

The moving finger

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If it's witty is it a crime? DAVID DALE spraypaints himself into a corner on the ethics of graffiti

IF YOU'RE travelling in a Sydney train this weekend, you may notice at the end of your carriage a small sign that says: "At night, rave near the guard's compartment, naked with a blue light." Finding this an unusual recommendation when I saw it the other day, I approached the sign and discovered that a few delicate dabs of white-out had transformed it from an intended suggestion that passengers should travel near the guard's compartment marked with a blue light. It was an example of a branch of the graffitist's art which we might call alterati.

Since then I've seen the same invitation in several other carriages, which suggests that the artists responsible were so proud of their wit that they have gone around repeating the performance. It's certainly a great leap forward on the most popular form of alterati in my childhood - a little job with a razor blade that made those yellow bus poles seem to display the invitation "PIS STOP". I find I am unable to condemn the perpetrators for trying to bring a chuckle into the life of the city commuter.

The standard bearers for meaningful messages in the 1980s were an elusive band called **BUGA UP** (Billboard Utilising Graffitists Against Unhealthy Promotions). While others simply swirled with the newly available technology of the spray can, the **BUGA UP** people transformed advertisements.

"New Mild and Marlboro" became "New Vile And A Bore". "Rothmans King Size" became "Rot Man Lung Size". Even the government health warning was not immune - it vanished entirely, to be replaced with "Accepting tobacco sponsorship is hazardous to your integrity".

In the early '90s, **BUGA UP**'s torch passed to feminist alteratists who added the letters "in" to the word bra in the slogan "We think more about what goes into your bra than your boyfriend". They were charged with vandalism when they added the phrase "Even if you're mutilated" to the slogan "You'll always feel good in Berlei" on a billboard showing a woman being sawn in half. In January 1993, the magistrate Pat O'Shane refused to record a conviction against the graffitists, on the ground that their addition to the billboard was a legitimate response to an ad that made light of violence against women.

So we can sum up the traditional justifications for graffiti: antiquity, celebrity, humour, religious fervour and political passion. Can I now suggest we add the word "subtlety" to that list? If graffiti are an inescapable part of the cityscape, we can only hope that the Age of the Spray Can is about to be replaced by The Age Of The Little Bottle of White-out.

(Excerpt from a longer article)