

# A SUBVERTISING HISTORY

## 1 BC

Roman dwellers of Pompeii, excited or upset by certain gladiatorial battles, add personal responses to 'adverts' promoting the events.

## 1958

The *Situationist International*, a group of intellectuals and artists, launch their inaugural journal in which they discuss the concept of 'détournement' as the integration of artistic production into cultural spheres (including advertising) in order to denounce their validity.

## 1968

Employing paint markers and spray paint, protesters during the May demonstrations and strikes express their frustration with advertising and consumerist logics on billboards across the Parisian streets and underground system.

## 1973

Jean-Jacques Michel and Victor Schwach publish 'Le détournement d'affiches', the first academic paper on subvertising. In the paper, the authors analyse the meaning of the May 1968 subvertising actions.

## 1977

Emergence of the first subvertising collective: *Billboard Liberation Front*. The BLF, based in San Francisco, uses paint and graffiti to expose and ridicule corporations.

## 1979

The group *Billboard Utilising Graffitists Against Unhealthy Promotions*, a collective of artists, activists and medical professionals, starts attacking cigarette and alcohol advertising on the streets of Sydney.

## 1980

Keith Haring moves from painting and drawing into the illicit realm of New York subvertising, first by painting over a jeans advert, reversing its meaning, then more famously, and two years later, by drawing his infamous characters in white chalk across subway advertising spaces.

## 1982

Jill Posener publishes 'Spray it loud', the first book dedicated to subvertising. The book showcases a large amount of humorous graffiti interventions into billboards that display the sexist underpinnings of particular advertisements and consumer society more broadly.

## 1989

The anti-consumerist magazine *Adbusters* publishes its first issue. The magazine prints its own mock adverts, revealing the horrors of certain corporations and capitalist economics more broadly.

## 1990

*Billboard Liberation Front* publishes 'The Art and Science of Billboard Improvement', the world's first subvertising how-to manual.

New Jersey art collective *ArtLux* collaborate with the artist Ron English paste their large-scale posters over billboards in an attempt to hijack the meanings of corporate and state messages.

## 1991

Reverend Michael Phleger, realising that Chicago's minority communities contained disproportionate number of alcohol and tobacco advertisements in comparison to white neighborhoods, splattered red paint on billboards. He went on trial and was acquitted. Reverend Phleger followed in the footsteps of Reverend Calvin O. Butts who conducted similar subvertising in Harlem a year earlier.

Mark Dery coins the term 'subvertising' in an *Adbusters* article, describing it as 'subvert[ing] advertising's attempts at directing the consumer's attention in a particular direction'.

The organisation *Résistance à l'Aggression Publicitaire* (Resistance against the aggression of advertising), also known as 'antipub', is founded by media theorist François Brune, writer René Macaire and artist Yan Gradis. Using subvertising, they confront the advertising industry and its multiple socio-economic effects. In the decades that follow, antipub collectives spread across France and Belgium.

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The subvertiser *EPDS257* publishes a visual guide to creating anti-advertising paint bombs using light bulbs.

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## 1993

New York-based graffiti writer paints his pseudonym *K4iv5* onto a billboard in New Jersey.

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In Berlin, the artist *Zévs* cuts out model from billboard in what he calls a 'visual kidnapping', asking a 500,000 € ransom from the attacked advertiser.

Throughout the entirety of the year, the New York subvertising initiative *Art in Ad Places* collaborates with a variety of artists to install weekly phone booth posters. The posters range from political manifestos, to abstract paintings and subversions of particular corporate advertisements.

Hacked billboard in Cardiff displays swastikas and messages about 'Shanah law'.

*Brandalism* launches the most extensive manual to date, offering suggestions about the keys, clothing, and attitude required for undertaking subvertising successfully.

Artists and activists in California illegally disassemble billboard structures to turn them into shelters for the local homeless population.

*Subvertisers International* launches a call to participate in a global subvertising action. Subvertisers from Buenos Aires, Brussels, Berlin, London, Lisbon, Mexico, Melbourne, Paris, Stockholm, Warsaw, Tehran and cities across the United States part-take in the coordinated actions.

In Italy, the artist *Hogre* is charged with 'Public Offense to Religion' over a satirical bus shelter subvertisement depicting an aroused Jesus and stood in front of a young boy, in response to the charges of sexual abuse in the Vatican.

*Special Patrol Group* organises bi-monthly 'how to hack advertising' workshops in London. The workshop also offers what the collective calls 'Ad Hack Packs', fitted with keys opening one third of bus shelter advertising spaces across the world.

Following a deadly shooting in a Florida school, the artist collective *Indecline* paints over a billboard promoting a shooting range, altering its text into 'Shoot a school kid, only \$29'. A few months later, the same collective take-over of a billboard in California with the text "We make kids disappear" - I.C.E.", in a critique of the separation of migrant children from their families by the US immigration agency.

Across Brazil, billboards of far-right politician Jair Bolsonaro are assaulted with 'paint bombs' and set on fire as he runs for and attains presidency.

New subvertising collectives are started in Wellington, Barcelona, Lyon, and other major cities across the globe.

## 2003

In Paris, hundreds of subvertisers, under the common pseudonym 'Robert Johnson', paint over advertisements in multiple metro stations using brushes and paint bombs. A trial is organised against 62 of the alleged 'vandals'.

## 2004

Kylee Magee paints over his first billboard in Melbourne. It is the first of many subvertising acts, always under the pseudonym 'Robert Johnson', that would eventually lead to the organisation Democratic Media Please, an organisation that removes advertising from public space in order to confront corporate control over the media landscape.

*Bill Posters* installs his first hand painted '48 sheet' billboard subvertisement in Liverpool, UK.

Creation of the *Collectif des Débouloonneurs*: a Parisian subvertising group known for painting graffiti slogans onto advertising spaces.

The infamous street artist *Banksy* writes the words 'The joy of not being sold anything' on an empty billboard in London.

The *Cut Up Collective* starts appearing on the streets of East London. Their method, unsurprisingly, is to select and cut up a billboard poster into thousands of pieces ('pixels'), reassembling the pieces into an entirely novel poster, which is then, in turn, installed on the original billboard space.

Launch of the Argentinian collective *Proyecto Squaters*. The collective is a self-proclaimed counter-advertising group known for painting over, writing over, or crossing out the texts and images of advertising to subvert their messages and bring to light what advertisements commonly hide.

The London-based artist *The Decapitator* 'beheads' models on outdoor advertisements by pasting his own digital prints of a decapitated head over the original heads.

The first recorded digital billboard hack. The process exposed by *Tottenkopff*, the hacker herself, during the hacking conference Defcon.

'Close window' buttons, recognisable from online pop-up advertisements, are pasted on billboards and bus shelter advertisements across France by the *Pop Down Project*.

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## 2009

The *New York Street Ad Takeover project*, organised by the New York subvertiser Jordan Seiler, paints over 20,000 feet worth of advertising space in largest collective subvertising campaign to date.

Prague-based subvertiser *EPDS257* extends his previous paint ball attacks on billboards, produces a homemade paint cannon to create 'abstract paintings'.

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## 2011

Following on from its New York edition, Jordan Seiler organises the *Madrid Street Ad Takeover* project, installing 106 posters designed by an international group of artists in bus shelters across the city.

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## 2012

The subvertiser *Vermibus* attacks the fashion industry with his 'dissolving' of the models on fashion adverts. Many similar interventions take place in the years that follow.

*Brandalism* launches with the world's largest subvertising campaign, taking over 36 large billboards with artworks from 28 countries addressing the social, economic and environmental effects of advertising.

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## 2013

On the 25th of March, the subvertising group *Collectif des Débouloonneurs* wins a court case launched against them for writing graffiti over billboards and bus shelter advertising. The judge deemed their actions to be protected under a 'freedom of speech' and 'reason of necessity' defence.

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## 2015

On the day when most people return to work after their Christmas holiday, London-based subvertising group *Special Patrol Group* takes over London Underground advertising spaces with quotes from anthropologist David Graeber pointing out how, under capitalism, most jobs are 'bullshit jobs'.

Jordan Seiler launches *Public Access*, an online platform where anyone can buy keys that open the advertising spaces in their part of the world.

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