

Companies strike back at billboard tampering

'CULTURE JAMMING'

Repair crews quick to restore intended messages

BY JOSHUA ERRETT

On June 8, an altered billboard at the corner of Spadina and Adelaide could have been the subject of some debate — had it lasted more than two days.

The Stella Artois advertisement that normally adorns the outdoor sign had been rearranged into a commentary on the price of gas. But before the altered billboard could be admired for its artistic merit or reviled for its brash vandalism, the original Stella Artois advertisement was restored.

And after a two-month renaissance of such billboard tampering in Toronto, it appears the outdoor advertising industry has perfected its counterattack against the decades-old practice known as "culture jamming" to some — and elaborate vandalism to others.

"Billboard companies have guys driving around the city looking for billboards that have been changed," says Fauxreel, the artist/vandal who takes credit for skewing the Stella billboard but would not give his real name. "Now, that's just part of the game."

According to Fauxreel, the mangled Stella Artois advertisement only survived 43 hours before a production crew from CBS Outdoor came to restore the original ad.

"I personally have done eight billboards in the last few months," Fauxreel says. "That was the fastest that one's been changed back."

In the beginning of Fauxreel's streak, he says the altered billboards would stay up for two weeks at a time, with one altered billboard at Dundas and Scarlett Road remaining intact for 15 days.

But as his billboard altering became more frequent and visible, advertising companies such as CBS Outdoor began to take note.

"I watched them change the ad back," Fauxreel says. "I talked to them about it. They thought it was funny, but obviously had to change it back."

But the quick reaction from CBS Outdoor — who did not return calls by press time — could also be seen as an overreaction by some.

"I think these ad companies worry too much about [billboard defamation]. It's a way of drawing attention to their advertisement," says Andrew Potter, an outspoken critic of billboard altering and author of *Rebel Sell: Why the culture can't be jammed*.

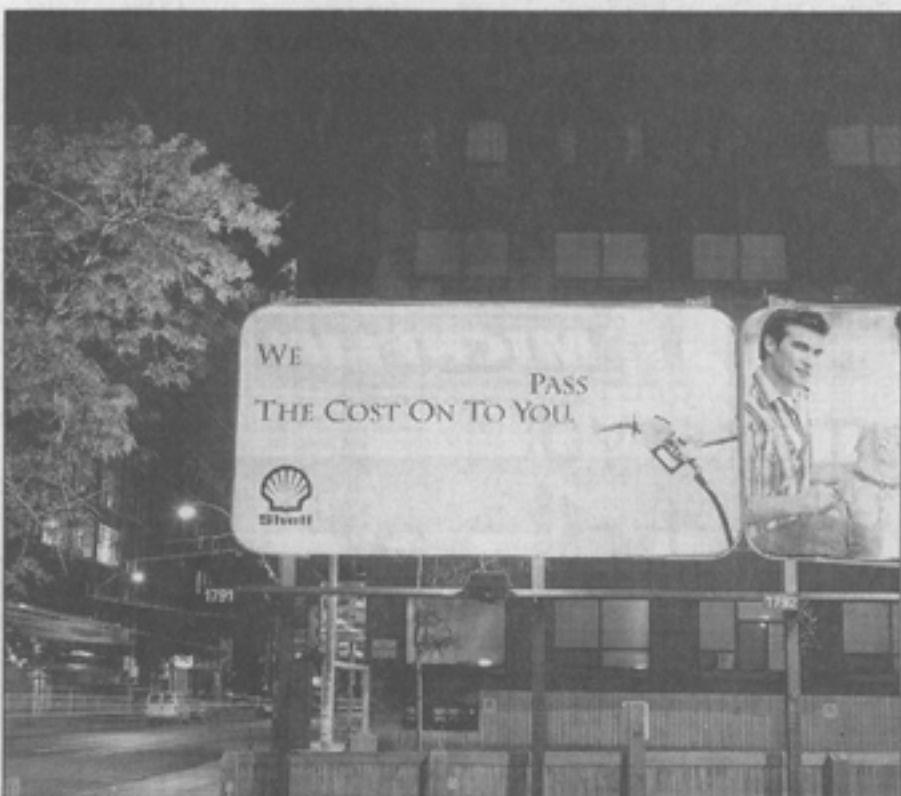
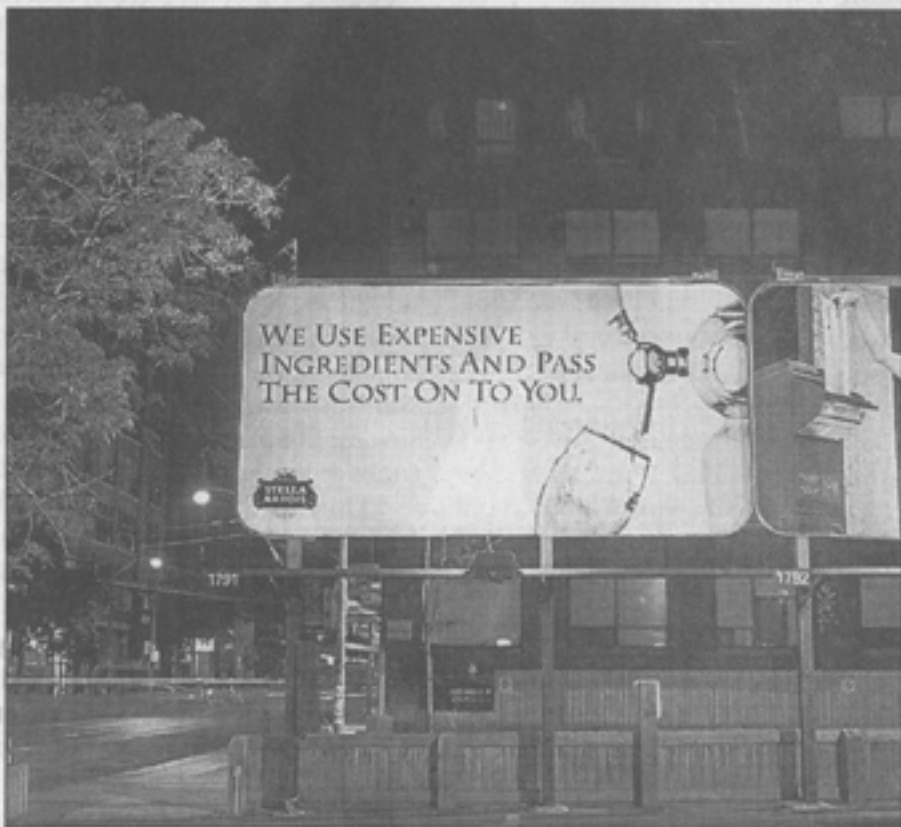
Mr. Potter said the practice of altering billboards is so much in favour of the advertisement that much of it is either funded by the ad industry or built-in to the ad.

"There are already ad companies defacing their own billboards," he says. "It gives an indie credibility to the ads, and it plays to the anti-ad chic."

While Mr. Potter agrees that companies such as CBS Outdoor could lose business if billboards were not promptly restored after they've been altered, he believes there is no negative effect on consumers.

"There's the mistaken idea that it somehow jams consumerism," he says. "But all it does is exacerbate consumerism and deface property."

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A Stella Artois billboard, top, at the corner of Spadina and Adelaide was rearranged into the above commentary on the price of gas.