

Billboards: Larry Sultan

Beginning in 1973 we worked together on open ended allusive designs for outdoor advertising billboards, mostly in the San Francisco Bay Area, where we lived, but sometimes exhibited in other parts of the country as a part of a workshop that we would lead with graduate students, or as part of an exhibition on appropriation or public art. With the billboard we wanted to reach a larger and more varied public than would ever find its way into an art institution. As in the case of Evidence, our understanding has always been that the context of the information, in this case an advertising context, conditions the way information is perceived. We chose billboards because we wanted to exploit, subvert, and expose the strategies of advertising to as wide an audience as possible.

One of our first billboards was Oranges on Fire (1974-75) whose title was included on the billboard next to a drawing of bare, muscular arms that held, in fact, flaming oranges. Although the message was enigmatic and had no commercial meaning, we found that people wanted to relate to it as an advertisement. Many viewers thought that it was a “teaser ad”, one that stimulates curiosity by naming an upcoming product without providing any other information. In “We Make You Us” the text is presented as a fragment of a larger partly hidden text. But the text that is able to be read suggests the frightening message of what cigarette and other advertisers are willing to do to us in order to sell their products. This message is juxtaposed with images of four smokers, two men, two women, printed in heavy inked black and white, each holding the cigarette as a object of pleasure, even sexual fetish. By recognizing and working within the structure of the language of advertising we have been able to adapt these highly sophisticated devices for communication in order to subvert the expectation of the ad and transmit our own messages.