

Talking back to an ad on the street

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The model in the ad in the bus shelter is emaciated, or she's all of twelve years old in lipstick and silk. Or the ad is for a homeopathic remedy, or it belittles members of a vulnerable minority, or it celebrates consumerism. You're moved to criticize the ad, to explain how it is misogynistic or otherwise oppressive, or that it promotes dangerous nonsense.

You could write a letter to its sponsor, but you want a wider and more open audience for your message than just company executives. Perhaps a letter to the editor would be better, or a blog posting, or an essay for a magazine or quarterly review. If you have the money, you could rent space for your own ad.

Each of these options is perfectly fine, but you want something more immediate, something that will reach the same people on the street who can't help but see the ad.

And so you write or draw on the ad itself or affix a sticker to it. Your message might be short and catchy or long and argumentative, but there it is, right on the ad, talking back to it, available for anyone who looks at the ad to see.

Now you've taken care, of course, not to damage the plastic sheet covering the ad. You haven't etched your message into the sheet, or used ink that won't ever wash clean. Your sticker can be scraped off fairly easily. It's okay to mark up the ad itself, if it's not behind plastic, for it will be removed when its tenancy expires, leaving no vandalism behind.

Being conscientious about property as you are, you might have to return to re-install your message should it be removed before the ad comes down. You're conscientious by nature, certainly, but still you're happy for people to notice your concern not to damage anything. They'll mark the care you took.

Perhaps the ad made you angry, but your anger is not your message, or not your only message. If your anger were your only message, you would have affixed your sticker to the face of the model or written your words over the name of the brand. You would have tried to obliterate the ad. That, though, would have been to prevent the advertiser from getting his message out. It would be like shouting down a speaker rather than answering him in the discussion period or demonstrating against his views. Destroying the ad, like disrupting a talk, is not at all in the spirit of critical engagement or democratic action. Whatever a person who destroys or disrupts an occasion of expression might be trying to say, his or her central message becomes disdain for freedom of expression and the endorsement of authoritarianism that that disdain implies.

You leave your comment a bit off to the side, or work it into the spaces, so that the message of the ad is not obscured. Your comment speaks against something in the ad, rather

than effaces that something. You have cost the advertiser nothing, at least nothing that he or she is entitled to, and yet you have made your point, and made it to exactly the audience you desired.

Should your actions count as vandalism? I don't see why. You've merely turned a monologue into a dialogue or offered to a captive audience another side to consider. An act of vandalism is an act of ill-willed destruction, but you've been nothing but creative and public spirited.