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Read Harry Kollatz's monthly column "Flashback" in Richmond magazine.

the Hat

Sunday, March 25, 2012

## High Visibility

HARRY KOLLATZ JR.  
 DATE POSTED: 3/22/12 11:40 AM

During Henry Miller's proto-Kerouacian 1939 journey across the country that became *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, he noted that while traveling U.S. highways, one could see billboards advertising air mattresses and trusses but not a single image of art. (This was the same book in which Miller claimed he'd rather die in Richmond, though it offered little, because the city still favored eccentrics.)

Then came *Burma Shave* and *South of the Border's Pedro*, and, in between, Lady Bird Johnson's attempt to beautify the country by cleaning up the proliferation of billboards. The dystopic Terry Gilliam film *Brazil* pictured expressways where views were completely walled off by beguiling commercial images and political exhortations.



Art by Claire Accardo was shown in the Richmond Billboard Art Project, 2010.

Now comes the Richmond-based [Billboard Art Project](#).

The effort isn't selling art, but exhibiting creativity for thousands of passersby. The Billboard Art Project involves a growing multi-city exhibition effort. Richmond was among the first when on Oct. 2, 2010, for 24 hours an electronic billboard on the I-195 Expressway near Westwood Avenue interrupted its regularly scheduled programming.

Billboard Art Project has since been featured in the [Chicago Tribune](#), local news and radio outlets, and most recently in [Grist Magazine](#).

This is an ongoing national series of exhibitions appearing in cities throughout the country and featuring new work with every show.

This same billboard is to be appropriated next month, April 2-29, for a full 28 days of photography and art, even sound. A six-hour cycle of presentation will repeat during each week and an eight hour cycle on the weekends. The line-up will vary each week and weekend.

These images come from artists throughout the United States, Canada, Slovenia, Italy, the Netherlands, Croatia, Brazil, Australia and the United Kingdom, including more than 20 from Virginia. Also featured will be artwork from students at regional schools in grades kindergarten

through 12th grade.



Billboard work by artist Stephen Decker

Since October 2010, the Richmond-based nonprofit has completed nine shows in as many different cities. Billboard Art Project has presented more than U.S. and international artists and shown more than 10,000 images.

This isn't the work of hackers or anarchists but a collaboration coordinated by David Morrison. About five years ago, Morrison, a Savannah, Ga., native who now lives in Richmond, drove by one of the newer LED imagery signs near The Showplace in Mechanicsville. "They were either testing it out

for the first time, or hadn't yet sold time to anybody," he recalls. "So what they were showing were just stock photographs without any advertising content."

These random images sparked in Morrison one of those, "What if..." ideas. What if a group of artists approached Lamar advertising to rent one of its billboards for artistic purposes just as any other client?

Through word of mouth and email, in grassroots fashion, Morrison collected 2,660 images. He sifted through them, and by show time, he wondered if people wouldn't get bored by their passing.

Stop-motion photography revealed that during the 24-hour period, more than 300 people pulled off the road to watch the flux and flow of images. Rather than being monotonous, it fascinated.

"They didn't just stay for 15 minutes, but for hours, and people talked about it," he says. When working with Hunton and Williams lawyer William J. Gray Jr., Gray a year following the first Richmond billboard creation, he recalled the sign. He experienced the image of a fortune cookie.

"He didn't know what it was, but he remembered seeing it," Morrison says. "And that's the thing: We don't have a metric to measure what people see, or for how long, but we know that for that instant, they aren't seeing what they expect."

Despite the many thousands of works that Morrison has sorted through and submitted to Lamar, few of them have received a thumbs down due to content. The Billboard Art Project is a paying client, thus there is a little leverage.

The Billboard Art Project is booking one show every month and the plan is to bring the exhibition back to Virginia specifically each year, in addition to the shows we have in other cities.

On weekends, the schedule will include Sight & Sound collaborations, featuring an audio component running simultaneously with the imagery that viewers can tune in at midnight on 105.1 FM, on Saturday and Sunday 12 a.m., 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. These will also be podcast.

If you'd rather sit and watch, or listen, you can park under the billboard by following Westwood Trail [after it intersects with Westwood Avenue](#).

Under the aegis of the Billboard Art Project is the [Highpoint Gallery](#), at 3119 W. Moore St., in Scott's Addition. It opened late last year.

The gallery is a free-form concept space for presentations of all mediums. Tonight, for example, there is a five-minute short titled *Solipsism*, by Kyle Arasim and Riley Arthur of VCU's of kinetic energy department; followed by the film *Rocket Science*; and on Friday, *The Squid And The Whale*; and Saturday, *Lord of War*. It's free and you bring whatever you consume.

Another exhibition opens on April 14: "A Few Little Follies" by Brooklyn-based artist [Monica Carrier](#), Sarajevo-born and New Orleans working [Lala Raščić](#), and Philadelphia-based sculptor [Matthew Brett](#).



The New Orleans Billboard Art Project in 2011 included this piece by artist Jill Ensley.

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Scott Burger

3/22/12 4:11 PM

Does Lamar get a tax break for these 'art' billboards? I have to say, I am still very angry about the illegal billboard on Mayo Island.

Billboard Art Project

3/23/12 10:32 AM

Lamar doesn't get a tax break for billboard space that is purchased, which the Billboard Art Project does. There is no charity on Lamar's part with regard to this event, so the ire that you speak of is yours to maintain.

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