

TORONTO

Doctored billboards make a statement

Artist's covert work turns urban ads into something to talk about

BY BERT ARCHER

If you were at Dundas West subway station this week, you might have noticed a billboard making a stronger-than-average statement about George W. Bush.

Instead of an unflattering picture of the U.S. President beside the words "Don't read enough?" — part of an ad campaign for an audiobook company — a picture of outspoken Bush opponent, rapper Kanye West, appeared next to him with the line: "Isn't Kanye an A-Rab name?"

Working under the alias fauxreel, which is also the name of his "photo-based creative studio," the man responsible for these and seven other billboard manipulations over the past year is Dan Bergeron. He believes it is unfair that only people with money get to have their say on billboards, although he sees his work more as professional development than an attack on advertising culture.

"I've done a lot of art shows, worked with ad agencies, but I've never worked with billboards," Mr. Bergeron said. "It's a way to get experience."

Unlike the culture-jammers of a decade or so ago who used similar methods to turn ads into attacks on advertisers and corporate culture, Mr. Bergeron said he is not "disrespecting" the billboard ads.

"I'm not trying to make myself out as someone who is against big corporations," he said. Quite the opposite. "I'm kind of reaffirming how powerful the ads are."

Mr. Bergeron, who has also altered billboard ads for ING Direct and Stella Artois, said he chooses his targets for purely practical and aes-



TIBOR KOLLEY/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Dan Bergeron tampered with this billboard on Roncesvalles Avenue, north of Bloor Street, to take a dig at U.S. President George W. Bush.

thetic reasons. "I look for how the space is used on the billboard, how much white space there is."

Asked how he does it, he demurred, saying an artist has to maintain an air of mystery. But the scale of the work, as well as the busy downtown locations in which he does it, has made many curious.

He tells a story about watching billboard workers fix his last project. After he identified himself as the responsible party, "they had just as many questions about how I did it as you did." He said they "shared

some trade secrets."

Mr. Bergeron did reveal that he does it alone, with no one on lookout, and an entire billboard costs him \$50 or less.

Pattison Outdoor, the billboard firm responsible for the audiobooks.ca ads, had no comment, and CBS, whose billboards have also been subject to Mr. Bergeron's tampering, did not return phone calls.

But as far as audiobooks.ca is concerned, it's pretty much no harm, no foul.

"We heard about it pretty quickly," said Sanjay Singhal, marketing manager for the Oakville-based international audiobook sales and rental company. "It's already got a fair degree of blog exposure."

News of a second, more provocative billboard reached him a little later.

That one, a slightly less central billboard in the same campaign, was altered with the same photo layout mocked up with the text, "Kanye, you's my nigga!"

"Then I had a reaction, which

was, 'Oh my God! I hope this doesn't reflect on us,'" Mr. Singhal said. "My fear is that people will make the connection between that picture of Bush, which is associated with us, and associate it with the language on the second one."

The company simply had the billboard firm change the ads back.

"I hesitate to say [Mr. Bergeron is] brilliant because I don't want to promote this kind of stuff," Mr. Singhal added. "But if it was our own ad agency that did it, I'd think it was pretty good."