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ART & ARCHITECTURE

Drive-by campaign to project points of view

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The plan to appropriate the side of a large building near Koreatown got scotched -- literally -- by a Chivas Regal ad. But the takeover of a carwash is still a go.

For three nights this month, starting Saturday, the art duo Think Again aims to project itself -- again literally -- into the national debate on illegal immigration and the consequences of free trade. The piece is called "The NAFTA Effect." Its goal: to provoke discussion of what the artists regard as an unjust and hypocritical system that extracts cheap labor from undocumented workers while threatening to give them the heave-ho back to Mexico. The artistic means: about 30 slides projected onto buildings around Los Angeles, some of them chosen to resonate with the terse texts crafted by creators D. Attyah and S.A. Bachman.

It's a technique that L.A.'s chief of code enforcement, Dave Keim, says runs afoul of city law: It's a misdemeanor, he says, to project signs onto buildings without a zoning variance, which requires a hearing process.

Since 1997, the Think Again duo has used strategies from mass advertising to put their spin on social and economic issues. They've gotten their points across with postcards, posters and stickers; mobile billboards mounted on trucks; and with an art book, "A Brief History of Outrage." The NAFTA piece is their first go at projection art -- which they say will feature texts as large as 30 feet high and 30 feet wide, beamed onto blank surfaces during nighttime tours of the city. Some buildings they'll use by agreement with the owners (Attyah and Bachman thought they had the OK for the Koreatown site, until the sign for Scotch whiskey went up). Others they plan to appropriate in the name of guerrilla art. They'll use a video projector mounted on a borrowed Jeep and powered by the vehicle's battery.

The potential for arrest is a subject Attyah preferred to change during a recent interview. Keim, the chief code enforcer, said inspectors have busted advertising sign projections but have yet to encounter a display done for art's sake. He added that the LAPD typically doesn't bother with signage rules enforcement, leaving that to the building and safety department.

"The NAFTA Effect," to be seen Saturday and Oct. 13 and 14 at sites to be announced at www.outpost-art.org the day of each showing, is part of the Fair Trade Contemporary Art Festival, a five-week series of events and performance-art pieces that ends Oct. 15. The organizer, L.A.'s Outpost for Contemporary Art, aims to promote creative innovation while backing art that has an international scope and potential for building ties across borders.

"The NAFTA Effect" was chosen from among proposals for the Fair Trade festival, said Julie Deamer, Outpost director. The theme dovetails with the festival's exploration of the pros and cons of free trade among the United States, Canada and Mexico, done by artists from the three countries. The committee also liked the idea of introducing art in places where people don't expect to see it. Outpost kicked in \$2,000 toward purchase of a \$3,500 projector that Think Again will use to remount the piece in other cities.

For Think Again, the artistry of projecting written ideas onto buildings lies in the concept and the execution. Attyah, who teaches art at Glendale Community College, and Bachman, who is on the faculty of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, became friends while living in Boston in the 1990s. Both were dismayed that in the public marketplace of ideas, the marketplace -- selling stuff through omnipresent advertising -- was crowding out the ideas.

"We were regular folks interested in politics and discourse," says Attyah, the male half of the man-woman duo.

Initially inspired by gay-rights issues and the fight against AIDS, they have commented on the downside of gentrification in a poster campaign, "White Blight"; used mobile billboards in a piece called "Popping the Question" that challenged the government's authority to sanction or ban marriages; and protested violence against women in a site-specific installation in Juarez, Mexico. Although they often create charged images, "The NAFTA Effect" will stick mainly with pithy written messages. The partners see themselves as part of an established tradition and cite such influences as Jenny Holzer, known for projecting text onto buildings and natural landscapes, and Krzysztof Wodiczko, an art professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology who has projected controversial images on famous buildings in Europe.

Part of the object of "The NAFTA Effect," Attyah says, is to use the slide-show possibilities of projected text to accomplish what a single image can't. "We can work much more deeply than a one-liner or slogan," he says. Bachman likens the five-minute sequence of messages to a book chapter in outline form. They intend to repeat the sequence in at least three locations each night, projecting the piece over and over, for up to 90 minutes in each spot.

Each segment opens with a verbal snapshot of the hands-on work that immigrant labor accomplishes in restaurants, carwashes, households and construction sites across American cityscapes: for example, "handbuffing hubcaps, fenders, dashboards and hoods." After that, the piece's unifying mantra, "salt in the wound," will flicker on the building, setting up an ironic punch line that enumerates a hardship or indignity that immigrants suffer in return for their labor: "speeding tickets that trigger deportation."

Attyah believes the medium suits the message, because those with the most minimal and marginal standing in society need to have their contributions and difficulties magnified in the most public places. "One of our goals is to write the debate as large as we can on the side of a building, to monumentalize what

people see as menial labor."

Projecting the debate onto buildings makes sense in terms of political art's core goal of drawing attention to a cause, says Carol A. Wells, founder and executive director of the L.A.-based Center for the Study of Political Graphics. "You may like it or not like it, understand it or not understand it, but you can't avoid it."

The Think Again duo intends to hang out in each neighborhood while their texts flash nearby, hoping to engage gawkers and passersby in discussion. After the initial projections, the display, and the discussion, will continue at saltinthewound.org. Think Again also archives its work at www.agitart.org.

"We've had our share of controversy over the years, between censorship and arrest" Bachman says. "We're hoping this one will be smooth."

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