "wilfully marking premises." Having admitted to refacing the billboard, he relied (as do most "BUGs" who are caught in the act) on the defence of necessity. His counsel argued that if Arthur had been arrested for damaging a truck that had been rolling out of control toward a group of children, the case would be dismissed on the grounds of necessity. The same principle, he said, applied in the case of the offending billboard. Two expert witnesses testified that cigarettes were highly addictive and that cigarette advertising encouraged children to smoke. After hearing all the evidence, Margaret Sleeman SM said that while she sympathised with the doctor's motives, she could see no evidence that his action had prevented any illness or death, and therefore the defence of necessity could not succeed. The magistrate imposed a token fine of \$20. When Arthur appealed to the District Court, the charges were dropped on the grounds that the billboard was not "premises" within the meaning of the relevant Act. "They were bugging around with a technicality, but

it's convenient for the courts because that way they don't have to confront the real issue," according to Arthur.

But the vigilante medico and his confreres in BUGA UP wanted an answer to the question: Are we criminals or are we not? So Arthur masterminded a "public refacing" of a billboard near the Sydney Cricket Ground on October 1, 1983, to which he invited all those responsible for the offending advertisement. The guest list included employees of the ad agency that designed it and of the tobacco company concerned, and the presidents of the Outdoor Advertising Association of Australia (OAAA) and the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA). None of them accepted the invitation to speak in defence of the sacrificial billboard. Although reporters representing radio, television and the press were present, none of their reports, apart from a segment on SBS TV, went to air.

As the news cameras whirred, Arthur delivered an eloquent speech justifying his colorful career in preventive medicine. According to *Billboarded*, BUGA UP's unofficial newsletter, the speech was also recorded by "at least three separate groups of 'spies' who were spotted lurking in the back of vans across the road, filming with telephoto lenses and shotgun mikes." Concluding his address, Arthur then climbed a ladder, brandished his spray can and wrote the words: "LEGAL DRUG PUSHERS — THE REAL CRIMINALS" on the poster. Many of the crowd of around 150 uncapped their spray cans and joined in. During the course of proceedings, according to Arthur, half a dozen police cars cruised by, observed the scene, and moved on. There were no arrests. "We took them on, we said how about it, and nothing happened." The metamorphosis of Dr Arthur Chesterfield-Evans was now complete.

Casually attired in jeans and a T-Shirt which read: "BURNSON & STENCHES SPECIAL KILLER — *When only the best*



will do you in" (\$8.50 from BUGA UP Non-Consumer Products Division), Dr Chesterfield-Evans told *Penthouse*: "As far as I'm concerned, the bloke who pushes cigarettes ought to be thrown in jail. To push a product that you know is going to kill a quarter of its daily users is a totally immoral act. The tobacco manufacturers and their advertisers need to be recognised as a mob of thugs."

People were writing various messages on billboards long before the acronym BUGA UP was coined. In 1979 three such people — Geoff Coleman, Rick Balzan and Bill Snow — had a chance meeting in Sydney and decided they should differentiate their activities from random vandalism. They began to sign their work "BUGA UP"; shortly afterwards the curiosity of thousands of Sydneysiders was satisfied when the acronym was spelled out on a blank billboard; and when the first court cases cranked up the wheels of publicity, the bouncing bastard BUGA UP had arrived.

The outfit's first major publication, the *Autumn Catalogue 1980*, provided instructions on how to reface billboards, urgently called for more "phantom sprayers", and spelled out the rationale of the founding BUGs: "There was just the recognition of a common aim: to combat the inhuman corporations who manufacture tobacco, alcohol, fast foods, soft (?) drinks etc, their sole aim being to profit from the sale of those unhealthy and wasteful products. . . . What we are trying to do with our graffiti is to expose the devices the advertisers are using to exploit us — demystifying their process. . . . It seems natural to use this system against itself."

BUGA UP is not seeking to ban the sale of "unhealthy" products. What they're on about is unhealthy *promotions* — that is, the advertising of "junk" or the misleading advertising of legitimate goods. In the simplest of terms, they have declared war on

bullshit.

BUGs stress that BUGA UP is not an "organisation" as such; there are no office-bearers and no members. Therefore nobody knows exactly how many Australians are in the habit of returning home from work, dining with the family, and then slipping out to bugger up a few carefully crafted messages from the outdoor advertising industry. Peter Vogel, BUGA UP's unofficial historian, says he could easily name 100 individuals who've made contact with BUGA UP around the country, adding: "I guess there must be several times that number out there who've never been caught." Six years after the movement's inception it has established a firm toehold in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, while Brisbane has recently witnessed a large upsurge in buggery; sporadic outbreaks have also occurred in Adelaide and Newcastle.

It's significant that unlike every other protest movement which springs to mind, BUGA UP is not merely a latter-day antipodean offshoot of some American or European notion. In fact BUGA UP is, ironically enough, as Australian as a meat pie and a can of Tooheys. The movement does have international appeal, however. Requests for literature have come from such unlikely places as Indonesia and Japan; New Zealand now has its own BUGA UP group; and the more politely titled COUGH UP (Citizens' Organisation Using Graffiti to Halt Unhealthy Promotions) has sprung up in England. When the first arrests were made there, the activists contacted BUGA UP to ask: "Okay, what do we do now?"

Dr Chesterfield-Evans provided some answers when he addressed an extremely conservative group of health professionals at the Second International Conference on Health Education and the Media in Edinburgh. He described the BUGA UP method as a "*civil disobedience and news creation model* drawing attention to health issues in a new way." The legal process

was a vital part of the campaign, because "The law is a relatively cheap way to get publicity. . . . It is not necessarily vital to win the case. . . . If publicity is generated and the conviction is based on a morality that is perceived to be absurd, the political and publicity consequences may still make it worthwhile. . . . If used intelligently, test cases can effectively change the law by changing the way it is interpreted."

In the six-year war of words between BUGA UP and the advertising industry, the BUGs have often abandoned guerilla tactics and locked horns with the enemy on open ground in their efforts to create news. These sporadic engagements have been nothing if not entertaining.

- In October 1981, the Philip Morris company offered "a \$25,000 reward for the Marlboro Man." The promotion required entrants to post a photo of themselves and state in 25 words why they should be deemed the Marlboro Man. Entrants didn't "have to look like a Newman or a Bronson" but should have a "strong and distinctly individual masculinity — that unique difference that personifies the flavor of Marlboro."

BUGA UP's entrant was Mr Frank C of Darlinghurst, Sydney. According to Dr Chesterfield-Evans, Frank C "knew all about cigarettes as he had lost [the use of] both his legs and most of his lung capacity finding out about them." Despite these setbacks, Frank continued to smoke through a hole in his neck — the result of a tracheotomy. According to Arthur, when Frank threatened to attend the judging, Philip Morris ferried journalists around in taxis to release the name of the winner at a private party. Shortly afterwards, the BUGA UP Marlboro Man appeared on the cover of the *Medical Journal Of Australia*, despite attempts by Philip Morris to prevent publication.

- In 1983 the Australian Association of National Advertisers distributed free to thousands of schools a booklet entitled *Un-*

THE WAR

derstanding Advertising. According to Vogel, "It gave the industry line about how essential advertising was to the economy and what great guys advertisers were. We got a lot of enquiries from teachers who wanted BUGA UP speakers and material on which to base a balanced course." The result was *AD EXPO — A Self-Defence Course For Children*. The BUGA UP teaching manual included a justification of the movement's activities ("BUGA UP have been described as Australia's most effective form of advertising regulation"), detailed explanations of what constitutes an "unhealthy promotion", examples of refaced billboards, and a series of students' exercises designed to reinforce the message. The most controversial of these was Exercise 14: "The students, singly or in pairs, analyse advertisements that they consider to be unhealthy or misleading. By 'refacing' the ads with paint, crayons etc they can change the picture or words to what they see to be the true message of the medium. Ask them to write up to 250 words on their reasons for picking that advertisement as unhealthy, and how the ad has been improved. Send the results to BUGA UP's AD EXPO project . . . If it is too large to post, a clear photograph will do."

The advertising industry took the bait hook, line and sinker, accusing BUGA UP of inciting children to flout the law. The result was extensive media coverage, aided by the response of the then NSW Minister for Consumer Affairs, Paul Landa, to a question without notice in the NSW Parliament asking for an urgent investigation. Landa sidestepped the question and stated: "I share a great deal of sympathy with [BUGA UP's] objective, but at times their means of achieving it seems to be somewhat dubious. I have no doubt they are people with fine intentions. . . ."

According to Peter Vogel, "We were very grateful to the ad industry for all this free publicity. It was a great success in the end."

• On October 20, 1984, BUGA UP staged "The 1984 Advertising Bogies" at the NSW Institute of Technology. The Bogies were masterminded by Peter Vogel: "It started when the ad industry published a catalogue of the previous year's award-winning ads, and all those we considered to be the worst won awards." The idea snowballed into a seminar at which 14 speakers including one advertising consultant spoke on the influence of advertising and methods of combating it. The climax of the event was the presentation of the Bogies. There were 20 categories, with the four finalists in each displayed on a screen and scored according to audience response on a "Bogeymeter." Categories included the Men In White Coats Award for bogus experts (won by an Electrolux ad

featuring Mr Jolly); the Informed Decision Award (winner: "Coke Is It"); the Advance Australia Award for exploiting patriotism (winner: a McDonalds ad in which Ayers Rock turns into a hamburger — "The Taste Of Australia"); the Sir Richard Kirby Award for breaking the most advertising regulations (winner: Tooheys 2.2 featuring Doug Walters); the Silliest Jingle Award (winner: Holden Astra — "I'm Glad I'm Civilised Now"); and the Most Inane Copy Award (winner: Peter Stuyvesant — "The International Passport To Smoking Pleasure"). None of the advertising industry invitees attended to collect their awards, although an anonymous person accepted the Advance Australia Award on behalf of McDonalds. The McDonalds ad was included among nominees for the Grand Bogey, but was tipped out on the Bogeymeter by the winner of the Personal Paranoia Award, a Tampax ad for tampons with cardboard applicators — "Life Would Be So Much

“The techniques we’re using are as effective as any that have been tried anywhere in the world.”

Simpler If You Didn't Have To Touch Yourself Internally."

Vogel sums up the event as "a riot — a complete circus. Once again, we owe the success of it to the ad industry because they tried to stop it from going ahead; we publicised that fact, and there was a lot of media debate as a result."

It's never easy to determine who's winning a protracted guerilla war. Both sides, naturally, claim imminent victory. BUGA UP accuses its opponents of a deliberate campaign of "disinformation and distortion." A spokesman for the Outdoor Advertising Association responds: "I'd say 99 percent of BUGA UP's claims are fabricated." Every argument, every statement, is met with an equally vehement denial. The media are in no position to referee this battle. They have their own interests to protect. So who's bullshitting and who isn't?

The following anecdote illustrates the difficulty in sorting fact from fiction. When told that he would not be allowed to "vet" this article, the OAAA spokesman requested anonymity on the grounds that he had a wife and kids and feared retaliation of

some sort. A couple of years back there had been alleged incidents of "firebombing" and attacks on private property such as cars and factories belonging to both advertisers and advertising agencies. The spokesman added: "Most of the ratbag element have since moved up to the hippie communes — living on the dole and smoking pot." However, he justified his caution by relating the story of a Rothmans representative who had supposedly been assaulted by two fanatical BUGs at a service station in the outer Sydney suburb of Bundeena back in 1982.

The BUGA UP version of that story is somewhat different. Under the heading "NEVER TRUST A DRUG PUSHER", *Billboard* reported that the altercation started when the two BUGs asked the Rothmans rep not to fix his cigarette ads to the front of the counter, since they would be at eye level for children. An argument ensued, whereupon "the service station owner lost his temper and told them that they had five minutes to get off his property. He then threatened one of them by aiming a petrol hose at his face, and when the other intervened, he punched her on the nose."

According to *Billboard*, the assault charges were actually laid by the BUGs, who were confident they'd win the case as a customer had seen the incident and would be called as a witness. However, the "witness" claimed he hadn't noticed what was going on and the service station owner alleged he'd been beaten about the head by one of the pair. The Rothmans rep collaborated his story. "As both the plaintiffs had 'criminal' records for billboard graffiti [one was Bill Snow, a founder of BUGA UP], the magistrate accepted the story of those fine, upstanding citizens who were 'just doing their job.'" Both BUGs were found guilty of trespass and one was found guilty of assault. They were fined and placed on bonds, the exercise costing them more than \$1000. *Billboard* added: "Considering that this money could have purchased 500 spraycans, they have learnt an important lesson about the cost-effectiveness of various forms of protest."

According to Peter Vogel, Bill Snow subsequently located a new witness and appealed against the conviction, but the appeal was not upheld. As to the general allegations of physical violence, he responds: "There may have been paint bombs thrown at cars covered in cigarette ads, but certainly never an attack by us on an individual. We could do that if we wanted to, but it's strictly forbidden. There have been more attacks and threats against BUGA UP people than vice versa."

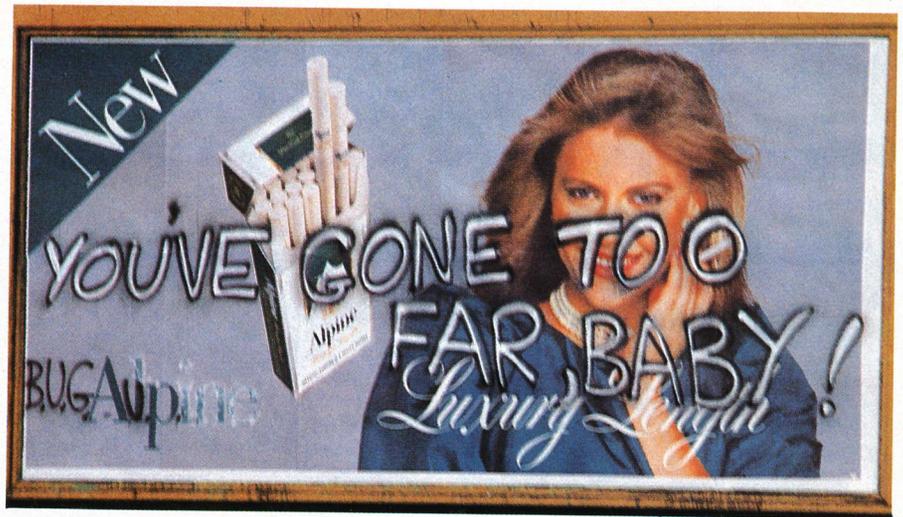
The latest of these was an alleged attack on BUGA UP activist Lachlan Partridge. On June 30 Partridge emerged from his grandmother's house in Sydney to find his car had been spray painted. He claims that on the way home a dark-colored Volvo sedan tried to run him off the road and into oncoming traffic.

On the question of who's winning this war of words, Dr Chesterfield-Evans is unequivocal: "I really believe we're the best. The techniques we're using are as effective as any that have been tried anywhere in the world. In terms of cost-effectiveness, no-one else has come up with anything like it."

But how is the "success" of BUGA UP going to be measured? As far as Vogel is concerned, the only real common goal is public exposure — keeping the issue alive. "There is good public awareness of who we are and what we are — as hard as the ad industry tries to deny it." And, as in any propaganda war, there's the claim that "the public is on our side." How did he substantiate that view? "Public support when we're out on the street and doing it. A few years ago you'd get a few people every night who'd abuse you, call you a 'vandal' and so on... Nowadays that might happen one night in ten. Most people are cheering and saying: 'Good on yer!'" Awareness of public sympathy, according to Vogel, had led the OAAA to launch an abortive anti-vandalism campaign back in 1981 which intended to portray BUGA UP as criminals. The last ad in the four-part campaign was to have been directed at billboard buggerers, but the whole thing was called off at stage one after BUGA UP countered the message: "VANDALISM IS A CRIME — SPEAK UP AND CALL THE POLICE" by spraying every available billboard with this response: "DRUG PUSHING IS A CRIME — SPEAK UP AND CALL THE POLICE... OR BUGA UP."

Our spokesman for the OAAA isn't having any of this: "BUGA UP are perceived, frankly, by the public as vandals. Our research — and the figures are constant over the last ten years — shows that around 74 percent of people like outdoor advertising. I would think if someone was to ask what people thought of BUGA UP it would be somewhere in the high nineties against what they're up to. But they make these outrageous claims about public support. What research have they done? None to my knowledge." BUGA UP claims to be funded entirely by donations and by the individuals in the movement. Peter Vogel says he personally outlaid several thousand dollars, for example, on production of color posters of BUGA UP handiwork. Would it be reasonable to expect BUGA UP to blow their cash on market research? "Well, I find their claim that they don't have funding very strange," responds the ad man, "because there's an awful lot of money that seems to end up in their basket for promotion and printing and so on, and a lot of it seems to have come through government channels, mostly indirectly... They're not getting the surveys done because they know they're on weak ground."

For the most part, the field of battle has been the courtroom... and that's where the BUGs are claiming imminent victory.



The defence of necessity has not worked in Australia as yet; of the 40-odd cases that have been fought so far, about 50 percent have been thrown out on technicalities or lack of evidence, the rest resulting in fines. But according to the BUGs, the precedent they've been seeking for years is just around the corner... and that, they reckon, will mean the beginning of the end for the outdoor advertising industry. "When BUGA UP started, that proposition was not on," says Vogel. "But the whole scene is changing and judges are now saying, in some cases: 'I agree with what you're doing but I have to find you guilty.'"

The advertisers aren't wearing that, either. Their claim is that, far from a tendency toward leniency, the courts are getting tougher on billboard buggerers. According to John Dollison, Chief Executive Officer of the Tobacco Institute of Australia, "There was a period — around 1982 — when the courts appeared to be more lenient. They were getting off on technicalities. But I would say the fines are getting larger and attitudes are hardening."

Not so, says Peter Vogel. He claims police are reluctant to tangle with BUGs because they know it will mean several days of tedious argument in court, with appeals stretching on for years — all for the sake of a lousy \$50 fine. "I think the most telling thing is that while our activities have been increasing all the time, arrests have been decreasing. There were about 40 arrests during the first few years and in the last two there've been virtually none."

As to the ultimate effect of BUGA UP on the outdoor advertising industry, Vogel proclaims: "If they'd voluntarily agreed five years ago not to have cigarette and alcohol billboards, the whole thing would have gone away; there aren't enough people out there who feel strongly enough about the other issues. So the whole industry has a small minority of advertisers to blame for what's coming."

No way, says the ad man. "They would love for BUGA UP to be made a bigger deal than what it is, but I can only see them disappearing in the future because they're going to run out of frontline troops. For



them to think they're going to have the laws changed — well, that's crazy."

If you get the impression the protagonists in this conflict couldn't agree on the outcome of a tossed coin, you're right. The ad industry claims self-regulation is its strongest defence against misleading ads; the BUGs describe the administration of the industry's Voluntary Codes by the Advertising Standards Council as "just a joke... a complete farce." The cigarette companies reckon there is no "conclusive proof" that smoking is damaging to health, conceding only a "statistical correlation" between smoking and disease, but no causal connection between the two; the BUGs endorse the opinion of the Chairman of the Federal Public Service Board, Dr Peter Wilenski, who recently proclaimed: "If the tobacco industry were marketing sex, they would claim that its association with pregnancy was only a chance statistical correlation." And so on...

For the millions of bemused observers, this curious form of entertainment continues to be supplied free of charge — buoyed up by a motley collection of fly-by-night BUGA UP offshoots, all of which have no doubt resulted from an appreciation of the sweet symmetry of turning the enemy upon itself at the enemy's expense. We've witnessed the rise and subsequent decline of the BLF (Billboard Liberation Front, an outfit who recently rang a Sydney radio station to announce they'd kidnapped a billboard and would desist from "writing something on it" in exchange for a ransom); BANG (Billboard Anti Nuclear

Continued on page 152