

 **Strathclyde  
Transport**

**Bellgrove**

**BI**





The **Bellgrove Station Billboard Project** was initiated by **Alan Dunn** Glasgow in 1990. It stands up as an imaginative model of an artists initiative in the area of temporary public art. At the outset, the project set itself an open brief: artists proposals should take into consideration the context of the station, work with minimal resources to produce original artworks for a purposefully built billboard measuring 20 feet by 5. The project ran from September 1990 to August 1991 and involved 17 artists. All the work ran for one month, except for June, which involved three weekly placements. Because of the financial restraints (each project

working with a budget of £20), all the works were handpainted rather than industrially produced in multiples. In this sense, they differ from many other billboard project which mimic the dominant imagery and language of advertising.

In September 91, the panel was dismantled and removed thus returning the site to its original condition. In the following interview, participating artist, **Craig Richardson**, spoke to the project initiator **Alan Dunn** about the issues involved. The interview took place in May 1991, 9 months into the project.

# LLBOARD

## Project

**CR** Can you describe the physical location of the billboard, or the plaque as I prefer to call it, and the use of the station?

**AD** Bellgrove may be considered a geographical threshold, the boundary between a so-called city centre and a peripheral area of Glasgow in the Eastern area, the junction between the industrial and residential areas. Bellgrove was once a focus of industry and commerce, but now apart from commuter usage, the station has three main functions, access to: Celtic football ground, the unemployment office and a second hand car lot. The people who pass along this line are usually travelling home and the billboard is suited to reading from the platform and from the trains. The station is at low-level and very well concealed from the street. Once through the narrow entrance you step down into the sunken platform and the 'real world', the noise, the street gradually recedes. It's very quiet on the platform itself.

**CR** That the station is unmanned is a crucial factor in the experience of the place. There definately is an atmosphere of threat and isolation.

**AD** It has been a kind of no-go area for non-passengers for many years now. Apart from the physical evidence of crime - recently one part of the station was burnt down - there is something perceptible in the air, which seems to be reflected in the way people stare at the retaining wall which is dark and overpowering as opposed to looking south to the new green area and private housing. There's some connection between that wall, the panel, the live wires: there is a threatening undertone.

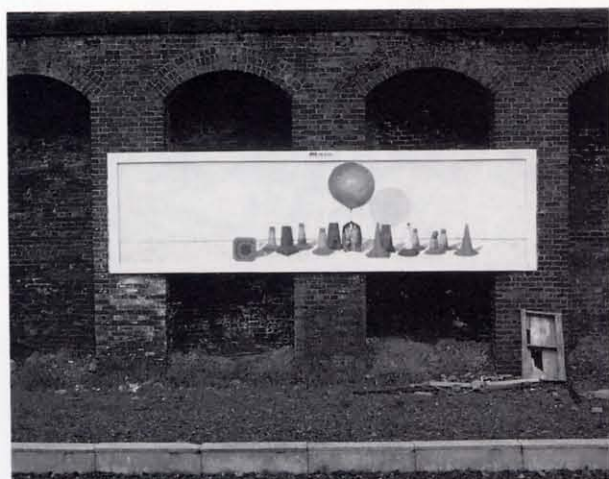
**CR** None of the works are visibly optimistic, they dwell on the social structure of the site and have picked up on the repressive politics of the situation, apparent in the decaying architecture, the constant interruption of services and of course the fatal train accident of two years ago in which two people were killed. In this context it would be patronising to offer 'solutions', indeed the collaborative work by **James Kelman** and **Alex Dempster** deliberately reflected the urban squalor of the place and in this way could be seen as 'protest'. Is it possible the artists are fortuitously adding to the repressive atmosphere?

**AD** There is a danger of the artists exploiting the drama of the place, responding to the threat, secure that they do not need to use this line everyday. The work by Kelman/Dempster, for example, seemed to be more about a *type* of situation, and it thrived upon being placed in surroundings where a perception of threat or repression is conceivable, although Kelman's 'urban panic' references did encourage very specific and local relationships to be made.

**CR** Most billboard projects attempt a Trojan-horse entrance into the world through pre-existing structures. Are you critical of these projects that are not dependant upon the physical reality of their sites, where for instance a **Willie Doherty** is shown in similar urban sites across the country and replicates the conventional billboard advertising process with accidental juxtapositions of art, advertising and events occuring in a hit-and-miss fashion?

**AD** I've done it myself over the years. Billboard projects do need





a new set of values not based upon how many cities they tour to. This project is site-specific. A relationship is built from one work to the next although work placed alongside commercial billboards can throw up some interesting juxtapositions, like a Les Levine work beside a 'Rambo' film poster.

**CR** None of the works so far have come from the 'community'. Artists have superimposed their imagery upon the site while they might be said to be exploiting it. What about the moral dimension to public art?

**AD** First of all, the community here is not residential. It is a community determined in terms of commuting rather than in any close-knit geographical grouping. Secondly, there's no consultation on my part with the local community because I'm part of that community in terms of commuting. As long as I'm involved in the production of every work through site visits or collaboration and discussion of ideas, I'm a 'clearance' for anybody involved in the project. As a member of that community that has initiated the project and invited certain artists, I'm not an outsider. Admittedly, others from different backgrounds in terms of profession, birthplace, age and so on, have been selected to respond to the specific situation.

**CR** It is difficult to find a common consensus anyway, although problems can arise for artists when there is no direct consultation. In the hearings to withdraw Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* from its New York site his lawyer argued that if you let one community decide what happens on their doorstep then you must let all decide and that could lead to anarchy: paradoxically public art defended as private property and affirming the values of private property. Whether dealing with or avoiding it, all public art highlights the use, control and ownership of the land/locale it resides in. The one thing that is effective about a billboard in that area, aside from the specific, is that it means someone is thinking about the place who isn't a commuter or overseer. **Anne Quinn** and **Peter Gilmour's** collaborative work, for instance, gave a textual identity to the site, although in a different way from the platform signs.

**AD** In response to signs dealing exclusively with text, like street names, they tried to make an equivalent in image, with no text. They selected an anonymous image of a family unit, a universal type.

**CR** It's like a piece of letraset, a symbol, a directional sign . . .

**AD** A symbol very quickly understood, like an airport type signifier, but also a symbol to indicate ownership. I have had discussions with them about the psychology of the platform as to where certain groups of people stand on it. Family groups, people with kids or prams do not tend to go too far up the platform and don't stray too far from the bottom of the entrance stairs.

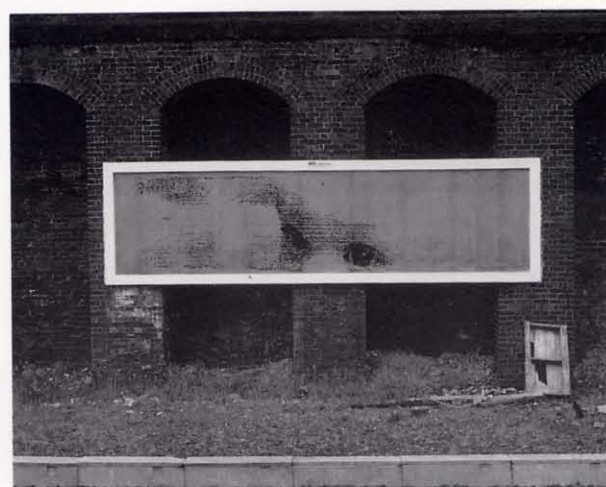
**CR** The image looks like a happy family of consumers on their way to shop.

**AD** The piece is quite tongue-in-cheek with the notion that if you don't have anything else then you always have your family. The area beyond the platform, Dennistoun and Parkhead, has always been quite strong on the 'following generations' and many generations stay in one single area. Although newcomers have started to move in, it has always been a family oriented area and they are making a comment on that by picking a stereotype of that community and by using a colour that has multiple references, a deep blue that has always been used by Scotrail to signify their property. It resonates with 'this is a commercial production'. Each work has to survive for thirty- one days, to get enough multiple references to retain interest, which makes Thomas Lawson's piece quite interesting in that it played on an event that was going to take place - a football match - to revive its intent.

**CR** His work is a highly structured image of police in silent consultation, assured of their authority overseen and sanctioned by the State, in this case symbolised by a lion from the George Square Cenotaph. This contained grouping is usually present in places where crowds congregate and it suggests that the security the police offer both protects and intimidates simultaneously. It could be seen as a metaphor for the entire situation.

**AD** The only time the station is officially manned by Scotrail is in conjunction with Strathclyde Police on the occasion of Celtic football games, which have their own history of crime and fiction in the area.

**CR** Through the working structure of the project, you have avoided the necessity for artists to gain permission to make works which criticise those who 'permit' the project to take place. Do you think you have side-stepped an important aspect in the placement of work, the process of persuasion? Had Scotrail known Tom Lawson would be disparaging of the police do you think they would have been willing to let it appear?



Alan Dunn





Ross Sinclair

**AD** There weren't any restrictions in the project's brief. Interference is preferable to blunt condemnation otherwise it would probably result in the termination of the project, although the work by **Ross Sinclair** for May was considered by the billboard company as 'too political'; having the Union Jack, the national flag, next to the word 'HATE' seemed a bit too blunt for them, which resulted in their paste-up employees putting up the word 'HAT'. So, the work was compromised by interferences from the authorities in the placing of the work according to the artists specifications. Long term discussion is all the project can offer, although there should always be a place for strategic politically-orientated work within a twelve month project, like the approaches of someone such as **Hans Haacke**.

**CR** All the works so far have utilised contemporary imagery and ideas in recent memory. There's been an avoidance of dwelling upon history as a grand given concept. Is this the result of the urgency of the issues of the site?

**AD** The site has such a strong identity already with the past, there's no need to create it, but there is a need to focus it, to draw attention to the aura of the past. This particular project represents one approach, and it broadly deals with the urgent need to deal with the here and now . . . I prefer works which are time-specific. In your own piece was the phrase 'Slowly all around you will pass away' which had a finality about it and offered a conclusion to the site whilst other works questioned or challenged. I suppose you took a risk formally by presenting it in Scotrail typeface and colours.

**CR** The work's temporal nature is part of its meaning, it happened in the middle of the project which was also the coldest point of the year and, by extension, a very depressing time in World events as a result of the Gulf War. My own piece existed within these contexts. But another context to the whole project is public art's role in the changing city. Permanent public art, like **Ian Hamilton Finlay's** 'All Greatness Stands Firm in the Storm' in the Broomielaw, may end up as decoration in a disenfranchised environment. It's title has many references. But ownership and permanence go together, people don't invest in the transitory.

**AD** It is one of the exciting challenges of public art - to make a work for it's time, and perhaps the Bellgrove Project is different in that sense from other projects. That is another issue which is open to constructive debate.

**CR** I like the temporal nature of the works, a temporality which breaks two golden rules of art; timeless quality and universality. In the art world, universality has been greatly discredited, mainly it might be suggested by feminist theory, but timeless quality as an issue appears to live on. I find it interesting that people like Jenny Holzer are now achieving Old Master status. Maybe what finally happens is that people equate the truly temporal with the disposable.

**AD** It depends which models Bellgrove is discussed in relation to. The approach of the project in relation to Public Art is not consolidated and is at an early stage but that is one of its aims - to accept working in the urban environment while your ideas are still developing, and to accept the ephemeral and the temporal but relate that positively to architecture that changes. Proposing other functions for this wall, this platform, this warehouse, this is positive renovation. 'Building a satisfying shape or form then fitting a function into it', that tends to be the first thing people respond to emotionally, the shape, the colour and so on.

**CR** Does the project end?

**AD** There has been a temptation to extend this work as a permanent supplementary art-space but that goes against original principles. It interferes with the architecture, it's not a billboard on a hoarding. It appeared anonymously as does each work and it's visibly uncredited. It has to be viewed as a model that can be repeated somewhere else, an experiment.

